

MR. ARKADIN (CONFIDENTIAL REPORT) 1955

Orson Welles

OVERVIEW

Auteur Orson Welles is one of the most important and influential filmmakers in American film history. After making a name for himself in theatre and radio, Welles signed with RKO Pictures to write and direct two motion pictures, a deal that was unprecedented at the time in terms of the creative control Welles enjoyed. His directorial debut, *Citizen Kane*, would go on to become arguably the greatest film ever made thanks to its innovative techniques and unconventional narrative style. He quickly became a household name releasing a total of twelve movies that include critically-acclaimed films like *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). He won the Academy Award, with Herman J. Mankiewicz, for Best Original Screenplay for *Citizen Kane*, and *Othello* (1951) won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival. Orson Welles died in 1985.

Film Orson Welles' second feature in Europe, *Mr. Arkadin* (aka *Confidential Report*) tells the story of a shady billionaire, Gregory Arkadin, who hires a con-artist and smuggler, Guy Van Stratten, to investigate his past he claims he has no memory of. The film follows Van Stratten as he travels around the world to find and interview Arkadin's old associates and friends. French film director and critic Éric Rohmer classifies *Mr. Arkadin* as more of a fable than a realistic thriller, which seems to fit Welles' original purpose as he wanted to make a movie about characters so "dense that they appear as archetypes, and thus commercially successful." However, due to circumstances described below, he never even wanted to speak of the movie in his later years.

Background The film was based on a script Welles wrote for the BBC show *The Adventures of Harry Lime*, which itself was created around the villain Welles portrayed in Carol Reed's *The Third Man*. *Mr. Arkadin* represents the epitome of the celebrated director's production troubles so much so that he would later say: "The film was snatched from my hands more brutally than one has ever snatched a film from anyone . . . it's as if they'd kidnapped my child!" According to the film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum in his *The Seven Arkadins* essay, there are four different versions of the movie as of today, none of which fully represents the director's original vision: 1) The Corinth Version released by Criterion Collection with the help of Peter Bogdanovich and Dan Talbot; 2) the Spanish version which was shot simultaneously with the principal movie, featuring different actresses and scenes; 3) the European edit, also known as *Confidential Report*, which does away with the flashback structure and adds voiceover; and finally 4) the US version, now in the public domain, which offers a clumsily truncated version of the original script. The movie's production shenanigans were such that the producer, Louis Dolivet, who was Welles' political mentor and friend, would never produce another movie.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Gregory Arkadin	The wealthy businessman who hires a smuggler to investigate his own past.
Guy Van Stratten	A small-time con-artist and smuggler who hopes to blackmail Arkadin.
Mily	Guy's girlfriend and helps Stratten in his plans to trap Arkadin.
Raina Arkadin	Arkadin's daughter and falls in love with Guy Van Stratten.
Sophie Radzweickz Martinez	The ex-leader of a human trafficking gang.
Jakob Zouk	One of the members of the human trafficking gang.

SYNOPSIS

While working as a cigarette smuggler and a con-artist in Spain, Stratten witnesses the murder of Bracco, who gives him and his girlfriend, Mily, two names to get his revenge on them: a mysterious billionaire Gregory Arkadin and a woman named "Sophie". Stratten and Mily manage to sneak their way up to Arkadin's circle in hopes that they can blackmail him. Stratten flirts with Arkadin's daughter, Raina, which draws Arkadin's attention on him as Arkadin is obsessively fond of Raina. After learning about Stratten's past as a crook, Arkadin offers him a job: Stratten has to find out about what Gregory Arkadin was doing before 1927 as he argues he has no memory of who he was.

Stratten travels around the world searching for people who knew Arkadin to learn more about his past. Via those interviews with strange people, Stratten discovers that Arkadin was a member of a human trafficking gang working out of Warsaw. It turns out that “Sophie” was the ex-leader and ex-lover of Mr. Arkadin. Stratten soon realizes that each and every one of these people he interviewed is being killed, including Mily who was on a yacht cruise with Arkadin.

