

Prime Time

Visual Cognition in the Prelude to Citizen Kane

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ABSTRACT: This essay presents a cognitive-phenomenological reading of the Prelude to *Citizen Kane*.

To experience a work of art is to have a distinctive kind of cognitive experience. Stated more specifically, the largely unconscious interactions between certain sensory systems and the sensible qualities that define a given kind of art constitute in substantial ways our conscious apprehension of that art. This is obvious enough for the visual or musical arts. But, it is equally true that our embodied cognitive experience of, say, reading a novel—the relatively automatic processing of conventionalized black marks from left to right and top to bottom, and so forth—is an essential element of our more directly conscious understanding of the content of a given story. A cognitively oriented examination of a given art form, then, will take off from the kinds of cognitive operations that most matter for the apprehension of that art form.

Film, since its beginnings, has been discussed in terms of its psychological qualities and affects.¹ To this day, psychologist Hugo Munsterberg's 1916 *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* remains a foundational work in film studies. Since that time, and especially in recent decades with the rise of second-generation cognitive psychology, two versions of a cognitive-psychological approach to film have emerged. We have a more strictly scientific version, grounded directly in cited laboratory research. It makes claims about the experience of film based on findings about the ways in which our eyes process moving images, the ways our eyes track the eyes of others, the ways that mirror neurons in the brain link us to the actions we see

on-screen, or the ways our emotion systems respond to certain kinds of visual cues. This kind of study has been done in various ways by, among others, such scholars as Gregory Currie, Torben Grodal (*Embodied Visions; Moving Pictures*), Greg Smith, Per Persson, James Cutting (9–27), and Arthur Shimamura.

But we also have a less strictly scientific version. As David Bordwell has observed, film “researchers aren’t psychologists or sociologists, but we can draw upon the best scientific findings we have to mount a plausible framework for considering effects” (44). That is what I will be doing here. My approach—I will call it a cognitive phenomenology—examines the experience of film in relation to our everyday kinds of cognitive experiences of the world, and it taps into cognitive psychology for direct support only at strategic points. Otherwise, this approach simply makes sure not to violate the general kinds of knowledge established by cognitive (and evolutionary) psychology. This kind of project has been carried out by, for instance, George Wilson, Colin McGinn, Noel Carroll, and David Bordwell. Here, I will take up a variation of this latter kind of approach. I will primarily turn to the field of ecological psychology in order to provide a cognitive-phenomenological reading of the Prelude sequence to *Citizen Kane*.

If we want to understand our embodied responses to fiction film, we may take as a first principle that film “engages our perceptual system directly, and we process the changing array of light before us as we process the natural world” (Anderson and Hodgins 65). Considered on the basic level of visuo-cognitive experience, motion pictures are the singular kind of visual imitation that comes closest to looking at the world. In fact as James Gibson, in establishing ecological psychology, explained, “we ought to treat the motion picture as the basic form of depiction and the painting or photograph as a special form of it Moviemakers are closer to life than picture makers” (293). Given this, we may explore our responses to film by asking: what every day acts of looking are like the special case—in fact the unique case—of looking at movies?

An unsurprising first answer to this question is that looking at a movie is like looking at a scene through an aperture of some kind. The most basic case of such an aperture would be, as Colin McGinn has argued, simply a hole (20). But for most of us, the more likely everyday comparison will be a kind of “picture window’ set before the locales” of a given filmic world (Wilson 53–54). A window is a transparent barrier, so in everyday life we have the experience of looking *through* a window (or other transparent barrier) *at*

whatever is on its other side. To be more exact, apertures and windows tend to pull our eyes to look through them. They are not simply neutral elements of the visual field. Our eyes and our interests have evolved in such a way that certain visible elements of our surroundings tend to immediately call our attention. Apertures are one such element. In the terminology of ecological psychology apertures “afford” our eyes the act of looking-through (Gibson).²

