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Will an A.I. restoration of "The Magnificent Ambersons" right a historic wrong or desecrate a classic?

By Michael Schulman
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A.I. re-creations of the “Magnificent Ambersons” stars Joseph Cotten, Agnes Moorehead, Dolores Costello, and Tim Holt. Videos courtesy Fable

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Edward Saatchi first saw “The Magnificent Ambersons,” Orson Welles’s mangled masterpiece from 1942, when he was twelve years old, in the private screening room of his family’s crenellated mansion, in West Sussex. Saatchi’s parents had already shown him and his brother “Citizen Kane.” (The boys found it sad.) But “Ambersons,” Welles’s follow-up film, about a wealthy Midwestern clan brought low, came with a bewitching backstory: R.K.O. had ripped the movie from the director’s hands, slashed forty-three minutes, tacked on a happy ending, and destroyed the excised footage in order to free up vault space, leaving decades’ worth of cinephiles to obsess over what might have been. Part of this outcome was the result of studio treachery, but Welles, owing to some combination of hubris and distraction, had let his film slip from his grasp. Saatchi recalled, “Around the family dinner table, that was always such a big topic: How much was Welles responsible for this? Mum was always quite tough on him.”

Saatchi’s father, Maurice, a baron also known as Lord Saatchi, is one of two Iraqi British brothers who founded the advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi, in 1970, which led their family to become one of the richest in the U.K. Edward’s mother, Josephine Hart, who died in 2011, was an Irish writer best known for her erotic thriller “Damage,” which was

adapted into a film by Louis Malle. Edward, born in 1985, grew up in London and at the sprawling country estate, surrounded by palatial gardens and classical statuary. He described his parents as “movie mad.” The actor and Welles biographer Simon Callow, a Saatchi family friend, recalled, “They had a cinema of their own inside the house, and it was a ritual of theirs every week to watch a film together.”

Aside from old movies, Edward was obsessed with “Star Trek”—especially the Holodeck, a device that conjured simulated 3-D worlds populated by characters who could interact with the members of the Starship Enterprise. That kind of wizardry didn’t exist in the real world, at least not yet. But the young prince of the Saatchi castle had faith that someday it would, and that it could bring the original “Ambersons” back from oblivion. “To me, this is the lost holy grail of cinema,” Saatchi told me recently, like Charles Foster Kane murmuring about Rosebud. “It just seemed intuitively that there would be some way to undo what had happened.”



Top: R.K.O. edited out a third of a late scene of Uncle Jack (Ray Collins) and George (Holt) at a train station. Bottom: To re-create the scene, Fable films the actors John Fantasia and Cody Pressley on a soundstage in L.A., speaking Welles's original dialogue. A.I. will later overlay the faces and voices of Collins and Holt. (Top) Photograph from *Blue Robin Collectables* / Alamy; (Bottom) Photograph by Brian Rose / Courtesy Fable

One morning last October, Saatchi slipped into a soundstage in Los Angeles. “Almost all the stuff that was cut is really about the financial downfall of the family,” he whispered. Before him were two actors wearing trenchcoats and fedoras, sitting on a bench in a large white void. They were rehearsing a late scene from “The Magnificent Ambersons,” set at a train station. A third of the scene had been cut and destroyed by R.K.O. Eight decades later, Saatchi had devised a method to restore what was lost.

In early September, Saatchi’s startup Fable Studio announced that it would re-create the missing forty-three minutes of “Ambersons,” using artificial intelligence. His Amazon-backed generative-A.I. platform, Showrunner, would feed off the data from the extant version of the film to prompt entire new scenes, based on voluminous production materials that survived, including scripts, photographs, and detailed notes. For emotional authenticity, Fable would first shoot live actors, then overlay the footage with the digitized voices and likenesses of the long-dead cast members. “I think that what’s coming is a world where we’re not the only creative species, and that we will enjoy entertainment created by A.I.s,” Saatchi declared last year on the CNBC show “Squawk Box.” “And so we wanted to train our A.I. on the greatest storyteller of the last two hundred years, Orson Welles.”

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Saatchi, who is forty and has a nimbus of curly red hair that has been compared to Sideshow Bob's, announced the project without having obtained the rights to the film from Warner Bros., which owns the bulk of R.K.O.'s back catalogue. This means that, for now, the restoration is merely an "academic" exercise that cannot be commercially distributed. Saatchi also did not approach Welles's estate, which is run by the director's seventy-year-old daughter, Beatrice Welles; a spokesperson for the estate released a statement that said, "This attempt to generate publicity on the back of Welles' creative genius is disappointing, especially as we weren't even given the courtesy of a heads up."

