

Poetry, Texas.

Produced and presented by Pejk Malinowski, a Falling Tree
Production for BBC Radio 4 (2012). Duration: 27' 40".

Reviewer: Seán Street



Tractor, Poetry, Texas. Image: P. Malinowski

In the past fifteen years or so, the digital revolution has forced broadcasting in all areas to confront issues of semantics in terms of how it defines itself, and radio, be it music or speech-based, has been particularly prone to the questions this has raised. Is it 'radio' or is 'audio' a better word? The rebirth of the word 'wireless' has done little to help clarify things.

Before evolving technology gave us all this to worry about, it was a question of the multifarious nature of radio itself. Generic branding created lateral layers of output, programming rather than programs, in many ways the antithesis of John Reith's original vision of BBC radio as containing an element of surprise, serendipity. At the same time, Reith's dictum that his organisation should inform, educate and entertain can be a somewhat limiting mantra in many ways, when interpreted too literally. In our program making we have choice: we can tell, or we can show; how we communicate our stories and how we respond to them are mirrors in which we reflect ourselves, as much as the subjects we choose to explore. Documentaries and features are about stories, but although they share much common ground, they often occupy very different worlds. It is an interesting time to consider speech radio in whatever form it may take; there is fresh air currently breathing through the lungs of program makers, particularly in the independent sector, supplying a range of speech material to networks internationally, showing us humanity through new ways of seeing and new ways of saying. Here though, we come back to our semantic problem; in many radio cultures a documentary is a journalistic framework for seeking answers to questions, whereas a feature may often be an impressionistic hybrid that can contain drama, music and poetry, moving often towards not necessarily answers, but more questions. This is sometimes difficult for the creative producer to communicate to stressed commissioning editors, many of whom may well have come from a news/current affairs background anyway. The radio feature is, it might be said, one of the the purest forms of radio; music, news, sport and drama all exist in other forms, in other media, whereas the radio feature can only exist in sound. It has the capacity to create a sense of wonder, but because it evolves as it is made, it is often hard to explain in a pre-program pitch.

Added to this, the term 'feature' is not in the vocabulary of every producer. In Canada, for example, Chris Brookes – undoubtedly a poetic feature maker of the first order – in common with the culture in which he works, uses the term 'documentary' when discussing his programs. For Brookes, however, the word is not journalism in its more narrow sense; it is not a document of reality, but as he has put it, 'It's about imagining reality. It's not about being in it really, it's about it being in your mind'. (Brookes 2010) So that is perhaps the answer; a documentary CAN be a feature, when it documents the maker's journey as they seek a way through their subject, asking questions of themselves as much as their chosen story, often through evocation rather than exposition.

Poetry, Texas, made by the Danish radio producer, sound artist and poet Pejk Malinovski for BBC Radio 4, through the conduit of Falling Tree Productions, is just such a program, an exploration of a metaphor in which the maker and the listener join in a thirty-minute journey into the meaning of a word, and what it is to be human. It was first broadcast on 14 May, 2012, and was repeated on 6 May, 2013, and came second in the documentary section of the 2012 *Prix Europa*, receiving a special commendation from the judges. The premise is a simple one: Malinovski the poet asks himself if there is a place anywhere called 'poetry', and he finds it in, of all places, Texas. He travels there, talks to the residents, and between times muses on the strata of coincidences to be found in lexical semantics, in particular, one word: 'poetry'. Once the concept is established in

the listening imagination, everything grows from one root, the word itself and its ability in this context to load itself with double meanings and layers of multiple truths.

Poetry, the place, is little more than a few fields and a main street, with a water tower proclaiming its name. Arriving, Pejk Malinovski notes that the roads have identities like radio stations, FM 986, FM1565. He is reminded of the words of Jack Spicer: 'The poet is a radio. He translates the world in his inner tubes.' Malinovski comes from a family of poets, has published his poems in Danish, and is a graduate of the MA in Radio Production at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He has produced work for WNYC, New York and BBC Radio among others, is a soft-spoken, close-mic'd presenter and a producer with an ear for the placement of sound in exactly the right place to produce maximum emotional effect. He has a poet's ear. The unhurried pace of interacting sound is the first thing you sense in *Poetry, Texas*. Malinovski points up the context, the metaphor and the motive for the program, and then, gradually, the poem of the place takes over, carried by the locals' unselfconscious use of a word that is moved from one meaning to another in our mind, from art to utility in everyday useage. 'It's difficult to know where Poetry starts and Poetry stops. Back in the day, it was well defined,' says one resident.

