

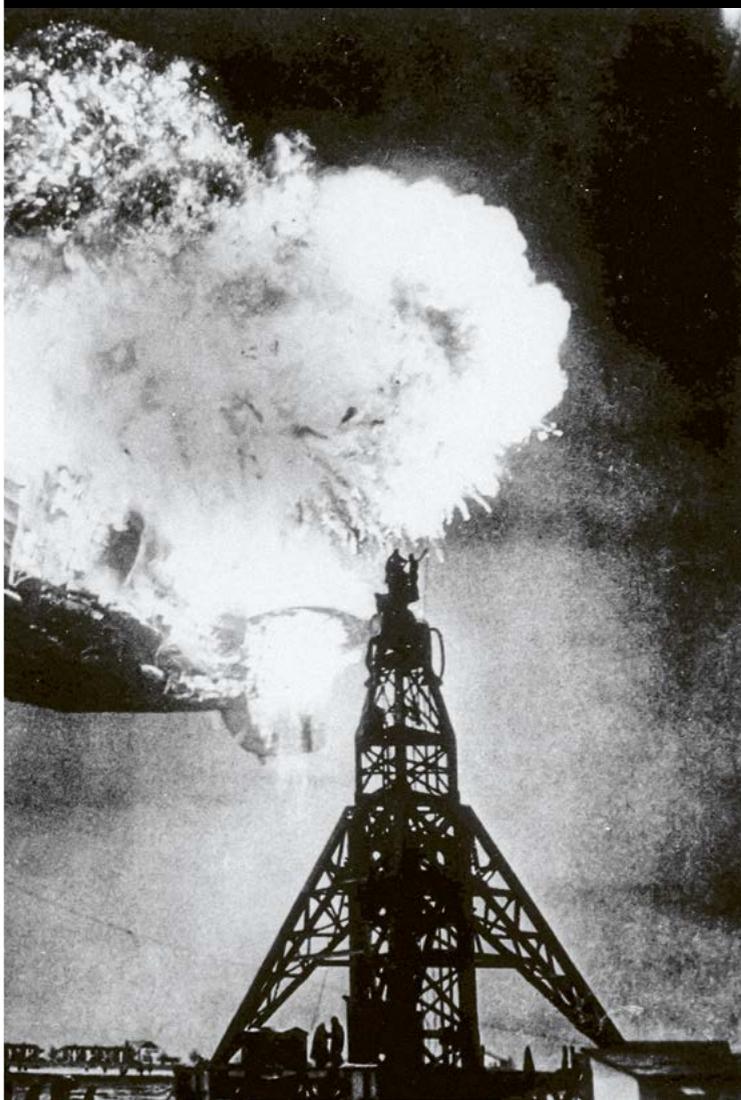
“GET THIS CHARLIE,

GET THIS CHARLIE!”

Jochen Meißner



OR THE CREDIBILITY RESERVES OF RADIO



One of the few iconic moments of radio history is based on an event that took place on 6 May 1937, in the US state of New Jersey.

The 31-year-old radio reporter Herbert Morrison from station WLS and his sound engineer Charles Nehlsen had flown in all the way from Chicago to report on the landing of the airship LZ 127 *Hindenburg* in Lakehurst. Nehlsen will record the news bulletin using a portable record cutting lathe. After the Zeppelin's catastrophic crash, they leave the lathe behind and return to Chicago with four "Presto Direct Discs". The aluminium plates coated with a cellulose nitrate lacquer were the industry standard for radio at the time. The following morning, segments of the 39-minute story are broad-

cast from the Chicago radio station. The NBC network also used the recording, for the first time allowing the broadcast of pre-recorded material. The American radio historian Michael Biel reports that the number of recordings knowingly or unknowingly broadcast by NBC until the middle of the Second World War could be counted on his fingers.¹ Radio was a medium based on the principle of live broadcast.

