The first item in this collection—written in late 1971 as an article for Film Comment but run as a book review—is one of the first pieces of film criticism I ever published. It also proved to be one of the most consequential for me personally. Among its probable consequences was the blocking of any possible friendship with Pauline Kael—a writer I had admired and learned from, in spite of the objections stated here, and whose own early polemical forays in I Lost It at the Movies undoubtedly exerted some influence on my own, as my title suggests. (I was surprised to hear from friends of hers much later that this article had such a negative effect on her; I had wrongly and perhaps naively assumed that because she had been so adroit at such polemical forays herself, in a spirit of fair play, she would have been more tolerant of one waged against her own writing.) Another possible (and more important) consequence was getting invited to lunch by Orson Welles in Paris a few months later, after writing him a letter asking a few questions about his first feature film project—the subject of chapter 2.

I don’t know if Welles ever read my attack on “Raising kane,” and Kael’s article never came up during our lunch. In my letter I alluded to having just published such an attack, which might have bolstered his good will if he hadn’t already been aware of it. In late June 2006—during a brief visit to the newly acquired “Everybody’s Orson Welles” collections at the University of Michigan (see my introduction to chapter 17) to select some images for the cover design of this book—I was delighted to discover that the voluminous Welles papers previously held by Oja Kodar contained a copy of my attack on “Raising kane.” But
I have no way of knowing whether Welles acquired this before or after our meeting. It seems likelier that he acquired it afterwards—not only because he never mentioned it, but also because my first paragraph contains a phrase that might well have dissuaded him from reading any further: “[Kael’s] basic contention, that the script of CITIZEN KANE is almost solely the work of Herman J. Mankiewicz, seems well-supported and convincing.”

I posted my letter on a Saturday afternoon and, having little hope of it being answered, went ahead and finished a draft of my HEART OF DARKNESS article by staying up Sunday night until around seven in the morning. Two hours later my phone rang, and the voice at the other end said something like, “I’m an assistant of Orson Welles, and Mr. Welles was wondering if you could have lunch with him today at noon.” Less than three hours later, I found myself walking a few blocks south of my rue Mazarine flat to La Méditerranée, the seafood restaurant across from the Odéon theater where I was asked to meet Welles. Fearful of bungling such a rare opportunity out of nervousness compounded by sleep deprivation, I decided not to bring along a tape recorder, restricting myself to a notebook. Welles arrived at his reserved table only five or ten minutes late and immediately apologized for his tardiness. When I began by expressing my amazement at his invitation, he cordially explained it was because he didn’t have time to answer my letter.

My belief that Welles didn’t have much to do with the writing of CITIZEN KANE was based almost entirely on my conviction that John Houseman, whose RUN-THROUGH I had recently read, was a reliable source of information about Welles—a belief sorely tested by Welles himself during our lunch when I brought up Houseman’s remarks in that book about the HEART OF DARKNESS project. Welles insisted that Houseman was in no position to have known much about the project because he hadn’t even been around during any of the story conferences. Then he went on to say (I’m paraphrasing from memory), “He’s the worst possible enemy anyone can possibly have, because he gives the impression to others”—meaning me in this case—“of being sympathetic.” “That’s really a pity,” I replied, “because his discussion of the Mercury radio shows is probably the most detailed account of them that’s appeared anywhere in print.” There was a long, smoldering silence at this point—the only moment during our meeting when Welles betrayed any anger—after which he said quietly, with a touch of both sorrow and sarcasm, “So be it.”
The subsequent publication of “The Kane Mutiny,” signed by Peter Bogdanovich, in Esquire (October 1972) raised further doubts in my mind about Houseman’s reliability, especially on the issue of Welles’s work on the Kane script. These were finally confirmed by the scholarship of Robert L. Carringer on the subject—above all in an essay, “The Scripts of Citizen Kane,” published in Critical Inquiry 5 (1978). This remains the definitive and conclusive word on the issue of the script’s authorship—even more than Carringer’s book on the making of Kane—yet it would appear that few Welles scholars are aware of it; none of the Welles biographies in English even cites it. I suspect this could partially be because the biographers wrongly concluded that the same facts were available in Carringer’s book; some of them are, but many of them aren’t. In any case, Carringer’s essential article was finally reprinted—first in Ronald Gottesman’s excellent (albeit pricey) hardcover collection Perspectives on Citizen Kane (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996)—where it appears immediately after “I Missed It at the Movies”—and then, more recently, in James Naremore’s Citizen Kane: A Casebook (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

