

---

# Is Radio Blind or Invisible? A Call for a Wider Debate on Listening-in

---

**Author: Alan Beck**

## Abstract

*This article seeks to widen the debate over radio as 'blind' through phenomenological approaches and a less defensive attitude to radio broadcasting. While clinical and pathological aspects of the 'blind' trope have to be confronted, Merleau-Ponty's internalist model allows ways of discussing the experiences of listening-in synaesthetically, or across the human sensorium. There is a danger that radio theorists reinscribe, unfortunately, into teaching and research status anxieties from the 'neurotic' radio industry and overcompensate by regarding instances of 'blindness' as exemplary. My future refocus is on how radio comparatively degrades or filters out data, on aurality and a shifting of the human sensorium in this digital age.*

### 1.1

Why ... define radio's status as a non-visual medium in terms connoting impairment, disability and lack rather than positive attributes such as power and magic? The repeated use of the words 'blind' and 'blindness' to describe radio would suggest that those writing about radio consider its lack of visuals to be a problem rather than a positive attribute: as something to be overcome rather than exploited.

(Shingler in [Shingler and Wieringa](#), 1998, 74)

How many listeners have considered the great advancement which has been made in the power of "seeing through the sense of hearing" since broadcasting began?

Two or three weeks ago, I determined to satisfy myself on this point. I took a blind man to a particularly heavy drama, which depended solely on action throughout. Afterwards he could tell me the whole play, and he went so far as to describe certain dramatic actions which he had "seen" and compared with what I saw myself, little had been lost. To satisfy myself further, I asked a doctor friend of mine whether he considered that our sense of hearing would be intensified as a blind person's by the constant listening to broadcast performances. He assured me that it was quite within the bounds of possibility.

('The Play in the Studio', Victor Smythe of the Manchester Studio, *The Radio Times*, 29 February, 1924, p 391)

## 1.2

To what extent is radio the 'blind' or the 'invisible' medium and how can we talk about it? In this article, I survey some aspects of this debate in the UK and the B.B.C. over the last seventy-five years and more; and I relate this to how radio degrades or filters out data, and to phenomenology. In the main part of my argument, I indicate where I think the blindness trope now gets things wrong for us as a paradigm or as a line of enquiry, and I will make rather a big deal out of this.

Generally, I believe it gets in the way of the rather more interesting topic of the epistemology of radio: listening-in and knowing, and how listening might be experienced as more 'real' than seeing. (I cannot pursue that here. It forms a strand in my work in progress, *Re-zoning Radio Theory*, [Beck, 1999](#).) In sum, I consider to what extent, as a teacher of radio and radio drama, and as a researcher, I can use such traditional descriptors of radio - 'blind' or 'invisible' - without squirming.

## 1.3

The debate surfaces variously in the B.B.C.'s weekly publication, 'The Radio Times', especially in the 1920s. This was when wireless practitioners sought to 'discipline' listening-in and use of the wireless receiving apparatus, and to give high culture status to some strands of B.B.C. broadcasting. [Note to 1.3](#). 'Blind' also surfaces in radio theorizing. In UK publications, I mean especially the monumental *Understanding Radio* of Andrew Crisell ([1986](#) and editions of 1992 and 1994), and subsequently *On Air. Methods and Meanings of Radio* by Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa ([Shingler and Wieringa, 1998](#)).

In this latter, the theoretical chapters have been written by Martin Shingler, and in addition to immensely valuable new insights, this volume builds into a timely and comprehensive consolidation of radio theory, and also sets up an interesting dialectic on some points with Crisell. In Chapter 4, 'The Mind's Eye' (73-93), in the section, 'Radio: a visual medium' (76-81) and in 'Invisible Assets (86-7), there is an enduring round-up of opinion, citing [Raban, 1981](#), [Lewis, 1981](#), [McLeish, 1994](#), [Esslin, 1971](#), [Wilby and Conroy, 1994](#) and [Arnheim, 1936](#). Other references can be found in the book's index. So I do not need to give a comprehensive survey of this 'topos' in radio theorizing, but I seek to widen the debate in some ways.

## 1.4

### 1.4a

I focus here on the challenge Shingler poses, in the quote above ('problem' or 'positive attribute'), and the overall context is his defence of radio theorizing, its pedagogy and indeed, radio broadcasting itself. Quoting Crisell, 1992, 3 ('the sole fact of its blindness'), Shingler ripostes:

But why call an entirely auditory medium 'blind'? There is, after all, a significant difference between calling a medium 'entirely auditory' and 'blind', given that the latter implies that something crucial is lacking and that the medium is, therefore, inherently deficient. Why 'blind' and not 'invisible'? ...

(Shingler and Wieringa, 74)

And further, and this is expertly put and worth the quoting:

Hence radio would appear to be both a deficient (incomplete) medium and one obsessed by its own limitations and inadequacies. The notion of radio as blind and, in particular, the notion that all its formal characteristics are essentially compensatory devices for its blindness, perpetuates this view of an inadequate (even neurotic) medium, robbing it of any potential virtue or strength it may have as a purely auditory form.

(75)

This strikes to the core. How should we teach and research radio, the 'neurotic' medium? Briefly, let me indicate my stance in my radio theory work overall. I emphasize radio's **filtering out**, its considerable degradation of data, in comparison with representation in the sight/sound media. I pleurably recognise also that radio's blindness is limiting, that it is less of a gestalt experience for the listener (employing less of the sense modalities), while it also imposes more tasks onto the individual in processing radio data.

