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Selling the American Dream: The Comic Underdog in American Film

Anne Glenisla Hart

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Selling the American Dream: The Comic Underdog in American Film

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Placing archetypal “underdogs” or “losers” in the roles of protagonists allows and encourages the viewer to identify with them or understand them as an idealized Other, though the audience may differ from the failure protagonist in social class, gender, or any other condition. In film, one of the most persuasive and ubiquitous media of the 20th century, underdog and weakling characters germinated in early popular comedies such as those by Charlie Chaplin and the other silent clowns. Using Chaplin’s filmography to illustrate the underdog’s ironic supremacy, this thesis aims to unravel the initial values and expectations inherent in Hollywood underdog comedy films, trace these components to their paradoxical political and economic roots, and draw conclusions on their social and economic consequences.

Keywords: Underdog, Charlie Chaplin, comedy, American dream

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INTRODUCTION

In 1918, a dog named Scraps performed alongside Charlie Chaplin in a thirty-minute-long silent comedy. This early Chaplin film, *A Dog's Life*, addressed the plight of the lower class by using a dog to draw a straightforward comparison between Chaplin's Tramp and the lowly life of a creature endlessly searching for food, shelter, and companionship. Together, in the end, the pair would get all three. The Tramp and Scraps share similar circumstances: they are hungry, purposeless, and wary of the police. They first meet when Scraps is being attacked by a gang of bigger and stronger dogs in an attempt to claim a piece of food. When the Tramp rushes in to save Scraps, a bond is formed in a "tender spot in the tenderloin." From here, the duo stick together in a mutually beneficial relationship that results in the Tramp acquiring a farm and family and litter of puppies from Scraps. Though the definition of success may be modest in this film, *A Dog's Life* is nonetheless a literal underdog story fulfilled through comedy. In the years following the film, underdogs became popularized as one of the most commonly used archetypes in each genre of American cinema. Hollywood productions are especially teeming with "underdog" protagonists. From Charlie Chaplin to Napoleon Dynamite, to Luke Skywalker and Ace Ventura, Hollywood's film history relies heavily on a dialectic of central characters that collide with an established standard or existing social hegemony, defy their undesirable circumstances, and eventually reach a positive synthesis. Underdog archetypes have assured audience loyalty in cinema patronage and cultural consumption since film moved from earliest documentary to constructed narratives. Indeed, the underdog trope has been significant in its contribution to over a century of film language and narrative since it was originally developed in 19th century European and American fiction.

The presence of so many underdog characters as protagonists in Hollywood productions seems to codify a meta-narrative that favors certain values and promotes certain expectations of personal success. This codification prompts an array of questions: Why is the underdog specifically appealing to American masses and where did the appeal come from? What comparisons can be made globally? How is that appeal shaping movie-goers' expectations of their own lives? Is the underdog narrative in film helpful or harmful to a society (and world audience) that deals with many cultures and many interpretations of success, or more realistically, deals more frequently with the mundane? This thesis cannot explore the scope of all of these questions, important as they are, and instead aims to unravel the primary values and expectations inherent in Hollywood underdog comedy films, trace these components to their political and economic roots, and draw conclusions about their social consequences, particularly as they apply to "real" underdogs in the United States (minorities, immigrants, the poor, the handicapped, women). This analysis should then open the door for further analysis on the above questions as well as for new ways of thinking about and constructing American narratives and promote further questions on the role of media in social perceptions. In order to accomplish this analysis, rather than conducting a sociological study, I will first look to historical narratives and myths as foundations for the underdog archetype; second, I will turn to film and comedy theory to establish a basis of understanding the power relations and cinematic factors that contribute to the appeal of the underdog within early comedy movies, specifically the popular films of Charlie Chaplin. Finally, I will meditate on the economic and social consequences of the ubiquity of the underdog archetype in popular cinema.

