THE TWELVE SCENES OF CHRISTMAS: NUMBERS 4 TO 1

by Brian Doan

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In case you've just joined us, we've been counting down twelve great scenes of Christmas from the movies. We've been everywhere from "Lethal Weapon" to "Since You Went Away" to "The Thin Man." Check out #12–#9 (http://www.rogerebert.com/balder-and-dash/the-twelve-scenes-of-christmas-numbers-12-to-9)and #8–#5 (http://www.rogerebert.com/balder-and-dash/the-twelve-scenes-of-christmas-numbers-8-to-5), then settle in for the final four.

4) "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" (1969)

"This is a very different kind of James Bond movie," my mother said as I passed through the living room in early '95, getting ready to go back to college after a visit home. "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" was playing during one of the periodic Bond-a-thons that cable provided in the early '90s (I think this one was on TNT). "Mmm-hmmm," I responded. It was just at the moment when Bond (George Lazenby) and the Contessa Tracy (Diana Rigg) had declared their interest in one another, and were about to be folded into what Roger Ebert once called the "semi-obligatory lyrical interlude": "[A] scene in which soft focus and slow motion are used while a would-be hit song is performed on the soundtrack and the lovers run through a pastoral setting." This one at least had the decency to be set to Louis Armstrong, crooning the beautiful Barry-David composition "We Have All The Time In The World." (It would be one of the last songs Armstrong would record before his death). It's certainly not the kind of montage that appears in any other 007 movie. I'm certain my mother had seen "OHMSS," as hard-core Bondophiles often refer to it, but perhaps not since its initial release twenty-five years earlier, and "OHMMS" is a Bond film that rewards re-viewing—it is indeed very different, and deliberately so.

When the movie was released in December 1969, George Lazenby was the gift producers Cubby Broccoli and Harry Saltzman offered series fans, but many critics and filmgoers declared him a white elephant: the former often made reference to his background as a male model as a way of noting his lack of acting experience (and not-so-subtly emasculating him in comparison to the previous occupant of the role, whom the film refers to as "the other fellow"), while the latter showed their disapproval at the box office: while a firm financial success, "OHMSS" made only half of what "You Only Live Twice" had. This Bond may have been "different," but difference wasn't what a lot of fans wanted at that point. The irony is that in a film where everything feels changed and "un-Bond"—from Rigg's more complex heroine, to Telly Savalas' more thuggish Blofeld, to the lyrical and digressive narrative, to the moody poetics of Michael Reed's cinematography, to the jazzy strains

of John Barry's score—the "other fellow" wouldn't have fit. George Lazenby's lack of acting experience means he wears his heart on his face, which is perfect for an adventure where Bond falls in love for real, and realizes he has one.

"Different" was a word used repeatedly in "OHMMS" trailers in 1969: this was, we were told, a "different Bond," a "different Bond girl—this one has style!," a "different kind of Bond film—this one has heart!" Set aside the slight condescension that advertising hype can create, and the points are well-taken: of all the James Bond films until "Casino Royale" (2008), this is easily the most human, and the most tragic. Coming at the end of the decade that had seen James Bond explode as a cultural phenomenon—initiated by President Kennedy's listing, in 1961, of "From Russia With Love" at number nine on his Life magazine list of favorite books, and then kicked into overdrive by the success of the film adaptations—"OHMSS" is an elegy for the golden age of 007, a final gasp of sophisticated decadence before the more flattened and camp-ridden adventures of the 1970s, as well as a Bond taxonomy, subtly referencing all that had come before, and finding a few final twists to add to the legacy. It's also, strangely enough, a Christmas film.

