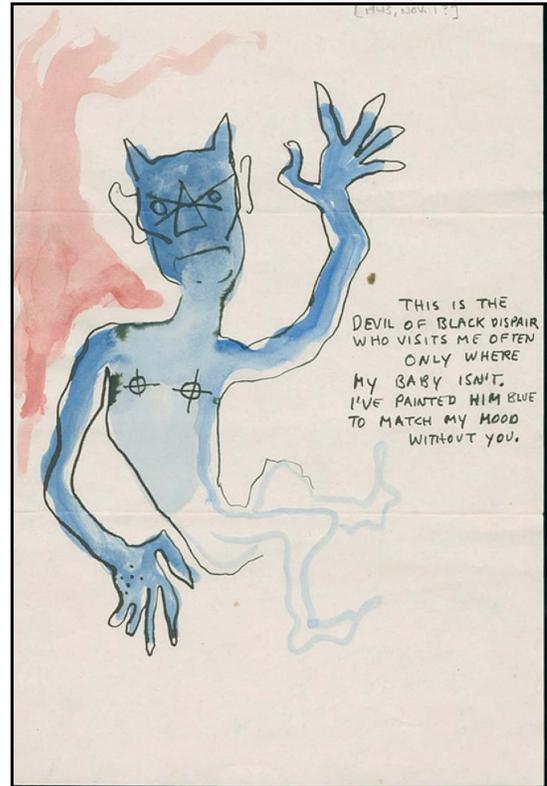


Following the Eyes of Orson Welles

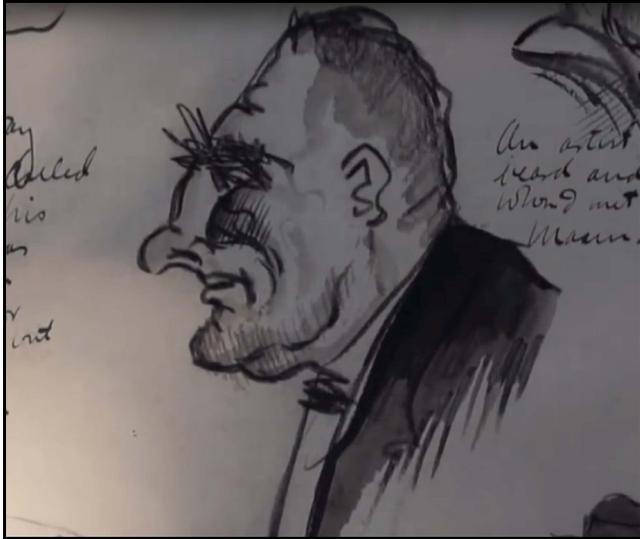
by

Janina Ciezadlo

Like many filmmakers, Orson Welles wanted to be a painter, and went to the Art Institute of Chicago to study. While he famously turned to theater and film, he kept drawing all of his life. Marc Cousins, the British-born, Irish-raised and Scottish-educated filmmaker whose global 15-hour (in one-hour chapters) *Story of Film: An Odyssey* (2011) is essential viewing, met with Welles' daughter, Beatrice, and gained access to a long stored-away box of these untitled drawings (some reproduced herein), caricatures and plans. Cousins' film, *The Eyes of Orson Welles* (UK, 2018, 110 min.) is a rigorous examination of Welles' drawings in the light of what they can tell us about his cinematic style and imagery.



Cousins is a superb practitioner of the essay film, an inheritor of Chris Marker and Agnes Varda. Documentary, even the best, has a chronological narrative structure and the most investigative documentary still tends toward information rather than ideas. Ideas are visual images in film; coherence in Cousins' film comes from his critical visual inquiry. And while docs still tend to rely on the third person point of view revolving around interviews and narrators, Cousins uses the second person: he is speaking to someone he admires completely, he is a student, an acolyte, and the audience overhears the conversation. We are learning about Welles' life, following his travels and even his amours while we explore his drawings. The second person invites us to



participate in Cousins' knowledge of and fervor for Welles' prodigious output in so many areas: art, theater, acting, directing, film, radio among others. Meanwhile the filmmaker is showing the audience how to understand the relationships between film and drawing as he explores the development and life-long flow of Welles' "visual thinking."

