

## **RadioDoc Review**

**Volume 9 • Issue 1 • 2024**

2024-04-19

### **For the love of: Book Review of Radiophilia by Carolyn Birdsall**

Lucia Vodanovic, University of the Arts London

#### **Abstract**

*Radiophilia*, the new book in *The Study of Sound Series*, discusses radio in the context of recent literature about affects and emotions. Informed by various traditions within media and cultural studies, and guided by the work of Lauren Berlant and Arjun Appadurai, it approaches ‘radiophilia’ -love for, or strong attachment to, radio—as a wide-reaching concept that includes groups practices and social moods and that can be practised in public spaces and communities, beyond interior and domestic set-ups.

#### **Keywords**

radio, affect, love, fandom, material culture, intermediality, Birdsall

#### **Recommended Citation**

Vodanovic, L., (2024) “For the love of: Book Review of Radiophilia by Carolyn Birdsall”, *RadioDoc Review* 9(1).

## **RadioDoc Review**

**Volume 9 • Issue 1 • 2024**

2024-04-19

### **For the love of: Book Review of Radiophilia by Carolyn Birdsall**

Lucia Vodanovic, University of the Arts London

#### **Abstract**

*Radiophilia*, the new book in *The Study of Sound Series*, discusses radio in the context of recent literature about affects and emotions. Informed by various traditions within media and cultural studies, and guided by the work of Lauren Berlant and Arjun Appadurai, it approaches ‘radiophilia’ -love for, or strong attachment to, radio—as a wide-reaching concept that includes groups practices and social moods and that can be practised in public spaces and communities, beyond interior and domestic set-ups.

#### **Keywords**

radio, affect, love, fandom, material culture, intermediality, Birdsall

#### **Recommended Citation**

Vodanovic, L., (2024) “For the love of: Book Review of Radiophilia by Carolyn Birdsall”, *RadioDoc Review* 9(1).

Both at the beginning and the end of *Radiophilia* we get glimpses of its author's personal life as a radio listener and lover: firstly as a teenager, in a Sydney suburb in the mid-1990s, listening to regular programmes on the AM/FM dial and also to public, commercial, community, or pirate radio in a dual cassette-receiver; lately as an academic living in Europe, being woken up by an analogue clock radio that emits a disagreeable sound so that it is easy to get up to a day punctuated by Internet radio, music streaming, and podcasts, consumed across multiple devices. But despite those scenes and parcels of personal life, this is a book not about the one-to-one relationship to radio but rather about a wider concept that includes group practices and social moods of different intensities, durations, and phases. Radiophilia, the "love for, or strong attachment to, radio" (p. 2), moves away from the conventional narratives of domesticity, intimacy, and interiority that have been used to discuss the qualities of radio, and takes us outside teenage bedrooms and family living rooms.

Part of *The Study of Sound* series, edited by Michael Bull, in which each book looks at a unique notion within the field, *Radiophilia*—a concept that, as the author informs us, until now had only been used in medical research (and the related *radiophile* in an account of radio receivers treasuring and trading)—exemplifies the multidisciplinary approach of the collection. It draws from a range of academic perspectives such as material culture, fan studies, consumer culture research, heritage studies, intermediality, and radio and media studies. The author is meticulous when unpacking those various traditions, clear in the research's alliances, and often original in the chosen approach. For instance, when framing the research in the context of fan cultures and fandom studies, Birdsall states that this work is a departure from early conceptions of fan practice as either exclusively negative—obsessive or disturbed behaviour—or positive—creative work that might forge connections—and that it doesn't rely exclusively on the conception of fandom as grassroots or members-led communities either. Rather, a substantial dimension of the research here is the very mainstream, consumption-driven spaces that can organise fandom practices in a less organic way such as fan magazines, official fan clubs, or the buying and selling of merchandise and memorabilia. Yet Birdsall explores those places without overlooking the amateur, informal, local, or less canonical sites where the love of radio is forged.

There is also important attention given to the role of radio in colonial modernity, in anti-colonial struggle, and in newly independent countries because the author

wants to avoid the “accepted historical norm” that most radio systems were created in the 1920s (p. 7). There are arguments about how, on some occasions, radio has worked as a tool of empire; for instance, a ‘modern’ West imposing its technologies on people without them and/or using radio in nation-building projects. But radio has contributed to their undoing too: Birdsall offers the example of the Angolan new sound and national sensibility embodied in what became Rádio Nacional de Angola (1975 – 7). While the broadcaster relied on and showed continuities with the colonial era, it also recorded revolutionary anthems and regional music traditions, some of which were censored years later in a different political context through intentional scratches on vinyl discs. The detail and specificity of this and many other examples to be found in the book further demonstrates that radio listening is not just an intimate practice but that it can also take place in and have consequences for the public sphere. And that the affection for radio and its fandom can be developed in a myriad of ways, some joyful, others infused with fear or danger.

This approach to fan culture perspectives and research delineated above speaks of how comprehensive and wide-reaching this book is; it discusses radio in its many forms, as medium and practice, as idea and infrastructure, as desire and archive. And despite it being a love letter to radio, the intermedial framing means Birdsall never loses sight of how this medium draws from and builds on existing sound media, or how the love of it is boosted or complemented by content derived from a variety of dialogues and inter-dependencies.

