

American film history 1930-60

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The chief technological innovation during the 1930s was the development of deep focus cinematography. Deep focus involved the expansion of depth of field, resulting in images that maintained sharp focus from objects in the extreme foreground to those in the distant background. Deep focus was achieved by filming with extremely wideangled lenses whose apertures had been stopped down. This sort of cinematography was made possible by a variety of developments in related fields of filmtechnology.

In 1939 the introduction of lens coatings, which permitted 75 per cent more light to pass through the lens to the film inside the camera, enabled cinematographers to decrease the lens aperture an additional stop, facilitating greater image definition. The results of these developments can be seen in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). This and other films which were shot in exteriors took advantage of relatively short focal-length lenses and abundant sunlight to produce 'deep' images. According to this new code, the film stock's greater sensitivity to the full range of colours signified a greater realism.

On *Citizen Kane* the Toland style is most pronounced, most systematically and effectively employed, and most widely recognized. Although he had been refining his methods in the films with Wyler and Ford, Toland had yet satisfactorily to combine his technical and stylistic interests within a single picture. He saw *Citizen Kane* as a chance to experiment on a large scale. In a June 1941 article in *Popular Photography* entitled "How I Broke the Rules on *Citizen Kane*", Toland related that 'the photographic approach ...

was planned and considered long before the first camera turned', which was itself 'most unconventional in Hollywood', where cinematographers generally

have only a few days to prepare to shoot a film. Robert L. Carringer, in his indepth study of the production, writes that Welles and Toland 'approached the film together in a spirit of revolutionary fervor', and that 'Welles not only encouraged Toland to experiment and tinker, he positively insisted on it' (Nowell-Smith 45). The work indicated something of a shift to a more documentary-style realism.

Citizen Kane was, then, an opportunity for Toland to make flamboyant deep focus identified with his own work. Welles had come to Hollywood with no professional film experience, and (according to Welles) Toland had sought out the Kane assignment. After the filming was completed, Toland was at pains to claim several innovations. For greater realism, he explained, many sets were designed with ceilings, which required him to light from the floor. Since the sets were also deep, he relied on the carrying power of arc lamps.

Furthermore, since Welles and Toland had decided to stage action in depth, Toland sought great depth of focus by using Super XX film, increasing the lighting levels, and using optically coated wide-angle lenses (Bordwell 45). The result shifted the traditional limits of deep space. In yielding a depth of field that extended from about eighteen inches to infinity, Toland's 'pan-focus' made it possible to have a sharp foreground plane in medium shot or even close-up and still keep very distant background planes in focus. Fifty years on, Kane remains contentious.

French critic Andre Bazin, who saw it in 1946 at the same time as Italian neo-realism, argued that its extensive use of deep focus promoted the reality of the phenomenal world of the film, but subsequent critics have noted that the film is also highly self-conscious, artificial, and even baroque. The use of

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deep focus was not unique, and director of photography Gregg Toland had already experimented with it on other productions. Welles's role as 'author' of the film has also been hotly contested, notably by Pauline Kael (1974), who argued, probably incorrectly, that the script was solely the work of Herman J.

Mankiewicz. But even if Kane was not completely novel in its structures or techniques, it remains the fact that these techniques are masterfully integrated in the film's complex texture. Bazin, for example, argued that Citizen Kane was a film of high quality in that it was a film of realism. Realism was an axiom of his aesthetic position. But the statement which links this axiom with the specific aesthetic judgement of Citizen Kane raises problems. The realism of the film, Bazin argues, derives from its use of deep-focus photography and minimal cutting.

Such techniques minimize fragmentation of the real world. The trouble is that this could be a definition of realism as nonfragmentation, or an assertion that films employing such techniques are perceived as more real. The latter, unlike the former, is open to empirical test, although Bazin uses it as a self-evident aesthetic judgement. Thus, although there is nothing inherently wrong with the argument, it does involve different sorts of statements with consequent different criteria of adequacy.

Bazin does share a considerable admiration for the achievements of Italian neo-realism; in particular. And yet Bazin rarely falls into the trap of seeming to formulate a puritan aesthetic which will include neo-realism at the expense of all else. Unlike Kracauer (formally, at least) he admits to different forms of realism. Thus, for example, the distinction he draws between the

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'documentary' realism of Scarface and the 'aesthetic' realism of Citizen Kane, both forms allegedly finding their unification in La Terra Trema (Bordwell 90).

