

Simon Wendt (ed.)

Extraordinary Ordinariness

Everyday Heroism in the United States, Germany,
and Britain, 1800–2015

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Studying Everyday Heroism in Western Societies <i>Simon Wendt</i>	7
"Our Heroes of To-day": The Royal Humane Society and the Creation of Heroes in Victorian Britain <i>Craig Barclay</i>	25
Everyday Heroism for the Victorian Industrial Classes: <i>The British Workman</i> and <i>The British Workwoman</i> , 1855–1880 <i>Christiane Hadamitzky</i> and <i>Barbara Korte</i>	53
Everyday Heroism in Britain, 1850–1939 <i>John Price</i>	79
Volunteers and Professionals: Everyday Heroism and the Fire Service in Nineteenth-Century America <i>Wolfgang Hochbruck</i>	109
Narratives of Feminine Heroism: Gender Values and Memory in the American Press in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries <i>Janice Hume</i>	139
Heroic Ordinairiness after Cavell and Capra: Hollywood Cinema and Everyday Heroism in the Interwar Period and World War II <i>Matthias Grotkopp</i>	167
Everyday Socialist Heroes and Hegemonic Masculinity in the German Democratic Republic, 1949–1989 <i>Sylka Scholz</i>	185

Everyday Heroes in Germany: Perspectives from Cultural Anthropology <i>Silke Meyer</i>	217
After Watergate and Vietnam: Politics, Community, and the Ordinary American Hero, 1975–2015 <i>William Graebner</i>	235
“It Must Have Been Cold There In My Shadow”: Everyday Heroism in Superhero Narratives <i>Michael Goodrum</i>	249
After the Working-Class Hero: Popular Music and Everyday Heroism in the United States in the Twenty-First Century <i>Martin Lütke</i>	271
Notes on Contributors	291

Introduction: Studying Everyday Heroism in Western Societies

Simon Wendt

In April 1906, in the small town of Midway, Kentucky, a retired blacksmith named Rufus K. Combs saved Richard Godson, a local lawyer whom he utterly disliked. Despite their enmity, Combs jumped into a gas-filled vault to rescue Godson, who had fallen into the pit when inspecting a leaking gas tank. Americans would probably never have heard about Combs's courageous act if it had not been for the newly established Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, which honored Combs by granting him a silver medal and \$1,500. Subsequently, newspapers across the country reported about this astonishing case of altruism. Journalists lauded Combs's unselfish bravery and noted approvingly that other Carnegie awardees had similarly risked their lives to save those of others.¹ To the editors of the *Washington Post*, for instance, such noble acts represented “a pleasing record for the encouragement of our faith that the heroic impulse still greatly moves the hearts of men to courageous acts of self-sacrifice.”²

In November 2014, more than 100 years after the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission paid tribute to Richard Combs, Tuğçe Albayrak, a young German woman of Turkish descent, tried to protect two teenage girls who had been harassed by three young men in front of a McDonald's restaurant in Offenbach, a town near Frankfurt. During a subsequent altercation, one of the young men punched Tuğçe, who fell on her head and died a few days later. After her death, many commentators lauded what they called Albayrak's civic courage, and some even called her a heroine. One of those comments appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a center-left newspaper from

1 “Note and Comment,” *Daily Springfield Republican*, October 20, 1906, 8; “Stories of Heroism,” *Anaconda Standard*, November 18, 1906, 17; “His Enemy Fights Fair,” *Duluth News Tribune*, December 2, 1906, 1; “Too Good To Lose,” *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, July 17, 1907, 3; “Too Good To Lose,” *Morning Olympian*, July 13, 1907, 3.

2 “Brave Acts of Humble Heroes,” *Washington Post*, October 13, 1907, 3.

Heroic Ordinariness after Cavell and Capra: Hollywood Cinema and Everyday Heroism in the Interwar Period and World War II

Matthias Grotkopp

The Hero as the Ordinary

The hero, so the idiom goes, comes to save the day. But what is that “day”? Does it not mean the “everyday,” the lives and livelihood of unheroic ordinary men and women? And does this not imply that the hero has to come again and again in order for “the day” to be saved? By this logic, the coming of the hero itself turns out to be an everyday occurrence; turns out to be ordinary.

What may sound like a short Kafkaesque parable concisely describes the specific turn that I want to give the discussion of the “everyday hero.” The aim is to describe the heroic and the everyday neither as the mutually exclusive terms some might take them to be, nor as a simple resolvable dialectic. Rather, they have to be regarded as irresolvable but equally indispensable antinomies of democracy and modern life – just like the antinomies of consensus and disagreement, of freedom and security, or of freedom and equality.¹

My goal is to formulate an idea of the importance of the ordinary as a “heroic ordinariness.” In order to do this, I want to present a short analysis of a film by Frank Capra: *Meet John Doe* (USA 1941).² This film is part of a series of films by Capra that are not only films with heroes in the sense of protagonists, or films about heroes, but films about the making and the unmaking of a specific kind of ordinary hero. A central reference point for me is Stanley Cavell’s philosophy of moral perfectionism and the way he formulates the task to rediscover the ordinary as a meaningful space of

¹ See Oliver Hidalgo, *Die Antinomien der Demokratie* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2014).

