

## 20 inspired visual moments in Citizen Kane

It's this kind of dazzling invention that has made Orson Welles's masterful debut so influential for 75 years and counting.

[Leigh Singer](#)



Citizen Kane (1941)

If you hold with [Orson Welles's](#) gleeful endorsement that making a film is “the biggest electric train set any boy ever had”, then his feature debut [Citizen Kane](#) is the hi-tech, speeding locomotive that powered cinema into the future. Still regarded as an all-time great, its huge influence is matched only by its reputation as one of the most inventive and exuberant of movie masterpieces. On the film's 75th anniversary, here are just some of the visual innovations led by Welles and his master cinematographer [Gregg Toland](#).

1. From its very opening sequence, the film displays its bravura visual intelligence. The foreboding introduction to Kane's Xanadu fortress shows a single light from an upper room within...



...and in a series of dissolves, even including a reflection on the water...



...we slowly come ever closer towards Xanadu...



...and with every shot bringing us nearer...



...the light source remains...



...in exactly the same place within the frame. Simple, fluid, elegant.



2. One of the most famous close-ups in film history – in a film that rarely gives them at all: Kane’s final word, “Rosebud”, which sets up the mystery at the heart of the story. Note the swirl of snowflakes, already suggesting a psychological as well as a physical space.



3. A disorientating view through Kane’s dropped snow globe’s smashed glass. Is this the way to view the entire film – memory and fantasy distorting reality?



4. A brilliant change of pace: from ominous gothic drama to the jaunty fake newsreel footage of 'News on the March', a clever summation of Charles Foster Kane's life told as obituary...



...and packed with visual invention. Here Welles precedes Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983) by 40-plus years, inserting himself into archive footage – deliberately made to look old and faded – with famous historical figures like Adolf Hitler and, here, US president Teddy Roosevelt.



5. An example of Gregg Toland's dazzling chiaroscuro lighting. What better way to establish a mystery than by shrouding even the journalists/detectives in secrecy too, with William Alland's investigator Thompson always shown from behind or in silhouette. Critic Roger Ebert also suggested it's an in-joke at US magnate Henry R. Luce's concept of faceless group journalism.



6. Pure giddy showmanship from Welles and Toland. To introduce Kane's second wife Susan, the camera cranes up the outside of the shabby-looking bar she's performing at...



...goes through the neon sign...



...tilts down towards the rain-soaked skylight through which we can just see Susan at a table...



... and then Welles uses a lightning flash as cover for a quick dissolve...



... before descending into the bar interior, as if the camera has passed through the glass in one continuous shot.



7. One of the most celebrated, genuinely unbroken shots in the film. Starting outside on young Charles playing in the snow, unaware of his impending fate...



...the camera tracks inside the window as his mother looks on...



...tracking all the way across the room, as the deal is done to sign Charles away to banker Mr Thatcher. Charles is ultimately positioned – imprisoned, even – in the background window, between

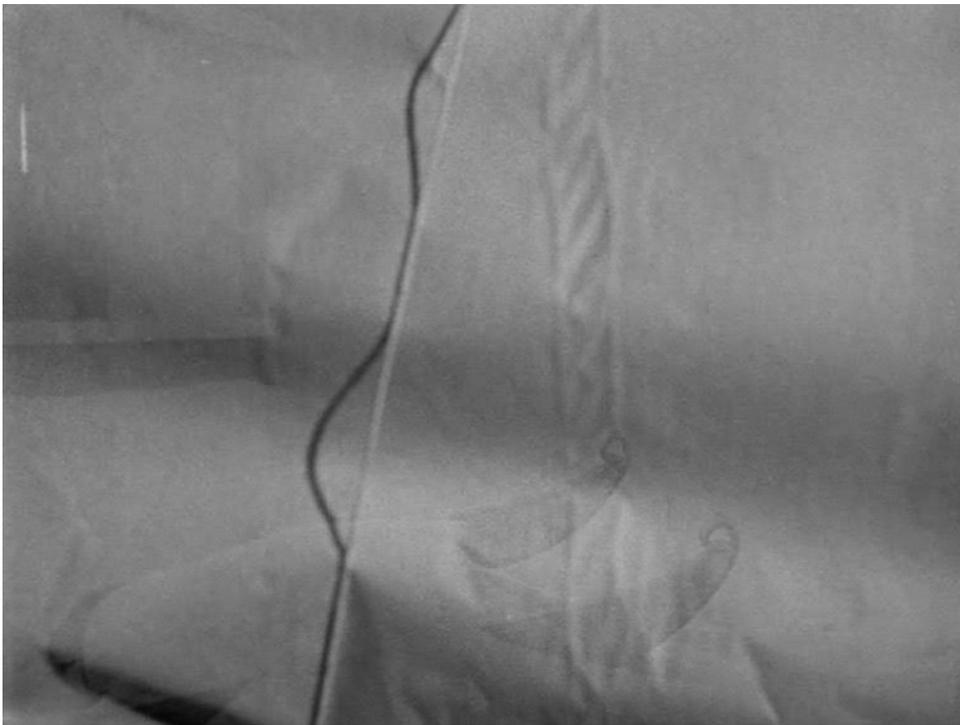
his feuding parents, Thatcher positioned on the same side as his mother, who firmly overrules his feckless father. It's brilliant visual storytelling...



