

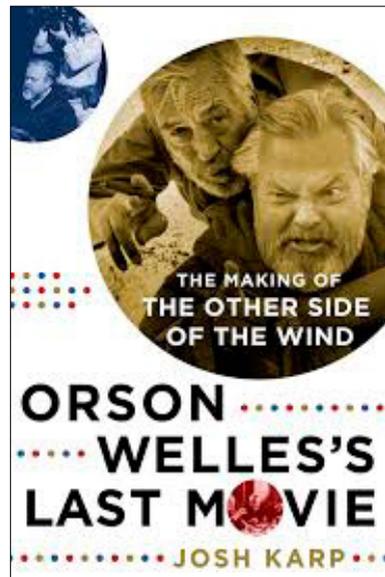
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## A Wellesian Odyssey at *The Other Side of the Wind*

Review of: Josh KARP. *Orson Welles's Last Movie. The Making of The Other Side of the Wind*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015.

As expected, the 2015 centenary of the legendary Orson Welles re-sparked interest in the life and work of one of the most controversial artists of film history – if the incessant attraction needed to be re-sparked. But what more could be put on paper or film about Welles? Are there any more mysteries that the director of world-acclaimed masterpieces like *Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Touch of Evil* or *Chimes at Midnight* held from the audience and film scholars?

Josh Karp found it in the movie that everyone has been talking about for forty-five years but few have really seen its magnificence: Orson Welles's last and still disputed project, *The Other Side of the Wind*. Started in the early 70's it is still the closing chapter that everyone expects for the Wellesian odyssey. After consulting a large amount of writings on the matter, correspondence and interviews, Karp invites the reader to a three-act journey behind the scenes of this enterprise, the artistic endeavors, the human frailties, and the personal and contractual agreements and conflicts that resulted in this unseen "Holy Grail" of cinema.



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True to the already classical story that begins with the death of the main character, the first chapter of Karp's book sets the pace back from the infamous day of October 10, 1985, when Hollywood's *enfant terrible* was found dead over his typewriter. Thus, the author constructs a Prologue, which some may find too daring, where one sees Orson Welles direct and narrate his own death, talk about the illusory matters of life and the tremendous loneliness of the main character, and finally introduce "one of [his] greatest acts of creating such illusions and to prove that [he] was anything but alone": the madding production of *The Other Side of the Wind*, started in 1970 and envisaged for the director's come-back to Hollywood after more than a decade in Europe. And the story of Welles creating a movie about an aging director, J.J. Jake Hannaford (played by another iconic actor and director – John Huston), who tries to make a return feature starts to develop in a game of alternate perspectives and viewpoints.

From the very beginning, the reader is taken to the early days of the project, where a fistfight between Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway could have sparked the former's interest in portraying "a ridiculously masculine novelist who has lost his creative powers", while declining any autobiographical link to his projects stating that "it's about us". But who was Welles in 1970, when he starts shooting his last feature? A strong-willed artist frequently regarded as a genius from birth, unaware or inconsiderate of limitations or authority, "a tidal wave of restless creativity, spontaneous brilliance, unflagging energy, remarkable productivity, and magnetic personality". *The Orson Welles*, as Karp in his frequent eulogistic lines puts it. The genius part of the carefully constructed *Orsonology* is closely followed by the "sensational catastrophes" that culminated with losing control over his prized last project at the end of the 70's, when the film's negative was being seized due to the coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. But, as the author clearly shows, scandals and a sense of chaotic catastrophes started from the debut with *Citizen Kane*, and followed him closely on most of his film projects. And *The Other Side of the Wind* seems to be the peak of Orson Welles's dark days as a filmmaker.

Set in a single day, that of Hannaford's seventy birthday and suicide, the story is retold by a complex of film styles and formats, from photos, 8mm and 16mm cameras and the 35mm film-within-the-film that gave Welles the opportunity to create dazzling visual material that those who have seen have labeled as "smashing rich and abounding in detail". At his birthday party, Hannaford would cross documentarians, journalists, writers, young film directors, critics, members of his staff and crew, producers and studio chiefs, and movie stars. Welles's script mentioned Jack Nicholson, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Bernardo Bertolucci, John Cassavetes, or Andy Warhol, that should have attended Hannaford's luxurious party. None of them did, but many more appeared at the party, as the film was prone to frequent alteration by Welles. And this is where Karp's research on the project becomes captivating, reeling in and off characters and events, some of which decisive in the past four decades of American film industry.

The first act of creating *The Other Side of the Wind* is set on July 3, 1970 to 1973, when Welles brings some essential people to making the film come true: Croatian actress Oja Kodar (his lover at the time), cameramen Gary Graver, Eric Sherman, and Felipe Herba, film critic Joe McBride, young film director Peter Bogdanovich, or actors Robert (Bob) Random and Dennis Hopper. Karp closely and convincingly describes the guerilla filmmaking strategies the director came up to in order to create many of the scenes, from turning to non-professional actors cast in real-life related personas, to hijacking filming locations or equipment from various inattentive studios or companies. A creative genius trying to get his movie started with, at first, no financial support and only a crew fascinated by the work with one of the most important directors of all times. The *VISTOWs* or “volunteers in service to Orson Welles”, as line producer Frank Marshall coined the group, shared not only admiration, but also professionalism, respect, endurance to the hardships of working day and night and to the inscrutable anger fits of Orson Welles when things didn’t go according to plan. “It required enormous work, but the outcome was artistically fulfilling and of colossal depth”, as Eric Sherman concludes.