1.4b

I refer to this stance of mine as the '**Degradation School**', though I am its sole (?) representative at the moment. At least such a 'degradation' debate poses crucial questions about conventional radio representations and the difficulties of creating significant alternatives (techniques, styles, avant-garde, etc.). My rather polemical stance enables me to ask **What is radio's deficiency factor?** and to address the disjunction between radio and the reality of the extra-radio world, and its fragmentation through the radio apparatus.

1.4c

I also believe that radio theorizing could be profitably influenced by phenomenology, as has happened in some publications in film theory. (See [Sweeney](#), no date, electronic publication.) I started to do this in my study of point-of-listening, orienting myself from within the listener's auralty ([Beck](#), 1998). Phenomenologists make the point about the essentially embodied character of perception and the tacit, background awareness of one's body. In Merleau-Ponty's words:

... one's own body is the third term, always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space.

([1945/1962](#), 101).

(See below in [4.6](#)).

1.4d

Continuing to engage with Shingler and 'blind' radio, I am impressed by his radio manifesto, the flavour of which is especially engaging on page 77. His alternative view of radio as a 'visual medium' is:

... one that is informed by the visual world and speaks to (in most cases) an audience that is both visually aware and has a large stock of visual

experiences and memories which can be drawn upon to make sense of radio programmes.

However, his succeeding point is not one which I think can be easily defended, either as regards popular culture works or high culture:

What this conception of radio reveals is the extent to which visuals are actually the most dispensable element of any artistic, dramatic or communicative medium (because audiences can supply these themselves). What it also reveals is that the notion that radio is the most deficient medium is quite mistaken.

(77-8)

#### 1.4e

Shingler does pull back a bit from this in 'it would be equally misguided to assert radio's superiority over the 'visual arts'' (80). But his line of argument would not easily stand point-to-point comparisons between scenography on stage, 'mise en scène' and specularly in film, and what I have termed 'mise en scène' in radio (providing we could come up with a wider vocabulary on the part of radio theorists to meet the challenge). His argument would also have to meet aesthetic demands.

One is tempted to go back to the point of origin of aesthetic comparison-making, by citing the German philosopher [Lessing](#), and his famous work on aesthetics, *Laokoon* (1766). He wanted to establish what was **intrinsic and essential** to each artistic medium - painting should not try to be like sculpture, etc. (Lessing, 1766/1965, chap.7). And so radio should not try to be the sight/sound media. But aesthetics are not enough to answer to the enormous flow of everyday broadcasting, and high-culture works on radio are always discretely aired.

#### 1.4f

Assertion on Shingler's part is not enough. For example, there are many stage pieces which cannot be transposed onto radio and even Alan Ayckbourn farces on B.B.C. Radio 4 suffer somewhat. The better way of regarding this potential battle between the technological and performing Muses is not to duel, and using the Latin tag, to accept that radio is, at its best, 'multum non multa' - better in sum in a limited number of ways qualitatively, and not a match in the many, quantitatively. I think there is the danger here of reinscribing status anxieties about radio from within the industry back into radio theorizing and pedagogy. What if we were researching and teaching the advertising world? (I will take this further in [5.1](#).)

On the other hand, in agreement with Shingler, some cross-media comparisons must be made, not least in reception studies of listening-in; and here I see the need for building a more extensive theoretical vocabulary and for benefiting from film phenomenological studies.

#### 1.5

But first, there are few foundational concepts of my own, adapted or invented, to be introduced here. One term I use for radio theorizing and criticism is radiowriting. I have been attracted by David Carrier's book, *Artwriting* ([Carrier](#), 1987) - the tasks of art

criticism and history. So I will occasionally use my newly-coined '**radiowriting**' and in a self-aware way, admitting Carrier's inflection on the rhetoric involved in theory-building. I also refer to the **Radioworld**. This is the enormous set of all the particular instances of radio. It is an open-concept recognition of the past, present and future of radio broadcasting and Internet streaming, etc.

A core concept in my radiowriting is **aurality**, corresponding to the specularity of film. Aurality is both active, that is, the 'listening-to-ness' of radio reception (the listener's activity), and passive, the 'heard-of-ness' of broadcast performers - speaker or presenter or interviewee or play character. It is also the listening-in, in itself.

Further, there is the '**extra-radio world**' and this is the world to which listeners have access through production by the radio apparatus, especially the recording microphone, and which is represented through broadcast. I also refer to 'mise en scène' - the locations, spaces and perspectives created in radio's sound pictures and inhabited by radio's performers, and not at all just the scenery of radio drama. So I introduce, rather breathlessly here, the following: radiowriting, the Radioworld, aurality, the extra-radio world and 'mise en scène'.

## 1.6

Let me move on to the main topic by a substantial quote from Crisell. Blindness is a **compensation**:

... [I] want first to stress that blindness is also the source of some real advantages which it [radio] possesses over other media. The most famous of these is, of course, its appeal to the imagination. Because it offers sound-only instead of sound and vision the listener is compelled to 'supply' the visual data for himself. The details are described, or they may suggest themselves through sound, but they are not 'pictured' for him, he must picture them for himself - and he may, indeed, use them as a basis for picturing further details which are not described. Moreover as we all know, the scope of the imagination is virtually limitless: we may picture not only lifelike objects but the fantastical, impossible scenes of an experimental play.

(Crisell, 1994, 7)

The blindness/invisibility trope is one way of talking about this 'supplying' and 'picturing', but - I want to stress - only one way.

