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From Ingres to Ensor: Retrieving Welles

Needless to say, the year's difficulties in going to the movies has given a significant boost to a trend that had already started a decade ago: the managed streaming of films over the internet. This platform system is dominated by Netflix, which was already an internet-based industry before the streaming boom. Netflix has its faults, but it has chosen to consolidate much of its power in the art of making movies, something that hasn't been seen since the days of the great moguls. While commissioning films from influential filmmakers, such as Spike Lee or Martin Scorsese, Netflix has also completed a legend, the subject of this review.

For fifty years, Orson Welles' *The Other Side of the Wind* had been a lost *cause célèbre*. Welles had intended the film to be shot over a few weeks – a simple ‘fast and loose’ project exploiting the lightweight equipment that was emerging at the time, but it took him eventually five years for principal photography and a half-century to complete the film. While there were technical and financial difficulties, the film was blocked because nobody wanted to hear what Welles had to say. Even Netflix buried the picture in its library after completion. But the film demands attention, haunting all those linked to it. Welles spent the rest of his life trying to complete it, as well as shoot other projects. The film's cinematographer Gary Graver tried to complete it until his own death in 2006. The surviving members of the crew ultimately banded together to crowd-fund its completion, but the call instead was heard by Netflix, who, for the paltry sum of six million dollars, found themselves with a wealth of riches: their investment yielded not only Welles' completed film, but a feature length documentary and a forty-minute *making-of* as well.

The film itself is something of a contrivance: a film being made within a film being made. Director J. J. Hannaford (John Huston) screens footage of his project to a number of prospective backers in order to complete it. The project is also titled *The Other Side of the Wind*, emphasizing here its foolishly crypto-poetic nature. The other film being made is all the various onlookers who film what they see. The resulting work becomes a collage of ‘found footage’ put together to record what would be the last night of Hannaford's life. Like all gimmicks, it works best because Welles subtly lets you in on the trick. Scattered throughout the film are a number of clues that hint at the elaborately planned fiction; clues like the private screening for a producer early in the film (who on Earth could have shot that?) and most strikingly the mannequin shoot-out at the end: in that sequence, Oja Kodar's character, the actress who had played fictitious film's unnamed leading-lady, shoots directly into the camera. No photographer in his right mind would stand in the line of fire of live ammunition.

The film opens with a filmic convention: what is ostensibly the last shot Hannaford would ever take for a film is seen as a montage of scantily clad women wearing turbans. The regular practice of shooting concurrent ‘making-of films’ was still a good decade and a half away, so who shot the film crew? The opening montage is also the key to the entire film. While diegetically it is just another shot for an avant-garde porno-chic art-house film, it is artistically a breakdown of Ingres's last major painting, *The Turkish Bath* (now hanging at the Louvre in Paris). More than forty years before art historian Adrien Gœtz' exploration of the collage as central to Ingres' technique as a painter where even *the Turkish Bath* is a memorial collage of the artist's favorite model in a variety of poses.¹ One wonders if Welles had not already guessed at that, or if simply the techniques of film making do not intrinsically point towards a sense of collage in the way we see things. Be that as it may, the references to Ingres places what is now Welles' last film at the end, and in many ways at the apex of, what would be the central consideration in that cluster of four films: what is art?

¹ Adrien Gœtz, “Ingres et la pratique du collage” Séance du 22 février 2006, Académie des Beaux Arts, (accessed December 3, 2020): <https://www.academiedesbeauxarts.fr/sites/default/files/inline-files/Ingres.pdf>. Page 9. To what extent is this film not the same thing for Welles?

The Other Side of the Wind offers the most pessimistic answer to the question. For both the film and the film-within-the-film show that art is never more than a series of political, commercial, intellectual and aesthetic compromises. Hannaford's party is an attempt to wine and dine a crowd of possible backers while illustrating his interest in the new generation's sensibilities. Hannaford's project is visibly a failed attempt to outdo what the young Turks both in Europe and the New Hollywood were setting out to achieve: filmic meditations on space, time and existence. Much of Hannaford's failure stems from the fact that he doesn't quite get it, and his film is basically artistic drivel. Much of Welles' failure (if we can call it that) stems from the fact that he does, and that he shows it up for the sham that it is. This is compounded in the story as we see, through a series of reaction shots to the screenings of the film project, that J. J. Hannaford is sufficiently honest (with himself, of not with others) to know that his attempt to create *high art* is in fact a bigger sell-out than any third-rate T&A film, for it is an artistic capitulation: the use of his abilities to submit to a style that is fundamentally alien to his sensibilities.

The 'found footage' arc extends on the other aspect of new generation's artistic aspirations, that of the *cinema vérité* school, where anyone who can hold a camera can make a film. Critics have noted how Hannaford's film project parodies and surpasses the Antonioni's ideals of cryptic film making, but few have noted how the real-life film questions with an equal ferocity Goddard's theories of *collage* film making. Welles makes this world the visual antithesis of Hannaford's project. One of the clues to the film as a contrivance can be found here as certain images are comprised of shots in black-and-white cutting to the same shot in color then returning to the original shot. The images here are as grainy as the project is smooth, the shots are as tightly framed and jaggedly cut as the project is ample and graceful. The resulting imagery is a madhouse vision which echoes James Ensor's worlds of monstrous clowns laughing and jeering at the world around them. On both sides of the screen as it were, Welles both elevates and reduces cinematic ambitions to artistic questions that have existed long before the advent of film. There is nothing modern in modern art that hasn't been seen and explored time and again. Hannaford's protégé Bruce Otterlake (Peter Bogdonavitch) warns him with the Shakespearian "our revels have ended" to which Hannaford answers with the vulgar colloquialism "you can kiss my sweet ass".

Three years after the Summer of Love and two after the 1968 uprisings, Welles embarked on a project that demonstrated how those two events ultimately failed in their promise of personal freedom. For the film is the illustration of the commodification of sex. The bus bringing a group of party guests to Hannaford's home stops and lingers in front of a billboard touting *Adult Books XXX for Sale*; a film student in Hannaford's car asks if the camera lens is an extension of the phallus; one backer eagerly wipes the glass to better see Hannaford's film project, in which Kodar's body is lit to look like a goddess from Ingres, which is little more than an aesthetically sanitized version of the wares touted by the billboard. The commodity of sex finds its reflection in the ubiquity of cameras. It is the lecherous backer who ultimately feels the brunt of that ubiquity: he is the one who want to see without being seen, watching the film while hidden in the booth and he is made to undress in front of the camera. Welles deflates the commercial strength of sex as a form of transgression – the ability to vicariously invade what should be the most private of acts. But in this our world, privacy has been voluntarily banished: just as Kodar carelessly struts naked in the wide spaces of the film, all the guests constantly perform before the ever-present camera. We even see Hannaford go to the bathroom. There is no distinction between the personal and the public. We have become prisoners of our own device.

The Other Side of the Wind, USA-France, Netflix, 2018. Directed by Orson WELLES, Produced by Frank MARSHALL and Filip Jan RYMSZA, Written by WELLES and Oja KODAR, Cinematography by Gary GRAVER, Edited by WELLES and Bob MURAWSKY.