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**"What's the Matter with Capra?"
Sullivan's Travels and
the Popular Front**

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"What's the Matter with Capra?"

Sullivan's Travels and the Popular Front

From two positions that rarely intersect, the 1930s is remembered as a golden age. Film lovers hark back to the genius of the classic Hollywood studio system, climaxing in arguably the film capitol's greatest years, 1939-1940, with such movies as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Stagecoach*, *Destry Rides Again*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *The Philadelphia Story*.¹ The 1930s was also the golden age of the American left, the great exception in American politics that brought the United States closer to a social democratic potential than at any time in its history. New Deal programs provided jobs, economic protection, and a vital public sector. "The most important social legislation in American history – the Social Security and Wagner acts"² – generated major party electoral class cleavages unprecedented in the United States. The mass organization of industrial workers into the CIO, which also put class divisions at the center of American consciousness, issued forth in the first permanent trade unions of factory hands and the greatest triumph of working class struggle in American history. And the anti-fascist, pro-New Deal, pro-labor alliance of mental and manual workers, liberals, Socialists, and Communists inflected political, economic, and cultural life in the direction of the Popular Front.

How to understand this conjunction of classic Hollywood and the Popular Front? Was it merely a coincidence? Was mass media entertainment an escape from conflict-ridden depression America or a legitimate mode of cheering up the populace

1 Hollywood itself proclaimed 1939 "The Greatest Year in Motion Pictures." For agreement that 1939 was the *annus mirabilis* of what has come to be known as the Classical Hollywood Cinema" see Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (New York, Scribner, 1993) 1; Robert B. Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1995), 1; Peter Bogdanovitch, *Pieces of Time: Peter Bogdanovitch on the Movies* (New York, Arbor House, 1973) 154-59; and, more generally Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York, Pantheon, 1988).

2 Thomas Ferguson, "Industrial Conflict and the Coming of the New Deal: The Triumph of Multinational Liberalism in America," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1989), 4.

during hard times? Did it provide symbolic social security in the service or at the expense of political change? Does the Popular Front deserve a share of the credit for Hollywood's golden age? Different motion pictures will answer these questions in different ways, but the only film actually to ask them was Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941).

Self-reflexive from beginning to end, *Sullivan's Travels* is a film about the effort of a director of escapist comedies to make a Popular Front film. It enlists in the New Deal project of demand stimulation to recover from depression by foregrounding mass consumers in their most spectacular appearance, as constituting the motion picture audience.³

The question of the audience, of popular desire, preoccupied alike New Deal Keynesians, capitalists and their allies in the mass consumption industrial sector, Hollywood moguls, and Popular Front intellectuals. "The film critic who proceeds from any criteria other than the interests of the audience and operates to any conclusions than the effects on the audience, must immediately discover the bankruptcy of personal judgment," wrote Sidney Kaufman in the second issue (1940) of the short-lived Popular Front quarterly *Films*. But behind this self-proclaimed democratic attention to audience lay the worrisome question of how film technique, the other topic that Kaufman's film critic must not ignore, was to mediate between the people as desiring subjects and documentary objects of film. How could motion pictures simultaneously display the people's world accurately, give audiences what they wanted to see, and move the masses to action? Could films be "an art form – and social manifestation" at the same time?⁴

Sullivan's Travels' extreme self-consciousness about the Popular Front motion picture critic's issues – film form, genre conventions, and mass audience – seems to confine motion pictures to being about themselves, a conclusion that would break the connection the Popular Front was trying to establish between Hollywood and the outside world. The director within the film wants to open up a Popular Front window

3 Brenda Wineapple, "Sullivan's Travels," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, **NEED CITE**, the one critic to have put the audience at the center of the film, comes to very different conclusions than we do.

4 Kaufman was reviewing Margaret Thorpe, **CITE** See Sidney Kaufman, **CITE** and Sawyer Falk, "Towards a New Ethical Base," *Films*, November 1939, 5.

on society; the director of the film turns that window into a self-reflecting mirror. In displaying the movie audience to itself, or so we will argue, the motion picture that results cuts against the grain of proponents of consumer democracy from 1930s reform intellectuals and advertisers to contemporary reception theorists. But in so far as *Sullivan's Travels* forces self-awareness on the mass viewing public, far from rendering itself politically irrelevant it exposes what drives us from outside Hollywood to want to occupy the spectator position.

By carrying to a totalizing extreme classic Hollywood intertextuality (present in the plots of backstage musicals, in comedies' inside jokes referencing other films, and more generally through star aura and generic coding), and by putting the audience into the picture, *Sullivan's Travels* shatters the realistic illusionism of the classic studio product.⁵ As self-conscious about the problem of representation as was *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the greatest documentary of Popular Front America, *Sullivan's Travels* responds in the opposite way from the book of reportage, photographs, and self-questioning meditations that appeared shortly before the release of the Sturges film. Shot at the end of the domestic Popular Front, and moving from its films of popular life to a theatricality that conspires with the dark forces it is supposed to holding at bay, *Sullivan's Travels* stands as the American *Rules of the Game*.⁶

5 Compare E. Rubinstein, "Hollywood's Travels: Sturges and Sullivan," *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 47 (Winter 1977-78), 50-52. Although David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York, Columbia UP, 1965) has rightly been charged with heavily overstating classic Hollywood's commitment to the invisibility of the form, *Sullivan's Travels* nonetheless remains exceptional within the practice of the studio system.

6 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1960 [1941]); Geneviève Joutard, *Le Cinéma du Front Populaire* (Paris, Lierre Lherminier, 1986), 161-64. It was Agee who, reviewing films for *Time* and *The Nation* in the 1940s, set the durable terms on which Sturges has come to be appreciated. For the writer's intensely ambivalent investment in the director, as if the two had made the opposite choices – commitment vs. comedy – out of one common ground, see James Agee, *Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1964), 73-76, 115-17, 342-45, 352-53, and Brian Henderson ed., *Five Screenplays by Preston Sturges* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985), 16-21.

II

To the question of the relationship between the two 1930s arenas of political and social action on the one hand and mass culture (for our purposes Hollywood) on the other, scholars have offered three opposing responses. The first has been, don't ask. In most writing on the Depression decade, Hollywood rests inside one watertight compartment, the New Deal and the Popular Front in another, so that any relationship between them would be purely coincidental. In Warren Susman's variant, "While traditional historians generally see the period as the age of Franklin D. Roosevelt, cultural historians are more likely to call it the age of Mickey Mouse."⁷

Challenging the bifurcation of political and economic historiography from film studies, a second, old left orientation begins by contrasting New Deal problem-solving and/or the Popular Front's concern with the real conditions of American life to Hollywood escapism. That dichotomy then generates attention to the efforts of the Popular Front to influence Hollywood.⁸ A third, new left or post-new left point of view finds synergy between Hollywood and the New Deal, what Guliana Muscio calls a "reciprocal attraction" connecting 1930s politics to mass communication. The old left, paying particular attention to the extra-textual political allegiances of filmmakers, sees class conflict at the points of production, including Hollywood. Post-new left scholars, by contrast, examine the communal potential of consumer society. They trace the New Deal project of a "more general economic recovery program premised on expanded mass consumption" from the "consumer economy"

7 Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Pantheon, 1984), 197. Even though this observation follows a discussion of *Sullivan's Travels*, the film – with a Mickey Mouse cartoon at its center – whose investigation of the relationship between political reform and Hollywood entertainment will be our subject, Susman's seminal work does not so much heal the split he identifies as exemplify it.

