

Citizen Kane (1941)

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Orson Welles



- After Welles' success in the theatre with his Mercury Players and his controversial 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, Welles was courted by Hollywood. He signed a contract with RKO Pictures in 1939. Unusual for an untried director, he was given the freedom to develop his own story, use his own cast and crew and was given final cut. Following two abortive attempts to get a project off the ground he developed the screenplay for *Citizen Kane* with Herman Mankiewicz. Principal photography took place in 1940 and the film received its American release in 1941.
- At only age 25, he co-wrote, directed, and starred in a major Hollywood film.

William Randolph Hearst

- Welles based his film on the life of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst – as well as his own.
- Hearst was born to a life of privilege and after attending Harvard he took over *The San Francisco Chronicle* from his father and then proceeded to build a media empire by acquiring dozens of newspapers and magazines.
- He was twice elected to the U.S. House (1903-07) but lost bids for Mayor of New York City and Governor of New York State.
- Conceding an end to his political hopes, and despite being married, Hearst became involved in an affair with popular film actress Marion Davies, and from about 1919, he lived openly with her in California.
- He built and lived in Hearst Castle halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. A playground for the rich and famous, it is now a national landmark and open to the public.
- Upon its release, Hearst prohibited mention of the film in any of his newspapers and succeeded in blocking screenings in a number of theaters, which led to mediocre box office receipts.



Citizen Welles



- With fascism on the rise in the 1930s, Hollywood produced a number of anti-fascist films.
- Often proclaimed the best film of all time, *Citizen Kane* was not primarily antifascist or, some would say, even political. But while the political content of the film may have been low, its political intent was surely high.
- The film tells that power corrupts and that money cannot buy happiness.
- This is an old Hollywood message, but it was not so much the message that made *Kane* great. Instead it was the way that message was conveyed.

Camera Angles and Placement

- The position of the camera and the angle of the scene being photographed are tools that directors can use to insert messages about the subject matter of their films.
- Generally speaking, extreme camera angles emphasize the meaning of the projected image. Hence, a high-angled shot suggests a different interpretation from that of a low-angled shot.
- Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland shot much of *Kane* from low angles, giving the characters a larger-than-life quality and thus emphasizing the politician Kane's mythical quality.
- Other shots are from an extreme high angle emphasizing impotence.
- In this way, cinematic techniques can be used to convey messages about politics that the spoken or written word cannot.





Flashbacks

- Kane's life is told in a series of flashbacks by a variety of witnesses.
- The witnesses tell their tales to an unseen newspaper reporter who seeks to unravel the character of the late Charles Foster Kane by learning the meaning of his dying word, "Rosebud."
- This is one of the most famous examples of non-chronological flashbacks. As the flashback interviews proceed, pieces of Kane's life unfold, but not always chronologically.
- The flashbacks are given from the perspectives of characters who are aging or forgetful, which casts doubt on the memories being discussed. In other words, these are unreliable narrators whose own opinions and interpretations affect their accuracy. The storytelling techniques succeed in painting Charles Foster Kane as an enigma, a tortured, complicated man who, in the end, leaves viewers with more questions than answers and inevitably invokes sympathy rather than contempt.

Claims to Truth and Justice I



- Journalists often claim to be able to discover objective truth and portray their institution as dedicated to surveillance.
- The young Charles Foster Kane sternly informs his ex-guardian: “I am the publisher of the *Inquirer*. As such, it is my duty—I’ll let you in on a secret—it is also my pleasure –to see to it that the decent, hard-working people of this community aren’t robbed blind by a pack of money-mad pirates just because they haven’t anybody to look after their interests!”
- Yet movies such as *Citizen Kane* help deconstruct those claims to truth and instead provide a counter argument that things aren’t the way they appear to be.
- Hence, though the young Kane is idealistic when he writes the “declaration of principles” for his first issue: “(1) I will provide the people of this city with a daily newspaper that will tell them all the news honestly, (2) I will also provide them with a fighting and tireless champion of their rights as citizens and human beings,” he stands in the dark, as he reads the declaration, a portent of things to come.



Claims to Truth and Justice II

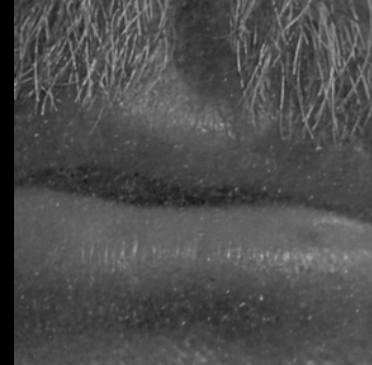
- “If I don’t look after the interests of the underprivileged,” the young crusading Kane declares, “maybe somebody else will, maybe somebody without money or property.”
- Kane’s politics are liberal, but elitist, a sort of noblesse oblige.
- In fact, he holds the people in contempt and manipulates public opinion with increasing cynicism.
- He stirs up a crisis in Cuba to boost newspaper sales.
- When his correspondent wires that there is no war, Kane responds, “You provide the prose poems, I’ll provide the war!”
- Before long, he is openly announcing that “the people will think...what I tell them to think!”
- Kane’s friend, Jed Leland (Joseph Cotton), sums up the publisher’s shallow, elitist liberalism when he observes that the American worker is “turning to something called organized labor, and you’re not going to like that one bit when you find out that it means he thinks he’s entitled to something as his right and not your gift.”

