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Radio Performance as Spectral Theatre: Synchretic Storytelling in the Home and the Nation

Can we come in?
—*Visitors*, Darkfield

Introduction

As the first-ever broadcast mass medium, radio produced a new genre of performance: one where the actor played for an invisible, absent audience, and listeners attended the spectral staging of a radio play. Audience members were also spectral to each other for the first time, each of them locked into a synchronous entertainment experience where they listened alone, together. Radio theatre, the art of performing a sonic narrative and producing a sense of theatricalized place through broadcast, is a sensorially disjointed phenomenon where the source of the sound and the technology that produces it are by necessity in disparate spatial locations. Though radio and radio performance radically connected the human race in ways it had never been connected before, the form also generated a deep sense of spatial displacement for those who engaged with it. Suddenly, the turning of a dial transformed the once private living room, the kitchen, the car into an altered performance space. Almost every radio drama, those scripted, performed audio plays composed specifically for the radio medium, commences in the following way: there is a ritualistic induction, carefully chosen theme music, signature sound effects, a matter-of-fact announcer, a narrator with a very specific personality, the introduction of actors who will perform for you... especially for you. With the advent of radio, homes became colonized by invisible actors whose voices draped across furniture, hung from curtains, and clung to walls. This article seeks to deconstruct how this radio magic operates to unsettle us, and to reframe preconceived notions of the spaces we inhabit in startling new ways. Through the phenomenon of spectral theatre, radio produces uncanny performance vectors not just around actors and audience members, but within them too.

All radio transmissions operate as a form of haunting. This article weaves together Derridean hauntology and the Freudian uncanny with Chion's notion of synchresis to assess the effects of radio storytelling on the individual and national psyche. Drawing on experiences at theatre company Darkfield's SÉANCE performance during the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, along with analyses of other works in Darkfield's repertoire that constitute what I term spectral theatre, this study explores the commonalities shared between these immersive performances and radio dramas. Radio engages audiences through a haunting performance paradigm that discomfits its listeners in their own domestic spaces, much like Darkfield's carefully tailored performance settings. Three intersecting themes will be examined here: Darkfield's shaping of spatial perception; the medium of radio as inherently uncanny due to its capacity for synchretic storytelling; and the broader faculty of radio broadcasting to bind a national public (King George V's addresses, Roosevelt's fireside chats, and Churchill's wartime speeches) as well as profoundly unnerve it (the Mercury Theatre's 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*) through what I call sonic tethering. By examining how and where these dimensions of sound performance converge, this work invites academics, listeners, and artists to experience and reimagine radio performance in new, provocative ways. The spectral theatre of the radio broadcast, bewitching all it touches, transfigures space into a performance radius wide enough to envelop the individual, the home, and the nation.

The Uncanniness of Darkfield Radio

As I wandered the cobblestone streets of Edinburgh in August 2017, a huge white rectangular metal box in the open lot outside Summerhall caught my eye. Weaving through the Fringe crowd of jugglers, stilt walkers, aerial performers, bubble-blowers, and comedians pushing flyers of their one-man shows into the hands of unsuspecting passersby, I realized that the box was in fact a shipping container. That wasn't particularly remarkable – the international performers trekking in from all over the world would ship in their stages, props, and sound systems for the festival. But this wasn't just a storage unit. The sides of the shipping container read simply SÉANCE, in enormous black letters. There was an eager crowd surrounding it, with two attendants in black shirts taking tickets at the front, attendees streaming inside, and (after what seemed like a rather short while) emerging from the other end. Attendees looked excited as they entered; those who exited looked stricken, bewildered, thrilled. I bought a £10 ticket. "SÉANCE, by Darkfield," the ticket read. I was surprised by the length of the performance: most Fringe shows averaged between an hour and ninety minutes. This one was only twenty minutes, and I soon discovered why: I would not have been able to bear a second more.

I waited for my time slot, handed over my ticket, and entered the shipping container. Its interior walls were covered with delicate, patterned wallpaper and surrounded a wooden table at the center. I took a seat in one of twenty identical red velvet chairs alongside nineteen other audience members, all of us instructed to put on the headphones waiting before us. We were then told to put our hands on the table and never to remove them from its surface throughout the performance. We were asked to close our eyes. When

we opened them, the room was engulfed in utter blackness, shutting out any trace of the bright summer day. SÉANCE began.

A man entered the space and joined us at the table. Or did he? What was happening in the shipping container and inside the headphones was indistinguishable. The man was our medium, and he began to talk, softly. He told us he was doing the summoning — the one we had all been waiting for. "You are afraid, in your heart of hearts, that the old stories might be true," the voice spoke quietly. There was very little space between the audience's backs and the shipping container wall, inches at most. But suddenly I could hear wide, hurried footsteps behind me, pacing back and forth, taking stairs above my head that I knew didn't exist. "We allow Spirit to pass amongst us," the medium said warmly. "Do not take your hands off the table… or Spirit will be loose." Whispers crawled toward us from every corner, the sound of a dozen voices — far away and then close to my face, right behind my neck. "Are you alone?" I heard footsteps: were my fellow attendees leaving? Was someone new coming? Sightless in the black, I could not differentiate what was transpiring in real time and what my mind was being forced to imagine by the sounds in our ears. The medium asked invisible presences to join with us, to move among us. "Have you come here of your own free will?" he entreated. "Is there anybody there?" Noise rose around our bodies, hovering behind us and above our heads. Whether our eyes were open or closed, there was nowhere to hide. Each minute felt endless. The table started to shake, harder and harder. The medium shouted: "Someone has taken their hands off the table! DO NOT TAKE YOUR HANDS — !" And then… silence. Nothing but the sound of our own breathing in the dark.

SÉANCE was what the company called "the first Darkfield Experience" (*Séance* 1). Founded by artists David Rosenberg, Andrea Salazar, and Glen Neath and launched in the United Kingdom in 2016, Darkfield specializes in producing immersive aural audience experiences in sound that push the boundaries of theatre, innovation, and technology. The company's in-person shows ("show" a term that fails to adequately capture the experience) are staged within carefully-fashioned sets built inside twenty-four feet by eight feet shipping containers. They are performed in pitch darkness with sensorially disorienting special effects, and, most importantly, with binaural audio – audio recorded by strategically-placed microphones on a life-sized mannequin. In performance, the binaural audio plays for the headphones-wearing listener experiencing sounds specific to the right and left ear, allowing for the effect of sound moving directionally within your given space. Each performance places each audience member at the heart of a meticulously-crafted narrative, whether it be that of calling forth the dead (SÉANCE), flying on a crashing passenger plane (FLIGHT), being paralyzed but still conscious in a hospital bed (COMA), or attending your own funeral (EULOGY). The company's tagline? "Strange Worlds Unfold."