8. ...as is a following sequence (and foreshadowed "Rosebud" clue) of young Charles's beloved sledge now buried in the snow. When Welles fades in...



...the wrapping paper of a Christmas present, torn away to reveal a fancy new sledge...



...the look on Charles's face shows clearly how his new wealth and privilege is no substitute for what he has now lost.



9. Another hugely inventive transition. As the adult Kane, now a newspaper publisher, admires the photo of staff from rival paper The Chronicle, the camera moves in closer on the line-up...



...while Kane tells us that six years later, he bought them all up to work for his Inquirer paper...



...and he walks into the shot to reveal that they're now posing – in exactly the same position – for his own photo. Genius.



10. The numerous flashbacks were cleverly planned. Here, Joseph Cotten's Jed Leland reminisces about Kane's marriage, already positioned camera left, to allow the next scene to dissolve in, while Leland is still talking about it.



11. Another dazzling use of montage to show the decline of Kane's first marriage. First positioned close together and attentive at the same table...



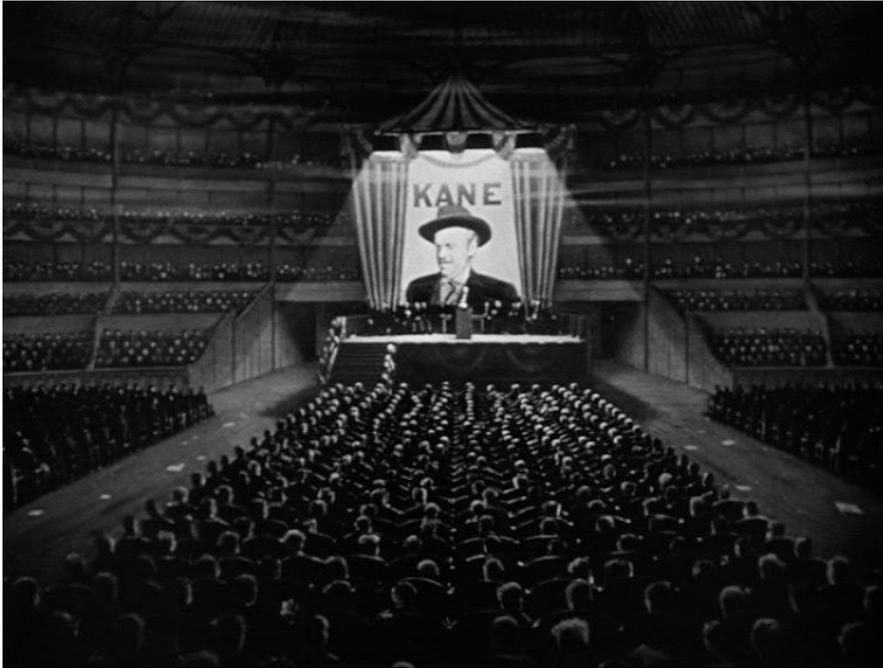
...a series of whip pans between single medium shots of Kane and Emily shows the passing of time and their gradual distancing...



...confirmed by the final wide shot of two disinterested partners, sat apart and sharing a table but little else.



12. Kane's political rally at Madison Square Garden would ordinarily demand a huge number of extras to give a sense of the event's scale. Instead, they used matte drawings of the arena, with small holes cut to allow light to shine through, giving impression of audience members and movement.



13. Welles's instinct for spatial composition and blocking of his actors was unerring. Here, for the scene where his political rival Jim Geddes reveals Kane's mistress to his wife Susan, the framing of competing glances and eye lines enhances the complex web of emotions at play.



