

## The Revival of Radio Drama: A Narratological Analysis of John Dryden's *Pandemic* (2012) and Martin Millien's *COVID39* (2020)

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine Radio Drama as a rich art form with distinctive qualities that could address serious issues and have a far-reaching influence on listeners. The resurgence of Radio Drama can be attributed to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic; however, there are a plethora of outstanding plays that tackle significant subject matters and are worthy of study. The researcher attempts the following questions: Can Radio Drama be considered an art form per se? Can Radio Drama be as influential as stage drama? The researcher compares two radio dramas: John Dryden's *Pandemic* (2012) and Martin Millien's *COVID39* (2020). The first play predicts the future and visualizes the stages that have led up to the outbreak of a deadly pandemic across the world, and the latter tackles the mental, psychological, and socio-political repercussions of COVID-19 after the lapse of 20 years. To provide a theoretical framework for the plays under study, the researcher employs the theory of narratology and draws upon the works of Elke Huwiler who was the first to apply the latter theory to Radio Drama. The researcher proves that both Dryden and Millien through their compelling radio dramas unravel the social and political problems in connection with the pandemic. Dryden, on the one hand, unveils the unscrupulousness and indifference of governmental officials which act as determinants of the pandemic outbreak. On the other hand, Millien unfolds the incessant discriminatory experiences of racism in the United States of America.

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, Radio Drama, Narratology, Acoustic signs

## Introduction

It is the year 2020 during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic when a lockdown was enforced throughout the whole world. People were terrified as everything turned topsy-turvy and they were deprived of the luxury of a daily routine. Ambulances roamed the streets with their blaring sirens, anxious voices of reporters broadcasted the pandemic news 24/7, and screams of a deceased coronavirus-infected patient's family, relatives, and friends were heard. People tried to grapple with that extremely difficult challenge in myriad ways and varied mental and psychological manifestations. Threatened by depression and mental breakdown, people had to find solace in something since going out was not an option. People started to read, watch television, settle down, attend to unfinished household chores, listen to each other, and listen to the radio.

Literature has long been the vehicle of amusement and relief; however, theatres were shut down, cinemas were deserted, and television was continuously broadcasting all pandemic-related news. The only alternative to this stalemate status was to transfer all activities from on-site to online in general. Unexpectedly, plays which were due to be performed during the lockdown as tickets were bought and seats were reserved had to be transferred to another medium to mitigate financial losses and help audience survive the global ordeal. Speaking in the same vein, Jeff Lunden remarks that theatres throughout the whole world had to close due to the outbreak of the pandemic and accordingly find other media to display their work of art. He adds that "Some have made archival video of productions available. Some have created Zoom plays. And some ... have returned to an old art form - radio drama, updated for the digital age" ("Theaters Return to an Old Art Form"). Accordingly, Radio Drama came the fore and was one of the invaluable alternatives to the cast aside forms of art.

The paper comprises two parts. The first part relates a brief overview of the historical background of Radio Drama, the elements and auditory signs of this art form, as well as the narratological methodology which sets the theoretical framework of the analysis. As to the second part, it analyzes the plays under study which were chosen in relation to the outbreak of a/the pandemic. The first radio drama is John Dryden's trilogy *Pandemic* (2012) in which he predicts the future and envisions what happened in 2020 and the second radio drama is Martin Millien's *COVID39* (2020) which examines the psychological repercussion of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic after

twenty years. However, both Dryden and Millien apparently employ the pandemic as a subject matter to provoke listeners to reflect on the socio-political incessant problems respectively.

### **History of Radio Drama**

In spite of the fact that the Italian Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) is known to be the inventor of radio, it is contended that the invention of radio has been the outcome of the work of scientists from different countries. The theories of James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1979), a physicist from Scotland were developed by the physicist Heinrich Hertz (1857-1994) from Germany (Hand and Traynor 5). Nevertheless, it was Marconi who developed the work of both Maxwell and Hertz and invented the system of wireless technology and commercially employed it (Klooster 161). As a result, radio was first known as ‘wireless telegraphy’ and ‘wireless’ for short. In 1906, the term ‘radio’ was then introduced in an international conference that was convened in Berlin (Coe 16). However, the term ‘wireless’ is used in Britain up to the present time.

The development of radio from wireless telegraphy to voice transmission was the main initiator of radio broadcasting whose precursors were David Sarnoff (1891–1971) and Frank Conrad (1874–1941). Sarnoff who worked for the American Marconi Company was the first to forward the radio as a recreational tool in 1916 as he declared: “I have in mind a plan of development which would make radio a household utility in the same sense as a piano or phonograph. The idea is to bring music into the home by wireless” (Qtd. in Maltin 2). Initially originated for military communication, voice transmission was further developed by Frank Conrad who worked for Westinghouse Electric Manufacturing (WEM) Company. Broadcasting oral communication and music emerged and a radio station was established by WEM company. (Coe 26) KDKA was the first radio station to operate in the USA in 1920 (Hand and Traynor 7). It was thus the first manifestation of radio broadcasting.

On the other hand, radio broadcasting debuted in the United Kingdom in 1922 through the British Broadcasting Company. The first radio station was established in Chelmsford whose aim was to broadcast on a global scale. More transmission companies emerged across the country and merged to form the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1925 which was then known as the British Broadcasting Commission (Burns 439). This commission was “a communications organization to be entrusted with the national interest: With a

monopoly of broadcasting ...it was envisaged that the Commission would be given the greatest freedom for informing, entertaining and educating the nations populace by radio” (Burns 439). The BBC was thus established with the aim of catering for the needs of the people and is reckoned “The first working example of public service broadcasting” (Barnard 29). It remains the most popular radio broadcasting company.

The medium was established and therefore an art form evolved: Radio Drama. Rudolf Arnheim support the premise that Radio Drama must be perceived as an art form per se which narrates a story by incorporating acoustic elements (16). Hans Flesch advocates the notion of radio drama as an independent art form. Radio drama is “a specifically radiophonic art form, one that takes into account those aspects of radio broadcast that make it unique from these other artistic media” (Qtd in Gilfillan xxi). Radio Drama is mainly called ‘radio pieces’ (Huwiler, “Radio Drama Adaptations” 130). Nevertheless, “These radio pieces are nowadays mostly not called radio drama or Hörspiel [listening play] but Soundscapes or Audio Art, although at the beginning of the development of radio art, there was no such clear division” (Huwiler, “Radio Drama Adaptations” 130). The researcher uses the term ‘radio drama’ throughout the paper.

