

A radio d'auteur: the documentaire de creation of Kaye Mortley

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Car derrière tout documentaire de création, il doit y avoir un auteur.

[Behind all *documentaire de création* there must be an author.]

Kaye Mortley (Mortley, 2009)

My first formal interview with Kaye Mortley occurred over ten years ago. Although she was still a regular contributor to ABC Audio Arts and Features on Radio National at that time, she no longer was living in her country of birth. After a few crucial years producing for the ABC's national cultural radio network – Radio 2, now known as Radio National – and playing a key role in a renaissance that was to occur from the mid 1970s in feature and documentary making in ABC radio, Mortley packed her bags for good (although fortunately not her microphones) relocating to France in 1981.

It's interesting here I think to recount an origins story from that first interview I recorded with her in Paris 1994, and described in more detail in later interviews. This story reveals not only how one might posit/reposit the idea of an *auteur* or *auteurism* in radio – terms one mostly associates with cinema – but it will also shed light on an important international documentary tradition within broadcast radio, for the most part obscured, overlooked or underestimated by critics and historians of media, radio and the media arts. The forms of documentary discussed here constitute an important strand of what has become a specialised field of largely *auteur* radio making (with multiple trajectories and genealogies). However, this strand of documentary feature production might better be encountered in terms of “approach”, rather than as a distinct genre of radio. And it is in this expanded sense of audio documentary that I come to the life's work and oeuvre of Kaye Mortley, which found its first momentum in the changing ABC radio of the 1970s.

A first listening

What is a radio program? Being in love and following your instincts.

René Farabet, long time Director of the *atelier de création radiophonique*, France Culture (Mortley, 2002)

With any genre, one needs to see other films, to have a cinematic culture, not in order to imitate, but to become aware of the level you must reach (Joris Ivens 1964 in Delmar, 1979:115).

When Mortley chanced on a research assistant's job in radio with ABC Radio Drama and Features in 1974, after living in France for many years completing a Doctorate at the University of Strasbourg and working briefly for Radio Australia in the French service based in Sydney, she was given a task that would seem outrageous (for its luxury) to anyone working in radio today. As she recounts: “They offered me a job... just 3 days a week, but for 2 years all I basically did was sit around and listen to their overseas tapes... I had to write short reports on them. And I suppose this was the way I discovered everything” (Madsen 2002a).

At the time of this origin story Mortley is recounting, Richard Connolly, then Head of Drama and Features, was recently returned from a tour of European cultural radio courtesy of a Churchill Fellowship. He claims this to be the first time any ABC radio producer had gone to Europe to survey current forms/practice (Connolly 1982). After six months in France, Germany, Italy and the UK (1971), Connolly brought home hours of radio recordings from programmes he'd encountered, and was much inspired to create a new kind of cultural radio programme for the national network, Radio 2.

He'd been most impressed by the new forms of feature and performance work he'd heard and witnessed in production in France, Germany and Italy, in particular the long form “feature” and radiophonic or “acoustic film”¹ which, by then, were using new mixing and editing techniques (including stereo), and making great use of “original ton” (from the German: original sound) or “wild sound” actuality recordings. Upon urging from then Controller of Radio 2, Arthur Wyndam (1972), Connolly was given the chance to rejuvenate the tired schedules of Radio 2, launching an audacious new evening program

(*Sunday Night Radio 2*) on the national network in March of 1973. This program he says, in its spaciousness and approach to forms, was directly modelled on the three and half hour experiment running since 1969 on France Culture: the *atelier de creation radiophonique* (hereafter referred to as ACR or *atelier*. Trans.: workshop for radiophonic creation).

Connolly had spent weeks with the *atelier* and its founding Director, Alain Trutat during his Churchill sojourn (Madsen, 2003b; Connolly, 1982). Importantly for the new program, Connolly was inspired to mix genres and forms, breaking old boundaries between documentaries and drama, performance and interviews, talks and music. Not only did this mix old “block” specialist genres with the new “flow” programming formats of music and “featureless” popular radio (Hendy, 2000; Barrell, 2000), it also had the effect of opening the possibility for new ways of approaching listeners – giving them listening “itineraries”, as the ACR was doing. It also introduced new access to the auditory world as a creative and revelatory material in its own right, in ways not disassociated from that of moving *son-image* documentary, and particularly the *mise en scène* of the “pro-filmic” as captured by camera (and sometimes) microphone from life “sur le vif”.

A “feature” or documentary however was no longer to be thought of as something you settled down to listen to with utmost attention as you tuned into your altar-like Radiola wireless. From its very inception the ACR proposed the journeying-like interweaving of forms and content (often on a theme), so one might follow the broadcast at leisure (as background or foreground) creating an alternation between heightened states of attention and reverie, as later Director of the ACR René Farabet, would describe the new more pleasurable listening experience he was aiming for. If certain moments or threads of story were to be missed in this presentation, no matter, the aim was not didactic; and new more sinuous, circular or musical structures would be the result. “From the beginning, the project was about managing a space of liberty in the heart of a station that had to submit to program formatting”, Farabet wrote. “We wanted to privilege the wandering, unraveling function of the radio, rather than its informative or pedagogic function.” (René Farabet, 1994: 15 Author Trans; Madsen, 2005a).

