12

Synthesis

Citizen Kane

RKO

The motion-picture medium has an extraordinary range of expression. It has in common with the plastic arts the fact that it is a visual composition projected on a two-dimensional surface; with dance, that it can deal in the arrangement of movement; with theatre, that it can create a dramatic intensity of events; with music, that it can compose in the rhythms and phrases of time and can be attended by song and instrument; with poetry, that it can juxtapose images; with literature generally, that it can encompass in its sound track the abstractions available only to language.

—Maya Deren, filmmaker and theorist

Overview As Maya Deren's observation suggests, analyzing a movie is no easy task. The previous chapters of this book isolate the various language systems of movies, exploring each system's range of expression. Film is a more complex medium than the traditional arts because movies synthesize many language systems simultaneously, bombarding the spectator with literally hundreds of symbolic ideas and emotions at the same time, some of them overt, others subliminal. Of course, filmmakers rarely use each language system at full tilt. In every scene—indeed, in every shot—there is a principle of hierarchical subordination. The combinations are constantly in flux, like the couplings, divergencies, and recouplings of a group of dancers.

The French critic André Bazin described *Citizen Kane* as "a discourse on method" because of its encyclopedic technical range. The film, directed by Orson Welles (1915–1985), is an ideal choice to demonstrate how these various language systems interact dynamically within a single text. The following pages can only touch on the high points of this famous movie, but the analysis can serve as a guide for a systematic explication of any film.

Citizen Kane is the life story of a powerful newspaper magnate, Charles Foster Kane, who is as contradictory as he is controversial. The film is a fictionalized biography of the ruthless publishing baron William Randolph Hearst (1863–1951). Actually, the characters in the movie are composites, drawn from the lives of several famous American tycoons, but Hearst was the most obvious. Herman Mankiewicz, the coauthor of the screenplay, knew Hearst personally and was a friend of the old yellow journalist's mistress, screen star Marion Davies. Davies was among the best-liked personalities in the film industry, and except for her fondness for alcohol and jigsaw puzzles, was quite unlike the Susan Alexander character in *Citizen Kane*.

The movie recounts the major events of the protagonist's lengthy life. Born in comparative obscurity, the eight-year-old Charles is sent away to boarding school after his mother inherits a huge fortune through a fluke. Kane's guardian throughout his youth is the banker Walter P. Thatcher, a pompous blowhard and political reactionary. After living a life of frivolous self-indulgence, Kane decides in his midtwenties to become a newspaper publisher. Along with his close associates, the doggedly loyal Bernstein and the suave Jed Leland, he dedicates himself to championing the cause of the underprivileged and attacking corrupt institutions of power. At the height of his career, Kane marries the refined Emily Norton, niece of the President of the United States. But the marriage eventually turns stale, then rancid. In middle age, Kane consoles himself by secretly taking a mistress, Susan Alexander, a pretty but rather empty-headed shopgirl with vague aspirations of becoming a singer.

Buoyed by his fame and popularity, Kane runs for governor of New York. His opponent, Boss Jim Gettys, attempts to blackmail him into withdrawing from the race by threatening to go public with the hypocrisy of Kane's marriage and to expose his cozy arrangement with Susan. Outraged, Kane refuses to capitulate, even though he knows that the scandal will publicly humiliate his wife, his son, and Susan. Kane loses the election and the respect of his best friend, Jed Leland. Emily divorces Kane, taking their young son with her.

Kane redirects his energies toward the career of a proxy, his new young wife, Susan Alexander Kane. He is determined to make her into a great opera star, despite the inconvenient fact that she has no discernible talent. Ignoring her objections, indifferent to her public mortification, Kane pushes the talentless Susan to the brink of suicide. Thwarted again, he finally agrees to give up on his scheme to make her an opera star. Instead, he builds an enormous, isolated palace, Xanadu, where he and Susan retire into semiseclusion. After years of being bullied into submission by Kane, Susan rebels and walks out on him. Finally, alone and embittered, the old man dies amidst the empty opulence of Xanadu.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Cinematographer Gregg Toland considered *Citizen Kane* the high point of his career. The veteran cinematographer thought he might be able to learn something from the "boy genius," whose accomplishments were mostly in radio and the Broadway theater. Welles, used to setting up his own lights in the live theater, thought that movie directors were also responsible for the lighting. Intrigued, Toland let him go ahead, allowing Welles to determine the design of most of the lights but quietly instructing the camera crew to make the necessary technical adjustments.

12–1. Publicity photo of Orson Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland during the production of *Citizen Kane* (U.S.A., 1941).
Toland, the most admired cinematographer of his generation, asked Welles if he could photograph the young director's first feature film. He was fascinated by Welles's bold theatricality, and he often suggested more effective ways of shooting scenes. They discussed each shot in the movie, which is eclectic in its visual style, integrating a variety of influences. Welles was strongly drawn to the lighting theories of such theatrical designers as Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia and to many of the techniques of the German expressionist movement. Welles was also influenced by the moody low-key photography of John Ford's *Stagecoach.* Welles was so grateful for the help of the veteran cinematographer that he gave Toland a conspicuous credit title—unusual in this era. *(RKO)*

Everyone saw at once that *Citizen Kane* didn't look like most American movies of its era. There is not an indifferently photographed image in the film. Even the exposition scenes—normally dispatched with efficient **medium two-shots**—are startlingly photographed **(12–2).** Not that the techniques were new. **Deep-focus, low-key lighting,** rich textures, audacious compositions, dynamic contrasts between foregrounds and backgrounds, **backlighting,** sets with ceilings, side lighting, steep **angles, epic long shots** juxtaposed with **extreme close-ups,** dizzying **crane shots,** special effects galore—none of these was new. But no one had previously used them in such a "seven layer-cake profusion," to quote critic James Naremore.

Photographically, *Kane* ushered in a revolution, implicitly challenging the **classical** ideal of a transparent style that doesn't call attention to itself. In *Citizen Kane,* the stylistic virtuosity is part of the show. The lighting in the movie is generally in moderate **high key** in those scenes depicting Kane's youth and those dealing with his years as a crusading young publisher. As he grows older and more cynical, the lighting grows darker, more harshly contrasting. Kane's home, the palatial Xanadu, seems steeped in perpetual night. Only spotlight patches of light penetrate the oppressive gloom, revealing the contours of a chair, a sofa, yet another piece of heroic sculpture. But the pervasive atmosphere is dank, impenetrable. The darkness shrouds an unspeakable evil.

12–2. ***Citizen Kane.***
Kane ushered in an era of flamboyant visual effects in the American cinema, and as such represented an assault on the classical ideal of an invisible style. Lights are often from below or other unexpected sources, creating startling clashes and abstract patterns and infusing the photographed materials with a sense of visual exuberance. There's nothing invisible about the lighting of this shot, for example. As written, the scene is merely exposition, setting up the movie's narrative premise. Some reporters are talking in a screening room, and while they talk, the light from the projection booth splashes into the darkened auditorium, flooding the silhouetted figures in a sea of undulating luminescence. *(RKO)*

Spotlights are also used in closer shots for symbolic effects. The mixture of decency and corruption in Kane is suggested by the contrasting lights: Sometimes his face seems split in half, with one side brightly illuminated, the other hidden in darkness. What is concealed is often more important than what's revealed. In an early scene between the idealistic Kane and his two associates, for example, the protagonist tells Bernstein and Leland of his intention to publish a "Declaration of Principles" on the front page of his newspaper, promising his readers that he will be an honest and tireless champion of their rights as citizens and human beings. When Kane bends down to sign the document, however, his face is suddenly plunged in darkness—an ominous foreshadowing of Kane's later character.

Gregg Toland had often experimented with deep-focus photography during the 1930s, mostly while working with director William Wyler **(see 1–20b).** But the deep focus in *Kane* is more flamboyant than Wyler's use of this technique **(12–3).** Deep-focus photography involves the use of **wide-angle lenses,** which tend to exaggerate the distances between people—an appropriate symbolic analogue for a story dealing with separation, alienation, and loneliness.

12–3. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Orson Welles and (at far end of the table) Everett Sloane and Joseph Cotten.*
Welles's deep-focus photography is meant to be admired for its virtuosity as well as its functionalism. André Bazin, an enthusiastic champion of deep-focus techniques, believed that it reduces the importance of editing and preserves the cohesiveness of real space and time. Many spatial planes can be captured simultaneously in a single **take,** maintaining the objectivity of a scene. Bazin felt that audiences were thus encouraged to be more creative—less passive—in understanding the relationships between people and things. In this photo, for example, we are free to look at the faces of over two dozen characters. "The public may choose, with its eyes, what it wants to see of a shot," Welles said. "I don't like to force it." *(RKO)*

Deep focus also tends to encourage the audience to actively mine a shot for its information. In a scene involving Susan Alexander's suicide attempt, for example, a cause–effect relationship is suggested in the opening shot. Susan has taken a lethal dose of medication and lies comatose on her bed in a semi-darkened room. At the bottom of the screen, in **close-up** range, stands an empty glass and a bottle of medication; in the middle of the screen, in medium range, lies Susan, wheezing softly; in the upper portion of the screen, in long-shot range, is the door to the room. We hear Kane banging on the door. He then forces it open and enters the room. The layering of the **mise en scène** is a visual accusation: **(1)** the lethal dose was taken by **(2)** Susan Alexander Kane because of **(3)** Kane's inhumanity.

