Impossible Autofiction: *The Other Side of the Wind* and Orson Welles

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In this paper, I portray Orson Welles’s posthumously released film, *The Other Side of the Wind* (shot between 1970-76 and released in 2018) as an impossible fiction. The impossibility arises not from ontological aspects of the work but rather, I argue, from how the diegetic frames employed collapse due to the encroachment of the extradiegetic personal stakes that Welles sought to explore in this autofiction.

The reason this failure is important is that it is a demonstration of the limits of reflexivity through film. Specifically, autofiction in cinema becomes impossible when the author cannot legibly or coherently employ reflexive gestures through metaleptic frames. The reasons for this impossibility are as much personal as they are aesthetic: Welles’ trial was too raw to be theatricalized, and thus he crammed together fiction, simulation, aspiration, imitation, and reflexivity into an unholy compound of jagged frames. The impossibility of dramatizing the arc of his significant career led this film into the heart of darkness: an omniscient narrator who is nevertheless tragically powerless.

I take the manner in which the creator of the film employs diegetic and extradiegetic frames to be an illustration of theatricality in modern art. These presentational forms – the virtual proscenium, the backstage/frontstage dichotomy, the film industry, etc. – serve to explore the relative distance between the artist and his work. Theatricality is thus a tool by which fiction may achieve epistemic ends that engender knowledge about the subject as well as about reflexivity in cinema for both the creator and the audience.

In the first section, I explain my construal of impossibility in autofiction. In the remaining sections, characterization, and production in new Hollywood are individuated as metaleptic frames in *The Other Side of the Wind*. In section V, I contrast Welles’s failure to integrate or at least harness the tension between metaleptic frames with other autofictions which successfully employ theatricality.
1. Fiction and its Impossibilities

The faculty of imagination aids in the development of coherent macro-level global explanations. As such, art allows for the creative discovery of multiple aspects and relationships (Gabriel, 2021). In this way, through mimesis and simulation, fiction can serve as a strategy to attain insight (Oatley, 1999). Art articulates humanity in a way that is pleasurable as well as informative, a utile dolci. From Mimesis and Sophistry to Troubadour song and Realism, the sources of fiction hint at this revelatory aspect of imagination (Lavocat, 2016).

Imaginative culture serves epistemic ends insofar as it makes intelligible or coherent sense of problems and confused experiences. Complex concepts like performativity, finitude, and the possibilities of representation have been well-served through exploration in literary and cinematic fiction. One of the tools by which fiction achieves epistemic ends is by eliciting emotional catharsis. For the audience, this is exploited through creating identification and empathy with characters and other elements of the film (Smith, 1994). The purpose of this empathy is not simply purging of emotions, but rather the affective sense of coming-to-know, which is an immanent removal of obstacles to knowledge. Salience is adjusted through characterization, plot, and other formal structures that sculpt the audience's relation to the film work. Molding salience onto aspects of the film through cinematic techniques exploits intersubjectivity (Honneth, 2014), which can be used to modulate the audience's sense of desire, excitement, and engagement.

In The Other Side of the Wind, Welles wanted to make intelligible his own arc of artistic production. The stakes were high here because one of the purposes of fiction for Welles is controlling or assessing the fictional narrativization of his life and career. The genre of autofiction is apt for these purposes as it is loaded with cathected symbols and frames for playing between diegetic and extradiegetic content. The manner in which autofiction plays between the levels of film as narrative and film as process is through metalepsis. My analysis of this film relies on the affective dynamics involved in the making of the film which led to its impossibility, both as (a) a fiction and as (b) a completed work. Moreover, I am concerned with how moral imagination is explored through reflexivity in autofiction. This is the locus for the references I make to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.

