New from Netflix: *Mank*, Fincher, and A Hollywood Creation Tale

Review of *Mank* (David Fincher, 2020)

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Mank is a study in paradox—at once classical and modernist, retro and cutting edge, an exquisite recreation of Golden Age Hollywood and a blithely inaccurate recounting of how one of its greatest achievements came to be. The film charts the writing of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)—or, more precisely, the screenplay's first draft—by Herman J. Mankiewicz while also conjuring (in an elaborate weave of flashbacks) the writer's inspiration for Charles Foster Kane via his relationship with William Randolph Hearst. And in terms of the story it tells, the manner of its telling, and the process of its making, *Mank* probes an elemental paradox of commercial cinema: the nagging issue of authorship.

Mank was directed by David Fincher from a screenplay by his long-deceased father, Jack Fincher (who died in 2003) and was financed and released by Netflix. It was Fincher's first feature since *Gone Girl*, an enormous hit for Fox in 2014, released just after he pivoted to series work for Netflix on *House of Cards*. Fincher was an executive producer on the hit series and directed the first two episodes, which ran in 2013 and earned him an Emmy. Since then, he's been similarly involved in Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017–2019). Now Fincher is pivoting back to feature films, and not just with *Mank*. Just before Netflix rolled out the film in November 2020, Fincher disclosed a four-year deal with Netflix specifically geared to features. "I like the idea of having a body of work," he told *Premiere* magazine, admitting

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that "it feels strange, after 40 years in this profession, to have only ten films to my credit."[1]

Actually, Fincher is credited with eleven features but refuses to include the first of them in his oeuvre, the disastrous *Alien 3* (1992, also for Fox), on which he replaced a dismissed director, battled the studio throughout production, and watched helplessly as the film was butchered in postproduction and then flopped. Fincher retreated from Hollywood for three seething years after *Alien 3*, directing TV commercials and music vids for Propaganda Films, a company he cofounded in the 1980s while still in his twenties that ruled the MTV rotation. Fincher had created Propaganda with the express intent of storming the Hollywood bastille, and he did come storming back in 1995 with *Se7en*. That breakout hit jump-started his filmmaking career, and over the next two decades, Fincher became one of the industry's most celebrated auteurs, specializing in dark psychodramas á la *Se7en* and others such as *Fight Club* (1999), *Zodiac* (2007), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), and *Gone Girl* and offbeat character studies like *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) and *The Social Network* (2010).

The genesis of *Mank* dates back to the unhappy *Alien 3* period in the early 1990s when Fincher's father, Jack, a retired bureau chief for *Life* magazine who had taken up screenwriting, was casting about for a subject. David suggested that he reread Pauline Kael's "Raising Kane," her sensational and notoriously one-sided account of the Mankiewicz-Welles collaboration on *Citizen Kane*.[2] As David recalls: "I said, Is there a movie in Mankiewicz pulling

1. Francois Léger, "Mank: David Fincher a un contrat d'exclusivité de 4 ans avec Netflix," *Premiere*, November 11, 2020. *Premiere* is a leading French film publication. Fincher's comments were immediately picked up and widely reported in the US press. See, for example, Elsa Keslassy, "David Fincher Has Signed a Four-Year Deal with Netflix, Director Tells French Magazine," *Variety*, November 12, 2020; Zach Sharf, "Fincher 'Feels Strange' about His Lack of Output, Joined Netflix to Strengthen His Body of Work," *IndieWire*, November 11, 2020. Translation of Fincher's comments vary slightly; quoted material in this piece are my translations.
2. Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane—I," *New Yorker*, February 20, 1971; and Kael, "Raising Kane—II," *New Yorker*, February 27, 1971.

this thing out the ether and laying it out for this movie brat to make? And Jack went off and wrote the script."[3]

