

Expressive Realism

Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*

Marilyn Fabe: closely watched films:
an introduction to the art of narrative
film techniques.
Berkeley: U of California P, 2004: 48-98

ORSON WELLES'S EARLY CAREER

In August of 1939, at age twenty-four, Orson Welles signed a contract with RKO Radio Pictures, Inc. to make three films, one a year. His pay would be 25 percent of the gross profits of each film with an advance of \$150,000. At his own choosing, he could be producer, director, writer, actor, or all of the above.¹ It was unprecedented in Hollywood for a director to have so much control over all aspects of his film. Welles entered Hollywood with such power because of his success as a theater director in the thirties. He first attracted attention at age twenty with a project sponsored by the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA), a production for the Negro Theater Project in Harlem of *Macbeth* in a Haitian setting and with an all-black cast. He was later commissioned by the WPA to create, in partnership with John Houseman, his own company, for which he directed a Brechtian jazz opera, *The Cradle Will Rock*, with a score by Marc Blitzstein. The subject was the unionization of the steel industry, and the work opened despite a government ban. He then founded The Mercury Theater, which got off to a successful start with a modern-dress *Julius Caesar*, which Welles directed as a meditation on fascism.

The production that catapulted Orson Welles to national fame and

garnered him his Hollywood contract was his 1938 Mercury Theater radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. Welles's brilliant idea was to narrate the tale of the first landing on Earth of flying saucers from Mars through a series of fictional news bulletins. A program of ballroom dance music kept getting interrupted by increasingly hysterical reports, first about the landing of a flying saucer from outer space, and then about sightings of little green men near Princeton, New Jersey. Listeners who happened to tune in late took the bulletin for real. *The War of the Worlds* created a national panic, resulting in miscarriages, broken bones, and near suicides. The recent news of Hitler's annexation of Austria, which was also broadcast by radio bulletins, must have increased the readiness of the nation to believe a tale of insidious invasion.

The notoriety from Welles's broadcasting disaster brought him to the attention of the new president of RKO, George Schaefer, who needed someone to put new life into his stagnating studio. At the time, Welles was not particularly interested in cinema. He claimed he was going to Hollywood in order to get enough money to finance future theater projects. Not surprisingly, Welles was received in Hollywood with great bitterness because of his youth, his beard, and his contract. Nor did Welles improve his popularity when he exclaimed on his first tour of RKO: "This is the biggest electric train a boy ever had!"²

After a number of expensive false starts, including a plan to film Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* using an experimental, purely subjective camera that would literally equate Marlow's "I" with the eye of the camera, and with only three months left before his contract ran out, Welles settled on an idea, suggested by Herman Mankiewicz,³ that resulted in *Citizen Kane*. The film centered on the life of a big American capitalist and was partially based on the life of the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. When Hearst got wind of the news that Welles was making an unauthorized biography of his life, he tried to destroy the picture. After failing to buy the picture himself and destroy all negatives, Hearst attacked it through his newspapers—by not advertising it, insinuating that Welles was a communist, and threatening to retaliate against theaters who showed it.

CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *CITIZEN KANE*

In spite of or perhaps because of Hearst's threat to destroy the picture, *Citizen Kane* opened to extraordinary critical acclaim. According to

Pauline Kael, "it was more highly praised by the American press than any other movie in history."⁴ Bosley Crowther's review for the *New York Times* is representative. "*Citizen Kane*," he writes, "is far and away the most surprising and cinematically exciting motion picture to be seen here in many a moon . . . it comes close to being the most sensational film ever made in Hollywood."⁵ Orson Welles was extravagantly praised for his acting but critics reserved special favor for his direction. He was seen as a kind of savior of the cinema, bringing a moribund medium back to life. Cecelia Ager wrote for *PM*, "Before *Citizen Kane*, it's as if the motion picture was a slumbering monster, a mighty force stupidly sleeping, lying there, sleek, torpid, complacent—awaiting a fierce young man to come kick it to life, to rouse it, shake it, awaken it to its potentialities, to show it what it's got. Seeing it, it's as if you never really saw a movie before."⁶

But Hearst's vendetta against *Citizen Kane* was successful in drastically reducing the film's box office revenues. While the film did manage to recoup its surprisingly modest production costs, that was not a sufficient return on investment in Hollywood to inspire confidence in a director. And Welles, who, in addition, had got the reputation of a man who did not much care about money, was doomed never to have total control over his work or funds sufficient to fully realize his ideas. *Citizen Kane*, for many critics, remains his one undisputed masterpiece.

