

# Danny Wu, director of *American: An Odyssey to 1947*, discusses Orson Welles and political and cultural life in the US in the 1930s and '40s

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*American: An Odyssey to 1947* is a valuable and intriguing documentary film written and directed by Chinese-Canadian filmmaker Danny Wu. It centers on the artistic and political evolution of US film director Orson Welles (1915–1985) in the context of the Great Depression, the Roosevelt administration and its New Deal, World War II and the postwar anti-communist purges.

Welles is best known for *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Stranger* (1946), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1951), *Mr. Arkadin* (1955), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *The Trial* (1962) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), along with numerous unfinished film works and stage and radio productions.

Wu's documentary begins and ends with Welles' leaving America in 1947, essentially driven out of the country by the combined efforts of the FBI, congressional witch-hunters and the media empire of William Randolph Hearst.

In addition, importantly, Wu devotes considerable time to the round-up and internment of Japanese citizens by the US government during World War II, the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the blinding of African American veteran Isaac Woodard by a racist Southern sheriff in 1946.

Wu uses remarkable graphics and animation (created by the film's art director Yifu Kang), along with film and newsreel footage, and interviews with a number of historians and commentators, in an effort to recreate the atmosphere and conditions of the time.

The film is strongly enhanced by the presence of Howard Kakita, whose parents were interned in the US and who miraculously survived the destruction of Hiroshima in August 1945; Satsuki Ina, born in one of the internment camps and whose mother was captured in an iconic image by photographer Dorothea Lange; Laura Williams, the great niece of Isaac Woodard; and Robert Young, Woodard's nephew. Film historian James Naremore and writer Todd Tarbox, the grandson of Roger Hill, Welles's mentor, biographers Harlan Lebo and Simon Callow and critic Richard France add their insights.

*American: An Odyssey to 1947* has value in its own right, but it is also significant as an indicator of cultural and generational shifts. Wu was born in China in 1996, the second of two children, which, as he explained in a recent video conversation, was "really rare" at the time, "because of China's one-child policy. My parents had to go through hoops just to get me onto this earth."

Wu's family emigrated to Canada when he was seven. He became "really good at basketball," but a knee injury ended his "dreams of being a professional basketball player ... I went to university and at first I was studying business, but that did not interest me at all."

Wu wanted to learn more about the arts and film. "I was also working as a magician, which was something I was good at." Eventually, he made a documentary in defense of Michael Jackson, "which was successful." Wu has been a reader of the WSWS, "off and on since 2019," because of an article we wrote about Jackson at the time. The article "made me a fan of your website," he said.

When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, Wu was visiting China, and he found himself unable to leave the country because of the general lockdown. "I thought to myself, if I'm going to go on this filmmaker journey, I'm way behind the curve. I was taught, as a basketball player, for example, to study the greats. I felt I had to do the same with filmmaking."

So, he added, "I started watching every movie that I could from all the lists of greatest films. The film I kept coming back to was *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles. I also learned about what Welles went through, all the difficulties. That's one of the reason I was drawn to him initially."

This is encouraging. A young person, with no previous extensive knowledge of cinema history, gravitates toward one of the most important films ever made. Is there something about the present state of the world, its explosive tensions and contradictions, that attracted the director to *Citizen Kane*? One would think so.

Wu treats Welles' life with a fresh eye, because the life and the conditions of the time are new or relatively new to him. As we learn, Welles, born in 1915 in Wisconsin, an "exceptional child," determines by the age of 15 to be an actor. At 16, he makes his stage debut at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. Back in the US, assisted by playwright Thornton Wilder, Welles joins actress Katherine Cornell's 1933–34 nationwide tour in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. He comes to the attention of producer John Houseman, who engages him to direct a production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in Harlem (his first professional directing job) as part of the Federal Theatre Project and its Negro Theatre Unit. Welles is 20.

In 1938, his adaptation on Broadway of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a modern-dress version with direct references to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy (featuring Welles as Brutus) and the first production of the Mercury Theatre, is a tremendous success. Hollywood, as one commentator in Wu's film notes, "began to pay attention."

Wu intersperses sections of the film devoted to Welles' life with segments on political events. Historians Gray Brechin and Mark Stoler in particular weigh in on the Depression, the election of Roosevelt and the growing hostility of media mogul Hearst to New Deal reformism. We see Hearst inveighing against government "interference" in the economy and warning that a graduated income tax will "aggravate class distinctions."

An early supporter of Roosevelt, Hearst is complaining by 1936 that the latter's policies are "communistic."

