

The presence of Orson Welles in Robert Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* (1944)

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When one thinks of the presence of Orson Welles in the 1944 film version of *Jane Eyre*, one thinks first of his acting in the role of Mr. Rochester, his first major credit after the series of RKO fiascos that cost him his directing contract with that studio. Many critics have seen the performance as Welles's bid for a career as an actor instead of an auteur. Of course Welles would eventually have a long and lucrative, if uneven, career as an actor; indeed, he regularly took acting work as a way of raising money for his movies. Moreover, Welles's part in *Jane Eyre* was undeniably designed as a star-making role: the adaptation transforms Charlotte Brontë's gruff, hard-featured, middle-aged Rochester into a tall, dark, svelte matinee idol. At times Welles's performance seems in harmony with this design. He uses his voice, size, and baby-faced good looks to suggest Rochester's violence, sweetness, and odd vulnerability. Yet the more characteristic notes here are dissonant. Deliberately or not, as an actor Welles undermines his purported comeback in this project. Sometimes he focuses so insistently on Rochester's mordant, ironic wit that he seems to be smirking at the entire project, perhaps because of self-consciousness at his lack of physical grace. As David Thomson suggests, Welles's physical awkwardness nearly sinks the performance—the boy wonder was flatfooted, and though he could move with energy and conspicuous power, he could rarely move with ease or poise (242).

Jane Eyre may have been designed to restart Welles's Hollywood career, and Welles's Rochester may often loom before us more vividly or loudly than Joan Fontaine's Jane, but one can hardly say his performance steals the show from her, or that his presence overpowers the narrative. Yet this is precisely the argument of those critics who believe this film adaptation of *Jane Eyre* ruthlessly excludes Jane's point of view. The *Encyclopedia of Novels into Film* quotes critics complaining that this Jane is completely bereft of intelligence, and that Welles's star in turn robs her character of the presence and authority she enjoys in Brontë's novel (202-03). Kate Ellis and E. Ann Kaplan's 1981 critique goes even farther in suggesting that "the limitations of film form," as well as director Robert Stevenson's "reversion . . . to patriarchal structures," lead to a "dilution of Jane's rebellious vision" in which she "is seen, for the most part, from a male point of view" (83-84). I agree that Welles's performance as an actor in this film is uneven and sometimes distracting, but I am much less certain that his Rochester or the film as a whole disempowers Jane to such a significant extent. Instead, I will argue below that Welles's presence as an uncredited producer/co-director in fact complicates an apparently simple Hollywood narrative and manages to reinscribe Jane's narrative authority in interesting and important ways.

Certainly, large parts of this film adaptation of *Jane Eyre* are melodrama pure and simple. And one must also concede that these melodramatic elements do not necessarily empower Jane as a female character, although one might also argue that they are not so much a reversion to patriarchy as a 1940s mass-market film analogue of the blood-and-thunder Gothic strain in Brontë's novel. It would probably be more accurate to say that the melodrama in Stevenson's *Jane Eyre*, if it in fact reinforces patriarchal structures, does so as an afterthought. The melodrama's primary focus after Jane is grown seems to be the story of the wounded lovers, mad with love and longing, who find and keep each other against all odds. Ronald Haver observes that David O. Selznick, the originator and initial creative force behind this

adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, was a romantic devotee of stories of *l'amour fou*, the madness of love, and Haver goes on to point out the essential similarities between Selznick's visions of *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*, both of which movies starred Joan Fontaine (7, 327). Selznick was well aware of these connections. His story editor, Val Lewton, reminded him that *Rebecca* had its "genesis in *Jane Eyre*" and a pollster Selznick hired to assist his casting decisions recommended against casting Fontaine in *Jane Eyre* for just this reason (Schatz 328-29). Welles himself had no great affection for such projects. When Peter Bogdanovich interviewed him nearly thirty years after the film's release, Welles said that *Jane Eyre* was "not my kind of picture. I was delighted to act in it, and very happy to do it, but I would never have chosen it. I think, if I had a chance of directing sixty movies, *Jane Eyre* wouldn't be one of them" (Welles and Bogdanovich 176). Given Welles's artistic and literary temperament, one might reasonably infer that it was Selznick's focus on *Jane Eyre* as a story of love madness that he found uncongenial.

