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## Introduction

### *Thrown Voices*

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#### Premise of the Project

RADIO BROADCASTING in the United States began in 1920. By the 1930s broadcasting was popular, commercialized, and important to the life of the nation. The industry had a definite structure to it, and the medium played a key role in mass communication systems. Although radio has continued to be important, one could argue that in no other decade did it have such cultural influence. Thus, this book, which is about the radio and the radiovoice<sup>1</sup>—and may, indeed, be more about the meaning of thrown voices themselves—focuses on programs from the 1930s. As radio became structured and the medium rendered seemingly ordinary, extraordinary events served to reveal the dynamics of listening to voices with an unseen source.

I focus here on specific programs that reveal the more everyday relationship between transmitted voices and listener. By studying some of the sounds of American popular radio in the 1930s, I move to new understandings of how such voices resound differently than other forms of speech.

My understandings are concerned with the politics and aesthetics of radio as a cultural force.

This project is informed by my background in performance studies and my use of cultural studies in teaching media. The book takes an interdisciplinary approach, reflecting both my training and my current research. My close readings of radio thus move in two directions at once, treating radio both as *text* with meanings and as *event* with theatricalities. These readings are also distinctly influenced by ideas from the fields of psychoanalysis and film theory, particularly those that discuss the significations of the voice.

Following J. L. Austin's distinctions in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), I view the mediated act as an utterance that is not necessarily "constative" but also poised to enact what it announces. For Austin, the *performative utterance* is an event in language when words match action—or rather, words *are* action. The often-cited example of this is when a bride or groom at a wedding ceremony utters the words "I do." In saying those words, the person has become married; the words have simultaneously performed the action. A performative utterance is spoken in the "War of the Worlds" broadcast because the program is itself the invasion that Welles's narrative depicts. It lays bare the action of the medium. It is a performative utterance that enacts the contract and contact between the medium and the listener.

Electric speech and the performative utterance produce an overlay that pronounces not only the speech or the utterance but also the devices and the characteristics of the medium. It matters greatly through which means one communicates, and the medium itself is also always communicating in these messages. Thus, this project follows Marshall McLuhan's insistence that each medium is not neutral but develops a seeming per-

sonality with different characteristics (1995). This insistence is a crucial one. McLuhan, writing in an era saturated by television, insisted that reality becomes “televisualized.” Likewise, I suggest that the 1930s were a time when the radio and the importance of the transmitted voice permeated all aspects of life in America and elsewhere. It dominated the imagination of the culture, connecting and severing the nation from itself.

Radio had distinct characteristics in the 1930s that informed its structures for decades. It removed voices from visible bodies and brought them into the homes of the listeners. It provoked a kind of seeing through voice, an envisioning inside the head, that required a focused listening.

Many of the characteristics of radio remain, yet the placement of the medium in the cultural life of Americans has changed. Radio has in large part left the home. Many users listen to radios in cars or through headphones in personal stereos; increasingly, radio stations are on-line, and users tune in via the Internet. Listening to the radio via a multi-tasking home entertainment center or in a vehicle (or while walking or running) changes the dynamics of the medium. Radio becomes one of many activities involving the body and psyche or the immediate technology. In the 1930s, by contrast, radio had a central place in the life of the nation and in the nation’s homes. It was a domestic object plugged into the walls, receiving traveling voices. This aspect is key to my particular reading of the medium.

## **Bodies and Disembodies: Media and the Medium**

Communications historian Carolyn Marvin writes that “the body is the most familiar of all communication modes”

(1988:109). In her view, the body is used to send or receive information. Also, each communication medium involves the activity of at least one region of the body intensely as part of the act of transmission and the process of operation. Although it is understood as part of the process of mediated communication, the body itself is often configured as a communications medium and not just as a “mode.” Judith Butler suggests that the body is configured as a medium on which “cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself” (1990:8). In other words, the body is not used neutrally, but its usage and appearances are related to larger cultural meanings. The body—or a particular configuration of the body—is interpretable and mediates between self and sociality. Since it is deemed responsible for the operation of the apparatus needed for transmission of bodily productions, the body is seen as speaking or heard as making an appearance.

In the last twenty years, much theorizing has focused on “the body” and its social construction, cultural meanings, and modes of communication. This work follows upon this emphasis, but it is offered as a discussion of *the disembodiment*. By making this distinction, I do not mean to infer that the latter term is only in the shadow of the body or only the lingual expressivity of the body. The disembodiment gains a relative coherence differently via electric media, and I stretch the word’s usage so as to use it as a noun. It is set apart from this “theoretical” body of recent inquiry.