² *Meet John Doe*, directed by Frank Capra (1941; Burbank, CA: Frank Capra Productions / Warner Bros., VCI Video Collection International, 2011), DVD.

public and political action.³ The following disclaimer should therefore not be a surprise: I will not concern myself with heroism as the doing of exciting, extra-ordinary deeds like saving lives by risking one's own life. John Price and others have investigated this kind of heroism in fine-grained analyses of rewards, medals, memorials and other measures of public appreciation for death-defying courage. Price, for instance, defines everyday heroism as "acts of life-risking bravery, undertaken by otherwise ordinary individuals, largely in the course of their daily lives and within quotidian surroundings."⁴

The striking insight these studies provide is that the public recognition of this kind of action, and therefore their very existence as a valid category of human action, has emerged only recently; that is, in the course of the nineteenth century. That is why it would be wrong to try to integrate this phenomenon into an a-historical, universal definition of heroism per se.⁵ And this certainly has to mean that the conditions that make this understanding of everyday heroism perceptible and meaningful are related to broader historical shifts in the cultural, social, and political discourses, as well as to shifts in media technologies, media practices, and poetics.⁶ It is to these underlying conditions at a very specific time and place upon which I will focus. My working definition for everyday heroism, or – in order to maintain this distinction for the moment – heroic ordinariness, would be the service to a moral ideal of everyday life, the defense of this moral ideal against dangers from the outside, as well as from its very own antinomies, and its predisposition to corruption. What is important to me is that this

3 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Andrew Norris, ed., *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

4 John Price, *Everyday Heroism: Victorian Constructions of the Heroic Civilian* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

5 Silke Meyer, "Helden des Alltags: Von der Transformation des Besonderen," in *Die Helden-Maschine: Zur Aktualität und Tradition von Heldenbildern*, ed. LWL-Industriemuseum (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2010), 33.

6 Lance Strate, "Heroes and/as Communication," in *Heroes in a Global World*, ed. Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008), 26. Strate claims that "the most dramatic shifts in conceptions of the hero have been associated with innovations in communication such as the invention of writing and printing, and the development of the electronic media." Strate applies this idea to long-term historical shifts like the transition from mythic to historical heroes and to the contemporary celebrity cult, but one can also use it as a searchlight for changes and differentiations on shorter time spans.

service does not happen in contrast to everyday life – like the idea of heroism as the exceptional implies – but has to be embedded in it.

There is a little diabolical question that immediately shows how the two phenomena are connected: "Why has saving lives in itself become publicly praiseworthy?" And I think that this question can only be perceived as scandalous or even oddly ridiculous in a secular context in which political community is not based on mythical origins, ethnic essentialisms, or doctrines, but on "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"⁷ for each and everyone, everyday. Heroic ordinariness would be a specific kind of everyday heroism that is positioned on the extreme end of the scale of what counts as "action," making it less about corporeal agency and more about service to a sense of commonality.⁸

If every form of heroism is a cultural mode of communication⁹ or address, then one needs to ask: What does this kind of everyday hero communicate, what problems does he address, and what is it that he makes thinkable? My proposition is that he makes us aware of those dangers to democracy, freedom, and everyday life that come from their very own conditions. He makes us aware of the way that the institutions of democracy – commerce, media, political parties, law, freedom of speech and of art, and so on – have in themselves tendencies or possibilities to subvert democracy, and that the everyday is not a realm of mindless repetition from which extraordinary actions stand out, but that it is the realm in which democracy and freedom have to be won, have to be deserved, again and again and again.

The United States in the 1930s: Heroism, Democracy, and the Age of Mass Media

This leads me to the specific context and object of my study: A series of films by Frank Capra from the 1930s and their inquiry into the condition

7 Thomas Jefferson et al., *The Declaration of Independence, 1776*, National Archives and Records Administration, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html.

8 Selwyn W. Becker and Alice H. Eagly, "The Heroism of Women and Men," *American Psychologist* 59, no. 3 (2004): 163–178.

9 Strate, "Heroes and/as Communication," 19–45.

of democracy. There were a lot of factors for the way heroism in particular, and political subjectivity in general, changed in the United States of America between the two World Wars.¹⁰ These years were a critical time for the nation's self-understanding as a democracy; from the Red Scare, to the economic crisis, and the New Deal. Not only the idea of an inherent connection between technological progress and democracy was questioned, but also the role of mass media and mass entertainment in a democratic public sphere was reconsidered.

