Death at Broadcasting House (Staffan Ericson)

Death at Broadcasting House is the title of a detective novel, first published in 1934. It is written by a pair of BBC insiders, one of them Val Gielgud, Head of Production for Drama at the time. The genre is the "whodunit", or classical detective story (Cawelti 1976), often associated with Agatha Christie. In this one, however, there are some interesting departures from the rules. While the crime of a classical detective story is situated within the private sphere, disrupting order by placing dead bodies in the midst of our family circle, this one involves a murder at the heart of a mediated centre: the studios of Broadcasting House, i.e. the first purpose-built headquarters of the BBC, inaugurated in London in 1932. During the live broadcast of a radio play, one of the actors, isolated in one of the talk studios, is strangled to death. While the task of a classical detective usually involves tracking past events via material clues and eyewitness accounts from the scene of the crime, this detective faces an intriguing dilemma: While millions have listened in to the live performance of a murder, no one has seen anything, not a single clue was left in the studio. To explain what happened, detective Spears must reconstruct the locality of a crime that has registered only in the ether.

An exterior description of the scene of the crime (fig 1) opens this story.

> Broadcasting House has been called a good many names, and described as a good many things. Names and descriptions have varied from the complimentary to the scurrilous, and almost from the sublime to the ridiculous. The building has been compared with a ship, with a fortress, with a towering cliff. It has been called 'Majestic'; 'A Worthy Edifice, well-fitted to house the marvels it contains'; 'A Damned Awful Erection' (by various architects who would have liked to have had hands in the building of it); 'Sing-Sing' (by certain frivolous members of the BBC staff who had visited Berlin and heard this term applied to the new building off the Deutsches Rundfunk in the Masurenallee); 'One of the Seven New Wonders of the World' (by a patriotic daily newspaper). Broadcasting House, in short, has been extravagantly lauded and ludicrously damned. But one thing about it remains: if you walk northwards from Oxford Circus for more than fifty yards you cannot miss it. The Round Church ceases to be the dominant architectural figure of the landscape. You stop. Your eyes travel slowly upwards from the bronze entrance doors; pause for a moment questioningly at Prospero and Ariel; continue by way of the flower-bordered balcony of the Director-General's room, past one row of windows after another, to the trellised metal towers upon the roof, and the flagstaff with the Corporation's flag flattering against the sky. You think. Announcers…News Bulletins…Dance Band Music…the Prime Minister speaking from the Guildhall … the Derby…Wimbledon…Gillie Potter…Christopher Stone…Walford Davies… Symphony Concerts…Talks…Plays…Microphones…Machinery…Actors…Engineers…'It's the hell of a big place anyway', you murmur to your companion, with a certain lack of conviction. (DaB:7 f)

"Response to Tradition", a British modernist manifesto published in1932 in *The Architectural Review*, opens with an imagined scene from the same site. The writer is architect Wells Coates, the actual designer of the studios in which the fictitious murder takes place.

> A foreigner, let us say, on a tour of London walks to the top of Regent Street, and finding there four or five architectural critics standing about, points to a building on the corner and says: "What is that?"
> The variety of possible responses to his question might include that it was a building which "expressed its purpose", or its "construction"; or that it displayed very bad manners indeed; or that "expressed" an important aspect of the national life; or that it was an example of unsymmetrical design; or that it "looked like a ship" and was built of Portland stone; or he might be told what he probably wanted to know, that, indeed, it was "Broadcasting House". Such a collection of verbal responses does not suggest an unfair picture of the state of architectural criticism today. (Coates 1932a:165)

In the above quotes, the imagined effect of the physical appearance of this building is similar: an abundance of words, but a failure of meaning. And media houses[1], in general, are strange

[1]) This article is a part of the research project *Media Houses: On media, architecture and the (re-)centralisation of power*, financed by the Baltic Sea Foundation.

sights:often imposing, at times monumental. Their external authority suggests the presence of centralized power, though not really of any traditional kind (like the church, or the state). They are presented to us as civic centres; being surrounded by parks or squares, inviting outsiders to come closer. But unlike other features in modern cityscapes (like the mall, stadium, movie theatre, museum), they are not really sites for collective experiences. Most of us will never see their interiors; as the boundaries between "inside" and "outside" are upheld by electronical gates and security guards.

Approaching Broadcasting House some eighty years after Coates and Gielgud, the multiplicity of meaning is still there. We are reaching the northern end of Regent Street, one of the busiest streets in London (according to some, the first and longest shopping street in the world). Its termination is accentuated by a shift from the horizontal to the vertical. The line of sight is tilted upwards, by three objects pointing into the sky: dominating the central perspective is the spire of John Nash's 19th century All Souls Church. Slightly to the left, a reproduction of BBCs radio mast from the 1930s. Slightly to the right, a work of art, added in the ongoing extension: the glass ramp of a beam of light, to be shot into the sky in commemoration of lost journalists, at regular news hours.

What we are looking (up) at, then, is a triad of attempts in supra-terrestrial communication. Or, with Mircea Eliade (1957/1987), a triad of attempts in the founding of "sacred space". According to Eliade, "profane space" is formless, fluid, homogenous, chaotic. Sacred space is real, absolute, orienting, organizing. Since the days of primitive habitation, man has attempted to found his world in the latter, by constructing sites (houses, sanctuarys, temples), that are a) situated at the *Centre of the World*, b) *opening a link of communication* between different cosmic planes (earth and heaven, life and death). Through history, such links have taken the form of poles, posts, pillars, spires. This particular triad has some suggestive interferences: The radio mast next to the light ray memorial: a reminder of how the word "medium", in the early days of sound recording and radio, was entangled with 19th century spiritualism, i.e. "the art of communicating with the dead" (Durham Peters 1999). The radio mast next to the church spire: a reminder of how the "natural", interior qualities of sound - listening, hearing, speaking - have been linked to divinity and salvation, for thousands of years (Sterne 2003).

