

The War of the Worlds was an episode of the American radio drama anthology series *Mercury Theatre on the Air*.

Directed by Orson Welles, the episode was an adaptation of H. G. Wells' classic novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and was performed as a Halloween special on October 30, 1938.

The live, 60 minute broadcast, presented mostly as a series of news bulletins, frightened many listeners into believing that an actual Martian invasion was in progress. There was public outcry against the episode, but it launched Welles to great fame.

Welles's adaptation is possibly the most successful radio dramatic production in history. It was one of the Radio Project's first studies.

Broadcast

H. G. Wells' novel is about an alien invasion of Earth at the end of the 19th century, as related by a narrator seeing the events unfold in England. The radioplay's story was adapted by and written primarily by Howard Koch, with input from Orson Welles and the staff of CBS's *Mercury Theatre On The Air*. The action was transferred to contemporary Grover's Mill, a community that has since been annexed by West Windsor Township, New Jersey, and the radio program's format was meant to simulate a live newscast of developing events. To this end, Welles even played recordings of Herbert Morrison's radio reports of the *Hindenburg* disaster to actor Frank Readick and the rest of the cast to demonstrate the mood he wanted.

About half of the 55-minute play was a contemporary retelling of the events of the novel, presented as a series of news bulletins in documentary style. This approach to radio drama was not exactly new. Fr. Ronald Knox's satirical "newscast" of a riot overtaking London over the British Broadcasting Company in 1926 had taken a similar approach (and created much the same effect upon its audience). Welles had himself also been influenced by the Archibald MacLeish dramas *The Fall of The City* and *Air Raid*, the former using Welles himself in the role of a live radio news reporter. But the approach had never been done before with as much continued verisimilitude [1]), and the innovative format has been cited as a key factor in the confusion that would follow.

The program, broadcast from the 20th floor at 485 Madison Avenue (in New York City), started with an introduction and a short introduction to the intentions of the aliens and noted that the adaptation was set in 1939. The program continued as an apparently ordinary music show, only occasionally interrupted by news flashes. Initially, the news is of strange explosions sighted on Mars. The news reports grew more frequent and increasingly ominous after a "meteorite"—later revealed as a Martian rocket capsule—lands in New Jersey. A crowd gathers at the landing site, and the events are related by reporter "Carl Philips" until the Martians incinerate curious onlookers with their "Heat-

Rays." (Later surveys indicate that many listeners heard only this portion of the show before contacting neighbors or family to inquire about the broadcast. Many of these people contacted others in turn, leading to rumors and later confusion.)

More Martian ships land, and then proceed to wreak havoc throughout the United States, destroying bridges and railroads, and spraying a poison gas into the air. An unnamed Secretary of the Interior advises the nation on the growing conflict. (The "secretary" was originally intended to be a portrayal of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, then President, but CBS insisted this detail, among others, be changed. The "secretary" did, however, sound very much like Roosevelt as the result of directions given to actor Kenny Delmar by Welles.)

Military forces begin to attack the Martians, but are unable to fight them off. People flee or gather in churches to pray as the Martian machines head towards New York City, spraying poison gas in the air.

This section ends famously: a news reporter (played by Ray Collins), broadcasting atop the CBS building, reports that Martians are invading New York City; he too collapses from their poison gas, and a despairing ham radio operator is heard calling out, "2X2L calling CQ ... Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there ... anyone?"

The last portion of the broadcast was a monologue and dialog featuring Welles, portraying "noted astronomer" Professor Richard Peirson, who had earlier commented on the strange Martian explosions. The story ends as does the novel, with the Martians falling victim to earthly germs and bacteria.

After the play ends, Welles breaks character to remind listeners that the broadcast was only a Halloween concoction, the equivalent of dressing up in a sheet and saying "Boo" like a ghost. An urban legend claims that this "disclaimer" was added to the broadcast at the insistence of CBS executives as they became aware of the panic inspired by the program; in actuality, it appears in Howard Koch's working script for the radio play as presented in his 1968 book *The Panic Broadcast*.

