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## Children of Sodom and Gomorrah: a critical reflection

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## Children of Sodom and Gomorrah: a critical reflection

### Abstract

This essay is an exploration and critical *sounding* of the multi-award winning radio feature *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah: why young Africans flee to Europe* (ARD 2009/ABC 2011) by the Berlin radio author/journalist and director Jens Jarisch. The reviewer, Virginia Madsen, finds something close to a dialectic approach in this unforgettable and searing 'radio film', but also the resonances of what she explores as 'allegorical thinking'. Jarisch, even if unconsciously, appears to have dug down deep into the modern-day ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, a 'no place' in Accra, Ghana where children eke out a living, forfeiting their childhoods and risking death to recycle our computer waste, before they flee to find a better life in Europe. This program takes on mythical fabular proportions while offering a journalistic 'investigation' based on actual field recordings and the witness of Jens Jarisch in his role as 'reporter' and writer. But what is discovered here goes far beyond everyday journalism and reportage, Madsen argues. Offering her reflections of this 'radio fiction' documentary or 'acoustic film', and drawing on references and dislocations experienced from her listening and research, she encourages us to tease out this tapestry of voices coming as if from an 'underworld', and surfacing from the depths and pandemonium to disturb our western 'paradise'.

Madsen understands and *imagines* this program as a pilgrim's journey between heaven and hell and purgatory as she sounds out key correspondences and dislocations the program evoked for her. Madsen was on a journey of her own when she first encountered this dream of paradise in Africa, an epic tale (Old Testament yet contemporary) of the blessed and the damned. Her essay speaks of the phenomenology of listening in that encounter, the underestimated power of a writing with the microphone and of the history of 'radio feature' culture, especially in Germany. Madsen responds to the depths this program sounds out as it invokes the voices of the dead and of the living, of hope, despair and longing in the face of overwhelming silence and noise. The interweaving of voices in this 'impossible dialogue' and 'play for voices' succeeds in writing itself onto our memories like a fable. And even if we remain fearful that nothing changes, the reviewer finds here something of great value and power that challenges us to listen beyond paradise. (And then maybe to act?) This is not quite Dostoevsky although he is invoked (as are Virgil, Dante and Breugel), but perhaps we come close to something that sounds like 'evidence in a trial': one of the many 'wild ideas' offered by great feature making traditions in radio.

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### Keywords

Jens Jarisch, Sharon Davis, Africa, refugees, environment

# Children of Sodom and Gomorrah

Author: Jens Jarisch (ARD Germany 2009; ABC Australia 2011).

**Full Credits:** English language direction for the ABC: Sharon Davis, with sound production by Russell Stapleton. Original script, direction and interviews in Africa and Europe: Jens Jarisch. Australian narrator: Rebecca Massey; translation voices: Josef Ber and Thuso Lekwape. 'The reporter': Jens Jarisch. Translation is not credited but appears to be by the author (2009). Produced for *360 Documentaries* by ABC Radio National, Sydney, Australia, 2011. Duration: 53'38".

**Original Production:** Title: *Kinder von Sodom und Gomorrha: Warum afrikanische Jugendliche nach Europa flüchten*. Further Credits: Music: Dela Botri, S.K. Kakraba, Leye Mbaye. Research and assistance for the original production: Katja Giersemehl; with support from the Film Foundation of North Rhine-Westphalia and the Goethe Institute in Accra, Ghana. A Feature Department production by Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg with Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Westdeutscher Rundfunk and Südwestrundfunk (rbb/NDR/WDR/SWR) together with the Norwegian broadcaster Norsk rikskringkasting, (2009).



