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The Atelier de creation radiophonique:
Propositions for an Expanded Radio Imaginary

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A “workshop for radiophonic creation”, the Atelier de creation radiophonique (ACR) has been broadcast as a weekly program on Radio France since 1969. For over thirty years, under the Directorship of René Farabet, this pioneering space has been dedicated to the exploration of the medium. Proposed as a creative construction site, this “event-space” (born of May 68) aimed not to produce works (œuvres) but sketches – an itinerary proposing a new kind of radio listening experience. As one of radio’s key sites for invention and research (internationally) it has sounded out an alternative imaginary for radio, refusing categorisation, opening forms, bridging past to future.

In 1951 the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote one small essay on the radio (Radio et Rêverie). He asked rhetorical questions about the future of radio: was it possible that a kind of radio space-time be devoted to the nurture of the unconscious? Could the prevailing codes of the time (which seemed to divide radio into information, reality, and entertainment) be altered just a little to accommodate another kind of radio – something compositional and imaginative (in its most concrete sense) as well as therapeutic? Was there the space to develop a radio which, “on each wave”, would touch and caress this “inner space of the listener” using what he called the “principle of reverie”?1

For Bachelard, radio was the ideal medium in which the possibility of an opening and a refuge might be offered to a listener – simultaneously an intense and easeful listening revealing “the essence of intimate reverie”.2 For Bachelard, this radio of sounds “well made” might return the auditeur to something like a “nocturnal” world of their own making as much as to a daylight world in which words and sounds are created, captured and manipulated by a radio producer or writer. In the Bachelardian “proposition” to the radio, the radio engineer would give way to a new type of engineer (a “psychic engineer”) who could speak “to the inner psyche in the manner of the poet”: “the listener might hear but no longer strain too much to listen”.3

This reverie Bachelardienne on the radio, and by implication “of” the radio as a space, as a site for listening in a particular way, has since been resounded in the Atelier de creation radiophonique (ACR), literally a workshop for radiophonic creation. From the program’s inception in October 1969 to his retirement in 2002, René Farabet was its principal Director and resident visionary.4 For over thirty years Farabet explored the public and private space of the radiophonic, breaking with established public broadcasting categories and practices of the
time, opening up a new space within the radio where genres might be renewed, mixed, and hybrid forms developed, offering the listener new “propositions” for an expanded radiophonic imaginary just as Bachelard had envisioned years earlier.

Farabet cites Bachelard in several interviews I conducted with him between 1994 and 2003, and the influence on the ACR was clearly there from the beginning. You can hear it in the programs and in the way Farabet talks about Bachelard’s “radio of reverie”:

One doesn’t listen to this kind of radio as if one were dreaming, but to recall Bachelard; it’s more like reverie. Unlike the dreamer, however, this radio listener has some conscious control over the images; he has the possibility of ferrying a little his own boat.5

Bachelard, writing on the cusp of an eclipse in radio – at least that is how it now looks from a position post the so-called “golden years” – seemed desirous of creating a radio that was not based on repetition, but rather on originality: “The radio is a function of originality. It cannot repeat itself. It must create itself each day anew”.6 This is a conception of radio which flies in the face of what was the soon to be dominant “vision”, whereby radio has been constructed as a site for ceaseless repetition – familiar songs, formats, jingles, ads, ad nauseum. This form of the radio might be termed (after Roland Barthes) a radio of enfratic or “humiliated repetition”: radio as an assemblage for positioning the listener vis-a-vis consumption, advertising. As Noel Sanders suggested, using Barthes’ term to describe commercial forms of radio, “The song or ad come-on do not lead out to the object or person, but back to the radio machine itself, via repetition. This takes place because the desire produced by radio is a desire for radio, i.e. radio repetition ([of] songs, ads)”.7

Since the passing of the “golden years” and the rise of mass television, the limited permutations of the announcer-music track-newsbreak-commercial format has given every appearance of being natural to the radio, but of course it is only one limited version of a number of possible radiophonies,8 beyond which Bachelard (and later Farabet) imagined an almost utopian (“heterotopian”)9 space for radiophonic reverie and composition being developed.

