Chapter 3

Radio/Puppets, or The Institutionalization of a (Media) Revolution

Listeners who tuned into station XFX in Mexico City at around 10 A.M. on February 19, 1933, were greeted with a cacophonous clangor and clatter of brass instruments, strings, cymbals, and xylophones—an avant-garde mélange of dissonant sounds interspersed with the fragmented melody of a familiar children’s song. Then at a certain point a voice intervened and said something close to if not exactly like this:

Hear my sonorous song ascend through my crystal throat and amplify in the magnavox of my mouth. I am troka the Powerful. The man of metal moved by electricity. So big, so strong, so resistant am I! My body is formed out of hard, shiny, polished planes. My arms and legs are made of aluminum to give them agility; my joints rotate on steel balls. My chest is of iron and in its interior hums my heart, an electric motor. Hear it! (A buzz is heard.) My head is made of bronze; in it I enclose my brain, made of electromagnetic apparatuses; from this brain my nerves emerge and fan out like metallic threads that run all over my body and transmit the orders that make me act.

Oíd mi sonoro canto que asciende por mi garganta de cristal y se amplía en el magnavox de mi boca. Soy troka el poderoso. El hombre de metal que se mueve por electricidad. ¡Qué grande, qué fuerte, qué resistente soy! Mi cuerpo está formado de duros planos pulidos y brillantes. De aluminio son mis brazos y piernas para que sean ágiles y flexibles; sobre balas de acero giran mis coyunturas. Mi pecho es de hierro y en su interior zumba mi corazón, motor eléctrico. ¡Oídlo! (Se oye el zumbido.) Mi cabeza es de bronce; en ella encierro mi cerebro hecho todo de aparatos electromagnéticos; de este cerebro salen y se distribuyen mis nervios, hilos metálicos que corren a través de mi cuerpo y transmiten las órdenes para que yo actúe.¹
Who or what is the subject of this Voice—this strange “spirit” cobbled together out of sheet metal, electrical impulses, and mechanical parts? Troka speaks in the stilted syntax favored by deities and commands his audience to hear his song, a song of the body electric that is simultaneously the “industrial song of the world.” Over the next few years, as the host of a popular “children’s hour” on the official station of the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education, he would spin stories in which modern machines conquer space and time while flaunting their strength and speed in the face of the older technologies they claim to supersede. In this initial apparition, however, he simply beckons his young listeners to listen to the myriad manifestations of his power. Troka (says Troka) is present in the “solemn murmur” of motors and the “impatient panting” of machines, in the whistle of locomotives and the “cry” of sirens summoning men to work in factories. He is the synthesis of all elements and the efforts of all men: of the ironworkers whose hammers send sparks flying, the engineers who build bridges out of cables and steel plates, the scientists who unlock the secrets of nature, the white men who fell the Canadian forests, the yellow men who sow the Chinese plains with rice, and the black men who tap rubber trees in the Amazon. His eyes are streetlights; his nerves are telegraph wires; his arms are radio towers. And his voice? It is the medium of radio itself. Troka is the ghost in the machine, the self-authorizing subject of technology that conjures its own power into existence and boxes in its own brain.

Or is he? In fact, it is likely some of the listeners who tuned into Troka heard echoes of other voices in his bombastic (or reassuringly avuncular?) timbre. At least a handful of the adults knew there was a reason he sounded so similar to Germán List Arzubide, a man (made of flesh and blood) whose notoriety extended back a decade to his days as one of the most visible and vocal estridentistas. During the early 1920s the estridentistas were notorious for their raucous odes to revolution and embrace of radio and other new technologies—though as was revealed in the previous chapter, several members had also turned their attention to indigenous culture with their short-lived Teatro del Murciélago. The movement “died” well before the end of the decade, crushed by the forces of reaction in the prime of its youth (or so the story goes), but it is conceivable some listeners could discern a few “strident” strains in the didactic declarations of this aural automaton. Still, probably fresher in the mind of most was the fact that less than a year and a half earlier, List Arzubide had been accused of hijacking Mexico’s most powerful radio station and broadcasting an antigovernment speech in commemoration of the Russian Revolution. So who really was this character now commanding impressionable young ears in the name of the Secretariat of Public Education? Did it occur to anyone that something about Troka was a little out-of-joint—that not all of his mechanical parts fit? As it happens, even some of the children might have had an inkling about one other curious detail: he was also (and perhaps originally) imagined as a marionette. The
Voice of Troka was not his own, and his song—“the industrial song of the world”—was shadowed by the specter of a small stage on which object bodies move to the motion of hidden hands.

This chapter sets out to resurrect Troka el Poderoso, a radio/puppet born in the afterlife of estridentismo and at the forefront of a fraught alliance among the artistic avant-garde, the communist Left, and the cultural bureaucracy of a “revolutionary” state. In doing so, it also counters the common narrative of an estridentista “radio revolution” and taps into an ongoing wave of interest in media that are ostensibly “old,” “residual,” “dying,” or “dead.” Carolyn Marvin’s When Old Technologies Were New, often cited as a prescient example of this trend, challenged what she called an “artifactual” perspective, in which new social practices are seen as emanating from the object itself, and offered an account of the telephone and the electric light as “constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures” emerging out of a “pattern of tension created by the coexistence of old and new.” More recently, Lisa Gitelman has shown how digital networks are acquiring their own “coincident yet contravening logic” vis-à-vis an existing textual economy by drawing comparisons to the phonograph, whose novel ability to record and replay sound was initially understood in relation to practices of writing and reading. Like Jonathan Sterne, who traces the “one hundred year history” of the MP3, Gitelman suggests that “the introduction of new media . . . is never entirely revolutionary: new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such” (6).

This self-reflexive trend in new media studies is premised on the idea that technologies no longer regarded as agents of progress and productivity can illuminate the ways in which media become constituted as historical subjects implicated in complex social, economic, and material relations. One of my aims is to show that these critiques of new media discourse—like efforts to reimagine the temporality of the avant-garde—have much to gain by redirecting their attention to regions of the world regarded as “backward” and “behind.” One might assume that the “mysterious spirit of mechanical things” would be born in the bowels of industry, but Troka the Powerful was a belated offshoot of an avant-garde movement in a largely agricultural country where relatively few people owned radio receivers and the transmitters were all imported from his imperial neighbor to the north. Artists are often intimately involved in the early, experimental stages of emerging technologies, and people in the role of technicians are often guided in part by aesthetic concerns; but these boundaries tend to be more obviously uncertain in times and places where the intellectual field is less divided and dominated by “experts” or “specialists,” and where access to the necessary knowledge and instruments is constrained by geopolitical inequalities. Contexts such as these can help estrange commonplace assumptions about what media are and what they can and cannot do—especially when the context is one where
the relevant institutions are in the process of highly politicized change. A lot hinged on the modernizing promises of technology in Mexico during the 1930s, but the illusion that it possessed its own agency and could erase the inequalities of the present and past had to rely more openly on the fiction-making and desire-inducing powers of “art.”

There is no hard evidence a puppet named Troka ever existed in physical form, and the character who spoke on and as the radio apparently never acknowledged his alter ego. But who knows? Despite an abundance of memos, proposals, and a collection of stories whose connection to his broadcasts is unclear, there are no recordings of his voice—and even if such aural evidence existed, it is unwise to take a radio puppet at its word. Instead, I glean the archival remains to piece together the tale of how Troka acquired his Voice, reconstructing him as a figure for the (partly) imaginary agent of technological progress and the protagonist of a fantasy of liberation via industrialization that fueled the expansion of capitalism in the 1930s. Rather than heed his siren song, I seek to (over)hear something similar to what Mladen Dolar calls the “object voice”—a voice which “does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify in an object of fetish reverence, but an object which functions as a blind spot in the call and as a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation.”\(^5\) Troka’s power was always precarious, uneven, and vexed, yet I argue that this radio/puppet born in the afterlife of the avant-garde in an “underdeveloped,” (post)revolutionary country can offer insight into a series of questions that are genealogically linked: How do media acquire and exercise power, and how is their agency enabled and bound by material strings? In what sense, if any, can art act as the avant-garde? And finally: what does it mean to make a revolution?

Avant-Garde Remediations

Nowadays, in our so-called postindustrial era, Troka’s hymn to the might of machinery is apt to elicit a wry smile, and his utopic vision of radio as the über-medium capable of orchestrating the labors of all mankind seems curiously archaic. Yet there is also something uncannily familiar about his lusty proclamation of power. Take for example the open letter from Louis Rossetto to his children Orson and Zoe in the May 2008 edition of *Wired*, where the founding editor of the journal cast a retrospective eye on the publication of the first issue in 1993 and recalls that “the Digital Revolution was ripping through our lives like the meteor that extinguished the dinosaurs. Practically every institution that our society is based on, from the local to the supranational, is being rendered obsolete.”\(^6\) It was good old Dad and his fellow techies who had predicted the “Long Boom,” which began with the introduction of the personal computer and was leading to the spread of liberal democracy, rising literacy rates, a decline in armed conflicts, and an
“unprecedented increase in material well-being for most of humanity” that was sure to continue “until at least 2020.” Nor did their powers of prophecy stop there, for they had also foreseen the emergence of a “new planetary consciousness” arising from the use of “ever-more-powerful” computers—an early intimation of what would come to be called the One Machine. As the folks at Wired envision it, the One Machine has no eyes, ears, arms, legs, or even an audible voice; instead of organs or appendages its constituent parts—MP3s, PDAs, PCs, DVRs, digital cameras, cell phones, webcams, data servers—are all “portals” leading directly into a single enormous brain. The One Machine, Rossetto tells his tykes, already has a million times as many transistors as the neurons in one human brain (HB), and by 2040 it is set to surpass 6 billion HB, exceeding the “processing power” of all humanity.

