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Exploring Time in *Citizen Kane*

The allure of *Citizen Kane* has persisted through the changing of cinematic technique and style. Although full of technical innovation and revolutionary for its time, its unshakable position as the 'greatest movie of all time' cannot be attributed solely to the technical genius of Orson Welles. His use of special effects was inventive, and showed clear influence from Welles' experience as a magician. In addition to its use of special effects, *Citizen Kane* was also groundbreaking for its addition of meaning to existing cinematic and editing techniques.

In his essay "The Technique of Citizen Kane", André Bazin describes how *Citizen Kane*'s use of cinematography and editing created the vocabulary from which an entire generation of film art could be born (Perspectives 230). Specifically, Bazin praises Welles' ability to use editing and mise-en-scène to transform space and time (Perspectives 230). A good example of this technique is at the very beginning of the film, when Kane is on his deathbed. The camera shows falling snow, then a house fades in. As the camera zooms out, the audience realizes that the house is actually inside a glass ball. Strangely, though, the snow remains falling over the entire scene. Even during the extreme close-up of Kane's lips whispering "Rosebud", the snow continues to fall over the entire screen. Then, as the globe falls from Kane's fingertips and smashes on the ground, the snow remains on the screen but slows and seems to hang suspended in space.

This surreal treatment of the snow would be interpreted by the 21st century audience as being artistic or perhaps even symbolic, but it can be considered instead as a good example for the projection of the mind onto reality. In reality, there is no snow falling in Kane's room, and a strict realist director would prevent an audience from incorrectly deducing the house is a real house. So what is the significance and meaning of Welles' use of the snow over the whole frame? The simple ambiguity of meaning is the great power and poetry of this shot. The snow is able to create a mood of depression and bleakness when superimposed on Kane's bristly and unshaven white beard and mustache. The audience gets a feeling of coldness and death as the music cuts off and the lights go out, showing only a stiff unmoving body on a bed. The snow in this shot has great significance later on, however, when there is a flashback to Kane playing in the snow as a little boy. Here, the snow represents a source of joy to Kane, who throws snowballs at his house and uses his sled to great enjoyment. While watching this scene, though, we can't help but be reminded of Kane's deathbed and the snow falling over the entire scene.

I used this example to illustrate Welles's defiance of the industry-imposed artistic confinements of filmmaking. He could have just shot Kane as an old man dropping a glass ball down the steps, and the important information of the scene could still have been conveyed. By superimposing the unrealistic snow falling over the room, though, Welles is able to create an atmosphere as well as provide mental hooks to which an audience can connect later images and ideas. Welles's exploration of his full artistic freedom as a filmmaker and his use of special effects are the easily noticed remarkable attributes of *Citizen Kane*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay titled "Citizen Kane", attacks Welles for the very attributes which I have just described (Perspectives 58). Sartre regards the film as an overly intellectual production where the main ideas are made painfully obvious to the audience. The basic plot, according to Sartre, is too plain and simple and Welles compounds the inherent problems with gaudily elaborate special effects and cinematic trickery. Most of all, Sartre criticizes Welles's intellectual approach to all aspects of film, including plot, dialogue, acting, special effects, editing, and sound. Sartre disapproves of the flashback nature of *Citizen Kane* and claims that by starting the film with the death of Kane, the power of uncertainty of plot is diluted. I disagree with this statement and make the claim that the flashback nature of *Citizen Kane* provides a meaningful story with human implications.

Welles's philosophies are discussed by Irving Singer in his book, *Three Philosophical Filmmakers*. Singer presents Welles's fascination with temporal reality, especially dealing with mysteries about the past (Singer 78). This theme is manifested in *Citizen Kane* with the reporter's search for the meaning of Rosebud. Singer also describes Welles's recurring themes of mystery about the past and a search for something impossible to find. Again, these elements are clearly evident in *Citizen Kane*.

I have briefly discussed the technical and cinematic innovations of Orson Welles and given some background information and opinions on *Citizen Kane*, but now will move on more specific issues of temporality. I will explore the use of time in the film and attempt to develop some insight on the artistic potential of rearranging time. I will

also discuss the use of objects as symbols in the film and relate this to the issues of temporality.

In her book *Citizen Kane*, Laura Mulvey writes:

> The language of the mind, with its dream images, allegorical objects, scenarios of desire, frozen memories and so on, finds a resonance in the language of cinema. In cinema, objects, gestures, looks, *mise-en-scène*, lighting, framing and all the accoutrements of the filmic apparatus materialise into a kind of language before or even beyond words. (Mulvey 19)

This perspective on cinema can provide a good basis for analyzing the use of time in *Citizen Kane*. Mulvey is describing the power of the camera to function as an omniscient mental eye. In a small number of films, the camera is limited to only show the point of view of certain characters. In the vast majority of films, however, the camera is free to appear in places where no human would or could go. Thus, the camera has evolved from merely being a passive human eye to an active watcher that can move around at will. This is the basis for Mulvey's theory that the film image relates closely to a mental image.

One example of the film image as a mental image is the introduction of Susan Alexander Kane. The camera starts outside the nightclub and tracks through the lighted sign on the roof. The camera then closes in to the skylight where the camera goes through the glass window and into the nightclub. The shot ends with a crane shot descending down to the floor and approaching Mrs. Kane. Clearly, a human's physical eye could not undergo this progression of shots. The mental eye, however, could fly up through the sign and descend through the window, which is useful in developing a spatial concept of the scene.

