1

Anatomy of a House Director: Capra, Cohn, and Columbia in the 1930s

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Whether filmmaking success is measured in terms of box-office revenues, critical and popular acclaim, or Academy statuettes, Frank Capra was without question the most successful American movie director during the 1930s. In a meteoric rise that coincided with Hollywood's so-called Golden Age, Capra directed a remarkable string of hits: *Lady for a Day* (1933), *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Lost Horizon* (1937), *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). All were huge moneymakers for Columbia Pictures, which shed its Poverty Row stigma during the 1930s to compete with the top studios. All six films received Oscar nominations for best picture, and five brought Capra nominations for best director. *It Happened One Night* and *You Can't Take It with You* went on to win Academy Awards for best picture, and Capra himself won three Oscars for best director in a five-year span (1934–38), a feat unmatched in industry history.

Not surprisingly, Capra's success also won him considerable clout in Hollywood. He served as president of the Motion Picture Academy from 1935 to 1939 and then became president of the newly formed Screen Directors Guild, mounting an outspoken campaign for directorial authority and creative freedom. Capra

had been battling studio boss Harry Cohn for those same rights and privileges, and in 1939 he finally won them—though not at Columbia. After a decade as Cohn's top contract director and principal combatant, Capra bolted Columbia and signed a deal as an "in-house independent" producer-director at Warner Bros., allowing him more creative, administrative, and financial freedom than virtually any other filmmaker in Hollywood.

Capra's defection was not unexpected, given his success and his well-publicized clashes with Cohn. What was unexpected was his steady, inexorable decline after leaving Columbia. Capra had a somewhat tentative start at Warners with *Meet John Doe* (1941) and *Arsenic and Old Lace* (produced in 1941, released in 1944) and then left Hollywood when the war broke out to produce a series of Why We Fight documentaries for the government. Capra's postwar tour de force, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), produced through his independent company, Liberty Films, suggested a return to his 1930s form. Remarkably, however, Capra managed only five more features during the remainder of his career, and none of them, not even the remakes of two earlier Columbia hits, had anywhere near the commercial, popular, or critical success of his 1930s output.

Capra's postwar decline scarcely affected his critical reputation. On the contrary, Andrew Sarris anointed him "a genuine auteur" in 1968, and Capra came to be regarded as an exemplary Hollywood individualist, a director who overcame the avaricious, dehumanizing machinery of the industry to express his distinctive "vision" and personal style.[1] And though auteurism has declined in the face of more sophisticated approaches to Hollywood's industrial and institutional history, film critics and historians still celebrate Capra as the visionary artist who put Columbia on the industry map. Neal Gabler, for example, in his 1988 study of the Hollywood moguls and the studios they built, *An Empire of Their Own*, posited that "it is safe to say that no other studio was as dependent on a single artist as Columbia would be on Capra, and no other studio was built through a single talent the way Columbia was built through Capra's."[2] Ethan Mordden, in another 1988 study of the industry, *The Hollywood Studios*, wrote that "the reason for Columbia's graduation from quickie to major status was a

director who worked for peanuts in order to command his films autonomously. This was Frank Capra, destined to be one of Hollywood's greatest self-defining talents."[3]

There is a certain irony in this latter statement, since the Capra mythos was most emphatically self-defined in the filmmaker's autobiography, *The Name above the Title*. Published in 1971 as auteurism was just taking hold and with its guiding "one man, one film" epithet planted every two or three pages, Capra's memoir contributed mightily to the romanticized conception of the movie director as lone artist battling the system. "Regardless of the origin of a film idea—I made it mine," asserted Capra. "Regardless of differences with studio heads, screenwriters, or actors—the thought, heart, and substance of a film were mine."[4] After his mid-1930s triumphs, *It Happened One Night* and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, Capra claimed that he could feel "the 'one man, one film' concept nearing fruition; at a time when the power-structure of executive control was at its zenith, I was the maverick demanding total control. That meant total responsibility."[5]

The antagonist in this scenario, of course, was Harry Cohn, the embodiment of executive control at Columbia. Capra portrayed Cohn as more of an impediment than an advocate in his climb to greatness, someone who hitched his studio to Capra's rising star. "I had to hit a home run every time I came to bat to keep [Columbia] out of the cellar," recalled Capra. "Atlas carried only the world—I was carrying Harry Cohn on my back."[6]

In retrospect, it's quite remarkable that Capra's account sold so well—and that it continues to sell, as Gabler's and Mordden's accounts well indicate. The fact is that neither Capra nor his work can really be understood or appreciated in terms of personal style and individual authorship. Nor can Columbia's emergence as an industry power during the 1930s be attributed to its Capra-directed releases. This is by no means a dismissal of the notion of directorial authorship—a notion that was even more important to top movie directors in the 1930s and 1940s than to auteurists in the 1960s and 1970s. As we will see in Capra's negotiations with David O. Selznick, United Artists, Warner Bros., and others when he decided to go independent in the late 1930s, individual authority and creative control were crucial bargaining chips during Hollywood's classical era. It is significant that other studio contract di-

rectors like William Wellman, John Ford, and William Wyler made the successful transition to independent producer-director status at about the same time. But Capra's steady decline after leaving Columbia suggests that he was a filmmaker whose talents, personality, and working methods were best suited to a studio-based production process. His "one man, one film" bombast aside, Capra may have been essentially a house director, a collaborative artist whose vision and artistry were inextricably wed to Columbia's 1930s house style.

