

A ‘star’ of the airwaves: Peter Lorre – ‘master of the macabre’ and American radio programming

Sarah Thomas *University of Warwick*

Abstract

The article argues that within analyses of star performers from the classical Hollywood period, the role played by the medium of radio has been significantly underestimated. Building upon new developments in star discourses which question the role of the cinema as the dominant medium in the creation of star personae, this article examines the relationship between Hollywood and American broadcast media through a study of the multi-medial persona of Peter Lorre in order to suggest that the macabre star persona associated with Lorre has been erroneously attributed to his cinematic career at the expense of a consideration of his radio career. Central to Lorre’s public persona was the nature of his employment on American radio between 1936 and 1964. The article discusses the three types of appearances made by the actor: as a star performer in horror programming; his position as host of horror series; and his “celebrity” cameos on popular shows. It explores how Lorre’s extensive radio work was reliant upon certain consistent modes of representation which had the potential to greatly influence public awareness of the performer and helped to cement his nefarious star persona to a far greater degree than his film roles or screen performances.

Keywords

Peter Lorre
radio broadcasting in
the United States
old time radio
horror
mystery
Hollywood
actors
star persona
1940s
radio performance

The actor, Peter Lorre, remains a figure firmly entrenched within popular culture and public consciousness. His iconic appearances in films such as *M* (Fritz Lang 1931), *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston 1941), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz 1942) and *The Raven* (Roger Corman 1963) made him a recognisable ‘star’ during his own lifetime, albeit often through supporting rather than leading roles. Furthermore, the particular ‘star persona’ associated with Lorre has been endlessly recycled in impersonations, parodies and caricatures, both during the actor’s lifetime and after his death in 1964 – from the mad scientist in Warner Bros. *Looney Tunes* cartoons (1946–1947) to ‘Maggot’ in Tim Burton’s *Corpse Bride* (2005). These redactions ensure that our dominant memories of Peter Lorre continue to conform to the image presented by his original star persona.

Traditionally, the existence of Lorre’s star persona has been explained in wholly cinematic terms: first, by the actor’s early appearance in *M*, in

which Lorre played a serial killer and, second, by Hollywood's appropriation of this character in the way the industry employed the émigré actor. However, an examination of Lorre's work across a variety of media forms offers an understanding of the way that a star image, which has hitherto been considered an explicitly cinematic phenomenon, can more accurately be defined as an inherently multi-medial construct. The central role played by the cinema in the construction of stars, star images and personae has been questioned within aspects of contemporary star discourse, particularly in relation to recent Hollywood stardom, modern multi-media practices and the rise of 'celebrity' culture (for example, McDonald 1998; Geraghty 2000; Austin and Barker 2003; Fischer and Landy 2004). However, this approach is less prevalent in examples from Hollywood's studio era. A study of Peter Lorre reveals the complex nature of this relationship between image, performance and medium, through evidence which suggests that his associated star persona had a much closer relationship with the actor's appearances on American radio than with his Hollywood film career.

The image of Peter Lorre as a 'master of the macabre' was primarily created through a combination of Hollywood marketing practices and Lorre's employment in associated media, rather than through cinematic representations of the actor. This is clearly demonstrated in the radio work undertaken by Lorre at the peak of his career between the late 1930s and the early 1950s – a period that coincides with the medium's own 'golden age' within American culture. What makes an investigation of Lorre's radio presence especially significant in the construction of his star persona is that, whereas certain modes of representation (such as written promotional material) work to create a marketable image based upon a star's persona, in relative isolation from the creative agency of the actor himself, Lorre's radio work illustrates the complicit role that he played – as a performer – in the construction and maintenance of this public persona.

American radio broadcasting and the Hollywood performer

Since its inception as a widely accessible media form during the 1920s, radio broadcasting has been considered an especially dominant form of mass media within the United States. It has been observed that even as early as the 1930s, radio was perceived to have become a major cultural, political and economic force in American society (Douglas 1999: 130). By the end of this decade, over 80 per cent of American households had access to at least one radio receiver and broadcasting was seen to be one of the few American industries to be relatively unaffected by the Depression (Hilmes 2001: 88). This position was further compounded both by the continued growth of radio audiences throughout the following years and by its role as a vital communication and entertainment medium during the 1940s, particularly during World War II.