The film opens as Cousins' camera travels into Manhattan and drifts around luminous, shifting, image-saturated Times Square while the voice-over addresses Welles, marking the passage of time and proliferation of images. Cousins addresses Welles, informing him of the new filmmaking technologies: the internet and iPhone movies. He moves on to explain how he gained access to the drawings through Welles' daughter Beatrice and then shifts to Welles' childhood and early art education in Chicago, wondering — and this wondering not just in his sonorous voice but in his constantly moving camera and flow of images — if Welles' famous low angle shots come from looking up at Chicago's buildings. Does Welles' use of lighted ceilings — and here he interpolates Welles' set drawings and shots from *Citizen Kane* and his film

version of Kafka's *The Trial* — originate in the translucent ceilings of the Art Institute? The Art Institute's Thorne Miniature Rooms, tiny models of period styles might also have provided him with inspiration for his set design.



Welles' dramas rest on a substructure of imagery, there is a vivid metaphorical coherence to his most powerful work. His knowledge of art informs his camera work,



and Cousins finds images from the old masters Goya, Mantegna, Tintoretto, Piranesi and Magritte, skillfully isolating their influence in Welles' imagery, set design and compositions. Magritte's wrapped heads from *The Lovers* (1928) appears in two different films, Cousins links this disturbing, recurring image to Welles' many drawings of faceless figures. Making direct reference to both the drawings and the films, Cousins

locates strains of Expressionism, Cubism, Constructivism and Abstraction, the visual languages of the 20th century, to compose his *mise-en-scènes*, to some theatrical, but as everyone knows from Film 101, quintessentially filmic, in his use of deep space and the long take. Each shot in what we might think of as a great film is carefully constructed. Welles understood the dynamic relationships between point of view, composition and choreography in a shot. His use of the technical possibilities of depth of field depended on how he was able to activate fore, middle and backgrounds, he had an architectural sense of space, and a corresponding facility with the languages of light and color.



Orson Welles saw the connections between the visual and the political. Cousins emphasizes Welles' political positions, his mother's civic-mindedness which leads to an interest in ordinary people and his work with The National Theater. He produced an extraordinary production of an all African-American *Macbeth* (1936) in Harlem. Alternating constantly between past and present,

Cousin's camera takes us to the place where Harlem's Lafayette Theater once stood. One thousand came for the opening. In 1955 Welles dedicated his BBC radio program to a tragically prescient examination of police violence: he tells the story of the blinding of an African-American war veteran Isaac Woodard in an act of unpunished savagery. He does not name the cop, but addresses him: "Officer X, I am talking to you."

Political convictions emerging from the temper of the times fuel Welles' vivid cinematic analyses of power. The actor-director inhabits notorious abusers of power — Faust, Lear, Macbeth, Kurtz and Hank Quinlan (*Touch of Evil*). The film's flow of drawings, clips and locations reveals the contradictions in Welles' work, his fascination with kings and common people, through drawings of archetypes of Pawn, King and Jester. Sketches and caricatures of everyday faces, many from an early trip to Ireland, forecast Welles acting and his work with actors.

As an antidote to the dark forces he summoned up with his Expressionist sets, his acting and perilous points of view and in some powerful dark heavily-worked, "jagged and fractured," ink drawings, the collection of Welles' drawings and letters contains numerous love notes, Christmas trees and Falstaff-like Saint Nicks. The director's hand is sure, his caricatures are deft, his archetypes and settings repeating and evolving in hundreds of drawings over the course of his life. Cousins ends the film, collapsing Welles' drawings, paintings and films, still speaking to him: "Your films are sketchbooks [and line drawings]: Macbeth is a charcoal drawing, *The Trial* is a lino-cut."

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Janina Ciezadlo is an artist and writer who lives near Chicago. She has written for *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, *Hyperallergic*, *The Newcity* and *The Chicago Reader* among other publications. Scholarly work has appeared in *The Yearbook of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Fine Arts* and the *Proceedings of the Society for the Interdisciplinary Studies of Social Imagery*. She publishes a Journal from Telluride and the Traverse City Film Festivals each year at: www.merelycirculating.com.