

A Voice of the CITY

On October 30th, 1938, radios nationwide signaled the beginning of the end of the world. The following day, Halloween, *The New York Times* reported, “A wave of mass hysteria seized thousands of radio listeners between 8:15 and 9:30 o'clock last night when a broadcast of a dramatization of H. G. Wells's fantasy, "The War of the Worlds," led thousands to believe that an interplanetary conflict had started with invading Martians spreading wide death and destruction in New Jersey and New York”. The last death in the play takes place from the roof of the Broadcasting Building in New York City. The aftermath of the radio play produced by Orson Welles and *The Mercury Theater on the Air* communicates the effect of radio on the listeners’ imagination, on New York, and on the nation. Responding to the hysteria, Samuel G. Gilbert’s remarked, “It is impossible to conceive of so violent a reaction to an editorial, movie, or play, however realistically produced.”¹ Given that the unfathomable panic lurched into being, what were the conditions of New York and the nation that allowed listeners to interpret this fictitious drama as fact?

Gilbert muses, “With visual realities absent, the radio writer can lead his audience by the ear anywhere he pleases; he can commune with atom or star, he can soar into the empyrean or plunge below the earth’s crust without hindrance of absurdity.”² Captivating radio plays have had the power to yank the listener from the confines of logical reality.

¹ 432. Samuel G. Gilbert. “Radio Appreciation: A Plea and a Program,” *The English Journal* 32, no. 8 (1943), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/805654>.

² 42. William Matthews, “Radio Plays as Literature,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1945), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209588>.

Riding on sound waves, the listener has been carried to an alternate universe, void of the laws of nature, void of the restrictions of an auditorium, of stage props, of actors. F. Scott Fitzgerald explores in *The Great Gatsby* how attaching a platonic dream to a realistic pursuit strips the dream and the keeper of the dream of their ethereal greatness. In attaching his dream for greatness to his pursuit of Daisy, Gatsby allows his dream to perish. Therefore, just as Gatsby's dream could not survive in the natural world, visual supplementation subdues the need for active imagination. Unlike television, Susan J. Douglas describes radio as a, "Mass medium that stimulated the imagination instead of stunted it."³ A radio play *requires* its listener to use his or her imagination to visualize the story. In her blog, Alicia Crook, a silent-film fanatic, indirectly connects the act of seeing a silent film to the act of listening to a radio play, "Seeing a silent film in the early 1900s was making a commitment to 'listening to the telling of a story.'" The invisibility of a radio play provides an opening through which the active listener can impose him or herself onto the story. Listening to a radio play is an act of authorship. Douglas continues, "With words and tone of voice as your only clues, you conjured up people's emotional states, their motivations, the tenor of their interactions with others."⁴ However, just as the imagination of the listener has the power to influence the radio play, the radio play has the power to influence the mentality of the listener. John Cheever, author of *The Enormous Radio*, describes the power of radio emissions to shake the Westcott apartment. The susceptibility of the apartment to the enormous radio may represent the susceptibility of the inhabitant of the apartment's, Irene's, mindset to the radio. According to Marc Fisher, the voice, program, or music of radio has had the power to

³ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In* (New York: Random House Inc., 1999), 4.

⁴ Douglas, 4.

change not only mindsets but also entire lives, again and again.⁵ Orson Welles eventually created work that created mass hysteria and made listeners believe their lives were coming to an end.

Orson Welles' ability to match his work to the medium of radio partially explains the cause of the panic spurred by *The War of the Worlds* broadcast. His assistant, Richard Wilson, explained the style unique to Welles:

“He asked the audience just a little bit more than others were asking in terms of a theater of the imagination: a little more demanding of them that they listen and imagine and set a stage and enter a world which he then better than anybody else could fill out with his ear, with his ability to cast, and the tastefulness of his choice of material.”⁶

Claiming to have developed first-person narrative in the context of radio-theater, Welles strived to plant the reader in the story. The organization of the plot of the play into newsreels provided the eyewitness sensation of first-person narrative. Seeing sounds as his art form, Welles's literary work rooted itself in an aural landscape composed of, what Leonard Maltin describes as, a “tapestry of sound”⁷, opposed to a series of isolated sound effects. Despite his tendency to meet deadlines by the skin of his teeth, or perhaps in spite of such tendency, Welles's sense of timing and tempo was, as Maltin asserts, his, “specialty as a director”⁸. Richard Wilson, a producer involved with *Mercury Theater on the Air*, affirms, “Things that we take for granted really were big developments in terms of rhythms and total rhythms of the program, scenic rhythms, climatic rhythms within a scene and things like that. It's like choreography in a dance, and it comes on the beat.”⁹

⁵ Marc Fisher, *Something in the Air* (New York: Random House Inc., 2007), xii.