The symbols of art and religion guides the visitor entering the building. In the entrance hall, the final destination *sans* accreditation, we find the following latin inscription:

This temple of the arts and muses is dedicated to the ALMIGHTY GOD by the first Governors of Broadcasting in the year 1931, Sir John Reith being Director General. It is their prayer that the good seed sown may bring forth a good harvest, that all things hostile to peace or purity may be banished from this house, and that the people, inclining their ear to whatsoever things are beautiful and honest and of good report, may tread the path of wisdom and uprightness.

So what sort of "temple" is this? Who were these "Governors of Broadcasting"? What sort of powers did they serve? What sort of knowledge did they disseminate? To direct our attention towards questions like these, Harold Innis introduced the distinction between "space-biased" and "time-biased" media:

A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural settings. According to its characteristics it may be better suited to the dissemination of knowledge over time than over space, particularly if the medium is heavy and durable and not suited to transportation, or to the dissemination of knowledge over space than over time, particularly if the medium is light and easily transported. (Innis 1951/2006 33)

The upholding of religious tradition, and the emphasis on sound, listening, orality, were for Innis typical traits of *time-binding* media. And this stone temple certainly appears heavy, durable, "not suited for transportation". On the other hand, it is built for the weightless dissemination of radio, that "ethereal medium par excellence" (Milutis 2006:x). Defiance of gravity was also signified in the exterior decorations of the building: the corporation flag, flattering from the rooftop, portraying "an azure field representing the ether /…/ broadcasting being represented by a golden ring encircling the globe" (*Broadcasting House 1932*, p 13). For the entrance, the BBC asked Eric Gill for a series of sculptures of Ariel, that "spirit of the air" from The Tempest. For the entrance hall, a sculpture of the biblical sowerman (the parable used by Durham Peters in *Speaking into the Air*, for linking Christianity and early mass communication), literally "broadcasting" his seeds.

That such speech also could be *space-binding*, in terms of territorial-political control, was obviously not lost to those Governors of Broadcasting. For the first Christmas at Broadcasting House, Sir Reith asked the British king, George V, for a speech. It was scripted by Rudyard Kipling, and broadcasted live:

"Through one of the marvels of modern science, I am enabled, this Christmas day, to speak to all my people, throughout the Empire. I take it as a good omen that wireless should have reached its present perfection at a time when the Empire has been linked in closer union. For it offers us immense possibilities to make that union closer still."[2]

In temporal terms, radio, much like television, has been understood as a promoter of actuality and ephemerality. But one may note that King George, with this very speech, initiated the still running series of Royal Christmas messages, an annual "media event" (Dayan & Katz 1992), indicating the active nature of broadcasting media in the organising of cultural *tradition.* And that in hearing the voice of King George today, we are routinely registering a form of *permanence* that was once regarded as one of the more fascinating novelties of sound recording. In a chapter titled "The Voices of the Dead", Detective Spears gets a sudden break: he incidentally learns that the play is to be retransmitted by the BBC, across the British Empire.

"Re-transmitted?" repeated Spears. "Do you mean to say that – By Jove!"/…/ Spears smacked his fist down in the desk in front of him. "You mean you´ve got the play recorded?" he said, and even in his voice there was a thrill of excitement. "You mean you can hear the actual scene over again?" "We can hear that scene", said Caird, "not only over again, but over and over again. As often as you like. I wonder if the murderer thought of that?" (DaB: 38 f)

What the murderer (and the detective) also had to consider, was that the performed scene was not confided within our regular sense of situational geography:

"You see Spears, this not an ordinary case. You know what broadcasting is. It gets the public in their homes. There are nearly six million people who feel as if anything that happens inside Broadcasting House has happened by their own firesides." (DaB:121)

To *The Architectural Review*, devoting a full issue to the opening of Broadcasting House, this building was not fixed by its geographical location:

When it is the centre of a great public service, it has a double significance. People will come to London to see it; instead of swooning at Savoy Hill, they will see what to them will be the new Tower of London. On the covers of magazines, on films, in catalogues, in guide books, in all the many means of publicity the new B.B.C. building, its

[2]) CD-disc (1997): *Radio Collection BBC: 75 years of the BBC*, BBC Worldwide LTD.

studios, its gadgets, its engineering devices, will appear. Since it is to be the new Tower of London, a focal point and a trade-mark for Broadcasting, it becomes something more than a mere block of offices, enclosing a sound factory. Like the Tower of London itself, it becomes a national monument. For this reason *The Architectural Review* devotes a whole issue to Broadcasting House, as it did to the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. But where the latter must draw its audience to Stratford the former can entertain the world. (AR 1932:43)

"The new building parts the roads like a battleship floating towards the observer", noted *The Architectural Review* (46). The metaphor has stuck with the building, though the external referents are quite few: the rounded external shape, the antennas/masts, the porthole-like windows at the top. But the ship, according to Michel Foucault (1967/1998), is the "heterotopia par excellence" – i.e. the sort of place that, on the one hand, *does have* real existence (unlike the utopia), but that, on the other hand, remains "outside of all places", being strangely linked to, but also contradicting or neutralizing, *all* other sites.

And maybe one way to attach the time/space-polarity to Broadcasting House, would be the dialectics of "inverted determinism", suggested in Blondheim's (2003) reading of Innis: Once a culture is dominated by space-biased forms of communication (like broadcasting), it is also threatened by the discontinuity of time. To compensate, it develops strongly time-biased concerns (like the building of broadcasting temples). When this happens, the process of dissemination is reversed: signals of the media, spreading "into the wind" (the title of Sir Reith's autobiography), are reintroduced as signals of architecture (mass, solidity, locality). And the ubiquitous is provided with an interior.

Interiorising the Modern

In terms of architectural styles, Broadcasting House represented both old and new to the editors of *The Architectural Review*.