The movie opens in late summer, as Bond meets Tracy on a beach in Portugal, as she is walking into the ocean to kill herself. Watching her from his Aston Martin, he races to the beach, saves her life, and is beaten up by mysterious thugs for his trouble, while Tracy speeds away in her sportswear. They meet again soon at a casino, where he bails her out of a gambling debt. She doesn't liked to be saved, and tells him so, and thus begins their courtship. She is the daughter of Draco, head of one of the world's largest crime syndicates, who kidnaps Bond, fills him in on Tracy's backstory, and begs him to romance her (promising to pay Bond for his troubles), which Bond agrees to do as long as Draco uses his criminal connections to help him find international super-villain Blofeld. After the single best Bond/M/Moneypenny scene in the series' history (I can say no more), Bond speeds back to Portugal and attends Draco's birthday party, where Tracy gets wind of her father's bribery. Deeply hurt, she runs away, and is again chased by Bond, who insists that while her father made him such an offer, it has nothing to do with his feelings for her. Cue Semi-Obligatory Lyrical Montage, and...

I know—it doesn't really sound like a Bond film, does it? Aside from that fight on the beach, I haven't referenced any action (although there are a few good fist-fights that break up some of the plot I'm mentioning here), and in many ways the suspense plot only kicks in 30 minutes into the movie's nearly three-hour running time. But following the lyrical montage, Bond goes after Blofeld in earnest, traveling to Switzerland around Christmas Eve, where Blofeld is hiding in vast mountain fortress called Piz Gloria (the producers, fearing extravagant costs after the volcano set of "You Only Live Twice," were delighted to find a fading resort in the mountains that perfectly suited their needs; they refurbished it on their own dime in exchange for the right to shoot there, and the real-life Piz Gloria was reborn through film publicity). He's posing as an allergy specialist, running an "institute" that is actually a cover for his plot—to brainwash the beautiful patients in residence and send them back home with the tools of germ warfare built into make-up kits. The world will face doom on New Year's if Blofeld's demands—amnesty for previous crime and recognition of his supposed claim to a count's title—are not recognized (in one of Richard Maibaum's finest lines, a dry M notes, "He's particularly insistent on that last point. A curious thing, snobbery..."). Bond—who has been posing as a genealogist named Hilary Bray—has his real identity discovered, and must escape. The Christmas Eve run down the mountains, captured in part in the clip above, is the result.

The chase was staged on film by Willy Bogner, Jr., a skiing champion who attached a camera to his skis to capture the action close up, and editor/second unit director John Glen, who organized the chase and would later be the director on the snow-heavy "For Your Eyes Only." From the Christmasy red-and-blue of the guardroom lights at the top of the scene, to the 70-mile-an-hour POV shots from Bogner's perspective, to the spectacular play of shadow and light on the mountain, the imagery blends with Barry's fuzz-guitar-driven score to create a tremendous sense of excitement and catharsis. Bond is literally escaping the world's most

surreal holiday party, and explosion of energy after the earlier and more digressive sections of the film is palpable—it's the cinematic equivalent of opening toys on Christmas morning.

Bond is also racing back into the arms of Tracy, who coincidentally is celebrating Christmas Eve in the village below. It is the last of their accidental meet-ups, for this is the moment when both their relationship and the film become much more serious. It's not just the Christmas setting that makes "On Her Majesty's Secret Service' a "Christmas film"—it's the intense focus on family as structuring identity. Whether it's Draco and Tracy, Bond's family crest ("The World Is Not Enough"), Bond and his Secret Service "family," Blofeld's desperate quest to be recognized as part of a heraldic tradition, or the way this all weaves deviously and exhilaratingly together in the movie's last hour, it is familial bonds that motivate every action in the film, and give its ending such a kick. Ironic, then, that aside from that moment in the living room all those years ago, "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" is the one Bond film I've never watched all the way through with anyone in my Bond-loving family—it feels more personal, the kind of film whose "difference" you almost want to protect. In the nearly 35 years since the film's release, its reputation has grown considerably, as critics, scholars, and the fan community have come to appreciate both its narrative daring and its tremendous sense of craft, but it will probably never fully feel like a "James Bond movie" in the way that even similar attempts at emotional depth in the Daniel Craig movies do. Its final gift is to take all of this brilliantly staged action, fine performance, rich scoring and painterly cinematography, and use it to turn Bond into a cinematic tone poem: dreamy, extended into new areas, and quivering with the possibility (only intermittently fulfilled since) of stylistic rebirth.