Whatever his reservations about the film, however, and we don't know whether they concerned the novel itself or merely this Hollywood adaptation of it, Welles was fairly intimate with Brontë's book. He had already performed it at least twice on the radio, first in 1938 during the first season of *The Mercury Theatre on the Air* as part of a series called *First Person Singular*, each episode of which adapted a famous work of literature and starred Welles as the narrator. (Throughout his career, Welles was interested in the narratology of first-person narration, as we shall see.) Jonathan Rosenbaum writes that this was the "first of several radio productions of the novel," although he documents only one more, this time during pre-production of *Citizen Kane*, on March 31, 1940 (Welles and Bogdanovich 345, 360). Although Lewton criticized Welles for playing Rochester as if he were the Hunchback of *Notre Dame* (Schatz 328), Selznick was receptive to John Houseman's suggestion to cast Welles in this role for the film adaptation Selznick planned. When Selznick later sold this project to 20th-century Fox, he apparently kept the idea alive, and in due course Welles was cast (Schatz 328-30). As a condition of his contract, however, Welles insisted that he be made producer as well, though he received no onscreen credit (Thomson 240). As producer, Welles was a primary, perhaps the primary creative engine in the movie. One of Selznick's own lawyers later acknowledged that "Welles did a great deal more producing on the picture than we had previously known. We have been informed by people from [Fox] that Mr. Welles worked on the sets, changes in the script, in casting, among other things, and that he had charge of the editing . . ." (Welles and Bogdanovich 175; Schatz 331). In later years, Welles was reluctant to take much credit for his work on the picture, telling Bogdanovich that he had "invented some shots" and "collaborated" on the movie, but never came "around behind the camera" actually to direct the movie. He maintained that he did not want to take any credit away from Stevenson, though he also acknowledged that he "did a lot more than a producer ought to do" (Welles and Bogdanovich 175).

Despite Welles's demurrals, I agree with Thomas Schatz that Welles was in fact a co-director on the film (330), and I further suggest that Welles's most vital presence in the film is as a director, not as an actor. Moreover, I will argue that two essential aspects of Welles's own cinematic vision, expressionism and composition in depth, adapt to the cinema, partially but powerfully, the distinctive narratological character and power of Jane's voice and imagination in Brontë's book.

Many recent analyses of *Jane Eyre* have focused on the novel as a woman's *bildungsroman*, one that imagines a newly self-creating female subject whose resistance to patriarchal structures is thrillingly subversive. The very title of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's influential study, *The Madwoman In the Attic*, suggests that Brontë's novel is a paradigmatic critique of those very structures. Certainly *Jane Eyre* is both powerful and empowering in just these ways. Yet one may fruitfully analyze the book in terms of its heroine's psychological development as well, turning the focus from culture to subject and the subject's own peculiar powers of self-creation. In her book *Eros and Psyche*, for example, Karen Chase argues that Jane's narrative is a kind of *psychomachia* in which she meets aspects of herself again and again until she finally becomes an integrated, whole person. In Chase's reading, Jane's narrative is a

myth of the progress of the self as it seeks and simultaneously generates the other in an effort to know and finally name itself (73-74).

Taking Chase's reading and refracting it in what I hope is a complementary direction, I want to stress Jane's power and placement as a narrator, one who is acutely self-aware and one who uses that self-awareness to situate herself very carefully within the narrative as both narrator and character, and to communicate that situation to us. Joyce Carol Oates writes beautifully of the "authority, resonance, and inimitable voice" of Jane Eyre's heroine, and points to the novel as in part an allegory of Bronte's own "mesmerizing psychological experience" of writing Jane Eyre, in five months (V, XI). Throughout the narrative, such allegorical moments occur, uncanny moments in which it seems that the narrative relates the very energies of its own creation. But more specifically, Bronte has Jane herself point us toward such considerations, and very cannily demonstrate the double and even trebled vision of the creative literary mind. It is this implied point of view, that of the self-aware narrator who offers us hints and parables of her own experience of narrativity, that Welles portrays at several key moments in the film.

I would like to look at one passage very early in the novel as an example of what I mean, a frame for my examination of Welles's directorial presence within the film.

Five short paragraphs after the novel's famous opening words-"There was no possibility of taking a walk that day"-Jane tells us of her rainy day pleasures, pleasures involving books, images, curtains, windows, and the location of the powerful imagination that united them all:

A small breakfast-room adjoined the drawing-room. I slipped in there. It contained a book-case; I soon possessed myself of a volume, taking care that it should be one stored with pictures. I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged, like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement.

