

## **RadioDoc Review**

**Volume 2 • Issue 2 • 2016**

2016-04-04

### **From the limbo zone of transmissions: Gregory Whitehead's "On the shore dimly seen"**

Virginia Madsen, Macquarie University, Sydney , None

#### **Abstract**

In this review-essay, Virginia Madsen enters the polyphonous 'limbo zone of transmissions' created by Gregory Whitehead's most recent 'performed documentary' and radio provocation, "On the shore dimly seen". This composed voicing, drawn from verbatim texts courtesy of WikiLeaks and the dysfunctionality of America's Guantanamo Bay, is heard as a fortuitous chance encounter with a medium – and as an increasingly rare listening 'detour' while Madsen is on the road. This essay is thus both a reflection upon the nature of the radio offered here, the chance listening experience to work of this kind, and upon the distinctive body of work created over more than 30 years by this American performance and radio artist. Digging down into this new radio 'no play' as she calls it, a 'forensic theatre' and convocation created by Whitehead for international audiences, and drawing on her interviews with the artist and other research and critical interactions, Madsen aims to sound out this work's greater depths and to connect us to some of the unlikely voices which still haunt its 'woundscape'.

#### **Keywords**

performance documentary, Guantanamo Bay, radio documentary, audio feature, Artaud, Bachelard

#### **Recommended Citation**

Madsen, V., (2016) "From the limbo zone of transmissions: Gregory Whitehead's "On the shore dimly seen"", *RadioDoc Review* 2(2). doi: <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v2i2.7>

# From the limbo zone of transmissions: Gregory Whitehead's *On the shore dimly seen*

## A review essay by Virginia Madsen

*Writer, director, montage/composition, vocals: Gregory Whitehead (USA)*

*Reader: Anne Undeland*

*Actor: Gelsey Bell*

*Broadcast 27 March 2015, Soundproof, RN, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Duration: 50mins. [Audio Link](#).*

In 1996 the artist Gregory Whitehead offered this clue to his already strong corpus of research and experiment in radio: 'unless you are willing', he wrote, 'to electrify yourself and enter directly into the flow of relations, the Limbo Zone of transmission, then you're not really doing anything more than pushing buttons' (Whitehead, 1996: 97).

What could Whitehead have meant by this, in the context of his own work at the time, or in relation to more recent developments in radio creativity, and his perhaps fragile place within that? What was this artist-writer-producer-performer-director (and theorist) referencing with these words? And what might be the effect if this provocation from the past is re-addressed to his most recent production, *On the shore dimly seen*, first broadcast in March 2015 and shortlisted for the 2015 *Prix Italia* media awards?

Interestingly, and provocative for this journal, *RadioDoc Review*, this work was not entered in the *Prix Italia* documentary category by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), but in 'Original Drama: Radio'. For those not familiar with Whitehead's considerable body of audio work, we may also wonder why the premier broadcast of this piece had not emanated from the artist's own country, the USA, but rather from the ABC and its cultural 'ideas network', Radio National (RN)? The subject of this performance documentary is intimately concerned with the treatment of political detainees in the US's notorious Guantanamo Bay 'facility' and the title and some text comes from the American national anthem. It is true there is an indirect connection to Australia in this subject matter: the verbatim voicings heard in the piece come courtesy of Wikileaks – and Wikileaks is the brainchild of estranged Australian activist Julian Assange. There are other reasons why Whitehead may have chosen to seek out Australian (ABC) support for the premiere

of this piece. One of these may simply be that he has had a long and rich relationship with the Australian public broadcaster, and particularly with its radio arts, drama and features producers and these mostly have been connected with the ABC's Radio National. An initiative like the recently inaugurated 'Creative Audio Unit' (CAU) on RN (CAU, 2014 -) continues a tradition of radio creativity and experiment which goes back to the 1980s, although I have argued this strand of broadcasting goes further back to the establishment of a Features Department in the late 1940s, and then to drama and features experiments at the national cultural network and also ABC FM from the 1950s to 1980s (Madsen, in Priest, 2009). Units like this also form part of the ABC's ongoing commitments to cultural and arts programming and to fostering innovation. This commitment is found, like the BBC's, in a charter, but also it manifests in the long history of public discussion and literature which has informed ABC policy and priorities. The ABC for example has always been much more than a publicly funded national media service; it is a key cultural institution continuing as one of the principal agencies in Australia for the promotion and nurture of the arts.

Whitehead's most recent 'adventure in radio'<sup>1</sup> could still find a place on this network today, as did many of his earlier works, because of this tradition of support for radiophonic and audio art and the performance arts. Within this space is still to be found dedicated specialist producers and a venue for highly produced and often longer duration work, equally not confined by traditional genre or radio format boundaries, or by more recent emphases on narrative-driven content. CAU, like its predecessors, has also welcomed international work and independents: radio works which are made by artists and *auteurs* of the medium. Whitehead's work was first broadcast by the ABC on the program *Surface Tension* in 1986 (*Dead Letters*, 1985) and original commissions resulted from his continuing relationship with ABC FM/Radio National's *The Listening Room* and later other audio arts programs. One of these commissions (*Pressures of the Unspeakable*) won for him and the ABC a *Prix Italia* (1992). Whitehead has had many international commissions of course, and his work has been aired in multiple countries and by major broadcasters such as the BBC.

