

WE INTERRUPT THIS BROADCAST: HIGHLY RELIABLE NARRATORS IN RADIO DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theory of highly reliable narration through the examples of 1930s and 1940s radio broadcasts. Compared to the unreliable narrator, which opens interpretive possibilities, the highly reliable narrator limits the conclusions that the reader/listener may arrive at. The highly reliable narrator may receive additional credibility through internal means (sharing confidences with the reader, etc) or external means (education, experience, etc).

Categories and Subject Descriptors

A.0 [General Literature]: General—*conference proceedings, general literary works*

General Terms

Theory

Keywords

Narrative theory, reliability, radio, narrators

1. INTRODUCTION

Highly reliable narrators were a characteristic of supernatural radio drama in the 1930s and 1940s as well. That radio represented a completely different narrative form than live theatre or written narrative is made clear by Orson Welles:

There is nothing that seems more unsuited to the technique of the microphone than to tune in a play and hear an announcer say, “The curtain is now rising on a presentation of . . .” and then for him to set the stage, introduce the characters and go on with the play. The curtain is not rising at all, as everybody well knows, and this method of introducing the characters and setting the locale seems hopelessly inadequate and clumsy. [3]

Pear argues that some voices must be particularly expressive, as radio performers “cannot compensate for a poor voice by appearance and gestures as a stage-actor can” [18]. The major argument that Pear makes in his work, and the one that is most relevant for this work, is his claim that personality can be communicated solely through vocal qualities: “The voice is a sensitive and delicate form of expressive behavior, which has the advantage—from the current standpoint—of being noisy. The

noises are interpreted as indicative of the speaker’s experience. The voice is notoriously affected under strong emotions, but often indicates very subtle changes of mood” [18].

Among the supernatural radio dramas of the 1930s and 1940s, two major categories of shows used highly reliable narrators. The first were the storytelling on the air shows, such as Wyllis Cooper’s radio show *Quiet, Please*, which ran for 106 episodes from 1947-1949, as well as Orson Welles’s 1938 Mercury Theatre production of “*Dracula*.” These shows most closely align with the short narratives discussed in Chapter 2, but provide unique complexity in terms of the multiple voices of the characters, the homodiegetic narrator who speaks directly to the audience as if in conversation. These stories do not attempt to masquerade themselves as anything more than fictional narratives, however, and are routinely accompanied by a frame which emphasizes that fictionality.

The second category of radio program that will be discussed in this chapter are the faux news broadcasts, most notably Welles’s 1938 production of “*The War of the Worlds*.” These radio programs adopted the structure of other genres of narrative, in this case the emergency radio broadcast. By crossing between a fictional and non-fictional genre, these faux-news broadcasts were able to add to the psychological effect of the narrative by de-emphasizing their fictional nature.

2. STORYTELLING ON THE RADIO

More straightforward than the faux news broadcast style of “*The War of the Worlds*” were the storytelling shows of mystery, suspense, and the supernatural that filled the radio waves, including such long-running programs as *Mystery!*, *Suspense*, and *Lights Out!*, to name just a few. The majority of these tales were written specifically for radio performance and were original productions rather than adaptations of earlier works. Additionally, as in written supernatural narratives, the bulk of these tales did not use a homodiegetic narrator. There were some notable exceptions to this trend, most particularly *Quiet, Please*, every episode of which was told by a homodiegetic narrator, sometimes acting as a proto-narrator, who recounts the tale through hindsight, as well as a character who is presenting the events of the tale in present tense; at other times, the audience followed the character as the events unfolded. While many of these narrators were unreliable, a few were highly reliable, including the narrator in the very first episode of the program, called “*Nothing Behind the Door*.” The highly reliable narrators of these broadcasts were often internally reliable and told short stories of supernatural events, uninterrupted by commercials, immersing the listener completely in the world of the teller.[†]

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[†] Since the storytelling dramas are more similar to short stories that have already been discussed, they will receive somewhat less attention here than the “*War of the Worlds*” broadcast.

