



Writing, Orality, Cinema: The ‘Story’ of *Citizen Kane*

I

With fiction film as with any other art form, if we wish to come to a critical understanding of meaning, we will likely consider on one level or another form in relation to content. Because of the nature of film as a representation, “form” involves an especially wide variety of possibilities: lighting, angles, acting, directing, audio, focus, and so on. As with drama, in fiction film (since the advent of sound) a particularly crucial element in presenting the story is spoken language. And the form of spoken language will always be essential to the content. We judge the quality of acting by, among other things, the convincing ways in which lines are delivered; for the form of the delivery will always be key to the “showing” that will make the spoken content more than simply “telling.” But language appears onscreen in at least one other form besides speech: writing. We tend not to give writing anything like the kind of importance we give to speech. However, I want to argue that, because of the nature of writing as a communications technology, whenever writing does show up in a fiction film, it will always be at least as significant as speech. Further, any film that specifically foregrounds writing will call for and reward special interpretive treatment because of the significance writing carries as a communications technology. In what follows I will lay out some theoretical claims about the nature of writing both in general and specifically in relation to fiction film as a kind of narrative. Then, a look at *Citizen Kane* will help reveal what such theories can discover about a particular film.

Need Bio

Most contemporary literary scholars will likely have at least some awareness of the ways in which Jacques Derrida, most famously in *Of Grammatology* and “Dif-férance,” helped initiate poststructuralism through his discussions of alphabetic writing in relation to speech. Taking off largely from his rereading of Saussurean structuralism, Derrida made the deconstructive case that reversed and then dissolved the ancient understanding of writing as the secondary, parasitic representation of the signs of spoken language. This logical maneuver then became (apart from the specific case of writing and speech) a conceptual paradigm that enabled similar investigations of all manner of other cultural constructions. But there has existed, almost exactly contemporaneously with poststructuralism, another scholarly understanding of writing in relation to speech. This understanding has tended to be much more historically and empirically based. Since the nineteen sixties a substantial group of scholars in various fields has investigated the nature and effects of writing as an invented human technology (for instance: McLuhan; Olson; Havelock 1982, 1986; Goody 1977, 1986, 1987, 2000; Ong 1967, 1977, 1982). Both understandings of writing are grounded in strong theoretical arguments, but clearly enough the post-structuralist camp has been by far the most influential.¹ And yet as we shall see, if we understand writing not as an abstraction, but as an effective historical invention, we open different doors to literary interpretation.²

In all the considerations of writing, one primary fact is always foundational for other claims: writing takes language out of its original oral/aural cognitive realm and transforms it into the realm of the visual. With writing, we are enabled to “see” otherwise ephemeral verbal speech as a material object, in the way that other objects may be seen (McLuhan; Havelock; Clanchy). This materialization of speech has been essential to a truly broad and powerful array of effects. With writing, basic features of language such as storage capacity, preservation, and accuracy are vastly expanded, and the mechanization of writing by print amplifies all this even further. As a result writing has promoted all manner of change in human history. We have, for instance, convincing arguments that the technology of writing in a crucial way produced modernity itself (Eisenstein; Olson). Walter Ong writes that: “One consequence of [writing] was modern science” (1982). Jack Goody has argued that “the very nature of formal reasoning as [literate cultures] understand it (that is, in terms of Aristotelian ‘logical’ procedures) is not a general ability but a highly specific skill, critically dependent upon the existence of writing and of a written tradition” (256). Roger Chartier has argued for the intimate connection between writing and modern concepts of individuality and privacy. And strong cases have been made for the intimate linkage of writing and the emergence of modern concepts of law (Clanchy; Green; Goody). In short, though we commonly take writing to be simply a representation of speech, in fact if we think about it as an invented technology, then we will see it as much more.

If writing has induced many and various positive effects in human affairs, nonetheless like any other technology it must also come with negative effects, some of which were recognized long ago. As is well known, Plato rejected writing because of what it meant for memory. With writing, Socrates says, people will remember “no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks” (520). And in some

ways he was right. History, for instance, which in oral cultures is what Brian Stock calls a specific kind of “social psychology”—an intimate, binding communal memory dependent on speech—has long since become almost entirely a function of the very asocial practice of writing (18). Plato also made the case that written words misleadingly appear to be just another version of speech: “they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent” (521). But of course being disembodied they cannot reply when questioned. And because writing is detached from the body, it “drifts all over the place” (521), unanchored by the immediacy of verbal communication. Plato here takes as a given fact the paradigmatic nature of what in modern linguistic theory has been called the speech-act: the cognitively base-line act of face to face, mouth to ear, and eye to eye linguistic exchange in a particular real-world context. In disembodiment of our words, writing removes them from their speech-act origins. Said another way, disembodiment of our words automatically decontextualizes them, and all actual speech acts depend on the immediate, material-world context of their speaking in order to signify successfully. Now, in claiming paradigmatic status for the speech act in this way, it matters to be as clear as possible about what I mean. I do not suggest that the speech act is in any way a model of exact or absolute communication. Such communication could only ever be, at best, an imaginary possibility. To take the speech act as a paradigm is a conclusion that follows logically from taking language as a function of our biological evolution. Given the material actualities of the human animal as a specifiable kind of biological creature that has evolved in particular ways in a specific environmental context, then the kind of vocal communication that occurs most naturally to that creature can reasonably be taken as the paradigm of vocal communication for that creature. Clearly, spoken language is in this sense the foundational human vocality. Humans are born predisposed to speech in much the same way that birds are born predisposed to song. Children will learn speech simply from being exposed to already-existing speech. Though we may have to coerce children to speak “correctly,” we do not have to coerce them to learn speech in general: they will pick it up just from being around other speakers. In contrast, writing (or any form of communications technology) has been consciously created by speaking humans in particular contexts for particular purposes; and unlike with speech, any given human must be, one way or the other, coerced into learning writing.

