Radio in Welles's *Heart of Darkness*

intended to mold with a "Group Theater method." Nevertheless, underlying these theatrical touches, his approach to filming Conrad's novel was fundamentally radiophonic.

The influence of radio on Welles's films has been noted. Robert L. Carringer, for example, has described the famous breakfast montage between Kane and his first wife as the "visual equivalent" of a radio cross fade (101). Welles's biographer Frank Brady has described the use of music in *Citizen Kane* as a "direct result" of the radio experience of both Welles and its composer Bernard Herrmann—particularly in the way they use music to bridge scenes, suggest moods, create backgrounds, punctuate narration, and fulfill other narrative functions. Brady further describes Welles's special attention, throughout his film career, to the sound tracks of his films: in making *Citizen Kane*, for example, "Welles would often cut the film footage to fit the music" (264). In both *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) and *Macbeth* (1948) he wanted to record all the dialogue before filming the actors speaking their lines (218, 409); and in Mr. Arkadin / Confidential Report (1962) he dubbed in many of the male voices himself (471). Welles acknowledged the ongoing influence of radio on his filmmaking in a comment to Carringer: "Welles told me, in fact, that he often applies the same test when he is directing—he turns his back and closes his eyes and listens to hear if the sounds are dramatically convincing on their own" (102). These manifestations of radio experience are summarized in Carringer's remark about *Citizen Kane*: "most important of all, the radio influence is evident in the way the film uses the physical properties of sound as an element of narration" (101). Radio experience translated, primarily, into innovative and rich uses of sound on most Welles film projects, *Heart of Darkness* might, in this respect, have been an exception: a film in which the presence of radio is seen more than heard.

The film was to begin with a prologue in which spectators watched from the viewpoints of a Canary, a death-row convict, and a golfer as Welles—in the roles of bird keeper, warden, and golf instructor—explained and demonstrated the unusual viewing experience to follow. Throughout the prologue, the camera was to dolly, pan, tilt, defocus, and black out so as to suggest the experience of a person (or

All around everything was still as far as the ear could reach. Orson Welles directed and starred in two half-hour radio dramatizations of *Heart of Darkness*; the first for the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* on 6 November 1938, and the second, six years later on 13 March 1945, to launch a short-lived series called *This Is My Best*. In between these broadcasts he tried to produce a feature-length film that would have had a curious ear for radio. A film version of *Heart of Darkness* was to have been Welles's first RKO picture, but it ran over budget and was canceled. He made *Citizen Kane* instead.

What can be said about a film that never existed? Not much with certainty. For obvious reasons, speculation about its probable use of sound is especially problematic. The available primary evidence includes a copy of Welles's Revised Estimating Script dated 30 November 1939, and a number of other documents that provide hints of how Welles might have fleshed out some of the characters and situations outlined in the estimating script. We have evidence, but we do not have a film.

Incomplete though it is, the available evidence suggests that Welles's approach to filming *Heart of Darkness* was based largely on his experience in radio. His familiarity with the theater, incredible for a 24-year-old, was also evident in images like that of Kurtz's Inner Station, which became a temple in the midst of a black lake more reminiscent of Southeast Asia than of Central Africa. The walls and ceiling of the temple were to be covered with skulls, an idea Welles had used previously in his 1938 Mercury Theatre production of *Danton's Death*. This theatrical flair would also have influenced his direction of the actors, whom, as a CBS press release claimed, he
bird) participating in each scenario. This, Welles explained, is how the viewer would experience *Heart of Darkness* — as if he or she were Marlow. He expressed the meaning of his method in the equation "\( x = i \)." The eye on the left indicates that the spectator will see everything just as Marlow does. The "i" on the right promises that, like the novel, this *Heart of Darkness* will be narrated in the first-person singular (a lower-case "i" was used so that the dot could be lined up with the pupil of the second eye). The equals sign (=) prepares the spectator to take on the narrator’s identity completely. As Welles planned to say, “You’re not going to see this picture — this picture is going to happen to you” (Rosenbaum, “Introductory Sequence,” 26).

Welles was seeking a filmic equivalent of the kind of identification that novels can effect in readers, and that his own Mercury radio show — subtitled *First Person Singular* — routinely evoked in listeners. But this experiment in first-person cinematic narration was doomed to fail, if only because of the terms of the cinematic situation. David Bordwell reminds us that perspective means “seeing through” — a handy way to recognize that both the object (the depicted world) and the subject (the viewer) are bound together through the picture plane.” The implications of this mediating presence for Welles’s first-person narration are made explicit by the voice-over narration in the prologue: “You are the star. Of course, you’re not going to see yourself on the screen but everything you see on the screen is going to be seen through your eyes and you’re somebody else” (Rosenbaum, “Introductory Sequence,” 25). Necessarily, the more Welles insists on his formulae’s “i”, the more the *you* proliferate. This is because the spaces a film inscribes for the viewer and the depicted world are on opposite sides of the picture plane, the transparent window through which we view the film.

