PBS documentary: "The Battle Over Citizen Kane"

A revealing look at an old controversy

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In 1940 Orson Welles, then 25 years old, made an extraordinary film, *Citizen Kane* **,** for the RKO studio in Hollywood. Welles and screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz based their script, a critical look at the career and times of an American newspaper magnate, on the life of William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951). Still a powerful ruling class figure at the time, Hearst launched a ferocious campaign against the film, preventing it from being widely seen.

After an initial run in 1941 the studio stored Welles's film safely away in its vault. The film's qualities were not universally recognized for another 15 or 20 years, by which time Welles's existence largely consisted of begging and borrowing funds in the US and abroad with which to make his movies.

In the making of their documentary, "The Battle Over *Citizen Kane*," recently aired on PBS, Thomas Lennon and Richard Ben Cramer clearly operated on the basis of several premises. Chief among these was the assumption that Welles's collision with Hearst was a ghastly and avoidable error. They furthermore took as a given the notion that *Citizen Kane* was Welles's greatest achievement and that his subsequent films were negligible.

The documentary makers' starting points, and the fact that they feel no need to argue them, say a good deal about the current ethos in the film and television world. The word "courage" does not appear once in the documentary.

One of those interviewed, writer Richard France, asserts that Welles had thought the controversy would be "beneficial" to his career, but that he had been wrong, "terribly so, terribly so, horribly so." Filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich chimes in along the same lines.

The documentary makers present the conflict over *Citizen Kane* as a battle between "two outsized Americans," Hearst and Welles. The breathless narration explains: "They were proud, gifted and destructive, geniuses each in his way."

This sort of superficial comparison—a cat has a head, a dog has a head, therefore a cat equals a dog—conceals far more than it reveals. For the purposes of proving their argument the filmmakers set aside troublesome historical and social questions. Egoists they both may have been, but the conflict between Hearst and Welles had more than a psychological significance.

Hearst's father, a mining millionaire and US Senator from California, handed his son control of the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1887. In his early days as a publisher Hearst cultivated a demagogic populism. His papers favored trade unions and progressive taxation, exposed corruption and generally inveighed against the rich and powerful.

At the same time Hearst was an ardent supporter of US imperialism. During the Spanish-American War in 1898 he went ashore in Cuba, "liberated" by the US from Spain, and personally accepted the surrender of a group of Spanish soldiers. Twice elected to Congress, Hearst's lifelong ambition to reside in the White House was never fulfilled.

In later years, particularly after the Depression dealt blows to his empire, Hearst became an out and out reactionary. He considered Roosevelt's New Deal reforms in the 1930s to be the first steps toward communism in the US.

In his campaign against *Citizen Kane* **,** which fictionally treated his extramarital affair with actress Marion Davies, Hearst made use of all his weaponry. Gossip columnist and Hearst confidante Louella

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Parsons, after attending a special screening of the film, telephoned executives from every major studio, as well as RKO board member Nelson Rockefeller, and reportedly said, among other things: “Mr. Hearst says if you boys want private lives, I'll give you private lives.”

Hearst threatened as well to point out to his newspapers' readers the large number of Jews and Jewish refugees employed in Hollywood, an issue about which studio heads were notoriously sensitive. Hearst papers branded Welles—who had had artistic associations with many left-wingers in the theater world and had evinced a general sympathy for radicalism—a “red” and set the FBI on him. Louis B. Mayer offered to buy the negative of *Citizen Kane* for $800,000 and have it burned.

Lennon and Cramer never point out the unequal nature of the contest. On one side, a 25-year-old actor and film director; on the other, a multimillionaire able to mobilize the media, film industry and the state against his adversary.

Welles was an extraordinary talent, perhaps the greatest theatrical mind in American history. He had the uncanny ability to place people among objects and decor and set them in motion so that the dramatic problems inherent in their lives could emerge with great clarity and force.

The product of an unstable home—an idiosyncratic inventor of a father and a progressive-minded, artistically-inclined mother—Welles began staging theatrical productions at school in Illinois before he was a teenager. At 16 he made his professional acting debut. He first made a mark in American theater with his 1936 production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in Harlem, performed by an all-black cast. Welles followed this up with a presentation of *Julius Caesar*, drawing parallels to the growth of fascism. In this period he also staged Marc Blitzstein's leftist musical drama *The Cradle Will Rock*. In 1939 RKO made Welles an unprecedented offer—$225,000 to direct two films with complete artistic freedom—and he accepted.

Although its technical innovations may seem less striking than they did to audiences in 1941, *Citizen Kane* retains its force today. The film is by no means a simplistic or unsympathetic portrait of the Hearst figure. Hollywood in the 1930s had presented far more villainous plutocrats—one thinks of figures in Frank Capra's films, for example. On the contrary, the subversive element in *Citizen Kane* is that the central character, played by Welles himself, is a tragic figure, a potentially great man, imprisoned by his money and an insatiable desire to possess objects and people.

In May 1941 the American ruling class, on the eve of mobilizing the population for intervention in World War II, faced a delicate political situation. It was not prepared to tolerate with equanimity such an “unpatriotic” exposure of the emptiness of the American Dream as *Citizen Kane*, particularly in a medium with a mass audience.

The documentary filmmakers fail to make any reference to this social and political context. Furthermore, because they identify success with a stable career and a steady income, they think Welles's subsequent work hardly worth considering. It never occurs to them that insofar as he fought for a particular kind of artistic truth, his “failure” in Hollywood was nearly guaranteed.

At least five of Welles's films— *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Chimes at Midnight (*1966)—at moments or as a whole equal or surpass *Citizen Kane* in intensity and depth.

The makers of “The Battle Over *Citizen Kane*” examine, albeit superficially, the impact of the conflict with Hearst on Welles's career. But they never think to ask themselves the more profound and troubling questions: what was the impact of the controversy on Hollywood and what did it reveal about the American film industry?

One might argue the case that the campaign against *Citizen Kane* showed the essential incompatibility of radical-critical films with the Hollywood studio system, and more generally of artistic freedom with an entertainment industry run for profit.

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