

FILM REVIEW

'A Name on the Line: David Fincher's *Mank* (2020)'

Keywords: David Fincher; Herman J. Mankiewicz; Orson Welles; *Citizen Kane*; biopic.

***Mank*.** Dir. David Fincher. Perf. Gary Oldman, Amanda Seyfried, Lily Collins, Arliss Howard, Tom Pelphrey, Charles Dance, Tom Burke, Tuppence Middleton, Ferdinand Kingsley. Netflix International Pictures, 2020.

It is fitting that the first name to appear in David Fincher's 2020 biopic, *Mank* (before the title card—in the film's textual prologue), is not that of its eponymous protagonist but of the towering figure who for so long supposedly overshadowed him: Orson Welles. 'In 1940', the film's introduction reads, Welles was given the chance to 'make any movie, about any subject, with any collaborator he wished'. That collaborator and the screenplay they produced together are the focus of Fincher's film, which provides a fictionalized re-imagining of the genesis of *Citizen Kane* (1941), told from the perspective of that most marginal of figures, the Hollywood screenwriter, in the visual style of the film that did not quite make his name.

That name, in fact, does not appear in full until the very end of the film, when a presenter at the 1942 Academy Awards announces the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for 'Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles'. Until then, the overlooked writer, played by Gary Oldman with a world-weariness that recalls his own Academy-Award-winning Churchill (*Darkest Hour*, 2017), insists that everyone call him 'Mank, please'. Beneath that monosyllable, though, the film reveals a plethora of personalities. Mank is 'Herm' to his 'promising brother, Joe' (Tom Pelphrey) and 'Hermie' to his wife, 'Poor Sara' (Tuppence Middleton)—a name she eventually rejects. At one point, Mank describes himself as 'Moses', and he also tells Welles: 'Call me Ahab'—a misquote that itself recalls a storyteller, Ishmael, who is often overshadowed by his literary creation. Mank ventriloquizes other writers, quoting Shaw, Pascal, Cervantes, and even Goebbels at will, and at one point he introduces himself in reverse ('Mankiewicz, Herman') when unrecognized at Hollywood's fashionable Café Trocadero. This confusion of identities splits Mank, like Kane, into a multitude of different personas, but it is in bringing those various selves together that he eventually goes on to produce his 'best work': the screenplay for *Citizen Kane*. Ultimately, this gives him the power to do what even Kane could not: to rise from his invalid bed and, in a Western-style final 'show-down', hit Welles with a screenwriter's bullet: 'I want credit', he demands—his name on the line.

As this summary suggests, *Mank* marks another footnote in the *Citizen Kane* authorship controversy, following in the footsteps of Pauline Kael's 'Raising Kane' (1971) and even another biopic, *RKO 281* (1991). Whereas Laura Mulvey (1991, 17) thought that Robert Carringer's *The Making of Citizen Kane* ([1984] 1996) would finally 'put paid to

the ‘Who is the author of *Citizen Kane*?’ debate’, the recent release of both *Mank* and a 167-page statistical analysis entitled *Who Wrote Citizen Kane?* (Buckland, 2023) suggests that the question remains as hauntingly fascinating as the meaning of Rosebud itself. Fincher, in his version, takes the rather predictable approach of building up Mankiewicz in order to knock down Welles, but the interest of his film lies less in the protagonist’s final incarnation on the credit line and more in the ‘collection of fragments’ that make him up. Like Kane, Mank is ‘a bit of a jumble’, a man of many parts attempting to navigate a 1930s Hollywood described by W. R. Hearst (played by a chillingly jovial Charles Dance) as a ‘new golden age... when all the world will be a stage’. But even in this time when ‘talkies are the future’, when the writer might once again be king, Mank discovers that he is fit only to play the fool: ‘court jester’, ‘performing monkey’, ‘meshuggener’.

It is by siding with the fools, however, against the Hollywood court—comprising not just Hearst but Louis B. Mayer (Arlliss Howard), Irving Thalberg (Ferdinand Kingsley), and to a lesser extent the ‘wunderkind’ Welles (Tom Burke)—that *Mank* tries to extract its protagonist from Kane’s chiaroscuro shadow (an aesthetic emulated so beautifully by Erik Messerschmidt’s cinematography). By offering a kaleidoscope of different Manks, the film hopes he will burst into glorious Technicolor, not unlike that other unrecognized triumph of Mank doctoring, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), a film which also, incidentally, Mank believes has a problem with names (‘Even the dog’s name is awful... sounds like a Japanese houseboy!’). Undoubtedly, the film’s greatest delights are quips like this, which offer to ‘knowing audiences’ (Hutcheon 2013, 122) a glimpse into a counterfactual Hollywood that would have been all the more grey without Mank. As such, the film is a testament to the power of rewriters, script doctors, and adapters—those literary labourers on the ‘dream factory’ floor, the engines of a culture industry that the film also alludes to in its dramatization of the founding of the Writers Guild of America.

Perhaps it is on such terms, then, as an homage to *rewriting*, that we can celebrate this biopic of a biopic (*Citizen Kane* itself was a veiled retelling of the life of W. R. Hearst) for its playful disregard of cinematic history. At times this is refreshing, as in Amanda Seyfried’s re-imagining of Marion Davies, who here outshines Hearst as an eloquent and intelligent performer, thereby nuancing the stereotyping of her as Susan Alexander Kane. Put in the terms of *Citizen Kane* itself, in fact, we might call *Mank* an exercise in deep *refocus*, highlighting in the background of Welles’ black-and-white art the more colourful complexities of life. Nevertheless, this is also the reason why *Mank* falls flat, for in claiming to offer a biographical explanation for the origins of *Citizen Kane*, *Mank* seems to overlook the fact that it is precisely the earlier film’s inexplicability that makes it so compelling. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Mank*’s aetiology for its forebear’s most famous scene: the shattering of Kane’s snow globe, which *Mank* suggests originated in a glass bottle dropped by the screenwriter when collapsing in a drug-induced stupor. Again, for a ‘knowing audience’, this is undoubtedly a satisfying nod, but in the logic of Fincher’s film, it ironically implies that it must have been someone *other* than Mank who stumbled across this most iconic of cinematic images, while the screenwriter was passed out drunk. Thus, if the film’s central premise is that behind every great auteur, there lies a greater author, moments like this do more to recall that author’s death than to restore him to life.

In conclusion, while *Mank* extends the line of self-reflexive Hollywood screenwriter films running from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) to *Adaptation* (2002) and beyond, it does not quite manage to have its Kane and eat it; while it aims to convince us of the *truth* of Mank as the originator of an original screenplay, in the end, that truth amounts to little more than what Thompson uncovered about Kane: ‘Not much, really’.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None declared.

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