Orson Welles's *The Other Side of the Wind*: A film 48 years in the making

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On November 2, Netflix released *The Other Side of the Wind*, a film directed by Orson Welles, who died in 1985. The footage was shot, with many breaks and delays and changes in location, from August 1970 to January 1976.

Netflix is also streaming a feature-length documentary about Welles's career and the film's fate, *They'll Love Me When I'm Dead*, directed by Morgan Neville (*20 Feet from Stardom*, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*).

The completion and release of *The Other Side of the Wind*, which treats the last day in the life of an aging, once-prominent American film director, played by filmmaker John Huston, was legendarily held up for decades by many factors.

The film's brief prologue notes that at age 55, "after two decades in exile, Orson Welles returned to Hollywood to start work on his comeback film, *The Other Side of the Wind*."

If it was indeed a comeback Welles was after, he was to be sorely disappointed. The most fundamental obstacle to the realization of the film was the director's exclusion at the hands of the Hollywood studios still hostile to the type of challenging works he continued to try and make until the end of his life. However, certain difficulties also arose from the filmmaker's own demoralized or cynical state that propelled him, for example, into financial relations with the family of the Shah of Iran. We will return to these issues.

Readers interested in all the ins and outs of the film's almost unbelievably tortured history and in ongoing controversies about its authorship can turn to various sources, including Wellesnet (the website devoted to Welles's work), a detailed Wikipedia account and at least two valuable articles by critic and film historian Joseph McBride (one posted at Wellesnet and one published in November's *Sight & Sound* magazine), who also appears as a character in *The Other Side of the Wind*.

Numerous individuals, including McBride, the late cinematographer Gary Graver, Welles's personal and creative partner Oja Kodar, writer and filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich and others, worked away for years at finishing *The Other Side of the Wind*, in the face of immense financial, legal and artistic hurdles. Editor Bob Murawski, along with collaborators, has done an extraordinary job of editing dozens of hours into a coherent work apparently along the lines of Welles's original conception (the filmmaker had himself edited some 40 minutes of the work before he died).

All of those involved, including critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, one of the consultants on the postproduction, deserve full credit for their dedication and perseverance. It is a significant cultural event that *The Other Side of the Wind* has finally been released to the public. Welles, the director of *Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Mr. Arkadin*, *Touch of Evil*, *Chimes at Midnight* and other works, is one of the leading figures in the history of the American cinema.

Sadly, many of those associated with or appearing in *The Other Side of the Wind*, including Welles himself, Huston, Graver, Susan Strasberg, Lilli Palmer, Edmond O'Brien, Cameron Mitchell, Norman Foster, Mercedes McCambridge, Paul Stewart, Dan Tobin, Tonio Selwart, John Carroll, Richard Wilson, Dennis Hopper, Paul Mazursky, Claude Chabrol and Curtis Harrington have died since shooting ended in January 1976.

The film opens with a wrecked automobile. We learn that Jake Hannaford (Huston), on the day of his 70th birthday, died in a car crash, or perhaps deliberately drove his vehicle off a bridge. A narrator, one of Hannaford's "acolytes," Brooks Otterlake (Bogdanovich), explains that the film has been put together from footage "shot by TV and documentary filmmakers, and also the students, critics and young directors who happened to bring 16 and 8mm cameras, having been invited" to Hannaford's birthday party. This is intended to help explain why the film is pieced together from innumerable fragments, shots taken from various cameras, from different angles, in different tones and hues.

Hannaford, back in the US to make his comeback film, is shooting a vaguely pretentious "art" film, complete with a good deal of sex. After completing a "lesbian" sequence in a steamroom, featuring The Actress (Kodar), the director, his crew, media figures and innumerable hangers-on set out for Hannaford's birthday celebration, to be held at a ranch owned by Zarah Valeska (Palmer), a retired European-born actress, near their shooting location in Arizona.

Meanwhile, one of Hannaford's longtime associates, a former child actor, Billy Boyle (Foster), is tasked with screening portions of the already filmed material for a crass, indifferent and youthful studio head, Max David (Geoffrey Land). David watches the entirely silent sequences of The Actress and Hannaford's newest discovery, John Dale (Bob Random), as they encounter and play sexual cat-and-mouse with one another amid skyscrapers and elsewhere, with growing incredulity and exasperation.

