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Senza Parole: a Review

Robyn Ravlich

Abstract

This is a charming radio feature of modest length in the form of a travel memoir. Its author-producer is Katharina Smets, a radio maker with a background in philosophy, theatre and philology with experience in teaching radio documentary at the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp, Belgium and as a reporter and feature maker for Radio 1, KLARA (VRT in Belgium) and Holland Doc Radio (VPRO in The Netherlands). Originally produced in Dutch, her English language version of *Senza Parole* has attracted attention at both the Third Coast International Audio Festival (2014), USA and the Sheffield Doc/Fest (2014) in Britain.

In *Senza Parole* Katharina Smets takes her recorder with her on what appears to be an aimless outing in Paris, a city in which she's a short term sojourner, courtesy of a cultural residency. By happenstance, in an overlooked corner of a small island in the Seine, she encounters another outsider, an apparently homeless woman, with whom she attempts to communicate. There is an obvious language barrier between them and some other unfathomable difference. Katharina returns with a useful gift, a watering can for the flowers in the woman's little garden. It's an act of kindness, a prop to further stimulate exchange, which occurs in fragments of elemental Italian and broken French. There's a story here in who this woman is and how she's come to be in these circumstances – displaced in a foreign land and homeless, sheltering in a plastic tent in a park. Is she mentally ill? Was she wronged in love? Is she sick? It's a tantalising story that is beyond reach; it cannot be told by the two principals - or understood by any of us. But there is contact, perhaps a clue or two; and meaningful, touching communication that occurs ultimately without words, *senza parole*. Quite a feat in an audio medium.

Keywords

Paris, travel, audio feature, audio storytelling, memoir, radio documentary

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Senza Parole

Review by Robyn Ravlich

Senza Parole by Katharina Smets

Holland Doc Radio, Radio 1 Netherlands, Belgium, 2014

The documentary was made possible by a residency offered by the Dutch-Flemish House deBuren in the Foundation Biermans-Lapôte in Paris and was produced at the [Center for Documentary Studies](#) at Duke University.

Duration: 18'36"

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My first impression of *Senza Parole* was that it was slight; the work of a young radio-maker finding their way in a hesitant, exploratory fashion. I was uncertain of what I'd heard, of what transpired in the course of what seemed a recorded stroll or excursion into an unfamiliar, overwhelming city. I re-listened almost immediately, taking back this initial response as I began to hear some rather subtle, touching things to do with communication and marginality; the application of delicate skills of composition and construction; and a finely written and spoken narration, weaving a thread between elements of gossamer. Artlessness now seemed more artful.

What does happen in *Senza Parole*?

In essence, unusually in a radio feature, the subject is elusive.

The author, Katharina Smets, goes on what appears to be an aimless outing in Paris, a city in which she's a short term sojourner, courtesy of a cultural residency. By happenstance, in an overlooked corner of a small island in the Seine, she encounters another outsider, an apparently homeless woman, with whom she attempts to communicate. There is an obvious language barrier between them and some other unfathomable difference. Katharina returns with a useful gift, a watering can for the flowers in the woman's little garden.

It's an act of kindness, a prop to further stimulate exchange, which occurs in fragments of elemental Italian and broken French. There's a story here in who this woman is and how she's come to be in these circumstances – displaced in a foreign land and homeless, sheltering in a plastic tent in a park. Is she mentally ill? Was she wronged in love? Is she sick? It's a tantalising story that is beyond reach; it cannot be told by the two principals - or understood by any of us. But there is contact, perhaps a clue or two; and meaningful, touching communication that occurs ultimately without words, *senza parole*. Quite a feat in an audio medium.

When Katharina goes out for a walk, in whose footprints does she follow? Radio features, since their birth in the 1930s, are in a constant state of re-iteration, flux and re-invention. This one is a hybrid form that draws upon the tradition of the written and narrated studio-based feature and actuality features (documentaries) which record their material out of the studio, *en plein air*. There are some fine antecedents of which she may be aware, or not, in the Belgian and Dutch radio worlds she inhabits. It scarcely matters. These legacies reside in the air, somehow, and stay there until absorbed - perhaps through teaching or via mentors; perhaps through listening to radio or discoveries online.

