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Radio drama and adaptation studies

Abstract

The introduction to this special edition discusses some of the key issues in radio drama adaptation and its place within the wider field of adaptation studies. These are primarily focused on the textual and the visual, rather than the aural. Little has been published on radio adaptation and that which is available mainly consists of scattered journal articles and chapters in edited collections. The critical work that does exist often discusses radio in relation to other media, rather than as a form in its own right. Radio drama has also frequently been analyzed as something literary, words on a page, rather than as sound: only a few rare exceptions engage with radio adaptation on a deeper level, offering theoretical and methodological reflections. It is also regularly described as a 'blind medium', negating our cognitive and sensory capacity to create the images for ourselves as listeners. This collection brings together a wide range of work considering techniques of adaptation and their transformative effects on their source texts. In doing so, it hopes to lay the foundation for future research.

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‘If you think adaptation can be understood by using novels and films alone, you’re wrong’, writes Linda Hutcheon in her ‘Preface’ to the first edition of *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006: xiii). Much has changed since the publication of this widely influential book – and, indeed, since the appearance of its second edition in 2013, expanded with many new examples – but adaptation studies are still dominated by textual and visual forms of art. Over the last decade, several essay collections have come out extending the notion of adaptation to video games, comics, graphic novels, theme park rides, song covers, operas, musicals, ballet, fan fiction, (auto)biography, historical writing and various kinds of online platforms, but radio continues to be largely excluded from the theoretical debate. Despite Hutcheon’s proclamation that the medium is ‘as important to this theorizing as are the more commonly discussed movies and novels’ (2013: xvi), she only devotes a short paragraph to the radio play, which is inevitably reductive and generalizing in its scope but may serve as a starting point:

> Adapting a novel into a radio play brings the importance of the aural to the fore, for the aural is everything in this case. The issues common to all dramatizations come into play, with distillation uppermost; because each character/voice must be aurally distinguishable, there cannot be too many of them. For this reason, most radio plays concentrate on primary characters alone and therefore simplify the story and time-line [...]. Here, as in all radio plays, music and sound effects are added to the verbal text to assist the imagination of the listener. [...] In some ways, though, radio plays are no different from other performance media: as in any dramatization, with the director’s guidance, the performers, who are adapting the script, we might say, must set up the rhythm and tempo and create the psychological/emotional engagement with the audience. (2013: 41–42)

This well-intended though inadequate attempt at including radio does little to contradict Kate Griffiths' claim, made in the same year, that the 'critical silence' of adaptation studies on the subject is 'deafening' (2013: 17). Then again, it would be misleading to conclude with her that '[w]riting on adaptation for radio is practically non-existent' (2013: 9). More accurate would be to say that what little has been published on the topic is scattered, mostly consisting of journal articles and chapters in essay collections, but also a few (partial) monographs.

Most common are case studies of individual adaptations from the page, the stage and the screen. These include Heinrich Böll's 'Murke's Collected Silences' (Keskinen 2019), H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (Ingvarsson 2013), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (Gough 2013), Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (Kinzel 2017), Philip Roth's *Indignation* (Mildorf and Kinzel 2016b), Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (Mildorf 2017), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Mildorf 2024), Alan Bennett's *The Madness of Georges III* (Mildorf 2020), Tom Stoppard's *Rock 'n' Roll* (Verhulst 2020) as well as various Hollywood films (Billips and Pierce 1995; Krutnik 2012, 2013) or cartoons (Jackson 2019). Others take a more transmedial approach that focuses on adaptations across radio, film and television, for example of novels by Raymond Chandler (Raw 2015), Graham Greene (Hand and Purssell 2015; Freer 2020) and Salman Rushdie (Stadtler 2023), plays by Harold Pinter (Verhulst 2021, 2023), John le Carré's spy thriller *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (D'arcy 2014), Orson Welles's numerous radio dramatizations and his film *Citizen Kane* (Jesson 2016), broadcast movie adaptations of Mark Twain (Killmeier 2025) or Ernest Hemingway's story 'The Killers' and Robert Siodmak's film noir adaptation (Schlotterbeck 2010). A particular strand of criticism investigates the narrative functions of music, ranging from a radio opera of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (Fjeldsøe 2024), a live transmitted performance of John Wyndham's sci-fi novel *The Kraken Wakes* (Williams 2024), symphonic drama (Carter 2024), Victorian stories of the occult (Cacchione 2020), dramatizations of Sherlock Holmes (Smith 2022), the musicalization of speech in radio

