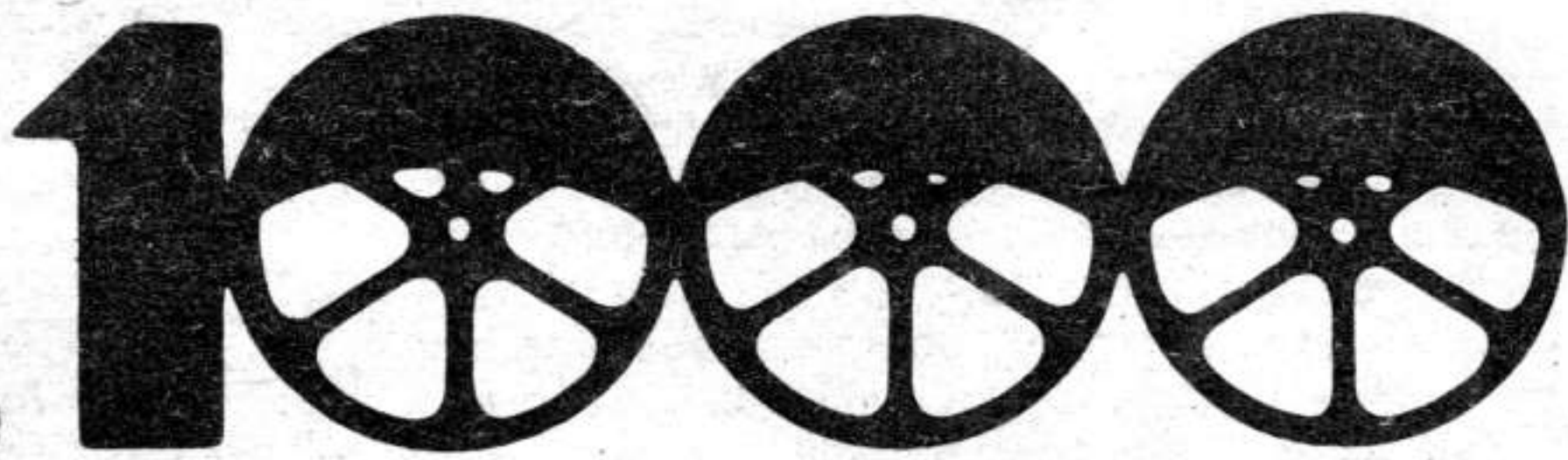


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Columbia Presents



Featuring Frank Capra

Capra: Big Man On The Columbia Lot

A dividend of the Regency's Columbia Pictures series is an eight-film "retrospective" of Frank Capra's historic association with that company in the 1930's. The Capra films are not being shown in any order, they are paired with films by other directors, and they are certainly not a complete survey. (Missing are the very early talkies such as **Ladies of Leisure** with Barbara Stanwyck, and the later Stanwyck soap opera **Forbidden** from 1932. **Lady for a Day** and **Broadway Bill** are apparently no longer distributed theatrically by Columbia having been remade by other studios as **Pocketful of Miracles** and **Riding High**, respectively. Most importantly, the 1938 Academy Award-winner, **You Can't Take It With You**, is being withheld from distribution by the Moss Hart estate.) Nevertheless, the films on view span virtually the entire decade and chronicle not only Capra's progress from studio workhouse to Hollywood's most honored director of the era but the emergence of Columbia from a Poverty Row company specializing in such action genre entertainments as the 1931 **Dirigible** to a major studio capable of realizing Shangri-La on its backlot (**Lost Horizon**) or re-creating the U.S. Senate in its scene

"The films . . . chronicle Capra's progress from studio workhouse to most honored director of the era."

shops (**Mr. Smith Goes to Washington**.)

Dirigible, 1931.

Not yet known outside the industry, Capra in 1931 was asked by the American Society of Cinematographers to write the introduction to their **Cinematographic Annual**. It reveals his thinking at the time:

"In the old days of the silent picture, it was a fairly simple matter to make a picture. You could take almost any story and, with a series of the beautifully photographed scenes, turn it over to the cutter and the title writer . . . and it could be doctored pretty well into good entertainment . . .

" . . . Today we must have a real story . . . which is given to the audience by the actors . . .

"Touches" by the director are nice things to talk about but poor direction . . . The minute an audience becomes conscious of the machinery of the picture, they forget the story."