The style of this unique theatre company focuses heavily on sound elements to create an uncomfortably realistic theatre experience which is centred on the listening audience member. In her four-star review of the experience, theatre critic Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* stated: "SÉANCE is Rosenberg and Neath's best collaboration to date, a creepy

and manipulative miniature which unsettles and makes you question not just your senses but what you actually believe" (1).

Within the context of the pandemic, however, Darkfield embraced an opportunity to truly shine. With COVID-19 restrictions making in-person shows impossible, founders Neath, Salazar and Rosenberg pivoted to at-home sound experiences that could take place everywhere and anywhere, and they called it Darkfield Radio. Inaugurated in July 2020, the premiere season featured three shows: DOUBLE, VISITORS, and ETERNAL. These app-based experiences were structured not as asynchronous podcasts but *synchronous theatre*. Audience members had to purchase tickets online, be in a specific location (their kitchen, their living room, their bed), have specific props (a glass of water on a table, chairs a certain distance apart), prepare specific equipment (download the app, binaural headphones or air pods), engage in show prep (rearranging furniture as necessary), and be present for a specific broadcast at a select hour for a performance experience co-attended by audience members from all over the world. Participants were instructed to listen with a partner or alone, depending on the show. The first of this season, DOUBLE, was an experience for two narrated by Chris Brett Bailey ("Double" 1). Here, listeners underwent a first-hand experience of the Capgras delusion, where one firmly believes that a beloved person close to them has been substituted by an identical, dangerous duplicate (Joshi et al. 2): the show was an inside-your-own-head simulation of this frightening disorder. In this Darkfield experience, you sat across from your partner, in your kitchen, a glass of water between you. You closed your eyes and heard the glass of water move, back and forth across the table. Had your partner moved it, or was the sound in your headphones? Bailey asks if you could really trust the person just a few feet away from you, his voice echoing in the chambers of your mind. Could I?

VISITORS, another two-person Darkfield broadcast, focuses on two spirits desperate to rejoin the world of the living and plays phenomenally with signifier and signified in the minds of its audience members. In all Darkfield partner experiences, Rosenberg, Salazar, and Neath exploit the fact that the two individuals experiencing the performance have separate sound sources, with a different script crafted for each participant. In VISITORS, you and your partner sit in the dark of your living room while performers Sonya Seva & Greer Dale-Foulkes voice ghosts that scratch at the door, telling you how very hungry they are ("Visitors" 1). You are told that if you've ever killed anyone, you should raise your hand, while your partner hears that if they've never killed anyone, they should do the same. You and your partner stare at each other as one person's hand lifts itself into the air and the other's remains unmoving, as the door you can't quite see in the dark, the door you used to enter your home, rattles relentlessly with invisible forces trying to force their way inside. This is not just an immersive podcast. This elevated form of sonic horror theatre, one that toys with the fundamental understanding of the nature of what surrounds its listeners, makes clear the game that radio has been playing with all of us since its very first broadcast.

Radio as Spectral Theatre

For decades, radio has off-handedly been referred to as the "theatre of the mind," (Verma, the American Public Broadcasting Station, UNESCO) or "theatre of the air" (*Mercury Summer Theatre of the Air*, *MGM Theatre of the Air*, *WNYC Radio Stage: Theatre of the Air,* to name a few). I simply wish to draw attention to the notion that radio is theatre. The word "audience" itself travels to us through late Middle English via Old French from the Latin *audientia* related to *audire*: "to hear." The audience fills the auditorium, the named space for the assembly of listeners. The vehicle for cultural exchange is sound, and the actors are sharing the same creative performance experience with this audience through spoken language. Norman Corwin, the acclaimed U.S. radio writer and producer hailed as the "Grand Master of American Audio Theatre," once affirmed that "[r]adio is a stage with a bare set" (qtd. in Hand & Traynor 42). But radio is not bare at all: its stage is the immensity of sound and space itself.

I operate from the central tenet that theatre is storytelling, with the human body, for an audience. Using a schema utilizing Marshall McLuhan, Charles Saunders Peirce, and Michel Chion, I argue that radio meets all three criteria. McLuhan's seminal theory as presented in *Understanding Media* is based on the concept that media serves as various extensions of the body, explaining that "even more than the telephone... radio is that extension of the central nervous system that is matched only by human speech itself" (302). The voice is an extension of the performer's body on radio waves. According to Peirce's semiotics, we have the notion of the index as sign: where there's smoke, there's fire. The human voice is indexical, the smoke of human presence. If "[h]earing is touching at a distance," as R. Murray Schafer argues (11), then the listening audience is present within the radius of the actor's performance. Film and television are iconographic, the world captured within a screen, its action contained and taking place on the other side of that glass. But the radio voice has no such contained stage. It tethers to your space and everything the sound touches. Cinema is *there*, while radio is *here*, *now*. Through the process of what Chion defines as synchresis, "the spontaneous, irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time" (*Audio-Vision* 64), I stipulate that radio theatre is essentially synchretic storytelling: storytelling that fuses itself, through sound, to the space the audience finds itself in. When we turn on a radio, we create the radius of a stage built on air that performers' voices reverberate upon. A stage, that, through broadcast technology, can unfurl itself across the expanse of a nation.

Many media scholars have approached radio as a paradoxical, anxiety-laden form of mass communication. Performance studies scholar Allen S. Weiss refers to the "paradox of radio," that of "a universally public transmission heard in the most private of circumstances" (38). In *Understanding Radio*, leading media theorist Andrew Crisell describes the "paradox of technology" of the alien intimacy the radio produces: that peculiar sense that the actor's voice, divided from its body on the radio, feels closer to us than it would were we sitting in the front row of a live theatre (153). The tension of public and private produces this sense of radio anxiety, as well does radio's production of the effect of a divided body. At its outset, radio was an indication of how modernity

was separating the body from itself, catapulting its presence across space to be heard not by friends, but by strangers. Weiss calls radio "the site of the loss of face and body" (78), and Schafer coined the term schizophonia to label the sense of aberration that resulted from the discomfiting split between an original source of sound and its technological reproduction (43-47). The actor's voice is cleaved from their body and stretched gossamer thin across innumerable territories: an invisible, intangible presence, but a presence nonetheless. Perhaps this is why Schafer called schizophonia "a nervous word" (47). There is something inevitably unsettling about radio's no-faces, with a technology that knows us in a way that we don't know it.