The first manifestation of Radio Drama was reading children books on air. To address the needs of a burgeoning audience, radio stations had to find appealing content to deliver. Asa Biggs describes the first form of Radio Drama as “‘Children’s Hour’ programmes” which “were not only very good, but introduced genuinely new radio forms and developed new radio techniques” (262). Radio Drama developed during the 1920s and derived its broadcasting material basically from theatrical productions. In New York, Eugene Walter’s *The Wolf* was the first drama to be broadcasted via a radio station in 1922. It is declared “the first ‘on air’ drama” by broadcast historian Howard Blue. (1) Whereas in the United Kingdom, the first radio play was Richard Hughes’ *A Comedy of Danger* which was produced by the BBC in 1924 (Hand and Traynor 16). Radio Drama has developed from airing bedtime stories to plays.

From its nomenclature, radio drama reveals the strong affinity “between radio art and literary drama” as Huwiler expounds (“Radio Drama Adaptations” 130). Ever since its inception, Radio Drama has been the direct outcome of theatre. The radio drama-theatre relationship dates back to the Second World War when radio was a replacement to going to the theatre (Hand and Traynor

33). Radio heavily relies on adaptations of literary pieces of art. Radio Drama continued to prosper over the years. It was the 1950s that witnessed the US Radio Drama 'Golden Age,' but it did not last and was surpassed by television. In contrast, the British Radio Drama was endorsed by the BBC since it was operated by the government to avoid the mayhem resulting from many rival networks in the United States in America. "Although the BBC would develop its own television broadcasting after the Second World War, it did so while maintaining a commitment to radio" (Hand and Traynor 20). Hence, Radio Drama evolved from being a recreational tool of communication to a socio-cultural medium. "Radio was no longer isolated for functional one-to-one communication, nor was it for private recreational use..." as Noone remarks (15). He expounds: "It was now an important cultural medium that had taken its place in the family home, taking the national voice to a local level, into the living room of the people. It played an important social and cultural role on both national and local levels. A new form of community was born worldwide" (Noone 15). Radio Drama bloomed and enchanted people across the countries.

Apparently, Coronavirus pandemic has been a fundamental reason for the revival of Radio Drama. New channels of the latter art emerged as a replacement to live stage performances, namely, the Quarantine Theatre Radio and the Corona Radio Theatre, the Covid Island Drama episodes, and other other radio dramas (Hand and Traynor 33). In addition to the new pandemic-related theatres, many festivals have been held in 2020, such as the Lockdown Theatre Festival and the UK Radio Drama Festival (Hand and Traynor 33).

Ironically enough, radio is underrated and seems to have been surpassed by other gadgets; however, it has its own appeal as Hand and Traynor remark that "... its real strength is an ability to infiltrate the mind, to unleash the most powerful dramatic weapon of all: the imagination of the listener" (33). Likewise, Corwin, a renowned writer and producer of US Radio Drama, eloquently acclaims Radio Drama:

First, radio is a stage with a bare set. This is not a deprivation, but an advantage, for a bare proscenium should be as inviting to a radio playwright or director as a bare wall is to a muralist, as a silent organ was to Bach. Not to be grand about it, but the features and dimensions of a place, of a room, of a landscape, are not, in a good radio script, described in so many words. They are perceived by

characters and brought out by speech, sound, by allusion. Obliquely. (Qtd. in Hand and Taynor 57)

Accordingly, Radio Drama must stand on par with other narrative forms which include but not limited to theatre and film.

## Elements of Radio Drama

Radio drama comprises four elements: the script, the production, the broadcast and the listener. Nevertheless, the listener is pivotal. "The writer and the production team provide stimuli, but the conversion of that information into drama is entirely dependent on the imagination of the listener" (Hand and Traynor 33). Speaking in the same vein, Donald McWhinnie, a BBC radio director, in his book *The Art of Radio*, expounds that a listener has to "translate the sound-pattern he hears into his own mental language; he must apply his imagination to it and transform it" (25). Radio Drama is the drama of imagination as listeners visualize the play in myriad ways as he/she unleashes his/her imagination. It is reminiscent of bedtime stories as Gray remarks: "Like a bedtime story, it whispers in our ear. Without visual distractions, the smallest subtleties of the voice become apparent and seize the imagination; a snatch of song or the rustle of leaves takes on a significance impossible in the theatre or on film" (51) He adds: "As soon as we hear the word in a radio play, we are close to the experience it signifies; in fact, the sound is literally inside us" (51). As a result, the listener's imagination is of paramount importance.

'Anamnesis' is the formal description of the imagination as Augoyard and Torgue deftly remark. They expound that 'anamnesis' is "An effect of reminiscence in which a past situation or atmosphere is brought back to the listener's consciousness, provoked by a particular signal or sonic context. Anamnesis, a semiotic effect, is the often involuntary revival of memory caused by listening and the evocative power of sounds" (21). Hearing sounds which include but not limited to human voices, songs, and poems recall different feelings and memories: "The inherent power of the acoustic and the aural was made even more profound with the invention of a piece of technology that seemed quite miraculous to many in the generation that saw its inauguration . . . radio" (Augoyard and Torgue 21). Radio drama's vivid sounds ignite listeners' imagination.

## Narratology and Radio Drama

Narratology is the lens through which Radio Drama can be seen and scrutinized. Bartosz Lutostanski in “A Narratology of Radio Drama: Voice, Perspective, Space” elucidates that “the fact that narratology is a *semiotic* discipline legitimizes a narratological examination of radio drama” (117). Radio Drama primarily relies on a system of signs both verbal and nonverbal. Verbal sign system is manifested through language and nonverbal ones through “voice, music, noise, silence, fading, cutting, mixing, the (stereophonic) positioning of the signals, electro-acoustic manipulation, and original sound (actuality)” as Huwiler expounds (“Storytelling by Sound” 51). Radio Drama is basically an audionarrative that is described as a “storytelling genre” (Crook 3). It is defined as “the acoustical art form that emerged from the development of the radio medium and in which stories are told or presented by means of electro-acoustically recorded and distributed sound material” (Huwiler, “Storytelling by Sound” 46). It relates a story by employing acoustic tools. “This narrative structure of radio drama acquires meaning gradually, with every individual event...can be comprehended only from the perspective of events already presented. Radio drama can therefore be conceived as narrative par excellence” (Lutostanski 119).