But alas, even before this declaration of triumph hit the web the subprime mortgage crisis was in the works, and within months the global financial meltdown would expose the Long Boom as a bubble that had burst. Now, as the Great Depression makes room for the Great Recession in the annals of history, perhaps it is a good time to reflect on what a radiophonic robot can tell us about the power and precarity of a digital brain. Like Troka, the One Machine vividly illustrates and accidentally allegorizes what Lisa Gitelman describes as a deeply entrenched “tendency to treat media as the self-acting agents of their own history”—and not only of their history but of History itself.7 These invisible automata are depicted as the causal forces of economic and political progress, spectral figurations of the Hegelian Spirit driving development toward some rational and always imminent end. As Paul Duguid noted more than twenty years past in a critique of claims about the demise of the book in the electronic age, this mode of media speak relies on the “futurological tropes” of supersession and liberation, which fuel two related assumptions: (1) each new technology subsumes and supersedes its predecessors and (2) each offers more transparent access to information by freeing it—and by extension us—from the constraints of materiality.8 Troka tells of how the typewriter trounced the pen and pencil and the elevator rendered the stairs a labor for fools, though his own Voice trumps them all because only it has the capacity to make man and machine one: “I am the radio that traverses the seas and resounds in all latitudes; the electric message that tells us of what the men of the world do; the voice of time; the universal clamor; the human cry . . . All is in me.”9 Seventy-five years later, his digital counterpart has shed even this vocal vestige of the body and (via its human proxy) augurs the end of analogue and every other alternative to his own reign.

One maxim of media studies is Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum that “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium.”10 In recent years, scholars have picked up on David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s use of the term “remediation” to show how the very “newness” of new media can be seen as a surplus-effect produced through remediation processes: emergent technologies establish their own difference and acquire their cultural significance by
imitating, refashioning, rivaling, and (only ever partially) incorporating the “old” media they are said to replace. Early photographers billed their art as an improvement on painting; film directors borrowed genres and other conventions from the theater; common wisdom claims digital media obey an entirely new logic distinct from books, television, or radio, but in fact they draw on many of their predecessors’ rhetorical conventions and techniques.

If the connection between radio and theater seems less intuitive today, it is in part because discussions of theater tend to privilege its visual element. Yet there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that during the 1920s and 1930s, theatrical performance was a frequent foil for what was imagined as its aural other. Like theater, early radio was “live”: not until the late 1920s did stations acquire the capacity to air prerecorded programming, and throughout the 1930s most broadcasts were performances transmitted to distant listeners in real time. Theater halls also set the scene for several early, experimental broadcasts, as when Guglielmo Marconi relayed a concert by the soprano Nellie Melba at a New York theater on May 19, 1920, or a few months later when Radio Argentina began regular transmissions from the Teatro Coliseo in Buenos Aires with a performance of Wagner’s Parsifal. Commercial stations continued this trend by broadcasting operas, dramas, and musical comedies straight from the stage. Articles from the early 1920s often treat the broadcast itself as the main event, delving into technical details about the proper placement of microphones, scrutinizing the sonic effects of the actors’ movements, and weighing in on which plays or genres are most suited for the radio. A New York Times article from March 1922 begins by announcing, “There is much the same fascination in going behind the scenes of a great broadcasting station as is found behind the curtain of a theatre”—only the fascination is greater, the writer implies, because what lies hidden isn’t just the mechanics but the performance itself. He invites listeners of an unidentified station near New York to “visualize the unseen stage from which they are being entertained,” describing the studio setting in minute detail and recounting every action taken by the technicians from the moment the program begins until it concludes and his theatrical metaphor runs up against a wall: silence. “The audience listening in is doubtless the largest ever assembled, but there is not the faintest whisper of applause.”

This chasm separating performer and public wasn’t necessarily seen as a limitation. Radio’s isolation of the aural was just as likely to be hailed as a triumph over space, an idealistic challenge to the tyranny of the material realm, and an exhilarating “emancipation from the body.” Such is how Rudolf Arnheim describes it in his widely read Radio (originally published in English in 1936), which devotes nearly as much ink to theater as it does to the medium referenced in its title. Time and again the German media theorist illustrates the specificity of this new aural art by way of comparison and contrast with the stage. Like radio, he explains, theater unfolds in and through time. The two art forms differ, however, because in the theater, particularly
Radio/Puppets, or The Institutionalization of a (Media) Revolution

in the case of naturalistic drama (Arnheim’s true bête noire), the spectator’s impressions are always subject to a split between the ear and the eye, a contradiction between the world conjured up by “the word” and the action realized onstage. Radio banishes the visual, allowing auditors to immerse themselves in a purely subjective realm of sound:

Although wireless, when it wished to, could beat the theatre at sound realism, yet those sounds and voices were not bound to that physical world whose presence we first experienced through our eye, and which, once perceived, compels us to observe its laws, thus laying fetters on the spirit that would soar beyond time and space and unite actual happenings with thoughts and forms independent of anything corporeal.¹³

This passage, right down to its rhapsodic tone, exemplifies a particular type of radio speak. Radio was (and still is) said to be immaterial and disembodied; it offers a shortcut to the spiritual realm, yet the experience it engenders is more intimate, immediate, and “real” than any ocular impression. Arnheim vehemently objects to the transmission of live performances and sporting events, because in such cases radio serves as a mere relaying apparatus instead of creating a self-referential “acoustic world.” His preferred model, the type of broadcast he believes best realizes its potential to transcend rather than transmit actuality, is the radio play. When radio dramas are done right, he argues, they reveal words to be sensuous sounds rather than mere conduits of semantic meaning; they recall a “primeval age” prior to language, when expression was limited to the mating calls and warning cries of beasts and “the word was still sound, the sound still word” (35). Such comments mark this radio enthusiast as a modern-day metaphysicist, heir to a tradition that locates the voice at the origin of ideality, prior to writing or even the advent of language. Indeed, Arnheim posits the possibility of radio dramas in which all trace of materiality has been effaced, “fantastic spirit-plays in the realm of thought with symbols and theories as characters” (20). This, then, is the real drama to which radio listeners are privy: the epic struggle for abstraction, the effort to wrest pure thought from flesh and have done with the specter of the stage—the same stage this discourse must evoke in order to cast its unrepresentable ideal into relief.

A similar dynamic riddles the notion of “auditory mysticism” evoked in the late teens and early 1920s by the Mexican minister of education José Vasconcelos, whose ambivalent relationship to theater was the subject of the first chapter. Although Vasconcelos left office before he was able to implement his radiophonic designs,¹⁴ Arnheim reveals himself to be a kindred spirit when he hails the “wireless as educator!” (269). Broadcasting, he suggests, offers the prospect of a new and improved mode of aesthetic education, not only because it reaches beyond the lecture hall to the common man but because
it does so through the ear, “the tool of our understanding, of the brain, the receiver of what is already formed” (279). Its pedagogical value has less to do with the specific content it conveys than with its capacity to engender the “right attitude,” to mold the listening subject’s mind and desires to an ontological form. By eliminating the “distractions” posed by visual phenomena, radio heightens the auditors’ powers of imaginative concentration, unifying them in their simultaneous contemplation and aural enjoyment of a single aesthetic object. Even better, it has a “disciplinarian effect”: because listening is a solitary activity (a dubious assumption Arnheim shares with many other commentators) no one else censors listeners’ responses, so they learn to internalize responsibility for their own reactions to what is beautiful and good (269). Suffice it to say, such a powerful force cannot be left to the whims of commerce but should be guided by “teachers, educators and littérateurs” (286).

Arnheim echoes a common call among intellectuals in the early 1930s to institute more cohesive regulatory regimes. As his own biography suggests, this desire for the state to take on a custodial role in radio cut across the era’s growing ideological divisions: an exiled German Jew living in Fascist Italy, he refrains from criticizing the Nazis’ centralization of broadcasting and even concedes that this “authoritative form” of radio may at times plant the indispensable seed of a more democratic, “organic wireless.” In countries where national sentiment is weak, radio can both prefigure and produce it by means of carefully crafted cultural programs, the goal of which is “leveling the taste and education of the different classes of people” (248) and “bringing art and philosophy and the people into accord” (251). Unified with the aid of technology, the radiophonic voice can stand in for and as the promise of an organic national body.

This effort to isolate radio’s singular nature refashions a long-standing discourse on theater even as it declares the theatrical stage an obstacle to be overcome. Friedrich Schiller had hailed the stage as a “moral institution” with the capacity to transcend contingencies of class, geography, and gender; 140 years later, Arnheim argues for the superiority of an ostensibly “immaterial” art, yet his desire to hypostatize the voice and banish the body is also a move to salvage the notion of culture-as-enlightenment from the crisis of liberal democracy and the systems of representation to which it was tied. In a short text from 1932, Arnheim’s compatriot Walter Benjamin takes this logic to task and insists that precisely because theater is the site where the crisis is most keenly felt, radio must engage it in collaboration and debate. Radio, Benjamin acknowledges, has most of the advantages on its side: not only is it far less encumbered by tradition, it can also reach larger masses of people, and both its “material” and “intellectual” elements (i.e., programming) are more closely intertwined with the interests of its audience. In comparison, what does theater bring to the table? His answer is unequivocal: “the use of a living medium, nothing more.”15
In the current context, Benjamin states, there are two possible ways one can grapple with theater’s dependence on people as the medium and material of signification. The first persists in portraying man as the all-powerful representative of “humanity,” laboring to compete with newer media by employing multitudes of extras and ever more complex machinery, or by re-creating distant times and places that radio and cinema can more convincingly simulate in a studio. Regardless of its subject or style such theater “always perceives itself as a ‘symbol,’ a ‘totality,’ a ‘total work of art’” (366). The alternative is Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater, and in particular the Brechtian acting technique of *gestus*, which is based on the principle of interruption and aims to achieve an effect similar to the critical method of montage employed in radio and film. What this re-remediation or “retro-transformation” of a mechanical medium by human actors does is to draw out “man in the present crisis, man eliminated by radio and film, man, to put it somewhat drastically, as the fifth wheel of technology.” Epic theater subjects this “diminished” remainder of humanity to examination as if in a laboratory and replaces culture-as-consumption with the “training” of judgment; or to invoke the more familiar Benjaminian lingo, it dissolves the aura of organicity (367).

