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# Radio Aesthetics in Pinter's Early Drama

## Abstract

This article studies Pinter's use of media to show that his early drama shifts from a transmedial strategy (different from adaptation), which allows plays to migrate freely between theatre, radio and television, to an intermedial poetics that exploits the affordances of various media while resisting transposition. Starting out with a terminological excursion and a discussion of Pinter's earliest works that feature a "radio aesthetics", the article explores *The Hothouse* as a play that thematizes radio and audio technologies. *A Night Out* and *Night School* are then analyzed as examples of Pinter's approach to acoustic and visual media, concluding with *Landscape* and *Family Voices* as marking the transition to his later work. The aim of this article is to stress the value of archival and intermedial methodologies for a fuller understanding of Pinter's dramatic practice, and to emphasize the largely overlooked importance of radio within it.

## Keywords

Harold Pinter, transmediality, intermediality, adaptation, radio

Harold Pinter's stage plays and his works for radio or television – this article will not consider the films or screenplays – are often studied separately, but the relationship between them and their many migrations between media, often straddling more than one, are only beginning to receive the critical attention they deserve. If the connection between works for stage and screen are sometimes explored, due to their common visual nature, his theatre is rarely studied in light of his radio plays, which are usually considered in isolation, if at all, and often as minor works. This state of affairs is partly the result of a more general bias

towards visual manifestations of culture in both literary and media scholarship, countered only recently with the emergence of paradigms such as sound studies and audionarratology (see Mildorf and Kinzel 2016; Bernaerts and Mildorf 2021), but single-author fields are not exempt from it. Another explanation is that, compared to Pinter's screenplays, it is often difficult to delineate his radio plays clearly. Critics generally agree on *A Slight Ache* and *Family Voices* as having been written originally for radio, and *The Dwarfs* is often approached as a radio play too, but these were also staged or televised and many others could be heard on the air, often even premiering there, so a broader perspective on what exactly constitutes Pinter's radiophonic body of work is necessary.

In order to meet that demand, this article focuses on the relationship between his radio and stage drama, including television as a go-between, to argue that his earlier plays are shaped by "transmedial" strategies that gradually evolve into an "intermedial" poetics in the later work. Many of Pinter's plays from the 1950s and 1960s seem to have been designed bearing a "cross-medial" purpose in mind. This made them readily adjustable to radio and television broadcast, as well as theatrical performance, with minimal changes and no significant loss – even gain in some cases, as I aim to argue below. Many of the later works are noticeably more resistant to such treatment, even shielded from it by Pinter himself. Although they continue to exhibit the remnant traces of radio, and therefore still qualify as intermedial, their transposition leads to a considerably altered, if not diminished, aesthetic experience.

It is difficult to study this evolution in Pinter's oeuvre using the texts as published by Faber and Faber in their four-volume edition of the plays, which always (for practical purposes that remain unstated) favours one version of the text over another, not necessarily that of the medium for which it was originally, but not exclusively conceived – if that can be determined at all. For this reason, the present article adopts a partly archival methodology,

following in the footsteps of Basil Chiasson's recent monograph on *The Late Harold Pinter* (2017). It combines correspondence from the BBC Written Archives in Caversham with audio recordings from the BBC Sound Archive as well as documents from the Harold Pinter Archive at the British Library in London. Comparing manuscripts and typescripts to the Faber texts offers a glimpse into the changes Pinter made before publication, as revisions often reflect the (re-)calibration of a given work for theatre, radio and television. In addition to the archival materials kept at Caversham and London, information from magazines such as the *Radio Times* – now available through the *BBC Genome* website – allow for a more comprehensive investigation of Pinter's engagement with media and his developing understanding of them.

After a clarification of the terms “transmediality” and “intermediality”, distinguishing them from the more common “adaptation”, this article first discusses examples of “radiophonic aesthetics” in some of Pinter's earlier works, including *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. These plays will be dealt with summarily, however, because the archive contains almost no draft material for them. The argument continues with *The Hothouse*, for its emphasis on sound technologies, followed by the highly transmedial plays *A Night Out* and *Night School*, which survive in multiple versions. The analysis concludes with *Landscape* and *Family Voices* to signal the start of a more exclusively intermedial phase in Pinter's career. By foregrounding some of his less-studied plays over much more extensively covered ones such as *The Dwarfs* and *A Slight Ache*, the article aims to argue that all works are imperative to understand Pinter's use of media, not only or necessarily the major and better-known ones.

## **Terminology**

As Irina O. Rajewsky rightly notes, so many different interpretations of “intermediality” exist that it is almost impossible to formulate a universal denotation. Variant terms abound as well, so “it becomes necessary to define one’s own particular understanding of intermediality more precisely, and to situate one’s individual approach within a broader spectrum” (2005, 45). On the one hand, Rajewsky situates historical or media-philosophical approaches to intermediality, which are primarily concerned with the diachronic development of media and their relationship to one another, notably in terms of their technological makeup and the modalities they employ or combine – a process which Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1998) label “remediation”. On the other hand, she posits a definition of intermediality rooted in literary studies, which will be the focus of the present article, but then applied to Pinter.

