

“Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” Two Tricks to the Myth-Making of *Citizen Kane*

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Abstract

This paper analyses, compares and contrasts *Citizen Kane's* two diegetic elements: “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball,” and locates them as the main signs that build the system Orson Welles created in his first feature film. In the first scene of the film, before the introduction of the “Rosebud” idea, the “Glass Ball” is presented only and exclusively to the extra diegetic audience (the viewers). The difference between to whom the former and the latter are presented, and the sequence in which they are presented, was what guided this paper’s research. Semiotics, cultural studies and film theory sustain and reinforce the argument that Orson Welles has used the skills he had developed as an amateur magician to create the myth of Charles Foster Kane to the diegetic audience (the characters within the film) and the myth of Citizen Kane, to the extra diegetic audience (the viewers). Moreover, “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” are interdependent signs that form a code to mislead and misguide both diegetic and extra diegetic audience to an elusive search for meaning.

Keywords: Citizen Kane, film studies, film theory.

1. Body of Paper

Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941) has been for fifty years at the top of *Sight & Sound's* once-a-decade international poll of film critics. Since then, criticism regarding Welles’ masterpiece have taken many different approaches. In some instances, as in Andre Bazin’s work *Orson Welles: A Critical View* (1950), criticism is dedicated to its formal mastery. Other works focus on *Citizen Kane's* political and historical relations to contemporary mass media issues, as in Laura Mulvey’s *Citizen Kane* (1992). This paper explores the system Orson Welles created in *Citizen Kane*, based on the code established in the very first scene of the movie by the presentation and juxtaposition of two elements: “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball.”

In *Against Interpretation* (1966) Susan Sontag challenges the general and traditional notion of art interpretation as a search for hidden meanings, and in respect to films she states: “In good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret.” Rather than interpret *Citizen Kane*, this paper aims to reveal the film’s “directness” through the analysis of “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball.” The manipulation and presentation of “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” are important - if not the most important - tools of *Citizen Kane's* diegesis, with evidences provided all along the film itself. These evidences are the film “directness,” they are visible and audible elements from which *Citizen Kane* can be deconstructed and revaluated. The film’s first scene presents us the following: After a short opening tour through the ruins of Kane’s decadent palace, “impossible” snowflakes appear on the screen¹. The image of a little house covered with snow overlays the image of the “impossible” falling snowflakes. The camera pulls back showing that the little house is inside a “Glass Ball,” which is on Kane’s left hand. The snowflakes overlay the whole sequence, as if the snowflakes are falling both inside and outside the “Glass Ball.” Kane’s lips then form the word “Rosebud,” juxtaposing the word and the image of “impossible” snowflakes. Finally, Kane dies. The “Glass Ball”

falls from his hand and breaks into pieces. The “impossible” snowflakes cease to fall. From this point to the end, the film’s narrative will oscillate between memories of many different characters, always punctuated by the search for “Rosebud’s” meaning and the appearance of the “Glass Ball.”

Thus, “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” appear in the first scene of the film producing a specific code, that is “a series of rules that will allow one to attribute a signification to the sign.”² This code then operates similarly to a magical trick, using a literal sleight of the hand (Kane dropping the “Glass Ball” at the moment of his death) to misdirect the interpretation of “Rosebud” as Kane’s lost childhood. Moreover, “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” are interdependent tools upon which the myth of Charles Foster Kane - the character -, and the myth of *Citizen Kane* - the film - are built. *Citizen Kane*’s great illusion - the search for “Rosebud’s” meaning - has endured as long as the myth of Charles Foster Kane and the film itself. Both elements then, play a major role in the film’s diegesis, “the content of the narrative, the fictional world as described inside the story.”³

In contrast to the understanding that both “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” are main structural parts of *Citizen Kane*’s narrative, here is what a quick Google search offers as the film’s plot: “When a reporter is assigned to decipher newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane’s dying words, his investigation gradually reveals the fascinating portrait of a complex man who rose from obscurity to staggering heights. Though Kane’s friend and colleague Jedediah Leland (Joseph Cotten), and his mistress, Susan Alexander (Dorothy Comingore), shed fragments of light on Kane’s life, the reporter fears he may never penetrate the mystery of the elusive man’s final word, “Rosebud.” Google serves here as a source with the purpose of evidencing that an ordinary summary doesn’t include the “Glass Ball” as part of narrative.” Moreover, the plot’s descriptions, critical analysis, academic works and essays, have developed a common interpretation for “Rosebud” as a romanticized and idealized connotation for Kane’s lost childhood. The “Glass Ball,” in another hand, has been interpreted as the mere diegetic vehicle to access the supposedly lost childhood. This common interpretation is precisely the effectiveness of Orson Welles’ trick. Both general and specialized audiences approach “Rosebud” as the sole main subject, while the “Glass Ball” is put aside. The “Glass Ball” is only brought back as forceful vehicle for a misled interpretation, as states Lars Trodson, author of the book *About Orson*: “Welles himself called the revelation about the sled a cheap trick. And if he called it that, why should we believe that the sled [Rosebud] is the thing to focus on? Maybe, like a consummate trickster, that sled was misdirecting our attention all along.”