But where does this idea come from “to propose long voyages, wanderings of two or three hours”? (René Farabet 1994) Farabet answers his own question: “It was about working directly with sound material which would lead to the abandonment of pre-existing forms and divisions” (ibid). And this was necessarily related to the sensibility of the time: “the fever of the moment” (ibid). “Also we wanted to be a part of, in harmony with, other creative research effected in other domains, such as writing and the cinema” (ibid). Farabet cites examples of this in the “multiplication of points of view” (ibid), and the “diversity of approaches” (ibid) which became a characteristic of the program. There was to be “an explosion (*une éclatement*) of themes and motifs”, an “opening out of the radio text” leading to “the establishment of a “*dramaturgie sonore*” specific to each program, with “stories delivered from all didacticism” (all ibid). Recalling the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Farabet described the new approach as “rhizomatic expression” and “a cognitive instrument of discovery” (ibid). Ambitiously, this work might “amplify the associative functioning of thought... one’s ears becoming ‘re/researching antennas’ [*antennes chercheuses*]...or instruments for a curious listening” – enabling the listener “to act artistically on the world” (ibid).

Perhaps even accidentally here, this new almost utopian approach to an entire program offering might have been the trigger for some of the experiments with the more reflexive, performative and “*vérité*” documentary approaches adopted by the *atelier*, evident for some years in cinema and encountered by Connolly in Paris. (I use the term *vérité* in its French sense, as first proposed after Dziga Vertov by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in relation to the self reflexive *cinéma vérité*, not as it mutated into the American documentary school, Direct Cinema.) Connolly described some of his first impressions of a three-hour opus feature from the ACR on the jazz musician Charlie Parker for example, which he later passed on to his new recruit Mortley on “Sunday Night Radio 2” for audition: “It was so rich, so sound rich! The whole idea of listening, and being on several levels at once...it was all quite mind blowing.” (Madsen 2003b) And writing of his time at Radio France with the *atelier* in his Churchill Report, Connolly confirms:

Of most interest to me were the programs of the *atelier de creation radiophonique*... This three hour program may consist of a single work, or more often a number of works... (talk, documentary, music, poetry) all on a particular person or hovering around a particular theme – but suggestively, paying due attention to the fact that radio is an associative medium and operates at various levels like a poem (Connolly, 1972).

The Charlie Parker program brings together a wild mix of music and interviews and archives composed as a kind of improvised jazz frenzy, a whirlwind of references — the man's life, vignettes recorded, actuality in New York, commentary,

quotations... a rhapsodic homage. The ACR's "Charlie Parker" still sits today unassuming in its 3 AGFA reel to reel tape boxes in a rarely opened cupboard, part of a "working archive" available to Performance and Features producers at Radio National in Sydney. These, and other tapes discovered from this collection (ACR), remain as an almost silenced memory of Connolly's visit in 1971, and also of the hours of listening labour Mortley devoted to these imports. The program does not exist in the official ABC Archive, nor is it catalogued there as yet, remaining in its original French boxes, without English annotation – its provenance and influence largely unrecognised by a new generation of radio producers unaware of its historical role in the formation of their craft.

But returning to that time of "éclatement" in radio: fortuitously out of that atmosphere of renewal and discovery Mortley was soon to discover her calling. She had arrived back just at the right time to benefit from this new ABC receptivity to European experiment and the types of programming directly influenced by the ACR and trialled on Connolly's *Sunday Night Radio 2*. In retrospect this period of renaissance at the ABC – happening in Radio Current Affairs and Talks also, and in evidence when the ABC launched its daring youth radio experiment "2JJ" – would mark a key moment in her apprenticeship as a radio *auteur*. This "first listening" was to be her "radiophonic education" (Mortley 2005), her first immersion into this new world of "radiophonic film"² and acoustic exploratory features. And it was only after spending the next stage of an "apprenticeship" at the ACR thanks to a fellowship she was awarded from the French Government (Madsen 2002a) that she would come to know these expressive and revelatory *auteur* features as *documentaires de création*. Welcomed into the fold at *France Culture* in 1974 by Alain Trutat and René Farabet, she worked and observed the ACR for one year. (In this time she won a scholarship to observe feature-making at the Finnish national radio and there also produce her own "radio film" after journeying to the northern region of "Lapland").

A radio d'auteur

[T]he things that really grabbed me. They were the more documentary things like *filmes radiophoniques*, *acoustique*, ...and I've started to say this recently: where "the sense is the sound and the sound makes sense" (Mortley in Madsen, 2002a).

