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Article Author: Bret Wood.
Article Title: Recognizing the Stranger.

Part Pub. Date: May; 1994

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Recognizing
THE STRANGER
By Bret Wood

Despite the fact that it was made at the creative peak of Orson Welles' career, his 1946 film THE STRANGER is the least discussed, most underappreciated of his works. Usually written off as a commercial, conventional and non-artistic part of the studio system, THE STRANGER offers a wealth of insight into Welles' career and foreshadows many of the studio-related problems that would characterize his later career. The film becomes especially fascinating when one glimpses the scenes that were removed from the film without Welles' involvement, for these scenes endow THE STRANGER with a tension and texture distinctly absent from conventional studio-produced pictures.

THE STRANGER arrived at a low point in Welles' cinematic career. After the tragic and substantial failure of THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE and RKO's financial withdrawal from IT'S ALL TRUE (which Welles continued to struggle to complete), his motion picture future seemed limited to acting. Unable to sign a direct contractual with a major studio, Welles turned his attention to other areas: politics and radio, often a combination thereof. Exempted from military service due to physical ailments, he contributed to the war effort in other capacities. From November 1942 to February 1943 he directed two weekly radio series: CEILING UNLIMITED, which rallied support for the Allies while providing an entertaining radio tour of aviation history, and HELLO AMERICA, a musical variety show designed to promote Pan-American relations—sort of an audio version of the collapsed IT'S ALL TRUE. In addition, he appeared on numerous other war effort broadcasts and directed several installments of the SOCIO-HISTORICAL CAVALCADE OF AMERICA.

While these programs are vital links in the development of Welles' radio craft—particularly in his unconventional use of narration and dramatization of history and world events—they are clearly without the artistic pretense of the MERCURY THEATRE ON THE AIR and CAMPBELL PLAYS RKO's broadcasts of 1938-1940. For in helping with the war effort, Welles knew it was necessary to temporaril

[Inspector Wilson (Edward G. Robinson)救灾]
[At the end of the movie, Welles learns that his unsuspecting wife Mary (Loretta Young) has been captured by Nazi soldiers.]

abandon the highbrow approach that to a degree characterized his previous series and to communi
cate to the common people—those who tuned in to Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy instead of the MERCURY THEATRE—its more informal and economical way. Similarly, Welles refrained from organizing ostentatious theatrical plays and instead staged a carnival-like music/magic variety show for servicemen.

It is this cut-down approach to his art that typifies Welles' treatment of THE STRANGER, and which many fail to recognize in their assessments of it. It was never intended to be a masterpiece of high art, and to judge it in those terms is to blind oneself to its qualities.

Another factor to consider is that THE STRANGER is primarily a vehicle for the expression of Welles' late-WWII political concerns—namely the survival of fascism. He fervently believed that fascism did not die when Germany lost the war, and that it was symptomatic of the Nazi mentality to give the illusion of defeat to buy time to reorganize for another conquest. Welles most directly expressed this belief when he delivered various speeches on the topic in several major cities. THE STRANGER allowed him to voice his opinions on the survival of fascism in a way that he could not rival in his speaking tour of the U.S., for in the film the words come directly from the mouth of a Nazi war criminal, who knows better than any American the truth behind the defeated Third Reich.

The storyline of THE STRANGER provided the perfect vehicle for this message, which is why Welles was willing to assume the role of actor and director for low pay, for an independent producer (Sam Spiegel) and under pitiful contractual restraints: he was not allowed the right of final cut, and to guarantee that he would not run the film over budget and schedule, he agreed to personally pay for any cost overruns.

When he signed on the project, a draft of the screenplay had already been completed (by Anthony Veiller and John Huston, based on a story by Victor Trivas and Decla Dunning). He went in without the support of the Mercury Theatre producers and performers. The only Mercury regular in the cast was Erskine Sanford, who makes a brief appearance in a party scene. Welles had campaigned to cast Agnes Moorehead in the role of the detective but this was vetoed by Spiegel and executive producer William Goetz.
Welles hoped that studios and producers would take note of his dedication, dependability and talent, and that his performance would help to dispel the negative rumors that had saturated the industry. The film came in under budget and on its 35-day shooting schedule. Welles was rejoined by set designer Perry Ferguson (CITIZEN KANE), but the budget allotted them was tiny in comparison to that of Welles’ 1941 feature film debut. The most impressive set was the clock tower/steeple where the climax occurs, reportedly the tallest set ever constructed for a motion picture. To make up for the shortage in the art department fund, Welles relied heavily on the photographic talents of Russell Metty, whose shadow effects covered some, but not all, of the sets’ shortcomings. Metty later served as the director of photography for Welles’ celebrated TOUCH OF EVIL (1958).

