Film Essay:

Citizen Kane

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American Cinema is one of the ways one can investigate the various beliefs and views of Americans both when it was produced and depicted. The film *Citizen Kane* was produced by Orson Welles in 1941 and is about a reporter investigating the life of fictional American industrialist Charles Foster Kane. During this investigation, the reporter covers the entire life of Mr. Kane whose story shows various aspects of American historical events and notions covered in class. Throughout the life of Mr. Kane, the American notions of gender and class are shown in detail to the viewer. The portrayals in the movie are not completely historically accurate but are connected to American notions. The gender stereotypes of women are shown in the two wives of Mr. Kane who are treated as over dramatic and emotional as well as himself. The class struggle and inequality are shown in how Mr. Kane treats the lower class as well as the vast difference in wealth between industrialists like Mr. Kane and the general working class.

The American notion of class played a key role in *Citizen Kane* as Charles Foster Kane’s whole life ends up being influenced by it. One of the first examples of this is who Mr. Kane chooses to use his fortune to run a single newspaper company to initially attack the elite of society who he viewed as abusing the rights of the working man. His first set of newspaper stories have the following headlines: “Wall Street Backs Copper Swindle!!”, “Copper Robbers Indicted”, and “Traction Trust Smashed By Inquirer”.[[1]](#footnote-1) His views in the beginning would align most with the progressives of the time and the stories he ran can also be connected to some of the first forms of journalism; Muckraking. Mr. Kane started out having the typical progressive view of wanting better treatment for the working class that was being exploited at the time by the very wealthy.[[2]](#footnote-2) The stories he ran seemed to be ones exposing this mistreatment as well as economic manipulation by the very wealthy to out them to the lower classes. This was inline with Muckrakers who would expose the various wrongs in society.[[3]](#footnote-3) As the film goes one Mr. Kane also seems to slowly take on one of the darker aspects of progressivism as well. When Mr. Kane runs for the office of governor, he believes that if elected he will be able to use the government to fix all the issues he believes exists between the classes in society. He is fine using intimidation and manipulation to achieve this goal as he thinks that once he is elected that the good he will do will outweigh the wrongs he used to get their.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is also evidence that Mr. Kane may not have been a complete progressive when his closest friend Jedediah Leland pointed out “your not going to like it one little bit when you find out it means the workingman expects something as his right, and not your gift!”.[[5]](#footnote-5) This seems to suggest that Mr. Khan did agree more then he would admit that charity rather then policy should be used to help the lower classes.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The American notion of gender also played a major part in the life of Charles foster Kane in his two divorced wives. His first wife Emily Kane was portrayed as being more opinionated and assertive and acted with a more progressive mindset.[[7]](#footnote-7) She had her own opinions on what Mr. Kane should run in his newspaper[[8]](#footnote-8) and when her husband was accused of cheating on her she took the initiative to go see for herself without telling her husband.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is in stark contrast to Mr. Kane’s second wife Mary Kane who is shown to be timid and loyal to her husband. She is shown as being very emotional and accepting of her husbands wishes[[10]](#footnote-10). These two extremes would seem to show a more progressive outlook on how a women should act compared to a more traditional view on how women should act.[[11]](#footnote-11) Mr. Kane himself also shows himself to act in a more traditional masculine way in how he controls his second wife’s life and seems to make all the major decisions.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The various portrayals in the film were not completely historically accurate but did an excellent job at chowing the various American nations. One major thing that is a bit glossed over in the film is how Charles Foster Kane himself seemed to use his newspaper to push for a war with Spain and is even seen as actually helping to start the Spanish American war that would lead to America acquiring Spanish colonial possessions.[[13]](#footnote-13) This is similar to how the actual war started with the press using the destruction of the Main to get the American people on board with fighting a war with Spain, and one of the major outcomes of the war was America acquiring Spanish colonies.[[14]](#footnote-14) This can be further connected to the American notion of politics as this can be considered proof that Mr. Kane was in favour of expanding American boarders and influence making him an American Imperialist.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Portrayal of gender in the film was accurate in that both types of women especially around the time that was depicted did exists. Even in the rare case of his first wife Emily Kane she was from a wealthy family and would have received an education that would help her to be more independent, while his second wife Mary Kane seemed to be less well off and whose views on how to function as a wife would have been largely influenced by society at the time.[[16]](#footnote-16) The portrayal of class seemed to be accurate as well as during that time their would have been big gaps in wealth inequality as well as less strict labour laws to help protect workers.[[17]](#footnote-17) Very rich industrialist like Mr. Khan would have existed, even some with a more philanthropic view like him on the lower classes.

In Conclusion The film *Citizen Kane* in covering the life of Charles Foster Kane shows various American nations. The portrayal of class shows the major wealth inequalities between the working class and the wealthy in America as well as how this class difference led to the rise of progressive thinking around wealth inequality. The portrayal of gender shows various stereotypes of both men and women with Mr. Kane and his two wives being an example. While these portrayals were not all completely accurate, they did an excellent job at showing various American notions. The ever-changing opinions of Mr. Kane as well as the passage of time helped show various American notions that were covered in class and provide a unique and complex view of American society.

Bibliography

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1. Orson, Welles, director. 2020. *Citizen Kane.* Prime Video. https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Citizen-Kane/0NYL1QOOH1YF9CK4SPUEV8TT1U, 23:48 to 24:44 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Noah fedosoff, “The Progressive Era,” (Lecture note, 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fedosoff “The Progressive Era” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fedosoff “The Progressive Era” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Welles 2020, 1:12:18 to 1:13:25) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Noah fedosoff, “The Gilded Age,” (Lecture note, 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fedosoff “The Progressive Era” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Welles 2020, 53:06 to 53:25) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Welles 2020, 1:03:52 to 1:04:25) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Welles 2020, 1:16:14 to 1:17:02) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fedosoff “The Progressive Era” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Welles 2020, 1:41:43 to 1:43:18) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. (Welles 2020, 24:46 to 25:47) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Noah fedosoff, “The American Empire,” (Lecture note, 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Noah fedosoff, “The American Empire,” (Lecture note, 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Fedosoff “The Progressive Era” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Fedosoff “The Progressive Era” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)