"That was a total mistake," Saatchi admitted to me. The estate, however, has not shunned A.I. altogether. In May, it licensed Welles's voice to the location-based app StoryRabbit so that, if you're, say, visiting the Taj Mahal, you can opt to listen to historical factoids narrated in Welles's mellifluous baritone. In the past few months, Saatchi has been wooing the estate and Warner Bros., in the hope that they will come around during the two years that Fable will need to reconstruct "Ambersons." (It doesn't hurt that Warner Bros. may soon be acquired by Netflix, a tech-forward company that, in 2018, released a posthumously completed version of Welles's film "The Other Side of the Wind.") Apparently, the charm offensive is working; last month, Beatrice told me, "As far as 'Ambersons' is concerned, I'm a purist and wish that originally it had never been tampered with. Nobody and nothing can think like my father. In regards to what Fable Studio is doing, while I

am skeptical, I know they are going into this project with enormous respect toward my father and this beautiful movie, and only for that I am grateful.”

Hollywood, like many other industries, has been alarmed by the potential encroachment of A.I. Alongside such inanities as Tilly Norwood, an A.I.-generated “actress” who is supposedly seeking an agent, there have been major moves, like a recent licensing deal that could allow Disney’s intellectual property (everything from Cinderella to Yoda and Captain America) to be manipulated on the OpenAI video generator Sora 2. Saatchi’s announcement came soon after an A.I.-enhanced version of “The Wizard of Oz” premiered at the Sphere, in Las Vegas, a production that delighted tourists but appalled cinephiles. (The technology supersized the film’s frame, generating an endless yellow brick road and scores of eerie waving Munchkins.)

The “Ambersons” project takes a more complex ethical stance. Instead of desecrating an easily available classic, Saatchi aims to resurrect a lost one. Rather than trampling a human artist’s vision, the project positions itself on the side of the auteur, whose work had been sabotaged by a greedy studio machine. Saatchi sees himself as “righting a historic wrong.”

That wasn’t how the news landed. According to Ray Kelly, who oversees the fan site Wellesnet, opinions among Wellesians have been divided. “Some people are absolutely horrified by the notion,” Kelly told me, and some, like him, are keeping a skeptical open mind. “I don’t expect them to turn out a film that will replace the current version. I think this will be something that film enthusiasts can look at and get a feel of what Welles intended.”

Saatchi believes that A.I. is less a tool that will supplement moviemaking than a “new art form” that will compete with it. Although he lives in San Francisco, he peppers his speech with references to Marcel Duchamp and Andrei Tarkovsky that would baffle the average tech bro. He finds most A.I. projects banal—“Here’s this starfighter blowing up another starfighter,” as he put it—and wants his “Ambersons” to reach for nobler heights. “To some extent, I’ve known since I was twelve years old that there would one day be the technology to do this, to make ‘The Magnificent Ambersons,’ ” he told me. “Finally, the technology is here, and to me it would be completely insane to use A.I. for anything else.”

The year 1942 should have been a triumphant one for Welles. He had arrived in Hollywood three years earlier, heralded as a boy genius, with an R.K.O. contract allowing him unheard-of levels of creative control, including final cut. “Citizen Kane,” his début film, came out in the spring of 1941, days shy of his twenty-sixth birthday, to critical acclaim (if lukewarm box-office). Despite efforts by William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper empire to bury “Kane,” whose protagonist is a Hearst-like press baron, its release proved that Welles’s knack for provocation paled next to his filmmaking prowess. How could he possibly top himself?



Holt (George), Costello (Isabel), and Cotten (Eugene), in a scene from the mangled version of "The Magnificent Ambersons" that R.K.O. released in 1942, with forty-three minutes of Welles's footage deleted. Photograph from Everett

For his second feature, Welles turned to "The Magnificent Ambersons," Booth Tarkington's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, from 1918. Set in a "Midland town" resembling Indianapolis, the story follows the aristocratic Ambersons from their rise, in the waning years of buggies and ballrooms, to their decline, in the ascendant age of the automobile. The family's scion, George Amberson Minafer, is a spoiled brat who spins into fits worthy of Hamlet when his widowed mother, Isabel,

reconnects with an old flame, the “horseless carriage” entrepreneur Eugene Morgan. Even as they watch their wholesome town “spread and darken into a city,” the Ambersons are nineteenth-century creatures marooned in the twentieth. They wind up either dead or broke, and all of them forgotten.