The Rise of Columbia Pictures

As with the other Hollywood studios, Columbia's house style coalesced during the early 1930s, mainly because of the effects of the Depression. The Capra films were key markers in Columbia's output, of course, but they represented only one facet of the company's overall production and marketing strategy, which actually took shape during the company's decade-long rise to power during the 1920s. Columbia began its corporate life in 1920 as the CBC Film Sales Company, a modest operation created by Joe Brandt, Jack Cohn, and Harry Cohn.[7] Brandt and Jack Cohn had worked together in advertising years earlier, before Jack decided in 1908 to join Carl Laemmle's IMP, the forerunner of Universal Pictures. Cohn learned the business end of the industry operating out of the New York office of Laemmle's bicoastal operation. In 1918 Jack's younger brother Harry, a former vaudevillian and song peddler in New York, joined Universal and was sent to the West Coast, where he was schooled in motion picture production. In 1920, Jack convinced Harry and Joe Brandt to join him in creating CBC (Cohn-Brandt-Cohn) to produce the kind of short subjects that Universal and other companies included on their programs. Seed money of $100,000 for CBC came from the Bank of Italy, a California-based concern run by A. H. and A. P. Giannini, two second-generation Italian-Americans vital to Columbia's development. Brandt and Jack Cohn ran CBC and handled sales out of New York, while Harry set up production on Hollywood's legendary Poverty Row, a block-long stretch of low-rent offices and studios on Beechwood Drive between Sunset Boulevard and Fountain Avenue.

CBC was successful enough that, in January 1924, the company went public and was incorporated as Columbia Pictures Corporation. Company headquarters remained in New York, with Brandt as president and Jack Cohn as his vice president in charge of sales. Harry Cohn remained in Hollywood as vice president in charge of production, with sole authority over the studio. Columbia expanded both its distribution and production operations in the next few years, developing a national merchandising setup and moving tentatively into feature film production. Columbia also began absorbing its Poverty Row environs until it encompassed most of the city block bordered by Sunset, Beechwood, Fountain, and Gower—thus the appellation "Gower Gulch." By the late 1920s Columbia Pictures, despite its low-rent facility and generally low-grade output, was beginning to look very much like a major Hollywood power, standing alongside the studios that would dominate the movie industry for decades to come.

Of those studio powers, Columbia most resembled Warner Bros. In fact, the similarities and differences between Columbia and Warners are quite illuminating. Both companies started virtually from scratch in Hollywood just after World War I, when powerhouses like Paramount and First National were already fully integrated companies with nationwide theater chains, global distribution networks, and factories on the West Coast turning out fifty to sixty feature films annually. Columbia and Warner Bros., conversely, began as small companies distributing via states-rights exchanges, gradually developing both the production and distribution systems to attain major studio status.[8]

Another obvious similarity between Columbia and Warners was the "family run" aspect. Both the Cohns and the Warners came from families of East European Jewish immigrants with four sons, and in each case only two of the sons (named Harry and Jack in both companies, coincidentally) remained heavily involved in the movie business, with the elder sibling running the New York office while his younger brother ran the studio. Thus, fraternal seniority reflected the hierarchy of authority in the industry, with the corporate headquarters in New York directing the "factory" in L.A. The older brother in each case—Jack Cohn and Harry Warner—was fiscally conservative, which meant limited operating budgets and cautious market strategies. Rather than the costly and

highly differentiated prestige pictures that companies like Paramount, Fox, and MGM were turning out, Columbia and Warners relied on standardized story formulas even among their top features. What's more, both stressed contemporary genres—urban crime films and melodramas at Warners, romantic comedies at Columbia—which were more economical and efficient to produce.

Studio bosses Harry Cohn and Jack Warner also had a good deal in common. Both were ruthless autocrats who converted fiscal restraint into oppressive filmmaking policies; they did constant battle with their top talent, especially their directors, writers, and stars. Both Harry Cohn and Jack Warner overworked and ruthlessly typecast their contract players, and both routinely put their contract talent on suspension for failing to cooperate. Interestingly, however, both studio bosses had a tendency to hire left-leaning writers, in part because of the renegade status of each company and also because of the topical, socially conscious nature of their output. In fact, Warners and Columbia were home to far more blacklisted writers (and members of the infamous Hollywood Ten) than was any other studio.

Both Harry Cohn and Jack Warner also did constant battle with the New York office, which was a function of sibling rivalry as well as of their efforts to secure larger operating budgets and more authority over sales and marketing. But here the Columbia-Warners comparison breaks down. Unlike Columbia, Warner Bros. was among the industry's elite "integrated majors." Along with Paramount, Fox, MGM, and RKO, Warners not only produced and distributed its own motion pictures, but also owned a theater chain and thus had a guaranteed outlet for its products. Columbia, along with Universal and United Artists, was considered a "major minor" (or "nonintegrated major") because, even though the company owned no theater chain, it did develop a distribution system to complement its production operation. This rendered Columbia a legitimate Hollywood power, since distribution was widely considered the most crucial element of the industry's production-distribution-exhibition process. Indeed, the five integrated majors and the three major minors were referred to as the "Big Eight" because of their complete domination of movie distribution.

Columbia's nonintegrated status put added pressure on its West