For the Gottesman collection, I incorporated into the present article some brief passages that had originally been cut by Film Comment’s editors—deletions that I protested and quoted in a letter published in their Summer 1972 issue, and which I have restored again here. I have two other regrets about this piece apart from my bungling of the script’s authorship, both of them much less serious. One is my contention that there is only one scene in Kane with the “‘News on the March’ people” (for some reason, I wasn’t counting the final scene in the Kane mansion). The other is my penchant at this stage in my writing for italicizing various words and phrases for emphasis—a habit probably influenced by film theorist Noël Burch—that would be impossible for me to sustain today at the Chicago Reader, where I have been writing since 1987, given my editors’ complete lack of tolerance for this practice.

Finally, a postscript relating to my allusion to André Bazin’s 1950 monograph on Welles: One likely consequence of this allusion was receiving an offer from a Harper & Row editor in 1974, shortly after I moved to London, to translate a book of Bazin’s called Orson Welles—an assignment and experience I’ll have more to say about later (see chapter 7). For now, I’d only like to clear up the common misconception that the book I wound up translating was the same book I’m alluding to here. Despite the claim of François Truffaut in his foreword to
Orson Welles: A Critical View (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), the book I translated was not a “revised and expanded edition” of Bazin’s 1950 book but a later and inferior study, written towards the end of his life. As of 2006, I’m sorry to say that the 1950 book by Bazin—his first, incidentally—remains unavailable in English. And as for the “embarrassing factual errors” that I allude to, I can recall only one of these today: attributing the cinematography of THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS to Gregg Toland.

The conceptions are basically kitsch... popular melodrama—Freud plus scandal, a comic strip about Hearst.

Although these words are used by Pauline Kael to describe CITIZEN KANE, in a long essay introducing the film’s script, they might apply with greater rigor to her own introduction. Directly after the above quote, she makes it clear that Kane is “kitsch redeemed,” and this applies to her essay as well: backed by impressive research, loaded with entertaining nuggets of gossip and social history, and written with a great deal of dash and wit, “Raising Kane” is a work that has much to redeem it. As a bedside anecdote collection, it is easily the equal of The Minutes of the Last Meeting and Robert Lewis Taylor’s biography of W. C. Fields, and much of what she has to say about Hollywood is shrewd and quotable (e.g., “The movie industry is always frightened, and is always proudest of films that celebrate courage.”) Her basic contention, that the script of Kane is almost solely the work of Herman J. Mankiewicz, seems well-supported and convincing—although hardly earth-shaking for anyone who was reading Penelope Houston’s interview with John Houseman in Sight and Sound nine years ago (Autumn 1962). But as criticism, “Raising Kane” is mainly a conspicuous failure—a depressing performance from a supposedly major film critic—in which the object under examination repeatedly disappears before our eyes. Contrary to her own apparent aims and efforts, Kael succeeds more in burying Kane than in praising it, and perpetrates a number of questionable critical methods in the process. The following remarks will attempt to show how and why.

