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## Books

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### Double Vision

The minds and works of Orson Welles and Roger Corman.



*Orson Welles: The Stories of His Life*

By Peter Conrad  
Faber & Faber, 368 pages, \$25

*Roger Corman: An Unauthorized Life*

By Beverly Gray  
Thunder's Mouth Press, 304 pages, \$15

If one could resurrect actor-filmmaker Orson Welles for an afternoon and put him on a festival panel with B-movie mogul Roger Corman, one might be amazed at how much they had to talk about. Depending on which phase of his career you care to analyze, Corman seems either a brooding artist-outsider-ringleader, a la Welles, or the sort of literal-minded, penny-pinching boss that Welles used to fantasize about strangling. Yet Corman always identified with guys like Welles, even when (especially when) he considered them to be his artistic betters.

The lives of Welles and Corman are examined in two excellent recent biographies: *Orson Welles: The Stories of His Life*, by Peter Conrad, and *Roger Corman: An Unauthorized Life*, by Beverly Gray. Both were oddball individualists whose early success, brazen confidence and bold ideas about moviemaking put them at odds with their industries. Both were forced—by temperament, style and circumstance—to go their own way. Both specialized in doing things that other people told them couldn't be done, often on budgets that studio-trained colleagues deemed too small to bother with. Both believed in a hands-on approach to moviemaking and resented the fact that less inventive filmmakers were given budgets much greater than theirs, often to realize visions that were similar and less interesting. Neither cared much for decorum, rules or sanctified "official" processes. They just thought stuff up and then tried to do it.

Conrad's biography offers a deliciously detailed account of Welles' movies from the 1950s and 60s—spit-and-baling-wire productions, shot mostly in Europe over months or years, then dubbed long after the fact (usually by Welles himself). Like Corman, Welles was shameless in his desire to stretch a dollar further, or will another one into existence. Conrad's book repeats a marvelous anecdote about Welles travelling from Rome to Nice to beg visiting producer Darryl F. Zanuck for money to finish his movie version of *Othello*, and coming away with \$75,000—plus \$420 to cover the taxi Welles hired to drive him from Italy to France. Corman was just as brazen, recycling plots, images and even whole sequences from one feature to the next. Journalist-turned-filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich's inventive debut feature, 1968's *Targets*, came about when Corman asked him for a feature that would employ Boris Karloff for two contractually obligated days while reusing footage from Corman's unsuccessful 1963 Karloff movie *The Terror*. When Corman's 1980 George Lucas rip-off *Battle Beyond the Stars* bombed at the box office, he repurposed the film's

spaceship footage in additional Corman productions for 20 years.

Gray's *Roger Corman* is not the first attempt to put the independent film mogul's life in perspective, but it does a better job of suggesting Corman's tangled motivations than any other biography I've read or seen. It organizes and distills previous scholarship on Corman and adds fresh interviews with such notable Corman employees as Joe Dante (*Gremlins*) and Allan Arkush (*Rock 'n' Roll High School*), who started out as editors for Corman. Then the author filters the whole tale through her own personal experiences as a Corman employee. (Gray was Corman's personal assistant from 1973-75 and worked as a producer and occasional rewriter from 1986-94.) This half-objective, half-subjective approach yields fascinating insights. Gray resists the hack biographer's urge to oversimplify her subject for drama's sake. Her version of Corman is an irresolvable bundle of contradictions.

Consider Corman's treatment of women. Corman missed no opportunity to exploit the female body in movies and posters and was responsible for some straight-up sexist films. Documentary filmmaker Christian Blackwood, hired by Corman to direct 1972's *Night Call Nurses*, remembers that Corman's introductory meeting "consisted chiefly of the directive to get frontal nudity from the waist up, total nudity from behind, no pubic hair, go to work!"

But in his real-life role as an employer, Corman exploited women in a different, more symbiotic way, benefiting both parties. Starting in the 1950s, Corman became famous (or notorious) for hiring young women as executives. Notable ex-employees include Barbara Boyle (*Phenomenon, Instinct*) and Gale Anne Hurd (*The Terminator, The Abyss*). Yet any anti-sexist impulses Corman exhibited were probably incidental. Corman dated his mostly young and pretty female employees and even ended up marrying one. Hurd tells Gray that Corman preferred female employees because "women worked harder, were paid less money and were more loyal."