But theater is not the only one with something to learn from its encounter with radio. As a counterpart to epic theater, Benjamin suggests that radio should also undertake adaptations of plays—not, as Arnheim desires, in order to fashion itself as an autonomous art or to create a world all its own, but to illuminate its own specificity and its limits. Although Benjamin briefly alludes to the dramatic “listening models” he himself had written and broadcast over the previous few years, it is once again Brecht who provides the main model, this time with works such as *Der Flug der Lindberghs* (1929), a radio play in which listeners were meant to follow the printed score and intervene in the action by singing designated parts. By its author’s own account, the piece was designed to put pressure on the existing apparatus of radio, revealing the need to transform it from a device for the simple distribution of prepackaged goods into a “vast network” capable of facilitating true communication. In commenting on the play, Benjamin concludes that only in this way can the apparatus “remain free from the halo of a ‘gigantic educational enterprise’ . . . and scaled back to a format fit for humans” (368). In the end, theater’s weakness is also its strength; only when it concedes that it is not larger than life can it cut technology down to size, help strip away the aura it too has accrued, and force the question of how to (re)construct human agency in a critical relation to these new media machines.

Despite the stark differences between Arnheim and Benjamin, both write from within and respond to a historical crisis that registered most acutely in the realm of art as a crisis of the bourgeois stage. In Mexico, on the other hand, the theatrical “naturalism” against which Arnheim defines his radio art had never taken hold; “theater” had never achieved the status of a “symbol” or “total work of art,” and while efforts were under way to make the stage a
“moral institution,” they were still highly contested and politicized. Theater was less often invoked as a metaphor for a stage of development to be overcome than as an elusive goal the country had yet to attain.

What Mexico could lay claim to was a vibrant tradition of popular puppet theater. The legendary Rosete Aranda company, whose roots reached back to the 1830s, regularly crisscrossed the country and had even ventured into Texas and Central America by the end of the nineteenth century. With its collection of more than five thousand marionettes (often referred to as autómatas), the company staged comic skits of local customs and regional “types,” re-creations of historic events such as the “grito” of independence from Spain, adaptations of classical literature, and picaresque tales involving characters such as the rural trickster Vale Coyote. According to most accounts, the upheaval caused by the revolution and the rise of new mass-mediated modes of entertainment spurred the decline of the Rosete Aranda puppets and other similar enterprises. In 1923 the family sold the use of the company name, though their puppets would continue to circulate for several decades, even appearing in some instances on the radio.18

Perhaps it is the image of the Rosete Aranda marionettes that hovers in the backdrop of the following text:

Twentieth-century guignol.
To be more precise: Radio-guignol.

Guiñol siglo XX.
Para llamarlo mejor: Radio-guñol.19

So begins an article in the July 7, 1924, edition of Antena, a short-lived literary journal sponsored by a cigarette company that had founded Mexico’s second radio station the previous year. Following his opening salvo, the author of “Al pie de la antena” introduces himself to readers as Maese Pedro, the itinerant puppeteer in Don Quixote whose performance goes awry when the novel’s protagonist intervenes to save the life of a beautiful marionette. On this occasion, however, the legendary impresario hasn’t come to beguile his audience with medieval tales of damsels held captive by the Moors; his purpose is to offer a backstage glimpse of a new kind of show that has made his own art obsolete.

No longer, as in times gone by, do people gather round to watch amusing puppets perform for them on the farcical stage; from far-away points, united by the miracle of air, people, distant from one other, sit down to listen.

But the puppets are the same. Those that used to travel the land in their humble carts performed a primitive, enthralling, entertaining art. These modern marionettes present a new art, more entertaining
and no less enthralling, from their distant studio, where they stand before the microphone, scattering the notes of their rhymes, of their songs or serenades to the four winds.

And at the foot of the antenna, which serves on this occasion as a curtain, the puppeteers in charge of moving the figures await the moment to commence the show for their imaginary audience.

Ya no, como en los tiempos idos, se reúnen las gentes para mirar lo que en el tablado de la farsa les presentan las graciosas marionetas; desde lejanos puntos, unidos por el milagro del aire, las gentes, distanciadas, se sientan a escuchar.

Pero las marionetas son las mismas. Un arte primitivo, subyugador y divertido, representaban aquellas que en los carros humildes hacían su recorrido por la tierra. Un arte nuevo, más divertido y no menos subyugador, presentan estas marionetas modernas, que desde el estudio lejano, frente al micrófono, lanzan a los cuatro vientos las notas de sus rimas, de sus canciones o de sus serenatas.

Y al pie de la antena, que hace en esta ocasión las veces de telón de boca, los titiriteros encargados de mover las figuras, esperan el instante de dar principio a la función ante el imaginario auditorio. (18)

The analogy is arresting in part because it doesn’t entirely add up, because it evokes the specter of a subject that never quite coalesces in the mind’s eye. If the radio performers are puppets, who or what are the puppeteers? The conceit unfolds as the narrator begins to elucidate the invisible infrastructure that makes Station CYB tick, introducing the key players by name and explaining the duties each one performs. Take the sonorous voice that welcomes listeners at the start of every show, he says: it might sound like the sad clown Pierrot, but in truth it belongs to Fernando J. Ramírez, a general in the Mexican army who doubles as the station’s announcer and technical manager. One Guillermo Garza Ramos operates the machinery from the wings, Mariano Ramírez keeps tabs on the “puppets,” and Ofelia Euroza de Yañez, the official pianist, plays the part of the organ grinder that once accompanied the guignol. The real wizard behind the curtain, however, is the stage director, a young man named Juan de Beraza who “holds in his hands the multiple strings that move the marionettes.” It is he who tells the performers when to make their entrances and exits, when to launch into their tales of love and jealousy, what to sing, or how to pluck a plaintive melody on the harp.

But Maese Pedro has one last trick up his sleeve, because the stage director’s power turns out to be incomplete; the real locus of control is even further removed from the bodies whose voices float through the ether and enter the listener’s ear. Only toward the article’s end does he shine the spotlight on CYB’s director, who is also the general manager of El Buen Tono cigar factory and an illustrious senator of the republic. The alto Jefe gives
a veritable laundry list of the wondrous benefits of radio: by broadcasting concerts of music by Mexican artists, it fosters greater unity within the country’s own borders; it facilitates closer intellectual relations and inspires “profound sympathy” between Mexico and its neighbors to the south; it instills a greater sense of purpose in the nation’s artists. Most importantly, however, it lures listeners away from less edifying diversions by offering them one that is new, free of charge, and “cultural.” Indeed, station CYB—like the puppeteers of yesteryear—devotes special attention to its youngest audience members, encouraging them to save their pennies and awarding prizes for those who build receptors. Wireless, like its primitive precursor, has the capacity to educate even as it entertains, just as the analogy Maese Pedro has drawn in such detail is meant to intrigue and instruct readers in the workings of this mysterious new medium. While the puppets perform their show, he explains, “the public listens, it divines their indispensable presence”—a presence whose power derives from the fact that it cannot be seen, even though we all know it must be there. In the end, “Al pie de la antena” delivers a lesson about the benefit of close collaboration between private enterprise and the state, about art’s proper role as an agent of social cohesion and the need for a well-defined hierarchy to keep the machinery of modernity running on track; at the same time, it teaches listeners to hear the radio’s voices as though they emanated from an imaginary stage.

Media theorists often refer to these uncanny voices unhinged from their bodily source as “acousmatic,” a word borrowed from the disciples of Pythagoras, the pre-Socratic mystic (and inspiration for Vasconcelos’s “theory” of rhythm as well as his even hazier auditory mysticism) who schooled his followers in the secrets of knowledge from behind a curtain or screen.20 The intent was to conceal the Master’s physical idiosyncrasies, his material props, the worldly setting of his words—and the theatrical element of which no lecture is entirely devoid—allowing the uninitiated to immerse themselves in the sound of his Voice and what it said. Two millennia later Maese Pedro evokes a similar aura of authority surrounding the acousmatic voices produced by the rise of radio. But this is 1924, a mere fourteen months after broadcasting made its Mexican debut, and what takes place on the other end of the antenna is not the theater of man but the diminutive farce of the guignol. Any power these voices possess isn’t truly their own because it only exists by virtue of a disjunction between the sound and its source. What occupies the space of this gap, dividing even as it connects those on either side, is the medium itself: not just the stage or the technological apparatus but the web of political, social, and economic relations in which the embryonic apparatus is enmeshed. Even the jefe, the illustrious representative of the national bourgeoisie, is just another character in the farce, and the quotation marks framing his words serve as a reminder that the acousmatic voice belongs to the Master/Maese, a fictional figure who has been regarded as a vestige of bygone days from his very first appearance in print. This baroque
Radio/Puppets, or The Institutionalization of a (Media) Revolution

allegory may hail radio as the singular voice of modernity, but the medium of its message reanimates those “humble” figures whose power crumbled when a renegade member of the emerging gentry fancied himself a medieval knight-errant and charged the stage.

Of course, some readers must have been aware that CYB was financed by French capital; many if not most surely knew that the station’s transmitter had been purchased from their imperial neighbor to the north. But just as the charm (and terror) of puppetry lies in seeing an object move and hearing it speak, Maese Pedro beckons readers to pretend there is magic in the machine.

( Media) Revolutions and Peripheral Avant-Gardes

Despite its allure, the posthumous voice of the puppeteer plays no part in most accounts of the origins of Mexican radio. A far more common narrative revolves around what Rubén Gallo characterizes as “the other Mexican revolution: the cultural transformations triggered by new media in the years after the armed conflict of 1910 to 1920.” In his book *Mexican Modernity: The Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution*, Gallo paints a picture of two separate and consecutive upheavals—one violent and the other “cultural”—a commonplace of Mexican historiography with roots in the postrevolutionary regime’s own efforts to cast itself as the culmination of the military conflict while simultaneously mobilizing support for its institution-building drive. For Gallo, however, the subject of this stirring saga is not the Mexican state or el pueblo; writing not long after the ouster of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which had ruled the country since 1929, and amid ongoing optimism over the ability of the internet to dissolve national borders deemed oppressive and obsolete, he hails the “new media” of this earlier era as the prime mover of an aesthetic revolution carried out by a “cosmopolitan,” “internationalist” avant-garde. The iconic images of peasant insurrection and ancient Aztec civilization painted by Diego Rivera on the walls of government buildings are entirely absent from this revisionist account, and even the artist’s *Detroit Industry* murals come under fire for propagating an “old” medium rather than opening up the process of artistic production to the “transformative powers of technology” (11). By contrast, the Italian-born photographer Tina Modotti is lauded for eschewing pictorialist representations of “premodern” themes (i.e., peasants) in favor of images of technological artifacts that draw attention to the indexical quality and mechanical reproducibility of the photographic medium itself.

