

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

David Fincher's *Mank*

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, November 18th, 2020

As a lifelong cinephile, with a master in Critical Studies from USC School of Cinematic Arts, I knew about the making of *Citizen Kane* (1941), directed by and starring Orson Wells. As a film journalist, I did interviews for the TV movie *RKO 281* (1999) and learnt about William Randolph Hearst's attempt to block the release of the film. I heard about Pauline Kael's 1971 book *Rising Kane*, crediting Herman Mankiewicz as the sole author of the screenplay. As a researcher for the Hollywood Foreign Press, I wrote the short bio of writer/director *Joseph Mankiewicz*, Mank's more successful younger brother.



Gary Oldman as Joseph Mankiewicz (c) Netflix

So I was fascinated by *Mank*, directed by *David Fincher* from a screenplay written by his father Jack Fincher. Gary Oldman plays Mank, nickname of *Herman Mankiewicz*, Charles Dance is *William Randolph Hearst*, Amanda Seyfried his mistress *Marion Davis*. The movie, shot in high contrast Black and White with digital cameras to recreate the look of *Citizen Kane*, explores the writing of the screenplay (by Mank alone, with no input from Wells) and the real events that inspired it, including a tender friendship between the screenwriter and Marion Davis, who in the movie would be portrayed as an opera singer, not a Hollywood actress.



Amanda Seyfried as Marion Davis (c) Netflix

What I did not know about were the political aspects highlighted in *Mank*, the 1934 campaign of author *Upton Sinclair* as the democratic candidate for Governor of California, and the fact that Hearst used to be a progressive Democrat and a supporter of President FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) in 1933 before becoming a right-wing conservative.

So when I interview Dance, I ask him about this, and he replies that a powerful and wealthy businessman like Hearst, who owned several newspapers, arrived at a point in his life where his political views changed in order to maintain his lifestyle.

I ask Fincher about the documentary produced by MGM studio head *Louis B. Mayer* to discredit Sinclair and his EPIC (End Poverty in California) Campaign. He confirms that Hearst and MGM paid for these newsreels that pretended to present both sides, but questionable lines of fake Sinclair supporters would lead viewers to a certain conclusion.



Arliss Howard as Louis B. Mayer © Netflix

I ask Gary Oldman about the sense of guilt that Mank felt about writing screenplays for Hollywood Studios and courting the powerful at Hearst Castle's lavish dinners. He says that Mank wanted to write the great American novel or stage play, that he was lured by Hollywood's money, but despised the film industry and thought that screenwriting was beneath his talent.

I ask Seyfried about Marion Davis, who left MGM for Warner Bros when the studio did not allow her to star in *Marie Antoinette*, a dramatic role that went to [Norma Shearer](#), widow of studio chief [Irving Thalberg](#). She replies that Marion was a comedian known for her madcap roles, but she wanted to portray the woman behind the scenes as really devoted to her older lover, Hearst, who reminded her of her father.

Thanks to this movie, I now have a better understanding of the connection between the Hollywood studio system of the 30s and 40s and politics. *Mank* opened in some US theaters on November 13, will air globally on Netflix December 4.

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