

**TRANSCRIPT FOR EPISODE 09: I'M SURE IT'S NOTHING (OCTOBER
2013):
SPECIAL WAR OF THE WORLDS EPISODE, NEIL VERMA INTERVIEW**

[Introduction music]

Christine Becker: [00:00:35] Hello and welcome to Cinema Journal Presents Aca Media. I'm Christine Becker.

Michael Kackman: And I'm Michael Kackman.

Christine Becker: And we're both here at the University of Notre Dame, so welcome back to the podcast. We've got a very special episode for you. We're actually going to kind of clear the decks here and do a special episode of a really great interview I conducted last month with Neil Verma from the University of Chicago. And you may have recognized our music there. That was a from the original War of the Worlds radio broadcast, and that's what we want to talk to Neil about.

October represents the 75th anniversary of the War of the Worlds radio broadcast. So I talked to Neil about it last month.

Michael Kackman: It seemed like a good opportunity to go back and revisit that.

Christine Becker: Exactly, yeah. Some fascinating issues for the study of history, but also the study of the present and media panics and the kind of things us media studies academics get really fascinated by and really want to dig into.

Michael Kackman: Absolutely.

Christine Becker: So we had a great conversation last month and we decided that that was going to be the sole focus, or one segment this broadcast, so we'll get back to the usual next month. I'm certain things will be back to normal next month, no doubt about it.

Michael Kackman: I'm sure they will.

Christine Becker: [00:01:35] But will run Neil's interview for the next half hour or so, because I think it was a really interesting, revealing interview and Neil is a fascinating guy, so I think everyone will really enjoy this interview.

[Musical interlude]

Christine Becker: [00:01:53] Neil Verma is a collegiate assistant professor in humanities at the University of Chicago where he received his PhD in the history of culture. His areas of specialization include US culture from the '20s through the '60s, sound and sound culture studies, theories of ventriloquism and a science fiction and film noir.

[00:02:07] His recent book, *Theater of the Mind; Imagination, Aesthetics and American Radio Drama*, is published by the University of Chicago Press. And other recent publications include an article on the radio place of Lucille Fletcher and a chapter on eavesdropping in film noir. Among other projects he's currently collaborating with Northwestern's Jacob Smith on an anthology about Norman Corwin's 70-year career in national and international broadcasting. Hello, Neil, welcome to the Aca Media podcast.

Neil Verma: It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Christine Becker: [00:02:37] Sure. We appreciate you taking the time and really looking forward to a conversation here. You know, it's most common to talk about war of the worlds, the radio broadcast, as a cultural phenomenon, and will certainly get to that, but I'm intrigued by your work on radio dramas as aesthetic objects and in particular your book, *Theater of the Mind; Imagination, Aesthetics and American Radio Drama*, which by the way it was winner of the best first book award from SCMS, so congratulations on that.

Neil Verma: Thanks.

Christine Becker: The blurb says it's an aesthetic history of 6,000 classic US radio plays, so I'm wondering if you could first share with us some of your knowledge about classic radio drama aesthetics. What were some of the defining characteristics of how these dramas told their stories?

Neil Verma: [00:03:15] I got interested in radio drama about seven or eight years ago, and what I was really interested in it was a series of different Gothic and suspense programs from the late '40s, it is sort of puzzled me why it is that interiority of various kinds is so compelling as a subject in the late 1940s. And so I did some running around that and I realized that I really had to go further back into history with this form and try and figure out how this particular approach developed.

[00:03:42] And so I started listening to a lot of different programs in the mid-'30s, so Cavalcade of America, the March of Time, the Mercury Theater Broadcast, which of course was Orson Welles start as a director, the CBS workshop. And what I noticed is that these dramas weren't about interiority at all. Like there's very little things like a stream of consciousness or kind of psychological Gothic. I mean, there were ghost stories, but there's no real kind of insideness to these plays.

[00:04:08] On the contrary, there's a huge amount of outside this. So when you listen to the way these plays actually sound, they're really going out of their way using sound effects, filters, amplitude, things like that to construct the exterior environment and to move us around quite quickly. So I started think about this and develop a few analytical terms I could use it to explain it. Also, if you're writing a book, you need to invent analytical terms, otherwise no one will take you seriously.

Christine Becker: Definitely.

Neil Verma: [00:04:36] So I thought about one thing that's important to listen to, especially in a dramas of the '30s, the dramas that Orson Welles was listening to and taking part in is to think about where you are according to what you hear in the world of the drama. Because this is something that directors really pay a lot of attention to and this comes across in all the writing. And so I thought of that, you know, the good terms of use would be this term audio position which I read about in the book, which is just that.

[00:05:01] Where am I according to what I hear? It's just a helpful way of thinking, "Well, with how do I unpack this radio drama?" So that's one thing. One thing is that directors are tending quite closely to where the listener is according to what they hear, and that's important to all of Welles' work. The other thing that I say is that there's a couple of styles that sort of emerge, aesthetic styles around this issue of positioning the listener.

[00:05:28] One of those a styles is what I call the intimate style, and this is sort of the notion that you spend most of the drama close by some other being, who tends to be moving in deep space, and the intimate style is extremely important for a lot of Welles' work, but also for a lot of kind of routine and narrative problems. How do you build suspense in the shadow? Well, you tell people that there's an inside and an outside and then you explain to them that a fire is about to happen. So a lot of dramas use that.

