

Splendor in the Glass:

The Pleasure of *This American Life's* America

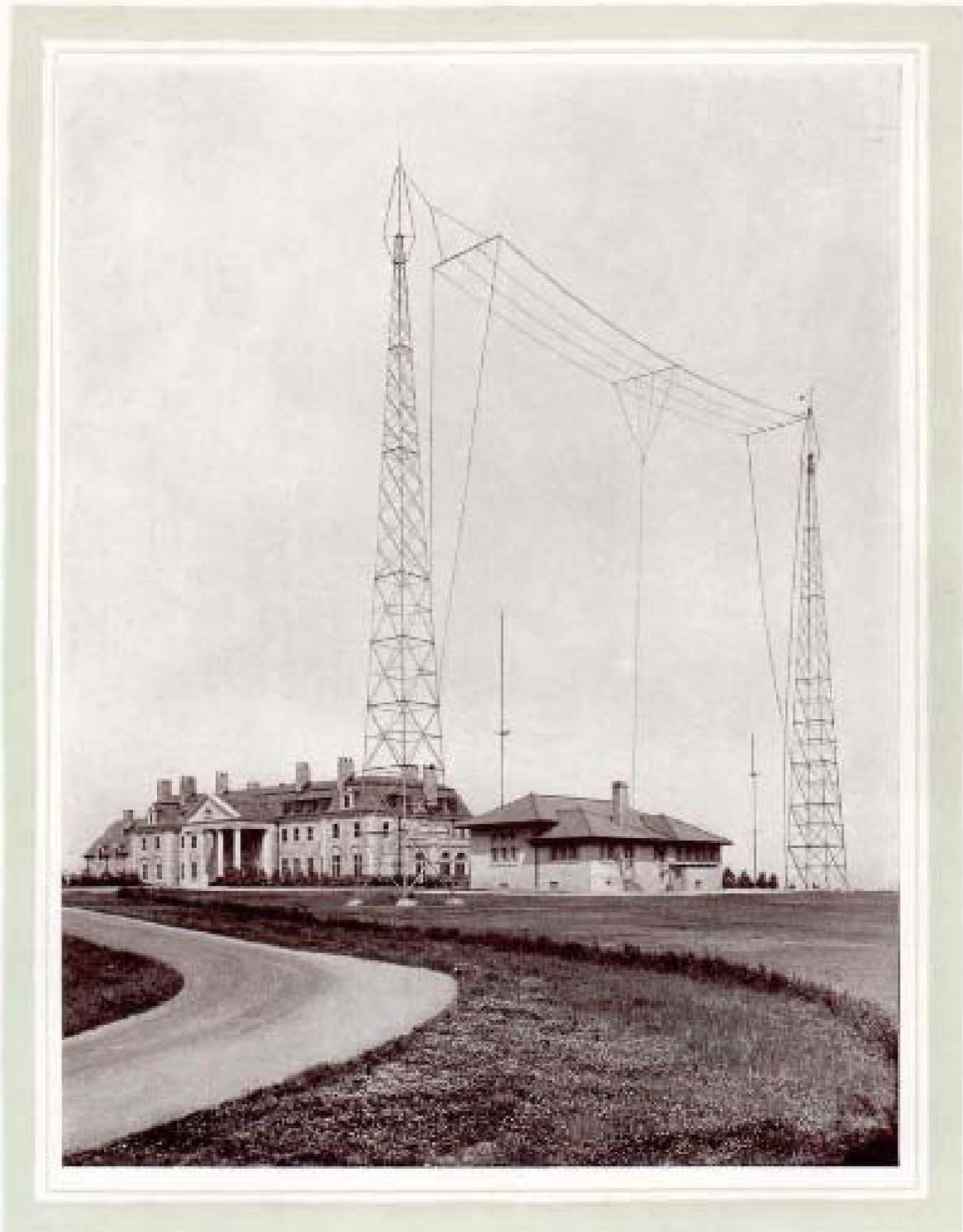
Jessie Taylor

Senior Seminar

Laura McGrane

Haverford College English Department

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Round Hills House and W M A F
Here, where sky and sea have long played hosts
to the Four Winds, has arrived a new guest.
Borne on wings of light, yet unseen; unheard,
yet bearing tidings to all mankind—the Radiol!

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Bambi Schlomovich writes a weekly column on *Jewcy.com* called “The Ira Glass Infatuation Post/*This American Life* Roundup,” which gives an overview of each week’s *This American Life* episode in thoroughly erotic terms. One post opens, “You’ve tapped into another epicenter of pleasure for me this week, Ira...”¹ For another episode, she claims, “this week’s installment ‘True Urban Legends’ was especially arousing. There’s nothing that inspires a surreal absence of the ego with lowered inhibitions like the combination of noir urbanity and its lies along with a talented Casanova to guide you through it all.”² Schlomovich’s posts present Glass as a pleasure provocateur, and she is not alone. In a *Salon.com* article, Rachel Louise Snyder calls Glass “an unlikely Romeo” (referencing an unnamed previous article which coined the epithet), adding, “I refrain from telling him that many of my highly educated, highly articulate female friends were reduced to schoolgirl giggles and the throes of groupiedom at the mention of my meeting him.”³ Marcia Froelke Coburn in a *Chicago Magazine* article follows suit in her description of the show: “That sincere, in-the-same-room-with-you voice has proved to be seductive for the listeners of Ira Glass.”⁴ In varying degrees of eroticism, whether named Casanova, Romeo, or unmonikered seducer, Glass is unfailingly associated with pleasure evocation.

This American Life is all about pleasure, and the 1982 Brown University semiotics major, creator and host Ira Glass is highly conscious of the show’s pleasure-construction.⁵ In an interview with *Slate*’s Kathryn Schulz, Glass explains, “The radio stories I make, the way I think about them is the way I thought about stories when I was in college reading Roland Barthes’s

¹ “Million Dollar Idea.” 21 July 2010.

² “True Urban Legends.” 27 Apr. 2010.

³ “My lunch with Ira Glass.” *Salon.com*. 16 July 1999.

⁴ “His American Life: A Look at Ira Glass.” *Chicago Magazine*. Mar. 2006.

⁵ Paul Greenberg describes Glass’s relation to the major in the article “The semio-grads: How an obscure Brown concentration trained graduates to crack the codes of American culture -- and infiltrated the mainstream.” *The Boston Globe*. 16 May 2004.

S/Z. He talks about the five codes of how a narrative gives pleasure—about how a narrative will keep you from knowing something and make you think the opposite and then reveal it.”⁶

Indeed, *This American Life* is literature-like in its storytelling despite, and in conjunction with, its oral form. The radio show is a collection of predominantly true⁷ stories constructed with “a lot of the techniques of fiction: scenes and characters and narrative threads,” fittingly called “acts,” which are juxtaposed within themed episodes.⁸ A *New York Times* article describes the show as “an elastic concoction of true stories, audio art, monologues, fiction and found recordings, each piece carefully sculptured with music, almost like the movies.”⁹ The show’s website reiterates this simile: “like movies for radio.”¹⁰

This confusion of media forms also points to the hybridity of this particular model of radio performance. In order to describe Glass’s narrative radio format, one is tempted to liken it to oxymoronic adaptations of other forms: like imageless movies; like embodied text. In many ways the invention of radio reignited oral storytelling, reinstating a voice and a listenership that had been lost to the silent textual medium of literature. Catering to its audience, radio employs many techniques of traditional oral narrative such as segmented plot, stock phrases and characters, repetition, and explicit foreshadowing or “sign-posting.” Unlike original oral storytelling, however, radio has a textual foundation. It is a *scripted* storytelling, which is to some degree being *read* to its audience through a veil of personable and conversational spontaneity. Perhaps *This American Life*’s narrativity comes closest to what Walter Ong has

⁶ From an article from Schultz’s column “The Wrong Stuff,” “On Air and On Error: This American Life’s Ira Glass on Being Wrong.” 7 June 2010.

