

Editorial

Falsing (After Marconi)

‘Henceforth, every form of writing will consist of an operation of decoding, of contamination, and of sense perversion. All this because all language is essentially mystification, and everything is fiction.’ – Brion Gysin

‘So much of the very best literature opens up illicit frequencies so that meaning can travel along channels other than the obvious or rational. The Tintin books are full of these frequencies, these channels; they even dramatise their setting up, hunting down, rumbling and relocating.’ – Tom McCarthy

At Christmas three years ago, I was given a postcard reproduction of the shipping forecast map. Seeing the charts (Fastnet, Cromarty, Biscay, Dogger, Malin...) triggered not only the calming memory of listening to the nightly broadcasts, adrift as I was in an alien city, but an associative recollection, one from much further back: the times I used to steal into my great-grandmother’s front room and play with her radiogram. The display named cities, both familiar (Belfast, Cork, London) and enticing (Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Reykjavik, Moscow, Prague, Trieste), and I would turn the dial and instantly be transported elsewhere. I didn’t—*couldn’t*—understand what was being said, but these mysterious, almost poetic cyphers¹ were

¹ *Peeping Tom* scriptwriter Leo Marks, who worked for the Allies as codes operator, conceived the idea of transmitting code embedded in lines of poetry—initially Shakespeare and Browning—but when the Nazis twigged, interpreted, and understood, Marks started writing his own original poem codes, most notably ‘The Life That I Have,’ which couldn’t be deciphered by the Germans as there was no reference. (But I’m getting ahead of myself...)

simply mesmerising to my younger self.

Thinking of the radio and otherworldly broadcasts, I remember the first time I heard numbers stations, not first-hand but mediated through recordings, sampled on music albums: first, on Stereolab's *Transient Random-Noise Bursts with Announcements*, then on Pere Ubu's *Story of My Life*. Numbers stations were at their apex at the height of the Cold War, and were assumed to be broadcasts sending coded messages across long distances.² Often starting with a disconcerting melody, or the sound of several Morse beeps, these transmissions were followed by the unnerving sound of a voice counting or reciting letters in other languages, and usually looped on repetitive play. It was purely one-way traffic—the transmitters sent numbers to the recipient over shortwave, the receiver did not reply, but deciphered these texts using 'one-time pads.' The Conet Project³ gathered the (now mostly extinct) broadcasts together in 2004: 'Swedish Rhapsody,' and 'The Lincolnshire Poacher,' and so on, named for the jingles used.

In the sleeve notes for The Conet Project, they write:

We are living in a time of widespread fear; fear of an all-powerful state watching our every move and motivation. This level of paranoia used to be exhibited (with good reason) in the Eastern Block states, now this virulent plague has crept into the Western mind-set. It has oozed in very slowly, which is how it seems to have been able to take such a firm and widespread grip on the population

2 See 'Dark Side of the Band,' Jason Walsh, *Wired* (2004)

3 irdial.hyperreal.org

without anyone really noticing that anything has changed.

As Tom McCarthy points out in *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*, Tintin's first outing was primarily a piece of propaganda to expose the evils of communism. What's more interesting, for me at least, is that the intrepid boy reporter filed very little copy to the newspaper he was working for. But he did transmit, repeatedly sending and receiving radio messages, and in fact McCarthy notes that some of the most striking images in the 'adventures' are not of characters or actions, but of 'radio masts, wires casting signals and antennae picking them up.'

In both *Cigars of the Pharaoh* and *The Red Sea Sharks* Tintin floats on the ocean while radio transmissions billow and swirl around him. In *The Blue Lotus* he tracks a radio transmitter to its source: this is the book's nutshell. In this respect he resembles Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who describes the air around him as 'full of noises, sounds and sweet airs;' or the same play's Ferdinand who, picking up Ariel's transmissions, wonders: 'Where should this music be? In the air or earth? ... I have followed it / or it hath drawn me rather ...' Most of all he resembles the eponymous hero of Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orphée*,⁴ who sweeps through the spectrum as he manically fiddles with the dial. 'WHEET ... CRACK ... CRR ... *dernières nouvelles d'Europe* ... CRR ... AA? ... AA? ... HNET! ... HNET! ... CRR ... The European news service ...' crackles Oliveira da Figueria's radio as Tintin tunes it in *Land of Black Gold*. 'BEEP-BEEP-BEEP ... 724 ... 326 ... Listen: the bird sings

⁴ Cocteau based his radio messages on the ones sent to occupied France during World War Two.

with its fingers ... Two Times ... BEEP-BEEP ...' crackles Cocteau's in *Orphée*. When asked why he is listening to it, *Orphée* responds: 'I'm tracking the unknown.'⁵

McCarthy's one-time pad for reading Hergé is Roland Barthes' hermeneutic code, a code that is a text made up of all the aspects of a text that 'constitute an enigma and lead to its solution.' Yet across the Tintin books, this enigma solving is never straightforward, there is constant jamming. Narratives, McCarthy says, are 'bought and sold, stolen and substituted, or twisted out of shape until, turned inside out or back to front, they mutate into other narratives.' It is a 'drama about the appearance and circulation of stories—also about their disappearance and re-emergence in another form.' Put another way, the narrative is coded/decoded, stories are embedded within other stories.