*Mexican Modernity* succeeds in destabilizing a certain canonical view of the *vanguardias* by shifting attention to works of art that seem to defy the familiar framework of cultural nationalism. At the same time, it uncritically echoes the rhetoric of rupture implicit in both the avant-garde and new
media discourse and reinscribes a unilinear conception of development all too amenable to the imperatives of Wired’s One Machine. Gallo relies on the language of revolution to bolster his claims for the radicalism of avant-garde art, but in doing so he actually divorces media technologies in the 1920s from the issues at stake in the armed struggle. Ignoring the unmet demands of the more radical, popular forces defeated by the leaders of the new regime and the ongoing opposition to the new social “order” (assassinations, strikes, and major revolts were hallmarks of the decade), he depicts the early 1920s as a clean slate, a time when “a new chapter in Mexican history was to begin—an era marked by peace, reconstruction efforts, and a technological frenzy that one writer called ‘the madness of radio’ ” (141).

Radio is in many ways the ideal artifact around which to construct this narrative of an entrepreneurial avant-garde unhindered by either class warfare or a strong state. During the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, the government and military had conducted experiments with radiotelegraphy, which also played a strategic role in the revolution, but public broadcasting did not begin until the early 1920s. In Mexico, the new government lacked the resources and organizational capacity to create the sort of centralized broadcasting system that was adopted in most European countries, and while a few branches of the bureaucracy set up stations to relay official information, private capital was encouraged to take the lead. The first station to receive a permit, like several following it, was affiliated with a print publication, in this case the illustrated weekly El Universal Ilustrado, known for keeping readers abreast of everything from vaudeville to the latest academic tome. The magazine was also a frequent forum for figures linked to the estridentista avant-garde, and when station CYL made its debut on May 8, 1923, the long lineup of performers was headed by the group’s front man Manuel Maples Arce, a brash twenty-three-year-old who initiated listeners into the ether with a reading of his poem “TSH” (short for telegrafía sin hilos, or wireless telegraphy). “TSH” evokes the schizophonic experience of tuning into a cacophonous space where geographical borders and the boundaries of subjectivity collapse as “transatlantic addresses” cross paths with “international pentagrams” and the “Jazz-Band of New York” pulsates in place of the speaker’s own heart. Other elements of the broadcast, however, point to the power relations in which the emerging medium was enmeshed: the “onstage” audience present at the event included the national secretary of communications, and the very first voice listeners heard belonged not to Maples Arce but to Raúl Azcárraga, co-owner of the station and a retailer of U.S. radio receivers whose family would go on to build the communications conglomerate now known as Televisa.

Carlos Noriega Hope, the editor of El Universal Ilustrado and director of station CYL, depicted estridentismo and radio as two hermanos de leche, or foster brothers nourished by the same breast, triumphantly declaring, “They’re vanguard things!” Rubén Gallo completes the chain of associations by citing the event as evidence of a “technological revolution” authorized and
enacted by the artistic avant-garde. But in fact, the word “revolution” doesn’t appear in either the poem “TSH” or press coverage of the broadcast, no doubt because its own meaning was still so unstable and subject to debate. Just a week after CYL took to the air, the Mexican government entered into talks leading to the Bucareli Accords, which aroused opposition from diverse sectors of the population by forfeiting the right to expropriate foreign oil and mineral holdings acquired prior to the Constitution of 1917. Signed in return for diplomatic recognition from the United States, the treaty was also part of a campaign to quell the concerns of foreign corporations and increase the influx of capital needed to spark the development of industry and technology. As negotiations were under way, President Álvaro Obregón liquidated one potential source of unrest when he either orchestrated or at least facilitated the assassination of Pancho Villa, who still enjoyed strong popular support in the North; shortly afterward he defeated a major rebellion led by his ex-minister of finance, Adolfo de la Huerta. According to the historian J. Justin Castro, Obregón’s opponents routinely sabotaged radio stations or commandeered them to broadcast their message and coordinate forces, prompting the government to implement stricter regulations and control over radio. Even before this, however, stations such as CYL avoided reporting on anything deemed “political” in the interest of developing a mutually beneficial relationship with the state.

Despite this injunction, the estridentista romance with radio runs right through the complex cultural constellation surrounding the rearticulation of Mexico’s role in the world economy. The visual artists Fermín Revueltas and Ramón Alva de la Canal designed ads for station CYB, some of which push the fragmentation of form so far they seem to subvert their ostensible function. Arqueles Vela wrote articles on radio, and Luis Quintanilla (writing under his phonetic nom de plume Kin Taniya) sought to re-create the experience of station surfing in “IU IIIUUU IU,” part of a longer “wireless” poem. Quintanilla also seems to have had plans to develop a sketch revolving around radio for the Teatro del Murciélago, though the group dissolved before it came to fruition and there is no evidence of what it might have looked like onstage—no clues, for instance, as to whether the radio listeners would have been indigenous, or whether this would have been one of the “urban” numbers. Most likely the latter, given the “inaugural broadcast” of the estridentistas’ ephemeral journal Irradiador, which points to radio as a model for reimagining the work of art in an era of “installations, electric generators, gears, and cables” and in a place where the “entire city crackles, polarized by the radiotelephonic antennas of an implausible station.”

In fact, the industrial infrastructure in Mexico was limited, radios were still a rare commodity, and for all their allusions to the medium, there is little evidence the estridentistas were involved in broadcasting in the years following the inauguration of CYL. Yet as the Soviet leader Leon Trotsky argued in 1924, the same year Maples Arce published his “Bolshevik super-poem”
Urbe, an ode to skyscrapers and submarines can be written with a pencil on a scrap of paper at the far ends of the earth. As I note in the introduction, Trotsky saw the appearance of futurism in Russia and Italy, two comparatively underdeveloped countries on the periphery of Europe, as evidence of the uneven and combined nature of development: in a world where capitalism draws distant regions into connection with one another, growth and change in any one place is partially contingent on what takes place elsewhere, and art is never simply a reflection of its immediate surroundings. Indeed, he argued, history had shown more than once that the “backward” countries “reflected in their ideology the achievements of the advanced countries more brilliantly and strongly.”

Technology was key to Trotsky’s rejection of the assumption that all countries must (or can) proceed through the same series of developmental stages, just as it was central to his sympathetic critique of futurism and its desire for an immediate fusion of art and “life.” In a speech delivered to the First All-Union Congress of the Society of Friends of Radio in 1926, the Bolshevik leader hammers home the challenges facing the Soviet Republic, a geographically immense territory divided by linguistic and cultural differences and lacking in basic elements of infrastructure such as schools and roads. His assessment, repeated like a litany: “We are a backward country.” Here again, however, he views backwardness dialectically as both an impediment and a spur to progress, just as he views the medium of radio as both an instrument and object(ive) of revolutionary struggle. “Socialism presupposes and demands a high level of technology,” but radio transistors and airplanes alone do not possess the power to establish a socialist society. Although science and technology (like art) possess their own logic, this logic is itself conditioned by social forces, and in the present, their meaning and materiality are still up for grabs. This may be why elsewhere Trotsky expresses no regret over the fact that the focus on rebuilding “old” infrastructure damaged during the war has stymied the realization of proposals such as Vladimir Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International, a constructivist radio tower designed to double as headquarters for the Comintern: the delay will allow the social struggle time to transform the relations of production, and in the meantime (he suggests) it is unwise to entirely relinquish the relative autonomy of art.

A year and a half after his speech on radio, Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party; in 1929 he would be forced into exile as Stalin consolidated power, and the vanguard movements he both defended and critiqued would crumble as artists committed suicide, faced repression, or came to terms with new realities. Yet at the end of 1936, he accepted an offer of asylum secured with the aid of Diego Rivera and arrived in a country where the trajectory of the postrevolutionary avant-garde was bound in curious ways to the one he had left behind.