3) "The Lion In Winter" (1968)

King Henry II wants his son John on the throne; his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine favors their older son Richard. Henry wants John to have Aquitaine, while he wants to continue to enjoy his mistress Alais, sister of Henry's rival, King Phillip II of France, who has promised Alais as the wife of whomever succeeds Henry on the throne. Eleanor's freedom here is contingent on the needs of both the holiday and the kingdom: imprisoned by Henry for conspiring against him, she has been released for the duration of the Christmas Court, called to determine the succession. Henry promises her permanent freedom if she agrees to his terms.

And you think your holiday get-togethers are stressful!

Adapted by screenwriter James Goldman from his 1966 play, "The Lion In Winter" uses the characters of history for its own, inverted screwball ends: while the general outlines of history are there in the names and the lines of successions, numerous historians have pointed out the ways in which Goldman plays with the record, while contemporary critics have noted how anachronistic his rat-a-tat acidity is within the contexts of 12th-century English castles. All of this complaint brings to mind Alvy Singer's line in "Annie Hall," that intellectuals can be positively brilliant, and still have no idea what's going on. Henry and Eleanor are not their real-life historical counterparts, but Nick and Nora Charles drained of their sympathy but none of their sharp verbal wit (or perhaps Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in "His Girl Friday," endlessly energized by their cruel banter). By transposing this mode of farce onto the imagined past, Goldman was able to comment on a contemporary world of both gender relations and fading American mythologies ("Henry, I'm against the war," Eleanor says with a resignation that must have had particular resonance in 1968), and the younger generation forced to be the pawns of an older generation's endless strategic scheming (Anthony Hopkins, Timothy Dalton Jane Merrow and Nigel Terry are all superb). He was also able to have fun with theatrical and cinematic conventions, a metatextuality enhanced by casting Peter O'Toole (who'd played a younger Henry II in 1964's "Becket") and Katharine Hepburn, bringing decades of interplay with Grant and Tracy to the role; Goldman would repeat this blend of intertextual memory and social commentary three years later in "Follies," the Stephen Sondheim musical for which he wrote the book, and which is an even darker look at the psychic toll of confusing love and ambition. The success of "The Lion In Winter" can be seen not only in the various period dramas that followed its model of anachronistic tone and play, but in the way it's

referenced in other pop cultural landmarks (most prominently "The West Wing," where Aaron Sorkin pays his debt to Goldman's style by repeatedly quoting lines from the film, and making it a favorite of President Bartlet's, thus complicating the character's surface idealism).

I'm writing this the day after Peter O'Toole died, which only adds to the resonance of this scene (http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/72872/Lion-In-Winter-The-Movie-Clip-It-s-What-I-Live-For.html), and its Christmas connections. Just as no one would truly "succeed" Hepburn (despite any number of supposed "heirs" mentioned by critics and journalists in the decades since), no one is going to "succeed" O'Toole, an actor of extraordinary charm and ferocious on-screen power. Think of Peter O'Toole, and you might imagine him in the Arabian desert, bright eyes shining from a head jutted forward and looking for adventure; or the soused (but gracefully soused) Alan Swan in "My Favorite Year," able to go from terrified to charismatically heroic in single moment; or the director-as-God of "The Stunt Man," who sees everything from his crane chair, and believes he can control it all. There are elements of all of those characters in "The Lion in Winter"'s Henry, but what strikes me in this scene is his controlled rage and his tremendous generosity.

