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Transgressing boundary rituals on radio

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Abstract

One of the hallmarks of radio has always been its imaginative and immersive potential. From the 1920s on, listeners have frequently found broadcast reality/fiction to be problematic. Once boundary rituals were established, demarcating out for listeners where one program ended and another began and contributing to the concept of the schedule, such rituals could be transgressed. This frequently happened when carefully crafted fictional programming was framed to sound like news. This is the case with the most famous example, *The Mercury Theatre of the Air*'s "The War of the Worlds" (~~CBS~~Welles, Houseman and Koch, 1938). Such phenomena, however, are not confined to science fiction. Biting and surrealist radio satire *On the Hour* (~~BBC~~Iannucci, 1991-2) used the conventions of radio news to fool its audience. More recent forms like the podcast have exploited this transgression as well, many of them re-working the aesthetics established by WBEZ Chicago/PRI's true crime/investigative journalism podcast *Serial* (Koenig, Chivvis, and Snyder, 2014-), such as *The Black Tapes* (2015-), *TANIS* (2015-), and *Lime Town* (2015-). Soap operas, such as *The Archers* (~~BBC,~~ 1951-), have listeners who have chosen to

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interpret their storyworlds as a form of "truth," regardless of whether they represent factual reality. Throughout its existence, radio has been shaped by its unique ability to transgress of boundary rituals, which allows listeners a uniquely immersive experience that blurs the nature of reality.

One of the hallmarks of radio has always been its imaginative and immersive potential, the 'sublime' paradox of distance combined with border-dissolving intimacy (Sconce, 2000, p. 66). This chapter will examine an international subset of texts that transgress the 'boundary rituals' of radio (Crisell, 1994, p. 6). Boundary rituals refer to a method by which we distinguish different genres, formats, or modes on radio as we move from one program to another. The boundary rituals developed relatively early as part of the 'format' of radio, as a 'means of producing a standardised and predictable output for listeners' (Chignell, 2009, p.115). While many examples have been deliberately constructed by program-makers as transgressing radio's genre or format boundaries, others can only be considered so due to their listener interpretations. These examples allow listeners a uniquely immersive experience that blurs the nature of reality. This mode is best achieved in a mono-sensory environment (see next section), involving imagination, liveness, instantaneousness (a difficulty in verifying real-time), radio's generic codes and conventions, and the intimacy of the human voice.

Why would a programme-maker want to transgress boundary rituals in the first place? Interpreting genre is an essential part of the way we interact with media.

Why would programme-makers want to problematize it? From the examples in this chapter, there can be any number of reasons: to satirize; to provide a new way of looking at news; to disseminate information; to investigate the limitations of current technology; to destabilize and frighten listeners; as a publicity stunt; to make reality more interesting. Perhaps the transgression of boundary rituals is the ultimate postmodern response to the conventions that developed around broadcast media at the beginning of the twentieth century.

On mono-sensory media

Scott McCloud has made the argument that comics are a mono-sensory medium, relying only on 'one of the senses to convey a world of experience' (1993, p. 89). That one sense in comics is sight. We can also refer to radio as a mono-sensory medium, which eliminates, in my mind, the possibly reductive language otherwise used to ontologically describe radio (as 'blind', 'invisible', 'dark', etc; (cf. Crisell, 1994; Crook, 1999; Hand and Traynor, 2011; Shingler and Wieringa, 1998). Because we can only *see* comics, McCloud describes them as mono-sensory. Comics have to represent other aspects of storytelling that are taken for granted in audiovisual media (time, motion, sound) through the single sense of sight. Radio can be described as mono-sensory because we can only *hear* it and thus must imagine concepts of space, motion, and visual information. This is not a limitation; in radio, from sound-only

information we construct a storyworld through sight, touch, taste, smell, space, and, to an extent, motion.

Found fFootage

The use of the imagination is key to the strength and potency of audio drama (Gray, 2009; Verma, 2012). The term 'boundary rituals' originates with Fiske and Hartley (1978, pp. 166–167) but was adapted by Crisell to mean a method by which we distinguish something fictional on radio from, for example, 'a continuation of the news bulletin we have just been listening to' (1994, p. 6). With this definition in mind, this chapter focuses specifically on the ways boundary rituals are ignored, subverted, or otherwise exploited to create this effect. This confusion specifically in radio has a long legacy.

