

## ***Touch of Evil* between restitutio textus and creative restoration**

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Many of the films of Orson Welles as we know them are not exactly as the director himself intended, on account of disagreements that arose during their making or of complex negotiations concerning the rights. *Touch of Evil* is no exception: Welles was appointed to direct the film almost by chance, following a misunderstanding between Universal and Charlton Heston, and was excluded from the project during the last phases of post-production. In fact the version distributed by the major in 1958 did not have his approval. Nonetheless public and critics alike never seem to have had any doubts as to whose film it was. The initial reaction of André Bazin was surely significant, and may indeed have given rise to the ensuing ambivalence. Hailing the film as one of Welles's greatest achievements, he dubbed it the first example of a new cinema of ambiguity (Bazin [1958] 2005: 172-6). Over the following decades *Touch of Evil* was restored on two occasions with the aim of providing a version which was closer to Welles's own wishes. The two subsequent releases, dating from 1976 and 1998, were each hailed as the 'new, definitive version', influencing new generations of critics, film directors and spectators and becoming the focus for analytical studies. In view of this history, and before going on to consider more strictly audiovisual matters, it may be helpful to go over the stages that led to the release of the three versions currently in existence, to see just what sort of text (or 'texts') we are dealing with.

The first version of *Touch of Evil* (1958) appeared once Welles had been excluded from the project, at the instigation of the head of production of Universal Edward Muhl. Acting in conjunction with Jonathan Rosenbaum, a protégé of Welles, Muhl gave instructions for Ernst Nims to re-edit the film and Harry Keller to film four new scenes in order to clarify the narrative, whereupon he terminated the post-production phase (Leeper 2001: 227). Welles was only able to view the result of this operation once all the way through. He gave vent to his bitterness about many of the editing decisions in his famous dossier, running to 58 pages, which contained precise instructions for 50 modifications (Welles [1957] 2008). For the sake of completeness (for this detail is all too often passed over), it should be pointed out that in some instances Welles specifically approved the end result. It must also be said that Universal did not entirely refuse to meet the requests of the director: more than one scene was revised according to his indications. The second version of the film (distributed in 1976) was made with the declared intent of providing a closer approximation to the film Welles had had in mind. In fact, however, it was simply the version that had appeared in 1958 with the scenes that had been cut by Muhl reinstated, but still with Nims's re-editing. The third version was produced by a team working under the supervision of Rick Schmidlin and with Rosenbaum, the pupil of Welles mentioned above, in a consulting role. The team included Walter Murch as sound editor, Bob O'Neil in charge of picture restoration and Bill Varney of re-recording. This new version, which its makers referred to as a 'restoration', took the 1976 version as an authentic copytext, comprising a negative of the video track and a magnetic master of the audio track with dialogues, music and effects (*DME*). The original negative for the opening sequence, without the credits superimposed, was found in one of the cans containing the 1976 version and substituted for the corresponding excerpt in the copytext (Ondaatje 2002: 186). On the basis of this material the team attempted to carry out the 50 modifications specified by Welles. In many cases they relied not only on the dossier but also on other writings left by Welles, in particular nine pages of sound notes he produced for Joe Gershenson (Tully 1999) – head of music in 1958 – and some annotations conserved by Nims. The sound notes, jotted down while filming was in progress, contain indications subsequently used by Henry Mancini when he composed the sound track. In them Welles goes into great detail concerning the genres of music to be used in order to create the feeling of a border outpost that characterises the film. He spelt out the distinction between 'background music' – “[...] ‘realistic’, in the sense that it is literally playing during the action” – and ‘underscoring music’ “[...] which accommodates dramatic action and which does not come from radios, night clubs, orchestras or juke boxes”, making it clear that the former should unmistakably predominate over the latter (*ibidem*). The annotations conserved by Nims are only referred to in an interview with Murch

(Ondaatje 2002: 196). According to the latter, they contained some thoughts of Welles concerning the strategies to be adopted for the film's audio. Unfortunately we do not know which year they date from, but there is no doubt that they were not written for *Touch of Evil*. For the moment we shall suspend judgement concerning the validity of the restoration criteria described thus far. The prime aim of this essay is to verify how the audio dimension was involved in the various attempts to reconstruct the text, and to show how the modifications that were effected influenced the audiovisual end product as a whole. Then, after examining some examples, we shall end by considering the problem of restoration/reconstruction.