From Journalist to Politician



- Kane runs for governor on a sort of populist-progressive platform, attacking “the machine,” which is represented by Boss Jim Geddes (Ray Collins).
- The campaign culminates in a big rally. A massive portrait of Kane hangs over the crowded auditorium—a scene modeled after the fascist rallies of the time.
- The crowd is a painted backdrop, dots rather than faces. The looming visage of Kane and the blurred crowd are an apt comment on Kane’s politics and the politics of personality as well.
- But the dark figure of Boss Jim Geddes gazes down on the rally from the back of the auditorium. Just as Kane is within reach of victory, Geddes demands that he drop out of the race. If he refuses, Geddes will tell the press that Kane has been keeping a mistress, a revelation that would cost him both the election and his family. Kane stubbornly refuses to quit. The story of his “love nest” is published and Kane loses both his wife and the election.
- Welles concludes this segment of *Kane* with his most succinct and cynical comment on politics and the media as Kane’s newspaper prepares alternative headlines for the day after the election: “Kane Elected” and “Fraud at Polls.”

Political Corruption in Film



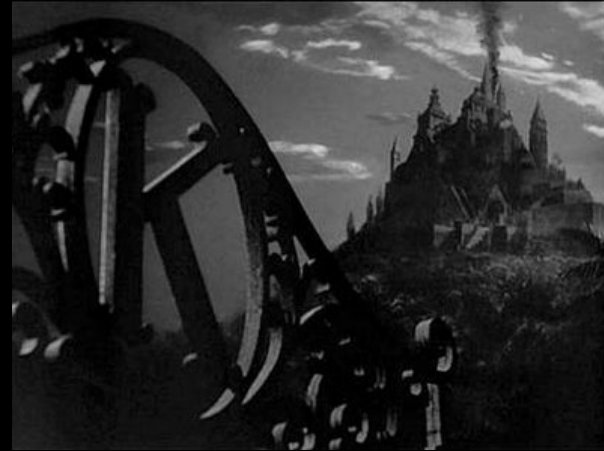
- Other American films had dealt with political corruption, from the nearly contemporary *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) to *The Birth of a Nation* (1919) and beyond.
- But *Kane* was different because Welles refused to offer simple solutions.
- Another distinction is *Kane's* focus on the corrupt man himself. Instead of the heroic Jefferson Smith (Jimmy Stewart) in *Mr. Smith*, we get Charles Foster Kane, a nasty man whom we do not like but for whom we feel some sympathy because of his lost childhood and his youthful exuberance and good intentions.

Limits of Power



- *Kane* is primarily a study of the private life of a public figure. Yet it is political in its obsession with power and in its depiction of Kane's election campaign.
- While films portray the press with extraordinary power, there are also limits to that power.
- Charles Foster Kane can do nothing to earn the public's love. In the process he abandons his principles, scorns the public, and dies with only the memory of Rosebud to keep him company.

From Failed Politician to Private Citizen



- Kane retreats to exercise his formidable power in private life, much as Hearst did, pushing the career of his mistress and building his palace, Xanadu, which closely resembles Hearst's famous estate, San Simeon, in California.
- His politics, referred to only indirectly in the latter part of the film, move to the right and are ultimately discredited when he poses with Hitler in Germany and returns to the U.S. to announce that there will be no war.
- These scenes hint at antifascism, but *Kane* is more clearly an antielitist, antiauthoritarian reiteration of the axiom that power corrupts.
- The good characters in the movie cannot stand up to Kane, the reporters cannot figure him out, and the people continue to buy his newspapers without protest, rejecting him politically for the wrong reasons—because of his mistress, not his egotistical elitism.

Rosebud



- According to Welles author David Thomson, “Rosebud is the greatest secret in cinema...” So what is “Rosebud?”
- Orson Welles, explaining the idea behind the word "Rosebud," said, "It's a gimmick, really, and rather dollar-book Freud."
- Is it the name of the sled and/or is the sled a metaphor for Kane's lost childhood?
- According to Louis Pizzitola, author of *Hearst Over Hollywood*, "Rosebud" was a nickname that Orrin Peck, a friend of William Randolph Hearst, gave to his mother, Phoebe Hearst. It was said that Phoebe was as close, or even closer, to Orrin than she was to her own son, lending a bitter-sweet element to the word's use in a film about a boy being separated from his mother's love.
- In 1989, essayist Gore Vidal cited contemporary rumors that "Rosebud" was a nickname Hearst used for his mistress Marion Davies; a reference to her clitoris, a claim repeated as fact in the 1996 documentary *The Battle Over Citizen Kane* and again in the 1999 dramatic film *RKO 281*. A resultant joke noted, with heavy innuendo, that Hearst and/or Kane died "with 'Rosebud' on his lips.
- Although “Rosebud” provides a simplistic explanation of Kane's character, the film's closing shot focuses on a “No Trespassing” sign outside Kane's lavish estate, suggesting that we cannot really know what makes people tick anyway.
- The symbolic sled 'Rosebud' used in the film was bought for \$60,500 by film director Steven Spielberg in 1982, at the time the highest price paid for a piece of film memorabilia. Spielberg commented, "Rosebud will go over my typewriter to remind me that quality in movies comes first." According to Peter Bogdanovich, Welles' reaction to Spielberg's purchase of the sled was "I thought we burned it..."

Aftermath

- A critical success, *Kane* failed to recoup its costs at the box-office -- partly due to Hearst's campaign against it. The film faded from view soon after but its reputation was restored, initially by French critics and more widely after its American revival in 1956.
- There is a semi-official consensus among film critics that *Citizen Kane* is the greatest film ever made, which has led Roger Ebert to quip: "So it's settled: *Citizen Kane* is the official greatest film of all time." It topped both the AFI's 100 Years...100 Movies list and the 10th Anniversary Update, as well as all of the *Sight & Sound* polls of the 10 greatest films for nearly half a century.

Sources



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