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December 2015

On The Shore Dimly Seen: Review

Götz Naleppa

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Recommended Citation

Naleppa, Götz, On The Shore Dimly Seen: Review, *RadioDoc Review*, 2(2), 2015.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol2/iss2/6>

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Abstract

A new wave of understanding and agreement with all sorts of secret service methods which pretend to protect us against terrorism makes Whitehead's radio performance, *On The Shore Dimly Seen*, even more precious and important than at the time of its production. Because it is the voice of a radical believer in democracy and human rights: today a lonely voice in the chorus of fear. We hear Gregory Whitehead's voice chanting the interrogation log of Guantanamo Bay detainee 063 (prisoners in Guantanamo do not have names, they are only numbers), interwoven with the voices of vocalist Gelsey Bell and actress Anne Undeland. Often interweaving documentary and fictive materials into playfully unresolved narratives, Whitehead's aesthetic is distinguished by a deep philosophical commitment to radio as a medium for poetic navigation and free association. In his voice and text-sound works, he explores the tension between a continuous pulse and the eruption of sudden discontinuities, as well as linguistic entropy and decay. We smell the fear. Whitehead forces us to be 'there' as a listener, feeling more and more uncomfortable – he won't let us escape as distant and objective spectators. Unwillingly we become witnesses, become 'guilty'. 'Non-touch-torture', 'enhanced investigation' - doesn't that sound human, legal and progressive? Those who use euphemisms have something to hide or to cover. In Whitehead's work we are confronted with the fact that the government of the proudest democracy of the world hides its actions behind such cynical euphemisms. 'On the shore dimly seen' is the first line of the second verse of the US-American national anthem; I interpret the use of this line as title of the Radio Performance as the *J'accuse* of a brave and upright American artist, who feels shame and anger when the symbol of freedom and democracy is misused against human rights. *On The Shore Dimly Seen*, a 'boneyard cantata' enquiry into no-touch torture, was short-listed for a *Prix Italia*.

Keywords

Guantanamo Bay, torture, performance documentary, radio documentary

On The Shore Dimly Seen

Reviewed by Götz Naleppa

Composer: Gregory Whitehead (USA)

Reader: Anne Undeland

Actor: Gelsey Bell

Broadcast 27 March 2015, Soundproof, RN, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Duration: 50mins. [Audio Link](#).

Gregory Whitehead's work *On The Shore Dimly Seen* - which I prefer to call a Radio Performance rather than a feature or documentary – was produced quite a while before the terroristic events that are making headlines these days: the IS terror attacks in Paris and elsewhere. Its textual background is documents about the approved but secret torture methods in Guantanamo, brought to light and to the knowledge of everybody who wanted to know by Wikileaks: 'Non-touch-torture', part of the so-called 'special interrogation plan' approved by Donald Rumsfeld and others in the Bush administration during the months following 9/11. At that time the published documents raised a storm of indignation. Today there is little news about Guantanamo, nor about Wikileaks. On the contrary: today there is a new wave of understanding and agreement with all sorts of secret service methods, which pretend to protect us against terrorism. This makes Whitehead's radio performance even more precious and important than at the time of its production. Because it is the voice of a radical believer in democracy and human rights: today a lonely voice in the chorus of fear.

A voice, yes. Because we hear Gregory Whitehead's voice chanting the interrogation log of Guantanamo Bay detainee 063 (prisoners in Guantanamo do not have names, they are only numbers), interwoven with the voices of vocalist Gelsey Bell and actress Anne Undeland. Whitehead: 'At the heart of this broadcast: one day in the no-touch torture of detainee 063, as expressed through my verbatim voicing. Other texts float through and around the log, voiced by Anne Undeland: lists of the approved techniques, brief histories in the development of no-touch torture, and analysis of what is happening within the interrogation log itself. Extended improvisations by vocalist Gelsey Bell both embody and repel the cruel logic of the texts.'

Whitehead has tracked the history of no-touch torture through writings on Desperado Philosophy, and believes that by responding to violence with torture, we betray the deepest values woven into the American flag. He thanks Rebecca Gordon, Alfred McCoy and William Cavanaugh for their researches into the darkest corners of the American imagination.

Who is the person behind this 'verbatim voicing', behind this chanting voice? I think in this forum I do not have to present Gregory Whitehead, and naming all his radio works would take the whole space I have for this short review.

