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# Representing the fragmented mind: Reinterpreting a classic radio feature as ‘sonic psychology’<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the intertwining of ideas about radio and popular psychology in broadcasting’s formative years by focusing on the case study of one pioneering BBC producer, Lance Sieveking. Using Sieveking’s private papers and other archival sources, the article attempts to reconstruct his private and emotional life in order to help us understand more fully the unusual and experimental programmes he made in the late 1920s. A focus on Sieveking shows an early example of radio being used as a medium capable of representing – and exploring – one’s ‘inner life’. More specifically, in the 1920s, Sieveking’s work is an example of radio being used as a means of working through anxieties and neuroses that are a recognized feature of life in Britain in the aftermath of World War I. It argues that when analysing the creative process in radio – which is, after all, what Paddy Scannell has called a ‘human-made’ thing – we might want to attend more closely to the personal psychology of its producers.*

## KEYWORDS

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## INTRODUCTION

Broadcasting and psychoanalysis were born together in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth. In 1922, a quarter-century after the first experiments in wireless telegraphy, the BBC was established as a company in Britain. In 1923, the British edition of *The Ego and the Id* was published – the first English-language translation of Sigmund Freud's work had been in 1911 – and, as the BBC was taking to the air, a watered-down and bastardized form of Freudian psychology was permeating more broadly 'into the culture, the social fabric, and the mentality of the era' (Thomson 2001: 97). Broadcasting and psychoanalysis did not just coexist – they *cross-fertilized*. Broadcasting metaphors were deployed to explain psychological theories: the mind was compared to a radio – something seemingly capable of transmitting as well as receiving thoughts. Similarly, psychological discourses shaped broadcasting discourses. In his seminal 1934 work, *The Stuff of Radio*, the British producer Lance Sieveking (1896–1972) wrote of radio as a kind of 'harnessed telepathy' – a 'machine' for achieving 'sudden mental contact' between creator and listener (Sieveking 1934: 111–12, 101). 'It is with that elusive thing a process of thought with which we are concerned', he suggested (1934: 97).

Sieveking is remembered today as one of the earliest figures to properly theorize the 'new' medium of radio. But in this article I want to attend to him more closely because he also vividly embodies the way in which radio was first used in concrete rather than metaphorical ways to represent an individual's *inner* life. More than that, through a focus on Sieveking's early programmes, I want to suggest that radio was being conceived by Sieveking's generation of producers as a space for *working through* the anxieties and neuroses many individuals experienced during the traumatic readjustments of post-World War I Britain. In so doing, I hope to make a case, too, for subjecting radio more regularly in the future to perspectives that recognize the personal psychology of its producers as at least one motivating factor in the creative process.

We are familiar with the mass of printed memoirs, autobiographies, poetry collections, novels and plays left to us by that war generation. Authors such as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, R. C. Sherriff, David Jones and Edmund Blunden found in imaginative writing in particular a means 'not so much to create a work of fiction about the war from outside, as to explore events and emotional states that had been their own, but which still felt difficult to acknowledge' (Roper 2009: 34; see also Fussell 2000). We know, too, that in modernist circles more generally, the 'psychological novel', more interested in its characters' perceptions and their 'perplexing mazes of "consciousness"' than any external events, was very much back in vogue during the first three decades of the twentieth century: 'stream-of-consciousness' writers such as Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were merely the most celebrated names among a very much larger tradition of novelistic introspection (Baldick 2004: 189–211).

It would be surprising if the new medium of radio could remain impermeable to this cultural climate. Indeed, LeMahieu (1988) has already pointed to the early BBC's attempts to gain cultural legitimacy for itself by attempting to present radio as the equal of literature – a new, and serious, art form, where the creativity of individual talents could find expression in aural form. Lance Sieveking was an important part of this process. Between 1926 and 1929, through a series of large-scale features – or, to use the preferred term

at the time, ‘fantasies’ – he sought to establish a new tradition of complex and highly textual programming, which somehow captured those ‘perplexing mazes of “consciousness” ’ that fascinated his literary contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite being called ‘the foremost exponent of radiogenic experiment’ in Britain, Sieveking has been granted almost no serious attention (Cohen 2010: 595). In part, this is because his programmes so neatly fit the stereotype of modernist obscurantism. Paddy Scannell describes them as unsustainable examples of radio for radio’s sake – ‘banal or pretentious’ curios (1986: 4). Hitherto, though, Sieveking’s seminal 1928 production, *Kaleidoscope*, has been assessed, if at all, only through a partial impression gleaned from brief extracts included in his book, *The Stuff of Radio* – quite simply because, as Scannell, LeMahieu and, more recently, Cohen have all suggested, ‘no script exists’ (Cohen: 595; LeMahieu: 194; Scannell: 6).

In fact, Sieveking’s own working copy of the script *does* survive, alongside scripts for his other broadcasts, a large tranche of private letters and, of course, the nine novels, four collections of poetry and an array of belles-lettres he published between 1919 and his death in 1972. Viewed collectively, and by paying particular attention to what they reveal of Sieveking’s unfolding emotional life, I would argue that we must now reinterpret his work. In doing so, we can perhaps begin to appreciate it as the first attempt in Britain to create a form of what we might call ‘sonic psychology’.