What Mortley was listening to in the beginning of her lone apprenticeship at the ABC, and as Connolly encountered and wrote about, offered the possibility of a very different approach to radiophonic and documentary expression. Here was something quite unexpected, and more to do with the acoustic traces gathered by a producer-author-writer with a roving microphone "*en plein air*". These traces, when carefully cut and mixed onto (then) magnetic tape, and forming their own *mise-en-scène* (or *mise-en-ondes*) would offer the producer and program team a challenge of a new kind. They could come very close to reality, yet be far from what we have come to regard as journalistic reportage. This was not a transparent conduit to the "real", although these audio "films" frequently possessed the ability to transport the listener (offering a kind of metaphysics) to new worlds made of sound and silence... and worlds not the poorer because they lacked images. Rather, and in keeping with radio's earlier expressive drama, feature and documentary traditions, the sound could conjure mental images to appeal powerfully and directly to the imagination, while at the same time giving the listener a sense of being "in the scene" at the interior of events. As Branigan explained it: "Sound draws our attention to a particular motion event and thus achieves a greater 'intimacy' than light because it seems to put the spectator directly in touch with a nearby action through a medium of air which traverses space, touching both spectator and represented event" (Branigan 1997: 98).

Musicality could also be important in these radiophonic "*films sonores*" as it continued to be so in similar offerings within the documentary film genre. The Australian critic and writer Barry Hill would refer to Mortley's own later feature work using musical metaphors. Here is what he had to say about one of her radio film "essays", "Stop Over Bangkok", in Melbourne's major broadsheet, *The Age*:

It is another masterpiece by Kaye Mortley, the only Australian I know who has found, in radio, the perfect artistic medium for the expression of an exceptional sensibility. Mortley uses the airwaves as other artists use paint or words or music. In effect she uses sound analogously to all of those mediums. Always personal (sometimes excruciatingly subjective), she can transform her own acoustic space into symphonies (1989: 8).

The grain in the voice

It was the frequently personal nature of these programs marked by the grain of the voice of an *auteur*, which attracted Mortley – in opposition to something like reportage or journalism. This *auteur* is usually the producer-director. The French adopted *metteur en ondes* as a term (Trans.: putting into [the] waves) after *metteur-en-scène*, which in cinema refers to the director also, but this *auteur* can be multiple as when she has collaborated with René Farabet, or a variety of artists such as the German Jochen Gertz, or with her daughter Anna, or with the eminent Franco-Russian writer Nathalie Sarraute, or even with her “subjects” – the participants in these intensely worked acoustically rendered universes. They too participate in the weaving and weft of authorship, which is these recordings – even if the signature remains unmistakably Mortley’s. In an interview, in *Ear Magazine* (1987), for example, Mortley described how, “even for outdoor recordings I prefer to use ‘studio’ mikes (Neumann U87, for instance) because they can reconstitute a sound which is larger than life, and more detailed: plastic, transparent” (Mortley 1987: 8).

And these “voices” never appear disincarnate, but carry traces of the time, flesh and breath that carried them, even as Mortley’s surprising choice of studio precision microphones for field recordings and attention to fine editing appears at first to render the voice without its coughs, gaffs, lip smacks or bodily noises. Indeed, I would argue in offering them to us in this way, her labour suggests an ethics as much as an aesthetic – based on an ecology of voice. Perhaps more than any other radio producer too, she has translated the material of others – and it is always identifiable I believe. In adapting the creations of a number of recognized radio *auteurs* (into French or English), she allows this work to continue to live and be heard in a polyphonous way beyond its linguistic and cultural boundaries. We must understand here how radio works of creation could not be subtitled as cinema (there was no visible text), and thus Mortley was contributing another kind of co-authorship here through a new poetics and ethics of radiophonic translation, helping to “give voice” to non anglo and francophone material – internationalising this field more generally and in another way following that already initiated by the German feature producer and Director of the International Feature Conference (IFC), Peter Leonard Braun (Madsen 2005b).

Mortley was drawn to this work then because it involved what I would call a powerful ecology of listening, which in its most important sense, is giving space and carrying capacity to voices (of people, places, things...the living, the dead). It was also as much a question of these works becoming fiction as being sourced in reality. As she explains, again recalling her early listening apprenticeship at the ABC:

[Mortley] There were all these European tapes which were heavily written onto the tape. [Madsen] What do you mean by ‘written’? [Mortley] I mean it was the voice and the sound that was the message. The medium was the message. They weren’t made of texts in particular. They were made of things, which belonged to the domain of sound. They were made outside of studios very often, and I was fascinated to see that this material could be put together more or less sensitively, intelligently, so what was reality in the beginning deviated towards a type of fiction... [Madsen] And this was authored work – as you might understand it within French film? [Mortley] What interested me was that somebody could be so completely immersed in the material: the material could be used on the one hand to be itself, but also on the other to express what the author wanted to say... There is the *cinéma d’auteur* and the *radio d’auteur*. Of course there are formulaic documentaries. I really don’t mind them. I watch them all the time on the TV – perhaps because there are no others – but there are also grand documentaries..., things which are closer to fiction (Madsen 1994).

Authorship can also be understood here in terms of the process and working context into which this work was made:

In the 80s and from a certain point on, and for reasons which escape me, my work attracted quite a lot of critical attention. As people read *Telerama*, or *Le Monde* or something, they saw my name. I probably never did more than five programmes a year, which in other people’s language is quite a lot, especially as the *atelier* is very labour intensive... The thing about the *atelier*, and I’m only just getting over it, is the hundreds of hours you’d spend with a production assistant... Then, maybe 35 hours in a studio. I think it takes me as long to work out on paper as it does to mix. So there’s 70 hours [and] hundreds of hours editing. (Mortley in Madsen 2002a).