The narrative moves back to present time where Stratten and Zouk plan to hide from Arkadin, who tracks them to an apartment in Munich. Mr. Arkadin has Zouk stabbed and frames Stratten for his murder. Stratten books a plane to Barcelona to tell Raina everything about Arkadin to ensure his survival. Deranged by this possibility, Arkadin gets on a private jet and follows him. On the flight, Arkadin places an urgent call through radio to talk to his daughter. Stratten convinces her to tell her father “It's too late”, insinuating that she knows everything about her father's dark past. Arkadin commits suicide by hurling himself out of his plane.

PLOT

Bronco tells two names and dies . While working in Naples, Stratten sees a man, Bracco, He's stabbed in the back with a knife. Before he dies, he gives Stratten and his girlfriend, Mily, two names he says worth millions. He advises Stratten to blackmail the man. Stratten is arrested on smuggling charges.



Stratten flirts with Arkadin's daughter Raina After leaving jail, Stratten goes to where Arkadin lives and finds out that Mily is also in town, preparing for the plan. Stratten starts flirting with Arkadin's daughter, Raina, at a night club. They spend time together in Spain. Raina tells him that her father has many secretaries and spies watching over her. Together, they attend the carnival of penitents and attend the masquerade ball Mr. Arkadin has organized.



Arkadin offers Stratten to investigate Arkadin's past As he is about to leave town, Stratten is invited to Arkadin's castle to discuss a business deal. Arkadin wants Stratten to prepare a report on his own past. Arkadin tells him that he built his fortune on 200.000 Swiss Francs in 1927. He doesn't remember how he got there and how he had the money because he is suffering from amnesia. Stratten agrees.



Baroness dies Stratten travels around the world and interrogates people from the underground world

as Arkadin asked him to do. From these interviews, he finds out about the human trafficking gang that Sophie and Arkadin ran in the past. A woman with the code name Baroness knows where Sophie is. While Stratten searches for Baroness, Arkadin finds her and gets Sophie's address. Baroness is killed afterwards.



Sophie dies Stratten finds Sophie in Mexico married to a Mexican general. She explains that Arkadin stole that 200.000 Francs from her and that they were once lovers. Even though she knew his real identity, she never wanted to blackmail him. She tells Stratten to tell Arkadin to leave her alone. Stratten later discovers that Sophie is killed too.



Jakob Zouk dies Stratten finds Jakob Zouk in a decrepit apartment in Germany. He explains that they have to hide. Zouk is reluctant to leave his place and asks Stratten how he found out about Mr. Arkadin. Stratten tells him the story of meeting a man named Bracco in Spain. Zouk is killed afterwards.



Stratten discovers the truth about Mr. Arkadin Stratten finds out that Sophie, Mily, and all the other people he interviewed during his investigation, have been killed by Arkadin. He realizes that Arkadin lied about suffering from amnesia. He hired Stratten to track down and get rid of the gang members so that his daughter can never learn about his past. Stratten tells Arkadin that he belonged to a human trafficking group that he was born in Tbilisi as Vasil Athabadze. ‘



Arkadin commits suicide Arkadin tells Stratten not to tell his daughter about his findings, who doesn't know about her father's real identity. Stratten gets on a plane to fly to Spain to meet Raina. Arkadin follows him to Spain and calls Raina on the radio. Stratten tells her to tell Arkadin that "It's too late" giving Arkadin the impression that Raina discovered the truth about his past. Arkadin commits suicide by jumping out of the plane.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Gregory Arkadin He is the quintessential tyrannical figure who likes to control everything and everyone. He has multiple minions, "secretaries," working for him to spy on his daughter as well as other people. The only thing he fears is the possibility that his daughter might find about his past. His love for his daughter is borderline obsessive.

Controlling Mr. Arkadin has enough clout, manpower, and money to control every part of his life: his daughter, his daughter's boyfriends, his job and his people. The biggest thing that is out of his control is his dark past—memory. In order to eradicate it, he chooses the nuclear option: finding each and every other person who knows the truth about him and then killing them. It's not about his inability to live with the truth about himself. He's terrified about the possibility that his daughter may find out about him. Since he can't *not* love his own daughter, he also has to control what she knows to ensure her love for him. "You don't know what it is to have conscience and no memory," Arkadin tells Stratten, completely and deliberately misrepresenting himself. What he really means: "You don't know what it is to *have* memory and *no* conscience." Now, that's control.