⁷ There is some fiction incorporated as well, but it is used in a similar way: “the fiction we have on the show functions like journalism: it’s fiction that describes what it’s like to be here, now, in America” (ThisAmericanLife.org/about).

⁸ ThisAmericanLife.org/about

⁹ Pam Belluck. “Arts in America; A Visual Radio Show With Birds and Guilty Psychics.” *New York Times*. 19 Mar. 1998.

¹⁰ ThisAmericanLife.org/about

termed “secondary orality.” “This new orality,” Ong argues, “has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas.... But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print” (*Orality and Literacy* 65). *This American Life* deliberately and self-consciously constructs an immediacy and intimacy through radio to produce pleasure for a literate society, which is based around a textual nature but disguised as oral informality.

As Glass notes in multiple sources, including his essay “Harnessing Luck as an Industrial Product” (2010), *This American Life* is the result of Glass’s long experience working for National Public Radio, during which time he “developed some very strong ideas about the best way to structure a story for radio” (60).¹¹ He realized that “someone could make a nice show that combined these emotional, funny, hard-to-turn-off documentary stories and these amazing radio writers” (60). First airing in 1995, the weekly radio show is an ongoing production of WBEZ in Chicago.¹² The show was originally named *Your Radio Playhouse*, but this name lasted only sixteen episodes before it changed to *This American Life*.¹³ Despite the name change, the show’s approach to radio production has been remarkably consistent from its beginning. In the introduction to the first episode, Glass outlines the format:

The idea of this show, this new little show, is stories—some by journalists and documentary producers like myself, some just regular people telling their own little stories, some by artists and writers and performers of all different kinds—

¹¹ Glass includes similar information in his writings on *Transom.org* and *Current.org*.

¹² The *This American Life* studios have moved to New York City, but the show remains affiliated with WBEZ, Chicago. The show received national distribution when it partnered with Public Radio International in 1996.

¹³ The name change process is detailed in the episode “Name Change / No Theme,” first aired in March 1996.

and the idea is we're going to bring you stuff you're not going to find anywhere else, and there's also going to be music. ("New Beginnings")¹⁴

A typical episode of the show will include two to five of these stories that fit together under a theme that ranges from broad subjects like "Liars" and "Summer" to more specific topics such as "Sinatra" or "#1 Party School." Glass emceeds each show, explaining the theme and connecting the stories together. For the show's tenth anniversary, the producers rebroadcast the first episode with an additional introduction to account for the slight differences listeners may notice, such as the name change. The name *Your Radio Playhouse*, Glass explains, "was intended to evoke a kind of old-time radio drama / radio playhouse kinda thing—perhaps wrongly" ("New Beginnings," 2005 version). This "radio drama" evocation is inaccurate in the sense that the show does not perform traditional radio plays. The show does, however, recall this old form in many ways, especially in the artificial division of its stories into "acts" and the intention of those acts to entertain. Glass also notes in the new preface that he was "relieved," listening to the show ten years later, "at how much the feeling of our radio show was right there—right from the beginning." Glass's term "feeling" indicates the show's distinctive style and tone, one that molds the stories into a particular *This American Life* telling.

¹⁴ All quotations of *This American Life* in this essay are my own transcriptions from podcasts of the radio show. The distinction between radio and podcast raises compelling questions that recall Walter Benjamin's division between storytelling and novels in "The Storyteller":

What announces itself in these passages is the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist as contrasted with the short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller. The first is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle; the second, to *many* diffuse occurrences. It is, in other words, *remembrance* which, as the Muse-derived element of the novel, is added to reminiscence, the corresponding element of the story, the unity of their origin in memory having disappeared with the decline of the epic. (9)

Following Benjamin's terms, the reminiscent storytelling of radio contrasts with the novel-like remembrance of a podcast. Recordings allow for detailed review whereas radio, a broadcast medium, exists for the listener only as an evanescent storytelling. As Walter Ong argues, however, radio as a "secondary orality" resembles a text-based medium more than a traditional oral storytelling (*Orality and Literacy* 65). Therefore, while the use of podcasts is necessary for the type of analysis I perform, I apply my readings to the radio show in general regardless of this difference of form.

Each episode of *This American Life* carefully constructs the narrative to optimize its pleasure potential—from the way the program sounds (editing conversation, manipulating speech patterns, layering music) to the unfolding narrative (chronological plotlines cut with increasingly informative analysis). The crafted experience of intimacy between the listener and the radio voice heightens the narrative pleasure for the show’s followers. This intimacy is due in part to the immediacy of the medium more generally. Radio, whether it has been recorded days or years ago, sounds live—the radio voice mimics the close-by and co-present. In addition, spoken words can connote emotion, social class, education, regionality, and nationality through tone, accent, inflection, and other non-verbal cues (Shingler and Wieringa 39). In his introduction to *Reality Radio*, John Biewen notes, “What [radio] does extraordinarily well is tell ... stories that explore the space between the ears” (6). As an imageless medium, radio stories tend to explore an internal rather than external world. Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa in *On Air* claim radio as “the most personal and intimate ‘mass medium’: an unrivaled companion and one of the most interesting, reliable and useful of friends” (110). This description is perhaps a little sentimental, but the feeling is shared by many critics. Writing on *Transom.org* (“a showcase and workshop for new public radio”), Tony Kahn proclaims similar devotion, “It’s hard to overstate how close radio is to us.... I realized that radio wasn’t just my profession, it was a lifelong companion, teacher and friend.”¹⁵ Like Kahn, Rick Moody, in the foreword to *Reality Radio*, follows the impulse to recall not just his experiences working in radio, but his entire life’s relation to the medium, referring to his “love affair with radio” (x).¹⁶

¹⁵ Tony Kahn’s reflection appears in an interactive comment thread about “Ira Glass’s Manifesto” on *Transom.org*.

¹⁶ Romantic descriptions of radio “companionship” are pervasive throughout critical writings on radio. Another notable example: Paul Donovan’s introduction to his book *The Radio Companion* (1992).

This American Life exploits this nostalgic and affective view of radio camaraderie. Because there is an obsession with the intimacy of a lifelong radio bond, the show can attract an audience to its brand of sentimentalized authenticity. By employing an informal and conversational tone, directly addressing the listener, and incorporating voices that are both varied and idiosyncratic, the show enacts the role of friend. As suggested by the popular emphasis on Glass as pleasure-inducer, it is Glass's mixed and ubiquitous role within the show that provides the most effective intimacy. Glass alternately and simultaneously performs the roles of writer, narrator, and host of the show, and the distinction between the roles is often forgotten, intentionally disguised. In Bambi Schlomovich's ever-erotic terms, "The hottest part of *This American Life* is the flexibility of the program to roleplay in any position and provide us with pleasure resourcefully—from interviews to live performances, Ira is like a madame who introduces you to his sweet delights for a (suggested) price."¹⁷ This simile aptly identifies Glass's chimeric function within the show, and it also implies that there is a single identity pleasuring the audience no matter the "position." Glass as madame consistently plays the character of "friend." The audience's pleasure emerges from the tension between the roles of radio writer and radio friend since the distinction between the character and Glass himself—the illusion and reality—is unclear.

