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# Playing with Voices: an Analysis of Tom Stoppard's Radio Plays

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## ABSTRACT

This paper takes into consideration the so-called ‘minor works’ written for the radio by one of the most celebrated contemporary playwrights of our time, Tom Stoppard, with the purpose of showing the enormous potential of a dramatic format which has often been neglected by critics and which is not likely to receive so much scholarly attention as traditional drama.

The first part provides the reader with an introductory background to the evolution of radio drama, outlining the main features that characterise this particular dramatic genre, in an attempt to discuss its limitations and its points of strength. In the following chapters, I proceed with a detailed analysis of Stoppard’s output for the radio, consisting of ten radio plays to date, conducted from a semiotic perspective: the aim of the present study is not only to focus on the recurring motifs in Stoppard’s radio plays, but to highlight the different techniques used by the playwright in order to convey his message to the audience through an exclusively aural medium.

In the second chapter, I discuss two closely related aspects, analysing how the temporal and the spatial dimensions are represented respectively in *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972), *Where Are They Now?* (1970), *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* (1964), and *In The Native State* (1991). The third chapter is dedicated to another characteristic feature of radio drama, namely its capability to follow the mind’s movements and express the inner thoughts of a character, a technique that is present in different forms in the plays *The Dog It Was That Died* (1982), *‘M’ is for Moon Among Other Things* (1964), *If You’re Glad I’ll Be Frank* (1966), and *On ‘Dover Beach’* (2007). Finally the fourth and last chapter presents some passages from *Albert’s Bridge* (1967) and other plays, focusing on how Stoppard has paradoxically found in radio a privileged medium to explore the

theme of the relativity of perspective and to address the subject of the visual. Lastly, the chapter ends tackling the problem of the transposition from a sound-based medium like radio to a visual one, offering a brief comparative study of *In The Native State* and *Indian Ink* (1995), the adaptation for the stage written by Stoppard of one of his most successful radio plays.

The study shows how Stoppard's masterful use of radio has produced some unique dramatic effects that cannot be reproduced on the stage without involving a considerable loss in meaning and incisiveness, thus effectively demonstrating that radio drama does possess a distinct artistic identity. In addition, experimenting with this dramatic format contributed to Stoppard's growth as a playwright, as it allowed him to explore several themes and techniques that he further developed in his stage plays; Stoppard's radio plays demonstrate not only that indeed it is possible to craft a form of theatre exclusively for the ear, but that radio drama can still represent a stimulating dramatic format nowadays.

## INTRODUCTION

It is no mystery to the modern public that drama can be produced through different media, yet when we think about ‘drama’ we still tend to instinctively associate this concept to that of ‘theatre’, overlooking the fact that in our time in most societies of the world, with a very few exceptions, various forms of dramatic performances enter people’s everyday life through electronic mass media such as television, cinema and – in more recent years – even the web. There is at least one more medium that could be added to this list, whose absence would very probably go unnoticed since it no longer enjoys the same popularity it had during the last century: indeed radio still has an important role in our culture, but surely enough it is not the first thing that comes to our minds when we think of literature and drama.

Val Gielgud, who was a senior drama producer at the BBC and a key figure in the history of British radio drama, perceived the contrast stemming from the idea of drama applied to a sound-only medium, and formulated it in the following terms: “we are all accustomed, in everyday phraseology, to going ‘to see’ plays, as opposed to going ‘to hear’ them. In consequence the mere juxtaposition of the words ‘radio’ and ‘play’ must imply for many people a contradiction in terms”.<sup>1</sup> Therefore if a play on the radio is something that we cannot ‘watch’, can it still be categorised as drama? Martin Esslin in his influential book *The Field of Drama* demonstrated how drama is in fact an extremely vast field, whose boundaries “will always be fluid” (1987: 23). Drama can surely take different forms, and among these forms that of radio drama is rarely taken into consideration by

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<sup>1</sup> V. Gielgud (1957) *British Radio Drama, 1922-1956*. London: Harrap, p. 85, cited in Crisell (2000: 469).

scholarly attention, yet it shares many common characteristics with the dramatic output produced for other media of transmission, and ultimately employs basically similar sign-systems.

One reason why this genre has been mostly neglected by critics to the point of apparently being destined to be “a literary art without a literature” (Wade, 1981: 224) lies in the notorious ephemerality of this dramatic genre. Similarly to stage theatre, it seems to suffer from its “evanescent art form status” (Crook, 1999: 7), in addition the problem of restricted publication and the consequent difficulty to access the original scripts concur to worsen the situation making it challenging to evaluate the artistic experience. Indeed there seems to be a relative shortage of serious critical literature on radio drama, due both to the fact that critics are not granted an easy access to the original material and that ultimately this material is often unfamiliar to the reader<sup>2</sup>. Drakakis however suggests a further reason why this genre often fails to be taken into serious consideration, which is to be attributed to the very nature of its medium. He claims that “the evolution of a fully fledged criticism of radio drama has, in some respects, been hampered by a nagging sense of the artistic inferiority of the medium itself” (34). Also T. Crook seems to be of a similar opinion, since he affirms that radio drama is the “most understated creative, dramatic and literary art form”, which has “suffered an element of cultural neglect in terms of the volume of critical publication rather than the quality” (1999: ix).

In *Sight Unseen* Guralnick points out that “the distinguishing feature of plays conceived for radio, that we do not see them” (ix) is true in more than one way: since they are rarely acknowledged in scholarly reviews, and generally not likely to be published, indeed they seem to “ghost away on the airwaves, leaving behind not a trace of their existence” (ix). The fact that the only way for a radio play to attain a high profile appears to be by being transferred to the stage, seems to suggest the existence of a hierarchy within these dramatic genres, in which plays written for the radio are bound to occupy a secondary position in relation to the plays conceived for the

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<sup>2</sup> P. Hollindale (1984) citing D. Wade’s article “British Radio Drama since 1960”.

stage.

Nevertheless, famous post-war British dramatists like Beckett and Pinter have resorted to writing for the radio early in their career, and it has “become commonplace to argue that virtually all important modern British playwrights started in radio” (Kelly, 1991: 31). Numerous talented playwrights have proved that radio drama can represent an interesting and challenging artistic format, which offers some unique possibilities, creating effects that in most cases cannot be translated to a theatrical stage without involving a considerable loss in meaning and incisiveness.

Tom Stoppard, one of the most celebrated contemporary British dramatists of our time, whose great variety of works ranges from his best known stage plays to fiction and screenwriting, has also tried his hand at radio drama, especially at the beginning of his career between the 1960s and the 1970s. As a matter of fact, Stoppard’s radio plays have not received so much scholarly attention as his stage plays, yet his production for the radio shows how he has been able to masterfully exploit the specific expressive dimension of this medium, effectively proving that “the absence of vision is not theatre in the dark” (Heptonstall, 2009: 205), but that on the contrary radio drama does have a distinct artistic identity. In my opinion Stoppard’s output for the radio is an excellent example of how plays written for this medium have the potential to go beyond a mere imitation of stage theatre, and to evolve into ‘radiogenic’ forms of drama (Crisell, 2000: 464).

In this paper I shall try to highlight how the choice of a specific medium – in this case, radio – can influence and condition the production of a playwright such as Stoppard in different ways, leading to the creation of plays which exploit the limitations of a sound-only medium and explore a new dimension of the conventional notion of drama. The first chapter is devoted to an overview of the origins and the evolution of this peculiar dramatic genre, taking into consideration the role played by the BBC in the development of British radio drama. I will also outline the main features which seem to characterise this artistic format, in an attempt to discuss whether this can be defined as a proper ‘genre’.

In the following chapters I shall then proceed to analyse Stoppard's radio plays from a semiotic perspective, trying to stress not only the recurring motifs present in the plays but rather focusing on what techniques Stoppard employed in order to convey his message to the audience. Consequently, I have decided to take into consideration the different plays according to their main features, rather than following their chronological order. In the second chapter I shall examine two closely related aspects, that is to say radio's "flexible handling of time and space" (Crisell, 2000: 468): I will describe how the temporal dimension is represented respectively in *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972) and *Where Are They Now?* (1970), before focusing on spatial locations in *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* (1964) and *In The Native State* (1991).

A further aspect that has long been associated with radio is its capability to imitate the mind's movements and express the inner thoughts of a character: therefore the next four plays, namely *The Dog It Was That Died* (1982), *M is for Moon Among Other Things* (1964), *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank* (1966) and *On 'Dover Beach'* (2007), will be examined in chapter three with a view to highlighting the consequences of the employment of this technique.

Next I will deal in chapter four with *Albert's Bridge* (1967) and *In The Native State*, as well as with a few examples from the aforementioned *Artist Descending a Staircase*, in order to discuss how Stoppard's radio drama, despite the absence of a visual dimension, can play with perspectives and reflect upon the subject of the visual. The last point that I am going to deal with before drawing my final conclusions is the issue of the transposition from a sound-based medium like radio to a visual one, such as the theatrical stage: thus in the last part I will offer a comparative study of *In The Native State* and *Indian Ink* (1995), the second version of the same radio play which was adapted by Stoppard himself for the stage.

## CHAPTER 1

### The origins and evolution of Radio Drama

#### 1.1 - *Radio drama as a British art*

Before proceeding to focus on the specific features of radio drama and discuss whether this peculiar form of drama might actually be defined as a proper genre, I reckon it would be useful to spend a few words on the origins of this kind of dramatic form of art, which are to be traced back to the second decade of the last century in England.

Some critics like G. Heptonstall have described radio drama as a “British Art”<sup>3</sup>, a definition that is undeniably true for several reasons: not only the BBC was the very first to broadcast the first dramatic attempts through radio in the early 1920s, but since then British radio drama has become the foremost exponent of this new genre, and has enjoyed this status until nowadays. Unlike what happened in most other countries, radio drama in Britain has grown since then and thanks to the BBC and broadcastings such as the Third Programme, it has retained a considerable amount of popularity until the present day, and now can boast of quite a rich tradition, despite having to compete with more successful visual media.

One of the most comprehensive and detailed accounts of the evolution of British radio drama is probably John Drakakis’s *British Radio Drama*, a book which offers a useful insight of the evolution of this new genre from its very outset up to the beginning of the 1980s. In his publication Drakakis not only talks extensively about the changes in the policy of the BBC concerning radio

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<sup>3</sup> Heptonstall, G. (2009) “Radio Drama: A British Art” *Contemporary Review (London)*. Vol. 291, Summer Iss. 1693, pp. 204-215.

drama, but he also addresses a few interesting aesthetic issues regarding the kind of reality that radio drama seeks to reflect and to communicate to its listeners (1981: 24- 34).

The majority of the accounts on the subject of radio drama dates the origins of this genre back to the 1920s, when in Britain the theatre director Nigel Playfair “pioneered drama in sound” (Heptonstall, 2009: 205) by commissioning Richard Hughes to write *A Comedy of Danger*, the world’s first radio play, which was broadcast in 1924. Yet, although *Danger* is universally acknowledged as the first play written especially for the radio, the very first drama broadcast was actually aired the year before, and consisted of an adaptation of three scenes from three Shakespeare’s plays, produced by Professor Acton Bond of the British Empire Shakespeare Society (Drakakis, 1981: 2). This fact shows how in its early days radio drama spontaneously turned to the traditional repertoire of the stage theatre, in the attempt to imitate established theatre drama, rather than exploring the new possibilities offered by the radio as a different medium. Although the early drama broadcast as a matter of fact consisted of studio recordings of plays that had originally been written for the theatre, nevertheless the early production on radio of stage plays contributed to the promotion of that theatrical work which until then had been destined to a limited and elite theatre-going audience. At that time the early dramatic production for the radio would try to reproduce a theatre effect, thus failing to discover “the actual radio effect” (3), which was defined only later with the exploration of radio’s own proper form. During this early stage in the 1920s the process of adapting drama for the radio took the form of simply cutting, continuing to adopt theatrical conventions, but soon enough radio drama started to manifest a desire to assert a more individual identity (3).

### 1.2 - *The impact of new technological innovations: the “Golden Age of Radio”*

The rapid development of radio drama in those years was also reflected by the changes in the organisation of the BBC, as in July 1924 a separate department for the broadcasting of plays was set

up under R. E. Jeffrey and Howard Rose. However, it is necessary to wait until the end of the 1920s for radio drama to be able to take a significant step forward, when a progressive improvement of the technological means available opened new expressive possibilities, thus affecting the new radio plays in terms of both quality and scope. Drakakis points out how “the progress of radio drama in its very early stages was hampered by inadequate technology” (1981: 6), asserting then that the development of radio drama largely benefited from the introduction of some technological innovations, such as the dramatic control panel, a device that permitted to control sound effects and allowed the simultaneous use of numerous studios. The dramatic control panel allowed radio drama “to dissolve both temporal and implied spatial boundaries” (5), as well as the dissolution of conventionally marked scene division. Another proof of the progresses made in this field is that “a basic grammar of radio production had been formulated” by 1930 (7), with a vocabulary borrowing from cinema, but also from literature and psychology.

Another important change that revolutionised the kind of experience offered by radio drama was the advent of the transistor radio. D. Wade points out that this innovative electronic device turned the action of listening to the radio from a primary to a secondary activity (1981: 223): while before listening to the radio used to mean that you had to take your time and sit in front of a rather large and immovable set, the advent of the transistor radio made it possible for the listeners to take this new electronic device around with them and listen to it while being occupied with some other activity. The influence of the transistor was felt in radio drama as well: not only in the sense that playwrights were required to adopt new techniques in order to hold the attention of their public, but also for what concerned the very nature of their plays, as the increasing demand for “plays for *cleaning up the lunch to*” (223) called for the airing of a new kind of less demanding and more entertaining plays.

A third influential technological innovation that had an enormous impact on the field of broadcasting was the tape recorder. One of the main advantages offered by this device was that it

granted a greater measure of control over the performance, allowing to correct mistakes and to add special sound effects (241). In addition, the advent of the portable tape recorder in the 1950s “vastly expanded broadcasters’ access to living speech and naturalistic diction” (Hollindale, 1984: 425), thus contributing to the achievement of a higher level of realism. Finally, the overall quality of the broadcasting largely benefited from the introduction of the frequency modulation (FM), which enabled a reception free from interference and a greater clarity, consequently promoting very high standards of radio acting (Wade, 1981: 241).

Also thanks to these technological progress, the production of radio plays increased considerably during the 1930s, and according to the figures provided by Drakakis, by 1945 the BBC broadcasted some four hundred plays a year (1981: 7). Radio enjoyed an unexpected monopoly especially during the war, when the closure of theatres prompted radio to become a space for political discourse and “actuality broadcasting” (11). The post-war radio service was then redesigned as a three-channel service (Whitehead, 1989: 65), and a new national radio station was added to the BBC Home Service and Light Programme. The Third Programme begun on 29 September 1946, and this radio network played a fundamental role in promoting the genre of radio drama, considering that half of its output was literary and its drama productions featured plays by authors like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Dylan Thomas (Heptonstall, 2009: 207).

In the late 1940s a new trend started to emerge, following the principle of separating popular from specialised listening (Drakakis, 1981: 12). This period became known as “The Golden Age of Radio”, a term that was loosely applied to some of the more brilliant output of the late forties and fifties (Wade, 1981: 225) and which reflected the peak popularity reached by radio at the time with the general public.

Drakakis also reports that during the 1950s a sort of new alliance emerged between radio and live theatre in opposition to television, which was rapidly becoming a serious competitor for audiences. The author remarks that “reports upon plays being performed on the Continent were

regularly commissioned, with a view to translation and broadcasting” (1981: 15), thus radio became “a kind of alternative avant-garde theatre” introducing audiences to new stage plays (15). In the 1950s radio drama started to be considered a “respectable alternative outlet for practicing dramatists”, offering the advantage to give access to larger audiences than the theatre could attract (16).

### 1.3 - *Radio drama as a gateway for the stage: its role in Tom Stoppard's career*

Although around the 1950s radio had gradually started to draw less attention due to the increasing popularity of television, the programs produced by the BBC, especially the broadcast of the Third Programme, remained an important point of reference for the cultural élite of the country. The scholar K. Whitehead devoted her attention specifically to this famous radio network, in the attempt to provide “an explanation of how the Third Programme functioned as a patron of contemporary literature” and creative writing (1989: 3). One of the distinguishing features of the Third Programme was its objective of raising cultural standards by “promoting excellence regardless of the demands of the mass audience” (1).

Whitehead reasonably argues that the Third Programme failed in its intent (1989: 2), and one of the reasons for that would be connected to the conflicting ideas of different members in charge of its policy over the years. For instance Val Gielgud, who occupied a senior position in the Drama Department from 1929 to 1963, was largely responsible for the immensely successful ‘National Theatre of the Air’ policy: he basically regarded radio as “the saviour of the nation’s dramatic heritage” (135), and although this policy did not exclude the new works originally written for the radio, yet it favoured a somewhat conservative approach, promoting the classics of literature rather than more experimental modern playwrights.

However, during the 1950s a new kind of drama that Gielgud did not approve of was starting to emerge, yet the era of the Angry Young Men and the Theatre of the Absurd with its new generation of playwrights started to be gradually accepted to the point that “the Third Programme became a recognised forum for avant-garde drama” (140). Despite the remaining notion that radio “was something of a nursery slope for playwrights whose real ambition was to write for the stage” (135), some major changes in the policy of the BBC took place in the following decade: in 1963 Martin Esslin was appointed Head of BBC Radio Drama, and since he considered it the department’s duty to widen the dramatic horizons of the public, he turned his attention to new promising writers at the same time as Stoppard was starting to write plays and seeking a production.

In the mid 1960s, at the time when Stoppard was beginning his career as a writer, radio was a well-recognised “gateway to theatre in Britain” (Guralnick, 2001: 69), and it actually represented a significant showcase for new aspiring playwrights: due to its comparatively low production costs, radio has long provided the perfect ground for unknown writers and more experimental plays, which would not otherwise be produced (Guralnick, 1996: ix). D. Wade also stresses the same phenomenon, citing Stoppard among those authors whose literary fame is to various extents due to the radio:

The existence in radio of an enormous market for plays and its consequent readiness to give new writers, once anyway, the benefit of doubt has been of incalculable value to many now-famous names – Bill Naughton, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard etc – who have consequently gone on to write for the theatre, the cinema and television.

(Wade, 1981: 220)

Stoppard’s production for the radio to date consists of ten plays, six of which are concentrated between 1964 and 1972, while the others are separated by ten-year intervals. This, by the playwright’s own admission, was due to “circumstances rather than a conscious withdrawal from radio”, and he confessed that ten years represent “an embarrassing gap for a writer who is so enthusiastic for BBC Radio Drama and in debt to it” (Stoppard, 1996: viii).

Stoppard's first two radio pieces, namely *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* and *'M' is for Moon among Other Things*, are both fifteen-minute plays which he wrote in 1964 and submitted for the series "Just Before Midnight" (Kelly, 1991: 31). His first plays apparently seized the attention of the BBC drama editor Richard Imison, who decided to commission further plays from Stoppard: his next radio play *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank* aired two years later on the Third Programme, followed in 1967 by *Albert's Bridge*. According to Kelly, these plays show "a more ambitious and self-conscious use of the radio medium" (33), clearly being more complex both in terms of narrative structure and themes addressed. Stoppard's fifth radio play *Where Are They Now?* was aired in 1970, and its subject – an alumni reunion dinner – was probably influenced by its targeted audience, since the play was commissioned for the BBC's "School Radio" series (36). The next play commissioned by the BBC in 1972 was *Artist Descending a Staircase*, the last of the series of radio plays Stoppard wrote between the sixties and the seventies, and which he conceived as a "pure, unstageable radio play" (38).

The remaining four plays that Stoppard wrote for the radio during his career are separated roughly by ten-year intervals – *The Dog It Was That Died* (1982) and *In The Native State* (1991) – with an even longer wait before *On 'Dover Beach'* (2007), while his last radio play to date, *Darkside*, aired recently on August 2013. During this long period of time the playwright devoted himself mainly to his stage plays and occasionally to screenwriting, thus confirming his personal preference for the theatrical medium, which he has never really tried to conceal:

I wanted to be in the theatre. The first play I wrote, in 1960, was meant for the stage, and the next plays, for radio and TV, were – I hoped – stepping stones towards getting a play on the boards. [...] This is not a philosophical claim for the value of one medium over another. It is simply the way I felt, and there were many like me in those early Osborne, Wesker and Pinter years, when bliss was it to be performed but to be *staged* was very heaven.<sup>4</sup>

T. S. 1993

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<sup>4</sup> Issued from the introduction to his collection of TV plays published by Faber & Faber (1998).