[00:05:53] On the other hand, there's also an equal number of dramas, especially news broadcasts, broadcast that are about occasions, celebrations, patriotic broadcasts, populous broadcasts that don't sound like that at all. Rather, we're segueing very rapidly from one scene to another scene, both of the scenes are pretty shallow? So I call this a kaleido-sonic sound. It's very evident in news broadcasts, very evident in kind of the famous World War II broadcasters like Norman Corwin.

[00:06:21] So this is, if you like, the kind of aesthetic language in which a drama like War of the World emerges.

Christine Becker: And as you're talking, sort of what you're saying because a lot of things, and varied things in War of the World, which is probably why, aesthetically, I think it's so interesting. It goes it to, literally, a lot of places, but also sort of sonically. A lot of different aesthetic techniques. So where do you see War of the Worlds fitting into this trajectory of aesthetics in radio drama?

Neil Verma: [00:06:47] Most of the radio dramatists' whose work has endured use both of these two styles that I've talked about. So Norman Corwin is a great example. A lot of his dramas will oscillate quite

quickly between these two different styles, often in order to kind of tell historical stories. A lot of other radio dramatists will use one style or another, so Archibald McLeish is a good example.

[00:07:08] His first major radio drama is *The Fall of the City*, which Orson Welles was the star of, and that's a very intimate drama. We spend the entire play right next to this correspondent of the city, debating what to do about this conqueror is coming. And then his other major radio drama, *Air Raid*, which Orson Welles listened to the day before they broadcast the *War of the Worlds* is much more kaleido-sonic. So it segues from place to place. There's often kind of a narrator who is kind of like the voice of time who is kind of telling us where we're going from place to place.

[00:07:35] And the *War of the Worlds* is the same. The first act is definitively kaleido-sonic in its structure, right? A lot of scenes, a lot of shallow scenes. It's actually a fascinating way of subverting that whole genre as well because lapses in on itself. Kaleido-sonic dramas are often very orderly and the end of the first act of *War of the Worlds* is extremely disorderly. You can actually read the end of that sequence as the eradication of audio position, right?

[00:08:00] There is no place in the drama for us to be because there's no outside of the drama. And then the second half, which almost no one ever talks about, is entirely intimate, right? We have this character narrator, Professor Pearson, and we are following him in deep space over a duration of time. So that, I think account for the stylistic differences between these two chunks of the drama. It's not the only way you can think about it, but I think it's a helpful one.

Christine Becker: What do you think Welles was going for and having the two different segments, then? What is supposed to be the kind of take away from the two?

Neil Verma: [00:08:33] Well, the rhetoric, if you like, of the kaleido-sonic style, it's very much about moments in time, right? Whereas the others, the intimate style is much more about exploring space. So when you use a rhetoric that is much more about a moment in time, you can have a lot of things happen very quickly. And Orson Welles' first job in radio was in - well, almost his first job in radio was on the *March of Time*, the news program. He played Phil LaGuardia. He played Sigmund Freud.

[00:09:00] I know, huh? And so he was used it to these kinds of dramas where you'd have a series of modular scenes. So I think that he deliberately adopted it. And, you know, you can tell from his dramas that he did just before this one, especially his Julius Caesar, which was one of the early plays of the fall season that year, in 1938, where he had a news broadcaster, H.V. Kaltenborn, who would set up different scenes. He's already experimenting in that play with making it sound like the news, right?

[00:09:28] So one of the reasons why people panicked is that it sounds like the news. It's because the news had this kind of kaleido-sonic quality to it. I think that's kind of a bit of a copout of a total explanation as to what happened. In the 1930s, most of the news that people listen to two word dramatizations, right? So it's not quite right to say that just because it sounded like the news, people thought it was real. But there is something that Welles was deliberately trying to do and we know that these were the instructions he gave to John Houseman, the producer, and Howard Koch, the writer, wanting to make it sound like a newscast.

Michael Kackman: Chris, I'm sorry to interrupt your interview, but I just wanted to let you know I just stepped out of the room here for a minute while that interview was playing and, I don't know, there's something a little bit strange going on. Take a listen to what I just overheard Jean Collins talking about in his class.

Christine Becker: Okay.

Jean Collins: [00:10:22] What I'm suggesting is what happens if we try to use [bluebell]? What is a quantum model of human subjectivity? Let's map it as follows; let N=Frank Booth, C=nitrous oxide and Xy=[pantown] 17-4139TCX azure blue. If we calculate the drag coefficient of the human ear as 0.39, where F is the drag force, which is by definition the force component in the direction of the flow velocity, we can infer that Isabella Rossellini is - hey, there's something sticky in my hair.

Michael Kackman: Now, I'm not sure where that's coming from.

Christine Becker: [00:10:59] Yeah, that was - what?

Michael Kackman: It's a little odd, and Mary Kearney just passed me in the hallway and she said - I don't know quite what she was talking about, but she said something about booting her feminist media criticism class this semester. She's decided that she's completely rethought it and she's reorganizing it around the mens' rights movement. She's apparently setting up guest lectures from Charlie Sheen and Seth McFarlane.

Christine Becker: [00:11:20] Really? To give them a platform, you're saying?

Michael Kackman: Well, I think so. I think she feels like they're just not getting enough voice.

Christine Becker: Huh. Is something in the water here?

Michael Kackman: I don't know. I think maybe it's just getting to the mid-point in the semester and everybody starts getting a little punchy, so they're just trying to keep people on their toes.