Before proceeding, though, I should identify two important methodological points. First, I have published elsewhere a close analysis of Sieveking’s most important work, *Kaleidoscope*, placing it in the context of modernism, surrealism, experimental film and creative ideas about sound in the 1920s (Hendy 2013). The argument I present here should perhaps be read in conjunction with this other publication if a fuller sense of his radio aesthetic is to be gained. Second, it should be emphasized that my methodological approach in this present article is emphatically *not* about applying a psychoanalytic perspective to my own subject matter. Rather, it is to proceed from Sieveking’s habit of psychologizing his *own* work. Instead of interpreting Sieveking’s state of mind retrospectively from a psychoanalytic perspective, I try to restrict myself to drawing on evidence supplied by Sieveking himself – archival evidence in which he ‘thinks aloud’ about his state of mind. It is important to stress that what’s being addressed here is not ‘repressed’, unconscious or unarticulated desires. Sieveking may well have had these, and they would no doubt make a fascinating study. But as a cultural historian, rather than a psychoanalyst, I focus here on what he articulates *openly* about his state of mind, and then explore what this openness tells us about the period in question and, in particular, why it might have been that radio seemed to be so aesthetically relevant to his circumstances. Thus, instead of following what might be termed the psychoanalytic approach of standard ‘screen theory’, heavily influenced as it is with Lacanian notions of repressed desire (see Metz 1982; Mulvey 2009) – or even the literary and biographically inclined criticism of Charles Mauron in his 1935 book *Aesthetics and Psychology* – my chosen task is to delineate the contours of Sieveking’s *own* analysis and see whether that helps us understand more clearly why the kind of radio he made in the late 1920s turned out the way it did. This, then, is a strictly historical approach: it seeks to position Sieveking’s work in the context of its time. It is also, of necessity, biographical in flavour. I have written more fully elsewhere about the methodological implications of using biography in media history (see Hendy 2012). There I acknowledge that a biographical approach will always provide an incomplete

2. Other programmes by Sieveking in this period included *The Wheel of Time* (1926), *Love* (1928), *Kaleidoscope II* (1929) and *Intimate Snapshots* (1929).

explanation, especially where it fails to engage with wider social structures. Indeed, there is much to commend in the critiques of author-orientated explanations in media: the 'auteur' theory of film, for example, is now rightly circumscribed by countless studies that have emphasized the shaping role of wider production processes, industrial influences, genre conventions and, of course, textual readings by the audience itself (see Braudy and Cohen 2009). But I would argue that an 'auteur' approach retains at least some relevance for studying radio – or, at least, for radio made during the interwar era – since production really was then a one-person operation in which supervisory structures were often rudimentary. The programmes Sieveking made were written, produced and directed by him, and by him alone. This made it possible for him to realize on air a particularly personal text. Finally, I would argue that the biographical approach is one that Sieveking himself urges upon us. Indeed, it is the biographical claims he makes that *demand* historical investigation.

### **'THE MORBID AGE': PSYCHOLOGY IN BRITAIN BETWEEN THE WARS**

It is important to our reading of Sieveking's programmes that we see their creation in the context of a newly 'psychologized' culture. In his recent book *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars*, Richard Overy has written of how 'a language of anxiety and sentiments of uncertainty' was omnipresent in the 1920s and 1930s (2009: 1). Inchoate pessimism drew strength from a number of shifts in social and intellectual life: biologists, having discovered the power of genetic inheritance, thereby raised the possibility of degeneration; over the same period, chemists and engineers had created weapons of huge destructive power; physicists had popularized the notion of entropy, with its suggestion of the inevitable trend towards decay and extinction; social scientists had started wondering whether modern urban existence was shredding our nerves and creating new forms of alienation (2009: 2–4, 47). One common thread was the sense that all sorts of invisible forces were being revealed, forces stronger in their influence on life and behaviour than might have been supposed only a few decades earlier. In this context, Freud's exploration of the 'hidden' dimensions of human consciousness – and the notion that 'base' thoughts, rather than more conscious and more rational ones, might be driving our behaviour – attracted huge interest, drawing strength as it did from a widespread and entrenched fascination with theosophy, spiritualism and self-help (Thomson 2001: 97–100). The implications were profound. In the 1920s, confidence in the notion of a unitary and rational self was evaporating, to be replaced by a 'multidimensional and potentially irrational' version. 'The human mind was recognized as having a mind of its own' – a vigorous, subliminal mental world that was not just highly malleable, but also, by implication, dangerously *suggestible* (Thomson 2001: 100–02). It was also a mind that always bore the traces of an individual's past: early experiences, Freudians argued, left their mark, even if unconsciously.

In this psychically unstable age, the longest shadow was cast by World War I. As Albert Schweitzer told an Oxford audience in 1922, the 1914–1918 conflict had, in effect, destroyed a long-held belief in relentless human progress (Overy 2009: 10). Countless books, pamphlets and public talks thereafter focused on the 'decline' of civilization, with the war acting as both cause and symptom of a deeper malaise. Several generations of historians have since seized on the evidence of profound mental and cognitive shifts in the aftermath of conflict. As Roper (2009: 7) points out, one approach has been to

argue that 'the encounter with violence undid the civilising process', so that primitive, violent impulses came to the fore. More influential still has been the suggestion, articulated most famously by Paul Fussell and Eric Leed in separate studies first published in the 1970s, that the war's effect was less one of brutalization than of *alienation* (Fussell 2000; Leed 1979). In making this claim, Fussell drew largely upon the literary outpourings of Britain's officer class. What he discovered in their writing was irony, black humour and disillusionment generated by the 'dynamics of hope abridged': this was a generation of bright young men at war with their elders, infused as it now was after trench life with a binary mentality of 'them' and 'us'. Just as importantly, these influences *lasted*: as Fussell (2000: 188) put it, 'Data entering the consciousness during the war emerge long afterwards as metaphor'. Leed's particular contribution was to show that because men on the battlefield had often idealized home as a point of continuity amidst the turmoil, they frequently broke down after they had returned: the reality of civilian life released 'funds of repressed anger and bitterness', as well as lingering nostalgia for military life (Leed 1979: 188–89). These interpretations have since been considerably revised, not least through a steady widening of focus in historical research – moving us beyond the testimony of literate officers in the muddy, shell-shocked trenches of the Western Front, to encompass, for instance, sailors, airmen, diplomats, spies and generals, as well as those fighting in Africa, Eastern Europe or the Atlantic, and the men, women and children on the home front. We now appreciate not just the sense of futility or despair that clearly existed for some, but also the thrill of combat, the pleasure of comradeship, even the sheer boredom experienced by many others (see Bond 2002; Todman 2005). In short, World War I was capable of many interpretations. And, as Hew Strachan (2006: xvii) points out, 'until at least the late 1920s those different meanings co-existed with each other': everyone emerging from the conflict 'had his or her own sense of the war's significance'.