The early relationship between Hollywood and radio was initially characterised by a resistance to converge the two media, although as Michele Hilmes (1999) has explored, this reticence was more due to external

pressures concerning the supply of new technologies, increased scrutiny by the Federal Radio Commission and financial issues brought on by the Depression, than an unwillingness on the part of the film industry to ally itself with the newer medium. Although various players within the film industry had been prevented from becoming financially involved with the business of radio (in particular regarding the creation and ownership of new radio networks), by the mid-1930s, Hollywood had found a more suitable means of increasing its involvement with the broadcast medium: its pool of creative talent, of directors, writers, producers and, especially, performers. The employment of established film actors within radio programming had become a central feature of American broadcasting by the end of the 1930s. This trend continued throughout radio's golden age, as stars made notable appearances in film-to-radio adaptations, dramatic series, gossip shows and variety shows that were broadcast to both domestic audiences and overseas servicemen. The relationship between performer, radio and film can be considered a reciprocal one, as many popular radio stars (for example, Bing Crosby) made an equally successful transition to film stardom (Hilmes 2001: 91). At the same time, a significant amount of the radio work undertaken by actors who were primarily associated with filmmaking was also instrumental in shaping public awareness of them as individual performers. As Richard J. Hand notes (in specific regard to dramatic radio programming, but nonetheless relevant to radio broadcasting as a whole), 'radio drama [served] to enhance or consolidate the careers of Hollywood stars, ensuring that they were household names through the instantaneousness of radio' (2006: 46).

Peter Lorre made his first appearance on American radio in 1936 and continued to work steadily within the medium until his death in 1964. Between these years, Lorre made 143 appearances on American network radio or the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS), which broadcast to serving forces stationed abroad (Youngkin 2005). In the concurrent period, Lorre made 68 feature films. Unlike Lorre's surprisingly varied film career, a significantly large number of the radio programmes that employed the actor were closely associated with the horror/mystery genre. As such, and to a far greater degree than his film work, the majority of Lorre's appearances on American broadcast radio conformed to the limits of, and in turn helped to perpetuate, public perceptions of the actor exclusively in line with his star persona.

'The master of the macabre': the transmedial star persona of Peter Lorre

Lorre's persona continuously cast him as a horror icon and a 'Master of the Macabre' (Hadley-Garcia 1983: 18). The actor's presence easily signified characterisation that was supposed to be menacing, perverse or even psychotic. Written descriptions of the actor from the late 1930s onwards repeatedly infer certain behavioural characteristics, such as 'murderous', 'strange', 'ghoulish' or 'insane'. In the words of the studio publicity

produced by 20th Century Fox during his employment with them, Lorre was 'the movies' one-man chamber of horrors' (Harry Brand 1940); and according to the *New York Herald-Tribune*, his name was 'a synonym for abnormal psychology' (Anonymous 1943). Using these representations as a foundation, we can discern how Lorre's persona was built around the concept of a particular form of 'evil incarnate': one which was linked to the compulsive or psychopathic desire to kill or harm (although often masked by an initially benign countenance), and also existed within the context of classical horror iconography in which the 'normal' battled with the 'abnormal', the 'unknown' or the 'monstrous'.

There is a marked connection between this persona and Lorre's portrayal of the schizophrenic serial murderer, Hans Beckert, in *M* (1931). However, whilst these resonances certainly inform aspects of the Hollywood image that came to define Lorre, the persona itself is more than a mere rehash of the German role. It incorporated a number of the actor's own personal qualities which became more pronounced only after his move to the United States (such as changes in his physical appearance and voice), and was thus constructed more from a vague appropriation of elements of the character than it was from the singular figure of Beckert. Although often perceived to have sprung directly from his appearance in *M*, Lorre's persona was formed significantly later than 1931. Publicity discourses and public representations of the actor only began to define Lorre specifically according to these macabre characteristics five years after *M*, in 1937, when he had already established himself as a Hollywood 'star', whose reputation was built around his standing as a European 'artist' in possession of formidable performative skills, rather than as a 'horror' actor.

There was also a distinct difference in genre and character between the role of Beckert and the inception of Lorre's persona. Lang placed his serial killer within a social drama and challenged viewers to pity the man behind the monster; Lorre's persona was (and is) rigidly connected to gothic discourses and horror iconography in which he is revealed to be the monstrous 'thing' that audiences must find fearful or distasteful.