So by thinking of speech in terms of biology and evolution, we can provide solid arguments for the validity of what Plato took for granted. And then if we take the speech act as paradigmatic, we can see that Plato’s complaints about writing do have merit. Because writing appears simply to be speech in another form, when we write, we may possibly *feel* quite sure of our intentions and our expressions, may feel them as certainly and clearly as with our spoken words in conversation, and very often writing succeeds quite as well as speech. Nonetheless, written words, lacking the bodily and contextual cues on both sides of an actual verbal exchange, cannot *in general* be as surely communicative as the default human linguistic exchange: a speech-act. I have explained this at some length because fundamentally it must be in relation to the speech act paradigm that writing (or other technological/mechanical forms of communication) must be assessed.

Plato seems not just to reject, but to lament the advent of writing. And this brings us to one final common, large-scale effect of writing. In a sense the introduction of any new technology will of necessity involve a conflicted relationship with either the already-existing technology or the human physical ability that is being superseded, and very often this will lead to a certain nostalgia for what is left behind. An example would be the conflicts between the early automobile and the horse-powered vehicles it was replacing, and then, later, the nostalgia for the good old days before the automobile. The technological innovation tends very commonly to make the displaced old seem simpler, purer, authentic in a way no longer possible. A similar process may be found with writing. The act of writing has always been a, perhaps *the* crucial element in the myriad conflicts between whatever version of literate and non-literate culture, the basis for which is the unjustified sense of superiority taken on by the literate in relation to the non-literate. But, paradoxically, also common is a sense of nostalgia often expressed by the literate for what has been lost in literacy, the great image of this being the romanticized noble savage. Typically, the actual nature of this kind of nostalgia is not consciously known to the one who experiences it. For this reason, a close study of such nostalgia can be revealing.

Once we comprehend the nature and effects of writing as a technology, we have a changed awareness of what, apart from simply the content, may be at work in any given instance of writing. It follows that the image of writing in a fiction film (henceforth: diegetic writing) will necessarily be overloaded with meaning. The script itself is an image in a visual narrative. As Gregory Currie writes, it functions “pictorially” (8), and therefore its visual form will be significant in various ways which will only become clear to us when we consider writing as a technology, because it is only when we consider writing in this light that the full significance of its form(s) becomes visible. Further, as a corollary to such an understanding of writing, we will necessarily also have a changed understanding of orality. Orality is the source for writing, but is also in its turn affected by writing. The two take on meaning in relation to each other.

Before turning to *Citizen Kane*, we need to set forth one final idea. We are considering the image of writing in relation to a certain technological kind of storytelling (fiction film); and of course historically, writing itself has been an immensely important technological means of storytelling. These facts bring us to the issue of “showing” and “telling.” Though in one sense showing and telling, like form and content, are dialectically opposite terms and so are not really separable, nonetheless there exists a material-world foundation upon which the opposition can provisionally be based: the human body. Taken literally, “to show” is to make visible to the eye; “to tell” is to convey by words. Strictly speaking, then, no written story can be a case of showing, because cognitively we cannot see the story. This is not to diminish written story as a kind of narrative. In fact it makes the successes of, say, the novel all the more impressive. But still, to be exact we must put “showing” in quotes when we deal with written story. Further, to show a story must literally mean to show diachrony, since all story one way or the other requires diachrony. Now, diachrony means “across time,” but if we think again in a foundational way, i.e. in terms of human cognition, we never show time itself. In terms of actual cognition, time has no

meaning. Rather, we show what humans can actually see: sequential change in state and/or space, which inescapably involves some form of visible motion (or, to use the term from which cinema is derived: kinesis). As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have argued (137–70), we linguistic creatures generalize metaphorically from the experience of visual perception to a concept of temporality. Given this, there are only two kinds of narrative that can literally show story: stage (or staged) performance and film. With these two genres, we should properly speak of story-showing/telling rather than just storytelling. But any stage performance essentially involves material performers before a flesh-and-blood audience, and this (among other things, cf. Munsterberg 401–7; Carroll 66–70; Bazin 1967, 76–124), separates it entirely from film (including a film of a play) as a kind of representation. In the history of story, fiction film holds a unique place as the narrative form with the capacity to show story. It is, as Gerald Mast has observed, a “perfect synthesis of Aristotle’s dramatic and narrative ‘modes’” (18).

