

An interview with Louis Pizzitola, author of *Hearst Over Hollywood*

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The recent film about the early life of corporate mogul Howard Hughes, *The Aviator*, directed by Martin Scorsese, raised a number of important questions. The film offered a portrait of a young Greek god, albeit an eccentric one, obsessed with speed, cinema and women. In a dishonest and evasive fashion, Scorsese's film sanitized Hughes' life and career, leaving out his fanatical anti-communism, anti-Semitism and intimate, long-term connections with the military and intelligence apparatus.

In response to a critical comment on *The Aviator*, the *World Socialist Web Site* received a letter from Louis Pizzitola, author of *Hearst Over Hollywood* (2002). Pizzitola's work provides a detailed and pioneering account of the role played in the American film industry by publishing and media giant William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951), a major figure in US public life in the first half of the twentieth century and the inspiration for Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941).

Pizzitola noted that our criticism of the Scorsese interpretation of Hughes' life reminded him "of my own attempt to tell the truth about William Randolph Hearst and his role in Hollywood." He was critical of a biography of Hearst by David Nasaw [*The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (2000)] that was published two years before his own book, and presented Hearst as a sympathetic figure, downplaying his anti-Semitism and fascist connections.

I contacted Pizzitola and we eventually conducted a telephone interview, which is presented below.

The concerted effort to "clean up" the past—in extreme cases, to rewrite it—and the specific attempt to rehabilitate powerful corporate figures with right-wing, authoritarian tendencies, is not an academic or "scholarly" issue. Such efforts have a great deal to do with contemporary politics and social life. They are aimed at obscuring the reactionary, anti-democratic role played by such figures, past and present, and thereby lulling the population to sleep in regard to present dangers.

Like Hughes, Hearst is an entirely legitimate and, indeed, fascinating subject for both art and historiography. He is a quintessentially American figure. It can hardly be coincidental that Hearst provided the basis for one of the most influential films ever made, a scathing portrait by the social critic Ferdinand Lundberg in the 1930s (*Imperial Hearst: A Social Biography*), the influential *Citizen Hearst* by W.A. Swanberg (1961), and the recent works by Nasaw and Pizzitola.

A man of great energy and considerable gifts, Hearst was born in San Francisco, the only child of George Hearst, a self-made and nearly illiterate multi-millionaire miner and rancher, and Phoebe Apperson Hearst, a music teacher. William Randolph Hearst took control of his first newspaper, the *San Francisco Examiner*—given him by this father, who had moved on to the US Senate—at the age of 23. He acquired the *New York Journal* in 1895 and built its circulation (from 77,000 per day to 960,000), in competition with rival publisher Joseph Pulitzer, through the newly-developed techniques of "yellow journalism": sensationalism, pictorialism and populism of a chauvinist and nativist variety.

"The public," Pizzitola quotes Hearst as observing, "is even more fond

of entertainment than it is of information."

Hearst's name will forever be associated with the relentless campaign for a US war with Spain in 1898, over Cuban independence. Swanberg, in *Citizen Hearst*, terms Hearst's coverage of the sinking of the US battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor, whose unexplained explosion provided a pretext for war, "the orgasmic acme of ruthless, truthless newspaper jingoism."

A man with a vast political appetite, Hearst was elected to Congress as a Democrat in 1902, by which time he already owned six major newspapers, and served two terms. His early program, according to Swanberg, included support for union labor, the eight-hour day, the income tax, the popular election of US Senators, control of the trusts, government ownership of the railroads, telegraphs and possibly mines and, true to his nativism, the exclusion of Chinese labor.

Hearst, not given to tact or subtlety, made far too many enemies, both within the political establishment as a whole and within the Democratic Party. His ambition, focused, above all, on the White House, was never to be realized. Campaigns for mayor of New York City and governor of New York state ended in defeat.

At its height, the Hearst media empire included 28 major newspapers. Nearly one in four US families read a Hearst newspaper every day. Countless others read one of his 18 leading magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Town & Country* and *Harper's Bazaar*, among them), listened to his radio stations or watched one of his film productions.

One of his own writers commented that a Hearst newspaper "is like a screaming woman running down the street with her throat cut." Crime and scandal were its mainstay, played up in blaring headlines and lurid photography. *Citizen Hearst* notes, "The faking of news stories and photographs was brought to a high art by the romancers of the Hearst press. Truth, the touchstone of news value, was unimportant to Hearst because circulation, money and power were his goals."

