Citizen Kane: Crash Course Film Criticism #1

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=qk0-m_LARCY
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Hello! As you might have noticed, I'm not Craig or Lily. My name is Michael Aranda and I'll be your host for the last third of CrashCourse Film. Now, since we're getting to know each other, let me ask you a question: What's your favourite film?

Maybe there's a film that makes you want to get fit, or become a spy, or save the world, or maybe you anything Zoe Saldana is in, because she's just the coolest.

Films can have an awesome story or sloppy lighting, dazzling special effects or characters who are just straight up stereotypes. All of these things affect how you would feel about a movie, or whether you would give it a thumbs up on Netflix, because that's a thing now. But, they can also affect how it fits into cinema history, and impacts the world around us.

We'll think critically about a lot of different movies, starting with an American classic that many call "the greatest film ever made." It came from ambition, and some unusual circumstances with Orson Welles at the helm. And, even though it's been a long time since it's release in 1941, the film's technical cleverness and story still resonate with audiences today.
I am talking, of course, about *Citizen Kane*.

[Intro Music]

Calling *Citizen Kane* one of the best films of all time is a complicated claim to make. To be honest, the idea of ranking movies and making a top ten list may be fun, but it's not what film criticism is really about. It's about thinking deeply about how the movie works, both to us as an audience member, and within history and society. It's about understanding, deconstructing, feeling, and learning. So, is *Citizen Kane* the greatest movie ever made? Well, we can't answer that, because that's not the question we should be asking. But, there's clearly something about it that sticks with us, and maybe that something is its origin story. Orson Welles was hoisted into the spotlight at the ripe, young age of 23, when he was performing with the Mercury Theatre Company, a troupe that he helped create. In 1938, Welles directed and narrated the radio drama, *The War of the Worlds,* and, supposedly, struck fear in some listeners that thought that an actual alien invasion was happening.

[Excert of *The War of the World,* Narrated by Orson Welles] "We know now that in the early years of the twentieth century this world was being watched closely by intelligences greater than man's"

But, he also caught the attention studio execs at RKO, one of the 5 film studios that reigned during the golden age of Hollywood. Not only that, but they gave him complete creative control, which was like, really unusual at the time. So, he did what any plucky artist in his mid-20s would do, he packed up his stuff and invited his buddies from the Mercury Theatre Company to come with him to Hollywood. Now, I don't want to sell them short, this was a group of very good actors, and despite his lack of experience with the movie industry, Welles leapt into this project with a lot of ambition, performing experience, and fresh ideas. He wanted to be involved with as many aspects of the film as possible, from directing to starring as the films eponymous Charles Foster Kane. Welles filled out his production team with other talented men from Hollywood who were itching to experiment with their craft. People like Gregg Toland, a cameraman who contributed a lot to the film's look and technical innovations. And, Welles has credited his co-writer with Herman J. Mankiewicz, a journalist who hopped over to the world of filmmaking and was an experienced screenwriter by the time he worked on this project.

Citizen Kane tells the life story of a wealthy newspaper magnet. The first time we meet Kane, he's on his deathbed in a massive mansion, called Xanadu, dramatically murmuring his last word.

[Excert of *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles as Kane] "Rosebud."

The story is told in flashbacks through interviews with people Kane once knew, like his friend and fellow reporter, Jedediah Leland, his business manager, Mr. Bernstein, and his second wife, Susan Alexander Kane. In the last sequence of shots, we find out that "rosebud" is referencing a sled he had as a kid before he was separated from his family and sent to boarding school with a new guardian.

So, *Citizen Kane* could be a story about, well, a lot of things; a loss of childhood, human flaws, memory, or the complications of power and wealth. Film criticism is pretty subjective. But, *Citizen Kane* is also a story that was influenced by real life, specifically tycoons like the news mogul, William Randolph Hearst. While Welles insisted that the film wasn't meant to be a personal attack on Hearst, all of the parallels and the fact that Mankiewicz was a former friend of Hearst, made him take the film real personally. And, when you have a butt-load of money and power over lots of news outlets, your grudges become public, fast. Initially, RKO and Orson Welles planned on debuting *Citizen Kane* at the Radio City Music Hall, like other big RKO movies, but the venue turned it down. Eventually the films release was delayed until May 1st, 1941 in New York, and the critical reception was actually pretty good. A review by Kate Cameron, published on May 2nd in the New York Daily News, called *Citizen Kane*, "one of the most interesting and technically superior films that has ever come out of a Hollywood studio." The controversy did mess with the films commercial success, though. It didn't gain much public traction until it was released again in the 1950s.

