Immersive night : audio horror in radio and podcasting

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Immersive Night: Audio Horror in Radio and Podcasting

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Footsteps tap behind you, a hot breath whispers into your ear, the tiny hairs on your neck stand on end: even though it might at first seem an unlikely medium for charting sensory horror, sound storytelling has an inexhaustible capacity for a "raw biological reality" that haunts "a too neatly rationalized world" (Morgan, 2002: 109). This haunting tracks with Ndalianis' analysis of the mediated physicality of horror in *Horror Sensorium*. According to Ndalianis, horror's "focus on sensory encounters" makes it important to study the genre within its medial proliferation as well as its medial specificity. Different media, after all, incorporate the senses in different ways, and by extension, create sensory horror in different ways as well. In learning about horror and sound mediation in conjunction with each other, the sensory affect of both come into focus. Just as radio, according to Neil Verma, is "always reinventing how listening is done" (2012: 228), podcasting works within the contemporary media environment to shape listening practices. While insightful steps have been made into the analysis of horror podcasts, research into podcasting's mediality is just beginning to develop a critical language appropriate to the study of the medium in its specificity (Berry, 2018: 23). This article contributes to that language by drawing on the horror genre's focus on liminality and sensory experience to better understand both horror and its mediation. It does so by situating a close reading of a radio text, CBC's *Nightfall* (1980 – 1983), and a podcast text, The Paragon Collective's *Darkest Night* (2016 to present), a narrative horror fiction podcast that presents itself as binaural. These series were selected for both their similarities and differences: both are horror anthologies and focus on their sensory effects as one of their main draws. They are different in that *Nightfall* is a radio series from the early 1980s and *Darkest Night* is a current podcast. The generic similarities between the series make it easier to learn about their differences in sensory mediation and the extent to which podcasting, following Andrew Bottomley, remediates radio. By studying the series in conjunction with each other, we further hope to shed light on the working of audio in sensory horror in general, even though any claims we make in this area are a tentative step into an under-researched area more than a conclusive statement on all of audio horror.

Nightfall was broadcast between 1980-1983 on Canadian radio (though it was also picked up by some US affiliate radio stations). In the late 1970s, CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) radio received government funding to create programing with a clear Canadian identity, which resulted in their late-night drama series, *Nightfall.* Not only did *Nightfall* present "murder as a Canadian national narrative" (Hancock, "Canada, oh Canadaaargh!": 1), the horror drama was thematically adult and violent, focusing on bodies in a way that other contemporary North American radio drama avoided.

By contrast, *Darkest Night* is told through a series of vignettes, each of which is focalised through the decapitated head of a recently dead person. The podcast emphasises its approach to spatiality when advertising itself as binaural. Binaural literally means two ears, and the use of some kind of binaural recording and reception technology has been around for quite a long time. As Stephen Paul points out in "Binaural Recording Technology: A Historical Review

and Possible Future Developments," many of the recent popular and academic approaches to binaural audio "give the impression that binaural technology, especially manikins and artificial heads, are relatively recent inventions. However, attempts to obtain signals and reproduce true-to-original sound have been made for over 100 years" (767). By directing one speaker to each of the listener's ears, as headphones do, it is possible to recreate a completely 3D sound environment. This spatiality opens itself up to horror storytelling because it means that creators can place sounds around the listener, even behind them, and at very different distances, including whispers in the ear and inserted within the head, between the listener's eyes (Collins and Dockwray).

Even though popular discourses asserting the novelty of binaural audio are ahistorical, they nonetheless inform listeners on how to listen and what kinds of sensory interactions to expect. Culturally, binaural audio has therefore come to mean types of media that focus on a precise 3D effect. Sometimes these discourses include technologies, like Dolby Atmos, that do not rely on headphone listening, but that present themselves as spatially precise and immersive, although there is argument within sound design as to whether these technologies are technically binaural. In contemporary podcast discourses, the phrase binaural audio is also often used interchangeably with 3D audio, immersive audio, and ambisonic sound design, although once again there is debate about whether or not that interchangeability is valid. That these terms are not settled indicates that they are part of a cultural negotiation about the relationship between what aspects of how these technologies mediate space and audience are the most precinct and should be used for categorization. The porosity of earbuds, combined with the potential for binaural audio to create a sense of 3D space around a listener and horror's generic focus on boundaries and sensorium (Ndalianis), makes *Darkest Night* an interesting place to study how podcasts mediate public/private space.