This American Life, as the pages below argue, constructs the illusion of authentic representation through an artificial intimacy. This imagined camaraderie provokes the audience to identify with its narratives and the constructed American community they gesture toward. The impression of the show's veracity pervades not only the individual stories but also the show as a whole—the unified sound and structure establishes a standard narrativity and a self-contained,

¹⁷ "The Ira Glass Infatuation Post/This American Life Roundup: Recordings for Someone." *Jewcy.com*. 18 June 2010.

self-perpetuating representation of reality. The geographic and cultural specificity of the content, moreover, marks the intended listener as American. The show's orality, like traditional orality as Ong suggests, fosters a "communal sense" for its listeners by incorporating a shared American geography and history into its projection of an intimate American culture.¹⁸ The show also incorporates moments of reflexivity (in varying degrees), which reveal its narrativity as a construct, but this unveiling works to reinforce the show's illusion of honest representation—acknowledging an element of artistry assuages listeners' apprehension of deception without undermining the narrative's effective realism. The play between the show's representation of America and the audience's own conception of cultural identity results in the audience's pleasurable identification with the narratives.

The Art of Illusion

In *Art and Illusion*, E. H. Gombrich summarizes Konrad Lange's theory of the aesthetics of illusion: "To him all aesthetic pleasure in art was rooted in our oscillation between two series of associations, those of reality and those of art" (280). According to Gombrich, Lange holds that this oscillation requires what Coleridge terms a "willing suspension of disbelief"¹⁹ (280), whether the illusion be of a visual or aural nature. The aesthetic pleasure of *This American Life* emerges from an oscillation between reality and art, but the show complicates the distinction since the "art" of the show is an illusion of reality. The show employs elements of realism—a relaxed atmosphere, a confessional tone, and an appeal to the shared American experience—that

¹⁸ Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*, 65.

¹⁹ This phrase sparks contentious debate for some critics as detailed in Anthony Ferri's *Willing Suspension of Disbelief* (Lexington Books, 2007). The term here conforms to a general use of the term for describing the experience of "aesthetic pleasure."

work to create an authentic representation of American life.²⁰ In contrast to this designed realism, the show occasionally breaks its formulaic narrative structure to self-consciously point to the show's construction. While the majority of stories do not have this metanarrative feature, the periodic reminder of the medium of radio, the conventions of radio speech, and the forgotten construction of the narrative gives the audience a glimpse of the show's own secrets. There is pleasure not only in the artifice of *This American Life* but also in the acknowledgement of its artifice. Gombrich invokes Quatremere de Quincy (1823) to make this point: "Our pleasure in illusion, he insisted, rests precisely in the mind's effort in bridging the difference between art and reality. This very pleasure is destroyed when the illusion is too complete" (Gombrich 278). The pleasure of *This American Life* similarly ensues not only from the stories themselves, but also the recognition of the stories *as* stories.

The oscillation between the show's illusion of reality and an external reality is confused by Glass's entwined roles of author and actor. When Schlomovich pairs her "infatuation posts" with Photoshopped images of Glass collaged onto backgrounds of various thermometers reading "hot" or "shvitzing," is she recognizing Glass as the creator of *This American Life* or as the voice of its pleasurable narratives? This confusion commonly occurs in literature, readers uniting the author and the first-person narrator of a fictional account. Of course, this writer/narrator conflation is additionally complicated in the case of nonfiction. When Glass shares narratives of his own life, the distinction between writer and narrator is further obscured, the roles circuitously feeding off each other. There is a particularly tangled and self-conscious example of Glass as fused writer/narrator in the episode "Accidental Documentaries." Halfway through the program, Glass as host introduces the second story as he would in any episode: "We have arrived at Act II

²⁰ The *OED* defines "authentic" as "reliable, trustworthy, of established credit."

of our program: Baltimore” (*TAL* 14).²¹ The act begins with an old tape of a smooth-voiced man saying, “We’d like to ask you this question, my friend—do personal problems and worries have you down?” The man is advertising a psychic, Mrs. Kay, reader and advisor, who will put these worries to rest. The speaker’s affect is kind and polite; the voice is measured and articulate; and the tone of the audio is uniform and soft—all of these features date the recording to a previous era of genteel society and limited audio control. Glass interrupts, as he often does, “I’m just going to stop this tape right there.” This speech-act characterizes Glass’s conflated roles: when narrator-Glass calls out, “I’m just going to stop this tape,” is it narrator-Glass or writer-Glass who stops the tape? Writer-Glass has scripted the act, but we hear narrator-Glass claim it, “*I’m*” stopping the tape. Both figures share the same rhetorical hand that “physically” stops the tape.

Glass continues the story, “I have three things to say about this tape.” He first highlights two aspects of the Mrs. Kay advertisement that are particularly amusing. “And number three,” he adds, “This is my father. In 1956, three years before I was born. He’s 23 years old.” From here Glass cuts back and forth from 1956-recordings of his father reading radio advertisements to Glass explaining personal background information of his father’s radio days. Then Glass cuts in, “Hey, Dad?” and his father’s present-day voice responds, “Yeah.” We hear a conversation between Glass and his dad about these recordings and his father’s early interest in radio. Glass surreptitiously slips in an analysis, implicating his own interest in and knowledge of radio:

IRA. You’re a good announcer.

IRA’S DAD. [laughs]

IRA. I didn’t really know that. I’ve been listening to the way that that you do the announcement—you-you’re relaxed and yet you sort of punch the main

²¹ *This American Life* citations will be abbreviated with the corresponding episode number. Sustained discussion will refer to the same episode unless otherwise specified.

points, but you sound completely at ease, and you're convincing. You're doing ads for the hokiest products in the world, and you sound completely like you believe it. (TAL 14)

After a few more back-and-forths, writer-Glass returns to alternating between 1956 and narrator-Glass reflection. The first of these reflections furthers Glass's analysis of a good radio announcer:

You know, a lot of what it's like to be *on* the radio is just trying to sound relaxed when, you know, you're not. You're doing a show. You know, you're not just *talking* to people. And in some of these tapes I can actually hear my father struggling to sound relaxed. And these recordings give me this picture of him that I've never had in my life, really. Um, he seems so young, you know, and um, innocent. A guy in his twenties doing this--this thing that I know so intimately myself. You know, just, sitting in front of a microphone, trying to sound at ease.

Trying to sound like this relaxed old pro. Not a care in the world. (TAL 14)

While Glass refrains from explicitly connecting this radio analysis to his own practice, the distinction between writer-Glass and narrator-Glass is perhaps more pronounced here than anywhere in the show. Glass is talking about everyone in radio; he says "you," "*You're* doing a show" instead of "*I'm* doing a show," but at the same time, he *is* doing a show. Writer-Glass is offering a radio metanarrative, having narrator-Glass act out the principles writer-Glass is prescribing for a "relaxed old pro" narrator. Writer-Glass is admitting to his listeners that narrator-Glass is a construction, an act. Narrator-Glass *sounds* relaxed when he's not—he is performing.

The performance of narrator-Glass is effective. By coming across relaxed and conversational, by successfully disguising the artifice of narrative construction, he forms an impression of friendship between the radio speaker and the audience. This rapport—real or imagined—yields the audience’s suspension of disbelief in relation to the narratives. Glass will even address the listener as “my friend,” as his father says in the 1956 recordings, implying a reciprocal bond. Glass labels his listener “friend” as Glass himself plays the role of the listener’s friend. As if in a conversation between confidants, the narratives of *This American Life* present themselves as revelatory of individual experience—rather than sensationalist, the stories are confessional. There is a deception, however, in sculpting factual plot lines into a consistent stylized interpretation while claiming the maintained status of “truth.”²² Glass engages with his imagined participants as he frequently punctuates his monologue with rhetorical questions such as “you know?” Glass claims that the way he speaks on the show is how he speaks in real life,²³ and he goes as far as to name this practice “one of the basic laws of radio: that you should never say a sentence on the air that you couldn’t say in a normal dinner conversation” (“Harnessing Luck” 55). His radio language intentionally mimics friendly discourse, and the presence of the second-person pronoun “you” and directly addressed questions in radio’s one-way communication marks a purposeful interest in the show’s feigned reciprocity.

