The Arts of Amnesia: The Case for Audio Drama, Part One

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Abstract

This article examines what the relationship between audio drama and radio drama might illuminate about both forms. Drawing on some 40 podcasts and other audio forms that take a serial structure, I explore the rise of audio drama podcasts since 2015 and situate them in both a more recent historical context since the late 1990s and in a broader history stretching back to the first Golden Age of radio. By listening closely to key works on *Serendipity*, *Homecoming* and other podcasts, I argue that contemporary audio has profound potential to change both how we listen and how we relate to the sound media of the past. This is Part One of a two-part series.

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Audio Drama / Radio Drama

No genre stirs dust into the shafts of sunlight in the attic of media history quite like

radio drama, so it is no surprise that the recent rise of fiction among podcasters has clouded a

problem that has been vexing critical and historical thought that surrounds the medium. It's not

clear whether or not we should be referring to radio as "radio," or even as *a* medium in the

singular. We have only begun to think theoretically about what the relation between traditional

radio and new podcasting forms ought to be, particularly since both are far more fluid,

technologically and culturally, than any simple rhetorical opposition in a sentence like this one

suggests. What creators and historians used to call "radio" without giving it a second thought

seems up for grabs, from funding structures and listening publics to what a "show" actually is,

and how to disseminate it, leading some writers to focus on the difference between podcasting

and radio, while others emphasize continuity (Berry, 2016; Bottomley, 2015; Hilmes and

Loviglio 2013; Lacey 2008; Johnson 2015; Doctor 2016). This ambiguity is felicitous for theory

(academics love nothing better than a naming crisis) but it sets up a dilemma for the very idea

of making audio of this kind. Should creators press for continuity of institutions, commitments

and aesthetic forms in the digital era, emphasising what we can learn from the past, even as

radio institutions – public and private, high powered and low, formal and informal – struggle, or should they make a clean break that upends our notions of quality, audience, art and appropriate material?

The answer, at least in the case of audio drama, is both. To explore that proposal, this essay will draw on some of today's audio serials with an agenda to show that the only thing more open than the future of audio drama is its past. I take as persuasive Richard Berry's notion that at the moment it makes sense to set "podcasting" off from "radio" when it comes to the nature and experience of new audio, but at the same time I believe that things are murkier at the "textual" level of these podcasts, which I aim to use as a resource for thinking through terms like "radio" and "podcast" in the first place. In recent audio work, I argue, dramatists are increasingly playing a double game: anthology programs ask us to "listen forward" in ways that open up podcast aesthetics, a theatre of the audible, but serial programs teach us to listen in old ways we've forgotten, a theatre of memory. Should this continue (I hope it does), not only will our concept of what podcasting can do expand – making drama is, after all, the traditional vehicle through which audio media innovate new languages and sensibilities – but our concept of the broadcasting form that it seems to have occluded will also evolve. So, while I will be surveying audio serial programs that are being produced mostly in the present (I studied 43 audio dramas that take podcast form for this piece, over the course of about six months, a little over 400 episodes, plus 50 hours of works released as audiobooks, all told), this essay has the larger aim to recruit audio production into the task of defining radio's very sense of its own historical existence, something that, ironically, podcasting stands to redeem.

What I Heard at the Revolution

Early one day in November 2015, at the Filmless Festival organised by the Third Coast International Audio Festival in Chicago, scores of attendees packed seats on risers in a black box-style theater set up using partitions in a high school gymnasium for "The Revolution will not be Televised: Radio Drama for the 21st Century." The workshop was led by Ann Heppermann and Martin Johnson, award-winning producers who had just launched the podcast *Serendipity* and The Sarah Awards (hosted by Sarah Lawrence College), both of which cultivate emerging fiction for podcast and other forms through a variety of initiatives and competitions. "It's time for audio fiction to have its own red carpet," as their website puts it. To get the crowd excited, Heppermann and Johnson staged a little gag in which some in the audience were instructed to pretended to be distracted during their faux-lecture (full disclosure: I was picked for this, and missed my cue), unashamedly using this venerable documentary audio conference for a little bit of theatre.