⁶ Leonard Maltin, *The Great American Broadcast* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1997), 82.

⁷ Maltin, 82.

⁸ Maltin, 81.

⁹ Maltin, 82.

Arthur Anderson, a Mercury Theater on the Air actor, equated Welles to a conductor.¹⁰ The sound effects man of Mercury Theater on the Air, Cliff Thorsness, described Welles' fluid versatility, "He was really conducting the ingredients of his radio show at the same he was acting."¹¹ Welles' ability to make a show his own under massive time constraints revealed itself October 30th, 1938 in the *War of the Worlds* broadcast. John Houseman, Welles' producing partner, reflected on how Welles' mastery of rhythm led the fictitious radio play to be interpreted as an actual news event.¹² After all, "Welles was unlike anyone else in radio – or in the whole of the theatrical world, for that matter."¹³ Just as Welles's work fit to the medium of radio, radio seemed to fit into a newfound trust in the messages carried through sound waves.

The complete reliance on the medium of sound to relay information stimulated the hysteria and spread it. Hearing of the event by word of mouth, especially through the mouths of trusted friends and relatives, carried the "war" from fiction to reality. Due to listeners' alarm, and subsequent desire to express concern, those who jumped to conclusions physically moved away from the radio to notify friends, family, etc. and thus did not listen to the story fully to comprehend its fallacy.¹⁴ One panic-stricken woman recounted, "I kept saying over and over again to everybody I met: 'Don't you know New Jersey is destroyed by the Germans - it's on the radio.'"¹⁵ Those hearing the news seemed to quickly believe the credibility of the event. A story from Washington in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (October 31st) purveys another example of the rash assumption of

¹⁰ See Appendix I

¹¹ Maltin, 80.

¹² See Appendix II

¹³ Maltin, 79.

¹⁴ John Gosling, *Waging the War of the Worlds* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 74.

¹⁵ Gosling, 73.

warfare.¹⁶ Regardless of the exact interpretation of the broadcasting, the American Telephone Company recorded an increase of 39% from the average number of phone calls in the hour of the broadcasting.¹⁷ Someone explains, “I was resting when an excited person phoned and told me to listen to the radio, that a big meteor had fallen. I was really worried.”¹⁸ The story took on a life of its own – fueled not only by the radio itself, but also by the mouths and ears of those who believed both in the credibility of radio and the credibility of fellow Americans.

The misinterpretation of the radio play for a news broadcasting illuminates the newfound relationship between radio and current events. H.V. Kaltenborn in New York strongly influenced the development of radio news. In 1936, he reported live for the first time from a front line, crouched by a haystack outside the Spanish town of Irun as bullets and bombs fell around him. Listeners may have interpreted the events in the broadcast as disparate recordings from a multitude of battlefronts instead of components of a cohesive narrative arc.¹⁹ Despite the one station break in the middle of the radio play for a news broadcasting, the radio play was, in fact, a program within a program. Actors mimicking the voice of news broadcasters interrupted phony music playing at the beginning of the show. A listener claimed, “I have heard other programs interrupted in the same way for news broadcasts.”²⁰ Although alert listeners would have noticed that from this middle point onwards the style of presentation returned to dramatic form, those who made such claims such as, “My radio was tuned to the station but I wasn’t paying attention to it,”²¹

¹⁶ See Appendix IV

¹⁷ Gosling, 72.

¹⁸ Gosling, 72.

¹⁹ Gosling, 74.

²⁰ Gosling, 72.

²¹ Gosling, 72.

may have been easily fooled. Likely remembering the Munich Crisis (1938) in which NBC interrupted regular programming over 440 times²², John Gosling believes the, “Listening public was in a highly receptive mood to take seriously a dire message of doom and destruction.”²³ In 1938, the year of such broadcastings, Kaltenborn verified, “The intensity with which America listened to the radio reports from the Munich crisis was without parallel in radio history.”²⁴ Radio’s new niche in news perhaps heightened its overall role reflecting the times.

