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ROBERT DESNOS, SURREALIST RADIO, AND POPULAR CULTURE

ABSTRACT: If the futurists had Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noise* (1913) and F.T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata's *La Radia* for guides, by 1933, when the latter was published, there was still a dearth of surrealist writings and artistic productions aimed at confronting the challenges posed by radio. Such an anomaly has not been left unnoticed by surrealism scholars. Literature and media scholar Anke Birkenmaier, for instance, asks: "How could the surrealists not be taken in by a medium that seemed to promise liberation from analytical "written" reasoning and grant access to an audience that had been out of reach until then?" (2009, 358). In this paper, I offer a counterpoint to Birkenmaier's supposition by uncovering some of the most popular, though forgotten, of Robert Desnos's contributions to the radio. I show how the interest of this surrealist poet in radio should be understood in contiguity to his work in poetry and engagement with popular culture. I demonstrate how he explores in these fields a capacity that sound, more specifically poetic voice, has to create points, or echoes that animate auditory perception and memory. These points allow the audience to hang on to and experience auditory surprises, as well as participate in cultural debates, and potential reconciliations. Borrowing a term from Marie-Claire Dumas, I call these points *accrochages sonores*.

KEYWORDS: Robert Desnos; surrealism; radio; poetry; popular culture; sound studies.

The Radiophonic Turn

While Breton chose not to dedicate a single line to this topic, it did not take long for a group of surrealist dissidents, to find in radio's embrace of popular culture and unassuming language a powerful medium to break the barriers of classical poetry and art, an essential and longstanding ambition of surrealism's project that only a new method could actualize.¹ To define the contours of this experimental field, Robert Desnos, and other participants of Studio Foniric will draw on Paul Deharme's propositions to the

¹ It is important to point out that Breton was not entirely indifferent to recording technologies. Supported by Christopher Schiff's essay "Banging on the windowpane sound in early surrealism," Douglas Klan writes: "Surrealism's founder Andre Breton brought principles of recording into his own body as a form of psychotechnics, implanting a trope into the brain where actual technology could not go. He used the term "modest recording instruments" in the 1924 Manifesto to speak of, among other things, automatic writing, that quasi-scientific transcription, the faithful recording of the incessant murmuring of the unconscious. The term had been derived, through the autoanalysis of French Dynamic Psychiatry, from telecommunications practices in the late nineteenth century..." (Kahn, 1992, 7)

radio exposed in his text *Pour un art radiophonique* published for the first time in 1930 and just recently re-published. This section sketches out the culture, and intellectual significance of Desnos's radiophonic turn. This series of mediatic experimentations opened surrealism to what Lauren Rosati calls the "global ubiquity of the broadcast medium" and allowed Desnos to explore a radiophonic form of poetic voice.²

Already a renowned poet by then, Desnos's work in the '30s followed the idea that "poetry is everywhere," even in advertising, a principle he has abided by since his first encounter with radio broadcasting. In *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life*, Katharine Conley starts her analysis of Desnos's radio career with his half-hour radio talk "Initiation au surréalisme." She writes: "Desnos began his radio career (at the invitation of radio pioneer Paul Deharme) at 7 p.m. on 14 June 1930" (2003, 89). Anke Birkenmaier corroborates this point in her text "From Surrealism to Popular Art: Paul Deharme's Radio Theory" (2009). Even if this talk is never mentioned by Marie-Claire Dumas, the main editor of Desnos's work, it is certain that in the '30s Desnos's artistic practice became increasingly more centered in the work he produced for Deharme's radio production, Studio Foniric.

His investment in radiophonic art forms, though not a total surprise given how diverse his interests were from the start, could be understood as a more definitive step towards new horizons following the polemical pamphlet "Un Cadavre" (1930). This publication represents a turning moment in the surrealist movement, an irrevocable renegotiation of fundamental premises established in 1922. In it, former group members decried Breton's authoritarian and elitist way of excluding works that engaged with more popular art forms, noticeably George Bataille and Desnos's journalist writings. In the latter's case, this will be taken even further in his pursuit of a truly radiophonic form of expression, which Breton's acolytes deemed too popular. He would later attribute to Deharme his salvation from "the shipwreck of my friendships within the Bretonian group" (Dumas 1990, 272). A turning point in his artistic career, radio also allowed Desnos to recast his position as a surrealist.