Radio has the power to create a sense of haunted space, born out of the discomfiture of the experience of the disembodied voice, and the anxiety derived from the paradoxical nature of radio as a simultaneously public and private media form. With the propagation of radio technology, once silent rooms became regularly haunted by invisible auditory presences. Aural-based performances like Darkfield and radio performance play on this synchretic storytelling game and this sonic anxiety, belonging to a spectral order of theatre grounded in performance that challenges notions of presence, absence, embodiment, and knowing. Spectral theatre plays gleefully with traditionally held, clear-cut articulations of what we experience as real regarding our sense of place, our experience of the individuals around us, and our understanding of ourselves.

The field of spectrality studies has yet to extensively consider the elusive configurations of presence and absence within the spectral performance medium of radio, though its lenses have been regularly applied to film, historical reenactments, tourism, fiction, and theatre as a whole. (King Hamlet's ghost operates as the spectral metaphor de rigeur). The concept of hauntology, introduced by Jacques Derrida in his 1994 work *Spectres of Marx*, provided scholars with a framework for identifying and amplifying lingering traces of the past that continue to shape the present. Colin Davis describes Derrida's portmanteau of haunting and ontology as an analytical lens that "replac[es] the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost… that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (373). With the introduction of the hauntological approach, Derrida had made a call to arms for a new type of scholar — one who troubles the distinctions between the real and unreal, being and non-being, actual and inactual, living and non-living. Spectral theatre in general and radio in particular is performance that produces precisely this kind of inquiry, with the actors and audience inevitably engaging in the critical interrogation of presences and absences, a kind of work regularly undertaken by the deconstructionist scholar.

Spectral theatre functions to trouble the audience's relationship to its own space. In his work *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson talks about performance spaces as open and communal locations. Though these theatres are supposedly operating as blank canvases, unadorned stages ready for meaning-making by the director, performer, and audience, Carlson stresses that they are inevitably experienced with preexisting affective associations:

> The empty spaces that have been utilized for centuries for theatrical events are particularly susceptible to semiotization, since they are almost **invariably public, social spaces** already layered with associations before they are used for theatrical performance. (133, emphasis mine)

But radio makes the private home, not the public space, a place of semiotized theatricalized performance. If the home is where we are our most unguarded and authentic selves, changing our immediate soundscape unsettles our perceptions of our cordoned-off living space, the security of our place within it, and our sentiments towards the greater landscape within which we find ourselves.

To close in on an understanding of spectral theatre and the effects of sonic performance upon the experience of inhabited spaces, it is beneficial to reach back to Sigmund Freud and his conceptualization of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*. In his 1919 treatise named for his popularized term, Freud defines the uncanny as a "particular area of aesthetics… (which) belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" (123). He contrasts the body of the uncanny to that of the realm of aesthetics as a whole, which he states generally tends to concern itself with sentiments of that which is "beautiful… grandiose… attractive" (123). Though the uncanny may evoke that sense of fear and dread, we are irrepressibly drawn to it, as we would to a resplendent painting or a prepossessing lover. Among its forms, Freud lists no fewer than eight categories in his seminal text that can be used to identify the manifestations of the uncanny:

1. Ambiguity regarding the animate vs. inanimate (140)
2. The Doppelgänger or double (141)
3. Repetition or recurrence of individuals, places, events, language, etc. (143)
4. Presentiments that prove accurate (146)
5. The return of that which is repressed: emotions, memories, histories (147)
6. Death and the death-adjacent: corpses, revenants, spirits, ghosts (148)
7. Disease: physical and mental (150)
8. The apportioned body: castration, severed limbs (150)

Freud's categories appear regularly as themes within in the genre of horror radio, and its impact can be read within the etymology of the term unheimlich itself. Though "unheimlich" most closely translates to "uncanny," "weird," or "eerie" in English, the literal meaning of the root "heim" in the contemporary German translates to "home." The word "unheimlich" then refers to the "un-home-like." However, if we reach back to the Old High German however, "heimlich" most closely translates to "familiar." That which is heimlich is then known to us, producing a sense of comfort, solace, intimacy, and safety. If we add the "un" prefix, what is unheimlich is then unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Fascinatingly, heimlich has an additional secondary meaning: that which possesses hidden, deeply-buried secrets (Freud 132). Though the heimlich, the homely, the familiar may be comfortable, it is taut with dormant and occulted truths. The unheimlich then is unhomely, unfamiliar, and utterly, unabashedly, distressingly expressed. The uncanny is

that which was once recognized and understood that has come to transform itself into something unrecognizable. Previous performance studies scholars have used these definitions to refer to our perception of historical events, to theatrical customs, to the individual objects of stagecraft, but the concept of the uncanny can be used to explore performance's powerful impacts upon space itself.

Freud describes intellectual uncertainty as one of the distinguishing factors of the unheimlich:

> The uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better oriented he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny. (125)

Spectral theatre produces performance that is spatially disorienting, making us a little unsure of our surroundings, fundamentally altering our perception of how we *feel* the places we call home. In *Metro Magazine*'s four-star review of Darkfield's DOUBLE, the effect of this phenomenon is pointed out: "Your kitchen – so achingly well known to you – becomes an eerily defamiliarised place" (Attwood 1). In Mark Fisher's review of the show in *The Guardian*, he describes his experience of the performance:

> "This is supposed to be a controlled space, a safe space," says Christopher Brett Bailey at the start of DOUBLE, and he's right. We are not in some unfamiliar theatre, like the shipping container where Darkfield has conducted similar audio experiments, but in our own kitchen. We're meant to feel protected here, so it's all the more alarming when the play sets you on edge. It's as if your very home has been transformed. (1)

Darkfield Radio turns up the volume as high as it can go on the spectral work that radio has already long been engaging in. Radio is a special kind of theatre where the turning of a dial activates a sense of the unheimlich wherever you happen to be. Our home is made un-home-like as it is populated by alien voices, sounds, music: an extension of an outside world pulled into the privacy of our own homes. We have lived with this medium now for over a century, and so we cease to see the wild import and impact of this technological innovation – our home is no longer only our homes alone, where we perform the narratives of our own lives to the exclusion of everyone else's. It might not necessarily evoke a profound sense of fear and dread, but it is still uncanny in that it fundamentally changes our experience of place itself, and makes our familiar surroundings unfamiliar. Radio generates a séance space filled by externally-crafted sonicity summoned by the flicking of your wrist. An unheimlich experience alters our perception of the places we thought we knew. In spectral theatre, the familiar becomes alarmingly unfamiliar. Richard Schechner says, "When people 'go to the theater' they are acknowledging that theater takes place at special times in special places" (169). With the spectral theatre of radio, wherever you happen to be becomes that special, uncanny performance space.