It was about time. That autumn, fiction podcasting had become conspicuous in the public sphere, but its ambit was still narrow. *The Black Tapes* serial was drawing 200,000 listeners a month with paranormal themes, featuring a radio reporter and skeptical scientist on the trail of geometry cults whose demonic doings are hinted at in the titular videotapes. With stories of possessions, upside-down faces, and a sinister order of Russian monks, *The Black Tapes* set imitators off in similar directions. The previous summer G.E. Podcast Theater's *The Message* had also been released, a limited narrative about a podcaster working with a team of codebreakers to decipher an alien message first received in the 1940s, as a deadly pulmonary virus spread around the world, seemingly borne by the sound itself. The program showed how

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a scaled narrative could be narrowed to the pinhole of a podcaster's microphone, modelling low-budget high-concept work. The long-running paranoia show *Welcome to Night Vale*, which features a community broadcaster blithely discussing life in a small desert town subject to a variety of hidden forces, announced plans for a new series entitled *Alice Isn't Dead*, about a trucker named Keisha searching the country for her lost wife, a series that consists of monologues punctuated by the sound of a CB radio's switch. That series would be followed by *Within the Wires*, set in an alternative history that "takes place" in the margins of a set of relaxation tapes bookended with sounds that reminisce elementary school film strips of the 1980s. Both *Alice* and *Wires* have a writerly sensibility, with minimal efforts to depict acts as they happen in the present tense, and a heavy reliance on music, voice and a script that puts them on the line between "theatrical drama" (in which actions are acted out for our ears) and reading aloud in character. And at the Filmless Festival that year, the podcast on everyone's lips was *Limetown*, a serial about a mysterious mass disappearance in a Tennessee research town and the reporter investigating it years later. With some 27 actors and a sound design that challenged peers, *Limetown* made it to the front page of iTunes within three weeks of launch.

In sum, at that moment, the preponderance of the fiction serial vogue consisted of light paranoid suspense serials that reminisce television shows like *The X Files*, sonically dappled with affectionate allusions to legacy audio technologies that listeners in their 30s and 40s remembered hearing as kids. In this way, they referenced not the Greatest Generation's Golden Age, but flirted with baroque elements of Gen X nostalgia. All were serials, but the modern variety – rather than giving us a drama series of sequential episodes in an ongoing narrative in a regular time slot, these programs graft the episodic open-ended structure with on-demand

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media practice (Chandler and Munday 2011: 394). That day in Chicago it was not clear (at least to me) that the Third Coast public radio crowd was the right one to bring such serials out of the black box and onto the red carpet. Most attendees at the conference had trained as journalists, coming to the vogue of radio storytelling under the influence of *This American Life* and its peer programs that blend reporting with first-person narrative. Indeed, many of the texts available to inform audio producers today have little to say about serial fiction, and there is no certainty that the skills developed for one genre would fit those required by another (Abel 2015; Biewen and Dilworth 2017; Kern 2008; Richman and Allison 2017). Historically, most radio dramatists in the US and overseas had trained as stage directors, composers, writers or poets, and many of the producers behind the more recent serials have been outsiders to the public radio world, coming to the form as a side hustle while pursuing film school, TV production, creative writing or working in the tech industry (Drakakis 1981; Kaplan 1949; Lenthall 2007). Radio people are surely spending more time on stages these days with successful live tours of such shows as *Snap Judgment* and *Radiolab*, not to mention the Third Coast's galvanising events, but as a population they remain more used to carrying microphones into the field than to rehearsing actors on bare stage. Nevertheless, Heppermann and Johnson's proposal alerted a professional radio community to an open creative space, adding a sense of urgency to counter thematic uniformity among the dramas out there (too much found-footage, too much sci-fi, just too *much*), and promising to expand audiences in the hopes that new podcasting could do for fiction what *Serial* and *Criminal* were doing for true crime.