Mortley was drawn to the authored nature of these often long *immersive* radio pieces – akin to the *auteur* cinema proclaimed by Truffaut in an essay as early as 1954 and a key part of the *nouvelle vague*. (Here the film director is claimed as the creative author: s/he writes with camera, images, sound). And as these new cinema *auteurs*, Mortley would come to

almost intuitively understand her work (also a montage) as a form of “writing”: on tape, in air, and now also in digital audio space. It is interesting that Mortley cites some of the same *auteurs* brought into a new pantheon of cinematic history by Truffaut as he proposed his “*politique des auteurs*” in that seminal essay (Truffaut 1954). Robert Bresson is notable here (Mortley 1996, 2002) because of his special interest in and most sensitive use of sound – and silence. For Mortley, Bresson could be understood as one of a number of significant “references” for her work as she draws on radio history as much as that of the cinema. In this conversation Mortley recalled too, with some embarrassment, how she always wanted to be a writer.

I thought it must be a wonderful thing. But I always thought I couldn't. I remember thinking very early on – and this was one of the things that charmed me with the radio- – the idea formulated by Alain Trutat, of “writing on tape”. It was the ephemeral nature of it; and it somehow pleased me a great deal as a way of writing. [Madsen] It was not about proclaiming itself as ‘literature’. [Mortley] I say the only trace of a radio program is what lives in the mind or sensitivities of the person who listens to it – *which is a great deal...which is enormous...* It had to do with writing, or...drawing – some people say ‘sculpting’, like Yann Paranthoën – or painting, in the air...on air (from Madsen 2002a).

The sculpting (and tailoring) metaphor is the way another highly regarded French radio documentary *auteur* Yann Paranthoën described what it was he was doing: (“*un tailleur de sons*”) (Compain 1990; Madsen 2003c; Paranthoën 2002). But for Mortley, her practice perhaps would combine the arts of writing (there are so many small texts) with sculpture, and even of the lapidarian. We might briefly detour here to dig down into this practice developed over years, building on that first listening, and begin to appreciate why it is so productive, even essential, to speak of an *auteur*'s work in this context of “*les hommes de radio*” (the men of radio) as they were described in France, the professional broadcasters, who for the most part dominated both state and public forms of broadcast radio until very recently. Mortley stands out in her early apprenticeship in this new field of the radiophonic film gathering force in Europe and Australia not merely because she was a woman, but more importantly because her unique approach to something so simple as recording, writing and giving space to a voice, made what she does into an art form – perhaps even a way of meeting and sharing the world. And this could be a kind of ethos for living.

Documentary was...a means of sharing experience...not just conveying the facts (Ivens in Delmar, 1979: 73).

This is deceptively minimalist work, where she appears to excise all sonic manifestations of body from a voice with her careful “fine editing” of lip noises and other “wet” sounds. One can even imagine this edited voice, stripped of its more obvious bodily functions (the click of a jaw), to be somehow disembodied as some writers and practitioners of radio have argued has become a defining characteristic of the highly polished mainstream radio voice, which Mortley plainly eschews – “cleansed” to the point of sterility – “trained, controlled and dead” (Lander 1994: 22).

To the contrary the voice as revealed by Mortley's meticulous editing is profoundly embodied and vibrant – and this voice is often “foreign”, or not conventionally articulate as in her audio portraiture of gamine dancers “*les petits rats*” de l'école de danse, Paris and at the Paris Opera (1996), or of the autistic child, Luc (in *L'histoire de Luc*), or the children in general who frequently enter her programs to remind us perhaps of our deadening/deafening will to control all that we see and hear and experience. This voice offers a *revealing* of the body as it is carried by the voice and released into the exterior world – a revealing perhaps of the grain of the voice (if we take up Barthes' term) through the finely honed craft of cut editing. This was at first a material practice involving touch. Whilst Mortley often reveals the voice as a multi-faceted jewel having diverse reflections, her craft is also akin to that planing and polishing which reveals the essential heartwood of a timber turned inwards, away from its rough surface towards its essential *timbre*. And amidst an apparent smoothness, this graininess also speaks of time, experience and memory.

A sound becomes a memory the minute it is recorded; it's a memory of itself and it's also your own memory of itself and it can become someone else's memory of something which they do not know, because we have memories of things which we do not know – which we don't know consciously – or things we haven't seen (Mortley in Madsen 1994).

