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Citizen Kane

Peter Wollen from 'Introduction to *Citizen Kane*', *Film Reader*, no. 1 (1975), 9–15.

To write about Citizen Kane (1941) is to write about the cinema. It is impossible to think about this film without thinking about its place in film history. Most critics, despite Welles's own unhappy relations with Hollywood, have seen him primarily, implicitly within the framework of the American narrative cinema. Pauline Kael talks about the 1930s newspaper picture and builds up the role of Mankiewicz, a hard-core Hollywood scribe if ever there was one. Charles Higham talks of a 'wholly American work', Andrew Sarris of 'the American baroque', and they leave no doubt, I think, that, where the cinema is concerned, for them America = Hollywood. And, from the other side, an enemy of Hollywood such as Noël Burch puts Welles in relation to Elia Kazan, Robert Aldrich, Joseph Losey, and Arthur Penn and condemns *Kane* for simply displaying an amplification of traditional narrative codes which it does nothing to subvert.

Against this mainstream trend, of course, we have to set the massive influence of André Bazin. For Bazin, *Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) were crucial moments in the unfolding of the cinema's vocation of realism. Together with the work of Jean Renoir and William Wyler, *Kane* represented a rediscovery of the tradition of realism, lost since the

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silent epoch (Louis Feuillade, Erich von Stroheim, F. W. Murnau). *Kane* looked forward to Italian Neo-Realism and, had Bazin lived longer, his interest would surely have turned to cinéma verité and the new developments in documentary which followed the invention of magnetic tape, lightweight recorder and camera, and the tape join. (Indeed the strain of 'technological messianism' in Bazin's thought must surely have taken him in this direction).

For Bazin, of course, the crucial feature of *Citizen Kane* was its use of deep focus and the sequence shot. Yet one senses all the time, in Bazin's writings on Welles, an uneasy feeling that Welles was far from sharing the spiritual humility and self-effacement, or even the democratic mentality, which marked for Bazin the 'style without style', the abnegation of the artist before a reality whose meaning outruns that of any artefact. It is easy to forget that, on occasion, Bazin talked about the 'sadism' of Welles, of his *rubbery* space, stretched and distended, rebounding like a catapult in the face of the spectator. He compared Welles to El Greco (as well as the Flemish masters of deep focus) and commented on his 'infernal vision' and 'tyrannical objectivity'. But this awareness of Welles the stylist and manipulator did not deflect Bazin from his main point. Fundamentally, his enthusiasm was for the deep-focus cinematography which Welles and Gregg Toland introduced with such virtuosity. It was on this that Welles's place in film history would depend.

Yet a third current has been felt recently, again often more implicit than explicit. Putting together some remarks of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the article by Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier in *Poétique* and that by William van Wert in *Sub-Stance*, we can see how it is possible to place *Kane* as a forerunner of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), a film which pointed the way towards the breakdown of unilinear narration and a Nietzschean denial of truth. It is in this sense too that we can understand Borges's praise of *Kane* as a 'labyrinth without a centre'. *Kane*'s perspectivism (leading so easily to nihilism), its complex pattern of nesting, overlapping, and conflicting narratives, put it in a particular tendency within the modern movement, which has its origins perhaps in Conrad or Faulkner and its most radical exponents in Pirandello and the further reaches of the French new novel.

And of course, this tendency, whose origins are in literature, has begun to spread into the cinema, especially in France, through the influence of writers—Marguerite Duras, Jean Cayrol, Robbe-Grillet—who have worked on films, even become filmmakers.

The oddest of these three versions of *Kane* is undoubtedly Bazin's. So flexible, so generous in many respects, Bazin was nevertheless able at times to restrict and concentrate his vision to an amazing degree. Obviously he felt the influence of Expressionism (which he hated) on *Kane*, but he simply discounted it—or tried to justify it by pointing to the exaggeration and tension in the character of Kane, a kind of psychological realism, similar to the way in which he defended the expressionist style of a film about concentration camps. (In the same vein, Christian Metz remarks how the formal flamboyance of *Kane*, the film, parallels the flamboyant personality of Kane, the man.) In general, however, Bazin simply hurried on to his favourite theme—the importance of deep focus and the sequence shot.

