



MYSTERY · DRAMA

Citizen Kane

1941 · Directed by Orson Welles

Classical Hollywood

Auteur Cinema

Melodrama

A powerful newspaper publisher dies alone in a vast mansion, leaving a single word on his lips. A reporter is sent to learn what it meant, and pieces together the man from the people who knew him, each telling a different story.

DIRECTOR Orson Welles

YEAR 1941

RUNTIME 1h 59m (119 min)

COUNTRY USA

GENRES Mystery, Drama

CAST Orson Welles, Joseph Cotten, Dorothy Comingore, Ray Collins, George Coulouris

MUSIC Bernard Herrmann

IMDB 8.2 / 10 (491,492 votes)

ROTTEN
TOMATOES 99% (critics)

METACRITIC 100 / 100

TMDB SCORE 8.0 / 10 (6,253 votes)

WHERE TO
WATCH Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home,
Spectrum On Demand
Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 A 25-year-old's first feature that rewrote the rulebook

Orson Welles directed, co-wrote and starred in his debut film. It is the most celebrated example of a Hollywood studio film reinventing its own storytelling, from structure to image to sound.

2 A life told as a puzzle, not a timeline

The film assembles one man from clashing accounts, newsreel and memory. It makes the viewer an active investigator, and shows how biography on screen could be subjective and incomplete.

3 Every shot is designed to be read

Deep focus, extreme low angles, long takes and overlapping dialogue make the frame itself a source of meaning. It is a masterclass you can watch for craft alone.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of the Hollywood studio era at its most ambitious, and the work that modern cinema most often treats as the point where American film showed how formally daring it could be.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a trial of a man's character in which no witness is fully reliable, and notice how the visuals comment on each one.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often foreground and background are both sharp, and how characters placed at different depths in one shot tell you about power and distance.
- The camera angles: many shots look up from the floor, and you can often see ceilings that earlier films would have left out.
- How scenes begin and end, with transitions through dissolves, sound bridges and overlapping speech instead of simple cuts.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

If everyone who knew one man tells a different story, what would it take to say you actually knew him?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** Welles arrived at RKO in 1939 with a rare contract giving him creative control, after fame in theatre and radio. Studio films were normally shaped by producers and house style.
- **Technology:** Cinematographer Gregg Toland pushed deep focus, keeping foreground and background sharp together, using faster film stock and powerful lighting. Sound was recorded with radio-style layering borrowed from Welles's Mercury Theatre broadcasts.
- **Dominant styles:** Hollywood favoured clear, linear storytelling, continuity editing and evenly lit sets. The biopic usually moved chronologically and treated its subject with admiration.
- **Context:** The central figure was widely understood to echo newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, whose papers fought the film and pressured the industry, shaping its troubled release.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

MOVEMENT

German Expressionism

Stark shadows, tilted authority and psychologically charged sets echo the Expressionist tradition, filtered through Hollywood lighting.



TRADITION

The March of Time newsreels

The film's opening newsreel parodies this dramatic, authoritative style of news reporting, which Welles used to summarise a life before questioning it.



FILM

Stagecoach (1939)

Welles is reported to have studied John Ford's film closely for its staging and use of space, and the low-angle ceilings of Kane echo that interest.



THIS FILM

Citizen Kane (1941)

NEW AT THE TIME *It broke chronology into overlapping subjective accounts while treating composition, lighting, ceilings, sound and editing as storytelling tools all at once.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in 1940–41 as war raged in Europe and America debated joining it, by a 25-year-old newcomer given unusual freedom by a Hollywood studio.

- **Country and moment:** The US was emerging from the Depression while Europe was at war. Isolationists and interventionists argued fiercely, and the press and radio shaped that debate. Powerful media owners were a live public concern.

- **Politics and press power:** The title character was widely seen as modelled on publisher William Randolph Hearst. Hearst's newspapers attacked the film and pressured the industry and exhibitors, which limited its release and its box-office returns.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Welles was famous from stage work and the 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*. RKO gave him an unusually generous contract, including final cut, for his first feature. Few directors had that much control.
- **Society and audience:** Audiences in 1941 were drawn to a story of wealth and ambition, shown through a rich man's public image. Many found the film's style unfamiliar, and it did only modest business at first.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Brisk and dense at first, then more deliberate. Information arrives quickly, so attention in the opening ten minutes pays off.
- **Structure:** Told through flashbacks from several narrators, jumping across decades rather than running in order.
- **Style:** Theatrical and stylised: dramatic shadows, striking angles, rapid-fire overlapping dialogue and a mix of newsreel and drama.
- **Performance:** Large, stagey and precise. Welles plays Kane from his twenties to old age through voice, posture and makeup.
- **Format:** Black and white, 1.37:1 Academy ratio, English, 119 minutes. Sound and image are rich enough to reward a good screen and volume.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

10+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from GB U and FR TP to DE 12 and US PG/NR; 10 suits a calm, talky black-and-white drama whose themes and pace suit older children.

