

**john houseman and
the voice of america:
american foreign propaganda
on the air**

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In 1942 John Houseman, a well-known radio, theater and film producer, inaugurated a government international radio propaganda broadcasting station: the Voice of America. The Roosevelt administration had used the printed press, movies and radio to put its views before the American people; Roosevelt himself had demonstrated his great mastery over the art of radio through his fireside chats.¹ But American overseas radio propaganda was an uncharted course.² Houseman and his fellow propagandists were aware, of course, of German and British propaganda; but Houseman had no intention of imitating foreign broadcasts, only of reproducing what he, and others, believed to be the powerful effects of these propaganda efforts. How Houseman was to create American propaganda, therefore, and what forms of broadcasting might prove most effective were decisions left to him. It was an exciting challenge, and Houseman took up the task with enthusiasm.

When Houseman established the Voice of America, he considered a wide variety of broadcasting formats. He wanted to create a special American sound, a sound which would announce to the overseas listener that this was America speaking. And Houseman, who did not come out of the world of journalism, as did most of the other leaders of American overseas propaganda, developed a

propaganda style which emphatically did not imitate that of traditional radio news and information. It was a unique sound which still startles the contemporary listener and raises several important questions. What did Houseman's Voice of America really sound like? Why did it sound as it did? And what impact upon the very nature of American overseas propaganda did this sound have?

Propaganda, according to Harold Lasswell's classic definition, is "the control of opinion by significant symbols." Radio propaganda is effected through the special medium of broadcasting, which is, in its barest sense, the art of what can be done with a microphone at one end and an amplifier at the other. Radio exists in pure sound, without vision; it works through the vehicle of the spoken word; and it is an art created by verbal patterns of pitch, duration and rhythm.³

Radio broadcasting, and hence radio propaganda, is an art with its own forms and styles. In order to understand Houseman's Voice of America, therefore, it is critical that we view form not as a superimposed addition to content, but as an intrinsic means of giving expression to content. In this sense, form is important in the entire field of radio, and not just in what one might call the "high culture" of radio drama and features.⁴ Through looking at Houseman's artistic, or formal decisions, we can fit Houseman's Voice of America into a broader cultural framework. We can, furthermore, investigate what messages were implicit in these forms, what listening audience Houseman envisioned, and finally begin to explore the impact the Voice of America may have had in war-torn Europe in 1942 and 1943. In order to answer these questions we will first describe the context in which Houseman inaugurated the Voice of America, go on to the radio styles and forms from which he drew his models, and proceed to the Voice of America broadcasts. In other words, we will move from the historic and artistic background to the propaganda itself.

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During the years between the two world wars the fear of propaganda, which had first been generated by the campaigns of mass persuasion launched by both Allies and Central Powers during World War I, increased with the success of fascism in the thirties.⁵ But international propaganda did not become a matter of urgent concern until April, May and June, 1940, when the Nazis swept across Western Europe, devouring Norway, Holland, Denmark, Belgium and France. Americans were shocked by the staggering success of the German army. The French had been protected by the Maginot Line and by as strong an army as existed in the West: yet France had collapsed within weeks of the German assault. France failed, many came to believe, because the French will to resist had been undermined by Nazi propaganda. It had been a battle won by words, in which the first, and crucial blow had come over the airwaves.

In the months following the Battle of Britain, President Roosevelt agreed to the establishment of an executive agency charged with overseas intelligence and overseas propaganda. President Roosevelt appointed William J. Donovan to be the Coordinator of Information (COI) in July of 1941. Donovan, in turn, asked

the New Deal liberal playwright and Presidential speech writer, Robert Sherwood, to take over the direction of international propaganda. Sherwood agreed to do so, and chose short-wave radio as America's principal medium for overseas propaganda. It was not until the shock of Pearl Harbor, however, that Roosevelt felt that the American government could create its own radio station, rather than work indirectly through the private radio industry. On December 26, 1941, Sherwood asked John Houseman to inaugurate a government propaganda station. Houseman agreed. The Voice of America went on the air six weeks later, and Houseman remained its director until June, 1943.⁶

The American propaganda station began during some of the bitterest months of the Allied war effort. In Russia the Germans besieged Sebastopol; in North Africa General Rommel outflanked the British; and in the Pacific the Japanese took Hong Kong and Manila. This was, moreover, largely a period of latent war in the West for the Americans. America did not actively take the offensive in Europe until November 8, 1942, when—eleven months after Pearl Harbor—the United States and its Western Allies invaded North Africa. From December, 1941 until November, 1942, therefore, the American propagandists could not talk about military progress in Europe. They had not only to find subjects that made suitable propaganda, but to make propaganda substitute for military action.⁷

Against this backdrop of events, Donovan, Sherwood and Houseman decided that radio propaganda had to be an aggressive tool of warfare. The Voice of America was to urge Europeans to resist the Axis; it was to be “the initial arrow of penetration, in conditioning and preparing the people and territory in which invasion is contemplated.”⁸ It was to be a fourth fighting arm of war, capable of changing men's minds and able to provoke them to action.⁹ This definition of propaganda dominated the Voice of America throughout 1942 and the first half of 1943. As an in-house report stated in the winter of 1943, “Propaganda warfare is not merely a battle of words. It is a battle for people's minds and through their minds their physical actions.”¹⁰

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John Houseman, born Jacques Haussman on September 22, 1902, to a Welsh-Irish-British mother and a Jewish-Alsatian father, was a man whose skills included radio production, a knowledge of European culture and politics and a mastery of several foreign languages.¹¹ He was a commanding and charismatic man with an artistic vision and the force of personality to make his ideas come alive. As director of the Voice of America he could be found everywhere, directing the shows, editing the scripts and providing a great fund of ideas for the propaganda broadcasts. One British observer wrote home soon after Houseman left the Voice in June, 1943, that he was a natural propagandist, “an executive who combined dramatic ability with real driving power.”¹² After abandoning a first career as an international grain broker in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929, Houseman became a live theater producer. He staged works by Virgil Thomson, Maxwell Anderson and Archibald MacLeish, and in 1935 went to work for the newly created Federal Theater Project (FTP)

of the Works Projects Administration (WPA). There he began his long collaboration with Orson Welles.¹³ Two years later, Houseman and Welles started the Mercury Theatre which in 1938 spun off the *Mercury Theatre, on the Air*.

