

The Most Vociferous Screwball Comedies:

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek and *Hail the Conquering Hero*

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Preface

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek (1944) and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944), written and directed by Preston Sturges, have received critical acclaim as masterpieces of screwball comedy. They have a lot in common: both feature a plot set in the rural community in America under the Word War II, and both of the male protagonists are 4F (unfit for military service) played by Eddie Bracken. Most of all, both films are outstanding among Sturges films in terms of their vociferous comic universe. Sturges has been admired for being “masterful with noisy crowds” (Farber 99). There is also such a testimony as “The noisier and more confused the environment, the better he seemed to like it” while at work on the studio (Curtis 146). It seems to mean that the unique quality of his films, most remarkably represented by vociferous comedy sequence, culminates with *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *Hail the Conquering Hero*. Focusing on these two films, this essay aims to explore how Sturges successfully created the noisiest screwball comedies.

It is significant in this context to call attention to the relationship between Bracken's hero and other supporting role characters surrounding him. As previous studies have pointed out, unique supporting role characters played by character actors and actresses, known as the Sturges Stock Company, are essential to Sturges' noisy comic universe.¹ Brian Henderson evaluates that “Sturges's visual style in *Hail the Conquering Hero* marks a new turn in his cinema”:

In scene after scene, physical reality is all but eclipsed by wall-to-wall characters; faces and bodies literally fill the screen... virtually eclipsing their setting and making the characters and only them the film's mise-en-scène. (Henderson, *Five Screenplays* 697)

However, relatively few studies have examined how he expresses his critical view of the modern mass society as characterized by the dichotomy between

a male protagonist (individual) and other minor role players (a crowd). An analysis of this dichotomy will reveal that in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *Hail the Conquering Hero*, noisy crowds contribute to his unique artistry of screwball comedy.

I . The more the merrier: Noisy comedy

1. Eddie Bracken:

The comic artistry of Preston Sturges is characterized by dialect humor and extravagant slapstick action generally accompanied by a tremendous burst of sound such as big shouting voice, a sound of a crash, etc. In *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *Hail the Conquering Hero*, Sturges takes it to its extreme and creates the most vociferous screwball comedies. Eddie Bracken, who plays the male protagonist Norval Jones in *Morgan's Creek* and Woodrow Truesmith in *Hail*, makes a great contribution to the noisiness of both films. Bracken is described as “a character actor endearing for his pathetic rather than his heroic qualities” (Shatz 168), or as “the preyed-upon American male, at the mercy of forces greater than himself” (Austerlitz 110). In both films, he skillfully impersonates a man who struggles in a desperate situation using an exaggerated facial and physical expression, frantic delivery of dialogues and hilarious slapstick actions. His peculiar performance makes us wonder if there is something physically and mentally wrong with him. He often stumbles, stammers, struggles with high blood pressure and seems on the verge of nervous breakdown. Both characters actually have physical flaws: Norval is rejected by the army because of spots in his eyes and Woodrow is discharged for chronic hay fever.

Bracken is in stark contrast to Joel McCrea who starred in three Sturges' films: *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) and *The Great Moment* (1944). McCrea is a handsome leading man who serves as both a comic figure with lovable eccentricity and a romantic hero with admirable qualities. He acts in a more refined fashion than Bracken; in a humiliating slapstick action sequence, he demonstrates the athletic ability to fall flamboyantly while preserving dignity and grace. In other words, McCrea's hero is distinguished by his superiority. It is also true of Henry Fonda in *The Lady Eve* (1941) and Rex Harrison in *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948). They are blessed with privileges such as great wealth (*The Lady Eve*),

special artistic talent as a comedy film director (*Sullivan's Travels*) and an orchestra conductor (*Unfaithfully Yours*), and inventive talent (*The Palm Beach Story*, *The Great Moment*).

Unlike these natural heroes, Bracken is just a humble boy next door characterized by his inferiority. Although Dick Powell in *Christmas in July* (1940) and Harold Lloyd in *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (1947) show a similar trait, Bracken seems more self-conscious of his inferiority than either of them, always ready to meet the expectation of viewers who are eager to celebrate his failure rather than his heroic act. Constant references are made to his inferiority in appearance: Norval resignedly admits to Trudy, "the older I got the uglier I got. ... So I really didn't blame you when you began looking at the personality kids with the Greek profiles and the curly hair cuts" (0:36:33-0:36:52); Sgt. Hepplefinger says to Woodrow, quite innocently, that his father "was a fine-looking fellow. He didn't look anything like you at all" (0:11:28-0:11:32). Both characters are even victimized by their virtue of modesty and sincerity and as a result thrown into the frantic situation. Bracken's hero is a masochistic character with the lowest self-esteem possible, and both his virtues and flaws make him a target of mockery.

