

# THE STRANGER (1946)

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' third feature film, *The Stranger*, is an intriguing blend of film noir, thriller and horror. Set in the immediate aftermath of the World War II, it tells the story of a United Nations War Crimes Commission agent hunting down a dangerous Nazi officer, Franz Kindler, who is known as the architect of the genocide. *The Stranger*, in another director's hand, could have become an escapist Hollywood entertainment; however, Welles injected enough politics and narrative sophistication to elevate the story over the expectations of the genre. The movie was also the first commercial film ever to use documentary footage about the Holocaust.

**Background** Orson Welles agreed to direct this movie because he wanted to prove to the Hollywood executives that 1) He could make a movie that is a box-office success, 2) He could work to a deadline, and 3) He could stick to a budget. He hit all his targets: The movie grossed \$3.22 million on a \$1.034 budget. The filming ended before the deadline, and he managed to stay under budget. Welles was given only marginal creative freedom. The extended and more Wellesian version of Meinike's flight through South America was ultimately cut and destroyed by the studio. This is one of the main reasons why Orson Welles dismissed this movie and why critiques consider this as his worst film. Still, the tone of the movie and certain shots carry his signature style. It's also worth noting the DNA the film shares with Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), which tells the story of two detectives, disguised as interviewers, arriving in a small town to hunt down a serial killer who is the uncle of one of the town residents.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

**Franz "Charles Rankin" Kindler** The main brain behind the gas chambers and now lives in a small New England town under the false identity of Charles Rankin.

**Agent Wilson** He works for the Allied War Crimes Commission and is hell-bent on catching Franz Kindler.

**Mary Longstreet Rankin** She is married to Charles Rankin and none the wiser about her husband's true identity.

**Noah Longstreet** Mary's worried brother helps Agent Wilson catch Kindler and save his sister.

**Judge Adam Longstreet** The respected Supreme Court judge and later learns that his daughter Mary is married to a Nazi.

**Konrad Meinike** A former Nazi officer, he comes to America to convince his old friend Kindler to atone for his crimes.

**Mr. Potter** The town clerk who runs a coffee shop and knows everyone.

**Sara** Mary's maid, who is concerned about her mistress' safety and well-being.

## SYNOPSIS

The convicted Nazi officer Konrad Meinike escapes from prison. Under strict surveillance of the Allied Forces agents, he locates his former associate, war criminal Franz Kindler, in a small town in Connecticut, who now lives under the pseudonym Charles Rankin. Kindler/Rankin regards Meinike as a risk and kills him. Kindler/Rankin marries the Supreme Court Justice's daughter Mary. Agent Wilson arrives in Connecticut and starts investigating Charles Rankin, who has an obsession with clocks, like Franz Kindler. Kindler/Rankin kills his wife's dog because it was about to unearth Meinike's body. Agent Wilson tells Mary's brother about his suspicion and asks for his help. They show Mary the footage of concentration camps and reveal the truth about her husband. Mary doesn't believe the story and instead chooses to help Kindler/Rankin by covering for him. After a nervous breakdown, she becomes a threat to Kindler/Rankin, who decides to kill her. When Mary finds out that, she shoots him at the clock tower. Injured, Kindler/Rankin climbs onto the clock mechanism and impaled by one of the clock's moving figures.

## SCENES

*A risky plan* Agent Wilson and the other members of the Allied War Crimes Commission argue over whether they should release a Nazi officer from prison. Angry at the prolonged discussions, Wilson tells them this is their only chance and that he is going to take all the responsibility.



*On the run* Konrad Meinike is made to believe that he's escaped from prison, but his every move is surveilled. Meinike finds Franz Kindler, living in Harper, Connecticut, under the name Charles Rankin. He arrives in Harper and leaves his suitcase with the town clerk. He lures Agent Wilson to an empty gym and knocks him out with a heavy iron ring.



*Murder* Meinike goes to Kindler/Rankin's house and meets his soon-to-be wife Mary. He and Kindler/Rankin meet in the woods. Meinike tells him he has killed the agent who followed him and urges Kindler/Rankin to confess his sins. Kindler/Rankin strangles him and hides his dead body under the leaves.



*Clock clue* Agent Wilson recovers. Without revealing his identity, he asks the town clerk about the strangers who have arrived in town recently. As he crosses off the names, the church clock gets his attention. He meets the mechanic who turns out to be Mary's brother Noah. He tells Wilson that his brother-in-law is going to work on the clock. Kindler/Rankin marries Mary and buries Meinike's body before he goes on honeymoon.



