

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES PAPER

This paper, written by Melanie Pringle for a Historical Perspectives section titled American Film and Culture: 1929-1945, focuses on the complex causal relationships linking historical period, American culture, the Hollywood studio system, filmmaker (Frank Capra), and It's a Wonderful Life.

Note how the author does the following:

- Establishes an engaging style via crisp verbs and clear, straightforward syntax
- Makes the paper's structure explicit via appropriate sub-headings
- Uses primary and secondary sources to put pressure on each other to create new meaning
- Deploys MLA documentation style professionally.

It's a Wonderful Life: The Fruitfulness of Failure

"People's expectations, financially, spiritually, were raised. There was such a beautiful dream. We were gonna reach the end of the rainbow. When the war ended, the rainbow vanished."

– Peggy Terry, as quoted in Studs Terkel's The Good War

Frank Capra embodied the American dream. Immigrating to the United States from Sicily at age six, Capra began his life in poverty and, purely through hard work and initiative, climbed the social ladder to stardom during the 1930s as a Hollywood film director. However, as the forces of institution, history, and culture impacted Capra's life and career—particularly those forces which changed both America at large and Capra himself during and after World War II—Capra began to doubt his success. In 1946, Capra crafted the classic It's a Wonderful Life, a film about a man's struggle and ultimate failure to live the American dream.

It's a Wonderful Life appeared in its particular form as a result of Capra's actions to fight the forces shaping his own life. Capra spearheaded Liberty Films, the company under which he produced It's a Wonderful Life, to distance himself from the controlling studio system. Capra also used the picture to subvert the star system, a system of which both he and actor James Stewart had been packaged products. As a lifelong believer in populist ideals, Capra used the

plotline of the film and the personal struggles of Stewart's character George Bailey to expose populism's failure in a postwar world. Capra even questioned World War II, revealing through its notable lack of presence in the film how much Capra wanted to distance himself from it, because it was such a source of fear and uncertainty. Thus, It's a Wonderful Life appeared in 1946 to reveal Frank Capra's perceived failure of the institutions shaping film and culture at the time, but also to reveal how those failures produced his own personal failure to continue living the American dream, one which resonated ominously for individuals in a struggling postwar world.

Frank Capra: "The Name above the Title"

Frank Capra began his career directing films solely with entertainment value in mind. He became famous in the 1930s for his critically coined "escapist" films, including the screwball comedy It Happened One Night (1934), which won him five Oscars, including best director. However, after a battle with nearly fatal illness and a supposed divine intervention, Capra felt called into using his "God given" talents for a higher purpose (Capra 176). Accordingly, he vowed, "Beginning with Mr. Deeds Goes to Town [1936], my films had to *say* something. And whatever they said had to come from those ideas inside me 'that were hurting to come out'" (Capra 185). In other words, Frank Capra wanted to create "message pictures," films that did more than entertain, films that taught his audiences something meaningful. In Capra's words, these messages should deal not with events of epic proportions, but rather with the strains and struggles of ordinary people: "My films will explore the heart not with logic, but with compassion . . . I will deal with the little man's doubts, his curses, his loss of faith in himself, in his neighbor, in his God" (Capra 375).

Capra grappled with just such issues in It's a Wonderful Life, with James Stewart, as George Bailey, embodying a "little man" who doubts himself and his God enough to consider suicide. Bailey has lost faith in his world, and more poignantly, himself, a mindset that echoes Capra's own feelings of doubt during the making of the film. Charles Maland, a longtime friend of Capra's, has recognized Capra's efforts as exposing his truth, observing, "It's a Wonderful Life is clearly a culminating work. By that term I mean one of those rare works of narrative art in which an artist at last finds a form to express precisely the preoccupations he or she has been dealing with in a number of earlier works" (131). Essentially, Maland believes that Capra finally captured the essence of the ideas that had been plaguing him all along. However, Maland's interpretation suggests that Capra's earlier films grappled with the same sense of disillusionment that It's a Wonderful Life confronts. On close inspection, this cannot possibly be the case, because in Capra's earlier films the protagonist always "wins," a resolution that contrasts dramatically with George Bailey's fate. Nonetheless, the film certainly addresses Capra's *current* "preoccupations," a message that even good, virtuous people face self-doubt and failure, often as a result of outside forces.