Photo: Jens Jarisch

## Reviewer: Virginia Madsen

I will begin this review essay with my memory of first listening to this 'feature', a kind of movie for the ears, by Berlin-based author Jens Jarisch. I am recalling close to the beginning of this unforgettable near one-hour documentary as I heard it on its first broadcast on the ABC network Radio National on the show 360 Documentaries, but as a downloaded mp3 podcast.<sup>1</sup>

Over drums, I hear a boy's voice (the accent and *grain* (Barthes 1977) lead me to understand *he is African*): 'You have to strive for yourself, and fight for yourself,' he announces, 'even if you have to die for striving for yourself.' The drums then cut to something like a child's scream, words of 'Oh my God' in English, and then a commotion of voices, men, objects, crying, something breaking or falling, those words again invoking a god, and actuality I will only be able to identify later which continues until the drums reappear, rise briefly then are cut to silence. A female voice then speaks in the space created by the silencing of all that mammon – an artificial calm perhaps – but it is an intimate almost comforting voice invoking and addressing another imagined but not yet fully revealed *you*: **'There is a place you find in your dreams...'** the new voice intones, **'when your life seems to have no way out.'**

I remember thinking, is this 'she' narrator speaking to me? Is the child we have just heard the one addressed? Of whom, to whom, does she speak? What is happening in this journey which, as we know from the title, cannot bode well? In this confused chaos gathering like a storm, have we arrived at our scheduled destination? Is this where we will find answers, 'on the scrapheaps of Sodom and Gomorrah'?<sup>2</sup>

A new voice breaks into my reverie: an eruption of something like laughter from amidst the noisy actuality. As quickly as it started however, this outburst will be cut short – as if by the will of the unusual female 'guide' who continues as before, seeming to draw together all the sounds and voices I'm hearing like threads into a tapestry: **'And there is another place you really end up in'**, she says, **'when there is no place left for you to live'.**

This narrator's words might have been a coda – but this is only the beginning of a journey, which most simply seeks answers to the question asked by a lone reporter in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Germany: why do young Africans flee to Europe? The first African boy's words were already a way of offering something akin to an epigraph to the epic tale which follows, and before we cross the Acheron-like waters separating a 'them' from 'us' like the multitudes of the damned from paradise. A different boy appears next, probably African and identifiably from the reporter's on-location recordings. The boy adds to the scene's building cataclysmic vision: **'...always here is burning...'** he states plainly, and to the reporter who is as yet unannounced; **'here is Old Testament'.**

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<sup>1</sup>The original German program won for Jens Jarisch and the ARD, the 2010 Prix Italia award for 'radio documentary - for overall quality'; and the Premio Ondas 2010 for 'Best Radio Programme Internationally'. Later an English language version, produced by the ABC, Australia, and directed by Sharon Davis, won the Directors' Choice Award in the 2011 Third Coast/ Richard H. Driehaus

<sup>2</sup> From the English language version, ABC 2011. (Text: Jens Jarisch). 'According to the Bible, God rained down fire and brimstone to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. "Sodom and Gomorrah" is also what officials in Accra, Ghana, have come to call a part of their city plagued by toxins of a sort the residents of the Biblical cities couldn't even have imagined.' In *The Children of Sodom and Gomorrah: How Europe's Discarded Computers Are Poisoning Africa's Kids* (Clemens Höges, Spiegel Online, 12/04/2009). This article from the German magazine *Der Spiegel* is linked on the ABC webpage for the first broadcast of the Australian version. See <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360/children-of-sodom-and-gomorrah/2956122>

I am listening to this podcast alone, as the train I am in takes me home from work. An advertising picture-perfect vision is what I see as the train speeds along past the flooded river valley of the Hawkesbury with its near-pristine bushland and sandstone outcrops rising in steep angles before my eyes. A kingfisher skims the surface of the still water, its reflection creating for a brief moment two arcs of dark line against the blue of sky and river. It is beautiful. This is the end of the day and a soft light from the encroaching dusk mixes with the remains of eucalyptus haze creating multi-coloured shadows as the train weaves through forest and water. I listen with my headphones and allow the scene conjured by this other play of voices and pandemonium to settle on this already in-between world.

As I listen, a sound picture is emerging of *this place* – a *no place* – which it will soon be explained, does not actually appear on any register or map of Accra, Ghana. It is also where *you* must live. Or, some of *you* find yourselves here I'm told, to lose your childhoods working in the mounting refuse and filth which this place has become. *You* are there, we can hear you, tearing apart 'our' computer screens to deliver back to us the precious metals inside – and which have been transported to this site because as the reporter discovers, *we* care more about what (and who) is coming into our paradise world, than what is going out. *Your* labour (you are one of many children) delivers to you only small change as you extract these saleable yet mostly toxic metals in a baptism of fire...