A natural application of film as a mental picture is the mental flashback. This is the mental picture that humans summon most frequently, such as when recalling an

event or location. Unlike the human memory, though, the cinematic flashbacks in *Citizen Kane* lack ambiguity. They actually correspond to perfect transport back in time. To this end, the use of deep focus lenses allows the audience to choose what elements of the flashback to examine in detail. This is an interesting decision because Welles could have easily used more conventional focusing techniques to direct the attention of the audience to specific elements in the scene.

In one scene, Kane as a young boy is playing outside in the snow while his mother talks to Mr. Bernstein. The camera keeps Kane in the background while simultaneously keeping the adults in the foreground in perfect focus. This dual focus indicates that the flashbacks in *Citizen Kane* have transcended memory; they actually represent going back in time. This is evident by the camera's impartiality to any particular element in the scene.

It seems obvious that a flashback represents going back in time, but I have made it an important point here because I want to highlight the realistic impossibility of such an event. If Kane had truly died, and a reporter was reconstructing his history, there would be no such detailed reproductions of his younger years. Rather, there would be hazy, conflicting, and spotty recollections. Reading Mr. Bernstein's diary would not result in a scene showing Kane as a boy on his sled in perfect focus, playing in the background. Rather, it would simply show a discussion with Mrs. Kane, focusing on the financial aspects of the agreement. Such a scene is characteristic of the beauty of *Citizen Kane*: the audience is actually transported back in time to various instances of Kane's life.

One basic element of human nature is to hold on to one's past. As we grow older, we cling to elements of our pasts, even if they may be only symbolic objects of past times. The object we hold on to most tightly is our memory, which unfortunately decays as time passes. The miracle of *Citizen Kane* is that no memories have decayed; the audience is taken back in time and sees the events unfold in full detail. After viewing the movie, one can't help but reflect on his or her life and mourn that there have been happy, sad, or otherwise notable moments that have been lost to time.

The film *Citizen Kane* traces a long arc of character development for Charles Foster Kane as the audience progresses through his life. Such an example of development is simultaneously beautiful and sad. Seeing him at different times in his life emphasizes to the audience that he is at each time instance an entity with a different personality, thoughts, and emotions than at any other time instance. The interactions and experiences of Kane show that various components of his psychology are lost and gained as he progresses through his life. This is evident in the breakfast montage where his changing attitude towards Emily is made very clear through the use of montage. Like the use of flashback, the transformation of character through time finds a resonant reaction in the audience. An audience member can't help but reflect on his or her life and recall the various character traits that have been won or lost at various stages of the life.

The final topic I would like to explore is the use of symbols in the movie. Singer mentioned in his book that Welles, along with many other filmmakers, aggressively avoided the use of symbols (Singer 79). In *Citizen Kane*, though, it is hard to avoid the desire to analyze Rosebud and the snow globe as symbols, since they are such

prevalent themes throughout the movie. Rather than analyzing the meaning of the symbols, however, I will attempt to analyze their existence as symbols.

Rosebud and the globe are relics from Kane's younger life. They are objects that appear and get mentioned throughout Kane's life. However, is there any deep significance to Rosebud or the snow globe? As audience members, we can only guess, because Welles has decided to go back in time as flashbacks in time rather than by using the perspective of one of his characters. If we went backwards in Kane's memory, we would understand perfectly what he was thinking when he said the word "Rosebud", or what he was thinking as he picked up the snow globe in Susan Alexander Kane's room. However, we remain outsiders to Kane's life throughout the film, since although we receive the power to travel through time, we do not receive the power to venture into Kane's psychology.

Still, the power of these symbols is undeniable. What is it about these symbols that burns them into our memories and keeps us trying to determine their significance? Rosebud and the globe are merely two elements of Kane's life that happen to appear in the story multiple times. They are items that were probably of notable significance to Kane, but the particular significance is indeterminable from the audience's position. Their success as symbols largely is due to the fact that they are not conventional symbols. They can be interpreted to represent any given part of Kane's psychology but in actuality, they do not represent any discrete part of his psychology. If a documentary were to be made about any given person, some physical objects would undoubtedly appear multiple times as important objects to the person. However, these objects would have no particular designed symbolism; rather their importance to the person would be

a result of a complicated interaction of the person's psychology with the object. Likewise, in *Citizen Kane*, the sled and the globe are not meant to represent anything in particular. They are merely important parts of Kane's life, and Welles has not given us the faculties to know for sure why they are important. In this regard, Welles has succeeded in his attempt to give the audience a "non-symbol".

Citizen Kane is a masterpiece in many different aspects of filmmaking. One of the most interesting approaches in the film is its treatment of time. I find Welles's use of time creates an intriguing and interesting complication that evolves significant thought in the audience. Specifically, the explorations into the history of Kane seem to be objective and impossibly lossless. In other words, the flashbacks are presented as current time rather than memories. This resonates with the human desire to go back in time without loss. Welles's use of Rosebud and the snow globe as symbols builds upon these ideas of time. These symbols do not have any predetermined meaning; instead, they are simply elements of Kane's life that he has an attachment to. The flashbacks offer a somewhat limited insight into the details of Kane's psychology since they are presented from an objective perspective. Thus, Welles has created a mystery around Kane's innermost shell that will continue to be prodded and explored by students and scholars as time marches on.

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