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Citizen Kane: American Heroes and Witnesses

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Citizen Kane is in no danger of being dislodged from its place as one of the most respected films of all time, but it is in danger of losing its vitality as a film with meaning as well as impressive visual appeal. When we call *Kane* to mind, we no doubt remember stunning scenes and cinematic images: the close-up of Kane's lips filling the screen, whispering "Rosebud"; the breakfast-table montage sequence that in a few short minutes tells virtually all we need to know of the history of Kane's first marriage; the deep-focus shots of Susan and Kane dwarfed by the dark Great Hall of Xanadu; the crane shot that surveys the unending clutter of Kane's possessions at the end of the film, from which Rosebud emerges; and on and on. Perhaps because such moments are so arresting, we tend to underestimate or overlook the ways by which Welles embeds ideas, arguments, critical statements, and questions in his cinematic techniques. For Welles, an image is a mode of analysis as well as representation.

Some of the best modern critics of Welles deflect attention from the quality of his thought. We might expect Pauline Kael, in the process of making a long list of Welles's shortcomings, to note that *Citizen Kane* "is a shallow masterpiece. . . . The conceptions are basically *kitsch*." (I should add that she goes on to say that "it is *kitsch* redeemed" [74].) But even Peter Wollen's shrewd assessment of Welles's genius is prefaced by a warning to disregard *Kane*'s substance:

> Nobody, after all, has ever made high claims for its "novelistic" content, its portrayal of Kane's psychology, its depiction of American society and politics in the first half of the 20th century, its anatomy of love or power or wealth. Or, at any rate, there is no need to take such claims very seriously. . . . The truth is that the "content" of *Citizen Kane* cannot be taken too seriously. Yet it had an enormous impact — largely because of its virtuosity, its variety of formal devices and technical innovations and inventions. (60-61)

Ironically, Welles himself might have agreed with such an approach. Late in his life he admitted in an interview that "You could write all the *ideas* of all the movies, mine included, on the head of a pin. . . . It's not a form in which ideas are very fecund, you know. It's a form that may grip you emotionally — but ideas are not the subject of films" (Leaming 196). But this disclaimer should be pushed aside in favor of trusting the tale rather than the teller, especially when in this case the teller is a master of trickery and indirection. David Bordwell resolves the matter emphatically and convincingly:

> The best way to understand *Citizen Kane* is to stop worshiping it as a triumph of technique. . . . The glitter of the film's style reflects a dark and serious theme. *Kane*'s vision is as rich as its virtuosity. . . . It is at once a triumph of social comment and a landmark in cinematic surrealism. (181)

I cannot do justice to the film's intellectual content in a few short pages, but I can at least sketch out a few crucial arguments that confirm *Kane*'s value as a work of social analysis, political commentary, and psychological, philosophical, and political interrogation.[1] It is an indication of how narrow traditional criticism can be that the following point even needs to be made: that *Kane* is a film of substance as well as style, a work of art valuable for what it tells us about American history as well as film history.

As with so much of the work of Welles, *Kane* hovers on the border between history and myth, but so much attention has been paid to the larger-than-life qualities of Welles's films — his occasionally grandiose visual techniques, tendency to have his major characters lapse into bravado and over-blown rhetoric, and penchant for stylization and abstraction, for example — that we tend to overlook how repeatedly his work is grounded in concrete, recognizable reality. Side by side with mythologizing, *Kane* is filled with direct references and allusions to critical problems of "modern" America. Note, for example, the subtle references to war that punctuate the story of Kane's life. The earliest date in the film is 1871, and the recent Civil War is a subtle backdrop to Kane's early problems: young Charles enthusiastically shouts "The Union forever!" as he plays in the

