

Hello, Americans: Orson Welles, Latin America, and the Sounds of the “Good Neighbor”

Tom McEnaney

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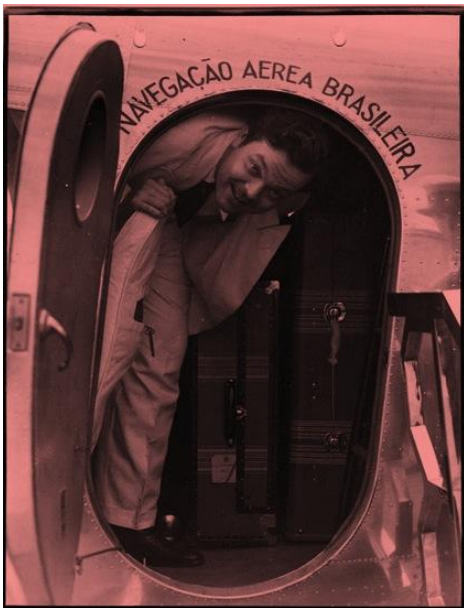
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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Diasporic Sound, From Mercury To Mars

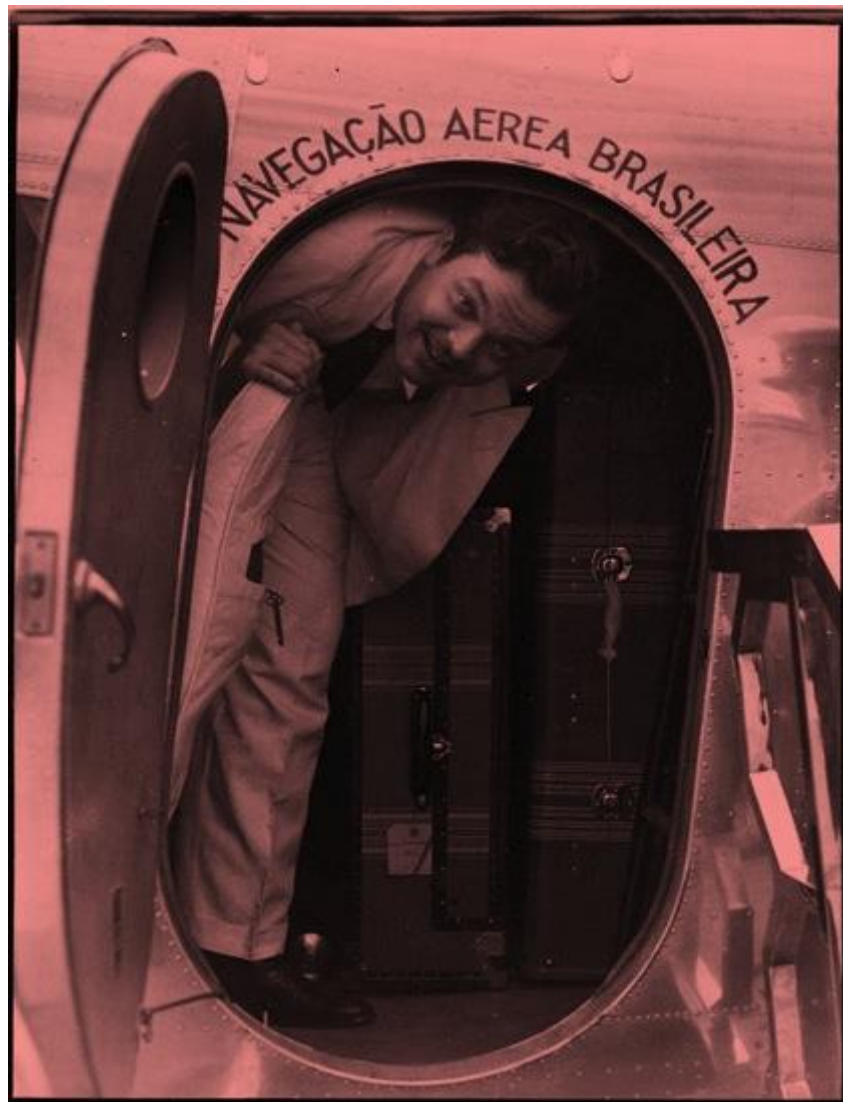


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And now, we interrupt this broadcast for a message from Guest Editor **Neil**

Verma: At 9:00 pm on July 11, 1938, the Columbia Broadcasting System unfurled a plush Tchaikovsky concerto to welcome 23 year-old *wunderkind* Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater troupe to national airwaves for a show destined to become the most famous dramatic radio anthology ever aired.