2 About this global network, Lauren Rosati writes: "Wireless technology began as the domain of hobbyists and the military before World War I, but by 1930 hundreds of commercial and government-operated stations collectively reached an international body of prospective auditors and united disparate but proximate regions, such as Mexico with the Caribbean, the Middle East with North Africa, and New Zealand with other Oceanic islands. In Continental Europe, France had a particularly robust network, with broadcast ranges extending to the surrounding territories of Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Surrealist radio dramas were presented in this multinational wireless system in the later 1920s and 1930s, infiltrating the global ubiquity of the broadcast medium, then in its golden age in not only France but also other industrialized nations like Argentina, Australia, Japan, and the United States" (52).

Speaking now from the margins of the surrealist movement, and precisely by taking up a neglected art form, Desnos proved to be a genuine surrealist. To Youki, his longtime partner, Desnos often expressed how writing something simple could be rather difficult: “il faut absolument populariser l’art,” he would say to Youki (Dumas 1999, 65). The popularization of art was closely articulated with one of surrealism’s major goals: to reconcile politics with the subversion of all rational constraints by playing with underdetermined poetic forces. Desnos himself accentuated the contiguity between radio and his career as a surrealist poet in *État de Veille* (1943). In the postface, Desnos discloses his decision to write a poem every day and how this was only possible because at the time he was “un des plus féconds rédacteurs de slogans et indicatifs publicitaires radiophoniques” (Dumas 1999, 97). He continues:

Toute substance poétique gratuite, toute inspiration étant pour longtemps consommés, je me livrai avec passion au travail quasi mathématique mais cependant intuitif de l’adaptation des paroles à la musique, de la fabrication des sentences, proverbes et devises publicitaires, travail dont la première exigence était un retour aux règles proprement populaires en matière de rythmes. (Dumas 1999, 98)

Twenty years after writing his first surrealist poems, Desnos continues to tether automatism and intuition, now with a renovated attention to popular roots of poetry, its “règles proprement populaires en matière de rythmes.” Speaking at once as a poet and radio producer, who by 1943 had spent the last ten years adapting speaking words to music, especially popular rhythms, he is the first to trace his later poems back to his experience at Studio Foniric. Simultaneously, he listens to the basic rhythmic rules of poetry, which is also the domain of what he calls the *fabrication* of sentences in a proverbial and slogan manner, an inspiration that will continue to inform the rest of his artistic work in the radio.

In her diaries published in *Les confidences de Youki*, she relays Desnos’s own understanding about his work: “je suis le poète le plus écouté d’Europe” (1999, 44). He would say it to his friends who, incredulous and surprised, could finish his slogans broadcast on the radio: “Pour être bien pourtant / Buvez du vin de Frileuse / Pour être bien pourtant / C’est l’plus fort des fortifiants!” Besides poetic sound effects such as repetition and rhythm, Desnos attributes the success of this campaign to a combination of intimacy with expansion. He creates the former effect by making a female voice murmur straight into the ears of his listeners, while the latter effect he credits to radio’s semblance to a church’s call. Both were made possible by overt radiophonic elements developed following recent recording technology innovations. In “La rédaction publicitaire radiophonique” (1939) first published in the revue *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, the poet writes :

L’année 1938 écoulee nous a apporté différents éléments radiophoniques nouveaux. On sait la fortune remportée par la phrase *murmurée* du “Vin de Frileuse”: “Votre pharmacien vend le Vin

Frileuse” dite par la speakerine à l’oreille même de chaque auditeur. La chambre d’écho, qui permet de donner à une phrase l’ampleur d’un *appel* dans une cathédrale ou dans un défilé de montagnes, a permis aussi d’intéressantes réalisations... (Dumas 1990, 790; italics mine)

This passage illustrates how Desnos was aware of how his radio combines strict poetic techniques with radiophonic elements to construct a new language, one where a murmur when passed through radio’s echo chamber becomes a reverberating call inside a cathedral’s cavity.