The catharsis of the film's confrontational ugliness was meant to clear the obstacles of understanding (Nussbaum, 1986). Yet, when form and content are not aligned, fiction can be rendered impossible insofar as it does not achieve its author's epistemic or cathartic goals. Autofiction can fail to clarify its subject because the reflexive gesture is blocked, the mirror is impossible to see into because the artist...
cannot synthesize the diegetic and extradiegetic frames appropriately. In this case, Welles is unable to unite aspects of screenplay, cinematography, editing, and casting, to achieve his artistic vision of assessing his career in the pictures. *The Other Side of Wind* is an impossible fiction because it fails to integrate its metaleptic frames. Welles could not complete the film in his lifetime and was thus unable to use the crafting of the film as a form of catharsis that clarifies. Analogously, the audience does not experience the catharsis of knowledge because the jagged multi-layered film does not cohere as a work of fiction and thus the work revels in the heart of darkness: a confused emotional grappling with meaninglessness.

### 2. Metaleptic Frames

In this section, I support my claim that *The Other Side of the Wind* was an impossible fiction by exploring its formal use of frames. Drawing from literary criticism, my focus is on metalepsis, the deliberate transgression between the world of the telling and the world of the told... intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe... a boundary that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself... Narrative metalepsis constitutes a “deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding [...] : when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action (Pier, 2016). This sliding between levels [creates] a strange loop that disturbs the fabric of the narrative universe (Wagner, 2002). This sliding can be used instructively to explore the artistic process, reception, and fictive worlds, as it is by writers such as Denis Diderot, Italo Calvino, and Vladimir Nabokov. In modern literature and cinema, metalepsis and mise en abyme are often employed to reveal the theatricality or artifice of the work and its mode of presentation.

The frames employed metaleptically in *The Other Side of the Wind* deal with Content, Characterization, Context and Form, Production, and an attempt at a synthesis of the career of the author. Autofiction as a format seeks to unite or transgress diegetic and extradiegetic frames towards achieving insight into the author and his or her condition. As I argue below, the frame of synthesis consistently troubles the broader aesthetic project and is largely responsible for the resentment and ugliness that suffuse the film and make it an impossible fiction.

The formal content of *The Other Side of Wind* is the frame of an art film within a cinema verité documentary. The difference between the art film and documentary frames allows for metaleptic tension that is literally inscribed in the shifting filmic mediums, from super 8 to 16 mm. to 35 mm. By pursuing this structure, Welles takes us on a journey into the origins of cinema, that is to say into the process by
which a film is made. He uses the silent art film to satirize trends in arthouse cinema, specifically the work of Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman. The heavy-handed pornography and amateur camera tricks and tropes of the silent film are meant to indicate the barren nature of director John Hannaford’s (John Huston) creativity. Meanwhile, the cinema verité (documentary-style) sections allow Welles to display the difficulties involved in producing a film. These include on-set interpersonal conflicts, the presence of sycophants and psychopaths, the quicksilver of finance, and the travails of publicity (Karp, 2015).

Through the documentary-style footage, Welles preempts certain readings of the film, in particular he seeks to rebuff psychoanalytic critiques that may be used by the new critics about his own motives. This gives us a clue into his motivation for making the film as a synthesis of his career in relation to the current state of cinema and film criticism. It also suggests that the autofiction frame is not a matter of mise en abyme, since neither of the films are mirrors, they are in fact in a more complex relationship in which the arthouse film registers as lowbrow and satiric while the documentary is tragic as it follows the failure and creative impotence of the director. Had Welles the requisite funding, energy, and support, The Other Side of Wind would have leveled an incisive criticism at the prevalent forms of cinematic fiction by ridiculing the abstract tendencies of arthouse directors at the same time as he lampooned the decadence of the movie industry. Moreover, the manner of juxtaposing frames would have revealed that he was in control of his medium by reiterating his ability to subvert the expectations of the audience and the film executives. The possible fiction Welles was aiming at would employ metaleptic tension to reveal his aesthetic and philosophical position concerning the state of cinema and his own standing in this light.