2. Kockenlockers: A noisy screwball family in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*.

Sturges is expert at creating a unique character. In *Morgan's Creek*, there are three more characters as unique as Norval: Trudy Kockenlocker (Betty Hutton), her younger sister Emmy (Diana Lynn), and their father Papa Kockenlocker (William Demarest). Sturges creates Trudy based on the star image of Hutton who was an energetic musical actress, as "a trouble-prone," "always does everything wrong" heroine (Henderson, *Four More Screenplays* 540): a boisterous small-town girl, inherently good-natured though a bit self-indulgent and silly. Her impulsive marriage and ensuing pregnancy has made many critics wonder how Sturges managed to put such a problematic heroine on the 1940's American screen. Demarest who appears in eight Sturges films impersonates a tough and crabby father often shouting at daughters and acting in a funny and slapstick fashion. Lynn, who plays a similar precocious girl in *The Major and the Minor* (1942), impersonates fourteen-year-old Emmy as something like a parody of wisecracking cynic trying to guide a naïve young couple.

Norval and the Kockenlockers always behave in an exaggerated manner, in an extremely chaotic situation caused and worsened further by their tendencies toward excesses. Even though Emmy asks Papa to “be a little more refined,” all of them are far from a person of refinement. Trudy acts in an emotionally intensified manner, often fusses and speaks in a shrill voice, trying to deal with her deserved predicament. Norval’s absolute honesty and affection for Trudy makes him commit several crimes (bigamy, prison breaking, bank robbery and so on) in a vain effort to help Trudy. Their tendencies toward excesses and exaggerations are also demonstrated in some lengthy conversations shot in a single uninterrupted take continuing for a few minutes. It is amazing how they speak to each other in turns without any interval or overlapping. They probably have never experienced an uncomfortable silence. What is necessary to stop their conversation is a sudden burst of big noise such as Norval’s fall from the porch or Trudy’s emotional cry. Though the film is interspersed with occasional quiet and sentimental moments, all of its characters are full of chaos-producing energy and ready to make a loud noise at any time.

Through the depiction of Kockenlocker’s home full of noise and bustle, the film satirizes the small-town family life.² Its focus on a widowed father bullied by his daughters emphasizes the burden of marriage life, especially worries about child-rearing, from which most of the married couples in screwball comedy are free. He expresses to Norval his fatherly concern about a teenaged daughter. Here he seems to be foretelling the birth of six boys: “well, wait ’till you get married and have half a dozen daughters, and see how you feel when some mug brings them home at eight o’clock in the morning” (0:32:46-0:32:51). Mr. Johnson also takes a similar point of view toward marriage: “No man is going to jeopardize his present or poison his future with a lot of little brats hollering around the house unless he’s forced to” (0:29:52-0:29:57). It is therefore understandable that Norval falls into a panic the moment he is informed all the six babies are his. And the marital union of Norval and Trudy, a supposedly happy ending, does not quiet sound like one because the problem of her hasty marriage with a departing soldier still remains unresolved: what will happen if the long absent husband Ratzkywatzky returns to his wife and finds out she’s married to another man?; how should they deal with a family life with the burden of six babies? The birth of sextuplets foreshadows the baby boom after WWII. In a sense,

Norval and Trudy anticipate some of the problems young married couples will face in the postwar era.

3. Enthusiastic crowds in *Hail the Conquering Hero*

Norval is suddenly and unintentionally acclaimed as a hero when Trudy delivers sextuplets. As Jared Rapfogel points out, “the presence of characters who are posing (though perhaps unknowingly) as what they are not” is the recurring theme throughout Sturges’ work. Norval’s celebrity status and an appointment to colonel in the state guard is more than he deserves, since he is still 4F and neither a husband of Trudy nor a father of sextuplets. In *Hail*, Bracken plays essentially the same character as Norval: a 4F who is accidentally acclaimed as a war hero and desperately struggles amongst the enthusiastic hero-worshipping townspeople. Given the fact that Norval becomes a hero and return to the hometown at the end of *Morgan’s Creek*, *Hail*, starting with a return of a war hero to his hometown (Oakridge, California), can be regarded as the sequel to *Morgan’s Creek*. In fact, *Morgan’s Creek* and *Oakridge* is virtually the same town shot on the same studio lot. It also contains a playful self-reference: a billboard of *Morgan’s Creek* appears in the last scene.

