

Citizen Kane (1941)

Review by CGK (An online movie blogger whom I strongly recommend --
his reviews are very well researched and extremely well written.)

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At one time or another, after viewing a certain number of films, there is a tendency for those interested in the cinema to want to express their interest in the subject with quantifiable terms--to make lists ranking films based on preference or "greatness". Perhaps these evaluations represent a search for the most effective and artistic expressions in a still relatively young medium. Whether the intent be to educate or to sell videotapes, a few of these lists have been widely publicized such as Sight and Sound's international poll of the greatest films (taken once a decade) and the AFI's listing of the 100 best American films. Both of these show *Citizen Kane*, directed by Orson Welles and released in 1941, firmly positioned at the coveted number one spot, and its reputation shows no signs of waning. If *Kane* has now comfortably settled into the general title of "greatest film of all-time", how did it get there? Rather than merely accepting the work's ascribed masterpiece status, its filmmakers, production, structure, characters, themes, and influences all deserve study. One of the film's rare qualities that makes it so admired is its ability to yield considerable thematic ideas upon further inspection; almost every sequence or even shot seems to have significance beyond what the frame contains. Maybe this is one of the most important things that Welles brought so strikingly to American cinema with his first feature: a deeper meaning behind all of the technical wizardry of the medium and the importance of analyzing and discovering this meaning.

Production Background

Before looking at the film itself, some mention should be made about the lives of William Randolph Hearst and Orson Welles as well as the controversy surrounding these two men over the release of *Kane*. The eponymous and tragic character of Welles' film was thought to be based on Hearst, although to what degree the film was an attack on his character was unknown. Welles insisted in a 1951 interview that *Kane* was not Hearst, interestingly adding, "*Kane* was raised by a bank. That's the whole point of the picture" (Higham 21). Possibly these denials were made because of the threat of legal action; the picture itself was almost not released because of the Hearst press's attacks on it and on RKO. A documentary entitled [*The Battle Over Citizen Kane*](#), directed by Michael Epstein and Thomas Lennon in 1996, presents the careers of Welles and Hearst leading up to the film and the ensuing fight over its release. It also focuses on the similarities between the film character, Welles, and Hearst, and leaves little doubt that Charles Foster Kane was drawn primarily from the real-life newspaper tycoon. After the picture was complete, RKO had second thoughts about even releasing it, but Welles threatened to sue the studio if they didn't.

Even besides Welles and prominent Hollywood scriptwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz, who had been to Hearst's estate a few times, the production team assembled for *Kane* was an impressive one that enabled the film to succeed in different stylistic areas. Gregg Toland, probably the most important member of the production other than Welles, was a brilliant cameraman whose contributions to the film included its revolutionary deep-focus photography, made possible because of his skill and experimentation as well as certain technical improvements (Cook 394). As original as many of the shot compositions are, Toland and Welles reportedly wanted to create a hypnotic flow of images where the mechanics of the filmmaking would be hidden and not distract the audience. The impressive, uniquely stylized set design by Perry Ferguson and Darrell Silvera was accomplished with an admirable economy of means since certain aspects of the film's physical construction were reused from other pictures. The lit window at Xanadu was in John Ford's *Mary of Scotland*, and the animated bats in the Everglades picnic sequence can also be seen in RKO's *Son of Kong*.

Kane was noted film composer Bernard Herrmann's first work for the screen, and he was given a much longer time period in which to create the effective score. Herrmann also composed the music as the film was shot, and some sequences were even tailored to match his score. One example of its complexity is that Susan's libretto in French is a speech about suicide, something her character later tries. Robert Wise, later a respected director, and Mark Robson did an excellent job editing the picture, particularly in sequences such as the opening newsreel and in complicated tricks like the "single take" into the El Rancho nightclub (Higham 12-17). For the film as a whole, notable stylistic influences include Ford's work, especially *Stagecoach* which Welles watched many times to prepare for directing his film; German Expressionism; and French poetic realism (Cook 393). Parallels have been drawn in terms of content or structure between Kane and earlier Hollywood films such as *I Loved a Woman* and *The Power and the Glory*, written by Preston Sturges (Higham 11). When completed, Kane had cost significantly less to make than Welles' next more somber picture, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, but was a financial failure nonetheless. The director was marked a loser in Hollywood and was never again allowed to exercise complete control on a film there.