The Studio System: David and Goliath

One of the greatest forces governing the production of It's a Wonderful Life was the studio system. The studio system, which flourished between the 1930s and 1950s, emerged with the intention of modifying Henry Ford's assembly line system, which had standardized car manufacturing, to standardize film manufacturing as well. Operating within this system, Hollywood studio heads could hold tight reins on every aspect of movie production, from enforcing strict acting contracts to censoring screenplay content to limiting film directors' decision-making power. Frank Capra resented most aspects of the studio system, although he

had operated under it for more than a decade. The controlling philosophy did not match his own personal beliefs in the power of the individual, nor did it allow him to exert the complete control of an *auteur* in his art. One must remember that Capra, while theoretically believing in each individual's freedom and power, believed especially strongly in the power of one individual in particular: himself.

Thus, in an attempt to establish a new Hollywood order by challenging the domineering studio system, Frank Capra, along with directors William Wyler and George Stevens and producer Sam Briskin, founded Liberty Films in 1946. Capra explains that the seeds of the idea sprouted during his time in the armed forces: "The idea for Liberty Films was born in the Army: unite producer-directors in service into a post-war independent combine of independent film makers" (Capra 372). Capra spearheaded Liberty Films in an effort to distance himself from the major Hollywood studios, to prove that his own success was not a product of the system but of his own talent, to prove that his star status had not been manufactured but earned. He explains the goal of this endeavor: "In short, we were something new in Hollywood . . . The 'one man, one film' idea was news again Once again, it threw down the gauntlet to the assembly-line 'committee system' of the major studios" (Capra 373). By creating Liberty Films, in other words, Capra wanted to define a system in Hollywood where he could exert more control, where he could shape the system rather than be shaped by it.

It's a Wonderful Life clearly reflects such roots, for one of its primary battles rages between George's "good" small-town Bailey's Building & Loan and Mr. Potter's "evil" big-business endeavor. Bailey's Building & Loan, under George Bailey's leadership, strives to be an independent entity, to retain the integrity of local control and the importance of personal relationships against the continuous pressure to give in to the enticing smell of wealth oozing

from Mr. Potter's more capitalistic ventures. Mr. Potter represents greed at its most extreme, sacrificing all forms of virtue and any semblance of humanity to gain economic control of Bedford Falls. In the duality between Bailey's Building & Loan and the character of Mr. Potter, Capra reveals his similarly dualistic view of Liberty Films and the major studio systems, blatantly critiquing the intentions of the latter and showing their inhumanity to justify and bolster his own rabidly independent endeavors.

The Star System: "They go to bed with Gilda, they wake up with me." -Rita Hayworth

Frank Capra's fame in the 1930s blossomed out of an ingenious tactic employed by studios to ensure a film's success. Individual motion pictures were nearly impossible to standardize, but studios found that they could easily market the people involved in those pictures, because audiences could connect with them. Thus bloomed the star system, a scheme in which the major studios built up enough commotion around individual actors and actresses—and even directors and producers, at times, as was the case with Frank Capra—that the studio could guarantee an audience if they billed a film with a particular name on it.

James Stewart, who stars as George Bailey in It's a Wonderful Life, was already a well-known face in Hollywood. Stewart captured the public's hearts in his roles as Mr. Smith in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1938), which was also directed by Frank Capra, and as Macaulay Conner in The Philadelphia Story (1940), which won him an Oscar. Both roles—Mr. Smith in particular—characterize Stewart as the good-natured, honest, "average guy" who fights for right. Using the logic of the system, one could assume that Capra, who created George Bailey in the same mold as Mr. Smith, would choose to cast James Stewart in the leading role, because Stewart would already carry with him this persona from his previous films.

However, Capra challenges this logic in a very subtle way. Despite their obvious similarities, Capra fully realizes that George Bailey is not Mr. Smith, because Mr. Smith triumphs over the evils of his world, with justice winning over cunning. George Bailey, on the other hand, does not triumph. Capra creates George Bailey so that, fighting against the evil Mr. Potter, he essentially loses his battle. Mr. Potter never returns the \$8,000 that Uncle Billy accidentally left with him, money that will bankrupt the Bailey's Building & Loan. George only survives as the hero of the film, because an angel comes to his rescue, and all of his friends in the community donate their money to prevent George's bankruptcy. Thus, Capra subverts the Hollywood persona through the Mr. Smith character's failure as George Bailey. He has fallen from the status of hero, now completely dependent on both fantasy and the strength of other people rather than his own virtue to solve his problems. The choice to prevent George's success in the film mirrors Capra's own fears that he himself could no longer triumph in the postwar Hollywood world, that Frank Capra "the success" persona no longer existed.

