H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

M. Todd Bennett. *One World, Big Screen: Hollywood, the Allies, and World War II.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. xiii + 362 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3574-6.

Reviewed by Colin Gilmour (McGill University)
Published on H-War (June, 2013)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

M. Todd Bennett's *One World, Big Screen* opens to the dichotomy of the well-known photograph of Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin as a seated trio at the Tehran Conference in 1943, and a lesser-known image of the same scene but from a further vantage point. The crowd of newspapermen and photographers visible in the second image, Bennett notes, speaks to the behind-the-scenes engineering which made possible the temporary unity of the three very different leaders and countries. Like this latter photo, *One World, Big Screen* aims to take "a fresh approach that reveals a transnational cultural dimension to the historical rise of the United Nations, World War II, and foreign relations more broadly" (p. 2).

The book begins by documenting the parallel developments of film and propaganda in the United States before American entry into the war in December 1941. After documenting the interwar debate over propaganda as a legitimate tool for communicating political aims or an "un-American" trick (p. 25), Bennett chronicles the development of the partnership between Hollywood and interventionist policymakers after the onset of the Second World War. Unlike Gregory D. Black and Clayton R. Koppes's work *Hollywood Goes to War* (1987), Bennett's narrative characterizes this courtship as both mutually desired and occurring with relative celerity.[1] Acting on both political and financial motivations, he writes, film moguls eagerly partnered with interventionists, who in turn saw Hollywood, with its vast influence and popularity, as the perfect sugar coating for the interventionist "propaganda pill" (p. 36).

Bennett's following three chapters document the successes of Hollywood's role in underpinning Allied unity and amity, as well as promoting a sense of internationalism and a commitment to the war in millions of American movie-goers. The relations between the United States and Great Britain form the core of this section, which traces how the silver screen helped to build American sympathy for Britain and the antifascist cause before Pearl Harbor in chapter 2, and the subsequent construction of the famous "special relationship" between the two countries as formal wartime allies in chapter 4. Specifically, Bennett argues that Hollywood films such as *Yank in the RAF* (1941) and *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), helped overturn traditional American Anglophobia and reservations about Britain as an imperialist and class-ridden society. Sandwiched in between these chapters, he also argues that Hollywood helped to establish feelings of unity and harmony among the United Nations in films like *Sahara* (1943), which featured an international cast of characters representing Allied nations as a united front against fascist oppression.

The book's remaining chapters, by contrast, focus on Hollywood's wartime failures to elicit such amity with the two other members of the "Big Four": Joseph Stalin's Soviet Russia and Jiang Jieshi's Republic of China. In films such as *Mission to Moscow* and *Song of Russia* (both from 1943), Bennett writes, Hollywood's efforts to promote the former met with initial success in both the United States and Russia, producing a temporary cultural interchange between the two countries while also creating fleeting American feelings of kinship towards "Uncle Joe" (Stalin). As Bennett argues, however, American audiences soon recognized the thinly veiled propaganda, while Soviet leaders began to see American cinema as a cultural threat to communist values, reverting the two countries back to mutual suspicion. Conversely, Hollywood's efforts to promote China as an ally failed to accomplish even such temporary results. Seeking to reverse China's racial "otherness," Bennett contends in his final chapter that Hollywood's use of yellowface performers, as well as many films' usage of a racially paternalistic dynamic between Americans and Chinese, actually reinforced existing racial boundaries and stereotypes.

As this brief summary demonstrates, *One World, Big*

Screen is not a general history of Hollywood during the Second World War. Rather, the book's major strength is its clear and consistent focus on one specific aspect of that history, resisting the temptation to stray too far into other well-documented but less relevant topics, such as Hollywood's role in the demonization of America's enemies. A similar focus on films' intent and impact rather than long plot recitations lends its argument both simplicity and analytical strength. Lastly, Bennett's clear and jargon-free writing style makes the book both an easy and entertaining read.

Such strengths notwithstanding, the work is not without weaknesses. While the book ably counterbalances the American perspective with that of Britain and Soviet Russia (something which separates it from more heavily Ameri-centric narratives like Gregory D. Black and Clayton R. Koppes's aforementioned work), this balance is noticeably missing from its discussion of Hollywood's promotion of Jiang Jieshi's China. Also, while the international nature of Bennett's approach is most certainly a point of strength, his analysis is largely restricted to the Big Four, with analysis of other members of the Alliance being either brief or nonexistent. His argument would surely have been beneficially augmented, for example, by discussion of Hollywood's depiction of Allied countries under occupation in such films as *Joan of Paris* (1942), *Edge of Darkness* (1943), or *Passage to Marseille* (1944) as described by historians Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry.[2] Moreover, the book's analytical treatment of the Commonwealth as simply an extension of Britain skips over the attempts by Hollywood to promote or highlight individual states like Canada in successful films like *49th Parallel* (1941), *Northern Pursuit* (1943), and *Corvette K-225* (1943), which were noted by well-known contemporary film critic Dorothy Jones.[3]

Despite such reservations, M. Todd Bennett's *One World, Big Screen* undoubtedly constitutes a valuable contribution to the historical literature on Hollywood and mass media during the Second World War. While utilizing a structure and source material which will be familiar to readers in the field, Bennett's work compellingly highlights the heretofore-neglected and fascinating narrative of Hollywood's role as a tool of American foreign policy, internationalism, and inter-Allied propaganda. Well researched and clearly written, the book well deserves a space on the bookshelves of anyone studying propaganda, mass media, or the United Nations during the Second World War.

Notes

[1]. Gregory D. Black and Clayton .R Koppes, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

[2]. Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry, *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

[3]. Such films, or others which depicted Canadian protagonists, featured some of the day's biggest stars, such as Lawrence Olivier (*49th Parallel*), Clark Gable (*The Met in Burma* [1941]), and Errol Flynn (*Northern Pursuit*). In a 1945 article, Jones mentions this specific American-Canadian cinematic partnership as part of her assessment of American film in promoting the wartime United Nations and American war effort, a goal not dissimilar to Bennett's in *One World, Big Screen.* Dorothy Jones, "The Hollywood War Film: 1942-1944," *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1945): 1-19.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Colin Gilmour. Review of Bennett, M. Todd, *One World, Big Screen: Hollywood, the Allies, and World War II.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37948

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.