How, then, might we access these highly personal experiences and responses? The textual evidence of private testimonies provides one resource. Through a close reading of the letters soldiers sent home, especially to their mothers, Roper (2009) has recently offered a psychoanalytically informed interpretation of the long-term emotional impact of close encounters with mass-organized death – not just upon the soldiers themselves, but also among the parents, siblings and children who had to live with them after demobilization. These letters suggest that, despite all the historical revisionism, the experience of fear – underpinned by a pervasive anxiety – was indeed common. They also highlight the degree of mutual dependence and interconnectedness that existed between the trenches and the home front, as well as the degree to which communication with loved ones had a role in sustaining men psychologically. While many soldiers sought to play down their anxieties when putting pen to paper, Roper (2009: 1) also notes that moments of intense fear prompted them to be 'thrown back to a child-like state' and a longing for 'the comfort of a mother'. These were young men: seventy per cent of those who served were under thirty. It was quite natural, then, for them to regress 'back to the memory of those who had cared for them from the earliest moments' (2009: 5–9). Similarly, after the war, since many a demobbed soldier had only grown to manhood during the conflict, 'the only civilian identity he knew was that of a child' (2009: 12). In his interpretation of the unfolding emotional impact of the war, Roper therefore draws on specifically Kleinian perspectives, with their central concern for anxiety and

3. Lilly MSS/Scripts/ "The Kaleidoscope": A Rhythm Constructed and Produced by Lance Sieveking' (4 September 1928). The subtitle used in Sieveking's working script, though it bears the correct transmission date, is slightly different from that published in *Radio Times*, which is 'A Rhythm, Representing the Life of a Man from Cradle to Grave'.
4. 'Autobiographical Sketches of Lance Sieveking', unnumbered pages. An early version of this is available in BBC Written Archives, Special Collections S61. My references are to a revised version of the same document in the private collection of Paul Sieveking.
5. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 2 February 1933.

the importance of early experiences. For him, the evidence that war became 'lodged in memory' is overwhelming (2009: 15). Moreover, he suggests, many veterans displayed a need to work through their experiences, making sense of what had, after all, been a contradictory set of emotional responses: the fear of death, but also the shame of cowardice; the desire for maternal comfort, but also the need to be good soldiers and grown men. As the psychoanalyst – and former tank commander – Wilfred Bion observed, there were an awful lot of undigested feelings around. These feelings were likely to be working away within the unconscious, only revealing themselves when individuals later 'acted out' (quoted in Roper 2009: 20).

Historians have traditionally recoiled from using retrospective psychoanalytical analysis. As the phrase goes, 'we cannot put the dead "on the couch" ' (Roper 2009: 25). Thus, while Peter Gay's studies of Victorian middle-class neuroses or Erik Erikson's profile of Martin Luther both drew brilliantly on Freudian and Kleinian ideas about the special importance of a person's adolescent years, the danger, as Peter Stearns argues, is that any theoretical model that implies a rigid and unchanging psychodynamic, or that focuses too heavily on individual case histories, might occlude the specific complex of historical forces at work in a given time and a given place (Stearns, 2010: 16–21). Roper's approach, however, circumvents these objections. His focus is very specifically on a period in which many individuals were clearly being driven, culturally, to explore their own psychological states and, indeed, to seek psychological explanations for their predicaments. Thomson (2001: 104) refers to the 'psychologising process of the early twentieth century' – a process in which managing one's *personality* was slowly taking over from the Victorian notion of managing one's public *conduct*. He points, therefore, to the 'opening up of a more extensive internal topography of the self', a shift that encouraged 'the individualism, and in turn potentially the atomization and narcissism, that have been associated with the experience of modernity' (2001: 104). One consequence of this was the intellectual concern of the age with the ability of the atomized 'modern' individual to resolve that tension between a 'civilizing, repressing process and the innate desire to satisfy instinctive impulses', seen as one of the fundamental causes of 'unease, dissatisfaction, and mental conflict' within modern life (2001: 105).

It is in this cultural context that we need to re-evaluate Lance Sieveking's radio programmes from the late 1920s. They have been dismissed as grandiose attempts at 'art for art's sake' – part of a brief, narcissistic vogue for modernist experiment that lacked long-term impact or intrinsic meaning (see Scannell 1986: 4). But they can also surely be read as artefacts of Thomson's *psychologizing* age – a meaningful attempt to represent in sound that 'extensive internal topography of the self'. Indeed, Sieveking repeatedly points us in this direction. His own on-air introduction to *Kaleidoscope*, for instance, tells listeners that 'the influences which come into a man's life very largely determine his character'.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards, he refers to it as an extraordinarily 'personal and private' affair.<sup>4</sup> In one of his later novels, *The Woman She Was* (1934), he tellingly reverses the imagined biography of his central figure, starting in old age and ending in birth, so that, as the author put it, 'you gradually see how and why she became what she was'. Sieveking told his mother privately of his underlying conception. 'All of us are made or marred by early experience', he said. 'And it is this lack of understanding and clearing up that makes all the trouble and misery and injustice in this bad world.'<sup>5</sup> Here and elsewhere, the evidence is unmistakable. Through much of his creative work, Sieveking

was seeking a means, not just of *representing* the many-layered nature of human identity, but also of ‘working through’ his own, very personal experiences and anxieties.

### SIEVEKING’S INNER LIFE

The nature of Sieveking’s psychic baggage can only be sketched out briefly here – and, inevitably, there is some guesswork involved. The main lineaments, though, are clear enough. War was certainly one unresolved experience – perhaps the major one. But there are features of his life that appear to absorb him in the 1920s and 1930s: aspects of his upbringing as a child, the breakdown in his first marriage, financial difficulties, overwork and, by the time he was making *Kaleidoscope* in 1928, a set of behavioural tropes that might collectively be labelled ‘neurasthenic’. I shall touch on these very roughly in chronological order.

