Eric Blodgett, Film 220, Professor Keating
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Historical Analysis, *Citizen Kane:* *Camera Movement*

Citizen Kane, directed by Orson Welles, was an exemplary and ground-breaking work. In narrative structure and film style, Welles challenged classical Hollywood conventions and opened a path for experimentation in the later 1940s. Gregg Toland's deep-focus cinematography and Welles' use of low-key lighting are often discussed aspects of the movie. True, these were areas of innovation, but when watching the movie in class I was particularly struck by the use of camera movement, or "mobile framing" as described in Film Art. In this historical analysis, I will take a detailed look at how Welles and Toland use camera movement to develop and challenge the Hollywood style. By referring to other movies viewed in Professor Keating's class, including *The Cheat, Wings*, *Applause*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Last Laugh* and *Bicycle Thief*, this paper traces one aspect of innovation and diffusion in the movie many call the greatest film ever, *Citizen Kane.*

The idea of moving the camera as a spectacular embellishment probably began in the Lumiere Films like *Leaving A Station by Rail* in which the cameraman set up his equipment on the train rather than by the side of the tracks. Audiences were amazed by the feeling of motion that this provided (a technique that returned in early CinemaScope films like *Viva Las Vegas*). But with the rise of the feature, camera movement took on storytelling functions. In a film like DeMille's *The Cheat*, the camera remains static until it needs to reveal something important to the plot, like when it tracks past the jurors in the courtroom scene. This is not spectacular but informational. By the end of the 1920s, under the influence of German Expressionism, ornate camera movement had returned,

but mainly to show off settings as part of establishing shots (Lecture, April 2). Murnau, in *The Last Laugh* uses camera movement subjectively when the doorman is drunk and hears the sound of the trumpet. This is unique, and shows how some filmmakers used the technique for more experimental ends (just as Lang would use sound in his film *M*). But in America, in a film like *Wings*, the spectacular camera movement in the French nightclub happens only once, and it just establishes a space before the action begins. With the coming of sound, in movies like *Applause*, camera movement became clumsy and difficult. Mamoulian still tried it to make his film look more fluid, but it often was distracting.

In *Citizen Kane*, Welles and Toland blend camera movement with the drama of the scenes, and use it more spectacularly. They extend the device in two directions, and in doing so they challenge Classical Hollyood's convention of Invisible Style. A good example is the introduction to El Rancho, where Susan Alexander works as a singer. The camera begins on a sign outside the restaurant and then climbs upward to the roof. Then it glides forward, through another sign, and approaches a skylight. When it reaches the skylight, Welles uses an "invisible" dissolve to cut to a high-angle long-shot of the interior of El Rancho. This camera movement calls attention to itself as a spectacle. Not only is it unusual to begin a scene by climbing up a building and floating across its roof, the cut through the glass window (skylight) is obviously impossible. Welles uses the crane shot to blend a miniature model of the outside of the restaurant with an actual set. The shot establishes space and sets up the scene, but it does this in an overt and noticeable way. The movement is more like Murnau than *Wings* or *Applause*. Welles uses the "unfastened camera" technique from UFA to tell his story and to show off technique.

In other scenes, the camera movement is simpler and tied to the story, but still powerful and noticeable. A good example is the scene where young Charlie is given away by his mother. The camera starts on the boy who is throwing snowballs, and then it pulls back, through a window, to show the room where his mother, father, and Thatcher are making arrangements. Welles uses long-take and deep-focus for this scene. He shows the adults making plans for the child without any editing, and he keeps the focus sharp all the way to the background where Charlie is playing outside. As we discussed in class, the scene is important because Welles reaches the goals of continuity editing, but only through staging and lighting. This is a dramatically powerful choice because we can watch Charlie or the parents all the way through, and we are always aware that the young child's fate is being decided. It is important to note how camera movement makes all of this possible. The track backward from the window reveals the space of the room, while keeping Charlie centered in the frame within a frame ("apeture framing"). By using camera movement, Welles makes sure that we see the space and the other characters in relation to the boy; he is foremost in our minds. It also stretches the depth of the shot so that we really notice how the composition and focus work. This is an ostentatious establishing shot, like something from Murnau or late silent film. But it is also motivated by character staging. The camera moves backward as the mother walks forward from the window to the table. Welles and Toland blend the camera movement with the ongoing scene, helping make it "invisible" to tell the story. In terms of film history, Welles is bringing together two trends here. He has the overt style of Murnau and the motivated style of Classical Hollywood.