snow even while his parents are arranging to turn him over to Thatcher, whose physical appearance marks him as a dour manager of men and money. Characteristically, Welles allows a moment of nostalgia here — it is this scene of playing in the snow, after all, that is linked with the mystery of Rosebud — but he also simultaneously undermines it: the Civil War has, as it were, come to roost in the Kane household. In this episode and others, the film demonstrates very subtly that nearly every "peace"-time period in American history can more rightly be designated as either pre-war or post-war, and the consequences of these tensions are in one way or another engraved deeply onto our individual psyches as well as our society. Critics do not frequently discuss *Kane* as a war film, but it powerfully reflects the inevitable presence of and intimate connection between the conflicts within a person (Kane is clearly shown as a person at war with himself, memorably conveyed by the progression of images throughout the film showing him literally splitting apart or losing control, culminating of course in the shot of him at the end in the hall of mirrors), within the family (there are no intact, let alone happy families in the film), within the country (society is split into rich and poor, powerful and powerless, the contours of our continuing Civil War), and between nations. The film ends in 1940, the year of Kane's death, just before America's entrance into a world war that Kane had guaranteed would never happen. Wars are, alas, easier to start — recall Kane's imagined role in promoting the Spanish-American War — than stop.

There are many other topical allusions throughout the film which add historical density and specificity and keep the characters from wandering too far into a landscape that is entirely expressionistic or unrecognizable. As in Woody Allen's *Zelig*, in some ways an obvious *hommage* to *Citizen Kane*, Welles embeds his fictional characters in history, and the phonied-up newsreel shots in both films are often wonderfully startling. (In his radio work he also interacted with or ventriloquized the voices of contemporary statesmen.) But for Welles, unlike Allen, history is not a joke or simply a convenient backdrop for comically detached observations. The traction trusts Kane sets out to expose, the economic depression of the 1920s and '30s, the fascists he is photographed with, the spectacular frenzy of the robber barons of the new world trying to buy up the culture of the old world and ending up with a warehouse full of junk: these

are all aspects of early-20th-century America that no conscientious historian can omit or take lightly.

Welles underscores the force of history not only by reminding the audience of various real-life events and characters but also by repeatedly adapting as part of the structure of the film conventions associated with the way "history" is made, discovered, and told. From the beginning the camera is established as the inquiring, intrusive, reportorial "eye" — and "I" as well, a pun that Welles planned to illustrate at the beginning of his film on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a project he never finished but which deeply affected his first completed feature film, *Kane*. The opening of *Kane* is only one of the numerous crane shots Welles uses where the camera apparently easily overcomes all physical obstacles and brings us in for a close look at its subject, suggesting that the mysteries of life — in this case, the mysteries of a particularly powerful but secretive man — can be penetrated and that we are invited to be witnesses. Then, as if to balance the subtlety of the opening sequence, Welles turns to a contrasting technique: the boisterous and overstated *News on the March* sequence unmistakably announces that the subject of the film is "historic."

This sequence turns out to be problematic; indeed, after it runs through the details of Kane's life in typical newsreel fashion, Rawlston, the chief of the operation, concludes that it never captures the subject fully and he therefore sends his reporters out on the search that is the basis for the rest of the film. Still, by incorporating the traditional newsreel genre at the beginning of the film, Welles is able to summarize much of Kane's story and indicate that he will try to do what the straight newsreel format fails to do: successfully tell the whole story and resolve the mystery of an interesting and important person. He does not repudiate the function of a newsreel: he modifies the format so he can accomplish the same purpose more successfully. And at the same time he does more than this: in framing the film as he does Welles makes us witnesses not only to how history is made by the participants but also by those who report on these participants. There is a dual focus throughout: on the life of Kane and on the making of the life of Kane, a corroborative enterprise that involves reporters, written records, and not entirely reliable witnesses, and generates conflicting and confusing conclusions. As a result, *Citizen Kane* is both a dramatic character study and a critical

analysis of the limitations of how we try to write (or film) history (or biography) and communicate the truth. Similarly, the dual focus of the film positions the audience in several opposite ways, sometimes inviting identification and/or empathy with Kane, other times revealing that the central subject of the film is the more critical and estranged process of inquiry and spectatorship.

