The Experimental Aesthetics of the Magnificent Ambersons

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Abstract

The Magnificent Ambersons (Orson Welles, 1942) is an incomplete film. It is not one of the many unfinished films in Welles's career that never reached their audiences, but it was not completed – and evidently not appreciated – by the director. "RKO destroyed Ambersons, and the picture itself destroyed me", he explains in an interview, as a big portion of the film was removed from the original cut, and additional scenes were shot by the studio, leaving a mutilated version of what the director intended in the first place. The film's complicated production process occurred at a time when RKO, one of The Big Five studios, already had lost money on Citizen Kane (1941), and it is exemplary in terms of illustrating the unstable power relationships between producers and filmmakers of the studio era.

> Ambersons is the only picture of mine I've seen after it was finished and released.
>
> Orson Welles (quoted in Rosenbaum 1992: 9)

The Magnificent Ambersons (Orson Welles, 1942) is an incomplete film. It is not one of the many unfinished films in Welles's career that never reached their audiences, but it was not completed – and evidently not appreciated – by the director. "RKO destroyed Ambersons, and the picture itself destroyed me", he explains in an interview, as a big portion of the film was removed from the original cut, and additional scenes were shot by the studio, leaving a mutilated version of what the director intended in the first place. The film's complicated production process occurred at a time when RKO, one of The Big Five studios, already had lost money on Citizen Kane (1941), and it is exemplary in terms of illustrating the unstable power relationships between producers and filmmakers of the studio era. Yet, Ambersons does not characterize the 1940's classical Hollywood film, exceeding expectations in terms of form and content. It could be interpreted as a progressive experiment in sound and image, as an avant-garde for the period in which it was made. Against RKO's attempts to turn the film into a classical look-alike, its final version still resists conventions, transgressing the forced mould it was given, even transgressing the previous stylistic innovations that Welles adopted in his first and only film until then, celebrated to this date. Seemingly one of the reasons why he could not complete the film stems from his perpetual interest in novelty, creativity and perfection, which contrasts sharply with pressing issues related to time and finances. In this article, we recognize The Magnificent Ambersons as an "incomplete Welles film", nonetheless approach it as a finished and distributed production, without looking for what might be missing or what might not be Wellesian. Ambersons bears some great cinematic experiments, unusual and advanced for both audiences and producers at the time, especially in terms of reflexive, essayistic filmmaking modes that became a mark in Welles's filmmaking years later. The film is significant in discussing the studio era and Hollywood's dominancy over a filmmaker as much as Welles's unique directorial style and his desire for independence and experiment. In fact, the film's incompleteness can be studied as a result of the contradiction between different parties involved in filmmaking and their different understandings of taking risks in creating art; one leaning toward making money and the other towards innovation.

The film's lengthy and complex production journey is largely due to Orson Welles's having to commit to multiple projects simultaneously. He started developing Journey into Fear (1943) while working on Ambersons, and around the same time he was appointed by the U.S. government to do a project in Brazil in support of "Good Neighbours Policy". Moreover, it was Nelson Rockefeller, a young politician who happened to be one of RKO's main stockholders, who asked him to become a goodwill ambassador. Welles had to hand over directing Journey into Fear to someone else because he was also acting in it, and he had to finish a rough cut of Ambersons before travelling to Rio to shoot the carnival on time for his docu-fiction titled It's All True. The overlap of these three projects meant that Welles's control was unsteady resulting in an unfinished project (It's All True) and a finished one (Journey into Fear) neither directed nor edited by him. The most forceful effect on Ambersons was the film's final editing whose total control eventually was transferred to Robert Wise, the studio editor who had worked on Kane. The final version of the film was reduced down to around 90 minutes; more than 45 minutes of scenes were eliminated from the director's rough cut. It was true that the filming of Ambersons took longer than planned and exceeded the budget. These complications cannot be reduced to Welles's personal artistic decisions though, as he did not have complete freedom over the films he was making. Presumably, he was less independent than when he had arrived from New York to Hollywood because there was evidence, especially for RKO, of how his artistic genius could turn into expenditure. The intricate relationships in the business in addition to its unfortunate timing defined the fate of Ambersons. Citizen Kane was not a financial success for RKO despite having received highly strong reviews. There is debate over whether this was due to William Randolph Hearst's putting pressure on movie theatres not to show the film, and banning any relevant content on his media outlets, or because the film's tone was too grim for the audiences. Regardless, Welles was under pressure: he had to re-accomplish the artistic success of Kane without upsetting financial matters with RKO as he was under contract with them for another film. Years later, he explains that he "thought [he] had a movie so good — [he] was absolutely certain of its value, much more than of Kane— that [he] had absolutely no doubt that it would win through in spite of that industry fear of the dark movie" (quoted in Leaming 2004: 244).

