



The Preface sketches a strategy for “defamiliarizing” the films of Frank Capra on the premise that the currently familiar understandings of them are no longer intellectually satisfying. Along the line I take special note of Nick Browne’s historical analysis of *Meet John Doe*. In a way, the project of Browne’s essay is also one of defamiliarization. Though Browne repeatedly refers to Capra as a utopian “populist,” he pointedly avoids the rags-to-Hollywood-riches version of the Capra story often cited to explain Capra’s broad appeal to thirties audiences. In its place Browne puts two other pictures, one a panorama of the historical development of a monopolistic Hollywood as a social institution aligned against other such institutions (the family, the church, the schools, the government), the other a close-up of the contractual arrangements obtaining between Frank Capra Productions, the Bank of America, Warner Bros., and Vitagraph (Warner’s distribution arm). Moreover, what Browne finds most fascinating about *Meet John Doe* is the way its story and mode of address reflexively confront the larger social dilemma figured by the Paramount antitrust case in which the government sued the studios on behalf of independent exhibitors and producers. Though Capra effectively allegorizes this conflict in *Meet John Doe* – with media mogul D. B. Norton standing for the studio system while John Doe (or, alternately, Ann Mitchell) stands for the Capraesque “independent” – the basic crux is finally that nothing short of a literal “miracle” would allow Capra to assert the value of expressive independence in the language of classical Hollywood without relying upon the monopolistic power of Warner Bros. to reach (or create) his audience.¹

I will eventually consider the efficacy of *Meet John Doe*’s Christmas Eve conclusion, to which Browne’s theological reference alludes. Here I want to register my somewhat anxious agreement with Browne’s decision to avoid the more explicitly biographical mode of explanation that Capra

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scholars have been prone to invoke over the years, though my agreement does *not* entail any doubts on my part regarding the general reality of Capra's authorship. (Far from it.) I have accordingly organized this chapter so as to foreground the process of "intertextual" inference by which viewers and critics construct "Frank Capra" as an interpretive hypothesis on the basis of various "pictures." Primary among these are the "motion pictures" Capra is on record as directing; indeed, I will conclude this chapter with an analysis of *You Can't Take It with You* that understands Grandpa Vanderhof as an unjustly neglected self-portrait on Capra's part. But other pictures obviously play an important part in the drama of interpretation and appropriation, especially those that help to establish various "reading strategies" through which the films are necessarily understood in the first place. The second segment of this chapter will address two such frameworks, the concept of "genre" and the concept of "the classical narrative cinema." The chapter's first section, "Meet Frank Capra," undertakes to complicate the text-context relationship somewhat by considering how Capra himself incorporates a portion of the historical record into the extremely complex visual texture of *Meet John Doe*. Readers who desire a more conventional biographical introduction will find some satisfaction here.

Meet Frank Capra

Meet John Doe (1941) was the first (and only) film produced by the version of Frank Capra Productions incorporated by coowners Frank Capra and (screenwriter) Robert Riskin in July of 1939. Upon the success of *Meet John Doe* depended the immediate future of Capra's own company and also (according to Capra) the long-term prospects of the independent producer-director "one-man, one-film" school of moviemaking that Capra had publicly advocated in a series of magazine articles beginning in 1936.² Moreover, it was with *Meet John Doe* that Capra intended to answer charges that he was a cinematic Pollyanna, a purveyor of simpleminded fairy-tale "Capra-corn." Capra wrote of his hopes for the film in *The Name above the Title*: "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 dark passions of mobs." Thus Capra's "first completely independent film venture . . . was aimed at winning critical praises."³