While mediated in different ways, these two case studies deal with the physicality, liminality, and urban spatiality of the modern world as reflected in horror media. *Nightfall*'s evolving relationship to sound-mediated horror was groundbreaking for its time and represents an early engagement with liminality and listener perception. *Darkest Night* similarly engages with spatial liminality in its use of binaural audio. This article first examines how both works use sound design to position the listener in space. It then turns to how their respective storytelling strategies work with that positioning, showing how both *Darkest Night* and *Nightfall* meld their narratives with their sensory effects to place the listener within their storyworlds, albeit in different ways. These soundworks use their mediality to create horror out of the boundary between public and private, *Nightfall* emphasizing the role of the listener as a member of a hostile Canadian public that inserts itself into the private lives of others, and *Darkest Night* focusing on the listener as a private person, intruded on by public sounds. Despite their differences, these soundworks both use the physicality of horror reception to reflect on public/private liminality and their own mediation.

Sensorium

As *Darkest Night* and *Nightfall* fit horror into their respective media, the similarities and differences between podcasting and radio come to light, especially in how each show uses sensory effects to create horror at the intersection of public and private. These sensory effects speak to audio's relationship with the listening body which, as Bonini argues for radio, "is no longer totally disembodied and immaterial" (17). *Darkest Night* uses sensory effects centered on binaural sound design to specifically place the listener within the storyworld and *Nightfall* embraces the audiopositioning of members of a large radio audience as part of a

mass-mediated Canadian public. Both works, then, use their sound design to place the listener within their storyworlds and create horror out of the public/private divide.

Darkest Night presents itself as immersive and relates that immersion to the sensory effect of binaural audio. In its show description, the podcast ties the 3D effect of binaural sound to its storytelling:

Darkest Night is a binaural audio drama that places you, the listener, at the center of a recovered memory that sounds as though it's happening around you in real time. Each chapter delves into the last memories of the recently deceased, slowly revealing a horrifying master plan.

This description presents the podcast as immersive in how it uses binaural sensory effects to position the listener as surrounded by the storyworld, tying these sound effects to the podcast's narrative immersion.

Nightfall similarly uses sound effects to create horror, even if they do not rely solely on headphone listening. *Nightfall* emerged from older radio drama practices from Old Time Radio (OTR) and pushed them further. Hand argues that the pleasures and excesses of OTR horror drama can be likened to the "*douche écossaise"* of Grand Guignol theatre, with humor disarming the audience to then assault them with a shock (*Terror on the Air!* 24). A "guilty pleasure," OTR horror could be cathartic, erotic, and could dramatise "the impossible" (*Terror on the Air!* 20, 18, 162). As Killmeier points out, the genre of horror did not exist per se in the 1930s (165), and there was considerable cross-over with the mystery-thriller (Verma uses the term "shocker" to encompass both). However, certain programs and certain standalone episodes had clear horror elements, some of which were pushed to extremes. OTR horror in such series as *Lights Out!* (NBC 1934 to 1947), *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (NBC/CBS 1941 to 1952)*, and Escape* (CBS, 1947 to 1950) was frequently criticised for going over the top with vivid sound effects and gory storylines (Killmeier 170; Hand *Terror on the Air!* 20). For example, when *Lights Out!* premiered, "Heads rolled, bones were crushed [. . .] There were garrotings, chokings, heads split open by cleavers" (Dunning 399); leeches devoured human flesh and eyes were splashed out (Hand *Terror on the Air!* 34). For some listeners, there was a tongue-in-cheek revulsion/attraction to this larger-than-life gore. The sound effects were an art form of their own and described in contemporary newspaper features (Hand *Terror on the Air!* 34). The sound effects of *Lights Out!* were deliberately chosen by its prolific and dedicated radio dramaturg Arch Oboler, who was nonetheless "scorned" by critics (Verma, 2012: 163). Oboler's egotism (Hand *Terror on the Air!* 183-5; Dunning 37-9) may have also had a part in how he shaped and responded to criticism of *Lights Out!;* he reveled in the controversy (Nachman 312), and his horror host of *Lights Out!* knowingly hovered on the fine line between sardonic humor and the "highly personable," (Hand *Listen in Terror* 141, 101) a trait adopted by the hosts of *Nightfall.*

