Mank: Screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz and the writing of *Citizen Kane*

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Mank, directed by David Fincher (*Se7en*, *Fight Club*, *Zodiac*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Gone Girl*) from a 1994 screenplay written by his late father, Jack Fincher, is a biographical drama about American screenwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz and his role, or purported role, in the creation of *Citizen Kane* (1941), the first film directed by and featuring Orson Welles. It is a Netflix Original film.

Much can be said about this subject, but we will have to limit ourselves.

An initial title in *Mank* informs us that Welles was brought to Hollywood in 1940 at the age of 24 by a struggling RKO Pictures and "given absolute creative autonomy, would suffer no oversight, and could make any movie, about any subject, with any collaborator he wished…"

The film proper opens as Mankiewicz (Gary Oldman) arrives at a ranch-resort in Victorville, California, 80 miles northeast of Los Angeles on the edge of the Mojave Desert, in the company of producer John Houseman (Sam Troughton) and an assistant, Rita Alexander (Lily Collins). Mankiewicz—recovering from a broken leg received in a car accident—has been dispatched to the secluded location to write a draft of a screenplay for what will become *Citizen Kane*. The script is inspired by the life of newspaper mogul and high-level political manipulator William Randolph Hearst, with whom Mankiewicz has had an acquaintance.

As soon as Mankiewicz and Houseman arrive in Victorville, Welles (Tom Burke) informs them in a peremptory phone-call that their writing period has been shortened from 90 to 60 days. More or less sighing, Mankiewicz, already the world-weary victim of the overbearing Welles, sets to work. The overall tone of the film has been established and our sympathies directed.

The screenwriter, a serious alcoholic and chronic gambler, has a great deal riding on the outcome of the new venture. In a scene that takes place a few weeks earlier, he laments to his long-suffering wife, Sara (Tuppence Middleton), "I should have done something by now."

Mank proceeds to shift back and forth in time, between the present (1940) and various episodes in the 1930s. We learn how Mankiewicz came to know publisher-multimillionaire Hearst (Charles Dance) and his mistress, the actress Marion Davies (Amanda Seyfried) in 1930, at the dawn of "talking pictures."

We witness the vile Louis B. Mayer (Arliss Howard) in 1934 as the prominent film studio head addresses his employees—with Mankiewicz (then an MGM writer) in attendance—and asks "everyone in the MGM family to take a painful step. I am asking to roll back salaries. I don't want to, but for this hallowed place to continue to exist, I am forced to. I won't break up this family over something like money. [How long are you asking for?] Shouldn't be long. [How much are you asking for?] Half. [Half?] Could be less."

That same year, at Hearst Castle, the palatial mansion built on the top of a hill in San Simeon, California, Mankiewicz trades barbs with Hearst, Mayer and the MGM chief's right-hand man, Irving Thalberg (Ferdinand Kingsley), about Hitler, fascism and Democratic Party candidate and former Socialist Party member Upton Sinclair's campaign for the California governorship.

Indeed, at a certain point, the ferocious response of the movie studios to Sinclair's "End Poverty in California" (EPIC) movement takes center stage in *Mank*. After having joked to Thalberg that the studio's fantasy machine should certainly be able to "convince starving voters that a turncoat socialist is a menace to everything Californians hold dear," Mankiewicz is horrified to discover that MGM—bankrolled by Hearst—has followed his facetious suggestion and produced a series of phony, anti-Sinclair and anti-communist propaganda newsreels, purporting to be interviews with ordinary state residents.

In regard to the *Citizen Kane* screenplay, Mank's writer-director brother Joe (Tom Pelphrey) is only the first of several individuals to show up in Victorville and warn that a film portrayal of Hearst, or anything close to it, will be a risk-fraught undertaking: "I hear you're hunting dangerous game. Word on the street is radio's golden boy [Welles] wants to go toe-to-toe with Willie Hearst, and you're helping in the kitchen." Later, Joe returns to the theme: "You pick a fight with Willie, you are finished. Mayer can't save you. Nobody can. Especially the boy genius [Welles again] from New York."

After Sinclair goes down to relatively narrow defeat in the November 1934 election, a defeat blamed in part on the propaganda films, whose director shoots himself, Mankiewicz turns bitterly on Hearst and Mayer. In a climactic scene in San Simeon, Mankiewicz, in a drunken tirade accuses Hearst of destroying Sinclair because the writer-politician is "exactly what" the publisher used to be, "An idealist." Having looked into the mirror, Hearst (says Mankiewicz) decided "to break this glass, a maddening reminder of who he once was." *Mank* suggests that the screenwriter penned *Citizen Kane* in part out of revenge for Hearst's dirty role in the 1934 campaign.