Imagining life unfolding here, as if *you* had been exiled from your own history and that of the North, I begin to feel the atmosphere of this place your elders have aptly renamed Sodom and Gomorrah. There are images also, not quite fully formed, which now usurp the others my eyes still register in the fading light of the train journey. There are some strange resonances and dislocations too between the unencumbered images of nature and water speeding past me, and the blue lagoon I'm told once existed before this 'secret city' established itself and spread, receiving its new name and incumbent mythology. **'In the middle of Accra, twenty... thirty years ago... there was a lagoon'**, our narrator informs us as if this were the beginning of a children's story, as if she were describing also a paradise lost. **'And it was blue!'** another female voice identifiably African replies, as if she were responding to the narrator as interlocutor, but this conversation only comes courtesy of the miracle of digital editing.

My attention (and imagination) is directed by these sounds I hear in the program too – an African world which spans Morocco to Mali, the Sahara to Warsaw, with airports and ports in between, and Europe; but here, immediately, we identify an outside location, a shanty town of eternal hammering, hawking, metal and men... surely not a children's world, of shouting, barking, despair and sometimes laughter, of deafening music rising from demolitions, brothels, chickens, crime, slums. Rising out of this 'old Testament' cacophony, the author/s of this 'radio film' have directed my attention to a group of agitated men who discharge their abuse at someone or each other. This must be I imagine, what is occasioning the child's distress that I have already heard. Their angry voices seem to betray the fact that we are in the wake of, or on the precipice of, some violent 'incident' yet to be fully divulged.

Following the unidentified narrator's words made more ominous by the surrounding montage, the listener detects the complexity represented in this release of emotion from the child in the foreground. The tears could almost be sobbing, but instead seem unnaturally to be held back. The weight of this absence speaks clearly and poignantly via the microphone's *auscultation* of trauma and of barely contained fear. It seems the author's choice to include such small 'cuts' so early on is precisely to allow us to feel the increasing pressure of this poisoned atmosphere we

have entered, and to dread its full revealing which will come in time. I am afraid also for *this real child* here in the present tense of my listening, even as the commentary given us via the narrator can only be speaking of what has already happened. Coming from the future, this narrator may not be able to change the past, but through her we might be offered a space to listen, and to reflect upon this blighted world and 'your' *and our* interactions within it.

Who is this *you*, we can again enquire. This *you*, as we are beginning to understand, is surely a complex multiple interpellation directed at this child who cries, nameless, and to that child who is about to be swept away by forces he is too young to comprehend or fight off. This is also the *you* the reporter meets in the village north of Accra, before you will leave home forever – a child who still has a name, but already in fear of its theft, writes the names of kin on the flesh of his upper arms, as if this were the only way of keeping safe the knowledge of who one is, and where one belongs. The narrator tells us these details we should note, not 'the reporter' – and we might ask why is this? Is not the *you* here the reporter, but also one child and 'every child', the named and unnamed, boy or girl, as well as the outcast who would be hunted down 'like an animal', hiding in the mountains of Morocco? The multiple is always singular in this bounded Africa, the singular multiple, as is the way with allegorical forms.

The *you* here is beyond that of any individual child who suffers, lives, dies. And this child, like the ghost they can become, without papers and grown up, searching for food by night, running by day from the military police...keeps switching places and locations with the others, one child after another, until his final speaking to us as a young adult, before he takes the last step in a long journey. This voice, multiple yet individuated, is the real protagonist in a story which reaches far beyond that of everyday journalism.

The narration and structuring of the program, as a kind of play for voices, does this 'big picture' stuff, working on the level of reality and myth so as to allow us to connect to the thousands of epic journeys young Africans will try to make every year to escape the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah; but more importantly perhaps, the mixing of reality and allegorical forms by the radio feature maker opens a space to sense meaning in some kind of corporeal way, not purely as information, but for us to experience the weight, even density, of these children's extraordinary wagers against death. The feature here hones in on seemingly small details, of individual lives captured by a chance encounter. Our own reactions are ciphered through the figure of the traveller: 'the reporter' (again, a character and the real Jens Jarisch) who comes and goes in this place with some risk attached, but unlike the child, is able to move freely and easily in the two worlds. In some senses, the reporter might be considered to function like the pilgrims of the western literary canon (such as we find in Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*) who make the journey to hell or Hades, inspect the state of lost souls in purgatory, enter unharmed, but not unmoved, make a record of what they see there before re-entering their world...and if the damned could name it anything, they might call it paradise.