In this narrowed sense, Rajewsky identifies three subcategories of intermediality which all “have to do in some way with a crossing of borders between media” (50). The first, “medial transposition”, involves “the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium” (51). Chiel Kattenbelt, writing specifically in the context of theatre and performance, prefers to use the term “transmediality” for this process, defining it as “the change (transposition, translation etc) from one medium to another”, whereby “once converted into the other medium very little reminds us of the medium specificity of the literary original” (2008, 23). This use of the terms “medial transposition” and “transmediality” for what is more generally known as “adaptation” is confusing, especially in view of what narratologists refer to as “transmedia(l) storytelling”.

This concept was developed by Marie-Laure Ryan (2004; 2014), Henry Jenkins (2006) and Jan-Noël Thon (2014; 2016) to designate storyworlds that are constructed across multiple media, including video games, films, comics, etc. Instead of just replicating the same narrative content for every additional format or adapting it, they all have to add something new to the overarching storyline by tapping into each medium’s unique creative

affordances. As a result, the storyworld is transmedially developed or advanced instead of merely reiterated. Although Pinter retells his stories with a slant, rather than developing or extending them across multiple media, adaptation does not quite cover the complex nature of this process, since it implies that a text is first designed for one particular mode of expression – radio, theatre, television – before it is converted to another. In Pinter’s case, media-flexibility seems coded into much of his early work from the start, allowing many of his plays to be rendered visually as well as acoustically in a variety of ways. This makes it hard, if not impossible, to distinguish between an “original” and a “target” medium. For this reason, transmediality is a more adequate term to describe the phenomenon than adaptation.

Rajewsky’s second subcategory, called “media combination”, involves “combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation . . . present in their own materiality” (2005, 51–52). Better known as “multimediality”, this phenomenon is typical of contemporary art installations and performances that highlight the audiovisual experience over the text. By extension, an author such as Pinter, who worked in different genres and media, can be regarded as a “multimedial” artist. Kattenbelt’s understanding of the term is largely identical to Rajewsky’s, with the addition that “because of its capacity to incorporate all media . . . we can consider theatre as a hypermedium”, and so, “because it is a hypermedium . . . theatre provides, as no other art, a stage for intermediality” (2008, 23). As we shall come to see, theatre occupied a similar place in Pinter’s work, always in relation to the other media he practiced.

Kattenbelt’s mentioning of the term “intermediality” brings us to the third and also final category in Rajewsky’s typology, namely “intermedial references” or

references in a literary text to a film through, for instance, the evocation or imitation of certain filmic techniques such as zoom shots, fades, dissolves, and montage

editing. Other examples include the so-called musicalization of literature, *transposition d'art*, *ekphrasis*, references in film to painting, or in painting to photography, and so forth. (2005, 52)

This intertextual connotation of the term “reference” is somewhat infelicitous, suggesting that mere quotation or mention of another medium suffices. However, Rajewsky specifies that “the given media-product” not just “thematizes” and “evokes” but, above all, “imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means” (53). Or, put differently, intermediality always presupposes the transposition of certain characteristics more readily associated with one medium – say radio – to another – for example theatre – rather than “combining different medial forms of articulation” (53) or so-called modes (image, text, sound, etc.) in one medium, which is the domain of multimediality. According to Kattenbelt, intermediality further encapsulates “those co-relations between different media that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other, which in turn leads to a refreshed perception” (2008, 25).

This dynamic, and particularly the central role that radio occupies within it, I wish to show, is what partly accounts for the radical transformation of Pinter’s stage drama from the 1960s to the 1980s. His deft combination of a transmedial approach, on the one hand, with an intermedial exchange, on the other, created a radical blurring of genre and media boundaries, which is one of the key elements that renders Pinter’s theatre in particular, as the hypermedium where all this experience accumulates, so original and innovative, especially in the 1970s.

## **Radio Aesthetics**

As Humphrey Carpenter has shown in his cultural history of the Third Programme and Radio 3, Pinter was an avid listener to the wireless in his younger years (1997, 50). It is little surprise, then, that he went on to work as a voice actor for the BBC in the early 1950s, to learn what he called “microphone technique” (208), before submitting the first scripts by his own hand in the late 1950s. However, *The Room* and *The (Birthday) Party* were both rejected at the time by BBC Script Editor Babara Bray.

For *The Room*, Pinter seemed to cherish little hope to begin with. On 6 December 1957, he confessed to Bray that most of the play’s impact on the stage appeared to have come from its visual aspects, so that television would probably be a more suitable medium for it than radio. (BBC WAC Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957 – 62).<sup>1</sup> Despite his misgivings, *The Room* is not entirely devoid of radiophonic potential. It features the character Bert Hudd, who is silent for most of the play, and Riley, an ominous “*blind Negro*” (Pinter 1996a, 106) who walks with a stick and hides away in the “black dark” (105) of the basement, which functions as a sightless and imaginative space of sorts alongside the visual domain of the stage. Strangely present and absent at once, he eventually imparts his loss of sight to Bert’s wife, Rose. These characteristics may be said to prefigure the famously mute and supposedly blind matchseller of Pinter’s radio play *A Slight Ache*, who mysteriously infects Edwards’s eyes with a similar ailment and usurps his place alongside Flora, his infatuated wife.