The production of and response to *Citizen Kane*, inspired by the figure of the multi-millionaire Hearst, features prominently in Wu's documentary. The film is Welles' first, directed at the age of 25. He comes out to Hollywood in 1939 on his own terms, angering studio executives, producers and others. Rumors about *Citizen Kane* circulate, reaching the ears of Hearst's minions.

*Citizen Kane* follows the life of a newspaper magnate, Charles Foster Kane (Welles), with political ambitions, who ends up alienating everyone in his life and surrounding himself with objects instead of people.

In our conversation, I asked Wu why he was so struck by Welles' work. He pointed to "many aspects of the film. 'The camera movement, the deep focus,'" he began. "The scene when the young Charles Foster Kane is playing in the snow and the camera starts going backward—I couldn't believe the beauty of the shot. Then there's the critical social subtext." All in all, *Citizen Kane* "seemed to me to be much deeper than any of the other films I was watching around the same time."

Then, Wu said, "there's the fact that Orson himself is in the film. He has such a powerful voice, and, despite everything, he made the Kane character so sympathetic, even though, on the surface, there was nothing sympathetic about him."

Interestingly, the young director had been "surprised to learn that William Randolph Hearst was offended by the film. In our family travels, we had been to the Hearst Castle in California, so I already knew who he was. I simply began obsessing over the story."

Wu detailed the remarkable process by which he came to create *American*: "I wanted to make a short YouTube video, trying to explain to my generation this story about Orson Welles and Hearst's attack on *Citizen Kane*, because to be driven out of the country, as Welles essentially was in 1947, is a big story and it needs to be told, especially today. I felt it was a story that would strike a chord."

He watched a documentary entitled *The Battle Over Citizen Kane*, which we reviewed and criticized on the WSWS. The film didn't "sit right" with Wu. "It painted Orson and the millionaire Hearst as equivalents, as though it was one powerful figure against another," a point we also made in our review.

So, he went on, "I wanted to make a documentary to show the power difference between Hearst and Orson Welles. One of the books I read was *Citizen Kane: A Filmmaker's Journey* by Harlan Lebo. I emailed Lebo and he agreed to do an interview. He told me that there was so much more you could learn about Orson Welles." After that, "I got every book that I could. I read them all. Richard France was one of the other interviews I did in New York. He put me on to the Isaac Woodard story. I wanted to find out if Woodard had any relatives still living. And he did. And I found her [Laura Williams] and she agreed to be in the documentary. It built like that."

Why do artists and others continue to come back to Welles and the period in which he was working?

"For me," Wu replied, "one of the key things is the unrealized potential. Welles really only had control on a handful of films. His story beats any other director's from that perspective. Here's a guy who was not in the Hollywood system, he comes in and makes his first film, it becomes known as the greatest film ever made. Then after that, it all begins to crumble. For people who start looking into films and film history, that's a very intriguing entry point."

Welles, he feels, "is so misunderstood." Critics and others want "to blame all the problems" he confronted on the director. "It's not possible to say anything positive about Welles without prefacing it with something negative. 'Oh, he may have been a great filmmaker, but what a tyrant, what an ego!'"

Wu emphasized that in making his documentary about Welles and his

times, "I wanted to dive deeper into his life, including his politics. One of the most gratifying aspects of this festival tour we're on right now is people lining up to talk to me after the screening, saying, 'We had no idea that Orson was involved in so much.' That makes me feel like I did my job, representing more of the truth about him."

*American: An Odyssey to 1947* recounts the facts of the concerted attack on *Citizen Kane* organized by Hearst and his accomplices, including gossip columnists Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons. The other major studio heads at one point offer to buy *Citizen Kane* from RKO, the studio that had hired Welles and produced the film, and burn it.

J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI open a file on Welles. Wu pointed out in our conversation that "the FBI file specifically concludes that *Citizen Kane* was '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].'" Todd Tarbox describes *Citizen Kane* as an "anti-fascist film."

Wu remarked, "Welles had a lot of friends who were leftists from his days in the WPA [Works Progress Administration, a New Deal program] or working on *Voodoo Macbeth* and other projects like that. So I think he was a very easy target."

In 1942, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the declaration of a state of war between the US and Japan, Roosevelt signs the infamous Executive Order 9066, resulting in the incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans in "relocation centers," or as one of Wu's interviewees puts it bluntly, "concentration camps."

As noted above, the film follows the extraordinary experience of Howard Kakita. Born in East Los Angeles in 1938, the outbreak of World War II finds him in Hiroshima living with his grandmother, while his parents are back in the US, where they get interned. Incredibly, Howard and his brother survive the American atomic bombing of the city in August 1945 although their grandmother's house is only 4,300 feet (1.3 kilometers) from Ground Zero.

