

Thoughts on Citizen Kane

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In *Three Uses of the Knife*, Mamet quotes Stanislavsky as saying there are two kinds of play. The kind where the thing is absolutely perfect, the film ends and you shout “Bravo!” and you’re elated walking out to the car and then have forgotten the thing entirely by the time you get home. And the kind where something’s not quite right and so it sticks with you, gnaws at you, because the notes don’t quite resolve.

Citizen Kane is definitely the second kind of movie.

To be sure, it had its moments of sheer genius. Number one, in my mind, is juxtaposing Welles’ performance as the young Kane gracefully dancing with a showgirl at an office party against him as a much older Kane stumbling in the effort to trash a room in his Florida mansion. In both cases, there’s an absolutely beautiful physicality to the performance and the notion that the same actor was capable of doing both at the same age is nothing short of stunning.

The film is widely-hailed for the cinematographic innovation of *deep focus*, using tricks with projections and lenses to keep foreground and background in focus at the same time. But the effect is even more interesting than the technique: the film is filled with long shots where tons of action goes on through staging but the camera never cuts away. A character in the foreground talks to a character in the background, they pace, they swap places, and the camera might pan a bit (but usually not) but it never cuts.

And when it does cut, it always cuts in a sort of overlapping way. The standard modern movie shot is the over-over-two-shot: characters A and B are talking, facing each other; the screen alternates between a shot of A filmed over the shoulder of B and vice versa. You can clearly see the people but you lose all sense of the space that they’re in, since your perspective is constantly flipping back and forth.

Kane does pretty much the opposite, almost every new shot overlaps in some way with the previous one, so you never lose your place. A shot might go from wide to tight or tight to wide or, in some cases, shift slightly to the left or right, but it almost never completely flips direction, and when it does (as when Kane enters the newsroom for the first time) it flips around a very noticeable piece of the set, so it’s extremely obvious what happened.

This may have been the result of some deep insecurity about confusing an audience mostly used to watching plays from fixed seats, but I like it. The result is to give the film a tremendous physicality that makes it all feel much

more substantial. This sort of thing was apparently extremely common in the early days of film, which makes me wonder why it's so rare now. (The main modern exception is *There Will Be Blood*, which was intentionally a period piece.)

But even among older films *Kane* distinguishes itself: most films have clear staging because they're simply staged as plays, with a static camera watching a flat scene. *Kane*'s sets, innovatively, have ceilings and a full complement of walls and while action feels staged in them they never really feel like they're on a stage.

But in the scheme of things, it has to be admitted, these are small things. *Kane* suffers from far bigger problems. The first, and most blatant, is that aside from Welles the cast simply cannot act. Well, they cannot act in movies, at least. Were this a radio show, they would have been fantastic — close your eyes and you hear nothing but strong, stirring performances. Were they on stage, they likely also would have done just fine. But this was their first role in film and apparently no one stopped to tell them that in the movies, we can see your face.

Their faces are consistently either blank, as if they forgot they were supposed to move it to and not just their voice, or overwrought, as if they were exaggerating their features so they would carry through to the cheap seats. In either case, watching them destroys any sense of realism that the careful shot construction has built up and brings the whole thing to the verge of melodrama.

The other big problem is the script. The “spiraling” effect of overlapping tellings of Kane's life (a bit like the overlapping cuts, I suppose?) may have been a brilliant formal innovation, but it doesn't really add much to the film. Instead of following the through-line of a strong and compelling story, we're constantly bouncing back and forth in time, with interruptions at key moments. What do these interruptions get us? As far as I can tell, they just slow the film down.

(The best argument I can make for them is that they emphasize the fact that Kane drove those who were closest to him away. This makes some sense for Susan and Jed, but Bernstein is still loyal to him and Thatcher is dead, so what does that emphasize?)

The modern excuse for this kind of early flash-forward is to set up a big mystery which only the full story can resolve (*Damages* is an egregious example). *Kane* kind of does this with the famous “Rosebud” (although since we see this first-hand, it doesn't explain why the whole investigative-obituarist plotline is necessary). Perhaps it was just terribly spoiled for me, but Rosebud did not feel like a particularly compelling mystery. Especially with all the questions raised by the “News on the March” sequence, it was really the last of the things I was curious about. (And the notion that an editor would be so curious about it as to waste that much money on an answer really belies the presentation of journalism in the rest of the film.)

(I'm also upset that the film wasted a great opportunity for the ending. It currently ends with a speech by the investigative obituarist, saying that he

never figured out what “Rosebud” was but even if he did it was probably just another ill-fitting piece in the man’s great jigsaw puzzle. Then the camera pulls out and cuts to a wider shot and cuts again and eventually cuts to a whole new scene where someone pulls a sled out of a pile and throws into into a fire and then we cut to the sled and see the name “Rosebud” as it gets licked with flames. The obvious ending is to have the camera pull back in one steady shot as we hear the jigsaw puzzle speech until amidst this enormous pile of junk the sled is just in foreground, with “Rosebud” written on its side, as the gaggle of journalists wanders off in background. What’s all this *deep focus* stuff for if you’re not going to use it for a movie-making shot like that!)

The film does have some great bits about journalism, but it also has some weird lapses. There’s hardly anything of substance about the Spanish-American War, which I would have thought was the most interesting tale of Hearst’s life. The film is weirdly afraid to leave the country (it follows Kane to Chicago, but not to Europe) or even the building (I guess street scenes would have been too expensive), making it feel a bit cooped-up and claustrophobic.

But the most frustrating thing, script-wise, is that it raises the grand questions of ambition and money and power and answers them with just a giant muddle. Kane was incapable of loving but desperate to be loved, we’re told repeatedly, but what kind of sense does that make? There are some great moments: in an early precursor of “Fair and Balanced”, Kane prints a brave “Statement of Principles” promising to always tell the truth on his front page, just above a story about a murder he invented. But this is on day one! There is no sense that power corrupts or even, as Caro would have it, that power reveals. Kane just stay the same throughout and as his means allow him to grow the size of his gestures, he also grows the size of his failures. Maybe this is an interesting philosophical point (don’t count on scale to save you?) but a story so static doesn’t work particularly well as drama. Caro would have told it as an epic rise and fall. Kane would have told it as an epic rise. But Welles just tells it as a flatline. It’s like a Caro subject without the Caro, or the subject.

I put this criticism last because it’s the one I’m most uncomfortable about. Maybe Welles was just so far ahead of his time that he decided to critique the next century of biopics in advance. People don’t actually change, *Kane* tells us; they just play out the same mistakes on larger and larger scales, over and over again, in patterns big and small. And if so, I take it all back and this critique is actually a tremendous credit. But it sure doesn’t feel like it’s trying to be a deconstructionist film.