Convinced that the Depression posed great dangers to American capitalism, and perhaps moved as well by the misery it was producing, Hearst became one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's staunchest supporters in 1932. Indeed, Swanberg suggests that Hearst, through the pressure he brought to bear on various politicians, "decided the [1932 Democratic Party] convention, the candidate [Roosevelt], and the future of the nation."

In the mid-1930s, opposed to certain of Roosevelt's measures and facing a growing financial crisis in his own businesses, Hearst swung away from the New Deal toward the far right. He became a trail-blazer in another arena, anti-communism. Hearst became "America's No. 1 Red-baiter," according to *Citizen Hearst*, sniffing out Communists everywhere and anywhere. With the aid of the FBI, Hearst and his minions smeared Orson Welles as a "communist" and made every effort to block the making and distribution of *Citizen Kane*.

It is worth noting, however, that Hearst's "flirtation with fascism," as it

is often referred to, *predated and coincided with* his support for Roosevelt and the New Deal. From 1927 until the mid-1930s, Hearst solicited and ran columns from both Mussolini and Hitler. He also had newsreel deals with both regimes (as Pizzitola discusses below). Hearst visited Germany in 1934 and interviewed Hitler; moreover, compelling evidence, reported in *Hearst Over Hollywood*, suggests that Hearst attended the Nazis' Nuremberg Rally in 1934.

The Depression weakened Hearst's operations. They landed in trusteeship in 1937, and by 1940 he had lost personal control of his communications empire. The Hearst Corporation remains a force today in publishing and communications, although the family no longer owns a controlling share.

Still an enormously wealthy man, Hearst died in 1951, largely discredited and in disgrace, certainly in the eyes of progressive public opinion. The renowned historian Charles Beard, in 1935, spoke for many: "William Randolph Hearst has pandered to depraved tastes and has been an enemy of everything that is noblest and best in our American tradition. ... There is not a cesspool of vice and crime which Hearst has not raked and exploited for money-making purposes. ... Unless those who represent American scholarship, science, and the right of a free people to discuss public questions freely stand together against his insidious influences he will assassinate them individually by every method known to yellow journalism."

Hearst Over Hollywood is an examination of the publisher's role in the American film industry, an aspect of his life and career that has received far less attention than his efforts in newspapers and magazines, and far less than it deserves, in the author's view. Louis Pizzitola makes the case, compellingly, that Hearst was one of the dominant figures in Hollywood for several decades in the twentieth century.

The opening section of *Hearst Over Hollywood* provides a striking picture of turn-of-the-twentieth-century New York City politics and culture. The Democratic Party's Tammany Hall ruled the city, in Pizzitola's words, through "extortion, intimidation and worse. There was no aspect of city life that Tammany did not touch and often control." Hearst was a prominent ally of the Tammany machine for nearly a decade.

Its rule, in Pizzitola's view, "became a model for Hearst, both in his publishing business and in the communications-entertainment industry he was about to help create." He goes on: "Hearst journalism borrowed from the bread-and-circus method perfected by Tammany Hall and [notorious political boss] 'Big' Tim Sullivan. In what became a predictable pattern, Hearst would expose an inequity or tragic circumstance in society, claim that his reporting had improved the situation, and then with great flair celebrate victory by throwing a party for the people and for his crusading newspaper."

In our conversation, I asked Pizzitola about the role of "yellow journalism," as well as early cinema, in diverting the new, working class population in America's big cities.

He replied, "The journalists and publishers were very open about how they were manipulating public opinion. Today people are less concerned about being manipulated. I talk about Tammany Hall and the connections with what Hearst did in Hollywood. Tammany Hall provided this 'free and easy' lifestyle for people, but at a great cost. They encouraged saloons and brothels, but, on the other hand, made a lot of money off them, obviously controlling them, using these entertainment venues to support the political party, keeping people mildly entertained while they filled their pockets.

"People were being manipulated in so many ways," Pizzitola commented. "They were unaware that producers of theater productions and movies were paying to have their productions reviewed in a positive way [by Hearst publications]. I mean, literally paid. There was nothing that one could feel was genuine criticism of anything.

"He was really a pioneer of the idea that you would acquire properties,

stories, for his magazines with the idea of making them into movies, so you were looking at a story for its cinematic potential even before it was published."