First, then, Sieveking’s childhood.<sup>6</sup> This had an intriguing mix of the conventional and *unconventional*. His mother, Isobel, was of French descent. Though a devout Anglo-Catholic, she was also an active suffragist. His father, Edward, was of German descent. He ran a struggling business with trading interests in Russia and Scandinavia, and was an altogether more traditional Edwardian figure. Isobel ensured the Sieveking household was frequently filled with the noise of debate, with campaigners from the Women’s Social and Political Union, and writers such as G. K. Chesterton – who also just happened to be Lance’s godfather – regularly passing through. Edward evidently took a dim view of this activity, since he eventually decided to live apart, remaining in London while his wife moved with Lance to the Sussex coast. ‘We are’, he declared, ‘two miserable wretches.’<sup>7</sup> Edward and Isobel continued to squabble regularly over Lance’s upbringing. Probably because funds were insufficient, their son did not attend school. Instead, he received a rather haphazard private education. His mother taught him French and encouraged him in his creative writing and music. She was evidently playful, too, happily taking Lance and his sister out for concerts in Hastings, with Lance dressed up in a high-necked blouse and skirt. His father, predictably, moaned that he was becoming soft, that his writing was ‘simply detestable’ and that he was showing ‘mental defects’.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Edward hired a succession of private tutors to attempt – usually without success – to train his son in ‘hard’ subjects such as geometry and German. One could easily speculate that Lance’s rather split existence could account for his later ‘catholicity’ of outlook and his healthy lack of respect for traditional disciplinary boundaries. The downside was that he was also caught in the middle of a fractious relationship. As a teenager, he wrote of wanting to leave home: ‘I can’t bear it much longer’, he confided to his father.<sup>9</sup> At this stage in his life, his one source of solace, other than writing poetry and short stories, was an intense, even passionate friendship with another boy his own age, Vivian Burbury. It was Burbury who later went on to translate into English Krafft-Ebing’s 1886 classic work on human sexual behaviour, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. And it was Burbury who, in the years immediately before the war, introduced Sieveking to telepathy, spiritualism, Freudianism, science fiction and Futurism – what Burbury called the whole ‘mind culture’ business.<sup>10</sup>

Sieveking had just turned 18 when war was declared in August 1914. Formal hostilities offered the prospect of leaving his teenage ennui behind. After a brief spell in Artists’ Rifles, he joined the Royal Naval Air Service as a

6. The details of Sieveking’s childhood in the following seven paragraphs are drawn largely from ‘Autobiographical Sketches’ (see Note 4), as well as from a large number of letters dated between 1897 and 1935 in the Lilly Library Sieveking Manuscripts collection.
7. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 20 February 1913.
8. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 18 September 1913.
9. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 13 May 1914.
10. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 29 October 1913.

11. Sieveking (1922b: 538–47); Lilly MSS/Correspondence/21 November 1915.
12. ‘Autobiographical Sketches’, unnumbered page.
13. Lilly MSS/Correspondence/18 December 1917, 28 September 1918.
14. Lilly MSS/Correspondence/11 April 1916, 10–19 May 1916, 14 November 1917, 25 March 1918.
15. Lilly MSS/Correspondence/22 April 1918.
16. Lilly MSS/Correspondence/26 July 1921.

pilot, and flew missions in East Africa and across the Western Front. He had long been attracted to the novel world of flying, having visited Hendon aerodrome regularly since 1911. Now, during the war, he wrote vivid accounts of being airborne – suggesting how utterly at odds his experience was with the ‘long disgusting drudgery of trench warfare’ on the ground (Lewis 1936: 137–38). Aloft, he said, he could feel alone, even detached: he might engage in mortal combat with enemy pilots ‘like a duel in the wood in early morning’, even drop bombs and destroy whole streets. But within an hour or two he would be ‘smoking a quiet after-lunch cigarette’ with ‘brushed hair and clean finger-nails’. He would feel as though he were ‘manacled’ whenever grounded, his mind ‘all hot and stuck fast’. Once airborne, however, he felt ‘completely unrestricted’, both physically and mentally: every one of his senses was stimulated, his mind, working with ‘unprecedented velocity and perfect precision’, able to see things ‘freshly’. So passionate was he about this new experience that he felt compelled, after the war, to write of it in *The English Review* – in an essay called ‘The Psychology of Flying’.<sup>11</sup>

But if flying freed his mind, being shot down behind enemy lines and subsequently imprisoned for the last year or so of the war inevitably intensified feelings of restraint and of time and youthful energy wasted. Between October 1917 and November 1918, he was held at Karlsruhe, then Clausthal. Both camps had their compensations. As an officer he had certain privileges, he was able to read books or play music and, like others, he was free to form strong and lasting bonds of friendship with those who shared his quarters. ‘Kindred spirits’, he wrote, ‘are close at hand day after day and month after month, available for companionship and talk at any time ... in a way that can never happen in ordinary life.’<sup>12</sup> Inevitably, though, the reality of incarceration, with no inkling of its duration, made him feel as though he had been ‘wrapped up and put in a sepulchre underneath a pyramid thousands of years ago’.<sup>13</sup> And, like the soldiers of the Western Front studied by Roper, his mind turned to fantasies of home and, in particular, returning to his mother: in his letters he dreams of playing the piano, talking about ‘the old days’, of sharing fresh bread and real tea, and of walking with her in ‘the sweet-scented breeze, such as only blows in all the world from off the wealds and downs of the South of old England’.<sup>14</sup> He was still only 22. As time wore on, the sense of lost opportunity – of ground to be made up once the war was over – loomed ever larger in his mind. ‘Dame Fortune will have to arrange a smiling future for me’, he grumbled, ‘if she is to compensate for the wilderness of barren and sapless waste in which she has compelled me to spend one of the best years of my life – or what should have been!’<sup>15</sup>