Ironically, in his own then-current production, **Dirigible**, Capra's main interests seem to have been in responding to the technical challenges posed by the film, rather than in enlivening a rickety two-buddies-in-love-with-the-same-girl-while-performing-a-hazardous-mission plot all to reminiscent of the silent days (even to vestigial inter-titles.) It is Capra the CalTech graduate, rather than Capra the dramatist who pilots **Dirigible**, a heavier-than-lead saga of lighter-than-air aviation, mainly recommended to zeppelin buffs.

Navy airship expert Jack Holt ("I've spent all my life with balloons") is given the assignment of persuading explorer Louis Rondelle to use a dirigible on his next Antarctic expedition. (Polar exploration was a topical subject when this last of the three Jack Holt-Ralph Graves service sagas directed by Capra was made; Admiral Byrd made the first flight over the South Pole in his 1928-29 expedition.) The Navy's eagerness to stimulate public and Congressional enthusiasm for an appropriations-hungry airship branch extended to the making of the film itself with Capra being given carte blanche for five weeks' shooting at Lakehurst Naval Air Station.

After some wooden expository scenes in Washington, D.C. of stock shots and cheap sets with obviously painted backdrops outside of the winds, **Dirigible** takes a turn for the better as the action switches to Navy Day at Lakehurst. The highlight event is Holt's demonstration of a mid-air hook-up between an airplane and a dirigible.

Piloting the plane for the hook-up is "grandstand aviator" Ralph Graves, fresh from breaking a trans-Atlantic record. **Dirigible** was made just before studio shooting, process fakery, and miniature photography took over completely in 1930's aviation epics; Capra's cast and crew went aloft in actual airships and thrillingly real vistas are seen through the gondola windows.

Holt was actually filmed inside the *Los Angeles*, pride of the Navy's dirigible fleet, while its sister ship, the J-3, used a camera platform to film the long shots of the *Los Angeles* in flight. Graves did his own flying in the film. The shots of Graves singing and conversing with Holt by radio were photographed in

a real plane; the sound for these scenes was taken "live" with the actual radio communications recorded directly onto the soundtrack. (Sound man Eddie Bernids had to hang microphones on the *Los Angeles*' motors so that the exterior shots taken from the J-3 could be intercut with those inside the *Los Angeles*' gondola without a change in pitch.)

The middle portion of **Dirigible** portrays the growing exasperation of Graves' wife (Fay Wray) with his headline-hunting and reckless barnstorming and her determination to leave him for the older, steadier Holt. (The porcelain figurine expressions and finishing school voice and mannerisms that made Ms. Wray the Perfect Victim for the likes of Kong and Lionel Atwill operate here in a vacuum.) Some visual imagination is employed as Capra tilts down from their embrace to reveal them standing amid newspapers announcing Graves' departure for the South Pole as pilot for the Rondelle expedition.

Graves' determination to have Rondelle plant the American flag at the South Pole results in the plane crashing miles from the base camp. (The sequence of shots is almost identical to the plane crash in **Lost Horizon** even to the use of blank frame to produce

a flash of white at the moment of impact.) In its last third, **Dirigible** partly redeems itself with a vivid depiction of the efforts of the failed expedition to survive. There are some effective horror touches: Roscoe Karns has his leg amputated and crawls off in delirium; Rondelle dies and has to be buried in a grave dug into solid ice. By subtle use of screen direction, Capra discloses the slowly dawning realization that after straggling 100 miles through snow and ice to get back to base camp, the survivors have actually walked in a giant circle and have come once more to Rondelle's grave. To cap the horror, Capra makes an early use of the zoom lens (developed by his cinematographer Joseph Walker) to show where the snow has blown away revealing the dead explorer's face glazed in ice.

If **Dirigible** belonged even then to the past, Capra's next film indicated the direction that he and Hollywood would take in the future.

Platinum Blonde, 1931

Platinum Blonde is not really the definitive Jean Harlow star vehicle its title promises (the 1933

Bombshell has that distinction). Actually, Harlow is billed third and cast against type—or miscast—as a stuffy socialite. The film's real distinction is that it was Capra's first from a Robert Riskin screenplay, although Riskin in this case merely happened to be the last of eleven writers (five of them credited) to contribute to the script.

It is typical of 1930's movie-reviewing that not one critic who praised Capra's **It Happened One Night** or **Mr. Deeds Goes to Town** for freshness and originality recognized the roots of both in **Platinum Blonde**. Like Clark Gable in **Night**, Robert Williams (a rising star of the early 30's killed in an auto crash after this, his fourth film role) is a "regular guy" reporter confronting a rich-bitch heiress. Unlike Gable, but very much like Gary Cooper in **Deeds**, he also acquires an echoing mansion and the appellation "Cinderella Man."