Given this, *Radiophilia* is both an original conceptual exploration of the affective responses of listeners and a survey of a century of different radio formats from wireless to digital. In this account, the varied ways in which we consume radio today—analogue and digital, terrestrial or streaming, across multiple devices—has expanded and made very visible certain forms of audio work like documentary and narrative-based formats as part of what is often called the ‘podcast revolution’. Refreshingly, Birdsall only uses that phrase once, so the podcast explosion is just one of the multiple iterations in the contemporary history of consumption and attachments of audio media. Rather than suggesting that there is something radically different today, the contemporary enactments of radiophilia are more autonomous and have more choice and listener agency than previous ones, which might explain why, as Birdsall suggests, so many of us (particularly, perhaps, readers of this journal) are driven to narrative formats that were less available or not as visible in the past. This is not to say that the author

regards radio and podcasting as the same thing. At various points in the text, Birdsall writes about radio *and/or* podcast content or research when talking about the current landscape of sound, suggesting that they are not synonymous. But she is not concerned with the question of podcasting being either a new form of expression or simply a different way of distributing radio, which is a widely dominant interrogation in academic research<sup>1</sup>. Her focus here is the ‘radioness’ that has existed for over a century, way before the era of contemporary podcasting.

The book is divided into four sections: loving, knowing, saving, and sharing. The first chapter discusses the idea of ‘loving’ as affects, attachments, and emotional investments and also situates it as an action and practice that infuses all the others. ‘Knowing’ is about learning to love radio after the first encounter; ‘saving’ is about the desire to capture the traces of an apparent fleeting love object, like photography does (at least in some of the ways in which it has been conceptualised); and ‘sharing’ is about communicating and displaying the interest and affection for radio with and in front of others. Succinctly put: “How do you *know* the thing you love? How do you *save* the thing you love? And how do you *share* the love of radio?” (p. 2) are the follow-up questions to the central ‘*What is the love of radio?*’

The answer to that *what* resides in the book’s proposal of treating the love of radio in the context of recent literature about affects and emotions (affect being close to a socially constructed ‘feeling of life’, as Birdsall reminds us of when referring to the work of Lawrence Grossberg [pp. 25–26]). It argues that approaches to love, emotion, and affect about radio are grounded in practice and process, and so are situated and relational. And it proposes the importance of considering three dimensions in this love of radio: firstly, the senses, as radio listening is a multisensorial experience that goes beyond the ears; there are tactile activities like tuning or encountering buttons and knobs, for instance, and taste experiences constructed around food routines, cooking, or taking a lunch break. Secondly, there is the intermediality dimension mentioned above that invites us to consider radio, as any other medium, as a mixed-media technology, and the listener experience as mixed with other medial experiences such as reading and viewing. And thirdly, there is an attention to the material objects and

---

<sup>1</sup> See the *Intimacy, Inc* book review by Robert S Boynton in this journal as an example of this.

practices that come together in this love of radio and that relate to acts of collecting, to memory, to objects, to museums, and to fan cultures and communities.

The influences of Lauren Berlant and Arjun Appadurai are evident in this book, which is at its most political when those alliances are made explicit. “Both scholars’ writings are heavily invested in the cultural politics of affect and emotion, even if their arguments work towards somewhat different ends”, writes Birdsall (p. 190) in the conclusion, referring to them as the guides in her thought process. The debt to Berlant’s work appears in the interrogation of the “paradoxes of desire and love” (p. 190), with love being restricted, shaped, and marketed by commodity culture when it moves through personal and ordinary life, and desire being a disturbance or destabilising force as it prompts an encounter with the social structures of sexuality, gender, intimacy, and romance. “In other words, to think with Berlant about radiophilia is to warn against the naïve celebration of love, affection or attachment”, the author states (p. 191). Conversely, the influence of Appadurai—as the emphasis on material culture described above exemplifies—confers potential to the capacity of media to produce a community of sentiment amidst the plurality and diversity of experiences of taste, pleasure, and politics in the context of globalization and its networks and flows, which have not erased our imagination’s capacity for local repertoires. “Appadurai’s attention to the imagination shows how it not only has the potential to reinforce the status quo, but also to transform or subvert it, which invites an acknowledgment of the imaginative capacity of a love of radio, of the potential for facilitating collectivities and affective ties across diverse bodies and lived experiences” (p. 191).

Birdsall concludes that those two authors should be the roadmap for any future research about radio. While Appadurai will remind scholars that radio has vast potential as a space for imagination and that audiences might experience pleasure and joy in the collective formations (they can “imagine and feel things together” [p. 191<sup>2</sup>]), Berlant will make them remember that the responses and uses of media are always shaped by the normative world in which we encounter them.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is a direct reference to Appadurai’s notion of a “community of sentiment” in his book *Modernity at Large*.

That research is necessary given that, as the book also argues, radio has been under-studied in favour of histories of recording technologies. The reader might also be left wanting to hear more about radio attachments in non-Western countries and of stories and narratives of radio in places outside Europe and North America. *Radiophilia* is peppered with observations and facts about this: we get to know about the now abandoned Joseph Gire Building, the historical home of Brazil's national radio in Rio de Janeiro, as documented by amateur enthusiasts writing for a radio heritage website; we read short references to another highly active amateur radio scene of *aficionados* in Latin America such as the one in Argentina; we learn that the transistor radio was regarded as a prized object in Zambia because it allowed listening outside the domestic sphere so that radio became a social activity knitted into the public realm (the various examples of and ideas around radio use in public urban spaces are, indeed, one of the most salient contributions of this book). The author acknowledges an over-reliance on North American and Western European digital sources though, particularly as the work was completed during the pandemic; as a result, those stories are minimal in the text as compared to that of BBC, for instance, given the vast archival culture and infrastructure around it. This book could work as an invitation to know, share, and save more of those other radio love practices.

## References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Boynton, R. S. (2022). Intimacy, inc. *RadioDoc Review*, 8(1), 8.

## Author details

Dr Lucia Vodanovic completed her PhD at Goldsmiths College and now works as Senior Lecturer in Journalism at LCC (University of the Arts London). Her published work discusses social aesthetics, lifestyle media, and issues of expression, subjectivity and tone in journalism and media.