Ruthless According to Peter Bogdanovich, the Arkadin character was inspired by the Russian dictator Josef Stalin. One can see the immediate resemblance. Like Stalin, Arkadin also goes after his old "comrades" and associates in order to silence them so that he can hold onto power. In Stalin's case, power meant authorial dominance over his country and perhaps the world. In Arkadin's case, power manifests itself as a means to control his daughter's life and, by extension, her love. His struggle for power renders Arkadin ruthless because he is desperate. Like all tyrants in their ironic cocoons, he is actually afraid of what he is controlling. Despite all his might, his own unlimited power turns him into a cornered animal and leads to his tragic end.

Obsessed Arkadin does everything to ensure the love of his daughter. As Raina's boyfriend says at the end of the film, Arkadin "loved her in a very strange way." He declares men "persona non-grata" just because they dare to date Raina. He employs minions to have his daughter and her potential boyfriends followed. Once he realizes that Stratten could steal Raina from him, he not only blackmails him, but also tries to paint him as a blackmailer in hopes that Raina rejects him. "I wish you'd stop

following me, dad," Raina complains. "I'm tired of living the life of a rich gypsy." The love he has for her daughter is not a healthy one. It's obsessive to the point of destructive, a reverse Electra complex.

Guy Van Stratten He is a small-time con-artist who wants to get rich by blackmailing a dangerous billionaire. His opportunism is tragically funny because he is woefully unaware of whom he is dealing with. But he is relentless in following the lead and locating the key people. It's rather difficult, though, to tell whether he is motivated by the promise of riches or something else.

Opportunist What type of smuggler working in a foreign land doesn't act on a tip given to him by a dying stranger who out of nowhere reveals a name he claims is worth millions? That's the opportunity a man like Stratten will never turn his back on. It's his chance to hit gold by blackmailing a potentially dangerous Russian oligarch, and he accepts it with arms wide open. When Bracco tells Stratten he's going to get rich, "the greatest fool in the world" by his own admission, is there to snatch it without questioning. He doesn't tell the police what Bracco told him, which may have solved the case there and then. Maybe, he could make a deal with the police to escape jail. But Stratten knows better. This might be a once in a life-time opportunity for a small-time crook like him. He even accepts prison time because fortune has finally smiled at him.

Relentless Gregory Arkadin sends Stratten out on a wild goose chase to investigate his past, a job big enough to demand a highly specialized team of investigators. And yet, the opportunist Stratten travels around the world, all by himself, to track down each and every ex-convict and criminal from the underworld who might know something about Arkadin. He investigates, interrogates, and sometimes soft-tortures an assortment of idiosyncratic characters to fish the truth out of them. And he does find that truth. He produces a stellar confidential report exposing the man known as Gregory Arkadin and what does he get out of it? "I should receive 15,000 dollars for the job, but I believe I'll also get a bonus," Stratten says sarcastically in the added voiceover. "A knife in my back." Even that doesn't stop him. He finds and hides Zouk despite Mr. Arkadin's effort to thwart him. When that fails, Stratten uses and manipulates Raina to ensure his survival despite his love for her because that's what Stratten does: he is a relentless survivor.

Mily Like Stratten, she is a swindler, as well as a dancer and possibly a prostitute, who hopes to make some easy money off their scheme. Essentially, she is a role-player, executing Stratten's strategy and obeying his instructions. Once she realizes that Stratten's game involves getting close to Arkadin's daughter, she gets jealous and threatens Stratten with snitching, but it never amounts to anything because she may actually love him.