The rage can be heard in his voice, the animal-like roar that spits out ultimatums to Eleanor, and seen in the way his hand curls around the post near the fireplace, as Henry tries to get hold of the energy and emotion boiling inside of him: he modulates it into a declaration of love ("I adore you") that feels both real and calculated (and at this point, perhaps even Henry doesn't know the difference). This is not young Lawrence, ready to bound into the desert because "it's going to be fun," but a king with years of power behind him, who must make every word and gesture count. Part of that power comes from giving people what they seem to want: this is as much Hepburn's scene as it is O'Toole's (she has all the great lines), but it doesn't work without his responses, the way he looks and listens and waits as Hepburn scratches her head and dances with every bon mot. "Watch and listen" sounds incredibly basic, but to do that while maintaining your own screen presence and charisma is the act of a king: look at O'Toole's face in the second half of the scene, as Henry leans against the desk, and O'Toole tilts his head and shoulders slightly forward, in a way that pulls his face down, makes it more open, almost blank. Those bright eyes are framed by wrinkles and a heavy beard, but it just makes them all the more expressive: O'Toole says nothing, but his eyes speak of curiosity, pain, and impatience, while taking nothing away from Hepburn's monologue. O'Toole would claim he was spooked by Hepburn on the set–"She is terrifying. It is sheer masochism working with her. She has been sent by some dark fate to nag and torment me"—but it's hard not to see the respect he has for her skills here, how much his own admiration and fear blend with Henry's to create something electric. To be reminded of that talent is both a loss, and a gift.

2) "Meet Me In St. Louis" (1944)

In his definitive book on the director, "Directed By Vincente Minnelli," Stephen Harvey details numerous anecdotes about Minnelli's habit of letting obsession over detail sometimes get the best of him: spending on the set of "Some Came Running" trying to get the set-ups for the fairground climax right, until Minnelli's order to completely dismantle a Ferris Wheel and move it several feet to fix the light in a shot caused Frank Sinatra to storm off and fly back to L.A.; ironically paralleling the creative solipsism of ham director Jeffrey Cordova while shooting "The Band Wagon" and getting so involved in the staging of "I Love Louisa" that he didn't even notice when Fred Astaire yelled at him; and, on the set of "Meet Me In St. Louis," arguing with Cedric Gibbons about roses.

Both Minnelli (who'd worked as a department store window dresser and stage designer on Broadway before become a stage and film director) and Gibbons (MGM's Art Director, and designer of the Academy Award statue) were brilliant visual stylists used to getting their way; but when Minnelli insisted that the motif in one scene be red and green (for a Christmas-themed look), Gibbons recoiled. It would not work, he claimed—it would look garish in Technicolor, was too obvious a Christmas reference, and anyway, red and

green didn't go together. Minnelli's response? "Tell that to God when he invented roses." Minnelli got his way.

One of the many fascinating things about this scene from "Meet Me In St. Louis"—one of the most artful, moving, and exquisitely designed musicals in film history—is how much it's about disjunction, what *doesn't* fit. It's a scene that starts on a moment of doubt: Esther (Judy Garland), comes up the stairs out of the shadows, moving leftward down the hall and making a diagonal across the center of the screen; she stops and looks down pensively when she hears a music box playing across the way (between the chiaroscuro lighting, Garland's expression, and the turn-of-the century wrap around her hair, this could just as easily be a shot out of a gothic horror film). Her head does a two-point turn to find the music box's source, and then she backtracks, over to Tootie's room. This whole scene is a set of variations on hesitation, and this is its first expression. Esther opens the door, and a match cut takes us back into the shadows, in this case those that literally and metaphorically surround Tootie (Margaret O'Brien), who sits forlornly playing with her dancing bear music box. It feels notable that there's never a point-of-view shot on what Esther is seeing, either as she approaches the door, or when she peeks in to find Tootie sitting by a window whose metal bars make it look like a prison. Instead, Minnelli's preference for unbroken takes generates a tracking shot following Esther through the inky blacks of the bedroom, drawing out the time and moving us rightward, in a reversal of the previous shot's direction. Tootie is waiting for Santa, she says, but her mind is actually on the uncertainty of next year, when the family will have moved to New York. "How will he know how to find us next year?," Tootie asks with great desperation. "He's so used to coming here." Esther tries to comfort her younger sister: "Oh, you can't fool him. He can find anyone he wants to find." As if on cue, a golden light suddenly shines on the lower left half of Tootie's window frame, and Esther looks out, distracted; there's a cut to a medium shot of Esther and Tootie's heads framed against the bars, and looking out, and now we do get a point-of-view shot, on neighbor (and object of Esther's affection) John Truett. But as strains from the earlier "Boy Next Door" number play on the soundtrack, Tom closes his shade, shutting out his light—and Esther's glance—like the window suddenly going dark at the start of "Citizen Kane." The matching shot doesn't lead to a match.