The most remarkable thing about *Hail* is the screen saturated with so many people in a great bustle. As James Harvey points out, “Never before, it seems, have romantic comedies been so densely populated, or these background figures so heightened and galvanized”(Harvey 513). Woodrow’s homecoming scene is a prominent example. First, a long shot shows townspeople gathering at the station and waiting for the arrival of Woodrow. Then, some medium shots introduce several supporting role characters such as Woodrow’s ex-fiancé Libby (Ella Raines), his mother Mrs. Truesmith (Georgia Caine), Libby’s fiancé Forrest Noble (Bill Edwards) and his father Mayor Noble (Raymond Walburn). However, every frame is populated by so many characters that it is difficult to recognize them all. In spite of a reception committee chairman (Franklin Pangborn) whistling and yelling desperately to coordinate it all, excited people do what they want to do and never listen to him. Ultimately, the noisiest moment comes when four bands starts to play simultaneously. They turn into a group of free and autonomous individuals at best, an unruly and anarchic mob at worst.

Sturges often makes the principle of hero worship a target of satire and

depicts enthusiastic crowds gathering around a principal figure, giving cheers and applause all the while. Such a moment appears in *The Great McGinty* (1940), *Christmas in Jury*, *Sullivan's Travels* and *The Great Moment*. In these films, people are only background players so that their figures and voices are difficult to distinguish one from the other, whereas people in *Hail* are vying with one another to put themselves in the foreground. For example, there is a shot in the homecoming scene in which one of the citizens carrying a placard cuts in front of Mayor Noble and occupies most of the screen (figure 1). A minor role player (Chester Conklin³), almost an extra, tries to steal the limelight from the more important supporting role player (Raymond Walburn⁴). There is a clear distinction between the two characters regarding their social status: after all, the former is just an employee of Western union, whereas the latter is the president of the Noble Chair Company as well as the mayor. Conklin's disrespectful behavior towards the authority figure disturbs the hierarchically organized star system in the real world, let alone the social hierarchy of the fictional community. Even the main character/performer (Woodrow/Bracken) is threatened by his unbridled vie for primacy.

4. Character actors and actresses in Sturges films

In *Hail*, the crowd is constituted of several character actors and actresses familiar to Sturges films, known as the Sturges Stock Company, in addition to anonymous extras. In the homecoming scene, there are Al Bridge, Jimmy Conlin, William Demarest, Harry Hayden, Esther Howard, Arthur Hoyt, Torben Meyer, Jack Norton and Victor Potel, in addition to Caine, Conklin, Pangborn and Walburn, already mentioned in the preceding section. Any viewer familiar with Sturges films will recognize some of the faces, if it is difficult to recognize them all.

They generally play consistent character-types from one appearance to another. For example, Demarest plays a surrogate father figure of the fatherless protagonist in *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail*: a future father-in-law in the former and a fellow soldier of Woodrow's dead father in the latter, both of them characterized by toughness and a volatile temper. Caine usually plays a generous motherly figure: Mrs. Johnson, a surrogate mother of Norval in *Morgan's Creek* and a mother of Woodrow in *Hail*.⁵ As for the bit players, they appear in essentially the same roles. Frank Moran appears as a

chauffeur in *The Great McGinty* and *Sullivan's Travels*, Byron Foulger as a governor's secretary in *The Great McGinty* and *Morgan's Creek*, while J. Farrel MacDonald as a law authority figure in five.

For character actors and actresses, typecasting is, to a certain degree, their destiny. They are identified as a specific character-type, often a stereotypical social type because of their ethnicity, age, and personal appearance, and repeatedly cast in that type of role. For example, Charles R. Moore was a black actor who appears in six Sturges films as a stereotype in the role of a porter or a servant, typical occupations of black males in those days. Raymond Carney describes their acting method as "technical" acting or "character acting," and the roles they play as "fixed" characters (as opposed to "free" characters). According to him, these characters "can always be analyzed back into particular social or psychological determinants of behavior"; they express themselves in terms of a legible repertory of manners, tones, and movements, and have no transcendental conception of freedom or free expression (Carney 329). On the other hand, Harvey admires the range and variety of the characters in Sturges films. He notes:

The point is that people are always unexpected in some way. That's what gives the Sturges comedy so much of its excitement. As if the liberated feelings we associate with the hero and heroine in screwball comedy had somehow spread through the whole cast. (Harvey 515)

In Sturges films, Sturges Stock Company players' regular appearances and the continuities of their character-type provide a site of coherence. At the same time, they are full of anarchic energy to break down culturally coded stereotypes and inscribe their unique individuality into the film.