In all likelihood Welles’s first film would have demonstrated the paradox that a narrative consisting principally of perceptual point-of-view shots effectively blocks viewer identification. Such a mode emphasizes the very separation between viewer and depicted world that classical filmmaking techniques (like shot/reverse-shot editing) work hard to efface. Robert Montgomery’s film *Lady in the Lake* (1947) helps to illustrate this point, since it was filmed essentially from the point of view of a different Marlow(e), Raymond Chandler’s detective Philip. The reactions to Montgomery’s film indicate the limitations of first-person cinematic narration. As the New York Times critic commented:

> you do get into the story and see things pretty much the way the protagonist, Philip [sic] Marlowe, does, but you don’t have to suffer the bruises he does. Of course, you don’t get a chance to put your arms around Audrey Totter either. After all, the movie makers, for all their ingenuity, can go just so far in the quest for realism.9

Here, as in Welles’s voice-over narration, the *you* proliferate. While the “just so far” above might refer to Production Code restrictions, the more definite limit is the “tunnel vision” effect that would also have limited *Heart of Darkness*. Robert T. Eberwein also noted that *Lady in the Lake* “offers the equivalent not of a first-person narrative, but of one written in the second person.” The closest Welles could have come to first-person narrative is narration in the second person. Yet the “i” does have a true referent: Orson Welles.

Welles planned to steal the show by appearing in the film in at least four different guises. First, after the prologue ends and Welles exits, Welles remains as the locus of Marlow’s perceptions and body movements, which, as narration that is self-conscious in the extreme, represent the presence of a flamboyant director. But these perceptions and movements also represent a character, and so — along with Marlow’s dialogue, spoken narration, and occasional reflections in windows and mirrors — they register Welles’s presence twice. Third, Welles embodies Kurtz, the goal and motive of the narrative. Fourth, and most problematic of all, Welles haunts the zone that most films reserve for the spectator.

By foregrounding his authorial discourse and by merging the camera’s viewpoint with that of Marlow, the omnipresent Welles threatens to edge the viewer out of the filmic event altogether. Rosenbaum has argued that, with few exceptions, Welles’s planned “technique remains functionally neutral throughout, rarely calling attention to itself” (“The Voice and the Eye,” 31). The directness and
simplicity of his approach might suggest functional neutrality, but in practice it would have involved an almost uninterrupted panning and dollying in, focused through Welles’s eyes, to behold Welles’s face as Kurtz, with Welles — ensconced in the space reserved for the spectator — looking on. As James Naremore put it, “Welles’s movie would never let the audience forget that the whole thing was being cleverly managed.” Welles was clearly trying to make Marlow as transparent as he could, yet there would be no getting around a character whose inscribed absence and privileged point of view situated him squarely in that space into which spectators normally fall.

Stephen Heath suggests a supporting explanation for why viewers could not have identified with Marlow. He has described how viewers, while watching a film, deal with their own absence from the world on-screen in terms of a complicated process of suturing: “What then operates, classically, is the effacement (or filling in) of the absence, the suturing of the discourse ... by the reappropriation of the absence within the film, a character in the film coming to take the place of the Absent One posed by the spectator.” Welles’s absent Marlow as much as guaranteed that the spectator, already an Absent One by virtue of the dynamics of film-viewing, was to remain just that — a you on the outside looking in.

A comparable view was expressed by Christian Metz about Lady in the Lake:

What happens in ordinary films, and is sometimes called “identification,” is in reality a temporary association, an act of projection whereby the spectator momentarily mentally accompanies the character (on condition that he has at other moments seen him from outside). Thus in his desire to achieve total identification, the director of The Lady in the Lake in fact inhibited that partial association which other films enjoy.

Metz concluded by stating the principle that Montgomery and Welles neglected: “The subjective image proper is therefore only possible in small doses and in association with objective images. The process is not generalisable” (“Current Problems of Film Theory,” 48). This principle is more fundamental than Metz here suggests.