The strong role of radio in the lives of its listeners and in the life of the nation brought the radio play, *The War of the Worlds* to life. Having reached 83% of American homes by 1940 according to the census, the radio clasped its invisible, powerful, tentacles onto the nation’s imagination. Welles’ narrative choices in *The War of the Worlds* broadcast easily swirled fantasy into reality. The first-person narrative, the news announcer roles, converted the listening audience into bystanders as legitimate news reporters would. Furthermore, Gosling describes how Welles controlled rhythm to the extent that his audience lost sense of the natural passage of time, “In building the suspense so slowly at first, and then accelerating the story at a faster and faster pace, Welles was able to capture the attention of his audience so perfectly that they failed to notice when events that should have taken days flew by in minutes.”²⁵ Spurred by the *sound* of “legitimate” news broadcastings, an imagination could romp like the mind of God²⁶ and contrive “legitimate” *visual* supplementation. On October 31, the *Trenton Evening Times* reported on a hysterical man who declared that planes were bombing New

²² Gosling, 72.

²³ Gosling, 72.

²⁴ Gosling, 73.

²⁵ Gosling, 75.

²⁶ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1925), 98.

Jersey. The man claimed that after having *heard* of the news on the radio, he went up to the roof of his building and *witnessed*, “the smoke from the bombs.”²⁷ An increased faith in the veracity of a radio play tipped an image created by the mind’s eye to an image perceived by the pupils. Again, responding to the words of the broadcasting²⁸, a woman from Boston notified a switchboard that, “the flames of ravaged New Jersey were visible in Massachusetts.”²⁹ *The War of the Worlds* broadcast demonstrated what Douglas describes as the, “‘hypodermic needle’ theory of radio’s power to instantly inject an unsuspecting people with unchecked emotions that would produce irrational responses.”³⁰ While such ‘unsuspecting’ people may not have expected an alien invasion the evening of the 29th, a fear of warfare did seem to have been gnawing at their subconscious.

Although imagination provides radio much of its power, the political climate of 1938 perpetuated the influence of radio on the imagination. Arthur Yorinks, author and director of radio plays at *The Jerome L. Greene Performance Space*, WNYC’s open gathering space, explains that during that time, “rumblings and tensions in Europe were building”. Weeks prior to *The War of the Worlds* broadcast, breaking radio news notified the listening audience that German troops had occupied Sudetenland. The event signaled the beginning of the end of Czechoslovakian independence and the lead-up to World War II. On March 12, 1938, Hitler’s voice shot out to tuned-in Americans, as he declared Anschluss, which absorbed Austria into greater Germany. Douglas reiterates, “In 1938, people heard “Martians” but many assumed “Nazis”.³¹ A listener explains this assumption after interpreting the radio play as a legitimate news broadcast, “I knew it

²⁷ Gosling, 73.

²⁸ See Appendix III

²⁹ Gosling, 73.

³⁰ Douglas, 165.

³¹ Gosling, 181.

was some Germans trying to gas all of us. When the announcer kept calling them people from Mars, I just thought he was ignorant and didn't know yet that Hitler had sent them all."³² Another intuitive interpretation of the Martian attack places the aftermath of the broadcast into historical context, "The announcer said a meteor had fallen from Mars and I was sure he thought that, but in back of my head I had the idea that the meteor was just a camouflage. It was really an airplane like a Zeppelin that looked like a meteor and the Germans were attacking us with gas bombs."³³ The ability of a part of the environmental context to heighten the credibility of *The War of the Worlds*, exemplifies the larger connection between radio and the country's history – politically, and psychologically.

Just as a written text provides the reader with a window onto the unknown and a mirror onto themselves, radio has both shaped our identities and provided insight onto our existing identities on both an individual and national level. As an evolving technology, the way in which people listen to radio reflects the listeners. Douglas explains, "Modes of listening cultivated in us by radio powerfully shaped our individual and collective identities and shaped the contours of American cultural and political history."³⁴ Listening to the radio has evolved from the 1920s when, as Linus Travers, an expert on radio, claims, listening was "really quite an adventure". The sounds of static, blasting, and feedback were novel to early tinkerers of radio. Only in the 1930s did the noise clear and the mode of story telling, radio plays, gain popularity. Yet, regardless of the evolving modes of listening, Douglas affirms that with the introduction of radio, "there was a revolution in our aural environment that prompted a major perceptual and

³² Gosling, 73.

