Citizen Kane: Plot, Narration, Cinematography And Editing

Orson Welles' Citizen Kane is a 1941 American drama film, depicting the rise and fall of the publishing mogul, Charles Foster Kane. The film was produced with ground-breaking forms, applying the use of modern light innovations and focal methods of cinematography and the dramatizing editing style. The story centrally revolved around the mystery surrounding the word 'Rosebud' murmured in Kane's deathbed, it was revealed to be the childhood sled of his. It is arguable that Citizen Kane is a multidimensional film due to the various forms that conveyed layered interpretations and meanings. The meaning or meanings in Kane can be decoded as we analyze multiple forms of the film. Critically investigated through the potentiality of more than one meaning in the film – the word 'Rosebud', the snow globe and the life of Kane – the exploration of factors that influenced the meaning such as the narrative structure, through the eyes of the other characters in Kane's life, the art of movement that guided the narration forward with the importance of props, and to consider visual cognition influence, how it prepared and supported the audience's viewing experience, as well as the art of editing in the sequence order and the play of spatial reasoning, lights and shadows.

Citizen Kane resembles a paradox of multidimensional meanings and fragmented interpretations of reality. According to Carringer (187), the snow globe was the film's central symbol. The film begins to capture the perspective through the shattered snow globe that has fallen out of Charles Foster Kane's hand when he uttered his final word, 'Rosebud', prior in taking his last breath. The broken pieces represented the fragments of what used to be Kane. It introduced a metaphorical architecture that will run throughout the course of the film. It sets up the movement of grasping the various different pieces given, to build and cultivate our own meaning of Citizen Kane. For instance, the film was composed exactly that way when even the sequence, 'News on the March', the newsreel biography of Kane is filled with fragments and pieces compiled to produce a caricature of the public figure. Although Naramore (123-160) argues that 'Rosebud' is the main constructive source of plot in Citizen Kane, due to the film beginning with a mystery to solve on the basis of a final word. Nevertheless, if 'Rosebud' is an important figure in the entirety of the film, it only serves as an object to develop further a concrete plot. The final word of Kane had spurred an investigation into the meaning behind his life or what was left behind. It challenges us to continue moulding the perspectives of Kane and construct our own interpretation.

Through the reflections and refractions, one would see through the pieces, we begin our pursuit in search of the meaning of Kane, by attempting to restore the snow globe to appease the wholesome vision that is the film. Experiencing it through Thompson, the reporter was entrusted to uncover and piece this tangled mystery, it had led to five people who knew Kane well in his prime. In this aspect, the meaning of the film could potentially be viewed through the characters as focal points. The people in Kane's life, proceeded to narrate their stories, although often biased and unreliable, it opened up a portal into their state of mind and provided insights to them as an individual (Naramore 123-160). We revel in the idea of seemingly getting to know more about the lives of these characters than Kane himself. Witnessing Susan's perspective, Kane's second wife, she recollected her life with Kane as a series of a whirlwind romance that faltered. While she painted herself as a victim in her stories by having forced to be an opera star against her wishes, she promoted her strength when she recalled her decision in leaving Kane.

It’s evident that the film thrived in a highly fragmented state with the individual stories and moments. Similar to Thompson’s tasks, the audience are to judge what is true with unreliable and unjustified bits and pieces presented.

Citizen Kane prioritize the use of narrative to influence the meaning of the film. The concept of narration is defined as the process of structuring the story to produce a certain desired effect on the audience (Tan 6). The depths of narration are beyond the simplification of order and structure, it constitutes highly concrete although abstract motions, to manipulate, alter and twist each part of the film to convey obscure meanings and produce specific effects. The narrative represents a description of the film in an abstracted perspective to allow the audience to process the information and insights accordingly. Film technology such as acting and camera work, served to support in ways that the production will impart the intended effect.

Cinematography in Kane is particularly compelling in representing motion despite minimum camera movements. As viewed in the scene when Kane realised that Susan has left him, he attempted to control his emotions. However, the build-up of emotions caused him to break, which unravelled him to wreck her bedroom. In a tensed frenzy of emotions, stripped of melodies and dialogues apart from the clashing sounds of fallen personal effects, the scene instilled a slight peek behind the curtain into Kane’s true identity as a character. In appearance with a low angle camera shot, Kane was pictured as monumental in what seems to look like an unproportioned size bedroom. He evokes a certain power by exuberating strength in that room, similarly, often translated in his relationship with Susan. While expressing his frustrations through brutal force, he was rendered immobile upon seeing a snow globe and we were gifted with the second and final mentioned of a whispered ‘Rosebud’ off-screen, which brought the film back to one of its meanings. That particular snow globe, especially what it represented, had the ability to move Kane, both emotionally and physically. It had and would always hold kinetic power over him, stabilizing a connection with the first scene of his death (Knapp 110-142). It enforced a depth of visual form to the essence of the film, the mise en scène plays a crucial role in making visual sense and connections. Consequent to his rampage, the single object allowed the story and Kane to move forward. Props demonstrate plot and meaning, it is the driving force in advancing the narrative into new territory as it contributes to the pacing of the overarching story (Speidel 10). In silence, Kane withdrew from the bedroom, passing by his employees and walked through a hall of full-length mirrors.