This is a documentary in one sense then; but on another level, it is not what we are used to hearing on the radio, where such a pilgrimage in search of an answer by a reporter/journalist might yield moments of actuality and witness, to be then combined with quite familiar content like topical information, statistics, scripted links and expert interviews. Even the so-called 'experts' Jarisch has interviewed become subjects for deconstruction through hermeneutic scrutiny. A '**border control practitioner by profession**' as one man describes himself from the European agency called 'Frontex', is edited in such a way that his Kafkaesque officialese not only is exposed to ridicule, but deconstructed before our ears. Into every section where this

man responds to Jarisch's simple series of questions, commenting on African illegal migration to Europe, answering the seemingly 'naïve' reporter, his words are as if prised apart while another male narrator voice (older, western) is inserted. There is a particularly striking example which heightens our perception of the differences between the two worlds separated by the Mediterranean and the host of agencies **'whose task it is to secure Europe's external borders'**:

**I'm a border control practitioner by Profession, so I'm a practical [pause, word inserted: 'CONTROL'] practitioner [word inserted 'TECHNICAL'], professionally oriented [OPERATIONAL], a Director of a Co-ordinating body...**

Of course what we decide to do with this 'dialogue'/commentary as listeners is up to us. This radio documentary also has some of the features of a story or fable being recited to children. We begin at the beginning, not quite 'once upon a time', but in a place which might also have been paradise. We begin, somewhat gently, urged on by the characters' comments, and from children so young their laughter cannot be corralled, nor their tears controlled. There is more than one guide to help us when we do not, cannot, understand. The narrator reassures us – even though her words speak of despair and the cruelty of this place off any map, and where all you can do is hope to survive, make some money and begin your journey to that real paradise in your dreams beyond the desert and the sea, called 'Europe'. **'The lagoon is dead'**, our storyteller informs us, **'as black as soot'**, she says, seeming to respond to an African woman writer brought into the telling, who did make it out of somewhere in Africa as a refugee, and who she recalls now, remembered when this water was blue. The narrator knows the future, as all storytellers do, and like a 'voice of God', not just the present or the past. The images of waste slowly decomposing...of drinking water we are told now **'only comes in little blue plastic bags carried in baskets on the heads of girls who sell it shining in the sun, like the artificial blue of a swimming pool'**, is beyond everyday reportage. It assumes the address and trajectory of allegory, as it also enlarges the field of meanings available to us (and to its author) through the scope and forms more familiarly advanced by fiction and myth.

It is interesting to reflect on the figure of the microphone here too in the *diegesis* (as a character in the world portrayed by the feature). The outcomes of serendipitous encounters by the reporter are recorded easily by the microphone: this is even remarked upon by the narrator/guide in a scene when the reporter is confronted by the thugs who work for the bosses of Sodom and Gomorrah. He goes with them to their surprisingly 'ordinary' office located inside the boundaries of this city within a city. It is not so different from those where he comes from in Europe: air-conditioned, efficient, **'portable computers flicker in silence'**. In contrast to the camera, the microphone does not seem particularly visible or powerful, hardly able to accuse, let alone convict.

**One decisive circumstance preserves the reporter from enduring hassle: he has not taken any photographs or filmed – he has only recorded sounds – which the men now listen to, wrinkling their foreheads, and being bored very soon.**

Compared to the camera, the microphone seems neither to be noticed, nor to announce itself strongly to the overlords of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is therefore underestimated and overlooked. Thus the officials in the office with file upon file headed **'Hamburg'** (the source of so much of the computer waste here which should never have been exported), will miss when our reporter turns on his recorder again and captures unnoticed their collusion with a corrupt government in turning children into mere **'units of labour.'**



The microphone is neither pen nor sword – which is lucky, for the reporter is able to record with it crimes which might otherwise be invisible, and to share something he still believes in, something we might call ‘truth’. The microphone here also seems to act like a membrane and barometer transmuting something like the emotional atmosphere, its violent intensities, and the invisible forces like longing, hope and despair. It is able to do this with the material of sounds and words, and in the gaps between these. It seems also to offer to us through the possibility of *auscultation*, a diagnosis – which we might hope is the first step towards ridding the organism of disease.