The more one is sensitive to the aesthetic effects of the technical choices that go into constructing film narratives, the more one can appreciate the groundbreaking cinematic experiments in *Citizen Kane*. The film was highly praised by the realist theorist André Bazin for its use of long takes and deep-focus photography, which Bazin felt brought a heightened realism to the screen and constituted "a revolution in the language of the screen."⁷ At the same time, Welles elaborated on the use of expressionist techniques associated with Soviet montage and German Expressionism. As many critics have observed, *Citizen Kane* marks a grand synthesis of realism and expressionism in film form. The richness of the imagery in *Citizen Kane* is further enhanced by the film's intricately structured sound track, which opened up fresh possibilities of combining sound and image. Finally, the way the story is told, in flashback through the eyes of six narrators, brought complexity and ambiguity to film narrative. Yet one never forgets that Welles was first and foremost a supreme showman and entertainer. The rich inventiveness of Welles's filmic and narrative techniques makes *Citizen Kane* both an astute, complexly told

portrait of an American tycoon and a film that stays fresh and entertaining even after repeated viewings.

NARRATIVE INNOVATIONS IN *CITIZEN KANE*

Most Hollywood films of Welles's time, like *His Girl Friday*, were narrated primarily from an omniscient or unrestricted point of view by an invisible narrator. Because of our omniscient perspective, our ability to see and know more than the characters on the screen, and our illusion that we are looking with impunity into a world which is unaware of our gaze, Hollywood movies give us a feeling of power. *Citizen Kane* begins by luring us into the pleasure of being the all-knowing spectator. At the start of the film the camera effortlessly pans up and over a sign on a wire fence reading "No Trespassing," thereby foregrounding the privilege of the film spectator.⁸ Through a series of slow dissolves we are transported beyond the "No Trespassing" sign to penetrate deeper and deeper into the inner sanctum of Xanadu, Charles Foster Kane's opulent, eccentric private castle. Finally, we find ourselves inside the room where Kane (played by Orson Welles) lies on his deathbed. With our eyes identified with the eye of the camera, we are the privileged, omniscient spectators of Kane's last moments before he dies. He is holding a glass ball that encloses a snow scene. His last word is "Rosebud."

At the moment of Kane's death, the glass ball drops from his hand and shatters into pieces. We see a distorted image of a nurse entering the room as the camera shoots through one of the fragments of the shattered glass. (See figure 2.2.) The distorted image of the nurse signals the end to our privileged omniscience. From this point on, with only a few exceptions, the film's narrative itself shatters, fragmenting our vision through six different perspectives on the life of Charles Foster Kane, each one distorted in its own way. The six narrators are: a "News on the March" newsreel obituary; Walter P. Thatcher (George Coulouris), the irritated, exasperated Wall Street banker to whom Kane's mother entrusted her son's upbringing and education after she was left a gold mine by a defuncting tenant; Mr. Bernstein (Everett Sloane), Kane's business manager and greatest admirer; Jed Leland (Joseph Cotten), Kane's bitter, disillusioned best friend; Susan Alexander (Dorothy Comingore), Kane's psychologically abused but still sympathetic second wife; and finally, Raymond (Paul Stewart), Kane's mercenary, tell-all butler.