#### 1.4 - *The characteristic features of the radio drama format*

The main distinct trait that sets radio apart from other dramatic media is definitely the absence of a 'visual' dimension. Consequently, radio has often been referred to as a 'blind medium', a fairly negative definition that seems to suggest that radio actually 'lacks' something in order to be a proper vehicle for Drama, thus confirming its supposedly artistic inferiority.

Yet, the scholars and critics who have tried to defend the distinctiveness of radio drama have frequently argued that on the contrary radio can be a powerfully visual medium. For instance Guralnick with regards to this point strongly asserts the "near universal preconception about radio, that despite its blank screen, it is powerfully visual" (xii), claiming that "radio speaks to the ear as to the eye" (1996: xiii), and similarly T. Crook argues that "it cannot be said that the ear cannot see" (1999: 7). Crook acknowledges the primacy of the eye as "the primary medium of human communication" (8), but at the same time he questions the need to establish a hierarchy of the senses, claiming that ultimately there is no philosophical difference between seeing physically with the eye and seeing with the mind (54), and therefore there is no necessity to define radio a blind medium.

While such authors stress the evocative power of sound and radio's capability of making the audience visualise "pictures that are tailor-made to the taste and the experience of each individual listener" (Imison, 1991: 290), on the other hand other critics and theorists like S. Briggs suggest a different approach to the subject: according to Briggs the broadcasting play has to do with the ear rather than the eye, since the distinguishing feature of radio would lie in its power "to create an autonomous yet intelligible world of pure sound that [requires] no visualization at all" (quoted in Crisell, 2000: 467).

Though this may be a matter of predominance of the ear over the eye or vice versa, the real recurrent question that scholars seem to ask themselves is the following: does the absence of the visual dimension represent a limitation, or is it one of radio's points of strength to be exploited at

the playwright's advantage? Guralnick seems to be of the opinion that the second option is the more likely one, and in her book she tries to demonstrate how a playwright such as Tom Stoppard has been able to turn the main apparent drawback of this medium to his own advantage; playing with the fact that the audience can only rely on their auditory perceptions, Stoppard's radio plays frequently aim to make the listener reflect on the role that vision has in our perception of reality, thus effectively thematising one of the very technical features of the medium he happens to be working with.

Another characteristic feature of radio drama is that it allows a "flexible handling of time and space" (Crisell, 2000: 468). As Imison points out, in radio drama "there are no barriers of time or space or everyday reality" (1991: 290), since indeed it is possible to evoke a specific and not necessarily realistic setting or a historical period only with a few sound effects. If you come to think of it radio, despite being based on a rather simple technology in comparison to the special effects usually employed for instance in modern cinema, allows a degree of freedom that could not be easily experienced in a theatre. Like Imison, also Heptonstall mentions the great liberty that radio allows, asserting that "the imaginative boundaries of radio are infinite space" (2009: 204), and explaining that radio compensates for being comparatively "technically basic" (204) in comparison to the majority of modern technology by heavily relying on the resources of the listener.

However, the kind of flexibility offered by radio is at the same time the source of one of the aspects of this medium that has most frequently been criticised, that is, the "unreliability of pure sound as an epistemological guide" (Crisell, 2000: 464) or, to put it simply, the issue of the untrustworthiness of radio. This view stems from the belief that supposedly sound is less able than sight to show us the true nature of things (467) and consequently, according to Goffman's analysis of radio signs (467), the verbal signs in radio plays might not be easily recognised due to the lack of vision, and could thus mislead the listener as to what they represent.

A notorious example of the potential misleading nature of radio can be found in Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds*: this 60-minute broadcast aired in 1938 simulated the announcement through realistic news bulletins of an alien invasion. On that occasion Welles employed a series of tricks, such as the device of presenting the broadcasting as a station interruption of a musical program that was already airing (Goffman, 1974: 390), which made the story appear so authentic to the point of generating panic among many listeners, who were effectively tricked into believing that the planet was really under attack.

Nevertheless, it is possible to take advantage of the absence of vision not only to produce a misleading effect; on the contrary this can represent a positive aspect for different reasons. For instance Imison calls attention to the fact that radio's lack of vision allows a special freedom to the actors who are "released from the tyranny of physical appearance" (1991: 291): in fact, in a context where there is no need for realism in front of the microphone, what is important is the voice of the actor rather than his appearance, so that it is possible for the fat man "to play Hamlet" (291) and for well-known actors to play a part outside their traditional range.

In addition, Crisell maintains that the epistemological unreliability of sound "can be exploited in entirely legitimate ways, especially in drama" (2000: 468): as a matter of fact, sometimes the simulation of actual sounds recreated in a recording studio can seem more realistic than the authentic sound themselves (468). The author mentions several examples of such techniques, among which the effect of coconut shells struck together in order to reproduce the trot of a horse, a device that has been used by Stoppard himself and which I will discuss more thoroughly later while dealing with *Artist Descending a Staircase* in Chapter 2.

A further distinctive feature of radio drama lies essentially in the verbal nature of this genre, which according to Crisell would have "prompted something of a rediscovery of the pristine character of drama, for historically it was bound up with speech" (2000: 469). As evidence for this claim, the author reminds us of the etymological origins of the term "audience", which can be

traced back to the Latin verb “audire”, meaning “to hear”. According to Crisell, the primacy of the verbal component of drama started to be progressively overshadowed only in the seventeenth century (469), with the introduction on the stage of technological innovations which made the attention of the audience shift gradually from the verbal component of the performance to the new spectacular and visual effects, a trend which has actually continued in the following centuries until nowadays. Since the radio play format lacks this element of spectacle, it must direct the attention of the audience exclusively on its verbal aspects, thus conferring special importance to words and sounds.

The essentially verbal nature of radio drama has led some critics to claiming that this genre shares an affinity with literature (McWhinnie: 1959), in the sense that they both care about the meaning and the effect of words (Heptonstall, 2009: 204). Guralnick has described radio drama as a genre combining “performance, story telling and poetry” (1996: 206): it draws from theatre, but the absence of visual effects confers to words a more intense value, which recalls poetry in a sense. Interestingly enough, Heptonstall also claims that radio drama can even represent a means of self-education, offering to people reluctant to enter a theatre or a bookshop the opportunity to become familiar with authors that they might never read.

I personally agree with Heptonstall’s idea that radio can be a very “democratic medium” (2009: 204), and I deem that this might be true in more than one way: not only does radio drama allow the listener to evoke in his own mind personal and unique images, but it also addresses a wide and not necessarily highly-educated public, who can, especially in the case of Stoppard’s works, enjoy a play on different levels. Stoppard often relies on his audience’s ability to understand and recognise the recurring intertextual references present in his comedies (Kelly, 2001: 11): the more the spectators are familiar with the frequent motifs in Stoppard’s work, the more they are able to appreciate the multiple layers of meaning, yet the plays remain at the same time accessible and enjoyable also for that portion of the audience who is unable to seize on all the resonances.

Furthermore, another characteristic that has come to define the genre of radio drama is that of being an artistic format which has traditionally been favoured by the experimental and the minimalist (Heptonstall, 2009: 214): as a matter of fact, it allows artists to explore new possibilities in the relative freedom of a medium “which [does] not respond primarily to commercial success” (214). Indeed one of the reasons why this dramatic genre represents an “opportunity for experiment” (Guralnick, 1996: 206) can be ascribed to its comparatively low production costs, which in a way contribute to “minimize the risk of artistic failure” (Kelly, 1991: 31), thus allowing the producers to give a chance to new playwrights as well as to more experimental and innovative plays without risking any severe economic loss. Radio drama might result appealing to the minimalist in the sense that it offers the dramatist less than what a conventional stage does in a material sense (Guralnick, 1996: xv), yet this apparent limitation at the same time represents one of the charms of this medium, which requires an active participation of its audience, actually inviting the listeners “to see for themselves” (xvi).

Finally, one of the most evident points of strength of radio as a medium consists on its ability to reach a vast audience. As an example in the 1990s the about 600 plays produced annually by the BBC’s Radio Drama Department, if added to the numerous serials and dramatized readings, could reach an overall audience of approximately 500,000,000 people a year, according to the figures provided by Richard Imison, who was an influential script editor for BBC Radio Drama from 1963 to 1991. Thanks to their availability, domestic media such as radio and television exercise a significant influence in shaping the modern public’s taste (Guralnick, 2001: 68), besides having an important role in the spread of culture. Radio, unlike many other media, is totally free, and since drama is broadcast nationwide (Imison, 1991: 291) – as well as worldwide today thanks to the internet – it is virtually accessible to anyone who wishes to listen to it. Imison also claims that radio drama draws from the tradition of “the ancient art of storytelling” (291), since it needs to adopt the

same techniques for holding the attention of the public, especially because a significant part of the audience is often involved in other activities while listening to a radio broadcast.

Furthermore, the experience of listening to a radio play is significantly different from what a spectator can usually feel in a theatre. The audience of a radio play is compelled to envision what they hear, and from this point of view the listener is more actively involved into the performance, due to the imaginative effort that this format necessarily requires. The fact that radio drama powerfully stimulates the imagination of the audience has been stressed by both Imison and Guralnick, who make different observations on the subject. Imison for instance argues that listening to radio drama can indeed be considered a “private experience” (1991: 290) because, unlike the collective activity of attending a theatrical performance, each listener visualises in his or her mind different and personal images, although the whole audience is actually listening to the same sounds: this idea that radio has the power to appeal to the individual while simultaneously addressing the masses represents a paradox that was grasped from its very outset, and led radio to be labelled as a “public-private medium” (Drakakis, 1981: 23).

While Imison focuses his considerations mainly on the experience of the listener, Guralnick insists especially on the visual dimension of radio, stating that “a given play for radio invite the mind’s eye to envision what the ear has heard” (1996: xii). Nevertheless, whereas on the one hand radio leaves substantial space to the imagination of each member of the audience, producing “pictures which are tailor-made to the taste and experience of each individual listener” (Imison, 1991: 290), at the same time sound and language can also be used to trick the audience, making it visualise what is not really there, and playing with the blindness of the spectator.

Stoppard in particular has become famous for being a playwright who relies on the active involvement of his public in order to “fill in the blanks” (Brater, 2001: 204) and complete the message of his plays. Stoppard’s ideal public therefore is not composed of passive spectators, but on the contrary it is called to decipher the actors’ allusive lines, so that it can be able to recognise

and appreciate the copious literary allusions which permeate Stoppard's unique style. Basically Stoppard counts on his audience's ability "to listen for texts behind the text" (Kelly, 2001: 11), and on it being "predisposed to playing with what it has already seen on mainstream stages before" (Brater, 2001: 205). As a matter of fact, many of Stoppard's best dramatic effects do depend on the ability of his audience to take part in the complex process of evoking further layers of meaning through the speech and the actions of his characters, and perhaps what fascinated Stoppard about the invisible stage of radio drama was exactly the expressive potential of this genre, which offers the playwright the chance to challenge his audience in innovative, unconventional ways.

## CHAPTER 2

### The representation of time and space in an aural medium

#### 2.1 - *Methodology: a semiotic approach*

The subject of my study in the next chapters shall be Stoppard's output for the radio, taking into consideration each of his radio plays to date. The challenge however lies in the very nature of such plays, which is the reason why I thought them worthy of attention in the first place. The fact is that the majority of these plays, with a few exceptions, have rarely been taken into account by scholarly attention, and many of the critics who do have acknowledged Stoppard's radio plays to various extents (Hunter, 1982; Corballis, 1984; Brassell, 1985; Jenkins, 1987; Kelly, 1991; Guralnick, 2001) have often failed to consider these plays in view of their medium, analysing them no differently than if they had been conceived for the stage, like the rest of Stoppard's theatrical production.

What I would like to do in the present study is to try to examine not only the message conveyed by Stoppard's radio plays, but the very process through which such message is conveyed: in other words, I shall focus my attention on the signs which radio's codes make use of in order to express their meaning and ultimately convey their message to the listener. To do so I will follow the example of Andrew Crisell (1986) and Martin Esslin (1987) and apply the basic principles of semiotics, the theory which studies the nature and the use of different signs, whose origin can be attributed to the theories of the Russian formalists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as to the work of the father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, and the American philosopher C. S. Peirce. Eventually the work of these pioneers was developed and applied to the field of drama

by other famous contemporary semioticians during the second half of the last century, especially in France (R. Barthes, 1964; P. Pavis, 1982), Germany (E. Fischer-Lichte, 1992) and Italy (U. Eco, 1976; K. Elam, 1980).

For what concerns the organisation of the following chapters, I have decided to avoid a merely chronological succession of the plays, but rather to group them according to the characteristics or the structural elements which they have in common, in order to highlight how Stoppard used similar techniques in different radio plays. It goes without saying that this is a subjective partitioning, which is far from being rigid, as I will occasionally need to refer to a distinctive play in different chapters.

Before proceeding to take into consideration the first group of radio plays and discuss the dimensions of space and time, it might be useful to spend a few words on the basic concepts of semiotics that I am going to refer to later on. In doing so I will largely refer to the book *The Field of Drama* (1986) by Martin Esslin, who explains in extremely practical and clear terms the basis of the aforementioned semiotic approach.

The semiotic approach applied to the analysis of drama provides an extremely practical method to explain “the way in which [drama] achieves its effects and conveys its meaning” (Esslin, 1986: 10): in other words, its aim is to examine the signs and sign-systems that are used to “achieve the desired communication” (10). This kind of analysis allows the reader – or the listener, since we are talking about drama for the ear – to better understand how the process of communication is achieved in a specific medium, as well as to understand more clearly the message that the playwright seeks to convey to his audience.

In his book Esslin applies this semiotic approach to the dramatic material conceived for the stage and the screen, comparing how different dramatic media (mainly theatre, cinema and television) can convey a message using similar signs in different ways; most importantly, in doing

so he also stresses the role of the audience, and how its ways of perception have been affected by the advent of new technologies:

More than ever, therefore, there is a need for us to understand what drama can and cannot express, how it formulates and transmits its messages, what techniques it employs to convey them to its audience and how that audience can and does grasp, ingest and understand the *meaning* of these messages – explicit or implicit, consciously understood or subliminally absorbed.

(Esslin, 1987: 14)

Curiously enough considering Esslin's extensive background in the field of radio and his experience as Head of Drama at the BBC, the author decided to exclude radio drama from his discussion, due to the "paradoxical and complex features" of this specific genre (30), which would have made the comparison with the other visual media he had decided to focus on exceedingly complicated. Nonetheless, the author warns his readers that it would be possible to adapt and apply the observations of his book also to radio drama, provided that the difference between these media is conveniently taken into account (30).

Such an enterprise was undertaken in 1986 by the broadcasting expert and academic Andrew Crisell, who tried to describe the different auditory signs of radio drawing from the concepts of icon, index and symbol, first formulated by Pierce and now representing the acquired basis of most semiotic studies. According to the theory of semiotics, it is possible to distinguish three basic types of signs – icon, index and symbol – which are at the base of any communicative act and differ from each other for the different kind of relationship that is established between a sign and its signifier.

The *icon* is the simplest type of sign, resembling directly the object which it represents: a picture is a classic example of an iconic sign, but not all icons are necessarily visual (Esslin, 1987: 43). Indeed we can also have aural iconic signs, for instance a ringing sound can be an aural icon of telephone call; in this sense, Esslin claims that "all dramatic performance is basically iconic", since every sign involved in a performance is a representation "of a fictional or otherwise reproduced

reality” (43). This is perhaps even more immediately evident in the case of radio drama, where we can only access the aural signs of an otherwise invisible reality.

The second type of sign, the *index*, can be defined as “a sign which is directly linked to its object, usually in a causal or sequential way” (Crisell, 1994: 42). Again if we focus on radio signs, the noise of a closing door can be an index of the entrance or the exit of a character from the scene, nevertheless, also some verbal elements can have an indexical function: the so-called ‘deictic signs’ – for instance personal pronouns, like ‘you’ or ‘he’, as well as demonstrative pronouns like ‘this’ or adverbs such as ‘here’ (Elam, 1980: 22) – are commonly used to allude to an object or a person. Interestingly enough, in an exclusively aural medium these deictic signs tend to result ambiguous since they cannot be accompanied by a clarifying gesture of the actor, and since they offer more possibilities for misunderstanding, they also represent the prompt for humorous puns and jokes, often present in Stoppard’s radio plays.

Finally the third and last type of sign is the *symbol*, a sign which has “no immediately recognisable organic relationship” with its signifier (Esslin, 1987: 44). The meaning of symbolic signs is unmotivated and derives from conventions: words for example are actually a form of symbolic sign (Elam, 1980: 22), and they acquire a meaning according to our awareness of a certain group of conventions, that is, our knowledge of a given language. Crisell claims that the symbolic character of words represents “the basis of radio’s imaginative appeal” (1994: 43), since the listener is continuously compelled to visualise an object which bears no resemblance with its word-sign. In addition he argues that since on radio “words are always and unavoidably spoken” (43), they create a sort of binary code in which the words are symbols of what they represent, while the voice we hear, in the case of a radio play, is an index of the character who is speaking.

In order to analyse Stoppard’s radio plays from a semiotic perspective I must therefore proceed with examining the basic codes of their medium: these can be divided into verbal and non-verbal codes, namely *speech*, *music*, *noise* and *silence* (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: xiii; Crisell,

1994: 42). As a matter of fact, despite its limitations radio is able to convey a kind of drama that is actually quite close to the effects achieved by conventional drama, and according to Crisell this is possible thanks to a process of *transcodification* (1994: 146): the radio medium requires that the visual codes usually employed by stage drama get replaced by exclusively auditory codes, among which the most important is the code of speech.

Even though speech is undoubtedly the primary signifier among the codes used by radio (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 30), failing to pay the proper amount of consideration to the rest of its non-verbal codes would result in a considerable loss of meaning and information. While in conventional drama *ostension*<sup>5</sup> is the main mode of sign production (Eco, 1977: 110), and on the stage the appearance, the gestures, and the actions of an actor are as important as his speech, on radio it is the sounds we hear that convey to the listener a large portion of the information that is necessary to visualise the scene and “frame” it within a given spatial and temporal setting. For this reason, I shall begin my discussion exactly from the two interrelated sign systems of time and space, which show extremely interesting characteristics when applied to the genre of radio drama.

## 2.2 - *The flexibility of time.*

According to Esslin, “dramatic time and space are the axes along which the multifarious sign systems of drama unfold themselves to its audiences” (1987: 42), thus they might very well provide a good starting point for the analysis of the radio drama genre. Alan Beck argues that because of the absence of a visual dimension, “radio plays must speak for themselves and create their own sound

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<sup>5</sup> U. Eco defines theatrical ostension as one of the various ways of signifying present in drama, and “the most basic instance of performance” (1977: 110), since acting is largely based on deictic ostention, that is, the use of gestural indexical signs. K. Elam explains that in the semiotics of theatre the definition through ostension corresponds to what is also called “mimesis” (1980: 112), that is the process whereby the actors and the objects present on the stage represent by convention real people and objects of the “real” world.

spaces specific to the medium, uniquely differing from the representation of time and space in plays in other media” (1998). While this can be true to a certain extent, at the same time it is undeniable that in its flexibility of time and space radio manifests some points of affinity with another kind of medium: cinema and television do offer similar possibilities in this sense, and indeed they provide a higher degree of liberty in terms of change of settings or time in comparison with a theatrical performance, which is usually subject to a series of limitations imposed by the physical boundaries of the stage. On the contrary in films the editing process allows the director to modify the plot and change the linearity of the story, moving back and forth in time as well as shifting from a location to another (Crisell, 1994: 154). Imison describes how similar results can be achieved by radio plays in the following terms: “there are no barriers of time or space or everyday reality; a radio play can span continents<sup>6</sup> and centuries with ease, or it can take place within someone's skull<sup>7</sup>. It can present searingly truthful social realism, or it can give a voice to animals, insects, or even inanimate objects<sup>8</sup>” (1991: 290).

However, Beck does not seem to share this widespread opinion regarding the temporal flexibility of radio drama, and on the contrary he argues that “dialogue and the radio drama diegesis impose a linear and ‘real’ time, which may have little or no elasticity” (1998). This observation may very well be valid if it were to be applied to the so-called “hearth plays” (Beck: 1998), that is, those plays which have a domestic plot aiming at portraying in a realistic way domestic every-day life, and since their principal set is the house, they usually depict a reality extremely familiar and close to that of the listener, who for this reason can easily identify with the protagonists of the play. Nevertheless, although this kind of plays is quite popular, on the radio we can also find a variety of

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<sup>6</sup> See Tom Stoppard’s *In the Native State* (1991), in which the plot is divided between India and England.

