

Radio Gets What It Deserves

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Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio. Edited by Michele Hilmes & Jason Loviglio. New York: Routledge, 2002. pp. xv + 569.

In his review of Woody Allen's unprecedented movie *Radio Days* (1987), Roger Ebert wrote (concerning the almost physical intensity of the memories of radio listening): "Television shows happened in the TV set, but radio shows happened in my head." I belong to those radio listeners who have favorite radio shows, and favorite voices, and so when I picked up *Radio Reader*, an anthology consisting of 24 essays on the cultural history of American Radio, focusing on the period 1920 to the present era, I was curious to see whether it had succeeded in covering the more personal aspects that I intend exist with radio, and that Ebert is reminiscing about in his review of Allen's movie. To me, radio has thus so far simply been a mere medium where I could get access to *that* show or *that* particular voice. After having read *Radio Reader* I've now come to think about this otherwise.

It becomes apparent, as one reads through the contributions to this book, that the history of radio, and especially American Radio, is so much more than a history of voices. But despite being not only one of the most influential media around today and perhaps the first there ever was, radio has been a sadly neglected theme in the field of cultural studies.

Radio Reader presents the history of radio in America as a fascinating mix of fantasy and reality, and the book altogether seems to be the joint result of two interests: The interest of telling a story in a straightforward manner, and the editors' interest in craftfully putting the pieces together into a cohesive and informative whole. This might sound like the interest behind any anthology, but the result is, in this case, both overwhelming and captivating: For it must be said that very few anthologies published these days display such a fine and sensitive editing. In the preface, Hilmes describes this as "results that surpass even my high initial expectations," and for once I really agree with what is being said about such matters in the preface of a book. Apart from being close to re-discovering the very idea of an anthology (this idea has certainly gone astray in most of today's anthologies in philosophy), *Radio Reader* also displays why anthologies are perhaps the best forum for cultural studies.

Although the anthology covers a wider range than most anthologies, when it comes to both time-span and thematics, the book is not wide, to the extent of

not being overviewable. It is also fascinating to what extent the various contributions teach the reader something—how they all, so to speak, bulge with information. In some articles this can be a bit too much, while others (e.g. M. C. Keith, chp. 18) never forget that information within an article also ought to be used to prove a point or to support assertions. In displaying how the commercial companies of today have their predecessors in the tension between freeform radio and commercial radio in the 1960's, Keith's essay is a lustrous example of the perfect blend of the aforementioned ingredients.

It has been said that radio, together with memories, provides us with the best pictures. Nowadays, with pictures everywhere, little is left to the pictures of our imagination and our ability to dwell on those pictures. Experiencing radio is, in that respect, related to experiencing literature, and written material on the subject of radio, when this is done as well as in P. Apostolidis "Scanning the 'Stations of the Cross'" (chp. 22), offers a double, almost chillingly delicate effect.

It is good to see how the various contributors avoid a prose, that if employed in the texts, would serve to mask the seemingly joyful process of investigating the themes dealt with. This is particularly noticeable in T. Hangen's contribution (chp. 6) on the history of *Lutheran Hour* and the prominent character W. A. Maier. Hangen's work is a feast of an article, and even though it is slightly marred by lack of in-depth analysis (but then again, what can you expect from only 15 pages on the life of a man and a program), or perhaps because of that very reason, Hangen's work, like the most enjoyable biographies, leaves us readers hungry for getting hold of some of Maier's highlights on tape.

On some occasions, though, the busy style leads the writer (and therefore the inattentive reader) to pass over points that really need further discussion, and this brings us to the question of the length of the essays (they are mostly 20-25 pp). Some essays, like J. H. Wang's (chp. 16), also strike me as too much of a pad between the indicative and the obvious, but this is seemingly caused by the lack of space. The attentive editing of the book, however, helps to make such questions of little matter. We are content with what we have so far, but at the same time we would love to see a second volume of *Radio Reader*, covering perhaps themes such as radio's role with regard to the music business and the other medias (such as the internet) etc., from the late 80s and onwards.

Radio Reader is very good when it comes to capturing the social impact radio has had in the US. But I still think there should be some contributions dealing with what radio offers on the more personal level. A book like this, dealing

with such a personal medium, suffers from not containing any discussions on radio as “company”. This is perhaps not worthy of a longer study for cultural researchers, but one must not forget that radio, in particular, is a voice to many people. They listen simply for the sake of hearing a voice, and radio is company in a way different from that of other media. One of the essays with good starting points for such studies is perhaps J. H. Wang’s “The Case of the Radio-Active Housewife”.

Fate, or whatever it was, had it that I broke my leg around the time when I was working on this review. I had set out to do a couple of quick readings of the book, write the review, and then go on to other things. But then I found myself forced to take things much slower, and I think my sudden access to time contributed much to my overall understanding of the book. *Radio Reader* is not just a big book, it is a great book, and the greatness is a thorough one, which might help to make this anthology a classic.

This might reveal more about how cultural studies is positioned today, and what characterizes it in comparison with the more frenzied up-to-date reports on consumer habits and often misguided analysis of cultural phenomenon that we find in glossy magazines and most newspapers. But as we know, today’s news is tomorrow’s toilet paper, and what *Radio Reader* makes so evident—apart from being an important contribution to cultural studies in itself—is that things printed in the press nowadays are so quickly forgotten because of its shallow style that we need cultural studies more than ever, not only to retell the stories, but to put things into perspective.

The book leaves me with a distinct feeling that radio as a medium is still able to reflect changes in society, but also and more importantly, that radio is still able to *make* changes in society. Radio has always been, and still is, vital. (See S. J. Douglas, chp. 23 “Letting the Boys be Boys” for a vivid depiction of this.) And *Radio Reader* helps to promote an awareness of the certain responsibility we radio-listeners have, especially in these awful times of warmongering. “Radio and television, like atomic energy,” we find in J. H. Wang’s essay (a quote from Charles Siepmann), “are explosive instruments. Our cultural survival depends, in no small measure, upon their proper use (p. 345).”

Even though I was once told that it is the very “death” of the reviewer to almost take for granted that every reader of your review will eventually pick up the book, this is exactly what I hope will happen in this case. *Radio Reader* is a powerful report on the powerful history of a powerful medium. It weaves tales of everyday life with stories about the transformation radio has gone through. It is captivantly told, and leaves the reader not only with a

wistful longing for the early period of radio, but also a wish to do research on the subject oneself. That is how strong this book is.