Lecture 15:
Citizen Kane

Citizen Kane (1941) directed by Orson Welles

Professor Michael Green 1

Previous Lecture

- Film History

- Film Movements

- *L'Atalante*

This Lecture

- Orson Welles: A brief biography

- *Citizen Kane* in film history

- *Citizen Kane*: A formal analysis
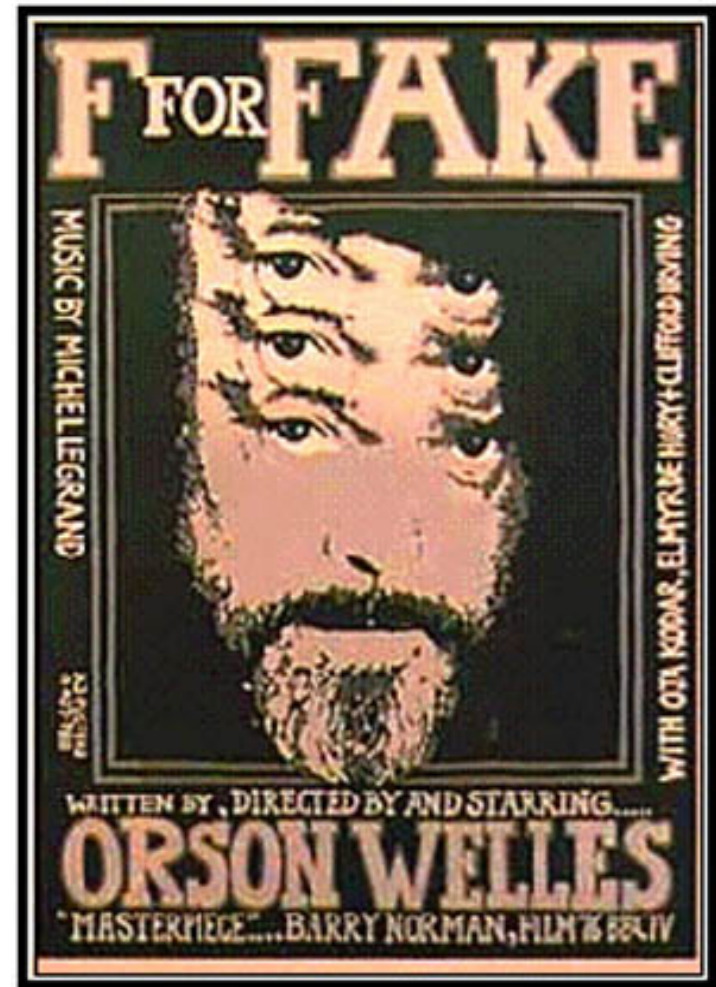
Orson Welles:
A Brief Biography

Orson Welles (1915-1985)

Lesson 15: Part I

Early Life

- He was born in Wisconsin in 1915.

- Welles started a career on the stage when he was still a teenager.

- He found major success in the theater in the 1930s as both an actor and a director.

Theater Highlights

- Welles staged a controversial but popular all-black production of *Macbeth* in Harlem.

- He formed the Mercury Theater with such famous actors as John Houseman and Joseph Cotton and staged a well-received *Julius Caesar* set in Fascist Italy.

Macbeth

Welles in Radio

- Welles was increasingly active on radio, as an actor, director and producer.
- He played *Hamlet*, adapting and directing the play himself, and produced a seven week series out of *Les Miserables*.
- He played Lamont Cranston on *The Shadow* and brought his Mercury Players to radio as well.

The War of the Worlds

- *The War of the Worlds* was an episode of the American radio drama anthology series *Mercury Theatre on the Air*. It was performed as a Halloween special on October 30, 1938 and aired over the CBS Radio network. Directed by Orson Welles, the episode was an adaptation of H. G. Wells' classic novel *The War of the Worlds*.

- The first half of the 60-minute broadcast was presented as a series of news bulletins, which suggested to many listeners that an actual Martian invasion was in progress.

The War of the Worlds (continued)

- Some fled their homes; others merely were terrified. The news-bulletin format was decried as cruelly deceptive by some newspapers and public figures, leading to an outcry against the perpetrators of the broadcast, but the episode launched Welles to fame.