The myth has persisted, perhaps inadvertently given credence by the activities of the fictional Charles Foster Kane in Welles's great film, that Hearst entered into the film world largely to advance the career of his great love, Marion Davies. In fact, as Pizzitola notes, Hearst first engaged in the cinema around the time Davies was born, in 1897. (They apparently met in 1914 when she was 17 and he 51.)

Hearst rapidly grasped the power of film, describing it as "the most modern form of presentation" of ideas. "That which is shown in moving pictures," he wrote, "impresses itself upon the mind with a force not equaled in any other way."

Putting his money where his mouth was, the publisher eventually became involved in every type of cinema: feature films, animation and newsreels.

Pizzitola carefully traces out Hearst's complex career in Hollywood. Much of this history has not been systematically documented before.

In the first years of the twentieth century, Pizzitola writes, "Hearst journalism continued to serve as a template for filmmakers," in covering crime stories and other sensations. His first full-scale production was *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), a serialization that introduced the word "cliff-hanger" into English. He plunged into newsreel production at the same time.

Over the course of the next several decades, Hearst would develop relations with every major studio, Paramount, MGM (he played a key role in its formation and Louis B. Mayer became a principal ally), Twentieth Century Fox and Warner Brothers.

I asked Pizzitola what had attracted Hearst, at a young age, to film and visual imagery.

He explained that Hearst took over the *San Francisco Examiner* during "the period when photographs were first being used in newspapers in any consistent manner. He was personally interested in photography and actually had a dark room set up in his house in Sausalito. ... I suppose he felt it had an enormous amount of power, as it did over him.

"'Yellow journalism,' as practiced by Hearst, and cinema started at the same time. You do see in his earliest newspapers, the *Examiner* and the *New York Journal*, that Hearst is very comfortable with that new medium. You could see film affecting the design of the newspaper and the choice of photographs or imagery in the newspaper. It's very much influenced by early cinema."

Pizzitola continued, "As soon as Hearst became aware that people were interested in going to the movies and seeing what were then five-minute films, he had cameramen come down to Cuba with him. He filmed the inauguration of William McKinley, he may have personally filmed it! There's one reference to his cranking the camera himself. It's remarkable."

I remarked that along with "yellow journalism" and film in 1895-96, the other explosive element was America's arrival on the world scene as a major power, in the Spanish-American War of 1898. There was an extraordinary confluence of events.

"One of the things that interested me," Pizzitola said, "was that some writers tend to separate the personal from other influences, cultural and social. I think, generally speaking, they are very much connected, and I certainly think they're connected in Hearst. This man who was very much interested in gaining power and maintaining power had to be involved in these power adventures, Cuba and so on. Not only does he bring cameramen down there, he brings along his mistress, who eventually becomes his wife, and her sister, who are more than likely prostitutes. And he has this kind of open secret, he's seen around town with them. Again, it's an audacity that endures, in terms of his politics and his personal life."

I asked Pizzitola how many of the films that Hearst produced he thought

stood up artistically?

He responded, “Of the Marion Davies films, there are at least two that really do hold up, as comedies. *Show People* and *The Patsy*, in the 1920s, by King Vidor, a talented director. And her talent is obvious too. Her performances are quite unique. You don’t see too many actresses of the period who could be described as being very, very funny and beautiful. That’s unusual for the period. A real flair for comedy, and pretty, and sexy to some extent, as much as the times allowed. There are other films that are more interesting than artistic, like *Gabriel Over the White House*.”

Indeed, *Gabriel Over the White House* (directed by Gregory La Cava) is a fascinating cultural artifact. Released in 1933, it centers on a machine politician (Walter Huston) elected president under conditions of a major social crisis. After suffering a serious injury in a car accident, the president is visited by the (unseen) Archangel Gabriel, who works a miracle on the unconscious politician. When he awakens, Huston is possessed by the belief that he has a mission to lead the country out of the Depression.

Huston first proposes a vast public works program (one of Hearst’s pet projects) that will provide work for millions. Subsequently, the president dissolves Congress and imposes martial law on the country. Leading underworld figures are summarily dispatched by firing squads. Turning his attention to world affairs, Huston blackmails world leaders, by demonstrating America’s newest and most deadly secret weapon, into signing a document establishing world peace! Huston suffers a fatal attack and expires. The spirit that has infused him leaves his corpse in the form of a puff of wind.