### **Encountering Whitehead's 'forensics' in a 'no play' for the radio**

In this reflection – instigated by a chance encounter with the actual broadcast as I heard it on my car radio – and this was an ordinary setting, listening while driving in the suburbs – I aim to sound out this latest work of Whitehead's, exploring its forensic theatre of operations and the forms, themes and voices which haunt it. I use terms like those in this subheading without much explanation now, but will elucidate them as we go on. We might read these words as descriptors for an array

of work Whitehead has developed over the last thirty years, and indeed they recur throughout his own writings on his work and as cited by others.

In reality, that evening when I heard Whitehead's new piece for radio, I was genuinely surprised. I had no expectations about what I was hearing as this was to be a chance encounter. I pulled over to the side of the road because I wanted to satisfy myself that what I was indeed stumbling upon here was a new voicing from an artist who might also be imagined as one of Gaston Bachelard's 'psychic engineers' of the radio medium. Bachelard wrote about the possibilities for creating sound plays (Bachelard, 1951) for this still new medium, and the role they might have for listeners. In his proposition to the radio, the radio engineer might give way to a new type of producer, a 'psychic engineer' who is able to speak to the inner psyche in the manner of the poet.<sup>2</sup>

Here in another sense was Whitehead drawn to the idea of the 'dead letter', a trope and subject he explored in one of his first works for cassette and broadcast distribution. Dead letters are messages which for whatever reason become stuck in limbo: they cannot reach their desired destinations. There are still dead letter departments in real post offices I imagine, but they can come in other guises too. For Whitehead these are latent voices which pertain to things and people: they are trapped in a no man's land until they can be given a new passage and released to reach their intended receivers. In this 'performed documentary' (Whitehead, *Soundproof*, 2015) we might understand the dead letters as being released from a place which is both symbolic and terrifyingly real. Guantanamo Bay is the site, now well documented, of a profound silencing: it's also a symbol of state violence and organized subterfuge. Messages never leave their senders' circumscribed limits, while the regimes of interrogation and control are justified in the name of American freedom and democracy. As Whitehead's transmissions in this work make painfully clear, it is in the name of liberty that detainees are stripped of their identities, their rights, and even their humanity.

The repressed communications uncovered by Wikileaks and pored over by Whitehead, also the 'vulnerologist' – a term Whitehead concocts for someone who studies wounds – are here to be gathered, read over and over, and finally edited and brought into a new space where dialogue might replace monologue: the enforced litanies of inquisition characterized by the interrogation process in the day to day routine at Guantanamo Bay. Whitehead is motivated to read the wound, opening up interpretations, perhaps to even offer hope. We discover the dead letter trope operating also in the words used from the Star-Spangled Banner: a kind of sacred text for most Americans. But this is a dead letter doubly reinforced and delivered though the juxtaposition of the verse of the national anthem and the verbatim voicing of one detainee's log over just one day at Guantanamo Bay.

In this polyvocal performance text it's important to know we do not hear the cliché of the first stanza. Rather the lines of the second verse are recited and these are far more mysterious and evocative in this context. It was pointed out to me by an early reader of this essay, that these words would hardly be known or even be recognized by most Americans. They are rarely performed. Whitehead's cryptic title also comes from this source and presents itself to us throughout the piece as a further kind of hermeneutics, in other words, a 'reading' through performance which attends to subtext and hidden meanings, offering a new interpretation. The words of the second verse applied as they are in this shadow play, now seem to hold the whole system and country to account for its abandonment of the ideals of liberty and democracy, those same ideals supposedly at the heart of the American constitution and imagination.

### **Lady liberty and the 'no play' of the Star-Spangled Banner**

The first words I hear in that encounter on the road were not those of a male voice, not yet Whitehead's; rather they are female, close-miked and intimate. She seems to philosophize from her sublimely disembodied vantage point: 'What could be more American than an interrogation team?' She ponders aloud, her thoughts made flesh through this voicing. She seems wise as she gently shares these thoughts with the unknown listener. Her words slip almost naturally into my own haphazard stream of thoughts as I drive through an intersection.

Where are we going to then as one listens and encounters these voicings re-arranged into a hardly expected dialogue? What is this new electrification and sounding out, which brings not only a new set of dead letters to life in the Whitehead *oeuvre*, but channels the voices of authority (the Gods?), to return to these bodies their names, wounds and identities. There is an illumination here where we sense the scope of the betrayal and the magnitude of what is at stake.

I listened to this emission, losing myself in its enunciation spilling into the ethers in highly controlled sentences voiced by Anne Undeland or Whitehead's sung liturgy. Still other more monstrous versions of lost souls in limbo escaped into the air – fractured screams, glottal splats, and plosive ventings half-asphyxiated. The piece felt like a William Blake painting or at least some medieval vision of tortured souls. The text revealed the wounds which could not be sutured, and here was an opening to something hidden and repressed, certainly beyond that articulated by words alone. As Alan Beck had written, '[r]arely does a radio fiction confound the narrative effect with sounds and silences from domains other than speech.' (Beck, 2002). But this was exactly Whitehead's method and I could now identify the *modus operandi* as he has employed it in the past. Here the litanies of 'no touch torture' encountered the provocation set in motion by this lady liberty and the words of the

national anthem. The unnamed female narrator alludes to her fate: it is she who 'sings in tongues' while sacrificed to the star spangled banner. And the encounters of that nameless internee '063' are mingled with other texts, including lists of 'approved techniques, brief histories in the development of no-touch torture, and analysis of what is happening within the interrogation log itself' (Whitehead, *Soundproof*, 2015). Here a new set of 'weasel words' (Watson, 2003) designed for subterfuge and named by devisers, the CIA – without doubt the product of a long post war cold war history of supposed scientific researches into psychological 'no harm' interrogation methods – are deconstructed and ultimately challenged.