The Mercury Theater on the Air came with hype. Welles was fresh off a streak of innovative stage adaptations of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar,” Shaw’s “Heartbreak House,” and Marlowe’s “Doctor Faustus,” pledging in a *New York Times* article to “treat radio with the intelligence and respect such a beautiful and powerful medium deserves.” A jab at his rivals? Maybe. Legends tell of 17-hour writing sessions, of rows minutes before airtime between Welles, producer John Houseman and composer Bernard Herrmann, of sound men abusing baskets, watermelons, toilets,

lawnmowers to make audio. *Time* described Mercury’s ambition as “bounded north and south by hope, east and west by nerve.”

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/merc-intro.mp3>

Welles was by then a radio veteran, the hero of *The Shadow* and impersonator of newsmakers from Sigmund Freud to Fiorello laGuardia on *The March of Time*. Hundreds of extant recordings link Welles to rousing Norman Corwin pageants, *Columbia Workshop* experiments, strident war shows like *Ceiling Unlimited*, buffoon turns on the Jack Benny and Fred Allen Shows, picaresque *Harry Lime* adventures, dense thrillers on *Suspense*, romances on *Lux Radio Theater*, diplomacy on *Hello Americans*, and [on](#) and [on](#). Welles gave radio new forms, as radio informed his filmmaking profoundly – the sound of *Citizen Kane* (1941) the characters in *Mr. Arkadin* (1955), the vocals in *Touch of Evil* (1958) the theme of *F is for Fake* (1974). Welles invented a cinema that is, among other things, a kind of radio play you can see.



Mercury (and the [Campbell Playhouse](#) it became) undertook plays like “Dracula,” “Treasure Island,” “The 39 Steps,” “Rebecca,” “Jane Eyre,” and “The Magnificent Ambersons” and dozens of others. But none would be remembered were it not for the “War of the Worlds,” adapted from H.G. Wells’s novel by Howard Koch. In October of 1938, WOTW aired to six million listeners, hundreds of thousands of whom misheard it as news. The “Panic Broadcast” became a series of fables: listeners treated for shock in Newark; families on Boston rooftops watching the fires of New York in the distance; an Indianapolis church service interrupted by a parishioner telling congregants “you might as well go home to die;” bomb threats and a police raid on CBS headquarters. Three quarters of a century later many agree with the *New York Tribune*’s Dorothy Thompson, who declared the Invasion “one of the most fascinating and important events of all time,” but the meaning of that event also feels unclear, growing more ambiguous with time. Today, the alien invasion is itself increasingly alien.

To confront that issue and to open *Mercury* to new kinds of critical practices in sound studies, *Sounding Out!* is partnering with [Antenna](#) over the next six months to bring you a 12-part series entitled **From Mercury to Mars: Orson Welles on Radio after 75 Years**. I’m honored to serve as *Sounding Out!*’s Guest Editor. We’ll be bringing you authors who engage aesthetic, historical and political aspects of Welles’ radio work with a depth and intensity unusual in Welles studies.

That’s especially true of this inaugural post by Cornell Comparative Literature Professor and SO! contributor [Tom McEnaney](#), who has been working on a book project involving radio and the

“neighborhood” of the Americas. I’m thrilled welcome Tom’s nuanced and provocative take on Welles’s adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and his *Hello, Americans* program, and I hope it will encourage you to stay with us as the series unfolds.

Like Welles, we’ve got a few tricks up our sleeve. Stay tuned. — nv



When WNYC’s *Radiolab* aired their [live celebration of *War of the Worlds*](#) five years ago, the odd laugh line was reserved for a moment at the start of the radio play when an announcer interjects “now we return to the music of Ramón Raquello and his orchestra.”

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/ramon-raquello-clip.mp3>

Raquello, as the *Radiolab* team makes clear, didn’t exist, and his “orchestra” was just an anonymous phonograph recording of the famous tango “La cumparsita.” Welles apparently chose the song for its “[tedium](#),” hoping it would make believable the lunacy to come. That the music of the Southern Cone set up listeners in the United States for the greatest hoax in history might have been yet another of the inside jokes Welles left us to listen for.

