

All's Welles That is Welles

DANIEL HALDEN

There is a scene in the film *Citizen Kane* where we see turn-of-the-century media titan Charles Foster Kane, flanked by his assistants Bernstein and Leland, about to sign a document that diminishes his command over his newspapers. After signing the paper, Kane moans, “If I hadn’t been very rich, I might have been a really great man.” In the film *The Lady from Shanghai*, seaman Michael O’Hara declares, “I’ve always found it very sanitary to be broke.” In the film noir *Touch of Evil*, the gypsy Tanya tells powerful police chief Hank Quinlan, “Your future is all used up.”

These three declarations are taken from three of the greatest works by incomparable filmmaker and artist Orson Welles. Alone, Welles’s motion pictures—and the dialogue contained inside them—are interesting, complicated, and intriguing to watch. Welles, who employed groundbreaking usage of narrative storytelling and framing techniques in his films, is a terrific craftsman even before one considers the ideas and motivations behind his work. But, as Stephen Greenblatt wrote in “Culture,” “The world is full of texts, most of which are virtually incomprehensible when they are removed from their immediate surroundings” (629). In his movies, Orson Welles tells worthwhile stories and has fun with the camera, but his art takes on a higher, more fascinating magnitude when it is placed against his society and his wants and beliefs.

Culture was as important to Welles’s cinema as the camera itself because he had such strong convictions about an astounding plethora of topics. What ultimately defined the incomparability of his art were the battles he fought to produce his work battles over Welles’s aggressive analysis and scrutiny of society in his films. Orson Welles’ films were consistently excellent—and they were also consistently under fire from the Hollywood establishment. Welles himself once said, “The pictures I like to make are not the pictures Hollywood producers, and particularly modern Hollywood producers, want to make” (Estrin 194). This clash of ideas and interests off-camera resulted in an inevitable clash of control and content that defines Welles’s art as much as

anything that ever appeared in front of the camera. The stiff studio system in “Golden Age” Hollywood used its power to quash the expressive innovations of Orson Welles on numerous occasions. The movie bosses used their power to re-touch, re-edit, and even discard many of his films.

Even a simple re-reading of the aforementioned quotes from *Citizen Kane*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, and *Touch of Evil* begins to point one in the right direction toward what Welles’s beliefs were. Welles was very vocal in his beliefs (“Artists should not be censored,” he once said) and he was also very aware that his thoughts and ideas came through quite clearly in his art. He said, “I am an anti-materialist. I don’t like money or power or the harm they do to people. It’s a very simple old idea. And I am especially opposed to plutocracy; it’s American plutocracy that I am attacking, from different angles in several films: *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Lady from Shanghai* and *Citizen Kane*” (Estrin 64). And while he does not specifically mention his great film noir from 1958 in this quote, *Touch of Evil* too deals with the detriments of power.

Let us review briefly what has thus far been established. In one corner is a flamboyant, passionate filmmaker in Orson Welles, who diligently sought to transmit his specific beliefs about the harms of money and power through his films. In the other corner is the crusty establishment of Hollywood producers and studio bosses, the men with the ultimate control over Welles’s work, a group of people who possessed unequaled money and power in the most renowned artistic community in the world. It is quite clear and not at all surprising that there were bound to be at least a few bumps along the many roads Welles and his bosses attempted to cross together.

This battle of interests that ensued between artist and employer is really not an unusual occurrence. In “Individualism: Art for Art’s Sake, or Art for Society’s Sake?” Suzi Gablik notes that in the artistic community there is a constant friction between the people trying to make art and the people trying to turn a profit: “Art has become malignantly decadent under monopoly capitalism, and rendered impotent by advertising and the media” (26). What is interesting to note is that the divisive forces that Welles encountered throughout his career served only to solidify his long-standing, fascinating resentment toward power and money. Welles made many films in his unique career, beginning with *Citizen Kane* in 1941, and the common theme among the vast majority of them is that the characters who are wealthy and/or powerful are, at one point or another, miserable and aloof. With the exception of *Citizen Kane*, for which his contract guaranteed him unprecedented absolute creative control over the project, Welles’s films inevitably were subject to the

powerful producers. The big studios stepped in to tamper with Welles's pictures. It turns out, then, that Welles's belief that money and power harm people carries at least some token of validity.

Sadly, Welles was right in these aforementioned beliefs as he tried to carry through his cinematic endeavors. His *Citizen Kane* follow-up, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, was re-shot, re-edited, and Welles's original print of the film has been lost. The studio stepped in to alter such later works as *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Touch of Evil*, as well. The public should be ecstatic, then, that the pure Orson Welles exists at all, even if he only exists in one picture: *Citizen Kane*, Welles's undeniable masterpiece because of its innovations with narrative, focus, and framing. In the picture, Welles presents us with Charles Foster Kane, a bright, charismatic, energetic, and intelligent young man who becomes king of all American media. As he gains more money, power, and fame, his personal life deteriorates. He becomes somewhat of an unlikable, miserable figure by the end of the film. He dies with no loved ones around him. His fabulous success has ultimately destroyed his life, as he has grown to depend and care for nothing but material objects.