*The dinner* Agent Wilson is invited to the Supreme Court Justice's house. Kindler/Rankin and Mary have returned from their honeymoon. At dinner, they discuss the War. Kindler/Rankin argues Germans will never stop warring and that they should be exterminated. When someone points out Karl Marx was not violent, Kindler/Rankin points out that he was a Jew not a German.



*Suspicious all around* Agent Wilson is preparing to leave town as he concedes Rankin is not Kindler. Kindler/Rankin takes Mary's dog, Red, out for a walk, but Red discovers Meinike's body. Mary reveals to Kindler/Rankin that she dreamed about the little man, Meinike, she met on their wedding day. Wilson realizes only a Nazi would call Marx a "Jew" and decides to stay.



*Investigation deepens* Agent Wilson reveals the truth about Kindler/Rankin to Noah, who agrees to help out. Wilson and Mr. Potter go through Meinike's suitcase while Kindler/Rankin and Mary arrive at the shop. At the mention of the "little man," Mary moves to say something, but is stopped by Kindler/Rankin.



*False confession* Kindler/Rankin tells Mary that the “little man” was someone who blackmailed him when he was a student in Geneva. Wilson and Noah find Red’s body in the woods. The vet reveals that the dog was poisoned. After examining the dog’s front paws, Wilson concludes that Red must have been digging for the dead body.



*Manipulation* Kindler/Rankin learns about the search party for Meinike’s body. He confesses to Mary that he killed “the little man” and the dog to protect himself, but still sticks to the blackmail version of the story. Mary believes him and agrees to be his accessory by promising to stay quiet about it.



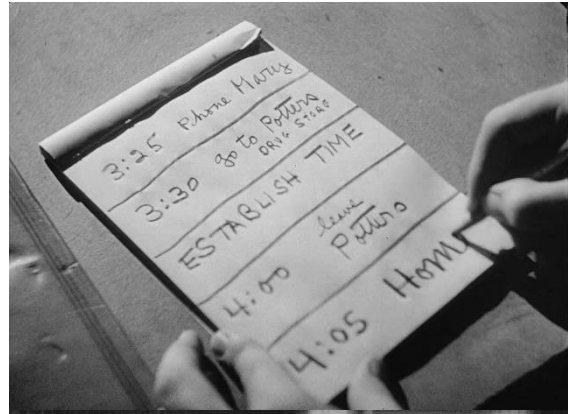
*Interrogation* Meinike’s body is found. Agent Wilson, in the presence of Mary’s father and brother, interrogates Mary about the little man. She lies about meeting him. Wilson shows Mary the footage of the concentration camps and tells her that her husband was the Nazi officer who invented the gas chambers. She runs off.



*The clock ticking* Kindler/Rankin fixes the church clock. The townspeople congratulate him. At the reception, Agent Wilson meets Kindler/Rankin and Mary. He t gives them a quote about the world getting smaller when committing a crime, which confuses Mary. After everybody is gone, Kindler/Rankin berates her for inviting Agent Wilson. Mary is on the verge of a breakdown.



*Both sides scheming* Mary's maid, Sara, reports to Agent Wilson about Mary's breakdown. Wilson fears that Kindler/Rankin may try to kill her. Kindler/Rankin is seen to be sawing a rung of the ladder up to the church tower with the clock. He prepares a schedule detailing his scheme. He phones Mary to tell her to meet him at the church but then stays to play checkers with Mr. Potter.



*Unraveling* Sara pretends to be having a heart attack to prevent Mary from leaving the house. Kindler/Rankin returns home in accordance with his alibi/schedule but is shocked to see his wife alive. He confesses that she was supposed to climb up the broken stairs and die. She calls him Franz Kindler and asks him to kill her.



*Justice* Agent Wilson sets up roadblocks so that Kindler cannot escape. Mary goes to the clock tower and finds Kindler hiding there with a gun. Agent Wilson arrives and tells him that he's been surrounded. As the two men fight, Mary grabs the gun and shoots Kindler. Injured, Kindler steps out onto the clock mechanism only to be impaled by the sword of a moving figurine. He falls off the tower.



## CHARACTERS

***Franz Kindler / Charles Rankin*** He is reportedly the main brain behind concentration camps and gas chambers. After Hitler's defeat he destroys all the evidence that could tie him back to the Holocaust. Living under the false identity of Charles Rankin, Franz Kindler is a narcissistic psychopath who is incapable of empathy and does not have any regard for human life. He is a first-rate schemer and manipulator, using people as tools for his evil ends.

