



I. CHARLES FOSTER KANE OR WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST?

1) From fiction: a criss-cross of points of view...

Citizen Kane, the movie directed by Orson Welles who also plays the lead character was released in 1941. It is a biography of a fictional character, a media mogul called Charles Foster Kane, whose life story is told by several different witnesses whose points of view intermingle to, as a jigsaw puzzle, endeavor to convey the full picture of Citizen Kane.

It is a journalist who, endeavoring to understand the meaning of the last word uttered by Kane before dying (the mysterious word *Rosebud*) launches into this inquiry, this investigation into the identity of Charles Foster Kane, questioning people who used to know him and to be closely related to him.

2)... To reality: William Randolph Hearst

However, the rise and fall of this fictional character is inspired from a real media tycoon of the time: William Randolph Hearst. Not only had the latter managed to build an impressive media

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empire, but he had gained such political momentum as to be able to call the shots and build opinion, so much so as to provoke a war: the Spanish American war¹. The conflict is directly evoked in the movie, as is Kane's leverage in shaping opinion and building the career of his second wife as an opera singer, however untalented she might be and however unwilling to actually be a singer.

3) A paradoxical character

We see Kane gradually building an empire by taking over newspapers, his first purchase being *The Inquirer* just because he thinks "it would be fun to run a newspaper". His intentions, as stated in his "declaration of principles" are initially noble: "telling the truth honestly", "defending human rights". How explain then, that his editorial policy evolves into yellow journalism: "Are we going to declare war on Spain? *The Inquirer* already has"?

An explanation is partly provided by Leland's narrative. Leland, his best friend, pictures Kane as a paradoxical character both intent on standing up for the rights of "the underprivileged, the underpaid, the underfed" when running for governor, but also doing so to further his own interests, brighten up his own image, flatter his own ego: he indeed criticizes Kane for considering the people as his own property!

Who is Kane then? A media tycoon, a politician, a business mogul, an American dreamer, to use the subtitle of Steven Millhauser's book? ² To a certain extent, Kane certainly is the embodiment of the American dream. Not even the Great Depression manages to completely cause his ruin! But on closer examination, he also evokes the old world, old Europe, even Asia, the memory of Kubla Khan, that other builder of empires or Shelley's *Ozymandias*, that "King of Kings", the remnants of whose empire are but a statue half buried in the sands of the desert.

II. XANADU

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea."

1 The Spanish American war was a conflict which took place in 1898 in the wake of the explosion of an American ship, the USS Maine, in Havana Harbor, in Cuba. It triggered the intervention of the US in the Cuban war of independence against Spain. It turned out that president McKinley was spurred into declaring war on Spain owing to the constant harassment performed by Hearst's propaganda and yellow journalism.

2 *Martin Dressler, The Tale of An American Dreamer* is a novel by contemporary writer Steven Millhauser, published in 1996 taking place in late 19th century New York. It tells the story of a young cigar maker's son building an empire in the construction of city-like hotels.

1) The Gothic castle



The reference to Coleridge's poem, *Kubla Khan*, first published in 1816, gives the tone of the movie. Like Kubla Khan, founder of the Yuan dynasty, Kane builds his own empire and his own castle, his personal "*pleasure dome*", also called Xanadu, which will always be left unfinished!

The first image of the movie is a shot through the fence, then the gate, of Kane's gothic castle. Nothing American here! We are back to the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, with gondolas evoking Venice, monkeys evoking Asia, mullioned windows and dark interiors conjuring up Gothic literature, reminiscent of *The Monk*, by Lewis, for instance, haunted by the character's obsessions.

"A savage place! As holy and enchanted

As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted", to quote Coleridge's poem again!

The castle is dark and is often shown in the dark, referring to Kane's unconscious and buried memories. Kane's second wife, Susan, is locked up in the castle (here again, as a direct reference to gothic literature, the damsel in distress confined in her turret), bored to death, missing the New York bustle, making jigsaw puzzles to while away the time. The two characters are alone in an overwhelming space, ever more drifting apart.