Public reaction

New York Times headline from October 31, 1938

Many people missed or ignored the opening credits of the program, and in the atmosphere of growing tension and anxiety in the days leading up to World War II, took it to be a news broadcast. Contemporary newspapers reported that panic ensued, with people fleeing the area, and others thinking they could smell the poison gas or could see the flashes of the lightning in the distance.

Professor Richard J. Hand cites studies by unnamed historians who "calculate[d] that some six million heard the Columbia Broadcasting System broadcast; 1.7 million believed it to be true, and 1.2 million were 'genuinely frightened'". (Hand, 7) While Welles and company were heard by a comparatively small audience (Bergen's audience was an estimated 30 million), the uproar that followed was anything but minute: within a month, there were about 12,500 newspaper articles about the broadcast or its impact (Hand, 7), while Adolf Hitler cited the panic, as Hand writes, as "evidence of the decadence and corrupt condition of democracy." (Hand, 7)

Later studies suggested this "panic" was far less widespread than newspaper accounts suggested. However, it remains clear that many people were caught up, to one degree or another, in the confusion that followed.

Robert Bartholomew and Hilary Evans suggest in *Panic Attacks* that hundreds of thousands of thousands of people were frightened in some way, but note that evidence of people taking action based on this fear is "scant" and "anecdotal." Indeed, contemporary news articles indicate that police were swamped with hundreds of calls in numerous locations, but stories of people doing anything more than calling up the authorities typically involve groups of ones or tens and were often reported by people who were panicking, themselves.

Later studies also indicated that many listeners missed the repeated notices that the broadcast was entirely fictional, partly because the Mercury Theatre (an unsponsored "cultural" program with a relatively small audience) ran opposite the popular *Chase & Sanborn Hour* over the Red Network of NBC, hosted by Don Ameche and featuring comic ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and singer Nelson Eddy, at the time three of the most popular figures in broadcasting. About 15 minutes into the *Chase & Sanborn* program the first comic sketch ended and a musical number began, and many listeners presumably began tuning around the dial at that point. According to the American Experience program "The Battle over Citizen Kane", Welles knew the schedule of the *Chase & Sanborn* show, and scheduled the first report from Grover's Mill at the 12 minute mark to heighten the audience's confusion. As a result, some listeners happened upon the CBS broadcast at the exact point the Martians emerge from their spacecraft.

Many of these listeners were apparently confused. In fairness, it must be noted that the confusion cannot be credited entirely to naïveté. Though many of the actors' voices should have been recognisable from appearances on other radio shows, nothing like *The War of the Worlds* broadcast had ever been attempted in the United States, so listeners were accustomed to accepting newsflashes as reliable.

While there were repeated statements concerning the fictional nature of the programme, no such statement was broadcast between the 12 minute and 40 minute marks. In fact, the warning at the 40 minute mark is the only one that occurs after the actors start speaking in character, and before Welles breaks character at the end. This structure is roughly similar to earlier *Mercury Theatre* broadcasts: due to the lack of sponsorship (which often included a commercial message at the 30-minute mark during an hour-long show),

Welles and company were able to schedule breaks more or less at will, depending on the pacing of a given narrative.

While the *War of the Worlds* broadcast was in progress, some residents in northeastern cities went outside to ask neighbours what was happening (many homes still did not have telephones at this time). As the story was repeated by word of mouth, rumours began to spread, and these rumours caused some panic.

Contemporary accounts spawned urban legends, many of which persist and have come to be accepted through repetition as fact: Several people reportedly rushed to the "scene" of the events in New Jersey to see if they could catch a glimpse of the unfolding events, including a few astronomers from Princeton University who went looking for the "meteorite" that had supposedly fallen near their school. Some people, who had brought firearms, reportedly mistook a farmer's water tower for an alien spaceship and shot at it.

Initially Grover's Mill was deserted, but later crowds developed as people rushed to the area. Eventually police were sent to the area to help control the crowds. To people arriving later in the evening, the scene really did look like the events being narrated on the radio broadcast, with panicked crowds and flashing police lights streaming across the masses.