This fiction became impossible because of the context of Welles’ troubled circumstances in his return to Hollywood after an exile of over two decades. The formal metaleptic frame of film within a film collapses for several reasons: the art film sections are generally plangent and in such bad taste that it is difficult to appreciate their irony, and the cinema verité does not offer any respite, in fact it is often more cynical and ugly then the satire of arthouse. Thus, the structure does not allow for relief and balance between frames. This collapse of the formal structure amounts to a failure of metalepsis to serve as a format for insight through fiction.

This slippage between personal and artificial is most dramatically represented by the casting of his muse, mistress, and artistic collaborator Oja Kodar as the silent, erotic woman in the art film. Kodar played an active and public role in the eventual commercial release of the film (Rosenbaum, 2007). Notably, Kodar plays a similar role in the final film that Welles saw to completion, F for fake (1973). In that film,
Welles successfully plays notions of truth and documentary against each other through a profile of an art forger and his public mouthpiece. The frames of documentary and fantasy slide against each other gracefully to reveal Kodar's sexual, cosmopolitan aesthetic allure to Welles. In one sequence, Oja seduces Pablo Picasso, a double for Welles, who is duped and drawn into a confrontation with an art forger. This metaleptic play allows the filmmaker to explore the authenticity of artistic aspiration in the context of the art market. By posing as a magician, Welles seduces the audience into a comparison between the impossibility of cinema fiction and that of magic. The apotheosis of the film, Welles' monologue on the value of art, is set to a haunting disappearing image of the cathedral of Chartres. In this sequence, Welles delivers a devastating soliloquy upon the ephemeral nature of artistic creation which shines a harsh light on the ambitious conceits of human achievement. The true target of The Other Side of Wind may have been the vanity of the production of cinema itself. F for fake represents a successful use of the formal metaleptic structure of fusing two films to make one clarifying whole. This use of mise en abyme allows for external and internal metalepses (Cohn & Dorrit, 2012).

The replacement of Welles the magician as an authoritative narrative presence with the uneven performance of John Huston as Orson Welles blocks the simultaneous use of external and internal metalepses. In the following four sections, I specify frames whose dramatic power are vitiated by the Welles' failure to synthesize the diegetic and extradiegetic world in this impossible fictionalization of his predicament.

3. Casting Doubles

One of the frames that play with diegetic and extradiegetic worlds is casting. This is a significant metaleptic frame in the movie since characters play people in Welles' personal, social, and professional circles. This is a productive space for exploring the status of his career and to test his relationships in the industry. By casting his mistress and artistic partner, his acolytes, as well as his colleagues, competitors, and heroes in the production, Welles created a microcosm of the domestic and professional arrangements that constituted his lived reality. In his return to Hollywood, it was crucial for Welles to maintain the privileged status of genius and enfant terrible (Rosenbaum, 2007). The chaos of his personal life was material to be mined through the metaleptic frame of casting his lover and friends as characters in this autofiction.

Most significantly, casting the great American director of old Hollywood, John Huston as John Hannaford, a concatenation of Huston and Orson Welles, allowed
Welles to align himself with this lion of old Hollywood. Meanwhile, Peter Bogdanovich is cast as Welles's successful protégé, which of course mirrored his actual ascent at the time upon the release of his debut film in 1971. The tension between Bogdanovich and Welles was indeed real as the mentor/mentee relationship was always on the edge of disaster (Karp, 2015). The fact that Welles wrote the lines that he made people in his life say in the film provided him a stage for phantasies of object relations. These public manipulations of the conditions within which he was working may have been cathartic insofar as the dramatization of his own desires became real when they were filmed.

Other characters represent critic Pauline Kael and studio executive Robert Evans. Directors Claude Chabrol and Dennis Hopper play themselves uncannily in the party scene. This doubling creates a metaleptic tension, especially pronounced when we hear Huston talk like Welles, as he does in all interactions with the press, who are depicted as a band of hyenas. Since Welles is in medias res, uncomfortably navigating the production of the film, it is natural that his bile and resentment corrupt the use of doubles to the point that the characterizations are more attentive to providing him emotional catharsis rather than allowing the film to assemble a coherent tableau. The tension is ramped up when Welles implicates himself perversely by loading negative characteristics from binge drinking to imperiousness and pederasty onto his double, Hannaford.

