

Style and Meaning in *Citizen Kane*

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The Magician

ACCORDING TO ORSON WELLES'S one-time producer John Houseman, Welles was "at heart a magician, whose particular talent [lay] not so much in his creative imagination (which is considerable) as in his proven ability to stretch the familiar elements of theatrical effect far beyond their normal point of tension."¹ Left-handed as the compliment may seem, Welles was, among other things, a professional magician ("You know an awful lot of tricks," Susan Alexander says to Charles Foster Kane during their first meeting, as he casts shadows on the wall to amuse her. "You're not a professional magician, are you?"), and his movies delight in visible trickery. In *Citizen Kane*, for example, the camera moves in to a close-up of a group photograph of the *Chronicle* staff while Kane talks about what good men they are; suddenly Kane walks right into the photo, and as the camera pulls back from the assembled journalists we find ourselves at an *Inquirer* party six years later. Such moments draw upon a cinema of plea-

surable illusion as old as Méliès, and many people are attracted to Welles's work precisely because of them. Before analyzing *Kane* as a narrative, therefore, let us consider its surface—not so much the elaborate special effects as the typical dramatic scenes, in which the “magical” style takes on meaning.

An obvious place to begin is with the wide-angle, deep-focus photography that became one of the most distinctive features of Welles's style. His methods were to change somewhat, growing more fluid, various, and in some ways more daring in his later films as he gained experience and encountered other photographers after Gregg Toland. He seldom returned to a truly elaborate depth of field, as in those deliberately grotesque shots in *Kane* (probably designed by Toland) in which a giant head only a few inches from the camera is in equally sharp focus with a figure that seems to be standing a mile away. Nevertheless, the principle of exaggerated perspective was suited to his temperament and remained an essential quality of his work. Like many other features of his style, it creates a slightly hallucinatory effect, marking him from the beginning of his career as anything but a purely representational or conventional artist.

This last point will become clearer if we examine one of the best known and most written about moments in *Citizen Kane*: the boardinghouse segment, where we meet Kane in his youth. The camera pans slowly across a handwritten line of Thatcher's memoirs—“I first met Charles Foster Kane in 1871”—and then, accompanied by Bernard Herrmann's lilting, crystalline “Rosebud” theme, the image dissolves from the white margin of the page into an unreal land of snow where Charlie (Buddy Swan) frolics with his sled. At first the black dot against pure white echoes the manuscript we have been reading, but it swoops across the screen counter to the direction the camera was moving, in conflict with the stiff, prissy banker's handwriting, suggesting the conflict between Kane and Thatcher that runs through the early parts of the movie. The camera moves in closer and an insert establishes the setting when one of the boy's snowballs strikes the sign over Mrs. Kane's boardinghouse. (Herrmann's music suddenly stops.) Following this shot is a single, characteristically

Wellesian, long take. The camera retreats from the boy and moves through the window where his mother (Agnes Moorehead) stands admonishing him not to catch cold; she turns, accompanied first by Thatcher (George Colouris) and then by her husband (Harry Shannon), and walks the full length of the parlor, the camera tracking with her until it frames the whole room. She and Thatcher sit at a table in the foreground, and the camera holds relatively stationary for the rest of the scene. By this means Welles deliberately avoids conventional editing and lets each element—the actors and the decor of the home—reveal itself successively, until everything is placed in a rather symbolic composition. (See figure 1.)

Toland's photography is much sharper than any reproduction of a frame from the sequence can indicate. The depth of focus enables us to see everything at once, and the wide-angle lens slightly enlarges the foreground, giving it dramatic impact. As is typical in *Kane*, the action is staged in terms of three planes of interest: in the foreground at the lower right, Mrs. Kane and the banker sit negotiating the child's future; in the middle distance, Mr. Kane makes agitated pacing movements back and forth,



FIGURE 1.

whining and complaining to his wife; and far away, framed in the square of the window as if in the light at the end of a tunnel, Charlie plays in the snow. While the parents and banker converse inside, the sound of the boy's play can be heard through the window, which Mrs. Kane has insisted must be left open. According to the RKO cutting continuity, the boy's shouts are "indistinct," but if you listen closely you will hear some of his lines. As his mother prepares to sign him over to a guardian and thus dissolve her family, the boy shouts, "The Union forever! The Union forever!"