8 See the special "Hollywood Number" of *Direction*, Vol. 3 (April 1940), whose perspective is carried forward with far greater sophistication in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, Verso, 1996), 362-422. See also Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' Wars* (New York, Knopf, 1981). Thom Anderson makes a convincing old left case for the role of Communists in creating the variant of film noir he calls "film gris" in the face of the postwar blacklist, but the movies he discusses emerge out of the breakdown of the Popular Front after World War II and belong to it neither in period nor in tone. See Thom Anderson, "Red Hollywood," in Suzanne Ferguson and Barbara Groseclose eds., *Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society* (Ohio State, Columbus, 1985), 183-91.

into consumer culture. To quote Susman again, "The shift to a culture of sight and

sound" – preeminently talking pictures – "created a special community of all Americans." In this view Hollywood helped create a shared American way of life, even a working class Americanism, that underpinned trade union organizing across ethnic lines and the New Deal coalition. From one perspective New Deal values found their way into film. Looked at inversely, the symbiosis between the entertainment and political capitals subsumed the New Deal under Hollywood instead of the reverse.⁹

Unlike those writing from a post-new left perspective, old left scholars emphasize the Popular Front as a specific political formation. Michael Denning has brilliantly shown (with Communist Party founder Louis Fraina/Lewis Corey as his American Antonio Gramsci) that the Gramscian project of creating a left national popular culture generated a cultural front during the New Deal.¹⁰ However crucial was the 1935 change in the Communist Party line (responding to the Nazi consolidation of power and the fascist threat), Denning rightly derives the turn to culture from the postwar political defeats suffered by the international left. The national situations in Italy and the United States were by the 1930s doubly opposed,

9 The quotes are from Guiliiana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia, Temple UP, 1997), **GET PAGE**; Michael A. Bernstein, "Why the Great Depression Was Great: Toward a New Understanding of the Interwar Economic Crisis in the United States," and Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, 34-35, 68-72, and from Susman, *Culture as History*, 160. See also Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1930-1939* (New York, Cambridge UP, 1990); Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1989); Lawrence W. Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression," and "Hollywood's Washington: Film Images of National Politics During the Great Depression," in *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York, Oxford, 1993), 206-55; Lary May, "Making the American Way: Moderne Theatres, Audiences, and the Film Industry 1929-1945," *Prospects*, Vol. 12 (1987), 89-124, and "Movie Star Politics: The Screen Actors' Guild, Cultural Conversion, and the Hollywood Red Scare," in May ed., *Reconstituting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), 125-53; Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York, Harper, 1972); Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London, British Film Institute, 1983); Mark Roth, "Some Warners Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal," in Rick Altman ed., *Genre: The Musical* (London, Routledge, 1981), 42-56; For the comparable view that "swing represented the cultural expression of the New Deal in music," see David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1994), and Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), quoted p. 257. We label the orientation of the above authors post-new left so as never to invoke (except in this one sentence) the much overused talismanic phrases "postmodern" and "cultural studies," which would not constitute the self-descriptions of most of the writers cited here.

10 Denning, *Cultural Front*, 98-104.

however, complicating the retrospective transfer of a Gramscian perspective to America. On the one hand, whereas Gramsci could imagine that an Italian national popular would be oppositional to the fascism that ruled Italy, the American Popular Front benefitted and suffered from the New Deal embrace. On the other hand, whereas – at least according to Gramsci – the absence of a national revolution had deprived Italy of a deeply-engrained national popular culture, leaving space for nationalist cultural mobilization under the auspices of the left, the United States produced in the wake of its revolution the first mass national culture in the world. Its original central forms, the frontier myth and blackface minstrelsy, derived from America's twin histories of racial domination, and its locus by the 1930s was Hollywood.¹¹

Motion pictures may have been a contested terrain in the early years of the twentieth century, with diverse sites of local, inexpensive production generating countless films of working class life.¹² In a devilish historical irony, however, by the time that the New Deal, the CIO, and the Popular Front were (not to minimize the severe limits within which they operated) setting the political agenda, the Left confronted in Hollywood a centralized, conservative, enormously pervasive and successful site of the national popular. In the United States, therefore, the cultural front was not faced with creating something that did not exist but rather had to transform something that all too palpably did – an effort that was called by one of the men who would come to lead the fight against it, "the Communist plan to take over the motion picture business." That figure, whose two giant steps toward the White House were taken first as President of the Screen Actor's Guild by supporting the House UnAmerican Activities Committee blacklist against the old left, and second by getting elected Governor of California against the new left, was, of course,

11 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith eds. (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1991); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Wesleyan UP, 1973); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Working Class* (N.Y., Oxford, 1993); Michael Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1991), and *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996).

12 Stephen J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1998).

Ronald Reagan.¹³ Because of the shadow he casts backward over old and post-new left conceptions of the national popular, we'll come back to him.

The effort to find Popular Front personell and messages in 1930s films attaches the old left to its enemies, Reagan and HUAC. To be sure, by the late 1930s the movie colony had a higher concentration of Communists and fellow travelers than any American neighborhood outside Greenwich Village. Yet the motion picture business, the fount of 1930s popular culture, is also the most resistant locale for claims about the sway of the Popular Front over cultural production. Strikes, political change, and (until the outbreak of World War II) anti-fascism are almost entirely absent from the depression Hollywood screen.¹⁴

Instead of ferreting out Popular Front influence in Hollywood, then, better to begin with two working assumptions that subvert the old left's Popular Front political starting point by extending it. First postulate a primacy of the political field over mass culture that takes the form not simply of a programmatic cultural front in the 1930s, but also of the entrance of politics into significant cultural work through broad categories of seeing rather than specific calls to action. Those ways of seeing would extend to apparently apolitical films made by Popular Front members, on the one hand, and on the other to films whose creators (like Preston Sturges) did not consider themselves on the left at all. Directors and films not caught up in reform meliorism might well offer a more radical perspective on the United States in the 1930s – be more attuned to its pleasures and pains – than would self-consciously Popular Front motion pictures.

Understanding the political as angle of vision rather than agenda for action has particular force – this is our second postulate – at the end of the depression decade. Cultural historians of the 1930s avert their eyes from the class struggles, political battles, and legislative achievements that distinctively characterize the New Deal decade. After the 1937 recession, however, and just as the Popular Front was achieving its greatest Hollywood density, domestic reform reached an impasse. "We

13 Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), 1-43.

14 For the contrary view, see May, "Movie Star Politics." May never looks at actual films, however. For the Communist presence in Hollywood, see, among many other sources, May, "Movie Star Politics," and Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the*

are living in a wave and an age and an era of reaction," Philip Murray told the CIO Executive Board in 1939.¹⁵ The New Deal had failed to end the Depression, fascism was on the march abroad and a resurgent conservatism at home, the Soviet alternative to capitalism had produced the collectivization and Moscow purge mass murders and the Stalin-Hitler pact, and anti-fascism as the fight for domestic social justice was giving way to patriotic celebrations of democratic America that mobilized the country for war. The mass consumption, state-directed, public social order envisioned by New Deal reformers in response to the 1937 depression would come to pass in war production, private spending, and the extension of visual popular culture from the public motion picture theater to the domestic television-enhanced home. By the end of 1941 Hollywood was mobilizing the country for war; it was around that celebratory nationalism that the Popular Front reconstituted itself after the bitterly divisive hiatus of the Stalin-Hitler pact. "Kulturbolschewismus is here," wrote Dwight MacDonald, using the Nazi term to respond to left attacks on "decadent" art that did not enlist behind American patriotism.¹⁶ Anti-fascism when Hollywood finally discovered it functioned to bury the failures of American society and to increase the gap between seeing and believing.

III

It was at that belated moment that the successful Hollywood director of escapist comedies John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrae) set out to make a Popular Front film – a "commentary about the modern condition, stark realism," as he puts it, "a true canvas of suffering humanity." Convinced that his lack of first-hand experience disqualifies him from directing "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?," his own version of the social protest movie whose ending as a film within the film commences *Sullivan's Travels*, Sully dons a hobo costume and takes to the road to find misery. Sturges' movie thus begins as satiric comment on such gritty 1930s social problems motion pictures as

Film Community 1930-1960 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979).

15 Quoted in Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," 74. More generally see Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, Knopf, 1995).