Ironically, however, this iconic moment of radio was not a live moment in the first place, but rather a live-on-tape moment. What mattered was not the immediacy of the moment, but rather the authentic sense of shock that was expressed by journalist Herbert Morrison, as he shouts out, at around minute 9 of his news report: "It's burst into flames, it's burst into flames and it's falling, it's crash-

ing. [...] Get this Charlie, get this Charlie! It's cra... and it's crashing, it's crashing, terrible."² The hydrogen-filled airship goes up in flames and crashes near the landing mast. Morrison watches as, in his own words, one of the worst catastrophes in the world unfolds. The horror is inscribed in his voice, as is his grief: "Oh, the humanity." The shock wave of the explosion is also visibly and audibly evident as a groove left in the disc as it is being cut on site. Thanks to sound engineer Charles Nehlsen, the cutting head and graver did not destroy the recording discs, which are now stored in the National Archives of the United States.³

But even at the moment of being overwhelmed, Morrison continues to do his job. The call addressed to his sound engineer and first listener, "Get this Charlie, get this Charlie!" ensures not only that there is something to be broadcast the next day, but also that the message he records of this historical event is preserved. The explosion itself is not audible on the recording. The high pitch of Morrison's emotional voice, however, is all the more evident. This is due to the fact that original recordings are always played around 3 per cent too fast, as Michael Biel found⁴ – likely an effect of the multiple transfers of the original discs cut on site to the wax master discs with 33⅓ revolutions per minute and shellac plates with 78 rpm.

In terms of media history, the following can be said about the media "coverage" of this event: The notion of radio as an exclusively live medium, as it started out due to a lack of suitable recording equipment, continued far into the period of professional audio recording. This also illustrates that the live principle is always a category of intermediation – in other words, it is never "immediate" and in very few cases singular. The authentic sound, after all, is not least of all a question of the equipment used for recording, of transmission, and of broadcasting the information. Not to mention the receivers and the media context in which they are situated. A *Volksempfänger* ("people's receiver"), identified by the model name "VE 301" – a reference to the date the Nazis assumed power on 30 January 1933 – naturally has a different media status than a television set seemingly endlessly looping the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on 11 September 2001. Terminal devices, which in addition to all the other streams of information also receive data packets with audio information, come close in their disembodiment to what amplitude-modulated waves (AM) on the medium-wave broadcasting band were able to do in the early days of radio. They brought enough energy themselves and – using headphones and something that served as an antenna – could basically be received without an amplifying terminal device: "From mouth to ear on the beam of electric power ...".

What is it then that distinguishes radio, and the art of radio, beneath the vast firmament brimming with frequencies and a network full of data packets? Even today, in times of crisis, it is the sense of experiencing an event live and direct as it unfolds. But this experience of the world, not only in acoustic terms, is also framed by the forms that the stories or narratives take. This already held true in the early years of radio. Were it not for the crash of the *Hindenburg*, Orson Welles' audio drama *The War of the Worlds*, presented live on *Mercury Theatre on the Air*, would not have had the effect

it did.⁵ Even eighty years after its premiere broadcast on 30 October 1938, the fictitious news story about an invasion from Mars is still the most famous audio drama in the world. And the small town of Grover's Mill (located like Lakehurst in the state of New Jersey) got a monument to mark the landing of extraterrestrials on the radio. Its effects played out in particular in the newspaper industry, which stood in competition with the new medium of radio, and which criticised the radio drama for allegedly triggering a mass panic.

"The reality of radio is the reality of radio ...", warned WDR audio play dramaturg Klaus Schöning in 1977, as he was producing a German adaptation of the Orson Welles' radio drama,⁶ before continuing, "... or otherwise the Martians will come."⁷ That amounted to a warning to listeners and an appeal to the makers to treat media narratives in a responsible way. When the radio drama was repeated one year after the original broadcast, on WDR 2's daily show *Mittagsmagazin*, 158 listeners inquired with the Westdeutscher Rundfunk about the Martians⁸ – despite the fact that Schöning made every effort to avoid the impression of a live newscast. The confusion may have been compounded by the fact that the host of the *Mittagsmagazin* show, Lothar Dombrowski, one of the station's characteristic voices, also had a role in the audio drama. One could surely lament the insufficient media competency of the listeners, but what is also apparent is the high level of credibility that public service radio enjoyed. At the time, there were no private radio stations in Germany.