Narratology is originally a French word ‘narratologie’ coined by Tzvetan Todorov in his book *Grammaire du “De’came’ron”* in 1969 who propounded the science of narrative, namely “Narratology” (Qtd in Meister, “Narratology”). Narratology is defined in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* as “a humanities discipline dedicated to the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation” (Meister, “Narratology”). It could be traced back to Aristotle who tackled the difference between ‘mimesis and ‘diegesis’ which are imitation and narration respectively (Manfred, *Narratology* 18). Chatman in his article “What Can We Learn from Contextualist Narratology” expounds that mimetic narratives include plays and films, whereas diegetic narratives comprise novels, short stories, and epic narratives (310). Nevertheless, Brian Richardson argues that “drama, like the novel, is and always has been a mixture of mimetic and diegetic representation, and that any theory of narration that ignores stage narration may be considered needlessly limited, if not seriously impoverished” (193). Moreover, a clear line of demarcation is drawn between mimetic and diegetic narrativity by Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer:

Mimetic narrativity could be defined as the representation of a temporal and/or causal sequence of events, with the degree of narrativity hinging upon the degree of eventfulness. Diegetic narrativity, on the other hand, refers to verbal, as opposed to visual or performative, transmission of narrative content, to the representation of a speech act of telling a story by an agent called a narrator. (338)

Therefore, the relationship between drama and narrativity has been established by narratological theorists, such as Brian Richardson, Manfred Jahn, Roy Sommer, Monika Fludernik, and Ansgar Nünning.

H. Porter Abbott in "Defining Narrative" defines narrative as "the representation of an event or a series of events" (13). However, a distinction between 'narrative' and narrativity' is drawn by Ryan who purports that a narrative is a "semiotic object" whereas "narrativity" entails being able to inspire a narrative response" ("Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology" 12). Speaking in the same vein, Prince in *A Dictionary of Narratology* elucidates that narrativity is "the set of properties characterizing narrative and distinguishing it from nonnarrative" (65). Since its inception in the mid-sixties and its development through the eighties, narratologists focused on defining general narrative structures as "the set of general statements on narrative genres, on the systematics of narrating (telling a story) and on the structure of plot" (Ryan & von Alphen 110). More importantly, narratology developed into a theory (Prince, "Surveying Narratology" 1), "analytical procedure" (Meister "Narratology") and a "discipline" (Fludernik and Margolin 149). Nevertheless, narratology is best marked out as a discipline which entails both theoretical and analytical approaches.

Narratology is classified into postclassical narratology and structuralist narratology. (Huwiler, "Radio Drama Adaptations" 130). Postclassical narratology examines "the relations between narrative structure, its verbal, visual or more broadly semiotic realization, and the contexts in which it is produced and interpreted" (Herman, *Narratologies* 9). It is a method of analysis that is not limited to adaptation of literary texts as structuralist narratology, but "can be applied to a variety of areas, since people tell and listen to stories in many forms and contexts: From the description of lived events in the form of everyday accounts, to witness testimonies and accounts of personal injury, to the reception of fairy tales, short stories, novels, biographies, history books,



comics and films” (Nünning Qtd. in Huwiler, “Radio Drama Adaptations” 131). Speaking in the same vein, Meister expounds that “its [narratology] concepts and models are widely used as heuristic tools, and narratological theorems play a central role in the exploration and modeling of our ability to produce and process narratives in a multitude of forms, media, contexts, and communicative practices” (“Narratology”). Different types of narratology are therefore employed to analyze narratives.

The nineties marked a change in narratology from a “concern for a systematicity and logical coherence” to “a more pragmatically oriented theory of narrative” (Prince, “Surveying Narratology”<sup>2</sup>). Accordingly, the notion of ‘narratologies’ was advanced and comprises “contextualist narratology,” “cognitive narratology,” “transgeneric approaches” and intermedial approaches” (Chatman, “What We Can Learn from Contextualist Narratology” 310-311). Context is of optimum importance for narratology theorists who overrate context rather than structural elements of the subject being narrated. Chatman explains the term ‘contextualised narratology’ as it “... relates the phenomena encountered in narrative to specific cultural, historical, thematic, and ideological contexts. This extends the focus from purely structural aspects to issues of narrated content” (“What We Can Learn from Contextualist Narratology” 311). On the other hand, theorists of cognitive narratology acclaim and pinpoint the mental and emotional understanding of narratives as Fludernik expounds (223). She adds a further insight into this approach saying that it “is not restricted to literary narratives: “natural” everyday and oral narratives are considered to represent an underlying anthropological competence in its original form” (224). Moreover, the transgeneric and intermedial approaches “explore the relevance of narratological concepts for the study of genres and media outside the traditional object domain of text-based literary narrative” (Meister “Narratology”). They go beyond the conventional study of adapted literary narratives to focus on other genres and media forms. Hence, narratology has greatly progressed over the nineties.

Narratological analysis fundamentally relies on Radio Drama auditory signs which include “words, sounds, music and silence” as Hand and Traynor expound (40). In spite of the fact that words are the most important communicative factor, sounds and music play a complimentary role. Words, in Radio Drama, can be categorized as “theatrical,” “textual,” and “amanation” which could be explained as a dialogue, narration or unclear sound respectively

(Hand and Traynor 40). Moreover, spoken words “need to carry extra freight” as Andrew Crisell elucidates because more details should be added in radio drama to render the picture clear (146). From a semiotic vantage point, Crisell perceives words as ‘primary signifiers’ (146) since they have to delineate a detailed picture that communicates meaning which is pinned down as a ‘transcodification’ process by Crisell (146). This process is further explained by McWhinnie:

I would defy anyone to judge by ear alone whether the feet in question are crossing the street or walking up the side of a house, or even to be quite sure that they are feet at all – they might, for example, be the sound of a methodical workman stacking bricks into heaps. ‘Fade in the sound of Euston Station’: the picture is clear enough to writer and producer, but to the listener it might well be Beachy Head during a storm; it certainly will not be Euston Station unless someone says so. (80)