This disjunction between Lorre's most notorious role and his star persona has conventionally been explained in filmic terms: the actor's subsequent cinematic employment worked to distort the role of Beckert into something far more grotesque. Lorre's Hollywood career is believed to have been severely restricted as a result of his typecasting as a 'film monster' or as a psychopathic murderer (McCullough 2004: 174). It is widely reported that the various Hollywood studios that Lorre worked for perceived the actor according to the remit of a persona which defined him as a 'horror' actor, and that, therefore, Lorre was only assigned to roles that were resonant with Beckert or in line with the nefarious persona that was seemingly directly derived from this early screen role (Frischauer 1953; Gemünden 2003; Thomson 2005). As such, it appeared that Lorre's star persona dictated and limited the terms of his screen work.

What these discussions of Lorre's American career fail to acknowledge is that, first and foremost, the actor's infamous star persona was not representative of Lorre's screen roles. Between 1929 and 1964, Lorre made 79 films. Despite the apparent link between casting and persona, Lorre portrayed characters that can be wholly defined according to the macabre and murderous public image associated with the actor in only six films (approximately 7% of his total screen output): *M* (1931), *Mad Love* (Karl Freund 1935), *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster 1940), *The Beast with Five Fingers* (Robert Florey 1946), *Double Confession* (Ken Annakin 1950) and Lorre's own directorial effort, *Der Verlorene/The Lost One* (1951).

Examples within Lorre's screen career contain individual elements of this image, but it is inaccurate to categorise them as comprehensively conforming to the constraints of his prescribed persona, to the degree that Lorre should be considered 'typecast' by this public image. For instance, his most famous Hollywood appearances are often considered evidence of his typecasting as macabre figure, and yet in both *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon*, Lorre's characters are motivated by money rather than psychotic compulsions, are characterised by wry cynicism – a trait found throughout Lorre's screen work, but conversely not within his persona – and the extent to which they should be considered 'dangerous' or 'menacing' is severely undercut by Lorre's carefully convoluted performances. The apparent resonance with Lorre's persona that is discerned in films such as these has more to do with the specific performative techniques employed by Lorre than from any continuity between the characters themselves – as written.

Even if one considers Lorre's film roles in relation to his apparent status as an icon of screen horror, the total number of horror films made by the actor remains a relatively small number at only eight: *Mad Love*, *You'll Find Out* (David Butler 1940), *The Boogie Man Will Get You* (Lew Landers 1942), *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Frank Capra 1944), *The Beast with Five Fingers*, *Tales of Terror* (Roger Corman 1962), *The Raven* and *The Comedy of Terrors* (Jacques Tourneur 1964). Furthermore, the way in which Lorre constructs his performances in these roles means that the majority of his characters in these horror films have little in common with the behaviour associated with his star persona.

Within Lorre's film career, there remain 67 screen characters (almost 85%) that cannot be 'explained' simply by an insistence that the actor was typecast or trapped by his notorious star persona, including some of his most well-known appearances. Indeed, Lorre's screen career was a particularly complex one that varied dramatically in tone, role, performance and employment practice. Therefore, the direct correlation which is widely assumed to exist between Lorre's star persona, his status as a horror icon and the roles that he played on the cinema screen can be seen to be an eminently problematic evaluation of the actor's film career. It is also a perspective that ignores the widespread and significant representations of Lorre within other media forms and his own performative work within these alternative arenas.

1 My access to these 52 radio broadcasts has been through two 'Old Time Radio' archives which have made their catalogues easily available to the public: the postal catalogue, 'The OTR Outlet', based in Manchester, UK; and the internet site, 'Great Old Time Radio', <http://otr-site.com>. These collections have been stored in digital format (usually MP3 files) and can either be purchased via on line download or by buying recordings saved onto disc.

A secondary consequence of an approach which defines Lorre (and his associated persona) as a specifically cinematic phenomenon is a broader issue concerning studio-era stars and star images; namely, that the construction and maintenance of star images could, to a large extent, occur away from the cinema screen, within other media. Whilst star images have always been defined as inter-textual and multi-medial (Dyer 1979), within analyses of studio-era stardom the cinema itself has remained the significant performative medium. However, this belies the importance of associated broadcasting industries, other performative arenas and the individual circumstances of an actor's employment during this era.

Peter Lorre's career on American radio

Potentially, many more Americans heard Peter Lorre star in radio broadcasts than paid to see the actor on the cinema screen. Although Lorre cannot be considered a major creative player within the wider history of American broadcasting, he nonetheless remained a frequent and prominent presence within radio programming during the height of the medium's popularity within American culture. Lorre made repeated guest appearances on many of the most prominent comedy variety radio shows that dominated the monthly ratings between 1937 and 1953 and he also performed in a significant number of radio dramas and popular genre shows.