Houseman and Welles adapted for this series H. G. Wells' science fiction fantasy of an invasion from Mars: *The War of the Worlds*. The two producers began their program with an anonymously read meteorological bulletin, interspersed with interviews and music. Only minutes into the program, however, the newscaster shifted gears and breathlessly began describing a Martian invasion. Houseman and Welles employed radio newscasting techniques in order to blur the distinction between fiction and news, or, as Houseman later wrote: "to slide swiftly and imperceptibly out of the 'real' time of a news report into the 'dramatic' time of a fictional broadcast. Once that was achieved . . . there was no extreme of fantasy through which they [the audience] would not follow us."¹⁴

It was a sensational production, which soon became known as the "panic broadcast" because it generated such fear among listeners that men and women living close to the supposed invasion site literally fled their homes in terror. *The War of the Worlds* heightened American consciousness of the power of radio to persuade men and women to act. But it was playing with fire, and neither Houseman nor Welles, nor any other radio producer, attempted ever again to reproduce its effects for a domestic audience. Yet when Houseman became director of the Voice of America, *War of the Worlds* stood as proof that radio could be used to great effect.¹⁵

As a versatile, experienced producer, and as a European, Houseman was thoroughly familiar with the whole range of styles which dominated American radio and European and American theater during the thirties. As a propagandist he considered these forms and as he began operations he quickly decided to discard some and to adopt and rework others. His options ranged from news, to drama, to documentaries, and, finally, to the political theater of agitprop.

He considered, and rejected, the model of broadcast news and information. "My first decision," Houseman wrote, "was to get away from the single-voice news reporting of the private stations and [the] BBC."¹⁶ Network reports were of substantial length, personal and direct. Reporters were individuals who created a direct link between event and listener.¹⁷ Moreover, network stories tended to be based on eyewitness accounts. This was a journalism of authenticating, carefully chosen detail. It reflected a belief that "concrete terms produce more vivid impressions than abstract ones. . . ."¹⁸ Through what Hugh Kenner has called a "connoisseurship of facts," network journalism convinced Americans through words what it could not show them through pictures: that it spoke the truth.¹⁹ But Houseman was looking for a broadcast style with greater energy, freshness and vitality than he felt he could get from news broadcasts.²⁰

Instead of from news, Houseman selected his models from radio drama, radio documentary and live political theater. By World War II, radio dramatists had developed a variety of techniques by which to reach an audience and maintain its interest. This, Houseman hoped, could be done through the use of dialogue, at times interspersed with narration.

The British writer and producer Martin Esslin indirectly explained Houseman's reliance on dialogue in *An Anatomy of Drama*. He recalled setting out to write a radio script in the late 1940's for the BBC World Service that would depict an employment office in such a way as to present a positive image of Britain. "I could have written a purely literary, discursive description," he explained, one in which the narrator might say:

The official asks the applicant for a job to give him the relevant details. He is not unfriendly although he maintains a certain reserve and distance, yet at the same time it is quite apparent from the tone of voice he uses that he is genuinely trying to help the person in front of him. . . .²¹

But, wrote Esslin, such a description would merely have sounded "like a very special pleading with a purely propagandistic intention." Instead, Esslin broke up what he had to say into dialogue:

OFFICIAL: Do sit down.
APPLICANT: Thank you.
OFFICIAL: Now let's see. Your name is . . . ?
APPLICANT: John Smith.
OFFICIAL: And your last job was . . . ?
APPLICANT: Machinist.
OFFICIAL: I see.²²

Drama avoided the tone of a special pleading. It conveyed a sense of the concrete by making its points in specific terms. This kind of dialogue invited the listener to step inside the room, move into the action, and sit down on a third side of the desk and achieved, thereby, a special intimacy with him.²³ Finally, it gave color to actions; it made what the producer wanted to tell come alive; hence, it captured and held the listener's attention.²⁴

The most important American radio drama and feature writer of the thirties, with whom Houseman, like most radio-listening Americans, was conversant, was Norman Corwin. Unlike many writers whose radio careers were short, and who quickly moved on to write novels or Hollywood screen plays, Corwin devoted his life to radio. He exerted an enormous impact on American radio writing in general, and on Houseman's Voice of America in particular.²⁵

Corwin's skill and style is well illustrated in a play entitled "So This is Radio," one of a five-part series he wrote in 1939 to dramatize the art of broadcasting. The fifth installment explored the role of music, which Corwin did not by playing music, but by using words, alone. He put together a montage of briskly paced speeches, in which the main character was the Average Listener, a man without name, personality, or distinguishing characteristics.