First, a word about The Citizen Kane Book itself, which appears to be a
fair reflection of Kael’s tastes and procedures. In many ways, it epitomizes the mixed blessing that the proliferating movie book industry has generally become: one is offered too much, yet not enough, and usually too late. Thirty years after the release of CITIZEN KANE, the script is finally made available, and it is packaged to serve as a coffee table ornament—virtually out of the reach of most students until (or unless) it comes out as an expensive paperback, and illustrated with perhaps the ugliest frame enlargements ever to be seen in a film book of any kind. One is grateful for much of the additional material—notes on the shooting script by Gary Carey, Mankiewicz’s credits, an index to Kael’s essay, and above all, the film’s cutting continuity—and a bit chagrined that (1) no production stills are included, (2) Carey’s notes are somewhat skimpy, and (3) apart from THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS, FALSTAFF, and MR. ARKADIN, no other titles directed by Welles are even mentioned (and the last, inexplicably, is listed only under its British title, CONFIDENTIAL REPORT).

When Kael began carving her reputation in the early Sixties, she was chiefly known for the vigorous sarcasm of her ad hominem attacks against other critics. Now that she writes for a vastly wider audience in The New Yorker (where “Raising kane” first appeared), the sarcasm is still there, but generally the only figures attacked by name are celebrities—like Orson Welles; the critics are roasted anonymously. This may be due to professional courtesy, or to the likelier assumption that New Yorker readers don’t bother with film books by other writers, but it makes for an occasional fuzziness. Thus we have to figure out on our own that “the latest incense-burning book on Josef von Sternberg” is Herman G. Weinberg’s; and that when she ridicules “conventional schoolbook explanations for [kane’s] greatness,” such as “articles . . . that call it a tragedy in fugal form and articles that explain that the hero of CITIZEN KANE is time,” she is referring not to several articles but to one—specifically, an essay by Joseph McBride in Persistence of Vision. The opening sentence of McBride’s piece reads, “CITIZEN KANE is a tragedy in fugal form; thus it is also the denial of tragedy,” and three paragraphs later is the suggestion that “time itself is the hero of CITIZEN KANE.” Yet taken as a whole, McBride’s brief essay, whatever it may lack in stylistic felicities, may contain more valuable insights about the film than Kael’s 70-odd double-columned pages. While it shows more interest in kane as a film than as
the setting and occasion for clashing egos and intrigues, it still manages
to cover much of the same ground that *The Citizen Kane* Book traverses
three years later—detailed, intelligent comparisons of the shooting script
with the film (the first time this was ever done, to my knowledge), an ex-
amination of the movie’s relationship to Hearst, and a full acknowledge-
ment (amplified by a quotation from the Houseman interview) that
“Welles does play down Mankiewicz’s contribution.” And if we turn di-
rectly to Kael’s own account of *Kane* published in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* the
same year, we find not only “conventional school book explanations” that
are vacuous indeed (Kane is “a Faust who sells out to the devil in him-
self”), but also the assumption that *Kane* is “a one man show . . . staged
by twenty-five-year-old writer-director-star Orson Welles.”

For all its theoretical limitations and embarrassing factual errors, the
best criticism of *Citizen Kane* is still probably found in André Bazin’s
small, out-of-print, and untranslated book on Welles (Orson Welles, Paris:
P.-A. Chavane, 1950). It is one sign of Kael’s limitations that she once
wrote in a book review about Bazin’s essays being “brain-crushingly dif-
ficult”—in English translation. A brain that easily crushed is somewhat
less than well equipped to deal with intellectual subjects, as her early re-
marks on Eisenstein and Resnais (among others) seem to indicate. *Ivan
The Terrible*, for her, is “so lacking in human dimensions that we may
stare at it in a kind of outrage. True, every frame in it looks great . . . but
as a movie, it’s static, grandiose, and frequently ludicrous, with elabo-
rately angled, over-composed photography, and overwrought, eyeball-
rolling performers slipping in and out of the walls. . . . Though no doubt
the extraordinarily sophisticated Eisenstein intended all this to be a non-
realistic stylization, it’s still a heavy dose of décor for all except true ad-
dicts” (*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*). And *Last Year at Marienbad* is “a ‘classier’
version of those Forties you-can-call-it-supernatural-if-you-want-to
movies like Flesh and Fantasy—only now it’s called ‘Jungian’ “ (*I Lost It
at the Movies*). Basic to both these reactions is a refusal or inability to re-
spond to self-proclaiming art on its own terms, an impulse to cut the work
down to size—or chop it up into bite-size tidbits—before even attempt-
ing to assimilate it. At her rare best, as in her sensitive review of *McCabe
and Mrs. Miller* last year, Kael can grapple with a film as an organic
unity; more frequently, it becomes splintered and distributed into un-
gainly heaps of pros and cons, shards of loose matter that are usually dropped unless they can yield up generalities or wisecracks, until all that remains visible is the wreckage. Many films, of course, *are* wreckage, and few critics are better than Kael in explaining how certain ones go over the cliff—the complex (or simple) mentality that often lies just behind banality or incoherence. But confronting the depth of *Kane*, she can hail it only as a “shallow masterpiece.”

