Orson Welles' The Stranger *as an Unexpected Site of Mediation and Political Engagement*

El extraño *de Orson Welles como espacio inesperado de mediación y compromiso político*

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Resumen

Este artículo se centra en *El extraño* (1946) de Orson Welles y en el uso que se hace en esta película de imágenes documentales de campos de concentración, capturadas por soldados aliados en 1945. La escena en la que se muestra este metraje dura unos pocos minutos, pero su uso es enormemente significativo tanto en relación con cuestiones de representación histórica como en debates en torno al uso de grabaciones visuales como documentos, pruebas y detonantes afectivos. El uso de este metraje también es performativo en el sentido de que determina la acción de personajes dentro de la historia, por un lado, y tiene como objetivo interpelar al público, por otro.

Palabras clave: *Orson Welles, metraje encontrado, imágenes performativas, imágenes de atrocidades, mediación, compromiso político.*

Abstract

This paper centers on Orson Welles's film *The Stranger* (1946) and its use of footage of concentration camps shot by allied troops in 1945. The scene where it is included lasts only a few minutes, but the implications are far-reaching in relation to both issues of historical representation and broader debates on the use of visual records as documents, as evidence and as emotional triggers. The use of these images is also a performative one, in the sense that they determine the action of characters within the narrative, on the one hand, and that they are meant to interpellate the audience, on the other.

Keywords: *Orson Welles, found footage, performative images, images of atrocities, mediation, political engagement.*

Introduction

The Stranger, directed by Orson Welles and released in 1946, begins with the release of Nazi criminal Konrad Meinike (Konstantine Shayne) by the War Crimes Commission at the behest of one of its investigators, Mr. Wilson (Edward G. Robinson). Wilson holds the belief that Meinike will lead them to the high-ranking officer Franz Kindler (Orson Welles) and sure enough Meinike, followed closely by Wilson, arrives at the small town of Harper, in Connecticut, where Kindler has been able to forge a new identity as a history teacher under the name Charles Rankin. Meinike manages to lose Wilson and reaches Kindler/Rankin's home, only to find he is not there, as his fiancée Mary Longstreet (Loretta Young) informs him. Impatient, Meinike goes in search of his former superior and meets him in the woods. Kindler/Rankin is immediately suspicious and kills Meinike, but only after explaining how he has been able to integrate himself seamlessly into the community, so much so that he is to marry the daughter of a justice of the Supreme Court that very afternoon. The couple is married and upon their return from their honeymoon they find that Mary's family has become acquainted with Wilson, who poses as an antiques dealer. Eventually, Wilson will confide in Mary's brother and father revealing his true purpose in Harper and eliciting their help in the capture of Kindler. But for this to happen, Mary's collaboration is essential, since she is the only person who can effectively connect Meinike with Rankin and, thus, reveal her husband's true identity as the evaded Nazi officer Franz Kindler.

The movie is commonly described as Welles's least personal and, therefore, least interesting production[1]. It is true that this was Welles's first feature film within the studio system after a four-year involuntary hiatus, and that he was terribly limited and forced to make major concessions[2]. It is also true that it was the only one of his

[1] The film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum writes in two different instances that the film is "perhaps the least distinctive and adventurous item he [Welles] directed" (in Rosenbaum, Jonathan, *Discovering Orson Welles*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2007, p. 270; and in Rosenbaum, Jonathan, *Movie Wars. How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See*, Chicago, A Cappella Books, 2000, p. 176). Film scholar James Naremore argues that it is "the most uncharacteristic of Welles's films, a picture that barely deviates from industry habits" (Naremore, James, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, Centennial Anniversary Edition, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 2015, p. 135. According to Frank Brady the film is a "totally atypical Wellesian project" (Brady, Frank, *Citizen Welles. A Biography of Orson Welles*, New York, NY Creative Publishing, 2015, p. 372). Even Welles himself renounces to offer a counter-argument to this view when filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich, in the course of his extensive interviews with Welles, states "I don't really consider it one of your most personal movies" (Welles, Orson and Bogdanovich, Peter, *This Is Orson Welles*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1998, p. 174).

[2] Clinton Heylin gives a detailed account of the limitations and challenges faced by Welles in "A Date With The Supercutter", (Heylin, Clinton, *Despite the System. Orson Welles Versus the Hollywood Studios*, Chicago, Chicago Review Press, 2005, pp. 173-197).

films that made a profit at the box office at the moment of its release[3]. For many, these circumstances seem to preclude the idea that the film could be of interest, beyond the entertaining and evasive qualities one might expect from a thriller with elements of melodrama, gothic storytelling, and film noir.