When asked about a script for the film Hannaford is shooting, Boyle tells the studio boss, "There isn't one." So, the other responds, "Jake is just making it up as he goes along." Boyle points out, "He's done it before." In the end, David walks out, "Tell Jake he wasted my time."

Meanwhile, Hannaford's entourage, on board a bus, is discussing the director's crisis and possible decline. Zimmer (Mitchell), the makeup artist, suggests, that Hannaford is "turning sour … He's going bad. … I'm a makeup man, an expert. All my life, I've been sticking my nose into other people's wrinkles. I know the little signs."

The director himself is at the wheel of a convertible, with Otterlake and a few critics (including McBride as Marvin Pister, or "Mr. Pister," an earnest, awkward cine?phile). Otterlake and the others suggest a few keys to Hannaford's personal history, including his father's suicide.

Hannaford and his entourage arrive at the ranch. A fantastic assortment of cameras and lights greet them. The invasive questions begin, and essentially never end. Valeska loosely presides over the gathering. Hannaford and the others wander around the various rooms and hallways, increasingly drunk and disoriented. During the course of the evening, Hannaford learns about Boyle's failure with David ("that dirty crook …

He's so crooked, he's got rubber pockets so he can steal soup") and that the "oil guys" in Texas, from whom great things were expected, "want no part of us." Hannaford is more or less broke and obliged to apply to Otterlake, who has had a string of film successes, for money to complete his film, but to no avail.

Other portions of Hannaford's uncompleted film, itself entitled "The Other Side of the Wind," are shown at the party, although power outages twice interrupt the attempted screening.

In those portions, we see more of Kadar-The Actress and Random-Dale cavorting in various locales. They meet in a nightclub. In the ladies room, various sex acts are going on. Later, the Actress has sex with Dale in a car, while her boyfriend drives. He eventually tosses them out in the rain.

Toward dawn, the remaining partygoers head off to a drive-in where they watch the final bits of the film-within-a-film. The camera continues rolling as Dale, taunted by an off-camera Hannaford, whose voice we hear, walks off the set. A female film critic, Juliette Riche (Strasberg), suggests that Hannaford has actually seduced various women to get to the men in their lives: "He has to possess her, because it's the only way that he can possess him. … After he's had his actor's girl, he throws her away. And then he's thrown his actor away and destroyed him in the process. Maybe that's what you really want." Hannaford strikes her, presumably because she has hit on a truth.

When Dale finally shows up at the ranch, the director invites the young actor to drive with him. When the former (still silently) turns him down, Hannaford takes off in the sports car he bought for Dale, heading toward his death. The narrator comments: "Who knows, maybe you can stare too hard at something. Drain out the virtue, suck out the living juice. You shoot the great places and the pretty people. All those girls and boys. Shoot them dead."

There are many intriguing elements and moments in *The Other Side of the Wind*. It is doubtful there is another figure in the history of the American theater or cinema with a greater ability than Welles's to arrange human beings, in relation to the camera or a background, to introduce or develop a specific theme or artistic idea.

Certain sequences stand out. An early scene, of Hannaford's entourage on the bus (bizarrely accompanied by mannequins), a group of remarkable performers with decades of screen work behind them, including Mitchell, O'Brien, McCambridge and Stewart, brings out both the chaos and absurdity of the process, the skills of the film professionals and the fundamental seediness and corruption of the industry.

Moreover, it instantly brings some of Hollywood's darker history into focus. Paul Stewart, memorable for his coldness and toughness in films like *Citizen Kane* and Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, convincingly plays another thuggish character here, Hannaford's "personal assistant," Matt Costello ("I do all the dirty jobs"). On board the bus, Costello suddenly addresses Juliette Riche, the critic, "I remember, Polack extraction. Richiviski?" Someone else puts in, "Matt here, he knows about everybody. Keep it quiet. He's on that committee, the one that decides if you're an American [i.e., the House Un-American Activities Committee]. Maybe you didn't know that these people are still in business."

The scene of Hannaford's arrival at the ranch is appalling. The mobs of media and cameras, the fawning fans, the besieged director—the pressure and brutality of the "entertainment business" summed up in a few images.