There are many such uses of mobile framing in the movie, but now I would like to turn to the historical influence of *Citizen Kane*. As mentioned in class and in the reading, *Citizen Kane* influenced film noirs like *Double Indemnity* and *Detour*. Mainly this was in low-key lighting, deep focus, and expressionistic camera angles. Camera movement, too, changed. At the beginning of *Double Indemnity*, the hero walks into his office and the camera tracks behind him. He is very dark and surrounded by brighter light, making the scene look like the beginning of *Citizen Kane*. As the hero walks through a pair of double doors, the camera moves with him, revealing the huge office building. But when the actor gets to a railing and has to turn, the camera keeps moving forward, showing off the set which has an atrium design. The camera begins being connected to character, but then takes off on its own to show the deep-focus mise-en-scene. This is very much like the "window" shot in *Citizen Kane*. In film noir, film style tells the story, but it also calls attention to itself and to its compositions. The scene actually reminded me of the bathroom scene in *The Last Laugh*, but it took *Citizen Kane* to make this style popular for 1940s movies. As Carringer notes in his book, *Citizen Kane* had a "UFA style" (page 93). Since film noir borrowed *Kane*'s lighting and focus techniques, it only makes sense that it would use the camera movement too. But where Welles and Toland really showed off their mobile framing in certain scenes, a movie like *Double Indemnity* only has brief shots like this, and then the scene switch to continuity editing. Noteably, by the end of the 1940s, even a "realistic" movie like *The Bicycle Thief* was using camera movement like this, particularly in the rainstorm.

My favorite camera movement in *Citizen Kane* sums up all these points. In the second flashback of Susan Alexander's opera performance, the camera starts on her

singing on stage and then moves upward, past the curtain and all the stage equipment. It finally reaches two stagehands on a catwalk who hold their noses to show how bad a singer Susan really is. The movement feels like the director put his camera on an elevator and pushed the "penthouse" button. As I watched it, I couldn't tell how high it would go, and didn't really know if it had a purpose. It seems to move for its own sake, like in the fair scene of *Sunrise*. Special effects played a role. Like the El Rancho shot, this was actually a composite of several shots of miniatures (rafters and equipment) and live-action, where the stagehands are standing. But on film it looks like a single movement, and it can take us out of the story for a moment. Without a character to lead the camera, the audience asks "where are we going" and "why are we moving so high." In a way it is like the Lumiere film where the viewer enjoys the "attraction" of movement through space. But then, at the end of the shot, Welles and Toland show that the scene is dramatically important. It shows the distance between Susan's lavish stage performance, and her public's actual perception of it. We start the shot on the illusion of the stage, but as the camera rises we see the mechanics behind the illusion, and see that it doesn't really help disguise the weakness at the center. This shot is a great achievement because it uses a technique from German and Classical Cinema, but in a new way. Film style tells the story, but it also adds flair and noticeable flourish. I think this is what makes *Citizen Kane* a great movie.

When Orson Welles released *Citizen Kane* it lost money at the box office. The public wasn't ready for such an experimental approach to film form. But time has shown that Welles did something more important than just pleasing an audience. He changed the face of filmmaking in Hollywood by pushing the techniques in new directions and

challenging the rule of "invisibility." "What is remarkable when considering the cinematography of *Kane*, is that instead of it being a result of years of practice and study, it feels so fresh because Welles had no previous experience and was forced to invent his technique on the set" (http://steadicam.lunarfilm.co.uk/Mike%20Marriage%20-%20Camera%20Movement.html). Maybe it took someone from outside of the studio system to discover its true potential. Later filmmakers, like Film Noir directors, now had new tools in their boxes to tell stories and move audiences.