Another cut takes us inside the house, where Tootie and Esther face one another, and the younger girl wants to return to the more pertinent question of Santa's arrival, and how she's taking all of her toys to New York, even her dead dolls. When Esther tells her she'll help her pack, and that Tootie won't have to leave anything behind, "except your snow people, of course," Tootie laughs, and they look out the window again. We see Tootie's snowperson re-creation of her family, a bit of golden light in the lower right corner providing a lovely contrast with the bluish snow on the ground. But as with the earlier glance at John, it's a moment of hope that quickly turns sad, with Tootie's giggle fading as she realizes what she'll be leaving behind. Esther winds up Tootie's music box, the dancing bears providing a surreal distraction to one of the saddest Christmas songs ever written.

Written by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blaine, the song is set in a minor key, and its melody line rises and descends as if it is as uncertain of its feelings as the character singing it. Just as the movement and match cuts suggest a kind of visual stasis—with direction in one tracking shot reversed in the next, or hopeful glances being shut out by disinterested objects of interest—so too do the lyrics create a temporal tension that can only be resolved in a very still melancholy. "Next year all our troubles will be out of sight," Esther sings, before shifting to the present ("here we are") which quickly becomes the past ("as in olden days, happy golden days of yore") before projecting again into the future ("faithful friends who are dear to us, will be near to us, once more"). Even that future becomes less confident as the song reaches its final verse, providing an ambiguity just when you think it might be offering hopeful closure: "Someday soon we all will be together/If the fates allow/Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow..." This wasn't even the original lyric: as Hugh Fordin notes in "MGM's Greatest Musicals," the original lyric was even darker: "Have yourself a merry little Christmas/It may be your last/Next year we may all be living in the past." As the song progresses, even

the two performers in the same shot disengage: Tootie turns away and can't look at Esther as she sings, while Esther falls into her own reverie, glancing up rather than into Tootie's eyes.

Darkness and uncertainty was a running theme throughout the production of "Meet Me In St. Louis": the Sally Benson stories on which is was based were digressive and anecdotal, and so thwarted early attempts at screen translation that one draft of the script invented a kidnapping plot involving Esther. Garland, Mary Astor and several other members of the cast fell ill during shooting, which played havoc with the schedule; Arthur Freed wanted to cut the famous Halloween sequence from the film, while Minnelli argued that sequence was his major reason for taking the film in the first place. Even O'Brien's audition had an air of morbid shock: according to Minnelli biographer Mark Griffin, it "included her impassioned plea, 'Don't send my brother to the chair! Please don't let him fry!'" In his autobiography, Minnelli recalled gearing O'Brien up for the histrionics of this Christmas Eve scene by offering a gruesome proto-Method image for her to ponder: he told her to picture a dog, and then to imagine someone shooting it. There would be blood everywhere, Minnelli went on, with the dog limping around, before he reached his climax: "AND THE DOG IS GOING TO DIE!" The tears started, Minnelli told his assistant director to turn the cameras, and they got the shot. After which, Minnelli notes, O'Brien "went skipping happily off the set."