2.1 Voice and Audience

While some written works of fiction in this period employ a narrator who addressed the reader directly, this technique is far less prevalent than in radio plays, supporting Welles's instinct that radio was an entirely new form of narrative, and as such required a new approach to narrator/audience interaction. When the voice of the narrator or the host of a program reached through the airwaves and addressed the listener directly, the effect seemed far less contrived than if a narrator in a written narrative attempted the same approach.

The relationship between the narrator and the audience is clearly closer than it is in written narrative, where the idea of a conversation between the narrator and the reader exists more as an analogy than as a description of the actual communication. The "intimacy" that West describes between the narrator and the listener strengthens the listener's perception of both unreliability and reliability in the narrator, allowing the listener to factor such details as tone and delivery into his or her assessment of the narrator, as well as giving more weight to those confessions and other vulnerabilities that internally reliable narrators reveal. "Nothing Behind the Door" represents the classic storytelling broadcast on radio, using a previously unpublished script performed by moderately well-known actors. Much of the draw for a broadcast of this type would be its inclusion in a series which appealed to a certain audience.

2.2 "Nothing Behind the Door"

"Nothing Behind the Door" is the story of Ross and his two friends, Hugh and Aldo, who take a trip to California's Mount Wilson observatory to see the telescope and, it later turns out, to find a hiding place for the money they anticipate gaining from a bank heist. While at the observatory, the trio sees a small hut to the side of the observatory marked "No Trespassing, Under Severe Penalty." When the three ask one of the resident astronomers what is behind the door of the hut, they are told simply "nothing." Recognizing a good hiding place when they see one, the gang pulls off the bank job, stealing \$53,000 and go up to Mount Wilson late that night to hide the money. After breaking through the chain-link fence that surrounds the small hut, Hugh and Aldo open the door and promptly disappear forever. The narrator, however, is stopped by one of the scientists before he can follow his friends. The scientist insists that there is "nothing" behind the door and takes the narrator to the telescope in the observatory to show him where his friends are. As the listener by now suspects, the "nothing" that is beyond the door is in fact the vast nothingness of space, into which both Ross's friends and the bank money have disappeared.

Ross operates as a highly reliable narrator in a similar manner to both Professor Dyer in "At the Mountains of Madness" as well as Eddie Stinson in Fitzgerald's "A Short Trip Home." Like Dyer, Ross is unwilling to simply believe the strange things going on around him, and eventually has to be shown the truth of the nothingness behind the door. Rather than Ross being a scientist himself, however, a secondary character has to lead Ross to the realization after his friends disappear:

Ross: My friends went in there!

Astronomer: They're not there now. There's nothing in there. Do you understand me? There's NOTHING in there.

Ross: [menacing] Listen--

Astronomer: No, you listen! I--though, I suppose, it would do no good to tell you--

Ross: Tell me what?

Astronomer: I'd better show you.

Ross: Show me what?

Astronomer: Come with me.

Once they arrive in the observatory, the astronomer has Ross sit in the seat behind the telescope while he moves the telescope's field of view from the stars to the vast blackness of the Horsehead Nebula. Ross the proto-narrator steps back into the show once again, telling the audience: "Yes. You've guessed what I saw. You've guessed what I saw clawing through black clouds of nothing. You've guessed what eyes I saw. I saw NOTHING." He then concludes the show with a present-day warning to any listeners who might be planning their own ill-fated trip to Mount Wilson: "Yes, the little house is still there on Mt. Wilson. You can go look at it if you want to, but don't go too close. Maybe somebody will tell you it's just a place where they store equipment. Maybe. Why do they keep the door locked then? Well, just one other thing: Don't you go around opening doors you don't know anything about. There might be NOTHING behind one of them!" Via the insistence of the astronomer and the evidence of his own experience, Ross reluctantly comes to the same conclusion as Dyer in "At the Mountains of Madness"; there are strange forces at work in the world, and it is his duty to inform the public about the dangers that they pose.