As Fincher's suggestion indicates, Kael's take on the creation of *Citizen Kane* had been required reading for anyone interested in cinema and in film criticism in the early 1970s, when auteurism was all the rage and the Hollywood renaissance was putting a new generation of "movie brats"—Coppola, Bogdanovich, Scorsese, Spielberg, and the rest—on the industry map. Kael was America's most prominent critic, and "Raising Kane" was a major publishing event in 1971, initially as a two-part fifty-thousand-word essay in the *New Yorker* (where Mankiewicz toiled briefly as a drama critic before he lit out for Hollywood), then in *The Citizen Kane Book*, where it appeared as a lengthy preface to the film's "shooting script."[4]

In "Raising Kane," Kael contended that Mankiewicz was the chief progenitor of the *Kane* screenplay and that his contribution was as important to the film's singular artistry as Welles's direction. And while deflating the origin story of a canonized classic, Kael also renewed a scuffle with Andrew Sarris dating back to his introduction of the "auteur theory" to US cinephiles in the early 1960s.[5] "Raising Kane" set off a firestorm that went on for several years, highlighted by "The Kane Mutiny," an in-depth refutation by critic-turned-filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich that appeared in *Esquire* in October 1972 and by scholar Robert L. Carringer's analysis of the screenplay's development (through seven drafts) in "The Scripts of *Citizen Kane*," a 1978 article in *Critical Inquiry*. Carringer expanded that piece into a 1985 book, *The Making of Citizen Kane*, which detailed the Mankiewicz-Welles

3. Fincher, quoted in Jonah Weiner, "David Fincher's Impossible Eye," *New York Times Magazine*, November 19, 2020.
4. Pauline Kael, *The Citizen Kane Book* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).
5. Sarris introduced the French critics' "*politique des auteurs*" to the US community in Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," *Film Culture* (Winter 1962–63). Kael first went after Sarris in Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares," *Film Quarterly* (Spring).

collaboration, spelled out their shared responsibility for the conception and writing of *Citizen Kane* and seemed to finally settle the matter.[6]

Thus, the *Kane* screenplay controversy was well-trod ground when the Finchers returned to it in the early 1990s, and there was precious little basis for a making-of yarn that had Mankiewicz pulling the story of *Kane* "out of the either and laying it out for this movie brat to make." But Jack doubled down on that version, and in fact David found his father's first draft too stridently anti-Welles—"An arbitration screed," he told *Variety*, "that seemed to me like a lot of sour grapes." He convinced Jack to tone down Welles's bullying and Mankiewicz's victimization in subsequent drafts, and David himself continued to refine (and tone down) the story in his own later rewrites.[7]

Mank was in and out of development over the years but failed to materialize, due mainly to Fincher's insistence that it be shot in black and white. It finally came together in 2019, when Netflix greenlit the picture in the $30 million range. That was well below the budgets on Fincher's studio pictures, but still he was able to reconvene the unit he'd assembled for those films, including production designer Don Burt, director of photography Erik Messerschmidt, costume designer Trish Summerville, sound designer Ren Klyce, editor Kirk Baxter, and composers Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross (all of whom worked on *Gone Girl*).

New to Fincher's orbit was Gary Oldman in the title role, who is in every scene in *Mank* and deftly carries the picture. He is equally compelling in the film's present-day sequences (in 1940), composing the screenplay while sequestered at a desert ranch in Victorville outside Los Angeles while convalescing from a broken leg, and also in its frequent flashbacks,

6. Peter Bogdanovich, "The Kane Mutiny," *Esquire*, October 1972; Robert L Carringer, "The Scripts of *Citizen Kane*," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (1978). In 1985, Carringer produced an even more definitive assessment, *The Making of Citizen Kane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

7. Fincher, quoted in Brent Lang, "Magnificent Obsession: David Fincher on His Three-Decade Quest to Bring 'Mank' to Life," *Variety*, November 12, 2020

flamboyantly striding—or drunkenly stumbling—between Hollywood and the Hearst estate at San Simeon. Oldman was just off an Oscar-winning turn as Winston Churchill in *The Darkest Hour* (1917), playing someone many years older, and here the stretch was in the other direction. Oldman was sixty-one when *Mank* was shot, and Mankiewicz was just forty-three in 1940. But Fincher "needed an actor's actor," and Netflix staunchly supported the casting move, selling *Mank* on Oldman's marquee value as well as Fincher's.[8]