If the window is clear and clean, we typically attend only to the scene beyond it. But, we also have the possibility of changing our focus in such a way that we can look *at* its surface, if, say, it is dirty or cracked, or if lighting and angle cause us to notice its surface as a mirror reflector (more about which as follows). This same option holds with the cinematic image. If there is some stain or mark on the screen, we can willfully adjust our focus so that we look at the screen itself as a barrier, rather than the image. Looking at movies is also like looking through a window because of the life-like visual quality of the film (photographic) image. Of course no one, except perhaps very young children, mistakes the film image for the real itself. Though “there is a degree of identification between human eye and camera lens,” we still maintain a certain “psychic distance” from what we see (Jaffe 100). But still, in the normative case, we look through the window to see just the world itself, and movies are the great representational art form that comes closest to that experience.

If we try to discover other acts of looking that are most like the special case of looking at movies, we quickly come up with an obvious second primary example: mirrors.³ As with windows, a mirror presents an image separated from the rest of the visual field. As with windows, we can willfully adjust our focus in order to look at the mirror’s surface, rather than at the image. As with the normative example of what we see through a window, the image in the mirror, except for the left–right reversal, looks very much like the world. Cognitively, then, looking at a mirror affords the act of looking-through just as does a window or aperture. We have an automatic sense that a mirror is or ought to be a kind of window (as contrasted with the opposite possibility: we do not typically have a sense that a window is or ought to be a mirror). Though we know this response is inaccurate, it remains quite strong, as witness the ancient fascination with something coming out of, or going into the mirror.

In spite of this affordance, we do not typically speak of looking through the mirror at the image. Rather, we look *at* the image *in* the mirror; we look

into the mirror. (We may speak of looking into a window if we are outside an enclosed space, looking in; but, we still have the sense of looking through the transparent barrier of an aperture.) But, we know the mirror is a two-dimensional surface, so we know that the image cannot really be *in* the mirror in any usual sense of “in.” Strictly speaking, we can only look *at* a mirror image. This disjunction between what our eyes register (looking into or through) and what we know to be the case is one reason mirrors have always been so fascinating.

We experience a related, but different disjunction when we watch film. We readily experience looking at film as like looking through an aperture. But, we know we are not looking through an aperture, so our analogous everyday experience with mirrors comes into play. We have a sense of looking *into* the world we see. Unlike with a mirror though, we do not tend to say that we are looking into the world *in* the screen; we do not think of looking *into* the screen. We describe our experience as like looking *into* the world *on* the screen. This is, once again, because of a conflict between our cognitive experience and our everyday knowledge. With film, our conscious knowledge governs our visual cognition in one way: we know the image is *on* a barrier, the screen. But our visual cognition governs our knowledge in the other way: we feel, inaccurately, that we are looking *into* the world, *on* the screen. So, we speak of looking into the world on-screen. These then, are some general properties of the cognitive experience of the film image.

But of course our cognitive experience of what we see on-screen is always happening in a set of specific contexts. Visual perceptions do not happen in a vacuum. We have material contexts such as, in the normative case, the darkened theater with collective seating, the large screen, the sophisticated audio, the surrounding historical and cultural contexts, and so forth. All of these will affect our experience. But, while the material context may vary to a considerable extent, there exists one nonmaterial context that, apart from avant-garde experimentation, is more or less universal: we are always attending to a story. So, our basic sense of apprehending a story will always be at work. We expect to be presented with a story, and we do our part toward making the story happen. This means that our conscious sense of the story with which we are involved—our narrative awareness—will always determine in part the specific qualities of our automatic cognitive responses. And at the same time, our cognitive responses will always determine in part our narrative awareness. Unless we are studying film, or viewing certain experimental

films, the conscious *distinction* between these two is not typically part of our experience. The viewer's basic cognitive operations happen apart from, but along with, conscious narrative apprehensions. Although normally narrative and cognitive awareness operate as a unified experience, here we may separate them for the purpose of analysis. Classical Hollywood style is famous for its commitment to producing such a unified experience. To this end, as James Cutting writes, "all manipulations of the camera, lighting, editing, and sets should be transparent, unnoticed by the filmgoer," so that we are aware only of the story. "To go unnoticed, these techniques must mesh with the human visual system" (9). A cognitive phenomenology of film will show just how the "mesh" works.

