

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE IN *CITIZEN KANE*

An analysis of the importance of
perspective in *Citizen Kane*

Essay

by

Martin N. Ségur-Cabanac

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Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941) today is as fascinating as it was upon its conception. Numerous different aspects of the film have been discussed and emphasised, from its unique story structure to its inventive use of camera and lighting, from its political messages about New Deal culture and the risks of American isolationism to its purported parallels to media tycoon William Randolph Hearst, from its Freudian contemplations to its significance to the *auteur* theory. But its secret to success remains as elusive as 'Rosebud' to the film's journalist Jerry Thompson.

Jorge Luis Borges claims that *Citizen Kane* is a labyrinth without a centre, referring to its story structure: the absence of linear time and space, the different types of narration, the different – and differing – points of view, all propelling the story towards its perceived logical conclusion in the revelation of the meaning of Kane's last words.¹ And it represents a “telling image”, as Laura Mulvey concedes.² The missing centre comes into play in two ways. The young journalist Thompson never does find out who or what 'Rosebud' is; therefore, his quest seems futile on a superficial level. And even though the secret is revealed to the audience, it does not leave it with a sense of omniscient understanding of either Kane's life or his character. But neither Mrs Mulvey nor Pauline Kael in her essay *Raising Kane*, nor Joseph McBride in his biography of Orson Welles, realises the significance of Charles Foster Kane's story being told through different points of view (although they all mention the fact in their works). For in the very sources telling the story of Kane lies the key to understanding the elusiveness of the centre of the labyrinth: *Citizen Kane* is not just about an American newspaper

1 Laura Mulvey, *Citizen Kane* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), p. 9, and Joseph McBride, *Orson Welles* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p. 33.

2 Mulvey, p. 39.

tycoon and failed politician and the quest for the meaning of his last words, but about the memory and understanding of his life and character *by his contemporaries* and, therefore, about *our* memory and understanding of other people and their lives in general. By seeing Kane in the different flashbacks of memory told by his friend, adversary, co-worker, lover, and butler respectively not as the same person throughout but as one *perceived to be such* by the one remembering him, one can appreciate the whole picture of *Citizen Kane*. Doing so, it becomes not so much a labyrinth but a painting; searching for a centre does not give satisfaction – one has to take a step back and look at the entire picture to grasp its full meaning and beauty.

There are numerous hints at the importance of this interpretation in the film. The very first frame, stating “No Trespassing”, is of course directed towards the audience, not only to tell us that we ought to keep out of the private life of Mr Kane, but to remind us that whenever we cross that boundary into someone else's life and start to interpret and judge his or her actions and words, we step onto dangerous and forbidden grounds. This is emphasised by the Gothic mansion of Xanadu sitting on top of its artificial mountain as well as the way the sequence is shot. As soon as the camera – and with it the audience – passes the fence into the forbidden land, we are directed towards the mysterious light in Kane's bedroom. The following scene in the room violates the 180 degree rule of film making several times, cutting across the invisible axis of Kane's body, as well as presenting us extreme close-ups of his lips and the glass ball; all devices deliberately used to accentuate an out-of-place feeling of disorientation: we do not belong here.

The cleverly used device of the 'News on the March' reel presents several differing points of view about who or what Kane was, pointing to us the incongruity we will encounter throughout the film. Newspaper headlines call him “sponsor of democracy” and “editor who instigated war for profit” alike. Thatcher deems him to be “nothing more or less than a communist”. A man at a workers rally calls him “a fascist”. Yet Kane sees himself only as “an American”. All these are leads, hinting at the dangers of accepting people's opinions as the truth. Upon the newsreel's end, as Mr McBride correctly identifies, the audience is finally presented with a coherent time system in which the story unfolds: a here and now.³ From now on we follow the journalist Jerry Thompson on his quest. The fact that we never see his face serves as a means of identification: he is the audience. And just like

³ McBride, p. 36-37.

him, we hear the story of Kane's life through the telling of others – yet another hint.

Thompson's journey starts with his first visit to Susan Alexander at the “El Rancho” nightclub. But she is drunk and refuses to talk to him or anybody. At first look, this scene seems unnecessary. We do not learn anything about 'Rosebud' or Kane; the main plot is at the same stage after this first visit as before (except for the waiter telling Thompson that Susan never heard of 'Rosebud', but that could have easily been told by herself later on). One could argue that it serves the function of Thompson telling us what he will do for the rest of the film in a phone conversation with his superior, but that information, too, seems quite unnecessary, for we will find out anyway. In the light of the thesis of the importance of perspective however, it is quite a crucial scene, for it tells us about Susan herself and how *she* is coping with Kane's death and what *her* life has become. All this needs to be taken into account later on when she tells her story of her former husband.