Sound is another important element of Radio Drama which consists of “sound effects (sfx), acoustics, and perspective” (Hand and Traynor 44). Sound effects have a significant added value to Radio Drama since they evoke one’s imagination and stand in contrast to the dialogue. They are sounds that transcribe the picture the writer attempts to draw. Rosemary Horstmann contends that sound effects “should be used with discretion to create atmosphere rather than as a primary vehicle of information” (41). The second sub-element of sound is ‘acoustics’ which is defined in the Encyclopedia Britannica as “the science concerned with the production, control, transmission, reception, and effects of sound. The term is derived from the Greek *akoustos*, meaning ‘heard’” (“Acoustics”). It is further defined as “the nature of the space in which the drama occurs: the natural ambience of environment” (Hand and Traynor 44). Besides ‘sound effects’ and ‘acoustics’, ‘perspective’ is a principal constituent of sound. It describes the space between characters in radio drama; how far or near they are (Hand and Traynor 44). Consequently, all the sub-elements of sound are interrelated and complement each other.

Moreover, ‘music’ plays a pivotal role in Radio Drama as Shingler and Wieringa remark that “radio is a highly appropriate vehicle for hearing music, because we do not need images to make sense of it: our relationship with it is direct and personal (61). They elucidate that “As a dramatic device, it has

particular strength because of its emotional power. Music performs many functions in radio drama, which have been articulated by a succession of radio drama producers and theoreticians” (Shingler and Wieringa 61). In addition, Crisell elaborates on the functionality of music in Radio Drama, and remarks that it is employed as a linking element within the narrative (51-52). In Radio Drama, music is played when the curtain falls to announce the end of a scene and the beginning of another, so it acts as a connecting and organizational tool. Moreover, music portrays the mood of the play's character and summons certain feelings and emotions. Moreover, music functions “as a stylized sound effect” (Crisell 52), in other words, it could be more effective than sound effects. In addition, it has “an indexical function” (Crisell 52) which is actual music heard by people in real settings.

### **John Dryden's *Pandemic* (2012)**

John Dryden is a British writer, radio producer-cum-director, and a dramatist. He wrote and produced *Pandemic* which was awarded the Writer's Guild Award for Best Radio Drama (Shelly). *Pandemic* is a trilogy set in the past, present and future about a universal outbreak of a virus. It consists of three parts, and each part is 43-minute long. It was broadcasted by BBC Radio 4 on March 26-28, 2012 (Shelly). Dryden declares that Radio Drama is “the theatre of the mind” (Shelly). He elaborates saying that “Creating images in the listeners' heads is what radio drama is all about. The most engaging radio dramas, in my opinion, do this not just with words but by realizing the world of the story through suggestion in words, sound and actions” (Shelly). Dryden has mastered the craft of radio drama and carved himself a distinguished niche in this arena.

Part 1 is titled ‘The Present,’ part 2 ‘The Future,’ and part 3 ‘The Past.’ An illogical chronological order of parts is displayed by Dryden. A normal temporal sequence should have been past, present, and future. However, Dryden commences his Radio drama with the part labelled ‘The Present’ then moves on to talk about ‘The Future’ and ends his trilogy with ‘The Past.’ In Part 1 ‘The Present,’ the main character is Dr. Jan Roldano, a microbiologist and advisor to the World Health Organization on contagious diseases, who was invited as a keynote speaker for a conference in Bangkok, Thailand. He was invited to the “Control Centre” to witness how they manage and control the spread of a bird flu. However, a new strain outbreaks and as a result, he is locked down in

Bangkok. Surprisingly, the play ends on an alarming note since Dr. Jan himself got infected with a new unknown virus while he has been helping the Thai government with the investigations. In Part 2 'The Future,' the action takes place five years after outbreak of a universal pandemic and revolves around Diane Harper, a British civil servant, who investigates the suicide of Dr. Robert Gilbert, a scientist affiliated to the government, and the disappearance of Amit Puri, the journalist who was in connection with the latter. Since she lost her daughter to the pandemic, Diane went on a persevering search for the reasons behind the global pandemic. However, the last part titled 'The Past' sketches a world of espionage and conspiracy in relation to the environmental ponders. It debuts with a conference about climate change in Copenhagen where Victor Klemant, a Swedish economist and environmental scientist gives a talk which is deceptively praised by Anna to defame and drag him into a scandal. This part ends with a scene from Part 1 where Anna is found in Thailand and seemingly working on another operation. Dryden deliberately reshuffles the parts in an attempt to grab the listener's attention to the real story behind the pandemic. The researcher analyzes part 1 and refer to the other parts in relation to the latter.

Space in Radio Drama has long been overlooked (Lutostanski 121). Nevertheless, narrative theorists, David Herman and H. Porter Abbott, have altered this predetermined disregard to space (Herman, *Story Logic* 265). Accordingly, narrative theorist Melba Cuddy-Keane coined new terminology to be aligned with radio drama, such as "*soundmark* instead of landmark for reference object and *soundscape* instead of landscape or region for concrete space of action" (385). In Dryden's *Pandemic*, spatiotemporal aspect is fathomed through sound. Dryden employs authentic and electro-acoustically manipulated noises to render the action authentic. Listeners can discern different places through sound. They can hear the hustle and bustle of a big city when the characters are standing or walking down a street. Moreover, the peeping sound of a remote control that opens the car and the sound that accompanies the car opening reflect that it is our present time and that Sumi drives a modern car. In addition, they can hear the beeping sound of ventilators in hospital wards or intensive care units. Thus, the hospital can be perceived as the principal "soundscape" since the characters will keep going in and out of it and the ventilators and other medical machines are reckoned 'soundmarks.' In addition, the silence and loud echo of a microphone in a lecture hall where a

doctor delivers a lecture and the clapping of attendees can be heard to identify the university setting. Another relaxing scene at a hotel is reflected through the sounds of people jumping into a swimming pool as water splashes. "In radio drama, the different ambient properties of various environments (acoustics) can be recreated and used very effectively to communicate spatial dimension" (Hand and Taynor 47). 'Soundscape' and 'soundmark' are deftly employed by Dryden to replace stage directions and as a result all spaces can be easily visualized by listeners.

