

100 years since the birth of Orson Welles—Part 1

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4 June 2015

May 6 marked one hundred years since the birth of Orson Welles, one of the most remarkable figures in American film and theater in the 20th century.

Welles began acting and directing at an early age. After gaining success in the theater and in radio in New York City in the late 1930s, he signed a contract with RKO, the Hollywood studio, and directed his first film, *Citizen Kane*, at the age of twenty-five. After various battles with studio executives and in the face of the anti-Communist purges in Hollywood, Welles left for Europe in 1947 and made films there as an independent, itinerant director before returning to the US in the mid-1950s. The last years of his life were dominated by unsuccessful and sometimes demeaning efforts to raise funds for various projects.

Welles died thirty years ago, leaving behind thirteen feature films. Setting aside five weaker efforts, three of them late in his career, there are eight films that make up the main body of his contribution: *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952), *Mr. Arkadin* (1955), *Touch of Evil* (1958) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). Each of these is strongly recommended to the reader.

Welles also left behind many uncompleted film works or projects, including versions of *Moby Dick*, *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Don Quixote*, along with countless original scripts or film fragments. In addition, of course, although it falls outside the scope of this appreciation, there is Welles' work in the theater (famed productions in the 1930s of *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* and many more) and radio (dozens of adaptations of classics and performances of original works). In addition, Welles provided the story idea for Charlie Chaplin's remarkable *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947).

A special word must also be put in for the 1993 documentary, *It's All True: Based on an Unfinished Film by Orson Welles* (Bill Krohn, Myron Meisel, Richard Wilson), which in exemplary fashion discusses Welles' efforts to make a three-part feature, *It's All True*, in Latin America in 1941-42, and includes remarkable footage he shot there.

Welles created and portrayed press magnate Charles Foster Kane, sailor and agitator Michael O'Hara, the sinister financier Gregory Arkadin and the brutal policeman Hank Quinlan, and brought to life Shakespeare's barbaric Macbeth, doomed Othello and comic-tragic Sir John Falstaff.

As a film writer and director (along with his collaborators), Welles invented dozens of fascinating major and minor personalities. One could add to those a number of figures not originally of Welles' creation, but whom he reworked, for example, Lady Macbeth (Jeanette Nolan), Iago (Micheál MacLiammóir) in *Othello*, and numerous characters in *Chimes at Midnight* (adapted from several of Shakespeare's plays).

Welles also appeared imposingly as an actor in scores of films directed—well or badly—by others, including *Journey Into Fear*, *Jane Eyre*, *Tomorrow is Forever*, *Black Magic*, *The Third Man*, *Prince of Foxes*, *Moby Dick*, *Man in the Shadow*, *The Long, Hot Summer*,

Compulsion, *Ferry to Hong Kong*, *The V.I.P.s*, *Is Paris Burning?*, *A Man for All Seasons*, *Casino Royale*, *The Sailor from Gibraltar* and *Catch-22*. His reputation was such that he is credited, rightly or wrongly, with influencing the direction of a number of these films, including *Journey Into Fear*, *Jane Eyre* and *The Third Man*.

At its best, Welles' directorial work contains a poetic, sensual, socially critical urgency perhaps unmatched in the American cinema. Steeped in Shakespeare and the classics, coming of age in the turbulent conditions of the Great Depression, always striving for a wide audience, Welles imbued his films with an intelligence and an intensity that make them almost unfailingly appealing.

As we wrote nearly 20 years ago: “Welles was an extraordinary talent, perhaps the greatest theatrical mind in American history. He had the uncanny ability to place people among objects and decor and set them in motion so that the dramatic problems inherent in their lives could emerge with great clarity and force.”

It is telling that Welles, whose last major work came out half a century ago, appears more *contemporary*, more *engaging* than the vast majority of our present-day film writers and directors.

At the same time, if his aspiration was to be the Shakespeare of modern American life, Welles failed at that, and the incomplete, unfinished character of his work cannot be blamed *solely* on a hostile and obtuse studio system. There was something unresolved and inadequate about his conceptions, including damaging illusions in American capitalist democracy and an over-concern (even if a critically minded one) with “great men,” that prevented him from treating contemporary society in an all-rounded and comprehensive fashion.

Bound up with that, Welles, always a bit of an aristocrat in his tastes and demeanor (a self-described “king actor,” i.e., one suited to play only authoritative roles), was rarely able to depict the conditions and feelings of the oppressed in a convincing manner. Filmmakers less brilliant than he in the post-World War II period were better able to represent the concrete character of working class life.

