

Humanist Masterpieces No 42

Citizen Kane (1941)

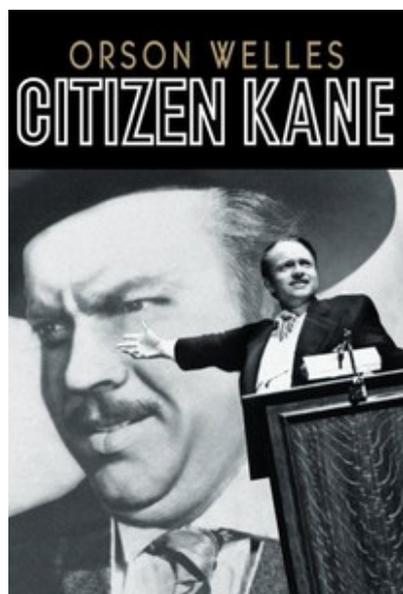
Brian McClinton

AFTER he lost the 2020 Presidential election, Donald Trump retreated into his White House bunker, only making forays down south to Virginia to cheat his way out of the bunkers on his golf course. It is a truism that the faults you find in others are often a reflection of your very own failings. It is therefore hardly surprising that Trump should insist he was cheated out of victory by illegal votes.

Trump's case has definite shades of Charles Foster Kane, the antihero of Orson Welles's 1941 movie masterpiece about a media tycoon whose political career collapses in scandal. When he loses the election for governorship of New York, Kane too feels cheated. His newspaper the *Inquirer* runs the headline: "Fraud at Polls". It is no coincidence that *Citizen Kane* is one of Trump's favourite films, though of course he completely misses the satire, believing that Kane, like himself, is a victim of others.

Like Kane, Trump acquired wealth from his parents. When he was a teenager he was attracted to the glamour of the cinema and even considered a career as a movie mogul. Like Kane, he is a lying megalomaniac, a showman and narcissist, always seeking attention and love while being incapable of giving himself to anyone. Like Kane, he has known how to use the media and stir up a crowd as a populist defender of the 'ordinary' citizen against big business and big government, while himself being wealthy and elitist. And, like Kane, he has alienated so many people, blamed others for his misfortune, and ended up isolated in a big house.

Yet Trump's failure of understanding is not unique. The true meaning of *Citizen Kane* has also eluded most of the American public and even the entertainment industry itself. Yes, there is an acknowledge-



ment that it is a great film and there is much talk about its mould-breaking technique: its use of deep focus, steep angle shots, crane shots, partial lighting, cut-back, overlapping dialogue, and so on. And there is also frequent reference to its diversity of genres: from gothic horror to mock documentary, to newspaper comedy, then to political drama, farce, domestic melodrama and – running through it all – the mystery of Kane's dying word, 'Rosebud'.

What is lacking is an appreciation of the film's message. Consider what happened to it early on. RKO Pictures, the studio which provided the \$500,000 budget and had given Welles carte blanche over its contents, withdrew the picture after a limited release and it was not widely seen until the late 1950s. Its suppression was ironically due to the power of the press that it satirised. It is clear that Kane is a scarcely veiled portrait of press magnate William Randolph Hearst, especially since the film was co-scripted by Herman Mankiewicz, a journalist, screen writer and elder brother of Joseph, who knew Hearst socially and who came to dislike him after

being exiled from his circle. In retaliation, Hearst banned mention of the film in any of his newspapers.

The script was Mankiewicz's revenge. In 1971 the *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael penned a 50,000 word essay, *Raising Kane*, in which she claimed that he was the guiding force behind the film. She argued that he almost entirely wrote the script and Welles had initially plotted to deprive him of any screen credit but Mankiewicz raised so much hell in the Screen Writers Guild that Welles was forced to split the credit and take second place in the listing (they were jointly awarded the Oscar for the Screenplay).

Whatever the truth about the script, it is likely that Mankiewicz wrote at least 60% of the finished product and much of the storyline clearly originated from him. John Houseman, the actor/producer appointed by Welles as editor and 'babysitter' to the alcoholic Mankiewicz while he worked on it, recalls: "Orson arrived one night in New York, and over dinner told me that Mankiewicz had come up with an idea for a movie: a multi-faceted story about William Randolph Hearst in which [Welles] would play the title-part and direct. He asked me whether I would work with Mankiewicz as editor and collaborator on the script" (*Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1962).

Mankiewicz, in his mid-forties, had the journalistic and political experience that Welles, in his mid-twenties, lacked. He had first-hand knowledge of the avarice, lack of culture and autocracy of press and film magnates like Hearst and Louis B. Mayer, the head of production at MGM. Although he had contempt for these greedy philistines, he and many other writers were prepared to act as paycheck whores, using the money to live on, while trying to create superior literary works. →

In 1925 Mankiewicz sent a telegram to the writer Ben Hecht in New York: “Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots. Don’t let this get around”. Hecht himself later described the movies as “an eruption of trash that has lamed the American mind and retarded Americans from becoming a cultured people”.

