The Modern American City in *Citizen Kane.* An Unconventional History

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This paper reads the city as an unconventional history through the visual narrative of *Citizen Kane* (1941) directed by Orson Welles. The authenticity of this work of art is emphasized in contrast to the Rankian doctrine of *wie es eigentlich gewesen.* The narrative paradigm of history offers an alternative solution to the filmic discourse to read the *multimedial translatability* of this metropolitan narrative as a *historiographic metafiction.* Kane's personal history is documented as a public history with the help of para-historical artifacts. One of these pseudo-facts is the image production of the modern American City that inscribes itself upon the protagonist.

1.

Written history is shaped and crafted in order to represent events to the readers as it actually happened. Conventional notions of history as an empirically based quest for the truth about the past have been criticized having an unquestioning approach to methodological and epistemological questions. Hayden White's theoretical work entitled as *Metahistory*, however, reconsiders the issues of historical consciousness that were challenged in the twentieth century by Foucault. White proposes the self-conscious self-reflexivity of the historical text that has metahistorical elements in its deep structure. These metahistorical elements are generally poetic and specifically linguistic (White 1990 [1973]: ix). Thus, metahistorical thinking reunites and invites a dialogue between historiography and literature on the basis of narrativity by claiming that history is not only a social science as it was in the nineteenth century but an artistic craft. White emphasizes that every work of art whether a novel, a play, or movie could only be understood, if analyzed, in its historical context. Frank R. Ankersmit argues for the existence of historical consciousness in the time-space compression of the immediate sensory experience by which we can have immediate access to the past. Ankersmit

raises the question that how we can find the traces of history in the authenticity of a work of art (Ankersmit 2004: 24-5).

The narrativization of history is constructed as a discourse that does not aim to comprehend the whole of the past and does not want to re/construct the past as it actually happened from the perspective proper. It believes, however, the *raison d'étre* of alternative histories such as oral history, historiographic metafictions or the filmic discourse as a complementary to historiography. According to Peter Burke, historical consciousness in films offers an alternative solution to the problem of turning images into words (Burke 2001: 159). This assumption does not mean that we cannot make distinction between facts and fictions but there is a gap between what we understand as fact and what we comprehend as fiction. This gap can be filled with visual narratives. *Historiophoty*, as White argues, is the representation of history in visual images and filmic discourse as a supplement to historiography (White 1988: 1193). Making past present corresponds to the potential of filmic discourse, moreover, some crucial facts about the past can only be represented by visual images, for example, the time-space compression of the modern American city. Therefore the underlying assumption of this paper is inviting the question of what an image can tell by *reading the city, the illegible* through the visual narrative of *Citizen Kane* directed by Orson Welles in 1941.

2.

After all, if the City is a narrative how we can read it? This assumption suggests that the City as the archetype of historical imagination has manifested itself in various constructed images (Oates 1981: 11). A contemporary perception of America corresponds to a vanishing city reconstructed from fragments of films, music and advertising images. The city is gathering meanings in which people invest their interpretations and try to create their own histories. In this sense, the city can resemble a text, as Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean argue, and can be constructed as a text like an "inscription of man in space" (Campbell and Kean 1997: 162). This assumption invites different layers of interpretations from the dominant historical readings till the interdisciplinary approaches like in *Citizen Kane* directed by Orson Welles. In this film, the protagonist is trying to grasp the real core of his own identity within the narrative of the city. Thus, in the filmic representations, urban space surrounds its subjects and echoes their inner fears and anxieties, which is connected to the notion of internal urbanization concerned with the inner life and mentality of the citizens with the role of acting and thinking in the process of urbanization. If the city is an imagined space that we create for ourselves in the very act of existing within it, then the city is a *labyrinth* of interpretations (Harvey 2003: 59).

The modern American City expanded itself both vertically and horizontally within the Cartesian grid and mass-produced an image of its own. This expansion of the material American City as a capitalist enterprise gets another dimension through the tele-mediated nature of urban life depicted within the filmic narrative. Thus, films like maps, through the transgression of boundaries, systematically create identities whether of people or cities. Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin are referring to a paradigm shift in the analysis of cities. The changed notions of time and space, the new types of consumption such as advertising, newspapers and television penetrate into society and private lives by challenging the nature of what is public and what is private to breaking-point. Cities are becoming invisible to us and change our traditional categories about them by inviting the reading and naming of the city (Graham and Marvin 2001: 48-9). In this sense, the "illegible" city as a text can be read with as many interpretations as it has readers within the limits of representation.