But what would the new audio drama actually sound like? Could it be made worthwhile, powerful, essential? Audio drama has been evolving more or less continuously for nearly a

century, but what's changed is that in public discourse this evolution is increasingly entwined with discourse about technological change in audio. It is historically in such moments – local radio to network radio; live radio to "transcribed" programming; radio to record; analog to digital – and the chaotic social drama that attaches to it, that the mystique of "doing" fiction in sound seems most intoxicating. "New practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them" as Carolyn Marvin has written, "as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings." (Marvin 1988: 5) The term "audio drama", thus far undefined in the Oxford reference ecosystem, seems at first to be one such improvisation. But it surely predates podcasting. Radio historian and theorist Tim Crook used it extensively in a 1999 book that almost always links "radio and audio drama" and associates audio drama both with the theatre before radio and with the internet age today – for him there is no clear "radio drama then audio drama" sequence, nor is there a perfect distinction between the two (Crook 1999). The first usage of "audio drama" in the modern sense that I could find in the *New York Times* came a year earlier, in a 1998 article focused on webcasts, live performance and audiobooks on cassette and CD; the term only later evolved to indicate direct-to-digital works that are materially distinct from "born-radio" dramas like *L.A. Theatre Works* or dramas from public broadcasters (Raeburn 1998). Search "audio drama" online now and you will find directories of amateur programs in mp3 format that run into the hundreds, accumulating at a growing rate, many inspired by long-running serials of adventure and post-apocalyptic survival such as *The Leviathan Chronicles* and *We're Alive* with cult fan bases (according to their publicity, *We're Alive* has been downloaded 50 million times) as well as experiments from Audible.com, such as Jeffrey Deaver's *The Starling Project*, Sebastian Fitzek's *The Child*, Joe Hill's

Locke & Key, and Dirk Maggs and Tim Lebbon's *Alien: Out of the Shadows* that dominate the "full cast audiobook" genre. Audible had some 24 original productions in the Audie Awards last year, cementing their place at the centre of the medium. There is also audio drama that falls in the digital cracks between radio and streaming – *Dark Adventure Radio Theater* does some of the best horror out there, but at the time of writing I could only get it on CD.

Listen to this body of sonic material broadly and what sticks in your mind is the complexity of its set pieces, ranging from teenagers whose heads open up as if on hinges and get lost in portals under an old New England house, to genetically engineered giants tearing a Mumbai slum apart in pursuit of a messianic immortal, hair-raising sequences involving the escape of an international war criminal, and a vast underground ship inside a mine whose bruised organic walls run thick with monster aliens. These plays are big, rich, fast, and pleasurable, mimicking the strengths of the bought-it-at-the-airport thriller novel. Sonically, all of them resemble Dirk Maggs's landmark instalments of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in the early 2000s, a touchstone for many working in this field, as well as film sound for action sequences. To me, the more exciting end of this type of audio drama comes from amateur creators who showcase their work on *Audio Drama Production Podcast* and *Radio Drama Revival*, where you can hear the chatter of a scrappy community focused on how to attract sponsors, coach actors and set up a page for contributions, all while geeking out about one another's programs about zombies and spies, robots and spirits, horror and porn, conspiracy and fantasy. Plays in this world have wide range, and you will find limited poetic works such as Rick Coste's *The Behemoth*, about a mysterious giant creature walking across Massachusetts with a young girl, and sprawling narratives that take place in future dystopias or after disasters

like *Our Fair City*, *Transmissions from Colony One*, *Wolf 359*, *The Bridge*, *The Orphans* and

others, a body of work drawn to the stories and techniques of H.P. Lovecraft, Philip K. Dick, the

Paranormal Activity films and TV's *Lost*.