***Devious*** According to Agent Wilson, what separates Franz Kindler from the likes of Goebbels and Himmler is his devious passion for anonymity. He preferred to stay in the shadows not because he didn't have an ego, but because he was prepared for all types of scenarios including the defeat. He was calculating, he was ready, and he was a couple of steps ahead of everyone. His duplicitousness is a feature, not a bug. It is the reason why he's so good at looking like an ordinary teacher married to a beautiful woman. He is a devious, two-faced monster. As the movie *Usual Suspects* reminds us, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist."

***Cunning*** As soon as he sees his old friend, he understands that he was released so that he

could lead the agents to him. At that moment, Meinike becomes a threat to his survival. This first murder starts a chain reaction, but Kindler stays calm. First, he gets rid of the dog. Then, seeing he has little room for manoeuvring, he surprisingly confesses to killing both Meinike and the dog by concocting a story that paints him as a victim in the eyes of his wife. The impetus behind this is his desire to control the only witness who could tie him back to Meinike. Mary is not his wife anymore, but his accomplice. And once he realizes that his wife has also become a liability and a threat to his survival, he devises a plan that not only ensures that Mary's death will look like an accident but also gives him a water-tight alibi.

**Manipulative** Kindler appears as an incredibly potent manipulator in two separate scenes. The first one is the family dinner immediately after his marriage to Mary. Agent Wilson, suspicious of Rankin's identity, asks Kindler about his thoughts on Germany. Kindler/Rankin, aware of Wilson's agenda, creates a perfect façade of an anti-Nazi persona on the spot, belittling German people and cursing their lust for another war. He ironically suggests the annihilation of German people as the "final solution", which almost convinces Agent Wilson that Rankin cannot be Kindler.

**Agent Wilson** From the very first scene, he is introduced as an outspoken and frustrated member of the Allied War Criminals Commission, determined to catch a Nazi fugitive, one of the biggest perpetrators of genocide, the "obscene" Franz Kindler. He is the mastermind behind the plan of letting Meinike "escape" from prison so that he can lead them to Kindler.

**Determined** Agent Wilson is determined to catch the "obscene" monster that is Franz Kindler because he wants this Nazi horror to be eradicated, root and branch. He is willing to release Konrad Meinike because he knows he will lead them to Kindler, something the Commission is reluctant about. This doesn't deter Wilson because he knows Kindler won't stop. To him, Kindler is a cancerous cell that needs to be dealt with before it spreads once again. That's why he tells the Commission that he is taking full responsibility. His determination comes from his desperation.

**Methodical** Wilson displays a methodical approach in catching Kindler. First, he allows Meinike to believe that he has escaped prison to give him a false sense of security. Then, he follows him to Harper, Connecticut, where he likewise tricks the town clerk. After earning his trust by letting him believe that he's winning at checkers, Wilson gathers crucial information about the strangers. He reveals his suspicions to Mary's brother, Noah, to bring him to his side so that he would have more leverage in convincing Mary. Then, he starts working on Mary by first appealing to her humanity via Holocaust footage and then revealing the truth about her husband. He doesn't get discouraged when Mary refuses to believe him. His crude psychoanalysis reassures him: "But we have one ally, her subconscious. It knows what the truth is and it's struggling to be heard," which proves to be prophetic as Mary ends up exposing and killing Rankin. Agent Wilson approaches this investigation as if this was a war as evidenced in his celebration after Rankin's death: "V Day in Harper."

**Mary Longstreet Rankin** Beautiful and educated, Mary Longstreet plays the quintessential virgin figure who is about to be spoiled by a stranger. That she is in love with the monster points to the American psyche of that era: She is the innocent and pure soul at "home" who is under threat by the horror lurking "outside". She is also smart and has a strong sense of self-worth. Finding out that she is in love with a mass murderer has her confused and cornered.

**Confused** Mary's confusion is multi-faceted in that it is both psychological and sociological. Her mind is suffering from cognitive dissonance because she does not and cannot believe that the man she loves is pure evil. Agent Wilson is perceptive in observing that: "[facts are] too horrible for her to acknowledge. Not so much that Rankin could be Kindler, but that she could ever have given her love to such a creature." This split in her psyche ultimately leads to her nervous breakdown. This cognitive dissonance also works on a sociological level as it speaks to a very American fear: "That the horror is just around the corner and that anyone can hurt us." Traditional American way of life, as symbolized here in a small town, will always be under threat, be it the Nazis or the Communists.