Christine Becker: [00:11:39] Well, we'll get back to the interview, and maybe you can look into this.

Michael Kackman: I'll see what I can find out.

Christine Becker: Maybe get Bill on this.

Michael Kackman: Yeah, we could get him going on this. Will do.

Christine Becker: Okay. Let's get back to the interview, then.

I'd like to dig into just a little more detail about the broadcast itself and how it played out, so to set that up, let's listen to a clip for our listeners who haven't heard it. We'll put the full version on our website, but just listen and get a little taste of what this broadcast sounded like.

[radio broadcast]

Christine Becker: And so, Neil, could you take us a little bit through the timeline of the broadcast and then and how it played out?

Neil Verma: [00:14:27] Sure. So the broadcast began as a script that was written in six days by Howard Koch, and in the days just up to the broadcast of the play, there was a lot of skepticism as to whether or not this piece even worked, and a lot of editing that went into it. It was a very intense process to create the play. And a lot of people were involved. There is a dozens of actors, there is the 23-piece band. There's, I think, three or four different sound effects artists. One of them was Laura Nichols, who is the kind of founding mother of all radio sound effects, who was working that night.

[00:14:57] So the broadcast starts with this piece by Tchaikovsky that all of the Mercury Theater plays a start with, and then it Welles gives this kind of famous great monologue about how complacent humans are and how, while we were being complacent, the Martians were scrutinizing and studying us from afar and drawing their plans against us. And then we kind of segue into this very banal scene. It's not really a scene, it's more like a broadcast of a broadcast, right? Of an announcer introducing Ramòn Raquello and his orchestra, who's playing this tango called La Comparcita, which Welles chose because he thought it was very tedious.

[00:15:34] He was right. And from there, the kind of play goes on. We have a series of it seems like a light evening fair that is constantly interrupted by a series of events. We are taken to Grover's Mill, where the scene of the Martian landing takes place. Eventually, the radio broadcast in, and it seems to be taken over by military frequency, shortwave bands. The Secretary of the Interior comes on.

[00:16:02] This was a last-minute change, because originally they wanted to have an actor playing Franklin Roosevelt, but they thought that you can't play Roosevelt, so they came up with the Secretary of the Interior, but Welles would make sure that the actor new to actually just play as Roosevelt, we'll just call him the Secretary of the Interior. Anyway, so while that's going on, but people outside, across the country, this is a national broadcast, our hearing kind of out of the corner of their ear sometimes this strange series of events.

[00:16:29] Now this is a country where more people have radios than have indoor plumbing. Something like 80 to 85 percent of all Americans have access to radios. They listen to it for about four hours a day, but they don't listen to it in the way that you pay attention to a novel or pay attention to a movie. Often, it's kind of in the background. So it's a background thing that's going on out there. So a couple of minutes into the broadcast, when the Martians start landing and coming out and giving people poison gas and heat rays and stuff, phone calls and telegrams and emergency communications started coming into CBS.

[00:17:03] Also, to a bunch of different origins; newspapers, local police officers, of people trying to figure out what's going on. A lot of people think that the Nazis are attacking. A lot of people think that this is sort of real. There's a kind of general fear of the unknown that kind of gets tapped into. This is the idea that a lot of people say about it. A lot of the stories that we have of this event are kind of colorful, so there's a lot of stories of people jumping in their car and driving through their lawns or through their driveway doors.

[00:17:35] A lot of people taking other money and go buying a bus ticket as far as they can, both during the broadcast currently there is this interesting character of the weeping sorority girl that often comes on. The weeping sorority girl who is either with her boyfriend or with the other girls in the sorority and kind of lamenting that they'll never get to grow up. There's a religious dimension to a lot of these stories. So a famous story; in Indianapolis, a congregant in a church comes in and says, "Don't bother, you're all going to die."

[00:18:04] There are mobs in the streets. A lot of people almost die, but no one actually dies. And this is important, right? Obviously not just for the reason that we don't want anyone to get hurt, but also imagine if someone actually had died in this scenario. I think that a lot of the people who were in the War of the World broadcast went on to fame and fortune. That might not have happened if someone had actually been seriously injured.

[00:18:28] So anyway, all this is happening and all of these messages are coming into CBS headquarters and they're actually coming through to the broadcast booth. So this is what they

sometimes call the reverse hoax of the broadcast. Orson Welles thinks that there are bodies pile up in the streets, you know? And you get a sense of this. There's an intervention about 40 minutes into the broadcast, and this is when a lot of these reports come into the booth. And so you here in the subsequent narration a lot of improvised moments where they're talking about, "Oh, this is not real, we're just having fun with you."

[00:19:02] And they think that this is a horrible thing. The police show up, and so when the play ends, they're taken in for interrogation. There turned over to the press, who write these sensational stories the next day, and Welles and Houseman, and I think Koch as well - no, Koch was at home. He was asleep the whole time. Welles and Houseman, they both tell this story - which doesn't mean it's true, but they both tell the story - of sort of assembling out days after being interrogated by the press and the cops and saying they expected to walk out of CBS and see looting and burning and bodies in the streets.

[00:19:37] And they were kind of shocked to see it was pretty much not like that at all. So anyway, this turns Orson Welles into this amazing showman, right? Who achieved by accident what no one could achieve by design. And so the story of Welles told throughout that week, every major newspaper has carried stories about this for several days, and the kind of legend mushrooms around him. I mean, he thinks that the whole thing was funny, it's true.