2) Vanity: “*memento mori*” (remember that thou shalt die)



All this creates a surreal atmosphere emphasized by the role played by the glassball and the scenes shot through it. It also sharply contrasts with the horn of plenty, the cornucopia of the lavish amounts of artefacts, works of art, uncanny statues, objects of all kinds acquired and accumulated by Kane, which, at the end of the movie, completely fill up space. How explain Kane's obsession with statues, all those still lives? They might work as a sort of vanity, with a “*memento mori*” function, as a reminder that for all his wealth and might, powerful and influential as he might be, Charles Foster Kane, like any other human being, is doomed to eventually die! How ironic for a man who has accumulated enough possessions to see him through several centuries!

All this adds to the mystery of finding out who Mr Kane was...

III. MIRROR EFFECTS AND ANAMORPHOSES: THE MASTER OF ILLUSIONS

Kane's second wife, Susan, when she meets him, sees him as a magician who knows a lot of tricks. It turns out that Kane is indeed a trickster, shaping and manipulating the public opinion, creating a

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war, turning his wife into an opera singer (at least for a while). This ability of Kane to shape and manipulate opinion is emphasized, in the movie, by a series of mirror effects and anamorphoses.

1) Anamorphosis



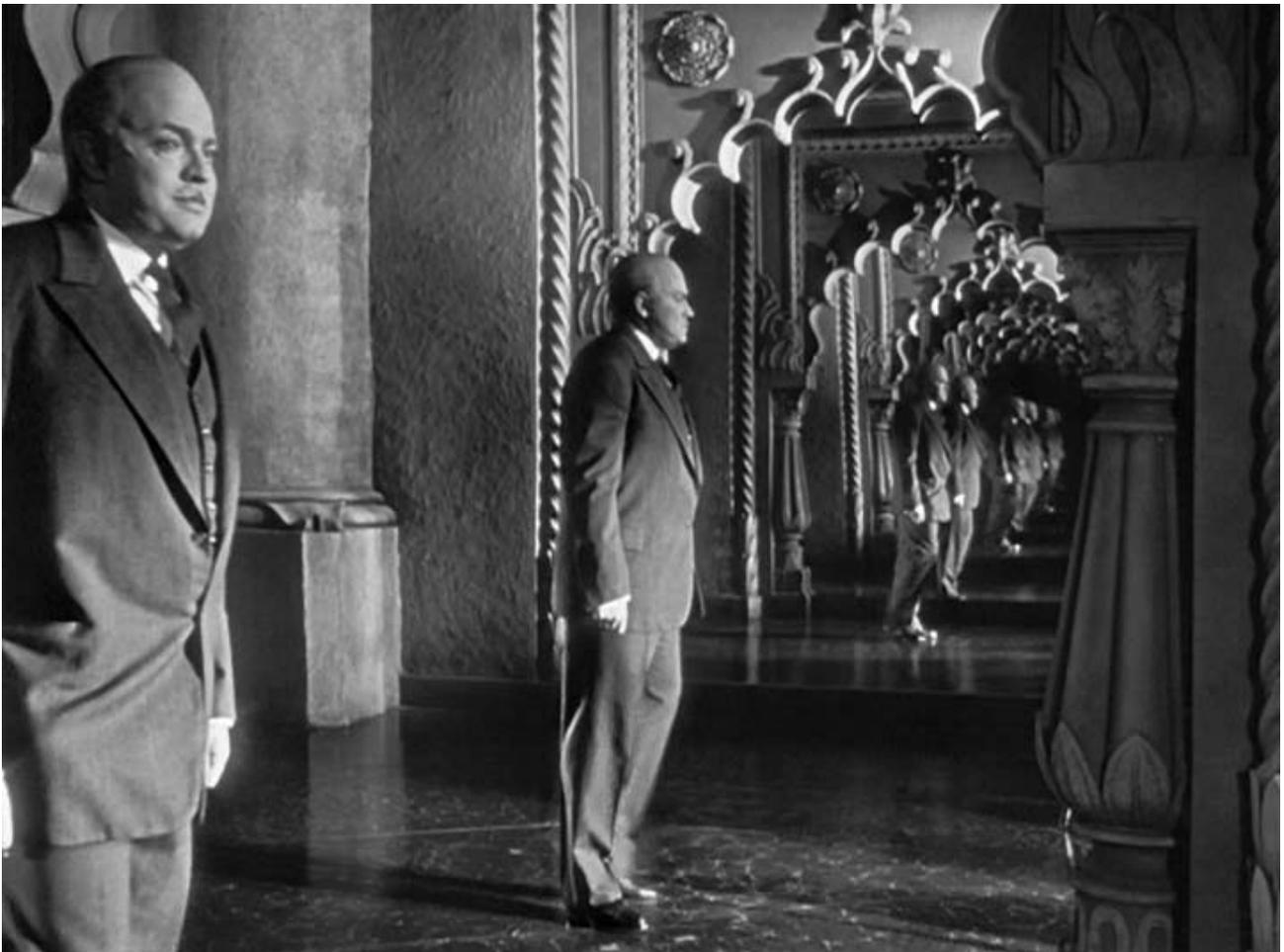
An anamorphosis is a distorted vision or perspective requiring the viewer to have recourse to specific devices or to shift his position, adopt a specific angle to actually reconstitute the image. In the movie, this is precisely the job that the viewer has to do: among all the images that are conveyed of Charles Foster Kane, the viewer has to find the right angle to strive to reconstitute the puzzle of the personality of Kane.