I want to explore some of the formal qualities of this particular radiophony, which I believe constitutes a rich, diverse and important cultural (and aesthetic) practice. This type of radio exploration (and programming), although highly articulated in its approach, and part of important wider international developments (the feature, ars acustica), remains strangely ignored by critics and histories of both media and art, and an arts establishment primarily focused on the visual. Even within the small field which has attempted to focus on radiophonic and sound art forms, and most recently “auditory culture”, the radiophony explored in programs such as the ACR has been given scant attention to date.10

The ACR, still running today as a weekly programme (with new directors), remains a radio open to what Farabet calls, “the long durée” (long duration),11 and to a space of
listening which allows for silences and reflection as much as information or diversion. (Originally the ACR was granted a two hours and fifty minutes weekly “space”, although the current program makes do with less than half this duration.) In this space dedicated to sustaining what Farabet and other auteurs involved in this more than thirty year project describe as a compositional listening, the ear is given its freedom to drift and (in Bachelard’s terms) an imaginative “constellating power”.

**composing the radio**

The radio conceived of as an experiment or research in itself is central to this idea of an expanded radio “imaginary”. It incorporates the idea that the radio “categories” (at least within public broadcasting) of music, drama, documentary and the “feature”,\(^\text{12}\) can come together in multiple ways (and create new forms) in what Farabet and others often describe as the “radio film”.\(^\text{13}\) This is a form of radio (as Bachelard suggested) able to produce images. The radio “film” not only unwinds, moving past us like film, it also allows the listener “to see” mental images which open onto a perhaps invisible yet resonant interior. These images whilst “less exact perhaps” (Farabet), “remain images nevertheless – at the interior of the sounds. At the interior of the voices there is this circulation of images, and also this constant continuity, which does not stop. Even the silence continues – always this unwinding.”\(^\text{14}\)

From its beginnings the ACR operated as an atelier in more than name only; in its entirety it has offered an ongoing work-in-progress which is in keeping with the principle of providing a space for continuous research and “play”. Under Farabet’s direction, the ACR has perhaps been one of the few rare moments in radio’s cultural and expressive history internationally where the radio itself has been approached as an ongoing site for exploration. Inside a seemingly monolithic state media institution, an artisanal space was dedicated to new types of programming, and new ways of engaging with, even theorising the listener:

Theoretically, an atelier is a place where you try out things. Not a place of exhibition – a museum, gallery – but essentially a place where one sees things in the process of being made. In other words, one sees the work [travail]. The work is present, visible; one doesn't hide it. We were always trying to show sketches more than finished works [œuvres].\(^\text{15}\)

The ACR’s central proposition has always been one fundamentally tied to opening up the space of listening and auditory experience. This listening is considered compositional (for the listener and the producer) and for the ACR must be open to the “chance encounter”. In becoming a “vagabond space” (Farabet), the ACR recalls the playful yet deeply political gestures and strategies of the 1960s “Situationists”, whose slogans and philosophical treatises were behind much of the May 68 riots in France. Amidst (what they labelled) the “society of spectacle” (Guy Debord),\(^\text{16}\) the détournements and dérives\(^\text{17}\) (practised by the Situationists) are alluded to, even referenced by Farabet, although there appears no formal alignment with these anarchist-inspired artists and intellectuals. These references evoke an older tradition
also: the Surrealists who wandered the streets of Paris constructing “propositions” out of back streets, enigmatic signs and forgotten lane ways. And before them, the flâneurs who took to strolling the Paris celebrated by Baudelaire and the Romantics. Farabet’s atelier continues in this ancient, yet modernist tradition of the sinuous line, the detour and the dérive: a vagabondage recalling and paying homage to the past, yet casting out new sounding lines into the future.

