

The Ambiguity of the Radio in *The Radio*

Paul Groot

I

It is as ancient as it is modern, and, although a usual household item, it still has a universal fascination. As one of the most important technical innovations ever, the radio has always radiated a certain familiarity. First operated with a tube, then with a transistor, the radio became the first compact sound apparatus. And of course in the form of the shortwave radio, the radio was the actual forerunner of the World Wide Web.

I once got a shortwave radio by the German artist Isa Genzken, made only of concrete, and I can tell you I heard what you expect a radio will give you. All the thousands and thousands of radio stations in one package, but even then you could still recognize every station individually.

Even though the radio is also a nostalgic phenomenon, Vittorio Santoro's video *The Radio* is not a nostalgic work. It has nothing to do with Woody Allen's *Radio Days*, or with the nostalgia of Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*. Here, *The Radio* seems much more related to the world of secret agents and encoded messages, as in Francis Ford Coppola's subversive movie *The Conversation*, where the spy becomes the spied upon. Radio as a metaphor of our secret technical, emotional and psychological desires... The apparatus that can simultaneously receive and emit the amazing radiation that carries our encoded business messages and at the same time our most secret wishes and desires far away. The radio has been surpassed in popularity by TV, but, thanks to the rise of the Internet, it is back in our fantasies. The fascination of the radio is the amazing power of being not only an acoustical but also a visual apparatus. And here, the radio seems something like radio and video at the same time: the radio, then, is the name of a game in which word and image exclude each other and in which sounds and images create the ambiguity of the function of the radio in *The Radio*.

Santoro gives us both a literal and a symbolic interpretation of radio. Here we have this exchange of acoustical and visual worlds, made in a specific mood that interweaves the different corporeal and psychological momentums, the normally contradicting spheres of sound and vision, of feeling and intellect, to form one single phenomenon. In an experience lasting but three minutes, we get the essence of the radio as a cultural metaphor, and, more than that, a media-mix of film and video, of sound and image. But more than anything else, it is a short, intense and compressed aesthetic experience that succeeds in confusing our experiences. This exquisite, compressed movie is not only a concise image of the history of radio, but also of the history of all the visual media. In fact, although *The Radio* emphasizes the history of movie making, it ultimately -defends the radio's status as an eternal apparatus.

II

As an artistic experiment, Santoro's *The Radio* is part of an older tradition. In fact, a tradition that is much older than radio itself. Apart from alluding to the history of the radio, *The Radio* seems to be connected to an instrument the writer Jorge Luis Borges tells us about. This "Aleph", a little spherical object with a diameter of three to four centimeters seemed to hold all secrets of the world. Continually changing its color and covered with a nearly unbearable shine, it showed not only the whole cosmic space, but the whole universe. And most amazingly, Borges found this microcosm of world and time, this ultimate dream of alchemists and cabalists, this *multum in parvo*, at a very strange place. Normally, this secret is kept as a precious stone in the mosque of Amr, in Cairo, where the All is to be found inside of one of the stone columns around the central courtyard. But Borges found it in a cellar somewhere in Buenos Aires. To be more precise, in the Calle Garay in Buenos Aires, in the cellar of the house of the parents of his friend, the poet Carlos Argentino Daneri.

So, it is not that strange that, in a normal home somewhere in the world, Santoro gives us an insight into a similarly amazing phenomenon. A camera seems almost lost inside a house, as insecure as an

intruder, while looking and staring at objects. And as always in movies, the camera feels itself invisible. Or doesn't it? In a short, nervous detour in this house, we see a reproduction of a fantasy mountain landscape, reflected in the water, a red chair, and a TV set showing another landscape out of a running train or so. Then, after focusing on a plate on the wall whose engraved text reads "Did he train you? Did he rehearse you? Did he tell you what to do and what to say?", the camera circles around a person who is clipping pornographic images and gluing them onto a sheet of paper as a kind of artistic invention. While this happens, we hear a radio sound scape I won't tell anything about. Just listen! And then, after a short glance I will later comment on, the camera looks at an image of a children's playground, the sound of which we hear clearly. A moment later, it will focus on this playground, and behind the closed window we hear the children play, but they are absent.

