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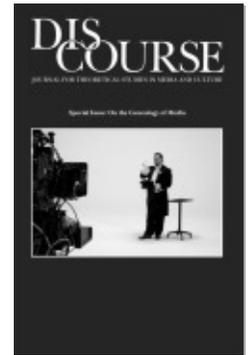
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# Radio Nights: Evita Out of the Waves

Klaus Theweleit  
Translated by Laurence A. Rickels

On 15 January 1944, on a warm Argentine Saturday evening, the city of San Juan, separated by a thousand kilometers from Buenos Aires, is leveled in an earthquake lasting twenty-five seconds.

Compared with the European housing collapses and liquidations at that time, the ten thousand dead in San Juan represent a relatively light sentence by Father Earth during his earthshaking production of political earth map no. 1945, but this event suffices to shape decisively the Argentine portion for the next three decades. The Argentine “nation” is born (again) out of this event, as is its future leader Juan Perón.

What do the dead count—when they are counted—and who accounts for them? What counts and is recounted are the births.

\* \* \*

In Santiago, the capital of the kingdom of Chile, at the moment of the great earthquake of the year 1647 in which many thousands lost their lives, a young Spaniard named Jeronimo Rugera, who had been accused

“Radio Nights: Evita Out of the Waves,” by Klaus Theweleit, is excerpted and translated by Laurence A. Rickels, from *Buch der Könige 2y: Recording Angels’ Mysteries*, by Klaus Theweleit. Copyright 1994 and 1996 by Klaus Theweleit and Stroemfeld Verlag, Basel/Frankfurt am Main. Reprinted with permission.

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of a crime, was standing beneath one of the pilasters of his prison cell and was about to hang himself.<sup>1</sup>

Jeronimo Rugera wants to hang himself because he is the father of a child who is not allowed to live. The mother, Josepha, a nun, is to be beheaded at that moment by the royal-pontifical lynching justice of 1647. Then the earthquake shows some compassion. It reduces *everything* to rubble; it saves father, mother, and child; it unites them outside the city for a few wonderful moments. “Meanwhile,” in Kleist’s earthquake prose, “the loveliest of nights had descended upon them.”<sup>2</sup> The hangmen have forgotten their business, but only until the following afternoon. Then death catches up with all of them but one, Josepha and Jeronimo’s boy, Philip, whom Kleist has destined for survival via a second birth out of the quake: assuming the place of a legal child, *Juan*, who is “dashed . . . against the edge of a church buttress,”<sup>3</sup> he is taken in by Don Fernando and Donna Elvira. The rest is ashes.

An earthquake (as is the case, too, with the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah) does not suffice to pull the ground out from under Evil for more than *one* day (which Heinrich Kleist, once again more precise than even Yahweh, knew for sure).

\* \* \*

Out of the great Hamburg flood of 1962 that united everyone for one day, Helmut Schmidt emerged with a life preserver; out of the earthquake in San Juan, Argentina, 1944, Juan Domingo Perón emerged rapid fire:

While the president of Argentina, General Pedro P. Ramírez, ordered all places of public amusement closed and all radio stations to broadcast only news and sacred music, Colonel Juan Domingo Perón took charge of the relief effort on behalf of San Juan. . . . The tragedy of San Juan provided the colonel and his new Secretariat of Labor and Social Welfare with instant national exposure [or, in this world, instant karma—K.T.].<sup>4</sup>

The earthquake, says Perón biographer Joseph Page, galvanized the Argentines in an unprecedented manner into a nation of mutual aid: when Colonel Perón put out the call on the radio for blood donations, more donors came than the blood banks could accommodate.

More genders showed up, too. Perón’s blood drive on behalf of the wounded of San Juan calls into being a type of radio listener nonexistent publicly or politically in Argentina prior to 1944; what

English and German women had obtained during the First World War, participation in jobs essential to the war effort and thus in public spheres shaken by war, Argentine women first attain with Perón's earthquake: the aid campaign for San Juan gathers on Argentine streets for the first time large numbers of women who see themselves as "citizens of the nation."

What the typewriter achieves for women's emancipation in New York around 1900, a natural catastrophe broadcast over radio waves must accomplish in the Catholic subcontinent in 1944. This not only testifies to the greater democratic power of purely technical as opposed to divinely created catastrophes. This single radio-exploited catastrophe engenders in Argentina the class of voters that eight years later, at the time when the men were all "used up," provides the leader Perón with the necessary extension of his term in office: "The first election I won with the men. . . . This one I shall win with the women . . . and the third I shall win with the children" (254). (The latter then became the *montoneros*.) Thus spoke the wise earthquake/radio product Juan Domingo Perón in 1952 regarding the sequence of political manipulations of those animated by earthquakes and media for dictatorial reelection in the South American non-banana republic of Argentina, the eighth largest country on earth (254).

While President Ramírez allows a Mass to be said on the Plaza de Mayo and then visits the disaster area, Colonel Perón mobilizes the country's leading stage, film, and radio personalities for a large benefit gala in Luna Park (Buenos Aires's Madison Square Garden) on 22 January, the Saturday night one week after the quake: the *Luna Park Extravaganza*, the final four hours broadcast live on state radio.

The woman, on whose arm the organizer will leave Luna Park that night, he does not yet know, the actress and radio announcer Eva Duarte. Completely lost still on the afternoon of 22 January in the cloud of polished cadets, stars, and starlets who cling to the heels of Colonel Perón at the street parade for the earthquake victims, by that evening she sits next to Perón at the gala, placed there by an officer she knows from Perón's staff, Lt. Col. Aníbal Imbert: the woman who will become a few years later the motor and angel of Juan Perón's presidencies, Argentina's Joan of Arc: *Evita Perón*.

Though she was not beautiful, sexy or particularly talented, Eva Duarte (Evita to her friends) was blessed with a tenacity that had lifted her from an obscure, small provincial town to a career in theater, radio and film. (4)

That Evita could advance to Argentine saint (and later to the title figure of an English musical) rests above all on her radio origin.

