At the End of the Street in the Shadow: Orson Welles and the City
By Matthew Asprey Gear/Wallflower Press/2016/292 pp./$90.00 (hb), $30.00 (sb)

"Why yet another Orson Welles monograph?," one might ask. The relevance of any work is in the eye of the beholder. If one beholds Welles’s oeuvre as one of the most multifaceted sets of modern artistic expressions, then surely one will find this newest book an enjoyable and stimulating read. Published earlier this year, Matthew Asprey Gear’s At the End of the Street in the Shadow: Orson Welles and the City has much to offer anyone interested in the numerous projects and the City—a landscape worthy of beholding.

Gear, a writer and professor at Macquarie University in Sydney, elaborates on this thesis with his first full-length nonfiction book. 

The Camera Does the Rest: How Polaroid Changed Photography
By Peter Buse/University of Chicago Press, 2016/308pp./$30.00 (hb)

Peter Buse’s recent book The Camera Does the Rest: How Polaroid Changed Photography is not a history of the Polaroid Corporation, but rather an investigation into the material and materiality of Polaroid film. Buse sets out to explore whether Polaroid photography is distinct from other kinds of photography and, if so, what makes it singular. (Spoiler: it is different, but not for the reasons we think.) In six chapters, he describes the rituals surrounding Polaroid, arguing that ultimately “the act of photographing” is just as important as, if not more important than, the resulting photograph” (20). Anecdote is interwoven with science, gossip, and a close reading of many diverse images. The sheer difficulty in writing about vernacular photography is this variety—there is no overarching snapshot “style”—and a challenge Buse deftly accepts.

All dozen or so of Welles’s commercially released films (from Citizen Kane in 1941 to F for Fake in 1973) are recruited, but one of the strengths (and potential weaknesses) of this book is the supremacy of the films over polemics. A generous number of stills, some diagrams, and a short dialogue excerpt enhance the study, fleshing out the idea that Welles’s modern cinematic vision was urban and cosmopolitan par excellence. The bravura opening border town sequence of 1958’s Touch of Evil, the labyrinthine Munich rubbescapes of 1955’s Mr. Arkadin, and the chiaroscuro urban textures of Zagreb in 1962’s The Trial are all referenced, both literally and visually.

Gear also pores over the massively disparate detritus of Welles’s unfinished film fragments, unrealized treatments, and unproduced screenplays—termed by some as the “shadow oeuvre”—for elements that shed light, if you will, on different cinematic dimensions of urbanization. By including the clips Welles shot as components of the 1938 multimedia theatrical staging of Too Much Johnson all the way to The Big Brass Ring, a 1982 script conceived of as a bookend to Citizen Kane, the book focuses not only on the collaborative (some would say compromised) full-length works, but the full range of Welles’s cinematic and cultural landscape—a landscape worthy of beholding.

MATTHEW MOORE is an assistant professor of humanities at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester, New York, and is finishing a book manuscript entitled “Watching Cosmic Time in Midcentury Suspense Films,” focusing on some films of Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Carol Reed, and John Farrow.

The notable shortcoming is the lack of attention paid to fine-art Polaroids. While Buse convincingly and expertly discusses vernacular culture and its images, he avoids a close reading of art Polaroids and instead writes (weakly) around the subject. Interpreting the relationships between the Polaroid Corporation and various artists (e.g., Ansel Adams and Andy Warhol) is essential to understanding the history of the company, but adds little to conversations about the cultural relevance of the film itself. A thorough treatment of actual images would have given more credence to his argument. In spite of this rather obvious hole, The Camera Does the Rest is an engaging survey, and one of the few that endeavors to probe the status and significance of Polaroid film.

Buse concludes by discussing the fate of Polaroid film today: “Under such circumstances of scarcity and disappearance, it became even harder not to hallucinate unique qualities for these image-objects” (228). Buse may not have wanted to pen an ode to the Polaroid, but The Camera Does the Rest is indeed a tribute.

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