Ann Heppermann and Martin Johnson had a very different starting point in their session

that November at the Filmless Festival, arguing passionately for a revamped 21st century audio

fiction that would shake off the clichés of classical radio, playing excerpts of recent works by

Jonathan Mitchell's *The Truth* and Kaitlin Prest's *The Heart* that had rhythm, depth, realism and

complexity unmatched by genre fiction offerings. Emphasising a literary sensibility, *Serendipity*

showcases some of the most exciting work out there and stands in a strong position to become

a successor to *The Columbia Workshop*, *Studio One*, *Earplay*, and other key anthology programs

that bent the aesthetic trajectory of radio by framing what counts as mature, edgy, and

medium-specific. In his 1940 book on radio directing, veteran dramatist Earle McGill wrote:

> Rumor has got abroad in the land that only those are workshop radio programs that have
> something about them dramatically radical or freaky, something politically to the left of left, or
> something so murky that no one but the director and his admirers can understand what it is
> about. The rumor ought to be suppressed, because it is far from the truth. A radio workshop is
> one that honestly tries to present to an adult-minded audience what is hoped will be the best
> and most adult-minded product of the medium (McGill 1940: 269)

Adult podcast fiction is important, sure, but here's hoping that *Serendipity* and other

anthologies remain unafraid to err on the side of freaky.

On the podcast you can hear Chris Brookes's original "Bannerman Quartet," a piece

based on an installation of four fictional monologues playing in a park in Newfoundland, but

also James Urbaniak's outstanding voice performance of Brie Williams's monologue "Status,"

about the experience of using Facebook. The first is a kind of experiment in the social, the

second an experiment in the vocal. In Lea Redfern and Rijn Collins's "Almost Flamboyant,"

meanwhile, a woman strikes up a friendship with a talking stuffed flamingo with a voice like that of crooner Tom Waits. The Australian piece is memorable for the specificity of a crisp soundscape – an alley in Chinatown with steam rising, closely-miked cigarettes and birds, workmen throwing out furniture from a bankrupt old nightclub, all heard from the position of a waitress on break leaning out a window – as well as for the low flaring growl of the flamingo, a mischievous figure. "Almost Flamboyant" won a prize from the Sarah Awards that year, and justly so; stand back from its surface story and you can hear a sonic exploration of Waitsian aesthetics that is thoroughly at home in this medium and no other. Martin Johnson's "Every Heart has a Limited Number of Heartbeats," finally, consists of a memoir of growing up in Sweden overtop of a dramatisation of a chance encounter in New York. The piece rewards re-listening through the use of a double soundscape. Over time the pattern of narration slows into a meditation on life and death spread across the memories of others, whispers, pops, surface noise, feedback, phone calls, lectures and interviews. The play moves sideways into edits that have the flavour of chance operations, a texture redolent of sound art. Johnson's piece calls to mind many of the hopes of radio theorists over the years – in the 1950s Donald McWhinnie advocated a radio that evokes rather than depicts; five decades later Richard Hand and Mary Traynor identified the blend of drama with musical technique as a possible direction for online production (McWhinnie 1959; Hand and Traynor 2008). That is indeed an exciting prospect that anthologies might nurture, but it is not the only one. If the work of Alan Hall, Pejk Malinovski, Sarah Boothroyd, Tim Hinman, Cathy Fitzgerald, Anna Friz and Gregory Whitehead is any indication, there is opportunity out there for operating between narrative and non-narrative registers, and also a hope for a podcast art that intervenes in the material of the podcast

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apparatus just as what Tetsuo Kogawa calls "radioart" intervenes in the electromagnetic spectrum that bears radio (Kogawa 2008). Podcasting needs to be twice as weird as it is now if it is going to be nearly as weird as radio is all the time.

