



OUT OF FOCUS

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OBLIQUE ANGLES, SOFT FOCUS, AND UNSETTLING EFFECTS IN ORSON WELLES'S *THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI*

The how is always more important than the what. This key sentence from Paul Schrader's "Notes on Film Noir" applies to Orson Welles, the great outsider of American cinema, more than virtually any other filmmaker. Though other directors like Howard Hawks or Robert Siodmak may have been more mainstream, or even have made far more "noirs," no one could rival Welles's stylistic radicalism. And if we are to agree with Schrader's view that film noir should be seen primarily in terms of style, then we can safely describe the brilliant creator of *Citizen Kane* (1941) as its rightful king.

While Welles's legendary debut feature does not actually fall into the category of film noir, it did act as a kind of catalyst for the genre. The film's expressive chiaroscuro aesthetic, its complex narrative structure, and the sensational use of deep focus had a huge influence on the noir style. Welles, however, not only paved the way for film noir; he was also the one to bring it to an end. Almost 20 years after *Kane*, the erstwhile prodigy – who had gained notoriety as a bit of a freak in the intervening years in Hollywood – drew a line under the classic noir period with the bizarre cop film *Touch of Evil* (1958). Between these two seminal dates

Welles directed *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), a fascinating and impenetrable thriller that is regarded in a formal sense as the epitome of film noir, and hence the reason for our in-depth analysis of this exemplary film in this essay.

There can be no doubt that film noir's enduring fascination is attributable largely to its specific visual qualities. Its flamboyant formal style makes it a dazzling anomaly in the history of Hollywood. At a time when the dream factory was ruled by the dogma of the invisible narrative – designed to allow viewers to immerse themselves effortlessly in a fictional world, as a way of reconciling them with reality and everyday life – the shadowy world of film noir stood in stark contrast. For, instead of disappearing behind the story, form tended to dominate over content in film noir. And, as we will see from *The Lady from Shanghai*, the visual strategies do not make it any easier for the audience to orient themselves either emotionally or in terms of content. Instead, their aim is to unsettle and destabilize the viewer. Film noir, then, renders the coordinates of conventional Hollywood cinema invalid. In doing so, it gives us a sense of the world's complex and



impenetrable nature, as well as a feeling of existential alienation and uncertainty. This is what makes it so refreshingly modern.

"I love movies. But don't get me wrong: I hate Hollywood!" is a quote from Peter Bogdanovich's book of interviews that might equally apply to Orson Welles. His perception of himself as a filmmaker was influenced to a far greater extent by European traditions than by the stark realities of the American entertainment industry. Hence he began his career as a director by trying to assert his artistic independence in the face of the pressures and stale conventions of the studio system. His refusal to compromise cost him his Hollywood career in the end, with the result that he was unable to complete many screen projects, or at least not in the way he envisaged. Even *The Lady from Shanghai*, originally designed as a movie lasting 150 minutes, is now only available in an 87-minute version. This may be a further factor contributing to the film's mysterious aura. Given all the obvious breaks and inconsistencies, it is hardly surprising that Welles felt personally that his work had been ruined. Yet even as a perceived mess, it is still an ambitious movie – a formal experiment, both beautiful and artificial.

Like so many other films noirs, *The Lady from Shanghai* tells the story of a naïve man who becomes embroiled in a deadly intrigue with a *femme fatale*. In New York, Michael O'Hara (Orson Welles) – an Irish sailor with a thirst for adventure who can hold his liquor – meets the mysterious Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth), wife of the famous criminal defense lawyer

Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane). Although he smells trouble, he agrees to working for the couple as a boatswain on a yacht trip through the Caribbean, and they are joined by Bannister's partner, Grisby (Glenn Anders), and a shady associate, Broome (Ted de Corsia). Seeing how unhappy Elsa is with her cynical and apparently impotent husband, Michael starts an affair with her, which does not go unnoticed by Grisby and Broome. Once they reach their destination, San Francisco, Grisby presents Michael with a plan (ostensibly risk free and a safe bet) that will net the young man \$5,000 if he carries it out – money that will finance his escape with Elsa. But the plan turns out to be a fiendish trap, and it ends up with Michael in court on a murder charge.

