Radio Drama*

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It was perfectly predictable. Radio was bound to present us mortals with a new art form. No self-respecting new technology can be content to serve simply as a medium and distributor for old arts like music and recitation. It naturally aspires to dispatch its own muse to the parliament on Parnassus. This is only proper, after all. Just as the nouveau riche are never wholly accepted socially until writers and artists regularly frequent their salons, becoming linked to an art of its own lends a new technology the necessary cachet.

Now it is radio’s turn. It has created its own new art form, one that can soon become popular and in time promises to be something people require, like film. The invention of cinematography brought us the art of film, the presentation of life solely for the eye. Radio is bringing us the new, exclusively audible art of acoustic drama, the presentation of life solely for the ear. As we read in the journal Die Radiowelt, one broadcaster has announced a sizable prize for just such an acoustic composition that clearly and grippingly presents some sort of action, a story, by means of sounds and noises.

Just as a blind person would perceive it. Without narrative description of the kind that says: “They came to the seashore. Then a storm broke out.” But rather a drama directly heard, in which at particular moments you hear the roar of the surf or the whistling of the wind.

For radio, like film, is capable of depicting nature in its very own way. The visible sets of the stage are translated, as it were, into sound. We hear the creaking of a door, the scraping of a chair, the ticking of a wall clock, and recognize the cozy atmosphere of a quiet room. We hear the din of a big-city street, which makes it hard to catch the words. Then we hear the chiming of a village church bell, a rooster crowing, sheep bleating, and we are clearly in the country. Then the muffled echo of approaching footsteps, the jingling of a bunch of keys, a scream, a shot, and all is still.

Yes, it is possible. Radio drama will become an art of its own and, like film, struggle upward through kitsch, coarse triviality, and stupidity to high poetic

potential. Radio drama is bound to develop into an important art, for—like film—thanks to the technology involved, it can become an inexpensive and widespread medium of popular entertainment. It would be a pity if the qualified artistic forces were to come too late in this instance as well. For technology forges ahead. Art, after all, is only a by-product.

The cinematograph was not invented to give Asta Nielsen a chance to create her revelations in mime. Its possibilities were only recognized and exploited after the fact. It may be that even the brush was invented for other purposes and painting only came later. In art it is a simple fact that one does not invent the spoon to eat soup, but rather that one invents soup because the spoons people can eat it with are already available.

So following film, the art for the deaf, we now have radio drama: art for the blind. Actually this is nothing new. The arts have always had the perspective of the crippled. Painting is only for the eye, and music only for the ear. In truth art requires us to switch off certain senses; attempts at the Gesamtkunstwerk have always proven to be dilettantish, discouraging affairs. The whole world is somehow too much for people, stretching their perception to the point of superficiality. One cannot enter a building through five doors at once, or the world through five senses simultaneously. The five are there for the mind to choose from. For things are after all to be seen, heard, smelled, felt, or tasted. But—and this is the great mystery—what we hear and what we see are not the same thing.