Inside *Noise*: A Case of Intersemiotic Translation and Metatheatre in Radio Drama

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Abstract

Although a number of discussions, analyses and interpretations of radio drama attempt to make effective use of semiotics, semiotic vocabulary tends to be employed mainly for the purposes of theoretical explications on the relationship between radio productions and their listeners. This seems to be an obvious direction, as intersemiotic translation is an inherent part of radio drama which is essentially based on the written script interpreted via the sound medium. In other words, radio drama may be said to exist thanks to intersemiotic translation between the written word and its acoustic realization. Taking the above as the starting point, this paper aims to show how intersemiotic translation works within *a produced radio play. I want to focus specifically on one BBC radio production entitled* Noise *(2012) and on its basis present the ways in which various semiotic systems (in spite of the apparent limitations of radio drama as a purely sound medium) interact on various levels. This reveals intersemiotic translation within radio plays as conducive to emphasizing its dramatic form, which further results in uncovering radio drama's metatheatrical elements.*

Keywords: *radio drama; intersemiotic translation; metatheatre; Noise*

It is fascinating to observe different ways in which, until the end of the 20th century, radio drama enthusiasts and researchers constantly had to reassert the need for their studies. In 1981, John Drakakis began the introduction to his seminal work *British Radio Drama* by stating that radio plays are characterized by "sporadic" and "incomplete" history (1). Next, in 1999, so almost 20 years later, another important radio drama researcher Tim Crook echoed Drakakis' observation when in the acknowledgements section of his *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* he called radio plays "the most understated creative, dramatic and literary art [form]" (ix).

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By contrast, especially the second decade of the 21st century has brought a far more increased awareness and proliferation of radio drama research. Two selected book-length contributions in this field, Jeff Porter's *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling* and *Audionarratology: Interfaces of Sound and Narrative* edited by Jarmila Mildorf and Till Kinzel (both from 2016), provide an insight into the scope of scholarly interest in radio drama. The former focuses mainly on the American radio in the 1930s and 1940s, attempting to "answer how literary sensibilities [...] radicalized a broadcast medium and were in turn energized by it" (Porter 2016). The latter is a collection of essays on "interfaces of sound and narrative" in the vein of "postclassical narratology" and the term 'audionarratology' refers to "forms and functions of sound and their relation to narrative structure" (Mildorf and Kinzel 2016).

Additionally, the present possibility to listen to radio online means relieving the listeners from the time constraints of traditional broadcasts. Here, the BBC iPlayer – with virtually all radio content available up to 30 days after broadcast – stands out as a prominent example. As Lawrence Raw rightly observes, thanks to the Internet listeners are able to control their listening experience "rather than [be] at the scheduling and archiving whims of individual radio stations and/or their controllers" (2013: 37-8), a further consequence of it being a greater internationalization of radio drama content.

The fact that modern technology provides an opportunity for multiple individual re-broadcasts of chosen radio plays can undoubtedly facilitate closer studies of radio drama. What is more, this reflects the long-awaited need to see radio plays as more than one-off events, which has been succinctly expressed by the leading post-war radio drama researcher Donald McWhinnie in 1959:

> I do believe that any artistic experience worth having can only be enriched by a second acquaintance, and the more profound the content the more closely you need to study it, as you come back again and again to a painting or a piece of music to discover new perspectives, new shades of meaning (McWhinnie 1959: 43 cited in Hand and Traynor 2011: 60).

The above quotation brings us to the methods of studying radio drama. These have varied a lot from the very inception of radio dramatic forms. Although "by 1930 a basic grammar of radio production had been

formulated," the vocabulary of radio drama research has been borrowed from such diverse disciplines as film, literature, theatre or psychology (Drakakis 1981: 7). This interdisciplinarity of theoretical approaches to radio drama has been developing until the present times (to include for instance adaptation studies and, most recently, narratology). What is more, theories established at the very beginning of radio studies are constantly reformulated in order to yield new insights. Good examples of such practices may be the incorporation of Lance Sieveking's thought by Tim Crook (1999: 70-89) or, in the field of Polish studies on radio drama, the return to phenomenological and aesthetic theories of Leopold Blaustein from the inter-war period (Łastowiecki 2013).

