

Expressionism In Citizen Kane

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André Bazin puts Welles in his pantheon of realist directors, along with Renoir, Rossellini, De Sica, Stroheim, Flaherty, and even Murnau (whom he praises for choosing the moving camera over editing in the construction of many of his filmic scenes). Yet *Citizen Kane* is also a film in the tradition of German Expressionism. Like Murnau, Welles externalized the subjectivity of his characters (and especially of Kane) by means of psychologically charged settings, acute camera angles, distorting lenses, and disconcerting camera movements.

The demented architecture of Xanadu in the mist-enshrouded shots at the beginning of the film recalls Edgar Allan Poe's "The Haunted Palace," in which an unhinged house metaphorically stands for an unhinged mind.¹³ Near the end of the film both Susan and Kane are dwarfed by the oversized ornaments and statuary that furnish Xanadu, and serve as external projections of Kane's inner deadness and mindless materialism. The gargantuan rooms through which their voices echo—they nearly have to shout at each other to be heard—reflect the distance that has grown between them. When Kane steps into an enormous blazing fireplace and informs Susan that "Our home is here," he metaphorically becomes the host of [hell](#). After Susan leaves him, Kane, now utterly alone, wanders past a structure of double reflecting mirrors which reflect his image into infinity. As far as he looks, all he can see are images of himself, a perfect physical representation for a man trapped within his own [narcissism](#).

Like Murnau, Welles also used extreme camera angles and strange camera movements in conjunction with his expressive *mise-en-scène*. When Thompson makes his first visit to Susan Alexander at the nightclub where she works, he comes in the midst of thunder, lightning, and torrential rain, weather suggestive of the emotional storm inside Susan after she gets the news of Kane's death. Unlike most directors, Welles does not show Thompson entering the nightclub through the door. Instead, an "unchained" camera travels up the side of the building that houses the nightclub, passes by a huge poster of Susan Alexander, and then moves past a lurid neon sign identifying the club as the El Rancho. From the rooftop, the camera looks down through a skylight to capture, from an extreme high angle, the watery image of Susan collapsed over a drink. The camera penetrates the glass, descending to a close shot of Susan. The initial high-angle shot of Susan through the glass skylight suggests Susan's despair (the high angle makes her seem tiny and extremely vulnerable). Moreover, as Laura Mulvey has noted, by shooting down at Susan Alexander through glass, Welles creates a subtle associative link between her and the snow dome Kane is holding the night he dies and utters the word "Rosebud," thus linking Susan to this mysterious word.¹⁴ The camera's movement through the glass roof, finally, suggests the in-



Figure 27. The extreme low angle of this shot emphasizes Kane's demented, unbalanced grandiosity. (Citizen Kane, 1941, Turner Entertainment.)

trusive voyeurism of the media, hungry for details of Susan's private life with Kane.

Equally expressionistic is Welles's use of low angles to project extreme psychological states. While shooting from a low-angle perspective can make a character seem dominant and confident, Welles's camera plays an interesting variation on this technique by shooting Kane from a low angle when he is most defeated. When Gettys (Ray Collins), Kane's opponent in his campaign for governor, exposes Kane's adulterous affair to Kane's wife and threatens to expose him to the media as well, an action equivalent to political checkmate, Kane shouts at Gettys, "Don't worry about me. I'm Charles Foster Kane. I'm no cheap, crooked politician. . . . I'm going to send you to Sing Sing." As he says this he is photographed from an extreme low angle (see figure 27). Because his threats are so clearly empty, the low angle makes him seem demented and grandiose, rather than powerful and dominant. The use of a wide-angle lens¹⁵ in this shot in combination with the low angle and slight tilt of the camera makes the planes in the image above Kane seem jagged and off-kilter, again exteriorizing Kane's mental state. In an even more extreme example, after Kane has lost the election and along with it the friendship of Leland, Kane is photographed from such a low camera angle that in order to get the shot, the cameraman had to shoot from below the floor level of the set. The effect of the shot, once more, is to emphasize Kane's demented, unbalanced grandiosity.

Citizen Kane also contains amusing feats of trick photography, such as when photographic images of The Chronicle staff come to life as employees of Kane's newspaper, The Inquirer. In an example of the opposite effect, an image of the exterior of the apartment building in which Kane "keeps" Susan Alexander imperceptibly dissolves into a photographic image plastered on the front page of The Chronicle, publicizing the scandal that will end Kane's career as a politician.

One could write an entire book, and many people have, about all the visual inventiveness that went into the making of *Citizen Kane*.¹⁶ As the above examples testify, Orson Welles brought a new richness to the expressiveness of cinema through his tweaking of conventional film techniques for startling new visual effects. The scenes discussed here are just the tip of the iceberg.