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating, me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves in my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. (Bronte 1-2)

A curtain that affords a kind of invisibility, a book whose pictures she will later tell us affect her as strongly as the maid Bessie's folk tales, panes of glass that both privilege and protect her view without cutting her off from the objects of that view: the portrait here is not only one of the creative imagination, but of the creative narrator mediating between perception and invention, contact and distance, solitude and intimacy. With these vivid, dialectical antinomies, Jane hints that she experiences something of her later capacity as narrator while she was still a character. To use Seymour Chatman's taxonomy, Jane's homodiegetic (first-person) narration includes within the story episodes of what we might call her own intuited, symbolized heterodiegetic relation to the narrative. This excerpt is a compelling allegory of the conscious mind mediating between imagination and perception, while remaining aware of each as distinct, and of the mediating power as a tertium quid itself subject to observation, contemplation, and figuration.¹ Bronte's Jane loves this middle space, framing her own narrativity with the double frame-or, as she puts it, the double shrine-of the curtain and the window. This middle space is one in which observer and creator are mingled and distinguished, and the self itself is both observed and created by the controlling narrative consciousness of Jane.

I contend that Welles tries to communicate this middle space in Jane Eyre by means of expressionism and framed composition in depth. That Welles was interested in narrativity is undeniable. One of his first projects after arriving at RKO in 1939 was to adapt Conrad's Heart of Darkness by using a "first-person" camera to suggest the presence and narratological peculiarities of Marlowe (Naremore 19-23).

And though this adaptation was never made, Welles's interest in the conditions and varieties of narration was essential to both *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, particularly *Kane*. Welles consistently said that the Rosebud device in *Kane* came from co-writer Herman Mankiewicz, and that his own interest lay primarily in the idea of one story told by multiple narrators (Welles and Bogdanovich 53). As many scholars of *Kane* have pointed out, Welles's device not only highlights the potential unreliability of narrators but also serves to foreground our consideration of the act of constructing a narrative, the very challenge that faces all of *Kane*'s narrators, including the apparently omniscient camera-narrator that shows the audience facts that no diegetic narrator knows, facts such as what Rosebud is and how *Kane* died. Welles's provocative examination of narrative in *Citizen Kane*—a kind of proto-narratology—reappears in *Jane Eyre*.

Let us first examine two examples of expressionism in the *mise en scene* of *Jane Eyre*, both because they are vivid traces of Welles's vision and because they point toward Welles's cinematic portrayal of Jane's interior life. Instead of the melodrama of the close-up, for which many times he expressed his distaste,² Welles chose most frequently to explore character through *mise en scene*. Expressionism, the artistic style that portrays internal states by means of external visual distortions, avoids sentimentality by means of hyperstylized *mise en scene* in which perspectival distortion, including chiaroscuro lighting and often grotesquely canted elements within the frame, transports the viewer into a symbolic psychological setting in which the central figure both signifies subjectivity and is signified within a setting of externalized subjectivity.

In figure 2 below, expressionism is unmistakably at work, and the *mise en scene* may be even more plausibly assigned to Welles when we compare it to a shot immediately preceding it. Here Jane has just been punished by Mr. Brocklehurst for lies she is alleged to have told. Note in this shot (figure 1) that the *mise en scene*, while dramatic, is not expressionistic, and conveys its narrative weight in fairly conventional ways. Whether Welles created it or not (I think not), the shot reveals little of Jane as subject.³ Figure 1

Now, by contrast, note a shot from the very next sequence, in which evening has descended and expressionism has appeared to give us Jane's "point of view" by symbolizing within the *mise en scene* her own agonized psychic state (figure 2). The radial lines suggest not only imprisonment but a kind of ferocious concentration, visually and psychically. Moreover, Helen Burns's radiant figure at the top middle of the frame casts a grotesque shadow at the right of the frame, a shadow that suggests both her own impending death and, in a trick of optical perspective, a shadow cast by, and symbolizing, Jane's own brooding inferiority. It is in such shots as this, I believe, that we most clearly see Welles's presence in this film, as well as his abiding interest in how the cinema, an art of surfaces, can portray the self's experience of its own subjectivity. Figure 2 Figure 3

Here is another example, one which gains in power when we compare it to a shot from *The Magnificent Ambersons*. In the shot from *Jane Eyre* (figure 3), Jane has just shut the door in bewilderment and torment after the party with Blanche Ingram, and the expressionist shadow across her body communicates the emotional and psychological barriers she feels within. The Wellesian presence here is even more obvious when we compare this shot to a similar shot near the end of *The Magnificent Ambersons* in which Aunt Fanny has collapsed from fear, exhaustion, and despair (figure 4). Figure 4