While Welles fully understood the step down in prestige he was taking by directing THE STRANGER (produced under the title DATE WITH DESTINY), he did not expect that he would be put through the trauma of another AMBROSIANS or IT’S ALL TRUE, especially since the film was not to be a lavish piece of high-concept filmmaking that general audiences might not accept. Although he did inject as many of his own ideas as he could into the screenplay, Welles was mindful of the expectations of the audience and his producers and sought to give both groups what they wanted. Nevertheless, the film was thoroughly re-edited—by Ernest Nims, under the command of Spiegel and Goetz, without Welles’ input—before its release, heavily damaging (but not destroying) much of Welles’ message and the manner in which he expressed it.

The full-length Welles cut ran 115m, twenty minutes longer than the version given theatrical release. In general, what was removed were the elements that digressed from the detective movie formula: scenes of horror, scenes of thematic development and, if the shooting script is any indication, scenes of subtle cinematic brilliance... scenes that are forever lost to the anxious eyes of those who seek to learn more about the director’s art, as well as to those who ignorantly still consider Welles a failure after CITIZEN KANE. Welles described the cut scenes as “everything which is interesting” in the film.

As released, THE STRANGER opens with the titles superimposed over the clock that is to become an important symbol in the film. But this was not the way it was supposed to begin. Welles prepared a cryptic precredit sequence, made up of scenes from the climax of the film, that established the mood of the piece and offered pieces of a puzzle that would fall into place in the course of the narrative.

The film was supposed to open with the sound of a clock tolling loudly, against the image of a demon silhouetted against the white screen. The camera pulls back to reveal that the demon is nothing more than the shadow of a tree cast upon the ceiling of Mary Longstreet’s bedroom. She rises from the bed, as if awaiting the bell’s signal. The filtered sound of a man’s voice becomes audible.

MAN’S VOICE (RANKIN):
Let’s go through the fields—it’s beautiful that way. It’s my favorite walk. The cemetery, over the little brook... and then the woods.

Mary wanders out of the house, carrying a small package across the snow-covered cemetery, through the rows of tombstones. The voice returns.

MAN’S VOICE (RANKIN):
James Longstreet 1866-1917. Died for his country. Noah Longstreet 1842-1863. Died for his country. William Longstreet 1713-1794. Died for his country...

Mary reaches the church in the center of town and climbs the ladder to the belfry. As she reaches the top an angry mob forms outside below, wielding sticks, rakes, etc. The camera joins them. A scream is heard from the bell tower and the people look up in time to see two people struggling high on the ledge above—a man and a woman. Finally both of them fall to the earth and the crowd of townspeople swarm around. The voices of the people are heard: “I didn’t see it. You say they both fell? ‘Yes, both of them together.’ ‘—Know who they were?’ ‘I don’t know anything about it. Think we’ll ever hear what really happened?’ ‘I wonder... who was he?’ ‘Who was he?’ ‘Yeah... who?’

At this point the idea of the film was to be splashed onto the screen, superimposed over the statues of the clock above. A mechanical demon slowly disappears into its portal and is pursued by a sword-wielding mechanical angel. The scene of Inspector Wilson (Edward G. Robinson) in the War Crimes office was to follow—filmed in a single, unbroken take. A Nazi war criminal is being released from a Czechoslovakian prison with the hopes that he will lead Wilson to his superior, Franz Kindler. The release cut then roughly follows the Welles version, as Meinkne goes through immigration, into a nameless Latin American country and is followed by a female agent, Senora Marvales, under Wilson’s command. It is here that Spiegel and Goetz made the most drastic revision to Welles work, removing about two reels of narrative—all written by Welles—scenes that depict Meinkne’s nightmarish flight to freedom and his comrade in hiding. These scenes are presented here for the first time in detail:

EXT FARBRIGHT KENNELS—NIGHT—CLOSE SHOT:
An enormous German police dog, fangs bared, leaps forward, growling. A man’s forearm meets the dog’s charges and the fangs close on the arm as CAMERA PULLS BACK to a trainer, within a wire cage, wrestling with the dog. In his right hand he carries a heavy whip which he cracks, driving the dog back. His arms are heavily padded and he wears a wire mask to protect his face.

