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FILM FORUM

Cast of Characters

Charles Foster Kane
Orson Welles

Jedediah Leland
Joseph Cotton

Susan Alexander
Dorothy Comingore

Charlie's Mother
Agnes Morrehead

Emily Norton
Ruth Warrick

Boss Jim Gettys
Ray Collins

Carter
Erskine Sanford

Mr. Bernstein
Everett Sloane

Discussion Guide For

Citizen Kane

Vatican Top-45 Category: Art

1941, RKO

119 minutes, black and White, English

Directed by Orson Welles, Screenplay by Orson Welles and Herman Mankiewicz

Cinematography by Greg Toland

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Background

1. Only “Citizen Kane” is consistently referred to as the greatest movie of all time. Certainly that claim is not universally accepted, but the mere fact that such an epithet has become part of the film’s reputation makes it loom high among the artistic achievements of this ubiquitous medium. Perhaps the claim continues to merit discussion because both the story and the way it is portrayed are truly remarkable and seem to take exceptional advantage of the medium itself.
2. Charles Foster Kane has inherited the sixth largest private fortune in the world, and he is not the least bit interested in it. Rather, he sets his sights on a small, unglamorous New York newspaper that he spots among his newly acquired holdings, and decides to occupy himself with the newspaper business. By sheer force of will, combined with the resources of his outrageous fortune, he creates a media empire that influences American politics, culture, and economy on a grand scale. Personal failures in marriage and politics, however, mar Kane’s happiness. He dies a tormented soul, with the mysterious word “Rosebud” on his lips.
3. The simple plot is presented to the viewer through the mechanism of a journalist’s research into the meaning of Kane’s last word; the reporter probes and interviews everyone who ever played a major role in Kane’s life, making the film a series of discreet flashbacks, like pieces of a puzzle that we try to put together in order to figure out what really made Charles Foster Kane tick. It is a dramatic exploration into the heart, mind, and personality of this towering figure who seems to represent the utter fulfillment of the American Dream, except for his mysterious unhappiness. The conflict that drives the film forward is double-layered: will the reporter discover what “Rosebud” refers to? And will we ever really understand what made Charles Foster Kane tick, what he sought in life and why he was able to achieve so much and remain so unhappy?
4. Orson Welles’s first and best attempt at directing has remained unmatched till this day, many critics agree. Every scene is not only superbly written and acted (he used many theatre actors in the cast, which gives the different characters an uncommon sharpness), but is visually stunning, as if each frame were meant to be a masterpiece photograph or painting. The editors used to look forward to receiving the day’s material simply because it was so visually unique and striking.

Viewing Tips

1. Try to view this film on as large a screen as you can find. This helps elevate the visual effect to its maximum intensity.
2. As you watch the film, pause the tape/DVD every once in a while to take in the visual effect of a particular scene. Notice how the contrasts and different shades of black and white are arranged to

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increase the dramatic effect – far from obscuring or flattening the scenes, the black and white photography thus utilized seems to add dimensions that color washes away, e.g. the scene in the Thatcher Memorial Library building.

3. Similarly, don't be afraid to re-watch a scene two times in a row. Even if you don't, however, try to notice how Welles utilizes depth of space: almost always the camera simultaneously focuses on figures or items in the foreground, the background, and the middle ground, increasing the tension dramatically by causing your attention to focus on three different but related elements at the same time, e.g. the scene when Charles' mother signs his custody over to Mr Thatcher and the bank.
4. Try to notice the different camera angles: sometimes we witness a scene from below, sometimes from above; sometimes straight on, sometimes tilted; sometimes we move in and out and sometimes the actors seem to move in and out... Notice the effect this has on you as a viewer witnessing the drama.
5. Notice also how Welles stretches the medium of film to its utmost by repeating the same scene from different perspectives. Kane's final tantrum, for instance; Susan's grand opening at the opera, for another example. This gives the viewer an added depth of perception into the reality being depicted: we see the same event from the viewpoint of different individuals.
6. "Citizen Kane" especially exemplifies how a director chooses every detail of the film. Nothing is by chance: whether a director makes each choice (casting, furniture, costumes, camera angles, etc....) with a conscious, enunciated purpose is another question all together, but the choices themselves are made. Notice for example how Susan Alexander is shown in the middle ground of the scene when she tells Kane that she is leaving him, and in the foreground is a little doll that resembles her. In Kane's eyes, is Susan much more than a doll, to be dressed up and displayed? The physical juxtaposition illuminates the relationship between the two characters.

Discussion Guide

1. As you watch the film, try to follow along and identify how each of Kane's friends/contacts see his defining characteristic. Each of them points out something different that Kane was searching for or striving for in life. Are any of them on the mark? Once you know what "Rosebud" refers to, do you actually have a better perspective on the question? Some of the following questions may help your reflection.
 - a. Why did Kane exert so much energy into building the Inquirer into a powerful media empire?
 - b. Why did Kane run for governor? Why did he not bow out of the race after Boss Jim Gettys threatened to unloose the "scandal"?