Mank was prepped in four months, shot it ten weeks, and then edited in another ten weeks—a remarkably tight schedule for a period film with such elaborate design and effects work and for a notoriously demanding director prone to shooting dozens, even hundreds, of takes. Facilitating the workflow was the fact that Fincher and Messerschmidt were shooting digitally on a specially made RED 8K Helium Monochrome (black and white) camera. And the cinematography was another of *Mank*'s paradoxical qualities, strongly invoking Gregg Toland's camerawork on *Kane* and the monochromatic esthetic of classical Hollywood while *Mank*'s wide-screen format, stunning day-for-night sequences, and digital effects give it a very contemporary look and feel. Digital technology also was used to effectively antiquate the footage and create *Mank*'s film-grade "patina," as Fincher called it—adding the scratches and crackles that typified celluloid, for instance, and inserting reel-change cues (and the accompanying audial pops) throughout the film.[9]

Mank's story structure invokes *Kane* as well, with the steadily intensifying present-day drama—Mankiewicz's deadline-driven quest to deliver a satisfactory screenplay draft to Welles—intercut with flashbacks presented chronologically, for the most part, tracing three narrative arcs: Mank's professional decline and deepening disillusion with Hollywood, the unionization

8. Tim Gray, "David Fincher on 'Mank': I Don't Want Sympathy for Mankiewicz, I Want Empathy,'" *Variety*, January 15, 2021.
9. On the digitally created effects and "patina," see Mark Harris, "Nerding out with David Fincher," Vulture, October 23, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/2020/10/david-fincher-mank.html. See also Lang, "Magnificent Obsession."

of Hollywood writers and the 1934 California gubernatorial race between Republican Frank Merriam and Democrat Upton Sinclair (a celebrated writer and avowed socialist), and Mankiewicz's relationship with Hearst (Charles Dance), which progresses from mutual bemusement to something much darker. This dark turn is fueled by Hearst's support of the effort to stop Sinclair, spearheaded in Hollywood by MGM (Mankiewicz's employer) and top executives Louis B. Mayer (Arliss Howard) and Irving Thalberg (Ferdinand Kingsley).

Mank's third act is dominated by two impressive set pieces. The first is MGM's 1934 election night party at the Trocadero, a raucous celebration of Merriam's victory but a dismal affair for Mankiewicz (see figure 1). As the party ends, he gets a call from Shelly Metcalf (Jamie McShane), an old pal at MGM who directed the fake newsreels and is crushed by Sinclair's defeat. Despite Mankiewicz's efforts to stop him, Shelly commits suicide. The other set piece is a lavish 1937 dinner party at San Simeon that Mankiewicz crashes and, in a drunken tirade, regales Hearst and his guests with a movie idea—an update of *Don Quixote* and an obvious warm-up for *Citizen Kane*. The pitch ends with Mankiewicz vomiting on the marble floor of the ornate dining hall and being escorted out by Hearst in what we sense is their last encounter. Before closing the door, Hearst pitches a story of his own, "The parable of the organ grinder's monkey," an obvious swipe at Mank, his newly banished court jester.

The two set pieces are intercut with visits to the Victorville ranch by various stakeholders in the screenplay. Mankiewicz by now is out of bed and sitting upright and has noticeably softened. The visitors include his brother Joe (Tom Pelphrey), a politically astute contract writer who warns Mankiewicz not to cross Hearst but also tells Herman that the screenplay is the best work he's ever done. Another is Marion Davies (Amanda Seyfried), a movie star and Hearst's longtime lover whose relationship with Mankiewicz is in many ways the emotional core of the story. The last visitor is Orson Welles (Tom Burke), barely glimpsed until the climactic confrontation. After they agree to press on with the picture despite Hearst's opposition, Mankiewicz rather

Figure 1: The election night party. *Source*: *Mank*, screenshot.

calmly asks for screen credit. Welles responds with a histrionic fit—but also bellows, "No doubt you'll get your credit," before storming out (see figure 2). As Welles drives off, Mankiewicz's long-suffering secretary, Rita (Lily Collins), gets word that her husband, a missing Royal Air Force pilot, has been found. "He's alive!" she cries, throwing her arms around Mankiewicz, who in the aftermath of the Welles meeting is also very much "alive," so to speak.