So, part of what makes *Citizen Kane* memorable is that is was an ambitious project headed by a maverick filmmaker, and had a lot of drama around its release. We humans do love ourselves some drama. But, the content of the film speaks for itself, too. The creators of *Citizen Kane* had the freedom to play and innovate. Many of their technical experiments changed the way film was being used as a storytelling medium-- which, arguably, could be another way to define "greatness." It takes a keen eye to notice some of these tricks, or, at the very least, some good commentary tracks. A lot of the innovation had to do with cameras. Gregg Toland, the cinematographer, helped pioneer the use of deep-focused lenses so that everything in a scene is in-focus at once, not just the foreground or the background. *Citizen Kane* doesn't use focus to guide your attention in a scene, instead things like dialogue or movement draw your eye to certain people at certain times. It's very much like theater, where Welles had honed his directing and acting chops. They use perspective to surprise you, like to mess with your sense of scale when Kane walks toward a normal-looking background, only to be dwarfed by a huge window or fireplace. It's a neat visual effect, but it also punctuates the story with a little metaphor; you're seeing this man physically shrink into his environment as he's losing control over his business and life.

And, camera movements are combined with other practical effects to really immerse you in the story. Take the scene where Kane is a kid playing in the snow, where his parents are inside a cabin and talking about sending him away. The camera pulls back through a window, and eventually stops on the other side of a dining table. But, from the final framing, you can see that the table would've been in the way of the movement. The trick is in the set. It's actually a mechanical table that splits and comes back together. So the mise-en-scene is never broken, and the scene can keep playing out. You, the viewer, are none the wiser, because you're wrapped up in the incredible illusion of the reality the film has constructed. Other

practical tricks are used in The Inquirer office, where Kane's newspaper staff works. These scenes were unusual for movies at the time, because there are visible ceilings. Now, this doesn't sound that weird, because, you know, normal office buildings have ceilings. But, production teams usually stuck lights and sound equipment above their actors' heads. So, to keep the movie magic intact, they had to keep ceilings out of frame. In this case, the lights and microphones are still up there-- just, hidden right above the ceilings, which are made of muslin sheets. They also cut out chunks of the floor to make room for the camera, so they could get dramatic, low-angle shots, making the actors look larger than life.

The trick to *Citizen Kane* is that all these effects, which are everywhere, don't feel like effects in the same way a CGI dragon does. They subtly draw you into the world. For instance, Welles often blends matte drawings with physical sets to make everything seem more immersive, despite a limited budget. This is how they create the beginning of the film, leading us toward the window of Xanadu and Kane's deathbed. Plus, it's how they make the inside of Xanadus, the outside of The Inquirer building, and the audiences during the big campaign speech and opera. These tricks were accomplished with optical printers, which let them shoot and light two images or scenes separately and stitch them into one. Effects also let them add visual twists to the story, in ways Welles couldn't with live theatre; like, when Susan Alexander is performing in the opera, we crane up from the stage and fade into the rafters to see the opera's production team reacting to how awful her performance is. The transition is precise and deliberate, and nowhere near as easy as dropping a fade into a digital video editor today.

Now, maybe you noticed some of these technical tricks, but they're done well and not obvious unless you're paying close attention. And, that's one of the coolest things about good filmmaking. But, a lot of the time, what makes our favorite movies so memorable is just a well-told story, and if you think about it, *Citizen Kane* doesn't really have a mind-blowing plot. It's a straightforward tale about a powerful, wealthy newspaper tycoon and his shortcomings, and the dialogue is all pretty crisp and generic. You get a newsreel summary of Kane's life at the beginning, but it's mostly told through flashbacks, and they're part of what makes the film feel so true to life. And, even though it's easy to link Charles Foster Kane with William Randolph Hearst, this archetype of a driven, powerful jerk who just wants people to love him is pretty relatable to a lot of us-- even Welles himself.

So, you might see things you like and hate about yourself in Kane, or Susan Alexander's naive optimism, or Jedediah Leland and his disillusionment with a friend. Honestly, the fact that it's his childhood sled isn't the most profound or surprising twist out there. It's not like there are hidden identities or "I see dead people." But, you have to admit, the film goes all-in on the idea of lost childhood. Kane drowns his feelings in material objects and tries to live vicariously through Susan Alexander's youth, telling her, "we're going to be a great opera star." Or, maybe you agree with the film critic Pauline Kael that the sled in just kinda gimmicky. But, critics, including her, don't call *Citizen Kane* great, because it makes you realize profound things about life, the universe, and everything. Every scene isn't a masterpiece, but the film holds up over time and people seem to a lot out of it-- historically, technically, or narratively. And, like I mentioned before, the whole idea of the best film of all time is ultimately kind of silly. It's more about understanding why and how we make movies that mean so much to us or to the world; and, that is pretty beautiful in itself.

Next time, we'll take a hard left turn into an action, adventure, horror film that's almost as quotable as Casablance: James Cameron's, *Aliens.* And, if you want to watch along with us, there's a full list of movies in the description.

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This episode of CrashCourse was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney CrashCourse Studio, with the help of these nice people and our amazing graphics team is Thought Cafe.

[Outro Music]