Welles, who had directed and starred in a 1939 radio version of “Ambersons,” had a curious attachment to the novel, claiming (improbably) that Tarkington had been friends with his father, a bicycle-lamp inventor. According to Welles, when he pitched “Ambersons” to R.K.O., George Schaefer, the studio president, dozed off—but Welles got the go-ahead, under a revised contract that denied him final cut. He wrote much of the screenplay aboard the director King Vidor’s yacht. Instead of taking the lead role, as he had with “Kane,” he cast the movie cowboy Tim Holt as George and filled out the ensemble with his troupe of Mercury Players, including Joseph Cotten as Eugene and Agnes Moorehead as the spinster Aunt Fanny.

Shooting began in October, 1941, and finished in January, 1942, two weeks behind schedule. Welles had erected a full-scale Victorian mansion over several soundstages on the R.K.O. lot; he also had his own steam room, masseur, and private cook. The budget ballooned to more than a million dollars—the studio had approved eight hundred and fifty thousand. Midway through the production, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and Nelson Rockefeller, as the government’s Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, called on Welles to go to Brazil and make a quasi-documentary promoting Pan-American unity. Two days after wrapping “Ambersons,” he left for Rio de Janeiro to film *Carnival*.



Welles enjoys himself in Rio de Janeiro, as studio executives back in Los Angeles were taking over the editing of "The Magnificent Ambersons." Photograph from Paramount / Everett

What happened next was a cinematic atrocity. On March 17th, R.K.O. held a sneak preview in Pomona. The response was disastrous. "Never in all my experience in the industry have I taken so much punishment," Schaefer wrote to Welles. The audience "laughed at the wrong places" and "talked at the picture." Never mind that the college-age crowd had seen the dour period drama following a peppy movie musical. The comment cards stung: "Rubbish." "It stinks." "Mr. Welles had better go back to radio, I hope." The film's grim view of American modernity was

out of step with the country's new wartime spirit. One spectator griped, "Make pictures to make us forget, not remember."

With Welles a hemisphere away, R.K.O. functionaries took a chainsaw to his work. Scenes were scrapped or reordered, with little regard for character or coherence. An extended tracking shot weaving through the Amberson ballroom, which Welles called "the greatest tour de force of my career," was sliced up like bologna. The score was so decimated that the film's composer, Bernard Herrmann, removed his name from the credits. Welles's bleak finale, in which Eugene visits Aunt Fanny at a dilapidated boarding house, was replaced by a cheery ending in which the two walk away arm in arm, smiling. By the time "Ambersons" came out, in July—with no fanfare, on a double bill with the Lupe Vélez vehicle "Mexican Spitfire Sees a Ghost"—it had shrunk from a hundred and thirty-one minutes to eighty-eight.

Welles, meanwhile, was living large in Rio, mostly ignoring the studio's panic. One associate recalled him pointing to a group of chorus girls he'd been filming and bragging, "I've fucked that one . . . and that one . . . and that one." (His Brazilian project, "It's All True," was never completed.) Working remotely when he should have bolted back to Hollywood to oversee postproduction, he wired back reams of cumbersome changes, which R.K.O. disregarded. He found out that the movie was in theatres from a Jesuit priest he met in the Amazon.

The "Ambersons" fiasco was the start of Welles's downfall. That summer, his Mercury unit was expelled from R.K.O., and Schaefer, his corporate protector, was ousted. The incoming regime dropped Welles and adopted a new slogan for the studio: "Showmanship in place of genius." "They destroyed 'Ambersons,' and the picture itself destroyed me," Welles lamented in a 1982 documentary. "I didn't get a job as a director for years afterwards." Welles spent the rest of his career taking

acting jobs and doing ads (frozen peas, jug wine) to fund his projects, never regaining the level of studio backing that he'd enjoyed with "Kane." In the seventies, his protégé Peter Bogdanovich saw Welles catch the mutilated "Ambersons" on TV and watch with angry tears in his eyes. "It was a much better picture than 'Kane,'" Welles insisted, "if they'd just left it as it was."

Attempts to recover the lost "Ambersons" are nearly as old as the film itself. At some point, Welles tried to reconvene the surviving cast members to shoot a new ending, with their characters aged twenty years, but, as he later said, he "couldn't swing it." Yet he left behind a substantial fossil record. There's the "cutting continuity," a document made by R.K.O. employees for the original film as a guide for editors and projectionists, with descriptions of each line, camera movement, and shot duration. There are publicity photos and frame enlargements—blown-up stills from the film reels, which Welles used while he was sending notes from Brazil—that provide visual clues. And there are Welles's comments over the years about what he filmed and the effect he intended it to have.