sounding lines

This Atelier was envisaged from its outset as a site dedicated to experiment and research. According to the proposal, drafted in 1968 by Alain Trutat and Jean Tardieu (an eminent poet and director of France Culture – established only six years before the ACR as “a public station dedicated quasi-exclusively to knowledge and the spoken word”19), a new space was required which might continue the (broken) tradition of experimentation and research established with the Club d’Essai (1942-1953) from which Pierre Schaeffer developed his musique concrete. Such a program was deemed important in terms of attracting new and younger audiences and talent to the radio at a time when television was taking up much of the limelight. This putative program would be broadcast in stereo, Tardieu wrote, comprising “original radiophonic works, works of fiction or music” but it should aim to create something more: “a radiophonic event” with “broadcasts dealing in depth with the key subjects of our time”.20

Whilst acknowledging that the better known Club d’Essai might be regarded as the forerunner of some of the kinds of investigation undertaken in the ACR, Farabet casts out a different set of genealogical sounding lines into another past of radio – a past and a future for radio which do not easily fit into Schaeffer’s more pronounced “scientific take” on research into music, or his focus on the extended technè of the radio laboratory, or what I call elsewhere, radio’s near hermetic “darkrooms”.21 One might argue that this emphasis on studio technique led Schaeffer and other musique concrétists to lose sight of the compositional space of both the listener in radio and of the world of voices and actuality (or “wild sounds” as a number of feature and documentary makers call these recordings) beyond the studio.

The ACR “did take a parallel path” to the Club d’Essai, Farabet suggests, but the work was to be very differently conceived. “Our work is not electro-acoustic [art or music]. We were more situated in a radiophonic tradition, even if that tradition was to be completely overturned”.22 In an article reflecting on the ACR’s foundations, he explains:

the intention was not to create a closed laboratory … the research should always be linked to production, and rhythmically connected to the fact that it was a regular weekly broadcast. 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. We wanted to privilege the wandering, unravelling function of the radio rather than its informative or pedagogic function. 23
(France Culture was inspired by the BBC’s first “cultural radio” experiment, the Third Channel, remaining Radio France’s primary cultural outlet. Hervé Glevarec describes it as “unique” in the radioscape: “somewhere between the media and the scholarly intelligentsia, the media and art, journalism and writing”.24)

And where does this idea come from, to propose “long voyages, wanderings of two or three hours”(Farabet)?

It was about working directly with sound material which would lead to the abandonment of pre-existing forms and divisions. And this was necessarily related to the sensibility of the time. Also we wanted to be a part of, in harmony with, other creative research effected in other domains, such as writing and the cinema.25

Farabet continues, citing the “multiplication of points of view” and the diversity of approaches which became a characteristic of the program: there was to be “an explosion [une eclatement] of themes and motifs”, an “opening out of the radio text” which would “lead to the establishment of a “dramaturgie sonore” proper to each program with “stories delivered from all didacticism”. Farabet describes the new approach – recalling the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari – as a “rhizomatic expression”, “a cognitive instrument of discovery”. Ambitiously, this work might even “amplify the associative functioning of thought … one’s ears becoming “re/searching antennas” (antennes chercheuses), “instruments for a curious listening” enabling the listener “to act artistically on the world”.26

My first recorded discussion with Farabet took place in 1994, in a small room deep in the heart of the labyrinthine, and hyper-modernist Maison de la Radio, the monumental home of Radio France in Paris (since 1963). On a number of occasions since then, I have had the opportunity to listen to an extensive selection of programs produced by the ACR – from its earliest days to the present. In this intense listening exercise I began to discover just how difficult (indeed how impossible) it is to come to grips with the prodigious output over time of this program, the sheer volume of work produced (more than 2,400 hours, 100 days of continuous listening), the vastness of its subject matter, the long list of names (voices) who might be heard there from all fields, all kinds of worlds.

