

## Audio Books in A Visual Culture

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According to André Bazin, long before cinema was invented, it existed as a platonic ideal, a dream awaiting fulfillment. In a similar way, the Talking Book has long been prefigured. In Cyrano de Bergerac's *Voyage to the Moon*, which was written in 1650, moon people use

A concern of metal something like one of our watches, full of curious little springs and minute machinery. It was really a book, but a wonderful book that has no leaves or letters: a book for the understanding which only the ears are necessary (Gladysz 15).

In 1889, Edward Bellamy foresaw lengthy phonographic books that could be read "with the eyes shut. . . [through] a sort of two-pronged fork with the tines spread in the similitude of a chicken's wishbone"(336-337). And in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1951), one finds:

You could see Mr. K himself in his room, reading from a metal book with raised hieroglyphs over which he brushed his hand as one might play a harp. And from the book, as his fingers stroked, a voice sang, a soft ancient voice, which told tales of when the sea was red steam on the shore and ancient men had carried clouds of metal insects and electric spiders into battle"(12).

The dream has become prosaic reality—we are now in the midst of a burgeoning cultural/artistic phenomenon. According to the Audio Publishers Association, 12% of American households listened to audio books in 1994, and the industry's sales have skyrocketed by over 50% since 1993. Over 50,000 titles are now available. Audio book publishing now comprises over a multi-billion dollar industry, showing growth levels and profit margins exceeding those of printed books.

Nonetheless, most of the information on audio books thus far must be ferreted out of trade journals and the popular press. The commentary I have found

primarily focuses on comparing the format (often unfavorably) with the experience of reading printed books. To many, listening to audio books is a debased or lazy way to read, with connotations of illiteracy (only pre-literate children listen to stories); passivity (real reading entails self-construction of the narrative voice); abandonment of control (real reading involves pausing, skimming and savoring); and lack of commitment (real readers sacrifice other activities for their books).<sup>1</sup> These underlying prejudices are reinforced by the format's association with such "low-brow" offerings as business advice and self-help titles, as well as radical abridgments of revered novels. Audio books are both dismissed as a negligible fad, and feared as another potent threat to traditional literacy.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to change the terms of the discussion. Although, undeniably, these books are tightly linked with literary culture, restricting the discussion to this linkage neglects audio's connections with other technological entertainment media. Even though film, video and television may initially seem irrelevant to the audio phenomenon, I believe that— notwithstanding their literary sources—audio books can only be fully understood in terms of their interrelationships with contemporary visual culture.

Accordingly, I offer first a brief survey of the format's history, which will begin to demonstrate the interrelationships; these connections will become more explicit when I lean upon film studies methodology to analyze audio books in terms of their production, distribution, and exhibition.<sup>3</sup>

### Historical Survey:

Audio books have three direct antecedents, each contributing different components that both prefigured the format and shape it today.

The first—and most obvious—is the tradition of reading books aloud. This tradition is a larger part of our cultural heritage than one might initially realize. Reading aloud was taken for granted in ancient

Greece and Rome, and of course, reading aloud from the Bible and other religious texts has been a central component of religious services for millennia. With the development of printing and the spread of literacy, both religious and secular texts were increasingly read aloud for education and entertainment; for instance, Natalie Zemon Davis discusses the institution of the *veillée* in sixteenth century rural France where during a winter evening the community would gather for social contact, mending tools, spinning thread and listening to stories read aloud (70-71).

During the nineteenth century, reading aloud became a major activity in both Britain and the United States. Alison Byerly has documented the extent to which such reading was commonplace in English family settings, and how the practice spread from the private recreation of the upper and middle classes, to working class clubs, coffeehouses and pubs, and into the vastly popular practice of commercial public readings or "lectures." These public readings might be performed by skilled actors, such as Fanny Kemble, who gave up the theater for a successful career as a reader, or by the authors themselves. Dickens, of course, gained great fame and wealth from giving nearly 500 public readings (Byerly; Collins). In the U.S., the same cultural investment in public readings is evidenced in the Lyceum movement of educational readings and lectures, in Mark Twain's popularity as a public raconteur, and in the fact that *McGuffey's Readers*, which sold an incredible 120 million copies between 1836 and 1920, emphasized the skills of reading *aloud*, not silent comprehension (Ong 115-116).

In contemporary American culture, due to the accessibility and popularity of competing entertainments (television, in particular), reading aloud has retreated from a general practice to specialized niches. Current educational theory is heavily invested in reading to children: children are read to at school, at library story hours, on special "educational" television programs, such as "Reading Rainbow," and, traditionally, at bedtime. Indeed, Jim Trelease, whose *The New Read Aloud Handbook* has sold "over one million copies!," advocates reading aloud as "one of the greatest intellectual (and emotional) gifts you can give a child; it is also the cheapest way to ensure the longevity of a culture" (xiv). American adults, however, are likely to hear a story read aloud only in literary milieus, such as college campuses or high-class bookstores, both of which (just barely) keep alive the tradition of notable authors reading excerpts from their own works.

