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# Framing Errors: Reality and Fiction in Audio Drama

Leslie McMurtry

## *Introduction*

Many genres and media create a blurring line between reality and fiction. Radio serials and in particular radio soap operas have inspired devotion in their listeners to the point where their fans throw themselves wholeheartedly into a universe of outward unreality and inward reality. This leads to framing errors, by which I mean an extension of blurring of reality. We will look at several examples from world radio soaps, including those from the US, Britain, Turkey, France, and Poland. However, radio soap operas do not have a monopoly on the blurring line between reality and fiction. Instead, audio drama is poised to profit well from this uncertainty and has shown itself capable of it many times, beginning in the 1920s in Europe and most famously in *War of the Worlds* (1938). *War of the Worlds* is, however, not the end of the story, and the way audio drama uses framing errors continues to this day.

The study of OTR (Old Time Radio) is, at present, marked by enthusiasms for genres, among academics as well as amateurs. For J. Fred MacDonald in *Don't Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life*, detective dramas and Westerns were his favorite subject. Susan J. Douglas in *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* discussed the wise-cracking antics of OTR comedy, like *The Jack Benny Program* (1932-1948) (164-5, 197-8) and *Amos 'n' Andy* (1928-1960) (103-4, 106-10). Even John Dunning, whose encyclopedic publication matches the scope of Lord Asa Briggs' *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* in five volumes, seems to have a fondness for *The Lone Ranger* (1933-1954), calling it "the essence of harmless fun" (409). One genre rarely championed in print is the American radio soap opera, long derided as a "deluge of dirt"<sup>1</sup> and inconsequential for study—much less do critics consider it on the same level as the work of Norman Corwin or Archibald MacLeish. This is an interesting omission considering that studies of the form have been emerging in recent years from other countries.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, safe to say that rigorous academic attention on the American radio soap opera has been somewhat lacking.

## **Soap Operas and Framing Errors**

There are many possible explanations for this omission, but it is more relevant to look at what the radio serial (or soap opera) has offered, and was among the first forms to do so, to the literary and pop culture canon. The radio soap opera—never termed that by its makers but rather by its detractors—is a kind of serial with certain genre conventions. The serial is characterized by its possibility for never-ending storylines,<sup>3</sup> the soap opera by a focus on domestic drama. The radio soap opera in particular offers something not exclusive to the genre and the medium, but one of the most sensational and enduring virtues of audio drama, though often cloaked under other guises. The literary text must, in William F. Touponce's words, "invoke and at the same time problematize, question, and even negate reader's

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<sup>1</sup> Marion Dickerman, quoted in MacDonald 232.

<sup>2</sup> See Joelle Neulander *Programming National Identity: The Culture of Radio in 1930s France* for a superb discussion of popular radio drama in France in the 1930s, and Heidi Svømmekjær, "Radio in Proportion: *The Hansen Family* and Strategies of Relevance in the Danish Broadcasting Corporation 1925-1950" (Roskilde University Diss. 2014) for a popular Danish serial.

<sup>3</sup> Ien Ang refers to this in the context of her primetime television soap opera study as "*Dallas*: television fiction without end" (6). Matt Hills terms it a hyperdiegetic universe, "an endlessly deferred narrative" (128).

expectations” (21). If we therefore take the core definition of drama as alternately rewarding and subverting audience expectation, even radio soaps as outwardly banal as *Our Gal Sunday* (CBS 1937-1959) could be considered to conform to that directive. “Can this girl from a little mining town in the West find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?” asked the announcer at the beginning of each episode (Dunning 526).

This kind of construction is strikingly similar to the examination of Kemalist Turkish radio serials in S. Meltem Ahiska’s 2000 thesis for Goldsmith's College; the lessons and life stories of Saadet and Füzuzan are complementary to the struggles of Sunday. One of Neil Verma’s major points in *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* is that “wherever old radio plays resound, we utter the same phrase every time: ‘Radio, the Theater of the Mind’” (2). The use of the imagination is key to the strength and potency of audio drama, and occasionally the potency develops beyond a mere hour’s entertainment in the afternoon. Ahiska, looking at the listeners of early Turkish radio soaps, determined that listeners committed “framing errors,” using “fantasy as a means of representing and safeguarding the national truth” (222). Taking Ahiska's definition one step further, we can use it to define when the audience is unable to tell fiction from reality in a broadcast.

