**Citizen Kane screening notes**

Citizen Kane: Biography and the Unfinished Sentence

Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941) is essentially a tale told in the hope of answering the question: What is the essence of this rarefied entity called man? More importantly, the story is about the life of one individual. The story unfolds around an enigmatic character named Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles). When Kane’s life finally expires, his associates and friends are contacted and urged to say what they know about this newspaper magnate. Citizen Kane highlights the struggle that often exists between the private, internal and metaphysical reality that makes up the essence of each individual, and its distillation in objective reality.

In the opening sequence we are treated to a glimpse into the world of Charles Foster Kane’s mansion — his castle — as some call it. The camera stands outside a black, cast-iron gate that has a large letter K affixed at the top. The night is dark and foggy, this, perhaps intimating or foreshadowing a mystery that is about to unravel. Citizen Kane is most definitely a suspense yarn that surprises us with its metaphysical/existential complexity.

In some respects, the film is truly a supreme portrayal of childhood. The theme of the film really hinges on the understanding or lack thereof that Charles Foster Kane’s friends, colleagues, and the media have of the enigmatic character. While the film suggests that the life of public individuals can never remain private, we are also to believe that the inner life of private individuals, on the other hand, can never be made truly explicit. Part of the reason for this is that if we understand individuality to mean an autonomous self-reflective form of contemplation, then this individualism of which Kane partakes, is his stamp of originality. Without a doubt, Kane is a complicated and multifaceted character. In this very respect he is a genuine character and not just a caricature or cardboard entity, as is the case more often than not in post 1960s films, for instance. Kane already displays his personality and idealism as a young man.

The great irony that surrounds Charles Foster Kane is that he is everyman. In fact, he is a composite sketch of many men. His struggle is characterised by the anonymity imposed on individuality by the contingencies of the objective world, and an autonomous sense of interiority. Kane knows exactly what he wants. What seems so misleading about the film in terms of the latter is the fact that Kane is both a public and wealthy person. These two components of his personal circumstance distract us from attempting to come to terms with Kane’s identity and not just with what he does. Citizen Kane is essentially an existential tale told in the only manner that any cinematic story can be told: with words and pictures.

Guillermo Cabrera Infante, writer and acute observer of cinema, makes the point that the two themes that inspire the film are the degradation of privacy of public persons and the crushing weight of materialism. Cabrera Infante’s most penetrating notion is his argument that the former is expressed verbally, while the latter theme is visual. This, he explains, is a strong case of counterpoint. (1) The essential ingredient that makes Citizen Kane a tale of existential significance is the collage of different characters from Kane’s past that offer testimonial commentary on his life. The firsthand account of these people creates a vital reality to the story that attempts to penetrate into the essence of Charles Foster Kane — the man — as he knew himself.

But do these testimonies succeed? Just who are these people? After we have dispensed with the outright malicious will of those who have an ax to grind, the limitations placed on us by time and memory, romantic exaggerations, and simple forgetting of details, we arrive at bare naked reality. In many respects, Kane enjoys the privilege of having so many people who are willing to make known their memories of him. How much their insight can say anything substantial about Kane has everything to do with the moral quality of his acquaintances and friends. Depending on their ability to articulate what they know about him, and the degree of their good will, will Kane’s essential qualities become known. This process, then, also involves a case of good fortune. If we are moved by the truism that the dead tell no tales, then what are we left with? Well, clearly their life, essence and work, as these can only be rounded off by those who knew them. This is a case of simple justice.

Citizen Kane offers an exploration of existential autonomy by juxtaposing the virtues of human essence with the exigencies of the objective world. We can contrast this dualistic approach where, even though the main emphasis is the internal, with one of Orson Welles last films — F for Fake (1973), a film that also seeks to uncover the difference between appearance and reality. F for Fake only focuses on the daily lives of several people, and their chic, incessant chatter. F for Fake tries to answer the question: what is real? In the latter film Orson Welles is back to his old cinematic tricks, the very staple of imagination that brought him notoriety, beginning with his radio broadcast of H.G. Well’s novel War of the Worlds.