The main soundscape is the hospital which is reckoned the fundamental setting of the play. Dr. Jan is invited to visit the hospital to confirm that the Minister of Public Health in Thailand is competently handling the outbreak of the bird flu pandemic. He is then summoned to the hospital again after delivering his lecture at the university to examine a new patient who suffers from another emergent unknown virus that has hit the country and news reports similar cases throughout the world. Other places are not as significant as the hospital, for example the university and the hotel. The hospital is the main setting in the play as shown in the following different occasions:

**SUMI**

Sorry... Er... Would you like to see the hospital?

**DR AHMAI**

I'm honored you have found time in your busy schedule to visit our hospital.

**LAKSAN**

I understand you visited the control centre at the hospital this afternoon.

**JAN**

I'll ask Sumi to take me back to the hospital. (Part 1, 2012)

Since auditory signs are of pivotal importance in Radio Drama, a thorough analysis of each sign is conducted. Words come to the fore as they are channels of communication between the listener and the narrator. In addition, words carry ideas which immediately capture the attention of listeners. It is contended that "Like all great drama, the best radio drama isn't so much about words as ideas. For it to engage the audience it needs a great premise, interesting, well-defined characters with clear needs and wants, reversals and conflict at the heart of every scene" (Shelly). Dryden's play revolves around the story of a doctor who travels to Bangkok to give a lecture in a Thai university.

He is also invited to the “Control Centre” to witness the procedures carried out by the Ministry of Health to control the outbreak of a bird flu.

**DR AHMAI**

(Director of public health, responsible for surveillance and outbreak control)

This outbreak we are experiencing... We are familiar with the viral strain.

It's an H5N...

**JAN**

Have you instituted an exclusion zone?

**DR AHMAI**

No, no. Only one small area is affected. And we have a vaccine. So a decision was taken with the Minister of Public Health to control this by local intervention...

**DR AHMAI (CONT'D)**

This is our virology laboratory facility... (Part 1, 2012)

Dryden makes deft use of scientific terminology which renders the story authentic. The play teems with words like “strain,” “viral,” “immunofluorescence,” “nucleotide,” “antigenic drift,” “respiratory and multiorgan failure,” “pathology,” “infection control,” “virologist,” “infectious diseases,” “viral haemorrhagic fever,” and “ecchymoses.” Verbal sign system sets the tone of the play. The method of narrating the story in Radio Drama is different from other forms as it primarily relies on words. Huwiler hails the importance of words in Radio Drama: “It is indeed difficult to come up with an alternative to the telling and the showing mode when it comes to audio art, as it combines telling and showing: on the one hand, more often than not, narrators are applied in a radio piece, telling us the story in words” (132). Similarly, Ryan declares that “It seems clear that of all semiotic codes language is the best suited to storytelling” (*Narrative Across Media* 10). Radio dramatists heavily rely on words to forward their message and tell their stories. Dryden has carefully selected medical terms to render the story real.

The narrative in Dryden's radio drama *Pandemic* is maintained through dialogues. Listeners can follow the line of action through well scribbled dialogues. There is no narrator in Dryden's *Pandemic*; however, discourse replaces conventional narrative. Adding a further insight, Manfred Jahn defines narration as “the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the

needs and enlists the co-operation of its audience; *focalization* is the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter” (“Focalization” 94). He adds that since ‘focalization’ is more in line with sight and vision ‘perspectival filter’ is related to hearing as listeners can formulate a certain point of view through voices heard (“Focalization” 94). Through dialogues, Dryden sketches an epitome of the coronavirus pandemic which appallingly hit the entire world in 2020. Not only does Dryden draw a similar picture of what happened in 2020 in part 1 of his trilogy, but he also identifies the place of the virus outbreak in Asia in part 2 through a dialogue between Diane and Father John as follows:

**DIANE**

The virus came... from here.

**FATHER JOHN**

What are you talking about? It started in Asia.

**DIANE**

Yeah... It was made in a laboratory in the UK... (Part 2, 2012)

More appallingly though, he accuses the government of deceiving the people and hiding facts as Father John declares: “Gosh, and all this time the government was lying to us (Part 2, 2012). Thus, dialogues “provide descriptive elements, which, alongside the sound effects and evocative music, work with the imagination to create ‘spatial and temporal flexibility’ (Shingler and Wieringa 88). In Dryden’s radio drama, dialogues replace the narrative agent.

Another sign system that can produce narrative meaning in Radio Drama is ‘voice’ which stands on par with ‘words.’ Huwiler elaborates:

The voice as a sign system generating meaning in its own right covers the tone of the voice, which also includes the idiolect of a character (individual linguistic choices and idiosyncrasies), as well as the way of pronouncing (accents, dialects) and the intonation (the structure of emphasizing words or so-called melodies within the uttered sentences). (“Radio Drama Adaptations” 133)

Each character has a distinctive voice intonation that unravels its social, psychological, and mental aspect. The sign system of a voice functions “as an indication of the attributes of a speaking person, such as gender, age and even social or regional background. But it may also indicate a subjective perception

or memory of a character's speech rather than representing the 'actual' speech of the character" (Huwiler, "Radio Drama Adaptations" 134). Listeners of Radio Drama can easily identify myriad aspects of each character through the voice.

Voice plays a significant role at both levels: story and discourse, in other words, what is said and how it is said. Hearing Dr. Jan Roldanus makes a listener feel that he is a man in his forties. His intonation sketches a humble, modest, and friendly man. At the level of discourse, he is a doctor who is not sophisticated and has no political agenda as he declares: "Yeah... well, I'm not really here in an official capacity. Just to speak at the conference..." (Part 1, 2012). He is a passionate doctor who loves his work to the extent that Dr. Kanya remarks: "Hmmm... I think you put your work before your family. One day you will regret it..." (Part 1, 2012). Another example is Sumi, the government representative, who is assigned to drive Dr. Roldanus and attend to his needs during his visit. He has an accent and his intonation unravels an obedient employee who blindly follows instructions and carries out orders. Likewise, Dr. Ahmai sounds like a follower who keeps up appearances and pretends that everything is under control. Another character that sounds the same is Dr. Padit Laksan, the Minister of Public Health, who elusively declares that "Everything is more than under control. Thailand is a safe country to come to, to enjoy yourself, to eat our food. There are no problems, not even with chickens..." (Part 1, 2012). On the contrary, Kanya, the doctor-to-be, has no accent "speaks English with barely a trace of an accent" (Part 1, 2012). She sounds young, smart, strong, confident, and not a follower. She has high self-esteem and sounds extremely confident. She contradicts Dr. Jan: "Surely the most dangerous viruses -are those that create no noticeable symptoms. If there are no symptoms, how can we tell who is infected?" (Part 1, 2012). Voice is an important acoustic element employed by narratologists to interpret radio drama.