Serendipity may not move in quite that direction in the future, but it has surely opened a lot of space, emphasising emerging possibilities beyond the "reality-based" premise that had hitherto been sine qua non to producers in the "Second Golden Age" of radio. Indeed, it works well in part because it emerges from a journalistic framework and so has provided architecture to move the sound of radio storytelling and documentary into dramatic genres. At any rate, thanks to shows like Serendipity as well as Jonathan Mitchell's The Truth, perhaps the two most important American fiction anthologies in the current generation so far, this type of programming is in good hands. The more complex problem lies in fiction serials, which matter in a different way. Thanks to their long story arcs and capacity to form and move fan bases, serials are where conventions are solidified and listening habits formed. They are vying for creating a "structure of feeling" for podcasting culture, to borrow a term (Williams 1977: 125-35). In serials, as Umberto Eco observed, we find the sociology of a form, access to the "horizon of expectations" for a particular group and historical moment, not in spite of their repetitious nature, but because of it: "Nothing is more 'serial' than a tie pattern," he writes "and yet nothing can be so personalized as a tie" (Eco 1990: 93). Anthologies can make art but serials can make culture. And while the former is exciting when it turns its ear to the future, the latter is at its best with an ear to the past.

On the Partial Existence of Audible Erections

Serials have accounted for much of the rise in podcast drama. In the 18 months since the Third Coast event mentioned above, brands have expanded (*Night Vale* has its two franchises, Pacific Northwest Stories has added two more shows to *The Black Tapes*) while larger podcasting shops have begun working in this space, such as Gimlet, Panoply, Howl, and Wondery. Fascinations have evolved. The independent horror program *Archive 81* brought a mise-en-abyme quality to the paranormal found-footage genre – in the series we hear podcaster Mark Sollinger listening to tapes of recently disappeared archivist Dan Powell listening to tapes of mysterious urban researcher Melody Pendras. The podcast also brings a welcome surrealist impulse and superior sound design to bear on recognizable audio technologies from previous eras. It's a steampunk radio series, full of sound treats for the media archaeologist. One memorable episode includes a tape of an impossible museum that features a hand mirror with a delayed reflection, non-Euclidean objects, and a canary that has survived for 38 years without food or water. Currently in its second season, *Archive 81* has begun to enter into Cronenberg territory, connecting recording devices and flesh, even referencing *Videodrome* for good measure. It's a fitting image for the sub-world of audio drama characterised by fixation with the mystery of recording tape, the one thing that audio production doesn't need these days. Indeed, audio drama is so thematically obsessed with tape that as a whole it could be interpreted as an elaborate elegy for that medium. In *Archive 81* that elegiac impulse finds a kind of apotheosis. I'm hoping that the third season will be available only on cassette.

Podcasts have also shown a capacity to react to trends in popular culture. Just three months after the program *Stranger Things* was a TV hit for Netflix, Panoply had a scripted series for children that had similar themes and terrific acting, *The Disappearance of Mars Patel*, a series distinguished by the use of an internal character narrator named Oliver Pruitt, who seems to be the principal villain of the series and also presents himself as its sponsor. Podcasts have branched out into other genres and publics. The British sitcom *Wooden Overcoats* has attracted a transatlantic following with the best opening line in all podcasting: "Rudyard Funn runs a funeral home in the village of Piffling Vale. It used to be the only one. It isn't anymore." What follows is the story of a mad rivalry punctuated by perceived slights, unrequited love, betrayal and pitiful elaborate plots, as told from the perspective of a pet mouse. Perhaps the most unexpected work to emerge in the last year is the thriller *Fruit* by indie wunderkind Issa Rae. The suspense series adopts first-person retrospective narration, one of the forms that radio itself helped to popularise in American fiction generations ago, but which has since been difficult to reintroduce among today's dramatists, who prefer the present tense (Verma 2012: 91-114). Taking the form of a monologue that segues into extensive scenes from the recent past, *Fruit* is narrated by X, a young pro football player, to a hidden narratee at some point in the future. The plot begins when X locks eyes with another man across a crowded club, and we know that his sexual orientation is awakening. The series then follows X's growing awareness of his own desires in a homophobic professional context. *Fruit* is a blend of corporate thriller, sports story and erotica that pushes all three genres in ways specific to the podcasting platform. One episode in the second season features the sound of an older man gagging while performing fellatio on the narrator, a sequence which, I am confident in predicting, is unlikely

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to air on mainstream radio, but can play any time at all through a wide variety of podcatching

apps on airplanes, in cafes – and in locker rooms – thanks to the smart phone, earbud and

noise-cancelling headphone that produce the extreme isolation in whose protective envelope

most of us listen to podcasts (Morris and Patterson 2015).