In the context of these uncertainties, it became equally questionable how far hero-worship in the classic sense – that means a worship of the military and political leaders like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln – could still be consistent with democracy and a valid form of expressing social and political values. For instance, the historian, Dixon Wecter tried to defend this tradition in his 1941 book, “The Hero in America,”¹¹ by claiming that these American heroes were chosen by the people rather than by an elite and that they had certain qualities that made them more common and less extraordinary.¹² The achievements of American heroes were a question of character and attainability “open to everyman's comprehension.”¹³

However, Wecter also observed with concern that not only American democrats but also Fascism and Communism used the idea of the common man as a heroic type. If the everyday hero, the idealization of ordinary men and women could be seen as something that seems inherently democratic, it could also be misused to undermine democracy, when the common man became “the collective ideal of the little man.”¹⁴ The hero-tyrant dressed up in plain clothes or the uniform of the foot soldier embodied not an invitation to self-realization and acknowledgment of the everyday but, rather, the invitation to give up individuality: “He is the triumphant sublimation of a million inferiority complexes.”¹⁵ Here the “everyday hero” intersects with another prominent figure of the political imagination of the early twentieth century: the masses. Wecter

10 On the idea of a social equalization of heroism through the fallen troops of the First World War, see Meyer, “Helden des Alltags,” 34.

11 Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York: Scribner, 1941).

12 Wecter, *The Hero in America*, 11.

13 Ibid., 486.

14 Ibid., 7.

15 Ibid.

concluded his typology of American heroes with a double warning. First, he cautioned against the growing sense of disillusionment and cynicism; of anti-heroism. But, at the same time, he remained suspicious of the way heroes are made in the modern age: “Above all others, newspapers and newsreel and radio and the mechanisms of ovation have such power in making or breaking the idol of the moment, that fresh irony has been given to the old saying, ‘Heroes are not born but made.’”¹⁶

This brings me to an important aspect of the context I am concerned with: the critical condition of democracy and the media as it has been discussed in the 1920s and 1930s. Nowhere has this crisis been as tangible as in the so-called Lippmann-Dewey-Debate. While I will not go into the details of that debate¹⁷ – which was far less antagonistic than some accounts suggests – I want to quickly show where it connects to the question of heroism and everydayness. The disagreement between Walther Lippmann and John Dewey, formulated by the first in his books *Public Opinion* (1922)¹⁸ and *The Phantom Public* (1925)¹⁹ and by the latter in his response *The Public and its Problems*, written in 1927,²⁰ can be summed up in these questions: If the masses are so susceptible by the media, how do you achieve a democratic public that is aware of its own interests? Is the ideal of a participatory democracy unrealistic? And should one instead rely on experts in government to solve the nation's problems and on experts in the media to communicate these decisions? If so, how do you then make the government and the media responsive to the general public?

The problem was less whether experts for the complexity of economic, social, and diplomatic affairs were necessary, but, rather, how to keep their activity legitimate. In other words, how do you make sure that experts remain experts of the everyday?

Whereas Lippmann took this latter problem to be a second-order question regarding the overall necessity of an expert-led democracy, it was Dewey's main concern. He struggled with ways to make ordinary people experts of their own needs and positions: not by sticking to the Enlightenment ideal of the universally informed citizen since this was

16 Ibid., 488.

17 Sue Curry Jansen, “Phantom Conflict: Lippmann, Dewey, and the Fate of the Public in Modern Society,” *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2009): 221–245.

18 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922).

19 Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925).

20 John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York: Holt and Company, 1927).

prevented by the quantity of information, the new quality of social and political complexities, and the sheer plurality of publics, but by instilling the right attitudes and habits in order to stop the descent into political apathy. According to Dewey, this was “the primary problem of the public: to achieve such recognition of itself as will give it weight in the selection of official representatives and in the definition of their responsibilities and rights.”²¹

But then again, the means of this education are themselves open to grave abuse. According to Benjamin, the arts as an *education sentimental* of the public can just as easily be transformed into a totalitarian aestheticization of politics.²² And this was precisely what Lippmann and Dewey were both concerned about yet drew different conclusions from. As Dewey noted: “The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government ... have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public.”²³ Indeed, this is the common thread that connects this debate and the figure of the everyday hero as he is presented in Capra’s films: They are reactions to the historical experience of a close encounter between democracy and totalitarianism at a moment when state propaganda and a tendency towards fascism seemed to become a viable option.

Frank Capra’s Heroes (out) of the Ordinary

The films in question are *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (USA 1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (USA 1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941), even though I will base my argument mainly on the last one. While one could include other films by Frank Capra in order to highlight the same reoccurring principle ideas and conflicts, these three form a cohesive trilogy. On the surface, these films are simple fairytales about innocent, common men who are used and misused by a corrupt elite, but then achieve self-awareness and triumph over evil. They are exemplary of Hollywood’s portrayal of politics

²¹ Ibid., 77.