Small wonder, then, that so much of the film confuses or eludes her. First she tries to “explain” as much of the film as she can by relating it to the biographies, public personalities, and (presumed) psychologies of Welles, Mankiewicz, and Hearst (“Freud plus scandal”). And when some parts of the film don’t seem to match her “real-life” drama, she connects them anyway: “There’s the scene of Welles eating in the newspaper office, which was obviously caught by the camera crew, and which, to be ‘a good sport,’ he had to use.” But what’s so obvious or even plausible about this fantasy when we find the eating scene already detailed in the script?

Kael is at her weakest when she confronts the film’s formal devices. The use of a partially invisible reporter as a narrative device, for instance—training our attention on what he sees and hears rather than on what he is—clearly confuses her. After criticizing William Alland in a wholly functional performance for being “a vacuum as Thompson, the reporter,” she goes on to note that “the faceless idea doesn’t really come across. You probably don’t get the intention behind it in *Kane* unless you start thinking about the unusual feebleness of the scenes with the ‘News on the March’ people and the fact that though Thompson is a principal in the movie in terms of how much he appears, there isn’t a shred of characterization in his lines or performance; he is such a shadowy presence that you may even have a hard time remembering whether you ever saw his face....”

Quite aside from the speculation she sets up about “the scenes with the ‘News on the March’ people” (isn’t there only one?), it is distressing—and unfortunately, not uncharacteristic—to see her treating one of the film’s most ingenious and *successful* strategies as a liability. Where, indeed, can one find the “unusual feebleness” in the brilliant projection-room se-
quence—a model of measured exposition, a beautiful choreography of darting sounds and images, dovetailing voices and lights—except in her misreading of it? Kael’s use of the second person here, like her resort to first person plural on other occasions, is ultimately as political and rhetorical as it is anti-analytical: one is invited to a party where only one narrow set of tastes prevails.

It’s hard to make clear to people who didn’t live through the transition [from silent to sound films] how sickly and unpleasant many of those “artistic” silent pictures were—how you wanted to scrape off all that mist and sentiment.

It’s hard indeed if you (Kael) fail to cite even one film as evidence—does she mean Sunrise or The Docks of New York (lots of mist and sentiment in each), or is her knife pointed in another direction?—but not so hard if you (Kael) don’t mind bolstering the prejudices of your lay audience: they’d probably like to scrape off “all that silent ‘poetry’” too, and producers at the time with similar biases often did it for them.

Kael finds a similar difficulty in taking Kane straight:

The mystery...is largely fake, and the Gothic-thriller atmosphere and the Rosebud gimmickry (though fun) are such obvious penny-dreadful popular thearctics that they’re not so very different from the fake mysteries that Hearst’s American Weekly used to whip up—the haunted castles and the curses fulfilled.