<sup>7</sup> See Tom Stoppard’s *On Dover Beach* (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Crisell cites the example of Don Haworth’s *On a Day in Summer in a Garden*, a radio play first broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1975, in which the characters are not humans but dock plants in a garden (2000, pp. 470-471).

plays whose subject is not necessarily realistic, and which do not conform to Beck's statement: Stoppard himself has proved that one of radio's greatest advantages as a medium is that it is not subject to any restrictions in terms of time and setting, and some of his radio plays are perfect examples of this. Just think about *Where Are They Now?* which continuously shift back and forth in time over a span of 24 years, or *In The Native State*, in which the action is not only divided between past and present, but also spatially, taking place in two different countries. The most complex and original structure however is that of *Artist Descending a Staircase*, which is by no chance often acclaimed as Stoppard's radio masterpiece. In an interview Stoppard cited exactly this play while commenting on the advantages of the radio medium:

Well, look at it this way, firstly it's an enormous audience – small compared with TV perhaps but bigger than anything else. Therefore it's to be taken seriously. Secondly, there are *no limitations at all*. I'll give you an example: this new play has three people aged 20 to 80, and in the first scene they're walking through the woods when the First World War breaks out all around them. Try putting that on the stage of the Old Vic or the Shaw Theatre. The lovely thing about radio, you see, is that it's liberating.<sup>9</sup>

### *Artist Descending a Staircase*

#### 2.3 - A circular temporal structure.

In this paragraph I am going to look more in detail at the aforementioned play *Artist Descending a Staircase*, which from now on I will refer to simply as *Artist*; I will try to highlight the characteristics which makes this play perfectly attuned to its medium (Guralnick, 2001: 76), paying particular attention to the techniques employed to convey the temporal as well as the spatial location of the different scenes. In *Artist*, Stoppard builds a mysterious story of blindness and

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<sup>9</sup> Stoppard to Barry Norman, The Times, 11 November 1972, cited in Hunter (1982: 66. Italics mine).

misinterpretation that stars as its protagonists three aging avant-gardists, namely Martello, Beauchamp and Donner. The latter's death caused by a fall down the stairs is at the centre of the question, yet the truth seems unreachable due to the ambiguity of the only piece of evidence at their disposal – a tape which incidentally recorded Donner's fall – and the quarrel between the two surviving protagonists triggers a “retrogressive recollection of their life and work” (Kelly, 1991: 38), presenting the listener with their ideas about art and the story of a past love rivalry which has bound the three friends.

Through the whole play the topics of art and love seem to intermingle, and they are best represented by the ill-fated love affair between the radical avant-garde artist Beauchamp and the beautiful yet blind girl Sophie, who defends the value of more traditional visual art. The second mystery permeating the play stems from Sophie's blindness. She is unable to tell for sure which one of the three friends she fell in love with at first sight while visiting an art exhibition years before: because of her progressively declining sight, she seems unable to recollect the exact aspect of the painting whose creator she so fervently admired. From her vague description they all gather that the object of Sophie's affection must have been Beauchamp, yet we discover during the various flashbacks that he could as well have been Donner, who apparently felt a sincere love for the girl and never forgot her.

This funny “comedy of recollection” (39) follows quite an intricate pattern, which goes progressively back in time from the here-and-now through a series of flashbacks which culminates in the sixth scene, and then the plot comes back to the present retracing the same temporal settings of the previous scenes. Thus, the play is set temporally in six parts, and its circular structure can be represented by the sequence ABCDEFEDCBA (Stoppard, 1996: 111). The circular structure of the play is expressly described by Stoppard in an introductory note to the printed version of the text, and similarly the first broadcast of *Artist* was introduced by a speaker as well as by the director, John Tydeman, who explained in a few words what kind of play the audience was going to hear;

consequently it can be argued that probably the sound devices employed to convey the temporal shifting of the scenes might not be sufficient to let the audience immediately grasp such a complex structure, which nonetheless becomes easy to follow as soon as it is explained through the paratextual material.

In other words, the so-called *plot time* in *Artist* is organised in order to present first the latest events, and then it goes backwards in time, before returning once again to the present. Such an apparently complicated structure however is not unintelligible, because the listener is able to “abstract the actual temporal ordering of events, including those merely reported, and so mentally construct the *chronological time*” of the events (Elam, 1980: 118), since the dialogue gradually provides all the necessary information, introducing and interconnecting the various scenes.

With a play sporting such an intricate temporal structure, the vocal characteristics of the characters’ voices become even more relevant than usual. In radio plays in general the voices that are heard carry important semiotic functions: not only the voice is an index of the character who is speaking, but it also conveys essential details which enable the listener to figure out the personality of the character (Crisell, 1994: 43). Through paralinguistic features such as accent, pitch, tone, speed and stress it is possible to convey an incredible amount of information (Elam, 1980: 79), which would be lost on a printed page: such details can imply different emotions, as well as evoke particular social or cultural factor, for instance the nationality or the level of education of a character (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 39). Indeed one great advantage of an aural medium like radio is that it can fully exploit the expressivity of the human voice, introducing a variety of connotative and implicit meanings, considering that the manner in which words are spoken is often more meaningful than the choice of the words used (38). In the case of *Artist*, the voices of the characters are especially relevant from a semiotic point of view because they convey also crucial temporal information. The temporal shift is indicated by the decreasing level of gruffness of the voices of the characters, which gradually shift towards a distinctively more juvenile tone. Such long

temporal shifts in any visual medium would have probably required special make up effects, especially if the actors were to remain the same ones throughout the entire film or performance. In a radio production, the advantage is that we can have two actors for each role, who do not necessarily need to resemble each other, and who can simply modulate their voice in order to indicate the actual age of their character.

In addition to the voices of the characters, Stoppard decided to use also some very peculiar sound effects in order to mark the shift from a sequence to the next one. As a matter of fact, every new scene is actually introduced by a distinct aural sign which indicates the location and time of the current scene; the function of these sounds is to draw the attention of the listener through their artificiality and “ease the auditor through jumps in sequence” (Kelly, 1991: 39). Yet, sound effects can also be used for other purposes. For instance, the beginning of the third flashback opens with “cliché Paris music” (Stoppard, 1996: 130), which is used to link the last words of Donner in the previous scene, who is talking romantically about Sophie, to the speech that the woman is delivering in the following scene. From Sophie’s words we can gather that she is about to move, and her description of the place would seem to fit Paris; however, in a few lines we understand that she is probably only moving from an area of London to a new neighbourhood, and that Beauchamp and Martello are helping her with the packing. In this case, this specific sound effect has a symbolic rather than iconic function, since the role of the cliché Paris music is not that of conveying a realistic setting, but of expressing the romantic feeling of Donner towards Sophie.

#### 2.4 - *Metaradio: a reflection on interpreting aural signs*

An interesting feature that characterises *Artist* is the extensive and peculiar use of recorded sounds, which often play a central role in the plot, thus presenting the listener with a reflection on the unique characteristics of the medium used by the play itself. For instance, the very first

flashback of the play takes the listener only two hours back in time, and the scene opens with another puzzling recording; it is Beauchamp's latest work of art, a "master-tape" reproducing a series of "unharmonious noises", which Donner – the one friend who is to be murdered shortly after – unceremoniously defines "rubbish" (Stoppard, 1996: 119). The use of the tape recorder is a recurring motif through the whole play: not only does it provide the only evidence of the mysterious murder, but further recorded ambiguous sounds continue to show up due to Beauchamp's obsession with the recording machine, often raising the problem of their interpretation. Thus, in a sense this play is quite an example of "metaradio", in terms of both content and structure. Indeed the protagonists discuss the reliability of Beauchamp's tapes: Martello claims his innocence arguing that "[...] the tape recorder speaks for itself. That is, of course, the point about tape recorders" (116), while his friend Beauchamp argues that the same tape would prove the very opposite. In addition Beauchamp strenuously defends his artistic work, affirming that his tapes have a far greater artistic value in comparison with Donner's paintings:

My tapes have greater mystery – they elude dogs, parrots, clerks and the greater part of mankind. If you played my tape on the radio, it would seem a meaningless noise, because it fulfils no expectations: people have been taught to expect certain kinds of insight but not others. The first duty of the artist is to capture the radio station.

(Stoppard, 1996: 120-121)

Moreover, Stoppard also plays with several sound devices in order to demonstrate how aural signs can be misleading. The play opens with a series of sounds, which are to be interpreted by the listener, in the same fashion as the characters themselves are trying to do:

(a) Donner dozing: an irregular droning noise. (b) Careful footsteps approach. The effect is stealthy. A broad creaks. (c) This wakes Donner, i. e. the droning stops in mid-beat. (d) The footsteps freeze. (e) Donner's voice, unalarmed: 'Ah! There you are...' (f) Two more quick steps, and then Thump! (g) Donner cries out. (h) Wood cracks as he falls through a balustrade. (i) He falls heavily down the stairs, with a final sickening thump when he hits the bottom. Silence.

After a pause, this entire sequence begins again...Droning...Footsteps...(as before).

(Stoppard, 1996: 113)

When the sequence starts again, we guess that it must be a recorded tape, which is being listened to in a loop, and which has recorded the last minutes of Donner's life, just before his apparent murder. This tape gag "contains within it the structural and conceptual germ of the entire play" (Kelly, 1991: 38), not only because the whole story revolves around the mystery of Donner's death, but also because it represents the first example of how Stoppard uses the blindness of the medium to his own advantage in order to prove that reality, like the tape recording Donner's fall, can be interpreted in different ways, and that truth is often difficult to grasp – even more so if we can base our assumptions exclusively on aural clues.

Another peculiar sound effect that Stoppard uses to play with the blindness of the audience can be found at the beginning of the fifth scene, the flashback set in 1920. The scene opens with the sound of Martello and Sophie climbing a set of stairs, while in the background we hear the noise of a ping-pong game:

*(Martello and Sophie are climbing stairs. Above them, behind closed doors, the sound of a ping-pong game in progress.)*

MARTELLO: Quite a climb, I'm afraid... Five more steps up now, and then turn left and that will be the top floor...  
SOPHIE: It must be a lovely big room...  
MARTELLO: We each have our own room, actually, but we share the drawing room – left – jolly good show.  
SOPHIE: I hear that ping-pong is quite the fad.  
MARTELLO: Is it really? – please allow me...

*(Door. Ping-pong loud. The rally ends with a winning shot – denoted by the hiatus where one has been led to expect, from the rhythm, contact with the 'other' bat.)*

SOPHIE: Good shot!  
MARTELLO: Gentlemen, I have the honour to present you Miss Farthingale.

*(The ping-pong resumes.)*

SOPHIE *(disappointed)*: Oh.

(Stoppard, 1996: 135)

The most important aspect of the scene and the key to its funniness is the fact that the audience shares Sophie's point of view, who has progressively lost her sight due to an illness, and now is blind. Similarly, the listener is equally blind because of the radio medium, and therefore Martello

counting the remaining step is functional to lead Sophie as well as the listener through the space. Thus at first we are lead to believe, as Sophie does, that Beauchamp and Donner are actually playing ping-pong, and that they are rather rudely ignoring the arrival of Sophie: in fact, it is Martello who again explains the situation, and only when he urges Beauchamp to “turn it off” (135), the listener can finally guess that they must have been listening to another of Beauchamp’s recorded tapes. The latter is ecstatic when he realises that due to her visual impairment, Sophie can probably be the first one to understand the concept behind his artistic experiments with the tape recorder:

SOPHIE: Is it for the blind?

BEAUCHAMP: Heavens, no. At least...the idea is you listen to the sounds with your eyes closed.

SOPHIE: It is very effective. I could have kept the score just by listening.

BEAUCHAMP: Yes!—you see—sorry!—I’m trying to liberate the visual *image* from the limitations of visual *art*. The idea is to create images—pictures—which are purely *mental*...I think I’m the first artist to work in this field.

(136-137)

Beauchamp’s last cue basically summarises exactly what radio drama ultimately does, namely creating mental images that are accessible to the listener through sound. In this sense, the whole play can be read as a reflection made by Stoppard on the limitations of the visual perception, yet the playwright succeeds in showing how aural signs can be equally misleading, and he does so through a series of gags like this one of the ping-pong match or the one about Beauchamp’s horse, which I will describe shortly.

From a semiotic perspective, the information conveyed through the stage directions in the aforementioned scenes become even more important than the actual spoken text: indeed also in stage drama stage directions are always important “indicators of the other signifying systems involved” (Esslin, 1987: 80), such as gestic and proxemical signs, that is, the actions or movements that must be performed by the actors. Esslin points out that as a general rule on stage “if there is a

contradiction between the words and the action, the action prevails” (83). Esslin cites the ending of *Waiting for Godot*, since it provides a well-known example of how paratextual information can be the key to the meaning of the performance: the play ends with Estragon’s exhortation “let’s go”, yet in fact the two protagonists do not move. In the case of *Artist*, the subsidiary text<sup>10</sup> assumes critical importance since it provides the description of the aural sign which is being commented upon by the characters, yet at the same time the playwright does not explain the situation completely – that is, the reason of Donner’s accidentally fall or the fact that the ping-pong noise is coming from a tape – with the consequent result that the listener and the reader alike are left with no more cues than the characters themselves.

Nevertheless, these are not the only examples of Stoppard’s employing ambiguous sound effects to play with the ‘blindness’ of the medium. Paradoxically, the main theme around which this radio play seems to revolve is that of sight and blindness, and by reminding the audience how easily our senses can be tricked into believing something to be true, Stoppard manages to draw a pointed and ironical portrait of the human condition (Guralnick, 1996: 30). The ‘horse gag’ in the central scene of *Artist* provides a perfect example of how Stoppard plays on the fact that in radio images are evoked solely through the combination of the words of the characters and sound effects. The scene I am taking into consideration is literally “central” in the sense that it represents the farthest recollection in time of the characters’ memory, when we find the three of them touring around the continent in 1914, as the war is about to break out:

*(Improbably, a convoy of rattletrap lorries roars past. Before their approach and their decline, nothing else is audible. At the end of it, Beauchamp’s horse is skittering about.)*

BEAUCHAMP: Steady, steady...good boy...

MARTELLO: Tell you what – give Mouse a go on the horse.

BEAUCHAMP: No. This horse only believes in me. What an animal! I’ve had nine

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<sup>10</sup> Esslin cites the definition provided by the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden, who differentiates the main text of a play, the ‘Haupttext’, from the ‘Nebentext’, the secondary text, which is composed by stage directions and footnotes made by the author (1987: 82).

horses at various times counting my first pony, but none has been remotely like this one... Absolutely no trouble, and he gives me a magical feeling of confidence. My spirits lift, the road slips by... What shall I call him? [...] Steady, steady...

DONNER: For God's sake, Beauchamp, will you get rid of that coconut!

BEAUCHAMP: Coconut! – not a bad name. And yet it lacks a certain something. Would Napoleon have called his horse Coconut?...Napoleon... not a bad name.

(Stoppard, 1996: 145-6)

From this banter we can finally deduce that Beauchamp's horse, which as listeners we had supposed to be real, does not really exist. Stoppard plays on the fact that the sound of hoof-beats is produced by clapping together the two halves of a hollowed-out coconut shell (Guralnick, 1996: 52), and he effectively tricks the audience into believing that the horse is real. This kind of effect cannot be duplicated on stage, as in the theatre it would be immediately clear that Beauchamp is only playing with coconut shells. Indeed this scene makes us realise that all images created by radio drama ultimately represent a paradox because, as Guralnick explains, "being only imagined, they are all of them false. Being faithful to our fancies, they are all of them true" (52).

Interestingly enough, the majority of radio sounds, like the trotting of Beauchamp's horse, as a matter of fact tends to be produced artificially, and therefore could hardly be considered as iconic, since the sounds we hear "often signify something other than the thing itself which produces the noise" (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 58). In this sense, since they are artificially produced, it would be more appropriate to consider such sounds as symbolic, despite seemingly having an iconic function. What is noteworthy in this scene is that Stoppard openly reveals and makes fun of a technique that is part of the established conventions of radio drama production, unabashedly admitting that there is no horse and thus breaking the dramatic illusion. For what concerns specifically the use of sounds on radio, the more common techniques used to artificially produce such sound effects have been described by radio theorists like Robert McLeish (1978) and Andrew Crisell (1994; 2000): to cite only a few examples provided by McLeish, the sound of a bathroom shower can evoke a pouring rain, cellophane being crumpled a building on fire, and an

umbrella being rapidly open and shut the flight of a pigeon (1978: 252).

Indeed, radio apparently seems to have the power of undermining the real nature of things, potentially turning umbrellas into pigeons and coconuts into horses (Crisell, 2000: 468). The fact is that “studio simulations of sounds can often sound more ‘real’ on the radio than the actual sounds themselves” (1994: 47), because paradoxically the real sound of something can often result unrecognisable on radio (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 59). The particular relationship that such sound effects establish between an aural sign and its signifier has been described in different ways by various scholars, and while Shingler and Wieringa describe these aural signs as symbolic since they are artificially produced (59), Crisell instead calls them “iconic indexes” (47), arguing that the clapping together of coconut shells can be considered an “image” of the sound made by a trotting horse. Whether they are artificially produced or recorded on location, sound effects can be said to have a symbolic meaning when they acquire an added signification in the play because of what they have conventionally come to be associated to over the years: they can be functional to indicating the time or the setting of a scene – for instance the crowing of a cock is a symbol for the beginning of the day, and birdsong for outdoors or the countryside – or to convey a specific atmosphere – the hooting of an owl symbolises the night, but it is also associated with mystery and the supernatural (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 59).

On the other hand, while the invisibility of radio can enable “sounds effect to evoke far more than what actually produces them [...] and our imaginations can transform a most mundane noise in something quite fantastic” (59), sounds on radio necessarily require textual pointing in order to acquire a precise meaning. Their narrative significance is generally established through the dialogue of the characters (60): Crisell rightly points out that sounds, especially in an exclusively aural medium, can be polysemous (1994: 48), consequently we need to listen to the characters’ words in order to understand if for instance the slamming of a door means that someone has left or arrived on the scene.

What is surprising in Stoppard's case is that in the aforementioned scene of *Artist* the playwright actually "plays fair" (Hunter, 1982: 70), leaving several clues to the truth in the dialogue, yet we still tend to trust what we hear rather than what the protagonist subtly says:

BEAUCHAMP: I know! —I'll call him Beauchamp's Tenth Horse!—He will be the *phantom* cavalry that turns the war—now you see him, now you don't—he strikes, and is gone, his neigh lost on the wind, he *leaves no hoofprints*; there is *only the sound* of his hooves on the empty road—He's *not physical*!—He's not metaphysical!—He's *pataphysical*!—apocalyptic, clipcloptic, Beauchamp's Tenth!—Here it comes—!!

(Stoppard, 1996: 147. Italics mine)

Furthermore, previously the characters had openly stated that they were going on "a *walking tour*" (144), yet, despite the clues that can be found in Beauchamp's lines, the audience is ready to believe that the horse is there: the reason for this is probably because the audience is "too well trained in the convention" of the medium (Hunter, 1982: 71), and not alert enough to reason and question what in reality are ambiguous signs. As a result, we are able to detect this trick of "radio magic" (Guralnick, 1996: 52) only when Donner orders Beauchamp to "get rid of that coconut" (Stoppard, 1996: 146). Indeed "the ear will believe what is led to believe" (Crisell, 1994: 48), and Stoppard uses every tool at his disposal to build such surreal and often comic situations out of thin air, occasionally leading the listener to acknowledge and laugh at the limits of his own perception.

### 2.5 - 'Back' to the ending: the characters trapped in a loop

In the end, the final scene of the play takes the listener back to the starting point: Beauchamp and Martello are trying to analyse once again all the facts they know about Donner's death, and during the whole time we can distinctly hear the sound of a buzzing fly, which could also be heard earlier in several points:

BEAUCHAMP: Hang on...

(Fly.) That fly has been driving me mad. Where is she?  
MARTELLO: Somewhere over there...  
BEAUCHAMP: Right.

*The original loop of the TAPE is hereby reproduced:*

- (a) Fly droning.
- (b) Careful footsteps approach. A board creaks.
- (c) The fly settles.
- (d) BEAUCHAMP halts.
- (e) BEAUCHAMP: 'Ah! There you are.'
- (f) Two more quick steps and then: Thump!

BEAUCHAMP: Got him!  
(Laugh shortly.) 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the  
Gods: they kill us for their sport.'  
Now then.

