

The Artist in Hollywood - Touch of Evil (USA: 1958)

Director: Orson Welles

Screenplay: Whit Masterson, Paul Monash and Orson Welles

Editors: Aaron Stell, Virgel Vogel and Edward Curtiss

Music: Henry Mancini

Producer: Albert Zugsmith

Cinematographer: Russell Metty

Cast: Charlton Heston, Janet Leigh, Orson Welles, Akim Tamiroff, Marlene Dietrich

As director of *Sight & Sound*'s perennial 'best movie of all time' *Citizen Kane*, Welles is guaranteed a place in the pantheon of great directors. It's possible that the film dogged the rest of his career. It was a thinly disguised satire of newspaper proprietor William Randolph Hearst who, unsurprisingly, used his influence to attempt to bury the film before it was shown (the enigmatic Rosebud apparently refers to Hearst's mistress' clitoris). The problems Welles had with the film set a template for his dealing with Hollywood studios for the rest of his career: he, the creative artist, vs. the commercial system.

Welles was undoubtedly a great director. *Kane* is a most audacious debut film, made by an *enfant terrible* (aged 25) famous for his Mercury Theatre plays and his radio version of HG Wells' *War of the Worlds* that convinced some Americans that Martians had landed.

Welles' follow up, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), was butchered by the studio, particularly evident in the banality of the ending. However, as Victor Perkins says the film remains:

One of cinema's glories – an incisive, moving generous and thrillingly accomplished work. (Perkins, 1999, p. 7)

As director three movies followed: *Journey Into Fear* (1942, uncredited), *The Stranger* (1946) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948):

The critics, if not the public... gave *The Lady from Shanghai* a good reception, but the public trailed far behind. This time, the case of Orson Welles was decided. Hollywood had had enough of a genius who in seven years' time had cost it millions of dollars. (Bazin, 1978, p. 94-5)

Before leaving Hollywood, Welles made a very cheap production of *Macbeth* (1948) and then embarked on a ten-year exile in Europe where he peddled his acting talent to raise money for his films.

The fact that *Touch of Evil* became his final Hollywood film was due to star Charlton Heston's misapprehension that Welles was to direct, and not just act, in the film; Heston had agreed only to star on the assumption Welles was to be at the helm. The opening 190 seconds is one of the most brilliant in all cinema and should be enough to convince anyone that Welles was a master of his craft. His Expressionist visual style, evident in *Kane* (which was possibly the first Hollywood film to shoot ceilings), places the camera in unusual positions and his use of deep focus distorts the space and so characters lurch frighteningly toward the camera or diminish rapidly as they move away. Welles' Expressionist *mise en scene* is evident throughout his *oeuvre* and fits ideally with the genre of *film noir*.

Welles was not a particularly good actor (though he had plenty of screen presence), however his portrayal of the corrupt cop, Hank Quinlan, must be one of his best performances, particularly in the scenes with Marlene Dietrich. His demise in the detritus of the river running along the Mexican-US border is one of the great death scenes.

In 1998 Walter Murch supervised the re-editing of the film based upon Welles' memo written in response to Universal Pictures barring him from post-production. The most obvious change is the opening shot shorn of credits and Mancini's score.

Andre Bazin (1978) *Orson Welles* (Elm Tree Books) – now available in Acrobat Books
Victor Perkins (1999) *The Magnificent Ambersons* (British film institute)

For more on *film noir* see Nick Lacey *Narrative and Genre* (Palgrave: 2002) pp. 143-62.

© Nick Lacey, 2005