Perhaps I can suggest how all these themes converge by focusing particularly on the character of Kane and by trying to suggest how Welles embeds him in American history not so much to resolve his mystery but to deepen it and add resonance. Robert L. Carringer suggests that just as "what finally characterizes American literary narratives is a preoccupation with Americanness," *Citizen Kane* too is part of the "common mainstream tradition of American narrative," "receiving the same basic impulses directly from the ambience of American life, and drawing from the same storehouse of accomplished narrative forms and characterizations" ("Some Conventions" 307, 308). Kane is a particular American (or, some might say, a composite of a few recognizable Americans, both fictional and non-fictional, a distinction that is harder and harder to uphold, given the textuality of reputations), a representative of a set of American character qualities and values which are more problematic than we are usually aware of, and embodies a peculiar faith in the process of arriving at truth, which may or may not be typically American but which Welles suggests is fallacious.

It suits Welles's purposes that the film both invites and spurns attempts to identify Charles Foster Kane with William Randolph Hearst. Critics have documented an extensive list of similarities between Kane and Hearst, and although Welles was able to protect himself from legal action by some careful revisions in the script and a continuing disingenuousness about the relationship between real and cinematic people, the life and character of Hearst provide a crucial model for the film. But Hearst is not so much the subject, let alone the target, as he is a convenient screen, a historically grounded, topically interesting stand-in for what really interests Welles, perhaps best revealed by one of the early titles for the script of *Kane*, called simply *American*.[2] Looking at his career as a whole, critics often place Welles in a European cultural context (particularly because of his constant travel later in life, the international setting of many of the films he made as well as acted in, and his interest in filming

such classics as *Don Quixote*), if not a specifically British context (because of his lifelong interest in Shakespeare). But perhaps like Kane himself, no matter how he was described by others, Welles might label himself an American and one of his recurrent themes, linking such films as *Kane, The Magnificent Ambersons,* and *Touch of Evil,* is the ambiguity and vulnerability of American heroes and values. Like a surprising number of masterworks of American culture, *Kane* is a compelling presentation of the vengeance of the American dream, a vengeance suffered by a hero whose weaknesses are as visible as his strengths.

Welles self-consciously portrayed his hero as a complex figure, and in a short documentary "trailer" made to advertise the film he challenged the audience to put all the pieces together. He described Kane as "a hero, a scoundrel, a no account, a swell guy, a great lover, a great American citizen, and a dirty dog. What's the real truth . . . . ? Decide for yourself" (Brady 308). But Welles's attempt was not so much to create a dramatically interesting, "round" rather than flat character for the audience to find interesting in a variety of ways, but to embody the tensions and contradictions of a society in one character and then work him to a breaking point. Welles knew that this would result in an unconventional film. Perhaps with a bit of unconcealed excitement over the prospect of making a film that consciously broke the rules, Welles said: "There have been many motion pictures and novels rigorously obeying the formula of the 'success story.' I wished to do something quite different. I wished to make a picture which might be called a 'failure story' " (Brady 284). And Kane's failure is our own, insofar as he suffers the ruinous consequences built in to certain values and dreams we may share with him.

I don't want to caricature or oversimplify the American dream, which surely exists in a number of different forms, but for the sake of argument let me summarize some of its typical components as follows: boundless faith in activity and human energy; nostalgia; materialism; emphasis on individualism; belief in business; residual liberalism; and a conception of charity as a patriarchal obligation.[3] These qualities account for Kane's greatness as well as his collapse. Each is portrayed fully in the film and deserves extensive analysis in order to understand how Welles positions the American dream on a razor's edge of contradictions: the pursuit of material possessions is a charming

adventure but also a sure way of stifling one's self in a sea of dead objects; self-reliance inevitably gives way to selfishness, never a benign trait; nostalgia proves to be a source of paralysis, not emotional or spiritual refreshment; business may seem to be a playground of adventure for growing boys, but disenfranchises and abuses all but the powerful few, and even the privileged end in some kind of grim mausoleum (such as Xanadu, the Thatcher Memorial Library, an old folks' hospital, or even an office like Bernstein's, a touching but pathetic shrine to Kane); and liberal concern for women, the poor, and the underprivileged leads to a Declaration of Principles that charts a life of betrayal and acts of charitable bullying and manipulation.