This radio feature also comes in the form I think of a mosaic-like painting, resembling the allegorical art of a Pieter Breugel (or a Hieronymus Bosch) and offers the hearer multiple ‘scenes’ within the larger picture for us to zoom in on, all within one bounded space, so that we can experience the whole as well as the detail, the ordinary life lived, then zooming out, its mythical and allegorical dimensions.

Unusually this is a journey for multiple subjects as I have discussed. It is also a story driven and bounded by realities, but propelled by a distinctive writing in sound, which draws on long journalistic, non-fiction and fictional forms, in addition to more specific radio feature making traditions. In this *feature* (and this is how it is introduced by its author), we can detect the influence of a rich German Radio-Feature<sup>3</sup> tradition as it has been developed and remade following World War II. This is a tradition transported from the British BBC features culture (its origins in the 1930s) and brought to German public broadcasters during the reconstruction period. (Madsen 2005; Madsen 2010) In places like Berlin and Hamburg in particular, a vibrant culture of the feature emerged from 1945, and this was marked by the experiments of writers who on the one hand modelled themselves on British feature making, and on the other hand, later came to challenge the BBC Features Department’s emphasis on literature and the ‘written feature’. Founding writers at NWDR in Hamburg, for example, like Ernst Schnabel and Axel Eggebrecht, explored documentary features which aimed to communicate and comment upon reality, past events, people and contemporary ideas and issues in novel ways.

The development of high quality portable recorders and stereo in the 1960s was an impetus for innovation and extended forms of expression in Berlin radio feature making. Peter Leonhard Braun, described as ‘the godfather’ of a European feature movement which emerged from the *Features* department of Sender Freies Berlin (SFB)<sup>4</sup>, advocated something new again: ‘the acoustic film’. Braun proceeded to make radio features with colleagues and technicians, emphasising recorded sounds from life/the field and using newly developed precision microphones, montage and *mise-en-scène* techniques to create these new wave radio

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<sup>3</sup> This is the common title for the form in German radio today (written also as Radiofeature), ‘Originalton-Feature’, ‘Feature’ (dating from 1945), akustischen Feature (P. L. Braun). Hörfolgen and Hörbilder (which predate the English terms) are also occasionally used. Lindemann writes that the feature can be all these subsets, including reportage documentary, but what distinguishes it from fictional forms such as Hörspiele or the radio play is that ‘the feature must convince the listener that what he hears is the truth. That the problems dealt with, the people involved, are real, not fiction.’ Even here, he writes, ‘the boundaries have long since become blurred’ and he proffers another extended definition from former feature maker at the BBC, John Theocharis: ‘A feature is an acoustical work that uses the manifold possibilities of sound radio to enable factual information to stir the imagination of the listener...and at the same time to sharpen his perception of the world and of human existence’. (in Lindemann 1987: 1)

<sup>4</sup> Translates as Radio Free Berlin. This station was formed in 1955. In 2003 it merged with an East German station to become Radio Berlin-Brandenburg (Rbb). This station was the principle producer of Jarisch’s *Kinder von Sodom und Gomorrha* (2009). It produces many features each year, cultivating radio ‘auteurs’ who ‘write with the microphone’. (See Madsen 2010) P.L. Braun was also the person behind the establishing of the International Feature Conference (IFC), which promoted an expanding international ‘culture of the feature’ as he described it (Madsen 2005; 2010). For Braun, the ‘feature’ ‘could not be nailed down with regard to either its form or its contents’; it was ‘an idea’, ‘wild’ and ‘boundless’, an ‘unexplored continent’, ‘an area of freedom’. (in Lindemann 1987: 5)



montages.<sup>5</sup> (Madsen 2005; Madsen 2010; Lindemann 1980/1987) Interestingly the BBC term 'feature' was, and continues to be, preferred by German radio over earlier terms like *Hörbilder*, literally translating as 'listening pictures or hear-pictures'. Actually the idea of the acoustic film had been born in Germany in Berlin before the war, with the experimental work of radio and film documentarian Walter Ruttmann who, working with radio producer Alfred Braun, called his first radio composition of recorded field actualities, *Wochenende/Weekend*, an 'acoustic film'. (Ruttmann 1930) Recorded and edited onto optical sound film, it premiered in Berlin May 15, 1930 and was also broadcast on June 13, 1930. (Madsen 2010; Schöning 1991, p.316) Jens Jarisch's body of work should be heard in the context of this broken, yet long and exploratory radio feature tradition, which has nurtured a highly sophisticated *auteur* culture and practice in the broad field of long-form documentary or *features*, and what we might provocatively also describe as 'reality-fiction'.<sup>6</sup>