Figure 22. The distorted image of the nurse through the fragment of broken glass signals the end of our privileged omniscience. (*Citizen Kane*, 1941, Turner Entertainment)

The newsreel obituary is all-inclusive but superficial. It offers only a general overview of the significant events in Kane's public life. These include the source of his great wealth, his creation of a newspaper empire and his campaigns against monopolies and trusts, his marriage to the niece of the President of the United States, his campaign for governor, his defeat in this campaign when his opponent exposes his adulterous affair, his efforts to make his second wife a great opera singer, his contradictory politics as both a supporter and denouncer of Hitler, and his final retreat to Xanadu until his death.

Because all the major events in Kane's life are thus laid out, we are never in suspense about what is going to happen to him. Our attention is focused instead on why his life turned out the way it did. Rawlston (Philip Van Zandt), the director of the newsreel, thinks the story on Kane lacks "an angle," a personal dimension to the "man who could have been President, who was as loved and hated and as talked about as any man in our time . . ." In order to fill in this gap, to add more juice to Kane's story, he decides to hold up the release of the newsreel, and directs his reporter Thompson (William Alland) to interview key people in Kane's

life, primarily in order to find out what Kane meant by his last word, "Rosebud." Rawlston hopes that the meaning of "Rosebud" will provide insight into who Kane was as a man, and what really made him tick. Thompson's quest for the meaning of "Rosebud" provides the pretext for the series of interviews, told as flashbacks, which recount the story of Kane's life.

Citizen Kane's narrative strategy, in which the whole story is told in flashback from slightly different points of view (the equivalent of the unreliable narrator in fiction), was unprecedented in a Hollywood film. The reliable technique of telling the story of Kane from multiple points of view dispels the illusion that we are learning the "truth" about Charles Foster Kane. As numerous commentators have observed, the film is like a complicated jigsaw puzzle which the viewer must piece together, bit by bit, in order to see the whole picture. Only in the final moments of the film, when we despair of ever discovering the meaning of "Rosebud," does the film's narration return us to a privileged omniscient perspective, revealing the final missing piece.

The final scene in *Citizen Kane* takes place at Xanadu. Thompson admits to his fellow reporters that he has failed in his mission to find out the identity of Rosebud. A colleague remarks: "If you could have found out what Rosebud meant, I bet that would've explained everything." Thompson replies: "No, I don't think so. No. Mr. Kane was a man who got everything he wanted, and then lost it. Maybe Rosebud was something he couldn't get or something he lost. Anyway, it wouldn't have explained anything. I don't think any word can explain a man's life." As the reporters go off to catch a train, the camera shoots down from above at a massive collection of crates, statues, etc.—all the objects Kane has accumulated in his lifetime—finally pausing on belongings associated with Kane's childhood home in Colorado. A worker picks up a sled. Raymond, the butler, refers to the sled as "junk," and directs the man to throw it into the furnace. A slow dissolve into the mouth of the furnace shows us the sled going up in flames. With just enough time to decipher the words before the flames obliterate them forever, we read the name inscribed on the sled: Rosebud. The film's final shot is of the exterior of Kane's castle. Smoke pours out the chimney as if Xanadu were a giant crematorium. The last words we see, before "THE END," are the first words we saw at the beginning, the sign reading, "NO TRESPASSING."

Citizen Kane thus has two endings: one for the characters inside the film and one for us, the spectators outside the film. The characters never

find out what Rosebud signifies. We are privy to the knowledge, but our sudden return to omniscience is qualified. We know what Rosebud refers to—the sled young Kane was playing with before Thatcher took him away from his home to be educated in New York—but what does it mean? Critics are still debating the significance of Rosebud. In general, there are two camps: those who believe that Rosebud does explain the solution to the mystery of why Kane, for all his advantages, failed in his political and personal life, and those who agree with Thompson, who declares at the end of the film that the life of any human being is too intricate and complex to be reduced to one explanation. The sled may explain some things, but not everything. Most critics share the latter view.⁹ To them, that “No Trespassing” sign has protected Kane’s privacy after all.

