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CURRICULUM

This teaching guide has three curriculum objectives:

- To help students and teachers using films and videos in the context of the following secondary school curriculum – English Language Arts, Film and Media Studies, Social Studies, and Visual Arts
- To assist educators who are planning to teach films studies for the first time
- To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text

CITIZEN KANE Orson Welles, 1941

Regularly at the top of critics' surveys of the greatest films ever made, *Citizen Kane* still seems remarkable today. Director Orson Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland brought together the best elements of the sound film until that point in film history and exploited each in creating a devastating study of ambition, power, and the American dream.

The film opens with an unforgettable scene: the camera is at the forbidding gates of Xanadu, tarnished under low key lighting, which hangs a cloak over the entrance; from here, we pan past the outside walls and then into Kane's oversized mansion; once inside, the camera takes us into a room, finally coming to rest on the dying figure of Charles Foster Kane just as he utters his last word, Rosebud, and passes from this world. From here the film becomes an investigation of a citizen – Kane in the film, but newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst by any other name – under suspicion of having soured the American dream. The imagery, use of sound, and intricate plot design make the film a masterpiece that "gets better with each renewed acquaintance" (*Time Out*).

Note: Classroom activities are provided after each section along with an answer key at the end of the guide. Answers are not provided for all activities as some questions depend on teachers to choose films they are already working with in their classes.

Preview Questions

1. Watch the opening sequence of *Citizen Kane* to the point where we hear Charles Foster Kane mumble Rosebud, just as he dies. Stop the film here. What do you think this movie will be about? What genre is it part of? Are you interested in the film thus far?
2. Now fast-forward to the end of the film. Watch the credit sequence where we see clips of various characters in the film. Watching this sequence, are your expectations of the film different? Can you guess what role any of these characters may play in the movie?

Post-Viewing Questions

Keep the following questions in mind as you watch the film, and when you have finished viewing it, discuss them as a class:

1. Discuss the significance of Charles Foster Kane's last words.
2. What is the purpose of the newsreel obituary of Citizen Kane?
3. Can you think of any reasons to explain why the plot is structured so that a reporter is trying to discover the real Citizen Kane?

CITIZEN KANE AND AMERICAN CINEMA

Citizen Kane (1941) was the first fully realized sound film made in Hollywood. Before 1941, Hollywood movies had of course used sound, but never before had all the elements in a film been wed together so successfully. In *Citizen Kane*, the sound, lighting, camera work, and narrative are all rich and complex, making it seem like the first movie to truly exploit all the tools filmmakers have to work with. It is as though Orson Welles' directorial debut realizes the potential of moviemaking for the first time and by doing this, forever changes how we judge movies and what we expect from the silver screen.

Today, when watching *Citizen Kane*, reactions are likely to be mixed. Some audiences immediately respond positively to the world of Charles Foster Kane and the power of Welles' cinema. Other audiences, particularly younger audiences, may not. Most recently, in 1998 the American Film Institute again recognized *Citizen Kane* as the best film of all time. But even with these kinds of accolades, which have been awarded to *Kane* time and time again since the 1960s, it is not always easy to love this film on first viewing. Because of this, one way to give younger audiences an "entrance" into the film is to screen a movie like Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a movie that owes a great deal to *Citizen Kane* but is set in an era closer to that of contemporary audiences.

In the 1940s, *Kane* did change the landscape of motion pictures, but the question remains:

What sets *Citizen Kane* apart?

For one thing, it manages to bring together a remarkably intricate plot with a complex and layered visual style and a powerful soundtrack. It is a tragic tale about ambition, greed, and the American dream in which we find the very embodiment of the American cinema. Like many Hollywood movies, it is a fine example of film craftsmanship, filled with brilliantly executed scenes and stunning photography by cinematographer Gregg Toland. The story centres on a monumental and all-too-American figure, Charles Foster Kane, who begins life in poverty and through good fortune becomes a powerful press baron. And at its core, *Citizen Kane* is ultimately about the desire for self-invention, a profoundly American theme that highlights the power of self-creation. All in all, the film is so tightly wed to the American cinema and America's vision of itself that Orson Welles and co-script writer Herman Mankiewicz initially titled the film simply *The American*, only to later change the title to *Citizen Kane* once shooting began.

Orson Welles

If the links between *Citizen Kane* and America's self-definition are some of the elements that set this film apart, director Orson Welles' bigger-than-life personality also distinguishes *Kane* in the annals of film history.

Remarkably, *Citizen Kane* was Welles' first feature-length film. Outside of the world of theatre, where his Mercury Players theatre company was popular, Welles was best known in America as the man responsible for creating a nation-wide panic on October 30, 1938. His pseudo-documentary broadcast of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* convinced unwitting listeners that aliens were invading the earth, causing thousands to run screaming from their homes into the streets.

Shortly after the *War of the Worlds* deception, Welles arrived in Hollywood to work with RKO, one of the smaller, financially troubled movie studios, on the promise that he would be able to control all of the production decisions for his first six films. Ultimately, this control never came to pass, in large part because *Citizen Kane*, as well as Welles' next two films (*The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942, and *Journey into Fear*, 1943) were commercial failures. Both *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* would eventually make money, but the problem is as writer Kenneth Tynan once noted, Welles' films are "long-distance runners in a system dedicated to sprinters." It should also be noted that some of the commercial troubles faced by *Citizen Kane* had less to do with the movie and more to do with the press baron William Randolph Hearst and his reaction to the film.

As many observers have noted, *Citizen Kane* is a thinly veiled allegory about the life of press baron William Randolph Hearst, a complicated figure who so despised the movie that he tried to have it banned in 1941. When this failed, he used all his power to limit its distribution in theatres.

Hearst's efforts did not entirely succeed, but he was remarkably influential in limiting the number of theatres who would dare to show the film. In some cases, Hearst's power was such that theatres would book *Citizen Kane* from RKO, and simply hold the print for weeks without actually screening it.

If initial audiences reacted poorly to *Citizen Kane*, or had a difficult time seeing it in theatres, critics and other filmmakers since the early 1940s have recognized Welles as a special kind of artist. Welles was an *auteur*, a filmmaker with a very clear sense of the artistic potential of his medium who created significant movies under the guise of Hollywood productions. Throughout his career, Welles would become a symbol of the misunderstood but determined artist, working to create his own vision in a Hollywood studio system where the primary objective was, and is, profit.

activity 01

*Research the press baron William Randolph Hearst. Who was he? What elements of his life correspond to the story in *Citizen Kane*? Why do you think he disliked the film so vehemently?*

activity 02

Think of a current film you have seen recently that you liked and consider great but which has received either little attention or mostly negative criticism. Describe the movie and detail specific elements you like in it. Also outline why you believe this movie was ignored or received badly by other film critics.