Despite its ruined parts, shifted focus and disturbed rhythm, The Magnificent Ambersons is a pleasure to watch. As it the case with Welles's most films, the stylistic choices in Ambersons add so many layers of meaning to the film's narrative, deserving an in-depth reading of their functions. Instead of providing a lengthy analysis of the whole film, we want to focus here precisely on the film's unconventional audiovisual storytelling that merges documentary and fiction. In addition to his well-known uses of deep focus and long take, mastered in Citizen Kane, that emphasize the continuity of space and time within a scene, Welles experiments with montage, cutting up space and time discontinuously across several scenes. In addition, the audio track of the film serves as a primary tool to reflect on the images, presumably because the screenplay is based on Booth Tarkington's novel, which was adapted to a radio drama prior to the film, and directed and narrated by Welles himself. The unconventionality of style in Ambersons can be studied scene by scene to discuss these characteristics, but we would like to focus on its visually and aurally dense opening montage that bears marks of early documentary cinema, Russian avant-garde filmmaking, theatrical mise en scène and performance, and audio design for radio drama.

The Magnificent Ambersons portrays the decay of an upper-class family caught up in the fast-changing times of the early 20th century. Modernity and its effects on everyday life mean new types of work, new classes and a re-distribution of wealth, which the Ambersons struggle to adapt to. The film depicts in the background the immense transformation that modern life has brought by way of showing its effects on a wealthy family as they lose their admired status and privileges in society. The story unfolds as Isabel Minafer Amberson (Dolores Costello) is approached by a suitor from the past, Eugene Morgan (Joseph Cotten), who has returned to his hometown a couple of decades after he was found unsuitable to marry her. Now a successful inventor, Eugene works in the automobile business and he belongs to the rising upper middle classes. Eugene has brought her daughter Lucy (Anne Baxter) to town, and as he tries to reconnect with his true love Isabel, Lucy gets close to Isabel's son, George (Tim Holt). In the midst of Ambersons' decline, we witness Eugene's possessiveness towards his mother ignited by the small talk in the town about her love life, which pushes her away from Eugene. Meanwhile the town turns into a city, the Amberson wealth diminishes, Isabel dies and lovers cannot meet. In the background of these relationships, the film's narration addresses questions related to change, progress, time, and people's resistance, indifference, and fear towards these things.

These questions are verbalized through the voice-over that hovers the film, albeit intermittently; they are particularly set forth in the film's intriguing opening sequence, which deserves a close reading as it bears signs of a kind of filmmaking much ahead of its time. The reflexive style in this opening is highly unconventional for classical Hollywood and is a precursor of some narrational strategies adopted by Welles later, such as the essayistic mode in F for Fake (1973) or Filming Othello. This sequence, led by the voice-over narration, is roughly nine minutes long, consisting of a montage of images that expresses the passing of time as well as introduces the narrative's main thematic concerns. The film begins on a black screen with Welles's distinctive voice: "The magnificence of the Ambersons began in 1873. Their splendor lasted throughout all the years that saw their midland town spread and darken into a city." A lengthy fade-out reveals the image of a mansion as he continues:

In that town in those days, all the women who wore silk or velvet knew all the other women who wore silk or velvet and everybody knew everybody else's family horse and carriage. The only public conveyance was the streetcar. A lady could whistle to it from an upstairs window, and the car would halt at once, and wait for her, while she shut the window, put on her hat and coat, went downstairs, found an umbrella, told the 'girl' what to have for dinner and came forth from the house. Too slow for us nowadays, because the faster we're carried, the less time we have to spare.

Such detailed explanation voiced over a static low-angle long shot of the mansion from across the street is highly unusual in terms of content and form. It bears no accurate visual information as to where and when the story is taking place, a quality generally expected from an establishing shot. The image does not connote to any dramatic elements but is simply a distant observation of an ordinary occurrence. This shot lasts over 40 seconds, letting us search for clues in the image of what the narrator has got to say. Group of women wave at one another, a couple of horse carriages pass by, and then a streetcar arrives at the gate. Movement is minimal against the building as background. We wait in real time for the woman to come down and hop in. There is scarcity of drama in the image; it is the narration that settles us in time and space, signifying the most prominent themes at once: passing of time, progress in everyday life, division of wealth, small town talk… Moreover, the narrator situates himself as a person talking from today, addresses our presence with the use of the pronoun “we”, and expresses his own viewpoint on the matters. This is a first-person storyteller that reflects on the images, positioned between the story and the viewers.