The fact that Welles conformed to orders from above enters in conflict with the romanticized image of Welles as a maverick, something that is made abundantly clear in statements such as Rosenbaum's assertion "To my mind, Welles always remained an independent who financed his own pictures whenever and however he could, and perhaps the only movie in his entire canon that qualifies as a Hollywood picture pure and simple, for better and for worse, is *The Stranger*"[4]. Of course, Rosenbaum is well aware that several of Welles's features (*Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Touch of Evil*) were produced by Hollywood studios. But these seem to be exonerated of the crime of fitting into industry standards, whereas *The Stranger* is not. However, there is nothing pure and simple about this assessment, just as there is nothing pure and simple about the film. In fact, I would like to argue that it is a surprisingly complex work of cinema, and one that stands out within a shifting political landscape, both in Hollywood and in American foreign policy.

The film's singularity well merits more scholarly attention. It is a movie that offers a ferocious political critique, a moral message, and an incisive commentary on complacency and disengagement. But what is truly intriguing is the way Welles tries to engage the audience, especially if we consider all the aspects that are held against it: that it was a mid-1940s Hollywood feature, made at the height of the studio system, produced by a poverty row studio, and under severe limitations. What is shocking about this movie – Welles's most commercial and conventional enterprise - is that it includes an absolutely radical element, a sequence where Welles does something audacious: he includes the actual images of concentration camps captured by allied soldiers after Germany's fall. The scene lasts a few minutes and yet it is crucial within the film's narrative. This harrowing footage is shown to newlywed Mary Longstreet in an attempt to persuade her to collaborate in the capturing of her husband, Charles Rankin, an evaded Nazi officer living under a false identity. Mary cannot bring herself to believe such a shocking accusation, however, seeing those images changes everything.

[3] By most accounts it grossed around 3 million USD (Barker, Jennifer L., "Documenting the Holocaust in Orson Welles's The Stranger", in *Film and Genocide* edited by Kristi M. Wilson and Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli, University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, pp. 45-66, p. 64; and Biesen, Sheri Chinen, *Blackout. World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2005, p. 207).

[4] Rosenbaum, *Discoverying Orson Welles*, op. cit., p. 272.

The Stranger as a Political Project

The film has been undervalued by both film critics and scholars, and most of the reviews at the time of *The Stranger*'s release were apathetic[5]. However, there are notable exceptions, some offering high praise others scalding critiques. As an instance of the latter, Herb Sterne writing for *Script* in 1946 called the film a "horrendous melodrama" and a "fright wig opera"[6]. On the other side of the spectrum, James Agee in *Nation* commended it as a "tidy, engaging thriller"[7], and goes as far as describing it as "an 'art' movie"[8]. Alberto Lena Ordoñez builds on this assertion of *The Stranger* as an "art movie" and contends that it is one of Welles's most ideologically ambitious productions[9]. He highlights Welles's use of a reality unseen until then, in reference to the footage of concentration camps[10]. Lena Ordoñez also insists on how the film expresses that the moral responsibility of these atrocities is not limited to Germany. In fact, for Lena Ordoñez, *The Stranger* hits upon three types of moral responsibility: individual, social, and institutional. The first is clearly symbolized by Mary Longstreet, as the only person who can effectively identify Rankin as Kindler. The second is embodied by the Longstreet family, who is portrayed as "the kind and provincial liberal America, that lives and lets live; the America that was uncapable of perceiving the threat of Nazism"[11]. The third is expressed in the scene in which Mary and Rankin have returned from their honeymoon and are dining at home with family and friends, among the guests we find Wilson, who has yet to reveal his true identity as a delegate of the War Crimes Commission. During the dinner, when Rankin is questioned as a history teacher about his view on the so-called German problem, he uses the occasion to try to distance himself from his Nazi ideology by criticizing America's neutrality regarding the Spanish Civil War, the War in Ethiopia and the first years of the Second World War and, unconsciously, reveals his true violent ideals by declaring the German people a threat to the world that must be exterminated. Lena Ordoñez defends that Rankin's speech conveys

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[5] Brady, *Citizen Welles*, op. cit., p 373. Alan L. Gansberg in his autobiography of Edward G. Robinson makes a similar statement: "When it was released in July, *The Stranger* failed to excite the critics of the audiences" (Gansberg, Alan L., *Little Caesar. A Biography of Edward G. Robinson,* Lanham, Maryland, Toronto and Oxford, The Scarecrow Press, 2004, p. 123).

