**Toward an Open System: The Prismatic Orson Welles**

***Introduction***

Let’s not start off on the wrong foot, stumbling forward with more of the “he said, she said” posturing that has already struck a fretful imbalance in the Wellesian mythology (let alone, Wellesian history). Clinton Heylin is correct in promoting that the history of Orson Welles must take a clear step back from the reliance on mythmaking, as well as, taking an additional sidestep from even the concept of Welles as his own mythmaker and thus presumption of the effects on history from the Wellesian “mosaic” itself (Heylin, *Preface*). Heylin endorses conceptualizing Welles’s oeuvre through a “prismatic” lens whereby a near infinitely dense and complex network of facts, factors and interactions can receive its ultimate point of focus through the film texts themselves (Heylin, 43). The prismatic (although referenced by Pauline Kael to different ends) is also an integral part of Catherine Benamou’s methodological approach to “restoring” a Welles text that never existed in its focused form (ie. a produced film)(Benamou, 14). Benamou’s concept of the prismatic can potentially be imported to Welles’s oeuvre and history, in order to re-construct Welles’s history without the front-loading of polemical rhetoric from “pro-Wellesian, anti-Wellesian” bipartisanism (‘he said, she said’ mythmaking varieties). Bolter and Grusin present a concept that is perhaps ideal for import to the historiography of Welles. “Remediation”, according to Bolter and Grusin, is the representation of one medium in another – an integral process of media to comment on, reproduce and replace each other (Bolter and Grusin, 55). Bolter and Grusin hold that it is a false notion that film is a medium that can “function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning” (Bolter and Grusin, 55). Could Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation be imported to the history of Welles? To the textual history, such as Welles’s actual labour as director on his films? To the extra-textual history, such as Welles’s personal and professional relationships – and all relationships with his work whether they have involved him directly or not?

Enter, Jonathan Rosenbaum – film critic, author and Welles authority. Rosenbaum, agrees with the concept of remediation as integral to media, but launches out further to incorporate cinephilia under the auspices of remediation – new cinephiles remediate old ones (Rosenbaum, *GCHC,* 6). For Rosenbaum, the historiography of Welles’s oeuvre should reflect a remediation of the textual and extra-textual factors of that history which can potentially be achieved through a prismatic methodology which organizes old and new, speculative and factual, words and actions to be focused for analysis and then historical (re-)construction. A complete picture of Welles (encompassing all textual and extra-textual facts, factors and interactions) will never form, but that is inherent in the concept of remediation, while the prismatic methodological approach to Wellesian historiography is apt for history’s inherent pluralistic nature. Gerald Mast has purported that an encyclopedic history of film is an encyclopedia and not a history per se and that a total history would only be possible through an aggregation of all individual histories past, present and future (therefore, the possibility of total history is unattainable)(Mast, 297-298, 313). Rosenbaum’s Wellesian bipartisanism is subsumed by his more practical agenda to “reconfigure” the history of Orson Welles by deconstructing it and reconstructing it through prismatic methodology (or at least I suggest this is an approach in lockstep with his expressed beliefs)(Rosenbaum, *GCHC*, 6). I would like to suggest that Rosenbaum’s agenda of remediating the history of Welles can be satisfied through this prismatic methodological approach, which may be modelled after Benamou’s own work on Welles’s never-made-film, It’s All True.

***Wellesian Historiography and The Extra-Textual***

Heylin, Rosenbaum and Wellesian Mythmaking

Clinton Heylin grounds expectations for Wellesian historiography in the preface of *Despite the System* – “some people’s motives and reasoning are lost now in the mists of forgotten memories and handfuls of dust, and cannot thus be subjected to any ongoing revisionism” (Heylin, ix.). This statement is a clear recognition of the spuriousness of reliance on the “he said, she said” dynamic to which history can sometimes reflect and which inevitably plagued Welles’s public reputation, and then the resultant writing of his history. Jonathan Rosenbaum elucidates Heylin’s point in the opening line of his quasi-poetic-montagist, autobiographical *Moving Places* – “imagination believes before knowing constructs” (Rosenbaum, *MP*, 1). With regard to constructing a film history, this kind of acute pessimism fortunately finds a pragmatic optimism as accompaniment. Heylin asserts that there is still a wealth of primary sources (from internal memos and shooting scripts to private correspondence and public lectures) to examine and analyze – “all help fill in the gaps and steer one toward a thesis of reconstruction” (Heylin, ix.-x.). The acknowledgement of “gaps” in Welles’s history and the goal of historical reconstruction that Heylin endorses both connect with Benamou’s prismatic methodological model which hinges on the idea that the text must be shaped by the extra-textual.