The ways “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” are displayed establish a film that leans towards a presentational mode rather than a representational one. By the use of specific angles, cuts and transitions, “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” are not meant to represent a narrative. Furthermore, both elements are meant no present a problem with an introjected solution to be revealed and completed by the audience, as an open work that offers apparently disconnected elements that can be only assembled by the viewer - the extra diegetic audience.⁴ This presentational concept provides an elaborated and planned scene that encourage the viewer to come to conclusions and interpretations and believe in them. It works as an invitation by Orson Welles to do so. As a diegetic element, the “Glass Ball” is part of the film’s narrative space, in other words, it is being shown on the screen as part of the action displayed. As such, it is a shared information between the characters in the film (diegetic audience) and the viewers (extra diegetic audience). “Rosebud” in another hand, is an intra diegetic element referring to a differentiated emotional space: Kane’s last moments. Kane’s last thoughts and feeling that might involve memories, regrets, or even joy. Whatever it is, “Rosebud” as an intra diegetic element is offered as an event during which “the character’s subjectivity becomes ours: there is a double privileging - we are positioned not only physically but also psychologically as the subject.”⁵ Being an intra diegetic element, “Rosebud” successfully creates identification and a sense of shared subjectivity between Kane and the extra diegetic audience (the viewers). Through the manipulation of a diegetic element - the “Glass Ball” - and an intra diegetic element - “Rosebud” -, Orson Welles tricked the viewers to pursue a search for “Rosebud’s” meaning, while the “Glass Ball” is left to fill what Susan Sontag refers to as the “itch for interpretation.” This “itch for interpretation” here is the need to make sense of the intimacy created between viewer and the main character, Kane.

To whom and how the two elements - “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” - are presented in the first scene of the film produce a specific code. A code similar to magic. More than just MacGuffins (“An object or device in a movie or a book that serves merely as a trigger for the plot”), and rather as signs that compose a narrative system, “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” build the code for *Citizen Kane*’s system.⁶ James Randi, the Great Randi, a worldwide guru of magic, once said that “Magicians are the world’s greatest communicators; it’s just that everything they are telling you is wrong!” Charles Foster Kane’s myth-making can’t be classified as wrong or right, but it certainly resonates with Randi’s words. As *Citizen Kane*’s story is told by many different narrators, the film’s story can be regarded as elusive at the very least. Moreover, in Welles own words: “Why not? I am charlatan!”⁷ Magic works through the sleight of hand to misdirect the audience focus while an unseen act is taking place, creating the impression that something impossible/magical just happened. Similarly, when in the first scene of the film the “Glass Ball” is held and then

dropped and broken into pieces, the extra diegetic audience (the viewers) experiences the effect of Orson Welles sleight of hands performing a magical trick. This magical act later will misdirect the focus to “Rosebud’s” meaning, while the “Glass Ball” remains in the shadow. Moreover, the trick allows further “Rosebud’s” interpretation as a romanticized Kane’s childhood. Thus, the relationship between “Rosebud” and the extra diegetic audience is purposely established so the viewers can retain it throughout the film until the end, when “Rosebud” is materialized as a forgotten childhood sled turned into ashes. By the end of the film, Mr. Thompson (the reporter assigned to search for “Rosebud’s” meaning and member of the diegetic audience) finds nothing. However, to the extra diegetic audience (the viewers) something else is given: the image of a sled where the word “Rosebud” is printed been burned in the fireplace of Kane’s palace. Here, another complimentary elusive trick occurs: Because of an earlier scene, where the extra diegetic and diegetic audience are presented to what was supposed to be Charles Foster Kane’s childhood, the film’s diegesis leads to a mythicized and romanticized interpretation of “Rosebud” as being Kane’s lost childhood. As his childhood is presented in the film by an imaginary memory, the whole diegesis is transformed in a great act of illusion. The scene that refers to Kane’s childhood is just and only the register of Mr. Thatcher’s (the wealthy man who took the guard of the young Kane from his parents in exchange for money) written memories. These memories are then read and imagined by a second character: Mr. Thompson - the reporter. Therefore, the described childhood could and could not be seen as a reliable information, much less as a referent. The two signs then, produce an almost invisible code that unfolds the film on the basis of a juxtaposition, therefore creating at least one diegetic tension, that is the display of an intra diegetic element - “Rosebud” - versus a diegetic element - “Glass Ball.” This opposing relationship negates the more commonly used referential relationship “Rosebud” equals “Glass Ball.” Furthermore, both the myth of Charles Foster Kane - the character, and the myth of *Citizen Kane* - the film, are based in the first scene presentational mode and its consequences. “Rosebud” invites the extra diegetic audience to associate the word to a certain referent presented through images that are a product of Mr. Thompson’s (the reporter) imagination while reading Mr. Thatcher’s memories. It is at this moment of memory and imagination that the trick infused in the first scene of the film unfolds in a magical and illusory myth: Kane’s “lost childhood” as the meaning of “Rosebud.”

