

How today's film industry views Orson Welles

By David Walsh
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RKO 281, an HBO original film directed by Benjamin Ross and written by John Logan, based on the PBS documentary *The Battle Over Citizen Kane*

The case can be made that Charles Chaplin (1889-1977) and Orson Welles (1915-85) were the two figures who sustained in the popular cinema the highest level of artistic excellence and complexity. Chaplin carried out his most important film work in the 1910s, 20s and 30s. Welles ought to have accomplished his in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Social and historical processes, above all, the onset of political reaction and a subsequent profound change in mass sentiment, made this extremely difficult.

His accomplishments, in the face of the hostility and indifference not only of the American studios but virtually the entire international film industry, are all the more remarkable. No one in cinema besides Welles continued to work over in such a serious manner the themes of personal and social morality and corruption and the temptations of power and greatness as they played themselves out under the specific conditions of the 1950s and 1960s (in *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Touch of Evil*, *Mr. Arkadin*, *The Trial* and *Chimes at Midnight*). There is something heroic about Welles's efforts in a time of reaction and conformism to persevere in making critical and personal films.

RKO 281, produced by and shown on HBO cable television in the US, is a fictionalized account of the making of *Citizen Kane*, Welles's first feature film, shot from June to December 1940 and first shown to the public in May 1941. Welles and Herman Mankiewicz wrote a screenplay inspired by the life of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951). Through his various minions, including gossip columnist Louella Parsons, Hearst, a hardened reactionary by that time, exerted immense pressure on the Hollywood establishment to suppress *Citizen Kane*. RKO executives eventually released the picture, but without much enthusiasm, and when it did not do well at the box office, were more than happy to store it away in their vault.

Writer John Logan and director Benjamin Ross (*The Young Poisoner's Handbook*, 1995) have loosely based *RKO 281*—the designation by which Welles's project was known during shooting—on a documentary aired in 1996, *The*

Battle Over Citizen Kane. Unfortunately, this is somewhat better than that superficial effort. The PBS documentary, written by Richard Ben Cramer and Thomas Lennon, essentially argued that Welles and Hearst were cut from the same egoistic and self-aggrandizing mold and that the conflict between the two of them had little more than a psychological significance. It managed to abstract from a discussion of *Citizen Kane* all the historical and social circumstances that made the conflict of such importance. The documentary also implied that Welles's decision to go ahead with *Citizen Kane* was a terrible career move, which no self-respecting careerist of the 1990s would imitate. All in all, it was a shallow and distasteful little work. (See PBS documentary: "*The Battle Over Citizen Kane*"—A revealing look at an old controversy)

Ross's film, produced by Tony and Ridley Scott and shot in Britain with a mostly British cast, is obliged, perhaps by the elementary needs of drama, to take a slightly more penetrating look. For instance, it was all very well for the makers of the documentary to suggest that the contest between Welles and Hearst was somehow a battle between equals. Ross and Logan, however, had to present the different circumstances and attitudes of the two protagonists if the audience was to make any sense of the events. The spectator sees with his or her own eyes that Hearst has vast resources at his disposal and Welles nothing but his film and artistic integrity. And that while Hearst resorts to anti-Semitism (his red-baiting is not mentioned) and economic blackmail to gain his ends, Welles, in a speech to RKO stockholders, points to the triumph of fascism in Europe and defends the right to free speech.

The film has the advantage as well of having two fine actors in its cast, Liev Schreiber (as Welles) and James Cromwell (as Hearst). John Malkovich also gives a relatively restrained performance as Mankiewicz. The lines given to Schreiber are not extraordinary, at times indeed they're quite clichéd, but he manages nonetheless to convey something of the pathos of Welles's situation—a 25-year-old filmmaker taking on one of the most powerful men in America. One believes him when he says, pitifully, of his film, "It's all I've got." He seems less ego-driven, in the end,

than a man determined at all costs to see that his version of the truth gets out.