Celebrities are now working in podcast fiction programs, including Jenna Elfman in

Secrets Crimes and Audiotape, Jemaine Clement in the Monty-Pythonesque farce *The*

Mysterious Secrets of Uncle Bertie's Botanarium and Oscar Isaac and Catherine Keener in the

recent Hitchcockian thriller *Homecoming*, about which I will have more to say in Part Two.

There is also an increasing population of "bit" voice actors, particularly in the recent wave of

highly produced true crime programs – *Crimetown*, *Stranglers*, *Unsolved Murders*, *Hollywood*

and Crime, *Inside Psycho* – that employ dramatic recreations to an extent you don't hear in

more professional investigation-based programs like *Serial*, *Phoebe's Fall* and *In the Dark*. In a

show like *Hollywood and Crime*, recreations from the infamous 1947 Black Dahlia case can take

up the foreground entirely in a way that undermines their seriousness – in scenes of reporter

scrums down at headquarters, for instance, the noir patter is a little too on-the-nose. The new

serials have also expanded personnel, and with production scope has come larger narrative

worlds. Take the GE Podcast Theater productions on Panoply. Their first series, *The Message*,

listed a cast and crew of about 20 people, a number they more than doubled to create their

second series, *Lif-e.af/ter,* a Gibsonian piece about a lowly FBI flack obsessed with speaking to

his dead wife, her voice made immortal in an audio social media ecosystem that seems to have

its own agenda and awareness, a scenario oddly prefigured by radio theorist Allen Weiss (Weiss

2002: xi). In the audiobook version of George Saunders's new novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*, there

are some 166 in-character voices, many of them celebrities like Nick Offerman, Susan Sarandon, David Sedaris and Lena Dunham. Lawrence Fishburne's historical *Bronzeville*, which focuses on the lives of African Americans in Chicago's famed nightclub district, lists more than 50 members of its cast, crew and staff in the first episode. They even have a caterer.

One common difficulty among these programs has to do with the way they incorporate violence in highly-articulated digital audio. In the classical period, this was less difficult – there is a smile inside every scream in plays by Arch Oboler on *Lights Out!* and Wyllis Cooper on *Quiet Please*, whose most terrifying broadcasts were also their funniest. That's not the case these days, as leading programs tend to either underplay or overplay horror. There is a rape and murder scene in the first five minutes of Audible's 13-hour *Locke & Key* drama, something that is managed poorly and likely turned listeners away. In the sixth episode of *Bronzeville*, Lawrence Fishburne's Curtis Randolph, a community patriarch driven mad by the murder of his wife, takes a razor to a suspicious hood who may have information, but the sequence happens well off mike, diminishing its dramatic power and capacity to bear moral complication. In the first episode of *Inside Psycho*, meanwhile, the sound designers go very far into explicitly depicting the murders of Ed Gein, including the ghoulish sound of the body of victim Mary Hogan being ripped apart. We also hear the sound of her face being removed and turned into a mask. If *Bronzeville* features torture lite, *Inside Psycho* features torture porn. Both indicate an uncertainty about the ethical bounds of depiction and imagination, something that lacks norms at the moment.