The juxtaposition of ordinary life with the otherworldliness and sonic mysteries suddenly presented by this distinctive Gregorian communion bubbling up from out of one of the dark chambers of radio while I least expected it, acted like a sign on the roadside almost missed, but which called out: 'Detour: entry to another world. Take the next exit'. The Situationists had a word for the intoxicating effects of such a sudden psychic deviation opened by triggers in the geography of landscape and mind, and the slippage between material reality and reverie, and as instigated by a certain artistic rite of passage: they used the evocative-sounding word *détournement*. The word 'turn' can be heard in this French noun, used by The Situationists<sup>3</sup> among other things to negotiate a way to make art from life as one constantly opened oneself to the unexpected. It's a key word for this group but harks back to the surrealists, even before to Baudelaire and the romantics.

On the road, driving to somewhere – not more than half listening and lethargic at first, but then awakened by the unusual sonic qualities of the voicescape delivered by that small receiver in the car, and recognizing that this was not ordinary radio broadcasting – I wondered at the contrast instigated by this encounter. The contrast between the ordinariness of the listening situation and the strangeness of the broadcast. This heightened the senses and one's awareness, allowing the surreal qualities of this kind of approach to the radio to refigure the reality of the moment. The juxtaposition of the world of the broadcast with one's own movement through the space – wherever it may be – can open up a porthole to somewhere else altogether. For me, this was a place I had not imagined I was heading to. Whitehead knows all about this trickery and this 'magic' of the radio: this is perhaps why he continues to make work first and foremost for radio transmission although podcasts and on demand audio are also available, and excerpts on his website and elsewhere. Here for him, and perhaps for the radio listener too, is the pleasure of lost ruins to be discovered without the aid of a map. The radio for Whitehead still has this serendipitous quality allowing two different worlds to co-exist in time often unexpectedly: the outcome can seem akin to a small miracle. These worlds too are able to speak to one another, interpenetrate and provide something like fissures

into the everyday. They defy broadcast formats and rules, and the security otherwise found in well defined radio categories and genres.

### **From dead letters to re-membering through resounding the woundscape**

From out of the darkness that obscures that shore dimly seen, Whitehead begins his piece quoting the barely recognized second verse of the American national anthem. This is how it goes:

*...on the shore dimly seen, through the mists of the deep.  
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes.  
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,  
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?*

These are beautiful lines. They provide the title and a commitment to break the silence that 'continues to surround the regime of no-touch torture imposed within Camp Delta at Guantanamo Bay' (Whitehead, notes, *Soundproof*, 2015). Whitehead performs these lines by Francis Scott Keys to begin his search for the 'spirit of liberty': it is this 'she' who was betrayed as soon as the flag and anthem were used, Whitehead writes, as 'props in acts of criminal abuse' (Whitehead, *Soundproof*, 2015). Explaining how he came to use these words, he recalls:

The interrogation log of detainee 063, as revealed to the public through Wikileaks, offers a detailed hour-by-hour chronicle of the so-called 'special interrogation plan' approved by Donald Rumsfeld and others in the Bush administration during the months following 9/11. In reading through the entire log that records many months of abuse, I was struck by the persistent use of loud music to assault the senses of the detainee; and in particular, the use of the Star-Spangled Banner, during which the detainee would be ordered to stand at attention with his hand over his heart.

This is theatrical 'no play' at work – of war and now also a site of autopsy – thus it is intended as a kind of forensic investigation which proceeds through theatrical researches and ritualized musicalized voicings. Liturgical in style and form, we can identify Whitehead's hand in this, if not quite one of his signatures. We are in the lab here, or the prison, and now we are also immersed in a space which, through performance, draws on the power usually attributed to the theatre and rituals associated with the sacred. There is a method in all this no-play, as I'm calling it, as we move from verbatim documentary recitation to something more like an exorcism. Or perhaps it is closer to those shamanic outings where the shaman is a medium through which the inhabiting voices of corruption, disease etcetera, may be

channelled. These 'demons' are being exorcised here, possibly coaxed out, and tricked.

As Whitehead, always the trickster, explains, the '[e]xtended improvisations by the vocalist Gelsey Bell' are designed to 'both embody and repel the cruel logic of the texts' (Whitehead, *SoundProof*, 2015). As I would discover, this performance ritualized through liturgical dialogue or shamanic channelling, and extracted so precisely from the pages of documented logs of interrogation and abuse (ex-Wikileaks) was also an exercise in a kind of concentrated listening (and reading) though re-performance. Drawing on the effects of extended repetition and 'a reduced listening', especially as we might encounter these in the research accompanying *musique concrete*, or as Steve Reich has explored in works like 'Come Out' (Reich, 1987) for example – where repetition of musical or word phrases are designed to produce a kind of release of the object, allowing the text to take on new meanings – we can recognize how Whitehead understands his actions, which are transformative in intent as they are made to 'repel the cruel logic' (Whitehead, 2015) of the interrogation itself.<sup>4</sup> This method as Whitehead employs it, is designed perhaps to ultimately re-member and resound the dispersed bones of those bodies and broken spirits all but silenced and left to rot at Guantanamo Bay.

Whitehead has written about this space of operations on numerous occasions. In his dialogue with Allen S. Weiss, he reflected; '[t]he Forensic Theatre is a space for fractured bodies and shattered voices, a stage that fairly vibrates with anxiety, anxiety about disappearance or dissolution into morbid anatomy, about the body in pieces, or even the fear of being buried alive' (Weiss and Whitehead, 1999). How appropriate is this last comment if we connect it to this latest radio work and the condition of lived interment/entombment created by Guantanamo Bay.