## 1.7

The radio listener is **active**. An analogy could be drawn with what visual scientists term '**filling-in**' and '**perceptual completion**' in real-life interaction (the Lifeworld) - the brain jumping to a conclusion. This is worth a small excursus. This filling-in refers to situations where we report that we see something present in a particular region of visual space and it is actually absent. But it is present in the surrounding area and we see a uniform expanse. There are a number of well known visual exercises to prove this in its varieties and it became popularly known from the work of Gestalt psychologists, originally of the Berlin School in the 1920s - Kurt Koffka's rings, etc. (See below in [3.5](#).)

Another example is where we anticipate and have expectations about objects in movement, and about the future - about a rotating coin and what is on the other side (the Queen's face on a UK coin), and about the weight and shape of a ball about to arrive into our hands. There are endless examples and they go beyond the visual. What about playing cards held in an outstretched hand and us expecting a game of poker or bridge?

### 1.8

Let me take visual filling-in a bit further in relation to the **blind spot** we have in each eye - the region where the optic nerve leaves the retina and there are no photoreceptors. But we are never aware of the blind spots of our two eyes as they do not overlap (neural activity versus subjective experience). What are called **visual perceptual completion phenomena** - making up for an absence - come into play. (As well as the blind spot, there are motion after-effects and illusory contours as well.) Interpretation of these information-processing systems is controversial and some cognitive scientists hypothesize that it is the brain actively filling-in the missing information.

All of this filling-in is part of the **phenomenal field** surrounding the object in perception. So much of this is a construct of culture and the individual experience.

### 1.9

So, from this excursus, the point is that in some ways, as radio listeners, we fill-in or complete details such as faces, gestures and movements of the radio performers, and also the aural 'mise en scène' they inhabit. The individualising sound pictures for each listener responding to the Radioworld will be to a greater or less extent completed along modal and functional lines (appearance, sound, smell, memory, intention, etc.).

This is where I take Crisell, 1994, 7 further - the listener 'may, indeed, use [self-supplied visual data] as a basis for picturing further details which are not described'. Of course, perceptual processing in radio listening-in is **temporal**, as opposed to spatial and instantaneous aspects of the visual. But it is more than akin to how the phenomenal field operates in real-life perception.

### 1.10

There is this difference in radio and radio drama's narratives. Whereas in the visual example, the brain could be said to ignore the absence of certain neural representations (caused by the blind spot, etc.), in radio listening-in, we fill-in with self-supplied content (Crisell ib.id), and in a variety of individually different ways, we represent the 'presence' of absences.

So we might say the following is specific to the radio listening-in. Active listening involves a great deal of such **individualising completion - subject/listener-level, aural perceptual completion**. Radio filling-in makes up for the difference between how things are (the incoming radio data to be processed) and how they seem for the listener, phenomenologically from lived experience (radio performers seem to have heads and bodies in our sound pictures).

### 1.11

I link this filling-in with what I term radio's **economy rule** – the extent to which radio filters out or excludes many sound events both by comparison with the sight/sound media, and also by comparison with the many sound events in the extra-radio world. Radio reserves many spaces for absent content. The question is to what degree this results in rupture or fragmentation or disjunction between resemblance and referents, the extra-radio world, and to what degree there are countervailing tendencies to assure us of the integrity of the Radioworld.

## 2.1

In the quote at the top of this article, Shingler and Wieringa, 1998, 1 point out that radio is seen as the 'poor relation' partly because even the most popular radio texts discuss the medium in terms of 'blindness'. As [Lewis and Booth](#), 1989, xii say in their introduction, radio offers 'a peculiar, not to say paradoxical position - at once present, and absent'. And 'the central fact of broadcasting's communicative context is that it speaks from one place and is heard in another' ([Scannell](#) in Scannell et al, 1991, 2).

## 2.2

So, to take up my main argument: should it be **blindness or invisibility** or should it be something else? Shingler's preference is for invisibility and he is perceptive in pointing to a possible conceptual misalignment here. In the carefully argued Chapter 4, 'The mind's eye', the 'invisible' should be substituted for 'blind' (to repeat the quote):

Why, in other words, define radio's status as a non-visual medium in terms connoting impairment, disability and lack rather than positive attributes such as power and magic? The repeated use of the words 'blind' and 'blindness' to describe radio would suggest that those writing about radio consider its lack of visuals to be a problem rather than a positive attribute: as something to be overcome rather than exploited.

(74)

Blindness - pathological blindness - is certainly equated with total visual loss, and therefore in radio audiences with the inability to 'see', and in radiowriting, sometimes with an overcompensatory emphasis on those radio texts which typify this ('pure radio', the 'radiogenic', blind characters in radio drama, occurrences of the almost totally aural 'mise en scène', etc.).

## 2.3

Let me trace the blindness trope back to other main sources of radiowriting prior to Crisell, and Shingler and Wieringa, and to a collection of essays, *Radio Drama* ([Lewis](#), 1981) and *British Radio Drama* ([Drakakis](#), 1981). Here is David Wade, radio critic first of the B.B.C. weekly publication, *The Listener* and then of *The Times*, raging against the coming of stereo in radio drama:

But why was it ever felt necessary to do so? The placing effect attempts to compensate for the blindness of radio as a medium, yet - as I hope I have shown - that blindness was and still is one of radio drama's greatest assets.

([Wade](#), 1981a, 243)

## 2.4

Wade's, and indeed Raban's chapters in the Lewis, 1981 collection and Wade again in Drakakis, 1981, might be regarded as examples of what psychoanalysts would call **splitting** - 'good object' (wireless drama pre-stereo) / 'bad object' (the new age of stereo). Whatever their insights, and especially those valuable ones of Raban's, they emerge as pessimistic and backward-looking in attitude, and more so in hindsight now, and in a category of radiowriting frequently encountered that I term the Primal Paradigm, or radio's 'enemies of the future'. They exploit the paranoid-ish trope of listeners-as-victims and are resentful of paradigm shifts in technology, as indeed were and are many radio practitioners either retraining or leaving the industry. This Primal Paradigm has also been influential in UK radio journalism and reviewing.