In January 1926 Maples Arce was conscripted to serve as secretary general to Heriberto Jara, the socialist governor of his home state of Veracruz, and
in turn he lured some of his crew to the city of Xalapa. By most accounts, Xalapa marks the high point of estridentismo: it was here where they concocted plans for Estridentópolis, an absurdist city set in the distant future of 1975. Its principal landmarks? A people’s university and a gigantic radio tower.\textsuperscript{36} In more immediate terms, however, the group took charge of the government-run press, with the truculent writer Germán List Arzubide at the helm and Ramón Alva de la Canal and Leopoldo Méndez in the role of official illustrators; in addition to experimental works by estridentista writers, they put out political tracts, didactic pamphlets on topics such as hygiene, free editions of texts by Mexican and foreign writers, and a journal called \textit{Horizonte} dedicated to a wide array of topics including culture, local labor issues, and news of Jara’s reforms. Some members of the group took up educational posts, others were involved in the newly created Department of Popular Aesthetic Culture or participated in the inauguration of the new stadium (a counterpart to Vasconcelos’s \textit{teatro-estadio}), and although there is no evidence estridentistas appeared on the air during their time in the city, Maples Arce oversaw plans for the construction of a state-run radio station.\textsuperscript{37} In the end, however, the institutional volatility of the 1920s, the very factor that facilitated this rapprochement between avant-garde art and political power, also precipitated the movement’s dramatic demise. In September 1927, amid a dispute with foreign oil companies and under pressure from workers and peasant groups demanding more radical change, Jara was ousted in a legislative coup backed by the federal government and the radio tower sending signals from the future became one of the era’s seemingly utopic, never-to-be-realized plans.\textsuperscript{38}

Strictly speaking, this is where the story of estridentismo ends. In the wake of Jara’s ouster, Maples Arce (though a persona non grata among the new officials) was elected to the state legislature of Veracruz for a two-year term, after which he wound his way through Cuba, New York, and Spain before settling in Paris to take courses in history and international law with an eye to a career in the diplomatic service. Luis Quintanilla, who had served in Brazil as a secretary to the ambassador from 1927 to 1929, was already in Paris, as was Arqueles Vela, recently returned from a spell in Germany teaching Spanish.\textsuperscript{39} The sculptor Germán Cueto and his wife Lola (an artist known for her textiles) spent the entire period from 1927 to 1932 in Paris and participated in a collective of abstract artists known as Cercle et Carré whose members included the Uruguayan constructivist Joaquín Torres García, Wassily Kandinsky, and Le Corbusier.\textsuperscript{40} Meanwhile back in Mexico some of the visual artists, including Ramón Alva de la Canal and Fermín Revueltas, formed a short-lived splinter group in Mexico City called \textit{j30–30!}, and Leopoldo Méndez illustrated various journals and joined the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{41} List Arzubide, an old anarchist who had joined the Communist Party in 1926, stayed in Xalapa and was active in labor organizing until 1929—right around the time of Vasconcelos’s failed presidential run and
the formation of the National Revolutionary Party (forerunner to the PRI), which coincided with a crackdown on the newly outlawed Communist Party. According to List Arzubide’s own account, he beat the heat by heading for the second World Anti-Imperialist Congress in Frankfurt; on his arrival he received an ovation from Jawaharlal Nehru, Madame Sun Yat-Sen, and other attendees when he presented a U.S. flag captured by Augusto Sandino in his struggle against the U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua. During his time in Germany, the ex-estridentista accepted an invitation to the USSR and spent several months palling around with the likes of Sergei Eisenstein and Vladimir Mayakovksy before heading back to Mexico by way of Paris, where he met up with the Cuetos and other old comrades.42

It takes a little digging to find these details, because right around 1929, the grand narratives of the avant-garde tend to fall silent: from the vanguardias of the 1920s the spotlight skips ahead to the alliance between the Left and the progressive presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), when collectives such as the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists) and its art school, the Taller de Gráfica Popular—spearheaded by the ex-estridentista Leopoldo Méndez—put art to work in the fight against fascism and in support of the government’s land reforms.43 Meanwhile, those missing years in the early 1930s lurk like a historiographical black hole.44

Object Voices and Institutional Strings

Yet out of this abyss emerges the echo of a “strident” voice. Shortly after 9 p.m. on November 7, 1931, three self-identified members of the Mexican Communist Party walked into the operations hub of the country’s most powerful radio station, tied up the technician, and then cut into a remote broadcast of a concert featuring the classical choir of the Secretariat of Public Education. Listeners all over the continent who tuned into XEW—the “Voice of Latin America from Mexico”—heard a man extol the Soviet Union as an example for capitalist countries wracked by mass unemployment and then denounce the “military dictatorship” of Plutarco Elías Calles as an agent of Yankee imperialism, guilty of aiding and abetting the murder of Julio Antonio Mella, a Cuban communist gunned down two years earlier in Mexico City while in the company of Tina Modotti. The speech lasted all of ten minutes and the technician was released unharmed; yet over the following weeks the federal police conducted a sweep of the local Reds before identifying the two accomplices as Valentín Campa, a member of the party’s central committee, and the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. As for the man behind the mike, the daily Excélsior relayed the official report: “The One Who Led the Assault Was Germán Litz Arsuvide [sic], Expert in Radio and Man of Rare Audacity” (figure 3.1).45
Who was this audacious man? Although the papers offered few facts, surely some readers recognized him as the former first lieutenant of the estudiantista avant-garde, author of a quixotic “history” of the movement and a longtime political militant who had recently returned from a sojourn in the Soviet Union. *El Machete*, the Communist Party newspaper, offered alibis for all three of the accused in its November 10 issue: Campa was said to be representing the party at its official commemoration of the Russian Revolution in downtown Mexico City, Siqueiros was holed up with a serious illness in the mountain town of Taxco, and List Arzubide was at a rally back on his old stomping grounds in Xalapa, delivering a speech much like the one read over the radio by a voice that clearly couldn’t be his. The federal police paid no heed and ordered the state governor to close in on the prime suspect, but in an odd twist he was saved by an opportune invitation from Lázaro Cárdenas, the future president who was then governor of Michoacán. “Here you will have the freedom to do everything you want,” List Arzubide would later recall Cárdenas saying as he offered him refuge until the furor died down. Several years later as president, Cárdenas would turn against the “military dictator” derided in the broadcast that led to this encounter; at the time, however, Calles was still a crucial ally, and Cárdenas himself would continue to be a target of the communists through his first months in office.
List Arzubide, however, sealed the deal with a statement that may (or may not) have been accompanied by a sly wink: “I didn’t give that speech. I would have liked to, but it wasn’t me.”

The brief seizure of the XEW’s transmitter turned the indeterminacy of the radiophonic subject into a tactical tool, giving an illegal party with dwindling numbers fleeting access to a broader public while making it loom all the larger for the fact that its voice had no face. The federal government, rushing to defend capital, seized on this same uncertainty to fuel paranoia and put the squeeze on an errant intellectual, precipitating a pact that allowed him to secure a space of “liberty” under the protection of an emerging political power. Yet it was just over a year later—and a full twenty-one months before Cárdenas assumed the presidential office—when a certain mechanical spirit began to animate the airwaves of the radio station of the federal Secretariat of Public Education. Troka the Powerful promised to lead listeners into the future by dint of his invincible strength, and from the vantage point of the present he appears as a figure for the forces driving the institutionalization of class conflict and consolidation of the single-party state. But Troka was more fractious and disjointed than he let on, and among the scraps of information, oblique references, and odd bits of bureaucratic prose in which he is named one can catch hints of an “object voice.”

Mladen Dolar associates the object voice with the objet petit a, the Lacanian term for the unattainable object of desire sought in the other. Like the gaze, it is a partial object that appears as an object-cause or remainder of the Real, though it is actually a surplus produced by the subject’s formation and incorporation into the Symbolic order. The object voice is that part of the voice that does not interpellate a subject and cannot be fetishized as an object of art but instead occupies “the space of a breach, a missing link, a gap in the causal nexus.” It is the medium of the voice, the material and mechanical aspect of signification that signals its (partial) presence when the movement of meaning catches on the hitch of what cannot be said. In my account of the fantasies of liberation via industrialization Troka enabled, it was the interference, the part of the radiophonic voice listeners had to learn to hear past in order to believe the promise of its power: the struggles and calculated compromises, material and organizational infrastructure, and all the other still-visible strings that made the “wireless” medium of radio work (or not, as the case may be). Did some listeners recognize a resemblance between Troka’s voice and the one that had interrupted the sweet sounds of a SEP choir with a call to revolution? Why do his appearances in the archive always seem to be shadowed by a puppet?

Just over a year after List Arzubide had his first encounter with Cárdenas, at the beginning of 1933, this Man of Rare Audacity joined a committee charged with revamping XFX, the radio station of the SEP, which had been deemed lackluster and in need of bold new ideas after years of leadership by a woman named María Luisa Ross. Nearly a year earlier a cross-section
of the Mexican intelligentsia—seemingly all men—had been invited to offer recommendations. The roster reads like a future who’s who of Mexican culture: in addition to Maples Arce (newly elected to the federal legislature), the group included Rufino Tamayo, a Zapotecan migrant to the capital who was to become one of the country’s most celebrated painters; Agustín Yáñez, a PRI politico-in-the-making who had recently arrived from Guadalajara and would later write one of the canonical “novels of the Mexican Revolution”; the concert pianist and music professor Salvador Ordóñez Ochoa, a native of the state of Hidalgo; José Gorostiza, a poet from Tabasco and newly named head of the Department of Fine Arts; and Xavier Villaurrutia, a poet and member of the newly created Teatro Orientación who (like Gorostiza) was affiliated with the Contemporáneos, an experimental group often at odds with the estridentistas. The committee was active throughout 1932 and early 1933 and exchanged preliminary drafts before submitting individual reports. When all was said and done, Agustín Yáñez had been named the station’s new director, with List Arzubide second in command.

The proposals submitted by the committee members vary widely in content and style: Maples Arce, for example, insists with manifesto-like bravura that the radio’s “socializing” effects must take the form of “immediate action,” and he lambasts the other proposals for focusing on the petty details of programming while failing to see that “strictly speaking, it is not a program, a microphone, or a machine that will constitute the radiophonic action of the Secretariat, but rather that superstructure which will make its euphonic dictation effective.” Still, like nearly all of the other members he concedes that the station faces two imposing obstacles: its transmitter has a very limited range, and the vast majority of its potential listeners in rural areas have no access to the medium. (Alas, the “superstructure” does in fact require a material base.) In cities, on the other hand, common folk listened to the radio in bars, which in the opinion of List Arzubide only encouraged their predilection for “coarse” music.

In light of such constraints, List Arzubide contends that programming should be primarily directed toward the small middle class, “the group that has historically been the one to guide the masses.” Here, in plain language, he reveals his adherence to the stagist view of development Trotsky critiqued: his statement implies that “backward” nations such as Mexico must follow in the footsteps of their forerunners and pass through the phase of capitalist accumulation and consolidation before achieving the desired but always distant socialist utopia. And so in the very last lines of his text he conjures Troka the Powerful, a “dramatic type” and “mysterious character who incarnates the spirit of man’s mechanical creations.” It is the task of Troka—an unlikely amalgam of media and machines—to arouse the interest of middle-class children in modern technologies.

