Orson Welles' Creative Background

Although recognized as a theater prodigy in New York from his arrival there in his late teens, Orson Welles first became nationally famous in 1938, when the 23-year old genius's realistic radio drama version of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* caused a serious panic in the Northeast when radio listeners mistook the fictionalized reporting of a landing by Martians for the real thing. Subsequently, Welles was invited by RKO Pictures to come to Hollywood with his radio acting company, the Mercury Players, to make any movie he chose with unheard-of artistic freedom. *Citizen Kane*, his first effort, debuted in 1941.

The Source for *Citizen Kane*

The movie is based on the life of the great American newspaper magnate, William Randolph Hearst. Hearst was arguably the most powerful man in America from 1898 to around 1930. He owned dozens of newspapers all over the country and he personally directed their editorial positions, thus making him an opinion shaper of unprecedented proportions. He had an ego to match, and the portions of the movie which deal with his successful promotion of the Spanish-American War, his self-financed political career, his attempts to create a star out of his lover, and his building of a garish and oversized pleasure palace filled with possessions but lacking any warmth, are all based on direct parallels in the life of Hearst. Hearst actually did help promote (and even directly involved himself in) the Spanish-American War of 1898, ran several times (only once successfully) for public office, tried to turn his lover into a major movie star, amassed the largest private art collection in the world, and built a garish “castle” on his vast estate in San Simeon, CA, that is still a major tourist attraction today.

The Commercial Failure of *Citizen Kane*

Hearst, needlessly to say, was not amused at the presumption of *Citizen Kane*. That Welles had had the arrogance to depict the aging egotist in so unflattering a manner was bad enough, but the film’s portrayal of the embittered, drunken Susan Alexander, a character based on Hearst’s real-life lover, the movie actress Marion Davies, made Hearst determined to suppress and even destroy *Citizen Kane*. At Hearst’s urging, a group of Hollywood producers offered RKO $800,000 to buy the film for the express purpose of destroying it. Welles’ impassioned pleas for the film based on freedom of speech saved it from outright destruction, but when RKO attempted to release it, Hearst newspapers refused to give *Citizen Kane* any reviews or advertising. After the film was snubbed (and booed) at the 1942 Academy Awards, winning only one Oscar out of nine nominations, the producers quietly shelved it and Welles was systematically frozen out of Hollywood over the next few years. But like any true work of art, *Citizen Kane* endured despite the attempts to suppress it. After World War II, the movie became a favorite on college campuses and at film festivals, with critics ultimately praising it as one of the greatest movies ever made. *Citizen Kane* still holds the #2 position in the American Film Institute’s *Best 100 American Films* listing.
Unfortunately, Welles’ career never really recovered from the financial failure of his first movie. He went on to make more well-received movies, but he always had difficulty getting financial backing. By the 1980s, he was a parody of himself, getting by doing wine commercials, narrating bad documentaries, and appearing regularly on late-night TV as a slightly tipsy and grossly overweight talk show guest.

Artistic and Cinematic Formalism in *Citizen Kane*

All narrative films are mixtures, in varying degrees, of cinematic realism and cinematic formalism. Cinematic realism attempts to duplicate the look of objective reality as commonly perceived, with emphasis on authentic locations and details, longer takes, and minimum of distorting techniques. In cinematic formalism, on the other hand, aesthetic form takes precedence over objective subject matter, placing emphasis on the symbolic content of objects and people rather than their simple appearance. A formalistic film’s style constantly draws attention to itself. John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (based on a novel by John Steinbeck) is a realistic film from the same era as *Citizen Kane*. After they are thrown off their farm in Oklahoma during the Depression of the 1930s, the Joad family’s adventures on the road to California occur in real time. Shot by the highly regarded cinematographer Greg Toland, the uncompromising images of poverty and suffering force the audience to “face the facts” about the trials of a dispossessed farming family.

Toland was also behind the camera for Welles, but the thrust of *Citizen Kane* is primarily formalistic. Welles and Toland make conscious and innovative use of the conventions and mechanism of moviemaking, and the flashbacks and constantly changing point of view tell Charles Foster Kane’s story in a determinedly non-linear fashion. Here are some of the elements of Welles’ highly distinctive artistic style in *Citizen Kane*:

1. Welles uses highly varied and expressionistic camera work that makes conscious use of depth, shadow, and space to convey moods, attitude, and symbolism. Greg Toland, whose outdoor location shooting was so effective in *The Grapes of Wrath*, brings his brilliant visual imagination to bear on the soundstage shooting for *Citizen Kane*. His camera takes in the action from every conceivable direction, sometimes coming down through the ceiling, sometimes looking from the floor up. That many of the rooms actually have ceilings was quite an innovation in the use of scenery. At the end of the film, the emotional distance between Charles Foster Kane and his wife Susan is clearly symbolized by how far they stand apart to converse in the cold, massive rooms of Xanadu.

