
Review: An Overwhelming Film

Author(s): Jorge Luis Borges, Gloria Waldman, Ronald Christ

Source: *October*, Vol. 15 (Winter, 1980), pp. 12-14

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778448>

Accessed: 06/11/2010 17:30

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mitpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*.

consummating, insipid horror—adds an amorous episode whose protagonists, no less chaste than enamoured, are the martyred Mrs. Verloc and a dapper, graceful detective, disguised as a greengrocer.

The other film is informatively called *Los muchachos de antes no usaban gomina* (The Boys of Yesteryear Did Not Use Hair Tonic). (There are informative titles that are beautiful: *The General Died at Dawn*.) This film—*Los muchachos de antes no usaban gomina*—is unquestionably one of the best Argentine films that I have seen, which is to say, one of the worst films in the world. The dialogue is totally incredible. The characters—doctors, toughs, and bullies of 1906—speak and live as a function of their difference from the people of 1937. They have no existence beyond that of local color and the color of time. There is a fistfight and another fight with knives. The actors neither know how to play patty cake nor how to box, which dims those spectacles a bit.

The theme—the “moral nihilism” or the progressive going soft of Buenos Aires—is, definitely, attractive. The film’s director wastes it. The hero, who ought to be emblematic of the old virtues—and of the old incredulity—is a citizen of Buenos Aires who has already been Italianized, a man completely susceptible to the shameful motives of apocryphal patriotism and the sentimental tango.

Sur no. 31 (April 1937)

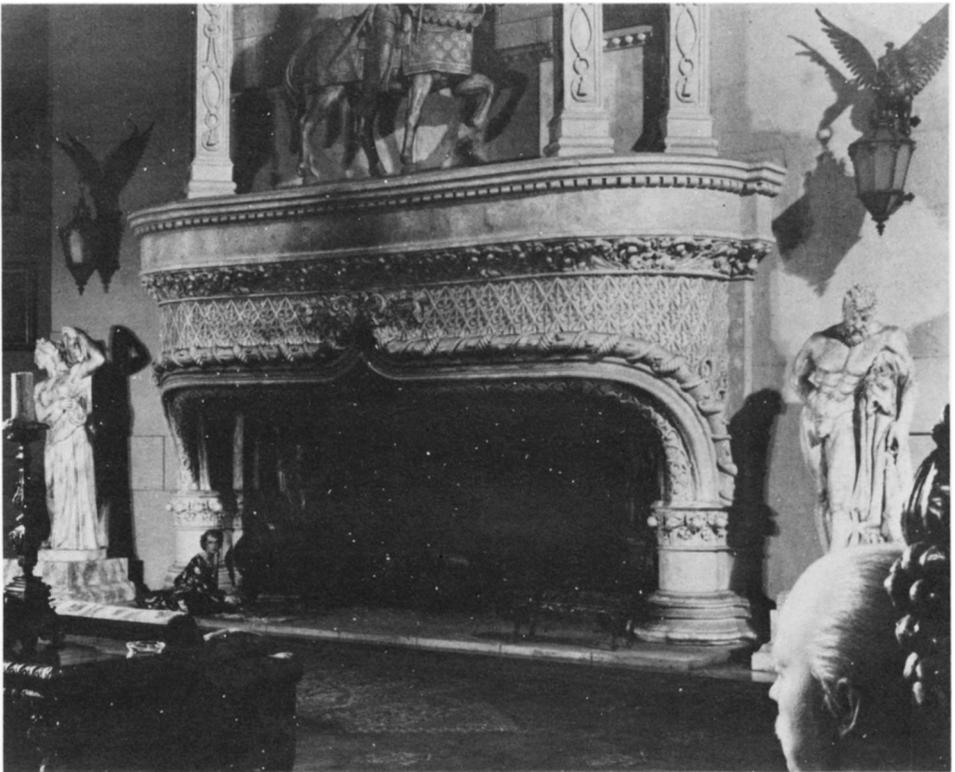
An Overwhelming Film

Citizen Kane. U.S.A., 1941. Director, producer: Orson Welles. Script: Orson Welles, Herman J. Mankiewicz. Photography: Gregg Toland. RKO Pictures.