Noise presents itself as only one signifier of the physical body, but the presence of body extends beyond this reduction. As Mortley would have it, the metaphysical body is carried in the voice channelled by microphony, in its meaningful

articulation as much as in those accompanying noises which she tends to remove so as to release something more. Mortley's precise practice also owes much we might now understand to the traditions of Zen Buddhism, and I would add, there are similarities between her intimate and very concentrated working with tape (or its virtual equivalent today) and that of the Japanese gardener who, in imitating nature via the creation of miniatures, chooses to purify and edit in the most exacting of ways, creating within the restrictions of a closed space, places of expansive contemplation intended to merge perceiver with the thing perceived. It is not incidental that Mortley compares her life work in radio with that of a Zen monk:

I wrote a paper in which I compare the detachment required of a radio producer to a Zen monk. Because as you know, there is a great deal of work that goes into a radio program, a great deal of time invested in it. Maybe no one will speak to you about the radio program, and you have to be prepared for this, all the tractations³ have to have been done between you and the work. So the attitude is one of extreme detachment already and in a sense, a radio program has absolutely no necessity except the same sort of necessity of the moon in front of the window which is the subject of a lot of Bashō's poetry (Madsen, 1994).

Giving a space to a voice

When we talk about the *documentaire* of the ACR, it's like the film documentarists, Joris Ivens... Robert Flaherty, Chris Marker, Jean Rouch. (We made an *Atelier* on him and Dziga Vertov). For me that is what we mean by "feature" on the ACR. One could also call it "*documentaire de creation*" (Alain Trutat in Madsen, 2002b. Author Trans).

As in Europe, the openness to change and experiment at the ABC marked a new willingness to "open up the studios" to "actuality sound", and also to the voices of ordinary people – recorded "wild" (or sometimes brought to the studio) without the need for scripting or actors to re-present their words. It is worth recalling that prior to the 1950s (and still evident in the 1960s) most documentary and "feature" style programmes were in fact scripted, with little location sound or usage of interviewees' own voices. As the long time BBC Features Department producer, Douglas Cleverdon recounted: "The radio documentary was originally constructed from documents, it only later came to include actuality" (Cleverdon 1977). As authored works these highly artisanal productions had aspired to be an "art form" (ibid), with their "main tool... the microphone" (ibid). The BBC Features Department (1941–1964) for example had built its renown through its early experimentation in "featured programmes" (Felton 1949: 99–109),⁴ and as a result of its association with many distinguished writers who produced classics in the post war period such as *Under Milkwood* (Dylan Thomas with Douglas Cleverdon) or *The Dark Tower* (poet, Louis MacNeice). These "features" as they were known at the BBC from the late 1920s — the term continues to be used by Western European public broadcasters, as by the ABC and is the legacy of BBC influence in this field – were really closer to performed poems. Douglas Cleverdon tried to define this (for many) confusing term as all those "works of poetic imagination which may have been inspired by documentary material, for example: *Under Milkwood*" (Cleverdon, 1977). In my interview with Mortley she admits, however, the French were hardly likely to adopt this term: "There is no real word to describe this sort of thing, and the French are not going to say 'feature'. Because they are not into using foreign words". [Madsen] "Particularly English". [Mortley] "Particularly English" (Madsen, 2002a).

Regarding this earlier period in France, Farabet gives a similar account of how the script was all, and that before the establishment of the ACR, interviews of whatever kind rarely were allowed to exist as spontaneous conversations. This was the case even when those interviewed were celebrated authors. "Very often these interviews were prepared in advance" says Farabet, "written in advance and then recorded. For example, Andre Breton. I remember Breton reading his responses to the interviewer. It was quite strange really" (Madsen, 2003a).

Even in the post war reconstruction period, spontaneous speech would largely be absent from these kinds of production, or when recorded, it would generally be used in short grabs with scripted renditions the preferred method (Scannell 1986). Most feature programs, as Farabet affirms in the French context, were also very literary studio bound affairs, contributing to the limited range of voices heard and the oft times mannered feel of many of the performances. In more than one sense, radio features until the 1960s and other drama productions were regarded as closer to theatre than say the cinema (See also Martin Esslin's essay "The Mind as a Stage", 1980). These features however were also principally understood as "writer's" (or sometimes composer's) programs, even if audio embellishments in the form of sound effects or composed music could take equal precedence to the text in the recorded result, with often striking impact (Braun 2001; Madsen, 2005). The BBC (with its radiophonic workshop), as in France, Italy, Germany and much of Eastern Europe, experimented

with the idea of radiophonic music composition and variations on *musique concrète* as pioneered by Pierre Schaeffer at France's national state broadcaster (then known as ORTF). Some of the major works of electronic music and experimental forms of radio drama were also the direct product of public service radio's support for "laboratories", workshops and studios in the 1950s to 1980s (Madsen 2009). Examples include WDR Cologne's Drama Department where Stockhausen produced "Hymnen", or the later *Studio Akustischer Kunst*; the *Club d'essai* of ORTF, France; and Milan's *Studio di Fonologia*, RAI, where Luciano Berio was a director for some years, and where new exploratory documentary approaches to radio theatre created hybrid forms of the kind that would also make a great impression on Connolly and in time on other producers including Mortley at the ABC.