Eyesight also plays a central role in *The Birthday Party*. Stanley, silent and inert for most of Act II, is deprived of his glasses by McCann, which in turn triggers a mental breakdown and reduces his speech to the mere emission of “*sounds from his throat*” such as “Ug-gughh ... uh-gughhh” and “Caaahhh ... caaahhh” (78–79). The script even calls for a blackout during which “*The stage is in darkness*” and the spectators must rely on their ears to figure out what is going on, as if they are listening to a radio play collectively in a theatrical



space (58). Apart from Pinter's notorious emphasis on language in most of his works, thus playing into one of the medium's foremost strengths, the constant tension between seeing and blindness is striking in this respect. It bestows on these plays a radiophonic quality that hinges on the absence of sight – a trait often ascribed to the “blind theatre” of radio (Crook 1999, 53–69) – while altering the function of language and sound in the dark.

Bray recognized as much when she read the script of *The Dumb Waiter* and judged in her memo of 28 April 1959 that it “could be rewritten as very effective radio” (BBC WAC, Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957-62). However, the play did not air until March 1965, when two extracts were included in a programme called “How People Talk”, and then again in 1973, when another ten-minute extract featured in a broadcast “For Schools”. Indeed, *The Dumb Waiter* is radiogenic. Two men, Ben and Gus, are waiting in a windowless basement, entirely cut off from the floors above, until they notice a serving hatch with a speaking-tube. They use it to send messages, but fail to establish a meaningful exchange, which brings to mind Bertolt Brecht's comment that “the radio is one-sided when it should be two-sided. It is only a distribution apparatus, it merely dispenses” (2000, 42). To overcome this situation, “radio must be transformed from a distribution apparatus into a communications apparatus”. The question should be “how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a network instead of isolating him” (42). But it is exactly isolation that makes Ben and Gus turn on each other. In thus exploiting some of radio broadcasting's unique traits, while toying with its major shortcomings, *The Dumb Waiter* could potentially be read as a witty reflection on the wireless and related technologies of telecommunication.

Pinter himself came closest to expressing his radio poetics in relation to *The Dwarfs*. “Penned in the early 1950s, before Pinter turned his hand to plays,” Mark Taylor-Batty points out, “it was put aside until 1960 when extracts were distilled into a radio play. Returning to

the book in 1989, Pinter decided to revise and publish it, dismissing the radio version as ‘quite abstract’” (2005, 220). This abstraction, however, was entirely the point and part of the reason why Pinter experienced writing for the wireless as such a liberating experience in the first place. As he explains in an interview from 1961:

I like writing for sound radio, because of the freedom. When I wrote *The Dwarfs* a few months ago, I was able to experiment in form – a mobile, flexible structure, more flexible and mobile than in any other medium. And from the point of view of content I was able to go the whole hog and enjoy myself by exploring to a degree which wouldn’t be acceptable in any other medium. I’m sure the result may have been completely incomprehensible to the audience, but it isn’t as far as I’m concerned, and it was extremely valuable to me. (Pinter 1996b, x)

Indeed, *The Dwarfs* bends all traditional conceptions of time and space, anticipating the later “memory plays”, with Len observing that “the rooms we live in . . . open and shut . . . change shape at their own will”, so he “can’t tell the boundaries, their limits” (87). Identity does not escape destabilization either, as Len tells Mark: “What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can’t keep up with it and and I’m damn sure you can’t either” (100). This skewed perception could very well be ascribed to Len’s mental breakdown, which also makes him hallucinate about mysterious little dwarfs. However, bearing Pinter’s comment about radio in mind, one is tempted to wonder if Len’s ‘*listening to wireless (earphones)*’ (102) – i.e. a self-enclosed encounter with a flexible and mobile world – might have something to do with the livelihood of his imagination, an by extension Pinter’s.