versions of Elfride Jelinek's prose (Kita 2024), or topics like historical accuracy (McMurtry 2024) and blackvoice (Lane 2020). Last but not least, we find studies that take a more cross-sectional approach to specific genres, periods or authors, e.g. mystery, adventure, westerns, science fiction (DeForest 2008), horror (Hand 2014), Robin Hood legends (Echols 2014), Greek antiquity (Wrigley 2015) and Shakespeare (Oesterlen 2009; Greenhalgh 2011; Smith 2021, 2022). Robert Giddings and Keith Selby (2001) have looked at the phenomenon of the 'classic serial' adaptation, but they only discuss radio as the historical point of origin for its later iteration on British television, not as an acoustic tradition that developed alongside its more popular audiovisual counterpart. A few rare exceptions engage with radio adaptation on a deeper level, offering a historical overview or theoretical and methodological reflections (Huwiler 2010a, 2010b; Hand 2017).

The fact that many of these studies have appeared in the last twenty years has much to do with a revival of radio studies in general, partly prompted by the centenary of the medium and a renewed interest from Modernist studies, but also other factors. Access to recordings and related archival materials has long been an issue, earning radio the reputation of being ephemeral. Hampered by a lack of recording technologies in the early days, meaning that it had to be performed live on air every time, postwar radio drama tended to be broadcast only once or twice, with the added advantage that preserved recordings could be repeated later. In some cases, landmark productions of special historical significance were also re-recorded in better quality and re-broadcast. However, many were not kept and efforts are being made to locate off air – usually amateur – recordings to supplement the archive, especially in the UK, where the Radio Circle has been working with the BBC to recover, remaster and rebroadcast such plays. Preserved productions were rarely publicly disseminated, first on cassette tapes or LPs, later on CDs, often because copyright was shared between the broadcasting service and the author. Thanks to the internet, from the late 1990s onwards, MP3 and other file sharing

formats, together with the emergence of databases, fan websites, digital radio platforms and streaming services such as YouTube, the Internet Archive and Audible, radio recordings have become more accessible, even though they still represent only a small – and relatively random – selection of the total output from the last century. In addition, broadcasting services have made their archival records increasingly available to the general public and scholars, both on-site and online. This is important, since the vast majority of scripts never appeared in print, except when written by well-known novelists or playwrights, but these authors were seldom involved in adaptations, except in rare cases of their own work, which further diminishes their publishing appeal from a commercial point of view.

Another limiting factor is that the academic study of radio, as opposed to television or film, did not develop into its own discipline until later, with more artistic expressions of the medium, such as radio drama, often being categorized under literature or theatre. As a result, radio plays were usually studied with the traditional methods of literary or dramatic analysis, ill-suited to a sound-based art form, even when it was just conceptualized as a text or a script. Following the rise of postdramatic theatre and performance analysis in the later decades of the twentieth century, the non-textual aspects of theatre became emphasized. Such developments, along with the arrival of sound studies and transmedial narratology, have paved the way for audionarratology (Huwiler 2005; Mildorf and Kinzel 2016a; Bernaerts and Mildorf 2021), a combination of classical narratology and semiotics that provides a methodology for analyzing the narrative aspects of acoustic genres such as radio drama. This has facilitated a much more fine-grained investigation beyond traditional literary notions (focalization, narration, narrative mediation), extending to sound-specific aspects such as music, voice and silence, along with 'technical features like cutting, fading, electroacoustical manipulation or the positioning of the signals in the acoustic space' (Huwiler 2010: 140-41). Some examples of the latter are the proximity of actors to the microphone, stereophony and binaural or surround sound, which

create a more immersive, three-dimensional experience, enhancing radio drama's trademark sense of intimacy, especially when listened to on headphones.

Peter Lewis's (1981) account of why, in general, the academic study of radio drama, as a 'lesser' art form, has remained marginal, still holds up. This, in turn, is amplified by the long-held misconception that adaptations are secondary to the 'original' works from which they derive. As such, they have traditionally been perceived as second-rate expressions of an inherently inferior dramatic medium or genre. This poor reputation has much to do with how radio developed historically in relation to other technologies. In the first few decades of the twentieth century, radio was cinema's counterpart, the one defined by sound, the other by vision. They made up for each other's deficiencies, although silent film tried to do this on its own through live music and on-screen text such as intertitles, while radio was supported by a richly-illustrated magazine culture. Especially in the US, there were many creative exchanges between the two. When the 'talkie' took cinemas by storm in the 1930s, radio and film slowly but surely drifted apart. The advent of television exacerbated this process over the following decades, it being audiovisual from the start. However, this 'new' medium relied on existing radio technology, for sound as well as pictures, and many early sets assimilated both devices, often expanded with a built-in record player (VanCour 2011). The invention of the transistor made radio and television receivers smaller, expediting their material separation. While they continued to co-exist under the roof of public broadcasting services, the postwar popularity of commercial television and radio in Europe, the one more often than not existing without the other, again severed their ties in the public perception. As culture became increasingly visual and multimedial in the course of the twentieth century, radio was thought to lag behind.