**Loyal** As soon as Kindler realizes that Mary can bring him down, he exploits her love for him to bring her to his side. After all, this is a war between two sides: Wilson and Mary's family *versus* Kindler and Mary. At that moment, Mary has no choice but to stay loyal to her husband because Kindler has made this war hers as well by turning her into an accomplice. She now must protect Rankin *and* herself. Yes, she is loyal to him, but more crucially she is loyal to the values she's been

brought up with. When those loyalties clash, she suffers a nervous breakdown. "That's the usual result of a person being inwardly divided," says Agent Wilson, and we agree with him because Good and Evil cannot occupy the same space. That conflict is also at work when Mary chooses to face Kindler alone, despite the risks: she has betrayed the Good and now has to fight in the name of it.

**Konrad Meinike** He is a former Nazi officer and a convicted war criminal. Though he professes that he has changed and found peace in God, he is still the same ruthless killing machine he once was. His time in prison has only made him delusional and paranoid.

**Delusional** He wants to meet Kindler because he believes it is his mission to urge him to atone for his sins. He is a changed man now: from a Nazi agent to God's agent preaching peace. Therefore, Meinike regards his freedom as a spiritual gift from the "highest" rather than a physical absence of a prison cell. And he has come to help Rankin reach salvation. Of course, Rankin sees through the charade immediately: "They freed you so you'd lead them to me," he says, already plotting to get rid of him. At that point, though, Meinike has become so delusional that he describes Agent Wilson as the evil one who "was dressed like any other man. He even smoked a pipe."

**Ruthless** Prison and God have not softened Meinike. Despite his repentance, he is still the same Nazi war criminal who kills anyone who stands in his way. Only now he is under the spell of a different power. The man is the same man. Kindler clues us in on this cosmetic change when Meinike tells him that he's been freed by "the highest," the same code phrase he uses to communicate with the other Nazis. "The highest" means Hitler. When he hears this, Kindler is duly confused. "You don't mean?" he says, and Meinike immediately corrects him: "I mean God." It's now God in whose name he kills. It used to be the Nazi party and Hitler. Meinike is nothing but a blunt tool. He is as ruthless as he has always been.

**Mr. Potter** Mr Potter is the town clerk who also runs a corner shop that sells everything from drugs to magazines to coffee. He is a very resourceful and inquisitive person, acting like the unofficial mayor of Harper. He is also the movie's comic relief, his eccentric traits rendering him relatable and fun.

**Resourceful** He claims that he, as town clerk, runs the town. As such, he knows not "just about everybody" but "everybody" in town. Even the bus stops in front of Potter's drugstore, where the town of Harper begins. Wilson is greeted by Mr. Potter after he gets off the bus. Meinike also entrusts Mr. Potter with his suitcase. All this is to establish that Mr. Potter is indeed who he says he is: the resourceful Informant. By welcoming everyone to town, he also gets to record all the strangers who have arrived in town. The list he gives Agent Wilson proves to be crucial.

**Inquisitive** His resourcefulness comes from his endless curiosity. He doesn't just run Harper's corner drug store: He *is* the corner store. Agent Wilson says that being a town clerk "must be quite a responsibility." No, it's more than that. It's Mr. Potter's mandate to know all the goings on about town. When Wilson arrives, Mr. Potter barrages him with question after question as if he is the investigator because Wilson is the new stranger. This inquisition helps Wilson understand what kind of a man Mr. Potter is and how useful he can be. Kindler has long realized that and makes sure that he plays checkers with Mr. Potter as part of his alibi because he knows he can rely on Mr. Potter remembering this when needed.

## THEMES

**1. Self-Love** Mary's love makes her vulnerable and gullible, but the defining characteristic is its self-referentiality. It's a product of her ego. She is momentarily paralyzed by love's attractive power so much so that she sacrifices her own well-being in the service of it. But she eventually replaces it with something else. Agent Wilson's observation of her is quite apt: "...but that *she* could ever have given her love to such a creature." Her love is so intricately connected to her sense of self that she cannot endure devaluing it. That's why she sticks with Kindler at the risk of becoming a criminal. And that's the same ego that ultimately wants Kindler to kill her when she figures out the truth. She "couldn't face life knowing what I've been to you." Who was she? A lover to a mass murderer. It is about her, not Kindler, when she adds: "But when you kill me, don't put your hands on me! Here! Use this!" She feels spoiled and violated. Her dignity overpowers her love at the moment of truth and her shooting Kindler repairs her own sense of worth.

