

Author of books on Orson Welles, film noir, Vincente Minnelli and more

An interview with film historian and critic James Naremore

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2 September 2015

James Naremore is one of the most intriguing writers on films and filmmaking around. Among other things, he has produced influential books on directors Orson Welles, Vincente Minnelli and Stanley Kubrick, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Alexander Mackendrick's *Sweet Smell of Success*, the *film noir* genre, acting in the cinema, and novelist Virginia Woolf. He has also written extensively for film journals, including *Film Quarterly*, and edited the Contemporary Film Directors series at the University of Illinois Press.

Professor Naremore has had a distinguished academic career. After graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he received his Ph.D. in 1970, he joined the faculty at Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington, where he taught for 36 years. Now retired, he is professor emeritus in the Department of Communication and Culture.

His film history and criticism stand out in the contemporary intellectual world perhaps above all because of their genuine concern with the historical and aesthetic conditions of artistic creation, a concern that has found concrete, well-researched expression in his various works. Naremore writes with both artistic and social passion, a sadly rare combination these days! No wonder he feels "slightly out of key."

As we suggest in the interview posted below, much of contemporary academic film criticism is dominated by various strands of postmodernism, poststructuralism, "Race, Class & Gender" Studies and related trends. These retrograde currents, driven by the social aspirations of sections of the upper-middle class and consumed by subjectivism and historical relativism, largely reduce art to an expression of congealed ideology. They reject both the ability of the honest artist to go beyond his or her immediate circumstances (historical, social, racial, sexual, etc.) and the objective value of art as a means of seeing, feeling and knowing the world.

We encountered James Naremore's works while researching and writing about two topics this year, the 100th anniversary of Orson Welles' birth and the re-release across the US of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944). In both cases, Naremore provided valuable insight into the various complex questions at hand. Whether we agreed or disagreed with his views, we found them carefully argued and often intellectually creative.

Publication Highlights (from the Indiana University website)

Acting in the Cinema. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Contemporary Film Directors. Vols. 1-4. University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Film Adaptation. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Filmguide to Psycho. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973.

The Films of Vincente Minnelli. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

The Magic World of Orson Welles. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Revised edition: Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989.

More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

The following interview is a combination of a conversation on Skype and written responses to certain questions.

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WSWS: The first question, or issue, concerns one of the striking features of your books on film. Your approach is unusual in recent decades, in that you combine concrete and thoughtful, and well-researched, historical and social context (from which one can actually learn something) *and* a serious effort to grapple with the aesthetic qualities of the work. In your writings, art has genuine, lasting value. Of course, one can disagree with this or that judgment, social or artistic, but the evidence or arguments are objectively presented.

Reading such material comes as a pleasure and a relief because it stands in contrast to much of what the academic world produces at the moment, dominated by postmodernism, so-called cultural studies and so on ... or, for that matter, much of what is passed off, falsely, as Marxism ... various approaches which tend to reduce the artist to nothing more than a sum-total of his or her social or historical shortcomings, and reduce art to nothing more than congealed bourgeois ideology.

If you accept this point, I'm wondering if you think there was something about your background or intellectual influences, or the historical period that allowed you to value, or weigh up, both the social roots of a work and its contribution as art.

James Naremore: I'm gratified by what you say and thank you for it. I do think that what you're describing about my aims is correct. I'm as much an aesthete as I am a social critic, and on both scores I believe I'm slightly out of key with present-day academia.

How did I arrive at this kind of writing? Maybe you already know something about my biography. I grew up in the South in the 40s and 50s. I was pretty much an orphan because my parents died when I was young. Maybe because I felt a bit of an outsider, I was sympathetic to outsiders of all kinds, and this influenced my ultimate political tendencies—you might say I was born with socialist instincts, which made me different from virtually everyone I knew in those days. But I wasn't what you'd call a social activist. The irony is that I was able to go to college by winning second prize—fellowship in a national oratorical contest sponsored by the American Legion. The right wing gave me a college education!