In addition to having Dyer's skepticism, Ross also exhibits internal credibility similar to Eddie Stinson. Rather than gaining the listener's trust by admitting he is in love with a woman who does not notice him, however, Ross admits to his criminal actions as a bank robber. Ross's disclosure is somewhat more believable than Eddie's vulnerabilities because it comes later in the narrative. Ross chooses not to introduce himself as a bank robber; that fact is slowly revealed in the course of the narrative, not as the main point of the story, but as an explanation of the group's interest in the hut on Mount Wilson. The admission of criminal behavior is also a more dramatic statement of trust than Eddie's confession, as the repercussions for such actions are greater. The criminal activity is never the main point of the narrative, however, as Ross talks about the actual heist in an offhand manner:

Well, of course you know what was up, you're way ahead of me, my Cleveland pals weren't in California just for a vacation. There was a bank I'd had my eye on for a while out in Pacific Palisades.

Significantly, this information is relayed in one of the direct addresses to the audience, giving them credit for a conclusion that they had probably not come to yet and invoking that sense of intimacy that West identifies. Ross admits to his vulnerabilities as well, often noting that he was uneasy during the course of the break-in, as in this excerpt: "I don't like any part of this place. I don't like the dark. I don't like the stars up above us. I don't like the lights down below. I don't like the silence. I don't like climbing around the top of a mountain with nothing under me but thin air for a mile or more."

More important than simply admitting his weaknesses is the way Ross tells the audience his thoughts. Ross as the proto-narrator is able to use both the past and present tense in his discussions with the audience, functionally allowing him to fulfill three roles—the traditional proto-narrator, the *in medias res* proto-narrator, and the character. Because Ross can change his voice to indicate which of the roles he is filling (proto-narrator or character) and his use of verb tense, it is clear which of the three roles Ross is filling at the moment. Additionally, while Ross is relating the actual break-in to the hut, the listener can hear Hugh and Aldo in the background, assisting each other over the fence or

whispering to each other, a kind of polyphony that is difficult to achieve in a purely written narrative.

Finally, the listener has one additional piece of information in assessing the character of the narrator, and that is the delivery of the narrative. If a narrator hesitates, prevaricates, slurs his words, changes volume erratically, or otherwise seems to be less than straightforward, the audience picks up on such things and factors them into their analysis of the narrator's reliability. Even if the listener is not listening critically to the piece as a scholar might, these cues are still processed unconsciously. In the case of "Nothing Behind the Door," Ross the proto-narrator sounds earnest, with regular pacing, and clear articulation (despite the generally poor audio quality of the existing recordings). Nothing in his delivery suggests stress, madness, or other factors that might make Ross seem unreliable. Ross the character, however, is notably upset when he confronts the scientist on Mount Wilson after the disappearance of Hugh and Aldo. In this case, the level of emotional response demonstrated by Ross's raised voice and more rapid speech is appropriate for the situation. A lack of this emotional response for the character, however, might be grounds for questioning Ross's reliability. While his vocal characteristics alone are not enough to make Ross a highly reliable narrator, it is a corroborating point that strengthens his external and internal credibility.

Beyond what his voice conveys is Ross's ability to speak to the audience in a literal sense, something that Dyer and Stinson simply cannot do in their narratives. The connection made with the audience as Ross speaks to them is something absolutely unique to radio—while a narrator may choose to break the fourth wall in film and communicate directly with the viewer, this is never sustained in the same way that it is in radio. The entirety of "Nothing Behind the Door" is Ross speaking directly to the listener, continuously establishing and reinforcing his internal reliability. Further, radio provides a sense of immediacy that is difficult to render in written narrative. While Dyer can describe the hurried flight from the shoggoths in "Beyond the Mountains of Madness," the broken and interrupted lines of dialogue lack the power of multiple voices speaking over each other and sound effects that radio can provide. These differences clearly mark the difference between radio and short narratives—while on a script level, the differences between Ross, Dyer, and Stinson may seem slight, when performed on radio, the unique attributes of the medium are clear.

