

Aesthetic, Politics, and Self in Orson Welles' Cultural Legacy

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This paper will study Welles artistic work in relation to his socio-cultural agenda and political commitments. In doing so, we will examine the way that Welles pursues his artistic and social goals through two distinct artistic projects. First the "People's Theater," realized by establishing the Mercury Theater, and second through his critical anti-fascist film projects, namely *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil*. I will begin by examining the Orson Welles project for establishing a "People's Theater" with a wider mass audience in the light of Marxist Cultural Theorists' thoughts on the relationship between the artwork and the masses or working class audience.

In the first manifesto of the Mercury Theater, published in the *Daily Worker*, the Communist Party USA's newspaper, Welles and his founding partner, Jacques Housman, declare that the Mercury Theater's vision of people, is "less an ideological theater than one marked by a new and wider audience" (Denning, 371). The Mercury Theater's agenda, as they declared in their first manifesto, was to present classic plays at popular and affordable prices with a special view to their contemporary social sense. Indeed, the Mercury Theater was Welles' project for employing art, here "the great classic plays of all periods" as a medium for democratizing elite culture (Housman qtd. in Denning, 371).

Welles' idea of democratizing the elite culture echoes in French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's discussion on the relations between one's social class and one's aesthetic dispositions, taste, and judgments in his book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu proposes that instead of the Kantian project of establishing a pure universal aesthetic, we must work to universalize the conditions of access to efficient educational (and consequently), cultural and social capital. He argues that: "[Taste] functions as a sort of social orientation, a 'sense of one's place,' guiding the occupants of a given social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position" (466).

Bourdieu's argument on the relations between one's social class and his access to high culture was also discussed by Marxist cultural theorists such as Antonio

Gramsci and Leon Trotsky. In his article “Marxism and Modern Culture,” Gramsci argues that “Marxism was confronted with two tasks: to combat modern ideologies in their most refined form in order to create its own core of independent intellectuals; and to educate the masses of the people whose level of culture was medieval” (Gramsci, 268). Trotsky expresses a similar concern in his article, “Art and Class,” asking “Does the proletariat of today offer such a cultural-ideological milieu in which the new artist may obtain, without leaving it in his day to day existence, all the inspirations he needs while at the same time mastering the procedures of his craft?” (Trotsky, 195).

For Trotsky, the answer is “no,” as the low level of literacy of the majority of the workers is a very great obstacle to this. He adds: “. . .and above all, the proletariat, in as far as it remains a proletariat, is compelled to expand its best forces in political struggle, in restoring the economy, and in meeting elementary cultural needs, fighting against illiteracy, lousiness, syphilis, etc.” (ibid.).

Thus, for Trotsky, the idea of exposing the mass to great works of art, which Welles proposes, is just an implausible ideal. However, Bourdieu proposes that through long-term, equal exposure to high art and culture, the working class might acquire the cultural capital that is needed to decode, apprehend, and appreciate the works of high art.

Elaborating on this point in chapters 3 and 4 of *Distinction*, Bourdieu develops his concept of the “field or champ” as a structured social space with its own rules and legitimate choices and opinions. According to Bourdieu, fields are relatively autonomous from the wider social structure in which people relate and struggle through a complex of connected social relations (qtd. in Lane 72-73).

As Bourdieu argues, these fields are sites of struggle over the definition of “legitimate” knowledge, culture and aesthetic taste (245-246). In Bourdieu’s thought, fields are sites of formation of the subject “Habitus,” which is another key term in Bourdieu’s theory. He uses habitus to describe a system of dispositions, “characteristic of the different classes and class fractions” (6). Bourdieu writes: “Social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus which is ‘normally’ (i.e., with a high statistical probability) associated with that position (372).

Thus, the ‘habitus’ is the “internalized” form of the class condition and of the “conditionings” by which a member of the class knows how to react to an artwork. As

Bourdieu argues in chapter 3, “it is in the relationships between two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and product (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-style, is constituted” (170).

In this sense, Welles’ ideal of democratization of elite culture demands a long-term, equal exposition to art and culture that is realized through a public, accessible education system. Indeed, Bourdieu, like Welles, views the elite and bourgeois culture as the legitimate and authentic culture, or as Welles names it, “the cultural wealth of the past” that should be freed from the monopoly of aristocrats and upper middle class and expropriated for the working class (Welles qtd. in Denning 371).