The screen writers prostituted themselves for a living and the film and press moguls promoted mindless entertainment and propaganda for wealth, power and conservative politics. Mayer, who sacked Mankiewicz twice from MGM, was a case in point. Called a monster by Elizabeth Taylor, he favoured sentimental romances that created a feel-good factor. “I want to make beautiful pictures about beautiful people”, he said.

Mutual benefit drew Mayer and Hearst together. Hearst had financed various MGM pictures, while MGM benefited by having film reviews included nationwide in the Hearst newspapers. Although Mayer was himself Jewish like Mankiewicz, neither he nor Hearst wished to offend the Nazi government in the 1930s because it wasn’t good for business. They knew that if they depicted Nazi abuses, they risked being branded as warmongers, trying to pull America into a European problem. They were also well aware of anti-Semitism’s prevalence in American culture and the dangers condemning it posed to them.

So when Mankiewicz – a kind of Schindler before Schindler who personally paid to help Jewish refugees escape from Germany – wrote a screenplay in 1933 about Adolf Hitler entitled *The Mad Dog of Europe*, Mayer would have none of it. He vowed: “We have interests in Germany; I represent the picture industry here in Hollywood; we have exchanges there; we have terrific income in Germany and, as far as I am concerned, this picture will never be made”.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Mankiewicz would seek his retaliation on both the press and film industries. Hence the whole idea of *Citizen Kane*. This is not to denigrate the contribution of Orson Welles. He directed the film and the

finished product is therefore his creation. Like Mankiewicz, he was a New Deal liberal and anti-fascist who urged American intervention in the Second World War. Hence the film’s portrayal of Kane as an isolated millionaire, surrounded in his Xanadu mansion by objets d’art from all over Europe, symbolises blinkered American isolationism just six months before the Japanese attack on Pear Harbor.

Yet *Citizen Kane* is much more than a criticism of American foreign policy. It is also a relentless exposé of US popular culture. It clearly demonstrates that, long before Trump, the American popular press was adept at manufacturing fake news, and its owners were populist demagogues, pretending to be on the side of the ‘little man’ while in reality accumulating wealth and power for themselves and mercilessly attacking bodies like trade unions that would actually represent their real interests.

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Citizen Kane is also a powerful assault on popular cinema. It adopts a mild form of the Brechtian verfremdungseffekt in an attempt to ‘alienate’ the audience, a technique that Bertolt Brecht adopted in his plays because he believed that the audience would better understand the message or moral if they were critical observers instead of being emotionally involved with the characters.

This is why for many *Citizen Kane* seems clever but cold. Yet its coldness is perfectly logical since its aim is to use the medium of film to expose American cinema as an effective medium of persuasion and propaganda and thus a means of providing precisely what Ben Hecht above noted: a mindless drug for the masses that prevented them from thinking critically about the shortcomings of their society.

In an interview, Orson Welles agreed that the film is also an attack on the acquisitive society. It seeks to illus-

trate how the single-minded pursuit of wealth and power destroy the possibility of happiness. On his deathbed Kane realises that you cannot buy happiness and that the simple things in life are the most important. His final utterance of ‘Rosebud’ refers to the sledge he had as a child before he was taken away from his mother. Welles described it as a gimmick, but it was Mankiewicz’s idea: according to his younger brother Joseph it was the name for Herman’s stolen bicycle (Gore Vidal mischievously claimed that it was the name given by Hearst to the clitoris of his mistress, the actress Marion Davies). And Mankiewicz is right because, as a metaphor for lost love, lost security and lost happiness it does explain much of Kane’s life.

Citizen Kane often tops lists of the greatest movies. The *Sight and Sound* poll had it as the number one every 10 years from 1962 to 2002 (*Vertigo* replaced it in 2012; the next poll is scheduled for 2022). Sadly, however, its message is largely lost on the American film industry, which continues to churn out mostly mindless pap in which the ‘heroes’ are often not far removed in character from Charles Foster Kane. Indeed, the myth of the superhero is alive and well, whether it is James Bond, Dirty Harry, Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, Martin Riggs, or The Man with No Name.

In *The Myth of the American Superhero* John Sheldon Lawrence and Robert Jewett argue that it is essentially undemocratic because it poses situations where institutions and elected leaders always fail and it is the lone, selfless hero who destroys evil. Taking the law into their own hands, usually violently, these charismatic, unelected figures assume total power to rid the community of its enemies, thus comprising a distinctively American form of pop fascism. Kane originally presented himself in this way, and we can see this myth embodied in Trump. The question is: although Trump was defeated, will Trumpism survive in a new form?

Citizen Kane is on a Universal DVD, and *Mank*, a film about Herman Mankiewicz, is on Netflix. □