Though written some thirty years after the fact, Capra's autobiographical

account of the making of *Meet John Doe* confirms Nick Browne's picture of the film as deeply engaged in its historical and institutional moment, a moment characterized by a decisive shift from a Depression to a wartime economy, fascism displacing unemployment as a primary topic of ideological concern. More specifically, *Meet John Doe* represents Capra's very explicit and self-conscious attempt to "reconfigure" his own institutional status, most obviously by declaring his independence of Columbia Pictures, where he had worked since late 1927, after the release of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in 1939. However, the institution that was the focus of Capra's deepest anxieties – both in making *Meet John Doe* and in the world of the film he made – was the press, most especially its "critical" arm. Capra's "independence," we might say, existed within limits; in seeking (and needing) the approval of "intellectual critics" Capra sought not only to confirm (by rewriting) his own status but to vindicate cinema as an art form. Put another way, though Capra's quarrels with Columbia's Harry Cohn and with the studio–producer system generally were already the stuff of fan-mag legend, Capra was now, more literally than ever before, his own producer, his own boss. In defending himself against charges of aesthetic irrelevancy, Capra was both required and inclined to defend the capacity of "classical Hollywood style" to make room for the individual voice, despite the charges of assembly-line "sameness" that Capra was himself prone to level at the studio system.

Given Capra's public status in the late 1930s – as president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and of the Screen Directors Guild – it was inevitable that people (Capra among them!) would link Capra's dilemma as a spokesman for Hollywood with Long John Willoughby's as a spokesman for "All John Does Everywhere." Indeed, the Capra/Doe equation is frequently called upon to explain Capra's failure of "voice" when it came to concluding *Meet John Doe*. Long John's inability to speak the whole truth of his fantastic story when publishing magnate D. B. Norton's neofascist storm troopers cut the power of the ballfield amplification system can thus be seen as prefiguring (or postfiguring) Capra's well-publicized inability to provide *Meet John Doe* with a satisfyingly "Capraesque" finale after Long John leaves the John Doe convention in disgrace. Capra and screenwriter Robert Riskin had plotted themselves "into a corner," as Capra recalled the incident in *The Name above the Title*, as if their story too could never be (told) whole.⁴ Indeed, any number of critics have followed Richard Glatzer in taking the dilemma as betokening "a perverse

sense of self-parody” on Capra’s part that links John Doe’s renunciation of “mass preaching” (auto)biographically with Capra’s growing doubts about “social mythmaking” at a time when Hollywood seemed to be out-preached and out-mythed by the likes of Goebbels and Hitler. A goodly number of biographical details can be adduced to confirm the “self-parody” notion. Glatzer cites the way “Long John’s accidental transformation from drifter to national figure parallels Capra’s own early drifting experience and subsequent involvement in moviemaking” as well as the way “Willoughby’s awakening to his power over the studio audience during the key scene of his first radio speech . . . parallels Capra’s emotional and physical illness which followed the success of *It Happened One Night*, and his ultimate decision to create social myth in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*.”⁵ In a like mood, Charles Maland notes that “Doe’s picture appears on the cover of *Time*, just as Capra’s had in 1938. Both were getting recognition, and both wondered if they deserved it”⁶ (Fig. 1).

Whether self-consciousness necessarily entails self-doubts of the sort attributed to Capra by Glatzer and Maland is an open question. Maland’s mag-cover equation, nevertheless, bears crucially on the way I currently understand the film, however minor a detail the *Time* allusion may seem at first. (Capra repeatedly refers to the *Time* cover in his autobiography, and the cover photo, by itself or framed by the original mag-cover graphics, is one of the most widely circulated images of Capra to this day.)⁷ At stake is the concept of personal authorship as it applies to the reputedly impersonal mechanisms of the classical Hollywood cinema. Moreover, the site where the debate takes place, on this accounting, is less the historical terrain mapped out by Nick Browne and others than the “textual” arena of *Meet John Doe* as described by Dudley Andrew and Raymond Carney. Both see *Meet John Doe* as staging a debate over film authorship – figured in the relationship between the film’s three Slavko Vorkapich montage sequences and the more conventional dramatic passages they serve to punctuate – into which (on my understanding) Capra injects even more complexity by invoking his own status as cultural icon via the Cooper/Doe *Time* cover.

Most critics who make the connection read it negatively, like Glatzer and Maland; Doe is a fake, so maybe Capra is a fake as well. However, anyone who remembers the story accompanying Capra’s *Time* cover might just as well decide to read the *Meet John Doe* allusion differently, as foreshadowing John’s eventual (if also deeply problematic) declaration of independence of Norton and his schemes. Indeed, the basic substance of



Figure 1. His picture on the cover: *Meet John Doe*.