With these universal cognitive-phenomenological properties of the normal fiction film experience in mind, we now turn to *Citizen Kane*. Many film scholars and film aficionados will claim *Citizen Kane* as one of the finest, if not *the* finest American film. Whatever its rank, it has certainly drawn a wealth of critical considerations. In some ways *Kane* is to scholarly film studies as *Frankenstein* and *Heart of Darkness* are to literary studies: a kind of litmus test for a given analytical approach. The list of essay analyses of the film is substantial. We have had explanations: based on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (Beja; Brinkley and Spiedel; Mulvey); based on Aristotelian dramatic theory (Maxfield); and based on evolutionary psychology (Billy; Schwartz; Anderson). Its use of audio has been explained (Altman; Thomas), as has its use of visual space in general (Jaffe), and of "cinematic depth" in particular (Arthur). Its use of onscreen writing (Jackson) has been analyzed, and, twice, its relationship to *The Great Gatsby* (Carringer; Mass). Three of the foremost film-criticism luminaries, Pauline Kael, Laura Mulvey, and André Bazin (*Orson Welles; What Is Cinema*), have produced lengthy investigations into the film, and it has earned at least two very solid essay collections (Naremore *Orson*; Gottesman). Any film-class student will have read about *Kane* because as, in Matthew Arnold's words, a touchstone text it is universally mentioned in text-book explanations of terms.

Because *Kane* is so rich in so many ways, our approach here will reveal much more than can be discussed in one short essay. A cognitive-phenomenological reading will necessarily be quite detailed. It will be a version of visual "close-reading" that is founded on a set of specified cognitive operations. But, both film as a kind of story as well as our experience of film are quite complex. No reading will likely be able to mention all the elements of

even an image or sequence, much less a complete film. Let us concentrate on the opening sequence, the Prelude, which carries out a set of quite specific cognitive operations in preparation for the film to follow.

Like the rest of this film, the Prelude has been examined in detail before.⁴ A given scholar's critical commitments will always determine what gets said about specific visual details. In this case, our concept of "looking through" in general, and more particularly of looking through windows and mirrors, directs us to notice and explain certain images and elements more than others. In other words given the fact that film affords experiences of a kind with windows and mirrors, then we might predict that windows and mirrors in films will be likely to carry special significances along with, but also apart from, any significance in terms of plot. And some films will make conspicuously distinctive uses of both.

We see just this right away with *Citizen Kane*, as soon as we pan up from the forbidding "No Trespassing" sign. The sign is posted on a wire fence, though it could as easily have been posted on a solid wall. The camera climbs slowly upward, leaving the sign behind in order to concentrate our eyes on the fence. The shot, an extreme close-up, is in shallow focus, so that only the fence wiring is clear. This automatically causes us to do what we would not do in the usual case of encountering a fence: look at the fence itself, rather than through it. A see-through fence, like a window, affords the act of looking through it, at what is on the other side. We would ordinarily only look *at* the fence itself in a special case: for instance, if we were in charge of making sure the fence was in good shape, or if we were trying to figure out how to get past the fence, to the other side. But, in this case, when we try to look through the fence, we see only a blur, because of the shallow focus. We are cognitively primed to look-through, but cannot do so.

As the camera continues up the fence, the first of the many dissolves in the film occurs: from the first kind of fence wiring to a different kind. It is still wire, still in shallow focus, only with differently shaped apertures. The cinematic lap dissolve, a kind of "dissolving space itself" (Jaffe 100), has no exact corollary in our actual visual perception.⁵ But because we are being primed to look-through, and because a "prohibited space becomes immediately fascinating" (Mulvey 26), our narrative awareness leads us to assume that the next step in the story will be coming to know what we are not now allowed to see. We expect to discover what there is to look at on the other side. The appearance of a second, very similar kind of fence, then, is frustrating

both cognitively and narratively. We can still see only the fence itself. In a few seconds, we see another dissolve to yet another kind of fence. This one is very solid, made of wrought iron, with apertures much less amenable to looking-through than before. The close-up is so extreme that we can see the grain of rust on its surface. But we still look at, rather than through the fence.

