

Radio Begijnenstraat: a radiophonic delirium

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ABSTRACT

Radio Begijnenstraat is an ongoing audio project on the psychiatric ward of the Antwerp prison in Belgium. For ten years now, NGO hell-er organises creation and recording sessions every week. Under the guidance of an artist, the residents work on a radio episode. The result is a podcast of about forty-five minutes: a cut-and-paste montage representing two months of prison time ranging from life stories to poetry, own texts and music, to performance, drama, and improvisation. Every year Radio Begijnenstraat produces six episodes and every month it broadcasts on local FM radio and digital radio online. In this article, I will describe how our project as a transferential medium introduces an empty non-existent space (the ether) that may be freely filled. We find that clients are naturally and actively confronted with different kinds of representations and derivations of the clinical transference. Also, there is the act of recording, preserving, juggling, and fixing. It is a reference to a fragment of a post-dramatic radiophonic narrative that is realised with editing and later listened to. Not only do we make radio for an invisible audience, we also listen to ourselves and that is the mirror, even during the creation of the episodes.

Keywords: prison radio, forensic psychiatry, transference, co-creation, post-dramatic radiophonic narrative.

Introduction

Radio Begijnenstraat is an ongoing audio project on the psychiatric ward of the Antwerp prison in Belgium. For ten years now, NGO hell-er organises creation and recording sessions every week. Under the guidance of an artist¹, the residents work, individually or in groups, on a radio episode. The result is a podcast of about forty-five minutes filled with the most diverse contributions. I say podcast because nowadays podcasts exist, but when we started over ten years ago, we called it audio theatre, a radio show. It's a cut-and-paste montage ranging from life stories to poetry, own texts and music, to performance, drama, and improvisation. The contributions can be made by the detainees solely, then they use our music studio and the material and edit themselves. The scenic work in the drama group, just like the biographical or creative work, is always edited—with consent—by Katrin Lohmann². This makes the editors neither directors nor curators who choose the contributions and form, but they co-create the story. Whereby something told incoherently suddenly turns out to have meaning.

Every year Radio Begijnenstraat produces six episodes and every month it broadcasts on local FM city radio and digital radio online. The website and Soundcloud account contain a substantial archive where one can find every episode from 2016 until now. Every episode is a representation of two months

prison life by all who inhabit the psychiatric ward. Radio Begijnenstraat holds the middle ground between a radio play and documentary. It organises itself as a collaborative collective with artistic and therapeutic meanings. Radio Begijnenstraat starts from the needs, talents, suffering, wishes, and strengths of everyone and aims to explore and support a meaningful daytime occupation, cooperation, empathy, creativity, and reflection. Depending on desire and need, everyone works on everything or nothing: inspiration and association, speaking and writing, directing and editing, or just being present. We use our biography, forms of our voices, literature, punk, editing techniques, music, imagination, our dreams and demons, theatre and creative writing in an unconventional and intuitive way.

Katrin Lohmann is co-founder and artistic coordinator of NGO hell-er and has a background as an actress and drama therapist. The project emerged from the drama group that she was giving on the psychiatric ward. Katrin was not really familiar with the medium of radio, but in the context of detention and isolation, she found out that conventional theatre techniques are not as easily adjusted to the diverse profiles of the residents so she developed enough skills in the field of technical realisation to be able to produce a professional pre-recorded podcast. Furthermore this medium turned out to be perfectly implemented within the setting of prison. You can record on the spot, without much hassle and resources, and you don't have to rehearse either. You can create dramatic material with incarcerated people each according to their needs, wishes, and talents. The voices and sounds create a whole world in your head. A world much bigger than the surface of a cell. As a sidenote, the project is subsidised by the ministry of arts and culture, not the ministry of justice or a health care department.