Nightfall did not shy away from these aspects of OTR horror, using their example to unconcernedly pile "its bloody, eviscerated, suppurating bodies one atop another" (Hurley 142). *Nightfall* far surpassed its contemporary, *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* (1974 to 1982), with graphic, grisly stories. For example, the very first episode, "Love and the Lonely One," is about necrophilia, and many of the episodes contain sequences that could be considered gratuitous, such as in "Hands Off" in which the scientist tests his aggressive compound on a cat that is then heard to claw its kitten to death. These effects are vivid and violent. Introduced as "we bring the most chilling of horrors . . . the kind that actually

happened," *Nightfall*'s "The Blood Countess," a "nauseatingly gruesome" (Hurdle) dramatization of the life of Elisabeth Báthory, includes the crunching of bone as a young woman is staked and a clockwork mechanism that stabs its victims in the breasts and crotch. Like contemporary North American TV horror series (such as *Tales from the Crypt, Tales from the Darkside,* and *Monsters*), *Nightfall* was an anthology show, but it differed in key ways. Violence against animals and the aberrant sexuality of *Nightfall*—including that of *The Blood Countess*—is almost too horrible to visualise, making it highly suited for a non-visual medium like radio. Similarly, as broadcast on CBC, a public service broadcaster, *Nightfall* did not have to satisfy commercial sponsors who might become nervous at being associated with such radical fare (Hand *Terror on the Air!* 20). Radio was often the only way to realise such excess, such as the perambulating, strangling, corpse-carrying tree in OTR drama "The Demon Tree" from *Dark Fantasy* (Killmeier 169). Similarly, as we will explain, *Nightfall* always began by telling listeners they were falling into a dream. *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* always concluded by wishing listeners "pleasant dreams," (Hand *Terror on the Air!* 28) but the host of *Nightfall* never followed suit.

Another difference in presentation regards mediation. Verma (2012), writing about radio drama of the OTR era of the 1930s to 1960s, does not consider binaural sound or headphones because they were not commonly used in radio at that time. He does, however, introduce the concept of audiopositioning, arguing that "[l]isteners do not just 'have' a point of audition; they are 'positioned' by audio composition and components of dialogue" (35). While *Darkest Night* clearly positions the listeners within the decapitated head, creating a claustrophobic interiority, the audiopositioning of *Nightfall* is more promiscuous. Nevertheless, in the case of "Hands Off," while the audioposition of the listener is close to Dr Striker (Colin Fox), listeners never fully hear the story from inside his head. As Striker says in soliloquy, "They can't get in . . . and I can't get out." Thus, the audioposition places listeners somewhere near him. Without headphones and without binaural sound, the episode's use of audiopositioning makes listeners present within the lab, even if they are not as specifically placed as binaural listening affords.

As Spinelli and Dann explain, a drama broadcast on radio "has to be balanced in such a fashion that it can be appreciated" in a range of situations that include a car, a mono kitchen radio, or on high-quality speakers (155). While stereo listening was possible on radio broadcasts by the 1980s (see, for example, *The Revenge* on BBC radio in 1975), it was not the norm. In the standard radio mix, panning would be limited, music would be used sparingly and mixed far below the level of the voices (ibid). In the broadcast mix, sounds were used to penetrate the larger space of room or car interior, whether that space was filled with several people or just one. Listening back to *Nightfall* on headphones now, either through one's computer (episodes are available on Archive.org) or via BBC Sounds (the BBC are re-distributing some episodes of *Nightfall*), the sound mix is still based on that original audiopositioning, one that is clearly different from *Darkest Night.* As will be discussed in greater detail below, the spatiality of these sensory effects align with *Nightfall*'s narrative conceit: the listener joins the storyworld of *Nightfall* vaguely placed, as if in a dream. Like in a dream, the listener is not necessarily a character in the story, nor is she watching from afar. This vague audiopositionality presents the listener as a nondescript member of a larger, public group of listeners. This positionality therefore forces the listener to participate in the violence carried out by the podcast's observing public, creating horror in exploring the public/private divide through the technical affordances of radio.