Radio writers understood the medium's uncanny power to discomfit and reframe that which we thought we knew so well before. Arch Oboler, show runner for the iconic *Lights Out* series and one of the most prolific twentieth-century American writers of the horror radio genre, stated that "the most frightening thing in the world… is the familiar suddenly unfamiliar" (qtd. in Echols 48). I return to Michel Chion's concept of synchresis to explore what in radio produces that sense of the uncanny in terms of its relationship to space. As a media studies scholar specializing in sound, Chion primarily discusses the impact of synchresis within the realm of cinema, but there is so much to be gained in bringing his perspective to the study of radio performance. Chion defines synchresis as "the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears at the same time" (*Audio-Vision* 224). Chion argues that the presence of sound alters our perception of our visual surroundings, presenting it in a manner distinct from the image alone (21). He states that "the senses are channels, highways more than territories or domains" (137), and that the relationship between sound and sight is no less than a phenomenological covenant, "a kind of symbolic contract that the audio-viewer enters into, agreeing to think of sound and image as forming a single entity" (216). The acousmatic, a term unearthed by musicologist Pierre Schaffer in antique French dictionaries, "is a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen" (qtd. in *The Voice* 18). The acousmatic refers to all sounds effects, music and voices on the radio, while the acousmêtre ("acousmatic" combined with the French être) is a specifically voiced character who is never visually revealed to the audience ("The Acousmêtre" 156). The prohibition of seeing the source of the voice, the denial of locking them down into a physical form, conjures a particular power we have seen again and again: the burning bush, the voice of Allah, the Wizard of Oz, HAL 9000. Chion names three powers for the acousmêtre: seeing all, knowing all, and the infinite potentiality of all action (*Audio-Vision* 129 - 130). This omniscient, all-seeing, all-powerful voice that Chion describes within cinema is also present as the eternally unseen radio voice, which, in the context of the radio performance space, will ever remain acousmêtre. The newscaster that so impartially delivers the state of our world to us as we brush our teeth in the morning, the Alex Jones who tells us that the Sandy Hook massacre was a forgery and makes us believe it, the urgent words of a broadcaster alerting us of a nearby disaster that threatens our lives. The radio voice is a powerful one that is not divided from us the way a screen voice is: it maps our reality for us onto the very ground we stand on. It has the ability to delineate for us what we should treasure, what we should protect, what we should fear, and what we should ache to see destroyed.

The acousmetric voice also haunts, and the language of haunting recurs throughout Chion's scholarly corpus. The acousmetric effect is a spectral one, laden with discomfiture, absence/presence duality, and the sensation of the unheimlich. Chion describes how the one weakness of the acousmetre is that it is bound by the image it is sourced from:

> "The acousmêtre… cannot occupy the removed position of commentator, the voice of the magic lantern show. He must, even if only slightly, have one foot in the image, in the space of the film; he must haunt the borderlands that are neither the interior of the filmic stage nor the

> proscenium – a place that has no name, but which the cinema forever brings into play" ("The Acousmêtre" 161).

In the realm of radio, cinema's trapped commentator that was bound within the borderlands of film is let loose once more in the now-haunted space that we as listeners physically occupy. The voice is not contained by the iconographic framing of a camera, or to the edges of an off-limits stage the actors are bound to and the audience is prohibited from. Radio's acousmêtre stands next to you, behind you, and above you – it can go anywhere it wants. Heard and not seen, the radio acousmêtre is nothing less than an unknowable, unfathomable threat which the imagination can extend infinitely, its full capacity for destruction incomprehensible because it denies us a visual anchor. There is no limit to the unbound radio voice's power in the listening space.

In cinema, Chion discusses how when the body of the speaker is finally revealed to the audience, the acousmêtre's power falls away ("The Acousmêtre" 164). Within radio, the acousmêtre never loses its command of the space it reverberates within. There is no embarrassment of being revealed as the little man behind the curtain, no containment in embodiment. The radio voices resonate in the air, say their words, scream their screams, and then disappear. But the locations that they tethered to remain, and the environments where these listeners communed with invisible voices in performance are transformed.

The notion of the acousmetric voice is the heart of spectral theatre. Theatre has its alternate story-world, the co-presence of actors and audience, the world-mapping onto surrounding space. But spectral theatre, with its phantom voices and relationship to space, adds this critical additional element to those distinctions: this kind of theatre has the power to fundamentally reconfigure an audience's experience of their reality through altered perceptions of location, knowledge, presence, and embodiment. For the subject placed within the realm of spectral theatre, they experience a performance and media form which generates a phenomenological misapprehension of what is actual and what is illusory, where fact and fiction are obfuscated. Radio achieves this by producing what Robert Spandoni refers to in *Uncanny Bodies* as "sound-induced perceptions" (67), where audio cues activate an outsize experience of what is transpiring in our immediate proximity. Sound instantaneously and most economically produces an emotional response within us: communications scholar Susan Douglas highlights that hearing is the primal warning mechanism regarding threats in our environment (30). In his article "The Emotional Brain," American neuroscientist Joseph E. LeDoux explains that the mental processing of sound cues is first passed from the auditory thalamus directly to the amygdala, the component of the human mind that is responsible for emotions, before it is processed by the cerebral cortex responsible for reasoning (106-107). Our emotional system mainlines sound to craft our experience of our private and communal habitus.