### **The death of Linnekar**

The film's famous opening sequence (1958, 1976, 1998: 0' 0''-4' 7'') has always aroused the most discussion, and it represents a very interesting case study for our enquiry. In 1958 it came in for scathing criticism from Welles, and was the focus for the most significant discoveries during the restoration phases carried out in the nineties. The scene that Welles saw, following the interventions of Muhl and Keller, was the one re-used in 1976: Mancini's sound track predominates, accompanying the credits and also preparing the moment when the bomb hidden in Linnekar's car goes off. The comment Welles made in the dossier shows how far it was from his own intentions: "I assume that the music now backing the opening sequence of the picture is temporary [...] it's not clear where you have decided to place the credits" (Welles [1957] 2008: 1). He went on to give a detailed description of his intentions for the audio: "[...] the plan was to feature a succession of different and contrasting Latin American musical numbers [...] loudspeakers are over the entrance of every joint, large or small [...]. The fact that the streets are invariably loud with this music was planned as a basic device throughout the entire picture" (*ivi*). He also gave specific indications as to how best to obtain the desired distorted timbre: "It is very important to note that in the recording of all these numbers – which are supposed to be heard through street loudspeakers – the effect should be just exactly as bad as that. The music itself should be skilfully played, but it will not be enough in doing the final mixing to run this track through an echo chamber with a certain amount of filter" (Tully 1999). Further indications concerning his audio project emerged with the discovery of not only the negative without the credits, duly reinstated in the new version, but also part of the original audio track. When the sound engineers in Schmidlin's team removed Mancini's music from the mix of the three *DME* canals they found background sounds of the sort Welles had described: footsteps, car horns, goats bleating and the voices of the extras. We do not know whether Welles ever heard this track or approved it, but there is no doubt that it corresponds exactly to the description he gave in

the dossier. Once he had retrieved this part of the audio, Murch decided to go on to interpret what Welles had said regarding the more strictly musical content. He used the music from the rest of the film, together with that featuring in the sound track prepared by Mancini, to create a sort of overture, an agglomeration of sounds and rhythms which emphasises the variety of cultures, races and social classes typical of a border outpost (Leeper 2001: 232). This creation could be labelled ‘pansound’, a term coined by James Naremore (2004 [1978]: 66) to complement ‘panfocus’. Lastly Murch decided to associate Linnekar’s car with rock’n’roll music playing on the car radio, adopting a strategy that recurs throughout the film (Tully 1999). However, in adding this detail he was clearly being creative, and it has significant repercussions in audiovisual terms. By inserting a few fragments of music playing inside the car, Murch defines a ‘point of listening’ that coincides with the viewpoint in the scene, taking in not only the car containing the bomb but all the other elements that characterise the frontier town as well. Welles’s indications were much less explicit, and could even have referred to the aural sensations of the Linnekar couple. In practical terms this could have entailed a listening point that did not coincide with the viewpoint governing the images, denoting a distinctly unconventional and experimental approach. Without pursuing speculative hypotheses any further or entering into considerations of the respective merits of the two approaches, there can be no doubt concerning two elements at least: the inclusion of music emanating from a car radio is in fact all it takes to define the overall sense of an audiovisual text; and rather than simply restoration or reconstruction, Murch’s intervention was clearly on the level of co-authorship.