Back in the world of 1902 St. Louis, however, Tootie is not ready to let go: as Esther finishes the final line of the song, Tootie breaks the mood by running out of the room, out of the house, and down to the snowpeople in the backyard, whom she destroys in an act of hysterical catharsis. Mr. Smith's appearance on the stairs is a further visual and narrative disjunction—he appears in the scene with no warning, as Esther chases Tootie into the snow—and Esther's voice is then disembodied, layered over the images of Tootie's family 'murder': "Tootie? Tootie, where are you?" It's a good question: this is a family about to move, but desperate to stay in place, even if the various visual cues surrounding their safe family home, at least in this scene, only lead to dismay, confusion, or destruction. "If I can't have them, nobody will!," Tootie yells, capturing the paradox of change and tradition that the whole movie—on both a visual and thematic level—is working out. It is that final visual reversal—moving from inside the house to the outdoors, leaving the house to stay in the house—that frees Tootie, Esther and her whole family from the emotional disjunctions they've been feeling around the holidays (which are also moments of supposed happiness that can feel as inexpressively sad as a Judy Garland song), as Mr. Smith decides that the move to New York is not worth it. And, as if to prove the poetic truth of the narrative, it was a moment of exquisite planning whose grace notes came by accident. Again, Fordin's book has the tale, this one from "Meet Me in St. Louis" cinematographer George Folsey:

"We had a shot looking down into the yard through the upstairs window. Since it was night, I felt it should have a sort of moonlight, softly lit snow effect. I decided to put out a big yellow light as though somebody had opened a door on the lower floor, the yellow light falling on the snow, Now we had a gray, whitish, slightly bluish snow and a shaft of yellow light. And getting all this ready, the backing, and the snow, and the lighting, fixing it and smoothing it out, and doing all the things to make it good—that consumed a lot of time. So, I got nervous about it and said, 'Let's shoot it—let's shoot it!...After the take was made, my head electrician came to me and told me in so many words that we were totally underexposed."

Folsey was as distraught as the characters he was filming, but the results are extraordinary. The play of light and color gives the film a tone that's both richly warm and hauntingly cold, that blends seemingly disparate tones of yellow/gray/blue into something perfectly balanced, that takes supposed disjunctions and makes them whole—kind of like the holidays.

1) "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946)

Well, of course.

It is the ur-text of holiday cinema, the Louis Armstrong of Christmas movies—everything that followed in its wake had to engage with it in some way, either through homage, assimilation, parody or rejection. Its

influence spread to other media—I mentioned the "Saturday Night Live" parody of "It's A Wonderful Life" in the "Gremlins" entry, perhaps my favorite example of the film's ongoing and complex appeal—but there are also TV movie remakes, cartoon variations (who is Charlie Brown but George Bailey's spiritual son?) and even a novel—David Thomson's "Suspects" hinges its stylistically complex, movie-reference-heavy narrative around the importance of Bedford Falls. "It's a Wonderful Life" has spawned reams of popular and academic criticism, finding in it everything from autobiographical confession, to Marxist critique of capital, to conflicted gender study, to coded horror film. The movie may have been a commercial disappointment in 1946, but its broad availability in the public domain for so many years (allowing for countless TV airings in November and December) meant its dark appeal was renewed for multiple generations. Nearly seventy years later, what is there left to say?

One place to start might be to remind ourselves of the sheer cinematic craft on display. When the film was on a loop in the public domain, its ubiquity (and lousy TV prints) made it easy to overlook its style and zero in on its themes and narrative ironies; catching it again a few years ago, during its now once-a-year TV airing, I was struck again by the gorgeous *filminess* of the thing (in his often exaggerated or fictionalized autobiography, Capra refers to making "It's a Wonderful Life" thusly: "the pace was that of four-month non-stop orgasm," a description that suggests the musical version of the movie might be titled "Every Day a Little Death"). To call Capra and his collaborators fantastically skilled technicians may sound obvious and silly, but this is a movie that reminds us that obvious and silly notions are often worth speaking up for. From the cinematography's eerie blend of small town detail and noirish shadow, which come together in this scene in the Bailey house (courtesy of Joseph F. Biroc, "Christmas In July" cameraman Victor Milner, and Capra's longtime collaborator—and secret weapon—Joseph Walker); to a screenplay contributed to by eight writers (including "The Thin Man"'s Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich, Dorothy Parker, Clifford Odets, the soon-to-be-blacklisted Michael Wilson and Dalton Trumbo, Jo Swerling, and Capra himself) and based on a short story by novelist and historian Philip Van Doren Stern; to its very fine cast, headed by Jimmy Stewart, Donna Reed and Lionel Barrymore; to Capra himself, wracked with professional insecurity and political anxiety, according to his biographer Joseph McBride, but still offering a finely wrought, logically illogical resolution to a decade of contradiction-ridden populist cinema. That's a compliment, by the way—in this film and his earlier masterpiece, "Meet John Doe" (1941), Capra confronts head-on the underlying tensions of his more optimistic "little guy" films, and his inability to wipe those tensions away without a *deus ex machina* is what gives them their haunting power.