Connolly encountered Georgio Pressburger's 1971 Prix Italia winning "pure radio" documentary performance "Children's Games" for example, while in Milan. Based on Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel's 1560 painting of the same name, Pressburger turned the studio into a play space for local children to perform games of birth, death and marriage, recording them over many sessions and creating a unique document of a "living performance", a new "writing on tape" as he called it⁵ echoing with the voices of sixteenth century peasant children and the over 300 ancient games made audible, and originally depicted by Bruegel. These kinds of experiments were an attempt to create "a visible theatre, a sort of hybrid between theatre and cinema, through pure sound" as Pressburger explained much later, reflecting back on this fertile time of radio re-imagining at RAI (Pressburger, 2002) where the script was created out of the auditory traces of the performed real. This was also a rare example of ordinary people – and one of the most repressed voices of all in radio – children – being brought into the atelier environment, there to create/provoke a new almost mythical "space filled with objects and characters through sound, first monophonic and later stereophonic" (Ibid).

Mortley would later quietly instigate her own documentary performance *atelier*-like environment for *Sunday Night Radio 2*, when she invited then barely known actor and Aboriginal tribal man David Gulpilil – emerging as a new star after appearing in Peter Weir's film *The Last Wave* (1977) – into the hallowed halls of high cultural Radio 2 for the "documentary" she would simply name "Gulpilil". The ABC entered the program in the Prix Italia in 1978 in the documentary category. Mysteriously she offered: "It is one of the four types of program I make, with just one actor". As one of the first feature programs she ever produced – and responsible for getting her internationally "noticed", taking her yet further afield to make radio, this time to Berlin – it was an extraordinary moment. As producer Tony MacGregor writes on the occasion of the program's rebroadcast some 27 years after its first broadcast:

At a time when radio documentaries were strictly controlled, built around detailed scripts read by professional radio actors, Gulpilil's undirected, 'free' use of the studio was a radical act – all the more so at a moment when black activism was just beginning to get militant, along with a new sense of the importance of Aboriginal culture (MacGregor & ABC 2004).

As Mortley recalled herself, it was perhaps the first time a tribal Aboriginal man had been invited into an ABC studio to talk on his own terms, and to have his own language given a space, rather than to be an object of anthropological enquiry or to be faded down to make way for the usual rendering via translation and voice-over. Rather as MacGregor wrote, "[i]n 'Gulpilil', the actor conjures images of the desert, and a haunted house; he tells his life story, and holds forth on culture, film and religion. He plays didgeridoo, and imitates the calls and flight of birds. It's a virtuoso performance" (ibid).

This "project" of Mortley's – and each work appears as if it were a project – could be considered an experiment, although it was not of the kind generally conducted, or being "performed" in the radio labs of Western Europe even in the late 1970s. Mortley's reflections on her first foray into this art of "writing on tape" and "with the real" speak eloquently of the work of the radio writer whose task it is to be a recorder of repressed silences and languages lost to colonial conquest. It is as much ethical as it is artistic.

Maybe I had a sense that it was important. There was hardly anything at all on the radio [featuring tribal Aboriginals]. I don't know how many days we recorded in the studio. You know Aboriginals have this way of walking – they don't walk with you, they walk behind you. It was the first time I had encountered that, and I have this vision of David Gulpilil, who is about as tall as the door, trailing in his jeans somewhere behind me through the door of the radio studio, and it was a movement like this. It was also so strange to see an Aboriginal there [in the ABC] (Mortley in Madsen 2002a).

Mortley has said before that she does not like to ask too many questions (Madsen, 1999) and that her work is not so

concerned with information or content provision. Of Gulpilil:

I asked him a couple of questions, but basically I just said, tell me where you come from...and sing me some songs and show me some instruments. I asked him to tell me first in his language and then in English. And that's why it took so long because his language would last a half an hour, and then in English. For me it was very important to hear this Aboriginal language on the radio and to give an aboriginal voice a space on the Australian airwaves...Radio is about giving a space to a voice (Mortley in Madsen 2002a).

Her approach appeared in opposition to most interview-driven programming and journalistic media practices and where silence and the spaces between words are almost always edited out. Mortley has said of these silences in her work, and of the fact that she asks "very few questions": "It's where the listener can write himself into the tape, which is why a lot of my programs seem very empty" (Madsen 1994). She has chosen what might be thought of as a "poor radio" in the tradition of an *art povera*, in the same way as the writer and auteur, Marguerite Duras, spoke of her film work as a "poor cinema". These words from Duras might well describe Mortley's own approach: [T]hose voices would just never have made it near the film if the film had been full of images, if the film hadn't any fissures, any...what I call holes, if it hadn't been impoverished - well, that for me is wealth (Duras & Gauthier 1987: 59).