Eva Duarte is born a country girl, fifth in a line of illegitimate children, whose father, farm-landlord Juan Duarte, is in a position to support two families (not unusual for men of his class): one legal family that lived in the nearby city (three children) and an illegitimate family living on the farm (five children) that must disappear whenever the legal family visits the farm. Upon the death of the father in an auto accident, when Evita is six, only *one* family is allowed to enter the cemetery. A brother of the deceased at least arranges finally to secure a place at the end of the burial procession for Juana Ibarguren, the illegitimate wife (of Basque extraction), and her five children. At the cemetery gate, however, the paternal relationship ends.

After her experiences in Smalltown Juín (formerly known as Los Toldos), Eva Duarte at the age of eleven comes to Buenos Aires, Argentina's Big Apple; by fifteen she is determined to become an actress; possible marriages with halfway-secure men like those her sisters enter into she declines, for some time now already coupled with the fan magazines available in Juín that unfold before her eyes the life of film and radio stars. "She sang all the time," says a neighbor (82). At age eight, she herself identifies her future life as "actress."

The first small film role at seventeen; then radio, radio roles being more significant back then because they connect with a mass public (every third Argentine household has radio access in 1937).

Eva Duarte is not alone in Buenos Aires; the only male offshoot of her family, her older brother Juan, is there with her. Speculations by her future enemies that she "slept" her way to success do not hold up; her brother was no pimp. He also later remains in her proximity as Evita's lifelong confidant. Her husband, Juan Perón, makes him his personal secretary. After Eva Perón's cancer death in the year 1952, he shoots himself in a hotel room (under the pressure of financial affairs). The illegitimate farm siblings at the head of state—united in death.

In the first year of World War II, Eva Duarte ended up in a bigger radio production as costar of a soap opera: "Eva was good at conveying suffering. When she found the soaps, she found her acting career" (83). Curiously, her brother works at that time for a soap manufacturer who sells his product under the name "Radical Soap"; Radical Soap subsequently sponsors several productions in which Eva Duarte performs; she appears in magazines: "Publicity shots show her as a typical 1930s starlet, youthful, alabaster-skinned,

hair often swept back, a coy expression often on her face” (83). There are the obligatory half-nude photos (later distributed as postcards by the First Lady’s political opponents). The tango city Buenos Aires conducts its political business from 1940 on (North-) American-media style.

In 1943 Eva Duarte can be heard in a radio series titled *Heroines of History*, in which she recites the roles (one after the other) of Sarah Bernhardt, Isadora Duncan, Tsarina Alexandra, Empress Josephine of France (Napoleon’s Josephine), Queen Elisabeth I, and Madame Chiang Kai-shek. “For Evita, life would soon imitate art,” says her biographer (84). She is a moment away from standing at Colonel Juan Perón’s side.

Eva is twenty-four years old, Perón forty-nine, when they find each other: a couple that could not be more radio-esque. Perón was mad about her from the first moment of *his* becoming a radio star at the earthquake gala; from then on, throughout the next eight years, the political and the performing radio mouths are inseparable except for Juan Perón’s short prison stay at the end of 1945: Eva, in her first large-scale political campaign, mobilizes the warehouse workers and labor unions and gains the colonel’s release from jail. Perón marries her right after this undertaking.

The radio-microphone woman (and wife) becomes in this way a political speaker just as seamlessly as her husband, the head of state, becomes an actor. Beginning in 1946, Eva delivers her radio speeches as First Lady at the side of the Argentine leader. She takes on for him, the military man, the task of making the government’s concern about worker’s interests credible and plausible to the Argentine workers, the *descamisados*, a view that would have been difficult for Perón himself to sell. Evita with her underdog persona finds it easygoing; she kept the underdog attitude alive her whole life long in manner of speech and gesture:

Evita proved invaluable. She served as secretary of labor and welfare. She was in virtual command of the Confederación General del Trabajo [General Confederation of Labor]. She sparked the movement that resulted in the extension of the vote to women, and she then organized the Women’s Perónist Party.<sup>5</sup> She created the Eva Duarte de Perón Foundation, which was given exclusive control of all charitable activity. Put in charge of the Ministry of Health, she founded hospitals and clinics and organized Argentina’s first effective campaign against tuberculosis and malaria.<sup>6</sup>

Publicly, she was always strictly the wife of the leader, super-loyal, but at the same time his *more radical half* as far as political

propaganda was concerned: plebeian media star, undemocratic and connected to the masses, agent of the workers, a South American left-wing fascist.

Her death in 1952 counts (because of the loss of her contribution to his public persona) as the beginning of Perón's decline (he is toppled for the first time in 1955). Perón now had to deliver Evita's speeches himself (which did not suit him). He could no longer play the part of *moderator* that he played best of all: the rhetorical conciliator of the political powers of Argentina.

Once the microphone symbiosis of the two falls apart, the leader falls too.

\* \* \*

Back to the beginning, January 1944: Juan Perón was so immediately enchanted (bewitched) by Eva's media qualities that, without hesitation, he was ready to put his military and political career on the line to make this connection, which he then did not need to do because he was right in his assessment, in his object choice.

She also knew this was it:

Evita probably took the initiative in rapidly cementing the relationship. She found new quarters for them in a building on Posadas Street . . . not far from Radio Belgrano. . . . Perón must have been fascinated by the uninhibited aggressiveness of his new companion. He did nothing to conceal their liaison. Indeed, on February 3, both he and Mercante allowed themselves to be photographed with her on a visit to the radio station. . . . Evita's artistic career lurched forward at a frenetic pace, undoubtedly propelled by her association with Perón. She continued the *Heroines of History* series while at the same time participating in thrice-weekly propaganda broadcasts sponsored by the Secretariat of Labor and Public Welfare. Entitled *Toward a Better Future*, these programs filled the airwaves with praise for the progress of the Revolution of June 4 and for the military officers at its helm. (84)

In addition to these professional activities, Evita found time to share her *compañero's* interests. She sat in on meetings Perón held in the apartment with military and civilian associates. (85)

Remarks like "*he* cannot be chosen for the position; he is a piece of shit" have been handed down. Perón paid attention to them. He took Evita Duarte along everywhere, and she did not remain in the background but stole the scenes, often without restraint and inconsiderately, if not brutally.

Following her promotion, Evita gives herself a makeover in 1943: she turns herself into a blonde for a film role and then stays a blonde, a Madonna blonde.