Special effects are used throughout the movie for a variety of reasons. In some settings—such as the exterior shots of Xanadu—the special effects lend the locale a slightly phantasmagorical quality. In other scenes, such as the political rally, special effects provide a realistic facsimile of large crowds and a huge auditorium **(12–4).**

12–4. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Ray Collins.*
RKO's highly respected special effects department consisted of thirty-five people, most of whom worked on *Kane.* Vernon L. Walker was in charge. Over 80 percent of the movie required some kind of special effects work, such as miniatures, **matte shots,** and **double** and **multiple exposures.** Many scenes required reprinting—that is, combining two or more separate images onto one through the use of the **optical printer**. For example, this shot combines three separately photographed images—Boss Jim Gettys (Collins) standing on a balcony overlooking Madison Square Garden, with Kane down below delivering a campaign speech to a huge audience. The frame of the balcony masks the dividing line between the two areas. The auditorium area combines live action (stage) with a matte painting (audience); the balcony set consists of two walls. Welles was thus able to give the movie an **epic** scope, while keeping production costs relatively low. Total cost of the picture: just under $700,000—not lavish by the standards of 1941. *(RKO)*

The American cinema of the 1940s was to grow progressively darker, both thematically and photographically, thanks in part to the enormous influence of *Citizen Kane*. The most important style of the decade was **film noir**—literally, "black cinema." It was a style suited to the times. Welles's style continued in a noir vein, especially in such movies as *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Touch of Evil*. Toland's death in 1948 at the age of forty-four was an irreparable loss to the American cinema.

MISE EN SCÈNE

Coming from the world of live theater, Welles was an expert at staging action dynamically. Long shots are a more effective—and more theatrical—medium for the art of mise en scène, and hence the movie contains relatively few close shots. Most of the images are tightly framed and in **closed form.** Most of them are also composed in depth, with important information in the foreground, midground, and background. The **proxemic ranges** between the characters are choreographed balletically, to suggest their shifting power relationships. For example, an early scene in the movie shows Kane, Bernstein, and Leland taking over the staid offices of *The Inquirer,* the conservative newspaper young Kane has just bought because he thinks it might be fun to run a newspaper. While workers and assistants stream in and out of the frame, carrying equipment, furniture, and personal belongings, Kane carries on a whimsical conversation with the stuffy, soon-to-be ex-editor, Mr. Carter, a Dickensian study in spluttering comic exasperation.

Perhaps the best way of understanding the complexity of Welles's mise en scène is to analyze a single shot. The dramatic context of **12–5** is offered in the caption.

1. *Dominant.* Because of his central position within the frame and the high contrast between his dark clothes and the glaring snow, Charles tends to attract our eye first. He is also the subject of controversy in the foreground.
2. *Lighting key.* The interior is photographed in moderate high key. The exterior—consisting mostly of blinding white snow—is in extreme high key.
3. *Shot and camera proxemics.* This is a deep-focus shot, extending from a medium range in the foreground to an extreme long-shot range in the background. The camera is at a personal distance from Thatcher and Mrs. Kane, a social distance from Kane senior, and a public distance from Charles. The boy is playing happily, shouting disconnected phrases like "The Union forever!" Kane senior is stubbornly resisting their plans, while Thatcher and Mrs. Kane, more frigid than the outside weather, listen wearily.
4. *Angle.* The camera is at a slightly high angle, because more of the floor can be seen than the ceiling. The angle suggests a slight air of fatality.

12–5. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Harry Shannon, Buddy Swan (in window), George Coulouris, and Agnes Moorehead.*
Almost all of the compositions in *Kane* are intricate and richly textured, at times baroquely ornate. But the visual complexity is not mere rhetorical ornamentation. The images are designed to reveal a maximum of information, often in an ironic manner. In this scene, for example, eight-year-old Charles plays with his sled outside in the snow while his future is being determined indoors by his mother and Thatcher. The boy's father watches impotently, sputtering a few feeble protests. The mise en scène is compartmentalized into twos, with the wall serving as the vertical dividing line. Kane senior and young Charles are grouped to the left in the upper portion of the frame; Thatcher and the severe Mrs. Kane dominate the right lower half, their pens poised to sign the contract that will soon separate Charles from his parents. Ironically, Mrs. Kane is motivated by love and self-sacrifice. She is sending Charles away to protect him from his father, a swaggering lout whose treatment of his son veers from forced jocularity to unpredictable outbursts of anger. *(RKO)*

5. *Color values.* Not applicable: The film is in black and white.
6. *Lens/filter/stock.* Though it is difficult to discern in this photo, a wide-angle lens is used to capture its depth of field. The lens exaggerates the distances between the characters. No apparent filters. Probably slow stock requiring lots of lights.
7. *Subsidiary contrasts.* Our eye travels from Charles (the dominant) to Kane senior to Thatcher, Mrs. Kane, and the spotlighted document they are preparing to sign. On the small TV screen, Charles would probably be lost and Kane senior would then constitute the dominant.
8. *Density.* The image is densely packed with information, thanks to the high-key lighting and the richly textured details of the sets and costumes.

9. *Composition.* The image is split vertically in half, a tug of war, with two figures on the left, two on the right. The foreground table balances off the background table and rear wall. The composition segments and isolates the characters.
10. *Form.* The image is in closed form, its carefully coordinated components suggesting the self-containment of a stage setting enclosed by a proscenium arch.
11. *Framing.* The shot is tightly framed, with little latitude for movement. Each character seems confined to his or her own space cubicle. The excluded Charles is imprisoned within the frame of the window—an enclosure within an enclosure. His freedom is illusionary.
12. *Depth.* The image is photographed in four depth planes: **(a)** the foreground table and its occupants; **(b)** Kane senior; **(c)** the rear portions of the parlor; and **(d)** Charles playing outside in the distance.
13. *Character placement.* Charles and Kane senior occupy the upper portions of the image, Thatcher and Mrs. Kane the lower—an ironic placement, because those in the "inferior" positions actually control the situation. Husband and wife are maximally separated at the opposite edges of the composition, forcing Charles to be coupled in the center with Thatcher—an intimacy both come to regret.
14. *Staging positions.* Kane senior is in the quarter-turn position, relatively intimate vis-à-vis the spectator. Thatcher is at full front, but his eyes are lowered, avoiding our gaze. Mrs. Kane is in the profile position, preoccupied with her spouse.
15. *Character proxemics.* Thatcher and Mrs. Kane are in intimate proximity. They are at an aloof social distance from Kane senior, and a remote public distance from Charles.

MOVEMENT

From the very beginning of his film career, Welles was a master of the mobile camera. In *Citizen Kane,* camera movements are generally equated with the vitality and energy of youth. A static camera, on the other hand, tends to be associated with illness, old age, and death. These same **kinetic** principles apply to Kane's movements. As a young man, he is a whirlwind of energy, playfully gliding through life with scarcely enough breath to finish his sentences before his attention is distracted and he sweeps to another location. As an old man, however, he almost groans with each calculated step. Often he is photographed in stationary positions or sitting down. He seems bored and exhausted, especially in the Xanadu scenes with Susan (see **12–6).**

No one has used crane shots so spectacularly as Welles. But once again, the virtuosity is rarely indulged in for its own sake. The bravura crane shots

12–6. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Dorothy Comingore (at lower left base of fireplace) and Orson Welles.* In scenes depicting Kane as an old man, the camera is often far away, making him seem remote, inaccessible. Even when he is closer to the lens, as in this shot, the deep-focus photography keeps the rest of the world at a distance, with vast empty spaces between him and other people. We are often forced to search the mise en scène to locate the characters. In this photo, for example, Susan is dwarfed into insignificance by the enormous fireplace and the heroic sculpture behind her. She is a mere **subsidiary contrast,** not even so important as the statuary and much less important than the **dominant,** Kane. These static shots are so totally drained of intimacy and spontaneity that they're almost funny, if they weren't so sad. *(RKO)*

embody important symbolic ideas. For example, after learning of Kane's death, a reporter attempts to interview Susan Alexander. The sequence begins in a torrential rainstorm. We see a poster and picture of Susan, advertising her engagement as a singer in a nightclub. As the soundtrack shudders with a rumble of thunder, the camera cranes up, up through the rain, up to the roof of the building, then plunges through a garish neon sign, "El Rancho," descends to the skylight where a blinding flash of lightning masks the camera's passage through the window itself, sweeps down to the deserted nightclub, where Susan is hunched at a table in a drunken stupor, prostrate with grief. (She is the only character in the film who is devastated by the news of Kane's death.) Both the

camera and the reporter encounter numerous obstacles—the rain, the sign, the very walls of the building must be penetrated before we can even see Susan, much less hear her speak. The crane shot embodies a brutal invasion of privacy, a disregard for the barriers Susan has placed around her in her misery.