In this work we also encounter voices rather than characters. The voice is disembodied not only in relation to its transmission on the radio, but as the residue which can be induced to speak from between the lines of the verbatim documents of interrogation. Description, 'found text', actions, reflection: all these too are activated by Whitehead's passionate desire to bear witness to the woundscape after he tells us he has consumed the 500 or so pages divulged from the Guantanamo Bay (CIA) logs. A lot of reading and forensics is behind this 40 or so minute broadcast, a performance of just one tiny part of the CIA magnum opus.

In Whitehead's work, I sense that reality, or rather, the ethical need to confront the truth, can come from the forms and frames more common to fiction, and performative 'translation' involved with any reading of a text. Composing from verbatim documentary sources – treating them like found sounds/texts – may also reap powerful effects and transformations in the listener. The work, coming from



quite another place than documentary as it is commonly encountered, also comes across as a kind of phantom theatre of voices in the style much earlier excavated by the likes of writers and radio playwrights like Samuel Beckett, or Antonin Artaud. Voices emerge in Whitehead's illuminated precincts, in calm but no less disturbing tones. The bureaucratic sentences he lifts from thousands of hours of scrutiny and characterized as a sung liturgy of terror, proceed with a relentless rhythm – even the part-singing out of the innocuous punctuating words, 'full stop' (lower pitched and slowed by Whitehead himself) induce something close to nausea. We are reminded that even text can rewrite identity, especially in concert with other forms of physical and psychological abuse.

The resulting polyphony, bubbling up from the subterranean depths on that shore dimly seen takes us right into the heart of the dysfunctionality of Guantanamo Bay. It is strange to admit, but parked by the side of the road, Whitehead's verbatim voicing coupled with his channelling of 'lady liberty', elicited within me an adrenalin rush. In the otherwise banality of that moment, on that ordinary day, I recognized I could still stumble upon this barely categorizable thing on the radio. It was a rare encounter and I felt grateful that someone had been bold enough to choose it to go on the national public broadcaster. The radio could offer something like the situationist detour, a chance meeting with a deeply considered work of radio communion. It could also connect the listener with an artist working on the edges of theatre, transmission, and the critical performance arts. His body of work developed over decades now – but perhaps not easily fitting with current trends driven by narrative – also connects us to the work of artists as diverse as Marcel Duchamp, Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters...and last but not least, Antonin Artaud.

### **Entering the limbo zone of transmissions**

Whitehead has produced from the materials of this limbo zone, as he calls it, more than 100 works for radio. None of these could be strictly labelled 'documentary'. We can think of all the 'dead' texts perhaps that this artist illuminates, sutures together, then electrifies through his voicings on the radio. From the earliest experimental documentary essays like *Dead Letters* (1985) which was based on extensive interviews in part with workers at the New York Post Office 'dead letter' department and a memorable interview with a man who was trying to memorize the entire *Iliad* in Greek, to the various docu-fictions of the 1990s, Whitehead has been prepared to enter the radio space through sound. He most literally takes on a *persona*. In *Pressures of the Unspeakable* (Whitehead/ABC, 1991), Whitehead spoke to the listeners as a kind of doctor of the scream. We might imagine him also as a magician, pulling rabbits out of hats or donning a lab coat, scalpel in hand. This latter image is conjured if we think of Whitehead's 'laboratory for acoustic

innovation and research' or the 'Institute for Scream Studies' founded for his *Prix Italia* (1992) winning work *Pressures of the Unspeakable*, also made for the Australian public broadcaster.<sup>5</sup> His 'Center for Woundscape Studies' was another of these performative sites for research around the study of 'vulnerology' as he coined it: the 'science of the wound'. Whitehead claimed to approach the wound as a site not only of trauma, but as a space to enact healing and renewal.

Whitehead can appear as the snake charmer, or trickster here, with his 'centres' and 'institutes' and his embodiment as such a character through voice *personae*; but I do not believe he means them ever to be 'mock', or mere artifice or gimmickry. These tropes draw on Whitehead's own trauma as a youth, after he nearly died in a car accident. This was some years before he found himself as radio's 'castaway' (Whitehead in Madsen, 2013). In this accident which has left its mark on him in more ways than one, he recovered cognitive function, but the impact was much more lasting on his subjectivity, he explains. In my interview with him from 2013, Whitehead recalls how soon after this accident he 'started doing these fake radio shows, just on cassette, two adolescents improvising a variety show'. He and his friend went on to 'create these acts and play all the roles' (all citations: Whitehead in Madsen, 2013). It was here, he realized later, that these plays were having an extraordinary effect: 'This performance of the self and other selves made those parts of my old consciousness feel OK, and I started to feel a little bit like my pre-accident self.' The performance through voicings like this created a conduit for healing, and was one of the precursors to Whitehead's entry into a new creative space for the radio which was emerging in the new public radio of the early 1980s, particularly in New York.

