Narrate and Describe? 
Point of View and Narrative Voice in 
*Citizen Kane’s* Thatcher Sequence

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In this Art, as in the others, there is, and always will be, whatever has been done already, something new to discover, something new to express, something new to describe.

—Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction*

One feels compelled to justify yet another study of *Citizen Kane* (1941), but 45 years of erudite exegesis have not completely "closed" this most impenetrable text. Besides, debate still rages over important issues of current film discourse that require further clarification. In particular, this article will address three interrelated questions concerning point of view and narrative voice in *Citizen Kane*: 1) Is Kane an example of polyphonic, multi-voiced discourse, or, rather, is it a paradigmatic instance of monophonic authoritative inscription in which the various narrative threads unite in a single metatextual construct—the implied author? 2) Is the film narrated from the points of view of its participants (à la Tolstoy) or described from the standpoint of an observer (à la Zola)? Finally, 3) Can specific formal articulations—camera movement, mise-en-scéne, dissolve, music and sound—as signifying codes, be meaningfully called textual "voices" or modes of spectatorial inscription?

Orson Welles’ first radio program was titled *First Person Singular*, and he often used an interlocutory limn of direct address to his audience before withdrawing to the "wings" to allow his characters to work through the plot machinations. His omniscience, however, remained: the players became mere functionaries of that "singular" narrational agency and *magister ludi*, Orson Welles. A similar narrational process may be observed in *Citizen Kane*. Marie-Claire Ropars is correct in asserting that the deval- orization of the ostensible narrators of *Citizen Kane—Thatcher, Bernstein, Leland, Susan, Raymond—reinforces the position occupied by the "invisi- ble narrator," the absent authority the spectator must discover, but she simplifies the issue by noting only two scenes—the prologue and epi- logue—without an obvious narrator. Indeed, while these two narrative units can be said to be "narrated" by the implied author, a "supra-


narrator" hovers throughout the entire film, sometimes close to the action and sometimes withdrawing to Olympian heights. The film’s com- plex narration thus establishes a dialectic of authorial "F" and charactero- logical "T" (what Mark Nash calls "displaced first person") in which a hierarchization of narrative voices—narrators mediating the narrations of others—best describes the process of enunciation. The Thatcher sequence alone demonstrates a remarkable imbrication of narrative voices. This mini-diegetic unit contains 30 shots that last 13 minutes on-screen. A close shot-by-shot reading of this reticular and overdeter- mined passage may elucidate some of the problems related to filmic voice and point of view not only in *Citizen Kane* but in all narrative cinema.

Seymour Chatman’s analysis of the scene is sketchy and inaccurate. For one, he insists that Thatcher is always on camera, whereas the banker is totally absent from nine of the 24 shots dealing with "his" story and fre- quently offscreen in the others. Chatman also asserts that the implied author “says”: "Let me show you visually what Thatcher is telling." This implies that the visual and aural substance of the sequence is somehow contemporaneous with the characters' diaries. Indeed, Chatman goes on to say that the narration fades into "the events themselves" and that "all the visual accounts of Kane are objective." On the other extreme, Bruce Kawin believes that Thatcher’s account is a totally subjective "first-person discourse" in which "Thatcher's mind dominates." Every scene corre- sponds with his personal conception of Kane, and illustrates this concep- tion rather than subjectively records "what happened." Kawin also says that "Thatcher narrates no scenes in which he himself does not appear." Despite their differences, both of these critics—along with virtually every other commentator—assume that Thatcher’s consciousness—whether objectively or subjectively represented—is the site of origination of the dis- course ill "his" sequence. This assumption reduces the issue to one of nar- rator reliability and denies that multiple narration is at work.

The first shot of the sequence is a low-angle view of a statue (Figure T.1). Through a hermeneutic code and apparent point-of-view structure, we might ask, "Who is looking at this object?" One might also wonder, "Who authorizes the diegetic echoes and the extradiegetic fun-poking musical commentary that accompanies this image?" Two possibilities pre- sent themselves. Thompson or an implied author.

