

Songs of Innocence and Experience:
Romance in the Cinema of Frank Capra

Songs of Innocence and Experience:
Romance in the Cinema of Frank Capra

By

Magdalena Grabias

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Songs of Innocence and Experience:
Romance in the Cinema of Frank Capra,
by Magdalena Grabias

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2013 by Magdalena Grabias

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4781-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4781-0

*To my mum and dad, my sister, my nephew, my grandma
and Clive Nolan, my friend.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter One	5
Frank Capra: The Artist and his Films	
Chapter Two	35
Comedy and Romance in Literature and Film	
Chapter Three	65
From Innocence to Experience: Innocence	
Chapter Four	105
From Innocence to Experience: Experience	
Chapter Five	161
Innocence and Experience: <i>It's a Wonderful Life</i>	
Conclusion	199
Bibliography	203
Selected Filmography	211

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1 The Old Comedy vs. The New Comedy	39
Table 2-2 Comedy vs. Romance	44-45
Table 2-3 Screwball Comedy vs. Romantic Comedy	49-50

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Christopher Garbowski, the supervisor of my doctoral dissertation and a *spiritus movens* of my academic research, for his incredible patience, kindness, good will, long years of hard work on me and with me, and for inspiring me with his vast knowledge and humanistic attitude.

I also wish to thank Professor Jerzy Kutnik and Professor Jacek Dąbala for valuable pieces of advice, support and time devoted to me and my book.

A thank you to Professor Jan Adamowski and my colleagues at the Department of Cultural Studies of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (UMCS) for support and the creative academic atmosphere.

Further thanks go to Ian Jones for his enthusiasm, his hard work on my book and invaluable help in solving linguistic and stylistic issues.

A thank you to Ivan Kinsman and Krzysztof Kurkowski for technical support.

A massive thank you (which I fail to express in words) goes to my family: my lovely mum Wiesława Karczevska-Grabias for her warmth and wisdom and teaching me to feel and love; my dad Professor Stanisław Grabias for being a never-ending inspiration and for knowing the way whenever I fail to see one; my beautiful sister Ewa Niestorowicz for being my best friend ever and never failing in that; Tomasz Niestorowicz for being always there for me; Adaś Niestorowicz for being the coolest little guy on Earth; my grandma Maria Karczevska for being perfect (I know you are watching over me from some better place now...); and Kasia for her unconditional love and kind heart.

Last but not least, a big thank you to all those I love, my wonderful friends who have been making my life worth living throughout the years and who make me want to reach for the stars (in random order): Clive Nolan, Christina Booth, Mike Booth, Ian Jones, Timo Groenendaal, Marijke Groenendaal-van der Schaal, Claudio Momberg, Rachel Wilce, Nick Barrett, Susanne Brauer, Victoria Bolley, Mark Westwood, Mrs. Margaret Nolan, Fernando Gomez, Alan Reed, David Clifford, Scott Higham, Andy Sears, Peter Gee, Nathalie Lebreux-Pointer, Mick Pointer, Paul Menel, Chris Lewis, Maggi Lewis, Paul Manzi, Agnieszka Świta, Marcel Haster, Barbara Haster, Graeme Bell, Simon Hill, Kylan Amos, Kim Carter,

Fabien Bienvenu, Noel Calcaterra, Arnfinn Isaksen, Morten L Clason, Stig Andre Clason, Ian Hemingway, Neil Palfreyman, Bridget Palfreyman, Patric Toms, Sian Roberts, Dominique Bordas, Tatiana Unzueta, Chris Walkden, Iain Richardson, Damian Wilson, Soheila Clifford, Farideh Clifford, Tasmara van Loon, Verity Smith, Tracy Hitchings, Alec Morris, Wojciech Jastrzębski, Agata Pawlos, Marcin Pawlos, Ewelina Tiemann, Marcin Tiemann, Magdalena Skórzyńska-Wach, Tomasz Wach, Michał Zajac, Magdalena Bardzik, Mariusz Bardzik, Ewa Mazurek, Ewa Leonowicz, Marcin Leonowicz, Anna Zielińska, Tomasz Żurek, Monika Chodkiewicz, Bogusław Nocek, Janek Kulka, Anna Kulka-Dolecka, Grzegorz Dolecki, Katarzyna Kaja Zieja, the Rev. Andrzej Szpak, Karolina Kmiecik-Jusięga, Marek Jusięga, Klara Skwarek, Andrzej Skwarek, the Rev. Jan Mazur, Karolina Fórmanowska, Mareczek Wójcik, Aneta Wójcik, Karolinka Wójcik, Andrzej Smyk, Małgorzata Anasiewicz-Kuzioła, Dorota Świta, Dariusz Mirosław, Natalia Kubacka, Agnieszka Świątnicka-Kulpińska, Tomasz Thom Kamiński, Artur Chachlowski, Małgorzata Chachlowska, Katarzyna Chachlowska, Magdalena Kinsman, Rafał Rejowski, Sławomir Artymiak, Jacek Karczewski, Katarzyna Obszańska, dr Anna Pado, Ewa Orłowska, Grażyna Krzyszczak, my colleagues at CNIcJO, Pendragon, Arena, the Pendie OCD, all at the Caamora Theatre Company; and Frank Capra—for wings...