## 2.5

Let me respond immediately to Wade's technological, indeed Luddite, point of view. In a discussion of painting, 'Art Narrowly and Broadly Speaking', Dickie, 1968 says that we sometimes admire skill if done before materials were developed which would have made the painting easier to produce, and we know the obstacles overcome. But he notes that although 'we do seem to appreciate a painting more if it requires skills', this leads to the 'rather silly position':

... that if painters want to paint better pictures they ought to use the most difficult and usually older techniques.

([Dickie](#), 1968, 76)

We all have experienced the split in opinion between listening to vinyl ('warmer') and CDs, and between analogue tape and the shift to digital production.

## 2.6

Wade's Luddite posing, or what I regard as such in his most waspish comments, comes down to an essentialist claim on radio as paradigmatic wireless. It is noticeable that the Primal Paradigm group, in their attempts to position radio drama as an aesthetic, champion a small range of avant-garde, relatively representational pieces over the mainstream of broadcast popular culture.

## 3.1

Now let me trace the blindness trope back to its origins in the 1920s. In the first decades of wireless, comparisons were made with the experiences of blind people, almost always to the advantage of the B.B.C. and to reassure listeners:

How many listeners have considered the great advancement which has been made in the power of "seeing through the sense of hearing" since broadcasting began?

Two or three weeks ago, I determined to satisfy myself on this point. I took a blind man to a particularly heavy drama, which depended solely on action throughout. Afterwards he could tell me the whole play, and he went so far as to describe certain dramatic actions which he had "seen" and compared with what I saw myself, little had been lost. To satisfy myself further, I asked a

doctor friend of mine whether he considered that our sense of hearing would be intensified as a blind person's by the constant listening to broadcast performances. He assured me that it was quite within the bounds of possibility.

'The Play in the Studio' by Victor Smythe, of the Manchester Studio, *The Radio Times*, 29 February, 1924, p 391.

(I gave this quotation at the top of the article.) The desire, and it is propagandist also, is for listening-in to make the world of materiality and its culture works totally available on broadcast. And further, for a world of evidence, and its social realities and symbolizations, to be confirmed solely through aural observation.

There is more than a hint that those blind from birth offer an exemplary model of listening-in. We could also gain access to a reality which our human seeing cannot perceive. 'I hear you' could be equivalent to 'I see', just as 'I see' is taken for 'I understand'.

### 3.2

Most perceptive on the lived experience of blindness and listening-in is an article, 'Wireless for the Blind' in 'The Radio Times' of 30 January 1925 (p. 244). A Captain Ian Fraser, blinded as a soldier in France at the end of the Great War, commented on the perceptual differences for him in listening-in to wireless dramas, as opposed to attending the theatre:

The B.B.C. has one difficulty additional to that - namely, that all the voices they present to the listener come from the same place, relatively to his ears. It may be a loud-speaker, or a headphone, but the voice is always in the same relative position with regard to the listener's ear, whereas, at the play, the stage is wide and deep, and it is possible to receive great assistance in following movement to utilize this direction.

### 3.3

Because of receiving technology of the time - the original valve radios and crystal sets with headphones - and studio production, Capt. Fraser had more difficulty in distinguishing, within the sound picture of the wireless drama scene, the sources, movements and perspective of the various sound events, characters and the different sound domains (speech from music and effects, etc.). Of course, this must be related to the broadcasting context of 1925, bandwidth etc., versus the live interaction of the theatre.

No B.B.C. plays of the 1920s were then recorded, as adequate and convenient technology did not then exist. It is my belief that although scripts (including many adaptations from the theatre) indicate sometimes adventurous movement and depth perspectives, actual wireless production was what I term 'unachieved'. Perhaps what listeners heard was, for the most part, actors in fixed positions and in a neutral acoustic. No wonder Capt. Fraser had difficulties 'placing' voices and sound effects within a 'mise en scène'.

### 3.4

The first wireless play in the UK originally written for the medium, Richard Hughes's 'A Comedy of Danger', broadcast by the British Broadcasting Company from its London, Savoy Hill studios on 15 January 1924 (and published in [Hughes](#), 1924), began in blindness down a Welsh coal mine:

MARY: (*sharply*) Hello! What's happened?

JACK: The lights have gone out!

MARY: Where are you?

JACK: Here.

(*Pause. Steps stumbling.*)

MARY: Where? I can't find you.

JACK: Here. I'm holding my hand out.

MARY: I can't find it.

JACK: Why, *here*!

(*Pause.*)

MARY: (*startled*) Oh! What's that?

JACK: It's all right: it's only me.

MARY: You did frighten me, touching me suddenly like that in the dark. I'd no idea you were so close.

Some three other examples of blind characters have been noted ([Chothia](#), 1996, 247).

### 3.5

We should be mindful of the origins of the radio-blindness trope in the 1920s, at a time of the Gestalt explanation of visual perception on the model of a 2-D, visual field, static, organized and pictorial (Gestalt psychologists of the Berlin School such as Max Wertheimer and Kurt Koffka - his book *Growth of the Mind* was published in 1924). Regularities and tendencies in perception were systematized into a set of good Gestalt factors. More work could be done on this cultural context for the emerging wireless.