Halliwell Hobbes as the butler who defines "puttering" to a dumbstruck Williams has the film's best scene and is one of the earliest in a long line of memorable eccentrics to appear in Capra films. A few other Capra touches are in evidence: the playful-serious bedroom duet as Harlow bends her husband to her will; immediately after Williams' assertion that he "wears the pants," Harlow appears—in pants; a bird-cage is placed in his room to confirm his status as a "bird in a gilded cage."

What keeps **Platinum Blonde** from being one of Capra's better comedies is its chunky, awkward pacing (typical of 1931) in which each scene seems played for itself rather than with a view to the overall continuity. The cutting pace is slow and scenes are played out in long takes, some of several minutes' duration. Capra's regular cameraman Joseph Walker nonetheless finds some opportunities for visual virtuosity: a love scene between Harlow and Williams is seen behind a translucent *moderne* fountain (repeated almost identically in Capra's 1933 **Lady for a Day**); the diffusion-filtered terrace scene in which the chic coiffeurs and diaphanous gowns of rivals Harlow and Loretta Young are set off luminously against the night sky.

American Madness, 1932

Other than the actual changeover from silence to sound no transition in American films was as dramatic as that which took place in the single year from 1931 to 1932. The last vestiges of early-talkie stasis were largely extinguished in favor of the snappy thirties pacing. No film illustrates this better than **American Madness**, Capra's first really good sound

film, which packs into a 75-minute program-picture running time a social documentary of the Depression, a bank robbery whodunit, a drama of marital estrangement, and a spectacular bank panic for a climax, plus the usual leavenings of romance and comedy.

In place of **Platinum Blonde**'s meandering tempo, Capra artificially accelerated the pace of **American Madness**, with the actors playing their scenes ever faster to counter the audience's shrinking attention



MR. DEEDS GOES TO TOWN: Gary Cooper adjusts to the high life

span so that, by the film's climax, lines were being read a twice-normal speed (including an early use of overlapping dialogue.)

Due credit must be given Robert Riskin who, with **American Madness**, emerged to full collaborative status writing the original story as well as the dialogue. (With the exception of **The Bitter Tea of General Yen**, Riskin would script all of Capra's films through **You Can't Take It With You**.) As the Capra-Riskin association flowered they discarded outdated genre elements and created their own genre based on the realities of the day. **American Madness** was too realistic for some; it lasted only two days in Baltimore after the city experienced a bank run.

Walter Huston in one of his Lincolnesque early thirties performances is a bank president who tries to convince his board of directors that true assets consist in people not "stocks and bonds that zig-zag up and down." (Huston's speeches are based on the ideas of Dr. A.H. Giannini, founder of the Bank of America who took a chance on the early movie producers whom conservative lending institutions wouldn't touch—and who provided the \$100,000 loan with which Harry Cohn started Columbia Pictures.) Huston also illuminates the despondent darker side of the Capra idealist in the suicidal passivity with which he regards the bank panic after coming to doubt his wife's fidelity (and in his longing look at the gun in the desk drawer.)

The bank run itself is a tremendous Capra "set piece" and a forerunner of the filibuster scene in **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington** and the rally in the rain in **Meet John Doe**. Capra was already specializing in the psychology of mass opinion and the follow-the-leader mentality of crowds. The panic is started by the bank's own telephone operator in her innocent stupidity. (The role and the actress are lifted directly from Mervyn LeRoy's 1931 **Five Star Final**.) As snowballing rumors exaggerate the size of the bank's deficit (most real bank runs did not emanate from anything so tangible as a robbery) Capra cuts successively shorter clips of all kinds of people, employing dramatically angled close-ups of faces against black backgrounds and fragments of dialogue—even in Chinese—as the normal order gives way to panic.

The mob's convergence on the bank organizes masses of people and the architectural forms of the bank building, ever-higher overhead angles showing the surging crowd. (The Bank of America lent its vice-president for equipment as technical adviser and the main set—a study grey and black, marble and

bronze—is an imposingly real evocation of the pre-F.D.I.C. when banks looked solid even if they weren't. Unemployed tellers from failed banks were hired as extras to re-enact panics they had witnessed and re-create such practices as the paying of withdrawals in dollar bills to stall for time.) The Depression-era scenes of Capra's semi-autobiographical compendium, **It's a Wonderful Life** drew heavily from this film.