INTRODUCTION

Although of Italian origin, Frank Capra (1897–1991) is considered to be one of the most quintessentially American directors of the golden era of Hollywood. Capra's biography proves that the ideals of the American Dream can be more than just a set of worn-out historical clichés. In the case of Capra, these ideals became the chance to escape poverty and the way to achieve an education and realise his professional aspirations. For Capra, the American Dream became a dream largely fulfilled in real life. His faith and gratitude to the country which offered him the opportunity to go from proverbial “rags to riches” were expressed by Capra in his films. He created an idealistic hero, who, in the spirit of a modern Don Quixote, in the name of common good, fights against a corrupt and unjust system during the difficult period of the Great Depression and attempts to build the New Deal in America.

At the time of their initial release, Capra's comedies, although undeniably commercially successful, were not always treated seriously by the critics. After several decades of detailed analyses and attempts to interpret and evaluate Capra's movies with regards to the changing tastes and perceptions, the critics and film scholars have largely accepted the importance and the artistic value of the director's works. In fact, the number of awards¹ as well as the continuous popularity of Capra's films, despite the passage of time, are clear proof of the filmmaker's genius and confirm his position in the pantheon of the masters of cinematography.

The critical literature offers a broad range of subjects concerning Frank Capra and his art. Among the most frequently discussed themes are populism and American social issues presented in Capra's films, as well as the influence of Catholicism upon his filmic universe; the ethos of the American Dream and glorification of small town values and the American

¹ In his career Capra directed over 40 films. It is interesting to note that his *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, and *It's A Wonderful Life* perennially occupy top positions on the lists of the American Film Institute. Furthermore, *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, as well as Capra's war documentary series *Why We Fight* are to be found in the Library of Congress and on the list of the National Film Registry.

middle class. My book is a study of selected Capra comedies and their analysis from the perspective of the theory of romance as initially proposed by Northrop Frye in his seminal works *Anatomy Of Criticism* (1957) and *Secular Scripture: A Study Of The Structure Of Romance* (1976). In 1988, Lesley Brill wrote an important book on Alfred Hitchcock, *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock Films*.² He based his analysis on Frye's concept of literary romance, which overlaps with comedy, and applied it to the realm of the cinematic art of Hitchcock. Therefore, Frye's theory proves to still be current and also adequate in the case of cinema. Moreover, Frye's theory became the background for Francesca Aran Murphy's interpretation of the world of comedy in her book *The Comedy of Revelation. Paradise Lost and Regained in Biblical Narrative* (2000).³

Frye claims that "in romance the central theme [...] is that of maintaining the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience."⁴ The above quotation, as well as the title of my book, echo William Blake's romantic reflections on the conflicting nature of innocence and experience, expressed in his *Songs Of Innocence And Experience* (1794).⁵ However, Frye's understanding of the notion of romance embraces broader aspects than the classic determinants defining the epoch of Romanticism. Frye acknowledges that romance is far older than Romanticism.

The methodology I have chosen to apply for the sake of my analysis of Frank Capra's films is closer to Brill's interpretation of Frye's theory:

By romance I mean to indicate the relatively fabulous kind of narrative that we associate with folklore and fairy tale and their literary and cinematic offspring. In film, such narratives may be as clearly related to their mythic and folkloric forebears as Cocteau's *Beauty And The Beast* or Murnau's *Nosferatu*; they may be modernised fairy tales like *The Gold Rush* and *Star Wars*; or may underlie such rationalized and relatively distant relations as *Grand Illusion* or *She Done Him Wrong*.⁶

² Lesley Brill, *The Hitchcock Romance: Love And Irony In Hitchcock Films* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

³ Francesca Aran Murphy, *The Comedy Of Revelation. Paradise Lost And Regained In Biblical Narrative* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy Of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 201.

⁵ Blake William, *Songs Of Innocence And Experience: Shewing The Two Contrary States Of The Human Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁶ Brill, *The Hitchcock Romance*, 5.

The subject of romance, as defined by Frye, has been given little attention in cinema-related critical literature. In my book I claim that romance is a pivotal element of Capra's movies and the one allowing for a more thorough interpretation as well as appreciation of the uniqueness of the director's style. Therefore, the arguments and discussion presented in the subsequent chapters are intended to support the thesis that in the light of Frye's theory that Capra's films constitute romantic pieces of art.

For the sake of my book I have chosen to examine seven films which, until the present day, remain Capra's most popular and the audience's most beloved films. In my opinion, all of the selected motion pictures most fully realise the Frye-related quasi-mythological formula (the subject of which will be developed further in subsequent chapters), which to an extent explains the continuous popularity of these particular films of the director among his many others.

The films have been systematised according to the three comedy types: paradisaical, purgatorial and infernal, which Aran Murphy adapts from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to buttress Frye's concept of romance.⁷ Finally, I have designated the films to two more general Blake-related categories of "innocence" and "experience", as such a division reflects the three levels of Dantean comedic reality. The category of 'innocence' corresponds to Murphy's paradisaical level, while 'experience' includes the purgatorial and infernal levels, since they can be readily dealt with together. I have assumed that the above categorisation portrays the correlation between paradise and childhood innocence and purity; purgatory with the process of acquiring experience; and inferno encompasses psychological and physical fatigue along with despair. This structure has enabled me to present and analyse Capra's filmic universe and the process of development of his filmic vision. My main purpose, however, is to indicate that the romantic elements can be found in all Capra's films chosen to be scrutinised in this book, irrespective of the category they have been assigned to.