Undoubtedly Welles's theatrical experience led him to conceive movie images in this way; indeed the stage sets for his famous modern-dress *Julius Caesar* in 1937 had been designed to allow for a similar in-depth composition. Actually, however, the long takes in *Kane* are in one sense less conventionally theatrical than the typical dialogue scene in a Hollywood feature, which does nothing more than establish a setting and cut back and forth between close-ups of the actors. Hollywood movies, in Welles's day as in our own, tend to emphasize the faces of stars; *Kane*, by contrast, puts a good deal of information into its individual shots, introducing a sense of visual conflict in the absence of cutting and close-ups. The spectator has an immediate impression of the whole, of several conflicting elements presented not in sequential fashion, but simultaneously, as if the camera were slicing through a cross section of the moment, looking down a corridor of images and overlapping events. Thus Welles designs the boardinghouse scene in such a way that we can't help gazing toward the window that neatly frames and encloses the boy's play, seeming to trap him at the very moment when he feels most free. At virtually the same time, we are aware of Mrs. Kane seated with the banker in the foreground, her face the image of stern puritanical sacrifice. Thatcher hovers officiously, while in the middle distance, caught between son and mother, the weak, irresponsible Mr. Kane keeps saying he doesn't like turning the boy over to a "gardeen." The faces, clothing, and postures of the actors contrast with one another, just as the slightly blurred, limitless world of snow outside the window contrasts with the sharply focused, gray interior.

The shot was meticulously organized in order to stress these conflicts; in fact it took Welles and Toland four days to complete the boardinghouse sequence as a whole because everything had to be timed with such clockwork precision. As a result, *Kane* has a somewhat authoritarian effect on the visual level. Welles may not be so Pavlovian a director as Sergei Eisenstein, but he keeps the actors and the audience under fairly rigid control, using the extreme depth of Toland's photography in highly expressive ways. As in the shot described above, the actors often assume unnatural positions, their figures arrayed in a slanting line that runs out in front of the camera, so that characters in the extreme foreground or in the distance become subjects for the director's visual commentary. Actors seldom confront one another face to face, as they seem to do in the shot/reverse shot editing of the ordinary film. The communication scientists would say that the positions of figures on the screen are "sociofugal," or not conducive to direct human interaction; and this slight physical suggestion of an inability to communicate is fully appropriate to the theme of social alienation which is implicit in the film.

Space in conventional Hollywood films of the late 1930s and early 1940s was certainly less symbolic than this. Oddly, however, Welles's uses of deep focus and long takes have frequently been praised for their heightened "realism." The notion derives chiefly from French theorist André Bazin, whose famous essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" has been a major influence on Welles's critics. In the essay, Bazin argued that between 1920 and 1940 there had been two kinds of filmmakers—"those directors who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality."² By "image" he meant "very broadly speaking, everything that the representation on the screen adds to the object there represented" (24), and by "reality" he meant an unmanipulated phenomenal world that could leave its essential imprint on the film emulsion. According to Bazin, a director had two ways to "add" to real-world objects: by means of "plastics" (lighting, sets, makeup, framing, and so on), and by means of editing or montage, which creates a meaning "not proper to the images themselves but derived exclusively from their juxtaposi-

tion" (25). In Bazin's view, such practice was challenged by Welles; thanks to the depth of field in *Kane*, Bazin wrote, "Dramatic effects for which we had formerly relied on montage were created out of the movements of the actors within a fixed framework" (33).

In Welles, as in his predecessor Jean Renoir and his contemporary William Wyler, Bazin saw "a respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, its duration" (34). Indeed, he said, the alternation of montage sequences and long takes in *Kane* was like a shifting back and forth between two tenses, or between two modes of telling a story. The latter technique, however, was more important for Bazin. Because the many deep-focus shots in *Kane* eliminated the need for excessive cutting within a scene, because they theoretically acted as a window upon the plenitude of the phenomenal world, and because they gave the spectator a "choice" of what to look at in any shot, he praised the film as a step forward in movie realism. Furthermore, he argued, the deep-focus style was appropriate to ideas expressed in the script. "Montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression," he wrote, and therefore "*Citizen Kane* is unthinkable shot in any other way but in depth. The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image" (36).

