Funhouse Mirror: Podcast Horror and Listener Culture in the Digital Age

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INTRODUCTION

Horror in the Age of Podcasts

As experts on horror can attest, humans are phobophiles: we are drawn to what repels us, fascinated by what frightens us. As much as we may fear what lurks in the dark, we still feel compelled to look – or, in the case of popular horror-themed podcast audio dramas, to *listen*. Within horror fiction, the familiar boundaries between what we call "reality" and fiction serve as lines of defense against actual danger, reassuring audiences that whatever creatures might be prowling within the confines of a text cannot, in the end, harm us. That said, the appeal of the genre lies paradoxically in how it *crosses* those boundaries in the minds of the audience, entering their lives in ways that both unsettle and delight. As an aesthetic and experiential phenomenon, horror is curated by its audience; they deliberately subject themselves to horror media, angst and delight intermingling as their boundaries are transgressed, however briefly. The podcast medium lends itself particularly well to the boundary-crossing potential of horror, physically invading its listeners' homes and even breaching their bodies, in ways that other horror media, books or films, in which the aural is subordinate to the visual, cannot quite achieve. This thesis examines the repercussions of boundary-crossing within popular horror-fiction podcasts and the impact it has had on the fandoms that have proliferated around them, in a digital age where once classic real-world boundaries between audience and author, and reader and text, have become more permeable and culturally unstable than ever before. In the first chapter, I reexamine key reader-response paradigms in light of modern fan culture, as the lines of content ownership and reader interpretations blur. Meanwhile, the second chapter focuses on the unique uses of sound present within podcast dramas, and how the creators of these podcasts utilize it to frighten and delight their audiences.

This thesis focuses on the podcast audio drama[1] specifically, as opposed to radio audio dramas, narrowed further to only horror-themed podcasts. The podcast's relationship to radio is hotly debated within academic circles, the main point of contention being whether or not podcasting should be viewed as an extension of radio or as a culturally distinct phenomenon. For the purposes of this thesis, I situate podcasts within media history as a descendant of the radio tradition, but a descendent that has carved out its own niche in the audio world; podcasts are more connected to the multimedia culture of the digital age than most radio programs, given the deep intertwining of internet culture with the distribution method of podcast media. Almost every podcast has some kind of social media and website presence online dedicated specifically to its own programming, which has become a necessary component of marketing and publishing podcasts. Another key problem with equating radio and podcast, beyond this digital difference, is the disparity in radio broadcasting between cultures: while many countries, including the United Kingdom, have a strong tradition of public broadcasting on the radio, and therefore have a listener base more familiar with audio drama conceptually, the United States, by contrast, has a much weaker radio presence. Several researchers, including Siobhan McHugh, have examined these different podcasting traditions, though the distinction between "American" and "European" styles identifies more the level of relation to radio and general stylistic choices rather than actual location. "American-style" podcasts tend to be seen as having a more "chatty, familiar, personal, fluid, intimate" tone, whereas "European-style" podcasts are more "sophisticated, anonymous, musical, sound-rich," and "crafted" in style, as well as being more closely aligned with traditional radio sound (Spinelli and Dann 22). Despite the relatively less developed radio history of America, it is primarily American and American-style podcasts that have seen widespread

[1] A dramatized, fictional, purely acoustic performed narrative; alternatively referred to as podcast dramas or simply audio dramas within this thesis.

success on podcatcher platforms such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify. Without a widespread radio-based frame of reference for their works, American podcast writers and producers instead have cultivated a homegrown sense of authenticity in their works through a carefully crafted sense of camaraderie with the listener on the part of the host. The influence of this style does sometimes cross international borders however, as research suggests that audiences tend to prefer the more "friendly" American style, which has inspired some non-American podcasts creators to emulate its tone (Spinelli and Dann 174). Thus, national differences – especially given that online, borders between countries are less defined than in the physical world – are relatively minimal when examining podcast dramas.

This is not to say that horror fiction is a universal or cross-cultural phenomenon. Horror as a genre reflects the fears and communicates the anxieties of the culture that produces it, just as the slasher films of the 1980s spoke to an American public steeped in highly publicized serial murders and Republican-fed paranoia about rising crime, and just as, in the twenty-first century, films like those of Jordan Peele speak to the anxieties that marginalized communities feel about societal and systemic racism in America. Understanding the fears that resonate with the audiences of popular podcasts is necessary in order to fully conceptualize the affect and effects of their narratives on the audience. While some media critics such as Danielle Hancock and Leslie McMurtry have discussed the reasoning behind the appeal of horror and mystery podcasts, in several articles published both together and separately, other critics focus primarily on the economic implications of podcast popularity instead of the social implications behind it for both podcast audiences and even society as a whole. This project takes a different approach. I examine the social setting of podcast fan spaces and how podcast media interacts with it, focusing on the consequences of fan appetites on the creative work in the industry instead of simply its monetary

possibilities and audience growth. To begin understanding the current climate in podcast fandoms and their narrative preferences however, one must first examine the roots of mainstream podcast audio drama by discussing one of the most popular horror podcasts to date: *Welcome to Night Vale*.

Widely considered to be the first podcast drama to achieve mainstream popularity, *Welcome to Night Vale*, originally released in 2012 and written by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, is a horror-comedy audio drama presented as the titular town of Night Vale's local radio station broadcast, hosted by the character Cecil Palmer. Each episode generally follows a radio-show format, with Cecil shifting between different news segments, which include a "weather" segment where a full song is played. While each episode functions as a standalone narrative,[2] there are significant narrative arcs that often span dozens of episodes; these arcs are rarely completed chronologically, however, and overarching plot points are frequently returned to months or even years after their initial introduction. The pilot episode, for example, mentions the missing "Delta flight 18713," which later became a larger narrative element more than 150 episodes later during the podcast's eighth year of production. Fink and Cranor's podcast is also notably experimental in style, often playing with and resisting the classic confines of the audio medium: for instance, Episode 94 "All Right," discussed in depth in Chapter Two, plays through only one side of the listener's headphones; Episode 133 "Are You Sure?" utilizes "dynamic insertion technology" – the tool that allows podcast creators to insert ads into their works, separately from the primary audio text, in a way that allows them to change those ads easily – to publish three alternate endings to the episode, with each individual download having a chance to get one of the three different endings (Quah). This is all to say that *Night Vale* remains deeply influential in the world of podcasting, and continues to innovate and push the boundaries of

[2] Barring multi-episode arcs such as Episodes 19A and 19B "The Sandstorm."

audio drama further as it continues publishing new episodes bimonthly. The surrealist horror elements of the podcast also lend themselves particularly well to fan interaction in the form of transformative creative works like fanart and fanfiction, a factor that, according to some researchers, may be the key one to launch *Night Vale* to its level of fame on sites like Tumblr (Watts 13).

Night Vale and its sister podcasts published under the Night Vale Presents banner are key to understanding both podcast audio drama and the fan culture surrounding it on social media sites, primarily due to *Night Vale*'s widespread popularity amongst podcast listeners. Tumblr, which this thesis will focus on when examining these fan cultures, was particularly influential in the rise of audio dramas in the past decade; journalists and even the writers of *Night Vale* themselves have acknowledged how its Tumblr fandom spread the podcast by word of mouth, going viral on the platform and spreading far beyond it (Baker-Whitelaw). At the height of its popularity, *Night Vale* was surpassing even Ira Glass' wildly popular *This American Life* – the same podcast which later launched podcast juggernaut *Serial* to fame, and a staple of the Apple podcast charts to this day – to become the number one podcast on iTunes only one year after its initial release (Wynn). It has remained fairly high in both ratings and the public consciousness since then, an influential force in audio drama even ten years later in 2022. Its more mainstream popularity has made it the subject of a significant amount of podcast scholarship, most notably the work of Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, who has edited a scholarly essay collection devoted to *Night Vale*. Aside from *Night Vale*, only Sarah Koenig and WBEZ's *Serial* has attracted similar levels of academic interest; this is despite the large rise in podcast listening over the past decade and the significant impact podcasts have had on culture, particularly within the fannish subcultures on social media.

WBEZ and Sarah Koenig's hit investigative journalism podcast *Serial*, released in 2014, launched podcasts into mainstream popular culture almost overnight, with an even larger portion of Americans listening to podcasts now than ever before. With a download rate of 4 million downloads per episode of its first season within the first month of its release, *Serial* quickly became a cultural phenomenon highly influential on the field of podcasting, and even spawned a resurgence of the "listening party" from the days of communal radio-listening (Spinelli and Dann 14-15, 253). While *Serial* cornered the market on nonfiction podcasts, *Night Vale* (released two years earlier, in June of 2012) was circulating widely in online fan spaces like Tumblr in the year after its release and onwards. To this day, in fact, many fans can quote from memory the opening lines of the pilot episode: "A friendly desert community where the sun is hot, the moon is beautiful, and mysterious lights pass overhead as we all pretend to sleep. Welcome to Night Vale" (Fink and Cranor, "Pilot" 0:00). Both podcasts have had significant cultural impact, especially among young people on social media. It is safe to say, therefore, that both *Serial* and *Night Vale* are touchstones to understanding podcast horror and audio media that podcast fans consume.

Night Vale's widespread popularity was foundational in creating the current expectations among podcast fans, as listeners joined other audio drama fandoms, that podcast dramas would contain the kind of boundary-crossing, immersive narratives that have come to define podcast dramas over the past decade. It was one of the first podcasts to perform live show tours; it has eight original works performed live in this way to date, including their ongoing 2022 tour of "The Haunting of Night Vale." Live shows are integral to the current podcast fan culture and dynamic, with numerous podcasts of various genres touring to sold-out theaters across the continental U.S. and abroad. While many podcast producers are limited by the prohibitive

expense of national or international tours, smaller podcasts will sometimes perform shows in their immediate communities, as *The Penumbra Podcast* did in 2018 with a live reading of the first two episodes of "Juno Steel" in Somerville, Massachusetts. These live shows allow the audience to enter a shared physical space with the creators of their favorite podcasts, and in doing so provide a spatial manifestation of the intimacy cultivated by podcast writers in their works. The symbiotic relationship *Night Vale* has with its fans helped create today's podcast fan culture, encouraging a climate of interactivity and closeness that had not previously existed in podcast fandoms. The audience's narrative involvement within the live shows – which already cross the border to invade the physical space of their audiences – alongside *Serial*'s wide recognizability, crafted a podcast fan base primed for the "post-*Serial*" subgenre's appearance and virality in the audio drama community. This subgenre imitated *Serial*'s style for its epistolary mode, further popularizing the format within the field of podcasting.

The epistolary format, while particularly emblematic of the post-*Serial* subgenre, has become one of the predominant narrative frames of podcast dramas. Earlier audio dramas like *The Thrilling Adventure Hour* (2005–2015) and *Our Fair City* (2012–2018) utilized similar "radio-esque" frames as *Night Vale*, with non-epistolary podcasts such as *Darkest Night* (2016–2020) (narrated by film actor Lee Pace) remaining outliers in the general podcast landscape. These non-epistolary dramas, with the exception of British comedy *Wooden Overcoats* (2015–present), tend to receive less traction within fan spaces, though some achieve success outside of that context instead. Many of the most Tumblr-viral audio dramas of the past decade however adhere to the epistolary format, with the horror anthology series *The Magnus Archives* (2016–2021) being one of the most significant and popular examples of the past 5 years. Produced by Rusty Quill and written by Jonathan Sims, *The Magnus Archives* began as a

horror anthology series framed as recordings of "statements" given by people who experienced paranormal events in their lives. Over the course of its five seasons, the podcast reveals a larger overarching narrative connecting the anthology episodes: within the world of the narrative various supernatural "entities," each representing a manifestation of common fears[3], vie for control of the world; each of the statements presented in the episodes are, within the fiction of the podcast, examples of those entities' horrific influence on the world. Like *Night Vale*, *The Magnus Archives* had a significant Tumblr following that influenced both its popularity as well as the course of the podcast itself. Notably, a large portion of the audio dramas that become popular on Tumblr have diverse casts and feature queer characters; Ella Watts notes this trend with respect to both *The Magnus Archives* and *Night Vale*, as there is some correlation between their increase in popularity in that fandom space and when characters were officially revealed to be queer (Watts 13). While I do not explicitly discuss the politics of fandom sexual identity within this thesis, it is worth noting that, since a significant percentage of Tumblr fans are queer themselves, there may be an additional level of emotional attachment to and projection onto these characters, thereby increasing fan investment in the podcast: an idea which I do explore later in this thesis.

While the diverse queer representation in *Night Vale* may have influenced its popularity in fan spaces, *Night Vale* itself heavily influenced the landscape of the audio drama genre. Podcast drama has never completely abandoned *Night Vale*'s horror elements: a significant portion of popular fiction podcasts, in fact, fall into various horror-adjacent subgenres. Used within this thesis as case studies, *The Magnus Archives*, *The Black Tapes* (2015–2017), *Alice Isn't Dead* (2016–2018) are all popular horror podcasts in social media fan communities; even popular sci fi podcasts, such as *The Bright Sessions* (2015–2018) and *Wolf 359* (2014–2017),

[3] For example, the titular archive is bound to an entity representing the fear of surveillance and exposure.

frequently employ some horror elements in their narratives. While many podcast dramas utilize the classic gothic epistolary frame, a number of those podcasts choose to imitate other podcasts, instead of radio as *Night Vale* does, as their mode. McMurtry and Hancock describe the "post-Serial" wave of audio drama, which model elements of their writing and acoustic styling after Koenig's *Serial*; these podcasts also tend to involve a paranormal mystery solved by the narrators, and often exist within their narrative worlds in the form of varying recorded audio media. Most famous is the award-winning audio drama *Limetown*, created by Two-Up Productions in the mid-2015 wake of *Serial*'s popularity. *Limetown* presents itself as an investigative journalism podcast hosted by the Koenig-esque Lia Haddock as she researches the fictional disappearance of the titular science-commune Limetown and the mysterious cover up that surrounds it. *The Black Tapes* is another popular example of this subgenre, using similar documentary styling, editing, and language as Koenig's podcast. Like many other audio dramas in years since *Serial*, *The Black Tapes* also focused on a paranormal investigation into an inexplicable disappearance. All of these aforementioned podcasts, even those not categorized as post-*Serial* by Hancock and McMurtry, still perhaps take inspiration from *Night Vale* in presenting themselves as recordings and broadcasts produced by their primary cast. In Chapter One, I examine how the interpretive framework that podcast audiences gained through *Serial* and its audio-drama descendants changes the way they approach audio drama narratives, as well as how the collective interpretive frame present within fandoms specifically shifts the audience's expectations for the podcast dramas it consumes.