In *Discovering Orson Welles*, Rosenbaum sets out to define the necessary conditions upon which Welles’s history must be investigated and even, interrogated. For Rosenbaum, to “discover” Welles is to rule out completion and closure and that a definitive view of Welles is an ideological and practical roadblock which he dubs, “The Rosebud Syndrome” (Rosenbaum, *DOW,* 1). Rosenbaum asserts of Welles, “as a filmmaker who delighted for most of his career in the very process of continuous revision…Welles challenges commodification like few other directors” (Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 3). Rosenbaum warns of “booby-traps” in Welles research because of the Wellesian “theatricality” which acts as a codification for how to perceive and interpret what Welles did and said in his career and life (this recalls Heylin’s Wellesian “mosaic”)(Rosenbaum, *DOW,* 8). The creation of “good stories” (and bad stories, for that matter) about Welles often perpetuates misinformation (ie. the Shull-Woodard incident)(Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 11). For Rosenbaum, metamorphosis is inherent in Welles’s work where forms and meaning cannot be frozen into something comprehensible and finite – in short, that certain options must remain open (Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 3). In one sense, Rosenbaum deconstructs Welles’s oeuvre through a prismatic methodology that simply reverses the process by which Benamou constructs a single Welles text, It’s All True. Rosenbaum’s rhetoric is rife with warning signs and signals that mark dead-ends…not dead-ends as we reach the fork-in-the-road, but instead dead-ends within a labyrinthine network which we continuously navigate when constructing the history of Orson Welles. In fact, Rosenbaum opens his book, *Discovering Orson Welles,* with a quote from Bill Krohn regarding Welles’s oeuvre – “an oeuvre that has always had more designs on us than we could ever have on it” (Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 1). A “Wellesian”, affirms Rosenbaum, has the desire to view “discovery” as an overall and ongoing activity, as opposed to a terminal goal – an open system (Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 5).

Welles vs. The Studio

In the previous section, Welles’s mythological legacy was posited as being a poor compass for navigating the complex network that comprises the textual and extra-textual of Welles’s history. Rosenbaum, having suggested a hermeneutic of suspicion around the traditional Wellesian historiography, goes on to provide encouragement for a programme of prismatic de-construction in the methodological model that would be most apt for then re-constructing Welles’s history – a system of openness, as it were. This perspective is reflective of a more subjective and individualized account of Welles and one that has its focus at the level of the personal. Rosenbaum and other film historians have also examined the extra-textual professional relationships that sought to (in)form Welles’s history as well as having plotted his trajectory within the industry throughout his career.

Rosenbaum is extremely suspicious of the impact that commercial studio cinema has on everything! Not to be flippant, as the fact remains that Rosenbaum’s focus in remediating Orson Welles’s history has been primarily to challenge how history has been (in)formed by dogmatic commercial practices of Hollywood. Rosenbaum understands these practices to have not only influenced the public’s perception of Welles through the studios’ manipulation of trade press and other print media in support of their own commodities, but also how the studios have actively, and menacingly impinged on Welles’s actual creativity and production in the cutting room and in the director’s chair. In support of my claims, Rosenbaum succinctly sums up his position when writing, “the mainstream routinely subjects Welles’s life and career to negative obfuscation geared up by ideology” (Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 13-14).

To focus on the commercial ideology of the time and place in which Welles worked in the film industry might be fruitful. Truffaut once wrote, “all the difficulties that Orson Welles has encountered with the box office… stem from the fact that he is a film poet… he transforms vile reality into poetry” (Bazin, 26). Bazin affirmed that the high quality of Citizen Kane on an intellectual level started Welles off on the wrong footing with the studios because the film ended as a “very bad financial deal for RKO” (Bazin, 58). Welles, himself claimed that RKO harboured an anti-intellectual enmity and later stated more generally that a producer was “the man who interferes with a movie” (Heylin, 126, 222). For Heylin, though, Welles was his own worst enemy… not screwing up as much as getting “screwed up” – “seeing an instant replay of previous catastrophes pass before his eye, he allowed a personal despair to get the better of him, at least temporarily” (Heylin, 307).