Where *Nightfall* embraces the sensory effects radio listening offers, *Darkest Night* fits its sensorium to podcast listening. It does so by using headphones to place the listener directly into the storyworld. By incorporating detailed sensory effects into its sound design, *Darkest Night* capitalises on the spatial specificity binaural listening affords. Contemporary discourses of binaural or 3D audio tend to sidestep how widespread headphone listening is in podcasting (76% of podcast listeners use headphones according to Edison Research's 2018 survey) in order to focus on the novelty of podcasts that dedicate a lot of energy into the sensory effects headphone listening allows, as *Darkest Night* does. Importantly, in order to get this 3D experience, the listener has to listen on some type of headphones. Binaural audio, then, implies a spatially individualised audience: one can listen at the same time as others, but only with her own device. This sensory effect marks a difference between *Nightfall*'s radio audience and *Darkest Night*'s podcast one. The discourse surrounding the kind of 3D binaural experience *Darkest Night* provides focuses on the audio's immersive qualities, often calling it "immersive fiction." Danielle Hancock explains binaural horror as "[v]oices may whisper in the ear, noises may sound from behind or above, footsteps may circle the listener — and all while they are disconcertingly, disarmingly deaf to their real-world environment" ("'Put on Your Headphones and Turn Out the Lights'"). Hancock here describes immersion as both hearing sounds from the storyworld that surround the listener and as completely blocking out sounds from the surrounding world.

Unlike Hancock's description of binaural audio blocking out the surrounding environment, iTunes reviews of *Darkest Night* claim the opposite. When these listeners talk about the show's binaural qualities, they do not mention their surrounding environment being blocked out, but instead as being enmeshed with the podcast's storyworld. User Lauhel, for example, writes that "The binaural sound gets me every time. I almost broke my phone freaking out that someone was behind me!" ("Yess so good!"). David Cummings, producer of the *NoSleep* podcast, speaks to the same effect when he notes that "[i]f a particular story matches the listener's real-life setting," particularly if the listener is enveloped in headphones, "the overlap between fiction and reality can be particularly unnerving" (cited in O'Donoghue). *Darkest Night*'s binaurality, then, does not completely subsume the listener. Instead, its very liminality—that these sounds could exist in the real world or in the storyworld—is what gives the show the horrific sensory effect Lahrel seems to enjoy. The horror is not from a kind of immersion that completely separates the lived world from the story, but from the difficulty in distinguishing between the two.

The podcast builds on this liminality by setting some of its vignettes in spaces listeners are likely to be, like at home, and including sounds normally found in domestic or private environments, like a baby monitor or a ringing cell phone ("Chapter 2: The Other"). These effects build on the porosity of some headphones, and of earbuds specifically, by building on environmental sounds instead of completely blocking them out. In "Voices-cast," Virginia Madsen writes that "the nonenveloping quality of the earbuds suggests some potential porosity between public and private—the porosity typical of networked digital culture" (44). That the podcast inserts sometimes already mediated sounds (like the baby monitor) into its spaces demonstrates how this "porosity between public and private" translates into the podcast's use of binaural audio to create horror out of the liminality of that distinction.

Darkest Night avoids the binary between public and private by playing with the permeability between spaces within the storyworld and the listeners' physical environment, using sound effects to create horror by rendering private spaces unwelcoming. In a review, listener Goggles Jacobs says that "I had to stop listening just before bed, as I would be about to fall

asleep, and then I was startled by a sound, not knowing if it came from the podcast or from my house!" ("Wonderful – Binaural Really Adds to It,"). The podcast introduces a strange sound into this private space, startling the listener who thinks the sound could be from his private home. The horror here is in the indistinguishability between public, mediated sound and the private, ordinary sounds of the home.