²² See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (London: Penguin, 2008 [1936]).

²³ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 109.

as a struggle for personal integrity and for the reconciliation of the public and the private spheres.²⁴ And even though ideological critique may ridicule this conflation, these films make politics matter for their audience; they make palpable “that there was a right way, or at least a livable way, to conduct political life.”²⁵ In this sense, one has to allow for the rhetorical pathos of a series of films that was explicitly meant to strengthen the movie-going public against the temptations of fascism.

Viewed as such, they become much more complex than escapist sentimentalism: They are explorations of modes to publicly express “America” and democracy.²⁶ The three films investigate the way the life of ordinary American citizens can be endangered by their society’s own institutions and conditions. The institutions of law and the practices of juridical, social, and aesthetic judgment are the primary concern of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*; professional politics and the question of representation is at the center of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; while *Meet John Doe* focused on the media industry and the controllability of seemingly grassroots movements.

The beginning of *Meet John Doe* immediately interweaves the question of media power and the – today one would say precarious – working conditions of ordinary people: Barbara Stanwyck plays Ann Mitchell, a journalist who loses her job after D. B. Norton (Edward Arnold), a rich man with political ambitions, bought the newspaper for which she was working. As a final act of defiance, in her last piece for the paper she fakes a letter from an anonymous unemployed man, John Doe, who announces that he would commit suicide on Christmas Eve out of protest against the state of civilization. Because of the strong reactions to this fake letter, she and her editor (James Gleason) have to produce a face and a body for this fictional character, and choose the unemployed baseball player, Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper).

For different reasons, the journalist, her editor, and the owner of the paper all want to make the most out of the attention this “letter of intent” has created. This culminates in a speech on the Radio, written by Mitchell,

²⁴ Harry Keyishian, “Heroes in American Political Film,” in *The Hero in Transition*, ed. Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 219–220.

²⁵ Ibid., 227.

²⁶ Raymond Carney, *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 281–282.

and held by Long John, who in the process of reading this speech “becomes” the character “John Doe” invented by the words. Across the country, spontaneous “John Doe Clubs” emerge, in order to promote neighborly values. This again prompts the tycoon to use these clubs as a base for his political ambitions of forming a fascist dictatorship. When he is made aware of being “mixed up with skunks,” Long John wants to use one of his public appearances to denounce the whole thing, but is silenced and exposed as a fake. As a result, when Christmas arrives, “John Doe” wants to fulfill his promise (which he never made) and commit suicide, but he is stopped by Mitchell, who has fallen in love with him, and by a group of faithful John Does.

The central objective of the film, as most critics and scholars see it, is the parallel creation of the figuration “John Doe” as a hero and the (re-) creation of Gary Cooper as the star of this film.²⁷ This is nowhere as apparent and openly acknowledged by the film than in the scene of the big radio broadcast at its center (0h 39m 45s – 0h 52m 27s). While preparing backstage, Mitchell tells Long John that his task is to think of himself as “the real John Doe.” She uses the word “real,” even though it is clear that he does not exist (although a previous scene showed her character referring to her deceased father as a kind of co-author of her speech). What therefore seems absurd is, on the other hand, the ordinary business of “actors”: Barbara Stanwyck is simply giving acting instructions to her colleague Gary Cooper. She asks him to do what he normally does: play a fictional character. Not only does this hint at the fictional and performative nature of heroism, which is not only achieved by the hero but imposed on him by his environment.²⁸ One could also claim that this shows how becoming someone – impersonating an identity – is something that is within the realm of what everybody does all the time, and that, therefore, becoming a hero is also an attainable kind of identity performance.

The act of reading the script is then not only filmed as the process in which the character Long John becomes more and more at ease with reading the script the journalist wrote for him, but also as the process in

²⁷ Ibid., 347.

²⁸ See Stanley Cavell, “North by Northwest,” in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005 [1981]) 43. Cavell writes about another actor (Cary Grant) and another film (*North by Northwest*) but the structure he describes can be applied to a lot of films that are self-conscious about the relationship between stars and their roles.

which Gary Cooper more and more acts like Gary Cooper – the top-earning movie star of his time who starred as ‘Wild Bill Hickok’ in *The Plainsman* (dir: Cecil B. DeMille, USA 1936), or as a multi-millionaire womanizer in *Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife* (dir: Ernst Lubitsch, USA 1938), and who won an Oscar as best actor the same year for his role as the war hero *Sergeant York* (dir.: Howard Hawks, USA 1941). Historically speaking, one could claim that the choice of Cooper – who was mostly known for his roles in Westerns – further demonstrates that heroism of the common man has, in the age of mass media, been firmly connected to the heroism of popular entertainment genres, as opposed to the heroic traditions of mythologies, political arenas, or battlefields.²⁹