Out of the 143 appearances made on American radio by Peter Lorre, an approximate figure of 110 appearances (almost 80%) can be considered to conform to the image of the actor as a 'master of the macabre'. A number of these broadcasts are no longer available, and as such this percentage has been calculated from a representative sample survey of 52 broadcasts, in addition to the logical extensions that certain roles or performances would have expectedly conformed to this image (including repeated guest cameos on other episodes of shows included in the survey, adaptations of texts in which the character is a known factor and an understanding of how the 'real Peter Lorre' was conventionally represented within promotional and media forms).¹

Almost 90 per cent of Lorre's work on American radio occurred between 1940 and 1954, and it is within these years that the 'macabre' image associated with the actor was at its most prevalent. Whilst it can be argued that radio was the most significant tool in perpetuating the star persona of Peter Lorre, it would be inaccurate to suggest that this image was initially created through the medium of radio. During the late 1930s, Lorre's radio appearances were few in number and varied in nature, often taking the form of film-to-radio adaptations or parodies of his cinematic creation, the Oriental detective Mr Moto, in addition to his more 'mysterious' roles in radio dramas adapted for such programmes as *The Royal Gelatin Hour*. This representation was typical even after 1937, the year in which Lorre's macabre star persona first became a coherent construction via written promotional discourses. From the 1940s onwards, Lorre had a far more prolonged and prominent radio presence, with three types of role: starring

in radio dramas, as a ‘host’ of horror and mystery programmes, and guest cameos on established or popular shows. These closely mirrored the nefarious persona that had first publicly appeared in the popular press and studio publicity. The consistent type of representation, the sheer frequency of his appearances post-1940 and the potential mass audience for Lorre’s radio appearances are all significant factors which suggest why Lorre came to be perceived as a horror icon within the American public consciousness.

The ‘star’ of radio drama

More than anywhere else, Lorre’s work as a leading actor in radio drama was where the qualities associated with his star persona can be found in their most undiluted form. Lorre appeared in series which employed both well-known and up-and-coming Hollywood stars to perform alongside an existing repertory-style supporting cast in tales of mystery, horror and suspense. He recorded eight programmes for *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (NBC 1941–1952) between 1942 and 1944 (‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, ‘The Man who Returned from the Dead’, ‘Dig My Grave’, ‘The Bells Toll Death’, ‘The Black Seagull’, ‘Death is a Joker’, ‘The Mind Reader’ and ‘One Foot in the Grave’), and six programmes for *Suspense* (CBS 1942–1962) between 1943 and 1945 (‘Till Death Do Us Part’, ‘The Devil’s Saint’, ‘Moment of Darkness’, ‘Back for Christmas’, ‘Of Maestro and Man’ and ‘Nobody Loves Me’). He also made isolated appearances within other mainstream horror programming, including ‘Beyond the Grave’ for *Creeps by Night* (NBC 1944) and ‘An Exercise in Horror’ for *Arch Oboler’s Plays* (Mutual 1945).

The actor was also of central importance to two radio drama series which ran for only one season: *Mystery in the Air* (NBC 1947) and *Nightmare* (Mutual 1954). In these programmes, Lorre played the leading character in every episode of the broadcast run (13 and 29 episodes, respectively). *Mystery in the Air* is particularly important, as it contains some of the most notable of Lorre’s dramatic radio performances, and because eight episodes remained available after the initial broadcast. These were officially released on vinyl record in 1978, in a collection entitled *Peter Lorre: Master of Mystery and Suspense* (Nostalgia Lane Records), further ensuring the association between Lorre and the ‘macabre’ within popular culture over a decade after his death.

Unlike the myriad of characters found within Lorre’s screen work – which, rather than being limited to psychotic killers, ranged from cheeky hobos, avuncular sidekicks and romantic existential heroes, to political assassins, cowardly alcoholics and tragic victims of circumstance – the actor’s starring roles in radio dramas appeared to be primarily restricted to the types of characters that were intrinsic to his public persona: torturers, killers, lunatics, psychotics, dangerous criminals and mysterious strangers.² Additionally, Lorre’s appearances were often constructed around established horror narratives that would have already been familiar to listeners. *Mystery in the Air* was particularly reliant upon this strategy and in 1947

2 One notable exception is the radio drama entitled, ‘Mr ‘God’ Johnson’, *Skippy Hollywood Theater* (1949), Synd, broadcast 5 April 1949. In this Lorre plays a wryly cynical philosophising character who is hounded by the inhabitants of an American backwater because he is different. It is a performance much more in keeping with his film roles and stylised screen performances of the 1940s.

