

Chiller-Dillers for the Shiver-and-Shudder Set: The Whistler Film Series

- Frank Krutnik

A 1947 review in *Billboard* identified CBS radio's *The Whistler* (1942-55) as "one of the neater, pseudo-psychological chiller-dillers on the air. Murder... is held to a minimum (just one) and in scripting and playing the emphasis is laid on psycho [i.e. psychological] overtones. These are achieved by the technic of having the Whistler's disembodied voice represent the criminal's conscience while at the same time serving as story narrator. The effect is strictly pseudo, but adequate for the shiver-and-shudder set" ("The Whistler" (review), *Billboard*, May 10 1947, 11). Largely oriented around tales of crime or mystery (rather than detection), *Whistler* narratives also had shadings of horror - then a popular genre on US radio. *The Whistler* was certainly a distinctive program, as the *Billboard* reviewer suggests, but it was also part of a flourishing tradition of radio anthology series that included *Suspense*, *Lights Out*, *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* and *The Mysterious Traveller*. Influenced by a host of pulp magazine predecessors, these programs offered 30-minute weekly doses of sensational and mysterious drama, often closing with a narrative twist. The genre would persist into the television era, via adaptations of *Suspense*, *Lights Out* and *The Whistler* as well as such small screen originals as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Twilight Zone*.

From 1944 to 1948 Columbia Pictures brought to the screen a series of eight films adapted from, or more accurately inspired by, this popular radio series. Although designed as a showcase for fading star Richard Dix, he played a different role in each film (with Michael Duane replacing him in the final instalment). Unlike radio crime series that centred on a serial figure (such as *The Adventures of Philip Marlowe*, *The Adventures of Sam Spade* or *Box 13*), *The Whistler* and its ilk offered a discrete story each week involving different sets of characters, with continuity provided by a recurring host-narrator and/or a broad thematic concept or atmosphere (e.g. what *Variety* described as *The Whistler's* "chiller-diller mood"). Radio programs based on the exploits of serial figures were relatively easy to translate to the screen, and Columbia already had a successful track record with B-series based, for example, on transmedial heroes like The Lone Wolf, Boston Blackie and Ellery Queen, as well as the radio original The Crime Doctor. The serial miscellany of *The Whistler*, however, required a different set of strategies, which led to a less ostensibly 'formulaic' screen property that differed substantially other contemporary B-series – resulting, intriguingly enough, in the only series routinely included within the canon of film noir.

This article explores the serial dynamics behind and within Columbia Pictures' rendition of *The Whistler*. I will examine how the series developed as part of Columbia's ongoing production strategy of B-series production, as well as within the broader synergies between radio and cinema during this period. Besides focussing on questions of transmedial adaptation, I will also consider the broader

field of the B-series, a prolific yet under-examined manifestation of cinematic seriality.

Biography

Frank Krutnik is Head of Film at the University of Sussex. He has published the books *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (1991), *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (with Steve Neale, 1990) and *Inventing Jerry Lewis* (2000) and has co-edited *Un-American Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era* (2008), as well as numerous chapters in critical anthologies and articles in leading screen studies journals. He is currently working on the monograph *Killers on the Kilocycles: Radio/Noir* and is co-editing, with Kathleen Loock, a special issue of the *Film Studies* journal on film seriality, to be published in 2017.