The story intermingles the life of Elmyr D’Hory, perhaps the greatest art forger of the Twentieth Century, with Clifford Irving’s fake biography of the reclusive Howard Hughes, and at least one of Pablo Picasso’s love affairs — a fake one at that — we learn at the end of the film. Here, Welles displays his ability for cinematic deception. He titillates, teases and goes fishing for suitable and gullible suitors who are quick to accept the fashionable and kitsch in the contemporary world. F for Fake is a romp through appearance, pretense and ambiguity. As much as Welles is credited with brilliant writing and direction, it is his cinematography, as is the case in Citizen Kane that steals the moment.

The existentially subjective aspect of Kane, who serves as the central focus of the film, is neither blatant nor conspicuous. The film is literate, and thus it demands — like all higher art — a level of sensibility and engagement from the viewer that determines its appeal. This existentially subjective angle can be easily compared with the explicitly surreal quality of Alain Resnais’ L’Année dernière à Marienbad (Last Year at Marienbad, 1961), for instance.

Where Citizen Kane solicits our understanding through the linear and temporal narrative of Kane’s associates, Last Year at Marienbad is ruled by a deliberate negation of temporal succession. When the female protagonist tells a male character, “you’re like a shadow visiting for me to come closer,” we hear distinct echoes of Jedediah Leland (Joseph Cotton), Kane’s associate describing Kane as being “disappointed with the world, so he built one of his own,” or a reporter who says, “a word can’t explain a man’s life.” Citizen Kane, like Last Year at Marienbad and F for Fake, is a film characterised by shadows — the shadows that time casts on an autonomous, vital will.

Kane is a man who is moved by a vision of transcendence, of remembrance. The end of his life, however, is nothing less than tragic. As we witness strangers rummaging through his personal belongings, one cannot help but to witness the futility of his vision. But this tragic temporal sterility is only one component of the equation. Given that a portion of the story is told in retrospect by those who did or merely profess to know him, one must not forget that Kane counters or reassures his critics by showing his greater than life vitality in person.

The question comes to mind in Citizen Kane as to just how much people actually listen to each other in conversation? This is suggested by the clamor that Welles portrays so powerfully in the diverging paths, origins and destination of the simultaneous and overlapping speakers in the film. Again, we can cite Last Year at Marienbad, when the narrator says of the surreal silence that engulfs the character: “Conversation flowed in a void apparently meaningless…or, at any rate, not meant to mean anything. A phrase hung in mid air, as though frozen…though doubtless taken up again later.” Just how much our conversations flow in an unreceptive void remains a point for speculation. What is certain is that we always leave many notices of our being posted throughout, as examples of our personal essence.

It is interesting to figure out how many of Kane’s unofficial “biographers” are up to the task of the existential vision that he created for himself? Kane’s circumstances are perhaps nowhere more clearly described than in what the Spanish essayist Salvador de Madariaga notices about the solitude that engulfs Hamlet, for instance. Madariaga writes, “Vague and unexplained to the mind, real and concrete to the instinct, known before he is understood as are persons and their affairs in life.” (2)

Madaraiga’s comment is insightful in two respects: existentially, and in the objective and external manner that some people consider “to know someone.” Kane is known as a newspaperman and a collector of antiques, but he is not known for who he truly is. The film opens in a mood indicative of mystery. On first viewing the film one can easily get the misimpression that Citizen Kane is a mystery or suspense tale. It turns out that this is precisely one of a select few viable interpretations of Citizen Kane. Yet this is the case for all the wrong reasons. The opening scene is of Kane’s castle, Xanadu shrouded in fog. The place is abandoned. Then…Kane utters “Rosebud” as he dies, dropping a crystal ball. The scenes that follow are of “News on the March,” a newsreel describing the grandeur of Xanadu, his home. The newsreel shows how difficult it is to attain the truth of a public person. The mystery aspect has to do with the notion of seeking firm ground in understanding how Charles Foster Kane viewed himself. Suspense, too, is a central staple of the film. We want to know more about this mysterious man who drops the crystal ball at the start of the film. And then… of course, the great suspense has to do with uncovering the meaning of “Rosebud.”