From this echo chamber, the poet will keep developing his poetic voice, a voice that speaks the very gap radio puts forward when it detaches the voice from the body. This gap is described by Laura Odello and Peter Szendy in *La voix, par ailleurs* by the concept of “antriloquie” or “la distribution ou le partage, la partition ou la répartition des voix dans et depuis l’antre où elles peuvent s’attacher à un corps dans l’exacte mesure où elles peuvent aussi d’en détacher” (2023, 16). If in their essay this *antre* is exemplified by caves and its multiple iterations (human torsos and bellies as well as vaults), I side with Desnos in underlining radio’s own “antriloquie.”³ For him radio is an echo chamber from which voices speak the echo, the very gap between the body and the voice, but also the improper in radiophonic voice that reveals voice’s own condition of possibility, whether broadcast through radio or not.

The very “intimate exteriority” that murmur/call, ear/vault represent is reclaimed by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe when he defines voice in general as “ce pur dehors en nous” or “la marque - même silencieuse - de cette intime extériorité ou de cette intériorité étrange en quoi nous consiston” (1985, 230). In other words, the voice doesn’t express interiority like the phenomenological voice that, present to itself, Jacques Derrida criticizes in his *La voix et le phénomène* as what guarantees the metaphysical closure operated by Husserl’s phenomenology. When Desnos defined radio in those words he had already been exploring this aspect of radiophonic voice for eight years, four years without the direct partnership of Deharme, who died in 1934. Yet many of his insights came from experimental poetry interested in this improper, “extimacy” of, voice, an aspect further explained in the next section. And if experimentation in poetry is a well-recognized surrealist stronghold, radio, however, is much less. What I have tried to highlight in Desnos’s radiophonic turn is precisely how, from the margins of the group, he still had his voice heard by taking up a medium less frequently associated with the movement without leaving poetry aside. Though a Breton-centered scholarship overlooks these mediatic initiatives created in surrealism’s name, radio commentators in France have repeatedly added Desnos to the list of radio pioneers.

³ They further define “antre” as : “L’antre (l’antrum latin, l’antron grec, à savoir la grotte ou la caverne), c’est l’espace entre les voix, c’est l’intervalle qui permet leurs différences comme leurs ressemblances.” (Odello, Szendy 2023, 16)

His talent in putting poetry and radio in tandem was not left unnoticed by radio producer and dramaturge Samy Simon who calls the combination of poetic and radiophonic techniques a “bend over,” a “deflection” of the latter. What Simon defines as Desnos’s capacity to “*infléchir la technique dans le sens de la poésie*” bears witness to his “*sens du rythme, des effets sonores, du suspense et du gag radiophonique*” (Dumas 1999, 788). And if these elements run across from simple to more complex radio productions such as *La Clef des Songes* from 1938 ou *Fantômas* from 1930, Simon already identifies in simple radiophonic slogans a certain “*virtuosité d’acrobate du vocabulaire, sa science prodigieuse du raccourci, du mot qui fait balle, alliés à un sens de la poésie populaire jamais en défaut*” (Dumas 1999, 788-789). For a reader of Desnos, these acrobatics are quite familiar. In his *Rose Sélavy* (1922 – 1923), *L’Aumonyme* (1922), for example, the poet expresses his love for homonyms and other syntax-centered techniques. They produce what Dumas calls “*échos sonores,*” and “*accrochage sonore,*” that is, a lack of equivalence between word and sound that reveals voice staging of itself and thus its difference from itself.

Poetic Voice and *Accrochages Sonores*: a Sonorous Remainder

In Desnos’s return to “*règles proprement populaires en matière de rythmes,*” Dumas identifies a shift from image to rhythm: “*Ainsi, par la pratique publicitaire, Desnos se trouve amené à privilégier le rythme sur l’image, ce qui réorientera partiellement ses recherches poétiques ultérieures*” (1999, 777). Yet, in Desnos’s writings, poetic image always had to compete with poetic voice, one flowing into each other without a necessity for replacement. In fact, the underlying component running through his works, including his journalistic writing, is a sensibility to sound’s ability to create an *accrochage sonore*, both a clash and a place to hang on to, an expression which could be translated as “*sound bite,*” or “*sound hanger.*” An idea I suggest should also be read in its cultural undertones as well, recasting sound culture as both a clash and a place to hang on to. I borrow this expression from Dumas to describe a special attention typical not only of slogans and refrains for advertisement, but also of his early poems.