Rosenbaum is even more apologetic than Heylin as he finds the “system” of the studio to be a reprehensible crutch on the development of the open system of cinema that connects people with a mirror image of their world for reflection (Rosenbaum, *GCHC*, 8). The commercial enterprise of the studio system has an impact on cinema (in the meta-sense of the word) that is described by Rosenbaum as, “suffocation experienced through a set of anachronistic conventions dictated by the agents of commerce” (Rosenbaum, *GCHC*, 8). Rosenbaum must conclude that, “it’s an unpleasant but unavoidable fact that according to the logic of capitalism, which tends to define reality exclusively in relation to marketable items, Welles as an artist died in disgrace” (Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 71). As a “remediator” of Welles’s history, Rosenbaum has entered into the Wellesian network (or mosaic, or labyrinth…) through a variation of positions where he acts as the chain for associations to be connected as well as nodes by which associations can converge and be consolidated. He has attempted to “debunk” Pauline Kael through interrogating her confirmation bias, he has criticized the memoirs of Houseman as spurious accounts of Welles’s personal and professional character, and he has reset dates and facts through cross-referencing personal accounts with primary sources (Naremore, 74-77). Rosenbaum has been vigilant - to a fault, perhaps - in exposing Welles’s history as having been constructed through poor methodological historical practices. To borrow from the immense knowledge of Michel Foucault, Rosenbaum finds confirmation for his ‘open system’ and the prismatic approach. Foucault writes, “uncharted land and unforeseeable conclusion does have a sense of danger… in lacking interiority and promise… but has methodological rigour” (Foucault, 39). Foucault, continues, “the object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of light. It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations” (Foucault, 45). In a profound way, Foucault is confirming Rosenbaum’s own position through his description of discursive models – the rigour of methodology which understands an object as complex and the subject as dispersed.

***Benamou and Prismatic Methodology***

I have been setting a stage for Catherine Benamou’s entrance to the discussion of Rosenbaumian remediation of Wellesian history, however, let discussion in this work regarding her prismatic methodology serve as a mere prolegomenon for its import to Welles’s history and historiography. To be fair and consistent, a proper exposition to describe the Benamou programme in relation to that of Rosenbaum would be far too lengthy for our purposes here. That being said, Benamou’s work on It’s All True must be mentioned as it is a realization on the level of the micro (a single Welles text) what Rosenbaum hopes to achieve at the level of the macro (Welles’s history and oeuvre). Benamou seeks to cast her net as wide as possible in her “restoration” project which necessitates a plurality of lenses or frames of analysis in interpreting and critically synthesizing primary textual and extra-textual sources for “It’s All True” (Benamou, 14). Benamou is not working with a discrete “object” in that the actual filmic material was never constructed into a produced film. Rosenbaum (and Foucault, for that matter) could imagine Welles’s history as lacking status as a discrete object, especially the case by virtue of the complexity of Welles’s personal and professional relationships (extra-textual) as well as the “unfinished” status of many of his films and their inherently complex nature even when finished (textual)(Bazin, 67). These kinds of textual and extra-textual complexities can be viewed as “strands” which Benamou understands as coming together as “interlocking facets as in a prism”(Benamou, 14). The point of focus for the strands becomes a “synoptic view” which provides an archaeological reconstitution into a provisional whole, but which also recognizes the discursive profile of history as evershifting temporally and thus history will remain “envisioned” (or in Rosenbaum’s terms, an “open system”) (Benamou, 14). It cannot be denied that I am actively appropriating Benamou’s methodology to describe a programme for Rosenbaum’s goal of remediation of Welles’s history. The transfer (or perhaps borrowing) of ideas lies with my initiative wholly, and is not explicitly endorsed or qualified in Benamou’s work. To avoid overextending myself, it would suffice to say that Benamou’s concept of “endotext” and “exotext” might also be conceivable in similar terms of “endohistory” and “exohistory” as the means by which the strands of the prism will be weaved, however, these too would be my own initiatives of appropriation. Benamou’s concepts of endo- and exotext are intriguing as they imply fissuring – a place of gaps – which might work well in operation with history of an oeuvre or a filmmaker, just as she employs them for a filmmaker’s single text (Benamou, 16). These fissures create a friction in the woven strands which imply “versions” – all consistent with Rosenbaum’s acceptance that Welles’s history will be re-constructed using all available materials and sources (some of which will exist as separate versions of Welles’s history and are all part of the rigour of an “open system”)(Benamou, 16). The logic of reconstruction should be based on the prismatic, rather than linear and straightforward deduction (Benamou, 17). Benamou’s methodological model based around this concept of the prismatic becomes a productive “tool” and model for the re-construction and re-construction programme of Welles’s history when adhering to Rosenbaum’s desire for maintaining an open system.