In February 1933, this invisible spirit began to speak through the lungs and larynx of List Arzubide. Although there are no recordings, clues to his pedagogical methods can be found in a later collection of short stories called
Troka el poderoso, which appear to be lightly revised scripts of his broadcasts. In his Second Appearance, Troka el Poderoso introduces Anselmo and Raymundo, two schoolchildren who heard his first broadcast and have now come to the Radio Station to meet him firsthand (23). When this originally aired, were these voices actual children, or projections of List Arzubide’s own voice? Quite possibly they were “real”: memos in the archive refer to children being invited to come and speak on air, though it not clear if they were given scripted lines or allowed to speak extemporaneously. In the text, at least, these untutored voices model the ideal relationship to their teacher Troka by exploring the interior of his body. Troka describes them going up an escalator at the station (his legs) and then riding in an elevator (his stomach) before finally entering his mouth, where they become like actors on a stage inside his body. They describe his brains, which look like a telecommunications center. They ask him questions about some wires, which he explains are electric cables that run from different Mexican cities to his center (24–25). These descriptions probably bear little resemblance to the actual appearance of the station’s operations, but empirical accuracy is beside the point. Through their two proxies, children listening from home can imagine themselves within the spectral body of radio, a technologically mediatized manifestation of the big Other.

But some of the children listening in on these tales might have had an inkling of the media monster’s more tactile, diminutive double. Troka’s very first appearance in the archive dates from August 1932, several months prior to List Arzubide’s involvement in the overhaul of XFX, and it comes in the form of a memorandum submitted to the director of the Department of Fine Arts by the ex-estridentista printmaker Leopoldo Méndez, who had been hired on as head of the Section of Drawing and Plastic Arts at the beginning of that year. Méndez includes a brief proposal for a radio character called Troka whom he envisages as a tool for teaching children to draw: primary school students will listen to his broadcasts and sketch his mechanical body as well as the stories he tells. The document describes the musical component of the program (“a song of motors, sirens, and metallic sounds”) and concludes with a short script for Troka’s opening speech. It also offers an explanation of the character’s name, which is graphically—though not phonically—marked as foreign by the letter k (nonexistent in Spanish). Troka, the proposal states, is an adaptation of the English word truck—a “word of universal industrialism” used in Mexico to refer not only to large vehicles but also “the wheels of locomotives, etc. etc.” Yet a reader attuned to the political sympathies of Méndez and List Arzubide might also note that “Troka” sounds suspiciously similar to troika—the traditional three-horse carriage that was an iconic symbol of prerevolutionary Russia and later, under the Soviet system, referred to a powerful triumvirate of bureaucratic leaders.

In fact, it was in the Soviet Union where List Arzubide had been inspired by the efforts of intellectuals to transform folk puppetry into a revolutionary medium of mass pedagogy. Although the proposal makes no mention of
puppets, it suggests children should learn to draw Troka and then represent the episodes he relates in school theater productions. As other archival documents reveal, Méndez was waging a contentious campaign to reorient school theatrics toward puppetry as a way of integrating manual arts such as drafting, design, and carpentry into the curriculum. Over the previous few months he and List Arzubide had begun to work with a number of their old cohorts including Ramón Alva de la Canal and Fermín Revueltas as well as Germán and Lola Cueto, who had a long-standing interest in puppetry possibly fueled by their time in Paris among the artists of the Cercle et Carré collective. The couple had recently returned to Mexico accompanied by Angelina Beloff, a Russian artist (and ex-partner of Diego Rivera) who assisted in translating a number of Soviet pamphlets and puppet plays. Other newcomers to the group were Graciela Amador, the ex-wife of David Alfaro Siqueiros and a communist activist and artist in her own right; Elena Huerta Muzquiz, another communist activist and artist who was connected to Siqueiros through marriage; and Dolores (Loló) Alva de la Canal, the sister of Ramón, who along with Roberto Lago would continue to work as a puppeteer for decades. They all met in the Cueto's patio workshop, an old estridentista haunt, where according to several accounts they began to experiment with marionettes, though the difficulties involved in making and manipulating stringed dolls eventually led them to opt for hand puppets—small figures devoid of details that betray an impulse toward formal abstraction and technical simplicity.

A month after Méndez submitted the proposal for Troka, his higher-ups in the Secretariat of Public Education approved the puppet project for funding, and Méndez hired List Arzubide in the Section of Drawing and Plastic Arts, giving the former fugitive an institutional foothold from which he quickly branched out into radio.

In the months leading up to Troka’s radio debut, the ex-estridentistas and their collaborators organized three puppet troupes and made the rounds of public parks and schools, performing short shows featuring talking animals and fantastical characters such as The Giant, as well as one of the most popular: the Everyboy character named Comino, created by List Arzubide and “animated” by Loló Alva de la Canal, who starred in plays such as Comino Goes on Strike!, Comino Brushes His Teeth, and Comino Beats the Devil. During the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas these troupes ventured into other regions as part of SEP-sponsored literacy campaigns, and today they are credited with ushering in the golden age of teatro guinol, a “popular” tradition seldom recognized as a second-generation offshoot of the country’s most irreverent avant-garde. Closely associated in popular memory with the Cárdenas era, the puppet troupes remained active for decades until 1985, when the Center for Children’s Theater of the National Institute for Fine Arts was destroyed in the 8.0 earthquake that shook the city that year—an event that not only caused thousands of deaths but also sparked widespread opposition to the Institutional Revolutionary Party.
Troca the Powerful is a tenuous link between the avant-garde and this more popular (and populist) past, and for years his infrequent appearances in accounts of this period have been dogged by the (unsubstantiated) claim that he once was or was first imagined as a puppet. In 2003 the puppeteer Pablo Cueto, grandson of Lola and Germán Cueto and son of the puppeteer Mireya Cueto, was invited by the University of New Mexico Chamber Orchestra to stage a show for their performance of a recently rediscovered piece by the modernist composer Silvestre Revueltas—a “dance pantomime for children” called *Troka*, said to have been written for a performance involving marionettes. Two years later Cueto’s company Teatro Tinglado shed the marionette strings and created a toy theater version. Billed as a celebration of estridentismo, its miniature set features the famous woodcut of the Estridentópolis radio tower by Ramón Alva de la Canal, framed by black-and-white images of factory whistles, tools, and angular buildings. The puppeteer composes the set before the eyes of the audience as Revueltas’s percussive, brassy composition plays over the speakers; when the dialogue begins, it is not Troca who first speaks but an image of Maples Arce that pronounces his poem *Urbe* while his arm—replaced with a mechanical hook—is moved by the partially hidden puppeteer. After this prelude, little by little, Troca the Powerful materializes onstage as the puppet master constructs his tiny figure out of cardboard cranes and paper trains. The audience hears the grating sound of a siren, the lights go out, and a flashlight intermittently illuminates his

Figure 3.2. A SEP guñol (puppet) troupe in an outdoor performance, ca. 1933. Courtesy of the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública.
small body as he declares, in a voice mediated by a device, *Yo soy Troka el poderoso* (I am Troka the Powerful). Yet after only a minute or so the lights go on, his human helper takes him apart, and only occasionally does he reappear in the interludes between a melancholic ode to Revueltas (who died young from alcoholism), snippets of other estridentista texts, and a glimmer of a warning about environmental damage. In its hyperawareness of its own history and constant juxtaposition of a human and diminutive representations of machines, the piece exemplifies what Rebecca Schneider (drawing on Fred Moten) describes as “inter(in)animation”—a term for the way in which “live” art and technological media “cross-identify” and “cross-constitute” each other, and in which the past and present coexist in the “syncopated time” of theater.

In 2007, Mexico’s newly established (and not yet inaugurated) Fonoteca Nacional, a sound archive and center dedicated to preserving the nation’s “sonorous patrimony,” collaborated with a Spanish intermedia artist on its first audio production: a podcast re-creation of a Troka broadcast, with the puppeteer Alejandro Benítez from Teatro Tinglado once again lending his voice. Like the very idea of an “avant-garde” in an “underdeveloped” country, this radio/puppet link poses a potential quandary for the developmentalist logic to which Troka himself subscribes. Radio is a “modern” mass medium whereas puppetry is an “ancient” art that has existed in some form for millennia. But it is more than just a question of chronology: the partial figure of a radio puppet that keeps peeking into view throughout the record of the reorganization and expansion of the cultural apparatus also confounds the very concepts and categories we use to talk about media and art. If radio is often imagined as immaterial and ethereal, puppet theater revolves around the manual manipulation of objects on a physical stage. Whereas radio is a sound technology, puppetry appeals to both the eye and the ear. Radio broadcasts emanate from a fixed source across a wide radius of space, drawing together listeners in distant locales, but the SEP’s *teatro guñol* troupes were peripatetic, staging repeat performances for discrete audiences at different moments in time. And while broadcasting requires a complex mechanical apparatus, the hand puppets and stage sets used in the guñol (like Teatro Tinglado’s toy theater version of Troka) were purposefully simple, designed for easy transport and assembly and with the hope that children who started out as spectators could eventually learn to play the part of puppeteer.