16 Dwight MacDonald, "Kulturbolschewismus is Here," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 8 (November/December 1941), 442.

the Lillian Hellman-scripted *Dead End* (1937), also starring Joel McCrae, and such politically-tinged adventure intrigues as Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), where the all-American boy reporter – Joel McCrea again – steps into Europe to unmask a fascist conspiracy on the eve of World War II. Sully at first suffers literally the fate shared (without acknowledgement) by these other Joel McCrea protagonists: he cannot get out of Hollywood. Treated as comedy, his failure gives way to the wrong kind of success, however. In one of the most infamous bait and switch routines in Hollywood history, when Sully has finally found sufficient material for his film and is distributing five dollar bills to hobo camp bums before returning to the movie capital, he is robbed, beaten, and shipped off to a brutal southern chain gang. In the hinge scene of the film, he there joins in against his will in laughing at a Mickey Mouse cartoon along with a movie audience composed of fellow prisoners and African-Americans. Far from confirming Sully's admiration for "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?," however, the experience which he and the viewers of *Sullivan's Travels* have now been put through convinces him to return to making the Hollywood comedies he has been trying so hard to escape. But is the audience supposed to take that ending at face value, as most viewers, reviewers, and critics have done? What are we to make of this strangely self-cancelling film?¹⁷

By the time *Sullivan's Travels* was released in January 1942, the depression was over, the United States was at war, and the 1930s had come to an end. The hobo jungle and prison farm that take over Sturges's movie mark it as the last 1930s social protest film. But *Sullivan's Travels* is more usually understood as the last screwball comedy, an affirmation of 1930s Hollywood's most distinctive genre against the pressure of demands for social significance. Wanting to make a social protest film is the plot that drives *Sullivan's Travels*, the ambition that the film convinces its

17 Henderson, *Five Screenplays*, 16-24 surveys the critical response to Sturges' films as a whole, Diane Jacobs, *Christmas in July: The Life and Art of Preston Sturges* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), 260-63 to *Sullivan's Travels* in particular. In Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* (199?), for example, the director within the film cites *Sullivan's Travels* to justify his return to Hollywood schlock after flirting with making a film of social significance.

Sturges originally called the book Sully wants to film, "For Whom the Night Falls," an obvious spoof of Hemingway. Hollywood had not yet filmed *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1941, however, and although *Dead End* (made from a long-running Broadway play) would have supplied a precedent, the obvious one was *The Grapes of Wrath*. Darryl Zanuck had recently paid a lot of 1939 dollars (\$50,000) for the Steinbeck best seller, which he and John Ford filmed in 1940.

director of comedies to abandon by the end. Since the director of *Sullivan's Travels*, Preston Sturges, was notorious not simply for never expressing an opinion about Roosevelt and the New Deal, but also for refusing to join both the Screen Writers and the Screen Directors Guild – he was accused in a letter from the latter organization (Frank Capra was its President) of being the only prominent director not to have a union card¹⁸ – it is easy to read *Sullivan's Travels* as a justification for the apolitical choices and film comedies that had made its director famous. In the debate between Popular Front intellectuals like Kenneth Burke and *Partisan Review* modernists like Clement Greenberg over whether art should carry a political message, Sturges seems squarely on the Greenberg side. Greenberg may have been contemptuous of Hollywood, but his defense of art for art's sake lines up with Sullivan's return to entertainment for entertainment's sake.¹⁹

But when *Sullivan's Travels* is placed alongside the other Popular Front classics made as Dr. New Deal was giving way to Dr. Win the War, rather a different picture emerges. John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941), and Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941) were all made under Popular Front influence. With the exception of the Ford epic, however, the political content in these films, consciously or unconsciously, is displaced by the problem of the medium itself as the message, that is, the power exercised over the national popular, over the people, by the mass media form.²⁰

18 Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 169, 183, 245.

19 See Kenneth Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," in Waldo Frank ed., *American Writers' Congress* (London, Martin Lawrence, 1935), 87-94, and "the Nature of Art under Capitalism," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1941); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 6 (Fall 1939), 34-59. On Burke as a Popular Front intellectual, see Denning, *Cultural Front*, 55-56, 122-25, 236-37.

20 A full consideration of late 1930s Popular Front Hollywood would also have to take notice of both the Warner Bros. social problems films and the William Dieterle biopics, especially Dieterle's anti-racist, anti-fascist allegory *Juarez* (1939). Even in these films, however, the mass media (in the form of newspapers) often play a central role. Winfried Fluck has responded to an earlier version of this paper by pointing out that *Sullivan's Travels* belongs to the media professional genre of the 1930s (which begins with *The Front Page* [1931] and includes *Citizen Kane*), bearing a particularly close resemblance to the 1940 *Front Page* remake *His Girl Friday*. In both the Sturges and Hawks films a media professional disenchanted with his or her work ends up with renewed dedication to it; hard times and romance enter both films, from this perspective, only as the vehicles which return the boy director and the girl reporter to the careers they are so good at. The two movies do share a cynically amused self-reflexivity about the work

The most instructive case, and the one on Preston Sturges' mind, was Frank Capra – "the most successful American movie director during the 1930s," as Tom Schatz has called him, "whether filmmaking success is measured in terms of box-office revenues, critical and popular acclaim, or Academy statuettes,"²¹ the figure who singlehandedly has established Hollywood's Popular Front credentials. When Sullivan's producers accuse him of wanting to make a film "something like Capra," the director within the movie asks the question to which the rest of Sturges's film is an answer, "What's the matter with Capra?"

Since Ronald Reagan is still the only President not only explicitly to have modelled himself on Capra's heroes, but also to have won election by – in the crucial 1980 New Hampshire primary debate – appropriating without attribution a line from a Capra film (*State of the Union*) – it is a retrospective embarrassment for the Popular Front that it endorsed Capra films that shared none of its political positions save the populism and founding father patriotism that would later sustain Reagan. Capra's Popular Front associations – the *Daily Worker* loved *Mr. Smith*, whose screenwriter, Sidney Buchman, would later be blacklisted as a secret member of the Communist Party – may identify the political valence of "the people" during the American 1930s with the left. But the association is not unproblematic. When on the eve of the Popular Front Kenneth Burke proposed at the 1935 American Writers' Congress that "the people" offered a more positive, inclusive mobilizing slogan for "revolutionary symbolism" than did "the worker," refugee writer Friedrich Wolf pointed out "the similarities between this usage and Hitler's harangue of the *Volk*."²²

Hitler was also on Capra's mind when he made his Popular Front trilogy, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe*. For Capra had broken down after the extraordinary success of his breakthrough film,

of media professionals, but in the view that will be taken here *Sullivan's Travels* is at once more open to the world than the Hawks classic and more corrosively self-enclosed in the mass media form that is its method and its subject.

21 Tom Schatz, "Anatomy of a House Director: Capra, Cohn, and Columbia in the 1930s," in Robert Shklar and Vito Zagarno eds., *Frank Capra* (Philadelphia, Temple UP, 1998), 10.

22 Rogin, *Reagan, the Movie*, 7; Eric Smoodin, "'Compulsory' Viewing for Every Citizen: *Mr. Smith* and the Rhetoric of Reception," *Cinema Journal* 35 (Winter 1996), 3; Leonard Quart, "Frank Capra and the Popular Front," *Cineaste*, Vol. 8 (Summer 1977), 6-7; Buscombe **NAME OF ARTICLE** in *Frank Capra*, 274; Geoffrey Hellman, "Thinker in Hollywood," *New Yorker*, Vol. 16 (February 24, 1940), 23-28; Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism," 88-89; *American Scholar*, "Thirty Years Later," Vol. 35 (Summer 1966), 506.

It Happened One Night (1934), which had almost single-handedly invented screwball

comedy. Ill and unable to work, as he told the story in his autobiography, he was visited by a "little man" who reminded him of his responsibilities by comparing him with Hitler. Hitler's power lay through radio, said the little man, turning up the volume on the one in Capra's bedroom as "that raspy voice came shrieking out of it." But Hitler could only reach 15 or 20 million people for twenty minutes. "You, sir, you can talk to *hundreds* of millions, for two hours – and in the dark." From then on, wrote Capra, he would "totally commit my talents – few or many – to the service of man. . . . Beginning with *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, my films had to *say* something." So the condition of Capra's return to work was that he abandon his own breakthrough genre and use his talent for comedy to make "a series of social-minded films."²³ But whereas the director presented himself as the answer to Hitler – the role he would assume explicitly in the *Why We Fight* series he directed for the government during World War II – his films themselves are taken over by a more troubled intimacy with the master manipulator of popular feeling.