Jarisch's use of a multi-voiced narration and the second-person mode in this narration is powerfully applied in *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, but has its antecedents. Among these I can suggest connections to the panorama-styled feature and 'report' by Ernst Schnabel, *Twenty-ninth of January*, written and produced in 1947, with an English version in 1948.<sup>7</sup> (Schnabel NWDR 1947, BBC 1948) Schnabel was a writer and pioneer of the radio feature in Germany. From 1951 to 1955 he was director of Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk (NWDR). This feature which I have talked about elsewhere (Madsen 2013), was based on more than 35,000 letters elicited from listeners for NWDR. A 'play for voices' more than characters, the words and sounds create an intense atmosphere hard to forget. Schnabel's script is notable also for its use of the narrator voice who draws on these letters from all over Germany to describe multiple individuals' thoughts and feelings on one freezing night in January. Not so much multiple, the narration delivers a text which is a tapestry of voices woven into monologue. At the end of a total war that had left Germany and most of Europe in ruins, we encounter here the intimate thoughts, fears and musings of ordinary people who reflect on their lives, what has happened and history. The narrator offers these reflections back to their owners, revealingly confiding in the text; 'It occurred to me, these night thoughts are like evidence in a trial.' (Schnabel/BBC 1948 cited in Madsen 2013, p.132).

I am strangely reminded of this haunting reality-fiction, which unlike Jarisch's reporter journeying to another *underworld*, contains no field recordings whatsoever. What seems to connect the two for me is the tone, and the ability to create a navigable passage between

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<sup>5</sup> Audio and discussion of the acoustic feature and stereo feature as developed by Braun and others, see <http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/414> I note Braun developed the idea of a *mutterband* (motherband) for features. This 'track' for narration allowed a greater possibility for translations/adaptations of radio documentary work to occur, as the single narration could easily be replaced by a new voice speaking the 'home' language and inserted. Braun's work was thus delivered into many versions around the world. This helps to explain also the dominance of narrator-driven features coming not only from Germany, but Europe.

<sup>6</sup> See Farabet, René. (1994) *Brefeloge du coup de tonnerre et du bruit d'ailes*, Arles, Phonurgia Nova. Farabet uses this term in his chapter 'La Pelure d'oignon', originally a paper at the 1981 'Reality and Fiction in radio conference': also documented and discussed in Mortley, Kaye. (1981) 'Real Fiction' (radio feature) for *Radio Helicon*. Australian Broadcasting Commission. Cassette recording. Author's personal collection. This tradition and culture of the feature or of the 'documentaire de creation' (French translation) is international, as we can already see. Jarisch is in dialogue with his antecedents like Braun and even the earlier pioneers at NWDR, but we can also detect other influences in how he approaches translation for the radio for example. Rather than the African voices being faded down or overridden by the translation (as so often happens in radio, or they are simply not there at all); the narration voice which speaks 'for' them in *Sodom*, also functions like a medium, allowing the children's voices to be channeled and heard as the witness of real individuated bodies while also being something larger than one voice. We find this form of adaptation where translator and translated exist together in some kind of 'voice play' in the work of *auteurs* like Kaye Mortley who, like Jarisch, work across languages. (Mortley has presented workshops to the 'feature' community for many years on this question of translation and narration).

<sup>7</sup> See also *Voices in Ruins* by Alexander Badenoch (Palgrave Macmillan 2008) and *Ernst Schnabel - Ein Mann im Wettlauf mit der Zeit*, by Helmut Kopetzky (MDR, Germany 2003). Schnabel went on to win a Prix Italia (Human Rights Prize 1958) for his 'reportage' feature, *Anne Frank - Trace of a Child*.

individuals' lone struggles, hopes and fears (an interior *thoughtscape* which brings the singular to the multiple), as well as the ability of both writers with their microphones to register a certain meteorology of feeling, as well as something like this 'evidence in a trial'.