For all its frightening authenticity, **American**



Madness never loses its sense of humor. "I wonder what started it all," says the oblivious telephone operator. Pat O'Brien has the film's penultimate line of dialogue, which we won't spoil by giving it away.

The Bitter Tea of General Yen, 1933

Customarily identified as the first film to play the Radio City Music Hall, **The Bitter Tea of General Yen** is one of the masterpieces of the 1930's. Possibly disappointing on a first viewing to someone expecting every Capra film to be an emotional roller coaster of humor and sentiment, this least typical of Capra's works emerges on a second viewing as one of his best. Ironical and complex, **General Yen** reilluminates the **Mr. Deeds/Mr. Smith** films much as Lubitsch's **The Man I Killed** forces re-examination of his image as an expert but frivolous Ruritanian pastry chef.

The opening scenes plunge the audience into a China perpetually ravaged by Civil War. Into this chaos comes New England missionary Megan Davis (Barbara Stanwyck) to wed Dr. Robert Strike, also a missionary. The early scenes of **General Yen** afford Capra ample opportunity to comment on the clash of cultures: Yen (Nils Asther) eating rice with chopsticks while clad in his Westernized military uniform, regimented Chinese servants atonally singing "Here Comes the Bride" for wedding guests who scarcely bother to conceal their contempt for the race they have come to uplift. In an unbroken long take a missionary recounts his efforts to instruct Chinese bandits in the story of Christ—only to find that when they next ambushed a caravan on the desert, the victims were crucified. "That, my friends, is China," concludes the missionary and Capra swish pans to a close-up of an enigmatic, anonymous Oriental face.

The wedding is interrupted when word comes that an orphanage is under attack. To rescue the orphans, Strike obtains from General Yen a "safe conduct" that in Chinese (which he cannot read) actually is, "This fool would rather be with orphans than his bride on his wedding night."

Stanwyck is separated from her fiancé during an air raid, loses consciousness, and is catapulted into captivity. She comes to slowly aboard Yen's private train. Here, Capra mixes the subjective and the objective, dissolving deliriously between Stanwyck's face and fragmentary flashbacks as the evening's wild events replay themselves in her mind. (It is reasonable to assume that Capra had Sternberg's **Shanghai Express** on his mind.) She regains consciousness in Yen's parlor car.

Stanwyck: "You rescued me?"

Yen: "If you want to put it that way."

Yen's designs and Capra's apprenticeship in silent films are revealed in a wordless scene masterful for its syntax of facial expressions. Capra dileneates the triangular relationship of Stanwyck, Yen, and Yen's concubine (Toshia Mori) by cross-cutting from Yen, to Stanwyck, to a seductive close-up of Mori watching knowingly, and finally back to a shot of Stanwyck discreetly lowering her skirt, (counterpointed on the soundtrack by the pulsating rails.)

But the sensual highlight of General Yen occurs as Stanwyck, watching from the balcony of Yen's headquarters, observes in the distance Yen's soldiers carrying off their mistresses to celebrate the Cherry Blossom Moon. This stimulates an erotic fantasy sequence expressionistically portraying Stanwyck's fear (desire?) of being taken sexually by Yen. She is attacked by a Chinese with exaggerated racial characteristics. In a shot simulating her fantasy of his fantasy, she is framed between claw-like hands with fingernails as the camera closes in on her. She is rescued by a masked protector who reveals himself as Yen, now handsomely Westernized and sexually acceptable.

(At the time of Nixon's visit to China, CBS news special perceptively lifted this sequence to depict America's ambivalent attitudes toward that nation.)

Stanwyck intercedes on behalf of Yen's mistress whom he correctly suspects of treason. Unable to understand the girl's "prayer," Stanwyck enables her to transmit a message to Yen's communist enemies.

(In light of America's recent misadventures in Asia, it is worth noting that the dramatic action in **General Yen** twice pivots on the unwillingness of Americans to learn the language of the people they are so concerned with saving.) Capra once said that the real subject of all his films was the Sermon on the Mount. But, in this film, it is Yen's one concession to Christian compassion that brings about his downfall and it is the pagan who teaches the believer something.

General Yen is atypical in style as well as theme. In place of the simple, direct style of lighting that he employed effectively in Capra's comedies, cameraman Joseph Walker went in for some Sternbergian atmospheric chinoiserie, notably in the scene of Stanwyck arising in an opulent bed chamber with silhouetted objets d'art in the foreground. **General Yen** is a rare thing: a film about the Orient that itself suggests some of the calm and subtlety of Oriental art.