The tradition of reading aloud underlies audio

books both as a fundamental inspiration and in specific practices. Tapes addressed to children comprise a major portion of the marketplace; many of these have an educational subtext in that they either impart a traditional tale such as "The Three Little Pigs," or come packaged with an accompanying book for the aid of young readers. Moreover, both nineteenth-century models, "famous actor-as-narrator" and "author-as-narrator," have been adopted by the contemporary format.

But audio books, of course, differ radically from physically-present storytellers—which is why we need to consider a second ancestor: radio drama. As is the case with audio books, in radio drama the performers and narrators are removed from the listener and mediated by technology. Like audio books, radio drama is addressed not to known or knowable individuals, but to a mass audience. Moreover, although many programs were written specifically for radio, broadcasts frequently presented adaptations and abridgments of already-familiar stories, novels or plays. In addition, radio dramas provided examples of aural dramatizations, of the use of sound effects, multiple performers, music. After flourishing in the thirties and forties, commercial American radio drama has been virtually killed off by the advent of television; National Public Radio may be the only American venue which minimally maintains the tradition of broadcasting narrative material. (In England, BBC Radio has continued extensive production of radio dramas to the present day [Lewis; Lamantia].)

Audio books offering "dramatized" productions specifically replicate radio aesthetics—for instance, the series of Louis L'Amour westerns produced by Double Day Dell offers multiple performers, a separate, all-knowing narrator, sound effects of horses galloping, and dramatic musical scoring.<sup>4</sup> But the links between the two genres are more substantive. Radio has provided the model of how spellbinding an oral medium can be, how listeners can become deeply engaged in a narrative without the benefit of visual cues. Audio tapes are now allowing new generations to experience radio drama because *audio tapes are to radio broadcasts what video tapes are to films: a mechanism for making the text available long after its initial exhibition, for allowing listeners unlimited individual access to texts.* Radio dramas, classic or current, are now being reproduced and marketed by audio publishers. One can obtain tapes of "The Shadow," "Mercury Theater on the Air," "The Lone Ranger," BBC radio plays, monologues by Garrison Keillor or Tom Bodett.

The vast, quiet sub-culture of recording for the blind is the last major precursor of audio books. In 1878, when Edison was designing a crude phonograph, he predicted that one of its benefits to mankind would be "Phonographic books, which will speak to blind people without effort on their part" (Gelatt 29).<sup>5</sup> The national program, coordinated by the Library of Congress, commenced in the early thirties on records (Morton); in 1948, a private charity, Recording for the Blind, also began production. Together these public and private services comprise an enormous network, producing and distributing tapes and players practically free of charge. Although books for the blind have been aimed not at the public at large, but at a specific clientele, it is important to recognize how large the system has become. Recording for the Blind currently offers 80,000 tapes—principally textbooks—while the library system offers 40,000.

Providing books to the blind offered an example of pre-recording a narrative and putting it in an individual's hands for consumption at a time convenient to him or her. In addition, the mail order service provided by the Library of Congress offered a prototype of today's audio mail order distribution. Oral texts for the blind necessarily emphasized the concepts of substitution and incapacity: one listens because—for one reason or another—one *cannot* read. I will return to this issue later when discussing how audio books are typically consumed.

Actually, radio drama and recording for the blind can be considered *ancestors* of audio books only in the sense that they were institutionalized earlier than commercial audio publishing. When considering the history of the industry, we should take note that the recording of speech (not music) was Edison's primary goal in inventing the phonograph. Early phonographs were actually called "talking machines" and were used for preserving the voices of loved ones, for business dictation, and for securing for posterity the speeches of famous statesmen. Using phonographs to convey narrative entertainment, particularly comic sketches, was also prevalent: according to Ronald Gelatt, by the mid-1890s, "speaking records were in great vogue" (53-54). In the early 1900s, the record industry turned rather resolutely towards musical offerings. Amy Lawrence argues that this shift was due to manufacturers' realization that more money could be made by selling pre-recorded material than by stressing home recording or business dictation, and that music records were more popular than talking records because they were seen as having more replay value (16).

Nevertheless, records were still made to preserve historically important speeches and addresses. And

storytelling per se was never completely eclipsed, especially in fare for children. For example, A.A. Milne read parts of *Winnie the Pooh* in 1929, and in the 1940s Lionel Barrymore recorded a version of *A Christmas Carol*, while Basil Rathbone narrated *Robin Hood* (Rust; Whiteman 271-91).