War of the Worlds

Orson Welles and the cast of Mercury Theater on the Air
performing *The War of The Worlds* broadcast in 1938

Welles in the Movies

- RKO Pictures gave Welles a two-picture deal with complete creative control.

- Initially he wanted to film a version of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

- He then moved on to *Citizen Kane*, which he co-wrote with Herman J. Mankiewicz.

- *Kane* was Loosely based on the life of William Randolph Hearst. Welles wanted it to be a quintessentially American story.

Later Career

- *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942)
- *The Stranger* (1946)
- *Macbeth* (1948)
- *Othello* (1952)
- *Mr. Arkadin* (1955)
- *Touch of Evil* (1958)
- *The Trial* (1962)
- *Chimes at Midnight* (1965)
- *F for Fake* (1974)
- Sustained himself as an actor

Citizen Kane in Film History

Lesson 15: Part II

Citizen Kane (1941)

- The movie was blackballed by William Randolph Hearst, on whom the movie was loosely based.

- It was a critical hit, but a popular failure upon it's first release.

- It received nine Oscar nominations, losing Best Picture to *How Green was my Valley* and winning only for screenwriting.

Kane's Resurgence

- The film was a huge success in France in 1946 and was rescued by the French critics around the time of their development of the auteur theory, which they applied to Hollywood filmmakers.

- Since at least the early '60s, it has generally been considered the greatest of all films.

Why Study Kane?

- From the moment of its appearance, *Kane* has been **canonized**, which means that it has been included in the list of films that are considered artistically accomplished and culturally important.

- It has formal innovation and a sophisticated relationship between form and content.

- It explores classical, universal themes.

- It can be considered subversive.

Authorship

- In the 1960s, an authorship controversy was ignited over *Kane* by the influential film critic Pauline Kael, who had already publicly debated the concept of authorship with critic Andrew Sarris.

- She (incorrectly) asserted that Herman Mankiewicz, the co-writer, had been responsible for much more of the screenplay than he had gotten credit for.

Authorship (continued)

- But her assertion pointed out a flaw in the auteur theory – that it overlooks the collaborative nature of film.

- Welles' work on the film – he was only 25 when it was released – reinforced his "boy wonder" reputation as an innovative creator and performer in theater and radio.

- For *Kane*, Welles co-wrote, produced, directed and starred in the film, a rare feat.

Authorship (continued)

- But in *Citizen Kane*, the music (a famous score by Bernard Hermann), art direction, special effects, editing, make-up, and many other jobs crucial to the film's success were by industry professionals.

- Perhaps most importantly, the film's cinematography, for which it is much celebrated, is by Greg Toland, not Welles.

Authorship (continued)

- In an unheard of move, to show his gratitude for Toland's contributions, Welles shared the final credit card with Toland.

- Another thing to consider in terms of authorship is that the movie's meanings proliferate beyond what Welles did or could have intended.

- Bearing all this in mind, how much of the film belongs to him?

Citizen Kane: A Formal Analysis

Lesson 15: Part III

Stylistic Influences on *Kane*

- German Expressionism
- Newsreels
- John Ford (*Stagecoach*, 1939)

Genre

- *Kane* subverts traditional genre conventions.
- The movie contains elements of:
  - Horror
  - Faux documentary/newsreel
  - Detective story
  - Newspaper film
  - Bio-pic
  - Historical picture

Genre

- *Citizen Kane* works hard to avoid the sometimes demeaning implications of the term "genre entertainment."

- It systematically tries to avoid some of the conventions of its time and foreground its inventiveness, its uniqueness.

Genre (Continued)

- The movie presents itself as a serious, artistically constructed fictional biography with contemporary relevance

- Just as it deviates from traditional formal practice, so does it deviate from traditional genre practice.

- It did not spawn imitations and there is no other film like it.

- Pause the lecture now and watch clip #1.