[6] Quoted in Biesen, *Blackout. World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, op. cit., p. 204.

[7] Naremore, to further his claim that *The Stranger* is the least interesting of Welles's films, explains that Agee's praise is consistent with the critic's dislike of Welles's style and, thus, further proof of how uncharacteristic *The Stranger* is of Welles's body of work. (Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, op. cit., p. 135).

[8] Biesen, *Blackout*, op. cit., p. 206.

[9] Lena Ordoñez, Alberto, "Orson Welles y *El extraño*: la otra cara del holocausto", *Estudios Humanísticos. Filología*, 39 (2017), pp. 135-148.

[10] This is not quite accurate as we shall she further down. Regardless, it does not diminish the work's radicality and audacity.

[11] Lena Ordoñez, Orson Welles y *El extraño,* op. cit., p. 145.

both an attack on the United States isolationist policy until 1941, which in turn gave wings to Nazism and Fascism during the nineteen-thirties, and the idea that Fascism is not a dead ideology, indeed the menace remains even if in latent form[12].

R. Barton Palmer has pointed out how the dismissals of *The Stranger* by leading film scholars must be understood as framed by an auteurist approach, which in turn proves to be of little use to illuminate the interest the film truly possesses[13]. Palmer shares some brief remarks about the film's political project and the relationship of that project to Welles's own publicly expressed political views via his columns for the *New York Post*. He mentions how the column touched upon different problems, including how "the phoney [sic] fear of Communism is smoke-screening the real menace of renascent Fascism", and how this observation is both prophetic and incisive[14]. However, surprisingly, Palmer does not delve deeper into this aspect of Welles's work and its relationship with the film, instead he offers a detailed look into the film's noirish features. According to Palmer, like most examples of film noir from the 1940s, *The Stranger* hints "underside of American character"[15]. There is one important difference, in most examples of film noir of the 1940s this somber menace is to a large degree abstract and open to different interpretations, while in *The Stranger* Welles is didactically clear about the imminent danger threatening America: the infiltration of fascism of a different order into everyday life.

It is precisely this didactic aspect of the film's message that is crucial for Jennifer L. Barker, for whom the fact that *The Stranger* was more popular and less technically challenging than other films directed by Welles made it possible "to reach (and possibly teach) a wider audience"[16]. Barker argues that the use of factual footage is a pedagogical tactic; in the narrative it is a way of instructing Mary and, by extension, offer the opportunity to instruct the audience. What it signals to is the need for responsible spectators, it is not only important to learn to see these images, but also crucial that being witness to these horrors via their photomechanical traces leads to action.

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[12] Ibid., p. 146.

[13] In reference to André Bazin, Peter Cowie, James McBridge and Naermore. (Palmer, R. Barton, "The Politics of Genre in Welles' 'The Stranger'", *Film Criticism*, Winter 1984-1985, vol. 9, N. 2, pp. 2-14).

[14] Ídem.

[15] An expression Palmer borrows from Paul Schrader, Ibid., p. 6.

[16] Barker, Jennifer L., "Documenting the Holocaust in Orson Welles's *The Stranger*", op. cit., p. 49.

The Stranger and Its Historical Context

To better understand the film's potential as a tool to confront these serious issues, we must place it in the context of Welles's *oeuvre* at large, not just within his filmography. It was produced within the studio system at its very peak in terms of movie theatre attendance and revenues, both were at an all-time high in 1946 and shortly after would dramatically drop[17]. In spite of the constraints of the heavily regimented studio system and the meager budget from International Pictures, it offers a scalding political critique rare for this kind of production. However, within Welles's trajectory it makes perfect sense, it was a natural development from his radical theatre productions done within the Federal Theatre Project[18] and his 1937 modern-dress adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in which Ancient Rome aesthetically morphed into Mussolini's Italy[19]. The ingenuity and success of these ventures were the reason behind RKO's desire to contract the twenty-four-year-old theatrical wunderkind in 1939. In spite of RKO's initial enthusiasm, Welles did not manage to get his first feature, *Citizen Kane*, off the ground until 1941. The film, which focused on tyranny in the figure of a media mogul, inspired by the very real William Randolph Hearst, was a commercial fiasco. In 1942, after *Citizen Kane*'s poor box office performance, as well as the hostility of Hearst and his powerful allies, Welles would end up losing control of his two following films (*The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Journey into Fear*). *The Stranger* was Welles's first studio feature in four years.