Radio in Welles’s Heart of Darkness

Conrad’s Marlow interrupts his tale to tell his listeners: “Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know.” Listeners and readers insert protagonists in scenes they imagine. Directors insert protagonists in scenes they film. In all three cases we see Marlow, whom we know. Welles’s spectator would have been denied that necessary anchor.

Thus, in attempting to reproduce a maximum of immediacy and find a visual equivalent to first-person narrative, Welles would have found it difficult to use the dynamics and properties of the cinematic medium. Are the dynamics and properties that he did use borrowed from some other medium?

Welles meant to begin Heart of Darkness as he had begun each Mercury broadcast: with a prologue in which he addresses the audience directly in his own persona. He introduces the story, then reappears as the frame narrator, then reappears as Kurtz. Listeners never lose the sense that Orson Welles is bringing them the evening’s entertainment, even as they custom-craft faces and figures to match the voices all flowing from the one man. Years later, Welles described the appeal radio always held for him: “It’s so ... what do I want to say, impersonal? No, private. It’s as close as you can get, and still get paid for it, to the great, private joy of singing in the bathtub.” Radio permits the dramatist to adopt and shift between multiple narrative agencies, all the while cultivating an aural intimacy with the imaginations of the listeners. The relationship between film artist and spectator introduces a visual orde: mediated by a picture plane. The spectator of Heart of Darkness would have found his entry into a comparable private intimacy blocked by constant reminders of the presence of Weeji and his bathtub.

The novel itself is more “radiophoric” than many others Welles might have chosen. Much of this tale’s radiophony emanates from the voice of its teller, for whom “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (48). Radio, as media go, can emulate this rich nothingness even better than printed text, because radio makes the
teller disappear. As the narrator of Conrad’s tale says at one point deep in Marlow’s story, “It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice” (83). Darkness has turned Marlow’s narrative into one “that seemed to shape itself without human lips” (83). Conrad has turned his readers into listeners around a virtual radio set.

In the transition from printed to radio text, Marlow’s tale becomes literally an oral narrative and thus gains a primal immediacy that suits the evocation of a primal world. The novel overlays levels of narration with bands of sensory experience that become less real as they converge on the heart of darkness. We might picture the reader’s virtual-listening experience as the middle stage of a simultaneous three-ring performance: we are reading; we are “listening” on the Nellie; and finally we are “seeing” the river and Kurtz. To fashion a Heart of Darkness for radio is to strip away one of these bands and to concretize the next one down: now we just listen and “see.” The comfortable solidity of the book in the hand is lost. Marlow understands this solidity when he discovers a copy of An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship: “The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real” (99). To remove this hard casing is to release Marlow’s tale upward to float in the air, the realm of radio drama.

The transition from radio to film text peels away the next sensory layer and transfers the meaning of Marlow’s tale to its kernel: now we just see. If tales and not their tellers are to be trusted, then Conrad’s declared intention to make us see does not distract from the frequently veiled and indistinct quality of what we are shown. How faithfully does the unblinking eye Welles fashioned represent a narrator who, in the novel, becomes increasingly unsure of his eyes as he approaches the heart of darkness? Marlow’s original reportage is shot through with “as if”s and “as though”s, laced with metaphor and obliquity.

Welles’s film, by making viewers see in the literally straightforward manner he intended, would have realized a heart of darkness with sharper edges than Conrad’s. In this sense, the film was to complete a process that began with the Mercury broadcast. In the radio version, imagined speaking and listening became physical transmissions and receptions. On film, qualified perceptions and murky cognitions would have become photographs projected at twenty-four frames per second. Staying off this liberalizing tendency of cinema takes knowledge, both of the medium and of the stylistic devices available. As usual, Welles did what he could with what he had.

Welles later described the mode as “kind of the perfect setup, because you needed a lot of narration” (This Is Orson Welles, 31). By keeping his narrating protagonist mostly offscreen, he would have confined Marlow mostly to the sound track. This approach would have been tantamount, in effect, to a kind of radio with visual accompaniment.

William Stott once quoted Edward R. Murrow on wishing his wartime reportage from London had been visual, that it “would be better if you could look at it.” But Stott added that Murrow “was more effective than any camera,” because “radio was the ideal medium for putting the audience in another man’s shoes” (Documentary Expression, 90). Stott highlights a dimension of the listening experience that the cinema cannot reproduce: radio does not reach audiences through a picture plane. The listener inhabits the “playing area” of the story, namely the shared space of imagination. This geographic identity extends to listeners a privileged capacity for identification that is also shared by readers.