Darkfield and Darkfield Radio shows are designed as sonic horror experiences: with their villains, ghosts, vampires, and spectres whispering in our ears, their shows are designed to profoundly unsettle us. Darkfield can be considered a descendent of the great American and Australian horror radio programs like *The Witch's Tale* or *The Haunts of*

the Hermit where the cackling host commands the listener to douse the lights in their home for the dramatic performance that will soon fill their living room. Radio has the ability to influence perceptions and elicit emotions that shape the listener's experience of their immediate place and space. Radio does this very specific work as an exemplary form of spectral theatre.

Spectral Theatre and the Nation

Radio and spectral theatre have the power to make the home unheimlich. With a sufficiently powerful broadcast signal, it has the capacity to make the nation itself unheimlich as well. It was Richard Schechner who stated that "Theater places are maps of the cultures where they exist" (169). Radio is a site of social cartography: it extends the presence of the body through air and demarcates space across it. Radio is theatre which is map-making and world-building: the radio performer emanates a plethora of information about identity and country that demarcate the very realm the listener occupies. The radio ether's primary building blocks are music, sound, and voice, all tethering themselves to each listener and contouring a stage within the listener's mind while reshaping the perception of the space they inhabit. This effect transpires across a performed broadcast's radius, binding those listeners together and creating a community audience. Paddy Scannell describes radio as a tele-technology that facilitates "an immediate connectivity between spatially distant points… [and] live interactive connection between people through the immediacy of living speech" (48). The words spoken on the air cast a very specific net around a listening community: dialects, accents, and idioms tying them together as a region and a people. Interests, fears, and dreams are articulated in such a uniform way that they can become the interests, fears, and dreams of all who hear them.

As Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* establishes the printing press as a delineator of national borders through written language, radio projects the perimeters of the nation through spoken language. In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan introduces the idea that media on the whole connects us as a *global village* (5). It sonically ties radio listeners, individually spread across an ambiguous geographic region, into one singular national space, and this theatrical amphitheater is the nation itself. When King George V inaugurated the British Broadcasting Company's Empire Service first-ever broadcast with what would become the annual Christmas Speech on December 25, 1932, he commended the medium's capacity for strengthening the bond between his global subjects:

> I take it as a good omen that wireless should have reached its present perfection at a time when the Empire has been linked in closer union. For it offers us immense possibilities to make that union closer still… I speak now from my home and from my heart to you all, to men and women so cut off by the snows, the deserts, or at sea, that only voices out of the air can reach them. ("First Empire Address" 1-2)

The King's words, spoken at 15:00 London time, echoed across Great Britain and British territories in Africa and Asia, aurally circumscribing a kingdom stage to which every British citizen around the world could pay audience to. With regard to radio, R. Murray Schafer elucidates that "[n]ever before had sound disappeared across space to reappear again at a distance. The community, which had previously been defined by its bell or temple gong, was now defined by its local transmitter" (130). McLuhan captures that sense of audience encapsulation in "Radio: The Tribal Drum" when he writes "I live right inside radio when I listen" (135). McLuhan is not only reflecting on a subjective psychological state resulting from the phenomenological experience of listening to radio media: he also expresses how listeners are encapsulated inside the *nationscape* that radio builds when it reaches through the ether and into the home.

I argue that King George V's performance of patriotism quite literally falls under what Schafer describes in *The Soundscape* as "imperial sound." Schafer defines this term as an assertion of auditory dominance, where amplified sound or disruptive tools grant individuals the ability to project and control sonic environments (108-109). While Schafer used this term referring to scenarios where amplification devices (like loudspeakers) expand acoustic influence over vast areas, and disruptive tools (like jackhammers) dominate nearby auditory activities, I say this imperial sound applies to the performances that are projected through radio's sonic stages. Essentially, imperial sound denotes the capacity to exert a range of influence and control through powerful, expansive sonic manifestations. I assert that this sonic colonization of the air serves to transform the radio waves into the boards upon which national actors perform nation upon.

In addition to signalling the outward reach of a particular performer, power, community, and nation, drawing people together within that realm, the circumference of sound also circumscribes. Radio's airwaves demarcate limits, borders, boundaries. Schafer discusses sound itself as a fortress that surrounds and binds the listener to the exclusion of other forces of influence:

> "The radio was the first sound wall, enclosing the individual with the familiar and excluding the enemy. In this sense it is related to the castle garden of the Middle Ages which, with its birds and fountains, contradicted the hostile environment of forest and wilderness. The radio has actually become the bird-song of modern life, the natural soundscape, excluding the inimical forces from outside… (131) … Walls used to exist to delimit physical and acoustic space, to isolate private areas visually and to screen out acoustic interferences. … Walls used to exist to isolate sounds. Today sound walls exist to isolate." (136)

Sound performance and radio theatre have the ability to install their listening audience within a particular world, to the exclusion of all others. *This* is the sound of performing our nation, *that* is the sound of performing another. I call this phenomenon sonic tethering, characterized by synchretic storytelling that is confined to a specific spatial region. Not only is there an automatic synchretic relationship formed between what one

simultaneously hears and sees, that relationship is bound and metaphorically fenced off within an auditory and perception-shaping perimeter. Demarcated by the radius of performed and produced sound, a cordoned-off field is produced with distinct borders that creates a radial stage for meaning-making.

Though much of the medium's history does not feature prominently in our popular global consciousness, historic radio moments endure in the international collective memory. Many of these moments tend to be news and political broadcasts rather than dramatic performances, but these moments are performances nonetheless: the live broadcast of the explosion of the Hindenburg in 1937, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's eleven years of fireside chats, and Winston Churchill's wartime speeches all perform narratives about the potential horrors of technological vainglory, the approachability of a global leader, a citizenry's steadfastness against a perilous enemy. The last of the three is an interesting case study in performing nationhood. What's not commonly known about Churchill's "We will fight them on the beaches" and the "Their finest hour" speeches are exactly how performed they, in actuality, were. These timeless addresses embedded themselves in the global psyche as extemporaneous, desperate rallying cries for Britain's survival. Thought to be given in a state of urgency, implored by a sweating, spitting Churchill to give courage to Britons in the face of certain death – these speeches were not broadcast live in real time as they happened. It is a little-known fact that it was illegal for the BBC to directly broadcast from or even record events within the House of Commons. As it happens, few are aware of who actually delivered Churchill's iconic early speeches for public broadcast at all. Found recordings of the Dunkirk speech labelled "'BBC, Churchill: Speech. Artist Norman Shelley" and dated "September 7, 1942" serve as surprising and narrative-shifting evidence that the great speeches written by Churchill, oft-credited for nothing less than helping the Allied Forces win the Second World War, were not read by the jowly and imperious prime minister at all, but by popular radio actor Norman Shelley (Thorpe 2). Shelley was best known for starring in Britain's longest-running radio drama as Colonel Danby on *The Archers* until his death in 1980 (2). The original speeches first aired during World War II were most likely delivered by an actor performing as and for Britain's prime minister – one of the radio history's best-kept secrets. The fact that Churchill's orations were in actuality delivered by Shelley was occulted for so many decades speaks to the power of radio to stage mythic performances that connect, inspire, and articulate the nation itself – myths we are compelled to protect and revivify (even if, and sometimes especially when, they're not wholly true).