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During the earliest years of radio, there were many instances of confusion regarding the new apparatus, how it functioned, how to situate the medium among existing forms, such as oral storytelling, print journalism and prose fiction, stage theatre and cinema? Radio's popularization coincided with the period immediately after the First World War and the subsequent notable belief in spiritualism, symbolizsing, for Verma, 'existential ambiguities for experiencing modern media' (2012, p.100). Thus, everyone involved in the making of radio, as well as the listeners, understood radio's uncanny aspect. Barfield (1996) notes an example of radio's uncanny nature as gathered from oral histories, highlighting early listeners'

lack of certainty over the source of the transmissions: where did radio come from? How did it work? And could it be used to contact the dead? Many believed it could (Hand, 2014; Hendy, 2013).

Transgressions of boundary rituals in radio/audio drama share some similarities with what is known as the 'found footage' film. When framing, production and marketing techniques are deliberately designed to present fictional feature film as amateur documentary (e.g. *The Blair Witch Project*, [1999], *Cloverfield* [2008]), 'found footage' succeeds in confusing the audience, even if only for a moment: is this reality or fiction? Aldana Reyes argues that 'found footage' is not so much a genre but rather a stylistic, not thematic, technique (2017~~,~~5 p. 124); transgressions of boundary rituals can mean that texts participate in several genres. McRobert conceives of the Gothic in film as something interactive and transgressive, but for the conceptual purpose of destabilization (2017). He claims that the blurring line between 'truth and fakery has proved most visually effective in the post-millennial found footage film' (p. 138). Naturally, the found footage film raises questions about *who* has 'found' the footage, but these questions seem less pressing in broadcast media. Thus *Ghostwatch* (~~BBC,~~Volk, 1992), the infamous, elaborately staged fictionalized documentary/news television programme hosted by Michael Parkinson and broadcast on Halloween, is closer to radio-like transgressions of boundary rituals than found footage due to its instantaneous nature. Framed and produced as a live news programme, the credibility of *Ghostwatch* was strengthened

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by the participation of presenters like Parkinson, known for his participation in live television interviews and not drama. However, it was the liveness of the programme, the fact it reached into the domestic space (unlike film), and an inability to verify its veracity in real-time that contributed to its more radio-like nature. *British Medical Journal* reports at the time demonstrated widespread chronic fear in children watching *Ghostwatch* due to its realistic framing, which 'may have prevented the parents from adequately containing their children's anxieties' (Forbes and McClure, 1994, p.714). Not all radio examples that transgress boundary rituals incorporate found footage explicitly; *War of the Worlds* was transmitted live and does not purport to be a 'recording' of alien invasion like *Cloverfield.* Nevertheless, many more recent examples of radio and audio dramas incorporate found footage.

'War of the Worlds' and its predecessors

The ability of listeners to cross geographical boundaries when tuning into radio has made governments uneasy. It was therefore unsurprising that the movement towards regulation began to regularize radio formats by the mid-1920s (d'Haenans and Saeys, 2001). From this, a schedule emerged, which enabled a social contract between listeners and broadcasters. Nevertheless, the quality of liveness as well as Britain's developing relationship between newspapers and radio news made it possible for subversive experiments to occur occasionally. In the UK, reporting news on radio had been initially prohibited, due to nervous newspaper owners fearing that radio's ability

to disseminate news almost instantaneously would diminish their own relevance**.** In January 1926, detective fiction writer Father Ronald Knox made a spoof broadcast from the Edinburgh-based radio station 2EH, relayed via London's 2LO (Crook, 1999; Walker, 2011). In this broadcast, music and talks were punctuated by breaking bulletins, describing insurrectionist mobs rioting across Whitehall in London and destroying the British Broadcasting Company's headquarters and government buildings. Listeners to this talk, *Broadcasting the Barricades*, were persuaded to assimilate the spoken words of Knox as news rather than fiction for a number of reasons: the codes and conventions of radio, which suggest that when a voice of authority explicitly said it would be delivering the news, the listeners should expect the news; the inclement weather across the country that kept people housebound, unable to independently verify through other sources (such as newspapers); the previous year had witnessed the General Strike, increasing the plausibility of the story.

