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Corrupt Elites: “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington”

Individual and Collective Struggles in the Films of Frank Capra

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“A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.” — Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) The Prince (1513)

Introduction

In 1939 the American director Frank Capra released *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a film that was nominated for eleven Academy Awards, winning for Best Original Story and turned James Stewart into a major star. Stewart plays Junior Senator Jefferson Smith in Washington who launches into a a filibuster talking non-stop for 25 hours and reaffirms American ideals of freedom. Capra’s depiction of manipulating elites is carried out in fine detail as Smith quickly learns the ropes on the Senate floor. This representation of the upper echelons of society is the common link between all of Capra’s major films of the 1930s and 1940s.

Capra exposes the negative behaviour and manipulations of society elites and tries to educate people into ways of dealing with these problems through solidarity and political means. Although Capra’s own politics may have been more conservative I will argue that Capra was in a very difficult position that meant he had to resort to an almost Machiavellian approach of appearing to do one thing but actually doing another. This made Capra’s films very progressive for their time and few directors have managed to do the same since, except, for example, the English director Ken Loach. Through the use of various different types of plot lines Capra turned cinema into a progressive socio-political vehicle for encouraging societal and community unity. I will look at some of Capra’s main films to explore how he achieved this while at the same time struggling to maintain his career against conservative political forces who were not happy with his popularity. I will also look at Capra’s films in the broader historical context of progressive Enlightenment ideas and aims.

Enlightenment traditions

In this series of articles I have been examining the effect of Enlightenment and Romanticist ideas on modern culture. The Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement that emerged in Europe during the 17th to 19th centuries arising out of a European intellectual movement known as Renaissance humanism. Enlightenment ideas centered on reason and science as the basis of knowledge and promoted ideals of progress and liberty.

How did Enlightenment artists and philosophers do this? They tended to focus on the psyche and conditions of everyday life, including poverty, oppression, injustice, and desperation, for

example, the writers Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Alexander Pope (1688-1744), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Voltaire (1694-1778) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797).

These traditions continued on to the nineteenth century with Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in France and John Stuart Mill (1806–73) in England, and by liberal (Mill) and radical Karl Marx (1818–83) social theories. Enlightenment ideas of progressive change crossed all the arts and could be seen in literature, music, art, poetry, architecture and theatre where they would have definite effects on form and content. The new art of cinema in the twentieth century was no different. Directors like Capra used cinema to highlight poverty and injustice, but also the positive social effects of individual acts of courage.

Capra used some of the techniques later developed in the Italian Neorealist cinema of the 1940s and 1950s such as a definite social context, a sense of historical actuality and immediacy and a documentary style of cinematography.

Capra's main films *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *American Madness* (1932), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Platinum Blonde* (1931), *State of the Union* (1948), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), all show a commitment to progress and social change. Capra depicts two separate social worlds which rarely come together except to show how different their values and moral systems are. Their relations are depicted two main ways:

(1) Failed attempts to corrupt a good man [*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Platinum Blonde* (1931), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Meet John Doe* (1941), *State of the Union* (1948)]

(2) Working class solidarity or victory [*American Madness* (1932), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)]

Capra's themes – (1) Failed attempts to corrupt a good man

Capra liked to show individuals who are human and have their own problems yet are courageous and morally upstanding. These individuals are bullied, offered well-paid jobs or the chance to retire wealthy but refuse to sell out their friends, class and/or family.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)

There are many scenes in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* where Capra shows how corruption and collaboration with the media push through the agenda of corrupt elites on the make. Capra uses an almost documentary style of having characters explaining in detail how they operate while at the same time giving out lots of information on how progressive-minded individuals can resist.

Smith is working on a bill to authorize a federal government loan to buy some land in his home state for a national boys' camp but the proposed campsite is already part of a dam-building graft scheme included in an appropriations bill framed by Taylor and supported by Senator Paine. Paine is concerned about Smith's reaction to all this and suggests they drop the bill. Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold), responds:

> "We can't drop it now, Joe. We bought the land around this Dam and we're

> holding it in dummy names. If we drop it or delay it–we are going to bring about investigations, and investigations will show that we own that land and are trying to sell it to the State under phoney names. No, Joe, in my judgment the only thing to do is push this Dam through–and get it over with."