The finished building /…/represents the outcome of a struggle between moribund traditionalism and inventive modernism. Struggles of this kind are not as a rule conducive to good architecture, and still less to good decoration. But in this case, fortunately, the struggle ended in a victory which largely favoured the modernists; for when it came to organizing the interior of a building of such a necessarily complex plan, the combined brains and help of a corps of architects and engineers were required. (AR 1932:47)

In other words, *tradition* was here represented by the *exterior*: the solid stone walls, the fenestration with small glass panes, suggested the appearance of a medieval, concentric fortress. While the *modern* was represented by the *interiors*: the site of the new technology, occupying the 22 studios, piled in an inner tower, with the huge control room sitting on top. All designed by a team of young, radical architects/designers, one of them Wells Coates, another Serge Chermayeff. According to V H Goldsmith (1932), chairing the BBC's "Studio Decorating Committee", the assignment of these men followed the outcome of a "battle", in which principles of modernism - fitness for purpose, avoiding all decoration not following function – defeated more "anachronistic" ideas. Decorating the studios as "period pieces" (Venetian style, Jacobean style, etc, to represent different phases of history), or as locations of the Empire (an elephant head for India, a log cabin for Canada, etc) was really not an option for institution as "enlightened" as the BBC, a medium as "fresh" as broadcasting.

At the time, Coates and Chermayeff were at the centre of a movement (cf Cohen 2006) committed to breaking the "retrospective stupor"[3] of British design, and introducing an architecture embracing the new era of "Steel and Communication" (Coates 1932a). Between 1931 and 1933 these two men visited the German Bauhaus, published articles, participated in exhibitions, formed organisations, designed interiors, and completed houses, still standing as modernist classics. The interior of Broadcasting House was one of their first assignments. It certainly succeeded in providing the shock of the new to a Lord Gerald Wellesley, Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects:

The interior of Broadcasting House is the most important example of untraditional decoration yet completed in this country. The accumulated rubbish or wisdom of the ages has been washed away, and something which is definitely and entirely new has taken its place. Such a phenomenon has never occurred before in the world's history. [4]

The "struggle" between old/exterior and new/interior had been a topic of interest in Siegfried Giedeon's (1928/1955) *Bauen in Frankreich*, and the work it soon came to inspire: Walter Benjamin's (1999) *Passagen Werk*. Looking back at industrial constructions of the 19th century - arcades, railway stations, factories – Giedeon and Benjamin saw the traditional and the modern caught in transition:

Outwardly, construction still boast the old pathos, underneath, concealed behind the old facades, the basis of our present existence is taking shape. (Giedeon 1928/1995:87)

By the 1930s, however, such historisizing masks should be long gone. To Giedeon and Benjamin, and to Coates, in his manifesto, stone was the material of old architecture. With steel, glass, concrete, the piled-up wall was no longer an essential element of the structure. From there on, Giedeon claimed, modern housing should strive for "the greatest possible overcoming of gravity" and for "maximum openness":

Corbusier's houses are neither spatial nor plastic: air flows through them! /…/ There is only a single, indivisible space. The shell falls away between interior and exterior (Giedeon 1928/1995:169).

This conception of modern architecture is revisited in the most ambitious current study of the relations between media and architecture: Beatriz Colomina's (1994) *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. This book declares that the relation between inside and outside, private and public, has been drastically changed by the presence of the media:

It is actually the emerging systems of communication that came to define 20th century culture – the mass media – that are the true site within which modern architecture is produced and with which it directly engages. In fact, one could argue (this is the main argument of the book) that modern architecture only becomes modern with its engagement with the media. (Colominas 1994:14)

Colomina measures the media's impact on modern architecture in terms of the strategies developed by two canonical figures: Adolph Loos and Le Corbusier. She demonstrates how the architecture of Le Corbusier is not only produced *for* the media (that is, for symbolic, immaterial reproduction, rather than construction on site) but also *by* the media (that is, is heavily influenced by the surrounding media culture; ads, newspaper clippings, films). But there is an even more fundamental connection at stake:

---

[3]) Chermayeff's choice of words, from a 1931 speech on "A New Spirit and Idealism", delivered at Heal's store for modern furnishing in London.

[4]) http://www.miketodd.net/other/bhhistory/bh_1932b.htm

The building should be understood in the same terms as drawings, photographs, writing, films, and advertisements; not only because these are the media in which more often we encounter it, but because the building is a mechanism of representation in its own right. (Colominas 1994:13)

In other words, the book's deepest concern is properly announced in the subtitle: the possibility of thinking modern architecture *as* mass media. The private homes of Le Corbusier exemplifies how the use of windows may transform the home into a camera, directed towards outer forms of life, transgressing demarcations of inner and outer through light and transparence.

With Broadcasting House, though, something else must surely be going on. For the stony shell of tradition - heavy, closed, monumental - is still there. And while the "falling away" of the shell of *domestic* space may be linked to the breaking up of distinctions between private and public (a main argument in Colomina's book), Broadcasting House is neither private nor domestic. It is planned as the space of a *public service*. And while Colominas and others tend to link media and architecture in *visual* terms (as when comparing Corbusier's interior plans to the mechanisms of a camera), Broadcasting House is planned as a "sound factory".

To Lt. Col.Val Myer, chief architect of Broadcasting House, the task of the programme was clear:

In the case of Broadcasting House, we had first to consider its functions. These are twofold; the actual broadcasting, and the administration of broadcasting. Obviously, the studios, Control Room, and the accommodation of technical equipment come first, with the actual studios as the most important factor of all. Accordingly, it was the planning of the studios which had to be the key to the whole scheme.[5]

And the main concern in that scheme was sound insulation. Every single studio had to be acoustically sealed off from the outside world (and from all other studios). Val Myer's general solution was to erect an inner brick tower for the studios, and to wrap the administrative offices around that tower (fig 2). With this plan, the interiorizing of the new seems less the result of the concealment of tradition, than by a series of functions involving *both* media and architecture.