That closes the Victorville narrative, which is followed by a long fade to black and a brief three-scene coda: the 1942 Academy Awards, which Mankiewicz and Welles did not attend, as their Oscar for best original screenplay is announced (*Kane*'s only win on nine nominations); a Welles radio interview, his voice played over a black screen with a screenplay-style slugline (a clever conceit used throughout the film) placing him in Rio, who playfully tells Mankiewicz he "can kiss my ass"; and Mankiewicz's belated Oscar acceptance speech to the press. Standing alone, Oscar in hand, he states, "I am very happy to accept this award in the manner in which the screenplay was written, which is to say, in the absence of Orson Welles" (see figure 3). This is the only significant scene change in the film that is not introduced with a screenplay slugline, and as Mankiewicz smiles and holds up the statuette, a flashbulb ignites and the image freezes, giving it an eerie

Figure 2: Mankiewicz asks for screen credit. *Source*: *Mank*, screenshot.

Figure 3: Mankiewicz's belated Oscar acceptance speech. *Source*: *Mank*, screenshot.

newsprint quality. The camera slowly pulls in on the smiling Mankiewicz and his Oscar, as we learn in a final epigraph that he continued his self-destructive ways and died of alcoholism at age fifty-five. And so the moment of triumph morphs, finally, into an obit.

Netflix gave *Mank* a limited theatrical release in November to qualify for the Oscars and began streaming the film on December 4, 2020. It was not a streaming favorite, spending only a single day on Netflix's list of top-ten shows (on December 5, at number ten).[10] But its prestige value and critical cachet were readily evident—most notably when it topped the Critics' Choice Awards with twelve nominations, hoisting Netflix to a record forty-six nods. The film scored with the Academy as well, topping the industry with ten Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor, and leading Netflix to thirty-five total nominations, more than double its closest competitor, Disney.[11]

The critics were virtually unanimous in their praise for Fincher's direction, Oldman's performance, and the film's production design. But in a curious disconnect with the historical record, even the top critics were inclined to give the Finchers a pass for their blatant distortion of *Citizen Kane*'s authorship. A.O. Scott in the *New York Times*, for instance, was scarcely surprised that *Mank* is "unreliable as history," noting that its real-life figures and events "are embedded in a spectacle that shimmers with knowing artificiality." Justin Chang in the *Los Angeles Times* acknowledged *Kane*'s "bitterly contested authorship" and then lauded Fincher's "imaginative weave of scholarship and speculation."[12] Anthony Lane of the *New Yorker*, where Kael's "Raising Kane" initially appeared, recapped the critical contretemps but had the temerity to ask, "Who cares who wrote 'Citizen Kane'?" He waves off the linkage between the 1934 campaign and Mankiewicz's conception of *Kane* and concludes—in a witticism worthy of Mankiewicz

10. Adam White, "Mank Slips Out of Netflix's Top 10 Most-Watched List within a Day of Release," *The Independent*, December 8, 2020.
11. Netflix's other top nominees were *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, with six nods, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, with five. Disney and its various subsidiaries (Pixar, Searchlight, Hulu, et al.) scored fifteen nominations.
12. A. O. Scott, "A Rosebud by Any Other Name," *New York Times*, December 3, 2020. Justin Chang, "A Cinephile's Delight," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2020.

himself—that *Mank* "is a story within a story, and, for all its great beauty, it winds up chasing its own tale."[13]