When the ‘sapless waste’ was indeed over, Sieveking’s life, perhaps predictably, became both frantic and directionless. Between 1918 and 1926, he spent time engaged, among other things, in the following activities: flying delegates into and out of Paris for the Versailles peace conference (exciting, but all too brief); studying English at Cambridge, where he ran the *New Cambridge Magazine* before dropping out (lack of funds); trying (and failing) to join the Foreign Office to be a diplomat; working briefly in a tax office, where he threatened to commit suicide through sheer boredom; returning to flying by joining what was now called the Royal Air Force and being posted to India (though becoming distracted by the desire to complete some poetry and write novels); living on a houseboat in Kashmir, and then in a villa in southern France, in order to pursue writing properly; joining a theatre company, then a film company, in order to break into acting (a ‘dusty, musty affair’);<sup>16</sup> and

even working briefly for the *Daily Express* as a journalist. The idea of post-war 'dislocation' is a familiar enough concept. And Lance Sieveking embodied it in abundance: 'I hardly know what to do with myself', he admitted as he cast about for a living in 1919.<sup>17</sup> Seven years later, and still with no regular job, he wrote of 'beginning to feel how frightfully short time is, and to wonder if I shall ever get anything done'. As it was, he lamented, life remained all 'rather vague and stupid'.<sup>18</sup>

One underlying reason for this evident lack of focus or commitment is that several very different pathways clearly presented themselves to Sieveking at this time – mostly as a result of the rich network of acquaintances he had built up through the war and immediately afterwards. A close friendship with the painter Paul Nash, and, through him, an introduction to Winston Churchill's private secretary, Eddie Marsh, had brought Sieveking into direct contact with an extraordinary and dynamic collection of 'Georgian' poets, painters and actors. Henceforth, he went to the theatre, dined at fashionable dinner parties and became a regular visitor at gallery openings, keenly interested in the work not just of Paul Nash and his brother John, but also of Vorticists such as Edward Wadsworth. A Cambridge connection to Geoffrey Fry, secretary to Stanley Baldwin and Bonar Law, brought him into contact with, among others, the eccentric polymath C. K. Ogden, the architect Clough Williams-Ellis and a host of leading figures in Whitehall, Bloomsbury and Fleet Street. This glittering array of contacts advanced Sieveking's own creativity through a constant supply of mutual encouragement. It was Nash, for instance, who helped Sieveking publish his first collections of nonsense poetry, and Eddie Marsh who nurtured his theatrical interests. But it was Sieveking's overriding ambition to make a proper, sustainable living as a writer. His childhood attempts had been encouraged by an aunt, who had told him that one day the 'poet's crown' would be his;<sup>19</sup> even his father, despite finding his style 'detestable', had been supportive enough to send him to a literary agent for advice. Now Sieveking worked, whenever he could, on completing novels and poetry collections that had been gestating in his mind since that year of confinement in Germany: *The Cud* (1922a), a collection of 'experimental' poems; *Stampede* (1924), a novel about a thought machine he had begun when he was just 16; and *The Ultimate Island* (1925), a science-fiction fantasy in the style of H. G. Wells. No matter how hard he tried, however, the advances and royalties were never enough to sustain the somewhat louche 1920s' London life-style to which he was now rather attached. Indeed, it was a sense of financial desperation, rather than any intrinsic interest in radio, that eventually led him to take a staff job at the BBC in 1926. Even then, his mother sought reassurances from him that this new post would not stop him doing 'good writing: your real aim'.<sup>20</sup>

Rather unexpectedly, though, it was to be in radio, not literature, that Sieveking found his calling. The job, as deputy head of Education department – a department responsible for a wide range of talks, readings and news – had, as he put it, 'a certain strange catholicity about it that I enjoy'.<sup>21</sup> In the space of a few weeks in August and September 1926, for instance, he was, among other things, rehearsing an experimental drama with William Walton and the Sitwells, directing a song recital in Esperanto, writing a serial and giving voice tests to Radcliffe Hall, Hermione Gingold and Fred Astaire.<sup>22</sup> Years before, a fellow prisoner of war had written of Sieveking's 'profusion of ideas'.<sup>23</sup> Now, the 'strange catholicity' of a new and as-yet ill-defined profession in which, as he put it, 'no one could say for certain what would happen', seemed to make

17. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/1 June 1919.
18. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 6 January 1926, 4 March 1926.
19. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 25 October 1911.
20. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/5 April 1926.
21. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 16 May 1926.
22. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 28 August 1926, 8 and 9 September 1926; Diary (1926).
23. 'Autobiographical Sketches', unnumbered page.

24. 'Autobiographical Sketches', unnumbered page; emphasis in original.
25. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 29 April 1926.
26. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 18 November 1927.
27. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 18 August 1924.
28. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 25 January 1927.
29. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 27 May 1928.
30. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 17 August 1924; emphasis in original.
31. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 27 and 28 May 1928.

utter sense of accumulated passions and an extraordinarily varied life. Here at the BBC, he was, he felt, free to use 'what imagination and ingenuity I had to the very fullest degree'.<sup>24</sup> He could, for instance, draw on his own eclectic interests in painting, cinema, theatre, literature, politics and journalism, as well as on his vast network of acquaintances. Being able to metabolize a wide range of contemporary thought and culture was now the *essence* of his job, as was knowing interesting people who might be persuaded to come before the microphone. Rather miraculously, he was being paid to be a dilettante.