(Stoppard, 1996: 156)

Through the repetition of the same tape we have heard at the beginning of the play, Stoppard solves the mystery of Donner death: the painter must have fallen down the stairs in the similar attempt of killing an annoying fly. Ironically, Beauchamp quotes aloud Gloucester's words, and indeed the listener up until now has shared the same perspective of the Shakespearian character, that of a blinded man, "atop an imaginary cliff, listening to stories in the dark" (Kelly, 1991: 41). The characters are symbolically trapped by the loop of Beauchamp's tape, as well as by the temporal circularity of the narrative, which in the end probably grants the listener a greater degree of understanding than that reached by the characters themselves, since we are left with the doubt of whether or not the two artists recognised the true reason of Donner's death.

The intricacy of *Artist's* narrative structure shows how Stoppard has been able to create quite a complex play, despite having at his disposal solely his extraordinary skill at building thrilling dialogues and his witty use of sounds effects. This play in a way anticipates a later stage success of Stoppard, *Travesties* (1974), which revolves around the same principal theme of the value and meaning of art, offering "a critique of the avant-garde dismissal of artistic material and skill" (Kelly, 1991: 42). Another trait that *Artist* and *Travesties* seem to have in common is that both plays present a segmented narrative structure, yet in the case of the latter this is due to the fact that

the story is presented through the recollections of Henry Carr, a character whose bad memory disrupts the linearity of the story, to the point of having a scene repeat itself several times (Stoppard, 1993: 11), not unlike Beauchamp's tape loop. Nevertheless, although *Travesties* is generally considered a more mature play, I think that *Artist* has the added artistic value of being a play especially attuned to its medium: dealing directly with the issue of perception, it encourages a poignant reflection on the very genre of radio drama, and on his most characteristic feature, that of being "invisible". Indeed radio appears to be a medium particularly suited to explore the issues of blindness and the relativity of perception, a topic which shall be discussed more in detail in chapter four.

### ***Where Are They Now?***

#### *2.6 - Jumping forward and backward in time*

*Where Are They Now?* (1970) is a 30-minute long play, shorter and less elaborate in comparison with *Artist*. It aired a couple of years before, and it represents one of Stoppard's first attempts at experimenting with a non-linear temporal structure, a feature that the playwright would later expand both in *Artist* and on the stage in *Travesties* (Kelly, 1991: 38). The subject of the play is an Old Boys' annual reunion dinner for the graduates of Hove, an English preparatory school, where the three now old friends Brindley, Marks and Gale spent the days of their youth, under the supervision of the Headmaster, Mr Dobson, and the French teacher Mr Jenkins. The most characteristic feature of the play is that it is "set in two inter-cut locations" (Stoppard, 1996: 89): the action shifts continuously from the present Old Boys' dinner, taking place in 1969, to a past School Dinner in 1945.

Basically we have two parallel storylines, and the focus shifts between the two temporal settings. What is peculiar in these time shifts is that they occur "without using any of the familiar

grammar of fading down and fading up” (89). The playwright expressly underlines this choice in an introductory note to the play, yet he claims that the points where the location changes are “self-evident”, which they effectively are. Despite breaking common dramatic conventions, the shifts are always perfectly perceivable due to the drastic change in the characters’ voices, which go from the gruff and deep tone of old men to the shrill and juvenile one of children. Stoppard does not specify the reason behind this artistic choice; Kelly suggests that it is determined by Stoppard’s wish to “cut the unnecessary break in illusion if it can be accomplished by language or voice”, and that as a result it creates “an edge of surprise” as well as intensifying the action (1991: 36). As I see it, my guess would be that Stoppard wishes to present the events of the past from an impartial point of view, and not as filtrated by the memory of one specific character. Thus, it is possible to stress the contrast between the Old Boys’ reminiscences and how things actually were during their schooldays, often with a comic effect.

However, the beginning of the play can result somewhat tricky to the ear, and we need to listen through at least a couple of scenes in order to understand what is going on. As the radio writer Mike Harris points out, the very beginning of a radio play is always of fundamental importance for the following reason: “audiences can’t see actors and locations in Radio Drama, so it’s absolutely essential to answer three questions within a few lines of the start of nearly every scene: Where are we? Who’s there? What’s going on?” (2007: 9). In this case, establishing “who is there” is apparently the most challenging task. As a matter of fact, the entire plot plays with the possible confusion of identity between the various characters, who used different nicknames back in school:

DOBSON: Oh yes!—Yes, yes—Gale, Brindley and Marks, we used to call you the—what was it?—the Three Musketeers, Chico...no, that can’t be right...

JENKINS: *(quietly)* I told you he’s past it.

BRINDLEY: *(laughing)* No, no—it was the Three Marx Brothers—Groucho, Chico and...

DOBSON: Harpo. Exactly.

(Stoppard, 1996: 101)

It is not until late in the play that we learn who is who, and while it is possible to understand that Brindley is “Chico” in the first of the play’s four flashbacks (91), it is only towards the end that it is possible to clear the dubious identity of the other two, and be sure that Marks and Gale are respectively “Harpo” and “Groucho”. Yet, there is also another comic revelation at the very end of the play about the identity of Mr Jenkins, who firstly is mistaken for the deceased French teacher of the Old Boys, and then for another namesake ex-student: the reason why Mr. Jenkins does not seem to be able to remember much at all is that he has mistaken Hove’s reunion for the dinner of Oakleigh House, another group who is having dinner in another room of the same building (106).

This intentional confusion of identities is created through different elements. Firstly, it is difficult “to discriminate between the voices of characters who have similar tonal value, [...] especially so when using young children” (Ferrington, 1993). Indeed the voices of the characters are not easily distinguishable, particularly in the first scenes. Alan Back underlines the importance of the first utterances of the characters in a radio play, which would correspond to the characters’ entrance on the stage (1985: 17). In *Where Are They Now?* the first line of each character flows rapidly in the chaotic conversation of young boys around a dinner table, consequently the indexical information that is usually immediately carried by the voice of the characters – such as their personality or attitude, which can be suggested by their accent and speech style – get somewhat lost in the quick pace of the dialogue.

Secondly, as mentioned before, the use of nicknames appears to further complicate things, and until we approach the end we cannot be completely sure of who is who. In addition, another puzzling fact is that one of the three Old Boys, Gale, is supposed to be attending the dinner alongside the others, yet he does not speak until the final scenes of the play. This is not something that is likely to happen in radio drama, because one of the basic rules of radio production states that “no character who is present in a scene can stay silent for long, for if not regularly heard or referred to he ‘disappears’ ” (Crisell, 1994: 144). Unlike the stage, radio cannot allow the presence of silent

characters in a scene for long, because a blind medium cannot use visual signs to convey their presence. Moreover, a radio writer must take into account that the ear has a comparatively short-term memory, and that “it’s harder to remember words and phrases than images” (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 37); therefore the listener needs to be reminded of the presence of a character through his lines. An additional side effect of Gale’s silence is that we do not know much about his personality, and this makes it even more complicated to match him with the personality of one of the boys that we hear speaking in the flashbacks. The only information about him is provided by the words of the other characters attending the dinner, who try to include Gale into the conversation, with little success on their part:

DOBSON: And what about Mr. Gale here? I’ve often wondered what became of you.

BRINDLEY: What! You don’t read the right paper! Our friend Gale is a journalist of considerable repute—a crusading journalist, I think one might call you, eh Gale?

DOBSON: Oh, I’m very sorry. But your failure to contribute to the Magazine’s ‘Where Are They Now?’ page does not leave you entirely blameless, Gale. Nevertheless, it is very good to see you after so many years. And what do you crusade for?

*(Small pause)*

BRINDLEY: Mr. Gale has recently returned from Lagos.

DOBSON: Really? How very interesting! What is happening on the Ivory Coast nowadays?

*(A small embarrassed silence)*

MARKS: I say, are you going to keep that bottle to yourself Gale? It’s pretty poor Chablis but I’ll have another crack at it. Thanks very much...Talking of Jankins, do you remember his famous Bruiser?

(Stoppard, 1996: 94)

As a matter of fact, the only signs of Gale’s presence are the silences that we hear instead of his replies to the other characters’ questions. In a way this kind of technique used by Stoppard shows us that even non-verbal signs can indeed carry meaning, and that unexpectedly they can perform an important function in this particular aural medium.

Another aspect of this play that is worth attention is the way Stoppard manages to link the two temporal dimensions of the present and the past in a continuous flow, yet still preserving a clear distinction between the different scenes. The playwright achieves this unique effect through the choice of the words of the dialogue, in which we often find a term used towards the end of the last scene repeated in the first cues of the following one (pp. 92, 98). A different method used to link the scenes together is that of preserving an apparent continuity of meaning, so that the first cues of the next scene seems to be replying to the last statement of the previous one:

DOBSON: Crawford seems to be embarrassed. Perhaps he thinks I didn't know? I can't think why—after all, Crawford, you were aware, were you not, that you were sometimes known as Crackers?

MARKS: Crakers!

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CRAWFORD: (*viciously*) Who said that?

(*Silence*)

CRAWFORD: Marks?!

YOUNG MARKS: (*scared*) It wasn't me, Crawford.

(Stoppard, 1996: 101-102)

This technique confers unity to the story and allows it to flow smoothly without any disruption, despite the continuous shift back and forth in time and the change of location; besides, like in this case, it is also used to achieve a humorous effect and get a laugh out of the audience, highlighting how similar the two situations seem to be although years have passed and the characters have supposedly grown out of boyish jokes.

The overall effect of the play surely benefits from the characteristics of its medium in more than one way. From the point of view of its structure, not only does radio offer the “opportunity for rapid juxtaposition of utterly different scenes or times by inter-cutting past and present” (Hunter, 1982: 68), but it also enhances the confusion between the identities of the schoolboys and their

adult selves. Stoppard delicately uses the ambiguity made possible by radio (68) to build a funny story about mistaken identities and the recollections of three old friends of their schooldays. *Where Are They Now?* also illustrates “the process by which one recollects and evaluates the past” (Kelly, 1991: 37), a subject that the author will expand further in his later plays. Indeed in a way Stoppard demonstrates that “narrating from memory can be as unreliable as interpreting sound” (37), since one is often influenced by his own experience. While Mark’s and Brindley’s memories of their schooldays are quite rosy-tinted, Gale speaks bitterly about the past and of how his hopes of happiness have been crushed growing up. Probably both their memories are biased in opposite ways, and we cannot possibly know which version of the truth would be more reliable. However, Stoppard decides to surprise the listener with an unexpected twist at the very end of the play, when the last line of the song of the school, “In happy days at Hove!”, cross-fades into the past, and we hear the sound of children playing some game together, and among the shouting and laughing we hear the name of young Gale being called by his friends; the note of the author states that “it is a day he [Gale] has forgotten, but clearly he was very happy” (Stoppard, 1996: 107).

### *2.7 - Evoking different places through sound*

As we have seen in the previous paragraphs, radio is a medium that can grant a large range of possibilities in terms of altering the temporal linearity of the dramatic plot, but this flexibility is not solely confined to the dimension of time; indeed radio has proved to be the perfect medium to shape space and places out of thin air, through the skilful use of the microphone and of sound effects.

M. Esslin praises radio’s nature as an “immaterial medium not definitely located in space, able to move between dream and reality, the inner world of the mind and the outer world of concrete objects” (cited in Crisell, 1994: 157). Yet, many critics share the opinion that in the case of radio drama, it is time, and not space, which should be considered its major structuring agent.

Crisell argues that this is due to the fact that “in radio all the signs are auditory” (1994: 42), and therefore they are conveyed in time rather than through space. One distinguishing feature of radio programmes is that they seem to “exist solely in terms of time” since we can say that once they are heard they literally disappear, leaving no trace of their passage (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 37). This evanescent quality of the medium has been commented also by Goffman, who stressed the fact that “radio non-visual signs exist in time and not in space”, and therefore they are “constantly threatened by silence, which itself portends nonexistence on the medium” (Crisell, 2000: 467). Apparently, space is generally associated more to visual signs, and since radio plays can convey their meaning exclusively through non-visual signs, this has induced critics to claim that we cannot speak of a proper space dimension in radio drama, but that such a form of sound signification might be articulated uniquely along a temporal axe.

Nevertheless, like any other kind of drama, radio plays do have a performance space. Albeit not directly visible to the spectator like in a theatre or on the screen, the dramatic performance is not something abstract, and it does take place somewhere. In this sense, we could take into consideration two main different performance spaces that characterise radio drama: that is, the studio where the play is recorded, and the listener’s head, in which the dramatic action of the play takes shape thanks to the listener’s imagination. In this respect, we cannot say that radio drama is devoid of a spatial dimension, indeed this is simply expressed through a different set of conventions, and consequently might not always be presently perceivable.

A. Beck explains that, according to the terminology adopted by the BBC production, radio plays are composed of “sound pictures”, each of which requires a set to be built in the recording studio, especially positioning microphones, screens and other necessary equipment such as a door, steps or other props mentioned in the script; all this is necessary because each scene or “sound picture” has a specific perspective and an acoustic (Beck, 1998), which need to be recreated by the technicians and operators through a set in the recording studio in order to be possible for it to be

perceived by the listener. The word “perspective” is one of the terms used in radio terminology “to designate the spatial quality of sound” (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 56), or in other words to indicate “where the characters are in physical relation to each other throughout the play” (Harris, 2007), and it is recreated through the movements and the positions of the microphone. As Harris points out, the mike in radio drama covers a function analogous to that of the camera in film: the distance of the actors from the mike establishes the different kind of interaction in which the characters are engaged, and any variation of that distance suggests a movement of the character through the space. For instance an actor coming into a location will be approaching the mike, and vice versa, while if we are to follow a character who is supposedly going somewhere the mike will stay close to the actor while he simulates movement for example by walking on the spot or climbing a set of steps.

One of the most important functions of noises and sound effects in radio drama is that they can act as *environmental indicators*, that is, they can be used to depict a scene or a given setting acoustically; conventionally, for instance, birdsong indicates that a scene is taking place outdoors, or possibly in the countryside. At the same time, sounds can also be used as *spatial indicators*: they often disclose information on the proxemics and the kinesics of a scene, that is, the physical distance between the characters and their movements in relation to one another and to the listener (Crisell, 1994: 146-147). According to Drakakis, what we call sound effects, and basically all the non-verbal signs in radio drama, would constitute a real “system of sound signs”, which can be intelligible thanks to a set of conventions shared by the broadcaster and the listener (1981: 30), so that the latter immediately understands that the fading out of the voice of a character either signifies his exit from the scene or the end of the scene itself. In addition, sounds can indirectly provide spatial indications for the domestic space, helping the listener to distinguish one kind of room from another through the “recognisable sounds of familiar everyday objects”, which according to Shingler and Wieringa provide the “props” of radio (1998: 57).

G. Ferrington uses the term “soundscape environment” (1993) to indicate an audio work’s setting, which can be evoked solely through such aural signs, thus providing the listener with the sense of a place and the context for the scene he is listening to. The author also illustrates the challenge of creating such acoustical spaces: to create the illusion of a space, the director needs to work on the distance of the actors from the microphone, and he might use selective focus in order to decide where to direct the attention of the listener, and distinguish relevant conversations from background noise. Another important element that contributes to build the listener’s perception of space is the use of narrative references, that is, any verbal elements in the dialogue – such as the deictic words like ‘here’ and ‘there’ – that might indicate the movements of the characters in the dramatic space and in relation to one another.

The opening scene of Stoppard’s radio play *Albert’s Bridge* provides a concrete example of what I have described until now. As Hunter points out, this play epitomizes radio’s ability “to take us into unlikely places, and many of them, very quickly” (1982: 67): overall the action shifts from the heights of Clifton Bridge, which Albert is painting, to the ground, where we witness the discussions of the Bridge Committee and Albert’s domestic life. The first scene of the play opens with the distinct background noise of a strong howling wind, which combined to the information provided by the narrator, establishes that the scene is set “high up in the gutters of Clifton Bay railway bridge, in the north of England”<sup>11</sup>. What is interesting about this scene, is its “original and precise manipulation of auditory effect” (Kelly, 1991: 35) which are functional to suggesting the spatial arrangement of the four painters who are busy painting the bridge:

*Fade up bridge, with painting on mike. Four men are painting a big girdered railway bridge. They are spaced vertically, in ascending order: BOB, CHARLIE, DAD, ALBERT. To begin with, the mike is on ALBERT’s level, the top.*

BOB:           *(the most distant)* Char-lee!

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<sup>11</sup> Here I am referring to the second version of the play, the broadcast remade in 1988, directed by David Hitchinson and starring Paul Copley in the role of Albert.

CHARLIE: *(less distant)* Hel-lo!  
BOB: Right, Charlie?  
CHARLIE: Right! Comin' down!...Hey, Dad!  
DAD: *(an older man, not very distant)* Hel-lo!  
CHARLIE: Bob 'n' me is done down here!  
DAD: Right!  
CHARLIE: Have you done?  
DAD: Comin' down!...Albert! Al-bert!  
CHARLIE: *(more distant)* Albert!  
BOB: *(more distant)* Al-bert!  
ALBERT: *(very close, crooning softly, tunelessly amid various tunes while painting)*  
How high the moon in June?  
how blue the moon when it's high noon  
[...]

(Stoppard, 1996: 53)

The four painters have come to the end of their day of work on the bridge, and they are calling to one another to begin their descent to the ground. As specified in the note, Stoppard decides to position the mike, and consequently the focus of the listener, on Albert's level, but the first man to speak is the one placed furthest from Albert and closer to the ground, so we can hear his voice very distant, and almost carried away by the noise of the wind. The second man to speak is the one placed up above the first one, and the same goes for the third man. Their vertical spatial disposition is not only conveyed by the varying intensity of the voices of the characters, but also by the painters' verbal references, such as "coming down" or "down here", which confirm the fact that they must be positioned one above the other. Such details create "the auditory effect of climbing the steel member, painter by painter" (Kelly, 1991: 35), until we reach the highest point, the one closer to the mike, where we find an happily self-absorbed Albert who is singing to himself while completing his task.

One last major difference concerning the movement within the dramatic space that must be taken into account when writing a script for the radio is that we cannot have characters moving silently on the scene. While in theatre "pure movement can, without a spoken text, powerfully

generate meaning” (Esslin, 1987: 68), on radio the signifying power of the movement in space – which is defined “proxemics” in semiotic jargon – is limited by the fact that any movement needs to be followed by some verbal sign, in order for it to become “visible” to the listener. On radio the characters must always “travel on line” (Beck, 1998), because if they make any move without speaking too the meaning of their action cannot be conveyed to the listener. For instance in *Artist*, when Sophie is being introduced to Beauchamp and Donner, Martello rebukes his two friends saying “there’s no point in sticking out your hands like that. Miss Farthingale is blind” (Stoppard, 1996: 136); the audience, who is as blind as Sophie, is informed of the gesture of the two characters through Martello’s words, which suggest that Beauchamp and Donner must have been awkwardly sticking out their hands waiting for Sophie to shake them.

### ***The Dissolution of Dominic Boot***

*The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* is the very first play written by Stoppard for the radio in 1964, and it consists of a short fifteen-minute piece for the BBC series “Just Before Midnight”. The protagonist of the play is a rather comical character, who “rushes about in a taxi, trying in vain to scare up the money to pay off his ever-mounting fare” (Guralnick, 2001: 69). Dominic tries very hard to please his demanding fiancée Vivian, but his efforts seem to go unnoticed, yet even though he ends up penniless, Dominic is determined to conceal his poverty, and find a way to pay the taxi fare. Consequently, during the entire play the young accountant asks the taxi driver to make several stops, in the hope of cashing in old debts or convincing one of his parents to loan him the money. Despite his efforts, the taxi fare continues to rise, and Dominic is inevitably bound to fail in his race against time: in the end, he loses his job as well as his girlfriend, and is left wearing his pyjamas,

the only piece of clothing he has left after having been forced to trade even his suit in order to repay the taxi driver.

In *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot*, Stoppard exploits radio's capacity to accomplish numerous changes of scenes through the use of a single word or sound effect. As remarked by Kelly, "the picaresque structure of the plot suits the spatial freedom of the medium" (1991: 32), which proves to be perfect for such a dynamic and quick-paced story. The play also deals with the theme of time, effectively confirming the old saying that "time is money": during the whole play the passing of time is marked by Dominic's frantic counting how much money he has left in his pocket.