The limitations on recording books stemmed from the fact that early records generally lasted only five minutes per side. (The blind benefited from a pioneering system of thirty-minute records, made viable by federal subsidizing of free customized players to each client [Morton 58].) The invention and standardization of commercial long-playing records in the late 1940s restimulated interest in recording stories, plays and poetry. The most famous pioneer of such material was Caedmon, a small company founded in 1952 by two idealistic young women, Barbara Holdridge and Marianne Mantell, who were finding their careers in publishing stymied by the lack of opportunities for women. (The name, "Caedmon," refers to Saint Caedmon, an English poet of the 7th century, known as "the father of English Song.") Caedmon recorded celebrated authors—Dylan Thomas, Thomas Mann, W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty—reading their own works, as well as famous actors, such as John Gielgud and Lawrence Olivier, reading celebrated texts. Their highly respected recordings have become invaluable oral histories, but Holdridge and Mantell struggled with financial difficulties and finally sold the company's name and assets to other publishers in 1970 (Maddocks, Roach).

Caedmon was dedicated to high literary culture; the opposite is true of another early exploiter of narrative audio—Walt Disney Studios—which produced story records to tie-in with its major films. The Walt Disney Storyteller LP series began in 1957, mutated into LLR Read-Alongs in 1965, and transferred to cassette tapes in 1977. Altogether Disney has produced close to 200 story records and tapes, many of which went "gold" or "platinum" signifying sales of over 1,000,000 copies (Smith).<sup>6</sup> I believe that Disney's story records have served a crucial function in the history of audio books because, due to Disney's unparalleled marketing muscle, they have acquainted each generation of children with the format. (I myself have clear memories of listening to a record version of *101 Dalmatians* in the early 1960s.) As of this writing, Read Alongs of *The Lion King* are flooding stores across the country. Like all tie-ins, they are a way for children to "own" and "hold on to" the cinematic experience.

The contemporary boom in audio books began in the early eighties. Even long playing records were heavy and cumbersome—a *War and Peace* produced for the blind took up 119 records! (Morton 60)—thus audio tape cassettes obviously provided great advantages. But the industry received its biggest advance from the invention and popularity of miniature, portable players, players which could be taken places where TVs could not. As others have noted, the contemporary industry was dependent upon the invention of the Walkman (in 1979), and upon the increasing prevalence of cassette players in cars (by 1988 roughly 60% of U.S. automobiles included such players [Donovan 42]). In 1985, the publishing industry was rubbing its hands over the opportunities afforded by all these cassettes players—Valeri Cade of Simon and Schuster noted: “There are between 140 and 400 million cassette players in the country...that means *there are more cassette players than tv households* [my emphasis]” (Anello 55).

Along with the technology making the format possible, certain cultural changes made it desirable. The rise of audio books is intimately related to housing and employment patterns: as more people have moved out of cities into suburbs their commutes have become longer and more tedious. The increased interest in health and fitness, which led to repetitious exercise routines, has also been a factor.

Under appreciated, but equally powerful, I maintain, has been the influence of visual media. Films have accustomed us to the use of novels as source material; we are not surprised or shocked by radical adaptations or abridgments. (Audio publishers overtly defend their abridgments by reference to cinematic practices.) Video tapes have habituated us to private performances of already-publicized texts, selected from a bounty of choices, consumed around our personal schedules, in private locales. As for television, firstly, it has provided the pre-eminent example of using technological narratives to divert and pacify restless children. And secondly, the number of hours television sets are operating in American households testify to how forcefully television has provided a model of combining entertainment with repetitive tasks, of ameliorating loneliness with technological company.

The influences of film, video and television will become more apparent as we turn to look at the audio industry today.

#### Production:

Thus far, I have been talking about audio books as if they constituted a unified genre, but in actuality the

field is comically eclectic, ranging from *Vanity Fair* (on 23 cassettes) to *Closing the Sale* (everything you need to know in 42 minutes), to I-Can-Read Packages of *Amelia Bedelia*, accompanied by the paperback. Tapes vary widely in length, subject matter, production value and aesthetic approach.

Since production is relatively inexpensive, the field of publishers is equally diverse: the standard catalogue, Bowker's *Words on Cassette* (which includes such fields as foreign language training and business instructional material), lists 1100 producers and distributors. Some companies—the Majors—are well-financed divisions of established publishing houses (e.g. Simon and Schuster, Random House); like old-time movie studios, they tend to have a recognizable “house style.” Other publishers are small scrappy independents. Most producers are headquartered in New York, but California hosts a sizable collection. Interestingly, many of the key executives come with backgrounds not in literary publishing but in film/video/TV. A small avant-garde movement is even stirring: some companies are experimenting by producing unconventional fare designed solely as spoken audio. Will Ackerman of The Gang of Seven could be parodying experimental filmmakers when he proclaims, “What I’m looking for is a whole new way to explore the medium” (Seay 50).