Populism: Good Ol' American Values

Prior to World War II, Frank Capra "the success" had full faith that he could triumph, however. Capra's moral ideology echoed a particularly optimistic brand of American thinking that typified classic Hollywood: populism. Populism celebrates democracy at its most elemental form, embracing the American dream and each individual's freedom to live it or lose it. Having lived this dream himself until the 1930s, Capra portrayed this dream as distinctly possible for his audience in many of his early films. Such a vision, he thought, would bring hope to a world struggling with the shocks of the Depression. John Belton, author of American Cinema/American Culture, pinpoints this value system as inherent to Capra's works:

[Frank Capra's] films celebrated nineteenth-century agrarian values such as hard work, frugality, honesty, good neighborliness, self-sufficiency, egalitarianism, common sense, personal authenticity, and moral sincerity. Through the heroic efforts of their stalwart protagonists, they attacked the twentieth-century evils of industrialism, big business, special interest groups, commercialism, political machines, urban corruption, cynicism, and intellectualism—all of which threatened the populist spirit that had animated small-town America. (Belton 243-4)

George Bailey seems to provide a perfect example of one such “stalwart protagonist,” working against the “urban corruption” of imaginary “Pottersville’s” and the big business and cynical minds of “Mr. Potters” themselves. James Stewart’s character embodies a scarcely hidden projection of Capra’s own misgivings about those same “twentieth-century evils.” In It’s a Wonderful Life, Capra only allows the full-scale corruption of corporate America to exist in fantasy, when Clarence the Angel shows George what Bedford Falls would have been like if George had never lived. This urban world of flashing lights, burlesque shows, drinking, and dancing provides a stark contrast to the quiet, slow-paced, small-town world of Bedford Falls in its current form. The only character who represents capitalist values in the film is Mr. Potter, and he is physically handicapped enough to need a wheelchair, adding to his perceived sub-human status. Unlike capitalism’s infirmed status in the film, however, populism seems alive and well in the heart of George Bailey and his community.

However, Capra uses George Bailey’s character in It’s a Wonderful Life not only to question the capitalist model, but to show how the populist model fails as well. George embodies all of the values and beliefs of a populist and possesses those things which make up the

American dream—a wife, children, a home, a car, a steady job. He practices the virtues of honesty and good-neighborliness, working to keep Bailey’s Building and Loan afloat at the expense of a college education and his own honeymoon. People in the town respect him, and his family adores him. Yet, still he is unhappy. In fact, he is so unhappy in this “idyllic” life that he tries to commit suicide to rid himself of having to face it. Thus, the populist model fails, because it fails to make George content, to make him the success that he dreams of being. Capra demonstrates the complete failure of this idealized world, because he can only save it artificially using the divine intervention of angels and miracles, something which audiences would recognize as strictly a Hollywood reality.

Furthermore, Capra does not even resolve many of the major conflicts in the film, because he does not see them as realistically solvable in a postwar world. First and foremost, Mr. Potter, the source of all evil, does not reform, suggesting that good may not always triumph over evil, that some people and, thus, the world cannot be inherently good. Second, George never realizes his dream of leaving Bedford Falls, suggesting that the power of dreams cannot always overcome circumstance. The harder George dreams, the more disappointed he becomes. These are modern, terrifying thoughts, because they contrast so glaringly with Capra’s earlier messages. Even Capra, the supposed idealist, can no longer ensure a happy ending. His guaranteed prescription for happiness, the populist life, rings hollow in a postwar world.

World War II: Bursting the Bubble

World War II was historically significant enough to upend the ideals of the America that came before it in order to establish the America that survived after it. Ironically enough, while the war had been destructive for America in general, it had produced a boom for the movie business. With people on the home front feeling helpless and needing some way to channel or

escape those feelings, movies provided the perfect form of both escapist and cathartic entertainment. However, many of the icons of the 1930s, including Frank Capra, were out of action, leaving room for a new group of actors, directors, and producers to shape a Hollywood undergoing significant transition. Frank Capra had rejoined the army to produce his now famous Why We Fight propaganda film series. James Stewart, along with numerous other Hollywood stars, had enlisted as soldiers. In a later interview, Stewart recalled, “I was inducted into the armed services on March 22, 1941. Like so many others, I came out of World War II with no desire to describe at length what I had done, seen, or felt” (Stewart 56). Stewart implies that the events of the war were too horrific to recount, exemplifying much of the disillusionment, fatigue and hopelessness that many Americans suffered after returning from the war. Emerging “victorious” did not prevent part of the American identity and, hence, part of individuals’ identity, from dying.