Stemming from stories of self-made men, the underdog or everyman archetype is composed of a character or team, generally male(s), who are at the bottom of a social, political,

or economic ladder. They are even often considered “losers” by their context in more ways than one. The character may be poor, unattractive, boring, down on his luck, or socially inept in the eyes of his peers. The character may even be a criminal. These characterizations are similar to and are derived from the squarely American concept of the “self made-man”—that is, a figure who defies his circumstances and works his way to the top with little or no help from others. However, while self-made men are almost always coupled with economic status (the “rags to riches” tale), underdogs are more narratively useful to a broader spectrum of social, romantic, moral, and even emotional internal struggles. The connection between self-made men and underdogs is nevertheless crucial to determining the cultural and economic consequences of promulgating an American Dream narrative. Scholars such as Irvin Wyllie, John Cawelti, and more recently Heike Paul have investigated the consequences of the self-made man narrative and determined it to be responsible for the continued belief in an American Dream that rewards the individual’s hard work with financial stability. The specific brand of underdog both increases and emphasizes these consequences merely because of the underdog’s ability to find a home in any narrative, economic or otherwise. Therefore, the underdog archetype is more capable than the narrower “self-made man” to conceal a positive capitalistic agenda behind more superficially neutral stories.

Placing underdogs in the roles of protagonists in big-budget Hollywood films particularly allows and encourages the viewer to identify with them on seemingly neutral ground, though the audience may in reality differ from the underdog in social class, gender, or any other condition. Because the underdog (or self-made man) myth, as Heike Paul labels it, is constructed from and dependent upon a capitalist economy as well as culture, it is entirely relatable to any person living under such an economic structure. The underdog stands as one of America’s mythical

origin stories as well as cultural sustenance for an optimistic view of capitalist models. Paul notes, “the defense of capitalism is, time and time again, the tacit subtext of the narratives of the self-made men” (372). If the defense of capitalism is tacit within self-made men narratives¹, such as the popular fiction written by Horatio Alger in the mid 19th century, it is expertly concealed in tales of underdogs. While narratives and declarations of support of the underdog sort have been spread in the United States from Benjamin Franklin to Booker T. Washington, no entity has been more powerful in ensuring the myth’s survival than 20th century Hollywood and the potent medium of film.

In Hollywood’s earliest films, underdog characters tend to be found most frequently in comedies, where their status can be the subject of amusement as well as inspiration, doubling the appeal, while making their loser position appropriate; to elaborate, it is more understandable to see a fool in comic situations sympathetically, rather than disgracefully. Comedy theory will be useful here to understand the gravity of the genre. Early popular depictions of underdogs in the first two decades of the 20th century include Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp, Buster Keaton’s acrobatic characters, Harold Lloyd’s sympathetic “game kid,” and the bumbling duo of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (Kerr); all were comic and vaudeville actors, some of them immigrants or first generation American citizens, and some of them from working class Midwestern towns. These early comics’ backgrounds often parallel their comic characters as lower class underdogs. Though the underdog’s heritage may stem from comedy, the role has spread into nearly every genre (as well as to real world sports and politics). Contemporary drama, romance, action, and

¹ Of course, not all underdog stories support a positive impression of capitalism. *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *Bleak House*, to name a few, actually mitigate the optimism of a burgeoning and evolving capitalist society. Those departures, however, are for another thesis.

sports films such as *Rocky* (1976) and *Seabiscuit* (2003) heavily feature underdogs as protagonists in the most obvious and crowd-pleasing of ways, but the practice can be found almost everywhere with added nuance. The basic premise of struggle against an established power or stereotype is located in the majority of American narratives particularly, from sorority girls earning law degrees (*Legally Blonde*, 2001) to stories of violent mafia kingpins achieving success (*The Godfather*, 1972). These underdog characters' origins are with the early comics of film. Therefore, the initial underdog, the comic loser, spawns an entire standard for American narrative that essentially emphasizes and rewards competition and individual potential. Though usually touted as heartwarming, inspirational, and without guile, this lucrative underdog narrative is not without complications.

The omnipresence of the underdog story, and therefore the propagation of the myth of the American Dream, relies on an economic paradox that lies at the heart of the discussion on the narrative's potential social consequences. First, the status as "loser" is vital to the success of the narrative. The "everyman" characterization could draw identification with the audience, who, even if they do not actually relate, understand the feeling of perpetual effort against an overarching sense of domination from some entity, known or otherwise. Chaplin's audience knew well the pressures of a world war, economic distress, and the lingering effects of a society undergoing industrialization. However, beyond Chaplin's time, the cult of the underdog prevails. A recent *New York Times* article on underdogs in sports (perhaps the most commonly recognized scene for discussions on underdogs) explains, "we're drawn to the message that giants can be toppled, that with a little luck we, too, can overcome" (Wertheim, Sommers). In this case, the "we" is assumed to be the American people, or more broadly, those of the Western world. However, the underdog would seem to symbolize, in an individual, the romanticized proletariat