It is in the choice of material and production decisions that the ties between audio books and visual culture become most blatant. A large proportion of audio books are tie-ins to movies and TV, and analysts see these tie-ins as partially responsible for the industry's recent phenomenal growth (Tangorra 64). The fact that audio publishers have minuscule promotional budgets has intensified this reliance upon tie-ins (Kopka “Audio Publishing,” A-4). Half a dozen different audio versions of *Dracula* rode on Coppola's coattails in 1992. “Seen the movie?/ hear the book” offers Books on Tape with recordings of *The Age of Innocence* and *Schindler's List*. Tapes of *Star Trek* are so numerous and popular as to occupy a shelf of their own. Dove Audio's Winter 1993 flyer offers abridged versions of: *A Brief History of Time*, *Tarzan of the Apes*, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Farewell to My Concubine*, and *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*.<sup>8</sup> The marketing of tie-ins is so pronounced that the whole genre could possibly be a covert promotional tool of the film industry.

This suspicion is bolstered by tapes such as Dove's *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, performed by none other than Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, which

represent a revealing subset of audio books—those that feature the actor(s) from the film. This practice is not a recent invention: for instance, Caedmon hired Henry Fonda to narrate a highly excerpted version of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1978 and James Mason to narrate *Lolita* in 1981. Such tapes are a direct continuation of the tradition of the Hollywood radio shows such as “Lux Radio Theatre” (1934-1954), “Screen Guild Theatre” (1939-1951), or “Screen Directors Playhouse” (1949-1951) in which movie stars openly promoted their films by re-enacting their roles for radio audiences. (The practice of radio adaptations of films has continued on a lesser scale into the present day: witness National Public Radio’s high profile adaptations of *Star Wars* (1981) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1983)—now available on audio cassette from Highbridge.)

Yet even audio tapes which offer material which has not been made into “a major motion picture” heavily utilize the Hollywood star system. Glance at most catalogues or audio shelves and the names of performers famous from film or TV leap off the page: Lee Remick, Roddy McDowell, Frances Sternhagen, Michael York, Charlton Heston, Meryl Streep, etc. Sometimes the “fit” between star image and text is uncommonly apt: Joe Mantegna reads *Get Shorty*; Elliott Gould, *The Big Sleep*; Leonard Nimoy, *The War of the Worlds*; Claire Bloom, *Rebecca*. The narrators’ associations with other texts adds an enriching or distracting intertextuality. Such casting also serves as a form of publicity for these movie stars and, in general, feeds into the public interest in stardom and celebrity.<sup>9</sup>

However, perhaps the ultimate linkage between audio books and the film industry is a new genre of tapes just offered by a company called “Cinema Sounds.” This Los Angeles company is aping Disney in taking films, not novels, as primary sources and producing what one might call “audio-izations” of such hits as *In the Line of Fire*, *Cliffhanger* or *Undercover Blues*. Their add copy reads: “Finally movies you can see with your eyes closed.”<sup>10</sup>

As for the actual production of the tapes themselves, industry practice and terminology again illustrate alliances with film/video/TV. In the case of abridgments, freelance writers are hired to produce a script. (Abridgment is generally done with the author’s consent.) In consultation with all the parties, the “executive producer” determines the cast. Reading well is an arduous acting challenge, involving not only a special voice quality, but discipline, concentration and—if requested—skill in differentiating characters through diverse accents and intonation.

On the day of the recording, the reader’s performance is guided by a “director”; this director may ask for the reader to speak more slowly, or louder, or more clearly, but he or she also asks for certain line readings and performance variations. During taping, each passage is repeated until perfect, in a manner analogous to shooting several “takes” of a scene.

The tape then moves into post-production where muffed lines are excised and the preferred takes strung together. The physical editing process is exactly analogous to film editing: the 1/4” recording tape is positioned in an editing block, cut with a razor blade and spliced with adhesive tape.<sup>11</sup> In a “fine cut” the editor even snips noises of swallows, breaths and mouth clicks. “Room tone” is added for pauses. Like the Classical Hollywood Style which labors to create a seamless product with all traces of enunciation and labor rendered invisible, tape producers aim towards a final version which erases all the hesitations and mistakes, and even hides the physicality of their storytellers. After a minimal “mix” to add music and side breaks, the tapes are then ready for duplication and distribution.

As is true with filmmaking, producing an audio book is manifestly a collaborative process: the text is affected by the cumulative contributions of original material, producer, abridger (if used), director and performer(s). Take, for instance, Simon and Schuster’s 1994 tape of *Streets of Laredo* (unabridged, on 14 cassettes). The story and characterizations are vintage Larry McMurtry, a rambling, humorous, fatalistic continuation of *Lonesome Dove*. The narrator, Daniel Von Bergan (he played the jury foreman in *Philadelphia*), has a calm voice full of weather and sand, tinged with wry humor. Someone—either narrator, director or producer—has decided that the chapters centering on two Mexican characters, Maria and Joey Garza, should be inflected differently, and so for these Von Bergan adopts a somewhat sing-song Mexican accent which is both slightly racist and highly effective in separating the characters and eliciting our sympathies for Maria. Similarly, someone decided to open and close the tape with brief, haunting harmonica renditions of the Western ballads “Streets of Laredo” and “Red River Valley,” a choice as resonant as any other in the text. Although McMurtry’s contribution is obviously paramount, the final product is shaped by the input of all the collaborators.<sup>12</sup>

#### Distribution:

Reading industry publications, one gets the impression that distribution systems are currently in

flux, reflecting both the diversity of the field and an identity crisis, as if the industry can not decide whether to model itself on books or on video. This confusion is physically replayed in the packaging: many of the tapes are packaged to resemble books, others to resemble video cassettes. (The ones that look like Celestial Seasonings tea boxes are "gift sets.") The two main distribution avenues are purchase and rental.