- FIRST VOICE: This is a program about music, and a little about you.
- SECOND VOICE: It's going to be an unusual sort of program for a number of reasons, to wit:
- THIRD VOICE: Although it concerns serious music, you won't hear much serious music.
- FOURTH VOICE: Although it concerns light music, you won't hear much light music.
- FIFTH VOICE: Although it concerns a seemingly simple phase of radio, actually the subject is quite complex
- SIXT VOICE: Although this program is already one-thirtieth gone by, it has yet to make a formal opening announcement. . . .²⁶

Corwin presented music through the sound of words. His dialogue was often very short and choppy, moving the listener along at a fast pace. Corwin's example of a radio play done entirely as dialogue exemplified a type of radio drama which greatly influenced early Voice of America news and features. Not only did Houseman model the Voice of America on styles and forms he found in thirties radio drama, he looked as well to radio documentaries, as they had emerged in the 1930's. They were part of a larger movement, which included films, such as Pare Lorenz's *The Plow That Broke the Plain*, books, such as James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and photographs, such as those taken by Walker Evans to parallel Agee's text. Documentary expression, in turn, was connected to the larger artistic movement of social realism in a decade of commitment, in which liberals and radicals used artistic forms in the belief that through their art they could transform society.²⁷ The documentary movement was, in this sense, an admitted form of propaganda.²⁸ It was one in which real pictures, people, events and information were portrayed through an art form which reflected and highlighted reality—rather than being reality.²⁹

Houseman was also well acquainted with the most popular and important American radio documentary program during the 1930's, *The March of Time*. This was a fully scripted studio event. Originated in 1931 by *Time* magazine, each half-hour segment required one thousand hours of labor and an entire week of preparation. *The March of Time*, both on the radio and, after mid-decade, also on film, provided its audience with a weekly dramatization of important events, re-enacted by a stable of actors adept at impersonation.³⁰ The series was exciting, and it became, as one radio historian has written, the "major example of how . . . the news story or essay on radio was most naturally cast as drama."³¹ Although *The March of Time* sounded less like the Voice of America than other contemporary programs, such as "So This Is Radio," the idea that news could be re-enacted in a studio proved crucial to the development of Houseman's Voice of America.³²

Behind these experimental forms of radio drama, features and documentaries lay several broader artistic movements. There was, to begin with, an attempt to define America as a unique, new world culture, which was equal—if not better—to that of the old world. This search for culture merged with the ideal of

social commitment. It produced an idealization of the group and the community. It highlighted the notion that Americans were a "folk," a native people whose Americanness transcended their ethnic and regional differences. This notion of "folk," in turn, became a means to define the collective identity of the American people.³³ These ideas were taken up and translated by artists and writers of all kinds. In radio it produced a type of drama built on the literary device of using typical, but nameless, people.

The theatrical device of using nameless people to present human types and express political ideas was heavily influenced by the post World War I German theater of Expressionism. In the twenties the Expressionists began to use caricatures or types as a standard literary device, rather than to develop realistic characters. Moreover, the Expressionists attacked the tradition of careful plotting and complete storytelling by constructing their plays, instead, from a series of scenes that succeeded each other with a rapid, almost cinemagraphic speed.³⁴

By the 1930's, the once revolutionary forms of Expressionism had become literary conventions.³⁵ The abstract forms of Expressionism, moreover, found particularly fertile ground in radio precisely because radio was a non-visual form of art. On the stage an actor could be costumed to represent a generic "man," rather than a particular person, but he still stood on the stage in costume. In live theater this sort of simplification easily became too obviously stylized. But broadcasters could do away with everything not necessary for dramatic action, and the actor could portray not only a discrete individual, but "man" in general.³⁶

Houseman used all of these styles during his tenure as director of the Voice of America. In so doing he drew upon the forms which were available to him as part of the culture of the thirties. This is important. It places the early Voice of America broadcasts directly within a specific cultural tradition. Once so recognized, the roots of the Voice of America can no longer be assumed to lie within the tradition of news broadcasting. Houseman's Voice of America was a distinctly American and a self-consciously thirties radio production.

But the single most important precedent came not from radio, but from live theater, both on the stage and on the street. It was the political theater of agitation and propaganda, known as agitprop. In the years directly following the revolution, the new Soviet government had used street theater to support the revolution; there, street theater was a means to bring news and propaganda to illiterate peasants and workers. But while it began in Russia, agitprop flowered in Germany, where a post-war revolution had failed, and discontent and anger continued against the Weimar government. In Germany, agitprop was wielded against the government, not in support of it.³⁷

Agitprop dramatists used many of the techniques of Expressionism. The artistry of montage, for example, had very practical applications for political theater. The revue facilitated highly political plays without forcing any unity of action.³⁸ Agitprop, like Expressionism, shed the individual man, like a layer of unwanted skin; it portrayed, instead, man as an archetype. As Erwin Piscator, the most important German agitprop producer, wrote: "It is no longer the private, personal fate of the individual, but the times and the fate of the masses that are the heroic factors in the new drama." It altered and distorted dramatic

dialogue to allow heavier use of political slogans, while it made use of choral chants to represent the will of the people.³⁹ Agitprop entered the United States through the workers' theater movement of the late 1920's, and gradually the worker's theater movement exerted a direct influence on mainstream American theater.⁴⁰

Agitprop was in the air in the New York theater world of the late thirties. As one Voice of America script writer later recalled: "I found it [agitprop] very exciting in the sense that this was very limited drama, but very effective, and that was the important thing." He went on to explain that his introduction to agitprop "was the first time it had occurred to me that art is a weapon, that this is a way to get people interested, excited and explain things."⁴¹ If Houseman did not know agitprop as street theater, and it seems highly unlikely that he did not, he did know it in its Federal Theatre Project incarnation, the Living Newspaper, one of the five units which comprised the government enterprise. Sponsored by the New York Newspaper Guild, the Living Newspaper not only dramatized the news: "it showed . . . the struggle of many different kinds of people to understand the natural, social and economic forces around them, and to achieve through these forces a better life for more people." It was, as Harry Hopkins noted, propaganda, a mild, very American form of protest through propaganda, whose goal was "to educate the consumer . . ." ⁴²

