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Orson Welles: Interviews (Book review)

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and “DV realism” to paradigms founded in the origins of cinema. In another essay discussing cinema, Jan Simmons takes issue with the fundamental concept of new media, aiming to undermine the basic tenets under which it has been theorized. William Boddy illuminates the issues facing the television industry in the face of personal digital television recorders, such as TiVo, in his provocative “New Media as Old Media: Television.”

The New Media Book provides a broad survey of several of the issues that are raised by the advent and implementation of digital technologies. The essays included represent an impressively wide range of specific topics on the subject, all written in clear, easy-to-understand language. Although the essays are relatively brief, few extending beyond 12 pages, they manage to treat their respective subjects with clarity and precision. By presenting this wide range of topically organized and insightful essays, *The New Media Book* functions well as a useful introduction to the central issues of new media.

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Orson Welles

Interviews

Edited by Mark Estrin. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2002. \$46.00 cloth; \$18.00 paper.

Mark Estrin’s fascinating collection of interviews, conversations, and profiles (in the “Conversations with Filmmakers” series, edited by Peter Brunette) confirms that what Welles said, with typical hyperbole, of Hollywood—“There’s nothing you can say about it that isn’t true, good or bad” (193)—might also be taken as a veiled commentary on himself. *Orson Welles: Interviews* is as prismatic as *Citizen Kane*, revealing its subject as complex and protean, charming and annoying, mightily ambitious and successful but also perennially blocked and diverted, earning admiration and applause as well as various forms of dismissal, neglect, and comeuppance. The last term is particularly haunting, and, as in Booth Tarkington’s *The Magnificent Ambersons*, for all its homespun associations takes on Shakespearean resonance and pathos as it comes to describe a recurrent pattern at the heart of Welles’s life and art, one etched throughout this book.

There is plenty of material here about Welles’s life as well as his art, realms that seem especially intertwined for him. From the beginning he was “shaped,” by himself and others, as an artist, and throughout the volume we see not only this process but also some of its consequences. Estrin stretches the definition of the term “interview” so that he can print items that, even without Welles playing a featured speaking role, show the Welles legend and its making. For example, he includes the final installment of a three-part *Saturday Evening Post* article from 1940 by Alva Johnston and

Fred Smith, “How to Raise a Child: The Education of Orson Welles, Who Didn’t Need It,” which focuses on and contributes to his being “branded for life” as “America’s leading *enfant terrible*,” boy wonder, infamous “Mars man” (because of the unforgettable *War of the Worlds* broadcast), and, ironically, victim of his reputation. Similarly, Gore Vidal’s “Remembering Orson Welles,” which concludes the volume, is primarily about the Welles persona, and attempts to somehow define the “purest Welles” (218), summed up intriguingly as composed of a “set of conflicting humours” (211), by reminiscing about the impression he made, as much in restaurants and on television appearances as in his late unrealized projects.

Welles speaks for himself more directly and extensively in the other pieces in the volume, and is frequently concerned with what he described to BBC interviewer Huw Wheldon as the duty of showmanship (91), the interminable job of “getting to the public” as well as setting the record straight on some subjects and in general trying to take some control of his persona, career, and reputation. The strain of doing this is evident in numerous places, heightened by Welles’s sense that, as he told Kenneth Tynan, wherever he went, “I drag my myth around with me” (136). No wonder that in a comical but candid moment he said to his good friend Wheldon that “I hate interviews . . . and do everything I can to ruin the . . . image of myself” (91)—a statement that, like so many of the self-consciously quotable epigrams sprinkled throughout this volume, is somewhat less than a consistent credo but somewhat more than a disposable *jeu d’esprit*.

Despite his occasional disparaging and exhausted remarks about interviews, he was, I think, serious, not cynical, when he told Gore Vidal that “I have made an art form of the interview” (216). More important than merely as occasions for showmanship, self-display, and self-defense, interviews were vital extensions of both “good conversation,” which he felt was “an essential part of good living” (134), and the social engagement that he felt was at the essence of good art. “A work of art,” he said, “is a conscious human effort that has to do with communication. It is that or it is nothing” (144). He was never an artist of the garret or the margins, and he habitually wanted to be in the center, defined as where the people are, where the audience is. Accordingly, while one can hardly imagine, say, Kafka being interviewed, one can hardly imagine Welles not being interviewed.

If there wasn’t anyone to interview him, he would interview himself, as he did increasingly and often with great ingenuity in his later works, such as “Don Quixote, Orson Welles’s Sketchbooks” (a six-part television series for the BBC), *Filming Othello*, and *F for Fake*. But for the most part, there were plenty of people around to interview him, and Estrin has gathered some of the best of these conversations, each of which succeeds in getting Welles past his not entirely disingenuous claim that “I don’t like talking about my work” (35). There is, as we might expect, a miscellaneous quality to the book, and to the individual interviews, which often ramble freely, but even the bits and pieces are fascinating. These include anecdotes about on the set improvisations, praise for innovation and experiment even

within a broader context of tradition, reflections on his own high medieval rather than Renaissance mentality, and frequent recollections of unrealized dreams, ambitions, and projects: to be a college president, write a picture about sexual obsession, run a theater school, become a writer or painter, make a film of one of the many comedies he had written, and so on.