Firstly, the plan realized a major *technological* step in the development of housing. Since the open air could not "flow" through Broadcasting House, it had to produce its own. With the embalming of the inner tower, each studio had to be supplied with artificial (and quiet) ventilation, humidity, temperature, lighting. According to Kenneth Frampton (1983), historian of architecture, light and climate control should be regarded as technology's most decisive influence on the modern building: from that point on, connection to local context may be cut, truly universal standardization applied. Broadcasting House was the first building in London to realize this possibility, as a direct result of the demands of media production.

.

Secondly, this plan reflects an *ideal model* of the *media institution* at the time. Howard Robertson, Principal of the Architectural Association School, compared the organisation of the building with a medieval castle:

There is the central Donjon, the Keep, which is the inner core, and round it are more public apartments, the service ways, like the outer ring of the defence. In the new building the public might invade the corridors, and even the offices, but the staff of the BBC could take refuge in their inner fastness, lock themselves in, live, cook, eat, circulate, and even produce music, plays, and noises-to-taste, without in any way being disturbed. (AR 1932:43)

---

[5] *BBC Handbook 1932*, quoted from http://www.miketodd.net/other/bhhistory/bh_1932b.htm

The need for interior design is intrinsically related to this model:

The new Broadcasting House is unique. It is in essentials a factory for the production and reproduction of sound, but it is not sufficient that it shall behave perfectly as a machine: it is considered vital that the artist shall derive inspiration from his surroundings, and in consequence some form of permanent interior finish or decoration is regarded as an integral part of the scheme. In the coordination of this and a chaos of complicated mechanical equipment lay the architects' task. (AR 1932: liv)

To Howard Robertson, this task exceeded the usual demands on design:

Architecture must become an aid to well-being. The designer, with no existing manual to help him, must improvise himself psychoanalyst. (*Broadcasting House 1932*:23)

Thirdly, in terms of a "machine", this plan suggests alternative ways of thinking "*architecture as mass medium*". Returning to the plan (fig 2), we may recognize a familiar shape: a human ear, with the studio tower in the position of the inner ear. The effect may be unintentional, nevertheless: the plan spatially reproduces what, according to Jonathan Sterne (2003), is the ultimate model of sound reproduction technology since the 18th century. Through various mechanisms (the eardrum, the bones of the inner ear, the auditory nerve), the human ear has the capacity to turn incoming sound into something else, and that something else back into sound. The imitation of this "transducing" mechanism was the key to various experiments leading to the telephone (using electricity and phone lines), the gramophone (using tracks and styluses), the radio (using electromagnetic waves, transmitters/receivers). In this sense, Broadcasting House may actually qualify as a medium, "in its own right" (Colomina): one large-scale, spatially organised, *tympanic machine*.

Making the building perform like one was a prime task for the team of interior designers, according to V H Goldsmith:

When it is remembered that the position of every piece of ventilating equipment, every lamp, every signal light, microphone lead, bell push, observation window, telephone, and every piece of furniture was fixed dependent on the precise needs of the programme in each individual studio /…/ that in addition thereto every material used, from quality of paint to nature of fabric, was subject to restriction as to its sound-absorbing or reflecting qualities, its position and area, it will be realized that never have interior designers had to solve a problem more severely conditioned. (Goldsmith 1932:55)

While some of the studios reproduced pre-existing sites with public functions – the concert hall, vaudeville theatre, chapel, library – Coates was committed to spaces solely defined by the functions of broadcasting: the control rooms, the studios designed for drama, talk, news, sound effects, gramophones. Including their equipment: Coates designed the air-suspended microphone fitting, (fig 3), picking up sonic effects from the walls, floors and tanks of the effect studio, to produce "every conceivable noise" (note the six surfaces of the table). And the way these studios were interconnected: Coates also designed the Dramatic Control Panel (fig 4), mixing incoming sounds from up to eleven studios, into one broadcasted play. Coates explained the function of this device himself, in *The Architectural Review*:

At the dramatic control panel table sits the producer, who gives the actors in other studios their cues by switching on cue lights controlled by the keys on the dramatic control panel, or governs the volume of the sound going out to the ether by turning the control handles which, if necessary, can cut out any studio or actor. Thus, when dramatic effects like rain, wind, or the hoofs of a horse are required, a switch will give the cue to the dramatic effects studio on another floor, and the turning of a control handle will increase the sound or diminish it until the producer cuts it out by turning the handle back. (Coates 1932c)

In *Death at Broadcasting House*, detective Spears eventually realises that to solve this crime, he must understand "the inside of that box of tricks". The producer of the play explains why the performers must be physically separated:

"Well", said Caird, "the chief reasons why we use several studios and not one, are two. The first is that by the use of separate studios, the producer can get different acoustic effects for his scenes. That is to say, in a small studio like 7C, which is built as to exclude all echo, you get the effect of a closed room or a dungeon – as in the scene when Parsons was killed. Whereas in a fairly large studio like 6A, you can get the effect of greater spaciousness – as in the scene previous to the murder scene, a ballroom. Secondly, the modern radio play depends for its 'continuity' – if you understand the film analogy – upon the ability to 'fade' one scene at its conclusion into the next. In an elaborate play, therefore, the actors require as many studios as the varying acoustics of the different scenes require, while, in order to avoid their being confused by music or extraneous noises, sound effects have a studio of their own, gramophone effects one more, and the orchestra providing the orchestral music yet another separate one". (DaB:78)

A sound effects man explains his way of producing 'natural' sounds:

"You see, in the old days when we started with sound effects, we did our best to make the real noise in front of the microphone. At Savoy Hill, I believe it's true that people fired blank cartridges along the corridors, and even assembled the greater part of an aeroplane and then dropped it from the ceiling of the studio to get the effect of an aeroplane crash. Now we know better. We wreck ships by crumpling match boxes and create avalanches with a drum and few potatoes." (DaB:61)