Where does the link lie? Like puppetry and other forms of theater, early radio was “live” as opposed to recorded—although phonograph recordings were often played on the air, just as they were often used in puppet shows. Yet both radio and puppetry also complicate and unsettle the sense of plenitude and embodiment associated with the live. Just as Rudolf Arnheim idealized radio as an “emancipation from the body,” Edward Gordon Craig and others during this era argued for replacing actors with marionettes in order to liberate the theater from its dependence on the human body. Sounds
and voices heard over the radio are acousmatic—the listener cannot see their originating cause—and in a guñól show the puppeteer typically remains hidden behind a curtain or beneath the stage in order to create the illusion that his or her voice belongs to the visible body of a doll. In each case, the efficacy of the medium (or is it an art?) hinges on a disjuncture between the body and the voice, which is also a split between sight and sound. The human voice, often imagined as the direct expression of subjectivity, is overtly mediated by a nonhuman element—in the case of puppetry, by the presence of the stage and the puppet itself, and in the case of radio by an invisible yet no less material technological apparatus. This mediation of the live by the material and mechanical explains the uncanny, spectral quality often attributed to puppets as well as to radio, especially in the latter’s early days. Indeed, in the figure of Troka—the “mysterious spirit of mechanical things”—the medium of radio becomes something akin to what Scott Cutler Shershow calls the puppet: an “inanimate object invested with histrionic ‘life.’ ”

Radio is not the only histrionic object that looms large in Julio I. Prieto’s woodcuts for Troka el poderoso, the collection of short stories that List Arzubide published in 1939, after Troka went off the air (figures 3.3–7). In the book’s preface, List Arzubide explains his use of a robotic spirit as a pedagogical tool by comparing the psychic life of children to the phenomenon of animism among “primitives,” an analogy he seems to borrow from Freud’s Totem and Taboo. Freud associates animism—the tendency to see spirits in plants, animals, and fetish objects—with the narcissistic stage of child development preceding self-awareness. (Later on Lacan would dub this the mirror stage, which hinges on the gaze or objet petit a.) List Arzubide simply explains that both children and savages lack the capacity to exercise critical reason; instead, their instinctive response when faced with the violent, mysterious forces of nature is to “project onto the horizon their own astonished and terrorized spirit, and [in doing so] animate, give life, their own life, to everything around them” (7). In the past, pedagogues and priests exploited this tendency in order to lure children into the realm of superstition, the prerational world of “totems and taboos.” In contrast, the ex-estridentista proposes to redirect those animistic energies toward the mechanisms of modern life, the instruments of technology and progress that constitute a “new nature” controlled by men. Children cannot be initiated into reason all at once, and thus the goal should be to “lead the child toward reality, give him real elements so that he can reflect on them animistically” (8–9). In other words, Troka’s mission is not limited to communicating information about technologies; his power derives from the process, the formation and aural interpellation of subjects suited to meet the demands of a modern industrial society.

What is surprising about this is not the turn to animism as a way of theorizing new media. Sergei Eisenstein, whom List Arzubide reportedly met in the Soviet Union, explained the appeal of Disney cartoons based on their ability to tap into a system of “prelogical,” “sensuous” thought; his desire to
direct this primitive vision toward revolutionary ends was what drew him to Mexico in 1930–1931 to film his unfinished epic Que viva México.\(^7\) Walter Benjamin, too, drew on anthropological studies of the “mystical,” “mimetic” mentality of non-Western peoples to speculate on the insurgent energies latent in commodities (most notably children’s toys), and he argued that new technologies had the (still unrealized) potential to liberate the forces condensed in things.\(^7\) Between 1927 and the beginning of 1933 Benjamin also scripted and delivered more than eighty radio broadcasts, the majority of them for the Youth Hour on Radio Berlin and Radio Frankfurt, among which was a radio play starring Kasper, a familiar slapstick character from German puppet theater.\(^7\) Despite their differences, both of these men saw animism as a way of imploding the commodity fetish; in contrast, List Arzubide openly instrumentalizes animism and turns it into a model for ideology, the grease that turns the wheels and sets seemingly self-acting machines into motion so that they can act as agents of progress and productivity and lead Mexico away from those “primitive” totems and taboos. (Of course, List Arzubide neglects to mention that Freud also associates animism, or the “omnipotence of thought,” with neurosis and obsessive thinking: \(^7\) parents might have balked at a theory of neurotic pedagogy.)

Despite his general aversion to “old” technologies, Troka makes an exception for the hammer and sickle, whose story begins with an argument over

\[\text{Figure 3.7. The hammer talks to the sickle. Woodcut illustration by Julio I. Prieto from Germán List Arzubide, Troka el poderoso: Cuentos infantiles (1939).}\]
Radio/Puppets, or The Institutionalization of a (Media) Revolution

which sound—the clang of the hammer or the swish of the sickle—is more
effective in inspiring men to work. At the end the two talking tools realize
each needs the other and they join forces, preserving the symbolic integrity of
revolutionary communism while offering a tacit nod to the agrarian reforms
that Lázaro Cárdenas began to implement after assuming the presidency at
the end of 1934. In the preface, List Arzubide cites a passage from Friedrich
Engels’s *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in which the author counterpoises
the French Revolution to the “less noisy” but no less transformative Indus-
trial Revolution that kicked off in England around the same time. Implying
that his (Mexican) readers are now following in the footsteps of their English
predecessors, List Arzubide goes on to argue that the machine has created a
“new social form . . . a social form that will very soon impose a society of free
men.” This statement hints at the need for Troka’s own invention: the idea of
radio as a revolutionary agent hinges on a series of contradictions that can
only be resolved in the form of a fictional figure. Men make machines, but
it is the machine (and not men?) that has made this new social form, which
will paradoxically “impose” freedom—just as the seemingly autonomous
movements of a puppet are controlled by a hidden hand. This discussion of
animism, then, is an attempt to grapple with a single question that was driv-
ing debates about the nature of development as well as disputes over the role
of culture and art in relation to the economic “base”: who or what actually
pulls the strings?

Nowhere in this text does List Arzubide mention puppets, and yet it is
hard not to see their specter, especially since the very puppets for which he
wrote some of the most popular plays were often referred to as *muñecos ani-
mados*, or “animated dolls.” At least one reference in the archive confirms
the connection: in a letter to Méndez following a guíñol troupe’s visit to her
school, a teacher praised the play *Un viaje a la luna* (A Trip to the Moon, by
List Arzubide) for the way it “satisfies the animism of children” (*satisface el
animismo infantil*) by personifying natural forces such as the sun and wind as
well as the telephone and radio. Finally, the only remaining aural evidence
of Troka seems to clinch the case: the theme song played at the beginning of
his broadcasts, by the modernist composer and estridentista affiliate Silvestre
Revueltas, is classified as a “dance pantomime for children,” and notes on the
score indicate that it was written for a piece involving marionettes.

Presumably this was the same piece that turns up in a discussion of the
Escuela Nacional de Danza, or National Dance School, an academy the SEP
started in 1932. The school sought to develop a form of ballet it called *teatro
coreográfico*, which drew inspiration from experiments in the Soviet Union
and the recent staging of its own choreographer Nellie Campobello’s “sym-
thetic proletarian ballet” ¡30–30! at the Estadio Nacional. In an unpublished
text written sometime during its first few years, the director Carlos Mérida
(himself a painter) emphasizes the potential of dance as “a complete medium
[medio] of artistic expression in which all of the fine arts are joined.”
the most ancient of all artistic expressions, it is the “concretion of all the arts,”
and as such it has “its own essence, absolute autonomy, it exists for itself”
(129). In Mexico, however, this essence and autonomy has yet to achieve
concrete form. Although the school has started to rectify the long-standing
neglect of the country’s rich “aboriginal” traditions by collecting, catalogu-
ing, and studying dances (160 to date), Mérida stresses that the ballets it
develops are not designed to “strengthen a spirit of nationalism” and must
avoid at all costs “offering the tourist a gift” (142–143). Like the national
dance school in Moscow—and (he says) like the Teatro del Murciélago,
whose composer Francisco Domínguez was one of the collaborators—he
and his fellow artists treat this folkloric material as a “plastic element” to
be realized through rigorous “technique” (140). Rhythm is the key, and
Mérida gives his due to Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, the inventor of eurythmics
and the system of “rhythmic gymnastics” introduced into Mexican schools
under Vasconcelos (see chapter 1). Ultimately, though, he critiques Dalcroze
for his method’s excessive “automatism” and praises the “freer” and more
“human” rhythmic technique taught by Mary Wigman, an important influ-
ence on German expressionism and (apparently) the new piece the dance
school had just begun to rehearse: a “ballet pantomime” called Troka, with
music by Silvestre Revueltas, stage set designed by Leopoldo Méndez, and
dramaturgy by Germán List Arzubide.

Mérida divulges few other details, opting to defer to a quote from List
Arzubide:

Troka is the spirit of mechanical things that have made many of
man’s ancient dreams possible. In this danced pantomime, Troka—
who is perhaps radio, the synthesis of our era—calls the children
of the world to dance with him in a solemn, grandiose spin uniting
people and desires; so that beyond the bitterness of a present of
war and hunger will rise the hope of a better day that begins with the
new generations and goes toward a horizon of redemption through
universal effort.

Troka es el espíritu de las cosas mecánicas que han hecho posible
muchos de los antiguos sueños del hombre. En esta pantomima bail-
able, Troka—que acaso es la radio, síntesis de nuestra época—llama
a los niños del mundo a danzar con él en un giro solemn y grandioso
que une pueblos y afanes; que sobre la amargura de un presente de
guerra y hambre levanta la esperanza de un día mejor que principia
con las nuevas generaciones y va hacia un horizonte de redención por
el esfuerzo universal. (141–142)

Dance is envisioned as the “coordination” and “concretion” of every other
art. Yet at the institutional origins of “Mexican” ballet are children circling
around the medium of radio represented in concrete form as a puppet. Dance achieves its status as a “complete,” “autonomous” art by remediating radio, which in turn is imagined as the aural “synthesis” of the era. Furthermore, this dance is also theater and clearly has a symbolic, representative function: it suggests that this mechanical agency is what links individual human bodies to the social collectivity. Here, it would appear, is where the radio puppet’s parts all come together. The catch? Neither Mérida nor List Arzubide mentions a puppet. And then there is the semantically ambiguous acaso: this word could mean “perhaps,” but depending on the context it can also function simply as a kind of embellishment added for rhetorical effect. It might not mean anything at all. In either case the reader of this passage is left to ask: did the children dance circles around a puppet? Around an actor who might represent radio? An actor representing a puppet who might be radio? Or was there nothing at the center of the circle at all?

