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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

University College

American Culture Studies

The Populist Dilemma

*Frank Capra's Increasingly Unresolved Populist Films of the Depression
Era*

By

Nathan Johnston

A Thesis Presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Of Washington University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts

May 2011

Saint Louis, Missouri

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2011

Acknowledgements

A work such as this cannot happen without tremendous support from numerous individuals. I must first thank Dr. Lutz Koepnick for his tireless leadership on this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Henry Schvey and Dr. Robert Moore for their assistance as readers for the finished work.

I must thank Josie Walters Johnson at the Library of Congress film room for her assistance and patience with my first experience using a reel-to-reel machine.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the input many of my colleagues have offered throughout my entire graduate work. Specifically, I would like to thank Tom Reck and Rich Reiss, without whom much of my work would have suffered. To my sister, Kristin, thank you for all the late nights you spent reviewing my work.

I must also acknowledge the support of the Lutheran High School Association of Saint Louis without whose assistance I would not have been able to complete this program.

Finally, thank you is insufficient to express my feelings for the patience and understanding of my family over these past several years. For my wife, Christine, the amount of work you have done to help review, revise, and provide intellectual direction to this work is entirely immeasurable. Kids, Dad is back. Honey, I'm home.

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Introduction

As the United States of America sank to ever greater economic depths during the 1930s, Hollywood, America's new entertainment capital, sought to keep the cameras rolling and the increasingly impoverished masses entertained. Having emerged in the boom period of the post-World War I era, the American film industry had come to dominate the entertainment marketplace with its combination of affordable ticket prices and considerably comfortable, and in some cases luxurious, movie houses. As the Depression took hold, Hollywood was in the unique position of systematizing production in the classical studio style, a method which produced films that had been standardized with profits in mind.¹ In fact, Thomas Schatz, in his study of the studio system argued that, "the prospect of anything truly innovative or distinctive being produced in Hollywood was becoming more remote by the mid-1930s, even at the prestige level where competition was fiercest."²

Fully engaged in this environment was a man destined to become one of the most famous filmmakers of all time. Frank Capra, a man who had immigrated to America as a child and virtually lied his way into his first job in the film industry, was on the verge of establishing his style as that of America's leading populist director. At the same time, the nation was poised on the verge of one of the most consequential presidential elections in the nation's history.³ Not only was 1932 an important political year for the nation, but

¹ For a detailed study of Hollywood during its classical era see Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

² Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, 198.

³ For the story of Capra's entry into the film industry see Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 15-30.

Capra claims in his autobiography that the year served as a thematic turning point for his philosophy of filmmaking.

Before 1932 I made only fictional films – without basis in reality – “escapist” the critics called them. Now I took a hard look at life from the eye level of the hard-pressed Smiths and Joneses. It was not the same, rosy life we saw – and copied – in each other’s Hollywood movies. The *real* lot of American citizens in 1932 was stark, bleak, and worsening.⁴

While Frank Capra began to think about the average “Smiths and Joneses”, the Democratic Party nominee for President of the United States made the common man the focus of his campaign. Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorably dubbed Capra’s “Smiths and Joneses” America’s “forgotten men,” and in so-doing, linked his message of hope for the average American with that of Capra’s films. The confluence of these two great communicators provides the initial impetus for this study. Both men captured audiences of unimaginable size at a time when the nation yearned for direction and reassurance. Both men held very strong opinions centered on the concept of American exceptionalism, yet were forced to deal with economic and social pressures that called into question the traditional concepts of American government, if not the very survival of the American way of life.

As both Roosevelt and Capra were giants in their fields during the 1930s, much has been written about both men and their effect on American culture during the Great Depression, so much, in fact, it might seem impossible to add to the existing literature. While many have speculated on the political implications of Capra’s films, few have approached the subject matter in a manner which attempts to study the films from a perspective of general societal influence, and have rather focused on Capra’s individual philosophy when seeking to explain the messages contained in his work. To a large

⁴ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 136.

degree, of course, this is due to the fact that Capra, himself, liked to view his films in an *auteurist* sense, though such a concept had not been formally suggested at the time. The auteurist theory of filmmaking emerged in the 1950s as the result of a debate between French film critics, though Capra, at least in retrospect, certainly seemed to be influenced by such a notion, as is evident in the philosophy of filmmaking he espoused during a 1971 seminar.⁵ With such admittedly singular perspective, I would argue that any piece of art is influenced by the cultural reality experienced by the artist. It is, therefore, my contention that Capra's films during the 1930s were considerably more than mere "escapist" fare, and though both he and Roosevelt seemed to appeal to the masses, were not exactly pieces meant to further the purposes of the Roosevelt administration. In fact, if one is to accept Capra biographer Joseph McBride's description of the political dealings of Capra during the 1930s, the two men could not have been further apart in their political ideologies. McBride goes so far as to point out that Capra never voted for Roosevelt, and remained a steadfast Republican throughout his life, a fact Capra himself made clear when defending himself against initial attacks as a communist following the release of his 1948 feature *State of the Union*.⁶

What, then, can be made of the overwhelming populist messages Capra delivered in nearly every motion picture he produced and directed during the Great Depression,

⁵ At a seminar sponsored by the Center for Advanced Film Studies in 1971, Capra offered his "one man – one film" theory of filmmaking. A transcript of the seminar can be found in James R. Silke and Bruce Henstell, "Frank Capra: 'One Man – One Film'" in *Frank Capra: Interviews* edited by Leland Poague (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 93. Originally appeared in a pamphlet produced by the Center for Advanced Film Studies' series of discussions with film principles.

⁶ McBride details much of Capra's political ideology throughout his extraordinarily detailed biography. He takes a generally negative view of Capra as an individual who did not believe in many of the apparently socialist messages some critics attributed to his films, but rather as a director who offered the audiences of the time stories which fit the national mood. For the specific reference to Capra's defense of his political ideology see Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1992), 547-548.

messages that seemed to promote the very philosophy of communal support which was at the heart of Roosevelt's New Deal policies? If Capra and Roosevelt differed so significantly in political philosophy, is it possible that the values promoted by the two were not as analogous as they appear? One must concede, of course, that Capra's populism came from different roots than Roosevelt's plan for government intervention in the economy as a means of surviving the Great Depression, and yet, the result of both seemed to be a deep faith in the American people as the source of that which would sustain the nation.

Much of the difference could be attributed to the varying definitions of populism which exist in America. As the concept of populism is the driving force behind this study of Capra's films during the years of the Great Depression, it is necessary to address the philosophical meaning of the term as it applies to this study. Populism, at its genesis, was a political movement which sought to improve the lives of the working class, particularly those who toiled in the agricultural sector of the economy. The Populist movement of the late 19th Century arose out of various regional farmers' alliances throughout the United States which had emerged in response, in large part, to a dramatic economic depression following the Civil War and the failed Reconstruction of the southern states. Particularly hard hit by the depression, many farmers began to believe that the economic transformation inherent in industrialization would leave the agricultural sector behind, thus rejecting the Jeffersonian agrarianism which they believed lay at the heart of American democracy.⁷

⁷ While countless scholars have written about the Populist Movement, I found Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History 1877 – 1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) and Gene Clanton, *Populism: The Humane Preference in America, 1890 – 1900* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991) particularly enlightening concerning the origins and details of the Movement.

This formal Populism merely provides a basis for the term populism as it is commonly used in the culture. James Youngdale expands the concept of populism in his study when he argues that viewing populist movements as a unified paradigm, “provides a perspective for seeing a shifting ideological response from Jacksonian individualism toward socialism, with radical neomercantilism as the predominant outlook.”⁸ While Youngdale studies populism as a historical trend, Wes Gehring applies a similar view of populism in his description of the concept in a cultural context.

Other characteristics frequently associated with this kind of populism include a celebration of rural and/or small-town life, mythic-like leaders who have risen from the people (also reflecting the movement’s often patriotic nature), an adherence to traditional values and customs (mirroring the phenomenon’s strong sense of nostalgia), anti-intellectualism (in an elitist sense), a faithfulness to honest labor, and a general optimism concerning both humanity’s potential for good and the importance of the individual.⁹

Taken together, then, these two perspectives define the notion of populism which will serve as the foundation for the term as it is used in this study. This type of populism is rooted in the political movements of the late 19th Century which sought to improve the lives of rural Americans who found themselves at odds with the new industrial realities of the expanding nation, though is not limited to the agricultural fields. This notion of populism is evident in Capra’s populist heroes who embody the description of populists as, “people who were deeply rooted in the social and economic networks of rural communities, not, as some would have it, among isolated and disoriented individuals.”¹⁰ As heroes rooted in this agrarian, populist philosophy, the Capra heroes find themselves

⁸ James M. Youngdale, *Populism: A Psychohistorical Perspective* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975), 11.

⁹ Wes D. Gehring, *Populism and the Capra Legacy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 1.

¹⁰ McMath, *American Populism: A Social History 1877 – 1898*, 17.

in difficult settings as they struggle against post-industrial cynicism and elitism in the den of the industrialist, the major urban areas of the Eastern seaboard.

Of course, it must be noted that populism often has an antithetical meaning when applied to the modern political environment. As Jim McGuigan explains, populism is often viewed with a negative connotation as a political strategy which appeals to the lowest common denominator, thus often equated to the use of demagoguery. This, McGuigan argues, leads to populism being used as a pejorative term to describe one's politically successful opponents.¹¹ McGuigan's explanation of populism does not, however, take into account the clearly positive aspects of the philosophy put forth by scholars such as Gehring. Margaret Canovan, in her study of populism, addresses this dichotomy in describing the more culturally positive tones sometimes intended by the use of the term populism.

It would be a mistake to suppose, however, that populism appears in politics only in this unappealing guise. For we must recognize that it can wear the opposite aspect. In some contexts, and for some of those who use the term, populism does not mean a *threat* to democracy but the true, radical ideal of democracy itself. For those who are populist in this sense, calling the political system of most modern Western states "democracy" is a sham, and reserving the term "populism" for demagoguery and dictatorship, a libel.¹²

It is the Gehring and Canovan perspective of populist philosophy which will define the word as it is used in this study. Such a definition of populism does not, of course, disregard the origins of the political movement. In fact, the rural nature of the political movement coincides with the rural superiority at the heart of the populist messages in Capra's films. Along with this rural focus, the heroes in these films find themselves in conflict with forces representing the institutionalized powers of industry, finance, and government, all of which challenge the notion presented in the self-sufficient

¹¹ Jim McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1-5.

¹² Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981), 172-173.

nature of Jeffersonian Democracy, and the pseudo-collective nature of the agrarian Populist Movement, which most closely represents Roosevelt's New Deal version of populist philosophy.

While Roosevelt's concept of populism and Capra's perception seem to differ, the combined definition of populism used in this study bridges this apparent gap with one unquestionable similarity: both men sought to champion the cause of the common man. Though this theory seems overly simplistic, I would propose that a deeper connection is present. I contend that Capra directed films which sought a centrist, American solution to the problems faced by Americans during the Great Depression in the face of challenges from both socialist and fascist movements. If one accepts this contention, Capra's films would fit comfortably beside Rooseveltian policies as uniquely American solutions to the challenges of the Great Depression.

Capra's decision to turn his focus to the plight of the common man not only coincided with the election of Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency, but also with the rise of fascist dictatorships in Europe. With such threats to western democracy looming across an ocean that, as a result of America's experience in World War I seemed considerably smaller than at the turn of the century, Capra embarked on a concerted program of filming stories which offered hope for the American way of life. Beginning with *American Madness* in 1932, many of the films Capra produced prior to America's entry into World War II dealt with the struggles of the average American in coping with a society which appeared to be collapsing. Whether it is the story of a banker who believes in lending money on trust (*American Madness*), a reporter escorting a wealthy, spoiled heiress across the country (*It Happened One Night*, 1934), or an eccentric family who

single-handedly keeps a sense of small-town Americana alive in the heart of a major metropolis (*You Can't Take It With You*, 1938), Capra's films consistently championed the cause of the average Smiths and Joneses of the world. These themes would meet their ultimate test in what would come to be called Capra's populist trilogy, consisting of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941). These films not only established Capra as one of the top directors in Hollywood during its classical era, but also serve as the defining films of Capra's narrative and formal style of directing. When paired with *American Madness*, arguably Capra's first socially-minded picture, these films demonstrate not only Capra's growing concern for the continued superiority and success of traditional American values, but also demonstrate his increasing inability to reach resolution with such themes in a world immersed in economic, social and political instability.

While Capra is often accused by critics of producing fantasies of American populism, a closer inspection of his depression-era films reveals a director struggling to find resolution in his films. Each of the pictures in his populist trilogy is progressively less resolved than the preceding film, a result that can be understood by analyzing the historical context of Capra's films, coupled with an analysis of the narrative structure and formal elements of Capra's work. In analyzing the films used for this study, it becomes clear that Capra's idea of resolution began to waver. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, for instance, what appears to be a fully resolved victory for the forces of populist politics, can only be an assumed victory as the populist hero is seen carried off the floor of the United States Senate after pouring his entire being into an attempt to reveal the unethical nature of a political machine which, at the conclusion of the film, is never shown to have

been dismantled. This difficulty, of course, put Capra at odds with the studio system of the day, as the film industry had established a mode of production in which all classic films were required to achieve full resolution. As Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy note in the introduction to their study of the social problem film in the Hollywood tradition, “The good-evil morality [of the Classical film] called for a clear-cut, gratifying plot resolution – the Happy Ending, in which evil was destroyed and good rewarded.”¹³ This expectation, according to Roffman and Purdy, was a result of the formulaic nature of, not only the production of the films, but the audience expectations as well. Audiences, they argue, expected certain elements to be present in each film, and without those elements, the film seemed incomplete. Add to this pressure the emergence of the Production Code which required the forces of good to succeed, and the complete resolution of the narrative became a necessity in Hollywood.

Thus, Capra’s struggle to resolve his films is a struggle which seems strangely out of sorts for a director of such self-assured nature as Capra. This inability, then, might signify an inner conflict for the director, a conflict between what he wished to portray in his films, and the realities of the world into which those films would be released. Analyzing this struggle may give insight to an inner political conflict experienced by Capra in the era of the New Deal as the very tenants of America were challenged by such overwhelming pressures as the Great Depression and the rise of European fascism. Taking such conflicts into account to complete a triangulation of analysis of Capra’s work will provide a better reading of the messages that seeped through Capra’s

¹³ Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 5.

productions, sometimes consciously, and at other times in a much more subliminal manner.

Between 1932 and 1941, the time period analyzed in this study, Frank Capra directed no fewer than eleven feature films. As the main focus of my research dealt with a comparison between Capra's films and Roosevelt's policies, ten of these eleven films were selected as the initial sample for this research, omitting only *Forbidden*, a film released in January of 1932 and, therefore, before Roosevelt's policies were widely known and discussed across the nation. The sample was, therefore, bookended by *American Madness* (1932), Capra's first attempt at directing a film which overtly examined the social issues of the day, and *Meet John Doe* (1941), Capra's final, and darkest offering in his populist trilogy. While all ten movies included in the initial sample offer, to varying degrees, Capra's commentary on American culture during the Great Depression, such a sample proved overly daunting for a study as limited as this thesis. If one were to analyze all ten films in the initial sample, even removing the two films which seem least applicable to the current thesis (*Broadway Bill*, 1934 and *Lost Horizon*, 1937), one would be left with eight films which could be subdivided into at least two categories of study which would require considerably more space than is allotted for this paper. For that reason, I narrowed the initial sample to four films, all of which display Capra's populist leanings, and all of which make direct commentary on either the political or economic situations which challenged the American system of government and, generally, the traditional American belief-system of democratic capitalism, during the time period of the Great Depression: *American Madness*, *Mr.*

Deeds Goes to Town, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe*.¹⁴ Of the four films selected for more detailed analysis, two movies were released during Roosevelt's first term as President and represent Capra's attempts to comment mainly on the economic struggles of the nation, while the latter two films are commentaries on the political environment during this turbulent decade. This change in subject matter, along with the increasing cynicism of the American political system displayed in these films and the increasing inability of the director to resolve the social issues raised in each film, was by no means coincidentally aligned with the policies pursued by the Roosevelt administration during their first two terms in office. In fact, I would argue, that by placing these films into context with the changing political landscape in both the nation and the world, it becomes clear that Capra's difficulty in achieving resolution mirrored the increasingly complex political state of the world as the Depression entered its second decade.