Bazin was certainly correct in describing *Kane* as an ambiguous film and as a departure from classical Hollywood convention; nevertheless, in his arguments about realism he underemphasized several important facts. For example, if in some scenes Welles avoided using montage to "add to the object represented," this left him all the more free to add in another way—through what Bazin called "plastics." Interestingly, some of the deep-focus shots in the film were made not by simple photography but by a kind of invisible montage, a combining of two or more images in a complicated optical printing process that creates the illusion of a single shot. (See, for example, the scene in which Kane, seated at a typewriter, completes Leland's opera review while Leland stands in the distance; the two figures in this shot were photographed separately and their images joined to look as if they occupied the

same space and time.) *Kane* is in fact one of the most obviously stylized movies ever made; the RKO art department's contribution is so great, Welles's design of every image so constricting, that at times the picture looks like an animated cartoon. This very artificiality is part of the film's meaning, especially in sequences like the election rally and the surreal picnic in the Xanadu swamplands. Technically (but not stylistically), *Kane* is the ultimate studio production; there is hardly a sequence that does not make us aware of the cleverness of various workers—makeup artists, set designers, lighting crews, and perhaps most of all Orson Welles.

Yet the public statements of both Welles and Toland seem to foreshadow or confirm Bazin's notions about realism. Toland claimed that Welles's idea was to shoot the picture in such a way that "the technique of filming should never be evident to the audience," and in his well-known *American Cinematographer* article about the photography of the film we repeatedly encounter comments such as the following: "The attainment of approximate human-eye focus was one of our fundamental aims"; "The *Citizen Kane* sets have ceilings because we wanted reality, and we felt it would be easier to believe a room was a room if its ceiling could be seen"; "In my opinion, the day of highly stylized cinematography is passing, and being superseded by a candid, realistic technique."³ The last statement finds an echo in Bazin's notion that *Kane* was part of a general movement, a "vast stirring in the geological bed of cinema," which would restore to the screen the "continuum of reality" and the "ambiguity of reality" (37). The same general argument can be heard in Welles's own remarks to Peter Bogdanovich in the interview published in this volume: "in the early days of my life as a filmmaker . . . I talked a lot about that 'giving the audience a choice' business. It strikes me as pretty obvious now."

One should remember that the term "realism" (often used in opposition to "tradition") nearly always contains a hidden ideological appeal, and has been appropriated to justify nearly every variety of revolution in the arts. But if realism is intended simply to mean "verisimilitude," then Welles, Toland, and Bazin are at

best half right. True, deep focus can preserve what Bazin called the "continuum" of reality, and three-dimensional effects on the screen (which owe considerably to Welles's blocking and Toland's lighting) can give the spectator the impression of looking into a "real" space. Nevertheless Toland is inaccurate when he implies that the human eye sees everything in focus, and Bazin is wrong to suggest that ether reality or human perception is somehow "ambiguous." On the contrary, human vision is exactly the opposite of depth photography, because humans are incapable of keeping both the extreme foreground and the extreme distance in focus at the same time. The crucial difference between a camera and the human eye is that the camera is nonselective. Even when we look at the deep-focus compositions in *Kane*, we do not see everything in the frame at once; we are aware of an overall composition which exists simultaneously, but, as Bazin has noted, we need to make certain choices, scanning the various objects in the picture selectively. Welles seems instinctively aware of this fact, because he designs his images quite rigidly, sometimes blacking out whole sections of the composition or guiding our attention with movement and frames within the frame. He gives us more to look at than in the average movie, but the information crowded on the screen has been as carefully manipulated as any montage.

Still another and perhaps more important factor should be taken into account in any discussion of the phenomenal "realism" of Welles's technique. Toland claimed that he was approximating the human eye when he stopped down his camera to increase the depth of field, but what he and most other commentators on the technique do not emphasize is that he also used a wide-angle lens to distort perspective. *Kane* was photographed chiefly with 25-millimeter or even shorter lenses, which means that figures in the extreme foreground are elongated or slightly ballooned out, while in the distance the lines formed by the edge of a room converge sharply toward the horizon. Thus if Toland gave the spectator more to see, he also gave the world an unnatural appearance. Furthermore, Welles's use of the wide angle, as in the shot of Mrs. Kane walking from the window to the

opposite end of the parlor, fundamentally alters the relationship between time and space, calling into question some aspects of Bazin's argument about duration. Here, for example, is an extract from an interview with the British cinematographer-director C. M. Pennington-Richards, who is describing properties of the wide-angle lens:

Of course using wide angle lenses the time-space factor is different. If you've got a wide angle lens, for instance a 1" lens or an 18mm, you can walk from three-quarter length to a close-up in say four paces. If you put a 6" lens [i.e., a telephoto] on, to walk from three-quarter length to close-up would take you twenty paces. This is the difference: During a scene if someone walks away and then comes back for drama, they come back fast, they become big fast. There is no substitute for this—you only can do it with the perspective of a wide-angle lens. It's the same with painting; if you want to dramatize anything, you force the perspective, and using wide angle lenses is in fact forcing it.⁴

These comments signal the direction that any discussion of photography in *Kane* should take. Most directors operate on the principle that the motion picture image should approximate ordinary human perception, but Welles used the wide angle to create what the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky would call a "defamiliarization." In retrospect, what was truly innovative about *Kane* was not its sharp focus but its in-the-camera treatment of perspective. Depth of field was less unusual than Toland and later historians have made it seem; like the photographing of ceilings, it was at least as old as D. W. Griffith and Billy Bitzer—indeed there are beautiful examples of it in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925). A certain "normality" of spatial relationships, however, was practiced throughout the studio years, when filmmakers used a variety of lenses but usually sought to conceal optical distortions by means of set design, camera placement, or compensatory blocking of actors. Welles's favorite director, John Ford, had used wide-angle lenses extensively in *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *Stagecoach* (1939), and Gregg Toland had made some interesting

experiments with them in *The Long Voyage Home* (1940), sharing a title card with Ford; but in all these films the slight visual distortion seems at odds with their directors' tendency toward invisible, self-effacing uses of the camera. In 1941, the same year as *Kane*, Arthur Edson photographed John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* at Warner Brothers using a 21-millimeter lens, which, at least theoretically, created as much distortion as in Welles's film. The space in *Falcon*, however, seems cramped; nearly the whole action is played out in a series of little rooms with the actors gathered in tight, three-figured compositions. The difference lies in the fact that Huston stayed within limits of studio conventions, underplaying Edson's offbeat photography, whereas Welles used the lens distortion openly, as an adjunct to the meaning of the story. In *Kane*, as in German expressionist cinema, space becomes demonic, oppressive; ceilings are unnaturally low, as if they were about to squash the characters; or, conversely, at Xanadu rooms become so large that people shrink, comically yet terrifyingly dwarfed by their possessions. (This effect is enhanced by the set design. At one point Kane walks over to a huge fireplace and seems to become a doll, warming himself before logs as big as whole trees: "Our home is here, Susan," he says, absurdly playing the role of paterfamilias.)

Again and again Welles uses Toland's photography not as a realistic mode of perception, but as a way of suggesting a conflict between the characters' instinctual needs and the social or material world that determines their fate. The short focal length of the lens enables him to express the psychology of his characters, to comment upon the relation between character and environment, and also to create a sense of barely contained, almost manic energy, as if the camera, like Kane himself, were overreaching. Fairly often he stages important conversations between characters against some counterpointed piece of business, as if he were trying to energize the plot by throwing as much material as possible onto the screen. One of the most obvious examples is the party sequence in the *Inquirer* offices, where Leland (Joseph Cotton) and Bernstein (Everett Sloane) debate about Kane's character (see figure 2). Here again, the shot establishes three planes which are set



FIGURE 2.

in conflict with one another. To the left is Leland, a young, handsome, fastidious WASP, frowning with disapproval. To the right and slightly nearer is Bernstein—slight, ugly, Jewish, and as loyal as a puppy. Leland is bareheaded, but Bernstein wears a Rough Rider's hat as a sign of his allegiance to Kane's war in Cuba. The contrast is further emphasized by the dialogue: throughout the scene Leland refers to Kane as "Charlie," implicitly recognizing that he belongs to the same social class, whereas Bernstein always refers to his boss as "Mr. Kane." (We have just heard a song about Kane: Charles Bennett, the entertainer at the head of the chorus line, asks, "What is his name?" The chorus girls sing, "It's Mr. Kane!" Then the whole crowd joins in, singing, "He doesn't like that Mister / He likes good old Charlie Kane!") The brief conversation between the two men is important to the plot because it underlines Leland's growing disillusionment and Kane's increasing ambitions. In the original Mankiewicz-Welles script, it was played at an interlude in the party. By the time of the actual filming, however, Welles decided to stage the conversation simultaneously with Kane's dance. Leland and Bernstein have to shout to be heard over the raucous sounds of the orchestra and chorus, and

our eyes are continually pulled away from them toward the antics in the background. Even when Welles cuts to a reverse angle, we can still see Kane and one of the girls reflected in the glass of a window (see figure 3). Notice that this shot contains an echo of the composition in the boardinghouse; once again Kane is supposed to be at play, and once again a window frame seems to mock his apparent freedom.