Sidekick Bracco whispers the two names exclusively into Mily's ears, which means she is free to run the blackmail game without relying on Stratten while he is in jail. She, however, does not have the means to execute a complicated plot like that. Once Stratten gets out of jail, he puts the plan in action, instructing Mily to get herself invited to Arkadin's yacht, which she does, and use her charm to see what she can find out, which she does. Since she is the only one who knows about the name "Sophie," she attempts to use that as a bait, but she backs down immediately when Stratten dismisses her out of hand. She cannot perceive the danger she is in when she drunkenly confronts Arkadin in his cabin because she cannot see the big picture. She cannot run the game. She's just a sidekick, who is seen and treated as expendable by both Stratten and Arkadin.

Romantic It is repeatedly suggested or insinuated that Mily's feelings for Stratten are much stronger than Stratten's for her. Stratten wants to take advantage of this great opportunity to blackmail a wealthy man, so he gets very serious about the plan. Mily wants that, too, but the problem is that she doesn't *just* want to get rich. She wants to get rich *with* him. Stratten's intimacy with Raina bothers Mily in spite of the fact that his flirtation is nothing but business. Her threat to expose Stratten is less about her power than the lack thereof. She tries to coax Stratten into treating her well by holding out information regarding Sophie, but she can't even last even a minute before giving him the name. She wants a kiss; she wants Stratten to stop courting with Raina; she wants him to take her to wherever he is going. The message is clear: Let us be one of those romantic criminal couples, in the Bonnie and Clyde mould.

Raina Arkadin She is the only daughter of all-powerful Gregory Arkadin. As such, she is the recipient of relentless love and suffocating attention. She is as pampered as she is dominated. Her father acts like her brother, her boss, and, at times, her boyfriend who supervises every aspect of her

life. She is also none the wiser about her father's criminal past and real identity, which transforms her from a bitter character into a tragic one.

Bitter Living under the shadow of a towering figure like Arkadin is enough for any person to feel trapped. For Raina, this situation gets even more complicated because she loves her father and her father loves her. Raina, of course, loves her father, but she's also bitter about the way he's been treating her. For Raina, her father is a bogey man who eats people alive, an ogre who dominates every aspect of her life. She's chained to him as though he is still holding her navel cord. When she meets Stratten in a hotel room hoping for a romantic getaway, she's surprised to see Arkadin as well. "I wish you'd stop following me, dad," she complains, "I'm tired of living the life of a rich gypsy." She is as frustrated as she is bitter because she knows she leads the life her father considers appropriate, not the one she wants to live.

Tragic "If you knew him, you'd see why," Raina tells Stratten, offering us a tremendous irony. We know that she is the one who knows nothing about Arkadin's past. In fact, her being ignorant is the reason why she becomes a pawn in the power game between Stratten and Arkadin. As both men fight to claim her, they want to control the narrative. Raina does not seem to matter to either of them, though on the surface it may feel like they are trying to win her over. Her tragedy is that she doesn't know who her father has been all those years and that her father's obsessive fawning over her is the reason for her being none the wiser. She's, in essence, just a plot point in these two men's lives. "Why use me to trick him?" she pleads with Stratten, who forces her to lie because he cares only about his own survival. Similarly, when Arkadin calls her at the airport, he only cares about his own image. Raina is just a battle ground. "To save your life I had to kill my father" he tells Stratten. It is the terrible indictment of her own life. In the end, she is finally free of both men, but only because she loses them. This is her tragedy.

Sophie Radzweickz Martinez As the ex-leader of a human trafficking gang responsible for shipping young girls to other countries for sex, Sophie Radzweickz is (surprisingly) also an honest and principled woman. Played by Katina Paxinou to almost absolute perfection, Sophie's arc is fascinating: She has made her peace with her dark past and opened up a new leaf that now says "Live and let live."

Nostalgic When Stratten arrives in Mexico to question Sophie over her involvement in the gang business, Sophie says, "I'm married. I have business. Everything there was against me is buried long." The ocular evidence tells another story because, two minutes later, she brings out an old album containing pictures of her past life with Arkadin. Nothing is buried. Past never has and never will leave her. What makes her such a subtle character is that she does not want it to leave her. In this sense, she is the perfect foil for Arkadin in that the latter wants to detach himself from his past whereas she keeps the attachment. Even though she plays the "I'm someone new" persona, she has never managed to forget about Arkadin. She does not miss being the queen of a sex gang. Her nostalgia does not have blood stains. It's about her possibly unrequited love for a man who is out there to murder her.