This is a program about change, and Malinovski is a presence throughout the journey. It is his document of exploration, and his comments point to this through quotes by poets and his own personal reflections. Would the program have been better without him? It is sometimes the case that a presenter can get in the way of the meaning in a feature; so could the vernacular poetry, the grain of the voices from old timers to children, have been allowed to flow and speak for themselves without a commentary, to better effect? Given the network, audience and place in the schedule, (BBC Radio 4, mid-weekday morning), exposition was probably always going to be needed to blend with evocation. The presentation style is idiosyncratic and perhaps not to every taste, and the words DO speak for themselves; the program would still be a meditation on the nature of poetry had the locals been allowed to curate the narrative on their own: 'Once you get to the other side of Poetry, there's nothing there,' and 'What is Poetry to me? Just a lot of hard work, trying to make an honest dime. You don't make a dollar any more. Those days are gone.' A listener cannot help but smile at the elegance and felicity of the double meanings. That said, such an approach would have made this a very different program; this IS Malinovski's personal journey, and while making his documentary, he remains essential to its nature as a feature, and he is a tactful and sensitive observer and companion throughout. A radio program that places the voice of a man dying of cancer in his trailer home next to the sounds of children talking about local history – 'everything that God's done for you' – is the product of poetic decision-making as it explores the struggle between the old and the new, and Malinovski crafts it as he would a poem, turning local values into universal ones in a way that Thomas Hardy would have approved.

The thoughtful unfolding of this meditation is certainly not for everyone; a colleague who presents an afternoon rolling format show on a well-known

London news station told me in no uncertain terms how much he *hated* it (his word.) I would not have expected anything else from him, given what I know of his own journalism. I might disagree with this view – in fact I do – vehemently. Nevertheless I must seek to understand it, and the context from which such an opinion arises. Archness, even preciousness or pretentiousness, can be perceived by some as an attitude in the making and discussion of any work of art, but it is usually more in the mind of the critic than in the work itself. Suddenly, there is that word, 'art', to further complicate things, and a program such as *Poetry, Texas* will always divide listeners, bringing us back to the documentary/feature 'split' discussed earlier. Yet to be a feature program-maker is to have a hard head as well as a soft heart; any speech program is made through journalism; when we ask a question of an interviewee with an editorial intention, we ARE making journalism, whether we choose the word or not. It may be sufficient to say here that in a radio feature such as this, a journalist asks the questions, but a poet hears and shapes the resonances in the sounds and the words. Malinovski's program is far more than an extended, rambling musing about the confluence within a word: it has a considered structure that informs its meaning, as does a good poem.

There comes in many radio features a key point, usually about two-thirds or three-quarters of the way through the program, a place in the story where the subject matter is reinvigorated, takes a new turn, where the telling moves into a new gear and takes on an extra charged significance, a kind of 'golden moment' that defines things. Sometimes it offers itself to the program maker in an almost god-given way during the process of making: a bell tolls at just the right moment in a location recording, a speaker pauses and we sense the thought in the silence, or a dog barks at the night on a back porch. Sometimes it is instinctive, even unconscious, but often it is part of the final intended shape. Whatever it is, it is a crucial part of the form in a program, just as it is in a poem. In *Poetry, Texas* just such a moment occurs when we meet Kathy Wilson, a warm, friendly person who welcomes us into her house and remembers how things used to be in Poetry. She talks of the view from her window, a beloved scene of fields, willows and ponds filled with fish. It turns out that Kathy is herself a poet. A poet in Poetry. She reads one of her poems:

There's a place out east of Dallas
Where southern breezes blow
Where sunsets are lovely, red
And kids run barefoot down the lane...

But this is a memory. North of Dallas is a place called Plano, a 'high end community' full of valuable real estate but built on arid ground. The meadows that Kathy once walked in are now a giant hole in the ground, and the verdant soil is being dug up to make gardens for Plano:

They're hauling Poetry to Plano,
One truck at a time,
They took the topsoil to plant the turf
And they burned the post oaks down.

They took Poetry from the country,
Took it to the town...

She breaks down and cries as she reads, then 'It's slippin' away, and it's hard to watch,' she says. By her presence and pain, Kathy Wilson ignites the golden moment; there comes a time in all relationships when we come to know someone at a new, deeper level, and so it is with a place. *Poetry, Texas*, is more than a metaphor, it is real, with real people and real problems. We live in a changing world, and not everyone sees change in the same way, as Don Strickland, the so-called 'Mayor' of Poetry, living across the street from the gas station says: 'What I call Poetry and what others call Poetry are different things.' The local Pastor, Robert Reed, is pragmatic, and frustrated with old values when he preaches in the little wooden church, 'I'm not sure that Poetry warrants revival.' The placement of this moment, near the end of the program, is perfect, and highlights the underlying meaning of *Poetry, Texas*: 'The problem is change. Nobody likes the word, "change". It disturbs people to change.'

