

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2008

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

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Show/Hide Navigation

MORE

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Collected Views
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Godard, Revolution and Representation

Eran Riklis' Lemon Tree and Gillo Pontecorvo's Battle of Algiers

Elia Suleiman's Divine Intervention

Hany Abu-Assad's Paradise Now

Paradise Now, Curfew and Divine Intervention

John Greyson's 14.3 Seconds

Themes of Subversion in Luis Buñuel's Los Olvidados and Subida al Cielo

Montage and character subjectivity in Alain Resnais' Muriel ou le temps d'un retour

Culture, Sexuality and Politics in Deepa Mehta's Fire

Visconti's Death in Venice

Themes of "momism", Communism and Conformity in 1950's American Cinema

Form and Meaning in Peter Rose's Secondary Currents and Michael Snow's So Is This

Identity Politics in Carol Reed's Odd Man Out and Neil Jordan's The Crying Game

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Alan Parker's The Commitments (1991)

John Crowley's Intermission (2003)

Bob Quinn's Atlantean (1983)

Carol Reed's Odd Man Out (1947)

The Virgin of Jerusalem: A Byzantine Icon

Analysis of Robert S. Nelson's Living on the Byzantine Borders of Western Art

Cronenberg's Canada

David Selter's Winter Kept Us Warm

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.

[1] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 96-98.

[2] *Ibid.*, 215.

[3] *Ibid.*, 216.

[4] Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 147.

[5] *Ibid.*, 148

[6] Giuliana Muscio, "Roosevelt, Arnold, and Capra, (or) The Federalist-Populist Paradox." *Frank Capra: authorship and the studio system*, Robert Sklar and Vito Zagario, eds., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 182.

[7] Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra, The Catastrophe of Success*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 432.

[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"]

[11] Bergman, *We're in the Money*, 146.

[12] *Ibid.*, 146

[13] *Ibid.*, 147

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[December \(1\)](#)

[November \(3\)](#)

[October \(1\)](#)

[September \(1\)](#)

[June \(1\)](#)

[April \(2\)](#)

[February \(1\)](#)

[December \(3\)](#)

[November \(1\)](#)

[October \(4\)](#)

[June \(1\)](#)

[May \(1\)](#)

[April \(1\)](#)

[February \(1\)](#)

[December \(2\)](#)

[August \(1\)](#)

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[Divine Intervention](#)

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[canada](#)

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[ici et ailleurs](#)

[israel](#)

[jean-luc godard](#)

[northern ireland](#)

[odd man out](#)

[subjectivity](#)

[suicide bomb](#)

[text](#)

14.3 Seconds
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Battle of Algiers
Coffea Arábiga
Cuba
Curfew
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Eran Riklis
Fire
Gillo Pontecorvo
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Invasion of the Body Snatchers
John Greyson
Julio García Espinosa
Lemon Tree
Luchino Visconti
Luis Buñuel
McCarthyism
Muriel ou le temps d'un retour
My Son John
Nicolás Guillén Landrián
Nietzsche
Rashid Masharawi
Rebel Without a Cause
Subida al Cielo
Sweet Smell of Success
Thomas Mann
Tomás Gutiérrez Alea
alan parker
algiers
atlantean
bob quinn
bollywood
christianity
communism
conformity
contemporary film theory
crash
cuban film
david cronenberg
david secter
deepa mehta
documentary film
film noir
frank capra
gangster film
godfather
goodfellas
great depression
holy virgin
identity politics
indian film
intermission
irish identity
israeli film
jesus
john crowley
last year at marienbad
lawfare
los olvidados
mexican cinema
michael snow

momism
montage
mr smith goes to washington
national identity
neil jordan
novgorod school
painting
peter rose
rabid
religious icon
representation
secondary currents
semiology
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soul music
text film
the commitments
the crying game
the sopranos
virgin of jerusalem
winter kept us warm

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