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The Peculiar Silence of *The Boat That Rocked*

GB 2009, Regie: Richard Curtis, Darsteller: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Bill Nighy, Emma Thompson, Kenneth Branagh

Richard Curtis's film *The Boat That Rocked* (2009 henceforth TBTR) was never intended to be a documentary. Curtis has stated that pirate radio was to him a symbol of liberty and sex which seemed to have bloomed in those years, and it is that spirit, rather than any sort of historical accuracy, that he was seeking to capture. The film's documentary concerns thus stand closer to those of Mike Myers´ *Austin Powers* than Anton Corbijn's *Control*, but nevertheless, it above all mobilized a series of myths about the offshore era that have been cultivated since the boats were still at sea.[1] Indeed, in the wake of the film's release, a number of 'factual' stories about the era of offshore 'pirate' broadcasting began to appear that perpetuated the long-standing myths.[2]

The years between 1964 and 1967 saw a relatively rapid explosion of commercial 'pirate' radio stations broadcasting from outside territorial waters (either on ships or abandoned naval forts) into the United Kingdom. While the politics and motives of these vessels varied widely, they were all commercially financed, and most were lobbying to break the radio broadcasting monopoly held by the BBC, to allow commercial radio to be licensed onshore. One of their key selling points to listeners was that they offered a constant service of entertainment programming, in particular large amounts of ´light´ music, (long associated with commercial programming), which was not at that point available on the public service stations. Perhaps one of the most enduring myths about 'pirate' broadcasting is that there were only one or two ships (Radio Caroline and

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[1] The classic example is Paul Harris's *When Pirates Ruled the Waves* (Glasgow: Kennedy and Boyd [1968] 2007), penned 1966-7 while Harris was still in school and an enthusiastic listener. It is now in its 6th edition.

[2] John Walsh, 'The swashbuckling rock rebels of Radio Caroline' *The Independent,* 18 March, 2009 http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/the-swashbuckling-rock-rebels-of-radio-caroline-1647240.html

Radio London being the best known) and that it was primarily a British phenomenon. In fact, the UK was very late in the offshore game (in fact, there had been earlier onshore 'pirate' radios in Britain, but they were associated with separatist movements in Scotland and Wales). The first commercial offshore broadcaster in the North/Baltic Sea realm was Radio Mercur, which began broadcasting off the coast of Copenhagen in 1958. Mercur in turn had taken its inspiration from the US ship *Courier*, which broadcast the 'Voice of America' into southeastern Europe from the eastern Mediterranean. There followed Radio Syd (1960) and Radio Nord (1962) in Sweden and Radio Veronica (1960) in the Netherlands and Radio Antwerp (1962) in Belgium.

The film sets its fictional stage by stating two supposed historical 'facts' about the pirates´ challenge to public service broadcasting: the mid 1960s, during the era when some of the defining artists of British rock and roll were active, the BBC only played 45 minutes of rock and roll per day. By contrast, it claims, "pirate radio played pop and rock 24 hours a day". The film's narrative and visuals are based around this (historically faulty) binary opposition between the old, repressed and/or feminine national territory and the young, free, music- and sex-driven 'pirate' ship. It is especially important for the main storyline, the coming of age of the young man Carl (played by Tom Sturridge) on the boat. Having got into trouble in school, the young Carl is sent presumably in the summer of 1967, to spend some time with his godfather Quentin (Bill Nighy), who is manager (and resident) of Radio Rock. Carl becomes part of the homo-social world of the ship's DJs, some of whom are loosely based around actual personalities from the offshore era. Mostly through the eyes of Carl, the film tracks the interpersonal relations and conflicts (almost entirely to do with women) of the DJs interspersed with their on-air hijinks. His development as a character essentially involves his symbolic and psychological movement from the onshore world to the offshore world. While the characters claim devotion to rock and roll music (and indeed, two of them do in fact risk death) the film is ultimately about men who want to, attempt to, and occasionally manage to, have sex with women. The ship as ostensibly 'woman-free zone' (with the exception of the one lesbian woman who

does the cooking) thus provides most of the narrative tension. The other key storyline surrounds the activities of the repressed and bureaucratic British cabinet minister Dormandy (Kenneth Branagh) and his underling Twatt (Jack Davenport). They are driven by disgust at the station's lawlessness and the loose, fun-loving content ('they hate our freedoms' would be an apt gloss for these characters' motivations) to find a legal mechanism to stop the pirates from broadcasting.