Some people called CBS, newspapers or the police in confusion over the realism of the simulated news bulletins. There were instances of panic scattered throughout the US as a result of the broadcast, especially in New York and New Jersey.

Edgar Bergen and Don Ameche, who were continuing their *Chase & Sanborn Hour* broadcast at the same time on NBC, are often credited with "saving the world". It is said that many startled listeners were reassured by hearing their familiar tones on a neighbouring channel.

Aftermath

In the aftermath of the reported panic, a public outcry arose, but CBS informed officials that listeners were reminded throughout the broadcast that it was only a performance. Welles and the Mercury Theatre escaped punishment, but not censure, and CBS had to promise never again to use the "we interrupt this program" device for dramatic purposes.

A study by the Radio Project discovered that some of the people who panicked presumed that Germans — not Martians — had invaded. Other studies have suggested that the extent of the panic was exaggerated by contemporary media.

When a meeting between H. G. Wells and Orson Welles was broadcast on Radio KTSA San Antonio on October 28, 1940, Wells expressed a lack of understanding of the apparent panic and suggested that it was, perhaps, only pretence, like the American version of Halloween, for fun. The two men and their radio interviewer joked about the

matter, though clearly with some embarrassment. KTSA, as a CBS affiliate, had carried the original broadcast.

Both the *War of the Worlds* broadcast and the panic it created have become textbook examples of mass hysteria and the delusions of crowds.

In 1988, during the weekend nearest the fiftieth anniversary of the broadcast, the township of Grovers Mills, New Jersey held a "Martian festival" to mark the occasion. Designed solely to attract tourist revenue, this event included "Martians" firing harmless "ray guns" and various carnival rides and hucksters' stalls. The *New Yorker* magazine covered this event with a review beginning "It's not every day we get to see the Martians invade..."

Conspiracy theory

It has been suggested in recent years that the *War of the Worlds* broadcast was actually a psychological warfare experiment. In the 1999 documentary, *Masters of the Universe: The Secret Birth of the Federal Reserve*, writer Daniel Hopsicker claims that the Rockefeller Foundation actually funded the broadcast, studied the ensuing panic, and compiled a report that was only available to a chosen few. A variation of this conspiracy theory has the Princeton Radio Project and the Rockefeller Foundation as co-conspirators. [2].

This theory seems at odds with the fact that the Mercury Theatre's broadcasts over CBS before December 1938 did not contain any sponsorship announcements, and the competing *Chase & Sanborn Hour* on NBC originated from studios in Manhattan's Rockefeller Center complex.

There has been continued speculation that the panic generated by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast inspired officials to cover up unidentified flying object evidence, to avoid a similar panic. Indeed, U.S. Air Force Captain Edward J. Ruppelt wrote in 1956, "The [U.S. government's] UFO files are full of references to the near mass panic of October 30, 1938, when Orson Welles presented his now famous *The War of the Worlds* broadcast."

Ironically, in a theatrical trailer for his film *F For Fake*, Welles joked about such theories, jesting that the broadcast indeed "had secret sponsors."

Popularity

Since at least the 1970s, the Los Angeles CBS affiliate radio station, KNX (1070 AM), re-broadcasts the radio program every year on Halloween and in 2006 the Florida, NY based independent radio station WTBQ (1110 AM) planned a broadcast on Halloween using a slightly modified script with local actors.

On September 9, 1957, CBS' prestigious life-television program, Studio One, opened its tenth season with Nelson Bond's *The Night America Trembled*, the first dramatization of the public panic to the radio adaptation of Wells' novel. The hour-long production was narrated by Edward R. Murrow and featured such future stars as Ed Asner, James Coburn, Warren Oates, and Warren Beatty.

A 1975 television film for ABC, Howard Koch and Nicholas Meyer's *The Night That Panicked America*, also dramatizes the public's panicked reaction to the broadcast but comes across as a fairly standard disaster movie (albeit one in which the disaster is assumed rather than actual). The production included Vic Morrow, Meredith Baxter, Michael Constantine, John Ritter, Will Geer, and Tom Bosley.