I was passionately interested in movies from a very young age and even

made an incomplete film on my own in high school. But there was no way for me to study film in school. I went to Louisiana State University and majored in English and French during the late days of the New Criticism [a formalist movement in literary theory]. I was interested in literary modernism, particularly in James Joyce because I had a teacher who wrote about him and who greatly influenced me. That teacher, who knew a good deal about Freud and Marx, became my mentor and role model. But I was also very interested in the formal or aesthetic qualities of literature, which made the New Criticism attractive as a method of reading.

The civil rights movement was in high gear around that time. Then in the 1960s I went to graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin, which was a hotbed of left-wing activity. While there, I became more and more interested in reconciling my aestheticism with my politics. I wrote a doctoral dissertation on Virginia Woolf, but all the while I wanted to write about movies—not only because they were an art form I loved but also because they had obvious social implications and a wide audience.

My first opportunity to write about them came after my Ph.D., when I got a job at Indiana University. I began by writing relatively short things about John Huston and Alfred Hitchcock. At the time I was greatly influenced by Andrew Sarris, and I've remained something of an auteurist [*auteur* is the French word for author; "auteurism" holds that a film reflects the director's personal vision, as if he or she were the "author"], which isn't encouraged nowadays in academic film study. (I was also influenced by the early writings of Noel Burch, a sort of left-wing formalist who tended to favor the avant-garde.) Ultimately I wrote a fairly ambitious book about Orson Welles, a director who had always fascinated me. I tried to combine a close study of film style and close reading of the films while also emphasizing Welles's politics.

As you say, I don't think Welles can be explained simply by the social, political environment in which he worked, but clearly that environment determined a good deal of his early career. He was very much involved in the Popular Front of the 1930s, and I'm convinced more and more that he was run out of Hollywood by the right wing. The FBI maintained an extensive file on him (no doubt prompted by William Randolph Hearst) and in 1945 assigned him a "Security Index Card" that declared him a potential enemy of the state. The climate of the postwar period, the red-baiting and the blacklisting, partly determined his European exile. If he had remained in the US, he would have been blacklisted.

WSWS: There may never have been a formal blacklisting of Welles, but I certainly agree that he was run out, or felt the need to exile himself. Unhappily, I don't think he could ever speak entirely honestly about that experience, as if it were shameful to admit how left-wing he had been and how much he was at odds with the Hollywood community, or what was perceived as American "public opinion."

JN: This is a complicated matter. I think as he got older you could see him recoiling against the atmosphere of hippiedom in the 1960s and the freewheeling culture of the 1970s. His mother was a suffragette, but he became a womanizer and at times something of a misogynist. He belonged to the old-fashioned left socialism of the 1930s, but he was also a highly intelligent and gifted artist, very committed to his creative instincts and his desire to make films. He ended up using his own money to make them, which is almost unheard of in Hollywood.

WSWS: Not to dwell on it, but I presumed the civil rights movement had an impact on your life.

JN: Yes.

WSWS: Were you still in Louisiana at that point?

JN: Yes. I marched in some protests, but I can't say I was really active at that time because I had a child when I was in my early 20s and I was bent on completing my education. I can recall the day JFK was shot, when I saw frat boys at LSU smirking in pleasure. I was very much an outsider, and once I was able to leave there I never wanted to go back.

When I was in Madison, a place I loved, the Vietnam War was the issue

and I became much more politically active. I think I'm basically a literary intellectual, with all the bourgeois implications of that term, but at the same time I'm a critic of American capitalism. I'm very left-wing in my sympathies and I try to do the right thing, but I haven't always been socially active except in a marginal way.

WSWS: Your interest in literature is a positive virtue for someone working in this field. When we spoke to Sarris in 1998, he confessed somewhat apologetically that it was the literary-dramatic qualities of a work that interested him the most. That grounding in literature has stood you in good stead.

JN: I'd like to think so. I still have people like yourselves who read my work and say nice things about it.

WSWS: It's an objective problem. Enduring work will find its audience when it should find its audience, so to speak.

JN: Yes. I don't write with some specific person in mind, though I do assume a certain level of knowledge and sophistication in my readers. It's a bit like sending a message in a bottle.

WSWS: There are other people out there, including us. When we were doing the piece on Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, we had difficulty finding any intelligent writing on *film noir*, until we discovered your book. It shed light on a number of questions, or raised issues, even when we disagreed.