Within such a climate of appreciation, even her highest tributes come across as backhanded compliments or exercises in condescension, as in her reversions to nostalgia. Having established why none of us should take Kane very seriously, she grows rhapsodic: “Now the movie sums up and preserves a period, and the youthful iconoclasm is preserved in all its freshness—even the freshness of its callowness.”

But if Kael can be dreamy about the past, she also records her misgivings about film as “the nocturnal voyage into the unconscious” (Buñuel’s phrase): “Most of the dream theory of film, which takes the audience for passive dreamers, doesn’t apply to the way one responded to silent com-
dies—which, when they were good, kept the audience in a heightened state of consciousness.” But does a dreamer invariably relate to his own dream—much less someone else’s—passively? And are “dreams” and “a heightened state of consciousness” really antithetical?

Much of the beauty of Citizen Kane, and Welles’s style in general, is a function of kinetic seizures, lyrical transports, and intuitive responses. To see Kane merely as the “culmination” of Thirties comedy or “a collection of blackout sketches” or a series of gibes against Hearst is to miss most of what is frightening and wonderful and awesome about it. When the camera draws back from the child surrounded by snow through a dark window frame to the mother’s face in close-up, one feels a free domain being circumscribed, well before either the plot or one’s powers of analysis can conceptualize it. As Susan Alexander concludes her all-night monologue, and the camera soars up through the skylight over her fading words (“Come around and tell me the story of your life sometime”), the extraordinary elation of that movement is too sudden and too complex to be written off as superficial bravura: a levity that comes from staying up all night and greeting the dawn, the satisfaction of sailing over a narrative juncture, the end of a confession, a gesture of friendship, the reversal of an earlier downward movement, a sense of dramatic completion, a gay exhaustion, and more, it is as dense and immediate as a burst of great poetry. At its zenith, this marvelous art—which is Welles’s and Welles’s alone—can sketch the graceful curve of an entire era; in the grand ball of The Magnificent Ambersons, perhaps the greatest achievement in his career, a track and dissolve through the mansion’s front door, while a fleeting wisp of garment flutters past, whirls us into a magical continuum where the past, present and future of a family and community pirouette and glide past our vision—the voices and faces and histories and personal styles flowing by so quickly that we can never hope to keep up with them.

What has Kael to say about Ambersons? It’s “a work of feeling and imagination and of obvious effort . . . but Welles isn’t in it [as an actor], and it’s too bland. It feels empty, uninhabited.” It’s nice of her, anyway, to give him an A for effort.

Throughout “Raising Kane,” a great show is made of clearing up popular misconceptions about Welles. Yet within my own experience, the
most popular misconception is not that Welles wrote *Citizen Kane* (although that’s popular enough), but that he “made” or “directed” *The Third Man*. And the worst that can be said about Kael’s comments is that they don’t even say enough about his style as a director to distinguish it from Carol Reed’s. So intent is she on documenting Welles’s vanity that the films wind up seeming secondary, trails of refuse strewn in the wake of the Great Welles Myth, and many of his finest achievements are denied him.

Seeing *Kane* again recently, she reports that “most of the newspaper-office scenes looked as clumsily staged as ever” (no reasons or explanations given). With a sweep of her hand, she consigns the rich complexity of *The Lady from Shanghai* and *Touch of Evil* to oblivion: “His later thrillers are portentous without having anything to portend, sensational in a void, entertaining thrillers, often, but *mere* thrillers.” (Like James Bond?) A page later, noting “the presence in *Kane* of so many elements and interests that are unrelated to Welles’s other work,” she takes care of those elements and interests by adding, parenthetically, that “mundane activities and social content are not his forte.” I’m still puzzling over what she could mean by “mundane activities,” in *Kane* or elsewhere, but if interesting social content is absent from any of Welles’s later movies (including the Shakespeare adaptations), I must have been seeing different films.