In only fifteen minutes, we have seventeen different scenes, which rapidly cut from the interior of the taxi to the various locations where Dominic stops to ask for money. These quick changes of scenes are conveyed through very short pauses, and most times the listener can understand what the new setting is thanks to textual pointing in the dialogue, when Dominic tells the driver their new destination. Another element that helps the listener to identify the various settings is the non-verbal code of those sounds, generally referred to as "atmos", which characterise the "atmospheric or ambient noise" (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 55) of specific places: for instance we know straight away that Dominic has entered a bank or his office because we can hear in the background the noise of typing on writing machines and the shuffling of papers, while similarly we can guess when he is standing outside on the pavement because of the noise of traffic. We tend not to perceive consciously this kind of subtle noise on radio, yet it has a relevant function since it makes possible to convey important information about the setting without having to resort to using verbal pointers, a technique which, if used too often, might result redundant and make the speech sound less realistic.

An interesting fact about *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* is that it was adapted for television a few years later in 1969. Stoppard himself adapted the script, and it turned into a fifty-minute

American production entitled *The Engagement*. However, Stoppard did not seem entirely satisfied with the result. In an interview about the film, the author declared that theatre and radio had probably spoiled him for film (Guralnick, 2001: 78), and that he was “definitely frightened” of shooting a film based on his previous radio play. On that occasion, he compared the two media, describing plays as “something that happens behind closed doors between consenting adults”, while film in comparison would be more similar to “a kind of three-ring circus”, in which the director has the leading role, while the screenwriter is nothing more than the clown “who comes on afterward and cleans up the mess” (78). Stoppard’s sceptic attitude about film appears to be due to the fact that in the rather complex mechanism of film productions often the writer has little say in the matter, unlike in theatre where the writer has better chances to convey the audience what he means.

All things considered, despite having quite a simple plot and being a relatively short play in comparison to the rest of Stoppard’s output for the radio, *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* presents a humorous, paradoxical short story which in a way underlines the economical nature of the value that we confer to time; it is not surprising that the subject of the play is better suited to the medium of radio, which allows a swift and continuous change of locations, thus perfectly conveying to the audience the feeling of the race against time experienced by the unlucky protagonist.

### ***In The Native State***

A further play that presents a peculiar structure in terms of temporal and spatial setting is undoubtedly Stoppard’s 1991 radio piece, *In The Native State*. The play is among the most elaborate creations of Stoppard for the radio, and it touches upon some much-debated postcolonial subjects, such as the issue of British colonialism and the differences between two different cultures. However, I shall further discuss the central themes of this radio play and the relationship with its stage adaptation, *Indian Ink*, in the last chapter, while now I am going to focus my attention

exclusively on the structure of the play and on the techniques employed by Stoppard to convey such a harmonious portrait of two opposing realities.

*In The Native State* is about the story of Flora Crewe, a poet who decides to travel to the fictional native state of Jummapur in 1930, where she meets the Indian painter Nirad Das, a local artist who admires her work and wishes to be granted the honour of painting her portrait. Yet, he is not the only man to show his interest for Flora, who soon becomes the centre of the attention of the British military officer David Durance, as well as of the local Rajah. At the same time, there is also another parallel plot, set in England sixty years later, which is focused on the meeting between Das's son Anish and Flora's younger sister, Mrs Swan, who is now an elderly woman. The reason of their encounter is that Anish has recognised his father's painting on the cover of a published volume of Flora's letters, and he wishes to know more about the mysterious relationship that has bound his father and Mrs Swan's sister, of whom he has inherited another unofficial portrait made by Das, a nude.

In this case, the double setting of the story is specified both in a note of the author in the printed edition, and by the narrator introducing the broadcast: both clearly state that "the play is set in two places and periods" (Stoppard, 1996: 198), namely in India in 1930 and in England in the present day, that is, in the early 1990s. The scenes of the play alternate between the two settings and periods, in a pattern that is immediately evident in the printed version of the text, but which soon becomes recognisable also for the listener. *In The Native State* is indeed a typical example of how in radio drama spaces that in reality are miles apart can be "simultaneously present, or to succeed each other within seconds" (Esslin, 1987: 40).

The use of sound effects is particularly important here to mark the difference between the two specific environments. The atmospheric sounds of the first scene of the play are described into detail by Stoppard, and are the very first thing that we hear before the beginning of Flora's monologue:

*The verandah of a guesthouse. Jummapur would be a considerable town, but the guesthouse is conceived as being set somewhat on his own; the ambient sound would not be urban. There are references to monkeys, parrots, dogs, chickens. The surround would be sandy, not metalled.*

FLORA:           *(interior voice)*  
‘Yes, I am in heat like a bride in a bath,  
without secrets, soaked in heated air  
that liquefies to the touch and floods,  
shortening the breath, yes,  
I am discovered, heat has found me out,  
a stain that stops at nothing,  
not the squeezed gates of soft gutters,  
it brims as I shift,  
it webs my fingers round my pen,  
yes, think of a woman in a blue dress  
sat on a straight-backed chair at a plain table  
on the verandah of a guesthouse,  
writing about the weather.  
[...]

(Stoppard, 1996: 199)

The detailed description of the sound environment sets the scene in some extra-urban location, yet the somewhat unfamiliar calls of monkeys and parrots specifically define the setting as an exotic and faraway place. The first voice that we hear is that of the protagonist, but while reading the text it is immediately evident that we are reading Flora’s thoughts, when we listen to the play we realise this only when her musings get interrupted by Das’s question, asking Flora if she would like to take a break from posing. An interesting detail is that the author subtly provides a description of the scene through the words of Flora’s poem: she pictures herself as a woman wearing a blue dress, sitting in a veranda somewhere with a torrid climate, working on her writing while being portrayed by a painter. One of the rules of radio drama is that the only possible descriptions of a setting or a person must be conveyed through the speech of one or more characters, yet here Stoppard manages to find a new way to present the listener with the aural equivalent of what in cinematic terms would be called an establishing shot: in a few lines, we get a first impression of where the scene is located and of what the protagonist looks like, and all this is expressed through the suggestive style of poetry.

The following scene opens in a different location, and once again the use of sound effects helps to contextualise the situation. Although the scene seems to start in the middle of an ongoing conversation, we are able to understand by bits of the dialogue that we are witnessing the encounter between the son of the Indian artist who was painting Flora's portrait in the previous scene, and an elderly woman, who we learn to be Flora's sister. The sound of china gives away that Mrs Swan is serving tea at her house, a fact that in addition to the woman's accent and manners suggests that the action takes place somewhere in England, unlike the previous scene. Nevertheless, at the end of the scene the shift in time and setting is once again marked by a brief pause in the dialogue, yet the silence is filled with the chirping of crickets and other similar noises that were already heard at the beginning of the first scene.

One consequence of this kind of structure and of the alternation between the two parallel plots is that both seem to shed some light on the other, so that we get a clearer view of the general picture of the events as we proceed through the play; in a way the demarcation between past and present is not as clear as in other plays, like for instance *Where Are They Now?*. The result is a unique blend between the two time dimensions, which gets even more articulate in the ninth scene. The scene is one of those set in India, and it opens with Flora apparently reading out aloud a letter that she is writing to her sister. Curiously enough Stoppard is able to turn the letter, which could be expressed through a kind of monologue, into quite an intricate dialogue filled with voices, although we always share Flora's perspective on the narrated events. The first few lines indeed refer to the first scene of the play, which is described by Flora's point of view: she confesses to be posing "in [her] cornflower dress sitting writing on a verandah" (226) while writing the letter, although the painter believes her to be working on her poems. Flora's account is interrupted several times, often amid a sentence, by a male voice, belonging to Mr Pike, who is the editor of her collection of letters. Just in the previous scene, Mrs Swan had commented on how annoying she found Mr Pike's footnotes, constantly interrupting the text of her sister's letter. Mrs Swan's statement "I hear Mr Pike's voice

every time I go to the bits at the bottom of the page [...] telling you things you already know or don't need to know at the moment" (217) is directly exemplified in the ninth scene, thus as a result we are effectively caught between different time dimensions: on the one hand we have Flora's account in Jummapur in 1930, while on the other we are constantly brought back to the present by Mr Pike verbose comments.

However, the structure of the scene soon changes so that we have a sort of flashback of the events that Flora is narrating. In a rather extensive note Stoppard explains how the sound effects should be used to illustrate Flora's letter: the appropriate "physical ambience" should be heard when "the letter takes us to an event", yet at the same time the appropriate background noises – the scratching of her pen on the paper, insects, etc. – should be heard to emphasise the "immediate presence" of Flora writing her letter on the veranda (227). Thus overall not only we have the interference of the present through Mr Pike's comments, but also the recollection of past events which took place in Jummapur before Flora started to write her letter. A similar structure is repeated in the thirteenth and fourteenth scenes, which are both again set in India. Through the same combination of recollections and actual events, another letter leads the listener through Flora's visit at the Club and her horseback trip with Captain Durance. A third letter in the following scene narrates instead in a similar fashion Flora's encounter with the Rajah of Jummapur, the whole scene constantly switching between the dialogue of Flora and the Rajah and the indirect narration of Flora's letter, which is occasionally interrupted by Mr Pike's footnotes.

All in all, *In The Native State* presents an extremely varying structure, in terms of both temporal and spatial setting. In this play Stoppard seems to be determined to explore all the narrative possibilities offered by the medium, with the result of an enthralling story which gets gradually unfolded to the listener through a variety of different points of view and narrative modes.

## 2.8 - Conclusion

Different theories and aesthetics of drama have always devoted special attention to the matters of dramatic space and time, which have been discussed in texts as early as Aristotle's *Poetics* (Esslin, 1987: 42). In this chapter I have endeavoured to show through different examples taken from Stoppard's plays how radio is a medium that offers a great flexibility in terms of both spatial and temporal dimensions. Overall, in his radio plays Stoppard frequently tends to ignore the Aristotelian rules of unity of space and time, on the contrary he employs all the techniques at his disposal to experiment with the medium and build original and peculiar temporal structures, as well as conjure up multiple fictional spaces. Stoppard's plays also prove that radio drama cannot be considered a genre which unfolds exclusively through time: through a skilful use of sound effects combined with the ability to master radio recording techniques, it is possible to evoke real "soundscape environments", and shape the dramatic space in order to meet the necessities of any plot-line, no matter how extravagant it may be. Yet, in an exclusively aural medium like radio, auditory signs alone might not be sufficient to convey precise information to the audience. Thus, also verbal signs acquire a fundamental importance, and narrative references are an important tool to indicate not only spatial location and time shifts, but they also disclose essential information on the proxemics and the kinesics of the scenes. In conclusion, radio drama is characterised by a remarkable flexibility in terms of both temporal and spatial setting, thus offering extraordinary possibilities to the playwright, since radio literally knows no boundaries but the imagination of the listener.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Theatre of the Mind

#### 3.1 - *Radio: a visual medium?*

As has been repeatedly pointed out so far, the chief distinctive quality of radio as a dramatic medium is its “blindness”. Yet, although radio is frequently referred to as “the blind medium”, many critics do not agree with this particular kind of definition, arguing that the use of the term blindness would suggest a sort of impairment or disability of the medium itself (Crook, 1999: 62). For this reason, Shingler seems to prefer to speak of radio’s lack of visuals in terms of “invisibility”, a word endowed with a more positive connotation, suggesting that the lack of visuals can be a positive attribute to be exploited rather than a deficiency to overcome (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 74).

Despite the absence of a visual dimension, radio has frequently been described as a “powerfully visual” medium (Guralnick, 1996: xii) because, as Shingler points out, “the realisation of the drama takes place inside our heads, as our imaginations set to work on picturing the scene” (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 92). The imagination of the listener takes part actively in the dramatic event, supplying the visual equivalent for the auditory signs that are used in the play. In this sense, each individual listener necessarily has a different and unique imaginary experience, determined both by the auditory signs perceived and by his own life experiences (Ferrington, 1993): while the whole audience may be listening to the same play, and therefore exactly to the same sounds, each listener visualises in his mind a different and personal image, drawing on his own memory and experience, which necessarily differ from that of the other members of the audience

(Drakakis, 1981: 24). Thus, to a certain extent the relationship between signs and their signifiers depends on the audience, since “it is the spectator’s imagination that produces the final effect, the ultimate meaning” of the play (Esslin, 1987: 134).

Guralnick remarks that since this particular dramatic genre requires the audience to actively use their imagination, then listening to radio drama might be regarded as a way “to plumb one’s own conscience” (1996: 99), as well as that of the characters, since a common device frequently used by radio dramatists is that of entering the characters’ consciousness, thus granting the audience direct access to their thoughts. In consideration of this fact, it is not surprising that radio plays are often described as dealing with the “theatre of the mind” (Crisell, 2000: 470), a definition recurring throughout the majority of the publications on radio drama.

One of the advantages of radio is that, due to its lack of a visual dimension, it is a medium particularly suited to move between the “world of the mind and the outer world of concrete objects”<sup>12</sup>: indeed radio drama can imitate the flexibility of the human mind, employing some techniques which have come to be part of the grammar of radio plays, such as soliloquies, flashbacks and the cross-cutting of scenes (Drakakis, 1981: 21). In an attempt to provide a definition of the unique nature of radio drama, Tim Crook takes notice of the importance of the role of the mind, stating that this dramatic genre “is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension” (1999: 8). The author, who is one of those critics passionately arguing against describing radio as a blind medium, also questions the concept of “theatre of the mind”: “so much stress has been placed on the mind’s eye or the image generated by the mind, that an essential feature of human experience in drama – ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’ – has been overlooked” (61). Crook argues that the most essential quality of radio drama would be its ability to powerfully convey the feelings and emotions of the characters to the listener, consequently he suggests that the “theatre of the mind” should be more appropriately called the

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<sup>12</sup> M. Esslin, cited in Crisell (1994: 157).

“theatre of the gut” (61), because of its capacity to shape memories and imagination in order to convey a peculiarly strong “sense of feeling” (61). Guralnick makes a similar remark, observing that in order to compensate for the absence of scenery, make-up, costumes, visible movements and gestures, an actor performing a part on radio “must display not just the talent, but the pluck” (1985: 81), since the only tool at his disposal to convey any emotion to the audience is his voice.

One of radio’s points of strength therefore is that it allows “to create the illusion of a personal and intimate verbal interaction” (Shingler and Weiringa, 1998: 35) between the characters and the listener, thus reinforcing a sense of intimacy which helps the audience to identify with the character who is speaking. One of the things at which radio drama is exceptionally good is representing those situations “in which there is literally nothing to see”, such as for instance the conflicts or thoughts taking place within a single character (Crisell, 1994: 155). Such situations can, of course, be represented also by conventional theatre, yet they are bound to achieve a different effect. On the stage, in order to “make the audience privy to his thoughts” (Goffman, 1974: 231), the actor must adopt the convention of speaking his thoughts out aloud addressing the audience, thus breaking to an extent the dramatic illusion with his soliloquy. As an alternative, in more modern *mise-en-scènes* it is possible to hear the recorded voice of the actor being played in a voice-over, which is to be interpreted by convention as what the character is thinking, which yet is revealed only to the audience, and not to the rest of the characters in the scene.

Crisell points out that “in the blindness of radio, however, the monologue is much more effective” (1994: 155) because we are not distracted by the fact of seeing the actor talking to himself, but on the contrary we are offered the opportunity “to inhabit without visual distraction the subjective world of a character” (156). Considering the medium’s kinship with literature, it is not surprising that one of the prominent features of the radio dramatic structure has its origins in the literary technique of the interior monologue. This connection between radio drama and literature has been commented on by several authors (D. McWhinnie, 1959; R. McLeish, 1978; P. Lewis,

1981; J. Raban, 1981; A. Crisell, 1994), who have all highlighted to different extents how both literature and radio drama seem to stimulate the visual imagination of the listener, or the reader, in similar ways: not only the visual dimension in both genres is exclusively confined inside the head of the listener/reader, whose imagination has an active role in the process, but both literature and radio drama rely uniquely on verbal codes, striving to evoke images through words. However, I would argue that there is a major difference between radio drama and novels, lying in the fact that the human voices that we hear on radio are far more evocative than the words on a printed page: the added value of radio drama consists on exactly that human element mentioned by Crook (1999: 61), which confers a higher degree of realism and immediacy to the emotions of the character, and consequently invites a more intimate relationship between the audience and the protagonist.

In the next paragraphs I shall describe those plays among Stoppard's radio productions sporting precisely this dramatic device, in order to analyse how the invisibility of the medium can be used as an asset to convey with great realism the mindscape<sup>13</sup> of the characters, with an attempt at outlining how the playwright has occasionally used this classic radio drama technique in a new experimental way.

### ***'M' Is For Moon Among Other Things***

Broadcast a few weeks after *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot*, this play is an equally short piece also written in 1964 for the BBC series "Just Before Midnight". *'M' Is For Moon Among Other Things* – which from now I will refer to simply as *Moon* – depicts the "conversation of a middle-aged couple who fail to connect" (Guralnick, 2001: 70), and it provides a good example of

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<sup>13</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, we can define the concept of mindscape as "the range of a person's thoughts and imagination, regarded as a panorama capable of being contemplated by another person". ("mindscape, n." OED Online. June 2013. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com.rproxy.sc.univ-paris-diderot.fr/view/Entry/233391?redirectedFrom=mindscape>> accessed July 10, 2013).

how radio drama can combine the realism of a domestic setting with the depth of psychological drama.

The play opens with the female voice of Constance, Alfred's wife, listing a bizarre series of apparently random words, "Macbeth... Macedonia... Magna Carta... Measles... Molluscs" (Stoppard, 1996: 15). Yet, what is even more puzzling is the fact that her husband apparently ignores her completely, absorbed in his own reading. Indeed we gather that the two of them must both be reading separately, thanks to the sounds of shuffling paper and of pages being turned, as well as from the textual reference in Constance's lines, "I wish the print wasn't so small" (15). For the first couple of minutes, we witness an odd alternation of cues from the two protagonists having no logical relation with each other. Gradually it becomes clear that we are listening to their inner speech, since they are both absorbed in their separate trains of thoughts, and seemingly show no reaction to each other.

The real interaction between the two starts only when Constance addresses Alfred asking him the date, thus distracting her reluctant husband from his thoughts. The play is based on their evident problems of communication, and their inability to understand each other is the key to the humorous quality of the play. Overall, the play is centred on the emotions of the protagonists rather than on any relevant event, and through making Constance's and Alfred's thoughts accessible to the listener, Stoppard is able to convey quite a strong characterisation of both characters, despite the shortness of the broadcast.

Curiously enough, a common thread running through the entire play seems to be the presence of the letter 'M', and its possible different meanings. The title apparently refers to the new volume of the encyclopaedia that Constance is currently reading, which gets delivered precisely every month, thus providing her with a constant reminder of the passing of time (Stoppard, 1996: 19). Then, the letter 'M' also recurs in the title of the Hitchcock film that has been airing on TV – by no coincidence a story about another unhappily married couple – and the soundtrack of *Dial 'M' for*

*Murder* can actually be heard in the background while Constance is voicing her preoccupation about aging and wasting her life (17). However, for Alfred the letter ‘M’ seems to stand exclusively for the poor Marilyn Monroe, whose tragic death absorbs his complete attention. For Constance, the letter ‘M’ used to stand for Millie, the name she was called by when she was young and happy: yet, time has brought Constance to realise that things in the grown-ups’ world are not so simple as they used to be when she was a child, and when in her ABC book “M was for Moon, and nothing else” (20). At exactly forty-two-and-a-half, she is now bitterly aware that ‘M’ can stand for many things, for “marriage” (21) among others, although her life is not turning up as she expected.

Like in *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot*, time is the central motif of the play, although *Moon* appears to expand it in a different way. While action abounds in *Boot*, in *Moon* basically nothing happens, yet these two plays mirror each other in “[making] poignant tragicomedy from the daily concerns of inconsequential people” (Guralnick, 2001: 70). Constance is the one who is more piercingly aware of the passing of time, and her bitter questions – “I mean there’s no purpose to make sense of it, is there? [...] Where’s it all going?” (Stoppard, 1996: 17) – resonate in the words of another female character, Gladys, the protagonist of *If You’re Glad I’ll Be Frank*, the next radio play written by Stoppard. The poignancy of Constance’s disappointment, which is effectively disguised by the humorous tone of the play, stems from the fact that for the two protagonists time has a complete different meaning, thus causing an emotional turmoil that fails to be expressed in action: while Constance realises that the date marks that she is likely at half of her uneventful life, which she is wasting away in a marriage marked by unhappiness and incomprehension, on the contrary for her unsympathetic husband the date is slightly relevant only because of the news on TV of Marilyn Monroe’s suicide.

