



Farokh Soltani

Radio/Body: Phenomenology and Dramaturgies of Radio (2020)

How does the phenomenology of listening to radio differ from the phenomenology of spectating? How do we account for everything that isn't listened for but is nevertheless listened to in the experience of radio? Where does resonance happen in a radio drama?

This oral introduction by Farokh Soltani provides an overview of the territory explored in his *Radio/Body: Phenomenology and Dramaturgy of Radio* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), in which he argues for a bodily, rather than semantic, analysis of radio dramaturgies. Complicating the literary and philosophical taxonomies radio has been categorised by over the course of its existence as a medium, Soltani ultimately argues that radio should learn to listen to itself: 'not radio that says it's flying, but radio that flies with you and takes you flying with it'.

Farokh Soltani is a researcher and teacher at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. He has also worked as a writer, sound designer, composer, theatre-maker and TV professional in his native Iran as well as the UK.

[00:15:00] WHAT IS THE BOOK'S TITLE?

My book's title is *Radio / Body* – and the slash is quite important – *Phenomenology and Dramaturgies of Radio*.

[00: 00:31] HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITING THIS BOOK? / WHERE DOES IT SIT IN RELATION TO YOUR PREVIOUS WORK AND INTERESTS?

The reason why this book came about is because of my really strange eclectic background. I have done sound design, I've done various kinds of things with sound, with music, with installations and so on. But I've also worked professionally as a dramatist and I taught writing for various dramatic media. I've also got this really weird thing which is that, as you can hear from my accent, I am from the Islamic Republic of Iran – and people in Iran do not sound like this. In fact, I will tell you that no one sounds like this. This is my own accent. No one else in the world has it. And the reason that I have this is that I learned to speak English by listening to radio. By listening particularly to radio drama and radio comedy, particularly BBC Radio Four, the biggest producer of radio drama in the world. Well, at least it used to be. So yeah, it turns out if you put all the accents on Radio 4 together, it's this. [*Points to self and grimaces.*] I've had an obsession with radio drama, I've been an avid consumer of radio drama, and I've had the skills that together make radio drama. And so it was always really strange to me that most of the radio drama that I listened to was more literary than sonic. My sound designer's approach, my sound designer self, would say: 'You could really do things with sound here', and my writer self would say: 'You could create really interesting moments with sound here', and my radio drama fan self would say: 'They're not doing very well, are they?!'

I remember exactly the moment that I realised there is something problematic in the way that we make radio drama, which is I listened to a really good radio play by Mark Walker. It's an episode of a series called *Dickens Confidential* – and *Dickens Confidential* is 'the detective adventures of Charles Dickens and his plucky secretary'. It's literally that! There was a bit where this Russian spy – because why not? – is putting the plucky secretary in a balloon and goes above Crystal Palace – yeah? – to drop a bomb on Queen Victoria, because, you know, that's the kind of story it is. And then the secretary and the Russian spy have a fight on the balloon and this is what a fist-punching fight on a balloon sounded like. This is the moment of revelation. This is what it sounded like.

[00:04:13 to 00:04:42] Excerpt from Dickens Confidential: Why Are We in Afghanistan? (2008)

[*Plays audio of a fist fight scene, melodramatically mouthing script and miming actions throughout.*]



Erm, I should do this professionally? [*Laughter.*] I found that amazing because the way that the sounds are organised in that scene is basically like a text. So what do you do? You put a punch. And then you say: 'That was a punch. Now here's another punch.' Boom! Everything reads exactly like a fight and nothing sounds like a fight. I was wondering why this is happening. So that's where the book came from. The book came from my attempt to understand, both philosophically and theoretically, why have we come to make radio like this? Because we have. If you look at the book, I spend a lot of it arguing that this is deliberate and this is the paradigm of British radio. And also why, practically, this paradigm has developed. That's why the book happened.

[00:05:58] WHAT IS THE BOOK ABOUT AND WHAT IS THE MAIN OVERARCHING THESIS OR ARGUMENT?

