Air Wave Sensationalism:

The Radio Exploitation and B Picture Discourse Surrounding RKO’s *Hitler’s Children*
A man emerges from a swirling mass of clouds, gripping a sphere. Lightning curves around him. Below, a radio microphone is held up, radiating light. The sphere the man carries reads: *Rio Rita*, referring to the 1929 RKO musical. The text below him advertises the RKO Radio Hour, where Bebe Daniels recently sang with Al Jolson “to millions” (“Radio First”). The print advertisement ran a month after the release of *Rio Rita*, but could have been an illustrated personification of any writing on radio exploitation well into the 1940s. In 1943, RKO ran another illustrated spread for *Hitler’s Children*, a B picture of nominal qualities that achieved a surprising box office return and an outpouring of sensational press. Newspapers and magazines wrote as if *Hitler’s Children* had invented radio exploitation. Yet this full-page spread from 1929 should be bold enough to act as a reminder that radio advertising did not begin with *Hitler’s Children*. There was a regular exploitation industry that relied on musical numbers, movie stars, and disputable exaggerations by 1929. Before making sense of the hysteria around RKO’s 1943 B picture, the exploitation context from which it sprang must be understood.

By the late 1930s, the value of radio exploitation was contentious, to say nothing of how stars were viewed. In 1937, Warners Brothers-First National stopped sending script versions of its films to local radio stations across the country, because they found the broadcasts were “generally inferior in quality,” even claiming that these inferior air plugs “have proved harmful to the box-office in numerous instances” (“Warners Drop Radio”). The scripts were pulled from 210 “smaller stations” only after a national survey conducted by the new heads of publicity for Warner, suggesting that this practice was extensive and relatively long-running (“Warners Drop Radio”). Most of the other studios at the time were interested in creating radio programs. In the same article, RKO abandoned plans for a studio radio show, since “the present radio ‘plugging’ on other programs [of music] is exceeding any possible advantages that a direct studio-radio tie-
up could provide” (“Warners Drop Radio”). This was a safe choice for RKO, whose musical radio plugs only needed a single recording and continued into the 1940s (see “BMI Film Tie-In”).

RKO’s choice might have been influenced by the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America (MPTOA), an organization particularly opinionated about the use of movie stars on radio programs. Before many studios had exploitation heads, radio spots were “direct arrangements between advertisers and stars” done through an agent and outside the jurisdiction of a star’s given studio (“MGM Sells Radio Show”). This practice was mutually beneficial for stars and radio stations, and indirectly beneficial for studios and producers. But exhibitors felt that stars’ radio appearances conflicted and competed with theatre attendance (Weaver). Why would anyone go see a star on the screen when they can listen to them from the comfort of their own home? The MPTOA formed a committee to investigate the possibility of “[regulating] the use of film stars and material on the radio programs” (“Tackle”). The committee, working in dialogue with the studio heads, ostensibly arrived at a vague, official “efforts will be made” agreement (“MGM Sells Radio”).

How much sway the MPTOA had can be judged by the sudden creation of exploitation heads and departments in most studios. These heads did oversee the contracting of their stars to radio stations, even if in practice this hardly settled the MPTOA’s qualms (Weaver). As this new radio exploitation practice was beginning to take shape, Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer ran studio radio programs to varying degrees of success. Paramount’s “Paramount on Parade” promoted a behind the scenes tour of various “visits to studio stages,” but cancelled their show after only a month apparently because of “the advent of warm weather” and the change to “Daylight Saving Time” (“MGM Sells Radio”). Their program was expressly designed not to
upset the MPTOA, by featuring few stars and refusing to reveal any plots. Yet the explanations given for the show’s turn-over are bizarre. MGM had more luck: their program started half a year later and ran until 1949. Unlike “Paramount on Parade,” this program featured “the entire roster of MGM talent on tap,” was “under the direct and sole control of the MGM studio” (“MGM Sells Radio”), and ran at 9pm on Thursdays, “on the assumption that this hour conflicts least with theater-going time” (“Lots of Interest”).

Whatever the reasons for MGM’s success and Paramount’s failure, the 1937 press sought to publicize both programs as the first of their kind. Paramount was the only company “on the air with a supervised regular program from its studios” (“MGM Sells Radio”). Half a year later, MGM’s program was “the first contractual assurance for a steady flow of top-notch motion picture talent for broadcast purposes” (“Lots of Interest”). Both had to be written about as firsts, even while both programs drew on a history of radio exploitation. The claim that MGM was ‘the first’ seems willfully ignorant in light of Paramount’s program only half a year earlier. But Paramount’s first must also be placed within a history that goes at least as far back as the 1929 RKO advertisement for RKO Radio Hour. The history of radio exploitation has to be constructed through a critical reading of the trade press. Exaggerations, celebrations, and especially ‘firsts,’ must not be taken at face value.