Welles's expressionistic sensibilities are powerful throughout *Jane Eyre*, and Ellis and Kaplan observe the film's faithfulness to the Gothic elements within the novel, though they attribute the expressionism, incorrectly in my view, to Stevenson rather than Welles (86-89). The film has yet another device to suggest that middle space Jane occupies, that of composition in deep focus combined with unusual framing. Several times in this film, Jane appears in the frame as an observer, not as she looks on longingly—in fact, we do not see her gaze—but as she frames the scene we also witness. (One thinks in this

regard of the symbolic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, one in which human observers function as witnesses and symbolic creators, standing in a middle space that invites both contemplation and identification.) Citizen Kane is justly celebrated for its deep-focus cinematography, of course, and throughout that film Welles loves to frame his shots with one figure on one side of the frame in the extreme foreground, one figure on the other side of the frame in the middle ground, and one figure in the center in the background, all in focus. In Jane Eyre, however, several shots go even farther with this technique to suggest Jane's double authority as character and narrative creator, and I believe these shots are Welles's invention. Consider first the shot from the scene in which Jane is commanded to be present while Rochester's apparent belle, Blanche Ingram, is playing the piano and singing (figure 5). Figure 5
Figure 6

Note that Jane is our window onto the scene here, as if she is at once on stage and the very proscenium that frames the action and thus presents it to us. She may at first appear passive and withdrawn in terms of the explicit action, but her position within the shot suggests otherwise and in fact privileges her with respect to the action while hinting that her own imagination captures and represents the action for us. It is exquisitely appropriate that in this scene, in many respects a theatre of cruelty Rochester has arranged for Jane's benefit, the *mise en scene* hints that Jane is the scenarist, the implied author present at the scene and presenting the scene to us. Indeed, the shot that closes this sequence (figure 6) re-emphasizes Jane's silent authority in this scene. One might go even further to argue that Jane's sewing during this scene not only contrasts her humble position with Blanche's exalted position, but also reminds us that this is Jane's story, a narrative of her weaving.

Ellis and Kaplan acknowledge some of these peculiarities of framing in the film, here and elsewhere, but they insist, reductively in my view, that these moments, however odd, are all aimed at robbing Jane of voice, authority, and power. Of the above scene they write, "Jane's subordination and passivity are particularly marked in the scenes where Blanche Ingram and Rochester's other guests come to Thornfield. Jane then skulks around with Adele, shot often behind the guests, in the rear of the room, glimpsed behind a door, or through the richly dressed, loud party. . . . Since her voice-over commentary is silent at this point, we do not get her thoughts and analysis or the contempt for the situation that Jane's point of view in the novel so strongly registers" (86). Yet in the frames above, Jane is hardly "skulking around." Instead, her size and position mark her as the dominant figure in the *mise en scene*. Writing in the very early 1980s, before film scholars had easy access to video copies of feature films, Ellis and Kaplan may be forgiven a lack of nuance and accuracy in their evidence. The larger point that they miss, however, is that narrative authority in film can be communicated in numerous ways, not all of them depending on dialogue, voice-over narration, or even explicitly "important" action.

Shortly after this point in the narrative, Rochester is forced to confront Richard Mason, Bertha Mason's brother, who has come to Thornfield unexpectedly. As Rochester prepares to meet Mason, he has an intimate conversation with Jane, one in which he seeks more assurances of her support and affection. The scene begins with a rather conventional shot/reverse-shot sequence between Jane and Rochester, and the melodrama of the wounded lover underlies the convention. Yet the scene takes a surprising turn as Rochester leaves and Jane watches him go. Figure 7

At this moment, a sharply disjunctive edit that looks very much like a later interpolation Welles may have created in the editing room, the conventional romantic shot/reverse-shot scene suddenly gives way to a scene in which the silently observing Jane physically dominates the frame, once again occupying that metadiegetic middle space (figure 7).

Ellis and Kaplan comment generally that "Orson Welles . . . always dominates whatever scene he is in," and conclude that "cinematically, Jane is placed as Rochester's observer . . . we retain Jane's point of view, but her gaze is fixed on Rochester as object of desire, an odd reversal of the usual situation in film

where the male observes the woman as object of desire in such a way that the audience sees her that way, too. Interestingly, the reversal of the look does not give Jane any more power. . . . Jane's look is of a yearning, passive kind as against the more usual controlling male look at the woman"(89). Yet in this instance we see not Jane's look but her looking. Her affect at this moment is hidden from us. We can, however, readily see her position within the frame, what seems to me to be a commanding position in a middle space where Jane-as-narrator mediates the events to us even as Jane-as-subject witnesses them with us. Figure 8 Figure 9