The sentimental condescension toward the people in Capra's Popular Front trilogy was supposed to elevate the heroic innocent who represented them, Mr. Deeds, Mr. Smith, John Doe. But these films actually show that Capra is twinned not only with his all-American boys but also with his newspaper magnate and political boss villains, and that Capra simply does a better job of crowd control. This identification moves ever closer to the surface from one film to the next. *Mr. Smith* counterposes the three 1930s dominant mass media forms: radio (Hitler's and FDR's instrument), newspapers (William Randolph Hearst's), and motion pictures to show the superiority of film. Unlike the yellow journalist (Edward Arnold playing Boss Jim Taylor), Capra is on Jefferson Smith's side; unlike the radio reporter (H.V. Kaltenborn playing himself), he can create mass audience sympathy for Smith by

23 Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York, Vintage, 1997 [1971]), 173-76, 182-85; James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in America from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York, Knopf, 1987,) 108, 153-54. Harvey's splendid book first alerted us to the importance of this story. By the time he told it Capra would likely have known that *It Happened One Night* was one of Hitler's favorite films. See Bennet Schaber, "'Hitler Can't Keep 'Em That Long': the Road, the People," in Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark eds., *The Road Movie Book* (London, Routledge, 1997), 17-19.

actually showing his filibuster on the Senate floor. But that Mr. Smith is in Capra's power is not what the film wants its audience to see.²⁴

By *Meet John Doe*, which makes the manipulation of the unsuspecting little man into its subject, the Edward Arnold figure as Capra's double blows up the Popular Front project (and Capra's long collaboration with his screenwriter, Robert Riskin, as well). Capra intention in that film of counterposing the fascist D.B. Norton to his unemployed, unwitting front man and victim, John Doe, collapses into the deeper identity between them – in their address to the mass public, their (anti)political program, and their relationship to the John Doe clubs. Metamorphosizing from passivity to mob hysteria and back, the John Doe clubs never constitute a collective popular (much less class) subject. They stand instead for nothing except the power of the figure – is it Norton, John Doe, or Capra himself? – who mobilizes them. A partisan of John Doe, Capra is actually, like D.B. Norton, using Doe as his front man to manipulate the mass public to which, on the film's evidence, the director feels superior. Pretending to escape media manipulation into the American heartland, Capra is actually letting the name above the title – *Mr. Deeds* had put it there – off the hook. *Sullivan's Travels* turns the Capra male innocent – Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart, now played by Joel McCrea – into the model for the director in order to take as its explicit subject the relationship between popular audience, director, and motion picture. Instead of covertly imitating the mass media manipulator, Sturges is asking whether self-reflexive entrapment within Hollywood offers the only way out.

With his John L. Sullivan homage to Capra, Sturges was repaying a debt. The tale of an heiress who escapes her father into a road adventure with a socially unacceptable newspaperman, *It Happened One Night* was based in part on the widely-publicized romance between Sturges and the Post breakfast cereal heiress Eleanor Hutton. To be sure, Sturges and Hutton were divorced by the time Capra made his film.²⁵ But as he moved away from being a role model for Capra's founding screwball comedy, Sturges was becoming the director's inheritor.

24 Cf. Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, 140-64; Charles Wolfe, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington: Democratic Forums and Representational Forms," in Peter Lehman ed., *Close Viewings* (Tallahassee, Florida State UP, 1990), 321.

25 Elizabeth Kendall, *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedies of the 1930s* (New York, Archon, 1990), 241; Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 90-102.

For as Capra abandoned screwball, Sturges took it up. "As a creator of rich and human comedy Mr. Sturges is closing fast on the heels of Frank Capra," wrote the *New York Times*' Bosley Crowther in response to the second film Sturges directed, *Christmas in July* (1940). The year that Capra's Popular Front project collapsed in *Meet John Doe*, Sturges released the most successful film in Paramount history, *The Lady Eve* (1941), compared on its release to *It Happened One Night* and the greatest screwball ever made. But Sturges now found himself, at the end of 1930s Popular Front Hollywood, in the position Capra had been at the beginning. In his version of Capra's anxiety, *Lady Eve*'s success "scared the bejesus out of me," Sturges told Crowther. "I feel like making a good safe tragedy." The director gives that aspiration to Sullivan, replacing the joke about safe tragedy with Capra's own uplift motivation.²⁶

Capra, Sturges, Charlie Chaplin, and Orson Welles, each with unprecedented power over the production of their own films, were in 1941 the four most famous Hollywood directors. When the producers remind Sully that he was a boy genius celebrity director by the time he was twenty-four, Sturges is surely referencing not himself, a latecomer to Hollywood star status, but Welles. (*Citizen Kane* had appeared just months before *Sullivan's Travels*.) Capra, René Clair, Leo McCarey, and "even Chaplin at his best have nothing on Sturges when it comes to command of his art," Crowther responded to *The Lady Eve* in the *New York Times*.²⁷ But whereas Popular Front directors Capra, Chaplin, and Welles were making films with a social message, Sturges was making *Ants in Your Pants*.

Or rather, Sullivan was making *Ants in Your Pants*. Sturges comedies had a Menckenesque edge entirely drained from the director's Joel McRae double. *The Great McGinty* (1940), the first film Sturges directed and the first "written and directed by" credit in Hollywood history, won Sturges an original screenplay Oscar. Made in the wake of *Mr. Smith*, this corrosive satire on machine rule answered back to the Capra attack on boss politics not by an *Ants in Your Pants* avoidance of the subject but by ironizing political redemption. A few years earlier Sturges had authored the tycoon biopic *The Power and the Glory* (1934), whose fragmented,

²⁶ Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 227, 239.

²⁷ Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 240, 291-92.

flashback story-telling method and downward life trajectory anticipated *Citizen Kane*.²⁸

Sturges deprives Sullivan of these signs of his own morbid sensibility. Sullivan was Sturges reimagined as a pure product of the leisure class without the distinctive history that had given Sturges and his films their distance from American pieties. Boarding school, college, and family wealth insulated Sullivan from the life of the poor. Sturges had a less conventional leisure class background. Solomon Sturges, the Chicago stockbroker with whom young Preston lived until he was eight, turned out not to be his father at all. The shock of this discovery "shattered" Sturges, as he told the story, for he learned the truth only when he wanted to live with Solomon Sturges after his mother demanded a divorce. Although not technically an illegitimate child, Sturges was well aware that the name that connected him to American wealth and status was "not mine by rights." Solomon Sturges was one of the many men his mother, Mary Desti (aka Dempsey) collected and discarded as she lived by her wits, her good looks, and the allowance the Chicago businessman continued to send his expatriate ex-wife after she moved to Paris. The close friend and companion of Isadora Duncan, Mary Desti also started a cosmetics business (with the face cream "Secrets of the Harem"). Preston grew up in Paris before managing Maison Desti in New York and becoming a writer of Broadway comedies. Although mother and son lived charmed financial lives, they did not always have secure sources of income. Sturges's upbringing brought home to him the arbitrariness of good (and bad) fortune. That unAmerican, unProtestant ethic was given broader currency by the Depression (which nearly wiped out Solomon Sturges). But although Sturges's history prepared him for the experience of tens of millions of Americans after the 1929 crash, he did not emancipate himself from the American trinity – hard work, moral virtue, worldly success – by sharing in the common life of the depression decade. As he moved from Paris to New York to Hollywood, he participated neither in 1930s hard times nor in the documentary impulse that drove other returning Paris exiles to seek out the real United States. Sturges gives that desire to Sullivan.²⁹

28 Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 128, 201, 210, 213.

29 Cf. Henderson, *Five Screenplays*, 6-16; Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, *passim* (Sturges quoted, 12).