While the critics tended to hedge on the authorship issue, they seemed generally clueless regarding the 1934 gubernatorial campaign. Midway through the film, Shelly Metcalf screens one of his anti-Sinclair films for Mankiewicz and asks whether "it's got that raw newsreel feel." "But it isn't news," replies Mankiewicz, "and it isn't real." The same can be said of *Mank*'s depiction of the anti-Sinclair campaign, at least in terms of both Mankiewicz's and Hearst's purported involvement. While Hearst's newspapers staunchly supported Merriam and routinely smeared Sinclair, there is no evidence that Hearst was in any way connected with the MGM misinformation campaign. According to Greg Mitchell, who literally wrote the book on the Merriam-Sinclair race (*The Campaign of the Century*), there's no evidence that Mankiewicz had any interest in Sinclair's candidacy. The suicidal Shelly Metcalf was also pure fiction, although there was an MGM test shot director who moved up to features after directing the newsreels.[14]

In the final analysis, I can live with *Mank*'s fabrications about the 1934 campaign, which don't alter the fact that *Citizen Kane* was provoked by Mankiewicz's animus toward Hearst, who indeed allowed him into his San Simeon circle and eventually cast him aside. Far more troubling are the strategic omissions about the writing of *Citizen Kane*. Shortly before the release of *Mank*, Fincher took a shot at Pauline Kael, oddly enough, in a conversation with film historian Mark Harris. "Pauline Kael knew a lot about watching movies," said Fincher: "What Pauline Kael didn't know about *making* movies could fill volumes."[15] Fincher does little to set things straight in *Mank*.

13. Anthony Lane, " 'Mank" and the Making of 'Citizen Kane,' " *New Yorker*, November 13, 2020.
14. Greg Mitchell, " 'Mank' and Politics: What Really Happened in 1934 California," *New York Times*, December 7, 1920.
15. Harris, "Nerding out with David Fincher."

In the film's opening scene, as the Mankiewicz entourage arrives at Victorville, Welles's producing partner John Houseman (Sam Troughton) tells the writer that he has ninety days to complete "the first draft" of the screenplay. Their conversation is interrupted by a phone call from Welles who tells Mankiewicz he has sixty days, "and then we can noodle." Before hanging up, Welles quips, "I'm toiling with you in spirit, Mank." That's the full extent of the film's acknowledgement of Welles' role in the writing of *Kane*. There is no reference—let alone flashbacks—to the hours of brainstorming and the hundreds of pages of notes the two of them generated prior to the Victorville draft. And there is no indication of the "noodling" and the subsequent cowritten drafts, as "American" gradually became *Citizen Kane*, nor to the further revisions that Welles made during production.

All of this is elided with the two-year ellipsis between Welles's departure from Victorville and Oscar night, and its erasure is completed by Mankiewicz's closing quip about writing *Kane* in the absence of Orson Welles. Thus one can only assume that the uninitiated viewer (i.e., someone not acquainted with Hollywood lore or the firestorm that Pauline Kael ignited) will come away from *Mank* thinking that Herman Mankiewicz alone was responsible for writing *Citizen Kane*.

Which raises the question of whether there is such a viewer and also the question of who actually is watching *Mank*. Critics seemed to assume, as did Fincher, that viewers are familiar with *Kane* and with the authorship flap, and are quite open to considering Mankiewicz's side of the story. Netflix, meanwhile, undoubtedly knows who's watching *Mank* but is not likely to share that information. The company is notoriously proprietary with audience data, although we know all about its algorithms. Indeed, Netflix's capacity to gauge potential viewership was a key factor in its decision to produce *House of Cards*, its first original in-house series, and to launch it with Fincher at the helm. Netflix undoubtedly ran the numbers again before greenlighting *Mank* and then ran them yet again before signing Fincher to the exclusive four-year deal.