In 1993, a Welles enthusiast from Detroit named Roger Ryan put together a reconstruction interpolating stills in place of the missing footage, paired with a recording of amateur actors reciting the dialogue from the original script. That same year, the scholar Robert L. Carringer published a readable adaptation of the uncut screenplay. In 2002, A&E aired a TV movie based on a draft of the unexpurgated script, starring Madeleine Stowe and Jonathan Rhys Meyers. Sadly, as Ray Kelly, of Wellesnet, told me, "It's just really a bad movie."

Others—Bogdanovich, William Friedkin—dreamed of finding an intact original print. In 1995, Joshua Grossberg was an undergraduate at Northwestern when his dorm master showed him “Ambersons.” Grossberg learned of a print that had been sent to Welles in Rio and supposedly destroyed—but rumors persisted that it was languishing in a vault somewhere. “I was just entranced, because it sounded like an Indiana Jones story,” he told me. During his Christmas break that year, he flew to Brazil and began a hunt that has lasted three decades. He’s making a documentary about his quest, “The Lost Print,” which he hopes to finish this year. “We have some new revelations, which I can’t disclose,” he said. Grossberg has nothing but disdain for Saatchi’s A.I. project. “I’m not looking to re-create the lost print,” he said. “I’m looking to *find* the lost print.”

In 2019, a filmmaker named Brian Rose started noodling around with his own reconstruction. Rose, who is forty-one, had been fascinated with “Ambersons” since taking a grad-school seminar on Welles. His class watched the “released version” (as Rose calls it) alongside Roger Ryan’s. “It was a haunting experience,” Rose told me last fall. “I was really struck by what a different and far more powerful film it was.” We were in his office in Kansas City, which was festooned with old movie posters, including two for “Ambersons,” along with an antique typewriter and parking meter.

At his vintage Steelcase desk, Rose pulled up his “Ambersons” files on a computer. After grad school, he’d spent years—and his savings—making a documentary about a Kansas City college student who went missing on a class trip. He submitted it to festivals and got nowhere. “I was in a terribly dejected place,” he recalled. He started researching “Ambersons” because he needed something to fill the void. He scoured Welles’s papers at Indiana University and bought a 16-mm. print. A film

restorationist gave him a copy of the cutting continuity. When the pandemic hit, Rose started creating rough Photoshop animations of the missing scenes. Then he refined them using digital sketching tools, hired actors to record the dialogue, and spliced his animated scenes into the surviving footage. (To get one transition effect that he wanted, he would light pieces of paper on fire in his shower and film them.) He submitted his “animatic” to animation festivals, but it was too weird. On his fortieth birthday, he rented out a theatre and showed the project to friends and family. “That didn’t go terribly well,” he said. “A lot of them were scratching their heads.”

Then, last June, Rose got a text message from Edward Saatchi, who had heard about his reconstruction. Saatchi said that he was an “Ambersons” fan and would love to see it. They began talking regularly by phone. “After a month of these conversations, Edward says, ‘I think we should collaborate,’ ” Rose recalled. The animatic would become the blueprint for Saatchi’s A.I. version. Rose was hired on as a consultant, and was given a stake in Saatchi’s company. (Saatchi called Rose the project’s “moral compass.”) “We both talk about how this can’t be like Fred Astaire dancing with a vacuum cleaner,” Rose said, referring to a 1997 TV ad that used computer imaging to partner the dead star with a Dirt Devil. Saatchi’s project, Rose told me, was “an opportunity to put all those doubts I might have about my own career to rest.”

On his computer, Rose showed me the detective work he’d done to approximate what Welles had shot. Most straightforward was a scene set in the Ambersons’ bathroom in which George bursts in and confronts his uncle Jack in the tub. R.K.O. had deleted about half of it, but the camera setups between the two actors were consistent, so Rose could simply plug in the missing shots.

Video courtesy Fable

Next, he pulled up a short, wordless scene of George placing a photograph of his late father on a mantelpiece. The entire sequence had been scrapped, but a surviving still shows what it looked like, and since the cutting continuity details George's exact hand motions, it was possible to fill in the blanks.

Video courtesy Fable

Trickier was a lost scene in which Eugene tries to visit his adored Isabel (Dolores Costello) on her deathbed but is turned away by Aunt Fanny, who secretly loves him. The cutting continuity describes the camera panning as Fanny watches him leave the house. Only one image—a closeup—remains. “The first problem is: What room is this in? And how do we know how to orient the camera?” Rose said. He pulled up a floor plan that he'd made of the set. “Welles built out the whole three floors of this mansion, and everything spatially relates,” he continued. He'd deduced that the scene must have taken place in the parlor, and that the camera must have followed Fanny at a certain angle to keep Eugene in the shot: “This is the only way that it satisfies all the criteria.”