Up until now audio books have been primarily sold through bookstores and mail order with smaller exposure in other markets. Major chain bookstores have long included a profitable audio section. (Barnes and Noble has recently demonstrated its commitment to audio by adopting a promotional mechanism belonging to film/video/TV: *the preview*. Barnes and Noble Superstores have been installing "Audiobook Preview Centers" which allow customers to sample two to five minute excerpts from current audio bestsellers [Kopka "Pilot," 25]). The average purchase price for two-cassette abridgments is between seventeen and eighteen dollars. Obviously, such pricing makes audio books more expensive than paperbacks, film-going, video rental or television and radio. In an attempt to broaden the market, at least four companies are currently moving towards establishing cheaper lines: Durkin-Hayes, Random, Dove and Harper are offering "a 'second tier' of audio, analogous to that inhabited by paperbacks in the book world" with prices ranging from five to nine dollars. Durkin-Hayes—a Canadian company—has had success opening up new sales venues at K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Payless and grocery stores and especially at truck stops (Kopka "Low Price," 32). Time Warner has announced a new push into record stores and sporting goods stores (Kopka "Time Warner," 28).

As for rental, the two major avenues have traditionally been libraries and mail-order houses. Although libraries are pinched by budgetary problems, the demand for audio books has been so heavy that libraries have made them a priority. *Library Journal* sees audio books as the fastest-growing library collection (Annichiarico 36-38). Mail order houses supplement these offerings: Books on Tape, which sends out 3500 books a day, is the largest commercial rental outlet. Both of these sources stress unabridged selections.

Because libraries have limited selection and mail order is also costly, it seemed only fitting in 1993 when Blockbuster Video agreed to test market renting audios at 200 selected outlets for prices equivalent to video rental. My thesis about the interconnection of audio and video phenomena would have received a

handy boost if this test marketing had succeeded; unfortunately Blockbuster was discouraged by returns and yanked the audio tapes. Audio publishers complain that the Blockbuster test was premature and that the staff of the stores were not adequately acquainted with the genre (Kopka, "Blockbuster," 32); Blockbuster apparently is now reconsidering (Kopka, "Blockbuster Reconsiders," 31). I believe that the failure actually indicates that—for reasons that will become apparent below—audio and video are not *interchangeable* entertainments.

Although some efforts are still being made to combine audio with video, the Blockbuster failure has turned attention to *audio-only stores*, modeled partially on bookstores and partially on video outlets. Indeed, *Publishers Weekly* recently reported on the rise and success of close to 100 audio-only stores around the country, with some of their trade devoted to sales, but with fifty to ninety percent of their business coming from rentals of tapes for less than \$3.00 each (Kopka "Sounds," 32). Although much of the industry's emphasis has been to attract the notice of the widest possible audience to audio tapes (at Wal-Mart, etc.), the growth of audio-only stores also indicates the solidification of a specialized segment of the population who have become habitual listeners to audio books.

A recent survey by the trade group, Audio Publishers Association, helps us understand the demographics of audio listeners. Unlike the teenagers thronging the video or record stores, the APA found that the average age of audio listeners was roughly 45 years old; their average income over \$47,000 and their average educational attainment quite high. (This tendency towards educational achievement is even more pronounced in the results obtained by an independent researcher who studied the clientele for Books on Tape's "high class" unabridged recordings in 1992. Helen Aron discovered, for instance, that 41% of her respondents held post-graduate degrees and that they are avid readers of printed books.) Both surveys, I suspect, must be skewed by focusing on the adults who consummate transactions; their statistics manifestly fail to take into account the sizable use of audio books by children (perhaps because children's tapes are coming from libraries and toy stores?) Nonetheless, among adults, one must conclude that thus far audio books have been relatively restricted to an older, upper-class, educated audience, people who are finding a new medium to feed an already-established reading habit. Intriguingly, a gender imbalance also appears. According to *Publishers Weekly*, until just recently the industry vastly

underestimated the appeal of the format to women, but "Now...the importance of female listeners has become established fact, overturning what had been conventional wisdom—that audio buyers were predominantly men interested in thrillers and tips on closing sales to ease the boredom of a long commute" (Goddard 24). The latest demographics indicate that 69% of the consumers of audio books are female. The importance of female listeners has not, to date, been reflected in the offerings available: less than 20% of the Books on Tape 1994 catalogue is narrated by female performers. Moreover, one can also detect a bias in the generic distribution of tapes; offerings clump in genres traditionally appealing to men, e.g. westerns, science fiction, sea stories, and neglect genres historically associated with women, such as romances.

