

Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi. By Timothy C. Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. 280 pp. \$68.95 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938. By Todd Avery. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006. 166 pp. \$89.95 cloth.

When Britain declared war with Germany on September 3, 1939, Neville Chamberlain announced it over the “wireless,” not in the newspaper. Radio broadcasting became an institution (BBC) in the interwar years, though the history of radiography stretches back to the nineteenth century. While everything today seems to be going wireless, the medium was once radical and new, and understanding its use, function, and effects on literary modernism remains a work in progress.

Atop the swell of recent scholarship on the impact of technology and media on cultural production sit Timothy Campbell’s *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi* and Todd Avery’s *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922-1938*. They are both excellent, despite being very different approaches to the use of wireless technology in the interwar period. Avery focuses on the radio work done by several prominent modernists

and the ethical implications of public service broadcasting; Campbell both builds on and theorizes beyond radio theory to concentrate on the maturing technology of the wireless medium in its pre-radio days, and places the emphasis on inscription (as opposed to voice) in his expert formulation of “wireless writing.”

In *Wireless Writing*, Campbell takes wireless telegraphy as the conceptual grid for his analysis of F.T. Marinetti, Gabriele D’Annunzio, and Ezra Pound, following the lead of Friedrich Kittler and John Johnston in highlighting the importance of the “partially connected media system” and the coupling of bodies and machines for modern cultural production (3). What makes wireless technology of the period particularly useful for Campbell’s study is its heightened media connectivity, coupling the hands-ears and body of the *marconista* with headsets to receive Morse-coded transmissions, which are then written down and “stored” in the alphabet. The interconnectivity of the wireless and the gramophone and sound strip in the 1930s produced altered configurations for sound processing, temporal manipulations, and listening.

Campbell focuses on texts that “register data flows in a sort of wireless dictation and to those forms that mimic wireless encrypting techniques” (xv), and each of his chapters reflects on how “features of wireless writing become linked to fascist symbolic, somatic, and political values” (xvi). The opening chapter offers a detailed history of Guglielmo Marconi’s experiments in radiotelegraphy, and introduces the reader to Marconigrafia, the narratives and myths surrounding Marconi and his invention. Campbell’s insightful analysis of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s speeches made during the 18-month occupation of the Austro-Hungarian port of Fiume following the Great War constitutes the next chapter, where the focus falls on the “apocalyptic tone” (34) of the modern prophet. D’Annunzio’s speeches enact a kind of technological hearing analogous to wireless practices, and Campbell draws important links between the *marconista*, crowds at Fiume, and future fascists. He argues in the third chapter that F.T. Marinetti’s *parole in libertà* (words-in-freedom) and *immaginazione senza fili* (imagination without strings, or wireless imagination) “inscribe the newness of the wireless in the medium of writing” (69), with the Italian Futurist as the wireless operator of his own brain.

The final two chapters on Ezra Pound comprise the second half of *Wireless Writing*, where Campbell’s contribution to existing scholarship is dexterous and bold. In general, Campbell argues that the wireless “accelerated and condensed poetry” by “forcing it to develop a capacity for registering transmissions on more than one frequency” (99); in particular, he correlates Pound’s use of quotation marks in the *Cantos* with the signature modulation of frequencies of the wireless and the switching of voices. Campbell’s central positioning of the typewriter in Pound’s compositional

process is adroit, and his contention that Pound's "poetry, his radio broadcasts, and his pedagogy presuppose the wireless media of the period" (100) is convincing and acute. *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) and Pound's Radio Rome broadcasts between 1941 and 1943 engage wireless programming and the "wireless-gramophone hookup" (144) in such a way that, Campbell argues, "Both *kulchur* and fascism may be viewed as wireless systems that exploit spacing to inscribe commands in a flash, isolating the route to the ear in oracles and apocalyptic tones" (135-36). According to Campbell, if we understand the fascist as a "subgenus of the wireless operator" and fascism "as an information loop that successfully extends wireless capacity by connecting lower echelons to a command central," the poet can be seen as a "cryptographer commanded to short-circuit the traditional pathways of understanding between *il duce* and a set of initiates tuning into the transmission" (100). Campbell's interpretation could benefit from a more patient engagement with Poundian scholarship at certain points, and from a more precise working definition of fascism itself, but *Wireless Writing* is remarkable for the way it rethinks wireless technology beyond the limits of radio theory and brings together different media in stunning combinations.