Commentary

Kane begins with the shot of a "no trespassing" sign as the camera proceeds to explore the sordid splendor of Xanadu. This sequence begins to convey the huge personal and psychological expanse that makes up a complex man like Charles Foster Kane who as of yet remains an unknown entity. After the poetic and puzzling sequence of Kane's death, the film begins its unorthodox narrative structure with the famous newsreel segment. This montage sequence gives a superficial glimpse into the events of Kane's life with a few telling statements, such as labeling Kane's Xanadu a "monument built to himself." Kane is shown to encompass all the contradictions of America, as evidenced by contrasting judgments that he was a Communist as well as a Fascist. The editing and photography of this segment has the feel of amateur news footage with its unauthorized glimpses into Kane's estate through a fence or seemingly over a protective wall. As the newsreel ends, the viewer is subjected to the babble of reporters whose faces are obscured from the light, serving to protect their identities from the viewer. This distancing technique is intended primarily for Thompson (so that he may remain a reliable guide for the audience), the man on a quest to discover the meaning of Kane's final utterance: Rosebud. "It'll probably turn out to be a very simple thing," one of the reporters mentions, and he is right. But this single, strange thing provides the impetus for complex journey through Kane's life, even if its importance and meaning become somewhat obscured in the details.

As Thompson reads Thatcher's memoirs the filmmakers continue to flex their array of skills. Welles throws in a couple of visual jokes while at Kane's original home including Charlie's snowball striking the sign above their house in just the right place to become a period in 'Mrs.' and to dot a lower 'i'. There is also a triangle conspicuously hanging from the porch which represents the general choreography of characters within the frame throughout the film. Toland's camera manages to capture both the conversation inside the Kane house and the boy outside the window playing, emphasizing how the situation directly involves Charlie and yet he has no say in the matter. His mother is the person who dominates this beautiful sequence as the camera follows her around the house in a long take, keeping her centrally located within the frame. Agnes Moorehead's anguished but controlled cry to her son outside conveys what she is feeling emotionally, and her motive for sending Charles away may relate to an abusive father. Although it is outside of Thatcher's possible scope of narration, the viewer gets a sight of Rosebud being engulfed by the falling snow, symbolizing Kane's lost childhood. One of the film's most distinctive transitional methods, called by Welles "lightning mixes", is displayed when Thatcher says, "Merry Christmas..." and we leap forward in time to an older Thatcher who continues, "...and a Happy New Year".

Bernstein's narration can be considered somewhat biased judging by this man's admiration for the recently deceased newspaper tycoon; he even has a huge portrait of Kane up on his wall. His part of the story revolves around Kane's Hearst-like ascendancy in the newspaper business. When Kane signs his "declaration of principles",

his face is completely enshrouded by darkness, signaling his insincerity on the subject. Leland seems to realize this and asks Kane if he can keep the document, mockingly suggesting it may be important one day--like his first report card from school. Another interesting transition involves the cut from a photograph of the greatest newspaper staff in the world to the same men seated for a picture at Kane's newspaper office. Even as Leland and Bernstein talk at the party, Toland is able to capture Kane's dancing image reflected in a window behind them, maintaining the triangular balance of three characters interspersed within the frame. Even though Kane claims to be a champion for the people, upon his return, he ignores their welcome-home present and quickly drives off with his new wife. His workers wave admirably at him from out of the letters of the newspaper building, showing themselves to be insignificant parts in Kane's ultimate drive for success. The first two viewpoints Thompson questions are unable to provide many clues to solving the mystery that is Charles Kane, and Bernstein signals this by saying, "Thatcher never did figure him out, sometimes even I couldn't."