Hence the objective understanding that the press and the public seek is paradoxical because it seeks to dispense with Kane’s anonymity by knowing more about his private life, not about him as a person. The more “objective” tidbits that the public is fed, the more it thinks it knows him. A genuine subjective or existential knowledge of the man’s essence is not what the press seeks. More often than not, such understanding would just prove to be a bore. One reporter who edits a newsreel is heard saying, “It’s not enough to know what a man did, but to know who he was.” What afflicts Kane, as a private/public entity is the same that concern everyone else, except that the expectations of the public are magnified in regard to public figures.

In some respects what qualifies a person as a public persona is often very much governed by capricious and arbitrary rules. If a bank clerk commits an indiscreet act away from his workplace, only the press can propel this person into the maelstrom of public scrutiny. In such a case there is no immediate need to know more about this person.

Kane is such a victim. Of course, he is also a public entity with a great deal of panache and flair for public affairs. He gets into squabbles, financial brawls, and spirited arguments with many people who, as we have witnessed in Socrates’ case, are in a position to hurt him. But Kane lives his life on a grand scale, laughing, carousing with people and displaying himself for all to see. In his form of living, as is true of any other, we disclose contradictions that are not easy to reconcile. Such is the human person. Kane wants to show people “the truth” but in doing so he also creates tabloids that achieve just the opposite. He builds a “castle” for himself, but he is barely home to enjoy it. Contradictions loom large in most peoples’ lives. Ortega y Gasset has this in mind when he writes. “The beliefs that coexist in any human life, sustaining, impelling and directing it, are on occasion incongruous, contradictory, at the least confused.” (3)

At least some of Kane’s contradictions spring from an unbridled idealism. At age 25 Kane sets out to run a newspaper “for fun” and to help the workingman. When he first takes up The Inquirer, he says, “If the headline is big enough, then the news is big enough.” The tension that exists between the public and private Kane is filmed brilliantly by Welles in his use of deep focus. Deep focus shots allow the viewer an almost omniscience look at the relationship that exists among the characters without interfering with the action. The deep focus shot, unlike a conventional shot, spreads the arena of man’s relationship in what is essentially a quasi three-dimensional cinematic look at the human world. Now, what is most important is not necessarily what lies at the surface of life. For instance, a fine example of this is the shot of the reporter in the telephone booth, while the maître d’ is framed by the door, as Kane’s second wife, who does not want to talk to the press is seen in the background. This is the view that an alert viewer would have of the world. But the true significance of deep focus is its portrayal of simultaneous depth — the multi-layered foundation of human reality. One philosophical implication of this technique is that it affords for different moods to flow out of any given scene. In Citizen Kane this is manifested in the transcendence of narrative into an almost real-time perception of the passage of time. These different moods are captured in isolation, but also in relation to their prescribed position in the scene. Welles has essentially transferred the main line of action and dialogue from one of a given fixed place in the screen and spreads it in every direction. Now the camera captures the entire field of view.

Citizen Kane remains an interesting film on many fronts. One of these is the great deal of attention that is paid to the William Randolph Hearst connection. How much Welles’ inspiration or motivation for the film owes allegiance to the former newspaper magnate remains a question. Welles proved to be a showman who knew the public’s collective psychology. However, there is no doubt that the film stands alone very well on its own merits without the help of historical invective. In fact, most viewers of Citizen Kane are not privy to this information on their initial viewing. What remains important in this film is that it focuses on some jarring universal notions: subjective autonomy, loyalty to one’s convictions, the misunderstanding of others, friendship, and the passage of time.

Concerning the latter point, one can argue that the film is a compressed drama of time itself. Beginning with a boy in a desolate Colorado farmhouse in the grip of winter, the story then follows the trajectory of this young boy until his death as an old man. This alone is just cause to create a compelling story. And yet, of all the themes of the film this one seems the most neglected. This is partly due because the mundane lack of appeal of this theme. Another reason is because so many critics have concentrated either on the technical merits of the film, e.g., deep focus, the overlapping soundtrack, and floor level camera angles or the political angle, e.g., capitalism, etc., that so many other aspects of the film have been neglected.