My book consists of five chapters. Chapter One is devoted to the person of Frank Capra-his life and film making career. The first subsection of the chapter is an attempt to place Capra and his career within the frameworks of the social and political situation in America in the 1930s and 1940s. In the second, I present an overview of critical literature concerning Capra and his films. The critical approaches range across virtually the entire range of film studies. In the final part of the chapter I discuss the cinematic legacy of the director.

⁷ See Aran Murphy, *The Comedy Of Revelation*, 24.

Chapter Two provides the theoretical background to the subject of comedy and romance in literature and film. In the first subsection I present the constituents of the literary Old and the New Comedy, which overlap and largely correspond with Northrop Frye's theory of romance, and discuss Frye's theory of romance in detail. The subsection is concluded with a comparison of both genres. The subsequent part is devoted to discussing Hollywood's realisation of the two genres and what could be termed their meta-relationship with the three types of film comedies critics discuss in relation to Frank Capra, namely screwball comedy, romantic comedy and populist comedy. The final part of the chapter is devoted to the notion of audience and the theory of emotions, laughter and ethics.

Chapter Three is the first of three analytical parts of the dissertation. In this chapter I formulate the thesis that Capra's films are romances and present the basis of my categorisation of the seven chosen movies. The main body of the chapter is devoted to the category "innocence" and the three films that represent it; namely *Lady For A Day* (1933), *You Can't Take It With You* (1938) and *It Happened One Night* (1934). The primary aim of this chapter is to indicate the presence of the romantic mode in all three motion pictures as well as justify the thesis that, in the light of Frye's theory, the films are romantic ones.

Chapter Four is an analysis of three populist movies representing the category of "experience": *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941). Following the presented pattern, I search for the romantic elements within the films, arguing that, despite the gloomy tone of this category, the above-mentioned films still fit into the frameworks of Frye's romance modified by Aran Murphy.

I devote Chapter Five to perhaps Capra's greatest masterpiece, *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946). I claim that the film is multidimensional and that all three Dantean levels of comedy—paradise, purgatory and inferno—can be found in it, and consequently it combines both categories of "innocence" and "experience". As in the two previous chapters, my main aim is to prove that the film is a romance and, moreover, represents the quintessence of Capra's romantic vision.

CHAPTER ONE

FRANK CAPRA: THE ARTIST AND HIS FILMS

The first chapter of my book will be devoted to Frank Capra, his life and his works. My purpose is to place the artist into the framework of the historical and social background within which he lived and created, and also to present the most crucial elements of the director's biography. Subsequently, I will devote the next part of the chapter to providing an overview of critical literature which has discussed Capra and his films throughout the years from the beginning of the director's cinematic career up to the present day, as well as Capra's position within the discipline of film studies. I will demonstrate how the films used to be perceived by critics, scholars and audiences in the past, and how the perception, interpretation and understanding of the movies have changed together with changing times and differing critical perspectives. Finally, I will attempt to examine Capra's legacy and the artist's influence upon the present-day cinema.

Frank Capra's America in Literature and Film

America at the turn of the twentieth century, its inevitable social changes brought about by World War I and later on by the years of the Great Depression, followed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, has been widely described, discussed and documented by historians, writers, film directors and documentarists. In literature it was a period when many artists drew their attention to the theme of the artificiality of class divisions and unfair social conditions, and hence in their works they offered a spectrum of lifestyles of people representing both the upper and lower classes. Stephen Crane described the life of a prostitute in his *Maggie: A Girl Of The Streets* (1893). Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) was a depiction of the life of a country girl who, in search of a better life, went to Chicago and became a kept woman. On the other hand,

Edith Wharton devoted her 1920 novel *The Age Of Innocence* to scrutinising and criticising the stiff conventionality of the upper class. Thus, the literary works of that period frequently indicated the general dissatisfaction of Americans with life, notwithstanding the social stratum they belonged to. The post World War I period was a time marked by the artists of the Lost Generation.¹ Writers and poets like T. S. Eliot with his *The Waste Land* (1922), F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* or *Farewell To Arms* (1929), or John Dos Passos in his 1930s *U. S. A. Trilogy* among others, described the post war society and the strong disillusionment of people after the war and the prevailing feeling of failure and loss of youthful dreams and ideals.

The Great Depression years brought about another set of subjects and social problems to be discussed in both literature and cinema. Following the Wall Street Stock Market Crash on 29 October, 1929, millions of people became unemployed, homeless and bereft of hope. The longest economic crisis in the history of America instigated the mass migration of people in search of jobs and the possibilities to establish a better life for themselves and their families. This phenomenon was described with an almost reportage-like style by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The author presents the story of a family of farmers, the Joads, who, together with other families from Oklahoma and Texas, were driven off their land in search of the Promised Land in California. The novel is a painfully realistic account of the situation of many families in America during the Great Depression. While preparing the book, Steinbeck announced: "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for that [the Great Depression and its effects]."² However, despite the grimness of the subject, and contrary to Dos Passos' grave satire on America presented in his trilogy, Steinbeck's novel is not devoid of positive and optimistic tinges. The Joads are part of the vast group of the hungry and discontented yet, in spite of their tragic situation, they manage to maintain the inherent goodness of common ordinary people.