It is not possible, I maintain, to encounter this program historically as an experience of listening; one must settle for fragments whilst embarking on an archaeological excavation, a dig; conjure the programme through discussions with makers, observers and listeners, and then perhaps via memory – many programmes of the ACR in fact have been adapted into English and broadcast widely. (I already knew this work reasonably well too from my earlier association with a radio department where selected programs from the ACR were auditioned and indeed admired; the program was to become highly influential and was even emulated by the 1980s, particularly in Scandinavia, Yugoslavia and Australia.)
notes from a radio journal

10 December 2002. I am alone in what appears like a dark tower, narrow stairs connect a small room in the core of Radio France (used only by Archives) to the main building. A tape “turns” in front of me; ACR No. 11: Fin, enfin. Spéciale Biennale 69. I hear Farabet: “Les bandes sont comme les larmes”. (Tapes are like tears.) The voice begins to lose its presence, becoming scratchy as if it were from an old gramophone recording. (There are many different times here, a series of layers. Already this is no ordinary radio listening experience).

In this programme (there were ten made by the ACR devoted to the Biennale of Paris, and the very first programme is all international material, a window on the world) one can hear the radio itself being performed, ideas essayed (in the full sense of trying out ideas) and a variety of means utilised to take the listener on what Farabet describes elsewhere as a journey, a derive, a wandering off course. In this radio essay encountering life sur le vif – as the verité filmmakers described it – and life as it is provoked by the microphone’s presence, one could hear philosophical dialogue, windows opening onto diverse street actuality (“raw” and “treated”, noisy, quiet, too much life, not enough), a narration in fragments, reportage, interview, aphorism, musical refrains, a sonic weaving of stories, times and places … (Time is here recognisable as a space.)

In this composition, Farabet and others managed to capture something of the essence of the moment and the new spirit propelling them forward. It was, Farabet recalls in my first interview, “the seething turmoil of the events all around us” that could “no longer be denied”. And as Farabet explained further, “the radiophonic arts, performance, even the news until then” were “very much confined to the studio, locked up in studios, literature”. And the radio institution itself was “under siege … paralysed by strikes”. Thus, in the midst of this environment of crisis, the ACR was offered nearly three hours of time and considerable resources – to excavate the spaces of radio, to move beyond the “dead” studio outside into the “light” and “tumult”, but also to “try and make a space for reflection”.

Whilst exploring this event – a festival involving dance, theatre, the art of the street mixed with an art of the mind – this program of nearly three hours was made in a style that is still recognisably that of the ACR: a style that is fluid, pleasurable, with “holes” through which the listener may enter. Voices whisper, emphatically affirm; sounds leap out or must be followed to near obscurity. Life becomes charged, radio active, radiophonic. But work must be done, even as one is free to drift in the “wild sound”. Worlds open and close as stories begin, only to begin again in a different way: another “take”. The listener works and wanders in the mise-en-scene, which appears to be in a constant state of flux: “the world of the future will be a certain mix of mind and machine”, a man offers. A group of intellectuals speak of the “crisis” in society. Brecht is mentioned in an intimate, close-miked discussion of radio itself: “Radio could be an acoustic magazine”, another voice says. And then another: “For Foucault, radio was a distopian bordel”. Allan Ginsberg sputters and warbles, “zap, zoom, meow, cock a doodle doo …”
As Farabet stresses, the ACR was a direct product and continuation of the événements of ‘68. And these first programmes were not acoustic or electro-acoustic art, drama, features or documentary in any traditional sense, they were an experience of the street itself: the “éclat of Paris, following the crisis of 68”. These new movements in radio form then were a response to these zeitgeist changes – which meant challenges to the authority of State-run broadcasting and the very notion of the authoritative voice. But they were also a consequence of the emerging accessibility of new portable high fidelity recording technologies: as with cinema, these allowed the field to open up in new ways, especially to an exploratory, more reflexive and verité approach as developed also by cineastes Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in Chronicle of a Summer (1961) or in less realist documentary terms by Godard or Resnais.