³³ Gosling, 73.

³⁴ Douglas, 7.

cognitive shift in the country, with a new emphasis on hearing”³⁵ Now, with the advent of newer technology, Yorinks asserts that, “The whole act of listening to something has come back again. Everybody’s plugged in – everybody has headphones on and earphones in”. As a culture that Douglas claims is supposedly, “glutted with visual stimuli”³⁶, I presume the return to listening reflects a moment in history in which technology matches our pace of life more than an increased yearning to listen. A desire to hear remains while the mode of hearing changes. Therefore, although radio programs did not travel onto the streets of New York City as the earphones of ipods do today, radio managed to represent the members of its city, and even the city itself.

The War of the Worlds broadcast highlights the relationship between radio and the radio listeners of 1938 while signifying the relationship between radio and New York City. David S. Dunbar and Kenneth T. Jackson claim that the psychological makeup of the “verbal city,”³⁷ “can best be explored by listening to the city’s voices in all of their forms.”³⁸ Radio is a voice of the city. Due to the specific role that radio plays in New York City, *The War of the Worlds* broadcast especially frightened New Yorkers. New Yorkers felt incredibly susceptible to an attack because of, as Yorinks claimed, the “sense of New York being the center of the country”. Being the headquarters of most radio stations, Yorinks continues to describe New York City as a, “media and news salvation” whose profound credibility, coupled with an in-play reference to a studio based in New York City, caused people to take the legitimacy of the broadcast for granted. Perhaps it is also due to these New York based headquarters that radio has both adopted and

³⁵ Douglas, 7.

³⁶ Douglas, 6.

³⁷ David S. Dunbar and Kenneth T. Jackson, *Empire City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xvi.

³⁸ Dunbar and Jackson, xvi.

perpetuated characteristics of New York City. According to Douglas, radio has, “Forever blurred the boundaries between the private domestic sphere and public, commercial, and political life”³⁹. Similarly, in 1947, John Cheever dramatized the effect of radio turning ‘the domestic sphere’ into public life: In her apartment house near Sutton Place, Irene Westcott, “shifted the control and invaded the privacy of several breakfast tables.”⁴⁰ David Dunbar and Kenneth T. Jackson explain the same morphing of private and public life in regards to NYC, “Public and private space and time are not separated the way they are in other cities. New York blurs the boundaries between them in the subway, in parks, in restaurants, in the streets, and even through the walls of the apartments.”⁴¹ Furthermore, just as Dunbar and Jackson claim New York City to be, “constantly remaking and reinventing itself, both in its physical structures and in its population,”⁴², Fisher also believes that, “American radio – like the pop culture it has helped to create, like the country it speaks to is ever adapting. As it ages, radio absorbs the new, co-opts the rebellious, and reinvents itself every step of the way”⁴³

The power of radio exemplified in the hysteria following the broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* radio play highlights the relevance of sound in our daily lives. I often rely on singing to clarify the events of my life. The songs that come to mind throughout the day, the week, the year, usually fit a situation. Therefore, when singing, I inevitably rely on the medium of sound to dramatize, and thus process, the story line running through my life. In his modern adaptation of H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man*, titled *The Invisible Man*, Yorinks played with the ability of sight to dramatize, and thus process, the

³⁹ Douglas, 9.

⁴⁰ Cheever, 127.

⁴¹ Dunbar and Jackson, 10.