Much insightful work has also been done on radio disembodiment, and media history has been invigorated by recent reconfigurations of gender and performance theory. Yet I aim to reconfigure much of this thinking on the body

in order to understand the particular expressivity of *vocal* disembodiment. I write of this disembodiment in its early electric and vocal appearances because the proliferation of Internet disembodiment—although of a different construction and with a vastly divergent background—has a strong relationship to radio disembodiment and echoes some of its aspects. In many ways, I use radio in the 1930s as a way to address contemporary media.

My use of the word *disembodiment* in this endeavor is particular. To disembody means “to divest of the body, of corporeal existence.” In order to be a disembodiment, one has to have been once encased in a body; one has to have emerged from some original carnality to which one may or may not be reunited.

For example, Kaja Silverman notes that in classic Hollywood cinema virtually all examples of the female voice-over are embodied at some point during the film (1988:49–50). A female voice may narrate a scene and may be heard as originating from another perspective than that of the camera, but this voice “does not transcend the body” (50). The female voice is affixed to a body from which it originates and to which it will return; the camera will reunite voice and image.

Gender and disembodiment are articulated differently on radio. In radio, voices are always what Michel Chion—following Pierre Schaeffer<sup>2</sup>—calls an *acousmêtre*. Radio voices are discernible entities without a corresponding fixed visual aspect, hence they are “sound-beings.” Male voices were predominant in 1930s radio: in classic Hollywood cinema the vocal disembodiment is virtually a male voice.<sup>3</sup> Yet what I want to avoid in this project’s usage of the term *disembodiment* is the assumption that I am referring to the spirit or the essence of what was once comfortably bounded within a

human frame. Neither does this disembodiment within the medium of radio gain access to the transcendental by virtue of its acoustic entity in the ways in which it might in cinema. The vocal disembodiment in radio, simply put, is not a narrative device that involves a search for the corresponding body; it is the aberrant norm of the medium.<sup>4</sup>

Another meaning of *to disembody* found in Webster's Dictionary is "to free from the body." However, my sense of the noun form, *disembodiment*, is not that it is without incarnation. Rather, I argue that there is a body in the disembodied voice itself. I mean this in two ways. First, this voice is itself an entity that can be thought of as having texture and consistency. Second, the listener, in hearing the vocal disembodiment, imagines a specific body. Depriving an auditor of the source of the voice provokes a fantasy of the originary body. This is part of our cultural training; as beings that hear, we always look to see what occurrence has produced a sound. When the occurrence is outside the visual field, we imagine the origin of it. We conjure up a body we don't get to see.

Thus, my use of the word *disembodiment* foregrounds its production and the willingness of the listener to participate in this production. Disembodiment suggests a body, but it is not necessarily the *original* or the remainder of what was once—or will become—the actual body.

Contemporary sound artist Gregory Whitehead's work examines "the schizophrenic double" of the radiovoice. In his essay "Who's There: Notes on the Materiality of Radio," Whitehead describes radiophonic space as

*a public channel produced by an absent other entering into a private ear.* The material specific to radio inscribes itself within the thoroughly libidinal circulations internal to a

ménage à trois. The language of radio is thus constructed not from a series of applied techniques, but from a series of fragile complicities. (1989:11; italics in the original)

The vocal disembodiment enabled by radio production is estranged from its speaker as soon as it enters radiophonic space. This voice operates within this space independently of the disc jockey, performer, or reporter. The body of the speaker, needed to initiate the sound, is no longer required for its transmission into the private ear. The absent other is this source, which, due to the processes of the medium, becomes an “other,” deprived of presence but able to affect listeners never seen. For Whitehead, radio is an intimacy of strangers, with voices entering ears via the public channel. Whitehead foregrounds the notion of the ears as organ *and* orifice. The process of listening to radio—that is, hearing a disembodied voice received and projected by a machine running on electricity—requires an affection toward the unseen voice that is also made possible only by the tacit agreement of the listener. The disembodied voice enters into the corpus of the listeners. This is an anonymous and intimate interaction, a backroom of sound.

