

Honeymoon Shocker: Lucille Fletcher’s “Psychological” Sound Effects and Wartime Radio Drama

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This paper describes a change in how American radio dramatists used sound effects around the time of Pearl Harbor, particularly on *Suspense*, one of the signature “shocker” anthologies of the 1940s. In *Suspense* dramas by writers such as Lucille Fletcher, sound effects no longer merely described settings and action, as had been the custom previously. Instead, effects swept away interpersonal forms of colloquy and coded character psychology, often to the detriment of the populist spatial aesthetics that had prevailed during the Depression. Using accounts of studio technique, as well as a close reading of Fletcher’s “The Hitch-hiker,” I argue that when radio told tales of characters under the sway of sound effects, it helped to promulgate the idea that minds are available to penetrating and persuasive “signal-based” communicative acts, just the sort of language required to make works of propaganda meaningful. In a larger way, this paper tries to rediscover the American radio play of the 1940s by treating it as not only “theater of the mind,” but also a theater *about* the mind.

In the fall of 1939, the heyday of experimental radio drama at the CBS network, publicist Lucille Fletcher married conductor Bernard Herrmann, a protégé of such pioneering broadcasters as Norman Corwin, Irving Reis, and Orson Welles.¹ Fletcher soon inaugurated a writing career, pitching a

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¹ On this period at CBS see Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States 1933–1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 64–125; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998), 381–84; and Judith E. Smith, “Radio’s Cultural Front,” in

scenario about a singing caterpillar that aired as “My Client Curly” in March of 1940. In April, she also published an article in the *New Yorker*, relating studio lore about sound effect gimmicks and predicting developments in radio storytelling.² Fletcher explained that engineers no longer used effects just to set scenes or to mark segues. Instead, they were giving their bells and whistles much more challenging tasks, such as using oscillating effects to signify the feeling of faintness or seasickness, aligning the listener’s hearing with a character’s affect. “Your real sound effect artist,” Fletcher suggested, was now using “abstract” modes of reference, and she surmised that the future lay in “psychological” drama, one devoted to interiority.³ The prediction proved astute. During World War II, dramatists began to air many plays of great psychological complexity, earning this poorly understood genre its enduring sobriquet as a “theater of the mind.” As Fletcher’s forecast suggests, however, there is more to this vogue than an increase in the number of psychologically themed tales, since this type of story required special techniques of signification appropriate to the caprices of radio. This paper concerns one such technique. I argue that in order to create psychological drama, writers such as Fletcher used what I will call “signals”: over-determined sounds that seem to control the inner lives of characters. Further, I propose that signal-based drama echoed the logic of contemporaneous mass messaging programs inasmuch as it depicted the mind as a highly susceptible organ beset by irresistible instruction, a mind that is vulnerable to (and imagined for) the instrumentalistic imperatives on which war exhortation depended.⁴ In light of its capacity to stage this concept, I approach radio drama as a laboratory in which broadcasters tested ideas about consciousness in the 1940s. In short, this paper considers the aesthetic that made psychological drama possible, and in asking this question I seek to mark one key juncture at which the theater *of* the mind became a theater *about* the mind, a drama with profound ramifications for our grasp of wartime culture.

Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, eds., *The Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 209–30.

² Lucille Fletcher, “Squeaks, Slams, Echoes and Shots,” *New Yorker*, 13 April 1940, 81–96.

³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴ On coercion and radio see Christopher Simpson, *The Science of Coercion: Communications Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 124–60; Todd Gitlin, “Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm,” *Theory and Society*, 6, 2 (September 1978), 205–53. Jason Loviglio has also touched on these themes; see Jason Loviglio, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: The University Of Minnesota Press, 2005).

It is difficult to overstate the degree to which radio structured quotidian life in the 1940s. By the time manufacturers ceased building sets for civilian use in April of 1942, radios were in about 87 per cent of all US homes, and up to 20 million words were uttered each day over 900 domestic stations.⁵ *Variety* reckoned that the industry was worth over one billion dollars a year.⁶ In light of such statistics, scholars often dub World War II a “radio war” for a “media generation.”⁷ Yet even prominent historians of the home front analyze few broadcasts in detail, often relegating radio shows to a coda in passages about wartime film.⁸ This asymmetry is misrepresentative. In the summer of 1942, Hollywood shot some thirty-eight war films, but broadcasters were collectively airing up to 603 war shows per week; twelve months after Pearl Harbor, CBS boasted to have aired 6,471 war dramas, 3,723 announcements, and 4,158 news shows.⁹ And dedicated war shows are only the beginning. Psychotic Nazis were on the loose in *The Mayor of the Town*, while characters served in war plants on *Joyce Jordan*, *Girl Interne*, as *Mr. District Attorney* told listeners to watch the coasts. In the first half of 1942, Superman captured four submarines, rescued an airplane in mid-air, and defended a hospital from a Nazi bombing raid, meanwhile reminding youths to “turn in scrap to slap the Jap.”

