The Moguls and the Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II. By David Welky. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xi + 416 pp. $46.00 cloth.

The work under review "seeks to explain how and why" Hollywood turned its "gigantic engines of propaganda" against the fascist dictators (2). At first reluctant to engage in politics on or off screen, the studio heads or moguls had, by 1940, rejected isolationism and sought to convince Americans that Europe's war also belonged to them. The moguls' journey into politics is Welky's story. Their initial hesitation gave way to unique influence. Hollywood emerged as an opponent of Nazism, a defender of aid to Britain,

even a clear supporter of FDR's interventionist foreign policy. As the author observes, from the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, movies "mattered … more than at any time before or since" (4).

Welky's book also matters, despite its flaws. The work's strength lies in its account of the period 1936-1939 when Hollywood made the transition to politics. In recounting the years of engagement, 1940-41, Welky is less successful.

Hollywood had good reason for political timidity even as Hitler's regime grew more threatening. Judaism, Welky notes, constituted "the third rail of Hollywood's politics" (169). Fearful of anti-Semitism, the moguls insisted that their productions existed only to entertain. Samuel Goldwyn summed up the medium's operative rule: if you have a message, send a telegram. But the pressure to respond to the threat of war in Europe proved irresistible, even for Hollywood. Anti-Nazi organizations proliferated within the Hollywood community and clamored for "current-events pictures" (80). Welky provides a comprehensive account of how such organizations attempted to exert influence on the studios, rarely with success.

More successful goading came from outside the Hollywood community. The studios increasingly found reasons to support FDR's foreign policy. In 1938 the major studios feared a Justice Department anti-trust suit that could divest them of their lucrative theater chains. Britain threatened to make importing American films prohibitively expensive. The Roosevelt administration intervened to Hollywood's advantage in both instances. The movie capital responded with gratitude. Jack and Harry Warner, Welky shows, vied to be FDR's closest confidants among the moguls. In 1939 they released *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, which "formally tackled the Nazi menace head on" (125). The same year MGM released *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, a paean to British virtues that supported FDR's clear preference for England in the looming European conflict.

But Hollywood's boldest productions did not appear until 1940. Welky labels June of that year "the pivotal month." France fell to the Germans and MGM released its most significant pre-war anti-fascist film, *The Mortal Storm*. Twentieth Century-Fox also began releasing anti-Nazi films that month. "The rough outlines of wartime Hollywood fell into place during 1940" (249). Unfortunately, the interpretative value of Welky's narrative falters as he recounts the events of 1940 and analyzes the year's most politically charged films, *The Mortal Storm* and *The Great Dictator*.

In writing of *The Mortal Storm*, the author largely ignores the two characters who drive the plot: Freya Roth (Margaret Sullavan) and her father, a renowned physiologist (Frank Morgan). The persecution of Professor Roth, a "non-Aryan," (the head of MGM, L. B. Mayer refused to allow the word "Jew" into the script) and the destruction of Freya convey the whole point of the film: to portray Nazi brutality and (somewhat sur-

reptitiously) anti-Semitism.

Welky focuses instead on Martin Breitner (Jimmy Stewart), Freya's fiancé, whom he describes as "a good natured peasant who eschews politics" (203). That description fails to capture either Breitner or his crucial role in the film. Breitner is a pacifist who develops in the course of the film into an ardent opponent of Nazism. In the vocabulary of American politics in 1940, he renounces isolationism for intervention.

Welky does well to show the relationship between *The Mortal Storm* and other productions of the time. I would argue, however, that he could have chosen for comparison films more relevant to its political message. He suggests that the "use of ... Stewart lent deep emotional appeal to ... [the film's] condemnation of Nazism" because of his recent roles in *Navy Blue and Gold* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, which "established his nice guy persona" and "confirmed him as the quintessential everyman" (205). The author overlooks the complementary role that probably mattered most to Stewart's performance in *The Mortal Storm*. In the summer of 1940 he gave up pacifism (*The Mortal Storm*); he also joined Katharine Hepburn in the frivolous world of *The Philadelphia Story*. Taken together, these films posed a stark question to American audiences: Did the war in Europe matter to us or could we ignore it? If we ignored it, did the fate of the Roth family in *The Mortal Storm* await us too?

Welky also misunderstands another important point about the film. He argues that when MGM excised the word "Jew" from *The Mortal Storm*, replacing it with "non-Aryan," the studio avoided exhibiting "direct evidence of [Nazi] anti-Semitism" (204). Only Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* therefore deserves the honor of making an "outcry against Nazi anti-Semitism" (233) and linking it to "the core of Hitler's ideology" (333). In fact, moviegoers who had read or knew of the best-selling novel, *The Mortal Storm*, had no trouble discerning why the plot of the film turned on the Nazis' hounding of Freya and her father. And if they did not know the novel, the very surname of both characters, Roth, brought the point home. *The Mortal Storm* quickly acquired notoriety. American anti-Semites did not need the word "Jew" to comprehend the film's message.

Welky's research apparently did not extend to the scripts of the films he analyzed. Scrutiny of the scripts for *The Mortal Storm*, available in the Margaret Herrick Library, reveals the key figure in the conflict within MGM over employing the word "Jew" in the film. The primary scriptwriter, Claudine West, led the fight to retain the word. Welky fails to mention West at all. Yet, as the lead writer for *The Mortal Storm*, *Good-bye, Mr. Chips* as well as *Mrs. Miniver*, West, a British subject, did more arguably than any other scriptwriter in Hollywood to make support of Britain palatable to American audiences.

Finally, Welky leads the reader astray when he writes that "Lind-

bergh had nothing to do wth [the 1941 Senate] hearings" to investigate propaganda in motion pictures (307). Welky, who co-authored a book on Lindbergh, *Charles A. Lindbergh: The Power and Peril of Celebrity*, echoes two other historians on that point. John Moser insists that "Lindbergh in no way associated with the motion picture investigation" (740), while Todd Bennett maintains that he "was not affiliated with the investigation into the film industry" (100). As Lindbergh's diary reveals, the aviator, in fact, worked closely from 1940 to 1941 with those Senators who conducted the hearings. Their consultations increased in the summer of 1941 and occurred with even greater frequency on the eve of the hearings. Lindbergh wrote his notorious Des Moines speech, delivered as the hearings began, under the influence of lawmakers convinced of the peril to America posed by Jewish control of film production.

The treatment of Lindbergh is a rare instance of Welky's reliance on secondary sources. He has made good use of such collections as those in the Wisconsin State Historical Society and the Frank McNaughton Papers in the Truman Presidential Library. His "Essay on Sources" is indispensable. I would add that for the serious student of Hollywood in the period 1936-1941, the papers of Charles Lindbergh at Yale and those of *The Mortal Storm* author, Phyllis Bottome, in the British Library remain essential.

A number of irritating, if minor, errors mar the text. These include misnomers for actor John Garfield and Idaho Senator William Borah. FDR was re-elected, rather than inaugurated, in the fall of 1940; and Warners did not begin filming *Casablanca* in the fall of 1941, but in the spring of 1942. Flawed though it is, Welky's treatment of Hollywood on the eve of war offers a comprehensive account of one of the major shifts in the history of American cinema. Approach the work cautiously to learn how Hollywood developed a conscience after all.

Works Cited

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