



'THE WAR OF THE WORLDS' RADIO BROADCAST: REALISM, HYSTERIA AND PROPAGANDA

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On October 30th, 1938, families across America tuned into an episode of *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, a radio drama anthology series that broadcasted over the Columbia Broadcasting System. A classic form of dinner entertainment, listeners of the radio show were expecting to hear a conventional interpretation of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. Few listeners anticipated that the performance would incite a temporary panic within members of its national audience, who were convinced that the events narrated on the show were happening in real time. In fact, it caused these people to step outside of their homes and cars in fear of an actual alien invasion. Narrated by Orson Welles, the episode reports a series of explosions on Mars, followed by the description of a cylinder-shaped, extraterrestrial object landing on a farm in Grover's Mill, New Jersey. The episode featured elements of an authentic radio show, including a weather report, intercutting musical accompaniment, and a narrative introduction by Welles. The rest of the episode was superseded by breaking news updates of 'real' live reports and announcements by professionals and military commanders. Although today it is speculated that the mass hysteria was mostly hyperbolized, the broadcast was renowned for its use of realism, brilliant casting, and sound effects. The broadcast furthermore set a precedent in radio, marked Welles as a brilliant actor and director, and continually reminds us of the innovative possibilities in storytelling.

The episode begins with a preface derived from the opening lines of the novel. Welles narrates how, in the early twentieth century, known extraterrestrial intelligences were observing life on earth. He characterizes the alien watchers as having "intellects vast, cool and unsympathetic," beings who "regarded this earth with envious eyes and slowly and surely drew their plans against us" (Koch, 1938). Because these lines emulate the language of the book itself, it is likely that a listener familiar with H.G. Wells's work was convinced of this as an authentic replication of



the work. This opener is followed up by a daily weather report and music by Ramón Raquello and his orchestra, like all radio broadcasts. Yet suddenly, the music is interrupted by a special announcement: Mount Jennings Observatory's own Professor Farrell reports a series of hydrogen explosions on Mars and the subsequent moving of these gases towards Earth. The report is validated by an astronomer, Professor Pierson, whom the radio show's commentator, Carl Phillips, 'meets' to confer with. This interruptive exchange was the listener's first indication that the report itself could be real, for these characters – Farrell, Pierson, and Phillips – do not appear in Wells's novel at all.

The breaking news report's sense of realism is intensified by a series of play-by-play disclosures from Phillips himself. He announces a wire message to Pierson about an unanticipated earthquake-like shock that had occurred approximately twenty miles outside Princeton, New Jersey, advising him to investigate a potential meteorite on the scene. Phillips, along with Pierson, abscond to the location in Grover's Mill to observe. While 'there,' Phillips conveys the strangeness of the scene while taking note of the gigantic cylinder that had struck a vast pit into the farmland. Although the observations by a frantic radio commentator were enough to move the realism of the report along, parts of the dialogue were dedicated to conveying a sense of spatiality:

PHILLIPS: It has a diameter of . . . what would you say, Professor Pierson?
PIERSON (OFF-MIKE): What's that?
PHILLIPS: What would you say . . . what is the diameter?
PIERSON: About thirty yards.

This dialogue suggests to the audience is that Pierson was far away from the microphone before subsequently moving closer. This minute detail constructs a perception of space around both characters, placing Pierson away from the microphone before he is up close. Instead of simply narrating what they saw, the script invites the listening audience in by allowing them to envision the space in which the events are occurring. Again, these spatial dimensions are constructed when Phillips interviews Wilmuth, the owner of the farm:

PHILLIPS: [...] Step closer, please. Ladies and gentlemen, this is Mr. Wilmuth.
WILMUTH: Well, I was listenin' to the radio.
PHILLIPS: Closer and louder please.
WILMUTH: Pardon me!
PHILLIPS: Louder, please, and closer.

By creating a space between the interviewer and interviewee, Phillip's dialogue not only places the listener within the area of the interview, but also exaggerates the chaos



of the scene itself. Asking Wilmuth to step closer and speak louder reiterates the importance of Wilmuth's commentary in addition to instilling urgency into the audience to hear that commentary. The insistence to speak louder helps the audience to imagine his necessity to do so among the frenzied space composited of thirty armed policemen and panicked onlookers.

When the alien presence makes itself known in the form of a jet flame "bouncing off a mirror," (Koch, 1938) striking the head of the advancing men and setting the whole field ablaze, havoc on the scene periodically escalates. Philips narrates a sequence of explosions near him, exclaiming, "The woods... the barns... the gas tanks of automobiles... it's spreading everywhere" (Koch, 1938)! In between his following remark, he is abruptly cut off by a crash to his microphone. The episode goes silent, accentuating a sudden and unexpected cut from signal communication. The announcement of military interventions and its takeover of national radio indeed confirms the severity of the ensuing events. General Montgomery Smith declares that the state of New Jersey is under martial law, the temporary substitution of military authority for civilian rule, and Captain Lansing identifies a metal entity, standing on legs, arising out of the cylinder. Furthermore, the Secretary of Interior proclaims a national state of emergency after reports of the same invasion occur all over the country, thereby insinuating the incumbent war between man and alien, and how efforts to push back against invasion align with the goal of "preservation of human supremacy on this earth" (Koch, 1938). The combat is narrated through military officers measuring point-blank-range with their troops, over headed by the sound of a crashing airplane motor. An announcer atop the Broadcasting Building in New York City provides the listener with an overview of a destroyed city below him, right before the sound thump of his fallen body, and a pleading operator calling on his home base: "Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone..." (Koch, 1938).

Two weeks following the broadcast, over 12,000 newspaper articles were published headlining the national panic that had reportedly ensued during its airing (PBS). Although most listeners understood the program to be a radio drama, the headlines highlighted how thousands of listeners "plunged into panic, convinced that America was under deadly Martian attack" (PBS). In response to this apocryphal panic, American filmmaker John Landis underscores the conflation of its mass hysteria, explaining that, "It was very overblown, but it was good stuff with great publicity... It was what's called 'a good story'" (Tonguetto, 2018). Indeed, the inclusion of realism and self-referentiality in this radio episode, despite the audience's restraint to simply listen, demonstrates Orson Welles' cinematic and theatrical talent. Three years after the show's airing, Welles would go on to both direct and star in the unprecedented masterpiece *Citizen Kane*. Although clearly important for Welles's career, what the



popularization of *The War of the Worlds* indicates is the sheer power of propaganda. Dorothy Thompson of the New York Herald Tribune attested to how the broadcast evinces the “incredible stupidity, lack of nerve and ignorance of thousands” (Thompson, 1938), thereby proving how easy it is for the population to submit to mass delusion and mania. The theatricality of Welles’s performance was enough to convince the masses that the events taking place were real. Dictatorial world leaders utilized the same theatricality within their propaganda to beguile audiences. She parallels their rhetorical power with Welles’ dramatic talent. Adolf Hitler, for example, with both dictatorial rhetoric and the help of an army and air force, managed to bring Europe to its knees, while Orson Welles “scared thousands into demoralization with nothing at all.” (Thompson, 1938). Ultimately, the dramatization of *The War of the Worlds* made its greatest contribution through helping us in our understanding of the inherent absurdism within mass media consumption.

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