At a philosophical level, Kane intrigues and even teases the audience with snippets of his inner world. What goes largely unnoticed in Citizen Kane is that the biographical narrative that ensues right up to the time of his death is Kane’s own life, his acceptance or failure thereof to understand this phenomenon as such. Hence, Citizen Kane is a visual biography. How would our own biography play out in public? The biographical component in Citizen Kane takes control of the film in several respects. First, because of the cinematic genre itself: a two- dimensional illusory visual collage depicting a four-dimensional vitality. Secondly, a great portion of his story is framed, for good or worse, by the contingencies of other people. What seems such a captivating aspect of the film is the question of just what Kane would have expected from his many “biographers.”

Ortega y Gasset, a thinker who has taken great strides in reflecting on the nature of biography, articulates the question in the following manner:

Nothing seen from within has form. Form is always the external appearance which a reality offers to the eye when the eye con-templates it from outside, making it a mere object. (4)

To interpret Kane’s life as “formless,” to use Ortega y Gasset’s word, is a little misleading. His life is not formless in the sense that it lacks a definite center that guides his actions. This remains far from the truth. His life, as a biographical entity in space and time, is wholly transparent to itself. This is essentially a problem of our proximity to ourselves. Ortega y Gasset has written that human life is transparent for itself, and thus it forgets itself. To focus the transparency of life upon itself, then, becomes the essential existential project of every life, he argues. What Kane’s biographers achieve, then, in Ortega y Gasset’s estimation, is to level the internal vitality of the man to that of a mere biological being; one more material entity to dissect. In fact, Kane’s life is spent in avoiding precisely that form of objectification that is so easily confused with happiness. He attempts to transcend this by contemplating on the order of time itself.

Welles’ treatment of the fullness of human life is mainly manifested in that he achieves a very convincing notion of real time through the confines of cinema. Kane’s biographers are all characters that work well as cinematic conventions because they are testaments to the passage of time. First and most obvious is the fact that they outlive Kane. And secondly, they are sought out in their respective stage of life and circumstances to comment on Kane. Once we have taken in the importance of dismantling Kane’s castle — the rough and ready manner in which his precious household items are thrown about – compare this to the early images of the young Kane playing in the snow – we begin to understand just how effective Welles’ treatment of time truly is.

Part of the meaning of biography in Citizen Kane is already answered when we consider that the investigation into his life — the reward of finding out who he was — is initiated by a reporter who has become intrigued by the word “Rosebud.” This comes as the recognition that Kane’s life, as is perhaps also true of other’s, is motivated and inspired by a singular motive. Rosebud is a mystery, and the reporters will not grant this public persona that privilege. Why should the passion that fueled Kane’s life become important at all? Isn’t this need also an admission of just how little we know of others whose life’s trajectory has become part of our circumstance? That none of his friends and acquaintances knows what “Rosebud” means is a further testament to the inner complexity of human beings.

Attempting to decipher the meaning of “Rosebud” becomes essential to the film because it would give his biographers, they believe, added understanding of how Kane conducted his life. However, as further commentary on the film, it is not entirely clear just what this new clarity would be? One way of viewing this is to suggest that knowing the meaning of rosebud would give his critics additional power over Kane, especially after he has died. Why did Kane keep this childhood memory alive and quiet for so long? Or did he mention it to someone but that person or persons did not pay attention to him? Speculation in such matters seems to have no end. What remains clear is that rosebud was immensely important to him given his memory at the end of his life.

Welles’ treatment of the passage of time and the changing world is again marvelously undertaken in The Magnificent Ambersons (1942), his follow up film to Citizen Kane. Unlike Citizen Kane, however, which was solely Welles’ project, The Magnificent Ambersons, according to Welles, had about forty-five minutes cut out. Welles says, “The whole heart of the picture really.” (5) The Ambersons endure a familial saga that pins an aristocratic Indianapolis family against the demands of the industrial age.

