

BBC
RADIO



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INVENTIONS IN SOUND

Hello, Raymond Antrobus here, I wanted to give more insight and context to this documentary, which you'll see appearing in italics as we go along.

The annotations you're reading now do not appear in the broadcast version of this programme.

Throughout the documentary there is a voice that reads out closed captions - some are real, some are drawn from my poems - it is the only non-human voice in the programme. Its readings are automatically generated, the tone is flat and emotionless...

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of time passing. Air pauses at night. Sound of separation. Radio of unsettled frequencies.

These captions are from a series of caption poems I wrote. The first of which was published by the Barbican which can be read here - <https://sites.barbican.org.uk/soundhouse-poemwithcaptions/>

[Sound of a radio tuning]

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Can you remember the first time you saw closed captions?

CAPTION VOICE: Music.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Turning on the subtitle setting so you can read the sound of a show.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of secret speech.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: I've always watched TV passively, I can't hear it unless it's turned up loud.

CAPTION VOICE: Music swells.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: But since the Lockdown started I've binged a lot of TV.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of doing nothing.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Reading the sound world of the shows I am watching has made me wonder about this act of translation

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of becoming visible.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: ...of how a sound is turned into a word.

CAPTION VOICE: Music ends.

MEG DAY: The earliest memory that I have of closed captioning was via Sesame Street.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Meg Day is a friend of mine, a poet and [Assistant Professor of English & Creative Writing](#) at [Franklin & Marshall College](#) in Pennsylvania.

I first met Meg Day when they invited me to be a resident poet at Franklin And Marshall College. I made some strong connections with them and their students and we have remained in touch since then. I recommend checking out Meg Day's poetry. This poem 'Elegy In Translation' is incredible - <https://lithub.com/elegy-in-translation-by-meg-day/>

MEG DAY: I remember very clearly, 'CLOSED CAPTIONING PROVIDED BY' and then it would cut to some kind of product or service, but then the commercial would not be captioned **[laughs]**. So I have this very distinct memory of the programming being, I don't know, valuable enough? Important enough to be captioned? But then also an understanding that captioning was not necessarily equitable or compulsory, because someone had to sponsor it. So there was something about television that seemed both real and not real to me? It was like when the captions were happening television was real and it was worth paying attention to. And then when there were no captions it turned into a different kind of, um I don't know, dramatic production? Where I'm like, 'oh! I can invent what's happening.' **[laughs]**

CAPTION VOICE: Gunshots. Car speeds off. Heartbeat. Gasping. Sirens. Heartbeat stops.

These are captions from the final scene of Menace 2 Society. A film I watched a lot as a kid, often at friends' houses with the volume low. It's a violent film and we didn't want to get caught watching it. I rewatched it for the first time as an adult under lock down. That iconic final scene is dramatised by slowing down time and sound.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: As a deaf person in the hearing world I know that there is no universal experience of sound. So how can we capture what it is? How do we turn sound into words? What is sound?

MEG DAY: [laughs] Oh... [sighs] It's a... I think it's a kind of mythology. It's, um, it's an inherited form, maybe. Just another way to [takes a deep breath] to understand the world? Deaf poet Ilya Kaminsky and I have talked a lot about sound being an invention of the hearing. Silence too. I think often about how our common understanding of sound is that it is natural and given and compulsory that it's just a thing that, um, I don't know occurs to us? [laughs] But if it is that sound is, you know, waves knocking around in the cave of one's head, and then processed in some kind of approximated but not necessarily universal way, then isn't sound just a metaphor? It's one way for experiences to touch.

CAPTION VOICE: Thunder. Sirens. Sobs. Wailing. Knocking. Knocking. Knocking. Door opens.

These captions are from the Leonardo Dicaprio version of Romeo and Juliet - another film I rewatched for the first time with captions.

MEG DAY: What is sound Raymond? [Laughs]

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Well, I mean, it's an interesting question for me because it makes me think of how, in literature, so much literature for so long, in the Western world, there's a kind of tone, which assumes this, kind of, universality. And there's just so much to undo [laughs] in that voice, and I think that undoing sound, or the kind of mainstream idea of sound, can be... I believe, and I don't, I don't yet have the language for it, but I believe it is a useful endeavour.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of sky splitting. Sound of emergency. Sound of heart accelerating. Sound of pain spreading. Sound of red hands. Sound of shadows behind a door. Sound of something inward. Sound of something invented.

