

CS4265: HOLLYWOOD AND THE WEST

FILM REVIEW 1: MANK (2020)

Rachel Rina Cheong Wen Xiu, U1930034L

Mank, Citizen Kane and the Auteur Theory

In *Mank* (2020), widely-acclaimed director David Fincher brings us back to the days of early Hollywood, where scriptwriter Herman Mankiewicz (also known as Mank) wrote the first draft of the classic film - *Citizen Kane* (1940), directed by Orson Welles. The film explores the events and people that influenced Mank's writing, including the rise of Nazi Germany, the electoral campaign between Upton Sinclair and Frank Merriam, and crucially, newspaper mogul William Hearst, who the central character of Charles Foster Kane is based upon.

One of the crucial points of *Mank* is the question of credit for the *Citizen Kane* screenplay. At the climax, Mank fights with Welles regarding credit for the screenplay. While they end up sharing credit and the Oscar for Best Screenplay, the final scene of *Mank* has him claiming that he wrote the screenplay 'in the absence of Orson Welles'. In real life, after awarding co-authorship of *Citizen Kane* to Welles and Mankiewicz, the debate was revived in 1971 by film critic Pauline Kael, in her essay *Raising Kane*. She challenged Welles' position as auteur of *Citizen Kane*, continuing the argument against the auteur theory that she had raised in a previous essay.

Created in the 1950s, the auteur theory proposes that directors are the primary creators of film, and so should be considered the authors of their films. This theory was raised in direct opposition to the studio system that dominated Hollywood, where directors had little to no creative control over the movies being produced. In the context of *Citizen Kane*, Welles had an exclusive contract with RKO Pictures, where he had full artistic control over two films, subject to a couple of stipulations. This kind of contract was unheard of at the time, and allowed for Welles' claim to 'auteurship' over *Citizen Kane*.

However, in her essay, Kael opined that Welles did not deserve credit as the auteur

of *Citizen Kane*, but asserted that Mankiewicz had been the actual and sole guiding force behind the film. Kael's view seems to be shared by *Mank*, which details Mank's process of writing the screenplay, as well as his influences and motivation for writing it. In the film, we never see Welles contributing to the writing, which corroborates with the final scene, where Mank accepts his Oscar by saying that he wrote the screenplay 'in the absence of Orson Welles'. However, I think that in order to construct a narrative where Mankiewicz deserves full credit, *Mank* intentionally leaves out Welles' contributions.

Many essays were written in rebuttal of Kael's *Raising Kane*, such as Robert Carringer's 1978 essay, *The Scripts of Citizen Kane*, where he reviewed all the script drafts and concluded that "the full "the full evidence reveals that Welles's contribution to the Citizen Kane script was not only substantial but definitive." Welles and Mank had indeed collaborated on the script. In 1940, after mutual agreements on storyline and character, Welles gave Mank 300 pages of notes and left him to write the script. Welles also condensed Mank's first, 325-page long draft, cutting out excess and writing in new, key scenes. Five months and seven drafts later, the final screenplay of *Citizen Kane* was complete. In his essay, Carringer said: "Mankiewicz [...] wrote the first two drafts. His principal contributions were the story frame, a cast of characters, various individual scenes, and a good share of the dialogue. [...] Welles added the narrative brilliance [and] also transformed Kane from a cardboard fictionalization of Hearst into a figure of mystery and epic magnificence."

Therefore, while I think that *Mank* was a fun dive into the world of early Hollywood, it misses the mark on many things - we are presented with a story of Herman Mankiewicz, a washed-up screenwriter, with one last shot at leaving a legacy. However, through the film, he never evolves beyond being a one-dimensional sardonic alcoholic, and we are left with an unsatisfying conclusion. He won his one and only Oscar for his 'best work', and yet he seems unfazed and bitter in the concluding scene. I felt no triumph on his behalf as he forced a smile for the cameras, clutching his statuette, along with his resentment for the credit he was forced to share with Welles.

Word count: 699 words