JN: Thanks again. The book on noir is far and away the most successful thing I've written. I did a great deal of research for it, and I'm pleased with the way it combines genre theory, aesthetics and social/political history. It would be interesting to discuss your disagreements.

WSWS: Speaking specifically about the Orson Welles anniversary, was it greater, smaller, larger, more significant, more profound, less profound, than you might have expected?

JN: It was a bigger occasion than I would have predicted. Here at Indiana, at the marvelous Indiana University Cinema, there was a very successful retrospective with scholars from six countries, plus a museum exhibit at the Lilly Rare Book Library, which holds a very large archive of Welles materials. I also attended an event at Woodstock, Illinois, where Welles went to school. I was supposed to appear at an event at the University of Michigan but had to cancel because my wife had an accident and injured her leg (she's fine now.) In October I'll be at an event in Rio de Janeiro, and in November I give talks in New York and Illinois.

Although I'm very happy about everything I've participated in this year, I'm a little frustrated because it has taken me away from a book I'm writing about filmmaker Charles Burnett [*Killer of Sheep*, 1978, *To Sleep with Anger*, 1990, *The Glass Shield*, 1994].

There's a large network of people with an interest in Welles, and it's surprising to see how many new things there are to say about him. When I was invited to Woodstock, they asked me talk about *The Stranger* [1946] because it has many allusions to the Todd School [located in Woodstock] and I realized I had missed an opportunity in my book. *The Stranger* is much more interesting artistically and politically than I gave it credit for being. I'm not sure about this, but I believe it's the first instance when images of the Holocaust and the death camps were included in a commercial film.

WSWS: Did the anniversary lead you to recalibrate in any way your opinions or thoughts about Welles?

JN: Not a basic recalibration. I expanded my view of him somewhat. I wanted to add (to the new edition of my book) some notes on Welles's unfinished work and on things he did other than movies. Of course he was always interested in the stage, radio and so forth. He also made interesting experiments with television. One of the elements of his work that I thought needed more emphasis is the pedagogical quality of his work. He always wanted to provoke thought, and there was a point in his life when he wanted to make educational films for universities.

WSWS: I think that's probably a strong side of his, actually. And it

contains a certain democratic sensibility. This is related to the work on Shakespeare and other classics.

JN: His and Roger Hill's *Everybody's Shakespeare* [1934] is a great example. And in the late 1930s, the Mercury Theater's "text recordings" were the first full-length recordings ever made of Shakespeare plays. They were widely used in schools and are still available.

WSWS: If the Welles events were bigger than expected, why do you think that is, aside from the obvious fact that he's an intriguing filmmaker?

JN: I don't have a good answer other than the fact that he has legendary status among filmmakers, even today. Where academic interest is concerned we will have to see, because the year's not over. The residue from individual conferences and celebrations at universities might be published and might show us if his work is still intellectually relevant.

WSWS: A lot of it is still quite contemporary. Welles is dealing with issues that are not resolved. And dealing with them in an aesthetically interesting and lively and rich way. At the same time, some of the great interest today is by default a criticism of what's going on today. It's a commentary on what *isn't* being done today—on the lack of richness and complexity in an awful lot of films today.

JN: I agree. On the negative side, there has always been a danger with Welles of falling into a cult of personality and a certain kind of romantic appreciation. But I don't think the danger is great because academic film studies have moved so far in the other direction. What I see now is a danger of relativism. There's nothing wrong with identity politics, but in many cases it almost seems the sole purpose of academic writing on film. There's also a retreat from evaluation—a sense that one should concentrate on the sociology of fandom and the audience instead. The danger of this is that it can play into Hollywood's hand. If you don't personally evaluate a work, even if your evaluation is wrong, I think you have no politics or seriousness in your approach.

WSWS: It's a lack of any historical sense. We understand that individuals don't jump out of their skins. They find themselves in certain circumstances. They inherit certain circumstances, prejudices and limitations, as we all do. But the question is: is there something universal and objectively true in what they've done despite the secondary difficulties?