One ACR producer Yann Paranthoën put it this way; “Radio before the Nagra? Was it truly radio”? In this new and vibrant public space then, change might indeed be harnessed and explored – actuality audited (as well as the past re-auditioned, and subjected to new interpretations). The radio documentary or radio feature (documentaire de création as developed by the ACR, and possibly one of its greatest achievements) could thus become a primary site for experiment, especially the exploration of recorded life, the trace of the real captured and inscribed by tape-recorders into a new and more “high fidelity” broadcasting environment. As part of these changes in form and method, new approaches to an art of radio which was more aligned to the documentary (and to new wave developments in documentary film) reflected this desire to connect in a direct and tactile way with the reality of the world (and its people), and to be freed from the worn out theatre of “sound effects” which had sustained an art of radio up until the late ‘50s.

The radiophonic “imaginary” was enriched by this contact with the reality “out there” just as it had also been enriched in the 1940s and 1950s by the “voices and sounds within” (recorded in the studio) which could emerge from out of the dark, captured and explored by the likes of Samuel Beckett (BBC Commissions) and Antonin Artaud (Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu/To Have Done With the Judgement of God). Indeed the ACR references Artaud’s landmark (suppressed) 1947 radio performance, as much as the “éclat” of Paris 1968. For Farabet, this work remains pivotal to his program and to the history of radiophony itself. Put to air some twenty-five years after its scheduled broadcast – as one of the ACR’s early program “itineraries” – Farabet describes it as “perhaps the first very great program in radio terms; a monster in the landscape of radiophonic history”. In it, Farabet discovers perhaps an ethos for his programme, at least in terms of the kind of performance Artaud was able to enact:

He [Artaud] said, “radio is in a sense an experience of solitude”. One starts from the private to go to another private. Artaud’s answer to his censors was this – he wanted to speak to a person and not to an audience. This is very important. I think we do the same. Radio is not just a place for speech. There is … the breath. The mat-er-ial of words.
Vibrations. *Mat, mat, mater-i-al.* Radio is not a mechanism of repetition for Artaud. We must feel the presence of the *act.* [Farabet’s emphases] It’s the breath that burns life. It’s as if he wanted to tattoo the air. 34

As Artaud imagined it then, the radio might act as a kind of laboratory for discovering a new way to talk to an audience, “not as a State mass”: “this was the prison developed by mass radio then … but from and to, a positionality of solitude” (Farabet). This idea, remarkable for its time, could even be said to prefigure that “axis of intimacy” to which Bachelard had imagined should found an almost *therapeutic* radio based on radio’s potential to induce states of calm and reverie in the listener.

One of the remarkable things about the ACR also, compared to programmes which may emphasise at least in some ways experimentation or even art, is that the ACR has never ceased to explore the *public* space of radio making and listening (think here of John Cage’s reference to listening/audition as that other great – although downplayed – public sense). This atelier does not cut itself off from the world. No men with white coats, no lofty attics, although the “research” which has occurred here remains passionately intellectual yet playful.

Radiophony for Farabet is first of all about listening (a democratic act), a reaching out to the other: “To listen means to be *together with the other.* It’s to put oneself in the same place …” but “to not force things by the effect of the recording”. 35

The ACR has also highlighted the importance of time/duration to radio (and its current loss); and in particular, the absolute need for the “long durée” – this extended time-space which allows for both a concentrated and discursive listening, moments of intensity opening within a space designed for drift.

The stress on place I think is significant also, in that Farabet understands the need for a space “set aside” from the “hosting institution” yet still supported by it – the ACR must continue as a living space. This support for a functioning, artisanal and experimental atelier contained within the body of an essentially conservative State institution is remarkable, even though it is within the “cultural radio” framework of *France Culture*. One might usefully make the comparison with the more usual situation, where the artist’s atelier only enters the cultural institution as *objet mort* – think of Brancusi’s studio frozen behind glass at the Pompidou Centre (Paris), or the painstaking relocation of the dead Francis Bacon’s studio within the confines of the Tate in London. In these instances, the atelier of the artist has become something more like an icon of “art”, or a model room only hoping to evoke creative production, a relatively hollow container of meanings.