It might even be argued that the debate as traditionally framed is ecologically invalid now, especially in the digital age of virtual environments, and as we are informed by cognitive science. The digital age has shifted the human sensorium and its workings - what McLuhan would have called the 'massaging of the ratio of the senses' ([McLuhan](#), 1967, 68).

I guess that applied research might show that the blindness/invisibility model would have

difficulty accounting for much of what we take to be radio data now, and even some in the applied sciences – which I am not - might subsequently argue that as a sole line of argument it is not defensible. I would suggest that the 1920s radio-blindness trope, and as it has grown from its origins through Wade etc., might now become distant from many of our concerns today, as radiowriters pursuing reception theory and uses of the radio apparatus.

#### 4.1

There are other approaches to the challenges of the blindness debate, but not so restricted by its terms; and these approaches could focus more adequately, I believe, on reception theory, and the epistemology and phenomenology of radio. I can only point to them briefly in my discussion here: Gibson's work on 'affordances' ([4.2](#)) and secondly, alternative ways of regarding the human sensorium, so that hearing is not so split off from the other senses in its operations (the internalist model [4.4](#)), as the blindness trope demands. I will now summarize them.

#### 4.2

Firstly, I am among the admirers of the work of ecological psychologist, J.J. Gibson, who challenged Gestalt work on perception ([Gibson, 1950](#)). The shift is from the older internal-representationalist paradigm of the mind (controlling a 'body machine') to an externalist, ecological paradigm. In particular, Gibson talks of 'affordances' ([Gibson, 1979](#) and [Ingold, 1988, 12-13](#)). Objects 'afford' certain things to the culturally-constructing subject. Humans are not alone in constructing their environments, and they do so in relation to the affordances of objects and other beings. Gibson's affordances refer to the properties of an object that 'render it apt for the project of a subject' (Ingold).

#### 4.2

So radio 'affords' certain things to human use. We encounter certain affordances in broadcasting and we integrate them into our human coherent systems. Meanings and uses are not given in radio itself, but are acquired by broadcasting having entered into a 'relationship' with human subjects. I would argue that **radio's affordances** limit the cultural choices available to radio makers, and especially playwrights, feature makers and producers, at various times and places, that is, limiting radio's products. And that this limitation has affected how radiowriters have gone about their discussions. An example of this is the blindness trope. But affordances is a more profitable paradigm for considering radio's filtering out and what I call the degradation of data from the extra-radio world into the Radioworld ([1.4](#)).

#### 4.3

There is also the question of how knowledge is obtained through the radio medium and radio's ways of pondering on its own epistemology, and how core this is to radiowriting. I suggest this has been at times rather off-sided, being conducted often through the blindness debate, that is, engaging the topic through a particular take on radio reception theory. In my future work, I want to link the topic of radio epistemology more to the radio apparatus. So that is the first alternative approach, through Gibson's affordances.

#### 4.4

I also mentioned a second approach. This is phenomenological, and considers how hearing is part of the human sensorium and does not split it off so strictly from the perceptual array (the multimodal thesis). This latter comprises the five modes of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling. Challenging the blindness trope on radio listening-in is the proposition that in our making sense of incoming data there is interpenetration across the senses, so that our hearing is penetrated in some way by the other four modes.

#### 4.5

Such is known in phenomenology as the **internalist model**. We can put faces to radio's performers, taste the meals in a cookery programme, sense colours, shapes and perspective in the radio 'mise en scène', and respond to the great deal of description broadcast ('What's that you've brought into the studio?', 'I am standing in the ruins of a Kosovan village, beside the ...'). We do this so 'naturally' in real-life interactions and so continuously in listening-in to radio that I am keen to find different ways of theorizing about it. The point to be pursued here is that the blindness trope depends on an opposite model of the human sensorium workings, the **externalist model**, the modular conception of the perceptual array. This splits hearing off from the other senses, and among some radiowriters, so to overvalue it.

#### 4.6

The classic work on the internalist model to which theorists of culture works return is *The Phenomenology of Perception* ([Merleau-Ponty](#) 1945/1962). (See [Sobchack](#), 1992 and [Sweeney](#), no date, electronic publication on its influence in film and Langer, 1989 for a commentary on the text.) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, philosopher and phenomenologist (1908-1961) was concerned to return philosophical analysis of phenomena to the 'Lebenswelt', to the world we meet in the lived-in experience. What is of interest here is his attack on the modular or split-off conception of the perceptual array.

#### 4.7

Let me move on to another application of phenomenology and reception theory. Gandelman, in discussing aesthetics, sight and paintings, refers to Alois Riegl's dichotomy of the *haptíc* (a seeing which penetrates in depth, and concentrates on texture and grain) and the *optic* (the scanning of objects according to their outlines and surfaces):

One reads a picture either haptically (by touch, visual touch) or optically (according to the pure vectoriality of outlines), or by a dialectical combining of the two visions.

([Gandelman](#), 1991, ix)

And indeed, even more interesting here, Gandelman considers that sight rarely operates without the other senses, that is, it rarely operates without **synaesthesia** (a blending of the senses), especially for the locating of objects in the world and their identification - pattern recognition (ib, 6).

#### 4.8

The sense of touch is transferred to the eye and one is able to locate and identify things in the environment, in one's sensory envelope. So can we consider synaesthetic aspects of aurality? - that listening can also be divided into the optic (where the sense of seeing is transferred to the ear) and into the haptic (where sound is physicalised and sensually experienced through the body, and touch, perspective and depth are experienced to a greater extent by the listener in processing); and that even smell and taste can be involved too (rounding off Merleau-Ponty's theory of integrating perception).