### **The murder of Grandi**

The second example is the scene of Grandi’s murder (1958: 1h 9’ 29”-1h 14’ 56”; 1976: 1h 20’ 44”-1h 26’ 10”; 1998: 1h 16’ 38”-1h 22’ 5”) which takes place in the Ritz Hotel. During their investigations into the death of Linnekar, Vargas and Quinlan clash over the line to be taken during interrogations; discovered by the Mexican as he was busy falsifying evidence to be used against a suspect, Quinlan decides to eliminate him by blackening the reputation of his wife. Suzan Vargas is seized by members of the Grandi family who stage an orgy, leaving the woman lying in a state of shock with marijuana and heroin scattered about the room. After making an anonymous phone call reporting the whereabouts of Suzan, Quinlan kills Grandi in the room where she is asleep so as to place the blame for the murder on her and get rid of an awkward witness. All three versions of the film are characterised by a precise atmosphere created, in sound terms, by a modification of the music. At the start of the scene the audio track sounds like music coming

from a juke box or a band playing on the ground floor of the hotel: the audio has a muffled quality and the music, exemplifying Welles's 'background' category, seems to be filtered through the walls of the building. The scene's finale is also the same in all three versions: the music, turned up louder and with the filters removed, is used to comment on the actions taking place with increasing intensity. The brass instruments and the conga rhythm provide a counterpoint to the sounds of the struggle between Grandi and Quinlan, with changes of rhythm marking formal breaks in the action. This new 'underscoring' function becomes ever more apparent as the scene progresses: Grandi's desperate shouts are echoed by the trumpets and his laboured breathing by the percussion, while Suzan's cries on seeing the corpse are preceded, introduced almost, by a trumpet blast. By contravening the laws of acoustics and preventing the spectator from identifying with a realistic listening point – the band or juke box would have had to enter the room where the murder takes place – this stratagem endows the scene with a surreal, oneiric atmosphere that can clearly be referred to Suzan: still in a state of drowsiness, but shortly to become the scene's principal viewpoint. There is, however, one detail that changes: in the 1958 and 1976 versions the passage of the music's status from background to underscoring corresponds to Grandi's smashing of the window during the struggle of the two men (1958: 1h 13' 31"; 1976: 1h 24' 45"). Whereas in the 1998 version the sound begins to increase in intensity when an exasperated Quinlan puts the phone down and locks the door (1998: 1h 19' 55"). The decibels increase, and the sound starts to lose the characteristic muffled quality of the early part of the scene, before the window is smashed. Thus in Schmidlin and Murch's version the transformation in the musical element is not justified by a narrative element (on the contrary, closing the door should have produced the opposite effect, making the sound even more indistinct). The shattering of the window loses its structural function of separating off interior and exterior, real and surreal, and becomes a mere scenic event. The different chronology alters the effect of the scene: in the first two versions the music becomes underscoring when Suzan begins to regain consciousness, anticipating the change in perspective for the ensuing narrative; in the third it becomes commentary slightly earlier.

One further clarification is called for: in strictly logical terms the example we have just illustrated has nothing to do with 'the author's wishes', since the entire audio component, and hence also the progressive increase in decibels, was the result of the editing carried out by Universal in 1958. In this respect the work of Schmidlin and Murch's team was arbitrary and surreptitious – since, unlike other interventions, they did not explicitly re-

fer to this one – and merely based on the version of 1958. Indeed it may be thought that my choice of this example is methodologically questionable. It does however illustrate the risks inherent in acting according to ‘the author’s wishes’: Welles made no criticism of the scene in question, giving the impression of being satisfied with its rendering, or at least of not considering it disastrous. Thus it could presumably have featured in a version which met with his approval. As a matter of fact the transformation in the status of the musical element, which takes place ‘in direct’ in front of our very ears, as it were, almost as if to reveal the mechanism commonly used in Hollywood sound tracks, stands as an original meta-textual reflection which the director could have evoked during the filming or which, more simply, he could have adopted at the suggestion of a collaborator.