At first, the angle hints that we are occupying *tile reporter’s* perceptual point of view—literally looking through his eyes—but, the camera pulls back to include Thompson in its field of vision. The shot’s filmic voice changes. What was initially assumed to be his point of view becomes a more objective site. Although by convention we are still aligned with the character’s spatial point of view (this placement at the corner of the frame, the over-the-shoulder angularity) and narrate-first subjectification (Thompson as the detached observer/narrator/mediator who explores the

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"Rosebud" mystery for us), this shot actually reveals a double vantage point. The reporter is both observer and character, dialectical site of seeing and seen, and, as such, his viewpoint provides a complementary attitude toward the objects observed by both the character and the ultimate narrator. Thompson thus becomes both the mediator and the object of our gaze, although the aural point of view is more problematic. We seem to see with Thompson, but "hear" with the implied author.

Here point of view must be distinguished from narrative voice. The former is the physical place (literal, perceptual), ideological (figurative, conceptual) situation, or practical life orientation (interest) to which the narrative events stand in relation. The latter refers to speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to an audience. For instance, the similarities between the exaggerated echoes in the Thatcher Library and the hollow reverberations in Kane's mansion, Xanadu, emphasize Kane's resemblance to his foster parent, particularly for those observant (and retrospective) spectators who have kept on file, so to speak, all the acoustical evidence linking Kane to Thatcher. This sonic correspondence clearly outruns Thompson's understanding at this point; instead it hints that a higher enunciative agency is at work.

Eventually we dissolve to shot 4, a closeup of the manuscript page, ostensibly "from behind Thompson's eyes." This transition allows us to examine the formal mechanisms by which judgments are communicated in Kane. We begin to see a mise-en-abyme structure: levels of narration—primary, secondary, tertiary—corresponding to Thatcher's memoirs being read by Thompson being presented by Welles for our gaze, and corresponding levels of mediation—stylistic and characterological—that are hierarchized moment by moment throughout the text. Here, for instance, the visual elimination of Thompson as character/narrator leads to his establishment as narratee and mediator. It may well be that the status of identification in this segment (and throughout the film) is with the process of discovery rather than with a specific character. Edward Branigan's ideas on point of view as a system of the text support this contention, since trying to locate a specific character or narrator as the producer of significance is really only a shorthand for a textual process. Similarly, point of view functions basically to control the viewer's access, not to real objects or psychological states, but to signification; thus, points of view become epistemological boundaries inscribed in the text.

The reporter's literal point of view seems to be purely perceptual and spatiotopic, while the plutocrat's written vituperation is mediated on the figurative level, except for the mysterioso authorial music which provides a negative commentary on the banker's self-importance. Thus, an elaborate process of "embedding" begins by which the author's view of Thompson's view of Thatcher's view of Kane becomes operative. For instance, as the diary page is scanned, the left-to-right camera motility ostensibly represents the literal movement of Thompson's eyes; however, the character only seems to produce the text; the actual production of space and character reveals the presence or an Ultimate Narrational Agency, whose function of fictionalizing consciousness makes it difficult to distinguish precisely between its various "voices." The musical transition, for example—from a somber melody to a brightly nostalgic flutter of harp and strings—can hardly be the reporter's figurative vantage point, nor is it likely to be Thatcher's. Agency and authority seem to be established here as a hierarchy of organization within the text; the construction of point of view and character subjectivity are represented through scale, angle, deep-focus mise-en-scene, editing, music and sound—but with no definitive key for unraveling their embedded imbrications.

Our first view of young Kane shows him on top of a snowdrift, lying on a sled, slides down a hill into a snowbank, and hurls a snowball toward the camera. These actions represent in miniature Kane's entire life and career: at the "top of the heap" from the start, a short attachment to a mother figure (the sled), and a quick run-in with a solid wall (Thatcher), followed by resentment and anger. The reverse angle shows the snowball splashed against the sign precisely at the punctuation mark after "Mrs." This view is a literal and figurative impossibility for Thatcher, who is both inside the house and unaware of the youngster's displaced Oedipal rage.
Indeed, it seems to convey Kane's spatial point of view, an unlikely orientation for the banker's account.