JN: I have always felt that as a critic I should point out if a film or a filmmaker is right-wing or homophobic or whatever. But I don't get a lot of pleasure from *merely* pointing out things like that. I need to write about something I respect on one level or another. I don't understand people who spend their careers writing about *Star Wars*.

WSWS: Let's be honest, it's a money-making industry. Cultural studies, identity politics and the rest has become a multi-million dollar industry. People get grants, fellowships, book deals, magazines, they make careers out of this.

The subjectivism is dreadful. Is it possible for an artist to know, identify the world objectively and rise above his or her immediate gender, racial or social circumstances? Marxism, paradoxically as it may seem to some, answers, absolutely yes. There's an objective character to it. Historians, biographers don't emphasize, concentrate on Charles Darwin's relationship with his wife and children. He made an objective contribution. Welles may have had all sorts of personal shortcomings, but there is an objective character to what he contributed to our knowledge of the world.

JN: Exactly. And there are plenty of books about Marx and what a horrible father or husband he was.

WSWS: It's the thing at the moment. Everyone turns out to have been a monster. We've been attacked for defending Julian Assange and others.

JN: I would add that there is often a tendency in left-wing politics of Puritanism. I don't reject it on those grounds, but I think one needs to guard against it.

WSWS: There's another issue. You write on page 117 of my edition of *The Magic World of Orson Welles* :

"Welles's tendency to become involved in controversy ... has an interesting relationship to his subsequent films. I do not mean that his movies became mere vehicles for ideas ... I mean, rather, that the mood and style of his later projects were indirectly affected by his alienation from the movie colony and society at large; that the frenzy and unorthodox form of his work for the next ten years may be seen as partly a response to the growth of reactionary politics in the country, and can be related not only to Welles's working conditions but to his growing dissatisfaction with American life."

We would strongly agree with this, but one might add to it some sort of comment about or exploration of the nature of his "dissatisfaction," as, in fact, you do.

There is no need to be in any way *uncritical* of the outlook of the American intellectual left. A general amnesty is granted these days, on the grounds that everyone on the "Left" was part of one, big happy "Popular Front" family.

In our view, this pro-Stalinist Left was utterly unprepared for the Cold War, McCarthyism and the purges. And that had enormous consequences, for them and for artistic life in the US. Welles was no different in this regard. There is much to admire in the films he made over the next 10 years, but there is also a good deal, and here we're speaking of the non-Shakespeare works, that's dissatisfying, evasive, in some ways. He may have had a hard time, in his discouragement, his sense of betrayal at the hands of the American public, of coming to terms with what was going on in the US.

Do you have any thoughts on any of this, either the broader trends or the development of Welles's own work?

JN: One of his associate producers, Dick Wilson, told me once that around the time of *The Lady from Shanghai* [1947] he saw Welles weep because he knew he was doomed in Hollywood. Nobody was going to hire him. His departure from the country was over-determined—Hollywood simply didn't like him, and not just for political reasons. What I see happening in his later films is that the move to Europe takes him out of the American social context that gave a certain edge to his work.

A film like *The Trial* [1962], for all its brilliance, is excessively abstract and seems to take place nowhere. It may not be his fault, but he doesn't have his finger on the pulse of American social life as he did before. This was a more general problem, of course.

WSWS: Yes, it was not the filmmakers' fault if they had to make Westerns or science fiction films. It was almost impossible in Hollywood for a time to make a critical film about contemporary American life. Welles's *Touch of Evil* [1958] may have had something to do with the civil rights movement and his sense of something stirring in America.

JN: I've always seen *Touch of Evil* as an allegory about racism and the civil rights movement. It's daring because it only seems to adopt racist clichés. To me it's an example of how much Welles gains by returning to America—not only the technical expertise of Hollywood but also a social world he criticizes. But his European films aren't completely missing this critical element. *F for Fake* [1974] has a great deal to say about the paradoxes of authorship and the commodification of art.

WSWS: Changing subject, in your book on *film noir* [*More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*] you express the desire to dispel certain notions about the genre. Could you explain what some of those are?