Welles also makes distinctive and creative use of editing. Many of the cuts are so abrupt that as to shake the audience “by the lapels.” (The cut from the eerie opening montage of Kane dying in his “haunted” mansion to the brassy opening of the “March of Time” newsreel documentary of Kane’s public life is quite a stunner.) The deterioration of Kane’s first marriage is shown in a series of quick cross-cuts of Kane and his wife at the breakfast table. In the first of these short scenes, they’re typical honeymooning lovebirds; by the last scene, they don’t speak or look at each other, and Mrs. Kane is deliberately reading a competing newspaper.
2. Welles uses **flashbacks** and multiple points of view to put the narrative together, providing a number of views of Kane without giving one of them precedence over another. The film deliberately abandons the simplistic, chronological narrative that usually passes for film biography. The **newsreel** footage at the beginning is an example of the defects of such biography: clichéd language, stock footage imagery, and an overheated "voice of God" narrator. The reporters who see it then decide to get a more accurate portrait through interviews with Kane's associates. Welles skillfully edits the film together in such a way as to make the viewer interpret Kane for himself or herself using the accounts of Kane provided by the various narrators.

Of course, each narrator has an "axe to grind." **Mr. Thatcher**, Kane's original guardian, saw Kane as an irresponsible traitor to the privileged class of bankers and businessmen to which he should have shown natural allegiance. Kane's old friend **Jedediah Leland** became disillusioned with Kane's abandonment of his original journalistic ideals. Kane's ex-wife **Susan Alexander Kane** has sunk into embittered alcoholism over their failed marriage. **Mr. Bernstein**, Kane's business manager, seems the most well balanced, but his relationship with Kane was that of dutiful, loyal employee who never questioned anything Kane did personally or professionally.

3. Welles creates his image of Kane through posture and gesture as much as he does dialogue. Kane doesn't just age physically in course of the film; Welles has Kane age symbolically, too. Watch how the young Kane's movements are loose and open, but as he ages he becomes tighter, stiffer, harder, almost robot-like in his movements. Kane tries to appear indestructible, but his stony exterior is defending an empty core. Plus, when we see Kane as an old man, it is amazing to realize that the actor playing him is only 26.

4. The film also builds in commentary on many of the conventions of moviemaking and movie going. The extensive newsreel that opens the film is an example. Movie patrons in the 1930s and 1940s would expect a newsreel as part on the evening’s program: the loud, portentous voice-over, the rapidly cut stock footage, and the heavy-handed irony were all characteristic of this **genre**.

Susan Kane’s ill-fated attempt to become an opera star mocks a whole series of Hollywood **backstage dramas** where deserving unknowns ultimately achieve popular acclaim through luck, determination, and talent. Susan lacks all three, and her public career is a disaster. **Marion Davies**, Heart’s lover and the real-life model for Susan, was in fact more talented and charming than Susan, but her lover Hearst’s attempts to make her a major star in expensive costume dramas he financed himself (instead of light comedies for which she was far better suited) damaged Davies’ career just as surely as Kane’s obsession with making his Susan an “opera star” harms her in the film.

5. Unlike standard issue Hollywood **melodrama**, **Citizen Kane** is dramatically uncompromising. The consequences of Kane’s character flaws are followed out to their tragically logical end-- no miraculous changes of heart, no flash of illumination,
not even any honest public regrets. The inflation and then the deflation of an overwhelming ego bent on controlling reality are played out unflinchingly.

6. Despite all its cleverness, the film still maintains a fundamental respect for the depth and mystery of the human personality. No matter how “public” our lives may become, each of us has a secret portion of our lives that no one else really comes to know. It is entirely appropriate in a way that the reporters never find out the mystery of “Rosebud.” If anything, “Rosebud” is a false lead because it only provides the final “puzzle piece” to the formal structure of the film. What the movie audience sees in the flames at the end serves primarily to unify the film structurally, bringing them back full circle to the beginning of the movie and the cheap snow scene paperweight falling from the dead hand. Yet knowing the “secret” of Rosebud does not provide any definitive answers to the personal and moral questions the film raises about the content of Charles Foster Kane’s personality.

The Moral Dimension of *Citizen Kane*

The idea that power and wealth cannot bring about happiness through force or purchase is one of those clichés to which everyone subscribes, but no one really believes. Welles has the moral courage and ambition to show the unequivocal truth of this idea by illustrating it through a character blessed with wealth and power in unlimited quantities; but despite his self-righteous good intentions, he ends up a loveless, isolated failure. Sometimes the power of a work of dramatic art is to remind us of unpleasant truths. *Citizen Kane* does this very well.