I have a notebook of Captions that I had been collecting from TV shows. I went to the notebook and selected some that would dramatisise the Romeo and Juliet captions even more.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: So in the hearing world, relying on subtitles and closed captions is something that I've had to do growing up but for most of the time had been absent. Like if I was watching films, there weren't any, like, subtitles or closed captions on those VHS tapes. And I was thinking back through that recently, actually, and I went back to rewatch some of the films that I'd only watched as a kid, and that I'd never watched before with subtitles or closed captions. And I'm kind of... **[laughs]** kind of blown away by how... how many plots of the films I'd actually gotten wrong. Like, I've kind of made up my own story for what I didn't understand.

MEG DAY: **[laughing]** Yes... You just filled in the blanks... **[laughs]**

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Exactly, right? And so, if I'm honest, in some cases, I was quite disappointed with... with it because I was like, 'oh, I thought this whole other thing happens, this whole other universe, and it's... and it's just actually pretty straightforward.'

MEG DAY: What a disappointment! **[laughs]**

CAPTION VOICE: The sound of sun entering the bedroom. The sound of eyelids opening.

These captions are from Christine Sun Kim's 'Closer Captions' video.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Christine Sun Kim is an American sound artist based in Berlin. Her work inspired some of my thinking around sound and text. I had seen Kim rewrite captioned text from films in order to revise the listening experience from hearing centric to Deaf centric. In one interview Kim asks her audience, 'Does sound itself have to be a sound? Could it be a feeling, emotion or an object? Could time itself become a sound?'

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: So I actually just did a video called Closer Captions and that video for me is a video full of my interpretations, my decisions and me playing around with showing what options could be out there.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Kim uses American Sign Language so we're speaking via video call. The voice you're hearing is the voice of her interpreter, Beth.

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: Because I feel like captions have boundaries and they can be limited. And sometimes there is the question of who made these decisions to put these sound captions out, right? And there is a discussion in response of, like, but who in general should be making the kind of decisions about how subjective these captions should be? But that's not really my question, right. And that's not really what I'm doing. I don't always want poetic captions, it does depend on the context. Sometimes I just want to watch a movie where the word **[music]** in parentheses is good enough. And sometimes I want more information.

CAPTION VOICE: Mournful music that sounds like crying alone in an empty bar in 1920s Paris, you're wearing a tiny but fashionable hat - that you tip to the bartender as you order your fourth martini.

Again, these come from Kim's Closer Captions.

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: I'm not sure if you're familiar with the show, the Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt? For me, that's one of the shows that just has the best sound captions out there. The sound captions include feelings, emotions, like it'll say **[anticipating]** **[waiting]**, all those things are in the sound captions. And I get the feeling that those sound captions probably came from the script writer. And I'm not sure right? I'm always wondering - regardless of what I'm watching - who is the person responsible behind making these sound captions?

MEG DAY: I remember very clearly when Princess Diana died. I remember where I was, what I was wearing, where I was sitting, the time of day. And the announcement came over the closed captioning on a television program actually, like, covered the closed captioning with the news, the report that... that Princess Diana had died. And it felt a lot like the voice of God. That there was someone - or something - out there that can interrupt television **[laughs]** to tell you when important people die. And it gave me this sort of unexpected comfort that I think kind of persists, like, I don't have great attraction to television in general, I don't watch a lot of television. And you know, movie theaters are a whole different deal **[laughs]** as you know. But I do find that when the captions are compulsory, when, you know, you go to a streaming service and it has remembered your settings, and the captions just appear, and they're in real time, they're not delayed. You know, everything's working smoothly. There is this kind of comfort, where I'm like, 'ah, I recognise it in my body'. And I think that... I think that's tied back to this sense that there is someone or something out there that can send you a message through captioning at any time. **[laughs]**

CAPTION VOICE: Muffled. Sound of one story. Heart accelerating. Sound of skin covering bodies.