Night Vale Presents primarily works within epistolary storytelling, with their namesake podcast being joined by similar horror and horror-adjacent podcasts *Alice Isn't Dead* and *Within the Wires* (2016–present) in the years since *Night Vale*. Later podcast audio dramas from Night

Vale Presents transitioned away from the comedy elements of *Night Vale,* with both of the aforementioned podcasts being more dramatic in tone than their predecessor. *Alice Isn't Dead*, created by Night Vale Presents' Joseph Fink, follows a truck driver who is searching for her missing wife through "audio diaries" that the narrator records through her truck's radio. Jeffrey Cranor, *Night Vale*'s other co-writer, writes and produces the dystopian sci fi drama *Within the Wires* alongside co-writer Janina Matthewson. It – like *Alice* and unlike *Night Vale* – is published in seasons, with each being told in both a different recorded format and following a different narrative set within the same fictional world[4]. Both podcasts were less popular than *Night Vale*, though still quite successful by the standards of podcast dramas, an aspect that I discuss in Chapter Two. I argue that a key aspect of podcast drama success comes from the exploitation of the epistolary framework: many podcasts create what I term a "narrative body" for their listeners, and the more successful and more effective immersion of their audiences within those surrogate bodies sensorially creates stronger attachments to the audio drama. All of the podcasts discussed within the body of this thesis create these "narrative bodies," as I term it here, for their listeners to inhabit with varying levels of success, through sound as well as the audience's fandom-influenced expectations.

In the digital age, where anyone with internet access and an online presence is available with the click of a button, the fan communities that spring up around podcasts are more prolific and well-connected than fandoms in the pre-digital past ever could dream of being. There has also been a radical shift in how audiences interact with media in the past two decades, as fan communities have gained notoriety and organization that they lacked previously: an occasionally toxic culture of "fan-ownership" has begun to dominate the online world. It is now a fairly common view among so-called "superfans" that they, as devoted audience members, are entitled

[4] The first season, a significant example in my second chapter, presents itself as guided meditation tapes.

to have a hand in the creation of their favorite works and even in the construction of the narrative itself. Fan audiences are now approaching texts from a primarily creative angle, responding to them not only emotionally but also physically in the creation and spread of art, derivative texts, and social media posts. Prioritizing collective over personal interpretation in readings of texts, fan culture has begun to degrade the apparent necessity of critical-analytical approaches to works in the minds of readers. This necessitates a shift in the critical paradigms scholars use in approaching and examining texts, as the social elements of reader interpretation become more important in a digital era where online communication can have such drastic impacts on the reader's experience of text. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, fans have an unprecedented personal and identitarian stake in the media they consume, and, given how interoperable identity and consumption have become, especially online, they may not be entirely unjustified in feeling this way. This thesis is comprised of two chapters: "The Mind: Listener Interpretation and Fandom Culture," which turns to "listener-response" criticism and affect theory to examine fan-culture influence on podcast narrative frames and on its implications for textual interpretation; and "The Body: Sensation, Sound, and the Narrative Body," which explores innovations in the use of sound and language in this supposedly monosensory medium, for, as we will see, audio-drama writers and editors create surrogate "bodies" for the listener that are then subjected to the physical dangers that horror narratives unleash. Through close readings of podcast texts and critical engagements with fan discourses and fan culture, I hope to uncover the surprising—and sometimes unsettling—ways in which reader interaction has undergone a sea change in the past decade, and how critical approaches to transformative new media can – and must – adapt to the modern digital age.

CHAPTER ONE

The Mind: Listener Interpretation and Fandom Culture

1. Introduction

The structuring logic of horror-themed media is the unsettling idea of porous boundaries: the edge of the known, that fine line between the self within and the monster lurking without. This border serves as both the outer limit of the normal and a protective line of defense for those still within the realm of "normalcy." In horror-based media, however, borders are often unstable. Fundamental to the horror experience, from the eighteenth century to the present, is the collapse of both literal and metaphorical boundaries by textual creatures, with many gothic texts even worrying the line between the reader and the work itself. We see this phenomenon in popular horror-themed podcast audio dramas today, such as *The Magnus Archives* and *The Black Tapes,* which pay homage to eighteenth-century gothic pioneers Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole, even as they push the aesthetics and psychology of boundary-crossing in unsettling new directions. In this chapter, we focus on the unstable boundary between the interactive listener and the unpredictable and invasive text, and how podcast dramas work to weaken that boundary. The heavily interactive fan culture of contemporary social media sites has destabilized traditional barriers between audience and text, author and reader, and between fans themselves. In allowing listeners and fans unprecedented levels of control over both textual meaning-making and textual production, this boundary-collapse has ushered in a culture of online bullying and fandom groupthink. As horror audio dramas invite the audience into their narrative worlds, the audience invites the horror into their own worlds. Through participating in fandom and championing the horror narratives they admire, podcast fans meld with the text to produce a unique kind of narrative monster.

This chapter serves primarily as an introduction to the mindspace of the podcast listener, examining the role of the listener in the interpretation and meaning-making of the narrative audio dramas that populate online fan spaces as well as providing a general introduction to the current state of fandom culture on social media sites. The culture of those fan spaces challenges the traditional academic conception of the reader and their role, as I will examine within this chapter. In the context of podcasts and podcast culture, Georges Poulet's classic assertion that reading is fundamentally a passive act is more dubious than ever (Poulet 59). For the sake of concision, this thesis will focus on fan culture and fandoms present on the social media site Tumblr. In many ways, Tumblr serves as a sort of microcosm of larger social media sites like Twitter or Facebook, though one that is popular for encouraging blogging about media and fandom specifically. As Tumblr staff note on the website's "About" page, Tumblr currently hosts around 546.1 million blogs; not all of these blogs, however, are necessarily current or regularly active ("Press Information"). At any given time, there are millions of users posting to and scrolling through Tumblr, many of them blogging about and consuming fan content for pieces of media they love. Tumblr users are not the only ones either: traditionally "fannish[5]" media (works considered genuinely nerdy or off-trend as recently as a few decades ago) have gained traction and acclaim in pop culture, with comic book adaptations and video games now saturating the popular market. Even the tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons, which for several decades after its release was so mercilessly mocked that players often denied playing it at all, has undergone a radical shift into mainstream acceptance in the past decade.

In light of the unprecedented rise of social media use in the past two decades, it is more important than ever for scholars and laypeople alike to examine what exactly their fellow citizens

[5] Defined in The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction as, "relating to or characteristic of science fiction fans or fandom," in this thesis expanded to include all fandom communities ("fannish").

are reading, watching, and listening to in their leisure, as well as how they interact with various texts once they have "consumed" them. If Tumblr – a website with approximately three times fewer monthly users than Twitter, whose daily user count also outnumbers Tumblr's total monthly users by approximately thirty million people – can inspire the kinds of dangerous and harmful fan interactions that it does in a corner as niche as podcast drama, what similarly abusive behaviors is society as a whole capable of ("Press Information"; Jay)? Thus, an in-depth analysis of social aggression and interpretive coercion in this particular corner of podcast fan culture can expose some of the more abusive and psychologically violent parts of our modern internet culture more generally.

On those social media sites, one podcast genre in particular dominates the audio drama fandom scene: horror. Aside from tabletop podcasts like *The Adventure Zone*, horror podcasts are among the most frequently discussed on Tumblr. Interestingly, *The Magnus Archives* is one of the only horror podcast dramas to become popular on Tumblr in the podcast community already present besides *Night Vale*. Podcasts such as *The Penumbra Podcast* (an anthology podcast that tends to alternate between "short story" episodes in two different sci fi and fantasy series) are popular, but their horror episodes from the early "seasons" of the podcast go largely unremarked upon in its fandom. Horror, however, has now become the biggest draw for podcast fans on Tumblr: from *The Magnus Archives* to its sister series *Old Gods of Appalachia*, from *Night Vale* to *Alice Isn't Dead*. Horror evokes strong emotions in a way that is both captivating and repellent to a user base prone to overanalyzing children's cartoons, fascinating in its complexity but whose subject matter chafes against the established propriety of Tumblr's fan culture. On a website where a large portion of fan communities balk at any narrative with elements deemed "problematic" (a term which could refer to anything from on-screen murder to poor word choice,

depending on who is using it), horror narratives that rely on the (often literally) gory details are intoxicatingly seductive and off-putting at the same time. Fans are fascinated by the terrible events the narratives present, caught in the perhaps surprisingly pleasurable sensation of being torn between the two extremes of emotion provoked. Podcast fans often have passing familiarity with several audio drama genres, given that many listen to multiple podcasts of varying genre after their first; this familiarity with broader conventions of podcast drama allows for stronger immersion, as it provides a tether back to the safety of the known from the discomforting, unfamiliar terror horror podcasts present. Regarding immersion, the so-called "mock reader" from reader-response criticism is also relevant to our discussion of horror in podcast dramas: given the post-*Serial* styling of many of the most popular horror podcasts and the predominance of "found-footage" and similar narrative frames, much of the horror in podcast dramas can be traced to the invocation of the audience within the world of the story. Additionally, as seen in fan spaces, many of the more popular podcasts have significant crossover in their fans; it is common to see users who are fans of and who blog about several major audio dramas at once. Thus, audio dramas tend to have fairly homogeneous fandom spaces, which influences the various podcasts' relationships with their listeners and makes much of the following analysis applicable across supposedly different podcast fan spaces.

2. Listener-Response Criticism

Before we explore the larger social and societal implications of podcast fandom, however, it is necessary to examine the relationship between audio text and listener. According to reader-response critics, the literary meaning of a text is not "contained in the words on the page," as Jane Tompkins notes; instead, it is produced by the audience's interpretation and

perception of the text (Tompkins x). Even in a medium that does not always rely upon written or readable texts such as podcasting, and which therefore might be thought of as better at communicating authorial intent through its verbal nuances as opposed to pure text, meaning-making still lies entirely in the listener's mind; while the voice work, sound effects, and sometimes music affect the listener's understanding and experience of the work, it is ultimately the audience's interpretation itself where the meaning of a work is found. Sandra Moyano-Ariza raises several interesting points within her research related to this, one of the most salient being the idea of viewing a work of art as itself an autonomous agent of affect: instead of a work of art or literature being purely representational of the world and inert affectively, it is a self-contained and unique experience that may act upon a reader's mind. Moyano-Ariza argues exactly this point, advocating for the treatment of works of literature as experiences, rather than simply representations of the world – the text itself affects the reader as "an autonomous third entity," in her words (Moyano-Ariza 1). Many reader-response critics have discussed literature in similar ways, shifting the focus of literary analysis from the purportedly self-contained text itself to the reader's experience of it. In today's fan-centric popular culture, audiences have certainly embraced the concept of creative works functioning primarily as interactive fan "experiences" instead of as purely representational works to be consumed passively. Art and literature now come with fannish identities attached to them, identities that themselves come with larger social implications than simply picking up a book or movie for fun may seem to have. Audiences are pressured by both media corporations and other audience members not simply to consume media, but to embody its brand even after the initial act of consumption. Movie-goers are encouraged to become *fans* of the films they enjoy, pressured by corporate media monopolies and popular culture into taking on media-driven identities now relevant to even non-fandom

spaces. The "identity effect" produced by texts now extends beyond the finite time dedicated to enjoying them and even beyond the original medium, creeping fungus-like into aspects of the reader's life seemingly unrelated to their media consumption.

As Tompkins notes, the effects of a text are equally important to its meaning, since the meaning "has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader" – or, in the case of podcasts, the mind of the listener (Tompkins ix). It is through this concept of "listener-response criticism" and affect theory that I will approach a discussion of audience, the representation of the audience within the work, and the interaction of fans with the text in a social online setting. Poulet notes that he often has "the impression, while reading, of simply witnessing an action which at the same time concerns and does not concern" him (Poulet 60). Modern podcast writing, particularly for audio drama, is keyed to draw the audience in even further than the passive witnessing Poulet describes, acknowledging the audience explicitly within the text in such a way as to incorporate the audience as an active participant in the narrative instead of as a passive container for it. The interpretation of text is also heavily influenced by the fan culture of social media sites, leading to commonalities in readings of works that diverge significantly from textual elements and opening fans to an experience of "common consciousness" between *fellow readers* of a text even more so than between individual readers and the text (Poulet 59). Key to this discussion, specifically with respect to podcasts and podcast culture, is the narrative frames of audio dramas and how they are interpreted by the audience and presented by the podcast writers. Leslie McMurtry discusses the idea of the "framing error" in radio drama listenership referring to this phenomenon as "transgressing boundary rituals," with the "boundary rituals" being the expectations the audience brings with them to a work regarding the traditional form of the medium; as a terminology note, I will be using the terms

"transgressing boundary rituals" and "framing error" interchangeably, as they refer to the same phenomenon. A "framing error" refers to the way some listeners of audio drama blur the line between the fictional world of the drama and the real world of the listener, an "error" in how the listener interprets the narrative "frame" of the story. One of McMurtry's key examples is the long-running English radio drama *The Archers*, and how listeners would call into radio stations to discuss characters within it as though they were real people whose lives they were following. The "found footage" style is extremely common in horror audio dramas, as we will see later, borrowing from the classic gothic epistolary format. Hence, there is a large pool of popular horror-themed podcasts that present listeners with the opportunity to make these so-called framing errors.

3. Truth in Fiction

McMurtry discusses the "infamous" documentary-style horror-based TV program *Ghostwatch*, a broadcast notorious for the repercussions the supposedly "live" broadcast had upon its viewers in 1992:

> Framed and produced as a live news programme, the credibility of *Ghostwatch* was strengthened by the participation of presenters like Parkinson, known for his participation in live television interviews and not drama. However, it was the liveness of the programme, the fact it reached into the domestic space (unlike film), and an inability to verify its veracity in real-time that contributed to its more radio-like nature (McMurtry, "Transgressing Boundaries" 2).