Thus, the essayistic qualities of the voice-over are set; it explains, communicates, and ponders. The following images of the opening sequence are narrated in a similar way. Loosely attached shots, most of which are similar to the first, possessing a photograph-like quality and without much temporal, spatial or causal cues, are edited together. It is the voice-over that indicates why and how to look at these images while introducing the story background in a brief manner. The main characters are first introduced visually, without a hint from the narrator, because his words read more like an audio commentary about the changing trends in men’s fashion in the late 19th Century. Short shots follow one another: a long shot of Isabel Amberson Minafer and Wilbur Minafer (Don Dillaway) together in a row boat; a close-up of Major Amberson (Richard Bennett) from behind his head, his hat knocked down by a snow ball as he turns around and smiles. Next is a series of shots (varying from close-up to long) of Eugene Morgan, the male protagonist, getting dressed in front of a mirror in different time periods as fashion items change. The narrator’s nostalgic tone in the previous shot adopts a humorous one with the change of music, supported by Cotten’s somewhat slapstick performance and the detailed wording about the rapid transformation of hats, boots, coats and trousers. Even though the film’s story has got nothing to do with changing fashion, shots of dressing up are used as a thematic instrument that explicitly show changing of times and the impacts of modernity on life style, and they serve as a narrational instrument to show the passing of time, similar to elliptical editing.

The last shot of the fashion section shows Eugene fully dressed, getting out the door, with a gift box under his arm. Before we see where he is headed to, the voice-over punctuates that “in those days, they had time for everything,”, the music changes and we see another image of the same house in the opening from the same camera position, first covered in snow in winter time, then on a summer night with lights hanging outside, then to the night of the serenade, with dissolves in between. Again, the passing of time is underlined with images as the narrator nostalgically comments upon the fact that they had time for “even that prettiest of all the vanished customs, the serenade.” The camera is still in its fixed position. Against the darkened house at night, a group of men appear, carrying instruments. In front of them is Eugene; he stumbles and falls onto his viola and breaks it. As he sits and looks up, there is a cut to the reverse shot of a woman looking out the window. This is a close-up of Isabel with a frustrated expression on her face. The time in which this serenade attempt takes place remains unknown to us (in this sequence and throughout the film), it is the first interaction of the two protagonists, and they are still anonymous. Retrospectively, we understand that this is one of the many times Eugene tries to catch Isabel’s attention, but it has no unique significance in the story. In other words, the narration in the first few moments in the film settles us especially in the narrative time, and creates familiarity with the narrative space and characters without specifying details.

This detailed breakdown is necessary to show how the multiplicity of sounds and images in this montage sequence works as tools of storytelling. The discontinuous editing is stitched by the continuity of narration, in sharp contrast with classical Hollywood conventions. A review of 19th Century fashion, individual shots with no narrative information, photograph-like images of a house that is not even the Amberson mansion could all be regarded as cinematic excess at a time when style is supposed to serve the story in a quiet and supporting manner. Instead of a prologue, the first part of this opening serves as a kind of epigraph, filtered through the perspective of its writer who emphasizes the crucial thoughts and concepts rather than the drama. Characters without names and a building without location become symbolic of a late 19th and early 20th century American small town alluding to matters about distribution of wealth, and its effect on work, leisure, everyday life and individuals.