In 1940, *Grapes of Wrath* was turned into an Oscar winning film by John Ford. Today, the film is considered to be one of the most significant movies documenting the Great Depression era. Nevertheless, the cinema of the 1930s did not solely deal with the gloom of the social situation. The

¹ The term Lost Generation was coined by Gertrude Stein and popularised by Ernest Hemingway in his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). The term refers to the generation of people who served in World War I.

² John Steinbeck quoted in Morris Dickstein's "Steinbeck And The Great Depression" in Harold Bloom (ed.) *Blooms Modern Critical Views: John Steinbeck* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 152.

American film industry experienced what many have claimed to be its golden era and many new genres were experimented with. Gangster and horror movies, thought to have reflected the sombre mood and pessimism caused by the Depression, were popularised by stars like Bette Davis, James Cagney and Boris Karloff. However, the audience also grew fond of an utterly new and much lighter movie genre, the musical comedy. The genre propagated a diverse message and in most cases aimed at uplifting people's morale and conveying an optimism and faith in the prospective improvement of the situation in the country and the regaining of prosperity and social balance. In 1934, having watched the greatest child star of that time, Shirley Temple, in one of her musical roles, President Roosevelt remarked:

When the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time during the Depression, it is a splendid thing, that, for just 15 cents, an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles.³

The gloom of the Great Depression was also reflected in the shift of subject matter as well as the alteration of character development in the classical genres of film comedy and drama. This tendency becomes conspicuous especially in comparison to the 1920s depictions of the frivolousness and carefree happiness of the upper class in comedies. In the Depression-era movies their fortune is often reversed, and in numerous films like Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* (1936) or Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), among many others, the members of the high society are forced to taste the experience of everyday toil and drudgery common to the less privileged social strata.

The historical events of the beginning of twentieth century - World War I, the optimistic and prosperous decade of the Jazz Age, the echo of sorrows of people struggling against the hardships of the Great Depression - all had an immense impact on Frank Capra and it is perhaps for that reason the famous words of Ma Joad uttered in John Ford's *The Grapes Of Wrath*: "We're the people that live! We'll go on forever, because we're the people", seem to be the central message of the most memorable of the director's motion pictures.

³ Franklin D. Roosevelt quoted in Ilana Nash, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls In Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 119.

The “Most American” of American Directors

As I have already implied, the America of Frank Capra was many different things historically, politically and socially. Born in 1897 to a Catholic family in Sicily, Francesco Rosario Capra arrived in America in 1903.⁴ The Capras settled in Los Angeles and the country soon became a real home for the six-year-old boy who, in time, was to become the quintessence of an American citizen and the embodiment of American ideals. Capra's life, as Janine Basinger suggests, can serve as “an example of how America allows individuals from humble beginnings to invent themselves, to be who they want to be, and to live by that mythology.”⁵

Young Frank began his working life in America as a newspaper boy and in the course of the initial years on the new continent he tried to make a living, among other things, as a door-to-door salesman, a waiter and a wandering musician. From the very beginning, Capra sincerely believed in the opportunities offered by America, and he quickly understood that the only way to get out of poverty and to break out of the social status of an Italian immigrant was to gain an education. Much against his family's will, who considered books and schooling a waste of time and money, Frank achieved his aim, reaching as high as Throop College of Technology (later the California Institute of Technology). He graduated with a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering in 1918, just in time to join the army in its First World War operations where he spent his time teaching mathematics to artillery officers in San Francisco. After the war, unable to find a job in his profession, he was forced to seek odd jobs travelling throughout the western states for the next three years. It was not until 1921 that he got his first job in the film industry when, in search of easy money, Capra tricked producer Walter Montague into believing that he had some experience in Hollywood filmmaking and was instantly asked to help direct the short film *Fulah Fisher's Boarding House* (1922) based on Rudyard Kipling's poem. The film is Capra's first movie and even today surprises the critics as more than a mediocre debut, especially for a young and inexperienced director as Capra was at that time.

Capra's real Hollywood career, however, commenced two years later

⁴ Frank Capra's short biography contained in this chapter is based primarily on: Frank Capra, *The Name Above The Title: An Autobiography* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), Charles Maland, *Frank Capra* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra. The Catastrophe Of Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

⁵ Jeanine Basinger, “Introduction” in Frank Capra, *The Name Above The Title: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), XIII.

with a series of jobs, among others, as a developer and printer in a lab, editor, prop man, and a gagman of the Hal Roach and Mark Sennet studios. Those first steps in the realm of cinema eventually resulted in the collaboration with a silent movie comedian, Harry Langdon, and the directing of two Langdon features, *The Strong Man* (1926) and *Long Pants* (1927). Both films were a huge success: they made Langdon one of the biggest stars of that time and they also attracted a great deal of attention to the young director. However, it is believed Langdon grew jealous of Capra's fast-growing popularity and got rid of him soon after the release of their second feature. In the long run such a state of affairs turned out to be for the better as that same year Capra was hired by Harry Cohn, the President and Production Chief of Columbia Pictures. Here, Frank soon became the leading director and ultimately helped to transform the small film company into a major Hollywood studio.