In the meantime, Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur), who was the aide to Smith's predecessor and had been around Washington and politics for years explains in detail to Smith how the system in the Senate operates:

> "Yes. House. More amendments–more changes–and the Bill goes back to the Senate–and *waits its turn on the calendar again*. The Senate doesn't like what the house did to the Bill. They make more changes. The House doesn't like those* changes. Stymie. So they appoint men from each house to go into a huddle called a conference and battle it out. Besides that, all the lobbyists interested give cocktail parties for and against–government departments get in their two cents' worth–cabinet members–budget bureaus–embassies. Finally, if the Bill is alive after all this vivisection, it comes to a vote. Yes, sir–the big day finally arrives. And–nine times out of ten, they vote it down. (Taking a deep breath) Are you catching on, Senator?"

Capra even goes so far as to have Smith (on the directions of Saunders) give direct quotes from the Senate Manual itself:

> "Uh–Mr. President–you and I are about to be alone in here, sir. I'm not complaining for social reasons, but it'd be a pity if the gentlemen missed any of this.(Then, referring to his manual–in a business-like tone) Mr. President–I call the chair's attention to Rule Five of the Standing Rules of the Senate Section Three. "If it shall be found that a quorum is not present, a majority of the Senators present–," and that begins to look like me–"may direct the Sergeant-at-arms to request, and if necessary *compel* the attendance of the absent Senators."(Then-stoutly) Mr. President–*I so direct*."

As the filibuster starts to attract the reporters attention Taylor ups the ante and grabs the phone:

> "Hendricks! Line up all the papers in the State! Don't print a word of what Smith says–not a word of any news story coming out of Washington! Understand? Defend the machine. *Hit* this guy! A criminal–convicted by Senate–blocking relief bill–starving the people. Start protests coming. Wires. Buy up every minute you can on every two-watt radio station in the State. Keep 'em spouting against Smith! McGann's flying out–be there in five hours. Stop your presses–yank out the stories you got in 'em
> now–and get going–*get that whole State moving*–!"

Senator Jefferson Smith pursues his filibuster before inattentive Senators

Meanwhile, in another documentary-style verbatim moment Smith reads out the United States Declaration of Independence:

> " "–certain Unalienable Rights–that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that

> whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness–" (Finishing with a flourish and putting the book down) Now, that's pretty swell, isn't it? I always get a great kick outa those parts of the Declaration–especially when I can read 'em out loud to somebody."

Of course, The United States Declaration of Independence was drafted by Thomas Jefferson and the irony of his namesake reading it out loud in the Senate was not lost on the audiences of the time. Thus, in a few short scenes, Capra shows how the Senate is manipulated, the power of the media and how filibusters work.

Platinum Blonde (1931)

Capra's film *Platinum Blonde* shows an ordinary person thrown into a rich millieu as a vehicle to show the lives and attitudes of society elites. Stewart "Stew" Smith (Robert Williams) an ace reporter for the Post meets Anne (Jean Harlow) the sister of a rich playboy Michael Schuyler (Donald Dillaway) he is sent to report on. Stew falls for Anne and they get married. However, while Anne tries to turn him into a 'gentleman', his workmates make fun of him:

> "CONROY: (singing) 'For he's only a bird in a gilded cage, a beautiful sight to see—'(he waves his hand) Tweet, tweet – ha, ha—"

Eventually Stew has enough of his new valet and being pressurised into behaving according to the social norms of the upper class. He refuses to conform and gives it straight to Anne:

> "STEW: Yes, I'll tell you – for the same reason I've never wanted to go out with those social parasites, those sweet-smelling fashion plates. I don't like them. They bore me. They give me the jitters.
> ANNE'S VOICE: Do you know you're talking about my friends?
>
> STEW: Yes, I'm talking about your friends, and they still give me the jitters."

He eventually decides to leave Anne and refuses to take money (she offers him alimony) which depicts his incorruptible nature and his working class allegiances.

Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936)

In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper), the co-owner of a tallow works and part-time greeting card poet inherits 20 million dollars from his late uncle, Martin Semple during the Great Depression. Semple's scheming attorney, John Cedar (Douglass Dumbrille) tries to get Deeds' power of attorney in order to keep his own financial misdeeds secret. However Deeds is not easily manipulated and fends off all greedy opportunists. His sincerity also charms minder Cornelius Cobb (Lionel Stander) and star reporter Louise "Babe" Bennett (Jean Arthur) who writes popular articles about him with the nickname "Cinderella Man". When Deeds meets a dispossessed farmer (John Wray) who comes at him with a gun, he calms him down and decides to give fully equipped 10-acre (4-hectare) farms free to thousands of homeless families. He is taken to court but wins over the people and the judge in the end.