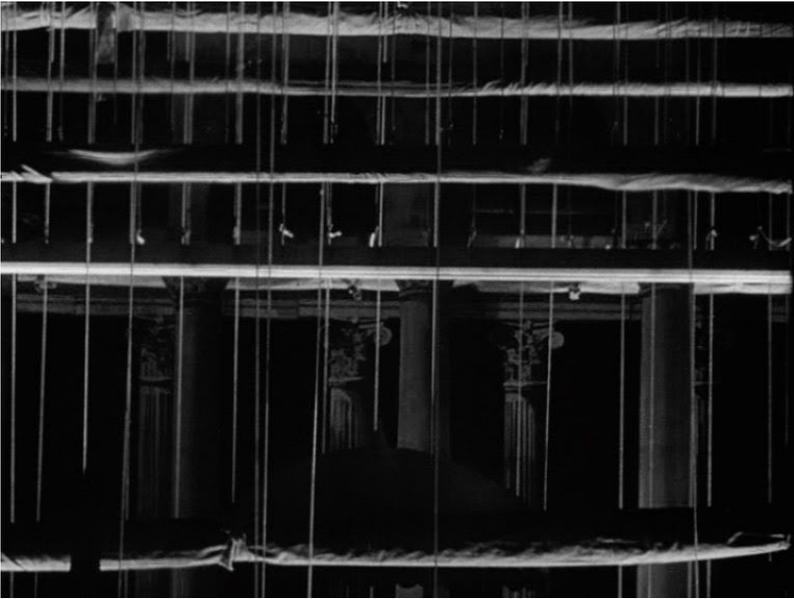
14. Citizen Kane is regularly filmed from low angles, which required the innovative use of ceilinged sets – ideal for suggesting limits to its protagonist's rise to power. This post-election defeat sequence uses the film's lowest angle shot, from a special trench, showing Kane as isolated and completely hemmed in, top to bottom.



15. Among the film's many optical illusions is this clever augmentation of scale. As Susan performs onstage and the camera rises upwards towards the rigging...



...Welles inserted a miniature built in the RKO studio to exaggerate extra height as the camera rises higher to the rafters...



...where a linked live shot shows the stage hands' disapproving verdict on Mrs Kane's singing abilities.



16. Citizen Kane is famous for its use of 'deep focus' photography – keeping all elements in the frame in focus simultaneously – which required innovative combinations of camera lenses, lighting and composition. The result, as here, is a rich mise-en-scène and depth-of-field within a single shot that layers Kane, his about-to-be-sacked friend Jed Leland and, waiting in the background, still-loyal employee Bernstein.



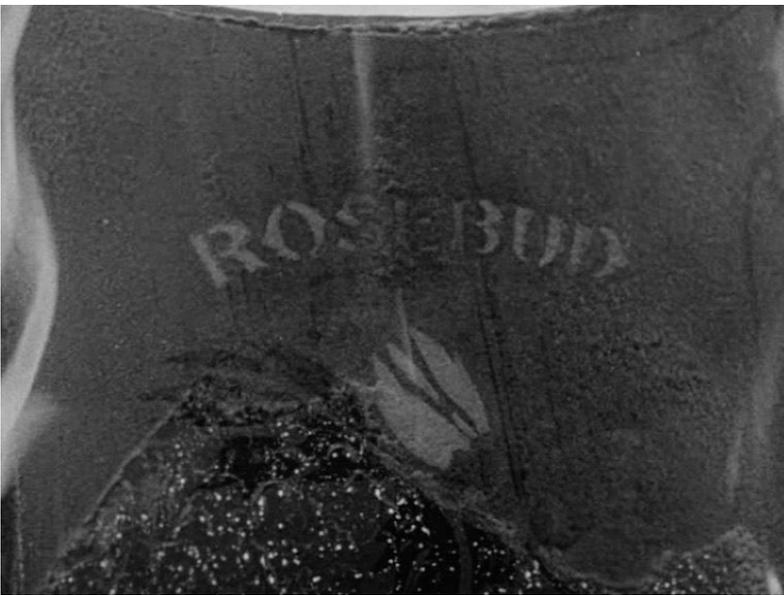
17. Charles Foster Kane at his lowest point, aged and abandoned, a fractured soul, wonderfully visualised by this hall of mirrors shot. It's also a neat antidote to the idea that anyone's life can be summed up by a single word.



18. The overwhelming tracking shot across the deceased Kane's vast material possessions, a shot today achieved effortlessly, but then a stunning display of technical camera prowess (Spielberg paid homage to it in the final scenes of Raiders of the Lost Ark).



19. The film's penultimate shot that everyone knows: the identity of Charles Foster Kane's "Rosebud", just before it too goes up in smoke, its mystery unsolved – and, really, in a wider sense, unsolvable.



20. For all the talk of Orson Welles's arrogance and ego, the final credit on Kane, which he shares with Gregg Toland, reveals a deep sense of gratitude for his partner-in-crime's invaluable contribution. You might be able to build a train set all by yourself, but a film requires teamwork – which Welles duly acknowledges here.

ORSON WELLES  
Direction-Production

GREGG TOLAND, A.S.C.  
Photography