

Citizen Kane

By Godfrey Cheshire

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It is now not one, but two. "Citizen Kane" strides forward, shadowed closely by the doppleganger: "CITIZEN KANE." The first is a movie directed by Orson Welles and released by RKO Radio Pictures in 1941, to considerable critical acclaim but disappointing box-office returns; at the Oscars it won only best screenplay (for Welles and Herman Mankiewicz). The second is the reputation: "the greatest film ever made." That superlative, which coalesced into critical orthodoxy in the 1960s, has its own history and of course can be, worse than an absurdity, an impediment. Truth be told, there are times when it seems "CITIZEN KANE" has wholly eclipsed "Citizen Kane." We have to strain to see the movie behind the monument.

Viewers who encounter it in the age of the computer should be cautioned to crank their expectations downward, to give "Kane" the chance it deserves — and needs. In the decades after its release, Welles's film inspired a generation of young European filmmakers to unleash an explosion of cinematic modernism that valued obliqueness, quietude, indirection, ambiguity. "Kane" exhibits few of those qualities itself. A Hollywood picture determined to outstrip Hollywood, it is hectic, bombastic, overdetermined, brassy with self-importance. Its psychology and social comment are leagues less sophisticated than those achieved by Henry James, among others, decades earlier, and even its celebrated visual vocabulary now looks fustian. In the 1940s, Welles's dramatic chiaroscuro, low-angled shots that revealed ceilings, crystalline depth-of-field, and so on, appeared powerful, modern, hyperarticulate. Today the same thing can seem not just baroque but dinky. Seen on TV, or a modern movie screen not shaped for its squarish picture, its proscenium is quashed by a puppet-show size; its people resemble miniatures, not giants.

The most likely way for a newcomer to be impressed, then, may be to ignore the possibility. Forget the reputation. Sit back, experience it as a souvenir of the studios' golden age. Above all, give it several viewings. Allow



Newspaper mogul Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) and his confidant Jed Leland (Joseph Cotten) stand amidst a sea of newsprint. Courtesy Library of Congress

time to absorb its flashy tricks — some extraordinary, some trite — until you begin to glimpse some of the ineffables behind them; the epic collision of talent and ambition, the sometimes inchoate paradoxicality, the strange soulfulness.

In "Kane," form determines content more than the other way around, and the key to the film's form (if a single one can be pinpointed) is radio. Welles was twenty-four, a Broadway boy-wonder, when he came west to take up his Hollywood contract, and one thing that seldom receives comment is how terribly anxious he must have been, behind the bluster and hype. With *tout* Hollywood waiting for him to land smack on his face, he took his time and covered himself well, bringing in many colleagues from his Mercury Theater group (including Joseph Cotten, Agnes Moorehead, and John Houseman), and relying, for both inspiration and example, on paradigms offered by his successes in radio: those include the newsreel show "The March of Time," a cinematic equivalent of which opens "Kane," launching us into a pseudojournalistic investigation of the death and life of just-expired newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane.

Imagine "Kane" as a radio play "set to images" and you have a useful angle on its central creative dynamic. In

perhaps no other great movie does the sound “lead” the picture as it does here. The film’s much-lauded “musical” structure, its use of syncopation, elaborate aural cues, and overlapping dialogue: all these owe to radio. So do things that seem primarily visual. Involving the most elaborate use of flashbacks seen in a Hollywood (or any?) movie till then, “Kane” recounts Kane’s life via the shifting, not always reliable testimonies of five former intimates, a technique Welles called “prismatic.” No doubt the device has numerous precedents and parallels in theater and the novel, but in those forms, such dreamily interwoven voices are exceptional; in radio drama, they’re standard.

Given the way that “Kane”’s narrative seems to blossom from seeds of monologue and memory, radio no doubt deserves credit for much about the film’s visual plan. If you’re to illustrate a time-shifting tale spun from many heightened, overheated subjectivities, the straightforward formulas of realism just won’t do, will they? Radio, when the mind vivifies its most suggestive images, tends to conjure an exaggerated, gothic/expressionist theater of the imagination, a bedazzled world of shadow and light, yawning with wide-angle distortions and fairytale architectures and perspectives so extreme as to induce vertigo. Such is the hot-house realm summoned up, Prospero-like, by Welles, using a photographic arsenal supplied (and in some cases created) by the great Gregg Toland.