²² Writing about radio, Shingler and Wieringa devote an entire chapter in their book *On Air* to a comprehensive analysis of radio language by interpreting a range of critical work on radio’s scripted nature, its emphatic use of direct address, and its highly connotative potential (34-41), all of which reveals conventional radio speech as illusory and intentionally crafted to provoke specific cognitive or emotional response. Describing the contradiction between the medium and its mode of discourse, Shingler and Wieringa write, “The reality, of course, is that radio speech is a form of public speech: speech which is consciously intended to be heard by non-participants.... Nevertheless, despite its status as a mass (and one-way) medium of communication, radio speech clearly strives to create the illusion of personal and intimate verbal interaction, implying not only intimacy but also participation and reciprocity” (35).

²³ In an interview with Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*, Glass says the way he talks on the show is “the way I actually talk in actual life.” Web. 22 Apr. 2009.

Describing *This American Life* in *The Nation* (1997), Bill McKibben writes, “It takes as its beat, well, life.” In certain respects this is true—the show sets out to cover stories of everyday people, stories that haven’t been heard before.²⁴ And while the criteria for topics have expanded over the years, stretching to include larger journalistic projects,²⁵ the stories are still approached from an “everyman” perspective, and could still be said to cover “life.” The show’s “beat,” a term expressive of a full range of characteristics—the show’s journalistic interests, its narrative pacing, and its metaphorical finger on a cultural “pulse”—aims to represent “life” in every facet of its construction. When considering the “beat” of the show, moreover, the “this” and “American” qualifiers of the title are equally significant to “life.” *This American Life* is *American* not only in terms of audience, content, and geography, but also in how it performs its narrativity, its ability to transform history into stories that its intended audience, as a constructed community of Americans, will accept and understand.

Glass identifies two essential parts in his radio stories: “there’s the action of a story, and then there are the conclusions” (Glass “Harnessing Luck” 60). He explains,

A person can ... have all manner of amazing experiences, but if he (or the narrator) can’t say something big and surprising about what that experience means, if the story doesn’t lead to some interesting idea about how the world works, then it doesn’t work for radio. Or anyway, it’s not going to be as powerful as the best radio stories. (60)

²⁴ As Glass explains in an interview, “One of the founding ideas of the show was, nobody who’s famous, nothing you’ve ever heard of, nothing in the news. It was just going to be stories of everyday life. In the beginning, we matched up these everyday-life stories with lots of arts programming.” (*Chicago Magazine* Mar. 2006).

²⁵ “Now there is much less emphasis on everything that isn’t actually reporting. Even the stories that David Sedaris does currently are much more journalism than about his own life. We still have an occasional piece of fiction, but it’s much less part of our mission ... about five or six years into the program, we started developing more of a storytelling style—characters and situations and dialogue. And we liked it.” (Glass *Chicago Magazine* Mar. 2006).

Glass terms his conclusions “moments of reflection,” which relate the events of a tale to what he calls “Big Ideas” (60-61). The producers of *This American Life* present these “Big Ideas” of the narrative reflections as universal, but they are undoubtedly *American* in that they assume an acceptance of American values. The intimacy that the show creates would be less effective if not for the societal relationship that provides a common ideology between the American characters and the American listeners. Hayden White suggests in “The Value of Narrativity” that to be able to moralize history, and thus to narrativize, the morals must come first. There must be an adequate social system, a secular ideology, an established legality against which the plot can be assessed.²⁶ In other words, there must be a community with common values and standards of behavior before the actions of a story can be evaluated in accordance with those principles. White uses the term “moralize,” not as a loaded term specific to any religious or philosophical belief, but as a concept applicable to any set ideology, much in the same way Glass uses the word “reflect” to describe the act of determining a story’s greater significance. This significance is socially determined based on culture-specific values. White proposes that the shared ideas, the community, must exist before the narrative can emerge, and for *This American Life*, it is an “American” ideology that provides the underpinning for its narrativity.²⁷

²⁶ In “The Value of Narrativity,” White argues that “narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine” (14).

²⁷ An American identity is expressed in the program even through the use of the English language, often rich with various American dialects. Gombrich clearly illustrates the connoted nationality of language with this example: “To me, at least, the cock says not “cock-a-doodle-doo” as he calls to the English in the morning, nor “cocorico,” as he says in French, nor “kiao kiao,” as in Chinese, but still “kikeriki,” as he says in German. Or—not to fall into the mistake of Socrates—it is not precisely “kikeriki” he says; he still speaks cockish and not Viennese. My percept of the throaty noise of his call is distinctly colored by habitual interpretation.... There is no reality without interpretation; just as there is no innocent eye, there is no innocent ear” (*Art and Illusion* 362-63).

To be clear, the show is not *All American Life*, it is *This American Life*. The “American” social basis to which the show appeals is self-selecting and incomplete, and the show itself constructs a particular perception of the American social norm. In an article titled “*This American Life* Completes Documentation Of Liberal, Upper-Middle-Class Existence,” the parody newspaper *The Onion* suggests the show has an excessively narrow conception of American life. The show “moralizes” its narratives in a subjective and controlled way, and while the *Onion* example may be extreme—as satire often is—the typing of the audience through this exaggeration highlights the way in which the show constructs and caters to a particular audience. The lampooning label “Liberal, Upper-Middle-Class” derides both the limited scope of the show’s material and the demographic that the show attracts. Regardless of the specific characterization, the example points to the show’s selective portrayal of American life. What’s more, this portrayal of American life, as a product of a mass medium, shapes the audience conception of what “American life” means to them. *This American Life* “moralizes” the sequence of actions it describes in relation to its America, and it does so throughout the story, interrupting the plot to explain the significance of what is being said and to make sure the listener understands why they are hearing this story as they are hearing it.

As Glass explains in a moral-appropriate analogy: “It’s the structure, essentially, of a sermon; you hear a little story from the Bible, then the clergyperson tells you what it means. Anecdote then reflection, over and over” (*Radio: An Illustrated Guide* 6). A typical *This American Life* episode will start with a short story, which Glass introduces and uses to illustrate the theme of the episode, the touchstone to which every story in the show will connect. In his reading, he employs his clergyman technique so that from the very beginning, the audience

knows *why* they are listening, i.e. how these stories are pertinent in a larger context. In the early episode “Quitting,” in which Glass has a particularly long introductory piece, he opens,

What will make you change? For most of us it is *not* self-help books, courses at the learning annex—we are *immune* to any number of long, sincere talks with our friends about the problems that do not go away, we are *immune* to resolutions made at the last minute of the last hour of each December 31st. Consider the story of Evan Harris: she didn’t like her job; she wanted to leave her boyfriend; she was living in a city she didn’t like. (TAL 7)

From here we get a sound bite from Evan Harris herself before Glass continues to narrate the background information of her story, but already, in just a few sentences, Glass has broadened the scope of her story to encompass a concept with which we can all identify: self-development, “growing as a person,” more specifically, the all-too-human failure to fulfill such lofty ideals. Not only does Glass provide an experience with which to identify, but he includes a set social group who already does: “most of us.” With this phrase, Glass groups the majority of his listeners, the majority of *everybody*, on the side of his argument. Individual listeners are united into the communal “us” of Glass’s American construct. Most of us, he claims, behave this way. Still not convinced this includes you? Have you ever disliked your job? Your significant other? The addition of concrete examples connects the broader idea back to Evan Harris, back to the story so that the audience now implicitly identifies with Evan Harris. These are *her* concrete examples, but now listeners are set up to “consider the story of Evan Harris” as it pertains to their own understanding of life change, or lack of change.

