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Citizen Kane, ‘The Best Film Ever Made’ (Film Review)

Often considered the greatest film ever made in the polls of critics, Citizen Kane (1941), opened multiple doors for the future of how directors decide to shape their films. Orson Welles’ use of cinematography including camera shots and angles shaped the way camera angles were used in the future of movies. Not only this but also the way the story unfolded before our eyes was nothing less than an engaging way to keep the audience on their toes.

Citizen Kane tells the story of Charles Foster Kane, rich and head of a newspaper firm, while also being a highly controversial man within the public eye. After passing away alone in his huge home, his last words were the only thing the people were interested in, this word is “Rosebud”. The movie revolves around a journalist working to investigate the meaning behind these words, going and talking to the people who were significant in Kane's life. What is it? Who was she? What did it mean? These are questions we as the audience are asking ourselves constantly throughout the movie and the main questions that revolve around the movie. This movie did an excellent job of telling the life story of Kane from being taken out of humble beginnings and being raised by the bank and becoming the wealthy man he was. Kane was raised in an environment where there were never really any consequences for his actions. As the story progresses, Kane is met with the idea that actually the world does not revolve around him and starts to understand that his actions and words have consequences.

Throughout the movie, the use of lighting and camera angles plays a huge role in the overall feeling of the movie. Considering this movie is made in black in white, it is important to note that the lighting uses the dynamics of gradient, meaning that lighting is either darker or lighter depending on the mood of the scene. Welles does a great job of this whether he wants the spirit to be mysterious or spooky or more uplifting and exciting, the lighting is used well in this way. For example, after the newsreel at the very beginning of the movie, the lighting while the journalists are talking about finding out what “Rosebud” means, the audience is barely able to see the actual people speaking and more of an outline of these men, silhouettes perhaps. This is to show that the people are not what is important, but rather the topic of discussion. It is the very first time that the real story of the movie is introduced to the audience, where we understand that the story is not just about a man but about what this man loved enough to say as his last word, not even words.

Another reason why this movie is so well made is the way Welles creates his storyline. It does not follow the stock narrative structure which is another reason why this movie is so enjoyable and engaging to watch. It is not one smooth motion of Kane’s life from start to finish, but instead starts with the newsreel which ends in a discussion of how the newsreel itself is a story without an ending and as said before, foregrounds the movie's focus on how stories get told. Instead of having the audience read a newspaper obituary on the screen, they are given the experience of the newsreel to find out that Kane is dead, similarly to how the people in the movie would find out about Kane’s death.

However, written words are a huge part of this movie and sometimes, if you blink, you will miss type of words. Since Kane runs The Inquirer, the newspaper firm, it is obvious that the audience would be seeing a good amount of written text on the prints of newspapers that we see throughout the movie, but there are other times where the words on the screenplay a huge part in the storytelling of the film. For example, at the beginning of the movie, we are presented with large white text from the S. T. Coleridge poem ‘Kubla Khan’. There is text on posters and signs all throughout the movie, some with little to no significance, but there nonetheless. Another example of text being an important part of the movie, arguably the most important part of the movie is at the very end of the movie when the audience is finally given the answer to the thing that surrounded the movie… the meaning of ‘Rosebud’. We are presented with his possessions being thrown away and burned, the most important thing that is being burned is a snow sled that we saw being covered up with snow at the start of the movie when Kane is taken away from his parents. On the front of the sled is the engraving “Rosebud”, the same sled he used to play with as a child. The entire story is based on this one small thing that has little to no significance to anyone else but means the world to this one man and in the end, the audience is the only other people who ever get to know the significance of the word “Rosebud”.

In conclusion, there is a reason why critics from the past have declared Citizen Kane as the best film ever made, and some critics of today will agree 82 years later. The lighting and camera techniques that Orson Welles uses in this film paved the way for how film directors film their movies which still work to this day. The non-generic narrative structure that Welles uses is like traveling from one space in time to the next and really captures the way life is, not one straight line but rather a trail of constant ups, downs, and loops. The story about how something so insignificant could be so significant to a man that had everything and the way “Rosebud” is the essence of Citizen Kane is what makes it so iconic. Citizen Kane, “the best movie ever made”.

Work Cited

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