Around eight years ago I'd planned to make a tour of Ireland, sticking to the coastline as much as possible, inspired, partly, by *Coasting*, Jonathan Raban's trip around Britain. My itinerary was sketchy at best, but was to include a visit to the Marconi Station on Malin Head. For various reasons the trip never happened: I did make it to County Donegal, but not as far as the peninsula. Last year, I had the chance to visit another Marconi Station (there were eight of them in total in Ireland). On a misty November morning I stepped off the bus, thumbed a lift, and headed out to

5 Tom McCarthy's pamphlet *Calling All Agents* looks at wireless communication, cryptography and broadcasting, and the International Necronautical Society, of which McCarthy is a member, installed their own Radio Broadcasting Unit at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2004. The script quoted Hergé.

trek the Derrigimlagh bog and the remains of the station in Clifden. There was not a soul about, and I expected to get lost, but did not. Though I have never been to East Anglia, the landscape struck me as eerily Sebaldian, not only barren but what Tacita Dean calls a ‘poetic cul-de-sac,’ a ghostly dead-end. Save for the spalled foundations there is nothing to be seen but the grass and ling heather, sheep droppings, one or two bits of machinery, and some rusted chains that would have anchored the antennae.⁶ Standing on the bog, I remembered a line from Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*: ‘This, I thought, will be what is left after the earth has ground itself down.’

Bologna-born inventor and electromagnetism enthusiast Guglielmo Marconi had strong roots in Ireland: his mother was from the Jameson whiskey family, and his first wife, Beatrice O’Brien, was Lord Inchiquin’s daughter.⁷ In the early 1900s Marconi set about establishing wireless transmission across the Atlantic, and sent his first transatlantic radio message in 1902. By 1907 he had established a regular radio-telegraph service between Europe and North America, competing with the transatlantic cable. The Clifden station was part of this transatlantic transmission service, linked to a similar station in Nova Scotia, and another in Cornwall. From a sign at the site I read: ‘At its peak, some 300 people were employed at the station. The 120ha site contained many buildings. Masts over 60 meters in height supported

⁶ The Clifden site has since been enhanced: visitors can experiment with sound frequencies on a tuning fork organ, and so on.

⁷ *Marconi—The Irish Connection*, Michael Sexton (Four Courts Press, 2004)

aerial wires each 1,300m in length. A narrow gauge railway facilitated works on the site. The station operated until 1922 when it was destroyed during the Irish Civil War.⁸

James Joyce made the same trip by bicycle to Clifden from Galway in 1912 to see Marconi, with the view to writing an article on the transatlantic transmitter for the *Piccolo della Sera* newspaper in Trieste. He was refused access to the station and was directed to writing to Marconi House in London for permission, but no further attempt at contact was made. Joyce, the faithful recycler, makes reference to the Marconi Station in *Finnegans Wake*: ‘as softly as the loftly marconimasts from Clifden sough open tireless secrets (mauveport! mauveport!) to Nova Scotia’s listing sisterwands. Tubetube!’

There is a strong presence of radio in *Finnegans Wake* (‘Dis and dat and dese and dose! You’re crackling out of turn like always. And 2RN and Longhorse Connaught. Stay off my air!’), indeed Jane Lewy⁹ posits an interesting theory that the *Wake* is not a novel about a dream state, but is instead an Electronic Voice Phenomenon experiment: all the voices that speak in the text are dead, and the polyglot language they employ is similar to Konstantīns Raudive’s voice tapes. She writes:

8 Alcock and Brown, who made the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic in 1919, crash landed on the bog next to the Marconi Station, and from there they sent a message to the *New York Times* announcing their arrival. A stone cairn resembling an egg now marks the site.

9 ‘The Tale of HCE and EVP’, hjs.ff.cuni.cz

Consider the following lines from Shaun, interspersed amid the babble: ‘Dood and I dood! [...] Do not flingamejig to the twolves! [...] The cubs are after me it zeebs, the whole totem pack, vuk vuk and vuk to them [...]’ I am dead, says Shaun, and persecuted by static unable to transmit or receive.

*Now we’re getting it. Tune in and pick up the forain counties!
Hello!’*