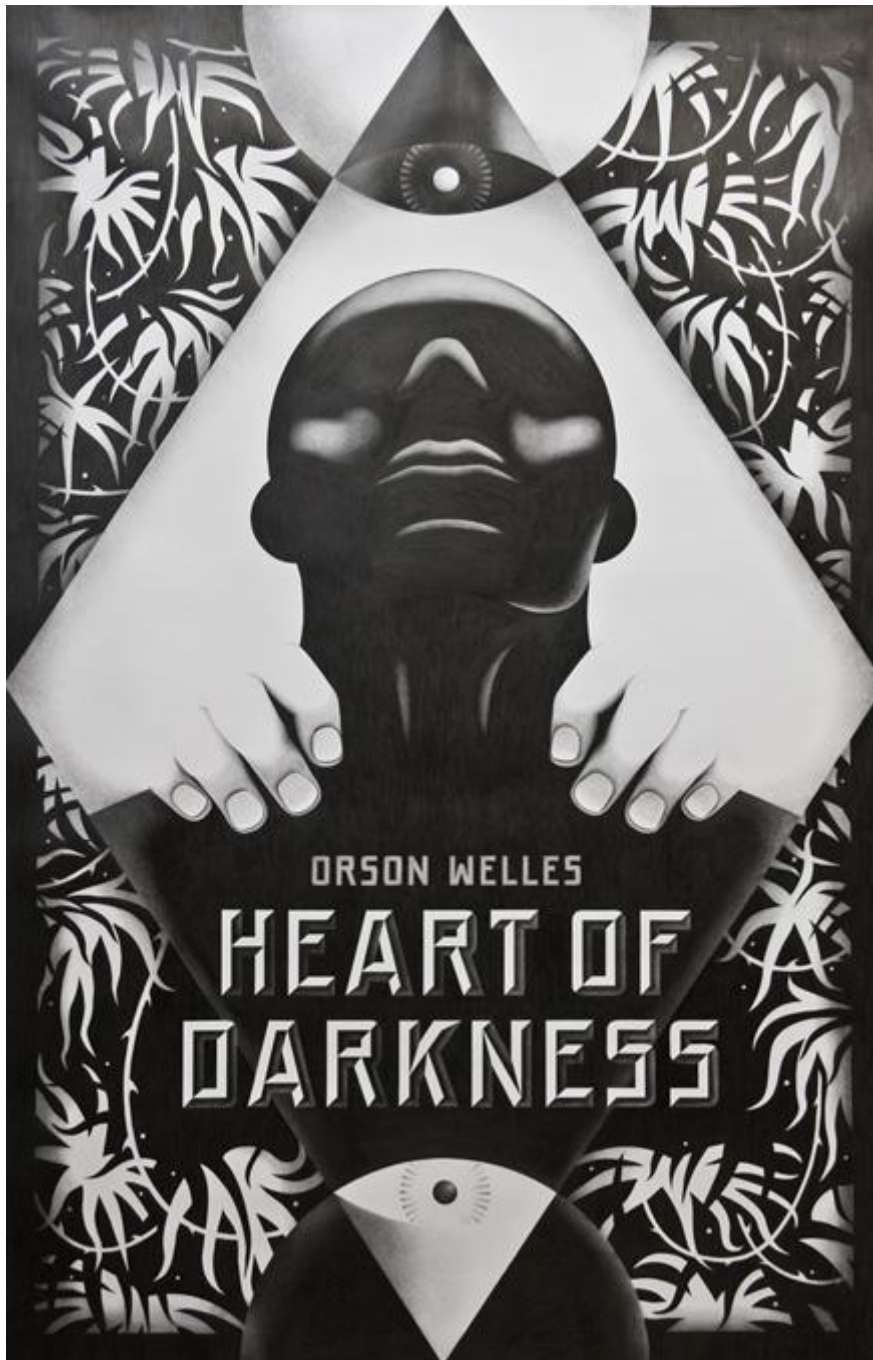
The sounds of Ramón Raquello and the settings of some of Welles’s most famous films—*The Lady From Shanghai* (1947); *Touch of Evil* (1958)—remind us how Latin America, and its relationship to

the United States, fascinated Welles in the late 30s and 40s. Five years after *War of the Worlds*, he began the final episode of his CBS program *Hello Americans* by recalling the show's mission: “It is important for the people of this hemisphere to get better acquainted, and the Mercury [Theater] has been given the job of helping out with the introductions.”

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/12-clip-1-orson-welles-pan-americanism.mp3>

An artful propagandist, Welles told Nelson A. Rockefeller, FDR's head of Inter-American Affairs and Welles's boss at RKO studios, that radio and film were the best way “to sell South America to North America.” Between 1938 and 1943 his technical innovations in film and radio, in addition to a 1942 stint as a “good will ambassador” to Latin America, created for him by Rockefeller, were meant to convince U.S. audiences of [FDR's claim in his first inaugural](#) that the United States should follow the policy of the “Good Neighbor.” Whether listening, watching, or reading his work during World War II, Welles's U.S. audiences were constantly reminded that they were residents of the Americas, rather than an exceptional and isolated America.