The film delves deeper into the protagonist's life as Thompson questions his "best friend" Jed Leland. The seemingly frozen nursing home patients in the background slowly dissolve into the background of Kane's house as Leland begins his story. The famous breakfast table montage shows the deterioration of Kane's first marriage as lighting and dialogue become harsher as time passes--intimate closeness becomes cold distance. Later, when Kane visits Susan's apartment for the first time, the snow ball object broken in the first segment can be seen among the mise-en-scene. This object's symbolic weight begins to grow in this scene as Kane talks to Susan about digging up some old things from his childhood, and she speaks about her mother. It becomes clear that Kane is going to fall in love with her, if only for associational reasons. The two seems to have trouble communicating or understanding one another already (a problem which worsens in the cavernous halls of Xanadu), suggesting their incompatibility and foreshadowing their eventual decline. The confrontation between Kane and Gettys shows both men's faces to be covered in darkness, implying they are both corrupt. Emily says that Charles has no choice in this matter, but Kane resists, maybe because the experience is too much like the one at the boardinghouse where he also had no control. Susan's poor opera performance is panned by the workers on the catwalk, again showing Kane's failure at being able to control the public. Leland's depiction of Kane illustrates a man who really didn't know those closest to him and who tried to buy others' love and respect only to wind up completely alone, without any friends or convictions.

Susan narrates the latter part of Kane's life that shows their weakening marriage and increasing solitude. Susan's performance is again shown but the film gives more reaction shots of disapproval to emphasize what she was feeling. One shot shows her husband in an upper balcony looking down on a tiny Susan as if she were his puppet or doll. Kane's embarrassing applause shows that he is still convinced that he can sway the public with his opinions and actions. Kane realizes he has lost touch with the people and when Leland sends him the declaration of principles, he rips it up and calls it an antique. The montage of Susan's jigsaw puzzles illustrates her boredom as well as the jumbled narrative of the film. But does the viewer ever get the final piece to the puzzle that explains Kane's life? After Susan leaves him, a lonely Kane passes by a set of mirrors which, contrary to his solitary emotional state, reflects his image many times. Kane refuses to look at these reflections, showing his refusal to recognize and accept the different sides of his complex personality. It seems not even Kane himself knew what he was all about.

Thompson responds that what he found out about Kane was, "not much, really." In the end many of the things that Kane had collected throughout his life, including his prized sled, are merely being burnt and diffused throughout the sky. No amount of things could ever satisfy Kane, and the results of rampant materialism turn out to be nothing more than junk and ashes. The final sequence again shows the "no trespassing" sign emphasizing Thompson's resigned statement: "I don't think any word can explain a man's life."

Critical Response

How much and exactly what we learn about Charles Foster Kane in the film has been an oft-discussed question by critics. On the surface he could easily be characterized as egomaniacal, loveless, and finally, completely isolated (Cook 402,406,408). His character also represents a bitter commentary on the American dream in his status as a complex, power-hungry businessman (Crowdus 37,87). In John Pitney's essay about antifascism in Kane, the central character becomes the focus of Welles' attack on fascism. Kane becomes the undeclared enforcer of fascist principles who would have become dangerous if he had been elected; even his political rally is shot in a way to suggest a similar meeting at Nuremberg (65-71). Interestingly, David Cook blames the new men from the Chronicle for distancing Kane from his liberal ideals (401), while Pitney feels Kane is fascist from the beginning and sees the issue of the new staff changing their boss as not addressed in the film (68). In any case it seems Kane would be ignorant of his views being characterized politically one way or another as evidenced by his meeting with certain fascist leaders in the newsreel and his subsequent assurance that there will be no war.

Charles Higham finds Kane to be somewhat sympathetic through Welles' performance and not intrinsically evil. But, nevertheless, he feels the protagonist is greedy, grandiose, proud, a cynical opportunist, and (incredibly) a two-dimensional character. Higham thinks Kane's is a generous portrait but lacks the man's true essence, and the other characters surrounding him are mere caricatures (45-6). Contrastingly, Peter Cowie sums up the protagonist's identity by saying, "Kane is all things to all men." He also reports that Welles has stated that Kane "abuses the power of the press" and is "at once egotistical and disinterested...at once an idealist and a swindler, a very great man and a mediocre individual" (32). Kane himself states, "If I hadn't been very rich, I might have been a really great man." Whether this is a true realization or Kane merely playing the victim, it seems that he could not change and tried to buy happiness until the very end. Regardless of what was finally learned about Charles Foster Kane, his character represents an extremely complex hero/villain whose dynamic nature allows for a wide exploration of ideas.