## Sound Technologies

While clearly sharing the formal freedom of *The Dwarfs*, as well as its theme of mental illness, compared to the plays Pinter had written up to that point *The Hothouse* stands out for its much more pervasive use of acoustic elements and sound technologies. After the psychiatric patient Lamb is placed into a “*sound-proof room*” by Gibbs and Miss Cuts, they communicate with him through a microphone from the control room, activated by a clicking switch, while Lamb is speaking into a receiving set wearing a pair of earphones (Pinter 1996a, 235). As soon as he is “plugged in” to the system, we hear the voices of Gibbs and Miss Cuts assailing him with questions, not waiting for his answers and frequently exposing him to an unpleasant noise that drives him to “*emitting high-pitched cries*” (244). For Miss Cuts, it is her “favourite room in the whole place”, so much even that “the intimacy becomes unbearable” (294), a feeling often associated with listening to the wireless. Later in the play, Gibbs, Roote and Lush also use an intercom, which sounds “a bit clogged up”, to try and speak to Tubb, who has “fitted up the loudspeaker system with an extension to all the corridors leading into the patients’ rooms” (276), so that all can hear Roote’s annual Christmass address, a feat Lush praises as “an exciting innovation” (288). *The Hothouse* also indulges in sound effects, most notably when the inmates are released in a cacophony of “*squeaks*”, “*locks turning*”, “*rattle of chains*”, “*great clanging*”, “*whispers*”, “*chuckles*” and “*half-screams*”, until “*the sounds reach a feverish pitch and stop*” (319). Such an interaction of voices and sounds would make for a gripping listening experience indeed, utilizing the medium’s lack of visuals to the fullest, but the play was – strangely enough – never broadcast.

According to Mark Taylor-Batty, *The Hothouse* was first “drafted for radio in 1958 but abandoned until 1980” (2005, 32). Indeed, Pinter first mentioned his idea to Bray in a

letter of 19 October 1958, soon followed on 12 November 1958 by an untitled three-page “Synopsis for a radio play” that was “set in a psychological research centre” (BBC WAC, Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957-62). Pinter’s summary of the play (broken down into five scenes) is much shorter than the text we know, mostly concentrating on the soundproof room, and slightly differs in its narrative details. Most importantly, his treatment of the material is more acoustic, already including many of the elements listed above, but also others. One of them is a tape recorder playing back questions to an unsuspecting Lamb while the interrogators retire for lunch, with cuts between the doctor and his assistants amidst the din of the cafeteria and the man in the silent room. Michael Bakewell’s internal memo of 18 November 1958 praised it as “a witty, sharp and thoroughly arresting and absorbing play” (BBC WAC, Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957-62). But, as was so often the case, Head of Drama Val Gielgud took a different view, instructing Bray to inform Pinter on 25 November 1958 that he would like to “have a further word” with him. The nature of their conversation is unknown, but a pencilled note at the bottom of the memo, dated 1 December 1958, reads: “Synopsis returned author for revision” (BBC WAC, Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957-62). Next, an extended synopsis found its way onto Bray’s desk by 24 December 1959, but its fate is unclear. If it was one of the more developed typewritten versions preserved at the British Library (all undated), these do not give a clear indication that *The Hothouse* was intended for broadcast. A list of “set instructions” even suggests that the play was now being geared for a theatrical performance, or at least left that option open. More accurately, perhaps, these earlier drafts reveal Pinter trying out several ideas that would work particularly well on the radio, had perhaps even originated in that medium, whereas others would be more attuned to a theatrical setting. It seems he never quite managed to fully integrate the two, which may explain why the script was put aside at the time, not to be

further overhauled for the stage until twenty years later, yet still retaining some its radiophonic origins, even then.

For example, there is a rather long bit of dumbshow that lends the play a more theatrical atmosphere. In the typescript, Miss Cutts opens up the soundproof room to Lamb and enters it with him, but then she closes the door again, so the audience can still see the two talking but is unable hear what they are saying. This spectacle continues as Gibbs walks in and shakes hands with Lamb while speaking mutely, until Miss Cutts exits to the control room and switches on the microphone, thus resuming the conversation of the two men in mid-sentence and making it audible for the spectators again (British Library, Add MS 88880/1/25, 36r). In the published text (Pinter 1996a, 235–36), they just enter the soundproof room and continue the conversation unhindered, whereas Pinter exploits that space, by means of audio technologies, to unsettle the stage business in the earliest surviving typescript. Because it relies so heavily on sight for its dramatic effect, the scene would be difficult to replicate on radio. Then again, other passages are more explicit about sound, which is significantly downplayed in the published version. The voices of Gibbs and Miss Cuts, both heard normally, are distinguished from Lamb's, which is coming from a loudspeaker, since he is inside the soundproof room. There is also a cue in the stage directions for the high-pitched buzz he is subjected to, making Lamb twist his body and scream (British Library, Add MS 88880/1/25, 40r). The latter are mentioned in the published version (Pinter 1996a, 244), but not the voices and the sounds. Also absent is Lamb's response to the question by Miss Cuts and Gibbs about what he has heard, expressing his inability to tell if the sounds were human or not. This scene would have worked particularly well on radio.

Even if *The Hothouse* shows an influence of the medium and related sound technologies on Pinter's dramatic writing, he was clearly still struggling to fit them all into a coherent script. Considerable adjustment, in both directions, would still be required to make

the play effective as either radio or theatre. While it may have been a valuable learning experience, it was not an altogether successful one just yet. In some of the plays that followed next, Pinter did manage to reconcile the two dramatic modes more efficiently, by deploying a transmedial strategy.

