

book review

Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s. Edited by Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies. Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

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The 1930s were a turbulent time in Hollywood. The costly implementation of sound technologies, experimentations with color film, the tug of war with moral crusaders and the PCA coming into its own all contributed—paradoxically perhaps—to the excitement and vitality of the era’s best films (as well as the drabness of its “film-by-number” worst). All this occurred in the turmoil of the country’s financial crisis, as savings accounts were wiped out and unemployment skyrocketed, placing almost all studios into receivership, and, for the first time, putting the entire industry into question. It is this rich period that *Hollywood and the Great Depression* investigates with its thirteen essays focusing on the era’s values and politics (part 1), its stars (part 2), and exemplary films (part 3).

The volume’s introduction does a commendable job at succinctly situating the reader in the financial and industrial context of the moment. Iwan Morgan summarizes how the financial crisis impacted Hollywood, how the studios adjusted and transformed themselves to survive, as well as how other actors—the government, special interest groups and moviegoers—played their part in affecting Hollywood’s transitions. Additional section introductions would have certainly been welcomed, especially for the first two sections, which are much less accessible and considerably more disjointed than the last.

The ambitious first part on “Hollywood Politics

and Values” covers much ground, from moguls’ and writers’ personal politics to working women, and congressional hearings. Mark Wheeler’s chapter explores the nascent politicization of Hollywood, and his discussion of Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg’s manufactured “fake news” documentaries, aimed at discrediting Upton Sinclair’s EPIC campaign, certainly does give the impression that a new era in American politics was indeed beginning. Ian Scott’s makes a convincing case for paying more attention to how screenwriters infused Hollywood with their own values and politics, looking more particularly at Columbia writers Jo Swerling, Sidney Buchman and Robert Riskin. While entertaining, J. E. Smyth’s chapter on working women seems too encompassing for its own good. Looking in turn at representations of working women on film, actual women working in various capacities off screen at Hollywood studios, not to mention actresses as models of independence and specific film treatment of women’s independence, only allows for cursory treatment of this vast area of study. The most groundbreaking piece in this section is Catherine Jurca’s close study of the 1936-1940 hearings to regulate film distribution. Jurca not only cogently highlights the tensions and dissent within allied groups opposed to the studio practices of block-booking and blind selling, but also examines the arguments put forth by small exhibitors in favor of these practices.

The shortest section in this collection, devoted to the stars of the 1930s, as mentioned above, remains somewhat disjointed. Ina Rae Hark's opening chapter examines Shirley Temple's daddy-quest films in the context of settler cinema, Mark Glancy's piece details Cary Grant's arduous journey into developing a coherent and appealing star persona, and Peter William Evan's chapter probes Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' *Roberta*. Going against the popular opinion that their film musicals served escapist purposes, the author shows how *Roberta* stages the lovers' courtship against obstacles and hardships reminiscent of those endured by the film's Depression audience. While convincing, this argument is somewhat curiously undermined by fellow contributors' comments to the contrary (176-177, 218 and 251).

The most approachable section, perhaps thanks to its greater length, is the last, examining specific films. It is also the section that deals most directly with the Great Depression. Here, two more chapters deal with musical comedies. Harvey Cohen opens with a piece on *Footlight Parade*, bringing to the fore the film's textual elements pointing to the labor disputes and studio's in-fighting occurring while making the film. Cohen also situates the film within the discussions—ongoing at the time—on how best to solve the financial crisis and overcome economic sluggishness. David Eldridge, for his part, contextualizes youth musicals (musicals featuring adolescents such as *Babes in Arms*, *Strike up the Band* and *Girl Crazy*) to show how the films help assuage fears regarding youth vagrancy and ultimately reassure parents that the kids would be all right after all. Brian Neve and Melvyn Stokes respectively offer straightforward production and reception history of two very different films critical of unbridled capitalism, King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* and Chaplin's *Modern Times*. For his part, Iwan Morgan reads John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* as a Popular Front hero. Morgan argues that Ford achieved this by emphasizing the “everyday man” Lincoln rather than the statesman, furthering the idea that anyone could emerge as a capable and sensitive leader. Finally, Anna Siomopoulos turns her attention to three films, *Gabriel over the White House*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *The Talk of the Town* to show how focus in these films is put on iconic public build-

ings rather than romantic coupling, and how this may have supported New Deal infrastructure efforts. Siomopoulos additionally tackles the gender politics at play where, in all three films, the female character must—at best—recede in the background to allow white men to emerge as leaders.

Hollywood and The Great Depression effectively meets its stated goals of casting light on lesser-known but crucial aspects of the film industry during the 1930s. The book's heavy emphasis on musicals and complete ghosting of gangsters and woman's films (why?), however, will certainly provide a somewhat distorted view of the era to newcomers and undergrads. It should also be mentioned that, despite its name, many chapters only perfunctorily glance at the Depression. The real subject here is the film industry in the 1930s, and the “Great Depression” is quickly replaced by such terms as “Great Depression decade,” “Depression-era” and “Depression years” to better reflect most of the articles' focal points.