Video courtesy Fable

Now that Rose's animatic will be made literal by A.I., I asked him if he worried whether a re-creation could possibly live up to the “Ambersons” created by decades of mythologizing. “I had that fear throughout,” he confessed. It put him in mind of the Venus de Milo: “The aura of that

sculpture is the fact that it's missing the arms and a foot. It's a much more iconic work than it would be if it was complete.”

One of Hollywood's anxieties about A.I. is its potential to kill jobs, but by October the “Ambersons” project had hired dozens of humans. The shoot in L.A. was the first of three that Saatchi has planned, beginning with preliminary tests featuring local actors. Next will be a more detailed test. Finally, once the technology is firmed up, Saatchi will hire what he called “experienced stage actors” to perform the entire screenplay in period costume and film a “coherent emotional performance.” This is what will undergird the final A.I. reconstruction.

At the soundstage, frames from Rose's animatic were pinned up like storyboards, and a table was stacked with books on American Victorian furniture and the Indianapolis automobile industry. “What we're doing today is filming the actors, so then the actors' performances can drive the visuals,” Saatchi said. In a side office, he opened his laptop and showed me a split screen of the train-station scene, in which Uncle Jack bids George farewell before heading off to rebuild himself from ruin. On top was Rose's animated restoration; below was a deepfake of the actor Ray Collins, who played Uncle Jack back in 1942, saying the exact same line.

Saatchi video-conferenced in two of his A.I. artists, Tom Clive and Emanuele Riccetti. Clive worked on the 2024 films “Here,” which de-aged Tom Hanks and Robin Wright, and “Alien: Romulus,” which brought back the late Ian Holm as an android. “The tools are much more sophisticated than they were not just two years ago but six months ago,” Clive said. For “Ambersons,” they had trained the tech on general period footage as a base model and were now building low-rank

adaptations, or LoRAs: specialized models for each character. “We’ve been capturing the body movements, facial expression, mouth articulation, and voice,” Clive explained, as Saatchi pulled up rotating 3-D heads of the late Tim Holt and Agnes Moorehead. If all went as planned, the final film would seamlessly meld the 1942 footage with the new A.I. bits.

Saatchi, however, wants more than seamlessness. “Is it going to emotionally communicate, or is it just going to feel dead? Is it going to actually pay off?” he asked. “That’s the thing I’m worried about.” Simply prompting the computer to suck up the existing movie and spit out new scenes would create a cold, uncanny-valley effect. A.I. tends to flatten lighting, and that would clash with Welles’s rich chiaroscuro. Then, there was what Saatchi called the “happiness” problem: left to its own guided intuition, the A.I. technology often makes characters look cheerier, especially women. Saatchi played an A.I. clip of sullen Aunt Fanny, in the grim final scene, inappropriately smirking in her rocking chair. “In terms of subtle despair, it has absolutely no idea what to do,” he said. “That’s part of why having the actor is really important.”



Fable's technicians have to correct the A.I. when it makes mistakes, as it did with this two-headed Joseph Cotten. Photograph courtesy Fable

On set, a young director named Victor Velle was rehearsing the train-station scene with the actors playing George and Uncle Jack. Velle, who wore a neck brace (Fourth of July diving accident), was joined by Katya Alexander, who had worked at the Sphere before Saatchi hired her as Fable's head of production. They would shoot the actors talking face to face, to create emotional depth, but then separate them for the A.I. work, which for some shots required the use of a motion-controlled robotic camera.

"It's not just putting together this puzzle," Velle said. "It's re-creating the pieces so that the puzzle fits together." Tiny dramaturgical details had been lost to time. In the train station, Uncle Jack holds an umbrella while accepting cash from George. "Is it going to be weird for him to

fumble with an umbrella as he puts the money in his pocket?”

Alexander asked. “How does he pick up the suitcase? We don’t have a shot of him picking it up.”

Velle added that Welles’s actors often handled props in an “aesthetically pleasing” way: “Orson is the king of cool, so how to do it with his flavor?”

They had put out a call for actors in *Backstage*, seeking not exact look-alikes but people with what Velle described as a “regal nineteen-forties vibe.” He said, “In that period, a lot of people would act as if they had tons of Botox—their foreheads don’t move.” The three actors they hired worked with a coach, Kimberly Donovan, to study their 1942 counterparts. “You’re reverse engineering someone else’s performance,” Donovan told me. Holt, for example, “attacks every word,” whereas Moorehead’s delivery can be “soft and kitten-like.”