Paradoxically, Albert seems blissfully unaware of the preoccupations of his wife, but he is ready to sympathise with the despair that must have driven Marilyn to suicide: “It’s such a cold shallow world she was living in. No warmth or understanding – no one understood her, she was

friendless” (18); his words could likely be referred to his wife, but in fact Alfred is lost in his dreams of rescuing the young, beautiful actress (Kelly, 1991: 32). Kelly rightly remarks that the humour of the play comes from the complete misunderstanding between the couple: “Constance mistakes Alfred’s regret at the death of Marilyn Monroe as sympathy for her own malaise, and simple-minded Alfred mistakes Constance’s habitual reading of *The Treasury* as a quest for knowledge” (1991: 33).

Thank to Stoppard’s use of the device of interiorising the voice of the characters’ minds, the listener is granted a privileged perspective, roughly corresponding to what in a novel would be called internal focalisation; hence, the listener can perfectly understand Constance’s feelings, while on the contrary she is unable to communicate her despair to her husband, to whom she appears to be simply killing the time through the mechanical task of reading the volumes of her encyclopaedia, while in fact her mind is busy pondering the issues of “aging and the apparent pointlessness of her life” (32).

However, it is not always easy to distinguish between the “public” and the “private” voices of Constance and Alfred (Kelly, 1991: 32), due to the playwright’s “refusal to disguise the movement between inner and outer speech” (33). At the end of the play, the couple is in their bedroom, preparing to go to sleep, and once the lights have been turned off, they once again resume their different musings:

ALFRED:           *(Thinks:)* Marilyn... Don’t worry, I’m glad you phoned... Don’t be unhappy, love, tell me all about it and I’m sure I’ll think of something... Do you feel better already? – Well, it’s nice to have someone you know you can count on any time, isn’t it?...Don’t cry, don’t cry any more... I’ll make it all right... *(Up – sigh)* Poor old thing...

CONSTANCE:    Oh, you mustn’t worry about me, Alfred, I’ll be all right...  
*(Thinks:)* Marshmallow... Mickey Mouse... Marriage...  
Moravia... Mule... Market... Mumps...

(Stoppard, 1996: 21)

Here the confusion between reality and consciousness reaches its peak, to the point that Constance answers to the half-voiced thoughts of her husband, who instead is actually thinking about Marilyn. Radio allows the playwright to show the blurring line between consciousness and reality: the sharp contrast between the realism of the dull domestic life of a middle-aged couple and the poignancy of their private dreams and preoccupations results in a pointed comic effect which characterises the unique sense of humour of the playwright, who shows his exceptional talent for writing about serious things in a comic way (Gussow, 1995).

### ***If You're Glad I'll Be Frank***

The next play in which Stoppard fully exploits radio's capacity to give us complete access to the minds of his characters is probably *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank*, which aired a couple of years later than *Moon*, in 1966. The play opens with Frank, who turns out to be a bus driver, dialling 'TIM' on the telephone, in order to listen to the Speaking Clock, a service that provides the exact counting of hours, minutes and seconds. What surprises Frank is that the apparently mechanical voice of the announcer actually seems to belong to his missing wife, Gladys, and he is determined to come to her rescue and take her back home with him. However, Frank's efforts have little result, since he is equally trapped by his bus schedule, and cannot stop by the office where Gladys is supposedly kept but for a few minutes each time his bus route takes him to stop near the building (Stoppard, 1996: 39-40).

In *If You're Glad* Stoppard reveals his "philosophical bent" (Gussow, 1995: 108) offering a profound reflection on the topic of time, a recurring theme throughout his plays for the radio. Indeed Frank's rush against time reminds us of another of Stoppard's character, Dominic Boot, who is equally bound to fail in his attempt to scrape together the money for his increasing taxi fare. Moreover, despite Frank's determination to save Gladys, he proves to be "as tied to [his bus] as

Gladys to her clock” (Hunter, 1982: 170), since it never occurs to him to leave his bus and disrupt the timetable: despite the apparent opposition of tempo between the two characters (Kelly, 1991: 34), given Frank’s hectic rushing around and Gladys’s reflective meditations, they are ultimately alike in being trapped in their roles.

An interesting detail of *If You’re Glad* is that Stoppard wanted the time of the play to be synchronised with that of the broadcast, so that the actual time announced by Gladys through the play would “be related to the number of minutes or seconds that have passed” (Stoppard, 1996: 25): through this expedient, the playwright efficiently demonstrates how indeed “time holds us hostage while we listen to the radio” (Guralnick, 1996: 71), thus increasing the level of realism and giving to the audience the impression of participating to the play in a way, which can be regarded as “a kind of timepiece” in itself (Kelly, 1991: 33).

A further theme explored by the play appears to be the juxtaposition between individual liberty and the established order (McKean, 2001). In the second scene we attend the arrival of the various characters working at the Post Office, in a perfectly timed display of punctuality and order: not only is the entry of each person precisely marked by a stroke of the Big Ben, but the series of greetings exchanged between the porter and the various characters provides a funny depiction of social hierarchy, expressed through the use of every possible variety of linguistic register of the English language (Hunter, 1982: 107).

Also Frank’s attempts to get to speak with someone in charge at the telephone office are systematically hindered because of the structured hierarchy of the company: neither the porters nor the telephone operators he speaks to seem to be able to get him to speak with the right “top man” (Stoppard, 1996: 46), so in the end Frank resolves to forcibly bust in a board meeting in the Post Office building, demanding to be given some definite answers on his wife. Yet, although Frank is finally able to speak with Lord Coot, the First Lord of the Post Office, the man chuckling dismisses Frank’s preoccupation: “My dear fellow – there’s no Gladys – we wouldn’t trust your wife with the

*time* – it’s a machine, I thought everyone knew that...” (49). Time itself represents the highest form of established order (McKean, 2001), and only Gladys seems to realise that its power is far greater than that of the almighty people working at the Post Office, who improperly think that “time is something they / invented, / for their own convenience, / and divided up into ticks / and tocks [...]” (Stoppard, 1996: 29).

Gladys, being forced to continuously keep track of the passing of time, has come to realise the immensity of such a mechanism, and she is aware that going back to her life would now be impossible, once she has experienced the extent of eternity (33). This awareness has apparently taken its toll on Gladys’s mind, and the impossibility of focusing on anything else but the endless flowing of minutes and seconds has driven her close to madness (31). As a matter of fact, the most original and bizarre feature of the play is exactly the peculiar characterisation of Gladys, who we hear speaking with two different voices (Kelly, 1991: 33). While in the background, her “public”, machine-like voice as the speaking clock can be heard announcing the “pips” and counting away the seconds, her “personal” voice expresses her thoughts and feelings in a much more human-like fashion.

In *If You’re Glad*, Stoppard skilfully exploits “radio’s gift for encouraging audiences to identify with confessional characters” (Guralnick, 2001: 73), thus prompting the listener to identify with Gladys, and keenly perceive her distress. Gladys’s lines are a perfect example of the medium’s aptness at the dramatisation of consciousness (Crisell, 1994: 156), and of how radio is able to minimise the distance between speaker and listener, recreating a unique suggestion of intimacy (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 89). Furthermore, the rhythm of Gladys ‘personal’ voice, resembling free verse both in its graphic form and for the large use of images, sharply contrasts with the rigid, repetitive rhythm of her official voice as the speaking clock (Brassell, 1985: 81). This duality – the total commitment to her task on the one hand, in opposition to her wish to rebel and disrupt such order – pushes the poor Gladys towards a mental breakdown: she is longing to answer Frank’s

desperate call, but she knows that “[she]’d bring the whole thing down with a cough, / stun them with a sigh...” (Stoppard, 1996: 42), and break the carefully built illusion that man can actually control the passing of time.

Radio is the perfect medium to convey the insubstantiality of Gladys’s condition, since she exists solely in the form of a voice. Her consciousness breaks the silence “in which [time] passes / impartial disinterested / godlike” (34). And what better way to convey the insubstantiality of abstract concepts such as time and God than the most insubstantial medium of all? Indeed on radio, like on the telephone, all we hear are voices without any substance. Lord Coot, who likes to believe he is *the* Lord (37), scrupulously checks all telephone services, and when his secretary Beryl puts him through the Bible-reading service with “God, my Lord” (40), we cannot help but smile at the ironic suggestion that even a divine entity might be reachable through the phone.

In *If You’re Glad I’ll Be Frank* Stoppard presents us with the insubstantiality of time: Gladys Jenkins is at the same time the voice of Britain’s Speaking Clock, and the missing wife of the bus driver Frank. Her singular condition of “neither a machine nor a woman [but] both simultaneously” (Guralnick, 2001: 71) can be reproduced only through the specific medium of radio. As a matter of fact, radio is the only medium which can support the ambiguous nature of Gladys’s existence: she counts the time “ad infinitum” (Stoppard, 1996: 30) with the precision of a machine, yet her memories and feelings seem to prove that she is human. Undoubtedly, her condition does not have “any visual equivalent” (Guralnick, 2001: 71) which could possibly convey the same effect with the same incisiveness on the stage.

Overall, *If You’re Glad* is surely a play that shows an “ambitious and self-conscious use of the radio medium” (Kelly, 1991: 33): not only it brilliantly exploits radio’s ability to convey the depths of the human consciousness, but it uses this technique to create the unique effect of Gladys’s ambiguous nature, sustaining the doubt whether she is a real person or a machine until the final lines, when Lord Coot has to console a sobbing Gladys at the phone, urging her to “control [her]

voice” and to resume counting (Stoppard, 1996: 50). In the end, neither Frank nor Gladys manage to escape from the established order, embodied by Lord Coot, who successfully convinces Frank that the speaking clock has nothing to do with his wife, and who also finally prevents Gladys’s breakdown. Ultimately the madness of Lord Coot’s post office seems to prevail (Kelly, 1991: 34), yet the closing line of the play shows that Gladys has apparently preserved part of her independence of thought (Hunter, 1982: 219), with her final contemptuous comment on Lord Coot, “He thinks he’s God” (Stoppard, 1996: 50).

### ***On ‘Dover Beach’***

*On ‘Dover Beach’* is currently one of the latest radio pieces written by Stoppard, and even though it first broadcast in 2007, it has been published only recently and added to the Faber and Faber volume of Stoppard’s collection of plays for the radio. One characteristic detail about the play is that Stoppard wrote it for a specific actor: this 15-minute play is part of a series of five short pieces especially commissioned by BBC Radio 4 to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of Alan Howard, a popular British actor and a friend of Stoppard.

The title of the play refers to one of the classics of British literature, the famous poem *Dover Beach*, written by Matthew Arnold and published in 1867. Stoppard writes a biting satire on the best-known work of the famous poet, imagining Arnold engaging an animate debate with himself about the real meaning of the poem, the circumstances in which it was written and the place it was to occupy in the history of literature after Arnold’s death. Characterised by a unique combination of prose and poetry, the broadcast opens with Arnold reciting the first stanza of the poem, yet when he comes to the beginning of the following stanza he gets interrupted by what seemingly is a second voice, who starts reminiscing about his life at twenty-nine, when he was “a published author and newly married, a poet and a husband in the first flush” (Stoppard, 2012: 287). He talks fondly of the

memories of the engagement with his wife, and of their trip to Dover after their marriage, during which the poet actually wrote his famous poem.

The memories of that happy time however are interrupted once again by the first voice, who resumes reading the poem. Remarkably this time we can hear the gentle sound of the sea waves clashing on the shore in the background, while the poet describes the pebbles being rolled backward and forward on the shore, “where the sea meets the moon-blanch’d land” (288). An interesting aspect that Stoppard’s radio play and Arnold’s *Dover Beach* have in common is that the poem is actually based on a sound: the noise of the waves hitting the shore is what triggers the poet’s reflection on the human condition, and in Stoppard’s radio piece we can distinctly hear the sound that supposedly caught Arnold’s attention. A feat that the printed page cannot possibly achieve no matter how beautifully evocative the poem may be, is easily accomplished by the aural medium, thanks to which the audience can actually comply with the poet’s exhortation to “Listen!” to the sound he is describing (288).

At this point, the two voices begins to argue with each other about the possible meaning of the poem, which has been vastly commented upon by critics and is probably “one of the most anthologised poems in English”<sup>14</sup>. The reason of the quarrel between Arnold and the poet’s alter-ego is the mysterious reason for the poet’s “apocalyptic despair” (289), which seems unmotivated considering Arnold’s happy condition of newly married man at the time. Stoppard, using his characteristic ability for coming up with new original explanations on given situations, suggests that Arnold’s sadness was “probably brought on by an unhealthy self-absorption that [he] took with [him] to Dover like a touch of food poisoning” (289), and that the splashing sound of the “ebb and flow of human misery” (288) was actually produced by his wife making her toilet by the washstand before retiring for the night, which can be heard as a faint noise in the background.

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<sup>14</sup> A definition provided by the speaker introducing the broadcast which first aired on 15th October 2007 on BBC Radio 4.

The humorous tone goes on with the poet jealously criticizing his fellow colleagues, among which we find some of the most famous writers of the time, such as Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning and Henry James. It soon becomes clear that Arnold resents being remembered mainly for his poem *Dover Beach*, while the rest of his works is largely forgotten, and he vehemently declares that “if this is posterity, I don’t like it!” (290). One of the most entertaining moments of the play is probably when Arnold is trying to defend his position and provide a reason for the sad tone of the poem, yet while he is arguing that the real meaning of the poem is “the sanctification of the love between two people” (290), his words are progressively drowned by the panting and grunting of a woman in the background. Without recurring to any verbal code, but simply through the use of sound effects, Stoppard seems to suggest that the reason why Arnold “was so gloomy when he wrote *Dover Beach* was inspired less by a dread of the departure of religion and the coming of anarchy than by a bad night's sex with his inexperienced wife” (Billen, 2007)

Far from considering *Dover Beach* his masterpiece, the poet dismisses the poem as one of his minor works, yet his other voice argues that “it was particular for you, evidently” (Stoppard, 2012: 290) and that there must be a reason why Arnold decided to publish the poem only sixteen years later when he was forty-five himself. Stoppard digs into Matthew Arnold’s life in order to find a reason for this, and in doing so the playwright effectively manages to portray a different image of the poet, in opposition to his image of “culture snob” (292), and revealing on the contrary Arnold’s most human side, picturing him as a father suffering for the premature death of three of his sons. Thanks to the intimacy allowed by radio (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 91), Arnold’s touching account of how he lost his sons is particularly poignant and incisive. After evoking the memories of the last moments he spent with his dying sixteen-year-old son, and of the day of his funeral, Arnold explains why he waited so long before publishing the poem: only after experiencing the sorrow of losing his sons, the despair of *Dover Beach* “found [its] occasion” (Stoppard, 2012: 292).

Nevertheless, the tone of the play lightens up again towards the end, and the second voice returns to question the poem, as well as to point out the reasons why Arnold was probably delivered to posterity as “nostalgic and elitist” (292), which the listener is likely inclined to believe since the poet’s attitude leaves no doubt to the fact that Arnold probably did have a considerably high opinion of himself. Despite Arnold’s confidence of being worthy of literary fame, the second voice commiserates him saying “Poor Matt! You were never born to be a poet except for one sublime moment in Dover when the good Lord paid you in advance and you hit the spot with a lyric that bobs up like a cork whatever one throws at it” (293). His alter-ego then criticises the “celebrated metaphor” (293) of the tide of human misery, ironically dismissing the poet’s melancholy on the basis that “tides don’t just go out, they invariably come back in. Give it twelve hours, the Sea of Faith will be banging up against those glimmering cliffs, and the world will be right as a trivet again” (293). With his poem relentlessly held as evidence against him, Arnold can only defend himself claiming that his accuser’s reasoning has more to do with oceanography than literary criticism (293). The play shows its circular structure as it ends with the poet resuming to read *Dover Beach* from the beginning, and we are once again transported to Dover: the voice of the character combined with the sound of the sea effectively conjure up a vivid mindscape of the cliffs of Dover glimmering in the moon light, and the movement of the waves gently hitting the shore is truly suggested by the rhythm of the lyric.

*On ‘Dover Beach’* is probably one of Stoppard’s most unconventional radio plays, as its structure cannot simply be described as a monologue nor as a dialogue: as a matter of fact, although we hear two voices, they actually belong to the same actor and the same character, which is somewhat exceptional for a radio play, where every voice is usually considered an index of one single character. On the contrary, *On ‘Dover Beach’* offered Stoppard the possibility to experiment with a character having multiple voices, a device that would pose a number of problems on the conventional stage, where “a character talking in two or more voices would be at best baffling and

at worst ludicrous” (Crisell, 1994: 156): on the other hand, radio “can exploit this device without difficulties of staging” (156), since in an exclusively auditory medium it is possible to recreate the effect of a person talking to oneself and voicing possibly contradicting thoughts without needing to provide a concrete visual equivalent for such purely ‘intellectual’ actions.

As Stoppard once pointed out in an interview, one of the playwright’s most strongly held beliefs is that “writing dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting yourself” (Gussow, 1995: 3): *On ‘Dover Beach’* seems to represent the perfect example of this notion, since in this play Stoppard decided to split two different sides of one character in order to have them argue with each other. The overall effect achieved with this technique is significantly different from the contrast between the private and public voices of Constance and Alfred in *Moon*, or from the unique flux of thoughts of Gladys in *If You’re Glad*. While in *Moon* we access the private thoughts of the two protagonists, and in *If You’re Glad* we listen to Gladys’s human consciousness behind her machine-like appearance, the structure of *On ‘Dove Beach’* resembles more a dialogue than a monologue. The presence of two voices allows the playwright to stage an articulate debate, and to paint a portrait of Matthew Arnold from different perspectives: not only do we hear the voice of the poet himself, as a man with a somewhat conceited personality and high literary standards, but at some points we also hear comments which seem to be issued from an anthology of English literature, providing a critical reading of Arnold as well as of his poetry. In addition to that, we also have a second voice, who irreverently insists on calling the poet “Matt” and seems to know the poet intimately, to the point of being exceptionally good at touching every sore spot of Arnold’s ego.

A further major difference between *On ‘Dover Beach’* and the other two aforementioned plays is that this time the protagonist is not a fictional character, like Gladys or Constance, but on the contrary Stoppard decided to write about a giant of English literature. Of course this is not the first time that the playwright adopts a comic and satirical approach at dealing with important historical figures – just think of *Travesties*, for instance. As a consequence, the audience listening to

a play on Matthew Arnold is bound to have certain expectations, and be conditioned by what they already know about the poet; the ability of the playwright in this case is to both fulfil and contradict the listener's expectations, painting a recognisable and realistic portrait of Arnold, yet offering at the same time some original insight to the poet's life. The overall effect of exploiting the familiar trope of a man talking to his alter-ego on radio results in a comical yet poignant representation of conflicting emotions, self-examination, and retrospective view of the past. Arnold's alter-ego, quoting *Culture and Anarchy*, warns us that "we must try to see things as they are" (Stoppard, 2012: 288), yet such a task is easier said than done, especially in a "blind" medium.

To conclude, we can now see why Hunter reckons radio to be "the best medium of all – better than the novel – for interior monologue, stream of consciousness, fantasy and recollection" (1982: 66): the absence of physical boundaries granted by the medium allows the playwright to explore not only physical spaces, but also the depths of the human mind, effortlessly moving between thoughts, dreams and recollections. The reason why radio drama can be one of the most evocative dramatic formats is that it reduces the distance between the listener and the characters to a minimum. Radio brings great realism to our impression of being able to hear the thoughts of the characters directly into the characters' heads, and this sense of closeness cannot be equally recreated neither on the stage, which is bound to employ special theatrical conventions to achieve a similar effect, nor by novels, in which the voices of the protagonists can solely be imagined, as ultimately they are inevitably confined to the printed page.

In addition to encouraging the identification of the audience with the characters allowing the listener to enter their thoughts, the characteristic invisibility of radio also makes possible to question the boundaries between what is real and what exists solely in a character's mind. Guralnick describes radio as a "fertile field for dramatists bent on exploring the mind in relation to objective reality" (Guralnick, 1996: 100), since "the airwaves allow no distinction to be drawn between worlds that exist as a matter of fact and worlds that exist as a matter of thought. All worlds are alike

on radio: they are all of them mental inventions” (109). In other words, radio not only seems to be exceptionally apt at imitating the flexibility of the human mind, but it is also appears to be remarkably fitting for conveying different and possibly opposing views of reality, a characteristic which makes radio a particularly suited medium to explore one of the themes which seems to fascinate Stoppard the most, namely his preoccupation with the relativity of human perspective, which shall be the central topic to be considered in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### Visuality and Perspectives

This chapter shall focus on a recurrent feature in Stoppard's radio plays, namely the peculiar use of perspective, and the techniques employed by the playwright in order to play with the "blindness" of his audience. Stoppard is incredibly talented at making sights emerge from sound, prompting us to reflect on our perception of reality, which can vary from one person to another according to their different perspectives. Paradoxically, such themes related to vision would seem to be ill-suited to a medium speaking to the ear rather than the eye, yet as a matter of fact Stoppard finds in radio a particularly apt medium to explore this particular subject and express his personal ideas about the relativity of things and points of view.