But the main synaesthetic aspects of aurality here suggested are the optic and the haptic. Riegl and others also contrasted whole cultures by their artworks into either the optic or the haptic: optic Egypt and haptic Greece, or optic Greece versus the more haptic Rome (Gandelman, 1991, 11).

## 5.1

So the **blindness/invisibility trope**, regularly evolving and revisited from its origins to today by radiowriters, could be claimed to be a Spartan Horse. It is hopeful of capturing ultimate prizes - of answering to anxieties about radio's status, or radio as an index and a motor of culture, and of answering the conundrum of radio's specific 'core' as a medium.

This returns me to an earlier point about how we teach and research radio, the 'neurotic' medium ([1.4f](#)), and how we find subject-focused analysis. Briefly, it should cause no surprise to observe that particular political values and preferences of groups and researchers not only set the agendas but may influence results. Better research is self-reflexive, and Shingler and Wieringa show this, as on page xiv. For some academics, the media must seek social change (e.g., [Gronbeck](#) et al., 1991, vii-viii on liberation, therapy and pleasure in cultural studies), rebranding teachers as cultural workers for a radical democracy. And mediation is an ideological process.

For myself, I do not see it as my task, as an academic working in radio, to intervene actively in controversies about the funding and status of current output. Work published and debate in the forum of the academy should suffice. I do not automatically go on the defensive about radio and radio drama.

## 5.2

But my view is that the 'blindness' trope, alone, is not too welcome as a problem-solving strategy any more. It cannot now, of itself, confront main empirical and conceptual problems: What is radio? and What uses do people make of it? These, with an overarching aurality theory ([1.5](#)), are my gateway to radiowriting.

## 5.3

The **blindness trope** also introduces a visualist precondition into listening-in, whereas my aurality thesis, with its focus on listening-in-itself, requires primarily no such association or interpretation - the listening is a direct experience for the radio audience. Radio almost **presents** the aural world in itself and at times, as with talk and music radio rather than with high production genres, we feel much less conscious of how it **represents**.

Radio reception theory should move on more enthusiastically to ponder how listeners, as autonomous agents, interact with differing radio environments and in what I call 'zones'. Is it time for a definitive break from what has been a heuristic topic in the past?

#### 5.4

My view is that this trope has been advantageous in the past, especially in the 1920s and in the shift from 1950s Modernism into the stereo age. But that now, having fully surveyed and digested it, we have to move the discipline of radiowriting out of this conceptual straightjacket. It remains as a sort of roadblock in the path of radiowriting. I wish to move the debate on to weightier questions and find new vocabularies. What is the tension, and the movement back and forth, between radio's exclusion of the listener (blind/invisible medium, constant use of commentator or description as intermediary, listening-to-the-listening) and radio's inclusion (suturing devices and the radiogenic)? What are radio's distancing devices as against its 'impression of reality' devices?

The ongoing mystery is how radio offers us aural data which seem to have materiality - surfaces, three-dimensionality and a dynamic (performers in movement), a materiality that has been shaped or processed so as to exhibit information for more than just sound itself. (Again reliant on Gibson, 1950).

#### 6.1

It is interesting that blind/invisible has shifted into current debate because of Shingler's substantial intervention and we have to define this issue in ways that are cogently descriptive. These must involve **clinical and pathological aspects of blindness as disability and as metaphor**. I do not consider these have adequately been addressed so far, or at least included. So I want now, briefly, to open out the topic to material from the cognitive sciences. The following comes from an article, 'Route Descriptions by Visually Impaired and Sighted Children from Memory and from Maps':

The wayfinding skills of blind and visually impaired people are based on very different kinds of information from those of sighted people. The information which the visually impaired person receives through the senses of touch, and hearing are more limited and fragmented than visual information. Therefore both the quality and quantity of information needed for wayfinding is likely to differ between sighted and visually impaired people.

([Edwards](#), Ungay and Blades, 1998, 39)

Also, as emerges in 'The Radio Times' of the 1920s, there is the puzzle whether a blind person can translate information from one modality into another - from the solely aural into inner sight and movement, and a puzzle about cognitive mapping, making out the 'mise en scène', for example, of the radio play.

#### 6.2

A renowned philosophical background lies here: the 'Molyneux question' put to the philosopher John Locke in the late seventeenth century by his friend John Molyneux. I give a swift summary. It concerns a man, blind from birth, and his ability to distinguish

by touch, the haptic, between a sphere and a globe. And then, if he gained sight, could he now make them out?

Locke answered no in his 'Essay concerning human understanding' ([Bolton](#), 1992), followed twenty years later by philosopher George Berkeley who concluded that there was no relation at all between sight and touch. There was not 'a common structure for the processing of visual and haptic [touching] information', as Garbis puts it in his commentary on it ([Garbis](#), no date, electronic publication). Garbis also notes that of the barely twenty cases known since of a blind person regaining their sight, 'the American neurologist Oliver Sacks describes just such a case ... in his book "An anthropologist on Mars"'.

### 6.3

It is what cognitive science would call a knowledge problem about shapes, and also it is about the functioning of perceptual systems, plus the experience of perception, along with the multimodality thesis. Further, it is about the difficulties of 'blind-sight patients' as informants. The Molyneux question was an early way of debating internalist versus externalist models of the human sensorium ([4.5](#)). All of this provides a wider context to the blindness trope in radiowriting. [Note to 6.3](#).

In the 1920s, for the propagandistic and other purposes that I have indicated, 'The Radio Times' put its wireless version of the Molyneux question: that this new aural medium was best interpreted and was best to be understood with the unimodal focus and skills of the blind. It was one answer to many questions. This paradigm then trailed a way through review columns in 'The Listener', etc., and into Wade's chapters, answering different needs, and with differing nuances and contexts along the way.