The resources that Orson Welles exploited – namely the radio reportage, with its live hand-offs to correspondents on the ground, the fluid format transitions from information to musical entertainment and back – all concealed the madness that was unfolding within the extremely compacted narrative. Within just one radio hour, rockets were said to have been launched from Mars, the invaders reached Earth and subjugated it, only to succumb shortly thereafter to enemies that this superior technological civilisation had not anticipated: earthly viruses and bacteria. The media scholar Wolfgang Hagen points to a phenomenon that he calls *Hörvergessenheit* ("listening forgetfulness"), by which one "forgets what it heard by forgetting that it heard, thereby being all the more convinced of the presence and factuality of what is heard".⁹ This listening – or general media-forgetfulness – accurately describes the moment when the monsters emerge from the closet, the Martians arrive from outer space, or a virus comes from Wuhan.

Even more than any media fiction that tickles the aesthetic awareness of each media consumer as a playful exercise in competence building, the greater danger lies in the delegitimisation of media-based information itself that is propagated by interested parties. Because if everything is just a "story", if the framing determines the perspective, in the process impeding any attributions related to identity politics, as well as any discussion or discourse, then reality can be denied, until – or despite the fact that – actual corpses start piling up in the refrigerated trucks.

Once the subversive strategies of the arts have become strategies of power used by the ruling forces, the media makers react in a variety of ways. Firstly, in the attempt to reclaim the credibility

resources of the radio (in whatever channel it is shared) in journalistic formats. Podcasts, like the one by German virologist Christian Drosten on the public service broadcasting channels, reactivate what has been denigrated (and eliminated) by the broadcasters for years as “*Schulfunk*” (“School radio”), because “storytelling” is so much cooler.

The main characteristic of the underlying principle of the podcast, however, is not primarily expertise, but rather the certification of its contents with the expert’s own voice. There have never been so many first-person singular narrators as there are today. Rarely does the author take a step behind the story that is being told. The capacity for abstraction that ensures every sound bite, every interview snippet is the result of a thorough process of vetting, is something that is expected from listeners less and less nowadays. Instead, we often get to hear hours of unedited talk. Who would have thought that boredom is an exceptional feature of authenticity? Not every interviewer is as interesting as the person they are talking to, and not every question serves to advance a deeper understanding of the subject at hand. Instead, meticulous attention is paid to ensuring that the journalist’s own perspective – complete with its blind spots and distortions of perception – is transparent at all times.

In radio drama, the certification of the art work through the voice (of the speaker) is much more difficult. It functions best when author and presenter are identical. Franz Mon and Gerhard Rühm, for example, act both as explainers and as performers in their experimental language pieces. Carlfriedrich Claus turned his physicality itself, or to be more precise: his articulation apparatus, into the subject of his work. And in Christoph Schlingensiefel’s voice, artist and artistic character blended into each other – as was clearly evident in his audio dramas.

At the moment, according to the criticism of radio drama producer Ulrich Bassenge in the *Neue Rundschau*,¹⁰ the radio industry is deaf “to the music of words, the subtle nuances of metalanguage: The Austrianisms of Ernst Jandl, the Bavarianisms of those providing Paul Wühr’s sound bites, the riparian oscillations in the lecture of Michael Lentz.” For this reason, he calls on the audio drama departments to forgo the use of trained speakers for one year in order to heighten the overall sensitivity to sound. At the same time, he warns against using the word “authentic”. In addition, Bassenge demands that “for one year (and clearly it would be the same year), no literature adaptations and no form of a secondary exploitation of literature” should be broadcast.

At the same time, it is evident that radio art formats such as audio drama, artistic documentary, or narrative sound-art pieces are currently moving away from the long-term trend toward documentary formats. What began with the *O-Ton-Stücken* / Original sound pieces of the 1970s and authors like Erika Runge (*Bottroper Protokolle* / “Bottrop protocols”)¹¹ or Peter O. Chotjewitz (*Die Falle oder Die Studenten sind nicht an allem schuld* / “The trap, or, the students are not to blame for everything”)¹² and continued with the stage formats of the theatre performance groups Rimini Protokoll (*Karl Marx: Das Kapital, Erster Band* / “Karl Marx: Capital,



The War of the Worlds monument in Grover's Mill.

volume one”)¹³ or She She Pop (*Testament*)¹⁴ is giving way to an increasing fictionalisation. Incidentally, both groups were awarded the still most prestigious German audio play prize, the Hörspielpreis der Kriegsblinden (War Blinded Audio Play Prize)¹⁵ for the audio play adaptations of their pieces. Both groups conceive of their audio drama from the perspective of the radio and create awareness among listeners of the possibilities and credibility reserves of the medium. Lisa Lucassen of the theatre collective She She Pop learned from radio “that audio drama is namely not theatre without image, but rather that theatre is a kind of audio drama with suboptimal timing, too many breathers, not enough sounds and no sound effects”.¹⁶