A radio program is the perfect medium in which to explore and debate such a subject. Because sound and experience are temporal, our relationship with the world around us is a continuing journey, in which the senses interpret life and make memory of it. Because sound is always present as it happens, always fading as it passes, it is a poignant link between ourselves as we are and ourselves as we once were, as well as a metaphor for our own transience. A freight train passes, its siren echoing across the plains. A car pulls out and accelerates down the road, and children's voices fade as they move away from us. Such witnesses show sound to be the gift it is, something, whether we have the facility to play it back on a machine or recreate it in our imagination, that we seek to preserve and revisit as we move forward. We live in the present, but we are shaped by memory, and a sound in a program can enter memory and stay. I first heard *Poetry, Texas* when it was first broadcast in the late UK spring of 2012, and I can still recall to mind the sounds of the town of Poetry as the producer quoted and saved them for me, sometimes as an involuntary memory of that first listening.

Sound is a symptom of the place in which it was created, and whether the personal image we create of that place is based on realistic knowledge or not, it remains 'true' *because* we as the listener have created its context imaginatively, using clues provided by the program maker; thus through this process we become custodians of its mnemonic importance on a personal level, with the potential for recollection at great distances of time and circumstance. Radio is suggestive, growing out of its connection with the temporal nature of life itself; we do not know what will happen in the next moment, and 'live' radio retains its capacity to surprise in the same way. The sounds the producer places to evoke a mood or a sense of place have the power to stir the imagination into its own personal pictures, which in turn have the potential to become memories for the listener, both of the program and associated sensory 'events'. The human mind is a kind of radio producer/receiver in the sense that it possesses the ability to interpret feelings absorbed through sound, particularly when those sounds act as reminders of past events in our own history. By partaking in this experience, we can shape fantasies and fictions, often created from disparate and various

audio symptoms of life around us in a partnership between imagination and memory. It goes far beyond the program itself.

In this, works such as *Poetry, Texas* create powerful ripples in the imagination. We 'hear' voices, sounds and stories echoing from audio sources that continue to touch us all the time, while we may recall very little of what we watched on television the previous evening, because it has been made for us, rather than with us. The great features producer Piers Plowright remembers 'a 1960s interview with the sculptor Henry Moore, in which the artist said "I became a sculptor because I wanted to walk round what I had made," and this was worth a hundred arm-waving presenters on TV trying to tell me what sculpture was about.' (Plowright 2013) This statement is highly significant in terms of our understanding and interaction with radio and sound. As listeners, we can 'walk round' a sonic experience in a way that we cannot with a flat screen; there is a blend between the real and the abstract, the factual and the mythic that lies at the heart of our interaction with sound. It is our mutual imaginative involvement in the making that enables us to carry these experiences with us, and in this, the golden moment is literally pivotal. Malinosvki provides us with all the resources we require to walk around Poetry imaginatively, but the program is actually much more than a feature about a place and the coincidence of its name.

The golden moment in *Poetry, Texas* lifts the program to a new level, moving us to a coda in which we return to the meanings in a word with new ears. Great radio always changes us in some way, be it by giving us a new joke, a new thought or an altered perception. Towards the end of his time in Poetry, Pejk Malinovski walks across a field and sees an old red tractor, half buried in the soaked grass. It reminds him of a poem by William Carlos Williams about a disused red wheelbarrow in the rain. Poetry as a form must be real, and there is a parallel for us here in our search to define the nature of a radio feature. Q: What turns a documentary into a feature? A: Poetry. Perhaps. Or perhaps not. 'What is Poetry[poetry]?' Malinovski asks, and then answers himself: 'A way of looking at the world, like a rusty tractor exposed to the elements.' In saying this, he confirms his program, in its last moments, as a statement about Place, poetry, art and the radio feature itself. That is surely the best way to identify the essence of a genre, a form or an idea: through the work, because seeking to define things too carefully and academically, divorced from the spirit of the making, can be an arid, specious activity. Let us just say then that, be it poetry or impressionistic radio, you aspire to it when you are creating it, and you certainly know it when you see, read or hear it. The form identifies itself. As Louis Armstrong said when he was asked by a journalist to define jazz: 'Man, if you gotta ask, then you ain't never gonna know.'

References:

Brookes, C 2010, Chris Brookes in conversation with the author, June 2010

Plowright, P 2013, Piers Plowright, in conversation with the author, October 2013

AUDIO:

Podcast of *Poetry, Texas* available at http://fallingtree.co.uk/listen/poetry_texas

Seán STREET is Emeritus Professor of Radio at Bournemouth University, and has written a number of key texts on radio and broadcasting, including *The Poetry of Radio: The Colour of Sound*, (Routledge, 2012/13) and *The Memory of Sound: Preserving the Sonic Past* (Routledge, forthcoming, 2014). He is currently preparing a new edition of his *Historical Dictionary of British Radio*, first published in 2006. (Scarecrow Press, forthcoming, 2015) Other prose work includes books on Gerard Manley Hopkins and The Dymock Poets. He has worked in radio for more than 40 years, and has published nine poetry collections, the most recent being *Jazz Time* (Lapwing, 2014).