## **Transmediality**

First aired by the BBC Third Programme on 1 March 1960, *A Night Out* was then broadcast, on 24 April 1960 by the commercial network ABC Television as part of its *Armchair Theatre* programme, and later it was also performed on stage. Based on the published text, one would think it had been originally conceived for television, due to its stage directions, divisions into acts and scenes, as well as a focus on visual close-ups, but this is at odds with its radio premiere. *A Night Out* is sometimes regarded as a radio play by critics (Esslin 1992, 81), perhaps because of its success in the medium and the fact that it was entered for the Italia Prize in that category (the bilingual English-French script is preserved at the BBC WAC). Still, Jimmy Wax, Pinter's agent, suggests a different chronology in his letter to Bray of 10 June 1959, informing her that Pinter would be willing to make a radio version of some new material he was in the process of developing, but that he wanted it to be commissioned for television first (Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957-62). This comment is peculiar, not only because the play premiered on radio, but also because the later contract stipulated this should be the case, even placing an embargo on all commercial television broadcasts, as appears from Wax's letter to Bray of 30 November 1959 (BBC WAC, Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957-62).

When Pinter submitted his four-page synopsis of *A Night Out* on 7 July 1959 (this time in eight scenes), he explicitly presented it as "a play for radio" on the first page. Yet,

unlike his synopsis of *The Hothouse*, the narrative is sketched in a distinctly visual way, alluding to scenes that would be lost on radio or difficult to convey in sound without added speech, for example Albert's mother tucking a handkerchief into the top pocket of his suit, or the cross cutting to couples dancing at the company party. However, around the middle of the script, Pinter starts paying more attention to acoustic elements, such as the sound of Albert's footsteps on the stairs, his screaming and shouting at his mother, or the voice acting during the scene with the girl. It even mentions a telephone call to the police after Albert has vacated her apartment. If *A Night Out* started life as a television play, it was now veering towards the radio medium, a transmedial shift that can be traced in Pinter's synopsis. It is also reflected in the BBC's response, positive on the whole, but leaving Bryan Izzard wondering about the "storyline" in his memo of 20 July 1959: "Mr Pinter gives very little clue as to how he intends to treat it. . . . I would imagine that the party scenes and the scene with the girl could become particularly powerful, and also the last scene with the crumbling Albert after his temporary elevation" (Rcont1 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter File I 1957-62). These are, indeed, key scenes that Pinter treats very differently for radio and television, which shows not only his growing understanding of what distinguishes the two media, but also his increasing willingness – perhaps out of sheer necessity, given the previous rejections – to adopt a transmedial approach to playwriting. If we compare the two productions, using the published text as an intermediary, it is clear that the play takes quite naturally to both radio and television, fascinatingly using the particular assets of each medium.

The two renditions of *A Night Out* shed a different light on Albert's role in the incident at the party. Completely in keeping with the visual nature of the medium, the television version emphasizes looking, staring and gawking. As if to turn the male gaze of the camera onto itself, long before Laura Mulvey would draw our attention to it in 1975, the stage directions in the published text read "*EILEEN turns and stares at ALBERT. Silence. All*

*stare at ALBERT*", soon followed by *"They look at each other, open-mouthed and wide-eyed"* (Pinter 1996a, 354). For the audience – though not for the party-goers – the matter is soon cleared up, as *"The Camera closes on MR. RYAN'S hand, resting comfortably on his knees, and then to his face which, smiling vaguely, is inclined to the ceiling"* (355). This is also how the BBC television remake of 1967 handles the scene (Pinter 2019), but it is hard to do on radio, where Albert's comment *"What are you looking at me for?"* (Pinter 1996a, 354) sounds like a poor attempt at conveying his anxiety under the accusatory glances that rest on him. Mr Ryan merely giggles in the radio version, an acoustic cue standing in for a visual one. Although his laughter, just like his smiling, still makes him seem suspicious, the radio version does so more subtly and ambiguously than the television play. As a result, it is less clear to listeners than to spectators if Albert is in fact innocent, depending on the medium.

When he threatens his mother with the alarm clock she had set to wake up just in time for his return, it ticks in the background throughout the scene as a bomb waiting to go off. The sound can be heard in both the radio and television versions, where it fulfils a similar function, but its impact again differs with regard to how we interpret the ending. Even if the published text at this point simply calls for *"A stifled scream from his mother"* (361), without added sound effects, the television script and the 1967 BBC version have Albert put the clock down again, leaving her unharmed, but this remains vague in the radio version. When he later returns home, on television we first hear the voice of his mother calling out to him, after which she appears in the picture, thus visually confirming that she is still alive:

*He sits heavily, loosely, in a chair, his legs stretched out. Scratching his arms, he yawns, luxuriously, scratches his head with both hands and stares ruminatively at the ceiling, a smile on his face. His mother's voice calls his name.*



*His body freezes. His gaze comes down. His legs slowly come together. He looks in front of him. His MOTHER comes into the room, in her dressing gown. She stands, looking at him. (374)*