For some time, media historians paid little attention to this material, instead stressing the forces that constructed network systems or considering propagandists and their institutions.¹⁰ Writers seldom listened to broadcasts,

⁵ William C. Ackerman, “The Dimensions of American Broadcasting,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Spring 1945), 3. “87% of Nation has Radios,” *Variety*, 11 March 1942; “600,000 Words or More Daily Pass through Propaganda Analysis Mill of FCC,” *Variety*, 31 Dec. 1941, 33.

⁶ “Radio’s Billion \$ Scope,” *Variety*, 21 Jan. 1942, 3.

⁷ Douglas, 152; Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 10.

⁸ See e.g. John Morton Blum, *Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1976); John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Richard Lingeman, *Don’t You Know There’s a War On? The American Home Front, 1941–1945* (New York: Nation, 2003).

⁹ Lingeman, 182; “603 War Shows on Web,” *Variety*, 29 July 1942, 25; the CBS figures come from an advertisement in *Variety*, 6 Jan. 1943, 113.

¹⁰ See e.g. Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alan Brinkley, “World War II and American Liberalism,” in Lewis Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, eds., *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); James Kimble, *Mobilizing the Home Front: War Bonds and Domestic Propaganda* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2006); Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information 1942–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

neglecting radio drama during its most significant period: in the year after Pearl Harbor, major networks aired seventy unique dramatic programs in prime time, compared to sixty-two music programs and thirty-one comedy or variety shows.¹¹ Recently, cultural historians have begun to use some of these programs to confront topics that range from national identity to civil rights discourse.¹² Yet few of these efforts stake claims on the nature of radio drama. For instance, Bruce Lenthall has recently catalogued the reactions of intellectuals to radio society as it brought about “a culture that was both mass-produced and designed for mass-consumption” in the 1930s.¹³ Although this sort of study asks powerful questions, characterizing how astute listeners reacted to radio, it looks away from broadcasts to study the medium, and the project is framed so as to better understand audiences rather than programs. In this way, radio scholars have become adept at revealing the fantasies of the radio age, yet they have neither required nor achieved an adequate history of radio storytelling. This deficit can be amended: to the field of books on how and why people listened we must add more closely argued historical criticism on what they listened *to* – how it was conceptualized and executed, what it conveyed, and why.¹⁴ I submit that to effectively study programming, it is necessary to ask about narrative structure, effects, volume, and acoustics. These formalistic properties would be trivial were radio a well-theorized form that scholars are as practiced at unraveling as they are at reading films or novels. But this is not the case, and we have only a few of works of criticism to which we might look for

¹¹ These figures are based on Mitchell E. Shapiro, *Radio Network Prime Time Programming, 1926–1967* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002).

¹² See e.g. Benjamin L. Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s–1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 91–127; Howard Blue, *Words at War: World War II Era Radio Drama and the Postwar Broadcasting Industry Blacklist* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002); Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Kathy M. Newman, *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935–1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 109–92; and Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

¹³ Bruce Lenthall, *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 208.

¹⁴ For a model of the approach that I advocate, please see: Shawn VanCour, “The Sounds of ‘Radio’: Aesthetic Formations of 1920’s American Broadcasting” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2008); and my dissertation, Neil Verma, “Theater of the Mind: The American Radio Play and its Golden Age, 1934–1956” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2008).

aid.¹⁵ Yet an argument that is accountable to plays for grounding must also offer some modest theorization of the format. Here I attempt such an approach, arguing that because dramatists crucially relied on effects to create tales in which they depict the mind, it will be profitable to understand how these effects operate, in order to discover how bells and whistles become bells and whistles – or something more. In this way, I hybridize history with media studies, foregrounding what gave radio plays their purchase on the imagination and clarifying how radio semantics ramified beyond the realm of entertainment. The rise of “psychological” sound represents an opportunity to lay out just such an argument.

The essence of Fletcher’s proposal can be best discerned in how it rejects the task of conveying exterior space, a problem that had guided the techniques of Orson Welles, Norman Corwin, and their cohort of broadcasters during the Depression. In Welles’s *Mercury Theater* and Irving Reis’s *Columbia Workshop*, listeners often followed a traveler’s point of audition through a sonorous landscape filled with sounds that approach and recede from us, or else listeners seem to jump from one aurally shallow scene to another. In Reis’s “Broadway Evening,” for instance, we follow a hypothetical stroller down Broadway on a busy night as if over his shoulder; but in most of Welles’s “The War of the Worlds” we have no such companion, instead teleporting around the dramatic space. These performances use segues and off-mike delivery to give a sense of vivid depth or crucial shallowness to scenic spaces, a spatial grammar that also resonated in political dramas. In typical Popular Front plays, once deep space is established we sympathize with a near voice so that we might empathize with further-off ones that represent benighted social groups. In Robert Tallman’s “I Sing a New World,” our point of audition tracks the ghost of Walt Whitman, who meets workers, waitresses, and vagabonds, just the sort of characters identified as “the people” in leftist collectivist fantasies, each equidistant from us. This volumetric equivalence enabled writers such as Corwin and Stephen Vincent Benét to create vast populist dramas including “Listen to the People” and “Unity Fair,” which draw voices together from distant solitudes, so as to aesthetically forge a social coalition around a central microphone.