This introduction establishes “something big,” a relatable idea, but the audience needs to hear the rest of the story to come to the fully formed “interesting idea about how the world

works,” i.e. the moral. The formula of plot plus “Big Idea” is only effective if the story exemplifies the point. Glass, as the narrator, constantly interrupts Evan’s story to ensure listeners are understanding, not only Evan’s story, but also how it connects to the—his—bigger picture. He continues with the story, describing how change in a person’s life can be triggered by a very small, seemingly insignificant moment. In Evan Harris’s case, this moment is a discussion about the letter Q, and we hear her say so before Glass interjects, “That’s it. [laughs] With the utterance of those words. Let me—let me just play those back for you because *these* are words which changed an adult human life. Here—here we go” (TAL 7). And we hear Evan again. This repetition is especially effective in an auditory medium. Radio makes use of redundancy more than most visual media because of our limited aural short-term memory and the “evanescent quality” of radio discourse (Shingler and Wieringa 37). Writing generally about the medium, Shingler and Wieringa explain, “Repetition is essential in radio broadcasting to ensure that listeners note and remember the key points of a discussion.... At the same time, the sign-posting of information ... helps to give the discussion as a whole a greater sense of structure from the outset and, by anticipating what is to follow, broadcasters have a better chance of maintaining listeners’ attention” (38). *This American Life* follows this model of radio sign-posting. After we hear Glass repeat Evan’s words, he introduces the show as a whole, “Today on our program: Quitting. Stories of people who quit everything in their lives that they hated, and what happened to them afterwards....” At this point in the narrative, still within the first *three minutes*, the show repeats the story, foregrounds what is to come later in the show, and introduces a new layer of meaning to the ongoing story, as “quitting” is a new perspective on the American modalities of change.

Glass continues to dominate the first half of the story. He explains Evan's (highly amusing) conversation about the letter Q and how it led to Evan's epiphanic idea for her zine "Quitters Quarterly." He explains the zine and how the idea of quitting took over Evan's life. He makes elaborate analogies to butter sculptors, acknowledging that muses work in mysterious ways. All of this guides the listeners beyond Evan's plot toward an understanding of something applicable to the American "us" and prepares them to interpret Evan's story as an allegory for a pervasive American experience. The second half of the story consists primarily of Evan Harris expounding her detailed philosophy on quitting with blocks of her quit-theory linked together, Glass's prodding and questions intentionally left out. In case the listener is getting too engrossed or confused, however, Glass breaks in again, "I'm just going to stop that right there. Are you following this? This particular point? Let's just—let's review those steps again, okay?" (TAL 7) Glass goes over what Evan last said and continues, "To me that indicates somebody who actually *has* been in that position..." By offering his own opinion, Glass reminds the listener that he's analyzing the story, that there is significance to what's being said, and sign-posting the conclusion to come. He also repeats the last words Evan said – in case you missed it – before speaking again on what the story suggests about Evan and other single-idea-obsessed people. He gives many examples of such obsessions ("the laws of supply and demand, fundamentalist Christianity, structuralist linguistic theory²⁸...") to remind the audience of the general example which Evan serves. Telling "anecdote then reflection, over and over,"²⁹ *This American Life* "moralizes" its narratives by offering interpretations and explanations of individual experiences.

²⁸ A reference to Glass himself ;-)

²⁹ Glass, Ira. *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*, 6.

An American Airscape

This American Life constructs the illusion of a single American community, that each and every listener is a part of the same intimate collective. Glass produces an artificial friendship with the audience that persuades listeners to accept the show's particular portrayal of America put forth as revealed truth. The show shapes individual experiences to conform to a consistent style and standardized American ideology, which in turn creates a brand of American mythology based around its community of self-selecting listeners and the communal sense the show encourages. The show chronicles American life through the specificity of geography and cultural cues within its stories as well as through the idiosyncratic sounds of American speech, American voices, and the distinct tone of the show itself. The emergence of an American space within the narratives locates the audience not only with respect to their own relationship to an American identity, but also with the community of individuals sharing a cultural experience. This communal sense roots American listeners within their specific conception of reality, which fosters acceptance of the show's narratives and overall representation as truth.

Counterintuitively, as the examples that follow demonstrate, the show's occasional breaks in standard narrative structure only strengthen the sense of authenticity the show designs.

Describing Glass's style for readers of *Slate* magazine, Kathryn Schulz writes, "on his radio show, Glass is adept at making you feel like you're hanging out with an old friend. He uses 'um' and 'like' and 'I mean' in a way that manages to come across as thoughtful rather than faltering and that brings to mind Don DeLillo's line: 'He speaks your language, American.'"³⁰ It is only through vocalization that Glass is able to imbue his words with additional meaning and "come across" in a specified way. Shingler and Weiringa's *On Air* details how radio speech, in

³⁰ Schultz, Kathryn. "The Wrong Stuff: On Air and Error: The American Life's Ira Glass on Being Wrong." *Slate*. 7 June 2010.

contrast with text, offers a heightened capacity for connotation. Robert McLeish, quoted in *On Air*, explains the ways in which verbal expression augments the literal meaning of words:

A great advantage of an aural medium over print lies in the sound of the human voice – the warmth, the compassion, the pain and the laughter. A voice is capable of conveying much more than reported speech. It has inflection and accent, hesitation and pause, a variety of emphasis and speed. The information which a speaker imparts is to do with his style of presentations as much as the content of what is said. The vitality of radio depends on the diversity of voices which it uses and the extent to which it allows the colourful turn of phrase and local idiom. (38)

This American Life capitalizes on the meaningful qualities of spoken language not only within the narration of events but also within the voices of the characters the producers interview and record. In the beginning of the episode “Accidental Documentaries,” Glass explains his interest in recording *how* people talk as much as what is literally said. Glass sets up an example of a story he did on a high school senior prom, after which he “tagged along with two couples, in a Ford Tempo, as they drove around, going to parties, talking and joking, and singing along with the radio” (*TAL* 14). He plays a few short clips of the group’s chatter before interrupting:

A word now on doing documentary stories. When you--when you’re doing this kind of story, this is pretty much exactly the kind of moment you dream of. Everybody’s acting the way they act when there’s no tape recorder present. It’s intimate; it’s alive. You feel like you’re hearing these people as they really are. Even though, you know, there is a tape recorder and a boom microphone—like a huge one, a foot and a half long—and a stranger. And to get to this point you have

to spend hours with people. Get them used to you. Get them to the point where they're actually bored of being recorded. (*TAL* 14)

Here Glass exposes the value *This American Life* puts on the intimacy garnered from the *sound* of authenticity. He explains, “The people spoke the way they really talk in real life; it was intimate; and it completely revealed what the people speaking were like.” The meaning of the recorded dialogue comes entirely from attributes of the characters’ delivery rather than any specific words or thoughts divulged. Glass posits this evaluation of the connotative potential of speech before an episode that focuses on the idiosyncratic voices of “accidental documentaries.” Act I, “Berrien Springs, Michigan,” is a long piece that cuts together parts of a 1960s “letter on tape” from a family to their son “Arthur Jr.,” who is away at medical school. The qualities of the voices—the mother, the father, and a younger sister—lend as much, if not more, meaning to the tale as the mundane topics of discourse the family presents to their son. Toward the end of the act, a present-day Arthur Jr. verifies that the recorded speech, complete with “ums,” accents, and run-on sentences, “captured the dynamics of his family perfectly.” The inflections of the voices communicate the passive tensions between the characters and the nuanced meaning of their words. When the mother describes their relatives Milta and Wendell as “sweet people,” for example, it is clear that she perceives them as plain or uncomplicated more than charming and kind. In addition, the audible regionality of the voices locates the story within a specific geography. The voices—identifiably Midwestern—affirm the show’s status as uniquely American.