The Living Newspaper in particular, and agitprop more generally, presented Houseman with an artistic, exciting style of propaganda; it was an obvious model for the Voice of America. It is not surprising, therefore, that as director of the Voice of America Houseman employed the essence of the form: staccato dialogue; choral chants; shifting scenes; and the use of stereotyped figures. The whole of any fifteen minute language program can be imagined, if seen in its entirety, as a kind of revue, a new form of drama that would allow America to say to the oppressed peoples of Europe what Piscator had argued in another context: "This is the type of society in which you live, you cannot escape it—here it is again, and again!"⁴³

It was not an exact copy. Houseman turned agitprop inside out. In the late thirties the Living Newspaper landed the Federal Theater Project in political trouble because Congress considered the experimental plays too radical and protested against Federal funding of what they labeled subversive drama. Congress misunderstood the essence of agitprop in America, where social and political protest became a way for immigrants to join mainstream America. But Houseman moved agitprop still further from its original European context by using it to assert a positive image of America and to attack the Axis. In his hands it became a weapon to defend democracy and attack fascism.

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These artistic movements were an integral part of Houseman's world. He used this wide range of dramatic devices in order to create a distinctively American broadcast propaganda. In order to understand how he did so, we must turn to the programs of the Voice of America, first to describe them and then to place them within the context of thirties culture.

The Voice of America broadcast from New York to Europe in all the languages of Western Europe twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Although the actual programs were written by language desks staffed by exiles and emigres, it was Houseman who directed the station and who infused it with his vision of how to create good broadcast propaganda. One of his very first decisions was that the Voice of America was to “be represented by several voices of different quality and pitch carefully orchestrated to achieve a maximum of variety and energy.”⁴⁴ Four announcers were provided for all shows, and multiple voices introduced each and every program:

FIRST VOICE: This is New York, the United States of America, calling the people of Europe.

SECOND VOICE: Every morning at this time you hear our voices from America

THIRD VOICE: telling you what this country is doing and thinking towards winning the war.⁴⁵

This was an important decision. The multiple voices of the announcers told the listener, by the very sounds of the statement and the rapidity of shifting tones, that this was the Voice of America, as no other propaganda station employed similar techniques. Multiple voices gave the Voice a distinctive aural pattern of pitch, duration and rhythm.

News headlines came next. By their content they established a tone of truth. They created a framework, a context, of traditional news broadcasting and, hence, veracity.⁴⁶ This was, after all, how Houseman and Welles had introduced *The War of the Worlds*. But despite the function of the headlines as news, they were announced as staccato chords, short and disconnected, and as such, reflected Houseman’s dramatic approach to the presentation of propaganda. A headline might be only ten words long, and take but a few seconds to read on the radio, but each headline was announced by a different voice, as in this show of April 15, 1942:

FIRST VOICE: Laval is back in power in vichy [sic].
The American government will only make its position known when the composition of the Laval cabinet has been officially announced.

SECOND VOICE: On the Russian front Soviet troops have won several successes.

THIRD VOICE: During the whole of yesterday the RAF attacked German installations in Normandy.

FOURTH VOICE: President [Roosevelt] declared that the present war was a life and death struggle where the fate of our entire civilization was at stake.⁴⁷

As in Expressionist theater, the lines were staccato and distorted. As in documentary expression, facts were used like bits of paint, brushed on the canvas to

create a composite picture meant to persuade the audience to a particular viewpoint. As in folk drama, news came from everywhere announced by symbolic voices rather than real characters. And as in agitprop theater, the news was personified, giving distinct characterization to news about Laval, the Soviet war effort, the Royal Air Force, or President Roosevelt.

This animated technique extended from the introduction to headlines to expanded news accounts. "Yesterday," a report on the war in the Far East broadcast on Wednesday, August 5, 1942, began, "there was good news on the fighting front in China":

FIRST VOICE: It came in communiques from Lt. General Joseph Stilwell which announced that American warplanes are now in full cooperation with the Chinese offensive. Here is that important communique:

SECOND VOICE: American bombers and fighters attacked Japanese headquarters at Linchuan in Kiangsi Province, dropping demolition and incendiary bombs while Chinese ground troops were attacking.⁴⁸

Two voices, two places: by employing two speakers Houseman implied that the second voice carried a message of special importance. Moreover, the second speaker was the nameless personification of the war-front communique, and not an anonymous voice reading a neutral piece of information. The voices, moreover, divided up the news into neat chunks of information; they defined each news segment from that which had preceded or followed it, and multiple voices created a "political revue" out of each fifteen minute language segment. Furthermore, while the magic of radio transported the listener to China, the propagandist turned the war communique into an argument underlining the heroic American war effort, the damage done to the enemy and the close cooperation maintained with the Chinese. Just as Martin Esslin had preferred drama to discursive prose, by expressing sentiments through brief dialogue, Houseman hoped to let these points emerge from the text. Dialogue turned Voice of America news into symbolic action.

Houseman extended this theatrical format to features. One feature, for example, described through the poetic form of a litany the severity of Nazi rule and the consequences to the French of the German plan to conscript French workers:

VOICE: Such is the law of Nazi Germany.

VOICE: All that is forbidden is required.

VOICE: Such is the voice Hitler wants to impose on the world.

VOICE: All that is forbidden is required.

VOICE: Such is the law the Vichy Kommandatur wants to impose on the French.