This willingness to speak of different types of realism can lead to problems in interpreting his position. In Signs and Meaning in the Cinema, Wollen takes to task two contemporary inheritors of Bazin's views (Barr and Metz) over their opposition of Rossellini and Eisenstein. The villain for Bazin, he points out, was not Eisenstein, but German Expressionism. But the real problem is that at different times, and in different ways, Bazin occupies both positions. He starts life invoking a case similar to Kracauer's in favour of a 'purist' realism.

But this proves too limiting for his much more catholic tastes, and so he also develops a second case as spatial realism. Unfortunately, he never really brings the two conceptions face to face; never really resolves the strains between them. It seems useful here to take a closer look at these basics of his argument: The realism of the cinema follows directly from its photographic nature. Not only does some marvel or some fantastic thing on the screen not undermine the reality of the image, on the contrary, it is its most valid justification.

Illusion in the cinema is not based as it is in the theatre on convention tacitly accepted by the general public; rather, contrariwise, it is based on the inalienable realism of that which is shown. All trick work must be perfect in all material respects on the screen. The 'invisible man' must wear pyjamas and smoke a cigarette (Bazin 108). Andre Bazin puts Welles in his pantheon of realist directors, along with Renoir, Rossellini, De Sica, Stroheim, Flaherty,

and even Murnau (whom he praises for choosing the moving camera over editing in the construction of many of his filmic scenes).

Yet *Citizen Kane* is also a film in the tradition of German Expressionism. Like Murnau, Welles externalized the subjectivity of his characters (and especially of Kane) by means of psychologically charged settings, acute camera angles, distorting lenses, and disconcerting camera movements (Tudor 56). The demented architecture of Xanadu in the mist-enshrouded shots at the beginning of the film recalls Howard Hawks' *Scarface* (1932). Near the end of the film both Susan and Kane are dwarfed by the oversized ornaments and statuary that furnish Xanadu, and serve as external projections of Kane's inner deadness and mindless materialism.

The gargantuan rooms through which their voices echo—they nearly have to shout at each other to be heard—reflect the distance that has grown between them. When Kane steps into an enormous blazing fireplace and informs Susan that “ Our home is here,” he metaphorically becomes the host of hell. After Susan leaves him, Kane, now utterly alone, wanders past a structure of double reflecting mirrors which reflect his image into infinity. As far as he looks, all he can see are images of himself, a perfect physical representation for a man trapped within his own narcissism.

Welles also used extreme camera angles and strange camera movements in conjunction with his expressive *mise-en-scene*. In the year of its release, *Citizen Kane* was a radically experimental film—fully twenty years ahead of its time—and was widely recognized as such by American critics. *Citizen Kane* is surely the most celebrated and analyzed of all English language films and, arguably, the greatest - at least as measured by periodic surveys of <https://assignbuster.com/american-film-history-1930-60/>

critics and scholars. We saw that in the 1940s a realist aesthetic somewhat modified classical practice. This was conceived as partly an 'objective' verisimilitude, especially of setting and lighting.

Location shooting, taken in conjunction with low-key ('mood') lighting, helped define one distinct postwar cinematographic practice. This practice did not fundamentally violate classical principles of causal and generic motivation. This conception of 'realism' also owed something to a standardization of deep-focus shooting. Certain traits became common to many 'realistic' films of the 1940s and 1950s. Finally, Bazin sees both forms of realism in spatial realism of Welles. Certainly *Citizen Kane* preserves the unity of space through Toland's deep-focus photography.

Certainly the cuts are minimized by use of dissolves and joins across the soundtrack. But Welles is, nevertheless, the true inheritor of expressionism, the specialist in the distortion by camera angle, the mysterious shadows once painted but now created through lighting, the grotesque, and the baroque. Works Cited Bazin, Andre, *What is Cinema?* op. cit. Bordwell, David, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. Routledge: London, 1988. Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey *The Oxford History of World Cinema*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997. Tudor, Andrew, *Theories of Film*. Viking Press: New York, 1974.