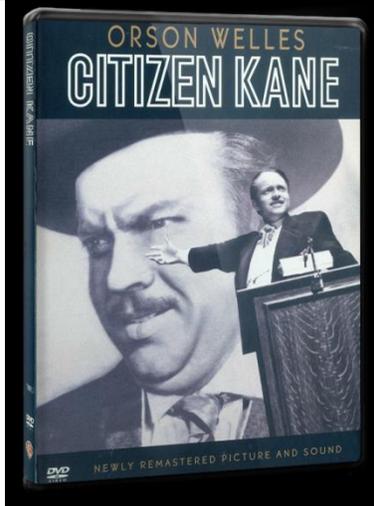


Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941)



Citizen Kane regularly appears at the top of the list of the greatest movies of all time, a remarkable achievement for a twenty-five-year-old director who had never made a film before. This lecture aims at answering the question, “What makes *Citizen Kane* so great?” The answer requires investigating the complexity of narrative as well as the complexity of technical effects. I make no apology for this complexity: it is what it is. But before delving into the complexity I should like to offer a simple explanation that lies behind it: magic. Orson Welles included among his many accomplishments that of being a skilled magician, and I believe that this aspect of his personality offers a key to what follows. Magic depends on misdirection in the service of illusion, both key elements in the creation of *Citizen Kane*. Unfortunately, explaining the illusion sometimes destroys the magic. For example, the suggestion of opulence in the Xanadu scenes relies in part on covering vast areas of the scene in black velvet, putting those areas effectively out of sight. The viewer mentally fills in the blanks and concludes that the entire scene must be as richly ornamented as the part actually shown.

Orson Welles made his name in radio and theatre before turning to film, and he had a genius for using the medium of radio for seizing the imagination of its listeners. Radio, of course, depends purely on sound, and *Citizen Kane* places an extraordinary emphasis on the power of sound, for example the distortion of voices depending upon the acoustical properties of their location.

Welles the magician delighted in the possibilities of illusion that he discovered in film-making, due in no small measure to the tutelage of cinematographer Gregg Toland. Camera trickery, in a world before the invention of computer-generated images, contributes much to the magic of *Citizen Kane*.

As in previous film lectures, I shall concentrate on story-telling, looking first at the original source material before posing the question “What is the story about?”, in twenty-five words or less, followed by an explanation of “How do you know that this is what it is about?” We proceed to the question “How does the director tell the story in cinematic terms?” before offering a number of film clips to illustrate these points.

Source: Original screenplay by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles

“Mankiewicz ... wrote the first two drafts. His principal contributions were the story frame, a cast of characters, various individual scenes, and a good share of the dialogue. Certain parts were also in close to final form in the Victorville script, in particular the beginning and end, the newsreel, the projection room sequence, the first visit to Susan, and Colorado. Welles added the narrative brilliance—the visual and verbal wit, the stylistic fluidity, and such stunningly original strokes as the newspaper montages and the breakfast table sequence. He also transformed Kane from a cardboard fictionalisation of Heart into a figure of mystery and epic magnificence.” [Carringer, p.35]

What is the story about?

Intrigued by the dying word of a newspaper magnate, a reporter, interviewing the man's friends and associates, produces a jigsaw-puzzle portrait without solving the mystery.

How do you know that this is what it is about?

"Intrigued by the dying word of a newspaper magnate"

"It isn't enough to tell us what a man did,' Rawlston says, 'you've got to tell us who he *was*.' The solution is Kane's dying word, a gimmick typical of Heart's yellow journalism. Rawlston gives Thompson a tap on the shoulder and a shark's smile, ordering him to go out and get Rosebud, 'dead or alive.'" [Naremore, p.144-145]

"a reporter"

Jerry Thompson, a cinema newsreel reporter, serves as a stand-in for the audience. "The character of Thompson is never clearly visible or identified—he is always viewed in backlit silhouette of from behind." [Dirks] Thompson's anonymity contributes to the sense of representing the audience.

"interviewing the man's friends and associates"

- Walter Parks Thatcher (written memoirs): Kane's legal guardian and bank manager
- Bernstein: Kane's personal manager
- Jedediah Leland: Kane's best friend
- Susan Alexander: Kane's second wife
- Raymond: Kane's butler at Xanadu

Multiple narrators: we see the same action in different ways, provided with new information, so that we understand the event in a new context when it reappears. "*Citizen Kane* is an unusual film in that the object of the investigator's search is a set of character traits. Thomson seeks to know what traits in Kane's personality led him to say 'Rosebud' on his deathbed; this "mystery" motivates Thompson's detective-like investigation." (Bordwell, 72-84)

"produces a jigsaw puzzle portrait"

See plot segmentation below. Actual jigsaw puzzles occur several times in the film.