It is just such an historical context that is often missing in the scholarly material on Capra's work. Scholars writing about Capra often center their analysis on narrative structure and formal elements of his filmmaking in examining the relative attributes of his work. These two lines of study are certainly important to the understanding of the particular thematic style of a director as well as how that director's work fits into the development of the film industry and the works' position in the international canon of acclaimed films. It is, however, lacking in context which might offer explanations of those societal events and concerns which inevitably influence any artist. As this analysis

¹⁴ The four films omitted from this study (*The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, 1933; *Lady for a Day*, 1933; *It Happened One Night*, 1934; and *You Can't Take It With You*, 1938) include a picture Capra directed expressly as a film of artistic quality to attempt to impress the members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and his screwball comedies, all of which display less overt commentary on the political environment of the day and offer much more insight into the cultural issues of the time.

examines Capra's work between the years 1932 – 1941, considering historical context during a decade as historically vital as that of the 1930s will allow one to consider the extent to which societal features inspired the director's work during this era, and therefore, challenge the notion that Capra's films provided merely escapist entertainment for a depressed populous. For this reason, I have chosen to triangulate my analysis of the four films which serve as the basis for this study. Such a study allows for a much deeper understanding of a director's work as it seems impossible to remove a film from its historical context and retain its original intent and influence on society.¹⁵ Thus, this study seeks to address the confluence of these three essential aspects of filmmaking to reconsider Capra's impact on American society during the troubling years of the Great Depression. Such an analysis will add to the understanding of a director whom, as William Pechter notes, is perhaps without equal in terms of his ability to address societal issues in an effective and profitable manner.¹⁶

¹⁵ For a discussion on the power of Capra's work to influence audiences, see Eric Smoodin, *Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity and American Film Studies, 1930 – 1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ William S. Pechter, "American Madness," in *Frank Capra: The Man and His Films*, edited by Richard Glatzer and John Raeburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 177 -185.

Chapter 1

The Only Thing We Have to Fear is...

Beginning with *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, my films had to *say* something. And whatever they said had to come from those ideas inside me “that were hurting to come out.” No more would I accept scripts hurriedly written and count on my ability to “juggle many balls in the air” to make films entertaining; no more would I brag about my powers to “shoot the phone book” and make it funny. From then on my scripts would take from six months to a year to write and re-write; to carefully – and subtly – integrate ideals into a meaningful tale.¹

According to Frank Capra, the realization that he would use his films to impart a message to a captive audience came to him during an illness he suffered immediately following the greatest success of his young career, a sweep of the five major Oscars (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Writer) by his film *It Happened One Night* at the 1935 Academy Awards. Capra relates a tale of how he originally planned to fake an illness out of fear of failure following such dramatic success, but that illness, eventually, took hold of him and forced him to retire to his sick bed. As his condition worsened, according to Capra, he was visited by an unknown “little man” who excoriated him for his unwillingness to accept his role as director for the masses. This visit caused Capra to believe he had been granted gifts of inspiration and communication, gifts which became a responsibility. That responsibility, according to Capra, would debut in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and would guide the rest of the director’s career.²

While this tale fits perfectly with the carefully crafted Capra mythology, according to biographer Joseph McBride, no “little man” ever actually visited Capra. In

¹ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 185.

² *Ibid.*, 171 -185.

fact, according to McBride, Capra's explanation of how he decided to direct socially-minded films was, more than anything, a means of taking ownership of what were, at best, collaborations with his screen writer Robert Riskin, and, at worst, Riskin's stories.³

Regardless of how Capra made the momentous decision to direct films with an eye toward societal commentary, the most interesting aspect of the shift is that the decision was made following the production of films that are nothing less than social commentary. Both Capra himself and McBride seem to argue that the change in subject matter was a sudden shift from films designed to entertain to films which attempted to address the societal issues of the day even while this shift followed some of Capra's most socially conscious films. Beginning with the 1932 release of *American Madness*, a film set in a bank at a time when many Americans had lost faith in the banking industry, Capra used nearly every film he directed to make philosophical statements on society and culture during the turbulent decade of the 1930s. Whether it was Apple Annie's rouse to keep her family from knowing the depths of her poverty in *Lady for a Day* (1933), Peter Warne's successful escort of socialite Ellen Andrews all the while displaying the moral superiority of the common man over the idle rich in *It Happened One Night* (1934), or Capra's commentary on the vexatious attraction and revulsion of opposing cultural influences in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), Capra clearly did not avoid social commentary even before his alleged *deus ex machina* encounter with the "little man." This trait, then, leads one to question not only the depth and effectiveness of Capra's social commentary as manifested in his films, but also the societal influences which may have led Capra to such a decision during a time of more conventional messaging from

³ Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1992), 317 - 324.

Hollywood. As the focus of this particular study is relatively narrow in scope, it requires a far more confined examination of cultural influence than could be undertaken. This study is concerned with Capra's work during the Great Depression generally and more specifically during the years of the Roosevelt administrations, and therefore, a discussion of societal influences relating to the years 1932 – 1941 seems most appropriate.

To say that Americans suffered during 1932 is to grossly understate the economic situation the nation faced during that pivotal year.⁴ In this election year, the Republican power of the post-Civil War era, a period during which only two Democrats occupied the Oval Office, was to meet its sternest challenge since that other great national crisis in the 1860s. Having secured prosperity in the wake of World War I, the Republicans had ridden a wave of economic good fortune throughout the 1920s. With the election of Herbert Hoover in 1928, the nation seemed certain to continue its economic rise to international power. Of course, Hoover would not get the opportunity to act as the custodian of an economic juggernaut, but rather, would be saddled with the worst economic crisis the nation had experienced. Worse yet from a personal perspective, as the titular head of the Republican Party, Hoover would absorb the criticism of a nation not only hurting, but beginning to question its fundamental belief in equal opportunity and success-driven economics.⁵ It was Hoover's unfortunate lot in 1932 to act as the Republican sacrificial lamb to the political gods.

⁴ For a statistical look at the depths of the depression in 1932 see Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929 – 1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 72 – 75 and Fredrick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America, September 3, 1929 – September 3, 1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939), 57-67.

⁵For more on the rampant fear of societal collapse see Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 311 – 312 and Charles R. Hearn, *The American Dream in the Great Depression* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977) , 56-57.

It just so happened that 1932 was the depth of the Great Depression, a reality that furthered the excitement of the Democratic Party.⁶ The party, which had found it nearly impossible to garner national support in the decades since the Civil War, could now capitalize on distrust of and anger with their opposition in the same way that the Republicans had so often marginalized the Democrats as the party of the old Confederacy. Emerging as the leading Democrat during the election year of 1932 was the sitting governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a politician who had led his state through early relief efforts in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929, and was blessed with a presidential pedigree.⁷

Roosevelt, sensing the need for the Democratic Party to relate to the citizenry, argued that the Republicans in Washington D.C. had lost touch with those they represented. In a campaign speech in Albany, New York, Roosevelt recalled the combined action of the nation during the Great War (World War I) and called on the nation to gather the will to address the economic crisis in similar fashion. The words he chose to describe what had been lost through the economic policies of the 1920s which, at the time seemed to put the nation on an eternally positive track of economic growth, but in retrospect had lost much, if not all, of their luster, would become some of the most important words spoken during the entire campaign for the presidency.

These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power for plans like those of 1917

⁶ Both McElvaine and Allen provide evidence of conditions Americans faced when being asked to elect a new leader. Also see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 1- 40.

⁷ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 4.

that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.⁸

While Roosevelt was appealing to the nation to remember the millions of forgotten men who served as the backbone of the economy, Hollywood responded to the economic collapse with what most critics describe as escapist entertainment. The two genres which best embodied such filmmaking were gangster films and backstage musicals.⁹ These types of films both offered what Morris Dickstein referred to as a, “mother lode of fantasy.” As Dickstein observed, “With their larger-than-life actors, films furnished a rich portrayal of American manners along with the seductive images of romance and sophistication. Many of these movies offered audiences elaborately embroidered tales of success and failure.”¹⁰ These fantasies were deemed as essential fare for a population trapped in the deepest economic malaise in the nation’s history.

Frank Capra, for his part, was beginning to emerge as the director for the common man. Roosevelt’s call to rescue the forgotten men was matched by Capra’s attempt to restore confidence in America’s shaken institutions. At the time, Capra and the man who would become his main collaborator on the screenplays for his populist works, Robert Riskin, were developing a screenplay with the working title *Faith*, an interesting title for a picture about an industry in which Americans had perhaps the least of that sentiment.

⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “The Forgotten Man.” Speech delivered April 7, 1932 in Albany, New York. Transcript retrieved December 28, 2010 from <http://newdeal.feri.org/speeches/1932c.htm>.

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the gangster film genre see Edward Mitchell, “Apes and Essences: Some Sources of Significance in the American Gangster Film.” In *Film Genre Reader III*, edited by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 219 – 228 and Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* chap. 6, “The Gangster Film: Genre and Society.” (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 132-153. For a similar discussion of the backstage musical genre see Jane Feuer, “The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment.” In *Film Genre Reader III*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 457- 471 and Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* chap. 4, “The Musical: Genre and Form.” 82-104.

¹⁰ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*, 312.

The film, eventually re-named *American Madness*, is set in a New York City bank, and was produced at a time when even the film industry began to feel the effects of the Great Depression. Capra himself reflected on this realization in his autobiography, describing 1932 as the year, “breadlines replaced box-office lines,”¹¹ while Capra biographer Joseph McBride argues that 1932 was the year, “Hollywood had been forced to admit that American institutions were in serious trouble.”¹² To produce a film which focused on a 48-hour crisis at a metropolitan bank at a time wrought with bank failures was certainly an interesting way to “entertain” the American public. Capra’s gutsy move to attempt to reassure the American populace of the security of their money was his way of shunning the typical, escapist form of most pictures being produced at the time.

The story of *American Madness* involves a populist-minded bank manager, Tom Dickson (Walter Huston), who is under pressure from the bank’s board of directors to sell the bank to a major banking conglomerate because he does not hold enough cash in reserve and he makes what the directors consider to be risky loans to small businessmen who have little to offer as collateral. Dickson responds with the following exchange that serves as the initial characterization of the values which come to define Capra’s populist heroes.

Dickson: The trouble with this country today is there’s too much hoarded cash. Idle money is no good to industry. Where is all the money today? In the banks, vaults, socks, old tin cans buried in the ground. I tell you we’ve got to get the money in circulation before you’ll get this country back to prosperity.

Clark: Well, who’re we going to give it to? Men like Jones? Last week you made him an extra loan of \$50,000. You call that intelligent banking?

Schultz: Can’t pay his bills. How do you expect him to pay us?

¹¹ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 136.

¹² Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*, 248.

Dickson: That's a fair question, Schultz. Now let's see how bad a risk Jones is, what's his history? He's been a successful businessman for 35 years. Two years ago business started falling off. Today Jones needs money and if he doesn't get it he goes into bankruptcy and throws 900 men out of work. Answer: Unemployment. It also means his creditors aren't paid. They're in trouble. They go to the banks and are turned down. More bankruptcies. It's a vicious circle my friends, and the only place to cure it is right here at the source. Help Jones and you help the whole circle. Now when Jones comes to me I ask myself two questions. First, is he honest? Yes. Second, is he as good a businessman as he was before? And the answer is, he's better. He's not only older and wiser, but his present trouble has taught him precaution. In my estimation gentlemen, Jones is no risk. Neither are the thousands of other Joneses throughout the country. It's they who built this nation up to the richest in the world, and it's up to the banks to give 'em a break.

In the screen play written by Robert Riskin and directed by Frank Capra, Roosevelt's forgotten man takes on the surname Jones, just as Capra's future populist heroes will take on increasingly benign surnames: Deeds, Smith, and, eventually, the indistinguishable Doe, all forgotten men of a great society. The film, as Leland Poague proposes, includes the dual examples of madness of Dickson's banking philosophy and a romantic crisis between the populist banker consumed with his clientele and his work, and his socialite wife (Kay Johnson).¹³ I would argue that Poague misses a third madness, the inherent madness at the heart of the film, the true American madness of the loss of faith in traditional American institutions, a madness which would belie the very notion of populism's belief in the inherent blessings of the American system. This madness is most obviously demonstrated by the run on the bank that occurs as the result of a rumor of the bank having been robbed, and with every re-telling, the amount of cash missing from the bank's vaults grows, causing patrons to fear that the bank would be insolvent. These crises combine to cause Dickson to consider suicide before the bank is saved by the common-man depositors in whom Dickson's faith had built a successful

¹³ Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema of Frank Capra: An Approach to Film Comedy* (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1975), 72-73.

banking business, and to whom he had staked his reputation early in the film. In the face of this overwhelming support, the Board of Directors throw their substantial support behind Dickson, securing the future of the bank backed by clearly populist philosophy.

The resolution of *American Madness* is typical of the Capra technique which would lead critics to describe Capra's works as Capracorn and fantasies of good will.¹⁴ In fact, the contemporary review in the liberal publication, *The Nation* referred to the film as, "sheer propaganda for the banks."¹⁵ What is often lost on critics and audiences alike, however, are the subtle points of realism which inhabit a Riskin/Capra collaboration. If one is to view Dickson's exchange with the Board of Directors as a fantasy of populist faith in crumbling American institutions, one must also recognize the action which precedes the confrontation. As Dickson makes his first appearance in the film, Capra develops his character as not only a businessman who cares for his employees on an individual basis (Dickson is shown making his way through the bank addressing employees by name and discussing personal issues with each), but also a thoughtful businessman who declines two separate loans as too risky for his bank. It is this type of detail that, in the optimistic endings so common in Capra's films, is forgotten by those who wish to decry Capra as a populist dreamer.

In the end, *American Madness* offered the movie-going public what it would take a presidential proclamation and a week-long bank holiday nearly a year later to ensure for the American public: renewed confidence in the financial institutions of the country.

¹⁴William S. Pechter, "American Madness," in *Frank Capra: The Man and His Films*, edited by Richard Glatzer and John Raeburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 179.

¹⁵ Alexander Bakshy, "Horse Feathers; American Madness," in *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane: Reviews of Significant Films at the Time They First Appeared* edited by Stanley Kauffmann with Bruce Henstell (New York: Liveright, 1972), 267-268.

This, however, was by no means the only example of Capra's art imitating that which Roosevelt presented to the American public as the way out of the Great Depression. A review of Roosevelt's first inaugural address, in fact, provides what might be read as notations on a Capra/Riskin screenplay about the character traits of the story's hero, and the theme of the film.

Yet our distress comes from no failure of substance. We are stricken by no plague of locusts. Compared with the perils which our forefather's conquered because they believed and were not afraid, we have still much to be thankful for. Nature still offers her bounty and human efforts have multiplied it. Plenty is at our doorstep, but a generous use of it languishes in the very sight of the supply. Primarily, this is because rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed, through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence, have admitted their failure, and abdicated. Practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men...The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we supply social values more noble than mere monetary profit...Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.¹⁶

Franklin Roosevelt used these words to reassure a nation teetering on the brink of collapse that something inherent in the American spirit made the American people uniquely suited to overcome hardships. Others were not so certain.¹⁷ What seemed necessary at such a moment was precisely what Roosevelt outlined in his inaugural address: a program of action designed to recapture that which was so beneficial about the American way of life while leaving behind the excesses such a philosophy had created. It is just such a concept that Capra presents in his 1936 film *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*.

¹⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address." Speech delivered March 4, 1933. Transcript retrieved December 29, 2010 from [http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/fdr-inaugural/images/address-2\[3\].gif](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/fdr-inaugural/images/address-2[3].gif).

¹⁷ See William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* and Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929 – 1939* for more on the dangerous and sometimes violent reactions by some segments of the American population during the Great Depression.

