

THE TRANSGRESSIVE AMERICAN: DECODING *CITIZEN KANE*

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INTRODUCTION

The social sciences have not yet developed an adequate analysis of the film's relation to politics and culture. Propagandist uses of film for political purposes are well known since the advent of the cinema, but the readiness of film makers to apply machinations of power-hungry elites to the entertainment and manipulation of the masses has been little explored. The susceptibility of film, in contrast to other art forms, to exploitation as a weapon against traditional culture needs clarification. I will analyze the American film classic, *Citizen Kane*, as an esthetic objectification of contra motifs in contemporary western culture. First, emphasis on publicity and psychology leads to shallow understanding of social life. Second, the focus on esthetic performance and technique in this film implies impoverishment of culture. Third, there is systematic denial of the idea of forbidden knowledge.

PUBLICITY AND PSYCHOLOGY

It is an open secret since *Citizen Kane* first opened amid controversy, over 40 years ago, that the protagonist, Charles Foster Kane, played by Orson Welles, is a thinly disguised stand-in for the sensationalist news magnate and publisher, William Randolph Hearst. Kane was billed as "... the greatest newspaper tycoon of this or any other generation." (Kael 1971 100) Part of the film's popular appeal derives from application of journalistic techniques to the Kane/Hearst character in the same manner that Hearst sensationalized the lives of others. In the film, little remains hidden or private. Instead, the private merges with the public context, only to overpower and scandalize it. Kane enters newspaper publishing, not with a motive of profit or public service, but because he thinks that it might be "fun" to run a newspaper. He fails in politics due to a scandal with a mistress. His makes his second wife an "opera singer" because he imagines that he has power to create talent where none exists. All of this is valid in the context of the film, and the power of *Citizen Kane* as a cultural weapon turns on its capacity to make the viewer think the private and psychological fully explains the public and the social.

Film must be analyzed as a culturally subversive art form in its tendency to exploit the established tension between private desires and public ideals, and the higher and lower energies of the self, in favor of the private or lower side of our culturally defined nature. Film, like the romantic novel before it, relies on exploration of ambiguities in social and personal life for much of its attraction and power. But film is a much more public art form. It explores and exposes the undersides of society and personality in the social realm, and thus creates a complicity with the audience which cannot possibly exist among novel readers, except in a most abstract sense.

The novel derives from a culture of the printed word. Part of *Citizen Kane*'s brilliance resides in its pictorial description of the transition from an era of printed words to an era of moving pictures which Kane/Hearst helped initiate by using the printed word more to arouse than to inform. The transitional nature of the Kane/Hearst figure may be gleaned from the opening "News on the March" newsreel which records with stilted seriousness the life and death of *Charles Foster Kane*. The newsreel and the reporters almost certainly represent the Luce organization, displacing the Hearst empire as the most influential publishers in the United States. The reporters' decision to concentrate on Kane's dying word as the key to understanding his life marks the symbolic death of a culture in which the dying have something of importance to teach about the conduct of life.

Kane dies alone, muttering the word "Rosebud;" the manufacturer's trade name painted on a coaster sled, his plaything in boyhood. The word had private and psychological reference to his severance from his childhood home and family, particularly, his mother. The two images could not have been more antithetical. On one hand a great moral teacher offers insight into the conduct of life, even when dying; on the other a corrupt dying publicist mumbles a meaningless word.

Emphasis on the private in *Citizen Kane* logically enters the realm of psychology. Luce reporter Thompson simply does not dig deeply enough for his story. Like other characters, he

suspects that the term *Rosebud* is connected with a scandal. The film picks up where journalism fails, thereby delving more deeply into the private side of life.

Although depth psychology may offer the most shallow level of interpretation, the structure of the film encourages the viewer to think otherwise. By drawing the viewer into the search for the meaning of *Rosebud*, the film implies that Kane's quest for power, as expressed through his pursuits in business, politics, the arts, and his private life with family and friends, can best be explained by reference to the childhood incident when his mother sent him away for tutoring under the care of Thatcher, his guardian, and trustee of Kane's enormous estate. According to this popular reading, Kane's quest for power may be attributed to the psychological scar that he carries from childhood. Kane hurts others because he has been hurt. He does to others what others have done to him. He turns them into objects to be manipulated by his will.