By early 1939, the discourse on movie stars on radio has not been exhausted. Twentieth Century-Fox pulled one of their stars, Tyrone Power, from a radio program as a direct result of “‘the protests and advice of exhibitors’” (Weaver). Far from solving radio dilemma, the conflict has shifted from exhibitors against actors to exhibitors against studios. RKO, United Artists, and a number of exhibitors supported Fox’s decision, while other studios who host regular radio programs declined to comment (Weaver). The reason provided for Power’s removal no longer
has to do with exhibition conflicts, but with the diminution of the star. Radio tie-ups were seen, at least by this author, to exhaust the stars, physically and as symbols, such that they “have nothing left to give the screen that the public cares to buy” (Weaver).

The year before the release of *Hitler’s Children* sees the discourse adopting a different attitude. Fox and Paramount discover that radio appearances did not exhaust their stars. Fox planned radio tie-ups “for all 76 players” under its contract, and Paramount arranged “the biggest radio exploitation campaign” for the 1942 *Star Spangled Rhythm* (“Campaigns to Promote Stars”). These campaigns broke from earlier practices, shifting from post-release to pre-release air plugs, which quickly become the norm. *Hitler’s Children* used the same technique the following year to an absurdly different reception. However, Fox and Paramount still relied on their stars to promote their films. Radio exploitation worked in tangent with the “regular radio commitments” most stars had, “which gave them an automatic opening for picture plugs” (“Campaigns to Promote Stars”). By 1942, the studios have begun to plan radio exploitation, but it still hinges on the presence of the stars.

One of the reasons *Hitler’s Children* caused a print hysteria is because it was radio exploitation without prestige. Two weeks before the premiere on *Hitler’s Children* on January 14th, WLW Cincinnati ran four one-minute radio spots over their Midwestern stations (“Third Big Pic”). On the eve of the 50-city premiere occurring in the same area, Variety ran a two-page spread the included pull quotes from other papers, but focused on the WLW sponsorship: a large radio tower stretches over the Midwest, “calling movie patrons to fill 100,000 seats in its listening area” (“Gigantic 50 City”). The film was premiering in the Midwest because of a rather unusual star power. The novel on which *Hitler’s Children* was based was written by Gregor Ziemer, a regular radio commentator over the WLW network (“Big Air Coin”). RKO took
advantage of existing radio connections, much as MGM and Paramount had exploited their stars’ connections in 1937 and 1942, respectively. Nothing was expected for this film with a budget of $165,000. This initial radio campaign, at least according to one source, “cost nothing” because of Ziemer’s connections, and was at first treated as an “accident” (Krushen).

After the initial success, Terry Turner, RKO’s exploitation head, made similar arrangements with radio stations across the country for the film’s general release. In New York, more “four one-minute transcribed spots a day” were broadcast, in this case being recorded by Orson Welles’ Mercury Theater company (“Big Air Coin”). The exploitation industry had learned since Warners’ discovery in 1937. They did not send out scripts to be recorded at local studios, but sent professionally pre-recorded transcriptions. In all, 45 more cities received the same radio exploitation that had proven successful in Cincinnati, while Turner added a number of special broadcasts using the unknown, soon to be known, stars of the film (“Map New Air Outlets”).

Sending the film’s stars, H. B. Warner and Bonita Granville, to premieres meant more local press for Hitler’s Children. The cost of transporting these relatively unknown actors was cheap relative to the perceived box office increase. As the Daily Boston Globe wrote upon the stars’ arrival: “the cost of the film isn’t nearly up to its importance as a box office attraction” (Adams). The Chicago Daily Tribune’s small column on the film is essentially an advertisement for the radio spot a week before the film’s release. The WGN radio station hosted Warner and Granville “supported by a cast of well-known Chicago radio actors and the WGN Symphony orchestra” (“Review ‘Hitler’s Children’”). Local talent was still used, but only under the close supervision of the stars and their entourage of agents and producers.

All of this energy resulted in a reported 190-200% increase in theatre-going (“Big Air
Coin”), a gross of $3,250,000 (Krushen), and many new arrangements between RKO and nation-wide stations for future exploitation. By mid-March, RKO officially credited radio broadcasting with the increase in box office revenue for Hitler’s Children (“RKO Credits Radio”). The statement was a strategic choice to acknowledge Ziemer and WLW’s influence while opening the studio up to new radio partnerships. In 1943 alone, Turner lead two more exploitation campaigns for This Land is Mine and Behind the Rising Sun. By the end of the year, RKO had deals for radio exploitation through 1944. WCAU in Philadelphia agreed to a three-picture arrangement that is symptomatic of the studio’s nation-wide plans (“WCAU-RKO Set 10G”).