But the very unsure footing dramatists have when it comes to explicitness points to a skill you can hear everywhere in audio drama: many have a deep awareness of the variability of

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the existence of objects, events and settings in the worlds they create. In an essential 1945

treatise on the poetics of radio, radio writer and historian Erik Barnouw wrote about this

phenomenon. For Barnouw, while many media rely on clear and sharp differentiation between

that which exists and what does not (what is on stage or not, on the page or not, on the screen

or not) radio drama is ontologically suppler, because it is just as easy for listeners to take on

board uncertainties as it is to subscribe to anything with "full existence" in the space of the

fiction. By the grace of radio's non-visuality and intangibility, as well as the writer's sense of

how to invite listeners to project her own ideas (or to withhold that same capacity through the

instruction of dialogue, effects and music), radio drama often features the "semi-existence" and

"potential existence" of objects and characters in dramatic space (Barnouw 1947: 23). It is this

quality that has made listening to radio drama seem so fitting to phenomenology; Clive Cazeaux

foregrounds how this kind of listening is particularly powerful when it comes to an account of

sensation as a mutual beckoning between the world and consciousness (Cazeaux 2005: 157-74).

To create for radio is to write sentences that always have open ends, to draw pictures whose

frames are only there sometimes. We don't hold objects and events to the same level of

predictable materiality as objects and events in other media; we sometimes even forget some

of the people we're listening to are there. In radio, in short, in radio there is no *mise-en-scène* in

the traditional meaning. Instead, what we think of as *mise-en-scène* obeys the logic of

contingency and expectation, of hint and hallucination.

Bearing that in mind opens up dynamics in many podcasts coming out these days. In

Lauren Shippen's *The Bright Sessions*, for instance, psychiatrist Dr. Joan Bright specialises in

working with patients who have superhuman powers as time travellers as empaths. Another

podcast that takes place in tapes, each session ends with hints about a subtext -- "the project" for which various patients are "assets" – anticipating that much of what the listener believes to be the real story "happens" in their own conjectures. In Justin McLachlan's *EOS 10*, a comedy about doctors in a space station, one sequence features protagonist Dr. Dalias poisoned by an alien lover with a xenopharmacological aphrodisiac that give him a priapism. Much of the two-episode story arc is taken up by scenes of embarrassment with the stubborn erection, something made funnier by the absence of the visual (To a colleague: "My eyes are up here, Doctor," a line that has the interesting effect of feminising Dalias in a sequence preoccupied with his sexual orientation). Importantly, we can from time to time forget about the existence of his discomfort as they seek a cure; the joke works because something that exists occasionally lapses into "semi existence" then springs back into existence (so to speak), which would be hard to accomplish in visual media that seldom let us forget what we see. Finally, take Daniel Manning and Mischa Stanton's *Ars Paradoxica*, a historical drama piece in which scientist Sally Grissom is transported back to the 1940s and a government science initiative, where she begins to create a "timepiece" that sets off an alternate timeline exploited by a shadowy government agency. The series asks us to imagine things that are either difficult, such as the plots of the agency made up of time travellers who get their orders from bosses in variable futures, or nearly impossible, such as a bullet that travels back through time to strike the same man in two different timelines. The second timeline, by the way, sets off a closed-time loop in which the victim's widow confronts Grissom about the death then shoots her, but misses and sends a bullet through the timepiece thereby killing the husband in the past whose killing she had come to avenge in the present. Get all that? The difficulty of these paradoxes also creates a medium-

specific pleasure, too: we don't need to *really* keep track of everything because it only "sort of"

exists, anyway. Manning and Stanton realize that the seeming impoverishment of sound is its

greatest deception. Audio dramatists should pity stage directors, TV producers and filmmakers

for their woefully narrow range when it comes to the dynamics of presence and absence.

In how they solve the problem of narration, these programs share a capacity to leverage

the property of partial existence for ends that range from exposition to affective response, to

use the non-depicted and semi-depicted intrepidly. In this way, they are dramas of ambiguous

presence, and as such capture something of the frenzy around the tangible in contemporary

media practices. I'm not sure if Shippen, McLachlan, Manning or Stanton had any familiarity

with Barnouw, but that is beside the point. It is astounding that his idea – written as a "lesson

learned" by the experiments of American radio drama in the 1940s – works so well with this

eminently contemporary material, as if the experience earned by dramatists generations ago

are still somehow around in our auditory muscle memory; on this model, radio drama is the