Whitehead is simply one of the most important US-American artists creating works for the radio medium, using radio as a creative medium and not simply as a medium for information and entertainment. He has created more than one hundred radio plays, essays and acoustic adventures for the BBC, Radio France, Deutschland Radio, Australia's ABC, NPR and other broadcasters. Often interweaving documentary and fictive materials into playfully unresolved narratives, Whitehead's aesthetic is distinguished by a deep philosophical commitment to radio as a medium for poetic navigation and free association. In his voice and text-sound works, he explores the tension between a continuous pulse and the eruption of sudden discontinuities, as well as linguistic entropy and decay. At a recent panel celebrating the 100th issue of the Performing Arts Journal (PAJ), Whitehead said, 'I embraced analog broadcast radio as my ideal creative home because the airwaves seemed to vibrate with the same qualities I sought to capture in my own plays, and in my own thinking: indeterminacy, fragility of signal, random access, tension between public and private, ambiguous borders, modulating rhythms, complex polyphony, and a pulse rate set by a wild heart.'

His plays have won numerous awards, including a Prix Italia for *Pressures of the Unspeakable*, a Prix Futura BBC Award for *Shake, Rattle, Roll* and a Sony Gold Academy Award for *The Loneliest Road*, which was described by the jury as 'a master class in sound'. His 2005 BBC production of Normi Noel's play *No Background Music*, featuring Sigourney Weaver, also received a Sony Gold Academy Award. *On The Shore Dimly Seen*, a 'boneyard cantata' enquiry into no-touch torture, was recently short-listed for a *Prix Italia*.

A 'boneyard cantata enquiry into no-touch torture', that is what Whitehead himself labels his work, not a documentary or feature or play. The expression embraces perfectly its musical form, a three-layered clear form as described by the author above. One layer consists of the vocal improvisations of Gelsey Bell, which set the 'scenery' of this invisible film, never naturalistic or descriptive, purely associative and musical. This layer is completed by a nearly

imperceptible soundwork of drumming, scratching or breathing. The second layer is the emotionless, matter-of-fact and non-commenting voice of actress Anne Undeland, informing us about the 'approved techniques' in Guantanamo. And finally there is Whitehead's chanting of the log of interrogation of detainee 063 and interrogation of one of the agents responsible for these torture methods in Guantanamo prison.

Why did Whitehead choose this 'artistic' form? The normal way to deal in radio with such a subject would be via a pure documentary form. My answer is: Whitehead knows too well how radio functions. Well-made documentaries occupy our brains, our cognitive capacities. And this is not enough in this case. I believe the author wanted to set barbs into our emotions too (which we normally protect by our intellect). Radio more than visual media has an impact on our emotions – as the ear is our inherited sense for defence and protection, omnidirectional and never to be closed. And it is rooted at least as much in our inner as in our outer world. At least for me Whitehead's intention worked: it was torture to listen to this cantata about torture. I write this with deep respect and admiration for this work. His earlier work *Crazy Horse One-Eight* (Radioarts Dreamland, 2014) had the same effect on me. For days I could not free myself from the impression of this artistic representation of a war crime of the US forces in Iraq – it had much more impact than watching the famous documentary video itself.

In my opinion Whitehead uses this artistic form also, because he knows like few others about the history of artistic radio since its earliest days. The first radio play produced and broadcast by BBC London was *A Comedy of Danger*, by Richard Hughes, on 15th January 1924. This first work 'written for microphone', about an accident in a coal mine, was set completely in the dark, which had an extremely strong effect on the imagination and the emotions of the audience.

We can see Whitehead's Radio Performance in this original radio tradition. From the very beginning, vocalist Gelsey Bell nearly physically leads us into the darkness and intimacy of the situation of interrogation – with the effect of unleashing our imagination. We smell the fear. Whitehead forces us to be 'there' as a listener, feeling more and more uncomfortable – he won't let us escape as distant and objective spectators. Unwillingly we become witnesses, become 'guilty'.

Whitehead's 'verbatim voicing' contrasts this dark vocal scenery. It is never angry, never aggressive or accusing. It is nearly tender and one might think of Gregorian chants in church service (in fact he sang as a boy soprano when he

was a child). The voice of a priest in the church of democracy? We know cases when art and artificial forms defuse and neutralize their subject. Here we have the contrary: Whitehead's musical forms sharpen our perception of the inner cruelty of the texts.