In his works, Desnos seems especially attuned to how poetic voice, either in radio or in poetry, could offer a special *écoute*, one beyond the comprehension of articulated speech (*entendre*), one that remains in suspense, in an opening suspended around the meaning it announces without delivering it to us yet. It should suffice to remember one of Desnos’s most famous poetic experiments from 1922: the series of aphorisms telepathically channeled from Duchamp’s alter ego, Rose Sélavy, and written under the technique of automatic writing and published in his most famous collection *Corps et*

Biens (1930).⁴ This series of homonyms guaranteed a lingering sense of questioning, of dissatisfaction, perpetuating the search for pleasure that poetry should aspire to. Made of two verses, the rebound between them is often surprising, playing with the ambiguity of words, the echo between them, and the echo in the word itself.

In *Études de Corps et Biens*, Marie-Claire Dumas lays bare the parts constituting a system of equivalences between the terms of these aphorisms first to extract its logical principle and then determine its limits. From syllables to letters, Dumas skillfully moves along different series of exchanges to account for the redoubling, or in her words the “repli,”⁵ to which Desnos exposes language. Starting from one, then groups of letters, passing through anagrams, the relations between words are explained by permutations that create equivalences between words.⁶ According to Dumas, the reader of these aphorisms is enticed to infer the rules of the game—the specific permutation of phonemes. Yet, the point was never to find the solution: “La solution d’un sage est-elle la pollution d’un page?... Faut-il mettre la moelle de l’épée dans le poil de l’aimée?” (Dumas 1999, 54)

The differentiation process between ‘solution’ / ‘pollution’, and ‘sage’ / ‘page’ resists commensurability⁷. In other words, preexisting identities are not reflected back on the other. Rather, the only ‘thing’ created is the excess of the one reflected on the other. Implicit in this surplus is also a hesitation in attributing gender to the word “page.” Desnos seems aware of this when he recurrently uses words whose meaning changes according to their gender. In the case of “La solution d’un sage est-elle la pollution d’un page?,” between *une* and *un* page a humorous effect is produced by the combination of

⁴ Marie-Claire Dumas points out that the first time Desnos experiments with Duchamp’s aphoristic style takes place in one of the “séance de sommeil” in 7th October 1922: “le poète, incité par Picabia à préférer un jeu de mots à la manière de Duchamps, répond sans attendre: “Dans un temple en stuc de pommes, un pasteur distillait le suc des psaumes.” (1999, 144)

⁵ “À l’origine posons que la parole de Rose Sélavy implique toujours un redoublement — avoué ou dissimulé, selon les cas ; de ce repli de la langue sur elle-même l’homonymie, stricte ou par à-peu-près, offre une forme évidente que Rose Sélavy ne méprise pas” (Dumas 1999, 40)

⁶ “La formule la plus économique est sans doute celle qui est consacrée à Marx Ernst (125) et qui énonce : “La boule rouge bouge et roule » ; seuls l’article et la conjonction de coordination ajoutent au carrée de base, qu’on peut formuler ainsi : « boule » est à « bouge » ce que « roule » est à « rouge ” (ou, en simplifiant, selon une présentation d’allure mathématique : boule / bouge = roule / rouge). Ce type de formule structure la plupart des jeux de Rose Sélavy (solution / pollution = sage / page en (4) ; fous / loups = foi / loi en (8) ; caresse / paresse = culs teins / putains en (26) ; nain / pain = nuit / puits en (34) ; pourriture / nourriture = passions / nations en (39) etc.) Quatre termes exprimés dans le texte, sont liés par des rapports phoniques qui tiennent à la permutation de deux lettres.” (Ibid, 42)

