The Rise (and Inevitable Fall) of Citizen Kane as the Greatest Movie Ever Made

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As a child cinephile, largely guided by his father, there was only one movie that David Fincher was allowed to think of as worthy of the title "the greatest ever made." "When we talked about stupid things like 'Are the Beatles the best band in the world?' [my dad] would say, 'Well, here are certain perspectives on that.' But when it got down to 'What's the greatest movie ever made?' it was without pause *Citizen Kane*," Fincher recalled to Vulture's Mark Harris earlier this year.

One could have favorites, but *Citizen Kane* was always number one.

Maybe it's hard to imagine now, but for many years, *Kane*'s dominance wasn't a matter of personal preference. It was practically a piece of data — like the name of the president, or the location of Florida. Miles and miles of words have been written about why Orson Welles's masterpiece was so widely acclaimed — why it was (and is) such a monumental film. And miles and miles of words have been written, of course, about whether it deserves that acclaim — not to mention who, exactly, is responsible for its greatness. But how did *Citizen Kane* become so firmly established at the top of the canon in the first place? Who put it there?

Unlike a lot of other classics whose greatness was recognized belatedly, *Citizen Kane* actually came roaring out of the gate. It was one of the most heavily anticipated pictures of 1941 — partly because young Orson Welles was already a phenomenon of radio and stage, a wunderkind who had made the cover of *Time* magazine at the

age of 23 and whose Hollywood debut had been greatly publicized, and partly because William Randolph Hearst's media empire began waging a war against *Kane* once it became clear that the ostensibly fictional character of Charles Foster Kane bore more than a passing resemblance to Hearst himself.

The film's advance notoriety was both a blessing and a curse. By the time *Kane* began screening for the press, its theatrical fate was in jeopardy. RKO had already moved its release date several times, and efforts were underway by the other studios — many of whose chiefs had close ties to Hearst — to buy and destroy the print before it could be seen. Oddly, all these efforts may have helped build additional hype around *Kane*. For journalists and critics writing about the movie (at least, for non-Hearst publications), there was some urgency in making sure that readers knew that the film was, you know, good. The poster's tagline "It's Terrific!" seems quaint now, but back in 1941, it was probably answering the question on everyone's lips: "So, how is it?"

But *Kane* wasn't a financial success. Despite the accolades — it won Best Picture from the New York Film Critics Circle and National Board of Review, and was nominated for nine Oscars, going on to win Best Screenplay — the movie didn't make its money back, primarily because the major studios barred it from their theaters. Back then, the Hollywood majors actually owned most of the screens in the country, a fact which had helped power the rise of the studio system. (There is an elegant and touching irony in this: The studios' control of theaters allowed them to effectively sabotage *Citizen Kane* at the box office. Seven years later, after a landmark anti-trust case brought about by the U.S. government, they were forced to relinquish their theatrical holdings. This helped precipitate the gradual decline of the studio system and the eventual rise of the Film Brat Generation … led by directors who worshipped *Citizen Kane* and Orson Welles and who would ultimately transform the industry.)

Back in 1941, the 25-year-old Welles made an ideal target for the right-leaning Hearst organization — an uppity, leftist kid who had scandalized ordinary Americans with his notorious *War of the Worlds* broadcast, who had staged an all-Black version of *Macbeth*, an anti-fascist modern-dress version of *Julius Caesar*, who was at that moment trying to get a production of Richard Wright's *Native Son* off the ground. They even tried to get him arrested: Welles recounted that during a lecture tour in Buffalo, New York, he was warned at dinner one night not to go back to his hotel, as there was a 14-year-old girl and a couple of Hearst photographers waiting in his room for him. Welles's co-writer Herman J. Mankiewicz — whose perceived betrayal in helping to make *Citizen Kane* was seemingly greater, since he had been friends with both Hearst and his mistress Marion Davies (in Fincher's film, he writes the script as a kind of score-settling confessional) — did come in for his share of harassment, too but the vast majority of it was directed at Welles, who was more recognizable, and easier to hate.