Sound effects were an integral part of this spatial drama, evoking what NBC sound chief Walter Pierson called “the environment of an act.”¹⁶ On

¹⁵ See e.g. Andrew Crissell, *Understanding Radio* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory & Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Richard Hand, *Terror on the Air! Horror Radio in America, 1931–1952* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2006).

¹⁶ Pierson is quoted in Remy Brunel, “‘March of Time’ Scenarists and Actors Trained to Swift Changes to Keep up with News,” *Washington Post*, 13 Sept. 1936, AA5.

The Edge of Night, a different buzzer was used for each of the doors of characters' homes, which helped notify regular listeners when they were at Eric's house rather than Adele's.¹⁷ Effects also conveyed motion and perspective: *Hopalong Cassidy* begins with frantic hoof beats that we follow beside, *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* set its mood with a creaking door that we walk through, and in *The First Nighter* we take a cab to "The Little Theater off Times Square," then move through the lobby into our seat. As producer Phillips Lord confessed, without the depth that effects conveyed, "our programs would be as flat as pancakes."¹⁸ Because effects make scenes legible, dramatists often relied on sounds that they surmised to be attached to specific locations, such as trolley bells that convey a city or cricket chirps that suggest darkened prairies. Radio director Himan Brown explained it this way: "When I did *Bulldog Drummond*, what did I need? I needed London, and what is London? London is foghorns, and Big Ben, and so on."¹⁹ Theorist R. Murray Shafer calls these "scene-making" sounds "keynotes," as they set baseline expectations for action in a scene.²⁰ In a 1940 directing manual, producer Earle McGill explains the prevailing philosophy about how to use such sounds:

A sound effect should be so instantly recognizable or so rigidly and shrewdly prepared for or flow so naturally and realistically from the text that the listener accepts it without questioning the aesthetic justice of including it in the drama.²¹

For McGill, good radio used the indicative qualities of sound and illustrated only naturally consequential scenes and action, tasks that reflect the spatial preoccupations of the period.

It is the rigid naturalism of this scenic referentiality that Fletcher noticed sound engineers questioning when she penned her 1940 "psychological radio" item. Fletcher's ideas also echoed a trend toward psychology that was resounding all over the airwaves around the time of Pearl Harbor. On *The Workshop* and *Mercury*, directors traded the nationalistic plays of Benét and Corwin for melodramas based on tales by the likes of Joseph Conrad and Wilbur Daniel Steele. Actors began to finesse *sotto voce* to convey stream of consciousness, as directors increasingly set tales in cloistered spaces in which

¹⁷ See Robert L. Mott, *Sound Effects: Radio, TV, and Film* (Boston: Focal Press, 1990), 197–98.

¹⁸ Lord is quoted in Remy Brunel, "Broadcasters Employ Complex Tricks to Put Over Radio Crime Thrillers," *Washington Post*, 30 Aug. 1936, AA7.

¹⁹ Brown is quoted in Ira Skutch, *Five Directors: The Golden Years of Radio* (Los Angeles: Directors Guild of America, 1998), 29.

²⁰ R. Murray Shafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1992), 272.

²¹ Earle McGill, *Radio Directing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940), 39.

action was close, atmosphere heavy, and boundaries rigid. Hysteria, madness, and dream sequences proliferated on *The Shadow*, *The Weird Circle*, and *The Lux Radio Theater*, as anthologies such as *Lights Out!* and *The Ford Theater* aired plays about characters vocalizing contradictory thoughts as they converse externally. And morale programs such as *Wings to Victory* centered on men with acute inner doubts that are uttered as asides and alienated from scenic action – only after heroic acts does the alienated voice return to the character, restoring the integrity of identity. Whatever we make of such sequences, it is hard to read them without relying on psychological understandings or interpretations, a reliance that is not so crucial for unpacking programs that had aired just a few years beforehand, most of which tended to rely on an exterior setting to support dramatic objectives.

It is with all of this in mind that Fletcher wrote her first original radio thriller, which was inspired by an incident that took place only weeks after she published her *New Yorker* piece.²² That summer, with radio programs on hiatus, Fletcher and Herrmann took a road trip across the country as a belated honeymoon. According to legend, the couple was just leaving New York when Fletcher noticed a pedestrian on the footpath of the Brooklyn Bridge. Several miles later, she spied a second figure that appeared identical to the first, this time thumbing a ride near New Jersey's Pulaski Skyway. The incident would inspire "The Hitch-Hiker." Fletcher's play consists entirely of the tale of a writer named Ronald Adams, a character originally played by Orson Welles. From an auto park on Route 66 near Gallup, New Mexico, Adams relates an account of a journey that had begun in Brooklyn six days earlier. We segue back in time to a scene in which he reassures his fretful mother that the open road is perfectly safe, then packs up his 1934 Buick and heads for Hollywood, where he has been promised a job. Like Fletcher, Adams spots a hitcher on the bridge and experiences déjà vu at the turnpike. He dismisses the episode until he sees the same figure yet again. Several hours have elapsed and a rain storm has dissipated, but the man reappears, still shouldering the same overnight bag and showing fresh raindrops on his overcoat. The phantom calls out "going my way?" from a gas station in the Alleghenies, a cow field on the prairie, and a desert in the mesa country. Adams soon succumbs to hysteria and tries to run the hitcher down. Alas, no sooner has the phantom fallen under the Buick than he reappears elsewhere. Finally, Adams reaches the empty auto park and phones home, hoping that his mother's voice can bring him back to his senses. But he can only reach a