Since fiction film is this kind of narrative, it follows that diegetic writing (writing internal to the story) will always necessarily be working in a special way both to show and to tell. I do not want to overstate this. The form (font type and size and color for instance) of literally any example of writing will always be a kind of showing, and of course its content will always be a kind of telling. But taken generally, writing has primarily to do with communicating content or again, in story terms, with telling, which will not be the case in fiction film. This fact becomes quite clear when we consider the written intertitles of silent film, which, typically being extradiegetic, have only one function: to tell what cannot be adequately shown by motion pictures alone. The more complex the story, the more necessary the intertitles. With this example in mind, we can see that fiction film only truly takes on its unique role in the history of story once there is audio, because until then no matter the “showing” intrinsic to motion pictures, the story still depended on purely informational writing. As we shall see, *Citizen Kane* will show an awareness of the historical relationship between these kinds of communications technologies.

II

Having laid out an array of ideas about writing and film, let us now turn to an actual example—*Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)—in order to discover what our ideas may reveal. *Kane* is commonly considered the finest American film ever made. Whether or not this be the case, it is almost certainly the most critically discussed. In numerous essay-length studies the film has been considered in terms of, for instance: Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (Beja; Brinkley; Mulvey), Aristotelian dramatic theory (Maxfield), evolutionary psychology (Billy; Schwartz), its use of audio (Altman; Thomas), its use of visual space (Jaffe), and its relationship to *The Great Gatsby* (Carringer; Mass). Film criticism luminaries such as Pauline Kael and Laura Mulvey and André Bazin have considered *Kane* at length. There have been at least two essay collections dedicated to *Kane* (Naremore; Gottesman). It is a safe bet that in the index of nearly any scholarly book on film, and especially American film,

Kane will have at least a handful of entries, if not an entire chapter. In nearly any college text-book on film, *Kane* will always be a prominent example used to illustrate all manner of terms and ideas. If a text's greatness may be inferred by how rich a field it continuously provides for serious critical attention, then *Kane* is unquestionably great.

And yet in all these studies, a distinctly prominent visual and thematic element of the film—writing—has had very little discussion. Since this film has to do with newspaper journalism, it is hardly surprising to see images of written words on-screen. But in fact such images abound, from beginning to end. Though the onscreen title of *Citizen Kane* is a case of extradiegetic writing, nonetheless we must begin with it because we will see a number of direct visual returns to its form later in the film. The title is shown in neon white letters on a black background. The letters are rather strikingly un-ornate and even by writing standards are decontextualized, not relatable to any particular other kind of lettering; but they are plainly mechanically produced, as opposed to being any kind of handwriting. There is no audio, no motion. This might as well be a photograph. We fade to black. When we fade up, we are quickly into the realm of the moving image and also into the image of diegetic writing. The camera looks from an angle to the left at a No Trespassing sign which, except that it is smudged with grime, would be a clear inversion of the title: mechanically produced black letters on a white background. Once we know the whole of Charles Kane's story, we know that this first image of writing is already a visual figure of the great reversals, always linked to writing, that will spoil Kane's wealth and success. The camera pans up over a gate's metal wire and iron bars until we stop with a low angle of a large, black letter K in ornate wrought-iron. The K will appear again in various forms across the film, so that it becomes the title character's logo. The camera looks literally through the fence and takes us, by means of a series of lap dissolves, to the climactic extreme close-up of the unknown lips speaking the one famous, and at this point incomprehensible, word: "rosebud." We will consider this image in detail below. For now, we move on to look at the snowglobe falling from the limp hand, and soon understand that the speaker of the one word has died. We fade to black.

When the image fades up again, things have changed in such a way that the purely cinematic nature of what we have just been shown in the opening sequence is all the more pronounced, because we are abruptly in a very different format. We have switched from fiction film to newsreel. Because the newsreel sets off the plot for the movie as a whole, we will need to look at it in some detail. We first see a still shot of a painting of flags and banners whose meaning is declaimed by a newscaster's voice as "news on the march." Then, redundantly, we see "NEWS on the MARCH" in white letters over the painting. We cut to an obituary announcing the death of "Xanadu's Landlord," which replays the visual form of the title, though this time the content of the neon white letters seems taken from a newspaper. This fades to a series of still shots and seconds-long action shots that introduce us to daytime views of the mansion we had seen only darkly in the opening. Unlike the images of the opening sequence, all these images come with verbal and/or written explanation. In other words though we have the act of showing, this is not really cinematic story-showing;

for fully cinematic story-showing, as opposed to silent film or film of news/information, does not need an extradiegetic voice or written words to tell the viewers the meaning of what they see. The form of the newsreel, then, by its abrupt contrast, foregrounds the filmic story-showing of the opening sequence.