To what end? Is *Sullivan's Travels* a film about why Sullivan should not make "something like Capra?" Does Sturges answer the question, "What's the matter with Capra?" by ridiculing the director who pretends to identify with ordinary Americans and to be what he is not? Or is *Sullivan's Travels* a superior "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?," a film whose intertwining of media manipulation and hard times goes one better than *Meet John Doe*, as *The Great McGinty* had undercut *Mr. Smith* and *The Lady Eve* had surpassed *It Happened One Night*? Does the self-referentiality from which *Sullivan's Travels* never escapes apotheosize a self-enclosed Hollywood world of motion pictures and their spectators, or does it provide the only path in a mass mediated society by which Sturges can direct us outside?

IV

These questions are forced on the viewer by the brilliantly unsettling triple opening, which never lets you forget you are inside a film. Hands open an envelope titled "Sullivan's Travels, copyright 1941," to reveal a man and woman dressed in farm clothes. An inscription reads "To the memory of all those who make us laugh: the motley mountebanks – the clowns, the buffoons, in all times and in all nations, whose efforts have lightened our burden a little, this picture is affectionately dedicated." Overcute archaism already complicates this children's comic book address.³⁰ The dedication to laughter introduces its opposite, moreover, as the film opens for a second time with a tramp and a railway dick slugging it out on top of a speeding boxcar. Riding the rails was perhaps the signature symbol for the Great Depression's dislocation. Whether one references the Scottsboro Boys (young black men convicted of raping two white women in a boxcar), or a proletarian novel like Nelson Algren's *Somebody in Boots*,³¹ there was nothing funny about either the joblessness or the horrifying violence associated with hobo travel by train. To what sort of comedy have we been introduced? Hardly has there been time to ask that

30 "We're going to have an old-fashioned barn dance, like the hicks we're supposed to be," Sturges has the farm mother say in his script for *Remember the Night* (1939), after which the family dresses up in the sort of old farmer clothes worn by the couple in the title shot of *Sullivan's Travels*. *Grapes of Wrath*, the purest Popular Front film ever made in the United States, is another referent. See note 16.

31 Nelson Algren, *Somebody in Boots* (New York, Berkley, 1965 [1935]).

question when the film begins for the third time, revealing that we have been watching not the opening of "Sullivan's Travels" but the end of a social problem film. To swelling music the two men fall off the train and disappear into a river as the words, "THE END" rise from the depths of the water. Cut to a heated discussion in the screening room. "Do you see the symbolism of it? Capital and labor destroy each other," are the words that introduce us to John L. Sullivan. "Who wants to see that kind of stuff?" studio boss Hadrian replies.³²

The director of *Sullivan's Travels* seems to side with the producers when they interfere to stop Sullivan from making a Capra movie. While the speeding train in the opening shots is heavily coded as dark and serious, it is impossible to inhabit the scene that way. The melodramatic music, grimacing faces, and stagey fisticuffs might have been perceivable as serious social commentary if they were part of an actual finale. Thrown at us as a first scene, however, they come across as artificial, even comic. The response of Hadrian to the scene ("It gives me the creeps") mocks the pretensions of the social problem film and discredits Sully's plan to make "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?" The producer's question – why would anyone want to see "an epic about misery and hungry people sleeping in doorways with newspapers about them?" – may underline the fact that his main concern is financial. But it points more deeply to the problem of Popular Front culture, since "the people" could not be counted on to pay attention to what they ought to want to see. Hope Hale was chastising her fellow left intellectuals at the 1939 American Writers' Congress for publishing little-magazine prose pieces of no interest to workers, when the most popular working-class magazine was the one she wrote for, *True Story*,³³ and Sturges seems to agree with her. Hadrian tells Sully that the film about Capital and Labor

32 The argument between Sullivan and his producers about whether Sully's next film should, as he wants, "hold a mirror up to life," actually mirrors the life of the studio system. The benevolent protection Sturges had enjoyed from Paramount head of production William LeBaron and West Coast Chief Frank Freeman was turning intrusive during the filming of *Sullivan's Travels*. LeBaron had replaced Ernst Lubitsch, just as Sturges had replaced Lubitsch as Paramount's leading director (darkening the joke within the film when Sully pretends to want to know "Who's Lubitsch?"). As for LeBaron, he himself had given way to the less supportive Buddy DeSylva. DeSylva began during the filming of *Sullivan's Travels* the micromanagement of scenes and the obsession with cost control that would ultimately drive Sturges from the studio and finish him off as a director of successful comedies. (Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 245, 171.) Since Capra had also lost his touch when he freed himself from Columbia and began to produce his own films, this final Capra imitation would serve as Capra's revenge.

had "died in Pittsburgh." "What do they know in Pittsburgh?" "They know what they like." "If they knew what they liked, they wouldn't live in Pittsburgh."

This opening repartée triply undercuts Sully's Popular Front desire to employ film as a "sociological" and "artistic medium." Not only is he presented as knowing better than the people what they want, whereas the producers speak for audience democracy, but in addition the rapid comic dialogue sounds more like screwball than serious discussion. The producers finally discredit Sullivan by challenging his professional credentials: "What do you know about hard luck?" they ask. The force of that accusation, which Sullivan acknowledges, is itself undercut by the exposure of the producers' own pretensions to early poverty as a confidence game. More dizzying yet, the role-playing that deauthorizes the producers reauthorizes the director, who will outfit himself in a hobo outfit to go out and live among the poor. Sullivan will discover the real America thanks to the Hollywood method of pretending to be what he is not. The net effect of the rapid-fire exchange of dialogue and clothes is to alienate the audience from both positions that claim to speak in the name of the people, and to force self-consciousness upon viewers as themselves the subject of the debate.

Instead of transporting Sully outside Hollywood, the effort of the director to become an actor to discover the life of the poor references other films. Sturges himself had briefly joined John Huston and William Wyler when they travelled as bums to prepare to make *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933). That method of changing class by changing clothes entered later depression-era comedies of class reconciliation like *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *The Devil and Miss Jones* (1941).³⁴ Sturges is parodying their method, and the scene which brings the opening sequence of *Sullivan's Travels* to an end discredits the legitimacy of masquerading as poor. For after all the film's false openings and unravelling claims to authority, a frontal head-and-torso shot from slightly below establishes the first authoritative speaker in the film. "Fancy dress, I take it," sneers Sully's butler at his employer's costume. "I have never been sympathetic to the caricaturing of the poor and needy, sir."

33 Donald Ogden Stuart ed., *Fighting Words* (New York, Harcourt, 1939), 43-47.

34 Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 248. On class crossdressing as a mode of gaining access to the working class, see Eric Shocket, "Undercover Explorations of the 'Other Half,' Or the Writer as Class Transvestite," *Representations* 64 (Fall 1998), 109-33.

The high seriousness of the butler's warning is itself part of the fun. In the name of attacking role-playing, *Sullivan's Travels* seems to deny the Hollywood method the right to step outside its own pleasures and make claims for social significance. That knife cuts too deep, however, for what sort of authority can accrue to the film in which we are now well enmeshed, one that makes comedy out of taking seriously hard times? As the butler discredits Sullivan's prurient interest in the poor, moreover, the producers discover its publicity value. This final nail in the Popular Front coffin introduces the comedy *Sullivan's Travels* has now become, a film whose own selling point (does this undercut or carry out the producers' intentions?) inheres in Sully's comic entrapment in Hollywood.