The problem, though, was that a combination of long hours at the BBC and late nights on the town quickly took their toll. As Sieveking admitted within a fortnight of starting at Savoy Hill, 'I am so tired at the end of the day nowadays that I hardly have the energy to write'.<sup>25</sup> The following year, his aunt wrote to him warning that he was living 'in such a rush'.<sup>26</sup> Soon he was suffering from liver and stomach complaints, with doctors prescribing more sleep, less nicotine and a raft of drugs. Sieveking's correspondence throughout this period suggests a general tendency towards mental unease. In 1924, he had admitted to 'the creeping paralysis of depression that is oozing into my veins', something he put down to financial worries and the 'moves, excursions, muddles, and alarums hanging over me'.<sup>27</sup> As time wore on we find his nerves more and more shredded. Displaying all the stereotypical characteristics of 'neurasthenia', he complains of being 'all of a tremble' at the noise of cars in the street; friends and collaborators worry over him being 'constantly gloomy';<sup>28</sup> and when, in 1928, he takes sick leave and heads off to France to recuperate, he finds Paris 'too noisy' and tells his mother he cannot shake off 'my real illness, that of unhappiness'.<sup>29</sup> The final straw appears to have been a combination of acute financial difficulty – exacerbated by his father's business collapsing and his mother needing constant care – and, above all, the disintegration of his first marriage, to April Quilter, after she had taken advantage of his lengthy absences to begin an affair. He had once told April that he saw their marriage as providing 'my own anchorage and place and identity and location and corner *at last*'.<sup>30</sup> Now, in 1928, with the marriage failing, he was 'feeble in spirit' and 'frightfully lonely'.<sup>31</sup> It was precisely at this troubled point in his life that he wrote and prepared what was to be his most celebrated radio programme: *Kaleidoscope: A Rhythm, Representing the Life of a Man from Cradle to Grave*.

### A RADIO 'MOSAIC': KALEIDOSCOPE (1928)

Even the title is telling. For modernist sensibilities, the metaphor of a kaleidoscope, that childhood toy, in which fragments of coloured glass could be twisted into a coherent pattern, then just as quickly twisted out again, perfectly captured the contrast between moments of order and of disintegration. In *The Soul of London* (1905), for instance, Ford Madox Ford had described a train journey as conjuring 'a vague kaleidoscope picture' of fleeting impressions and memories (quoted in Haslam 2002: 120). Dorothy Richardson, too, in early volumes in her monumental work *Pilgrimage*, interwove biography and the optics of a kaleidoscope: she deployed it as a kind of *technology* of memory (Marcus 2007: 149). For both authors – and, we might assume, for Sieveking – the kaleidoscope captured the way vivid experience was, as Sara Haslam (2002: 9) puts it, 'always changing, always made new', an ever-changing combination of past and present jumbled together.

But it is in the overall form of the programme itself that we most clearly hear Sieveking attempting to convey in *sound* what others had already

achieved on the page.<sup>32</sup> Over the course of 70 extraordinary minutes, we get a mosaic of impressions representing the subjective mental state of its protagonist: an unfolding drama of a man in pieces, in which past and present collide, and our hero's mind is repeatedly torn between the competing impulses of 'Good' and 'Bad'. The sense of stylistic novelty should not be underestimated. Until this point, most radio dramas on the BBC had been highly conventional, sticking firmly to the Aristotelian unities of time and place, and differing only slightly from the fairly static theatrical conventions of the British stage (see Crisell 2000; Drakakis 1981). In *Kaleidoscope*, however, Sieveking deployed seven studios, each containing in turn a full orchestra, a quintet, a dance band, a choir, a vast cast of actors and a bevy of sound effects technicians, to create a complex, multi-layered montage, in which dramatic vignettes are interspersed with poetry readings and music, or the impressionistic sounds of cafes, or countryside, or battlefield (see Hendy 2013 for a more detailed scene-by-scene analysis).

Sieveking's working script shows that his use of long cross-fades between two or more layers of sound was pervasive, creating a layering of sometimes competing, rather than complementary sounds. About ten minutes into the programme, for example, he conjures the coming of World War I by superimposing and cross-fading over one another the sound of marching feet, British, German, Russian and French national anthems and a poem by Rupert Brooke. Elsewhere, he mixes jazz and classical music – the former suggestive of 'degenerate' influences, the latter of 'civilizing' influences – each one struggling to gain dominance. Every now and then, these various layers of sound were all faded to maximum, creating a sense of climactic disorientation through a wall of noise. It is here that the script is marked with capital letters: 'KALEIDOSCOPE'. The first such 'twist' in Sieveking's coloured fragments of sound takes place in the midst of a war scene, in a sequence melding together Rupert Brooke's poems, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the sound of soldiers' marching feet, before slowly resolving into a jazz tune. Throughout, as one disembodied voice ('Bad') encourages him to 'do what you jolly well like' while another ('Good') urges him to avoid 'degenerate' influences and find his better self, our hero struggles manfully with his conscience. Should he fight in the war? Should he leave his wife? Should he dive into the water and risk death to save her from drowning?

On the way to a sticky but heroic end, *Kaleidoscope* takes us through scenes that, in light of what we now know of Sieveking himself, must surely be interpreted as highly autobiographical. We hear our hero messing about in boats on the coast, and of student days in Cambridge, of war, seduction, courtship, marriage, financial worries and domestic arguments over infidelity. The parallels between Sieveking's private experiences and this very public portrayal of the struggle to 'fix' one's fragile identity are highly suggestive. This psychological reading is reinforced if we take note of the near-simultaneous publication of an experimental book by Sieveking. *Beyond This Point* (1929) was a collaboration with the American surrealist photographer Francis Bruguiere (1879–1945), and consisted of a 'stylistically complex text' by Sieveking interwoven with a series of abstract and multi-exposure photographs by Bruguiere. And just as *Kaleidoscope* had been constructed so as to give listeners an overall impression from a mix of sounds emerging from seven different studios, *Beyond This Point* describes seven different courses of action at three key moments of crisis in its protagonist's life. The moments of crisis are tellingly familiar: a health scare, marital infidelity and financial ruin. Similarly, the book tells its readers,

32. Details of the programme in the following two paragraphs are drawn largely from Sieveking's own working copy of the script: Lilly MSS/Scripts/ "The Kaleidoscope": A Rhythm Constructed and Produced by Lance Sieveking' (4 September 1928). See Note 3.