In shot 8, the camera pulls back into the boarding house interior, establishing Thatcher and Mrs. Kane, and continuing the diegetization of style by relegating Charles to the spatial background while his fate is being decided. The dolly moves from the unlimited, indeed infinite, horizon of the outdoor scene to the more circumscribed and delimiting adult world inside. Kane's childhood begins and ends in this single shot and the memories associated with this brief moment of unlimited possibilities are thereafter invested by him (to the point of near-fetishization) in the sled and the glass paperweight. The camera motility also creates a retrospective point of view that seems to be transferred from that of the boy to Mrs. Kane. The complex theatrical blocking and mise-en-scène of this two-minute plan-séquence detail the struggle for jurisdiction over the child (as a later plan-séquence will for jurisdiction over Kane's empire).

These figurations—blocking and deep focus cinematography—all marks of a very specific authorial presence: the motion picture director. The shot is clearly directed and clearly directed at an implied viewer, not at the implied reader of Thatcher's journal. The depicted empathy for the father cannot represent Thatcher's position since the diegetic banker is repeatedly rude to Jim Kane. Nor can the ironic juxtaposition of the boy's shouts—"The Union Forever"—at the precise instant that Mary Kane signs the document that dis-unites the family unit be the plutocrat's perception or conception of the event. It is just as hard to imagine Thompson reading this irony into his perusal of the memoirs. Next, without apparent dramatic motivation, the camera pans subtly to the right just as Mrs. Kane signs the boy over to the banker, all but eliminating the father from the frame, but also revealing the presence of a glass bibelot on the dresser. None of the characters is capable of authorizing such a recurring motif; only the implied author can.

Shot 9 begins as a low-angle closeup on the mother looking out the window, but soon the camera dollies outside (Figure T.2). Here, the blocking and dialogue represent the shifting attachment and relationships within the family. Indeed, a triangular pattern is established between the principals (reechoed in the dinner bell "triangle" that dangles from the porch). Whenever Charles looks or moves toward his father, Mrs. Kane intervenes by calling him back or blocking his path, thus usurping and undercutting his gaze at his father. When the boy looks at his new guardian, their eyelines inscribe a powerful diagonal vector across the screen until young Kane finally displaces his oedipal rage onto Thatcher, striking him with the "Rosebud" sled. Throughout this long take, then, Thatcher's body and eye authorize the space of the frame as subject, but *ue* tend to identify with the one viewed, Kane. The scene's moral authority resides with him as well.

Shot 11 is one of the most problematical views in the entire film, an instance when objective/omniscient treatment shifts to the subjective/personal realm through dissolves, music and sound effects (Figure T.3). If the previous scene represented a "limited third-person" point of view with a more or less covert narrator and an illusion of mimesis through "camera eye" conventions, then this view of a sled in gently falling snow might be seen as a nonpersonal descriptive shot with certain personal markers that announce the realm of an unmediated authorial "I." No longer does this ultimate narrational agency speak through the characters (as in "displaced first-person" narration); rather "he" holds the scene onscreen longer than its "action" warrants (12 seconds) and adds to the impersonally coded image strong connotations of individual style and diegetic superfluity—thereby converting it into an unassigned first-person view. We are certainly in the realm of what Metz called "subjectivizing the objective."

Though this shot seems to have no character to support its physical point of view, the musical segue, the wistful moan of the faraway locomotive whistle, the loneliness of the Infinite, snow-filled background space, and the futility of the "Rosebud" sled imprisoned in a mounting snowbank all contribute to positing a figurative point of view loosely attributable to young Kane himself. The effaced Prime Mover thus occasionally takes an
active, empathetic role in the narration, especially through "poeticization," and lowers the mask of self-effacement to assume the role of a "central consciousness" or to participate in a hierarchized junta-like narrational entity composed of characters, settings and cinematic devices. This shot therefore demonstrates many marks of direct address between filmmaker and spectator by rupturing the seamless transparency of the diegetic world. Equating this device with the conventional "calendar leaves turning," as Peter Wollen does, does not explain its status; rather, it explains it away.9 The plaintive emotionalism of Kane's childhood dispossession from his parents is certainly expressed, but its source is dearly a participating authorial presence who both narrates and describes. Authority here, as elsewhere in the text, seems to involve a hierarchy of organization mediated by the mode of attention of various characters-as manifested in mise-en-scène, dissolves, music, sound effects, and editing--and the authorial construction of point of view. In this case, both characterological and authorial modes seem to be copresent.