Ghostwatch presents itself as a live journalistic investigation of poltergeist activity at a home in London, with the final portion of the made-for-television film revealing that (within the universe

of the "documentary") the broadcasting of the program was spreading the poltergeist to others' homes and strengthening the spirit. The program allegedly frightened many of the families watching it in much the same way that Orson Welles' notorious 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* did, with several accounts of the show's aftermath claiming that the BBC received a staggering number of panicked and angry calls – though the exact number is unclear, some sources have placed estimates as high as 1,000,000 calls on the night it aired – which led to *Ghostwatch* being permanently (though informally) banned from being reaired on British television ("GHOSTWATCH FAQ"). To this day, only clips from the show have been shown on British channels, and the original full-length film has not ("GHOSTWATCH FAQ"). Much of the original outcry was due to how realistic the film seemed to be, and how the program did not clearly acknowledge that it was fictional within the film's content. In a similar way, some audio drama podcasts have embraced a less clearly delineated presentation of their reality-blurring narratives, in opposition to other podcasts which more clearly acknowledge their status as fiction. Consider Two-Up Production's 2015 podcast drama *Limetown*: the podcast presents itself as an investigative journalism piece in the same vein as Sarah Koenig's 2014 podcast *Serial* – the explosion of popularity it experienced will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter – imitating the editing, writing, and speaking styles of it as well. This presentational format is popular among audio drama writers working in horror specifically, as the equivalent found-footage format became popular among horror filmmakers; within podcast dramas, the genre picked up steam with the release of *Limetown* and other horror podcasts such as the recently-adapted *Archive 81* and *The Black Tapes*. Unlike many of its sister-podcasts, *Limetown* steadfastly refuses to acknowledge its own status as a work of fiction within the podcast episodes themselves or on the podcast's official websites. *Limetown* does not credit

writers or voice actors at the end of episodes (as is common in other popular audio dramas such as *Night Vale* and *The Magnus Archives*), and there is no sound present within the podcast that is not technically diegetic (as the music and editing is part of the in-universe editing done prior to the "broadcasting" of the episode within the storyworld). The producers assiduously omit any textual evidence that the story is fictional from the description of the podcast on podcatcher sites, instead stating quite matter-of-factly (alongside a production credit to their company): "In this podcast, American Public Radio reporter Lia Haddock asks the question once more, 'What happened to the people of Limetown?'" ("Limetown"). A listener unfamiliar with American radio history may not know that the in-universe broadcasting company American Public Radio is fictional, as it bears a name and acronym that invokes the very real NPR and American Public Radio, nor would they necessarily know that the town itself is fictional. Without prior knowledge and context, *Limetown* is functionally indistinguishable from a real piece of investigative journalism; Jessica Biel, star of the podcast's television adaptation, did not initially know that the source material was fictional: "I just thought I missed it because our world is so insane that anything is possible really, right?" (qtd. in Hume).

In modern podcasting and particularly in the post-*Serial* style of *Limetown* and *The Black Tapes*, writers often carefully walk the interpretive line between reality and fiction, complicating the affect and effect of their narratives. Documentary-style podcasts, both fictional and not, are frequently seen as more "truthful" than representational by today's audiences, and in comparison to written texts, such as novels, may be seen as more credible from the beginning. As I will discuss further in the next section of this chapter, this may be due more to a general decline in media literacy than anything else. Podcasts, however, do borrow significant amounts of perceived legitimacy from NPR's legacy on the radios of Americans, as well as the larger

societal perception of documentaries being "true" by definition. A significant amount of research has already been devoted to *Serial* and its impact on podcasting, with several scholars discussing its arguably unique format as a podcast, audio-editing decisions, and journalistic innovations at length[6]. Despite the journalistic nature of *Serial*, it leans heavily on fictional storytelling conventions and techniques when presenting its seasonal cases. The editing style is also fairly recognizable, with an opening "quick dense montage" of audio relevant to the investigation and a semi-conversational spoken tone reminiscent of NPR hosts (Spinelli and Dann 51; Hancock and McMurtry 98). The opening sequence of *Limetown*'s first episode imitates this, using "news clips" and "911 calls" allegedly from the fictional disappearances spliced into the podcast's musical theme. Koenig's background with shows like Ira Glass' *This American Life* lends her both credibility and a tangential relationship to NPR in the minds of the audience: these qualities, in combination with the personable tone she cultivates, all serve to endear Koenig to her listeners and increase their emotional investment in the narrative she communicates. *Serial* also notably recreates "the passive listener as coinvestigator," in the words of Spinelli and Dann, as Koenig and her team utilized their listener base to cultivate new leads on the first season's case and would respond to and call for tips from the audience (Spinelli and Dann 204).

This epistolary structure of these post-*Serial* podcasts also recalls the gothic horror that still influences horror podcast writers today, leaning upon the largely familiar tropes of the genre: haunted houses, grotesque creatures, and societal and moral corruption. Novels like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), in presenting themselves as "true" accounts of "real" events, grant the fantastic elements of their narratives a space to inhabit in the real world; placing the story within recognizable settings normalizes the supernatural, allowing the audience greater leeway in their suspension of disbelief. Part of the psychological intensity of the audio dramas comes from their

[6] See Spinelli and Dann's first chapter and the work of Leslie McMurtry for some comprehensive examples.

realism and sensory naturalism; while the listener may not actually believe in the supernatural, it is easier to suspend one's disbelief when the "evidence" is placed within a world that the listener can already understand. In the case of *Limetown*, for example, the culture of surveillance and governmental secrecy that exists in modern America makes the eventual exposure of the large-scale coverup of the titular town's unethical scientific experiments more plausible and believable a premise, rather than shocking an incredulous audience from their narrative immersion. The epistolary format in combination with the post-*Serial* journalistic style makes it sometimes difficult to distinguish the documentary-realist horror podcasts from true reality, as *Limetown* showcases well. Remaining for the most part grounded in actual reality allows *Limetown* a more ambiguous state of "truth" in comparison to podcasts like *The Magnus Archives* that deal exclusively with supernatural phenomena, the pilot episode of *The Magnus Archives*, for instance, featuring a monstrous supernatural angler fish that uses a human body as its lure. Despite its more overt embrace of the supernatural, *The Magnus Archives* still grounds itself within real structures and cities within the United Kingdom (and occasionally abroad). The fantastic, when placed in the realm of the quotidian, is normalized in the interpretive lens of the listener. The audience questions the text they consume less and less, potentially contributing to the dissolution of boundaries between truth and fiction, strangers and friends; as the apparent necessity of critical distance from a text decreases in the fiction they consume, the case can be made that due to this lack of critical-thinking challenge, the line between reality and fiction becomes harder for audiences to discern and analyze in other texts in their lives.

4. Social Media and Media Literacy

Before discussing the idea of media literacy, it is helpful to explore the idea of shared understanding. Literary critic Jonathan Culler describes the "grammar" of literature, referring to the structural aspects of a textual work as such; he posits the idea of "literary competence," where the generic and structural conventions of a work direct its audience to a "correct" reading of the text (Culler 101). Or, as Stanley Fish argues, "[i]f the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform" (Fish 84). In a medium where, perhaps contrary to popular belief, structural conventions are extremely well-established and widely comprehended by the primary listener base, the "grammar" of the medium is one that is fairly uniform in the minds of its audience. Even outside of audio drama, there is little experimentation with the style and conventions of podcasts – the round-table talk-show style with one or more regular hosts, often featuring guests, remains one of the most popular formats for new and old podcasts alike. Some more avant-garde podcasts exist, such as Radiotopia's *The Heart*, and do receive critical (if not popular) acclaim, but are certainly not part of the mainstream listening culture. *Serial* and its descendant post-*Serial* podcasts (audio drama and otherwise) heavily influence the podcast scene to this day, and alongside *Welcome to Night Vale*'s popularity in the podcast drama fandom community, have cemented the pseudo-documentary and "found footage" narrative style as the predominant narrative frame of podcast audio dramas. While *Night Vale* is notably experimental in its audio styling and storytelling techniques, the bulk of audio drama takes on an epistolary form. Episodes 13 "A Story About You" and episode 94 "All Right" of *Night Vale* are some of the best examples of the podcast's experimentation, with the former being one of the only episodes to be told entirely in second person and the latter making use of binaural audio techniques to present

the audio through only one side of the listener's headphones. In-universe recordings are the primary format, as seen with *The Magnus Archives*'s tape recordings; broadcasts, whether over radio or other communication broadcast platforms as in *Wolf 359*'s deep space logs, are also popular. This consistency in structure and form is largely considered key to obtaining success as a podcast, with workshop leaders like podcaster Andrew Burkum[7] devoting entire sections of presentations to the idea. Audiences *seek out* the sense of familiarity that comes from the episodic introductions and recurring bits, lending the medium as a whole a larger propensity towards unhealthy parasocial relationships with hosts, writers, and characters.

While it is normal, to a certain extent, to feel emotionally invested in the lives of celebrities whose work resonates with us personally, there is still a clear-cut boundary between the emotional "intimacy" one has with a famous stranger and the mutual intimacy one shares with a friend. We may, for example, be happy for an actor who is having a baby, but we're more likely to feel a deeper emotional bond with a friend who is expecting. Within fandom culture, this boundary is often crossed and erased; some fans treat the creators involved in their favorite texts as their friends, and often feel entitled to know personal details about their lives that creators may not be willing to share. Of course, this is not a phenomenon exclusive to podcasting, as social media has exacerbated this issue to new heights – beyond even the level of paparazzi – given the unprecedented access it gives *every* internet user to all others, from the most anonymous to the most famous. Fans become ever-present observers and consumers of celebrities online, digital stalkers who can be extremely difficult to escape. Even more passive and well-meaning social media users have near constant access to aspects of other people's lives typically kept private: addresses, families, and sometimes even legal details are accessible for obsessed tech-savvy fans. Niall Horan of the band One Direction once tweeted about being

[7] In a 2021 workshop, as part of University of California, Merced's Collaboratorium event.

unsure what time of day he was born, and within minutes was inundated with replies from eager fans telling him the exact time down to the minute: 8:04AM (@NiallOfficial). Celebrities of all kinds are subject to this kind of public exposure; however, as we will see, podcasts are one of the few kinds of consumable creative content that encourages these behaviors within the medium's conventions. While media conglomerates like Disney may also encourage fans to create parasocial relationships with the celebrities who work in their projects, films and television shows tend to utilize extratextual events (interviews, convention attendances, etc.); in comparison, podcast creators primarily make use of textual elements within episodes to nurture emotional intimacy between hosts and audience. The "American" podcasting style[8] that the bulk of popular podcasts use places listeners on an equal level as the host, inviting the audience to the table with the host or hosts, so to speak. According to several largely informal studies, young people tend to prefer this style, and a key feature of this style being a sense of camaraderie that the hosts and writers encourage among themselves and their audience (Spinelli & Dann 22). Podcast listeners are given a seat within the text itself, even in non-drama podcasts that do not assign them "character" roles, cultivating a sense of intimacy with the podcast and its host that is widely discussed in literature on podcasts. As Spinelli and Dann explain, "When we talk about podcast intimacy we refer to efforts to create and reveal emotional experiences and personal connections in a comfortable space between interviewers and interview subjects, between the producers themselves, and between listeners, producers, and subjects" (105). Intimacy is a fundamental element of building and maintaining an audience for a podcast, increasing the likelihood of a listener finishing long episodes week after week. Podcast-listening is often undertaken privately and while doing other tasks, such as household chores; the illusion of

[8] Podcast enthusiasts have discussed the idea of the "American" style of podcasting – drawing a clear difference between it and the more radio-aligned non-American West.

conversation evoked in many podcasts by their hosts allows a podcast to keep its listener company, much as a friend might (Burkum). As previously noted, this level of supposed intimacy is very important to the idea of truth-effects and authenticity that drives the audience's appetite for emotionally meaningful texts.

Fan interpretation of those texts becomes blurry, however, when the intense emotions that intimacy evokes are involved – especially when it comes from such an emotionally affective aesthetic mode as horror. Podcast writers and hosts build a sense of camaraderie within the structure of their podcasts, and one might even argue they build *friendships* between their texts and their fans: developing inside jokes for long-term listeners (*Night Vale*'s treatment of the station's interns[9]), giving them special group nicknames (*My Favorite Murder*'s hosts affectionately refer to their fans as "murderinos"), and addressing them directly within the podcast. The fandom in-groups develop and exhibit the same behaviors they might with their real-life (or online) friends with the podcasts and with fellow fans, forming an interpretive clique in fandom spaces centered around the media they consume. Even the culture of fan-supported podcasting through sites like Patreon and Kofi strengthens this, as podcasts release bonus content to their paid subscribers; in doing so, they reinforce the sense of exclusivity and intimacy that comes from being part of the "in" group privy to the special content. New patrons (the official term for Patreon subscribers) are often verbally thanked by name as a part of the credits section of podcast episodes, with even small-time podcasts doing so. Another simple method to achieve intimacy with a podcast audience is to invite the listeners to experience a more "authentic" version of recorded reality: "[I]t is simply more honest to 'let the audience hear and know that you are manufacturing a version of events'" than it is to create a so-called "perfect" or clean

[9] The interns, much like the infamous "red shirts" of Star Trek, rarely last more than an episode; the running gag is that when an intern is introduced, they are expected to die fairly soon afterwards.

piece of audio (qtd. in Spinelli and Dann 48). Content like blooper reels posted as extra content reveal, intentionally, the "unpolished" edges of the podcast and its creators. The already privileged members of the audience are allowed to see the "vulnerabilities" of the writers and hosts, again reinforcing the audience's sense of familiarity and closeness with them. Via the "brief inclusion of slips, gaffs [sic], mistakes, or conventionally 'unwanted' audio" within the published version of a podcast episode, the audience is given a parasocial sensation of emotional closeness with the hosts of narrators (Spinelli and Dann 58). The audience is allowed to hear "mistakes" the speaker makes, "errors" that become endearing in their realism. Perfectly polished speech and sound have an uncanny and unreal quality, the artificial neatness unpleasantly noticeable and inauthentic; while published audio is often heavily edited, the deliberate inclusion of a few stutters or "um"s maintains an illusion of imperfection much preferred by audiences. Many podcast creators will even send personalized objects to their highest-paying fans, whether books or scripts or merchandise for the podcast. A fan podcast for the *Wheel of Time* novel series that I follow, for instance, utilizes these tactics, despite only having 84 patrons at the time of writing, ending every episode with a list of new subscribers as well as a list of the higher tier (and higher paying) patrons. At a certain level of monthly donations, patrons are sent personalized packages including items like hand-annotated books from the hosts of the podcast. This pen-pal relationship to the creators quite literally invites them into the patron's home, being allowed to enter offline life with the same casual air as a friend might. This potential physical exchange and the direct acknowledgement of their audience are only two of many ways podcasts create intimacy with listeners, cultivating a sense of fan community and even friendship.