[00:20:07] His favorite story about it was that John Barrymore, who was his idol as an actor, heard the broadcast and was also taken in by it. So here's poor Barrymore, and he thinks it's the end of the world, and so what does he do? He releases his favorite dogs. He takes all of his beloved dogs and he says, "Go, be free, because you've only got hours to live, so who am I to hold you?" And well thought this was the funniest thing in the world, and he would tell this story the rest of his life.

[00:20:35] And so this is sort of what I think is important for media science people to think about is we should avoid the humorlessness that I think can sometimes creep into our own tactic of aggrandizing the event. I think Welles thought it was funny. I think a lot of people did a little bit of a face-palm and were like, "You got me." And that was a big part of, I think, the overall effect of it. So Welles and

Houseman and Koch, they got the most important thing that you can get in radio in 1938, and that's a sponsor.

[00:21:06] So Campbell's Soup begins to sponsor the broadcasts and they go on for six or seven months and then come back now and then while Welles is in Hollywood. But it ultimately, I think, was a great event.

Michael Kackman: Chris, I'm really sorry to interrupt again, but I wanted to bring in this report from Bill Kirkpatrick from Santa Cruz.

Bill Kirkpatrick: Hi, this is Bill Kirkpatrick, I'm on the campus of UC Santa Cruz talking to Professor Herman Gray about the issue of race in War of the Worlds and in general about the contested space of radio and television, and television in particular as a space for contesting racial meanings. Professor Herman Gray.

Herman Gray: [00:21:41] You know, I've been studying what is race? I don't ever recall - I don't really think about race or television where the images of black people around people exist. I don't even think about that.

Bill Kirkpatrick: Michael and Chris, I'm going to send it back to the studio from Santa Cruz, California. This has been Bill Kirkpatrick with Professor Herman Gray.

Christine Becker: So maybe it's not just at Notre Dame. Is there something...

Michael Kackman: I'm not sure. In fact, listen to this clip of what sounds like Will Brooker that was just recorded from the BBC in London.

Will Brooker: [00:22:23] Are there any bad effects of comic books? I say here on this subject, there's practically no controversy. Anybody who's studied them and scenes them know that some of them have bad effects. It's my opinion, without any reasonable doubt and without any reservation, that comic

books are an important contributing factor in many cases of juvenile delinquency. This is a public health problem.

Michael Kackman: We're going to have to explore this further.

Christine Becker: I'm starting to freak out a little bit.

Michael Kackman: [00:22:50] I'm sure it's nothing. Let's just get back to your interview.

Christine Becker: Okay, all right. So you said Orson Welles wanted this to sound like a real news broadcast and personally was hoping this would scare people, but did he envision the reaction it did generate in any way? Was that what he was hoping for?

Neil Verma: [00:23:07] Okay. So here, we have the moment in the story where everyone involved, everyone involved, their story changes depending on when you ask them. So here's what's for sure. It's definitely for sure that Orson Welles decided to - he was just the one who decided that this should be the play they do. He assigns it to Howard Koch, who is relatively new at the Mercury Theater, relatively new as a playwright.

[00:23:31] And he hates the assignment. He thinks it's really hard to do. A lot of the stuff you just kind of pulls out of the air. One famous story is that he picked the setting Grover's Mill just by kind of randomly pointing his finger at a map of New Jersey. But he doesn't feel as if this is a really worthwhile pursuit. And actually everyone involved in the play has incredible doubts about it as an effective piece of drama. They think it's very boring.

[00:23:55] They're not sure if the audience will get it. Also, I'm not convinced that they can really predict the audience reaction in the way that I think retrospectively we imagine that they do. I mean, one of the main reasons why a lot of people panicked is that they didn't hear the introduction of the play that Orson Welles does as a kind of exterior narrator. And the reason that a lot of people didn't hear it is because they were tuned into the Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy show on another station.

[00:24:22] So it strains credulity that he would have a timed things so that people would listen to the opening monologue of Edgar Bergen and then tune over to the Mercury Theater. Certainly in the days afterward, he claims that it was all a kind of accident. It's not until later on in life, when he starts to view this as a kind of great moment in his history, and his reputation and part of what makes them who he is.

[00:24:47] It's not until then that he starts to give interviews and talks and says, "Well, we kind of knew that this was going to happen. We weren't dummies. We were playing with fire." So it's a competent answer. I feel like he does want it to sound like news for aesthetic reasons. He's not the only reason who makes radio dramas that sound like news. If he intended to step over the line, I find that kind of hard to believe. But another way of thinking about this is that the war of the worlds isn't about what really happened. It's about what we say about what happened.

[00:25:16] So in that case, I think that we should kind of subscribe to the hoax idea.

Christine Becker: All right, well speaking more to that, as you say, that's sort of the most famous aspect, almost, is the mythologies tied around to this and the fun people have had with perpetuating those. So what are, to you, some of the most interesting mythologies to come out of the broadcast and how and why have those gotten perpetuated over time?

Neil Verma: [00:25:41] I mean, this is kind of the question, really, when it comes to this broadcast. So maybe I'll start with what we know is relatively certain. So we think about 6 million people listen to the broadcast and about 1 million, little more than 1 million kind of were worried or panicked a bit. In a country of 130 million people, this isn't a huge audience.