While this characterization parallels some actors’ experience of Welles on set, it also bears upon Welles’ early script treatment of The Heart of Darkness (written in the 1940s), for which he was planning to play both Agent Marlow and Colonel Kurtz (Rosenbaum, 2007). In this unfinished treatment, Kurtz is portrayed as a version of Dr. Faustus spoiled by power. These characterization doublings are confusing since the final cut of the film was completed over thirty years later by other hands so that many of the subtleties may have been effaced. The metaleptic frame of characterization in The Other Side of Wind comes across as too real because Welles has not sublimated the material in a way that allows the film to speak his disenchantment without pushing the audience away. This contributes to the cathartic ugliness of the story and the script, which may serve a function for Welles to purge his angst and frustration but does not do so in a way that allows the audience to join the filmmaker or find space for their own emotional cathexes.

4. Style and Production in New Hollywood

The theatrical frame of the film industry concerns the contextual situation that Welles found himself in. Namely, a master of old Hollywood who must navigate the
mature motion picture studio system (1966-1975). Although the artistic license the new wave of directors enjoyed was precisely the model that Welles fought for during his Icarian ascent in the 1940s, he was burdened by the possibility that he had been left behind.

Welles used this frame to settle scores with the industry that had so rudely spurned him. He lashed out against the betrayals he experienced from studio executives when he was making *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), and *Touch of Evil* (1958). Welles could never return to the place he was before being exiled by the industry to shadowy border cities, like Vienna in *The Third Man* (1949), and locked out without a trial, like Anthony Perkins in *The Trial* (1962).

In *The Other Side of the Wind*, from the Western to camera tricks, the fictional forms and motifs of Old Hollywood are portrayed as exhausted. The tension between eras reveals that the motifs and tropes of old Hollywood, and not only the business model and culture, have been emptied out. As if to say that the hero narrative is no longer enough to sustain a film of such proportions, the character John Hannaford is shown as a husk of man with a very thin sense of motivation. This stands in contrast to the vigor and style of New Hollywood with its depictions of decadence, intellectualism, and savvy personified by Peter Bogdanovich and Dennis Hopper. Welles also uses this frame to look askance at new Hollywood. The pace and the cinematographic techniques he employs do not compare favorably with the work of New Hollywood. Contrast for example the moving car shots of *The Other Side of the Wind* with the moving motorcycle shots of Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969). The catharsis Welles is hoping for through using the film to relate critical insight about the tension between Hollywood eras does not clarify because Welles cannot accept where he stands. Thus, this metaleptic frame does not convey insight into the changeover of styles and the tension simply comes off as ugly and resentful, particularly in the garish party scene set piece. This orgy of nasty industry folks takes place, aptly, at the shooting location of Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970).

The theatrical frame of the on-set production itself reveals the limits of auteurship. Famously, Welles was unable to summon the financial backing required to finish the film and ultimately lost access to it after the 1979 revolution in Iran. This is the practical reason that Welles was never able to finish the film. The impotence of trying to command the devotion of his creative team with less and less funds and prospects of distribution and success left Welles at the end of his rope. The financial backing was not available without the help of the new production houses. Thus, the circumstances of shooting and editing were hardly ideal, and it likely became self-evident to Welles that it was easier to fly by the seat of his pants as a young man (Karp, 2015). The frame of Welles’s self-interrogation ultimately disrupts his ability to understand his diminished circumstances and marshal influence to secure the
financial backing necessary to complete the film. This resentment comes out in the party scene, which must ultimately designate the heart of darkness of the film. In this over-long scene, what is put on display is the depravity of the Hollywood industry, and especially of his fellow filmmakers who drunkenly leer at the camera. It is Kurtz's hut in the Congo surrounded by severed heads, in this case the dummies, drunks, and sycophants who linger around movie sets and parties in Hollywood.