On the level of the city turned into an image, crucial transformations appeared in the metropolitan narrative. According to Klaus R. Scherpe, the history of these transformations can be revealed step-by-step around the rhetoric of walking from the Parisian *flaneur* till the viewers' "as-if-walking" experience in the pseudo-darkness of the cinema auditorium. According to Scherpe, one may define three historical levels in this process of transformation (Scherpe 1992: 75):

1. The depiction of the world by means of expressive art considered to be *authentic* that culminates in German expressionism.
2. The depiction of the metropolis in the consciousness of its "second nature," that is, in consideration of its *functional character*.
3. The narration of the city in the post-war period in the face of reality's *multimedial translatability* and of the changed notions of space and time to the unity of time-space that have been altered by new communication systems.

The third historical level of multimedial translatability corresponds to the latest comprehension of the city that goes beyond the conventional investigations by framing it as an urban discourse. Thus, the modern city as production site seems to be transformed into a "retooling site" and permanent rebuilding in an always-shifting way. The self-representation of the city gains importance, thus, the "narrated city" seems to transform into the "narrating city." In *Citizen Kane*, the city is represented as projected images of bodies, that is, the city becomes the place that re/produces, regulates and structures bodies (Grosz 2001: 48). This becomes explicit in the final scene of *Citizen Kane* with image of the city built from cardboard boxes. The working title of the film, entitled as *American* implies (Cohen 1972: 17) that Charles Foster Kane's personal history is narrated and documented unconventionally as a public history. The para-historical artifacts of Kane's "junk-city" function as an allegory for the state like in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* where Marco Polo is invited by Kublai Khan to describe the cities he visited, that is to give space to the Khan's feeling of emptiness:

> It is the desperate moment when *we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin* that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing. (Calvino 1997: 5, emphasis mine)

Moreover, the film itself is also a product of an artificial city named as Hollywood, the Dream-Factory of the cinematic city. This image production was accompanied with ideology making through the medium of newspapers, radio broadcasting or filmmaking. This new language of visual images redefines the concepts of Americanness and citizenship by opening up channels of communication across traditional cultural and state boundaries and bridging the gap between fictional and factual discourses. The false consciousness of ideology is represented in the media imperialism of Charles Foster Kane. The pseudo-events incorporated into the filmic narrative as real events, for example, when Kane went to Europe to discuss the forthcoming war, are essential characteristic features of historiographic metafictions. According to this interpretation, *Citizen Kane* as a historiographic metafiction violates narrativity by problematizing the Rankian doctrine of reconstructing historical events as they actually happened and rewriting past into fiction. As Kane reports about the "success" of his "European Tour: 'I have talked with the responsible leaders of great powers in Europe[...]They are too intelligent to embark on a project which should mean to end of a civilization as we now know. There will be no war!'"

3.

Historiographic metafiction is in both written and visual form, as Hayden White argues, and is a "para-historical representation," "docu-drama," "faction," "infotainment," or "the fiction of fact" (White 1996: 18). The genre of historiographic metafiction is an intersection of fiction and history by presenting a kind of document to the reader/viewer combined with pseudo autobiographical elements or quasi evidences of photographs. Its textual self-awareness is manifested with a commentary on its own narrative (Hutcheon 1980: 1) by unveiling its own fictional character, for example, the newsreel within the film functions in this way. This reality-effect plays upon the truths and lies of historical record, thus, it has the function of re-writing, re-presenting the past in the present in a way that we know what is presented is deliberately false. Actually that makes it different from the original historical fiction where we can clearly see the borderlines of what is fiction and what is fact.

The different narrating voices of *Citizen Kane* mirror the self-reflexivity of the filmic text that underlines the metafictive historical reconstruction on the level of the form, thus, fiction and history are distinguished by their frames. On the surface level, *Citizen Kane* is about the personal history of an American magnate. Charles Foster Kane gets different labels from the protagonists of his life-story, like being a communist, a fascist, a magician, a liberal, a friend of working man, a journalist or Father. The only sign for his own identity, however, is one saying of him presented by the headlines of the newsreel on his obituary. That is: "I have been, and will be only one thing; *an American*," and later he says to his ex/friend Jed Leland: "I am *more than a hope*." After all, who is Charles Foster Kane? Can we define him through the jigsaw of his empire upon empire or his "City upon Hill" of Xanadu?