What may we say of these images? They are the first of what James Naremore calls the “periodic frustrations the camera encounters” (71). More exactly, they are the first frustrations that the eye encounters. Since cognition is an embodied operation, we may compare watching a movie on this level to physical activity. Some physical activities we may just start into, without much worry about getting our pulse and muscles and breathing prepared. But then there are some activities, more demanding ones, which require a warm up. Cognitively speaking, the opening set of fences in shallow focus does just this. We are able only to look at an object that normally affords looking-through. With this, we are primed on the perceptual level for a filmic experience that will not be as comfortable as the usual classical Hollywood story. It is as if, since we are about to begin a story that will not be easy, a story that will be demanding, challenging, we need to be warmed up on the level of looking itself.⁶ This perceptual priming crosses over into the level of narrative meaning. As the fence is to what is behind it; so the visual “surface” of the film is to the story’s final significance. We will be seeing a story that promises a looking-through to meaning or to the answer. We will get that meaning, but only enigmatically and only in the last act of looking-through, when, through the flames, we see “Rosebud” disappearing forever.

But the warm-up has only just begun. Passing through a multiple dissolve we see the signature “K” at the top of a gate. Then, though the gate does not open, our eyes finally get a bit of relief, because through another dissolve and a shift to deep focus, we get to look at the castle Xanadu, with its one lighted window, perched on a dark hilltop in the distance. The one light, like any solitary light in an otherwise dark field of vision, necessarily solicits special visual attention. As that light remains steady and in the same spot across the series of dissolves, it also grabs our narrative attention: this must be where we are headed in order to obtain some solid narrative foothold.

From the outside, all the inside of this fenced-in world is a blur. But, once we are inside, everything, though dark and dreary, is nonetheless clear. As the dissolve through the fence continues, our eye is drawn to the only motion and the only animal life in the scene: two monkeys. The placement

and actions of the monkeys are quite precise. They are sitting, just left of center screen, half-way in and half-way out of the bars of a different kind of “fence”: a large cage with a sign that reads “Bengal Tiger.” Normally, the bars of a tiger cage afford us the experience of looking through the bars at the animal, while keeping us safely separate from the animal. We would not attend to the bars, but to the tiger. But though we can readily see through this fence, we do not see what the sign consciously primes us to see. There is no tiger. At a zoo this might entice us to peer more intently through the bars in search of the hiding animal. But, in this case the monkeys, chattering to each other, directly grab our attention. In other words, this exact visual image engages the eye quite differently than if a tiger or even the monkeys were simply *in* the cage, or if no animals at all were in the cage. As with the opening shots of the fences, the visual affordance of the cage itself as a permeable barrier becomes a key feature of the image. Our eyes are experiencing a different version of the kind of frustration we have just been experiencing. And like the monkeys, we are just at this moment passing through a fence: the one that surrounds Kane’s world.

Both monkeys look simultaneously to their left (screen right), enticing us, as do all “deictic gazes,” to look for whatever has caught their attention (Persson). The fact that our gaze is directed by monkeys rather than humans links all this directly to the noncultural, biologically based elements of what is going on here. Our monkey-directed look leads us to attend to the area on the right of the screen, where we first see one of *Citizen Kane’s* major visual motifs: arched apertures. Though Xanadu looms in the upper right of the image, the monkeys have directed us to an area below it in the frame: we see an elaborate, arched wrought-iron gate. An arched aperture affords yet another visual action of looking-through. As with a window, our eyes are naturally drawn to look through the arch in order to see what lies within, but also beyond its frame. When we look through the arched gate, our eye is most immediately drawn to the one, most well-lit (in fact unnaturally lit) object through that gate: another arch, below a dark, arching footbridge. Though this arch also draws our eye, the distance and dimness prevent us from seeing anything beyond it. Primed with these new images whose most immediate affordance is the act of looking-through, we can now notice that in fact we are looking at this entire scene through an archway. It is created by a thick vine that grows up from off-screen to the right, curves across the top of the frame down to join visually with another vine growing up from the