This culture reaches its zenith in the liveshow phenomenon, which sometimes becomes more an event for fans to display their fannish allegiances to others than one for creators to display new podcast content. Rising in popularity over the past decade, many podcasts have taken to staging live performances of their podcasts in performance spaces around the continental United States and sometimes abroad. This phenomenon is seemingly not restricted by genre; comedy talk show podcasts like *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*, nonfiction informational podcasts like *Lore*, and audio dramas like *Welcome to Night Vale* all tour frequently. Danielle Hancock frames the audio drama liveshow as a physical manifestation of the online community of fandom, where fans frequently cosplay[10] and otherwise visually identify themselves as part of the larger group via merchandise ("Desert" 45). She also discusses the boundary-shattering roleplay that many *Night Vale* shows call for, as the audiences of the shows are often given direction explicitly from the podcast's host, Cecil, involving them physically with the show's narrative (45-46). Fans are able to be quite literally in the world of their favorite podcasts, physically present in the same room as hosts and characters to whom they devote so much time listening. They cross over the boundary between digital and physical space, with the emotional intimacy cultivated within episodes being translated into a perceived physical intimacy as well. This intimacy, of course, is more illusory than actual. The hosts, voice actors, and writers are no more than strangers, and the ephemeral shared space created by the liveshow is no more physically intimate than any other live performance would be. Recalling my stalker analogy (though "stalker" may be more descriptive than metaphorical), fans develop a cultivated obsession with podcast hosts and characters that mirrors the distorted and ultimately false image some stalkers create of their victims: believing in a relationship that does not exist, fans run the risk of overstepping their bounds in several senses.

[10] Dress up as characters from various pieces of media, in this case as those from audio dramas.

One of those boundaries is the one that traditionally exists between audience and author. To return to Culler's concept of literary competence, fannish "readers" are literarily *incompetent*, at least by his definition, in today's fan circles – the perpetuation of a largely "incorrect" frame through which fans of all kinds approach their favored texts frequently skews them *away* from both the authorially-intended readings ("correct" readings) and from the less tendentious readings of non-fans (listeners who are not emotionally immersed in fandom activities or culture). It is an almost willful ignorance displayed by fans who do perpetuate these frames, and it is a topic that is hotly debated on Tumblr: one can look to posts like this, from Tumblr user prokopetz, for a list of the commonly agreed upon "deadly sins" of fandom in this vein. Given the more than 18,000 notes[11] on the post, almost 7,000 of which indicate shares to other blogs, it is fairly clear that the phenomena prokopetz describes is a common occurrence within fandom spaces on Tumblr, and the feeling of annoyance at these behaviors prokopetz displays is also a mutual feeling. Most relevant to our discussion are the first and second "sins" on the user's list: "Treating popular fanon[12] regarding a character as authoritative, and getting angry at people whose feelings toward that character are informed by the version who appears in the actual text" and "Conflating 'it's possible to construct this particular narrative from elements present in the text' with 'this is the narrative the text in fact presents'" (Prokopetz, "deadly sins"). Hancock examines an excellent example of the former, discussing the idea of collective truth-building within the fandom for *Night Vale*: despite a lack of canonical description, a collective image of the series narrator as a thin, blond, white man arose out of the sharing of fan creations ("Desert" 41). This is what prokopetz refers to as an "authoritative" fanon view in their post, and their latter point continues in a similar vein of critiquing fandom collective consciousness.

[11] Tumblr's combined count of likes and shares on a post.
[12] "Fanon" refers to commonly accepted concepts about a text created and shared by fans; it is used in opposition to the term "canon," from "canonical," referring to textually present ideas.

Popularized by other fans, ideas do not always need to be textually supported to become "canonical" in the minds of fans.

The fandom space functions as an echo chamber for fans, perpetuating distorted views on characters and narratives that begin on social media. The identities attached to various pieces of media allow for the formation of in-group subcultures, adding another cultural lens through which a reader consumes a text. Returning to Fish's notion that uniform understanding arises from shared language, within the fandom subcultures that form around media there is a shared language unique to fan spaces on social media and even within fandoms individually. Created to more effectively discuss fandom-unique phenomena like fanfiction, terms used throughout this chapter (such as "fanon" and "headcanon") have developed over time within fan communities. It is a lexicon immediately recognizable to members of fandom spaces, but difficult for outsiders to understand without explanation or immersion within fan communities. Within individual fandoms, elements of the narratives can become fandom in-jokes and shorthand that makes little sense outside of those fandoms: fans of *The Magnus Archives* might say that someone would "belong to the Eye"; *Night Vale* fans may say that mountains are not real and look quite foolish to those who do not recognize the reference. Returning to Hancock's aforementioned point, she acknowledged the problematic nature of this shared understanding of Cecil as a white blond man; depicting him as such presents this image as "default," alienating fans of color with the backlash those who did not adhere to this depiction received (Hancock 40-41). The fan interpretation of the text *becomes* the "correct" one, given the strong sense of shared understanding and experience that comes with fan identity.

These fans also develop a sense of entitlement over the media they consume due to the emotional effects of fandom and the sense of solidarity that comes with it. The transformative

works fans create (fanfiction and fanart primarily) frequently remove the elements of the text from their original contexts, in turn creating entirely new creative works using parts of the original one. Fans sometimes create things like "AUs" (alternate universes), relocating the original narrative and its characters to other, often wildly different, settings from the original text, and "headcanons" (an opinion about a character or about other narrative elements that have little to no textual basis within the work), sharing them online with other fans of the work. Take a Tumblr post from user feathered-serpents describing an AU for *The Magnus Archives*, where the characters play a Dungeons & Dragons game together, as an example of these concepts: this fan has reimagined the podcast as a tabletop game run by the character Gerry Keay, where each of the main characters has their canonical fate mirrored with an event in the game; the character Sasha's in-podcast death and replacement by a supernatural creature is comically depicted as Sasha's character dying and her returning to the game the next week with an extremely similar character labeled "Not!Sasha" (Feathered-serpents). Ideas from the transformative works of fans become more and more popular and widely accepted within the fandom community, to the point where any textual basis for their readings is less important to them than the personal feelings inspired by a text. For a podcast fandom example of this, we can take *The Magnus Archives*' fan community on Tumblr. One of the major characters of the podcast dies in the finale of the third season, and fans reacted to this largely with disappointment; however, instead of processing and discussing the character's death, the fandom popularized a joke about the character "being on a kayak trip." While some of these behaviors and fanon ideas are, as seen in these examples, more endearing and ironic than others, the tendency of fandom to ignore authorial intentions, narrative constraints, and textual events is not limited to interactions in fan spaces. I believe that there must be a balance between freedom of interpretation and acknowledgement of textual integrity,

as the wholesale rejection of critical-analytical thinking in the context of fiction bodes poorly for interactions with other kinds of texts and cultural contexts. Without practice in all kinds of text, the ability to interpret and closely read potentially dangerous texts for elements of propaganda or misinformation becomes more and more difficult to achieve. The comfort and ease that comes with popular media can encourage the audience to ignore the need to approach media critically, leading to more inflammatory interactions in online spaces as social media users struggle to communicate effectively.

5. Listener as Character

The ease of understanding and the ability to situate themselves within the narrative of podcast dramas that listeners experience stem from a familiarity with the style and conventions of the genre. Most objects and actions have sounds that accompany them – the hum of a refrigerator, the squeak of a chair pushed back – which a listener, even if pre-consciously, understands and associates with those phenomena. It takes less mental energy to comprehend familiar audio cues like these, allowing the listener to dedicate more mental energy to following the often-complicated narratives of audio dramas. A significant portion of podcast listeners do so as a "secondary activity," driving or doing chores in sometimes distracting situations, and the familiarity serves as a "signpost" in the narrative that makes the narrative easier to follow even if one gets distracted (Spinelli and Dann 23, 143). Podcast success often hinges on practical listenability even more than on how well-written it is, with the narratives of even popular and experimental podcasts like *Night Vale* being of secondary importance in comparison to the familiar structure of its episodes. Even if a listener briefly loses the thread of the narrative, they can expect to hear *Night Vale*'s musical "weather" near the end of the episode – giving them a

foothold to return to the narrative flow. With this familiarity of style comes an ease and comfort with "entering" the world of the narrative.

McMurtry only briefly touches on the question of "*who* has 'found' the footage" in narratives in the pseudo-documentary subgenre in her examination of the post-*Serial* podcast; I argue here that the "who" in question is one of the most important elements to consider when discussing the current state of fan interaction with texts such as the horror audio dramas I examine here (McMurtry, "Transgressing" 2). Within these texts, the listeners are not simply passive observers of the narrative events. Instead they take on prescribed roles within the storyline: in *Welcome to Night Vale*, listeners are interpolated as town residents tuning in to a local radio program; in *The Magnus Archives*, listeners may have found the tapes that record the lead characters within the fictional universe; even *The Penumbra Podcast* relies upon a frame narrative that (in the seasons that published horror dramas) addresses the listener directly as a guest at a liminal hotel whose doors "open" to the actual stories of the episodes. The listener becomes *part of the world* in the podcasts, and is treated as such by the podcast dramas themselves, becoming both subject to and participatory in the horror of the narrative. Some podcasts do this more effectively than others, as seen in a comparison of the previously mentioned podcasts with Night Vale Presents' *Within the Wires*. Within the first season of the podcast, the originally anonymous, faceless protagonist addressed by the tapes is slowly given distinct features and a canonical identity as the season progresses. The tapes' narrator reveals the protagonist's name – Oleta – as well as key personal details from her life that remove the ambiguity that allowed Oleta to function as the audience's narrative body. The audience becomes privy to memories of Oleta's childhood and family, as well as her previously-secret relationship to the tapes' narrator, as Oleta regains control over the plot. As Oleta is given control over her

own body and narrative again, culminating in her escape from the facility she is imprisoned in, the audience is abruptly cut off from the body of which they seemed to be in control. Oleta begins to take physical action within the story as well, in opposition to the relatively powerless narrative bodies of podcasts like *Limetown* and even later seasons of *Within the Wires*. Hester, the season's narrator, acknowledges these between-episode events within her recordings; while some of these actions and decisions are more innocuous, as with the locations Oleta listens to the tapes, Oleta does at one point commit a murder off-screen. Perhaps ironically, this narrative reembodiment coincides with Oleta's largest loss of bodily autonomy in the narrative, as she is forced to undergo an invasive surgical procedure (evocatively and metaphorically referred to as "carpentry" by the season's narrator). Oleta vies for control over her own body both narratively and metatextually, exorcising the listener from her body in her ultimately violent reassertion of selfhood as she murders a security nurse in the season's ninth episode. This action does however also wound the listener: this episode is one of the first where the protagonist takes action within the narrative, and one of the actions she takes is murder; the listener is uncomfortably forced into complicitude with this during the chaotic transition from audience surrogate to overtly and fully-fledged character.

This transition leaves the audience alienated from the plot in which they were previously so immersed – *Within the Wires* achieves this to greater effect by not only assigning the listener a clearly defined character role but one that makes them culpable for an in-universe act of violence. As I have discussed in previous research, the incongruity of identity between the listener and what was originally the audience's surrogate body reminds the audience that they are not, in fact, part of the narrative world (Sumida-Tate 9-10). The less incongruous "listener character" of aforementioned podcasts like *Night Vale*, where the listeners are given relatively

featureless "off-screen" characters to imaginatively inhabit, allows the extratextual audience to feel like they are part of the story alongside the fully-fleshed out characters. They are able to participate, however voyeuristically, in the mystery and adventure of the narrative despite the boundary between fiction and reality. By inviting the audience into the narrative world stylistically, the podcast creates an extra level of intimacy with it – the intimacy of audio drama comes from the personal connection to story and character instead of a parasocial relationship to a host as in other podcasts, and treating the audience as part of the physical world of an audio drama's narrative helps craft a similar close connection to the material that may otherwise be lacking (Sumida-Tate 10). Unfortunately, this projection onto the narrative does have negative side effects. To cite another post from Tumblr user prokopetz: "Projecting yourself onto a fictional character, then going about loudly insisting that everybody else is stupid and evil for basing their understanding of that character on the version that appears in the actual text rather than the version that lives in your head is a problem, but it's not a problem because it's morally wrong – it's a problem because it's annoying" (Prokopetz, "trouble"). There may not be any version of a character that is purely from "the actual text" as this user says, for fan interpretation often drowns the textual base of the podcast within the popularized fanon, latching on especially to audience surrogate characters on which to project their own feelings. The audience *wants* to feel they are a part of the story they love, no matter the cost to the text or to the listening experience of other fans. The personalized relationship of a fan to their favored media text becomes paramount in that fan's mind, shaping their experience of the text and precluding other interpretations of the text. Once they become characters within the text in this way, of course they feel a sense of entitlement over where the story is going: it is, after all, *their* story that is

being told. Listeners are no longer relegated to the narrative sidelines to passively observe. Now, they play an active role in the narrative.

The role of the spectator – for podcasts, the listener – is still one that is key to understanding both the relationship between listener and podcast as well as to the fan spaces of those podcasts, despite fans' perceived inclusion within the narrative worlds. The consumption of podcasts has become fundamentally *active*, as listeners take control of narratives, fashioning their own fan-centric counter-texts in response, including theory posts attempting to make sense of a text's narrative gaps, transformative works like fanfiction and fanart, and even posts on social media sites as previously discussed. The "readers" of a podcast's text are certainly not Poulet's passive consumers, quite literally producing their own texts in response: a foundational element of many podcasts is the creation of fan-run Wikipedia-esque sites about the narratives, as well as forum posts and social media posts containing and sharing theories about the podcast's mystery. Once the podcast is published online, it is dissected in real time: fans are able to rearrange the textual content of the podcast like Frankenstein did his monster – and this literal re-creation, in addition to the more unconscious version described in reader-response criticism, in which readers instinctively fill in narrative lacunae with their imaginations, adds an interesting layer to the interpretation of narrative affect. There is a level of intensely personal investment with the story that comes from that act of creation and the idea of bringing something to life in that sense, making the affect of the original work itself even more potent. The podcast fan is both listener and author at once, both in control of and completely unable to change the plot of the work in which they are so invested; they are a passive consumer of and an active character within the narratives of the dramas. This is of course an immensely satisfying experience for fans – as they are able to escape into a world they identify as their own, without having to make that

world from scratch – which certainly contributes to the widespread lack of critical thought within fandoms about this phenomenon.