It should almost go without saying that there are intriguing and weighty historical and ideological questions touched upon in *Mank*: the role of Hearst, the character of the Sinclair campaign, the radicalization produced by the Depression, the specific artistic contributions of Welles, Mankiewicz and others, and more. In a sea of trivia and worse, the viewer will understandably be attracted to something more substantial.

But raising an issue is not the same thing as treating it properly and objectively. Here *Mank* falls down badly.

One of the signals that should alert the viewer to dangers ahead is *Mank*'s thudding literal-mindedness and, accompanying that, in many regards, triteness. It treats the making of a black-and-white film, hence it too must be shot in black-and-white. It deals with the writing of a screenplay, so the various titles indicating time and place have to be done in that format ("INT. SAN SIMEON ASSEMBLY ROOM – NIGHT – 1933 (FLASHBACK)").

Universally characterized as brash and egotistical, Welles needs to be brash and egotistical at every instant he appears on screen. The British-educated Houseman, in fact, a substantial, left-wing figure at the time and a contributor to the writing of *Citizen Kane*, is pegged as prissy and

"constipated," essentially a lackey, and is never allowed to stray far from that demeaning persona. Davies is the brassy, Flatbush "broad" she might have been at 19. It doesn't seem to occur to anyone that years as the "kept woman" of an increasingly reactionary business titan might have had the slightest impact on her physical or psychic being.

Mankiewicz himself is given the most all-rounded treatment and the best lines, and Oldman, a wonderful performer, does justice to the part. In general, nothing said here should be construed as a polemic against the screenwriter, who did important work on *Citizen Kane* and other lesser efforts. But he is built up here out of proportion.

Yes, Mankiewicz does have the "best lines," and far too many of them. Since he has gone down in history as a sometimes member of New York's sparkling, acerbic "Algonquin Round Table" (Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, George S. Kaufman, Alexander Woollcott, etc.), Mankiewicz is required to be unvaryingly and wearingly clever throughout the new film. Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum responded recently to all the "witty lines" in *Mank* by asking out loud in a column, "Can't somebody, just once, speak half-normally? Is cynicism the only spice we're allowed to taste…?"

But all these difficulties merely point beyond themselves to more serious, underlying problems: the invention or falsification of historical facts and personalities.

It is not helpful to simply make things up, in the spirit of contemporary postmodernist culture, even taking into account the latitude permitted by artistic license. The Finchers situate their Herman Mankiewicz as a supporter of and something of a martyr in Upton Sinclair's quasi-socialist 1934 campaign for governor. But there is no indication that he played any role in this at all.

A reading of Greg Mitchell's *The Campaign of the Century: Upton Sinclair's Race for Governor of California and The Birth of Media Politics* (1992), a detailed study of the 1934 California election, including Hollywood's central role in it, turns up two references to Herman Mankiewicz, neither of them related to the Sinclair campaign.

On the other hand, the book contains numerous references to Joseph L. Mankiewicz, his younger brother and, eventually, a generally pedestrian film writer-director.

As Mitchell pointed out in the *New York Times* December 7 ("'Mank' and Politics: What Really Happened in 1934 California"), "There is no evidence that Herman took any stand for Sinclair, let alone a nearly heroic one, or even voted for him." In addition, the *Times* column observed that "there's not a shred of proof that Hearst actually financed those phony newsreels, as *Mank* suggests in a key scene, nor that Mankiewicz objected."

The younger Mankiewicz, however, features in Mitchell's book as the author of an *anti-Sinclair* skit for a radio broadcast. He was apparently enlisted by conservative MGM director W.S. Van Dyke. Mitchell writes in his book that "Mankiewicz and Van Dyke saw eye to eye on the dangers of Sinclairism, particularly as it applied to higher taxes, so Joe had agreed to polish GOP campaign speeches and anti-Sinclair radio scripts." Or as Mitchell explained in this week's *Times* piece, Joseph Mankiewicz "wrote outrageous anti-Sinclair radio dramas."

The WSWS posted an article in 2003 by Shannon Jones that set out very well the facts and lessons of the 1934 election in California. Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) was a popular writer, journalist and social reformist. He is best known today for his searing work about the conditions of immigrant workers in the US, *The Jungle* (1906), focusing on the meat packing industry. But he wrote dozens and dozens of other novels, some of them still worth reading. As we noted about *Oil!* (1927), which was loosely the inspiration for Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007), it is "not a great work of art, but it is lively and observant." Sinclair was popular in the 1920s with left-wing theater directors in Europe and the Soviet Union, who adapted a number of his colorful novels into plays.

As a politician, Sinclair was a reformist, who adhered to the right wing of the Socialist Party—except at the most critical political junctures: he left the Socialist Party during World War I, because of his endorsement of the American war effort, rejoined it, then left again, for the Democratic Party, in the midst of the Depression in 1933.