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- c. Why did he marry the first time and what did he like about his first wife? Why did that marriage fail?
 - d. What did he like about Susan Alexander the first time he met her? Why did he marry her? Why did he insist on making Susan Alexander into an operatic success?
 - e. Why did he build "Xanadu"?
 - f. Why did he collect so much art? Why did he never throw anything away?
2. Consider the title: "Citizen Kane". Kane was far from an ordinary citizen, and yet, by his having achieved the "American Dream" (going from weakness and rags to power and riches), he could in a certain way symbolize every American citizen. In this sense, his "success" in life would touch the very core of the American identity itself, as would his failures. This parallel is sharpened by the fact that Orson Welles based much of the story on the life and exploits of William Randolph Hearst, a real-life media magnate (76 years-old at the time of the movie's release) who recognized himself in the film to such a degree that he organized a campaign against it. (A semi-successful campaign, by the way: Hearst was foiled in his attempt to suppress the film completely, but while "Citizen Kane" was nominated for nine Oscars, it received only one [best screenplay]). To what extent does "Citizen Kane" embody or reflect the greatness and/or the tragedy of American culture?
- a. Would Kane have considered his life a success? Did his friends? Do you?
 - b. What are the elements of success in the "American Dream" as achieved in Kane's life?
 - c. What are the elements of true success that are missing in Kane's life, and that therefore may be missing in a traditional version of the "American Dream"?
 - d. How would a strong Christian faith have altered the path of Kane's rise and fall? What would have been different in his life if he had believed in Christ?
 - e. Do you see any of the negative aspects of Kane's "success" glorified by current social trends or norms?
3. What did "Rosebud" really refer to? Was the search for *that* the real motive behind Kane's epic life? If so, why was the search unsuccessful?

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4. Which of the following evaluations of Charles Foster Kane more accurately reflects the truth of his life's experience:
 - a. The quip by his best friend, Jedediah Leland: "He never finished it [Xanadu], never finished anything. He was disappointed in the world, so he built one of his own, an absolute monarchy."
 - b. Or the glib conclusion of Jerry the journalist at the end of his unsuccessful investigation into the meaning of "Rosebud": "Kane got everything he wanted and lost it – Rosebud was one or the other. No word can explain any man's life; Rosebud is just a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, a missing piece."

5. How does the profession of journalism emerge from its treatment by the film? Does it appear to be an honorable profession, a real service to society? Why or why not? Do you agree with the film's take on it?

6. Did you notice any religious symbolism in the film at all? In your opinion, is it significant for American culture's self-perception that religion plays such a role in a movie considered by so many to be one of the greatest of all American films?

Supplementary Passages

1. On Happiness and Success

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for... (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #27)

This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity -- this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed -- is called "heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1024)

The Beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness. This desire is of divine origin: God has placed it in the human heart in order to draw man to the One who alone can fulfill it... (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1718)

The name "atheism" covers many very different phenomena. One common form is the practical materialism which restricts its needs and aspirations to space and time. Atheistic humanism falsely

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considers man to be "an end to himself, and the sole maker, with supreme control, of his own history."... (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2124)

2. On Wealth and Power

The goods of creation are destined for the entire human race. The right to private property does not abolish the universal destination of goods. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2452)

The beatitude we are promised confronts us with decisive moral choices. It invites us to purify our hearts of bad instincts and to seek the love of God above all else. It teaches us that true happiness is not found in riches or well-being, in human fame or power, or in any human achievement -- however beneficial it may be -- such as science, technology and art, or indeed in any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love:

All bow down before wealth. Wealth is that to which the multitude of men pay an instinctive homage. They measure happiness by wealth; and by wealth they measure respectability... It is a homage resulting from a profound faith... that with wealth he may do all things. Wealth is one idol of the day and notoriety is a second... Notoriety, or the making of a noise in the world -- it may be called "newspaper fame" -- has come to be considered a great good in itself, and a ground of veneration. (John Henry Cardinal Newman) (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1723)

... The exercise of freedom does not imply a right to say or do everything. It is false to maintain that man, "the subject of this freedom," is "an individual who is fully self-sufficient and whose finality is the satisfaction of his own interests in the enjoyment of earthly goods." Moreover, the economic, social, political and cultural conditions that are needed for a just exercise of freedom are too often disregarded or violated. Such situations of blindness and injustice injure the moral life and involve the strong as well as the weak in the temptation to sin against charity. By deviating from the moral law man violates his own freedom, becomes imprisoned within himself, disrupts neighbourly fellowship, and rebels against divine truth. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1740)

3. On Journalism and the Media

Within modern society the communications media play a major role in information, cultural promotion and formation. This role is increasing, as a result of technological progress, the extent and diversity of the news transmitted, and the influence exercised on public opinion. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2493)

The information provided by the media is at the service of the common good. Society has a right to information based on truth, freedom, justice, and solidarity:

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The proper exercise of this right demands that the content of the communication be true and -- within the limits set by justice and charity -- complete. Further, it should be communicated honestly and properly. This means that in the gathering and in the publication of news, the moral law and the legitimate rights and dignity of man should be upheld. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2494)

"It is necessary that all members of society meet the demands of justice and charity in this domain. They should help, through the means of social communication, in the formation and diffusion of sound public opinion." Solidarity is a consequence of genuine and right communication and the free circulation of ideas that further knowledge and respect for others. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2495)

The means of social communication (especially the mass media) can give rise to a certain passivity among users, making them less than vigilant consumers of what is said or shown. Users should practice moderation and discipline in their approach to the mass media. They will want to form enlightened and correct consciences the more easily to resist unwholesome influences. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2496)

By the very nature of their profession, journalists have an obligation to serve the truth and not offend against charity in disseminating information. They should strive to respect, with equal care, the nature of the facts and the limits of critical judgement concerning individuals. They should not stoop to defamation. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2497)

"Civil authorities have particular responsibilities in this field because of the common good... It is for the civil authority... to defend and safeguard a true and just freedom of information." By promulgating laws and overseeing their application, public authorities should ensure that "public morality and social progress are not gravely endangered" through misuse of the media. Civil authorities should punish any violation of the rights of individuals to their reputation and privacy. They should give timely and reliable reports concerning the general good or respond to the well-founded concerns of the people. Nothing can justify recourse to disinformation for manipulating public opinion through the media. Interventions by public authority should avoid injuring the freedom of individuals or groups. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2498)