So the book is essentially a philosophical retooling of the practice of radio dramaturgy. What I really observe in this book – by looking at the way that radio drama is talked about theoretically and by looking into the ways that the practices of radio drama are taught and are presented to both students of the practice and to beginning practitioners (so basically a paradigmatic analysis of scholarship), and also by looking at the history of how the practice of radio drama in this country has developed to argue that the way that British radio drama has been made until very recently – is something that I call a 'semantic paradigm of dramaturgy'. And the semantic paradigm of radio dramaturgy is a way of understanding radio as an intellectual form of art – an art that addresses itself to the mind. In fact, if you read books about radio drama, most of them will at some point say: 'Radio doesn't take place in front of your eyes. It takes place in the theatre of your mind!', which I've always found a really strange idea because if radio is the theatre of the mind, then what is theatre the theatre of? Who knows?

So yes, radio has always been presented as though it is understood intellectually and is understood by the mind and also it is made as though it is understood by the mind. And I argue in this book, as is apparent from the title, that radio doesn't actually work with the mind, it works with the body. Listening to radio drama, just like listening to any kind of drama or just experiencing any kind of drama, is a bodily phenomenon. If you want to understand radio drama, you cannot understand it by analysing its meaning-making, you have to analyse how it is addressed to the body. The way that you do that is by thinking about the various ways in which radio uses sound. So the book's proposal is essentially that we need to stop thinking about radio dramaturgy as a semantic endeavour, as an endeavour of meaning-making, but we need to think of it as a resonant endeavour, as a way of resonating with the audience in any way that you can.

The very strict rules of radio dramaturgy, as have been placed – as have been developed in this country, really don't allow us enough room to create moments of resonance. I also argue that nowadays after the era of 'listening to radio drama while washing the dishes from a tiny transistor radio in the corner' is over, and anyone can make radio drama at home and anyone can listen to radio drama right in your ear, as though it is – as though you are there. There is a time, there is an opportunity, and there's a need for a paradigm shift towards a resonant dramaturgy. Radio should not be the theatre of the mind, radio should be the theatre in the body – that is what I say.

[00:10:30] WHAT DOES THE BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE EXISTING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE IN ITS FIELD?

The field of radio drama theory is very eclectic, it draws from a lot of different areas of knowledge. It draws from semiotics, it sometimes draws from psychology, cognitive science and narratology, and various aspects, theories of understanding.

Having looked at a lot of these – [*laughing*] well, having looked at all of them basically – they all come from areas of science that directly have to do with modes of theoretical understanding and theoretical awareness. I think the thing that I do in this book that has a basis in the fields a little bit, but hasn't been done as extensively, is that I draw from phenomenology to give a new angle on how radio drama works. There have been works of smaller scope or of smaller remit that have pointed out how a phenomenological understanding of the world is a really appropriate and useful way of thinking



about radio drama, but I pushed this idea really to its natural conclusion by proposing a phenomenology of radio drama.

I also hit some other notes that hopefully will be helpful to other ideas in the field. Particularly as part of my exploration of a phenomenology of radio drama, I end up by accident having to do a phenomenology of drama itself, which is actually my next big thing – just try to understand the experience of drama as opposed to the experience of any other performance practice from the phenomenological point of view.

[00:13:25] WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND WHY?

I've actually organised this book around some really weird ideas, some really weird sentences about radio doing things. So I begin with a chapter that is called 'Radio thinks, radio sees', because the way that most scholars have talked about radio drama I would summarise as: people either think that radio is like thought or people think that radio is like vision. So the first thing that I do is really dig deep into the available theoretical ideas of radio drama and try and categorise them as this. Basically, as I said, most of them talk about radio as a theatre of the mind, which is the subtitle of my first chapter because the first thing I did – this book is basically a reaction to the idea of the theatre of the mind, of radio as an intellectual experience.