That symbolic house, as revealed in Isabel's reverse shot described above, is the house across the street from Amberson mansion. This is ensured in the following shot as the camera switches to the opposite side of the street. Eugene is walking towards the mansion in the same dress and with the same gift in hand, saluting the camera with his hat as it pans towards the left to frame him entering the garden. That this is a gesture to the camera is negated in the next shot when we see a group of people in medium long shot presumably looking at his direction. From here onwards, the opening sequence takes on another layer of sound, those of the characters. The gossipy townspeople talk about the mansion's worth and its fanciful details, filling in the missing pieces for each other, and for us. They are like a chorus from a Greek tragedy, seemingly aware of the narrator and familiar with the characters. They exceed the diegesis at times and escort the narrator in his telling. The townspeople start introducing the characters in groups of three to six outside the mansion, inside a barbershop and a tailor's, as their dialogue is crosscut with Eugene's efforts to pursue Isabel. There is an admiration of Isabel's beauty and fate and a mockery of Eugene's idiosyncrasies including the serenade as opposed to Wilbur's steady business and wealth. On screen, we see Eugene traveling in town on his own-invention, seemingly an automobile prototype (which is something still undisclosed to viewers), suggestive of the streetcar in the beginning. The mansion door closes on Eugene's face a couple of times followed by his unsuccessful attempt to give Isabel a flower bouquet next to her husband-to-be. The people talk to each other, to off-screen, to the viewers by directly addressing the camera, and to the narrator. Calling them "prophetes" Welles narrates that they "proved to be mistaken in a single detail merely. Wilbur and Isabel did not have children; they had only one," as one of the people interrupts: "Only one?" speaking about George's spoiled personality that cannot be controlled by anyone. This is the final part of the opening sequence in which we see George as a little boy and the many ways in which he teases and bothers the rest of the town with a sense of entitlement. "Major Amberson's only grandchild [is] a princely terror," according to the narrator, and grown people wished to live to see the day to see his "comeuppance," whose meaning is repeated within the diegetic world by the chorus in response. Shot on a similar horse carriage as when he was a little boy, we see George around the town one last time with the information from the narrator of news that he has returned home for summer after his sophomore year in college. Thus, the present narrative time and space are set, along with the main characters, and the main conflict around progress, symbolized by different vehicles.

This complex use of address – a non-diegetic narrator talking to the viewers and talking to the diegetic chorus, who in return look into the camera to reveal information to us, talk to each other on and off screen, and remark on narrator's words as if conversing with him – takes its most intensive shape in this opening sequence. Later, individuals from the chorus continue as anonymous extras in the film forming the chatter in the town, which becomes George's nightmare about his mom's, and indirectly his own, reputation. In one sense, the distinction between what is diegetic and not, is ambiguous; the seemingly non-diegetic introductory "conversation" in the opening between the narrator and the townspeople become the actual gossip about Isabel and Eugene. This ambiguity persists as the narrator's identity is disclosed in first-person as Orson Welles himself at the end of the film, during the unconventional credits sequence, symbolized by the image of a microphone rather than a face. This image, it seems, emphasizes the role of sound and sound directing. Even though the voice-over narration does not surround the whole film, and re-appears towards the end as a commentary, presumably, it had a more comprehensive function in the original intended version. This narration focuses on the background story, "the decay of the Ambersons" and its causes and effects through the bleak images of changing times. As Welles talks about the town one last time before George moves out of the Amberson mansion, he explains that "the town was growing, changing, heaving up in the middle incredibly, it was spreading incredibly". This narration is over a slow superimposition of city images, composed of lines and diagonals of factory buildings and newly built streets and electric poles, reminiscent of the formalist style of the Soviet avant-gardes. Such mixtures of audio and sound, as in the opening, upset the fictional universe and tend toward a documentary style.

The Magnificent Ambersons is a love story between Eugene and Isabel as much as a display and criticism of the effects of the development of modern life in the early 20th century on individuals and relationships. It is about machines and how they changed the perception of time and wealth and leisure. It is about community, the rigid positions it assumes for each person, and the fragile concepts of social recognition and reputation. It is about how others perceive a person and affect them to a certain extent. These themes are introduced and reminded by the film's narration, defined by an expressive voice-over and observational images.

The Magnificent Ambersons is an extraordinary experiment in audiovisual storytelling, strictly in contrast with Hollywood conventions, and it is a unique example of how studio pressure could own and contain artistic talent. Even though the film does not hold an engaging rhythm throughout – especially towards the end where its focus (thematically and stylistically) disintegrates – it has some fantastic scenes, each of which may be studied as individual units for analysing mise en scène, cinematography, editing and sound. The ball sequence is a play of deep focus, long take, sound and off-screen space, which points at the excellent artistry of mise en scène design and choreography of movement. The several conversations inside the house, at the staircase, are foundational in dramatic conflict, and they are shot from different levels of the house using volume and acoustics as much as the words in the dialogue as guides for a spatial orchestration of characters. The power of these scenes come from their visual and aural aesthetics having a strongly link to the narrative.

This is a highly overlooked film, presumably because it is not wholly Wellesian. Nonetheless, what it offers is still significant in filmmaking style and production history, akin to Kane. It is a great case to study the limitations and potentials of auteur theory, apply mise en scène criticism, and examine Hollywood studio structures. Marked by its essayistic, reflexive narration, it is one of the most interesting avant-garde films of classical Hollywood, and deserves more attention in film criticism and film history.

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