Cody Pressley, an actor with a sonorous Wellesian voice, was playing both George and Eugene in separate scenes. Pressley said that he often gets cast in period pieces. (Previous roles include Gerald Ford’s photographer in “The First Lady” and a drunk teen in “Stranger Things.”) He’d been camping in Colorado when he got the call from Fable and rushed back to L.A. “It’s so very technical,” he told me. “You have to match the cadence of an actor from the forties. You have to match the words verbatim. And you basically have to keep your head still.”

They started shooting the scene. John Fantasia, who was playing Uncle Jack, stumbled over a wordy bit of dialogue. “Cut!” Velle yelled. He gave Pressley a note: “George’s voice is a tiny bit higher pitch than what you did.” They rolled again, as the robotic camera whirred. Later, Fantasia told me that he had limited knowledge of A.I. “As an actor, I thought, I

don't think I'll ever want to do this, because it's contributing to the downfall," he said. "But then I thought, It's already seeped into the Hollywood subculture." Plus, he added, "it's a paying gig."

In the afternoon, Saatchi and Rose took me to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences's Margaret Herrick Library. The two made an odd couple. Saatchi was in minimalist black-and-white, in the style of a Silicon Valley guru. Rose, who had flown in from Missouri, wore a tucked-in plaid shirt with a tie and had a Nikon camera hanging from his shoulder, like a tourist at Niagara Falls. We sat in a reading room and opened a folder of weathered correspondence. First came a letter dated August 18, 1941, in which the R.K.O. employee Reginald Armour gushed to Welles, "If the picture turns out to be as good as the script, you already have another smash hit on your hands."

Then things deteriorated: memos about budgets, anxious telegrams sent to Welles at the Copacabana Palace, in Rio. A few pages later was a note from George Schaefer, the R.K.O. president, to Armour, suggesting that they save all the footage they had cut: "Some day someone may want to know what was done with the original picture Welles shot." Finally, on December 10, 1942, a banal note from one studio underling to another confirmed that the studio would "junk" it instead. "This document right here is why we're all sitting here today," Rose said.

Saatchi added, ruefully, "He was betrayed by everyone."

Of all the characters in "The Magnificent Ambersons," Saatchi identifies most with Eugene, the auto inventor played by Joseph Cotten. But his background is closer to that of George, the highborn

son. He gets squeamish when asked about his posh upbringing, but Simon Callow, the old family friend, recalled young Edward as “Tiggerish—huge enthusiast, and very bright, with ideas swirling around inside his brain all the time.” Last summer, Saatchi told Callow about his “Ambersons” project at a party that his father threw at the Sussex estate with his new partner, Lynn Forester de Rothschild. Callow, who is at work on his fourth volume on Welles’s life, told Saatchi that it was a “great idea” and agreed to be an adviser. (“And a very jolly alfresco affair it was,” Callow added.)

Maurice Saatchi never pressured his son to join the family business, but Edward learned from the advertising racket not to underestimate the public’s intelligence. At Oxford, he read all of Shakespeare’s works, in consecutive order, and wrote plays about Vita Sackville-West and Andy Warhol. Then he moved to Paris to get a master’s degree at the Sorbonne in the history of philosophy, while simultaneously attending a French film school. In 2007, midway through both programs, he became inspired by Barack Obama’s Presidential campaign. “I kept calling Chicago from Europe to be, like, ‘What can I do to help?’ And they were, like, ‘Don’t come. You’re not American, and you don’t have a car,’ ” he recalled. Finally, he flew to Iowa and showed up at a volunteer office. “They were, like, ‘O.K. Here’s a sign. Here’s a street corner. Go wave the sign and get people to honk,’ which I did.” (He still fist-bumps instead of shaking hands, a habit that he picked up from the campaign.) Saatchi & Saatchi had helped bring Margaret Thatcher to power in 1979, with its famous “Labour Isn’t Working” poster showing an unemployment line, and Maurice served as co-chairman of the Conservative Party in the early two-thousands. But Edward insisted that his Obamaphilia wasn’t a rebellion: “Dad thought Obama was awesome, too.”



"They destroyed 'Ambersons,' and the picture itself destroyed me," Welles said years later. Photo illustration by Tyler Comrie / Source photograph from Uber Bilder / Alamy

During the campaign, Saatchi and two staffers created NationalField, a Facebook-like network that volunteers could use internally to compete over doors knocked and money raised. After Obama won, the company moved its operations to Washington, D.C., and worked with the Administration and other clients, including the health-care consortium Kaiser Permanente. In 2013, it was acquired by the Democratic data giant NGP VAN. The next year, Saatchi, who had been contemplating

“what comes after cinema,” moved to San Francisco, where he and two Pixar veterans founded a virtual-reality startup called Story Studio. It then joined Oculus, the V.R. arm of Facebook, and produced the Emmy-winning V.R. animated short “Henry,” about a lonely hedgehog.