When analysing essential features of radio drama, *Dermot Rattigan in his* Theatre of Sound: Radio and the Dramatic Imagination (2002) provides a neat diagram of its constituent parts and it is quite obvious that the underlying theoretical assumptions are based here on semiotics (222). The two opposing poles of the diagram present the dramatic text and the performance text, which instantly brings to mind such semiotic discussions of drama/theatre relationships as the classical approach of Anne Ubersfeld elaborated in her *Reading Theatre* (1999). The numerous elements located between both 'texts' imply that the script for radio drama has to undergo a process of translation into signs of a different nature in order to become a fully realized radio production.[1] This kind of translation, therefore, can safely be called intersemiotic, as it mediates between two different semiotic systems: that of the written text and of its audio realization.[2] This application, albeit indirect in Rattigan's case, of semiotic terminology is nothing surprising and even taken for granted among radio drama researchers (see, for instance, Crisell (1986), White (2005), or Bachura (2012) in Poland). However, it is interesting that the concept of intersemiotic translation is mainly, if not exclusively, used to study how meanings are produced by various elements of radio drama on their way from the script to the listener's ear (as in Rattigan 2002). What could further these analyses is attempting to find out how the concept of intersemiotic translation could be used for the discussion of the worlds created by radio drama, that is within the imaginary realms created by radio productions.

Taking the above as the starting point, in this paper I would like to demonstrate how intersemiotic translation can be seen as operating inside a radio play. I want to focus specifically on one relatively recent BBC radio

production entitled *Noise* (2012) by Alex Bulmer and on its basis present the ways in which various semiotic systems (in spite of the apparent limitations of radio drama as a purely sound medium) interact on various levels. The analysis reveals intersemiotic translation within radio drama as conducive to emphasizing its dramatic form, which further results in uncovering radio drama's metatheatrical aspects.

Noise tells the story of a young woman called Kit, an orphan of Polish origin, who is suffering from a memory loss. Her amnesia is the result of a serious case of hypothermia whose causes are unknown at the beginning of the story. After some time spent in a special clinic, where she takes part in sessions with the psychologist Helena, Kit goes back home and is taken care of by her partner Dan, a freelance music editor and an ex-lecturer. As the story develops, the listener learns that shortly before Kit's accident her relationship with Dan was on the verge of falling apart. Now Dan tries to take advantage of Kit's memory loss in order to replace her original memories with the ones he creates in his own studio by remixing the recordings from their past. He is almost successful when Kit's two encounters – first with Helena, and next with Dan's colleague Matt – spark off a chain of associations in her head that lead to her final realization that she has been cheated and that Dan is responsible for her suffering.

The play begins with a mixture of inexplicable voices, sounds and a piano tune. Together, they create the title 'noise' which the listeners are going to decipher in the course of the play. Out of the noise, the sound of an encephalograph comes to the fore, which signifies the space of the hospital in which we first meet Kit. The first words of the play are spoken by Dan. His exclamation "She blinked!"[3] marks Kit's transition from the unconscious state in which only sounds dominate to the visual reality with language as its defining feature (the listeners would not know what happens to Kit if it were not for Dan's words). Thus, the transition may be said to take place between the aural and visual/verbal semiotic systems, although Kit's core memories still remain in the audio sphere. Additionally, the beginning of the play swiftly foregrounds Kit as the main character by giving the listeners access to the 'noise' in her mind out of which they accompany her while she enters the visual world.

The next step for Kit is to get accustomed to reality again after the shock of hypothermia, which means learning the basics of everyday life anew. She is first assisted by Helena, who from the very beginning takes

total control over Kit's convalescence by isolating Kit from Dan and arranging regular sessions with the girl. During these meetings Helena turns out to be a very matter-of-fact professional who tries to awaken self-confidence in Kit and build in her mind a consistent picture of reality.

It is interesting to observe how much emphasis Helena puts on language. Even before the beginning of the therapy, Helena hears Kit slowly uttering the sequence of letters "ABD," which she instantly corrects to "ABC" in accordance with the alphabetical system. It is only later revealed that Kit at that moment is naming the notes of the melody (so, in other words, a sequence of sounds) she is recalling. However, Helena's concentration on the linguistic aspect of reality is too strong to consider the sequence from a wider perspective. This linguistic focus is further proved by Helena's request that Kit should keep a journal in which she should record all events of a given day so that she can later reread them and gradually construct a reliable reality around her.