In Susan's opera debut, a traveling shot is used for comic effect, its payoff a virtual punch line. As she begins her first aria, the camera begins to rise, as if to ascend to the heavens. While she continues singing, her thin, watery voice grows progressively more feeble as the camera continues its upward journey, past sandbags, ropes, and platforms, until it finally comes to rest on two stagehands on the catwalk, looking down at the performance. They listen for a moment longer, then turn to face each other. One stagehand waggishly pinches his nose, as if to say, "She really stinks."

Like all movies—like every human enterprise—*Citizen Kane* is flawed. A number of scenes in the film are merely adequate, nothing more. One such scene, singled out by several critics, appears late in the movie, when Susan finally walks out on Kane forever. Enraged, the old man tears up Susan's bedroom, scattering its contents and demolishing its furnishings. Welles obviously wanted to convey Kane's fury through the sheer kinetic energy of the old man destroying the room. But the shots tend to be too lengthy and the camera too distant from the action. The violence of Kane's rage would be more effectively communicated if Welles had kept the camera closer in, so that the movements would dominate more. He also should have **edited** more, to convey the idea of

12–7. *Citizen Kane.* In many respects, *Kane* is structured like a mystery story, a search to penetrate a great enigma. Welles is able to suggest this idea in the very opening sequence, through a series of dissolves and traveling shots. The movie begins with a sign: NO TRESPASSING. Ignoring it, the camera cranes up over the sign and over a wire fence. We dissolve from an ornate grillwork to an iron gate showing the letter "K." Xanadu is in the background, suffocating in mist, a solitary window light its only sign of habitation. Here lies the mystery. Here the search begins. *(RKO)*

12–8. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Everett Sloane, Orson Welles, and Joseph Cotten.*
As a young man, Kane is a dynamo of energy, and his youthful high spirits are often conveyed kinetically—with brisk traveling shots that parallel the protagonist's movements. In this scene, for example, he comically lurches forward and backward, then forward again, the camera retreating and lunging back with him, as he nervously tries to announce his engagement to Emily Norton. *(RKO)*

12–9. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with George Coulouris, Orson Welles, and Everett Sloane.*
Welles frequently used lengthy takes in his staging, choreographing the movements of the camera and the characters rather than cutting to a series of separate shots. Even in relatively static scenes such as this, these lengthy takes provide the mise en scène with a sense of fluidity and dynamic change, while still entrapping the three characters within the same space. The setting is a large office in 1929. The Great Depression has dealt Kane a severe setback, forcing him to relinquish control over his publishing empire. The sequence begins with a close shot of a legal document, while Bernstein recites its contents. He lowers the document, thus revealing Thatcher, now an old man, presiding over the dissolution. The camera adjusts slightly, and we then see Kane, listening grimly. *(RKO)*

fragmentation and confusion. As played, the scene works well enough, but for many viewers it seems somewhat anticlimactic. Kinetic energy must parallel its subject matter or the motion can seem too much—or too little.

EDITING

The editing in *Citizen Kane* is a calculated display of virtuosity, leaping over days, months, even years with casual nonchalance. John Spalding has pointed out that Welles often used several editing styles in the same sequence. When Susan recalls her opera career, for example, the singing lesson with her exasperated voice teacher is photographed in a lengthy take. The backstage chaos prior to the curtain going up is edited in short bursts of fragmentary shots to emphasize the utter confusion of her opera debut. Welles used parallel editing to contrast Susan's terror on stage with Leland's contemptuous boredom in the auditorium. Kane's argument with Susan over her disastrous reviews is cut according to classical conventions. Thematic montage is used to condense her national tour on the road **(12–13).** The final scene of the sequence, Susan's suicide attempt, opens with a deep-focus lengthy take, as Kane crashes into Susan's hotel room and discovers her comatose in bed.

It's difficult to isolate the editing in this film because it often works in concert with the sound techniques, not to speak of the fragmentation of the story. Often Welles used editing to condense a great deal of time, using sound as a continuity device. For example, to demonstrate Kane's gradual estrangement

12–10. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Orson Welles and Ruth Warrick.* Welles often combined editing with another technique, which he used as a payoff. In the famous breakfast montage sequence portraying the disintegration of Kane's marriage to Emily, for example, he concluded with this final shot. The distance between the two says it all: They have nothing to say to each other. *(RKO)*

from his first wife, Emily, Welles features a series of breakfast scenes, using only a few lines of dialogue with each brief episode. Beginning with some honeymoon sweet-talk, the mood quickly shifts to slight irritation, then strained annoyance, bitter resentment, and finally silence and alienation. The sequence begins with the lovers sharing the intimacy of the same medium shot. As the marriage deteriorates, Welles cross-cuts to separate shots of each, even though they are sitting at the same table. The one-minute sequence ends with a long shot of the two at opposite ends of a lengthy table, each reading a different newspaper **(12–10).**

12–11. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Orson Welles.*
Budgetary considerations often determined the cunning editing strategies of the film, which was edited by Robert Wise. In the political campaign sequence, for example, Welles cut from long shots of Kane delivering his speech to closer shots of his family and associates listening in the audience. These isolated fragments are intercut with **reestablishing shots** of the entire auditorium (see **12–4).** The huge hall and its thousands of inhabitants weren't real: The cutting makes them *seem* real—by association. *(RKO)*

Welles used a similar technique in showing how Susan Alexander eventually becomes Kane's mistress. The first time he meets her, he is splashed with mud on the street. She offers him some hot water, if he wants to come up to her small apartment for it. While there, they become friends. She admits that she sings a little and he asks her to perform for him. While she begins to sing her song at an old piano, the image **dissolves** to a parallel shot, only now she is in a large, handsomely decorated apartment, where she finishes the song at a grander piano, dressed in an elegant gown. We don't need to be shown what happened "between" these two shots. We can infer what happened by Susan's much improved wardrobe and living quarters.

Coming from the world of live radio drama, Welles was often credited with inventing many film sound techniques when in fact he was primarily a consolidator, synthesizing and expanding the piecemeal accomplishments of his predecessors. In radio, sounds have to evoke images. An actor speaking through an echo chamber suggests a visual context—a huge auditorium, for example. A distant train whistle suggests a panoramic landscape, and so on. Welles applied this aural principle to his movie soundtrack. With the help of his sound technician, James G. Stewart, Welles discovered that almost every visual technique has its sound equivalent. Each of the shots, for example, has an appropriate sound quality involving volume, degree of definition, and texture. Long and extreme long-shot sounds are fuzzy and remote; close-up sounds are crisp, clear, and generally loud. High-angle shots are often accompanied by high-pitched music and sound effects; low-angle shots by brooding and low-pitched sounds. Sounds can be dissolved and overlapped like a **montage** sequence.

Welles frequently cut from one time period or location to another with a shocking sound transition. For example, the film's opening prologue concludes with Kane's death, which is accompanied by the gradual snuffing out of the sound. Suddenly, we are almost assaulted with a Voice-of-God narrator booming out "News on the March!"—the beginning of the newsreel sequence. In another sequence, Jed Leland is delivering a campaign speech, in which he describes Kane as "the fighting liberal, the friend of the workingman, the next governor of this state, who entered upon this campaign . . . " Cut to Kane in Madison Square Garden, continuing ". . . with one purpose only . . . "

Welles frequently overlapped his dialogue, especially in the comical sequences where several people are trying to speak at the same time. In Xanadu, the rooms are so huge that Kane and Susan must shout at each other to be heard, producing an incongruous effect that's both sad and funny **(12–6).** The Madison Square Garden facsimile is convincing in part because we *hear* the shouts and cheers of the enormous crowds and hence imagine that we see them as well.

12–12. Publicity photo of Orson Welles and composer–conductor Bernard Herrmann during a recording session for *Citizen Kane.*
Herrmann was the composer for Welles's Mercury Theatre of the Air, and when Welles went to Hollywood, he took Herrmann with him. *Citizen Kane* was his first movie score. The two worked closely together, Welles often cutting his film to accommodate the musical numbers, rather than vice versa, which was usually the case in Hollywood. Herrmann was present throughout the production, taking twelve weeks to compose the score, an unusually lengthy period of time. Difficult, intensely egotistical, an uncompromising perfectionist, Herrmann did most of his best work for Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, including the scores for *The Magnificent Ambersons, Vertigo, North by Northwest, Psycho,* and many others. *(RKO)*

Bernard Herrmann's musical score is similarly sophisticated. Musical motifs are assigned to several of the major characters and events. Many of these motifs are introduced in the newsreel sequence, then picked up later in the film, often in a minor key, or played at a different tempo, depending on the mood of the scene. For example, the poignant Rosebud motif is introduced in the opening sequence, and when Rosebud is brought up during the course of the investigation, a variation of the musical motif often underlines the dialogue. When Welles finally reveals to us—but not to the characters—the mystery of Rosebud, the musical motif swells powerfully into prominence, producing one of the most thrilling revelations in all of cinema.