“News on the March” is an almost encyclopedic mixture of the technological means of telling a man’s story at this time in history: picture magazine, photography, painting, newspaper, radio news, and film. Its subject of course is Charles Foster Kane, but it comes at the actual man in an oddly oblique manner. After a sequence about the building of Xanadu, we fade to black and then back up to more neon lettering announcing the great funeral. Over footage of the service, the announcer tells us the one bit of information that the written words and the moving images have not divulged: the name of the deceased is Charles Foster Kane. Then, finally, we see the face of the title character. We first see Kane in what appears to be a free-standing photograph, until the camera pulls back to reveal a front page newspaper headline announcing Kane’s death, followed by a series of other front page headlines over other photos of Kane. So, although we are in a film format, nonetheless the first actual visual image of the title character is distinctly non-filmic, and dependent on the written headlines to tell us the meaning of what we see.

We do not see an actual moving image of Kane himself until half-way through the newsreel, when we cut to footage of Kane in front of a microphone reading a written statement to a well-dressed crowd in an elaborate lobby. Just before this moment we have seen two examples of film with its own (that is, diegetic, non-voiceover) audio. We have seen and heard Mr. Thatcher, Kane’s original guardian, reading a statement to a congressional committee in which he calls Kane a communist. And we have seen and heard an unnamed speaker at a worker’s rally accusing Kane of being a fascist. The newscaster then prepares us for what would seem to be a climactic moment: footage of Kane telling us his opinion of himself. But just when we appear to have arrived at the cinematic “actuality,” we see silent film of Kane before the microphone, then the neon letters appear again to tell us what he was saying: “I am, have been, and will be only one thing—an American.” And then we return to the silent moving image. So our first cinematic look at Kane foregrounds the way silent film depends upon writing to get the story told.

After passing through another mixed series of newspaper photographs, paintings, black-on-white written titles, and more silent newsreel footage, we do finally get to see and hear Kane. In newsreel footage from just before World War II a reporter asks him about the situation in Europe, and Kane responds with smug self-assurance that there will be no war. Earlier we have seen the newspaper front-pages announcing Kane’s death. Scattered around the headlines about Kane are many other headlines clearly detailing the German aggressions that cause WWII. So when we do first see and hear Kane, the newspapers have already ensured that he will look glibly foolish, like a “stilted old codger” as James Naremore puts it (144). Within the newsreel, then, the newspaper has been the means of at once memorializing and belittling the title character, a key effect which will occur again later.

If we consider the newsreel as a whole, we find that it has presented a history, not just of its subject, but of the ways of telling the story of its subject. In moving

from still photography with newspaper headlines to silent film with intertitles, and finally to the “talkie,” the short bio-pic seems to flaunt its own technological comprehensiveness, making sure that we see how easily it incorporates the competition.

But of course except for the “talkie” footage, writing has been indispensable to all the various means of getting Kane’s story told. Besides the examples already considered, we also see different kinds of posters with writing; more newspaper headlines; more neon intertitles; and finally on the side of a building a public electronic news bulletin that announces Kane’s death to the city in horizontally scrolling letters of light. So the stress on writing in the opening sequence and the News on the March sequence installs writing as, at least, a visual motif in the film. But as we move on to other examples, it will become clear that motif is not really a strong enough term.

From the newsreel we abruptly switch to the newsroom scene. This scene, as Robert Carringer notes, “could easily be mistaken for something out of a newspaper comedy of [Frank] Capra or [Ben] Hecht or [Howard] Hawks” (189). It is very much after the traditional movie images of newspaper reporters in a smoky pressroom, haggling over the big story. So right away we find an implied similarity between newsreel and newspaper. And just this similarity will become the problem that sets off the plot of *Citizen Kane*. Mr. Rawlston, the newsreel producer, tells the main reporter, Thompson, that we have seen a “good short,” but “what it needs is an end. All we saw on that screen was that Charles Foster Kane is dead. I know that. I read the papers.” And yet death is as solid an ending to an individual life as we can ever have. So how can this ending be unsatisfactory? The key problem lies in the failure of the newsreel to provide something that a newspaper cannot provide. Shortly, Rawlston will bring up Kane’s “dying words,” and one of the shadowy voices in the room will ask: “What were they?” Thompson, chagrined, replies: “You don’t read the papers,” which draws an embarrassed laugh from the other newsmen. Further, the sense of communicative inadequacy will be reinforced twice later in the film when the waiter at the El Rancho and then Jed Leland both inadvertently taunt Thompson by mentioning that of course they know of “rosebud” from the papers. Taking all this together, we can see that the plot to come depends on a conflict between two kinds of communications technologies. And yet we have plainly seen in the newsreel itself how cinematic news overtakes and surpasses the newspaper as a means of communicating information. The simple fact is that film can include images of newspapers and all previous means of written or photographic informational narrative, but newspapers cannot include film. Still, in Rawlston’s mind the newsreel has failed to distinguish itself from the most successful contemporaneous print medium.