⁷ Compared to Théodore de Banville’s perfect correspondent verses which aim at an equivocating echo (“Dans ces meules laques, rideaux et dais moroses. / Danses, aime, bleu laquais, ris d’oser des mots roses.”), the particularity of the phonemic excess in Desnos’s sonorous echoes becomes more accentuated.

this ambiguity and the sexual connotations of “pollution” (soil, defile). This playful, active creation of mis-recognitions can be identified very early on in Desnos’ attitude towards poetry. The consequences of this for the study of surrealism concern the principle of automatic writing and the verbal process that founds psychic automatism. Pushing back against narratives of automatic writing that reduce it to an exploration of “image poétique,” the performativity dimension of these texts relies heavily on the appeal to the ear.

These aphorisms only find their *poetic expression*, here understood as different from their *meaning*, in the auditory reflection of the one on the other, a reflection that doesn’t produce identity but rather a difference, like Echo in the myth of Narcissus as recounted by Ovid. Crucial to discern this reflection is the lack of a solution or response to the question. About the remainder that doesn’t enter any system, but rather troubles word-game’s rules, Marie-Paule Berranger (2010) writes: “Les opérations de Rrose deviennent poétiques d’offrir un “reste,” quelque phonème irréductible, grain de sable dans les rouages du jeu de mots” (39). From this remainder, this *reste* that doesn’t enter in one ear to leave through the other, the *accrochage* is created, a point of clash but also where it is possible to hang on. From this remainder, a certain voice echoes, one equivalent to the kind of *écoute* defined earlier as different than a simple *entendre*.⁸

This is also the case of “L’Aumonyme,” a series of poems also published in *Corps et Biens* and made out of fragments whose boundaries are difficult to define since few of them are titled. Nevertheless, from the neologism in the title, one can guess the thread that will unite these fragments. The word *aumonyme* is a homonym, or more specifically, a homophone of the word *homonyme*. It is also a *mot-valise*, i.e., a term composed of non-significant elements borrowed from other words. This word evoked two others, *aumône* and *homonyme*, whose relationship is not obvious. In line with Desnos’s heretical attitude, the contamination between a religious practice, *aumône* (alms), and a poetic figure, *homonyme*, performs a kind of sacrilege, as the following poem reveals: “Notre paire quiète, ô yeux !/ que votre « non » soit sang (t’y fier ?)/ que votre araignée rie, /que votre vol honteux soit fête (au fait)/ Sur la terre (commotion)...”.

As its name suggests, “L’Aumonyme” is marked by humor, word games, and sound acrobatics, such as contrepèteries, phonic approximations, establishing relationships between several words or groups of words according to their sound proximity, despite

⁸ Robert Ryder in *The Acoustical Unconscious: from Walter Benjamin to Alexander Kluge* writes about the difference between the meaning of these two verbs in Jacques Derrida’s analysis of voice: “Interpretive listening is what “makes a latent expression heard,” seeking a way to hear a certain kind of meaning in nonexpressive signs, which for Husserl is not possible. Like the singular sounds emitting from Benjamin’s conch shell, meaning murmurs for Derrida in gestures and facial expressions: only by “listening” to these indicative modes of communication can one “hear” meaning in these otherwise nonexpressive signs.” (2022, 6)

their meaning or referent. This effect is not very different from the metaphor, where two discordant or antinomic images are compared. But here the approximation is not premised on resemblances based on the referential world because, though sounds are part of the linguistic world, they are not based on referential meaning.⁹ Words in these poems have their phonic matter tainted by acoustic contamination either by participating in a horizontal or vertical slippage of sound, widening or compressing the soundscape of the poem. This is the case of the poem “P’OASIS” where the question “Sœur Anne, ma sœur Anne que vois-tu venir vers Sainte-Anne?” is answered by:

Je vois les Pan C
 Je vois les cranes KC
 Je vois les mains DCD
 Je les M
 Je vois les pensées BC et les femmes ME
 et les poumons qui en ont AC de l’RLO
 poumons noyés des ponts NMI
 Mais la minute précédente est déjà trop AG

From letters to syllables, phonetic units are separated and then repeated in the form of other words or more than one lexical segment. Echoes and referential chaos generate suspicions about the meaning of the words. Sometimes easily identifiable, such as the recreation of the “Lord’s prayer” in phonetic units, the section is fundamentally made out of short poems where the poet seems to look for the limit of the poetic power of homophonies, more specifically of the paronomasias. These inaccurate homophonies explore what in linguistic is known as minimal difference between lexical unities. The effect of these inaccuracies is not just humoristic. To borrow Dumas’s term, they are also a “repli,” a double bind, a fold, and a tie to hold on to.