“Columbia’s Gem” (as the original *Time* story was titled) involved the as-if inevitable Hollywood power struggle that went on between producers and directors, between “cinemamanufacturers” and “craftsmen,” with Capra cast as one of several successful exceptions that proved the rule, and it concluded with the prediction that Capra would eventually follow Riskin in leaving Columbia to join Sam Goldwyn.⁸ How “independent” one could be in the Hollywood context was thus a constant Hollywood issue, of which Capra seemed far more painfully aware than most.

The issue is raised, on Dudley Andrew’s reading of *Meet John Doe*, by the film’s Slavko Vorkapich montage sequences. As a general Hollywood rule, montage sequences amounted to a holdover from the silent era and one of later Hollywood’s few “concessions” to the artistic legacy of experimental filmmaking. Unlike the base-line “classical Hollywood” film, these montage “intrafilms” disobey the system’s “rules concerning invisibility of technique, clarity of development, primacy of character, and most crucially, homogeneity of narration.”⁹ Here the filmmaker, instead of hiding behind a coherent cause–effect series of psychologically motivated actions, comes to the forefront, asserting the power of film to elide space and

time in the creation of novel images and associations, as opposed to the rigorous subordination of image to narrative typical of the generic Hollywood film.

Nevertheless, in the Hollywood film generally, and in *Meet John Doe* particularly, this excess of stylistic energy is absorbed (on Andrew's reading) into "the standard logic of the Hollywood narrative voice."¹⁰ Despite their frantic pace and literal layering of information, montage sequences serve chiefly as punctuation, as a concise means for telescoping time and recirculating the primary graphic and narrative motifs of the film. For example, *Meet John Doe's* first Vorkapich montage, serving as prologue to John Doe's first inspirational radio address, tells (at least) two stories: the story of Ann Mitchell's series of "I Protest" articles, published under the name (and picture) of John Doe, and the story of the rising circulation of D. B. Norton's *New Bulletin* as depicted by newspapers and money changing hands (the hands nearly always in close-up, detached from faces and bodies). Supposedly free expression (Ann's, Vorkapich's) is thus appropriated and controlled by a larger system of expression (Norton's, Capra's).

A similar emphasis on the limits of personal expression, similarly focused via discussion of the role of montage sequences in *Meet John Doe*, marks Raymond Carney's discussion of the film in *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra*. In Capra's earlier films, on Carney's reading, montage sequences are typically used to embody and represent systems of social communication that exist "in fierce competition with . . . the personal styles and tones of the chief characters in the films."¹¹ The catch, as Carney understands *Meet John Doe*, is that its chief characters are too unformed to compete with the newer technologies of experience that the montage sequences epitomize.

As Carney observes, "John Doe" himself is a nullity, a publicity stunt, a fiction; indeed, even the self who embodies that fiction, a minor-league baseball player known as "Long John" Willoughby, is himself always already a fiction, an entertainer, a "pitchman" (in Capra's play on the baseball-advertising analogy), whose first name, in its coincidence with the first name of the mythical "average American," only complicates matters. When Ann Mitchell tells John to "think of yourself as the real John Doe," the "self" referred to is thus a matter of constant deferment – which John? Nearly the same question can be asked of Ann herself in view of the schizophrenic split between the righteous personal anger of the woman who writes the "I Protest" columns and the dissociatedly elegant cynicism of the

woman who gladly accepts the patronage of D. B. Norton; Stanwyck's Ann Mitchell is as much a creature in the making, in process, as the fictitious John Doe she urges people (herself among them) to meet.