DEEP-FOCUS PHOTOGRAPHY

The cinematic style of *Citizen Kane*, especially its use of extreme deep-focus photography in many crucial scenes, was as innovative and groundbreaking as the film’s narrative technique. Working in collaboration with his cinematographer Gregg Toland, Welles shot scenes in which we can see objects a few inches from the lens just as clearly and sharply as objects 200 feet away.¹⁰ This practice was counter to the prevailing Hollywood style in 1941, which was characterized by diffuse lighting and images with a shallow depth of field, in which objects in the foreground are clear but the background appears blurry or out of focus. André Bazin was especially impressed with Welles’s use of deep focus. “Depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image,” he writes. “Hence it is no exaggeration to say that *Citizen Kane* is unthinkable shot in any other way but in depth. The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image.”¹¹

It is clear that Welles’s choice to shoot many of his scenes in deep focus and in long takes had their origin in his past as a stage director: he was trying to preserve the integrity of theatrical space on the screen. In numerous sequences in *Citizen Kane*, because of the use of deep-focus photography in conjunction with long takes, our eyes have the same freedom to wander around the screen image as we have in the theater. We can focus on the actor who is speaking or instead watch the actor who is listening. Our eyes can move around the frame, focusing on whatever

we choose. The realist director may design the mise-en-scène artfully, thereby guiding our attention to significant actions, but he or she does not have autocratic control over what we see, as happens when the action is broken down into short shots by editing or photographed in soft focus so that we can see only images in the foreground.

Chaplin favored the use of “realist” techniques because they were best suited to capturing on film the intricacies and subtle timing effects of his comic choreography, but Welles’s deep focus was much deeper than Chaplin’s and his long takes much longer and more intricately structured, to create dramatic (as opposed to comic) effects. The following analysis of just one shot in *Citizen Kane* demonstrates the subtle dramatic effects Welles’s innovative cinematographic style enabled him to achieve.

SEQUENCE ANALYSIS OF A LONG-TAKE DEEP-FOCUS SHOT

Early in the film Charles Kane’s mother (Agnes Moorehead) signs the papers handing over her eight-year-old son (Buddy Swan) to Mr. Thatcher, a Wall Street banker. There is something chilling in Kane’s mother’s willingness to send her young child off into the world in the hands of a stranger, but evidence later in the film suggests that Kane’s father is abusive and that the mother gives her son away, at great personal cost, in order to protect him. The mother’s feelings about handing over her son, like almost everything in *Citizen Kane*, are left ambiguous, and the complex way this scene is photographed allows multiple interpretations of it, as well as adding dramatic resonance to this crucial moment in the film.

The shot lasts over two minutes. (As a point of comparison, the longest shot in *The Adventurer* was only 47 seconds.) It begins with the young Charles Kane in long shot, playing with his sled in the snow. The camera then pulls back to reveal that it has been shooting through a window. This effect creates a visual metaphor. The boy playing in the snow is not as free as he at first seems. Just as his image is suddenly confined by a window frame, so his life will be circumscribed by a decision that is being made for him inside the house. Kane’s mother appears at the window calling out to her son to “Be careful,” and “Put your muffler around your neck, Charles.” As the camera tracks backwards from the window into the space of the house, it reveals Mr. Thatcher standing at the right of the window. He says, “We’ll have to tell him now.” Ignoring this comment, the mother replies, “I’ll sign those

papers now, Mr. Thatcher." From frame left Kane's father appears, saying, "You people seem to forget that I'm the boy's father." The camera tracks backwards as Mrs. Kane walks over to a desk in the foreground of the image and sits down to sign the papers, with Thatcher seated next to her. An argument ensues in which the father, who appears in the middle ground of the image, strongly protests the mother's decision to hand his son over to a bank and threatens to take the case to court. The mother is icily adamant in honoring the agreement she has made with Thatcher. In exchange for the bank's full assumption of the management of the gold mine (the Colorado Lode), the bank which Thatcher represents will assume full responsibility for all matters concerning the boy's education and place of residence. Mr. and Mrs. Kane will receive fifty thousand dollars a year as long as they both live. This last bit of information, which Thatcher reads aloud, silences the father, who mutters, "Well, let's hope it's all for the best."