If the theme of the 1930s was restoring the common man, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* fit the mold perfectly. The film tells the story of an archetypal small town American, Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper), who inherits \$20 million and moves to New York City to accept his new reality as a millionaire. While in the city, Deeds becomes the victim of all manner of shysters who seek to either take his millions or capitalize on his small-town naiveté. Chief among these cosmopolitan predators is the newspaper reporter, Babe Bennett (Jean Arthur), who begins the story by exploiting the story of the “Cinderella Man,” as she dubs Deeds, but becomes Deeds’ romantic interest as the story progresses. Upon discovering that Bennett had used him for the exclusive story every newspaper in the city sought, Deeds decides he will return to his hometown of Mandrake Falls, as much the archetypal Americana rural community as Deeds is the quintessential American common man. As he is leaving his urban mansion, Deeds is confronted by a destitute farmer who challenges Deeds’ behavior as displayed in the newspapers, and therefore, challenges Deeds’ representation of all that is morally and ethically pure in America. This encounter, coupled with the disappointment of betrayal at the hands of a woman he loves, causes Deeds to devise a scheme to give away his inheritance in a manner that would benefit poor, desperate farmers. The plan causes Deeds’ greedy relatives to have him arrested and tried on charges of insanity. After initially falling silent in the face of these charges, Deeds is convinced by a desperate Bennett to defend his sanity, does so successfully, and wins not only his freedom, but also the girl.

Capra, with his hero Longfellow Deeds, creates the prototype for his other heroes in the populist trilogy, a hero dedicated to small town, rural morals and old-fashioned

American values. It seems as though Capra and his screen writer Robert Riskin created a character who embodied the ideal American values enumerated by Roosevelt. When Charles Maland writes that Capra was, between 1936 and 1941, a “director almost perfectly attuned to his audience,” he is referring to Capra’s ability to give the audience the optimism they needed to believe that the nation would emerge from the Great Depression. This is certainly a valid point with which to explain the success of the Capra films of the era, but, again, fails to connect the visions and characterizations presented by Capra and Riskin to those values which Roosevelt described as essential for the restoration of the nation. Maland concludes his discussion of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, by pointing out the seemingly confused messages in the film which could be viewed as both for and against the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration, but does not connect these readings as the first sign of a director finding it difficult to resolve the complicated social questions of the day in a motion picture.¹⁸

As *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* is the initial movie in which Capra attempted to deliver an overt social message, it is interesting to note what the director believed he “said” with the picture. “And what was the great ‘message of *Mr. Deeds*?’” asked Capra in his autobiography. “Nothing earth-shaking. Just this: a simple, honest man, driven into a corner by predatory sophisticates, can, if he will, reach deep down into his God-given resources and come up with the necessary handfuls of courage, wit, and love to triumph over his environment.”¹⁹ If Capra’s assessment weren’t enough evidence of the link between the character traits portrayed in Longfellow Deeds and Roosevelt’s ideal

¹⁸ Charles J. Maland, *Frank Capra* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 93-98.

¹⁹ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 186.

American, Leland Poague summarizes the characterization of Deeds with words quite reminiscent of Roosevelt's first inaugural address.

What we have, then, is a package of basic ideals, represented by Longfellow Deeds and the people who support him, set against the cynical grubbiness of slick, city materialists. Deeds believes in the ability of men to be humane towards one another. He believes that people are more important than money. He believes that families should be permitted to grow and prosper without fear of hunger or destitution.²⁰

Such sentiments seemed to fit the political landscape of 1936. The Roosevelt administration had embarked on a dramatic program of federal intervention in the economy to buoy the nation, and though some of the New Deal policies had been struck down by the United State Supreme Court, the public seemed clearly on Roosevelt's side.²¹ As the year began, Roosevelt laid out the presidential election as a contest between those who would stand with him for good, old-fashioned American values, and those who supported the notion of greed-driven capitalism. In the end, the President won an unprecedented landslide victory, winning all but two states in the Electoral College.²² Even though the struggles with the Supreme Court presented a significant challenge to his agenda, Roosevelt, like Deeds, believed that the American way of life would eventually defeat the forces which had altered the American philosophy to one of self-serving capitalism. His overwhelming electoral victory would, however, establish an environment in which Roosevelt would overvalue his mandate, and, subsequently, Capra would find it increasingly difficult to resolve the social and political questions in his films.

²⁰ Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema of Frank Capra: An Approach to Film Comedy*, 178.

²¹ For more on the court struggles of the New Deal, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Roosevelt: Volume II: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), 274-283 and James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt, the Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Word, Inc., 1956) 229-234.

²² Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929 – 1939*, 275-282.

Following his landslide reelection in 1936 Roosevelt turned his attention to the United States Supreme Court, the only branch of the federal government that dared to challenge Roosevelt's policies in any meaningful way. On February 5, 1937, Roosevelt proposed a plan to remake the Supreme Court into a court much more sympathetic to his policies. His idea was to add justices to the court to balance the conservative leanings of the institution. Unable to simply add justices at will, Roosevelt devised a plan to call for retirement of the Supreme Court justices at the age of 70. If a justice refused to leave the bench, as one would argue was likely considering the U.S. Constitution stipulates that the term of a justice is life, a new justice could be appointed to the high court. Attacked as unconstitutional, what came to be known as the court-packing scheme signaled the low-water mark of the Roosevelt presidency. Conservative politicians, as one might expect, decried the plan as a threat to the very nature of democracy, while opponents joined the attack from both the moderate and liberal ranks within the political establishment signifying a unified opposition to Roosevelt's plan. When the plan came to a vote in Congress it failed, yet the greatest casualty of the episode was Roosevelt's prestige. The man who had assured the nation that fear was the only thing holding the country back from recovery when he first took the Presidential oath had given Americans something to fear. As Robert McElvaine writes, "In the eyes of most Americans, the world of 1937, replete as it was with Hitlers, Stalins, and Mussolinis, had quite enough 'masters'."²³

It was into this suddenly cynical political reality that Frank Capra released his most obviously political film to date, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Released in 1939, the film tells the story of a rural man known mainly for his work with young boys in the Boy Rangers (Capra's surrogate for the Boy Scouts), Jefferson Smith (James Stewart),

²³ Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929 – 1939*, 285.

who is selected to serve out the remainder of a recently deceased United States Senator's term. Smith, a patriotic hayseed cut from the same cloth as Longfellow Deeds, is thrust into the nation's capital, a place he has developed into a sort of political and patriotic Utopia, while those who have lived in this flawed kingdom and have become jaded by the cynical nature of politicians and the political process, merely mock this small-town patriot. The plot centers around a graft-laden land deal being pushed through Congress by the state's senior Senator (Claude Rains) for the state's powerful political boss (Edward Arnold). When Smith decides to propose a bill as his one meaningful contribution to the political process during his short time in the Senate, he discovers that the land he has chosen to set aside for a national boys' camp is the same land at the center of the shoddy, machine-oriented land deal. Smith, devastated by the fact that Senator Paine, the state's senior Senator whom Smith idolizes, is a principal player in the saga of the land deal, filibusters the bill to the point of physical exhaustion in an attempt to reveal the truth of the corrupt Senator Paine and the power of the state's political machine. When Smith collapses on the Senate floor, Paine attempts, unsuccessfully, to commit suicide with-in earshot of the Senate chambers, and finally bursts into the chamber to declare that Jefferson Smith was right all along, and he was caught up in a corrupt political machine, seemingly leaving truth and American values supreme.

While we will address the specific narrative difficulties in *Mr. Smith* in the second chapter, it is important to note here that not all is defeated by Jefferson Smith's patriotic legislative stand. In fact, the film ends without addressing the future of the powerful political machine. One may walk away from the film believing that, with Smith's success at revealing the land scheme, the machine and all involved would collapse. No

such resolution is offered, however, signaling a much more complicated political reality in the United States at the end of the 1930s. The ambiguous conclusion seems a fitting representation of what so many Americans must have felt about Roosevelt and his administration following the fight over the court-packing scheme. On top of his disastrous court scheme, Roosevelt was soundly defeated in his attempt to cleanse his national party of those who opposed his agenda, an episode William Leuchtenberg describes as eerily totalitarian in nature.²⁴ Roosevelt himself, like the previously honorable Senator Paine, could no longer be trusted to work for the good of the forgotten men he represented, people like Jefferson Smith.

As American audiences believed that Jefferson Smith had defeated the forces of political corruption, Capra had begun to reveal his quandary of resolution. The more Capra sought to resolve his films with a combination of rugged individualism and communal support, the more these resolutions seemed incongruent with the political reality of the world as the decade of depression passed into a decade of conflict.²⁵ Just as Roosevelt began to display what many considered to be dictatorial tendencies, Americans began to recognize the imminent dangers posed by European dictators. The triumvirate of totalitarianism (Benito Mussolini in Italy, Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union, and Adolf Hitler in Germany) offered an autocratic solution to the economic problems of the Depression. Capra, himself an immigrant from Sicily, felt moved to counter these radical ideas by depicting a uniquely American value system which would sustain the nation through the hard economic times. Capra even claims that in his visit from the “little

²⁴ William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 266-274.

²⁵ While many sources exist which study the political changes in Europe and the United States on the eve of World War II, I found William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972 – Volume I* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973) 209-287 to be particularly enlightening.

man” he was challenged to use his films to greater effect than Hitler used the radio to convey his message of hate.²⁶ Even so, Capra took his fight against fascism a step further with the 1941 film *Meet John Doe*.

Hitler’s strong-arm success against democracy was catching. Little “führers” were springing up in America, to proclaim that freedom was weak, sterile, passé. The “new wave” was Blood Power! Destroy the weak, the Jews, the blacks; destroy Christianity and its old-hat commandment “Love thy neighbor.”... Riskin and I would astonish the critics with contemporary realities: the ugly face of hate; the power of uniformed bigots in red, white, and blue shirts; the agony of disillusionment, and the wild passions of mobs.²⁷

Meet John Doe was the final, and most unresolved film of Capra’s populist trilogy. As the title suggests, this film’s central character is the quintessential forgotten man. Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper) is originally employed by Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck), a recently fired newspaper columnist, to represent all the John Does of the world after her parting shot to the newspaper is a column written by a John Doe giving voice to the struggles of the common people, and threatening to commit suicide on Christmas Eve as a final act of disillusionment. When Mitchell’s former boss, newspaper tycoon D.B. Norton decides to use Willoughby to propel his personal political ambitions to national attention, Willoughby is caught in the in-tractable position of being a false prophet of American ideals. When Willoughby discovers the plot, he attempts to unveil Norton’s sinister plans at the national John Doe Convention, but Norton’s para-military police literally pull the plug on Willoughby, and the original John Doe decides his only recourse is to commit suicide, the phony threat which was made in Mitchell’s original column which provided the impetus for the movement.

²⁶ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 176.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

Finding a suitable ending for *Meet John Doe* became impossible for Capra, and he recalled in his autobiography that he had filmed five endings to his film, none of which seemed satisfactory.²⁸ The question one must ask is why Capra and Riskin found it so difficult to find a suitable conclusion to this cautionary tale. Capra himself describes the problem as, “self-inflicted,”²⁹ while some scholars have pointed to the difficulty of resolving a plot which had grown beyond its reasonable scope, from a story which can be resolved on a local basis, but not as the focus of a national political movement.³⁰ While these flaws will be dealt with in greater detail in chapter two, it seems impossible to separate the issues Capra faced in resolving this script from the dangers Capra sensed in his political world.

It is clear from numerous comments Capra made about the second half of the 1930s that fear of fascism weighed heavily on his mind as he produced his populist trilogy. With the outbreak of war serving to intensify Capra’s fervent anti-fascism during the production of the final installment of the trilogy, one would assume that the power of the American spirit would emerge triumphant, and yet, *Meet John Doe* offers the most ambiguous ending of all four films studied for this project. Perhaps it was disillusionment that took over, or perhaps Capra allowed his fear of totalitarianism to overtake the project to such an extent that no solution seemed reasonable. While both are valid interpretations of Capra’s struggle with *Meet John Doe*, it is my contention that they miss the essential connection to the time. World War II had begun in earnest when

²⁸ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 303-305.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

³⁰ For a detailed analysis of the narrative collapse in Capra’s populist trilogy see Brian Geoffrey Rose, *An Examination of Narrative Structure in Four Films of Frank Capra* (Arno Press, 1980).

Meet John Doe was released in 1941, and after the fall of France, the reality of a fascist Europe seemed not only possible but probable. In such a world, the easy, American-traditionalist answers would seem trite. I would argue that Capra, realizing this, found it impossible to resolve a plot he feared would become life imitating art.

Chapter 2

“We Had No Acceptable SOLUTION to Our Story.”¹

As Frank Capra and Franklin Roosevelt attempted to steer the American public through the tumultuous waters of the Great Depression, both men utilized their ability to communicate to the masses to attempt to reassure a public teetering on the brink of utter disillusionment. While each utilized different media to influence the population, the message delivered in nearly every case was designed to offer Americans a sense of confidence in the fundamental structures of American society. As leader of the nation, Roosevelt could address the public in such a way as to convey the government’s responses to the seemingly unending crises which characterized the 1930s. The President famously entered America’s living rooms with his fire-side chats, addresses meant to speak to the American public in a more informal manner, a format which served to calm the nerves of a panicked public.² Capra, on the other hand, saw his power of persuasion coming not from a position of leadership, but rather, from the sheer numbers of people he could influence with his films.³

In essence, Roosevelt and Capra worked to reassure the American public with what can only be considered populist sentiment.⁴ Perhaps the greatest difference in each

¹ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 303.

² For more on the effective use of radio by Roosevelt see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 330-331 and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Roosevelt: Volume II: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), 571-573.

³ Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1992), 432.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the populist connections between Roosevelt and Capra see Giuliana Muscio, “Roosevelt, Arnold, and Capra, (or) the Federalist-Populist Paradox,” in *Frank Capra: Authorship and the*

man's fulfillment of this daunting task, however, was the style used to convey such messages. For Roosevelt, as a national leader, the message needed to be focused on reality. The public looked to the President for direction out of the abyss, and no "fantasy of goodwill" would suffice. For Capra, on the other hand, the message was, by nature, in the realm of fantasy. Hollywood's great commodity, after all, was the story. Through plots which centered on populist heroes, Capra would attempt to reassure the public that the foundations of American society were sound.

When one considers the populist themes transmitted by leaders in American society during the Depression years, and considering David Bordwell's argument that the paramount position in classical film is reserved for the characters, it is necessary to examine the populist nature of Capra's heroes if one is to gauge the effectiveness of the populist motif in these films.⁵ Establishing as a foundation for such a discussion the definition of populism offered by Wes Gehring in his study of populist directors provides a point of departure for an analysis of Capra's characters. Gehring argues that populism as commonly understood in society is defined as, "a basic belief held by many people that the superior and majority will of the common man is forever threatened by the usurping, sophisticated, evil few."⁶ Gehring's definition, while symbolizing the common-man philosophy, representative of the early American presidential triumvirate of Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln which lay at the heart of both political and cultural populism, would

Studio System edited by Robert Sklar and Vito Zagarrro (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 164-189.

⁵ David Bordwell, "Part One: The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917 – 60: Chapter 2: Story Causality and Motivation" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 12-23.

⁶ Wes D. Gehring, *Populism and the Capra Legacy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 1.

require Capra's heroes to challenge symbolic representations of the various institutions which had seemingly conquered these same American ideals, as well as the philosophies behind them. The fulfillment of the heroic narrative would require the hero to then vanquish the threats to American idealism causing the nation to, once again, embrace the great mythology of American exceptionalism.

When one considers the overwhelming burden placed on Americans who found themselves in positions of authority during the Great Depression, it is little wonder that the transmission of a hopeful message at times seemed antithetical to the social realities of the day. Roosevelt had what could be considered the much more difficult task, as the reality of the situation during the depths of the Depression seemed ultimately demoralizing to even the most optimistic American, and as leader of the nation, it was his task to reassure the nation that the country would not only weather the economic and cultural storm presented by the Depression, but emerge from the crisis a politically relevant nation. It is all the more interesting, then, to note that it was Capra, and not Roosevelt, who seemed to buckle under the weight of the societal challenges brought on by the Great Depression and the ensuing rise of international fascism and communism.