Ward F(ou): excess and ether

About fifty people live in the psychiatric ward of the Antwerp prison. These detainees have all different legal statuses (they are defended, convicted, and interned (ejustice, 2014)). Their stay on the psychiatric ward is indicated on the presence of one or multiple severe psychiatric problems and/or mental crises—not for people with psychological problems like depression or anxiety related to their stay in prison and or their crimes and the consequences thereof for families, work, etc. We organise the daily living environment in this department with voluntary participation in group and living moments to a social psychiatric model. The group of residents consists of a unique broad group of people with very different psychiatric problems in different unstable or chronic conditions. Their backgrounds tell stories of homelessness, juvenile detention, years of psychiatric treatments, forensic treatments, and exclusion from mental health services due to aggression and a lack of good prognosis. But also fathers and mothers with what would be referenced as “normal” lives who lose their jobs and decompensate into one or more criminal acts. The only thing in common amongst this broad group of people is the temporary or permanent inability to comply with rules. There are

laws in our society, there are house rules in our psychiatric hospitals, there are implicit agreements about how to communicate appropriately, on how to live and engage in relationships ... and one way or another, they fail in this sort of compliance with rules of the other in society, or even beloved ones close by.

This prison ward has become an asylum for the chronically mentally ill, those not stable, and sometimes aggressive clients and our work is characterised by a continuity in contact and intensive therapeutic treatment. It shares no finality with the institute where we reside. In the collaboration, the function of the group determines the form and conditions of meeting. It varies from time to time and from individual to group. We can't do intakes, people show up one day and we can't send people away, even after critical incidents. People are using drugs and medication, and prone to addiction. We focus optimally on relational and dynamic safety, there is no supervision of prison guards, they are present on the ward but not with us. We do not have any advisory function vis-à-vis the Justice Department or the courts/tribunals.

I would like to address two functionalities of our radio project.

Relation self–other

First, our project as a medium introduces an empty imaginary space with no real boundaries (the ether) that may be freely filled. In this vacuum, a human being speaks. And speaking as such, is also a call to something or someone and an attempt to relate to others. It is the invocative function of the voice that calls to the other, and its echo that *mutatis mutandis* represents the mirror. In our radio work we find that clients are naturally and actively confronted with different kinds of representations and derivations of the clinical transference. The project contains possibilities in transference clinical therapeutic work.

It stages different constellations that shape that transference relationship.

The relation to the self

The radio work instigates the narrative identity. Our self has a narrative structure and is developed in relation to others and the stories we are entangled in. In our storied world we organise and communicate what happened, our emotions, our actions. The radio work is a window into the narrative world of meaning, expressing his or her unique voice. We urge (and enjoy) to understand and give meaning to our experiences by telling stories to others. This narrative identity does not concern a truth, it can be utterly untrue and delusional. But it is not, per se, fictional—it exists in the words of he or she who speaks and in the eye and the ear of the beholder.

The relation to the other

In our lives, stories, and life events we consider multiple “others”.

There are the others whom we work with at the radio project. For example, if someone is telling about himself, the others will sometimes confront him or her with their words. It is an open chaotic group, which leaves space for

intervention and group dynamics, that will also be recorded. People intervene on content (what you are saying is not true), on relations and transference (you say so, but I think you hurt some of us, they are not interested, get mad or laugh). If someone is giving very personal information about a victim, myself or Katrin will intervene by stating that on the radio project one can only say something this personal about him or herself and not the others. We don't speak for others. The story stays but we will edit the piece together so that detailed information on another is cut. And we work with this person individually on his need to talk about the victim. We protect individuals but not the group.

That means that sometimes the radio is being used as propaganda against another other, the state, and their criminal case and rehabilitation. It is known in Belgium that this group of detainees are badly treated. People wait for years in prisons for places in forensic hospitals and are coming back to prison a lot. To do it all over again. The reality is that we work for years with the same detainees, and often see them back after two weeks, six months, or five years. Belgium has been convicted multiple times by the European Court of Human Rights for the manner of incarceration of mentally ill offenders, so I am not making this up. For now, several new forensic psychiatric institutions have been built, but there are still a thousand of them waiting in prisons—and coming back to them. My opinion about this is that the forensic psychiatric treatments in Belgium are based on conduct and the interventions are more of a pedagogical kind and less of intensive and long-term psychotherapy, which is obviously needed.