The complexity of this parallel creation is emphasized by the fact that, of all the different media technologies that are traversed in the course of the film’s narrative, the moving pictures themselves are left “out of the picture”. The audience is encouraged to identify the hero-creating performance of Cooper and of the film’s expressive qualities as an integral part of the acts of staging and manipulating that are shown in the film’s plot. Throughout the delivering of the speech, Cooper is, with only slight variations, framed in the same frontal, slightly low angle medium shots. What is gradually enhanced is firmness of diction, assurance of bodily posture, timing of accents and pauses. This is in contrast to the beginning, when his voice is always breaking, his hands are shaking and disrupting the microphone, and he is repeatedly looking to the side of the stage for support from Mitchell or looking for the emergency exit, where his friend “The Colonel” (Walter Brennan) beckons him to leave. But not only the performance of Gary Cooper changes, the performance of the film does so as well by giving increasingly more time and space to the impact of the speech on the audience in the hall, on Mitchell and the impressed editor, and finally to the audience listening on the radio. It is as if his self-assurance is the direct product of their perception and of their communal agreement to his agreeableness. Everybody seems to be united in unanimous approval of the content and the style of the speech: praising the resilience and the strength of character of the “little punks,” praising team-work and charity, calling on others to live the “spirit of Christmas” the whole year, invoking “a tidal wave of goodwill that no human force could stand against it.”

²⁹ John Dean, “U.S. and European Heroism Compared,” in *Heroes in a Global World*, ed. Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008), 74–75.

However, the moment in which the ideal of the average man as a political utopia achieves full embodiment is not only the moment in which he ceases to be average, but also the moment in which the tycoon Norton realizes his potential to mobilize support for political causes. Having secretly observed the euphoric reaction of his domestic staff, who firmly approve of the message, Norton realizes the malleability of public opinion.

There are two analytical studies within the film: The first shows how heroism is a question of perception that can be written, produced, and directed, while the second transforms this into a study of taking heroic responsibility for everyday life. The fact that, of all the different media *within* the film – from newspapers and billboards, to public appearances and radio broadcasts – film itself is absent, can, of course, be interpreted as proposing that film as art, as opposed to film as media, is an exception from these structures of staging and manipulating. But as I have already claimed above, it can also be taken as pointing towards the fact that the film *Meet John Doe* puts itself in question and asks its audience: How is it possible, that a very specific somebody like Gary Cooper, with his singular appearance, can convincingly play a “John Doe”; i.e. can be a credible anybody?

The answer given in the scene of the casting (0h 14m 23s – 0h 17m 04s) is simple: It is possible due to the right music, and the right editing and timing. The moment of Cooper’s entry is accompanied by a suggestion of pastoral music, as opposed to the mickey-mousing effect accompanying the candidates before him. It is also longer than the ones before him and his face is intercut with Stanwyck’s approving look, asking the editor – and us – to agree with her aesthetic judgment. When Stanwyck tells the editor, “Look at that face, it’s wonderful, they’ll believe him,” she means as much the people in the film as the audience of the film. In this sense, the film is very pessimistic and optimistic at the same time, because it shows that there is no exception, no “outside,” to the media technologies that produce identities; that “John Doe” as well as “Gary Cooper” are empty signifiers to which star- or hero-making technologies like framing and editing moving images are attached. As Carney notes: “There is no one there, only a series of images or masks. Doe is an absence at the centre of the events in which he nominally stars.”³⁰

30 Carney, *American Vision*, 363.

But at the same time that the star system is criticized because it is just a technology that seems to contradict the democratic values of equality³¹ and because it mixes attainable fame with unattainable desire,³² the star also becomes comprehensible as the perfect expression of these values. The idea of the “star” in the Classical Hollywood era was neither the absolutely exceptional, nor the reproducibly stereotypical, but something oscillating between the two. Cavell uses the term “type” to describe Hollywood personalities as reconciliations of the competing claims of individuality and sociality. Their social features, and the reoccurring costumes and behaviors, did not determine the types, but, at the same time, they were not completely independent from these: they were “individualities that projected particular *ways* of inhabiting a social role.”³³ For the audience, they indicated the mutable ways of positioning oneself to the possibilities and the limits of becoming and being acknowledged as an ephemeral, singular projection of selfhood (within a plurality of roles and eccentricities) which is central to any democratic imagination of the political. The star or type therefore can be regarded as a form of thinking self-education and self-development. As Cavell saw it: “Their singularity made them more like us – anyway, made their difference from us less a matter of metaphysics, to which we must accede, than a matter of responsibility, to which we must bend.”³⁴

And that brings up the second analytical study of the film: the study of responsibility. As a political allegory, the false promise of fascism and the horror of repression are easily deciphered by the contemporary audience. In the scenes that feature the rich tycoon, D. B. Norton, one can immediately see how well Capra was prepared for his next task: After the USA entered the war, he prepared a series of government information films for the soldiers that were sent to fight. Especially the first parts of this *Why we fight*-series (1942 – 1945), called *Prelude to war* (1942) and *The Nazis Strike* (1943), were propagandistic information films that were – more than anything else – based on analyzing, re-editing and thus exposing German and Italian propaganda films of the 1930s and more specifically

31 Ibid., 307.

32 See Philip Drake, “From Hero to Celebrity: The Political Economy of Stardom,” in *Heroes in a Global World*, ed. Drucker and Gumpert, 438–440.