Not surprisingly, Welles publicly acknowledged that *Citizen Kane* was intended to criticize American civilization, saying, "I think every artist has an obligation to criticize his own civilization, his contemporaries." In "Culture," Greenblatt would go on to write, "Art is an important agent then in the transmission of culture. It is one of the ways in which the roles by which men and women are expected to pattern their lives are communicated and passed from generation to generation. Certain artists have been highly self-conscious about this function" (630). Orson Welles was such an artist. Beginning with *Citizen Kane*, he adopts the Greenblatt school of thought that works of art are designed to inform, impress, and instruct. Greenblatt goes on to describe works of art as "educational tools" (631). With *Kane*, Welles attempts to educate the American public on the forces he found to be so ruthlessly detrimental and harmful.

I personally love what Welles has to say in his films. I am not the least bit offended by any of his ideas—perhaps because I'm not a Hollywood executive. Orson Welles was simply trying to impart his vision of the world to the rest of society, and the honesty with which he expressed himself angered those who were being criticized. But what I really find to be spectacular about the legacy of Orson Welles is the paradoxical effect his glorious experiments in the world of cinema had on his career and his life. His career and life are arguably the most successful and controversial Hollywood has ever seen. Welles was credited for having changed the way movies are made with

Citizen Kane; it was also this film that got him into deep trouble with the Hollywood establishment and media mogul William Randolph Hearst. Welles was the first person ever nominated for four Academy Awards for one film (*Kane*); ironically, it was that same film that notoriously tanked at the box office. Upon arrival in Hollywood in the early 1940s, Orson Welles was hailed as a “boy wonder”; it was only a few years later that he found it difficult to get work in America and was forced to pursue cinematic and theatrical endeavors abroad.

Over time, the style in which *Citizen Kane* was made, with its use of brilliant storytelling narrative and delicious array of focuses and shots, seeped into the majority of other pictures. When the studio system died out in the late 1960s and independent producers such as Miramax came to power in the 1970s, more and more filmmakers began to employ a Welles-like honesty in their movies. What, then, became of the man who started this revolution in the entertainment world? His peers seemed to respect him. Marlene Dietrich, who appeared in *Touch of Evil*, went so far as to say, “People should cross themselves when they say his name”—and any time one is mentioned in reference to Jesus, he must be unique. Instead of being hailed for the groundbreaking movements he made in *Citizen Kane*, Welles was in hot water with RKO, the film’s distributor, immediately after the picture’s release. Welles was forced to pursue several artistic opportunities abroad, something that troubled him; he said, “I deeply regret my inability to make films on American subjects, because they’re the ones that interest me most” (Estrin 85). So, this was a man who had made great technical advancements regarding the cinema, a man whose first picture—made at the tender age of 25—was hailed as a masterpiece; this was a man who also could not get work in his home country, who found it virtually impossible to make a living in the very artistic community he revolutionized and re-energized.

Why? Surely Orson Welles was not the first person in the history of Hollywood to have tackled somewhat of a touchy subject in a motion picture. Why was he shunned and rejected by the establishment, instead of being embraced for the amazing things he had done? Ironically, I believe that it was some of those remarkable feats—for example, Welles’ quadruple task as actor, writer, director, and producer of *Citizen Kane*—that triggered his downfall in Hollywood, even though they simultaneously made him a hit among his peers and an eventual legend among film historians.

Gablik wrote, “Both these positions—art as the expression of the individual or as the fulfillment of social needs—seem equally intelligible, but their conflicting demands at this point frame a major crisis in our culture: truth to

the self or truth to the values of society” (24). Herein lies the problem Orson Welles faced. Had Welles been only the star of the film, he may never have gotten into so much trouble with the Hollywood bosses; he just may never have had a starring role again. Had he only been the director and/or producer, he probably would have been destined to a career in B pictures. Had he only written *Citizen Kane*, he probably would have been deprived of the production of more of his movie scripts. But his fingerprints were all over this picture: the brand-new style he employed was distinctly his, and he acted in, wrote, directed, and produced the film as well. The movie was clearly *his*, so while he explored some ideas that Gablik would call the “truth to the values of the society,” it was inevitable that these were also the truths “to the self” of Orson Welles. There was no denying that *Citizen Kane* was a product of Orson Welles, and there was no denying the fact that it criticized wealthy and powerful Americans, particularly those involved in the media—people very similar to the people who ran Hollywood.