[00:26:03] I should also say there's a level of dubiousness to those statistics. They're largely based on Crossly Service and Hooper Ratings that were kind of employed by social researcher Hadley Cantril, who wrote this important book, "The Invasion from Mars" in 1940 about the panic.

[00:26:19] Now, the Hooper Ratings and the Crossly Service, they're like the Nielsen ratings of the day. But the problem is that nobody believes them. I mean, if you read the trade literature of this time,

Printers, Inc., Variety, I mean, week in and week out, every single person is complaining about these statistics because they don't agree. They don't think the methodology is very sound. So even people in the industry thought this was kind of a bit uncertain.

[00:26:42] Anyway, so that's what we think happened. A big part of us are remembering it starts in the days and hours - hours and days after the broadcast where a lot of sensationalist news reports come out. I also think that part of to do with not just the hoax, but also with this theory of the primed audience that I think almost everyone in the '40s and '50s but is sort of talk about when they talk about the broadcast, which is to say that this is right after the Munich crisis and a lot of people are kind of jittery, worried about war coming.

[00:27:14] And so the war broadcast gives them a way to express these nerves. Also, because it was your Halloween, so a lot of people feel that superstition had something to do with it. But I feel like in media studies we get an awful lot of traction out of this primed audience idea. One thing that the radio agent did is it made vivid the notion of a susceptible listener as a something that can be studied and quantified and sometimes sold. So is not surprising that a lot of early communications studies work on this tends to be kind of exaggerated, because it kind of aggrandizes the project of communication studies at the time.

[00:27:50] So I think that's one thing to say about it. Another thing to say about it is that whole line of following the susceptible listener, it kind of combats the humor of - there's something very humorlessness about it. If you listen to Orson Welles' interviews about the subject, part of which is in - I think a lot of your listeners will know "F is for Fake" has a segment where he talks about the broadcast. And he things it's kind of funny, right? And I actually think a lot of people who were panicked also think it's kind of funny.

[00:28:20] We've kind of built up this mythology around it. I mean, you know, André Bazin's book on Welles has these wild claims that never actually happened; people committing suicide, miscarriages, but nevertheless a lot of things did happen, right? There were lots of reports of fires, people in Grover's Mill

shooting at water towers, geologists running into the night with flashlights. People in Boston would stand on their rooftops and look for the fires of New York in the distance.

[00:28:45] Anyway, so I think a lot of people did have this kind of feeling of jitteriness, but a lot of people kind of enjoyed that feeling. And, you know, I think that we're kind of doing the wrong thing if we just indulge our own fantasy of the relentless power of the media, you know? Not a catastrophe, not even really a hoax, but an extremely interesting event that tells us something about our own attitudes towards mediation and has consistently been such for 75 years.

Christine Becker: Yeah, and that consistency, why would resonate so much today, there's of sessions with what is real, with the spread of misinformation about twitter, about having moral panics about videogame violence, and you can see this being something that keeps getting kind of repurposed for new media ages and thoughts about kind of the spread of misinformation and how people react. So I can really understand how it would still resonate in that way today.

Michael Kackman: [00:29:39] Yeah, and you know what I was thinking about just the other day is that there's kind of an interesting parallel between this and the fake panic for the kind of miss of the panic of the Lumiere brothers, "Arrival of a Train." You know, Tom Gunning has it is a famous essay where he talks about this, where there's this story is that when the Lumiere brothers premier "Arrival of a Train" in Paris, that the audience freaks out and they run away because they think that the train is real, right?

[00:30:03] No, the myth of that happening is much bigger than what actually happened. But Gunning has this important point in his essay where he talks about we can decide, "Okay, this is a mess," and then discarded, or we can decide, "Okay, this is an allegory." If we think of it as an allegory about susceptibility, about mediation and immediacy, about the very similar and about the real, then it becomes this incredibly rich note for thinking, and I think that's the right approach to this. It's an interesting event, rather than something that did happen..

Michael Kackman: I'm a really, really sorry to break in here again, but I just got an audio file emailed to me from someone who claims to be a student in Henry Jenkins' fan studies class. He apparently completely went off on them. Take a listen to this.

Henry Jenkins: You know, before I answer any more questions, there's something I wanted to say. We received all your letters over the years and I've spoken to many of you and some of you have a travel, what? Hundreds of miles to be here. I'd just like to say, get a life, will you people? For crying out loud, it's just a TV show. I mean, look at you. Look at the way your addressed.

[00:31:15] You turned an enjoyable little job that I did as a LARP for a few years into a colossal waste of time. How old are you people? What have you done your yourself? You must be almost a 30. Have you ever kissed a girl? I didn't think so. There's a whole world out there. When I was your age, I didn't watch television, I lived. So move out of your parents basement, get your own apartments and grow the hell up.

[00:31:45] I mean, it's just a TV show, dammit. Is just a TV show.

Christine Becker: So, oh my God, what is going on here? I think we need to get Bill on this even more.

Michael Kackman: Actually, Bill is on it actually. I think we can bring him to us right now. I believe he's in Madison, Wisconsin, now.

Christine Becker: Okay, so he's got a follow-up report for us?

Michael Kackman: Yeah, Bill, can you paint us a word picture?

Bill Kirkpatrick: [00:32:11] So Michael and Christine, I'm speaking now with Michele Helms to see if she has some reaction to the stranger marks from Henry Jenkins. Professor Helms, thank you for joining us.

Michele Helms: I'm happy to be here.