As depicted by Gray, Corman is an infuriating character. He was eager to promote new, young talent, and gave a certain amount of artistic freedom in lieu of money. The list of future boldfaced names on his payroll included Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, John Sayles, Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Jack Nicholson, David Carradine, Ron Howard and James Cameron. Yet few of the movies made by soon-to-be-famous artists under Corman were anywhere near as good, or even interesting, as movies they would make after they left Corman. That's because Corman was notorious not just as a penny-pincher, but as a classic example of an interfering, recutting, fire-the-director kind of mogul—a businessman with a patriarchal attitude whose attempts to do things more "sensibly" often backfired. In the late 1950s, Corman went to South Dakota, where he produced and directed *Ski Troop Attack* simultaneously with *Beast from Haunted Cave*, the directorial debut of Monte Hellman.

"He told everyone in town we were UCLA film students doing a student film," Hellman tells Gray. "So we got hotel rooms for, I think, a dollar a night, but we had two people in a room so it was 50 cents a night per person, and we were shooting in ten below zero and he served salami sandwiches on plain white bread for lunch...Those kinds of economies don't pay off in the long run. You get a lot of bad will that's generated."

Welles generated bad will during his lifetime, too, but it has largely been eclipsed by stories of his genius. Peter Conrad pays attention to both sides of Welles—the pioneering, at times fearless filmmaker-writer-actor, and the annoyingly self-serving, dishonest, easily distracted man who could be the artist's worst enemy. Like Gray, Conrad approaches Welles with a mix of personal admiration and icy detachment. But unlike Gray, Conrad is one of the finest critics of film and filmmakers writing today. As was the case with Conrad's

splendid Alfred Hitchcock book *The Hitchcock Murders*, Orson Welles reverses the usual biographical equation: Instead of trying to understand the work by studying the life, Conrad seeks to enrich our understanding of Welles' life by studying his work. Conrad finds clues about Welles' personal and professional motivations in the damndest, most original places, from studio documents to personal letters to obscure non-English-language interviews to dialogue and character traits rewritten by Welles as a condition of making guest appearances in other peoples' movies.

Conrad has an uncanny knack for seizing on filmmaking and acting choices that suggest that Welles was critiquing, or at least trying to understand, his own nature while he was making art or earning a buck. Pointing out Welles' fondness for playing legendary, unknowable men, he notes that Welles' character in the movie *Casino Royale* has a symbol for a name, and all his aliases are variants of the word "number" or "cipher" in different languages. Analyzing Welles' early stage version of *Moby Dick*, Conrad observes that "the monomaniacal captain is played by the Actor Manager who runs the theater. The dual role, of course, was Welles'."

Conrad considers Welles, chapter by chapter, as a liar, as a poet, as a devotee of the Renaissance, as an "American and Pan-American" and as various fictional characters who obsessed Welles over the decades, including Don Quixote, Falstaff, Kurtz and Prospero. Like a linguist analyzing a poem line by line, Conrad excavates and defines themes, symbols, motifs and contradictions in Welles' life that other biographers either ignored or failed to properly explain.

Talking about Welles' numerous temper tantrums, Conrad speculates that "these rampages were a complaint against the stubborn, resistant nature of reality. They allowed Welles to return to that malleable state before anything was fixed, before forms and rules were imposed on us." Similarly, Conrad speculates that Welles' notorious inability to spend a budget and make out a schedule in a sensible way might actually have been a subconscious defense mechanism, designed to make it impossible for anyone to condemn any movie he made too harshly. If people complained about something that was lacking, Welles could explain that he didn't have enough time or money, or that this aspect or that aspect of production was stacked against him, or that the work was, for all intents and purposes, incomplete.

Summarizing an introduction of Welles on the radio series *Campbell Playhouse*, Conrad describes the "overawed announcer" telling viewers to "imagine a combination of Baron Munchausen and Alice in Wonderland: A man who was at once a vaunting fabulist and an ingenious child." In the introduction, Conrad says that as an actor, Welles wavered between heroic and villainous self-images; his description of Welles could serve as a summary of any driven visionary, from Roger Corman to William Randolph Hearst, who tried to will a new reality into existence. "He was never sure whether to think of himself as a hero or as the monster who is due to be slain by the hero," writes Conrad. "Potentially, he was both."

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