The plot of *The Lady from Shanghai* may seem cliché-ridden at first, but on closer inspection it turns out to be part of an ironic game, as the unfathomable scheme itself suggests. In fact, the plot's credibility is called into question – by the narrator himself, and in a major way – right at the start of the film, when Michael and Elsa first meet at night in Central Park. We hear Michael saying in a voice-over, "Once I'd seen her, I was not in my right mind for quite some time." The film then reflects Michael's memory of events, who admits to being only partially sane through the course of the action. The *mise-en-scène* immediately conveys this unstable narrative perspective by changing from the indirect speech of the voice-over to the direct dialogue between Michael and Elsa, during which even the camera does not take a clear viewpoint. When the sailor



offers the blonde woman a cigarette, it is shot from Michael's perspective: Elsa looks directly at us as she accepts it. But the very next instant, the camera readopts an objective point of view and we see Michael's smiling face in a reaction shot. This first meeting of the two main characters then finishes with Michael's narrative voice confiding in us: "And from that moment on I did not use my head very much, except to be thinking of her." A sentence that only makes his powers of recall seem even less reliable.

Even if the voice-over is absent through long sections of the film, we are nonetheless warned from the outset that in *The Lady from Shanghai* we are dealing with a narrative the veracity of which must be taken with a grain of salt, and that the story line is presented by a narrator who possibly exaggerates, misremembers, or even sets himself up as a hero. While this devalues the content (the what) to a certain extent, the form (the how) becomes increasingly important at the same time. In this way, the actual theme of the movie – the hero's existential aberration – is revealed not least through Welles's elaborate visual strategies. It is obvious that the

root of this abnormal behavior is an erotic infatuation. The title itself gives an indication of this, as do the various pinup shots of Rita Hayworth, most of which were apparently added later against the director's wishes; the idea was to make the film more appealing and focus more clearly on the theme of the erotic fixation of the male gaze.

These images leave us in no doubt that *The Lady from Shanghai* is all about the central theme of film noir, the battle of the sexes. And with its *femme fatale*, Welles's film draws on a key character in these pessimistic crime movies. Reference has often been made to the conclusions that can be drawn about the faltering marriage between Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles from the direction of the screen couple Elsa/Michael. The suggestion that Welles turned Hayworth – the vivacious, gorgeous star of *Gilda* with her famous mane of red hair – into an icy, cropped blonde to damage her image and career remains, however, a matter of speculation. In the context of this text, this potential personal angle is less significant than the blatant way this female star is filmed in order to shatter the expectations and viewing habits of the audience.



The Subjectivized Narrative as Nightmare

For the purposes of our formal analysis, however, we return to the start of the film, to the initial meeting mentioned above between Michael and Elsa in Central Park at night. While Michael's voice-over introduces us to the narrative, we see him strolling through the park, which is only sparsely lit by a couple of old-fashioned lanterns; at that point he comes across a coach in which Elsa is being driven around. Unprompted, Michael refers to the beautiful stranger as "princess," as if confirming the fairy-tale quality of the set. Here, Welles seems to be directing the action in a way that makes it difficult to pinpoint it in time: The story could be set just as well in Welles's present-day 1940s as in the late 19th century. This palpable detemporization ends abruptly when the coach emerges unexpectedly into the traffic of New York's metropolis. Yet in a sense the beginning, which seems unreal, influences both the perception and the representation of what will follow. Even though the filmic action is clearly set in the immediate postwar period from that point on, it seems to be divorced from the set rules of an objectified narrative. We experience the plot as something more than simply Michael's memory, which at least pretends to be bound to external reality: It is like a nightmare we live through with the hero, as well as from his perspective.

Interestingly enough, unlike many other film noir directors, Orson Welles dispenses as far as possible with the subjective camera. Michael is

present visually in every sequence, if not in every shot, within the subjective narrative. Welles possibly realized that it not only unsettles the viewer when the camera adopts the protagonist's perspective, but above all distances him as well.

Welles clearly shows Michael's loss of control, which is closely associated with this nightmare, as gradually escalating. Initially, the Irish sailor appears as a figure of authority. In the opening scene in the park he beats up a gang of young men who are molesting Elsa. When her husband, Arthur Bannister, tries to hire him to work on his yacht, the visual composition emphasizes Michael's physical superiority over the puny attorney on crutches. This relationship is reversed, however, in direct proportion to the development of the plot. No sooner has he boarded the yacht than the hero suffers a visible loss of authority. This is conveyed by a very unusual shot that follows directly on, significantly enough, from a voyeuristic sequence that shows Elsa scantily clothed like a mermaid, sunbathing on a rock by the sea (observed through a telescope by Grisby). Smoking a cigarette, the hero enters from screen left, looking across the sea from the deck of the yacht. His shape can be clearly made out in the close-up, but the profile is blurred, as if his face is too close to the camera and thus outside the focal range. The motif of identity loss is directly visualized in this shot.

