

Becoming A Shadow

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When I was growing up in Belmont Massachusetts (a sleepy little bedroom dormitory just outside of Boston) in the 1940's, I would listen faithfully to "my programs." These, of course, were commercially broadcast radio programs (amplitude modulation), the dominant form of entertainment of America until the advent of commercial television in the 1950's. Part of the interest in "my programs" was due to the fact that I made "my own radio sets"- crystal sets that is. As Broadcast detectors I used such minerals as zincite, anglesite, arsenic, bornite, cadmium sulfide, carborundum, cerussite, chalcopyrites, galena, and iron pyrites. Also I tried using one of my father's discarded Gillette Blue razor blades and a length of pencil graphite. The look of the simple circuitry of wires, capacitors, resistors, etc. and of course, the pièce de résistance- the hand wound inductance solenoidal coil made of 300 turns of number 18 gauge copper wire carefully patinated with two coats of ruby red transparent varnish- all gleaming and sparkling from the light of a single bulb that graced that part of the basement of our house that was "my workshop," created an impression on my mind of total allure and complete possession of whatever came through the earphones. "My programs," therefore could be completely separated from "the adult programs" that entered our house via the large Philco Console fourth generation superheterodyne. I did not feel that sense of "crystal-set covert technology" again until I saw and experienced psychotronic instrumentality for the first time.

As a preteen I had no interest in what engrossed my parents such as the lyric nonsense of Jack Benny as he described the lives of those hapless victims of existence "running on the treadmill to oblivion" verbally constructed by the Boston born wit, Fred Allen, or laughing at the child-adult wisecracks of the Edgar Bergen ventriloquist dummy, "Charlie McCarthy." My mother, of course, never missed an episode of "The Romance of Helen of Helen Trent" even to its finale, along with the other famous soap operas on Black Friday, November 25, 1960, even after we owned a television set for nine years.

I, of course, became lost in the defined "kids" shows of the day such as, "return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear when from out of the past came the hoofbeats of the great horse "Silver,"...the Lone Ranger rides again. "Hi-yo, Silver-awa-a-a-a-ay!" The masked rider of the plains was always accompanied by his faithful companion (kemo sabe) Tonto. The fact that Tonto was not played by an authentic Native American, but an elderly British Shakespearian actor named John Todd never fazed me a bit.

Other shows like "Little Orphan Annie" and "Captain Midnight" were both sponsored by "Ovaltine" the ultimate kid magic elixir (the equivalent of Spirulina or Ubiquinone for today's adults). The "Ovaltine" drink was but an easily dismissed annoyance in favor of what I was really after, the secret decoder rings- that allowed me to help fight world domination first against fascism, and then communism. The show that I hated the most which was on every Saturday morning at 10:00 am, was "Let's Pretend;" my mother made me listen to it. To me its only positive aspects were the avoidance for a half and hour of homework or chores. A middle aged woman name Nila Mack presided

over a troop of child actors, Mack was to me a combination of Elsa Lanchester and Angela Lansbury (she was pointed out to me once walking on Fifth Avenue near Rockefeller center in New York City). The theme of the show was to tell children's stories that were not standard fare. They aired stories like "Princess Moonbeam" or "The Yellow Dwarf." Like leftover 15th century morality plays, these "kid's shows" simply pandered to the adult idea of what children should be listening to. In a similar way some contemporary architects design "children's playgrounds" with that attitude. The fun is more for the adult designers than the kids. As an example "The Parc de la Villette" located in the North East of Paris in the 19th Arrondissement, master-planned in the 1980's by Bernard Tschumi features a science and technology complex plus a music complex. It looks like an amusement park designed by crew from an educational television program, all the danger of life is removed. I visited the park on a weekend. There were very few adults to be seen wandering around in its vast wasteland, and the children were all huddled around a very old-fashioned looking merry-go-round that you could fall off of, hidden by trees. Completely ignored by everyone were the radical chic post-modern swings and endless comfort slides and bright red cubic architectural "follies" (designed by Tschumi himself) that all went to expose a "post-humanist," "anti-history" sense of modern placelessness- a design ploy which frustrates the child-mind, a consciousness composed almost entirely of wonder and imagination, motivated by a glorified vision of adulthood which one's parents never seem to live up to.