Conrad’s Marlow remarks that “nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven’s remains, till I got out and stepped into his shoes” (54). Thicknesses of sensory experience and the coils of the river separate readers from Kurtz — and so do the frame narrator, Marlow, and the skeletal Fresleven. Films can evoke this sense of entering other bodies, of passing from link to link along chains of engagement, but only indirectly.

The misconception Welles took to its limit with his Heart of Darkness is that listening to a story is the same as watching it. This same confusion helps to account for the power of The War of the Worlds broadcast, only in that production Welles shared not in the
confusion but in its willful perpetration. Here, a fictive agency disguised as a news announcer leads already wildly imagining listeners toward still wilder visions: “We have dispatched a special mobile unit to the scene and will have our commentator, Carl Phillips, give you a word picture of the scene as soon as he can reach there from Princeton.” But printed words, spoken words, and moving pictures each induce their own range of effects, just as narratives that are read, heard, and seen engender identification according to the principles of their own media. This news announcer’s artful jumble of mock-information is difficult to sort out, especially when one’s mind is in a panic. Considering Murrow, Stott writes that “radio’s limitation became its strength” (Documentary Expression, 91). During the first months of his film career, radio’s strength became Welles’s limitation. The i on the right side of his formula masks an ineffaceable you, and the eye on the left hides another property of the mode’s real nature. The type and degree of identification he had in mind, and his plan for achieving it, suggest that Welles configured the visual component of his Heart of Darkness for an impossible sense organ: a seeing ear.

In film narrative the terms “perspective” and “point of view” insistently evoke their literal senses. The swapping of one sense with another—for example, the presentation of a character’s (or viewer’s) perceptual point of view as his or her mental point of view—is common in the history of film theory and criticism. This tropism seeks to encompass the abstract senses of “seeing”—with its synonyms, and a constellation of related words—and the literal seeing carried out by characters, cameras, and viewers in the course of a film. A character sees, literally, from a given point of view. A character has a given mental attitude toward the object that she or he is, literally, seeing. These two facts are related but not interchangeable.

In Heart of Darkness Welles was prepared to elevate the pun on the word “see” to a structuring principle. Neither radio nor the theatre provides a director with the opportunity to conflate optical and narrative point of view. The cinema, by its capacity to place and move an optical point of view almost anywhere, encourages just such a confu-
ness is filled with the voice of Kurtz. Conrad masterfully rendered the effect of Kurtz’s voice on Marlow, but the medium of sound film required Welles to find something for Kurtz to say.

Conrad’s Kurtz is famous for his eloquence: “of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words — the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible” (113). But Conrad’s readers are treated to very few of Kurtz’s actual words, and most of what we know about Kurtz is said of and not by him. Moreover, when Kurtz does make an impression directly, it is often by speech reduced to pantomime, as when Marlow reports that “I could not hear a sound, but through my glasses I saw the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its bony head that nodded with grotesque jerks” (133–34). By contrast, Welles’s Kurtz is a formidable presence with an unmistakable voice.

Like the tale that seems to shape itself without human lips, this character of Kurtz, who is “very little more than a voice” (115), appeals to an artist like Welles, who is fully aware of the potential of radio where, as Rudolf Arnheim wrote, “it is very significant that certain expressive voices do not strike the naive listener as ‘the voice of somebody one doesn’t see’ and whose appearance can be speculated on, but rather transmit the experience of an absolutely complete personality.” Welles rounded out a man who “presented himself as a voice” (113) with talk, filling in the blanks of Marlow’s original account. Kurtz’s lack of actual dialogue has given filmmakers and actors a free hand to improvise a cadenza that is also the climax of the story, as the examples of Marlon Brando and John Malkovich demonstrate.

Silence on the radio is known as “dead air,” and, like first-person narration in the cinema, it is best evoked indirectly. Welles and Howard Koch retained Kurtz’s silence in the Mercury Heart of Darkness by implication (without actually broadcasting more than a second or two of silence at a time). Their heart of darkness is — although rich with sound — not filled with speeches. The Mercury production preserves the novel’s ambiguities against the medium’s
tendency to reify. What pressures against the cinema’s tendency to do likewise could Heart of Darkness have exerted?

Welles’s Kurtz tends to stop all narrative movement while he delivers a speech. Visually, he serves as a fixed target for Marlow’s protracted approach. Frequently he looks straight into Marlow’s camera eye and talks, a sight that — as Lady in the Lake demonstrates — is not very cinematic. Most of the dynamism of Kurtz resides on the sound track: that space in a film text toward which a character conceived with radio in mind might naturally gravitate and expand to fill. Carringer writes that the challenge facing Welles was to “externalize the story while at the same time remaining faithful to Conrad’s spirit. In a sense, he had to fill in Marlow’s vast silences and make them dramatically palpable” (The Making of Citizen Kane, 3). But silence in the cinema is dramatically palpable. The voice of Kurtz suggests that Welles’s film would have remained faithful to a medium that was neither Conrad’s nor the one at hand.