Following that initial theatrical run, *Kane* didn't seem to get the extended life other acclaimed studio pictures enjoyed. 1942's *Casablanca* was re-released in 1949, for example, while 1939's *Gone With the Wind* was re-released in 1942, 1947, and 1952. RKO didn't even bother to re-release *Kane* when Hearst died in 1951, noting that they didn't want to lose any more money on the film.

But what America dismissed, Europe embraced. After World War II, *Kane* began to make its way across the formerly war-torn corners of the continent. It opened in France in June of 1946, in Italy in November of 1948, in Austria in September of 1949. Along the way, it became a phenomenon. Francois Truffaut (whose pseudo-autobiographical *Day for Night* features a scene of the protagonist as a child stealing the lobby-cards for *Kane*) talks of Welles's picture as a rite of passage for himself and others: "The appearance of *Citizen Kane* was an extraordinary event for cinemaphiles of our generation," he wrote in 1959. "This film, I believe, consecrated a great many of us to vocation of cineaste. It was shown regularly for five or six years, and we went to see it at each showing — first at Marbeuf, it went on to L'Artistic, then to Reflets, to Studio Raspail, to Studio Parnasse, and finally to Cine-Opera which became the Vendome, where it is shown again today," Truffaut recalled, counting off the cinemas where he and others had seen the movie as if they were stops on a pilgrimage.

"Thanks in large measure to film writers in France, the film world began to see *Citizen Kane* as a masterpiece, just as it had done when the motion picture debuted in 1941," writes Harlan Lebo, in his excellent book *Citizen Kane: A Filmmaker's Journey*. It's interesting that the debates around *Kane* so often center on who deserves credit for its screenplay — a controversy that Fincher's latest, *Mank*, has reignited — since these foreign cineastes were generally responding to something other than *Kane*'s sparkling, brilliant script. (Indeed, Truffaut noted how poorly it had been subtitled in French.) They were responding to the visual style, to the inventiveness of Gregg Toland's cinematography, and to Welles's experiments with sound, much of which was inspired by his background in radio. For Andre Bazin, who would go on to co-found *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1951 and become the spiritual father of the New Wave, *Kane* represented, in Welles and Toland's use of deep focus and long takes, a new understanding of realism in the cinema. "*Citizen Kane* is part of a general movement, of a vast stirring of the geological bed of cinema, confirming that everywhere up to a point there had been a revolution in the language of the screen," he wrote in the early 1950s.

Still, it took some time for *Kane* to become a consensus favorite. In early 1952, a referendum of around 100 filmmakers was held in Brussels to determine the best movies of all time. There was barely any mention of *Kane* there, either on the final list or among the runners-up. (Of the few ballots made available from that voting, it only appears on one, that of the future director of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Bridge on the River Kwai*, David Lean.) Inspired by that Brussels referendum, a few months later *Sight & Sound* magazine conducted its first international poll of 85 critics to determine the greatest movies ever made. *Kane* fared a bit better on that list — it didn't crack the top ten, though it was a runner-up. Looking at some of the ballots that *Sight & Sound* made available at the time, the film's main support comes from British critics (some of that probably because they were also overrepresented in the voting pool, since *Sight & Sound* is a British publication).

May 1956 finally saw the first major re-release of *Kane* across theaters in the U.S. But perhaps more importantly, it also began airing on television that year. RKO had been among the first studios whose catalog was sold to TV, and suddenly, *Citizen Kane*, after lying dormant though much of the 1940s and early 1950s, was ubiquitous on a mass medium. That was when a lot of the filmmakers and critics who would go on to define modern American cinema experienced Welles's work for the first time. (Among them was a young Martin Scorsese, who recalled seeing *Kane* — on his list of the ten greatest of all time — on WOR-TV's "Million Dollar Movie" as a kid.)