5. Theatricality: Films about Film

In their explorations of 19th-century French painters such as Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet, Michael Fried and Robert Pippin clarified a central trope of Modernism named theatricality. This refers to the portrayal of distance and the employment of knowingness in everything from subject matter to perspective, relation to art history, and painterly technique (Fried, 1996). Theatricality allowed for a shared intelligibility between the artist and the viewer (Pippin, 2013). While in painting, theatricality is explored through perspective, treatment, and subject matter, in cinema theatricality can be accomplished through various methods that put the process and the medium itself in question. The genre into which The Other Side of the Wind fits, autofiction, was firmly established. There are many examples of successful utilization of the tension between frames employed in this approach. In the early days, there was Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera (1929) and the great silent works of Charlie Chaplin. In the 1970s, the genre was transformed when experimental approaches and intertextualities thickened the soup of reflexivity.

In autofiction, the theatrical tension between metaleptic frames can be harnessed towards cathartic epistemic insight because the artist is able to artfully juxtapose the conditions of making with the content in such a way that the viewing of the film is augmented by the tension between diegetic and extradiegetic frames. We can further distinguish between the disorienting experience of pure reflexivity, or mise en abyme, and metalepsis which is playing with reflexivity as one of many frames which can be manipulated relative to each other towards achieving narrative coherence qua modernist theatricality.

In this genre, John Cassavetes’ oeuvre, especially his early works, Shadows (1959) and Faces (1968), sought, above all, a form of verisimilitude, a crude realism. For example, Opening night (1977) demonstrates the impossibility of capturing the density of drama relative to the life it represents and, occasionally, supersedes. The impossible fiction of characterization/casting is apparent in the work of Gena Rowlands, wife, muse, and collaborator of Cassavetes. In Opening night, we see the
director in the position of writing an impossible fiction of a play, of directing his wife to be a wife, of acting opposite his wife as her husband. Ben Guzzara, as the double, like Huston, then plays Cassavetes, the director. The theatricality is tripled in this film with the layers of knowledge and confusion rubbing against each other till the viewer slowly learns who is who and the larger context of their behaviors. Cassavetes slowly but consistently zooms out over the course of the two hours, till, finally, we see ourselves in our seats, watching. The work of Persian director Abbas Kiarostami employs similar shifts of perspective to great effect, for example in Close-up (1990). Jaafar Panahi pursues this strategy as well in response to being censored by the cultural apparatus; for example, in This is not a film (2011), Taxi (2015), and most recently in No bears (2022). This perspective of well-crafted layers of confusion and clarity is one that The Other Side of the Wind never quite reaches.

Michael Hanneke’s Code Inconnu (2000) likewise plunges the viewer into a state of unknowingness: is this the movie or the documentary, is it real or unreal? Better yet, is it the real part of the unreal scenario? Cinema can function at these multifarious levels of interpretation because it can form a self-enclosed fairytale world. Like a paranoid fiction, a ‘wrong man’ story (ex. Saboteur, The Wrong Man, Torn Curtain, etc.), it constantly searches for itself. Welles was aware of this function of cinema, and we find him for example winking at the audience when he uses the theme of Gilda (1946) behind Rita Hayworth in the Lady from Shanghai (1947). More recently, Living in Oblivion (1995) on the set of an independent movie and Olivier Assayas’ Irma Vep (1996) that casts Jean-Pierre Léaud as the director of an impossible movie about Louis Feuillade’s Les Vampyres (1915), continue to expertly mine the insider territory of the film within a film.

By the 1970s, not only had the era of the hero as exemplified in the 1950s Western passed, but even the heroic (now bewildered) figure seems at a loss, like Marcello Mastroianni, Fellini’s double, in 8 ½ (1963) and La Dolce Vita (1960). Welles is like Fellini in 8 ½, searching for the film he is trying to make and narrating the struggle to find meaning in his work (Fellini & Grazzini, 1983). The great edifice that Welles/Huston/Hannaford seeks to build is doomed, not only because Hollywood had changed as a business and a culture, but the medium of cinema had itself changed by the time that Welles was making this film.

