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Special Section: Radio Drama Takeover

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Abstract

We make a case for the necessity, the pleasure, and the provocation of radio drama by arguing that it is important for its accessibility, the way it uses imagination, and its sense of intimacy. We note the current state of academic study on radio drama and provide the reasons and history behind the founding of the Echo Salon Audio Drama Listening Group.

Keywords

radio, drama, audio, podcast, history, digital

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Radio Drama Takeover: Introduction

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Mass media, now more than ever, allow for the proliferation of stories, true and untrue, classic and novel, first-hand and narrated. Effective and moving journalism or nonfictional storytelling is essential. Fictional stories for entertainment, enlightenment, information and diversion are equally necessary. Sound storytelling in the form of podcasts has had a remarkable impact on the profile of nonfiction genres and modes, despite the acknowledged 'campfire' quality to stories told through the human voice. Radio feature-makers like Piers Plowright, Alan Hall and Charles Parker have capitalised on this quality, taking "this form of radio into new realms of poetic experience" (Street 2012: 4). More and more, we are seeing fictional and scripted stories making their way into the podcast format, and while this is a welcome addition to the podcast canon, digital audio drama brings with it the heritage of an almost century-old radio drama tradition. However, the lack of scholarship around audio and radio fiction is well-known; since the 1960s, radio and audio drama have failed to receive the widespread recognition and cultural capital of forms like film, television and subscription video on demand (SVOD). In this curation, we nail our colours to the mast regarding the necessity, the pleasure and the provocation of radio drama.

Why radio and audio drama are important

From a producer's perspective, audio drama is a godsend. It is much less expensive to produce an audio drama than to make a film or a television series on even the slightest shoestring budget (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Unlike writing a novel, however, which is also a cost-effective means of telling a fictional story, audio drama is almost never a solitary affair. Some wunderkinds can write, direct, produce, mix and even act in their own work, which is made possible by the increased accessibility and decreased cost of digital audio workstations (DAWs) and distribution platforms. However, most audio dramas (and almost all radio dramas) offer the opportunity for collaboration. Whether in the case of live radio in the first half of the 20th century, where actors read scripts in front of microphones while sound-effect technicians and musicians provided the soundscapes, or today's virtual environment, which can see actors in four countries recording dialogue online and never meeting in person, audio drama retains the liveness of the stage, but with the potential for manipulation (editing) made familiar by film. Unlike stage drama, however, which can also be produced on a smaller scale than broadcast or SVOD media, radio drama is not dependent on a physical audience (or the size of a theatre). The notion of *broadcasting* (originally a farming term) suggests the widest possible reach. When radio was the dominant medium, it had a profound influence on which national and transnational identities were performed, constructed and projected (Kreutzfeldt, n.d.). Despite the fact that national boundaries often kept radio programming insular, radio possessed the ability to transgress national borders, defy barriers of space and time, and remain undetected by private gatekeepers (Hilmes 2012: 2).

Today, it is not unusual for millions to listen to daily original drama broadcast on BBC Radio 4. The audience has always been potentially large for radio broadcasting. The Third

Programme controller P. H. Newby notes that a single broadcast of a play on this station would reach an audience big enough to fill the Royal Court Theatre for nine months. By the time playwright Samuel Beckett's first radio play *All That Fall* reached its seventh broadcast in 1965, this would have amounted to more than four years of selling out the Royal Court (Addyman et al., 7). Broadcasting also used to mean something ephemeral: heard once in the ether and gone forever, like "so much moonshine" (Guthrie, 1931: 24). The narrowcasting (or end of Chris Anderson's long tail) of digital media means that the potential audience for an audio drama is limitless. Despite the possibilities of the digital, the BBC still hoards its back catalogue—gatekeeping still an issue.

Geoffrey Heptonstall has described radio as "potentially the most enriching, and the most democratic, of media" (2009: 204), and radio drama is also particularly accessible for listeners as well as producers. Dramatisation can sometimes galvanise listeners in a way that straightforward reporting or non-fictional storytelling cannot. For example, Lee Hall's breakout drama *Spoonface Steinberg* (BBC Radio 4, 1997) generated "hundreds of letters and phone-calls", as the titular character's "natural courage" in the face of cancer was affecting and admirable (Crook 1999b). Although not immune to criticism (Crook, 1999a: 148), the emotional response from the listening public to *Spoonface Steinberg* was profound.

How can radio drama enhance the experience provided by the stage play? Through its imaginative use of sound. This is not to suggest that stage sound is neglected, but that by removing the visual, the listener's imagination can take over. "Starving the eye will inevitably bring the ear, and therefore the imagination, more into play" (Thom, 1999). Sound storytelling might be described as a mono-sensory medium in the way that comics have been described as mono-sensory. Comics tell stories in space (they are static visual objects) that can nevertheless provide the illusion of movement and sound (McCloud, 1993, p. 98). Novels are also, in that sense, mono-sensory, because they use input from sight to simulate visuals, sound and movement in time and space. Audio dramas are also conveyed through one sense (sound) and use that to provide the illusion of the visual and the spatial.

