

Childe Orson

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1941/05/03/childe-orson>

Published in April 1941 by John C. Mosher

The noise and the nonsense that have attended the release of “Citizen Kane” may for the time being befog the merit of this extraordinary film. Too many people may have too ready an inclination to seek out some fancied key in it, after the silly flurry in our press, and to read into the biography of its leading character extraneous resemblances to persons in actual life. There is a special kind of pleasure to be found in such research, and the success of the most commonplace movie often lies in the simple fact that it suggests one’s neighbors, or the scandalous people who took the house on the corner one year, or the handsome bootlegger who used to call every week. “Citizen Kane” can hardly suggest the ways and habits of neighbors, at least to most householders, but it may remind some of revelations in Sunday supplements. To others, I suppose, it will all seem more like Mars—just Mr. Orson Welles and his Mars again.

Since movies hitherto have commenced with a cast list and a vast directory of credits, we are promptly jolted out of our seats when “Citizen Kane” ignores this convention and slides at once into its story. For introduction, there is only a stylized and atmospheric hint of background, of shut high gates and formidable fencing, and this formal difference seems revolutionary enough to establish Mr. Welles’ independence of the conventions. This independence, like fresh air, sweeps on and on throughout the movie, and in spite of bringing to mind, by elaborately fashioned decoration, a picture as old

in movie history as “Caligari”, the irregularity of the opening sets a seal of original craftsmanship on what follows. Something new has come to the movie world at last.

Mr. Welles is not merely being smart, clever, or different. By the elliptical method he employs, he can trace a man’s life from childhood to death, presenting essential details in such brief flashes that we follow a complex narrative simply and clearly and find an involved and specialized character fully depicted, an important man revealed to us. With a few breakfast scenes, the progress of a marriage is shown as specifically as though we had read the wife’s diary. By a look and a gesture, electricians high above a stage describe the sad squawks an opera singer is giving below them. The use of an imaginary “March of Time” provides an outline which allows us to escape long exposition. Scenes in the great man’s Xanadu never drag, never oppress one with useless trimmings, yet we get an immediate comprehension of the unique, absurd establishment, with its echoes and its art collection, and the one gag allowed (“Don’t talk so loud. We’re not at home”) becomes just a reasonable statement.

Sometimes I thought there was too much shadow, that the film seemed to be performed in the dark. Mr. Welles likes a gloom. He blots out the faces of speakers and voices come from a limbo when it is what is being said and not how people look that is important. Only once or twice, at times like these, does the film seem mannered. For the most part we are too absorbed in the story and its characters to observe any tricks, too swiftly carried on by its intense, athletic scenes.

Dorothy Comingore, George Coulouris, and Joseph Cotten are on the list of the fine players, but clearly it is Orson Welles himself, as Mr. Kane, the great millionaire publisher, the owner of Xanadu, the frustrated politician, the bejeweled autocrat, the colossus of an earlier American era, who is the centre and focus of all the interest of the film. By a novelist's device, we learn of this man through the comments of the few who have been close to him, the second wife's being the most sensational—that second wife whom he drives into the grotesque mortification of an operatic career for which she has no talent. The total impression, though, is not of something entirely monstrous. Mr. Kane does not come out of all this a melodrama villain. I think it is a triumph of the film, and proof of its solid value and of the sense of its director and all concerned, that a human touch is not lost. Sympathy for the preposterous Mr. Kane survives. Indeed, there is something about him which seems admirable. I can imagine that various rich gentlemen who own newspapers may find the characterization only right and proper, and claim that their sensitivity, like Mr. Kane's, has been misunderstood by their intimates, and others may recognize many a Mr. Kane among their competitors.

With every picture now, Marlene Dietrich grows more and more a comic. I mean it in the most delightful and flattering sense, for the lady is very droll indeed, and charming also, in "The Flame of New Orleans." René Clair has the direction of her here—the business of

revealing her as a wicked siren of a century back, out to mullet the rich boys of the bayous. Both the director and the star clearly have a fine time of it. Her polite rendition of a drawing-room ditty about a maiden's blush is one of the bright movie tidbits of this spring. The story is one of those brittle, tricky items, candidly ridiculous, but its control proves that M. Clair has managed to salvage his own talent and leave the mark of his skill upon his first Hollywood film. Men, though naturally kept busy in the film, are rather kept in the background. We find Roland Young anxiously scurrying about as an eligible bachelor, and Bruce Cabot is here, too, as an eligible sailor. The sailor manages, I noted, to revivify that spark we used to recognize in the Marlene of the heartbreak days. Now the spark serves merely as part of the holiday fireworks.

Even Gale Sondergaard (formidable female that she is), Basil Rathbone, Hugh Herbert, Brod Crawford, and Bela Lugosi don't manage to make a good mystery out of "The Black Cat." The shade of Edgar Allan Poe, chancing in on the picture, would probably be the only spectator to remain startled or surprised by the plot after the first few minutes. Quickly the film shows itself to be the usual kind of thing about an old house with secret passages, sliding panels, disappearing figures, reaching hands, and the like. Greedy relatives

and insane menials scheme and maneuver. There are murders and a goodly number of Hugh Herbert squeals, and cats and kittens. ♦

Published in the print edition of the May 3, 1941, issue.