Throughout the scene, while all this activity takes place, we can see the boy Charles playing with his sled far in the back of the image, in extreme long shot, framed by the window pane, and totally oblivious to the momentous decision his mother has made about his life. Because of the length of the shot and the careful blocking of the action, our eye is free to focus on whichever player we choose, or our attention can wander from one player to another, as if we were spectators in the theater.

At the same time, the camera places us sufficiently close to the actors in the foreground of the image that we can read their expressions with much greater clarity than would be possible in the theater. We can look for clues in the frozen but somehow anguished expression of Mrs. Kane for why she is so determined to separate herself from her son. We can wonder in observing the slightly exasperated and nervous expression on Thatcher's face what kind of guardian he will make for a young boy. Or we can observe the father's angry, worried expression and wonder why he backs down. The father's position further back in the screen space makes him seem smaller than his wife and Mr. Thatcher, his diminished size somehow appropriate to his lack of power to influence his son's fate. The crowning brilliance of the scene is the tiny image of Charles Kane far in the depth of the screen space. Although the film is about him and in later scenes he will loom large indeed, here he is a tiny speck. On first viewing the film, some may not even notice him. But his understated presence playing outside the window, shouting "Union forever" as his mother is about to send him off into the world without her, is one of the most poignant moments in film. (See figure 23.)



Figure 23. The understated presence of the young Charles Kane playing outside the window shouting "Union forever" as his mother is about to send him off into the world without her is one of the most poignant moments in film. (*Citizen Kane*, 1941, Turner Entertainment)

Welles used similar deep-focus long-take techniques in numerous other scenes in the film, such as Thompson's first meeting with Kane's second wife Susan at the bar where she works as a singer, the scene in which Kane fires Jed Leland in the newspaper office, the scene in which Thatcher takes control of Kane's newspapers when Kane goes bust during the depression, and the scenes of Kane and Susan sitting in empty splendor in the halls of Xanadu. In a way unique to each of these scenes, their dramatic power is enhanced by the deep-focus techniques.

DEVIATIONS FROM STYLISTIC REALISM

Welles does not confine himself to a realist style in *Citizen Kane*. In one notable instance, he adds dramatic power to a scene by using a standard Hollywood shot/reverse shot technique. In the scene in which Susan Alexander and Charles Kane first meet, Welles alternates between long takes of Kane and Susan talking together in a medium two shot



Figure 24. Close-up of Susan Alexander, the night she meets Kane. (*Citizen Kane*, 1941, Turner Entertainment)

and a series of alternating, soft-focus, reverse-angle close-ups. (See figures 24 and 25.) Because Welles avoids such shots throughout most of the film, when he does use them, they are all the more effective. While the couple clearly seems to be falling in love, their being so emphatically framed in separate shots as they speak to each other (not sharing the screen space as they would if they were photographed together in the frame in a long take), suggests that each is off in a separate fantasy world, cut off from the other person mentally. Here Welles, by using a standard Hollywood technique sparingly, revitalizes its psychological expressiveness.

Not only did Welles occasionally employ conventional Hollywood-style editing, he also borrowed from the Soviet montage style of Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein, as discussed in chapter 2, tried to keep his viewers alert, their attention cemented to the screen, by the frequent use of shock cuts created by sudden graphic or associative contrasts. Welles uses these effects sparingly, but effectively. At the beginning of the film, after Kane dies, Welles cut from the somber darkness of Kane's deathbed scene



Figure 25. Reverse shot of Kane. (*Citizen Kane*, 1941, Turner Entertainment)

to the bright image of the flags that begins the "News on the March" newsreel. The loud voice of the announcer and high volume of the music that accompanies it compound the shock effect produced by the contrasting tones. Moreover, the juxtaposition of a dead man with jaunty images of flags and upbeat music creates the impression that no one much cares that Kane has died. Welles uses another shock cut at the beginning of the sequence in which Raymond recollects Kane's tantrum in response to Susan Alexander's leaving him. A somberly lit medium shot of Raymond is followed by a close-up of a shrieking white cockatoo flying away. The image associatively recalls Susan, whose voice has become shrill and harsh, before she too flies the coop, abandoning Kane.