²² Fletcher relates this anecdote in Martin Grams Jr., *Suspense: Twenty Years of Thrills and Chills* (Kearney, NB: Morris, 1997), 13.

neighbor, who says that his mother is indisposed, mourning her son Ronald, who died several days before in an auto accident on the Brooklyn Bridge.

The play's defining performance came in 1942 on *Suspense*, a thriller anthology created by producer William Spier, directed by sound engineer Johnny Dietz, and scored by Herrmann.²³ One of the signature programs of the period, *Suspense* ran for twenty years, boasting such marquee stars as Rita Hayworth and James Stewart.²⁴ *Suspense* also led a trend in which a number of thriller playhouses were inaugurated in wartime, including *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* and *The Whistler*. These anthologies fed off a conceptual link that had associated radio with supernatural themes ever since the pre-network period.²⁵ In the 1920s, many evangelists and healers had filled the airwaves with hokum, and as these dissipated in the 1930s, gothic plays arose.²⁶ CBS and NBC each began to air adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe, and the author's work formed the content of at least thirty-two broadcasts from 1935 to 1955, while his themes were purloined by many. *Calling All Cars* aired at least one play patterned after Poe's "The Black Cat" in 1939; *Dragnet* did the same thing twelve years later. Other gothic authors soon came to the airwaves. In 1937, NBC hired Stephen Benét to adapt "The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow" into an operetta; a year later, on CBS, Orson Welles inaugurated his *Mercury Theater* with "Dracula." In New York, both WHN and WBNX featured *Ghost Walks* around the city, each station unaware that the other had the same title and premise. Meanwhile on WEAJ Manhattan, Alonzo Deen Cole's *The Witch's Tale* became wildly popular.²⁷ Youths gathered around the "campfire" of host "Old Nancy, Witch of Salem," to hear macabre stories in exactly the same years that their parents came to the "fireside" of President Roosevelt to hear reassurances and policy.²⁸ Such material generated resistance. In 1935 a "National League for Decency in Radio" warned that blood-and-thunder radio promoted "sex delinquency."²⁹

²³ This broadcast (2 Sept. 1942) is not to be confused with a version that aired on *The Mercury Summer Theater* (21 June 1946).

²⁴ For appraisals of the program see Douglas Gomery, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 90; James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 279; Hand, 21; Allison McCracken, "Scary Women and Scarred Men: Suspense, Gender Trouble and Postwar Change, 1942–1950," in Hilmes and Loviglio, *The Radio Reader*.

²⁵ For more on this see Douglas, *Listening In*, 40–82; Allan Weiss, *Phantasmatic Radio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence for Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 59–91.

²⁶ "Cycle of Ghost Stories Hits Radio," *Variety*, 4 March 1936, 49.

²⁷ "Radio Reports – The Witch's Tale," *Variety*, 8 Oct. 1936, 37. ²⁸ Hand, 82.

²⁹ "Letter from the National League for Decency in Radio," *Variety*, 15 May 1935, 38–39.

The critique had few results, as lucrative ad contracts ensured that ghost stories remained bread and butter to Depression radio.

And in wartime they became meat and potatoes. Allison McCracken notes that the number of “paranoid gothic” thrillers nearly tripled, many of them becoming wildly successful – *Sanctum* was among the top twenty radio programs for fourteen years.³⁰ The craze was apparent as early as 1942, when *New York Times* radio critic John Hutchens noted a rise in what he called “the shockers.”³¹ Shock effects were probably favored by sponsors because many programs were sponsored by anxiety tonics. *Sanctum* funded its dark tales by hawking Carter’s Little Liver Pills, “the best friend to your sunny disposition,” while *Lights Out!* sold Ironized Yeast tablets, which promised to relieve “that tired feeling” when “the War got you down.” Both shows foment unease before plugging a nostrum for it. Shockers also offered experimental scope to writers. *Lights Out!* used stream of consciousness under Arch Oboler, a master of the style, while *Suspense* used internal retrospective narrators: of the 365 plays aired on *Suspense* in the 1940s, 230 begin with some variant of “Dear listener: I now face disaster. It all started when ...” Hutchens argued that there are advantages to the grim atmosphere of which shock radio liberally partook, explaining,