Moreover, Dryden uses 'silence' as a distinctive sign system in *Pandemic*. He believes in the assertion propounded by R. Murray Schafer: "If we have a hope of improving the acoustic design of the world, it will be realisable only after the recovery of silence as a positive state in our lives" (259). Schafer thus perceives silence from a positive perspective and shuns away its negative connotations. In Radio Drama, McWhinnie asserts that "it is the contextualization of silence which makes it positive" (88). He adds that "silence, as a calculated device, is one of the most potent imaginative stimuli;



prepared for correctly, broken at the right moment, in the right context, it can be more expressive than words; it can echo with expectancy, atmosphere, suspense, emotional overtones, visual subtleties" (88). Dryden uses silence to reflect discomfort at some scenes. Dr. Jan feels uncomfortable when Sumi informs him that he has to go to the Control Centre to report that they are in full control of the bird flu outbreak.

**SUMI**

You probably heard about the small trouble we had with the bird flu... As advisor to the WHO we thought you would be interested to see how well we handle such...

**JAN**

Yeah... well, I'm not really here in an official capacity. Just to speak at the conference...

**SUMI**

Yes... They drive in silence. But Sumi is getting increasingly anxious.

Actually doctor, the Minister is very keen for you to see our control centre. So you can report back that we are handling everything well.

**JAN**

Sure. No problem. Maybe, if there's time, after the conference...  
Another uncomfortable **silence**. (Part 1, 2012).

Norman Corwin expounds different types of silences and pins them down as "dread silences and spooky silences and heavy silences and restful silences. There's a whole vocabulary of silences alone" (Qtd. in Hand and Taynor 57). Silences clarify the mental and psychological status of characters. Silence also acts as a pause between scenes. Dryden employs silence to move from one scene to the other. Silence before embarking on a new scene provides listeners with a pause to cognitively connect the actions of the story. Silence in the scene below clarifies the debate that has started by Kanya against Dr. Jan during his lecture. She refutes one of his theories and the chairperson steps in to ease the air and stop Kanya from embarrassing the doctor.

**Silence.** The Chairperson steps in.

**CHAIRPERSON**

But if there are no symptoms, what's the problem? Okay, next question please...

**JAN**

No let her explain. Kanya, isn't it? We met. (Part 1, 2012)

Through the skillful use of verbal and non-verbal sign systems, Dryden has managed to forward his message and warn people not only against potential pandemics, but also against the socio-political policies in relation to the environmental crises that would eventually lead up to universal disasters. Therefore, Josh Miller, a lecturer in the Sociology Department voices out his concern and elaborates on the inaptitude of politicians who do nothing but make money.

**JOSH**

Nothing's happening, Richard. That's the whole point. For the last fifty years people have been protesting about the state of our planet... G7, G8, protocols, accords - Does any of it make any difference? No. It's just businessmen and politicians flying around in planes. They pay lip service, but in their hearts - and in their wallets - they have no intention of cutting anything at all and in the meantime... in the meantime... (Part 3, 2012)

In a retaliation act, activists defame or kidnap scientists who are not true avid supporters of the Earth.

**JOSH**

We are living on borrowed time. The delicate balance has shifted. People - too many people - are suffocating our planet. Our friend, Dr. Kemant... and others like him, have hijacked the arguments to enrich themselves. They have given politicians an excuse to do nothing. But we are running out of time. Climate change, tsunamis, droughts, mass movement of people... worse is to come. Should we just sit back and allow our planet to die? (Part 3, 2012)

Therefore, Dryden did not pursue with a logical sequence of past, present, and future in his riveting Radio drama. In contrast, he has intentionally arranged his trilogy to start with the present, followed by the future, and ends by the past. Part 1 (The Present) ends on an alarming note where Dr. Jan gets infected with an unknown virus and declares "Oh God. I'm dead... aren't I?" (Part 1, 2012). Whereas, part 2 (The Future) ends on the arrest of Diane Harper who has been looking for the truth "Diane is thrown into the van. The door is shut. The siren comes on. It drives away" (Part 2, 2012). As to part 3 (The Past), it ends with a similar scene extracted from Part 1 where Anna declares with a hint of whine in

her voice: "Don't they know it's the end of the world..." (Part 3, 2012). A clear manifestation of prioritizing the present, reflecting on the future, and understanding the past. His award-winning Radio drama *Pandemic* which was written and produced in 2012 predicted the future. It was aired eight years before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic throughout the whole world in 2020. Comparing the events in Dryden's radio drama to the events of the year 2020 reveal many resemblances and tolls a warning bell. Appallingly enough, a similar universal virus hits and lockdowns are enforced. Dryden's radio drama stimulates listeners to reflect and ponder about the reasons that might lead to future pandemics.