Both *Darkest Night* and *Nightfall* rely on audio mediation to place the listener within their storyworlds; they simply do so in different ways. For *Darkest Night*, binaural listening affords precise placement that makes it possible to vividly create closeness and distance, depending on the demands of the plot. The podcast uses this technical ability to insert public sounds into the listener's private sonic environment, making it sound like things are happening around her. *Nightfall*, on the other hand, embraces radio's comparatively vague audiopositioning to place the listener as a member of a nondescript listening public. Once again, horror stems from how this audiopositioning relates to the public/private divide.

Narrative

Darkest Night and *Nightfall* create narratives that complement these respective audiopositionalities in order to reflect on the social issues of their times. *Nightfall* reveals the Gothic tension between home/domestic space and the horrors within and without that existed in Canadian society in the early 1980s. As per the nihilistic aesthetic of *Nightfall,* nowhere in Canada is safe[1], whether the setting is urban or rural. Serial killers lurk in remote, snowbound northern Canada ("The Porch Light") and are equally at home in urban laundromats ("All-Nighter"). The insidious, claustrophobic small-town community in "Lazarus Rising" sees the visiting urban reporter exclaim at the end of the episode that he'd rather cover bombing in a Middle Eastern warzone than stay another minute in the murderous, supernatural Canadian backwoods. *Darkest Night*, on the other hand, focalises its vignettes through the decapitated head of a cadaver, the listener reliving the last moments of that person's life. The podcast's use of binaural audio inserts sounds from the dead person's life into the listener's environment while the podcast's focus on the head centralises the role of mediation itself in telling the story. This centrality becomes even more important when the listener learns the memories they are reliving are, or could be, the result of mind-altering drugs. These drugs further centralise mediation (the stories are mediated by the heads, by the drugs, and by the podcast) while rendering that mediation unreliably. The podcast therefore creates horror out of the listener's inability to distinguish between mediated and non-mediated realities, or their own ability to control their lived and mediated environments. Both *Darkest Night* and *Nightfall*, then, create narratives specific to their audiopositionalities: *Nighfall* with vague positioning and a dream-like public, *Darkest Night* with a precise, individualised audience.

Accompanied by eerie music and wind sound effects, a radio announcer begins every episode of *Nightfall:* "In the dream, you are falling, lost, in the listening distance, as dark locks in." A male scream moves slowly away from the listener, suggesting both the terror of a nightmare and falling into a dark abyss. This portal, in other words, takes the listener figuratively away from their listening environment and places them in another, darker one. Darkness is a celebrated hallmark of the radio listening experience (Hand *Terror on the Air!* 18). Darkness was, indeed, evoked by one of the first radio horror programs, *The Witch's Tale* (Mutual, 1931-38, Killmeier 76), explicitly in the title of *Lights Out!* and implicitly in its minimalist preamble: "Lights out . . everybody" (Hand *Terror on the Air!* 27). The darkness in these dramas seemed to both highlight radio's intrinsic strengths but also its potentials for

misinterpretation (a theme picked up in *Darkest Night* through the binaural construct, see page 17).

Nightfall's introduction integrates the perception of radio as a dark medium into its horror. Crisell (3) coined the term "blindness" when referring to a quality "everyone" notices about radio. The term coined by Hand and Traynor, "darkness" (33, 35–36) used instead of "blindness," is twofold in *Nightfall*: the world the horror podcast creates is thematically dark and the radio medium itself is not predominantly visual, making it dark. By falling into a dark abyss, then, the listener enters the storyworld while incorporating the darkness of that world into their surrounding visual environment.

Hancock describes this introduction through the darkness and the personal experience of the Verma's "theater of the mind" (2012: 3). "In the darkness of our mind's eye," she states, we each journeyed alone to a peculiarly individualised imagining of what we all heard being described" ("Welcome back listeners" 30). The suggestion is that listeners have been swallowed up for the duration of the program; whether they can "wake" themselves or "escape" is subject to conjecture. They are, however, not in exactly the world they once found themselves in. In situating listeners in a dream or nightmare by its ritualised opening, *Nightfall* uses audiopositioning (the "listening distance") to figuratively block out the surrounding world and cocoon the listeners in its immersive storyworld. As Hancock puts it, the listener "is invited to join the host in their own domestic location" with the listener's current location as an irrelevance ("Welcome back listeners" 126). In this case, the listener's Canadian location is irrelevant, in that she can be anywhere in Canada, and relevant in that she is in Canada: *Nightfall* is dark because its stories can only be seen in the mind's eye, but it also casts darkness onto Canadian spaces.

