

The Eyes of Orson Welles: A markedly political approach to the American filmmaker

...

... and *John & Yoko: Above Us Only Sky* (about John Lennon's 1971 album *Imagine*)

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The Eyes of Orson Welles

Irish filmmaker Mark Cousins' *The Eyes of Orson Welles* represents an intimate, imaginative and markedly political approach to the work of American filmmaker Orson Welles (1915-1985).

Welles is known for a number of enduring works, including *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).

A generally left-wing figure shaped by the Great Depression and the impact of the Russian Revolution, Welles was artistically and intellectually demanding and for the most part found Hollywood nightmarish.

In the face of the unfolding Red Scare in Hollywood, the filmmaker—whether directly blacklisted or not—left for Europe in November 1947, just as the studio ban on employing suspected Communists was being implemented.

As an independent, itinerant, often cash-starved figure, he made a series of remarkable films on a shoestring, before returning to the US in 1956. The last several decades of Welles' life were dominated by often unsuccessful and sometimes demeaning efforts to raise funds for various projects. The "New Hollywood" of the 1970s had little use for him.

At its best, Welles' directorial work contains a poetic, sensual, socially critical urgency perhaps unmatched in the American cinema. In 1995, David Walsh wrote: "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." Cousins asserts in his film that Welles' *Citizen Kane*, which the latter directed at only 25, "changed cinema and is known for its expressionism and critique of vainglory."

Cousins (*The Story of Film: An Odyssey, I Am Belfast*), sometimes responsible for rather grandiose or self-indulgent films, is more concrete and down-to-earth this time around.

The Eyes of Orson Welles takes the form of a letter from Cousins, a living filmmaker, to Welles, a dead one. Cousins based his movie in part on archival material from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, which houses a substantial Welles collection. He received assistance from Welles' daughter Beatrice. Cousins attempts to trace Welles' life and

filmography though an examination of his art work.

Welles painted and drew prolifically starting in his adolescent years, studying at the Art Institute of Chicago in his early teens. In the film, we see and hear Welles observe that "I don't take art as seriously as politics." For the most part, unlike contemporary filmmakers, the director never separated the two.

Cousins begins by telling Welles that the "world has become more Wellesian, Orson. The despots that you were fascinated by are gaining ground" and that "life has become far more visual ... The internet is like black magic." At one point, Cousins states: "Way back in the 1940s, when you were making *Citizen Kane*, you and cinematographer Gregg Toland dreamt of a time when there would be no film and the camera would be an electronic eye. That dream has come true, too."

On several occasions, the documentary mentions Welles' artistic focus on the working class: "In the summer of 1933, you went here, Spain, to the Gypsy Quarter of Seville. Working people again. Traditional culture again..."

"And also in 1933, of course, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Italy was a police-state by then. Within a year, you were in New York doing radio, a pawn medium, intimate and personal... It let you get into the minds of the people. It let you whisper to them or boom that big voice of yours. You wanted to be the listener's griot, their consigliere, their consciousness-raiser."

Cousins suggests that Welles' liberal-minded mother "seeded" his political outlook, his trips abroad "peopled it" and the "rise of fascism" made it harder and firmer. "So you came here, to Harlem in New York. The year was 1936. Your progressive politics were taking on a new dimension. ... The Harlem renaissance had been a big story in the 1920s but, a decade later, 80 percent of Harlemites had no work ... and you and your team decided to mount an African-American theatre production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* .

"The setting would be Haiti. The witches would be voodoo. 10,000 people showed up at the opening ... 100,000 people saw your Voodoo *Macbeth* ."

Cousins goes on: "In 1937, you made your anti-fascism more explicit. You ripped into another Shakespeare play, the one that stimulated your visual imagination most, and your political imagination, too. *Julius Caesar* ... You saw Caesar as an ancient Mussolini, didn't you?"

The documentary brings up anti-Communist witch-hunter Joseph McCarthy, who in 1946, "was elected senator in your home state,

Wisconsin. You made political speeches now. One said, ‘In this shrinking world, adult education must first enlist’ in the war against provincialism. ‘Educators are sworn to the tremendous task of telling people about each other.’” Cousins adds that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover placed Welles on the “security register” (actually, the Security Index) in 1945, i.e., the list of those “subversives” to be arrested in case of a national emergency.

The Eyes of Orson Welles recounts the story of African American soldier Isaac Woodard, who, on February 12, 1946, hours after being honorably discharged from the US Army, was attacked while still in uniform by a South Carolina policeman. He was beaten to unconsciousness and blinded. Welles reported the atrocity on his radio program in July 1946. Cousins: “The policeman’s name wasn’t known, so you called him Officer X. You said that he brought the justice of Dachau and Auschwitz to America.”

It was subsequently discovered the culprit was police chief Lynwood Lanier Shull, who was tried, found not guilty and returned to his job.