Citizen Kane (whose title in Argentina is “The Citizen”) has at least two arguments. The first, of an almost banal imbecility, wants to bribe the applause of the very unobservant. It can be formulated in this way: a vain millionaire accumulates statues, orchards, palaces, swimming pools, diamonds, cars, libraries, men and women. Like an earlier collector (whose observations are traditionally attributed to the Holy Ghost), he discovers that these miscellanies and plethoras are vanity of vanities and that all is vanity. At the moment of his death, he yearns for one single thing in the universe: a fittingly humble sled he played with as a child! The second argument is far superior. It links Kohemoth to the memory of another nihilist: Franz Kafka. The theme (at once metaphysical and detective-fictional, at once psychological and allegorical) is the investigation of the secret soul of a man through the works he has made, the words he has spoken, the many destinies he has smashed. The procedure is that of Joseph Conrad in *Chance* (1914) and of the beautiful film *The Power and the Glory*: a rhapsody of

heterogeneous scenes, not in chronological order. Overwhelmingly, infinitely, Orson Welles shows fragments of the life of the man, Charles Foster Kane, and invites us to combine them and to reconstruct them. The film teems with the forms of multiplicity, of incongruity: the first scenes record the treasures accumulated by Kane; in one of the last scenes, a poor woman, gaudy and suffering, plays with an enormous jigsaw puzzle on the floor of a palace that is also a museum. At the end, we understand that the fragments are not governed by a secret unity: the detested Charles Foster Kane is a simulacrum, à chaos of appearances. (A possible corollary, foreseen by David Hume, by Ernst Mach, and by our Macedonio Fernandez: no man knows who he is; no man is anyone.) In one of Chesterton's stories—"The Head of Caesar," I think—the hero observes that nothing is so frightening as a labyrinth without a center. This film is precisely that labyrinth.

We all know that a party, a palace, a great undertaking, a lunch for writers and journalists, an atmosphere of frank and spontaneous friendship are essentially horrible. *Citizen Kane* is the first film that shows these things with some awareness of this truth.



Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*. 1941.

In general, the film's execution is worthy of the vast argument. There are shots with admirable depth, shots whose farthest planes (as in the paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites) are no less precise and minute than the closest.

Nevertheless, I dare to guess that *Citizen Kane* will endure as certain of the films by Griffith or by Pudovkin have "endured"—films whose historical value no one denies but which no one is resigned to seeing again. *Citizen Kane* suffers from gigantism, from pedantry, from tediousness. It is not intelligent, it is genial: in the most nocturnal and Germanic sense of that bad word.

Sur no. 83 (August 1941)

Two Films

Now Voyager. U.S.A., 1942. Director: Irving Rapper. Script: Casey Robinson, after the novel by Olive Higgins Prouty. Photography: Sol Polito. Producer: Hal B. Wallis. Warner Brothers.

Nightmare. U.S.A., 1942. Director: Tim Whelan. Script: Dwight Taylor, from an idea by Philip MacDonald. Photography: Georges Barnes. Producer: Dwight Taylor. Universal Pictures.

They say that the doctrine of the transmigration of souls and of circular time or the Eternal Return were inspired by paramnesia, by a disturbing and sudden impression of having already lived the present moment. In Buenos Aires, at 6:30 p.m. and at 10:45 p.m., there is not a single movie-goer, however forgetful he might be, who does not know that impression. For many years, Hollywood, like the Greek tragedians, has stuck, in effect, to ten or twelve arguments: the aviator who, by means of a convenient catastrophe, dies in order to save the friend whom his wife loves; the deceitful typist who does not refuse the gifts of furs, apartments, tiaras, and cars but who slaps or kills the giver when he "goes too far"; the unspeakable and renowned reporter who seeks the friendship of a gangster with the sole motive of betraying him and making him die on the gallows . . . The latest victim of this disconcerting asceticism is Miss Bette Davis. They have made her act out this romance: a woman, weighed down by a pair of spectacles and a tyrannical mother, considers herself insipid and ugly; a psychiatrist (Claude Rains) persuades her to vacation among palm trees, to practice tennis, to visit Brazil, to take off the spectacles, to change dressmakers. The five-part treatment works: the captain of the ship bringing her home repeats with obvious truthfulness that not one of the other women on board has had Miss Davis's success. Before this endorsement, a niece, previously formidable in her sarcasm, now sobbingly