Writing in the Theatre of the Mind

Information Sheet

In radio drama, the writer must communicate everything with sound. The senses of touch, smell, sight, and taste, as well as the deeper sensation emotion must all be conveyed to the audience using sound alone. The spoken word, music, and sound effects are the radio drama writer's tools for creating stories. Together, all these sounds stimulate the audience's imagination, creating visual images of people, places, things, actions, and emotions. The important idea here is stimulate. In radio drama it is not a good idea to give too many details. The writer must find and present just the right combinations of spoken words, music, and sound effects to fire the audience's imaginations. Once fired, the listener's imagination takes over and creates images more vivid than the most powerful movie. Radio drama, like reading, is a medium of the mind. This means that with radio drama anything that can be imagined can be created.

Stage, film, and television dramas are media of the eye. A simplified definition of these dramas is that they are stories told to an audience by a series of visual actions. Here, the spoken word is mainly used to communicate information that cannot be communicated by action. Because the eye can only see physical images, TV and movies must use real images. The power of the computer, with its ability to process graphic images, has created some impressive pictures. As spectacular they may be, however, these images must always be real. They are always graphic representations of someone else’s mind.

The radio drama set has no such limitations. At the speed of thought, the radio drama set can change from a neighborhood street to an uncharted planet on the far side of the universe. Radio drama sets are constructed in the listener’s mind. This makes the possibilities of what can be accomplished virtually limitless. In “The Thing on the Fourble Board” (a Quiet Please episode from the 1940s) an oil rig brings a creature, from 4,000 feet down, up to the earth's surface. The creature has the body of a tarantula but the face of a woman so hypnotically beautiful that it paralyzes its victims before devouring them. To make this believable to a movie audience would require that the image be so beautiful that it would paralyze the audience—not very practical, but in the Theatre of the Mind nothing is impossible.

Incredible things can be done with radio drama. It is up to the writer to arrange the story's dialogue and effects in such a way as to cause the listener to mentally experience the scene. This means that the writer must not only imagine the scene, but must, in addition, know how the effects are going to be accomplished.

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