Rawlston then complains that “it’s not enough *to tell* us what a man did. You’ve got *to tell* us who he was” (emphasis mine). What most matters is outdoing the newspaper at its own game: telling. The primary aim of both newspaper and newsreel is to tell. But the newspaper is almost entirely direct telling. Able to include only the minimum possible showing—the illustration or photograph—newspapers cannot show a story. The newsreel would seem to be straightforwardly superior to the newspaper because the newsreel is most definitely a showing, though as we have seen it does require the indispensable help of direct telling by voice or writing. And with respect to the “who he was” problem, this newsreel has made a point of revealing personal and

emotional elements in Kane's story, not just what he did. It has included as much of loves, hatreds, and emotions as it has of anything like hard news. However, Rawlston is dissatisfied. Very much in the tradition of films about newspapers, he "stops the presses," postpones the newsreel's release in order to squeeze in the one remaining sensational scoop. The question of Kane's true identity remains, and that can only be answered by investigating the meaning of his last spoken word: "rosebud." The film has set up a plot based on the struggle for superiority between two modern communications technologies—one based in print, the other in film—and, significantly, the outcome of that struggle will depend on telling the world the meaning of that most singular example of speech: a man's dying words.

Thompson begins his search for the secret of the mysterious word. After a fade to black, the camera pans up to reveal what will, in being repeated twice more during the film, become the written logo for Kane's second wife: the neon sign above the El Rancho night club. The camera passes through the words of this sign as it did the No Trespassing and K logo of Kane's gate, but to no avail since Susan establishes her own no trespassing sign by refusing to talk. Still, we have a visual motif of passing through written words in order to get at the one oral word that most matters. Next, Thompson visits the Thatcher memorial library, wherein we will encounter a man whose only remains are his written words. The exaggerated security as well as the setting, lighting, and shots work to figure Thatcher's memoir as a fabulously rare and valuable document, almost a living being. The inner guard, Jennings, carries the bound volume as if it were a baby; and then after he delicately places it on the table, he continues to gaze on it, as a parent would a sleeping child. Thompson is finally left alone with the text. In a repetition of the camera movement through Xanadu's fence and the neon El Rancho sign, the camera looks over his shoulder and down at the page. After scanning the first line of script, we look, by means of a lap dissolve, through Thatcher's handwritten words directly into a flashback scene from Kane's boyhood.

Before turning to that scene, we need to notice that another important visual motif has been established: "looking through" writing. In a film that makes so much of writing, this has an intriguing effect. Writing solidifies, materializes the otherwise ephemeral nature of speech and thereby takes on its immense power. But in *Citizen Kane* the camera (and so, the viewer) in a way renders that materiality itself ephemeral. Figuratively, film is taking on a certain kind of power over writing. As we shall see, this will matter in our understanding of the film as a whole. For now, what matters is that the past into which we look shows the event of Mrs. Kane literally signing her son over to Thatcher. This entire scene revolves around a written contract, which in its turn depends on a previous written document: a deed in which the Colorado land was signed over only to Mrs. Kane. Reading, signing, talking about, and handling of documents is the main action. The signing of this document begins the identity of the man who will later be important enough for a newsreel story. In a sense the boy is "born" into an entirely new identity as a function of a hand-written contract that effectively deprives him of his own speaking voice. At the end of this scene, the boy, who obviously does not want to leave his home, simply falls silent. All he can do is [look his resistance]? to Thatcher.

The flashback continues on through the young adult Kane's confrontation with Thatcher over the *Inquirer's* Spanish war campaigns, and then we return to our position as Thompson's eyes sliding over Thatcher's handwriting. When we reach the date 1929, we once again look through the handwriting to a scene of legal writing. This time a typewritten legal document is being read by Mr. Bernstein, which turns the *Inquirer* back over to Thatcher. As if to stress the historical change from writing to print, the camera makes sure that we see the writing on the document, and then it makes sure we witness first Thatcher and then Kane actually writing in their signatures.

It is hardly surprising that these two legal documents would be important in Thatcher's written record of his encounters with Charles Foster Kane. But in both scenes the strong focus on not just the content, but the actual writing itself pushes forward the film's general attention to writing in an important way. Clearly enough, most people in modern society are aware of the significance of writing with respect to, for instance, legal documents. We all know that signing our names commits us to a document's contents in a fundamentally different way than simply by giving our word. But still, because of the sheer ubiquity of writing in any modern culture, the nature of writing as a technology tends to be obscured by the content of any given example of writing. The writing in a contract appears to be only a kind of final recording of the actual information, qualifications, and specifications that precede the writing of the document. The writing on a birth certificate appears to be simply the verification of an already-established event. The writing on a marriage certificate appears to be only the ratification of an already-made decision. And on the one hand, in each case the writing does communicate pre-existing content. But on the other hand what gets lost is the fact that only with writing do any of the examples I have given become possible in the first place. Strictly speaking, writing does not just communicate this kind of content; rather, it enables, forms, and, ultimately, requires this kind of content. In a modern literate culture in very substantial ways neither a birth nor a marriage, not to mention a contract, is quite real without the authentication of a written certificate. As we have discussed above, writing has many positive effects in human life, but a certain purely bodily sense of self-sufficiency gets lost when authentication becomes so broadly dependent on writing. In making the signing of these two specific contracts so visually and narratively prominent—the first one literally ending the idyll of Kane's boyhood life, the second one making irrevocable the defeat of all his dreams as a young newspaper man—*Citizen Kane* brings the ambivalent powers of writing directly into the thematic foreground.

