Orson Welles's *CITIZEN KANE* (1941)

Who's Afraid of Charles Foster Kane?

This is a review about a movie that, for almost sixty years, was regarded as the best film ever made. Although in 2012 it was 'downgraded' to #2, *Citizen Kane* remains one of the most daring, complex, and intriguing production of all times.

Taking into account all of the above, the thought of writing another review – after the hundreds, if not thousands, already written – about this giant of the cinema was, at the least, a daunting task. It also goes without saying that it was impossible to produce a short review on such a challenging subject.

Everything is intimidating about *Citizen Kane*: the character – physically strong, with a resounding voice, charismatic, wealthy, notorious, influential, and powerful; his creator, Orson Welles – at the young age of 26 and already famous; the movie itself – incredibly innovative, challenging, and always listed among the best movies ever made for the last sixty years; the story behind the 'making of…', especially the legal, political and ideological clash with the newspapers mogul William Randolph Hearst.

As mentioned before, I was, and still am, somewhat inhibited when I started this review. Not only because *Citizen Kane* was the Best Movie of all Time for 59 years, but also because every time I watch it I feel that words cannot encapsulate the whole meaning of this movie. I always thought that this film would be ruined by words, that words cannot bring forth the whole meaning of it, that Ludwig Wittgenstein was right when he asserted that language cannot perfectly capture reality.

Citizen Kane is not just a movie; it is the embodiment visual philosophy. Moreover, knowingly, or inadvertently, Welles introduces the public to a philosophy of the visual – a meditation in images about the inner purpose of sight.

The innovations in this movie are legion. Visually, they could be counted almost frame by frame. Conceptually, they shed a completely new light on various matters including some 'mythical' ones - like that of the "American Dream", for instance. Structurally, the narrative is entirely turned inside out. Welles voluptuously breaks the classic linear chronology into a temporal puzzle. There is an image by the end of Citizen Kane in which Kane passes in front of a mirror and his image is reflected multiplied *ad infinitum* - the puzzle inside the puzzle inside the puzzle... The central character may be among the first post-modern figures in Western culture. Kane is endlessly re-interpreted. His persona emerges erratically   and only occasionally, when summoned by the memories of his entourage, and takes shape only based on the "interaction between the reader and the text" (Jaques Derrida). In this case, "the reader" is the public, and "the text" is Kane himself.

It is worth mentioning – as I have earlier – that Orson Welles was only 26 years old when he directed, produced, wrote, *and* acted in this incredible piece of art. Moreover, *Citizen Kane* was his first film. In 1940 – when most filming took place on what is now Stage 19 on the Paramount lot in Hollywood - Welles was already a notorious figure in the entertainment world. In 1938 he directed and produced the now-legendary radio play *The War of the Worlds* on *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. His rendition of H.G. Welles's most famous novel was so powerful that New Yorkers went into a panic and started to evacuate the city, believing that an extraterrestrial attack was underway. The airing of the radio play had to be interrupted in order to calm down the city's residents.

Among other things, *Citizen Kane* is regarded today as an attempt to create a new style of filmmaking by combining various forms of movie making into one. As mentioned above, never before had a film included such abundant and various ground-breaking techniques. Here is an attempt to mention and briefly explain only a few, according to *SparkNotes Film Guide Series - Kane*:

CINEMATOGRAPHY
- Welles uses the « deep-focus », a technique that allows him to bring into focus both the foreground, the middle-ground, and the background at once.
- Low-angle shots were used to display a point of view facing upwards, thus allowing ceilings to be shown in the background of several scenes (never before seen in Hollywood's productions).
- The extensive use of genuine historical footage to create the 'newsreels' in the film.

EDITING
- The collapse of time and space through editing. A sequence is used on the same set. Through costumes and make-up changes between cuts the scene following each cut would look as if it took place in the same location, but at a time long after the previous cut. For instance, Welles' account of the breakdown of Kane's first marriage is done in five vignettes that condense 16 years of story time into two minutes of screen time.

MAKE-UP
- Transforming Welles into the old Kane required six to seven hours, meaning he had to start at two in the morning to begin filming at nine

SOUND
- In addition to expanding on the potential of sound as a creator of moods and emotions, Welles pioneered a new aural technique, known as the "lightning-mix". Welles used this technique to link complex montage sequences via a series of related sounds or phrases. In offering a continuous sound track, Welles was able to join what would otherwise be extremely rough cuts together into a smooth narrative. For example, the audience witnesses Kane grow from a child into a young man in just two shots. As Kane's guardian hands him his sled, Kane begrudgingly wishes him a "Merry Christmas". Suddenly we are taken to a shot of his guardian fifteen years later, only to have the phrase completed for us: "and a Happy New Year". In this case, the continuity of the soundtrack, not the image, is what makes for a seamless narrative structure
- Overlapping dialogue. Welles used this technique (never used before) in order to give the viewer a sense of real-life interactions.
- He also pioneered the technique of putting the audio ahead of the visual in scene transitions (a *J-cut*); as a scene would come to a close, the audio would transition to the next scene before the visuals did. J-cuts are extensively used in nowadays productions.