Doors squeak, footsteps pace off the measured step of doom, triggers click, doleful music wafts through the night ... The story may be dubious and the characters dull, and the violence so immoderate as finally to be only ridiculous, but the atmosphere is always “right,” proving once more that radio’s power of suggestion is unequalled.³²

Touting the “suggestiveness” of sound effects, Hutchens points directly to the issue of semantic meaning, a subject long ignored by scholars in their appraisals of these programs. By asking how footsteps measure doom in “The Hitch-Hiker,” we can situate the play in the period and illustrate how Fletcher both draws upon 1930s spatial radio and slyly undermines it. Like many dramas of the 1930s, Fletcher’s play conveys scenes using keynotes. The car’s motor “says” that we are moving, a cowbell “tells” us that we have reached the countryside, as volume and reverb “describe” the distance that separates Adams from the hitcher, a scheme on which the effect of suspense is greatly reliant. “The Hitch-Hiker” also fulfills one hallmark aim of 1930s radio – to allow us to move through deep space, just for the sake of it – by arranging the tale as a journey. Yet the play also thematizes impediments to

³⁰ McCracken, 183; Skutch, *Five Directors*, 25.

³¹ John K. Hutchens, “The Shockers,” *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1942, X12.

³² *Ibid.*

this trip: although the hitcher ostensibly seeks a lift, Fletcher associates him with a series of impasses and breaks in the roadway. He appears at a railway track, under tunnel arches, at a state border and leaning against a detour barrier. Adams even calls him “drab as a mud fence,” and it may be significant that the journey ends near the continental divide. On these badlands, Adams sees impediments everywhere: “I’d see his figure, shadowless, flitting over dried-up rivers, over broken stones cast up by old glacial upheavals.” The land itself seems to desiccate conduits and hoist barriers, as if refusing to be traveled upon. This effect is complimented by changes to the manner in which the play offers exposition. Early scenes use effects to “set the stage,” but later sequences rely on speech, a change that gives the setting an unreal quality. The land does not self-illustrate, denying us that sense of place vital to the style of the 1930s; the nation seems to become more imaginary as we move across it. This foreshadows the revelation that the narrator is dead and we have traveled no further than the bounds of his imagination. In this way, Fletcher builds a world only to tell us that it is not there, using a theater that creates landscapes to develop a theater that imagines the psyche as itself a landscape.

This is why the sound profile of the play offers only trivial relationships between the listener and most of the characters. In the 1930s, directors had contrived acoustics and volume so that listeners feel intimately close to a character who stands in a rhetorically strategic spatial relation to “far-off” characters that emblemize social problems; the world of the play seems to be a space of many vantage points, a pluralistic land of “the people.” But things are different in “The Hitch-Hiker.” In Fletcher’s play, with the exception of the narrator, we do not get to know anyone very well, which gives the play a solipsism that prevents us from using our protagonist as a proxy to access scenes. The play’s solipsism is also stressed by the way in which we perceive material. Although no other character can hear the hitcher’s voice, the listener can, suggesting that we are *in* Adams’s sensorium rather than simply *near* it. This change of position represents a decisive break with convention. In the 1930s, directors had made the listener part of an intimate dyad exploring a world. But in the 1940s, those worlds were replaced by states of mind in which the listener was coextensive. Lost is the sort of stage that is able to comment on issues affecting public life. And so there can be no social problems in “The Hitch-Hiker” because the play does not take place in society as such.

This internalization of the social is only the first innovation to be found in “The Hitch-Hiker.” In the context of this change, Fletcher’s play also tells a complementary tale about spoken communication in the midst of failure;

the mind only becomes a well-articulated venue as it seeks to define itself through conversation but ends up being defined by sounds. Throughout the play, Ronald Adams pursues interlocutory talk, compulsively expressing an acute desire to “talk to somebody,” as a means to soothe his frazzled nerves. The play’s direct address structure is itself an attempt: “If I tell it,” Adams says, “maybe it’ll keep me from going crazy.” While desperate for palliative talk, he is also wary that it may fail, explaining that he must hurry or else “the link may break.” The root of this anxiety soon becomes apparent, as we hear Adams vocalize to a series of other characters that he meets along his journey – troubled conversations that always fail to achieve satisfying exchange. Halfway through the play, for instance, Adams offers a lift to a young woman outside Oklahoma. While she hints at erotic interest, Adams learns that she cannot perceive the hitcher, which makes it hard for him to express his predicament to her. She soon misunderstands Adams’s talk and questions his sanity, eventually fleeing. As the narrative continues, Adams seems to fear that the listener–addressee of his tale might misunderstand him as well. Twice during the play, his narrating persona interrupts ongoing events in order to reiterate how the hitcher looked to him initially, as if he is afraid that he has been unclear in previous efforts to convey these details. Despite his trepidation, Adams feels compelled to keep trying to establish a connection, citing the great loneliness of his journey. His loneliness is a clue to the final revelation (because the play takes place only within his mind, true rapport is precluded) and it is also ironic, since the hitch-hiker’s calls are a constant offer of remedy. As Adams reflects, “The thought of picking him up, of having him sit beside me was somehow unbearable, and yet at the same time I felt unspeakably lonely.” This bind is sustained throughout the drama as Adams loses every attempt to achieve an interlocutory exchange that is both bearable and “speakable.”