To understand how Capra dealt with the increasingly complex societal forces of the 1930s, one must consider the narratives presented by Capra in his populist films of the decade. In analyzing the narrative of each film, I will focus on three recurring themes in Capra's work, all of which signify an increasing inability to fully resolve the narrative structure through a reliance on populist themes. This difficulty manifested itself in the less-than-resolved ending of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and the unconvincing resolution presented in *Meet John Doe* (1941). Both of these films demonstrated strained

lines of resolution, in the face of political disenchantment in the case of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and totalitarian threats to the system of government employed in the Western World in the case of *Meet John Doe*.

These political realities, which Capra recognized in the changing political tides both in Europe and at home, began to serve as obstacles to the full resolution classical directors required for their work. This difficulty is evidenced by the increasingly strained image of populism one detects in Capra's films, a complication revealed in large part by the failure of his heroes to fully embody the director's original populist intent. These difficulties become more apparent when one considers the relationships which influence the characterization of the protagonist. In the case of Capra's heroes, these relationships center on romance with a heroine who doubles as a guide through an unknown environment, and the relationship of the hero to the society at large, the true manifestation of the populist ideal. It is my contention, then, that the relationships which drive the narratives in Capra's films provide evidence of the director's increasing difficulty in establishing effective resolutions based on populist themes.

Several narrative conventions also provide evidence of Capra's struggle to resolve his populist films. The first such narrative convention I will address deals with the simple communication of plot through the speech of the characters, and, specifically, the populist heroes. As was mentioned earlier, both Roosevelt and Capra used their mastery of the available media to illuminate their visions of America to the Depression-era populous. In both cases, the use of the spoken word became paramount. A detailed analysis of Capra's films, however, reveals a troubling trend of the inadequacy of speech to resolve complicated issues. This inadequacy manifests itself, most often, in an

inability or refusal to speak, as is the case in both *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. The failure to achieve resolution through speech is one of several complications which point to a director who found himself unable to resolve his films in the face of mounting pressure to the ideals espoused in his work. Such difficulty put Capra at odds with the system of classical production which emphasized the necessity of resolution in order to provide the viewer a concise, fully resolved narrative.

As a result of the recurring, and, in fact, intensifying obstacles presented by societal forces, Capra was forced to seek resolution to his films by other means. Having established himself as a director of romantic comedies before his social awakening, Capra, when presented with the problems of resolution in his populist themes, found himself relinquishing resolutions of his films to the romantic relationship between his hero and heroine. This final narrative feature brings into question the clarity of Capra's social vision as the films analyzed for this thesis were, by Capra's own account, works intended to challenge his audience to consider the social questions of the day. The reliance on the romantic comedy to achieve resolution would lead one to conclude that, while Capra wished to produce films that "said something," he found that "something" increasingly difficult to portray, and, therefore, relied on a proven commodity to ensure the film's resolution, and, more importantly perhaps, commercial and critical success.

The Populist Hero Triumphant?

In his study of the classical Hollywood cinema, David Bordwell argues that characters serve as the main narrative vehicle of the classical film. While he acknowledges, and indeed analyzes, the important narrative function of nearly all elements of film (from the credits to the lighting, and everything in between) Bordwell

argues that characters, at least in the classical sense, are the main transmitters of film narrative.⁷ If one is to accept Bordwell's contention, it would follow that an inability to resolve major narrative conflicts would land squarely at the feet of the characters, and this argument would tend to lead any study of film from Hollywood's classical period to a detailed analysis of the characters within the film sample. Thus, in discussing the narrative elements of Frank Capra's films of the 1930s, a decade which must be considered not only part of the classical age of Hollywood film, but perhaps the very heart of such a period, one must devote considerable attention to the characters Capra uses to relay his stories. Considering that Capra's characters were intended to portray the theme of the populist man against entrenched societal forces as presented by Gehring, I contend that much of Capra's seeming inability to reach resolution in his populist films stemmed from problems the director experienced in the development of the heroes of these films.

Before embarking on an analysis of the populist nature of Capra's characters, however, it is necessary to consider the very nature of populism as it applies to this study. Taking Gehring's definition of populism as presented in his study of Capra's populist tendencies, and as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, provides a suitable foundation for the discussion of the populist nature of the films analyzed.⁸ Gehring argues that populism is characterized by a determined resistance to the entrenched institutions of industrial society, and a reliance on the conservative, rural sensibilities characterized by Jeffersonian democracy. If one is to consider certain films to be

⁷ David Bordwell, "Part One: The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917 – 60: Chapter 2: Story Causality and Motivation" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, 12-23.

⁸ Wes D. Gehring, *Populism and the Capra Legacy*, 1-25.

populist in theme, predicated on the combination of Gehring's definition of populism and Bordwell's theory of character supremacy in classical narrative, one must begin with an analysis of the populist nature of the films' characters. If Capra's characters embody the traits which emulate Gehring's description of populism, one must conclude that the ideals of populism were the main focal point of the Capra films studied for this thesis. If, however, these traits do not enjoy personification in the Capra characters, one must conclude that alternative narrative emphases drove Capra's work during this crucial time.

The heroes who emerge from the film sample used for this study, not only fit Gehring's definition, but, indeed, could be seen as quintessential personifications of the populist ideal. In Tom Dickson (*American Madness*, 1932) Capra presents a bank manager who lends money to people during the depths of the Great Depression on the belief that the borrowers' good name is enough to ensure repayment. In Longfellow Deeds (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*), the hero becomes the refreshingly naïve rural townsman who is thrown into New York City, and attempts to display the superiority of rural sensibilities over urban cynicism. Jefferson Smith (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*), much like Deeds, attempts to carry that rural sensibility even further by infiltrating the hallowed halls of the United States Congress with such ideals. Finally, Long John Willoughby (*Meet John Doe*), the most complex of the heroes studied for this project, is the symbol of all the down-on-their-luck unemployed who came to represent the ongoing plight of the worker throughout the Great Depression. As Ray Carney argues while discussing Capra's move to more socially conscious film-making, "the performers are asked to become social masters of ceremonies."⁹

⁹ Ray Carney, *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, Published by University Press of New England, 1996), 113.

While these characters clearly qualify as representations of the common man referred to in Gehring's definition, a fully compliant character must also face the forces of, "the usurping, sophisticated, evil few." Again, Capra's populist heroes fulfill these criteria. Dickson must face his board of directors, intent on pursuing a much more conservative lending policy. Deeds is confronted by various urban oligarchies including the opera board, the literati, and, of course, the shyster lawyers at Cedar, Cedar, Cedar and Buddington. When Capra's films take a much more overt political turn in both *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*, the heroes must face a powerful state-wide political machine with national reach and a pseudo-fascistic publisher with dreams of national political prominence respectively. Considering the entrenched nature of the institutions which present obstacles to Capra's heroes, one can conclude that the challenges to the ideals upheld by Capra's heroes fully complete the requirements of populist representation presented in Gehring's definition.

Upon establishing the populist credentials of the hero in each of the films in the sample used for this study, and using Bordwell's explanation of the central role of characters in the narrative, one must assume that Capra was attempting to convey populist ideals with these films. This assumption is, of course, defended by Capra himself, and countless pieces of scholarship which point to the populist messages contained within many of the director's films of the 1930s.¹⁰ The question then becomes the successful portrayal of populism in these films. If classical narrative is moved, predominantly, by the characters, and Capra's main characters are, ostensibly,

¹⁰ For Capra's recollections on the populist nature of his characters see Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*; James L. Silke, Bruce Henstell, "Frank Capra: 'One Man-One Film' – 1971" in *Frank Capra Interviews*, edited by Leland Poague (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 86-87.; James Childs, "Capra Today – 1972", *ibid.*, 93-98.; Harry A. Hargrave, "An Interview With Frank Capra – 1976, *ibid.*, 159-160.; American Film, "Dialogue on Film: Frank Capra, *ibid.*, 177.

personifications of populist ideals, one would expect the resolution of these films to portray that which critic Richard Griffith termed a “fantasy of goodwill.” I contend, however, that such resolution began to elude the director as he worked his way through his populist trilogy, resulting in ever more problematic conclusions to these films.

While the heroes in the trilogy seem to emulate populist ideals, a closer analysis of each provides evidence of Capra’s increasing inability to resolve the populist dilemmas presented in the scripts. Each of the heroes presented finds, or attempts to find, resolution in actions which typify the populist world view. Dickson, for instance, is saved from both personal and professional collapse when two of his employees solicit financial aid from the bank’s more able clients. One character in particular, Matt (Pat O’Brien), serves as an interesting study on the need to resolve narrative conflicts in classical films. During the film we learn that Dickson had given Matt a job at the bank after he broke into Dickson’s house, thus offering Matt societal salvation in the opportunity to redeem his life through a respectable job. This realization explains the reticence to prove his innocence which Matt exhibits when he is accused of being involved in the bank robbery around which the resolution of the narrative revolves. Knowing he is innocent of the accusations but needing to reveal the apparent affair between Dickson’s wife and the head teller, Cluett (Gavin Gordon), Matt decides to sacrifice his own freedom for the continued stasis of ignorance represented by Dickson’s faith in his wife. When he is finally proven innocent, and the apparent infidelity has been revealed to Dickson, Matt works to save the bank, the institution which, as we have learned through the course of the film, lies at the heart of Dickson’s passions. The importance of this resolution is not so much in the fact that it causes the board of

directors to acquiesce, a change that fits into Griffith's criticism of fantasy, but rather, that the resolution originates in an individual who owes his station in life to the beleaguered hero and has never lost faith in Dickson's superior nature, thus a message fully rooted in populist notions.

While *American Madness* can be viewed as Capra's first truly populist narrative, his more overtly populist films would come later in the decade. As Capra's populist trilogy of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe* begins, Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper), the populist hero of the first film in the trilogy, nearly rejects resolution altogether, as he is willing to allow the powers of cynicism to consume him. In this case, resolution comes not only from a personal source, but also from a communal source. While Deeds refuses to answer to the charges of insanity in the culminating sanity hearing, he is surrounded by those he has tried to save through his generosity, the same generosity which stands at the center of the accusations against Deeds. As powerful as this display of support is, however, resolution comes only when the reporter Babe Bennett (Jean Arthur) admits her love for Deeds, an admission that spurs his defense. In the end, by describing the idiosyncratic nature of humanity, Deeds is declared wholly sane, and resolution is achieved.

While these first two films offer reasonable resolution to the populist issues presented in the narrative, Capra's inability to resolve similar narratives arise in the final two entries of his populist trilogy. In the case of Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), the hero is actually carried off the Senate floor, having exhausted his whole being in defense of his populist ideals. While the film ends with the admission of guilt by Smith's one-time mentor, now antagonist, Senator Joseph Paine (Claude Rains), the actual villain of

the film, political boss Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold), is nowhere to be found in the culminating scene. The removal, both symbolic and in this case literal, of the hero as the film concludes gives rise to the sense that Smith, as a character, is considerably less resolved than both Dickson and Deeds.

Finally, the case of Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper) is the most tortured of all of Capra's populist heroes in the films studied for this paper. Poague argues that *Meet John Doe* failed to resolve the complicated issues presented in the film primarily due to the immaturity of the hero.¹¹ Poague's analysis, however, fails to take into account the specter of European fascism and, indeed the possibility of American fascism which Capra claimed was at the heart of this final offering of pre-war populism.¹² Of course, in the face of the Nazi domination of Europe at the outset of World War II, it is no wonder that *Meet John Doe* has an ending that can, at best, be called ambiguous, but more honestly, must be considered un-resolved.

In discussing the difficulty of finding a suitable ending, or resolution, for the film, Capra referred to the difficulty as, "self-inflicted."¹³ Newspaper woman Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck), in order to save her job, develops a fictitious John Doe character to represent the frustrations of Roosevelt's forgotten man, a population which seemed to be unaffected by the rebound in the economy experienced as a result of the European war. To further the rouse, she convinces her editor, Harry Connell (James Gleason) to hire a John Doe to put a human face to the protestations offered in letters to the editor. Eventually, media baron and pseudo-fascist D.B. Norton (Edward Arnold) exploits the

¹¹ Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema of Frank Capra: An Approach to Film Comedy*, 190.

¹² Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 297.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 303.

movement for his own political gain. All the while, John Willoughby, the injured baseball player chosen as John Doe, moves in and out of comfort in his new identity until his budding love for Mitchell causes him to devote himself to the movement.

While the John Doe character seemingly fills the role of populist hero one expects to find in a Capra film, his alter-ego, and essentially, his reality, is far less representative of typical populist ideals. Willoughby's initial acceptance of the main position in the John Doe rouse, stemmed from his desire to make enough money to get his injured pitching arm fixed, therefore not characteristic of typical populist notions, but rather, completing the characterizations used by Capra in the film as being motivated by selfish motives. This selfishness, as it characterizes all the main characters in the narrative, establishes an initial stasis with little populist sentiment.

In the case of *Meet John Doe*, then, the populist hero ideal fails at the outset as the hero does not initially portray ideals to be emulated.¹⁴ While Long John Willoughby is often characterized as one of Capra's populist heroes, the reality is that he hardly fits the characterization of a populist presented by Gehring.¹⁵ Rather than representing the common man, Willoughby represents selfish individualism, an ideal that can be considered more representative of the industrial elite which are often characterized as the antagonistic forces in Capra's films. When Willoughby does begin to represent populist ideals, in fact, in the character of John Doe, these ideals were, as a result of the hero being the heroine's creation, as much a rouse as the John Doe identity itself. Capra, himself, realized the troubling nature of the characterization, and admitted to an inability

¹⁴ Ibid., 303.

¹⁵ Gehring, *Populism and the Capra Legacy*, 1.

to find a suitable resolution for this film.¹⁶ The problem, of course, was the fact that a populist resolution might seem reasonable for Doe, but was not possible for Willoughby as such a resolution would, essentially, alter the original characterization to an unconvincing degree.

With such an admission, it is little wonder that Capra turned to the people, again, to save his protagonist. This attempted resolution, however, is hardly convincing when one juxtaposes the John Doe Club members on the roof of City Hall urging Willoughby (or Doe, which, again, displays the tortured nature of this particular hero) not to commit suicide, but rather, to rejoin the cause with the same members' rejection of Willoughby in the ball park during the John Doe convention. Glen A. Phelps argues that the Willoughby/Doe character is unrealized to such a degree that Capra is forced to include the character of the Colonel (Walter Brennan) to help lead both the character and the audience to some resolution as to the true heroic nature of the character.¹⁷ Even the suddenly populist editor, Harry Connell (James Gleason), when issuing the parting shot of, "There you are Norton, the people, try and lick that," seems ineffectual as Norton is left with his oligarchy clearly still intact on the roof as the people descend to the world below, supposedly triumphant.

If one seeks clear resolution of narrative conflicts in Capra's films of the 1930s as one would expect from films firmly grounded in the classical era, one is left with a dilemma: either one must accept the "fantasy of good will" apparent at the conclusion of each film, or one must question the resolutions offered. In analyzing the films used for

¹⁶ L. Silke, Bruce Henstell, "Frank Capra: 'One Man-One Film' – 1971" in *Frank Capra Interviews*, edited by Leland Poague, 87.

¹⁷ Glen A. Phelps, "Frank Capra and the Political Hero: A New Reading of 'Meet John Doe,'" *Film Criticism*, 1980, vol. 5, no. 2: 49-57. *Film & Television Index with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2011).

this project, one finds that the first two films, *American Madness* and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* resolve their narrative conflicts in a fantastical, yet somewhat believable manner, a typical Hollywood convention. In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*, however, the resolutions become not only strained, but in some sense absent. If one is willing to look beyond the cheering audience in the Senate Gallery in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* for instance, one finds no evidence that Taylor's machine has been vanquished. Likewise, it is difficult to argue that Norton and his henchmen have lost much of their power at the conclusion of *Meet John Doe*.