While nobody - nor diegetic or extra diegetic audience - knows what “Rosebud” means, and everyone keeps searching for its meaning, the “Glass Ball” appears in two more moments in the film. These three presentations of the “Glass Ball” offer yet more direct evidences of how Orson Welles’ trick is performed. First “Glass Ball” appearance after the first scene transports the audience and the film’s characters to Kane’s imagined childhood as referred above. In a second appearance, very discreetly, the “Glass Ball” is one of the objects of Kane’s second wife - Susan. When the “Glass Ball” is seen in Susan’s room, the film offers yet another “directness” to stick with: Susan asks Kane if he is a magician, which for Kane answers that he is not. That “directness” offered through a dialogue, presents an interesting paradox: while Orson Welles is performing an act of misleading magic with *Citizen Kane*, in the film Welles as an actor performing Kane denies the magic performance. Finally, at the end, when Kane loses Susan and destroys her bedroom, he holds the “Glass Ball,” uttering the word “Rosebud.”

If nothing about Kane’s presented childhood can be retained as reliable information, “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” might not have a meaning at all and at the same time that might be what their meaning is. Through the voice of Kane’s butler Raymond, the film reveals the fragility of “Rosebud’s” signification. In Raymond’s words, “He [Kane] did all kinds of things that didn't mean anything.” Not coincidentally, these are the last words uttered in the film. However, after establishing the possibility of meaning absence, the film ends with the image of something been burned in Kane’s fireplace. It is a sled, just as the sled showed in Kane’s imagined memory childhood scene. As the camera gets closer, the extra audience (the viewers only) can read the word “Rosebud.” Therefore, by the end of the film what rest is nothing but a myth, or better, two myths. One, Charles Foster Kane the character. Another, *Citizen Kane* the film. Both myths require intensive search, research, deconstruction and debate. Both are built upon many stories and versions, many memories and imaginations, as a great myths demand.

Citizen Kane is, of course, much more than two elements. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine the film without “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball.” In using two different yet complimentary signs - “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” - Orson Welles created a code for his film that was not part of the usual cinematic arsenal, at least not at the time it was produced. Perhaps that’s why at the time the focus of film criticism was directed toward cinematography, sound, lighting and screenwriting. Later as the movie kept its status, and film theory was developed to new levels, *Citizen Kane* was appreciated as film d’auteur. During its 75 years, “Rosebud” has been fully explored creating the myth-making of *Citizen Kane* inside (diegesis) and outside (extra diegesis) the movie. In Welles own explanation of *Citizen Kane*, we find his statement in respect to how to tell a story more than what story to tell: “He [Charles Foster Kane] is never judged with the objectivity of an author, and the point of the picture is not so much the solution of the problem as its presentation.”⁸ Therefore, to whom and how “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” are presented define the tricky invitation to the film’s complex diegesis. As a magic lover and practitioner, Welles has made intriguing use of “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball” to establish an illusionistic search for meaning, while constructing two myths at once:

The myth of *Citizen Kane*, the film; and the myth of Charles Foster Kane, the character. The former, a work that has produced a great amount of different interpretations, legends, stories and debates over the last 75 years; the latter, a character equally endlessly analyzed, interpreted and debated for as long as the film exists. Without “Rosebud” and the “Glass Ball,” the film’s plot could remain untouched, but the story would not be the same. If faced as labyrinth, as once proposed Jorge Luis Borges, *Citizen Kane* should be seen as one that creates as many false trails as it can, misleading both diegetic and extra diegetic audiences, but offering one center: Orson Welles’ cinematic mythmaking and his mastery in creating an elegant trick played since 1941.⁹

2. References

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2. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979), 28.
3. Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 100.
4. Annette Michelson and Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California, 1979), 124.
5. Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema*, 100.
6. “*Oxford Living Dictionaries*,” Oxford, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mcguffin>
7. *F For Fake*, DVD directed by Orson Welles, written by Orson Welles and Oja Kodar (France: Saci, 1975).
8. Christopher Hawthorne, *Rosebud Remix: The Citizen Kane DVD Is As Coldly Magnificent As The Original Film*, Slate Blog. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2001/10/rosebud_remix.html
9. Jorge Luis Borges and Eliot Weinberger, *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

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