

# Orson Welles

## And American Film in the 1940s

- Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)
- Welles as an artist
- Influence of *Kane*
- Hollywood in the 1940s
- Film Noir

# Orson Welles (1915-1985)

- Background in theater and radio
- *War of the Worlds* (1938 radio broadcast)
- *Citizen Kane* (1941) was his first film, made with complete directorial freedom
- *Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) taken from Welles and re-edited by studio (RKO)
- *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947)
- *Touch of Evil* (1958)
- Work in Europe in 1950s & 1960s (including *Othello*, *Mr. Arkadin*, *The Trial*, and *Chimes at Midnight*)
- Final documentary films: *F for Fake* and *Filming Othello*
- Unfinished projects

# *Citizen Kane* (1941)

- Based on life of William Randolph Hearst
- Suppressed due to Hearst's power
- Revived, and recognized, in the mid-1950s
- Influence on later American film
  - Depth of field and use of lighting
  - Narrative structure
  - Mise en scène vs. montage (André Bazin)

# *Citizen Kane*: Style

- Gregg Toland, cinematographer
- Low camera angles
- Prominent shadows
- Deep focus and deep space
- Use of wide-angle (short focal length) lenses to increase 3-dimensionality
- Ceilinged sets
- Prominent & aggressive sound editing
- None of these elements are entirely new in themselves, but Welles pioneers their systematic use, making an integrated style

# *Citizen Kane*: Form

- The enigma of “Rosebud”
- “NO TRESPASSING”: Continual sense of penetrating into a forbidden space
- Narrative as a series of flashbacks
  - Limited information, limited point of view
  - Long takes nonetheless imply objectivity
  - We never get Kane’s own POV

# Deep Focus Cinematography

- Allows long takes instead of shot/reverse shot
- Simultaneous action at varying distances from the camera
- Importance of diagonals
- Very few close-ups
- “Instead of following the usual practice of cutting from a close-up to an insert (which explains or elaborates upon the close-up), we made a single straight shot, compressing the whole scene into a single composition” (Gregg Toland)

# Deep Focus, Deep Space, and Long Takes

- Makes the film more “realistic,” closer to what is seen by the human eye
- Makes the film more “theatrical,” more like the stage, allowing for greater emphasis on acting and on character
- Allows for ambiguities of interpretation, for the viewer’s freedom to interpret and judge, in ways a montage style does not
- Impression of vast, empty spaces (Xanadu dwarfs Kane; cf. scene of Susan’s suicide)
- Do all these possible implications fit together?

# Expressionism: Camera Angles and Lighting

- Low camera angle aggrandizes Kane
- But the low angle also isolates him against empty space
- Heavy use of angular shadows and of indirect lighting
- The characters often seem to be absorbed into the *chiaroscuro* space, instead of standing out from it

# Welles' Use of Sound

- Score by Bernard Herrmann
- Overlapping sound montage
- Visual transitions and montages cut in synch with the music
- Multiple, overlapping dialogue tracks
- Cutting on sound instead of image
- Continuity of sound through visual cuts

# Eclecticism

- Welles uses different stylistic techniques when they are suitable for a given scene
- Avant-garde opening, which dissolves into the newsreel
- Shot/reverse shot as a witty depiction of the decline of Kane's first marriage

# Narrative Structure

- Prologue: opening montage and newsreel
- First attempt to interview Susan
- Thatcher's memoirs (Kane's youth)
- Bernstein (early, idealistic days at the paper)
- Leland (Kane's first marriage, his run for office; Leland's disillusionment, culminating in his bad review of Susan's singing)
- Susan's story (her marriage, her singing career, her attempted suicide, until she leaves Kane)
- Raymond the butler's narrative, and the debris left behind in Xanadu

# Rosebud

- We discover its meaning in the final shot, even though the reporter doesn't
- The sled: brings us back to young Kane, before Thatcher took him away
- But is it really the key to understanding Kane?
- “Rosebud” as a marker of loss: a past that is unknowable, and cannot be recovered
- *Citizen Kane* as a film in the past tense
- The fatality and unknowability of character

# Hollywood After *Kane*

- World War II (Dec 7, 1941- August 1945)
- War and adventure films
- A new sort of hero (e.g. Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum)
- Humphrey Bogart & Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944)
- The post-War boom
- Increasing prevalence of deep focus & long takes in the 1940s, compared to the 1930s
- Increasing use of expressionistic lighting, editing, and camera angles: *film noir*

# Film Noir

- Both a specific genre, and a general tendency, visible in other genres as well
- Not named at the time; strictly speaking, a subset of the crime film
- “Crime and corruption in dimly lit urban settings”
- Noir (black, dark) both literally and metaphorically
- Mid 1940s through late 1950s:
  - From Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944)
  - To Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* (1958)
- Shot on low budgets (hence in black & white)
- Moods: anxiety, alienation, cynicism, paranoia
- Themes: corruption, moral ambiguity, nihilism

# Film Noir: Visual Style

- Visual influence of German Expressionism
- Nocturnal urban settings and motifs
  - Dark and murky streets in the rain
  - Dimly-lit apartments and hotel rooms
  - Swirling cigarette smoke
  - Light through Venetian blinds
  - Flashing neon lights
- Oblique camera angles, low-key lighting, prominent play of light and shadow

# Film Noir: Characters & Themes

- The amoral tough guy
- The femme fatale
- Pervasive criminality: crime as a social pathology, rather than an individual choice
- Existentialism: no pre-given moral focus, everyone for himself/herself
- Betrayal
- Gender anxieties

# Some Examples of Film Noir

- Billy Wilder, *Double Indemnity* (1944)
- Tay Garnett, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)
- Robert Siodmak, *The Killers* (1946)
- Jacques Tourneur, *Out of the Past* (1947; with Robert Mitchum & Jane Greer)
- Rudolph Maté, *D.O.A.* (1950)
- Fritz Lang, *The Big Heat* (1953)
- Robert Aldrich, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)
- Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil* (1958)