While *Wireless Writing* does not address the ethical questions that begin to add up when wireless transmissions become fascist commands (or commands to fascism), *Radio Modernism* takes the ethical inquiry as its starting point for investigating the relationship between the BBC and literary modernism. Todd Avery's book links "radio studies and modernist cultural history" (5), building on social histories of the British Broadcasting Corporation and renovating the inquiry for literature scholars by exploring the roles played by H.G. Wells, T.S. Eliot, and several members of the Bloomsbury Group in the inaugural two decades of broadcasting in Britain. J. C. W. Reith's reign at the BBC from its first steps in late 1922 to its pre-war maturation in 1938 sets the bookends of Avery's study. Focusing on the quasi-Arnoldian mission of the BBC during these years provides few surprises, but Avery's investigation of "radio broadcasting as a site of ethical struggle" (9) is lucid and results in a fresh look at some old figures.

Radio Modernism reads the "aestheticist ethics" of the Bloomsbury Group, the "internationalist ethics" of Wells, and the Christian idealism of Eliot as products in part of their negotiation of radio broadcasting at the BBC (9). Reith's religiously inflected cultural values and the censorial nature of his highly moral programming as Director-General of the BBC—the evangelizing of culture, Avery suggests, could help explain Reith's emerging "fascination with fascism" (26)—forms the backdrop against which Avery measures the others' ethical positions. Avery explicitly links radio and print cultures, and blends analyses of broadcasts and writings about radio from a range of Bloomsbury figures such as Virginia and Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, J. M. Keynes, and Desmond MacCarthy, as well as those of Harold

Nicolson. The emphasis here lies on the Bloomsbury model of conversation and individuality as a challenge to rigid moral and cultural codes then in favor at the BBC. Early Talks Producer Hilda Matheson was instrumental in drawing many prominent figures to the microphone, not least H. G. Wells who brought his collectivist and (Thomas Henry) “Huxley-inspired ethics” (86) to the airwaves, perhaps best exemplified in the final moments of his “Point of View” broadcast when to his listeners he expressed his wish to “turn this apparatus about now” so that “I could listen in to you” (101). Avery reads the social function of the BBC as a paradoxical one during this period, signaling as it does both the democratizing potential of radio broadcasting and the established complacency of reactionary culture.

Building on the outstanding work of Michael Coyle and David Chinitz, Avery turns his attention to T. S. Eliot and the consecration of broadcasting in the final chapter, where he examines Eliot’s desire to use radio as a call, if not a means, to restoring a common culture. That culture is, of course, a Christian one, and Eliot’s “deontological morality” (131) is a snug fit, Avery argues, with the BBC’s ideological predilections during this period. Avery’s project emphasizes the way early broadcasting at the BBC brought representatives of modernist literary culture together with the mass medium of radio in an effort to (re)unify the nation. The book constitutes a considerable addition to criticism that rethinks the relationship between modernist writers and the mass media as far more complicated, and often amenable, than merely antipathetic.

Read together, each book reveals a lacuna in the other. On the one hand, Avery’s analysis of “radio modernism” could benefit from more conceptual sophistication, such that its nuances and associations could be reoriented to function critically in other contexts. Focusing on the BBC under Reith’s guidance is, in many respects, keeping things neat; an understanding of the upheaval wrought by war on the ethical import of radio seems of paramount importance. Though his concluding remarks deal with Ezra Pound, Avery’s concern with ethics demands a more profound engagement with Pound and George Orwell, for example, broadcasters whose propaganda would make criticism’s “ethical turn” dizzying. On the other hand, it is precisely ethics that Campbell turns away from in his study of wireless writing: some of the questions raised and analogies drawn in *Wireless Writing* come dangerously close to jumping the curb of accountability: “In other words, is Pound the source of his poetry or is he just another piece of information on the wireless interface in use?” (122). This is not a bad question in itself (Pound *is* a piece of information that we encounter alongside the *Cantos*, and he does conceive of himself as an antenna receiving transmissions), and the interdisciplinary drive that moves it is one of the most exciting elements of Campbell’s book. But when poetry is reduced to a form of “data processing” (117) in the conceptual apparatus of wireless

writing, other reductions begin to sound like technological determinism, despite Campbell's own warning that, "At the risk of reducing too much, the wireless appears bent on programming Pound for a role within a particular wireless subsystem known as fascism" (132). Who is responsible for these transmissions?

Wireless Writing is at times esoteric and difficult, but its subjects move freely between countries and geographies of the mind—perhaps another correlative of its own "wireless writing." Scholarship that forges new tools for interpretation and analysis must incur risk, and Campbell's theoretical gambles often lead to electrifying results. *Radio Modernism* avoids theoretical considerations of technology in order better to tune in to the ethical tenor of radio broadcasting, and by so doing represents another thoughtful renovation of the "Great Divide" between mass culture and literary modernism. Taken together, *Wireless Writing* and *Radio Modernism* constitute the latest bright points in an expanding constellation of interdisciplinary scholarship.

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