Fidelity is, however, an elusive criterion by which to judge an adaptation. Welles also sought to equate the dark forces behind Kurtz with the rise of fascism. This displacement and modernization of Conrad’s symbolism made an all too familiar vocabulary available for the transformation of Kurtz’s silences and implied speeches into audible words. In the script, Kurtz dreams of conquering “five more continents,” and compares himself with “a man now in Europe trying to do what I’ve done in the jungle” (Rosenbaum, “The Voice and the Eye,” 29–30). This comparison with Hitler reappeared at the end of his 1945 radio version of Heart of Darkness.

Further hints of Welles’s intentions with Kurtz can be found in the villain of Mexican Melodrama, a project Welles considered between the cancellation of Heart of Darkness and the start of his work on Citizen Kane. Rosenbaum describes the film as “a thriller that, like both Heart of Darkness and The Smiler with a Knife, centers on a charismatic, fascistic figure (in this case, a propagandistic radio commentator)” (This Is Orson Welles, 358). Was Heart of Darkness to be a unique gesture addressed to the dangerous political potentials of radio? Naremore writes of Mexican Melodrama that “much of the script involves a wonderfully atmospheric journey through the jungle
toward the radio station” (*The Magic World of Orson Welles, 26).* In a sense, this description might also have fit *Heart of Darkness.*

Whatever else it may represent, the *Heart of Darkness* shooting script is a document of learning. As Rosenbaum notes, given the audacity of its concept, “coupled with a million dollar budget, 82-day shooting schedule and the outbreak of World War II, it is hardly surprising that RKO shelved the project” (“The Voice and the Eye,” 28). These factors certainly contributed to the project’s demise, but they do not rule out the possibility that Welles was hugely relieved when RKO pulled the plug. Carringer’s perhaps more illuminating comment is that what ended the project — as much as these factors — was Welles’s realization that “he had gone as far as he could with it” (*The Making of Citizen Kane, 14*). The results were in and it was time to move on to new experiments. Rosenbaum reports that just prior to cancellation, Welles had decided to play only Marlow (This is Orson Welles, 356), perhaps because the problems inherent to his cinematic blueprint — and the cinema’s real nature — had dawned on him. Maybe the closest he came to expressing the lesson he took from the project was when he introduced his third *Heart of Darkness*, the *This is My Best* production, in 1945: “I’m glad, too, to start off with an old favorite, a show that Mercury brought you first, a story we came to Hollywood to make a movie of. We never did. Maybe someday we will, but I think it’s particularly well suited to radio.”

A CBS press release reported that Welles had “embarked upon a radical experiment at RKO in applying recognized principles of radio and recording showmanship to the production of his first film venture” (“Welles Uses Radio,” 1). This experiment — which was perhaps more radical than anyone realized at the time — was in essence an attempt to weave the fabric of the radio medium into the visual field of a film narrative. As Naremore has noted, in *Mexican Melodrama* “the subjectivity is achieved by a method precisely opposite from *Heart of Darkness.* The camera aims at the central consciousness” (*The Magic World of Orson Welles, 24*). This about-face shows Welles as an exceptionally quick student, and confirms that the man who was about to make *Citizen Kane* was fast on his way to mastering another medium.

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**Notes**

3. For a survey of these documents, see ibid., 152n4. The Orson Welles Collection at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, has a number of other sketches and production documents not mentioned by Carringer. Excerpts from the Revised Estimating Script have been published by Jonathan Rosenbaum as “The Voice and the Eye: A Commentary on the *Heart of Darkness* Script,” *Film Comment* 8:4 (November 1973), 27–32.
4. CBS press release, 30 November 1939, “Orson Welles Uses Radio and Recording Techniques [sic] in Readying First Film.” His “Group Theater method” meant that the actors in his group should know “at all times what the entire production is about, and what their essential contributions to that production are to be” (1). Quoted by permission of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
6. This “Introductory Sequence” to the Revised Estimating Script has been published, with a commentary by Jonathan Rosenbaum, in *Film Comment* 8:4 (November 1973), 24–26.
16 Quoted with permission of CBS Radio.
18 Quoted with permission of CBS Radio.