This dynamic is interesting in relation to Michael Bull's division between "warm" and "chilly" soundscapes in *Sound Moves*. Bull studies how iPod users listened to music as they walked around the city, blocking out sounds of the city by turning up the volume on their music. According to Bull, this music creates a warm "auditory bubble" linked to private space and free time and is in contrast to the surrounding world, which Bull describes as "chilly" in part because it is populated by strangers and linked to public space (9, 67). As a radio program that pre-dates the research that created these distinctions, it is no surprise that *Nightfall* does not neatly fit into Bull's categories. Its storyworld is, however, mobile to the extent that the radio of the 1980s reflected the changes in mediation that had occurred postwar. While radio had become part of the domestic space of the home in the 1930s, by the 1950s, with the invention of the transistor, radio followed people out of the home and into their leisure spaces: the garden, the beach, and, as is clearly referenced in *Nightfall,* the car (for example, the episode "Welcome to Homerville," which follows big rig driver RC O'Connor through his CB conversations, radio listening, and phone calls as he travels north). This mobility is distinct from that of iPod and cellular phone listeners, but it nonetheless makes it possible for listeners to hear the podcast in a variety of public and private environments. Because *Nightfall* was broadcast radio, those spaces were almost exclusively Canadian. As listeners entered the darkness of *Nightfall*'s world, they remained surrounded by their own public and private Canadian spaces alongside the listening public implied by *Nightfall*'s radio broadcast and audiopositioning. This spatiality connects *Nightfall*'s dark publicness to Canada specifically.

Instead of presenting their program as part of the listener's warm, private life, *Nightfall*'s nihilistic outlook emphasises this publicness, converting the whole

contemporary world (of the 1980s) into "chilly," dream-like public spaces, whether they are literally chilly or part of the unforgiving urban jungle. Given the winter weather associated with many parts of Canada, it is perhaps unsurprising that punishing snowfall in remote locations is a major theme of *Nightfall*. For example, the remote outpost in "Weather Station Four," the workplace of Devlin, a young college graduate, has been rendered untenable and "chilly" in a way that has nothing to do with the weather. Trapped in the station with unfeeling, self-sufficient McNab and his Malamute Thrasher, Devlin would love to retreat into the "warm auditory bubble" Bull connects to familiarity of close social ties and the iPod, if only such a thing had been invented in 1983. Instead, the continual strain of performing identity within this hostile workplace underlines the chilliness of the world outside the individual, leading to murder and suicide. The urban environment is no better for Norman Laramie, a mild-mannered research chemist in "Reverse Image." This drama posits the Canadian urban social sphere as "ruthless, cynical, hateful, decadent" as personified by Norman's cruel, adulterous, alcoholic wife, Madge. Even though these close social ties should create warmth in Norman's environment, they are, like *Nightfall* itself, an immense source of public pressure from which he can only find relief in his antiques (and eventual split personality). The listener consumes these stories as the protagonists struggle with and succumb to the pressures of a distant, foreboding public life as a member of that public themselves. Even though they may relate to these characters, they do not embody them. As the protagonists search for and fail to find a fulfilling private space, the listener remains there, a constant public presence within the chilly storyworld.