This story is also a good example of the subtle audio manipulation *This American Life* enacts to render a consistent and distinctive tone throughout the show. The original tape was recorded in the 1960s, yet the audio has familiar qualities, the pacing consistent with the

measured progression common to all *This American Life* stories. Every story is edited to emulate a cultivated sound that unifies the show. In a 1999 *New York Times* article titled “The Glow at the End of the Dial; Ira Glass Is, Um (Pause, Delete) . . . Listening: The Perfectly Edited World of His ‘American Life,’” Marshall Sella highlights this fine-tuned aspect of the show. He writes, “For more than four hours, Glass has been agonizing over every stammer, every breath, every millisecond between words in what originally was a 12-minute chat. ‘Should I laugh there?’ he whispers to himself. ‘No. I should not.’” Radio editing produces what Frances Dyson describes as “an unlikely speech: faster, clearer, more audible” (Dyson 1994).³¹ “Speech,” Shingler and Wieringa explain, “which is more perfect than natural speech since it makes a point to extracting the repetitions and hesitations, the coughs and wheezes of ordinary speech” (*On Air* 42). In *This American Life*, however, the “ums” and “uhs” are often editing *in*, each pause or sputter calculated to serve a purpose. Sella quotes Glass questioning his editing, “Does the ‘um’ work?” Sella’s article reveals the manipulating madame behind the scenes of Glass’s constructed camaraderie. Not only is Glass’s language devised to foster a sense of friendship and intimacy, but his speech is then edited into an appreciably human delivery—the producers edit all material to fit the particular “feeling,” as Glass terms it,³² of the show as a branded sound. The ideal speech of *This American Life* includes, even emphasizes, the imperfections of naturally flawed conversational speech, but these imperfections are honed to create the intentional illusion of an authentic, idiosyncratic community: the sound of *This American Life*’s America.

The use of editing technology is occasionally acknowledged in the show itself. In “Recordings for Someone,” for example, the producers edit the speech of a stuttering college student so that he can record a stutter-free message to “the Pizza Pipeline in Moscow, Idaho”

³¹ Frances Dyson’s description is quoted in *On Air* (Shingler and Wieringa 42).

³² “New Beginnings” 2005 version.

(TAL 203). Glass explains, “using the editing gear that we use to edit *all* of the sound on our radio show, we can take out the stutters, the pauses, the repeats. We can make Kevin sound different from how he has ever talked in his life.” Such editing blurs reality and fiction, and it presents the inherent challenge of documentary production: how to accurately represent reality.³³ Toward the end of Kevin’s story about stuttering, the editing equipment is “turned off,” and Kevin’s following speech sounds labored. Kevin claims he is not himself without his stutter, which suggests the story up to this point, portraying Kevin with minimal irregularities, falsely represents reality, while stuttering Kevin is “Kevin himself.” The implication here, however, is that at this point Kevin’s stuttering speech has not been edited, which is misleading as “*all* of the sound” of the show is edited.³⁴

Radio as an American media form has a complicated history with the notion of truth and realistic representation, demonstrated memorably in Mercury Theatre’s 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. Orson Welles and Howard Koch’s adaptation of H. G. Wells’s science fiction story famously simulates a conventional radio music program interrupted by breaking news of a Martian invasion of New Jersey, which was so convincing to some listeners as to incite mass panic.³⁵ They achieved this deception by imitating a live radio broadcast with everything from

³³ In his essay “Reality Radio: The documentary” (2004), David Hendy summarizes documentary’s contradictory quandary as such: “[Documentary] claims a special relationship with reality, observing and collating the ‘raw’ sounds, images and objects of the world. Yet it also insists on generating wider meanings from such observations, by attempting a creative interpretation of this raw material – sometimes to establish general truths about social and political policy, at other times to explore less tangible aspects of human existence, such as love, hate, fear, loss or loneliness. It offers authenticity, but it also denotes artifice” (*Radio* 220).

³⁴ As John Biewen notes in *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound* (2010):

In this postmodern age, we’re supposed to understand that there is no absolute, objective truth “out there”—certainly not one that we can vacuum up through a microphone, assemble into a perfect bundle of sonic reality and transmit to the listener. Every choice the producer makes is subject to dispute, from where to point the microphone to the digital slicing of a phrase at the expense of some nuance. (5)

³⁵ In his book *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, Tim Crook details the *War of the Worlds* broadcast and its psychological aftermath. He notes Welles’s motive to be “to challenge the public’s unquestioning trust of the medium of radio and demonstrate how people could be deceived” (109), and he pinpoints the

reporters and stereotypical interviewees, to interference and microphone malfunctions—even adding pauses and go-to emotive musical interludes between segments of information. The radio play locates the site of the invasion with specific geography and recognizable sources of information—the broadcast depicts an interview from “Princeton Observatory,”³⁶ a field report from Grover’s Mill, and a military response in “the foothills of Watchung Mountains” among numerous specified locations, which prompts identification by the American audience and inspires belief. To further establish credibility, the speakers perform a variety of vernacular improvisations—e.g. articulate reporters, a stodgy professor, and a colloquial farmer. Describing the UFO striking his farm near Grover’s Mill, one Mr. Wilmuth speaks with a local parlance:

WILMUTH. I seen a kinda greenish streak and then zingo. Something’ smacked the ground. Knocked me clear out of my chair.

PHILIPS (Reporter). Well, were you frightened, Mr. Wilmuth?

WILMUTH. I ain’t sure. I reckon I was kinda riled. (*War of the Worlds*)³⁷

Wilmuth’s colloquial speech substantiates his regionality, which adds to the play’s deception of candor—Wilmuth *sounds* “the way he really talks in real life.”³⁸ *This American Life*, like the radio play of *War of the Worlds*, utilizes such American specificity, in terms of shared geography, unique speech patterns, and cultural understanding, to create a believable narrative for its American audience. Welles and Koch were consciously mimicking the conventions of radio (structure, tone, vernacular) to create a convincing event that preyed upon the listeners’

root of the deception’s efficacy as being the exploitation of radio traditions—both in terms of its communication style and its “convention of integrity and honesty of intent” (111).

³⁶ To avoid legal complications, the writers changed institution names such as “Princeton University Observatory” to “Princeton Observatory,” but the effective association remains clear (Crook *Radio Drama* 109).

³⁷ This quotation is from a transcription of the original *War of the Worlds* broadcast (American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank). Orson Welles is credited with the idea for the play, and Howard Koch is credited with writing the script (Crook *Radio Drama* 106).

³⁸ Glass uses these terms in episode 14 “Accidental Documentaries,” previously quoted.

faith in radio's literalized voice of authority. *This American Life* also exploits radio practice and history but with subtler purposes. Where *War of the Worlds* persuasively fabricated an illusive reality from fiction, *This American Life* purportedly begins from a place of fact. That is to say, Glass and the other producers create illusion not from make-believe but from "real" stories.

