A Critical Analysis of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington: A Film Directed by Frank Capra (1939)

Produced and distributed just as the nation was recovering from the effects of the Great Depression, with the economy somewhat stabilized following Roosevelt's New Deal, and with the looming 2nd world war, Capra's Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939) is an important document not only in terms of the state of affairs as it was at the time of its production, but also in terms of what led up to it and what was about to follow. To better understand how the film accomplishes this, one must first examine the idea of freedom and its changing meaning in the period leading up to Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. Following that, the ways in which this idea is used in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington and to what end, will be explored. Finally, the film's role as an active agent in the reality that is to ensue with the outbreak of the 2nd World War, as relating to the past/present reality of the time and Capra's manipulation of this reality, shall be considered.

During the depression and its aftermath, the idea of freedom took several meanings as different issues were at the forefront of the American socioeconomic reality. Foner explores depression-era ideas of freedom, concluding that the socioeconomic freedom (to work and be able to earn one's living) became of greater importance than the political freedom (as expressed in the constitution).[1] But this idea soon came to change as the conditions improved following Roosevelt's New Deal. Following the labour union disputes and the more militant activism of organizations like the CIO and the Popular Front on the side of the workers, civil liberties and the freedom of speech took an increasingly central role as the decade was nearing its end[2]. The creation of the Department of Justice's Civil Liberties Unit in 1939, established civil liberties as an issue with "a central place in the New Deal understanding of freedom"[3].

It is exactly this idea of freedom that Mr. Smith Goes to Washington builds on to convey Capra's message. While Capra's film conveyed the nation's self image as it was at the time (perhaps more "than one has any right to expect" according to Bergman[4]), it also used this self image in order to make its message heard by his listeners. Qualifying Capra's way of manipulating images as genius and referring to the way that he "understood enough of what people wanted...to help create a consciousness, and to build himself into the system"[5], renders the work not only as one of a reactive nature, but also as an active protagonist. As Muscio notes, Capra was not simply a witness or narrator, but rather a key protagonist in the relationship between communications and politics[6]. As Capra explains: "For two hours you've got 'em. Hitler can't keep 'em that long. You eventually reach more people than Roosevelt does on the radio"[7].

Capra's film then, was in fact a cry to fight for the freedom of civil liberties and the freedom of speech, employing such rhetoric as: "Liberty's too precious a thing to be buried in books...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"[8] or "Fighting for something better than just jungle law, fighting so's he can stand on his own two feet, free and decent"[9]. But while such a fight was being fought at home by the CIO and protected by the Civil Liberties Unit, Capra points to the looming fight to keep these liberties overseas with his mention of Hitler (and his inability to captivate his audience) and the CBS reporter in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington reporting: "In the diplomatic gallery are the envoys of two dictator powers. They have come here to see what they can't see at home...democracy in action"[10]. Bergman points to the relationship between "the Arnold machine [Jim Taylor's dictator-like control of the media and politics] and the politics of these diplomats"[11]. The nation, according to Bergman, was being "girded for war" in its movie theaters.[12]

In conclusion, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington is a document important not only in the way it represents the past and the present at the time of its production, but also one indicative of the media's power and role in the eve of the 2nd World War in priming the American people for the fight for their freedom and for democracy. The question of "how much did Capra create and how much he responded to"[13] then becomes moot in the
eyes of history - *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was as much a part of America as America was part of it, as such, Capra is neither reactive nor catalyst, but simply, a part of history.

[3] Ibid., 216.
[5] Ibid., 148
[8] *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Directed by Frank Capra. Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1939, [00'51'34"]
[9] Ibid., [2'02'13"]
[10] Ibid., [1'50'44"]
[12] Ibid., 146
[13] Ibid., 147

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