

Visual Narrative in *Citizen Kane*

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ABSTRACT

Lists of the greatest movies of all time are far from identical, but *Citizen Kane* is often near or at the top of these lists. One of the most remarkable aspects of the movie is its cinematography, not only because of the movie's innovative photography and sheer beauty, but because the cinematography plays in integral part in telling the story of Charles Foster Kane

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Orsen Welles's *Citizen Kane* is one of cinema's most revered and studied films. Scholars and critics have taken various approaches to studying it: its screenplay, its soundtrack, its acting and, perhaps most of all, its cinematography. This paper will focus on its cinematography and in particular on the way that visual elements, created both by the cinematographer Greg Toland and the director Welles, are integral to the story itself.

At its heart, the movie is an examination of the public and private selves, and whether the private person can ever be known. This theme is highlighted visually throughout the movie. In a sense, this parallels the idea in Japan of the "tatemae" and "honne". However, it is overwhelmingly an American story, a dissection of the American dream and the pursuit of happiness, the emptiness of ambition and material gain. It is also, at least superficially, a mystery. Through flashbacks of Kane's life, as told by acquaintances, we try to understand the mystery of Kane's last word: Rosebud.

The status of *Citizen Kane* in the cinema world is such that even if all critics do not put it at the top of their all-time best lists, few would omit it from their top five. What is so intriguing, and what leads so many to think of Welles as a genius, was that not only was Welles only 26 years old when he

made *Kane*, but it was his first movie. The young Welles was famous before going to Hollywood for his work with the Mercury Theatre in New York and for an infamous radio broadcast. On October 30, 1938, his group did a radio performance of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* that convinced many people that Martians were actually invading earth. The degree of panic that this caused is disputed, but what is certain is that it caught the attention of producers in Hollywood.

Such was the name that Welle's had made for himself that the studio that signed him, RKO, gave him an almost unheard-of deal: Welle's was given final cut. Final cut means that the edit, or cut, of the movie shown to audiences is the version of the film that the director, not the studio, approves. Very few directors are ever given this power. Woody Allen has final cut, as do a few very famous directors like Spielberg and Scorsese, but the proliferation of after-the-fact 'director's cut' special DVDs is evidence that most studios like to retain the power over movies that they are paying for.

That Welle's had final cut is certainly one of the reasons that *Kane* is such a remarkable movie. Welle's had the freedom to create something different from the mainstream, and he did so. Another reason, of course, was the subject of the movie, which by all

accounts was first conceived of by the writer Herman J. Mankiewicz. Although many critics now feel that *Citizen Kane* better explains the career of Welles himself, the original idea, promoted by Mankiewicz, was to base it on William Randolph Hearst, who Naremore describes as “the multimillionaire newspaper publisher who was regarded as the creator of “yellow journalism” [who] used his newspapers to promote the Spanish American War and to back various jingoistic causes. (Naremore) An interesting insight that Naremore makes is that Welles’s, after the panic the War of the World’s caused, may have been “drawn to stories about proto-fascist demagogues who manipulate the masses.”

Citizen Kane’s cinematography is probably its most celebrated aspect. Again, because of Welles’s reputation before arriving in Hollywood, one of the best photographers in the business, Greg Toland, offered to work with Welles, who had no experience making movies. The irony is that it was because Welles’s was a novice filmmaker that Toland wanted to work with him. Toland was reportedly tired of typical Hollywood movies. As Carringer writes, Toland “was a devoted rebel against the conventions and rituals of big studio filmmaking. He was always in the forefront of change, the first to adopt new methods made available by technological developments in lighting, optics and film stock” (Carringer)

Like any complex art form, great movies are created when all of the facets of moviemaking come together, when all of the stars align. With *Kane*, the writing, the filming and the acting (Welles had brought his troupe of Mercury Theater actors with him from New York) all came together. For example, without depth of character and story, beautiful imagery is only that. David Thomson writes that the photographic techniques that Toland brought to *Kane*

were visible in earlier movies but that it took the brilliance of Welles to give it meaning. “Look at *The Long Voyage Home* and you can see Greg Toland in possession of all the photographic measures of *Kane*; you may see, too, how little he or Ford knew what to do with them. The Ford film is senselessly pretty.” (Thomson)

Welles and Toland employed visual techniques from German expressionism of the time, such as deep-focus photography, ceilinged sets, and exaggerated low-key lighting. Bradshaw’s description of *Kane* and his second wife Susan at their castle describe the expressionist aesthetic. “The scenes of *Kane* and Susan together at Xanadu are eerie: an Expressionistic bad dream, all darkness and weird perspectives, the couple are marooned in the gigantic, sinister house, *Kane* prowling up to Susan while she morosely fits together a jigsaw. *Kane* wanders to a bizarrely huge fireplace and for a second looks tiny, and Xanadu looks like the giants lair rom Jack and the Beanstalk.” (Bradshaw, 2015)