How does this work in practice? The simplest example is to confuse genres, as in turning on the radio and being unable to distinguish whether a program is a documentary or a drama. A few steps further leads us to the world’s most famous radio soap. *The Archers* is BBC Radio 4’s regular soap opera drama which purports to depict the lives of “every day country folk.” Set in a middle-class farming community, it began its life as an educational program aimed at disseminating farming information on BBC Midlands. It has aired continuously for over 60 years with a current average weekly reach of 4.87 million. *The Archers* is also one of the most notorious examples of framing errors. As William Smethurst reports, in the 1950s, a woman overheard *Archers* actor John Franklin speaking and said, “You are Mike Daly in *The Archers*, aren’t you? [. . .] All my family said you were fiction, but I knew you must be real” (40). Unlike many programs, in which framing errors may be accidental, *Archers* creator Godfrey Baseley actively denied his audience fictional certainty. Just before Christmas 1950, Baseley interviewed the cast of his new drama in character, using an improvised format.

He assumed that Borchester was a real town, and Brookfield a real farm [...] and that he, Godfrey Baseley, a well-known BBC Midlands agricultural reporter, was able to go there with his OB unit [...] and talk to the inhabitants (Smethurst 23).

*Announcing the Archers* was broadcast on 28 December 1950. Within a week, the audience had doubled to four million. Clearly this strategy worked, both in creating a mystique that capitalized on framing errors, and in making an appealing program that delighted listeners, whether they “believed” in it or not. Framing errors have contributed to *The Archers*’ longevity. When longtime cast member Norman Painting died in 2009, listeners reacted to it like an actual bereavement. Framing errors in *The Archers* have convinced listeners that they are part of a community with the same oral history. This explains why a listenership who no longer tune in for Dan Archer’s farming tips still feel in 2015 that there is something with which to identify.

*The Archers* is not alone in this. When Hubbell Robinson Jr. of Rubicam & Young advertising agency listed elements for a successful radio soap in the 1940s, he included “an

understandable predicament” which includes in its makeup the value of the “ordinary family” in radio soaps (MacDonald 232). This was certainly the main appeal of *La Famille Duraton*, a French radio serial that aired from 1937 to 1966. The description “Naturalistic” seems not often to have been applied to soap opera, and indeed, *Les Duratons* exhibited one of the outwardly unrealistic traits most connected with soap opera: a narrative situated around a dinner table, not interested in its characters’ “whole lives” (Ang 59). However, *Les Duratons* is a good example of what Ien Ang has described as an “inner realism” combined with an “external unrealism” (47). Ang uses this dichotomy to describe the soap *Dallas*, but when French listeners found themselves praising the realistic quality of a family interested in “the price of milk, income tax, problems parking, work annoyances,” *Les Duratons* enacted this blend of realism/unrealism and inspired devotion (“*Je me souviens*”). One Good Friday, Mrs. Duraton prepared lamb for dinner, and the program received 7,000 letters of protest.

This valuation of the “ordinary family,” in whom the listeners could feel investment, ownership, and even a degree of power, is surprisingly widespread within European radio drama. *The Matysiak Family* (1956-) is a Polish soap opera centered on an urban family, and has become, for many Poles, a kind of “moral tradition” (“History Matysiakowie”). When *The Matysiak Family* began broadcasting, it was considered admirable for combining news and current affairs, both large and small scale, and mixing them in the “crucible” of the family, despite the censorship of the communist regime in power. *Jeziory/W Jezioranach* (1960-) is *The Matysiaks*’ rural counterpart, running continuously with a break from 1981 to 1983 when martial law was declared in Poland. It follows three generations of the Jabłońskich family and their neighbors. In keeping with the early myth-building for *The Archers*, the actors were not identified at the end of each segment, continuing to build a sense of realism. It still has a large following drawn from different social and age groups.