I leave you to recall some of the specifics of how Welles transforms the above abstractions into images and dramatic actions, but I will discuss briefly one aspect of his treatment of the American dream and fate of the typical American hero. Kane is most attractive in the scenes that show him as a young tyro, a whirlwind of energy who seems to embody the open-ended promise that America has been identified with since its founding. "I think it would be fun to run a newspaper," he writes to Thatcher, horrifying the old man not only with his claim that work can be enjoyable but with his implicit optimistic presumption that the world is filled with frontiers of opportunity rather than worrisome responsibilities. But this energy proves to be self-consuming and the optimism fragile. Kane's enthusiasm first causes only humorous disorder, as in the takeover of the old newsman's office. Soon, though, it breaks up a marriage, as we see in the breakfast-table montage, which is not only a witty series of portraits of a relationship foundering because the man turns all his attention away from the woman but is also one of many evocations throughout the film of Kane's basic insatiability: he is never able to find full expression for or fulfillment of his relentless desire, imagination, and energetic will.[4] What borders on domestic farce in his first marriage soon turns into something more ominous: the darker side of Kane's boundless energy emerges in his manipulation of and cruelty toward Susan. Finally, Kane's energy fails him because it gives out, and he hardens into a stiff, immobile old man. The tragedy is not simply that Kane grows old and dies, but that he never finds — in fact, never searches for — any regenerative power or renewable energy.[5]

Citizen Kane not only examines the frailties and contradictions of what I have been calling the American dream and the typical American hero, but also calls into question an allied version of what might be called the American philosophy, a reliance on pragmatism and simple empiricism resulting in a basic confidence in one's ability to find and communicate "truth." Like many other "modernists," Welles feels that this confidence is misplaced because human investigators are incapable (or at least extremely limited) and "truth" is complex and multi-faceted. He might have chosen other models for Kane from a wide assortment of contemporary great men in America — Howard Hughes, for example, who Welles evidently had in mind as he planned another film about a wealthy American with fascistic tendencies (Carringer, *The Making of* Kane 14), or Henry Ford, fully as grand and quirky as Welles might have required[6] — but Hearst was particularly attractive because of his connection to the communications field. Using Hearst allowed Welles to present not only a dramatic character study of a larger-than-life person but also attempt a critique of modern mass media and comment on the inevitable risks and uncertainties involved in the processes of investigation, representation, and truth-seeking.

As Michael Denning points out, Welles's activities in the 1930s show his "fascination with propaganda and media manipulation" (15), and *Citizen Kane* is indeed filled with lies, hoaxes, misleading headlines, empty rhetoric, and the language of coercive power rather than disinterested inquiry or compassionate concern. Kane himself is at the center of much of this, sometimes as a playful fabricator, inventing stories when there are no interesting ones to be found, but other times as a tyrant writing scripts that he is in a position to impose on a large number of people around him because of his communications empire.[7] Through the course of the film, Kane undergoes a transformation from a charming, imaginative investigator dedicated to serving the people's interests to a cynical monopolizer and manipulator. He sums up his final position in a harrowing phrase: the people will think not what is true or good for them but "What I tell them to think."[8]

Welles's point throughout the film, though, is surely more than that we live in a world of dangerous illusions created by well-intentioned but unscrupulous people working through communications networks established as vehicles of power and

profit rather than truth and goodness. Denning is correct to set *Citizen Kane* in the context of "Popular Front culture" and an interest in documentary styles, and to emphasize its anti-fascist and anti-authoritarian elements, but it is also a film much influenced by other artistic models and concerned with other types of problems. Its "prismatic style" links it with such movements as cubism in the visual arts which replace a reliance on a single, unified perspective with an awareness of multiple perspectives, each of which is necessary but not sufficient to grasp a subject in its entirety. In fact Kane appears less as a subject than as an object, whose life story is told not by himself but by a procession of witnesses, each of whom offers a partial view. When all these views are put together, we have too much, not too little evidence to assemble what we normally think of as a coherent picture of a person, and the many interrogations that the film is structured around bring us away from rather than closer to any simple understanding of Kane's life. Such a fragmented narrative also underscores the fracturing of Kane's personality, one of the central actions of the film, and if *Kane* is a portrait of an American, it calls to mind not a traditional realistic photographic image of a unified subject but a painting like Picasso's *Ambroise Vollard* (1909-10): complex, decentered, multiply split.