Nightfall's violence similarly uses the program's vague audiopositionality to present the listener as a member of a larger, public group of listeners. A promotional poster for *Nightfall* shows a skull through which the modern Canadian urban cityscape can be seen, reflecting the show's focus on framing Canadian public life through a nightmare. *Nightfall*'s stories frequently pit the individual against a society that has gone insane, responding vividly to a "denial regarding Canadian murder and violence" among Canadian politicians and public officials (Hancock ""Canada, oh Canadaaargh!" 1). This dynamic is especially pronounced in episodes that have a more overtly sexualised quality that was almost completely absent from heavily self-censored OTR drama. This sexuality often violently patrols the boundary between public and private, an example of which can be found in the episode "In the Name of the Father," in which Ada (Dixie Seetall) visits a remote village in the Maritimes, one to which she is alternately attracted and repelled. The shocking conclusion of this story sees Ada uncovering the ritualised rape of the village women by sharks. While the episode's sound effects create a strong sense of presence through audiopositioning, allowing the listener to feel she is with Ada in the Maritime village, the listener herself is, as if in a dream, somewhat removed from the action. Instead of being the victim, or even Ada herself, the listener is involved through her membership in an observing audience. Like in the previous examples, the horror here comes from how *Nightfall* implicates the listener as part of a public community enacting violence onto the episode's female characters. The show creates horror from the permeability of the public/private binary by presenting usually private-coded sex acts for visceral, detailed public observation. While in *Darkest Night*, the listener experiences this visceral transgression from the perspective of the private, *Nightfall* positions the listener as a member of the public violator. The show therefore uses the trope of a dream to work with radio's audiopositioning, blending extreme and vivid bodily violence with the unclear placement of the listener serving to place her as a member of an ill-defined, violent, and powerful public.

Darkest Night similarly creates narratives that work with its technologies to explore, and create horror out of, the public/private divide. The podcast is a series of vignettes focalised through a different decapitated head in each episode, the listener reliving that person's last memories from their perspective, the characters' thoughts positioned right between the listener's eyes and the story happening around, and inside, them. The narrative uses this trope to concentrate on the role of mediation. The series' first season has a story arc in which a scientist character moves from head to head, drawing attention to the mediating quality of the head, and plot points that further highlight the importance of the physicality and sometimes unreliability of the heads' mediation.

The show's paratexts explicitly link this mediation on the story level to its own recording technologies. In a promotion with CNET, *Darkest Night* presents recording with a binaural head as an important part of their process: "We use three different microphones. We do a take on Neuman U87s with all the actors recorded separately. And then we do a take where we use most of it on a Neumann KE100. It looks like a human head and it's been a huge part of our show from the get go" ("Darkest Night will Scare the Earbuds Off Your Head"). They also present the bodiless head as a stand-in for the listener and show the actors interacting around the head, commenting that it is "almost like you're blocking an actual visual project instead of an audio project, so when you hear on *Darkest Night* they'll usually be on different sides of the head, and they'll be going around the head" ("Darkest Night will Scare the Earbuds Off Your Head"). When the listener consumes the podcast, she is inserting herself into this dummy head in the same way the scientist in the story inserts herself into the head of the dead person. *Darkest Night*'s concentration on its technologies and the physicality of the Neumann head it uses to record train the listener in how to listen to the podcast and how to interpret their listening experience: the story parallels the recording technologies, just as the listener is inserted into the head of another on a fictional, narrative level through the podcast's story, they insert themselves into the Neumann head while listening to the podcast.

This parallel is especially interesting given contemporary discourses surrounding binaural/3D/immersive audio that treat it like a cheap effect and implore podcasters to only use it when the story requires it. In an interview for *The Verge*, for example, Rob Herting insists that 3D sound isn't "a replacement for good storytelling, and you can't think of it like a gimmick, but I think when used well, it can be really, really impactful" (qtd. in Carman 2021). Stories and sound design, in other words, should work together. *Darkest Night*'s self-presentation as being binaural and its use of the Neumann head inform listeners on its recording process and show how the podcast mediates. At the same time, the storyline also trains listeners similarly focusing on the head without a body and centering the plot on how that head mediates. The podcast's emphasis on recording technologies in its self-presentation is taken up by the narrative of the podcast and, in a media environment in which binaural audio is often seen as abnormal, justified through the podcast's story. In both the podcast and its self-presentation in videos like the one on CNET, the podcast centralises its own mediation and the centrality of the listener—and the listening head—in that mediation.

Darkest Night questions the accuracy of this mediation on the story level when it reveals that the memories the listener has been experiencing have been from people under the influence of mind-control drugs. The presence of these drugs is analogous to the podcast itself: the drugs make people experience things that are not there just like the podcast makes listeners hear things that are not there. In making its own mediation a plot point within its narration, then questioning the sounds that make up that narration, *Darkest Night* enhances its

liminality: the listener who is already unsure if sounds are coming from the story or from her house now has to question if the sounds are even really within the story.