Wojcik have noted, among several of Sturges critics, "Recognition of the actor in a series of films create a double identification in which we see not only the character but also the star" (Wojcik 176).⁶ In this respect, it is interesting to note that Brian Donlevy and Akim Tamiroff appear in *Morgan's Creek* as McGinty and Boss; the same characters they played in *The Great McGinty*. They are even credited as "McGinty and Boss." It can be considered as a self-conscious indication of the close association between their star personas and their performances within the film. By impersonating a fictional character, actor/actress assumes a new identity.

However, Sturges Stock Company players do not completely disappear into a role. Rather, they express themselves by impersonating specific character-types, which are constructed on the basis of the unique personalities of their own. Their performing techniques such as the comical peculiar facial, physical and verbal expressions further stress the uniqueness of characters played by them. Despite their brief appearances, they contribute a lot to the unique qualities of character construction in Sturges films.

5. The Ale and Quail Club in *The Palm Beach Story*

They are easily recognizable I-know-him-players. But how many audiences really “know” them? For example, do we know their names, biography and filmography? They did not enjoy a great publicity like major stars. It is also true of the roles they play. One illustrative example is the Ale and Quail Club, a group of noisy and eccentric millionaires in *The Palm Beach Story*, which seems like an exhibition of the Sturges Stock Company including Chester Conklin, Jimmy Conlin, William Demarest, Torben Meyer, Jack Norton and Victor Potel, all of whom appear both in *Morgan’s Creek and Hail*.⁷ The film provides only a brief personal information about these characters. They appear for the first time in a scene at Penn Station in which they pass through a ticket gate one by one while giving one’s name to a gateman. The dialogue of train conductors and a brakeman⁸ indicates that they are millionaire members of a hunting club, have gone on a hunting trip by train and caused trouble. Though we actually know very little about them, we feel as if we knew them because their frequent appearances in Sturges films make us feel an affinity for the characters as well as the actors playing them.

If we consider their appearances in Sturges films as elements of a coherent whole, we can draw a more detailed personal profile for each of them. For example, Demarest appears as Mr. Bildocker, the same name as the coffee company employee he played in *Christmas in July*. Quite naturally, we assume that his success in coffee business is virtually guaranteed from the start. To take other examples, Meyer introduces himself as Dr. Kluck. Judging from his roles as a doctor in five Sturges films, Dr. Kluck’s presumable profile is as follows: he is a doctor hired by a movie studio in *Sullivan’s Travels*; after the trip to Palm Beach, he becomes a doctor in

Morgan's Creek and attends the birth of sextuplets; his ancestors were also doctors since Meyer also played a doctor in *The Great Moment* set in the 19th century and *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (1949) set in the Frontier Period.⁹ A valet of Mr. Hinch (Robert Warwick) is played by Robert Greig who specialized in playing servant roles: he serves Pike family, a wealthy brewer in *The Lady Eve*, as a butler named Burrows; Burrows also serves Sullivan, a successful film director in *Sullivan's Travels*; in *Unfaithfully Yours*, he becomes a valet of an English aristocrat, Sir Alfred; his ancestor was also a butler who served Mr. and Mrs. Morton in *The Great Moment*.

There is a possibility that viewers overlook or simply neglect these minor characters/actors. All that remains is a vague sense of having seen them before. Indeed, there is no need to care much about them. One of the most hilarious moments in the film is the anarchic slapstick action on the train by the Ale and Quail Club members. It contributes little to the narrative progression. Eventually, they are removed from the story when their private car is disconnected from the rest of the train carrying the heroine. They simply disappear from the story and their subsequent fate attracts no more attention. Sturges Stock Company players generally appear in a nonintegrated comedy sequence and they are readily dismissed from the narrative.

6. Toward the integration of minor characters into the narrative

Carrying the absurdity and chaos of comedy sequence to the extreme can be seen as a manifestation of Sturges' inclination for excess, just like his casting favorite Stock Company players as much as possible. In his flops, Sturges seems to have failed to integrate extravagant comedy sequences into the narrative structure, as can be seen in a scene of serious medical experiment abruptly turning into a knockabout comic set piece in *The Great Moment*, and a lengthy and chaotic gun fight scene in *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*. From the perspective of narrative requirement, rational explanation for these sudden bursts of extravagance is almost impossible. In *The French, They are a Funny Race* (1955), the whole film consists of a succession of fragmented episodes of French people's funny habits.