Through the Looking Glass

Certain narratives of *This American Life* address the show's own deception of documentary realism. Moments of self-awareness come up in different ways, sometimes, as with an earlier example, it comes from Glass's acknowledgment of his role as a performer. Other times the story will recognize itself as radio, implicating the conventions of the show and the medium as a whole, such as in the conclusion to Jonathan Goldstein's story about "the greatest phone message of all time" in episode number 203 "Recordings for Someone." The beginning of the story introduces Goldstein's friend Josh, a quick-tongued character who "thinks of himself as an idea man" with ideas of "pure gold" (*TAL* 203). One such "gold-standard" idea is the main subject of the anecdote: an early 1990s, expletive-laden, *Little Mermaid*-themed viral voicemail message that may or may not have crashed Columbia University's phone system. Josh, a Columbia student at the time of the alleged message, contends that this message—from an indignant mother to her son "Fred"—became "the defining moment in his class's campus life that year" after being forwarded across campus through the Rolm phone system—"like a precursor to the internet." Josh convinces a doubtful Goldstein to investigate the veracity of his claims, which, through the course of the story, prove surprisingly true, corroborated by virtually everyone Goldstein speaks to that went to Columbia that year. The message spawned ironic spin-

offs, a dance remix version, and “the most crowd-pleasing musical number from the year-end varsity show.”

The story up to its conclusion is already entertaining. Goldstein seamlessly blends the unraveling “golden” story into a framework of the sharp-witted, colorful banter of established friends Jon and Josh. The conclusion, however, adds a new dimension to the piece by incorporating an element of self-reflexivity. It refocuses attention from the narrative to an analysis of the results, including both Goldstein’s would-be conclusion and Josh’s criticism of that conclusion, the latter effectively nullifying the former:

JON. I’m going to read you a piece of script that I’ve written that I’m thinking I might actually end this whole story with, okay? Because I want to get—I want to get some of your feedback. Okay?

JOSH. Oh I’m ready.

JON. I would say something to the effect of, “And so a recording intended for one person unintentionally became the beloved property of thousands, and in so happening, the message went from being what might have been considered a rather tragic personal artifact that spoke of dysfunction to becoming a triumph of contemporary American humor.”

JOSH. What is that?! That’s public radio wussy talk. Be a *man*!

JON. No. A-a part of that whole statement is that I’m actually saying to you, you were right, and I was wrong.

JOSH. Alright, whatever, if you want to talk that fancy talk, you do your—you do your thing, alright? But don’t drag me into your serious-voice nonsense. And

you get to speak in this stentorian tone like “And then, America laughed at this inadvertent piece of comedy. I’m Jon Goldstein.” (TAL 203)

The introduction to Goldstein’s conclusion immediately invokes the metanarrative by identifying itself as a script. Goldstein announces, “I’m going to read you a piece of script that I’ve written,” which implicates the entire story as “pieces of script” and marks itself as a scripted script-reading. His summation condenses the story into what he surmises to be the unexpected, larger-picture significance of the anecdote, which is a conclusion in concurrence with the general *This American Life* narrative formula. Josh’s conclusion, mocking Goldstein, reminds the audience that they are listening to public radio, that Goldstein and public radio in general are using a serious-voice, “stentorian tone” and deems such a practice “nonsense.” His final quip, “And then, America laughed at this inadvertent piece of comedy,” satirizes Goldstein’s language and suggests that Goldstein’s conclusion manipulates the story to conform to analytic standards that may be false. Josh’s sarcasm also draws attention to the show’s construction of a collective through “contemporary American humor.” Josh points out Goldstein’s move to associate Fred’s individual experience with the American community of the show’s intended audience, and Josh’s mockery deconstructs the notion of “contemporary American humor” as a “Big Idea” that the narrative uses to moralize its plot. While Goldstein’s story—the one Josh is a part of—could itself be called an example of contemporary American humor, Josh preemptively strikes down the act of such labeling and denies the “moral” of the story’s forced significance.

The style of the show’s reflexivity fits with the tone and format of the program, making the self-conscious questioning seem a natural extension of the show’s playful rhetoric and casual, conversational discourse. Audience pleasure from such moments manifests itself, not separately, but in concert with the show’s usual narrativity as illustrated by the second act of the episode

“Shoulda Been Dead,” “stories of people who thought they were going to die, and what they learned, or did not learn, from the experience” (*TAL* 50). The setup of this act is crucial to understanding the story’s multiple layers of reflexivity. Glass begins, “We’re at Act II of our program, ‘Maybe Six Months.’ Well, Lawrence Steger is a filmmaker and a performance artist here in Chicago, and I told him about Kevin Kelly’s story, and it turned out that, um, like Kevin Kelly, at the moment Lawrence thought he glimpsed the possible end of his life, *Lawrence* also set out on a big road trip.” “Kevin Kelly’s story” is the previous act of the episode, which the audience has just heard. The audience also learns Lawrence Steger is “a filmmaker and a performance artist,” which explains, to a certain extent, the form of the story: the reading of a film treatment. The act begins:

LAWRENCE. Title: Road. Treatment: It’s shot entirely on video, mostly hand-held, shaky, out of focus, bad color—overblown color, actually.

[The faint noise of radio-tuning in background]

Um, can I get this microphone adjusted so I don’t have to lean over so much?

IRA. Yeah, sure, Larry, just pull that down.

LAWRENCE. Ok, check, one, two, three, um—Synopsis: The story concerns Luke: gay, white, Midwestern, late 20s. Follows Luke on the day he is informed of his HIV-positive status. Luke cops a stance of cold, brittle, not unlike the Harrison Ford narration on *Blade Runner*, but there’s a hint of vulnerability to Luke—have we got the Harrison Ford or the Rutger Hauer voice?

IRA. Yeah.

LAWRENCE. Great, roll it. [Clip of Harrison Ford narration] Great. Take it under me. (TAL 50)

Steger interrupts his film treatment to give directions for the radio production in progress. He directly questions Glass, radio producer, who responds both verbally and by fulfilling Steger's audio requests. This fluctuation between film script-reading and radio script-direction persists through the whole story, which draws attention to the scripted nature of the radio production as the interruptions of the script-reading are themselves scripted. A metanarrative example of Walter Ong's concept of secondary orality, Steger plans his oral narrative to sound spontaneous, and the story enacts this spontaneity self-referentially by presenting its own active script writing.³⁹ The narrative also immediately establishes an American setting and specific type of American character, "gay, white, Midwestern." "Luke," the scripted character reenacting Steger's experience, represents Steger in general terms. The listening audience is also presumed to be familiar with key American imagery and references: the road trip, the Midwestern stereotype, Harrison Ford, which mark Luke's experience as a particularly American narrative and imply, according to *This American Life* form, an expandable significance for the listening community.

The reflexivity of the story continues, drawing attention to the medium of radio and the story's artifice. The film script recounts Luke traveling to the HIV clinic with his college friend Bill and describes Luke's emotions:

³⁹ Secondary orality arose with the advent of sound recording technology, which allows oral storytelling to take on textual qualities. Secondary orality resembles primary, or preliterate, orality in some ways, but the nature of the discourse is fundamentally different. For example, Ong writes, "[Where] primary orality promotes spontaneity because the analytic reflectiveness implemented by writing is unavailable, secondary orality promotes spontaneity because through analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing. We plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly spontaneous" (*Orality and Literacy* 137).