These difficulties to helm and retain control over his own projects in the film industry did not mean idle rest for Welles. On the contrary, these are years of intense activity as actor, prime-time radio broadcaster, writer, lecturer, campaigner for Roosevelt, and even magician[20]. Of all of these endeavors, that of columnist for the *New York Post* is perhaps what can give us greater insight into *The Stranger*'s political critique. The column lasted only six months, but Welles attached great significance to it, in his words: "The column is so important that I plan to devote all my time to it as soon as I can"[21]. The column is also proof of how aware and involved he was in national and international political events. On the one hand, as a notorious Hollywood liberal he is concerned by the House Un-American Activities Commi-

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[17] Chopra-Gant, Mike, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America. Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*, London and New York, I.B. TAURIS, 2006 p. 19; and Sedgwick, John, "Product Differentiation at the Movies: Hollywood, 1946 to 1965", *The Journal of Economic History*, September 2002, vol. 62, No. 3, pp. 676-705, p. 676.

[18] Brady, *Citizen Welles,* op. cit., pp. 78-79.

[19] Ibid., pp. 117-119.

[20] Ibid., pp. 362-371; Welles and Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles,* op. cit., pp. 177-182.

[21] It was first written under the title "Orson Welles Almanac" and after FDR's death it changed to "Orson Welles Today", (Brady, *Citizen Welles,* op. cit., p. 370).

ttee (HUAC), which was investigating the possibility that the American Communist Party had infiltrated the Works Progress Administration, including the Federal Theatre Project[22], for whom Welles had developed several plays between 1935 and 1937[23]. When the founder of HUAC, Martin Dies, retired from Congress in 1944 he was succeeded by congressman John E. Rankin of Mississippi, whose brief tenure would be fundamental in consolidating it as a permanent committee[24]. Rankin, who blamed Jews for Communism and for "trying to undermine and destroy America"[25], was virulently racist, antisemitic, and nativist[26]. Therefore, the fact that Rankin is also the name the film's villain assumes to pass as an ordinary History teacher in New England is an eloquent and pointed gesture.

On the other hand, Welles was following firsthand as a journalist another historical event: the United Nations Conference on International Organization that took place from April 25th to June 26th, 1945 in San Francisco[27]. It is precisely at this time that Welles saw footage of the concentration camps, some of which he will later re-edit into *The Stranger*[28]. The images impacted him so that he devoted his entire May 7, 1945 column to praising the documentary newsreels capturing horror of the concentration camps and their "hideous sights"[29].

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[22] HUAC had been in existence since 1938 and it had the mission to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive organizations. During the Second World War, its work was supposed to be aimed mostly at German American involvement in Nazi and Ku Klux Klan activities. Instead, it concentrated on investigating the American Communist Party and so called "fellow travelers" (Freedland, Michael and Pakin, Barbara, *Witch-Hunt in Hollywood. On McCarthyism's War on Tinseltown*, London, JR Books, 2009, p. 22).

[23] Brady, *Citizen Welles,* op. cit., pp. 77-99. Unsurprisingly, the FBI had a file on Welles, covering his activities from 1941 to 1956, and it is precisely in the mid-1940s when the FBI's scrutiny reached its peak. His column for the *New York Post* and his attendance of the U.N. conference in San Francisco were issues of great interest to the Bureau at the time (Naremore, James, "The Trial. The FBI vs. Orson Welles", in *Film Comment*, Vol. 27, No. 1, January-February 1991, p. 22-27).

[24] Doherty, Thomas, *Show Trial. Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2018, p. 35.

[25] Horne, Gerald, *The Final Victim of the Blacklist. John Howard Lawson, Dean of the Hollywood Ten*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2006, p. xi.

[26] According to Doherty, Rankin was behind the blocking of Democratic proposals to eliminate poll taxes and enact federal anti-lynching laws, more to our case, Rankin was responsible for securing the vote in Congress to make HUAC a permanent standing committee of the house A move that has since been deemed "one of the most remarkable procedural coups in modern Congressional history" by Robert K. Carr Quoted in Doherty, *Show Trial*, op. cit., p. 36.

[27] In fact, Naremore singles this event out as Welles's "major preoccupation" at the time. (Naremore, *The Magic World*, op. cit., p. 126).

[28] Rush, Peter D. and Elander, Maria, "Working through the cinematography of international criminal justice: procedures of law and images of atrocity", *London Review of International Law*, Vol. 6, Issue 1, 2018, 17-43, p. 29.

[29] Gottlieb, Sidney, "Orson Welles as Journalist. The *New YorK* Post Columns", in *Orson Welles in Focus. Texts and Contexts,* edited by James N. Gilmore and Sidney Gottlieb, pp. 111- 130, p. 123.

