TRANSCULTURAL AUDIO STORYTELLING: WHEN GERMAN, AUSTRALIAN AND AFRICAN VOICES MEET

Siobhán McHugh

Within the genre of crafted audio storytelling, the transnational nature of podcasting delivers huge potential to cross-fertilise culturally different traditions, as producers around the world can listen to, emulate and extend a newly accessible trove of audio aesthetics and content. An imminently productive transcultural liaison was that between the US-based Spanish-language NPR podcast *Radio Ambulante* and Gimlet Media's hipster internet-themed podcast *Reply All* (2015), which refashioned a *Radio Ambulante* story by Daniel Alarcón (2015) about an ordinary Guatemalan woman whose social media post unexpectedly unleashed huge anti-corruption protests. The *Radio Ambulante* episode, "#RenunciaYa", was reversioned as "Quit Already", to suit US host P.J. Vogt's scripted "spontaneous" narration and allow him to re-interview the key subject, Lucia Mendizábal, instigator of the campaign. A comparison of both treatments is outside the scope of this article, but merits scholarly interest.

This article will examine in a similar example of transnational liaison what cultural accommodations were made to enable a complex crafted audio documentary created in a German feature making tradition to be adapted to an Australian storytelling style for an English-speaking audience. It will do so by drawing on interviews with the two Australian producers, Sharon Davis and Russell Stapleton, and on comments by Jens Jarisch, author of the original German feature. It will interpolate analysis from two critics, English audio feature producer Alan Hall and Australian scholar Virginia Madsen, who demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the "invisible achievements" (Aroney 2005: 397) of the crafted audio feature and an appreciation of the highly choreographed placement of sound in an excellent radio documentary – an artifact described as "the built form par excellence of radio journalism" (Hendy 2009: 221). The analysis by Hall and Madsen is informed by a framework for criticism and deconstruction of the crafted audio feature form that has been established by the journal *RadioDoc Review* (2014). This journal, of which the author is

Founding Editor, was created to fill a gap in scholarship and critical discourse about highly produced audio features, a field that has rapidly expanded since the advent of podcasting (McHugh 2014). *RadioDoc Review's* analysis matrix identifies key characteristics of optimal audio storytelling. These address storytelling strength, dramaturgical coherence, originality and innovation; journalistic craft and sonic artistry; emotiveness, empathy and audience engagement; depth of research, ethics and complexity of character portrayal.

KINDER VON SODOM UND GOMORRHA /CHILDREN OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH: A CASE STUDY IN TRANSNATIONAL RADIO FEATURE PRODUCTION

Kinder von Sodom und Gomorrha (KSG) was first produced in German by German radio producer or features author, Jens Jarisch, and broadcast in 2009 at a duration of 53'25 on European radio stations RBB, SWR, NDR, WDR and NRK. Jarisch, who was born in 1969, grew up in Berlin, Tehran and Lima, so he came to radio with inherent crosscultural sensibilities. He was an accomplished producer before producing KSG, having won two Prix Europas. Billed as *Kinder von Sodom und Gomorrha: Warum afrikanische Jugendliche nach Europa flüchten* (Children of Sodom and Gomorrah: why young Africans flee to Europe), the feature won the prestigious Prix Italia in 2010. The core story examines the dumping of toxic e-waste in Africa by western countries and the effects this has on children who scavenge the waste scrap heaps. This investigation is overlaid with the yearning of the poor young Africans Jarisch met, to escape to Europe and its imagined comfort. In 2011, the feature was reversioned in English by an acclaimed ABC Radio National duo: producer Sharon Davis, one of Australia's most awarded feature producers, and Russell Stapleton, an eminent sound engineer who has won Prix Italias for drama. This English-language version, *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah* (CSG), won the Director's Choice Award at the Third Coast International Audio Festival, 2011.