33 Stanley Cavell; *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film. Enlarged Edition*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 33 [emphasis in the original].

34 Ibid., 35.

the infamous works of Leni Riefenstahl.³⁵ The first screen appearance of Norton (0h 28m 0s – 0h 28m 30s) shows him on horseback presiding over a choreographed parade of a paramilitary motorcycle-brigade that eerily resembles the geometrical aestheticization of war machinery in the fascist imagery.

But there is another, more implicit but also much more urgent, warning: the central nemesis of Capra's films is not evil intent, but the danger of escapism or moral disengagement. As Carney points out, Long John Willoughby is the poster child of the citizen as Walter Lippmann imagined him: "One could say that he is the perfect modern democrat, willing to obey the majority vote, the perfect unprincipled pragmatist, with no convictions apart from what opinion polls and advisers tell him."³⁶ His companion "the Colonel," who is constantly at his side during the first half of the film protesting against all the claims that are made upon John, does not fare much better. His protest could, at first, be confused with Ralph Waldo Emerson's or Henry David Thoreau's gesture of radical retreat from society as a mode of criticism and expression of society's insufficiency.³⁷ However, quite the contrary is the case: He simply embodies disenchanted indifference. And even though John is sometimes momentarily moved by the words that are put into his mouth, what he and his friend want more than anything else is to have no engagement in society of any kind.

The object of the film is not the evil of political repression, but – using Hannah Arendt's famous term – "the banality of evil";³⁸ i.e. indifference as the refusal to think for oneself and the inability to judge one's company. As Arendt saw it:

Out of the unwillingness or inability to choose one's examples and one's company, and out of the unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment, arise the real *skandala*, the real stumbling-blocks which human powers cannot remove

35 For a detailed comparative analysis of Capra's and Riefenstahl's propaganda aesthetics, see Hermann Kappelhoff, "Kriegerische Mobilisierung: Die mediale Organisation des Gemeinsinns. Frank Capras Prelude to War und Leni Riefenstahls Tag der Freiheit," *Navigationen. Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften* 9, no. 1 (2009): 151–165.

36 Carney, *American Vision*, 357.

37 See Cavell, *Cities of Words*.

38 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

because they were not caused by human and humanly understandable motives. Therein lies the horror and, at the same time, the banality of evil.³⁹

Thus, the dystopian prospect of everyday life is not repression, but an everyday life without ideals and dreams. As Carney put it: "The real horror of the film is thus not a vision of the repression, but of blankness and vacancy."⁴⁰ In other words, Capra is warning against an everyday life where freedom and repression would be indistinguishable. The "little man", the everyday person, cannot be the traditionally idealized pillar of moral values as long as he does not accept responsibility for his everyday existence and the people he encounters. That is the true meaning of the film's title as I would interpret it: John Doe or Gary Cooper becomes the protagonist or hero of the film only through those that meet him. Heroism or heroic ordinariness thus becomes a form of encounter. Again, we can see how everyday heroism is not a continuation of universal ideas about what constitutes a hero (something superior or even superhuman, for example⁴¹) or traditional heroism because it lacks one of the latter's basic characteristics, which demands that "members of a society are separated from their culture heroes by time, space, and social class, and therefore know their heroes only through stories, images, and so on."⁴² For a large part of *Meet John Doe* this seems to be true. The members of society are related to John only by media technologies and acts of staging, but the film transforms these into scenes of direct encounter and mutual acts of acknowledgement which then are presented as the genuine ordinary heroism.

The end of the film is exemplary for this transformation: The mediated John Doe is exposed as a fake and the film refuses to give him any kind of satisfactory resistance or even triumph. He only receives consolation and moral support from those that he was abused to betray: the ordinary people. A lot of people, including Capra himself,⁴³ have complained that the ending – or, rather, the endings, since there were at least five different

39 Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy. 4th Session," cited in Ronald Beiner, "Hannah Arendt on Judging," in Hannah Arendt: *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 113.

40 Carney, *American Vision*, 369.

41 Christian Schneider, "Wozu Helden?," in *Die Helden-Maschine: Zur Aktualität und Tradition von Heldenbildern*, ed. LWL-Industriemuseum (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2010), 20.

