

# *Introduction: radio modernisms: features, cultures and the BBC*

Article

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# Introduction

## Radio Modernisms: Features, Cultures and the BBC

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An article published in *Media History* 24.2 (May 2018),  
a special issue on the theme of 'Radio Modernisms: Features, Cultures and the BBC'

This special issue arises from a one-day conference on the topic of 'Radio Modernisms: Features, Cultures and the BBC' that we held on 19 May 2016 at the British Library, with the support of the Communications and Media Research Institute at the University of Westminster. Almost all contributors to this issue gave papers at the conference; others who spoke or who had planned to speak (Hugh Chignell, Henry Mead, Kate Murphy and Paul Wilson) enriched the discussions in welcome ways, and we remain grateful for their contributions. The talk by Paul Wilson, Curator of Radio at the British Library, brought the significant issue of archives—and their preservation, curation and accessibility—centre stage; his championing of the series of public listening events ('Louis MacNeice: Radio Writer and Producer', curated by Amanda Wrigley) across May-June 2016 meant that the conference's papers and discussions were followed by an act of communal listening to, and discussion of, a little-known example of MacNeicean radio.

The conference was attended by around fifty participants from richly diverse areas of expertise including practice-based research and the historical study of architecture, broadcasting, classics, drama, imperialism, literature, modernism, musicology, radio, sound, television and transnationalism. The enthusiastic engagement of participants across the day underscored the sense that 'radio modernisms' as an idea represented a productive meeting-point for the exploration of common questions from a broad range of perspectives. This not only indicated a hot interdisciplinary topic but it also mirrored distinctive aspects of the conference's particular focus—the programmes, aesthetics, personnel and creative practices of the BBC Features Department in the middle stretch of the twentieth century.

In truth, we did not anticipate that this topic would resonate so widely. The idea for the conference had arisen from a specific desire to engage two scholarly constituencies more closely in dialogue with each other. We had observed with excitement the recent flowering of interest from scholars of English literature in 'literary radio' (for want of definitive terminology). The radio programmes of interest to these scholars either adapt and realise in sound modernist works in print, bring to light the

radio writings of canonical and more marginal modernist authors, or are radiogenic creations (often feature programmes) that exploit radio technology in a way that engages with the concerns and aesthetics of literary modernism and modernity itself. But the focus is often concentrated on the text and the writer. The second constituency comprises broadcasting historians in the UK—especially those, like ourselves, who have literary backgrounds and are actively researching the literary cultures and modernist aesthetics of BBC radio in the middle decades of the twentieth century. This constituency is rather diffusely spread across a variety of institutions, research centres and departments (of, for example, communications, cultural studies, education, English literature, modern history, media history, media studies, television and theatre). On the one hand, then, the practical aim of the conference was to enhance the sense of connection amongst those based in the UK with research interests in BBC Radio's imaginative programming from the mid-twentieth century; and, on the other, the intellectual project was to explore how we may best share and learn from each others' methodologies and sets of expertise with the aim of strengthening scholarship across disciplinary boundaries.