I wrote these captions originally for my book of poems, 'All The Names Given'.

CALUM DAVIDSON: We do try and remove as much subjectivity as possible.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Calum Davidson is a captioner, or what some may call "The voice of God", he also trains others how to caption films and TV.

CALUM DAVIDSON: When there are sounds that we're trying to describe, we try and be really careful about what we're... what we're doing about that because we don't want to give away the game early. If it's horror films...

CAPTION VOICE: Low thud and creaking.

These are Calum's own captions from The Woman in Black.

CALUM DAVIDSON: You know, if you describe the sound of a...

CAPTION VOICE: Creaking, rhythmic thudding.

CALUM DAVIDSON: ...the sound of a ghost approaching down the hall...

CAPTION VOICE: Rhythmic thudding grows louder. Thudding and creaking grows faster.

CALUM DAVIDSON: ...you don't use the word ghost in the description.

CAPTION VOICE: Raindrops drumming.

CALUM DAVIDSON: ...because that's it, you know, you're depriving somebody the opportunity to actually discover that at the time the program maker wants them to discover it.

CAPTION VOICE: Thunder crashes. Distant music box tinkling.

CALUM DAVIDSON: We get a lot of feedback about quiz shows, giving away the answer in the question, which is just rule number one man that's like, where **[laughs]** some of these people come in. Don't put the question up on the same caption as the answer, like, that's just rubbish! Jokes as well - comedy shows - don't give the punchline away with a build up, like it's... you have to let people come to it in their own time.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Are captions a transcription or a translation of speech and sound? What assumptions do captioners have to make about their audience?

CALUM DAVIDSON: Taking dialogue and putting it into text - there's a translation there because people don't speak in regularly punctuated sentences. And they don't finish their sentences they um and they ah and there's abandoned thoughts half the way through that if we transcribed it word for word... when you read a transcription like that, it's really difficult to... to understand. Now that might be the point in some cases. We have quite a lot of debate about how closely to transcribe politicians, for example, some politicians. Where they prevaricating or **[laughs]** talking around a subject and umming and ahing is quite revealing. But if you take that to the other extreme, where it's someone who's being interviewed, who is upset... I don't know

someone that's gone through something horrendous. And they are stammering... because it's difficult to talk about. You might indicate the stammer a little bit in the captions. But you're not going to write every... every vowel sound they make, you're not going to write every... every noise they utter, because it starts to look quite insensitive, you know. We walk quite a tightrope but we do tend towards objectivity, we try and make it as fact-based - and as brief - as possible. If you can read it, instantly take it in, and then move on with the film - that's what we think a successful caption is. It's been interesting thinking about this because it's started to make me question quite a lot of what we take for granted in that.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of wider seeing.

I wrote this caption originally for a poem that appears in my next book of poems, 'All The Names Given'.

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: Something I would have loved is like a degree-o-meter, if you will, of like, how much information in my sound captions do I want? And something that I could toggle on a spectrum, right? 'Today, I'd like only a little bit of sound captioning detail. And tomorrow, I want a ton'. Or if I could ask for who I'd want to be the sound captioner! Today, I want Person A and tomorrow, I want Person B to do the sound captioning.

MEG DAY: I have favourite interpreters for, um, particular events or scenarios, different styles of interpreting, different topics or environments in which they really excel. And I... I'd love for that to be the case with captioners. Like I want to know who they are and what their style is. And I want to, you know, go see a film based on who the captioner is. I think that that might make a huge, like... can we get baseball cards, you know? [Laughs] Like, I think that it probably requires a great amount of skill. And I just, yeah, I would love to know more about that and then have, I don't know, have some kind of choice about it.

LINDSEY DRYDEN: For me, and from a storytelling point of view, sound is a sort of emotional space, and a... and a non-literal space... I think it's about perspective. Giving people the opportunity to experience somebody's perspective.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Lindsey Dryden is a filmmaker and founding member of FWD Doc an organisation that's seeking greater inclusion of D/deafness and disability within the entertainment industry.'