With talk breaking down, Fletcher’s play introduces a new element into Adams’s bind: every time he does vocalize to another character, the colloquy is pestered by a competing sonic motif that sounds off each time a conversation fails. The first expression of this sound occurs when Adams meets a gas station attendant in Pennsylvania. As Adams tries in vain to express his situation, a series of chimes ring out, as the gas pump measures off the fuel that it dispenses. The background chime returns in a new form further down the road, just after Adams fails to convince the owner of a diner to open after hours. As Adams drives away, he arrives at a railroad track, whose safety barrier descends across the roadway, accompanied by a chime that strongly resembles the sound of the fuel pump. Toward the conclusion, the play also introduces a tolling bell deep in the background audio of Herrmann’s score,

as if the chime has broken free of natural objects and now works in the atmospheric level of the drama. The repetitive quality of this motif even begins to affect Adams's exposition. Early in the play, towns had evoked detailed commentary, but later they "tick off, one by one." The warning system finally thwarts talk when Adams calls home from Gallup "to hear the even calmness" of his mother's voice – as opposed to the warning's hec-toring staccato. In this scene, the long-distance operator instructs Adams to deposit a number of coins into the telephone, an activity that is amazingly over-illustrated. For nearly a minute, Adams does nothing but follow the operator's instructions to fill the change box, which sounds as if it had been initially empty, creating fifteen impacts that resemble the pump, rail warning, and bell effects. Adams's stymied attempt to return to the mother represents an extraordinarily failed conversation, and the voice of the operator tells us so by devolving into yet another repetition: "Your three minutes are up sir ... Your three minutes are up sir ... Your three minutes are up sir ..." The operator's dialogue shuts down the retrospective narrative, and fades like a warning siren receding from earshot.

By itself, each of these chime events conforms to a naturalistic drama, but taken together they suggest a development in what sounds are intended to signify in dramatic context. Actually, the motif differs quite starkly from virtually all of the sounds discussed above. During the Depression, keynote effects evoked locales, a useful and appropriate tool for directors trying to establish space. But Fletcher's chime decouples from the sounds that express it, just as sounds disengage from the objects that produce them; because of this process of double abstraction, even though the sound may literally indicate events and illustrate action, it is also something beyond that which occasions it. We know this from context, too: traditionally, effects took place in an exterior, but Fletcher's play offers no external space, so the chime cannot emanate from outside of Adams's mind. In fact, it is possible to class the chime as psychological only because it is far more prominent than the types of sound used to set scenic backgrounds in the 1930s. As the motif migrates from fuel pump to railway barrier, speech acts and telephone change-box, it is as if it rises from a subconscious level to burst into the open at the instant of epiphany, circling inward from an aural periphery to impeach its own claims at material referentiality. Keynotes call on cultural memory to create a cliché scene; afterward, they tend to disappear into the background. By contrast, the chime becomes more prominent over the duration of the drama, because it is an organizing principle within the consciousness that the play so powerfully explores.

Murray Schafer calls sounds of this type “signals,” sonorous events to which our attention is especially directed.³³ In 1940s psychological radio, these signals do more than simply flow from story events. They reveal inner truths, take on a life of their own, intrude upon action, and affect inner dynamics, hence the sheer exorbitance of the pay phone sequence. It would be a stretch to say that the “motif is the message” of “The Hitch-Hiker,” but it is without question the most critical stylistic innovation devised by Fletcher, Herrmann, Spier, and Dietz. And signal-based communication also befit a time of war, as many writers echo the logic behind Fletcher’s chime motif. Ernie Pyle is typical. “War has its own peculiar sounds,” Pyle writes in *Here is Your War*:

They are not really very much different from sounds in the world of peace. But they clothe themselves in an unforgettable fierceness, just because they are born in anger and death. The clank of a starting tank, the scream of a shell through the air, the ever-rising whine of fiendishness as a bomber dives – these sounds have their counterparts in normal life, and a person would be hard put to distinguish them in a blindfold test. But once heard in war, they are never forgotten.³⁴

Pyle’s ferocious sounds extract the “voice” of an object and commandeer memory just as chimes take over Adams’s mind and distort “normal” aural life by filling it with vestiges of a remembered reality that is monstrously ever-present – signals traumatize time and the psyche at once. Pyle’s lists of sounds could practically be taken from a radio script:

The memory of [war sound] comes back in a thousand ways – in the grind of a truck starting in low gear, in high wind around the eaves, in somebody merely whistling a tune. Even the sound of a shoe, dropping to the floor in a hotel room overhead becomes indistinguishable from the faint boom of a big gun from far away. A mere rustling curtain can paralyze a man with memories.³⁵

Pyle’s signals decouple from objects that instantiate them just as Fletcher’s motif is always more than the pumps and telephones that summon it. In fact, signals only attain theurgic power by disavowing objects, a transcendence that contributes to their fetishistic property. Signals take over mind and memory, resting on the logic of Pavlovian reaction in listeners real and fictional.