One was a fun series called *Faits Divers*, in which the co-hosts, with madcap dare, advanced out of the studio with microphones to record on a range of improbable topics, engaging delightfully with their randomly selected subjects, non-expert, ordinary folk who had many interesting things to say and forms of expression. Very fresh, and impressive because, like *Senza Parole*, it was improvisational, using such slight materials and scant intentions to fashion features that danced around a subject, accumulating substance in the process.

At the high end of European radio culture is *Every Day Something Disappears* (Luc Haekens and Edwin Brys. VRT, Belgium, 1993)ⁱ, a master work of synthesis between the lyrical text of a concert pianist recording his descent into dementia and observational recordings in a nursing home, revealing a sensitive engagement between medical carers and the elderly residents who are disintegrating physically and cognitively. Something of the tender regard conveyed in this feature and its respectful pacing with pauses for breathing room seems to infiltrate *Senza Parole*.

But this is Paris, in the freer days before the terrorist attacks of 2015, when a person could walk the streets, randomly, in safety, following her eyes and ears, listening to the city and its invitations to dawdle and dream. I've done it myself, recording café life, street markets, river traffic, children playing in

parks, the hum of a crowd swelling under the Louvre's glass pyramid, buskers on the streets and in the metro. *Paris Streets*, Kaye Mortley's exquisite long-form radio feature, is the acme of a lyrical sound poem to her beloved, adopted city, evoking its evolutionary history in the stories, textures, sounds and names of its streets. ⁱⁱMary Zournazi's *Walking with the Surrealists*, an imaginative radio feature made for *The Listening Room* on ABCⁱⁱⁱ, came about as a result of philosophical speculation on her idle walks as a visitor through the Parc des Buttes Chaumont to the north-east of Paris, amongst whose surreal landforms she began thinking of André Breton's novel *Nadja* (1928) and its sad, 'mad' literary heroine inspired by a chance encounter with a woman whilst he was out walking. In the companion online feature on the ABC arts portal, Zournazi noted that for the surrealists 'walking was about chance encounters and irrational meetings, and this walking inspired their pursuit of experimental writing'^{iv}. To meander with a microphone is to be an *acoustic flâneur*. The German sound artist Hans Ulrich Werner described the phenomenon in notes accompanying his soundscape *Vanscape Motion* (1996): 'The acoustic flâneur, the sound searcher alone stops for a moment and listens through his microphone. His recorded sound becomes frozen movement, a sound current from inside the city.'^v Today, we are sound walkers but nineteenth century writers, such as Charles Baudelaire, were the original *flâneurs*, strolling at leisure along grand boulevards and in glass-covered arcades, observing the rise of the great modern city and feeling its pulse.

Katharina Smets' feature is a series of linked scenes or acts; the first beginning when she heads outside into the day with her microphone searching for sound. We hear the hum of French voices and a quintessential French sound mark, a busker playing accordion. She tells us, 'Paris, a beautiful city, a city of many clichés. One cliché is that you can feel a bit overwhelmed by Paris. I feel it. I feel a little bit lost.' A door slams and we are whisked away in the metro. As if mirroring her discombobulated inner state, she does something rather ingenious, creating a *musique concrète* from her edited fragments of subway sounds and recorded announcements. This is an important signal that the feature will roam between actuality and creation, shifting in time and space. Her music evoked for me a creativity inspired 'dérangement of the senses' (Rimbaud style), but in an interview with Katharina for the website of the Third Coast International Audio Festival ^{vi} she refers to *Paris syndrome* as a real phenomenon afflicting visitors, most notably Japanese tourists, who are overcome by the experience of visiting Paris, not unlike the *Stendhal syndrome* which affects viewers in the presence of great art. I think that is what she is representing here.

Our protagonist follows the invisible roll of a dice to exit the metro at Avenue du Président Kennedy. She first sees a Statue of Liberty and then the Seine, in the middle of which is an island. It's near the Eiffel Tower, a major landmark; yet looking down on the island she observes a plot of land with a garden of poppies growing right there in the middle of Paris. This overlaid narration seems casual, but these are key concepts explored in this feature – random events and choices, freedom to be oneself, a garden to shelter within as a bulwark to the chaos outside.