LINDSEY DRYDEN: Part of what we really encourage people to do is to think about captioning and audio description as an embedded part of the storytelling. You're not just adding on something ugly and irritating at the end, it's the very opposite of that. This is... this is like a whole strand of how you tell your story, how you give your audience the opportunity to engage with your... your characters, your... your storytelling perspective. You know, there's that short

film called Dawn of the Deaf, directed by Rob Savage. And there's a couple who are BSL users in that film. And there's a point in the film where they're having an argument.

CAPTION VOICE: I just feel everyone looking at us. I can't talk to you right now.

These are subtitles from Dawn of the Deaf.

LINDSEY DRYDEN: And we only get to see the parts of the captions on screen, that the audience would be able to see if they could read their lips. You're only given access to part of the perspective and I think that kind of approach to language and to communication has to be embedded in our... in our kind of storytelling more generally. So I think we are at a time of exciting opportunity.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of distant radio.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: So this is my first time making a radio programme and I'm conscious of making something in a medium that excludes us - D/deaf people - hard of hearing people. How do I create work that doesn't privilege a hearing audience? I have written the transcript for this show, something that I hope offers an even richer version of this work than the audio version. And I wanted to ask Deaf artists what their relationship is to radio as a medium. I wanted to know if I was going to achieve a richer non-hearing centric show, what can I learn from them?

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: I have a little bit of a relationship with the radio. For me growing up, my parents didn't really, like, use the radio that much. But reading history books, I saw that FDR would give his fireside chats and families would sit around and listen to the radio and the radio seemed to indicate times that families would get together and spend time together. And I understood that through history books, right. And I knew also growing up that when my friends and I were driving around, we'd play around with the radio in the car, right, and we'd try to find a station that had some bass and we'd just drive around with some bass, right? Like, if we could feel that beat, we would just kind of go through all the channels, we've no idea, right, but if we could feel that sensation in the car, that was a connection.

[Music - 'Cellophane' by FKA Twigs]

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: So for me radio almost means like a search, and a search that happens like in an enclosed space.

[Music swells]

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: Radio also works better in an enclosed space, because then you can feel those vibrations as a vibrational device.

CAPTION VOICE: Place your hand on the radio.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: I've been thinking about something Meg Day said in an interview. I'm going to read the quote, "I was obsessed with the radio because the radio is a thing that you can put your hand to and feel. It's like a drum. You can feel the rhythm, the beat. I think just fascination with sound, and then this intense obsession with trying to fill my poems with sonic play. I was often told that my poems needed sounds that leap across the field instead of sounding like some jackhammer in a city."

CAPTION VOICE: Music ends.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: I resonate with this. Because it's something that I too am interested in. As a kid - I would listen to the radio - but it would be this thing that would get me into trouble because I had to turn it up too loud for everyone else. My parents and my neighbours... So I'd have to record the shows that I wanted and wait until everyone was out the house and play them through the tape with the sound up. I ask Meg this question, poet to poet, how might we make radio lean into us... into our sound? In a similar way to how - as poets - we make poetry lean into us?

MEG DAY: I wish that the radio would lean into its own... physical quality. I think that there's a lot of like, really technically cool things about radios, but I would love if they were built for Deaf folks. You know, like, um, my partner and I are expecting a child. And it's COVID, which is wild for Deaf folks, as you know, with masks and you know, we went to the appointment and they're, they're finding the heartbeat and everyone's, you know, being weird in the room. Everyone's so sad that they're gonna find this heartbeat and I won't be able to hear it. And so they find the heartbeat, you know, everybody's faces light up in the room. They're like **[sound of gasping]** like, are you seeing... And I'm like, well, can I hold the monitor? You know - and I know that you know this - that when you use your hands for things, especially language, your sense of touch is something otherworldly, is absolutely wild, right? And so, I'm... I'm holding my kid's heartbeat in my hand. Like, I'm holding my kid's heart right there in my hand, and it's like, my whole arm is vibrating. They've got it turned up so high, and it's like, it's the radio all over again, except that it is the future. **[Laughs]** And so I think of that, and I think of the way that sound is a kind of synesthesia, for so many people, regardless of whether or not we call them Deaf kin, and I wish that the radio... the radio as if it's, you know, the radio people out there... would understand that and then and then make them with us in mind. Make them with, like, high reverb materials. Make them with an 'I'm alone in my house' version of the volume. I just... I think that there's so much untapped potential for experiencing sound as what it is, which is... which is mythology absolutely, but... but also physical vibration.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: This is actually one of your own questions that you ask your audiences in your work. And I'm curious to what you have to say to this today, where you're... where you're at now. But what is sound?