The soft focus is striking, of course, because cinematographers in the studio era usually took great pains to capture clear images. A film's narrative was thought to be more easily understood if the symbolism was unam-



biguous and transparent – the viewer can then concentrate completely on the story and nothing else, without having to decipher blurred, opaque images. This aspect alone reveals *The Lady from Shanghai* as an unusually experimental film, which jettisons the conventions of feature films more systematically than almost any other film noir, in order to unsettle the viewer and wrest control of the plot from him.

It goes without saying that the convoluted plot adds to the disorienting process: The viewer is constantly misled about the motives of the protagonists, and kept in the dark about the real villain's identity. No one sees immediately through the complex scheme in which the hero/narrator is becoming increasingly entangled. Even at the end it is not absolutely clear why the whole game of betrayal, murder, phony love, and avaricious money-grabbing began in the first place, sucking the sailor into it like a vortex. At the end, as in the very beginning, he settles for the succinct observation that he exits the story a fool – an innocent, if naïve, one. Yet Orson Welles disorients the viewer even more so at the formal and aesthetic level. Rather than clarifying, as was standard in the conventional narrative cinema of his day, his filmic images obscure, by using big close-ups, low angles, and harsh contrasts for facial shots. They unsettle us because these extreme shots gradually erode the authority of the subject who actually constitutes the gaze – Michael. And in the process, the world also loses its objective status. In this way, *The Lady from Shanghai* confirms one specific qualitative difference between film noir and Hollywood's classic cinema of illu-

sion: Welles's movie expands the familiar objectified narrative through expressive moments that mirror the mental state of the male protagonist. In a sense, as a result of this subjectification process his inner self becomes the viewer's "event horizon."

Attraction and Repulsion

The use of short focal lengths favored by Welles since *Citizen Kane* is especially worth mentioning in this context. In contrast to longer focal lengths, the extreme wide-angle lens has not only the advantage of the broader field of vision the term itself conveys; it also creates a greater sense of depth (the depth of the image virtually disappears when a telephoto lens is used). Welles and his cinematographer, Gregg Toland, made sensational use of this effect in *Citizen Kane* by establishing deep focus as the key compositional tool. Another feature of short focal lengths, especially the fish-eye lens, however, is spatial distortion, which is most obvious at close range and at the edge of the frame: Lines are bent, the general appearance of subjects is distorted, and facial features become grotesque. Welles makes deliberate and frequent use of this feature in *The Lady from Shanghai* in order to produce a feeling of unease.

Faces, especially that of Arthur Bannister's partner, Grisby, are often shown in big close-up, mostly as point-of-view shots, which seem to reflect the perspective of the hero, Michael (though they never quite correspond



entirely, as is the case when a subjective camera is used). However, this spatial proximity by no means creates a sense of positive emotional closeness to the character thus depicted, such as sympathy or even identification, in a way that could easily be achieved using a traveling shot (when the camera slowly approaches the actor's face until it fills the entire image). Instead of carefully approaching with a moving camera, Welles uses the shock tactic of an abrupt cut. Michael is taken by surprise and put under pressure – along with the viewer.

Grisby's face leers unpleasantly close to us, not just because we are taken by surprise, but also because it is grotesquely distorted in wide angle. So the physiognomy – not a particularly appealing one, with a thin-lipped, snarling mouth and droopy eyes – is emphasized by the visual effect as well as by the actor reinforcing it through facial expression. This produces more than just distortion, however. For, although the face fills the actual visual space, we can still detect the depth of the hidden area. So the face cuts off our escape route: While we are being sucked into the image by the deep pull of the wide-angle lens, it is, in a manner of speaking, confronting us as well.

This effect is also produced because the face is shown in sharp focus. At such close range we can make out every pore, bead of sweat, and whisker of stubble, and the low angle pushes Grisby's nostrils uncomfortably to the fore. The face becomes disturbingly three-dimensional, affecting us in an almost physical sense (one could argue that the face replaces the scenic

space, becoming the scenic space itself). It almost seems to be bursting out of the screen toward us. And just as Grisby's perplexing, delusional remarks and disturbing laugh pierce our ears acoustically, his breath and sweat are like a visual confrontation. There can be no doubt that Orson Welles is deliberately playing here with the experience of physical repulsion.