Radio's power to shape the perception of the space we inhabit and perform nation upon is facilitated by the quality of urgency that its communicative immediacy engenders. This sense of instantaneous world-building within the listener lends itself to a facsimile of hyper-realness, blurring the line between what is real and what is performance. Radio plays have the power to conjure disorientation and confusion within the listener base, so much so that they can result in audience members acting in ways that are dangerous to themselves and those around them. Radio historian Tim Crook relates that Gabriel Germinet and Pierre Cusy's *Marémoto*, the inaugural radio play crafted for French airwaves was met with a ban by the country's Sea Ministry in 1922 (115). The reason? The script, which translates to "Seaquake" and centred upon a sinking ship in distress,

was deemed excessively true-to-life for broadcast due to the SOS calls that featured prominently throughout its script (115). This prompted concerns from state authorities about a potential panic among listeners and caused them to delay *Marémoto*'s broadcast for three years, until 1925 (115). It speaks volumes that France's maiden foray into creative narrative for radio was met with censorship because its theatricalized radio performance was indistinguishable from actual events transpiring in real time.

One of the most significant and well-known moments in radio history was a dramatic radio performance, though it may not have initially seemed so to millions listening in at the time: that of CBS' Mercury Theatre's live broadcast of *War of the Worlds* on Sunday, October 30, 1938. A young Orson Welles made a global name for himself with the simulated alien invasion of planet Earth, with newspapers all over the United States reporting nation-wide instances of traffic jams, fainting, heart attacks, attempted suicides, and mass panic. At 8 PM on the CBS Radio Network, *The Mercury Theatre of the Air* broadcast what would become an overnight sensation and a world-famous radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' classic novel. The episode opened as just as any radio broadcast might have: a forecast from the Government Weather Bureau and a musical performance, this one by an ensemble called the Ramón Raquell Orchestra who were said to be playing from Park Plaza. Suddenly a special bulletin broke through the jaunty notes of "La Cumparsita." Observatories in Chicago and Princeton, New Jersey had observed strange phenomena of incandescent gas explosions lighting up the sky. It wasn't long before listeners were informed by onsite correspondents that an unidentified flying object had crash-landed in the very real farm town of Grovers Mill near Princeton. Radio audiences listened "in real time" as breathless reporters described creatures emerging from the smoking door of that vessel, a shaking voice telling them a blast from the craft had killed 1500 locals, and that Brigadier General Montgomery Smith, Commander of the State Militia of Trenton, had imposed martial law. What followed was one of the most mythologized reactions to a radio drama in media history.

Listeners were disoriented by the extremely realistic simulated news broadcast, which Welles had carefully structured to mirror the horror of the live on-air reporting of the Hindenburg disaster in May 1937. The Monday morning after the broadcast, the *New York Times* ran the following headline on its front page: "Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact" (1). The article described nothing short of nationwide upheaval: a frenzy of phone calls to radio stations and police switchboards, businesses shuttered closed, standstill traffic jams across interstate highways, and people spilling out into the street with handkerchiefs over their mouths in Harlem, San Francisco, Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore, New Orleans, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Memphis, Atlanta, and more (4). The article also recounted how a gentleman in Pittsburgh found his wife in the bathroom with a bottle of poison in her hand as the broadcast aired, the woman shouting "I'd rather die this way than like that" (4). New York motorists called the police station to ask how they could leave the city now that the Pulaski Skyway had been blown up (4). The *Honolulu Star Bulletin* announced the "attack" from Mars drove thousands across the country to flee their homes ("Populace Terrorized" 1). The *San Francisco Chronicle* described men from Brevard College fainting out of fear and fighting for the phones to call their parents in North Carolina, while a woman in Indianapolis brought an abrupt end to services at St.

Paul's Episcopal Church when she ran into the building and announced, "New York destroyed: it's the end of the world. You might as well go home to die. I just heard it on the radio" ("Great War Scare" 1). Men in San Francisco tried to sign up to enlist in the war against the Martians (Dixon 2). Restaurant patrons in Chicago leapt from their tables mid-meal and abandoned their dinners ("Nation-wide Panic" 1) while police headquarters in Scranton, Pennsylvania received hundreds of calls stating that members of their families had been driven to hysteria by the program (19). Multiple articles stated that people *saw* smoke, flames, and actual rockets from the alien invasion ("Radio Listeners in Panic" [4], "Radio War Drama Panics Thousands" [1], "Strange Stories of Broadcast" [2], "War of Worlds Play Probed" [2], "War is Too Real" [1]). The fictional radio performance had the power to influence what people claimed to see. In her article for the American National Archives, Lee Ann Potter reports that of the nine to twelve million listeners of the broadcast across the nation, approximately one million of them took direct action as a result of the performance – one in twelve individuals ("Jitterbugs" 1). The Boston Daily Globe ran the simple headline: "Radio Play Terrifies Nation" (1).

Fall Business Wanted!

The Boston Daily Globe

Want Advertisements

BOSTON, MONDAY MORNING, OCTOBER 31, 1938—EIGHTEEN PAGES (2) TWO CENTS

RADIO PLAY TERRIFIES NATION

The Capital Parade

Lehman Expects Poletti Victory

READY FOR HALLOWEEN

3 FIRES SET IN SO. END HOTEL

52 Guests, Employees Held in Darkness as Police Hunt Incendiary

PATROL WAGON, AUTO CRASH

Mars Invasion Thought Real

Hysteria Grips Folk Listening In Late

Many Fear World Coming to End

Police, Youth Groups Plan Safer and Saner Halloween

FAIL TO CLAIM

POLICE, BRIDAL

Mystery Veils Fatal Injuries

Figure 1. The front page of *The Boston Daily Globe* the morning after the broadcast. Image by: the *Boston Daily Globe*.