## Conclusions

Having considered these two examples, we can now go back to the issues we raised at the outset. The involvement of the sound dimension in operations of ‘restoration’ is manifest and comparable to, if not indeed more conspicuous than, that of the video dimension. In the case of *Touch of Evil*, once Welles had been sidelined, someone had to be brought in to take charge of the sound dimension before the film could be released. However, the main issues concern the definition of the term ‘restoration’ and the principle, usually considered axiomatic, of respect for ‘the author’s wishes’. The occurrence of both problems in the same context actually denotes an adherence to philological principles which in the case in question were continually suborned in the interest of artistic considerations. Leaving to one side the problem of how the term ‘restoration’ should be defined and whether it can strictly be used in the case of genuine operations of ‘reconstruction’ (Canosa 2001: 1072-1083), it is clear that the 1998 text is the result of an operation that borders on philological malpractice. One only has to consider the differing status of the texts by Welles that the authors of this version drew on: while the dossier he compiled in 1958 can indeed stand as a list of corrections to serve for an *emendatio* of the text carried out at a later date, the annotations contained in the sound notes contain elements which are of considerable interest for a study of Welles’s creative process but cannot properly be used for a *restitutio textus*. And if one wanted to pursue the matter further, there is one consideration that puts a stop to any serious philological discussion. Quite simply the film is an unfinished product: restoration of the parts that do exist may indeed be carried out with respect for ‘the author’s wishes’, but there can be nothing

philological about completing it. Here, we can note in passing, another highly contentious issue rears its head: how should one go about establishing, on the basis of the different versions available, which portion of text was in fact complete when Welles was excluded? There can be no doubt that ‘the author’s wishes’ is an elusive concept, only to be approached asymptotically; in any case it cannot act as the sole orientation in an operation like the one in question. Even if it were possible to reconstruct the wishes of the author without any margin of doubt, this would not by any means give us *Touch of Evil* as Welles himself conceived of the film. A film text is fundamentally the outcome of a negotiation between several authors: hence even if Welles had had charge of the final phases of the film’s post-production, he still would not have been directly involved in the audio. He would merely have reviewed the proposals of his collaborators, rejecting them, suggesting alternatives or adopting them *en bloc*. And as a matter of fact, this last reflection obliges us to reconsider the idea that *Touch of Evil* can even be viewed as an unfinished product.

Clearly the logical short circuit that characterises discussion of this film has its roots in the difficulty encountered in handling a text ‘with a complex structure’ such as a film, whose status has been a focus for debate for some time now (Canosa 2001, Mazzanti – Farinelli 2001, Micciché 2002). The problems increase when the text in question is the outcome of the work of a director whose approach came to revolutionise the very concept of ‘author’ as it is viewed in the film world. What has to be emphasised here is that reflections concerning the audio component within this type of debate are still very limited. The issue has recently gained due recognition (Calabretto 2010: 277-286) and certainly deserves to receive a systematic treatment.

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## **Film details**

### Welles Orson, *Touch of Evil* (USA 1958, 93' - 1976, 108')

SCREENPLAY: (based on *Badge of Evil* by W. Masterson) O. Welles, P. Monash, F. Coen – DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: R. Metty – SOUND: L. I. Carey, F. Wilkinson – MUSIC: H. Mancini – MUSIC SUPERVISION: J. Gershenson – FILM EDITORS: V. Vogel A. Stell – GOWNS: B. Thomas – MAKE-UP: B. Westmore – ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: P. Bowles – PRODUCER: A. Zugsmith – CAST: C. Heston, J. Leigh, O. Welles, J. Calleia, A. Tamiroff, J. Moore, R. Collins, D. Weaver, V. De Vargas, M. Mills, V. Millan, L. Rios, M. Sargent, P. Harvey, J. Lansing, H. Shannon, M. Dietrich, Z. Gabor.

### Welles Orson, *Touch of Evil* (USA 1998, 112')

PRODUCER: R. Schmidlin – EDITOR: W. Murch – RE-RECORDING: B. Varney, P. Reale, W. Murch – PICTURE RESTORATION: B. O'Neil – CONSULTANT: J. Rosenbaum – ASSISTANT EDITOR: S. Cullen – SUPERVISING SOUND EDITOR: R. LeGrand, Jr. – SOUND EFFECTS EDITORS: H. Snodgrass, R. McNabb, W. Hooper – TITLE DESIGN: D. Ross Film Design – DIGITAL RESTORATION SERVICES: Pacific Title/Mirage, Restoration Division – TITLES AND OPTICAL EFFECTS: Pacific Title/Mirage, Optical Division – LABORATORY SERVICES: YCM Laboratories – NEGATIVE RESTORATION, CUTTING AND TIMING: E. Aijala – RESTORED BY: Universal Studios, Restoration Services.