class, kept down by the unseemly and often generalized forces of higher classes. Importantly, that symbolism is applied narrowly to one individual, rather than the masses, which complicates the ideology of the underdog. The energy of lift from a lower class that appeals so broadly to audiences is actually provided by socialist ideals of class equality that the working class, even of a capitalist nation, relates to. Therefore, the underdog narrative exploits the affective sense of the proletariat's revolt for justice and equality while reinforcing a highly capitalistic narrative of competition and individuality.

More importantly for the Hollywood industry, even if an underdog does not achieve wealth and prosperity by the end of the narrative, he or she has won the continued approval and admiration of the audience. As an example, during Scrap and the Tramp's struggle with the gang of dogs in *A Dog's Life*, townspeople crowd around and wave their arms. Though it is unclear whether they are rooting for the Tramp and Scrap or the attacking dogs, they are invested in the outcome. This outsider interest particularity begins to mark another aspect of the underdog paradox. Underdogs are only successful with audiences as they remain down on their luck or during their process of ascension. Once success is achieved, whether it is financial, romantic, or sporting, the magic is gone shortly after victory. Looking again to sports, one might view the Boston Red Sox's World Championship of 2004, or the 2016 World Championship of the Chicago Cubs as case studies. Both victories signaled the end of superstitious "curses" that brought die-hard fans and casual observers alike together to root on these teams that had been losers for so long. A recent USA Today article touches on this pickle, claiming that regarding the 2016 World Championship between the Chicago Cubs and the Cleveland Indians, no matter what the outcome, the Cubs would lose something. In the claim that the Cubs would either lose the series or their "mystique," the article states, "Victory is sweet. But even sweeter is longing for

that elusive crowning victory. For it is only through collective suffering and agony that a fan base is truly united” (Peter). Arguably, upon their victories, both teams have lost broader support as they occupy the role of rich, winning teams. While sports continue each year anew, and the reality of such ascensions lives on, most Hollywood films end at the point of victory, never to show or expose the paradox of the underdog’s triumph.

Because of the success of the underdog narrative that essentially preys on socialist motivation to achieve a capitalistic end, we tell this story again and again, in variations and in sequels, further reinforcing and remixing the traditional ways in which we engage with narratives. As a result, audiences of Hollywood films are continually sold an idea: that they too can succeed in love, in art, in wealth, and in any goal they may have. *A Dog’s Life* is charming, funny, and warm, and its narrative’s message comforts its audience in their hopes and desires. As such, Charlie Chaplin’s films may be held highly responsible for the popularization of the capitalist underdog archetype. The underdog narrative, though at the core is structured by a foundation of socialist ideals, sells the American Dream of a capitalist and individualistic equal opportunity through Hollywood’s comedy films to the masses.

Part 1: Some Historical Underpinnings of the American Underdog

Though many foundational events and cultural attitudes spark America's preoccupation with the underdog, the founding of the United States and the official split from England must be the most fundamental event that marks the sanctioning of an American underdog spirit, at least in retrospect. The revolutionary event was preceded by attitudes and circumstances that aided a perception of overcoming the odds, and such attitudes were certainly only bolstered in the years to follow. This attitude of social and economic vertical mobility was not a uniquely American trend. Irvin G. Wyllie's text on the self-made man in America makes this acknowledgment, stating,

Though it was an American conceit that the self-made man was peculiar to our shores, he had been known in other lands. Since virtually all societies provided some channels for vertical social circulation, men of this type had been common to all. In the older nations of Europe such institutions as the army, the church, the school, and the political party served as agencies for testing, sifting, and distributing individuals within various social strata. (10)

While an interest with being self-made spans geography and history, Wyllie hits on an important difference in American culture: the conceit in believing the United States is the best, if not only, place for the lower class or the underdog to succeed. On his visit to the United States in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville recognized some cultural traits that clearly correlate to the fixation with a specifically American underdog archetype. He begins his essay of *Democracy in America* by noting that previous European interests already engaged trends of egotism, "a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person," (2) and then insinuates the difference of *individualism* found in a new American culture. According to de