Lest you consider this to be just another futile exercise in "nostalgia ain't what it used to be," I consider "kids radio programs" to be a form of education of the imagination of a par with the theatre of fear and terror- that product of fin-de-siècle France Le Théâtre Du Grand Guignol. It opened on the 13th of April 1897 and lasted until the latter part of November of 1962 to be finally ended by the rise of Hollywood slasher docudramas and psychological thrillers. Situated at 20 Bis Rue Chaptal in Montmartre, Paris, it featured a variety of troupes of actors which titillated Parisian audiences with its one act performances of murder, mayhem and revenge. Every night on stage they performed stabbings, mutilations, beheadings, gougings, tortures and dismemberments in such graphic detail to a delighted, horrified audience who would often laugh, cry, and faint all in the time of one dark evening. Each set piece was about 15 minutes in length, the same time as a kid's radio program.

Its structure was predicated on the stimulation of the grossest, grotesque, rawest and most adolescent of human interactions and desires: incest and patricide; bloodlust; sexual anxiety and conflict; morbid fascination with bodily mutilation and death; loathing of authority; fear of insanity; an overall disgust for the human condition and its imperfect institutions.

The name of the theatre was derived from the medieval "Punch and Judy Shows" for children which was a puppet show in which the little hook-nosed humpback Punch fights savagely but comically with his wife Judy. What appealed to the barbarous cruelty of children was amplified 10 fold in Le Théâtre Du Grand Guignol, and so was the laughter, that dark and hidden ingredient of The Grand Guignol.

Its influence on the minds of children did not actually reach its apotheosis until the advent of commercial radio. Science fiction novels took part of The Grand Guignol sensibility but mitigated it because the ideas were transmitted via the 19th century novel which was better suited to personal psychological musings rather than graphic, grotesque,

and bizarre behavior for which the motivation is shrouded in the mists of time. Comic books while closer in intent than science fiction novels to *The Grand Guignol* suffered from their lack of spontaneity. Censors were able to catch stuff they did not like before the comic hit the newsstands.

Commercial radio was for the most part live, unlike television that moved quickly from live programs to taping. Although commercial radio had written scripts it was possible to make changes and corrections during the broadcast because the scripts were simple (but well structured as they were in the playlets of *The Grand Guignol*).

The effective realism of early radio to bypass one's conscious critical powers can not be gainsayed if we but recall or read about that fateful day, October 30, 1938 (Halloween) when Orson Wells with his "The Mercury Theatre on the Air" astounded the world and just plain scared the hell out of the inhabitants of Grovers Mills, New Jersey (a real town decided upon by closing his eyes and stabbing a map of New Jersey) when he dramatized H.G. Wells's novella "The War of the Worlds" by simply switching the locale from England. After the ballyhoo about martians invading the earth died down in the papers, political pundits like Dorothy Thompson claimed the entire episode "proved how easy it is to start a mass delusion." I think she missed the point. The real answer is that radio's use of sound has the power to enter "the theater of the mind" and mess with it.

Stephen King, the current maven of monsters, author of such stories as "The Shining," "Carrie" or "Misery" has described radio's prime strength as: "the mind's innate obedience, its willingness to try to see whatever someone suggests it see, no matter how absurd and the fact that fear and horror are blinding emotions that knock out our adult pins from beneath us and leave us groping in the park like children who cannot find the light switch." What he is saying in essence is that "kids radio programs" reached a level of the subconscious that went deeper than the so-called "collective unconscious," that term coined by the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) the genetically determined part of the conscious that occurs in all the members of a people or race, and moved into the territory explored by the fin-de-siècle Symbolist Movement. Members of that art movement created what could be called "Zombie Aesthetics" which is the recognition that true symbols which connect time with eternity also connect the living with the dead. The word zombie is the name of the Python god of certain West African tribes and is similar to Pytho, the serpent killed by Apollo that produced the Delphic oracle. It is also related to Kundalini, the serpent-energy that rises through the human charkas inducing enlightenment. A zombie is a person under the influence of revelation, appearing to others as one of the "walking dead." Visually, zombiism surrounds a symbol with a "layer" of kitsch that has been toughened by the deadly nature of the sacred geometry of Phi. To break through to the revelatory heart of the symbol, it is necessary to penetrate the "kitsch barrier" which protects the inner revelation.

