

Orson Welles, Citizen Kane (1941)

Major Credits:

Cast: Orson Welles (Kane), Agnes Moorehead (Mrs. Kane), Everett Sloane (Bernstein), Joseph Cotten (Leland), Dorothy Comingore (Susan)
Screenplay: Orson Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz (working title: American)
Cinematographer: Gregg Toland
Music: Bernard Herrmann

Background:

Welles brought to Hollywood in 1939 by financially troubled RKO under an unprecedented six-film contract giving him complete artistic control. His first feature was to have been an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's The Heart of Darkness.

Script was loosely based on life of William Randolph Hearst, who tried to suppress the film. The parallels between Kane and Hearst were readily recognized by the 1941 audience, adding a touch of the scandalous.

Like Kane, Welles himself had a rootless childhood, his parents separated and his mother died when he was eight. Welles, too, was a prodigy, an egotistical, public man. Sadly, the film has also become prophetic of its creator's long (though less lonely) decline.

Stylistic Qualities:

1. Depth of Field

- creates ambiguity: "The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image" (Bazin)

- creates sense of isolation of the characters rather than their relationship.

2. Moving Camera - imitates the inquisitive reporter, involving audience in the process of investigation and culminating in the climactic tracking shot over the rubbish of Xanadu.

3. Overlapping Sound Montage - what Welles called "lightning mixes," these bridge lengthy gaps in time. Welles' prior experience in radio enabled him to employ particularly expressive uses of sound throughout the film.

4. Camera angles - reflect Kane's rise and fall.

5. Lighting - to establish emotional moods (e.g., the screening room after the newsreel, to express spatial relationships (the cavernous quality of the mansion), to reflect psychological elements (Kane's face half-lit, Susan swallowed up in Kane's shadow).

6. Special Effects

- the matched dissolves in the opening sequence (imitating a tracking shot, but less "realistically")

- freeze frames (photo of Chronicle staff, door of Kane's "love nest")

- tracking shot "through" the skylight of the El Rancho (watch for cut disguised by lightning)

7. Flashback Structure - as in Caligari, the reminders of a subjective point of view call into question not only the "truth" of the story but also the "realistic" basis of cinema itself.

Questions for Discussion

1. Which of the narrative points of view is ultimately most convincing?

2. Welles himself called the "Rosebud" motif "dollar book Freud." Does the final identification of this symbol prove revealing or disappointing? That is, does the "rosebud" image strike you as a profound commentary on Kane's life or an ironic commentary on Thompson's attempt to unravel and understand it?

3. In light of the film's original title, what does Citizen Kane have to say about specifically American values?