During the eleven years at Columbia he directed such award winning masterpieces of American cinema as *It Happened One Night*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *You Can't Take It With You* (1938) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). It is in the period of his long-lasting collaboration with New York playwright Robert Riskin and cameraman Joseph Walker, among others, at Columbia that Capra developed and established his unique comic style⁶ which, according to Robert Sklar, "possessed the knack of providing mass entertainment in which intellectuals could find both pleasure and significance."⁷ After the commercial success of some of his films at Columbia, Capra fought and won the battle to gain control over every aspect of his movies' production. "I wanted to make my own films," Capra recalls "'one man, one film' was

⁶ Capra's style has been named *Capraesque* by the critics and in critical literature the term operates in reference to the director's originality and uniqueness. There has been a discussion among some of the critics concerning Capra's actual input in what is considered to be Capraesque stylistics. Joseph McBride in his book presents a very radical opinion which denies Capra's right to be called an auteur by indicating the tremendous role of Capra's colleagues and giving credit especially to Robert Riskin. Most of other critics are not that radical and, while they do acknowledge Riskin's role in establishing Capra's characteristic style, they still consider Capra to be the driving force of Capraesque. See: Sam B. Girgus, *Hollywood Renaissance: The Cinema Of Democracy In The Era Of Ford, Capra, And Kazan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 63; McBride, *Frank Capra*, 252; Pat McGilligan, "Introduction" in *Six Screenplays By Robert Riskin*, (ed.) Pat McGilligan (Berkeley, University Of California Press, 1997), XXIII.

⁷ Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History Of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 198.

for me a fetish.”⁸ The fulfilment of this ambition was reflected in the placing of the director's name above the title of his features and, what is more significant, it found realization in the movies themselves, regardless of whether they belonged to the genre of romantic, *screwball*, or his populist comedies.

Frank Capra, as Charles Maland points out, was an auteur long before the auteur theory was proclaimed by Truffaut in his essay “La Politique des Auteurs” published in *Cahiers du Cinema* in January 1954.⁹ In fact, auteurism was based on an assumption which Capra had already been exercising in his movies for more than two decades. The theory claimed that one person should be the driving force of filmmaking and, hence, the films of a particular director should be examined and interpreted according to the recurring stylistic and thematic patterns.¹⁰ And Capra's works certainly fulfil this criterion.

In the early thirties, Hollywood was eagerly experimenting with sound and discovering new possibilities that the innovation offered to cinematography. Capra was soon using it for the sake of introducing verbal humour and fast witty dialogues into his films, which, together with silent era visual gags, are considered to be one of his trademarks and a technique which he skilfully practiced even in his later films. This combination enabled Capra to define and develop the genre of *screwball* comedy, which, as it is frequently suggested, started with *It Happened One Night*.¹¹ The use of chiaroscuro, operating with light, incorporating music and singing, as well as reaction shots, dream sequences and flashbacks became Capra's ways of transmitting social ideas, the signs of the tightening of human bonds, and the means to express feelings and illustrate the characters' emotional states.

After the enormous success of *It Happened One Night* which—as the first film—swept the Oscars in five main categories in 1935, Capra went through a period of self doubt and emotional breakdown. He spent a few months in a hospital and the whole experience led him to choose to

⁸ Frank Capra in Richard Schickel, *The Men Who Made The Movies: Interviews With Frank Capra, George Cukor, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Vincente Minnelli, King Vidor, Raul Walsh, And William A. Wellman* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 67.

⁹ Maland, *Frank Capra*, 19.

¹⁰ See Maland, *Frank Capra*, 176.

¹¹ See Leland A. Poague, *The Cinema Of Frank Capra: An Approach To Film Comedy* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1975), 153. The issue of *It Happened One Night* and the genre debate around the film will be discussed in the third chapter.

differentiate the thematic issues of his movies, which eventually resulted in his decision to direct populist comedies within which, apart from entertaining his audience, the director could also “say something.”¹²

Although the motif of a hero struggling for his ideals in an unfamiliar and unfriendly territory can be traced back to Capra’s Langdon features, it is in his populist movies that the Caprasque hero gained his most recognizable traits. Capra’s Deeds and Smiths are usually small town dwellers and apparently plain common men. However, in the course of the action, they turn out to be uncommon and prove to be “the hope of the world.”¹³ They are romantic idealists willing to stand up and fight for what they believe in and defend their values against the cynical corrupt environment. As Richard Schickel states, Capra’s heroes “became archetypes which reflected back to us our best qualities – common sense, down-to-earthness, idealism, patriotism, fidelity to family values.”¹⁴ They are imaginative heroes of unusual will and moral strength who, like Capra himself, are thrust upon “the roller coaster experience”¹⁵ of personal struggles experienced during trying historical events.

The Capra family emigrated to America at the very beginning of the twentieth century and consequently found themselves in the vortex of social change and the country’s rapid transformation. As a young adult, Frank lived through the times of World War I, the joy and cultural liberation of the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age, the miseries of the Great Depression, and subsequently the atrocities of World War II. Throughout the years life accorded him both joyful and tragic experiences. He received an education, managed to find a job in filmmaking and became successful beyond all expectations at a professional level; he was married twice and it was during the second, long-standing marriage that his children were born. However, he also suffered a great deal. The death of his parents and a son, divorce, emotional breakdown and the period of self-doubt after the success of *It Happened One Night* have influenced and shaped Capra’s mature perception of life. Consequently, all these personal rises and falls are reflected in his heroes, and it is probably due to the diversity of their character traits, as well as their profound genuineness, that they seem so humane and credible to the viewer and allow the

¹² Capra, *The Name Above The Title*, 185.