I would like to say one final thing about the narration of Jarisch's feature. It seems to me that this strange comforting narrator takes on a role which is almost like that of an absent mother who seems to care about the characters as if they could be her future children. She is a strange 'voice of God/goddess' (Beatrice and Virgil combined), not so much all-seeing, everywhere and nowhere, but restaging the past and the future for us, able to read our thoughts, but yet also prepared *to listen in*, as she makes space for these otherwise forsaken voices to resound over the noise, or cut through it, as she also appears to converse with the characters and other players here who are given the chance to voice themselves as subjects and witnesses to history, even if briefly.

One of the most confronting and powerful moments in this feature (and there are two for me) then comes from the young man who could have been that child 'the reporter' sat down with early in the program, when they were overcome, horrified, speechless, and forced to the other side of the road as they both witness a horrifying and senseless murder. (I'll return to this scene in a moment.) In Sodom and Gomorrah we know from the Biblical story that this should also be the everyday reality; that a child can be violently bashed to death here, because he is so unlucky, and that this could happen while the reporter, 'our' ears and eyes, was there.

As we reach the final *movement* near the program's end, the boy who survives and still holds out a thread of hope of making it across the Sahara to float over the channel in a leaky boat, to land maybe in a harbour in the Netherlands, says these devastating words to the reporter (it is also that first voice that we heard, with 'the epigraph' I talked about earlier). The African boy speaks:

**I have nobody. I have myself. Even that whom you call your friend is not your friend because he also is suffering. [silence] Sometimes, I have to, I have to...**

(As he stutters, I feel physically sick, with a whirl of words and images from the program suddenly rising up like one of those mysterious water spouts you hear about that generates itself in the sea, perhaps more myth than reality).

**...I have to sell my life to eat. It's like I have to give my life to somebody to use...[his anger is now palpable]**

Then, after the narrator explains calmly how the odds are stacked against his success, the voice seems to speak directly again to the reporter:

**But I'm happy being here because when I see someone like you, a journalist asking me my feelings, [pause] you know [pause] I like to see people like you asking me how I feel because... [longer pause, words more emphatic still] it's been five years since I've been seeing somebody asking me how I feel...**

**[and his voice rises, desperate, then released]...**

**I'm waiting for the day when I'm going to a European continent so I mix with good people...[he is a little softer now, this actor – not an actor it turns out, but an amateur – he is so perfect]...**

**...maybe people who understand life a little, because life is hard.**

As each scene is conjured of this reporter's journey to find out the truth of **'why young Africans flee to Europe?'**; and how the waste gets to Sodom and Gomorrah in the first place, even as there is supposed to be legislation to prohibit its export, we are offered the opportunity to interpret, share and interrogate what is happening (as the narrator and other voices do). This is not as some cause and effect equation, or as presenting isolated accounts of events, but rather through the shared recognition which comes with this seizing of a kind of power through speech, and through the gaps in the noise, where truth breaks through, and through what I call 'allegorical thinking' (after Walter Benjamin, the German thinker). The author brings into powerful focus the reality which is better perceived via fictional strategies, rendered using techniques of narrative common also to myth. There is something close to a dialectic approach, as understood by Benjamin, here too. Jarisch, even if unconsciously, appears to have dug down into the modern day ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah to sound out their depths as he also follows their echoes through Africa and between ports. The interweaving of voices in this impossible dialogue succeeds in writing itself onto our memories like a fable, and even if we remain fearful, as I am, that nothing changes, it has offered a voice to someone, who before it could not be heard.

Returning to where I started, on my journey home looking out on paradise, I had another strange confluence of stories hit me as I lost myself in *Sodom*...and this is how I will end my review essay. I recalled a short story within a larger one, as penned by Fyodor Dostoevsky in his epic *The Brothers Karamazov*. As I listened to *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, and a new scene where those first sounds of a child crying are revisited so as to be made finally clear to the listener, I recalled one devastating event in particular and indeed the whole story behind it, from the classic penned by the great Russian novelist in 1880. The small scene about halfway into the radio program reveals to us the reason why the child might have been crying in the beginning of Jarisch's feature. But I will start with Dostoevsky's scene in parallel, which opens this way: 'One day', says the brother Ivan in the story, 'a serf-boy, a little child of eight, threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general's favourite hound.'