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This incident created a minor panic, though listeners who appreciated the spoof far outweighed those who complained (Barber, 2020). Such playfulness with conventions was at odds with the ordered and serious ethos envisioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation post-1927, after its management under J.C.W. Reith was assured. Nevertheless, the early to mid-1920s signaled a Europe-wide predilection, from a few experimental broadcasters, towards challenging the strictures of radio broadcasting and its technological limitations. By this period, the allure of the

broadcast voice was domesticated (no longer as uncanny as in the early 1920s), and boundary rituals, allowing listeners to know what to expect through the broadcast day and week, were understood. This phenomenon can be collectively referred to as 'danger' plays, from the 1924 broadcast of Richard Hughes' *A Comedy of Danger* on the BBC, frequently credited as the first, original, full-length British drama for radio for adults.[1] In *Danger*, a group of middle-class sightseers are trapped in a mine. Despite appeals to the imagination, to the intimacy of the human voice and liveness, *Danger* is unlikely to have convinced listeners that it was happening in real-time. For one thing, OB (outside broadcast, 'on location') units were still in their infancy and technologically outside the reach of the BBC (Bridson, 1971; Shapley, 2001), so the microphone could not have followed the sightseers down the mine and continued broadcasting.

Marémoto (1924, France), like *Danger*, was the first drama written exclusively for radio rather than as adaptation. It was conceived by Pierre Cusy and Maurice Vinot (pseudonym Gabriel Germinet). Given Germinet's reputation as a radio news writer, *Marémoto* unsurprisingly takes as its origin point an event that

[1] Most likely, the first radio drama broadcast in the UK were scenes from *Cyrano de Bergerac* in 1922 followed by scenes from Shakespeare in 1923; the first original full drama was *The Truth About Father Christmas*, a children's drama broadcast from Newcastle (Wood, 2008, p. 36).

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could have been plucked from news headlines of the era. The drama is primarily a dialogue between a radio-telegrapher and a sailor who uses his radio connection to desperately seek help from TSF (Télégraphe sans Fils, a French station). At first listen, *Marémoto*'s authenticity places it closer to news than drama, invoking liveness, instantaneousness, and imagination – 'We hear the rain, the wind, the sounds of the spray, the cracks on the hull' (Méadel, 1994, p.291). However, the use of the listener's imagination is invoked by the storytelling approach (the listener has to imagine the desperate sailors in the storm) and the intimacy of the radio voice, which are allowed to function above and beyond authenticity and generic codes and conventions. The key plot point would have been impossible in 1924, because ships could only communicate by Morse code, rather than radio transmission via voice. Nevertheless, from this, Méadel argues, a more powerful effect is created, 'suggesting feelings, stronger than if we had planted a microphone in a real shipwreck' (p. 292). This is further emphasized by an intrusion of boundary rituals: just when the shipwreck seemed imminent, it was interrupted by a dialogue between the announcer Radiolo and the station director. The transgression was over, and equilibrium was restored.

In 1929, Friedrich Wolf wrote *Hörspiel- S.O.S. ... rao rao ... Foyn. 'Krassin' rettet 'Italia,'* whose rather unwieldy title references the airship *Italia*, whose radio signals were picked up after it crashed during its expedition to the North Pole. This real-life event, like *Marémoto*, provided 'edge-of-one's chair authenticity that the

tragedy of the airship *Italia* would still evoke in the minds and hearts of the radio listener one year following the actual events' (Gilfillan, 2009, p. 82). The connection to *Marémoto* is clear; the fictional nature of *S.O.S.* is obvious, given its title (*Hörspiel* is the German term for radio play) and the fact it dramatizes a well-known event. John Barber notes that *Der Minister ist ermordet!* (*The Minister Is Murdered*), broadcast in 1930, goes one step further than *S.O.S.* by conflating seemingly real events with fiction, causing such controversy that Germany's Minister of the Interior launched an investigation (Barber, 2020).