The overall attention that the BBC paid to the studios when erecting their first headquarters, and particularly the type of tasks executed by Coates, lends support to a bearing argument in Jonathan Sterne's (2003) book on *The Audible Past*:

Without studios, and without other social placements of microphones in performative frames that were always real spaces, there was no independent reproducibility of sound. /…/This is contrary to the often-made claim that reproduction decontextualizes performance and deterritorializes sound /…/From the very beginning, recorded sound was a studio art. (Sterne 2003: 236)

In such studios, people performed for the machines, not for audiences. The machines were built to reproduce sounds, not eavesdrop on existing, "original" ones. In contrast with discourses that stress the "liveness" and "fidelity" of sound reproduction, Sterne claims that distinctions between copy and original, artificial and real, were irrelevant in the early days of mass-distributed sonic events. In contrast with discourses which attributes "no sense of place" (Meyerowitz 1985) to broadcasting, Sterne claims that such events were the product of a reproducibility to which "location was everything".

This argument runs parallell to the plot of *Death at Broadcasting House,* and to a theme in Walter Benjamin's (1936/1968) classic essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Here, Benjamin exemplifies the loss of "aura" by a visit to a film studio: a site where an actor performs for the machines, and a visitor never loses sight of the technical equipment. The film spectator, though, sees none of it:

The mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology (Benjamin 1936/1968:233)

According to Benjamin, this "procedure" was unimaginable before film. And according to V H Goldsmith, the studios of Broadcasting House could not duplicate the practice of film.

> In the film studio, not only do production and rehearsal precede a 'shot', as they do for some of the work in broadcasting, but 'shots' can be repeated until the desired result is achieved. This repetition of 'shot' is not possible in broadcasting, hence every help must be given to the artist in his one and only actuality. (Goldsmith 1932:53)

In other words, Benjamin's "equipment-free reality" was here to be performed in real time. This was the rationale behind the organisation of the studios of Broadcasting House. And part of the dilemma of detective Spears: this crime hade only left traces in equipment-free reality. Listening to the recording of the broadcasted play, as edited by the Dramatic Control Panel, the localities of the reproduced sounds, as well as their status as artificial or real, were already undistinguishable. The final solution, the detective concludes, is "inseparably connected with the methods and ingredients of broadcast play production", and thus with "the geography" and "inside working of Broadcasting House" (p 96). Like the murderer before him (constructing his perfect alibi), the detective must reproduce the spatial conditions of a "land of technology", organised by Coates and his colleagues.

Liquidating the Interior

The preferred scenario for the linking of media and architecture (cf. Rice 2007 ch. 5), is usually that of the "home" (an actual, pre-existent site), being infiltrated, disturbed or challenged by "the media" (immaterial, site-less). In the career and mind of Coates, designing the broadcasting studios of the BBC more or less coincided with a rethinking of domesticity.

In an article from 1932, "Furniture Today and Furniture Tomorrow", Coates claims that the modern architect should not be concerned with various styles and fashions, but with "the organisation of a new service".

> The natural starting-place for this new service must be the scene in which the daily drama of personal life takes place; the interior of the dwelling – the PLAN – and its living-equipment, the furniture. (Coates 1932b:31)

Coates pursued this ideal as chief architect for ISOKON (Isometric Unit Construction), a company set up in 1931 to produce "unit dwellings", with inbuilt furniture and accessories. The most renowned result was *Lawn Road Flats*, projected and completed between 1930 and 1934. This complex, located in Hampstead, London, consists of thirty "minimal flats"(from 18 to 30 square meters), with adjacent "communal" areas – club, bar, roof-top terrace, garden, garage – including "very full domestic service"[6] (washing, cleaning, cooking, shoe-shining). When completed, Lawn Road Flats attracted some interesting tenants - among them, Agatha Christie, and the the international avant-garde of design: off and on during the thirties, Lawn Road Flats housed members of the German Bauhaus - Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius, Lazlo Moholy Nagy – some providing assistance in ISIKON's designs. When Coates died in 1958, the memorial in *The Architectural Review* claimed that Lawn Road was "nearer to the *machine à habiter* than anything Le Corbusier ever designed"[7].

[6]) Publicity material for Lawn Road Flats, quoted from Cohn 1999:159.
[7]) J M Richards: "Wells Coates 1895-1958", *Architectural Review* (1958) December.

There are some tangible correspondences between Coates' organising of studios (as in Broadcasting House) and his notion of a "machine for living" (as in Lawn Road Flats). In terms of "the plan", Coates organises his dwellings as *minimal* units, externalising their points of access (stairs) and social functions (communal spaces), serving them with all necessities (water, heating, air) from the outside, and securing that "conducted sound had been reduced to an absolute minimum"[8]. Visually, the open air-solutions of Corbusier could not be more distant (and complaints of claustrophobia were soon heard from the tenants of Lawn Road Flats and the artists of BBC). The idea of a "total design" was equally applicable to the studio and the dwelling (during the late thirties, Coates designed several of the most popular British radio sets for home use). To Coates, supplying the proper "living-equipment" meant obliterating the "old-world dwelling-scene" of our parents:

How barbaric their habit of overloading was! How seldom did an object stand in the place which correlation points to it! How obstrusive their pictures and ornamental bric-à-brac! (Coates 1932b:32)

To Coates, tables, chairs and beds were no more "personal belongings" than heating systems or bathtubs. His presented his most radical proposal of "unit dwelling" in 1947, as a (never realized) plan for production of room units, ordered in parts off the shelf, complete to the last light switch, transportable to the countryside for the weekend. Already in 1932, Coates was arguing for a notion of modern dwelling not fixed by location:

The love of travel and change, the mobility of the worker himself, grows with every opportunity to indulge in it. The 'home' is no longer a permanent place from one generation to another. The old phrase about a man's 'appointed place' meant a real territorial limit; now the limits of our experience are expanding with every invention of science. (Coates 1932 b:32)