Images of Real-Life Atrocities

Welles's May 7, 1945 column is evidence of how images of this horror were already in circulation during the final stages of the war. One can only assume that this circulation was not massive, due to their delicate nature and to the fact that they did not create more upheaval. But they did arrive to the American audience via the RKO Pathé newsreel of April 26, 1945[30]. It is also known that American and American based filmmakers, such as George Stevens and Billy Wilder, worked with this footage for documentary films, some of which would serve as evidence in the Nuremberg trials[31].

The fact that Welles includes this factual material in a Hollywood feature film is radical to say the least. Most Holocaust scholars trace American public awareness of the Jewish ordeal to the late 1950s, when the term "Holocaust" became synonymous with the eradication of the Jews by Nazi forces[32]. However, Baron proposes a different timeline and speaks of a "pioneering" or "first wave" of Holocaust films produced between 1945 and 1959[33]. As one might expect, these pioneering Holocaust films bear the imprint of the cinematic styles and narrative practices of Hollywood productions of this era. They share "a linear structure, deliver a moral message, treat individuals as the primary agent of historical change, and simplify the causal complexity of history. They elicit admiration for heroes, antipathy toward villains, and sympathy for victims"[34]. Much of this can be seen clearly in *The Stranger,* however, in addition to the inclusion of documentary images of the liberated camps, which makes it unique within this category, *The Stranger* offers significant variations. For instance, the sole person capable of identifying the Nazi

[30] Barker, "Documenting the Holocaust", op. cit, p. 56. Lawrence Baron goes as far as to claim that the American public had been exposed to "widespread dissemination of footage and photographs of the liberation of concentration camps in newspapers, newsreels, and magazines in 1944 and 1945" (Baron, Lawrence, "The First Wave of American 'Holocaust' Films, 1945-1959", *American Historical Review*, vol. 115, issue 1, February 2010, pp. 90-114, p. 92).

[31] Stevens worked with it for the documentary *Nazi Concentration Camps*, which was used in the Nuremberg Trials and in Adolph Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem over a decade later (Wilson, Kristi M. and Crowder-Taborrelli, Tomás F., "Introduction. Defining Genocide: 'Reckoning with Evil'", in *Film and Genocide*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012, pp. 3-16, p. 8). Wilder directed *Die Todesmühlen* (*Death Mills*) for the German public, which is an abbreviated version of *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey*, a British documentary, a rough cut was screened in 1945, after which the film was shelved unfinished until its release in 2014 (Lena Ordoñez, "Orson Welles y *El* extraño: la otra cara del holocaust", op. cit., p. 140; Jeffries, Stuart, "The Holocaust film that was too shocking to show", *The Guardian*, 9 January 2015 (https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/09/holocaust-film-too-shocking-to-show-night-will-fall-alfred-hitchcock) Last accessed 12 October 2024.

[32] This periodization is consistent with the pioneering surveys of Holocaust cinema by Ilan Avisar, Judith Doneson, and Annette Insdorf. Although Doneson also acknowledges previous Hollywood films that touch upon the subject, albeit they limit this response to exposé of domestic antisemitism, with films such as *Crossfire* (1947) and *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) (Baron, "The First Wave of American 'Holocaust' Films", op. cit., pp. 90-91).

[33] Ibid., p. 95.

[34] Ídem.

in hiding is a woman, Mary, thus, a great moral weight is placed on her shoulders. More importantly, she is a stand-in for the public, in the sense that what is asked of them is to face reality and not remain silent. The moral message is clear, Fascism must be confronted, even the most innocent of people cannot just stand by, which is something that Welles also conveyed through his columns, where he argued that neutrality "aids and sustains the enemy"[35]. Not only that, but Fascism had mutated in appearance and infiltrated the domestic sphere. For Welles, VE Day did not do away with the spirit of Hitler, he believed it survived through the device of the Red Scare[36].

This is made even more apparent when taking a close look at the villain of the film. The character Franz Kindler was, in part, based on Marin Bormann, head of the Nazi Party Chancellery and private secretary of Adolf Hitler[37]. Kindler in hiding takes the name Charles Rankin, as a clear reference to John E. Rankin of HUAC. Thus, Kindler/Rankin is a metaphor for this metamorphosis of grandiose Fascism to a different but equally insidious kind of homegrown racism and bigotry. These two very real historical figures are combined and played in a highly stylized manner by Welles himself. While it might make the villain seem psychotic, it plays into the theme of the monster. But what makes Kindler/Rankin an interesting figure is that his monstrousness is moral, not physical, and, as a result, "the very threat of the monstrous is its paradoxical invisible visibility, the fact that it is an element of the everyday world which must be defamiliarized in order to be contained"[38].