Herrmann's score often parallels Welles's visuals. For instance, in the montage of breakfast scenes between Kane and his first wife, the disintegration of the marriage is paralleled by the variations in the music. The sequence opens with a soft romantic waltz, tenderly underscoring the fascination each feels for the other. This is followed by a slightly comical musical variation. As the relationship becomes more strained, the orchestration becomes harsher, more dissonant. In the final scene, neither one bothers to speak anymore. Their silence is accompanied by a brooding, neurotic variation on the opening musical theme.

In many scenes, Welles used sound for symbolic purposes. For example, he used a dissolve and montage sequence to show Susan on her disastrous

12–13. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Dorothy Comingore.* *Kane* demonstrates that virtually every kind of visual has its aural counterpart. This montage sequence is reinforced by an aural montage of Susan Alexander's shrieking arias, orchestral music, popping flashbulbs, and the sounds of newspaper presses rolling. The pounding sounds are machinelike and inexorable, battering their sacrificial victim until she is stupefied by terror and exhaustion. *(RKO)*

operatic tour **(12–13).** On the soundtrack, her aria can be heard, distorted into a screeching, dismal wail. The sequence ends with the gradual dimming of the light, to symbolize Susan's increasing despair. On the accompanying soundtrack, we hear her voice winding down to a wounded moan, as though someone pulled the plug on a record player in the middle of a song.

ACTING

Welles had his own stable of writers, assistants, and actors, who worked with him in both radio and the New York live theater. When he went to Hollywood, he took many of them with him, including fifteen actors. Except for Welles, none of these players was well known, and even Welles was known primarily as a radio performer. (He captured the imagination of the mass audience when his notorious *War of the Worlds* broadcast of 1938 panicked thousands of Americans, who believed that we were actually being invaded by creatures from Mars. Welles was delighted, of course. As a result of this cause célèbre, he got his picture on the cover of *Time* when he was only twenty-two years old.)

Citizen Kane boasts a first-rate cast. There are a few so-so performances, but none that is weak, and several that are outstanding, most notably those of Welles, Dorothy Comingore, Joseph Cotten, Everett Sloane, and Agnes Moorehead. Like most performers who are used to acting repertory-style, members of the cast work as an ensemble; the total effect is one of dramatic scenes that

mesh seamlessly. The Mercury players look like seasoned film performers, not the young neophytes they actually were. For most of them, this was their first movie, yet they are always natural, sincere, and believable.

Even some of the cameo roles are performed with distinction. Because these parts are limited to only a few lines of dialogue, the actors must be able to convey the complexity of their characters—who are often contradictory—without appearing inconsistent. For example, Ray Collins performs Boss Jim Gettys as a cunning survivor. Streetwise and cynical, he is a man who has seen it all. Or at least he thought he had seen it all until he came up against Kane. Gettys seems quietly shocked that Kane, a supposedly high-class opponent, would be so low-class as to publish a doctored photo of Gettys "in a convict suit with stripes, so his children could see the picture in the paper, or his mother." We can't help but sympathize with Gettys's outrage, notwithstanding the fact that otherwise he is a creep.

Although she appears in only one scene, Agnes Moorehead as Kane's mother leaves an indelible impression. (Moorehead was to go on to an even more brilliant performance in Welles's next movie, *The Magnificent Ambersons.*)

12–14. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Dorothy Comingore.*
Comingore's brilliant performance as Susan provides considerable warmth to an otherwise cold and intellectual film. The few close-ups in the movie are reserved primarily for her, forcing us to become more involved with Susan's feelings. Like most of the major characters, she's a study in contradiction, screechy and pitiful at the same time. She can also be very funny. "A person can go crazy in this dump," she complains in her typical whining monotone. "Nobody to talk to, nobody to have any fun with. Forty-nine thousand acres of nothing but scenery and statues." *(RKO)*

Moorehead's Mary Kane might almost have stepped out of a tale by Hawthorne: stern, puritanical, joyless. She is a woman who found out too late that she has married a fool. Trapped, she will endure the humiliation of her marriage, but she will not subject her son to the same fate. In her mind, he is meant for better things, even if that means she must part with the only person she loves. Mrs. Kane is a woman of few words, but her determination is communicated by her steely stoicism, her decisive movements, her ramrod-straight back. This is not a lady to mess with.

Everett Sloane and Joseph Cotten are flawless as Bernstein and Leland. Bernstein's uncritical hero-worship of Kane establishes him as the less intelligent of the two, a man who—unlike Leland—puts friendship above principle. But the endearing Bernstein is something of a comic innocent, so blinded by loyalty that he is incapable of seeing Kane's flaws, much less his vices. As an old man, Bernstein is still funny, a successful businessman, but no shallow materialist. "It's no trick to make a lot of money," he scoffs, "if all you want is to make a lot of money." He recognizes that Kane's motives ran deeper than the crassly entrepreneurial. He is still awed by the mysterious depths of Kane's inner spirit. And perhaps a bit saddened by the contrast with his own ordinary soul.

Welles's performance as Kane was lavishly praised. John O'Hara, reviewing the movie for *Newsweek,* said, "There has never been a better actor than Orson Welles." D. W. Griffith described it as the greatest film performance he had ever seen. Tall and imposing, with a deep, flexible voice capable of a wide spectrum of nuances, Welles was an astonishing technician, equally convincing as a brash young man, a rigid autocrat in middle years, and a burned-out, hulking septuagenarian. At twenty-five, Kane is charming and charismatic, with an insolent skepticism toward all forms of authority. In fact, he is so charming that we hardly notice some of his questionable methods, his insistence on having everything his way. As a middle-aged man, Kane is more somber. The element of threat is more brazenly paraded. He no longer argues that the end justifies the means—he automatically assumes it, expecting others to acquiesce to his views. As an old man, Kane is among the walking wounded, a man who has repeatedly fought and lost.

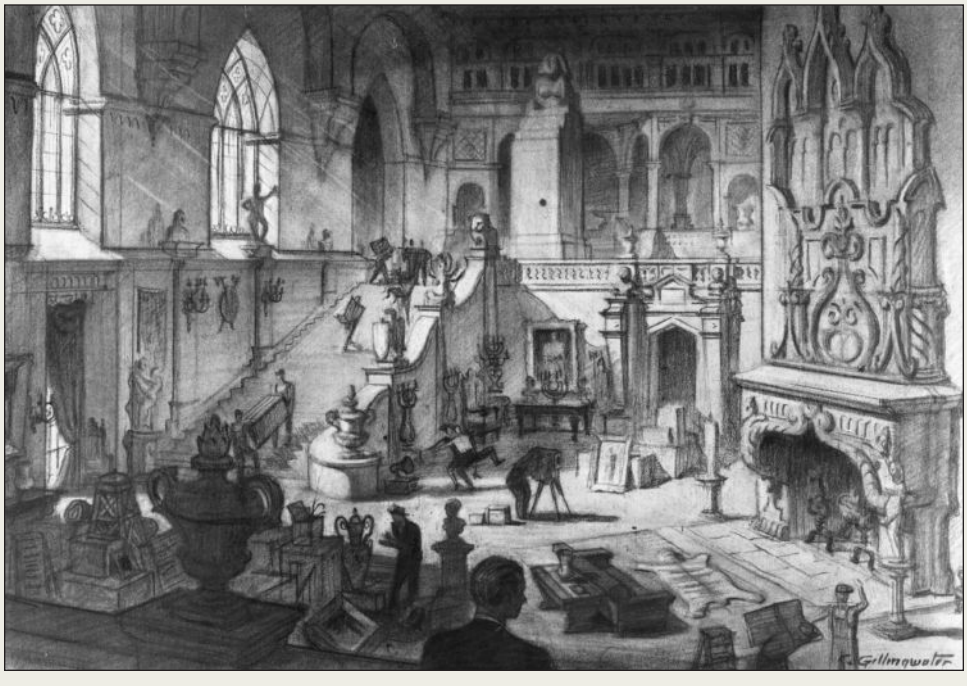
The live theater was Welles's first love. As a youth, he attended a progressive prep school, where he directed and acted in over thirty plays. Shakespeare was his favorite dramatist. In 1930, at the age of fifteen, Welles left school permanently. With money left from an inheritance, he traveled to Europe, where he bluffed his way into the Gate Theatre in Dublin, claiming to be a well-known Broadway star. The managers didn't believe him but were impressed nonetheless, and they hired him. For about a year, Welles directed and acted in many stage classics, mostly of the Elizabethan period.

When he returned to America in 1933, he finagled an acting job touring with Katherine Cornell, one of the major stage stars of that era. They performed mostly Shakespeare and Shaw. In 1935 in New York, Welles joined forces with the aspiring theatrical producer (and later actor and director) John Houseman.