I will stop here. The list could go on for another page or so. However, *Citizen Kane* is not only a collection of innovative techniques. It is much more than that. The non-linear storytelling, never before used in film, and the re-composition of the character from the puzzle of multiple narrators' memories throws us into an unusual philosophical journey – for a movie. As mentioned before, Kane may be the first post-modern character in a narration, way before post-modernism was even a term. One of the central tenets of post-modernism is that « the *representation of a thing* is substituted with the

discussion of the thing « (Lawrence Cahoone, *Intoduction to From Modernism to Post-Modernism: An Anthology*). The 'thing', here being Kane, is indeed not represented in this movie. Kane never speaks of, or about, himself. He is re-constructed, de-constructed, and endlessly re-interpreted by others; Welles re-composes Kane from a perplexing puzzle. In this context, the discussion about the individual becomes more important than the individual himself.

And then there is Xanadu. Not the medieval Chinese capital of the great Mongolian Empire established by Kublai-Khan, but the secluded surrealist realm of Charles Foster Kane. Xanadu is not only a vast piece of land but also a castle of sorts, built in an eclectic style. It is here that Kane amasses everything he buys – ancient statues, paintings, rare pieces of furniture; in a word, outrageously expensive objects. Xanadu is the Versailles of warehouses. The castle's interiors are carved with large halls, interminable staircases, and monumental ceilings. Despite this dazzling appearance, the opulence of Xanadu is bruised by a frightening loneliness. There is a scene between Kane and his second wife, Susan Alexander, in which they have a discussion in one of the grand chambers of Xanadu. The immensity of the place prevents them from having a normal conversation. They sit far apart in that gargantuan room and the sound of their voices dissipates in the space between them forcing their conversation into a yelling contest. The physical distance is meant to be converted by the viewer into a spiritual remoteness which eventually pushes Charlie and Susan beyond of each other's event horizons.

Kane's spiritual detachment from all the people surrounding him is sustained by a ruthless pursuit of power. His last word, on his death bed sums up the futility of this pursuit. Ironically, it was exactly that enigmatic word - humble in its essence and forever obscure for the outside world - that drove Kane through his whole life. "Rosebud" was Kane's essence as a human being. It was the threshold separating "Charlie" from "Citizen Kane", severing *humane* from mere *human*.

Between Xanadu and Rosebud there is only wasteland; no roads, no life, no light.

Ironically, Kane's unattainable dream is similar in its simplicity with that of Chaplin's humble 'citizen Tramp'. Although at the opposite ends of the social spectrum, both these characters are trapped and seek escape - 'Citizen Tramp', from the oppressive prison of extreme poverty, Citizen Kane, from the alienating penitentiary of immeasurable wealth. The notable difference is that while the Little Tramps' life story is an inspirational epic for survival, Kane's is only a collection of superfluous, exorbitant and outrageously expensive junk.

At the end of the day, "Rosebud" – the mysterious missing piece of the puzzle – is the only one that counts, regardless of her/his/its public anonymity or 'market value'. Citizen Kane gives us a profound lesson about vanity and death. It also sheds the light on the irrelevance of two very contemporary concepts – consumerism and popularity. The last image of the movie is that of black smoke reaching the evening skies while the majestic and sombre "K" can be seen in the foreground, welded on the gates of Xanadu. What a wonderful metaphor of the sheer futility of compulsively collecting objects! What a profound perspective of worldly glory turning mundane when faced with Eternity.

Paraphrasing Michael Scott (*The Sorceress*), after we cross the Styx, we will be nothing more but the sum of others' memories.

Ultimately, nobody is afraid of Charles Foster Kane; intimidated up to a point, maybe, but not afraid. True, Charles Foster Kane is a mogul, a titan among the rich of the world, but he is also a big disappointment to his friends and a sad, bizarre story for the very media he once dreamed to control.

Renowned French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre – the champion of 20th century existentialism – held that "existence precedes essence". Orson Welles' masterpiece would have presented him with a perplexing conundrum. For Rosebud was both inside Kane (essence) and outside him (existence). Which one came first? I guess we will never know. The last frame of the movie seems to seal this conclusion with that sign nailed onto Xanadu's gates:

"NO TRESPASSING".

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