the idea here is to create a 'kaleidoscope eventfulness of days and weeks in which the narrator tries to rally all the forces of the past that are "me at this moment"' (Sieveking and Bruguere, 1929: 19, 42, 59, 63–66). It is as though the book's main character, like the hero of *Kaleidoscope*, is genuinely unsure of what precisely constitutes 'the self'. As for Sieveking himself, it is surely significant for our reading of *Kaleidoscope* that in his later memoir, *The Eye of the Beholder* (1957), he spurns the form of a traditional biography and creates instead only a fragmentary impression through throwing his focus onto *other* people in his life. After all, he reasoned, 'A 3D picture of a man, a truly stereoscopic portrait-in-the-round, would include every individual "shot" that had been taken of him by all those who had known him' (Sieveking 1957: 9). That same sense of using subjective snapshots to build a 'cubist' whole can be seen at work in *Beyond This Point*. Indeed, reviews in the British press described the 1929 book as a form of 'Mind Photography' and as 'Human Emotions Analysed with the Aid of a Camera' (McCauley 2008: 47). In this context, it is reasonable to think of its immediate radio progenitor, *Kaleidoscope*, with its overt multi-layering of sounds and its mosaic assemblage, as a form of 'Mind Recording', or perhaps as 'Human Emotions Analysed with the Aid of a Microphone'. *Kaleidoscope*, in other words, is best understood as an attempt to create a form of 'sonic psychology'.

Of course, we could argue that *Kaleidoscope's* fragmented form was merely an objective attempt to reflect the diffuse and incoherent nature of modern life in general. But, in the 1920s, there was no such thing as an *objective* attempt to capture modernity: the modernist's point being that *subjective* experience was all. Aesthetically speaking, *Kaleidoscope had to be* a personal reflection, an examination of one person's perception or consciousness – even if what was being consciously perceived and worked through was the incoherence of 'modern life'. It turned out to be radio, rather than, say, literature or art or cinema, that allowed Sieveking to do this, for three fundamental reasons. First, because of the essential *ambiguity* of sound: its precise meaning – what was being heard – was always a little uncertain. That allowed always for a more fluid 'reading' by listeners; certainly, as far as Sieveking was concerned, more fluid a reading than was allowed by the relatively 'fixed' images of cinema or the words of the printed page. The less you give the audience, Sieveking (1934: 76–77) later wrote, 'so much the better'. Secondly, radio's *liveness* gave it distinct advantages over cinema for communicating one person's interior thoughts directly to another. As Sieveking later explained, the medium had an extraordinary power to affect the listener because 'what is heard is *real*, in that its voices are the voices of men and women alive at that moment of hearing' (emphasis in original). It was this 'sudden mental contact' that allowed producer and listener to 'understand each other not only intellectually, but emotionally' – indeed, that made radio not a medium of ideas but a medium of *feeling* (51, 101). And third, it was the ability of a radio producer to perform *beyond the script* that allowed, according to Sieveking, an infinite amount of personal expression to come through. The script, he wrote, was only ever about 'twenty per cent' of what was ever heard: the rest was the producer expressing himself live, unmediated except through his toolbox of sound, as if the machinery of production responded directly to the touch of the producer and thus, by implication, to his or her inner feelings (Sieveking 1934: 29, 59).

As Sieveking's comments about 'touch' suggest, attending to the form of *Kaleidoscope* does not tell us the whole story. The *process* of making it was also important to him. We have to recall here the extraordinary way in which the

programme was created on the night of its transmission, 4 September 1928. No pre-recording – even of isolated elements – was possible. It was a live ‘event’ in the studios of the BBC’s Savoy Hill headquarters, with Sieveking, at the centre of it all, operating the new ‘Dramatic Control Panel’, a kind of proto-mixing desk, which allowed him to communicate with various performers in each studio and fade up and down their output as the drama unfolded. The complex handwritten notes to his working script testify to the speed with which his hands had to move across the console and flick the various knobs representing the various studios – as if it were a musical instrument of some kind (see Hendy 2013 for a fuller discussion of its use in the programme). In one sense, directing the performance was rather more like conducting an orchestra, with Sieveking having to ‘cue’ in the various elements of sound and create the right balance between them at any given moment. And indeed, Sieveking, dressed in white tie and tails for the occasion, looked the part. But in one of the most striking sections of his unpublished ‘autobiographical sketches’, he recalls an even stronger impression taking hold of him as the programme began: a flood of memories unleashed by the Control Panel before him. Like the best aeroplanes, he wrote, the Panel was ‘nimble, spry, quick to answer’ his touch. ‘I felt exactly as I felt on that cold bright morning when I had been told to take the aeroplane into the air alone for the first time.’ ‘The world was listening ... A touch of the rudder! Now. Back with the joystick and up we go!’<sup>33</sup> Producing radio, for Sieveking, was indeed like flying – a vivid, tactile, sensual activity that brought with it a sense of escape and individual adventure. Like flying, of course, one eventually had to come down to earth. When *Kaleidoscope*’s 70 minutes were up, Sieveking sat back and realized that in this painfully ephemeral medium there was ‘nothing left’: ‘the whole of my complex, lovely picture, with its voices, its castles, its landscapes, its musics, its men and women, had been painted on the underside of a cloud with a brushful of iridescent vapour.’<sup>34</sup> But for 70 minutes, at least, he had been able both to be in the moment and relive his past. The process seemed to mark some kind of catharsis. In the months following its broadcast, once he had allowed ‘a great tiredness’ to seep over him, he had a big party and sold off half his belongings: ‘I feel I’ve been encumbered’, he told his mother. ‘I feel I should like to sell all and pay off everyone and start afresh ... Even take a new name and forget all that has gone before.’<sup>35</sup> By June 1929 he felt able to declare that he was ‘better now – more calm and tranquil ... I have at last got through’.<sup>36</sup>

33. ‘Autobiographical Sketches’, unnumbered page.

34. ‘Autobiographical Sketches’, unnumbered page.

35. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 23 April 1929.