***Conclusion***

Jonathan Rosenbaum turns to Bellour’s concept of “the unattainable text” to understand the massive intertextuality of reception for film (and arguably for the history of a filmmaker)(Rosenbaum, *GCHC*, 6). In this light, Wellesian mythmaking as an extra-textual component of the Welles history can be regarded like Bellour’s unattainable text as essentially ever-evolving. Estrin writes, “the Welles career was multidimensional and thoroughly interwoven with the Welles persona,” which recalls the myth “mosaic” Heylin alluded to when describing Welles’s own involvement in writing his history. It would seem then that Welles’s history having relied so much on mythmaking up until now would benefit from, and perhaps requires an open system of de-construction and re-construction that Rosenbaum has suggested in his remediation programme for Welles’s history (Estrin, ix.). Orson Welles once commented in an interview with Francis Koval in 1950, “I have lost years and years of my life, fighting for the right to do things my own way, and mostly fighting in vain… and the narrative line of my stories was ruined by commercially-minded people” (Estrin, 33). In an interview with Bazin and Bitsch in 1958, Welles claimed, “films are always violently torn from my hands” (Estrin, 40). Welles only subjectively confirms what detailed historical accounts from Heylin and Rosenbaum have objectively done through ample evidence from varied primary sources. The plurality of causes and effects – of facts, factors and interactions – in the extra-textual material of Welles’s history compel putting stock in Rosenbaum’s open system understanding of Welles’s history. I have suggested that this open system for de-construction and re-construction of Welles’s history is best served by implementation of Benamou’s prismatic methodological model of historiography. Heylin confirms that “prismatic” is an apt basis for a methodology in this case (Heylin, 43). And Peter Conrad eloquently relays the importance of remediation for Welles’s history – “We do need to know what kind of a man Welles was… it does matter what you say about people, because in summing them up you try to arrive at a precise judgment of individuals who struggle against, or perhaps surrender to, an inimical world”(Conrad, 9). This leads Conrad to conclude, that to know Welles is to know what was possible for him to have left behind.

A final note regarding Rosenbaum’s role in the remediation programme for Welles’s history is that Rosenbaum should not be regarded as a liaison or advisor. He, himself has made claims that would compromise the best interests of his own open system programme. In an interview with Lawrence French, Rosenbaum has taken sole credit for getting the ‘punch’ sound back into the soundtrack of the Sanchez interrogation scene of the Murch re-edit of Touch of Evil (wellesnet, interview). By his own admission, Rosenbaum understands the importance of this change – “the moral difference a sound can make” (Rosenbaum, *DOW*, 66). In fact, the change would have likely altered Bazin’s own account of Touch of Evil, thus creating reverberations throughout the historical record. Yet, Rosenbaum assumes sole responsibility for this change? Who is to say that he wasn’t simply more outspoken on a change that Murch and Schmidlin had themselves seriously considered (and would have implemented) but had deliberated self-consciously about? I would suggest that for Rosenbaum to assume the responsibility here is to create a ‘slippery slope’ back toward mythmaking in general. Benamou might defend against my charge as she understands myths to be functional to the relationship with objects (as per “charting across habituses”), however I believe that it is beside the point if one is to be focused on Rosenbaum’s “open system”(Benamou, 3). Rosenbaum’s open system is an inspiring endeavor for historical reconstruction. Peter Wollen quotes Jorge Luis Borges in a seminal essay on Welles and Citizen Kane, where Borges describes the film as “a labyrinth without a center” (Naremore, 250). This is more telling than it might seem because the Wellesian history is a complex labyrinthine network of textual and extra-textual facts, factors and interactions which must be threaded out into the strands that will be focused at a synoptic point by which the history can be re-constructed. At the center of the network is not the heliocentric-anthropocentric “star” of Welles, but instead and at least, a binary star system (and perhaps even a cluster) that together represents Orson Welles, the human. Rosenbaum remains an important component of the network as he remediates through connecting, filtering and consolidating historical evidence into explanatory historical arguments which respect the geometry of Welles’s complex historical network and which promotes the open system that best describes the network.

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