left side of the tiger cage. All told, we have three nested, arched apertures: the footbridge arch within the wrought iron gate arch within the arching vine. In this one shot, then, we have a kind of collage of the two kinds of looking-*through* that, cognitively, matter for film as a visual art form, and for this film in particular. We have the simple open aperture, the arch, through which we look at whatever is on the other side. And we have the see-through barrier—the fences, the cage—which draws the eye to look-through in order to see what is on the other side. So, what we may call the cognitive work-out is still going on.

The next dissolve establishes another important motif that, as explained above, ties directly to the cognitive experience of looking at film: the mirror. The mirror surface of a lake appears, with the upside down image of Xanadu still showing clearly in the upper right portion of the screen. This image specifically begins the mirror motif with a non-manufactured, natural instance of mirror reflection. And it immediately links the mirror motif to the window motif, for even though the castle image is an inverted reflection, the one lighted window remains at the same place on the screen as in the previous shot. We have a window and a mirror in one image. The film will go on to experiment with this specific kind of image later. At this point because the window remains in place as its surroundings change, we tend to automatically—on both the cognitive and narrative levels—expect to look through it at some story-worthy scene within it.

Another dissolve takes us closer to the castle, and replaces the previous right-side wrought-iron arched gate with an arched stone gate. We dissolve to a yet-nearer shot of the castle, and here again a leafy vine arches over what we look at. The next dissolve, with the window still at the same spot on the screen, features an elaborate stone archway on the left. Finally, we arrive at the foot of the castle, and see that arched apertures are a primary architectural element of the building. The window is clearer and more enticing than ever. Many times in these few seconds, then, images of arched apertures have directly primed the visual activity of looking-through. The effect is like the previews for a film (which this sequence is, in a way), or warming up beforehand for a physical activity, or even subliminal advertisements for a product. Again, it is not simply a case of building narrative suspense in general. Rather, the suspense builds, in part, through the manipulation of specific kinds of visual affordances.

When we finally arrive at the window, this priming is stronger than ever. A count will reveal about a dozen arched aperture forms in this shot, most prominently the window itself, which features three smaller arches within its overall arched construction. If we look closely, we see that this window is leaded, in patterns almost identical to the wire apertures of the first fence. But unlike our experience with the fence, the deep focus lets us see at least in a general way what is inside the window: a bedroom. In fact this repetition of the “fencing” gives us the normal experience of a fence, looking through it, rather than at it. As a result, we finally have a distinctly unified sense of cognitive and narrative satisfaction, even achievement. But just as we are getting sure of what we see, the light goes out, leaving only the barrier quality of the window: no more looking through at all.

We are being teased of course, and on many storytelling levels. As, on the level of plot, a series of promising memories and eye-witness accounts will lead the reporter to a dead-end about “Rosebud”; so this series of very specific cognitive-priming images leads us, at first, to a dead-end of cinematic eye-work. It is as if we have been warming up for some athletic event, only to have it called off at the last second. But since we are only being teased, we soon get the relief, through another dissolve, of not only seeing through the window but “magically” (Arthur 372) being in the room, where we can now see a body lying stiffly in the bed. The priming seems to have paid off after all (except that we were primed to look through the window at the secret content; which we do not really get to do).