The editing of *Citizen Kane* is innovative in another respect as well—the imaginative way in which Welles constructs transitions to signal temporal and spatial gaps in the narrative. Because of its complicated narrative structure, the plot of *Citizen Kane* continually leaps forward and backward in time. Welles used standard, traditional transitional devices to signal these leaps, but embellished them to add psychological and thematic implications. A good example of the subtle psychological sugges-



Figure 26. The lengthy lap dissolve of the young Kane's face on the snow-covered sled suggests that although he is on his way to a new life, something of himself will forever remain behind. (*Citizen Kane*, 1941, Turner Entertainment)

tiveness of Welles's transition shots occurs at the end of the sequence in which Kane's mother sends her son away with Thatcher. As he is playing outside his home with his sled, the boy is abruptly given the news that he is to leave home with Mr. Thatcher that very day. He does not take the news well. In the final image of this sequence we see a big close-up of young Kane's face framed by the body of his mother. He is glaring offscreen in the direction of Thatcher, whom he has just attacked with his sled. Through a long-held lap dissolve,¹² the image of Kane's face is superimposed onto the image of the sled, which is now covered with snow. (See figure 26.)

Dissolves are a conventional way for a director to signal the passage of time. In this case, the amount of snow that has accumulated on the sled and the sound of a distant train whistle suggest that a good deal of time has elapsed and that Thatcher and Kane are on the train to New York. But the lengthy lap dissolve superimposing the young Kane's face onto the snow-covered sled has symbolic significance as well. It suggests that although the boy is on a train on the way to a new life, something

of himself is being left behind. Another dissolve reveals the sled more deeply blanketed in snow, as if part of the boy will remain forever frozen and undeveloped as well. The abandoned sled stands in symbolically for the abandoned child.

At this point, dissolved onto the image of the sled is an image of white wrapping paper. Because the whiteness of the paper matches the whiteness of the snow, the transition is very smooth. We don't realize we have been transported to a new time and place until the wrapping paper is whisked away (accompanied by a tearing noise on the sound track), to reveal the sullen face of Charles Kane glumly contemplating a shiny new sled, a Christmas present from Thatcher. The camera tilts up the body of Thatcher who is standing by a huge Christmas tree. He wishes Kane a "Merry Christmas." There is a cut back to Kane, whom we see from the high angle of Thatcher's perspective. Kane sarcastically replies "Merry Christmas." The new, shiny sled is clearly no compensation for all that he has lost.

The next shot is a medium close-up reverse-angle shot of Thatcher saying "And a Happy New Year." In this shot Thatcher is now an old man with gray hair. In a split second of screen time more than fifteen years of story time have elapsed. Charles, we learn, has reached his twenty-fifth birthday. So innovative was Welles in executing rapid time transitions that a new term was coined for his technique—the "lightning mix." In a lightning mix, images separated from one another by vast gaps in time and space are seamlessly melded together by continuity on the sound track, usually by using the dialogue. (In this instance, Thatcher's phrase "Merry Christmas . . ." is not completed until the next shot fifteen years later, when he adds "... and a Happy New Year.") Welles's use of a lightning mix to catapult young Kane into adulthood perfectly conveys the idea of a child who had to grow up too fast. Welles also uses a series of lightning mixes in the famous "breakfast montage" to present in a few minutes the ten-year deterioration of Kane's first marriage. Here the lightning mixes dramatize how rapidly young love can turn into mutual hatred and contempt.

EXPRESSIONISM IN *CITIZEN KANE*

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 Getrys (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 Getrys, "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-

killter, 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.