Quote: I'm not sure how I feel. I feel a little sad, sort of mad. I guess blank, but I'm okay. End quote. Luke thinks he's sounding like a short story assignment in a creative writing class, or worse, trapped in an artsy novel. Luke imagines himself in a television dramatization of himself. Camera pulls back from behind Luke's head. The ceiling of the car must be incredibly high, he thinks to himself. (*TAL* 50)

Luke's lines in the would-be film are marked by explicit signifiers "quote" and "end quote" while his internal commentary is noted without such markers. The inclusion of Luke's inner thoughts—without reference to say, a voiceover or other means of delivery—shows how this story discreetly trespasses the presented framework of a film treatment. The "treatment" fails to code Luke's expression for filmic representation. The character's fear of sounding like or being in a work of fiction—short story, artsy novel, television dramatization—ironically reflects the fact that he is in such a medium. "Luke's" awareness of being a character, moreover, gestures toward the audience's perception of Luke as such and at the potential for the audience, identifying with the character, to see themselves as characters within their own "American lives." As Luke becomes his own audience, the distinction between character and audience, narrative and reality, blurs, and the tension between the two is the site of narrative pleasure—like Glass who morphs between author/narrator roles, Luke as a character transcends clear boundaries between art and reality.

The confusion of authorship furthers when the narrative's narrator inserts himself as a character: "Luke's narrator imagines how many people have been in these cubicles..." (*TAL* 50). Is Luke's narrator a feature of the described film? Of Luke's imagined literary or television presence? Of the current radio narrative? Later, Steger reports, "[Luke] thinks his narrator wants

him to get out of the cubicle,” which suggests Luke is aware of his narrator—perhaps in terms of the novel or other medium Luke *thinks* he’s in—but at the same time, Luke *is* the narrator. The parallel actions “Luke’s narrator imagines” and “[Luke] thinks his narrator” refer back to Lawrence Steger’s autobiographical role as narrator of his own fictionalized story. Within the story, Steger plays the role of author and Luke plays the role of his narrator, both versions of the same identity—just as Glass, through the whole of *This American Life*, plays the role of friend, a character who can traverse identities of author, narrator, and subject. Steger’s representation of reality is complicated—his story renders himself as a literal character who follows a stylized plot of Steger’s real life experience—but this complication illustrates the artifice of *This American Life* more generally by exposing the illusion of authentic representation to be a set series of narrative techniques.

Steger’s story speaks to the formal composition of *This American Life* when the story imbeds another *This American Life* story within itself—the most unambiguous instance of metanarrative. Steger’s story inserts part of the previous act (Kevin Kelly’s story) into the narrative *as* a radio story, which draws attention to the construction of the stories and of the show as a whole. The illusion of reality remains, however, as the exposure of a crafted portrayal implies the honesty of this revelation. Counterintuitively, breaking the standard illusion of authentic representation only reinforces the illusion by seeming to reveal a more accurate reality behind the exposed interpretation. The unveiling of the story as a construction is still a part of the story—it is still a construction itself. The film treatment calls for the car radio to become audible with an appropriate life-lesson for Steger’s/ Luke’s “Maybe Six Months” conclusion. Steger directs, “Voice comes up on the car radio: ‘Try not to think of the future. Just live in the present moment.’ Uh, something like that. You got that?” (*TAL* 50) The “radio” comes on and listeners

hear the voice of Kevin Kelly—the subject of the previous act of this episode. Kelly, however, as listeners may remember, does not preach a “live in the moment” doctrine. At the point Luke tunes in to the story, Kelly is explaining, “I also decided that it was an entirely unnatural and inhumane way to live and that, um, having a future is part of what being human is about, and that when you take away the future for humans, you take away a lot of the humanness, and that it’s *not* actually a very good thing to live entirely in the present.” Steger cuts off Kelly’s story here and inserts Luke’s commentary, “Live entirely in the present, huh?” Luke does not acknowledge or comprehend the opposition of Kelly’s advice against his own desires—his incredulous remark, “Live entirely in the present, huh?” suggests skepticism of the radio message, as if Kelly has suggested this advice. By reversing the message, Steger’s narrative repudiates the generalization of Kevin Kelly’s analysis. Luke’s oblivious response to Kelly’s forward-looking tenet sanctions the disregard of certain *This American Life*’s mythologies, and his example insinuates that each listener may extract from a story an individual—even opposite—understanding despite the show’s construction. Steger’s experience, contrasting Kelly’s, proves that “having a future” is not *always* “part of what being human is about”—Steger, infected with HIV, must find a way to “live entirely in the present.” This contrast between the two acts of the episode, the contrast between the two experiences, reveals a standard “moralizing” to be insufficient. Juxtaposing these stories, *This American Life* acknowledges the artificiality and subjectivity of constructing “moments of reflection;” however, this recognition only reinforces the sense of the show’s authentic representation of a diverse American community.

The effect of this narrative reflexivity is the radio equivalent of theater’s practice of breaking the fourth wall. In *This American Life*’s type of radio narrative, the proverbial fourth wall does not exist to be broken—the audience is directly addressed throughout the show, which

works to engage the listeners rather than distance the audience from the story. However, the show's metanarrative or self-reflexive interruptions of its standard address to the audience perform a comparable role: revealing the show as a whole to be a fabrication. These holes in the narrative illusion function similarly to Barthes's idea of "inoculation"—"admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil. One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion" ("Myth Today" *Mythologies* 150). In other words, by making a small admission of myth-making, the show appeases listeners' potential concerns about deception without undermining the show's more extensive manipulations.⁴⁰

Glass states that a person can have an amazing experience, but without connecting the experience to greater significance about "the world," the story "doesn't work for radio" ("Harnessing Luck" 60). The implications of this idea affect not only the show's selection of content but also its shaping of each story to fit the criterion of grandeur. Even Glass's language about the show follows this model—Glass claims that the meaning of *This American Life*'s stories applies to *the world* even though the show maintains a distinctly American purview. The suggestion that the show's content is predominantly American is by no means revelatory, but the show depicts its own *kind* of American. *This American Life* builds itself from verifiably

⁴⁰ This kind of "inoculation" reinforces the illusion from which it seems to break, as *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* acknowledges in the work of Bertolt Brecht relating to the idea of "illusion":

Brecht used *Verfremdung* (distancing) to expose imitation and fourth-wall illusionism as tools for preserving the bourgeois status quo.... While his self-reflexive use of *Verfremdung* is sometimes described as anti-illusionist, to draw attention to the process of illusion making is itself an attempt to give the appearance of being true or real. Whenever makers of representation engage with conceptions of reality and art's relation to it, they by definition contribute to the constitution of illusion. (617)

American components—a shared geography, history, culture, ideology—but the notion that a single American community exists and that the show objectively represents this community is a fantasy the show constructs. The readings the show offers are not necessarily false representations, but they are subjective interpretations crafted to conform to a specific narrative. The illusion of the show is that its narratives document a real America, that its stories *uncover* hidden truths applicable or significant to not only individual listeners but also the vast American collective as a whole. The show implies that such meaning can be discovered in any story—any experience—and that identifying with individual life experiences is important to the American community. Consequently, the show generates its own conception of America that may in turn influence the audience's own perception of American identity.

The deception of a constructed reality is not unique to *This American Life*, as Orson Welles proved as early as 1938, but *This American Life* enacts the illusion in its own and particularly intimate way. Glass, playing the role of pleasure *évocateur*, effectively engages his listeners so that the conclusions the show presents emerge as if from natural conversation. The scripted informality and Glass's feigned friendship suggest an especially American style of discourse and recall a history of radio intimacy. The personal, confessional "truth" to which Glass as friend lends access stimulates listener pleasure—the stories seem to be authentic revelations about the world, or at least America, which connects listeners to a shared, if illusory, American identity. The occasional break in the show's usual structure and its inclusion of reflexive insights that question the show's conclusions may surprise the listeners and seem to counter the show's imitation of reality, but the metanarratives further the illusion by adding complication to the show's conflation of art and reality; already a play between the two, the show's reflexivity heightens pleasure by prompting further confusion of authenticity.

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