Of all the possible enterprises available to the twenty-one year old Charles, he chooses the newspaper. And he will, at least at first, come at the newspaper in a thoroughly idealistic, reformist way, committed to helping those "who have no one to look after their interests." Having been ripped out of the family union as a helpless child by the written contract, he seems to turn to the newspaper as a way of "writing" (we might say) that ordinary wrong. And at least early on in his trust-busting days, he succeeds.

Yet although as a newspaper publisher Kane is associated with print, the film also makes a strong point of associating him with handwriting. In terms of writing as a technology handwriting is, on both the large historical level as well as the level of

each individual human learner, always the original move out of orality. Once there exists the mechanical uniformity of print, handwriting takes on extra meaning because it at least bears visible signs of the individual hand, and so carries a kind of authenticity unavailable to any kind of type. *Citizen Kane* makes much of this.

For instance, Kane establishes his coming of age through a handwritten note to Thatcher in which he announces that he will take over the *Inquirer*. And he announces his marriage to Emily by a handwritten notice (just after which we see Kane's workers, including Jed and Bernstein, looking through the enormous letters on the façade of the *Inquirer* building, as if, unlike him at this point, they have been fully subsumed by Kane's magnification of the print medium). But most importantly, handwriting is featured when Kane, by writing his declaration of principles, establishes himself as a new kind of newspaperman. The unlikely blocking in this scene stresses, again, not just the content but the activity of writing, for Kane is shown from a frontal and then a rear shot standing up and writing on a sheet of paper held flat against a window. (In the shooting script Kane was to be seated on the bed, which would have significantly downplayed the act of writing [Kael 170].) Kane feels this commitment to provide the news honestly and to champion citizens' rights is necessary because he does not want to publish only "pictures and print." Rather, he wants to make the newspaper as important to the city as the gas by which it illuminates the darkness. He seems in fact to feel that the newspaper as it currently exists fails to get at what most matters, just as Rawlston will come to feel the inadequacy of the newsreel in relation to the kind of newspaper that Kane is at this moment creating. And again just like Rawlston, Kane stops the presses in order to get this last, most important item in.

Jed, impressed, wants to keep the handwritten note. He calls the two-sentence statement a "historical document," like the declaration of independence or the constitution on the one hand or like a child's first report card on the other. And this statement, as the act of declaring his independence from the already-established norms of the medium, does constitute Kane as a new kind of publisher. Committing his declaration to writing gives material solidity to his words, and so he will in a way be bound by his statements as a nation is bound by its written self-establishing documents. A child's first report card is the material proof of first participation in the educational system. In literate cultures where so much of life comes to require written documentation, the actual attendance at school will in a sense not have happened, and in any case will not have mattered, without the written record of performance. Also the first report card is rather monumental in life because for most of us it is the first official written documentation for something we have done as human beings apart from parents and family. It authenticates our first move into a truly social, and literate, arena. Kane's handwritten declaration, even more strongly than the newspaper itself, is figured as the material proof that he is now a newspaper man; and given his life story to this point, it also memorializes his first full step into the adult social, business, and political world.

The difference between the report card and the declaration, though, is that Kane gives himself his own written validation. In this and other ways the film makes clear that there are two sides to what he is doing. Rather portentously, he turns off the

lamp just as he claims that the paper needs to be like the gas in the light. His face is in shadow as he stares down at his writing, but at the same time he looks almost worshipful and reads his own words aloud in a theatrically solemn tone, very much as if reading from a hallowed historical document. In fact we have a replay of the manner in which the guard at Thatcher's library looked upon Thatcher's memoir. Once again the camera features the signing of a signature, with Kane, Bernstein, Jed, and the viewer all looking on. Through both this kind of visual image and Kane's idealism about the newspaper, writing accrues a near-sacred glorification.

But where Jed tends to see the positive side of putting the declaration into writing, Mr. Bernstein sees the downside. "You don't wanta make any promises, Mr. Kane, you don't wanta keep," he says, by which he means that once the promise is in writing, it does not just passively record what Kane has said: it takes on the power to command what he will be legitimately able to say and do in the future. In other words Kane is signing what he himself looks upon as a handwritten contract that will shortly appear in print on the front page, complete with a facsimile of his signature. At this point Kane is idealistic and so, unworried by Bernstein's warning. Both literally and figuratively, he begins the project of "writing" the wrong he experienced as a boy.