In his pioneering *Understanding Radio* (1986/1994), Andrew Crisell perpetuated – though not without mitigation – the notion that the medium is 'blind' (1994: 143–63). Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa have countered this negative label by stating that one might just

as well call radio ‘entirely auditory’, which does not imply that ‘something crucial is lacking and that the medium is, therefore, inherently deficient’. Their alternative – ‘invisible’ – is not entirely positive, however, even though it is meant to convey a sense of ‘power and magic’ (Shingler and Wieringa 1998: 74). Anticipating the more phenomenological approaches of Clive Cazeaux (2005), inspired by the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Tim Crook has questioned ‘the philosophical difference between seeing physically with the eye and seeing with the mind’, criticizing that ‘vision be placed ahead of sound from the point of view of sensory hierarchy when numerically the organs are equal’ (1999: 54). Put more simply, in the words of Richard Hand and Mary Traynor, radio offers ‘just a different way of seeing’ (2011: 36). This is certainly a more neutral and fruitful stance than saying that radio is ‘television without the pictures’ (Hand and Traynor 2011: 35–36) or, conversely, that ‘the pictures are better on radio’ (Miller 2017). Shingler and Wieringa are right to remind us that we do not normally consider paintings, posters or photographs, which all lack sound, as incomplete (1998: 75). Neither do we think of novels as blind or mute, even though they feature neither acoustics nor visuals and only consist of text on a page. As Hand and Traynor explain, this pecking order of genres or media has everything to do with the fact that ‘*radio* drama came after *drama*’ (2011: 36) and is enacted or dramatized rather than read. Whether radio does indeed prove that ‘visuals are actually the most dispensable element of any artistic, dramatic or communicative medium (because audiences can supply these themselves)’ (Shingler and Wieringa 1998: 76–77) or that it is ‘the most visual medium of all’ (Hand and Traynor 2011: 33–34) will probably remain a matter of debate, but it does show our cognitive and sensory capacity to fill in blanks, regardless of the artistic conduit.

Herein lies the radio medium’s creative power, rich with potential for adaptation. Even though the theoretical discourse has now largely moved away from thinking comparatively in terms of fidelity, loss and gain, with more attention going to creative reworkings and change,

the study of radio drama has not benefited from this shift in the same way as other art forms have, suggesting that the cultural clichés attached to the medium are not shaken off so easily. In addition, there is a bias toward ‘dramas written specifically for radio’ as being ‘so often the most interesting and innovative’, even though they were ‘far less common’, the vast majority consisting of ‘plays written for the stage’ or ‘adaptations of novels’ (Chignell 2021: 1). In this respect, we have to be mindful of historical changes in the approach to radio adaptations that are closely bound up with the development of the medium and cultural as well as institutional broadcasting situations. Therefore, what Gertjan Willems (2020) calls ‘industry analysis’ is equally important to close readings of individual case studies. While radio broadcasting in the US was often more driven by entertainment and commercial rather than artistic or educational considerations, in Europe the change from a single national station before the war to multiple postwar networks, often further diversified across regions, impacted programming. During the first few decades, adaptations of classic plays and novels were favoured, as much for reasons of edification as for lending the new medium cultural legitimation through tried and tested works of literature. These still exist and thrive today but from the 1950s and 1960s on, more scheduling space opened up for radiogenic texts that were non-canonical or even appeared so antithetical to radio that they required an experimental approach, fostering adaptive creativity. In this regard, the dozens of ‘how to’ books on writing for radio often distinguish ‘adaptation’ from ‘dramatization’. Vincent McInerney, for example, bases his dichotomy on the genre or medium of the source text, with ‘adaptation’ entailing ‘the modification of stage plays and film scripts’ and ‘dramatisation’ referring to ‘the modification of novels and stories (short and long) into radio drama’ (2001: 149). For Claire Grove and Stephen Wyatt, the main difference lies in the nature of the creative intervention, irrespective of the source text: ‘An adaptation could, for example, involve cutting and rearranging an existing text to fit a specific time slot,

whereas dramatisation clearly means that the writer has turned the book into a fully fledged radio drama' (2013: 213).