In 1937, Welles and Houseman formed their own company, The Mercury Theatre. Several of their productions were hailed for their brilliance, most notably a modern-dress, antifascist production of *Julius Caesar*. Welles not only starred and directed but also designed the sets, costumes, and lighting. The influential theater critic John Mason Brown pronounced it "a production of genius." Critic Elliot Norton described it as "the most compelling Shakespeare of this generation."

Welles financed his theater with his earnings as a radio star. During his halcyon years in the late 1930s, he was earning $3,000 per week in radio, two-thirds of which was plowed back into the Mercury Theatre. The company was a shoestring operation, constantly on the brink of collapsing. In 1939, after its first flop, the Mercury Theatre folded. Welles originally went to Hollywood with

12–15. Artist's rendering of the interior set of Xanadu for *Citizen Kane*.
In the area of set design and décor, Welles was fortunate in his choice of studio, for RKO's art director, Van Nest Polglase, was among the best in the industry. Perry Ferguson, who actually designed the sets under Polglase's general supervision, shared his boss's preference for monumental sets with unusual sources of lighting and richly textured details. *(RKO)*



the intention of earning some quick cash so he could return to New York and revive the Mercury.

Welles's experience in the live theater proved invaluable when he turned to making movies. He regarded film as essentially a dramatic rather than literary medium. As we have seen, the lighting style of *Citizen Kane* is more indebted to the stage than the screen, and Welles's use of **lengthy takes** is similarly derived from the need in the live theater to stage the action in a unified space.

In the area of art direction too, Welles was able to save hundreds of thousands of dollars by showing only parts of sets rather than entire rooms. For example, the office set consists only of a desk and two walls, yet we seem to be in a huge luxurious office **(12–9).** Similarly, in the Xanadu scenes, Welles spotlit an oversized piece of furniture, a sculpture, or a fireplace, leaving the rest of the room in darkness—as though it were too enormous to be adequately illuminated. (The rooms are actually sparsely furnished.) When these techniques were insufficient, Welles was able to count on the RKO special effects department to create an epic canvas through such techniques as **animation,** matte shots, and **miniatures.**

Edward Stevenson's costumes adhere closely to the actual styles of each period. Because the movie traverses nearly seventy years and the events are not chronologically presented, the costumes had to be instantly recognizable for the

12–16. Exterior set of Xanadu for *Citizen Kane*. The mist-shrouded tropic setting groans under the weight of the sprawling, towering Xanadu, unfinished and already beginning to decay, like a rotting mausoleum from the pages of Edgar Allan Poe. Although the palm trees sway as the wisps of fog drift past dreamily, the set was actually a matte painting, only a few feet high. *(RKO)*

a b c

12–17. Three photos of Orson Welles as Charles Foster Kane at various periods in his life. Welles was required to age about fifty years during the course of the story. Thanks in part to the makeup artistry of Maurice Seiderman, Welles is completely convincing, whether playing Kane at twenty-five **(a),** forty-five **(b),** or seventy-five **(c).** As Kane grows older, his hair grays and recedes, his jowls sag, his cheeks grow puffier, and the bags beneath his eyes grow more pouchy. Seiderman created a synthetic rubber body suit to suggest the increasingly flabby torso of an older man. *(RKO)*

audience to know the period of each scene. Kane's childhood has a nineteenth-century flavor—a cross between Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. The former can be seen in Thatcher's stiff collar and stovepipe hat; the latter in the plain frontier simplicity of the clothes of Mary and Jim Kane.

Costumes are symbolic as well as functional. As a crusading young publisher, Kane favors whites. He often removes his jacket and tie while working. Later in life, he is almost always in black business suits and ties. Emily's clothes look expensive, but with an understated elegance. She always looks like a well-bred young matron—fashionable, modest, and feminine. Susan favors simple clothes before meeting Kane. After meeting him, she is generally dressed in ritzy patterned dresses, sometimes sprinkled with sequins—like an aging showgirl parading her loot.

The following is an analysis of Susan's opera costume **(12–18),** a triumph of irony and wit:

1. *Period.* Ostensibly nineteenth century, though in fact an amusing pastiche of various periods and "Oriental" influences.
2. *Class.* Royalty. The costume is profusely festooned with pearls, precious jewels, and other queenly niceties.
3. *Sex.* Female, with an emphasis on curved, swaying lines and peekaboo slits in the skirt. Only the turban provides a masculine touch, though it is whimsically inflected with fluffy white feathers.

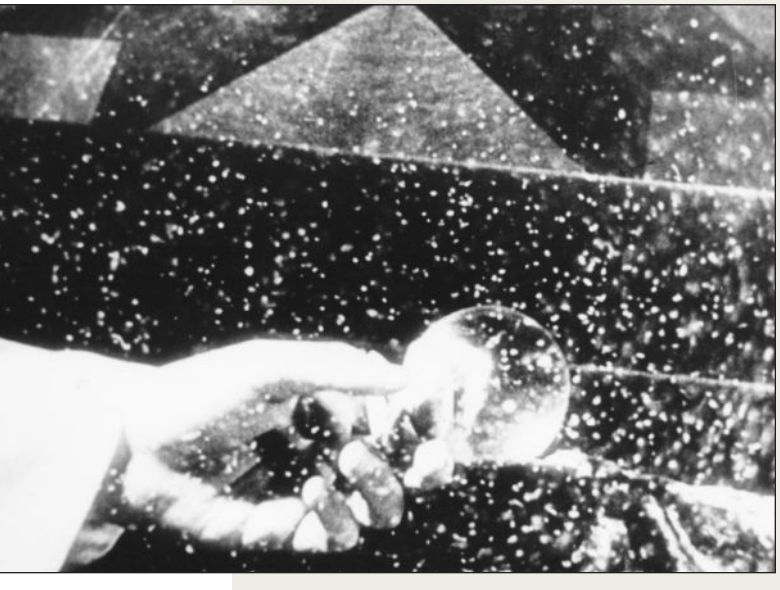
12–18. Publicity photo of Dorothy Comingore in opera costume for *Citizen Kane.* Bernard Herrmann composed the film's opera, *Salommbô,* in the style of nineteenth-century French "Oriental" operas. Edward Stevenson's costumes are in this same **campy** style of mockery. For example, Susan's outlandish regalia is a send-up of what the well-dressed French-Oriental opera queen might wear while suffering the agonies of unrequited love, torment, and despair. *(RKO)*

4. *Age.* The costume is designed for a woman in her twenties, at the peak of her physical attractiveness.
5. *Silhouette.* Formfitting, unabashedly highlighting the wearer's curvacious contours.
6. *Fabric.* Silks, beaded ornamentation encrusted with jewels.
7. *Accessories.* Turban, pearl strands, incongruous Joan Crawford-style ankle-strap shoes.
8. *Color.* The film is in black and white, but most of the fabric has a metallic sheen, suggesting gold and ebony.
9. *Body exposure.* The costume reveals and highlights such erotic areas as the breasts, midriff, and legs.
10. *Function.* The costume is totally without utility, difficult even to walk in. It is intended for a person who does not work, but is displayed.
11. *Body attitude.* Tall and proud, with head and breasts held high, like a Vegas showgirl flashing her gaudy plunder.
12. *Image.* Every inch the opera queen.

The differences between story and plot can best be illustrated by comparing the narrative in chronological order with the restructured sequence of the plot. When Herman Mankiewicz approached Welles with the idea of the story, Welles was concerned that the materials would be too sprawling, too unfocused. To sharpen the story line and infuse it with more dramatic urgency, he suggested scrambling the chronology of events through a series of **flashbacks,** each narrated from the point of view of the person telling the story. Welles had used this multiple flashback technique in a number of his radio dramas.

He and Mankiewicz also introduced a note of suspense. In his final moments of life, Kane mumbles the word *Rosebud* **(12–19).** No one seems to know what it means, and its significance piques the curiosity of a newspaper reporter, Thompson, who spends the remainder of the movie questioning Kane's former associates about this mystery, which he hopes contains the key to Kane's conflicting character.

Welles claimed that the Rosebud **motif** was merely a plot gimmick, intended to hook the audience on a dramatic question that's really a wild goose chase. But the gimmick works. Like the hopeful reporter, we too think that Rosebud will unlock Kane's ambiguous personality. Without this gimmick, the story would have remained rambling and unfocused. The search for the meaning of Rosebud shapes the narrative, providing it with a forward thrust, with a dramatic question we all want answered. This is what foreign critics mean by the American genius for storytelling.



