

THE CLAIMS OF SOUND BROADCASTING

DAVID LLOYD JAMES

AS newly discovered television 'stars' blaze into incandescence, or at least into headlines, and as one parlour game succeeds another, radio programmes begin to sound a defensive note. The strong emotions which are revealed when the House of Commons debates the future of television colour most discussions by the professionally engaged of the claims of sound broadcasting in a world which is rapidly switching from loud-speaker to screen. In the Autumn 1953 number of the *B.B.C. Quarterly* Louis MacNeice made 'A Plea for Sound'. The word 'plea', with its overtones of advocacy and partisanship, suggests some of the passion which this controversy can provoke. And one of the unfortunate results is that the opposing sides in this pointless warfare have resorted to that most tedious of stratagems which forbids the praise of X without the condemnation of Y. Not that I think Mr MacNeice guilty of this. 'Television, obviously', he says, 'is an exciting and fertile medium in which many fine things can be done that sound could never attempt. The point is that sound can do many fine things that will never be possible in television. We should all therefore hope both that television may develop to the utmost and that sound broadcasting may survive.' In which future directions are these fine things likely to be found?

Imagine a future in which sound and television are equally available to most people, in which several alternative television programmes are transmitted for the greater part of the day, and in which the present technical limitations of television have been to a considerable extent overcome. How should these two plan their programmes so that the one need not try to tackle what can be better done by the other?

The whole field of what is now called 'Outside Broadcasting' will, I take it, be assigned to television. It may be many years before events in distant countries can be flashed across the world on to the screen, and during that interval sound will substitute. But to those who have heard and watched a great occasion or a great game it can only be a substitute. No sound commentary,

however eloquent and evocative, can stifle the impulse to rise on tip-toe, to try to see more than your fair share, more than a member of a crowd should expect. And this is just the opportunity that television offers, a Royal Box by your fireside.

Many of the most memorable moments of television programmes have been a result of this power to open a window on to the world. And it is not only state events, great events, the flaring excitement of a quick-moving match or the sustained drama of cricket, that it can so well communicate. Viewers will remember, too, those moments when it has caught and conveyed the casual happenings of ordinary life, the expressions, the half-finished gestures, the behaviour of un-self-conscious people. Whenever this window is opened, and the eyes that look out direct their gaze with imagination and discretion, television offers scenes of rich, varied and continuous interest.

With imagination and discretion it can go much further. It can recreate human situations with extraordinary truth. The best of its documentaries have given evidence of a remarkable vitality, a power to compel and to convince. In drama, too, it may possess an incomparable advantage over sound so long as the characters and the situations ring absolutely true, so long as it continues to persuade the viewer that the window opens out, if not on to the passing events of life itself, at least on to a scene which is true to life. Much of the drama that draws large audiences for sound could be more effectively presented on the screen. And those who saw the television production of Menotti's *The Consul* will have realised how much some operas may gain in emotional potential when brought into close-up.

Outside broadcasts, documentaries, drama, ballet, light entertainment, are all part of the vast territory which television is exploring and in which it is likely to stake lasting claims. But I agree with those who believe that this territory has its frontiers and that beyond them there lie the regions to which sound has a valid and an enduring title. It would be arrogant as well as rash to attempt to map the frontiers now, but it may be possible to make out some of the features of the distant landscape.

A recent broadcast will serve as a point of departure. *Under Milk Wood*, by Dylan Thomas, is a work perfectly conceived for sound. Nothing could possibly be added to it by television. The intrusion of a visual element could only weaken its impact, for

much of its force depends on its power to set the mind exploring: the very absence of the visual element brings freedom to the imagination. For while the combination of sound and picture can inspire the imagination, it can also stifle it, either by saturating the senses or by focussing the viewer's attention on the immediate image, the here and now. Often the unaccompanied word encourages a freer flight.

The Rescue by Edward Sackville West, *Christopher Columbus* by Louis MacNeice and *The Face of Violence* by Dr Jacob Bronowski, are other examples of work especially written for sound, not to be translated into another medium. And this is true not only because they were expressly designed for sound but also because they belong to the realm of poetry, and to the kind of poetry which sound alone can present in its most perfect form.

For sound broadcasting has done a unique service to poetry. It has made it possible for people, in the silence and privacy of their own rooms, to listen to a disembodied voice, to concentrate entirely on the uttered word, undistracted by the appearance of the speaker, by the presence of a surrounding audience or by any visual interruption. Since few people read poetry well the experience of hearing it can be both painful and embarrassing, but it can for many bring satisfaction, a realization, far deeper than that of silent reading.

If poetry and poetic 'feature programmes' are regarded as an enduring part of the province of sound (and I echo Mr MacNeice's hope that they will be), a good deal of poetic drama may also find a permanent place there. It is difficult to see how television could hope to present *The Dynasts* or the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. And even among works which are part of the familiar repertory of the theatre some may gain from sound an added strength.

These our actors,
As I foretold you were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air.

In a radio production Prospero can cast a spell, the 'fabric of this vision' can be conjured up, with exceptional intensity, because we do not see the proscenium arch and the costumed figures on the stage.

For music, too, sound offers advantages. I suspect that the number of those who regard the loud-speaker as the merest

substitute for a seat in the concert hall is small and diminishing. Some works (Handel's *Messiah* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* are examples) undoubtedly make a far greater impact in the auditorium that they do over the air. They possess a dramatic quality which makes one wish to be a spectator as well as a listener. These can be better presented by television than by sound. But many lovers of music find that they can devote to a broadcast work a degree of concentration which is impossible in the concert hall. And while television is likely to devote some proportion of its time to serious music, it can hardly hope to replace the kind of service which is offered at present by the Third Programme.

In this highly tentative and purely personal sketch I would suggest that a third province of the territory of sound may be assigned to talks. A considerable part of the present output of radio talks would undoubtedly benefit from the aids of television. Much that is largely informative can be more readily communicated by screen and sound than by sound alone. But in the Third Programme in particular any week will provide examples of talks which seem to me to be outside the scope of television. In the *Radio Times* for the week beginning February 14th the following are announced: 'The Name and Nature of Folk Music', 'The German Novel Tradition', 'Portrait of Leopardi', 'The Counter-Reformation and Spanish Literature', 'Scrutiny and its Last Controversy', a review of E. M. Forster's *Hill of Devi*. It may be argued that these talks serve an audience which is known to be small, at any rate by comparison with that reached by the Light Programme, but it exists, and we should hope that it will continue to be served by sound.

I am not trying to peer into the future. These are no more than indications of the part that sound can continue to play as television develops. But, whatever may happen, it is greatly to be hoped that the two will be regarded as complementary, not mutually exclusive, and that the permanent claims of sound will not be neglected.