Several *Citizen Kane* scenes depict Kane's inability to escape from his childhood trauma, and from childish patterns of behavior. The original hatred that Kane expresses as a child against Thatcher in thought and action when he struck him with his sled, continues to reveal itself. Decades later, Thatcher asked Kane: "what would you like to have been?" Kane replied: "Everything you hate." (Kael 1971 302) On a more abstract level, examples of childlike behavior are never clearly linked to the trauma. Kane says he feels like a kid in a candy store after buying away the staff of a rival newspaper. He impulsively buys art without regard to merit. He refuses to say that he is sorry after slapping his second wife in the tent scene. These examples suggest that psychology offers the deepest explanation of Kane's thought and action.

Yet Kane is not an isolated individual thinking and acting in a social vacuum. He may also be defined by his relation to society, by reference to his social and moral self. The psychological view of Kane offers only a partial explanation. Worse, it ignores the capacity of religion, politics, business, and other communal commitments to transform the psychological into a meaning entirely different. Marriage and friendship may transform a person's motives, helping to cure self-love.

Vocational commitment may provide a safe outlet for hatred and aggression. Politics can allow a socially controlled and beneficial quest for power. Patronage of the arts may refine the patron's sensibilities. Kane undergoes no such inner changes as a consequence of his communal commitments. In fact, it is his social and ultimately his moral failures that become lost in the film's focus on the determinative power of childhood character. *Citizen Kane* fails to convey adequately the alternative possibility, which only *begins* to open up through the character of Leland, that Kane cannot escape from his prison of self-love because he cannot change his basic self-interpretation. This is another way of denying the transformative power of communal commitments. The film does not reveal the hidden link between impulsive, infantile behavior patterns and moral failure.

CULTURE AS TECHNIQUE

Objections to what Orson Welles has called the "dollar-book Freud" gimmickry of the *Rosebud* theme are nothing new. One American film critic, Kael (1971) of *Citizen Kane* says that it simply does not work, and contends that it "... is not a work of special depth or a work of subtle beauty ... but a *shallow masterpiece*." Yet she clearly thinks that it is one of the finest American films, which qualifies as a masterpiece precisely because of its well executed shallowness. It is a triumph of technique and a mastery of showmanship by director-producer and starring actor Orson Welles. It dazzles the most critical and sophisticated of audiences.

Kael (1971 5) argues for the superiority of *Citizen Kane* on the basis of esthetic criteria, by which, I refer to modes of communication, to the shaping of sensation, rather than to what constitutes beauty, which represents a more recent understanding of the term. *Citizen Kane* ranks high esthetically not simply because of its use of innovative techniques, such as deep focus and fadeouts, but from the theatrics of Welles, who managed to create a popular masterpiece, "comic-strip tragic ... and overwrought in style." For Kael, *Citizen Kane* is an esthetic masterpiece primarily because it *works*, not because it produces understanding or insight.

To value efficacy while conveniently ignoring

illuminative aspects of culture accords well with the film's spirit, which devalues acts of interpretation and critical reflection in favor of immediate impact and response. Kane shares a similar view of culture. The hidden link between the newspaper age and the film age is not only emphasis on publicity, but also the view that ideas, images, and symbols which we call *culture* ultimately depend on function and utility rather than on meaning for their importance in human affairs.

In the context of the film, Kane's inability to believe in anything or anyone except himself illustrates well the problems associated with a purely instrumental "understanding" of the world. The newsreel segment in which Kane is accused of being a Fascist and a Communist before he declares himself to be an "American" underscores the utility-of-belief theme. What the Nazis, Fascists, Communists, and Americans all have in common, despite popular misconceptions, is the *absence* of fixed beliefs (Arendt 1973 476). Kane holds no traditional convictions or principles. His "Declaration of Principles" becomes an "antique" because as an American, he values performance instead of a highly developed sense of purpose.

Such a perspective squares entirely with the sensationalist journalist's cavalier attitude toward the truth, because in his world there is no truth, either factual or moral. Kane's paraphrase of the famous Hearst quip about "providing the war" in Cuba exemplifies his disregard for the factual truth, and his claim to be both a committed capitalist and a public crusader for the downtrodden demonstrates his contempt for moral truth.

The assumption that the world of ideas and images derives from instrumental uses implies a coercive view of culture, without moral order, in which the world becomes merely political and subject to those best able to manipulate symbols for their own ends. In this vein, Kane runs for political office, and relies on esthetic effect instead of a systematic set of beliefs. Politics is a matter of style and ceremony, bolstered by ideas understood as purely functional. Hence slogans prevail which do not really mean anything, but are calculated to arouse strong feeling and uncritical response. Kane understands his own public crusades as propaganda. If he did not, he might have to

admit that not all symbols are reducible to instruments of coercion.