Wu told us, "Our animator Yifu Kang also does landscape design, so he can model things in 3D." From memory, Kakita was "able to draw us a map of what his house looked like and he provided photographs of what the courtyard looked like. So from there, we were able to remodel his entire courtyard, basically what it looked like before the bombing. Howard told us that everything was gone except for one water pump. The water pump survived the atomic bombing."

Wu's family in China, who "don't know much about Orson Welles," watched his documentary and "their response was strong to the part about the Japanese." Wasn't that significant, I suggested, considering enduring anti-Japanese sentiment, encouraged by the Beijing regime, as a result of the crimes committed by the Japanese military in China in the 1930s and during the war?

"When I began making this film," the director answered, "I knew that probably a premiere in China was out of the question, because of the historical context. It was also very important for me to speak about the crimes of the Japanese in China. We mention that. But I feel that for my family, when they watched the film, it was more of a story of what this individual, Howard, had to go through. I think for my grandma, it's hard for her to swallow because she actually lived through the Japanese bombings, and she had friends get killed because of them."

"The ordinary Japanese person was not responsible for that, in any case," I observed.

Wu: "Exactly. It was surprising for me that my grandmother had such a good response. She said that she was just seeing Howard as a little boy, navigating his life, and all this was brought upon him." After a moment, Wu added, "It's about someone's being pulled into this situation that he had no control over. His parents send Howard back to Japan. His family in the US is sent to the internment camp, and he's alone and he gets atomic bombed. Anyone would sympathize with him, of course—at least anyone

decent.”

Wu devotes a serious portion of the film to the case of Isaac Woodard, the African-American World War II veteran brutally attacked by police in South Carolina in early 1946 while still in uniform, beaten and blinded. Laura Williams, a writer and Woodard’s great niece, and Robert Young, his nephew, speak powerfully about this racist crime.

Welles takes up the Woodard affair on radio in four broadcasts, denouncing the crime to a wide audience. A benefit concert held in New York in August 1946 attracts tens of thousands. Those performing include Nat King Cole, Billie Holiday, Woody Guthrie and many others. Ultra-right Congressman John Rankin of Mississippi contacts Hoover about the campaign in defense of Woodard, whose police assailants are eventually acquitted. The FBI, in its file on Welles, calls his comments “highly inflammatory and extremely dangerous.” Welles is removed from the air in October 1946 and has no radio career after that.

Welles is placed on the FBI’s Security Index, a list of people supposedly representing a threat to “national security,” designed to facilitate the rounding up and detention of alleged subversives during a national emergency.

The appalling, degrading Red Scare unfolds in Hollywood. The October 1947 hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) become a means of stigmatizing left-wing figures in Hollywood and laying the groundwork for a wholesale purge of the entertainment industry. One interviewee in Wu’s film observes that by this point there was “nothing in the US” for Welles. Another suggests that for the director a subpoena was “imminent.” James Naremore comments that had he not left the country, Welles “would have been a victim of the blacklist.” Welles departs the US November 4, 1947, and would not return permanently for another 23 years.

In the final moments of Wu’s documentary, we hear Welles in a 1974 interview: “America is not as happy with me as I am with it.”

The strengths of *American: An Odyssey to 1947* are considerable, including the imaginative approach to presenting complex historical and cultural events. The ability of a young filmmaker to treat these questions in an objective and forthright manner is heartening. Wu’s instincts about art and politics are healthy ones. In a short period of time, he has developed an important understanding of some of the most vexing problems of the mid-20th century, problems that remain unresolved in our day.

What’s weaker in Wu’s film is the nearly inevitable product of his inexperience in regard to certain important issues. It is understandable that a young director would rely on “his elders.” The narrative offered by historians Brechin, Stoler and others, however, is the conventional, liberal-academic, pro-Democratic Party version of things. Roosevelt saved the country, Roosevelt put people back to work, Roosevelt led the fight against Japanese aggression and Hitlerite fascism. The Second World War was a crusade for democracy against totalitarianism.

Roosevelt was an astute bourgeois politician, who recognized, under conditions of increasing social upheaval in response to the catastrophe of the Depression, that concessions had to be made to defend the capitalist system as a whole. He came into conflict with sections of his own class, such as Hearst and, for example, the Business Plotters, who viewed any social reforms as providing aid and comfort to “Bolshevism.” The gains won in the 1930s came about as a result of the semi-insurrectionary movement of the working class, expressed in the mass strike movements in Minneapolis, San Francisco and Toledo in 1934 and the later wave of sit-down strikes. In any event, Roosevelt’s New Deal was only possible in a country where, as Trotsky noted, the ruling class had “succeeded in accumulating incalculable wealth.” The condition of American capitalism has drastically altered, which is why there is no Roosevelt wing of the US ruling elite today—both major parties have shifted far to the right, repudiating with contempt any social reform measures in the face of mass

economic hardship.