Here’s where the paradoxicality — the battle (or ballet) between “Kane” and “KANE” — begins to show. The film’s style was originally hailed as “realistic.” Today, most viewers would judge it as hallucinatory as “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.” Which judgment is correct? Weirdly, the film makes a case that both are. Though utterly phantasmagoric by current codes of realism, “Kane” holds fast to its own notion of realism, and we have to admit its point: it is, at the least, a documentary of the inside of someone’s mind.

Paradox also infuses current appraisals of the film’s story, where a zestfully elaborated superficiality pretends toward, and glancingly attains, a kind of profundity. Sweeping from the late nineteenth century across most of the twentieth century’s first half, through the corridors of politics, media, show biz, big money, and high society, Kane’s vision of America is more operatic than analytical and surely no more incisive than could be found in the era’s better novels or magazines. Yet it became so iconic as to be accepted as cinema’s testament to the collective memory, while other sources have been

forgotten. In any case, the film is not really about backdrops; its country, finally, is the vast heartland known as Charles Foster Kane.

He is least interesting considered as a satiric portrait — or vicious caricature, the acid mostly supplied by Mankeiewicz — of right-wing press baron William Randolph Hearst, who hated the film and tried to stop its distribution. Welles obviously was after something grander in any event: Shakespearean Everymogul, one large enough to sustain his own decades-spanning, rafters-shaking, expertly overblown performance while also digging into modern America’s fears of loneliness and loss. Kane, after all, is the man who gains the world only to lose his soul; who builds an empire and a castle but forfeits the love of everyone around him, most movingly his oldest and best friend, the stoic newspaperman Jed Leland (Cotten).

Why the unstoppable trajectory toward that bitter end: dead in his mansion surrounded only by junk and servants? A pop-psychological mystery, “Kane,” like “Gatsby,” circles ever-backward looking for a reason and locates one finally in childhood trauma: Kane was wrenched from his mother at age eight. Though Welles and Mankiewicz both disowned that event’s poignant symbol — the little sled with the tender, vernal name — “Rosebud” by now has passed from cliché to archetype and survives, happily, as one of the film’s most poetic and inspired touches. “Kane,” in any case, cautions us that it may not explain anything after all.

Concerning Kane, perhaps it doesn’t. Concerning Welles, however, it asserts a connection to his own abruptly interrupted childhood and the epochal effort to entertain the world that followed. Such biographical linkages may be irrelevant to the worth of most movies, but in this one they end up being central. For “Citizen Kane” is nothing if not the great proof and paradigm of *self-expression* in the cinema. One may quibble with or ever deride its view of America, or human nature or cinematic technique, there’s no contesting this: Until Orson Welles did it, no one—no *artist*—had come to Hollywood in the sound era and (co) written, directed, and starred in his *own* studio movie, much as a novelist, a playwright or a composer conceives and controls a creative project.

Modern cinema, the era of the *auteur* and the art film, begins with that audacity, which forever after remains its primary symbol and holy text. Yet “Kane” continues to excite, impress, amuse, and astound (and, occasionally,

exasperate) today not because of its landmark status but because it still exudes the wonder and thrill of artistic discovery, the giddiness of high-stakes daring, the narcissistic pull of power, fame, and youthful self-regard. Beyond its many paradoxical fusions (of expressionism and realism, fairytale and reportage, projection and autobiography), it lets you sense what it must have felt like to be a boy genius suddenly let loose in the vast dream factory of Hollywood; the film's encyclopedic ambitions, its air of trying to cram everything (and then some) into a single movie, stem from the terror and possibility of that freedom.

As for how the movie turned into the superlative : it is a fascinating tale that runs from the rediscovery of American cinema in post-World War II Paris to battles over auteurism in America in the 1960s and beyond. Enterprising cinephiles should be urged to launch their own

voyage through the astonishing galaxy of opinion that, in illuminating "Kane," comprises "KANE." Read, among others, André Bazin, François Truffaut, Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael, Peter Bogdanovich, Joseph McBride, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and David Thomson. Ultimately, it's no secret that "Citizen Kane" became "the greatest film" by being, without question, the greatest *critic's film*.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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