With American identity in transition, many of those formerly established Hollywood stars felt they had to prove themselves worthy of a new American audience. Capra had to grapple with his fall from grace, as Charles Maland explains: “When Capra returned to Hollywood in mid-1945 after winning the Distinguished Service Medal, he had lost his place as one of the preeminent Hollywood directors” (132). Thus, Capra could no longer depend on his prewar star status to ensure that his films would sell. He recounts his own worries, confiding, “It’s frightening to go back to Hollywood after four years . . . wondering whether you’ve gone rusty or lost your touch” (Capra 374). Capra mirrors the views of many people returning from the war to a public that had not witnessed most of the action; he evokes a sense of uncertainty, an apprehension at trying to “go back to normal,” or to “pick up where he left off,” which many soldiers would have felt.

To deal with his fear, Capra attempted to shrink the magnitude of its source in It's a Wonderful Life; Capra chooses to minimize the effects that World War II had on the people in Bedford Falls, an irony which actually deepens the war's significance for himself and for his audience. He recalled his thoughts in his autobiography, The Name above the Title: "Okay, genius, what *is* your first film going to be about? I knew one thing—it would *not* be about war. I sensed a growing revulsion among the world's people against brutality" (374-5). According to this passage, Capra believed that the American public did not want to face the war and would benefit from a "look the other way" philosophy, an action that seems like an obvious projection of his own desires. However, his audience would have known that a more brutal, more horrific version of the war story existed, thanks to the obvious changes in the soldiers who had returned home who were having difficulty readjusting to an unenlightened world. Capra's unwillingness to confront this issue with frankness in the film seems to be a common theme in Hollywood: "We could cite this sequence [the WWII montage] as typical of Hollywood's tendency to avoid or gloss over difficult issues" (Anderegg 4). Capra does acknowledge World War II in It's a Wonderful Life, but only in a brief, saccharine sequence in which he speeds through the actions that people were taking at home, mentions Harry Bailey's heroism as a fighter pilot, and moves along his merry way, with everyone in Bedford Falls pulling their weight and not a single character dying. His view of the war is extremely limited; however, this minimization only inflates its true significance to his personal life. By its glaring absence, the film reveals how vainly Capra was trying to remove himself from the war and from its momentous effects on America and on himself, trying once again to fight the undeniable power of cultural forces that were shifting America and its values in a newer, darker direction.

Failure: A Newly American Theme

The Hollywood that Capra reentered was not the same as the one before the war. The sense of innocence, of certain victory, of moral rightness, all of these stark, clear ideas now looked murky and uncertain. People were struggling to define themselves individually and as an American people. None of the institutions, whether literal, like the studio system, or metaphorical, like the star system, fit anymore. How is it, then, that It's a Wonderful Life, which emerged amidst this postwar turmoil, survived as a classic example of Hollywood film, now beloved by more people than when it was first released? What is it about Capra's film that transcends time?

The failure of It's a Wonderful Life to flourish at the box-office confirmed for Frank Capra many postwar feelings of failure and inadequacy that burrowed deeply in the American consciousness. However, these negative feelings toward the war and its effects were complicated by the fact that the war had allowed the United States to make huge economic strides and had virtually pulled it out of Depression more than any New Deal possibly could have done. David Kennedy, author of Freedom From Fear, describes the degree to which the war woke America from its comatose state: "The war had shaken the American people loose and shaken them up, freed them from a decade of economic and social paralysis and flung them around their country into new regions and new ways of life" (857). This newer, freer America sought a matching newer, freer identity.

Established Hollywood directors like Frank Capra were eager to promote an American identity that would suit their own tastes. "During this era of great transition and turmoil, these directors [Capra, Ford, and Kazan] sought to rediscover and represent American values and beliefs" (Girgus 56). Frank Capra absorbed the more encompassing themes of his time—the studio system, the star system, populism, and World War II—and channeled them through his

particular lens to give them meaning, or, as the case may be, to demonstrate their lack of meaning, their lack of durability in film to withstand the world of which he was an active part. It's Wonderful Life sharply depicts just such a lack of durability of the American dream, exposing its failure. However, in doing so, Capra actually succeeds, as he had hoped to do, in defining an American value by making it a theme in It's a Wonderful Life: failure. In other words, Capra, who himself lived the mythic "American dream," claims, through George, that the dream may not be reconcilable with a post-Depression and post-war America: "More than any other character in the movie, George Bailey recognized that the American Dream was no longer a given, that it depended on the will of its adherents" (Girgus 104).