Bill Kirkpatrick: So you've heard about Henry Jenkins' strange outburst and I was wondering, as a colleague of his, whether you have any ideas about what might be going on. Is this something we should be worried about?

Michele Helms: [00:32:33] Well, I've spoken to Henry recently. He seemed fine to me. I don't know what's come over him, but, you know, we were discussing some online teaching. He seemed perfectly normal.

Bill Kirkpatrick: Online teaching, you say?

Michele Helms: Yes, that's right. We were thinking about MOOCs and similar types of experiments and he seemed perfectly rational to me.

Bill Kirkpatrick: So no idea where this might be coming from? I guess it's an isolated incident, then. We don't have to worry about it. We can continue as normal, then.

Michele Helms: [00:33:02] I would think so. I mean, everything has been going on just as it has been.

Bill Kirkpatrick: Okay, well then as long as I got you one of the line, I was wondering if I could ask you a little bit about your latest research on radio and what you're up to in that regard.

Michele Helms: What?

Bill Kirkpatrick: Radio . Your work on radio studies.

Michele Helms: Radio? That medium went out with a TV. Seriously, who would waste their time on something without pictures?

Bill Kirkpatrick: Professor Helms, I'm surprised to hear you say that. After all, I thought that you thought that radio was an important medium.

Michele Helms: [00:33:31] If you're stuck in your car in traffic, you might punch a few buttons on the dash, I suppose, but only if you forgot your iPod or there's nobody to text to kill the time. Who wants to listen to someone drone on and on without pictures, you know, video, graphics, something. Radio is over. Didn't you see my Facebook post about this?

Bill Kirkpatrick: No, I guess I must have missed that. Well, I guess that's an interesting new perspective from Professor Helms. I guess, Christina, Michael, I'm going to throw it back to you in the studio.

Michael Kackman: Bill, can you offer further explanation of that? Bill? Bill? I think we've lost him.

Christine Becker: I think we've lost everybody. What is going on here?

Michael Kackman: It's entirely possible. We're going to keep working on this.

Christine Becker: Let's get back to the interview. We'll follow up on this for you. We're going to get back to the interview.

Speaking of, then, the current age, you are helping to direct a variety of anniversary events, including a series of blog posts at Antenna and Sounding Out, and will put links to those on our website, but also I'm a very intrigued, you're planning a live tweet of the broadcast on October 30, so I was wondering if you could tell us more about these events; what value your hoping to mine from them, what you think we can learn from these aspects and filtering this War of the Worlds 1938 media then experienced through 21st century media and participatory culture.

Neil Verma: [00:34:53] One of the most interesting things about the War of the Worlds is how it's been thought of overtime. There were new versions of it. One is done in Ecuador in 1939, another one and done in Buffalo in the 1968. There were the films; the 1953 version by Byron Hasking, and I think a lot of your listeners will know the 2005 Spielberg version. A lot of TV versions, or television broadcasts that are about the panic.

[00:35:18] But when I was looking at all of this stuff I thought, "I wonder how we should think about it today. What's the most appropriate way to commemorate this perpetually commemorated panic?" And I thought that it would be interesting to do something that re-creates the kind of mass audience of the radio age in a small way, but at the same time hybridizes that with some of our own media reception practices today. So we came up with this kind of harebrained system of events, and this is myself, Jennifer Stouffer Ackerman from SUNY Binghamton, Andrew Bottomley from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and Erin Trammell from Rutgers.

[00:35:55] The first thing we came up with was this notion of a web series. So it's a 12 or 13 part series, I'm not quite sure yet, but it started in August and it was going to go through until January that's running in parallel on Sounding Out, which is the sound studies blog that I think a lot of your listeners will know. And also, the Antenna blog at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. And we got a bunch of authors, people like Debra Ray Cohen from the University of South Carolina, Michele Helms, Murray Pomerantz, Jake Smith from Northwestern, all writing about either the war of the worlds itself or about other broadcasts in the Mercury Theater series.

[00:36:27] So, we call it "From Mercury to Mars." And that kind of respond this idea of doing a live event for the actual anniversary on October 30, which should be about 8 PM Eastern. And so we got in touch with the WHRW radio SUNY Binghamton, and they expressed interest in doing the broadcast. So we end up with this three-hour chunk of time, and in the first hour we're going to have a bunch of different media studies scholars Kate Lacey, Paul Heyer, who wrote a book on Welles and radio, from Wilfrid Laurier, Alex Russo from Catholic University. They're going to kind of set up the broadcast.

[00:37:02] And then from 8 o'clock to 9, we're going to play the original. Right afterwards, we'll have a few events, but we thought, "Wouldn't it be great if we could actually get people to listen?" Classes, artists, professors, just fans reacted to it using a common across the different social media. So we came up with this idea of the hashtag WOTW 75, so we want to create this kind of social media event around the anniversary that we can to subsequently archive.

[00:37:30] I mean, one of the great things about the War of the Worlds is that we know more about this audience than perhaps any other radio play audience in history because of all of the studies that were done of it. So it's left this kind of residue of reactions, and we want to do something similar. We want to create some kind of residue of reaction so that people will be able to understand what it was like to listen to the War of the Worlds in 2013.

[00:37:54] I think it might tell us something. I'm not quite sure what it is. When the people who made the War of the Worlds got together in the broadcast studio in 1938, they didn't quite know what they were doing either.

Christine Becker: That's inspirational, then.

