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| Capra, Frank (1897-1991) |
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| Frank Capra was born to an Italian family in Palermo, Italy, and raised in Los Angeles. With films characterized by nimble narratives, idealistic characters, and happy endings, he became one of the most influential Hollywood directors of the 1930s and 1940s, and one of the first to be acknowledged as an auteur by subsequent generations of critics. His name was written above the title of his films, a circumstance that signals his status as a star director. He later titled his autobiography *The Name above the Title.* |
| Frank Capra was born to an Italian family in Palermo, Italy, and raised in Los Angeles. With films characterized by nimble narratives, idealistic characters, and happy endings, he became one of the most influential Hollywood directors of the 1930s and 1940s, and one of the first to be acknowledged as an auteur by subsequent generations of critics. His name was written above the title of his films, a circumstance that signals his status as a star director. He later titled his autobiography *The Name above the Title.*  Capra’s romantic comedy *It Happened One Night*, with Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, earned five Academy Award nominations and is credited with changing the way Americans looked at both fashion and relationships in the cinema. The film tells the story of a bus ride from Miami to New York. Claudette Colbert plays a runaway heiress who falls in love with a middle-class news reporter. The film sought to encourage audiences during the Great Depression. In the end, the passengers of a bus start singing together, thereby ‘inventing a fleeting moment of hope where they can forget their problems and become united as community’ (Levy 2005).  Capra’s protagonists are usually naïve Americans surviving against impossible odds in the face of corrupt politics and business practices; they were most emblematically incarnated by his main male leads, Gary Cooper and James Stewart. Both play innocent, naïve characters who win out against much stronger antagonists after experiencing considerable suffering, in such titles as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946). *Lost Horizon* (1937) is a fantasy film that influenced generations of filmmakers, including Steven Spielberg. Capra’s films tell stories of hope and of the survival of idealism in an essentially cruel world.  During World War Two, Capra directed a series of documentaries to support the American war effort. Called *Why We Fight*, the series had lasting impact on documentary film style. He founded the independent studio Republic Pictures to produce *It’s a Wonderful Life* – now considered his masterpiece – but this ended in financial disaster. The company went bankrupt and Capra was seen as a liability by the studios. In addition, during the late 1940s and 1950s, Capra was also disillusioned with the HUAC witch-hunts in Hollywood.  Link: https://archive.org/details/WhyWeFightPreludeToWarPt11943  1 The full-length version of *Why We Fight: Prelude to War*  Capra’s last years were devoted to making educational and industrial films. From 1952 to 1956, Capra made four science-related television specials in color: *Our Mr. Sun* (1956), *Hemo the Magnificent* (1957), *The Strange Case of the Cosmic Rays* (1957), and *Meteora: The Unchained Goddess* (1958). Capra also made industrial and scientific documentaries on space: *Rendezvous in Space* (1964), his last film, was shown at the 1964 New York World's Fair and was screened at the New York Hall of Science after the Fair ended.  Link: https://archive.org/details/our\_mr\_sun  2 *Our Mr. Sun* Partial Filmography Capra made over fifty films; this list of works is necessarily partial.  *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933)  *It Happened One Night* (1934)  *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936)  *You Can't Take It with You (*1938)  *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (*1939)  *Meet John Doe (*1941)  *Why We Fight* (1942-44)  *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944)  *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946)  *State of the Union* (1948)  *Pocketful of Miracles* (1961)  *Rendezvous in Space* (1964) |
| Further reading:  (Capra)  (Levy)  (McBride)  (Poague)  (Smoodin) |