



Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film
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Excerpts from the Introduction

Peter Warne is a son of a bitch.

There is absolutely no reason anyone should like Warne. He is a fast-talking cynic with no regard for the truth, a brash opportunist who will stop at nothing to get what he wants, an amoral, alcoholic rogue who will lie, cheat, do anything to get a scoop for his newspaper, a big-city, wisecracking shyster who talks fast, thinks fast, works fast, often lives by his wits, and won't take any crap from anyone.

Yet as played by actor Clark Gable, written by Robert Riskin, and directed by Frank Capra in *It Happened One Night* (1934), he is irresistible.

Peter Warne may be cocky, but you sense he is a good guy, maybe even an idealist who has a love-hate relationship with the newspaper world of scoundrels; he may secretly even want to do what he considers to be the noble thing and quit the newspaper racket. He is, as pop culture social commentators have put it, the roguish shyster trying to become a knight in shining armor, a part of the corruption of the city yet somehow above it, a combination of the illicit appeal of sin with the moral righteousness of being superior to those around him.¹

Peter Warne is a prototype of the male newspaper reporter in motion pictures, an image of the news hawk,² part of a gallery of journalists created out of past stereotypes and presented as fresh and seemingly spontaneously by Frank Capra, one of the most popular American directors in film history, and his writers, who were responsible for much of what Americans thought they knew about their journalists in the twentieth century. Those familiar images still focus our

thinking today – whether they be the energetic, opportunistic reporter who would do anything for a scoop; or the cynical big-city newspaper editor committed to getting the story first even if it means strangling his reporters to do it; or the tough, sarcastic sob sister trying desperately to outdo her male competition; or the morally bankrupt, ruthless publisher who uses the power of the press for his or her own ends.

Americans's perceptions of journalism and journalists were indelibly imprinted on the national psyche through the popular Capra films, which brought reporters, columnists, editors and media tycoons to flesh-and-blood life from the late 1920s through the 1930s and 1940s and into the early 1950s.

These images of the journalist, complete with every cliché of the newspaper world, originated in hundreds of novels and silent films in the early years of the twentieth century. They were polished up, honed, and presented to the public in unforgettable ways by Capra and his writers, who were either former journalists or playwrights who spent a good deal of time with newspaper friends and were no strangers to the language and mores of the city room.

Although there were many other films involving journalists, including *The Front Page* and *Five Star Final*, two popular Broadway plays turned into seminal talking films in 1931, few had the popularity or influence of the Capra films.³ With the exception of the multiple images in film of gossip columnists based on Walter Winchell,⁴ the images of the journalist the public remembered came primarily from Capra films.

In nine major films – starting with *The Power of the Press* in 1928, continuing through the much-copied *It Happened One Night* in 1934, and ending with the lackluster *Here Comes the Groom* in 1951 – Capra and his writers created big-city smart-alecky journalists and their greedy bosses who would come to represent everything the public believed about the mass media. Many of the archetypes created in these films were reinvented in later decades and, with little variation, turned into radio and television newspeople who were just as circulation-hungry and cynical⁵ as their prototypes. Frank Capra made more than fifty films, thirty-six of them feature films between 1926 and 1961, and social critics believe he “had a profound emotional and psychological effect on more than three generations of American audiences.”⁶

Endnotes

¹ Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1981), p. 35.

² The influence of the image of the reporter that the movies have reinforced since their inception is summed up by Erika Stone, a journalism teacher played by Doris Day in *Teacher's Pet* (1958). She knows the image so well that she can size up a veteran journalist without ever having seen him: "He works, I'm sure, with a cigarette dangling out of his mouth...in a suit that he hasn't had pressed in months. And, of course, he has the battered old hat that he wouldn't give up for the Crown of England. Poker comes easy to him but, oh boy, he drinks hard, and after he's had a few he'll always tell you, 'Why, I never even got to high school, and I'm proud of it.' ...Oh, he boasts about his exploits with the ladies. Of course, he'll never marry anyone but his job. In short, he's a perfect example of that dying race, the unpressed gentleman of the press."

³ Capra films always did relatively well at the box office and some were genuine hits. They have had a successful afterlife on television and home video. *Platinum Blonde* firmly established Jean Harlow's stardom and would have made Robert Williams a star if he hadn't died after the film was released. Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992), p. 231. *It Happened One Night* made 1934 the most profitable year for Columbia since the conversion to talkies, setting a house record for an opening day at the Radio City Music Hall, and it played repeat engagements well into 1935. It won Academy Awards for best picture, director, writer, actor, and actress. Joseph McBride, pp. 309, 724. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* received great popular and critical acclaim, bringing in more than a million dollars in rentals in its first release in 1936, and winning Capra another Academy Award for best director. Joseph McBride, pp. 348, 725. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* opened strongly at the box office, eventually amassing rentals of nearly \$4 million. Joseph McBride, p. 424. *Meet John Doe* was not a box-office hit by Capra standards but did well enough compared to other releases that year. *State of the Union* ranked fourteenth on *Variety's* 1948 list with rentals of \$3.5 million dollars, more than respectable if not a commercial hit. Joseph McBride, pg. 547. *Here Comes the Groom* finished nineteenth on *Variety's* 1951 list with rentals of more than \$2.5 million. Joseph McBride, p. 559.

⁴ The public was aware of Walter Winchell, the powerful, real-life Broadway gossip columnist who had a national audience and could destroy or create careers overnight. Movie audiences were eager to see what life was like for these big-city columnists who wielded so much power. Winchell played himself in two films, *Wake Up and Live* (1937), followed by *Love and Hisses* (1937), and twenty years later he was the know-it-all narrator in the television series *The Untouchables*. In 1998, Stanley Tucci played Walter Winchell in the biographical drama *Winchell*, showing the rise and fall of the gossip columnist and reporter.

⁵ Usually, the reporter or editor's cynicism is transformed either, in the words of one historian, "into a sense of commitment or...an escape from the profession," Richard R. Ness, *From Headline Hunter to Superman: A Journalism Filmography* (Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, 1997), p. 5.

⁶ Ray Carney, *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra* (Wesleyan University Press, published by the University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, 1996), p. xix.