To put it bluntly, the face – distorted by the wide angle and shot in deep focus – penetrates the viewer's space. There is even a thematic counterpart to this *mise-en-scène* in one scene in the movie. During the court case the district attorney, Galloway, calls Elsa Bannister, who is observing in the public gallery, to take the stand. He pressurizes her with indiscreet questions about her relationship with Michael until her apparent vulnerability makes her reveal her affair with him (she swallows, unable to withstand his presumptuous glances). Galloway ends his interrogation with a flourish – “No further questions.” The verbal violation ends in a big close-up of Galloway, which mirrors the sadistic pleasure in his face with almost terrifying clarity.

The whole trial comes across as chaotic. The defense and prosecution interrupt each other constantly. Along with the judge, they seem more intent on outdoing each other with amusing speeches than finding out the truth. So the cross-examination is more about entertaining the public and jury than establishing the evidence. The public indulges in heckling, the jury whispers in secret, and, in a kind of running gag, one of them frequently interrupts the trial with a sneezing fit. Through all this, the camera constantly changes position, showing the courtroom in an extreme high-angle



shot, and pointing obliquely up at the faces from the end of the public rows. A nosy old woman jumps up from her chair; another absentmindedly sticks a piece of gum under her seat. During Elsa Bannister's questioning, members of the public lick their lips in eager anticipation of the intimate details. Michael is the only one who is always filmed from the same angle: a cut-in of him, creating, interestingly enough, the same shadowy image in nearly every case. He follows the proceedings with a serious look on his face. The repetition of this image is jarring, an effect heightened by the fact that Michael is lit entirely separately. This static camera perspective suggests that he is locked up in the courtroom as well, where his innocence is actually supposed to be proved.

Another disturbing effect is the constant switch between extreme high- and low-angle shots. They begin in one of the first conversations between Grisby and Michael, when the lawyer asks Michael questions about his past. When Michael fires the revolver in the harbor, we experience this through an extreme low-angle shot, as if he is shooting at us. On one occasion, Welles plays with a miniaturizing effect: We see Michael walking through the cabinet of curiosities in the deserted amusement park. Huge shadows are projected onto the walls, as if foreshadowed by an overwhelming destiny. Added to which, he walks forward in his dream without getting anywhere.

The scene in which Michael signs his murder confession in Grisby's office is also composed of a continuous interplay of high- and low-angle

shots. So, when the conversation begins, the lawyer is sitting in the lower right frame of the picture, with three exotic masks above him diagonally to the left, further emphasizing the demonic side of his character. We then see George in a high shot from screen left, as he walks over to the safe and takes out \$5,000 to pay his murderer. Finally, a low-angle shot is also used for the conversation in which Grisby explains the ridiculous legal position to Michael – he will be considered dead if someone admits to murdering him, but the murderer cannot be found guilty if the body is not found. When they have finished talking, Grisby stands right in front of Michael, who is seated with his head thrown back and looking up at him. The camera is placed oppressively close to the two men, so that the viewer's gaze is also directed sharply up to the lawyer and down to Michael. It ends with the lawyer taking a step forward, with half of his face disappearing out of shot. The viewer's final gaze is directed at his mouth, which is contorted in ugly laughter.

However, the most significant means of unsettling the viewer is surely the deconstruction of the spatial context in the film. Welles shows us places without any spatial continuity, where we cannot get our bearings with any certainty, as their appearance appears to change with every shot. One example is the scene in the Chinese theater, when Elsa finds Michael after he has fled from the court. (It should be pointed out, however, that, at the studio's insistence, this scene was later edited radically.) First of all, we see Elsa and Michael sitting together in the stalls, followed by a close-up of



Elsa, evenly lit, and then an extremely shadowy shot of Michael's face. It looks as if Welles has deliberately created a continuity error. For while we start out seeing both characters in exactly the same room, they are then shown as if they are in different rooms with completely different lighting conditions. This can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it basically adds to the strangeness of the imagery, while on the other hand it can be read as the existential expression of a world in which everyone exists only for himself and is left to his own devices, where intersubjectivity seems impossible.