In 2018, Saatchi and the director Pete Billington founded Fable Studio, which won an Emmy for its debut project, “Wolves in the Walls: It’s All Over,” a V.R. adaptation of a Neil Gaiman children’s book, in which the protagonist addresses the viewer as her imaginary friend. “I had an intuition that A.I. storytelling was the future,” Saatchi told me; he was curious what an artificial perspective might teach humans about themselves. But he found A.I. chatbots “boring” and most A.I. videos “bland.” It was one thing to make a creepy demo in which everyone has thirteen fingers, another to move an audience. “I developed a strong faith that creating an artificial person is going to be as much a work of art as a feat of engineering,” Saatchi said.

With his high-flown pronouncements, Saatchi sometimes sounds a bit like a Bond villain. When he appeared on CNBC to announce the “Ambersons” project, he spoke of A.I. as being “potentially the end of human creativity” and discombobulated the program’s hosts by showing them an A.I.-generated cartoon of themselves, in which an evil robot threatened them with a “permanent vacation from work.” (“Where did it get our voices?” the host Rebecca Quick asked. “You’re very famous people,” Saatchi purred.)

The cartoon was part of his animated A.I. series, “Exit Valley,” a satire of Silicon Valley. The idea is for users to generate their own episodes, punching up at their tech overlords. Saatchi envisions a new entertainment genre that is “interactive and personalized and

multiplayer,” he told me. For now, this can be done with animation, but “Ambersons,” he said on CNBC, “unlocks for us live-action”—proof of concept, perhaps, for a future in which viewers can order up their own bespoke episodes of “Friends.”

In 2023, Saatchi produced ten off-brand “South Park” episodes generated by his A.I. tool, Showrunner. When he unveiled them online, he stressed that they were just prototypes, with no commercial use, since he hadn’t procured the rights. The move was provocative, especially because it came as Hollywood writers and actors were striking—in part because they were seeking guardrails to protect their work from A.I. exploitation. At the time, Saatchi said that tech companies had been downplaying what A.I. could do; he simply wanted to give the guilds “leverage” against the studios by demonstrating A.I.’s true capabilities. But the fact that he did it by ripping off “South Park” didn’t go over well. (On a real “South Park” episode from last year, one character shrieks, “You cannot just do whatever you want with someone else’s I.P.!”)

“A.I. is still completely hated,” Saatchi told me, though he hopes that its reputation will change once it produces something of artistic merit—something like “Ambersons.” “This, if we can do it, will stand the test of time,” he said. “Not because *we’re* great but because *Welles* is the greatest filmmaker of all time, and we’re all curious what he actually intended.”

Some find this argument disingenuous. “This guy has the ethics of a piece of dirt,” Justine Bateman, the former “Family Ties” actress who is now known as an anti-A.I. activist, told me, when I explained what Saatchi was up to. “The first public thing he did was rape ‘South Park?’” Bateman characterized Saatchi’s “Ambersons” interest as “just trying to grab at some sort of legitimacy, and it’s a bullshit marketing tactic.” The project, she went on, “sets a precedent to do what you want with old

films. That is so wildly unethical to me, because no one involved had any idea this tech was coming.”

A gallery of Fable's A.I. models of Moorehead, Collins, Holt, Costello, and Anne Baxter. Photographs courtesy Fable

Saatchi admitted that there are “ethical issues” with manipulating dead actors. “I can’t come up with any reasonable defense for driving the performance of someone who’s not here,” he told me. “It’s just the only way to bring to life Welles’s vision.” I spoke to Melissa Galt, a business coach and the daughter of Anne Baxter, who was eighteen when she played an ingénue in “Ambersons.” Galt hadn’t heard about Saatchi’s project, but she was wary. “Mother would not have agreed with that at all,” Galt said. “It’s not the truth. It’s a creation of someone *else’s* truth. But it’s not the original, and she was a purist.” (By contrast, Galt’s great-grandfather Frank Lloyd Wright had often embraced new technologies, so she was more open to A.I. riffing on his work.) She remembered that her mother had objected to her old films being colorized: “Once the movie was done, it was done.”