Radio audiences were used to endings that reinforced the fictional nature of the piece that they had just heard, as in the ending to "Nothing Behind the Door:"

Announcer: You have just heard "Quiet, Please," which is written and directed by Willis Cooper. The man who talked to you is Ernest Chapell.

This pronouncement comes on the heels of Ross's proto-narrative announcement that the house on Mount Wilson is real, and that there may be NOTHING behind the door. By stepping out of the framework of the play itself, the announcer, who is not Ernest Chappell or Willis Cooper, but rather an entirely new voice in the drama, forcibly draws the listeners' attention to the fictionality of the piece, telling them both that it was a work of fiction and that "Ross" who told the story was actually a character played by Ernest Chappell. The important distinction here is that the announcer breaks in only long enough to let the listener know that Chapell is not the character he was portraying. After that distinction is made, the microphone goes back to Chapell to introduce the rest of the cast.

3. THE FAUX NEWS BROADCAST

Radically different in both form and effect from the storytelling radio narratives were the faux news broadcast radio narratives. Because of the differences from traditional narratives which emphasize their fictional nature, the bulk of critical and historical studies of radio narratives focus on faux news broadcast narratives. Perhaps the most famous hoax in all of modern media history is the one perpetrated by young Orson Welles and his band of Mercury Theatre players just a few months after their presentation of "Dracula." On October 30, 1938, they aired a heavily adapted version of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. Despite three announcements of the fictional nature of the drama, one at the beginning, middle, and end of the performance, countless people appeared to believe that the aliens had actually landed in the small town of Grovers Mill, New Jersey, and were on the march to destroy New York City and conceivably the rest of the world with their heat rays and poison gas. While opinions of the extent of the panic vary considerably, the most cited is Princeton sociologist Hadley Cantril's observation in his 1940 book, *The Invasion from Mars*:

Long before the broadcast had ended, people all over the U.S. were praying, crying, fleeing frantically to escape death from the Martians. Some ran to rescue loved ones. Others telephoned farewells or warnings, hurried to inform neighbors, sought information from radio or newspapers, summoned ambulances and police cars. At least six million people heard the broadcast. At least a million of them were frightened or disturbed. [5]

Cantril's work was based on a series of ninety-nine interviews of people in the New Jersey/New York area, which he completed shortly after the broadcast, as well as studies of national radio listenership during that evening. breaks to disturb the illusion that Welles created. A great deal of recent debate has focused on the true extent of the panic, both in the number of people affected and the actions which those people took, mostly downplaying the initial estimates and accounts of the panic.[‡] Many critics argue that newspapers took the opportunity to denigrate radio and to assert their dominance as Americans' primary news source, and accordingly blew the event out of proportion. As Joseph Campbell observes, "Clearly, many people in America were confused, unnerved, and even frightened by the 'War of the Worlds' broadcast. But it was an untenable leap for newspapers to extrapolate mass panic and hysteria from a comparatively small number of anecdotal reports" [4]. What all critics seem to agree on, however, is that at least some listeners were sufficiently taken in by the program that they, at minimum, attempted to verify the events that they were hearing on the radio, either by checking other stations, calling the police, clergy, or neighbors, or checking newspaper listings.

[‡] For fuller accounts of this much discussed event, see Campbell, Edward Miller, Bainbridge, Goode and Bartholomew.

3.1 The Script

While a great deal of the success of “The War of the Worlds” came from the external elements of historical situations, the presentation of the script as a news broadcast, the sound effects and the voice acting, at least an equal part of the play’s effectiveness in convincing a reasonable audience that the aliens had arrived came from aspects inherent to the script itself. The localizing of H. G. Wells’s story, the use of multiple viewpoints, the various highly reliable narrators, and the character of Professor Pierson himself, all combined to create a singularly believable narrative upon which the Mercury Theater players could add the unique aspects of radio narrative that made the medium so powerful.

Koch’s recollection of the choice of Grovers Mill for the broadcast is almost fantastic if one considers the far-reaching effects of this seemingly simple choice. Driving through southern New York on his day off before he began the project, Koch was given a map of the area by a gas station attendant, and it was this map that Koch looked at during the first day of writing his “War of the Worlds” play. “I spread out the map, closed my eyes, and put down the pencil point. It happened to fall on Grovers Mill. I liked the sound, it had an authentic ring” and it had the further advantage of being near Princeton, allowing Koch to easily bring in the astronomer Professor Pierson [12]. Once he had chosen Grovers Mill as ground zero for the Martian attacks, he describes deploying his forces across the landscape, moving to New York, and ultimately destroying the Columbia Broadcasting System (in what he calls an effort of “unconscious wish fulfillment”), and the die was cast and familiar place names replaced English villages, increasing the panic of the listeners [12]. According to Koch, over a hundred New Jersey state troopers were dispatched to maintain calm in the Grovers Mill area the evening of the broadcast [12].

Beyond the locations in the radio broadcast, Cantril also pointed to the apparent credibility of Professor Pierson, and Welles’s portrayal of the character as a major motive for belief. Of course in Welles’s broadcast, the astronomer Pierson was not alone in providing external authority; he was joined by various professors, General Montgomery Smith, Commander of the State Militia at Trenton; Mr. Harry McDonald, vice-president of the Red Cross; Captain Lansing of the Signal Corps; and finally the Secretary of the Interior (who sounded very presidential indeed). Again, Cantril gathers listener reactions to the broadcast relating the reliability of the voices in the narrative: “I believed the broadcast as soon as I heard the professor from Princeton and the officials in Washington”; “When the Princeton professor talked to the people then I was really scared”; “I knew it was an awfully dangerous situation when all those military men were there and the Secretary of State spoke” [5]. The emphasis on authority here makes it clear that external reliability is a potent way of conveying the impossible in a believable manner.

Cantril also makes an important distinction when he notes that these secondary characters are largely drawing upon institutional authority rather than personal credentials or characteristics. Mr. Harry McDonald has no importance in this narrative for the listener; the role of the vice-president of the Red Cross does. In “The War of the Worlds” it is not just Professor Pierson or Harry McDonald talking, it is Princeton and the Red Cross.

While corroboration and external institutional authority played a large role in listeners’ determining the credibility of the broadcast, part of the success of the show was related directly to the way that the character of the primary narrator, Professor

Pierson, was written and played. The role of scientists as externally highly reliable narrators has been adequately discussed in previous chapters, and Pierson certainly represents the highest ideals of scientific inquiry and skepticism early in the program. Phillips’s initial interview with him allows Pierson to demonstrate his knowledge and cynicism, calmly rattling off the distance from the Earth to Mars, and using the terminology “in opposition” [12] to define the planets’ relative positions to each other. Carl Phillips’s introduction of Pierson as “famous astronomer” [12] does little to hurt Pierson’s credibility either. Here, Phillips is setting up the main narrator, so that when the task of narrating events falls from Phillips to Pierson, the audience is more than ready to accept him as an authority on the subject. By the time the pair arrive at the Wilmuth Farm in Grovers Mill, Pierson’s authority is well-established, and it is at this point that Koch takes a significant turn in the narrative; he begins to show Pierson’s inability to come to terms with what he is seeing, which Cantril calls the “bafflement” effect. Faced with the emerging aliens, Professor Pierson says, “I can give you no authoritative information—either as to their nature, their origin, or their purposes here on Earth. . . .” [5]. When the Princeton astronomer is unable to reconcile what he is seeing with his experience of the world, his uncertainty becomes a cause for greater panic among the listening audience, because, after all, the nature of being an expert lies in having answers to questions and problems just like this. More importantly, if these so-called experts do not have the tools or understanding to deal with this situation, how would laypeople fare when faced with the same circumstances? Pierson’s inability to put a name to the events that transpire in Grovers Mill does not make him less credible however; it simply shows the limits of his experience.

3.2 Sound Effects, Voice Acting, and Pacing

While the script of “The War of the Worlds” forms the backbone of the broadcast, it is undeniable that it loses much its narrative force when deprived of the unique aspects of radio—specifically sound effects, acting and pace. Welles was particularly interested in the use of sound effects to add to the atmosphere of his radio plays. According to John Houseman, Welles spent three hours trying to replicate the sound of a severed head for his adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and moved the recording of *Les Miserables* to the men’s bathroom of CBS in order to take advantage of the acoustics of the urinals to replicate the sounds of being in a Paris sewer (Brown 203). This was not the last time that the CBS men’s rooms were pressed into service, as Ora Nichols, the lead sound effects technician for “War of the Worlds” created the sound of the alien spacecraft opening by unscrewing the top of a glass jar inside one of the toilets. Similarly, Nichols created the clockwork ticking of the telescope that dominates the early part of Professor Pierson’s interview from the Princeton observatory by placing a ticking alarm clock inside of a metal trashcan. While these seemingly banal instances of sound-effects wizardry may seem to represent more of a curiosity than a narrative feature, the result of these sound effects, particularly of the unscrewing of the Martian ship served to heighten the sense of reality felt by the listeners. While no one had ever heard what a Martian ship might sound like if it opened in the middle of a New Jersey field, when they heard Nichols’s sound effects, suddenly no other sound could possibly represent the events that the listeners were witnessing. Certainly no one heard the ominous grinding opening of the ship and said to themselves, “That must be a pickle jar being opened inside a toilet bowl.”

In addition to using sound effects to create belief, there was the question of how best to convey reliability and trustworthiness on the air. One of the greatest influences on radio actors was a man completely untrained in theatre—Franklin D. Roosevelt. Radio historian Robert Brown christens Roosevelt the “radio president” and argues convincingly that the fireside chats, combined with Roosevelt’s calming demeanor and speaking style was one of the greatest influences on ending the Great Depression. As Brown notes, “FDR spent countless hours preparing his texts, developing the proper delivery techniques, and refining his voice and sense of timing” in order to best take advantage of his radio addresses [3]. FDR also understood the importance of pacing his addresses; while typical radio operators spoke at speeds of 175 to 200 words per minute, Roosevelt’s typical fireside chats were much slower at approximately 120 words per minute, and at times of national crisis, such as the outbreak of war in Europe and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he dropped below 100 words per minute. “His slow speaking rate projected an air of calm assurance to which the American people, frightened by the Depression and the impending war, responded to with gratitude” [3]. Additionally, unlike previous presidents, FDR’s voice was largely devoid of a regional accent, his volume was well-modulated and soothing, and his correctness in speaking was held up not simply as an example for politicians, but for all people working in radio.

Welles himself, in the role of Professor Pierson, made perhaps the greatest use of the lessons that Roosevelt taught. Welles “uttered [his speeches] in measured tones that to listeners must have sounded like the very voice of reason” [7]. Welles was faced with a series of last-minute changes to prevent the show from becoming a farce, and instead of speeding up the events and emphasizing the plot, Welles took the opposite tack. Welles “slowed [the show] even more, stretching out the pregnant pauses, reinstating dialogue that had been cut in earlier rehearsals precisely because it had been felt to be dragging down the story, and piling on the banal piano music” [7]. By applying the same principle to the entire narrative as Roosevelt applied to his most critical speeches, Welles was able to tap into the same sense of seriousness and concern. While Koch’s script was inherently more credible to an American audience than Wells’s novel, the script alone would not have moved listeners to panic. Only when the trusted voice of Welles in the guise of America’s greatest astronomer spoke against the background sound of a giant alien spaceship slowly opening did the broadcast become truly potent.

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