Films and Society

Orson Welles
Citizen Kane
Orson Welles, Citizen Kane 1941

- One of the most controversial movies in Hollywood history

- How does Kane become a millionaire?
- How does Charles Foster Kane embody the American Dream?
- What are the limits of power and money?
Orson Welles vs. William Randolph Hearst

• Orson Welles (1915-1985)
  • child prodigy, theatre and radio actor
  • He is invited to Hollywood and gets a contract of full creative control for a movie

• William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951)
  • Son of a self-made millionaire & US senator
  • Newspaper magnate
  • Failed mayoral, gubernatorial, presidential candidate
  • Builder/owner of Hearst Castle in San Simeon
Rosebud

• Film starts with his death and then we are told the whole story of Kane as a newsreel
  – Stock footages and some footages shot for the film
• The rest is the reconstruction of the life of Charles Foster Kane,
  – by a virtually anonymous reporter
  – in search of the meaning of his last word “Rosebud”
  – The fragments are told by various people who knew him
Visual language of Citizen Kane

• Innovative visual effects (cinematography by Gregg Toland)
  – “Deep focus”
  – Light and shadows – *chiaroscuro* (“sculpting with light”)
  – Size shift -- relative size of people and props
  – Innovative camera angles
  – Right bottom corner: ‘the witness position’
  – Special effects
  – Makeup – Welles goes from 25 to 70
Citizen Kane and the American Dream

- Kane’s childhood is traded for money
- He rebels against his rich background
- and becomes rich again through this rebellion (his newspapers)

- Power, money and objects do not bring happiness
- Happiness is something more mysterious, intangible
  - For Kane it is linked to his lost childhood (the key to his bond to Suzanne Alexander)

• What do we learn about the immigrant experience from this movie?
• To what extent does the maffia embody basic American values and the American Dream?
• What do Vito and Michael Corleone stand for?