On 6 September 1944, the U.S. embassy includes a memo in its observations of the Argentine scene: the star of Colonel Perón is waning because of the “Eva Duarte connection.”

Officer colleagues are, befitting their rank, “shocked”; Perón is a “bad example” for the army.

In response to such criticism on the part of his staff, Perón arrives at the classic formulation that became famous: “They reproach me for going with an actress. What do they want me to do? Go with an actor?” (85).

The response is even wittier than it looks: the military officer’s obligatory homosexual page (an actual lieutenant or one from the municipal theater) saw the end of military service in the radio age, says the modern Perón, who proudly shows himself everywhere with his uncouth radio woman, who will make a First Lady and a Labor Minister like the media world (both inside and outside of soaps) had not yet seen.

Not until August 1953 does the radio, which was inaccessible to the political parties in Argentina but wide open to the government, become something other than the media private property of the Peróns. Under pressure from the growing opposition, Perón declares in 1953 the end of his “Argentine revolution,” appoints himself president “of all Argentines,” and admits opposition groups on the radio. Thus, for the first time since Perón became president, the nation’s airwaves carried voices of dissent (313).

This continues for one month and, as anti-Perónist demonstrations and campaigns mount, is again revoked. Once the situation becomes threatening to him, Perón lets his resignation be announced: over the radio; the effect: he is recalled to office by the masses overflowing the Plaza de Mayo (315).

Evita had achieved the same effect a year before in 1952, at the time of the failed coup that General Menéndez led against Perón. After the coup, mortally ill, she thanks the Argentines on the radio for their loyalty to Perón and implores her listeners to “pray to God to restore me to the health I have lost, not for my sake, but for Perón and for you, my *descamisados*” (249–50).

Evita knows that her illness is incurable, but that does not matter on radio waves that never (or always) lie.

And, dying, she does not entrust her legacy to their effects alone. She pauses to reflect. Her final wish is the arming of the *descamisados* as a militia for Perón—to be financed by their own

private fortune. Perón grants this wish (though *not at all* willing to arm the workers). That the *descamisados* alone would in fact be ready and in position after her death to support Perón in case of civil war is entirely her idea.

In the last year of her life, Evita attends the large state holidays of Perónism wearing a corset under her fur coat. No longer able to stand upright on her own, she nonetheless shows herself at parades standing in the car and on balconies, propped up by corset and Perón; her voice can hardly be made audible anymore, even via microphone. Even still “from her death bed” the “Spiritual Chief of the Nation” (258)<sup>7</sup> whispers the radio message to the simple spirits: don’t ever withdraw support from her spouse.

A populist true *guerillera* from the rural lumpenproletariat who was loved by the workers, then Smalltown, actress, radio creation, died of cancer at age thirty-three as the wife of a populist dictator:

... what would have become of Marlene Dietrich had she made the leap in Germany from film to state career at Hitler’s side, which was (allegedly) offered her?

Not an Evita by any means: the division of labor Hitler/Goebbels (in rabble-rousing and solicitude) was successful enough without requiring any “Marlenes” for German *descamisados*. Hitler and Goebbels themselves became the radio stars (binding those who would otherwise not submit not through media women, but rather through concentration camps).

What to do with the dead Evita? Does one simply lay such a media creation in a grave and “end of broadcast”? No. The corporeal part of Evita was embalmed, like the nontubular parts of media girls still must be, and then placed on a monument on the Plaza de Mayo. There her Snow White radio body became the object of unending Catholic-Perónist soap-kissed Virgin Mary veneration. That remained the same after Perón’s forced resignation in 1955. The pilgrimages continued while Perón had to keep going, first to Paraguay, then Panama, then Venezuela, and finally into Spanish exile.

A state campaign to discredit Perón’s memory failed in 1955 and resulted in extension of the waiting lines in front of Evita’s mausoleum. The Aramburu government found itself “obliged to act”: Evita’s corpse was removed from the Plaza de Mayo and kept at alternating sites that each time did not remain secret, and so was finally lodged in the headquarters of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT). Her body always attracts floods of Perónist fans. On 22 December 1955, a group of officers under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Carlos Eugenio Moore Koenig, head of the

Army Information Service, steals it from the CGT building. Because of government indecisiveness about her final resting place, Evita is stored, packed in a crate labeled “Radio Equipment,” in the office of Lt. Col. Moore Koenig.

In June 1956—“Heartbreak Hotel” climbs to the top of the American radio charts—Col. Mario Cabanillas replaces Lieutenant Colonel Moore Koenig as Army Information Chief. Moore Koenig forgets to inform his successor about the crate. A few days later, while tidying up, Cabanillas discovers the embalmed body of Evita Perón in the crate with the radio equipment.

“Where is Evita?” . . . this is meanwhile a public outcry in the form of thousands of rumors . . . death by fire . . . death in the river . . . “Evita lives.” . . .

The claim that there once were Peróns and a Perónism had already been pulled from circulation months earlier by the Aramburu government (public and legal prohibition against representation of Juan, as of Evita Perón; in the newspapers, Perón is given the state-approved name “the fugitive tyrant”).

Yet where to put Evita’s corpse? The stressed-out government would gladly grant her a “Christian burial” . . . but *where*, without the continual stream of political pilgrims?

The head of the Catholic world himself is contacted; with the aid of Pius XII, Evita reaches Europe and an unidentified Milanese cemetery, from where she establishes and maintains contact with Juan Perón. When he reaches his Spanish exile, Perón has her brought from there to his house in Madrid, on the upper floor of which she peacefully sleeps away the time until Perón’s return to Argentina (until she lands again, in silver casket, at the Plaza de Mayo).<sup>8</sup>

“Don’t cry for me, Argentina / The truth is I never left you . . .”<sup>9</sup>

Perón later tried it once again—it had worked so well—with a media woman in the government palace. In exile, he marries the Argentine dancer María Estela Martínez, stage name “Isabel.” The future Vice President Isabel Perón is twenty-four years old when Perón meets her (twenty-four, like Evita Duarte eleven years earlier). After Perón’s death, Isabel, the dancer, becomes Argentina’s president.