Whitehead found a way to enter radio in the 1980s and worked with the radio artist and producer Susan Stone: the two young producers teamed up to make what they called 'Radio Schizophonia', a term Whitehead and Stone develop in new ways after being inspired by acoustic ecologist Murray Schaefer. One of the very first things they attempted was to try to create a live simultaneous translation and re-performance in English of Antonin Artaud's infamous but censored radio play and voicing, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* (1947-1948, ORTF, France)<sup>6</sup> or in English, 'To have done with the judgement of god'. This was a broadcast on American radio of Artaud's original work for voices for the French state broadcaster. Whitehead tells me that 'on the left track', and over that almost continuous drone which is just as essential to this piece as the more well known and frequently 'collected' screams, 'was me in English' (in Madsen, 2013). Whitehead still recalls the immersion and how he loved 'that drone. He's literally being eaten alive... It's this wounded howl in a way. And it turns this wounded self...that hum... into an ethereal presence. It had a very, very strong impact on me'. And yes, says

Whitehead, 'it was very risky. I disappeared into it, it was a boundary crossing experience' (Whitehead in Madsen, 2013).

These *personae* Whitehead inhabits from perhaps that moment on, are not simply part of some mockumentary spoof. Nothing Whitehead does is mockumentary, and he stresses; 'I don't like that because its not mocking anything, there's no mock, its using a fictive premise to bring out the reality that is there. Again, it's like those little moments of voices bubbling out of *Dead Letters*: you have to conjure it. It was conjuring the real' (Whitehead in Madsen, 2013). There is room for direct channelling of another, and an opening to new interpretations and interpenetrations. This idea must have a bearing on *On the shore dimly seen*: 'the idea is not to disrupt so as to in some way destroy, even when the temptation may be very strong, but rather to dissemble in a way that reveals the critical nerves and bones, that lays bare the skewed intelligence of the system...' (Weiss and Whitehead, 1999).

In these psychic interventions in the radiophonic space, Whitehead has been able to call up all kinds of spirits to life, commune with their voices as *personae*, and thus 're-member' bodies, almost like so many Frankensteins on the slab. Radio for Whitehead has always been more than the relay of sound and waves: from the very beginning we find the emphasis on the liveness and deadness paradoxically of the event. Then there is the community this radio creates in the relationship between individual listener and the broadcast/er. From the analogue era, we also encounter how important cutting and electrification have been to the process of this creation and re-membering. This is a kind of resonance imaging, a forensic investigation: a recreating of a body from organs which divulge secrets, are cut up to be repurposed, sounded; and the reading of wounds that are made to speak, sometimes to sing, offering up their own hermeneutics.<sup>7</sup>

Recently Gregory Whitehead commented about his ongoing focus on wounds: 'we stress that if the wound is not allowed to spill forth all its chaos and pain, the "healing" will do nothing but provide cover for the festering interior contamination, which is very much a contamination of the self.' (Whitehead in Hume, Christine, 2014).

In this new work Whitehead is sounding once more the woundscape and screamscape: one festers while the other is suppressed. He continues as *provocateur* here in the theatre of ideas, but is not quite the master of ceremonies or simply the expert revealing to us the body on the table and the meaning of its wounds (e.g. *Display Wounds*, 1986). In this mixing of sacred texts and dead letters, Whitehead must take on the powerful attributes and *personae* of shaman, exorcist, and Medium.

## The original theatre of operations and Antonin Artaud

I can't hear Whitehead's *On the shore dimly seen*, and his provocation to electrify oneself from almost 20 years ago – I return to those opening questions – without also then thinking of the spirit of the writer, performer, actor, poet and fellow psychic navigator of that original radio theatre of operations, Antonin Artaud. Artaud, one might well argue, attempted just that kind of electrification in a singular and probably pioneering moment of (non) broadcasting history ('no play') in 1947. It appears that Gregory Whitehead has sought to re-sound that moment and that corpus starting from very early on in his career in the 1980s. I would suggest he is still acknowledging the debt and the 'healing' he owes to Artaud here.

When I first heard the fractured screamscape of *On the shore dimly seen* combined with the sung and spoken debriefing from the log of torture, in a not quite verbatim theatre taken from actual interrogations and actions documented, I knew the bones of Artaud's 1947 'monster'<sup>8</sup> work were being re-electrified and somehow re channelled. With Whitehead's new work though, Artaud is not explicit, as in that much earlier radio exploration I have recounted and which Whitehead essayed in the mid 1980s when he first discovered the repressed original recording. Yet, we could argue that Artaud's idea and research for his 'theatre of cruelty'<sup>9</sup> surfaces in this new Gregorian provocation and theatre of operations, 'built – at least in principle' Whitehead wrote, 'to pick up the pieces' (Whitehead, 1990: 103). '[T]he forensic theatre is a theatre of literal re-membling, recollecting living histories from bodies gone to pieces' (Ibid). *Pour en finir...* we should also recall was one of the first influences on Whitehead's own re-negotiations of those forms of the radio which are so familiar to an American listener to the present: the 'talk-show, tirade, incantation, threat, confession, lament' (Whitehead, 1996: 98).<sup>10</sup>

Artaud's transfiguration performance has interested a host of theatre practitioners as well as writers and theorists since the late 1940s – Jerzy Grotowski was one of the most influenced and influential of these.<sup>11</sup> And, as I have briefly stated, Gregory Whitehead is one of those drawn also to Artaud's explorations that mean performance is much more than mere representation of something: putting on the mask must enact transformation. Artaud seems to channel voices from outside of himself, much like a medium, and those from deep within, those that cry out in pain or defiance. These voices may lay claim to being an expression of the greater reality and suffering he actually was experiencing at the end of his life, as well as being a conduit for the wider horrors contained in those first concentration camps dreamed up in the name of a total theatre of war, or alternately the 'asylums' the mentally ill had to endure whether in peace or wartime and which mirror certain aspects of the Nazis' total war camps. (Artaud was subjected to sustained therapy of electric shocks and starvation while in an asylum). In his last great work, he seemed to

channel this personal and collective suffering not only in his now iconic screams, but through the voiced glossolalia, and almost child-like musical accompaniments (the single drum, the drone) and through the other actors that we hear in this piece. These voicings and texts, in a *radio povera* or ‘poor theatre’<sup>12</sup> still have the power to profoundly shock and move us. And they do seem to speak again to the Guantanamo Bay channellings that Gregory Whitehead has summoned.