Tocqueville, individualism “is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow creatures” (2). He is critical of both egotism and individualism, but saves his highest reproach for the latter, stating, “individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run, it attacks and destroys all others” and goes on to warn of the community and familial ties that are severed under democracy’s political embrace of individualism. The result, he laments, is that individualist democracy “throws [one] back forever upon [oneself] alone, and threatens to confine [one] entirely within the solitude of [one’s] own heart” (3). Whether de Tocqueville’s disapproving opinion here is correct or not, his points are certainly pertinent considering the centuries of individualist thought following his visit and publication. His perspective pierces the center of an underdog idol in American culture. The underdog is at the heart of The American Dream, which, in its most widely accepted form, as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, is “An American ideal of a happy and successful life to which all may aspire.” The definition could not be broader. It is inclusive in that the opportunity to find happiness and success is open to all, but there is no mention of a communal achievement or of personal success including the success of one’s neighbor as well. As such, the Dream remains highly individualistic. If any American was asked to define the American Dream, she or he would likely give an answer approximate to the definition above, which only states a goal, not a process. The underdog archetype acts as one popular answer to the question of realizing the American Dream.

Underdogs as we understand them in American culture today—those expected to fail and as a result possess cult-like popularity—had their roots in colonial America. The earliest colonizers imbued a seedling culture with both the desire to acquire wealth quickly and with an autonomous attitude. Colonies such as Roanoke and Jamestown are evidence of this

entrepreneurial impulse as well as evidence of the efforts' shortcomings. Roanoke's failure was tempered by the slight success of Jamestown—a success that reinforces a belief that repeated attempts will eventually produce positive results; in other words, the colonies were built with Protestant work ethic. Influential figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Crèvecoeur likewise tout a perspective of branded American self-reliance and independence in the name of economic and political success². These attitudes and interests of the colonizers contrast drastically with America's earlier inhabitants, whose Native writings and oral traditions demonstrate a communal and complex relationship with achievement³. Just as European colonists edged out the Natives in terms of property and place, they also colonized an individualistic attitude that would be written into the fabric of American identity. Finally, the Revolutionary War itself is a romantic historical moment for myth-building; the colonies were outnumbered, inexperienced, and underfunded facing the Red Coats, but through tenacity, luck, and God's will (another standard facet of constructing American Dream mythos), the revolutionaries were victorious.

With core ideas of successful independent revolution despite the odds, an entire culture and economy of individualist capitalism was born and nourished while a standard Dream was likewise constructed. In most cases, though it may not always be acknowledged, the Dream reflects financial aspirations. While the pleasant idea of happiness and success for all could be molded to fit a variety of ideals and particulars, it has often construed the term “American” to mean capitalistic and traditional, where happiness and success depend on fiscal earnings.

² See Franklin's *The Way to Wealth* (1733) and Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782).

³ Works such as Native American trickster tales (see *The Winnebago Trickster Cycle* for an example) demonstrate contradictory and complex characters that interact with their communities and environments in elastic ways. These works focus on place and a connection between past, present, and future, rather than goal-oriented successes.

Wyllie's analysis reports, "you will see that success is identified to some extent with fame; still more with power; most of all, with wealth" (9). This identification can be credited to perceptions from media, even in its earliest forms of newspapers, literary works, and Franklin's almanacs⁴. The American Dream, in all its breadth, was and is continually undergoing revision and refinement with stories of national heroes being honest (George Washington's cherry tree), innovative (Benjamin Franklin), and defiant in the face of failure (Abraham Lincoln). Pioneers and frontiersmen exemplified the American Dream in their thirst for exploration, more land, and gold.

Such ambitious attributes and ideals concerning gain were woven into narratives for consumption early on in tales of self-made men, explorers, and settlers. Later, transcendentalist notions of self-reliance, inner exploration, and internal riches of peace and harmony pushed against the pursuit of material gain. While American transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson touted inner economy through simple living, the goal of "achievement" is the same, albeit the parameters of success are altered. The very name "transcendentalist" connotes an upward movement, just as the vertical mobility essential to a capitalist economy. This verticality is found in the religiosity that grounds America's traditions as well. Christianity, which relies heavily on theology concerning self-governance,