The Medium of Film

It is by no means the first time that a Hollywood film portrays a monster whose deformity is not physical but moral, we could sustain that much of the vilification of femme fatales in film noir is based on this same notion of a seducing physicality paired with moral depravity. However, in *The Stranger* it is a male figure who has managed to seduce not only the ingénue, but an entire provincial New England town. His mission is to lay dormant until the time is right to further his machinations taking advantage of his total immersion within, and acceptance by, the community. Meaning that the real threat, once the Axis powers have been defeated, is not Marxism or a possible overthrow of government by subversives, but to accept bigotry and fanaticism as a part of ordinary life.

[35] Quoted in Gottlieb, "Orson Welles as Journalist", op. cit., p. 113.

[36] Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, op. cit., p. 126.

[37] Baron, "The First Wave of American 'Holocaust' Films", op. cit., p. 95.

[38] Palmer, "The Politics of Genre in Welles' 'The Stranger'", op. cit., p. 9.

Whose exact idea that was is hard to determine, for the very same reasons that the authority of the script is hard to determine with accuracy[39]. What is certain is that the earliest draft we have for the film, dated August 9, 1945, includes two names on its title page: Orson Welles and John Huston, in that order[40]. Huston and Welles were both united in many political causes on the left that would render them suspicious under the lens of HUAC, a committee for which they both shared unambiguous contempt. Huston had been one of the high profile film directors behind the Committee for the First Amendment (CFA), who had issued a public petition denouncing HUAC, and was among the twenty-nine members of the motion-picture industry who flew to Washington DC to show their hostility to the 1947 Committee hearings[41]. Welles's opinion on the matter is abundantly clear thanks to his radio broadcasts and columns in the *New York Post*[42]. In fact, for Welles, the menace of Fascism seemed just as present in 1946 than during the war, a war that had taken a devastating human toll and yet, Welles feared, everyone seemed eager to forget and think of as a problem of the past. A fear that is already made clear in his column published May 7, 1945, where he wrote:

> No, you must not miss the newsreels. They make a point this week no man can miss: The war has strewn the world with corpses, none of them very nice to look at. The thought of death is never pretty but the newsreels testify to the fact of quite another sort of death, quite another level of decay. This is a putrefaction of the soul, a perfect spiritual garbage. For some years now we have been calling it Fascism. The stench is unendurable[43].

His statement "No, you must not miss the newsreels" is crystal clear, images are important, *these images* are important. Images *can do* things. In fact, the effects and affects triggered by images, in particular moving images was one of Welles's deepest concerns. As Gottlieb contends, "Welles was shrewdly aware of the importance of mass media [...] not only during but also after the war, when the contours of the peacetime settlement might be greatly influenced by a public consciousness to a

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[39] The authorities of scripts are a thorny subject in the Hollywood of the 1940s because of how the studio system granted writing credits. In the case of *The Stranger,* the original story is by Victor Trivas, a German film director in exile since the 1930s, and the film's script is usually attributed to Decla Dunning and Anthony Veiller. But it is a known fact that both John Huston and Orson Welles worked on the script although their efforts in this regard went uncredited. Welles declared "I *worked* on all of it during general rewriting with Anthony Veiller and Spiegel" (Welles and Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, op. cit., p. 186). Also according to Welles, Huston "wrote most of the script - under the table, because he was in the army at the time and couldn't take credit" (Ibid., p. 187).

[40] Heylin, *Despite the System*, op. cit., p. 173.

[41] Humphries, Reynold, *Hollywood's Blacklists. A Political and Cultural History*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, p. 88; Doherty, *Show Trial*, op. cit., p. 92.

[42] Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, op. cit., p. 126.

[43] Welles, Orson, "Orson Welles Today", *New York Post*, May 7, 1945, quoted in Barker, "Documenting the Holocaust in Orson Welles's The Stranger", op. cit., p. 57.

large extent shaped by the media"[44]. In January of 1945 Welles had given a lecture at the City Center in New York entitled "The Nature of the Enemy"[45], where he importantly linked politics and the media in no uncertain terms:

> Inspiration for the showmanship of fascism comes from the military, the old dumb-show of monarchy and mostly from the theater. In Germany, the decor, the spectacular use of great masses of people — the central myth itself was borrowed from grand opera. In Italy, the public show, the lavish props, the picturesque processions were taken from the movies. Even the famous salute, the stiff arm up-raised, comes not from history, but from Hollywood. Surely one of the most amusing footnotes in all the chronicles of recorded time is that Hitler and Mussolini stole their showmanship from Richard Wagner and Cecil B. DeMille![46].