preconscious of audio drama. To use a third metaphor, we can think of the poetics of potential

existence as like a step that's shared by two different paths that take different directions to

head up the same mountain. If the problem is how to depict happenings in audio that most

listeners are used to experiencing with images, then the happy discovery is that audio provides

more leeway, not less: this produces what Rudolf Arnheim, radio drama's first theorist, called

radio's "economy of enjoyment" (Arnheim 1986: 134). And this is just one awareness that old

radio and new podcasting have in common. In Part Two of this essay I will argue that the sound

of serial "audio drama" should take a clue from the *Ars Paradoxica* bullet, and both move

forward and backward in time. By embracing radio drama, audio drama will not only be vastly

improved, I think, it will also become a mode of doing radio historiography that hasn't existed

before.

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AUDIO DRAMAS STUDIED

Alice Isn't Dead (10 episodes, 2016)
Alien: Out of the Shadows (Audiobook, 2016)
Archive 81 (13 episodes, 2016-17)
Ars Paradoxica (20 episodes, 2015-17)
The Behemoth (20 episodes, 2016)
The Black Tapes (24 episodes, 2015-16)
The Bridge (3 episodes, 2016)
The Bright Sessions (8 episodes, 2015)
Bronzeville (7 episodes, 2017)
Campfire Radio Theater (10 episodes, 2013-17)
The Child (Audiobook, 2014)
Crimetown (11 episodes, 2016-17)
Dark Adventure Radio Theater (8 CDs 2007-13)
The Disappearance of Mars Patel (10 episodes, 2016)
EOS 10 (18 episodes 2014-15)
Fruit (20 episodes, 2016)
Good Omens (6 episodes, 2015)
The Heart (3 episodes, 2015-16)

Homecoming (6 episodes, 2016)
Hollywood and Crime (9 episodes, 2017)
Inside Psycho (2 episodes, 2016)
*The Leviathan Chronicles (*10 episodes, 2008)
Lif-e.af/ter (10 episodes, 2016)
Limetown (6 episodes, 2015)
Lincoln in the Bardo (Audiobook, 2017)
Locke & Key (audiobook, 2015)
The Message (8 episodes, 2015
The Mysterious Secrets of Uncle Bertie's Botanarium (21 episodes, 2016-17)
Neverwhere (6 episodes, 2013)
A Night Called Tomorrow (5 episodes, 2016)
Our Fair City (6 episodes, 2012)
The Orphans (4 episodes, 2016)
Serendipity (16 episodes, 2015-17)
Secrets, Crimes and Audiotape (3 episodes, 2016)
The Starling Project (Audiobook, 2014)
Stranglers (12 episodes, 2016-17)
Transmissions from Colony One (30 episodes, 2013-15)
The Truth (2 episodes 2013-15)
Unsolved Murders (3 episodes, 2016)
Welcome to Nightvale (55 episodes, 2012-17)
We're Alive (10 episodes, 2009)
Within the Wires (10 episodes, 2016)
Wolf 359 (6 episodes, 2014)
Wooden Overcoats (8 episodes, 2015)

NEIL VERMA

Neil Verma is assistant professor of sound studies in Radio/Television/Film and associate director of the MA in Sound Arts and Industries at Northwestern University. Verma is author of *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago, 2012), which won the 2013 Best First Book Award from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. He is co-editor (with Jacob Smith) of *Anatomy of Sound: Norman Corwin and Media Authorship* (California, 2016). Verma has published articles on topics ranging from film history and television sound design to experimental listening and podcasting in *The Cine-Files*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Journal of American Studies*, *Journal of Sonic Studies*, *RadioDoc Review*, *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry, Sounding Out!* and *The Velvet Light Trap.* He is Network Co-director for the Radio Preservation Task Force at the Library of Congress, and founded the Great Lakes Association for Sound Studies (GLASS). He holds a PhD in History of Culture from the University of Chicago, where he was also Harper-Schmidt Fellow in the Society of Fellows from 2010-14.