In the same vein, we should also mention the constant alternation between high and low angles, which makes us shrink or grow – in other words, forcing us down on our knees or putting us up on a pedestal. We follow the film from Michael's point of view from the outset. It is his story that is narrated, and he is the person visible from the first to the last shot of the film; yet the more embroiled he becomes in this conspiracy, increasingly becoming a pawn in a game, the more he loses control of the images. Who else but him looks up at his interlocutor from a slightly low angle, when he actually is at least as tall as his opponent? So the image is not an objective representation of the filmic narrative, but the hero's subjective perception: Losing control of the action is inextricably linked with the loss of visual power. The same thing happens in the viewer, who is forced to watch as Michael undergoes this process – experiencing the same loss as the film's character through the narrative perspective.

The hero's growing confusion, which takes place in the course of the subjective narrative, is resolved at the end of the movie after a second de-historicized episode. In the sensational showdown in the amusement park, the film makes a complete break with any objectified representation of time and space. Michael's slide into the hall of mirrors is like a tumble into the abyss. When he ends up as the only person to escape the deadly chaos, he emerges into the open air as if from an air lock. The quiet calm of the deserted park in the morning as he walks through it corresponds to the now obviously distanced gaze of the camera. Like Michael, we too have woken from a nightmare, and the film ends with this awakening as well.

Another visual high point of the film demonstrates the bold way the narrative, which is virtually removed from its moorings in space and time, is used to create an allegorical *mise-en-scène*. Welles chose the Bay Aquarium in San Francisco as the location for this scene, which opens with the long, sinewy arms of an octopus writhing across the image. Michael then enters from screen left, and it cuts to Elsa standing in front of the glass pane of the aquarium. The couple's movements through the set are lit only by the light from the bay. When they talk of their love and eloping together, they stop in front of one of the windows. Suddenly the fish behind the glass are huge. Elsa throws her arms around Michael's neck, and, as they kiss, a class of schoolchildren comes around the corner, only to be herded away by their outraged teacher. The couple walks on, and the fish are back at their normal size. When Michael assures Elsa that she need have no con-



cerns about their future, at that point they are walking past a large sea turtle – a symbol of domesticity and security. They then stop in front of a shark tank, and Michael confesses to Elsa about the murderous plot he has become involved in to secure their future. When he goes on to show her the letter with his confession of guilt that will earn him \$5,000, the fish in the background are suddenly disproportionately large again. Their scales are like gleaming metal, while others are chapped and raw, with widely gaping jaws. At the climax of the scene, leopard sharks dart past the couple. The light flickering in the aquarium water gradually becomes brighter, and the faces of the two lovers become silhouetted against it. As they end up in another embrace, the picture fades to black.

According to the rules of classic Hollywood cinema, Orson Welles made basic errors of the trade at this point. But, of course, he did so quite deliberately. It could be argued that he breaks the law governing identification of what is seen, for everyone recognizes in the scene just described that the fish appear far bigger than they actually are. Needless to say, this increase in size is used primarily to create a symbolic *mise-en-scène*: It is certainly no coincidence that we see predatory fish next to the dangerous Elsa – a moray eel to begin with, and then sharks. Even at this stage we are advised of this woman's true nature, and the final kiss apparently seals Michael as her prey. Added to which, the *mise-en-scène* once again emphasizes the nightmarish quality of the narrative. In order to manipulate the proportions in the scene, Welles worked with back projection. In the

interview with Bogdanovich, he explicitly acknowledges the dreamlike effect of the images produced using this technique: "And yet you know, some of that tricking we had to do gave that part of the picture a dreamlike air which I rather like."

Life as a Labyrinth

There is a striking and obvious difference in visual terms between *The Lady from Shanghai* and Welles's masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*: *Kane's* visual elegance, clarity, and deep focus are formally impressive. According to the film critic André Bazin, deep focus puts the viewer into a relationship with the image that is closer than the one he has with reality. Similarly, a blurred image pushes the viewer away from the screen, forcing him back into his role as passive consumer and leaving him to his own devices. In the case of *The Lady from Shanghai*, the viewer realizes that, along with Michael, his understanding of the story has slipped away from him. His perspective is misaligned. Now he has to find his own way, independently of the hero constructing the story in fact, through the maze of the narrative.