VOICE: Free Expression,

VOICE: FORBIDDEN.
VOICE: To be a patriot,
VOICE: FORBIDDEN.
VOICE: To eat enough,
VOICE: FORBIDDEN.⁴⁹

Moving back and forth between statements of what the French needed and wanted, and the inevitable Axis response, the dialogue expressed these ideas through impersonal, disembodied voices. It was verse as dialogue, which because it was poetry, removed the action from the everyday, familiar sphere of life. In its highly stylized form, in its repetitive and exaggerated pace, it told the listener that the Voice of America was condemning German action.⁵⁰

Houseman used multiple voices to achieve drama and immediacy, not accuracy, but he also worked his shows to further the propaganda directives which the leaders of the Overseas Branch of the Office of War Information, under whose aegis the Voice of America operated, sent down on a monthly, weekly and daily basis. The standing directive of March 11, 1942, for example, instructed the Voice to project the expansion of American military forces and to broadcast positive news concerning American military operations.⁵¹ In response, the Voice of America broadcast a story of a U.S. Army Air Force bombing expedition over Burma that “in spite of the blinding monsoon downpour. . . smashed the Japanese airdrome. . . .” The story was inherently dramatic, but the multiple voice format made it more so. Having outlined the main facts of the story, the announcers added:

VOICE: So heavy at times was the rain through which our
bombers flew that one of the pilots said:
VOICE: It wasn't airplane piloting. It was submarine
navigation.⁵²

Again, the Voice personified the impersonal news and used drama to bring the story to life, and the listener into the action.

Houseman's use of thirties radio styles and agitprop drama set the original Voice of America apart from any other propaganda radio station of the era. The dominant cultural themes reflected in Voice of America broadcasting were those of a culture of innovation, of political commitment and social realism and of a new nationalism. Radio broadcasting itself was a new technology which demanded experimental forms, and the fact that Houseman employed the most experimental techniques of radio implied a special American openness. Documentary expression came out of an era in which commitment to improve the lives of ordinary people who were suffering the shock and hardship of depression became a paramount theme of American culture. Houseman used ideas from documentary radio to express American commitment to end Axis oppression. In thirties America the drama of the nameless person, anybody and nobody, the representatives of all of “the people”, became a search for a transcendent identification in a land composed of many regions and diverse ethnic groups and an assertion of the greatness of America. And Houseman expressed

the vitality of this America through his style of broadcasting. Finally, agitprop, once it took root in America, became a means to create a political revue out of the news and to affirm a national commitment to the war effort.

Houseman employed these forms to project an image of a democratic, industrious America at war. For example, the chanting form of a feature such as "This is the Law of Nazi Germany," projected an image of a democracy, a nation of many voices working together to win the war. Houseman created the image of an industrious America through the vital, excited tones of his radio style. This was a nation which, despite its heterogeneity, had a sense of self. It would never crumble before the Axis threat.

But these forms did more than demonstrate American democracy. Form expresses the artist's vision; it is symbolic action. In the case of agitprop drama, the form was intended to persuade the audience to take action, just as it had tried to do on the streets of Germany. By personifying a communique from General Stilwell, Houseman was arguing that news from China was not merely a collection of inert facts. Houseman wanted dialogue to tell the ordinary person that she or he could take action that would affect the course of events. The broadcast style of the Voice of America conveyed a political message and a propaganda goal. Through the forms of its programs the Voice of America told its audience to rise up and overthrow the Axis. It urged Europeans to take their fate in their own hands: to resist.

Houseman's choice of forms and styles, the Voice of America as it was for the first year and a half of its existence, thus implemented a critical political decision. It is one which we need to understand in order to evaluate early American overseas propaganda. Houseman's goal—and that of the American propaganda leaders in general—was to use propaganda to provoke European resistance and undermine the Axis from within. It was, as we have said, a fourth fighting arm of the war. And this Houseman tried to effect through his highly stylized, and very aggressive form of radio propaganda.

This goal implied those whom Houseman and his colleagues had defined as their audience: the oppressed masses of Europe, who had not profited from, nor collaborated with, the Axis powers, but who were suffering and who, therefore, would hopefully resist the enemy. Nevertheless, when Houseman took over the Voice of America, he did not know who the actual audience would be, or even if the Voice would have one. Perhaps for this reason the propagandists never articulated a clear concept of audience. As one of the earliest of the Voice writers later recalled, "we didn't know whether we were talking to ourselves; we didn't know whether anyone was hearing us at all . . . we were sailing, flying blind."⁵³ Embedded in the text of their broadcasts was what literary critics call an "implied" reader, or for us, an implied listener. This is why we must look for the propagandists' understanding of their audience in the literary styles and forms of Voice of America broadcasts.⁵⁴

To begin with, there were no specialized programs in 1942, and, beyond the standard news and features, by early 1943, only one show for women and another for labor. This was not for want of ideas, for a year later the Military Show, the Religious Show, the European Show, Day by Day and a variety of other specialized programs filled the airwaves. Nor was it from want of staff.

Rather, it reflected a concept of audience in which all of France, Germany or Italy was considered as one. The listeners formed a “mass,” that could be provoked into action through words alone, as a charismatic leader could ignite a crowd through speech and force of personality. Just as the Voice stripped many of its characters of their individuality in the news and feature shows, so this literary concept of audience denied the same individuality, or uniqueness of interest, to the listener. The listeners were an undifferentiated group addressed by many anonymous voices. Because the technology of radio allowed millions of people simultaneously to turn on the same program at the same moment, Houseman saw radio propaganda as a technique to approach a large crowd of people: a message directed to the masses.