Artaud does sound insane in parts of his ‘radio play’, as his iconic screams from this censored broadcast of 1947 still float in the internet, and continue to be regarded as markers of madness. But in his *Pour en finir...* perhaps he was not so insane after all when we think of this performance in the context of total war, the inhuman treatment of prisoners or the mentally ill, and the already collective forgetting of this trauma as the Americans moved from Europe’s old war to the new cold war, the baby boom looming on the horizon as a possible answer to the unprecedented loss of life and *détournement* of capitalist production witnessed in the death industries created by the Nazis. Artaud’s work still resonates not because it has been reduced to a sign of madness (via his so called rantings and glossolalia), but because he becomes a medium for an otherwise obscured or suppressed truth. When I heard his character, a questioner, or a relatively new kind of radio interviewer – one who says to another of the *personae* Artaud performs in this piece: ‘you are deranged, Monsieur Artaud, surely you are deranged?’ (Artaud 1947, adaptation, Madsen/ABC, 1996) – I do not interpret his state to be that of the lunatic. And perhaps this is also what we find being channelled in Whitehead’s interventions, after the revelations of abuse at Guantanamo Bay are brought to light?

Taking these thoughts into consideration, *On the shore dimly seen* appears to sit strangely, does it not, as the subject of an essay in *RadioDoc Review*? As a program, it is not ‘documentary’, at least not in any conventional sense, and certainly it is a long way from more journalistically driven factual forms we might readily associate with certain radio outlets and their programs. Whitehead adopts the descriptor, ‘performance documentary’ (*Soundproof*, 2015) but it can be understood now I hope through the sounding I have tried to give it, and especially through the theatre of operations launched almost 70 years ago by Artaud. Documentary is a site for exploration, but to qualify the field yet again, it is a ‘more poetic tradition of documentary’ – the ‘more essayistic tradition’ – such as we might associate with [*cinéaste*] Chris Marker. ‘His *Sans Soleil* [Sunless] had an immense impact’, recalls Whitehead. Connecting this documentary impulse to current work, Whitehead reflects how often radio stations, outlets and producers restrict what is possible:

‘It’s so funny to me when people start getting into these ludicrous discussions about what qualifies as documentary, because we actually live in a culture where it’s actually the fabrications which are making the

history, whether it is fabrications about war, or fabrications about products, or fabrications about how well the economy is doing, everything is just a projected illusion. And yet, artists are supposed to be the last persons concerned about authenticity.’ (all quoted here: Whitehead in Madsen, 2013).

For me the smudgy messy border zones between reality and fiction, documentary and drama, poetry and journalism should be embraced as germinative spaces, rather than their boundaries delineated, or worse, policed. The eminent US public radio broadcaster Jay Allison wrote that Gregory Whitehead is a ‘radio philosopher’, a ‘creator of radio plays, documentary essays, voiceworks, castaways, soundscapes and acoustic adventures that have roamed the American psyche’ (Allison, 2009: 1). This seems a better way to approach what is also a richly theorized and performed essaying.

In hearing Whitehead’s work, as a moment of serendipitous interruption, I have also discovered that there remain these special places on the radio, which still offer up this type of challenge and even affront, while drawing on very deep reserves of feeling, resistance and empathy to do so. Being a broadcast, they are thrown out freely to anyone who may encounter them on the airwaves. This is why, no doubt, Whitehead still holds in his heart that special place for the radio.

In *Performing Arts Journal* (PAJ) 2012, Whitehead reminded me that what he was trying to do was open the space, provide ‘an invitation to drift, ruminate, and make connections where a split second before there had been nothing but bafflement and darkness. Utopian aspirations, to be sure, but I still believe in the pure power of free association’ (Whitehead, 2012: 30). There is an ecological reference in all this too: Whitehead believes ‘in the poetic vitality of edges, which is where the mysteries reside. Edges between Eros and Thanatos, seduction and oblivion, order and chaos; between sense and nonsense, facts and fables, the living and the dead; between the lover’s whisper and the warrior’s scream’ (Ibid). Public broadcasting remains a key platform here, even with the rise of new podcast creativity, in that it can ‘create community, even for an hour or two, and to feed the imagination with nutrients not offered elsewhere’. ‘[O]ffering such a feast remains a worthy mission for public broadcasting’ adds Whitehead, although mainstream American public radio like NPR seems to have had much less space for this kind of work over the years. Whitehead’s work is much more likely to be found on the BBC, and as we have seen, it still manages to survive (just) on the Australian ABC.<sup>13</sup>

Whitehead is the castaway here on the radio ship. He’s still very much, ‘the anti-journalist really’: ‘If you go in thinking you know what you’re looking for – oh you’ll

find it – but you won't find anything else, and you probably won't find what's important.' (Whitehead in Madsen, 2013).