Citizen Kane, too, is a saga, but a personal one at that. The first thirteen minutes of the film is a retrospective documentary that is in the process of being put together by newsmen in a dark screening room. The film’s opening sequence is a shot that looks in through a gate into Kane’s castle. At the top of the iron gate is a large letter “K.” The beginning of Citizen Kane is replete with drama and mystery. For instance, what country could this mansion be in that has two monkeys on the premises? To compound this early oddness, we also see two gondolas gently floating.

This is further complicated in the subsequent scenes when we understand that Kane’s castle is located in America. Yet Welles’ logical mastery is evident when we hear some time later that Kane created his own world out of disappointment with the real one. Things now begin to make sense. We are convincingly awed by the scale and splendor of Kane’s world. As the camera moves stealthily through the fog we get the impression that the place is abandoned. Then, high in a corner of the castle a light is seen in a room. But, soon after, the light goes out signifying Kane’s death. This is the point in the story when Kane utters “Rosebud” as he drops the glass ball. This scene is significant not only because this is the rallying point — “Rosebud” — on which the film is anchored, but also because of the symbolism of the crystal ball. The ball is a self- contained world of a small cottage that is covered in snow. Because the introduction of Rosebud and the crystal ball take place before the actual scenes that they allude to, the viewer tends to forget their importance as the film progresses. Citizen Kane is one of those films that do not give away its secrets on first viewing it. The crystal ball is important to Kane because it is a rendition of his early years in Colorado. As the glass ball drops to the floor, the scene turns to that of a fisheye shot of a nurse entering the room to cover Kane’s body.

The next scene is one of “News on the March”: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree” — the comparison is to Coleridge’s poem Kubla Khan. The newsreel shows who this Charles Foster Kane was, as scenes of Kane’s castle follow: “A collection of everything so big it could never be catalogued or appraised. Enough for ten museums, the lute of the world.” At the end of Kane’s life all of his uncatalogued and unapprised lute may create a problem for those responsible for his estate, but Kane did not purchase his pieces for profit or even as a collector. To Kane, whatever he bought, he did so because he liked the object. Thus it seems interesting that the narrator, as an outsider, should view Kane’s castle with such derision. But in a prophetic statement the narrator adds: “Xanadu’s landlord leaves many stones to make his grave.”

Kane’s vexing ways run the gamut of admiration to hate. He is considered a communist by some, a fascist by others, while Kane simply says about himself, “I am, have been, and will be only one thing — an American.” As the newsreel runs through Kane’s life, we begin to imagine this distant, unapproachable entity. We learn that he married twice, divorced the same number of times. His first wife died in 1918, in an automobile accident along with their son. His second wife, Susan Alexander (Dorothy Comingore), was a singer. He even created her an opera house, but to no avail, her talent just wouldn’t do. As an old, balding Kane is wheeled around through his gardens, the narrator continues: “Alone in his never finished, already decaying pleasure palace, aloof, seldom visited, never photographed.” All of these descriptions of Kane are external vignettes that probably say very little about the man. Is he alone or aloof because he stays out of the limelight? And how can we be sure that he is never visited if the press is not allowed to photograph him? This is the point where the newsreel ends. The newsmen turn on the light and begin to discuss the best approach to take in their documentary. One of the reporters says, “seventy years is a lot to try to fit into a newsreel.” And another gets an idea, “what we need is an angle.” This might all be very appealing to the audience, but does it have anything to do with Kane — the man — not just what he did or represented?

Some of the reporters think that Rosebud was a girlfriend, or just an “it,” or even a horse that he once bet on. The melodrama of the Walter Parks Thatcher library scene is exquisite — the light streaming down on the table, the safe with a guard nearby. Thatcher’s (George Coulouris) manuscript regarding Mr. Kane reads: “I first encountered Mr. Kane in 1871…” the story then begins with the young boy playing in the snow outside of Mrs. Kane’s Boarding House” in Colorado. The rest of the story is about Kane living his life.