In the same sense that the myth of the American Dream had broken, so too had the myth of old Hollywood and even of Frank Capra after World War II. Film critic Pauline Kael lamented that old Hollywood's glorified vision of war nearly broke her of her love of film: "I've always been a movie person, but the war years really put a strain on my patience. I got so angry. It was so difficult to deal with, because in some intangible way they did represent the essence of war propaganda" (Terkel 125). With the advent and subsequent popularity of the film noir genre, which represented a much darker side of the American psyche, classic Hollywood appears extinct: ". . . film noir represents a remarkable epistemological shift in America's self-conceptualization. Capra's utopian, small-town America didn't exist anymore—except in Capra's pictures" (Belton 245). Here, John Belton fails to give Capra enough credit, because Capra proposes that such an America does not, in fact, exist in his films anymore than it does in real life.

Thematically, Frank Capra acknowledged in It's a Wonderful Life that his former values did not hold up in the face of discouragement and failure. Modern critic Sam Girgus claims that

Capra actually subverts the values of freedom and individuality in It's a Wonderful Life by allowing George to return to the family and community that have controlled him:

Through the actions of Mary and their friends, George learns to love himself for his failures, and acknowledges the powerful paternal and ideological forces that put him in his position of weakness. He accepts and relishes his castration and reaffirms his allegiance to the system that has so repeatedly wounded him . . .

George's return to family and community constitutes an abnegation of his freedom and independence. (Girgus 92-93)

Instead of fighting his failure, George accepts his fate and works within the system of already established pressures and limitations. Thus, this example shows not only the failure of the individual to make himself or herself happy, but also the failure of institutions like the family to do so. George returns to his family fully knowing that they have not provided for his needs.

Frederick Lewis Allen, author of Since Yesterday emphasizes the important function that the family served prior to World War II: "The family seemed to have become more highly prized as an institution" (135). Capra clearly understood the importance of this model; however, through the film he demonstrates that it no longer functions in a postwar society: "It's a Wonderful Life indicates the growing failure of the family to cultivate security, freedom, and love resulting in an ensuing flight into social and cultural ennui and chaos" (Girgus 94). Thus, the film proves that even those institutions that Americans had relied upon for stability for centuries might now be coming undone.

Thanks in part to its being a pervasive theme in It's a Wonderful Life, failure also becomes crucial theme for America, a theme which resonates painfully but truthfully with the modern American audience, as it has with changing American audiences over the past sixty

years. As the phenomenon of failure has become more prominent and, perhaps, more of an acknowledged presence in the American psyche, particularly after the Vietnam War, during which occurred a notable resurgence in the popularity of It's a Wonderful Life, the film becomes more and more celebrated as a classic. Thus, the film's failure to succeed in its time may have solidified not only its later success but also its significant role in weaving the American story.

Lighting: From War to Noir

It's a Wonderful Life also technically explores the mood of failure. Exemplifying his cinematic prowess, Capra chooses to use the lighting in It's a Wonderful Life to emphasize George's shift from his familiar idealist "Mr. Smith" character to someone dark and hopeless, a shift that mirrors Capra's own disillusionment. Through the transition from high-key to low-key lighting, Capra actually visually demonstrates George's spiraling feelings of failure and, consequently, his own failure. The darkness of the later scenes in the film, while George contemplates suicide and while Clarence shows him the nightmare of Pottersville, only enhances the sense of hopelessness and doom, a sense which contrasts beautifully with the soft focus and high-key lighting of the film's—and George Bailey's—optimistic beginning. George's face, once so brightly lit, now hangs in long, sorrowful shadow. Scholar Sam Girgus recognizes Capra's technical skill at mimicking the film's mood change: ". . . the aesthetic and cinematic complexities of the film's rendering of the tensions, ambiguities, and darkness at the core of modern American experience make it a major achievement" (90). The film is cinematically complex, because Capra uses the film noir style, which became overwhelmingly popular after WWII, to subvert his own classic Hollywood style, employing it to represent the new themes of failure and uncertainty that were so inextricably present in the American psyche. Maland cites critic Robin Wood as suggesting that "the central tension of Wonderful Life is produced by the