Then I followed by talking about radio in a phenomenological sense. So my second chapter is called 'Radio listens', because I do argue that once you do a phenomenological exploration of what it is like to listen to radio, the thing that you will discover – and this is a little bit weird and a little bit counterintuitive – is that what you're listening to is someone doing listening, someone listening to the world, someone listening to people, someone deliberately listening to certain people and not others, deliberately listening to certain sounds and not others. And then they are sharing their listening with you. I actually do something that, again, is counterintuitive. I will say: 'That is radio. When you listen to radio, you are listening to the radio as it listens.' Well of course radio cannot listen because it's not a living thing, but that is a theoretical fact rather than a phenomenological fact. I would say that when you listen to radio, phenomenologically the radio is listening. So that's going to be my idea for the rest of the book. The rest of the book is: if we look at all kinds of radio drama, historically and contemporarily, and we don't analyse this based on what it 'sees' or what it 'thinks', and analyse based on what it 'listens', we realise that it actually adopts a very specific deliberative, deliberate, intellectual mode of listening. It doesn't mean it can't listen any other way. It means that the dramaturg designs every bit of radio to listen in this particular way. Which I would say, drawing from Michel Chion, this is a semantic mode of listening – that is, you listen to the sound not to listen to it, not to experience, not to resonate with it, not to feel it, you listen to understand its meaning. For example, I have a lot of noise behind me, I have a confusing accent, I am not a very good fluent speaker. But you don't listen to all the nuances of my voice, you don't listen to all the sounds around me. You listen to me. You don't listen to my accent, you don't listen to how I say my 'sh's and my 'th's, you just listen to the meaning of the words that I am putting forward. In fact, I would say you are not listening to even the words that I speak, you are listening to the meaning behind them, which is why if you play this back and try to listen to this, non-semantically you will realise that there are lots of sounds that actually don't have any meaning – but you don't hear them. Radio in Britain is developed in a very particular way and through certain practices to listen like that. I critique that and I say we don't listen like that, human beings do not listen like that. So that's my third chapter – is 'how radio listens', how does radio listen? And then I trace the history of that – and weirdly enough, although this is a very paradigmatic and really common, really dominant way of doing dramaturgy in British radio, it's always been surrounded by little moments where people don't actually do this. People look at radio and say: 'How can I use this for sound? How can I use this for resonance? How can I move away from this semantic approach to dramaturgy?'

And in fact the fourth chapter of my book is 'Radio learns to listen', where I look at how people have decided that this is the way that we should do radio and all of those non-semantic ways that are things we shouldn't do. And, just like any time you look into history, you find that – unlike a lot of people claim – this isn't the natural way that radio should have developed. There are technological



issues involved, there are political issues involved, there are historical issues involved. Every time someone tries to do semantic dramaturgy, it's not that it doesn't work on radio, the way that radio 'sees' and radio 'thinks', it's just that at some points they didn't have good technology to create those kinds of moments. At some points they didn't have the listenership to experiment with it. At some points just they had a very bad boss. Like Val Gielgud, who was John Gielgud's brother, who came from a very theatrical family and loved theatre and really thought that radio should be like theatre, and he was in charge of BBC Radio Drama from 1927 to 1956. It was literally just because this guy said: 'No, don't do all that noise stuff. That's not true theatre. True theatre should be of the mind, should be a play of ideas.' So once you put all of that aside, you realise that radio can work in all other ways.

And then my fifth chapter is 'Radio listens to itself'. I have an explanation for that which you should read the book for [*laughing*] or maybe I'll read a bit of it later, but which is that when radio tries to resonate with you rather than just tell you things. So my fifth chapter tries to explore various kinds of dramaturgy and various dramaturgical techniques in which – rather than going the semantic way – dramaturgs try to somehow give you the experience of, for example, a fight, not by saying that there is a fight and just putting the icons of the fight in front of you, but by trying to shake you.

My favourite radio dramaturg is a man called Dirk Maggs and he actually created a moment where it's a Superman drama – and Superman flies. I'm going to play it for you and just listen, without mentioning it, how you can feel Superman fly.