**2. Politics** Politics is not the main concern of the movie as it was supposed to be a Hollywood thriller, but it still permeates the story in subtle ways. Orson Welles, via documentary footage of the Holocaust, introduces the politics of war as a meta-commentary. The monster lurking in the shadows becomes a war criminal responsible for genocide. Suddenly, the police procedural is not only entertainment, but politicized to lend the movie a political heft. Orson Welles was very vocal about his anti-Nazi views, and *The Stranger* gives his political activism another potent platform. Having Kindler mention the “extermination” as a solution to an imagined problem involving a race is his way of rendering the idea as ludicrous as possible.

**3. Psychology** The investigator Agent Wilson employs his rather clumsy psychoanalysis on Mary while trying to explain away her unwillingness to accept the presented truth. His reference to Mary’s “subconscious” is unfortunately erroneous as there is no such thing as subconscious in psychoanalytical literature; however, his larger point regarding psychology still stands if we assume that he actually means “unconscious mind” in the theory of repression. In Mary’s case, this plays out in a fascinating manner. First, the relationship between her ego and her love causes a split in her psyche, forcing her to push the truth deep in her consciousness. Second, the resulting repressed guilt surfaces in the shape of a dream in a very Freudian fashion. She dreams about Meinike, who appears to move away, but his “shadow stayed there behind him and spread out just like a carpet.” She course-corrects her cognitive dissonance when she eventually kills the source of her guilt, accomplishing her wish-fulfilment. Mary’s character arc is an interesting dramatisation of psychoanalysis, which was getting more and more popular in America in the 1940s and 1950s.

**4. Justice** *The Stranger* presents a consistent moral structure, in which Evil is defeated by Good. Probably the film’s least interesting part, its ending, wraps up this moral universe by having the pure and innocent soul kill the devil in a heavily symbolised moment. The “fiery sword of Siegfried” that Kindler discusses during his ironic dinner monologue ultimately becomes the sword of the American town that delivers the justice to him. And it is of no coincidence that Mary, who deals the first blow, happens to be the daughter of a Supreme Court Justice. In this world, where the moral order is momentarily disrupted by Evil, murder also becomes an accepted form of justice, a “Carthaginian peace” if you will.

**5. Town life** *The Stranger’s* take on the traditional American town is performative and optimistic. While providing the audience with idyllic scenery, Harper also emerges as another character, representing The Familiar to The Stranger. The horror festering outside comes to town to spoil it, but the forces within—justice, honour, pride, law, purity—prevail in the end, eradicating the threat it poses to its way of life. Therefore, the town as the sacred embodiment of traditional puritan values is saved and protected by killing Kindler on the church clock in the presence of the townspeople.

**6. Appearance** Both the protagonist and the antagonist hide their true intentions in order to get what they want: The investigator appears to be friendly with the town clerk so that he can glean as much information as possible about the town and its denizens. The Nazi officer appears to be a loving husband, teacher and clock enthusiast so that he can blend in until time is right for his nefarious plans. Meinike believes that he has escaped prison whereas he is simply let go by the Commission in hopes that he’ll lead the agents to Kindler. It is interesting to navigate through such dramatical and situational ironies that fuel the narrative engine.

**7. Past** Franz Kindler / Charles Rankin and Meinike have worked in the concentration camps as a Nazi officers. They are hiding from the law. However their past catches up with them and they die at the end. Franz Kindler tries to hide his past and Agent Wilson tries to expose him in his new town.

**8. Quest / investigation** Agent Wilson is determined to find out where Franz Kindler / Charles Rankin is and bring him to justice sooner or later. He first allows Meinike from the prison with the intention of trailing him to catch Farnz kindler, then follows him pretending to be a old clocks expert.

## CINEMATIC NARRATION

The movie displays some of the cinematography and long takes Orson Welles is famous for, but it is certainly not on the level of *Citizen Kane* or *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Throughout *The Stranger* Welles appears as more of an artisan than an artist, letting the genre conventions play out rather than attempting to create visual poetry. That said, he still manages to sophisticate an otherwise straightforward storytelling by using Holocaust footage from the *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945) documentary made by George Stevens, James B. Donovan and Ray Kellogg. These post-liberation scenes add a more serious and immediate political angle to a genre that Hollywood had long



exploited for entertainment and escapism.



*First use of documentary footage about the Holocaust in a commercial film*



*Agent Wilson and Mr. Potter play a game of checkers – The reflection in the mirror highlights the true game Wilson is playing with Mr. Potter as part of his investigation.*



*Franz Kindler killed by the Angel figurine that chases the Devil on the Church clock, a symbolic reading of Good vs. Evil within the duality of Angel vs. Devil.*

*Metaphorical use of objects: Mirrors and Clocks*



*Welles' signature expressionist style*