This uncertainty, this "deferral" of identity, this schizophrenia, is taken by Carney to typify the entire film, especially given the fact that each of the film's major characters can be taken as standing in for an aspect of Capra's authorial self. I have already noted the link of Capra and John implicit in the *Time* magazine reference (to which I will return); we might observe here that Long John's wanderings as a musically inclined hobo, one willing to engage in fraud for the sake of a sore pitching arm and a meal, are an echo of the post-World War I years Capra spent, after his discharge from the army, as an itinerant laborer, musician, and storytelling, bookselling mountebank. Indeed, John and Capra are both rescued from (relative) obscurity by meeting up at a crucial juncture with a woman in the form of Barbara Stanwyck whose self-creation through dramatic actions is underwritten and directed by a man of wealth and power. This latter formulation suggests yet another equation linking Capra and an on-screen surrogate, D. B. Norton and Frank R. Capra, both of whom "direct" Barbara Stanwyck's actions in *Meet John Doe*. This equation authorizes Carney's claim that the "broadcasting" or deferral or "cutting up" of identity that typifies montage sequences earlier in Capra has expanded in *Meet John Doe* to account for the entire film, making it Capra's "cinematic version of American cubism."¹² It is to this multiplication and subsequent fracture of identity that Carney explicitly attributes Capra's inability to finish the film, or his need to finish it five times over.

The interpretive dispute here is finely tuned. Andrew emphasizes Capra's ultimate power and responsibility, his knowing *use* of montage sequences to solve narrative problems, which also entails Capra's blindness to the monolithic power of his medium despite his pretensions to one-man, one-film independence of the system that empowers him; Carney's Capra, far from being blind to the dilemma, openly fears being absorbed by the medium that made him: "Capra sees that if his pet myth of personal freedom and independence from the mass market can be converted into a marketable commodity" – as, for example, *Meet John Doe* – "then none of our personal dreams and fantasies are safe from the threat of social, political, and institutional systematization and exploitation."¹³ Despite their differences on the matter of Capra's authorship, Andrew and Carney invoke alike a demonic, nightmarish either/or logic: Either Capra authors or the

system authors. At a certain level *Meet John Doe* evinces a similar understanding of the technologies of expression, to the extent that authorship within the film is *contested*, as (at the end) between Long John and D. B. Norton. However, at another level – a level pointed to by the montage sequences that Carney and Andrew both enlist as evidence – an alternative model of authorship is offered. We might call it a matter of (a positive) “difference.”

Both Carney and Andrew take the montage sequences of *Meet John Doe* as generally unitary in form and function. Carney makes no distinctions at all among them and only refers to Vorkapich in passing. Andrew is more definite in noting that there are three such sequences, all of them by Vorkapich, one coming in the middle of each of the three reels of the 16mm print. What both overlook is the presence of yet one other montage sequence, the one behind the opening credits, an oversight that allows a simplified picture of the Vorkapich material and (arguably) of the film’s conclusion as well.

The credit montage differs from the other three in two important respects. Though all four sequences rely on graphics and dissolves or superimpositions to layer information, the graphics of the credit sequence are *not* a matter of newspaper headlines within the film world but of credits from the filmmaking world, an acknowledgment of responsibilities rather than a deceptive and irresponsible circulation of signifiers. Moreover, though many of the shots in all four sequences have human beings as their subject, only in the credit sequence is the shot scale routinely one that allows for complete representation of whole persons; the credit sequence does *not* give us anonymous hands edged out of the frame by newspapers or magazines or circulation graphs.

Indeed, the credit-sequence montage effectively “personalizes” the movie to follow, though in a decidedly complex and (at least in retrospect) ambivalent fashion. The credits themselves, for example, are in two different fonts, block letters for most purposes, a cursive (as if handwritten) script for others: *Presenting Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck in Frank Capra’s “Meet John Doe.”* Moreover, the “people” shots are of two sorts: extreme long-shots of crowds, “the people” literally diminished, “little people,” alternating with full and medium-shots of recognizable human figures, typically of workers, often women workers. Even the music reflects this complexity. The sound montage is built from pieces of various “American” tunes, but this general “Americanness” is qualified, even questioned, by

their sequencing. The first tune we hear is Stephen Foster's "Hard Times, Come Again No More" (playing over a shot evoking the heroic style of 1930s documentary photography; the tune also accompanies Ann Mitchell's first reading of her father's diary). The last is "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," as if play or game might be a way "out" of "Hard Times."