In b.g., behind wire, other dogs leap high, barking wildly.
CAMERA CRANES UP to a stone ramp in front of a building adjoining the cages. Meinkne, on ramp, looks down on the scene below.

Meinkne’s attention is taken from the scene below by the sound of a door opening. He turns toward the sound. In b.g., there is a circular staircase, leading to rooms above. The room at the top of the building, at the head of the stairs, is open, and a man—Farbright—stands silhouetted against its brightness.

As Meinkne moves to the foot of the stairs, looking up, a door near him on the ramp level opens and the dog trainer, in complete equipment, stands staring at him silently. The grotesque appearance of the trainer adds to Meinkne’s nervousness.

MEINKNE:
(looking up towards Farbright)
I hope you remember me, sir. I remember you.

Farbright does not answer. Meinkne begins to climb the circular stairway eagerly, speaking as he goes. CAMERA MOVING WITH HIM. There is the sound of his feet on the steps and the barking of dogs from the kennels.

FARBRIGHT:
(from above)
How do you account for your presence here?

MEINKNE:
(climbing)
I am seeking information as to the whereabouts of Franz Kindler.

Meinkne has now reached a stairway landing and pauses for a few moments before continuing.

FARBRIGHT:
(from above) Not why you are here... but how?
MEINKE: (confused) I obtained a passport at Cracow using the name of Stefan Polowski. I then went to Salonika where I took ship.

FARBRIGHT: Why were you not hanged?
MEINKE: Fumbling futilely at his necktie.

FARBRIGHT: (very frightened) Once you are convinced, you will tell me where to find Franz Kindler? It is a matter of the utmost importance.

MEINKE: Has reached the top landing. His face, turned toward Farbright, is terrified. Farbright jerks his head slightly, significantly toward the lighted room behind him and stands aside, indicating that Meinike is to enter. Meinike, very hesitant, slowly crosses the landing and enters the room. We see Farbright start to close door.

MEINKE: They only want vengeance.

FARBRIGHT: What about information?

MEINKE: I told them nothing. My cell door was left open. I walked out.

Russell Merity frames a closeup of Welles in preliminary test makeup.

There is a silence. Meinike has only a few more steps to climb.

This breeze, blowing through the room, keeps the lamp moving almost imperceptibly throughout the scene.

As Faber passes by window and around room, we can see, in b.g. the dog trainer, standing silently watching the scene before him.

Over SCENE there is the sound of dogs barking faintly from below.

MEINKE'S VOICE: (in same flat monotone) On the fifth day of April.

Dr. Faber now comes around behind Farbright's desk and we see Farbright, his elbows on the desk, leaning towards Meinike as he continues to question him. Camera pulls back to show Meinike, one sleeve rolled above his elbow, sitting in a chair facing Farbright and Dr. Faber. This is the first time we have seen Meinike during this scene.

FARBRIGHT: (continuing) And found guilty—What questions were put to you?

MEINKE: (not understanding) Yes.

FARBRIGHT: (impatiently) What questions?
MEINKE: If I knew the whereabouts of those with whom I had previously been associated. I did not answer...

At this moment, a particularly loud yelping is heard from below. Farbright nods significantly to the dog trainer, who exits silently.

DR. FABER: Was the drug ever administered, as—on this occasion?

MEINKE: They did not use drugs.

FARBRIGHT: (suddenly harsh) Why were you not hanged, Konrad Meinike! The reason! Tell it!

Meinike shakes his head. His voice has a hollow ring to it. He calls out his answer, as though at some distance from his questioner.

MEINKE: There was no human reason. I think God delivered me.

Dr. Faber giggles at this, drops his pince nez, replaces them.

FARBRIGHT: Really? (trying a new tack) Why do you want to see Franz Kindler? What is so important about it?

MEINKE: I have a message for him.
FARBRIGHT:
From whom?

MEINIKE:
From the All Highest.

The two men instinctively stiffen. Farbright's heels actually click.

FARBRIGHT:
From—why did you not tell us this before?

MEINIKE:
Because the message is only for him. For Franz Kindler.

The two men exchange a swift glance. Farbright crosses to his desk and scribbles a few words on a slip of paper.