Redeemed Sophie has a complicated relationship with the past. Stratten is shocked when he hears that Sophie chose not to expose Arkadin despite knowing the dark truth about him. For an opportunist small-time crook like Stratten, this is valuable information worth serious money. For Sophie, such information is part of her dear past with Arkadin, which she regards as more precious than any amount of material goods—including the money Arkadin stole from her. This has an inherent value that originates from her own redemption. It's such a strong feeling that even a character like Stratten "gets" it in the end. When he finds out that Arkadin killed Sophie, Stratten shouts that Sophie knew everything but didn't care. "She'd say: 'Live and let live.'" That's what Sophie did. She didn't want her money back; she didn't want to expose Arkadin, and she created a new life for herself out of the ashes of the old one. "Why not take care of your life," she says when Stratten first contacts her, "and leave the others alone?" Her redemption story is about her being alone with her memories. And her most prized memory will not allow that.

THEMES

1. **Mystery** The film has the structure of a thriller with its central mystery being its titular character Gregory Arkadin. Until we meet him, he's portrayed as a mythical character with a sinister past and a present secret. The fact that we are first introduced to him in a masquerade is a symbolic gesture that strengthens the cloud of enigma surrounding Mr. Arkadin. There is even a meta-narrative buried in the plot: Gregory Arkadin doesn't know about Gregory Arkadin. The subsequent investigation and interrogation of a bevy of outrageously varied characters do nothing but add more questions to the central wonder of the narrative: Who is *really* Gregory Arkadin? What is his dark secret? And how is Sophie related to that fundamental riddle? All these questions form the engine of an adventurous plot.

2. **Appearance** There are several party and carnival scenes, all of which contain symbolic and at times literal references to masks, personas, hoods, and statues. The point is that the film's central characters all play a game of identity, marked by different masks and personas. Mr. Arkadin is seen wearing a mask the first time he appears on screen, a not-so-subtle reference to his façade revealed later. Similarly, Stratten, who appears to be friendly with Raina, is only trying to hide his real identity as a con-artist to get what he wants. There are also several shots of animal statues, bats hanging upside down and a flea expert, all of which could be regarded as references to the animalistic features of some characters. Arkadin, for one, makes a subtle point about himself as he tells the story of a scorpion who stings a frog that carries him across a river. "Couldn't avoid it. It's my character," the scorpion (read Arkadin) says. The flea expert makes a similar connection between crooks and fleas. "They're just the stupidest, the fleas of the world," he tells Stratten, who he knows is just another crook, a flea.

3. **Power** There are two kinds of power in the movie—hard power and soft power. The former is all about the wherewithal to direct people, manipulate situations and manufacture results, the power Mr. Arkadin holds in abundance. It originates from money and is executed through violence. It is aggressive, coercive and based on fear. He uses it on his daughter to shape her life, on Stratten to manipulate him into doing what he wants, and on others to access information germane to his ends. Soft power, which relies on co-option rather than coercion, is all about strategy and policy. As the other side of the Arkadin medallion, Sophie uses soft power in her dealings. Her decision not to employ the information regarding Arkadin's dark past allows her to keep the status quo, which serves her needs. While Arkadin uses the information to attack Stratten, Sophie chooses *not* to use what she knows. The power not to act is in and of itself a display of power. It's a subdued diplomacy. Her power lies in her ability to decide not to act whereas Arkadin's power almost always forces him to react. They are complete opposites in terms of how they execute their authority.

4. **Paternal love** Arkadin's love for his daughter is his main motivation behind the plot he devises. This paternal love urges him to protect her, to control her sexual life, and to oversee her choices. It is as obsessive as it is toxic. He regards Raina as his daughter and his most valuable asset as if he is running a "daughter business". She is just another corporation he has to supervise. He is even ready to murder his old friends and associates just to make sure that his daughter never learns about his dark past. He cannot lose her. That's where his reason to live comes from. She is too essential to his being. In some respects, this toxic love feels uncomfortable, as one of the characters attests in the movie. It's a strange type of love that evokes Freudian tendencies, an obsessive animalistic drive which ultimately propels a powerful man into suicide.