Neil Verma: Yeah, it is. We're patterning ourselves after this a valiant effort, you know, trusting the unknown. But hopefully it will yield something interesting.

Michael Kackman: Chris?

Christine Becker: Yeah?

Michael Kackman: I'm really sorry, we have to interrupt this again because, okay, now it's not just - there is audio clips, there's...

Christine Becker: I'm checking my Twitter feed, too. Dude, are you seeing? Oh my God, we've got Jenn Holt is a tweeting is that the SEC should be eliminated because the industry has suffered enough from heavy regulations.

Michael Kackman: Whoa, check this out, from @AmandaLots, "New job at CBS. Finally, network TV is back."

Christine Becker: [00:38:44] Oh my god, I've got Kevin Heffernan on Facebook. He's posting brony memes. Brony memes.

Michael Kackman: Brony? Ew.

Christine Becker: Yeah.

Michael Kackman: You know what? I've got another audio clip I think we need to share here. Well, you guys can just listen to it. I think this is Jason Mittell.

Christine Becker: Okay.

Jason Mittell: [00:39:04] America is just so weird and what they think is right and wrong. Like I was watching Breaking Bad the other day and they were cooking meth. I could literally cook meth because of that show. I mean, people watch that show and they can just copy it. What is TV doing to us? Just think of the children. Breaking Bad, I just got into it but I haven't been able to keep up with it as much. There's just a lot of him coughing. I'm in the first season at the coughing is driving me crazy.

[00:39:31] Like, we get it. You're dying. Do we really need a whole two-minute scene of another cough attack? It's just too much. Every bad situation, how does he get out? He just starts coughing. So I think I'm going to start Downton Abbey next, but I don't know if it's my vibe. I always thought that shit was too hipster.

Christine Becker: Hang on a second here. I'm trying to read more tweets. I'm trying to process all of this stuff. Just give us a second here.

[Musical interlude]

Christine Becker: [00:40:09] This is a true stunner. I can't even processes. David Bordwell, on his blog has put up a blog post, a 5,000-word blog post about how he is moving to France and undergoing psychoanalysis so he can better understand himself and psychoanalysis as a film theory.

Michael Kackman: [00:40:27] Look at this. He's just announced himself on Twitter.

Christine Becker: Twitter? Bordwell is on Twitter?

Michael Kackman: Yeah. Whoa, check out of that handle. I guess if we wanted to follow him, just look at [@Objah]. I don't know what that means. I don't know.

Christine Becker: Well, I have the game-ender right here, too. Barb Klinger on twitter, she just tweeted she is dissolving SCMS. And I quote here from this tweet, "The Hollywood Reporter and The Wrap of the industry covered. We're done here." Michael, are we done? Are we seeing the end of media studies here?

Michael Kackman: [00:41:00] There's something going on here.

Christine Becker: Okay. We'll go back to the interview. We'll keep carrying on with Neil.

Michael Kackman: All right. I'll see what I can find in the meantime.

Christine Becker: One random aside I wanted to ask, you said that many people tuned in the late to the War of the Worlds broadcast because they were listening to Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and I had to bring this up because you also list theories of ventriloquism as a research interest. This always just a fascinates me, when I'm teaching history of broadcast, and Michael and I have talked about this.

[00:41:27] And you get to ventriloquism on the radio and the students' minds are blunt. They just don't understand this concept. So can you explain to us what the phenomenon of ventriloquism on the radio is.

Neil Verma: I listened to a lot of the Bergen and McCarthy broadcast. I think they're quite funny, but I specialize in radio place, and I'll tell you one thing that's really interesting is that ventriloquists are often killers in suspense plays. Ventriloquism as a kind of mode of relationship is one that a lot of people attributed to the medium itself, right?

[00:41:56] So the easy answer is, "Well, the radio itself is ventriloquism. It's a voice throwing mechanism, essentially." So isn't it interesting that we can also put been focused on the radio? I mean, that's kind of the easy answer, right? That the radio is, itself, ventriloquism. But another answer is that we call a radio the theater of the mind, and that's a both a trivialization and also a kind of something important.

[00:42:22] When we say that, we're also saying, "Well, there's no craft behind it is constructing everything in mind." And I guess that's true that's also true of a novel. So that's not quite a satisfying answer. On the other hand, we do listen to this acoustic information and participate in some kind of visualization exercise. And that's a rather sophisticated process. So I think when we're listening to a ventriloquist play, it kind of has a way of tickling that relationship.

[00:42:48] You're picturing this dummy show in an incredibly sort of vivid and powerful way. I think people find that really compelling in part because they realize how visual the experience of radio is. So I guess that's my answer. My answer would be that the ventriloquists act as a phenomenon on radio point us toward the vision reality of the medium that we are used to experiencing but surprised to have vivified for us.

Christine Becker: Which in turn makes it fascinating to think about people flipping, or whatever you would call it back in the 1930s, switching from listening to that to War of the Worlds, that idea of kind of what we create in our minds seems like a really profound connection between what might be seen as rather disparate things. And then kind of throwing in the contemporary age, this idea of social media and what we can imagine from what we see in social media, which is, of course, virtual.

And I'm not seeing the people in tweeting with, but what our mind does and can put together with all that is a fascinating kind of cultural and psychological issues there.