Sullivan's Travels parodies the road movie, a metagenre of particular resonance during the depression decade – it's defining melodramatic and comic versions, *Wild Boys of the Road* and *It Happened One Night* were both released in the early thirties – in which people on the run either looking for work or escaping oppression discover new forms of social life on their journey. Both fugitive couple stories that foreground the transformative power of romance and doomed outlaw tales that document social injustice set up the road as a liminal space. Outside convention, neither the city nor the country, the road generates new myths and new alliances. Artificial barriers break down, impossible connections are made, social relations are reinvented, and new communities form.³⁵

Appearing in the wake of the three great road movies of the end of the decade, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Stagecoach* (1939), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) (as well as of the quasi road film *Remember the Night* (1939) that Sturges himself had written), *Sullivan's Travels* combines the road adventures' utopic and dystopic elements: Sully links up with "the Girl" (Veronica Lake) from a different social class on the model of *It Happened One Night*, and he experiences, as in *Wild Boys of the Road*, the deprivations of the homeless and imprisoned. But Sully's adventures authorize neither class reconciliation nor social transformation. Instead of discovering new experience and new communities on the road, Sully moves through

35 Cf. Schaber, "Hitler Can't Keep 'Em That Long," 19-26. Did Sturges intend for his hero's name to invoke John L. O'Sullivan, the Jacksonian publicist who coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny," and thereby to offer ironic comment on Sullivan's ability in O'Sullivan's words, to "o'erspread the continent" as a maker of comedies but not Popular Front films?

a series of movie genres and film sets. The road, Sullivan's travels suggest, stands in for another form of movement, moving pictures, the mass culture that actually forges individuals into an American national identity. As *Sullivan's Travels* frustrates Sully's effort to discover America by, as he puts it, "going on the road," it underscores the movie audience's investment in the motion that it sees on screen.³⁶

The opening image of *Sullivan's Travels* is the cover illustration of a book titled "Sullivan's Travels." With Sully and the Girl in tramp outfits looming over the crowd of tiny people at their feet, the drawing mimics a children's edition of *Gulliver's Travels*. Max Fleischer's 1939 animated feature film of Swift's story continued the tradition of transforming this brutal political satire into a children's fairy tale. Bringing his hero through four film genres, one for each book of *Gulliver's Travels*, Sturges will return to the original.³⁷

Sully's first voyage takes the form of slapstick visual comedy. He hitches a ride with a teenager speeding around in a jeep, whose head is inside a war film, to generate a series of familiar slapstick routines – a mud-spattered cop gives chase in blackface, a dumped bag of white flour inside the pursuing studio "land yacht" produces a black cook in whiteface, a girl reporter ends up sprawling with her legs in the air, and the jeep plows into a hay mound. Sully gets free of his studio entourage only to be trapped by an overstuffed, lecherous widow, and the truck that rescues him from her embrace brings him back to Hollywood.

Sully meets "the Girl" in his second adventure, in which snappy, argumentative dialogue, whacky romantic scenes, and the woman initially on top identify the genre of screwball comedy. In arguing with his producers, Sully had rejected "keystone chases, bathing beauties, custard pies." His first adventure delivered the keystone chase and a white flour version of the custard pie; his second supplies the bathing beauty, along with many other familiar screwball trappings: the swimming pool into

36 *It Happened One Night*, Warren Susman has perceptively observed, is organized around all the various technologies of transportation and communication; Sturges's genius, writes Manny Farber, is for motion picture speed. **(SHOULD THIS SENTENCE BE IN THE TEXT PRECEDING THE SENTENCE AT NOTE 35?)** Compare Susman, *Culture as History*, 264-67 and Manny Farber, "Preston Sturges: 1954," *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York, Da Capo Press, 1998).

37 Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, 580, 590-93 also sees *Gulliver's Travels* as the inspiration for the four movie voyages in *Sullivan's Travels*, although his four genres differ somewhat from ours.

which everyone falls, the jail where identities are revealed, and the (rail)road trip that at once cements the romance and restores the proper gender order.³⁸ Though this episode contains the "little sex in it" that the producers had insisted on for "Oh Brother," *Sullivan's Travels* is no more invested in the romance than in the slapstick. The romance that drives this film is Sully's with the people not with the (unnamed) Girl, and the brief scene of bums running to hop the freight as Sully and the Girl return to the road (before the reversion to comic dialogue between those "amateurs" in the box car and the professional hoboes), foreshadows the genre that will replace screwball.

"As if some force keeps shoving you back where you belong," a Sully feverish from riding the rails is again returned home – that is, to his Hollywood home away from home, the studio land yacht. More than ever determined "to find out how it feels to be in trouble," Sully and the Girl enter a silent documentary of Hooverville depression misery. Entirely without dialogue, this episode follows them through streets filled with bums into soup kitchens, delousing stations, a mission service for the homeless, and a flophouse. But once again the generic coding, this time pushing documentary into melodrama, calls attention to the sequence as film, particularly in the absence of speech at the heart of a talking picture. After a triumphant brief interlude in Kansas City, when Sully congratulates himself on having finally found real misery, the film reverts to silence to follow him as he distributes five dollar bills to the tramps "in gratitude for what they done for him." This charity that separates the film director from the grateful, incredulous mass of poor at his feet makes it clear that Sully's third voyage has still not escaped Hollywood. In his fourth adventure the director will fall into prison and not be able to get back.

The first three films within the film are framed by two scenes shot to give them special authority. In the first, which we've already described, Sully's butler warns him of what will come to pass. The prediction that Sully's masquerade will condescend to the poor climaxes with his faux documentary distribution of alms to the homeless. The alternative prophecy that the masquerade will become too real begins when a tramp stalks, assaults, and robs the director. Still within the

38 As Rubenstein ("Hollywood Travels," 51) points out, the Girl who masquerades as a boy to ride the rails is imitating a girl in *Wild Boys of the Road*, down to the cap that hides her long hair.

conventions of silent melodrama, that scene gives way to a shot of another order entirely, its subject filmed frontally as was the butler only now from the tramp's point of view. Paralyzed amidst a maze of tracks and blinded along with the film viewer, the tramp stares into the beam of an oncoming train. As in silent film's cinema of attractions, the locomotive that will kill the tramp comes straight into the audience at the same time. The opening train battle of the film within the film had paid deliberately tired homage to the early silent classic *The Great Train Robbery*. The train that breaks the fourth wall to kill the tramp invokes the gun shot directly at the audience to end (or in some versions begin) that movie. Cinematically bringing home the butler's original warning, this train shot forces us to confront our own spectator stake in vicarious pleasure.³⁹

The depression train that ended the social problem film with which *Sullivan's Travels* began and was then displaced into a comic road movie now takes its revenge, as our momentary involuntary participation in the tramp's fate introduces Sully's new persona. For the tramp has stepped into Sully's shoes, the shoes that contain the director's card of identity. Instead of freeing Sullivan from his attacker, the train that kills the tramp traps his victim in the tramp's body. John L. Sullivan, the director, is taken for dead in the identity exchange. The tramp has tossed his living body into a boxcar, and – ironic comment on the earlier boxcar meeting of "amateurs" and professionals – when the disoriented passenger wakes up in a railroad yard, he suffers the fate of a professional himself. Mistaken for a real hobo, Sully strikes back at the railway dick who has assaulted him (thus reenacting the battle between tramp and railway dick in the opening film within the film) and is sentenced to a prison farm. The train transporting him to prison goes in the tragic direction, South, instead of traversing the West-to-East and back again circular route of the trains and cars of the previous episodes. Sullivan has finally become what he was pretending to be.⁴⁰

39 See Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectators, and the Avante-Garde," in Thomas Elsaesser ed., *Early Cinema* (London, British Film Institute, 1990), 56-62.

40 Judicial misrecognition, turning the tables on the privileged man who thought he was in charge, was a staple of romantic comedy. *Sullivan* references such films to underline its difference from them. When Sullivan faces the judge, like J.P. Merrick in *The Devil and Miss Jones*, not only is the judge ignorant of the celebrity's identity but so is the amnesiac director. Merrick's fall unites the boss publically and anarchically with his union-organizing workers; Sullivan joins prisoners

The brutality of "Mister" on the interracial chain gang culminates in Sully's solitary confinement in the sweat box. "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?" could well entitle this episode. For the establishing train shot has granted us entry to society's outcasts through yet another movie. We are now watching a remake of *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), the film that Sturges borrowed and screened while he was making *Sullivan's Travels*,⁴¹ except that the director marks the difference between his movie and the original by reminders that Sully is still in a film. "What do you think this is, a vaudeville show?" asks Mister when he orders Sully back to work, and how is the viewer supposed to respond? Are we being reminded that Sullivan is no longer in charge of his vaudeville show, or that Sturges still is? Has the imprisonment of the director shocked the audience out of Hollywood and into the real hidden America, or is it only the director in the film and neither the one making it nor his viewers who have come up against the reality principle?