Communicative Obstacles

If one accepts the notion of the primacy of character in the transmission of narrative as described above, and one adds to the contention that the conversion to sound films during the classical era put an increased emphasis on the sounds related to the characters portrayed in classical films, one must consider the delivery of dialogue an essential narrative device in the classic Hollywood cinema. Essentially, if narrative is conveyed through the actions and sounds of the character, and the films analyzed for this project are said to lack resolution, it would follow that evidence of this difficulty in achieving resolution can be found, not only in the dialogue, but in the actual delivery of the characters' speech in the films.

As Gallagher argues, "Frank Capra's cinema...is quintessentially a cinema of *presentation*, that is, one in which speech acts, most particularly those of the hero, dominate the narrative and determine its meaning."¹⁸ This focus on speech, according to Gallagher, is centered on the maturation of the hero who, as the film begins, is naïve to

¹⁸ Brian Gallagher, "Speech, Identity, and Ideology in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." *Film Criticism*, 1980, vol. 5, no. 2: 12. *Film & Television Index with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 25, 2011).

the point of childishness and, in order to reach resolution, must mature into the populist hero so representative of Capra's work. Gallagher's hypothesis is all the more convincing when applied to a comparison of the other great voice guiding the nation through the Great Depression, the voice of President Franklin Roosevelt. Just as Roosevelt used his speech, particularly his intimate fire-side chats, to appeal to the American public, Capra would seek to give voice to his populist ideals by portraying heroes who expend much of their energy finding their own voice.¹⁹ As with many scholars, Gallagher focuses on the populist trilogy in his article, though the character of Tom Dickson in *American Madness*, while not the immature hero of later Capra films, certainly fits the argument of giving voice to populist ideals.

As convincing as Gallagher's argument is, I would argue that he concludes his analysis when it proves his hypothesis, failing to pursue the analysis through an examination of the resolution of the film itself. Take, for instance, the main focus of Gallagher's study, the character of Jefferson Smith in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. According to Gallagher, Smith's voice matures from his first speech in the Senate (one could even argue from his speech at the official banquet at which he is introduced as the newly appointed Senator) to reach full maturation in the marathon filibuster which serves as the climax to the film. The filibuster scene of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* could be seen as Capra's last attempt to carry his narrative through the speech of his hero. A filibuster, by nature, is an act defined by the art of speech. The individual who embarks on a filibuster has, after all, decided that one's ability to continue speaking, alone, can stall legislative action to such a degree that the other legislators will question their political position on a particular issue. In essence, filibusters are rarely effective due to

¹⁹ Ibid., 12-22.

what is said, but rather, the simple reality that one is willing to exhaust oneself in an attempt to cause one's colleagues to reconsider their position. As Smith loses his ability to further delay what seems to be a legislative inevitability, the use of speech to resolve the narrative begins to seem as ineffective as the filibuster itself.

This understanding, however, fails to recognize how that display of maturity ends. Rather than convincing his opponents to admit to their unethical behavior in light of his dedication to the truth as shown in his commitment to the filibuster, Smith's opponents attempt to silence his maturing voice. Senator Paine does so through procedural maneuvers in the Senate, while Jim Taylor, the boss of the state-wide political machine which has produced both Senators, attempts to keep every word Smith utters during the course of the filibuster unheard by Smith's constituents. Taylor is shown at this point of the film in a truly Machiavellian light, taking all possible steps to quash the truth and replace it with *his* version of the events, going so far as to use violence to disrupt the publication and distribution of *Boys' Stuff*, the newspaper which Smith's Boy Rangers produce to keep the public informed of their leader's battle against the entrenched forces of the established political machine and media empire.

As Smith approaches his breaking point, he yields the floor to Senator Paine who takes the opportunity to introduce to the Senate telegrams from the people of their home state imploring Smith to end his filibuster, apparent proof that the people in whom Smith has put his faith, have turned on him. Smith approaches the baskets of telegrams on the Senate floor, studies them, and appears to have surrendered his fight. After a moment of unspoken encouragement delivered through a knowing glance by the Vice President

(Harry Carey) serving in his role as President of the Senate, Smith answers the telegrams with one of the most impassioned bits of dialogue to be found in Capra's films.

[Facing Paine] I guess this is just another lost cause Mr. Paine. [Turning to the other Senators] All you people don't know about lost causes. Mr. Paine does. He said once they were the only causes worth fighting for. [Moving toward Paine's desk] And he fought for them once. For the only reason any man ever fights for them. Because of just one plain, simple rule: love thy neighbor. And in this world today, full of hatred, a man who knows that one rule has a great trust. You know that rule Mr. Paine. And I loved you for it just as my father did. And you know that you fight for the lost causes harder than for any others. Yes, you even die for them. Like a man we both knew, Mr. Paine. You think I'm licked! [Turning back to the full Senate] You all think I'm licked! Well, I'm not licked! And I'm going to stay right here and fight for this lost cause even if this room gets filled with lies like these. [Picks up and throws a handful of telegrams] And the Taylors and all their armies come marching into this place. Somebody'll listen to me. Some...[Smith's voice gives out and he faints]

A strict adherence to Gallagher's hypothesis would claim that this is the point at which Smith has reached full maturation, and yet, he has been silenced. While it is true that the ensuing scene is the culminating scene of Paine attempting suicide, and then vindicating Smith and accepting full responsibility for the conspiracy to frame the junior Senator, Smith's voice is not heard again in the film, and Taylor is unseen. One is left, then, as Poague explains, to wonder about true resolution in this film.²⁰ Thus, the hero's speech, while perhaps meant to appear triumphant, is hardly unequivocally so.

While *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* may offer the best example of Capra's use of speech to carry the narrative development of the film, and to signal a difficulty in resolving the conflicts presented in the script, it is not the only example to be found in the trilogy. In fact, this convention is first utilized in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* when the hero Longfellow Deeds refuses to speak in his own defense, willing to allow the forces of urban cynicism to defeat his rural populist values. Long John Willoughby, the hero of the darkest film of the trilogy, *Meet John Doe*, likewise, is silenced by the pseudo fascist D.B. Norton (Edward Arnold) as he tries to explain the John Doe rouse to the attendees at

²⁰ Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema of Frank Capra: An Approach to Film Comedy* (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1975), 186.

the national John Doe convention. In the case of Deeds, he recovers his voice and the film finds resolution, whereas with Willoughby, the issue of voice is further complicated by the confusion of whose voice we hear, whether it is the voice of Willoughby, or the fictitious voice of John Doe, a situation that provides one of many instances of irresolution to be found in *Meet John Doe*.

Resolution, By any Means Necessary

As it became increasingly difficult for Capra to achieve resolution through his populist heroes, and even the heroes' speech often failed to transmit such resolution, the director was cornered into seeking an alternative source of resolution in the films. As Bordwell points out, resolution is an essential characteristic of classical cinema, and, therefore, Capra, a director of classical films would, by definition, need to find resolution to his narratives.²¹ Having found a successful narrative which dealt with difficult societal issues through romantic relationships in his most celebrated film, *It Happened One Night* (1934), Capra had a formula which he knew could lead to success for his films. As Schatz writes, in the classical studio system, proven formulas often superseded innovation, especially in terms of the narrative.²² Thus Capra was often forced to rely on the proven formula of romance to resolve his complicated populist narratives.

This reliance on romance is not surprising, as Bordwell explains that the romantic theme is nearly always one of several themes found in a classical Hollywood film.²³

²¹ For more on the characteristics of the classical Hollywood cinema see David Bordwell, "Part One: The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917 – 60" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, 1-84.

²² Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 198.

Capra adheres to this convention in each of his films studied for this project. *American Madness*, being the most resolved in terms of the populist issues presented in the plot, relies least on romantic conventions and, in fact, one could argue that the romantic storyline is the portion of the plot that is questionably resolved while the populist narrative enjoys full resolution. In his populist trilogy, however, Capra relies much more heavily on romantic conventions to either lead to resolution, or, in the case of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*, offer the only true resolution of the film.

Mr. Deeds Goes to Town can be considered the transitional film in the phase of Capra's populist resolutions. While Longfellow Deeds is resigned to the victory of cynicism and materialism over populism, he has, as discussed earlier, assumed the role of silent, vanquished victim. He has chosen to refuse to resist the power of the urban establishment even in the face of false accusations of insanity, based on the fact that he decided to give away his inheritance to destitute farmers, a clearly populist solution to his desire to rid himself of the pressures of wealth in the urban setting in which he feels so isolated. Deeds is, of course, most devastated by the fact that much of his disenchantment comes at the hands of the woman he loves, a woman who exploited him for her own personal advantage, thus symbolic of the very urban lifestyle his rural sensibilities have been set against in the populist narrative. The film turns, however, when reporter Babe Bennett, the woman Deeds loves, expresses her love for him and convinces him to defend himself against the insanity charges brought against him. Upon hearing her profession of love, Deeds emerges out of his self-imposed silence to defend

²³ David Bordwell, "Part One: The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917 – 60: Chapter 2: Story Causality and Motivation" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, 16.

his sanity. Deeds defends his own idiosyncratic behavior upon which the insanity argument had been based by presenting the inherent idiosyncrasies of all human beings. Deeds argues that, as all the key witnesses for the forces attempting to prove his insanity display similarly idiosyncratic behavior, either everyone is insane, or these idiosyncrasies do not offer evidence as to the mental health of the individual. Not only does the judge declare Deeds sane at the end of the hearing, but goes as far as declaring him the “sanest man that ever walked into this courtroom,” signifying the triumph of Deeds’ ideals not only over those forces arrayed against him, but even codifying those ideals through the action of the court. While this film can be considered resolved in terms of the populist narrative, it required intervention of romantic convention to ensure an adequate resolution to the film. In the ensuing entries in the populist trilogy, Capra would find it increasingly difficult to resolve his populist dilemmas, and, therefore, rely much more heavily on the romantic storyline to establish resolution to his films.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Capra’s most clearly political film during the Depression years, provides clear evidence of his inability to find resolution in the populist storyline. As was previously discussed, Capra’s hero, Jefferson Smith not only fails to fully resolve the political dilemmas presented in the script, he even fails to witness the conclusion of the film. Of course, none of this climactic scene would be possible without the direction of the Capra heroine, in this case, Senate staffer Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur). As McBride observes, one interesting feature of Capra’s populist trilogy is the necessity of the heroine to guide the hero through unfamiliar territory.²⁴ In the case of Smith, Saunders, the heroine, will prove to be not only the shepherd to the naïve hero, but, in fact, the character who saves the narrative by convincing Smith to stand by his

²⁴ Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*, 416-417.

principles and challenge the unethical system characterized by Taylor, the state political boss, and Paine, the state's senior Senator.

Interestingly, the relationship between Smith and Saunders has a similar foundation as the relationship between Deeds and Bennett. In each case, the cynical heroine is challenged to deal with the naïve, idealistic hero. The major difference, of course, is how each heroine reacts to the challenge. Bennett seeks to exploit Deeds to earn a raise and a paid vacation, while Saunders would rather quit the political racket than deal with the fabled young Senator she dubs, "Daniel Boone." This initial reticence, however, is tempered by Saunders' desire to shepherd Smith through the short appointment he has received to the Senate. As Poague argues, this is evidenced by her reaction to Smith's idealistic treatment of introducing a bill for the development of a national boys' camp, a camp dedicated to teaching boys about the unique ideals of American democracy.²⁵

Of course this budding romance is complicated by Smith's infatuation with Senator Paine's daughter, Susan (Astrid Allwyn). While this obstacle is presented in the script, it is wholly ineffectual as Smith confides his deepest feelings not to Susan Paine, but to Saunders, even commenting that he will mention Saunders to his mother, a clear indication that Saunders, and not Susan Paine, will, in the end, fulfill his romantic desires. This romance culminates as the populist themes collapse in the film. Smith stands accused of graft in his plan to develop a boys' camp and begins to doubt the very institutions of government in which he put his faith. He decides to abandon his position as Senator, and it is Saunders who finds him before he leaves Washington, and convinces him to fight for his ideals through the use of the filibuster. Saunders coaches Smith

²⁵ Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema of Frank Capra: An Approach to Film Comedy*, 180-181.

through this Spartan-like attempt to fend off his attackers, educating him on the rules of the Senate which allow a filibuster, and how he must act to maintain his control of the floor. As Smith embarks on the marathon filibuster, Saunders is in the Senate Gallery providing both encouragement and direction as he digs in for his last stand of democratic, populist ideals, a portion of the film which did not endear Capra to the reigning Senate Majority Leader.²⁶ As the filibuster drags on, and Smith buckles under the pressure, Saunders initially tries to arrange positive press coverage for Smith's constituents, but, failing that in the face of the Taylor media empire which is set in motion to deny any fair presentation of the situation, implores Smith to end his filibuster and save himself from physical exhaustion, and perhaps, even, physical harm.

Such actions by Saunders which are meant to save the very health of the hero, clarify the romantic resolution in the film in the face of the inability of political resolution. It should be noted that this resolution is not all together surprising when one considers that just such a resolution was foreshadowed in the film when Saunders informs Smith she had received a jar of preserves from his mother, a symbol of familial acceptance. Even this romantic resolution itself, however, is not fully realized, as the film ends before Saunders and Smith can meet following the idealistic victory assumed by Senator Paine's admission on the Senate floor that Smith had been framed. This lack of pure resolution lends evidence to the notion that Capra found resolution, even typical romantic resolution, increasingly difficult as he developed his populist trilogy.

To argue that Capra chose romantic resolution over political resolution, one must provide evidence of the failed political resolution. As has been discussed, the clearest evidence of failed narrative resolution lies in the hero's failure to witness the defeat of his

²⁶ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 287.

antagonists. This, however, seems to be a creation of the director himself. According to Columbia records, a fully resolved narrative existed before Capra edited the final cut.

The first cut of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was incredibly long. Capra used preview audience response to help shorten the film. Among the scenes cut was the film's ending: after Mr. Smith is carried out of the Senate, the story moves back to his home state (Illinois, according to Capra, not Montana), where the Senator and Saunders are given a parade. The Taylor machine is crushed, the crowds are cheering, and Smith notices Paine on a street corner. He stops the motorcade, forgives the senior Senator, and they all visit Smith's mother.²⁷

Hence, Capra, while taking many of his cues from his audience, was beginning to doubt the populist resolutions characterized by the victory of Jeffersonian, rural ideals over the entrenched, urban-industrial elite which had proven successful in his previous films. This doubt, unquestionably, led Capra to seek resolution for his films elsewhere, often in the familiar tropes of romantic comedy, though even the romantic resolutions seem more presumed resolutions than fully realized within the confines of the film itself.

The case of *Meet John Doe* provides, as it did in the discussion of the general populist resolutions of the films, the most tortured example of a lack of romantic resolution. In the previous films, Capra offers a shepherd, in the form of the cynical woman, to guide the hero, and at the same time, provide for the hero a willing partner in a romance which will fulfill the hero's need for a suitable partner and, in turn, act as the individual example of the metamorphosis in character offered by the hero's ideology. In this film, not only is the populist resolution unconvincing due to the confusion as to the motives of the characters involved, but even the attempted romantic resolution fails due to the fact that newspaper woman Ann Mitchell has created the very character she is meant to shepherd, and with whom she falls in love. Adding further complication to an

²⁷ Quoted from the *Movie Scrapbook* included in the *Premiere Frank Capra Collection*, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.

already difficult narrative, Mitchell has used her father's diary to develop the John Doe characterization, allowing an Oedipal complex to creep into the narrative.

This complex narrative draws to a close when Willoughby (or Doe, a constant source of confusion in the film) has decided to commit suicide on New Year's Eve to fulfill the initial claim Mitchell made when she created the John Doe character. This decision is made following the collapse of the John Doe movement, which, to some degree, occurs as the result of Willoughby discovering that Mitchell has created the Doe character for selfish reasons, and has allowed the industrialist D.B. Norton to use the movement to propel his own political aspirations. As Mitchell attempts to rescue Willoughby from suicide, she is altogether unconvincing as she has, to a great extent, initiated the situation by creating John Doe himself, and she collapses in the arms of Willoughby assuming the same unfulfilled resolution experienced by Smith in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. In both cases, characters who must be considered essential to the resolution of the film are carried off the scene and fail to witness the end of the film, therefore, failing to enjoy fully realized resolutions. Thus, the romantic resolution one has come to expect from Capra's populist dilemmas fails due to the combination of fictional and selfish natures of the characters involved.