However, while Welles pursues this goal through quite short-term financial and aesthetic policies like popular ticket prices or innovations in staging the great classic plays, Bourdieu proposes long-term policies that work to universalize the conditions of access to efficient educational and, consequently, cultural and social capital since the early stages of one’s socialization.

Another issue that the Marxist cultural theorists discuss is the content of the work of art that is presented to the working class. That is, whether the pre-socialist or bourgeois high art might serve the purpose of socialist revolution as well as the art created specifically to reflect the life of the working class and subvert the capitalist domination (Mazierska & Kristensen, 9).

In a review of Daumer’s *The Religion of the New Age*, Marx himself notes: “If the decline of earlier classes, such as the medieval knights, provided the raw material for magnificent and tragic works of art, that of the petty-bourgeoisie characteristically gives rise to nothing but impotent expressions of fanatical ill will and a collection of Sancho Panzaesque saws and maxims” (qtd. in Solomon, 64).

This point is reiterated by Trotsky in his discussion “Art and Class,” where he asks: “How is it thinkable that there should be not an historical but a directly aesthetic relationship between medieval Italian books and us?” Furthermore, he argues that medieval Italian art can affect us on the condition that it finds an intense and powerful expression that surpasses the limitations of its era (Trotsky, 197).

Similarly, Marx’s praise of a royalist writer like Honoree de Balzac for revealing the corruption of capitalism echoes in Lenin’s argument about the way

Tolstoy's novel can serve the ideal of socialism by indicating the weakness and impotence of the pre-revolutionary Russia (Lenin, 176).

These Marxist cultural theorists' discussions are reflected in Welles' body of theater works at the Mercury Theater, where he insists on the social significance of great classic works of art such as Elizabethan tragedies and Shakespeare and Marlow's histories in fighting against the "fascist worship of power." Welles's giant protagonists are indeed the embodiment of modern dictators or ruined capitalists on the stage, "...our Julius Caesar gives a picture of the same kind of hysteria that exists in certain dictator-ruled countries of today" (qtd. in Denning 375).

Thus Welles, like his favorite author, Charles Dickens, establishes himself both as an "author" and "entertainer." As Marguerite H. Rippey notes in her quite extensive study of Welles projects at RKO, "Welles and Dickens are linked by their efforts to circulate their work among the mass populace, to spread their art beyond elite associations. In this way Dickens and Welles share a certain 'vulgarity' that flouts the very notion of 'classic' by courting mass appeal (H.Rippey, 47).

The next medium, through which Welles pursues his goal to create a work of art in dialectic with contemporary politics and aesthetics, is cinema, where Welles left a great legacy both in terms of narrative as well as aesthetics. The left-wing and Marxist cultural theorists' appreciation of cinema – as the most important medium to serve the purpose of socialist revolution – mostly revolve around Soviet revolutionary cinema, which together with German Expressionism and Italian Neorealism, constitutes the art-cinema in opposition to the capitalist Hollywood studio system.

In this sense, what distinguishes Welles' critical works from his left-wing anti-fascist counterparts is that he criticizes the ruined capitalism within the very studio system of Hollywood. This is best exemplified in *Citizen Kane*, Welles' great box office success, as well as his most acclaimed work by film theorists and critics. John Huntlyk in his Marxist reading of *Citizen Kane* shows that Kane, as a capitalist figure, represents one of the pantomime villains that Marx skewers in *Capital*:

The villain takes several forms: he is moneybags, alongside whom we will see bankers and moneylenders, usurers, factory owners, company managers, vampires, 'agents' of capital, an 'idle stratum', an executive committee, the state, the factory inspectors, the philanthropists and the leaned professors of political economy who may or may not emanate from the same cloth that cut the dons of Haileybury College who trained the officials of British east India company... police, politicians [etc.].

As Huntnyk notes, for Marx, all these categories of people populate the staging of *Capital* as personification of economic categories, each operating a theatrical politics rather than a progressive one (Huntnyk, 223).