INNOVATIONS IN SOUND EDITING

The visual inventiveness of *Kane* was by no means the only reason for its success. It is just as groundbreaking in its use of sound. Welles's experience in radio made him understand that there is much more to film dialogue than the meanings the words convey. The loudness of a voice, its pitch, timber, or accent, all convey worlds of information about the speaker. The voices of the actors in Welles's film, his own included, are thus richly textured for added emotional expressiveness. Just a few examples will suffice. The shrill pitch of Kane's mother's voice when she calls to him from the window expresses the tension she feels as she is about to send away her son. Susan Alexander's voice starts out as soft, warm, and modulated when Kane first meets her, but as her marriage draws to an end, her every sentence is a scream. The increasingly high pitch of Susan's voice becomes a vocal barometer of the rage and frustration she experiences as Kane's wife. Almost every character except for Kane has a marked accent that lends subtle dimensions to their characterizations. Susan has a lower-class Midwestern accent, which is in marked contrast to the upper-class accent of Kane's high-born first wife. Jed Leland has a rich Southern gentleman's drawl, Mr. Bernstein (who

is never given a first name) has a Brooklyn accent that marks him as Jewish. Kane has no discernible accent, but his rich baritone voice exudes confidence and authority at the height of his power yet seems pompous and hollow as he grows older in defeat. Welles also understood from his radio experience that the sound quality of the dialogue can give psychological dimension to a story, and he applied this knowledge to the screen. The vast rooms of Xanadu are made to seem even more alienating because of the reverberating echoes whenever Kane and Susan shout at each other from across the room. A similar high reverberation of voice tones is used to suggest the sterile hollowness of Thatcher's library. Kane's voice mightily reverberates through the hall during his political rally speech when he is at the height of his power. In contrast, his words ring totally flat when he threatens to send Gettys to Sing Sing.

Just as Welles has been praised for bringing a heightened realism to the film image, he is also praised for bringing heightened realism to the soundtrack of *Citizen Kane*. Numerous commentators have remarked on the way the deep focus of the images is accompanied by a corresponding deep focus in the sound. Welles carefully regulated his sound levels so that voices in the depth of the image sound farther away than voices in the foreground of the image. The best example occurs in the "signing the papers" sequence in the Colorado cabin. The voice of the boy playing in the background is faint in comparison to the voices of his parents and Mr. Thatcher in the foreground. As the father turns away and heads toward the background, his voice becomes muffled and fainter as well. While Rick Altman convincingly demonstrates that Welles is not consistent throughout the film in maintaining this kind of spatial sound realism,¹⁷ Welles's experiments with sound perspective in *Citizen Kane* influenced other filmmakers (and Orson Welles himself) to continue experimenting with deep-focus sound.

For the film's score, Welles hired Bernard Herrmann, who later became famous for his scores for Hitchcock films such as *Psycho* (1960) and *North by Northwest* (1959). *Citizen Kane* was the first film Herrmann had ever worked on (just as *Kane* was Welles's first feature film). According to Bernard Herrmann's personal account of his association with Orson Welles in "Score for a Film," Welles recognized Herrmann as an extremely talented novice, like himself. Just as RKO gave Welles unprecedented freedom and control over his film, Welles gave Herrmann unprecedented freedom and control over the musical component of the sound track. Herrmann was permitted to do his own orchestration for his music, to conduct the music, and to consult on the sound levels and

dynamics of the score. Moreover, Herrmann writes, "Most musical scores in Hollywood are written after the film is entirely finished, and the composer must adapt his music to the scenes on screen. In many scenes in *Citizen Kane* an entirely different method was used, many of the sequences being tailored to match the music."¹⁸