6. Fandom Interactions

This personal investment in the stories they consume also leads to deeply problematic and overtly harmful behaviors within fandoms. Behaviors like the “callout post” – a list of perceived, or sometimes real, online “crimes” committed by a user, posted and spread within online circles with the goal of deplatforming the subject of the “callout” and ostracizing them from the wider fan community – are extremely common in these fan spaces on Tumblr, as both a form of violence against and control over other fans. It would be unethical to cite a specific callout post within this paper, given the inherently personal nature of the information provided in one, but the general tone and culture behind the practice can be summarized in this post thread begun by Tumblr user dingdongyouarewrong:

> do you ever read a ‘callout post’ where the summary on top is like ‘they EAT BABIES and RUN A COFFEE SHOP FOR MURDERERS and they HATE GAY PEOPLE’ and then you scroll down and actually read the post and it’s like, they posted about lamb chops once, they work at starbucks and one time someone who killed someone had a coffee at that starbucks, and they made a ‘fruit (derogatory)’ joke once (Dingdongyouarewrong).

Tumblr user glumshoe goes on to comment in the same thread on how some callout posts contain information on actual real life crimes a fan on the site has committed, saying "some of the time it’s this, some of the time it’s shit like ‘six in-depth paragraphs about problematic opinions on Steven Universe followed by an offhand mention of the time they faked their own illness and

death in order to pose as their own fictional partner and crowdfund medical and funeral expenses'" (Glumshoe). Blinded by their affection for their chosen forms of media, and by the roaring voices of thousands of other fans cheering (or booing) them, fans cannibalize each other on the site for social clout using their favorite media as a weapon. As glumshoe points out in the quote above, the subject of the callout's opinions on media are often more important to the callout maker than any *actual crimes* are. A "bad" opinion about a text – one that perhaps does little else but disagree with popular fanon – is given equal weight to the actual crimes like fraud jokingly used in this post. To fans lost within their projection onto a narrative, there may not be much difference between the two on an emotional level. Not only are they entitled to influence over the story, but also a say in how other people interpret it. Popularity within a fandom gives a fan power over other fans in a way that quickly, and unfortunately often, goes to the user's head. The control they feel they have over media content, including podcasts, warps their perception of control in fandom spaces as well. The wanton disregard for other people displayed by many members of the fan communities on Tumblr is monstrous, and only a symptom of the larger social issues at play in society today.

Unfortunately, there is another negative side to the listener-character role the audience takes on: the deeply parasocial nature of the podcast fan experience leads to a stronger feeling of entitlement over the stories produced than ever before. As Tompkins reminds us, there is a kind of "moral drama in the domain of criticism" surrounding the idea of focusing on the reader and their role in the creation of textual meaning (Tompkins xv). She writes: "[T]he reader's activity is declared to be *identical with* the text and therefore becomes itself the source of all literary value" (Tompkins xvi). In online spaces, however, this view can be problematic for a number of reasons. As Culler reminds us, and as discussed above, the reader's activity quite literally is *not*

identical with the text. The audience now creates *their own version* of the text, and not simply their own interpretation of it; fans make changes purposefully and at their own will, crafting narratives that can fundamentally not align with the original text they enjoyed. The reader's experience of the text becomes a kind of feedback loop, where initial collective interpretation is reinforced and not often publicly challenged by other individual fans in their online spaces. Diverging opinions are met with the aforementioned misguided vitriol, suppressing the alternative ideas presented in favor of the interpretive status quo. Public challenges, when they occur, often herald larger changes of fandom politics; it tends to be more of a shift in dominant factional power more so than an increase in interpretive freedom of expression within the fandom. Even when the text itself dares to break from the fandom's established expectations, readers and listeners now expect *the text* to accommodate their reading of it instead of changing their established, fannish interpretive lens.

For example, the writer of *The Magnus Archives*, Jonny Sims, only last year addressed fandom controversy on his Twitter account. Within the thread, Sims says that there are "multiple reasons" he no longer responds to users who tag him in their critiques of the show, among which is the "volatile" state of the fandom (@jonnywaistcoat). Sims writes:

> And Thirdly, the show is complete. I have no power to change it, and nothing I could have to say about it would have any effect on the text. You have questions for me? You have as much access to the text as I do - nothing I could say would carry any canonical weight.
>
> So much for the questions. As for the criticisms - at this point I have very much heard them. The most egregious I have made my apologies for already and those others I have taken on board to try and learn from for my future writing. (@jonnywaistcoat)

The year before this seemingly final statement shutting down most fan interaction, the official Discord server for its production company Rusty Quill was the subject of a fairly influential callout post on Tumblr, which the staff of Rusty Quill allegedly responded to; while much of the original content of this post and its response has since been deleted, posts still circulate with the (now broken) link to the Google Doc callout alongside various inter-fan arguments (rqo-callout). While one cannot blame fans for feeling strongly about a particular story and its characters, it does not excuse the bullying and coercion that some members of fandom feel they have license to do. Many critics, like Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, have argued that the process of reading a text also betters (in a therapeutic sense) the reader; however, I argue that it is possible for a text to function in the opposite manner, as we see in these fandom behaviors.

7. Conclusion

As I have argued and discussed throughout this chapter, it would be difficult to argue that the reader does not dominate the audience-text relationship; readers are instead fully creating their own experiences of the texts they consume, in a much more literal way than many reader-response critics could have predicted in the pre-digital era. This raises several important questions about media more broadly than just podcast audio dramas: what then happens when the "rules" authors and readers rely upon are different? What if the fans, divisive and yet still operating under similar understandings because of it, have a fundamental disconnect from the understanding and culture of the author who created the text? Some authors – podcast writers included – do come from a similar online culture as their fans, but there is a fairly strong generational divide as well as varying levels of fan culture immersion that definitively impacts this gap between author intention and audience reception. Younger fans (who often grew up

using the internet and social media sites, including massive multiplayer online games for children like *Club Penguin*) or more "online" fans (who participate on social media more frequently than other less "online" internet users) are more likely to participate in the online fandom activities that directly lead to a wider divide between authorial intent and their perception of the work. Fans are consuming, producing, and even participating in the actual narrative experience all at once. The lines between author and reader are not only more socially blurry than ever before, with the accessibility of celebrities through social media, but they are also blurred in the fan conception of the media itself. While audiences from centuries past may have also crossed these boundaries, certainly able to interfere with theatre performances and (as many performances throughout history have shown) even physically assaulting other audience members, the key difference between those pre-digital audiences and the fandoms of today is scale. Unlike the ephemeral nature of a live performance, podcast drama fans have a performance and collective audience that are *eternal*: there is no end to a constantly accessible performance with the podcasts' episodes, and the audience can return to the metaphorical theatre from anywhere and at any time with the click of a button. Additionally, unlimited by the bounds of a physical space such as a theatre, the audiences for these audio dramas have no maximum capacity. The effects of the crowd are ever-present, and unless one completely leaves fan spaces, also inescapable. Not only are the presentation of the audio dramas and the modern fan culture on social media sites today influencing this particular behavior in podcast fan spaces specifically, but also in the actual space the listener inhabits both within the universe of the text as well as within their actual physical locations. Indeed, as I will explain in the next chapter, the way that podcasts are listened to and the way sound is used within them directly contribute to and influence the listener's "reading" of the text.

CHAPTER TWO

The Body: Sensation, Sound, and the Narrative Body

1. Introduction

To hearing audiences, sound is integral to the experience of the world. Nearly every sight, touch, motion, and even smell is accompanied by sound: leaves rustle in the wind, shoes scrape against concrete, garlic sizzles in a pan. In horror-themed media with auditory elements, this is often exploited by creators in order to intensify the audience's emotional reactions to scenes. The shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*, for example, would not be nearly as memorable or impactful without the intense shriek of the strings behind it. Even the *lack* of sound in horror-based works often indicates that something is deeply wrong in a scene. The birds stop singing, the music fades away, and the audience is left at the edge of their seats waiting for the other shoe to drop. The vacuum of silence also amplifies the often sudden return of diegetic sound, often causing or contributing to what is colloquially referred to as a "jump scare" – jolting the audience out of their suspense and into the cathartic release of terror's justification. In podcast audio dramas, however, the narrative must of course rely entirely on sound, instead of using it to amplify other visual elements; due to this, many podcast creators have crafted various editing techniques to enmesh the real, physical world into the narrative ones within the audio dramas. Podcasts are uniquely situated in physical space as well as in the diegetic world of the narrative, as the listener is immersed within both simultaneously through the "narrative body" I discuss within this chapter. Thus, the actual space the audience inhabits influences their "reading" of the text, adding an interesting dimension to a medium that does not have a set consumptive environment, as discussed within the previous chapter.

Horror is also inherently physical in podcasts that use its aesthetic mode, even beyond the very literal physical-focus of horror narratives on the body and its viscera. How this focus interacts with the disembodied nature of recorded vocal performances is particularly interesting, given the predominance of horror stories within the podcast landscape. While film and media scholars such as John A. Riley and Isabella van Elferen have discussed the physicality sound can have within radio dramas and film, I argue that podcast dramas specifically cultivate it within their narratives as a significant element of the medium and genre conventions of contemporary podcasts. The embodiment of the listener in the world of these podcasts is key to both its success in fandom spaces as well as the clash of differing interpretations within those fan communities, since they must reckon with a bevy of sensorially-experienced "lives" from each individual podcast listener. Through close "readings" of various audio drama scenes and editing techniques, I examine the creation of "physical" bodies and sensory experiences within the narratives of fiction podcasts within this chapter, attempting to uncover what precisely makes the podcast drama so attuned to horror as a genre.

2. Physical Horror

While many texts about podcasting and listening to them (including Spinelli and Dann's *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution*) refer to the medium as a single-sensory experience, this may not actually be the case according to cultural critics like Steph Ceraso. The influence that sound has on the body – even when divorced from the physical environmental sensations or visuals normally associated with it – makes the common conception of podcasts as a monosensory medium surprisingly inaccurate, and may unintentionally diminish their value as affective objects of art. Additionally, understanding sound as simply another kind of text –

"simply more content to be interpreted" as Ceraso phrases it – cannot fully encompass the experiences that created sound, as seen in audio dramas, can evoke (Ceraso, "Multimodal" 102). Ceraso refers to sound as a multisensory experience, even in the case of a medium like podcasting, which by its nature does not overtly include senses like sight. Ceraso discusses auditory reminders of physical space in audio texts (with the sound moving further or closer), though I will also consider it from the perspective of "phantom sensation" or physiological responses to some of the audio choices in podcasts.

In her discussion of multimodal listening techniques, Ceraso points out that "[i]t is also possible to feel sound in one's stomach, throat, legs, and other areas if the body – a common occurrence at clubs where music is amplified" (102). Even when listening to podcasts through headphones and not aloud as the music in Ceraso's example, the invasion of that piece of technology quite literally into the listener's body becomes part of the experience of listening. Sound is still "transforming" the body, as the brain interprets and reacts to the audio coming through the speakers (108). Podcast audio work still relies upon the idea of "visible movement" discussed by Ceraso, referring to motions associated with certain sounds, like the sound of a chair being scraped across the floor; in an audio medium this of course works in reverse, with the sound being used to evoke the sensation and image of motion (108). The sound of a door opening, or the wet thwack of Elias' weapon in *The Magnus Archive*"s season 2 finale, work to create within the listener's imagination other elements of the sensory experience. As this chapter will later discuss, the relative lack of full sensory input aside from sound may actually work to podcast dramas' benefit: enhancing the narrative experience in their reliance upon listener imagination. The ideas behind multimodal listening are a gateway to the creation of fuller, more

embodied, and – in the case of horror podcasts – more terrifying environmental and sonic experiences for the listener.

Before we examine the embodiment – and reembodiment – possible through purely acoustic means, it is necessary to discuss disembodiment in the medium of podcasting and how it factors into the success of a horror narrative. The fear in horror podcasts is apparently disconnected from the listener's physical body on an extratextual level – unlike horror movies or even books, there is no fully established situational and environmental setting for podcast listening that involves all of the listener's senses. The audience is able to experience other mediums in a more fully-embodied way, as there is a standardized way and situation in which to have those experiences. One may go to the theatre, for instance, and experience horror on the silver screen: the darkness of the theater, the slightly-too-cold air, and the hush of a crowd sometimes containing hundreds of people all work to enhance the fear inspired by creating an embodied experience. While a physical horror book might also be considered a primarily monosensory experience, the ritual of opening the book and the places most people choose to read become immersive and regulated on an individual basis; a reader is even bound in place by the action, needing to be still in order to focus on the words and actually read them. But what about podcasts? The listening environment of podcasting is as varied as the listeners themselves – they listen in cars, or in public, or at home alone tucked in their beds. Some people listen to podcasts while doing chores or homework, while others might prefer to lay still and focus on nothing else. Beyond the "ritual" of hitting the play button, podcast and other audio mediums are among the least physically ritualized and standardized, with some studies suggesting that it is becoming more common to listen to podcasts primarily at home (Hancock and McMurtry, "Post-*Serial*" 90).

The experience with and of disembodiment is inherent in a purportedly single-sense medium like podcasts, where sound is not always a "full" sensory experience the way other mediums can be and often are. It is far too easy to become distracted with the outside world, as the visual and sensory cues around the listener provide near constant reminders of the podcast narrative's physical distance from their own bodies and lives. The podcast narratives themselves are disembodied in the lack of full surroundings in that sense, with the focus some audio dramas have on the voices of the characters – frequently the sound work is minimal, and does not create full soundscapes as a movie's sound work does – perhaps creating an unrealistic sensory experience. Alternatively, however, as I will explore later in this chapter, some listening environments may in fact enhance the experience of an audio drama's sound – and the more minimalist sound design may be *more* effective as a storytelling technique, especially for horror. Horror audio dramas have found many clever tricks to drag the listener back into their worlds: by reembodying their fans within the texts and sounds of their work, podcast authors have managed to overcome the medium's unstandardized experience in order to deliver their scares.

