

Fake News in Hollywood

by Michael Curtis



Hooray for Hollywood, that screwy bally Hollywood, where you're terrific if you're even good.

In the illustrious novel, *In Search of Last Time* by Marcel Proust the tasting of a madeleine dipped in tea evokes a journey of memories. The resulting sensory stimuli recall events or objects that elicit a response. Nowhere is this behavior more true than dipping in the taste of Hollywood and its dream factory in its golden age, in its self-obsession and self-regard. The film industry barely needs stimuli to engage in navel-gazing, making films about itself, whether lack luster productions such as *La La Land*, or *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, or the latest film *Mank*. This is a movie about the making of a movie, mainly the tale of the writing of the initial script of *Citizen Kane*. It is Proustian in its portrayal of the protagonist absorbed in memories of his days

in the movie industry.

The film is based on the writing of the first draft of what was originally called *American* which became *Citizen Kane*. About this issue of the real author there has always been controversy since the publication of an article by Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane," in the *New Yorker* of November 13, 1971 that the script of what is often called the best Hollywood film ever made, was written by Herman J. Mankiewicz, Mank, though Orson Welles claimed the credit.

The film *Mank* sidesteps the controversial issue of the "auteur theory," that films are the reflection of the vision of the director and his style rather than merely collective studio productions. However, it mainly supports Kael's position and suggests the sole author of *Kane* was the troubled, brilliant Mankiewicz, who was hired by the 24 year old Wunderkind Orson Welles, for whom he had written scripts for the Mercury Theater, to write it, rather than Welles himself. Indeed, in the film Welles himself only is limited to a few phone calls and a furious quarrel at the end over writing credits for the film.

The screenplay of *Mank* is based on a work written a couple of decades ago by the father of the director, David Fincher, one of Hollywood's technical masters. It is a mixture of truth, portraying real events and personalities of the time, though it sometimes distorts the reality, and fiction. Technically, it pays homage to *Citizen Kane*, CK, telling a nonlinear story, in black and white, of the writing of the script in 90 days, while living in an isolated house in Victorville, CA, about 80 miles from Los Angeles, bedridden, recuperating from injuries he suffered in a car accident, and dictating to his English secretary.

Without mimicking the whole style, *Mank* uses some of the techniques of CK, with its deep focus, fadeouts at the end of a scene, changing time lines, using script cues as titles,

breaking linear narrative, brilliant use of light and shade, scratchy sound, wide shots, sharp angles, and use of metaphor. But it is not a warm film, nor does it have the strong impact of every scene as does CK, nor is the person Mank who drank himself to death a tragic hero.

Mank has references to real feuds and alliances, to conflicting egos, to witty repartee from writers like Ben Hecht and S.J. Perelman, to sordid deals, glamorous and sleaze, class divisions, the Great Depression, and to a genuine political conflict, an issue which has resonance in current U.S. politics.

Mank really is a double narrative told in different time lines; the writing of the script, and displays of the meetings and good friendship of Mank with William Randolph Hearst and his mistress actress Marion Davies who is portrayed very sympathetically and as intelligent. Underlying it, is the tension, and indeed struggle, between power and money on one hand, and creative ability. The narrative, as Mank explains, is "one big circle, like a cinnamon roll, not a straight line pointing to the nearest exit. You cannot capture a man's entire life in two hours."

Mank is the nickname of Herman J. Mankiewicz, former NYC journalist and member of the Algonquin Round Table, compulsive gambler often in debt, acerbic and droll wit, a prestigious writer for major journals, who left for Hollywood to become a highly paid screen writer. His wit was trenchant. Commenting on John Houseman he remarked, "why is it that when Houseman edits, everyone ends up speaking like a constipated Oxford don?" Mank wrote or worked on innumerable film scripts including the Wizard of Oz and Marx Brothers comedies, His caustic wit made him the Central Park West Voltaire. But he became, as Hearst said, the "organ grinder's monkey."