Of *Gabriel*, Pizzitola said, “There’s a good deal of evidence that Hearst had a lot to do with the making of that film. Other films clearly have his touch—*G-Men* [1935] is one of them, *The Big House* is another. He was very interested in prison reform and was opposed to the death penalty. You see a lot of that in *The Big House* [1930]. And then there are some of the serials, *Patria* [1917] and *Perils of Pauline*.

“I decided not to discuss the artistic merits of the films at length. People love to debate these things, and that becomes a distraction. I thought what I could do more successfully was place the films in the context of Hearst’s biography, of the biography of the film industry. I was trying to write a ‘history’ of Hearst and a ‘biography’ of film. I used as a metaphor the stereopticon image of the two pictures that meld together, which was very much connected with early film and Hearst’s own interest in photography and the sort of pre-cinema.”

I asked Pizzitola about Hearst’s specific contribution to the film industry.

“Probably Hearst’s biggest contribution,” he commented, “was moving film away from being an artistic medium and more towards a communications medium. Although he didn’t speak about that and he spoke about film as an art form, I think his chief concern was that film communicated, could have a message, film was propaganda. He would never have used that word. How else can you see a film like *Gabriel Over the White House*? It’s not an artistic film.”

I suggested that it had artistic elements. “That returns us the debate over artistry in a film,” he replied.

I continued: “In Hollywood, film is business and art intertwined in such a complicated way. I’d like to raise *Gabriel Over the White House* in another context. You discuss Hearst’s and his wife’s flirtation, or more than flirtation, with Mussolini and later Hitler. That doesn’t just post-date his support for the New Deal. Roosevelt had some connection with *Gabriel Over the White House*, which is an authoritarian film.”

Pizzitola explained, “Roosevelt was very much aware of it. It was made in part to help him. And it advanced the notion that sometimes a leader has to be something of a dictator.”

Speaking of Hearst’s turn to the right, he observed, “There was a marked change with the onset of the Depression, which affected Hearst’s

company. He started blaming criticisms on Communists. His financial situation propelled him in an anti-Communist direction in Hollywood and so on.”

I said, “The 1930s was a decade of great turmoil. The New Deal was an effort to stave off social upheaval and social revolution. Roosevelt was farsighted enough to carry out certain reforms in order to stave off a greater crisis.”

Pizzitola remarked, “You can go back to Tammany Hall, there’s a parallel again—Roosevelt came from that—you give a little, you’re putting off the big changes.

“Hearst was originally on board with Roosevelt,” he pointed out. “Not just for a few months, for a few years he was really behind him. They were talking on the phone. Hearst was giving Roosevelt suggestions about cabinet positions and so on. There was some talk about putting Hearst in the cabinet, and there was talk about having his son in the government too. Hearst’s basic idea was doing a little and making it look like a lot.

“He had that typically paternalistic idea, ‘I can do anything with my life and money, but I know what’s best for other people.’ At San Simeon [his ‘dream castle’ in California] there was hypocrisy all over the place. Hearst had this policy that unmarried couples couldn’t stay together. He would just come down on the elevator with Marion Davies from their bedroom when people were ready to have dinner.”

“What about Hearst’s relations with Hitler?” I asked.

Pizzitola: “There’s this parallel going back to the early advertising days, and paying for good advertising. He made an earlier connection with Mussolini, and it was a newsreel deal, an exchange of newsreels, so that Hearst Newsreels in America would show footage from the Italian newsreel company, which was controlled by Mussolini. There was this even exchange of newsreel footage—that was well publicized—and then he made another deal with Hitler which was never publicized.

“My book is the first to expose that. He organized a similar deal, and it happened at the same time as Hearst visited Hitler in September 1934. The end result was that American newsreels carried pro-German, pro-military footage without any commentary.

“I can’t believe that Hearst was unaware that he was spreading propaganda that was being created and spread by the Nazis in Germany. He had a very strong personal connection with Germany, going back to this youth, when his mother took him there. He often took trips to Germany as a young man. He loved the country. He also saw Hitler as a barrier to Communism. That was to him the bigger evil. How much he even saw Hitler as an evil is open to question. I think he did. Like Tammany Hall was an evil, but a necessary evil.

“I discovered that he was at the 1934 Nuremberg rally, or he was certainly in Nuremberg, and his son was definitely at the rally. There was no other reason for Hearst to have been in Nuremberg, except that he was connected to the rally. He was at a hotel in which his was the only American group, the rest of the hotel was booked with SS people. It’s amazing to me, when I discovered those records. It wasn’t reported at the time.”

For more information: www.hearstoverhollywood.com



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