Cousins draws a certain parallel between this terrible story and Welles’ “portrait of the 20th century” in *The Trial* (1962), based on the famed novel by Franz Kafka: “*The Trial* is about facelessness. The law has no name. Officer X.”

Cousins relates Welles’ answer when the filmmaker was asked why he changed the novel’s ending in his film: “Because the book was written before the Holocaust. And I couldn’t bear the defeat of K [the central character, Josef K] in the book, after the Holocaust. I’m not Jewish, but we are all Jewish since the Holocaust. And I couldn’t bear for him to submit to death as he does in Kafka. Masochistically submit to death.”

Personally, Welles, says Cousins, was like a “lighthouse.” He goes on to quote actress Geraldine Fitzgerald: “When you were caught in his beam, he was utterly dazzling. When the beam moves on, you’re plunged into darkness.”

But the professional-artistic disappointments were many. A jarring, cubist-like oil painting was the product, according to Beatrice, of her father’s acute frustration at being stopped from completing *Touch of Evil* by Universal Studio.

Cousins returns repeatedly and legitimately to Welles’ themes of “totalitarianism and corruption.” Regarding the 1949 film noir, *The Third Man*, directed by Carol Reed, Cousins describes Welles’ character Harry Lime, as his most corrupt creation, someone “who profiteers from penicillin stolen from hospitals.”

Still addressing Welles, Cousins notes that his character “famously talks of the Borgias, as you casually put on gloves and the camera glides in.” In fact, the black marketeer Lime defends his criminal operations in *The Third Man* on the basis of a sophistic historical contrast between turbulent Italy and peaceable Switzerland: “In Italy, for 30 years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed. But they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love. They had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.”

Welles portrayal is appropriately cynical and menacing, a comment on the fact that after the supposed vanquishing of fascism in the world war, capitalism was continuing to breed sinister and reactionary social types. Welles was driven out of Hollywood, like Charlie Chaplin and many others, for a reason.

His deep feeling for Shakespeare and his desire to bring the playwright’s work before contemporary audiences are threads that run through the documentary.

Cousins describes Welles’ *Macbeth* as “tenebrous and excessive,” a dark, violent film about a tyrannical king, made in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, while his *Othello* features a just ruler manipulated by an evil antagonist.

The documentary pays special attention to what Cousins describes as the “most resonant line in your art,” in the heartbreaking scene in *Chimes at*

Midnight (from Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part 2*) in which Prince Hal (Keith Baxter) rejects his erstwhile friend and long-time boon companion Falstaff (Welles). “I know thee not, old man,” says newly crowned King Henry V, who haughtily dons the mantle of power. The massive-girthed, slovenly Falstaff slumps to the ground as if pierced by a sword.

There is also a clip of Welles’ terrifying performance in the title role in Peter Brook’s 1953 live television production of *King Lear*.

“How do I finish a letter like this?,” asks Cousins finally, “Should I mention that there’s been another financial crash? The wolves of Wall Street screwed up, like they did in 1929. This is Kenosha [Wisconsin], where you were born. Now parts of it look like a deserted Hollywood studio back lot. Or images from the 1930s. The Great Depression that followed the Wall Street Crash helped form you, didn’t it, Orson? Will our new depression make a new Orson Welles?”

A good question and, all in all, an unusual work.

Above Us Only Sky

British singer and songwriter John Lennon (1940-1980) is another figure who continues to fascinate and someone about whom people still feel a great deal.

Above Us Only Sky, a documentary by Michael Epstein, is primarily concerned with *Imagine* (1971), the most successful album of Lennon’s post-Beatles solo career. Footage includes interviews with Yoko Ono and Julian Lennon, as well as a number of the musicians who played on the album.

Interestingly, the film refers to the fact that in 1969 Lennon returned his MBE [Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire] to Queen Elizabeth. His letter explained: “I am returning this MBE in protest against Britain’s involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra thing, against our support of America in Vietnam and against ‘Cold Turkey’ [Lennon’s song] slipping down the charts.”

The documentary’s postscript notes that in 2017 Lennon’s song “Imagine” was named the most influential song of the last 100 years by the National Music Publishers’ Association. Yoko Ono was also recognized as a co-creator of the song. Several poems from her 1964 book *Grapefruit* inspired Lennon’s lyrics.

Of the song, Lennon once commented: “‘Imagine’, which says: ‘Imagine that there was no more religion, no more country, no more politics,’ is virtually the *Communist Manifesto*, even though I’m not particularly a Communist and I do not belong to any movement.” In another interview, he asserted that there was “no real Communist state in the world; you must realize that. The Socialism I speak about ... [is] not the way some daft Russian might do it, or the Chinese might do it. That might suit them. Us, we should have a nice ... British Socialism.” Ono described “Imagine” as “just what John believed: that we are all one country, one world, one people.”



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