According to the newsreel, "few private lives were more public" than his. Kane's life-story is reconstructed by pseudo-events that disseminate other pseudo-events in the geometric progression of the newspaper headlines. Thus, quoting Daniel J. Boorstin, he is not a hero distinguished by his achievement but a celebrity defined by his image. Since, the hero created himself, the celebrity is created by the media (Boorstin 1992 [1961]: 61). The hero was a big man, the celebrity is a big name, like the sign of K on the gate of Kane's artificial city, Xanadu implies. Kane who believed only in himself and lives in the shadow of his statues is "hollow at the core" (Cohen 1972: 20).

The film is framed by the sign of "No Trespassing," indicating the illusion of the "open gates policy" of the United States and the impossibility of grasping "the deserts of American cities," that is, it prohibits entering into the fiction of America. Although "the American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies," as Baudrillard argues, and grasping its meaning one "should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city"(Baudrillard 1988: 56) by giving frame to the image of the city as *screenscape*. Actually, the film gives an illusion of going beyond the gates of hell and finally entering into the other world, since the film begins with and returns to the death of Kane. The smoke rising from the chimney and the destruction of the enigmatic sled named as "Rosebud" gives a sense of waste and indicates an empire and a life that has turned into junk and is going up in smoke.

The film begins with an almost totally black screen. Then, out of the misty dawn, there begins to appear fencing, then a great castle silhouetted on the mountaintop. Through a window, the camera penetrates into the room of Kane's death chamber and the viewer witnesses Kane's death and hears his last words: "Rosebud." This word becomes the key in search for the "true life-story" of Kane. This death scene is violently broken into by blaring music and a voice announcing a "News on the March" newsreel. When the newsreel ends, we find ourselves among several practically faceless men sitting in a dimly lit projection room (Cohen 1972: 17). The end of the film returns to the beginning; Thompson – whom we cannot

see face to face – walks out of the frame and the camera takes us back through Kane's life from the position high above the jungle of junk, para-historical artifacts of Kane's life.

Kane's personal history is narrated and documented unconventionally as a public history. Firstly, in the form of newsreel, then in the different forms of oral narratives. Sequences of flashbacks and reminiscences of his second wife Susan Alexander, his general manager Mr. Bernstein, his ex/friend Jed Leland and Raymond the butler present Kane's life-story from their points of view. The anecdotes and different points of view break the linearity of narration. Mr Thather's unpublished memories and Kane's *Declaration of Principles* as para-historical documents help Thompson to solve the riddle of "Rosebud" and comprehend the enigma of the past, all in vain. Among the quasi oral histories, Susan Alexander's narration gives another frame, since her figure in the bar, called *El Rancho,* reappears two times.

One of the weaknesses of the film is that Susan's character is not well elaborated. Her position, however, in the bar, called *El Rancho* – as its name implies – represents the opposition of the country against the expanding city. She represents also the Sphinx of the American City who poses the jigsaw puzzle of Kane's life-story. Actually, she utters to Kane that: "*I am the one who gets rosebuds,*" at least for her singing. Kane's personal history is like a play with the jigsaw puzzle which is looking for its missing piece, something that he has lost. As it is reconstructed in the newsreel: "Kane helped to change the world, but Kane's world now is history. He as a journalist himself lived to be history, outlived his power to make it."

4.

The city presented in this visual narrative is more than an image, rather it mass-produces its own images by inscribing itself on the characters. Consequently, reading the city implies comprehending *Citizen Kane* as a historiographic metafiction that violates narrativity by directly addressing the viewer and rejecting the conventional plot. This unconventional history of Kane depicted within the multimedial translatability of the metropolitan narrative offers an alternative interpretation of historical consciousness within the filmic discourse. According to Hayden White, convention alone which defines the value on behalf of which a given discipline "plays its game," that is, convention functions as an authority that the given discipline invokes in order to distinguish its way of work from that of other disciplines (White 1981: 151). *Citizen Kane* presents the personal history of a fictional character, Charles Foster Kane as a public history in a way that it transgresses the boundaries of fictional and factual discourses. Therefore, this film of Orson Welles does not just illustrate but has been and is American art, history, politics and culture.

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