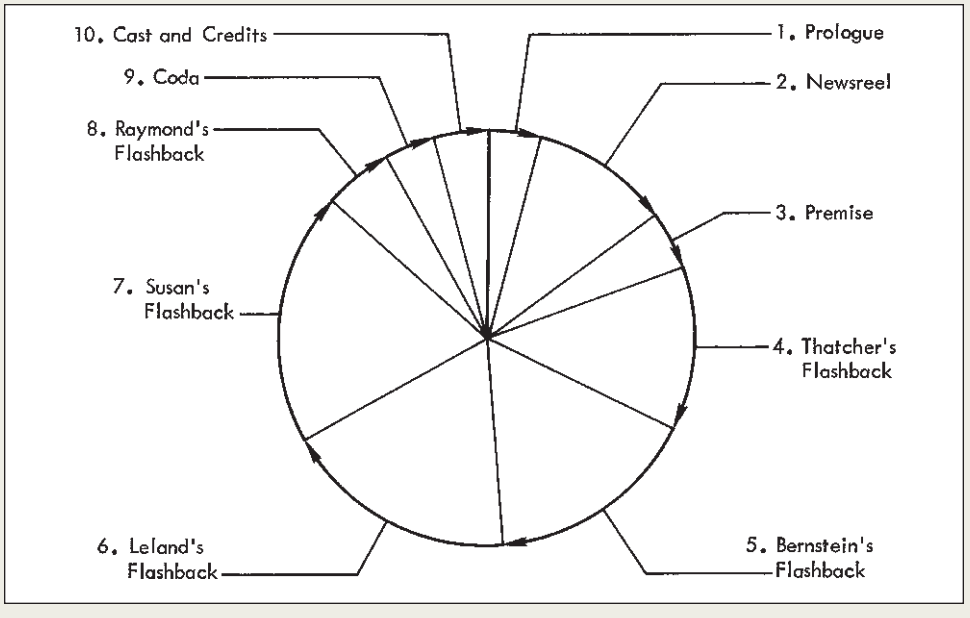
12–19. ***Citizen Kane.*** Like a number of Welles's other movies, *Kane* begins with the end—the death of its protagonist when he is about seventy-five. In his final moments of life, the old man holds a small crystal ball containing a miniature scene that flurries with artificial snow when shaken. With his last dying breath, he utters the word "Rosebud." Then the glass ball crashes to the floor, splintering into a thousand fragments. The plot of the movie is structured like a search—for the meaning of this final utterance. *(RKO)*

The flashback structure of *Citizen Kane* allows Welles to leap through time and space, cutting to various periods of Kane's life without having to adhere to a strict chronology. To provide the audience with an overview, Welles introduced most of the major events and people of Kane's life in a brief newsreel shown early in the film. These events and people are explored in more depth in the individual flashbacks that follow.

Many critics have marveled at the intricate, jigsaw-puzzle structure of the movie, with its interlocking pieces that don't click together until the final scene. The following plot outline sets forth the main structural units of the film and the principal characters and events of each:

1. *Prologue.* Xanadu. Kane's death. "Rosebud."
2. *Newsreel.* Death of Kane. Enormous wealth and decadent lifestyle. Contradictory political image. Marriage to Emily Norton. Exposé of "love nest." Divorce. Marriage to Susan Alexander, "singer." Political campaign. Opera career. The Great Depression and Kane's financial decline. Lonely, secluded old age in Xanadu.
3. *Premise.* Thompson is instructed by his editor **(12–2)** to discover the mystery of Rosebud by questioning Kane's former associates. "It will probably be a very simple thing." False step: Susan refuses to speak to Thompson.
4. *Flashback: The Memoirs of Walter P. Thatcher.* Kane's childhood. Thatcher becomes guardian. Kane's first newspaper: *The Inquirer.* Introduction of

12–20. Approximate proportion of each plot unit in *Citizen Kane.*



Bernstein and Leland. Newspaper crusading years. Kane's financial decline in the 1930s.

5. *Flashback: Bernstein.* Early days at *The Inquirer.* "Declaration of Principles." Building a publishing empire. Engagement to Emily Norton.
6. *Flashback: Jed Leland.* Disintegration of marriage to Emily. Kane meets Susan. Political campaign in 1918. Exposé, divorce, remarriage. Susan's opera career. Final break between Kane and Jed.
7. *Flashback: Susan Alexander Kane.* Opera debut and career. Suicide attempt. Years of semiseclusion with Kane at Xanadu. Susan leaves Kane.
8. *Flashback: Raymond, butler at Xanadu.* Kane's final days. "Rosebud."
9. *Coda.* Revelation of Rosebud. Reverse of opening Prologue, producing closure.
10. *Cast and credits.*

The ten sections of the film vary in length. A diagram charting the approximate proportion of each section is shown in Figure **12–20.**

Citizen Kane is often singled out for the excellence of its screenplay—its wit, its taut construction, its thematic complexity. The script's authorship provoked considerable controversy, both at the time of the movie's release and again in the 1970s, when critic Pauline Kael contended that Welles merely added a few polishing touches to Herman Mankiewicz's finished product. Mankiewicz was a Hollywood regular, a notorious drunk—charming, witty, and almost totally unreliable. When he approached Welles with the original idea for *American* (it was later called *John Citizen, U.S.A.,* and finally *Citizen Kane*), Welles asked his former partner, John Houseman, to help Mankiewicz write the screenplay, preferably in an isolated place, far removed from temptation.

Welles made extensive revisions on the first few drafts of the screenplay—so extensive that Mankiewicz denounced the movie because it departed radically from his scenario. Nor did he want Welles's name to appear on the screenplay credit, and he took his case to the Writers Guild. At this time, a director was not allowed any writing credit unless he or she contributed 50 percent or more of the screenplay. In a compromise gesture, the guild allowed both of them credit, only with Mankiewicz receiving top billing.

When the controversy resurfaced in the 1970s, the American scholar Robert L. Carringer settled the case once and for all. He examined the seven principal drafts of the screenplay, plus many last-minute revision memoranda and additional sources. Carringer's conclusion: The early Mankiewicz drafts contain "dozens of pages of dull, plodding material that will eventually be discarded or replaced altogether. And most tellingly, there is virtually nothing in them of that stylistic wit and fluidity that is the most engaging

trait of the film itself." In short, Mankiewicz provided the raw material; Welles provided the genius.

The script sparkles with surprises. The main characters are a far cry from the tired stereotypes of most movies of this era. Only Thatcher seems conventional, a variation of the 1930s tycoon. The writing is often tersely funny. During Kane's noisy marriage to Susan, for example, the couple is surrounded by pushy reporters. When asked what he's going to do now, Kane replies, "We're going to be a great opera star." Susan chimes in: "Charlie said if I didn't, he'd build me an opera house." The gallant Kane demurs: "That won't be necessary." Cut to a newspaper headline: KANE BUILDS OPERA HOUSE.

There are also moments of pure poetry, like Bernstein's surprising reply to Thompson after the reporter scoffs at Bernstein's suggestion that Rosebud might be a long-lost love. "You take me," the old retainer explains. "One day, back in 1896, I was crossing over to Jersey on the ferry, and as we pulled out, there was another ferry pulling in, and on it there was a girl waiting to get off. A white dress she had on. She was carrying a white parasol. I only saw her for one second. She didn't see me at all, but I'll bet a month hasn't gone by since, that I haven't thought of that girl." Welles always loved that speech—and wished that he had written it.

Thematically, *Kane* is so complex that only a brief itemizing of some of its themes is possible within these few pages. Like most of Welles's other movies, *Citizen Kane* might well be entitled *The Arrogance of Power.* He was attracted to themes traditionally associated with classical tragedy and the epic: the downfall of a public figure because of arrogance and pride. Power and wealth are corrupting, and the corrupt devour themselves. The innocent usually survive, but they are severely scarred. "All of the characters I've played are various forms of Faust," Welles stated. All have bartered their souls and lost.

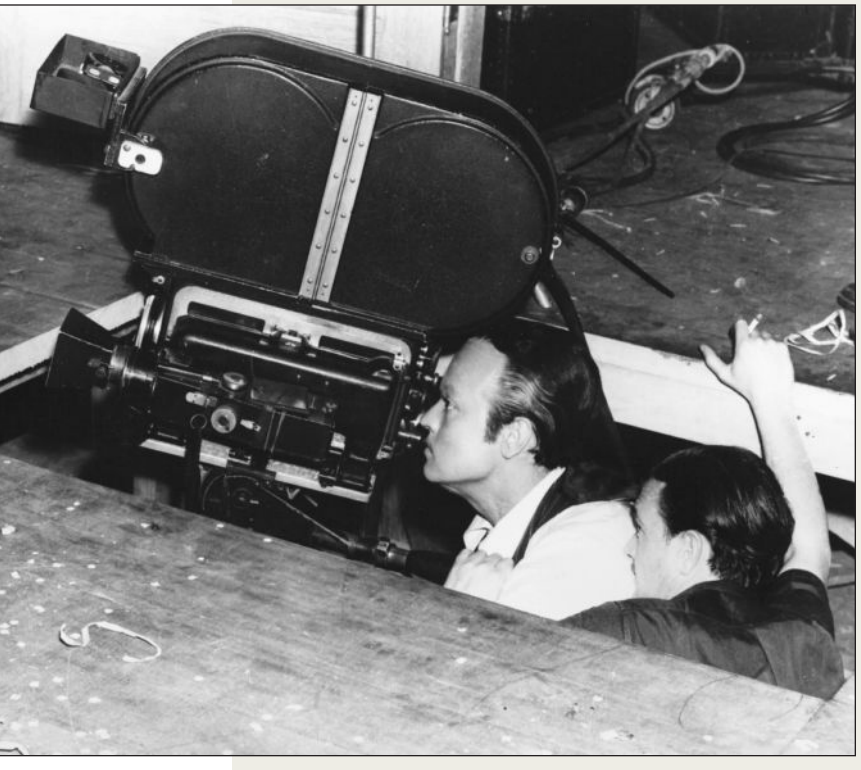
Welles's sense of evil is mature and complex, seldom conventionalized. He was one of the few American filmmakers of his generation to explore the darker side of the human condition without resorting to a simplified psychology or to moralistic clichés. Though his universe is essentially doomed, it's shot through with ambiguities, contradictions, and moments of transient beauty. Welles considered himself a moralist, but his movies are never priggish or sanctimonious. Instead of facile condemnations, *Kane* laments the loss of innocence: "Almost all serious stories in the world are stories of a failure with a death in it," Welles stated. "But there is more lost paradise in them than defeat. To me that's the central theme in Western culture, the lost paradise."

