Gregg Toland: Cinematographer

I. Film Appreciation:  http://www.twyman-whitney.com/film/celluloid_profiles/toland.html

Toland's trademarks included sharp, deep focus pictures, black-and-white film, ceilinged sets, low-angle lighting, and touches of Germanic expressionism. After much success in his early career, Toland remarked, "I want to work with someone who's never made a movie. That's the only way to learn anything from someone who doesn't know anything." He got his chance in 1941 with Orson Welles and "Citizen Kane".

Toland received numerous nominations for best cinematography (Misérables, Les (1934), Dead End (1937), Long Voyage Home, The (1940), Citizen Kane (1941).


The most influential and innovative cinematographer of the sound era,

He first made a name for himself in 1924 by creating a soundproof camera housing which blocked any mechanized noise from reaching recording equipment, a major advance in the new era of sound, as it allowed directors to film intimate moments without accidentally capturing the winding of film as well.

Toland's fame rested on his gifts for innovative lighting techniques and crystalline deep-focus photography. His work was remarkably evocative.

He revamped the Mitchell BNC camera to include a new anti-noise device which allowed even greater flexibility of movement and control, eliminating the need to intercut between scenes and enabling Welles to create long, continuous shots.

Toland was duly rewarded for his innovations on Kane by receiving credit alongside Welles at the film's close -- the director's clear acknowledgment of the crucial importance of Toland's work -- and it has often been suggested that the film's brilliance was as much a product of his vision as it was Welles'. However, deep focus was slow in sweeping across Hollywood. It was never a common practice; still Toland remained its leading proponent in features ranging from 1941's The Little Foxes to 1946's The Best Years of Our Lives. Ultimately, his techniques reached their fullest application in the medium of television.

III. IMBD.  http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005904/bio

For "Kane" Toland used a method which became known as "deep focus" because it showed background objects as clearly as foreground objects. (Film theorist Andre Bazin said that Toland brought democracy to film-making by allowing viewers to discover what was interesting to them in a scene rather than having this choice dictated by the director.) Toland quickly became the highest paid cinematographer in the business, earning as much as $200,000 over a three year period. He also became perhaps the first cinematographer to receive prominent billing in the opening credits, rather than being relegated to a card containing seven or more other names.

(Over)
During the deeply entrenched days of the Hollywood studio system, cinematographer Gregg Toland's technical and visual innovations set him apart from the flock of doctrinaire technicians and engineers embedded in the formulaic studio factories. He was that rarity among technicians - a cinematographer eager to accept technological advances and apply them creatively to the narrative film form. Toland's talent was readily accepted by the Hollywood establishment, who graced him with a charmed life amid the workmanlike atmosphere pervading most studio productions. Contracted throughout his career to Samuel Goldwyn [although he was lent to other producers], Toland was permitted more freedom than most cinematographers of his time, from being allowed his choice of crew and story properties to converting studio cameras to his own specifications. Working with such outstanding directors as Howard Hawks, William Wyler, John Ford and Orson Welles, Toland was in the unique position of incorporating technological innovations into equally innovative narrative frameworks.

In Toland's early work, in films such as "Les Miserables" (1935), "Dead End" (1937), "Intermezzo" (1939), "The Grapes of Wrath" (1940), "The Long Voyage Home" (1940), and "Wuthering Heights" (1939), he consciously rejected the soft focus, one-plane depth of the established Hollywood house style and strove for a more jarring, razor-sharp black-and-white, employing recent advances in photography that included the use of high-powered Technicolor arc lamps for black-and-white productions, Super XX film stock (a 1938 Kodak stock four times faster than its previous stock without any increase in graininess), lens coating (to cut down on glare) and self-blimped cameras (permitting filming in confined spaces).

At first Toland's deep-focus technique was considered too radical a departure from Hollywood norms. Moreover, Toland's fellow cinematographers found the films that succeeded 'Citizen Kane', 'The Little Foxes' and 'Ball of Fire', too visually dense and confusing, and they complained that Toland's exaggerated depth-of-field sacrificed compositional roundness and rendered the image cartoonish. Toland was in the process of toning down his bravura technique into a more adaptable style, when, at 44, he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1948.

Where Toland rebelled in the 1930s against the prevalent style, by the end of the 1940s, Toland's technique had become the 'new' Hollywood style, a transformation that invigorated a moribund classical cinema through the late 1940s and into the 1950s, until the advent of television and cheap cinematic gimmicks marked the fragmentation of the Hollywood system.