'Non-touch-torture', 'enhanced investigation' - doesn't that sound human, legal and progressive? The reality of this euphemism we can hear and nearly physically share in Whitehead's Radio Performance. Euphemisms normally are at home in totalitarian regimes (think of George Orwell's *1984*). Those who use euphemisms have something to hide or to cover. In Whitehead's work we are confronted with the fact that the government of the proudest democracy of the world hides its actions behind such cynical euphemisms. We learn that this 'enhanced investigation' includes keeping the detainee awake by use of loud music, annoying sounds, flashing lights, and subjecting him to isolation, rectal hydration, icy temperature, derision of the Koran, standing for hours with raised arms, no access to toilet facilities, 11 days in a coffin box – just a small choice from a long list. Towards the end we hear the sentence: 'subject's complete identity began to disintegrate', 'kidney shut down and hallucination began'. And the torturer answers the interviewing journalist: 'it absolutely did work'. We are explained the use of this 'enhanced investigation' developed by the CIA: 'it leaves deep scars on the soul instead of the body', 'its advantage compared to physical torture: it is forensically difficult to prove and does not outrage the public'. The goal: the compliance of the detainee, the breaking of his personality, following the CIA rules: 'delta charlie delta = dependency, compliance, dread'.

There is one more technique used in Guantanamo, which leads us to the title of Whitehead's Radio Performance *On The Shore Dimly Seen*. At the beginning of the interrogation detainee 063 has to stand up and put his hand at his heart when the US anthem is played. Everybody knows that 'on the shore dimly seen' is the first line of the second verse of the US-American national anthem:

*On that shore dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, now conceals, now discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected now shines on the stream;
'T is the star-spangled banner; O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!*

I interpret the use of this line as title of the Radio Performance as the *J'accuse* of a brave and upright American artist, who feels shame and anger when the symbol of freedom and democracy is misused against human rights. In this title vibrate his emotions, that he avoids throughout his sweet chanting of horrors. But we who have heard his performance, will be reminded of this abuse from now on every time we hear the anthem.

Restrictions and limitations of civil and more generally human rights that we experienced after 9/11 – and experience again in these days after the terror attacks in Paris – are they not the greatest victory of terrorism? It shows that terrorists are able to manipulate our democratic achievements, the fundamentals of a 'free' world. What is stronger: fear or 'pursuit of happiness' of a free world? Questions that turn in my head after listening to *On The Shore Dimly Seen*, thanks to Whitehead's 'cantata'.

But not only is the author Gregory Whitehead to be praised for this work, but also the radio station that has the courage in these times to broadcast it. After the end of the performance there is this sentence in the credits: 'Detainee 063 is still held at Guantanamo Bay. Until this day not a single perpetrator of non-touch-torture has been held accountable'.

Nothing more to say.

AUDIO LINK:

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/soundproof/on-the-shore-dimly-seen/6326866>

GÖTZ NALEPPA was born in East Prussia in 1943. He studied drama, German literature and history of the arts in Berlin and Madrid, and obtained a PhD in 1970 in Science of Theatre, German philology and History of the Arts at the university Freie Universität, Berlin. He was assistant producer at the theatre Schiller-Theater in Berlin and freelanced as producer of theatre and radio plays, and as author and translator. Since 1970, Götz Naleppa has produced and directed innumerable radio plays, initially for the Radio 'RIAS Berlin', later for Germany's National Radio Deutschlandradio and for nearly every public broadcasting corporation in Germany. He is one of the most well-known and most experienced directors of radio plays in Germany. In the first place, his work includes literary radio plays, but also thrillers,

plays for children, comedies and documentaries. In the '80s he turned towards musical and experimental radio play forms and towards sound composition. Teaching assignments include the Technical University and the Academy of Fine Arts, both in Berlin; workshops and direction work in Latin America followed. From 1994 to 1996 he set up of the radio play departments of Deutschlandradio (Cologne/Berlin) as head of the radio play departments of both broadcasting centres. From 1997 he worked as producer and editor for Deutschlandradio (as editor responsible for sound art). Naleppa left Deutschlandradio at the end of 2008 in order to work as a freelance producer, translator and media artist. He has won numerous prizes for radio play direction (many times Radio Play of the Month/*Hörspiel des Monats*, *Prix Europa*, *Prix Marulic*, Gold Medals of New York Festivals, *Prix Italia* and others).