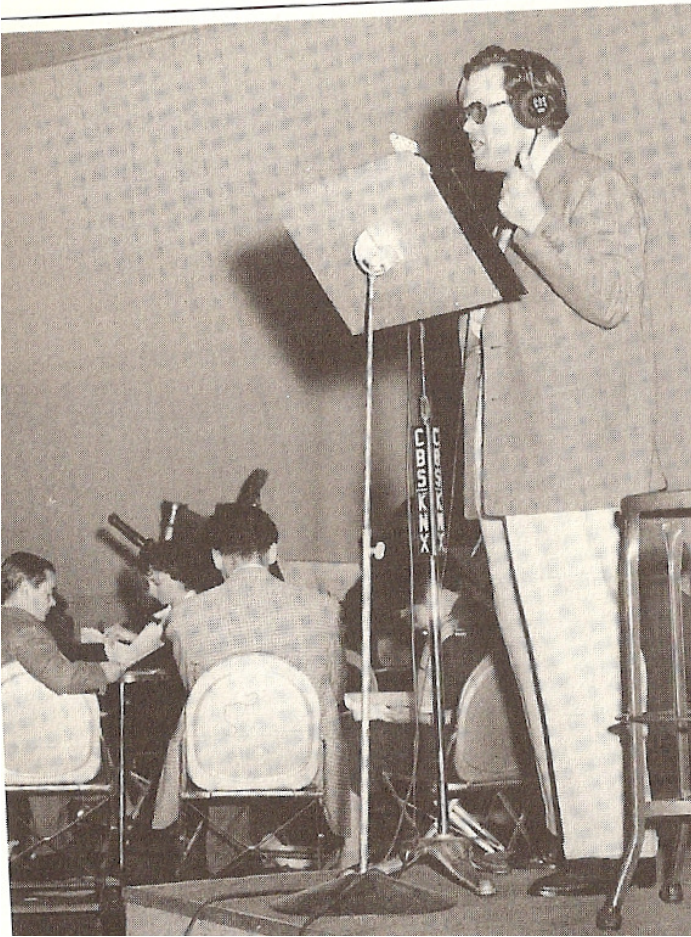
⁴² Dunbar and Jackson, xv.

⁴³ Fisher, xiv.

essence of a sound. For example, in viewing an image of a faucet, he was able to understand the significance of the sound of a faucet letting out water throughout the piece. As the Invisible Man sleeps and thinks, Yorinks used the sound to “dramatize a piece of tension”. Being interconnected, sight and sound seem to feed off one another. For example, the overt characteristics of the homeless of New York have made them invisible, and thus unheard. Along with the adage, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” sound has the power highlighting, or hiding, the problems of cultural and political society. The reaction to *The War of the Worlds* radio play highlighted New York City, as a headquarters for radio studios, as a symbol of the psychological state of the country. The panic following the broadcast of the radio play likely defiled the unwavering trust New Yorkers gave to radio producers and sensitized listeners to the gripping power radio had as a narrator of their lives.

Appendix

I. Orson Welles directs from his podium at CBS in Los Angeles



- II. “He didn’t touch it, he didn’t go near it until the day of the performance, but what he gave it was audacity, tremendous courage. The reason that show worked as well as it did was...nerve... the slowness of the show in the beginning. Those credible pauses were maintained, and Orson really stretched those. The reason the show works as it does is that the acceleration is very carefully calculated and is quite extraordinary; that is why by the time you are twenty minutes into the show you are moving hours at a time... and no one even noticed.”⁴⁴ – John Houseman

⁴⁴ Maltin, 81.

III. Excerpt from *The War of the Worlds* radio play

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/ufo/mars/wow.htm>

PHILLIPS: Now the whole field's caught fire. (EXPLOSION) The woods . . . the barns . . . the gas tanks of automobiles . . . it's spreading everywhere. It's coming this way. About twenty yards to my right . . .

(CRASH OF MICROPHONE ... THEN DEAD SILENCE)

IV. “A near panic broke out at a religious revival meeting when an excited woman rushed in and told of ‘an attack’ on New Jersey in which forty or more persons were killed.” Turning on the radio to test the woman’s claim themselves, the parishioners tuned in at a climactic moment of the play and caused many to rush for the exits and “scores of women in the big tent tabernacle [to fall] to knees in prayer.”⁴⁵

V. Excerpt from *The War of the Worlds* radio play

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/ufo/mars/wow.htm>

ANNOUNCER TWO: Ladies and gentlemen, I have just been handed a message that came in from Grovers Mill by telephone. Just a moment. At least forty people, including six state troopers lie dead in a field east of the village of Grovers Mill, their bodies burned and distorted beyond all possible recognition. The next voice you hear will be that of Brigadier General Montgomery Smith, commander of the state militia at Trenton, New Jersey.

⁴⁵ See Appendix V