Setting up this binary conflict makes for a narrative driven by desire for liberation in the form of music and sex. While this conflict serves the film's dramatic aims, it maintains a peculiar silence about the main driving forces of the historical situation: money and law. Except for an oblique reference to the government threatening Radio Rock's advertisers, the film excludes economics entirely from its chains of cause and effect. A case in point is the 'fact' cited at the start of the film about the amount of time per day that the BBC devoted to playing popular records. The statement is both roughly accurate, and somewhat misleading. The BBC´s Light Programme was indeed in part determined by the public service broadcasting ideals laid down by John Reith, its first controller, which held that radio should not just entertain, but improve its audience. Two other BBC channels provided more serious programming, while the Light Programme had as its remit all other forms of light programming and genres of music from rock and roll through to popular operatic arias. More specifically, however, the BBC was limited by contract in the amount of records it could play. Record companies demanded payment from the BBC for playing their products, whilst the musicians' unions demanded that a certain (large) proportion of the station's music be played by live, jobbing musicians. To an extent, they wanted to play more of what their audience wanted, but they were legally obliged not to.

The onshore/offshore contrast in the film also omits other forces of commercial broadcasting that existed in Britain at the time: above all, Radio Luxembourg. Since before WWII, the tiny nation of Luxembourg had used its position as a sovereign nation to develop commercial broadcasts for the countries that

surrounded it. In the early 1950s, it began broadcasting on the medium wavelength of 208m, which made it an easily available spot on the AM dial. Unlike the BBC, Luxembourg played many records. In fact, during the 1950s, Luxembourg had increased its emphasis on youth-oriented records in part in response to competition for advertising revenues from the British commercial television stations that came into existence in the middle of the decade. More than ever, Luxembourg looked to sponsorship from record companies, and in fact, the airtime for Luxembourg´s English pop music services were essentially owned by four major record companies Decca, Pye, Philips and EMI. After Ronan O'Rahilly, the impresario behind Radio Caroline, tried to get records by a band he managed played on Luxembourg, he discovered it was impossible, because they were on a competing label. It was as much this hermetically-sealed payola system as the BBC´s Light Programme that was the impetus for offshore radio in Britain.

If the film's assertion about the BBC´s 45-minute per day output is somewhat misleading, the assertion that the stations played pop and rock 24 hours a day reflects more the self-projections of some of the DJ´s and fans – as well as some of the most strident arguments against the stations - rather than their actual music programming. In many ways, they faced many of the same troubles in trying to identify and target their audiences as the BBC, and this was actually exacerbated by their commercial interests. While the stations were undoubtedly more oriented toward light and in some cases at some times of day pop music programming, Robert Chapman´s thorough and skeptical analysis of the pirates has shown that in the early months of Radio Caroline, the schedule was not much different than the Light Programme.[3] Over all, their exclusive associations with youth-oriented pop music, not to mention American styles of DJ delivery are grossly overestimated. Radio London, for example, was careful to market itself as an all-music station, rather than an all pop and rock station.

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[3] Robert Chapman, *Selling the Sixties: The Pirates and Pop Music Radio* (London: Routledge 1992)

In the film, as in popular memory and contemporary advertising, 'pirate' radio is almost synonymous with the light, portable transistor radio. Such radios are key points of several montage sequences in the film, showing people all over public and private space listening to Radio Rock. The portable device, which appeared in the late 1950s quickly became iconic, not just for a leisured, mobile lifestyle in general, but particularly for youth a mobility of realms of cultural consumption outside of domestic and familial spheres. One of the great ironies of this is that the relatively weak medium-wave signals were easier to pick up on the larger high-powered home sets with aerials. Signal boosting devices were often necessary to tune them in. Similarly, whilst many of the main DJ's on the 'pirate' stations were increasingly addressing a youthful pop audience, many of the big ad agencies like J. Walter Thompson that placed adverts on the offshore stations envisioned an audience of housewives (traditionally the targets of both consumer efforts as well as light music). Another offshore broadcaster, Radio 390, specifically targeted this audience and offered almost no pop or rock. These tensions, which posed a powerful dilemma to some of the pirates, also posed a challenge to the makers of the film. The montage sequences that are meant to show the broad-based popular audience of the pirate stations have to square this widespread appeal with the myth of exclusively the youth-oriented pop programming it also perpetuates: the resulting montage even shows images of old age pensioners rocking out to the latest hits. At one point later in the film, a claim is made that 93% of the nation was listening to the pirates. This preposterous figure is inadvertently another authentic historical detail: the pirate stations often inflated estimates of their audience in public debate and to their advertisers. They were undoubtedly popular stations, but their popularity rested in part on the variety of music they played in addition to pop and rock.

By substituting the conflict of music styles for the economic struggles at their core, the film actually mirrors some of the public debate at the time, but the caricature figures of Dormandy and Twatt hardly do justice to the position of the government. For most in Harold Wilson's Labour government, which was elected in 1964, the main issue with the pirate station was not their style of music, but the

fact that they were commercial stations, pressing for commercial licenses. Nevertheless, in many debates, the quality of the music, and in particular the (somewhat) American-style pop format was often held up as a reason why such stations should be shut down. Many in the rival Conservative party by contrast (not a party noted for its embrace of free love) supported commercial broadcasting. Such a stance gave them an opportunity to appear as populists, even whilst actually supporting big business interests. The terms of political debate of the time thus actually helped to construct some of the mythology that now surrounds the era, and that TBTR perpetuates.