Like *Citizen Kane*, *Sullivan's Travels* refuses to counterpose the methods by which film achieves its effects to an unmediated world independent of them.⁴² The director's display of his bag of tricks only makes more disturbing the appearance – even as we know it's not true – that he has been deprived of them. "It could happen to you," to invoke the title of Nathanael West's failed socially conscious screenplay (1937).⁴³ What could happen to you in the first instance is the deprivation of freedom, the fall from upward mobility into an imprisoning fixed lower class identity that was the menace of the Depression and that could land you in jail. But the apotheosis of film at the climax of *Sullivan's Travels*, to which we are about to turn, opens up an even more disturbing possibility of loss, the deprivation of Hollywood itself.

V

The chasm between the actual causes and conditions of depression America and the values in which Americans continued to believe deeply troubled 1930s left

hidden away on a chain gang.

41 Harvey, *Romantic Comedy*, **GET PAGE**

42 E. Rubenstein ("Hollywood's Travels," 52) also puts *Sullivan's Travels* in the same class as *Citizen Kane*.

43 Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York, Farrar, Straus, 1970), 279-80.

intellectuals, so that if the depression decade was marked on the one hand by the

documentary impulse, the discovery of the real America, it was shadowed on the other by the anxiety over deep symbolic disorientation. Thurman Arnold, the man responsible for prosecuting the anti-trust suit that finally broke up the Hollywood studio system, responded to the Great Depression – like Robert and Helen Lynd, like Kenneth Burke, like Suzanne Langer – not so much with a confident left materialism as with the recognition of the human need for "symbols" by which to live. (Nietzsche rather than Marx haunts this sensibility.) Arnold hoped he could close the gap between the values that gave meaning to people's lives and the techniques that would solve their actual problems, but he also imagined society as a giant insane asylum in which social doctors ministered to the delusions of their patients– like Harry Hope's saloon in Eugene O'Neill's 1939 play, *The Iceman Cometh*, before the reformed travelling salesman Hickey deprives its denizens of their "pipe dreams." Like *New Deal Hollywood*? Nowhere does *Sullivan's Travels* more deeply belong to the 1930s than in its knowing recourse to fantasy as a protection against the void.⁴⁴

"There aint another Mister takes his gang to the pitcher show," the trustee comforts Sully as he falls out of the sweat box. Cut to the interior of a ramshackle black church. "We're going to share our pleasure with some neighbors less fortunate than ourselves," intones the preacher. Don't make our guests feel unwelcome, "For we is all equal in the sight of God, and he said, 'and the chains shall be struck from them . . . and the blind shall see."⁴⁵ As the choir begins to sing the Negro spiritual of deliverance from slavery, "Let My People Go," the camera cuts to the chain gang shuffling along in the darkness outside. After the prisoners file into the church, down comes the ramshackle screen. And as Pluto chases flies, crashes into furniture, and

44 Cf. Thurman Arnold, *The Symbols of Government* (New York, Harcourt, 1962 [1935]), 232-33, and *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven, Yale UP, 1937), 69 for the insane asylum. Also see Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, Harcourt, 1937); Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1942); Eugene O'Neill, *The Iceman Cometh* (New York, Random House, 1946 [written in 1939; first performed in 1946]). The upbeat version is William Saroyan, *The Time of Your Life* (New York, Harcourt, 1939). See also Susman, *Culture as History*, and Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York, Harper, 1973).

Compare Muscio's judgment (*Hollywood's New Deal*, 62-63) that whereas FDR failed to transform the material conditions of American life, he knew how to make people feel better; he was a master of the mass media, a Hollywood director.

45 Preston Sturges, "Sullivan's Travels," in Henderson ed., *Five Screenplays*, 668. (We quote the words in the film, which differ slightly from those in the screenplay.)

gets twisted in knots in his attempts to unstick himself from flypaper, the audience of blacks and prisoners begins to laugh. Sullivan, amazed at himself, finally joins in. Out pans the camera from the hysterical laughter to the darkness outside.

How to understand this extraordinarily disjunctive scene?⁴⁶ Most interpreters, whether they like it or not, accept the moral that Sully draws after his release from prison: "There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. That's all that some people have." And the film fades out into a montage of laughing people, beginning with the prisoners – fat and thin, healthy and in hospital beds – with a serious Sully and the Girl in the foreground (as in the image that opens the movie) framing the hilarity. Sully is going to continue to make comedies.

But where does that moral leave the motion picture we have just seen? The final film within the film – this is Sturges's last laugh – is actually an antidote to the opening social problem movie in quite the opposite sense than the one Sully claims. For whereas heavy-handed generic coding discredits the class war between Capital and Labor as a window on the depression, Pluto's animal war that leaves him stuck in flypaper throws back at the mass Hollywood audience its own condition.

Begin with the church. Although the Negro spiritual was the one safe form in 1930s film in which black Americans could be depicted in a non-comic, non-denigrating mode, Sturges goes much further. Instead of condescending to African-Americans or making them the butt of laughter, the film allows the black preacher to condescend to whites by labeling prisoners who have fallen off the social ladder, notably Sully, "equal in the sight of God" with the black people above them on the bottom. Singing "Let My People Go," the black congregation returns the spiritual from its Hollywood association with stoic Negro endurance (or, the ultimate falsification of history, with singing slaves marching to fight for their masters in *Gone with the Wind*) to its original meaning as a cry for freedom – and now in solidarity with chain gang white men as well. No wonder the NAACP praised the film. Producer Buddy DeSylva by contrast, as if he were playing one of the

46 Set it against the entirely conventional episode of inmates watching a newsreel in the 1939 James Cagney prison film, *Each Dawn I Die*, which ends with one prisoner stabbing another.

producers in the film, tried to get the scene cut. He knew it got in the way of the sort of comedy Sullivan claimed to be after.⁴⁷

So does the cartoon itself. The Disney animation (Sturges' first choice was a Chaplin short) looks backward through *Sullivan's* earlier car-chase scene to vaudeville comedy, with its roots in working class experience. It is a reminder of the violence to which Sullivan, other prisoners, and free blacks, are routinely subjected. When the inmates guffaw at Pluto stuck in flypaper they are recognizing their own confinement. Or perhaps they are enjoying its fantastic inversion, since the animal giving chase is caught, not his prospective victims.⁴⁸ The camera does not let *Sullivan's* audience forget the prison either, panning outside the church at the end of the cartoon to remind us that the men are still inside.

Inside what? The converted motion picture theater is only a temporary escape from prison; that is why the convicts need to laugh so hard. Sullivan will not share their fate, of course. By confessing to the murder of John L. Sullivan, Sully gets his picture in the paper and himself out of jail. As Sturges would have known, however, Robert E. Burns, from whose autobiography *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang* the 1932 film was taken, was actually returned to the chain gang when he surfaced to promote the movie made out of his ordeal. Hollywood freed Sullivan from prison only after sending his role model back. Burns, moreover, had been the innocent accomplice in a hamburger restaurant hold-up, featured in the film version of *Fugitive* and referenced in the *Sullivan's Travels* scene where Sully and the Girl beg for food. The actual armed robber was played by an actor named Preston S. Foster.⁴⁹ Even if Sturges had not attended to the coincidence of names when he was running through the earlier film to borrow for the one he was making, the episode underlines his own sense of the arbitrary line insecurely separating the damned from the saved, on one side of which is young Preston grieving from the double loss of the man he thought was his father, on the other his rescue through the false legitimacy of the S. (for Sturges) family name that, the grown-up Sturges said, was not his by

47 Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 263, 259-60.

48 The Mickey mouse logo that introduces the cartoon, derived from Al Jolson in blackface, would underline the table-turning racial association in the political unconscious. Thanks to Russell Wright for pointing this out.

49 Roddick, *New Deal in Entertainment*, 123-24.

right. Both inside and outside the film, then, and on the (Preston S.) border between film and life, Sullivan's happy ending only calls attention to those he has left behind.