His comments on cinema, especially his own films, which form a large part of the volume, are always substantive and interesting. Estrin rightly notes that many of the later interviews “are characterized by an increasingly pronounced collective stocktaking” (xvii), and we are fortunate to have Welles’s own detailed inner views and overviews of his works, which he describes and analyzes shrewdly, entertainingly, and at times somewhat wistfully. One of the strongest impressions we get as we overhear Welles talking is the depth, extent, and sincerity of his social and political concern, often underappreciated elements inextricably and subtly as well as overtly embedded in the text and texture of his works. We find evidence of this concern throughout the volume: for example, in his summary of his own application of The Method (“I believe in preparing actors by telling them about the entire society in which they live rather than emphasizing the psychological and psychiatric and Freudian aspects of characterization” [90]), his emphasis on “what a film says” rather than “cinematic style and plastic shrinery” (93), and his repeated affirmation that he was a man of ideas, often about our communal dilemmas, and, at least in a carefully qualified sense, a moralist. All these qualities endeared Welles particularly to the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and the *Cahiers* interviews with Bazin et al. and Juan Cobos et al. are not only highlights of the present volume but perhaps among the most important Welles ever participated in, to a large extent because of their remarkable exploration of what he calls his “moral cinemascope” (112)—his attempt to make films that embody an “ethical point of view” without oversimplifying this quest or losing sympathy for those all too human and all too many of us whose morals and actions one cannot approve of.

I wish that Estrin had saved room for more of these kinds of interviews (some of which he cites in his introduction [xxv]) by leaving out the personal profiles and perhaps the interesting but long section from Leslie Megahey’s BBC program, *The Orson Welles Story*, easily available on videotape. And it would have been nice to have more early pieces, rare and hard to come by, as Estrin notes, but well worth tracking down and reprinting. But the volume as it stands is comprehensive, interesting, and useful from beginning to end, and exactly the kind of book Welles deserves—and, for what it is worth, perhaps would have welcomed. When Wheldon ended their interview by asking what he would like people to remember him by, Welles said that he hoped there might be a book that, unlike most studies available at the time that, in his eyes, were “very derogatory,” would instead contain “something nicer that they could read about me,” “if somebody should ever want to know about me” (94, 95). Without puffery or special pleading, *Orson Welles: Inter-*

views is such a book, reminding us that, in the words of *Touch of Evil*, when considering richly complex and ambiguous characters, of whom Welles was certainly one, we can admit that in some ways “You’re a mess, honey” and still conclude that “He was some kind of a man.”

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A Panorama of American Film Noir, 1941–1953

By Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton. Trans. Paul Hammond. San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2002. \$16.95.

Black & White & Noir

America’s Pulp Modernism

By Paula Rabinowitz. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. \$18.50.

Borde and Chaumeton’s *Panorama du film noir américain* was first published in France in 1955 and now appears for the first time in English—almost 50 years later—in a crisp translation by Paul Hammond. If one of the ironies of the initial publication of Borde and Chaumeton’s study was that it materialized just as the classical period of noir was coming to a close (the terminus usually set by critics is either 1955, the date of Aldrich’s apocalyptic *Kiss Me Deadly*, or 1958, the date of Welles’s baroque, south-of-the-border *Touch of Evil*), one contemporary irony—as a number of recent films, *Memento* (2000), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001), among others, testifies—is that noir as a genre is arguably more robust than ever.

To be sure, noir for Borde and Chaumeton was not so much a genre as a “series,” or a “group of nationally identifiable films sharing certain common features”: “style, atmosphere, subject” (1). Although the current critical wisdom is that noir, unlike the musical or Western, is *not* a genre (see Steve Neale’s *Genre and Hollywood* [2000]), most people would concur with Borde and Chaumeton that it is—at least in its early, classical phase—an *American* series. But Neale aside, and given that film noir’s status has definitively moved, as Rick Altman observes in *Film/Genre* (1999), from an adjectival to a substantive one, it’s quite refreshing to have the authors of *A Panorama of American Film Noir* declare that “noir is *for us*” (5). The advantage of this formulation, it seems to me, is that it effectively displaces the whole “generic” question of what noir is to the rather more intriguing issue of viewers and audiences.

From this reception perspective, the interest—indeed, charm—of Borde and Chaumeton’s panoramic survey of noir from 1941 to 1953 derives less from its presentation of so-called empirical or historical spectatorship than from