The key concepts here for Bazin were those of spatial and temporal homogeneity and dramatic unity. It is almost as if the theatrical scene was the model for Bazin's theory of the cinema. Of course, he believed that filmed theatre should respect the scene and the stage. Beyond that, it seems he believed in a *theatrum mundi*, which it was the calling of the cinema to capture and record—there is a sense in which all cinema was for him filmed theatre, only in Neo-Realism, for instance, the world was a stage, the players were living their lives, and the dramatist, who gave meaning to the action, was God himself. No wonder then that, for him, the artist, in Annette Michelson's phrase, was 'artist as witness' and the whole of reality the offering of an 'Ultimate Spectacle'. Indeed, Bazin writes that in Italy daily life was a perpetual *commedia dell'arte* and describes the architecture of Italian towns and cities as being like a theatre set.

Bazin always laid great stress on the theatricality of Orson Welles. He saw Welles as a man of the theatre and talked about the sequence shot as a device for maintaining the primacy of the actor. 'An actor's performance loses its meaning, is drained of its dramatic blood like a severed limb, if it ceases to be kept in living, sensory contact with the other characters, and the setting. Moreover, as it lasts, the scene charges itself like a battery . . .'.

Basically Bazin justifies the sequence shot and deep focus for three reasons: it maintains the dramatic unity of a scene, it permits objects to have a residual being beyond the pure instrumentality demanded of them by the plot, and it allows the spectator a certain freedom of choice following the action. In *Kane* it was the first which was uppermost. The second was important to Bazin—he talks about the door-handle of Susan Alexander's bedroom, in the sequence after the suicide attempt, and goes on to describe the cold feel of copper, the copper or indented enamel of a door-handle,

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yet we must feel that this is his own projection, reverie almost (in the Bachelardian sense), which has little relevance to *Kane*. As for the third reason, Bazin recognizes that Welles directs the spectator's attention through lighting and movement as imperiously as any editor at times, but he remains aware of the potential ambiguity of the sequence shot and, of course, links this to the ambiguous portrayal of Kane's character.

Yet, with the advantage of hindsight, we can see that Bazin's love of the sequence shot has been strangely betrayed by the filmmakers who have subsequently used it. Who do we think of? Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub, Miklós Jancsó. There are links of course—Straub reveres Bazin's hero, Bresson; Godard was deeply marked by Roberto Rossellini—but clearly the sequence shot has been used for purposes quite different from those which Bazin foresaw. Some of these filmmakers have stressed the autonomy of the camera and its own movement, rather than the primacy of the actors or the drama (Jancsó, Snow), others have used the sense of duration to de-realize the imaginary world of the film (Godard), others have been interested in duration as a formal feature in itself (Warhol). Straub, probably the closest to Bazin in his insistence on authenticity, on a refusal of guidance for the spectator's eye, has none the less put his Bazinian style to purposes very different from those Bazin himself could have envisaged.

It is worth noting that most of the sequence shots in *Citizen Kane* are, in fact, used in the framing story rather than the flashbacks, in the scenes in which Thompson talks to each of the interior narrators. The average length of a shot in *Citizen Kane* is not particularly long because of the number of short shots that exist both in the newsreel sequence and in the numerous montage sequences which Welles uses, mostly as transitions. The decision to use sequence shots in the framing story is clearly a decision not to use classical field reverse-field cutting, and thus to de-emphasize the role of Thompson, the narratee. Thompson only appears as a shadowy figure with his back to the camera. It is hard to separate decisions on length of shot and editing from decisions on narrative structure. By shooting Thompson in this way Welles precludes any spectator identification with the character who, from the point of view of information and focalization, is the spectator's representative in the film.

In the last analysis, what concerned Bazin was dramaturgy (even if, as with the Neo-Realists, he could speak of a 'dramaturgy of everyday life'), and he tended to assume the need for characters and a continuous narrative line. He simply thought that psychological truth and dramatic configurations would reveal themselves more fully if there was a minimum of artistic intervention. He remained hostile throughout to experimental film (for him Stroheim was the great experimentalist and Welles, of course, can easily be perceived as an avatar of Stroheim) and thought of theatre and the novel as the models with which cinema should be compared. There too he tended to have conventional tastes—he aligns himself with Sartre's condemnation of Mauriac, but seems also to accept without question Sartre's positive tastes—Dos Passos, Faulkner, Hemingway—and clearly was not interested in the literary revolution inaugurated by Gertrude Stein and James Joyce.