A woman is observed washing her clothes in a bucket, painted with polka dots. Walking towards the Seine, a pair of red lacy pants drops from her pail. Our narrator picks them up and returns them to the woman, noting the shredding skin on her face and hands. They share smiles, a few incomprehensible words, then the woman returns to her tasks, drying her clothes on a rack in her plastic tent. All these things (the red lace, the polka dots, the strange skin, the woman's makeshift home in an island park) elicit our interest with their intriguing details. But what most connects is the observation that the mysterious woman puts her watch and rings on the same calm way the narrator's mother does after doing the daily dishes. This moment of connection is ruptured as the woman approaches her: 'I think she will ask me to go away. I stop recording.'

This is unusual in an audio feature, switching off the recorder – just as the communication she's seeking may occur. The few moments of silence are quite dramatic and yet, the silence, the suspension of recording is illusory because the feature continues with the narration in the central role. The action is described to us. The woman offers chocolate, taking care not to touch it with her fingers. An observation is made: 'She has good manners'. The lively script attempts to chart and make sense of their haphazard communication with its scattering of words, not French ones it transpires but of necessity, Italian – 'fiori' for flowers and 'aqua' for water.

Beneath the voice-over commentary the recorder has been imperceptibly switched on again. The narrator uses the few Italian words she knows – 'allora', 'per favore', 'giardini'; and some garbled linguistic misfits. The woman sings just two words of a song, *Senza Parole*, repeated by the narrator who knows that they mean 'without words'. She attempts to say she'll return the next day. We are not quite half way through this feature.

A shift in background atmosphere signals a new scene in a shop where we are told that a watering can is being bought as a present for the woman to water her 'fiori' in the 'giardini'. We are treated to a philosophical thought on the

nature of a French formal garden with its openness, symmetry, ordered lines of sight. The geometry of the garden on the island, she notes, leads one to view the small-scale replica Statue of Liberty, with its symbolic allure.

A time shift is conveyed in sound and we are transported back to the statue on the island, but our woman's not there. Another woman sits there on a bench, open to conversation – this time in French - which seems to substantiate our flimsy impressions. The woman may be Italian, she has a skin disease and appears to be homeless. We understand what is being said by the clever integration of translation into the voice-over. The French woman tells a story of a well-educated engineer who lost his wife, job and home due to mad love. She surmises that anyone can become homeless, losing everything in love. Perhaps this is a romantic story, the sense of which is enhanced by learning the name of this island is Île aux Cygnes, isle of the swans. Katharina leaves the watering can and a note with a smattering of Italian, Spanish and French words (Bongiorno, un cadeau, fiori, giardini, proxima).

Having resolved to return the following day with a prepared list of Italian questions to aid her she has more success in her communication with the woman. In this scene they exchange names; Katharina, Liliana. There is some confusion. She came from Italy, but why did she come to Paris? 'Ultima fermata a Parigi', she responds. 'Non andate piu.' The last stop was Paris, she couldn't go further. Then, the revelation: Liliana is Bulgarian, she was in Italy for five years.

Again, Katharina adeptly intertwines her actuality of the conversation in elementary Italian with voice-over translation in English. Her tone is well judged to sound naturalistic, a style she developed by writing almost as soon as she started her recording project^{vii}, rather than later as is more common. It sounds true to the situation, not imposed upon it, other than in her pensée about the French garden.

Things are becoming confusing. Liliana says something that Katharina interprets as being about her passport, green papers and 'E cosi', that's how it is, she can't do anything. What she does understand is that Liliana is happy with her watering can, that it's charming.

There's a little space in proceedings and Liliana says 'Senza parole' again and whistles. Katharina gets that it's an Italian love song. Now, there's a rapid shift to another sonic space where a recording of the song starts up and Katharina voices over it, 'a love song about a couple that doesn't understand each other anymore, but that's OK, without words.' Even better, she begins to sing along

with the lamenting, cheesy male Italian popstar, voicing the translation in the spaces between the singing voices. Speech, music and allusion are integrated.

Then, last moments with Liliana. They go to see the Statue of Liberty. It's 'Bella!'

As it began, so it ends with the metro train approaching. It stops and the door resounds. This journey to this station is over.