Sinclair's EPIC program for solving unemployment and poverty, as the WSWS noted, "envisioned the state taking over idle farms and factories and turning them into cooperatives that would trade among themselves using scrip. In Sinclair's vision, these cooperatives would compete with privately-owned businesses and corporations and prove their superiority. … Other planks in the EPIC plan included more conventional reforms—a progressive corporate and individual income tax, an inheritance tax, property tax relief for small homeowners, and public works programs."

EPIC was utopian, parochial ("socialism in a single state") and ignored basic social and political realities. It imagined the capitalists peacefully acquiescing to socialist rationality and the Roosevelt administration going along with that. Nonetheless, amidst the general social misery and explosive conditions of 1934 (this was only months after the San Francisco general strike of May-July), it attracted great attention and support from broad layers of the working population desperate for a way out of the crisis.

Moreover, Sinclair used fiery and no doubt sincerely felt language, especially when it came to the brutality of the capitalist class. Speaking of America's "autocracy," he wrote that such men "have the mentality of birds of prey. They are exploiters, to whom men and women are commodities … Their idea of meeting this depression is to sit tight and wait for the storm to blow over. That this means hundreds of thousands of our people sentenced to slow extermination troubles the masters not at all. So long as the masses submit, they despise them; and when they revolt, they send the police with machine-guns and poison gas."

The American ruling class demonstrated its instinctive terror of socialism or anything that smacks of it by mounting a vicious, well-financed campaign (almost $200,000,000 in today's money) to defeat Sinclair. Despite the near unanimous opposition of the media and the establishment and the studious, decisive silence (in reality, hostility) of Roosevelt, Sinclair received nearly 900,000 votes to his Republican opponent's 1.1 million.

As to another central question in *Mank*, the authorship of the *Citizen Kane* screenplay, there truly ought to be no "controversy" at this point. Serious scholarship has demonstrated, time and time again, that Mankiewicz and Welles collaborated, whether they were in the same locale or not, on the script. Film historian and critic Joseph McBride went over this ground again in his lengthy, strongly worded November 28 piece, *Mank and the Ghost of Christmas Future*. It is not necessary to repeat what is convincingly said there.

Writers such as Robert Carringer and, more recently, Harlan Lebo have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that Mankiewicz's later claim that he wrote "about 98 percent of the picture" was simply fanciful, if professionally and psychologically understandable. In the first place, Mankiewicz only took off for Victorville, as McBride notes, after "the…weeks Mankiewicz and Welles spent together in Hollywood working out the structure and characters of what became *Citizen Kane*."

McBride cites Carringer's verdict: "Herman Mankiewicz's principal contribution to the *Citizen Kane* script was made in the early stages at Victorville. The Victorville scripts elaborated the plot logic and laid down the overall story contours, established the main characters, and provided numerous scenes and lines that would eventually appear in one form or another in the film....Work [had] scarcely begun on the most glaring problem in the material, making *Kane* into an authentic dramatic portrait. ... In the eight weeks between the time the Victorville material passed into Welles's hands and the final draft was completed, the *Citizen Kane* script

was transformed, principally by him, from a solid basis for a story into an authentic plan for a masterpiece."

Moreover, as Lebo observes, "Welles did much more than add new text and slice out the extraneous scenes: he stripped away unnecessary material to create a lean structure that focused on the major issues that affected Kane's life and career. Although Mankiewicz's original characters said a great deal, they required many pages of dialogue to do so; Welles's rewritten characters communicated much more while saying less." Added to that is the fact that "much of the film," as Welles's assistant Kathryn Trosper pointed out, was created "on the fly," during the shooting itself.

Perhaps most convincing of all, there is the matter of Welles's and Mankiewicz's respective careers. The latter was involved in the writing of a large number of films, some of them amusing and entertaining, including *The Front Page* (1931), *Horse Feathers* (1932) and *Duck Soup* (1933) for the Marx Brothers, *Dinner at Eight* (1933), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Enchanted Cottage* (1945) and others.

On the other hand, usually under duress, Welles directed *Citizen Kane, The Magnificent Ambersons, The Stranger, The Lady from Shanghai, Macbeth, Othello, Mr. Arkadin, Touch of Evil* and *Chimes at Midnight*, one of the most distinctive bodies of work in the history of the American cinema, as well as breaking new ground in countless theater and radio productions in the 1930s and 1940s. He also co-wrote, at the age of 17, *Marching Song*, a drama about abolitionist John Brown, one of the most important American plays of the 20th century, which has not, to this date, received an appropriate production.

Welles was a generally left-wing figure, who in the 1937-38 period was quite close to individuals in the Communist Party and to the party's policies. He and Houseman, for example, introduced their new Mercury Theatre to readers of the *Daily Worker*, the CP newspaper, in a September 1937 article headlined "Theater and the People's Front." Welles took on Hearst and the phenomenon of American Robber Barons in general, on the basis of his social outlook.