There is first the glassball through which Kane's death is shot. It is a deeply significant element in so far as, just as the viewer's vision is distorted through the glassball, Kane's readers' vision is distorted by his yellow journalism tricks. The whole world has to see reality through the prism of Kane's newspapers: the whole world is to believe that his second wife Susan, is a gifted opera singer. To achieve his goal, he will thus have praiseworthy reviews published in all his newspapers. This distortion of reality achieved through the prism of his newspapers is Kane's constant strategy.

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2) Mirror effects

This is also stressed by the different scenes which mirror each other in the movie. The last scene of the movie is an echo to the first, with the view of the castle shot through the fence and the gate, which is further highlighted in the opening scene by the reflection of the castle in the water. We have the same strategy of scenes echoing and mirroring each other in the scene when Susan first sings for Kane, with a similar scene when they are eventually married, with exactly the same shooting angle. We can also quote the image showing the door of 185, 74th street and its exact reflection as a drawing in the newspaper, which will cause him to lose when running for governor. Not to mention the series of doors and the series of mirrors reflecting thousands of Kanes, as a *mise en abime* of the question: who is Charles Foster Kane? There are different layers of reality giving rise to different versions of citizen Kane and try as they might, no character whatsoever manages to grasp the essence of that public figure!



3) “Rosebud”, the world in a word!

And little could they achieve it by the way, because none of them knows the meaning of “Rosebud”. Here the viewer is given a considerable edge! The viewer knows that “Rosebud” indeed sums up the whole life of Charles Foster Kane, which actually is the life of a forsaken child, abandoned by his parents, craving his whole life long for his lost childhood, represented by the

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sleigh, and for the love of his parents. Kane's loneliness and lack of love is embodied in the considerable amount of statues that surround him, mock representations of all the human beings (friends, family, lovers, wives) who have adamantly forsaken him, as cleverly suggested by Anastasia (ECE1)! Even the loss of his only son, killed in a car crash with his first wife, seems to little affect him. Is it because he has hardly had time to make real bonds with anyone? But would he have been so much as able to do so, since the bonds with his own parents were so brutally cut...

Here is Citizen Kane then, at the end of his life, the ghost of a man, surrounded by the ghosts of all things and all relationships past, the ghost of his childhood, in his deserted castle; Ozymandias, king of kings; with the question looming: was it all worth it and what is left of it all?

Kubla Khan

By [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) , 1816

Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
 Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
 The shadow of the dome of pleasure
 Floated midway on the waves;
 Where was heard the mingled measure
 From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,

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Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.