This was, like the reanimated love in exile, more a parody of the microphone symbiosis of Juan and Evita: Juan Perón had grown senile; Isabel was in league with younger people around him who pursued their own political agendas and who used the figure and name Perón only as label; he was, now played out, Isabel’s puppet on the microphones when he died.

Argentina's media star (next to TV star Maradona) remained Evita, the country girl on the radio waves, wife of the leader who rose up out of the earthquake.

What does one conclude from all this: better a Reagan (from the screen) than a burning Bush from the CIA? If with Reagan we had been primarily dealing with an actor, perhaps; but he was an actor only so he could, under this pretense, work as an undercover CIA agent in the actor's union before he came forward as the public front man of the California Right. *Always* already a professional politician, in the final analysis. . .

### *Leadership, God, Medium*

In most countries emerging from colonialism, a relatively thin aristocratic upper stratum faces the masses of the working and the poor. The training ground for the ruling intelligentsia is above all the military. There exists no broad bourgeoisie and barely a middle class with its typical institutions: schools, polytechnical colleges, chambers of commerce, clubs, community associations, lobbies, and professional associations. But an all-comprehensive state church is already there and waiting with a strong tendency toward religious fundamentalism.

This is also, with exceptions, the case in Argentina, otherwise the "most European" of South American countries. Between domination/power and the population there are few intermediary circuits. A direct leader-people relationship via mass movement is much easier to produce in such countries than in societies with a differentiated infrastructure; that much easier when the political leader succeeds in establishing the bond between his political populism and religious fundamentalism. For a country like Iran, for instance, this is the case even more so than for Argentina.

The new *communications media* furnish the decisive missing link (and also the missing piece of the Holy Trinity). In the Argentina of the 1930s, radio simply moves as the third power into the place between the political leadership and the will of God. Perón/the military plus Virgin Mary worship plus radio soaps are the big three of political power, evident to the senses in Evita, who assumes the representation of this connection.

New technical media in "underdeveloped" societies lead directly to political dictatorships, either by inheriting the prevalent religiosity or bonding with it.<sup>10</sup>

The voice of God, the voice of state power, and the voice of the medium coincide in one and the same; it follows from this in the

Argentina of the 1930s that the voice of God, the voice of Perón/Evita, and the voice of tango cannot be distinguished and that tango therefore is *direct* propaganda for the leader. In Germany this led to the transformation of jazz, insofar as it could be played on the radio (not to mention Bach and Mozart), into direct Führer propaganda.

This does not exclude that “below” this level, in the gradual *becoming commonplace* of the new medium, a completely opposite process takes place: a type of democratization of those who stay tuned transpires along the lines of McLuhan’s Global Village or what Diederichsen calls the *tribalization* of people through media into the clan of jazz, soul, punk, and hip-hop members, especially when the Holy Trinity of leadership/God/medium breaks apart through the failure of the political leadership. Thus it is conceivable that the bit of democratic potential that was around in Germany in the 1950s came from the nursing breast of the radio: for following the words from the *Führer*-voices the music always comes on, and, no matter which selection, plays not as or at the order of the high command but as smaller and more scattered, more dispersed sensations, *sounds* instead of the thunder of sense.

Gottfried Benn becomes (halfway) democratic in the 1950s with the resumption of the lyrical production of his 1920s sounds, with the cessation of the primeval uproar of Beethoven, with the casual dropping of the Wagner effect. Evita finds peace, transformation, and redemption in the *Evita* musical by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber, who had already created *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The phantom of power disappears into the *Phantom of the Opera*; the expanded media spectrum detaches political leadership from the God function; cable connections worked not toward divinization of Chancellor Kohl but rather, through the violence of its own flat trajectory, promoted at that time an increase in social violence.

Where they acquire media dominance, new media elevate the level of open societal violence *everywhere* during the time of their introduction and acceptance.

The “fundamentalist violence” that emerges at the end of the 1970s in Iran belongs to a comparable trinity of Khomeini/the mullahs plus radio plus cassette recorder and is set in motion (on the way to power) by a movie-theater fire. But first, we must pass through another birth by catastrophe.

*David Sarnoff: Seventy-two Hours in Hades*

On 14 April 1912, shortly before midnight in New York, radio operator David Sarnoff emerges from the waves of a catastrophe made

for him, only twenty-one years old and soon to become in all media “industry’s No. 1 wonder boy in the United States”:<sup>11</sup> in 1922, thirty years old, he is general manager of RCA, the Radio Corporation of America; in 1926 he founds NBC, the National Broadcasting Company; beginning in 1928, he experiments with TV . . . he will be known after 1940 as “father of television in America.”

On 14 April 1912 at exactly 11:40 p.m., the twentieth century receives its model catastrophe and David Sarnoff gets the call from Pluto’s catastrophe administration office. He sits at night on the roof of the John Wanamaker department store in New York sending and receiving radio signals. Wanamaker, one of the most renowned department stores of the time, invested a good sum of money to set up America’s largest radio station on its roof, installed by the then largest American radio company, American Marconi. David Sarnoff is an employee of American Marconi and performs his nightly duty on Wanamaker’s radio roof.

With course set for the tip of his transmitter mast, the ship plows through the ocean a few hundred miles away, the enormous sister ship of the gigantic *Olympic* (White Star Line, Liverpool, associated with Pierpont Morgan’s International Mercantile Marine, IMM, Connecticut), launched to outrun and run down the competition not through velocity but through luxury and mass. Correspondingly heavy and in light spirits, Captain Smith and his *Titanic* make their way into the malicious iceberg. In New York, David Sarnoff decodes the message on Wanamaker’s radio equipment: “S. S. Titanic ran into iceberg. Sinking fast.”