Cromwell, the son of film director John Cromwell, does a fine job portraying an individual of considerable contradictions. Hearst began his newspaper life as something of a radical and friend of the common man. He also prided himself on his taste in art and antiquities, collecting them massively. By 1940, he had turned into a quasi-fascist, opposing the New Deal as the first step toward communism in the US. "Roosevelt is a Bolshevik," he says early in the film, "He'll have us at war with [Nazi] Germany in a year." Cromwell has a wonderful way of draining the color from his face to indicate Hearst's self-righteous and megalomaniacal fury.

Some of the film's best scenes involve Hearst at his nastiest. When informed by Hedda Hopper, a gossip columnist not in his employ, about the subject of *Citizen Kane*, Hearst immediately summons Parsons (Brenda Blethyn). I pay you a good deal of money; why didn't you know about this? he asks. Parsons is furious and humiliated to learn what Welles has been up to behind her back. "I want blood," she says. "Good," Hearst comments dryly, "retain that feeling."

In a meeting with Louis B. Mayer (David Suchet), Hearst makes a point of inviting the MGM chief to an exclusive Los Angeles country club and suggests that he bring along the heads of the other studios. Oh, he says—as if suddenly recalling the fact—but none of you would be allowed in, you're all *Jews*. Hearst's threat is obvious. Mayer and the rest were extremely sensitive about the fact of their Jewishness reaching the public.

After Hearst and film actress Marion Davies, his longtime mistress, watch a private screening of *Citizen Kane*, the newspaper tycoon gets on the phone to Parsons. "Use the file," he tells her, referring to material the Hearst papers have accumulated detailing the sexual misdeeds of Hollywood's stars. Its publication would mean the studios' ruination, Parsons points out to Mayer. The MGM chief thereupon summons the other studio bosses (Jack Warner, David O. Selznick, Harry Cohn, etc.) to an emergency meeting at which the film industry brain trust comes up with the idea of buying up the negative and prints of *Citizen Kane* from RKO for \$800,000 and burning them. Fortunately, RKO executives turned down the proposal.

Although the film makes these and other useful but relatively obvious points, I wouldn't want to argue too strongly for its insightfulness. While they obviously feel obliged to make reference to some of the circumstances surrounding the effort to suppress *Citizen Kane*, the filmmakers do their best to reduce the conflict between Welles and Hearst to a struggle of oversized egos.

The film creates whatever analogies it can between the behavior of the two. While Hearst lords it over the heavy-drinking Davies (Melanie Griffith), Welles mistreats alcoholic screenwriter Mankiewicz (the brother of film director Joseph Mankiewicz and father of Frank Mankiewicz, Robert F. Kennedy's press secretary and George McGovern's political director in 1972). Both Hearst and Welles, it seems, can be "soulless monsters." Both want love "on their own terms." Ross and Logan stage a fictional encounter between Welles and Hearst in an elevator, in which the latter tells the former, "My battle with the world has almost ended. Yours has just begun." And so forth.

Because certain facts have apparently been forgotten by the majority of those at work in the film industry, it is necessary to recall them. *Citizen Kane*, made by someone with left-wing political sympathies (of which no hint is given in *RKO 281*), called into question aspects of the American dream and criticized a man who sacrificed principle and potential greatness on the altar of money and power. (It is ironic that Hearst was so thin-skinned and obtuse that he couldn't perceive, as others have, that Welles's portrait of him was a remarkably balanced and sympathetic one.)

Moreover, Hearst's campaign against Welles's film was a blatant act of censorship, with which the movie industry wholeheartedly attempted to comply. The battle over *Citizen Kane* provided a foretaste of what was to come during the McCarthyite anticommunist witch-hunt of the late 1940s and early 1950s. It revealed the cowardice of Hollywood's studio executives and their thoroughgoing lack of interest in democratic principles.

The conflict also indicated how difficult it would be for a director to pursue consciously critical artistic work within the Hollywood system of making films for profit and what courage and fortitude opposition to this state of affairs would require. Welles, with all his weaknesses and foibles, was a man with such qualities. In increasingly difficult financial and personal straits, he fought to make his films for another 30 years or more following the blows dealt his career and reputation by Hearst and the film establishment. His life's work was a "failure" only by the standards of opportunists and toadies. As the American film industry seems to be waking from a long sleep, its most serious artists ought to look to Welles's struggle as an example, not a cautionary tale.

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