These issues bring us to the question of who is listening to audio tapes, when, and why.

#### Exhibition:

Unlike printed books, but like their visual counterparts, audio book exhibition is dependent upon technology. The apparatus is small, portable, and so cheap that the players themselves are used as giveaway bonuses by tape publishers. And cassette players—unlike projectors, laser disc players, or even VCRs—are uniquely unthreatening. In *Video Playtime*, Ann Gray interviewed numerous women who were technophobic about their VCRs, but she discovered none who harbored similar unease about cassette players. User friendly or not, for exhibition, the apparatus must be fully functional: a stolen tape deck, a malfunctioning cassette, or dead batteries make the text completely inaccessible.

Although operating the players is easily mastered, leading individuals to feel control over exhibition, this control is close to that one exerts over a video tape and quite unlike one's relations with printed books. This is due both to the physical characteristics of audio tape, and to the phenomenology of the performance. Like video, the individual decides when to start, stop or pause. However, the tape plays forward without page numbers or chapter headings for guidance or easy reversibility; there are no "tracks," and nothing analogous to "picture search." Finding one's place if inadvertently lost is a major headache; rereading a passage is possible but cumbersome. Rand Richards Cooper remarks on the extent to which audio narratives unroll at a predetermined pace: "A spoken novel...goes relentlessly, invisibly on, a single line of sound that keeps coming at you, freezing you in an eternal, nervous Now"(15). Learning to concentrate

continuously, to keep up with the tape's pace, is a skill that takes some practice.

Moreover, audio tapes, like our visual media, and unlike books, offer a *concretized performance*. Whether expressively broad (like Herminone Gingold's over-the-top reading of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* for Caedmon), or neutrally deadpan (like Dan Lazar's rendition of *Frankenstein* for Books on Tape), each reader gives an interpretation which is mechanically fixed. Just as each pianist will play a score differently, each audio narrator will offer a unique enactment of a written text. The listener does not attend to this performance *passively*, for audio tapes call forth a special level of imaginative engagement, but it is true that the listener has no power to change an immutable interpretation.

Actually, the circumstances of exhibition separate audio books from most other art forms. As we all know, "reading" audio books is generally combined with other activities that monopolize the hands and eyes—as with the blind, one listens when one physically cannot read. Approximately 50 percent of the time, audio books are listened to while driving, either for routine commuting or special long-distance trips. Listening while commuting is primarily a solitary experience; family car trips comprise the only major circumstance in which listening to audio books is a communal activity. In either case, the duration of listening is tied to external factors, i.e. the length of the trip (though I've been reassured to learn that other listeners also sometimes sit in parking lots until they can break themselves away). Furthermore, in both cases the movement through the narrative is mirrored and amplified by the car's physical movement through space, creating a sensation of *driving through the story* that may be unique in the history of narrative.

The other 50% of the time people listen to audio books they combine listening with such activities as ironing, knitting, or exercising. Books on Tape solicits stories from its customers and publicizes such intriguing combinations as listening while swimming laps, climbing mountains, sculpting clay, or herding llamas.

What ties together both automobile use and the other activities is that audio books are turned to as distractions from some activity which would otherwise be tedious, arduous and or solitary. The language of the customers writing in to Books on Tape reveals not only aesthetic enjoyment, but the reliance on this medium as a palliative. Pam Johnson writes, "Listening to a book while nursing our son, Eric, has been a real lifesaver. For the first two months I spent 3-4 hours a day nursing." Inez Devlin-

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Audio books offer a unique avenue for ameliorating modern living conditions. In *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schorr argues that since the 1950s working hours have steadily increased, not just for ambitious professionals, but across the board, for housewives working the second shift, for blue collar workers putting in long overtime or moonlighting on second jobs, etc. It can hardly be

coincidental that as working hours have extended and leisure hours contracted, Americans have found diversion in a format that is so portable and that leaves hands and eyes free. Audio books might be condemned as an opiate, allowing people to bear work or routines that otherwise might become unbearable. Or they might be thought of as a liberating tool, a way to beat the system by making the routine instructive, aesthetic, and entertaining. Listening to an audio book allows one to combine duty and pleasure.

Industry research indicates that once a consumer starts listening to audio books, he or she gets “addicted,” and price becomes secondary. This explains both the industry’s comfortable profits and why the fastest-growing segment of the industry is unabridged books. Regular users of audio books can not get enough out of ninety-minute texts—there are too many miles to jog or drive, too many boring tasks to finish.

Granted that a tedious situation can be made more bearable by distraction, why not read a book or watch TV or videos? When portability is the issue, why not listen to the radio or music tapes? Why audio books now?

**The pleasure of the text:**

Although I have already offered multiple partial answers, here we must directly confront the key questions: What is the “message” of this medium?