A third other is our inner circle in society. The radio is broadcast on local city radio and on digital radio online. We have an audio archive online. Everyone knows this and signs to consent that the episodes leave prison. Before that happens, we listen to them together, with everyone (even non-contributors). If there are no problems, we broadcast. If someone has a problem, changed his mind on being in the show, we cut it and edit the montage. Radio is relatively anonymous but also personal: family, lovers, parents, sons ... will recognise the voice of their relative. The use of our voices creates some intimacy for those who can relate to them.

A fourth other is society as a whole. It is in this spectrum that the narrative identity of the offender will resonate to a world where he is supposed to work back to. I think that this level on taking up the link between the mentally ill offender and society is utterly useful in every forensic treatment. What happened and where did interests conflict on these two levels? Sometimes people conclude that they cannot live in society and search for places where they can live alone, and they will be left alone.

If people ask me why it is important to do a silly chaotic creative radio project in prison, I always say it is not silly and it is the most of what a forensic treatment can look like in prison because of this last transference link to society. We are being broadcast, we know someone is listening, and we don't know who. It is the injection of the representation of this other, this link to society, and their lives outside prison that is of fundamental importance from the

start of a treatment, to not be excluded and not be completely taken by prison life and all of what goes on inside. To keep that link to the world outside of prison.

The indeterminate presence of our listeners carries our desire to get something made, without being censorious. In fact, we never know if they are even there. I suspect the context of prison drives the radio makers to still get something said about themselves, another person, the world inside the walls and the world outside. Perhaps as a refuge, to satisfy themselves that the latter still exists in the meantime, after all these years. For heard—or at least broadcast—one transmits one's morse and fragments are freedom.

With the radio, it is something like a cantonada (Van Hoorde, 2007), where one turns from the stage—here the radio—to an absent listener, lost and invisible, silent, mute. It is the invocative function of the voice that calls to the other, and its echo that represents the mirror. Not only do we make radio for an invisible audience, we also listen to ourselves, and that is the mirror, even during the creation of the episodes, that we hold up to ourselves. Not only for confrontation, also to continue to recognise ourselves.

Relation to time

The second concept that constitutes the radio project is the relation to time. There is the act of recording, preserving, juggling, and fixing. Sometimes listening to it again and again. It is a reference to a fragment of a post-dramatic radiophonic narrative that is realised with editing and later listened to by, and with, others.

The focus on repetition, on what repeats itself, finds its source in psychoanalytic practice. For example, remembering is also repetition, albeit in words. The repetition in the word under transference by no means constitutes a mere pathological, deathly repetition, but the possibilities of a creative symbolisation of what has never been symbolised before. It is this idea of a repetition with variation, of the repeated representation of the subject, that we explore as a line of thought in our radio project and in creativity (Geerardyn, 2007). I wish to underline that creativity is by no means reducible to its therapeutic effects.

Yasco Horsman (2014), reflects in his article “Radiophonic delirium: Beckett, radio, psychosis”, on the function of the ego in a talking cure in psychoanalysis and as staged in theatre. An analytical session, according to Freud, is a *spiel*—which in his discourse takes on the meaning of “play” but also of “stage play”—in which by means of transference the drama of conflicting psychic impulses is enacted, making process (*durcharbeitung*) possible the moment the patient becomes a spectator of his own unconscious “drama”. That which is compulsively repeated can then be translated into an integrated series of “memories”, which the patient “knows” in the first person, so to speak.

Dynamically, here, you find the introduction of the dimension of time which is also present in our radio work. For example, one person talked a lot about

the hallucinations he was having and used us and his reference to his radio work as a way to make memories from hallucinations. That introduction of dimensions of time, calmed his need to act on the hallucinations. He felt like he had more agency concerning the hallucinations because of the recording, editing, mixing ... which made them less threatening.

Also, the fact that this is a structural project, for at least two days per week for the last ten years, is important. This way our radio work is often a safe point around the conflict they all live, personal, group related, or circumstantial, maybe due to prison environment.

After describing the radio project's two functionalities related to therapeutic possibilities, I would like to end with its form.

Form follows function: a radiophonic delirium

The radio has a specific form, it is not a narrative, there is no overhead voice, there is no red line. It has the form of a radiophonic delirium.