Both "Le Théâtre Du Grand Guignol" and "kids radio" broke through the "kitsch barrier" into the realm of pure visionary imagination as opposed to typical scholarship as a method of knowledge. I learned more about my current interest in dimensionality at the start from a show know as "Dimension X" (introduced in diminishing reverberations "Dimension X-X-X-X-X-X..."). It lasted one season between 1950 and 1951. It featured "Adventures in Time and Space Told in the Future Tense," with commissioned scripts by master science fiction writers like Ray Bradbury, Earl Hammer Jr., Robert

Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Robert Bloch, and Kurt Vonnegut. Later in 1955, "Dimension X's" position in radio culture was replaced by "X Minus One." "From the far horizons of the unknown come transcribed tales of new dimensions in time and space. These are stories of the future, adventures in which you'll live in a million could-be years on a thousand maybe worlds. The National Broadcasting Company, in cooperation with Galaxy Magazine, presents X-X-X-X-X...minus-minus-minus-minus....one-one-one-one."

Two other shows that engendered my interest in topology were, first: Arch Oboler's "Lights Out." He was the acknowledged Edgar Allan Poe of radio. He often got his ideas from listening to sound-effects records. His most celebrated audio effect was of a man being turned inside out. This was accomplished by turning a watery rubber glove inside out to the accompaniment of crushed berry baskets, to simulate broken bones. I literally lost a week of sleep from that show; second was Himan Brown's "Inner Sanctum" which starred Raymond Massey as the host of farfetched tales from the crypt which was riddled with eerie sound effects, the best of which was its signature sound of the creaking door which introduced each program. Everyone who remembers when "The Inner Sanctum" left radio for TV, it finally made the creaking door visible. The appearance of the door was certainly horrible- slightly askew and festooned with cobwebs- but to aficionados of radio actually seeing the door was a relief as nothing could have looked as horrible as that creaking door sounded.

The radio show "Superman," not the comic book version, gave me a hint of what it would be like to have a space alien with superhuman powers actually live among us, and take an interest in human affairs (unlike the stern Klaatu from the 1951 movie "The Day The Earth Stood Still" who had absolutely no interest in what the earth did as long as it did not disturb the planetary system that he represented.) That sense of the absolute otherness began to seep into my consciousness when I first began to realize what I was listening to in 1948 when I was eight years old and starting to apprehend "The Shadow," a program that became my favorite but also the program that most perplexed me because of its title. Each week on Thursday night at 7:30 on station WEEI (by this time I was logging the name of a radio show and flagging different turns on my tuning coil on my crystal set in terms of name, weekday or night exact station and time), the announcer would explain the "The Shadow" (the ultimate alter-ego of the wealthy student of science Lamont Cranston) who long ago while traveling in the orient discovered the power to cloud men's minds so they can not see him. By this Cranston became H.G. Wells's "Invisible Man" without the bother of imbibing chemicals, and thereby became the world's greatest fighter possessed of human DNA.

His true identity was known only to his constant friend and companion Margot Lane. The fact that Lamont, even in his incarnation as The Shadow remained a physical being was revealed when he admitted to Margot that his presence could be detected by a photo-electric beam and perhaps destroyed by it.

At that time I never directly questioned the physics or the mind-physics of Cranston's situation except to feel a great disappointment that the ultimate voice of conscience ("who knows what evil l-l-lurks in the hearts of men. And whose sardonic laughter "heh-heh-heh-heh," was followed by: "the weed of crime bears bitter fruit, The Shadow knows") became the exploiter of some kind of super-mesmerism rather than a literal shadow which, of course, was the name of the show.