These ideas and thematic concerns are as varying as the views of the protagonist. Cook argues that the audience discovers much about Kane's life but not what he meant because, like *Rosebud*, he was ultimately meaningless. A general corollary to this idea is that reality itself is ambiguous and unreliable. Cook also sees *Rosebud*'s identity of an inanimate object as representative of Kane's inability to relate to people (409). Higham suggests the film occasionally illustrates an American nostalgic romanticism, characteristic of Welles, which believes in the myth of an America that maybe never existed (46). He lists the snowy scenes of Charlie's childhood as an example, but it seems an even better one occurs as Thompson first begins talking to Bernstein. Before Bernstein addresses the questions about his former employer, there is a brief vignette where he describes always remembering a beautiful girl he once saw long ago for only a brief moment. This poignant aside illustrates a kind of sad romanticism that similarly characterizes Kane's lost childhood and his favorite sled being the last thing he speaks of before dying. This mood would become central in Welles' adaptation of *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Higham sums up the film by labeling Xanadu a tomb of American dreams, "buried in the material splendor of 1940" (47). Cowie reports that Andre Bazin summarizes Kane's message in that it is worth nothing to conquer the world if one has lost one's childhood. Cowie himself discusses how Kane attempts to compensate for this loss by acquiring a vast number of material goods. He cannot create, only collect things that have no lasting personal importance or value; many of the things he collected wind up as junk to be burned (33). The theme of a grandiose figure meeting a tragic end is the blueprint for much of Welles' subsequent work (Cowie 53), but Kane arguably represents its fullest expression.

Not only is Kane much revered today, it also received a large amount of critical praise upon its release. Long-time movie reviewer for *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther, had much good to say about Welles' directorial debut, such as addressing the controversy around the film with, "suppression of this film would have been a crime." Already grand pronouncements were being made on the picture's behalf as Crowther labels it the "most surprising and cinematically exciting motion picture to be seen here in many a moon" and mentions it "comes

close to being the most sensational film ever made in Hollywood." He praises the work of Toland, Herrmann, and the "penetrating performances of literally every member of the cast". His only major complaint is the ambiguous nature of the central character who remains "an enigma--a very confusing one." He also laments that the "final, poignant identification of 'Rosebud' sheds little more than a vague sentimental light on this character." Although the film fails to provide a clear picture of Kane, outside of being selfish and an egomaniac, Crowther eventually concedes that "nobody understood him. Why should Mr. Welles?" He also notes the film's impressive scope and imagery composed of a "rapid and graphic rotation of thoughts". The film's unclear message, nevertheless, points in the direction of an overall thematic question: "For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Overall, although containing no outright stunning observations, Crowther's original review holds up quite well in relation to the now enormous amount of critical work related to Kane.

Clearly, what films are considered the 'greatest of all-time' depends on each person's individual selections and ranking films numerically is a somewhat absurd practice; it's analogous to comparing apples to oranges to bananas and so on. As these lists proliferate, maybe it is best to see their rankings as a combination of popularity and influence. How much Kane has influenced cinema around the world is hard to judge. Cowie states the picture was easily 15 years ahead of its time but does not really fit into any set aesthetic progress. He considers the film's main influence to have spread primarily for the two decades following its release (40). Similarly, Higham feels that the film's effects on cinema as a whole are not as extensive as generally claimed and have disappeared almost completely with the Cinemascope widescreen process. Cook, however, has entitled a complete chapter of his massive study on the history of narrative film, "Orson Welles and the Modern Sound Film". He claims that by attempting to reproduce the field of vision of the human eye and the aural experience of sound, Kane can be said to influence almost everything coming after it (409-10). Bazin used the film to champion his quest for a film aesthetic based on reality, the long take, and mise-en-scene rather than montage and the sequencing of images. The film has also inspired individual directors such as Carol Reed as well as whole movements such as the French New Wave. Its low-key lighting and flashback structure also find widespread use in film noir (Cook 409-10). In view of Kane's popularity and influence, it seems unjust that Welles was unable to complete more films according to his own design. Filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard sums up the film's importance by saying simply, "Everyone will always owe him everything" (Cook 420).

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