Neil Verma: [00:43:40] Yeah, and I think that one of the things that's often said about the kind of McLuene-esque stream of reasoning about the radio is that radio is kind of less than other things. It's less than television, it's less than film. And that minimal quality, I think it shares with things like tweets, right? That has a kind of coolness to it that gives us the perception that we are in control of some kind of relationship with some kind of image, with some kind of communicative act that a comparatively richer form of medium might not provide.

[00:44:12] It's a slippery argument, but there's something to be said about that. Something to be said about the fact that both the radio and social media often seem like they're reducing larger things, drawing things down to hints and double entendre and pointing towards other cultural artifacts and objects, and by doing so they're able to kind of enrich their own narrative field.

Christine Becker: And considering how much I enjoy Twitter and social media, you've given me something intriguing to think about in that regard.

Michael Kackman: All right, Chris, I'm sorry to come back in here, but things are getting a little bit more - I don't know, there is definitely something going on here and I think we're going to need the help of our listeners. Maybe you can get on the twitter and start putting out the word so that we can try to figure out what's going on?

Christine Becker: [00:45:00] Really? I mean, if we're serious about this, twitter? Twitter is a total waste of time.

Michael Kackman: Chris? Come on, you were just on there.

Christine Becker: I've never been on twitter. I've always thought that was a total pointless waste of time. I mean, we've got so many other important - I mean, 140 characters? You can't say anything in 140 characters.

Michael Kackman: But that's - Chris? Chris?

[Musical interlude]

Michael Kackman: Okay. I appear to be by myself in the studio now, so I'm going to go ahead and play the closing of Chris's interview with Neil Verma, but this might, in fact, be her last appearance on the podcast. In the meantime, we're going to solve this thing. I need to get out of the studio. We need to find some guidance on this. You know what? I got a media studies scholar that I can look up. I think I can figure out what's going on.

Christine Becker: [00:45:59] Well, this has been a fascinating discussion about War of the Worlds, and one last thing. I've heard you've taught an online course, a MOOC, as they're called, about this as well.

Neil Verma: [00:46:10] Yes, we just finished the first semester, and some pretty prominent media scholars took it - Henry Jenkins, Michele Helms, Jim Collins, Will Brookers among others. I'm sure they got a lot out of it. They'll never be the same again, in fact.

Christine Becker: Well, that sounds like a great course. I'll have to take it when you offer it again.

Neil Verma: Definitely. We're starting up again very soon. The firm that manages it is this great startup called 2X2L Educational Technologies. They've been a very generous meeting my unusual requirements. You know, I'm convinced that MOOCs are academia's future and I believe that if you and everyone out there listening right now takes my class, this could change the face of media studies forever.

[00:46:54] And I'll be watching closely to see that unfold. Perhaps almost as narrowly as a someone with a microscope, I'd scrutinize the transient creatures that form and multiply in a drop of water.

Christine Becker: Well, I am now very intrigued and I can't wait to see what happens. So thanks for your time, Neil.

Neil Verma: Thank you, and goodbye everybody.

Michael Kackman: I've left the studio now in hopes of getting some guidance from Dr. [Will Edgar] Pearson, the noted scholar of digital media and prelapsarian quantum mechanics. Professor Pearson, we seem to be experiencing an un-precedented crisis in our field. Scores of scholars appear to be losing themselves, abandoning all of that they once stood for. Can you shed any light on this?

Dr. Pearson: [00:47:34] Well, it's not really quite as unprecedented as you might think. Why I recall quite clearly a number of similar ruptures, most notably the evisceration of the ranks of 19th-century phrenologists, following a number of high-voltage electric experience conducted among the members of the Royal Society of London, it's really a sublime bit of productive chaos.

[00:47:59] Really, I'm reluctant to engage in conjecture, but it may well be attributable to MOOC spores.

Michael Kackman: MOOC spores?

Dr. Pearson: Oh, yes. Truly marvelous of things. They can survive virtually anywhere and are circulated by the luminiferous ether. A robust MOOC wipe can be terrifically productive, wiping up the clutter of thousands of years of accumulated nonsense, making room for...

Michael Kackman: A MOOC wipe?

Dr. Pearson: [00:48:25] A completely new metaphysical paradigm. In fact, I'll be starting up a new MOOC of my own, and I'd love to have you participate. It's quite inexpensive and it provides an elegantly efficient means of reaching thousands. No reading or homework required, either. I've been working with

the some colleagues at the University of Chicago to develop a new MOOC focused on critical pedagogy and with just a little luck we should be able to usher in a new era of consciousness.

[00:48:55] Reports show my student participant count growing at a fantastic rate. One might even say I'm going viral.

Female Voice: What are you doing?

Female Voice: Do we have class today? Are we going to have class?

Female Voice: I kind of want to go.

Female Voice: Can we just take a nap?

Female Voice: Professor Kackman? Dr. Kackman?

Female Voice: Can we go?

Bill Kirkpatrick: [00:49:54] This is Bill Kirkpatrick. I don't know whether anyone can hear me now. I'm speaking from a student radio station, 2X2L. Skype seems to be down. I tried calling Chris and Michael and couldn't get anyone on the phone. I couldn't even get Chris Becker to respond on twitter. That's unheard of. This may be the last podcast, but I'll stay here until the end.

[00:50:31] The collected knowledge of decades of cinema study, media studies, radio, TV, cultural studies, it's gone. The MOOCs, they've taken it all. This is the end now. 2X2L calling. 2X2L calling. Isn't there anyone in media studies? Isn't there anyone in academia? Isn't there anyone?