### **War of the Worlds and Beyond**

When Séan Street admits that “radio can add the weapon of blurring reality to its armoury of imaginative devices” and that it tells “the best ghost stories,” he is without a doubt correct, and in some senses *War of the Worlds* (1938)—or at least its progeny—could be considered a type of ghost story (30). *War of the Worlds*’ free adaptation from the H. G. Wells’ source-text galvanized listeners, many of whom recognized it was simply a well-written, well-directed play, by its innovations, including the use of fake news bulletins and, moreover, inserting them into a simulacrum program of “light” music. To allege *War of the Worlds* is a ghost story when it is patently a science fiction adventure/horror story about Martians invading the US references its use of tension and imagination, which the program elevated to a new level by its use of layers of false reality.

Tiziano Bonini has wrongly identified the infamous broadcast as “the first to shatter the sacredness of the real,” and therefore experiment with framing errors, a task accomplished much earlier, in 1924, in France, when *Marémoto* was broadcast (90). *Marémoto* can be seen as one of the early radio drama experiments in blindness; its counterpart in English, *Danger* by Richard Hughes, was the first acknowledged British play for radio, broadcast the same year. In *Danger*, a group of middle-class sightseers are trapped in a mine, and audiences were encouraged to listen to it in the dark. However, due to announcers’ framing and the limits of radio technology, it seems likely those who listened to *Danger* knew it to be fiction.<sup>4</sup> This was not true for *Marémoto*, the first drama in France

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<sup>4</sup> Though it is impossible to know this for sure; Howard Blue reports the case of an American policeman in the 1920s who, “hearing the screaming [from a radio] through an open window, was so convinced by its realism that he came bursting into the house to stop the ‘assault’” (2).

written exclusively for radio rather than as adaptation. *Marémoto* is a dialogue between a radio-telegrapher and a sailor who calls desperately to TSF (the then army-owned transmitter) because his boat is about to crash. The play caused a sensation in France because of its realistic approach, despite the fact that during this era, Morse code and not radio communication was used between ships. Furthermore, unlike the closure we receive when we listen to *War of the Worlds*, just when the shipwreck seemed imminent, it was interrupted by a dialogue between the announcer Radiolo and the station director, further accentuating the interplay between drama and reality.

In *War of the Worlds* and *Marémoto*, reality and fiction blur; one is an adaptation, one is an original drama. Further blurring took place in Britain in 1926, when Monsignor Ronald Knox played a “prank” on listening radio audiences. Broadcasting from the Edinburgh Studio at 2EH, Knox was able to convince listeners, snowbound after a sizable storm, that anarchy had descended on central London as striking crowds tore down government buildings, in *Broadcast at the Barricades*.<sup>5</sup> Knox’s broadcast was clearly meant to be taken seriously and caused a minor panic, due to the inclemency of the weather and subsequent difficulty to verify his “news” through other sources. This proved the power of radio fiction, clothed as news, being taken very seriously, more than a decade before Welles. In 1929, Friedrich Wolf wrote *Hörspiel- S.O.S. . . . rao rao . . . Foyn. “Krassin” rettet “Italia,”* whose rather unwieldy title references the airship *Italia*, whose real-life crash during its expedition to the North Pole had galvanized the public in 1928. The *Italia*’s radio operators’ distress signals were picked up, both in reality and in this fictional re-imagining. This play “provides the 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,” with clear links to *Marémoto* (Gilfillan 82).