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of interpretation.

I like how the time that passes while this caption is read matches the time it took Christine Sun Kim to receive my question from Beth, her ASL interpreter.

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: So I think I answer this question differently every time. But a long time ago, I answered that question with a response that I think is still applicable now. But to me, sound feels a little bit expensive. Every time I need to exercise my place, my space, my position in the world, I need an interpreter. That's how the world works, right? Like I could do without an interpreter - typing back and forth - but there's nothing as fluid or as immediate as being able to bring in an interpreter for that. And for me, what's really interesting about that process is the interpreter's voice and my voice become one, right? And it feels like dating. Like, if I didn't like Beth, we're screwed for this interview. **[Beth laughs]** Thank God, though we like each other but... **[Laughs]**

MEG DAY: So we're Deaf folks on the radio. **[Laughs]** And no one can see us right now. They can't see Emily (*Meg's interpreter*). And so we just sound like regular fools on... on radio, right. And so I'm thinking a lot about the visibility of access. I think about it in terms of captioning also - the evidence of access - the presence of an interpreter or, or captioning is, is one of our kinds of visibility as Deaf folks. And it brings me really closely and swiftly to a question of, of lip reading and speech reading, with masks, not having access to this form of interaction right now.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Just before lockdown, my last reading was at the 'Hidden Hearing convention' for audiologists. I was invited into their labs and shown more advanced hearing aids than my NHS ones. I was given new digital hearing aids which sync with all my devices, my computer, phone, TV and doorbell, everything is coordinated sonically in a way that is new. For the first time I can hear through the walls. In lockdown there have been reports that some Deaf and hard of hearing people have suffered double the intensity of isolation because of deafness. Despite the power of my new hearing aids I hate that they are hidden, invisible to most eyes. It has meant that going out to shops and everyone being masked, I can't lip read and have to keep pointing out my hearing aids so my deafness is understood. There are many days that I don't want to think about deafness let alone explain it to hearing people, but the state of the world now doesn't give me that luxury.

CHRISTINE SUN KIM: In the US, we've got like a term called HPA. I'm not sure if you're familiar with it, but it stands for Hearing People Anxiety. It's kind of like a new term that's kind of come out. I think younger Deaf people are using this term. And it just means like, whenever you go to any kind of situation where you realise that everyone's going to be hearing and no one knows sign language, it doesn't matter if that's a party, the bar, a lecture, you get that anxiety, where you know that no one's going to be able to understand you in that sense, and you kind of have to build up your resilience to get through the event. I don't personally lip read, I don't speak. And so for me, finding that accommodation between myself and a hearing person to communicate is

a little bit more work. And so the anxiety that I feel around that we call HPA and I think that that's also maybe a syndrome that we experienced growing up as well and in a way that we felt not on equal grounds with the people that we interacted with. A lot of us, by default, become activists because we've spent a lot of our lives fighting to get and ensure our basic rights. Whereas hearing people don't even question that right. The system is ready and made for them. They don't encounter that many barriers, if any at all.

All the captions that are about to appear were taken from my notebook of captions I'd been keeping for a year or so now.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of ending with a question.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: What is sound to you? What kind of relationship do you have with it? What kind of relationship do you want with it?

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of revealing a lie.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: I discovered a while ago that the idea that we have five senses is not quite true.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of forest renewing.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Poets, artists, free-thinkers and those living with synesthesia know we can combine senses and develop a language for them which can become something new. A sound can become a sight...

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of garden withering.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: ...a feeling...

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of astonishment.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: ...something that we invent.

CAPTION VOICE: Sound of newer names.

RAYMOND ANTROBUS: Sound of newer names.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]