While many scholars have analyzed the difficult resolutions of Capra's films as a sign of characters in search of personal maturation, these explanations fail in light of societal forces which surrounded the filming.²⁸ Capra, while attempting to direct movies of social commentary during the Great Depression, seemed unable to fully resolve his

²⁸ For more on theories of maturation of the Capra heroes see Brian Gallagher, "Speech, Identity, and Ideology in 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.'" *Film Criticism*, 1980, vol. 5, no. 2; Glen A. Phelps, "Frank Capra and the Political Hero: A New Reading of 'Meet John Doe,'" *Film Criticism*, 1980, vol. 5, no. 2; Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema of Frank Capra: An Approach to Film Comedy*.

films as his social themes were challenged by the political realities of the day. With populism as the chosen avenue for his social commentary, Capra had, in essence, chosen to rely on a philosophy of simplicity in an increasingly complex, industrial world. This reliance caused considerable difficulty in the narratives as Capra's heroes were increasingly incapable of providing populist solutions firmly grounded in rural individualism to a world characterized by the urban-industrial elite. Capra's heroes are so overwhelmed by their position as purveyor of the American ideal, that each buckles under the pressure, and the common use of speech to resolve the major elements of the narrative breaks down as the heroes are either silenced by choice or through sacrificial offerings at the altar of American ideals.

Thus failing to resolve his films through populist narratives, Capra was forced to seek other sources of resolution. For Capra, the obvious answer was romantic comedy, a genre in which he had excelled earlier in the decade. Romance, however, also failed as a means of resolution as the heroes of the populist films had been presented as men who would change society, and a simple romantic resolution was insufficient to handle the complicated problems presented in Capra's populist narratives.

As evidenced by the edited conclusion of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and the failure in five separate attempts to find a suitable ending for *Meet John Doe*, what many previous Capra scholars accurately address is the increasing difficulty Capra experienced in attempting to resolve the complicated dilemmas posed in his films. These analyzes, while, reasonable and somewhat convincing form a perspective grounded in conventional narrative analysis, fail to recognize the influence of societal pressures on these pieces of art. It is my contention, then, that Capra lost control of his narratives, and, indeed, lost

the ability to resolve his populist films, not as a result of any formal obstacle, but rather as a consequence of the increasingly complicated geo-political realities of the late Great Depression period. In such an environment, as witnessed by the poor reception of the eventually edited conclusion of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the idealistic, populist resolutions which Capra valued seemed little more than contrived solutions to issues that seemed almost impossible to resolve considering the international threats to the American way of life.

Chapter 3

“This is Another Expression of Optimism: Movement, Life, Energy, Vibrancy.”¹

Frank Capra was well aware of the need for American reassurance during the decade of the Great Depression. Enjoying a position as one of the premiere directors in Hollywood at the time, Capra was granted a captive audience for his reassuring messages of American exceptionalism at a time of significant doubt as to the long-term viability of the American system. Feeling the pressure to offer narratives which would serve to strengthen the American resolve, Capra turned to the idea of populism, a philosophy founded on the simple notions of individual liberty, rural sensibilities and an inherent distrust of the urban-industrial classes, as the key to a resurgent American nation.

Having established the difficulty Capra found in achieving resolution through these populist themes, however, it is interesting to note that Capra himself seemed to recognize the fact that the societal themes presented in his films were challenged by the political realities of the day. While not a film chosen for this particular study, Capra's 1938 romantic comedy *You Can't Take It With You*, offers what might be the best example of the populist ideals at the heart of so many of his films during the 1930s, and yet, also the realization that those same themes were in danger of fading entirely in the face of modern political radicalization. In discussing a theme for a play, the patriarch of the family around which the narrative revolves offers the following advice to his daughter.

¹ James Childs, "Capra Today," in *Frank Capra: Interviews* edited by Leland Poague (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 93. Originally in *Film Comment* 8.4 (November-December, 1972), 22-23.

Penny, why don't you write a play about ism-mania. You know, Communism, Fascism, Voodooism, everybody's got an ism these days...When things go a little bad nowadays, you go out and get yourself an ism and you're in business...Give her Americanism, let her know something about America. John Paul Jones, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, Lincoln, Grant, Lee, Edison, Mark Twain. When things got tough for those boys they didn't run around looking for isms. Lincoln said, "With malice toward none, and charity to all." Nowadays they say, "Think the way I do or I'll bomb the daylights outta you."

One can note in this small bit of dialogue the admission, perhaps subconsciously offered by the director, that by the end of decade, Frank Capra struggled with the populist ideals he wished to impart in the face of new political realities.

Thus I would argue that the disintegration of Capra's narratives is a result of the increasing pressures placed on his chosen avenue for narrative resolution, the avenue of American populism. That said, Capra, attempted to control the disintegration of his narratives through several formal elements which would offer him the control which he had ceded to the political winds with the choice of populism as a main narrative theme. These formal elements are, essentially, the toolbox from which a film director must draw in order to ply his trade. In that sense, the formal elements define the art of the cinema.

In her discussion of the artistic styles of four classical directors, Barbara Bowman argues that, "Master filmmakers, then, begin with the knowledge that the space of film is initially neutral of any feelings on the spectators' parts, that they possess it, sponsor it, gain power from it, or lend power to it."² The director, then, has the ability to frame his or her narrative in such a way as to elicit a particular response in the psyche of the spectator. As the focus of this thesis is the prominent role of, and eventual collapse of Capra's American populist hero mythology in his Depression-era films, I will focus the discussion of formal elements on those elements which serve to accentuate the

² Barbara Bowman, *Master Space: Film Images of Capra, Lubitsch, Sternberg, and Wyler* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 3.

characterizations of such a hero. Such a focus will offer evidence of the importance of the populist hero mythology in Capra's response to the pressures of the Great Depression and the emerging crisis of war at the end of the 1930s.

In their detailed study of the classical cinema, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson painstakingly analyze films from Hollywood's classical era in order to establish norms for the art of moviemaking during the industry's first half-century. Bordwell, specifically, calls attention to the importance of the character-driven narrative in the development of classical norms. That said, he does not ignore the importance of the formal elements of filmmaking, but rather, devotes considerable space to a discussion of the importance of these elements in the construction of the narrative.³ Thompson includes a discussion of the importance of formal elements in understanding the conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema in her discussion of the formation of the classical style of films.

Depth placed the spectator on the edge of the narrative space and lighting helped pick out the salient objects in that space. But lighting was only reinforcing another strong cue for the spectator's attention – framing. Centering, the balanced composition, and the mobile frame to follow or reveal action could all work with or without selective lighting to guide the eye and to create expectations about the most important elements in a scene.⁴

Thompson is discussing one particular formal element, that of framing, and yet, this passage addresses each of the elements I will discuss in terms of Capra's use of formal elements to impart narrative meaning. While Leland Poague, in his detailed analysis of Frank Capra films, argues that, when discussing the formal elements, all aspects of a film

³ For a discussion of the development of norms in classical cinema see David Bordwell, "Part One: The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917 – 60" in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-84.

⁴ Kristin Thompson, "Part Three: The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-28": Chapter 17: Classical Narrative Space and the Spectator's Attention" in Bordwell, et al., 227.

could be included, such a study would be considerably more detailed than this thesis allows, even when one considers that those elements are often considered the foundation of an individual director's style.⁵ For this reason, I have chosen to focus on those elements which characterized the populist themes contained in the films studied for this project, as well as the breakdown of these same themes: shot composition, lighting and the juxtaposition of movement and stasis.

Shot Composition

The frame is to a filmmaker what the canvas is to a master painter. It is the medium upon which his art is captured and preserved for others to view. In that sense, the frame becomes the ultimate purveyor of the director's vision. What makes film different from other visual arts is, of course, the fact that this canvas is so malleable. While a painter must focus his attention on a fixed medium, and a theatre performance is limited to the confines of the stage, film offers nearly endless options for the medium upon which the narrative is recorded. Even if one is to consider a closed set, the Senate set used in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) for instance, one could hardly list the different canvases upon which Capra could formulate his art. Depending on the angle of the camera, the depth of the shot, the characters included in the shot, and countless other variables, each shot of a film represents more of a Monet study of the cathedral at Rouen than a Cezanne still life.

With such unlimited artistic renderings available for analysis, interpreting a director's stylistic touches can certainly be a daunting task. For this reason, it is important to narrow one's focus of analysis in order to effectively draw conclusions. In

⁵ Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema of Frank Capra: An Approach to Film Comedy* (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1975), 95-96.

this section, then, I will focus on two major conventions utilized by Capra: framing and shot angle. In the case of both techniques, Capra, through shot composition, was developing his populist heroes as the sympathetic heart of the film narrative.

In discussing the framing conventions employed by classical directors it is important to note, as Bordwell argues, the classical cinema's affinity to the rules of composition, such as centering, which had been established by other forms of the visual arts.⁶ Thompson offers a succinct summary of classical cinema's framing conventions when she argues, "Important characters and actions draw our eye because they occupy the center of the screen."⁷ For Capra, the centering of the hero is one of the most ubiquitous conventions throughout his canon. One could easily analyze each film and note the number of shots in which the hero is centered, though this would be a rather innocuous statistic considering the numerous other shots which include other characters, perhaps even the antagonists, centered in the frame. The question becomes, then, how does one accurately determine the importance of the centered figure in Capra's framing? Answering this question is, by nature, subjective as it calls for interpretation. I would argue that repetitive use of such framing leads one to conclude a particular intent on the part of the director. In the case of the Capra films studied for this project, one recognizes two specific conventions employed by Capra which would lead the spectators to sympathize with the populist hero.

The first such technique involves the centering of the hero in the medium close-up group shots which Capra favors. The director often uses this convention in the initial

⁶ David Bordwell, "Part One: The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917 – 60: Chapter 5: Space in the Classical Film" in Bordwell, et al., 50-51.

⁷ Thompson, "Part Three: The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-28: Chapter 17: Classical Narrative Space and the Spectator's Attention" in Bordwell, et al., 227.

establishment of heroic characterization. Take, for instance, the initial shots of Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper) in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936). As Deeds arrives home and meets the representatives of the estate from which he is about to inherit the fortune which lies at the heart of the narrative arc of the film, Deeds takes his seat between two of these representatives. Later, as Deeds sits down to lunch with his visitors, he is seated between the Semple estate's press agent Cornelius Cobb (Lionel Stander) and John Cedar (Douglas Dumbrille), the attorney for the estate. It is possible that this framing is meant merely to balance the composition of the shot, especially when one considers that Cooper is easily the tallest of the actors in the scene, but when one compares these initial shots of Deeds to the establishing shots of Cedar, Capra's use of the center framing for emphasis becomes clearer. Considering the central role Cedar will play as the main antagonist in the film, it is interesting to note that Capra's establishing shot of the attorney has Cedar seated at a desk in his law office, his body sliced by the right side of the frame. Centered in this shot is Cobb, a signal that, at least in this shot, it is Cobb with whom the spectator should sympathize, a fact which seems unlikely based on this first introduction to Cobb as a brash press agent. As the film progresses, however, these early sympathetic feelings for Cobb become more reasonable as he acts as a sort of urban shepherd for Deeds. Such foreshadowing provides evidence of Capra's use of centering to establish targets for his spectators' sympathies.

Capra also relies heavily on the framing convention known as directed gaze. As one might expect, Capra, as all classical directors, attempts to direct the spectator's gaze to that which they feel is important to the narrative.⁸ In the case of the Capra heroes, this

⁸ For a discussion of the importance of the gaze in cinema see Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Casetti argues that the directed gaze

convention is most easily discernable in the many medium-range shots of the hero along with other characters which populate Capra's films.⁹ The scene in which Jefferson Smith (James Stewart) in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) first arrives at his Senate office in Washington, D.C. is one such example. Smith has wandered away from his handlers at Washington's Union Station and spent the day as a typical tourist in the nation's capital. When he finally arrives at his office, his Senate staffer Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur) and her confidant, newspaper man Diz Moore (Thomas Mitchell), are in the office awaiting his arrival. After a brief period of introductions and shots of Smith attempting to acquaint himself to his new office space, the newly appointed Senator launches into a soliloquy about the patriotic sites he visited during the day. During this description of the day's events, Smith is flanked by Saunders and Moore, essentially establishing a frame-within-a-frame composition which serves to focus the spectator's gaze on Smith. Along with the spectator's gaze, Capra also uses the composition to focus the gaze of the other characters in the shot on Smith. This convention reinforces the director's intentional use of the gaze as a narrative convention, directing the spectator to focus intently on Smith's dialogue as though the spectator were another principle in the action. This technique, repeated numerous times in the film and representative of Capra's cinematography in all four films analyzed for this project, provides evidence of the important narrative meaning Capra imparts on the direction of the gaze in his films.

is used to negotiate a solution between two opposing world views, a theory which certainly applies to the manner in which Capra portrayed his protagonists and antagonists, and utilized the formal elements to direct the spectator's gaze.

⁹ For a discussion of Capra's cinematographic tendencies including shot composition, depth of focus and editing, see Poague, 108-113.

Just as the framing of characters often informs the spectator of particular characterizations, the angle at which the camera records its subject also carries meaning. As Bordwell argues, “classical narration of space thus aims at orientation: the scenography is addressed to the viewer.”¹⁰ In essence, Bordwell argues that the artist, in this case the directors of classical cinema, orientate their viewers through repetitive technique, imparting implied meanings on nearly every aspect of the art of filmmaking. Thus, the angle at which a particular object is shot comes to mean something to the viewer as he or she experiences countless references to the same technique.

While this thesis has focused exclusively on classical Hollywood cinema, and more particularly the Depression-era films of Frank Capra, referencing the work of one of Capra’s European contemporaries offers perhaps the best example of the use of shot angle to imply meaning. Leni Riefenstahl’s films caught the eye of the rising leader of Germany’s National Socialist Party (Nazi) who recognized the power of film to impart propaganda. As the party began to establish its hold on Germany, Adolf Hitler and his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, commissioned a film of the 1934 Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg, to be directed by Riefenstahl, which would serve as the foundation of the Nazi propaganda machine’s push to convince the German people that the party would renew the dignity and position of the German nation. The film, entitled *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will), became a cinematic masterpiece due in large part to Riefenstahl’s cinematography, but also due to the fact that it displayed early indications of the power the Nazi Party would wield over the German citizenry.¹¹ Of the most

¹⁰ David Bordwell, “Part One: The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917 – 60: Chapter 5: Space in the Classical Film” in Bordwell, et al., 54.

noteworthy aspects of Riefenstahl's work are the angles at which she shoots her subjects throughout the film. The technique is displayed from the very opening images of the film which capture the approach of Hitler's plane to meet the throngs of party loyalists gathered for the party meetings. The artistic treatment of the descent of the leader's aircraft gives a messianic quality to the Führer, a quality which is carried forth throughout the film as Riefenstahl tends to shoot Hitler at an upward angle. With such repetition, it becomes clear that Riefenstahl uses this technique to impart not only a feeling of reverence toward the leader, but also to put Hitler in an unqualified position of authority, looking down on his people as his gaze acts in an almost deified manner in the sense that it seems to create his subjects. Riefenstahl shoots most of the members of the various party auxiliary groups from either a high angle, looking down on a large crowd to impart the sheer size and inevitability of the movement, or from a neutral angle to display the equality of those involved in the movement. This technique of shot angle, while certainly not the only noteworthy aspect of this classic piece of propaganda, provides evidence of the ubiquitous nature of repetitive style in formulating meaning in film.