"To Thatcher, Kane is a spoiled do-gooder who is a menace to business; to Bernstein, he is a hero who helped build the country; to Leland, he is an egomaniac who wants everybody to love him but who leaves only 'a tip in return.' ... The audience is invited to fear along with Susan, but also to feel sympathy for Kane, who is so pained by age and thwarted desire. ... Each phase of the movie becomes more painful than the one before, until we arrive at the most cynical of the witnesses, Raymond, who is ironically responsible for the most intimate details." [Naremore, p.156, 157]

"without solving the mystery"

Explanation of Rosebud shown only to the audience.

Two sleds:

- Rosebud: decoratively-painted, placid, pretty, from nature, innocent (from Kane's childhood home and a reminder of his mother)

- Crusader: metallic, strident, cold and heartless, crusading (received from Thatcher when Kane was Kane from his home to be the ward of the impersonal banking interest) [Dirks]

Non-linear storytelling

1. Xanadu: Kane dies. **First glass ball**
2. Projection room:
 - a. “News on the March” [provides us with a “map” at the beginning of the investigation into Kane’s life]
 - b. Reporters discuss “Rosebud”: “It isn’t enough to tell us what a man did. You’ve got to tell us who he was.”
3. El Rancho nightclub: Thompson tries to interview Susan
4. Thatcher Library:
 - a. Thompson enters and reads Thatcher’s manuscript
 - b. **First flashback**
 - Kane’s mother sends the boy off with Thatcher (“Crusader” sled)
 - Kane grows up and buys the *Inquirer*
 - Kane launches the *Inquirer’s* attack on big business
 - The Depression: Kane sells Thatcher his newspaper chain
 - c. Thompson leaves library
5. Bernstein’s office:
 - a. Thompson visits Bernstein
 - b. **Second flashback**
 - Kane takes over the *Inquirer*
 - Montage: the *Inquirer’s* growth
 - Party: the *Inquirer* celebrates getting the *Chronicle* staff
 - Leland and Bernstein discuss Kane’s trip abroad
 - Kane returns with his fiancée Emily
 - c. Bernstein concludes his reminiscence
6. Nursing Home:
 - a. Thompson talks with Leland
 - b. **Third flashback**: Breakfast table montage: Kane’s marriage disintegrates
 - c. Leland continues his recollections
 - d. **Third flashback continued**:
 - Kane meets Susan and goes to her room. **Second glass ball.**
 - Kane’s political campaign culminates in his speech
 - Kane confronts Gettys, Emily, and Susan
 - Kane loses election and Leland asks to be transferred
 - Kane marries Susan
 - Susan’s opera premiere
 - Because Leland is drunk, Kane finishes Leland’s review
 - e. Leland concludes his reminiscence

7. El Rancho nightclub:

a. Thompson talks with Susan

b. **Fourth flashback:**

- Susan rehearses her singing
- Susan's opera premiere
- Kane insists that Susan go on singing
- Montage: Susan's opera career
- Susan attempts suicide and Kane promises she can quit singing
- Xanadu: Susan bored
- Montage: Susan plays with jigsaw puzzles
- Xanadu: Kane proposes a picnic
- Picnic: Kane slaps Susan
- Xanadu: Susan loves Kane

c. Susan concludes her reminiscence

8. Xanadu:

a. Thompson talks with Raymond

b. **Fifth flashback:**

- Kane destroys Susan's room and picks up paperweight, murmuring "Rosebud". **Third glass ball**

c. Raymond concludes his reminiscence; Thompson talks with the other reporters; all leave

d. Survey of Kane's possessions leads to a revelation of Rosebud; exterior of gate and of castle; the end [Bordwell, pp.74-75]

How does the director tell the story in cinematic terms?