American media historian Erik Barnouw:

He alerted other ships in the area, and informed the press. While President Taft ordered all other American transmitters to stay silent, young Sarnoff stuck to his key for seventy-two hours, relaying news of survivors to anxious relatives. He was the one link with the scene of disaster, and won world fame. Member of a poor immigrant family—from the Russian village of Uzlian, a cluster of wood huts—he had started with American Marconi at \$5.50 a week; within a few years after the *Titanic* events, he was commercial manager. As American Marconi grew, he grew with it. He was, heart and soul, a company man. And the company was turning into big business, and winning government contracts—in spite of navy misgivings.<sup>12</sup>

For his seventy-two-hour performance at the keys of Wanamaker’s electric piano of the beyond, the president himself appoints Sarnoff solo operator of a radio line into the heart of the *Titanic*: connection to government contracts, media empires, big business. From “sole” catastrophe broadcaster in 1912, Sarnoff rises up “with

heart and soul” to become lord of *all* wireless connections by 1922. The American *Dream* . . . who *built* such media *models*?

In 1900, Sarnoff, oldest of five children, reached New York with his mother, where they rejoined his father, who had gone on ahead. Two days later he is selling newspapers on the streets of New York and from then on is in business. When his father dies, fifteen-year-old David is the provider for six people. He signs on with Commercial Cable Company at \$5 a week. For a while, as a budding broadcaster must, he goes to sea . . .

At sea the yarn grows. What all does one not think about sitting around at night on rocking ships in front of radio equipment and picking up the phantom voices of navigational reports? Now and again an SOS mixes with the voices . . . somewhere out there bodies are thrashing about in the water again; at some point there will be a big fish out there . . . perhaps, for once, one will be nearby . . .

For the seventeen-year-old family breadwinner, rescue fantasies are the stuff of dreams of course. That is the beauty of Sarnoff’s *Titanic* story, that it is made up, a yarn of upward mobility through *catastrophe*. The story, part of several American books on radio history, always had its source in Sarnoff himself: his own “oral oracle.” Promoted to the top of his company after the World War and then his own media boss, he recounted it over and over again until *his story* was in fact history—had it not been for Edward Bliss, who took an interest in the journalistic side of the affair. Bliss wanted to know what the New York newspapers during the third week of April 1912 reported about the seventy-two-hour hero Sarnoff—and found: nothing. If not entirely fabricated, the story was at least totally exaggerated, pieced together from all sorts of rumors about the sinking ship and the miraculous radio station.

During the World War *so much* had happened . . . who would ever check what a media czar recounted about his calling and ascent . . . nobody. Nobody.

1,517 souls went down with the *Titanic*.<sup>13</sup> Through Sarnoff’s little construction, they advance to sacrifices buried in the foundations of RCA.

Even the kings of America’s technology empires require Elias Canetti’s “mountain of corpses,” the imaginarily piled-up pyramid in front of the broadcast palace. And where there is no mountain of corpses in *personal history*, one must be *invented* or at least attributed to one; otherwise the king is not a real king and his empire possibly only a castle of sand, a castle for the waves . . .

RCA was itself only just born in 1922 as the product of a rapacious act, a dispossession that America, triumphant in war, could

allow itself in the light beaming across of the Russian Revolution. The American firm of Guglielmo Marconi, the radio inventor who was the first to be patented, was commercially part of British Marconi, the head company of this young Italian, who, because of the acknowledged lack of interest by the Italian monarchy in his invention, slipped away (with his British mother's encouragement) to the more radio-dependent Great Britain: sea routes. Then on to America.

Congress in Washington did not want one more foreign finger in the American radio sky after experiencing the importance in war of wireless broadcast and reception. Endeavoring to keep the new pearl of public control under state influence, it passed a law according to which no foreign firms were allowed to maintain majority interests in American technical communication institutions. American Marconi was compulsorily transferred to the Radio Corporation of America, established specifically for this purpose. Employee David Sarnoff was expropriated with it—compared to the British Italian Marconi, a veritable *Ur*-American—and thus qualified for promotion all the way to the top of the corporation.

Worse was planned and could have turned out worse: the American Navy, which controlled all broadcasting and reception during the World War, wanted a law that kept radio an absolute Navy monopoly even after the war. This did not come to pass, but leading Navy personnel (along with the former Marconi people) were given leadership positions at RCA as compensation and consolation. The military monopoly (which is then only allowed again during wars) hid behind sports broadcasts and the like: Sarnoff's first "live" broadcast is the Dempsey vs. Carpentier boxing match on 2 July 1921, heard by an estimated 300,000 listeners; lacking their own radios, the majority of these auditors listened in halls and bars.<sup>14</sup>

His bosses ignored young Sarnoff's proposal to manufacture a Radio Music Box series (as early as 1916). The establishment of an imperial world news network stood in the foreground.

During the development of sound-film technologies at the end of the 1920s, RCA in Hollywood worked closely with RKO, the company in which Joseph Kennedy, father of John F. Kennedy, invested money made from whiskey smuggling during Prohibition. RKO is the abbreviation for Radio Keith Orpheum: *one* firm at any rate that emblematically carries in its name the Orphic dimension that at this historical-technological moment was being recast and redefined.

I have not checked to see whether there was also a feminine-Eurydicean being during Sarnoff's transformation into supreme

media commander who introduced her part into the empire; the origin from the clean technical hertz-wave field alone did not suffice as line of ascent in the *consciousness* of this king: the waves of the ocean *themselves* and what they swallowed, the great pond as *Hades*, must have been the origin from which the message emerged that catapulted the radio operator to the positions of radio boss, czar of the record company, and finally Father of TV (as the Russian musician of the spheres, advanced to Goliath, is ultimately enthroned in the columns of the *American Biography of New Technologies*).

\* \* \*

. . . “and the Lorelei did that with her singing?”

No. The “blue band” does not flutter over the oceans in a woman’s golden hair, the glance of the sailor *with wild woe* does not climb “up to the heights;” he follows a clock and a concept: that of velocity, with which the titanic century sought to escape itself on the wrong path. The old *mechanical* tempo, the *titanic*, earth- and water-bound tempo, resigns (attended by major opening of the floodgates of the beyond) and rises (in the following decades) into the air.

There, Sarnoff, lord of the airwaves, waits to pick up the wand. For seventy-two hours he was *over there* as *wireless* angel of death embodying and boding another *sort of velocity* and other *kinds of transfer*; and as the first messenger of future wars *constituted otherwise* in the long, long night at the Wanamaker ticker . . .

. . . in the (by presidential decree) *contrived* narrative of his *broadcast*.

The dead do not always sleep *soundly* . . . they operate keys . . . shake hands (from the beyond) . . . make connections.