Capra, we might say, is written all over the credit sequence. His devotion to America, his affection for the people, his playfulness, his insistence on his "name above the title" – all are there. However, so too is an awareness of potential conflict, the prospect that people will diminish themselves by crowding together; that play will replace work, will make times harder by diverting attention from the jobs at hand; that the personal quality of script will be replaced by the impersonality of block letters (as, in the first shots after the credits, the eccentrically calligraphic "Bulletin" sign is replaced by the streamlined sans-serif "New Bulletin" plaque). Capra inscribes himself into this ambivalence very directly – and twice over. The sign of his proprietary interest, the possessive "Frank Capra's" *Meet John Doe*, appears over the longest shot of the credit sequence (a city square or intersection, lines of pedestrians and cars); his "worker" credit as director appears over the closest shot of the sequence, a tight medium-shot of an infant in a hospital nursery (Fig. 2). Indeed, two shots are involved here, a conspicuously moving camera track along a row of newborns, followed via dissolve by a closer shot that reframes to center a particular infant, over which we hear the final strains of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," the unsung last lines of which would be "Three strikes you're out, at the old ball game."

I read this last image–sound complex as a culmination of the credit sequence, as exemplifying its author's relationship to his images and his characters. *His* status as implicit character is denoted by the credit itself (*Directed by* Frank Capra) and by the obtrusive camera movement. Nevertheless, that camera movement picks a child out from a crowd of children, as if by chance; individuality is a possibility, not a certainty. Moreover, given black-and-white photography and the connection of women with work and the feminine connotations of "Doe," the name with which Ann Mitchell chooses to sign her "whole world's going to pot" protest letter, we might wonder about the uncertain gender of the child singled out, as if Capra the imageworker and Ann Mitchell the wordworker were each equatable with the baby in the hospital crib, hence with each other. Furthermore, the connection of Capra to Long John Willoughby is implicit in the pitch-

man character evoked by “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” As the third film in Capra’s populist trilogy, *Meet John Doe* might very well be taken as the third pitch, as Capra’s last strike. But who, exactly, is the pitcher, who the batter?

This uncertainty or multiplicity of authorship is then picked up in the Vorkapich montage sequences that follow, the first of which we have already discussed. Like the first, the second Vorkapich montage also tracks the expanding influence and presence of John Doe, now a public speaker rather than a crusading amateur newspaper columnist, though Ann still writes the scripts, and Norton still “produces” them. Shots of Ann and John traveling from city to city alternate with signs denoting John Doe clubs or banners announcing a John Doe appearance or maps detailing the nationwide progress of the John Doe movement.

Unlike the first montage sequence, however, the second includes near the end a series of thirteen shots that shift from a primarily graphic to a more dramatic mode. We move from Wall Street to Washington, D.C., to the Capitol steps, to the Democratic Party Headquarters, to the Republican; and in each setting the same minidrama is played out, the same question (more or less) posed by one character to another: What do the John Does want? However, the shift of modes here is signaled, as if caused, by the insertion into the sequence of the edition of *Time* with Cooper/Doe on the cover as the “Man of the Hour.” His presence there obviously signals his importance to “National Affairs” (the magazine section where his story is purportedly elaborated). The use of *Time* here (rather than some other magazine) also amounts to a claim of authorship on Capra’s part, a reference to his own appearance on the cover in 1938, an equation (also) of Capra, whose name appears “above the title” of *Meet John Doe*, with John Doe himself, whose name provides the title for the John Doe movement and is featured, like a marquee credit, in the many banners announcing his appearances.

This equation of Capra and Cooper/Doe, and with it our sense that the authorial function of *Meet John Doe* is becoming increasingly more personal yet (also) more tenuous, is confirmed by the last of the Vorkapich montage sequences. Like the first, it begins with newspaper headlines, this time announcing John a fake rather than a prophet. Cut to a shot of a John Doe flyer floating toward a curb side sewer grate, with walking feet (moving right to left) above it, feet we can take as John’s given the next shot, a close-up of Willoughby walking toward the camera, superimposed over