The secret of success in *Hail* lies in its supporting character actors and actresses: they are fully embedded in the fictional community and repeatedly

appear throughout the film. Most of the minor characters appearing in the homecoming scene reappear in the later part of the film, often as a group, and sometimes individually in a less crowded scene so that audiences get a chance to know them. For example, Conlin, a regular member of Sturges films,¹⁰ is nothing more than a stranger to audiences when he makes his first appearance in the homecoming scene; we wonder who he is and what he is talking about. In the latter scene in which a group of townspeople visits Woodrow's house, we finally get to know his name and occupation (Judge Dennis) and his intention (asking Woodrow to run for mayor). To take another example, Arthur Hoyt, who is in the background and probably goes unnoticed by most of the viewers in the homecoming scene, reappears in the church scene in which he occupies the privileged space on stage and gives a long speech. He is in the spotlight to show viewers what kind of character he is: a respectable reverend in the town.¹¹

In *Hail*, it is as if no one is satisfied with being an anonymous background figure. Sturges portrays each of them as an individual with unique personality of their own. Integrating such eccentric supporting role characters fully into the narrative structure generates an extremely boisterous situation. Ironically, there is a possibility that the more outstanding the minor characters become, the less impressive the major ones will be. In fact, the heroine (Libby) and the rival suitor (Forest), supposedly leading characters in a screwball comedy, are less impressive than the other supporting characters; Libby is the hero's former love who is still in love with him, and Forest is a stereotypical "other man" who is destined to lose his girl. The film focuses more on the battle for prominence between Woodrow and the townspeople than on the battle of sexes. Both in *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail*, Bracken's hero is forced to share the limelight with self-assertive minors: Kockenlockers in the former, a crowd of townspeople in the latter. In the following chapter, I will explore the ambivalent quality of the protagonist/hero and his problematical relationship to the masses of people.

II. Bracken's hero and the mass

1. Contrast between an isolated civilian and soldiers

Both *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail* focus on the male protagonist's self-consciousness as an outsider; a man unfit for military service is totally alienated from the community in war-time America. In *Morgan's Creek*,

soldiers always act in a group and surround Trudy as in the scene early at the music shop. The farewell party scene, filled with soldiers and girls, is placed right before the shots of Norval spending a lonely night at a movie theater. Moreover, his orphanhood is an obvious metaphor for his rootlessness. Similar contrast between an alienated civilian and a group of soldiers can also be seen at the beginning of *Hail*. In the opening scene, Woodrow drinks alone at a bar counter while his dialogue reveals his sense of social alienation. This opening is similar to the one in *The Great McGinty*, in which a chorus girl is dancing in front of a band and a depressed ex-bank cashier drinks at a banana republic's bar. 4F Woodrow resembles the criminal refugees in this film – the ex-bank cashier, and the Boss and McGinty, who run a bar somewhere in South America and cannot go back to America (their hometown), while the six marines in *Hail* usually act in a group and help each other (they are literally sharing one glass of beer). Their repeated act of “surrounding” Woodrow is the proof of marine solidarity. They are like brothers; if the six baby boys in *Morgan's Creek* join the army in the future, they will be just like the six marines.

Norval is surrounded by people when he wears a uniform. In the wedding scene, he wears an old-fashioned military uniform in order to pretend to be a soldier and is surrounded by three character players (Almira Sessions, Esther Howard and Porter Hall). The most remarkable one is Howard who acts as a chatty lady—a confirmed interrupter of other people's remarks and an expert at overlapping dialogue. During the wedding ceremony, her big face looms right behind Norval and Trudy as if disrupting the couple's intimate two-shot (figure 2). In the following scene at the Kockenlocker house, more character actors fill the screen and each one speaks in their own interests (figure 3). Military policemen (Budd Fine and Frank Moran), U.S. Marshal (George Melford) and county Sheriff (J. Farrell MacDonald)—each of them claims their jurisdiction over Norval.¹² Mr. Johnson (Al Bridge), a town lawyer, hastens to the scene in defense of Norval, a newspaper editor (Victor Potel) is hungry for a scoop, while Mr. Rafferty (Julius Tannen) is anxious about the Kockenlockers. In the final shot of this film, Norval is officially assigned for a Colonel and pushed down to the lower part of the frame by the curious onlookers piling up high and filling the frame (figure 4). The relative scarcity of crowded scenes in *Morgan's Creek* may be attributed to the fact that Bracken doesn't become a soldier/hero until the last moments

of the film.