In other words, Coates' idea of modern dwelling was committed to that "structure of feeling" that Raymond Williams (1974/1997) has used to explain the historical development of broadcasting: *mobile privatisation*. With the notion of a "furniture of tomorrow", Coates presented the architect with the task of providing "supplies, equipment for the living of a free life":

There is an important distinction to be realized between what is 'possessed' as an adjunct of personal vanity or wealth (a 'museum-piece' you are told, with a smack of satisfaction) and what is merely included for use in the dwelling-scene for what its efficiency and formal significance is worth in the daily drama and routine of life. In the latter case the article is not valued as a 'personal possession' so much as a means, a medium, for the liberation of individual values and appetencies which alone are the truly 'personal possessions' of a man. (Coates 1932b: 33)

Such articles were to be "machine-made", and affordable for "the people". They would reveal "the colossal pretence that has stood for 'art'". In other words, while referring to furniture as a "medium", Coates made similar predictions, and used similar distinctions, as Walter Benjamin's art work-essay, written a few years later. In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin had already registered the loss of aura through the history of our dwellings. Benjamin starts with the bourgeois apartments of the 19th century:

In the style characteristic of the second empire, the apartment becomes a sort of cockpit. The traces of its inhabitant are moulded into the interior. Here is the origin of the detective story, which inquires into these traces and follows these tracks. (Benjamin 1999:20*)*

[8]) Presentation of Lawn Road Flats in *Architectural Review* (1934), August, quoted from Cohn 1999:167.

With the turn of the century, this sense of the interior was lost. To Benjamin, the "artistic visions" of Jugend provided a "mirror image of the world of commodities", not a space of refuge for the individual. The challenge of the modern was to embrace this experiental loss. In an article from 1933, "Experience and Poverty", Benjamin (1996-2003) describes the contemporary world as a barbaric, impoverished space, where "naked man…lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present." (p 733) Still, this world must provide housing for its citizens. Benjamin is fascinated by the "stations for living" imagined by poet Paul Scheerbart: "adjustable, movable, glass-covered dwellings of the kind since built by Loos and Corbusier" (p 733): "Objects made of glass have no 'aura'. Glass is, in general, the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession." (p 734)

Such a "liquidation of the interior" ("1939 exposé", p 20) does not lament lost experience, but executes the necessary break with the (always illusory) "dream image" of private life.

> If you enter a bourgeois room of the 1880s, for all the cosiness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be, "You've got no business here!" And in fact you have no business in that room, for there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark – the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the antimacassars an the armchairs, the transparencies in the windows. A neat phrase by Brecht help us out here: "Erase the traces!" is the refrain in the first poem of his *Lesebuch für Städtebewohner/*…/This has now been achieved by Scheerbart, with his glass, and Bauhaus, with its steel. They have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces. (Benjamin 1996-2003:734)

This is the sort of room in which a dead corpse is placed, in *Death at Broadcasting House*. The producer and the writer discover it, after the broadcast:

> In the far corner, almost under the microphone standard, lay a man's figure unnaturally crumpled. /…/ Behind the three of them the door shut automatically. 7C was a studio with special acoustic treatment removing all natural echo, and at that moment Rodney Fleming felt acutely the oppressive, almost sinister atmosphere of the room with its single shaded light, its thick carpet and queerly padded walls. The ventilation was perfect, but he felt wanted to draw unusually deep breaths. (DaB:17)

The Scotland Yard arrives, and the room is properly photographed and searched. But the detective is left without any traces to track.

> "You can see for yourself, sir" he said. "This room's as bare as a board. The carpet's too thick to take any impression, and whoever did this job knew too much to leave anything behind him. Here are the contents of the pockets, sir." /…/There was something indescribably wretched and forlorn about the little pile of coppers: the paper packet of ten Players cigarettes, three quarters empty; the indubitable pawn-ticket; the soiled handkerchief; the three loose keys on a piece of knotted string: the chubbed stump of pencil; and the shabby pigskin pocket book. (DaB:33)

These are the possessions of modern man, the traces of a crime committed in the interior of the modern. According to the detective novel, Broadcasting House is not only a marvel of technology, but a scary place to be. If the task of the designer was to "improvise himself psychoanalyst", Coates and partners may have succeeded all too well. The building was soon to produce a stronger image of interior terror. In George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Room 101 is a chamber for psychological torture, the room where our imaginary fears will suddenly and inexplicably materialise. The original Room 101 is believed to be have located in Broadcasting House, where Orwell worked during the Second World War. In the novel, this room contains "the worst things in the world". That is, no specific objects at all, since the worst thing imaginable will vary individually: to be buried alive, to drown, or, the fear of protagonist Winston, to have your face eaten by rats. And perhaps this is the most scary aspect of Room

101: once you enter, your torturers will reveal that they have access to your most private space, your worst inner fears.

Interiorising Social Space

In 2000, BBC decided to put "architecture once again at the heart of /its/ strategy" (Jackson 2004:14). The old Broadcasting House was to be transformed into one "huge, highly efficient global broadcasting machine"[9]. To Greg Dykes, Director General at the time, the BBC had neglected what the founding fathers had grasped: the symbolic importance of buildings. But while the old Broadcasting House had spoken of a "self confident organisation with a clear vision of its role in the world", it could not, according to Dykes, "reflect the values and ethos of the modern BBC":

"As a building it's patriarchal, even frightening./…/ today, the BBC needs buildings that connect with our audiences, not buildings that frightens them." [10]

"For the first time", declares the publicity material, "the BBC in central London will have a public face accessible to all – where broadcaster and audience can meet directly." [11]
After a limited competition, architect Sir Richard MacCormac was awarded this task. His strategy was not so much outright transparency, as the framing of so-called *interstitial* spaces (Jackson 2004, ch. 4). In natural geography, the interstitial is the shoreline, in architecture, it is the gap between walls, neither outside nor inside. With MacCormac, the interstitial is defined as social space, an interface for meetings. From this follows his re-interpretation of the function of the building: not in terms of what the factory produces, but in terms of the social and symbolic organisation that it houses (MacCormac 2005).