When Sharon Davis heard Jarisch's original feature, she was struck by its power and contacted Jarisch to see if he would be amenable to the idea of an English version. The complex architecture Hall (2014: 2) describes ("…beautiful sound recordings, even of the most barbarous scenes, an elegant choreography in the compilation of actuality and a narrative architecture that carries the listener through nearly an hour of complex, layered radio in one cinematographic sweep") was pulled apart and reworked from the original recordings made by Jarisch. "He was able to give us the full layout of the original mix on Pro Tools with all the individual tracks delineated (narrator, reporter, interviews, sound, music) as well as copies of the complete original recordings," explains Davis.

> This meant that sound engineer Russell Stapleton and I were able to unpick the mix itself and find additional sound, or original English recordings (because many of the interviews were in English) as well as additional sound, to reconstruct the program in English, and lay in an English narration. It was a time-consuming but worthwhile process. (Davis 2017)

In KSG, the African voices are heard briefly in English before being overlaid with translation by a male German narrator. Just losing that layer of intervention greatly increased the feature's raw power. Other changes were easily accommodated, such as having Jarisch re-record his German narration in English as "The Reporter." Translation brought its own disturbance. "The rhythm and pacing changed a great deal," recalls Davis. "We had to find much more sound to work with under the narration, because the English translation was longer then the German original. We were helped by access to Jens' original recordings and the genius of Russell Stapleton." Stapleton describes it as "an elaborate process of unstitching and re-embroidering. Peeling back the actuality often revealed bits of gold I was able to work in around the script so they'd bounce off each other…I remember it as being very detailed but very rewarding" (Stapleton 2017). For example, in mining the original recordings, Davis and Stapleton found and included a child using the phrase "bad man", not heard in KSG. Interviews with customs officials who spoke in English in KSG were counterpointed with an 'echo' technique of repeating key words of jargon in German; Davis decided the device could still work as an English-upon-English tier.

Madsen finds echoes of Dante and Milton in the way Jarisch, objectified as The Reporter in the feature, can be seen in the role of a pilgrim or traveler as he traverses shantytowns and villages, bringing the listener on a voyage of interpretation and discovery. She locates Jarisch's production techniques from the Kafkaesque echoing of bureaucratic language to the use of second and third person voice by the cool studio narrator, as being part of a "long and exploratory radio feature tradition, which has nurtured a highly sophisticated *auteur* culture and practice" in Germany (Madsen 2014: 7). It initially borrowed from styles established by the BBC in the 1930s, before reinventing itself in successive waves after World War Two, particularly in centers such as Berlin and Hamburg.

The historical associations between British and German feature making notwithstanding, contemporary feature producers in Europe and the UK take quite distinct approaches. Practitioners such as Hall speak of a "documentary feature", a poetic, sound-rich work occupying a territory that lies somewhere "between the concert hall and the cinema" (Hall 2010: 101). Respected UK scholar and producer Seán Street suggests that the "documentary feature" is distinguished by the personal mediation by the producer of content, a quality that in one sense links back to the authored European feature:

> A documentary CAN be a feature, when it documents the maker's journey as they [sic] seek a way through their subject, asking questions of themselves as much as their chosen story, often through evocation rather than exposition. (Street 2014: 2)

In the European tradition, a formal narrator is often heard, such as in KSG. Hall admits to feeling discomfort with Jarisch's complex deployment of narrator devices, which he attributes to his own cultural conditioning.

> For a British audience, the terms of the contract between documentary producer/reporter and listener are built on expectations rooted in long-established journalistic conventions [...] This documentary, even in its Australian re-versioning, retains the technique of much German feature making in detaching the narrative voice from the author (the reporter or producer) [...] it is Jarisch's experiences that we're invited to share but not his voice that carries the burden of presentation; it is his words we hear but they are delivered, in the German manner, by an anonymous narrator. Jarisch is nevertheless the *author*. (Hall 2014: 3)

In reversioning KSG, Davis sought to honour the spirit of Jarisch's creative approach. But as an Australian, mixing a version for an English-speaking audience, she was particularly conscious of hitting the right tone for the central narrator role. "We did not want a cold, disconnected voice, which is a feature of some European productions." (Davis 2017) In Jarisch's original feature, Davis saw the narrator role as

> [...] a very 'literary' device, cinematic even [...] It provides a distance and is very clearly an outsider's perspective on the story itself. This is not a story being told by the young African characters in it—it is clearly a story told by a western voice, bringing with it a western cultural perspective that may not be shared by these young African men and women. Yet it is also a voice of warmth and empathy. So one of the key questions for us as producers of the translation was to find a voice that reflects both distance and warmth. (Davis 2017)

Davis eventually settled on the Australian actress Rebecca Massey and coached her until she felt she had achieved that dual effect. But to Hall's English ears, "the uneasy dance of intimacy and distance" (Hall 2014: 4) in the production was still disturbing.