Thus, from a Marxist perspective, *Citizen Kane* becomes the embodiment of a pre-revolutionary, culturally scandalous, and socio-politically corrupt capitalist society. As Welles himself in an interview about *Touch of Evil* elaborates on his hero-villain characters: “More or less voluntarily, you know, I’ve played a lot of unsavory types...all of these horrible men I’ve interpreted...Quinlan [in *Touch of Evil*] is the incarnation of everything I struggle against, politically and morally speaking” (qtd. in Denning, 377). Then, in an interview with *Cahier Du Cinema*, Welles says, “Caesar was a great man. Why present him otherwise just because the play is anti-Caesar? That is...the error of left-wing melodrama, wherein the villains are cardboard Simon Legerees” (ibid.).

Discussing it from the auteur theory’s perspective, Francois Truffaut relates this characteristic of Welles’ heroes to his intellectual concerns and contradictions:

“As [Welles] himself is a poet, a humanist, a liberal, one can see that this good and non-violent man was caught in a contradiction between his own personal feelings and those he has to portray in the parts given to him because of his physique. He has resolved the contradiction by becoming a moralistic director, always showing the angle within the beast, the heart in the monster, the secret of the tyrant. This has led him to invent an acting style revealing the fragility behind power, the sensitivity behind strength...the weakness of the strong, this is the subject that all of the Orson Welles’s films have in common (qtd. in McBride 36).

Truffaut, in his quite poetic description of Wellesian hero-villains, romanticizes them as a reflection of the filmmaker/author’s inner life and humanist concerns.

Žižek, however, views these characters as part of “Welles’ basic motif,” which is the “rise and fall of larger-than-life characters” (Žižek, 93). He studies Welles’ “larger-than-life” characters in the context of his filmmaking trajectory:

This shift from a ‘a social-realist commentary (the liberal, gently critical, ‘social democratic’ depiction of everyday life) to a morbid obsession with its Gothic excesses, the prodigious individuals and the tragic outcome of his hubris (which, incidentally, provides also the background for the shift from Marion to Norman in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*), is the central unresolved antagonism of the Welles universe, and, as Adorno would have put it, Welles greatness resides in the fact that he does not resolve or dissimulate this antagonism. (Žižek, 92)

Further, Žižek argues that for Welles the essential “immoral” goodness of his larger-than-life characters is consubstantial with what others perceive as their threatening “monstrous” dimension (94).

Further, reading it in the light of Nietzschean thought, Žižek suggests that these characters are “beyond good and evil” and thus, essentially good and life-giving: “...he is broken by the narrowness of and constraints of the self culpabilizing morality that cannot stand life-asserting will” (94). Referring to Adorno’s thesis about Freud’s theory, in which he says that Freudian theory resides in the very unresolved contradictions of his theoretical edifice, Žižek concludes that “the inner contradictions of the Wellesian subjectivity is irreducible, one cannot assert one side of it as the “truth” of the other side and, say, posit the generous, life-substance as authentic...(ibid)

One could reach towards a compromise between Truffaut and Žižek’s thoughts on Welles’ ambivalent heroes, who are both a reflection of the author’s inner contradictions as well as his philosophy on the nature of good and evil. Nonetheless, Welles’ statements on his characters are mostly misleading or ambiguous. For instance, assessing his characters, Welles describes himself as “a moralist against morality.” He further adds: “In reality, I am a man of ideas; yes, above all else – I am even more a man of ideas than a moralist, I suppose” (qtd in McBride 32).

Then, in another interview, talking about his adoption of Kafka’s *The Trial*, he says:

All the characters I’ve played are various forms of Faust. I hate all forms of Faust, because I believe it’s impossible for man to be great without admitting there is something greater than himself – either the law or God or art – but there must be something greater than man. I have sympathy for those characters, humanly but not morally. (ibid., 157)

Considering characters like Quinlan in *Touch of Evil*, for instance, it is not clear what Welles means by “humanly not morally.” As McBride also notes, one can find “an irreconcilable conflict between Kafka’s material and Welles’ philosophical attitude toward his characters” that could lead to “an extreme dialectic tension between the characters’ actions and the director’s view of them” (ibid.).

This might be the reason that most of the commentaries and biographies on Welles, in particular those from a Marxist perspective, fail to give a plausible explanation or analysis of the trajectory of Welles’ socio-political and cultural agenda in cinema.