It appeared that by the end of the 1920s, radio dramatists had moved on and enjoyed provoking framing error confusion in less literal senses. If *War of the Worlds* was the most infamous later example, it was not the last. In the immediate aftermath of the broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, the US radio networks lived in fear of punitive action by the FCC, to the point that Fred Allen, a mischievous and extremely popular radio comedian, was prohibited by broadcasting a very funny *War of the Worlds* parody in late 1938 (Gosling 88).<sup>6</sup> The cursory manner in which many people, from *YouTube* trolls to students of access radio, dismiss *War of the Worlds* as evidence of humanity’s more gullible past, or some blip in audio drama’s story, never to surface before or since, proves that they completely miss the point. Between 2008 and 2009, the Italian state radio station RAI Radio 2 broadcast *Amnèsia* in a slot normally devoted to fiction. Bonini has done a fascinating profile of this phenomenon, a superb example of how the Internet allowed *War of the Worlds* to be played all over again. *Amnèsia* was the story of a young man who alleged he had woken up one morning missing one year of his life; the stuff of confessional science fiction, yet played as fact. Using a ritualistic formula that grounded listeners in the reality of the speaker, Matteo Caccia, *Amnèsia* presented a carefully constructed conspiracy over 235 episodes helped create an approach that won many over. Many listeners “immediately thought that this story just had to be true” (Bonini 91).

What is important to remember about *Amnèsia*, however, is that it represents the tension between fiction and reality. Many of those who e-mailed the makers of the program

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<sup>5</sup> See Tim Crook, “The Psychological Power of Radio.” 1999. Web. 14 Aug. 2013, and David Pat Walker, *The BBC in Scotland: The First 50 Years, a Personal Memoir* (Edinburgh: Luaath Press Limited, 2011) for two accounts.

<sup>6</sup> The resolution was that, due to the fact that the broadcast had broken no laws, “the FCC distanced itself from any punitive action,” leaving responsibility with, in a characteristic action, the networks themselves (Gosling 90).

felt that they “knew” it was fiction, but that this didn’t matter; they were swept up in the visceral enjoyment of art imitating life. This is true for most examples of audio fiction that perpetrate framing errors, even for *War of the Worlds*. At the end of the broadcast in 1938, Welles finished speaking:

That grinning, glowing globular invader in your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and nobody’s there, that was no Martian [...] it’s Halloween (Wells).

The blurring line between adaptation, fantasy, fact, sensationalism, and journalism has remained a fascinatingly elusive one on audio—and perhaps will forever.

## Conclusion

This piece has used several, sometimes disparate, examples of audio and radio drama to illustrate two points. The first is defining framing errors in terms of listener devotion to the “unreal/real” universe of radio soaps such as *The Archers* and *La Famille Duraton*. However, radio soap operas are not alone in blurring the line between reality and fiction. Audio drama is the only art form to offer convincing framing errors. Neil Verma is on the pulse of this very debate when he concentrates on radio drama’s hybridization of “several trades and expressive registers” (5). The fact that the medium has cultivated such close encounters between fact, fiction, actuality, adaptation, and artifice suggests its own awareness of this powerful creative asset. Taken out of context, a novel could be read as nonfiction and vice versa; there have been famous cases of this occurrence. A fictional film, if stumbled upon midway through on television, may be mistaken for dramatized documentary and vice versa again. Yet most illusions of this nature are “exposed,” whereas radio framing errors have the power to galvanize segments of entire populations, as in *War of the Worlds*, and with a command of time that is unknown in other media, as in *The Archers*. Contemporary examples of “hoaxing” behavior, to varying degrees, such as *Ghostwatch* in the UK and the 2008 film *Cloverfield*, are qualified by metadata and framing systems which are easier to expose on TV and in film than on radio.<sup>7</sup> Claiming framing errors does not as a device guarantee audio drama a place in the literary canon; it could be dismissed as a cheap trick. It is the possibilities for creativity, what artists can imply and bring across using the principles of framing errors that in turn inspires some of audio drama’s most virtuoso work.

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<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that *Cloverfield* “employs an immersive aesthetic based on the thematic conceit of the entire film being ‘found footage,’” the fact that it was advertised as a trailer on mainstream cinema screens framed it as fictional (Hantke).

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