42 Strate, "Heroes and/as Communication," 23.

43 Frank Capra, *The Name above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 338–339.

ones⁴⁴ – is somewhat unsatisfactory because it does not really deliver a solution to the critique of the media institutions, nor to the potential dysfunctionality of the common man. Least of all could he present “John Doe” as the heroic answer to the social and political problem posed by “John Doe,” the corruptible protagonist inclined to indifference and conformism. But is this failure really only caused by the film’s ideological tensions and ambiguities; its “strange mixture of demagoguery and attacks on demagoguery” as a form of “confusion”?⁴⁵

I would counter this simple tale of failure by turning it into a tale of Freudian faulty action. That means that failing to make John Doe the hero of the film in a classical sense – challenging the corrupt system as had Mr. Deeds and Mr. Smith in the previous films – is the heroic, sacrificial gesture of the film itself. While both the hero as extraordinary agent and the conformism of the common man have to be distrusted, neither can be dispensed with since they are both sources or mechanisms – quintessential antinomies – of democratic imagination. And they are both corruptible into forms of totalitarian absolutisms. The hero “John Doe” only attracts heroic qualities through the realm of the media but, he himself is incapable of heroic action. The real heroes are those “John Does” that represent him (rather than he is representing). The real heroes are those ordinary citizens that want to continue the dialogue of society with itself: the citizens that “John Doe” meets, that can be spoken to by him, and than can speak for him in the sense that they take responsibility for their words and deeds as everyday expressions of a political community. As Poague noted: “Even in its failures and hesitations, the conclusion of *Meet John Doe* is more usefully understood – *not* as Capra’s quick and easy cure to social dysfunction or disaster – but as ‘figuring’ (as standing for, as working out) the problem of authorship or language.”⁴⁶

The film asks how it is possible to create a free personality for which one can take responsibility and claim authorship, when the conditions of that creation are always already predetermined by media technologies and when the myth of this free personality can always be converted into a marketable commodity or worse. (Incidentally, this idea of marketability

44 Carney, *American Vision*, 371.

45 Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 431.

46 Leland Poague, *Another Frank Capra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 47–48 [emphasis in the original].

has become one of the central arguments in the second half of the twentieth century for claims that “heroism” has been replaced by “celebrity.”⁴⁷ This claim can be countered by the fact that, while there may be ordinary heroes, there is no such thing as ordinary celebrities – only vulgar ones.⁴⁸) Heroic ordinariness is a form of accepting the fact that there is no innocent, immediate outside of media technologies, and at the same time a form of insisting against simple determinism. Heroic ordinariness, as the film presents it, is simultaneously exposing heroism and posing it as resistance. It presents heroism as taking responsibility for one’s personal fantasies of selfhood: not only a “product of communication,”⁴⁹ but also a mode or a process of multiple, conflicting ex- & re-communications.

The unspectacular but fundamentally new answer of *Meet John Doe* to the problem of the hero as media product is to refuse to exempt the hero from the ordinary and to transfer stardom/heroism from the singular star/hero to the plurality of everyday singularities that he represents or rather expresses. It claims that it is vital to risk expressing one’s dreams of singularity, one’s ideas of heroes, even if they can be abused for sinister ends.

In a scene close to the end of the film, John tries to accuse the tycoon of abusing the John Doe movement, (1h 39m 19s – 1h 48m 26s) but he is held back and prevented from talking to the people first by crowds of people that want to talk to him, then by the audience singing an anthem, as well as by a priest leading the audience in prayer. After he is dragged away from the microphone and makes it back, the wires are cut. It would be much too simple and very much against the film’s ambiguities to claim that “the film metaphorically equates the hordes of ordinary citizens, the state, and the church as cooperating, interlocking forms of repression,”⁵⁰ since, at the same time, they are also the very institutions that make the life of the community possible and livable – and I would propose that here Capra includes the arts and the cinema itself. The fact that they are also the sources of the greatest dangers to the political community makes it so

47 Strate, “Heroes and/as Communication,” 23–26. Drake, “From Hero to Celebrity,” 437.

See also Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, (New York: Atheneum, 1978).

48 A pun on the strong connotation of “ordinär” as “vulgar” in German.

49 Strate, “Heroes and/as Communication,” 21.

50 Carney, *American Vision*, 347.

much more necessary to take responsibility for them and to engage in them.

Heroic ordinariness is not about life and death, but about defending the ordinary as the realm of personal dreams and fantasies that intersects with our public dreams and fantasies – with movies about heroes for example. It is, I would claim, a question of conceiving action in the public sphere in a way that makes everyday heroism of the life-saving kind possible or at least perceivable in the first place. It can further be regarded as a melodramatic kind of heroism that participates in the highly political struggle of recognizing the ordinary, the everyday, as an exciting place in which to act.⁵¹ It is a kind of heroism that makes heroism its own reward in the strongest sense. It is a kind that considers heroism not as a given but as an achievement.⁵²

Stanley Cavell's Political Philosophy of the Ordinary as Heroic

As it turns out, the question of everyday heroism, as I would like to propose it, is based less on an idea of what constitutes heroics than on a political philosophy of the everyday. Referring to Stanley Cavell's works on the ordinary and the political as conversation (or conversation as the political), I would claim that Capra's film works on the production of "heroism" and "ordinariness" as categories of the public sphere. According to this view of public action, ordinary men, women, and children are not heroic because of their deeds and their contributions to society. However extraordinary those deeds may be, what makes them heroic is the fact that the doers resist the urge to be set apart from their fellow beings because of them. As Cavell noted: "No amount of contribution is more valuable to the formation and preservation of community than the willingness to contribute."⁵³

51 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1995 [1976]), 6, 13–14.