Above, we have mentioned the sense of nostalgia for orality often embedded in writing, and the way in which if we attend to writing as a technology we will have a changed understanding of orality. *Citizen Kane* is exemplary in both respects. Even before we know the meaning of "rosebud," we can see in the way Kane thinks of the newspaper as a public service that he chooses this profession with a sense of, perhaps unconscious, nostalgia for the time before he was victimized by writing. But added to this is what we see of Kane in his later life. For Kane is not only associated with print and handwriting, but also very conspicuously with orality. Now, of course all the characters speak, but just that is hardly evidence for a distinct and significant association with orality. But once Kane has established himself as a successful newspaper publisher, he turns to politics; and at this time in history that meant a turn to political oratory. All we see of Kane's politicking is his one campaign speech, but there we see him at length orating in the most classic pre-microphone manner: flamboyantly bombastic, verbally and histrionically dramatic, easily filling a large auditorium with the strength of his voice. In fact the film consciously places Kane directly in the grand tradition of American political oratory, and at the same time directly associates his move into politics with his lost boyhood in Colorado. Earlier, when his mother is signing him over to Thatcher, the young boy is visible outside in the snow, calling out slogans that allude to Andrew Jackson's famous second inaugural speech: "The union forever! You can't lick Andy Jackson," he shouts. Jackson is still known as the first truly "people's president," was himself a famous orator in a golden age of political oratory (the three contemporary greats were Daniel Webster, John Calhoun, and Henry Clay), and dealt at length in his famous second inaugural address with the states' rights issue as a serious threat to the union. The adult Kane both as a crusading newspaper publisher and a populist candidate for office follows directly in Jackson's tradition. Given the way the story has dealt with writing as a technological power, it is as if Kane, having succeeded through the newspaper in "writing" the wrong that was originally done to him as a boy, is now enabled to regain the voice that was lost to him in the past.

So Kane is clearly being associated with one of the most prominent historical examples of the speaking voice as political power. And yet even by the time of *Citizen Kane*, such oratory had become all but a relic of the political past. Fiery passion and theatrical skill will, once there are microphones (not to mention television), come to look like the ranting and raving of a lunatic. On both the individual level of Kane's life and on the national historical level the film at once celebrates and creates a sense of nostalgia for this golden age of the voice. For no matter how powerful Kane is as a speaker, his words cannot overcome the printed headline: "Candidate Kane Caught in Love Nest with 'Singer'".

The one word in quotes, "singer," sets the conflict that will power the second half of Kane's life. This is especially ironic because Susan is not a "singer" when the headline appears. All she has done is perform in private for her lover, Kane. The *Chronicle* headline in fact both creates and destroys her (and Kane) as a "singer" at the same time. We see that quoted word three different times: twice—in the newsreel, and then again the morning after Kane refuses to give in to Gettys—in the form of newspaper headlines; and the third time as another version of the decontextualized neon lettering of the film's title: "Kane Marries 'Singer'". But this time we have black lettering on white instead of white on black, so that once again the form, the visual appearance itself, embodies the reversal in Kane's fortunes. Further, Jed Leland will specifically mention the "singer" problem in his interview with Thompson. According to Leland, Kane was "going to take the quotes off the 'singer,'" and to this end set out to make Susan an opera star. So in a parallel to the film's stress on not just the content but the action of handwriting, we now find a stress on not just the content but the form of this printed word. Once again writing is figured as playing a key role in reversing the direction of Kane's life. As has been noted before, Kane, the individual, becomes emblematic of certain historical "turn-of-the-century types" in all this (Naremore 83). Ironically, the kind of writing that he himself has made a historically new force in public affairs—the newspaper—is what now turns round to crush his political ambitions.

Citizen Kane pushes this complex of orality and writing even further when Kane commits to making Susan, and himself, an opera star. "We're going to be a great opera star," he declares to the press on his wedding day. Clearly, he experiences the quotes around "singer" as quotes around himself. He has displaced his failed oratory onto her singing voice. Since opera is the definitive high-brow form of musical theater, and since it has always depended on the sheer expressive power of the voice unamplified by microphones, we now have a figure of the voice as artistic power to parallel Kane's oratorical voice as political power. With this, the implied search for the lost past continues, but fails again. In a moment of yet more powerful irony that builds upon the written form of the *Chronicle*'s "singer" headline, we are shown an extreme close-up of typewriter keys violently striking in the letters to "weak" as Kane himself writes out Jed's unfavorable review of Susan's performance. The visual magnification of stamping in the word figuratively magnifies the reversal of the power that writing has had in and over Kane's life. Now the undoing of Kane's attempt to "write" his past through the newspaper comes full circle, for it is his own *Inquirer* that will print the damning review. After this failure there cannot be a return

even to the second golden age of his life: the lost time when, as a young, principled newspaper man, he worked successfully to “write” the wrongs committed by news-distorting special interests. We are pointedly shown the false headlines through which Kane tries to create Susan’s success. He himself becomes the self-serving special interest. The material sign of the loss of this second golden age appears when Kane himself tears up the old handwritten declaration of principles. Finally, in spite of all his efforts Susan tries to kill herself, and Kane must admit defeat. The most thoroughly public of men takes his wife and retreats behind the No Trespassing sign at Xanadu.