When a story isn't told in a straightforward, chronological manner, something is lost and something is gained. What's lost is the suspense of any conventionally told tale, which usually asks, What does the protagonist want and how is he or she going to get it? In *Citizen Kane,* the protagonist is dead almost from the start. We are forced to piece together his life from the points of view of others. This technique of multiple narration forces us to gauge the biases and prejudices of each narrator. *Citizen Kane* is their story, too.

There are five different storytellers, and each tells us a different story. Even when the events overlap, we view them from a different perspective. For example, Leland's account of Susan's operatic debut is colored by his condescending attitude toward her. Her performance is viewed primarily from the audience, where Leland is sitting. When Susan recounts the same event, the camera is primarily on stage, and the tone of the sequence is no longer comic but agonized.

Welles's narrative strategy is something like a prism: The newsreel and the five interviewees each offer a unique view of the same man. The newsreel offers us a quick tour of the highlights of Kane's public life. Thatcher's account is tainted by his absolute confidence in the moral superiority of the rich and powerful. Bernstein's story is steeped in the gratitude and loyalty he felt for Kane when they were young. Leland offers a more rigorous perspective: He judges Kane by what he actually does, rather than what he says. Susan is the most victimized of the storytellers. Yet she is also the most compassionate and sensitive. Raymond, the butler, pretends to know a lot more than he does. His brief flashback merely concludes Thompson's investigation.

There are literally dozens of symbolic motifs in the movie. Some of them are technical, such as the film's predominantly low camera angles **(12–21).** Oth-



12–21. Production photo of Orson Welles (in middle-aged makeup) and Gregg Toland lining up a shot for the postelection scene between Kane and Jed Leland.
Welles used low-angle shots as a motif throughout the picture, especially to emphasize the awesome power of the protagonist. In this scene, the angle is so low that the floorboards of the set had to be torn away to allow for the camera's placement. Combined with the perspective-distorting wide-angle lens, such low-angle shots portray Kane as a towering colossus, capable of crushing anything that gets in his way. *(RKO)*

ers are more content oriented, such as the series of fences the camera must penetrate before we are able to see Kane. There are also persistent motifs of stillness, decay, old age, and death. The two most important motifs in the movie are Rosebud and the fragmentation motif.

Rosebud turns out to be a favorite childhood possession. Scholars and critics have argued about Rosebud for decades. Welles himself described it as "dollar-book Freud"—that is, a convenient symbol of childhood innocence. The ideas of Freud gained wide currency in the American cinema of the 1940s, especially the centrality of a child's prepubescent life in determining his or her later character.

But Rosebud is also a more generalized symbol of loss. Consider: Kane is a man who lost his parents when he was a child. He was brought up by a bank. He lost his youthful idealism as a publisher. He lost in his bid to be governor. He lost his first wife and son. He lost in his efforts to make Susan an opera star. He lost Susan. Because it's much more than a mere object, more even than a symbol of Edenic innocence, the revelation of Rosebud to the audience delivers a powerful emotional impact.

12–22. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with William Alland and Paul Stewart.*
Near the end of the movie, Thompson (Alland) admits defeat. He never does find out what Rosebud means, and he describes his investigation as "playing with a jigsaw puzzle," while the camera cranes back and up, revealing thousands of crates of artwork, memorabilia, and personal effects—the fragmented artifacts of a person's life. "I don't think any word can explain a man's life," Thompson continues. "No, I guess Rosebud is just a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, a missing piece." *(RKO)*

The fragmentation motif acts as a foil to the simpleminded notion that any single word could "explain" a complex personality. Throughout the movie, we are presented with images that suggest multiplicity, repetition, and fragments of a larger whole. Examples of this motif are the jigsaw puzzles, the profusion of crates, boxes, and artwork. The very structure of the movie is fragmented, with each narrator providing us with only a partial picture. In Raymond's flashback at the end of the film, the elderly Kane mutters "Rosebud" when he discovers a glass globe. Dazed, he walks down a corridor, the globe in his hand. As he passes a set of facing mirrors, we see his image multiplied into infinity. All of them are Kane.

IDEOLOGY

Welles was a lifelong liberal, firmly committed to the values of the moderate left. The New York theater scene of the 1930s was intensely political and **left-wing** in its leanings. Like most intellectuals of that era, Welles was a Roosevelt enthusiast, strongly pro-New Deal in his sympathies. In fact, he helped write several of President Roosevelt's famous radio speeches.

Not surprisingly, *Citizen Kane* can be classified as liberal in its ideological slant. However, the movie is definitely in the implicit range in terms of its bias. It refuses to be the purveyor of glib certainties about its values: The characters are too complex, often paradoxical. The film is filled with the messy contradictions of life.

The protagonist is a "fighting liberal" as a young editor. Jed Leland is his comrade in arms, his conscience figure **(12–23).** But as he grows older, Kane moves further to the **right,** ending finally as an authoritarian bully. Kane also believes that environment is a stronger force than heredity. In one

12–23. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Joseph Cotten.* Jed Leland (Cotten) represents the moral conscience of the film, Kane's idealistic alter ego. Roles like this are difficult to play well, because they can easily degenerate into sentimental clichés of piety. Cotten toughens up the role by refusing to make Leland too likable. Although sensitive and intelligent, Leland is also a bit of a prig, "a New England schoolmarm," to use his own phrase. Like Bernstein, he loves Kane and is loyal to him when they are all young and committed to social reform. But when he finally recognizes Kane's ego for the destructive force it is, Jed pulls back, disillusioned. *(RKO)*

scene, he says that he might have become a really great man if he hadn't grown up rich.

Kane is a relativist in terms of his morality. When he no longer loves his wife Emily, he forms an adulterous liaison with Susan. To him, his marriage certificate is merely a document, something that bears no relation to his feelings. Nowhere in the film does Kane express an interest in religion. He is a thorough secularist.

As a young man, Kane displays nothing but contempt for tradition, the past, and authority figures. Well into middle age, he is oriented more toward the future—building up his newspaper, courting Emily, expanding his empire, running for governor, guiding Susan's career. Only as an old man does he withdraw from the arena of life, shutting himself off from the outside world, "lording it over the monkeys" in Xanadu.

Similarly, as a young man, Kane emphasizes the communal. His newspaper is a collaborative effort, with him at the helm, flanked by his two faithful lieutenants, Bernstein and Leland. As he grows older, he no longer consults his colleagues. He issues them orders, brooking no disagreements. As a young editor, he identifies with common workingpeople, promising to become their spokesman. As an older man, he seeks out the company of important world leaders, shakers, and movers. He surrounds himself with yes-men.

12–24. ***Citizen Kane,*** *with Joseph Cotten and Everett Sloane.*
Kane's rampant consumerism is best illustrated by his mania for collecting European art treasures. Not because he enjoys art—indeed, he scarcely ever mentions it—but because of its value as a status symbol. His conspicuous consumption becomes a habit rather than a passionate interest. After a while, no one even bothers to uncrate his purchases—they're simply stored away with all his other possessions. *(RKO)*

Citizen Kane is also strongly feminist in its sympathies. The three main female characters are all victimized. Mary Kane is trapped in a loveless marriage and feels she must sacrifice raising her son to get him away from his bullying father.

Emily Norton Kane is a decent if somewhat conventional young woman. She has been raised by the book and obviously takes seriously her duties as a wife and mother. She is propriety incarnate. Kane betrays her faith and love through no apparent fault of her own. He got bored with her.

Susan Alexander Kane is the most sympathetic of the three and the most illused. She endures great suffering and spiritual anguish, all in the name of love. She doesn't care much about money or social position, which merely complicate her life. She is one of the few characters capable of forgiveness. After the reporter Thompson listens to her sad tale of humiliation and loneliness, he says, "All the same, I feel kind of sorry for Mr. Kane." Blinking back her tears, Susan replies, "Don't you think I do?"