Ellis and Kaplan's "yearning, passive" Jane is further complicated in my final example, a series of shots late in the film (figures 8-11). Here Jane leaves Rochester. She is devastated by their interrupted nuptials and the discovery of Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason. She still loves Rochester, though she will no longer live with him. Yet at the very moment in which the film might have emphasized her melodramatic position as wounded lover, the very Wellesian *mise en scene* instead reasserts her power within the narrative and her power over it. In figure 8, the departing Jane has grown much larger than the bereft Rochester. In figure 9, Jane begins to open the door, and Rochester is Lilliputian in comparison to her; he has shrunk almost to the size of a thought in her mind, a regret in her heart. In figure 10, Jane has opened the door wide enough to walk out, and in the process she has eclipsed Rochester altogether, excluding him from the frame, a striking visual demonstration of authorial control implied by her position in the frame. The Rochester she leaves behind (Figure 11) seems both devastated and powerless. Here again, the *mise en scene* suggests not only her power within this narrative but her power over this narrative, indeed her own complex homo-and heterodiegetic relationship to this narrative. Figure 10 Figure 11

With the above examples, I have tried to make a persuasive case, based on historical and stylistic evidence, for specific and important instances of Welles's creative presence in a film officially credited to another director. The obvious objection to my analysis is that a large part of my evidence is circumstantial or speculative. I sympathize with the objection. My argument is frankly inferential. Authorship is rarely absolute, especially in so collaborative a medium as film, and while it is clear that Welles was a vital creative presence on and off the set of *Jane Eyre*, attributing specific shots to his directorial authorship in this case is risky-risky, but worthwhile, I think, if we want to recognize and analyze the film's successes as well as its failures. The result, of course, is an incoherent film, but the film's coherence would be difficult to defend in any case. That the film ends quite conventionally cannot be denied. Nor would I deny that the whole in this case is not as great as the sum of its parts. Welles's Rochester has his moments, as does Fontaine's Jane, though neither performance can be fairly judged a complete success. In many respects the film is a mess. But not in all respects.

To my eye, the film's most compelling moments, moments that neither reinforce patriarchal structures nor erase Jane's narrative authority, bear clear and convincing signs of Welles's cinematic practices and sensibilities. The value of Welles's contribution to the 1944 *Jane Eyre*, and the most telling mode of Welles's presence in this film, lies in the richness of his literary and cinematic imaginations, in his own interest in-and grasp of-the layers and varieties of narrativity within a story. David Thomson has called Welles a "shut-eye," a magician who wanted to be tricked by his own magic, to believe in the illusions he himself created (101). Does Thomson describe a dupe or an artist? I suggest that Welles, like Bronte's Jane and Bronte herself, was smart and self-aware enough to recognize the heterodiegetic position of the narrator in a "first person singular," and to recognize the dramatic power of the middle space within (and, paradoxically, beyond) the diegesis as witness and creator, itself an object of contemplation in a metacognitive drama. Cinema is notoriously bad at first person narrative. Usually the presence of the implied narrator is made explicit through voice-over, and *Jane Eyre* uses this device at times, though never very well or convincingly. But Welles's neoromantic expressionist vision makes its presence felt in this film as a way of portraying for us just this layered sense of the narrative as framed, and mediated, and called into being, by the imagining mind.

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Campbell discusses the vital role of actor Orson Welles in the 1944 film version of "Jane Eyre" which was directed by Robert Stevenson. This melodramatic film was intended to resurrect Welles' career after a series of failures at RKO that cost him his directing contract. Several examples of expressionism in the scenes of the movie are presented.

Copyright Literature/Film Quarterly 2003 | Notes | 1 For Chase, this moment of "double retirement . . . represents a moment of spatial, as well as emotional, equilibrium. . . . Bronte articulates space in order to articulate the personality, and the figure of the prospect becomes a figure of the balanced self: secure (but not confined), open (but not exposed)" (86, 89). My own reading is more narratological than specifically psychoanalytic, but Chase's observation that Jane's "soul is presented as located at the vanishing point of the self, the elusive essence that 'looks out' from its bodily frame" is an essential observation, and I am greatly indebted to her work. | 2 "Personally, I don't much like [closeups. . . . I tell actors, 'Look out-if you aren't good enough, we'll have to move in for a close shot' I stay away from closeups when I can . . . when my actors are good enough" (Welles and Bogdanovich, 16, 22, emphasis Welles). | 3 All frames from *Jane Eyre* are taken from the 1993 Fox Video laserdisc (catalog number 1247-80). The frame from *The Magnificent Ambersons* is taken from the 1986 Criterion Collection laserdisc (CAV format, catalog number CC1109L, ISBN 0-931393-30-2). For both films, the frames were captured electronically, directly from the video sources. | Gardner Campbell | Mary Washington College