

Citizen Kane and the Active Spectator

Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* explores cinema's potential to communicate visual meaning through a dynamic spectator-screen relationship. The film's sophisticated use of deep focus presents multiple, interacting planes of action within a shot, allowing for a more active spectatorship. The cinematographic distribution of light within the frame serves to inform the viewer of the nature of a character's identity and moral inconsistency. This cinematic discourse is supplemented by the presence of visual symbolism. *Citizen Kane*'s employment of deep focus creates a more active spectatorship that enables it to comment on character integrity through the use of lighting and visual imagery.

Citizen Kane capitalized on the frequent use of deep focus, presenting multiple planes of action within a frame to encourage a more active role of the spectator. Deep focus editing utilizes a greater depth of field, fewer cuts, and an often stationary camera. All planes in the shot are in sharp focus, inviting the spectator to explore the multiple layers of each constructed image and draw meaning from their interrelation. Brian Henderson comments that "foreground/background relation is the axis of composition-in-depth expressivity" (Braudy, 61). In one example of this multiplanar interplay in *Citizen Kane*, we see a spoon in an empty glass accompanied by an open pill bottle in the foreground and a dimly-lit image of Susan lying in the middle-ground. These images, in combination with the background image of Kane struggling to bust through a locked door, may lead the active spectator to a conclusion: suicide attempt. In "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," André Bazin observes that traditional montage, by nature,

directs the audience's gaze to an object in a single plane, which "isolates it in space through the focusing of the lens" (Braudy, 49). For this reason, Bazin argues that montage naturally eliminates ambiguity from its message. In contrast, he praises Welles for "his refusal to break up the action, to analyze the dramatic field in time," and through the resulting "unity of image in space and time," composition-in-depth creates an ambiguity of meaning that is the spectator's responsibility to dissect (Braudy, 49). *Citizen Kane*'s use of deep focus allows for the conjunction of multiple planes of depth within a shot, producing an ambiguity of meaning that encourages active spectatorship.

Citizen Kane systematically employs contrasting levels of brightness within a frame to convey the nature of its characters' identities. The film's cinematographer, Gregg Toland, was celebrated for his recurrent application of chiaroscuro, or extremely low-key lighting, throughout the film (Nowell-Smith, 262). Susan Hayward explains that the effect of contrasting light and dark within one shot can be used to signal character ambiguity (Hayward, 17). When Kane first announces his "Declaration of Principles," his whole figure is hidden from the audience by shadow, notwithstanding he is the center of attention in the shot. This lighting technique serves as a warning to the active spectator of the protagonist's moral ambiguity; while Kane assures Bernstein that his promises will be kept, surely enough he later refers to the "Declaration of Principles" as nothing more than "an antique." Accordingly, Laura Mulvey asserts, "By its very use of inconsistency and contradiction, the film warns the audience against any reliance on the protagonists as credible sources of truth" (Mulvey, 222). To the active spectator, the distribution of light in context of the frame can signify character ambiguity, like the volatile changes in Mr. Kane's identity throughout the film.

The film complements its high-contrast lighting system with the device of visual symbolism to provide a commentary on the moral incongruity of Charles Foster Kane. Mulvey describes this layering of meaning on screen as “exploitation of the cinema’s hieroglyphic potential to create a space for a deciphering spectator” (Mulvey, 219). In the scene where Susan leaves Xanadu, there is a shot in which a set of mirrors projects a corridor of infinite reflections of Mr. Kane. The spectator could read this metaphor as an elaboration on the moral inconsistency of Kane (a character who at one moment declares he will “tell all the news honestly” and at another moment proclaims that people will think “what I tell them to think”). Hayward confirms that “mirrors offering reflections of a character point not just to the myth of Narcissus but also to the idea of duplicity” (Hayward, 17), reminiscent of Kane’s line to Thatcher: “The trouble is you don’t realize you’re talking to two people.” The notion that there are multiple Kanes is only reinforced by the numerous names the man is referred to as (Charles Foster Kane, Charlie, Mr. Kane, Xanadu’s Landlord, etc.). Constructions of visual imagery, such as the shot of infinite reflections of Mr. Kane, further communicate to the active spectator about the moral inconsistency and ambiguous identity of the protagonist.

Citizen Kane redefines the spectator-screen relationship with cinematographic techniques that enhance the audience’s perception of the characters. The film takes advantage of its greater depth of field to present a multiplicity of interacting planes of action within the frame. Bazin asserts that deep focus differs from montage in that it preserves ambiguity of meaning, leaving the audience to decode its intended message through analysis of visual cues. Cinematographer Gregg Toland’s calculated use of chiaroscuro provides a commentary on character identity, as Kane’s dubious nature is

sometimes suggested by his dimly-lit figure. Also, visual metaphors and symbolism, such as the endlessly mirrored image of Mr. Kane, offer further elaboration on the moral foundation of the characters. *Citizen Kane* achieves its visual complexity and character expression by combining composition-in-depth, high-contrast lighting, and visual symbolism, accordingly augmenting the role of the active spectator.

Works Cited

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