The violent overlappings and baroque contrasts occur not only on the visual level, but also on the soundtrack. Welles didn't invent overlapping dialogue any more than he and Toland invented deep focus, but the complex, hurried speech in *Kane* and the various levels of sound within a scene are especially effective corollaries of the complex photographic style. Here again, the technique is more expressive than purely realistic. The listening ear doesn't make sense of overlapping speech or the chaos of sounds in the real-world environment; like the eye, it needs to select some things and screen out others. The microphone, on the other hand, is as nonselective as the camera. Hence the sounds in *Kane*, like the images, have been carefully orchestrated and mixed to blot out unwanted distractions and to serve sym-



FIGURE 3.

bolic functions, even while they overheat the spectacle and make the viewer work to decipher it.

Because Welles was a celebrated practitioner of radio drama, critics have often pointed to the "radio-like" attention to sound in *Citizen Kane*. (The first words Welles speaks in the film, after the whispered "Rosebud," are a reference to his Mars broadcast. "Don't believe everything you hear on the radio," he chuckles.) The most interesting aspect of the sound design is the degree to which music, dialogue, and sound effects become adjuncts to the layered principles of deep focus, so that the various types of sound counterpoint with or comment upon one another. There are also moments when dialogue and incidental sound have been made somewhat "realistically" chaotic, because the director is willing to sacrifice clarity for pure speed. By the early 1930s, a fast-talking, breezy manner had become virtually the norm for American movies, and Welles was especially fond of the technique. His use of overlapping speech is an important key to the overall style in *Kane*, where so much depends on superimposition and simultaneity, with one scene dissolving into the next, one account of Kane's life slightly overlapping the succeeding account, one actor biting the other's cue. In its first half, the film is as rapidly paced as a Howard Hawks comedy, not so much for the sake of realism as for the sheer thrill of the zesty atmosphere.

The sense of pace and energy depends more on editing than is usually noted. Even Bazin, who was interested chiefly in the long take, recognized that superimpositions were characteristic of Welles's work. What Bazin did not emphasize, as Brian Henderson has pointed out, is that "the long take rarely appears in its pure state." In fact, Henderson notes, "the cut which ends a long take—how it ends and where—determines or affects the nature of the shot itself."³ For example, toward the end of the scene in Mrs. Kane's boardinghouse, Agnes Moorehead rises and walks back toward the window, the camera following her. She pauses, and Welles cuts to a reverse angle, looking past her face toward the opposite side of the room as she opens the window and calls out to Charles. The sequence as a whole is composed of a shot/reverse shot, but there are some interesting differences between

this particular editing style and standard Hollywood practice. For one thing, the cutting is not keyed to the statement-and-reply rhythm of the dialogue. Instead it imposes a structure on the narrative, holding off the change of camera viewpoint and the crucial close-up until the most effective moment. Equally important, the editing of shots such as this one, photographed with a wide-angle lens, creates a slightly more violent effect than the editing of normal perspectives and makes the audience more aware of the cutting process. The exaggeration of space gives the reverse angle an unusual force, as if we had been jerked into a radically different viewpoint. Thus Mrs. Kane's face looms up in the foreground, and the impact of the image is reinforced when she calls loudly out the window to Charles. The cut emphasizes the mother's pain and her pivotal role; behind her, we can see the figures of the father and the banker standing awkwardly in the distance, dwarfed by the size of her head. (See figure 4.)