His was for the most part a world of articulate, forceful personalities engaged in dramatic encounters about significant moral and social issues: corruption, greed, treachery in high places, official brutality, the danger of tyranny. The confrontations, however, largely take place over the heads of the average citizen, who is reduced, one might say, to the role of a mesmerized spectator. The intervention of masses of people in *making history* almost never arises as a serious issue.

Much of the intellectual-ideological unsteadiness in Welles' work, in our view, comes from attempting to fit events somewhat awkwardly and regressively into the mold of momentous *personal* chronicles in a century dominated by global civil war and the movement of vast *social* forces.

To treat the complexities of twentieth-century existence with “Shakespearean” objectivity, in other words, required an outlook *more precise* and *more advanced* than the Elizabethan playwright's own.

Citizen Kane and The Magnificent Ambersons

Welles' first film, *Citizen Kane*, is one of the most discussed in the history of the cinema. Perhaps in response to the semi-official designation of the work as the "greatest film of all time," there is a tendency today to treat it with a certain degree of condescension. *Citizen Kane* may well not be Welles' best work, but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless, and not simply because it was directed by someone only a few months after his twenty-fifth birthday, who had never previously made a feature film.

The film depicts the life and times of Charles Foster Kane (Welles), a fictional media mogul, based in part on newspaper owner and multi-millionaire William Randolph Hearst, as well as a number of other American tycoons. It begins with Kane dying virtually alone in his mausoleum of a mansion in 1941 and proceeds to follow the efforts of a reporter to find out something about the man, through conversations with a number of those who knew him well.

The bulk of the film is told in a series of overlapping flashbacks. We first return to 1871, when the action occurs that largely determines everything to come. Kane's mother (Agnes Moorehead), who runs a boarding house in Colorado, has been given the deed to a gold mine that has proven immensely valuable. She determines, against her husband's ineffectual protests and contrary to the inclinations of her own heart, to send her young son away to the East to be raised and educated under the guardianship of a cold, stiff banker, Mr. Thatcher (George Coulouris).

French critic André Bazin suggested Welles was obsessed with or nostalgic about childhood. If so, it was an obsession with something more than the filmmaker's own formative years, or those of one or more of his fictional characters. At issue here, in our opinion, is the childhood of modern industrial and commercial America. Welles' first two films (*Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*) both begin in the 1870s, the decade following the Civil War, on the eve of the emergence of the US as an economic world power. Kane senior (Harry Shannon) mutters, "The idea of a bank being the guardian [of his son]!" but surely the film's implication is that financial institutions became the overseers and controllers of American life as a whole, with far-reaching consequences.

But is Welles "nostalgic" for the America that was lost? He is certainly too historically aware to believe that the US could have retained its semi-rural character, dominated by small-town life and small, family-owned business. Indeed, both films point to the narrowness and backwardness of such a sort of existence. For instance, when the young Kane's father suggests that what "the kid needs is a good thrashing," Mary Kane responds pointedly, "That's why he's going to be brought up where you can't get at him."

Nonetheless, there is an ambivalence in Welles about the development of modern society, which becomes more pronounced in *The Magnificent Ambersons*. To suggest that twentieth-century American life, with its factories and cars and "dark" cities, is principally something to be dreaded ("a step backward in civilization"), which Welles borders on arguing, is to ignore or remain blind to the historically earth-shaking and potentially revolutionary implications of that development. And this is an unsettled issue in Welles' thinking and art that never goes away. *Citizen Kane* does hint in a couple of places at the possibility of social upheaval going beyond the present political set-up. In his early days as a populist muckraker, Kane informs Thatcher, the banker, that as a newspaperman he intends to look after the interests of "the working people," adding ominously, "I think I'm the man to do it. You see, I have money and property. If I don't look after the interests of the underprivileged, somebody else will. Maybe somebody without money or property. That would be too bad."

Later in the film, a drunk Jed Leland (Joseph Cotten), Kane's longtime friend and collaborator, warns the budding mogul, "When your precious

underprivileged really get together, oh, boy, that's gonna add up to something bigger than your privilege and I don't know what you'll do. Sail away to a desert island, probably, and lord it over the monkeys."

In any event, the emotional needs of the boy Charles Kane are sacrificed on the altar of economics and respectability, and that sets the tone for the entire film. Kane becomes an acquirer of things, or treats other people as things he can acquire. In the end, surrounded by statues he has bought, he turns into something resembling stone. The American dream of success and possession of money and objects becomes an unbearable nightmare.