Joining an army is sometimes the result of an ambition to be a hero by means of a distinguished service in a war. It is quite a masculine and patriotic way of achieving the American Dream. In addition, Norval and Woodrow's desire to get into the army represents their eagerness to join the majority since every young male was expected to join the army and fight for freedom during WWII. When a man joins the army, he undergoes a ritualistic process of homogenization and as a result, is transformed into an anonymous soldier. Though each of the six marines in *Hail* has his own name, it is a lot easier to perceive them all together as "marines"; their uniformed appearance and behavior (e.g. all of them wear a marine's uniform and act in accordance with the marine's motto) represent the archetypal image of "marines." Being a soldier is both an individualistic action (becoming somebody) and a collective one (becoming one of them). In either case, once Norval and Woodrow become a soldier, they are destined to be surrounded by a crowd of people.

2. War hero, local hero

In *Hail*, there exists a dichotomy between a civilian and a soldier; the former is isolated and a screwball, while the latter joins the majority and is accepted as a legitimate member of the community. Throughout the course of the film, Woodrow fluctuates within the dichotomy. At first, he is an isolated civilian: a screwball who wants to join the normal people by serving as a soldier just like everyone else. Chronic hay fever and consequent 4F status is the important component of his unique personality. Then, he becomes one of the marines and welcomed by the townspeople as a war hero. Soon after coming home, however, he takes off the military uniform and resists being treated as a war hero. Such behavior deviates from the community values so that people cannot take him at his word, attributing his desperate protests ("I'm no hero") to his modesty or to "jungle fever." As the story develops, he increasingly behaves in a comic manner and gives the townspeople a strong impression that he is a screwball. He eventually confesses the truth and decides to leave the town as if trying to be a self-exiled civilian again.

The confession scene is a critical moment in which he is freed from the dichotomy and establishes his own identity as a local hero. Throughout his life, he has tried to meet the community's expectation that a son should

follow in the honorable steps of his father. In the confession scene, he is for the first time “given an opportunity to prove publicly, permanently and beyond peradventure of doubt that he was honest, courageous and veracious” (1:37:43-1:37:52), to use Doc. Bissell’s words. In other words, he gets a chance to express his true self as an ordinary and screwball civilian (one of them). Since all the townspeople are screwballs with eccentric personalities of their own, being a screwball is far from unusual in this town. And his modest virtue such as honesty and devotion to his mother makes him a local hero (the one and the only hero, as it were). As a result, townspeople finally accept him for what he is, not for what they want him to be.

At the film’s ending, Woodrow is shown waving his hands to the departing six marines, just like the rest of the townspeople; he has finally become a part of the community. At first he occupies the privileged space at the center of the frame (figure 5), but then disappears into the crowd as the camera pulls back (figure 6). A close-up on Woodrow, inserted one more time, only serves to reemphasize him as the principal figure of the film and a local hero of Oakridge (figure 7). On the other hand, the six marines on the train leaving the town continue to be clearly perceivable until the very last moment of the film (figure 8). They are like war heroes waving their hands to the cheering crowds from the heights. This is almost the only moment in *Hail* in which the marines are depicted as heroic soldiers. Even though they deserve to be called war heroes, they are consistently depicted like frauds; they are always making up heroic stories as if wearing a military uniform decorated with shining medals is not enough. Maybe Sergeant Hepplefinger is dissatisfied with the American society which is far from appreciating his twenty-five years military service. That may be the reason why he gets an almost paranoid obsession with making Woodrow a war hero. His lines such as “Boy, I wished I was in your shoes” (0:37:26) reveal his envy towards Woodrow.

There are acknowledged war heroes in Oakridge: Woodrow’s father and General Zabriski. But they have nothing to do with the everyday life of the townspeople and eventually will fall into oblivion. It is as if there is no place for true war heroes in the community. Despite their willingness to join the hero worshiping festivity, the six marines does not belong to the community in the first place. At the film’s ending, townspeople performs a farewell ceremony for the six marines (true war heroes), which makes a striking

contrast with the welcome home ceremony for Woodrow (a local hero). The final shot of *Hail* in which the six marines are dissolved into the portrait of Woodrow's father seems to foretell their eventual death in combat, which will make them true war heroes (figure 9). The only honorable soldier is a dead one.