The director manages to play with the notion of the labyrinth several times, impressively realizing this motif, for instance when Elsa is running through a confusing building during the harbor festival in Acapulco. Similarly, the landing stage where Grisby and Michael meet to set up Grisby's murder suddenly becomes a baffling system of girders and walkways, an impression



heightened by a speeded-up tracking shot that gives further expression to Michael's agitation. The nightmarish quality is also brilliantly achieved when Michael keeps on running without escaping from the place, an effect repeated in the scene in the amusement park.

This metaphor is successfully conveyed again when we look down on San Francisco nestling in the valley, as Elsa drives up a mountain in a cabriolet. For a moment she is on the same level as the viewer. It is as if she has just managed to escape from the labyrinthine city. But the next thing the camera pans left, and the automobile is forced back down the hill into the impenetrable warren of streets. The prison where Elsa visits Michael is also like a maze – an effect again achieved because the space appears to be composed of different lighting zones.

The most confusing labyrinth, however, is the hall of mirrors, which expresses the representational nature of reality and simultaneously dissolves the notion of identity through its visual replication process. This hall of mirrors becomes the very essence of paradox, as we can enter it visually, while being denied physical access. This illusion cannot be broken because the mirror itself is concealed in the act of reflection. Such a rational formulation, however, fails to mention that the viewer is repeatedly shot at in this sequence. Our presence is suggested, as much as our complicity in the matter.

We might start off believing that justice will prevail and that the two villains, Elsa and Arthur Bannister, will kill each other in the hall of mirrors.

The reality turns out to be even more absurd. Justice is indeed restored when Michael abandons Elsa as she is dying – a kind of justice indeed, brought about at the price of betraying his love. In this context, it is worth noting the curiously low camera angle at this point. The fish-eye lens allows Welles to place us right next to Elsa's face, as if she is turning more toward the viewer than Michael. At the same time we are judged along with her, and watch Michael anxiously pacing up and down.

The enigmatic quality of the showdown scene in the hall of mirrors lies in the simultaneity of proximity and distance, which prevents us from positioning ourselves in the world. Welles uses dissolves and duplication to dispel any oversimplistic notion of identity. Furthermore, at some point we notice that it is not just the mirrors that are shattered by the gunshots, but that the camera lens has also been fractured. The labyrinth metaphor serves to describe the inability to maintain distance, for we find ourselves in a labyrinth situation when we cannot assume a meta-level in relation to it. The original meaning of "labyrinth," as a complex system of passages, often underground, has been supplemented in modern times with associations with games and puzzles.

Ultimately, all the images that have an unsettling effect on us play with manipulating our experience of space. A cinematic image not only allows us to see objects in that space; the space is simultaneously a device that allows us to move around. The suggestion is that we could move effortlessly in any direction, or even that we cannot leave a specific loca-



tion. Whatever the nature of a particular image, we have assimilated the basic information that affects us as physical beings even before the content has been decoded. There is a sense of non-space in this film. We constantly see images that appear incompatible, measured against the previously prevailing lighting conditions. The space lacks a coherent identity. The camera leaves us high and dry. It refuses to help us orientate ourselves, and instead throws us into a floundering state. The height of the camera changes continuously, showing the characters in high and then low shots alternately, and finally on the same level. The viewer is made to feel dizzy in the cabinet of curiosities, because the images convey a sense of the oblique levels that have to be navigated with care, and disorientation is produced by the lurching camera movements.

Welles's film has traditional roots, reminding us of the Baroque "theater of the world" that tells the tale of the labyrinth of the world and of feelings; and, as Michael says in his closing monologue, only through death can we overcome it all in the end. Nor is the hall of mirrors any more an invention of film noir than the narrator's admission of his own weakness. It is debatable whether Welles intended to deliberately highlight the allegorical nature of the characters. Accordingly, Elsa represents seduction and female power, as well as lies and intrigue. We need only think of her face – quite noticeably heavily made up throughout the film – which we initially interpret as part of her flawlessness. It is only when we see Elsa's face in the Chinese theater alongside the heavily painted actors that we suddenly recognize her masklike quality.

The ending of the movie is particularly revealing in this respect, when the dialogue between Elsa and Michael after the duel in the hall of mirrors reveals that the woman is mad. While she appeared calculating and d6evilous right up to the end, her madness and irresponsibility now become crystal clear. Reality has slipped from her grasp at the end and, with it, her responsibility for her actions. But Elsa still has to undergo one final transformation. When she screams that she does not want to die, she becomes a creature clinging to life just like any other.