1. Narrative Structure

- Multiple narrators (the five people whom Thompson tracks down) The only time we see Kane directly and in the present is when he dies. Subjective recollections.
- "News on the March" short: objective, but it reveals nothing about Kane's inner life
- Omniscient narration: stagehands' reaction to Susan's opera debut; the hand with the paperweight in Xanadu; the key to "Rosebud"; the "No Trespassing" signs

2. Cinematography (Gregg Toland)

"You know how I happened to get to work with Gregg? He was, just then, the number-one cameraman in the world, and I found him sitting out in the waiting room of my office. 'My name's Toland,' he said, 'and I want you to use me on your picture.'" [Naremore, p.31]

"He appears to have been driven by a compulsion to expand the accepted technical boundaries of the medium. ... Toland insisted on using his own equipment because some of the pieces were fitted with his own special modifications and also because he was using a camera and lenses that were not commonly used in the major studios at the time." [Carringer, p.68, 69]

"Welles says that Toland spent enormous amounts of time patiently explaining the most elementary and basic things about cameras, camera angles, lenses, and lighting to him but that he always did this

quietly and in ways that carefully avoided showing Welles up in public. Clearly, too, Toland was selling Welles on the merits of a particular approach.” [Carringer, p.69]

- Deep-focus cinematography (obtained through the use of a wide-angle lens and narrowing the aperture setting): required faster film stock. Deep-focus cinematography externalizes the perspective. We tend to take each narrator’s version as objective. (In contrast to the point-of-view angels in a Hitchcock film)
- Long takes: “Permitted the actors to play scenes almost continuously, as they were accustomed to play them on the stage.” [Carrington, p.83]
- Elaborate camera choreography: moving the camera or staging multiple planes of action in order to eliminate the need for cuts. Pattern of penetration into the space of a scene (opening scenes past a “No Trespassing” sign and over a series of fences; the spectacular crane shot when Thompson goes to interview Susan Alexander; crane shots repeated in Thompson’s second visit to Susan) “Opens with an elaborate descending crane shot, the first recorded appearance of the kind of exaggerated moving-camera effects that were to become the Welles trademark. ... Later on, this crane shot would be joined optically to a similar exterior shot to give the appearance of continuous movement through the skylight.” [Carringer, p.71, 72] “Unlike Hawks, Ford, or any of the action directors of the time, he gives us very few moments when the camera sits passively and allows an actor’s body its own natural freedom.” [Naremore, p.138]
- Unconventional lighting, including backlighting and high-contrast lighting (e.g., RKO projection room, shot at daringly low light levels—“on the streams from the projection windows and a few small fill lights.”)
- Low-angle camera setups made possible by muslin ceilings on the sets
- Striking visual devices, such as shooting directly into lights (not an acceptable practice in conventional cinematography)
- In-camera dissolve (“The first shot slowly goes dark, the film is rewound to precisely the right point, the setup is reverse matched on an interior set, and the lights are slowly raised again.” [Carrington, p.82]
- “Documentary” quality of the newsreel conveyed by using “several different film stocks to make it appear that the different shots have been assembled from widely different sources.” [Bordwell, p.284]

3. Special effects (more than 50% of the film’s total footage involves special effects of one kind or another)

- Fades, dissolves, superimpositions: Optical printer: “An optical printer is a device in which a camera and a projector are lined up facing one another and made to run in exact synchronization. Developed film running through the projector is exposed on raw stock running simultaneously through the camera. By varying the light in the projector, one can create fades. By exposing the camera footage twice, one can make dissolves and superimpositions.” [Carrington, p.89]
- Montage: use of dissolves in a series of shots—used to compress time (see the examples in the plot segmentation). Notably the spectacular breakfast table montage, which compresses nine years into six scenes.

- Matte shots: live action shot on a set, and then the resulting film projected against a painted matte. Susan's suicide attempt: "In the foreground, only inches from the camera, are a medicine bottle and a glass. Behind them, unconscious on the bed, is Susan, sweating and gasping for breath. In the background, Kane and a servant break down the door to get in. All the planes of activity, from extreme foreground to distant background, are in focus. ... The multiplane composition revealing Susan's suicide attempt is not an extreme deep-focus effect, as it is usually described, but an in-camera matte shot. First, the foreground was lighted and focused, and shot with the background dark. Then, the foreground was darkened, the background lighted, the lens refocused, and film rewound, and the scene reshot. ... The shot reveals Welles not as a photographic realist but as a master illusionist." [Carringer, p.72, 82]
- Invisible montage: "Some of the deep-focus shots in the film were made not by simple photography but by a kind of invisible montage, a combining of two or more images in a complicated optical printing process that creates the illusion of a single shot. See, for example, the scene in which Kane, seated at a typewriter, completes Leland's opera review while Leland stands in the distance; the two figures in this shot were photographed separately and their images joined to look as if they occupied the same space and time. [Naremore, p.128]