But they were wrong. Radio is an intimate medium. Its message moves through the power of speech, which introduces a very personal element. Radio can achieve the intimacy of a conversation between two people. The sound of the voice, the personality of the speaker: these are the special properties of radio broadcasting. And the radio audience, too, is very special. It is absolutely distinct from the audiences of live theater or film. Large groups of people assemble in theater houses for movies or dramas, but people gather in very small units of one or two or three to listen to the radio. As the German psychologist Rudolph Arnheim has written: “the wireless addresses those millions [in the audience] not as a mass but as individuals. It talks to every one individually, not to everyone together.”⁵⁵ This was the magic of Roosevelt in his fireside chats and Edward R. Murrow in his reports from London. Roosevelt and Murrow could persuade their listeners to a political position because they came across as people, as public personalities who were at the same time ordinary people, speaking to other quite ordinary people.⁵⁶

This brings us, finally, to the question of how Europeans actually perceived the Voice of America. Each nation had its own radio service by World War II, and the peoples of Europe were, therefore, conditioned to think of radio broadcasting within the cultural framework of their own broadcasts. British radio, for example, by contrast to American radio, was not only a state financed monopoly with no competition built into the system, its sound was more subdued. When the British pollster and social scientist, Mark Abrams, travelled to New York to work with the Voice of America in late 1942, he found the station “hammy. I remember shuddering,” he recalled, and described the Voice’s tone as rather like “selling Colgate toothpaste, urgently”⁵⁷ Cultural styles formed a barrier of taste and habit.

In attempting to assess the impact of the Voice of America it is crucial to remember these caveats, especially as there is no good evidence of who was listening in Europe, how often or to what effect. How could there be in war-torn Europe where listening remained outlawed, few escaped the continent, and even fewer could be relied upon to tell the truth to the Allied interviewers? This makes internal evidence all the more important. What we do know is that Houseman chose broadcast formats that sounded not only impersonal, but very American. It seems logical to conclude that the Voice of America broadcasts were jammed not only by enemy signals, but by cultural interference. Houseman’s propaganda was innovative and brilliant. But it is doubtful that it

persuaded the people of Europe to resist the Nazis or Nazi collaborators, or that it persuaded them to admire the United States, if they did not already do so.

iv

The leaders of the Office of War Information jettisoned Houseman's approach to propaganda in 1943 for a series of mutually reinforcing reasons. While Congress did not dismantle the Voice of America, it did express increasing discontent with the station's liberal political positions and its radical thirties tone, as did the State Department. Together they forced a change in the leadership of the Office of War Information and the Voice of America.⁵⁸

Moreover, by 1943 it had become clear that the Allies would win the war and, therefore, mass revolt increasingly served no military purpose. With the momentum of mounting victories the war became its own best salesman, and American propagandists concentrated on giving their news-starved audiences reports about the actual course of the war. Furthermore, the ascendancy of fascists to political power in Allied occupied territories following the Allied invasion of North Africa and the overthrow of Mussolini rendered the liberal foreign policy positions of 1942 difficult for the American propagandists to maintain. Instead, they turned to a low-keyed, informational propaganda in the broadcasting style of network news. A new political viewpoint demanded a new artistic vision.

Throughout 1942 Houseman had tried to make Europe see America as democratic, energetic and egalitarian. He had worked to encourage the peoples of Europe to rise up and overthrow their Nazi and Fascist rulers. He had chosen a broadcasting style he believed would accomplish this twin mission. It was not, however, a broadcasting style the Voice of America would ever again use. American propagandists, through the trial and error of Houseman's experiment, rejected experimental drama and agitprop theater as not only ineffective, but too radical for an America which had emerged as a world leader and a bastion of global stability.

washington, d.c.

notes

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1. Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven, 1978); Richard W. Steele, *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-1941* (Westport, Connecticut, 1985); Steele, "American Popular Opinion and the War Against Germany: The Issue of Negotiated Peace, 1942," *Journal of American History* (December, 1978), 704-723; Steele, "The Great Debate: Roosevelt, the Media, and the Coming of the War, 1940-1941," *The Journal of American History* (June, 1984), 69-92; Steele, "Preparing the Public for War: Efforts to Establish a National Propaganda Agency, 1940-1941," *American Historical Review* (October, 1970), 1640-1653; David Culbert, *News for Everyman: Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America* (Westport, Connecticut, 1976); John M. Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York, 1976), 39-45.

2. The Roosevelt administration's foreign propaganda has gone largely unexplored. Historians have discussed international propaganda during World War II, and in particular the Voice of America, both as a government agency and as an agent of American foreign policy. The debate has focused on the degree to which the State Department and the military imposed their views and procedures on the Overseas Branch of the Office of War Information, and if so, to what effect. In particular see Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda*; Robert W. Pirsein, *The Voice of America: An History of the International Broadcasting Activities of the United States Government, 1940-1962* (New York, 1979); Thomas Sorenson, *The Word War: The Story of American Propaganda* (New York, 1968); Leo J. Margolin, *Paper Bullets, A Brief Story of Psychological Warfare in World War II* (New York, 1946); Robert L. Bishop, "The Overseas Branch of the Office of War Information" (Diss. Wisconsin, 1966); Maureen Jane Nemecek, "Speaking of America: The Voice of America, Its Mission and Message, 1942-1982," (Diss. Maryland, 1984); Sidney Stahl Weinberg, "Wartime Propaganda in a Democracy: America's Twentieth Century Information Agencies" (Diss. Columbia, 1969); Edward P. Lilly, "A History of the Office of War Information" (Records of the Office of War Information, Record Group 208, National Record Center, Archives Division, Suitland, Maryland). [Hereafter cited as Records of OWI.]

3. Douglas Cleverdon, interview with author, 4 November, 1985; Peter Lewis, "Radio Drama and English Literature," in Peter Lewis, ed., *Radio Drama* (London, 1981), 179; Rudolph Arnheim, *Radio* (London, 1936), 28; John Drakakis, "Introduction," *British Radio Drama*, ed., John Drakakis (Cambridge, 1981), 25.

4. Arnheim, *Radio* (London, 1936), 19. For a further discussion of the relationship of form to function, and of literature as symbolic action, see Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, 1973).