There is no known script for this performance, though the scattered trail of Troka does (or rather did in my case) lead to multiple mimeographed copies of a dramaturgical outline for a “dance pantomime for children” with the title of Troka. The copies are buried in the archive of Leopoldo Méndez, the prose reads like the work of List Arzubide (though the document is unsigned), and throughout the text are numbers that sync up the action with Revueltas’s musical score. According to the schematic two-page text, the piece begins with a brief musical introduction—most likely those same dissonant notes heard by radio listeners at the start of every broadcast by Troka. When the curtain opens the stage is in darkness, and only little by little does the title character appear—not in his entirety, but “disarticulated, shapeless [informe], a suggestion of the character (a hand, an arm, the head),” each illuminated by some type of “phosphorescent substance.” There is a dramatic crescendo from the orchestra, a gong is struck, and then a little boy and girl watching from the wings come forward with “surprise” and “fear,” examining Troka as if in astonishment and wonder. Like a fetish object, or a work of aauratic art, he remains motionless as other children flood the stage, calling to their “invisible companions” (other radio listeners?) to join them in dancing circles around the silent cipher while singing the traditional children’s tune “A la víbora del mar,” one of the recurring leitmotivs in the aural automaton’s theme song.

What is the object around which they dance? A mind prone to paranoia might start to suspect that the artists engaged in the project all conspired to conceal the answer to this question, because there is no indication of what (in concrete terms) Troka is meant to represent or how (if at all) he was incarnated onstage. There is no mention of a radio, and at no point is it hinted he could be a marionette. Logistics would also seem to work against this scenario: a small doll with throngs of children circling around it would have been difficult to see, and the puppeteers would have had nowhere to hide, since the performance was clearly intended to take place on a human-sized
stage. And then there is the question: would such a small object inspire awe?
It could be that the artists planned to use an oversized doll maneuvered by
circumstantial and financial limitations the new dance school faced this solution seems
unlikely. Or perhaps Troka would have been embodied by a human actor—a
man (or woman) playing the part of a marionette whose voice was radio.
(Petrushka, the ballet by Stravinsky in which a traditional Russian puppet
comes to life only to be tragically slayed, was a common reference among
the artists involved in the project.) The paradoxical figure of a wireless
marionette is compelling precisely because it is so difficult to envision its
incarnation onstage. How was mechanical versus human agency depicted?
Once again: who or what pulled the strings?

But in fixating on an (absent) object, the viewer or auditor (or critic) can
become blind and deaf to the action around it. Whether or not he had yet
read Freud, this opening scene illustrates something similar to the theory of
animistic pedagogy List Arzubide would later lay out in the preface to the
print version of Troka el poderoso. Troka first appears as an inert object,
and the children (along with the audience) struggle to glean what lies hid-
den within, piecing together the individually illuminated parts in an effort to
discern the whole, the self-acting agent in the machine. In truth, however, its
anima or spirit is a projection of their own inner selves, their deepest desires
and fears, and their movement is the motor making him act. Suddenly, Troka
wakes as if from a slumber and breaks through their circle with “excessive”
or even “insolent” gestures (gestos desmesurados), dispelling the reverie as
he greets a group of children carrying a “ridiculous” puppet or doll identi-
fied as the “corps of imperialism.” As the orchestra plays an ironic lament,
the children unceremoniously toss the puppet on the floor and recommence
their dance with “frenetic,” “crazy” joy, perhaps resembling those “savages”
whose primitive psychic state List Arzubide would later describe as analo-
gous to their own. The action is interrupted once more by the sound of a
gong, the stage goes dark . . . and then the mysterious spirit of mechanical
things speaks. He launches into a story about “what the Chinese are cur-
rently suffering” (an allusion to the civil war between the communists and
the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek), and then, as if to warn that the
effigy lying at his feet might have life in it yet, he concludes his story with
the proclamation, “‘and that is what happens on account of this puppet’”
or—the text offers as an alternative—“any other such silliness” (o cualquier
tontería semejante) (figure 3.8).

All of the action leading up to this moment has prepared the reader to hear
a serious, ideologically charged message; instead the text casually undercuts
the mood of solemnity and suggests that it may not matter exactly what
Troka says. This “silliness” marks a hermeneutic limit: like the historian who
scours the archive, critics too tend to desire an object, words on a page or
bodies on a stage that can be picked apart and pieced together in order to
illuminate their inner anima. But this is an outline for a performance still in the stage of rehearsals, still being shaped by its collaborators’ competing desires and ideas, not to mention the complex confrontations and concessions taking place within the cultural bureaucracy at this time. Despite Troka the Powerful’s seemingly simplistic and deterministic view of development, what ultimately drives his mechanical heart is the art of theater, with its reliance on stagecraft and the element of contingency performance always entails. As Troka stands over his imperialist enemy, a somber tableau of “poor, sad children, looking desolate, miserable, etc.” is illuminated behind him by means of spotlights, “or whatever else occurs to you/them to use” (*o por lo que se les ocurra*); soldiers arrive and engage in a tumultuous battle, which then dissolves through the use of “silhouettes or some other trick” in an effect possibly inspired by the medium of film. In the distance, the march of Troka is suddenly heard. The children listen attentively, until finally it is revealed to be the march of the *niños obreros* or “working-class children” who have come to join their (implicitly) middle-class allies onstage: “The stage is flooded with light and the working-class children enter and are received with overwhelming joy and they begin the dance of labor. Of the workers’ labor that will make the new sun rise [*o no, como se quiera*]” (figure 3.9).

The interpretation of this passage hinges on the odd parenthetical remark at the end—“*o no, como se quiera*”—a subjunctive phrase with an impersonal, unspecified subject that has multiple meanings and in this case could signify “or not, as the case may be” or “or not, as is desired.” Immediately following this the text cuts to an abrupt ending: “The dance ends, all sing the march (or hymn) of Troka. March of optimism and hope.” All is well. Dancing around the voice of radio, or a puppet, or a radio puppet, or whatever this mysterious spirit of mechanical things is, will bring a brighter day. And yet this ending cannot erase the instability and uncertainty that *o no, como se quiera* creates. The intention could be to offer a dramaturgical option: perhaps the dance of labor is superfluous and the performance can cut straight to the concluding march or hymn if the choreographer (or someone with
bureaucratic oversight?) so desires. An equally plausible interpretation, however, is that the workers’ dance will not necessarily bring forth the new sun. Perhaps in order to make the new day dawn these children will need to perform another giro or turn, one that does not involve circling around the voice of technology or revering an object of art—a performance that will not occur in the orbit of a “revolutionary” state but will require a revolution of some other kind.

An Unfinished Medium (Or Is It an Art?)

Troka makes no appearances on any of the programs for performances of the dance school.84 Perhaps in the end the ex-estudiantistas themselves, when faced with the exigencies of the stage, were unable to decide how to represent Troka; or perhaps they never got the knack of manipulating a marionette. Most likely this was one of the many projects from this era that never came to fruition, one of the many “unfinished” performances that were instrumental in re-creating both the conceptual and organizational infrastructure of all the old and new media and arts. There is an extant program for the Department of Fine Arts’ “Cultural Series” from 1933 that makes mention of a future performance of Troka with choreography by Gloria Campobello, Nellie’s half-sister (figure 3.10). Once again, however, there is no mention of a puppet, though it seems plausible since the SEP’s puppet troupes did often perform in conjunction with displays of dance in the context of what could be regarded as “multimedia” shows for festivals, held in parks and the many open-air theaters built during the 1920s. In some cases as many as twenty-five hundred programs were printed, which invites the question of

Figure 3.9. From the dramaturgical outline of Troka (dance pantomime for children). Archive of Leopoldo Méndez, Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación e Información de Artes Plásticas (CENIDIAP).
how everyone in the audience could have seen and heard the show, especially the part involving the small hand puppets. Internal memos in the archive suggest the auditory issue was resolved: microphones and amplifiers were used, and the festivals were often broadcast over the radio.\footnote{85}

So let us imagine this performance did take place (despite the lack of evidentiary proof), and let us even imagine it was broadcast over the radio. What did young listeners hear? Possibly nothing, given the irony behind Troka the Powerful’s name: XFX, the Secretariat of Public Education’s radio station, was notoriously faulty and weak. In the report he drafted during the station’s reorganization in 1932–1933, its future director Agustín Yáñez prefaced his ambitious plan for the station to become the be-all and end-all of Mexican education by noting that his proposals “revolve around the idea that the voice of the SEP can be heard clearly in the entire country and even during the months of the worst atmospheric conditions.”\footnote{86} Yet he also acknowledges this is a fiction. His plan is premised on an idea of a “mass” audience that was precisely that: his own speculative ideal. The Voice of radio, the Voice of technological progress, the Voice of the state, Troka’s voice, was apt to cut out and was inaudible for some listeners from time to time. Troka the Powerful, in other words, was no less of a fantasy for his creators.

Of course, fantasies can have very real effects. In fact, if Troka was successful, it was in some sense because of his failings: as Jonathan Sterne argues,
sound technologies have historically been accompanied by a pedagogical discourse that encourages listeners to develop certain “audile techniques,” which usually involve learning to hear past any interference to distinguish “pure sound.”

The ideological force of sound media, in other words, hinges on turning the medium into a vanishing mediator that must be present only to disappear. Again, what the children were supposed to be learning was to not hear Troka’s voice, if one considers the voice not as the content of meaning but as the materiality of signification. Troka tried to teach them to abstract technology from the economic and social practices in which it was embedded—an illusion that sustained his creator’s own seeming belief that industrial development under the tutelage of a national bourgeoisie could undo imperialism. At the same time, in trying to hear Troka through all the static and spotty transmission, they were being taught to turn a deaf ear to the unfinished form of the state apparatus as well as the inherent fragility and fallibility of technology.

Troka, it is important to remember, was called into existence to create the power he claimed to possess. Just as the puppet troupes aimed to involve children in the productions, he formed a Friends of Troka club that sponsored social events and invited individual children to come to the radio station and appear on air. And just as the puppet troupes asked children to draw the scenes they saw, Troka frequently asked his listeners to draw the events he narrated, to envision and draw the figure of Troka, and then send their drawings to the radio station to be judged by—who but Troka himself? According to memos the station sometimes received as many as two thousand drawings in a single contest, and at least one public exhibition was planned, though only a dozen or so remain in the station’s archive, all from his initial broadcast. What do they reveal? I refuse to say or show, because regardless of what is or isn’t there, it was through these new practices and institutional relations that Troka’s power became partially real.