A case *could* be made, I think, that the influence of Mankiewicz and Toland on *Kane* carries over somewhat into Welles’s later work, for better and for worse: *Mr. Arkadin*, in particular, suggests this, both in the clumsiness of its *Kane*-derived plot and the beauty of its deep-focus photography. But in her zealous efforts to carry on her crusade against Welles’s reputation as an auteur, Kael seems to find more unity in Mankiewicz’s career as a producer than in Welles’s as a director. And despite her lengthy absorption in the battle of wills between Mankiewicz, Welles, and Hearst, all she can find to say about the following quotation, from one of Mankiewicz’s letters, is that it “suggests [Mankiewicz’s] admiration, despite everything, for both Hearst and Welles.”

With the fair-mindedness that I have always recognized as my outstanding trait, I said to Orson that, despite this and that, Mr. Hearst was, in many
ways, a great man. He was, and is, said Orson, a horse’s ass, no more nor less, who has been wrong, without exception, on everything he’s ever touched.

Here, in a nutshell, we have a definition of contrasting sensibilities that is almost paradigmatic: Welles (almost) at the beginning of his career, Mankiewicz (almost) at the end of his own. Considering this quote, it’s hard to agree with Kael when she writes of Mankiewicz that he “wrote a big movie that is un tarnished by sentimentality,” that is “unsanctimoni ous” and “without scenes of piety, masochism, or remorse, without ‘truths.’ “ KANE, on the contrary, has all of these things, and never more so than when it entertains and encourages the idea that Kane is “a great man,” and worships raw power in the process of condemning it. It is a singular irony that the aspect of KANE that Kael writes about best—Welles’s charm as an actor—is precisely the factor that makes the script’s corruptions, obeisance to wealth and power (and accompanying self-hatred), palatable. But when similar sentimental apologies for megalomania occur in ARKADIN and TOUCH OF EVIL, they carry no sense of conviction whatever. One suspects, finally, that KANE’s uniqueness in Welles’s work largely rests upon the fact that it views corruption from a corrupted viewpoint (Mankiewicz’s contribution), while the other films view corruption from a vantage point of innocence. By abandoning the “charismatic demagogue” and “likeable bastard”—the sort of archetypal figure that commercial Hollywood thrives on, in figures as diverse as Hud and Patton—Welles gave up most of his audience; but it could be argued, I think, that he gained a certain integrity in the process.

The overwhelming emotion conveyed by KANE in its final moments is an almost cosmic sense of waste: an empire and a life that have turned into junk, and are going up in smoke. If we compare this smoke to the smoke that rises at the end of THE TRIAL, we may get some measure of the experience, intelligence, and feeling that Mankiewicz brought to CITIZEN KANE. Yet thankful as one may be to Kael for finally giving him his due, one wishes that some of the despair and terror of KANE’s ending had found its way into her tribute. Perhaps if, as Kael claims, KANE “isn’t a work of special depth or a work of subtle beauty,” the ending may be just
another joke in what she calls “almost a Gothic comedy” — the final blackout gag. But for some reason, I didn’t feel like laughing.

Notes

1. As evidence, I can cite the examples on pages 104, 234–35, and 276 as exhibits A, B, and C. Most of the others are nearly as bad. It is also regrettable that the stills illustrate the script rather than the cutting continuity, a strategy that gives the former no chance to exist on its own (although it may subliminally — and unfairly — reinforce the notion that the film is more Mankiewicz’s than Welles’s). A bizarre consequence is that some of the images shown, like the famous cockatoo, misrepresent the script. And for the record, the shot shown on pages 116–17 is out of sequence, misplaced by some 93 pages.

2. An anthology edited by McBride and published by the Wisconsin Film Society Press in 1968. In the same collection is an article on THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS, also by McBride, which is probably the most useful account of the film that has yet been written. It includes a rather complete description of the original 135-minute version that far surpasses the inadequate summary given in Charles Higham’s The Films of Orson Welles.

—Film Comment, Spring 1972