We are now on the opposite side of the room, looking at, not through the window. An unexplained light outside the window ensures that the window remains a quite strong presence in the scene, “a presence,” as Ira Jaffe has written, “perhaps more extensive and privileged than that of any human character” (102). This image dissolves, impossibly, into falling snow, just as it would fall outdoors. Now, falling snow need not necessarily have to do with the activity of looking-through, but that is the way it is used here. No sooner do we get to see what we have been primed to see—the object in the lighted room—than this (un)natural see-through barrier comes between our eye and the promised object. We have a conflict between our narrative awareness and our cognitive awareness. Our storytelling sense has been satisfied by arriving at the expected destination, but that satisfaction is unsettled when we find ourselves looking through snow at a person in a bedroom. Both the bedroom and the snow are cognitively understandable separately,

but they present an enigma when we see them on-screen together with no explanation.

The image of looking-through the snow dissolves into a miniature house, set in a snow globe held in some unidentifiable hand. What is the nature of a snow globe? Humans enjoy looking at life that is set off from the world at large. Often we do this by looking through some see-through barrier at the enclosed form of life. We have already seen this with the tiger cage and, after a fashion, with the fence that surrounds Xanadu. Aquariums and terrariums work the same way. We enjoy looking at enclosed life so much that we even create artificial versions of it, just for the pleasure of looking. A snow globe with a cozy human home is one modest, relatively static version, though we add liquid and “snow” because we prefer to look at an enclosed life with movement. Clearly, the movies are another example of (what appears to be) an enclosed world into which we like to look, a world that remains the same no matter how many times we look at it. A snow globe is a kind of primitive quasi-movie, associated with a childish delight at looking into a miniature world.

But, this association lasts only an instant. As the window earlier went black just at the moment of clarity, now, after we see the enormous lips speaking the mysterious word, “Rosebud,” the globe falls and breaks. In a film rich with dazzling special-effects shots, the screen-filling shot of the broken globe may be the most dazzling of all. It is in Garrett Stewart’s words, “an unsettling mix of the flamboyant and the blatantly impossible” (433). We are in extreme close-up at floor level. Much of the shot is fairly murky, though there are three distinctive areas of light. The left third of the screen features the snow-covered miniature cabin, turned on its side. The arched window appears in the upper area of the shot. And the lower right section of the broken glass reflects and refracts, as in a funhouse mirror, yet another multiply arched aperture, a doorway on the opposite side of the room from the window. Kane’s deathbed and his outstretched arm are visible, though distorted, below the arched window.

This image climaxes a specific visuo-cognitive sequence. First, we encountered the close-ups of the fences, which were easily recognizable, but cognitively frustrating. Then, the mix of interior scene and snowfall presents us with easily recognizable visual parts, but we experience frustration because the parts are combined into an impossible whole. The climactic image, however, is not just frustrating. It is disorienting in very specific ways. Though

the details of the shot may be accurately described, that is not the same thing as describing what we can actually apprehend in the shot. Obviously, no one in a theater-showing would have the luxury of stopping the film in order to assess the image at leisure. It is on-screen for only a few seconds. Still, our eye immediately, irresistibly—just as a function of being an eye—tries to make sense of what we see in terms of our narrative knowledge of what is happening.

We can most readily make visual sense of at least two primary elements. First, the little house is closest to the camera, easily recognizable from the previous shot of the snow globe, and its trim of contrastive white snow grabs our attention in the generally dark shot. The next most readily apprehensible element is the clearly lit arched doorway, and then right away a white-uniformed nurse comes through the door, so we have both lighting, color (white) and movement to draw our attention. In fact, as with the monkeys earlier, the movement in the shot instantly captures our eye. We tend automatically to follow the nurse as she moves off-screen to the right. When she is gone, we have two seconds to make sense of anything else. We may be able to understand that the third illuminated space in the shot, at the top of the screen, is the window we came through earlier. Or not. The odds of making visual sense of the bed and Kane's extended hand are small. Further, the image shows us a scene in front of us—the miniature home, then the bed, body, and window—and, at the same time, shows a reflected scene from behind us: a nurse coming through the door to the bedroom. Further still, the tiny artificial home, shot in extreme close-up, is fantastically large, while the real nurse appears as extreme long and therefore impossibly small, and she appears to be coming into the room below the bed. The normal experiences of windows, mirrors, looking-through, looking-at, proportionality, in front of and behind, above and below are all broken apart, but still present in this image. It is like a pastiche or a collage, or simply an unassembled visual puzzle.