Thompson then pays a visit to the library of the deceased Mr Thatcher, where the first of six flashback sequences starts. Here, one should note the peculiar setting. An entirely de-feminised woman acts as a kind of threshold guardian to Thatcher's mind. Only under strict rules and supervision is Thompson given the “rare privilege” of reading the bank manager's memoir, kept in a safe within a room that itself represents a giant safe – protective layer upon protective layer. All this punctuates the fact that we now enter Thatcher's mind. He tells us about his first meeting with the young Kane, how the contract was signed by his mother, and how Kane detested him from the very beginning. After the scene plays out all that remains is the boy's sled, left behind in the snow. That image not only emphasises the sled's importance to the conclusion of the 'Rosebud' quest, but tells us something about Thatcher. Since, by the time snow accumulates on the sled, Thatcher has already left with the boy, the image of it in the winter landscape is one of Thatcher's imagination. Kane attacked him with the sled, and Thatcher presents him with a new one at Christmas, which the boy doesn't seem to like at all. The banker is very aware of the vast canyon separating the two men, a canyon that can never be bridged. To him, the sled becomes an icon of Kane's hatred. After Kane takes control of his fortune and the Inquirer, Thatcher is furious about his yellow press take on issues. When he confronts him with his lurid journalistic style and the fact that his paper loses money, Kane answers that “at a rate of a million dollars a year, I have to close this place in sixty years.” Money is

not of Kane's concern; he undermines and ridicules all Thatcher is and represents, challenging his whole world. When depression hits in 1929 and Kane has to hand control back to Thatcher, they meet for the last time. Again, the banker only has power over Kane's assets, not over his mind or heart, as Kane tells him that he was "always too old" and that he would have liked to become "everything you hate." Thatcher's flashback sequence ends on a sad note. He never could connect to Kane, never could become a surrogate father or even friend to him.

Thompson then catches up with Mr Bernstein, who from the outset declares his enmity towards Thatcher, which is echoed throughout his flashback memory of Kane's life in Bernstein's obvious fascination with the man. His is an up-beat story full of comical characters and slapstick humour (e.g. the old Inquirer editor and Bernstein's cumbersome first entrance into the office), as well as the glamorous office party and the planned homecoming reception for Kane after his trip to Europe. This reflects much more Bernstein's own personality than Kane's. He is a cheerful man who likes to remember the good times more than the bad, which is one reason why his story ends at the high point of Kane getting married to his first wife, Emily Monroe Norton. His vision of Kane is one full of energy and movement, a loving memory of a friend held in the highest regards. But, although he is utterly captivated by Kane's winning personality upon the conception of his "declaration of principles", he is not without cynical insight when he reminds him that "you don't want to make any promises, Mr. Kane, you don't want to keep." However much insight he might have into the misconducts of Kane, he always sides with him. The way Everett Sloane delivers the line "Miss Emily Norton was no Rosebud" clearly puts blame for the failing of the marriage on her, even though he knows about Kane's affair with Susan Alexander. And his thoughts about Kane's involvement in the Spanish-American war speak for themselves:

Bernstein: I guess Mr Leland was right. That was Mr Kane's war. We didn't really have anything to fight about. But do you think if it hadn't been for that war of Mr Kane's we'd have the Panama Canal?⁴

Mr Bernstein is Kane's most devout and loyal follower, as he himself points out to Thompson: he was with him before the beginning, and is so after the end.

Jedediah Leland is the most complex character telling Kane's story. He was once his closest friend, yet they parted and never spoke to each other after Leland got fired. He tells Thompson that

4 *Citizen Kane* (Mercury Productions, Orson Welles, 1941).

