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'War of the Worlds' documentary explores 1938 panic broadcast

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Oct. 28, 2013 NCR Today

"War of the Worlds," PBS American Experience
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In 1938, Americans might let their car payments go or give up their telephones, but 80 percent of American homes had a radio. Listeners tuned in for entertainment but became used to the edgy intrusion of news bulletins with bad news interrupting programming.

Exactly a month after the Munich Agreement, a pact that allowed Nazi Germany to annex part of western Czechoslovakia, and after months of hearing the drumbeats of Adolf Hitler and the possibility of war in Europe leading up to that agreement, at 8 p.m. Eastern time Oct. 30, 1938, CBS and Orson Welles announced The Mercury Theater on the Air program for the evening, H.G. Wells' "War of the Worlds."

"We know now that in the early years of the 20th century, this world was being watched," began the narration -- and the rest is history. It was an updated version of Welles' original 1898 account of an invasion of the British countryside, and if you were listening at the beginning, you knew it was theater. But most people were listening to a popular ventriloquist on "The Chase and Sanborn Hour" on NBC, and when there was a musical interval by Nelson Eddy, people began dial twisting -- the modern equivalent of channel surfing -- and came in just in time to hear dire news of an alien invasion and missed the announcement.

This hourlong documentary explores many of the elements that created the context for such a strong reaction to Welles' reporting of an alien invasion from Mars in Grover's Mill*, N.J., on Halloween eve in 1938.

"Fear, anxiety, and foreboding of the future" were the dominant emotions of the time as the country emerged from the Depression accompanied by news bulletins about Hitler and "disaster after disaster," such as the Lindbergh kidnapping and the crash of the Hindenburg. Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt said at his inauguration in 1932 that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," people seemed to forget it with the news bulletin Welles read that Halloween eve.

Fear, hysteria and how people react physically to cues all contributed to what happened, the experts say in the film: "People were pre-wired to be sensitive to danger in those days," and "if there is a cue out there, we will react to it first and reason comes later."

In the attempt to maintain the historical aura of the story, producer/director Cathleen O'Connell chose actors to give voice to some of the many letters written to CBS and Welles after the program aired. My favorite was outraged judge A.G. Kennedy from Union, S.C., who said Welles' "inhuman instincts and fiendish joy ... caused distress and suffering all over the country. He is a carbuncle on the rump of degenerate theatrical performers and he should make amends for his consummate act of asininity."

I think this film would be of interest to educators and anyone interested in questions of censorship, government control of the radio (and by extension, any future media that would be invented), the power of media, and how

popular culture works. Film history students will appreciate the overview of Welles' considerable talent and instinct for taking advantage of every opportunity. This is a very interesting film about a media phenomenon about the most famous U.S. invasion that never happened 75 years ago, before most of us were even born.

Welles' eldest daughter, Chris Welles Feder (born just months before this radio event), is one of the commentators, and Oliver Platt narrates.

Click here to see the trailer [1]. The DVD is also available from PBS.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly spelled the name of the city.*

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[1] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/trailer/worlds-preview/