5. As Harold Lasswell wrote in the mid-1920's: "When all allowances have been made, and all extravagant estimates pared to the bone, the fact remains that propaganda is one of the most powerful instrumentalities of the modern world. . . . [It is] the new dynamic of society." (*Propaganda Technique in the World War*, [London, 1927]), 220.

6. John Houseman, *Front and Center* (New York, 1979), 20.

7. Hans Speier and Margaret Otis called this kind of propaganda "symbol warfare" ("German Radio Propaganda to France During the Battle of France," *Radio Research, 1942-1943* eds., Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, [New York, 1944]), 212.

8. Harold Gosnell, "The Framing of the OWI" Executive Order, 24, Box 15, Unit 160, Records of the Bureau of the Budget, Record Group 51, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

9. Ritchie Calder, Director of Plans and Operations for the British propaganda organization, the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), created the phrase "the fourth fighting arm." It became very widely used, especially in England, and Calder himself remained very proud of it throughout the rest of his life. Lord Ritchie-Calder, interview with Author, 24 March 1981.

10. "Overseas Operations," n.a., n.d., Record Group 208, entry 6, box 35, folder 3 ring notebook, Records of OWI.

11. John Houseman, *Run-Through* (New York, 1972), 15. Biographical details on Houseman except where otherwise noted, are from volume 1.

12. Leonard Miall, "Relations between O.W.I., New York, and the Political Warfare Mission—A Six Months' Summary," [20 August, 1943], (Papers of Leonard Miall, Taplow Village, England).

13. MacLeish went on to become head of domestic information as Director of the Office of Facts and Figures, and Director of the Domestic Branch of the OWI.

14. John Houseman, "The Men from Mars," in *Gentlemen, Scholars and Scoundrels*, ed. Horace Knowles (New York, 1972), 30-31.

15. James B. Gilbert, "War of the Worlds," *Journal of Popular Culture* (Fall, 1976), 326-336; Max Wyllie, ed., *Best Broadcasts of 1938-39* (New York, 1939), 449. See also Howard Koch, *The Panic Broadcast Portrait of an Event* (Boston, 1970); Hadley Cantril, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (Princeton, 1940).

16. Houseman, *Front and Center*, 35; Culbert, *News for Everyman*, 72; William L. Shirer, *The Nightmare Years, 1930-1940* (Boston, 1984), 284-326; Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933-1953* (New York, 1968), 74-83.

For sound recordings of NBC international war news see the Division of Motion Pictures, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereinafter cited as Library of Congress)

17. This style contrasted sharply with contemporary BBC news reporting. The BBC news "readers" were nameless until the war; during the war the BBC changed

their policy and began using named announcers. These men were carefully chosen for their well-modulated Oxbridge accents which gave no clue as to the speaker's regional origin. The BBC reader gave a careful report of the day's news, representing, as he did so, the voice of Britain's national radio authority. For two examples (among many) of typical BBC news readers see Stuart Hibberd, "Narvick, Second Battle," 13 April, 1940, BA 8319, BBC Sound Archives, or John Snagge, "Fall of Panelleria," 11 June, 1943, BA 5868, BBC Sound Archives, London, England.

18. Herbert Spencer, "The Philosophy of Style," in Dudley Bailey, ed., *Essays in Rhetoric* (New York, 1965), 150.

19. Hugh Kenner, "The Politics of the Plain Style," *New York Book Review* (15 September, 1985).

20. Houseman, *Front and Center*, 35.

21. Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (New York, 1976), 15.

22. *Ibid.*, 16.

23. Cleverdon, interview with author.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Erik Barnouw, *Radio Drama in Action: Twenty-Five Plays of a Changing World* (New York, 1945), 204.

26. Norman Corwin, "So This is Radio," *Columbia Workshop*, 7 September, 1939, LWO 16588-A, Library of Congress.

27. David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London, 1981), 8.

There is a parallel between artistic experimentation in radio and film, as well. In both media experimental writers and producers rejected traditional storytelling formats and formal notions of drama. This, they argued, would be using the new technology as a key-hole, through which the audience would watch, or hear, traditional plays. Instead, they wanted to use the special properties of the new media to create new forms. For the film makers this meant concentrating upon the way the camera could be used—with its movements and angles of vision as they related to the objects being photographed—and focusing upon the editing of that film. For the radio producer this meant a concentration on pure sound and a manipulation of the aural effect of words. Cleverdon, reflecting this view, insisted that radio writing, as an expression of the unique properties of radio, was best done by poets and not dramatists. This approach can be seen through the experimental and verbal approach Corwin took towards explaining the role of music in radio production, as shown above in the text. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London, 1952), 78-79; Cleverdon, interview with Author.

28. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, 1973), 12; Rotha, *Documentary Film*, 92; Elkan and Dorotheen Allan, *Good Listening: A Survey of Broadcasting* (London, n.d.), 124.

29. Cleverdon, interview with author.

30. Wylie, *Best Broadcasts of 1938-1939*, 138-140.

31. Howard Fink, "The Sponsor's vs. the Nation's Choice: North American Radio Drama," in Lewis, ed., *Radio Drama*, 209.

32. For a further description of *The March of Time* see Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York, 1978). Robert Newman, who wrote the Voice of America program "News From Home," said of the *March of Time*: "I was very impressed with *The March of Time*. I listened to it on a regular basis." Robert Newman, interview with Author 20 February, 1986.

33. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History* (New York, 1984), 154-172, 205.

34. Mardi Valgemae, *Accelerated Grimace: Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920's* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1972), 12. Drama was strongly influenced during the 1920's and 1930's by cinema as well. Erwin Piscator, for example, vividly recalled the deep impression that Eisenstein's *Potemkin* made on him in the late 1920's.