The FBI opened its file on Welles at the time, in March 1941, declaring in one report: "The evidence before us leads inevitably to the conclusion that the film *Citizen Kane* is nothing more than an extension of the Communist Party's campaign to smear one of its most effective and consistent opponents in the United States [i.e., Hearst]." Three years later, top FBI officials placed Welles's name on the agency's secret Security Index. This list contained "the names of those individuals who can be considered to be a threat to the internal security" of the US and who would be rounded up and interned in the event of a national emergency. Welles was essentially driven out of the US in 1947, by an official or tacit blacklisting.

James Naremore (*The Magic World of Orson Welles*) comments that "*Kane* may not have been a thoroughgoing anti-capitalist attack, but it was close enough to ensure that Welles would never again be allowed such freedom at RKO." Welles's subsequent woes have been well chronicled.

Swinish and even malevolent plutocrats have never been absent from Hollywood films, from their earliest days to the present. Edward Arnold, as critic Andrew Sarris once noted, specialized in playing a "bloated shark of Wall Street…beyond even [Soviet director Sergei] Eisenstein's power of imagination," including in *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), directed by Frank Capra, a staunch defender of the American Dream and later an informer.

Welles and Mankiewicz, however, accomplished something far more significant. They presented an essentially sympathetic character in the young Charles Foster Kane, whose degeneration is *inexorably shaped* by both the historical epoch—the emergence of modern American capitalism—and the requirements of his position as a wealthy businessman. As McBride argued, in one of his early works on Welles, in regard to that deterministic element, "As Kane's megalomania begins to reach Hearstian dimensions, blunting his youthful idealism, Kane's boyish swagger begins to stiffen. His face becomes less mobile, his carriage more rigid. Kane begins to seem more like a statue than a human being, Welles implying in this concrete manner that the willful exercise of great power saps the humanity of a man."

Indeed, it may be this semi-tragic aspect that most offended Hearst. It is one thing to be denounced as a "malefactor of great wealth," for example, which at least allows one to retain one's self-image of sweeping grandness intact, even a baleful sweeping grandness. It is another to be depicted, including through the examination of one's most intimate relationships, as a pitiable, miserable and "colossal failure," as a "damned man," in Welles's phrase.

The film represents great wealth itself as a curse, a terrible affliction. *Citizen Kane* carried forward the reasoning of capitalism's critics who had long asserted that class society was a catastrophe for the oppressed and the oppressor. The 19th century German socialist Wilhelm Liebknecht, for instance, argued that it was "even less possible for the rich to escape the moral consequences of unnatural and perverse social conditions" than it was for them "to escape the material consequences. Every injustice, every oppression, degrades twice: the person who suffers the injustice and is oppressed is degraded, and so is the person who commits the injustice and oppression."

Likewise, Oscar Wilde, in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, observed that the "possession of private property" was often "extremely demoralising, and that is, of course, one of the reasons why Socialism wants to get rid of the institution."

It is the subversive, unsettling character of *Citizen Kane* and Welles's other works, in which the filmmaker demonstrates that he is more observant and wiser than the ruling class and its apologists, and by implication, that the sharpest critics of existing society in general have the intellectual and moral upper hand, that generates recurring attacks on the filmmaker. Much of this is framed as "merely" a criticism of the filmmaker's alleged arrogance, hubris, etc., as though only the rotten elements in society have the right to be presumptuous, or his supposed self-destructive impulse. In reality, from critic Pauline Kael's ignorant piece in 1971 onward, the attacks on Welles over the authorship issue have had a fundamentally right-wing, philistine character.

Fincher doesn't improve on this track record. He turns Welles, who only appears briefly, already threatened at the time with a red-baiting witch-hunt and embarking courageously on a direct confrontation with one of the most powerful men in America, into Mankiewicz's enemy and oppressor. The Welles part is poorly written and acted, capturing next to nothing of the real figure.

Welles here is an abrasive pest, an interloper in the creative process. It is the world turned upside down. Welles cannot be referred to except in an insulting manner, as noted above, as "radio's golden boy," "the boy genius from New York," "Maestro the Dog-Faced Boy," "the wunderkind," etc.(Meanwhile, Hearst—who in September 1934 was granted a personal interview with Adolf Hitler—and Davies are treated, relatively speaking, with kid gloves.)

The garden variety contemporary filmmaker takes as his watchwords: Don't stick your neck out, commit to nothing, attacking the rich and famous is a bad career move. *Mank* values the individual who acts discreetly, who operates by means of backroom chats and the occasional outburst, but who gives up when he knows he's beaten.

Fincher's work will have value in so far as it arouses interest in Welles, *Citizen Kane*, the conditions of the Depression and more. We have confidence that an examination of the events and developments will lead the serious investigator toward quite different conclusions than those reached or implied by *Mank*.

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