This prismatic method also recalls an important literary model for Welles, the novels and stories of Joseph Conrad. If *Citizen Kane* is Welles's *Ambroise Vollard* or *Nude Descending a Staircase* it is also his *Nostromo* (a tale of multiple narrators) and *Heart of Darkness*, a work he was perennially fascinated by. Welles went to Hollywood initially to make a film of *Heart of Darkness*, which he had already presented as a radio drama (on *Mercury Theatre on the Air*, November 6, 1938, later modified and rebroadcast on March 13, 1945). This film was never made, but as various commentators have noted, *Citizen Kane* bears many traces of Conrad's story (see, for example, Carringer, *The Making of* Kane 1-15, and Cohen). The central investigator in each, for example (Marlow, Thompson), is an uncomprehending witness as well as a secret sharer implicated in the fate of the main character. (Thompson's sympathy for Kane is shown especially well at the end of his second interview with Susan.) Each "hero" dies with a gnomic phrase on his lips ("Rosebud," "the horror, the horror"). And each narrative leads up to a climactic moment in a jungle setting. The picnic scene — complete with dense

foliage, bats in the background, indeterminate human voices moaning on the soundtrack, a black jazz band, and later a screeching tropical bird — that precedes Kane's break with Susan and his destruction of her room and disintegration in the hall of mirrors is the most direct indication that Welles is reworking Conrad's material in this film. There is little doubt that as in his radio versions of the story and in his screenplay for the proposed film, Welles confirms that Conrad's portentous statement that "This also has been one of the dark places of the earth" refers not only to England but also to America. Apart from all these particular debts and similarities — which still need to be traced further, I believe — the crucial general point is that for both Welles and Conrad at the heart of power and achievement is loss and "the horror," and at the end of even the most strenuous and noble quest for something quite different — not power and achievement, but truth and meaning — lies an enigma shrouded in a mystery.

This is not to say that Welles, in *Citizen Kane* or elsewhere, capitulates easily to vague or gloomy confusion, nihilism, or despair. Noël Carroll suggests that built into *Kane* is enough evidence to support contrasting interpretations which form part of the "dialogic" structure of the film and our experience of it: that "the nature of a person is ultimately a mystery" (the "enigma interpretation"), and that "Kane's personality is finally explicable by some such notions as those of 'lost childhood' or 'lost innocence' " (the "Rosebud interpretation") (51). The revelation of Rosebud near the end of the film, accompanied by powerful music that unmistakably signals to us that something important is happening, is thus not only one of the great climaxes in film history but also one of the great anti-climaxes, and the final shot of Xanadu, so much like the opening of the film, conveys both a sense of closure and a reminder that this is a conclusion in which nothing is concluded.

But even if nothing is finally concluded, something has been accomplished. In *Citizen Kane* Welles presents a forceful critique of American heroes, dreams, and values, not to tarnish a revered ideology but to inspect and challenge it, and not to warn us away from acts of interrogation or quests for truth, which may be frustrating and endless, but to make our interrogations and quests more wise, knowledgeable, and, as much as possible, satisfying. Robin Bates likens the experience of watching *Citizen Kane* to that of participating in a therapeutic drama and

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emphasizes that the exhilarating breakthrough of the film, at least as watched by its original audiences, was one of cleansed vision:

> [T]he film provided an outlet which audiences found breathtaking. It pointed to the existential vision which artists and intellectuals would flock to later in the decade and in the 1950s. The Rosebud revelation was that the entrepreneurial capitalist, the embodiment of the American Dream, was dead. His value system was exposed as corrupt, and rejecting him was an admission of the dark truth about America, a throwing over of illusions. One could now look upon the world with a naked eye; an act of self knowledge freed one of systems. (20)