52 See Dean, "U.S. and European Heroism Compared," 75.

53 Stanley Cavell, "What Photography Calls Thinking," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005 [1985]), 133.

If it really is true that "we desperately need to live heroically,"⁵⁴ then Capra's heroic ordinariness is the lesson that teaches us to live heroically together; to share heroism within the ordinary. And if trying to define heroism always implies defining the evil that heroism battles, then the opposite of everyday heroism is not cowardice or weakness but a refusal of the ordinary: the will to extraordinariness and its logical counterpart, the disenchanted fall into indifference and cynicism.⁵⁵ Cavell reformulates the Kantian stance on moral as a question of choosing to view human community as possible or to view it as nonexistent in this way: "This takes moral as the will to exempt oneself, to isolate oneself, from the human community."⁵⁶ Heroic ordinariness means to accept to be judged by others; to be subjected to their acknowledgement or rejection.

Again, this idea is strongly connected to the life-saving everyday heroism whose evil counterpart is the fragility of mere life as an endangered existence in modern, secular societies: Saving a life in this context means to save it as a public life worth living; as the representative saving of everybody's right to speak and to be heard.

Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* shows the creation of a "star" or a "hero" out of an ordinary person. And it – as well as in the other films I have mentioned – shows that becoming a hero is not a special gift, but expresses something very general; something absolutely common. It expresses "a stance toward whatever endowment you discover is yours, as if life itself were a gift, and remarkable."⁵⁷ Heroism denotes the promise or the necessity to become aware of the public responsibilities of everyday private actions and private sensibilities; the necessity to balance our everyday obligations with the most valued claims of political ideals. In this sense, the dialectic between heroism as a stabilizing, conservative force⁵⁸ and, at the same time, as a challenge to the concrete establishment⁵⁹ is kept in suspense because heroism becomes the challenge to the corruption of authorities in the name of the spirit they were supposed to embody.

54 Strate, "Heroes and/as Communication," 19.

55 See the papers by William Graebner and Martin Lütke in this volume.

56 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 80.

57 Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 114.

58 Roger R. Rollin, "The Lone Ranger and Lenny Skutnik: The Hero as Popular Culture," in *The Hero in Transition*, ed. Browne and Fishwick, 33.

59 Meyer, "Helden des Alltags," 31.

Finally, one could argue that what John Doe is trying to become in his final stage is the most current embodiment of the everyday hero as I have tried to describe in these pages: the whistleblower. This figure presents us with another step in the “evolution” of heroism away from extraordinary action by the extraordinary few and towards the preservation of moral causes by the many within ordinary life. How do we identify wrongs in our societies? How do we maintain the conditions of participation and acknowledgement? These are heroic tasks. But the community of heroes is open to everybody and it is created only by the will to contribute to it – everyday.

Everyday Socialist Heroes and Hegemonic Masculinity in the German Democratic Republic, 1949–1989¹

Sylka Scholz (translator Simon Ward)

Introduction

This study of everyday heroism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) begins with the analysis of one of the Republic’s iconic heroic images.² This photograph, created barely a year before the founding of the state on October 7, 1949, shows the miner Adolf Hennecke. Hennecke was seen as the prototype of the socialist “hero of labor” and embodied, as I argue here, the hegemonic masculinity of the GDR. The photograph was taken on October 13, 1948 and shows the miner at work. In this shift, which subsequently became legendary, he accomplished “387 per cent” of the work norm.³

¹ For the purposes of this book project, this contribution expands on my earlier publications on this topic. See Sylka Scholz, “Sozialistische Helden: Hegemoniale Männlichkeit in der DDR,” in *Postsozialistische Männlichkeiten in einer globalisierten Welt*, ed. Sylka Scholz and Weertje Willms (Münster: Lit, 2008), 11–35; Sylka Scholz, “Vom starken Helden zum zärtlichen Vater? Männlichkeit und Emotion in der DDR,” in *Die Präsenz der Gefühle: Männlichkeit und Emotion in der Moderne*, ed. Manuel Burotta and Nina Verheyen (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), 203–229.

² Scholz, “Sozialistische Helden,” 11–35.

³ Silke Satjukow, “Früher war das eben der Adolf Der Arbeitsheld Adolf Hennecke,” in *Sozialistische Helden: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Propagandafiguren in Osteuropa und der DDR*, ed. Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2002), 118.