Like other films Curtis has written and produced, TBTR uses the contrast between Britain and the US to help to construct images of Britain for a transatlantic audience. Just as Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill* and Andi MacDowell in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Philip Seymour Hoffman ('The Duke') plays the token American that throws the quirky British characters into relief. In *TBTR*, however, the American character (as well as a British DJ who has come back from the US) also serves as a piece of accurate historical detail. DJ's were in fact highly mobile throughout the Anglophone world, and many of the 'pirate' DJs were from North America, or had experience in places as far afield as Australia. Many had also worked for the British Forces Network overseas, which was lighter and more youth-oriented than the BBC. For such men – and the film relatively accurately picks up and emphasizes that this was a very much a male-gendered occupation, which was unique to the British pirates – particularly the pop-oriented pirate vessels did indeed create a space where they could develop a new style of radio. This was a far cry from the formal 'announcer' style of the BBC, but it was also somewhat different from the US-style that Radio London had tried to import part-and-parcel from the US. Indeed, the concept of the self-operating DJ, which had grown up in the US in part as a cheap way for local stations to produce radio output, encouraged the development of a radio personality, and even an expression of personal emotion. The British broadcasting historian Paddy Scannell takes Tony Blackburn, one of the DJs who got his start on the pirate

ships, as a key example of medium's potential for mass personability.[4] This is one aspect of 'pirate' broadcasting that TBTR does highlight, namely the range of styles, from the creative buffoon Simple Simon (loosely styled, probably, on Kenny Everitt) to the silent and sexy late-night DJ Midnight Mark. In highlighting such figures, the film does indeed stress the main creative force at the pirate stations, but at the cost of acknowledging that they were both frequently underpaid for their labour of love, and that the stresses on them came as much from the structures of the stations themselves than the conflict with the government onshore.

Beyond the personal level, which the film makes most visible, there was also an institutional level of Anglo-British confrontation on the 'pirate' vessels. Radio London, which was perhaps the best-known 'pirate' along with Radio Caroline, was set up by Texan oil entrepreneurs, wanting to set up US-style commercial broadcasting in Britain. They hired Philip Birch, who had worked for the influential ad agency J. Walter Thompson, as well as other ad men to run the station. Furthermore, some of the adverts, and even the shows on the stations, were American – notably syndicated programmes by US-based evangelical churches, which were carried at times by both Caroline and London. This, too, made for a strange contrast with many of the popular music programmes the stations carried. Indeed, the film shows a stand-off between station owner Quentin and the Duke, in which the Duke wants to say 'the F-word' over the air, whilst Quentin fears that this may drive the authorities against him. In reality, most of the pressure on the styles of announcing came from the economic forces, namely advertisers, wanting to make sure including their records, were given due respect and attention.

Once the film's internal narrative mostly draws to a close (Carl gets the girl) the film's external narrative draws to a climax as the government passes the Marine Offenses Act. This piece of legislation, which had been suggested by a resolution by the Council of Europe in 1965, made it illegal for a British citizen to

[4] Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (London: Blackwell, 1996), Chapter 6, 'Identity'.

work on or supply an offshore broadcaster as of August 14, 1967. It was wide-ranging, but did not, as the movie claims offhand, make it illegal to *listen*, which was not even banned during the Second World War. The law ended up being entirely a deterrent – there were dire warnings, but nobody was actually ever prosecuted under it. Most of the pirates did stop, but like Radio Rock in TBTR, Radio Caroline continued broadcasting for a short time. What stopped Caroline was its financial backers pulling out, and Caroline's two ships were taken off the air without any sort of formal announcement and towed to the Netherlands in the night of 2-3 March, 1968 by the owners. In TBTR, Radio Rock is threatened with invasion by British authorities and then the ship dramatically sinks, its crew rescued at the last minute by a Dunkirk-style flotilla of mostly female admirers.

Ultimately, in taking the small creative part of pirate broadcasting as its central whole, the film perhaps captures the spirit of the pirates, particularly the experience of many listeners. In so doing, however, it loses some of era's paradoxical tension between the new spirit of liberty and youth culture on the one hand, and the extent to which this culture was built on expanding structures of capitalism. These tensions ran straight through the entire pirate project and into the era that followed. The film ends its fiction as it began with historical facts, pointing out that in 1967, there were no more pop stations in Britain, but as of the film's making, there are 277 rock and roll stations. Ironically, one of the first of these was the BBC. Acknowledging the need expressed by the pirates, the BBC set up Radio 1, which was designed to cater at least in part, for some of the audiences the 'pirates' had addressed - and they had their choice among a number of suddenly out of work DJs to choose from. Whilst taking on many of these popular names, Radio 1 was not an exact clone of the pop pirates, but more of a hybrid. A short time later, commercial broadcasting was allowed under the guise of local broadcasting, and the first station, Capital Radio, started in London in 1973 – now owned by the giant Global Radio, which owns over 80 local stations in the UK.

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