Outside inside, inside outside, all are one, what we see on this image is now reality, as real as the world outside. One thing is clear: radio or not, we are here confronted with our own imagination, in a Borgesian fantasy. The cellar is here a room, and the sphere—in the Borges tale connected with the Platonic ideas—is here transformed into a radio, which is connected with some hidden sites of our imagination. Or better, connected with our own brain. It is as short and intense as Borges' *Aleph*, and it is connected and guided by this incredible sequence in which the incredible will be seen.

But where is the radio?

III

Already when entering the room of the person, *The Radio* starts a kind of modern sound scape. But do I remember now the radio itself? Is it just a transistor on the table the young man is working on, or did I pay too much attention to this text on the wall and do I now only in my imagination see a battery of instruments and receivers in that room? And when the text reads: "Did he train you? Did he rehearse you? Did he tell you what to do and what to say?", what is the meaning of these questions? What is the relation with the sound scape? Or is it a comment on the fantasy of the young man, doing his strange, enigmatic artistic, pornographic work? Does this young man reveal the identity of Santoro, the director, himself? And how to interpret the sound scape? Where to look for the double identity? Or should we follow Santoro's indications when he says, "My aim was to foreground the camera-eye as a theme, allowing/suggesting to the viewer that the camera could also be the young man's inner view (or maybe his moral concern)"?

Of course, much comes to mind here. For instance that essential moment of our contemporary culture, -Michelangelo Antonioni's *Professione: Reporter* (1975). In this movie, Jack Nicholson takes someone else's identity, only to discover that his new "self" is a gunrunner caught in a deathtrap. As the quite hermetic movie it is, *Professione: Reporter* is especially remembered for its many brilliant stylistic exercises. The movie deals with the fact that our identity is insecure, and of course, with the relation between lived experience and virtual life. In this road movie the story of which unfolds from the African continent to Barcelona and beyond, one sequence is one of the most important cinematographic inventions. There the camera makes this magic detour from inside a room, through the window, then traveling in a circle-like movement over a square, and then again back to the room. The figure that the camera describes has the form of an Omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet, the traditional symbol of death.

Santoro's *The Radio* creates a totally new variation of classic themes from both Borges, Antonioni, Ford -Coppola. And from a lesser known artist, Tariq Alvi. Borges' *Aleph* as a radio set, Antonioni's Omega deconstructed into a less determined detour, Coppola's *The Conversation* without a visible radio set! And what the young man is doing is a method that artist Tariq Alvi is famous for: cutting out pictures of naked boys, bits and pieces of their bodies to be brought together in samples of myriads of boys. Are we here witnessing the work of a part of a cell of some secret society, and are we witnessing how secret messages are being sent and received?

IV

Up until now I have perhaps spoken too much of Borges and Antonioni, Coppola and Tariq Alvi. But this movie is not only a movie about an event in an apartment, but the movie is, in a sense, a movie

about itself, about the traveling shot through the house itself. A snake that bites itself in the tail. And if so, *The Radio* seems more than anything else a function of the real enigma. Because in a yet not mentioned short fragment, we are suddenly witnessing the displacement of the TV set and the red chair. It is a very surreal event, a chair on wheels, and on strings pulled away by an unknown force. What kind of force? Has it perhaps something to do with the person in the room? Or is it a metaphor for the existence of the traveling camera itself? Or is this also a trick to de-mystify the artistic world of the great movie makers?

What is the essence of this most surreal scene? In fact it is an event I can't get my hands on. This is an event out of order, something we are not prepared for. Is this the work of a/the reporter, or a/the missionary, or a/the ghost, or a/the criminal doing something forbidden? Or is it just the work of a/the lover that fantasizes about being/going in the house of his beloved?

This is really the centre of this movie, the Big Enigma for the viewer, the Great Desire of the young man and the Simple Key of Santoro himself! So we better let it be as it presents itself: a secret!

Amsterdam, September/November 2005

@ 2006 Paul Groot

This text was first published in: Vittorio Santoro *Everything's Not Lost*, Revolver Verlag, 2006 Frankfurt a. Main

Paul Groot is an art critic, curator, artist and editor at *Mediamatic*, lives in Amsterdam. He is currently working on an exhibition on the atrocities of the Iraq War, which will be shown at the *Mediamatic Groundfloor*, Amsterdam, in March 2006 (www.mediamatic.net).