Radio for Gregory Whitehead remains very much 'the outsider's medium', and even with international recognition that comes with prizes and large institutional commissions and broadcasts, he finds he must still push against the mainstream:

I don't want to be the part of the history of radio that is the history of the system, that is the voice of the system...I really want to be the part of radio that is the voice of individuals who are there for their love and for their passion, or for their neurosis, or for their wound or for their craziness. An individual and not a system. Those are the sirens that call me, get the wax out of my ears...If I listen to too much NPR these days I get physically sick. I get pale...it triggers me in a way which is psycho-kinetic. It's so much the voice of a system that has nothing to do with an individual insight. Even the presenters are so much out of a series of conventions...I'm hearing a certain institutional bracketing. I have to gasp for air... open all the windows (Whitehead in Madsen, 2013).

This work then, can use structures and forms that come from diverse places and times, and may play with, and re-perform what we imagine or even know as art or the sacred – exposing lies, hypocrisy and the cruelty which may otherwise lie hidden in the machinery of government, power, belief, bureaucracy, and so called 'intelligence'. As a site of intense research, and the healing effects of a ritual revoicing of the woundscape, with sympathetic resonances from artists long dead, this artist's body of work was able to resound powerfully in this piece and in that moment it took to pull over into the detour.

Whitehead shows us perhaps in this program that without the messy edges, and a nutrient rich ecosystem to support diversity, we risk crushing 'our capacity to imagine a viable future for our mysteries'. It is diversity which is always desirable 'and that includes poetic and aesthetic diversity' (Whitehead in Madsen, 2013).

## References

- Allison, Jay, 2009. *The Transom Review*, 9 (3). Retrieved 23 March 2016 from [http://transom.org/wpcontent/uploads/2009/06/gregorywhitehead\\_reviewdraft.pdf](http://transom.org/wpcontent/uploads/2009/06/gregorywhitehead_reviewdraft.pdf)
- Artaud, Antonin, 1947., adapted by Virginia Madsen for *The Listening Room*, ABC, 1996.
- Artaud, Antonin, 1948. Letter to Paule Thevenin, Feb 24, 1948. In *Oeuvres completes*, XIII, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, pp. 146 -147. (Translation for this article by Madsen)
- Artaud, Antonin, 1995/1947-1948. Artaud, Antonin - Pour En Finir Avec Le Jugement De Dieu/Monsieur Van Gogh, vous delirez: INA, (ed. With Rene Farabet). CD and booklet. Andre Dimanche Editeur: Marseille.
- Artaud, Antonin, 1996/1947. 'To Have done with the Judgement of God'. Adapted by Madsen, Virginia/ABC FM; September 16, 1996, for *The Listening Room*.
- Bachelard, Gaston, 1951. 'Rêverie et Radio', in *La Nef*. Reprint in Bachelard, Gaston 1970. 'Rêverie et Radio': GARCIN, P. (ed.) *Le Droit de rêver*. 2nd ed. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Beck, Allen, 2002. 'The Death of Radio?: an essay in radio philosophy for the digital age', *Sound Journal*. Accessed online: <http://www.savoyhill.co.uk/deathofradio/index.html>
- Hume, Christine, 2014. 'Interview with Gregory Whitehead', April 2014, *The Conversant*: <http://theconversant.org/?p=6758>
- Jannarone, Kimberley, 2012. *Artaud and his Doubles*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbour.
- Kahn, Douglas & Whitehead, Gregory (eds.) 1992. *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press.
- Madsen, Virginia, 2009a. 'Written in Air: Experiments in Radio' in: Priest, G. (ed.) *Experimental Music: Audio Explorations in Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press, pp.154-174.
- Madsen, Virginia, 2009b. 'Cantata of Fire: Son et Lumiere in Waco Texas, auscultation for a shadow play'. *Organised Sound*, Cambridge University Press, 14, pp. 89-99.
- Madsen, Virginia, 2013. 'Gregory Whitehead interviewed by Virginia Madsen'. Audio recording, Lennox, Mass, USA; Dec 15, 2013.
- Ong, Walter J., 1982. *Orality and Literacy*. New York: New Accents/Routledge.
- Pawlik, Joanna, 2010. Papers of Surrealism, Issue 8, 2010 pp1-21. Accessed <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal8/acrobat%20files/Articles/Pawlik%20final%20version.pdf>
- Priest, Gail (Ed.)2009. *Experimental music: audio explorations in Australia*. Sydney, UNSW Press.
- Reich, Steve, 1987. *Steve Reich Early Works*, Elektra Nonesuch (CD).



*Soundproof*, 2015. ABC Radio National. Retrieved 30 March 2016 from <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/soundproof/>

Sussman, Elisabeth, Institute Of Contemporary Art (Boston Mass.), Musee National D'art Moderne (France) & Institute Of Contemporary Arts (London England) 1989. *On the passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: the Situationist International, 1957-1972*, Cambridge, Mass. Boston, Mass., MIT Press; Institute of Contemporary Art.

Watson, Don, 2003. *Death Sentence*, Sydney, New York, London, Random House.

Weiss, Allen. S. (1992), 'Radio, Death and the Devil: Artaud's Pour En Finir avec le Jugement de dieu' in Kahn, Douglas and Whitehead, Gregory (eds.) 1992, pp. 269- 308.

Weiss, Allen. S. & Gregory Whitehead, 1999. 'Radio Silence, A Conversation between Allen S. Weiss and Gregory Whitehead'. *Merge* 4, Spring 99.  
<https://gregorywhitehead.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/radiosilence.pdf>

Whitehead, Gregory, 1985. *Dead Letters* (full audio program, documentary essay). Available: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Whitehead.php>

Whitehead, Gregory, 1990. 'The Forensic Theatre: Memory Plays for the Post-Mortem Condition', *Performing Arts Journal* (PAJ), Vol. 12, No. 2/3 (1990), pp. 99-109; p 100:  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3245556>

Whitehead, Gregory, 1991. 'Holes in the Head: A Theatre for Radio Operations'. *Performing Arts Journal* (PAJ), Vol 13, no.3, pp. 85-91.

