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Fake Noses, Real Masks and One Big Headache

The Making of *The Other Side of the Wind*.

When Netflix accepted to step in and invest in the completion of Welles' unfinished film, they felt that at the very least, they would get a documentary on Welles' failure to complete the film. Documenting Welles' failures is a popular sport. In some ways, it's not all that surprising: measuring his achievements is a far more daunting task. Where to begin? Where to end? One forgets that by the time he shot *Citizen Kane*, he already had nine years' experience as an actor, five as a theater director/manager and three as actor/director/producer on the radio. Welles' first love was Shakespeare and he was driven by a desire to popularize the Bard. All other endeavors were to back that main project.

All this is to point out that Welles' earliest interests were not in film. He would not truly focus on film making until the 1960's – the decade when he shot *The Trial*, *Chimes at Midnight* and a television production *An Immortal Story*. Welles disliked the modern world in its desire for conformity and predictability, and he liked to think that Shakespeare disliked his modern world as well. Welles loved innovations, however. When arriving in Hollywood, he considered the studios the greatest train-set a boy could ever want, and with all the youthful enthusiasm and childish whimsy of a twenty-five-year-old boy (and the help of such creative masters as Gregg Toland - whom he never ceased to praise) he brought all his dreams to the making of his maiden film. Welles was never allowed to make another such film within the confines of the Hollywood film industry. Hollywood carefully destroyed his reputation and maintained the fiction that he was impossible to work with until the day he died.

After he died, he was canonized. Welles himself joked about it, saying “they’ll love me when I’m dead.” Which is the title to the feature-length documentary on the making of the *The Other Side of the Wind* and the concurrent unmaking of Welles. Welles had intended the project to be his Hollywood comeback film. The documentary presents the project as his ultimate downfall. Director Morgan Neville’s basic conclusion was that Welles was essentially crushed by the towering achievement of *Citizen Kane*, and that he could never escape from its shadow. It is an interesting, albeit disingenuous, theory, for it patently ignores the fourteen other films he was responsible for (twelve as director and two as producer, one uncredited), many of which are classics in their own right, not to mention his work on radio, a television series as well as a pilot for another. For any other film maker, it would be an enviable résumé.

An interesting counter-narrative is the other documentary on the completion of *Wind*, *A Final Cut for Orson*, which was also produced by Netflix, but can be seen on YouTube. Ryan Suffern’s film pays tribute to a group called VISTOW, or *Volunteers In Service To Orson Welles*. In so doing, it points to an opposite trend, one could almost say a counter-culture, underscoring an entire group of people dating back to Welles’ early years, who went above and beyond the call of duty to achieve Welles’ vision. At one time or another, one could add to the list names like John Houseman, Gregg Toland, George Schaeffer, Micheál Mac Liammóir, Akim Tamiroff, Jeanne Moreau, as well the casts and crews of the Mercury Theater. During the shooting of *Wind*, the core of that group were Oja Kodar, cinematographer Gary Graver (both worked with Welles until his death), Peter Bogdonavitch and producer Frank Marshall. It shows the mesmerizing quality of Welles’ leadership and the loyalty he inspired even when working his people to exhaustion. The website Wellesnet shows how such a group is still thriving today. One could say that the one weakness of the group is their inability to help one another. If anyone deserved an award for their

work on *The Other Side of the Wind*, it would have to be cinematographer Gary Graver, who at times with little more than hope and a prayer, brought to life the visual dreams of the last Welles. It is a shame that it never occurred to producer Frank Marshall (or to any of the young directors gravitating around Welles in the seventies) to offer Graver a serious job as cinematographer, for he really proved his mettle in *The Other Side of the Wind*.

When setting aside the problems with Welles, both documentaries explore an awesome quality in the making of Welles' film: it covers the entire spectrum of film making, demanding the utmost in film technique and technology, but also working at an almost ad-hoc, home-movie level. Frank Marshall fondly remembers the student-film atmosphere, where everyone pitched in to do whatever was needed to move things along. At the other end, the film explored the very qualities of the film images. Editor Bob Murawaski –who wanted to complete the film more for Gary Graver's sake than for Welles' – noted how the film needed a technology that had yet to be invented: computer editing. If Welles had had an Avid editing board, he would have had all his rushes at his fingertips; the variety of film stocks would have ceased to be the unsurmountable problem it had apparently become. But even in the final run, the film demanded innovations from post-production facilities in the daunting task of lining up film cuts with the original negative. Fifty years after the film's inception and thirty-eight years after Welles' death, the film remains at the forefront of film making.

They'll Love Me When I'm Dead visually becomes a sly companion piece to *Wind*, stringing together excerpts of Welles' films and clips from various interviews to illustrate the reasoning behind the project. A film by Orson Welles is something of a Rube Goldberg cartoon: an extremely elaborate mechanism to achieve an extremely simple task. In that sense *A Final Cut for Orson* is about the young crew setting up the Golbergesque mouse-trap. *Citizen Kane* is a

classic Hollywood newspaper movie; *Touch of Evil* is the story of a dirty cop. *The Other Side of the Wind* is a Hollywood party. But Welles describes it to actress Jeanne Moreau as a joke: a film about two films, neither of which are Orson Welles films. It is essentially a masquerade (as in game of masks). Neville notes in *Dead* how Welles invariably wore a fake nose or some other disguise as an actor. *The Other Side of the Wind* is the ultimate fake nose, for it is the process of making the film itself that is the disguise for the film. If *Wind* is a fake nose of a film, is it an autobiography of Welles' inability to get financing? This is what director Morgan Neville would have you think, and it is true in the sense that any personal statement is personal.

But to say that *Wind* describes Welles' life and situation is a red herring. Welles understood the difficulties in setting up any project, as did Huston or Capra, or any other film maker. Making a film is like building a house of cards in a wind storm, but that never daunted him. What Welles most feared was going stale. While there are over-arching themes and visual signatures to his films – the stuff that critics love to dwell upon – for Welles, each new project had to be *new*: something other than what he had done before. He could have simply come back by completing *The Deep*, but there, he would have done 'another thriller', which was to offer up what people expected - essentially falling into self-parody.

Welles' great desire was to forge ahead, to chart new possibilities in what could be done with the medium at his disposal. But for anyone who needed reliability, he could be infuriating. He was not really profligate: most of his completed projects in fact came in reasonably on time and on budget; but he *was* exhausting and unpredictable, jumping from one idea to the next and never stopping. *Wind* obviously contradicts the first statement, as it took him five years to shoot, but overwhelming supports the second, as both documentaries attest.

Great producers however could bring out the best in Welles. Harry Cohn's revisions to the *Lady from Shanghai* make it the classic that it is. Welles in turn brings out the best in all those around him. *Citizen Kane* is Greg Toland's masterpiece and the best thing Herman Mankiewicz ever wrote. *The Other Side of the Wind* is John Huston's best role and taught Frank Marshall all he needed to know about producing. It is the central aspect that Morgan Neville did not explore.

But it explains the tireless devotion of all those around him.

Francis Mickus

They'll Love Me When I'm Dead: Dir. Morgan Neville, USA, 2018, Netflix.

A Final Cut for Orson: Dir. Ryan Soffern, USA, 2018, Netflix