Of course, writing cannot capture this semantic relation as grippingly as aural dramas such as “The Hitch-Hiker,” which according to my reading is a psychological tale only inasmuch as it depicts how talk fails and signals take over consciousness. This simple scenario could yield many variations, as

³³ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 175.

³⁴ Ernie Pyle, *Here Is Your War* (New York: Lancer Books, 1943), 157.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

many 1940s programs proved. In “Voices of Destruction” on *Front Page Drama*, an author tries to write out a confession, but fails to do so because the bombastic concussions of the Blitz have traumatized him to the point that his ability to express himself verbally is compromised, and his confession turns out to be a blank page. In “The Beckoning Fair One” on *The Molle Mystery Theater*, an author suffers writer’s block; as writing fails, he begins to hear a song behind the dripping faucet in a rented house, a sound that drives him to murder. In “Wailing Wall” on *Inner Sanctum*, a man murders his wife and stuffs the body in the wall, then begins to hear a whistling from it that he fears is her undead spirit; only after shunning human contact and living with the signal for decades does the hero realize that the sound came from a tiny aperture in the masonry. It is meaningful that “Wailing Wall” draws from Poe’s “The Black Cat.” Indeed, Poe’s writing prefigures the logic of the sound signal, which explains his appeal in the 1940s, as many of his stories culminate in a monomaniacal listener straining to hear an overdetermined sound. This is especially true of “The Tell-Tale Heart” – which is the most-frequently adapted story in all classic American radio.

Because signals are a way of thinking about signification and more than just a category of sounds, signal-based dramas are not limited to the shocker genre. While shockers spin tales in which signals invade interiors, morale plays use the same move to mark impressive resolve. Consider *Cavalcade of America’s* “Continue Unloading,” which follows a photographer and a coastguard medic during the invasion of Sicily. Although our point of audition moves from ship to beach in the deep space of the play, the PA system on the transport vessel constantly repeats “Continue unloading!” everywhere in the space of the drama, often sounding equidistant from our point of audition even if we move according to information in the dialogue. No matter the tribulations of which the servicemen grouse on the beach, the signal under which they maneuver continues unabated, programming their minds – when the medic falls injured, “continue unloading” is all that he can verbalize to his comrades from his delirium, a mark of successful instruction. *Words at War* aired a similar drama that used an address system to frame action in the North Atlantic, this time under the title “Condition Red.” These plays are but two of many in which men die but orders remain, a process that fetishizes the act of instruction to the point where it accrues outstanding imperative qualities.

Of course, Fletcher herself continued to pursue signal-based themes in “The Search for Henri LeFevre” and “Sorry, Wrong Number.” But signals also structure dozens of other dramas that aired on *Suspense*. In “Heart’s

Desire,” a bank clerk becomes so obsessed by the sound of an ocean liner’s horn that he cannot remember the code word that he needs to utter in order to recover the millions that he stashed with a pawnbroker before serving a sentence for theft. Frustrated by this failure for most of the drama, the clerk at last recalls and utters the phrase, only to be dispatched by an opportunistic femme fatale as the liner’s horn mockingly resounds in the background. “August Heat” opens with the sound of scratching along paper, as a sketch artist automatically draws his own tombstone when his mind wanders one day. Perplexed, the hero meanders through London until he meets a mason who has inexplicably carved the very stone from the drawing. The men dine and talk, but fail to achieve understanding, and although no motive appears in the play, the drama ends with two coinciding sounds – the pencil scratch and a chisel sharpener – which seem to have their own quasi-metaphysical connection that compels murderous action. By definition, all signals are irresistible, but not all take the form of sound effects. In “The History of Edgar Lowndes” the sound of a train is a mnemonic of a childhood trauma and incites a series of psychotic breaks, but in “The White Rose Murders” the same result is associated with “The Beer Barrel Polka.”

Perhaps no play follows in Fletcher’s footsteps more closely than “Donovan’s Brain,” a 1944 *Suspense* broadcast, again directed by Spier and starring Welles.³⁶ The play begins with Dr. Patrick Corey (Welles) reading the history of his “Experiment #87.” We segue back to some months earlier to find Corey in his lab developing apparatus to keep monkey brains alive after death. An airplane crashes nearby, and the injured tycoon William Donovan ends up in Corey’s lab. Seizing the moment, Corey allows Donovan to die and harvests his brain. As the drama proceeds, Corey falls increasingly under the influence of the surviving brain in its jar, becoming Donovan’s surrogate and suffering amnesiac spells. When Corey’s wife urges him to stop the experiment, he puts her in a mental hospital; when Corey’s colleague tries to turn off the fuses that keep the brain alive, he becomes paralyzed. In the end, Corey murders his own son at the behest of the brain. When we segue back to Corey in the present, we hear him exact revenge, destroying the brain and its life-sustaining equipment. In a denouement, we learn that despite all that we have heard, the brain had been dead for months.