All the 'danger' plays engaged, to some extent, with qualities of the mono-sensory medium, liveness, imagination, instantaneousness, generic codes and conventions, and the intimacy of the human voice. The most infamous culmination of this mode took place on American radio network CBS in October 1938, during the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* (1938, 1946) programme. Initially titled *First Person Singular*, the programme was flamboyantly produced by Orson Welles and John Houseman. In the adaptation of the H.G. Wells novel, Martians invade an unsuspecting Earth. Cantril's 1940 study, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic*, estimated a listenership of six million people to the adaptation of 'The War of the Worlds,' of whom approximately 28 per cent believed it to be reality, not a fictional adaptation. That led to more than one million people feeling upset about the broadcast, inspiring a nationwide panic (Gosling, 2009, p. 54). A number of factors influenced the audience's reception of this event as real-life rather

than a dramatization of a Victorian novel. The evidence suggests that, far from being taken by surprise by the ensuing furore, as he claimed at the time, Welles and team actively cultivated the sensationalism of this stunt. Without a doubt, Welles knowingly transgressed boundary rituals.

The broadcast's liveness and instantaneousness were heightened by world events. Many listeners tuned in at least ten minutes into the programme, missing the subtle opening monologue that framed it as radio drama. Furthermore, reeling from the recent German invasion of Czechoslovakia, many listeners were prepared for an invasion of New Jersey (if by Germans and not Martians). The generic codes and conventions framed the broadcast like a programme of light music, interrupted by news bulletins of increasing urgency. It was written and delivered like a real news broadcast.[2] CBS' news reporting already had a credible reputation, and actor Frank Readick modelled his performance on reporter Herbert Morrison's coverage of the *Hindenberg* disaster (Gosling, 2009). While little imagination was required given the ritualistic framing, nevertheless, the imaginative sound design by Ora Nichols convinced some listeners that Martian capsules really were opening on air. Actors such as Readick and Welles achieved credibility with the intimacy of the human

[2] Barber (2020) argues that it was also influenced by more purely fictional dramas such as *The Fall of the City* (1937), *The Crimson Wizard* (1938), and *Air Raid* (1938).

voice. American radio had already shown a tendency towards self-regulation (Murray, 2002), and despite Welles' initial fears he would face lawsuits, neither regulators nor lawyers pursued him for the panic caused by 'The War of the Worlds' (Barber, 2020).

News framing and satire

Even in the 1940s, with 'The War of the Worlds' superseded by CBS' reputation as an outstanding source of news programming (Dunning, 1998), the network's programme-makers were aware of the potential benefits of occasionally transgressing boundary rituals. This was manifest in the feature-like drama series, *CBS Is There/You Are There* (1947–50), in which listeners were transported back in time to witness historical events, accompanied by an 'entire network newsroom' (ibid.). The imaginary leap required for listeners to appreciate *You Are There* was predicated on the skilful use of news framing conventions, such as John Daly 'reporting' from the studio and reporter Don Hollenbeck getting 'vox pops' on location, such that the roaming reporters actually seemed to perish while covering the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (25 August 1947). Nevertheless, there was never any question of its imaginary programming being mistaken for real radio news. While not everyone listening to *Maréemoto* in 1924 would have realized it had to be fictitious given that ship communication used only Morse, not radio speech, everyone listening to *You Are There* would have realized a radio broadcast was not possible in 79 A.D.

You Are There was produced towards the end of what is traditionally considered the 'Golden Age of Radio' in American history. While this categorization is far from uncomplicated, nevertheless American radio in the 1960s began, in a very broad sense, to conform to a small number of genre expectations, mainly news, music, and sports. While this was supplemented in the 1970s with more free-form broadcasts and joined by talk radio in the 1980s, the music format remained ubiquitous across the vast majority of radio stations broadcasting in the US in the latter half of the twentieth century. This was not the case in the UK, where drama and comedy broadcasting continued in an unbroken line on the BBC from the 1920s until the present day, providing more room to experiment in transgressing boundary rituals. The blurring line between fiction and reality was harder to divine with the news-framed BBC radio satire, *On the Hour* (Iannucci and Morris,1990–1~~), produced by Armando Iannucci and starring Chris Morris~~. The radio predecessor to much-acclaimed TV satire *The Day Today* (Iannucci~~BBC~~, 1994–5), *On the Hour* 'brought utter nonsense to the public with a pompous confidence that made them go along with it, taking soundclips from actual news shows and putting them in strange new contexts' (Blair, 2016).