JN: Unfortunately, I haven't done a good job of dispelling some of them. The same old generalizations about "expressionist" shadows and femme fatales persist. I argue that in a sense *film noir* is something created by critics, who invented the name during one particular historical period. Over time, the name took on other meanings and ideological implications in different contexts. There is no way to adequately define *film noir* and most of the generalizations about it can be disputed. It's chiefly defined

by a chain of associations—a list of movie titles in which item A has something in common with B, and B has something in common with C, but C doesn't necessarily have anything in common with A. Still, there are important things to say about the films in the list.

I wanted to talk about the connection in the 1940s between the crime drama and a certain kind of modernism, a modern art that was critical of the dominant values of society. I wanted to emphasize that and I wanted to overturn generalizations about the style of *film noir*. I also questioned the idea that many *film noirs* were B movies, when, in fact, a lot of them were not, they had substantial budgets.

I wanted to talk about the politics of the films and the climate of political censorship in the 1940s. Thom Andersen had said some interesting and important things about these matters in *Red Hollywood* [1996 documentaary], but I thought there was a bit more to say about how censorship functioned in the US in that period. [Critic and filmmaker] Paul Schrader and others have argued that *film noir* is a genre of cynicism, disillusionment, and pessimism. On the contrary, I think *film noir* is the last gasp of socially critical cinema in a popular form. A lot of the individuals we associate with *film noir* were associated with the Hollywood left, and had a history of being socially engaged.

WSWS: Here's the quote from *More Than Night*: "Most of the 1940s directors subsequently associated with the form ... were members of Hollywood's committed left-wing community. Among the major crime writers who provided source material for dark thrillers, Dashiell Hammett, Graham Greene, and Eric Ambler were Marxists to one degree or another, and Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain were widely regarded as social realists."

This point is quite important. Obviously, it's a very contradictory mood...

JN: And the filmmakers and writers are boxed in by all sorts of Hollywood requirements...

WSWS: They're dealing with certain built-in limitations in regard to what they can say and what they can't say. But they are also responding to the Holocaust, to the war, to Stalinism, to a truly traumatic couple of decades. How does one make sense of all that? If you have some hope, or some optimism about humanity. There is a genuine effort, within the limitations of the genre. There is a humanity in a lot of those films, an extraordinary humanity.

JN: That's how I feel. There's another level to those films. I think one of the things you can say about most of those films ... of course no generalization applies to all of them, but so many of these films are told from the point of view of criminals or those accused of being criminals. When you do that, you almost automatically open the door to social criticism. You're putting the audience in the position of the criminal or the accused, and this can enable you to criticize at least indirectly the dominant forms of society.

WSWS: As opposed to most of present-day work, which adopts the viewpoint of every law enforcement official imaginable. Everyone in a uniform gets his or her television series or film. Every level of the police, CIA, FBI, imaginary agencies like NCIS...

Do you have any thoughts on contemporary filmmakers or trends?

JN: I had a job with *Film Quarterly* for a number of years, putting together my 10 favorite films of the year. I was very active at the time trying to watch many different things. I didn't turn away entirely from Hollywood or fail to mention what Hollywood made, but I tended to prefer what is sometimes called world cinema—basically foreign films. To me, Hollywood paled in comparison with some of the things being done elsewhere. In fact, Hollywood should be ashamed of itself.

As we all know, or should know, the industry targets teenage boys. Too many pictures are derived from comic books. The studios have devised an economic model from which they profit, and they largely control mass exhibition, with the result that relatively few people have the opportunity

to see alternative types of film. I just find myself not terribly interested in going to Hollywood films any more. Now and then, of course, something good will happen.

WSWS: Clearly, enormous skill remains. They can create any sort of image imaginable. But you do have to have something to say. That's a problem.

JN: I think that some of the most interesting American filmmaking today is on the pay-TV channels, in long-form television. Series like *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, Todd Haynes' *Mildred Pierce*, and the recent miniseries *Show Me a Hero* couldn't be done as Hollywood features. Some others, such as *Mr. Robot*, about which I was initially hopeful, seem to be descending into a cute fascination with dark moods. That show isn't nearly as good as *Ex Machina*, a feature film that deals with somewhat similar modern anxieties.

WSWS: Thank you for taking the time.



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