

FIL 1001, SPRING 2003 TERM
Introduction to Understanding Film
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Citizen Kane
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The movie, *Citizen Kane*, is considered “as the greatest motion picture to come out of America during the black-and-white era,” especially when you watch it through the director’s eye (Berardinelli, Par. 3). This movie can be classified both as mystery, because the viewers will never find answers to their questions, as well as a drama, because it follows very closely Kane’s tumultuous life. Orson Welles was “only 25” years old when he directed *Citizen Kane*, and his creative energy is obvious throughout the movie (Berardinelli, Par. 10). For the first time, even the untrained eye becomes aware of some of the techniques that directors use to develop the narrative of the movie. The mise-en-scene is used to direct the viewers’ attention toward certain details, objects, people or people’s interactions:

Mise-en-scene (or “putting on the stage”) includes the relationship of everything within the shot to everything else within the shot—of actors to the décor and actors to the lighting; of actors, décor, and lighting to the camera position; and so forth.

In the theater, mise-en-scene serves as a “reading” of the action. Set design, costume, lighting, and the movement of the actors are designed by the stage director (or producer) to present the ideas in the script to the audience in a more or less predigested way. (Belton, 43-44)

Citizen Kane is a very complex movie, where décor and mise-en-scene are used with the obvious intention to overwhelm the viewers, and they are important in understanding—partially—Kane’s

character and life. Numerous scenes exemplify how Welles uses mise-en-scene but only a few will be discussed in this essay.

From the beginning of the movie, the readers enter Kane's lonely and strange world. Welles uses mise-en-scene to suggest this world: a "No Trespassing" sign warns the viewers that they are not welcome, then a series of quick camera shots of different type of closed fences and gates exemplify how unreachable Kane really was, and finally the monstrous palace, Xanadu. A close-up of Kane's hand holding a glass ball might provide an important clue in understanding Kane's last word—rosebud. The vision of something he held dear was probably encapsulated in the glass ball: a precious memory...a favorite toy (perhaps his first sleigh and not its substitute)...the lost innocence of his childhood...his mother's love...who knows! If the word remains a mystery—not only for the viewers who meet Kane for the first time but also for his friends, employees, and acquaintances—is quite understandable after entering his fortress. It's pretty obvious that Kane was a very private person, who not only built material fences but also psychological ones, as the viewers will later notice. This is the first scene where it becomes obvious that mise-en-scene serves Welles' intention to intrigue and overwhelm the viewers.

Welles proceeds to tell Kane's life story in a very compressed—yet complex—manner. Quick and obvious transitions, similar to turning the pages of a book, are ingeniously used to join otherwise unrelated events. These events seem to flood the viewers' brains. An interesting thing happens when music is connected to this chain of events. It takes a while for the sound to catch up with the light (image in this case). The inertia of music from an image overlaps with the next image, even though a second music clip already plays. As a result, it takes a few seconds for the viewers to assimilate the new sounds, but then they're quickly drawn into the visual shot. It's almost like being

in a car that comes to a full stop abruptly, only to start up right away. This relationship between music, images, and transitions is a great example of how the director uses mise-en-scene to influence our perceptions and direct our attention toward certain events.

Another great example of how Welles uses mise-en-scene to create an atmosphere can be seen at the beginning of the scene between Mr. Thompson, a reporter who wants to find out the meaning of Kane's last word, and Mrs. Alexander, Kane's last wife. The mise-en-scene is obvious from the beginning of the scene where the movement of the camera transports the viewers through the roof, going out of focus only to refocus on the other side of the skylight. This is a great camera shot and the thunder sound effects enhance the dramatic atmosphere and prepare the viewers for the sincere suffering that Mrs. Alexander experiences. Welles uses an interesting combination of high- and low-key lighting; certain camera angles; and close-ups, medium close-ups, and medium long shots to reveal the nature of relationships between characters. The reporter remains "faceless," as the viewers see him only from the back, and his body remains hidden in the shadows most of the time. On the other hand, Mrs. Alexander's face is well lit and filmed with a close-up. The waiters are filmed in medium long and long shots, and their faces are sometimes in the shadows as well. We can now see that there's a direct relationship between lighting, the length of the shot, and that character's relationship with Kane. It becomes obvious that the reporter knows nothing about Kane, while Mrs. Alexander knows a lot. What an ingenious way to evaluate the nature of relationships between characters!

Welles "follows" the "faceless" reporter in his attempt to find the meaning of Kane's last word. Once again, Welles uses mise-en-scene to try to explain Kane's complex character. Flashbacks that move back and forth along a time line; the use of low-angle shots predominantly during his good

years and high-, extremely high-, and extremely low-angle shots during his downfall; and appropriate lighting and sound are only a few of the techniques that Welles ingeniously uses to develop the narrative of his masterpiece that almost captures Kane's character. Something is always missing, and no one succeeds in explaining the meaning of "rosebud."

Perhaps Welles' best use of mise-en-scene is to reveal Kane's isolation, which is only enhanced by his material possessions. In Kane's palace with large rooms, his voice creates an echo while speaking to Susan and vice versa. Welles uses extremely long shots in order to maximize everything in the room with the exception of their bodies. Susan has to find ways of entertaining herself since Kane doesn't know how, nor want, to participate. Susan's remarks express how bored and unhappy she really is: "Gee...11:30 [p.m.]. Shows are just getting out! People are going to nightclubs and restaurants. Of course, we're different because we live in a palace. A person could go crazy in this dump. Nobody to talk to...nobody to have any fun with...49,000 acres of nothing but sceneries and statues. I'm lonesome?" And indeed, after Welles demonstrates on screen how insignificant one's life and emotions seemed inside the huge palace, the viewers understand exactly how difficult it must have been for Kane and Susan to live there.

"Rosebud" remains a mystery, because no "word can explain a man's life. "Rosebud" is just a piece of a jigsaw puzzle—a missing piece." In the end, the only clue to the meaning of Kane's last word gets burnt by people who regard it as junk. Welles' narrative comes to a full circle when the "No Trespassing" sign and the fences reappear, recreating the mise-en-scene from the beginning of the movie. The viewers are warned that they can't solve the puzzle either, since they already know that important clues are missing. One can only admire the talent and techniques that the director uses to revolutionize the Hollywood classical style by introducing new ideas and techniques. In the

beginning of the movie, the viewers' attention is captured by an explosion of scenes and clues, while toward the end the creative energy slows down to a more fluent course that allows the viewers to relax and enjoy the ride. The viewers sense Kane's hidden pain and loneliness because he only knows how to love in his own terms. What a great movie!

Belton, John. "Classical Hollywood Cinema: Style." *American Cinema, American Culture*.

Editors Alison Husting and Curt Berkowitz. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994. 43-44.

Berardinelli, James. "Citizen Kane." *Reelviews: Berardinelli Sees Film* 26 January 1996.

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Citizen Kane, dir. Orson Welles. Mercury Productions and RKO Radio Pictures Inc., 1941.