

Thinking Out Loud

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‘Thinking radio’ could mean a number of different things. It could be taken in a vaguely, warmly complimentary sense, as thoughtful radio, or thinking persons’ radio, or radio that makes you think. It could also refer readily enough to the act of thinking about radio in general, assessing its conditions, possibilities and limits. The doubled sense that I would like it to have is this: thinking about the kind of thinking that radio affords. This would itself imply or include the following two subheadings: thinking about the kinds of thinking in general radio can represent or effect; and reflecting on the question of whether there is a distinctive kind of thinking for which radio might be specially apt, or might even be unique to it. If there is a way in which radio can think, is there also a special variety of thinking, a ‘radio thinking’, that radio seems to offer?

I want to think here about one particular aspect of this, namely the sonorous dimension that thinking can sometimes have. I have called this Thinking Out Loud, but might equally have called it the Noise of Thinking. What happens to thinking, what kind of thinking might it be, when it is done in audible form? (Does this necessarily mean in ways that involve the use of the voice? I think I think so, but this may a question we might wish not to settle too early, which is why this is not called ‘The Voice of Thought’).

The very phrase ‘thinking out loud’ suggests a slight inversion of expectation. We sometimes catch ourselves thinking out loud unawares, and may even feel moved to apologise for it: sorry, I was thinking out loud; perhaps you will allow me to think out loud for a while. This might imply that the natural or default condition of thinking is to be silent. We are accustomed to assume and oft-times also to affirm that you should think first and speak later, that speaking is the articulation or utterance of processes of thinking that have taken place earlier and elsewhere. This in turn might suggest that the articulation of thought comes at the end and as the outcome of a process of refinement and clarification, the forming of definite proposition or sequence of propositions from a more diffuse set of possibilities or first drafts. If speech is thought to emerge from a process of thinking that is supposed always to have taken place already, then the utterance of thoughts might be understood as the emergence of thought or thoughts out of thinking, as form out of indefiniteness, or signal out of noise.

There is little doubt that speaking, writing and other formalisations of thought often serve to make a potential thought actual, giving a diffuse semi-reflection some definite form. But the very definiteness of articulation can also provide a kind of embodiment for the thought, something therefore that is in some sense accessory to it, not of its essence. The articulation can become not just the articulation of the thought, but the articulation of the thought – the thought, translated, displaced, disposed, deposed, put out, or set at a slight angle to itself. Something extra happens

when thinking is given voice, something which makes the articulation in some sense extraneous to the thought which is concealed within or behind it. The articulation delivers the thought that would not be there without it, and could not be judged to have preceded the articulation until the articulation has first come about. Articulation is in this sense a self-originating aftermath.

It might be possible to call this the event of thinking – for it is indeed something like thought’s appearance or emergence. But the word event has so regularly been used in recent years to evoke that which comes out of nowhere, that which marks and makes a complete break with whatever has come before, that I want to press the claims of another term. The kinds of utterance and speech-action I have just been evoking it, may, I propose, be called the *occasion* of thought. I mean by this not just the specific date and setting in which the thought has been articulated, the loc. cit. of the thought, but the factual situation of the thought, its worldly condition, as something that falls out (occasion is from *occidere*, to fall), something that comes about, an incident, an opportunity.

Radio has the reputation for giving us disembodied voices. But exactly because the voices we hear are dissevered from visible bodies, they become, so to speak densely saturated with embodiment. To listen to radio thinking is to listen to thinking taken up into this kind of radiophonic corporeality. This is not the same as ordinary corporeality, though it sounds identical to it. Radiophonic corporeality may be characterised as the sound of general embodiment, the sound of having to have a particular kind of embodiment, a particular kind of haecceity, of the hic-et-nunc. The radio voice is not simply in place, in the way in which all sounds are sounds in and for a particular location. It is not just auditory Dasein, being-there, being-there. It is being-there squared, or raised to a demonstrative condition. It is the dispositif of Dasein, or *mis-en-scène* of being-there. It is a parallel to my condition of necessary contingency. It is not in the least necessary for me to be me: I might just as well have been you or her or him. But it is absolutely necessary for me to have been somebody or other. The radio voice is similarly caught, or held, or spread, between these conditions of necessity and accident. It is the sound of having to make a sound, of having to enter into the incidence of sound. It is for this reason that it allows for the occasions of thought, the thinking of thought’s occasionality.

Am I in all this, speaking simply about the recording and broadcasting of acts of thought, the ‘think-pieces’ and thoughts for the day that fill up the odd corners of Radios 3 and 4? I certainly don’t look for radio to be given over wholly and solely to such thinking. Radio is good for lots of things – for argument, for lament, for protest, for comedy, for storytelling, for just nattering. But I would like to think that there might also, here and there, be a kind of radio that would be good to think with.