A simpler analysis of Welles’s body of work would be content to stop at this point, but there remains a fascinating twist so ironic it would appear to have jumped right out of the script of one of his movies. Welles, at the age of 25, was able to secure an unprecedented amount of control over the project, particularly for a brand-new filmmaker who had literally just arrived in Los Angeles. As producer, director, writer, and star, Welles basically had absolute power over *Citizen Kane*. He himself acknowledged that the film “was extraordinary in the control it gave me over my own material” (Estrin 80). While Welles remained a staunch, self-proclaimed anti-materialist until the day he died in 1985, *Citizen Kane* is so utterly ironic because it, at least temporarily, turned him into a version of the one thing he really despised and, because of this, ensured that he would never get the type of work he was looking for again. Just as Charles Foster Kane controlled what went into his newspapers, Orson Welles controlled everything over *Citizen Kane*—the script, the casting, the editing. It was this power that made him an innovator, an Oscar winner and a legend—as well as the person wholly responsible for the film’s box-office failure and its notorious tanking with the Hollywood elite. The absolute power of Orson Welles enabled *Citizen Kane* to be created and today, he and the film are rightfully celebrated as enormous cinematic achievements. But back in 1941, they were lambasted as ugly ducklings wandering through the Golden Age of Hollywood; with no one else to point fingers at, RKO waved goodbye to Orson Welles the next year. The power Welles enjoyed over *Citizen Kane*—which must have been a dream come true for a 25 year-old newcomer—ended up crushing him in Hollywood.

My real curiosity after such an intricate look at the life and work of Orson Welles lies in our perception of his art. How are we to see his films? Are we to look at *Citizen Kane* as the movie that caused a storm of controversy in 1941 Hollywood or as the film that set the standard for virtually every picture that came after it? Are we to look at Orson Welles as the square peg in a round hole who couldn't buy a job in Hollywood during much of the Golden Age or as an artist who was perhaps ahead of his time? Or can we just simply sit down on the couch, pop in the DVD and watch *Citizen Kane* as a work of art without worrying about the quagmire it caused? Can we watch any of Welles's films that way? Can we watch *The Lady from Shanghai* without looking for the spots where Columbia reportedly ordered there be more close-ups of sexy leading lady Rita Hayworth? Can we watch *Touch of Evil* without thinking about how lucky we are to be seeing the restored version? Can we watch *The Magnificent Ambersons* without wondering what Welles's lost print may have looked like?

As a man who changed history, Welles should be looked at in the context of history. It is really my belief that any person should be looked at within the context of their time, but with Welles I feel that such a procedure is absolutely crucial. Welles said that the only thing he wanted was "to occupy an unoccupied terrain and work there" (Estrin 93). The man was enthusiastic about experimenting with the camera, and the fact that he was able to do so within the rigid studio system—even if it only really worked with one film—is absolutely remarkable. If *Citizen Kane* was all that we have—and in a way, it is—then Marlene Dietrich was right. Orson Welles is a saint among a lower legion of filmmakers. The story of Orson Welles is the story of a man with very bold, very passionate convictions, several of which turned out to be true beliefs: the power of the studios turned them into corrupt companies, and the power Welles himself had during *Citizen Kane* proved harmful to the rest of his career. And yet, while Welles had trouble getting work in Hollywood after 1941, the films of today—even films made in Hollywood—owe, in at least some way, their existence to *Citizen Kane*. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, T.S. Eliot wrote, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (635). In that regard Welles remains a key player in the Hollywood landscape he so dramatically changed more than sixty years ago. How ironic that Welles, who could barely get work in America after *Citizen Kane*, now enjoys a legacy and a presence that few other contemporary artists possess.

Did Welles die alone in a palace in Florida surrounded by nothing but expensive art, as Charles Foster Kane did? Of course not. But he did experience a similarly rapid rise and fall from favor, a remarkable journey born from the power and control Welles possessed so early on in his career. More than anything else, this is the legacy of *Citizen Kane*. If ever there was a case of life imitating art, this would be a prime example. Orson Welles enjoyed the power and control that enabled him to innovate and create as had never been seen before in the cinema. But, as he so forcefully stated in *Citizen Kane*, it was this power that inevitably led to his downfall in Hollywood. His brilliant usage of the camera and storytelling strategies have ensured that his name is respected once again throughout the artistic community. But during his life, Orson Welles fell victim to the very element he attacked in *Citizen Kane*: the element of power. It is this wholly remarkable irony, this intriguing twist of fate, that is the most remarkable feat of Welles's life and masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*. Welles was concerned with money, power and "the harm they do to people." His career was one of power's victims, while the unique circumstances of his films and life have in turn given birth to his undeniable legend.

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