In a sense, Welles and Toland, because of technical advances in camera, lighting and film technology were able to look *back* to the silent era of film. The crisp looking photography of the silent era had been lost when sound was introduced because the arc lights used in the silent era made too much noise to be used with sound recording. Arc lights were replaced by normal incandescent lamps, which were quieter but dimmer. As Carrington explains, “To compensate for the light that was lost, lenses had to be used at maximum aperture settings; this reduced the depth of field and it could also soften the image.” (Carrington) The soft look of early sound pictures was as much a technical necessity as an artistic choice.

In the quotation above, Carrington mentions

the most famous aspect of the photography in *Kane*, the deep focus. What this means is that everything in the picture is in focus, which is very different from what most movies have. When lenses are used with wide apertures, the lens blurs everything that isn't the main focus. Still photographers use the Japanese term "bokeh" to describe this effect. In most movies, backgrounds to a greater or lesser effect are blurred, which is not only pleasing to the eye but also focuses our attention on whatever is in focus. With *Kane*, in contrast, *everything* is in focus. This was used by Toland and Welles to great effect.

Another photographic approach employed was long takes, which is to say a long time between cuts. There are a number of famous scenes in the movie that employ long takes (as well as deep focus) that will be discussed below. In modern movie making, we have become so accustomed to short takes, that Welles's use of such long, involved shots is quite surprising to a viewer today. Some of the scenes go on and on, with the camera moving and climbing in seemingly impossible ways. A modern comparison might be the World War I movie 1917 by director Sam Mendes and cinematographer Roger Deakins. Music videos are the polar opposite of this, often having a cut every second.

In the early sound era, cameras needed to be insulated so that the mechanical noises of the camera would not be recorded. The result was that cameras become enormous and difficult to move. By the time *Kane* was made, technological progress had made cameras smaller again, and Welles and Toland used this advance to set the camera free. The camera's movement makes it into an observer of the action as it follows the movement around. Naremore writes that, "Here and elsewhere, the camera functions as a restless, ghostly observer, more silent and discreet than the journalists who poke among Kane's

belongings, but similar in certain ways. Like Kane's own newspapers, the camera is an "inquirer," and the periodic frustrations it encounters (a door closing, a light clicking out, a sled being pulled away) are like teasing affronts to our curiosity."

The artistry of the cinematography all had practical aspects. Welles had come from the theater, which is of course technically very different from moviemaking. In the theater, scenes run continuously, which Welles adopted to *Kane* with long takes. Deep focus allowed Welles to adopt theatrical blocking to a movie. As well, Carringer writes, "the extreme mobility of the camera allowed Welles to exercise fully his special talent for elaborate choreographics." This doesn't reduce the achievement of *Citizen Kane*. The fusion of theatrical staging and movie making resulted in one of the most memorable movies ever. That the visual aspects of the movie are so integral to the story itself is what help make *Citizen Kane* a masterpiece.

Visual Storytelling

Opening sequence : The first image on the screen is a *No Trespassing* sign on a foreboding wire fence, behind which we can see some lights. In time we will learn Kane has become a recluse and the fence is meant to physically keep people away. Symbolically, from the opening scene, we are being told about the public/private duality, about the defenses people construct to keep people out. We see the vast, foreboding castle that is Kane's Xanadu, completely in darkness but for the single light at the top. We are shown vast, unimaginable wealth, but also complete isolation and loneliness. From this first scene, the camera movements give us a sense of seeing things personally, of being a voyeur. The lighting throughout the scene remains the same, emanating only from the single window, presumably

Kane's.

Closeup : The extreme close up of Kane's mouth when he whispers to us, the audience, his final word : Rosebud. The visual presentation of this final confession establishes its importance to the movie. It establishes the plot of the movie, which is to determine the meaning of this final word. What did Kane mean? What was Rosebud? Between us and Kane snowflakes can be seen, which suggest a psychological barrier between us and Kane.

Snow Globe : Snow globes are a reoccurring object in cinema. They are specifically chosen to make or break, both figuratively and literally. They are both enchanting and threatening. Simple, and yet able to feed on the complexities of desire. They bring an aching reminder of the dream that was too far from reach. A barrier between reality and fantasy : then and now. Memory and fantasy distorting reality. The distorted image we see through the broken snow globe may be alerting us to the inaccuracies of memory. The distorted edges of the frame are also a clear reference to German Expressionism.