Official ratings: US PG/NR · UK U · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** Older children curious about how films are made may enjoy the inventive camerawork, dramatic lighting and puzzle-like structure. It is a good film to watch together and discuss.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Dialogue-heavy, with overlapping time periods and many characters. Younger children may lose the thread or become restless over nearly two hours.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Adult relationships, ambition, power and money are central. Emotional conflict is mostly spoken rather than shown, but the tone is often cold and sad.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Some period attitudes, especially in how women and relationships are portrayed, reflect the 1940s.
- **Explain first:** It is a black-and-white film from 1941, and it jumps back and forth in time as different people tell their memories.
- **Explain first:** The story is about a powerful newspaper owner, so it helps to know that newspapers once shaped public opinion.

Talk about it after: *Why do you think the film shows its main character through several different people's memories rather than one narrator? How did that change what you thought of him?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film explores how impossible it is to reduce a life to a single explanation. It can be read as a study of how wealth and power can fill a man's world while leaving something essential missing, and of how biography always misses the person.

THEMES

- **The unknowability of a person:** Each narrator offers a partial portrait shaped by their own interests and regrets. The film suggests no single word or account can explain a human being.
- **Power and its corruption:** Kane begins as a crusading idealist and ends controlling people the way he controls his papers. Money lets him buy everything except genuine affection.
- **Loss and lost childhood:** The film can be read as tracing adult grasping back to an early separation, with possession used as a substitute for love.
- **Media and image-making:** Kane shapes public opinion with headlines and spectacle, and the film itself opens with a newsreel that flattens him into a summary.
- **Memory and subjectivity:** Recollection is selective and self-serving. The film's style shifts with each narrator, making perspective itself a subject.

Key scenes

The newsreel obituary

It gives the whole life in a few minutes and then declares it insufficient. That sets up the film's argument that facts are not understanding, and it parodies a real newsreel form.

The breakfast table montage

Years of marriage pass in a series of quick scenes linked by swish pans and costume changes. The distance between the couple grows with the table, compressing a decay into minutes.

Susan's opera debut

A camera rises high above the stage to the stagehands, who comment on the performance. The shot shows the ordeal from a perspective no character shares, and exposes Kane's pressure with devastating economy.

The final tracking shot through Xanadu

The camera moves across a mountain of collected objects, turning the mansion into a portrait of obsessive acquisition. It gives the audience knowledge that the investigators lack, and leaves the answer a matter of interpretation.

Filmmaking

- **Cinematography:** Gregg Toland's deep focus keeps several planes sharp, so one frame can show a child at play, a mother and a guardian signing an agreement. Space becomes a way to show who holds control.
- **Low angles and sets:** Ceilings were built into sets, allowing low camera positions that make Kane loom or appear trapped. Shadow and scale suggest a man isolated inside his own power.
- **Editing:** Robert Wise's cutting uses dissolves, montage and sound bridges so scenes, years and narrators link smoothly. Transitions often carry meaning, not just continuity.
- **Sound and music:** Radio training shaped overlapping lines, echoing halls and voices that carry across cuts. Bernard Herrmann's first film score builds mood through short themes and varied orchestration.
- **Writing and structure:** Herman J. Mankiewicz and Welles wrote a multi-narrator structure where each account covers a different period. Credit for the script has long been debated, though both shared the Oscar.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

The film opens with newspaper tycoon Charles Foster Kane dying in Xanadu, his enormous estate, whispering the word Rosebud. A newsreel summarises his life as an influential, controversial publisher, but its editor wants to know what the last word meant. Reporter Jerry Thompson is sent to find out.

Thompson interviews the people who knew Kane. Through the memoir of banker Walter Thatcher, we see Kane as a boy sent away by his mother to be raised by a guardian. Kane's friend Jedediah Leland and business manager Bernstein recall his rise: taking over the Inquirer, pursuing a crusade against corruption, and marrying a president's niece.

As Kane's ambition grows, his first marriage fades. His political campaign for governor is destroyed when his rival, Boss Gettys, exposes his affair with Susan Alexander. Kane marries Susan and forces her into an opera career for which she lacks talent, then keeps her virtually imprisoned at Xanadu. She eventually leaves him. Leland, who has broken with Kane, remembers him as someone who loved only on his own terms.

Thompson never discovers the meaning of Rosebud and concludes that no single word could explain a man. In Xanadu, workers sorting Kane's belongings throw a child's sled into a furnace. The audience sees its painted name, Rosebud, as it burns.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Welles's unusual contract:** After the 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* made him famous, Welles was offered a rare RKO deal with creative control, including final cut. It is a key reason the film is so personal and uncompromising.
- **Toland and the crew:** Welles later credited cinematographer Gregg Toland generously, even sharing a title card. Many cast members came from his Mercury Theatre company, which helped create the fluid, theatrical ensemble work on screen.