The production and dynamics of the disembodied radio voice, which provides an opening for a philosophical and aesthetic questioning and appreciation of the medium, also serves to create a precarious situation for the listener. This situation could be called the “Oz Effect.”<sup>5</sup> As in the Walter Fleming film classic, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), the transmitted voice creates a booming, commanding voice, rich with missives and instructions. This voice’s sonority anticipates and encourages the complicity of the listeners. The disembodied voice becomes a ruling voice through the auditors’ involvement with the broadcast.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt used his disembodied voice to gain support for his policies. Although he was handicapped and his actual corporeality could be viewed by the populace as frail, the voice he transmitted became a key way to show strength, confidence, and reliability. The voice thus becomes a *representation*<sup>6</sup> amongst many other key representations of the power and ramifications of the person.

The disembodied voice desires its listener. This listener, even if deemed inactive or rendered laconic by the broadcast's command, is never exactly passive. As Roland Barthes writes: "*Listening speaks*" (1985:259). Listening is a posture and a form of utterance—a way of accepting sound into "a hole in the head" (Whitehead 1991), but it is also an embodied production that enters into a relationship with the enunciator and with the auditor's context. Listening, which may appear to be silent, is not a silence. Listening speaks, then, not only through the speaker's interpretation of the listener but in the responsive modes the listener uses, all of which might escape the speaker's consciousness but are crucial to understanding the event.

In the realm of radio, Whitehead suggests that the speaker engages and imagines the listener he cannot see as part of the pleasure of sending out a voice (1989). The listener looms large; the audience's posture is audible. The experience of the listener to the disembodied radiovoice of the 1930s is multifarious (described as hysterical, for example, after responses to the "War of the World" broadcast). I argue that the newness of listening to so many unseen voices produced an uproarious connectedness. This experience of connectedness was not always welcome—even as the radio as object became ubiquitous, with its dial always switched to on. By this I mean that even as radio became familiar, it



retained a strangeness in the home. In fact, I believe radio still retains this strangeness and has the potential for creating hoaxes in a way that television, for example, could not. This potentiality resides in depriving the listener of the source of the sound and the body of the speaker. Radio keeps its poker face.

The word *medium* is the singular form of the word *media*, but it also suggests spiritualism. A medium is a person one visits in order to contact the beloved dead, a person who enables an interchange between the living and someone who has been revived. This medium is also able to transfer (or appear to transfer) the whims and activities of the deceased. The medium is someone who goes between the dead and the living and transmits messages back and forth. The medium was a very prevalent figure in the nineteenth century. I argue that the medium also has a great impact on conceptions of twentieth-century media.<sup>7</sup> This spiritual medium uses his body in order to transmit in ways that the character in *The Shadow* does. Such a medium is at once radio-like and yet never totally evacuates all sites of corporeality.

Lamont Cranston's alter ego in *The Shadow* becomes disembodied as a tactic to expose and transmit truth. He is able to enter into the heads of the villains. In turn, as a specter, he is able to transmit—in a booming voice—to these villains (and via radio waves to his girlfriend, for they share a frequency to which she can tune in). Not exactly a telepath, he is more of a radio transmitter and receiver. He personifies the medium in its haunting omniscience. The medium never completely disappears from the place of interaction. Rather, when completely possessed and transformed by the interaction between human parties, the medium itself extends and is enlivened.

In this aspect, my stance is different from that of Marshall McLuhan, who argued that media are the extensions of humans and suggested that media are analogous to (or literally) prosthetics. I view media, and radio in particular, as a separate terrain—in between, but able to interact. I view “radiospace” as a breeding ground and a graveyard for the disembodiment, not as an attachment to the human frame. I acknowledge this space’s autonomy. When voices are thrown into the medium, they are severed and resound virtually independently of their origin. The intent of the speaker does not guide how the voice is heard.

The word *medium* also has the meaning of “middle” or designates that which is neither small nor large but “in between.” For me, this between is expansive and peculiar. Influenced by the parties on all sides of this middle, it also keeps its distinctiveness. Radio is an “in between” that seems to forget that which is around it. It begins to appear as if it were a distinctive space.

Medium in its verb form also refers to intervening between two conflicting parties so as to lessen the effects of the clash. In this way, the word suggests a cultural healing—to mediate in order to resolve. Yet much of the discussion of the medium of radio here foregrounds the more menacing aspects of the medium. My premise, then, is indebted to Catherine Covert’s argument in her essay on the popularization of radio “We May Hear Too Much” (1984). She shows that although radio became popular during the 1920s—and was being hailed as way to unite geographically and culturally diverse Americans, creating a common American culture—this did not mean that the medium was unequivocally and universally loved. In fact, she argues that by the late 1920s the radio became a dread necessity as much as a beloved fireside companion.

