

## **Betwixt Hollywood and Pulp Horror: A Cultural History of *The Witch's Tale***

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This paper provides a cultural historical account of *The Witch's Tale* (1931-38), a U.S. radio program that emphasized the horror genre. It was a half-hour, weekly anthology program that debuted on WOR New York in 1931 and was syndicated by the Mutual Broadcasting System network from 1934 to 38. *The Witch's Tale* was one of the first U.S. horror radio programs. As Richard Hand notes, it innovated the framing host in horror radio, which influenced other radio programs as well as horror comics and television programs. Creator Alonzo Dean Cole wrote the plays and directed their broadcast. *The Witch's Tale*, and horror radio in general, have received scant critical attention. Recovering the program's cultural history will illuminate its unique characteristics and provide insights into one of the twentieth century's most resilient genres across a variety of popular media.

The program's heterogeneous content is suggestive of horror's intermediality in the 1930s and afterward. Its narratives bridge the older, Gothic style of popular horror and the more modern. *The Witch's Tale* not only bridged generic changes but also other media. The cultural historical significance of *The Witch's Tale* lies in uncovering its intermediality. The programs' intermedia and intertexts—popular Hollywood horror pictures and horror pulp magazines—are imperative critical contexts for understanding its resonances in the 1930s. This paper situates *The Witch's Tale* amongst its intermedia cohorts and explores the interactions among them in order to probe the particularities of the program and better understand the permutations of the horror genre. These contexts will inform a critical analysis of the program's narratives and use of the medium to assess the interaction of content and form.

### Horror Pictures

Hollywood film was certainly an influential “intermedium” for most other media in the 1930s, especially radio. As Michelle Hilmes argues, Hollywood provided programs and talent to radio. These intermedial interactions were particularly important for *The Witch's Tale*. While the program did not employ Hollywood talent, or directly translate horror films, the latter likely influenced *The Witch's Tale*. The subjects of Universal Pictures' horror films of the 1930s, especially *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Werewolf of London* (1935), were echoed in the program's plays. *The Witch's Tale* also adapted Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1931, and broadcast plays dealing with vampirism and lycanthropy. As the most prestigious and publicly scrutinized mass medium, Hollywood's success with horror indicated large audiences for and public tolerance of mass-mediated horror. Hollywood also influenced *The Witch's Tale* through its Gothic narratives and representational realism. While the program also featured modern horror much of its drama was Gothic. Hollywood's earlier development and heightened refinement of representational realism was an important influence on *The Witch's Tale*. Hollywood's realism set the bar for radio drama through seamless narration and strong continuity. Its horror pictures also raised expectations for fantasy realism through deft special effects. Hollywood horror's realism registers in *The Witch's Tale* through strong narrative and evocative use of sound effects.

### Horror Pulps

The American pulp magazines were successors to the nineteenth-century dime novels; both were aimed at and largely read by working-class readers. Lee Server claims that many popular genres—science fiction, horror, private eye, Western and superhero—originated in the pulps. Pulps were certainly a constitutive intermedium for radio early on. *The Shadow* grew out of *Street & Smith's Detective Story Magazine Hour* in the 1920s; the latter program consisted of readings from Street & Smith's weekly pulp magazine. The horror pulps were a small part of the pulp's large corpus of popular, short fiction, but were influential on *The Witch's Tale*. *Weird Tales* (1923-54) was the most influential horror pulp, and the longest running. The magazine's early stories tended toward the Gothic, but also featured a mix of classic horror and original stories that carried on and innovated upon the classics. This was likewise the case with *The Witch's Tale*, although *Weird Tales* had a great deal more expressive freedom; it was not hampered by the norms and regulations governing radio. Supernatural and weird subjects were mainstays of *Weird Tales* and faintly echoed in *The Witch's Tale*. In addition to their use and reworking of classic horror and generic ties, *Weird Tales* and *The Witch's Tale* likely shared audiences. Cole reworked a radio play, "The Spirits of the Lake" (1/2/33) for the November 1941 issue of *Weird Tales*.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, while a great deal of the pulps and radio were serials, horror pulps and radio used an anthology format, which was conducive to heterogeneity in subject, setting and character (much of TV horror followed suit).

#### Aural Realism & Uncanny Stories

Hollywood horror pictures and horror pulps influenced *The Witch's Tale's* formal characteristics and content. The program sought to create a mood or atmosphere that complemented its content through sound effects and music. Sound effects were used to create an aural realism that enhanced the fantastic and supernatural plays' verisimilitude. Aural realism was also used as a means of heightening the uncanny subjects dramatized. Finally, *The Witch's Tale* used sound effects and music expressively, to elicit and cue affect. Aural realism also enhanced the program's content, which tapped the Gothic, supernatural and weird subgenres of horror. *The Witch's Tale's* content straddled classic and modern horror, and was similar to but distinct from its intermedia. Its Gothic plays and moderate representations were more akin to Hollywood than the pulps. However, *The Witch's Tale* was closer to the pulps in its conscription of the imagination in storytelling.

*The Witch's Tale* plowed the same supernatural ground as Hollywood and the pulps, crafting cultural narratives that likely resonated with overlapping audiences. Understanding the program and the genre's appeal in the 1930s necessitates situating them in the context of contemporary crises—the Great Depression, the wake of World War I and the onset of World War II. The article therefore also assays *The Witch's Tale* symptomatically, reading its narratives as cultural expressions not only of genre and intermedia contexts, but as tapping, dramatizing and crystallizing the terrors of its times.

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