If one were to look for the proleptic evidence of radio thinking, it would very likely be found in David Hume, and in particular in a passage in which he reflects on the question of personal identity. Hume famously casts doubt on Descartes’s assertion that it is not possible for me to doubt the reality of my self, the thinking thing that is the very existence of my existence. He asserts that, whenever he attempts to seize the self that is supposed by Descartes to be so immediately and indubitably present to consciousness, he is always diverted by the particular acts of perception in which the self is always at any time engaged. These perceptions cannot be the self, because they are endlessly variable, and the self is, by definition, unvarying and identical with itself.

And yet, when there are no perceptions, as when I am deeply asleep, 'so long am I insensible of myself and may truly be said not to exist'. As for somebody who insists that he does in fact have knowledge and experience of himself, Hume says: 'He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me'. As a philosophy tutor memorably paraphrased Hume 'Monsieur Descartes tells me that I have a self which is immediately available to my consciousness and of the existence of which I can have no doubt. I have to tell Monsieur Descartes that I've had a look: and there's nothing there'.

The marvellous point about this argument is that it is at once a clarification, a marvellously composed and well-tempered demonstration and the spinning out of a paradox. The reason I have been committing the passage to memory is that I want to have available to me not the thought itself (I have had that available to me since that Wadham tutorial thirty years ago), but the thinking of it, the occasion of it. As we read this, and more importantly, as we imagine hearing it spoken, we hear a voice undoing itself, constituting and sustaining itself on the calm assurance of its non-existence. Hume even provides a kind of *mis-en-scene*, or *mis-en-abime* for this staging of the self:

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different, whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which it is composed.

It might be thought that I am thinking only about the broadcasting of monologic meditations, the structured following out of reasons and arguments, or the articulated dialogue of the mind with itself. It is not, I think, necessary for such sounded out reflections simply to silence everything in their vicinity. Rudolf Arnheim complained that sound cinema, far from giving a voice to what had previously been mute, in fact silenced the screen, which had previously accorded no privilege to the speaking voice, so that every visible thing 'finds tongue to fling out broad its name'. With the coming of synchronised sound, protests Arnheim, everything visible was organised round the spectacle of speech – the camera and viewer became fixated upon the movement of lips, and everything else on the screen became mute, inert, invisible or merely attendant.

Something like the reverse applies to radio. When one hears something other than a voice on radio, when the voice is accompanied by noise, the noise starts up into the condition of voice. What you hear on radio is never, as it might be in cinema or TV, the sound of something, but rather a thing entering into sound. We hear auditory occasions and occasionings. Radio sound is self-constituting, self-framing, self-announcing, self-sustaining; there can be background sound on radio, but there can be no background for sound to be in. Every noise is, so to speak, uttered, set out in sound. Radio is panophonic, hears the voices of things everywhere. This means, I think, that the conversations that are possible between sounds and thinking voices are richer, more textured and dimensioned than they are in film and TV, in which it

is very hard to get anything seen to operate other than in the mode of demonstration or illustration of what is being said - 'here, take a look'.

I have been speaking of thinking as a more or less structured kind of thought. But there are many different modes and moods of thought. Just as radio is good for lots of different kinds of things, so thinking radio can embody many different modes of thinking – all the way from formal reasoning and disputation through to ruminative doodling. In fact, I have come more and more to feel that there is profit in a much fuzzier model of what thinking involves, one that attests to all the fuzziness that attends even the most disciplined and focussed act of thinking. Structured or methodical thinking represents itself to itself as a deduction or abstraction, the following out of a single, progressive line. But this kind of thinking in fact very quickly runs out of resources. One needs fuel to think with, and this fuel is often provided by some foreign body, some indigestible principle, some quasi-object, around which thinking can cling, and which can act to hold the thought together in some way. It is for this reason that I have suggested that all thinking requires the intermediary of some kind of 'thinking thing', some accessory or support for the thinking, which otherwise is as spectral and evanescent as Hume's non-entity. Radio is the kind of imaginary theatre, the non-space in which thinking nevertheless finds a kind of room, into which to expand, with space enough to be able to turn on itself. Radio is itself this kind of space of reflection, of resonance, an imaginary theatre in which thought can turn over on and partly meet up with itself. Radio is an example of the kind of imaginary cohering object, the integument or container, that W.R. Bion thought was necessary for anyone to be able to think with.

Of course radio prides itself on the opportunities it offers for dialogue. I find myself less interested in the stagings of dialogue than perhaps I should be, precisely because there are now so many familiar and frankly rather restrictive conventions for staging such dialogues. It is in setting up dialogues that radio starts to come closest to TV, which operates according to the Lyotardian principle that nothing can happen unless it has in fact already actually happened. Dialogue tends to mean and require the distribution of fixed and predetermined positions, which tends to act as the deterrence of thinking.

I would like us to go beyond the broadcast function of radio – the idea that the function of radio is to amplify or enlarge access to events and experiences. Radio can perform this broadcasting function perfectly well, but this does not have to be all that it ever does. Radio can also encompass and occasion the act and fact of thinking itself.