How is this notion translated into architecture? When describing the interior organisation of the new extension, MacCormac tends to refer to public, outside places: the market place, the high street, the forum, the thoroughfare.[12] Places where people interlock, become physically and visually aware of each other (like they will, on the inside of the new Broadcasting House, on stairs, circulation routes, breakout areas). What is being interiorised here is not so much modern space, as (old) public space. To express the interstitial externally, McCormac enhances the opposites (inside/outside, light/heavy, convex/concave, opacity/transparency) through which the "in-between" may be experienced. The new spire of the artwork, for instance, has the same geometric dimension as that of the church, but is turned upside down, and made transparent. The heavy convexity of the old building is countered, inverted, by the air-light concavity of an open-air square or theatre (fig 5), surrounded by a special type of glass, producing a sensation of volume: opaque during the day, transparent during the night, when the inner light transforms the whole building to a theatre. What the new building encircles and embalms, is not so much the production areas of the artists, as this open-air square: "the heart of the BBC".

---

[9]) The words of John Smith, at the time serving as BCCs Director of Finance. http://news.bbc.co.uk, 31.10.2000
[10]) Speech given at the British Property Federation Conference 2003, http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/pressoffice/speeches/stories/dyke.
[11]) http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/keyfacts/stories/bh_development.shtml
[12]) Notes from a talk given by MacCormac on Broadcasting House, Feb 2004, www.cityofsound.com/blog/2005/12/notes.

For the BBC to return to Broadcasting House, the shell had to be opened up. The irony being that the exterior that is now preserved as BBCs proud heritage from the 30s – the Portland stone, the sculptures by Eric Gill – was already at that point signifying tradition. While what was considered modern and forward-looking at the time – the design of the interiors, Coates' studios – had more or less vanished within a decade. Stronger forces of technology called for reorganisation: the arrival of television (with new spatial needs for production), the outbreak of the war (with bombs and rockets threatening central functions, from above).

What remains is photography: in 1932, the BBC published a book with over 100 pictures of the brand new interiors of Broadcasting House (including fig. 3 and 4). To architect MacCormac, these pictures appear "spooky - like a German expressionist film-set"[13]. An abandoned film-set, one might add. For what is lacking in them is people: not one single trace of a living soul – not even a corpse! – in any one of these studios. Benjamin (1931/1980) once noted the same absence in the Parisian scenes of 19th century photographer Eugene Atget: his street exteriors were "empty", "voiceless; the city in these pictures is swept clean like a house which has not yet found its new tenant" (p 210), the city resembles "the scene of a crime" (p 215). A sight of "healthy alienation", according to Benjamin, neither artistic nor realistic, but a forerunner to the "constructed" nature of surrealist photography, and hence, to Benjamin's notion of "equipment-free reality". With the pictures from the interiors of Broadcasting House we are looking at, not equipment-free reality, but the material and technological conditions of its production. Spaces and machines for the reproduction of the "voices of the dead" that are, precisely, "voiceless", uninhabited, suggestive of unspoken crimes and terrors.

Before finally demolishing the interior structure of the Broadcasting House, in preparation for the ongoing redevelopment, the BBC asked British artist Rachel Whiteread for a cast of its most infamous space: Room 101. It is an odd memorial, a countermove to Benjamin's "liquidation of the interior", to the Brechtian motto: "Erase the traces!" In Whiteread's Room 101, the features of interior space are inverted; the metaphor for the worst thing in the world is transformed into an object – "blank" and "ghostly", but material. When asked what would be in her own Room 101 (that is, her worst fear), Whiteread replied: "Outer space"[14].

"Because there are no walls, no parameters, nothing to relate me to the earth, nothing to stop you going off. I would find that frightening."

About as frightening as Mircea Eliades's "profane space" – borderless, fluid, chaotic. Maybe Whiteread's casting of interiors is contemporary mans version of founding sacred space, of establishing the centre of the world. To reconnect with ourselves, rather than the gods, what is needed is not the raising of spires, but the solidification of social space.

[13]) ibid.
[14]) *Independent on Sunday*, Nov 16 2003.

References

Architectural Review (1932), August.
Benjamin, Walter (1931/1980): "A Short History of Photography", in A Trachtenberg (ed.): Classic Essays on Photography, New Haven, Connecticut:
Benjamin, Walter (1933): "Experience and Powerty" ("Erfahrung und Armut"), in *Selected Writings* (1996-2003), Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Benjamin, Walter (1936/1968): "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books.
Benjamin, Walter (1999): *The Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk*), Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Broadcasting House (1932), London: British Broadcasting Corporation.
Blondheim, Menahem (2003): "Harold Adams Innis and his Bias of Communication", in Katz, Durham Peters, Leibes & Orloff (eds.), *Canonic Texts in Media Research*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Cawelti, John (1976): *Adventure, Mystery, Romance. Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Coates, Wells (1932a): "Response to Tradition" in *Architectural Review*, November.
Coates, Wells (1932b): "Furniture Today and Furniture Tomorrow", in *Architectural Review*, July.
Coates, Wells (1932c): "The Dramatic Control Panel No 1", Plate IV, *Architectural Review*, August.
Cohen, Deborah (2006): *Household Gods. The British and their Possessions*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Cohn, Laura (1999): *The Door to a Secret Room. A Portrait of Wells Coates*, Aldershot: Scolar Press.
Colomina, Beatriz (1994/2000): *Privacy and Publicity. Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.
Dayan, Daniel & Elihu Katz (1992): *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Durham Peters, John. (1999): *Speaking Into the Air*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Eliade, Mircea (1957/1987): *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*. Orlando & London: Harcourt Inc.
Foucault, Michel (1967/1998): "Of Other Spaces" in Mirzoeff, Nicholas (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, London & New York: Routledge.
Frampton, Kenneth (1983): "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle: Bay Press.
Giedion, Sigfried (1928/1995): *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-concrete (Bauen in Frankreich)*, Santa Monica, Calif.: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities.
Gielgud, Val & Holt Marvell (1934): *Death at Broadcasting House*, London & Manchester: A Cherry Tree Book, Withy Grove Press Limited.
Innis, Harold (1951/2006): *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Goldsmith, V H (1932): "The Studio Interiors", in *Architectural Review*, August
Jackson, Nicola (2003): *Building the BBC: A Return to Form*, London: BBC.
MacCormac, Richard (2005): "Private View II: When Art Meets Architecture", *TATEet*c, Issue 5, Autumn 2005.
Meyrowitz, Joshua (1985): *No Sense of Place*, New York: Oxford University Press.
Milutis, Joe (2006), *Ether. The Nothing That Connects Everything*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.