The excitement around Hitler’s Children and the success of radio exploitation must be viewed critically and within the context of similar campaigns. RKO and WLW teamed up again in 1944 for a revival of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves that attributed its success to radio plugs. That campaign broke the attendance records in Cincinnati set by Hitler’s Children the prior year (“Radio Did it Again”). Yet the column was written in a publication dedicated to radio broadcasting news; the contemporaneous press presents a history of radio exploitation that is nearly totally successful. It is more difficult to discover films that failed in spite of their radio exploitation. RKO’s two pictures after Hitler’s Children, This Land is Mine and Behind the Rising Sun, met with polar reactions at the box office and in the press.

Directed by Jean Renoir and starring Charles Laughton and Maureen O’Hara, This Land is Mine was an A-budget film, and RKO’s first experiment after the success of Hitler’s Children. Contracts with radio stations across the country were in effect. Fox and Paramount ran similar campaigns for their A pictures in 1942. Yet the absence of extensive writing on the film reveals its box office failure more blatantly than any article could. A small excerpt from Variety mentions “60 announcements for the next two weeks” before the film’s release in San Antonio.
(“RKO’s ‘Land’”). The film had premiered a month earlier to mixed success. Even though RKO upped its plugs to five “a day for half a month,” the film did not make an exponential return like *Hitler’s Children* (“Air Plugs Don’t Draw”). One writer theorized that the “ultra-ultra drama” and “graphic” scenes were too much for radio audiences (“Air Plugs Don’t Draw”).

If the success of RKO’s next radio exploitation, *Behind the Rising Sun*, can be taken as symptomatic, perhaps it was exactly that graphic drama that listeners desired. This film was a return to the xenophobic propaganda apparent in *Hitler’s Children*, with the Nazis replaced by the Japanese. *Behind the Rising Sun* also upped the radio plugs by expanding to New York immediately and adding “eight 15-minute promotion transcriptions” besides RKO’s usual one-minute spots (“Third Big Pic”). The film cost $200,000 and opened to 78 theatres in the North Eastern region (“‘Children’ Success by Ballyhoo”). While there was not the same outpouring of written press on *Behind the Rising Sun*, there were still reports of the film “breaking all house records to date” in theatres (“‘Rising Sun’ Zowie”). Why this film was a success and *This Land is Mine* was not is a complex topic deserving its own extensive research. I hope to provide possible research questions below, after a brief consideration of how *Hitler’s Children* was part of an ongoing change in industry radio exploitation.

*Radio* called the entire RKO 1943 year a “revolution in amusement advertising,” while other papers were hesitant to credit RKO with accomplishing anything (“Big Air Coin”). The radio exploitation practices used for *Hitler’s Children* were not invented by RKO. Their approach drew from the historical precedents previously outlined, with minor changes. Instead of running a studio program or doing general publicity tie-ups, RKO focused advertising on one film. Instead of using stars and risking pressure from the MPTOA, they brought on no-name talent. The most significant deviation from conventional procedure was a radio advertising
budget almost as much as the budget of the film itself; before *Hitler’s Children*, radio exploitation was limited to class-A features.

What the press did agree on is the widespread turn to radio exploitation by all studios following the release of *Hitler’s Children*. Where they differed was how much they attributed this movement to *Hitler’s Children*. In either case, the staying discursive power of the film’s title is possibly the film’s most intriguing legacy. For instance, a *Motion Picture Herald* article documented the industry’s shift towards radio exploitation, citing the “restricted use of magazine lineage” and “newspaper stock shortages” caused by World War II as the principle causes (“Majors Increase Radio”). Yet even there, there is a passing reference to *Hitler’s Children*.

In 1944, radio spending continued to increase, and press writing continued to mention *Hitler’s Children* when covering exploitation. MGM teamed up with WLW Cincinnati for a promotion of *An American Romance*, a star-drive feature. A *The Billboard* article cited *Hitler’s Children* as a predecessor for the deal, even while *Romance* expanded its exploitation to 130 cities and included a “caravan tour” through the Midwest (“WLW-MGM Tie-Up”). Like RKO’s own attempt at A-film exploitation, the resulting box office was not extravagant. The return “results are not quite up to expectations,” wrote *Variety* in their Grosses section (“‘Romance’ $12,500”). It is hard to understand why studios did not follow RKO in exploiting their B-films over radio. It was *Hitler’s Children* and *Behind the Rising Sun* that “pioneered in radio exploitation with highly successful campaigns,” not *This Land is Mine* (Glickman). But it is equally difficult to frame these campaigns as relative failures without understanding the necessary regular promotion of stars and their features.

To understand whether or not *Hitler’s Children* directly resulted in an increase in radio exploitation, future research questions would need to consider how material media was affected
by WWII and how propaganda in the United States was ideologically received. How many resources, both media and human, were regulated and limited by the war, and did this result in an increased radio advertising budget? Similarly, the success of *Hitler’s Children* and *Behind the Rising Sun* must be partly attributed to their ideological appeal. How common and popular were racist depictions during the war, and how were they widely received when presented as ‘sensational’ B pictures?