Huston's presence is enormous. The film and character would be unthinkable without him. One believes these are life-and-death matters to him. The actor-filmmaker brings his own history of battles with studios and with the witch-hunters, his own history of compromise and submission to powerful forces, his own frustration and bitterness.

Norman Foster's Billy Boyle is presented as a stooge, a lackey. His life revolves around Hannaford. He is at times a pathetic figure, a former alcoholic who gorges on candy, but his commitment to the film is genuine. Another character singles him out late in the film, after Boyle has already gone back to drinking, in despair at the apparent wreckage of Hannaford's film: "No, what you need, now and always, are the soldiers, the good soldiers. Men like Billy. They followed Hannibal and Napoleon. They really crossed the Alps. They are the heroes in any story."

(Foster had an interesting career. He worked as an actor in films in the early 1930s, before directing Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto mysteries. He worked with Welles on the incomplete social realist film they began in Brazil, *It's All True* (1941), and directed Welles in *Journey Into Fear* (1943). He later made a few interesting films, *Kiss the Blood off My Hands* (1948), *Rachel and the Stranger* (1948) and *Woman on the Run* (1950), before going to work for Disney.)

There is a brilliance at times to *The Other Side of the Wind*. The cutting and timing are often exquisite.

However, ultimately, there is more failure than success here. And the failures and difficulties are interrelated.

One of Welles's notions was to parody a certain art film associated with Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, a portion of whose dreadful *Zabriskie Point* (1970) had been filmed nearby in Arizona, and other European filmmakers. Swiss-French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, then in his short-lived "leftist" phase, also comes in for mockery. A character in *The Other Side of the Wind* cracks that "Godard has just set up a government in exile." There was certainly a great deal of pretension and falseness to the "revolutionary" film trends of the time.

Welles made clear to anyone in the media who would listen that the film-within-a-film portion of his work, featuring Kodar and Random, was not like anything he would direct. However, an unsuspecting audience would have no way of knowing that a certain aesthetic approach is being ridiculed. Hannaford and company treat them with great seriousness. The actors, Kodar and Random, apparently throw themselves into the silly business, including the pointless, extended car sex sequence.

It is rumored that Kodar considered the scenes to be artistically important and wanted half the film to be composed of them. (Joseph McBride writes, "I eventually was informed that she [Kodar] considers that material her baby and that she actually thinks of Jake's sex fantasy as a serious art film rather than the absurd parody Welles and Graver told me they considered it to be.") The extent to which Welles was influenced by this, of course, is unknown. Fortunately, someone's cooler or wiser head prevailed. Nonetheless, the scenes in question take up far too much of *The Other Side of the Wind* and their purpose is entirely unclear. One is left not knowing what to make of a substantial and murky section of the work.

The idea for *The Other Side of the Wind* apparently began with a script about the novelist Ernest Hemingway. The date of Hannaford's party (and death), July 2, was the day on which Hemingway killed himself in 1961.

Welles, we are told, wanted to critique a certain "he-man" mythology. McBride, in his article at Wellesnet, comments, "The *film a ?clef* deconstructing the macho man exemplified by Hemingway evolved from a story about an aging movie director obsessed with a handsome young bullfighter into one about an aging movie director obsessed with his handsome young leading man."

In his *Sight & Sound* article, McBride reports, "I was on the set when Welles's old crony Richard Wilson asked, 'Orson, what's this movie about?' Welles replied, 'It's an attack on machoism.' He never went in for the macho posturing that was common among directors in the days of [John] Ford and [Howard] Hawks and Raoul Walsh."

No doubt there was much to criticize about Hemingway and his exploits. Perhaps Huston and Welles, although not precisely the same personality type, felt their own lives and methods deserved to be scrutinized.

These are legitimate issues, but, it seems to me, quite secondary ones, and largely a distraction from a more difficult job, concretely appraising life in the early 1970s, including the convulsions shaking American society.

Huston is an imposing, impressive presence in *The Other Side of the*

Wind. But a somewhat unnecessarily sinister one. His baiting of one of John Dane's old teachers and his apparent seduction of a high school girl are downright unpleasant, sordid.