On the one hand, we know where we are narratively. Though on a first viewing we may not know whose hand we see nor why the hand is holding the snow globe, seeing the globe at least gets us back to a normally recognizable element of the world after the unexplained snow falling in the bedroom. We see the globe fall and break, and then we cut to this detail shot at floor level, so we know consciously what the image is supposed to be. We automatically take this as a match on action edit. Simple narrative continuity tells us this is the broken snow globe.

But, on the other hand, the shot stymies us on the visuo-cognitive level. We have to do extra-difficult work extra quickly in order to get our bearings in the purely visual sense. We automatically try to make visual sense of what we see, but we are not given time to do so. And then with this cognitively confounding image still in our minds, we see someone being laid to final rest followed by a fade to black; but then, inexplicably, a fade up followed by a second fade to black. It is as if we get one fade to put this unknown deceased person to rest in the usual cinematic way, and then we get a second fade to cover up, rather than somehow resolve or make sensible, the climactic disjunctive image. Given this, it makes sense that, the next thing we know, our experience of the movie begins again in the usual way of movies in the 1940s, with documentary newsreel footage. Unlike in the Prelude, the News Reel sequence always has a voice over to make clear any possible visual enigmas. But, as we leave the Prelude, the effects of the shattered snow globe remain in place.

What about this spectacular, but nearly inapprehensible image? Though it is an overstatement to say this image is “the film’s main symbolic ‘event’” (Carringer 187), it clearly demands extra attention. Considered in thematic terms, the broken globe (once we know the whole story) readily becomes a metaphor for what Kane has had, and has lost. The broken-apart, perfect little world can represent his lost childhood, his lost mother, and his lost last chance with Susan. But if we are thinking in terms of visual cognition, other meanings emerge. After all, any normal shot of the broken globe on the floor would act as the metaphor of loss. If anything, this shot—so hard simply to make visual sense of—overshadows that most likely significance. In other words, we need not have a disorienting visual image simply because a snow globe shatters.

Now, the images that lead up to the shattered snow globe all operate in the usual way of a prelude. Typically, a musical prelude teases the audience with quick introductory hints at major themes and melodies to come. The images we have identified in the Prelude to *Citizen Kane* are all, except for the shattered globe, first entries in a set of visuo-cognitive motifs that will play out across the course of the film. The looking-through affordance of the fence will re-appear in a number of ways, most distinctively and imaginatively with the act of looking-through writing: both actual written documents (twice through Thatcher’s reminiscences) as well as, twice, through the marquis of the El Rancho club, and then the dissolve through “Kane

Builds Opera House” to Susan singing. This motif will climax as we look through the flames at the end and through the writing on the sled as it disappears forever. The mirror-window affordance, beginning with the reflected window in the lake, will develop into a series of progressively more tricky mirror windows, climaxed by the cognitively challenging shot of Kane, Bernstein, and Jed looking at the Inquirer office front window mirror from the street. The arch affordance will come to a spectacular climax in combination with the mirror affordance when we see infinitely reflected Kanes after he ransacks Susan’s room. Each cognitive motif, then, has its own beginning, middle and end.

Unlike the other visual elements, though, the shattered snow globe does not begin its own cognitive sequence. We see plenty of fanciful shots later on, but we do not see another sheer visual enigma like this. And yet the image is integral to our final experience—narratively and cognitively—of the film as a whole. Recall that we see this enigma after being systematically primed with a set of images that are the everyday visuo-cognitive parallels to the cinema as a visual experience. But the Prelude climaxes with a disjunction between our narrative awareness and our cognitive awareness. The film as a whole, though, is “symmetrically closed” (Mulvey 26). It climaxes with an equal, but oppositely enigmatic *reconnection* of our narrative awareness and our cognitive awareness.