Senza Parole is a gentle, lyrical and understated radio feature. It's suggestive, raising as many questions about its subject as it seeks to answer or clarify. We have learned very little in the way of facts, but much about emotional sensitivity, resonance and human communication as an exchange between two people who are out of place. This story has occurred by allowing happenstance; seeing where one's eyes, nose and ears will lead and then developing an acquaintanceship with a person and place. Its virtue is its delicacy of intention and inquiry; its touch with tone and fugitive meaning. It doesn't impose, but imaginatively stirs the air to find substance.

LINK TO THE FULL PROGRAM IS [HERE](#):

<https://soundcloud.com/senzaparole-1/senza-parole>

<http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/1572-senza-parole>

References:

ⁱ *Every Day Something Disappears* won the Prix Italia, Prix Europa and Premio Ondas in 1993

ⁱⁱ *Paris Streets* can be heard in this 2015 re-broadcast on *Soundproof*, ABC RN
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/soundproof/paris-streets/6518892>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Walking with the Surrealists*, first broadcast on ABC Classic FM's *The Listening Room* on Monday, May 21, 2001.

^{iv} *Walking with the Surrealists* Companion online feature (2001) <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/surreal/>
Retrieved 25 November 2015

^v (Werner 1996) Composer's program notes published in the booklet accompanying the CD: *Soundscape Vancouver 1996*, Cambridge Street Records. *Vanscape Motion* was composed by Hans Ulrich Werner during the Vancouver '96 project at the Sonic Research Studio of Simon Fraser University and presented to the public in a multi-channel concert as well as on CD

^{vi} Interview with Katharina Smets in EXTRA, *Behind the Scenes*,
<http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/1572-senza-parole> Retrieved 25 November 2015

^{vii} Interview with Katharina Smets in EXTRA, *Behind the Scenes*,
<http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/1572-senza-parole> Retrieved 25 November 2015
'Although I'm a radio producer in the first place, I love applying literary tools to non-fiction sound and stories...I knew I wanted to work with a certain kind of very close voice-over, a voice that would resemble my own thoughts in the moment. So I started to write right away, during the recording. I wanted to remember the small but meaningful details, like red underwear, a cup of hot coffee on the stool, socks in sandals.'

Robyn Ravlich



Robyn is an Australian radio feature maker and writer with a distinctive, poetic approach to radio production. She now practises her vocation as an independent producer after a long creative career at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation where she worked on a range of innovative and specialist programs on ABC Radio National including *The Listening Room* (1988-2003, Presenter from 1993, Executive Producer from 1995, Feature Producer and Supervising Producer throughout) and *Into the Music* (2006-2010). She was a highly regarded Executive Producer and mentor to staff and freelance producers and other creative collaborators.

During an ABC radio career of more than 35 years (1975-2010) Robyn produced a range of innovative and specialist programs and worked with many composers, actors, and musicians to create unique radio works. Since then she has contributed to new ABC programs such as *Radiotonic* (*Radio Yak*: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/radiotonic/radio-yak3a-robyn-ravlich/5454474>) and *Earshot*, including *Timewarp*, a two part speculative feature series about memory, place, personal and cultural history (<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/timewarp---part-1/6375246> , <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/timewarp-part-2/6375908>) and *Marina Abramović, artist and icon*. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/encountering-marina-abramovic-artist/6545930>

In 2014 she produced and narrated an immersive audio guided walk of Lavender Bay in Sydney for the Voicemap mobile app. <https://voicemap.me/walk/sydney>

Robyn has been honoured with international and national awards and broadcasts, receiving Special Mentions at the Prix Italia for *Birds of a Feather* 2006 and *The Graveyard Gate* 1994, Silver awards at the New York Radio Festivals (*Nora Guthrie, Her Father's Daughter* in 2013, *Afterimages - Carol Jerrems Through a Lens* in 2012, and *Blind Tom – Slave Pianist Sensation* in 2010) and Bronze for *Diana Jones and her Appalachian Roots* in 2014. Her radio documentary about asylum seekers *On the Raft, All at Sea*, produced with Russell Stapleton, was awarded both the Australian Human Rights & Equal Opportunities Commission Radio Award and the United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Prize for Radio in 2002. She has chaired the Prix Italia jury for Radio Documentary and organized the International Features conference in Sydney, 2001.

For further information about Robyn, including an interview with her about her approach to radio making and downloads of some of her productions

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360/on-a-raft-all-at-sea---robyn-ravlich-tribute/3039092>