

RadioDoc Review

Volume 7 • Issue 1 • 2022

2022-01-03

Radio Drama Takeover 3: Vampirella

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Abstract

Angela Carter wrote *Vampirella*, her first of five works for radio, in 1976. The play serves as a sequel to Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897) where the vampire's final descendent is a countess trapped in a castle, whose mythology is pitted against the rational thought of the early twentieth century. Gothic horror (and also much of Carter's work) is often concerned with the violation and deconstruction of bodies. In this essay I explore how Carter uses the radio's existing deconstruction of bodies to evoke something surprisingly visceral.

Keywords

Radio, Bodies, Voice, Dracula, Horror, Angela Carter, Grotesque

Recommended Citation

Best, E., (2022) "Radio Drama Takeover 3: Vampirella", *RadioDoc Review* 7(1).

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The radio play character, represented only through sound, is often characterised as 'disembodied'.¹ This is certainly true and while, technically, all the voices that we hear are disembodied (as Steven Connor observes in *Dumbstruck* (2000), the voice is only audible precisely because it has left the body), normally both the source body and the voice are available for observation/audition. While on the radio we hear the voice but do not see its source, that does not necessarily mean that it is not there: alongside the voice, the sound of shoes on a pavement or the clapping of hands will demonstrate the presence of a physical body. But dramatically speaking, they remain entirely reliant on sound in whatever form to assert their existence. This is one of the most exciting things about radio drama: not the wholesale removal of the body but its representation through sound.

Vampirella (1976) was Angela Carter's first piece written specifically for radio. After this she would write *Come Unto These Yellow Sands* (1979), *The Company of Wolves* (1980), *Puss-In-Boots* (1982) and *A Self-Made Man* (1984). Carter would also adapt *Vampirella* to the short story 'The Lady of the House of Love' for inclusion in her selection of traditional story retellings, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

Vampirella is the story of a vampire, descended from Dracula, who sits trapped in a castle tower, immortal and doomed to a loveless existence, with only exiled cannibal-turned-housekeeper Mrs Beane for company. That is, until a young man, named only as Hero, arrives at the castle enroute to take his post as a soldier in Bucharest, the play being set on the eve of the First World War. Hero takes shelter in the castle, blissfully unaware of the women's plan to keep him, like so many before him, as a sacrifice to the Countess. However, when she attacks, Hero responds not with fear or swooning but with reason, even suggesting that the Countess be sent to Vienna for psychoanalysis. His resistance not to her physical attack but to the fear she and her legacy would traditionally instil ultimately defeats her, and the morning after the attack all that is left is a lace negligée and a trace of blood.

Carter was inspired to write for radio because of a sound. In the preface to the published version of *Vampirella*, she remarks, "I started writing for radio, myself, because of a sound effect. I made it quite by accident. Sitting in my room, pencil in hand [...] I ran the pencil idly along the top of the radiator. It made a metallic, almost musical rattle. It was just the noise that a long, pointed fingernail might make if it were run along the bars of a birdcage" (Carter, 1985, p. 9). The specific sound here is not the body but the pencil upon the radiator, of course, but it would not have been made but for Carter's own propulsion of the pencil, this then inspiring the sound of fingernails on a birdcage. The imagery conjured by the sounds of long fingernails demonstrates Carter's understanding of the sonic power of the body.

¹ See, for example, Weiss, Allen S., ed. *Experimental Sound & Radio*. TDR Books. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001 or Crook, Tim. *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*. London; New York: Routledge, 1999.

In refusing to accept the Countess's body as supernatural, Hero erases it entirely. In her introduction, Carter writes that "[t]he *Lady of the House of Love* is a Gothic tale about a reluctant vampire; the radio play, *Vampirella*, is about vampirism as metaphor" (Carter, 1985, p.10). The body of the vampire is at odds with the human or mortal body in that it ingests blood rather than bleeds; it also lacks a reflection illogical: so, as the radio character has no visual trace to the listener, the vampire cannot visually evidence its existence to itself. The ultimate curse for *Vampirella* is that her body is not real—not just in that resolution only comes for her when Hero denies her existence, but Carter herself asserts her lack of physical presence by framing her in this way.