### *Catastrophic Births, Continued*

Gertrude Stein chose the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire as the big shock that “completely changed” her life. Not that she had “experienced” the catastrophe: thirty-two years old, living in Europe for some time, commuting between the art venues Florence and Paris.<sup>15</sup> The earthquake, however, *sent* something to her from across the ocean, exactly what she needed to be happy: . . . a slim, dark, Polish-Jewish, piano-playing American. For Gertrude’s oldest brother Michael and his wife Sarah, the great fire was cause to return for a short time from Paris to San Francisco to

settle property matters. Three paintings by Henri Matisse traveled with them, the first to cross the Atlantic. Michael and Sarah Stein show the paintings in San Francisco to, among others, art enthusiast Alice B. Toklas, that young unattached woman who is somewhat unenthusiastically stuck in her training as a concert pianist. Alice, fired with enthusiasm for something as beautiful as a Matisse, decides to go to Paris and see firsthand all the things the Steins so enthusiastically describe.

“Do you believe in love at first sight?—Yes I’m certain that it happens all the time . . .” This is the case with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, in any event, except that it was perhaps not first sight but rather first sound. Gertrude’s *voice* was “velvety like a great contralto’s, like two voices” in one.<sup>16</sup>

“She came and saw and seeing cried I am your bride.”<sup>17</sup>

Alice from the earthquake is the gift that transforms Gertrude Stein’s life into the life “of the genius” she (together with Alice) becomes. This time, *love* comes from the earthquake, one that even has staying power, a gift for the second half of Gertrude Stein’s life; the first half she spent with her brother Leo (and in unhappy relationships with women).

Gertrude Stein placed this story right on page 2 of her *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: “The earth itself wanted it thus . . . the two of them as a pair . . . the earth itself as fiery and trembling father of the greatest female writing pair on earth.”<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

“Nearer, my God to Thee,” hundreds of passengers, certain not to be saved, had sung on the Titanic as the ship was going down. The way to God is outlined in this hymn with the words “Sun, moon and stars forgot / Upward I fly . . .” *Naturally*, the song is continually “cited” in contexts where someone was involuntarily moved into the greater proximity to God with slapstick blows to lamebrains and wherever the rug, on which it had just been so good to lie, stand, or fly, was pulled out from under someone. From the beginning, satire sticks to the lines.

“Sun, moon, and stars forgot / Upward I fly” is also the song of Sarnoff’s own (from this point onward) ascending telegraph-operator self. Of course Sarnoff *knew* that this had been the song on board when he later invented his story and recounted it *again* and *again* . . . knowing it would transform him in the ears of his listeners into the great one lifting off and upward. . . . One is brought

*Nearer, my God to Thee*, to a religious or political place of power, via media . . . while the 1,517 unmediated ones must take the longer flight through the depths.

Helmut Schmidt invented the “Hamburg Flood Catastrophe” also for himself—or so one thinks when listening to him on the radio in 1992 on the thirtieth anniversary of the “event.” It is all very fresh . . . everything is in the present tense . . . *I* have . . . *I* . . . again “*I*” . . . personally forged the trident with which Neptune drove the waters over Hamburg’s dikes . . . and then put the North Sea in my pocket . . . he himself had flung each sandbag into the torrential Elbe River . . . and has not taken off the Prince Heinrich cap, the captain’s lid, since then . . .

The great captain Winston Churchill could never forget the *stranded ship* that his nurse showed him when, ten years old, he was spending summer vacation on the Isle of White. Run aground on a reef, it lay partly over, partly under water, dead in the ocean, its bow concealing a number of dead soldiers, who were intent on returning from South Africa, but in the meantime, with their nearby destination just before their eyes, had to make do with a watery grave instead of the one hoped for, at the end of the lifeline, in England’s soil. This ship had its hold over Churchill. He repeatedly gives account of it in his various memoirs and also gives its name. It was the *HMS Eurydice*.

The schoolboy who takes in the sunken *Eurydice* in 1884 advanced at the beginning of World War I to British Minister of the Navy. In the Dardanelle Offensive (Entente troops against Turkish troops allied with the Germans), Winston Churchill seizes the opportunity to lend to the catastrophe dormant within him, whose mere *observer* he had been, a more real body. His disastrous decisions (he ensures that his troops land at a very well fortified, invulnerable site) result in losses of around 90,000 men. For this he is not celebrated as the “Orpheus of war,” but is instead for now dismissed. But twenty-five years later (the story of the sunken *Eurydice* with the dead Boer War soldiers in the bow is recounted again and again) his moment in the light, in the flak and flames of the Second World War, arrived after all. Catastrophes, apparently, keep their promises (to their chosen relatives).

Can one do anything about it? Beseech the earth to stop the catastrophizing as planetary labor pains at the birth of leaders? Hardly. Where there are no real catastrophes on gigantic waves for the kings, they make them up or they help themselves to some . . . The catastrophe king himself makes the pretext that he needs to prove his “legitimacy.” This is his entry into the *occult* dimension of

political media worlds; without a telegram from the desk of Pluto, there can be no *calling* there.

And: the telegram comes in rhythms . . . every ten years a great man . . . “who covers the expenses” is no longer a question, was it ever one?

\* \* \*

The one person who could also have received Pluto’s call slept right through it: the radio operator of the ocean steamer *California*, which was just a short distance away from the *Titanic* at the time of the disaster. He had just switched off his equipment and gone to sleep when the sinking giant sent out its distress signals. *Everyone* would have been saved, except the ship and the blue band, of course . . . the century would have had to seek to distinguish itself with another catastrophe. . . . Sarnoff would have had to come up with a different one. Perhaps *this* radio operator would have then become the boss of RCA and *Father of Television* in America or a Juan Domingo Perón in Washington<sup>19</sup> . . . as it stands, no one remembers his name.