Soundings in the dark

In the ABC of the early 1970s, we can recognise then a desire to create "reality fiction", following on from earlier European and British experimentation in the broad genre of "features" and in the early attempts at acoustic documentaries. Producers could grasp the expanded possibilities of field recording, as they escaped the confines of the studio and the overly literary constraints established by the scripted feature. Cutting and editing reality – whether actuality or voices of ordinary people – became a key part (in general) of a new idea of feature making, and drama too: take the new *hörspiel* (hearplay in German), which also heavily used actuality or "original ton" (Schöning 1991). In a certain sense these developments (and unusual emphasis on the art/craft of production: montage, editing, *mise-en-scène*, "writing" with the microphone and tape) also helped to focus attention on the producer as author, and away from the writer of a (radio) script. Emerging here was a new *radio d'auteur*, whether this author was understood as a "producer-writer" in the BBC features sense (Cleverdon 1977), or as the pursuer of that depth to be discovered "in the real", through a new kind of sonorous "writing with tape" (Connolly 1982: 26). This mirrored the rethinking underway in cinema as we have seen to the realm of authorship (or the *auteur*) and its relationship with the tools of cinema (the "camera-style").⁶ These French debates around *auteur* cinema are now well known, but at the time they were the subject of much discussion and critical writing, having impacts far beyond the French film scene, and as we now can more fully recognise, even on the radio made at the ABC.

No less influential to the formation of a new *auteur* tradition in radio documentary and Mortley's own development, were the cultural changes which opened up this new space in the French state broadcasting institution Radio France, and these equally influenced art, culture, society and politics more broadly in the wake of 1960s counter culture movements (Madsen 2005). In the French context, we can hear a sense of the upheaval happening immediately in the wake of the '68 "événements" in this manifesto like statement from René Farabet, then a new producer with vision at the ACR in 1972. "The world is the studio of tomorrow. A great open air", he proclaimed. "To recommence history at zero." ("*Le monde est le studio de demain. Un grand plein-air. Recommencer l'histoire à zero*" (1972), (Rene Farabet 1994: 20). As I have already referenced, Farabet would go on to become the Director of this experimental space (1969-2001) within the mostly conservative institution of Radio France, actively shaping new approaches to "*documentaire de creation*", as well as new forms of "*filme radiophonique*" and "*filme sonore*." Mortley would collaborate too with Farabet after her "apprenticeship" experience at the ACR. Spending some time going through the archives of this program at Radio France – which has just celebrated its 40th anniversary (France Culture, 2009) – Mortley's contribution is amply evident, in addition to the prodigious and oft-cited output she has also accomplished internationally.

In perhaps an unofficial sense (very little writing exists assessing the work of radio makers), I would argue for her critical but understated influence both on ACR and on wider international traditions of documentary and feature radio (Bouchez 1994). In a survey I conducted of some of the world's key European radio documentary makers she is consistently singled out as one of those who have made a significant contribution to the field of radio creation internationally (Madsen 2002-2004). The frequency with which her work is still commissioned and rebroadcast by the large European state broadcasters also attests to this status.

Mortley's earlier invocation of "grand documentaries" and the *auteur* however may seem too romantic by far to those accustomed to viewing/critiquing media forms within a vaguely post-modernist or post-structuralist framework, or to those used to "reading" popular culture "texts" in the wake of Derridian deconstruction or Foucault's and Barthes' earlier polemical claims of the "death of the author". I am repositing here nevertheless an idea of the author in relation to this new field of radio (1970s on), and which draws directly on Mortley's invocation of the term as it emerged and has been critically used within French film and literary studies since the late 1940s (forming the basis of the *cinéma d'auteurs* constructed in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950's). In the broad field of documentary cinema, the word *auteur* still has resonance and currency, even if in radio it has often seemed at loggerheads with the prevailing industrial commercial or bureaucratic public service production cultures a characteristic of radio around the globe. Here we are more used to encountering personalities or talkback kings, and rarely the producers behind the scenes who, in public broadcasting, now anonymously ensure content is there to be turned into audio. Today, this kind of discussion may have an added import (in an ethical sense) as the idea of an author who takes responsibility for his or her work in media production (and is identifiable at all) becomes obscured, or is rendered almost meaningless (and increasingly powerless) by the current managerialist and populist broadcasting model where producers are increasingly treated as closer to post-industrial "content providers". I would also argue that work of the calibre, sensitivity and individuality found in Mortley's 30-year oeuvre appears to be having less and less traction with those responsible for programming and decision-making, and this within public broadcasting institutions in France and Australia who formerly commissioned this kind of work on a regular basis, and without too strong an editorial hand (Madsen, 2007b).

Mortley has a distinguished body of work that has developed and evolved over decades and across cultures. Nearly all this corpus is made for the radio, and thus it has always risked being overtaken by what one early feature maker described as the "ghastly impermanence of the medium" (Sieveking 1934). As I have argued elsewhere, however, the dawn of the mp3 download (or podcast) may offer to change what might seem like a generally depressing situation for this rare breed of *producer-auteur* such as Mortley within a public broadcasting ecology. We may still get to hear more of this exquisite yet hard to categorise "writing in air", and like the parallel *auteur* tradition developed since the 1920s in cinema, this work may yet find new and appreciative audiences.