- 3 'Beyond Good and Evil', *Mystery in the Air*, 1947, NBC, tx. 28 August 1947.
- 4 'The Devil's Saint', *Suspense*, 1943, CBS, broadcast 19 January 1943; 'Moment of Darkness', *Suspense*, 1943, CBS, broadcast 20 April 1943.
- 5 'Of Maestro and Man', *Suspense*, 1944, CBS, broadcast 20 July 1944; 'Nobody Loves Me', *Suspense*, 1945, CBS, broadcast 30 August 1945.
- 6 'The Horla', *Mystery in the Air*, 1947, NBC, broadcast 21st August 1947.

Lorre recorded adaptations of the 1933 film, *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (which was re-titled 'Mask of Medusa'), the Edgar Allen Poe stories, 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart', Guy De Maupassant's 'The Horla', and 'The Lodger', in addition to other original stories. In almost all episodes from this series, he played murderers or madmen.

Despite the prevalence of psychotics and killers within his radio work, not all of Lorre's leading performances can be described as passive repetitions of an established public image. Many characters possessed enigmatic or ambiguous qualities, and this complexity can be seen as indicative of the ambitious and adventurous nature of genre radio drama during the 1930s and 1940s (Hand 2006). There are instances where Lorre did not play the central villain; or if he did, his characters were offered the chance of redemption, such as the spiritual conversion that occurs in 'Beyond Good and Evil'.³ However, even in these examples, Lorre's persona remained a vital element within the dramatic structure and the narrative of the programmes often remained reliant upon the characteristics associated with the actor. The uneasy tension created within 'Devil's Saint' and 'Moment of Darkness' was dependent upon having audiences believe that Lorre's characters could be murderous or dangerous (although both characters ultimately have heroic motivations behind their initial deception).⁴ Additionally, episodes set in urban contemporary locations, including 'Of Maestro and Men' (1944) or 'Nobody Loves Me' (1945) were reliant upon the expectation that Lorre's characters could suddenly become deranged, as this swift shift in tone could otherwise jar with the listener.⁵

Aside from the formal construction of the characters or narratives, Lorre's performances also aimed to heighten the association between the actor and the macabre or horrific. Lorre utilised an intense acting style within these radio dramas, with the express purpose of frightening his audience. As with other examples of horror programming, there were instances where this central 'fright' was undercut by narrative twists or the reassuring voice of the host. However, Lorre often went beyond the boundaries of the programmes' remit, and this is most apparent in 'The Horla', in which his self-reflexive performance at the broadcast's conclusion served to continue the tense atmosphere of the central story, rather than offer relief from it. Having finished his performance as 'the narrator', Lorre moves from playing the fictional character to portraying a version of 'himself' who unwittingly finds himself at risk from the destructive force contained within De Maupassant's story. The broadcast culminates in Lorre seemingly being possessed by 'The Horla', as he screams into the microphone:

There's one thing I can do, I . . . I can destroy myself . . . yes, yes, yes! I must destroy myself! Destroy! Yes! Let me go! Yes! I know I feel alright! Let me go! Yes I know I'm Peter Lorre, I know it's a story, I know it's by De Maupassant, I know it's Thursday and we are on the air, but it's the Horla! . . .⁶

Lorre's final words, in which he regains control of his identity and jokes, 'I beg your pardon. I'm sorry I got so excited but I warned you at the beginning, it's a very uncomfortable story', appears to restore a sense of normality through its wry humour, much like that used by hosts of certain other horror shows. And yet, his intensely dark tone does not aim to undermine the horror of the story by situating it within a broadly comic setting in which an ironic performance distances the audience from the action. Instead, Lorre's acting presents a 'reality' which is highly susceptible to fictional horror. Therefore, in instances when people somewhat mistakenly remember being scared witless by the 'screen exploits' of Peter Lorre (Hadley-Garcia 1983), it is far more likely that 'frights' they are describing came from Lorre's dramatic radio performances than from the cinema.

7 With the exception of the *Mystery Playhouse* broadcast of *Inner Sanctum Mystery's* 'Death is a Joker' (1944), Lorre never introduced a drama in which he also performed in the leading role.