While *You Are There* made clear to its audience the nature of its boundary ritual transgressions in the form of a generically hybrid historical drama framed by the conventions of a live news broadcast, listeners seemed less aware of the boundary ritual transgression in *On the Hour*. As was the case with 'War of the Worlds,' *On the Hour* integrated its news-framed conventions so successfully within the broadcasting

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expectations of the time that some listeners incorrectly read the comedy as news, as evidenced by listeners complaining about the way 'host' Chris Morris treated 'guests' (Blair, 2016). The appreciative reception of 'War of the Worlds' by some listeners at the time acknowledged its creative storytelling and its audacity; nevertheless, Welles admitted in an interview, it was also potentially a warning to the gullible (Barber, 2020, p. 110). *On the Hour* may have had a similar function in mind, a love of the medium of radio while at the same time delivering a 'pithy pisstake' (Blair, 2016). In the program-makers' minds, the transgression was a deliberate choice. While 'The War of the Worlds' used suspense and science fiction as its genre identification, *On the Hour* was aligned with comedy and satire. There have been other BBC radio satires that exploited the codes and conventions of contemporary radio for comic effect, but none quite so effectively as *On the Hour*. The segmentation and appeal to broadcast flow/scheduling (Williams, 2003~~1975~~) were performed with convincing perfection, including credibly febrile vox pops and slick station 'imaging'; the framing was accurate, but the content was nonsensical, satirical, even potentially offensive.

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Boundary rituals and establishing community

The vast majority of the examples given in this chapter have been standalone dramas, as it is more manageable to provide a holistic listening experience that transgresses boundary rituals in the shorter form. Sustaining a longer serialized story would

seemingly test boundary ritual transgression to the limit. Once the boundary rituals have been shown to have been transgressed, it would seem like the point would have been made. However, in one subset of boundary ritual transgression, this is not the case, and that is the genre of the serialized drama/radio soap opera. Radio soaps showcased ordinary people (MacDonald, 1979), 'linked to their regions, certain of their values, attached to their traditions' (Sabbagh, 1995, p. 74).

Launched in the late 1920s on American radio, much of the rest of Europe followed suit by the 1930s. Britain resisted the continental appreciation for the soap opera, due primarily to Reithian disdain for America's 'Mammon'-obsessed commercial writing. This began to be relaxed in the 1940s, when serialized family dramas were developed, such as *Front Line Family* (1941–48), *Mrs Dale's Diary* (1948–69), and *Life with the Lyons* (1950–61). Quite differently than soap opera serials from American and European traditions, *The Archers* (~~BBC,~~ 1951-), set in a middle-class farming community, began its life as an educational programme aimed at disseminating farming information on BBC Midlands. *The Archers* is BBC Radio 4's regular soap opera drama, which purports to depict the lives of 'everyday country folk.'

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The transgression of boundary rituals with *The Archers* begins with the intentions of its creator, Godfrey Baseley, and then interestingly changes from a boundary ritual transgression to the imaginative, collective world-building of the show's fans. Before the launch of the serial, Baseley, as an established BBC Midlands