FARBRIGHT:
You may want to rest. When you are better... (handing him the note)
...take this to whom it is addressed.

He makes the necessary arrangements.

Over SCENE we hear the sudden loud, agonized yelping of a dog being beaten viciously.

SENIORA MARVALES:
(inaudible)

INT WILSON'S HOTEL ROOM—DAWN—S.A.: He is sitting on the side of the bed, still wearing his shirt and trousers. He has been up all night, waiting. His book and pipe are beside him. He is holding the phone and from the receiver we hear the rest of Senora Marvares' conversation.

SENIORA MARVALES' VOICE:
(calling through receiver)—the kennels at 5:38.
On foot, I am observing. He will not be lost.

Wilson replaces the receiver on its cradle without a word. The bed light is on. He sighs wearily, turns off the light and sits壁纸, silhouetted faintly against the dawn sky.

EXT A DESERTED STREET—DAWN: Meinike, his eyes glazed, moves down it. CAMERA trucking ahead of him. His jerky shuffle, more loose jointed than ever, speeds him forward. His hand clutches the paper given him by Farbright. His lips move ceaselessly in a soundless babble of near hysteria.

EXT MORGUE—DAWN: An old woman leading a goat is coming down the street in front of the morgue. A couple of pails are clacking noisily about the goat’s neck as the old woman cries, “Leche... leche...” Meinike, about to enter the morgue, stops aside to let her pass. He then goes to the doorway and knocks loudly. There is no answer.

CLOSE SHOT—MARVALES IN WINDOW

MORGUE:
(inaudible)

INT MORGUE—DAWN: A loud knocking is heard.

GUINAZU: (the morgue attendant, gone around the door. He is wearing a dirty woolen robe over his night shirt. He has been awakened by the knocking. CAMERA TRUCKS TO follow him. Guinazu opens the door cautiously, sees who it is, throws door wide and Meinike enters."

CAMERA TRUCKS AHEAD OF THEM as they come through ante room into morgue. FULL SHOT OF ROOM.

A long line runs the length of the room, on either side of which is a series of marble slabs, where lie lifesized figures, decently shrouded.

There are no windows in this place and the light is obscure, and very gray, even semi-dark. We can hear the old woman crying distantly. "Leche... leche..." The room, seen in the murkiness of early dawn, has an unreal quality.

Guinazu switches on the lights, looks more closely at Meinike, takes his glasses from the pocket of his robe and puts them on. Meinike, without a word, removes his pass from an inside coat pocket and hands it to Guinazu, who studies it.

GUINAZU:
Inferior paper... print too heavy. A poor job... but no matter. (closing the passport, he leads the way down one of the aisles) You’re lucky. Very often days go by, weeks; sometimes, while we wait for a suitable alternate. (he stops before one slab) This fellow must have known you were coming... And now, Stefan Polowski, it is time for you to die.

Meinike recoils. Guinazu laughs at his own macabre wit.

GUINAZU:
Don’t be afraid. You are not to die. Only the name on the passport, (tossing the passport on the slab) you are to die. So dies Stefan Polowski. (removing identification card from metal slot on the slab itself) Long live Philippe Campo. Born in this city. Forty-four years old. Unmarried.

As Guinazu finishes speaking, we heard the door to the morgue open and footsteps begin to cross the floor towards Guinazu and Meinike, who turns towards the sound.

The bruises, one the dog trainer from the Farbright Kennels, enter, carrying a body on a stretcher. It is covered with a rough cloth.

GUINAZU:
Good morning.

The men murmur good morning. We can see hair, long hair, hanging down from beneath the cover. As the men set the stretcher and its burden upon an empty table, there is a small thud as some object drops to the floor. One of the men from the kennels stoops and picks up an earing.

CLOSE SHOT—EARRING held in a man’s dirty hand. The earring is an exceptionally heavy, very wide hoop of gold.

BACK TO SCENE: The man places the earring in his pocket. Guinazu uncovers the body and stands looking down at it. We cannot see what he sees.

GUINAZU:
(looking down at what he sees)

Poor woman... Dreadful accident... I wonder... How do you think it happened... (studying the matter)

Dogs, maybe... a number of dogs... (he clucks regretfully)

DISSOLVE TO: INT WILSON’S HOTEL ROOM—DAWN: Wilson, seated on the bed, is speaking into the phone.

