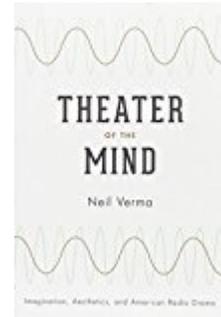




Neil Verma. *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 296 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-85350-5; \$29.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-85351-2.



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## The Significance of Sound

The mediums of radio and film both enjoyed tremendous success over the past century, though they have not attracted an equal amount of scholarly interest. Classes devoted to film, and even entire departments, have been institutionalized at universities for decades, while radio, the most ubiquitous form of electronic media, has generated substantially less scholarship.

The number of academic works devoted to radio has grown in recent years, and Neil Verma offers his own contribution with this examination of an under-theorized area, the sound of radio itself. With few exceptions, most cultural histories of radio largely ignore the actual aural experience of the listener, and instead focus on the social construction of the industry or its relationship to one of the larger themes that have dominated history in recent years (race, labor, gender, consumerism, etc.). Critics have long praised the kind of intimate, personal experience evoked by radio, though Verma reminds us that this experience did not occur spontaneously or by accident. Building from a metaphor consistently applied to radio, the “theater of the mind,” Verma aims to analyze

the dramatic practices of the 1930s-50s that were used to evoke specific emotions. In this regard, the book belongs as much to the burgeoning scholarship of sound studies as it does to radio history.

This emphasis on aesthetics evokes the way film scholars have long operated. Not surprisingly, the first person thanked in the acknowledgements is noted film scholar Tom Gunning, and Verma makes numerous references to other film theorists. These references, along with even more to radio scholars, indicate that Verma has clearly spent a significant amount of time on this topic; it should be noted that his 2008 dissertation bore a similar title to this newly published work, additional evidence of significant research. Verma states that he listened to over six thousand radio plays for this project. He chose dramatic radio plays, including anthology, suspense, mystery, and police-procedural programs, as his focus because these best illustrate the techniques used to establish the “theatre of the mind.” The analysis draws upon some articles from the trade press, and some internal documentation, though the great bulk of Verma’s

attention is devoted the sounds of the radio drama themselves.

But if his approach was inspired by film studies, Verma does not believe that concepts developed for one medium can be directly applied to another. To this end, he puts forth some new concepts for how to describe radio aesthetics. In contrast to the film term “vantage point,” he suggests “audioposition” (p. 35). This designation emphasizes how radio plays deliberately position the listener in a specific locale and orchestrate sounds to enforce this effect. He also spends a chapter outlining two contrasting styles used by radio plays. There is an intimate style, in which the listener shadows one particular character, who may not be a reliable narrator, and a kaleidosonic style. This second term is comparable to having an omniscient point of view, and can be heard in numerous plays from the late 1930s that presented the sounds of various locales to the listener, as if one were traveling the globe in a matter of minutes.

The book is divided into three main sections, framed by the overlapping time spans 1937-45, 1941-50, and 1945-55. Verma justifies his decision to begin in the late 1930s because dramatic conventions for radio had been well established by that point, in contrast to earlier years in which (according to Verma) playwrights had not completely adapted to the unique qualities of the medium. Production of radio plays was also centralized by this point, with New York and Los Angeles as the hubs, while the CBS and NBC networks had begun a serious commitment to sustaining (non-sponsored) programs, such as the Columbia Workshop, which began on CBS in 1936.

The decision to begin analysis in the late 1930s is somewhat questionable. While every historian must somehow limit the phenomenon which they are studying, the astonishing variety of experimentation during radio’s earliest years perhaps deserves more attention that it gets here. During the 1920s, for example, radio stations tried many unusual techniques to grab listeners’ attention, including broadcasting from exotic locales and developing original dramatic works. Verma glosses over this period, claiming the techniques from this period were borrowed from earlier art forms. Amos ‘n’ Andy, in this explanation, was simply a traditional minstrel show (p. 24). While Amos ‘n’ Andy may have borrowed the exaggerated Black dialect of minstrels, the program did not otherwise conform to minstrel conventions and in fact represented something quite new for the medium of radio. The idea of a continuing, daily serial, with a stable cast of characters, was a novel idea when Amos ‘n’ Andy

debuted in 1926 (originally known as Sam and Henry). The work of Shawn VanCour similarly indicates that the soundscape of early radio was not as artistically barren or undeveloped as Verma suggests.[1] A comprehensive account of the “theater of the mind” could then benefit from more attention to the origin of the dramatic conventions that flourished in subsequent decades.

Verma also notes that his “periodization is in part pragmatic, since many recordings have survived from these years” (p. 6). Perhaps then the primary reason for beginning the analysis in 1937 is not the codifying of conventions but the lack of earlier audio recordings. In a coda to the book, Verma offers some intriguing self-reflexive commentary on the material conditions that produced the source work for his study. While original listeners experienced these plays in one form, Verma scoured the Internet to find surviving recordings, which have been passed down through generations in a variety of formats, each one adding its own audio signature. In this section, Verma is keenly aware of the precarious relationship between facsimiles of the past, the actual lived experience, and memories, though he does not display the same mode of analysis when justifying his decision to begin in 1937.