The difficulty here is that Welles's film at times, perhaps unconsciously, shifts the burden of responsibility for the unfolding disaster from the character of the film business as a ruthless, morally and artistically destructive, profit-making industry onto the personal defects of Hannaford-Huston.

And that shift has broad implications. Hemingway, Huston and Welles (born within a 16-year period) belonged to a generation, or to generations, that were profoundly shaped by the big events of the first half of the 20th century: the First World War, the Russian Revolution and the subsequent ascendancy of Stalinism, the Great Depression and the radicalization it produced in America, the coming to power of fascism in Italy and Germany, the Spanish Civil War and, finally, a second imperialist world war.

They were all generally left-wing figures, who came under the influence of Stalinist-led Popular Front politics in the 1930s and 1940s, which in their minds was nearly identical with strong support for Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies. Each was thoroughly unprepared for and shaken by the eruption of right-wing, Cold War politics and by the McCarthyite anti-communist purges in the late 1940s. Each spent a good many years in exile, self-imposed or otherwise, because of his obvious disgust and horror at the intellectual-political conditions in postwar America.

The individual failings and weaknesses of such intellectuals, including streaks of selfishness and opportunism, came to the fore, in other words, because of the generally unfavorable conditions that existed—above all, due to the throwing back of the revolutionary cause of the working class and socialism. They were not directly aware of the centrality of that social fact and its damaging, demoralizing consequences, but that did not lessen its significance in their lives. That is a unifying, tragic element. An awareness of that historical tragedy is missing from *The Other Side of the Wind* and so the emphasis falls on symptoms, on secondary indicators.

In relation to what was noted above—how was it possible, for example, that Welles, an enemy of tyranny and oppression for all his conscious, artistic life, could have taken money for *The Other Side of the Wind* from the brother-in-law of the Shah of Iran, Mehdi Bushehri? Bushehri, a wealthy Iranian, according to journalist Robert Graham, was "used by the Shah as an important contact with French business interests. Bushehri is credited with having been the Iranian intermediary in arranging the sale of French nuclear reactors to Iran." (*Iran–The Illusion of Power*, 1980) The Shah's regime, backed to the hilt by Washington and the CIA, was a murderous, bloody dictatorship. Welles's relationship with elements in that regime, even obliquely, is inexcusable and speaks to the weakening of his artistic-political faculties.

The attacks on Welles by the studios, by the US government and the FBI and by the right-wing media began in the early 1940s and did not let up. He came under immense political and commercial pressure. The general turn to the right by American liberalism, its adoption of vicious anti-communism, the closing down of opportunities for left-wing artists, all these processes took their toll. These were objective, generalized problems. Over the course of the years, like many others, he had much of the political-oppositional stuffing kicked out of him—or at least he could no longer see that such sentiments were of the same value and relevance they once had been. Disappointment over the reception of *Touch of Evil* (1958) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), two of his greatest accomplishments, must have also been a blow.

Welles asserted that there would be no script for *The Other Side of the Wind*, that it would be largely improvised. In *They'll Love Me When I'm Dead*, Welles can be seen explaining that art is the result of "divine accident." One should take this with a grain of salt, and it is known that he wrote a massive amount of dialogue for *The Other Side of the Wind*. However, again, there is clearly a slide here, a giving way before what perhaps appeared to be almost insurmountable obstacles. As Welles's own life and career demonstrate, important breakthroughs do not come to the artist in his or her sleep. They are the product of conscious thought, tireless mental and physical effort. It is ridiculous, a philosopher once asserted, to believe that the great artist does not know what he is doing.

Intuition itself is not "magic," it is the name we give to truths and ideas "of which we are certain, without being assisted by conscious, analytical thought. In intuition, necessary ideas and opinions are formed in the sphere of the unconscious" (Aleksandr Voronsky, "On Art," 1925).

Welles's concessions to mere improvisation, to artistic carelessness, to "accident" reflected some of the difficulties of the period, the increasing skepticism about conscious, rational thought and a turn away from direct social criticism and confrontation. The drama suffers as a result. The film is not the deeply moving, affecting work it should be.

The Other Side of the Wind is a fascinating, seriously flawed product of its time. With all its faults, it is important viewing for anyone concerned with the fate of art and society.