Although the television version again resolves the ambiguity, the additional value of the visual medium is that it conveys the dramatic change in Albert's body language. Because he does not say a word in this scene, the "blind" medium of radio seems powerless to match it. It finds an intriguing way of dealing with the situation, by building on the previous scene with the clock, which did not reveal if Albert struck his mother with it or not, before stepping out into the night again. Because we do not see his mother on the radio, only hear her voice, it is possible that he imagines her presence, having interiorized her as part of his psyche, as she is lying unconscious on the kitchen floor, possibly dead. This is similar to what Alfred Hitchcock does at the end of *Psycho*, when Norman Bates's deceased mother speaks through her son as he sits staring the camera or the spectator full in the lens or the eye, with a look of harrowing defiance. It is film, so the ambiguity is resolved, but Pinter leaves it intact in the radio version of *A Night Out*. We do hear footsteps on the stairs, but the sound of Albert's mother drawing up a chair (375) seems purposefully left out of the radio broadcast, and her voice is always at the same remove through audioposition, sounding intimately close, not distant or drawing near.

As opposed to *A Night Out*, *Night School* was first broadcast on Associated Rediffusion Television, as part of ITV's *Television Playhouse* series, in July 1960, the radio version trailing on BBC Network Three in 1966. Despite its television premiere, the published text is the radio script, so again this is contrary to *A Night Out*, yet Pinter's treatment of key scenes in this play is quite similar. When Walter goes up to his room one last time, to retrieve some of his things, he rummages through Sally's belongings and finds an

envelope. We do not yet learn about its contents in the published version, which follows the radio production by simply reading: “*He opens the cupboard and rummages. (Muttering.) Where’s that damn case? Wait a minute ... what’s this? Sound of large envelope tearing. (Softly.) Gaw ... huuhh!*” (Pinter 1996b, 198). Here it becomes interesting to look at Pinter’s manuscripts again, as an earlier draft of what is clearly the television script – in which Walter is still called Desmond – sketches the scene quite differently. As we watch him open the envelope, we see that he is looking at a picture of Sally in underclothes, striking a suggestive pose at two men in what appears to be a nightclub setting (British Library, Add MS 88880/1/46, 08r). As this example shows, not only does the television version disclose immediately that the item is a photograph of Sally, Walter/Desmond also peers at it and we see what is on it through his perspective, so Pinter is again approaching the medium in visual terms, as with *A Night Out*. In the televised version as developed on the typescript, we learn from the outset that Sally works as a stripper, and thus also that she is the girl referred to as Katinka in the nightclub scenes, because we recognize her as Sally on sight.

The radio version is different, divulging bits of information piece by piece acoustically. Hearing only the sound of an envelope, we do not yet know which item Walter has discovered in his/Sally’s room. It is not until later, when he shows the photograph to Solto, that we realize this must be it. We also learn more about what is on it when Walter asks: “This is a club, isn’t it, in the photo? . . . And that girl’s a hostess, isn’t she?” (Pinter 1996b, 203). Solto wishes to know who she is, but Walter refuses to give up her identity. Solto has of course heard him talk of a schoolteacher at the house and he is clever enough to put two and two together. Even more intriguing is the way Sally’s double identity is handled on the radio. Earlier in the play, Walter says the following to her:

WALTER. You’re a Northerner?

SALLY. That's clever of you. I thought I'd...

WALTER. I can tell the accent.

SALLY. I thought I'd lost it...

WALTER. There's something in your eyes too. You only find it in Lancashire girls.

(209)

It is easy to lose track of this conversation by the time we reach the later nightclub scenes and hear Katinka – Sally's alias – speak for the first time. When she tells her colleague Barbara of Solto's indecent proposal, claiming that she said to him "Go on, get off out of it, buzz off before I call a copper" (214), the listener realizes that it is not another girl speaking here, but Sally in a Lancashire dialect, contrasting sharply with the sophisticated and snobbish RP English she dons in her role as schoolteacher. In visual renditions, this scene does not have the same impact, as it is easier to recognize Sally, but on radio her identification depends largely on the listeners' ability to recall that she is from the North. The text as published resolves this ambiguity entirely and instantly, her first line as Katinka being given as Sally's. This is thus an excellent example of how the voice can be used to convey narrative information through sound alone on the radio and create a listening experience that is not only more gripping, but also more demanding and ambiguous than the televised version, as was the case with *A Night Out*.

### **Intermediality**

Shortly after *Night School* was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme, Pinter finished a new play, *Landscape*. Upon reading the script, Esslin felt it would make "splendid radio", writing to the author on 29 December 1967: "Dare I ask whether it would be available?"

(BBC WAC Rcont12 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter (David Baron) File II 1963-1967). Pinter feelings about the request were mixed, as appears from his response of 4 January 1968. While he claims to have written the play specifically for the stage, to visually offset the immobility of the actors with the words they speak, he does allow Esslin to broadcast *Landscape* after it has been performed in a theatre (BBC WAC Rcont12 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter (David Baron) File II 1963-1967).

