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as the bewildered, frightened engineer tries to elude the fate that he knows to be hanging over him. People he least suspects turn out to be enemies, while friends appear in unexpected places; and always in the dimly-lit cabins and corridors of which Orson Welles is so fond, the shadows hint at hidden terrors.

*Journey Into Fear* should be capable of wearing some of the covering off the edges of theatre seats almost anywhere, even when the people sitting in them are just ordinary entertainment-seekers and not earnest searchers after cinematic truth. For superficially this is just a better-than-average thriller, much less an eccentric curiosity than other Welles productions (perhaps because Welles left the direction of it to Norman Foster). But the cognoscent will not be slow to recognise wherein the distinction lies or that they are again in the presence of one of the screen's few pathfinders.

## THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS

(RKO-Radio)

 THIS is a much more distinctively Wellesian production than *Journey Into Fear*, but in my opinion, it is rather less successful. For one thing, it very largely repeats, on a less grandiloquent and less arresting scale, what Welles has already done in *Citizen Kane*. Again his theme is the disintegration of a dynasty; this time a rich and proud American family at the turn of the century, which breaks up partly because of internal stresses, partly because of outside pressures on the social structure—the transition from the horse-and-buggy era to the age of the automobile.

Just why Orson Welles chose to make a film version of this Booth Tarkington novel I can't quite imagine. By conventional screen standards, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is a most unattractive story, and I think that even such an iconoclast as Welles could without much difficulty have found better material than this queer, morbid piece of melodrama in which to express his unorthodoxy.

But if you are interested not so much in a story as in the way it is told, then don't miss the *Ambersons*. There are two features about it which at first I was inclined to regard as defects, and blame on the theatre that was showing the film. One was the dimness of the lighting; the other was the difficulty of hearing all of the dialogue. But now I am convinced that these were deliberate effects. Note how almost every scene on the screen is fuzzy and faded round the edges. In some extraordinary way, the producer conveys the impression that you are looking at a series of faded photographs (or would they be daguerreotypes?) of the period. It is not merely the composition of the scenes, and the costumes and furnishings, that are *fin de siècle*, but the very texture of the photography itself. Similarly with the dialogue. You may be annoyed because you cannot catch all that is said, but I really believe that you are not meant to.

For to understand what Welles is trying to do, it is necessary to realise that, instead of allowing you to be just a detached observer of what goes on in the Amberson household, he is trying to make you actually experience the life of that gloomy, hideously-furnished

mansion. But you do not enter it knowing exactly what the situation is inside, or who the people are, or what they are talking about: you have to piece that knowledge together for yourself from what you see and from half-overheard snatches of conversation. It is difficult, but it is fascinating, and it becomes easier as more and more you get the hang of the situation, and as the characters of the occupants are revealed. For just as in real life few things have a clear-cut beginning or end, but each event merges into or grows out of another, so in this film we get a series of impressions, almost at random, which gradually begin to make sense. So also we find ourselves listening sometimes to as many as four different conversations at once, and often without being able to see who is speaking. But that is what frequently happens in real life when we are set down in strange company.

I have devoted so much space to the Welles technique that I have said practically nothing about the story, and nothing at all about the acting of Joseph Cotton, Tim Holt, Dolores Costello, Anne Baxter and Agnes Muirhead. They do capably what the producer wants them to do. But after all, it is the revolutionary, impressionistic treatment that is the important feature—the factor that, in both the films I have reviewed here, is helping to make screen history while the box-office is writing both of them off as complete failures.

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