4. Sound (recall Orson Welles's career in radio, and the sensation *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938)

- Exaggerated sound effects to produce extreme sound realism characteristic of a radio show. "*Citizen Kane* contains not a single moment at which the demand on our attention is left to the image alone." [Naremore, p.182]
- Overlapping, talk-over dialogue
- Distortion of voices: "The first spoken word (Charles Foster Kane's last word), which is ostensibly whispered, but whose reverberation endows 'Rosebud' with a paradoxical sonority and resonance." "The speeches of the labor leader at Union Square and of Kane at Madison Square Garden are affected by the reverberations of loudspeakers." [Naremore, p.169]
- Sound effects as punctuation for dialogue. "One of the film's most obvious uses of expressive sound involves the typewriter on which Kane completes Leland's opera review for the *Chicago Inquirer*. ... In the office of the drunk and sleeping Leland, Kane asks Bernstein for a typewriter. Welles cuts immediately to the hammering of the keys, which, with an exaggeratedly slow rhythm and an angry force, type out the letters of the word 'weak' in an enormous, emphatic close-up. Cut to Leland's office, where Leland wakes and begins to speak with Bernstein while Kane continues to type in the room beyond. The formerly isolated foreground noise now becomes distant, and from this moment on the sound of typing is accompanied by the regularly spaced returns of the typewriter carriage. Without exception, the more prolonged sound of the carriage is placed after the end of a rejoinder in the dialogue. The final confrontation between Kane and Leland, who will never see each other again, begins with a fresh and quite loud return of the carriage, which exactly coincides with a cut to the outer office and which seems all the more violent because Kane and the typewriter are now seen as large elements in the foreground. ... 'Hello, Charlie, I didn't know we were speaking.' Kane allows a brief lull to set in before his last rejoinder: 'Sure we're speaking, Jedediah. You're fired.' His line is followed by a final, exaggeratedly drawn-out carriage return, which puts an end to the conversation and to the two men's friendship. [Naremore, pp.173-174]
- "Lightning mix": transition in which sound links two scenes (e.g., Kane's hand-clapping for Susan's private recital for him dissolves into applause during Jedediah Leland's campaign speech for Kane before a small crowd. The mix links sexual and political conquest.

Kane and Hearst

- Both multi-millionaire newspaper publishers and wielders of public opinion
- Both political aspirants to the Presidency
- Both created extravagant mansions filled with art objects
- Kane buys Susan Alexander an opera house to further her singing career; Hearst bought a film studio to promote Marion Davies' career as an actress

Hearst tried to destroy the film by

- Buying and destroying the negative
- Forbidding his newspapers from advertising the film
- Pressuring theatres to boycott the film and threatening libel lawsuits

Clips

Clip 1 (Final Word, 3:11): “No Trespassing,” passing through barriers. Camera tracking: snow →cabin→glass ball→ “Rosebud”→nurse reflected in fragment of glass

Clip 2 (News on the March, 9:18): affectionate parody of Time Magazine’s “March of Time”—note “corkscrew prose,” varied film stock, portentous narrator

Clip 3 (Rosebud Dead or Alive, 1:52): lighting effect: shadows, high contrast, low illumination

Clip 4 (Thatcher Library, 1:17): larger-than-life statue, intimidating room, expressionist lighting, shadows, huge door, exaggerated sound effects

Clip 5 (Declaration of Principles, 2:25): low angles show ceiling (unconventional); Kane’s face in shadow

Clip 6 (Life with Emily, 5:43): interview with Leland; nine years compressed into montage of six scenes; notice the changes in each scene; intercutting dialogue

Clip 7 (Night at the Opera (I), 4:39; Negative Review, 2:07): long shot from stage to catwalk—middle section actually an RKO model; sound effects—percussion of typewriter; deep focus

Clip 8 (Suicide Attempt, 3:21): montage of reviews and nightmarish experience as seen from Susan’s perspective; bottle and glass; deep focus

Clip 9 (Life at Xanadu, 5:49): montage of jigsaw puzzles, echoes, enormous fireplace

Clip 10 (Susan Walks Out, 3:04; Destroying Susan’s Room, 3:21): low angle, visible ceiling; “You can’t do this to me”; startling bird; long corridor shot; an old man’s tantrum; Glass Ball (symbol for Susan, mother, and lost childhood); multiple mirror shot

Clip 11 (Rosebud, 3:21): vast accumulation of possessions, black smoke; reversal of opening camera movement