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Neutrality in Thought and Greed

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Review of The Moguls and The Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II, by David Welky. The Johns Hopkins University Press. 403 pgs. $45.00

How much does Hollywood influence politics? That is the fundamental question raised in David Welky's new book, The Moguls and The Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II.

An assistant professor of history at the University of Central Arkansas, Welky examines the making of American films in the 1930s and early 1940s and the struggle of the studios to balance the forces of commercialism, ideology and prevailing public opinion.

Welky focuses upon four major themes: Hollywood's association with the federal government; its subservience to domestic and foreign markets; the rise of anti-fascist organizations in the film community; and the interventionist content of mainstream movies during the run-up to the Second World War.

The book is well-researched, but contains few surprises for anyone familiar with the subject. We know the cast of characters. The dictators: Mussolini, Hitler, and Francisco Franco. The moguls: Harry Warner, the dour, patriotic penny-pincher in New York, and his brother Jack, the parsimonious profiteer in Hollywood; Harry Cohn at Columbia, Louis B. Mayer at MGM, and Mr. Malaprop, Sam Goldwyn. Daryl F. Zanuck, at Fox, the one non-Jew, is a smidge late to the party, and therefore freer to take shots at the Nazis.

Welky's argument, though never clearly articulated, boils down to the claim that the late 30s and early 40s were a crucible through which Hollywood "became a mature industry, comfortable, to some extent, voicing its opinions on affairs that did not directly pertain to it." The movie business, he maintains, pushed for American intervention in the war. Isolationists like Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota were no match for it: "Far from pure entertainment, movies played an indelible role in creating tastes, spreading ideas, and characterizing people....Hollywood's interventionism - both on and off the screen - practically guaranteed that isolationists' position would not win out. Nye knew this and he hated it."

This conclusion is contradicted by most of Welky's evidence. Throughout the 1930s - as Welky points out - Hollywood was preoccupied with commercial interests at home and abroad, fighting anti-trust action by the Roosevelt Administration and working diligently to keep the German, Italian and British markets open to its pictures. While "the Nazis were on the rampage," Zanuck remembered, the moguls spewed "pious crap" about "giving the public what they wanted in these troublous times--which was entertainment pure and simple."

When war broke out in Europe, a few overtly political pictures (most of them "B" movies) did get made. But they tended to be anti-fascist, with virtually no references to Jews nor intervention -- and therefore relatively safe. Ads and trailers downplayed political content in favor of romantic themes. Since President Roosevelt never advised Americans, as Woodrow Wilson had, to be "neutral in thought as well as deed," releasing Confessions of a Nazi Spy in April, 1939, was hardly a profile in courage for Warner Brothers. And, Welky admits, "the rest of Hollywood stuck to safer genres such as service-pictures
under the American military flag. Some have described these films as flag-waving explorations of United States history."

Interventionist films, it is important to note, came after fascist countries had closed their markets to American films. Almost without exception, moreover, as in The Mark of Zorro and Brigham Young, they took the form of parables or allegories. Sergeant York, of course, is about World War I. And Casablanca, the most famously interventionist movie of them all, with its signature line - "I bet they're asleep in New York. I bet they're asleep all over America" - was not released until 1942!

So, despite all of the myths about communist-agitating actors, writers and directors, on the one hand, and mongering moguls in military uniforms, on the other, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, caution and commerce trumped ideology. When Hollywood finally began to address issues of the day, it was reflecting (and not shaping) the views of the Roosevelt Administration and an emerging consensus among the American people.

Which begs the question: has Hollywood become more comfortable carrying the banner for one side or the other in political arguments in the decades after World War II?

Not when you look at the movies. With a few notable exceptions - Chaplin, Oliver Stone, and Michael Moore come to mind - commercial imperatives, the structure of the studios, and the tendency of filmmakers to choose entertainments over agitprop, have kept the ideological inclinations of movie-makers largely in check.

And certainly at bay. The most significant anti-Vietnam War films, for example, came well after U.S. forces were defeated: Coming Home, 1978; The Deer Hunter, 1978; Apocalypse Now, 1979; Platoon, 1986. Ditto with the war in Iraq. In 2008, when fewer than 30% of Americans approved of George Bush's handling of his job, and a solid majority endorsed a withdrawal of American troops from the Middle East, the industry's major releases remotely challenging the War in Iraq: In the Valley of Elah; Redacted; The Kingdom; Rendition; Lions for Lambs; and Home of the Brave waited until 2006 and 2007 and were box office dust, not gold. And Stone's W in 2008, was hardly an anti-war picture.

So, the next time someone on Fox News or talk radio blasts "liberal Hollywood" be a bit more skeptical. On American politics (though maybe not on American culture), for ill and for good, mainstream movies follow green lights, not red lights.