



# Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama

By Neil Verma

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For generations, fans and critics have characterized classic American radio drama as a “theater of the mind.” This book unpacks that characterization by recasting the radio play as an aesthetic object within its unique historical context. In *Theater of the Mind*, Neil Verma applies an array of critical methods to more than six thousand recordings to produce a vivid new account of radio drama from the Depression to the Cold War.

In this sweeping exploration of dramatic conventions, Verma investigates legendary dramas by the likes of Norman Corwin, Lucille Fletcher, and Wyllis Cooper on key programs ranging from *The Columbia Workshop*, *The Mercury Theater on the Air*, and *Cavalcade of America* to *Lights Out!*, *Suspense*, and *Dragnet* to reveal how these programs promoted and evolved a series of models of the imagination.

With close readings of individual sound effects and charts of broad trends among formats, Verma not only gives us a new account of the most flourishing form of genre fiction in the mid-twentieth century but also presents a powerful case for the central place of the aesthetics of sound in the history of modern experience.

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## Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama By Neil Verma Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1138656 in Books
- Brand: Brand: University of Chicago Press
- Published on: 2012-07-11
- Released on: 2012-07-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.30" w x 6.00" l, .95 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 296 pages



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### Editorial Review

Review

**\*\*Winner of the Best First Book Award from the Society for Cinema & Media Studies\*\***

"I can think of no monograph on mediated sound since Sterne's *The Audible Past* that charts so many exciting avenues of scholarship while building upon the tremendous work that precedes his study. [...] Any scholar or critic invested in the soundscapes and cultures of postwar media within or without the US - cinema, radio, television, print, and even such post-postwar audiovisual media as the home computer and the smartphone - must hereafter contend with the concepts so richly developed in *Theater of the Mind*." -- **Paul Young (Vanderbilt University), *The Journal of American Studies***

"Offering ample depth and breadth to satisfy the specialist, yet accessibly written and concretely supported, the book provides scholars and students of American radio history, American studies, and American history critical concepts for assessing and interpreting the formal characteristics, conventions, and styles of classic radio drama." -- ***Journal of Radio & Audio Media***

"While most scholars have explored radio in terms of broadcasting music or journalism, Neil Verma explores the medium's neglected but very popular dramas. In this detailed analysis, he reveals how radio, from the thirties through the fifties dramatized the conflicts of the Depression and New Deal and the paranoia of the fifties. By constructing a "theater of the mind," radio used sound and narrative structure to tell the nation's stories, encompassing social transformation and psychological perspective." -- **Tom Gunning (University of Chicago)**

"Neil Verma's *Theater of the Mind* is a gift in an age when so many have forgotten the depth of radio's contribution to sonic culture. Verma rethinks sound as a creative medium in the past and in the present, offering a definitive account of radio drama in the 20th century. His spatial readings of these dramas and their listeners--supported by fresh concepts like audioposition and kaleidosonic space--promise to transform the ways in which we analyze creative audio. *Theater of the Mind* is a major work of radio history." -- **Jonathan Sterne (McGill University)**

"Any scholar or critic invested in the soundscapes and cultures of postwar media within or without the US—cinema, radio, television, print, and even such post-postwar audiovisual media as the home computer and the smartphone—must hereafter contend with the concepts so richly developed in *Theater of the Mind*." *(Journal of American Studies)*

"*Theater of the Mind* does more to reanimate the study of radio forms and structures—indeed, of sound art in general—than any work published in recent memory. Neil Verma's exploration of audio narratives and sonic techniques during radio drama's heyday opens up a vast body of creative work that has been shut off from serious contemplation for decades. It is an important intervention in the growing field of sound studies, not to be missed."

(Michele Hilmes *University of Wisconsin–Madison*)

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(Jonathan Sterne *author of The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*)

“Verma begins his ambitious and impressive book on classic radio drama with ‘one of the most venerable clichés’ about the medium of radio: it is ‘the theater of the mind.’ Over the course of several close listenings, he transforms the phrase from ‘an idiom into a heuristic’ of remarkable depth and breadth. In doing so, Verma provides a fresh vocabulary for thinking about classic radio drama, with remarkable insights into the ways radio dramatists employed new strategies of sound design. . . . Verma’s contribution to the growing shelf on U.S. radio history is significant for its unprecedented insight into the centrality of the aesthetics of sound in radio drama, its insightful close listening to exemplary broadcasts, and its sheer scope in encompassing thousands of broadcasts.”

(*Journal of American History*)

“Verma returns to recordings of golden age radio dramatic programs and listens anew. His refreshing, thoughtful *Theater of the Mind* establishes a theory of radio aesthetics through close readings of programs and genres, a method of ‘excavational listening’ that he calls ‘media archaeology . . . the paleontology of experience.’ Recognizing that we can never hear with historical ears, Verma nonetheless takes radio programs seriously as art—art about the self, especially—and as evidence of ambient ideas about interiority, identity, and consciousness.”

(*American Quarterly*)

“Verma’s study is a valuable text that informs popular literature studies as much as sound, radio and communication. His exhaustive study of the post Second World War crime and spy genres on US Radio offers an important adjunct to any school of English. . . . This is a work of exceptional scholarship and will be a seminal contribution to the history and aesthetics of radio drama in the USA for many years to come.”

(*Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*)

“Verma deftly alternates between close readings of single moments in plays and large-scale interpretations across entire series to convincingly contend that radio drama was fundamentally imbricated in shaping (in addition to reflecting) the ways in which Americans apprehended space, time, self, and mind in relation to domestic and international politics, intimately and publicly, across three decades. . . . *Theatre of the Mind* will be of interest to performance, theatre, culture, and media scholars working in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States. Yet it will also be of interest to scholars and students working far beyond this geographical and temporal focus for its innovative methodology and elegant, consistent argumentation.”

(*Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*)

## About the Author

**Neil Verma** is a Harper Fellow in the Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts and a Collegiate Assistant Professor in the Humanities at the University of Chicago.

## Users Review

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