[00:22:01 to 00:22:42] Excerpt from *The Trial of Superman* (1988)

[*Plays audio clip which communicates the action of flying using orchestral music and the sound effect of whooshing around in space.*]

This isn't the kind of radio that just tells you: 'Oooh, I'm flying!'. It flies with you and takes you flying with it. It doesn't just put forward what it hears in the room, it experiences what is happening, it listens to itself as it's experiencing what's happening, and it allows you to listen to that world not just through what is in it but also how it feels to be in it.

And that's where I end. I say: 'Let's do that! That's how we should do it.'

[00:23:25] HOW ENJOYABLE/DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE BOOK?

Aah, I really dislike... So I should preface this by saying that I have three degrees in writing, [*laughing*] and I am a lecturer in writing and I teach writing. I absolutely despise writing – but with this book, the most fun bits of this book, the thing that I really enjoyed was that I read a lot about how people were thinking about radio when it was just becoming a thing.

So between 1927 and 1937 is where British radio really became what it was. And I spent about a year, a good year, just wallowing in the thoughts of those people – and wallowing in the *feelings* of those people. Particularly there are two people who are very important at the time. One of them is Val Gielgud, who was the head of BBC Radio Drama, and the other one was a man called Lance Sieveking, who's this really weird poetic modernist figure who was an airplane flight bomber thing? – I don't know what it's called, second language! – and who was a flying ace during World War One. He was also a poet and a writer and an artist and also slightly a bit of a communist and also slightly bit of religion, he was posh but he was also very down to earth. And he was the most experimental of the BBC producers in the 1920s. And these two people had a really strange love-hate relationship. And Lance Sieveking writes in one of his books: 'I really want to live my life the way that I want to. And I want to have grandchildren and I want to dangle them on my knees and tell them stories – [Mr Gielgud] does not want that for me'. [*Laughter.*] So they literally really hated each other but also really loved each other. The most enjoyable bit of this was actually getting into the mind of those people as they were trying to grapple with a completely new media, while also just being very petty normal people. And seeing how the impact of their personal relationship has changed the whole medium was quite fun to figure out.



The most difficult thing that I did during this was just trying to articulate the basic experience of listening to radio – which I thought would be pretty simple. It turned out to be really confusing because once you look into what the experience actually is like, suddenly it becomes inarticulate – ‘inarticulable’? – and, yeah, it took me a long time to articulate it and then it took me a long time to make it understandable to others because it became very counterintuitive. I hope I've done that. People have told me that I've done that. [*Crosses fingers and smiles.*] Let's see.

[00:27:15] WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PASSAGE, CHAPTER OR IDEA FROM THIS BOOK?

I think one of the most – I think my favourite idea in everything, and I think it's the core idea of the book, is the idea of the ‘radio body’, which is my attempt at arguing that the experience of radio drama is really the experience of two bodies who are straddling two worlds. One body is my body, is the listener’s body, and the other one is the body of the radio. When I listen to a piece of radio drama, I am listening to the bodily experience of an other, and that other I only encounter, absolutely only encounter, through radio. And even though I know that the radio is just a device, and it's just sounds that are produced in a studio, the moment that I listen to the radio, the radio is no longer the radio, it is a radio body.

I think that idea is really useful, because I can then describe my experience of listening to radio not as the experience of listening to an object, not as the experience of listening to a sonic object conveyed to me through a medium, but as just experiencing the world and experiencing it in its holistic, anti-predictive corporeality. That was a very convoluted sentence but hopefully it makes sense. So I really, really think that is the best idea that I’ve had in this book [*laughing*], it’s to talk about what I listen to on the radio, what I hear on the radio as a radio body hearing. And that was also the most difficult thing to make sense of – but, yeah.

Transcription by Nick Awde

Clips Summary

[00:04:13 to 00:04:42] *Dickens Confidential: Why Are We in Afghanistan?* (2008), BBC Radio 4.

[00:22:01 to 00:22:42] *The Trial of Superman* (1988), BBC Audio.

Audio available at www.auralia.space/library2-farokhsoltani/.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Salazar Cardona, Juan Felipe; Soltani, Farokh (2021) LMYE Library #2: Farokh Soltani - Radio/Body (2020), *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.14014055.v1>.