We must also acknowledge that radio listeners' minds are open to the fundamental connection between the aural and the imagination, no matter what their motor abilities.

### 6.2

But radiowriting should experience a paradigm shift in this age of virtual reality (VR), virtual environments (VEs) and immersive virtual bodies or avatars, an age which shifts discussion of uni-modal perception.

The blindness/invisibility debate must include acknowledgement of the subjective, fallible and partial functioning of the ears as sources of information for understanding. Radio broadcasting can also expand and enhance hearing. The microphone and the radio receiving apparatus can be prosthetic devices which collaborate with the body's own deficiencies. (For the phrasing here, I am grateful to [Douane](#), 1993, 5.)

Embodiment is relevant here - the inclusion of the body in cognitive processes - and is derived from Merleau-Ponty. I can only make the briefest of references; and [Langer](#), 1989, 47 talks of how we 'transplant' objects and the tools of our trade into ourselves - we 'incorporate them into the bulk of the body itself'. This has implications for radiowriting about listening-in and our uses of radio reception apparatuses and rapid changes in technology (Internet streaming, the launch of digital interactive radio, etc.).

### 6.3

So finally on the blindness trope. It seemed from the 1920s a firm paradigm that the

listener could reasonably get hold of, a listening strategy in association with other stationary, disciplining procedures linked to the wireless apparatus which were encouraged by the B.B.C. In my article 'Fictional Soundscapes', [Beck](#), 1997b, I began by quoting from 'The Radio Times' of 1928:

The art of listening is to make a selection from the many and varied items of the day. Mark those to which you would listen and attend to them in much the same way as if you were at a public performance. If you are able to dim the lights and prepare your mental attitude for what is coming, you get the full measure of realism every time.

('Letters from a fond Uncle, no 11: Do we listen reasonably? by Sidney Moseley', 'Radio Times' 3 February 1928)

But in the digital age, I find the blindness trope an ungraspable thesis for radiowriting, now, on contemporary listening-in. From the 1920s, it seemed to offer a 'proof' of what it was theoretically constructing - the 'blind' medium. I look for other descriptions of relations between the Radioworld and its listeners, though I admit these relations will never be fully known.

#### 6.4

What is missing in radio is the **human body**, though it is represented. It is that lack, that aporia, that the blindness conundrum engages with. In culture, it could be said that the body is the measure of all things, the sole object of which we have both objective and subjective knowledge. [Napier](#), 1992, 142, in a work on cultural anthropology, claims that body and culture are metaphorically identical, and that the body is the stage for cultural impression and expression.

In some ways, radio can compensate for its blindness and vacuity, for example, by its negotiating between the interior voice (what I call the 'interiorizing' convention in radio drama) and the external, and by paraproxemic effects (the creation of an apparent interpersonal distance between, say, you, the radio listener, and what is within the radio 'frame'). Again, I can only point briefly to these issues.

#### 6.5

But it is a feature of all cultures that some particular ways of thinking and knowing, and of consequent neurological brain adaptations, become predominant, while other techniques are subordinated and alienated ([Napier](#), 1992, xxiv-xxvi); and this is even more important for us radiowriters in the symbolic domains of culture, image-making and the making of art works.

In our own culture we are so open to visual elements (**oculocentrism**), a worldview centered on the 'view', at the expense of or alienation from other aspects of the human sensorium. An alternative mind-set is **logocentrism** - the privileging of speech and language texts, and in radio I have termed this the verbocentric. I have argued elsewhere of radio drama, that radio creates an 'aural paradise', and the radio director operates as 'ideal ears' in an ideal sound universe a paradise ([Beck](#), 1998, 12.7).

#### 6.6

I would add that within the radio programme boundary, the aural perceptual system is

obviously the source of pleasure, and so what is available solely through this medium becomes the predominant mode of cognition and affect. Day-to-day listening and different listening strategies, including ways of avoiding aural fatigue, help to shape further experiences and beliefs across the range of the listener's sensorium.

## 6.7

I have kept with the term **blindness** (in spite of Shingler's 'the notion that radio is the most deficient medium is quite mistaken', 78) and I hope my discussion will show that it allows for contradictions within itself. Although I have ended up on the 'blind' rather than the 'invisible' side, I hope I have contextualised and widened the debate, and related it to other anxieties of the radio industry itself. These latter I believe should be openly declared as intellectual baggage, with the option that an individual radiowriter can declare himself or herself apart from them, to a degree. And also that there are other ways around the problem, particularly through cognitive sciences studies of the human sensorium and Merleau-Ponty's internalist model.

## 6.8

On the other hand, radio being 'blind' or 'invisible' as a topic will never go away, for it is part of our listening-in and its everyday pleasures. Philosophers have a history of asking and answering foundational questions from what are homely in our experiences – Thales and water (the universe's essence), Hume and his billiard balls (doubts about causation) and Marx's table (commodity fetishism). The kitchen radio or Walkman or Internet streaming on the computer join the list for the pondering radiowriter.

Another mystery is why so few radio works, radio plays, features, packages, etc., are about aural perception in itself, whereas so many films, novels and poems are self-reflexive, especially in this post-modernist moment. Perhaps listening-in is both too weighty and too slight, too 'invisible', too 'blind' for focused knowledge on the part of radio practitioners?