In this well-known episode from radio history, we have all the elements of spectral theatre. We have a nationwide sonic tethering of an alternate story world onto the physical topographical space that the listening audience inhabited. The acousmatics of falling meteors, death rays, spurting poison gas, and crumbling buildings. The omniscient, all-seeing acousmetric voices of newscasters and actors playing government officials warning listeners of the hellscape unfolding around them. The synchresis of the audience weaving the sound of the radio storytelling into what they believed was a new and terrifying reality. The Orson Welles' production was rendered so convincingly that it effectively reshaped how a national audience felt their nation.

With its narrative anchoring that named real places and dealt in familiar radio conventions, the Mercury Theatre made the entire nation *unheimlich* to its listeners. The Halloween morning after the broadcast, the *New York Times* wrote: "Scores of persons in lower Newark Avenue, Jersey City, left their homes and stood fearfully in the street, looking with apprehension towards the sky" ("Radio Listeners" 4). Tapping into national anxieties about invasion on the brink of another world war, this radio drama made listeners fear the sky itself. It is too unsettling for some to believe that Orson Welles was able to reshape the experience of individuals across the entirety of the country with little more than sounds and voices on radio waves.

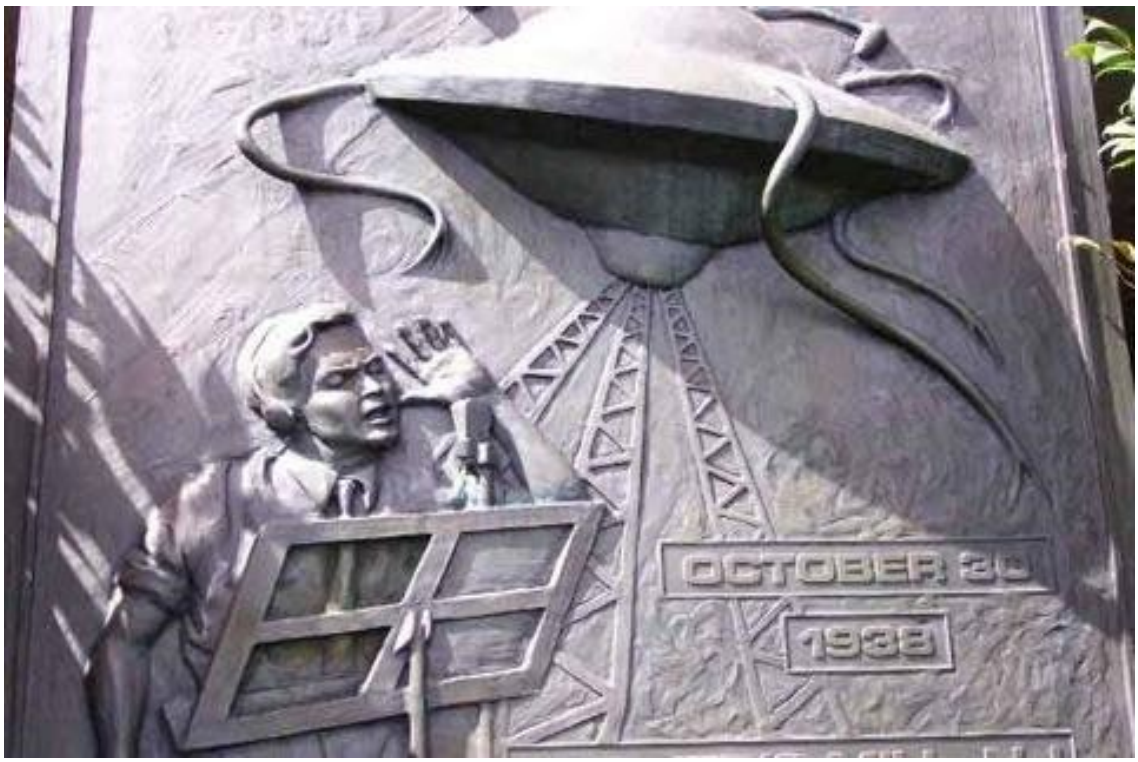

Figure 2. Orson Welles depicted in *War of the Worlds* Broadcast Monument. Image by: Thomas Jay Warren.

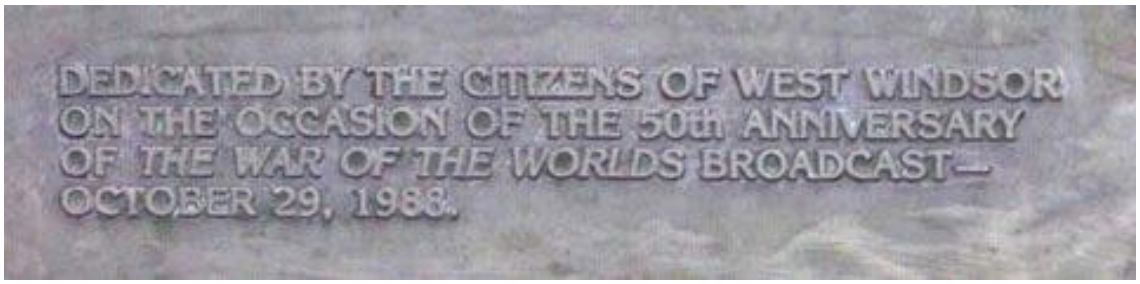

Figure 3. Inscription on the *War of the Worlds* Broadcast Monument. Image by: Thomas Jay Warren.

The 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio performance has literally left its mark on America. Incredibly, the real town of Grover's Mill in New Jersey has featured a bronze monument standing over two meters tall commemorating the broadcast for over three decades. Produced by Mississippi-born artist Thomas Jay Warren, the sculpture was erected on

October 29, 1988 to mark the CBS broadcast's fiftieth anniversary. Called the Martian Landing Site Monument, it features a three-dimensional bas-relief featuring Orson Welles speaking dramatically into a studio microphone, pipe in hand and script before him. Below Welles a frightened father, mother, and son listen in horror to the tabletop radio in their living room. The mother and child embrace each other, while the father has his hand extended and his foot at an angle as if he is going to leap out of his chair. Towering above the family is a menacing Martian in a tentacled war machine, resembling a sinister water tower. At the time of its creation the monument was unique in America, and its unusual design continues to attract visitors. Tourism website *Roadside America* calls it "a war monument worthy of a war that never happened" ("Martian Landing Monument" 1). CBS' *Mercury Theatre on the Air* created a moment so indelible within the American nation's psyche that its community saw fit to give physical form to voices, sound effects, and the invisible performance of the H.G. Wells radio broadcast. Memorializing absence with the presence of a historical marker serves as an appropriate tribute to spectral theatre's capacity, through synchretic storytelling and sonic tethering, to fundamentally transform our perception of the landscapes it projects itself upon.