On the last day and a half of test shooting, the “Ambersons” team turned to the final scene: Eugene’s visit to penniless Aunt Fanny in the boarding house. The empty white soundstage was outfitted with a period settee and a phonograph. Cody Pressley, the actor, had on a fake mustache, and Laura Bellomo, an Australian actress with the angular features of Agnes Moorehead, wore a frilly black outfit. The scene, filled with long, painful pauses, involves Eugene telling Fanny about going to see George in the hospital, after he has been struck by a car. Fanny, who once pined for Eugene, listens from her rocking chair and says little. As Welles described the scene to Bogdanovich, “Everything is over—her

feelings and her world and his world; everything is buried under the parking lots and the cars. That's what it was all about—the deterioration of personality, the way people diminish with age, and particularly with impecunious old age. The end of the communication between people, as well as the end of an era. Sure, it was pretty rough going for an audience—particularly in those days. But without question it was much the best scene in the movie.”



Left: On the soundstage, Laura Bellomo acts out excised lines originally spoken by Aunt Fanny, played by Moorehead. Right: Fable's A.I. Moorehead.

(Left) Photograph by Brian Rose / Courtesy Fable; (Right) Photograph courtesy Fable

Brian Rose, clutching a dog-eared copy of the continuity script, prepped the actors. “It’s this kind of mismatch of expectations. Eugene is going

there to talk to someone he considers a friend. Fanny, who has throughout the whole story had an unrequited love for Eugene, doesn't know quite what to make of it," he told them. "This is a six-minute scene, and there's barely two minutes of dialogue in it. The rest of it is filled with this terrible silence."

The actors took their places. "Awkwardly long—that's the name of the game with this scene," Velle, the director, instructed. "And . . . action!"

It was the project's biggest challenge so far: Could you capture all that unspoken yearning and alienation and get A.I. Joseph Cotten and A.I. Agnes Moorehead to act it persuasively?

Saatchi gave me a preview of how it would all work. Between takes, the crew subbed me in for Pressley, putting me in a period coat and a clip-on tie, and had me blunder through one of Eugene's lines. Two hours later, the A.I. team sent back a rough clip of Cotten doing the line—turning his head as I'd turned mine, speaking in his voice but with my delivery, even breaking into a laugh, as I had done after tripping over the words. "Usually, we'd spend a lot more time on it, but this is just to give you a feel," Saatchi said. Still, it was pretty impressive—and disorienting.

Saatchi demonstrates how his A.I. process works by having the writer Michael Schulman speak some deleted dialogue of Eugene's; then A.I. reprocesses the recorded lines so that they come out in the voice of Cotten. Video courtesy Fable

As it turns out, "The Magnificent Ambersons" has a lot to say about disruptive technology. The film has a Luddite heart; it opens with wistful narration from Welles about the olden days, when "everybody knew everybody else's family horse and carriage." Viewed from another angle, it's about the perils of burying your head in the sand as the world

changes around you. At its best, it weighs both points of view. In one scene—which R.K.O. mercifully kept—George confronts Eugene at the dinner table, blasting his “horseless carriages” as a “useless nuisance.” Eugene responds:

I'm not sure George is wrong about automobiles. With all their speed forward, they may be a step backward in civilization. It may be that they won't add to the beauty of the world or the life of men's souls—I'm not sure. But automobiles have come, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They're going to alter war, and they're going to alter peace. And I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles. And it may be that George is right. It may be that, in ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend the gasoline engine but would have to agree with George that automobiles had no business to be invented.

Saatchi sees himself in Eugene's tortured ambivalence. “He loves the Ambersons more than anyone, and he's the villain who's basically destroying them, in a completely inadvertent way,” he said. “My equivalent is loving cinema and doing something that's maybe going to undermine this art form that I love.”

A “proof of concept” A.I. clip of Costello, as Isabel, and Cotten, as Eugene. Video courtesy Fable

Before starting on the boarding-house scene, Saatchi had gathered the cast and crew in a circle and told them, “Raise your hand if you're concerned for yourself or your society about A.I.” Almost all of the

twenty-two people raised a hand. Then Saatchi read Eugene's dinner-table speech aloud, substituting "A.I." for "automobiles." The last line went, "It may be that, in ten or twenty years from now, if we can see the inward change in men by that time, I shouldn't be able to defend A.I. but would have to agree with George that A.I. had no business to be invented."

Saatchi looked up. "The automobiles wipe out Fanny, wipe out this family, but there was no stopping them," he said. "So let's see if we do better with this technology." Then everyone applauded and got back to work. ♦

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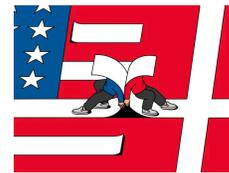
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