¹³ Capra in American Film Institute interviews with Frank Capra, “Frank Capra: One Man–One Film” in *Frank Capra. The Man And His Films*, (ed.) Richard Glatzer and John Raeburn (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1975), 19.

¹⁴ Schickel, *The Men Who Made The Movies*, 57.

¹⁵ Maland, *Frank Capra*, 23.

audience to identify with them so deeply.

Even though more than seventy years have passed since some of Capra's early movies, the director is still considered to be one of the most fervent advocates of the idea of the American Dream. His firm belief in upward social mobility is illustrated in his films on numerous occasions, especially in his populist movies. The theme was named by the critics "the Cinderella motif" and many a time was criticised as naïve and excessively corny. In the end, the term "Capracorn"¹⁶ was coined to describe the Capra style in general. However, who, if not an Italian immigrant whose life is the most tangible proof that the American Dream can at times be fulfilled in reality, had the right to propagate the ideals, to glorify America, and to express his gratitude to the country that had provided him with the opportunity to complete his aims and aspirations successfully? Moreover, despite the fact that Capra's filmic universe was frequently described as romantic, pastoral, Disney-like,¹⁷ or he was accused of dealing in pure fantasy, his social vision was largely based on his own experience and in most cases, his films, against all appearances, developed subjects well known to Capra himself and common to the immigrant middle class minorities in general. William S. Pechter notices that

[Capra's] comic genius is fundamentally a realistic one. [...] He seems obsessed with certain American social myths, but he observes that society itself as a realist.¹⁸

Capra is an interpreter of an American experience.¹⁹ It is within the framework of the comedy genre in his Columbia era that he ingeniously succeeded in portraying America and commenting on the political and social situation during the Great Depression, the New Deal and at the threshold of the war. Even though, frequently, the central focus of his films is elsewhere, movies like *American Madness*, *It Happened One Night*, or the populist trilogy: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe* (1941) all include significant images and shots which do not allow the viewer to forget about the social and political situation within which the plot of the story unfolds. On their way to

¹⁶ The term, its source and connotations are discussed, among others, in Stephen Handzo "Under Capracorn" in *Frank Capra. The Man And His Films*, (ed.) Glatzer and Raeburn, 164-176.

¹⁷ See Poague, *The Cinema Of Frank Capra*, 50, Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 209.

¹⁸ William S. Pechter *American Madness in Frank Capra. The Man And His Films*, (ed.) Glatzer and Raeburn, 183-184.

¹⁹ See Maland, *Frank Capra*, 186.

achieving their goals, the characters of the 1930s films are put on the road and become a part of the experience of social mobility. The upper class heroine in *It Happened One Night* travels by public night bus in the company of working class members and, together with them, is forced to suffer hunger, to sleep in a motel and share with them all sorts of inconveniences so far unknown to her. *American Madness* depicts the iconic shots of bank runs after the Wall Street Crash; and in the Deeds-Smith-Doe trilogy are depicted people living in Hooversvilles, standing in bread lines, or roaming across the country in search of land, jobs and dignity.

Together with Hollywood directors like John Ford, Frank Capra became to the cinema what contemporary writers like Steinbeck, Hemingway or William Faulkner were to literature – the documentarist of his times and the voice of the populace. The critic Sam Girgus claims that “Capra is today remembered, [...] like Ford, for the influence of his creative genius and social vision of his own and later generations of filmmakers and viewers.”²⁰ Apart from presenting contemporary American issues, the films also provide an alternative perspective and depict Capra's vision of the country in which the ideals of the American Dream find their fulfilment. As Ford states, “Frank Capra is an inspiration to those who believe in the American Dream.”²¹ At the end of the movies, Capra's heroes are victorious, and the climactic moments constitute the affirmation of life and the praise of democracy and humanistic values like family, morality, human dignity, friendship and simple kindness, which are considered intrinsic to American culture. “There were real human issues at stake in his movies,”²² the director John Milius notices. Moreover, Girgus proclaims Capra to be the “avatar of the democratic impulse in cinema.”²³ Both of these features, together with Capra's ability to refer to the most profound human experiences, explain why audiences find his films so tremendously appealing.

Capra's attitude towards the audience reflects the assumption of Classical Hollywood that a movie should absorb the attention of the audience as much as possible.²⁴ Capra shared the belief that the audience is always right. “People's instincts are good, never bad. They are right as

²⁰ Girgus, *Hollywood Renaissance*, 57.

²¹ John Ford, Foreword to Frank Capra's *The Name Above The Title* (1971).

²² John Milius in *Frank Capra's American Dream*, dir. Kenneth Bowser, Columbia Tristar Television, 1997.

²³ Girgus, *Hollywood Renaissance*, 58.