Lastly, in the final part of the chapter I am going to tackle the problem of adaptation, and investigate how our perception of a play can vary according to the choice of a different medium. In order to do this, I will compare the radio play *In The Native State* and its adaptation written by Stoppard for the stage, *Indian Ink*, in an attempt to identify what new sign systems are involved and underline the most significant differences from the point of view of theatrical communication marked by the introduction of the visual dimension.

#### 4.1 - *The use of blindness as dramatic device*

As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter (paragraph 3.1), the term "blindness" is generally likely to show up whenever the potentialities of the radio as dramatic medium are discussed: notwithstanding the results of the on-going debate on whether it is appropriate to

describe radio as a “blind” medium, the idea of blindness has undoubtedly come to be associated to radio over the years. As a matter of fact, in his radio plays Stoppard seems to be generally fascinated by radio’s potentiality of playing with the blindness of the audience, with the result that some of his radio plays effectively thematize the most characteristic feature of this medium. The radio play in which Stoppard explores this theme the most is probably *Artist Descending a Staircase*: in addition to several passages in which the playwright exploits the ambiguity created by the exclusive use of aural signs in order to trick the listener’s perception for comic effect, the plot itself revolves exactly around a debate on the worth of *visual* art, and the role of the artist.

Donner, to be able to “justify a work of art to a man with an empty belly” (Stoppard, 1996: 126), has resolved to make his art edible, and he is working on sculpting his Venus out of sugar, while Martello’s “metaphorical” statue (128) sports artificial pearls for teeth and straws for hair. Donner is outraged when he is told by his friend that Martello’s rather ridiculous sculpture should supposedly represent Sophie: Donner, nearly weeping, reminiscences Sophie’s beauty, her hair like “ripe corn” and her “teeth like pearls” (129), his description thus proving that Martello’s sculpture, albeit not beautiful, has at least respected the symbolism of her features. This passage offers an interesting example of how Stoppard plays with words and aural signs to mock the traditional use of descriptive metaphors: in this case the pearls, which are a symbol of Sophie’s beautiful smile, are no longer simply a conventional term of comparison usually employed to describe a woman’s beauty, but become concrete objects, since the playwright makes Martello use actual “artificial pearls” (128) to represent Sophie’s teeth. Stoppard toys with the literal meaning of the metaphor, but the result according to Donner is a rather unsatisfying and not very realistic representation of Sophie’s beauty. Still, since the episode is actually narrated through an aural medium, the only concrete sign that we can perceive of the presence of the described pearls is an indexical sign, that is, the sound of the pearls bouncing on the floor when Donner accidentally knocks out the statue’s teeth.

Debating about visual art in a medium lacking a visual dimension seems to open the possibility of complicating things and to offer the playwright the chance to exploit the blindness of the audience to conjure up bizarre images, and occasionally even trick the listener, as in the episode of Beauchamp's horse. The use of coconuts to reproduce hoofbeats is a classic expedient used for sound effects: a popular version of the comic gag of the horseless rider can be found in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, a 1975 British comedy film parodying the legend of King Arthur's quest to find the Holy Grail, directed by Terry Gilliam, with whom Stoppard collaborated in writing the script of the Oscar-nominated film *Brazil* in 1985 (Nadel, 2001: 93). The first shot of the film shows a dark and misty outdoor setting, and the sound of approaching hoofbeats can be heard, although the actual sight of the knight is concealed by the mist. Once King Arthur and his squire Patsy finally emerge from the mist, it becomes evident that they are actually on foot, the sound of the hoofbeats being reproduced by the squire banging together two empty halves of coconut. Unlike radio, on screen the trick is immediately revealed as soon as they enter the frame, and the sense of anticipation created by the sound of hoofbeats culminates in the pretty comic sight of the pair.

However, in Stoppard's *Artist* the playwright does not play with the listener's blindness solely for comic purpose. The blindness of one of the main characters is functional to the plot, yet at the same time it is the key to one of the most intense scenes of the play: Sophie's inability to see is enhanced and complemented by the very blindness of the medium (Guralnick, 1996: 50), thus making the listener sympathise with this character. As a matter of fact, the condition of Sophie, who has gradually lost her sight and with whom the three artists are all in love, is also shared by the audience who, exactly like the girl, is unable to distinguish visually the three main characters. The problem is that she first met the three artists at an exhibition shortly before permanently losing her sight, so when they meet again she confesses that "I do not know which of your voices goes with the face that has stayed in my mind" (Stoppard, 1996: 141). At the time, she apparently fell in love at first sight with the man who painted a snow scene with a black border fence, who turns out to be

Beauchamp. Yet, Sophie is likely to have been victim of her bad sight: the snow scene could as well have been Donner's painting which, as Martello points out to him years later, resembles "looking at the dark through the gaps in a white fence" (154). Could Sophie tell apart a snow scene from a white fence? What if "in her mind's eye" (153) she actually loved Donner instead of Beauchamp? Once again, the truth remains unrevealed, and as Stoppard seems to suggest, it ultimately depends on how you look at things.

The scene of the play in which the blindness of Sophie is most keenly shared by the listener is the one in which she is desperately addressing her beloved Beauchamp, who apparently does not love her anymore and is determined to leave her. Beauchamp however does not speak during Sophie's heartbreaking speech, and the dramatic power of the scene in which she is abandoned by Beauchamp is heightened by the fact that the listener shares Sophie's inability to determine if her lover is actually still in the same room silently looking at her.

SOPHIE:                    [...] Mouse? Are you here? Say something. Now, don't do that, Mouse, it's not fair—please, you are here...Did you go out? Now please don't...How can I do anything if I can't trust you—I beg you, if you are here, tell me [...].

(Stoppard, 1996: 151)

The poor girl slowly works herself up into a panic attack, and the scene abruptly ends with the sound of glass shattering, as she kills herself jumping out of the window. In this powerfully poignant scene, the blindness of the medium makes the audience experience what Sophie is feeling, and our sharing her confusion further enhances "the confusions in identity that permeate the play" (Guralnick, 1996: 50). Stoppard's masterful use of radio in *Artist* not only reveals our limitations as listeners (51) but, as put by Guralnick, "epitomizes the human condition: in our blindness, we see; in our sight, we are blind; and the truth remains open to question" (30).

The aforementioned scene of *Artist* effectively shows how significant the silence of a character can be in radio drama. This proves that in fact, in a form of theatre based chiefly on

words, also the absence of words can have important semantic value. A. Crisell affirms that “in various ways, [...] radio is positively besieged by silence” (1994: 160). How is it so? We must keep in mind that on radio drama a character or an object exist “simply by being named” (160), therefore the presence of a character must be heard throughout the scene, otherwise the listener – exactly like Sophie – will gather that he must have left. Moreover, we do tend to notice silences more on radio than in other media because, unlike in the theatre or cinema, silences are “visually unfilled and therefore absolute” (160), thus they are more keenly perceived by the unseeing listener. Consequently, silence on radio always tends to have a meaning, either positive and functional to the dramatic action, or negative, in the sense that if the silence lasts for more than a few seconds, the listener can conclude that there must be some problem with the station transmitter or their own receiver (160).

#### 4.2 - *The use of visual images*

*Artist*, however, is not the only radio play by Stoppard dealing with the theme of art. Also *In The Native State* discusses, to an extent, the subject of visual art: the story develops around the portrait of the protagonist, Flora Crewe, posing for a local Indian artist a few months before her premature death. What is interesting about the painting is that Stoppard successfully mixes the characters’ opinions about art with a reflection on the postcolonial issue, effectively conveying their conflicting perspectives on the colonisation of India. While the Indian painter Das seems to be “enthralled” and fascinated by “everything English” (Stoppard, 1996: 242), Flora sharply rebukes him for this and exhorts him to behave like an Indian artist:

- FLORA:                    [...] You *are* an Indian artist, aren’t you? Stick up for yourself. Why do you like everything English?
- DAS:                        I do not like everything English.
- FLORA:                    Yes, you do. You are enthralled. Chelsea, Bloomsbury, *Oliver Twist*, Goldflake cigarettes...even painting in oils, that’s not Indian. You’re

trying to paint me from my point of view instead of yours – what you *think* is my point of view. You *deserve* the bloody Empire!

(Stoppard, 1996: 151)

In the end, as the existence of a second portrait is revealed, Das seems to have complied with Flora's wish; the woman apparently asks Das to paint her again, nude this time, after she is recovering from a sudden attack of breathlessness (237). In the twelfth scene we get to hear the description of this second portrait, a watercolour, which fascinatingly seems to combine the two different cultural perspectives since, as Mrs Swan remarks, "it looks Indian but he hasn't made *her* Indian" (247). The picture is described as a peculiar mix of typically Indian symbolism, with flat figures and non-naturalistic proportions, and the Western, Pre-Raphaelites realism of Flora's body. In this play, Stoppard is able to evoke through the words of his characters a unique picture in which two perspectives of the world are virtually united, and which he leaves to the listener to imagine and interpret as he pleases.

A further play in which Stoppard exploits radio's lack of visuals in order to make us reflect about the theme of perspective is *The Dog It Was That Died*. In one episode in particular the playwright evokes an odd visual image, related to the bizarre mission of one of the characters, Mr Blair, who is resolved to realise an architectural folly, a pastiche of Gothic and classical features. Blair's building becomes a symbol for Stoppard's "preoccupation with the relativity of perspective" (Kelly, 1991: 56): as a matter of fact, the obelisk on top of the Gothic tower does not look centred, and it is always bound to look loop-sided no matter where one is standing because Blair in his eccentricity wanted his tower to be octagonal. Blair recognises his mistake, yet he seems aware of the tricks that can be played by perspective, as he contemplates the view of London's skyline:

BLAIR: [...] The view north from St James's Park is utterly astonishing, I always think. Domes and cupolas, strange pinnacles and spires. A distant prospect of St Petersburg, one imagines... Where does it all go when one is in the middle of it, standing in Trafalgar Square with Englishness on every side?"

(Stoppard, 1996: 151)

Unlike the protagonist Purvis, who is no longer able to put things in the right perspective after having worked for so long as a double agent for the English and the Soviets, on the contrary his superior Blair well understands that although from a distance St Petersburg and London can be imagined as interchangeable, one needs to look at things close up in order to distinguish what is true. Curiously enough, this time Stoppard appears to draw from architecture for inspiration (Kelly, 1991: 56), playing once again with visual elements that he invites the listener to imagine for himself, ultimately using the ear to make us reflect on how the eye works.

### ***The Dog It Was That Died***

After an interval of ten years from his last radio play, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, Stoppard's new play for the radio, *The Dog It Was That Died*, aired on Radio 3 in 1982. *The Dog* concentrates on the question of identity, a theme that Stoppard had already started to explore in his previous radio plays, and which now becomes the central issue of the story. The protagonist of the play is Purvis, a British double agent infiltrated into a group of Soviets, who after several years of working under cover, is no longer able to tell which government he really works for. The conflict between Purvis's contradictory identities makes it impossible for him to sustain such an existence, but in an attempt of killing himself by jumping off Chelsea Bridge he involuntarily lands on a barge and kills the dog that cushioned his fall. Unwillingly saved from committing suicide, he is sent to recover to a "health farm" (Stoppard, 1996: 172) on the Norfolk coast; the paradox of Purvis's situation is made more and more clear as the play progresses, and since no one, not even his superior Blair, seems able to remind him "the ideological nub of the matter" (165), and explain him exactly what they are all working for, Purvis resolves to put an end to his life, succeeding in his second attempt of suicide.

In *The Dog* Stoppard explores the rather serious topic of Purvis's existential uncertainty, at the same time preserving a light tone well fitted to the idiom of comedy (Kelly, 1991: 56). This play represents a good example of that kind of radio drama defined by Crisell as a "blend of realism and fantasy" (1994: 160), which according to the author would be akin to absurdist and surreal drama. The opening scene of *The Dog* actually paints quite a surreal scene, with Purvis reading out aloud his farewell letter addressed to his superior Blair just before "[taking] the plunge" (Stoppard, 1996: 159). The letter indeed appears as the rambling speech of a madman, mentioning the most disparate things, from denouncing the opium den secretly run by the Chief of their department, to Purvis's intent of "taking a belly dancer to Buckingham Palace" (160), and a quarrel with the vicar of his church.

Interestingly enough, Guralnick defines *The Dog* as the "radio equivalent" (2001: 77) of Stoppard's stage play *After Magritte* (1971), where "the stage is arranged to resemble a surrealist painting which the play then proceeds to explain with amusing banality" (77): similarly in *The Dog* the virtually surrealist scenario described by Purvis's suicide note is gradually explained, thus proving according to Guralnick that "Magritte's sort of world can be painted on the radio as vividly as on stage or on canvas" (78). Stoppard seems to be fascinated by such a process of "problem-solving" (Hunter, 1982: 174), and he often describes apparently absurd or surreal situations which in the end turn out to be rationally explicable: just think about the tape recording Donner's fall in *Artist Descending a Staircase*, Purvis's suicide note in *The Dog*, or the whole plot of *After Magritte*. The latter is perhaps the most representative example of Stoppard's unique skill at solving bizarre mysteries. The opening scene of the play seems to be inspired by one of Magritte's paintings, *L'Assassin Menacé*, yet all the details of the apparently surrealist situation can be rationally explained: the elegantly dressed woman on her hands and knees on the floor is Thelma, Harris's wife, who is looking for her shoes in the dim light of the room; Harris is standing bare-chest on a chair because he is waiting for Thelma to iron his shirt, which explains the presence on

the scene of an ironing board, and Harris is trying to plug the iron into the only available socket, that is, at the place of the bulb of the hanging lightshade; finally, the body lying on the ironing board in only a towel and a bathing-cap is not a corpse, but Mother, who is about to receive a massage from Thelma, before having a bath (Corballis, 1984: 56).

Exactly as Harris tells to Inspector Foot, “there is a perfectly logical reason for everything” (Stoppard, 1971: 32), and indeed with *After Magritte* Stoppard effectively demonstrate to his audience how “truth can be stranger than fiction” (Corballis, 1984: 60). This characteristically Stoppardian concept is represented by a key episode discussed during the play, namely the appearance of a puzzling figure, which the three protagonists, Harris, Thelma and Mother, all notice while passing in the car on the way back from an exhibition of surrealist art at the Tate Gallery, although they cannot really agree on what exactly they have seen. The idea for this mysterious man – possibly a one-legged footballer with his face covered in shaving foam, or a blind man in pyjamas carrying a turtle – seems to come from a story frequently mentioned by Stoppard in interviews (Gussow, 1995: 7), about the singular incident of a friend of the playwright and the man’s pet peacock. As the story goes, early in the morning, while shaving his face, the owner of the rare and precious bird notices that his peacock has run away from the garden and is heading for the trafficked road: at this sight the man drops his razor and runs out after the peacock. Stoppard admits to be fascinated by the idea of what someone driving by at that moment must have thought about the bizarre sight of a man in his pyjamas, with his face half-covered in shaving foam, carrying a peacock.

The odd image of the figure in pyjamas repeatedly makes its way into Stoppard’s plays (Keblowska, 2004: 147), as this kind of apparent nonsensical, yet perfectly explainable situation seems to appeal strongly to Stoppard’s imagination<sup>15</sup>, who in his plays ironically exposes our

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<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the playwright during an interview in 1972 affirmed that “It’s a favourite thing of mine: the idea of an absolutely bizarre image which has a total rationale to it being seen by different people. And everybody is absolutely certain about what they see.” (Quoted in Gussow, 1995: 7-8).

“tendency to classify what we see as we are seeing it, according to unconscious preconceptions, and thus to delude ourselves” (Hunter, 1982: 76). The episode of Blair’s visit to the rest home in *The Dog* exemplifies well this point: Blair’s attempts at finding Dr. Seddon, the person in charge of the structure, are repeatedly hindered first by a man that Blair assumes to be the gardener, and then by a woman who introduces herself as the Matron (Stoppard, 1996: 172-175). As a matter of fact, both characters, who at first appear to be perfectly fine, then turn out to be patients of the structure. When Blair finally meets the Doctor, the man does not look much more sane than his patients, and in this comic atmosphere of confusion we come to understand Purvis’s preoccupation for being unable to distinguish between different layers of reality.

Through Purvis’s doubts, Stoppard raises the issue of the relative nature of our perceptions. Caught for years in the double bluff of working under cover for the English, while pretending with the Russian to be a spy selling them the secrets of his own country, at some point Purvis forgot “who [was his] primary employer and who [his] secondary” (181):

PURVIS:                   [...] Both sides were often giving me genuine stuff to pass on to the other side...so the side I was actually working for became...well, a matter of opinion really...it got lost.

(Stoppard, 1996: 181)

The overall comic atmosphere of the play is dampened and a “distinctly sombre tone” is introduced at the points when Purvis “tries to recall on which side his loyalties are ‘real’ and on which false” (Brassell, 1985: 259). Yet, no matter how hard he tries to remember, Purvis admits that thinking back “both ways sound equally right” (Stoppard, 1996: 180), and he sadly wonders if all his work of counter-espionage has really helped the cause of either parts in the end.

According to Kelly, *The Dog It Was That Died* further develops all the elements introduced by Stoppard in his previous plays – for instance the use of interior voice, this time presented in epistolary form, as well as the “evocation of bizarre visual images” – and all these elements would be “orchestrated to express a single idea: the maddening relative nature of human perception and

experience” (Kelly, 1989: 451). Stoppard prompts his audience to reflect upon how knowledge is built, proving that our understanding can easily be influenced by the point of view that we decide to adopt, and that sometimes reality can be far more puzzling than fiction.

### *Albert's Bridge*

*Albert's Bridge*, one of Stoppard's most successful and acclaimed radio plays, aired in 1967 on the BBC's Third Programme. The play, originally directed by Charles Lefeaux, was then remade in 1988 under the direction of David Hitchinson, starring Paul Copley in the role of Albert. In *Albert's Bridge* Stoppard further elaborates a major theme present in his two previous plays for the radio '*M' is for Moon Among Other Things* and *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank*, that is, in Kelly's words “the struggle between a desire of withdrawal in the form of fantasy, contemplation, or the complete immersion in mechanical tasks and the desire for involvement in the world outside the self” (1991: 34). The play describes Albert's progressive alienation from the world and from his family, as he becomes more and more obsessed with his job. The mission of Albert's life is to paint Clifton Bay Bridge, a task that gradually absorbs all his time and becomes his sole purpose. When the members of the City Bridge Subcommittee decide to economise on the bridge maintenance starting to use a new paint that lasts eight years instead of only two, Albert accepts the job and remains alone to carry out the enormous task.

Albert loves his job, to the point of abandoning his university studies in Philosophy, and he even neglects his wife and their child, in order to spend as much time as possible on the bridge. The reason for this absolute dedication is that from the heights of Clifton Bridge he is able “to take it all in” (Stoppard, 1996: 62) and contemplate life from a distance. Nevertheless, time seems to outwit the City Bridge Subcommittee, and when they realise that Albert's work of re-painting is taking too long and the rest of the bridge has inevitably started to deteriorate, they decide to send a veritable

army of workers to finish Albert's job in record time; yet, when the 1800 painters march together on the bridge, the vibrations created irreparably damage its structure, and the industrial giant finally collapses under their weight.

Brassell considers *Albert's Bridge* "a virtual companion piece to *If You're Glad*" (1985: 84), as it is possible to draw several analogies between the characters of Albert and Gladys. They both decide to withdraw from their lives for the sake of an ordered existence, and their detachment is also expressed in a similar almost lyrical tone:

ALBERT:           Dip brush, dip brush  
                      without end, come rain or shine;  
                      A fine way to spend my time.  
                      My life is set out for me,  
                      the future traced in brown,  
                      my past measured in silver;  
                      How absurd, how sublime  
                      (don't look down)  
                      to climb and clamber in a giant frame;  
                      dip brush, dip brush, slick, slide wipe  
                      and again.  
                      [...] Don't look down,  
                      the dots are looking up.  
                      Don't wave, don't fall, tumbling down a  
                      telescope, diminishing to a dot.