The notion that the Roosevelt or Truman administration represented “democracy” is belied by much of the material that Wu presents in his documentary: the mass round-up of the Japanese, the racist Jim Crow system in the South presided over by the Democratic Party and the barbaric bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (to which one could add the firebombing of German and Japanese cities that led to hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths).

Indeed, historian Gabriel Jackson made the point in *Civilization and Barbarity* (1999) that under “the specific circumstances of August 1945, the use of the atom bomb showed that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy.”

Some of these issues came up in our conversation with Danny Wu:

David Walsh: You have some very important and disturbing episodes in your film. Not everyone chooses to treat the Japanese internment, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, because as I’m sure you’re aware, even though you’re relatively new to this continent, World War Two is presented as the great war for democracy.

That’s not how we view it. Tens of millions of people hated Hitler and Mussolini, and hated Japanese imperialism, which committed horrible crimes in China. But from the point of view of the ruling class, it was not a war for democracy. It was a war between the United States, Germany, Britain, France and Japan for the division and redivision of the world.

Danny Wu: In a film that praises Roosevelt a lot, we can’t turn a blind eye to things like the Japanese internment camps. Because it’s a criminal act, for sure. It affected so many people to this day. You can still see the trauma that it has caused.

But I mainly wanted to highlight that because I feel that, as you said, World War II is presented as this great victory for democracy and for the people, but it wasn’t a victory for the people in Hiroshima, right? It wasn’t a victory for the families who just disappeared in a second. There were people with friends in these different neighborhoods, and within a blink of an eye, they all had disappeared.

I wanted to show that side of the war and then juxtapose it with the celebration in the US, because I feel like it’s a largely forgotten moment, even with the American left at the time. Orson went on radio to do a speech about it [the atomic bombing]. He didn’t write the speech. But later, to his credit, he said that he thought that that was a mistake and that he didn’t stand by it. It was just surprising to me that no one really talks about that part of the war.

David Walsh: I’m aware of Welles’s radio broadcast, we wrote about it. That was the American left, except for our movement, the Trotskyist movement, which denounced the bombings as barbaric. The Communist Party had a cartoon presenting the bombings as a “one-two knockout punch,” that is, the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It isn’t just a question of Welles’s individual mistake. The whole point is that the American left, the pro-Soviet, pro-Stalinist left tied itself up in impossible contradictions. They pursued this fantasy that Roosevelt was going to lead to socialism or social democracy in America.

What actually happened was mass internment, the atomic bombing, the national security state, the blacklist and McCarthyism. And this left was completely unprepared for it.

Danny Wu: Reading Welles’s letters to Roosevelt is a big cringe, you know. Because he never talks to anyone like that, and I personally feel Roosevelt never matched the same energy in his responses.

David Walsh: That’s one of the tragedies of Welles’s life. Not simply that he was driven out of the country, but that he didn’t really understand what had happened to him.

Danny Wu: I actually do agree with that. He definitely left the country

because a subpoena was coming. But he could never admit that after the fact.

David Walsh : And, unfortunately, that's part of the mythology propagated by these people themselves. You see, after the fact, they could never admit how left-wing they had been. They had to present themselves as nothing but good New Deal Democrats, which was a lie. They were not that, they were further to the left than that.

In the final moments of our interview, Wu described the process of being rejected by "every, every film festival" after he began submitting the film in January 2022. "We had zero connections. Absolutely none."

Wu explained that "we sent the film to so many sales agents and their response was always, hey, we can make money off of Orson Welles. But Isaac [Woodard] and Howard [Kakita], that's a bit too much. We don't even know how to monetize that." Recently, however, "we screened the film in Greece at the Thessaloniki film festival. We had a packed theater."

The difficult experience, the young director went on, "got me to thinking about how many works we may miss because of a process like this. It's terrible, but I can tell how long festival officials have watched the film. It's so hard to swallow when they watch, say, ten minutes of it and then turn it off. I feel you have to give our film a chance. It disguises itself as a standard historical documentary, but I think it turns into much more than that by the end. We weren't getting a shot. I had trouble sleeping for an entire year."

*American: An Odyssey to 1947*, with whatever limitations it may have, is a welcome and important contribution. A new generation of artists, free from the cynicism and many of the prejudices of the past several decades, is emerging.



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