In Capra's work, as in Riefenstahl's, the angle at which the subject is shot is rife with meaning. While Riefenstahl used the slight upward angle to denote those whom the audience should revere, Capra's heroes were meant to be men of the people. Therefore, Capra tended to shoot his heroes with a neutral angle, in much the same way as Riefenstahl shot the members of the party auxiliary groups. In both instances the director uses this convention to imply equality as this angle is meant to disarm the spectator, removing the sense of inferiority one might feel from a shot taken with an upward angle

¹¹ For a discussion of the film see Folke Isaksson and Leif Furhammer, *Politics and Film* translated by Kersti French (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 104-111.

or the feeling of superiority one might experience from a shot angled downward. As the Capra heroes were populist in nature, and therefore men of the people, this angle served his purpose of guiding the spectator to believe that the hero spoke for their concerns. This can be juxtaposed to a tendency to shoot the antagonists at a slight upward angle. While this convention is by no means consistent throughout Capra's canon, its use in the populist films is intended to position the antagonist as one who holds power over the common people as the film begins. Often in these films, Capra intends to relate the loss of this power and the triumph of the common man represented by the populist hero of the film. This attempted re-ordering is represented by a reduction of the angle at which the antagonist is shot, resulting in the antagonist being shot at either a neutral or downward angle by the end of the film.

With framing and shot angle, it is possible to add meaning to the image on the screen without the use of dialogue. Many of the classical directors exploited these techniques to further advance their narratives. Frank Capra, in his populist films, sought to represent images that would inspire the common man during a period of grave economic crisis. By utilizing the technique of centering his hero, directing the gaze of both spectators and other characters toward the hero, and, finally, shooting these populist heroes at a neutral angle, Capra employed formal elements of shot composition to imbue his heroes with populist qualities.

Lighting

Film, as a visual art, is steeped with images which assault the viewer's sense of sight. While sight is certainly not the only sense utilized in the film experience, nor is it the only sense intentionally stimulated by the artists who create the experience, it is

important to note that Frank Capra, along with many of his classical cinema contemporaries, originally plied their trade during the era of silent films, an era during which the visual aspects of the film were certainly paramount. For this reason, as well as the practical necessity to illuminate a set in order to effectively capture an image on film, lighting became a craft in and of itself within the studio system.¹² Of course, along with nearly all of the technical aspects of filmmaking, eventually lighting moved from a simple necessity into a distinctive art within the cinematic spectrum, an art which would direct the viewer's attention to particular aspects of the image.¹³ It is just such a realization that Capra utilized to help direct the gaze of his viewers.

Before discussing the specific use of lighting in the films chosen for this work, it is important to address Capra's lighting techniques in a more general manner. According to Poague, Capra sought realism in his films, and this desire extended to his choice of lighting for his films. Poague argues that Capra wished to have his characters filmed as they would be seen naturally as, to Capra, the character drove the narrative in his films. It is, then, Poague argues, the exception to this rule that critics and viewers alike recall.¹⁴ If one is to accept Poague's argument, one would expect many images to be lit in an unorthodox manner when one considers that natural lighting is not overly conducive to the requirements of film. If one considers the fact that natural light is generally dull light, and would result in film images with little definition due to the naturally dark images

¹² For a description of the technological development of lighting during the classical era see Kristin Thompson, "Part Four: Film Style and Technology to 1930: Chapter 20: Initial Standardization of the Basic Technology" in Bordwell, et al., 270-275.

¹³ Kristin Thompson provides a concise description of the change from necessary lighting to artistic lighting in Thompson, "Part Three: The Formation of the Classical Style, 1909-28: Chapter 18: Classical Narrative Space and the Spectator's Attention" in Bordwell, et al., 223-227.

¹⁴ Poague discusses the lighting techniques among other formal elements of Capra's filmmaking in Poague, "Chapter 6: The Capra Style", 95-119.

recorded, one begins to understand that lighting designed to emulate natural lighting could be considered the most un-natural lighting. With that said, it could be argued that Capra's lighting technique was not only inherently un-natural, but, in fact, was used in a much more direct and artistic manner than Poague is willing to concede. I would argue that, rather than being natural, Capra uses expressive lighting to further his narrative. For the purposes of this study, then, any element which advances Capra's narrative would also, by nature, provide emphasis to the populist representations within such narratives, and, perhaps, signal a pending difficulty in the resolutions of the films in question.

If one is to use Poague's arguments of natural lighting and the primacy of the character in narrative development in Capra's films as the reference point in a discussion of Capra's lighting techniques, one must concede the point that Capra used the formal elements of his craft to advance his stories and highlight the characters who portray those stories. Not only does this follow the reasoning advanced by Poague, it is also supported by the fact that Capra himself considered narrative development the key to any successful classical film.¹⁵ In general, then, one can certainly fall into the same convenient trap which entangles Poague of seeing lighting as a minimal feature in Capra's work as his traditional lighting could be considered neutral in-so-far-as his techniques rarely draw attention to the lighting conventions in any drastic manner. For one to find meaning in much of Capra's lighting techniques, one must look for subtle differences, and also, as Poague argues, seek out the exceptions to Capra's normal conventions.

¹⁵ While Capra discusses the importance of character in numerous interviews, and no single reference would do justice to such a broad assertion, a careful reading of his autobiography, Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971) reveals Capra's devotion to character development in his films.

The subtle differences in lighting employed by Capra tended to establish a bit of a norm in Capra's films on their own accord. If Capra's characters were the main vehicle of the narrative, and Capra was using his populist films to develop populist heroes who related effectively to the common man, one would expect those heroes to receive preferential lighting. In the four films studied for this project, with the exception of the famous backlighting technique used on his heroines, Capra lit his heroes in such a way as to distinguish them from the others in a scene. This fairly obvious observation, however, trivializes Capra's lighting technique. In fact, arguing that Capra illuminates his heroes is to disregard the much more dramatic lighting Capra uses to establish changes in his characters. The manner in which Capra lights Longfellow Deeds in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* is perhaps the best example of such lighting techniques in the films analyzed for this project.

During the first half of the film Deeds is customarily illuminated in such a way as to portray his heroic stature. The lighting scheme used to highlight Deeds' position as the hero of the film is one which takes pains to keep Deeds the most illuminated figure in all of the scenes in which Deeds shares the frame with other characters. This lighting is all the more apparent as a main focus of the film's narrative when one juxtaposes the populist values portrayed by Deeds to the more cynical values of the urban elite who challenge the legitimacy of Deeds' new position of wealth and privilege, and, therefore, his membership in their elite society. This lighting changes, however, as a result of the relationship between Deeds and the reporter Babe Bennett (Jean Arthur).

It is likely that Capra used particular lighting conventions as an aspect of this central relationship to further emphasize its importance to the narrative. One could

argue, in fact, that the lighting used at crucial moments in the relationship is, itself, a study in Capra's lighting technique. The scene in which Deeds phones Bennett as she is writing one of her columns about his exploits as the naïve, immature, out-of-place heir caught in the unforgiving environment of New York City is a case-in-point. The scene is set in Bennett's apartment, and the lighting design appears to be neutral. In the middle of the room, however, is a floor lamp which casts both light and shadows in an un-natural manner. Bennett is at a typewriter, enshrouded in dark shadows, trying to write her column. As she gives up in frustration, the telephone rings and her roommate, with whom she has been discussing her frustrations relating to her exploitative relationship with Deeds, answers the phone and informs Bennett that it is indeed the subject of their discussion on the other end of the line. Bennett moves across the room to take the call, emerging from the shadows, and now bathed in light. Capra keeps Bennett illuminated as the shots alternate between Deeds in his mansion and Bennett in her apartment, conversing over the phone. All seems designed to bring Bennett out of the shadows of exploitation and into the light of a romantic relationship with Deeds until he says, "You've made up for all the fakes I've met." At this, Bennett sinks out of the bright light, into much more neutral lighting as she realizes that she is seen by Deeds as the honest heroine, guiding him through an urban jungle of exploitation, while it is she, in fact, who has exploited him to the greatest extent.

The lighting in this scene is telling. When writing a column, Bennett is the ultimate fake, exploiting Deeds for her own professional purposes, and the lighting captures this by enveloping her in shadows cast across the room. When speaking with Deeds on the telephone she is bathed in light, even granted a touch of the famous soft

back-lighting of the Capra heroine, a sign that the personal relationship will, in the end, overcome the selfish notion that served as the genesis of the relationship. When confronted with the fact that Deeds trusts her, however, she sinks back into the shadows as she realizes that she is destined to devastate this man who is becoming the object of her romantic desires, even though the relationship was the result of her exploitation of an innocent man. Capra, in a relatively short scene, uses lighting to denote the importance of the relationship and betrayal which will serve as the main source of conflict within the film's narrative.

Yet another example of this convention of juxtaposing sympathetic lighting to shadow occurs in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. While it is certainly the case that Capra tended to reserve dramatic lighting for instances of extreme tension within the narrative, and therefore, these cases almost always centered on an important narrative juncture for the hero, the scene in *Mr. Smith* which best displays this technique does not include Jefferson Smith. The setting is the study of the Governor's mansion, and Governor Hubert "Happy" Hopper (Guy Kibbee) is meeting with political boss Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold) and Taylor's associate, Chick McGann (Eugene Pallette). The meeting is to discuss the appointment of the interim Senator, the very genesis of the film's entire narrative. Capra has, in previous scenes, given the impression that Governor Hopper is becoming frustrated with Taylor's power, and yet, is incapable of effectively challenging Taylor and his control over the entire political apparatus within the state. In this scene, the governor is seated with Taylor in front of him in what Barbara Bowman describes as the, "standing men frame."¹⁶ While the framing of this scene is important, it is the lighting which further emphasizes the framing that seems to give this scene its

¹⁶ For a discussion of Capra's use of this convention see Bowman, 42-45.

dramatic strength. Capra has placed a lamp nearly centered in the frame, the result of which is a weakened Governor bathed in sympathetic light, while his overbearing political boss and the machine's strongman hover over him in foreboding shadows. While it is impossible to argue that Governor Hopper is any form of hero in the classical sense, this scene is evidence of how Capra uses lighting to guide the spectator's sympathies in much the same way as he used framing conventions to direct the spectators' sympathies toward Cornelius Cobb in the scene from *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* discussed earlier in the chapter.

While these scenes provide little evidence in terms of the populist focus of the films, they do display the director's use of formal elements to emphasize dramatic points of the narrative. For evidence of populism shining through in Capra's films, one needs to look no further than *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. While it is true that Capra tends to light his hero, Jefferson Smith with preferential lighting in much the same manner he used with Longfellow Deeds, it could be argued that an even more symbolic lighting was used in this film to illuminate its populist theme.

As populism draws on American traditionalism, symbols of American strength and history play a vital role for most proponents of populist philosophy. With this realization, Capra has Smith take in the sites of Washington, D.C. immediately upon his arrival. One of these sites is the Lincoln Memorial, the shrine to one of the greatest of the American heroes upon which the populist philosophy is built. While at the memorial, Smith takes in not only the great sculpture of the man at the center of the temple-like structure, but is also drawn to the words engraved on the opposing walls of the shrine. As he reads these words, shards of bright light illuminate a passage which not only

provide evidence of the populist nature of the film, but also foreshadow the climactic scenes yet to come. Illuminated is the following passage taken from Lincoln's second inaugural address:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in...

As powerful a message and image as this is, Capra has yet to reveal the starring populist symbol, the dome of the United States Capitol. At various times during the film, Smith points out the dome as a symbol of American democracy, and this symbolism plays a vital role in the film's populist theme. It is no wonder that Capra is fixated on the Capitol dome as a key symbol of populist ideals as it sits atop a building often referred to by citizens and politicians alike as, "the people's house." Not only is the dome an important symbol, as Ray Carney argues, perhaps the vital symbol of the film, but the lighting of the dome at important moments in the film serves to emphasize its symbolic force.¹⁷ In one crucial scene, as Smith and his aid, Clarissa Saunders are working on a bill to establish a national boys' camp to impart what can only be described as populist ideals, Smith searches for the correct language to verbalize such ideals. Failing to find the words, he turns to the window in the office, sees the Capitol dome centered and illuminated in this frame-within-a-frame, and finds his inspiration.

Saunders: Now look, let's get down to particulars here. How big is this thing? Where's it going to be? How many boys will it accommodate? You've got to have all that in it, you know?

Smith: Yeah...Yeah. And something else Miss Saunders. The, uh...the spirit of it, the idea, the...How do you say it, the...[Turning to the window and pointing at the Capitol dome.] That's what's got to be in it!

Saunders: What?

¹⁷ Carney argues that Smith is the virtual embodiment of all that the Capitol dome has come to symbolize in Ray Carney, *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, Published by University Press of New England, 1996), 299-344.

Smith: The Capitol dome!

Saunders: [Quizzically] On paper?

Smith: I want to make that come to life for every boy in this land. Yes, and all lighted up like that too.

Smith has found his beacon, his proverbial shining city on a hill and in typical Capra fashion, lighting serves to emphasize the point. Of course, claiming that an illuminated Capitol dome should serve as the “idea” to impart at a national boys’ camp seems populist, but as the scene continues, Smith leaves little doubt of the populist ideal to be symbolized.

Smith: You see, you see, boys forget what their country means by just reading, “Land of the free” in history books. Then they get to be men, and they forget even more. Liberty’s too precious a thing to be buried in books, Miss Saunders. Men should hold it up in front of them every single day of their lives and say, “I’m free. To think and to speak. My ancestors couldn’t, I can, and my children will.” Boys ought to grow up remembering that.

Hence an object, a symbol, the dome of the United States Capitol, becomes the purveyor of the populist ideals in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Of course, as Carney argues, this symbolism will be transferred to the character of the populist hero, Jefferson Smith, but in this important scene Capra is using a symbol and not a character to represent the ideals he intends to impart with his narrative. Not only that, but by focusing on the dome illuminated, Capra is adding considerably more symbolic meaning to the object, inferring its status as a beacon of hope in an otherwise dark world. When one considers the political realities faced by the United States while Capra filmed *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, it is little wonder that such symbolic representation stood at the heart of the narrative message of the film.

While I have argued that Capra uses lighting to emphasize his major narrative messages, it is important to note how he utilizes shadow, and or dim lighting to signify the breakdown of his narrative, or, at the very least, the major psychological conflicts at

the heart of these films. Whether it is Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper), in his role as John Doe in *Meet John Doe* (1941), travelling to a rain-swept, dreary baseball stadium to address a crowd clothed in black raincoats, protected under black umbrellas, or Jefferson Smith's return to the Lincoln Memorial at night when the bright lights serve not only to illuminate the Great Emancipator, but also cast imposing shadows in and around the shrine, it is clear that Capra uses dramatic lighting to signify the emotional and psychological low points for the heroes in his films.

While the two scenes mentioned provide examples of Capra's technique, scenes from *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* are most representative of how Capra uses light to emphasize a major psychological change in character. Longfellow Deeds has been taken into custody on charges of insanity, and has been confined to the county mental hospital. In a nearly flawless example of his populist themes, Deeds is institutionalized and accused of insanity as a result of his plan to disperse his inherited fortune in plots of land granted to farmers who have fallen victim to the Great Depression, an obviously Jeffersonian concept. In the hospital, Deeds sits in a nearly catatonic state on a chair, staring out the window. Throughout the scene, Deeds remains silent and motionless, save twiddling his fingers. The lack of motion and speech are both techniques used by Capra to represent a defeated character (both of which are discussed elsewhere in this study), as well as the ominous lighting which is the focus of the current analysis. The only light which penetrates this dark cell holding Deeds comes through the window and is further fragmented by the fencing placed over the window. The action and speech in the scene belong to Cornelius Cobb, Deeds' personal assistant, who has taken it upon himself to shepherd Deeds through the cynical urban environment and, through the process, loses

his ultra-cynical attitude. As Deeds sits in the shadows peering into the light from which he is figuratively and literally barred, Cobb tries to facilitate a defense against the charges. During the scene, Cobb occasionally leans into the light, specifically when pleading with Deeds to defend himself. Deeds stays shrouded in the shadows, unwilling to attempt to recover the light which he can see, but feels he has been denied by the conspiratorial urban value system he has opposed throughout the film.