Welles' quotes, with which Simon Callow begins his biography on Welles, shows the difficulties of studying Welles' intentions and attitudes toward the hero-villain characters that he creates on the screen:

If you try to probe, I'll lie to you. Seventy-five percent of what I say in interviews is false. I am like a hen protecting her eggs. I must protect my work. Introspection is bad for me. I am a medium not an orator. Like certain oriental and Christian mystics, I think the 'self' is a kind of enemy. My work is what enables me to come out of myself. I like what I do not what I am [...] Do you know the best service anyone could render to art? Destroy all biographies. Only art can explain the life of a man – and not the contrary.” (qtd. in Callow, xi)

Later, in a conversation with Peter Bogdanovich, Welles says: “the more we know about the men who wrote [*Don Quixote*, *King Lear* and so on], the bigger chance there is for all the Herr Professors in the academic establishment to befuddle and bemuse” (qtd. in Welles & Bogdanovich, 257).

In a sense, Welles' view of his hero-villain characters is reflected in Marlene Dietrich's words at the final scene of *Touch of Evil*, where she talks about Quinlan, who had just been found dead: “He was some kind of a man. What does it matter what you say about people” (Wells, 19). These tensions between the characters' actions and the director's view of them makes Welles' thoughts and works even more intangible for his biographers and commentators; in particular, for studies that aim at examining Welles' works from the perspective of his cultural agenda, social commentary, and political commitments.

This becomes even more difficult when it comes to the way Welles uses his trademark formal techniques, namely the deep focus and wide angles for depicting the life and fate of his larger-than-life characters. Andre Bazin argues that Welles' use of these techniques, in particular in his masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*, gives us an illusion of being present at the events unfolding before us as in everyday reality. According to Bazin, this impression is mainly created by Welles' *decoupage*, which “allow[s] an impression to remain of continuous and homogenous reality” (qtd in Beja, 141)

However, McBride argues that Welles' employment of the deep focus technique is to detach the larger-than-life figure from his environment and the ordinary people in the background.

While there has been great theoretical discussion about depth of field in the film [*Citizen Kane*], rather little has been said about forced depth of perspective... again and again Welles uses deep focus not as a “realistic” mode of perception but as a way of suggesting a conflict between the

characters' institutional needs and the social and material world that determines their fate... The short focal length of the lens enables him to express the psychology of his characters...to create a sense of barely contained, an almost manic energy, as if the camera, like one of his heroes, were overreaching. (McBride 36)

As McBride shows, in addition to wide angle lens and deep focus techniques, Welles uses a godlike, omnipotent narrator to detach the viewer from the struggle of the hero, as "in most of his films he distorts chronological structure, beginning the film with scenes which depict or imply the hero's destruction, thus placing his subsequent actions in an ironic parenthesis" (32).

These Wellesian visual and narrative techniques form what could be discussed as Welles' "showmanship." Welles himself believes that "showmanship is fundamental to the fascist ideology" (qtd in Denning, 308). And as Denning shows in his discussion of Welles' anti-fascist aesthetics, Welles employs "showmanship" as a part of this aesthetic, in order to explore, reflect on, and reveal fascism (ibid.).

One possible question here is whether this deployment of showmanship is a key self-referential aspect of Welles' work. In response to McBride's discussion on the anti-realist impression of Welles' trademark techniques of deep focus and wide angles, Žižek points to "the Wellesian larger-than-life subjectivity in all its ambiguity, oscillating between excessive, superman power and pathological ridicule" (Žižek 92). Accordingly, he argues, this shows that Bazin's notion of Welles' use of depth-of-field is not simply wrong:

It is as if the very distance between two uses of depth-of-field in Welles – the Bazinian – in which the individual is embedded in a multilayered reality and the "excessive" which emphasizes the rift between the individual and his social background-articulates the tension in Welles work between the liberal progressive collectivist attitude and the focus on the larger-than-life individual. (ibid)

Ultimately, the trajectory of Welles' artistic legacy is tied to his life-long pursuit of creating a work of art that is created through the dialectic of contemporary politics and aesthetics. However, from the social activist and political commentator Welles of the "People's Theater" to the Hollywood director of *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil*, one could explore the Welles universe in relation to his Caesar/Citizen, larger-than-life characters with all their complexities and contradictions. It might be possible to find their real counterparts in Welles' era or the past, yet they belong to

the man's masterfully constructed dramatic worlds, where their antagonisms remained unresolved in space in between good and evil.

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