The Other Side of the Wind wallows in the disintegration of the visual medium of film and form in its endless, arduous bouts of editing. Despite their protestations of fealty, the darlings of New Hollywood, exemplified by Peter Bogdanovich, are not after the same thing as Welles and Huston. Bogdanovich’s first film, The Last Picture Show (1971), declares the end of one kind of coming-of-age story and the beginning of another. As in Stanley Donen’s Singin’ in the Rain (1952), we watch one generation of filmmakers make way for another, only in Welles’ case, the shift is anything but
endearing, it is cruel. Welles is trying to make a self-conscious cinéaste picture, but it fails to reach the searing transcendent knowing of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963) which casts Fritz Lang and Jack Palance to great effect. Vincente Minnelli’s diptych *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Two Weeks in Another Town* (1962) with Kirk Douglas and Edward G. Robinson stretch the lens on the process of filmmaking to include the struggles of process. In these pictures, Minnelli is able to depict modernism through the process of filmmaking by showing proscenium upon proscenium, to suggest that the stage is life itself. François Truffaut in *La Nuit Américaine* (1973) successfully intermingles diegetic and extradiegetic process through the emotional drama that takes place on set.

As compared to these films by Dziga Vertov, Vincente Minnelli, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Federico Fellini (*8½*, 1963), Billy Wilder, John Cassavetes, Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, Olivier Assayas, and Michel Hanneke, *The Other Side of the Wind* is not successful at utilizing the tension that arises between metaleptic frames to create a dialectical synthesis which illuminates the condition of cinema as a theatrical reflection of modernity because Welles is overwhelmed by the conditions of producing the film and his own desire to create a synthesis of his career. The task of synthesizing characterization and demonstrating his position as a filmmaker in contrasting eras in Hollywood through balancing adequate proportions of metaleptic frames proved too much for Welles. Thus, we find in the place of a lost masterpiece an impossible autofiction.

*The Other Side of the Wind* is unsuccessful at harnessing the tension that arises between metaleptic frames of characterization, filmic mediums, and theatricality to create a clarifying synthesis. We are led to the heart of darkness of cinema: a catharsis that does not clarify.

When the viewer and the movie equally make believe they are facing a mirror, the spectacle of cinema re-tells us as fiction; ultimately, it replaces us with our fantasies (Gabriel, 2021). But what happens when the fantasies are unsatisfied, raw, and resentful due to the conditions in which the filmmaker finds herself? What happens when the catharsis of fiction only reveals darkness and impotence? This is other side of the wind: the unsaid, the life of the artist that creates upheaval, the unmoved mover, which brings forth the wind through its void. At its best, the wind blows away all artifice, even that which the filmmaker requires to ground his own identity in a work of art that clarifies.

The language of cinema was transformed after the Western and the Noir of Old Hollywood, and its old darlings could only survive as hollowed-out hulks.
situation put Welles in the unenviable position of trying to express resentment and impotence in an industry that had outpaced him. Thus, in Welles' putative final film, we are assailed by too many connections, too many ideas, too many last words, things to say, and shots to make. We experience this as the heart of darkness: Welles is Kurtz, who tried to civilize cinema into a creative form of theater. He had to be brutal to have his way; this alienated the powers that be and led to his exile from Hollywood. Among the ivory statues reaped of his talent and ability are Citizen Kane, Harry Lime, and Hank Quinlan, but at what cost to the man? In The Other Side of the Wind, we watch the metaleptic layers grind against each other till all tenderness is crushed. The film ends with Huston narrating that one can stare at something too hard. Tedious, sublime, painful, and cathartic; Welles laments against the horror of his inability to master his medium in autofiction.
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AUTEUR

Rami Gabriel

Voir ses autres contributions

Columbia College, Chicago, rgabriel@colum.edu