WISON:
(inaudible) I’m terribly sorry, Senor Marvaes... There’s nothing else I can say.

He listens for a moment then, very slowly, hangs up. He picks up his pipe, holds it in his hands. CAMERA MOVES IN FOR VERY close shot of pipe held in Wilson’s hands. His fingers tighten the stem of the pipe— we can see the strain on his fingers as he grips the pipe stem in imminent rage. The stem snaps suddenly under the pressure.

DISSOLVE TO: INT MORGUE—DAWN: Camera tilts to show open drawer in small aperture. Guinazu sits at an open drawer of the filing cabinet. From it he produces a passport which he hands to Meinike.
GUINAZU:
There you are, Senor Campo. Everything in order but your picture—(handing him a card)

MEINIKE:
(laughing at card) Picture?

GUINAZU:
(almost clicks his heels) Our superior officer in this district. He is also an excellent photographer.

The scene in which Meinke visits the passport photographer appears in the release cut much the same way it does in the shooting script, with one exception, which explains how Franz Kindler chose his name for the new world. The photographer prints the name FRANZ KINDELER on a piece of paper, crosses out the F, Z and DLER to leave RANKIN. From this scene the film (and screenplay) cuts to the town square of Harper; but where the film shows the arrival of Wilson and Meinke, the screenplay features a long sequence that shows how Mary and Rankin first meet. She notices him looking up at the clock and explains that it no longer runs. Rankin comments, "You know, my first impression of your town was the incongruity of a Gothic clock in a Connecticut church tower." They introduce themselves and he leads her on a walk through the graveyard, where he speaks the lines heard at the beginning of the film.

As they walk back, Mary explains that she will not walk over a nearby bridge, due to her fear of heights. Nevertheless, Rankin coaxes her across and they walk along happily. The script then cuts away to Meinke on board a ship for America, with Wilson keeping an eye on him. "There is Cuban rumba music coming from the ship."

Back in Harper, Mary announces to her family that she is engaged to Rankin. After this scene comes that in which Wilson and Meinke arrive in Harper and visit Potter's store. One important difference between the script and film that becomes evident here is that the boys in the script are considerably younger—about twelve years of age. The reason for the change had to do with the fact that it was not proper to have children mixed up in a detective/murder plot, as Welles had planned. In the film, the boys are of late high school age. Welles patterned the Harper School for Boys after the Todd School where he got his own education.

Welles' cut and the release cut are generally the same here, as Wilson follows Meinke to the school gym and is knocked unconscious. Meinke goes to Mary's house, then meets Rankin in the woods. Fortunately, the producers did not attempt to cut the scene in which the two former comrades are reunited, for Welles shot the four-minute scene in a single take. As they greet each other, Meinke brings out his Bible (his message from the "All Highest" referring to God—not Hitler, as Farbstein assumed) and tries to convert Rankin, who summarily tells the man to shut his mouth. As Rankin later buries Meinke's body, he mumbles under his breath, ironically, "Died for his country..." a scrap of dialogue that was unnecessary when the previous reference to Mary's ancestors was cut out.

Welles' cut was largely followed throughout the scenes of Mary's wedding and the dinner table conversation at which Rankin drops some clues to his identity; as well as the scene in which he kicks the dog Red (which was digging in Meinke's grave), and that in which Wilson speaks frankly to Noah about his professor and future brother-in-law (only the scene is set not in a rowboat, as it is in the film, but in the town square).

There followed a scene in which Wilson visits Mary and Rankin in the clock tower, a sequence that was vital in defining Rankin's fascist beliefs. Mary recounts a theory of her husband's, which describes "the ideal social system in terms of a clock."

The force that runs the clock, the spring, or the weight, or whatever it is, is the head of the State. The pendulum is his government which transforms his inspirations into law... The train of gears are the working masses... formed into economic units which engage each other without friction... The face are individuals, and just as there are of flawless metal, well ground and polished, so must the individual be of good blood, trained and fit physically.

Rankin, the perfect heartless fascist, is like a clock, mechanical and unfeeling. Welles emphasizes this when Mary, looking down to Wilson and Noah below, comments that the two have been spending a lot of time together. Her speech is interrupted by the sharp sound of a spring breaking. She turns to see Rankin holding the broken spring. "Small beads of sweat stand out on his forehead." Welles also paralleled Rankin's emotionless self-control with clocks by having him meticulously time his alibi for his planned murder of Mary, and in another scene winding a grandfather clock in an attempt to regain control over his crumbling predicament. When Rankin is finally defeated, the hands of the clock that he has been obsessed with spin wildly out of control.