Kane’s failure to remove the quotes from around “singer” finds its counterpart in the failure of Thompson to remove the quotes that implicitly surround “rosebud”; for until its meaning is discovered, “rosebud” remains only a contextless piece of spoken language and cannot be accurately written as a meaningful free-standing word. And this brings us to the pre-eminent case of orality in a film so concerned with writing: the original image of the screen-filling lips saying “rosebud.” The image has three key qualities. First, the extreme close-up isolates the single bodily source of speech, apart from the rest of the body that normally helps determine verbal meaning. The only way to get any closer to the physical production of the word would be to shoot the speaking somehow from inside the mouth. Second, the word is cut off from any other human presence. We have no other face to show us how the word should, or even might, be received. Third, though we have a material world context that necessarily gives us some information—wealth, prohibited access, a bedroom, etc.—nothing in that context has any decipherable relationship to the bud of a rose. Paradoxically then, the sheer physicality of the act of verbalization gets compounded by its detachment from any recognizable speech-act. We have a maximal image of the bodily action of speaking.

The content of what Rawlston calls Kane’s “dying words” is important as well. “Dying words” is of course a cliché, so standard that it gets used even when, as in Kane’s case, everyone knows there was only one such word. But considered more closely the everyday phrase invokes a specific set of qualities, some perhaps rather mythic. A person’s last words are taken to be uniquely important, spoken when the body has become so weak that the physical act of speech is about the only motor function remaining under conscious control. Therefore, no tool or technology or artifice—no writing—of any kind can come between the thought and its verbal expression. The knowledge looms that soon the voice too will be gone. The very last energy of life gets devoted to these words. In *Citizen Kane* the magnified lips make the sheer orality of this all the more prominent. As a result, we find, at the center of a world so thoroughly determined by writing, a super-magnified image of the individual voice.

“Dying words” are not only powerfully oral, they are also uniquely narrativistic, always, at least in the realm of fiction, some kind of summing up. Like the final words of any story, they retroactively determine the full significance of what has come before. In *Citizen Kane* we have a special case of dying words because “rosebud” remains an enigma until the end of the film. It must be conclusive, and yet no one except Kane knows what it means. The result, as the newsreel producer sees, is that some crucial, secret story must exist within Kane’s very public life, which

makes the meaning of “rosebud” all the more intriguing. If Thompson can tell that story, the newsreel will have outdone the newspaper: it will, so Rowlston believes, have told us “who” Kane really was.

Taking all this in the context of the film as a whole, we find a stark contrast to the representation of orality that we have already considered. Earlier, political oratory and opera were eclipsed simply by the power of the one written word in a newspaper headline: “singer.” But with “rosebud” we find that an inviolable oral core of identity remains. No newspaper can even discover the meaning of, much less somehow overcome, this dying word. Evidently, no newsreel can get at that meaning either. After all his searching, Thompson wearily tries to cover his failure by concluding: “I don’t think any word can explain a man’s life.” We must assume the newsreel never succeeds in distinguishing itself from the newspaper.

Further, if we consider Rowlston’s earlier stress on “telling,” along with the way that showing, telling and writing have become central to the conflict between newsreel and newspaper; then *Citizen Kane* implies that “telling” *in general* cannot by itself communicate *the story* of innermost identity. That story must be both shown and told. The newspaper cannot do this because it depends on writing, and because, lacking motion pictures, it cannot show story. The newsreel fails because, though it shows story, it depends on written or vocal explanation to do its telling. The struggle between newspaper and newsreel was, from the start, doomed to have no winner. (This was of course prepared for early on by the figurative equations of the two, beginning with the screening room scene after the newsreel.) To get at identity on the most intimate level of “dying words,” we must have art, not information, which always privileges telling over showing. Only fiction film, because it has the power to look through writing and the power to subsume informational film, can show/tell the story of the definitive core of identity. And this notion is visually and thematically wrapped up by the fact that no one in the film learns what the dying word “rosebud” means. With our privileged look at the name written on the burning sled we have the final proof of what only film can do. Just this has been the ‘story’ of *Citizen Kane*.

To conclude, we have considered some possibilities of how a theory of writing as a communications technology can work as a literary-interpretive tool. Because writing can reasonably be taken as a, if not *the*, foundational technology in the history of human invention, it serves as relatively solid basis from which to assess the nature of any other practice that can be suffixed with “graphy.” Even cinematography, which would on the surface seem so entirely apart from writing, can in fact be illuminated through its relation to the ancient technology. Further, any theory worth learning ought to help us to new insights with even the most canonical texts, and for this reason I have chosen to consider perhaps the most canonical of all American films. In my application of the theory, I have remained primarily within the realm of the text itself. But an obvious next step would be to consider the interplay of writing with the historically specific cultural forces of, especially in this film, class and gender. In other films race would matter as well. Clearly, writing has to do with cultural power, and so there will always be issues of who writes, in what contexts, who reads, who interprets, etc. I hope this examination of *Citizen Kane* will lead to such work going forward.

ENDNOTES

1. Jackson; Goody (109–18), and Ong (1982, 165–70) have discussed the problems with the poststructuralist take on writing in relation to writing as a technology.
2. To see the difference in what the two approaches to writing can mean for the interpretation of film, compare the present essay to Conley, who works from the poststructuralist position and so comes to quite different conclusions.

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