On the one hand, the journal is supposed to facilitate the recovery of memory which may be frequently overburdened with the unstoppable flow of new information. As Andrews and Maksimova sum up Lotman's observation, "written text and the process of writing shift the burden of memory from an individual to an external symbolic system" (2008: 264). At the same time, however, language in this case acts like a "memory condenser" (Lotman 1990: 110). Thus, the written observations present the subjective perception which cannot be verified again by any objective means, as going back in time is impossible. Therefore, at the very beginning of her recovery Kit is subjected to the process of reality transformation, albeit for a good purpose.

Helena further underlines the importance of keeping a journal by claiming that "[w]e need history." For her, the process of one's conscious act of writing can at least give an impression of maintaining control over one's life, as she advises Kit: "Take control of the things you can control." In this way, she asks Kit to "translate [herself] through […] history" (Kloepfer and Shaw 1981: 33)[4], which also implies an intersemiotic translation of her memories based on sound into the linguistic order that in Helena's view governs the visible reality.

In their discussion on intersemiotic transposition, based on examples taken from poems accompanied by visual elements, Claus Clüver and Burton Watson observe:

> [T]he interpenetration of visual and verbal signs is such that the meaning constructed from the text as a whole will be quite different from the meanings derived from the signs alone; not infrequently, the signs of one system by themselves do not permit the production of any coherent meaning at all (1989: 57).

This is exactly what Kit seems to be afraid of when she finally returns home and begins her struggle for independent life. As if to 'double check' the reality of her new space, she keeps repeating the words which refer to objects or actions she is performing at a given moment (for example, while pouring hot water into a cup and brewing tea). The naming process she undertakes can seem to be an illustration of gluing together Saussurean signifieds and signifiers. In a comic exchange with Dan, Kit even questions the nature of the object called 'coffee table' as they never put coffee on it. Thus, she underlines the arbitrariness of names given to objects in a language which she is forced to hold on to in order to regain her former self.

Dan's involvement in Kit's convalescence employs a different means. The man attempts to help Kit in her recovery by asking her to listen to selected recordings from the past that they both shared. Dan's strategy is based on his intimate knowledge of Kit. She does not realize it yet, but he is fully aware of Kit's previous fascination with music and, by extension, the reality of sound. That is why he chooses to appeal to her emotions through recorded voices which he has intentionally edited in advance. What is more, in his conversations with Kit – which he also records – he purposefully steers each dialogue in the direction which would equip him with more material for further editing. For instance, shortly after they arrive from the hospital, Dan encourages Kit to repeat the word 'home' with reference to the space of his flat in order to use her voice later as part of the recording which is to prove her former attachment to the life they spent together.

Thus, the word 'home' becomes a metonymy of security and lost happiness for Kit. The significance of this metonymy – which, apart from the metaphor, constitutes a "fundamental [mechanism] of meaning construction" (Osimo 2008: 329) in artistic works – is intentionally narrowed by Dan in order to limit the range of possible interpretations that Kit might come up with while listening to the recordings. What is more, Osimo proposes to see single words as well as texts like metaphorical "mugs":

> One mug (special nuance of a word) is the one that interests us in the given chronotopic context, but the other ones are inseparable, and go around with it. When we stop at a table to deliver our tray (word), we put down our tray having in mind one particular mug (acceptation), but our receivers, sitting at the table, since we (inevitably) give them a lot of mugs with different drinks (acceptations), may decide that they prefer to interpret our word as composed of some other drink, and we, senders, don't always realize that (2008: 328-9).

Kit is actually unable to see beyond a much broader scope of possible interpretations due to Dan's interference with the recordings. The fact that Dan wants to be the sole controller of audio reality for Kit is further highlighted by his admonition that she is never to enter his studio, where he gives acoustic shape to his intrigue.

The "meaning-changing mechanism" (Osimo 2008: 330) that in Dan's case are the edited recordings may also influence the listeners' perception of the main protagonist's name. In this way, even the seemingly stable proper name becomes a fluid concept (Osimo 2008: 330-1). Under Dan's control, Kit becomes a metaphorical "tool kit" which Dan makes use of to realize his plan of keeping his partner forever subordinate to him. The listeners are being reminded of the man's obsession with control every time Dan is alone working on his recordings – at these moments piano music, the same as the one in Kit's head in the opening of the play, is audible in the background.

Therefore, it seems justifiable to claim that two semiotic systems are in conflict inside Kit. Inspired by Helena, Kit strives to establish some contact with reality through the spoken and written languages that are to remain in constant collaboration. On the other hand, her yet unrealized fascination with sound is abused by Dan, who provides her with fabricated facts. These two conflicting semiotic systems fight within Kit's mind and as the play progresses it transpires that the constant undermining of Helena's therapeutic measures by Dan's deception leaves Kit alone in her struggle for recovery.

The turning point for Kit comes with the unexpected visit of Dan's colleague Matt, who became her confidant shortly before Kit's accident. To him she confessed the problems she had with Dan's obsessive love for her. The meeting ends quite abruptly because Dan earlier falsely informs Kit that she was sexually abused by Matt. Having been isolated from all other

people apart from Helena and Dan, Kit resorts to the only information she possesses and asks Matt to leave.

However, the visit is long enough to awaken Kit's suspicions. This takes place in an exchange which interweaves numerous strands of the semiotic systems presented in the play. As a music teacher who previously taught Kit to play the piano, Matt expresses his surprise at the fact that the piano in Dan and Kit's flat serves only as a support for flowers. For Kit, this function of the object, which has been devised and imposed by Dan, is unquestionable. In Kit's linguistic system a 'piano' – with its arbitrarily assigned name – may only be a piece of decorative furniture, which reflects her previous experience with the inexplicable nature of the name for the coffee table. However, when Matt keeps insisting that the piano is actually Kit's property, brought to the flat of her own initiative, the two semiotic systems which Kit has so far tried to reconcile begin to be in conflict.

The linguistic system proposed by Helena seems to have failed, as the process of naming and assigning functions to objects is questioned by Matt as an outside observer. Inevitably, Dan becomes the first suspect as it is him that prepared the flat before Kit's arrival from the hospital. In addition, Dan stands for the semiotic system of sound which provides Kit with her memories and is intended to help her construct an integrated personality. What is even more important, the object which triggers the conflict of semiotic systems may also be said to embody both of them. At first, the piano for Kit is a linguistic construct with a function unconnected with any production of sound. After Matt's visit the piano reveals its potential for producing sounds which Kit can control – it was her who learnt to play it, the learnt piece was by Chopin and in fact it is his music that the listeners can hear at the beginning of the play as well as later in various moments of the story.

Thus, Kit undergoes a transformation. At first she is an active interpreter/creator of the linguistic semiotic system and a mere recipient of the audio semiotic system. With the realization that she could and perhaps still can control sounds, Kit expands her area of independence and realizes that her freedom in interpreting reality can go beyond just one semiotic system.

The climax of the play results precisely from this realization. While preparing a special dinner to celebrate Kit's progress, the girl picks up on Dan's accidental remark about one of their trips and asks him to play one

of the recordings again. It is important to notice that at this point it is her who for the first time consciously selects audio input. After listening to the recording she quickly compares it with her written records in the journal and finds out a serious discrepancy between two versions of the same story. This pushes her to instinctively accuse Dan of deceiving her. Paradoxically, the inconsistency between the two semiotic systems brings about her consistency of mind. This is how she becomes the organising agent in constructing her own independent perspective on the world.

The play ends with a mix of sounds, voices and noises that are almost identical with the opening sequence. Now, however, all elements are clear and understandable. Once more the listeners enter Kit's mind to find out that perhaps the form of her memories has not changed, but the content is finally decipherable. The last exchange between the characters belongs to Dan and Kit. After the man observes that the weather outside is so cold that it is hard to imagine anyone being able to endure such low temperatures, Kit answers briefly: "I can." Her words are doubly meaningful. Firstly, they refer to her regained physical endurance and secondly, to her mental abilities which she is now learning to control even more fully.

As it can be observed, intersemiotic translation in *Noise* works on numerous levels. With regard to therapeutic methods applied to Kit, Helena attempts to translate her sensations, feelings and observations into the semiotic system of language. Dan not only translates Kit's unrevealed memories into sound, but first of all by fabricating them supplies the versions which conform to his devious plan. In each case, Kit is the final recipient of the intersemiotic translation process.

It is interesting to note that during the scene when Kit compares the two versions of her memories – one in sound and the other in the written form – it is the latter that turns out to find its confirmation in Matt's words. Therefore, the suggestion is that the written record – which might be called a translation of a conceptual structure into its corresponding linguistic form (Osimo 2002: 618-9) – is supposed to be credited with more reliability. At this point one is reminded of the above-mentioned diagram by Dermot Rattigan, in which the written text is at the source of the aural realization of a radio play. Therefore, the hierarchy suggested inside the play Noise is also applicable to the process of creating radio drama, which almost always possesses the written text as its indispensable basis. Such a connection

provokes a discussion on metatheatrical elements which can be observed in the analyzed play.

In the words of Lionel Abel, metatheatrical plays

> have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. [...] Now, from a certain point of view, only that life which has acknowledged its inherent theatricality can be made interesting on the stage. From the same modern view, events, when interesting, will have the quality of having been thought, rather than of having simply occurred (2003: 135).

These remarks are only partly applicable to *Noise*. This is because, on the one hand, the listeners throughout the play are encouraged to accept that they are participating in the events that have "simply occurred." Kit has to struggle with her memory loss and at no time does she signal that as a person "appearing on the [radio] stage" she knows she is "dramatic before the playwright took note of [her]."

On the other hand, a closer look at *Noise* reveals that this radio drama is in fact about various aspects of creation: Dan in his recordings creates memories for Kit; Helena creates a way of approaching reality in order to help Kit regain her former self; finally, Kit struggles to create her own world out of the contradictory elements she is supplied with.

Among metatheatrical elements enumerated by Patrice Pavis – which include a play within a play, addressing the audience or making theatre the subject of dialogue (2002: 287-9) – he also suggests that metatheatre is present everywhere the depicted reality resembles theatre. This is especially true for *Noise*. Dan is involved in the process of editing the recordings, which is precisely what takes place during the post-production of radio plays. Therefore, the listeners experience post-production on a double level. They receive the effects of post-production of the play called *Noise* (produced for the BBC by Polly Thomas) as a play about a man trying to 'post-produce' a young woman's memories. In this way, everything that takes place once Kit moves to stay in Dan's flat resembles a carefully planned performance based primarily on words and sounds, so in fact the essence of radio drama.

What is more, the fact that the play begins with the noise inside Kit's head gains here additional significance. By putting emphasis on the need for the disentanglement of the various sounds in Kit's memory, the listeners are persuaded to think of the radio play *Noise* as a selection of Kit's memories which are remixed by Dan, transcribed with Helena's help and targeted at Kit as their ultimate recipient *within* the world of radio drama.

When one steps beyond this world and becomes conscious of his role as a listener, the fact to be considered is the moment when Kit finds her independent way to regain memory through combining contradictory verbal and sound inputs she has received. Just like Kit's understanding arises out of the discovery of interrelationships and contradictions which she is left alone to decipher, the task of the listeners – also alone in their experience of listening to radio drama – seems to hinge on being watchful of gaps that have to be filled in. These gaps appeal to to the organising power of the listeners' imagination whose aim is to discover the "translation system" peculiar to a given radio play and then to learn its "system of teaching it" (Kloepfer and Shaw 34) to the listeners.

Notes

1. Rattigan calls the two processes "literary inception" and "aural realization" (222).
2. The term "intersemiotic translation" is used here after Jakobson, who in his essay "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" defines intersemiotic translation as an interpretation of verbal signs into non-verbal ones (1959: 260-1). By extension, intersemiotic translation can be understood more broadly as an interpretation of one semiotic system by another.
3. All quotations have been transcribed directly from the play.
4. Although Kloepfer and Shaw use the quoted statement in reference to prose works and the characters' relation to historical change, it seems also perfectly applicable to the context of the discussed play.

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