. . . *Ayatollah Out of the Fire*

On the evening of 18 August 1978, the *Cinema Rex* burns in the Iranian oil city of Abadan. It is a full house, with over a thousand audience members attending the late show. The people rushing to the exits register in panic that the doors of the theater have been bolted from the outside. The fire department is on the scene within fifteen minutes, but for some reason no water flows from the hydrants. Over six hundred people burn to death. The other four hundred are taken to clinics. This is “without doubt the single most horrible event in Iran’s recent history,” writes Amir Taheri in his history of Ayatollah Khomeini and his ascent to political power.<sup>20</sup>

The Shah is on his last legs in August 1978 . . . the fire is what one calls a *fanal* (particularly since the film shown was a pro-Shah documentary of progress in Iran). But the stench of the burnt bodies weighs so heavily on the country that even the political statements, otherwise stopping for nothing, skip a beat: “The tragedy created such widespread shock that for two full days neither the regime nor its opponents knew how to react.”<sup>21</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini in his exile in Paris ultimately makes the first move: via the BBC Iranian program in London, he alleges that

the Shah himself commissioned his Brigadier General Razmi with the staging of the cinema catastrophe . . .

“Model: Reichstag fire.” *Navid*, the news magazine of the mullahs—illegal in Iran at that time—receives the “report” and disseminates it further . . .

This was not the only, just the largest, of a *series* of arson attacks on cinemas during the Iranian “Revolution” . . . and not the last: the cinema was a well-chosen enemy of the *fundamentalist opponents* of the Shah’s regime . . . the clearest expression of the “Westernization” of Iranian Islamic culture . . . one of the primary causes of the many unveiled women on the streets of large Iranian cities. The Shah was the (predominantly US-controlled) emancipator in the eyes of the mullahs . . . in the eyes of the Left, just the opposite, a suppressor of democracy . . . Leftists and fundamentalists ultimately fight him together . . . the most peculiar coalitions are formed in history (the history of catastrophes).

The last Shah-appointed regime quickly decides, before going down, to close all four of the country’s casinos and imposes a ban on exhibition of films with “sexually suggestive scenes” . . .

Bans, fires . . . the last and first wing beat of coming and going dictatorships . . .

How did Khomeini, exiled commander of the Iranian fundamentalist revolution with residence in Paris, gain access to the Protestant BBC? World power poker . . . Khomeini profits from the trouble the Shah is in with the British because of his splendid relations with the Americans. Iran belonged traditionally to the British sphere of influence until the Second World War: the majority of Allied relief deliveries for the Soviet Union during the war passed through Iran. In this way the country advanced, also with the Americans, to the *Bridge of Victory* against Hitler. After the war, Iran, as a potential site for deployment of American nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union, and because of its oil, became an increasingly important ally of the USA in the Cold War. In the 1960s the U.S. influence increased still: the same applied to the trade relations of Iran with the Federal Republic of Germany. The Shah consequently fell out of favor with the British. Already in the 1960s, the British opened to the fundamentalist mullahs BBC broadcast channels meant specifically for Iran. When in 1977 Khomeini in Paris settles into his final exile before his return as ruler, he discovers to his astonishment another Shah opponent in Giscard d’Estaing. France also hopes for advantages from the overthrow of Reza Pahlavi and his dynasty . . . and the Americans, too, are less favorably disposed toward the Shah than was earlier the case: . . . they fear his regime is too weak to keep the increasing

leftist tendencies in Iran under control. Iran is possibly falling “to Communism” . . .

Under the injunction to back off on public attacks against the USA and the West in general, Khomeini receives support in his Parisian suburb of Neauphle-le-Château—the local post office connects two telex and six direct telephone lines to Iran. For the first time in the sixteen years of his war against the peacock throne, Khomeini is in a position to “communicate” hourly with Motahari, his representative in Tehran. What is more: a rented local recording studio produces thousands of tapes in the following months with daily messages from the Ayatollah “to his people.” Sermons, speeches, interviews reach Tehran hourly and the BBC daily.

“In that Parisian suburb the Ayatollah gave a total of 132 radio, television and press interviews during his four-month stay. He issued some fifty declarations which were quickly published and distributed in Tehran.”<sup>22</sup> The Ayatollah, absent in Iran, acoustically gains a *daily presence* for Iranians: over the same portable radios and radio cassette recorders from which, at the same time, western youths feed themselves the remaining musical spasms of the 1970s and the beginning of punk . . . the modernization commandments of the hour.<sup>23</sup>

The burning *Rex* in Abadan ignites the “hot phase” of the revolution. . . . Parisian telephones, radios, and cassette recorders accelerate the victory of the Islamic revolution. . . . Shiite fundamentalism triumphs via the western industry of transistors and transformers.

A little later (twenty years after Eisenhower) Khomeini becomes the first Islamic TV president. . . . We see television in Iran in the 1980s as agitation medium for a nation-state militarism . . . the *most direct* connection of the political and religious leader with “the people” . . .

“Cool medium” . . . “hot medium” . . . Marshal McLuhan’s value scale is wrong for Iran; here radio, *as well as* television, were *hot hot hot* and continue thus.

Each new medium is in the *moment* of its seizure of power an absolute sovereign, of course in accordance with the given surroundings, but sovereign nonetheless. For Iran in 1978: tape recorder yes . . . *Shiite* tape recorder. Compact cassettes with *Read Only Memory*. Cinema no . . . *infidel* cinema, erotic cinema, Cinema World West.

*Their Masters’ voice* blasting from the technologized mosques . . . the generators of state-creating late-show catastrophes.<sup>24</sup>

The industrial fascist magic formula of *Dual Use* opens up unheard-of possibilities in the current state of global media non-simultaneities. What will young Chinese conquer with their ghetto

blasters . . . their girlfriend? . . . markets for Phillip Morris? . . . Europe? . . . or *their* country?

\* \* \*

Who could have known anything about the Iranian media war in Berlin on 2 June 1967? Mayor Schütz and his police force protected the undisturbed gaze of the Shah upon the Brandenburg Gate with *liverwurst tactics* and the shooting of the student Ohnesorg; the Shah, who was condemned *to fall* in the BBC, in the Palais d'Elysées, in the Pentagon . . . the Shah, who even in Iran was *screened* from view, was, in other words, *media backward*.

Who reckoned with mullahs and *radio studios*? Shadows of new leaders in (of all places) the trailblazing transistors of the West?