Yet at the risk of contradicting myself, I do not want to entirely repress the more curative meanings of reconciliation that the word *medium* suggests. Although broadcast disembodiment can sound creepy or haunting at times and in each instance involves an operation (in the medical sense of operating—removing a voice from a body), this voice also creates pleasure. It can connect listening and speaking publics, producing a space of dynamic interaction energized by a seduction. Yet when the ether is increasingly run by corporate forces that delimit interaction and encourage censorship, the harsher aspects of the radiovoice are emphasized.

## Radio as Identity

A subculture of “radio boys” during the teens in America used the medium of radio as a way to communicate with each other across great distances.<sup>8</sup> They were inspired by Thomas Edison and by Jack London—adventurers and inventors. With homemade receivers and transmitters, they quickly became more proficient at navigating the airwaves than was the Navy. “Narrowcasters,” as opposed to broadcasters, some of them believed their communication was circumventing the encroaching monopoly of the Bell company. Amateur radio users organized into groups of radio operators (such as the American Radio Relay League), later becoming a lobbying group that vied with the Navy for control over the airwaves.

This struggle—over commercialism, modes of usage, and military versus civilian (and then corporate- versus community-oriented) applications—has been repeated with the Internet. As before, it is clear that the large corporations—now Microsoft and ATT, then General Electric and NBC—are winning. This project does not focus on the takeover itself,

but rather emphasizes the ramifications of this corporate victory and its trickle-down effect on how voices on the radio are heard.

Broadcasting is always, in part, a potentially disastrous endeavor, not because it serves to turn the public into a passive listening mass, kept in the home tuned to strange voices from a box but because the circumvention of distance has the capacity to become troublesome, a magic performance of technology with all sorts of possibilities. Radio gives voices to eyewitnesses. Yet they transmit only sound; the speech of the eyewitness is made up of “word-pictures,” a term used to designate an attempt to relay what the reporter sees. Their access to the visual puts such voices traveling along all sorts of psychic borders. For the eyewitness and his listeners, risk is involved in this transmission because the eyewitness can get too close and become subsumed into the event.

Radio voices are thrown. Their sound is often enjoyable: erotic, captivating, enlivening. Seemingly customized to each listener, they connect each to the story. The corporate structure of radio, though, is an estranging one, turning the voice into something potentially more nebulous. American broadcasting is concerned with particular strategies of covering events that are deemed disaster, tragedy, catastrophe, crises, and so forth, rather than focusing on presenting the news from a variety of viewpoints, contextualizing what is happening locally, nationally, and globally. Indeed, it is not involved in telling stories in either innovative or time-proven ways.

Of course, the world of the 1930s was filled with the need to report on occurrences of disaster. But the burgeoning communications industry was linked to the threat of malfeasance. This was not only to ensure that listeners stayed

tuned, but also because the industry was affixed to the circumvention of distance and the ability to place a voice near the edge of the horrid event.

For the listener, the presentation of the event and the capability of the medium itself to describe far-off events can be framed as “entertainment” or even as “info-tainment” or just plain old “containment.” Yet by the 1930s, this also pointed to the power relations of the industry. The amateur radio users and broadcasters of the first two decades could claim mastery over an event and the medium. But the dynamics were different for the listener to the commercialized broadcasts of the 1920s and 1930s. Listening may speak, as Barthes asserts, but with the advent of the broadcasting industry, the speech of the listener may be drowned out. Catherine Covert suggests, referring to this audience, that it “may hear too much” (1984).

Perhaps the hope of American isolationism is for a story that is not interrupted by the reporting of a crisis. But reports of crises have their own bizarre reward: Tales of survival are held so dear and seem so real; first person accounts encourage vivid picture-making in the minds of the listener.<sup>9</sup> The Internet, which is often touted as providing information, also repeats modes of storytelling that emphasize being there.

Even so, homespun conspiracy theories circulate, and all sorts of rumors run rampant on the Internet. Such missives reveal a relationship with the medium and its management. With media under corporate control, aided by the complicity of the government, fantasies and falsehoods gain credence. In this structure, a strange yet familiar voice can sound quite harsh and haunting, telling unfathomable stories, warning of monstrous invaders from Mars. The monsters stand in for corporate forces that dominate the medium.