There are portentous and somewhat laborious elements in *Citizen Kane*, including the opening and closing sequences set in Kane's Xanadu mansion. There are also sequences done in an unnecessarily elaborate fashion.

But *Citizen Kane* also includes scenes carried off with extraordinary visual flair and even brilliance. The scene of the banquet held to celebrate the success of Kane's first New York newspaper is one of those. Kane, still a young man, is at his most charming and charismatic, flirting with a group of dancing girls who sing a silly number about him. His new staff members, all bought from a rival, are admiring him and the women. Fun and laughter and light-heartedness seem to rule, but something sinister and unprincipled is taking place, which leaks into the party at its edges (in addition to Kane's cheerful urging of a declaration of war against Spain!). In a corner, Kane's assistant, Mr. Bernstein (Everett Sloane), and Leland are discussing Kane's principles, or lack thereof.

"LELAND: Bernstein, Bernstein, these men who were with the *Chronicle*, weren't they just as devoted to the *Chronicle* policy as they are now to our policies? BERNSTEIN: Sure, they're just like anybody else. They got work to do, they do it. Only they happen to be the best men in the business. LELAND: Do we stand for the same things the *Chronicle* stands for, Bernstein? BERNSTEIN: Certainly not. Listen, Mr. Kane, he'll have them changed to his kind of newspapermen in a week. LELAND: There's always a chance, of course, that they'll change Mr. Kane—without his knowing it."

Welles' use of deep focus, which allows every element from back to front to appear in focus, is a distinctive feature of *Citizen Kane*. The actions and attitudes of several characters, along with the physical décor, are available for the viewer to consider at once. At least theoretically, he or she has the choice to focus on this or that feature, or to shift visually back and forth between the various elements.

The film is by no means an unsympathetic portrait of its central figure (Kane tells Bernstein at one point, "If I hadn't been very rich, I might have been a really great man"), but the artistic and psychological subtleties were lost on Hearst, who declared war on *Citizen Kane* and exerted his considerable influence to see, unsuccessfully in the end, that it was never shown to the public. The FBI opened its file on Welles at the time, in March 1941, declaring in one report: "The evidence before us leads inevitably to the conclusion that the film *Citizen Kane* is nothing more than an extension of the Communist Party's campaign to smear one of its most effective and consistent opponents in the United States [i.e., Hearst]."

James Naremore (*The Magic World of Orson Welles*) comments that "*Kane* may not have been a thoroughgoing anti-capitalist attack, but it was close enough to ensure that Welles would never again be allowed such freedom at RKO." Welles' woes in that regard are well documented, and they resulted in his next film being mangled by the studio.

Based on a Booth Tarkington novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons* follows several decades in the decline in the fortunes of the Amberson family, at one time the most distinguished family in a small Midwestern city. Isabel Amberson (Dolores Costello) should have married the bright, up-and-coming inventor-industrialist Eugene Morgan (Cotten). Instead she wed the passive, uninspiring Wilbur Minafer (Don Dillaway).

Twenty years later, Minafer is dead and Morgan is a widower with a

teenage daughter, Lucy (Anne Baxter), more or less the same age as Isabel's son George (Tim Holt). Morgan, an automobile pioneer, and Isabel resume their interrupted relations. But the spoiled, impossible George, egged on by his frustrated, unmarried Aunt Fanny Minafer (Moorehead), thinks Morgan isn't good enough for the Amberson-Minafers. Isabel dies unhappily, and the Ambersons' economic condition goes rapidly downhill.

Moorehead in her anguish and, ultimately, hysteria is unforgettable, especially in scenes that take place in the Amberson mansion's stairways. The final sequences of the film were not shot or edited by Welles, and simply have to be ignored. As a whole, or at least in what's left of it, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is a more fluid and humane work than *Citizen Kane*, less focused on one individual (tellingly perhaps, it is the only one of his films in which Welles does not appear as an actor, although he does the narration), and with moments of extraordinary intimacy. Both early films benefit enormously from the presence of Joseph Cotten, who brings depth and complexity to his characters.

Welles and the left intelligentsia in the US

One of the legitimate criticisms that can be made of Welles' film work is that it never took on one of the thorniest questions in American political life, the role and evolution of liberalism and the Democratic Party, and, specifically, that he never addressed popular illusions in Franklin D. Roosevelt. In part, this is because Welles shared many of those illusions.