Data aside, there are obvious risks involved in entering a long-term pact with the headstrong Fincher. But so far Netflix's risks have been rewarded, and signing a house director who is also a high-profile resident auteur may prove to be another watershed for the upstart studio. The Netflix-Fincher alliance is certainly off to a strong start with *Mank*, a prestige picture par excellence and the most heavily nominated film of 2020. Fincher is singing the praises of his new home while distancing himself from the "legacy" studios. "I've never been happier working at a place than I am at Netflix," he told *Variety*'s Brent Lang prior to *Mank*'s release: "They're building a repository. It's nice that movies have a place to exist where you don't necessarily have to shove them into spandex summer and affliction winter." And unlike so many of his big-screen colleagues, Fincher is not lamenting the sorry state of the theatrical marketplace. "Let's be real," he told Lang, "the exhibition experience is not the shining link in the chain right now."[16]

While Fincher signaled his comfort level with Netflix, he also distanced himself from TV series work. "I wasn't meant to be a showrunner," he told *Premiere* and became one "by default" on *Mindhunter*. But he came to realize he was "too obsessive and too finicky" to run a series and was unwilling to make the kind of time commitments required to sustain a hit.[17] He might also have mentioned that most successful showrunners are hyphenate writer-producers while series directors are invariably hired guns with little creative control. Fincher, in contrast, is exclusively a director with no designs on screenwriting, or producing, for that matter, which he leaves to his wife and longtime partner Ceán Chaffin. He also told *Premiere* that the agreement with Netflix is "to deliver them 'content'—whatever that word means," but it's abundantly clear that what Fincher means by "content" is feature films. And although he plans to "try very different things" at Netflix, his

16. Lang, "Magnificent Obsession."
17. Léonard Haddad, "David Fincher: 'I signed this Netflix deal to work in the way Picasso painted' [interview]," *Premiere*, November 23, 2020, https://www.premiere.fr/Cinema/News-Cinema/David-Fincher-I-signed-this-Netflix-deal-to-work-in-the-way-Picasso-painted---interview.

first picture under the new pact is much safer bet than *Mank*—an assassin thriller written by Andrew Kevin Walker, who scripted *Se7en* (and worked uncredited on *Fight Club* and several other Fincher-directed studio films).[18]

But one can expect Fincher to take more chances on future projects, given the success of *Mank* and Netflix's growing penchant for spending and risk taking in the current streaming boom. In January, Netflix unveiled a release slate of some seventy features for 2021 as its global subscriber count approaches two hundred million.[19] This output far outpaces the traditional studios; in fact, Netflix may well release more films in 2021 than all the surviving Hollywood majors combined. Indeed, it harkens back to the halcyon classical era, when the studios controlled the marketplace and rolled out a new feature every week, which sounds a lot like Netflix today. The streaming giant will be competing with the major studios in the heady franchise arena as well. In March, it started production on *The Gray Man*, a $200 million series-spawning globe-trotting action film starring Ryan Gosling, with writer and director teams on leave from Marvel.[20] And weeks later, Netflix plunked down a staggering $450 million for two sequels to the 2019 hit *Knives Out*, with writer-director Rian Johnson and star Daniel Craig attached.[21]

Those Netflix incursions into the mainstream—and into what looks increasingly like an arms race with Disney—takes the pressure and spotlight off Fincher. As he settles in at Hollywood's newest studio, he appears to be ideally positioned to recast the house directors and resident auteurs of old—Frank Capra at Columbia, John Ford at 20th Century Fox, Vincent Minnelli at MGM—as Netflix reboots the studio system for the streaming era.

18. Rebecca Rubin, "David Fincher to Direct Netflix Assassin Drama 'The Killer,'" *Variety*, February 24, 2021.
19. Nicole Sperling, "Netflix, Flexing Its Muscles, Announces 2021 Film Slate," *New York Times*, January 12, 2021.
20. Directing *The Gray Man* are the Russo Brothers (with four MCU films to their credit); the writers are Christopher Marcus and Stephen McFeely (three MCU films); costarring with Gosling is Chris Evans (*Captain America*).
21. Brent Lang and Matt Donnelly, "Netflix Buys 'Knives Out' Sequels for $450 Million," *Variety*, March 31, 2021.