3. The Narrative Body

To begin the examination of *reembodiment* in podcast sound, I must first discuss the "found footage" and "found audio" framework as it dominates the audio drama (and more specifically horror) scene. As I explained in the previous chapter, this narrative frame dominates the horror genre of podcast drama: popular podcasts like *Archive 81* and *Limetown*, arguably alongside the radio-esque *Welcome to Night Vale*, all draw upon the epistolary format of their literary gothic predecessors. What makes this so interesting when discussing the idea of reembodying the listener is the way these stories frame their audience: all of them rely upon their

audience being part of the fictional world. In order to do this, audio dramas must create a "character" for the listener to inhabit. *Night Vale*'s "dear listeners" are directly addressed within the narrative (and often have things happen to them because of it), though even the implicit listener of audio dramas such as *Limetown* are treated as part of those podcasts' narrative worlds. In a move appropriate to the horror genre, the narrative of many podcast dramas essentially transfers the audience to a new body within the work; tying the narrative body to the audience's physical body through those kinds of sense memories and psychological or cognitive responses to sound, the listener inhabits the world of the narrative much more completely (and with more implicit encouragement from the text itself and its authors) than any other medium outside of full virtual reality. Though never addressed, podcasts like *Alice Isn't Dead* and *The Magnus Archives* through their presentation as things someone could simply pick up and hear – the former's narrator broadcasting over her truck's handheld radio and the latter existing on physical tapes – create an *implied* listener body for the real-world listener to inhabit. Rochester claims that the less detailed characters, without much physical description and with many details of their lives previous to the series' beginning left ambiguous, lead to much stronger "imaginative self-identification" with the characters and through that a stronger engagement with the podcast itself; the facelessness of the implied listener allows the listener free control over the narrative body (Rochester 365). The "narrative body" provided by the audio drama is then subjected, alongside a listener's actual body, to the sensory experiences of the story. Through sound and the physical responses that it can provoke, the listener is able to inhabit more fully the surrogate body provided. Through the surrogate body, the audience is given a level of agency – and, in horror podcasts, danger – enhanced by the acoustic experience. By creating the idea of space and sensation through the audio medium, the narrative body is given a full sensory experience; the

narrative body moves, sees, touches, and *hears* within the fictional world all through the use of sound.

Sound alone can be very physical, in both an ephemeral and very literal sense – even besides the invasive experience of headphones (covered later in this chapter), techniques such as binaural recording can give the listener phantom sensations of motion and space within an audio work. Ceraso and Ahern discuss the idea of adding dimension to recorded audio through the use of physical space, having students creating a soundscape physically move around the room and therefore change their experience of the sounds. Some creators record audio in similar ways, crafting portions of audio that imply or simulate distance from the microphone, as in binaural recordings, therefore adding the sensation of motion to the audio. *The Magnus Archives* for example frequently uses sound shots like this: characters will often walk towards or away from the in-universe tape recorders on which the podcast's audio is "found," as indicated by the volume of their voice on the tape. The distance from the "microphone" creates a mental map of a physical space for the listener – a landscape to match the soundscape created by the podcast editors. The implication of motion and the inclusion of one of the ways people can sensorally experience it in a physical space (listening to the footsteps as someone walks away, or hearing a voice becoming fainter with distance) works especially well in horror podcasts, where the physical danger that both the characters and perhaps even the listeners are in is a salient feature of the narrative. The listener must "believe" in the immersive danger of the drama in order to be scared by it, and the sonic environment created – even those that are acoustically simple – adds to the believability of the story being told. If one can hear it happen, even quietly, one can imagine and fear it as well.

4. Volume

Speaking of sound volume, horror podcasts often take advantage of abrupt changes in the sonic experience to deliver more potent terror. *The Magnus Archives*'s first season finale for example is a two-part narrative arc, where the titular institute is under siege by supernatural worms (as a representation of the fear of contamination). In this finale, one of the "archival assistants" is murdered on tape, an event marked by her final, deafening scream at 19:53 in the podcast's 39th episode. Sasha, the doomed assistant, is the first character to die in *The Magnus Archives*, though certainly not the last. At the moment of her death, the audience is suddenly forced to acknowledge the very real danger the characters of the frame narrative are in, and the extended sequence of Sasha cautiously checking her surroundings before meeting the creature that will kill her heightens the tension in the audience before the climax of the scream: the scene begins at 17:31, and her death does not occur for another two minutes and twenty two seconds. The episode itself was at that point extremely unusual for the podcast, as it opens in chaos and features a fire alarm sound effect prominently throughout much of the episode; until this point, episodes are primarily delivered in low, even tones, with even the post-statement commentary from the protagonist rarely rising above a normal speaking level. Season One's finale marks the first, though certainly not the last, time that any of the primary characters fully screams on both fictional and literal tape.

On the level of story, Matthew Melia muses on the utility of the scream for horror: "It has a narrative function, telling the audience where and when to be afraid, an indicator as to the climax of a frightening sequence and an instance of catharsis and release. It mediates our reaction to the terrifying scenario before us" (Melia). Sasha's final scream, coming during the climactic sequence of the first season's finale, ends the rising dread her investigation inspires

with a gut-wrenching, ear-splitting shriek. Interesting and necessary for a discussion of the use of a scream here is a description of the entity that kills her: Sasha is murdered by a creature known in-text as the "Not-them," which takes on the identity of the victim and replaces them both physically and in the memories of all except one person (in Sasha's case, later series mainstay and assistant Melanie identifies there being two Sashas in the beginning of Season Three). It must be noted that the Not-them explicitly does not take on the victim's appearance, instead appearing completely different from the original. Melia interprets the scream as an assertion of the self, noting that, "[i]dentity is tied to physical presence[,] and the inability to realise and recognise personal subjectivity leads to a complete erasure of the self" (Melia). He also specifically discusses the use of the scream in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, an example remarkably applicable to the situation Sasha finds herself in: her scream is the final expression of selfhood this character ever gets, as she is murdered and replaced by the Not-them. Here, the screams of the character call the listener's attention to their own fear as the frame narrative is completely overtaken by what was – until the final portion of the first season – the distant monsters of the statements.

Just as the characters are overrun, the scream dominates the listener's experience of the podcast: the loudness of the scream itself crosses a boundary for the audience. The sudden increase in volume, even beyond the emotional response screams evoke in a listener invested in the story, can be physically painful and even more sensually invasive than quieter audio. Melia refers to the scream as "an act of cruelty" when discussing the way it "impinges on and invades the space of the listener" (Melia). The audio throughout the episode contains much louder sound effects and vocal performances than the usual episodes, with a fire alarm effect blaring in the background of several of the "tapes" after the 14:15 mark; in comparison, Sasha's death scene in

the titular archive's artifact storage (beginning at 17:31) lowers the volume of the alarm significantly and contains very little audio aside from it and Sasha's voice. As Sasha approaches the table containing the Not-them entity, the music rises and shifts to a more intense volume (19:06), following by an increase in the static effect (19:26) and finally the podcast's eerie string music (19:36). The moment of her death and scream is accompanied by a high-pitched static whine beginning at 19:51, fading several seconds after Sasha's scream also dies off and returning the podcast's volume to the previous near-silence. The static whine and the scream both rise to a volume that may hurt the ears, creating a physical pain that mirrors the pain Sasha feels in the same scene; this mentally and bodily paralleled experience blurs the boundary between character and listener experience, and through that between the audience and the text.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from "MAG39 Infestation," *The Magnus Archives*'s "MAG15 Lost John's Cave" has a sequence that is so quiet initially that it may require the listener to turn the volume up. This episode's "statement" focuses on two women and their supernatural experience cave diving, and evokes the podcast's entity representing claustrophobia and the fear of being buried alive in the descriptions of the tight passages of the caves and being lost in the dark labyrinthine tunnels underground. To heighten the sensation of weight and claustrophobia, the podcast makes use of low-pitched, rumbling music throughout the episode. It rises and falls in volume and intensity over the episode, with rises in its volume corresponding to particularly panicked moments that the statement's narrator experiences: beginning at 16:48, for example, that musical element rises and falls to match the use of the word "clunk" as the narrator describes trying to surface from her underwater dive (Sims, "MAG15"). It is at its loudest from 19:20 to around 20:33, as the statement reaches its most intense point as the subject describes the appearance of a ghostly lantern. At the end of the episode (beginning at 27:03 and continuing

until 27:17), the podcast's narrator plays a "camera recording" found amongst that episode's subject's belongings that contains audio from that moment: the in-universe audio clip is only a woman repeatedly whispering the phrase "take her, not me" with little other sound or variation. It is markedly quieter than the usual volume of the rest of the podcast, and may require a listener to increase their device's volume in order to discern what she is saying (Sims, "MAG 15"). Accompanying this lone whisper is the sound of dripping water and the faint sound of something almost like footsteps – perhaps those of the mysterious figure with the lantern she describes earlier in her statement. A whisper in the ears is rarely pleasant, and the terrified pleas coming after an episode spent with that character in the bowels of the earth – with the accompanying dread-inducing music – is even less so. The hushed audio may also necessitate the listener raising the volume in order for the words to be intelligible, an action that sonically brings the whisperer closer to them. Not only is this particular section of the podcast particularly creepy due to the whispering, but the physical participation it requires from the listener becomes especially interesting against the common conception of podcasts. An action as simple as needing to adjust the podcast's volume mid-episode crosses the boundary between participant and observer, making listeners themselves responsible for their own fright – it's a reminder of the willing submission to terror that consuming horror media entails. In moments like the ones presented in these two episodes of *The Magnus Archives*, the sound itself can force physical interaction with the podcast – as one clicks the volume buttons or tears out their headphones, escaping or submitting to the fear invoked becomes a quite literal action on the part of the listener.

Moving back to the use of sound however, one must also consider the use of *silence* within horror narratives. Horror podcasts make especially careful use of sound's absence when creating the acoustic environments of their narratives: the calm before the storm, the sudden hush

of something cut tragically short. In *The Penumbra Podcast*'s episode "Home," the final sequence of overpoweringly loud noise is suddenly cut at 26:46 as the protagonists are freed from danger; *Limetown*'s second episode ends similarly, with nothing but the natural sounds of the night following the terrifying minute and a half long sequence of a man slamming his head against the narrator's door and screaming (Kaner & Vibert, "Home"; Akers, "Winona"). *The Magnus Archives*'s second season finale contains a 28-second section with nothing but the sound of blood dripping from the table (Sims, "MAG80"). All of these moments represent a kind of pause on the events of the drama – the silence lingers over what remains, a moment of suspension where neither character nor audience can be completely sure that they can finally relax. It also plunges the listener suddenly back into the base audio of their actual environment, either allowing them to relax as the environmental sound breaks their immersion or increasing it in a quieter environment.

5. Textured Technology

Many podcasts also make use of sonic "texture" within their frequently found-audio narratives, adding gritty "lower quality" effects to their audio or muffling them. *The Penumbra Podcast*'s "Home" muffles the character Jack's voice as he speaks to his sister around 17:10 in order to give the listener the impression that he is speaking through a door, changing the textural experience of his voice in order to mimic the real-life sonic experience despite the non-physical medium. *The Magnus Archives* also uses similar techniques extensively, deliberately adding audio "fuzz" over all of its diegetic audio to mimic the analog recording tapes the audio is recorded on within the narrative; only the non-diegetic music and the click of the tape recorder starting are presented in clear quality. This decision adds a level of authenticity to the audio

drama, as the effect's realism blurs the boundaries between true analog recordings and the modern professional microphones actually used in the recording of the podcast. Even the static base texture of the episodes is often modified to draw attention to different elements of the plot – static crackle effects are increased when supernatural phenomena occur within it, marking even seemingly innocuous sections of episodes as supernaturally influenced. For an example of this, the episode "MAG65 Binary" contains a conversation between the protagonist Jon and one of his assistants, Tim; they discuss being unable to quit their jobs or for Jon to fire Tim, the increase in crackle (26:33–26:55) over this portion of their conversation foreshadows the later reveal that they are under a supernatural influence that does in fact prevent them from leaving the institute (Sims, "MAG65"). Though not necessarily something a listener would remark upon when listening – it's not particularly jarring or loud – it does subtly mark those sections as more memorable and important.

The impact of the technology imitated by the podcasts itself cannot be ignored either: the technology with which podcasts are created and consumed itself becomes a feature of many horror dramas; an audience who by the very nature of the podcast scene must be technologically literate desires content that appeals to this. Many of the podcasts discussed in this study rely on now old-fashioned and nostalgic forms of technology as frames for their "found footage" narratives: *Night Vale* uses traditional radio equipment; *The Magnus Archives* and *The Black Tapes* use tape recorders; and the truck handset of *Alice Isn't Dead* also has a more analogue feel than podcasts such as *Limetown*'s digital-age presentation as a podcast distributed within its fictional world. John A. Riley cites Jeffrey Sconce when analyzing this phenomenon in horror as a genre, discussing how "we often perceive media technology as having some kind of power or indescribable presence" (Riley 10). Richard J. Hand goes even further, drawing a direct parallel

between specifically recorded audio and ghosts that dominate horror media: “Perhaps we can imagine the impact: a captured voice, invisible and disembodied, talks to people in the room. In this regard, we can see how uncanny is the realm of the auditory: immaterial, time-based and encompassing, what could be more like a ghost than sound?” (“Empty House” 72). Podcast dramas make frequent use of this sonic uncanniness, and many are inspired by or directly mimic digitally native horror genres when doing so. *The Magnus Archives*’s “MAG65 Binary” for example deliberately models the now ubiquitous “creepypasta” found on the same social media sites its fans use. The creepypasta[13] is a now-classic internet horror phenomenon, most easily recognizable for creating characters such as Slenderman (famous offline for the character’s involvement in a 2014 attempted murder, as the girls committing the crime claimed it as an attempted “sacrifice” to the fictional character). Returning to the episode, “Binary” is a radical departure from the previous episodes as it veers into the territory of purely-online, technology-based horror. The episode’s subject recounts her experience with a paranormal “chatbot,” which originally seemed to be a simple piece of malware, recalling its increasingly strange responses to her as a “player” of the chatbot’s game. Those involved in online horror writing spaces may find these story beats familiar, as famous creepypastas such as “Ben Drowned” similarly recount tales of supernatural video games breaking the bounds between game and reality. It also heavily features body horror (the subject of the video that the “chatbot” plays for the entity’s victim is described eating the keys of a keyboard, in appropriately gruesome detail) as well as the acknowledgement of the online spread of urban legends (the episode’s narrator finds the file through an online forum) – both surprisingly realistic scenarios that the listener may themself have experienced, though not to this extent of course. Fans may have experience with malware and unfortunately gruesome videos stumbled upon on dark corners of

[13] Internet-original horror stories or urban legends, often spread on sites like 4Chan and Reddit.

the web however; and the combination of this with the found footage-framing makes the appearance of technology within these podcasts interesting and worthy of further study.