3. Ambivalence in Sturges' life and films

Sturges films usually reveal profound ambivalence toward the American society and culture. Several critics have attempted to explain this aspect of his films by referring to his biographical facts, especially his childhood experiences in Europe with his free-spirited mother.¹³ In regard to *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail*, it may be useful to refer to his war time experience. While volunteering as a flyer in the American air service in WWI, Sturges remained completely indifferent to the war effort in WWII. Judging from the entries in his autobiography, it seems that Sturges deliberately maintained an ambiguous attitude toward both wars. As for WWI, it is doubtful if he was really motivated by enthusiastic patriotism or youngster's bravado in joining the army. After being turned down by the United States Army Air Service because of a blind spot in one eye, he volunteered for the Royal Flying Corps in Canada. Obviously, he did not share his mother's "silly idea" that "young men should serve only in the armies of their own countries" (Sturges 147). And the reason for choosing the air service is because he wished a nice death in aerial battle, rather than the one in trench with cooties crawling all over him (Sturges 146).

As for WWII, he looked at it with some detachment:

...though I imagined I could still fly if necessary, I had absolutely no desire to get in. Either this war was not as well advertised as the last one, or there is a great difference between the thinking of an eighteen-year-old boy and a man in his early forties. Or maybe one doesn't fall for the same guff twice or something. Certainly my life was very much less precious to me at this point than it had been then, so it couldn't have been that. Maybe if people got to be old enough, there wouldn't be any wars. Maybe war is just youthful exuberance, a recurring form of exercise in the spring. (Sturges 296)

While most of the Hollywood filmmakers were willing to make a contribution to the war effort, he took a quite unique stance: he was neither for nor against the war, impassively keeping a certain distance from the majority of people. Such an ambivalent attitude might be one reason for the unique portrayal of the small-town America under the war in *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail*. Both films have surprised many critics by their bold mockery of the war time America and American soldiers.

Notwithstanding his professed indifference to WWII, Sturges seems to have recognized the necessity of the unity of American people under the war. The townspeople in *Hail*, whose individualism is akin to selfishness, are conscious of the necessity, which is clearly indicated in Judge Denis' earnest request to Woodrow:

There's something rotten in this town.... It's like the town was selfish...Everybody thinking about little profits.... All things that are all right in peace time, things you used to call thrift and relaxation that made many a fortune, but things that are plain dishonest in war time. The motto of this town is 'Business as usual' but a lot of us feel war time ain't a usual time and that business as usual is dishonest. That's why we need an honest man for Mayor. (0:40:59-0:41:44)

This is the very reason why they can demonstrate solidarity to boost Woodrow as a candidate for the mayor. To take one example, the reception committee chairman manages the election campaign far better than the homecoming ceremony and enjoys leading a campaign song "Win with Woodrow." Woodrow's transformation from a war hero to a local hero helps to transform the anarchic crowd of people into a more harmonious one. It might be seen as the ultimate celebration of the American individualism. Moreover, they are not susceptible to dangerous demagoguery and never turn into a lynch mob.

Though Sturges films have been criticized for his ambivalence or alleged lack of seriousness about social problems,¹⁴ his films are obviously a close reflection of his own criticism of contemporary America. This is particularly true of *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail*: they clearly reflect "a fundamental and deep-seated anxiety about the problem of the individual in a mass society" (Susman 263). Warren Susman points out that there developed a new

culture, “the culture of personality,” in the early decades of twentieth century. It seemed crucial in the mass society to distinguish oneself from the others in the crowd, and “personality” which connotes “both the unique qualities of an individual and the performing self that attracts others” (Susman 281) was seen as the key to becoming somebody. He also notes that the 1930s and WWII years were the heyday of the “people,” a term meant to cut through various divisions in the society. America traditionally had enshrined the rugged individualist and the self-made man; the meaning of individualism has grown more complicated as a consequence of the great social changes in the early twentieth century.¹⁵

Through the portrayal of Bracken’s hero whose attractiveness derives from his inferiority complex, Sturges suggests how to distinguish oneself from the others while keeping a sense of belonging to a group in the modern mass society. In Sturges films, no one is free from faults; everyone is encouraged to accept themselves as they are, warts and all. Even if one deviates from the socially imposed norms of behavior, they could be accepted as a local hero instead of being exposed to social alienation. It is also true of the other minor characters. Sturges contrasts them with the faceless crowds in a mass society and celebrates the more intimate local community made up of screwballs.

III. Conclusion

As has already been mentioned by several critics, Sturges consciously parodied Frank Capra’s populist films. For example, Shatz notes: “Capra’s populist conception of the essential wisdom and innate goodness of “the folks” is turned upside down in Sturges’ comedies” (Shatz 170).¹⁶ Generally described as a social-minded, seemingly optimistic “fantasy of goodwill,” Capra’s populist films are more complex than it may seem at first. As Carney notes, Capra “had a love-hate relationship with crowds”:

Capra more often than not shows how difficult it is to establish an adequate relationship to a group. The individual is threatened with frightening loss of identity in a crowd, and a crowd is always on the verge of turning into a mindless mob in his work. (Carney 159)

As a matter of fact, Capra’s ambiguous attitude toward the crowd has a lot in

common with that of Sturges. Though a close comparison and examination of similarities and differences between Capra and Sturges will be a subject for future research, it is clear that both of them raise social issues in the modern mass society and explore possible solutions in a style of their own.