The first four chapters focus on the late Depression years, 1937-45, and include a detailed discussion of Norman Corwin, one of the most famed radio playwrights. Verma also performs close readings, if that word is truly applicable, of a 1937 play from the Columbia Workshop, “The Fall of the City,” as well as the notorious 1938 performance of “War of the Worlds” by the Mercury Theatre. One of the many claims made about radio, and about electronic media in general, is a homogenizing effect upon distinct cultures. When everyone is exposed to the same information, every place becomes just like every place else, as the mantra goes. When Verma analyzes radio plays from this time period, he finds a contrasting dynamic as playwrights used a variety of sound effects to establish distant times and locations. This discussion benefits from Verma’s knowledge of technical details, such as the layout and construction of recording studios and various capabilities of different types of microphones.

The second group of chapters explores the period from 1941 to 1950, when Verma claims playwrights grappled with psychological questions relating to the nature of communication itself. This thematic trend is related to the growth of mass communication as an area of scientific study, exemplified by the research of Paul Lazarsfeld.

Funded by commercial entities and the government, the study of mass communication became a quest to identify specific effects that could be measured by charts, tables, and Likert scales. The resulting model of communication identified active transmitters and passive receivers, with influence flowing from one to the other.

This particular way of conceptualizing communication directly influenced radio playwrights of the period; as a result, 1940s radio dramas were populated by “pathological talkers and compulsive listeners” (p. 125). A number of radio plays, particularly horror and mystery programs such as *Inner Sanctum*, *Lights Out!*, and *Suspense*, are then analyzed within this paradigm of a “transmission model.” Many plays, for example, featured people who heard things that they should not have, or were unable to convince others of their news. One of the most well-known radio plays from this era, “Sorry, Wrong Number,” typifies this theme.

This section of the book concludes with a discussion of three types of character often featured in such radio plays: eavesdroppers, ventriloquists, and signalmen. The final category is defined as those who “manage signals in some way” (p. 150) within a communications network, and includes messengers, phone operators, press agents, broadcasters, along with individuals in the actual U.S. Signal Corps. It is possible that playwrights chose such characters because of the narrative options they made possible, though Verma has a more grandiose explanation for their prevalence, arguing that “we should conceptualize radio itself as a kind of wartime laboratory for the theorization of communication” (p. 117).

The third section, covering 1945 to 1955, begins by challenging conventional thinking about the dramatic transformation of radio following World War II. In the retelling of media history, it is customary at this point to jump to television, a visual form of broadcasting, as this medium did usurp the radio receiver’s cherished spot as a focal point of domestic life. The transition was not, however, as abrupt as is often depicted and Verma emphasizes how many dramatic radio programs continued well into the 1950s. There was a move, though, away from anthology programs, in which dramatists might contribute a one-off, experimental drama. The emphasis instead was on crime dramas and mysteries, and “there was therefore an overall narrowing of the range of dramatic techniques” (p. 171). Drawing from other cultural histories of this period and from film scholarship, Verma writes of a growing nihilism within radio drama. Anxieties about the Cold War were expressed in claustrophobic stories of

immobility, with characters trapped in elevators or other confined locales.

Chapter 9 is one of the strongest, and manages to find something new to say about film noir, a continual focal point for film theorists. The emphasis remains on the medium of radio, and Verma explores the proliferation of crime dramas in relation to cinematic noir. Not only did many of these shows feature similar plots and story-telling devices, such as the first-person retrospective, but many noir films were directly adapted for presentation on radio (p. 184). Verma cites previous work on radio crime dramas by Kathleen Battles, Jason Loviglio, and Elena Razlogova, though the sheer volume of material from this era suggests that crime dramas offer ample fodder for future exploration.[2]

Verma concludes, initially, by revisiting the original “theater of the mind” metaphor. The original proponents of these dramas and critics of the period praised the intimate experience made possible by radio, as if the medium could be fused directly to the mind of the listener. In Verma’s own words, “the issue is not how to break this ‘unnatural’ fusion of mind and medium so as to replace it with some ‘purer’ idea ... the issue is how to historicize this connection in a way that enables its demystification” (p. 223). In a welcome break from academic tradition, Verma follows this conclusion with a brief coda (mentioned earlier) that relates his experience interviewing Norman Corwin, as well his thoughts on the abundantly complex intersection of media and culture.

Not every reader will be convinced of Verma’s conclusions, such as traditionally minded historians (a category which includes this reviewer) who are skeptical about attributing such grand motives to creative actors. When “*The Fall of City*,” for example, changed its audioposition from one above the crowd to one within the crowd, did such a change signify ambivalence about New Deal policies, or was it simply a technique for producing a more engaging listening experience? It is possible that both explanations are valid, though many readers may not fully accept Verma’s arguments. Despite such differences, Verma has produced an impressive work of scholarship that offers a number of ways in which the history of radio may be reimagined and reinvigorated. And, if ever there was a book that warranted a companion CD, this is it. The book could be a useful benefit to any number of graduate seminars; without an accompanying CD, instructors wishing to use this text will have to exert a little effort to track down the particular programs analyzed by Verma, as it is difficult to fully engage with this

work without actually listening to the sounds. Radio is an aural medium, and any scholar or student interested in the topic must keep this fundamental characteristic in mind.

#### Notes

[1]. Shawn VanCour, "The Sounds of 'Radio': Aesthetic Formations of 1920's American Broadcasting" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008).

[2]. Kathleen Battles, *Calling All Cars: Radio Drag-nets and the Technology of Policing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); and Elena Razlogova, "True Crime Radio and Listener Disenchantment with Network Broadcasting, 1935-46," *American Quarterly* 58 (March 2006): 137-58.

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