In this time of immersion and apprenticeship in a new radio, flourishing as it was within European public service broadcasting – and also finding its space in Australia – Mortley discovered she too might be drawn to write with microphone, sound and silence. The works she heard from all over Europe, not only from the *atelier de création radiophonique*, appealed to her because they offered a charged reality which rubbed up against fiction; and the sounds and silences which presented themselves in the layers of listening could be freed to the imagination as "mind movies" (eg., *On Naxos; Thebes, A Road Movie; Stopover Bangkok*) or appear as "transparent documentaries" (eg, *Under the wing of...*)

Crucially for Mortley, these radio films were not about information or facts – "facts are always a lost cause" wrote Mortley, quoting Francis Niney, who in turn quotes from the French documentary film maker Max Ophuls – but were "ways of saying, ways of doing" (Mortley 1996). They were not journalistic in any traditional sense, although Mortley does record interviews, as she has also presented sometimes profound testimonies and witnessing of events and places existing uncomfortably just beneath the surface of society's respectability: for example her award winning *documentaire de création* on the rarely discussed Second World War concentration camp *Le Struthof* in Alsace, responsible for atrocities and genocide on French soil. At the time of making *Le Struthof The French Camp* (1998), Mortley was well aware of the tradition of new wave and feature styled *vérité* documentary in France and influential around the world. She recalls Resnais' *Le nuit et le brouillard* ("Night and Fog") and *Le Chagrin et Le Pitié* ("The Sorrow and the Pity") of Marcel Ophuls – which impressed her at the time she was living in Alsace (Madsen 2002a). And when she was making her own piece, she recalled the effect of Resnais' film (after Auschwitz):

It was a very new wave film, but very interesting also. It's not a documentary really – well it's a documentary, about an empty space. And maybe that one influenced me a great deal, because there is a lot of empty space in "*Le Struthof*"... as in many of my programs (Ibid).

In this sense of allowing silences to speak – the gaps we mask by too many words – radio might act not as Fourth Estate journalistic inquisitor, but rather as a deeply inward and ultimately revelatory medium. I would also say in this lovingly

made *radio povera* – in making space for voicing and silence – Mortley allows her *auditeurs* the privilege of approaching the microphone and the radio as *auteurs*.

I suddenly realise I have written little here of Mortley's programs' subject matter but as she says, this is not what is important:

Very little work does address emotion or sensibility. It addresses subjects. And what I always say in my workshops is that the subject is always a pretext unless you are a real journalist or you have to do a paper on say Afghanistan. The subject is multi-faceted. And the subject is a pretext for something bigger than the subject... which may not be named. It may be worked around I think... I would make a plea for very human work: human work which has feelings in it, and emotions in it, and time and love, life and death. But this may be very old fashioned. (Mortley in Madsen 2002a).

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1 This term finds its origins in the few rare "acoustical film" which were attempted on optical sound film in Germany. Walter Ruttmann's (1930) *Wochenende [Weekend]* recorded and edited onto film but broadcast on the radio is one example. The term was much later used by feature makers at radio Sender Freies Berlin in Germany who were using portable tape recorders and stereo recording microphones to capture long take actuality in the field to create their new acoustic films for radio. (See Lindemann 1987; Madsen 2002c).

2 A term first used in France as early as 1928 by a writer of radio drama, Paul Deharme: according to Charles Lord, who references René Sudre: "after the mecanisme of dreams, in provoking the automatic unwinding of memories and sensory hallucinations" (Trans.fr French Madsen). Rather than film per se, this usage referenced this idea of a mind movie and the oneiric possibilities presented to the surrealist imagination by dreams and reverie (Charles Lord in Tardieu, Khaznadar, & Ford 1969: 103).

3 A French word meaning negotiations, bargaining. There is a sense of shadiness to such dealings.

4 Felton writes: "The Drama Dept was from the first associated with a progressive and experimental attitude towards radio-technique" (1949: 44) which led to it being responsible for 'featured programmes' (ibid); ie 'high-spot' programmes that could also be publicized." "The word lost its final 'd'" explains Felton, himself a producer, and "was soon extended to cover the more experimental types of radio programme as a whole. It so happened that a number of those who were concerned with these programmes had a natural tendency towards documentary rather than fictional work." (ibid).

5 Connolly also first heard the term, "writing on tape" on this Churchill trip. Although Mortley ascribes it to Alain Trutat of

the ACR (and he certainly used it at this time) Connolly references it as originating from the Studio di Fonologia (RAI, Milan) and the then young radio director Giorgio Pressburger. Andrew McLennan, a producer with the ABC Drama department in the 1970's who also began to programme the new stereo features when he worked for ABC FM, recalls Connolly's discovery of Pressburger and this new way of "writing": "Pressburger had a notion that Dick thought was great – the notion of 'writing on tape'. The creative process is what is putting it onto the tape" (Madsen, 2007a).

6 Alexandre Astruc proposed the notion of a new filmic author (not always singular, although usually meaning a film's director) in 1948 with his "*camera-stylo*" (camera-pen) (see Astruc, 1948, 1968). The current *atelier de creation radiophonique* directors reference the term in their adaptation of it for radio of the "*micro-stylo*" (microphone-pen), (France Culture 2009), although long time Director of Features at SFB (Berlin) and founder of the IFC (International Features Conference) Peter Leonard Braun referenced the idea when he wrote: "We must see with our ears, think with our ears, write with our ears. (Cited in Mortley 2002).

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