



Criticizing materialistic cultural values through film

“Well, it's no trick to make a lot of money... if all you want to do is make a lot of money.”

-from *Citizen Kane*

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One of the enduring arguments against the capitalist system is that it leads individuals to neglect social companionship, in favor of wealth and material goods. Since art is a relatively safe way to express such strong, but controversial, criticisms, great artists such as Robert Frost in *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors*, and Scott Fitzgerald in The Great Gatsby, have both touched upon this social dilemma. Film, too, has served a role in this criticism, with perhaps the most notable example being Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). Through his use of deep-focus photography, expressive high-contrast lighting, and elaborate set design, Orson Welles attempts to disparage the false goals erected by a material-driven society by depicting the tragic rise and fall of one man ultimately driven by those goals.

Citizen Kane is a wonderfully built film, and possibly one of the best American-produced examples of elaborate *mis-en-scene*. It is apparent that Welles took great care in composing each shot to his exacting specifications, in order to create the precise visual metaphor required in the moment. A case in point is the set of Thatcher's library/shrine, an immense structure of almost comedic proportions. The shots within are composed in great depth, with shadows that are vast and encompassing and sound that reverberates against the unseen walls. Welles' marvelous attention to ornate set detail relates closely

the theme of the film, in that material objects dwarf humans, and in a way, reality.

Thanks to advances in film speed prior to *Citizen Kane*'s production, this technique of film depth, called *deep-focus photography*, became a technical possibility. It essentially allowed Welles to depict the entire detail of a scene in one wide shot, rather than being limited to the traditional focus zone of earlier cameras and film. Thus, Welles' camera framing tends to be wide, relying on the action itself to draw the attention of the viewer, rather than camera movements. Being largely a social commentary, this style is important, as it serves to engage the viewer in the active interpretation of the message. The opening faux newsreel footage further serves this purpose, by lending authenticity to the underlying plot through repetition. As the film progresses, unexplained clips seen during this first "newsreel" are examined in greater depth and detail. Just as a speechwriter might repeat an important word or phrase, Welles uses repeated imagery to give the viewer a sense of expert involvement with the underlying message being conveyed.

A good portion of the film is set within the bounds of Kane's first newspaper office. The set itself is relatively large and plainly-styled, similar to how a typical contemporary newspaper office might look. However, it is meaningful to comment on the reason for the office's unusually low-slung ceiling. Roger Ebert suggests that this set characteristic was simply due to technical concerns, as Welles purportedly created this false ceiling out of cloth and hung his camera microphones from above, which perhaps

restricted the height of an otherwise normal room. Regardless of whether the room's height was artistically intentional or a technical necessity, Welles makes clear use of it throughout, to portray young Kane as a powerful, boastful, and important figure. In several office scenes where Kane is present, the camera has a low angle, which, in comparison to the low ceiling, makes him appear large and foreboding. In one such scene, which takes place upon Kane's arrival back from his hiatus in Europe, Kane bursts through the door to the office into a crowd of his welcoming employees, dressed in a pristine white suit. The suit itself deserves notice, as it is contrary to everything else he has previously worn in the film, and is in stark contrast with the dull browns and grays of his employees. In a way, Kane emerges through the doorway as a metaphorical knight in shining armor, at the height of his day, a hero to be admired and revered. As Kane quickly parades through the room, the camera tracks with him. From the camera's low angle, Kane literally looks to be as high as the ceiling, and thus seems very imposing, almost god-like.

Later in the film, after Kane has built his mega-palace Xanadu for him, Susan, his second wife, is seen sitting in one of Xanadu's presumably many rooms, in front of a fireplace, working on one of her many jigsaw puzzles. Kane enters, emerging from the shadows, and they argue about staying at "home" or going out to the city. Susan apparently (as visually represented by the dozens of puzzles she has worked on) is bored of life in Xanadu, and wants to leave, but Kane suggests that everything they need is

there, even fronting the pitiful perspective that their friends can be imported. As they are talking, Kane paces toward the distant fireplace, which, until then had had no point of reference. But as he nears it, the massive mantle looms above him, as if to swallow him whole. This imagery contrasts that created by the earlier low-ceiling office ceilings, by showing Kane as being very small and weak, and represents his recent decline from greatness. Essentially, Welles is conveying the idea that Kane's material possessions have gone from being owned, to owning him.

Another brilliant sequence involves Kane immediately following his rageful destruction of Susan's bedroom at Xanadu, in response to her leaving him. Left alone and feeling completely isolated, Kane leaves the room, and we see a crowd of his servants massed outside the door, peering inside. But as Kane walks away, the crowd seems totally uninterested in him, and instead remains transfixed on the open door. This serves to solidify the feeling of total isolation that the now-decrepit Kane is suffering. Then perhaps the most intriguing image of the film follows as Kane carries himself down the hallway: Walking through a double set of facing mirrors inset in the hallway, Kane's reflection is repeated infinitely through them into the distance. The large mirrors are themselves encased within an ornate frame, the pattern which is likewise reflected. This serves to illustrate the main premise of *Citizen Kane*, in that Kane has become trapped within and surrounded by his own wealth and material monuments. But, as Kane walks past the camera and off into the hallway, so too does his reflection vanish, signifying

perhaps the contention that immortality is derived from human companionship, rather than materialistic ownership.

Through impressive *mis-en-scene*, elaborate sets, and lighting contrasts, Orson Welles serves up a timeless criticism of capitalism and the ills of materialism. Until society overcomes these problems, it is likely *Citizen Kane* will continue on as a perpetually contemporary reminder on what is truly important in this money-driven world.

A good example of contrast of lighting: the snowy-white globe, signifying Kane's old boyhood home, is contrasted with the blackness of the dark, filled room of Xanadu.

Film frames courtesy Aaron Caldweal <http://www.geocities.com/aaronbcaldwell/Citizen.html>



Ebert, Roger. "Citizen Kane." Chicago Sun Times Online. Online, Oct. 2001.
<http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/greatmovies/kane.html>