The script was also updated and broadcast by PBS on the 50th anniversary of the original radio play in 1988. It starred Jason Robards, Steve Allen, Douglas Edwards, Scott Simon and Terry Gross and was nominated for a Grammy Award.

In 1994 the L.A. Theater Works' *The Play's the Thing* and KPCC rebroadcast the original radio play before a live audience, featuring actors from the various Star Trek television shows, including Leonard Nimoy, Wil Wheaton, Gates McFadden, Brent Spiner, and Armin Shimerman. John de Lancie served as the director.

Recordings of the broadcast are still available (see old-time radio).

On October 31, 2002, radio show host Glenn Beck did a live version as well in honor of the drama on Halloween.

XM Satellite Radio has broadcast a new version called *Not From Space* in recent years in which Microsoft's Bill Gates is one of the Martians.

In 2004, a local teenager of Kelowna, B.C. was able to convince Oldies AM 1150 to broadcast the original show during Halloween as a special program for radio listeners.

Beginning in 2006, Three Eagles Communications station, Star 106, KLSS (106.1 FM), will broadcast the radio program on Halloween in Northern Iowa and Southern Minnesota beginning at 6 p.m. central time.

Influence

It is sometimes said that the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was first received in skepticism by the American public, as a consequence of the radio performance.

Amazingly enough, the drama has been rewritten to apply to other locations and rebroadcast, with similar results:

- A 1944 broadcast in Santiago, Chile caused panic, including mobilization of troops by the governor.
- A February 12, 1949 broadcast in Quito, Ecuador panicked tens of thousands [3]. Some listeners, enraged at the deception, set fire to the radio station and the offices of *El Comercio*, the capital's leading newspaper, killing twenty people. The property damage was estimated at \$350,000. Three officials charged with responsibility for the broadcast were arrested.

Because of the panic in the 1930s and 1940s associated with this radio play, U.S. TV networks have deemed it necessary to post bulletins to their viewing audience to inform them some TV stories were in fact fictional drama, and not really happening. Disclaimers of this sort were shown during broadcasts of the 1983 television movie *Special Bulletin* and again during the 1994 telefilm, *Without Warning*, both of which were dramas disguised as realistic news broadcasts (*Without Warning*, presenting Earth being hit by three meteor fragments, acknowledged that it was a tribute to *War of the Worlds* and was broadcast on CBS TV on the 56th anniversary of the radio broadcast). NBC placed disclaimers in an October 1999 TV movie dramatizing the possible disastrous effects of the Y2K bug even though it was obviously drama and was unlikely to be confused with reality.

On December 22nd, 1991, the popular student-run satire TV show Ku-Ku on the Bulgarian state channel Kanal 1 broadcast reports of an accident in the Bulgarian Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant, in an attempt to draw attention to the lack of preparedness for such an accident. The report's impact was heightened due to people's memory of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster and its incomplete coverage by official media during events of 1986. The show used actual TV news reporters because actors from the show were popular and would have been easily recognized. Reminders of the program's fictional nature were broadcast during music video breaks but largely ignored. There were reports about people taking iodine pills in order to protect their thyroid glands from absorbing radiation. In the aftermath, the show was canceled, but trial charges against director, screenwriter and producer were dismissed.

In 2006, a false Belgian news bulletin, broadcasted by RTBF, reported that the Dutch-speaking Flanders region of the country had declared its independence from Belgium, and led to widespread panic in French-speaking Belgium. It was actually a hoax inspired by Orson Welles's adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*. See *2006 Belgian Secession Hoax*.

Possible influence on Welles

A 2005 BBC report suggested that Welles' idea and style may have been influenced by an earlier 1926 hoax broadcast by Ronald Knox on BBC radio. Knox's broadcast also mixes breathless reporting of a revolution sweeping across London with dance music and sound effects of destruction. Moreover, Knox's broadcast also caused a minor panic among listeners who did not know that the program was fictional.

A somewhat similar hoax from 1874 used wild animals rather than aliens claiming that they were escaping from New York Central Park Zoo and this also seems to have generated some public panic.[4]