²⁴ See Maland, *Frank Capra*, 177.

the soil, right as rain”,²⁵ he remarked on one occasion. Therefore, over the years he managed to create a bond between himself and his audience and he placed a great deal of trust in his viewers. He chose his audience to be the first and the decisive judge of his works. In order to check whether a film had a chance of being received positively, he was among the first to organise closed previews for a certain group of viewers to test their reactions. The results of these sessions were recorded and it allowed the director to make the necessary alterations to the film before its official release.²⁶ After a short time the practice of closed previews became a standard in Hollywood. It is interesting to note, that in the case of Capra, it was also the way of exercising his democratic ideology. It was to the people's will that he entrusted the decision about the ultimate shape of some of his films. In his autobiography, Capra reminisces that, for a filmmaker, there are few things better than seeing his audience enjoying the film:

For two hours you've got 'em. Hitler can't keep 'em that long. You eventually reach even more people than Roosevelt does on the radio. Imagine what Shakespeare would have given for an audience like that!²⁷

The above quotation reflects the respect and concern of the director for his audience, and also constitutes an accurate commentary on the power of cinema. Capra's belief in his audience's opinion seems to have been appropriate, as the warm reception of most of his films, as well as the commercial success of his Columbia productions, prove that the sentiment was, and largely still remains, mutual in the case of several films.

Capra treated his actors with equal affection and respect as his audience. “I treated them all as stars,”²⁸ Capra says, as was confirmed by the actors themselves on more than one occasion. And such an attitude was true in the case of all the actors he worked with, notwithstanding the fact whether they appeared in the film for ten minutes or ten seconds. In one of

²⁵ Capra quoted in Geoffrey T. Hellman “Thinker In Hollywood” in *Frank Capra. The Man And His Films*, (ed.) Glatzer and Raeburn, 5.

²⁶ Charles Wolfe devotes his article to the phenomenon of Capra's relationship with his audience and solving the matter of the problematic ending to *Meet John Doe*, which will be discussed further on in the book. See Charles Wolfe “*Meet John Doe: Authors, Audiences, And Endings*” in *Meet John Doe: Frank Capra, Director*, (ed.) Charles Wolfe (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 3-29.

²⁷ Capra quoted in Hellman “Thinker In Hollywood”, 13.

²⁸ Capra interviewed by Richard Glatzer in *Frank Capra Interviews*, (ed.) Leland Poague (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 120.

his interviews, Capra stated:

If the so-called 'bit people' are believable and can involve the audience in a sense of reality, the audience forgets they're looking at a film. They think they're looking at something in real life. The bit people have a great chore because they're helping to make that background real. If the audience believes in the small people, they'll believe in the stars.²⁹

Similarly, as in the case of his audience, he had confidence and faith in his actors. Stars like Clark Gable, Claudette Colbert, Gary Cooper, James Stewart, Jean Arthur and others had the opportunity to co-create the role they played and thus add something unique to the characters they impersonated. "I gave each of the actors a personality, a sense of being, a sense of existence – no matter how small their part, even if it was a walk-on. [...] I didn't want them to ape me,"³⁰ Capra claimed. Hence, the predominant style in Capra's movies is what Raymond Carney claimed to be a transcendental acting style, which he explained as allowing the actors to "speak the language of desire." According to Carney:

It has a more emotional interiority than the other kind of acting. It attempts to put the viewer in touch with private states of feeling that almost defy verbal or social expression. It is in these respects more mysterious and more imaginatively stimulating than the other sort of acting.³¹

As a result, both the audience watching the films and the actors playing the parts found, and still do find, the characters believable and convincing.

Capra directed his last picture for Columbia in 1939 and subsequently left for Warner Brothers where he made two more movies, *Meet John Doe* (1941) and *Arsenic And Old Lace* (1944). During World War II Capra was assigned to the army's Morale Branch (later called Special Services), where, in 1942, he was commissioned by General George C. Marshall to direct the seven-part series of war documentaries aimed at raising the morale of American soldiers and eventually called *Why We Fight*. In a way the series became an answer to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph Of the Will* (1935), an orchestrated praise of Hitler's policy and Nazism. "She [Leni Riefenstahl] scared the hell out of me. The first time I saw that picture I said, 'We're dead, we're gone, we can't win this war,'" Capra

²⁹ Capra in Poague, *Frank Capra Interviews*, 120.

³⁰ Capra in Poague, *Frank Capra Interviews*, 120.

³¹ Ray Carney, *American Vision. The Films Of Frank Capra* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986), 235.

commented.³² The film showed clearly how powerful a weapon the use of national symbols is, and it provided Capra with the idea of using some of the enemy propaganda footage for the sake of highlighting the enormity of the danger and explaining the necessity of American military forces to fight, as well as the reasons for it.

Although the *Why We Fight* series was Capra's first documentary project, it is constantly being appraised as valuable and skilfully directed propaganda material. Some of the critics claim that, even within the series, the Capraesque-style and sensitivity can still be found. The films highlight the positive aspects of the common American lifestyle, virtues of common people, pride in American culture, as well as freedom and liberty in general.³³ As such, they convey Capra's belief in democratic values, affirmation of life in a free country, and present a social vision similar to the one we can find in most of the director's populist movies.