6. Narrative Intimacy

Moving on from the purely auditory, we come to the sensation of distance between the audience and the narrative. Grace Gist discusses the idea of "narrative distance" in her examination of *Night Vale*'s protagonist and narrator, Cecil Palmer, focusing on the idea of intimacy in relation to audience: "Because Cecil's story becomes increasingly personal, intimacy is established and we become invested in the narrative. Night Vale's success thus depends upon the voice of Night Vale becoming not just a voice but an intimate presence" (Gist 84). This is also true of other horror podcasts: as the plot begins to trap the characters, the listener becomes more invested in their eventual fate. *The Magnus Archives* has an extremely similar narrative arc in comparison to *Night Vale*'s Strexcorp arc as Gist discusses it; beginning as a seemingly pure anthology series, over the course of the first season the frame narrative becomes more and more dominant. This culminates in the first season finale, which focuses on the life or death situation the four main characters find themselves in as the titular institute is overrun by monstrous, flesh-eating worms. This intimacy cultivated with the characters, as the listener hears them bicker and joke with each other throughout the season, causes the harm that befalls them to feel more personal. Gist also paraphrases Neil Verma in discussing the auditory positioning of the listener in relationship to the characters of the podcast, discussing how "intimate positioning" tends to follow a small number of characters and how the "aural favoring" of those characters leads to stronger attachments to them and their experiences (Gist 85). Even series with larger casts tend to focus on, at most, a very small group of characters. *The Magnus Archives*'s actual

main character is Jon, though his archival assistants also play large parts in both the recordings and narrative; however, it is Jon's voice the listener hears most often, as he is the one making the tape recordings canonically. Later in the series, assistant Martin becomes one of the leads alongside Jon, and both he and Jon remain fan favorites on social media – especially amongst queer fans, as the two become romantically involved in the final season. As the podcasts include intimate and person details about their characters (a few "tapes" in *The Magnus Archives* begin with excerpts of Martin's poetry, for example), the listener is placed on the same personal level as the characters are with each other; encouraged by the intimacy of the position the listener has – silent and unacknowledged as they may be – fans come to view the character as something closer to friends than impersonal subjects.

On the other hand, from the friendly intimacy of increasing emotional intimacy, some podcasts also distort the intimate positioning of the audience to the point of discomfort. *The Magnus Archives* for example utilizes this as part of its primary storyline. As it is slowly revealed within *The Magnus Archives*'s narrative arc, the tape recorders and the making the tapes are actually manifestations of the cosmic horrors the podcast focuses on: "The Beholding" (one of several names for it within the narrative) is an entity that feeds off the fear of being observed, thus making the ever-present recordings take on a deeply sinister tone. The protagonist, Jon, as an "avatar" for this entity – a conduit for the powers on the material plane – also begins to *need* the statements the audience has been listening to, to his own increasing horror and angst. The audience is both privy and subject to all of this, becoming themselves uncomfortably aware of their own voyeurism in beholding the suffering of the podcast's characters. Jon is physically incapable of stopping himself from reading through the full statement, trapped as a voyeur of the statement's events just as the audience is listening to the narrative unfold without agency over it.

Once emotionally invested in the characters of a podcast, the listener may find it increasingly difficult to listen to them suffer, helpless to do anything but continue to bear witness to their fates. Intimacy becomes a double-edged blade, increasing both the pleasure and pain that comes with listening to audio drama. Given that many podcast listeners do so through headphones, this emotional intimacy also transforms into a distinctly physical one as well.

Part of what makes headphone-listening so much more intense is the close physicality of the experience – when the sound enters, inescapably and directly into the listener's ears, the audio breeds fear far more easily than it can from the safer physical distance of a speaker on a device. Hancock discusses the virtual soundscape of Strickland's 2015 *The Stone Tape* "placing the listener at the centre" of the narrative's danger in its use of binaural recording techniques and creation of soundscapes ("Headphones" 58). Many horror audio dramas use similar techniques when designing the sounds and editing of their episodes, recreating physical space through careful use of alternating audio channels and various vocal effects. As a straightforward but surprisingly complex example of these techniques, I will discuss the use of these techniques within the episode "Home" produced for the first season of *The Penumbra Podcast*. Created by Harley Takagi Kaner and Kevin Vibert in 2016, *The Penumbra Podcast* is primarily a sci-fi/fantasy audio drama with comedic elements; the podcast runs seasonally (as a television show might), alternating between the "Juno Steel" and "Second Citadel" storylines in short arcs. During the podcast's first season however, the podcast also released several unrelated episodes or episode arcs – among those is the episode "Home," a supernatural horror story about a child (Lily) who is set to move from her family home soon. The house itself fights against this, possessing her brother (Jake) and physically shifting as the episode progresses. The sounds of the

episode, edited to be from the child protagonist's perspective, places the listener on her shoulders as she is relentlessly pursued across the house by her suddenly murderous brother.

After the introductory sequence, the narrative opens with a muffled quality: Lily begins the episode playfully hiding under a blanket, reflected in the change in audio quality as the blanket is removed. During this same sequence, binaural techniques are used to give the mother going up the house's staircase the sensation of movement to match; her conversation with Jake upstairs is also muffled as though heard through the floor from downstairs. Later in the episode, around 13:00, the sound of the TV Jake is watching can be heard faintly and is muffled as though heard from another part of the house. As Lily approaches the room containing the TV (from 13:45 to 3:54), the music rises in both volume and quality. These elements effectively create a mental map of the house for the listener, constructing purely with sound the space the characters inhabit. Of course, similar techniques later increase the intensity of the attacks from both possessed Jake and the house itself: luring Lily upstairs after the power goes out, Jake's vocals are muffled as he apparently speaks through his bedroom door (around 17:00 until 17:26). Lily's vocals are still perfectly clear in comparison, as are Jake's again when – at 17:26 – he crashes through the bedroom door, swinging a broken trophy at his frightened sister. Apparently knocked to the floor during the scuffle, judging by the sound of fabric being dragged along the ground and the faint sounds of skin hitting wood as she frantically shuffles away from her brother, the listener is treated to more than two minutes of frantic chase and hiding, with Jake smashing objects at varying distances seven additional times. For the first several swings that are actually quite close to Lily, the trophy sounds as though it is coming from directly behind the listener – achieved through filtering audio through the two sides of the headphones at differing levels – placing them alongside her in apparent physical danger. The crashing grows fainter as Lily

escapes and hides in the office, but Jake's footsteps and voice gradually increase in volume as he discovers her after she drops a phone (the clicks of her dialing and the clatter as she fumbles placing it back are quite clear).

All of these sound elements come together in just the right way to make the danger the characters experience more real to the listener; this is an experience that is deeply enhanced by the use of headphones, as there is a level of invasiveness and isolation inherent in their use. As Hancock says, headphone listening for horror audio dramas becomes more terrifying as the listener is "disconcertingly, disarmingly deaf to their real-world environment" (Hancock, "Headphones" 55). While the act of putting in earbuds and pressing the play button may be voluntary, the physical interaction with the horror experience – and the small-scale ritualization this act of submission requires – frames this way of listening in an interesting light. Not only are earbud-style headphones physically entering the listener's body, but they also separate them from the acoustics of their physical environments. John Donne famously insisted that no man is an island, but thanks to headphone-listening one can certainly get rather close to that sensory and psychological state. Cut off at least partly from the real world through this loss, the audience is transported to an entirely new acoustic world within the podcast, immersing themselves within narratively and sonically dangerous environments. Returning to Melia's idea of screams as "an act of cruelty" visited upon the innocent listener, one must consider the idea of the listener as not-so-innocent in light of this: listeners are in fact (perhaps masochistically) willing participants in their own acoustic abuse (Melia). It is a pleasurable experience to be frightened in such a deeply intimate and personal way, the pulse-pounding experience of violence safely mediated through alternative narrative bodies. Frightening, yes, but not so much that the listener does not love it still. The thrill is part of what keeps listeners coming back, even beyond their emotional

investments in the characters or storyline. The imaginative space created by podcast audio dramas and their soundscapes allows the more cautious thrill-seekers room in which to play.

Some listeners choose to lose themselves further in the imaginative space of the podcast drama, by listening in the dark and allowing the tantalizingly terrifying uncertainty on which the horror genre relies to have even greater sway over their listening experience and body. Several studies have suggested that a fairly significant portion of podcast and audio drama listeners enjoy regularly listening to them in the dark, and some may even prefer it (McMurtry, "Imagination"). Horror podcasts are especially well suited to this, as researchers of sound and imagination have "consistently found that images of the bizarre capture listeners' imaginations rather than the mundane" according to McMurtry's research ("Imagination" 3). The removal of vision brings the story's subjects closer, just as the footsteps grow ever louder auditorily, as the visual reminder of its physical distance from the listener's reality and self is shut off with the flick of a switch. As seen in *The Penumbra Podcast*'s "Home" earlier, the dark helps intensify the audio experience in the lack of certainty in one's own environment it entails, especially in binaural recordings (Hancock, "Headphones" 55). In the dark imaginative space, horror's impact is boosted by the inherent uncertainty: when you cannot *see* the source of one's terror, one tends to *imagine* it as the worst possible thing. The monsters become bigger, the killer more sadistic, the viscera more disgusting than even the writers may have imagined when creating them. Riley discusses Michel Chion's conception of the "sound object" in his essay on the work of Peter Strickland, arguing that through recorded media the sound object is removed entirely; however, though the sound objects cannot be physically present, I argue that their *implied* existence within the narratives still leaves them with significant affective power (Riley 10). Unclear sound objects are inherent to the podcast medium, but this only serves to make the experience of them more uncanny: the

uncertainty it gives the listener is uncanny, as the intangibility of sound itself is as well (Toop, ix). The producers of *The Magnus Archives* exploit this phenomenon frequently: for example, the appearance of one supernatural entity within the podcast is marked by the faint sound of a calliope organ. The calliope, a specific and canonical object within the audio drama's world, never makes a physical appearance within the fiction; the sound it makes, however, does. It serves to let both characters and audience know that *something* dangerous is nearby, but does not tell them exactly *what* or *where* the danger lies. The audience is left to imagine and guess at whatever will come next, only able to listen to the narrative world's environmental cues and wait.

7. Sounding Physical

Some podcasts also make use of the ambient sound of those sonic environments, both within the podcast itself as room tone or sound as well as the actual sounds of the world around the listener. While some sound (footsteps or doors closing, for example) is diegetic in that it is associated with the action of the scene and is still tied to implied imagery, some sound that podcasts use is purely non-diegetic (like the musical overlay of *The Magnus Archives*) and not present "in-universe." While *The Magnus Archives* uses a difference in audio clarity to separate diegetic and non-diegetic sound, podcasts like *Limetown* rely upon the audience's familiarity with the *Serial*-like editing style to draw that interpretive line instead. The diegetic soundscapes of horror podcasts sometimes line up eerily with a listener's actual physical environment; this brings the real world crashing into the narrative one, blurring the line between danger and safety by incorporating the listener's supposedly safe environment into the unsafe narrative realm. *The Magnus Archives*'s "MAG86 Tucked In" episode, for example, includes a scene at the end of the

episode which takes place in a coffee shop, with people talking audibly but indistinctly in the background – unintentionally recreating the sonic experience that a headphone listener might have in a louder or more public listening environment. While this invasion of the real-world into the fictional (and vice versa) could take a listener out of the immersive moment, I suggest that it can also place the listeners more strongly within that moment as well. Hancock writes about *Night Vale*'s 94th episode, "All Right," and it is one of the strongest and most self-aware examples of this that I have come across yet. Within this episode, a mysterious and dangerous creature is hunting one of Cecil's listeners – and to help protect his audience from it, he directs them to remove the left side of their headphones and listen only through the right. Even if one does not, the audio channel will only play the episode's audio through the right side (for most of the episode, unless Cecil comments upon and directs changes to this). This episode repeatedly asks its listeners to focus on the sounds of the real world around them, as the creature could be making any of them: the actual environment around the listener is suddenly plunged into the narrative, as the podcast asks the listener to believe that they are in danger *in the real world*.

"All Right" also frequently requests that the audience physically participate in the narrative action of the podcast. Listeners are asked to put earbuds in, to take them out, to hum, to speak aloud, and even to plug their other ear in a specific way to recreate the "weird sound" Cecil is attempting to describe to them (Fink and Cranor, "All Right" 4:47). These moments continue to blur the real and fictional worlds of the podcast, with Cecil laughing afterwards that someone saw the listener plugging their ear. A commenter on the official YouTube video for the episode wrote about this moment, "I was walking home from college listening to this and SOMEONE ACTUALLY SAW ME STICK MY FINGER IN MY EAR MOMENTS BEFORE CECIL LAUGHED AT IT!" (Cassodembreankia). Another user, referring to Cecil's directive to

the listener to close their eyes, put their other headphone in, and listen to the "weather" so that they do not hear it coming if or when the creature attacks them (17:03), commented that their cat sniffed them at the end of the weather segment and frightened them – their own very real creature overlapping with the fictional one of the podcast (Cousin M). The episode's creepiest portions all come from *the real world* as the writers take advantage of and draw attention to the constantly shifting sounds of the rooms and spaces around us. The soundscape and room tone of the environment, normally so safe as to be completely ignored, become a subject of fear as safe reality is pulled into unsafe fiction. Ambient sound is not something that should be ignored, and podcast episodes like this one prove that sometimes, they cannot be.