Lost Horizon, 1937

When the Museum of Modern Art had a "Frank Capra Day" in conjunction with the publication of the director's autobiography in 1971, the director himself imaginatively compared the Museum's archival work and film showing to Father Perrault's stockpiling of civilization's treasures in **Lost Horizon**. Although Andrew Sarris has described Capra's Shangri-La as "an anti-intellectual's paradise, a rest home for the troubled mind with even then eternal problems of aging and dying miraculously banished from consideration," the idea of eternal youth, while part of the film's popular appeal, is really quite secondary to its theme.

Capra's Shangri-La, significantly presides over by a religious man, plays the same role that the monasteries did during the Middle Ages: the preservation of classical civilization. Put into production just after Mussolini invaded Ethiopia and released just before Nazi planes bombed civilians at Guernica, **Lost Horizon** suggests a Western civilization on the verge of a new Dark Ages.

(One does wonder, though, how Father Perrault's Himalayan minions managed to construct a lamaseri that resembled a cross between a deco/moderne Southern California movie theatre and a particularly ambitious WPA Post Office.)

It will be interesting to see which edition of **Lost Horizon** turns up in the Regency series. For quite a few years, the standard version has been the wartime re-issue, re-titled **Lost Horizon of Shangri-La**

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Frank Capra films at the Regency:
"Mr. Deeds Goes to Town," Feb. 1
"Lost Horizon" and **"The Bitter Tea of General Yen,"** Feb. 10-12
"It Happened One Night," Feb. 16-19
"Dirigible," Feb. 27-Mar. 2
"Platinum Blonde," Mar. 3-5
"American Madness," Mar. 20-21
"Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," Mar. 24-26



LOST HORIZON: Ronald Colman fighting off rebel hordes

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to capitalize on President Roosevelt's claim that the planes which took part in the Doolittle raid on Tokyo in 1942 had been based in "Shangri-La." The chaotic bloodshed which begins the film and which in the original 1937 release was actually a Chinese civil war instigated by British colonialism, is attributed via doctored titles to aggression by the Japanese.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, 1939

Capra's last film for Columbia, **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington**, was, fittingly, the culmination of his work in the 1930's—projecting an archetypal Capra plot and cast (Jimmy Stewart, Jean Arthur, Edward Arnold) to the level of national mythology. As in **Mr. Deeds**, the climax of **Mr. Smith** is essentially courtroom drama on a grandiose scale, but with more arresting imagery than in the earlier film especially in the use of the Senate chamber as a gladiatorial arena.

I have discussed the main visual motifs in this film elsewhere (Film Comment, November 1972) and many writers have used it to smoke out Capra's politics, but there is a seldom-discussed, near-Freudian familial theme which is at the core of the film's emotional life—the child's acquisition of maturity through the search for substitute parents.

In Capra's autobiography, there are many references to his mother as a source of stability and strength, but rather few to his father who was mangled by farm machinery when Capra was still a boy. It is two films starring James Stewart, **Mr. Smith** and **It's a Wonderful Life** that hit closest to home. In these films, it is the son's burden to carry out the unrealized work of the deceased father while the widowed mother—played in both films by Beulah Bondi—provides emotional sustenance.

Thrust into Washington like a little boy looking for his parents, Stewart gradually re-creates Jean Arthur into a mother surrogate. (She herself likens her reaction to his maiden appearance in the Senate to a mother sending her son off to his first day at school "hoping he can lick the other kids.") The paternal void is at first filled by the father's closest friend, the Senator played by Claude Rains and, as he proves false, by an even more commanding father figure: the statue of the long-dead Abraham Lincoln with all the abstractions it mythologizes.

Mr. Smith's battle against the Washington political Establishment mirrored Capra's own battle to free the producer-director from the restrictions of big studio compromises. In 1939, Capra as president of the Screen Director's Guild successfully led the fight to obtain recognition from the moguls of the Guild as bargaining agent. In a way, **Mr. Smith** is a metaphor for Hollywood's own political upheavals during the era of the New Deal, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, and the unionization of the studios. (The screenwriter of **Mr. Smith**, Sidney Buchman, was subsequently identified as a Communist and black-listed.) The techniques used by publisher/industrialist Edward Arnold to crush the people's movement in **Mr. Smith** are reminiscent of the tactics employed by the Los Angeles business Establishment and the movie producers, notably William Randolph Hearst and Louis B. Mayer, in frustrating Upton Sinclair's 1934 bid for the California governorship.