The war years also left their mark on Hollywood. The old studio system was no longer as strong as in its pre-war period and those who decided to return to their former occupations after the war were frequently searching for alternative ways of finding employment. After four years of military service, Capra resolved not to return to any of the film studios he had been formerly involved with. Instead, he and three other leading Hollywood directors, Sam Briskin, William Wyler, and George Stevens, chose to try their luck with their own independent production company. Thus, in 1945, Liberty Films was formed. It was for Liberty Films that Capra made his most famous masterpiece, *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946), which will be discussed in detail in a further section of this book, and *State Of The Union* (1948). As the critics judged, these were the director's two last meaningful productions. Capra continued filmmaking for the next thirteen years during which time he directed four features and a series of scientific programmes for television. None of these, however, turned out to be as successful as their predecessors, and Capra's 1961 *Pocketful of Miracles*, a remake of his own *Lady For A Day*, became the director's swansong. Twenty years later in 1982 the American Film Institute honoured Capra with a Life Achievement Award.

Nevertheless, neither *Pocketful Of Miracles* nor his television productions became the last time the world heard about Frank Capra. In 1971 the director published his autobiography *The Name Above The Title*, a heart-warming account of his life, but also an exciting history of the golden years of Hollywood and its ways. The book was immediately

³² Capra in Schickel, *The Men Who Made The Movies*, 82.

³³ See Maland, *Frank Capra*, 128.

highly acclaimed by both the critics and the readers and it commenced a new era for Capra. The early seventies became the time of Capra film revivals. A generation of young people discovered in them the values and charm that had been largely absent from cinema for decades. Frank Capra became a celebrity again and enjoyed tremendously touring the country and lecturing young students in universities across America.

Capra died in his sleep at his California home in 1991. Today, he still is considered to be the epitome of American culture and the most eager warrior fighting for the American Dream's values and ideals. John Raeburn claimed that Capra was “the most insistently American of all directors. [...] He was most obsessively concerned with scrutinizing American myths and American states of consciousness.”³⁴ It is clear that Capra worshiped his adopted country, to which he gave proof on numerous occasions in his films, his autobiography, interviews and lectures. In his speech during the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award celebration, Capra conveyed his gratitude once more declaring: “For America, just for living here, I kiss the ground.” Capra was aware of his obligation to pay back the debt he owed to America for the opportunities it had offered to him and his family. At the same 1982 AFI event in reference to Frank Capra, George Stevens Jr. recalled the fragment of William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize address concerning the duty of an artist:

It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor, and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.³⁵

These words seem to accurately describe the art of Frank Capra. Currently, just like in the past, in the hearts of his audience Capra remains “the lighthouse in a foggy world,”³⁶ bringing a spark of hope and optimism to what frequently seems like a dull and grim quotidian reality.

³⁴ John Raeburn, “Introduction” in *Frank Capra. The Man And His Films*, VIII.

³⁵ William Faulkner's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. Online on January 16, 2013 at: <http://fiction.eserver.org/criticism/faulkner-nobel.html>.

³⁶ Capra used these words twice in his movies: first in *Meet John Doe* and later on in the first of his *Why We Fight* series *Prelude To War* in relation to all the political leaders in the service of democratic ideas and liberty. See Maland, *Frank Capra*, 117.

In the Eyes of the Critics and through the Prism of Cultural Studies

The understanding of Capra's works has, to a large extent, been shaped by the critics and scholars who have been examining the films for their meaning and artistic value over the years, which have reflected the different concerns of film studies as they have evolved. Hence, in this part of the chapter, I will provide an overview of the critical ideas concerning the director and his movies, as well as Capra's place within the framework of cultural studies.

Looking at the vast number of critical works and articles concerning Frank Capra and his films that have been published since the beginning of his career, a clear dividing line between two trends of interpretation is conspicuous. Namely, between the criticisms from the 1930s on up to the seminal publication of Raymond Carney's *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra* in 1986, the first fully auteurist approach, and those which appeared after it. In the preface to the 1996 edition of *American Vision*, Carney notices that most of Capra's critics up till then had read, translated and interpreted Capra's visions into a "series of sociological generalisations"³⁷ which, in the case of Capra, would be "using the films to discuss social conditions during the Depression, power relations between men and women, or other aspects or pre- or post-war American society."³⁸ Within these frames of reference, the critics were arguing how to appraise and treat Capra's movies. On the negative side, the director was accused of being a populist (in the negative sense of the term), too naïve and too popular to be treated seriously. As early as the 1940s Richard Griffith called Capra's films "fantasies of good will," as they proclaimed the naïve belief that "the kindness of heart is in itself enough to banish injustice and cruelty from the world."³⁹ Capra scholar Leland Poague claims that in his articles Griffith goes as far as to imply that "Capra is naïve at best, politically pernicious at worst, and intellectually bankrupt in any case."⁴⁰

The second group of critics admits the alleged naivety of Capra's movies, but does not perceive it as a negative trait. Lewis Jacobs believes that their "naivety" is the reason for their popularity and the source of entertainment and appeal to the audience. Poague claims, contrary to

³⁷ Carney, *American Vision*, XIV.

³⁸ Carney, *American Vision*, XIV.

³⁹ Richard Griffith "It's A Wonderful Life And Post-War Realism" in *Frank Capra. The Man And His Films*, Glatzer and Raeburn (ed.), 162.

⁴⁰ Poague, *The Cinema Of Frank Capra*, 17.