journalist, interviewed the cast of his new drama in character, using an improvised format. Clearly, Baseley's strategy was to ensnare listeners; if they considered they were eavesdropping on a real town's residents, they would be more likely to follow the farming advice rather than rejecting it as outsider intervention. Instantaneousness at the time of broadcast meant listeners could not easily discover the true 'identity' of the *Archers* cast. By participating in a community that seemed 'real' or at least was framed as authentic, listeners could more easily connect. Baseley's approach was not unique – in *Jezioany*, a Polish radio soap that began broadcasting in 1960, the actors were not identified at the end of each segment, suggesting by omission that there were no 'actors' (Jezioany, n.d.) – but this was accomplished at a more sustained level with *The Archers* (Smethurst, 1996, p. 40). Baseley's transgression of boundary rituals accomplished its goal of drawing in potential listeners to *The Archers*, at which point it was no longer necessary to 'pretend' that the programme represented recordings of real people instead of a scripted drama. Clearly, listeners of today can easily go on the *Archers* website, Twitter feed, or listen to fan podcasts, and conclude that they are dealing with a fictional programme voiced by actors. So, while continuing to emotionally invest in the imagined rural community of *The Archers*, most listeners are content to let the fictional qualities go undisputed. Nevertheless, the fan group *The Archers* Anarchists' website proclaims:

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> The Archers are real; there is no cast [...it's] a real life fly-on-the-wall documentary about one of the strangest villages in England.
>
> (Archers Anarchists, 2020).

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Despite the fact that the boundary rituals that exist between a BBC news broadcast and the beginning of *The Archers*, punctuated by its theme tune, at 2-pm every weekday, for some people, the initial boundary ritual transgression (or the memory of it) was so successful that they prefer to engage this way.

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Welcome to Night Vale (2012–) creates a similar community space to *The Archers* for its listeners (Włodarczyk and Tyminska, 2014), despite a transmission strategy entirely divorced from the radio soap opera serials of the mid-twentieth century, a very different production imperative, and a generic fluidity. *WTNV* is a horror comedy podcast created by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor that emulates the stylistic conventions of American community radio broadcast (Bottomley, 2015; Hancock, 2018). It creates its soap opera-like community space through a lack of boundary rituals, utilizing strategies from radio soap operas and satires like *On the Hour*. The normalizing of seemingly bizarre broadcasting content from radio presenter Cecil Palmer (Cecil Baldwin), framed in the US community radio presenting style, allows audience identification. In *On the Hour*, this created cognitive dissonance as listeners did not know whether to accept outrageous statements as news

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or fiction; in *WTNV*, the odd news and sung weather forecasts of the desert town of Night Vale are accepted as appropriate to the science fiction world-building of its locale. Perhaps surprisingly, *WTNV* has maintained its community with live shows, in which Cecil Palmer 'broadcasts live' in front of audiences. *WTNV* may have also initiated the trend in stylistic found footage podcast drama in the American context (Watts, 2021), as discussed in the next section.

Boundary rituals, genre, technology, and true crime

If the transgression of boundary rituals has their origin in *Broadcasting the Barricades* and their twentieth-century high point with 'The War of the Worlds,' it is perhaps unsurprising that speculative fiction is where they would revert by the end of the twentieth century. There were earlier forays in radio into this mode, such as the found footage 'Ghost Hunt' (1949) episode of *Suspense* and 'Welcome to Homerville' (1980) from *Nightfall*, which mirrored the relationship between voyaging victim (in this case, a big rig truck driver) and radio voice that had been initiated in *Maré moto*. Various texts reworked the strategies of 'The War of the Worlds,' such as the Canadian zombie-apocalypse *One by One* and the 1996 British radio dramatization of alien invasion film *Independence Day*. The latter explicitly invokes 'The War of the Worlds' in its opening monologue, saying, 'It could never happen again. … Or could it?'

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Once again drawing on the codes and conventions of BBC radio, *The House on Spook Corner* (1987) seemingly influenced *Ghostwatch* with its plot, in which participants in the infamous 'documentary' *The House on Spook Corner* reflected on the paranormal investigation ten years later. In the 'documentary,' an ordinary East End household was rocked by apparent poltergeist activity;[3] when the whole thing was retrospectively debunked as a hoax, the ambitious, fraudulent producer becomes 'possessed' live on air, 'self-reflexive at both a thematic and formal level' (McRobert, 2017, p.142). *The Dark House* (BBCWalker, 2003) was in a category of its own, exploiting qualities of the mono-sensory medium and liveness, but clearly signposted as fiction due to its innovative approach to narrative, 'three simultaneous binaural productions of three parallel scripts', on the day of broadcast 'crafted by the audience into a single, experiential horror drama' (Hand, 2014, pp. 194–195). Found footage radio drama also tended to be situated mainly in the suspense genre rather than speculative fiction, in single dramas such as *Listen to the Words* (BBC, 2010Hime, 2008) which explored depression and isolation among teenagers, *My One and Only* (BBCKing, 2012) which detailed domestic abuse, and Jonathan Mitchell's 'Tape Delay' (The TruthMitchell, Herbstman, and Hoopes, 2012),in which a man inadvertently records his phone call with a date that goes wrong. Serializsation and