The film conjures up the Hollywood past and its personalities, and portrays them in unflattering light, arrogant and

hypocritical L.B. Mayer co-founded MGM in 1924, headed the studio for 25 years, and claimed July 4th as his birthday, forced his staff to take substantial pay cuts. He says the film business was a "business where the buyer gets nothing for his money but a memory. What he bought still belongs to the man who sold it." Irving Thalberg, the other Wunderkind who co-founded MGM at age 24, is seen as a tough bargainer who exploited workers. Hearst was the most powerful publisher in the world, a man who had been in Congress but lost bids to be NYC mayor, NY governor and Democratic candidate for president, was a monarch in his mansion, accompanied by the gifted film comedienne, Marion Davies.

Mank was a frequent guest of Hearst at his grand estate, modelled on San Simeon, who enjoyed Mank's witty conversation and saw him as his court jester. The film Mank shows person Mank very friendly with and almost linked, platonically, with Marion Davies. It also shows that *Citizen Kane* with its unfriendly portraits of Hearst and Davies was seen as a betrayal of the hospitality Mank had received. This is particularly poignant in a moving, bitter scene when Mank, heavily drunk at Hearst's party outlines the plot of his script to the disgust of those present.

Mank is a valuable film in explaining the behavior of person Mank and his critique of the movie industry. The subplot, relevant for contemporary times, relates to Mank's disillusionment when the Hearst organization and the studio titans employ Fake News to torpedo the electoral campaign of Upton Sinclair, candidate for governor of California. Sinclair, author of about 100 books, had been important since the publication of *The Jungle* which exposed corruption in the meatpacking industry, and which led to government regulation of meat, and to the Food and Drug act. He was a declared Democratic Socialist, as were Jack London, Carl Sandburg, and William Carlos Williams in his time, as are today Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Above

all, his policies of tax reform, pensions, public works, and his advocacy of Democratic Socialism suggests that he is akin to and a precursor of Bernie Sanders.

Sinclair complained of the fake news perpetrated by the film studios that Los Angeles was overcome by migrant workers. His retort was strong, "You can make the world swear King Kong is 10 stories high and that Mary Pickford is a virgin at 40, but you can't convince starving voters that a turncoat socialist is a menace to everything Californians hold dear." In his novel *The Brass Check*, of 1919 he has satirized Hearst, "I saw our richest newspaper publisher keep his mistress in a city of palaces and cathedrals, furnished with shiploads of junk imported from Europe."

As an outspoken socialist and on the Socialist party ticket, Sinclair had run twice for Congress, once for Senate and twice for over governor of California. However, in 1934 after winning primaries, he ran as a Democrat for governor of California, on an End Poverty program, gaining 879,000 votes to Republican governor, Frank Merriam, total of 1,138,000. His comment was sharp, "I think we simply have to recognize the fact that our enemies have succeeded in spreading the Big Lie. There is no use attacking it by a frontal attack, it is much better to outflank them."

Sinclair had offended Mayer, then chairman of the California committee of the Republican party and Irving Thalberg when in 1935 he said that the state of California should rent one of its idle studios and let the unemployed actors make a few pictures of their own.

Hearst portrayed Sinclair as a communist and said that the film magnates were considering moving to Florida if he won. Amusingly in the film, when Mayer implied Sinclair resembled Hitler, Mank lectured him on the difference between socialism and communism.

The film implies that an offhand critical remark by Mank to Thalberg about Sinclair led the mogul to action. MGM began making fake newsreels featuring false conversations on the preferences of citizens. Those depicted as "undesirables," poor and dirty, were sympathetic to Sinclair, while those who seemed clean and educated were favorable to the incumbent republican Frank Merriam. Hearst papers published fake photos of tramps on a freight car going to California to live off the state. Thalberg defended the fake news by saying "nothing is unfair in politics." One invention in the film is a character named Shelly Metcalf who made one of the newsreels for Thalberg, and who stricken by guilt, commits suicide on election night.

The film *Mank* does not fully resolve the question of who did write *Citizen Kane*, or whether it is the greatest movie of all time, but it does throw light on the power and the politics of Hollywood, and its use of Fake News.