And popular culture plays a crucial role in producing *accrochages* out of quotidian, banal, experiences, especially the one Desnos decides to come back to the experience of listening to music on the radio. A striking example is the use of popular “airs” to provide first and foremost a musical encounter between the audience and the name of the advertised product. For instance, the song “Jambe en bois,” introduces the toy “Bonhomme en bois,” and “Claire de la lune,” the pasta “Pâtes la Lune.” About his predilection for folklore songs, Desnos writes:

⁹ It is interesting to remember that Derrida’s investigation in *La voix et le phénomène* on the contamination between expression and indication as defined by Husserl started by leading the ear to a suspect homonym: the word “sense” in German, *Zeichen*, an equivocality Husserl was not willing to bear.

En effet, ces airs que les puristes estimaient déshonorés par le matériel publicitaire qu'ils portaient entraînent néanmoins dans les oreilles de l'auditoire, ils s'inscrivaient dans leurs mémoire, ils surgissaient rajeunis." (Dumas 1990, 274)

Not only does radio advertising give new form to a part of musical folklore that seemed muffled, if not muted, but also the public, taken by something more than just the ear, by their auditive memory, can rejoice in the pleasure of recognizing a familiar tune coming from the radio. Desnos was thus aware that the conversation between these *airs* and the *matériel publicitaire* went on between perception, memory, familiarity, and renovation.

Despite not being spatial or related to any anatomical locus, sound, as something to hold on to, can serve as both a shortcut to the musical past and a snapshot of the present, renewing the link between them in a strictly modern way.¹⁰ Another example of this is the use of classical music such as Schubert's *Marche Militaire* as the theme tune, a deliberate attempt to irrigate most banal moments of quotidian life with "*la grande musique*." The unexpected "clash" between mass communication and "*airs classiques*" reinforces the sense of familiarity while recasting the boundaries between the latter and popular music.

Trans-national Sound Culture

National memory wasn't the only thing that fueled radio. The invasion of international voices into France's radio-wave territory was received with enthusiasm by Desnos, who, sensitive to sound's capacity to cross over boundaries, was overtly engaged in producing a *sound culture*. In *Robert Desnos and the play of popular culture*, Charles A. Nunley points out the trans-cultural potential of sound culture as it appears in Desnos's clandestine text "Le veilleur du Pont-au-Change." Nunley writes:

Throughout his text the poet, though associated in the title with the sense of sight ("veilleur"), repeatedly portrays himself in terms of the significance of sound and the power of transmitted voice: he is both a listener trying desperately to apprehend the voices that come to him from afar – "Je vous écoute et vous entend. Norvégiens, Danois, Hollandais, / Belges, Tchèques, Polonais, Grecs, Luxembourgeois, Albanais et Yougoslaves, camarades de lute" — and someone who himself calls out to others to join him in the struggle against oppression: "Je vous appelle dans ma langue connue de tous / Une langue qui n'a qu'un mot: / Liberté!" Replacing the isolated listener of the interwar period, Desnos in time of war comes to occupy an acoustic realm comfortingly people by a plurality of conjoined voices from near and far." (2018, 118)

¹⁰ Desnos writes: "L'oreille du public était déjà préparée à toutes les audaces. Le folklore ne tarda pas à devenir une mine d'indicatifs rendant sans qu'on s'en rende compte, un inappréciable service à la cause de la chanson populaire." (Dumas 1999, 790)

Putting himself in the place of radio, one in service of dissemination of other voices, Desnos reclaims a transnational network that subsequent worldwide wars had undermined. But the interest in the transnational capacity of sound predates “Le veilleur du Pont-au-Change.”