Formal/Stylistic Elements

- Salient formal elements in *Kane* include:
  - Deep Focus Cinematography
  - Long Takes/Moving Camera
  - Montage
  - High and low angles
  - Innovative use of sound

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Formal/Stylistic Elements (Continued)

- Non-linear narrative

- Flashbacks that emphasize subjective point of view (Literature/fiction)

- Only a partial resolution
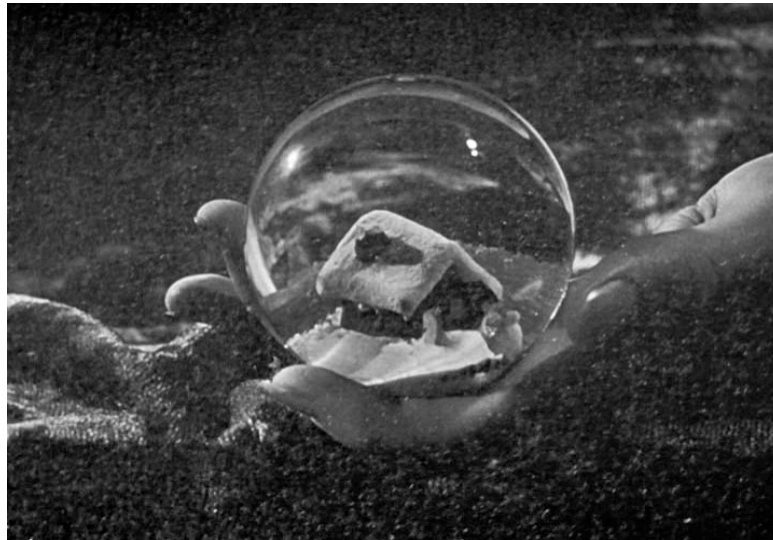
Deep Focus Cinematography

• Remember, **deep focus cinematography** refers to shots in which objects in all planes – or from close to the camera to the far distance – remain in focus.

• In *Kane*, cinematographer Greg Toland began to perfect the techniques he had been working on with other directors, so that Welles could **compose in depth**.

Deep Focus Cinematography (continued)

• The technique accentuates the interplay among several levels of meaning.

• The frame's more pronounced three dimensional space helps to depict Kane's immense power as well as his limited choices. In the movie, Kane is routinely positioned between other people who make decisions for him.

Deep Focus Cinematography

The Long Take/Moving Camera

• Remember, the **long take** is an unusually long shot without a cut. It is often in tandem with a moving camera

The Long Take/Moving Camera

- In *Kane*, deep focus cinematography and the long take work together to allow shots to unfold freely in time and space.

- This system disregards Hollywood's invisible editing style and such standard techniques as shot reverse shot and cutting on action. Welles' style calls attention to itself.

Clip #2

• Pause the lecture and watch clip #2.

• Notice the use of long takes and deep focus cinematography. Notice also how these techniques allow Welles to carefully place the characters in the scene, and how this placement yields narrative meaning.

• Visually recurring patterns of figure placement visually convey one of the important questions concerning Kane: is he in charge of his own life?

Montage

• A **montage sequence** is a segment of a film that summarizes a topic or passage of time into brief symbolic or typical images.

• Kane makes use of montage sequences, in several scenes, including the opening newsreel; the series of scenes that summarize Kane's first marriage; and the sequence that shows the progression of Susan's opera "career."

•Pause the lecture and watch clip 3.

Example

Narrative

- *Citizen Kane* features both traditional and non-traditional narrative

- It is a non-linear narrative that becomes more linear as it moves forward.

- It has a suspense/mystery story, but it is more about character than plot.

- Ambiguity

Narrative

- It is told largely in flashbacks that emphasize subjective points of view rather than omniscient, as in literature/fiction. The only time we see Kane in the present is when he dies.

- While we do find out what "Rosebud" is, it is only a partial resolution to the film.

- For a detailed breakdown of the narrative of the movie, read the section on Kane in Chapter 3 of your textbook.

Acting

• *Kane* featured no movie stars even though it was made at the height of the studio star system.

•It was the first film for many of the actors, many of whom came from Welles' Mercury Theater Troupe.

•The film made no one a star, though Welles and Joseph Cotton both had long acting careers.

Acting (continued)

- Welles's directed his own performance, which became something of a cultural icon

Motifs/Themes

- One can pick out a number of motifs and themes in the film.

- Motifs include "Rosebud," snow/snow globes, statues and sleds.

- Themes include the myth of the American Dream, isolation, old age, materialism, and the unreliability of memory

Other Aspects

- Other aspects of *Kane* to consider include:

  - Representation of race/ethnicity

  - Representation of gender and sexuality

  - Representation of class

End of Lesson 15

Congratulations!
You've finished the course!