Philip Van Doren Stern said the basis of his story "The Greatest Gift" had come to him while shaving on Lincoln's birthday in the late thirties (one of Stern's books had been a biography of Lincoln). He talked the story out to encouraging friends, worked on several drafts, and when it was rejected by several magazines, had it printed as a small book to give to friends on Christmas 1943 (following Capra's derisive description, several sources misidentify the story as being published as a "Christmas card"). Stern's Hollywood agent asked if she could pitch it to the studios. Thinking she was crazy, Stern said sure. RKO bought it for $10,000 because one star was intrigued by its possibilities: Cary Grant.

That suggests another way to appreciate "It's a Wonderful Life"'s achievement: imagined alternate casting. Watch the scene above, and picture Grant in the Stewart role. It's not inconceivable—both had broken through as stars around the same period, both would become among the highest paid and most business-savvy of postwar freelance stars, both would do some of their best work with Alfred Hitchcock, and both had a core of darkness and desperation beneath their sunny exteriors. Grant had played a desperate Cockney ne'er-do-well in Odets' "None But The Lonely Heart" in 1944, a flawed but very underrated film whose blend of darkness and sentimental family drama overlaps with the tone of "It's a Wonderful Life"; he would play a variation on Clarence the Angel in "The Bishop's Wife" (1947), suggesting his ability to occupy all of Capra's emotional spheres with ease.

Still, there's something about Stewart here—the way his Pennsylvania twang both grounds George within the recognizable American archetype of "Midwesterner" (ironic that a Pennsylvania accent makes him seem "Midwestern") and also make his vowels more noticeably stretched and high-pitched when he gets hysterical twelve seconds in: "Stop it! Stop it!," he yells at Janie as she bangs out notes on the piano. His body language there is remarkable—he walks forward with speed, but also with a slightly hunched back, and runs his hands through his hair in a manner that expresses all the pain and confusion we can't read in his half-shadowed face (praising his contemporary, Cary Grant would compare him to Brando, but note, "Jimmy did it first"). His voice is reduced to husky breaths as he tries to regain composure, and fails, taking his rage out on his office area, the portrait of Lincoln on the wall acting as symbol of George's goodness and his divided personality, an inside joke on Stern's biography, and ironic foreshadowing of how Clarence will make George 'whole" again without fully resolving the reasons for his psychic split.

Split consciousness runs through the whole film. In his book, 'Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success," Joseph McBride relates two related anecdotes about Stewart on the set. The first, told by Stewart himself, frames the actor as frustrated and despondent about his performance, and his profession generally. Co-star Lionel Barrymore gives him a pep talk: "Jimmy, don't ever forget that acting is the greatest profession ever invented. When you act, you move millions of people, shape their lives, give them a sense if exultation. No other profession has that power." Stewart returned to his work with a renewed sense of purpose, and the rest is several decades of very fine post-war work.

The second story is an addition from Capra: that, when Stewart, who had been a bomber pilot in World War II, told the other actor that he wasn't sure if acting was "decent," Barrymore had asked him "if he thought it more 'decent' to drop bombs on people than to bring rays of sunshine into their lives with his acting talent. Stewart told me Lionel's barbs had knocked him flat on his ass, and that now acting was going to be his life's work."