The 'horror' host

In addition to his leading performances in self-contained radio dramas, Lorre was also employed as the 'host' of the horror/mystery series, *Mystery Playhouse*, for at least thirty appearances between 1944 and 1945. This series re-broadcast episodes from existing American series, such as *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*, to American soldiers serving overseas on the AFRS, along with new introductions recorded by Lorre. The use of host figures was an established feature of horror programming from the 1930s onwards. Commonly these genre programmes shared a similar structure, wherein the central narratives were framed by the words of the 'host' (usually a fictional character played by an actor) who directly addressed the audience at the beginning and end of the broadcast, although the tone and style of the address was often very different from programme to programme – overtly comedic, knowingly self-reflexive or intended to specifically create a tense atmosphere for the listener (Hand 2006). The hosts were the 'trademarks' of the programmes, and a number of them became celebrity figures in their own right, including 'Old Nancy' (*The Witch's Tale*, WOR, Mutual 1931–1938), 'Raymond' (*Inner Sanctum Mysteries*) and 'The Man in Black' (*Suspense*).

Lorre's role as the host of *Mystery Playhouse* can be seen as typical of the figure of the 'horror host', and also in keeping with radio representations of the 'real' Peter Lorre, as in 'The Horla'. Although he played 'himself', Lorre's hosting duties were constructed around a representation that had little basis in reality. *Mystery Playhouse's* 'Peter Lorre' was as equally fictitious as *The Witch's Tale's* ancient witch of Salem, 'Old Nancy'. The actor's framing monologues usually began with the introduction, 'Good evening Kreeps, this is Peter Lorre', before continuing with a short spiel that reinforced Lorre's apparent position as a master of the macabre in some way, such as the following opening from an episode entitled 'Mr Randall's Discovery'⁷:

If you like mystery and suspense; if your tastes run to the macabre or the supernatural; if sweetness and light bores you – then my friends – you've

8 'Mr Randall's
Discovery', *Mystery
Playhouse*, 1944,
AFRS, broadcast
30 April 1944.

come to the right place. I promise you, there is nothing sweet and very little light here.⁸

Lorre's performances and scripts heavily adhered to the public image of the actor, and the relationship between the series and the performer was one of mutual reinforcement. Just as 'Old Nancy' was the trademark of *The Witch's Tale*, *Mystery Playhouse* was purposefully closely associated with Lorre himself, despite his reduced airtime as host. Lorre's employment enabled the actor's star persona to be used as a cohesive tool, which bound together a number of otherwise unrelated stories or broadcasts, which ranged from *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* repeats and adaptations of literary mysteries to Nero Wolfe and 'Thin Man' detective stories and original science-fiction narratives. The presence of Lorre (specifically the association between the actor and his 'macabre' persona) served to give the series a fixed identity of its own that was distinctly linked to the horror genre, despite the often disparate nature of the individual episodes. Furthermore, as a result of his hosting duties – and in part because of the cult or iconic status of horror radio hosts in general during the 1930s and 1940s – Lorre was again publicly perceived to be an actor that was primarily associated with horror stories.

The celebrity guest

Lorre made countless appearances away from horror programming throughout his career on American radio. The majority of these other appearances were as a celebrity guest star on existing shows, many of which dominated the monthly ratings of this period or were hosted by the era's leading personalities. Lorre made cameos on *Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge* (NBC 1938–1949) in 1940, *The Jack Benny Program* (NBC 1932–1948, CBS 1949–1955) in 1941, *Milton Berle's Three Ring Time* (NBC 1942), *Duffy's Tavern* (NBC 1940–1951) in 1943, *The Baby Snooks Show* (CBS 1944–1951) in 1945, *The Eddie Cantor Show* (NBC 1940–1946) in 1946 and *The Martin and Lewis Show* (NBC 1949–1953) in 1949. He also made multiple appearances on *Fred Allen's Texaco Star Theater* (CBS 1940–1944), *Amos 'n' Andy* (NBC 1929–1939, CBS 1939–1943, NBC 1943–1955), *The Abbott and Costello Show* (NBC 1940, 1942–1947, 1949) and *Dinah Shore's Birdseye Open House* (NBC 1944–1946) throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

These programmes tended to be comedy or variety shows in which Lorre briefly appeared in a comedy skit. Therefore, in keeping with the overall tone (and in contrast to his 'straight' appearances on *Mystery in the Air*), Lorre's 'macabre' public image was manipulated for comedic effect. In these guest slots, Lorre invariably appeared as 'himself'. More accurately, and in a mirror of his appearances as 'Peter Lorre' within the radio dramas previously discussed, this was a highly fictionalised version of 'himself' where the apparently authentic representation of the man acted exclusively within the remit of Lorre's star persona. In 1949, in answer to a question posed by Dean Martin on *The Martin and Lewis Show* which made

reference to the actor's sinister screen characters, 'Lorre' menacingly replied, 'What makes you think I'm acting?'⁹

Despite the obviously fabricated nature of Lorre's personality in these cameos, the comedy that was central to his guest appearances was constructed from the insistence that Lorre was being presented 'as he really was' – that his 'real' identity was as horrific as that of his fictional roles. As illustrated below, along with some representative examples, these cameos repeatedly followed a similar four-point structure, and the humour of the situation was created through a series of binary oppositions between 'fictional'/'real', 'comedy'/'horror' and 'normality'/'abnormality' which were revealed as the sketch progressed.