To assess the aesthetics and politics of Welles's engagement with Latin America, it's worth returning to the October 30, 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. Presented as a live news report of an alien invasion on the East Coast of the United States, *War of the Worlds* sent its mass audience into hysterics, proving to Marshal McLuhan that radio was “a tribal drum,” capable of calling forth the “archaic forces” of “the resonating Africa within” (301). The primitivist and racist logic in McLuhan's [Understanding Media](#) (1964) sought to explain away the irrationality he (and his Frankfurt School forebears) identified as the enlightenment's dialectical twin by exiling it to Africa. In this, he might have merely followed Welles's Mercury Theater, which aired a production of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* a week after *War of the Worlds*, thus linking an allegory about fascism (and radio's dangerous complicity with irrational politics) to a Conrad adaptation that critic Michael Denning [calls](#) “a fascist parable” exalting “power for power's sake” (376).



Yet these radio works concern themselves with fascism from very different narrative and social positions. While *War of the Worlds* depicts an alien *invasion*, his [Heart of Darkness](#) describes a journey *towards* the alien racial Other, presenting listeners with what had become by 1938 the more mundane miracle of radio—to bring them close enough to hear Kurtz’s haunting repetition: “the horror, the horror.”

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/orson-welles-hod-horror-horror.mp3>

Welles, who plays both Kurtz and Marlow in the conversation that leads up to these climactic lines, depicts here the seductive power of his own voice, able to encapsulate the story’s most important characters, and, as Kurtz, to impress even himself, as Marlow.

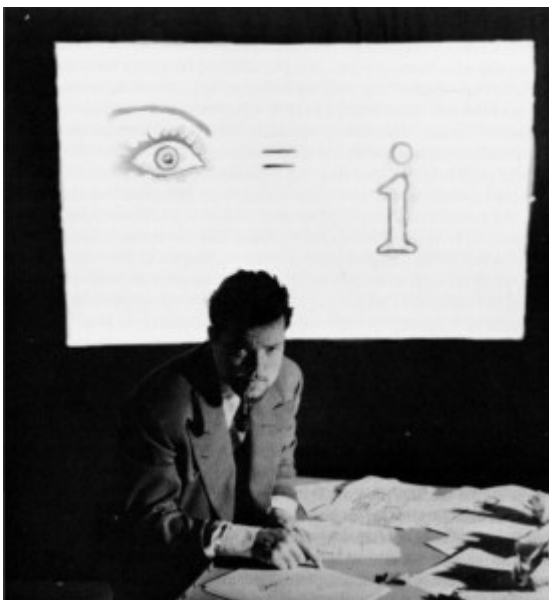
<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/orson-welles-hod-convo-w-kurtz.mp3>

“Mr. Kurtz,” Marlow / Welles says with awe, “is a remarkable man.” Repeating a line heard throughout the play, Marlow’s words are slyly deflated when they are echoed, with a tone of critical distance, in the voice of one of the ivory company’s employees, a voice that stands in for the listening audience, and encourages their own distrust of Marlow’s naïve faith in Kurtz’s lust for power.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/orson-welles-hod-remarkable-man.mp3>

Meanwhile, the play tells a complimentary story of proximity and distance: as the boat moves back down the river, the music shifts from tribal drums to spiritual laments to a meandering jazz saxophone, tracing, in basic and exoticist fashion, a capsule history of African diasporic music.

One year later, Welles also attempted to adapt *Heart of Darkness* as his cinematic directorial debut for RKO, shifting the frame narrative to New York City, while planning to shoot on location in Panama, where expansion had begun that year on the Panama Canal to allow for the transportation of US warships. For this project, Welles planned a first-person camera technique, mimicking his radio work with first person address. The Mercury Theater’s program, originally named “First Person Singular,” placed listeners on the scene. In film the technique became even more immersive, plunging the audience into uneasy, inescapable identification with Marlow’s point of view.



The first person in Welles’s screenplay combines *Heart of Darkness*’ journey into alien territory with *War of the Worlds*’ alien invasion—the sense that the audience was under attack. Forced to look out through the eyes of the imperialist adventurer Marlow, the audience surprisingly became the object that everyone *in* the film watches. The technique could prove threatening to the predominantly white and male movie audiences in the United States of 1940, as Welles planned to enlist 3,000 African American actors to play the so-called natives on the shores of the river—2500 more black extras than worked in Hollywood [at the time](#). When the audience fell under the black gaze in the Canal Zone, where African American men

increasingly worked as part of the defense industries, the story’s imperialist theme would have pointed back to the United States’ own [racist working conditions](#), revealing the nation’s complicity and subordination to the imperialist pursuit whose destiny is the primitivist conditions it creates.