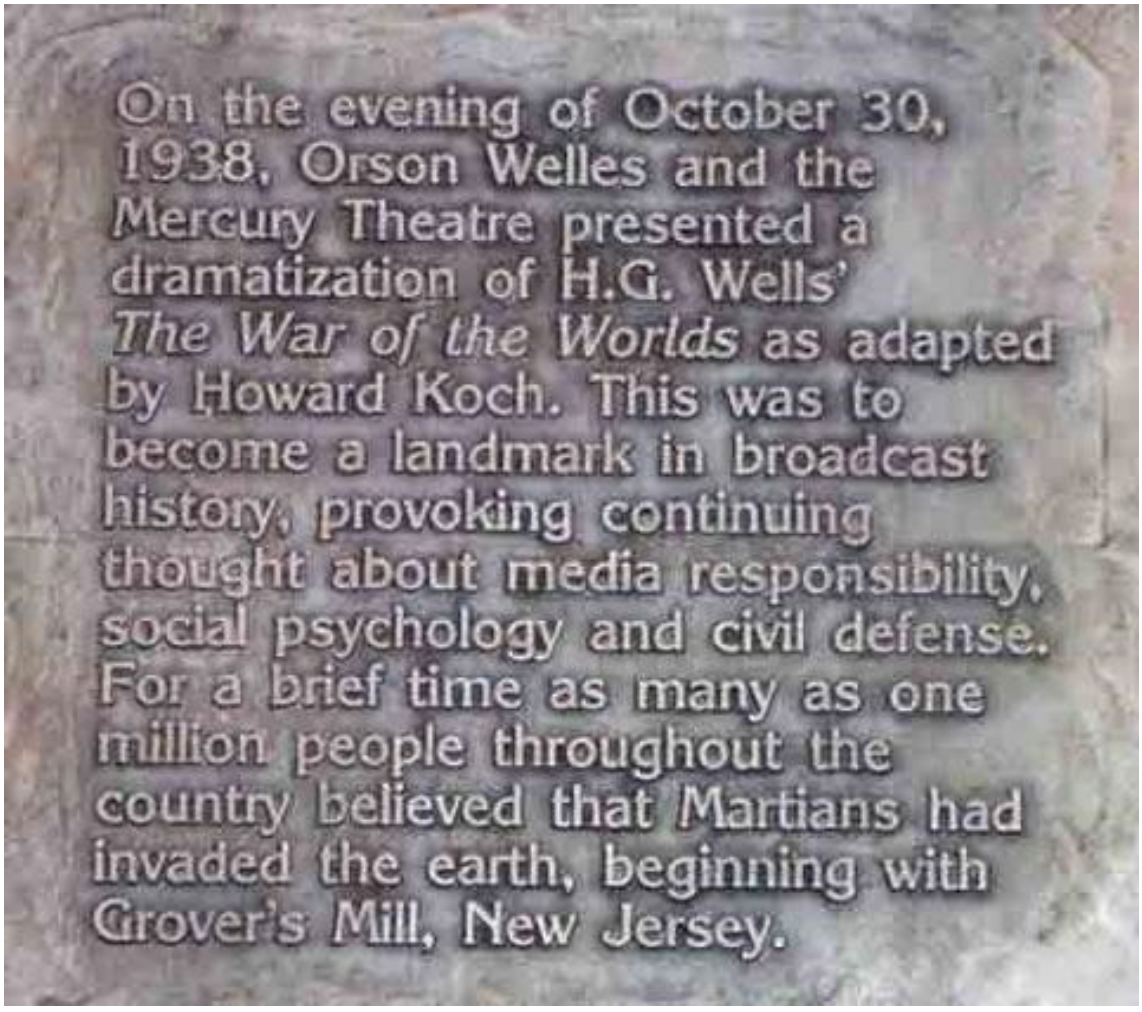

Figure 4. Historical inscription on the *War of the Worlds* Broadcast Monument. Image by: Thomas Jay Warren.

Figure 5. A family listens in terror in the *War of the Worlds* Broadcast Monument. Image by: Thomas Jay Warren.

A final note: There has been controversy among scholars and historians regarding Orson Welles' 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio production: some argue the supposed panic caused by the broadcast was a fabrication, suggesting that the events of the evening were sensationalized by publishers and agencies to sell newspapers and to discredit radio as a reliable source of news. The implication is that radio theatre could not possibly have such a profound influence on our perception of the landscapes we inhabit. But the unique capacity for radio to reframe our experience of place has been proven time and time again. When the Spanish-language radio production of *War of the Worlds* was broadcast in Ecuador by producer Leonardo Páez on Radio Quito in February 1949, local audiences were utterly convinced once more that aliens were invading the planet (Rodrigo-Mendizábal 22). Families packed their belongings into their cars and drove out of town. Fire brigades and police were deployed to the edges of Quito to fight off the invasion. When it became apparent that the events described on the radio were a radio performance, hundreds of Quito residents rioted. An angry mob burned Radio Quito's station to the ground. Six people died, and Leonardo Páez fled to Venezuela, never to return (Ribadeneira 142).

The outsized reaction to the 1949 Quito *War of the Worlds* broadcast is more than a historical footnote — it is yet another example that speaks to radio's power to unite and unmoor, to forge intimacy while destabilizing perceptions of our reality. Whether through fiery orations by political leaders, synchronous sonic horror experiences, or panics induced by the aural performance of an alien invasion, radio binds audiences in a shared yet disorienting experience, collapsing distance while unsettling space. This is the essence of spectral theatre: a performance that exists in no place and this place, its disembodied voices transforming ordinary space into an uncanny landscape. For this reason and many others, radio does not merely entertain. It expands beyond the speaker and into the psyche, conjuring performances that linger at the edges of our perception. The transmission is ephemeral, yet its effects endure. Like all hauntings, radio theatre leaves traces—echoes in the airwaves, reverberations in the imagination, and spectral imprints on the spaces we call home.

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