Mind-control drugs also speak to the listener's ability to control her soundscape. For Michael Bull's iPod listeners, the issue of control is paramount. Bull explains that when his listeners walk around the city, they use the sound of their music to aestheticise that experience, using the music as a soundtrack in their real-life movie (41). Bull's listener has complete control over that soundtrack, and so she has complete control over how she perceives the city. This control makes the city "warmer" (42). Bull's analysis here shows how mediated sound can influence listener perception of her lived environment and how listeners feel like they are in control over that perception because they control their media. When *Darkest Night* introduces mind control drugs into its narrative, it takes that control away. Instead of the listener being in charge of her own perception, the drugs are. They insert sounds into the storyworld just like the podcast inserts sounds into the listener's environment. The podcast's narrative creates horror in its questioning of the listener's ability to control her perception by controlling her media: where Bull's listener uses sound to mediate the surrounding world through her own perspective and experiences—like the main character in a movie—*Darkest Night* makes the listener's centrality a cause for concern. The sound is not a soundtrack separate from the listener's world, but sometimes indistinguishable from it. Just like it is not always clear what sounds are coming from the podcast and what are coming from the listener's surrounding environment, the characters in the podcast experience things in their environments that are not actually there, but are the result of mind-control drugs. These characters have lost control over their own perception of the world around them because their world is being mediated through these drugs. *Darkest Night*'s central conceit, then, is the fear of how media shape listener perception.

Nightfall uses the storytelling capabilities of 1980s radio to create a frame from which the listener can experience her role within a mass-mediated Canadian public as horrific. Through the severed head trope, *Darkest Night* focuses on podcasting's individualised listener to create horror out of the role of public media on private life. Both audio productions, then, incorporate narratives that deal with the position of the listener in consuming media. Those narratives, in turn, build on the distinct forms of sound mediation present in podcasting and radio in order to create horror out of how audio mediates the line between public and private.

Conclusion

Darkest Night and *Nightfall* use audio mediation to position the listener within uniquely crafted stories, including and implicating the listener within their narratives. *Nightfall* places the listener within a warped public. The series uses graphic sound effects and radio's lack of spatial precision to locate the listener as a somewhat anonymous member of that public, implicated and guilty in its transgressions into private life. *Darkest Night* incorporates the precision of binaural audio to place the listener within the head of a private person, creating an alternative world capable of inserting sounds into the listener's lived environment. The podcast's narrative reflects on this insertion, making the move from head to head a continual plot point, and binaural listening and recording a large part of its self-presentation. On both the level of narrative and sound design, then, both series center how audio can mediate the public/private divide.

These findings complicate contemporary narratives that position podcasting as uniquely immersive. While these discourses have a cultural function and should not be trivialised, they

do not necessarily align with how media and storytelling work together. *Nightfall* uses its sound design to include the listener within a narrative. That narrative is different from *Darkest Night*'s, but it is not necessarily less immersive. By examining the differences in audiopositioning and narrative between both *Darkest Night* and *Nightfall*, we see how the different media create horror at the intersection of public and private and place their own mediation at different places within this divide. Both series use elaborate sensory effects that recall the grotesque affect of Freud's uncanny, the "gleeful excessiveness" of Gothic horror in order to centralise the role of the body within this mediation (Hurley 142). Such a body is "a body of fear, but fear tempered with fascination" (Hurley 138). For both works, like horror films of the 1970s and 1980s, this is an "aggressive, artistically ambitious and socially engaged" aesthetic that centers the issues of its time (Hutchings 170). That issue is, in *Darkest Night* and *Nightfall*, the role of mediation and the public/private divide, an issue that both shows use audio storytelling to amplify "the visibility of suture" where the "inside threatens to show through" (Halberstam 155).

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[1] Not every episode of *Nightfall* is set in Canada, but given the production imperative to tell uniquely Canadian stories, the vast majority are set in Canada's past or (1980s) present.