RKO rejected Welles’s screenplay, as they did his later documentary project, *It’s All True*, which sought to transform his 1942 trip throughout Latin America into a tale that fused “the story of samba” with “the story of jazz” to situate African American and Afro-Brazilian musical cultures at the heart of Pan-American culture. Welles soon repurposed the material from *It’s All True* for a radio program entitled “Hello Americans” that attempted to complete the shift in representation towards a more lateral and dialogic notion of adjacency, positioning U.S. and Latin American culture on the same plane. The means to make these introductions included interviews with and recordings by musicians from Cuba, Brazil, and Mexico, historical tales about Montezuma, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Benito Juárez, Atahualpa and others.

In the show’s most experimental section, Welles simultaneously reinforces and mocks the idea that radio’s ability to collapse distances and transcend borders makes it *the* medium to communicate the idea of neighborliness.

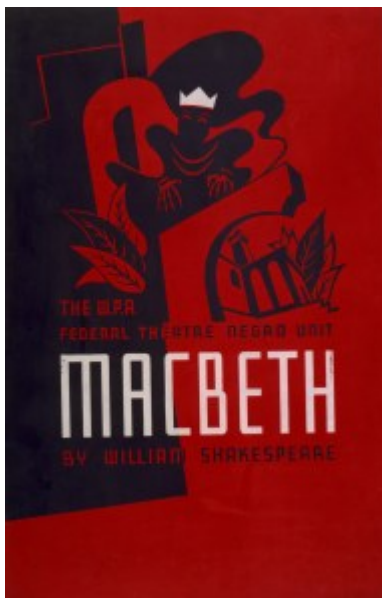
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Transporting his audience to “a clay hut somewhere in South America,” Welles introduces a small family in which the son, Juan, builds radios at a new factory, and his father, José, listens to the device. Once the broadcast begins, the listening audience within the frame—Juan, José and his mother—share the same space as the audience listening to “Hello Americans.” All listen together as a broadcast voice introduces Roosevelt’s inaugural address, then Roosevelt’s recorded voice announces his policy of the Good Neighbor, and finally static interrupts Roosevelt’s voice, and a German accented voice takes over to complain about “the republic of the Jew Franklin Roosevelt.” When José comments that the broadcast seems strange, his son Juan answers, “Oh no, they’re all like that. Señor Schmidt at the factory told us it’s uh, it’s because we’re closer to Germany.” Then, a musical curtain falls and Welles returns to reassure his audience that “Juan has learned. Today he works in another factory and he’s a member of the Latin American Confederation of Workers.”

The passage distinguishes between voices—José, Juan, the US broadcaster, Roosevelt, and the German propagandist—and reflects the imagined proximity implicit in Roosevelt’s idea of the Good Neighbor. But the technique also reveals how “Señor Schmidt” and his countrymen take advantage of the geographical confusion made possible by radio’s transcendence of borders to imply that Germany is actually more of a “neighbor” than the United States. These types of confusion between imagination and reality had once launched listeners into panic, but now Welles steps in to calmly and condescendingly reassure the audience that Juan “has learned.” Learned, that is, to join the left leaning Confederation: an untenable statement on US radio less than a decade later.

And yet, the unnamed obstacle impeding both foreign transmissions is language itself. Because everything filters through English, with accents marking the space between Spanish and German, *Hello Americans* imagines Pan-Americanism through one language alone. Radio’s monolingualism highlights one of the medium’s limitations. Whereas *It’s All True* could employ subtitles, and allow audiences to listen to a subject’s voice while reading what they said, radio faltered on its most medium-specific component – words.



Furthermore, while Welles imagines a “neighborhood” for all Americans, listeners lose the more radical racial politics he had once placed at the center of [his Haitian Macbeth \(1936\)](#), *Heart of Darkness* (1938), his theatrical production of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1941) and *It’s All True* (1942). Together these works place the African diaspora at the center of U.S., Pan-American, and world culture. They insist that the attack on fascism abroad must include a change in race relations at home. More ambivalently, they reveal Welles participating in acts of love and theft – a New Deal Kurtz, he draws the power to criticize fascist power from exoticized images of Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Brazilian, and African American cultures, supporting and appropriating the art and struggles of the African diaspora to bill himself as the cultural leader of, not just the ambassador for, Pan-Americanism.



Orson Welles as Othello (1952)

Tom McEnaney is an Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Cornell University. His work focuses on the connections between the novel and various sound recording and transmission technologies in Argentina, Cuba, and the United States. He is currently at work on a manuscript tentatively titled “Acoustic Properties: Radio, Narrative, and the New Neighborhood of the Americas.”



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