The question of Welles' political opinions and positions, and their evolution, is a large one, which can only be touched upon briefly here. In any event, it is not so much a matter of his personal views as those of the left intelligentsia as a whole in the US in the era under discussion.

In the years 1937-38, Welles was quite close to individuals in the Communist Party (CP) and to the party's policies. He and John Houseman introduced their new Mercury Theatre to readers of the *Daily Worker*, the CP newspaper, in a September 1937 article headlined "Theater and the People's Front." The new theater group, they explained, would be "another step ... towards a real People's Theatre in America."

According to Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (a source of useful information, but a deeply wrongheaded book, which whitewashes the role and impact of Stalinism), "By the spring and winter of 1938, Welles was a regular part of Popular Front events: in February, he introduced a *New Masses* [Communist Party cultural magazine] concert; in March, he and [composer Marc] Blitzstein [*The Cradle Will Rock*] appeared at a Workers Bookstore symposium on the 'Culture of the People's Front'; in April, he appeared at the American Student Union's Peace Ball."

Welles' 194-page FBI file, initiated in March 1941 just prior to *Citizen Kane*'s opening, lists a host of organizations, "said to be Communist in character," with which he had associated himself, including the Negro Cultural Committee, the Workers Bookshop, the American Youth Congress, the People's Forum, the Hollywood League for Democratic Action and many more.

One FBI memo, dated November 1944, asserts flatly, "Welles has been a consistent follower of the Communist Party line." Another memo a month later reports on the "Salute to Young Americans Dinner," sponsored by the American Youth for Democracy, "the successor to the Young Communist League." The memo explains that "Welles concluded his remarks by stating that Fascism in the United States was still possible until all the greedy people in this country had been killed."

Although unable to find any record of Welles' membership in the Communist Party, probably because he never joined, top FBI officials in 1944 placed Welles' name on the agency's secret Security Index. This

list contained "the names of those individuals who can be considered to be a threat to the internal security" of the US and who would be rounded up and interned in the event of a national emergency. His name was removed from the Index in September 1949, after he had been in Europe for a couple of years.

There is no difficulty in proving that Welles was a fellow traveler of the Communist Party into the war years and perhaps still by the end of the war, but what precisely does that mean? "At various times," notes James Naremore, "he called himself a Socialist, remaining strongly anti-fascist yet somehow within the 'pragmatic' ethos of the New Deal."

In *Socialism, Historical Truth and the Crisis of Political Thought in the United States*, David North notes the profound impact of the Wall Street Crash on the American intelligentsia, producing as it did "within this social milieu a certain sense of urgency, a heightened interest in social problems and even a degree of sympathy for radical politics."

These sentiments often translated into a general sympathy for the Soviet Union. This was deepened when the Stalinist Communist International adopted the policy of the "Popular Front" in 1935. According to this political line, the various Communist Parties were to ally themselves with, and support in every way, the liberal and progressive parties of what the Stalinists referred to as the "democratic" bourgeoisie.

North explains, "Parties, politicians and governments were no longer defined and analyzed on the basis of class interests they served. Rather, they were to be evaluated as either 'fascist' or 'antifascist.' The political independence of the working class and the goal of socialism were to be sacrificed in the interest of what was really an imperative of Soviet foreign policy."

The admiration among liberals for Soviet accomplishments and support for the Soviet regime, he notes, "did not at all signify an endorsement of revolutionary change in the United States. Far from it. Rather, many liberal intellectuals were inclined to view an alliance with the USSR as a means of strengthening their own limited agenda for social reform in the United States, as well as keeping fascism at bay in Europe."

In 1938, the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky observed in *Art and Politics in Our Epoch*, "A whole generation of 'leftist' intelligentsia has turned its eyes for the last ten or fifteen years to the East [the USSR] and has bound its lot, in varying degrees, to a victorious revolution, if not to a revolutionary proletariat. Now, this is by no means one and the same thing." In the victorious revolution, Trotsky pointed out, there was not only the revolution, but the new privileged social layer, the Stalinist bureaucracy, that had raised itself *on the shoulders* of the revolution. "In reality, the 'leftist' intelligentsia has tried to change masters. What has it gained?"

In the US, the Stalinists aggressively courted liberal and radical intellectuals in the late 1930s and, as North writes, "in many respects the day-to-day politics of the Communist Party assumed an increasingly liberal coloration, most notably in the American CP's virtual endorsement of Roosevelt and the New Deal." For many left intellectuals, "their personal identification with the Soviet Union seemed, at least in their own eyes, to make up for the fact that they lacked any independent program for radical action in the United States." CP members and supporters in Hollywood presented themselves, and probably thought of themselves in many cases, as merely the most fervent and politically far-reaching of Roosevelt's supporters.