In an article in *New York* magazine, Naomi Woronov is articulate about the pleasure she gets from this format: “It takes us back to slower days, when...

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When Carolyn goes away to judge a llama show or attend a conference she takes your books with her. Time sure drags when she’s gone . . . the least she could do is leave your books home for us!

Cassandra and Spring Fantasy  
of Camelot Llamas  
Bill and Carolyn Blalock  
Long Valley, New Jersey

Photo/feature from 1994 Books on Tape Catalogue.

the poetry of prose—the rhythm and sound of the lines—was as meaningful as the meaning”(43).

“*It takes us back to slower days.*” Ironically, given the horror some literati express, I believe that the format is profoundly conservative in the sense of *conserving* a cultural heritage. Film, video, TV are ultimately the progenitors of audio books, because by their omnipresence, they have created the yearning for their antithesis. Audio books stress the richness of words, not visual images, the ear, not the eye. They offer narrative, description, dialogue, not MTV editing, special effects dinosaurs, or car chases. They offer continuous absorption, without the frustrating interruptions of commercial television or radio. These rectangles of magnetic tape have a quaint, old-fashionedness about them; they hark back to reading aloud in the family parlor, to Dickens performing *A Christmas Carol*, or to gathering around the wireless for the latest episode.

For notwithstanding all the movie tie-ins painstakingly emphasized above, the industry is tightly linked to traditional literary culture, with all its riches and prestige. The owners of New York City’s first audio-only store were astonished by numerous requests for Dante’s *Inferno* in Italian, and for unabridged versions of *Moby Dick* (Kopka “Audio Independent,” 24). Craig Black, the President of Blackstone Audio Books, explicitly argues that these books are the avenue for preserving “the wisdom of the past,” for “remedying that which was missing from [one’s] education.” (He goes so far as to claim that the format has come to the rescue of a decaying society [Blackstone, inside cover].) For the older, educated, wealthy audience identified by the surveys—who may be living in the suburbs and enduring long commutes—audio books present a major new avenue to hold on to a valued literary tradition, to carve a space for it in their busy lifestyles.

However the appeal goes even deeper. Woronov also notices that, “Listening to books takes us back to the loveliest moments of our childhood—those quiet attentive times when someone special read aloud to us or spun us yarns or told us spooky stories.” The industry itself is fully aware that the psychic pleasure of audio books is the pleasure of Storytime. On Harper Classic’s packaging the invitation to regression is explicit: “Let us read you a story. . . Remember how great it was to have somebody read to you?”

The format is thus linked not only to our cultural past, but also to our own pasts. In their examinations of “the pleasure of hearing,” Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman both rely upon the perspective of

psychoanalytic theory, where the Voice is seen as symbolic of the voice of the mother that surrounds the infant child. They turn to the writings of Guy Rosolato, who “associates that enclosure with plenitude and bliss, and reads it as an emblem of the idyllic unity of mother and child. Rosolato also argues that this primordial listening experience is the prototype for all subsequent auditory pleasure” (Silverman 84; Doane). If listening pleasure in general is unconsciously associated with the mother, listening to a story told aloud is even more associated with childhood, because as Silverman notes, in Western culture, the mother is the archetypal first narrator.

Audio books by their very nature offer a special companionship, an easing of solitude or loneliness. This may explain the fervent gratitude—e.g., audio books are “a lifesaver,” “a godsend”—in the tones of the Books on Tape respondents quoted earlier. (This may also explain why motivational, religious and self-help titles sell so well on audio.) Unlike film, video, and dramatic television programming, all of which are predicated on the illusory fourth wall, the fiction that these events are just happening and the viewer is magically privileged as an unacknowledged, invisible observer, audio books are predicted upon *direct address*. We are not overhearing, or eavesdropping; the narrating voice is explicitly addressing the listener. In fact, “envoicing” the narrator creates a sense of connection stronger than reading impersonal printed pages: the communicative paradigm—storyteller to listener—that underlies printed texts has again become flesh.

And this connection is powerful. As Christian Metz teaches us, the voice always refers us back to its source. The special “grain of the voice,” the accent, and inflections of each narrator are unique, personal. Alone in one’s car—suspended in transit between one location and another, one occupation and another—the proffered companionship is uniquely seductive. If the companionship offered is that of Meryl Streep or John Lithgow, so much the better.

Yet this return of the repressed, this return of the oral storyteller, is fraudulent. The storyteller is not a physically-present bard, nor a snugly parent, but a well-paid, highly skilled performer of a text (usually) originally composed for a printed medium. What we are witnessing is not actually a return to orality, but an embrace of what Walter Ong calls “secondary orality,” the technological mediation of the voice.

