



## Camden Council Library Services – Movie Club

### Citizen Kane (1941)

#### Discussion Questions

1. Some critics at the time of release felt that the structure was “entirely out of place... Of course I understand that Kane having been a newspaper publisher, Welles treated his death from a newspaper angle in short staccato flashes. I do not object to that, but I do object to his beginning with Kane's death. Far be it from me to rewrite the story but I do believe that the story might have been so arranged that Kane's death could have been shown in the old traditional way — at the end (Stroheim, [Citizen Kane \[Review\]](#), 1941). How do you feel about the film's narrative structure? We have looked at non-linear films before ([Pulp Fiction](#)). How do you feel it compares? Is this structure “out of place” or is it appropriate for the story and the character? Does the structure give the film more meaning?
2. “Welles’ classic belongs to no specific genre, but operates like genre films by tapping mythic resonances and shaping them to dramatic ends... It was as if this stranger to Hollywood, child of New York theatre and radio, had viewed objectively all the various strands of film technique of thirties Hollywood and woven them all together. His notorious ego, which he exerted as cowriter, producer, director, and star, also makes Welles’ film a prime example of auteurship.” (Monaco, *How to Read a Film: movies, media, and beyond: art, technology, language, history, theory* [Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, c2009], p.334). Do you agree with this assertion that the film mixes different genres? What film genres can you see in the film? How authentically are these used? What effect does this have on the narrative and meaning of the film?
3. As well as the unique approach to narrative, the film also had many technical achievements. It has clever dialogue, a solid cast (comprised of the players of the Mercury Theatre, with whom Welles’ worked in New York) and, most notably, striking cinematography. This later point has three elements: its play of light and shadow; its framing; and finally the use of deep focus that allows images in the background to be as clear (and therefore as significant) as what exists in the foreground. This was newly innovated while filming *Citizen Kane*. Are these technical innovations still apparent today? Has the style in anyway dated?
4. Contemporaneous critics had problems with the character. One complained that “at the end Kubla Kane is still an enigma—a very confusing one”, concluding that “the less critical will probably be content with an undefined Kane, anyhow. After all, nobody understood him. Why should Mr Welles?” (Crowther, [Citizen Kane \[Review\]](#), 1941). Another felt “the

laboratory analysis — under the microscope — of Citizen Kane's heart and soul has been forgotten” and that, with the exception of the singular Rosebud “there is not one touch in the film that would tend to make Kane human and understandable” (Stroheim, [Citizen Kane \[Review\]](#), 1941). But this was not universal, with another stating that “sympathy for the preposterous Mr Kane survives” (Mosher, “Childe Orson”, 1941 in *The New Yorker Book of the 40s: Story of a Decade*, [London: England William Heinemann, 2014], p.501). Are we meant to understand Kane? Does the film set out to present him in full detail with all of his life experiences, or are we, at the mercy of accounts of several people, meant to continue to be mystified by this figure? Is Kane a believable or a preposterous character? Is he meant to be?

5. “It is widely thought that what finally characterises American literary narratives is a preoccupation with Americanness” (Carringer, [Citizen Kane, The Great Gatsby, and Some Conventions of American Narrative](#), 1975). An earlier version of the script was originally titled *American*. Had the title remained, would you view the film differently? In what sense, if any, is Citizen Kane preoccupied with Americanness? To what extent is Kane an ‘American’ and how representative is he of fellow citizens? Think about things such as Kane’s luring of staff from a rival newspaper, his ‘making’ of Susan’s career, or his near obsessiveness in collecting European artefacts culminating in his building Xanadu both as a repository and extension of these treasures. Do films and literatures from other countries have similar tendencies? If so, how?
6. What is the meaning of Rosebud? The final scene reveals to what it refers, but just because “it explains what Rosebud is” does not mean it explains “what Rosebud means” (Ebert, [Citizen Kane \[Review\]](#), 1998). Is it simply “the emblem of the security, hope and innocence of childhood, which a man can spend his life seeking to regain” or is it, as Thompson concludes in the Xanadu warehouse, like Kane himself, incapable of being explained by words (“I don't think any word can explain a man's life”)?
7. Is Citizen Kane the greatest (or one of the greatest) film(s) ever made? It has been highly regarded over the last fifty years, appearing, until 2012, at number one of the British Film Institute’s [Sight and Sound Poll](#), when it was placed second behind Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (Rushfield, [Citizen Kane v. Vertigo: Why Kane fell in the Sight and Sound Poll](#), 2012). We saw with [The Searchers](#) that films once hailed as masterpieces have receive considerable criticism, particularly in the last decade. Is it, given the virtuosity of its narrative and cinematic accomplishments, deserving of its status? Or do you feel that it is a film “whose historical value is undeniable but which no one cares to see again” (Borges, [An Overwhelming Film](#), 1941)?