Like “The Hitch-hiker,” the simplicity of the manifest level of “Donovan’s Brain” is complexified by deeper formal dynamics. For one thing, moments of identity change are punctuated with a vocal signature – Welles plays Corey with a mid-Atlantic tint, but plays Donovan with a slow, deep register;

³⁶ This reading is based on a version that aired in two parts on *Suspense* (18 and 25 May 1944).

blends of these voices usually coincide with the eerie phrase, “sure, sure, sure.” These vocal signatures, however, are much less prominent than the sound that signifies the activity of the disembodied brain. Whenever the brain reacts to events in the drama, an oscillator sounds off to represent a “sonar device” attached to an encephalograph that measures Donovan’s “delta waves.” In this case, a signal is not only cuing interiority, but literally indicating the act of thinking – the most “psychological” of all effects. Resembling a slide-whistle, the signal warbles crazily when threatened, and lolls along placidly when at rest. Like the chimes in “The Hitch-Hiker,” the signal also seems to “disobey” spatial structures in the drama, exceeding walls and drowning out the bubbling beakers that signify Corey’s lab. And whenever music swells to indicate a segue of time or setting, the brain continues to sound according to its reaction to events in the concluded scene, as if it obnoxiously continues to declaim from behind a curtain that has already been closed for a set change. As in “The Hitch-hiker,” the signal attains its force after conversation has gone awry. After all, the aim of Experiment #87 is not simply to keep the brain alive, but to converse with it, as Corey attempts to decode the signal, translate it, or step up its power “as one steps up the power of a radio transmission.” Oddly, even when the doctor realizes that his own mind has been overtaken by the brain, he still attempts to “converse” with it. Yet Corey never “talks” to the brain signal at all, suggesting that he is but a vessel for its signals rather than a participant in a conversation with another being. In this way, the play illustrates the notion that one cannot truly interact with a signal, only submit as it overtakes consciousness. Like Ronald Adams, Corey is more crucially defined by his relation to signals than by its relation to voices, a supine situation that is made all the more ominous by the revelation that Corey’s submission has taken place entirely within his interior being, where our point of audition had evidently sojourned all this time.

In this way, signal dramas illustrate what a break dramatists such as Fletcher, Herrmann and Spier made with the radio of the Depression. During the 1930s, radio had used keynotes to bring unheard voices toward a microphone as if from the margins of society into its new center; radio aesthetics resembled a town meeting thick with interpersonal talk. But as war approached, although *voices* filled air in greater numbers, radio drama was ironically emptying of *talk* in the ordinary sense. With regular chatter fading, the airwaves now supplied orders, information, instructions, and sirens that warn, urge, and compel, a class of didactic material whose creators aspired toward the same instrumental power over real people as signals had over the characters in psychological shockers. While persuasive speech had always

been part of the advertising material surrounding radio dramas, it was not until wartime that processes of influence migrated from the outer hide of the drama into its very formal bloodstream. Signal dramas literalized, empowered, and subtended this process. By showing *individual* signals dominating a mind, radio plays made it seem that *mass* appeals could also dominate many minds, promulgating the notion of communication as the inescapable imposition of will, a paradigm that fulfilled advertising's cherished fantasies and rationalized propaganda.

Because sounds were considered to have great purchase on the listener's mind, broadcasters also gave themselves a powerful role to play in the conflict. Around the time that "The Hitch-Hiker" aired, *University of Chicago Round Table* producer Sherman Dryer suggested that radio drama offered "the richest promise of eliciting concerted action" in recruitment, CBS executive William B. Lewis argued that radio should convey "action messages" to the public, and radio critic Bob Landry could proclaim that radio ought to "incessantly instruct, order, explain, [and] beguile."³⁷ By lending logic to these beliefs, signal-based semantics gave plausibility to the notion that mass communication could inexorably program belief. While subsequent generations would question the strength of this plausibility, one enduring legacy of the cycle of radio shockers is how its basis presumes that the mind and the media define one another in some crucial way. Radio plays such as "The Hitch-Hiker" not only "say" that the mind is vulnerable to messages, they also query the philosophical basis of that relationship, entertaining the notion that communication and consciousness became mutually constitutive in the modern era. This process may have displaced the social issues implicitly posed by radio aesthetics in the Depression, but it afforded its own complexities within the larger nervous system of wartime. Dramatists were using the depth of their *métier* to transform a sort of drama that takes place in the mind into one that thematizes how that mind works, a notion with true conceptual prowess and durable fascination well beyond ephemeral broadcasts commanded by the bells and whistles whose simplicity only barely masks their extraordinarily rich meaning.

³⁷ Sherman Dryer, *Radio in Wartime* (New York: Greenberg, 1942), 205; William Bennett Lewis, "Radio Propaganda Must Be Painless," *Variety*, 6 Jan. 1943, 97; Robert J. Landry, "Radio: Key to National Unity," *The Atlantic*, April 1942, 503.

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