This comparison to the museum and the insistence on the *architectural* reality of its location is not mere whim. Farabet’s atelier was not for visual display; he compares it to the positioning of an interior space, labyrinthine and diverting, within the very heart of the city:
an island within a larger island, without being a ghetto … a place within this larger ‘house’ of the radio [maison de la radio]”.36

This radiophonic place is paradoxically structured more like an ancient city with winding narrow passageways.37 (The figure of the labyrinth – a place in which one can get lost, and also which provides a shelter – is able to hold sway amidst the hygiene [and this is substantially different to purity] of the modernist fascination with uninterrupted transparency, smooth surfaces.)

Thus in a “working monument” to modernity (the building for instance housing Radio France) a new proposition born of modernity, found itself sounding out an ancient form – the labyrinth. And paradoxically, Bachelard’s refuge for listening, his other “maison” of the radio.

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2 Ibid., 219.
3 Ibid., 220. Images of the house, the cave, an attic, the night, are evoked in this idea of intimate reverie.
4 This program is not the product of Farabet alone. Since its creation it was given a dedicated team of sound engineers and editors. A diverse group of réalisateurs or “metteurs en ondes” (including writers, audio artists and composers) have also worked with the Atelier.
6 Bachelard, 217.
7 Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, 41-42, cited in Noel Sanders, “Radio and Repetition: the Structure of Commercial Radio”, in Media Paper No. 4 (Sydney: University of Technology, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, 1980). “Encratic” repetition, as it is explained in Sander’s paper, is nothing more than a re-assemblage of the dominant in different ways; there is an appearance of emphasising and proclaiming the new, that is, the latest hits for instance, or the latest shampoo, but “the new is a re-emergence of the already there”. 19. The radio is here defined as a selling machine having cult like qualities.
8 “Radiophony is a heterogeneous domain, on the levels of its apparatus, its practice, its forms, and its utopias”.
10 Very little commentary exists on primarily public institution based work. See however Harrison, MacGregor, Madsen (eds), Art & Text (Special Issue “Sound”) 31 (Sydney: 1989) – includes writings from Mortley and Farabet.
“It’s extremely interesting, I think, this duration question, this space of the long duration. It was said that people wouldn’t listen for a very long time … More and more programmes were tending to become shorter, smaller. But for us it was completely the reverse…” Farabet Interviews.

Originally taken from British print journalism (and later the BBC), this term has developed a very particular usage amongst public broadcasters since the 1960s. In the main it refers to a rich tradition (and practice) of auteur radio documentary-making almost exclusively supported by public (and some state) radios. See also Klaus Lindemann, “What Is a Feature?” in Flor Stein (ed.), A Feature Anthology (International Feature Conference, 1984-1994).

This term finds its origins in the few rare “acoustical films” which were attempted on optical sound film in Germany, for example Walter Ruttmann’s 1928 Weekend recorded and edited onto film but broadcast on the radio. Farabet regards much of the work of the Atelier to be filme sonore.


See for example, André Breton’s Nadja, ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1975). Original “novel’ was written in 1928.


“Programs were mainly made in the studio using texts, scores, things like that”.

For much of its history, the ACR has managed to retain “one of the highest budgets for any program on France Culture, or Radio France for that matter”. L. Bloch Interview with Virginia Madsen (Paris: 2003). Bloch was Directeur Adjointe of France Culture at the time of interview.
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29 Farabet Interviews.

30 ACR No. 11: Fin, enfin. Spéciale Biennale 69. INA Archives, Radio France.

31 Farabet Interviews.

32 Notes, Yann Paranthoën, On Nagra… (Paris: Co-editon Radio France, INA, SCAM, 1993), 2. The Nagra was “the first small, portable, lightweight, autonomous tape-recorder (magnétophone)”. Built by Stefan Kudelski, this engineer won the Concours des chasseurs de sons in 1952 with a recording of Notre Dame cathedral’s bell, without the need of electric cabling. Thus, says Paranthoën: “the leap into radiophonic space”, indeed “a new radio horizon”.

33 Farabet Interviews.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.