One can think of audio drama not only in terms of production aesthetics, but also in terms of the communicative effects. This is precisely what Schorsch Kamerun does, singer of the punk band Die goldenen Zitronen. He too is a recipient of the Hörspielpreis der Kriegsblinden, for his piece *Ein Menschenbild, das in seiner Summe null ergibt* (“An image of humanity that adds up to zero”).¹⁷ As a fan of inauthentic speaking – preferably with a megaphone – he dismantles the aporia of the by-now stale state of subversive speech in his “extra-theatrical audio play about the end of diversity” entitled *Kreiskolbenmotorhase* (“Circular piston engine hare”).¹⁸

Having been socialised in a “dissident discursive pop culture”, Kamerun takes on the role of the “Tailwagger” in his audio drama, who jumps over every stick that is held out for him. As a “circular piston engine hare”, Kamerun rotates between the hedgehogs, who

always get there quicker and who define the limits of the communicative spaces. Because sovereignty is held by whomever determines the framing. However and herein lies the point: In his hounded panting, work is being done – mechanical work, like in the combustion chamber of the circular piston engine, and aesthetic and political work in the audio play. The title of the audio play, *Kreiskolbenmotorhase*, “circular piston engine hare”, literally makes sense. “Get this Charlie, get this Charlie!” we hear Herbert Morrison calling out from the distance.

It cannot be the primary task of the arts to react to simplistic, contradictory, and destructive media messages with fact checks. Just as Schorsch Kamerun reacts to complexity-reducing malignancies by increasing the level of complexity, for example by pondering an expression “that is not suitable for H&M advertising or the next original slogan by [the FDP politician] Christian Lindner”,¹⁹ so too does visual artist and audio play producer Eran Schaerf attempt to increase the level of complexity.

In his audio drama *Die Stimme des Hörers* (*The Listener's Voice*) from 2002, he employed a term used in 2017 by Kellyanne Conway, advisor to US President Donald Trump, to cover up a particularly blatant lie.²⁰ She called it an “alternative fact”. In the automated talk radio station *Die Stimme des Hörers*, featured in Schaerf's audio play by the same name, computer software ensures that information such as the names of people, places, and wars are occasionally replaced by “alternatives”.

In 2017, Eran Schaerf's audio play *Ich hatte das Radio an* (“I had the radio on”), was aired for the first time.²¹ The title refers to a suggestive one-liner uttered by Marilyn Monroe. When asked by a reporter whether she was naked during the photo shoot for a calendar, she protested: “It's not true that I had nothing on. I had the radio on.” Schaerf's piece, like the production before it, is set in a fictional radio station. This time it is a super-station formed through a merger of all the German-speaking broadcasting institutions of the 2030s. News reports are “randomly-automatically” distributed to the listeners. Topicality plays only a subordinate role here. The news bulletins that Schaerf broadcasts in his audio drama reflect – on a highly abstract level – the media-related implications of canonical audio dramas. *Der Lindberghflug / Ozeanflug* (*Lindbergh's Flight / The Flight across the Ocean*) by Bertolt Brecht is cited, as is *Der Tribun* (“The tribune”) by Mauricio Kagel and the previously mentioned *Falle* by Peter O. Chotjewitz. And of course, Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds* is not missing either.

The media-theory significance of radio for Marilyn Monroe is that of the interplay of the meaning of coverage, as in clothing, and news coverage, as in reporting. Monroe's remark, as we learn in Schaerf's audio drama, thus has less of a consequence for the fashion industry than it does for media theory: “Monroe is saying what we already know, namely that every news report also covers up something at the same time – a detail, a perspective, an occurrence on the side-lines of events.” Revealing and concealing are the two sides of a media-based representation (also reception) of the world – an aporia that cannot be escaped. The disclosure of this insight is also part of the credibility reserve of a medium that

reflects on itself. When, as is the case in Eran Schaerf's audio drama(s), thesis, argument, proof, and example converge, and become audible in their execution, then it becomes clear what radio, what audio drama, is capable of. Get this, Charlie.