1. The regular cast (and audience) is told that Peter Lorre is the guest star. Lorre's 1943 appearance on *Texaco Star Theater* is prefaced with the following warning from the announcer: 'Any knives, daggers, stilettos, forks . . . found sticking in people's backs after Mr Lorre leaves tonight must be wiped clean and returned.'¹⁰
2. The regular cast discuss how frightening Lorre is onscreen. On *The Martin and Lewis Show*, Jerry Lewis' response to Dean Martin's suggestion that they meet Lorre is to remember that, 'One time I took my girl out to see Peter Lorre in a picture. He was so sinister and menacing, when I came out I had the creeps!'¹¹
3. Lorre appears and protests that he is 'really harmless'. On *Duffy's Tavern*, having arrived at the titular tavern, Lorre pleads with the cast, 'I don't want you to think of me as a horrible person... Think of me as a sweet lovable man who makes certain people faint: a sort of non-musical Frank Sinatra!'¹²
4. The opposite is revealed to be true, usually through Lorre's own morbid actions. Extended indications of Lorre's apparent macabre nature formed the bulk of his cameos, but concise examples of this punch line can be seen in *Amos 'n' Andy* (1943) – where Lorre softly, yet menacingly, states during an argument between the titular characters, 'I do not like bickering, it disturbs me. It often makes me do things that I am very sorry for' – and in *The Abbott and Costello Show* (1943), when Lorre greets Lou Costello with the words, 'It's cold outside, you must be killed – oh I mean chilled'.¹³

In addition to the deliberate choice to present the 'real' Peter Lorre as a man who appeared to act in accordance with his otherwise fictional star persona, therefore implying that Lorre's own identity was inextricably linked to the 'macabre', these guest cameos had two further purposes which also aimed to reinforce certain public perceptions about the 'horror' of Peter Lorre's persona.

First, these comic representations continued a trend which had been present within the promotional discourses that surrounded Lorre from 1937 onwards: an insistence upon the link between Lorre and classical

- 9 *The Martin and Lewis Show*, 1949, NBC, broadcast 8 May 1949.
- 10 'The Missing Shot or Who Killed Balsam Beamish?', *The Texaco Star Theater*, 1943, CBS, broadcast 3rd January 1943.
- 11 *The Martin and Lewis Show*, 1949.
- 12 'The Missing Salami Sandwich', *Duffy's Tavern*, 1943, NBC, broadcast 19 October 1943.
- 13 'The Locked Trunk's Secret', *Amos 'n' Andy*, 1943, CBS, broadcast 5 November 1943; *The Abbott and Costello Show*, 1943, NBC, broadcast 11 February 1943.

- 14 *The Abbott and Costello Show*, 1943.
- 15 *The Texaco Star Theater*, 1943.
- 16 *Birdseye Open House*, 1946, NBC, broadcast 9 May 1946.

horror iconography. Publicity material written about Lorre made reference to his Hungarian birthplace being ‘at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains’, and in doing so, it implicitly implied a connection between Lorre and the definitive icon of modern gothic horror, ‘Dracula’. Lorre’s radio cameos were far more explicit in reinforcing his association with established horror tropes. For *The Abbott and Costello Show*, Lorre was re-invented as a mysterious figure who ‘knew’ Dracula (Lorre says, ‘I caught him stealing from my blood bank!’).¹⁴ This type of characterisation, and Lorre’s apparent ability to exist within both the ‘real’ world of contemporary American society and the ‘fictional’ world of gothic horror, was repeated throughout sketches that played upon his celebrity status. On *Texaco Star Theater*, Lorre revealed to host, Fred Allen, that in the past he had worked for Jekyll and Hyde and that he now spent his time with Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi and Dracula.¹⁵ On the *Birdseye* show in 1946, Lorre again emphasised his close relationship with grotesque horror characters when he informed the host, Dinah Shore, that ‘ghosts, vampires, mummies and zombies are the loveliest people’.¹⁶

Whilst these cameos sought to represent Lorre in a specific manner, they also worked to reinforce the underlying assumption that the origins of his public image could be attributed to his film appearances, appropriately illustrated in the quotation from Jerry Lewis on *The Martin and Lewis Show* referenced above. In making the connection between Lorre and ‘horror’, the radio scripts and gags constantly reference the repetitive nature of the actor’s screen work as a star of horror films and the terrifying qualities of his screen characters.

