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Hollywood Dreams of Wealth, Youth, and Beauty

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The "American Dream" is the hope that in the United States of America, anyone can become rich and/or famous if they work hard and have a good attitude. But is this view realistic? And if not, where did these ubiquitous visions of rags-to-riches orphans and immigrants come from? In this article, reporter Bob Mondello looks at how Hollywood films since the 1900s depicted life in America. As you read the text, take notes on the imagery used to illustrate American life. How might these images have impacted an outsider's view of the U.S.? Are they true to life as you know it?

[1] Tinseltown¹ didn't invent the American dream, but it sure put it out there for the world to see — a dream lit by the perpetual sunshine of Southern California, steeped in the values of the immigrant filmmakers who moved there in the early 1900s and got enormously rich.

It was their own outsider experience these Italian, Irish, German and often Jewish moviemakers were putting on screen, each optimistic, escapist fantasy a virtual American dream checklist:

- Hard work carries the day in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.
- Little guy makes good in the oil-rich world of *Giant*.
- Character matters more than birth, as no one knows better than Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*.
- And you make your success as an individual, says rugged individual John Wayne in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.



"Chaplin in Modern Times" is licensed under Public domain.

Hollywood's not called a dream factory for nothing. It manufactures optimism, and in the process of selling it, can make the possibility of success feel wondrously real.

During the Great Depression², for instance, the silent comedy *Modern Times*³ had Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp imagining not great wealth, but an idyllic⁴ middle-class existence, in a house with orange trees and grapevines so nearby he could pluck fruit through his window, and a cow in the backyard that came when called and filled a pitcher with fresh milk when Charlie patted its flank. This was a life of ease in a land of plenty, and though the Little Tramp was an outsider, even he could dream.

1. Tinseltown is another name for Hollywood, California – the center of the movie industry, celebrity culture, and glamour.

- [5] So could the showgirls, gangsters and cowboys who populated early Hollywood fantasies. In big-sky Westerns, every man was his own boss; in organized-crime flicks, entrepreneurs turned to bootlegging⁵, where life was short but glamorous; and in the Depression, was the Hollywood musical depressed? No way! Chorus girls were turning into stars overnight. Upward mobility⁶ was everywhere.

And yes, there were millions who were left off the dance floor. People of color rarely got to watch their dreams get realized on screen until decades later. African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latin Americans, gay Americans — the list of people who were left out of Hollywood's dreams in the first half of the last century is appallingly long.

It wasn't until after World War II that the film industry took more than a glancing interest at the aspirations of minorities — the transplanted Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story*, for instance, who sang with dripping irony of why they'd left San Juan for New York.

I like to be in America
OK by me in America
Everything free in America
For a small fee in America

Hollywood had long been inspiring immigrants to come to the U.S. with images that filled them with overstated optimism about what they'd find here. The Italian film *Golden Door* depicts the dream in all its glory; made in 2006 but set a century earlier, it centers on a Sicilian immigrant who's lured here by trick photos that show American rivers flowing with milk and onions the size of wheelbarrows.

- [10] By the time he gets to Ellis Island, traveling in steerage⁷, he's figured out that these are false hopes. But then he sees Manhattan's skyscrapers glinting in the sun. Someone calls them "golden houses 100 floors high," and his face lights up again. That is the power of the American dream.

There is, of course, a catch to all this dreaming. The movie industry stacks the deck pretty heavily, treating wealth — or at least financial security — much the way it treats youth and beauty. The vast majority of happy characters in movies are young, good-looking and well-off, so the subtext is that those qualities all go hand-in-hand.

Never mind that the storyline is telling you that what matters is what's in your heart. Never mind, in fact, when it tells you that not everyone makes it. Because even the folks who aren't making it on screen are still movie stars.

"I coulda been a contender," laments Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront*. "I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum." Well, sure, but he's still a young Marlon Brando — and he's earning a movie star's salary.

2. The Great Depression (1929 - 1932) was an extreme economic downturn that began on October 29, 1929 with the news of the stock market crash (a day known as Black Tuesday). Over the next decade, industry nearly came to a halt, and many unemployed Americans were forced to live in poverty.
3. *Modern Times* is a 1936 silent film directed by Charlie Chaplin in which his iconic Little Tramp character struggles to survive in the modern industrialized world.
4. **Idyllic (adjective):** extremely happy, peaceful, and perfect
5. **Bootleg (verb):** to make, distribute or sell illicit goods (especially liquor) illegally
6. **Upward Mobility:** A person is "upwardly mobile" when he or she moves from one social class to a higher class.
7. **Steerage (noun):** the part of the ship that is reserved for people with the cheapest tickets

And that speaks to why Tinseltown's version of the American dream became so seductive. Chaplin, who played the Little Tramp, was a millionaire, a fact that was not unknown to the public. For decades there has been no greater glamour than that bestowed⁸ by Hollywood. Even when fame is fleeting, it's flashy.

- [15] And you don't hear about the big star who lives in an ordinary house and drives an ordinary car, because that's not part of the fantasy. By leaving out the caveats⁹, Hollywood can make the American dream seem a persuasive American reality — even if it's not the reality most of us experience.

Which is why when people come to visit from overseas, they often remark on something that seems kind of unremarkable if you live here.

"All the cars are new," they say. "It looks like a movie."

What they can't see, of course, is the monthly car payments, or the maxed-out credit cards. But they're right, the image is like the movies. It does look American, and is kind of dream-y. All filmmakers are doing is making what they know. And then doing a little editing.

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8. **Bestow (verb):** to give
9. **Caveat (noun):** a warning or caution