The central character of the film is of course Kane, but the crucial focus of the *experience* is not so much our identification with Kane but our critical examination of him. The crux of the film, as Carringer, alone among critics, subtly points out, is not whether we accept or reject, rise or fall with Kane, but whether we will end up to be an investigator like Rawlston or Thompson ("Rosebud" 187-90). Rawlston is the "Boss journalist," gimmicky, superficial, reductive, and manipulative. Thompson is shadowy and occasionally intrusive, but quietly skeptical (to use Carringer's phrase), patient, sympathetic, and genuinely interested in the subjects of his investigations. And in one of the most intriguing displacements in the film, at the end he emerges as the focal point: the "location" of the essential drama shifts from the subject, Kane, to the investigator. Thompson has the last words in the film, and they call our attention to the search for truth, not the source of truth. This kind of displacement — from "hero" to observer, from object to process, from action to investigation — figures not only in *Heart of Darkness* (Marlow, not Kurtz, comes to dominate the last part of the story) but also in detective/mystery films and *film noir*, overlapping genres that Welles gravitated toward for the rest of his career. Perhaps the concluding displacement of the film is Welles's way of signaling the much-needed shift from American heroes to American witnesses, not passive and cold, but engaged and critical. *Citizen Kane* is a valuable text about the responsibilities of such witnesses.

1. For an extensive analysis of Welles's work, including *Kane*, in the context of 1930s America, see Denning. Bates stresses that much of the power of *Kane* on its contemporary viewers came from a confluence of its psychological and political dimensions: it "offered revelatory insight into the historical moment and suggested a way to situate oneself in a world on the edge of cataclysm" (5). Naremore's chapter on *Kane* (52-83) touches on many aspects of the film but never forgets to foreground its "particular historical moment" (52) and the fact that Kane is "a man designed to embody all the strengths and failings of capitalist democracy" (67).

2. The release title purposely obscures what might have been a dangerously direct reference to Hearst, whose newspapers frequently used the word "American" in their titles (Brady 240). But the new title also retains a clue that the film is outspokenly political. "Citizen" carries populist, even radical connotations, many of which are undermined or ironized in the course of the film. At one point during his recollections Leland observes that Kane spent much of his life trying to take the quotation marks from around the newspaper description of Susan Alexander as a "singer." One could say that throughout *Kane* Welles attempts the opposite, in effect putting quotation marks around "Citizen," a title Kane is unable to sustain for very long.

3. See also Carringer's brief summary of the characteristics of the typical American hero ("Some Conventions" 307), which he then elaborates on in his extended comparison of Kane and Gatsby.

4. Carney suggests that this problem of desire is a recurrent theme in American literature, painting, and film.

5. I use these specific terms to indicate that Kane's tragedy is a continuing American problem with practical as well as psychic consequences: our characteristic "fuelishness" may well be linked with other kinds of foolishness.

6. Carringer emphasizes the near interchangeability "of portraits of the representative American as an entrepreneur, magnate, or tycoon" ("Some Conventions" 319), including such figures as Benjamin Franklin, Christopher Newman, Frank Cowperwood, and Colonel Thomas Sutpen.

7. Various critics have noted that these qualities link Kane with Welles himself, who throughout his life was a trickster and magician, and always aware of one of the great ironies of artistic creation: that it is simultaneously a mode of truth-telling (or seeking) and lying. Nearly all his films, including *Citizen Kane*, tend to look at lies, transgressions, manipulations, and artistic activity as related, if not fundamentally identical. In this light see especially Falstaff in *Chimes at Midnight* and Quinlan in *Touch of Evil*, the latter of whom Welles may have playfully

and seriously envisioned as a parodic "Citizen Cane," signaled by the eponymous prop that he leans on throughout much of the film, which turns out to be an important clue in solving the murder of Grande.

8. Welles himself echoed this in describing his own views of his power as a director. In an interview, Keith Baxter recalled that Welles once told him that "Audiences will look at what you tell them to look at" (279).

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