What this essay can examine is how the success of these B pictures fit into the popular discourse in trade publications. Many publications saw the failure of *This Land is Mine* and the success of *Behind the Rising Sun* as an indication that radio was made to advertise B pictures. In some columns, no further explanation was needed: “A B picture … based on an essentially sensational subject matter, was easy to sell via radio” (“Children’ Success Ballyhoo”). Other writers invoked class-related icons: “They have found that ‘you can’t sell Rolls Royces with radio.’” since “the voice of a high-priced film star somehow has the prestige watered by radio” (“Third Big Pic”). The language here diminishes the success of *Hitler’s Children*, either by claiming the film as an inherently more marketable, and thus less valuable, asset, or by negatively associating radio with low quality. These lazy rhetorical attempts to explain the success of radio exploitation in terms of A and B films draw language from the existing print discourse, which often only mentioned B pictures when criticizing them.

By a large margin, the writing on B Pictures in the same publications that celebrated *Hitler’s Children*, around the same time, regularly bemoaned their existence. An article from 1938 quoted a vague group of college women asking “why Hollywood ‘persists’ in giving [them] these poor pictures,” referring to B films (“Shrewd Questions on Films”). In 1940, Bob Moak writing for *Variety*, wrote that “B-budget pictures, bane of the exhib’s life … are due for an
axing before the 1940-41 season.” And Thomas Pryor in the New York Times wrote in 1942 that “the B picture … will unregrettably disappear.” Each article has the same message: no one would have missed the B picture. Yet the longevity of this message reveals an unwritten history. If the same thing was being written in 1938, 1940, and 1942, then the B picture must have been either persistent, if these authors are to be treated as public figureheads, or the B picture must have been well-liked and no one wanted to say so.

This dismissive language was generally shared by the RKO production heads. Dore Schary, chief of production following Charles Koerner, who oversaw Hitler’s Children, went on record with his distaste for the term ‘B picture.’ In the New York Times, he wondered “why a picture costing $185,000 shouldn’t have similar values to that $2,500,000 epic.” And in Variety he stated that “‘the most awful thing’ he could imagine … was studios ‘actually trying to make B’s.’” Schary hesitated to reject low-budget films entirely, but was wary of seeming as if he supported them. He was more concerned with phrase ‘B picture,’ which suggests that the term had taken on certain connotations that the public wanted to reject. His predecessor, N. Peter Rathvon, who temporarily took over production after Koerner’s death, made a statement against the contemporary discourse: “We’re going to keep on making them [B pictures]—and you can quote me” (“RKO to Continue Making”). Rathvon’s statement was shocking precisely because, “major studio execs for years have refused to admit they make the secondary type pix” (“RKO to Continue Making”). The writer’s statement might have been equally shocking; executives might have denied they made B pictures, but trade publications also denied that there were B pictures being made that were not being discussed.

Within this discourse that supported the star system that audiences knew and loved, the success of a prominently B film like Hitler’s Children stood out. This intrusion into the popular
press, along with the fact that the film generated new ideas in radio exploitation, explains the enduring prominence of the film in writing about radio exploitation. It was a cultural anomaly, a film that no one in mainstream discourse was supposed to admit to liking or wanting to produce. The press liked to write about the big-budget features that adopted this exploitation before their release, and liked to write about B pictures only after they succeeded.

The use of radio to exploit *Hitler’s Children*, and later in 1943 *Behind the Rising Sun*, was nothing new. It developed out of a practice of radio advertisement prominent through the 1930s and changed to suit its particular needs. Without stars, it relied on the prominence of its radio commentator author. Without a budget, it relied on its ideological slant to generated a public interest. Its use of professionally recorded transcriptions instead of locally sourced versions granted the air spots a public legitimacy the film itself lacked. After the world premiere of *Hitler’s Children*, RKO used its newly discovered stars to cheaply promote the film nationally. The film’s success was widely written about precisely because it was the kind of film publications did not usually write about. *Hitler’s Children* was turned into the kind of success story that Hollywood likes to capitalize on, even while the language used was ambivalently dismissive.

This a history of experimentation in media and critical reading. Without access to radio transcriptions, the histories must be doubly read through contemporaneous publications. How an event is written about is often as illuminating as what the author is saying. This historical methodology can be applied to contemporary discourse to make sense of the legacy of the B picture. What films, usually absent in press writing, are given spotlights, and why? What new media practices go undocumented until paired with a success story? Perhaps there is a more honest, less sensational writing practice waiting to emerge.
Works Cited


“RKO Credits Radio with Boosting Class B Film into Class A Grosses.” *Variety*, vol. 150, no. 1,