When it came to considering events like the Moscow Trials—at which the leaders of the October Revolution were denounced as counter-revolutionaries and agents of fascism and condemned to death—and the entire genocidal campaign against socialists and revolutionaries carried out in the USSR by the Stalinist regime in the late 1930s, the left intellectual milieu in the US made its evaluations on the basis of its own narrow social interests and generally petty concerns.

It is certainly a stain on the reputation of major artists such as Charlie

Chaplin, Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright, and on that of lesser figures too—Marc Blitzstein, Dorothy Parker, Nathaniel West, Henry Roth, Ring Lardner Jr., Rockwell Kent, Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, John Garfield, Morris Carnovsky, etc.—that they publicly endorsed the slanders made in the Moscow Trials against Trotsky and the other Bolshevik revolutionaries.

One of these wretched public statements, endorsed by a number of actors, writers and “educators” and published in the *Daily Worker* in April 1938, defended supposed Soviet efforts to “eliminate insidious internal dangers,” attacked the “Trotskyite-Bukharinite Traitors” and supported the CPUSA position that the trials and executions prevented “the fascists from strangling the rights of the people.”

Welles’ name does not appear anywhere, although Blitzstein, an enthusiastic Stalinist and Welles’ collaborator at the time, apparently signed every slanderous statement that came his way.

Whether Welles kept himself aloof from the pro-Moscow Trials campaign or was not yet a sufficiently prominent name to be actively pursued by the Stalinists is unclear. In any case, these were the circles in which Welles traveled. And this had short-term and long-term consequences.

As we argued previously, in a review of Reynold Humphries’ *Hollywood’s Blacklists*, the subsequent devastation of the Hollywood left—and Welles’ fate is part of that general fate—is inextricably bound up with its disastrous misreading of political and social conditions in the US, the character of the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Party, the world war and the prospects in the postwar period.

We noted, “While millions went into combat motivated by the desire to defeat Hitler and fascism, World War II, in its social and economic essence, remained an imperialist war, a struggle between great power blocs for the division and re-division of the world. The US, with its vast industrial strength and reserves, could afford Roosevelt’s reformist experiments in the 1930s, but that did not make the war aims of the American ruling elite or its plans for the postwar world any less predatory or criminal.”

The Communist Party and its periphery closed their eyes to the incredible brutality of the Allied forces, including the firebombing of German and Japanese cities. They cheered the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs in August 1945, which killed and maimed hundreds of thousands of civilians, as Welles shamefully did too, in a radio broadcast.

The Hollywood left was terribly unprepared for what was coming. The CP had promised a rebirth of democracy, a New Deal on a grander and more socialistic scale. It had recruited on the basis of support for the war and for “Americanism.” Now that the wartime alliance with the USSR was at an end and the Stalinists had served their purpose of marshaling popular support for the war, “the mask came off and the grisly visage of American imperialism, now the dominant capitalist power, appeared.”

In his short-lived 1945 column in the *New York Post*, then a liberal daily newspaper, Welles’ chief themes, according to James Naremore, “were the need to perpetuate New Deal social legislation, and the necessity of translating the Allied victory over Germany into a world democracy. He argued for a fair working relationship between labor and capital, but believed government price regulations should continue after the war; he inveighed against a ‘certain sort of businessman’ who ‘openly favors a certain percentage of postwar unemployment,’ saying that such types ‘don’t want any percentage of government control over their affairs. They want to be free as buccaneers, free to encourage a little convenient joblessness.’ He supported the basic structure of American government and encouraged the two-party structure, but at the time he hoped aloud that Henry Wallace [Roosevelt’s vice president during his third term, 1941-45, and Progressive Party candidate for president, supported by the Stalinists, in 1948] would be the next president.”

“Welles could sense a growing propaganda effort against the Russians,” writes Naremore. The *Post* column commented, “We are still building our Bulwarks against Bolshevism. The phony fear of Communism is smoke-screening the real menace of renescent Fascism.”

Welles, like many of his radical and liberal counterparts, was operating on the basis of a utopian and false perspective, that the “progressive” elements of the American ruling elite, represented by the Democratic Party, could be pressured into opposing the “little Wall St. camarilla” and its supposedly exclusive political agency, the Republican right wing, and into acting in the interests of broad layers of the population.

To be continued



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