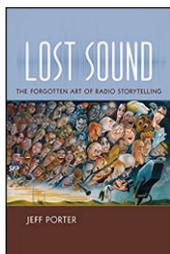


Review



Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling. By Jeff Porter. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 296 pp. ISBN: 9781469627779.

In *Lost Sound: The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling*, Jeff Porter provides an important exegesis of the acoustic techniques and modernist literary practices that contributed to the growth of narrative radio from the 1930s through to the 1970s. Cogently and authoritatively written, *Lost Sound* is an exciting read for literary, sound, and communication studies enthusiasts alike. Divided into eight chapters that flow together seamlessly, *Lost Sound* coheres around Porter's idea of radio as an acoustic medium. An aural experience, modernist-influenced radio, for Porter, produces what he terms an "acoustic drift" (p. 9) that plays with sense and sound, tensing the relationship between word-meaning and sound-meaning. Relying on a methodology founded upon close readings of canonical radio programs, from Archibald MacLeish's *Fall of the City* to Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy*, and to New Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, Porter's *Lost Sound* is a much-needed contribution to the field of radio and sound communications history.

Chapters one and two lay the foundation for the remainder of the book by outlining the network economic, new technological, and modernist literary practices under which radio grasped the medium's sonic power to engender new modes of listening. Influenced by avant-garde sound poetry and experimental literature on the air, early radio, Porter posits, blurred the distinction between lowbrow and highbrow cultural content. In doing so, radio played a crucial role in producing diverse popular culture texts that expanded beyond the medium's own daytime serials, comedy sketches, and soap operas. Yet while experimentation on radio characterized evening programming between the mid-1930s and early 1970s, Porter is cautious not to overemphasize the impact that such innovative programming has had on contemporary broadcasts.

Gone, he acknowledges, are the literary and sound traditions through which writers and studio engineers, especially those at CBS's *Columbia Workshop* in the mid-1930s, pushed the envelope for both playwriting and broadcast technology for its listeners. Careful not to wax too nostalgic, however, Porter notes the impact of Ira Glass' *This American Life* on new modes of storytelling for late-twentieth-century and twenty-first-century radio and podcast listeners. Though largely "post-dramatic" (p. 210), new radio podcasts have perhaps sparked a renaissance in acoustic storytelling across multiple media platforms, especially with younger listeners—a demographic that evaded networks in earlier decades.

The exploration of radio's aural environment in *Lost Sound* is far-reaching. Of particular interest is Porter's treatment of the human voice as a communicative technology. Porter addresses the multiple ways in which voices exceed form, becoming yet

another sound in addition to sirens, knocking, and footsteps in modernist radio's aural environment. One of the trust-worthiest voices on early radio was that of the announcer or narrator, a voice that was afforded a great deal of authority and imbued with authenticity. As avant-garde literary conventions were used to take radio in new directions, storytellers, such as Orson Wells, sought to disturb the medium's traditionally single authorial position. He accomplished this by denying listeners of any single, trustworthy narrator. Wells did this in *Dracula* (1938) and *War of the Worlds* (1938), for example, in a move that was typically reserved for print media. But if Wells disturbed the single "narratorial presence" (p. 73) on radio by bringing the novel to the airwaves and playing with radio's representational codes, women's voices posed yet another tension for sense-making.

In Chapter 5, "The Screaming Woman," Porter acknowledges that women's voices were radio's outsiders. During radio's golden years, most news broadcast positions were reserved for men, and women were typically relegated to performing roles. Even in these capacities, however, women often played the roles of desperate and/or hysterical subjects. The screaming point characterized a distinctive feature of women's voices in radio drama. Taking a cue from Michel Chion, Porter argues that the sound of the screaming woman transgresses language, signalling a disturbance in meaning. Without a stable reference point, women's voices were present, but emanated from elsewhere, only to be silenced, exemplified by Agnes Moorehead in Lucille Fletcher's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1943). Women's enunciative power posed a threat to network radio officials, one that reflected the gender dynamics central to modernist thinking. While the trope of the screaming woman was characteristic of 1940s thriller broadcasts, her voice not only represented a disturbance in the relations between language and meaning, but also indicated the antagonistic relationship women were forced into as a result of radio's masculine orthodoxy.

If Dylan Thomas and Samuel Beckett associated the voice more with sound than speech, the classical pianist Glenn Gould would push this further, questioning why the voice evaded the world of music. Porter makes a strong case for Gould to be cast alongside other sound artists, such as John Cage and Pierre Schaeffer. Exploring *The Solitude Trilogy* (1967–1977), Porter argues that Gould's contrapuntal radio documentaries, influenced by Bach's fugues, overlaid voices and ambient sounds to create fictional acoustic spaces that demanded the close listening skills of an audiophile. In doing so, Gould's work placed high demands on its listeners by deploying modernist collage-like techniques to move documentary radio—a speech-based genre—toward the realm of music, redefining listening practices for an entire generation.

Lost Sound is a tour de force that invites us to reconsider the relationship between literature and radio. In contrast to works that explore radio's impact on literature, Porter seeks to uncover literature's influence on radio. Although experimental literary practices would be met with some resistance, particularly at the institutional level, during the prestige radio era, storytelling expanded the aural environment beyond speech—the spoken word would be just one sound among others. When sounds, such as screams, sirens, and so on, draw attention to themselves, they have the ability to transcend their referent, tensing the relationship between sense and sound. Porter is

acutely attuned to the history of radiophonic experimentation, encouraging us to place our own ears as close to the radio as possible.

Ryan J. Mack, University of Western Ontario