Sturges' films pursue pragmatic means for survival in the modern mass society. Norval and Woodrow are not saved by goodwill of people nor by a Capraesque divine power. In *Morgan's Creek*, the miracle workers are not angels but fallen politicians: Governor McGinty and the Boss¹⁷ take advantage of a miraculous birth of sextuplets for their own benefit and as a result, bring the marital union of Norval and Trudy. In *Hail*, the six marines willingly tell lies to incite a hero-worshipping frenzy among the townspeople, and townspeople are eager to believe and forgive their lies. Their quasi-fantastic transformation from a lynch mob to people of goodwill,¹⁸ which pave the way for an opportunistic happy ending, seems like a parody of Capraesque narrative developments. In Sturges' films, deceptions and lies are the key to happiness. Though they do not give a Capraesque eloquent speech to express their devotion to the American ideals of democracy and individualism, their vociferousness itself serves as a loud celebration of a unique self and individualistic action. In *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail*, each of the characters, from principal figures down to bit players, is a person of marked individuality and an embodiment of self-assertiveness essential for survival in the modern mass society.

Notes.

1. For further discussion, see Austerlitz, Carney, Dickos and Harvey.
2. For further discussion, see Rozgony.
3. Conklin was a popular silent film comedian and worked steadily through the sound era. He appears in six Sturges films, always as a bit role player.
4. Walburn was a familiar face in screwball comedy and usually played a pompous and stuffed shirt character. He appears in three Sturges films as a president of a company: a president of Maxford House Coffee company in *Christmas in July*, Noble Chair company in *Hail*, Waggleberry Advertising company in *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock*.
5. Caine also played the mother of a male protagonist in *Christmas in July* and the heroine's mother in *The Great Moment*.
6. For a detailed discussion, see Dyer and Wojcik.

7. There also appear such Sock Company players as Roscoe Ates, Robert Greig, Arthur Stuart Hull, Sheldon Jett, Dewey Robinson and Robert Warwick.
8. The train conductors are played by Al Bridge and Arthur Hoyt and the brakeman by Frank Moran. All of them appear both in *Morgan's Creek* and *Hail*, though Moran's presence as a town painter in *Hail* is difficult to perceive.
9. Meyer also played a doctor in *Unfaithfully Yours*, though he is not a medical doctor but a cymbalist of an orchestra, whose name (Dr. Schultz) is same as the one in *Hail* (Mr. Schultz, an owner of a grocery) and almost the same as the one (Dr. Shultz) in *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*.
10. Conlin appears in nine Sturges films, from *The Great McGinty* to *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock*.
11. Arthur Hoyt also played a clergyman in *Sullivan's Travels* in which he is more comical and a bit phony, compared to the one he plays in *Hail*.
12. In the script, there also appear two state policemen (Hal Craig, Roger Creed), two secret servicemen (Keith Richards, Kenneth Gibson) and Pete (Chester Conklin). Though all of their dialogues are eliminated from the film except one line of a secret serviceman, their figures are barely recognizable among the crowd in this scene.
13. For a detailed discussion, see Agee, Farber, Rapfogel and Sarris.
14. See Agee and Farber for more details.
15. For a detailed discussion, see Susman and Lears.
16. For further discussion, see Austerlitz, Bazin, Pirolini and Sarris.
17. McGinty and Boss have been arrested on charges of corruption and bribe and escaped to banana republic in *The Great McGinty*. In *Morgan's Creek*, they are restored to the former status as if nothing had happened.
18. According to Sarris, "Sturges was severely criticized in 1944 for toying with the emotional expectations of his audience by transforming an apparent lynch mob in *Hail the Conquering Hero* into a crowd of well-wishers" (Sarris 317). Farber also notes, "This ending has been attacked by critics who claim that it reveals Sturges compromising his beliefs and dulling the edge of his satire" (Farber 92).

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Filmography

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Figures.



Fig.1 (00:20:39)



Fig.2 (01:00:41)



Fig.3 (01:03:52)



Fig.4 (01:37:58)



Fig.5 (01:40:20)



Fig.6 (01:40:34)



Fig.7 (01:40:37)



Fig.8 (01:40:40)



Fig.9 (01:40:43)