Capital and Labor (so identified as the last two roles on the cast list) murder each other in the opening film within the film. By the time Sullivan brings himself back to life by confessing to his own murder, the director who wanted to make "something like Capra" has killed the director of "Hay, Hay in the Hayloft." The moral of the social problems film ("This picture is an answer to Communists," Sully had told his producers) was class reconciliation; Sullivan the Houdini escape artist leaves his fellow inmates in jail. What about us?

As Sully observes the hysterical laughter of the prisoners, his own laugh is palpably forced out of him in painful spurts and lurches. It is as if, against his will, he has finally crossed over some border, finally stepped out of the movie. Where he has landed, however, is not in some extra-filmic real world but in the motion picture audience. Sully was an involuntary audience member in his earlier genre travels, watching with the widow a movie we do not see in the slapstick adventure that has itself now migrated onto the screen within the screen, and listening with other mission bums to a preacher we do not hear in the silent film within the film. Sully wanted only to escape from the audience those first times; now he is happy to be part of it. In this one painful moment, *Sullivan's Travels* finds the Archimedian point it has been structured to deny. Sturges has closed the gap between film and the world by invoking our need, as mass audience, for Hollywood. It is our faces, reflected back in the disturbing, needy laughter of the prisoners, that drive the fantasies on screen. Enclosed within a compendium of Hollywood conventions, the church scene escapes Hollywood confinement by implying that the horror of our own lives, our own need for fantasy, is what generates our collective plots. Like the prisoners chortling at their existence played back to them as joke, *Sullivan's Travels* invites us, its audience, to laugh at the replay of our own enthrallment to Hollywood.

The inhabitants of Plato's cave see only shadows reflected on a wall, but at least their source is the sun. There is no sun in Pluto's cave, for the only light in the surrounding darkness comes from a motion picture projector. The eyes that see the chains struck, as promised by the African-American preacher, are watching a movie. Just as the light from the primitive motion picture projector – a shot of it precedes

the cartoon – takes over from the blinding locomotive beam that killed the tramp, so – as Christopher Ames puts it in the words about this scene with which he ends *Movies on Movies* – "The new church is the movie theater, where we are moved to laughter in our chains."⁵⁰

"How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?" asks Melville's Ahab. Sturges leaves that prison wall intact, turning it into a movie screen. But film's ride to the rescue requires the prior opening up of an abyss between motion picture technique and the desperate brute world beyond its reach. The fall into prison underlines both the distance separating movie audiences outside prison from those inside and the ease of slipping from one state to the other. The expression of solidarity in the film's last laughs raises a still more disturbing possibility, however, that those of us outside prison (no blacks this time)⁵¹ are as desperately in need of Pluto's cave as are the inmates, that we share their condition.

A surfeit of counterevidence has deprived film theory of the belief it once held in the progressive content of self-reflexive form. Apparently using self-consciousness against the Popular Front message film, *Sullivan's Travels* has turned the tables on entertainment. The reason lies neither in Sturges' own politics (he had none) nor in some intrinsic politics of form, but rather in the conjunction of his own personal history with the outside historical forces that – as Dr. New Deal and the Depression are coming to an end, as "the good war" is about to restore America to faith in itself once again –leave their mark, the political unconscious, on the film.

Defending the motion picture business against Thurman Arnold's antitrust suit *U.S. v. Paramount et al* shortly before *Sullivan's Travels* went into production, Paramount executive Stanton Griffis insisted that the industry steered entirely clear of politics. Hollywood, said Griffis, "stuck to its knitting of furnishing amusement, laughter, entertainment and escape; spends [its] far-flung energy in making the world a happier place to live in."⁵² By the time Sullivan echoes the words of Sturges's studio boss, his film has inverted their meaning. Underneath Griffis' defense of

50 Christopher Ames, *Movies about Movies*, (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 226. On the motion picture apparatus as Plato's cave, see Baudry

51 Sturges originally intended to include African Americans in his final montage; their elimination exposes another (Jim Crow) truth that undercuts the film's proclaimed happy ending. See Henderson, *Five Screenplays*, 683.

escapism was the threat that Hollywood would turn to politics to protect itself from the New Deal. Behind Sully's need to underline the happy moral of his travels lies the visual evidence of desperation. Far from merry enjoyment, the maniacal laughter in the closing montage, like that of the prisoner audience, looks and sounds like hysteria. In contrast with "Ants in Your Pants" or the carnivalesque denouements of so many screwball comedies, it is the laughter of another late 1930s document that also invoked Israel in Egypt land, *The Day of the Locust*. It is laughter at the death of innocent laughter, the laughter that comes after and with the chain gang and cannot wipe it away. Although it apparently has the opposite ending, *Sullivan's Travels* is the lineal descendant of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the ur-American example of comedy turning into horror before our eyes.⁵³

Not according to Sturges, to be sure. Although reviewers were now for the first time comparing the director to Welles, he thought that the point of the film "I would be most willing to hang my hat on" was "to tell some of my fellow filmmakers that they were getting a little deep dish and to leave the preaching to the preachers."⁵⁴ Like the preacher in the prison scene, one wants to ask? Movie viewers were as free as Sturges to ignore the evidence before their eyes, although that is not the way reception theory normally understands consumer democracy. Authorial intention and audience response provide relevant data about the historical meaning of cultural artifacts, of course, and what popular success *Sullivan's Travels* enjoyed may well have required that it not be taken too seriously. Whatever the director and his audiences consciously made of the film, however, its two overwrought episodes of audience hilarity – in prison and in the closing montage – stand out in dark relief

52 quoted in Muscio, *New Deal Hollywood*, 177.

53 Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (New York, Random House, 1939); Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York, Harper, 1965 [1889]).

"Such a laughing audience is a parody of humanity. Its members are monads, all dedicated to the pleasure of being ready for anything at the expense of everyone else. Their harmony is a caricature of solidarity. What is fiendish about this false laughter is that it is a compelling parody of the best, which is conciliatory. . . . The supreme law is that they shall not satisfy their desires at any price; they must laugh and be content with laughter." Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, Continuum, 1998 [1944], 141. Horkheimer and Adorno might have given more credit to the scene and the film that almost certainly inspired this diatribe. (Also unnamed, Veronica Lake receives a snide reference a few pages later [154]).

54 Jacobs, *Christmas in July*, 260-63 quotes Sturges on *Sullivan's Travels*.

when placed alongside their famous counterparts, scenes which Sturges was probably invoking and of which he was certainly aware.

First: *It Happened One Night's* incognito heiress Ellie Andrews and arrogant newspaperman Peter Warne – "truculent Gable and 'brat' Colbert," as Capra's autobiography puts it – finally join the people by singing "That daring young man on the flying trapeze" along with the other passengers on the bus taking them from Miami to New York. A chasm separates this road movie's innocently affirmative audience participation – Capra's "laughing happy mass of human bodies" – from Sully's acceptance of his shared prisoner fate. Second: the (silent) laughter of a vaudeville audience – the final shot of King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928) – underlining the futility of the protagonist's effort to set himself apart from the mass, allows him momentary respite from his nightmarish private life. Having already propelled a desperate Sully into the audience for spectacle, Sturges ends by allowing us to see ourselves reflected back through the looking glass screen.⁵⁵

James Allen twice escapes from prison in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, and the second time he knows he must never go back. His sudden appearance at night to the girl he loves – among the most famous endings in all 1930s Hollywood, by itself it established Warner Bros.' reputation as a socially conscious studio⁵⁶ – produces out of an entirely black screen the final lines of the movie: "How do you live?" she asks him. He answers, "I steal." Over that black background appear the words, "The End." A black screen introduced *Sullivan's Travels* as faux social problem comedy, with "THE END" rising from the black water into which Capital and Labor have fallen. Now imagine asking that same question at the actual finish of Sturges' film: "How do you live?" "I laugh." Or, since it's the director who's answering, "How do you live?" "I make people laugh."

55 Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, 170-71.

56 Roddick, *New Deal in Entertainment*, 124.

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