Morley, David (2000): *Home Territories. Media, Mobility and Identity*, London: Routledge.
Rice, Charles (2007): *The Emergence of the Interior. Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*, London & New York: Routledge.
Sterne, Jonathan (2003): *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham & London: Duke University Press.
Williams, Raymond (1974/1997): *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Routledge.

Staffan Ericson is a PhD in Media and Communications, and an Associate Professor at Södertörn University, Sweden. His dissertation from 2004 compares the dramatic forms of modernist playwright August Strindberg and television dramatist Dennis Potter, and how the dream-play format is integrated in Raymond Williams' and Walter Benjamin's theories on mass culture and modernism. He is currently the co-leader of the project *Media Houses: Architecture, Media and the (Re-)centralisation of Power*, which studies the buildings of major media institutions in a historical context (and is to be presented in a forthcoming anthology, published by Peter Lang, New York).

Fig 1

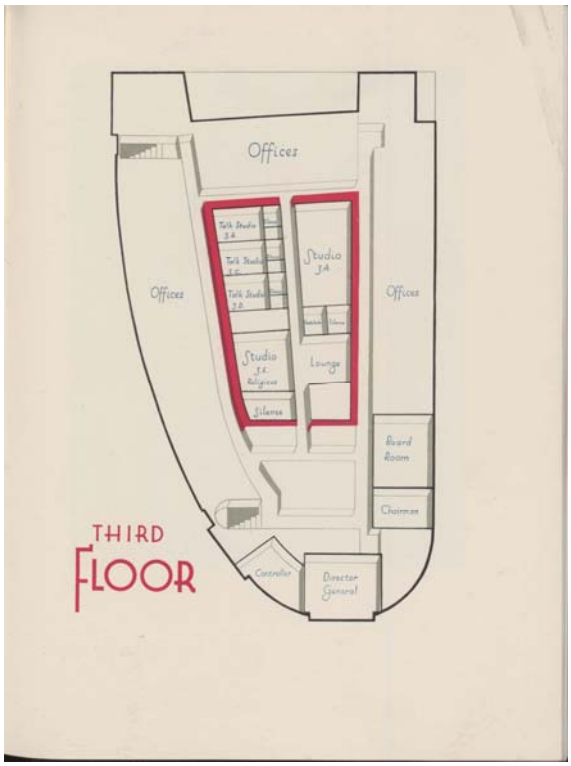
Offices
Offices
Offices
Studio
Lounge
Board Room
Chairman
Controller
Director General
THIRD
FLOOR

Fig 2

Fig 3

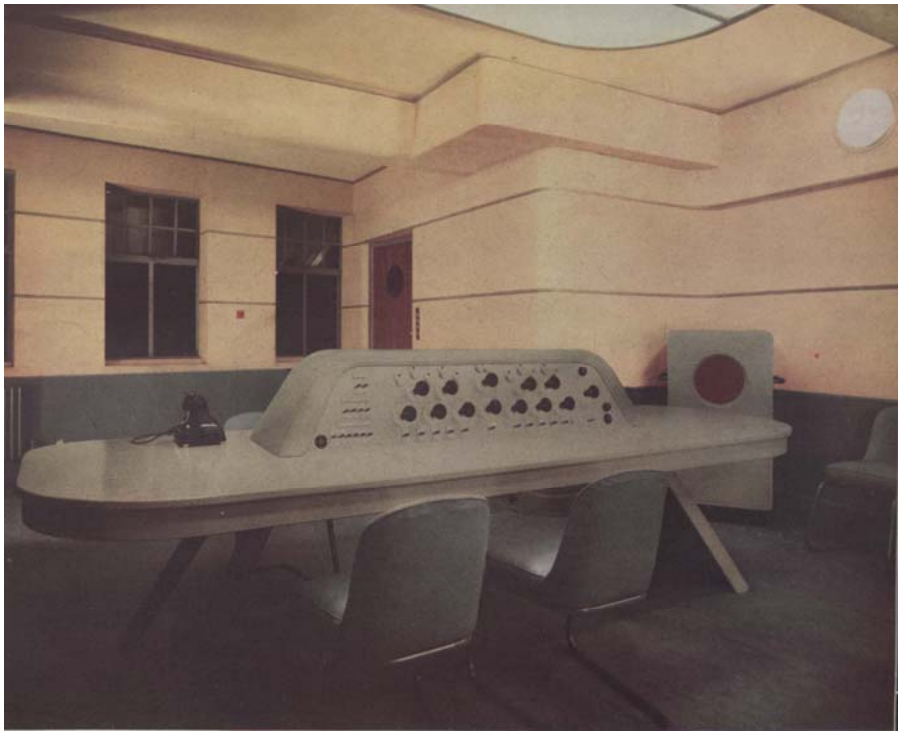

Fig 4

Fig 5

Restbilder:

För spirorna, i introt

För glastorget, slutet

För Whiteread, slutet