[3] In turn, we are seeing this re-worked again in 2021 with BBC Sounds' horror podcast drama, *The Battersea Poltergeist.*

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the ethical questions of surveillance returned in *That Was Then* (~~BBC~~Myerson, 201~~8~~)7), in which a neurotic vicar uses her mobile phone recordings to manipulate other people.

The cycle of 'post-*Serial*' speculative serial podcast dramas is the definitive example of this mode of framing errors. Beginning in 2015, these dramas share enough stylistic features with nonfiction 'true crime' radio/podcast series *Serial* (WBEZ Chicago/*This American Life*, 2014-) to be termed post-*Serial* (consumption; visibility; community; and new media identity) (Hancock and McMurtry, 2017). Dramas such as *The Black Tapes* (2015–17), *TANIS* (2015-), *Limetown* (2015-), *The Message* (2015), *Archive 81* (2016-), and *The Bright Sessions* (2015–18) exploit the mono-sensory medium, now re-defined as podcast fiction rather than radio drama. Participating in the Gothic, they 'sift through layers of dream, psychosis and dubious history in search of an uncorrupted perspective' (McRobert, 201~~7~~5, p.137), responding to the profound uncertainty of the real in everyday life. While McRobert describes found footage films as succeeding through the 'use of representational codes and aesthetics more typically associated with amateur and non-fiction media' (p. 139), post-*Serial* podcast dramas in speculative/Gothic mode employ the codes and aesthetics of true crime non-fiction radio/podcast media. They appeal in varying degrees to the imagination and work much less explicitly with liveness than previous iterations of these modes. Where they excel, however, is in a new use of instantaneousness. In dramas like *Broadcasting the Barricades* and 'The War of the

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Worlds,' listeners could not easily verify, in real-time, that what they were hearing on their radio sets was not actually happening. This increased the drama and compelling quality of the human voice with which listeners desperately sought connection.

In the age of Web 2.0, high speed Internet, and smartphones, it should have been easy to debunk the fictionality of *The Black Tapes*; yet in 2020, the serial has maintained its framing strategy so well that listeners are still not quite sure. This is because *BTP* has been conceived with enough kernels of 'fact' mixed with the limit of verifiable knowledge to allow listeners to Google along with each weird case study, frequently inviting this mode of second-screening (Hancock and McMurtry, 2017; Hancock and McMurtry 2018). This complements the dramas' refusal to play by the rules of boundary rituals, by actively encouraging the comparison with *Serial* and true crime, for example *BTP*'s 'near-perfect reproduction of *Serial*'s aesthetics' (Hancock and McMurtry, 2018, p. 85). The post-*Serial* dramas also adapt beyond the mono-sensory to manifest a full transmedia presence through the use of websites, social media, and other online interfaces.

Nearly seven years on from the first post-*Serial* podcast dramas, this mode, like found footage horror films, is potentially spent. Given the popularity of post-*Serial* podcast dramas, it is unsurprising that streaming services/online platforms have sought to replicate their formulae (Holloway, 2017; Thorne, 2020; Williams, 2017) – though will they work as convincingly on a non-mono-sensory platform? While the makers of soap opera serials established a community that is welcoming to the listener

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through transgressing boundary rituals, speculative fiction deals in boundary ritual transgression to deliberately unsettle the listener; could it happen to you next? Radio as a mono-sensory medium has dealt with great ingenuity in transgressing boundary rituals, allowing listeners to participate in genres such as suspense, speculative fiction, horror, satire, and soap opera. Like radio itself, this mode continues to reinvent itself.

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