These eloquent words demonstrate Welles's deep concern and keen insight into the real impact that the medium of film has had on the way we have come to see the world. If in his May column he made a point to signal Fascism's "unendurable stench", indicating how the problem of Fascism is not done with, in his lecture he highlighted another crucial fact: that film is an enormously seductive and powerful tool for propaganda, which must not be taken lightly, but neither must its potential as a means for contestation. In fact, Welles uses all the media within his reach to make this clear, he writes, he broadcasts, and expresses himself via moving images, which hold a privileged position in the transmission of ideas and concepts. According to Vivian Sobchack, "More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflexive movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood"[47]. But images of the concentration camps are something else, or something more. Welles sermons us to pay attention to this footage. It had had a profound impact on him as a spectator, to the point that he was moved to include them into the first film he manages to get off the ground in four years, his most commercial and most "conformist" film. He is boldly taking full advantage of popular narrative cinema to deal with a recent traumatic event, a reality so horrifying it has since become the paradigmatic example of the historical event that "should, in essence, resist narrative arcs of comple-

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[44] Gottlieb, "Orson Welles as Journalist", op. cit., p. 117.

[45] McCarten, John, "Dedicated Wunderkind", *The New Yorker*, January 19, 1945. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1945/01/27/dedicated-wunderkind) Last accessed October 14, 2024.

[46] Quoted in Denning, Michael, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, London, Verso, 1997, p. 380.

[47] Sobchack, Vivian, *The Address of the Eye. A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 3-4.

tion or redemption"[48]. As Thomas Elsaesser has pointed out, the Holocaust defies representation and yet demands it[49]. A demand that Welles responded to swiftly and with great sophistication.

Spectators in and of the Film

It is necessary to detail the scene in which the concentration camp footage appears. Mary Longstreet, who by now knows her husband is living under an assumed identity but is unaware of his past as a high-ranking Nazi officer, is summoned by her father. Mary goes to her father's home, walks into a darkened room, and is received by him and Mr. Wilson, who have been watching a series of films. The lights are switched on and Wilson questions her about Meineke. As Wilson suspects, Mary met him but was later prevented from sharing this information by Rankin. Mary denies any knowledge of, or contact with, Meineke. Wilson accuses her of shielding a murderer, it is then that Wilson discloses who he is and why he is in Harper: it is his job to bring escaped Nazis to justice. While Mary learns all this, the lights are switched off again and the reel starts rolling. We hear the disquieting hum of the projector and see the reflection of flickering lights on the faces of Mary and Wilson. Mary is truly horrified.

In this scene we have a film that exhibits its own apparatus and in so doing, the film is speaking of the medium itself. We see the projector; thus, we see what normally is hidden from view. There are several shots where we see both the projector and Mary, in one such instance, Wilson asks her "How can you be sure you've never met the man?", referring to Meinike, to which she responds "Of course, I can't be certain." Simple dialogue that is hinting towards the complex relationship between images, truth, certainty, and rational and emotional processes. Towards the end of the scene, when it becomes clear that only Mary can identify Kindler, the loose end of the film reel taps incessantly against the table, ticking like a timebomb about to explode.

It is important to point out that this is a highly unorthodox cinematic experience, Mary sees the footage in a dark room, but it is not the darkness of the movie theatre. The screening takes place at her father's home, but she is not viewing home movies. The images' impact is so strong that her home, her father, everything familiar is rendered strange. Cinema itself has also become strange, we see what is

[48] Lee Kemp, Laura J., "The middlebrow Spanish Civil War film: a site of mediation between culture and history", *Belphégor [en ligne]*, 15-2, 2017, p. 3.

[49] Elsaesser, Thomas, "Subject Positions, Speaking Positions: From *Holocaust*, *Our Hitler*, and *Heimat* to *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*", in Sobchack, Vivian, *The Persistance of History. Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, New York and London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 145-183, p. 147.

usually hidden, the machine that enables the fantasy, only it is not a fantasy. It is not the dazzling spectacle of Hollywood; it is its contrary. It is not Leni Riefenstahl's monumental depiction of mobilization of bodies in film, it is its result. Mary, as spectator, is also turned, she is not enjoying the anonymity of the movie theatre, she is being scrutinized by two authority figures, her father - patriarch and justice - and Wilson - representative of the War Crimes Commission. She is under watch, and she is expected to act on account of what she has seen. Therefore, these images are not only representative, they are also transformative, provocative, that is to say performative. As Aurora Fernández Polanco contends, "Claiming the performative uses of images requires invoking their strength above their meaning; finding precisely that provocative character"[50]. This is key, since Welles is not trying to make sense of the images - for what sense can such absolute and inhumane destruction have? -, he is putting them in recirculation with a purpose[51].