### **Martin Millien *COVID39* (2020)**

Martin Millien, on the other hand, has started writing a compelling radio drama entitled *COVID39* on April 2020 after the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. The structure of this unconventional radio drama unfolds into 34 episodes. Each episode is entitled 'chapter,' and lasts from 10 to 18 minutes. Written, produced, and directed by Millien, *COVID39* documents the period of the 2020 lockdown, and examines the mental and psychological status of people after the elapse of 20 years. It is the story of a girl and a boy whose families were quarantined together, accordingly after twenty years, they are bound together and question their relationship. The first chapter commences with the following writer's notes:

This series is intended to be a companion to people experiencing what we are all experiencing on a daily basis but provide some levity and beauty and a sense that none of us are alone via narrative. Something you could listen to after being depressed by your daily news podcast, but abounding with a hope that is hard to see right now. We hope it provides inspiration, hope and a little distraction to our collective chronicles. #covid39 #covid19 #coronavirus #quarantine #rona #quarantinechronicles #covidchronicles #coronachronicles #qibi. (Ch.1, April 2020)

Randi Morgan and Shane Phillips have rescued letters written by their parents during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. In an attempt to recuperate the psychological trauma of their childhood, Randi and Shane delve deep into the past (the year 2020) to reshape their future (the year 2039). Assisting them to overcome their childhood ordeal is psychiatrist Dr. Melissa Estrum. The story revolves around a call (probably through Zoom) between Dr. Estrum, the

psychiatrist and Randi and Shane, who seek professional help to re-examine their relationship by reminiscing about the past. Millien declares before listeners start the audio that “This is a fictional audio drama that points out the humanity of our fateful present and examines the future we are helping to create for our children” (April 2020). Nash, similarly, points out that narratives could be perceived in “the recollection of life events, in historical documents and textbooks, in scientific explanations of data, in political speeches, and in day-to-day conversation” (xi). Thus, Millien projects the repercussions of the 2020 universal outbreak on the coronavirus pandemic in his narrative.

Voice is one of the most significant semiotic codes employed by narratologists to analyze Radio drama. Genette perceives voice as “the subject that carries out or submits to or reports the narrating activity” (Qtd. in Lutostanski 122). Huwiler expounds: “The way the voice is used ... as a means of signification shows how the acoustic elements of a radio play may perform a varying narratological role: voice serves not only to characterize the actants at the level of the story, but as a means of focalization at the level of the discourse” (“Storytelling by Sound” 54). The voice of Dr. Estrum is assertive, appeasing, and candid which shows a confident and professional doctor who attempts to placate Randi and Shane and help them reach a self-reconciliatory status. On the one hand, Melissa initiates the conversation by saying: “Well, I know this is difficult. You are ... both of you are demonstrating a real commitment to growth by even contacting me...Randi has some concerns about moving forward and you Shane want to move forward ...” (2020). Adding more mollifying comments, Melissa remarks that “You have to understand this is as common as the cold. I'm not worried about that” (2020). On the other hand, Randi's voice is shaky and perplexed while she describes her relationship with Shane: “Shane has been a part of me for so long. It's like when you lose a leg... you learn to walk again and eventually run... you come to depend on this prosthetic that makes you whole again, but you catch a glimpse of yourself and realize those aren't my toes” (Chapter 1 April 2020).

Conversely, Shane's voice reveals a rebellious, unsatisfied, and distorted person. He reluctantly endeavors to accept Dr. Melissa's analysis of their cognitive and psychological condition. Melissa believes that “you [Randi's] and Shane's relationship exists because as children your two families were quarantine together during the corona pandemic of the early 20s” (Chapter 1

April 2020). Melissa explicates the period of the 2020 coronavirus and its implications in reference to their complicated unresolved relationship:

Near the beginning once the government was willing to admit how bad things were going to get, the health experts of the time partnered with public media organizations that were primarily funded by their listeners, they came up with a therapy of sorts that they thought would be helpful among all the social disruption they were experiencing; electronic text and audio files journaling their experience during the lockdowns. (Chapter 1 April 2020)

Melissa sketches an authentic picture of the time through her words which reflect the “secret states of mind, the inner world and private vision of the speaker” as McWhinnie point out (57). She elaborates:

The Library of Congress archived all of it. The disconnection from one another was profound. You couldn't see it, but you could hear it and The Echoes of sirens rising and fading but persisting... increasing it started far away and then you knew someone who knew someone and then you knew someone. And then you loved someone. And they had it and you had to feel lucky even then. Millions of people lost their jobs those who kept them didn't know how long they'd have them. Rich and poor the bodies piled up and cold trucks ... the size of shipping containers parked outside of hospitals. And worst of all no one knew how long it would last...There was only tunnel. No light. (Chapter 1 April 2020).

Similarly, Shingler and Wieringa pinpoint the supremacy of spoken word in Radio Drama: “Speech may be the primary code of radio... Without words, radio would be seriously disadvantaged, rendered obscure, ambiguous and virtually meaningless” (51). Adding a further insight into the significance of spoken word in Radio Drama, semiotician Andrew Crisell propounds that the spoken word carries “extra freight” (149) because it should “communicate additional information which would be visible to a cinema or theatre audience” (Qtd in Hand and Traynor 41). He explains that words are “primary signifiers” and maintain the process of “transcodification” (146) which is expounded by Hand and Traynor as follows: “When an object cannot be seen, then it must be heard, and if this sound alone does not communicate, then the function of words is to offer explanation” (42). Therefore, Millien heavily relies on verbal sign to narrate his story.

In addition, non-verbal sign systems, namely noise and music, play an important role in Radio Drama. “Non-verbal codes, such as noise and music, are still integral to the medium. They evoke radio’s moods, emotions, atmospheres and environments. They provide a fuller picture and a richer texture” (Shingler and Wieringa 51). However, this has a little relevance in *COVID39* as the spoken word comes to the fore and occupy the whole audio scene. Listeners can hear very low background music when a character starts reading a letter; however, it does not invoke any feelings because listeners must concentrate to understand the letter which abounds in detailed information. ‘Letters’ can be perceived as the ‘soundmark’ throughout the play. It is what listeners yearn to listen to in each episode. They are letters written by the parents of Randi and Shane 20 years ago during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. There is no ‘soundscape’ yet the letters are of paramount importance to the narrative.

These letters function as a contextualization of real life deftly employed by Millien to document the political, psychological, and social implications of the 2020 pandemic. One letter is read at each episode by either Randi or Shane which unravels the events that occurred back then. These letters are the “sjuzet” or the discourse narrative as Chatman explicates that the elements of a narrative comprises two parts, namely a story and a discourse. He asserts that “the structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discourse*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated” (*Story and Discourse* 19). In other words, the story is what is said and the discourse is how it is said. He states that “the story or fabula is the natural (i.e. linear, chronological) state but discourse or sjuzet is the temporal and spatial reconstruction of that story by the writer (or narrator) (*Story and Discourse* 19). Millien re-establishes the spatio-temporal structure of the story through a thread of letters.

Each letter narrates a significant event in 2020. Millien recounts the outbreak of the pandemic in relation to all socio-political events that took place in the USA. From the first letter, the word “black” saliently struck listeners’ ears.