- 1 Michael Biel, correspondence: “The Hindenburg Broadcast”, *History of American Broadcasting* (last updated 21 Nov. 2019), <http://jeff560.tripod.com/hindenburg.html>
- 2 The complete recording of Herbert Morrison's commentary (uploaded 20 Feb. 2017) can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm36oLQzbQ0>
- 3 Entry on “Herbert Morrison – Hindenburg Disaster, 1937”, *Eye-witness: American Originals from the National Archives*, <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness/html.php?section=5>
- 4 Biel, “The Hindenburg Broadcast”.
- 5 Orson Welles, *The War of the Worlds*. Based on the novel of the same name by H. G. Wells, radio drama version by Howard Koch, directed by Orson Welles. First broadcast on CBS, 30 October 1938.
- 6 H. G. Wells, *Der Krieg der Welten* (based on the radio drama by Orson Welles), translated into German by Robert Schnorr, directed and adapted by Klaus Schöning. First broadcast on WDR, 18 April 1977.
- 7 Klaus Schöning, *Die Wirklichkeit des Radios ist die Wirklichkeit des Radios oder Die Marsmenschen kommen*. Feature, first broadcast on WDR, 18 April 1977. Print edition in Klaus Schöning, ed., *Hörspielmacher – Autorenporträts und Essays* (Königstein im Taunus: Athenäum, 1983), pp. 123–34.
- 8 Werner Faulstich, *Radiotheorie. Eine Studie zum Hörspiel “The War of the Worlds” (1938) von Orson Welles* (Tübingen: Günter Narr, 1981).
- 9 Wolfgang Hagen, “Der Radioruf. Zu Diskurs und Geschichte des Hörfunks”, in Martin Stingelin and Wolfgang Scherer, eds, *HardWar / SoftWar. Krieg und Medien 1914 bis 1945* (Munich: Fink, 1991), pp. 243–74, here p. 271.
- 10 Ulrich Bassenge, “Hoerspiel my ass. Eine Geschichte der Verachtung”, *Neue Rundschau*, 3: *Himmel Horspiel* (2019), pp. 28–32.
- 11 Erika Runge, *Bottroper Protokolle*, directed by Peter Schulze-Rohr, produced by SDR. First broadcast on SDR, 11 June 1969.
- 12 Peter O. Chotjewitz, *Die Falle oder Die Studenten sind nicht an allem schuld*, directed by Richard Hey, produced by SDR/SR/WDR. First broadcast on 20 January 1969.
- 13 Rimini Protokoll, *Karl Marx: Das Kapital, Erster Band*, directed by Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzel, produced by DLF/WDR. First broadcast on 20 November 2007.
- 14 She She Pop, *Testament – Verspätete Vorbereitungen zum Generationswechsel nach Lear*, audio drama based on the performance of the same name by She She Pop and their fathers, music composed by Max Knoth and Christopher Uhe, directed by She She Pop. First broadcast on Deutschlandradio Kultur, 19 September 2011.
- 15 The prize was established in 1950 by the Bund der Kriegsblinden (Federation of the War Blind) and has since been awarded frequently for radio plays representative of “state-of-the-art” radio drama.
- 16 Lisa Lucassen on the occasion of receiving the Hörspielpreis der Kriegsblinden prize for the audio drama *Testament – Verspätete Vorbereitungen zum Generationswechsel nach Lear* on 12 June 2012 in the small broadcast hall of Westdeutscher Rundfunk in Cologne.
- 17 Schorsch Kamerun, *Ein Menschenbild, das in seiner Summe null ergibt*, directed by Schorsch Kamerun, produced by WDR. First broadcast on 25 September 2006.
- 18 Schorsch Kamerun, *Kreiskolbenmotorhase*, directed by Schorsch Kamerun, produced by WDR. First broadcast on 14 November 2017.
- 19 Schorsch Kamerun, “Die Hamburger hätten gegen G20 gestimmt” [“Hamburg had voted against G20”], interview with Stephan Lebert, *Die Zeit Online*, 4 July 2017.
- 20 Eran Schaerf, *Die Stimme des Hörers*, directed by Eran Schaerf, produced by BR/ZKM/Intermedium 2. First broadcast on 23 March 2002.
- 21 Eran Schaerf, *Ich hatte das Radio an*, directed by Eran Schaerf, produced by BR. First broadcast: on 7 April 2017.

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