Notwithstanding the “companionship” of the audio narrator, audio tapes can paradoxically also be recognized as cloistering. Our culture has long been uneasy about “secondary orality,” fearing that it will replace interpersonal contact. (Remember when

people were afraid of the telephone?) Children's audio books, specifically, have often been castigated as illegitimate time-savers for working mothers. Daniel Boorstin darkly warns that all technology insulates and isolates (10); certainly audio books are a new tool for withdrawing from one's immediate task or surroundings into a private, imaginative world. Could there be something perverse about listening to an audio book instead of the birds, insects, and traffic on one's walk; is there something worrisome about "seeing" the fictional diegesis rather than the countryside one is driving through? Listening to an audio book in the house while doing the chores is qualitatively different from reading a printed book because one sequesters oneself from family members noises and voices via the earphones.<sup>13</sup> Ray Bradbury's habitual listener to singing books in *The Martian Chronicles*, Mr. K., does not provide a sanguine model. Mr. K is insensitively withdrawn from and unfaithful to his wife, and ends up murdering the first astronaut to arrive on Mars in a jealous rage.

Part of the importance of acknowledging the interrelationships of audio books with film/video/TV is that this knowledge serves as partial antidote to the format's nostalgic associations and high culture claims. Audio books are only a pseudo-escape from contemporary stress, consumerism, and impersonality; they are part and parcel of the interconnecting web of high technology, marketing manipulation, and celebrity fetishism that drive the visual media. Often they are literally part of publicity and tie-in campaigns.

But another thing we can learn from approaching audio books in relation to their visual cousins is to reject narrow-minded judgments. Film history illustrates how blindly critics may resist a novel, popular, technologically-based upstart and how long it may take to win a true understanding of that upstart's unique aesthetics and riches. Audio books may be that rare treasure, something perilously close to a new art form. Or rather, the rebirth, in mechanical guise, of an old art form. In watching the fate of audio books today, we have ringside seats as Calliope's daughter comes of age.

## Notes

I would like to express my gratitude to Rick Harris and Carolyn Willis of Harper Audio, Lynda Sheldon of Random House Audio, and Barbara Singleton of Books on Tape, all of whom contributed much helpful information.

<sup>1</sup>See discussions by Cooper and Birkert in such mass circulation venues as the *New York Times* and *Harpers*.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the fear of the effect of computers on traditional literacy see Richard Lanham's *The Electronic Word*.

<sup>3</sup>A note on terminology. There is currently no agreement on what to call audio books: "books on tape," "spoken word," "recorded books," "books on cassette," "talking books," etc. are all used haphazardly. By "audio books" I am here referring to commercially recorded narratives now generally distributed on audio cassette tapes (previously on records, and in the future, perhaps, on CDs).

Similarly, listeners to such books are commonly referred to as either "readers" or "listeners"; and the speakers are termed "readers," "performers," or "narrators." As a general rule, one should avoid "readers" because of the possibility of confusing the two parties.

Finally, one must decide how to label audio books. They are not a new *medium*, nor a new *technology*. Perhaps the best choice is to see the phenomenon as a newly popular application of existing technology, a *genre* or *format* that has developed stable outlines.

<sup>4</sup>Even here, however, the influence of film and television is apparent. L'Amour's *There's Always A Trail* (BDD, 1994) starts with a "pre-credit" sequence, an ambush in progress, and pauses later for title identification. To my knowledge radio dramas did not use such teasers—film inaugurated the practice in the 1950s and it was later adopted by television.

<sup>5</sup>I am indebted to Amy Lawrence for her discussion of early phonographs and for her citation of Gelatt.

<sup>6</sup>In addition to *The Lion King*, Disney is currently marketing some 40 Read-Alongs.

<sup>7</sup>Seth Gershel, Vice President of Simon and Schuster Audio, remarks "Audio is not supposed to be the book spoken; it's a different medium. It is not meant to replace the book or to be a read-along. The audioscript is tantamount to a movie script" (Annicharico, 36).

<sup>8</sup>Audio books "[C]an enjoy four promotional opportunities," Weitzberg [VP sales Wood Knapp Video] boasts. "You're guaranteed two hits, first when the hardcover is out and then the paperback. Then, if it's a movie, that's a third hit, and there's another when it comes out on home video. So the life of the product spreads out over one-and-half to two years" (Paige, 45).

<sup>9</sup>The practice of using Hollywood stars predates the contemporary industry. For instance, in listing 78s produced in the 40s, Paul Whiteman cites an *Alice in Wonderland* narrated by Ginger Rogers, a *Moby Dick*, read by Charles Laughton.

<sup>10</sup>This concept is not original with Cinema Sounds. In the late 1970s and early 80s there were record versions of *Citizen Kane* (Mark 56), *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

(Columbia), and *E.T.* (MCA), all of which were awarded Grammys.

<sup>11</sup>Like the film industry, audio publishers are on the cusp of moving into digital technology.

<sup>12</sup>End credits for this "blockbuster" production include director, recording engineer, editor, two associate producers, producer and harmonica player.

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of the loneliness and isolation of book reading per se, see Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*.

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