CRITIQUE

Citizen Kane is a masterpiece of formalism. True, there are some realistic elements in the film—its basis in fact, the newsreel sequence, the deep-focus photography that was so highly praised by realist critics like André Bazin. For the most part, however, it's the bravura sequences that are most memorable in the movie. Welles was one of the great **lyricists** of the cinema, and his stylistic rapture is best illustrated by the ornate visuals, the dazzling traveling shots, the richly textured soundtrack, the kaleidoscopic editing style, the highly fragmented narrative, and the profusion of symbolic motifs. The movie is brazen in its technical audacity.

Kane is the work of an indisputable *auteur.* Welles not only produced the film, he also coauthored its script, selected the cast and crew, starred in its leading role, and directed the entire production without interference. The movie is also typical in that it explores a complex of characteristic Wellesian themes and is executed in a showy style that became a virtual signature of its author. Welles was always generous in his praise of his coworkers, especially actors and cinematographers, but there is no question that he was totally in command during the production of this film.

The commercial and critical history of *Citizen Kane* is a fascinating story in its own right. Shortly after the collapse of the Mercury Theatre, RKO offered the twenty-four-year-old Welles an unheard-of contract: He was to be paid $150,000 per picture, plus 25 percent of the gross receipts. He could produce, direct, write, or star in any of his films, or function in all four capacities if he wished. He was granted total artistic control, answerable only to George Schaefer, the enlightened head of the studio.

RKO was in financial distress, as it had been throughout most of its brief span. The studio was founded in 1928 by the financier Joseph P. Kennedy (the father of President John Kennedy) and by David Sarnoff, the head of RCA and

12–25. Promotional poster for *Citizen Kane.*
Then as now, a studio's advertising emphasized a picture's commercial appeal. Then as now, sex and violence were the most common ploys to lure the mass audience. The promotional campaign for *Citizen Kane* was somewhat classier. It stressed Welles's box-office appeal as the film's star and the controversy surrounding the picture's release. Posters and lobby displays also exaggerated the love angle, presumably to appeal to women patrons: "I hate him!" Susan proclaims. "I love him!" Emily counters. (Neither statement is in the movie, of course.) Interestingly, this poster crudely parallels the multiple points of view found in the film itself. *(RKO)*

later NBC. Sarnoff hoped that the studio would become an "NBC with pictures." Kennedy soon withdrew, with a profit of some $5 million. After a promising start, RKO fell on hard times, primarily because of the constant reshuffling of management, which gave it no continuity. Unlike the other majors, RKO had no consistent identity or characteristic style.

Sarnoff and his new partner, Nelson Rockefeller, wanted RKO to produce sophisticated and progressive films, but they discovered that artistic worth and box-office success were not easily united. Rockefeller and Sarnoff were pleased with Schaefer's idea to hire Welles, for they reasoned that if anyone could produce quality movies that also made profits, surely it was the boy genius, fresh from his Broadway and radio triumphs.

When Welles arrived in Hollywood in 1939, the resentment against him was immense. Most directors considered themselves lucky if they were permitted to direct an **A-film** before they were thirty-five, yet here was a mere stripling, an outsider at that, who was given total autonomy on his first time out. "This is the biggest electric train a boy ever had," he quipped when he saw the production facilities at RKO. The flamboyant Welles was regarded as arty, supercilious, and arrogant by most industry regulars. He didn't help matters by openly sneering at the film community: "Hollywood is a golden suburb, perfect for golfers, gardeners, mediocre men, and complacent starlets," he announced with obvious amusement. He was an incorrigible smartass. He paid dearly for the flippant wit of his youth.

Almost from the start, the production of *Citizen Kane* was sparked by controversy. A master publicist, Welles had the film colony buzzing with speculation. The movie was shot in "absolute secrecy." Rumors were rife about the identity of the leading character, and when the syndicated Hearst gossip columnist, Louella Parsons, heard that the picture was to deal with her boss's private life, a campaign against the movie was launched by La Parsons, with Hearst's blessings and full cooperation.

As the film neared completion, Hearst's campaign got ferocious. He threatened the industry with a series of scandals and exposés unless the picture was destroyed before release. His stooge, MGM's Louis B. Mayer, the most powerful man in the industry, offered to reimburse RKO's costs, plus a tidy profit, if the studio would destroy the negative. Hearst pressured the other studios to refuse to book the film in their theaters. His newspapers attacked Welles as a Communist and suggested he was a draft dodger. (Welles was rejected for military service for medical reasons.) RKO stalled, paralyzed with indecision. Welles threatened to sue unless the movie was released. Finally, the studio decided to take the risk.

With only a few exceptions, *Citizen Kane* received rave reviews. Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* called it "one of the greatest (if not the greatest) films in history." It won the New York Film Critics Award as best picture of 1941, which was a very good year for American movies. It received nine Academy Award nominations, but at the ceremonies, Welles was booed whenever his name was mentioned. Significantly, the only Oscar that the movie won was for its screenplay. Pauline Kael suggested that this was intended as a gesture of support for Mankiewicz, the Hollywood regular, and as a rebuke to Welles, the upstart, who lost out on the acting, directing, and best picture awards.

Incredibly, *Citizen Kane* failed at the box office. It was the beginning of the end for Welles in Hollywood. When it failed to please several sneak-preview

12–26. ***The Magnificent Ambersons*** **(U.S.A., 1942),** *with Dolores Costello, Agnes Moorehead, Joseph Cotten, and Ray Collins; directed by Orson Welles.*
Like most of Welles's movies, this, his favorite work, deals with the theme of a lost paradise. Unlike *Kane,* however, the tone is warm and nostalgic, the images more softly lyrical. Welles does not appear in the film, though he does narrate the story off screen. He concludes with a shot of a microphone on a swinging boom, accompanied by his spoken credit: "I wrote the picture and directed it. My name is Orson Welles." *(RKO)*

audiences, his next masterpiece, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), was cut by RKO from its 131-minute length to 88 minutes, and a happy ending was tacked on. It too failed at the box office. Shortly afterward, there was a management shuffle at RKO and both Welles and Schaefer were ousted.

Welles was always a favorite with critics, especially in France. As early as the 1950s, excerpts from his scripts appeared in such journals as *Image et Son* and *Cinéma d'Aujourd'hui.* Welles was an idolized source of inspiration for the critics at *Cahiers du Cinéma,* who spearheaded the French **New Wave.** "All of us will always owe him everything," gushed Jean-Luc Godard. Truffaut claimed that *Citizen Kane* inspired the largest number of French filmmakers to begin their own careers, and he included a tender tribute to this famous movie in *La Nuit Américaine* (literally, "The American Night," but released in the United States as *Day for Night).*

Welles's critical reputation continued to rise. In the year of his death, 1985, three books were published about him. In a poll of international film

12–27. ***Othello*** **(Morocco, 1952),** *with Orson Welles and Suzanne Cloutier, directed by Welles.* In 1948, Welles, discouraged by a string of box-office failures, left for Europe and Africa, where he hoped to work as an independent **producer–director.** His first movie was this adaptation of Shakespeare. The project was a nightmare. It was over three years in the shooting, and Welles had to interrupt production many times to seek additional funding. He lost several players in the process. There were three Desdemonas, four Iagos. Sequences had to be reshot time and again. But finally the movie was finished. On the Continent, it was enthusiastically praised and swept the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. But British and American critics complained of its crude soundtrack. This was to be the pattern of virtually all his subsequent work outside America. *(United Artists)*

critics, conducted every ten years by the prestigious British journal *Sight and Sound, Citizen Kane* has consistently topped the list of the ten greatest films of all time. The filmmaker who consistently receives the most votes as the greatest director in the history of the cinema: Orson Welles.

FURTHER READING

CALLOW, SIMON, *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (New York: Penguin, 1996) and *Orson Welles: Hello Amreicans* (New York: Viking, 2006), first two volumes of a projected trilogy, written by a distinguished British actor.

CARRINGER, ROBERT L., *The Making of Citizen Kane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Definitive.

CONRAD, PETER, *Orson Welles: The Stories of His Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003). An attempt to untangle truth from legend.

GARIS, ROBERT, *The Films of Orson Welles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Very strong on Welles's literary sensibility.

HEYLIN, CLINTON, *Despite the System: Orson Welles versus the Hollywood Studios* (Chicago Review Press, 2005). A sad account of repeated studio interference with Welles's work.

HIGHAM, CHARLES, *The Films of Orson Welles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). Critical study and psychobiography. Very well illustrated. See also Higham's *Orson Welles: The Rise and Fall of an American Genius* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

KAEL, PAULINE, *The Citizen Kane Book* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971). Reading version and a cutting continuity of *Kane,* prefaced by Kael's controversial essay on the authorship of the script.

LEAMING, BARBARA, *Orson Welles: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 1985). Extensive interviews with Welles; somewhat idolatrous.

NAREMORE, JAMES, *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Critical study.

THOMPSON, DAVID, *Rosebud* (New York: Knopf, 1996). A well-written biography, with sixty-nine photos.