The voices of Beth and Duff, meandering in a landscape of memories real or imagined, apparently unaware of each other, their bodies and minds stretching across time and space – as in *The Dwarfs* – do seem rather radiogenic. But the arresting image of two static figures, almost reduced to mere conduits for speech, isolated or disconnected yet simultaneously present in the same performative space, generates an essentially theatrical experience, however informed by radio aesthetics it may be. As Anna McMullan has illustrated for Samuel Beckett's drama, the disembodied effect of radio spurred on the radical "re-embodiment" of his later plays, with their disjointed heads and mouths, even ghosts (2010, 4). In a similar way, for Pinter, the free-flowing exploration of thought in "memory plays" such as *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Old Times* and *No Man's Land* significantly alters the dramatic form of his stage theatre, as well as the function of the body and the voice within it, fusing elements of radio and theatre.

Esslin respected Pinter's views, replying on 11 January 1968: "I quite understand what you say about the new play. Perhaps after it has been done on stage we might get a chance to do it on radio – I have a feeling it would work particularly well in stereo" (BBC WAC Rcont12 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter (David Baron) File II 1963-1967). Pinter's wishes notwithstanding, the Lord Chamberlain refused to grant the play a stage license, a verdict to which the BBC was not bound. They cleared copyright on 22 February and the play eventually premiered on Radio 3 (25 April 1968), preceding its first staging at the Aldwych

Theatre on 2 July 1969 by more than a year. This series of events led to some confusion when BBC TWO televised *Landscape* on 4 February 1983 and the *Radio Times* announced it as “a play written for radio” (67).

Pinter’s remark to Esslin that *Landscape* was conceived as a theatrical project from the start is seemingly confirmed by the draft materials preserved at the British Library. While the opening stage directions do not yet appear as part of the text until the later typescripts, a loose sheet of handwritten notes shows a drawing of a triangular stage where character “a” is situated centre back, and characters “b” and “c” are placed front left and right (British Library, Add MS 88880/1/33). Admittedly, this image of three, not two, actors dispersed across the stage is more reminiscent of subsequent plays like *Silence* and *Old Times* than the still more conventionally domestic setting of *Landscape*, where “BETH sits in an armchair, which stands away from the table, to its left” and “DUFF sits in a chair at the right corner of the table” (Pinter 1997, 166). But, although its setup would continue to change, Pinter’s sketch and his response to Esslin’s request both indicate that the visual dimension of *Landscape* – lost on the air – was crucial to the result he had in mind.

Significantly, none of the plays that he wrote next would be heard on radio at that time, except for *Silence*, which was aired just once on 2 August 1970. Again, Esslin, and producer Charles Lefaux, felt “the intimacy of radio might suit *Silence* better than the wide open spaces of the Aldwych”, asking of Pinter on 15 December 1969: “Do you agree?” His answer has not been found in the BBC Written Archives, but even if he did not oppose or ban radio productions of plays like *Landscape* or *Silence*, it is evident that in this period Pinter’s attention was more exclusively directed at the theatre – in addition to film and television – than it had been in the foregoing decades. Because the author had somewhat withdrawn from the medium in previous years, BBC Script Editor Richard Imison wrote to Pinter on 9 November 1977, saying that they “always live in hopes of a new radio work”, and asking:

“Can we still offer you something which other media cannot? I do hope so” (BBC WAC Rcont15 Harold Pinter (David Baron) Scriptwriter File IV 1973-1982). Although Pinter’s answer is not known, he did take Imison’s question seriously, setting out to pursue it in the form of a new radio play, completed and sent to the BBC by September 1980.

*Family Voices* was originally called “Fragments”, a word crossed out and replaced with the final title on the cover of the yellow legal pad that Pinter used to draft the first version. This emphasis on fragmentation, coupled with the epistolary style of the text, creates the impression that we are not listening to an actual correspondence, but instead are eavesdropping on a stream of private ruminations, as a broadcast coming to us in bits and pieces across the airwaves. After all, “what the medium could do best”, states John Drakakis, “was to represent the psychological processes of the human mind” (1981, 24). The published text underscores the mental nature of the words, for example when the son says “These are midnight thoughts, mother” (Pinter 2011, 139), or when she assures him: “You see, I have my thoughts too. Thoughts no one else knows I have, thoughts none of my family ever knew I had. But I wrote of them to you now, wherever you are” (141). The blurb on the back cover of *Other Places*, the first printing of *Family Voices* with *Victoria Station* and *A Kind of Alaska*, all performed at London’s National Theatre of 14 October 1982, summarizes the radio play as “a set of parallel monologues in the form of letters which a mother, son and father may have written to each other but never exchanged”. Given the fact that *Family Voices* concluded Pinter’s series of “memory plays”, enacting a variety of interior monologues, its emphasis on the mind is no surprise. Then again, as much as the visual aspect was pivotal to *Landscape* as a stage play, the lack thereof was an element vital to *Family Voices* as radio drama.

The character of the father is essential in this respect. Although it is possible that Pinter did not intend to include him in the text originally, he became one its defining features

in both the radio and the theatre production. In the manuscript he first appears as a later addition to the son's line which in the published text runs: "I am not lonely, because all that has ever happened to me is with me, keeps me company; my childhood, for example, through which you, my mother, and he, my father guided me" (British Library, Add MS 88880/1/33, 06r; Pinter 2011, 133). The father is also invoked by the mother when she informs her son, be it differently put in the manuscript than in the published text, that his father has passed away (12r; 134). At the bottom of this page and the top of the next, Pinter drafted a few lines for the father. These not only contradict the mother's statement about his passing away, much earlier in the manuscript than in the published text, they also suggest that the mother might be dead herself, leaving the son to imagine two deceased people talking to him about each other (12r–13r). Pinter placed a large square bracket around these sentences, eventually omitting them from the typescript. In the published text, the father does not speak until just before the end:

I know your mother has written to you to tell you that I am dead. I am not dead. I am very far from being dead. . . . Well, that is not entirely true, not entirely the case. . . .  
I'm writing to you from my grave. (Pinter 2011, 146)

Of course this is a physical impossibility, but less so in the imaginative realm of radio. Here, it seems, Pinter is falling back on his earlier comment about *The Dwarfs*. Like the published text, the manuscript ends in confirmation by the father – "I have so much to say to you. But I am quite dead. What I have to say to you will never be said" (British Library, Add MS 88880/1/33, 46r; 2011, 148) – marked with the word "END" in the margin, yet Pinter's notes go on for one more page, containing yet another contradictory line by the father, dropped

from the published text, promising his son that he will one day walk towards him and make him look up (50r).

This feeling of ontological uncertainty that surrounded the paternal character in the play was clearly of great importance to Pinter. On 14 January 1981, he complained to producer John Tydeman about the *Radio Times* announcement of *Family Voices*, which forewarned listeners that the father would speak, a revelation Pinter eventually decided to save for the end, despite his own premature disclosure of that fact in the manuscript (BBC WAC Rcont15 Harold Pinter (David Baron) Scriptwriter File IV 1973-1982). In the *Radio Times* edition for 17–23 January 1981, *Family Voices* is indeed described as “a new play by Harold Pinter with Peggy Ashcroft as The mother, Michael Kitchen as The son and Mark Dignam as The father” (61), suggesting he will speak. This “spectral intervention” of the father, as Michael Billington phrases it, posed some challenges for the Platform Performance of the radio play at the National Theatre in early 1981, soon after the BBC aired *Family Voices*. As Billington notes, “it subtly shifts its meaning depending on the medium in which it is played”:

On radio, it all seems to take place within the young man’s consciousness as he imagines the letters he might have sent and the replies he might have received. On stage, with the mother and son sitting alongside each other and the father’s ghostly voice issuing from the grave, it becomes much more obviously a play about the deep longings that transcend the chasm between kith and kin. (2007, 279)

Tydeman, who wrote to Pinter about the performance on 17 February 1981, applauded that the father remained hidden on stage (British Library, Add MS 88880/6/3), but this choice of course resolves an ambiguity that the radio medium is able to leave intact, owing to its lack



of visuals. Bodies never materialize on air, unless by proxy through a voice. Tydeman also set the father apart from the other characters in his radio production by using stereo sound, the paternal voice emanating from the right speaker, the son and mother clearly coming from both. This acoustic effect resembles the visual solution of the staged version, although it is unclear if Pinter knew about or even authorized it.

## **Conclusion**

As this article has aimed to show, much of Pinter's work is characterized by a radio aesthetic, probably due to his early experience with the medium, which made it a formative influence on him, closely intertwined with writing for the stage and the other media he practiced at the same time. From a transmedial approach in the late 1950s and early 1960s, perhaps born of necessity, allowing his plays to migrate freely from radio or theatre to television and back, he gradually adopted a more exclusive intermedial poetics in the 1970s and 1980s, by which time he had become an established author and theatre his mainstay, alongside film. While still indebted to radio, these later plays are noticeably more resistant to transposition. Pinter's exploration and redefinition of dramatic genres in this period also illustrates that works arising from intermedial cross-pollination cannot just be translated back wholesale into the media from which they took inspiration, without a significantly altered or diminished aesthetic experience. There are many more examples to be discussed from the period covered in this article, and the trend continues with later plays like *Victoria Station* or *A Kind of Alaska*, but the few case studies I have singled out hopefully suffice to lay the foundation for a more integrative approach to Pinter's work and his media, assigning a more central role to archival material and to radio or sound technologies.

## Bio

Pim Verhulst is a postdoctoral researcher and teaching assistant at the University of Antwerp. He has published books, essay collections, chapters and articles on Samuel Beckett, Dylan Thomas, Caryl Churchill and Tom Stoppard. His most recent work includes *Radio Art and Music: Culture, Aesthetics, Politics* (edited with Jarmila Mildorf, Lexington, 2020) and *Tuning in to the Neo-Avant Garde: Experimental Radio Plays in the Postwar Period* (edited with Inge Arteel, Lars Bernaerts and Siebe Bluijs, Manchester University Press, 2021). *The Making of Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays*, his latest monograph, is forthcoming with Bloomsbury in the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project, of which he is also an editorial board member.

## Notes

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