As this terminology implies, there is, to some extent, a continuum when it comes to adapting various source texts, genres or media to radio. Prose may seem the easiest or most straightforward, in that it shares radio's appeal to the imagination and does not require the translation of visuals. Descriptions can often be reassigned as monologue or dialogue, cut down or conveyed with sound effects. In this respect, novels generally require more editing than short stories, which can affect both the plot and the number of characters, depending on the length of the programme. Whereas serials consisting of multiple instalments, scheduled across a variety of standardized slots, allow for more or less complete transpositions of the original, adaptations in two or three one-hour broadcasts will be condensed and necessitate creative interventions (Low 1981). Since prose is on the whole a diegetic genre, compared to radio drama being primarily mimetic, the narration and the focalization of novels or stories cannot usually be transferred wholesale – an issue it shares with stage or film adaptations. For novels that are low on dialogue, common strategies to diversify the narrating voice include introducing the author as a co-narrator or intradiegetic tools such as recording devices – less frequently inanimate objects that speak, like the house in Lucy Gough's BBC radio adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (2013: 158). As this example illustrates, the medium has some unique features to offer. Because its visual dimension entirely resides in the listener's imagination, radio drama is able to treat space and time more fluidly, with different chronotopes coinciding or alternating freely. This makes it ideal for adaptations of science fiction, fantasy and horror, but also travel narratives, historical fiction, action and suspense. A character's state of mind or emotions, colouring their perception, can be rendered through the manipulation of sound effects or with the help of music, and the same pertains to their reliability as a narrator. In the case of serialized novel adaptations, the difference from audiobooks fades, since these have

also become more dramatized and absorbed features of radio drama (Rubery 2016), recent audio adaptations by Audible representing something of a hybrid form between the two.[1]

While plays already come pre-dramatized and length is usually not an issue, they can be quite tricky to adapt for radio. What is directly visualized in the theatre now needs to be evoked entirely through speech and sound. The same holds for stage directions, which are sometimes spoken out to set the scene by an extradiegetic narrator, not part of the storyworld, or an intradiegetic character/narrator, although this practice is frowned upon by radio adapters (Drakakis 1981: 123–24). Having too many characters can overcrowd the soundscape and make the actors' voices indistinguishable, which is usually solved by dropping, shortening, conflating or rearranging roles and scenes. Then again, when actors no longer make sound, this implies they have made an exit. Because noises and voices are the only entities by which physicality can be expressed on radio, the medium is sometimes referred to as disembodied, although this stereotypical view – like the medium's blindness – has been contested from the perspectives of phenomenology and affect theory (Soltani 2020). Actors do have physicality, but this is not expressed directly, as in the theatre, rather metonymically or metaphorically. Still, the ethereal effect of radio holds great potential for ghost stories or tales of the occult and the unnatural, as well as scenes of a hallucinatory kind. Another complicating factor is that theatre, much like radio drama itself, has a 'double identity', as text and performance, the former being fixed while the latter is mutable. This has caused a rift in the academic discourse on drama between theatre and performance studies, which 'raises a fundamental question of what precisely is being adapted' (Drakakis 1981: 112). Much like a theatrical performance is an interpretation – if not an adaptation – of a text or script (whether published or not), as well as a dialogue with previous performances – if there were any – all radio adaptations of theatre negotiate between their own textuality and that of their source texts as well as both production

histories. Since radio producers are often aware of these legacies, adaptation studies would do well to also take them into account.

It becomes much harder to generalize for radio adaptations of other art forms, although all of the above applies to them too in one way or another. Whereas audiovisual media such as film or television often call for a change in emphasis from image to sound, silent films disrupt this transition and inspire poetic approaches that take more creative leeway, while comics and graphic novels require both text and illustrations to be remediated. In the case of non-fictional works that combine history and biography, typical characteristics of radio plays often merge with more documentary or feature-like elements that result in a sound collage. A recent case in point is Stephen Wakelam's fascinating adaptation (BBC Radio 3, 2024) of James Birch's memoir *Bacon in Moscow* (2022), which recounts the story of the artist's first solo exhibition at the Central House of Artists in 1988, before Mikhail Gorbachev lowered the Iron Curtain and disbanded the Soviet Union. As the book weaves a narrative around journal fragments, letters, the exhibition catalogue, photographs and reproductions of the featured art works, so the radio adaptation must find a way to navigate the textual and the pictorial in sound, mixing in references to Russian films by Sergei Eisenstein. If radio drama was mostly preoccupied with defining itself at the start of the twentieth century, often in relation to other media or art forms, it now has more than a century of first-hand experience to draw from. This tradition, ephemeral as it may be, is both national and international, due to an increased globalization – as well as digitization – of the airspace since the postwar period, facilitated by competitions like the Italia Prize/Prix Italia and the UK International Radio Drama festival.