It is evident then, that Frank Capra, while often utilizing neutral lighting for practical purposes, also utilized what Poague refers to as, “expressionistic lighting” in his films.¹⁸ In utilizing lighting techniques to signal the ebb and flow of the central relationships in his films, Capra provided aesthetic clues for his viewers as to the appropriate, sometimes conflicted responses to his characters. By illuminating both heroes and symbols, Capra emphasized the meanings behind each, in the case of the films studied for this project, populist ideals. Finally, Capra used dramatic shifts in lighting technique to emphasize the height of the psychological conflict inherent in each of the films analyzed. These techniques make it clear that, far from the concept of the neutral lighting director proposed by Poague, Frank Capra realized the powerful effect of lighting in the art of film, and utilized this understanding to further his narrative themes.

Movement vs. Stasis

Our responsibility is to all of the people in this country. This is a great national crusade to destroy enforced idleness which is an enemy of the human spirit generated by this depression.¹⁹

With these words from his April 28, 1935 fireside chat, President Roosevelt announced to the nation that his administration would do all in its power to address the

¹⁸ Poague, 115.

¹⁹ Franklin Roosevelt, Radio Speech, April 28, 1935, *On the Works Relief Program*, <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/042835.html>, accessed February 8, 2011.

problem of unemployment which plagued the country during the depths of the Great Depression. Roosevelt, in describing unemployment as “enforced idleness,” was invoking images of tens of thousands of men unable to provide effective effort for the national economy. These men sat idled on the sideline of the economy, unable to assist in moving business back to profitability, the economy to expansion, and the nation as a whole out the Great Depression.

With millions rendered idle by unemployment it is little wonder that Frank Capra saw motion in a metaphorical sense while directing his populist films throughout the Depression years. In analyzing the films used for this project it became clear that Capra imparted considerable amounts of narrative meaning to the presence or absence of motion in his films. This technique seems to follow Bordwell’s description of Gregg Toland’s cinematography which, Bordwell argues, carried artistic and narrative meaning in stark contrast to earlier techniques in which camera movement was of a primarily technical nature.²⁰ In the case of Frank Capra’s films, motion takes on a multi-faceted role. In discussing Capra’s specific use of motion, it is important to differentiate his use of camera motion and the movement of characters within the frame as each technique offers narrative meaning.

Barbara Bowman, in her discussion of the influence of space in the films of Capra and other classical directors, argues that, “camera movement is also an important element in ritualization because it familiarizes us with the characters’ routines.”²¹ This ritualization is designed, according to Bowman, to allow the spaces depicted in the films

²⁰For a discussion of the early use of movement in cinematography see Bordwell, “Chapter 23: The Introduction of Sound”, in Bordwell et al, 304-308. Bordwell discusses Toland’s techniques in “Part Six: Film Style and Technology, 1930-1960: Chapter 27: Deep-Focus Cinematography”, 347-349.

²¹ Bowman, 33.

to portray a typical reality. As Bowman notes, this technique is utilized most prominently in *American Madness* (1932), Capra's earliest paean to populist ideals. The motion to which Bowman alludes in her study deals with the introduction of the hero, Tom Dickson (Walter Huston). As Dickson, the bank manager at the center of the narrative, arrives to work in his cathedral of capitalism and is introduced to the viewing audience for the first time, the camera tracks along with him, following his routine arrival into the setting which will serve as the fulcrum for the ideology presented in the film. As he makes his way through the lobby, Dickson stops several times to converse with both employees and clients of the bank. The tracking action of the camera serves to characterize Dickson as a man of action, juxtaposed with the bank's board of directors, the group which will challenge his populist notions. Upon their arrival, which actually precedes Dickson's allowing them to represent the entrenched forces of greed which Capra will assail in the narrative, the director uses four separate angles, all with static cameras, to shoot the oligarchic group as they move through the same space which Dickson will inhabit. This difference in cinematography foreshadows Dickson's speech delivered to the board in which he defends his liberal banking policies as a means to circulate capital in the economy to spur economic activity and, eventually, economic growth while the board is urging an increase in the bank's reserves, a far more static economic proposal. Not only does this motion characterize Dickson as a man of action, the tracking of Dickson in single shots, or in conversation with others composed mainly of neutral, medium close-ups also serves to establish Dickson as equal to the spectator. This can also be juxtaposed with the initial shots of the board members which capture the

men moving together as a group, signifying their power existing only as a result of their membership in this economic cabal.

Charles Maland argues yet another narrative convention based on the early tracking shot of the bank's employees moving into position to begin the day's business. The shot is a long tracking shot following bank tellers as they move their money carts across the bank lobby toward the teller windows, and is used, along with many of the early shots of the film, to establish the routine nature of the bank's operation. This establishment is essential, of course, because the fact that this routine will be upset and must be re-established, will serve as the main arc of the narrative in the film. Maland alludes to this disruption in discussing a later tracking shot of Dickson at the height of the narrative conflict, moving amongst the tellers behind the counter as he and his employees try desperately to fend off a run on the bank. In this shot, the camera moves in quick, broken and uneven fits.²² As a clear indication of the loss of necessary equilibrium, this technique displays Capra's use of camera movement for narrative effect rather than merely technical necessity. Capra puts his cameras in motion to either establish or advance specific narrative elements, whether they be the main conflict of the plot, or to advance the ideals presented in the film.

Capra's use of movement as a narrative device was not, however, limited to his use of the moving camera. In the populist films used for this study, Capra uses movement to differentiate characters, applying movement to his heroes, and keeping his antagonists considerably more static. The most representative Capra hero of this characterization is Jefferson Smith in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* who is portrayed in nearly perpetual motion as is seen in his pacing during his dictation of the legislative action which will

²² Charles Maland, *Frank Capra* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 72.

lead to the ultimate climax of the narrative. As Roosevelt argued that idleness, or lack of activity was a psychological burden on the American public, Capra presented populist heroes who seemed to be in constant motion. This motion, however, would be used to signify the increasingly difficult resolutions the director attempted as the Great Depression dragged the nation through the end of the decade.

In reviewing the four films, it becomes clear that while the juxtaposition of motion and stasis is important in all the films, each deals with the issue differently. In *American Madness*, the case for action being an essential aspect of the populist hero is made during Dickson's confrontation with the bank's board of directors early in the film. While the conflicting philosophies of money have been previously discussed, it is important to note that Capra further emphasizes this difference by putting Dickson in motion during his confrontation with the board. Throughout the scene, Dickson is seen moving around the conference table at which the various board members are seated. The board members remain static, save the relatively inconsequential shifts in their chairs. Thus Capra characterizes the hero as a man of action not only because he issues an impassioned defense of circulating money throughout the system to spur economic recovery, but by actually putting him in motion while delivering such a message. The board, on the other hand, with their static figures, represent those who were hoarding their cash, waiting for a better day to invest or spend, all the while keeping the economy off the road to recovery.

In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, both heroes, Longfellow Deeds and Jefferson Smith, again represent motion as an important character trait for Capra's populist heroes. Deeds is shown sliding down his marble banister, racing to the window to see a fire truck pass by his mansion (while the elitist opera board

sits around a conference table assuming the same static pose as the board of directors in *American Madness*), and generally bringing exuberant motion to the more staid urban environment, an environment which does not fit with Deeds' more idealistic view of life. Smith, on the other hand, is in almost constant motion. Whether it is his escape from his handlers upon their arrival in Washington, D.C., or his confessed inability to sit down while crafting his bill to set up the national boys' camp, Smith is characterized as an individual brimming with exuberant energy.

While these heroes provide evidence of the importance of movement as a characteristic of Capra's populist heroes, this same characteristic serves to demonstrate the breakdown of Capra's populist narrative. As both heroes are challenged by the entrenched, cynical forces within the establishment, they both begin to lose their characteristic motion. In the case of Deeds, as he is institutionalized and accused of mental incompetence, he assumes a voiceless, motionless posture. Deeds has given in to the establishment, and has adopted their static characteristics. He regains both his voice and his motion only as Capra allows for a romantic resolution to the film, offering some semblance of continuity and closure to this, the first film in Capra's populist trilogy.

Jefferson Smith carries the problem of resolution a step further as he loses his characteristic motion. In the climactic filibuster scene, Capra uses the shifting of the characteristic from the protagonist to the antagonist to betray his resolutions of the populist themes in the film. As Smith progressively weakens as a result of his marathon filibuster, Capra juxtaposes this weakening with the movement of the antagonistic forces of Taylor's political machine and media empire arrayed against the faltering Senator. Capra's editing in this case is quite important, as he uses quick montage sequences to

highlight the considerable inadequacies of the forces of good to those forces which seek to suppress the more ethical ideals displayed by Smith. One montage sequence shows the strength of the machine over the common man, both figuratively and realistically. In the case-in-point, the editing quickly cuts between images of the political machine effectively using the machinery of industry and mass communication to overwhelm the Boy Rangers, Smith's youth organization, whose members are desperately trying to produce as much pro-Smith material as possible using considerably more primitive hand presses.²³ In the end, as one might expect from the sheer overwhelming industrial force displayed by the Taylor machine in the montage, Taylor's forces effectively silence the truth. At the same time, Smith delivers his last, impassioned lines as his body gives out from exhaustion. Smith is carried off the Senate floor, motionless, voiceless, having ceded the characteristics of motion to the Taylor machine. This aspect of the film, perhaps more than any other, gives evidence of the unresolved nature of the film's populist narrative.

The final entry in the populist trilogy, *Meet John Doe*, is ambiguous on many levels, not the least of which is Capra's use of motion as a narrative function in the film. As one of President Roosevelt's "forgotten men," Long John Willoughby represents the idle unemployed described by the President in his fireside chat. He is a drifter, moving at the pace of the depressed workforce, when he is drafted into the publicity scheme of the John Doe charade. His confidant, the Colonel (Walter Brennan), waxes poetic about how Willoughby will lose his freedom, especially his freedom of movement, if he continues with the rouse. Capra then uses motion as symbolic of escape to a much more independent life, one which keeps the individual out of society all together. During his first radio address as John Doe, Willoughby is tempted by the Colonel to simply give in

²³ For a discussion of the montage sequence see Carney, 341-343.

to the call of the road (in this case, the railroad), hop a train, and flee the entrapment of the establishment. Willoughby completes the speech, and then gives in to the overwhelming psychological urge to flee. Thus, Capra has once again transformed the narrative function of motion. In the case of *Meet John Doe*, motion no longer characterizes the populist ideals of the hero, but, rather, offers an escape from the powerful forces of greed symbolized by the establishment.

As a master director, Frank Capra utilized many techniques to effectively deliver his message. In the case of his populist films of the Depression era, this message was one of hope for a population wallowing in the mire of an economic catastrophe. To offer the public heroes in the populist tradition, Capra used various technical elements which emphasized the special characteristics of the everyman hero. Whether it was the lighting that seemed to characterize the hero as a beacon in a cynical world, shot composition that portrayed the hero in a more neutral manner leading the spectator to relate to him as a common man, or putting the hero in motion as a means of emphasizing the need for the nation to move forward, all these formal elements served to emphasize the necessity of a populist approach to the problems of the Great Depression. These elements, while serving to characterize populism as a viable solution to the Depression, also betrayed Capra's faith in these solutions, evidenced by both the lighting and the motion conventions which breakdown as the populist answers seem inadequate to deal with the growing complexities of the world.

Conclusion

The 1930s, as a decade, will be remembered for the widespread disillusionment caused by the Great Depression. In such an environment, the American public sought sources of optimism and leaders who could offer hope for a better future. As a result of the popularity of motion pictures, some of this desire was directed toward those Hollywood artists who offered entertainment for the masses, and in many cases, an escape from the social hardships presented by the economic reality of the decade.

Frank Capra, undoubtedly one of the most successful Hollywood directors of the time, became convinced throughout the decade that films needed to offer the public a sense of reassurance that the American system had not failed, and that the American way of life was not only exceptional, but would emerge from the Great Depression in some ways strengthened by the struggle against economic collapse. Evidenced by his desire to make movies that, “said something,” Capra attempted to turn away from strictly entertaining films to offer the public some sense of optimism in the face of a seemingly hopeless economic situation. To argue this point, Capra relied on traditional American populism centered on the ideals represented by rural, agrarian, communal values. Considering that the original populist movement had emerged as an economic program designed to improve the standing of the American farmer, it is little wonder that Capra and others turned to such a philosophy in the face of the economic calamity of the Great Depression.

At the same time, President Franklin Roosevelt instituted policies designed to secure the very institutions which had seemingly failed at the onset of the Great Depression. Through his New Deal programs, Roosevelt sought to spur economic

growth through communal efforts which would employ citizens in efforts designed to promote American development, be that the development of the nation's infrastructure or its culture. All the while, Roosevelt communicated his vision to the American public attempting to reassure the populous that the nation would eventually emerge from the economic tragedy.

In the end, only one of these great American visionaries found it possible to carry his optimistic visions through to the end of the Great Depression. Frank Capra, for all the accusations by critics and scholars alike of his films offering "fantasies of goodwill," struggled throughout the decade to impart his populist messages of hope and American exceptionalism for the American public. This difficulty resulted in films which failed to achieve resolution, a characteristic entirely at odds with the classical Hollywood tradition. Capra seemed to display his ideals, and the ideals he attempted to convey through his films, in an increasingly endangered sense as the decade dragged on in an apparently perpetual economic malaise.

Coupled with the economic realities of the day, Capra also recognized the emerging political threats of authoritarian governments which would exploit a desperate populous. These pressures provided considerable challenges to Capra in his attempts to reconcile his simple, populist ideals with the realities of an increasingly complex world. According to Brian Geoffrey Rose's dissertation, Capra's resolutions became strained as the scope of the narrative expanded.¹ Rose argues that *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) achieves complete resolution as its narrative is narrow enough in scope, focusing on the life and experiences of one individual, and the impact that one man may have on others if

¹ Brian Geoffrey Rose, *An Examination of Narrative Structure In Four Films of Frank Capra* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

he lives his life in a positive, populist fashion. In both *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941), however, the protagonists are faced with similar issues, yet on a regional, and even national, scale. This expansion in scope, argues Rose, is what leads to increasingly unresolved issues Capra's populist films.

While Rose's arguments are interesting, they fail to address the increasingly strained nature of the world in which Capra worked. As was explained in the first chapter of this thesis, Capra and his heroes found themselves attempting to resolve complex social and political issues in a world beset by fascism, communism, and the almost dictatorial actions of the President of the United States. Rose's argument, then, fails in that it seems to reject the notion that artists are influenced by the social environment in which their work is done. This, obviously, is not so, as nearly every type of art, whether music, painting, writing or film consistently reflects the social issues faced by the artist who fashioned the piece. Rose's conclusion also ignores the director's comment as to the specter of fascism faced as the fascist forces expanded their hold on Europe, and the real possibility that the United States could face a similar fate.²

Desperate for resolution, Capra turned to formal elements to attempt to salvage his films. Through lighting conventions, framing conventions and the symbolic treatment of movement vs. stasis, the director attempted to recover his narratives. This attempt, however, was destined to fail, as it is the narrative which drives classical films. Facing this reality, Capra turned to conventional romantic relationships in a final attempt to resolve his films, thus fulfilling the requirements of classical cinema. This too failed,

² Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 297.

however, as the romantic resolutions proved increasingly insufficient to the complexities of the social issues raised in the films.

Thus, the Depression-era cinema of Frank Capra should be viewed through a much more complex prism. While it is possible for one to view his films of this era as grossly simplistic and highly improbable fantasies offered to a public seeking an escape from a crisis which challenged their trust in the political, social, and economic institutions which defined their nation, a more detailed analysis reveals a much more complex reality. Considering the increasingly failed nature of both his narratives and his heroes which found their inspiration in populist philosophy, one must conclude that Capra buckled under the political forces arrayed against such philosophies, and was unable to effectively resolve his populist films as those pressures became less philosophical, and more realistic with the emergence of the increasingly successful European authoritarian regimes. In this light, then, Capra can hardly be considered a director of “fantasies of goodwill,” but rather, should be considered a filmmaker desperately attempting to reassure his audience that they could recapture the naiveté of an earlier epoch while he himself began to doubt this message.

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