‘disturbing influx of *film noir* into the world of small-town domestic comedy’ (146). Capra’s successful use of both styles marks this film as a true turning point for American cinema, for it bridges the two worlds of film styles together, effectively and uniquely mapping their transition. The subversiveness of the film noir style with respect to classic Hollywood style explains why the film uses it to echo its dramatic mood change. John Belton explains:

Thematically, film noir grapples . . . with existential issues such as the futility of individual action; the alienation, loneliness, and isolation of the individual in industrialized, mass society; the problematic choice between being and nothingness; the absurdity, meaninglessness, and purposelessness of life; and the arbitrariness of social justice, which results in individual despair, leading to chaos, violence, and paranoia. (Belton 230)

Capra’s *George Bailey* certainly struggles with all of these traits, but the most revolutionary thing about *It’s a Wonderful Life*’s use of film noir is that George exemplifies the noir character not in an “industrialized, mass society,” but in the idealized small-town of paradisiacal agrarian lore. Thus, Capra even hints at subverting the film noir style, echoing its themes but without its necessary setting. He suggests that the noir mentality, thanks to the ripples of war, pervades even those formerly untouched places where lives seemed simple and fulfilling, that it might even be unavoidable.

Turkey Dinners: Resolution or Revolution?

However, Capra does not end the film with the shadowy world of Pottersville and George Bailey’s attempted suicide. Instead, the high-key lighting returns. Optimism and jollity ensues. The final scene in *It’s a Wonderful Life* uncannily mimics artist Norman Rockwell’s piece, “Freedom from Want,” which he made in 1943, a work intended to make its viewers believe that

family and community are all a person needs to be happy. In both Rockwell's and Capra's works, the head of household sits down with his beaming loved ones to a "turkey dinner," literal in Rockwell's case and metaphorical in Capra's. Bosley Crowther, a contemporary critic for The New York Times who reviewed It's a Wonderful Life, satirizes this ending:

The late and beloved Dexter Fellows . . . held that the final curtain of every drama, no matter what, should benignly fall upon the whole cast sitting down to turkey dinner and feeling fine. Mr. Fellows should be among us to see Frank Capra's 'It's a Wonderful Life' . . . He would find it very much to his taste...its illusory concept of life. Mr. Capra's nice people are charming,. . . but somehow they all resemble theatrical attitudes rather than average realities. And Mr. Capra's 'turkey dinners' philosophy, while emotionally gratifying, doesn't fill the hunger paunch. (19)

Crowther implies that Capra still believes in his Hollywood "happy ending," that the film ends in such a way simply to make people leave the theatre feeling good, that it lacks the grit and truth of George's earlier struggles. Crowther writes scene off as Capra's avoidance of difficult issues, of his illusory, Hollywood-tainted perspective.

But why actually does the film conclude with the "turkey dinner," despite its obvious lack of sincere resolution, and even after its protagonist fails? The complex causes that created It's a Wonderful Life are inextricably linked to the direct impact of those causes on the film's director, Frank Capra. Those causes—in this case, the studio system, the star system, populism, and World War II—would have neither existence nor meaning were it not for the individuals affected by them and, in turn, affecting them. For this reason, Crowther misinterpreted Capra's "turkey dinner" ending. Capra does not conclude It's a Wonderful Life with a "turkey dinner,"

because he thinks that both he and his audience can find it realistic. Capra ends the film with a “turkey dinner” because he has no other way of ending it. Capra does not have solutions for the problems addressed in film any more than he does for the same problems he faces in life.

Instead, he uses the powers he has left in Hollywood to create the ending he would like George Bailey’s and, more importantly, his own story to have. Thus, Capra saves George Bailey from self-doubt by an angel that shows him how important he is to the world and by a community who resoundingly confirms this truth. Capra, through George, relinquishes self-reliance and relishes failure in It’s a Wonderful Life. However, through the “turkey dinner” ending, he provides a window of hope, a small space for dreamers in the modern experience to test success anyway, even though he knows that the American dream has failed. By doing so, Capra revolutionarily solidifies this mindset as part of the new American identity. Bosley Crowther, among others, has missed the point by faulting Capra for his sentimentality and unrealistic resolution in the film; but, after all, if he had a choice in life, would he not choose the turkey dinner, too?

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