To continue with the theme of reembodiment within podcast dramas, however, sound's effects on the physical body even beyond the use of the physical environment of the listener must be explored. The disembodiment inherent in the podcast medium causes a tension between the raw physicality of some of the horror elements and the potential lack of connection on the listener's part; however, the involvement of the listener within the narrative of the text and the narrative body they inhabit give them a connection that allows the invocation of deeply physical fears relating to sound. Hancock refers to a viral audio file from around a decade ago, of a binaurally recorded "haircut," when discussing the "illusions of physical touch" possible through binaural audio: "[L]isteners to binaurally recorded 'virtual' haircuts report sensations of tickling as the sound of electric clippers traverse the virtual space surrounding their heads" (Hancock, "Headphones" 55). Many studies have demonstrated a strong link between the various senses, with stimuli to one set of sensory neurons often provoking "subthreshold" micro responses in other sensory neurons, allowing phantom sensations like those Hancock describes to occur in response to podcasts' audio stimuli (Lee, 887). Isabella Van Elferen draws on the visceral (and

deeply relatable) sound of a dentist's drill in her article "Sonic Horror," describing the experience of undergoing a painless anesthetized procedure thus: "At the dentist's my physical pain may be blanketed by local anaesthetics, but the sound of the drill is in my head, invasive suggestion of a horror that I cannot see and do not feel" (1). For those who have experienced that particular sound, even thinking about it may make one cringe – though there is no actual danger involved with the sound itself, the sense memory of past dentist visits haunts our experience of the noise. Much of the audio that podcast dramas employ within their episodes relies upon the audience's familiarity with it, as they must be able to successfully connect the noise itself with the image it is intended to evoke. McMurtry reminds us that "the comprehension of a sound requires a commonality of experience," and the use of "closure" ("mentally completing that which is absent") on the audience's part functions to mentally complete the visual elements associated with the sound they are listening to ("Dark" 6). This does not necessarily mean that the audience needs to have *experienced* the sound, only that they know what it means: ideally, few listeners will have personal experience being chased by someone trying to kill them, as is the case in the episode "Home," but the image itself is something that can be easily imagined and understood.

Horror's quite literal physicality within audio drama also plays on the idea of embodiment, placing the reembodied listeners in physical danger within the podcasts' narratives. By focusing heavily on the body and flesh, the podcasts offer listeners unsettling reminders of their own real-world bodies in a way that heightens the sympathetic fear response as the narrative body is threatened. *The Magnus Archives*, in its intentionally wide evocation of common fears, frequently features distortion of the physical body even when representing those entities and fears that may not necessarily require it. An avatar of the fear of heights (among other things) is once described as having a long, gray, and "completely inhuman" arm, for

example (Sims, “MAG124”). Fear entities like “The Corruption,” on the other hand, naturally feature horrific human insect hives, and the aptly named “The Flesh” entity of course deals with body horror as its primary component. In its inaugural episode, *Alice Isn’t Dead* viscerally describes the first-season antagonist taking a bite out of a bystander’s neck; *Limetown*’s second episode involves over a minute of audio presented as a man repeatedly slamming his head into the protagonist’s door. Horror is a physical genre at its core, and the focus many horror podcasts give the body – after trapping the listener within their new narrative one – provides a deeply unsettling experience for listeners as people are physically harmed within the podcasts.

8. Conclusion

“Living” within fictionalized bodies, crafted (apparently) for them alone, fans are able to exist within narrative worlds that are, even without the intimacy of inhabitation, emotionally important to them. Horror as an audio drama genre allows the listener, through their new narrative body, to safely experience terror. With the relatively large percentage of queer fans and fans of color within Tumblr’s podcast fandom communities, horror podcasts like *Night Vale* and *The Magnus Archives* grant these audiences narrative outlets for existential anxiety within stories focused on characters whom fans may feel are truly representative of themselves. Within *Night Vale*’s episode “All Right,” Cecil comments on “his” audience approaching audio dramas as an escape:

> I know my role. You come to me for escape, loyal listeners. To forget about the world, or…not to forget about it, but to hear its dangers organized, put into a narrative framework, turned into a story that can safely end. But no matter how deeply you enter

> into the stories I am telling you, you can never fully escape. The world is around you. You can hear it with one of your ears right now. (Fink and Cranor, "All Right")

It is exactly the return to reality Cecil addresses, however, that I argue is the point of horror-themed audio drama's popularity. Listeners do not truly visit these narrative worlds as escapism, instead seeking out safely cathartic *danger* in media they perceive will accept *all* of their persons. Danielle Hancock quotes several Tumblr users in her own examination of *Night Vale*'s fan culture, all of whom express a desire to live in Night Vale, with one in particular saying, "I am so grateful to Night Vale for being my strange, frightening, absurd home" (Hancock, "Night Vale" 37). While not all fans want to live in the often less-welcoming worlds (in comparison to Night Vale) of these podcasts, many still feel a strong connection to and find a sense of safety within them. As much as the actual content of audio dramas (and the "harm" done to their narrative bodies within them) may frighten and disturb, listeners and fans continue to embrace fictional worlds where people like them are completely quotidian – and those fictional worlds, as seen throughout this chapter, embrace them back.

CONCLUSION

Horror Podcasting and the Future

In so thoroughly blurring physical reality with digital narrative, horror podcasts have contributed in compelling and unsettling ways to the destabilizing, in the twenty-first century, of classic literary-critical oppositions such as author and audience, text and listener, and artistic consumption and production. As we've seen, fandom spaces are expansive and productive in nature, revealing new dimensions to the texts they celebrate, whether by sharing and seeding interpretations, spawning new fan-driven texts, or forcing writers to accommodate fan wishes, thereby making popular culture more interactive and less authorially-determined than ever. Fans are exerting more conscious control over the texts they consume; immersed in a digital culture that encourages fandom-specific interpretive frames, fans are collectively creating novel approaches to textual interpretation and textual interactivity. Tumblr – and other social media sites with large fandom presence – provide a space for the proliferation of fannish identities that shape the lives of listeners, and indeed blur the virtual with the "real" world, long after those fans have logged off. Podcast dramas frame the audience as characters within their narratives, creating identities and virtual worlds for listeners within the text itself. The narrative frames of podcasts also lend themselves to this kind of reality-blurring, as the presentation of audio dramas as "real" audio – combined with skillful editing and technologically elaborate soundscapes – makes it easier for the listener to suspend disbelief. Additionally, without critical distance from those texts, it can be difficult for some fans to remember to *un-suspend* their disbelief when the episode is over. The internet allows unlimited access to texts, authors, and other fans, and the unprecedented intimacy that digital existence encourages and enables can sometimes contribute to a level of complacency in analysis, an uncritical sense of personal investment, that spills into

other facets of life. While the current combative and inflammatory climate of online spaces cannot be traced exclusively to podcast fans or even to fandom spaces, fan communities on sites like Tumblr provide us with a microcosmic glimpse into the psychology underlying the miscommunication and misinformation that plagues online culture in the digital era.

Furthermore, the unique sensory experiences of podcast-listening contribute to the strong identification listeners have with the texts they consume. As I have argued, sound is a multisensory experience that allows for recorded audio to still cause physical reactions through sense memory, despite the lack of material proximity live sound has. Reminders of experienced sound serve to intensify realism within these audio dramas, with many audio dramas deliberately incorporating "mistakes" and sonic texture in order to mimic physical sound and analog recording techniques. This auditory naturalism contributes to the level of intimacy between listener and podcast, as the credibility makes it easier for listeners to become invested. Podcasts cultivate emotional and even physical intimacy within their episodes, drawing the listener closer to characters and to danger at the same time. Situated within a simulated narrative body, the audio drama's tale becomes that of the listener as well, giving them a concrete – if narratively unimpactful – role within it. Fictional bodies are placed in the same danger as those of focal characters, and those uncomfortable paratextual reminders of the listener's real-world body, instead of disconnecting the audience from their immersion, forge a stronger sense of terror in the sympathetic fear responses provoked by it. This inhabitation of fictional worlds on the part of the audience further confuses the line between listener, author, and story, with podcast fandom reinforcing this confusion as these "personal" narratives compete among fans.

Additionally, the relative permanence of the internet maintains an "afterlife" for podcasts, long after episodes have been published: new fans can easily find and interact with fan content

on social media from months or even years earlier, perpetuating the impact of these posts ad infinitum. Active fan communities of currently publishing podcasts have a tradition of "live-blogging" their reactions to new episodes, with people tracking the tag in real time as the episode is released and consumed by listeners, who post initial reactions and commentary for the benefit of other fans, who, in turn, interact with these postings. Even years later, if one digs deep enough into internet archives and blog tags, fans may continue to pass around these posts and perpetuate the horror experience of audio dramas through fan creations and word-of-mouth recommendations, maintaining momentum and relevance through the community built by fans. With the collective interpretive frames created within these communities, and often shared between fandoms as audiences migrate between fan communities, and as media interests and priorities change, those same posts live on, continuing to shape the reception of the podcasts, even outside the frenetic context of their conception.

There are both positive and negative aspects to the creativity and interactivity present within these podcast-based cultural communities, however. This raises a number of ethical and epistemological issues for listeners, authors, and even for online bystanders. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of people are posting about these podcasts online in real-time, while new fans are contributing thoughts on older episodes and fan postings, creating a virtual space defined by achronological and unfocused crosstalk. Fandom shapes both the narrative and each other's experience of it – and all the while, nearly every one of those people on some level feels entitled to a level of direction over the narrative. With the borders between audience and author being more porous on social media, and with fans being able to directly contact the writers of podcasts on platforms like Twitter, fans sometimes feel a sense of ownership over a work, exacerbated by the "equal footing" they have in the interpretive space of the internet. The

enormous variety of interpretations can sometimes cause problems, however: thousands of often conflicting narrative choices are advanced and debated, usually anonymously, within fan circles which lack the protocols found within professional interpretive communities, causing a disproportionate amount of strife between fellow fans over relatively petty textual matters such as which of the characters may end up in romantic relationships within the narrative's canon. The blurring line between listener and character also influences how some treat social media users, whose anonymity online can make them seem "unreal," given the ease with which one can fake an identity online. Some, then, seem to treat others as mere "side characters" within their own "story" online, dismissing the impact their actions may have on those others. On the other hand, online communities can be deeply nurturing spaces, despite and because of that anonymity: for example, the connection to the text and to each other allows for communal grieving in fandom spaces. When characters die, the fan collective suffers together, and are able to form stronger emotional bonds through shared, virtual trauma. Thus, the facelessness of an online identity becomes a safety measure allowing fans to express more vulnerability than would otherwise be comfortable in a public setting. Fandom culture provides audiences – including marginalized communities – with opportunities to connect with others empathetically, united by the same intense feelings towards the media they enjoy.

Perhaps paradoxically, horror is ideal for this kind of connectivity, given its reliance upon particularly intense emotions and the audience's familiarity with horror fiction's cross-media generic conventions; for example, the use of sudden loud noises as a sonic "jumpscare" owes a debt to the sound design and music choices of film. The genre has also proven adept at processing cultural and historical anxieties, including the rise of the surveillance state or global environmental catastrophe. In her sweeping assessment of the current state of podcast drama,

Ella Watts predicts that podcasting is due for a new wave of audio dramas. I contend that horror will continue to be a staple of audio drama for the foreseeable future; after all, in her list of the most culturally impactful audio dramas since 2018, more than half are either horror narratives or contain significant horror elements (Watts 23). If the popularity that *The Magnus Archives* enjoyed in its final seasons and the relative success of its recent sister podcast *Old Gods of Appalachia* are any indication, then horror fiction may be trending towards both bigger and smaller scales: while potential world-ending apocalypses have become a common focus, podcast dramas are zeroing in on the intimate, individual level in ways that appeal to their fannish audiences. Listeners seek characters and stories they relate to; the increase in the number of characters from diverse backgrounds in successful audio dramas reflects a desire on the part of both creators and audiences to see themselves represented – even in narratives designed to frighten them. It is no coincidence that nearly every podcast discussed in this thesis features characters of color and queer characters, which has contributed to their growing attraction to listeners from marginalized communities. It remains to be seen which podcast dramas will achieve widespread popularity next. That podcasts like the Lovecraftian *Malevolent*, *I Am In Eskew* and the aforementioned *Old Gods of Appalachia* have gained traction on social media in the wake of *The Magnus Archives*' conclusion is certainly suggestive of audio drama's new direction; perhaps, in an era of near-constant social unrest and political instability, it makes sense that stories grappling with uncertainty and unknowability are attracting attention.

To meet this upcoming wave of confusion and questioning, both literary and cultural criticism must shift its current understanding of and approach to their practices. The relationship between audiences and texts has changed fundamentally since the days of critics like Georges Poulet, and the influence of non-traditional and non-literary forms of storytelling on reader

interpretation and social culture should certainly become a larger scholarly focus. Reader-response criticism must adapt to readers who frequently approach texts primarily as a vehicle for identity-creation, prioritizing relationships to social fan communities even over the actual creative works on which those fandoms are ostensibly based. Additionally, given the symbiotic push-and-pull between writer and reader examined within this thesis, neither audience nor text are truly "passive" in the reader-text relationship in modern media: texts envelop readers into their narrative worlds, in podcasting crafting "narrative bodies" for listeners to "physically" inhabit; meanwhile, audiences pressure and change texts to conform to collectively-created interpretations born from fan interaction. Beyond the confines of the podcast fandoms discussed here, these attitudes still apply. Media marketing within film, television, and many other mediums pushes collective identity in the proliferation of merchandising and fan-based marketing events targeting large swathes of consumers, shifting those texts into a state that actively influences its fan-identifying audiences. On the part of the audience, many have developed distinctly parasocial relationships with these texts, seeking media that has been carefully crafted to meet the demand for "friendly" and emotionally intimate textual reading experiences. The usual relationship between modern audiences and the texts they consume calls for a reexamination of the classic paradigms of reader-focused theory, especially given the impacts digital culture has had on collective interpretation.

There is also a growing lack of critical distance from texts being consumed in today's digital age, increasingly concerning due to how digital texts are becoming more socially influential than ever before. Like the reflection of a funhouse mirror, the traditional reality-fiction binary is blurred and distorted, and audiences may lack the necessary ability to distinguish between the two. The media-based identities I discuss may be expanded further into

examinations of larger identity-focused groupings on social media sites, as the sense of community and belonging people find amongst apparently like-minded internet users is a significant contributor to the explosive, abusive exchanges sometimes seen within and between those groups. Non-literary and nonfiction texts have also become more relevant to discussions of reader-response, as misinformation has become increasingly common in both news sources and amongst perfectly normal internet users. For example, politicians' tweets and social media homepages are how many people get their news now, and – as with all texts – there is a significant risk of audience interpretation differing from authorial intent. Without the ability to approach these texts from a more objective perspective, many social media users have begun engaging in inflammatory and abusive exchanges online, as mentioned previously. In a world of collapsing boundaries between the self and others, and truth and fiction, we must find new ways to think about maintaining some of those boundaries and approaching texts from a more critical angle. The epistemological foundation of horror may be the transgression of boundaries, but it nevertheless presupposes that there are boundaries to cross – horror, after all, is founded upon the *temporary* collapse of bodily integrity and textual cohesion. New approaches to textual interpretation and readers would help reinforce these boundaries, allowing for nuanced discussions of modern texts while still acknowledging the vast shift in audience priorities and textual relationships that come with such an interconnected digital era.

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