Newsreel footage : Movies are often faced with the same problem, the problem of filling in the audience on the back story of the movie, the characters history, known in literature and movies as exposition. Many movies deal this problem clumsily, which is sometimes called an "information dump." Because Kane was a newspaper publisher, Welles could employ an inspired method to bring us up to speed, as it were : News on the March – like a newsreel shown before movies. The backstory newsreels illustrate his history as a newspaper publisher. His life in headlines. The contrasting headlines, Communist! Fascist! illustrate the difficulties of really knowing any person. There are conflicting opinions about our public faces. The scene also cleverly

changes the pace of the movie, from the foreboding and mysterious opening scenes at the beginning of the movie to modern and fast paced. That it tells the story through Kane's own medium is tremendously clever.

Reporters meeting : The scene employs chiaroscuro, a contrast of light and dark. In this scene, the mystery of Kane's life is being discussed. The scene is shot in shadows, with many of the characters visible only in silhouette, unknowable to the viewer. It is also, of course, visually beautiful. The contrast to the preceding, flashy newsreel with the darkness of the newsroom, is telling. Behind the façade there is darkness and mystery.

Introduction of Susan : Filmed to look like one continuous shot, there is in fact a dissolve just before the camera 'passes through' the skylight. When Kane's second wife Susan is introduced in the course of the reporters uncovering the mystery of Rosebud, the camera arcs up to the outside of the shabby looking bar that she is performing at, goes through the neon sign, tilts down toward the skylight through which we can see someone collapsed over a table, and then appears to move through the skylight and down into the bar. The camera movement here again creates a feeling of personal point of view while also giving us the feeling of moving from the outside in, from the external to the internal reality of the situation. This scene is inspired and revered. "The nightclub sequence is filled equally daring visual conceptions. It 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." (Carringer, 71)

Childhood scene : This shot is a 'oner', a long unbroken shot. At the beginning of the shot, we see the young Kane playing outside in the snow,

unaware that his fate is being decided without him. The camera moves back into the house to take in Kane's mother watching him. The camera moves back again to take in the negotiation that will see Kane taken away under the guardianship of Thatcher. Kane himself becomes the background of the shot, while his father is off to the side, away from the action and powerless to intercede. Seeing the young Kane through the box of the window frame may suggest imprisonment. At the end of the scene, we see the sleight, highlighted by itself, which slowly gets covered with snow.

First scene at newspaper : Kane is sitting in the middle, Thatcher is seen from the back, and everything revolves around him as he says : you provide the prose, I'll provide the war. Kane refers to there being two Kanes : public, private.

Interview with Bernstein : his reflection is shown in the glassy top of his desk as he tells the reporter a deep truth about himself – both sides of him are visible, the public and the private – he says of Leland : His father was one of those men who were worth 10 million and when he dies there are nothing but debts.

First marriage : The use of blocking to show the partners becoming distant. At first, they are shown in near close-up, together at the same table and intimate. Then, a series of shots shows the passing of time and their growing distance towards each other. Finally, there is a wide shot with the two at opposite ends of the table, showing no interest in the other.

Election : this is where the German expressionism starts ; the picture of Kane, blown up like propaganda
Election defeat : The film uses many low angle shots, but this one is the lowest, shot from a trench. The ceiling, the debris from the election and the floor

combine to make Kane look small and trapped. He is defeated with seemingly nowhere to go.

Jed Leland being fired : One of the deep focus shots, which required special lenses, lighting and blocking. In this scene, Kane looks past the camera, while Leland looks pleadingly at Kane while he learns of his termination. In the deep background, we can observe Bernstein, his only remaining friend, shot to look almost miniature.

Old Kane in Mirrors : The reflections that multiply the aging Kane suggest that nobody is knowable in a simple way, such as knowing the man by understanding the meaning of Rosebud.

Rosebud Burning : The mystery remains unsolvable and Kane, the man, unknowable.

Final scene : Finally, in the most vivid clash of all, we have two endings : first the reporter Thompson quietly tells his colleagues that a single word can't sum up a man's life, and the camera moves away from him, lingering over the jigsaw pieces of Xanadu's art collection ; after Thompson's exit, however, the camera begins tracking toward a furnace, where it reveals the meaning of "Rosebud" after all. In its last moment, the film shifts from intellectual irony to dramatic irony, from apparent skepticism to apparent revelation. (Naremore)

Conclusion

Citizen Kane is, even so many years after its creation, a visually stunning work. However, visual beauty is not enough to make a great film. The visual elements, from the photography to the blocking of the scenes, needs to be intimately connected to the narrative of the story. This is part of what makes *Kane* such an indelible work of art.

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