DENIAL OF FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Like all films, *Citizen Kane* succeeds largely because it enchants audiences and draws them into a fantasy world. Technical effects abound. The film is melodramatic rather than dramatic. It applies popular formulas, such as the notion that the rich are lonely and unhappy, calculated to confirm the more typical viewer's pet illusions. But the fantasy world of *Citizen Kane* cuts more deeply because it tends to invert our common and accepted sense of character and culture. It implies that the individual is best understood *qua* individual, not as a social being. To suggest that culture is reducible to a war for power, holds the fantasy that personal and collective worlds must submit to no authority, and that human existence is infinitely malleable.

The history of western culture leads one to suspect that human nature and human culture incorporate safeguards which limit the freedom of humans to invert their world. Thus, every culture depends for survival on the idea of forbidden knowledge — that certain things cannot be done except at the cost of self-destruction. Following Philip Rieff (1972 98) I shall refer to these cultivated limitations as *interdictory motifs* and to exceptions to these interdicts as *remissions*. Interdictory motifs may coexist with the structure of reality, or they may be buried so deeply within us that we cannot escape them even as fantasies, particularly in the collective fantasy of a film.

The psychological and esthetic levels of *Citizen Kane* represent remissive motifs which obscure but do not eliminate the hidden interdictory structure of the film. *Rosebud* may be understood as a psychological reference to the idyllic home of Kane's childhood, or alternatively, as an esthetic reference to the life of self-realization and self-expression which he never achieves. But both understandings assume that what Kane's life lacks is possibility, and opportunity for change. The alternative to both understandings emphasizes not possibility but necessity, suggesting that *Rosebud* refers not to past or future life, but to the present life which Kane fails to recognize because of his rebellion against all self-limitation, and his preoccupation with

doing rather than *not doing*.

Kane remains a willful, destructive and self-immolating individual without the inwardness of character that the internalization of cultural limits would engender. Not even what the critic calls Orson Welles' "charming, wicked rapport with the audience" (Kael 1971 50) can disguise the transgressiveness of his actions. Kane's confrontation with the corrupt political boss offers a case in point. Even after it is clear that he will be ruined by scandal if he stays in politics, Kane refuses to quit, and consequently insures his own humiliation and the destruction of his family. Like a "professional magician," as his second wife, Susan Alexander, jokingly calls him, Kane values the effective performance, which is merely another method of getting one's way. On the rare occasions when Kane does not get his way, he becomes demented with rage. This is most spectacular in his fit of meaningless temper, triggered when Susan deserts him. The havoc he wreaks with the furnishings in the bedroom scene provides an image of what life would be like if we were completely uninhibited, and able to express everything.

Psychological understanding of Kane's drive for power, expressed in his pursuit of business, politics, the arts and his private life cannot sustain the interpretive weight of the filmic details of his life involvements. His expulsion from the Eden of his childhood is more myth than reality, because it too is the creation of his radical contemporary expression of journalistic imagination. This easily justifies his failure to recognize in any serious way that *not everything* is permitted, and that even the rich and the powerful must live in a world of interdicted possibilities. Kane recognizes no forbidden knowledge. Just as reporter Thompson thinks that he can crack the case of Kane's life by discovering the meaning of the publisher's dying word, Kane fantasizes that the real meaning of life is trapped in the artificial past of his glass snowball, which he cannot recapture. He likes to imagine that even if he had not been rich, he could have become a great man.

CONCLUSION

Kane is best understood in terms of form rather than content, and in style rather than in psychology or economics. He is a breaker of cultural interdicts, where the enchantment with generating news destroys any ethic of newspaper responsibility. He is both capitalist landlord and public crusader for the downtrodden who recognizes no conflict of interest. He is a transgressor against binding commitments of family and friendship. As one of Toqueville's defaulted democratic citizens exercising privilege without responsibility, Kane retreats into his private fantasy, complete with "No Trespass" signs, and thus externalizes his failure to internalize any cultured limits.

Kane is an archetypal transgressive American because his symbolic offerings to everything that is not himself, like the Cain of old, are merely masks for his own elaborate self-aggrandizements. No binding tradition, no inhibiting guilt feelings, no constraining ethic restricts his disarming boldness or thought and action. He lives in no moral universe. The psychological scars, which supposedly prepare for the abuse of economic privilege, political failure, and social misfortune, do not reduce a young man's charm to an old man's loneliness. Rather, repeated infractions of cultural interdicts, and institutionalized trespassing cause the very problems that Kane uses as excuses. It is precisely this reading of social and personal life that the film systematically obscures.

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