

Capra, Smith, and Doe: Filming the American Hero

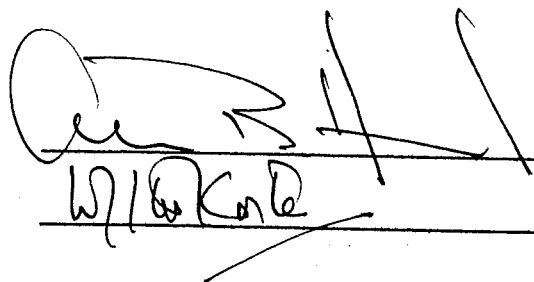
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## Thesis Abstract

Various thinkers and artists, Emerson among them, struggled with the appropriateness of hero-worship in a democratic society. Concerns included potential abuses of power; inequality; and the people's ability *en masse* to act wisely without the guidance of an exceptional individual. At the same time, others argued that America has a special need for heroes. These critics contended that America is a 'placeless' country, due to westward expansion, and a 'fatherless' one as well, due to an absence of traditional European hierarchies. Placelessness and fatherlessness make the country's hero figures and collective symbols more important in maintaining a sense of national continuity.

The hero figure in America is a composite of several individuals whose qualities have been simplified and idealized. The qualities of the quintessential American hero include an un-aristocratic background; 'practical' knowledge and native intelligence; vigor and athleticism; a lack of pretension; an aversion to personal power; and experience with failure.

This figure appears in our politics, literature, music, folklore, and in the modern popular arts like film. Director Frank Capra gave many of his main characters the qualities of the quintessential American hero, and he attempted to cast his own life in this mold when he wrote his autobiography.

Capra, however, shared the reservations of others (notably Emerson) about heroes in a democracy, and about the people's ability to act in the absence of heroes. These reservations are at the heart of two Capra films, **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington** and **Meet John Doe**.

In **Mr. Smith**, Capra questions the traditional qualities of the American hero. In an increasingly institutionalized and media-mediated culture, the traits Americans have prized in their heroes cripple the hero's ability to successfully challenge societal evils. In **Doe**, the breakdown of these heroic qualities is complete and the people are left with neither a hero nor Capra's faith that they will be able to act wisely in the hero's absence.

Despite this, the heroic qualities traditionally prized by Americans still carry enormous weight. A 'coda' to this thesis examines Capraesque heroes in contemporary politics and the arts.

The full text of this thesis is available on an Internet Web site. It may be viewed at

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA97/CAPRA/home.html>