35. Renate Benson, *German Expressionist Drama: Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser* (New York, 1984), 9; Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression* (New York, 1974), 8.

36. Arnheim, *Radio*, 152.

37. C. D. Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama* (Cambridge, 1972), 26.

38. Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre* (London, 1980), 81; John Willett, *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator: Half a Century of Politics in the Theatre* (London, 1978), 51; Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre*, 187-190.

Berthold Brecht also used the technique of montage. He called his plays "epic," by which he meant episodic rather than heroic, and, like Piscator, tried to break down the conventions of plot with the new scheme of "reportage." Brecht defined epic theater as "a sequence of incidents or events, narrated without artificial restrictions as to time, place or relevance to a formal 'plot.'" John Willett,

The Theatre of Berthold Brecht A Study from Eight Aspects (Norfolk, Connecticut 1959), 171.

39. *Ibid.*, 44-45; Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre*, 32.

40. Harry Goldman and Mel Gordon, "Worker's Theatre in America," *Journal of American Culture* (Spring, 1978), 169-181; Valgema, *Accelerated Grimace*, 114; Wilson Whitman, *Bread and Circuses: A Study of Federal Theatre* (New York, 1937), 225; Goldstein, *The Political Stage*, 277-8; Gerald Rabkin, "The Federal Theatre Project," in Warren French, ed., *The Thirties* (Deland, Florida, 1967), 209.

41. Robert Newman, interview with author. During his interview with the author, Newman, while considering the possible influence of agitprop on the development of the Voice, commented that one of Houseman's most famous live theater productions, *The Cradle Will Rock*, "is the most overt agitprop."

42. Hallie Flanigan, *Arena* (New York, 1985), 59, 65, 184.

43. Piscator, *The Political Theater*, 82.

44. Houseman, *Front and Center*, 35.

45. 5 August 1942, LWO 12487, Reel 21A3, OWI Collection, Library of Congress.

46. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (New York, 1977), 10-12.

47. "French News Summary," 15 April 1942, Box 6, Transcripts, Records of OWI. The rest of the headlines included news about Libya and Yugoslavia and a statement from Mexico. For a discussion about the process by which the external setting of a text can impose upon the reader the way in which she or he understands that text see David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (New York, 1977), 9-17.

48. 5 August 1942, LWO 12487, Reel 21A3, OWI Collection, Library of Congress.

49. 14 September 1942, Box 57, Transcripts, Records of OWI.

50. Esslin, *The Anatomy of Drama*, 37-39.

51. "Standing Directive—France II," 11 March, 1942, Entry 6, box 39, Folder FIS Directives, Records of the OWI.

52. 5 August, 1942, LWO 12487, reel 21A3, Library of Congress.

53. Robert Newman, interview with author.

54. For an overview of reception theory see Susan R. Suleiman, "Introduction," in Suleiman and Inge Croseman, *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton, 1980). Croseman concluded this collection with an annotated bibliography of the current literature in the field.

For a discussion of domestic listening groups in both the United States and Britain see Frank Ernest Hill and W. E. Williams, *Radio's Listening Groups: The United States and Great Britain* (New York, 1941). Listening groups were often organized for educational purposes in both countries, and before the war this extended to short-wave listening as well. There were, for example, groups organized in Europe to listen to the only American, private but non-commercial, short-wave only broadcasting station, WRUL.

But war-time conditions prevented any sort of organized group listening to overseas stations. As one French respondent told an American interviewer in mid-1944, there was widespread listening to foreign broadcasts in the South of France, but "even so, great precautions were taken by listeners in the South: the set was tuned very low and the family huddled around the radio. . . . Families listened together; otherwise, in the South of France there was no group listening." "Interview with Gripsholm Arrival," 9 June, 1944, Bureau of Communications Facilities, Survey Section, Records of the OWI, Entry 365, box 156.

55. Arnheim, *Radio*, 72.

56. Douglas Cleverdon, interview with author; Leonard Miall, interview with Author; J.B. Priestley, "Introduction," *All England Listened: The Wartime Postscripts of J.B. Priestley* (New York, 1967).

It is also instructive to look at the in-depth analysis of Kate Smith's tremendously successful radio campaign to persuade Americans to buy war-bonds in September, 1943, by Robert K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive* (New York, 1946). Smith's campaign was only domestic, and therefore operating within one cultural framework, it was done in an open society in which listeners could freely and openly tune in Smith, rather than listen clandestinely at risk of arrest through the atmospheric fadings and enemy jammings which were a daily part of listening to short-wave broadcasts. Smith's drive also was an 18 hour marathon, and a near-unique event, rather than a twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week, year in and year out propaganda service. Nevertheless, having noted these critical differences, the interviewees described their response to Smith as intensely personal and individual: "It seems that she's sitting in your kitchen and talking to you. The way it would be with a friend," said one listener. Another felt that Smith "was speaking straight to me," and yet another that "you'd

think she was a personal friend. I feel she's talking to me."

57. Mark Abrams, interview with author, 23 March 1981.

58. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda*, 73-111.

Houseman left the Voice of America in June, 1943. Sherwood moved to the London office nine months later, at which time the major leaders of the OWI—Joseph Barnes, James Warburg and Edd Johnson—were forced out of the government altogether. The Voice of America had been taken from Donovan's control a good bit earlier, and in the context of a different bureaucratic and political fight; in June, 1942, he had taken over the newly created Office of Strategic Services (OSS) at which time the Voice of America had moved into the also newly created Office of War Information.

For an in-depth examination of the Voice of America throughout the Second World War see Holly Cowan Shulman, *The Voice of Victory: Propaganda and the Voice of America during the Second World War* (Madison, Wisconsin, forthcoming, 1989).