In shot 13, the desolation of the sled in the snow is elided by a sharp cut (actually a three-second dissolve) to the whiteness of the wrapping paper being slit. The suddenness of the slit and its exaggerated sound characterize the precipitant nature of Kane's maturation. A high-angle view of the boy and his new sled--"Crusader"--reestablishes Kane's subordinate position vis-a-vis his guardian and also identifies the more adult role expected of the boy: that of a "crusader" with an iron mask, not a tender "rosebud" (Figure T.4). This view is followed by one of Citizen Kane's only subjective point-of-view shots, a tilt up to show Thatcher from an extreme low angle, although it begins as a third-person view. Thus the original codification of the shot is contradicted by the tilt, what Noel Burch calls "retropective" point of view.10

Thematically, Kane is shown to mature quickly; indeed, he ages almost 20 years between a "Merry Christmas" and a "Happy New Year," the Biblical passage from birth to circumcision, from infancy to the ritual of coming into manhood. Shots U through 6 are all linked by straight cuts (and continuous sound), even though a major time ellipsis is involved, to reinforce the psychological suddenness of Kane's "complete independence from the firm of Thatcher & Co." During shot 16, the camera dollies in as the banker reads aloud from Kane's letter--"I think it would be fun to run a newspaper." Despite the direct address to the camera which suggests a direct communication between narrator and narratee, it is unlikely that Thatcher, the invoking diarist, would portray himself as such a stuffy and pompous Dickensian fuddy-duddy (Figure T.5).
In Shot 24, mature Kane is introduced as his former guardian lowers a newspaper with a patently false headline—"WAR EXTRA." This headline prefigures the Kane-Thatcher "war" about to be enacted and, since prefiguration is a decidedly authorial prerogative, establishes a narrational agency in the scene. The young publisher is seen from a high angle looking over Thatcher's shoulder. Their eyeline gazes again create a strong diagonal across the frame, as if to dynamize the ensuing oedipal confrontation. Eventually, the complex blocking of characters and camera movement in this two-and-one-half-minute take establish Kane's dominance through placement, lighting and dialogic authority. As Kane finally stands up to his surrogate father (physically and phonetically), the camera dollies in as he says, "You're talking to two people." This overt statement of dual identity encapsulates much of the film's narrative dynamics: Kane as boy/man, radical/reactionary, and character/narrator, as well as Orson Welles as actor/author.

Eventually the two men stand, eyeball to eyeball, in a frontal composition favoring neither party. Even when such a third-person stance is approximated visually, a background pole divides the frame and separates the two men. The soundtrack also conspires to inscribe an authorial voice in the discourse. The comical music over Kane's closeup, for instance, is in clearly directed at Thatcher, even though Kane is favored in the composition. This tongue-in-check laugh at the surrogate father's expense is severely foreshortened by another abrupt musical segue. As the diary page dissolves over Kane's face, the uilllitical thelle quickly turns sour. Ominous chords replace the jocular theme, and Kane's temporary moral triumph over his guardian is severely punished, seemingly by the Great Depression (the ensuing diary page reads, "In the winter of 1927"). This rapid segue moves us from Kane's boastful declaration in 1898—"I'll have to close this place ... in 60 years"—to 1929 when he does in fact have to give up control of his newspaper. His oedipal "comeuppance" may have taken 30-odd diegetic years (not his predicted 60) but it is accomplished in only three seconds of screen time. Once again, a radical temporal elision shows how quickly Kane was forced to mature.