The art form is still vibrant as ever, engaging not only in a creative exchange with its own history and previous radio adaptations, but also with those for other media, giving way to varying degrees of playful, postmodern self-reflexivity and self-consciousness. Important to keep in mind here is that radio has not only served as a target medium, but also as the source

for many adaptations into other media, often as part of a transmedially constructed fictional universe. A famous – but by no means the only – example is Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* franchise, which started out as two radio series in 1978, then continued as five novels (1979–92), before it eventually made its return to radio for three more series (2004), and ventured into television and film as well. While radio drama in the traditional meaning of the word is under threat, due to a rapidly changing broadcasting landscape and funding cuts for public broadcasters, audio culture has continued to live on in different forms. As many people experienced screen fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic, audiobook sales shot up and the popularity of podcasts increased, while theatre companies began recording their cancelled stage plays as audio dramas, and a range of new online initiatives came into being. In combination with mobile devices, apps such as BBC Sounds allow listeners to carry around many hundreds of hours of radio content, while the success of audio drama producers such as Audible and Big Finish suggests the medium is on the rise. New podcast dramas are being created by producers 'drawn from a different set of cultural experiences and influences [...], with film commonly being cited as the medium in which they originally trained and worked' (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 104). These creative agents are not using the techniques of the previous generations simply because they are unaware of them (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 105). Whether producers or audiences come to radio drama from a position of knowledge and expectation or not, there is still a recognition of radio/audio drama's power to connect people.

This special issue cannot possibly hope to capture a hundred years of radio and audio adaptation, but it hopes to lay the groundwork for future research by offering a wide selection of case studies, mostly covering the UK, the US, Germany and France, which boast some of the longest and richest traditions of radio drama. These begin with Wibke Schniedermann's examination of one of the most popular recent sound adaptations by Audible, Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, which focuses on current media nostalgia trends and the desirability of fidelity

that caters to fans of the original comics. Lindsey Geybels analyzes two versions of the classic H. G. Wells novel *The Time Machine*, with an emphasis on the use of narrative techniques that move beyond the possibilities of the original novel's text-based medium. The work of Hungarian-Jewish writer George Tabori, in particular the radio adaptation of his own short story *Weissmann und Rotgesicht*, is explored by Inge Arteel, in light of the original text's intermedial origins and the cultural context of post-Holocaust Germany. Pim Verhulst follows the process of adaptation in the opposite direction, from radio drama to other media such as film, television and theatre, for Samuel Beckett's *All That Fall*. Andrea Smith then outlines the importance of voice acting in adaptations of theatre plays for radio through the work of female performers portraying the roles of young boys in Shakespeare. Siebe Bluijs discusses the unusual multi-stream radio adaptation of an experimental multimedia cult novel, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and its DVD release. The final essay by Leslie McMurtry explores questions of narration, embodiment and space in *The Midnight Cry of the Death-Bird*, an adaptation by Amanda Dalton of a silent film (*Nosferatu*) which, in turn, adapts a novel. The special issue concludes with a practitioner's perspective from Richard Hand, who offers insight into his own adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe stories, illustrated with the complete production script of 'The Tell-Tale Heart'.

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[1] This creates interesting opportunities for comparative analyses. Audible, for example, now offers George Orwell's novel *1984* (1949) in multiple sound versions, several of which were produced in-house: a BBC Radio 4 full-cast dramatization (2013), audiobooks narrated by Andrew Wincott (Canongate, 2015), Stephen Fry (Audible, 2021), Hugh Kermode (SNR, 2021), Benjamin May (Page2Page, 2021), Mark Bowen (Strelbytskyy, 2023), Carl Mason and Mark Young (Lauscher, 2023), as well as an 'Audible original adaptation' (2024) voiced by Andrew Garfield, Cynthia Erivo, Andrew Scott and Tom Hardy, described as 'an immersive listening experience like none you've heard before' owing to its Dolby Atmos soundtrack.