Because of the many wide-angle views in *Kane*, shot/reverse shot editing takes on new dramatic possibilities. Consider, for example, the scenes of Kane and Susan separated by the vast halls



FIGURE 4.

of Xanadu, where a simple over-the-shoulder editing style becomes a powerful and witty statement about alienation and loneliness. Elsewhere in the film, Welles avoids reverse views altogether, playing out whole scenes in one take and "editing" by revealing successive playing areas. Sometimes he will throw a brief wide-angle shot on the screen with stunning effect, as in the *Inquirer* party, where a distorted close-up of a smiling black man coincides with a blast of music. In a few other scenes, however, he uses an ordinary shot/reverse shot style and even an ordinary lens, as in the meeting between Kane and Susan in her apartment. Ultimately, the chief difference between *Kane* and the standard film has less to do with a total avoidance of classical continuity editing than with the perspective of the shots Welles puts on the screen, plus his tendency to animate the space around the actors. Generally he keeps the camera at a distance, using the wide-angle lens to increase the playing area so that he can draw out the individual shots and fill them with detail. Welles wanted the audience to "read" a complex imagery, and wanted to choreograph dramatic movements of the camera and actors within a single shot. His work ran somewhat against the grain of classic studio movies, which used a paint-by-numbers editing style and encouraged the audience to forget technique and identify with the players.

The acting in Welles's early films is determined by similar principles, being slightly overwrought and at times self-consciously inflated. During the argument between Kane and Thatcher in the newspaper office, Welles and George Coulouris project their lines to a greater degree than in an ordinary movie, as if they were oblivious to the idea that acting for a camera ought to be low-key and naturalistic. The entire Thatcher section of the film is a subtle, deliberate echo of Victorian melodramatics, but even the later episodes are particularly high-pitched, creating a sort of repressed hysteria. Agnes Moorehead, Ray Collins, and Dorothy Comingore are a bit more wide-eyed and loud than they need to be; Collins, for example, underplays the villainy of Jim Gettys, but he stays in one's mind as a vivid portrait largely because he handles the quieter lines of dialogue almost like a stage actor,

preserving the illusion of calm while he speaks at a high volume. Later, in the scene where Susan (Dorothy Comingore) attacks Kane for allowing Leland to write a negative review of her singing, the sound technicians seem to have added an extra decibel to her already piercing voice: "*What's that?*" she shouts as Kane opens a letter from Leland. "A declaration of principles," he says, almost to himself. "*What?*" she screams, the sound cutting at the audience's ears and making Kane flinch as if from a whiplash.

Welles's own remarkable performance in the central role is in keeping with this stylized quality. His resonant, declamatory voice speaks the lines rapidly, almost throwing away whole phrases but then pausing to linger over a word, like a pastiche of ordinary excited speech. A masterful stealer of scenes, Welles also knows that if he glances away from the person to whom he is speaking, he will capture the audience's attention. His slightly distracted look, plus the gauzy photography he prefers for his own close-ups, gives his acting what François Truffaut calls a "softly hallucinated" tone, something of a counterpoint to the more nightmarish mood of the rest of the movie. (Welles's screen persona and some of his directorial mannerisms may have developed less out of taste or theory than out of necessity. A massive, fascinating presence, he was nevertheless somewhat flatfooted and graceless in movement, and his best performances were in the roles of very old men. As the young Kane, he is usually photographed sitting down; when he does move—as in the dance at the *Inquirer* party or in the scene where he destroys Susan Alexander's room—his stilted, robotlike behavior is acceptable because it is in keeping with the highly deterministic quality of the script and the visuals.)

Keenly aware of his acting range, Welles designs most of his own scenes in *Kane* to accommodate his physical limitations; partly as a result of this habit, he is also very fussy about the movements of the other actors, who, as we have seen, are locked into rigidly structured patterns. Unlike Hawks, Ford, or any of the action directors of the time, he gives us very few moments when the camera sits passively and allows an actor's body its own natural freedom. And yet there are individual scenes, such as the one when Kane destroys Susan's bedroom, in which the emotions

are so intense that the actors seem no longer to be pretending. These moments are as unconventional as the slightly exaggerated, artful playacting. By the early 1940s, American movies had developed a slick, understated acting style that avoided behavioral extremes. *Kane* was slightly different. It made the audience conscious of psychological pain in a way that was more common to the theater; it may have been a dream world, a wonder show, but it was also capable of touching upon important emotional truths.