Again the Spiegel/Goetz cut follows Welles' script, through the scenes in which Potter operates Meinke's suitcase, Rankin lies to Mary about Meinke's identity, and Red is found dead. Only one brief scene was missing, in which Rankin notices Noah absent from class (he is lecturing on a German military leader who was prepared to poison himself upon capture). Incidentally, a military advisor was used on the film, suggesting that the dog be put under anesthetics during its death scenes and complimenting the writers for not depicting the poisoning of the animal.

When Adam and Wilson show Mary the war atrocities film, the footage was supposed to include shots of Meinke, hardly recognizable in uniform. Welles apparently removed the shot since it diluted the impact of the actual footage. When she returns home, Rankin drops one of the sleeping pills he got at Potter's store into a glass of milk and serves it to her. Mary, under the pill's influence, "brings her hands together and dry washes them in the immemorial gesture of blood guilt. Now her subconscious is in control and thus she acknowledges her complicity in the crimes of Walther Kuhn."

Later, when she sends Noah to Rankin at the clock tower in her stead, she realizes that he may be killed and faints, whereupon an "impressionistic montage" begins. Set against the realistically pancaked dialogue of the characters in the room who surround her body, the sequence was a clear precursor to the Crazy House montage of THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI.

In Mary's eyes, the room tilts crazily... Noah catapults towards the CAMERA, his face filling the screen... Superimposed over this is the strong, black silhouette of a high ladder. This falls with Noah and stops with him just ahead of his face. He grasps a rung of the ladder. It breaks and Noah falls out of scene. CAMERA tilts to follow his hands... They clutch first at one rung, then at another... rung after rung shatters under his weight—finally a rung holds—The last. Beneath it the two shafts of the ladder stretch down into space like a pair of cosmic stilts. Red, the dog, is at the base of this lunatic machine (seen very distantly because Mary's Delicious eye is viewing this scene from a great height). He howls furiously and claws at the foot of the shaft... His baying echoes and merges strangely with the music. Noah, clinging to the last rung, looks as if he were treed. But
now—CAMERA closes in on him and shows us suddenly that it’s not Noah after all! It is Rankin...
We enter Mary’s dream completely. Rankin looks into our
eyes.

RANKIN:
You need have no fear.
(his still clinging perilously to the last rung of
the ladder) You won’t fall, you won’t fall—fall—fall.

The camera moves in, “until only one of his eyes
fills the screen, monstrously...”

RANKIN’S VOICE:
Failing to speak...you become part of the crime...
With these hands. The same hands that have held you
close to me...the hands stand for progress, which would
not occur by fits and starts but according to the laws of
harmonic motion.

Rankin’s eye grows so only the pupil remains,
“and changes queerly into the face of a clock.”

RANKIN’S VOICE:
My first impression of Harper was the incongruity of a
Gothic clock in a Connecticut church tower.

The film was then to repeat the enigmatic opening
sequence, of the shadow of the demon on
the ceiling, cast by the tree outside Mary’s window.
She wanders out of the house to the clock tower.

Confrontation in the tower is largely the same
as in the released film, only it closes with a final
exchange of dialogue.

LAWRENCE:
Seems the war’s over in Connecticut.
POTTER:
Do tell—you’re all crazy! Welles’ll get him a good ladder.
He’s had enough trouble, and they say accidents
always come in threes.

WILSON:
In threes? What about World Wars?
Mr. Potter, I devoutly hope and pray you’re wrong!!
Good night, Mary...pleasant dreams.

This was later changed to the “V-Day in Harper”
dialogue that stands in existing prints.

Like virtually every film released in Hollywood
during the Production Code Administration’s rule,
THE STRANGER faced some interference with
Joseph Breen, director of the agency. Not all the
correspondence between censor and producers
existed, but Breen did require that they “take great
care” with a scene in which Rankin and Mary
converse during the reading of a Psalm. “We
assume that this conversation will be whispered,
in such a way as not to make the finished scene
offensive.” The scene was, instead, deleted entirely.