5. **Romantic love** *Mr. Arkadin* has a very subtle theme of romantic love that decides the fates of almost all major characters. As already mentioned, Arkadin shows ill-advised paternal care towards his daughter and the other characters, like Raina, Mily, and Sophie, have suffered or are suffering from romantic love throughout the story. Raina, despite knowing what kind of a man Stratten is and what kind of a job he is hired to do, seems to have fallen for him. Her infatuation and her desire to please him is so strong that she follows the instructions of a man she's known for only a brief amount of time, disregarding her father in the process. Her sorrow at the end of the movie is multi-layered: the two men whom she loved are now gone, and she might have had something to do with it. Sophie's love acts similarly in that she still loves Gregory Arkadin, but that man, too, is long gone. She has a new life, a new business and new husband(s), and yet, Sophie still has a soft spot for Arkadin even after the latter's betrayal. The movie doesn't spend too much time developing her character, but Mily also seems to be romantically tied to Stratten. Her dream of becoming rich is less about her motivation for money than being a romantic criminal couple who become rich *together*. Like Raina, she also does whatever Stratten tells her to do, and like Raina, that also leads to her tragic end.

6. **Past** In the movie, the past emerges almost as a physical space that has a real and tangible connection with the present. Even the movie's flashback structure makes this relationship as relevant and inevitable as possible—at least as far as the Orson Welles' original conception goes. For Gregory Arkadin, the past is where his identity was forged, so it is something to be destroyed by getting rid of everyone that has a connection to it. For Sophie, too, the past is where her story was forged, but it is something to be cherished and embraced. Arkadin fears his past whereas Sophie understands it. Arkadin uses his past as a weapon, while Sophie uses it as a shield. Arkadin wants to divorce himself from the shackles of time, whereas Sophie hides herself in a protective cocoon. In each case, identity emerges as a function of the past. Both Arkadin and Sophie have new personas in the present; however, the former wants it to be isolated, while the latter appreciates its continuity.

7. **Crime** Crime appears as the essential motivator and plot engine in the movie. Its protagonist, with whom we are invited to identify, is a petty criminal peddling cigarettes and contraband goods. The antagonist has his whole life centred around crime: be it helping the Nazis or Fascists in building their regimes, or running a sex trafficking gang, or killing the members of the said gang so that his criminal past wouldn't surface. In fact, Gregory Arkadin is so deeply synonymous with criminal behaviour that he almost becomes a caricature of himself, a metaphor whose symbolic meaning goes beyond the story's borders. Indeed, the film scholar James Naremore suggests that *Mr. Arkadin* can be construed as a Cold War allegory with Guy Van Stratten resembling a young, athletic Richard Nixon and Gregory Arkadin a stand-in for Josef Stalin. Stratten, Mily, Sophie, and all the peculiar interviewees Stratten interrogates throughout the story are or were part of a criminal underground network at some point in their lives. Raina, who seems to be the only innocent party, is eventually impacted by the consequences of a criminal enterprise.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

Orson Welles' original script required a flashback structure, within which the story went back and forth in time a la *Citizen Kane*; however, after removing Welles from the decision process, Louis Dolivet, along with the editor, decided to simplify the narrative by removing flashback scenes and employing a more straightforward storytelling. In the *Confidential Report* cut, the movie opens with a voiceover by Stratten as he arrives at the motel where Jakob Zouk stays. The Criterion Collection cut, closest to Welles' vision, does not have a voiceover and instead has Stratten walk quietly into the complex. The latter's eerie superiority over the former is undeniable. From a technical standpoint, Welles used highly dynamic camera work to reflect the adventure style of the story as well as low angle photography to strengthen the domineering effect of Mr. Arkadin himself.



Images 1-2: Welles' usual deep-focus photography and contrast-heavy mise-en-scenes





Images 3-4-5-6: Shadow, light play, and reflections offering depth, ambiguity and suspense



Images 7-8: Low angle to indicate dominance and power