Welles was of course assisted by the RKO technical staff and learned a good deal from watching the films of his Hollywood predecessors, including Ford, Ernst Lubitsch, and F. W. Murnau. In turn, his own work was to influence American cinema throughout the 1940s. Nevertheless, if the classic studio style ever existed (and by "classic" I mean movies that used chronological narrative, invisible editing, minimalist acting, and a muted photographic expressionism—everything designed to immerse the audience in content and make them forget the manipulations of style), then Welles was a challenge to the system. His movies contain a fine frenzy of performance and information, and the progress of his American career was to be a fairly steady movement away from the conventions of cinematic reality toward the bizarre and surreal. Most of his later pictures in Hollywood, made under severe contractual restraints and without the full participation of the Mercury Theater company, are characterized by a dazzling aesthetic unrestraint. (See *The Lady from Shanghai* [1947] and *Touch of Evil* [1958].) The density and bravado of his style in *Kane* may even have helped RKO executives fuel the myth of extravagance that still surrounds his life and work. Welles never went drastically over budget and was never responsible for a true financial disaster; nonetheless the idea persisted that he was a waster of studio money. This, together with his satiric vision of America, severely limited his ability to work in Hollywood.

Welles's artistic flamboyance also had a somewhat paradoxical effect on the films themselves, because his leading themes were the dangers of radical individualism and unlimited power. He was preoccupied with tyrannical egotists or Faustian types who try to

live above the law and who ultimately become prisoners of guilt, self-delusion, and old age; meanwhile, his public philosophy was consistently humanistic and liberal. The question naturally arises, then, whether there was a tension or contradiction between Welles's politics and the personality implicit in his style. In my view there was such a tension—a productive one, however, as can be seen if we now examine more closely the maze of conflicts and oppositions that structures *Citizen Kane's* overall narrative.

The Labyrinth

There are two snow sleds in *Citizen Kane*. The first, as everyone knows, is named Rosebud and is given to Kane by his mother; the second is a Christmas present from Kane's guardian, Thatcher, and is seen so briefly that audiences are unaware that it, too, has a name. If you press the pause button on the DVD edition of *Kane*, you will discover that for a few frames sled number two, which is called Crusader, is presented fully to the camera. Where the original has a flower, this one is embossed with the helmet of a knight. The symbolism is fairly obvious: Kane repays Thatcher's gift by growing up to be a crusading, trust-busting newspaperman, out to slay the dragon Wall Street. Deprived of maternal care, he turns himself into a phony champion of the people, an overreacher who dies like a medieval knight amid the empty gothic splendor of Xanadu.

Crusader was a tiny joke that Welles could throw away in a film that bristles with clever asides. I mention it chiefly because I'm foolishly proud of knowing such trivia, but also because it's a convenient way to point up the duality in Kane's character and in the very conception of the film. The contrast between Crusader and Rosebud is only the most superficial instance of the way images, characters, and ideas are set off against one another. Kane has not only two sleds but two wives and two friends. The camera makes two visits to Susan Alexander and two journeys to Xanadu; it even shows two close-ups of Rosebud, once as it is being obliterated by the snows of Colorado at Mrs. Kane's board-

inghouse, and again as it is incinerated in the basement of Kane's Florida estate. Finally, in the most vivid clash of all, we are given 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.

At every level the movie is a paradox: Kane himself is in some ways as much like Welles as he is like Hearst. The style of the film is both derivative of earlier Hollywood models and critical of them. The leftist implications of the project adversely affected Welles's entire career, and yet in many ways the attack on Hearst is somewhat oblique. Actually, *Kane* is almost as deeply concerned with the movies themselves, and with the potentially deceptive, myth-making qualities of the media, which are epitomized by the Hearst press. In other words, it has a complex attitude not only toward its subject, but toward its own cinematic bravura.

These tensions and contradictions can be seen in the two contrasting movements at the beginning of the film—a dreamy, expressionistic portrayal of Kane's death, followed by a newsreel depiction of his life. As David Bordwell has pointed out, Welles seems to be paying homage to the dual fountainheads of cinematic perception—the fantasy of George Méliès and the realism of Louis Lumière.⁶ But even though the two modes are placed in dialectical relation, they achieve only a negative synthesis; each suggests the voyeurism inherent in the medium, and each leaves Kane an enigma.

In the first shot, we see a No Trespassing sign that the camera promptly ignores. To the strains of what Bernard Herrmann called a funereal "power" music, we rise up a chainlink fence toward a misty, bleak, studio-manufactured sky, a series of dissolves providing glimpses of Kane's private world. As we pass beyond the gigantic *K* atop the fence and progressively nearer to a lighted window in a castle, we encounter a surreal montage: