

## **Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling**

JEFF PORTER, 2016

Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press

pp. 283, \$29.95 (paperback)

In film studies there has recently been an impetus to focus more attention on the institutions and audiences surrounding films and media texts than those objects themselves – to ‘look beyond the screen’. In radio studies this kind of historiographic focus is more customary, and in some ways a reflex rather than a new impetus. Scholars have had such limited access to historic radio recordings that in a sense they have had no choice but to rely on the abundance of paper archives (e.g. the BBC Written Archives at Caversham) to see how the often inaccessible texts were shaped and received.

Jeff Porter’s *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling* demonstrates that radio historians don’t have to ‘hole up’ in the archives, awaiting the outcomes of major digitization programmes by libraries and broadcasters. At the end of the introduction Porter notes that the majority of the radio broadcasts he discusses can still be heard today thanks to the digitization efforts of grassroots networks of fans of ‘Old Time Radio’ (OTR). Porter undertakes a sustained and impressive ‘close reading’ – or ‘close listening’ (13-14) - of radio texts from the 1930s to the 1970s, demonstrating that the radio work of key figures like Orson Welles, Norman Corwin, Dylan Thomas, Samuel Beckett and Glenn Gould should be indispensable to a history of literary modernism. Importantly, Porter does not treat these radio broadcasts as literature by other means, attending not just to their narrative strategies, but to what we might term their ‘experiential dimension’, in terms of their aural elements, their conditions of transmission, and how they address or situate the listener.

Given the paucity of interdisciplinary vocabulary to address the aural dimension of media texts, Porter can also be commended for coining several useful new terms. For example, Chapter 4 explores Edward R. Murrow's broadcasts from London during the blitz, and the way in which they relied heavily on what Porter terms the *proximity effect* – 'a referential gesture that seeks spatial nearness to an acoustic source in order to localize meaning, as if language were not up to the task' (p. 90). Through closely recording or relaying through narration particular sounds or ambience, Murrow isolated elements of the blitz soundscape to create 'acoustic close-ups', which conveyed the wartime structure of feeling.

One criticism of this chapter, which does apply to much of the book, is its 'blind spot' in entirely overlooking the radio feature, a genre unique to the medium. Porter credits Murrow with 'the invention of a hybrid genre that borrowed from the modernist tradition of literary journalism as well as the emergent form of [American] radio drama' (86), which sounds like a description of an ambitious radio feature (a form which had its origins in the 1920s). Similarly, in Chapter 6 Porter pays tribute to Dylan Thomas' blending of radio genres (fiction, drama, documentary, talk) in *Return Journey to Swansea* (1947), without acknowledging Thomas' strong links to the BBC Radio Features Department.

Another term coined by Porter - 'acoustic drift' - is utilised adroitly throughout the book in the service of close listening. Porter uses this term to refer to 'the uncoupling of sound from sense, to those moments when sound becomes unmoored from the anchor of language' (19). Porter's analysis of acoustic drift in *Columbia Workshop* productions of the 1940s demonstrate how the prestigious drama showcase experimented with a radical sound aesthetic, tempered, in the case of Norman Corwin's work, with a reverence for the poetic imperatives of the spoken word. The introduction of such 'highbrow radio' was a convenient and relatively affordable solution to a programming shortage on CBS, at a time when the network was receiving criticism for its heavily commercial programming. More broadly, the

use of acoustic drift allowed radio drama to overcome the kind of logocentricity perpetuated across radio programming, such as the daytime soap. In the same spirit, Porter's final chapter focuses on the fluid and eclectic mixing of approaches and formats (such as reportage and freeform monologues) that characterised National Public Radio (NPR) in the 1970s, and its use of female and regional voices to challenge the hegemonic status quo of broadcast talk.

Porter's exhaustively researched book can be regarded as a significant contribution to the exploration of radio as a storytelling medium, and provides a model of how the primacy of theory and text can be reasserted within radio history/studies.

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