Yet the example of contemporary filmmakers has shown that the long take and the sequence shot tend to undermine the primacy of the dramaturgy: duration becomes a stylistic feature in itself and, far from suppressing the filmmaking process, the sequence shot tends to foreground it. At most, the sequence shot can be associated with a Brechtian type of dramaturgy, based on tableaux. In fact this tendency can be seen even in *Citizen Kane*, where it is disguised by the movement in and out of the framing story and the complex character of the transition. Bazin thought that the principal function of the cut should be that of ellipsis, but, within the kind of rhythm built up by a series of long sequence shots, the cut automatically takes on a role as caesura rather than ellipsis alone.

Truffaut, always fundamentally a conservative critic—as he has shown himself to be a conservative filmmaker—has said that 'if *Citizen Kane* has aged, it is in its experimental aspects'. It seems to me that it is precisely the opposite which is true. All Welles's 'tricks', as they are often contemptuously called—the lightning mixes, the stills which come to life, the complex montages, the elasticity of perspective, the protracted dissolves, the low-angle camera movements, etc.— are what still gives the film any interest. Nobody, after all, has ever made high claims for its 'novelistic' content, its portrayal of Kane's psychology, its depiction of American society and politics in the first half of the twentieth century, its anatomy of love or power or wealth. Or, at any rate, there is no need to take such claims very seriously. It seems quite disproportionate for Noël Burch to submit them to his acute dissection and attack, as he himself seems to half-acknowledge.

Indeed, the 'pro-Hollywood' defence of *Kane* is quite pathetic in its lack of ambition (*Kane* after all, is widely held to be the greatest film ever made). Pauline Kael begins with hyperbole 'the one American talking picture that seems as

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fresh now as the day it opened', but soon descends to dub *Kane*, in a famous phrase, 'a shallow work, a *shallow* masterpiece'. The shallowness does not worry her, however, because it is what makes *Kane* 'such an American triumph', and then we discover its triumph lies in 'the way it gets its laughs and makes its points'. Basically, she assimilates *Kane* to the tradition of the well-made Broadway play, translated into the 1930s comedy film, with all its astringency and sense of pace and fun. Other critics do not really claim much more: Charles Higham talks of a 'masterpiece', but also 'epic journalism'; once again, we get the insistence on the 'American' quality of Welles and *Kane*, ironic in the light of the original intention to call the film *The American*. Energy, grandeur, and emptiness.

The truth is that the 'content' of *Citizen Kane* cannot be taken too seriously. Yet it had an enormous impact—largely because of its virtuosity, its variety of formal devices and technical innovations and inventions. In themselves, of course, these are purely ornamental, and the dominant aesthetic of our age is one that rejects the concept of ornament—the ruling aesthetic of our day is one of expressionism or functionalism or symbolism or formalism, seen as a complex process of problem-solving rather than wit or decoration. Welles is usually described in terms of baroque or expressionism, sometimes the Gothic, but this seems to reflect the ponderousness of his themes. His interest in formal devices and technical ingenuity puts him closer to mannerism, to a conscious appreciation of virtuosity and the desire to astonish.

It is this 'mannerist' aspect of Welles which still lives—not the dramatic unity which deep focus and the long take make possible, but the long take and deep focus as formal features in themselves. Similarly, it is not the theme of time, youth, memory, age, etc. which is of any interest, but the devices used to organize time within the film. Many of these point the way towards a quite different kind of use—contemporary filmmakers' variations on the long take, Robbe-Grillet's variations on the freeze frame–still. *Kane* remains an important film historically, not within the terms it set itself, or those within which it has been mainly seen by critics, but because, by a kind of retroactive causality, it is now possible to read there an entirely different film, one which Welles probably never intended. *Citizen Kane*, we can now say, was a milestone along the road which led, not to a reinvigoration of Hollywood, or a novelistic complication of narrative, or the unfolding of the realistic essence of film, but towards the expansion and elaboration of a formal poetic which would transform our concept of cinema entirely, towards film as a text which is a play with meaning rather than a vehicle for it.