Carter also plays with bodies in the theatrical presentation of this piece. Radio is in some ways similar to the theatre in having a sense of internal staging, with actors at varying proximities to and orientation around a microphone. A silence, a fade or a musical interlude might replace the curtain to denote a scene change, and the visual 'landscape' of a film might be supplanted by the 'soundscape' of what we hear, as first explored by R. Murray Schafer (1993).

One way that radio differs from these other formats, however, is the arrangement of characters as diegetic (within the 'action' of the scene) or extradiegetic, such as might be shown in the theatre by an actor turning to the audience and breaking the 'fourth wall' or in film using voiceover narration. There are narrators in *Vampirella*, but Carter complicates this arrangement. In his examination of the use of narrators in radio drama, John Drakakis notes,

In radio (as in the novel) the narrator is often "transparent" – integral to the scene but peripheral to the action – rather than a grafted-on presence. Bearing in mind the natural propensity of radio towards intimacy, the narrator either employs his soliloquies to set the scene [...] or alternatively he becomes a kind of bardic presence, mediating the action in a more conscious fashion and smoothing its passage between play and listener. (Drakakis, 1981, p. 125)

As far as they both address the audience directly and speak, as Drakakis describes, as 'peripheral to the action', both Hero and the Count in *Vampirella* function as narrators. This is an interesting nod to the narrative variation in the original *Dracula* novel by Bram Stoker, where many characters including Jonathan Harker (to whom the Hero seems to allude) have a first-person narrative, comprised of journal entries and letters, but *Dracula* himself is omitted. Indeed, as noted by Debra Rae Cohen in her review Orson Welles' 1937 production of *Dracula* for the Mercury Theatre radio show, the novel's composition in this way is intensely media-conscious, thus lending itself well to the tropes of radio (Cohen, 2013). Like Welles's production, Carter's use of direct address here, placing observers in direct conversation (if one-directional) with the audience, acknowledges *Dracula* the character's absence from and peripheral existence to the action of the play. While the Count does have a voice in *Vampirella*, his speeches are mostly observations on and qualifications of the action, suggesting that he is observing in real-time with the audience, but both for Hero's past-tense narration and the action as it happens, for example:

HERO. [...] Her beauty was like a dress too good to be worn but, poor girl, it was the only one she had.

COUNT. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder. (92)

And, conversely:

HERO. Grinning, she lunged towards me,

Cry from Countess

COUNT. Claws and teeth sharpened on several centuries of corpses, sick him, girl,
sick him! (110)

In the written script, Carter uses the term 'thoughts microphone' to denote when either the Count or Hero are speaking extradiegetically, though, of course, such a qualification would not be made to the audience in the broadcast of the play. There is no evidence of this term being used by other radio playwrights, or indeed, by Carter in any of her subsequent radio plays. Although, even across the various occupants of the thoughts microphone this varies: we know that Hero retains the body that has been used in the main diegesis of the play. The Count, meanwhile, is separate and at no point features in the main story, making his own body difficult to place. This not only plays into existing cultural imaginings of Dracula as shape-shifting or unstable (whether from Stoker's novel, Bela Lugosi or one of the many Hammer horror films that were made in the decade preceding Carter's play) but undermines the horror of the Countess as visible to the other characters.

As noted by Cohen there are formal similarities between Stoker's novel and the arrangement of voices and shifting perspectives offered by radio. But in some ways this is the case with the narration of any novel or story told from a perspective or multiple perspectives: unlike the panorama of theatre or film where even if a protagonist is looking another way the viewer sees action in its entirety, the narrated text and the radio alike are able to communicate only what is observed. This complicated the position of the count in that he is both observing and narrating, suggesting that he is sharing some sort of space with the actors in the main story but does not function so much as a narrator of a story he knows as one he himself observes in realtime. He is more a messenger than a storyteller.

The complicated relationship with bodies that Carter presents with her metaphorical vampires is used here to position relative narrative standpoints as embodied and disembodied. In doing so, Carter uses one form of precarious and unreflected body reliant on narrative representation—the vampire—as a metaphor for another form: the radio character. In this way, the radio drama becomes the perfect platform in which to explore the relationship between bodies, self and narrative, and is reflective of Carter's intensely visceral style translating into an aural format.

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