Toward the middle of the film Michael tells the Bannisters a parable about sharks that eat each other, and go crazy swimming in their own blood. This could be a reference to two well-known sayings: the proverb about big fish eating little fish, and the notion of man as a wolf to his fellow man. In this context, the first name "Michael" is significant, of course, because it alludes to the Archangel Michael, who fights against evil. And it is no coincidence that the boat they are sailing in is called *Circe*, that Elsa is depicted as a siren, and that "Black Irish" (Michael's nickname) represents a man "on life's odyssey." In spite of this obvious stylization, the film maintains a real sense of pathos, especially at the end, when we hear Michael's monologue on the futility of human endeavor. We are naturally tempted to read an existential attitude into this, though the absurdity of existence and human greed are exposed throughout the film; in the words of Camus, *vivre le plus* (living life to the full) is positively celebrated. Another excerpt from the interview with Peter Bogdanovich makes it clear that Welles had alienation and absurdity in mind when he complained about the complete failure of the music



forced on him by the studio: "This sort of music destroys that quality of strangeness which is exactly what might have saved *Lady from Shanghai* from being just another whodunit."

As we have seen, Michael's moral view of the world is deconstructed in Welles's film, while the viewer is unsettled by an elaborate visual game. As the film unfolds, this uncertainty builds up with every new shot. It not only increases, but becomes more powerful as well. Welles clearly intended to present us with an ingenious conspiracy, and to find confusing images for it. The film calls the viewer's authority into question. Since the days of classical antiquity, art has worked on the principle of intelligibility, and rhetoric has developed a sophisticated normative system for facilitating communication. Decorum and internal and external "aptum" (appropriate style) are all governing concepts that are designed implicitly to ensure understanding. In famous writings on rhetoric, it states that art is at its most successful if it appears like nature and sheds all artificiality: Effects would thus appear at their most powerful when their formal construction does not manifest itself.

These claims, as formulated above, might arguably have defined 20th-century mainstream cinema to an extent as well. Equally, it could be said that American cinema of the studio era tried to make form invisible: movies that were not allowed to exceed a certain length for fear of boring people; editing that was meant to be invisible; well-lit scenes and standard camera angles; the absolute no-no of casting movie stars against type. The common feature of all these points is that they are designed to ensure that

form goes unnoticed. If we were to talk of an ideology at this point, then it is one of narrative made absolute. The formal means must not become an end in themselves, but instead be subordinate to the narrative. Only when the formal tools become invisible can the viewer become immersed in the narrative and enjoy the most intense experience of the action.

Although its length was cut by an hour, *The Lady from Shanghai* contradicts this ideal of the Hollywood studio production at just about every level. The characters and figures come over as completely theatrical, and seldom in the studio era has there been a movie with such innovative visual language. What seems so thrillingly excessive to us now made the film's producers feel uneasy: They also resisted showing Rita Hayworth as a fairly short-haired blonde. Not to mention the fact that Welles was forced to reshoot big close-ups of the star to make the film more successful. As Joseph McBride wrote, "Columbia was so horrified at what Welles had done to her image that it held up the film's release for two years and rushed her into several more conventional roles." It was no use, because *The Lady from Shanghai* not only put the brakes on Welles's Hollywood career for ten years, it demolished it completely. The brilliant creator of *Citizen Kane* became an outsider, an outlaw in the film industry.

Abrupt changes in perspective, the use of unusual focal lengths, and the resulting cinema of unsettling effects, soft focus, and oblique angles, as we have demonstrated in a formal aesthetic reading of *The Lady from Shanghai*, can be seen as symbolic of the loss of control over the action – intrinsic to the film and in its external production – and of the search for the central



theme. Soft-focus shots are in this sense not merely the result of inferior technical conditions during takes; they are stylistic features of a film. They serve another function as well – as images of perception. At moments when the composure of the film’s protagonist begins to waver – as a result of drunkenness, poisoning, or fainting fits for instance – soft-focus shots are often used to visualize the character’s disturbed perceptual state. This effect nearly always comes into its own only when the subjective camera is used; that is, when the gaze of the protagonist coincides with the gaze of the person viewing the film. This means that the disruption of perception within the filmic diegesis – and hence the associated loss of control of the action – is transferred into the movie theater.

