

Orson Welles, Broadcasts and Fake News

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Orson Welles' spectral return to the screen, ingeniously in posthumous mode, should have come as a comfort to the magicians skilled in the arts of trickery. Beyond the grave, he seems to be exerting a continuing influence, with his film, [The Other Side of the Wind](#) making its debut after 48 torrid years at the Telluride Film Festival. His delight for illusion and the magical manipulations of the camera would not have been out of place in the anxiety filled age mistakenly called the "post-truth" era.

Starting momentarily grand and at summit greatness in *Citizen Kane*, and heading low into financial difficulty and stuttering projects, his genius was as prodigious as his luck was absent. His aptitude in mastering the brutish nature of the directing set was unquestioned – except in Hollywood. Throughout he was plagued by the curse that money has over the genius of expression. Power and control do not necessarily entail backing and profits – for Welles, it was the sheer sense of doing something, the need to run multiple projects that might never have seen the light of day. His mind, and application, proved inscrutably errant.

What Welles did master, to an extent, was the degree of fakery, creating a world of illusion that refuses to date. The word “fake” has a certain pejorative quality, having been further stained by its users in the age of Donald J. Trump, often in connection with that other unreliable companion, “news”. But Welles managed to give it a boost of respectable guile, a teasing sense of about how other realities might be seen. Now, to challenge such ways of seeing by claiming them to be fake would either make you a mental patient or a US president. For Welles, it was a cinematic experiment or a broadcasting contrivance, an effort to alter the senses and entertain.

Welles could hardly have been despondent about this age, he being the finest exponent of the values of fakery. He would have gotten down to work, tyrannically engaged with his staff in producing a fine work on the odiously named “post-truth world” (since when was there a fully truthful world in any case, one pulsating with verity?).

His most delightful ribbings would have now been subsumed under such tags as misinformation, crowned by the meaningless nature of fake news. Could he have gotten away with the radio announcement made on October 30, 1938 that extra-terrestrials had, in fact, landed on earth and attacked it with single minded fury? Any empanelled jury would have to ponder.

The occasion is worth retelling. Grover's Mill, New Jersey, and the Mercury Theatre group, featured, along with an updated version of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. National radio supplied the thrilling medium and the delivery. “The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the air in the ‘War of the

Worlds' by H.G. Wells." A mild mannered, sensible start.

Then came the Welles' introduction, followed by a weather report. The announcer duly took listeners to "the Meridian Room in the Hotel Park Plaza in downtown New York, where you will be entertained by the music of Ramon Raquello and his orchestra." Cue the music, then a report that "Professor Farrell of the Mount Jennings Observatory, Chicago, Ill" had noted "explosions of incandescent gas, occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars." Re-cue the music, then an interruption that a meteor had found its way into a farmer's field in Grover's Mill, New Jersey.

The Martians had purportedly arrived. Observers were on hand. Emerging from a metallic cylinder was a creature "wriggling out of the shadow like a grey snake. Now here's another one and another one and another one." There were unsettling notes of "wet leather"; the faces were "indescribable". "The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent." Then the shooting commenced: "heat-ray" weapons trained on the humans at the site. Some 7,000 National Guardsmen were vaporised. The US military were deployed. Poisonous gas followed in retaliation.

The hoax had seemingly had its dastardly effect, though the extent of it remains disputed. Tim Crook, in his [discussion](#) on the psychological potency of radio, suggested that the newspapers had embellished the account, largely on account of the threat posed to their estate by the emergence of radio. "It does not appear that anyone died as a result, but listeners were treated for shock, hysteria and heart attacks." Welles came to a similar conclusion: paper headlines reporting lawsuits running into \$12 million were a consequence of envy occasioned by threat posed by radio advertising.

One myth speaks of thousands of New Yorkers speeding from their homes in deluded panic, their minds impregnated by the prospective deeds of extra-terrestrial terror. Ben Gross of the New York Daily News [recalled](#) in his memoir a scene of New York's streets: there was a state of near total desertion that October in 1938.

The Federal Communications Commission, trapped between the [remit](#) of enforcing regulations ensuring proper use of the airways for such things as "promoting safety of life and property" yet also fostering "artistic, informational and cultural needs" conducted an investigation into the affair. It found the laws of the United States unbroken, regulations intact. This was a fine thing, given the [famous assertion](#) by US Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in *Schenck v United States* (1919) that, "The most stringent protection of free speech should not protect a man in falsely shouting 'fire' in a theatre and causing panic."

The wily Welles, ever the tease, escaped ruination and duly went on to make *Citizen Kane*. "We can only suppose," [he reflected](#) on being informed that the FCC would investigate the episode, "that the special nature of radio, which is often heard in fragments, or in parts disconnected from the whole, had led to this misunderstanding." And in this, we have the precursor to mass information and disconnection; between selected parts and the baffling whole; the Internet and social media dissemination; Trump tweeting at midnight and digital trolls roaming around the clock; the misinformation merchants and the mercenaries of trickery.

At the release of *The Other Side of the Wind*, Peter Bogdanovich [struck](#) a melancholic note on the Palm Theatre stage. "It's sad because Orson's not here to see it." But then came a

rueful qualifier. "Or maybe he is."

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