The footage has a performative function in two senses: one, in the story, where the images are meant to drive Mary to action; and two, in the film, which is meant to move the audience. Welles is rearticulating these images; he is mediating them for the public at large just as Wilson is contextualizing them for Mary. This is a crucial point, Wilson - and by extension Welles - does not let the images speak for themselves, because images do not speak for themselves, on the contrary, they are highly malleable. Images need to be anchored in order for them to perform, in order for them to *do* things, or in Elizabeth Edwards terms they need "placing and remediation"[52]. Wilson describes the images, he places them in a specific discourse, he is mediating Mary's experience of the footage. Something that is reinforced visually by situating Edward G. Robinson between the projector and the screen, illuminating him and imprinting temporarily the footage onto his body. These images have become part of him, they are now ingrained in him, and he wants Mary to interiorize them as well.

This operation is fascinating because it reinvigorates the images in the sense that Mary now cannot avoid having a relation to them, they act on her and, she in turn, must act on them. The scene is also a reflection on what it takes for images to be *seen*. After this screening, Mary is called into action, as is the audience of the film. The images are performative because they produce a transformation in her from an apolitical character, defined by a domestic setting, into an active agent in the public

[50] Fernández Polanco, Aurora, "Performative uses of images", *Re-visiones*, No. 2, 2012, pp. 1-5.

[51] This is not unproblematic for Welles, who is against exploiting real misery, agony, or death for purposes of entertainment in principle, but declares "I do think that every time you can get the public to look at any footage of a concentration camp, under any excuse at all, it's a step forward. People just don't want to know that those things ever happened". Welles and Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, op. cit., p. 189.

[52] Edwards, Elizabeth, "Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 41, 2012, pp. 221-234.

realm. She has let a monster into her intimate circle and, confronted with such a perverse menace, passivity or inaction can no longer be justified by ignorance or innocence. After seeing the images, she is neither, she cannot ignore the lifeless emaciated bodies on screen, those "corpses, none of them very nice to look at".

Conclusion

The Stranger, Orson Welles's most commercial and conventional production, is nonetheless a film of great sophistication in the sense that it offers a series of complex considerations regarding traumatic historical events and film's role as medium for representation and critique. In fact, it is an example of how cinema can aspire to be a tool for political mediation and engagement. Both the fictional film itself, as well as the documentary footage re-edited in the film, are made *to do things*, to provoke, to interpellate characters and audience to act, or at least to not look away. Its use of factual footage showing the true horror of the Nazi regime, at a time when the Holocaust was not yet a central concern in the discourses on the Second World War, is revolutionary and radical. It is the underside of German fascism's spectacular self-presentation and it could be read as Orson Welles response to what Elsaesser terms "the representational reality of Nazism"[53] and its harrowing consequences.

Importantly, Welles is not only analyzing the immediate past, he is also signaling to a new danger articulated through "phony fear of Communism" and "American's complacent superiority"[54]. These were key critiques Welles singled out in his *New York Post* column, and it was precisely these topics that limited his readership in a country ready to move on from war to peace, and from sacrifice to consumerism. These topics were considered not acceptable to a large portion of the reading public, and yet they did not receive the same push-back when inserted into his entertaining noirish thriller, *The Stranger,* where they are just as crucial. Perhaps it was the only way, during the rise of conservative politics directly related to a shift towards what would be the Cold War, to highlight how the struggle against fascism "was in danger of betraying its ostensible ideals"[55] and room was being made for scaremongering, censorship, and bigotry.

Although the film has all the markings of conventional Hollywood features of its time, it is a rare work of cinematic art. It elaborates on images of horrors that have become part of the world, a world that is increasingly known to us through audiovisual media. What the film makes clear is that images do not speak for themselves, in fact, some images are so incomprehensible that it is necessary for them to

[53] Elsaesser, "Subject Positions, Speaking Positions", op. cit, p. 150.

[54] Brady, *Citizen Welles,* op. cit., p. 371.

[55] Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles*, op. cit., p. 126.

be interpreted, to be thought through thoroughly, even at great pains, if they are to serve for something. The result is a fascinating visualization of political problems, and a politization of visual problems regarding images of real-life atrocities. Visual and political problems that are still very much with us today and have not lost their prescience.

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