Meet John Doe (1941)

In *Meet John Doe* Ann Mitchell, a newspaper reporter prints a letter from a fictional unemployed "John Doe" threatening suicide on Christmas Eve in protest of society's ills. The letter gets much attention and Ann is rehired to exploit the fictional John Doe. She gets John Willoughby, a former baseball player, hired to play the role of John Doe. Ann then writes a series of letters exposing society's disregard for people in need inspiring ordinary people to start "John Doe clubs" with the slogan "Be a better neighbor". This philosophy develops into a movement. Willoughby himself becomes inspired by the movement which the newspaper's publisher, D. B. Norton decides to manipulate to have himself endorsed as a presidential candidate. After Norton exposes the letter fraud John decides to kill himself as the original letter had stated (by jumping from the roof of the City Hall) but the people change his mind when they tell him that they planned to restart the John Doe clubs anyway. As John leaves, the editor Henry Connell turns to Norton and says, "There you are, Norton! The people! Try and lick that!"

State of the Union (1948)

In *State of the Union* Kay Thorndyke (Angela Lansbury), Republican newspaper magnate, plans to make her lover, aircraft tycoon Grant Matthews (Spencer Tracy), president, a power which she can then manipulate. Matthews's wife Mary agrees to support him in public because of his idealism and honesty. Matthews is a powerful speaker and appeals to ordinary people and their trade unions ("audience was full of cheering union men") He is a progressive:

> "I'm going to tell them that the wealthiest nation in the world is a failure unless it's also the healthiest nation in the world. That means the highest medical care for the lowest income groups. And that goes for housing, too. […] And I'm going to tell them that the American Dream is not making money. It is the well-being and the freedom of the individual throughout the world from Patagonia to Detroit."

Elite manipulation of the economy itself is indicated:

> "Now, look here, Jim, you know just as well as I do that there are men at that banquet who'll be rooting for a depression, just so they can slap labor's ears back."

Capra exposes elite methods of divide and rule ("They've carried hatreds around for centuries. The trick is to play on these hatreds, one nationality against the other, keep them voting as blocks.") and shows how the people can get their voice heard on the monopolised media:

> "Ladies and gentlemen,this is a paid political broadcast. Paid for, not by any political group or organization,but by thousands of public spirited citizens who have taken this method of insuring that their voice, the voice of the people shall be heard."

When Matthews discovers the political manipulations going on behind his back, "He steps to

the microphone before the cameras, and confesses to the American people. While promising to seek bipartisan reform — and challenging the voters to vote — he denounces as frauds both his backers and himself and withdraws as a candidate for any political office."

Capra's themes – (2) Working class solidarity or victory

In these films the main theme is the machinations of elites to gain control, monopolise and increase profits. The developing awareness of ordinary people that they will be the ones most affected if these plans are successful forms the basis of solidarity action.

American Madness (1932)

Set during the Great Depression, the Board of Directors of Thomas Dickson's bank want Dickson (Walter Huston) to merge with New York Trust and resign. Dickson refuses as he believes that the merger will exclude many of his ordinary clients in the drive for profits. When the bank is robbed of $100,000 different aspects of this morality story relating to extra-marital affairs, gambling and staff loyalty are played out. As word of the robbery gets out a huge crowd of clients arrive panicked about their savings and a run on the bank starts. However, the long held policy of Dickson to help people when they were down produces positive results as favours are called in. Clients who did well arrive at the bank holding up wads of cash declaring that they were depositing money, not taking it out. This action of solidarity with Dickson calms the queues and people start putting their money back in or going home thus saving the bank from the vulture Board of Directors.

It's a Wonderful Life (1946)

38-year-old George Bailey postpones his plans to tour the world before college to sort out the family business, Bailey Brothers' Building and Loan. George's father suffers a stroke and dies but the board votes to keep it open, provided that George runs it. George marries Mary Hatch but they end up using their $2,000 honeymoon savings to stop a run on the ban and it solvent. George sets up Bailey Park, a housing development financed by the Building and Loan, in contrast to his competitor Henry F. Potter's overpriced slums. Due to a mistake by his forgetful uncle a large sum of cash goes missing which threatens the future of Bailey Brothers' Building and Loan. George becomes desperate and contemplates suicide. However an angel appears on the bridge he is about to jump off and shows him what the town would have looked like without his efforts.

This idea is a stroke of genius in the film as the angel shows him that his town Bedford Falls has been renamed Pottersville, "a seedy town occupied by strip clubs, swing halls, and cocktail lounges" thus depicting the reality and desperation of many places in the United States at the time. George has a change of heart and begs the angel for his life back. He runs home to discover that the townspeople had rallied and donated enough money to save the bank.