**SHANE’S FATHER:** (Shane reading the letter)

The coronavirus is infecting and killing **black** Americans at an alarmingly high rate... trips to the grocery store and pharmacy

should only be taken in emergencies. We've been watching the rest of the world suffocate, praying for Italy and praying to not to become Italy and now it feels like it's our turn to choke. The prime minister of Britain is in intensive care. Each day there are more people with masks when we take our walks, even here in Dallas. We politely cross the street half a block away from our neighbors who have become potential carriers... Majority **black** counties are dying at six times the rate of majority white counties. And we are just at the beginning. (Chapter 2, 2020)

From a narratological approach, Millien narrates the story from his own lens. Narratology proposes that "narratives [are] not merely a literary form or medium of expression, but a phenomenological and cognitive mode of self and world knowledge" (Nünning Qtd. in Huwiler, "Radio Drama Adaptations" 131). The word 'black' reiterates throughout the episodes. At the debut of the radio drama episodes, Millien points out that blacks are dying out of the virus at a greater rate than white people. He reiterates the same idea: "Our people are dying at a much greater rate than whites or POC, and so this virus has made us niggers again" (Chapter 15, 2020). In addition, the brutality of the police is pinpointed as such in Mara's letter: "We were poor growing up, but racism had ebbed into the subtlety of sledgehammers instead of the bloodlust tied to nooses. Redlining had refined itself into gerrymandering. But the police remained. Brutal and efficient" (Chapter 9, 2020). Stories of Breonna Taylor who was killed by the cops, Ahmaud Arbery who was shot by a white man (Chapter 34), and George Floyd who was cold-bloodedly killed by a white cop are enlisted (Chapter 34). Marcus writes in his letter which is read by Shane: "Today was George Floyd's memorial. Al Sharpton was there, of course. He beseeched those in earshot, America in this case, to get your knees off our necks...They set bail for the officers, the other three that were there when Floyd died, at \$750,000" (Chapter 34). Not only does *COVID39* tackle the psychological impact of COVID-19, but also it revisits racial discrimination in the United States of America by documenting all outrageous incidents that occurred in concurrent with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Millien has sketched an acoustic panoramic scene of segregation in America in line with the psychological and social ripple of the pandemic. In the last episode of the play, Millien declares that "She's [America] always been a stubborn kind of kid, convinced of her own nobility despite evidence to the contrary" (Chapter 34).

The last words of the play extend a sincere advice to listeners: “Trust yourselves, your family, and that America has not been subtle about her intentions” (Chapter 34). Millien mourns and announces that America is still plagued with segregation.

## Conclusion

Radio drama is an acoustic medium of expression which demonstrates a concoction of mimetic and diegetic representation. It is an independent art form which stands on par with other art forms. As a result, Radio Drama should not be underrated when compared to stage drama since it has acoustic tools and auditory signs which could smoothly forward the dramatist's message. Both Dryden's *Pandemic* and Millien's *COVID39* are seemingly about the outbreak of a/the pandemic; however, they are deftly written radio dramas that pinpoint the socio-political concerns of their writers respectively. Dryden through mimetic narrativity has endeavored to shed light on the corruption and dissimulation of policy-makers and governmental officials in regards to the outbreak of a pandemic. A salient delineation of the causal arrangements of events that have led up to the outbreak of an unknown virus. On the other hand, Millien unravels the continuous manifestations of the deeply instilled racial discrimination in the United States of America through diegetic narrativity which has been rivetingly expounded. From a contextualised narratology standpoint, both writers have moved beyond the 'structural aspects' of radio drama to focus on the 'thematic context.' Through Radio Drama, both Dryden and Millien have motivated listeners to reminisce about the pandemic in relation to their social and political issues. Unlike other forms of art, Radio drama is the least studied and underestimated in spite of its rich acoustic elements and vivid sounds. Therefore, it must be further examined and delved deep into.

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إحياء الدراما الإذاعية: دراسة سردية تحليلية لمسرحية الجائحة (٢٠١٢) لجون درايدن  
ومسرحية كوفيد ٣٩ (٢٠٢٠) لمارتن ميلين

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المستخلص

إن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو دراسة الدراما الإذاعية كشكل فني ثري له صفات مميزة يمكن أن يعالج قضايا هامة وله تأثير واسع النطاق علي المستمعين. إن إنتعاش الدراما الإذاعية يمكن أن ينسب إلي تفشي وباء الكورونا. فعلي الرغم من ذلك، هناك وفرة من المسرحيات الرائعة التي تناقش مواضيع تستحق الدراسة. سنقوم الباحثة بالإجابة علي الأسئلة الآتية: هل يمكن أن تكون الدراما الإذاعية شكل من أشكال الفنون القائم بذاته؟ هل يمكن أن تكون الدراما الإذاعية مؤثرة مثل الدراما المسرحية؟ لذلك فسوف تقوم الباحثة بمقارنة مسرحيتين ألا وهما مسرحية " الجائحة" للكاتب جون درايدن (٢٠١٢) التي تنتبأ بالمستقبل و تتصور المشهد والمراحل المختلفة التي أدت إلي تفشي وباء قاتل في شتي أنحاء العالم ومسرحية "كوفيد٣٩" للكاتب مارتن ميلين التي تناقش التداعيات الذهنية والنفسية والإجتماعية السياسية لكوفيد ١٩ بعد مرور عشرين عاما. وسف تستخدم الباحثة نظرية السرد لتوفير إطار نظري للمسرحيات قيد الدراسة و تستند علي كتابات إيلكي هيولر الذي كان أول من يطبق النظرية السالف ذكرها علي الدراما الإذاعية. تثبت الباحثة إن درايدن وميلين استطاعا من خلال مسرحيتهما الإذاعية الكشف عن المشاكل الإجتماعية والسياسية فيما يتعلق بالجائحة. فدرايدن أثبت أن إنعدام ضمير المسؤولين بالحكومة واللامبالاة هما السبب في تفشي الجائحة وأن ميلين علي الجانب الآخر كشف الستار عن الممارسات العنصرية المستمرة بالولايات المتحدة الأمريكية.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الجائحة، الدراما الإذاعية، السرد، إشارات سمعية