For Freud, theatre is the terrain in which repressed conflicts are played out. It is, in other words, the terrain of neurosis, and I would like to add perversion to that. Whereas theatre metaphors play a key role in Freud's reflections on neurosis, the vocabulary is surprisingly more absent in literature on psychosis. In his article on radiophonisation, Yasco Horsman (2014) examines what kind of theatrical "space" is needed to make psychosis imaginable. The reason why I add this little detour in our presentation is because of the fear of working with drama and dramatherapy with psychotic patients in psychiatric hospitals and forensic facilities. As our radio project does not exclude any detainees of working with us, that means that we work with them even when they are, or can be, overtly psychotic, delusional, or agitated. It is not our experience that drama and dramatherapy is dangerous to conduct with these patients. If you open the form of drama, loosen its often neurotic narrative that is demanded in most therapeutic programmes. The form of the medium has to follow its function.

Historically, psychosis and "madness" (in its radical, non-neurotic sense) are therefore recurring themes in both post-dramatic theatre and experimental radio plays. Horsman³ (2014) suggests that this is no coincidence, but that where neurosis is perhaps best "dramatised" in the traditional theatrical way, psychosis lends itself to a "radiophonisation", where the voice is central. A good and well-known historical example are the radio plays and radio experiments in Beckett's oeuvre. Much of Beckett's post-1960 works are pieces, not for characters, but for "radiophonic" (disembodied) voices.

Radio Begijnenstraat tries to tell you something about the voices of people who wander. About the beauty of language and speech, without conventions, but free, beyond prison walls. We try to (re)write our stories and move on, in the ether, on the radio. Because even a prison is no place to stay stuck in your own head, your own thoughts, your own compulsions and urges. It is the language—and that may have many forms—that makes us human and that is special. For instance, someone spoke that he was afraid to cry that day, because "a kilo of tears would fall heavily from his eyes", and he

didn't know if he could carry that, there in his face like that, that kilo. It is that conversation, any conversation, that is worth having. The voices belong to people. On paper, homeless people, people who often became silent, some from day one given the circumstances, others after a few weeks anyway, having recovered from the initial shock and already gone through the first survival strategies. Some habitués, very at ease with the temporary asylum, are happy to make their bed in prison.

There are people we don't understand, but we manage to find words or gestures that eventually mean something to both parties, that takes time, and we have time. That can become a beginning of a monologue or a conversation. But the beginning is the appeal to another. This appeal that makes us speak not only to the voices in our heads but also to each other. Or at least we try to.

Notes

1. Apart from Katrin Lohmann and Nelle Van Damme, we also have Gerard Herman, an artist, who leads the drawing workshop and Thomas De Smedt, a musician–producer, who works with the detainees on songs, lyrics, and music production.
2. Katrin Lohmann is a psychotherapist specialised in dramatherapy and emotion-focused therapy. She has also been trained as an actress and works in the field of professional theatre and television as well as in the Antwerp prison where she founded and coordinates an ongoing participatory podcast project: Radio Begijnenstraat.
3. Horsman states that there have been two developments that have made it possible to rethink the relationship psychosis–drama. First, the emergence of a series of radical innovative theatre practices that theatre historian Hans-Thies Lehmann calls “postdramatic”, because dramatic conflict is no longer central. Second, the development of radio, a new technological medium that can be used to offer drama (in the form of radio plays) that are akin in their organisation to post-dramatic theatre. The combined advent of radio play and post-dramatic theatre offered theatremakers an opportunity to develop strategies to represent the experience of psychosis theatrically.

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Listen to Radio Begijnenstraat on Spotify: scan QR code.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nelle Van Damme works as a clinical psychologist and a psychoanalytical therapist in the psychiatric ward of the prison of Antwerp and from 2024 in the prison of Ghent (ministry of Justice, Belgium). She is co-founder of NGO hell-er, that produces Radio Begijnenstraat. She has a clinical practice in Ghent (Belgium) since 2011. She worked as a freelance supervisor for the psychoanalytic education programme at Ghent University, gives lectures at different psychological training programmes, and has published on topics such as forensic psychotherapy and psychosis, culture, and prison.