The conference was held at the ten-year point since the 2006 publication of Todd Avery's landmark book *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938* (and we were delighted that he was able to give the keynote address). A number of book-length studies by literary modernist scholars followed: for example, many of the essays in Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle and Jane Lewty's 2009 collection *Broadcasting Modernism* and Matthew Feldman, Erik Tønning and Henry Mead's 2014 *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era* are concerned with modernist auteur engagements with radio, as are Melissa Dinsman's 2015 *Modernism at the Microphone*, Emily C. Bloom's 2016 *The Wireless Past* and David Addyman, Matthew Feldman and Erik Tønning's *Samuel Beckett and BBC Radio* (2017, eds). Without neglecting their fundamentally important skills of literary criticism and textual analysis, literary scholars are increasingly seeking to anchor their work more broadly. Bloomsbury's *Historicizing Modernism* series (in which Feldman, Tønning and Mead's 2014 volume and Dinsman's 2015 monograph are published) emphasizes the importance of historical sources beyond the modernist text itself. Another recent collection, Debra Rae Cohen and Michael Coyle's special issue of *Modernist Cultures*, titled 'Broadcast Traces / Tracing Broadcasting: Modernism and Radio' (2015), perceptively highlights the need for modernists interested in literary radio to 'move beyond the simple limning of relations between single authors and radio' as they introduce new work that is intended to '[trace] plural histories, multiple conversations, and feedback loops' (2). The latest monograph on the shelf of literary radio tomes, published almost simultaneously with this special issue, is Ian Whittington's 2018 *Writing the Radio War: Literature, Politics and the BBC, 1939-1945*. Whittington conforms to the customary one author per chapter arrangement, but seeks to represent the 'broad literary coalition' of wartime radio writers and in doing so navigates cross-currents of broader cultures and politics assuredly (4). *Writing the Radio War* is about literary radio but its foundations are much broader.

This flourishing interest in literary radio revives aspects of a rich seam of scholarship from the 1980s that had been foundational for our own research. For example, *British Radio Drama*, edited by John Drakakis in 1981, offered essays by Christopher Holme on Louis MacNeice, Peter Lewis on Dylan Thomas, Donald A. Low on Susan Hill and Dorothy L. Sayers, Frances Gray on Giles Cooper, Roger Savage on Henry Reed, Katharine Worth on Samuel Beckett and David Wade on radio drama from the 1960s. *Radio Drama*, edited by Peter Lewis, focused less on individual auteurs, with contributors (English literary scholars mainly, with some practitioners) bringing a more generic, theoretical or practice-based lens to the topic of drama, fiction and features. In 1982, Ian Rodger's *Radio Drama* brought his practice-based and critical expertise to an interpretation of the development of the form across three decades from the early 1920s. Kate Whitehead's 1989 monograph, *The Third Programme: A Literary History*, offered a tightly integrated discussion of the institutional contexts for the work of poets, playwrights and novelists for the BBC's Third Programme network, 1946–1970. The qualities that these works from the 1980s have in common include a serious engagement with creative processes within institutional frameworks, the aesthetics and intermediality of literary radio and an assessment with the evidence for programmes and programme-making preserved in the BBC Written Archives Centre. They offer, in short, valuable historiographical models which were soon underpinned by excellent cultural and social histories of pre-war broadcasting: D. L. LeMahieu's 1988 *A Culture for Democracy* and Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff's 1991 *A Social History of British Broadcasting*.

Those currently engaged in historical research on literary radio who style themselves as historians of broadcasting, culture, media, society, etc, do engage in close analysis of programmes (including the text, whether existing as audio record or script) but they are keen to decentre that text through the application of historicist methodologies to the investigation of its contexts, such as collaborative practices amongst producers and other creative personnel involved in realising scripts through sound; to investigate the institutional frameworks and policies informing programme choices; and to assess the properties and grammar of the soundscape itself which (when extant and available for researchers to access) conveys a fuller sense of the original audience's sensory experience of a programme than any script alone can offer. In broadcasting history more generally, there has been attention paid to listenerships (Kate Lacey's 2013 *Listening Publics*; Amanda Wrigley's 2015 *Greece on Air*), national identity (Thomas Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain*, 2010), transnationalism (Michele Hilmes, *Network Nations*, 2011), the soft diplomacy and cold war politics of overseas broadcasting (Simon Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, 2012; Alban Webb, *London Calling*, 2014), the role of women at the BBC (Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 2016) and architecture and the built environment to 1945 (Shundana Yusaf, *Broadcasting Buildings*, 2014), to name just a few recent perspectives that illuminate the rich heterogeneity of radio's histories and deepen our knowledge of broadcasting, and the BBC in particular. Current work promises to add welcome depth to the still persistent perception (in some quarters) that broadcasting history is monolithically 'institutional'.