What happens next seems beyond imagining and yet it has the feel of documentary truth about it, as is often the case with the writer of fiction, especially we might say of Dostoevsky, who meticulously researched his stories like the best of investigative reporters today. 'Why is my favourite dog lame?' the General asked, and the boy is locked up for the night.

I have never forgotten this child, and the retribution exacted upon him, an event recounted in such terrifying brevity that what follows appears to hit you with an almost physical force before you are fully aware of what has taken place. In this you are made brutally aware of your own passivity. The next morning, in Dostoevsky's story, Ivan tells us that the merciless General had ordered the child to be presented and undressed. His servants and huntsmen are assembled at the scene – with this small detail added: 'in front of them all stands the mother of the child'.

The voice you hear in your head upon reading this is objective, calm and yet touched somehow. Ivan goes on: 'The child is stripped naked'; 'is shivering', is 'numb with terror, not daring to cry'.

Before I even knew where it came from, I saw this 19<sup>th</sup> century scene all over again in a moment of silence and disbelief while I listened to the radio documentary, remembering the

detail of the mother from *The Brothers Karamazov* as much as the child. In the radio feature the narrator went on to tell us what 'our reporter' has witnessed, yet is unable to prevent. It is an ordinary yet no less extraordinary day in Sodom and Gomorrah, when *she* recounts:

**Then you moved into one of those two-storey wooden shacks of Sodom and Gomorrah: a 'children's hotel'. [Dogs are barking, you hear the angry men.] Downstairs there is a bar where they serve alcohol and play deafening music. Upstairs they rent out tiny rooms to girls who sell themselves. The hardship has slashed the age limit to an unimaginable level. [More and clearer male voices, yelling, commotion as in the introduction scene.] Today our reporter asked about you. He's waiting outside your children's hotel...**

Dostoevsky's storyteller also recounts what happens to a boy who encounters bad luck:

While all the party look on, the General then commands, 'Make him run.' And the boy does so, the dog-boys baying after him, 'Run! run!' and the General yelling 'At him!' as he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child.

Before you even had a chance to digest it, the next words rush in and shock you with their speed. This storyteller continues without so much as taking a breath: 'The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes!'

In Sodom and Gomorrah, it is almost the same as the narrator finishes what she had started, allowing us to see this moment now fully revealed through the eyes of one small child, and from the perspective of another 'innocent' witness, the reporter. Back in Sodom...

**Just then a teenage boy is being accused by some men of stealing; and as you pass, the men are beating the boy, urged on by a noisy crowd... [there is the smallest of pauses]**

**Until he is dead.**

The listener here, as the reader, is speechless, and in shock. The listener may even be angry at the reporter who has done nothing to stop them. The focus shifts to the child witness crossing the road, as the narrator must finish what she has set in train: '**You turn away and walk across the road**', she says;

**You sit beside the reporter on the curb. You exchange a long silent look. The reporter's look is shattered; yours is only sad. [pause]**

**You both lack the words for the boy's murder.**

Perhaps you see now what I meant earlier about the resonances and dislocations I felt while listening to this searing, moving audio feature on an ordinary journey homeward. The radio journey is not quite Dostoevsky, not nearly Virgil, Dante or Breugel, but there is something to these correspondences: the sense that these worlds – biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, a morning's proceedings in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, a tour of heaven and hell, a 'no place' in the shades of Accra, Ghana that we prefer not to officially recognise for what it is – all of them are not so far apart; and that this document has been skilfully written, directed and performed

with/for the microphone, a transmission/transmutation *for us*, transcribing with breath and life this *will to record* what remains hidden, yet is so remarkably 'like evidence in a trial'.

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## **AUDIO:**

[PODCAST: Kinder von Sodom und Gomorrha \(2009\) German version](#)

[PODCAST: Children of Sodom and Gomorrah \( 2011\) English version](#)

[ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT:](#)

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