But it's not just that *Kane* was suddenly available. It was also the right movie at the right time. Maybe it had been ahead of the curve back in 1941, but now, the curve had arrived. Synthesizing the stylistic hallmarks of the preceding half century of cinema that came before it, morphing from horror film to mock-documentary to drama to musical to comedy to tragedy, *Citizen Kane* was a film school condensed into 119 minutes. Welles often credited its achievement to his own inexperience and ignorance: He was able to flout cinematic convention and clichés because he didn't know any better, and he was able to create such remarkable images because he was willing to let his veteran cinematographer Gregg Toland go to town with the camera and the lighting. For all the silly talk of Welles as a credit-hog, he never passed up a chance over the years to cite Toland's enormous contributions to *Kane*, a fact which he had immortalized onscreen by sharing his own director card with the cinematographer during the closing credits.

Despite its limited budget, *Kane* also had a certain all-American brashness and extravagance, without the old-fashioned epic indulgence of a *Gone With the Wind* or the jingoistic qualities of some wartime pictures. It looked forward even as it looked backward — an ideal film for a generation seeking to forget the war while also feeling somewhat conflicted about the economic boom that had begun in earnest in the early 1950s. *Kane* had freshness and cynicism in equal measure. Kane and Mankiewicz's tale of the rise and rise of a businessman who came from nothing, built a massive empire, then lost his soul indulges in the charm and myth of power and money while also showing their downside. It's a movie about spiritual corruption that lets you nevertheless enjoy the

journey towards spiritual corruption. “It is a demonstration of the force of power and an attack on the force of power,” Truffaut had written. Is it any wonder then that directors who adored *Kane* went on to make such films as *The Godfather*, *Barry Lyndon*, *Scarface*, and *Goodfellas*? *Kane* may have risen to the fore thanks to television, but it grew its lead because in many ways it came to represent both the pinnacle of the American studio system as well as one auteur’s rebuke of it.

Sight & Sound’s 1962 poll is generally regarded as the first official indication of *Kane*’s emergence as the greatest movie of all time, where it just edged out *L’Avventura* and *Rules of the Game* to overtake the No. 1 spot. There had been yet another Brussels poll of filmmakers a few years earlier — in 1958, at the Brussels World’s Fair. There, *Kane* came in ninth place, one of only three sound films to place in the Top 12. It would go on to dominate the *Sight & Sound* poll in 1972, 1982, 1992, and 2002. (Along the way, it would top lots of other surveys as well.) Looking at the polls and individual ballots over the years, you can see *Kane*’s influence growing, as it’s increasingly featured on the lists of international critics — starting with the British, then moving on to other continental critics as well as American ones, then expanding even further abroad. Sometimes, it’s the only Hollywood movie featured on a critic’s ballot. *Kane* may have risen to the fore thanks to television, but it grew its lead because in many ways it came to represent both the pinnacle of the American studio system — the most dominant film industry on the planet — as well as one auteur’s rebuke of it.

In some senses, the debate over who actually wrote *Citizen Kane* slips in between these two extremes. In her 1971 essay, “Raising Kane,” Pauline Kael made the case for *Kane* not as a brazen, important directorial statement but the high-point of a rich 1930s tradition of tough-minded, satirical newspaper pictures, some of which Mankiewicz, himself a former newspaper man, had worked on. “Raising Kane” is a phenomenal work of criticism: Kael does a remarkable job reclaiming those 1930s pictures and their writers, and her analysis of *Kane* as a movie is brilliant. But when it comes down to assessing who contributed what to the film, she’s not on very solid journalistic ground. (For a more definitive look at the creation of *Kane*, I highly recommend historian Robert

Carringer's meticulously researched 1984 book *The Making of Citizen Kane*.) Welles took Kael's perceived attack hard, but in truth, the director wasn't her real target; she actually quite liked some of Welles's later efforts. Kael's real quarry were auteurist critics like Andrew Sarris, with whom she tussled throughout the 1960s and '70s. By bringing the focus back to Mankiewicz, and suggesting that he was primarily responsible both for the script and for what made *Kane* so special, Kael perhaps hoped to do away with the idea of the all-powerful auteur once and for all. (Of course, auteurism never actually claimed this, but that's a heated conversation for another time.)