## Features, Cultures, Modernisms

The energy and experimentalism of the BBC Features Department in itself gives the lie to any assertion that the BBC, as a site of cultural production, was in any way monolithic; histories of its output need therefore to be similarly flexible, nuanced and grounded in its multifarious cultural contexts and intermedial relationships. Of course, what is often referred to as the 'Features Department', referring mainly to its post-war incarnation, did not spring fully formed from the corridors of Broadcasting House. As early as 1928, the *Radio Times* used a full-page article to introduce its readers to the feature programme: a mixture of music, drama and talk, constituting 'an original form of expression, peculiar to broadcasting'.<sup>1</sup> In the 1920s, such features were a result of artistic experiments in the direction of producing radiogenic drama, as distinct from dramas that were to an extent derivative of the stage. As a result of this formal experimentation, there was, as producer Rayner Heppenstall noted, 'no short answer to the much-asked question: "What is a feature programme?"'; he himself came up with perhaps the best answer by characterising features as 'anything put out by a producer in Features Department'.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that although production staff were proud to stake a claim to the feature as 'purely a BBC invention',<sup>3</sup> other national broadcasters were similarly engaged in pushing the boundaries of radiogenic form (compare, for example, the tradition of German *Horspiel*).

The generic boundaries of the feature form are fluid and generously adaptable to the meaning a writer and producer intended to be communicated through sound. Practically speaking, features utilise imaginative combinations of speech, drama, music, location recording and sound effects in order to suggest meaning, drawing selectively on, for example, the entire range of possible speech forms and arranging them artfully to prick listeners' imaginations. Features may look, on the face of it, like documentaries, radio plays, radiophonic engagement with modernist poetry, wartime propaganda pieces, travelogues, social history, journalism, etc, but their modes of communication are protean. In the years before the sustained use of actuality and stereo sound became commonplace, for example, many features contained little location recording and sat more within the parameters of dramatic convention rather than in a format comprised of narrated links and contributor clips intercut with sound. The vernacular of features in the time period covered by this volume created rich imaginative worlds by embracing the fluidity of the in-between, interstitial, territory inhabited by the genre itself—one that straddled the boundaries of realism and drama, fact and fiction.

The longstanding significance of the creative innovation of early feature writers including Tyrone Guthrie, Lance Sieveking and Mary Hope Allen is acknowledged by the post-war head of features Laurence Gilliam in his 1950 book *BBC Features*. He discusses the important origins of the Features Department in the form of the Research Unit which in the 1920s explored the dramatic and artistic possibilities of the medium; that unit developed into the Features Unit which, together with the Drama Unit, formed

a department under the leadership of Val Gielgud. After the war, the Features Unit was granted the autonomy of a Department, which was led by Laurence Gilliam until his death in 1964, soon after which it was disbanded. Institutional origin myths reveal only so much, however; perhaps features are best understood as products of creative encounters within ‘contact zones’ made possible by the BBC, ‘where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other’.<sup>4</sup> These ‘cultures’—plural—include artistic, social and political dimensions that are entangled in multiple ways with those of modernism. The title of this collection also seeks to embrace ‘radio modernisms’, plural: it champions the expansive conception of modernism which includes the people and the words of the early twentieth-century literary movement but also radio as a technology, a site of cultural production and impactful on the individual’s experience of daily life.<sup>5</sup> Radio in itself is multiply expressive of many modernities that can be examined through a number of lenses which relate to perceptions and experiences of individual and collective identities (e.g. race, class and gender). The expansive conception is also open to the inherent intermediality of artistic and cultural practices. We adhere to the temporal extension of modernism beyond the Second World War and into the 1950s—the so-called ‘golden age’ of radio when many mid-century writers were deeply engaged with experimentation within broadcast forms. In 1952, Gilliam wrote that ‘the flow of new imaginative creation for radio shows no sign of drying up. It is a heartening thing to find this, among the youngest of art-forms, attracting the creative effort of some of the best of our contemporary writers’.<sup>6</sup>

In navigating the cross-currents of interest amongst scholars from different disciplines, we have sought to ensure that each author’s contribution to this collection has the best chance to speak meaningfully beyond disciplinary boundaries—that is, where possible, engaging with a programme in terms of sound, as a cultural event from a specific moment in time, as team creation, as something heard in its original domestic context and as a cultural work that may have attracted a certain canonical pedigree. This combination of the particular, the contingent and the contextual extends through into this special issue.