> We hear authentic, 'hot', present tense conversations, scenes and events. These are filtered through the usual processes of deliberation — selection, editing, compilation — before being framed for broadcast by a cooler, emotionally detached narrator. The language that the narrator uses is a combination of description, poetic reflection and an emotional engagement with the stories it's sharing. The shifting blend of second and third person narration — speaking on behalf of and then directly to the authentic voices we hear — and further sophisticated production devices (the echo voice, dynamic recording perspectives and jump

cuts) are intended to enhance the telling of the tale, pulling us into its world. But they just
as readily have the effect of distracting us from it, pushing us away. (Hall 2014: 4)

After the initial contact, Jarisch, perhaps wisely, had little to do with the Austra-
lian team, but told Davis he was "very happy" with the result. Indeed he told the
author of this article that he prefers it to his original (Jarisch 2014).

While Hall hails the feature in both its iterations as a magnificent achieve-
ment, he admits to one qualm. "There's something I can't quite shake off. It's
brilliant and horrific. The effect is unsettling to the point that I'm not sure that
I understand the information it's trying to convey or that I trust my feelings
about it." Hall (2014: 3) is referring to a woman's piercing scream at the very
start of the program. "The effect was – and still is – to put this listener on edge,
on guard; it signals foreboding of worse to come." (ibid) Hall's concern is that
this scream has been lifted from a 'barbarous' later scene, when Jarisch records
the bludgeoning to death of a boy who has been accused of stealing. So what's
wrong with that, one might ask? Hall explains:

> As a feature maker myself I feel not just a concern to gauge the potential impact on listeners
> of specific pieces of actuality recording, or potent juxtapositions of material, but an obli-
> gation to be able to justify the intention behind their effect. In relation to Jens Jarisch's
> documentary, I have felt caught between an awed admiration for the courage with which
> material has been gathered and then composed virtuosically into a narrative and, on the
> other hand, a suspicion of that same virtuosity, the storyteller's seductive use of the tools of
> fiction to represent true stories. (Hall 2014: 3)

Suspense is a key tool for any storyteller. But Hall believes that in uncoupling
the scream from its context of the attack on the boy, Jarisch is manipulating the
listener. Instead of the horror we would feel had he kept it "in situ", we instead
lean in, almost titillated, wondering what the scream presages. Davis acknowl-
edges that "as an investigative journalist, there were moments in the feature
that I questioned". But she felt it was important to suborn her own authorial
voice to that of Jarisch, and "maintain the integrity" of the original feature.

> To have changed the beginning, or some of the other 'scenes', or to have combined the narrator
> and the reporter's voices, would have moved the program away from his intention, and it would
> have become something other than the program we were re-versioning in English. (Davis 2017)

Even so, warns Hall, with Jarisch's feature, we cannot guarantee that the new,
transnational audience will 'get' that original intention.

> It can't be assumed that the contract with the listener will be universally signed up to — that
> conventions, whether predictably fulfilled or meaningfully confounded, will be understood,
> that the grammar of the piece will necessarily be shared by all. (Hall 2014: 4)

Hall's feature-maker associate at London-based company, Falling Tree Productions, Eleanor McDowall, has pioneered an elegant way to subtitle audio works online, observable at her Radio Atlas (2017) site. She observes: "every act of translation is obviously a transformation – it's a tool that changes the character of the original documentary into something else" (ibid). In the case of *Kinder von Sodom und Gomorrha* and *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, while the listener will always bring a subjective understanding to the piece which is coloured by their own auditory cultural baggage, the character and caliber of these two audio features align remarkably well across wide transnational spaces.

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