The mirrored images of Kane were multiplied, producing an immaculate representation of Citizen Kane’s main character. The visual representation of Kane in the mirrors forced us to examine the film even more intimately. The film does so well in implicating the audience in their own interpretation of its meaning. What does the multiple reflections of Kane mean? What does it show and tell us about the Kane we knew ever since the start of the film? The representations here clouded the judgement of the audience who as of now, might not even have a clear sense of who Kane really was. Through the multitude of reflections, one can infer that there are many layers to Kane, and it forced us to perform and assume a role in the film, to identify the pieces that fit and those that do not, just like Thompson. For instance, when he was reading the manuscript to start off his investigation, the camera work allowed us a first perspective viewing of the written word (Leff 11). The audience somehow had a first-hand knowledge of the clues and it remained part of our viewing experience. However, the shifting point of view that inspired specific expectations, stalled our ability to create a conclusion about Kane.

Our cognition abilities process and tracks the images that moves on-screen, we are indefinitely

linked to the action and expected to respond to the visual cues. When Kane moved through the hall of mirrors, the scene adjusted our point of focus towards the interpretation of the many reflective visions of Kane, this could represent different meanings for an individual. It is believed that while watching a film, we are expected to have a story to follow, however when the film is as fragmented as Citizen Kane and shifts ever so often through the different characters point of views, our cognitive senses has to be put to work to make visual sense of the obscure plot, to construct the pieces and craft our own interpretation of the story instead (Jackson 494-511). This is present especially in this scene, since it showcased mirrors reflections of Kane, therefore, through questions of reasoning, conceptualizing and perception, it enabled audience to fill in their own blanks (Leff 10). Through every layer, form, surfaces and point of views of Kane, the audience are forced to assemble their own viewing experience of the film (McGinty 46-50).

Visually, the art of editing has affected the way the film is interpreted. Kane's 'death' sequence at the beginning has structured the film as a mystery. A notion to think about is the assumption that the death of the man is indeed Charles Foster Kane. We are only gifted with an obscure vision of his face and his shapely silhouette in the shadows (Leff 18). It seemed that audience are constantly in the shadows and are only provided with relevant parts that has been lighted up. The presumably dead Kane's entity was somehow brought to life through characters' recollection throughout the film. A simple reorder of the film's sequence would affect the meaning of the film and later the story. The plot shapes how a story is told, the rhythms in the cutting of sequences and scenes can influence mood. In the case of Citizen Kane, the structure has embodied in creation of intrigue, audience responses to the film are shaped by the plot's attempts at manipulation (Speidel 4). Since Citizen Kane is not accurately structured chronologically, audiences are required to piece together the order in which the events occur.

Some of the elements of cinematic expressions were used to support and emphasize the scenes. In the breakfast scene of Kane and his first wife, Emily, spatial reasoning, light and shadows came out to play. With multiple jump cuts and swipe transitions, we are bolted through time and space, witnessing the gradual distancing in the relationship and the retrogression of their marriage. Upon the final shot of them at breakfast, we see them sitting on opposite ends, in silence, reading their papers separately, in dim lighting with an exquisite shadow cast across the dining table. The lights and shadows casted, strongly suggest the visuals of cages. We can interpret this visual sense as the couple are trapped in an unloving relationship with no means to escape, as their dynamics are so familiar at that point in time and were almost a routine for them.

In the course of Citizen Kane, the story does revolve around the word 'rosebud', it is central in advancing the narration and plot of the film. However, according to Welles, it was his intention in producing this movie through the eyes of other characters, to play with the representational concept of the word 'Rosebud', as opposed to co-relating it to a cheap sled. For Kane, it represented simplicity and comfort from his mother who he was taken from once upon a time. Through the film, we can conceptualized how Kane gained everything he wanted in this world, yet loses his soul piece by piece, the film translates to a 'failure story' instead (Welles).

The different forms such as the plot, narration, cinematography and editing are cores in the production of Orson Welles' Citizen Kane. The film gained significance in its time with the use of modernized forms in film to accentuate the fundamentals behind the meanings. Kinetic movement was also strongly emphasized in this film as it allows gateway for the audience to be

a part of the visual experience. Through the investigation and critical analysis of Citizen Kane, we explored the different central aspects of the film that could be regarded as its meaning, the structure of the film’s narration, movement in the film specifically through objects and the mise en scène, as well as the consideration that visual cognition is an influence and the editing of sequences with the use of space, light and shadows.