In 1946 Frank Capra released *It's a Wonderful Life*, a film which is still shown every year in cinemas and on TV thus maintaining its popularity. Yet when released it performed poorly at the box office mainly due to the sheer quantity of films released that year. Despite the rough start the film went on to become voted as one of the best films ever made. Though often perceived as a sentimental movie, a more recent analysis describes the story line as "a terrifying, asphyxiating story about growing up and relinquishing your dreams, of seeing your father driven to the grave before his time, of living among bitter, small-minded

people."

The individual and the collective

In these films Capra operates on two levels (sometimes at the same time) – the individual and the collective. He exhorts the individual to stand strong in the face of extreme pressure, and shows the power of collective action, even if it does take some time to form. However, this is an important point in itself as changing beliefs and ideas lead to a new understanding and self-awareness within the group. The success of collective action then gives the group a feeling of self-worth and power which becomes an important element in future struggles. In a way, Capra takes on a similar role as Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) the author of the 16th century book *The Prince*. While many would see Machiavelli as a self-serving immoral opportunist writing a book advising elites on the craft of ruling and exploiting the exercise of power, this may not have been the case. Erica Benner writes:

> "Just a year before he finished the first draft of his "little book", the Medici swept into Florence in a foreign-backed coup after spending years in exile. They were deeply suspicious of his loyalties, dismissed him from his posts, then had him imprisoned and tortured under suspicion of plotting against them."

She notes that "Machiavelli's writings speak in different voices at different times" and that "Francis Bacon, Spinoza and Rousseau – had no doubt the book was a cunning exposé of princely snares, a self-defence manual for citizens. "The book of republicans," Rousseau dubbed it."

Benner describes the benefits of seeing Machiavelli in a positive light:

> "His city's tempestuous history taught Machiavelli a lesson he tries to convey to future readers: that no one man can overpower a free people unless they let him. […] Citizens need to realise that by trusting leaders too much and themselves too little, they create their own political nightmares. […] So what can citizens can do to preserve their freedoms? For one thing, they can train themselves to see through the various ruses in the would-be tyrant's handbook. Machiavelli's The Prince describes most of them, in ways that mimic their disorienting ambiguity."

Capra, like Machiavelli, shows in detail how elites manipulate in many different ways, through friends, bought-off individuals and their use of the media. Capra also shows people the negative effects of trusting their leaders too much and how they can resist being overpowered by developing awareness and solidarity.

However, Capra, like Machiavelli, also experienced suspicion and rebukes from the elites he was depicting. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* had been attacked as a film that showed America in a bad light, the sort of things that "unfriendly" people were saying "in and out of America" about "the institution of these United States".[1] The film *State of the Union* was criticized by the Hollywood columnist Lee Mortimer of Hearst's *New York Daily Mirror* as:

> "stuff slipped through the customers by one of the oldest dodges in the game, 'Sure I'm against communism, but -' The big 'but' here seem to be a deep-seated dislike for most of the things America is and stands for … The

> indictment against this country, its customs, manners, morals, economic and political systems, as put in the mouths of Tracy and Miss Hepburn, would not seem out of place in Izvestia [Russian newspaper].” [2]
>
> The implications of being anti-American and pro Soviet Union were very serious for Capra as they attracted the attention of HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) which could lead one to be black listed and effectively unemployed. As Capra himself stated: “Courage made me a champion ... But the world was full of ex-champions.” [3]

Capra urged respect for American traditions of free speech and political dissent invoking the names of Jefferson, Paine, Emerson and Thoreau and tried briefly to organise a petition of support for Hollywood writers, including the ones he had worked with who had been subpoenaed and black listed. However, this fell through and Capra abandoned the protest. (Capra replied to criticism by saying he was a Catholic and wanted to present a Christian doctrine). As it happened Capra was never criticized by name in the hearings “nor were [his] films such as *Mr Deeds* and *Mr Smith*“. [4] As Capra saw his colleagues being forced out of Hollywood he “set about purging his work of any elements he could anticipate that anyone, anywhere, present or future, might find ‘un-American”. [5] Sadly, this action resulted in his later films becoming ever more saccharine and innocuous.

Conclusion

The 1930s and 1940s were an extraordinary time for progressive cinema and Frank Capra became one of America’s most influential directors. He won three Academy Awards for Best Director from six nominations and was active in various political and social activities in the industry. His social realist depictions of society depicting the conflict of groups with very different economic and political agendas, is a far cry from much cinema today.

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Notes

[1] Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 1992), p.422

[2] McBride, *Frank Capra*, p.547

[3] McBride, *Frank Capra*, p.543

[4] McBride, *Frank Capra*, p.542

[5] McBride, *Frank Capra*, p.543

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