Presiding over accidents, as he used to see the work of a movie director, Welles mesmerized the crew with his innovative artistic and technical abilities, working with found sets or improvising on the spot, and closely rehearsing and shooting scenes again and again, until the right material emerged. But financing has always been a problem for *The Other Side of the Wind*, and Orson’s difficult personality and constant rejections of any contract that would dent his freedom made working at this project a nightmare for most of the producers who approached it. Most certainly this prevailed over the “karmic repayment for his good fortune” with *Citizen Kane*, as Karp dramatically puts it, trying to follow the “almost Homeric financing adventures [that] swallowed huge amounts of time and energy”. On his own, Welles funded his projects by acting or appearing in movies, ads, or television shows, but his last movie swallowed more and more money every week, topping 1 million dollars in 1976.

As expected, the second act of the story brings Welles and his team to “a point of maximum discomfort”, while opening with a the fascinating scene of legendary actor and director John Huston who arrived on set for the lead role, and discussing “whether a big beard was right for an immortal filmmaker”. With Orson Welles, everything seemed to get to life beyond formal rules or producing constraints. There was only one common interest: the artistic merits of film. And Welles didn’t keep from any means to get it, even if they were embarrassing, cruel, excruciating tiresome or manipulating for his crew. For this, Karp describes one scene where, in order to get Huston’s mixture of fragility and power, Welles encouraged him to drink through the day, and shot the scene fourteen times, which resulted in one of the most important moments of the film.

All these years led to a kind of dependency between Welles and his crew members, especially Bogdanovich and Graver, apart from the special relationship to Oja. Not just once, we see Orson in love-hate situations with the most important people on the set,

and even editing a hardcore lesbian sex-scene when he needed the latter – who relied on petty jobs to earn his living – for his project, or getting involved in the former’s first directed features. Moreover, in the long process of making *The Other Side of the Wind*, art started to imitate life, as Welles decided to rely on real people and events for shaping his characters and story. It is no secrecy that the spiteful critic Juliet Rich (played by Susan Strasberg), who tries to bash Hannaford’s career, is nothing else than Welles’s replica to Pauline Kael’s publishing the devastating article “Raising Kane”, implying that the Wellesian masterpiece was nothing more than a studio-raised hit, where the director acclaimed work actually rooted in the talent of his co-writer Herman J. Mankiewicz.

Throughout these years money get tight and the Iranian financing managed by Mehdi Bousherhri (the brother-in-law of the Shah of Iran) through Astrophore (a Paris-based production company owned by Iran) and Avenel (a Liechtenstein-based company of Welles and Kodar) sparked controversies, as much could not be justified or seemed misplaced. Even if the producers – that also included other European companies – were practically under the spell of the sequences they have seen with various occasions and which were being edited in France, as years went by everyone grew more and more impatient about the release date of the film. Moreover, the political changes in Iran made Bousherhri’s working together with Welles very difficult, in spite of the former’s good intentions. Thus, the third act of this quest is marked by a sense of desperation and sickness, the beginning of the end being placed around the American Film Institute glamorous event of February 9, 1975, where Welles received the Lifetime Achievement Award, but no cent he could use in order to complete his project.

In spite of this, the director continued his Quixotesque journey to *The Other Side of the Wind*, by filming scenes, even if years had passed from the beginning and he was forced to make important changes in the cast, due to some actors being unavailable or even dying meanwhile. “What would be the end result artistically? Will the desperation behind this crazy patchwork be revealed for what it is?... Is it even possible to hope that the result has been an improvement, even an enrichment?” asks Welles in a memo to producer Dominique Antoine. During the editing process that Karp describes amazed, most of his co-workers, the health, and the relationships to family members and friends started to degenerate. The Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979 complicated things all the more, and the project that started in 1970 still had no delivery date, re-igniting the “fear of completion” theory that followed Welles in his career. With the negatives in the possession of Astrophore and the director having the work print in Los Angeles, it seemed that “it was about as complicated a situation as a picture can get into”, as stated by John Huston in 1976. And this situation is the core of Karp’s investigative approach, creating a thrilling tour behind the scenes of film industry and its legal affairs.

And the movie does not end with the director’s death in 1985, as the author follows the project in an Afterlife chapter, where the numerous heirs and life and busi-

ness partners struggle to finish – sometimes with substantial personal financial profits – the still unseen film of Orson Welles.

Although maybe reiterative in the first chapters, especially for those already fascinated by the genius of Orson Welles, the three acts and the last pages of the Josh Karp's book are especially interesting owing to the sum of details he reveals and to the connective manner of presenting the people and events of this project that is still a mystery for large audiences, and which, from May 2015, has been the subject of crowd-funding campaign to raise the 2 million dollars necessary to finish it.