In 1928, when introducing Alejo Carpentier’s work on music, his friend and Studio Fonoric partner Desnos decides to reminisce about the pre-history of their partnership. He recalls his time in Cuba, the moment he met Carpentier, guided not only by music but also by all the sounds composing the soundscape of the place. I quote the passage almost in full not only because scholars have largely ignored it but also to provide a representative case of how sound culture came to occupy a privileged place in the way Desnos built personal, cultural, and political connections:

Des instruments étranges s’entrechoquaient et, sur tout cela, passaient l’immense plainte des cornets à pistons et celle de la mer. Je n’oublierai jamais ces musiciens noirs que je devais revoir, débardeurs le jour, sur le port, et, la nuit, danseurs magnifiques et obscènes [...] Et moins encore je n’oublierai la plainte fraternelle de ces chants nouveaux, à l’accent neuf mais qui, d’être plus humain qu’aucun autre, parlaient une langue qui m’était familière. Si familière que pour l’avoir entendue voici de longs mois j’en reste encore obsédé et bouleversé. Et que je garde à Alejo Carpentier la plus vive reconnaissance d’un tel cadeau et d’un tel accueil si fastueux. (Dumas 1999, 435)

The most interesting point about this passage is not the richness with which it describes Cuban soundscape. That is, indeed, quite striking but not surprising given Desnos’s interest in music. But what conveys the sense of *accrochage sonore* is the lasting feeling of familiarity that coexists with strangeness. As though the sound could reveal a shared space and time where Desnos and Carpentier had already met, as a nostalgic catalyst for a time they did not live, and yet, that it does not cease to return anew. In Desnos’s words, the memory of this encounter takes the form of a *cadeau*, a gift working like a promise to be revisited and reaffirmed as the repetition of “je n’oublierai jamais” gives away.

Finally, Desnos’s long-term work in the newspaper, and more importantly, his active participation in the French popular culture scene, allowed his work to engage with the politically dangerous context of the time. What I call “participation in the popular culture scene” is not limited to but it also takes the form of being a catalyst figure in the Parisian bohemian life. Every Saturday, at number 34 Rue Mazarine, together with Youki, his partner, Desnos entertained distinct members of the artistic Parisian scene such as Langston Hughes, John Dos Passos, the dancer Julia Tardy Marcus, Georges-Henri Rivière, Michel Leiris, as well as Léon-Gontran Damas, one of the *négritude* movement founders, and later, during the 1940’s Artaud’s psychiatrist Gaston Ferdière, Paul and Nusch Eluard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. These parties were a meeting point and a perfect exemple of what Paris represented at the time: a center of international collaboration from where most of the excitement and innovation in the arts

came from. From the abundant descriptions of these encounters, it is possible to notice that differently from the staged and ritualist seances in Breton's apartment, Youki and Desnos's parties aimed less at providing an opportunity for the guests to meet their illustrious host than to provide a space for enjoyment and freedom independent from veneration gestures or acolyte procession.¹¹ This bohemian context was also determined by extreme political positions, which Desnos can translate when writing about cabaret and local theater shows, movies, or trivial affairs. The political spin Desnos will try to give to his journalistic essays is a central point in Charles Nunley's analysis of some of Desnos's articles issued in the newspaper *Voilà* between 1933 and 1935. Moreover, one of the points his journalistic and earlier surrealist works had in common were themes such as the quest and the taste for adventure Desnos would manifest throughout his life. Radio was just another opportunity to reach different audiences and uncover topics he was deeply devoted to and whose political implications he was painfully aware of. One of the few members of surrealism to stay and work in France during the Occupation, he had to confront both autochthone and Nazi fascism. He will end his days still insisting on the capacity to relay voices, to reach yet another public, foster a variety of sensibilities, and give his voice and life to poetry before anyone else could take them from him.

¹¹ Carpentier describes them as follows: "Every Saturday there was a traditional party where guests had the absolute right to do anything they fancied: to play music on the phonograph, to examine the collections of rare objects, to climb up onto the library ladders, to cook, drink, perform acrobatics, flirt with one of the women guests—as long as they weren't interfering with someone else's interests" (Dumas 1987, 333).

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