

Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies. *By Louis Pizzitola*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 540 pp. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 0-231-11646-2.

Reviewed by Pennee Bender

The need for another biography of William Randolph Hearst, so soon after David Nasaw's *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst*, is dubious, but in *Hearst Over Hollywood* Louis Pizzitola chooses to focus on Hearst's often neglected role as film producer. He merges Hearst's life story with the development of Hollywood and makes a strong case for the rich intersection of yellow journalism and the development of early film form, as well as Hearst's role as a power broker within the emerging film industry. Organized as a traditional life history, *Hearst Over Hollywood* parallels Hearst's attraction to the cheap amusements of New York City's Fourteenth Street, his early experiments with motion-picture cameras, and his growing financial involvement in silent film production alongside his print journalistic interests in mass entertainment, news as melodrama, and the use of sensationalist photo series. One of his first movie ventures in 1914, *The Perils of Pauline*, a twenty-part adventure serial, combined Hearst's penchant for melodrama and his relentless promotion of his films and their actresses in the pages of his newspapers. *The Perils of Pauline*, with its spunky female heroine, also reflected Hearst's merging of entertainment and politics, in this case his progressive position on women's independence.

The new film industry grew in tandem and became intertwined with Hearst's media empire, which relied on advertising revenues from film and popular entertainment while simultaneously featuring articles on the films, film stars, producers, and theaters that paid for the ads. Although he opposed the vertical integration of studios and exhibitors represented by Paramount, Hearst developed his own ways to consolidate his film and publishing businesses. The Hearst newspaper format that emphasized human-interest stories, sports, and gossip columns and his magazines that offered serialized melodramas provided a constant source of material for his movie scripts as well as promotion for the finished films. In fact, Hearst managed his magazines with film-story

acquisition in mind, instructing his editors in 1919 to “make sure that every story will be fit for moving pictures” (p. 190). In 1920, Hearst formed the International Story Company to buy motion-picture rights for a wide range of books, plays, and short stories.

Even as his journalistic empire grew to include over twenty newspapers, a news wire service, newsreels, radio stations, and a wide range of magazines, Hearst maintained constant, hands-on control of his Cosmopolitan Studio productions. Cosmopolitan released pictures first through Famous Players–Lasky (soon to be Paramount), then through MGM (1924–1934) and Warner Brothers (1935–1937). Motion-picture production offered Hearst some financial success, but, perhaps more critically, greater political power through the propaganda value of movies. Yet Hearst’s political positions changed almost as frequently as his film-producing alliances. Hearst shifted from a populist, antitrust reformer in the teens, to an antiwar, pro-German position in World War I, to an isolationist in the 1930s, to a leading anti-Communist crusader by the 1940s. Pizzitola chronicles Hearst’s use of film propaganda to argue his current position but does not always provide the larger historical context of these political twists and turns. *Hearst Over Hollywood* amply draws the parallels between Hearst’s publishing concerns and practices, political stances, and his movies deals, but it offers minimal analysis of the style and content of the films themselves.

Just as it took hold of the U.S. public’s imagination during the first half of the twentieth century, so does W. R. Hearst’s personality loom larger than his movies in *Hearst Over Hollywood*. Pizzitola states that his “primary focus is the impact and context of films and film genres,” rather than the specific content and form of Hearst’s movies (p. xi). But by relying so heavily on Hearst’s life story, which has been adequately covered by others, Pizzitola misses the opportunity to carve out entirely new territory by interpreting Hearst’s movie and newsreel vision and showing how his films merged propaganda content with cinematic form. It seems especially unfortunate that the book does not explore the influence of Hearst’s journalistic style, which carried over into his radio and film interests, on the development of newsreels and their transformation into television news. At times Pizzitola’s focus on Hearst’s personal life and scandals and his reliance on personal anecdotes reflects the muckracking style of Hearst’s

journalism without explicitly analyzing its social function, popular appeal, or narrative power in either yellow journalism or film history.

*Hearst Over Hollywood* offers valuable information on the overlapping territories of journalism, politics, and popular culture in early-twentieth-century U.S. history—from the connections between yellow journalism, entertainment, and Tammany Hall in the first decade, through Hollywood's support of FDR and the New Deal, to Hearst's anti-Communist campaign in the 1940s and 50s. By making Hearst's yellow journalism a central theme, Pizzitola offers new perspectives on film history, especially when he explores the links between New York City politics, popular entertainment, and early film development. The book reflects extensive research into Hearst's business and advertising practices and his range of business ventures, and it traces Hearst's broad network of associates and their ties to politics and corporate power. However, the reader may be sometimes overwhelmed with details, and the account could have used a conclusion that pulls its major points together. *Hearst Over Hollywood* succeeds as a biography of a powerful film producer, as a persuasive argument for Hearst's key role in the development of Hollywood, and as a chronicle of Hearst's shift from the populist impulse of the early film industry to the anticommunism in the 1950s.

*Pennee Bender is associate director of the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning at the City University of New York Graduate Center. She has just completed a dissertation on Hollywood, newsreel, and educational film propaganda about Latin America during World War II, titled "Film as an Instrument of the Good Neighbor Policy, 1930–1950," and has worked in documentary film and television news production.*