(Stoppard, 1996: 68)

While for Gladys "man becomes insignificant measured against the vistas of eternity" (Brassell, 1985: 84), for Albert the whole town down below becomes nothing more than a fragile "toytown" made of coloured kid blocks, where men and buildings are reduced to "dots, bricks and beetles" (Stoppard, 1996: 71). Yet, Albert's task gradually leads the protagonist to become more and more self-absorbed, to the point that Albert identifies himself with the bridge; not only does he proudly announce "I'm the bridge man" (67), but he starts to imagine himself as part of the industrial giant he is painting:

ALBERT:           [...] Dip brush, slide, stroke,  
                      it goes on as smooth and shiny  
                      as my sweat. I itch.  
                      Paint on my arm,

silver paint on my brown arm;  
it could be part of the bridge.

(Stoppard, 1996: 72)

The only character who appears to understand Alfred's point of view is Fraser, an aspirant suicide who, distraught by the chaos of life, one day climbs the bridge to take his leap and put an end to his misery. Albert however is not happy about the unexpected company, and his unsympathetic question "what are you doing on my bridge?" (Stoppard, 1996: 76) betrays Albert's irritation at Fraser's intrusion in his own "private sanctuary" (Brassell, 1985: 86). He does not even seem very concerned by Fraser's wish to kill himself, as he would clearly be glad to have him gone, no matter how:

ALBERT:           You came up to go down?  
FRASER:           To jump.  
ALBERT:           Jump?  
FRASER:           Off.  
ALBERT:           Jump off? You'd kill yourself. Ah.  
FRASER:           Yes.  
ALBERT:           I see. All right, then.  
[...]  
FRASER:           Aren't you going to try to talk me out of it?  
ALBERT:           You know your own mind. And you're holding me up. I've got to  
                          paint where you're standing.

(Stoppard, 1996: 77)

As argued by Brassell, Stoppard here seems to scrutinise the desirability and the morality of achieving such "a detached view of human life" (Brassell, 1985: 86), since evidently it has led Albert to stop caring for his family as well as for Fraser's life.

However, the would-be suicide Fraser in the end changes his mind and decides to climb back down, since from the heights of Clifton Bridge he has realised that "from a vantage point like this, the idea of life is just about tenable" (Stoppard, 1996: 78). Yet Fraser, much to Albert's dismay, returns at regular intervals on the bridge in order to flee the chaos and the noise of everyday life, but once up there, he punctually changes his mind. Unlike Albert, Fraser is well aware that he is "a victim of perspective" (82), as he is repeatedly attracted to the top of the bridge, where life,

contemplated from such a height, can be coped with. Nevertheless, despite Albert's and Fraser's wish to escape from reality and contemplate life from this vantage perspective, they are ultimately compelled to face the truth: that "life", as Albert's wife points out, "is all close up, isn't it?" (69).

In the end, Albert's dream of a peaceful and logically ordered existence falls into pieces along with his precious bridge, as the army of painters hired to complete the works of re-painting marches in unison on Clufton Bridge. Curiously enough, to represent the final crash of the bridge, Stoppard does not recur to some special audio effect, but he focuses instead "on Albert's pained cry of incomprehension" (Guralnick, 2001: 74): through radio, Stoppard is able to portray a bridge that represents something more than an industrial construction, it becomes Albert's "golden abstraction" (74), a mental image that would probably lose its power if it were to be materialized through a visual medium.

In conclusion, radio drama seems to be the perfect format for Stoppard to explore and describe the "relative nature of human perception and understanding" (Kelly, 1989: 449). One of the main recurring motifs present in the playwright's pieces for the radio such as *Artist* and *The Dog* is how we access truth. Stoppard insists on showing through his plots the relativity of things and points of view, and what the playwright finally seems to suggest is that truth is ultimately a matter of angles. A characteristic feature of Stoppard as a playwright is that he rarely takes a final, definite position on the matter, and he tends to leave to the listener the task of drawing his own conclusions: such as solving the mystery in *Artist*, or deciding where Purvis's loyalty might actually lie.

In his radio plays, as well as on the stage – in plays such as *After Magritte* and in *Jumpers*, for instance – Stoppard delights in demonstrating how an apparently paradoxical and absurd situation can be rationally explained. In a paradoxical world, the only option left seems to consist in facing reality with irony; Nancy Shields Hardin describes this characteristic attitude of the playwright with what she calls Stoppard's "politics of laughter" (1981: 154): "Stoppard makes no pretense of having

answers; indeed, he revels in contradictions. What he offers is the possibility of altering our perspective just enough so that we may survive in spite of our despair". Through his plays, Stoppard often invites his audience to "embrace the paradoxes of reality" (156), and to remember, like Fraser in *Albert's Bridge*, that life can be bearable, if only we manage to see everything from the right perspective (154). Ian Mackean, commenting on the themes characterising Stoppard's early works, underlines the key role of the concept of perspective in Stoppard's theatre, and he claims that "Stoppard's final statement" on this topic is related to the idea that ultimately our perception of reality is relative, and therefore bound "to the knowledge we happen to possess":

Each of [Stoppard's characters] is an individual struggling to establish some kind of relationship with the rest of the world. They all ultimately fail to achieve what they were striving for; 'the world' asserts its superior strength over the individual. The struggle is seen in terms of a series of dialectical oppositions [...]. The opposing principles take on a number of guises; Chaos versus Order, Freedom versus Responsibility, Illusion versus Reality, Logic versus Common Sense, the Individual versus 'The Establishment'. The key for dealing with these apparently irreconcilable opposites is the concept of perspective. The world is too chaotic for [...] Albert, and too rigidly ordered for Gladys and Frank. But it is the same world. The way we see the world depends upon the way we look at it; reality is relative. This is the heart of the 'world picture' established by Stoppard in his early minor works.

(Mackean, 2011)

#### 4.3 - *From the air to the stage: In The Native State and Indian Ink*

In late 1992, Stoppard began to work on the idea of adapting for the stage his radio play *In The Native State*<sup>16</sup>, which had been transmitted on BBC Radio 3 on April of the previous year. Since in the meantime Stoppard was absorbed by other projects, among which the staging of *Arcadia*, the process actually took a few years, and the play opened in London only in 1995, under the title of *Indian Ink*. In various interviews Stoppard explained that his choice of adapting *In The Native State* was determined by the positive reaction received by the radio play (Gussow, 1995:

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 2 of this paper for a detailed description of the plot of the play.

129), and by a lingering sensation that in the 1991 play he had not “sufficiently addressed the issue of the ethos of empire” (Fleming, 2001: 209). Nevertheless, in hindsight the playwright admitted that in the new stage version he ended up with focusing more on the characters, rather than further exploring the issue of colonialism. Fleming affirms that the reason for this is that “Stoppard got attracted to the character of Flora Crewe” (209), which influenced the overall development of the play. As a matter of fact, *In The Native State* is defined by a deeper characterisation in comparison to the majority of Stoppard’s output for the radio: the radio play is articulated around the fascinating and well-developed character of its protagonist, while the plot of other shorter plays, such as *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot*, is mostly based on the idea of a situation with comic potential, generally at the expenses of a more naturalistic and detailed characterisation (Brassell, 1985: 260).

*In The Native State* is not the only play among Stoppard’s production for the radio which has been adapted for the stage: *Albert’s Bridge* and *If You Are Glad I’ll Be Frank* were staged at Edinburgh’s 1969 Fringe Festival (Kelly, 1991: 38), and Stoppard wrote also an adaptation of *Artist Descending a Staircase* which ran in London in 1988, and was then followed by a Broadway production (Guralnick, 1996: 199). However, *Indian Ink* represented a different kind of challenge, as the playwright declared that he felt that the new play “was different enough to necessitate having a new title” (Kelly and Demastes, 1994: 14).

But what does it entail exactly re-writing a play for a different medium? From a semiotic perspective, and in terms of sign systems involved in the performance, the stage version is inevitably more complex, due to the higher number of codes involved in a theatrical event. According to the theory formulated by the Polish theatre semiotician Tadeusz Kowzan, thirteen sign systems are involved in a theatrical performance: words, voice inflection, facial mimicry, gestures, body movement, makeup, headdress, costume, properties, stage design, lighting, music and sound

effects.<sup>17</sup> While in radio drama are present approximately only four of these sign systems, namely those regarding the delivery of the text (words and voice inflection of the actor) and those concerning the aural signs (music and sound effects), on the stage we undoubtedly have a higher number of sign systems interacting with each other.

Consequently, in adapting *In The Native State* for the stage, Stoppard had to take into consideration a series of new elements related to the area of visual signs, which generally play a central role in conventional drama. In this sense, adapting a radio play for the stage requires a process of *transcodification*, whereby the semantic information conveyed on radio exclusively by auditory codes is translated into visual signs, or “supplied simultaneously by different kinds of signal” (Elam, 1980: 84). It is interesting to remark how in the new production Stoppard used the same means at his disposal on radio in a new way: for instance in *Indian Ink* Flora’s poems are heard as recordings, which makes it easier to distinguish them from the letters to her sisters, which instead the actress reads out aloud directly to the audience. The stage offers the possibility to distinguish the different kinds of speech of the protagonist, thus obtaining a different effect in comparison to the radio version, in which Flora’s speech flows smoothly switching between her thoughts, her poems and the dialogue with other characters.

Overall, *Indian Ink* does not differ significantly from its radio source, and even the same actress, Felicity Kendall, got to play the part of the protagonist in the first London production. From the point of view of the plot, Stoppard did not alter it much, albeit in *Indian Ink* the action is more linear, and the episodes of Flora’s stay in the fictional native state of Jummapur are presented according to their chronological order, rather than occasionally narrated in retrospective through her letters like in *In The Native State*. The main alteration that Stoppard had to make to the story consists of the introduction of the character of Eldon Pike, the scholar and editor of the collection of

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<sup>17</sup> The list elaborated by Kowzan in his much-influential book *Literature et Spectacle* (1975) is commented both by U. Eco (1977: 108) and M. Esslin (1987: 52).

Flora's letters, who in the radio play is not directly involved into the plotline, but appears only as the voice commenting Flora's letters as if reading the book's footnotes. During an interview, Stoppard explained that the biggest challenge he had to face was to find a place for Pike on the scene:

In this particular case, there were a number of problems, one of which was that the radio play includes somebody who's writing footnotes to the play. He's an American academic! [...] In the radio play, you have all these voices coming in, and I have no place for this person to be, or to speak from, so there are problems.

(Kelly and Demastes, 1994: 14)

In *Indian Ink*, Pike is present on the scene as a full character, who visits the elderly Mrs Swan, Flora's younger sister, in order to collect any useful information regarding Flora's life. His academic interest for the poet leads him to travel to modern-day India to trace back the steps of Flora's journey in Jummapur. According to Fleming "the larger presence of Pike is theatrically used to create a fuller integration of the two time periods" (2001: 211), and in addition it is also functional to explore the issue of British colonialism, drawing a comparison between the India of 1930s and the effects of the decolonisation, which are sourly described by the newly-introduced character of Dilip (Stoppard, 1999: 451), Pike's local guide for his mission.

Another problem was represented by the very structure of the plot, since in the radio play the plot alternates between two places and times, namely India in the 1930s, and present-day London. For the stage production, Stoppard specifies in an introductory note that "it is not intended that the stage be demarcated between India and England, or past and present" (Stoppard, 1999: 366). Therefore, unlike the radio play, the scenes of the two plotlines are more closely intertwined, and the two groups of characters are often simultaneously on stage. With a common space to share and even similar furniture (366), any temporal or spatial indication is left to the characters' lines. The depiction of the two locations is bound to lose part of the evocative effect it has on radio, since in the theatre the spectator is no longer allowed to construct an ideal mental image of India on the

basis of the suggestiveness of the sound effects, but instead the audience's imagination is somewhat confined by the stage design and the choices of the director.

Nevertheless, the stage clearly offers some advantages. While radio is a medium that precludes any form of simultaneous action in drama, necessarily directing the attention of the listener to one scene at a time, on the contrary the theatre-goer can decide on which part of the stage he wishes to focus his attention at any given moment (Esslin, 1987: 94); for instance the spectator can follow the protagonist's action, or his attention can be drawn instead to another character moving silently on the scene, a feat that is undoubtedly precluded to radio drama. As Shingler points out, this is due to the fact that "unlike the eye, which can take in a multitude of visual details simultaneously, the ear is only capable of distinguishing a limited range of simultaneous sounds" (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 81-82). On the other hand, in *Indian Ink* Stoppard is able to organise the action on the stage so that it becomes possible to establish a link between the two separated acting areas: halfway through the first act, we have Flora posing for Das, and soon after also Anish asks Mrs Swan the permission to draw her (Stoppard, 1999: 392), thus creating an interesting parallel situation that bridges the two virtually separated settings.

A further way to direct the audience's attention generally used in a stage production is the lighting. Esslin stresses not only the obvious iconic function of light, which can be used to indicate day and night for example, but he underlines the deictic function of light, which can be regarded as its most important function in a dramatic performance, since "it is the lighting that can direct the attention to the focal points of the action, almost literally an 'index' finger pointed at the area of maximum interest" (1987: 76). This "traditional" use of lighting is of course present in *Indian Ink* to shift the audience's attention from Flora and Das in Jummapur to Mrs Swan's house in London (Stoppard, 1999: 368), yet Fleming points out that in Peter Wood's original production of the play, the lighting ideated by Mark Henderson interestingly contributes to convey the understated meaning of one of the most intimate scenes between Flora and Das in the second act (2001: 215). The play

never clearly states who is Flora's lover in Jummapur, but Stoppard seems to suggest that Flora's romance was with Das, and this is reinforced in the performance by the romantic atmosphere created by the use of blue lighting during the scene when Das shows Flora her nude portrait. In an earlier scene in the play Das explains to Flora the Indian concept of "rasa" (Stoppard, 1999: 407), the emotion that the artist must arise through his art: he describes the rasa of erotic love as related to the colour blue-black, and later exactly the same kind of colour dimly lightens the two lovers, just before the stage goes to black. This example shows how the lighting can also have a symbolic function, in this case that of indicating the romantic feelings of the two characters, suggesting the existence of a relationship between them, which yet remains verbally unstated.

Overall *Indian Ink* divided the critic and received different reviews: on the one hand, the detailed characterisation of its characters and the "intimate" nature of the play was praised, yet some less than enthusiast reviewers pointed out that the plot was lacking significant substance, and did not result strong enough to sustain its three-hour running time, and compare with Stoppard's other major stage successes. As a matter of fact, the plot might not be the main point of strength of *Indian Ink*, which is rather centred on the long dialogues expressing the opposing opinions of the characters about art, life, and politics: in a sense, this is rather a play for "voices", and therefore might result better suited to a medium like radio than theatre, where also the fluidity of the continuous change of setting and time is partially lost. J. Lee claims that the play can be read as a "dramatised debate" on the "ethics of empire" (2001: 39), and indeed dialogue is usually considered Stoppard's greatest point of strength; the playwright, who admittedly loves to "complicate the picture" (cited in Fleming, 2001: 223), generally tends to focus first on his dialogues, as these offer him the possibility of expressing different and possibly conflicting perspectives (Hardin, 1981: 158). In any case, in comparison to *In The Native State*, the story presented in *Indian Ink* is inevitably bound to lose part of the appeal that it holds on radio, since the stage performance is always "presented as an already produced and bounded object which the spectator observes, rather

than constructs, from his permanent lookout point” (Elam, 1980: 63); therefore we must take into account that any director – and even Stoppard himself – in the end has to face the extremely hard task of meeting the expectations generated by the imagination of those who have listened to *In The Native State*.

## CONCLUSION

After having closely analysed Stoppard's output for the radio, it is impossible to deny that the often-neglected dramatic genre of radio drama does actually possess a distinct artistic identity. Stoppard's radio plays, albeit frequently dismissed as 'minor works', can present a level of complexity in terms of content and structure that can easily equal the playwright's most mature and successful stage plays. Despite being an exclusively aural medium, radio by no means hinders the communication with the audience, on the contrary it has proved to be a particularly fit medium for exploring some specific topics and themes, such as the epistemological unreliability of our senses, the investigation of our inner thoughts, and the reliability of memory and perceptions.

These recurring motifs in Stoppard's radio plays are in a way connected to the specific characteristics of radio, which can be a complex dramatic medium, offering to a playwright both limitations and advantages. However Stoppard, writing plays brilliantly crafted for the ear like *Artist Descending a Staircase* or *Albert's Bridge*, demonstrated how it is possible for a playwright to turn radio's apparent drawbacks to his own advantage, achieving some unique dramatic effects that could not be reproduced on the stage without involving a considerable loss in meaning and incisiveness. Furthermore, Stoppard does not conform to the general tendency of radio productions, which usually tend to have a rather linear dramatic storyline and an "easily comprehensible structure" (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998: 82): the playwright on the contrary widely exploits the ability of the medium of breaking through temporal and spatial barriers, experimenting with techniques that he could hardly apply in plays for the stage.

A further feature concurring in making radio a particularly fit medium for the playwright is that radio drama is a dramatic format largely centred on dialogue, an aspect that is unanimously

recognised as one of Stoppard's greatest points of strength. Crisell remarks Stoppard's exceptional "sensitivity to the nuances of the spoken word" (2000: 472) as one of his distinctive features as a playwright, and Stoppard himself sustains that the reason why he writes plays is "because writing dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting yourself" (Gussow, 1995: 3). Radio drama, a format favouring dialogue over plot (Fleming, 2001: 20), seems to emphasise Stoppard's ability at writing dialogue, stressing the great timing of his characters' lines, which never fail to surprise the audience with clever jokes and unpredictable replies.

Experimenting with this dramatic format also contributed to Stoppard's growth as a playwright, as it allowed him to explore several themes and techniques that he further developed in his stage plays: radio drama taught Stoppard to build his characters focusing on voice and dialogue, to exploit the potential of aural suggestions, and to explore the mechanisms of memory and the mind to find new forms of dramatic narration (Kelly, 1991: 59). Stoppard's radio pieces show the playwright's unique gift of writing serious plays which result at the same time incredibly funny and entertaining, and which succeed in capturing the attention of the listener and the spectator alike. The audience is also called to participate directly in the dramatic event, using their imagination to visually complete the picture painted by the playwright exclusively through aural signs. Masterfully exploiting radio's dramatic possibilities, Stoppard demonstrates not only that indeed it is possible to craft a form of theatre exclusively for the ear, but that radio drama can still represent a stimulating dramatic format nowadays.

To celebrate Tom Stoppard's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in July 2012, the BBC in collaboration with the British Library has recently produced a set of audio CDs with the original broadcast of four of the playwright's most famous radio plays: *Albert's Bridge*, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, *The Dog It Was That Died*, and *In the Native State*. In addition to this, also the script of Stoppard's previously unpublished radio piece *On 'Dover Beach'* (2007) has finally been made available in the new

edition of the volume collecting the playwright's radio plays published by Faber and Faber<sup>18</sup>. A curious series of events is currently contributing to increasingly bring Stoppard's production for the radio to the attention of the general public, especially after the surprising announcement made during last spring of a new radio play written by Stoppard to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the release of Pink Floyd's 1973 best-selling album *The Dark Side of the Moon*.

The new hour-long play, entitled *Darkside* (2013), aired on BBC Radio 2 on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, with an impressive cast including Iwan Rheon, Bill Nighy, Rufus Sewell and Adrian Scarborough. The play is an original combination of voices, alternating with the lyrics from the album, and with dialogue occasionally written over instrumental pieces. In an interview<sup>19</sup> presenting his new radio play Stoppard explained that he has used the album "as a kind of underscore, [...] picking up some kind of emotional clues from the music", consequently trying to invent a story "in the spirit of the album". The music apparently inspired Stoppard to go back to themes related to moral philosophy, somehow recalling his stage play *Jumpers* (1972), as the playwright chose to include in *Darkside* some characters which have been invented by famous philosophers to illustrate moral dilemmas.

Stoppard's return to the medium that first sustained him at the beginning of his career represents yet another example of how experimental and versatile radio can be, and how it can expand the boundaries of contemporary drama, allowing an unexpected fusion between music and acting. In the same interview, Stoppard affirmed "I am enormously pleased that, in a rather irregular way, I've managed to keep radio as part of my life for fifty years", and with his tenth radio play he has proved once again that radio drama is a timeless dramatic genre, offering innovative and surprising artistic possibilities.

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<sup>18</sup> Stoppard, T. (2012) *Tom Stoppard: Plays Two*, London: Faber & Faber.

<sup>19</sup> An interview with Mark Lawson for BBC Radio 4's *Front Row*, broadcast on 19 August 2013.

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