No one. Out of *our* suitcases came jazz and rock . . . our *fundamentalism* . . . jazz and rock . . . and *never again*, for our sound-saturated brains, would there be voices of “priests and politicians” at our entries and exits, where the final stages are wired together with the brain . . .

### *Medium Supergold*

Beginning in 1492 the royally dispatched conquistadors expected gold and silver in raging currents flowing from the wonderful catastrophe of the new Atlantis surfacing from the blue Caribbean waters . . . great Atlantis . . . Columbus's news . . .

Rio de la Plata is called “silver river” . . . so named by its discoverer Díaz de Solís because of its “metallic” hue . . .

Argentina (from the Latin *argentum*, “silver”) was supposed to be the land of silver as Mexico was the land of gold . . . and if not Mexico, then Eldorado.

The morphologies were deceptive, but prospects never cease: in the designations of subsequent hopes in all things “gold,” America stuck to shining metals: tobacco, the foundation of the first North American wealth, advanced to “brown gold,”<sup>25</sup> cotton to the white one . . . “black gold” coal . . . supergolden gold oil. Then came the media silver screen—the film screen in America—and the radio tube's crystal valve. In its interior, the crystal philosopher's stone sparkles so enchantingly like the promised metal of the silver screen of cinema light (what the Germans call instead film's “canvas screen” is completely un-American). And the Aztec on top of the record group distributes gold records to the king of diamond needles . . . Platinum Records . . .

. . . *Record and Play* . . . technical alchemies, processes from the world of *making gold* . . . originally an American technomedia occultism. Export hit No. 1 . . . virus . . . spread out into the occult of everyday life.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich von Kleist, "The Earthquake in Chile," trans. Michael Hamburger, in *German Romantic Novellas: Heinrich von Kleist and Jean Paul*, ed. Frank G. Ryder and Robert M. Browning (New York: Continuum, 1985), 122–35, quotation on 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Page, *Perón: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983), 2; hereafter cited in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Women receive the right to vote on 23 September 1947.

<sup>6</sup> Lester A. Sobel, ed., *Argentina and Perón: 1970–75* (New York: Facts on File, 1975), 10.

<sup>7</sup> The Congress bestowed upon her the title *Jefa Esperitua de la Nación*.

<sup>8</sup> Sobel, *Argentina and Perón*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> In politics and literature, *Evita* (the musical, as well as her actual political history) plays with the figure of Inez de Castro, famous in the Spanish-speaking world as the "dead queen on the throne." Inez was the secret wife of the Spanish King Pedro (reigning from 1357 to 1367). He married the commoner after the death of his proper wife. His father prevented her enthronement during his lifetime. Pedro fought him and set the embalmed body of Inez on the throne after his father's death. The court and the world had to parade past her and kiss the hand of the dead (cf. Martin Nozik, "The Inez de Castro Theme in European Literature," *Comparative Literature* 3, no. 4 [1951]: 330–41).

Camões deals with the story in the third canto of the Portuguese national epic *Os Lusíadas* (1572). From then on, "the dead to be honored on the throne" becomes a subject of world literature: over two hundred adaptations and several operas. In Spanish-Portuguese literature, Don Pedro and Inez are probably better known than Orpheus and Eurydice.

Luis Vélez de Guevara (1579–1644) wrote one of Spain's best-known and most often staged plays about the fate of Inez de Castro (to give a broader historical basis to the later famous statement that one who speaks of Castro must not remain silent about Guevara). The possible date of origin for the drama is around 1607.

Whoever speaks of Fidel, must not keep silent about Che . . . another dead person on the throne . . .

<sup>10</sup> This is also feasible in more developed crisis-ridden societies.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Maxine Block, ed., *Current Biography 1940: Who's News and Why* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1940), 713.

<sup>12</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 17–18.

<sup>13</sup> 1517: Cortez with the Aztecs—one of Montezuma’s vengeful number games.

<sup>14</sup> Westinghouse broadcasts the entire opera season of the Chicago Civic Opera on its own KYW station in 1921–22. Only opera, nothing else . . . like the women’s chant from the convent church in Hildegard von Bingen’s time in order to promote Christianization. The opera songs increase the number of radio sets sold in the Chicago area from November 1921 till summer 1922 from 1,300 to 20,000. At the end of 1924 there are an estimated 3 million receivers in the USA. In Germany, civilian radio does not *begin* until 1922–23.

<sup>15</sup> Gertrude Stein, “Didn’t Nelly and Lilly Love You,” in *Gertrude Stein: In Words and Pictures*, ed. Renate Stendhal (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1994), 65.

<sup>16</sup> Stein, “Didn’t Nelly,” 65.

<sup>17</sup> Alice B. Toklas, *What Is Remembered* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. also *ibid.*, 16–23. Her travel companion Harriet Levy read *Lord Jim* (discontentedly) on the crossing from New York to Cherbourg (19).

<sup>19</sup> *Domingo* means “the Sunday child” . . . born under the star of the real catastrophe . . . turned into real medium.

<sup>20</sup> Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 223.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>23</sup> Weakened by cancer and despondent, the Shah is not seen for months in his medium, the state medium of television (the medium that Khomeini will unswervingly occupy and monopolize for himself a few months later).

<sup>24</sup> One can study the religious instructions of Khomeini to Iranians in his *Clarification of Questions* (Ayatollah Sayyed Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini, *A Clarification of Questions*, trans. J. Borujerdi [Boulder, CO: Westview, 1984]). It presents numbered life and relationship instructions for each everyday situation, for everything legal, commercial, and so on: 2,897 paragraphs in all.

Paragraphs 394–499, for instance, stipulate conduct for menstruating women (105 rules for the 6 principally different “sorts” of menstruating women, according to Khomeini).

Paragraphs 2,889 and 2,890 ban the sale and purchase of radios and televisions by Iranians, who want them for anything other than religious use (391–92).

<sup>25</sup> When, after over one hundred years of tobacco cultivation, the soil was exhausted and other useful crops were cultivated for regeneration (grain, among others), the original tobacco region in Virginia was dubbed the Golden Tobacco Belt. Old Gold is a popular brand in the nineteenth century. In 1926, it is brought on the market as a new brand and changes in Germany after 1948 to the well-known Golddollar (filterless in a green pack; youth weed smoked on the railway embankment).