There is an old saying about background music in Hollywood films: If the viewer becomes aware of it, it isn't functioning properly. The music should work subliminally and unobtrusively to create a mood or comment on the action. Bernard Herrmann's score for *Citizen Kane* casts doubt on the validity of this statement. The music adds such energy to the images that it becomes a very overt presence in the film. The more we are aware of it, the greater is our pleasure in watching the film. For the many montage sequences throughout the film, rather than creating vague background music, Herrmann composed complete, self-contained musical pieces that pointedly reflected the content of the scenes. For the "breakfast montage" sequence in which Kane's first marriage dissolves, for example, Herrmann composed a theme and variation on a waltz. The waltz, with all of its romantic connotations, plays at the beginning of the sequence, when Charles and Emily (Ruth Warrick) are very much in love. But as the marriage becomes discordant, so does the music. At the end of the sequence the waltz theme can still be faintly heard, but it has become sad and bleak, played in the high registers of the violins. Discordant chords accompany Kane's increasingly harsh words to his wife.¹⁹

Herrmann carried over to the screen the technique familiar in radio of blending sound effects with musical instruments in order to add further dimensions to the meaning of the image. In the shot in which Kane's sled becomes increasingly covered with snow, for example, the combination of the train whistle with mournful musical chords adds poignancy to the image. Overlapping fragments of Susan Alexander's singing voice are combined with driving, discordant musical rhythms to create the effect of Susan's rising hysteria and mental disintegration as she is forced by Kane to pursue a disastrous singing career. A final example of the way Herrmann's music provides more than neutral background atmosphere, instead adding intensity to the image, is when his musical score simulates the ticking of a clock as Susan and Charles Kane are languishing in boredom in the empty halls of Xanadu.

Herrmann composed two main *leitmotifs*, or recurring musical themes, for the film. These give the score unity and underline two sides of Kane's

personality. One leitmotif emphasizes Kane's power. Herrmann describes it as "a simple four-note figure in the brass." These notes are first heard at the beginning of the film as the camera explores the grounds of Xanadu. Herrmann writes that this motif is transformed in the course of the film, "becoming a vigorous piece of ragtime, a hornpipe polka, and at the end of the picture, a final commentary on Kane's life."²⁰ The second motif is that of Rosebud. According to Herrmann, it is first played as a solo on the vibraphone at Kane's deathbed scene, but it is heard again and again throughout the film, providing a musical clue, for those who catch on, to the identity of Rosebud.

Not all the leitmotifs in the film are musical. The sound of clapping hands is brilliantly organized in a series of important sequences of the film to add psychological depth to the action. The sequence in which Kane meets Susan Alexander ends with Kane clapping as Susan sings for him in their private love nest. The sound of Kane's hands clapping segues into a shot of a small group of people on the street clapping as Leland delivers a speech in support of Kane's campaign to become governor. In another lighting mix transition, a sentence begun by Leland is completed by Kane some time later, as Kane is now seen speaking in a huge hall, not to a few claps, but to thunderous applause. This sequence is followed by the scene in which Kane's affair with Susan Alexander is exposed by Gettys. Kane is defeated at the polls, after which Kane launches Susan Alexander on her ill-fated career as an opera singer. At the end of one of Susan's disastrous performances, Kane is the only one left applauding. The film has come full circle. By using applause as the link that binds these scenes together, Welles suggests that Kane's desire for political power comes less from his progressive ideals than from his excessive need for approval and love, a desire satisfied by applause. The sound of applause is a leitmotif that symbolically links Susan's singing career to Kane's political career, exposing the raw (unacknowledged) need that makes both of these projects, as well as his marriage, fail.

Just as with the visual effects, the sound effects in *Citizen Kane* are so rich and subtle that one could almost endlessly go on pointing out interesting examples. With every repeated screening of the film, one can discover more. It is a mark of Welles's achievement that these effects are never merely clever gimmicks. They invariably work both to amuse by their wit and to deepen the film's psychological and thematic meanings. These meanings are never directly spelled out, but implied through a vi-

sual and aural symbolism that encourages a level of audience participation in creating meaning that was (and remains) rare in a Hollywood film. Welles's groundbreaking synthesis of realism and expressionism in the images and sounds of *Citizen Kane* more than justifies the critical acclaim with which it was first received and the high praise it receives to this day.