The plot is set up as a kind of detective story, with our interests directly aligned with Thompson, the reporter. Typically, in such stories, we follow the detective and are rewarded with knowledge or not, just as he is or is not. But the concluding narrative enigma of *Citizen Kane* is not just that the detective never gets the meaning of “Rosebud”; it is that he does not, while we do. The satisfaction of learning the secret that instituted the plot is reserved especially for us. Equally as important, this concluding narrative satisfaction comes to us through a final, most-dramatic moment of looking-through. We learn the name of the sled as we look-through the framed opening of the furnace (which the camera makes sure remains in the shot), then through the flames, and then through the name itself as it disappears. What had been originally climactically disjoined—our narrative experience and our visuo-cognitive experience—has now been climactically rejoined. This satisfying conclusion is further validated as we end back at the opening shot of the Prelude: the No Trespassing sign.

In conclusion, we have seen a working example of a cognitively oriented, interpretive approach to film: or what I call cognitive phenomenology. Such an approach will typically explain how meaning emerges from the relationships between certain cognitive universals and specific elements of a given film experience. A cognitive-phenomenological approach, then, differs from the more common approach of a cognitive poetics in a key way. Since Aristotle's time, a "poetics" has typically (certainly not always) focused on explaining how effects are produced in viewers or readers. When we read *Poetics*, we do not really expect to find explanations of meaning—which would be a hermeneutical approach—beyond the basic meaning of satisfying the human "instinct for imitation." But, the approach used here explains not just *that* an effect is produced in a given film. It explains what it means for that film that an effect is produced in the exact way that it is. To this extent, a cognitive-phenomenological approach operates in much the same way as do other, noncognitive approaches to film. Psychoanalytic or postcolonial or gender-studies approaches, for instance, will have a general theory of how unconscious desire and/or ideology determines conscious behavior and identity. The lens of theory in each case will typically have two primary analytical effects. It will cause certain elements of a given text to be more apparent than they might otherwise be, and it will offer a means of explaining the significance of the effects of those elements. Our approach to *Citizen Kane* has worked similarly, except that our theory of the unconscious determinants of consciousness has come from the cognitive sciences, ecological psychology in particular.

Above, I said that *Kane* is to film studies as *Frankenstein* and *Heart of Darkness* are to literary studies. A given approach to narrative fiction will often demonstrate its utility by providing new readings of these already well-studied texts. I have tried to do the same here, in bringing cognitive phenomenology together with *Citizen Kane*.

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NOTES

1. For a recent, nonpartisan review of this history, see, Bordwell *Psychocinematics* 29–52.

2. In turning to ecological psychology I am most directly preceded by two volumes: Anderson; Anderson and Anderson.

3. McGinn mentions these possibilities: “holes, water, windows, mirrors, microscopes, telescopes, the sky, flames, the eyes, and the mind” (19). All of these and others—a camera for instance—are relevant, but none so directly comparable as mirrors and windows.

4. To this day Ira Jaffe’s detailed reading of the Prelude in his “Film as the Narration of Space: *Citizen Kane*” remains one of the best. But see also, for example, Naremore 68–72 and Stewart 430–39.

5. As already mentioned, *Citizen Kane* is over-rich with possibilities. The film’s multiple dissolves are potent cases of the act of looking through, but they deserve an essay on their own.

6. This kind of preliminary “warm up” has a long history, on the narrative level. When a story begins with a relatively detached prelude that in the end turns out to have taken us into the story, we have such a warm up. We are being one way or the other narratively prepped for the story to come. A frame story is the most traditional form. But, the warm up on the cognitive level, as far as I can tell, only begins with cinema. *Kane* is an early example. Not surprisingly, the cognitive warm ups become steadily more complex and challenging over the decades. Four examples that would profit from my approach here are the openings to *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock 1954), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982).

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