The sense of intimacy engendered in sound storytelling is also unique. Neil Verma describes the intimate experience of the listener being carried along with the hero on their adventure (2012, p. 59) as opposed to the more 'kaleidosonic' experience of hearing a range of scenes and characters at an equal distance, perhaps reflecting the difference between a first-person narrative novel and a theatrical play where all actors are contained within a single plane. Further, like television or the novel as opposed to the theatre or cinema, radio listening happens in the domestic space or on headphones—it is often solitary. In this way the listener is afforded the opportunity to develop their own imaginative landscape based on an almost one-to-one encounter with a character or situation.

The current state of the academic study of the genre

In 2019, we began celebrating the centenary of the institution of radio worldwide. Next year, in 2022, we can (probably) celebrate the centenary of the radio drama. While Tim Crook argues that the first transmitted broadcasting drama was the opera-only station KYW in Chicago in 1921 (1999a, p.5), stations 2MT in the UK and WGY in the US perhaps better suit our definition of radio drama. Marconi's experimental station 2MT's inaugural broadcast in 1922 was an

extract from *Cyrano de Bergerac*. WGY broadcast an adaptation of the stage melodrama *The Wolf* in the same year (Wood 2008, p. 34). It would seem logical that, after so many years and so much broadcasting—the BBC has been continuously broadcasting original radio drama weekly for at least 90 years—a robust academic presence would be established as well as a clear canon of the important works of radio drama in the last century. This is not the case. The reasons for this may have to do with the very promiscuity of the medium, encompassing everything from soap operas (which were invented on radio) to long-form dramas, as well as the sheer volume of the work and its relative inaccessibility in archival form.

As noted above, live radio went out and was lost forever until the means to record were developed; scripts were often discarded and very seldom published. 'Important' film scripts are routinely published, as are stage plays. Until recently, dramas that were recorded were difficult to access. In that sense, the digital age has meant a rebirth for collecting, assessing and enjoying radio drama. Furthermore, it remains an ironic statement on radio that it took the digital online age to "create" the analogue radio age as an object of study. Broadcasts from the analogue age persist *only* because they were transformed before dispersing in space, plucked from the air and mineralised like fossils (Verma 2012: 227), so that we can now access them in a way the digital age has made possible.

Despite the increasing accessibility of radio and audio drama, it is still relatively neglected in academic circles. Perhaps most damningly of all is how infrequently it is taught. A handful of programs worldwide are able to teach the history, aesthetics and/or production of audio drama. This is despite the fact that many celebrated authors (usually famed as playwrights) have written key works for radio, such as Louis MacNeice, Harold Pinter, Dylan Thomas, Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard, Caryl Churchill, Angela Carter and Lee Hall, and not including masters of the medium who have not achieved fame elsewhere (Norman Corwin, Lucille Fletcher, Gregory Whitehead, Katie Hims, Nick Warburton). It's notable that the first works of radio drama (that we know about) were stage adaptations; radio and audio drama also excel at adaptations. For too long, adaptation studies were mired in unhelpful discussions of fidelity, when the qualities revealed by adaptations can be exceptionally powerful and communicated with great intimacy in nuance in the sound medium.

To this end, there remained only a handful of academic titles on radio drama by the end of the twentieth century, and those writing about radio drama were hamstrung by an ignorance of each other's work. Things began to change with the publication of Professor Tim Crook's *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* in 1999, and a flurry of publications on radio drama began to emerge¹. By 2021, a growing scholarship² is being supported by PhD students and works exclusively on digital-only sound drama, like podcast drama.

In this volume, we will contribute to this growing scholarship through the examination of three audio dramas that we believe to be noteworthy for different reasons but that have perhaps been less celebrated and studied than their contemporaries. We examine the merits of radio adaptation of a stage play, probing further into the dramatic potential of sound, through

¹ Hand (2006), Hand & Traynor (2011), Verma (2012), Hand (2014)

² McMurtry (2019), Chignell (2019), Spinelli & Dann (2019)

the BBC's 1998 adaptation of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. We also look at the way that the social conventions and expectations of the radio format, through its links with communities and adherence to specific genres and audiences, can be subverted to dramatic effect through the New Zealand radio series (latterly resurrected as a podcast) *Claybourne* (1998). Lastly, we look at what happens to the body when put through a radio and how a listener might compensate for its invisibility through Angela Carter's first play for radio, *Vampirella* (1976).

The future

My co-authors and I are convinced of the necessity, the pleasure, and the provocation of radio and audio drama. To this end, we met in early 2020 to create some kind of forum for the sharing and discussion of key works. Sessions modelled on the *In the Dark* events at the British Library—group listening to sound dramas in the dark, with discussion to follow—had to be abandoned due to the pandemic. What emerged instead was the Echo Salon, a virtual audio drama discussion group. In the past 18 months, the Echo Salon has listened to 16 dramas, either standalone plays or episodes of longer series or serials. These selected dramas have been written by some of the authors mentioned above but also include relatively recent non-broadcast works like *Bronzeville*, *Wolf 359* and *In Strange Woods*. Our discussions are very wide-ranging and predicated on the heterogeneous mix of industry professionals, academics and audio drama enthusiasts who attend. Our attendees are also international, demonstrating that appreciation of audio drama extends well beyond the Anglophone world to the well-established traditions of Germany and the Netherlands. We intend for the Echo Salon to continue in its virtual form and in-person events to be held in the near future. We would encourage like-minded individuals to visit the Echo Salon or develop their own community of audio drama listeners. We can be found @EchoSalon5 on Twitter and echo.salon.drama@gmail.com.

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