The diary page dissolves to a legal document, which is then lowered to reveal Thatcher, its obvious author. Kane is heard offscreen, and the camera pans to reveal him moving away (Figure T.6). Kane's metaphoric movement into the recesses of the room mirrors his fiduciary relegation to the background of his own newspaper syndicate. Kane's smallness in this deep focus composition also represents a reassumption of his childhood role with Thatcher. He must accept an "allowance," just as his father did,
return for giving up his "baby," the newspaper. Finally, Kane moves to the foreground to sign the agreement, just as his mother did 58 years before. Nonetheless, this two-minute sequence-shot shows Thatcher in a much more sympathetic light, even though he is seizing control of Kane's empire. Ill is more solicitous, more concerned about his charge's state of mind, making Kane's rudeness even more apparent. Since this is the last shot of the "flashback," it might be that Thompson begins to feel sorry for the banker as he concludes his reading. On the other hand, the organization of narrative space and the structure of the filmic narration may be commenting here—as elsewhere—on the similarities between Kane and Thatcher. In fact, Kane does become everything Thatcher represents.

This is graphically illustrated in a subtle dissolve. Back in the Library, Thompson closes the memoirs. The reverse angle establishes a looming portrait of Thatcher, which had been an offscreen presence for the entire sequence (Figure T.7). The reporter addresses the portrait—"You're not Rosebud, are you?"—and reestablishes the original hermeneutic, What/Who is Rosebud? he then exits to ironic, fun-poking music. The plutocrat's pomposity is again ridiculed, but the dissolve to the next sequence shows a correspondence in positioning between the portrait of

![Figure T.7]

Thatcher in the library and the portrait of Kane over Bernstein's mantle (Figure T.8). Kane thus literally and figuratively dissolves out of Thatcher.

Throughout Citizen Kane, there is a recurring disanalogy between camera and narrative voice, which produces an unstable economy of discourses with an ambiguous and shifting lueranluzed system of enunciation. The distinctions are clear enough between the frame story of Thompson's quest and the dramatized flashback reconstructions of his interviewees, yet identifying a single "voice" at any particular moment remains problematic. The film alternates ambiguously between monophonic authorial inscription, in which the various narrative threads unite behind a reliable implied author, and a more polyphonic discourse with an ironic narrational agency.

Many thematic and diegetic details go unnoticed by Thompson and Thatcher—youth Kane's snowball, the Rosebud sled, the bibelot on the dresser, and the similarly positioned portraits, for instance—though the observant viewer does notice them. The epistemological and heuristic points of view are therefore oriented toward the spectator, transmitted by the same powerful but undisclosed authorial function that shows us the paperweight in the prologue and the sled in the epilogue. The overriding moral irony of the sequence is clear: Thatcher ostensibly narrates (that is, he is diegetically responsible for the instigation of the narrative, though not
literally responsible for its form or content), but Kane, his arch-enemy, is shown in a favorable light. This ambiguity makes it impossible to equate the banker, as character or narrator, with the implied author. Attributing the scene to a direct entry into Thompson's mind is equally problematic. That would necessitate viewing the events as non-narrated, reducing it to a Gasparovlan code of the performative model.\(^\text{11}\)

_Citizen Kane_ presents, within the context of a realistic image and as a function of space, the marks and traces of an offscreen presence—an organizer or systematizer—that exhibits the formal properties of a consciousness. Whether a single or more multi-leveled Prime Mover, it transforms the depicted world into a discourse. Although locating a specific "central consciousness" in any given shot may be difficult, a systematic reflexivity is encoded through various formal strategies: camera movement, mise-en-scène, editing, dissolves, music and sound. One need not posit a "mind-screen" to account for this presence. It is simply an authorial agency that alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, narrates from the points of view of the participating characters and describes from the viewpoint of a more impersonal author.

The film's mixed limns of address both hide and reveal, displace and announce, its narration, and, in so doing, continually ambiguates Charles Foster Kane's status as subject and object. This multivalent address is directed to a spectator who has followed a classical, though complex, process of _pertpateta_ and _anagnorisis_ only to reach a modernist position of indeterminacy. Although we know more than the characters because of the authorial intrusions, the layers of narration and the sled's revelation at the end, any ultimate resolution is denied by the final words ("No word can explain a man's life") and images ("No Trespassing").

Notes

1. For an explication of the use of these terms in the context of literary criticism, see Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" _Writer and Critic and Other Essays_, ed. and trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970), 110-18.
3. This term is used by Leonard J. Leff in his article on the Thatcher sequence, "Reading Kane," _Film Quarterly_ 39 (fall 1985), 10-21.
7. These distinctions are made in Seymour Chatman, _Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film_ (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), 151-53.