Whitehead, Gregory, 1992. 'Pressures of the Unspeakable: a nervous system for Sydney', *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture* (Radio, Sound & Film Culture Issue), 6 (1), pp. 115-17.

Whitehead, Gregory. 1996. 'Radio Play is No Place: A Conversation between Jerome Noetinger and Gregory Whitehead' in *TDR/The Drama Review* T151; Vol 40, No. 3, Fall, 1996, pp96-101.

Whitehead, Gregory, 1998. In *The Drama Review* (TDR), No 151.

Whitehead, Gregory. 2009. 'Let us Lay on Splendid Nights', *The Transom Review*, 9 (3), June 2009. Retrieved 23 March from [http://transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/gregorywhitehead\\_reviewdraft.pdf](http://transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/gregorywhitehead_reviewdraft.pdf)

Whitehead, Gregory, 2012. *PAJ* 100, 'Belief' Issue, Vol 34, No 1, pp. 30-31.

---

---

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This was a term (also incorporated into publicity and statements) employed by the first Audio Arts Unit of the ABC, established in the mid 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> Whitehead has referenced Bachelard and his ideas on radio on a number of occasions (see Whitehead, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Guy Debord wrote *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967. In 1957, he had already called for the 'construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality' (in Elisabeth Sussman et al., 1989: 8).

<sup>4</sup> I tried to do something similar in *Cantata of Fire* (ABC/ARD), a performance documentary using verbatim media texts. This was inspired by Whitehead's forensic theatre and the operations of applying repetition and auscultation to a media event in its post-mortem condition. See Madsen, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> See also Whitehead, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Recorded between November 1947 and January 16th, 1948, Paris, for the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (ORTF). Scheduled for broadcast February 2, 1948, but banned due in large part to its anti-American and anti-religious content. First broadcast: Radio France, March 6, 1973. The full production was published in 1995 (Artaud, INA, Farabet, 1995). This recording features the voices of Roger Blin, Maria Casares, Paule Thevenin, and Antonin Artaud. Whitehead would have heard an earlier version published in the 1980s, but there were also possibly other bootleg cassettes circulating before this.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead was very interested in Walter J. Ong's, *Orality and Literacy*, 1982. Whitehead found much in this to explore about the differences between aural and orality. Ong, he says: 'was a Jesuit, very attentive to the theological aspects: he understood about listening. He was a born radio philosopher' (Madsen, & Whitehead, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> René Farabet, former director of the *atelier de creation radiophonique*, France Culture, Radio France, was the first to broadcast *To have done with the judgement of god* (in 1973) and described it as: 'perhaps the first very great program in radio terms; a monster in the landscape of radiophonic history.' (Farabet in interview with Virginia Madsen; included in *To have done with the judgement of god*, Australian premier, a retransmission and translation of *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, directed with new translation of the text by Virginia Madsen, broadcast ABC Radio National and ABC FM on *The Listening Room*, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> 'Antonin Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty" literally changed the course of modern theater, while his Pre and Post Surrealist writings, essays, and letters have had a far reaching influence in the fields of Philosophy, Psychology, Psychiatry, Literature and Critical Theory': see Artaud, INA, Farabet, 1995; and Allen S. Weiss in Kahn and Whitehead, 1992). I do not think it an overstatement to say that the recording of *Pour en finir...* also was responsible for opening theatre studies to an entirely new influence which has had a profound and lasting impact.

<sup>10</sup> Whitehead assesses Artaud's impact from this radio program: 'By far the most important program that was ever produced at Radio France was pour *En finir avec le jugement de dieu...*This was the most idiosyncratic voice in the century' (Madsen & Whitehead 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Whitehead refers to Artaud's influence and Jerzy Grotowski's 'poor theatre' in Whitehead, 1998. The Living Theatre of Julian Beck and Judith Malina 'was the first American company to base production work on Artaud's ideas' (in 1959, see Kimberly Jannarone, 2012: 13-14); and there were strong influences in the work of Richard Foreman and Allan Kaprow. Artaud also influenced a whole generation of American poets and composers, e.g. Allen Ginsberg and John Cage (see Pawlik, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> See Allen S. Weiss for more on *art povera* and the idea of a poor theatre in relation to Artaud.

<sup>13</sup> Whitehead's radio works can be heard on the web:

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Whitehead.php> and

<http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/producers/461-gregory-whitehead> Selected works are accessible via his own site: <http://gregorywhitehead.net>

---

**VIRGINIA MADSEN** is a senior lecturer and the convenor of radio at Macquarie University, Sydney, where she is a member of the Centre for Media History (CMH). Her research explores cultural and public broadcasting traditions. She is writing the first account of the documentary imagination in radio, exploring its origins, forms and developments from the golden age of radio to the new waves of the 1970s to the present digital 'renaissance'. She leads a large Australian Research Council Discovery Project, 'Cultural Conversations: A History of ABC Radio National'. Formerly a producer with Radio National, Madsen has contributed distinguished productions for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and her work has been broadcast in Europe and the USA. Her critical writing is in key collections: *Companion to the Australian Media* (2014), *Radio's New Wave* (Routledge, 2013), *Voice* (MIT Press, 2010) and *Radio* (Routledge, 2009). In Autumn 2014, she was a visiting research fellow with the British Library, London.