## Endnotes

### Note to 1.3

Crary, 1993, 132, in his discussion of the popular 1850s photographic stereoscope, which is held to the eyes, describes how the user is '**disciplined**', that is, subjected to the operational process. I have appropriated the term, especially for discussion of the wireless apparatus technologies of the 1920s and 1930s. [BACK TO DISCUSSION](#) (1.3)

### Note to 6.3

Chalmers, David, 1996, 'Moving Forward on the Problem of Consciousness', raises the larger cognitive sciences issue:

A final theory of human consciousness will almost certainly lie in a

combination of processing details and psychophysical principles: only using both together will the facts about experience be explained.

(2.4, 'Other deflationary approaches')

Consciousness ('where it all comes together', 'our opening to the world') is defined as reportability, binding or integration of the sensory functions, experience, discrimination, etc. [BACK TO DISCUSSION](#) (6.3)

[TOP](#)

## References

(Note that Lewis, Peter and Lewis, Peter M. are different radiowriters. This article is adapted from work in progress, Beck, 1999.)

Arnheim, Rudolf, 1936, *Radio*, translated by Ludwig, Margaret and Read, Herbert, London: Faber & Faber.

Beck, Alan, 1997a, *Radio Acting*, London: A & C Black.

Beck, Alan, 1997b, 'Fictional soundscapes', World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), electronic publication,

<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/WFAE/readings/Listentoradio.html>

Beck, Alan, 1998, 'Point-of-listening in radio drama', *Sound Journal*, electronic publication,

<http://speke.ukc.ac.uk/sais/sound-journal/beck981.html>

Beck, Alan, 1999, *Re-zoning Radio Theory*, electronic book in progress, continuously updated, electronic publication,

<http://speke.ukc.ac.uk/sais/sound-journal/index.html>

Bolton, Martha, 1997, 'The Real Molyneux Question and the Basis of Locke's Answer' in Rogers, G.A.J., *Locke's Philosophy: Content and Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carrier, David, 1987, *Artwriting*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Chalmers, David, 1996, 'Moving Forward on the Problem of Consciousness', electronic publication, <http://ling.ucsc.edu/~chalmers/papers/moving.html>

Chothia, Jean, 1996, *English Drama of the Early Modern Period, 1890-1940*, London: Longman.

Crisell, Andrew, 1986, 1992, 1994, *Understanding Radio*, London: Methuen.

Dickie, George, 1968, 'Art Narrowly and Broadly Speaking', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 5, January.

Douane, May Ann, 1993, 'Technology's Body: Cinematic Vision in Modernity', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 5.2.

Drakakis, John, ed., 1981, *British Radio Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Edwards, Rachel, Ungar, Simon and Blades, Mark, 1998, 'Route Descriptions by Visually Impaired and Sighted Children from Memory and from Maps', *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness* available also as electronic publication,

<http://www.lgu.ac.uk/psychology/ungar/intact/Papers/Edwards1.html>

Esslin, Martin, 1971, 'The mind as stage', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1, 3, 5-11.

Gandelman, Claude, 1991, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Garbis, Christer, no date, 'Spatial Representation and Haptic Mental Rotation', electronic publication,

[http://www.lucs.lu.se/Abstracts/LUCS\\_Studies/LUCS56.html](http://www.lucs.lu.se/Abstracts/LUCS_Studies/LUCS56.html)

Gibson, James J., 1950, *The perception of the visual world*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gibson, James J., 1979, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gronbeck, Bruce E., Farrell, Thomas J. and Soukup, Paul A., 1991, *Media, Consciousness and Culture. Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, London: Sage.

Hughes, Richard, 1924, 1966, *Plays*, London: Chatto and Windus.

Ingold, Tom, 1988, *What Is An Animal?*, London: Routledge.

Langer, M. M., 1989, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: A guide and commentary*, Tallahassee: Florida State University Press.

Lessing, G.E., 1766/1965, *Laokoon*, ed. Reich, Dorothy, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, Peter, ed., 1981, *Radio Drama*, Longman.

Lewis, Peter M. and Booth, Jerry, 1989, *The Invisible Medium. Public, Commercial and Community Radio*, London: MacMillan.

McLuhan, Marshal, 1967, ***The Medium is the Massage***, New York: Bantam.

Merleau-Ponty, M., 1945, *Phenomenologie de la Perception*, translated 1962 by Smith, Colin, *Phenomenology of perception*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

McLeish, R., 1994, *Radio Production*, 3radio drama edn, Oxford: Focal Press.

Napier, A.D., 1992, *Foreign Bodies: Performance, Art and Symbolic Anthropology*, California: University of California Press.

Raban, Jonathan, 1981, 'Icon or symbol: the writer and the "medium"', chapter 5 in Lewis, 1981.

Raffman, Diana, 1993, *Language, Music and Mind*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Scannell, Paddy, ed., 1991, *Broadcast Talk*, Sage.

Shingler, Martin and Wieringa, Cindy, 1998, *On Air. Methods and Meanings of Radio*, London: Arnold.

Sobchack, Vivian, 1992, *The Address of the eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sweeney, Kevin W., no date, 'The Persistence of Vision: The Re-Emergence of Phenomenological Theories of Film', *Film and Philosophy*, vol. 1, electronic publication, [http://www.hanover.edu/philos/film/vol\\_01/sweeney.htm](http://www.hanover.edu/philos/film/vol_01/sweeney.htm)

Wade, David, 1981a, 'British radio drama since 1960', chapter 8 in Drakakis, 1981.

Wade, David, 1981b, 'Popular radio drama', chapter 6 in Lewis, 1981.

Wilby, P. and Conroy, A., 1994, *The Radio Handbook*, London and New York: Routledge.

[TOP](#)