- **Hearst's campaign:** Hearst's newspapers attacked the film and refused to carry its advertising, and pressure on theatres limited its release. The film lost money at first despite strong reviews and a run of Oscar nominations.
- **The screenplay dispute:** Herman J. Mankiewicz wrote the first drafts, and Welles heavily revised them. The Writers' credit was shared, and the exact balance of authorship is still argued by historians.
- **Myth:** Welles invented deep focus for this film. **Reality:** Deep focus had been used before, including by Toland himself. What was new was how thoroughly and expressively the film built its visual style around it.
- **Myth:** The film was ignored or hated on release and only later admired. **Reality:** Many critics praised it in 1941 and it earned nine Oscar nominations. It struggled commercially, and its reputation grew more strongly in later decades, especially after postwar rediscovery.
- **Myth:** Welles wrote the screenplay entirely alone. **Reality:** Herman J. Mankiewicz wrote the first draft and shared the Academy Award with Welles. The extent of each man's contribution remains debated.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

MOVEMENT

German Expressionism

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TRADITION

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THIS FILM

Citizen Kane (1941)



MOVEMENT

Film noir

Its shadows, flashback narration and morally compromised protagonist fed into the dark visual and narrative style of 1940s crime films.



FILM

The Godfather (1972)

Gordon Willis's dark, top-lit interiors and the film's portrait of power and family corruption owe a clear debt to Kane's design.



MOVEMENT

French New Wave

Critics like Bazin championed Welles's long takes and deep focus, and young filmmakers took from him the idea of a director's personal style.

Reception and reputation

Many critics admired it as a bold, inventive work, and it received nine Oscar nominations. Hearst's papers attacked it and some theatres avoided it, so box-office returns were disappointing. At the Academy Awards it won only for screenplay, and the film's audience was smaller than its acclaim suggested.

After the war it was revived, especially by French critics and later by television and repertory screenings, and it grew into the standard example of a landmark of film art. Its reputation is now so large that the challenge is seeing past it to the human story and its flaws.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 9 nominations, 1 win (Best Original Screenplay, Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles). Nominated for Best Picture, Actor, Director, Cinematography, Editing, Art Direction, Sound and Score.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Rosebud as shorthand:** "Rosebud" became a byword for a story's final secret or a person's hidden motive. Spoiling the sled reveal is a familiar joke, and the word turns up in countless parodies and references on television and elsewhere.
- **Hearst and media power:** The film's thinly veiled portrait of William Randolph Hearst made Kane a lasting emblem of the press baron and of wealth and political ambition mixing. The story is retold in the documentary *The Battle Over Citizen Kane* and the HBO film *RKO 281*.
- **Parody and homage:** The Simpsons, with Mr. Burns and its "Rosebud" gags, and other TV comedies have borrowed its imagery. The Kane-style newsreel, the cavernous Xanadu and the long breakfast-table montage are among the references that viewers recognise.
- **Welles and Mank:** The making of the film became a subject in its own right, with Welles as the boy-wonder genius undone by his debut. The authorship dispute with Herman Mankiewicz inspired David Fincher's *Mank* (2020).

Its lasting influence

Its deep-focus compositions, low-angle shadows and fractured storytelling shaped film noir, later auteur cinema and critics such as André Bazin. The idea of a life reconstructed from conflicting testimony recurs in films from Rashomon-style dramas to modern biopics.

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WHAT NEXT?**COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH****The Rules of the Game (1939)**

Another ambitious film often set beside Kane, using deep focus and long takes in a very different European social satire.

FOLLOW THE IDEA**Rashomon (1950)**

Where Kane offers partial accounts of one man, Rashomon builds a whole story from contradictory testimonies about a single event.

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR**The Magnificent Ambersons (1942) **COMING SOON****

Welles's second film continues his visual ambition, though it was cut and altered by the studio, which makes it a lesson in what control means.

SEE ITS INFLUENCE

The Godfather (1972)

A later American epic of power and family that shows Kane's lighting, structure and tragic ambition in a new form.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Double Indemnity (1944)

A prime example of the shadowed, voiceover-driven Hollywood style that Kane helped open the way to.

FULL CAST AND CREW

**Orson Welles**

DIRECTOR · ACTOR

as Charles Foster Kane

**Joseph Cotten**

ACTOR

as Jedediah Leland

**Dorothy Comingore**

ACTOR

as Susan Alexander Kane

**Ray Collins**

ACTOR

as Jim W. Gettys

**George Coulouris**

ACTOR

as Walter Parks Thatcher

**Bernard Herrmann**

COMPOSER

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