36. Lilly MSS/ Correspondence/ 20 June 1929.

## CONCLUSION

Not every radio feature – then or since – has been as intensely personal a project as Sieveking’s *Kaleidoscope*. One reason for this has simply been that the circumstances of production have changed considerably since 1928. *Kaleidoscope* was forged when radio itself was, as the novelist Richard Hughes put it ‘in the crucible: blazing, volatile, as yet innocent of the mould’ (Sieveking 1934: 7) – a medium in which the individual producer still had the opportunity to express him- or herself directly – and was not yet the ‘routinized’, industrialized, automated process that has been traced countless times over in recent literature (see, for example, in the British context: Crisell 2002; Street 2002; Avery 2006; Starkey 2004; Wu 2010). How very brief this period of complete innocence was can be sensed if we note that within less than one year of *Kaleidoscope*’s broadcast, Sieveking was already having to struggle against plans by his BBC managers to remove his favourite creative tool, the Dramatic

37. Lilly MSS/  
Correspondence/  
19 February 1929.

Control Panel, from the clutches of producers and transfer it to a new breed of studio engineers.<sup>37</sup> For Sieveking, this destroyed the tactile ability of individual producers to translate directly their own inner thoughts into sound – and achieve what he described, in almost Brechtian terms, as that ‘sudden mental contact’ that could pass between creator and recipient, when ‘for a flash two minds “click”’ (Sieveking 1934: 84, 101).

Yet perhaps we should avoid *overstating* the loss of individual expressivity. Making radio remains, even today, considerably less cumbersome a task than making, say, television. It is still, at least potentially, the *hand-crafted* medium par excellence. Sean Street (2012: xii, emphasis in original) draws our attention to the way in which ‘a poetic *way of making*’ survives – where the sounds and the form emerge ‘in a strange alchemical way that cannot be predicted but only experienced as they enter the consciousness’. He confidently explores at book length the rich and varied output of individual producers still working in this creative tradition. And if he is right to do so, there are important therapeutic implications, since other authors have drawn our attention to a broader point: the psychological value of hands-on production for the person actually doing it. Richard Sennett (2008: 120), for instance, has examined the value of ‘craftsmanship’, and has written about the importance of what he calls ‘engaged material consciousness’. People invest thought in things they can change, he suggests, but generally this investment comes through engaging directly with these ‘things’: leaving a mark on them, giving *human* qualities to them (2008: 119–46). Sennett illustrates his points by reference to phenomena such as the potter’s wheel. But there is no reason to exclude from this kind of consciousness-making the craft of radio – which, even after digitalization, remains at least partly haptic. Our fingers no longer conduct, or slice and stitch magnetic tape, but they still dance about over keyboards and mixing desks. This is still physical motion translating mental ideas into sound – and, as Sennett would suggest, back into consciousness again. In this respect, David Gauntlet’s recent work is also pertinent (2011). ‘Making is connecting’, he suggests, not just because it usually involves a tangible form of physical assemblage, but also because acts of creativity usually connect us with other people and, perhaps most importantly for our present debate, they increase our sense of engagement. He reminds us of that great Victorian social reformer and craftsman, William Morris, who argued cogently that people need to be able to make their mark on the world through self-expression and the ability to share this self-expression if culture is to stay alive.

A second challenge might be raised, however, to us drawing any universal conclusion from the singular example of Sieveking’s *Kaleidoscope*. This is to argue that, in seeking to use the medium of radio to represent aesthetically the unstable condition of his own inner life, Sieveking should be regarded as exceptional rather than typical – indeed, that he was very much the product of a particular time and place, the member of a small and self-obsessed intellectual and artistic coterie in interwar Britain. I hope that I have acknowledged the extent to which Sieveking was indeed fully a product of his era and class and background – and, above all, that he was working specifically in what has been referred to as a ‘psychologizing’ age. Moreover, it is clear that from the early 1930s, British radio had to veer away from any tendency that smacked of self-indulgence or narcissism in order to address more pressing social problems. As Paddy Scannell has shown (1986), fantastical features in the tradition of *Kaleidoscope* quickly gave way to ‘social’ documentaries exploring poverty, homelessness, industrial change and the slide towards further international

conflict. Ever since then, the steady influx into broadcasting of journalists – and thus of journalistic values – has undoubtedly reified the notion of ‘objectivity’ as the *sine qua non* of documentary and reportage. The notions of ‘authorship’ and of individual creative ‘genius’ have also long ceased to be fashionable: for perfectly understandable reasons, they fail to chime with a more open, more accountable and more interactive media culture.

Yet, once again, we should avoid overstating the degree of change. Indeed, there is room to argue that Sieveking’s attempts at sonic psychology did not constitute a complete evolutionary dead end in radio history. For one thing, his novel use of multi-studio techniques, multi-layered sound and montage-style non-linear narrative acted as a ‘stimulant’ for others. As his manager at the BBC later admitted, ‘less audacious producers benefitted from his mistakes’ (Gielgud 1957: 26). Though something as epic and complex as *Kaleidoscope* was rarely attempted again, the impressionistic feature survived. In doing so, it added colour and range to what might otherwise have been an aridly journalistic documentary genre. That, after all, is why Sean Street is able to proclaim that ‘the poetry of radio’ is still with us. More specifically, Sieveking drew attention to radio’s intrinsic ability to represent *interiority* in a natural dramatic form. It is a means of representing the subjective viewpoint, of speaking aloud a person’s private thoughts. It is, in short, the psychological medium par excellence. Perhaps, therefore, what *Kaleidoscope* points to more than anything else is the huge and largely untapped potential for future research: putting not just the dead on the couch, but the whole of radio. After all, if a lively academic tradition of psychoanalytical perspectives can exist for literature, for cinema and occasionally even for television, why can it not exist for us, too?

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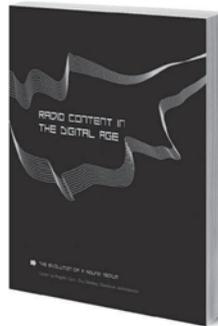
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