

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

CITIZEN KANE

TUESDAY
JANUARY 14, 2020
7 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



When 24-year-old Orson Welles arrived at RKO in 1940, he called the studio apparatus “The biggest electric train set any boy ever had.” RKO had given him an unprecedented contract to produce and direct two films with complete freedom over subject, script, production, and final cut. Welles had already triumphed in theater, radio, and magic. Now, for his first feature film, he would run his train headlong into not only one of the most powerful men in the country—newspaper and media magnate William Randolph Hearst—but also into Hollywood’s conventional wisdom of how a movie should be made.

Many aspects of *CITIZEN KANE*’s style—including flashbacks, chiaroscuro lighting, deep-focus cinematography, extreme camera angles, elaborate camera movements, montage, overlapping dialogue, sound bridges, and special effects—already existed. But aside from orchestrating them brilliantly, Welles boldly *foregrounded* his techniques in opposition to classical Hollywood’s “invisible” style, thus heralding modernist cinema. *KANE* is at once a summation of film to that point and a guidepost for the following eight decades. The numerous directors who have cited it as an essential influence include François Truffaut, Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese.

Welles immediately demonstrates his mastery of visuals and sounds. Bernard Herrmann’s ominous music accompanies an imposing “No Trespassing” sign that does not deter Welles, who *trespasses*, dissolving through fences and presenting shots of gloomy exteriors that are united by the placement of a castle’s lighted window. A magical transition to the surrealistically-rendered interior, where boundaries of time and space disappear, and snow falls, not just in the globe, but in the room itself. An unnervingly huge closeup of a man’s lips as he says, “Rosebud” (the most famous opening word in all of film), followed by a slow-motion representation of his death. Suddenly, interrupting this somber mood, a booming announcer for “News on the March,” detailing the life and death of Hearst-surrogate Charles Foster Kane.

Welles loved to be disorienting: many 1941 spectators probably believed the fake newsreel to be real. He had fooled radio audiences in 1938 with a similar trick, interrupting big band music with bulletins about a Martian invasion. The newsreel bombards us with facts, much too rapidly to digest. Welles expects us to assemble them with the rest of his ensuing jigsaw puzzle. It takes 12 minutes into *KANE* before he finally orients us: we’re with the staff that has just viewed the newsreel. But Welles refuses to make it easy for us, as the scene is in almost complete darkness, except for lights emanating (self-reflexively) from the projection booth. The editor confidently says that Rosebud “will probably turn out to be a very simple thing.” It isn’t (as the thunder-and-lightning response implies). The reporter, and we, are about to enter a labyrinth.

CITIZEN KANE opened to almost universal critical acclaim. The *New York Times* said that it “comes close to being the most sensational film ever made in Hollywood” (praise guaranteed to evoke the industry’s envy). But it flopped at the box office, largely because Hearst, having failed to suppress its release, warned theaters that if they showed it, nothing they’d play in the future would be advertised in his papers. He also enlisted Hollywood studio executives’ support by threatening scandalous exposés. The Academy did manage nine nominations, including Best Picture, Director, and Actor. But *KANE*’s only Oscar was for Original Screenplay, thought to be a tribute to co-writer Mankiewicz; and reportedly every time the film or Welles was mentioned at the ceremony there were numerous boos. RKO changed its management a year later, violated its contract with Welles by mangling *THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS*, and proclaimed, “Showmanship in Place of Genius: a New Deal at RKO.” Their slogan was clearly aimed at Welles, the genius who had trespassed.

Then, as if in a magician’s act, *KANE* vanished for about fifteen years. In 1952, when the British publication *Sight and Sound* conducted its initial once-every-decade poll of international film critics naming the greatest films of all time, *KANE* was #11. But in the 1962 poll—after TV broadcasts, re-releases, and some serious critical writing about Welles—*KANE* catapulted to #1, a position it held for the following four decades. In 2012 it placed #2, below *VERTIGO*, but it remains the most influential work in film history.

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY **ORSON WELLES**
SCREENPLAY BY **ORSON WELLES** AND
HERMAN J. MANKIEWICZ
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **GREGG TOLAND**
PRODUCED BY **MERCURY PRODUCTIONS**
AND **RKO RADIO PICTURES**
(1941) 119 MINS.
STARRING **ORSON WELLES, JOSEPH
COTTEN, DOROTHY COMINGORE, RUTH
WARRICK, EVERETT SLOANE, RAY
COLLINS, GEORGE COULOURIS, AGNES
MOOREHEAD, AND WILLIAM ALLAND**

No. 8
SEASON 6

DID YOU KNOW: LINWOOD DUNN, THE SPECIAL EFFECTS PIONEER WHO WORKED ON THE FILM (UNCREDITED), ESTIMATED THAT APPROXIMATELY HALF OF *KANE*’S SHOTS INVOLVED VISUAL EFFECTS, INCLUDING MINIATURES, MATTE PAINTINGS, COMBINATIONS OF LIVE ACTION AND MODELS, STOP-MOTION ANIMATION, AND, ESPECIALLY, OPTICAL PRINTING, WHICH HELPED CREATE MANY OF THE DEEP-FOCUS COMPOSITIONS. IRONICALLY, ALTHOUGH THE ACADEMY NOMINATED EIGHT FILMS FOR SPECIAL EFFECTS, *KANE* WAS NOT AMONG THEM.

NEXT UP: THE FSC CONTINUES ITS TRIBUTE TO THE ANNIVERSARIES OF COEDUCATION AT YALE WITH A SCREENING OF THE DOCUMENTARY **IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL** (2004), ABOUT ARTIST HENRY DARGER, BY YALE ALUMNA JESSICA YU '87. SEE THE FILM IN 35MM, **SUNDAY, JANUARY 19, 2020, AT 2PM.**