Within those two stories lies the entire aesthetic of Frank Capra's Christmas wish: sentiment and acidity, hope and fear, joy and violence, homespun homily and quick put-down, sunshine brushing against the bleakest of all holiday visions. While it was the basis for the film's many screenplay drafts, "The Greatest Gift" is missing several key components that would be added to the film: "Bedford Falls" as a town name, Old Man Potter as a villain, Pottersville as a dark vision of decay, the richer detail of George's childhood, the battles over the "old Building and Loan," the image of Mary as a doomed spinster in George's alternate future. To say nothing of the angel, and the explicit religious imagery that amps up both the sentiment and cynicism that duel for the movie's spirit: the story has a magical, mysterious stranger but never names him as a being from Heaven. But most importantly, "The Greatest Gift" misses "It's A Wonderful Life"'s visual imagination and its marvelous actors, which shape it and, to use Barrymore's phrase, give its its sense of exultation. Film critic Andre Bazin, writing just as Capra is shooting his film in 1945, noted art's "mummy complex," its desire to battle the ravages of time by preserving an image: "To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life." The innovation of photography was its "essentially objective character," the way in which the mechanical apparatus removes the subjective hand of the painter or sculptor: "For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man."

The "mummy complex" is what George believes to be the solution to his problems—to be snatched from the flow of time, to be shown a world where he is stowed away neatly, but not ravaged (before Clarence brings him into that alternate timeline, George has a bleeding cut; in the alternate timeline, he is fully healed). For many critics, "It's a Wonderful Life" is flawed because it is Capra's own cinematic body snatched from the flow of time, and deployed to flesh out Stern's brief story with well-known archetypes and plot twists from previous Capra films (in a further irony, the director promoted "It's a a Wonderful Life" by writing a *New York Times* editorial in which he complained that "filmmakers began to get their ideas not from life but from

each other's pictures. We were creating within walls of mirrors"). But if we extend Bazin's metaphor further, and think of the audience rather than the camera as that through which "an image of the world is formed automatically"—through their response, through broader cultural memory, through filling in the emotional holes of Capra's desperate narrative solution—then "It's a Wonderful Life"'s split consciousness feels like a tremendous grace note.

Remember that Adorno line I mentioned in the post on "Batman Returns" (http://www.rogerebert.com/balder-and-dash/the-twelve-scenes-of-christmas-numbers-12-to-9)? Perhaps the crossroads of magic and positivism lies in Bedford Falls, where contradictions don't resolve but find a productive tension. And perhaps that's why it's the ultimate Christmas film, for the way it doesn't ignore either the deep depressions of the holiday nor its equally deep joys, but allows both the space to breathe, just as Potter and Bailey exist in symbiosis with one another. Noir, comedy, romance, populist political film, religious allegory: on the page, this blend might not work, but through the "objectif" (to use Bazin's original pun for the camera lens), all of the story's various stylistic, narrative and ideological tensions can jostle for space, like family members crammed together for the holidays. "Cinema is objectivity in time," Bazin concluded, "...the image of things is likewise the image of their duration..." "It's a Wonderful Life"'s ultimate *deus ex machina* is cinema itself: like the angels, shifting when necessary from objective observation to clear point of view, but allowing for the unfolding of multiple possibilities and deep emotional ambiguities, at least for the duration of a single picture, and at least within the frame of a film or television screen. In the end, when George races back into the "real" world of Bedford Falls, he's also racing back into the imagination of the movies.

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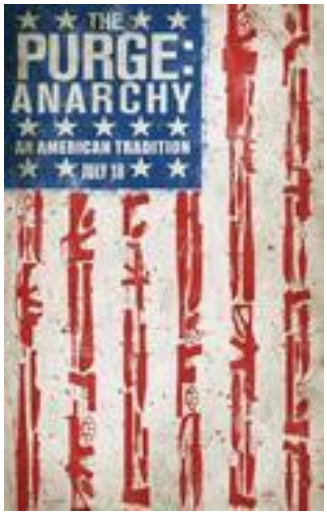

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