Even though so much of Welles’ input into THE
STRANGER was deleted, it should not be wholly
discounted, for even in the castrated version
in circulation today, there are numerous
manifestations of the director’s well-honed talent. Because
Welles was downplaying the boldy theatrical,
his touches are less evident, reserved for a series of
effects that are combined to form a cohesive theme
throughout the picture.

Most notably, Welles manipulated vertical space
in his direction, both in the positioning of actors
as well as the camera, to heighten suspense and
buttress the film’s labyrinthine ideas of entrapped
and domination. Incidentally, Welles would later
use the same kind of spatial manipulation more
subtly in THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI to
communicate a maze-like entrapped and in TOUCH OF
EVIL to illustrate a crossing of physical and psycholog-
ical borders.

The most obvious example of this aspect of THE
STRANGER is in the town’s geographic center
piece, the clock tower. Rankin’s infiltration and
potential domination are expressed by his position
of high authority, controlling the workings of the
town’s “heart,” taking a god-like pleasure in looking
down at the ant-sized beings of Harper below.1

At other times, Rankin and Meineke are put in the
submissive role. When Rankin scrambles to lay
a false trail for the paper chase, the camera rises and
looks straight down on the panicked fascist. Like-
wise, when Meineke makes his way through Latin
American customs, the agents watch him from a
ramp high above, monitoring his every move.

As the positions of power change hands and the
characters vie for superiority over each other, the
suspense builds. Occupying the higher ground
means having the upper hand, if even for a brief
moment. When Meineke knocks Wilson unconscious
with a gymnast’s ring (tossed from a balcony),
he tells Rankin, “I felled him from on high” (a
line of dialogue removed from the film). When (in
the deleted Latin American sequence), Meineke is
trying to track down Rankin and thus regain some
of his lost powers, he clamps a great staircase at
the Fairbright Kennels. Mary’s confessed fear of heights
and her expressionistic dream sequence are two
other components of Welles’ thematic design. When
Mary confronts Rankin about his past (in the bed-
room), she stands above him, briefly gaining con-
trol over their relationship, but he quickly soothes
her suspicions, standing, rising above her and again
resuming command.

Of course the film ends with America (Wilson)
back in control, perched in the rafters of the
significant clock tower.

Another major theme running through THE
STRANGER is that of religious corruption. Partially
linked to the hierarchy of height, this facet of the
film was used to underscore Rankin’s contempt for
American values. When Rankin lays the false trail
for the paper chase runners, Welles had intended
that he rip pages from Meinike’s Bible and spread
them in a new path, but such a violation of a sacred
object, no matter what the justification, was too
daring for a mainstream 1946 feature. The religious
values of the Longstreets are implanted even in their
names: Mary, Adam and Noah. The most literal
manifestations of religion are in the angels that chase
the demons around the clockface, symbolically re-
presentations of Wilson’s quest. As garishly melodra-
matic as the scene is, it is thematically significant
that Rankin be pierced by the sword of the angel
before his fall from power.

Oddly, Welles depicted Meinike as exactly the
opposite, a man whose religious lies at the heart of
his fanaticism.

There is little hope that a full-length version of
THE STRANGER will ever be rediscovered. Indepen-
dently produced and released through RKO, original
materials have since disappeared. When Turner
Entertainment recently released the film on laserdisc
(through Image Entertainment), it seems they were
unable to locate a sharp print, for the entire picture
lacks the sharpness and proper contrast of the other
Image/RKO releases. Perhaps Turner decided to
save the expense of a new transfer and instead just
used the master prepared for the film’s colorization.

Nevertheless, THE STRANGER should not be
cast aside or purposefully ignored in Welles career,
but recognized for what it is...not a masterpiece,
but not a failure, either...a well-intentioned, intelli-
gently written and directed picture that acts as a
vehicle for the director’s outspoken political views.
Examined in that context, THE STRANGER
finally regains the value and importance it has for almost
half a century been denied.

1 It is worth noting that Orson Welles touches on the
same themes in the dialogue he wrote for Harry
Lime in THE THIRD MAN (1948). While riding
clockwise on a colossal ferris wheel in Vienna,
Harry Lime (Welles) speaks of how easy it would
be to kill the speck-like people on the fairgrounds
far below, and mentions how all of the world’s
greatest inventions came from war-mongering
countries. And for what intention is peaceful Swit-
zerland best known? “The cuckoo clock.”—Ed.