he can remember “absolutely everything”, as if to convince us that what we are about to hear is the inviolable truth. That alone should make the avid viewer suspicious. His is the story of feeling betrayed, misled and forgotten by his friend, and consequently he paints an entirely different picture of Kane than Bernstein does. In his first of two flashback sequences, he tells about something so private – the breakfasts of a married couple – that he cannot possibly speak from first-hand knowledge. Therefore, the clever cinematic telling of the deterioration of the couple's relationship must not be mistaken as the truth. Not only does it serve to put blame for the failure of the marriage on Kane – as opposed to Bernstein's standpoint – but it also focuses much more on the decline of Kane's character than that of the relationship, culminating in his statement that people will think “what I tell them to think.” Nevertheless, Leland portrays him as a highly sympathetic man when he tells yet again of something he did not witness himself: Kane's first meeting with Susan. In it, he paints the picture of a Kane who is so innocently enchanted with the inept singer precisely because she has no idea who he really is. She makes him a blank canvas, devoid from prejudices born out of his public life, giving him the rare chance of making a first impression. The two following political rallies might be safely assumed to be sticking to the truth, for they would likely be on record and therefore not so much infused with Leland's interpretations. And it is precisely this fact that makes Leland's own wholehearted participation in them important, for it shows us that he either at one point believed in the same cause and the same principles as Kane, or that he at least followed him because of the power and fame it promised. Therefore, when, after Kane's election defeat due to his affair with Susan, Leland drunkenly lectures him about the working man expecting something as his right, not Kane's gift, and about love on one's own terms, he reprimands himself as much as Kane. It is at this point that he realises either his own political misconceptions or his misguided patronage of Kane. Consequently, he has to get away from the influence of his friend's captivating personality. His story becomes not only one of defiance against a former friend, but one of his own guilt and disgrace. Viewed in this light, his vision of Kane is that of a scapegoat for his own shortcomings.

Thompson then pays a second visit to a now slightly more sober Susan willing to talk. Her story is that of an utterly innocent, weak, and obtuse girl forced beyond her natural limits by a man unwilling to accept the mediocre. In her naivety, she really believes that Kane liked her voice as she poses the question to Thompson of what else he thought he built that opera house for. She is the only

one not talking about anything she was not witness to herself, making her story the truest and purest of all. When forced above and beyond her boundaries she can only find refuge in suicide, and it is the attempt which frees her from her obligation to perform. Her memory is not that of a romance with Kane but solely one of his forcing her to sing, driving her to suicide, and then confining her to the prison of Xanadu. Slowly but deliberately she manages to break free until she is finally able to leave him and go back to the mediocrity life holds for her. But precisely because she has seen the life of the grand opera and the riches of Kane, she cannot find happiness in it, and becomes a drinking night club dancer. Therefore, even though she says she feels sorry for him, she probably regrets ever having met him.

The last and shortest flashback sequence is the butler's, and it, again, is presented by an unreliable witness. He states that he heard Kane utter 'Rosebud' on his death bed, yet we have seen the room empty at the beginning. His asking money for information does not give any credence to his story, either. He is the least important of characters and only serves to tell of Kane's fit of rage after Susan's departure.

Of course, *Citizen Kane* also tells the life story of Mr Kane himself, of his rise and fall both as media tycoon and human being. Many interpretations, from the Freudian contemplations mentioned at the beginning to Kane's resemblance to the biblical Cain (with Leland as Abel, as McBride suggests), have been undertaken to analyse and define his life.⁵ Unfortunately, this has led to an overall critical approach much too focused on the single person of Kane, even though all three critics mentioned (Mulvey, McBride, and Kael) at various points refer to the multiple viewpoint narrative structure. Pauline Kael professes that "one is aware that the narrators are telling things they couldn't have witnessed", but dismisses it as "part of the convention" of the genre.⁶ McBride states that "what is on the screen at a given moment is not definitive but is part of a state of mind", but never makes the necessary connection to the importance of perspective.⁷ And even though Laura Mulvey comes closest, she follows her own conclusions in a different direction, offering symbolism and visual clues as the solution to unreliable witnesses.⁸

5 McBride, p. 51.

6 Pauline Kael, *Raising Kane* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2002), p. 94-95.

7 McBride, p. 39

8 Mulvey, p. 23.

Whenever a person tells us of another person, their telling is littered with personal judgements and reflections put on the life of the latter; it is a basic human function. Therefore, we ought to keep guard over what that first person says about the second, and realise that, in his or her subjective point of view, he or she tells us much more about himself or herself than the one he or she is talking about. Consequently, Leland, Susan, Thatcher, Bernstein, and the butler are not mirrors in which we can look to find and arrange pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that is Kane, but rather the opposite: Kane is a mirror in and through which those five characters see themselves and their own life stories. In telling us their accounts of Kane, they reveal their own weaknesses and shortcomings while struggling in vain to hide in the shadow of that public figure their own shame, rendering Charles Foster Kane a scapegoat and condemning him to a lonely death in his dreamland of Xanadu.

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