Kate Lacey’s opening essay considers the printed schedule for pre-WWII radio broadcasts (published in the *Radio Times*) to be a kind of modernist text in itself. Its fragmentary fluidity (‘the national stream of consciousness’) is said to capture and mediate the contradictions of modernity—and for all, with listeners imagined as ‘co-authors’, enabled to transcend class, gender and social stratifications by the progressive potential of the medium. Todd Avery locates echoes of nineteenth-century aestheticism in the artistic innovation of writer-producers of early radiogenic dramas such as Lance Sieveking and Tyrone Guthrie whose experiments in drama from the 1920s established a rich and welcoming cultural environment for modernist writers such as Beckett, Joyce and Woolf.

Alex Goody moves the discussion into another formative period for the evolution of features when, during the Second World War, the BBC engaged writers to fashion features to counteract Nazi propaganda. Goody explores the moral questions arising for BBC staff concerning the affective power of the voice when used to stand for historical

figures in representations of real events in wartime features. Leonie Thomas explores how the poetic voice of the Jamaican poet Una Marson became more experimental as a result of working within the currents of transnational modernism at the BBC, in the heart of the British empire, from 1939 to 1946. Her experience of racism, however, limited her broadcasting career at the pivotal point when—with *Caribbean Voices*—she had helped to construct a platform for other Caribbean writers. Alex Lawrie evaluates the evidence for listeners' engagement with modernist innovation and aesthetics in literary radio programmes broadcast in the 1940s and 1950s, with case studies including a talk seeking to demystify Virginia Woolf, radio presentations of David Jones' high modernist epic poem *In Parenthesis* and Herbert Read's verse play *Moon's Farm*. Certain paths across Louis MacNeice's work as poet, radio writer and producer have been well traced, but Aasiya Lodhi explores new territory in her discussion of how the geomodernist dimensions of several of his boundary-crossing travel features signify the 'reshaped global order' at the moment when Britain, having moved through the Second World War, faced the disintegration of its empire.

E. Charlotte Stevens and John Wyver investigate the intermedial extension of aspects of the radio feature genre into the poetic mode of television documentaries made by Denis Mitchell and Philip Donnellan in the 1950s and 1960s, drawing on their prior experience working on radio features. Stevens and Wyver argue that these producers were able to transfer and transform distinctive aesthetics of 'pure radio' into highly effective visual forms. Also on an intermedial theme, Amanda Wrigley's essay charts the rich afterlives of what are perceived to be 'classic' literary features, such as Edward Sackville-West's *The Rescue*, Louis MacNeice's *The Dark Tower* and Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, considering the significance of repeat performances on the radio, realizations in other performance media and, especially, their adaptation into print form in the construction of a sense of a 'canon' of radio features. We are indebted to David Hendy for drawing together some of the pertinent strands in this collection and casting them outwards for scholars of all stripes to interweave.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> B. E. N., "Feature Programmes".

<sup>2</sup> Heppenstall, *Portrait*, 26, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Bridson, *Prospero*, 80.

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<sup>4</sup> Ranasinha, “South Asian Broadcasters,” 62, who borrows from Mary Louise Pratt’s usage of the term as a space ‘where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath’ (34).

<sup>5</sup> Pace Friedman (“Definitional Excursions,” 513) who warns that the plural may suggest heterogeneity without always delivering it.

<sup>6</sup> Gilliam, “The Radio Feature,” 11. On ‘mid-century modernism’ as the most appropriate term with regard to modernist aesthetics in media history, see Bloom, *The Wireless Past*, 162–3.

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