Oddly enough, Kael's salvos also helped *Citizen Kane* maintain its status as the greatest movie ever made, establishing it as the fulcrum on which debates about the nature of cinema as an art form continued to turn, several decades after its release. Also helping was the notion that Welles's career was a long, self-destructive slide down after *Citizen Kane*, an idea that Fincher has seemed to buy into in some of his recent interviews. It's important to remember that Welles was never a "has been" — he remained a major, recognizable actor for pretty much his whole life. He was a regular presence on radio, and later, on TV. And the films he released over the years, whatever their issues, weren't exactly disasters. Look no further than the movie he released immediately after *Kane*: 1942's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, a lyrical, melancholy adaptation of Booth Tarkington's novel about the fall of a great American family that was also widely acclaimed and nominated for Best Picture. *Ambersons* was famously taken out of Welles's hands and given a ridiculous happy ending; the lost footage from the director's original cut remains the Holy Grail of film archeology. Despite all that, it's a near-masterpiece, and even placed on the *Sight & Sound* lists in 1972 and 1982, at ninth and eighth place respectively. Additionally, many of us consider later Welles titles like *The Trial* (1962) and *F for Fake* (1973) to be equal to, or greater than, *Kane*. (Hell, Sarris himself never put *Citizen Kane* on any of his *Sight & Sound* lists; he preferred *Ambersons*.)

By the time the 1962 poll was conducted, Welles had not only won the Palme d'Or at Cannes with his 1951 adaptation of *Othello*, he had made 1955's *Mr. Arkadin/Confidential Report* — a *Kane*-like thriller about the search for a mysterious businessman, told via flashbacks from the people who knew him — and had attempted a Hollywood comeback with the deranged noir *Touch of Evil* in 1958. Welles's post-*Kane* efforts were brilliant, sometimes astoundingly so … but they were decidedly imperfect. To put it another way: They weren't *Citizen Kane*, which with each passing year seemed like a kind of Camelot, an Edenic moment when young Orson Welles briefly had final cut and the full faith and credit of RKO Pictures, at the height of the American studio system. Thus, the more films Welles made, the more the legend of *Citizen Kane* grew. And the further Hollywood itself moved away from the heydays of the studio system, the more *Citizen Kane* seemed to shine like a distant city on a long-ago hill.

Then, as it must to all movies, death came to *Citizen Kane*'s top spot on the *Sight & Sound* list. In the poll's 2012 iteration, Welles's film fell … all the way to second place, behind Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, which now claims the top spot. It's understandable. The poll has grown over the years, becoming more international and more diverse, and more titles are now available to us than have ever been before in the history of humankind. The masterful *Vertigo*, savaged by critics upon its release in 1958, had slowly clawed its way up the list over the years. It was a runner-up in 1972, eighth place in 1982, fourth in 1992, and second in 2002, just five points behind *Kane*. Along the way, restorations and re-releases in the 1980s and '90s had helped *Vertigo*'s cause, as had its ubiquity in academia, where its psychosexual layers and scopophilic indulgences fueled thousands of term papers (one of them, mine). It'll be interesting to see if *Vertigo* survives atop the list, or if it will be dethroned in 2022 by something else. *Tokyo Story* and *The Rules of the Game* have been hovering in the top five for decades, *2001: A Space Odyssey* has been slowly creeping up the list, and, let's not forget, *Citizen Kane* is still there, too. But one thing seems sure. The idea of a consensus pick, and for that matter the need for any kind of consensus, is a thing of the past. *Citizen Kane*, the ultimate canon title, has itself become proof that canons are there to be exploded.