As I have outlined, this was not an accurate summation of Lorre’s cinematic career. However, radio’s repeated references to Lorre’s ‘macabre’ star persona and the insistence upon this association with his film roles meant that these popular broadcasts took on an almost instructive element for the American public. Coupled with the actor’s extensive dramatic work in horror radio programming, American audiences were effectively taught to perceive Peter Lorre as a horror icon – not through their role as film audiences, but through the way Lorre performed and was represented during the ‘golden age’ of American broadcast radio. This period between the late 1930s and early 1950s was a time of prosperity for both radio and cinema, and also for Lorre himself. Therefore, he can be considered as much a bona fide ‘star’ of the airwaves as he was a ‘star’ of the silver screen. The image of ‘Peter Lorre, Master of the Macabre’ was popularised via radio broadcasting, and as such, the actor illustrates the inherently complex and potentially multi-medial creative agencies that lay behind the construction of star images during the classical period of Hollywood stardom.

References

- Anonymous (27 June 1943), *Cherubic Lorre: He Puts Charm in His Murders*, New York: Herald-Tribune, p. 3.
- Austin, Thomas and Barker, Martin (eds.) (2003), *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, London: Arnold.

- Brand, Harry (1940), 'Studio Biography: Peter Lorre', 20th Century Fox, Peter Lorre holdings, Los Angeles, USA: Margaret Herrick Library.
- Douglas, Susan J. (1999 (2004)), *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dyer, Richard (1979–1998), *Stars*, London: BFI.
- Fischer, Lucy and Landy, Marcia (2004), *Stars: The Film Reader*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Frischauer, Willi (30 May 1953) 'Mr Murder', *Picturegoer*, p. 9.
- Gemünden, Gerd (2003), 'From 'Mr M' to 'Mr Murder': Peter Lorre and the Actor in Exile', in Halle and McCarthy (eds.), *Light Motives: German Popular Film in Perspective*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 85–107.
- Geraghty, Christine (2000) 'Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies and performance', in Gledhill and Williams (eds.), *Reinventing Film Studies*, London: Arnold, pp. 183–201.
- Gledhill, Christine and Williams, Linda (eds.) (2000), *Reinventing Film Studies*, London: Arnold.
- Hadley-Garcia, George (1983), 'The Mysterious Peter Lorre', *Hollywood Studio Magazine*, 16, pp. 18–19.
- Halle, Randall and McCarthy, Margaret (eds.) (2003), *Light Motives: German Popular Film in Perspective*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Hand, Richard J.H. (2006), *Terror on the Air!: Horror Radio in America 1931–1952*, Jefferson N.C, London: McFarland.
- Hilmes, Michele (1999), *Hollywood and Broadcasting: from Radio to Cable*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- (2001), *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- McCullough, Christopher (2004), 'Peter Lorre and his friend Bert Brecht: Entremdung in Hollywood?', in Millin and Banham (eds.), *Extraordinary Actors*, Exeter: University of Exeter, pp. 164–175.
- McDonald, Paul (1998) 'Reconceptualising Stardom', supplementary chapter in Dyer, *Stars*, pp. 177–211.
- Milling, Jane and Banham, Martin (eds.) (2004), *Extraordinary Actors*, Exeter: University of Exeter.
- Thomson, David (28 September 2005), 'The M Factor', *The New Republic*, pp. 32–36.
- Youngkin, Stephen D. (2005), *The Lost One: A Life of Peter Lorre*, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press.

Suggested citation

Thomas, S. (2007), 'A "star" of the airwaves: Peter Lorre – "master of the macabre" and American radio programming', *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 5: 2&3, pp. 143–155, doi: 10.1386/rajo.5.2&3.143/1

Contributor details

Sarah Thomas teaches in the Department of Film & Television Studies at the University of Warwick, where she has recently completed her Ph.D. thesis; "'Face-Maker": the negotiation between screen performance, extra-filmic persona and conditions of employment within the career of Peter Lorre'. Contact: Department of Film & Television Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom. E-mail: S.K.Thomas@warwick.ac.uk.

Copyright of *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.