⁴ Entrepreneurs have lauded Franklin's personal organization for centuries. His methodology for success is framed in graphs, tables, and pithy aphorisms. In *The Way to Wealth*, Franklin is found quoting himself (as Poor Richard) promoting ideas such as: "God helps them that help themselves," and "But with our industry, we must likewise be steady, settled, and careful, and oversee our own affairs with our own eyes, and not trust too much to others" (459). In many ways, Franklin's attitudes may have monopolized measures for achievement. The values he set in place and that became popularized are now the values that determine what success looks and feels like for many people (Furay, 37). For further reading on American self-made men, see P.T. Barnum's *The Art of Money-Making* (New York, 1882), John G. Cawelti's *Apostles of the Self-made Man* (Chicago, 1965), and Robert Cushman's *Elements of Success* (Washington, 1848).

responsibility, equal footing, and ultimately ascension and exaltation, could be (and often is) easily paired with the economic ideals of America's foundations. Indeed, the biblical story of David and Goliath is often the first point of contact for underdog ancestry (and has been popularized by Malcolm Gladwell's 2013 publication *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*). While these avenues are used to convey the American Dream to the masses, storytelling and fiction are likewise vehicles of the message. Eventually, comedy was marshaled to the job.

The use of the underdog in comedy to propel the American Dream into widespread appeal did not reach its full potential until the arrival of savvy narrative film in the early 20th century though it was certainly touched upon by 19th century writers such as Mark Twain. Individualist thought that leads to the construction of an underdog protagonist pervaded the national literature due to, as historian Conal Furay explains, the fact that "The ideal of individualism is deeply rooted in American economic, political, and social life. It flows as a core theme through American literature, language, history books, theories of character, slogans, and, predictably enough, popular culture" (32). Furay goes on to explain the shape that individualism takes in popular culture, stating, "Of its [individualism] several meanings the one appropriate to the present discussion relates to the capacity of the individual to shape his own destiny, to control his fate by drawing upon inner resources. In this light individualism becomes a matter of a personal battle against forces, both good and evil, which continually seek full domination over one's life" (32). The individualism found in popular works finds parallels to the peoples' realities; as such, obvious American Dream themes such as gold rushes became the subject of comedy films that take advantage of the relatable struggle in order to gain popularity. In fact, one of Charlie Chaplin's most successful films is *The Gold Rush*. With the introduction of comics

such as Chaplin, audiences could access and relate to the American Dream in an unprecedented way. Such access and relatability was partly due to the nature of comedy itself (which will be further discussed in Part 3) but even more powerfully due to the nature of the film medium as the total art. Walter Benjamin illuminates the significance of cinema in a capitalist society and warns that it is “a mistake to underestimate” the role of art in politics (231). As the art of storytelling adapted to the technologically reproducible film medium, “authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production” and art becomes “based on a different practice: politics” (234). In the case of the underdog, the reality of economic circumstances behind Chaplin’s Tramp character may be authentic, but film took that authenticity, and, running headlong into the 20th century, reproduced it and thereby distanced it from its initial value. Though perhaps already codified in literature, in only ten or fifteen years, the underdog of the movies went from being a character of the people to a character sold to the people for profit and politic.

Part 2: Film as the Medium for the Underdog's Influence and Self-promotion

Though stories of self-made men and underdog figures were available and culturally familiar in texts long before the movies, no other medium brought to life the narratives of class or personal struggle nearly as powerfully as Hollywood film. Only the Bible's underdog David defeating Goliath may contest this due to its familiarity in Western civilization, but one must take into account the centuries of exposure of the story and its typology to a commonly religious population versus film's handful of years by the 1920s, by which time going to the movies was an imbedded American cultural practice. Film's sphere of influence flourished rapidly. As such, the stories the movies brought to the masses democratized or standardized an intake of perceived information about the world. This massive media impact was nearly immediately apparent to theorists and thinkers. In 1915 Hugo Münsterberg, in one of the first works of film theory ever written, says, "The most evident gain of the new scheme is the reduction of expenses. One actor is now able to entertain a hundred and a thousand audiences at the same time; one stage-setting is sufficient to give pleasure to millions" (12). Münsterberg's point can be taken further to address how the film medium itself conveys a message in addition to the plot and subsequent morals of the narrative. This idea gains heightened significance with Marshall McLuhan's work in the 1960s and his claims that media is not only confined to the content we encounter. Instead, the very medium conveying media or content (which McLuhan extends to include everything from electricity to firearms) also contains a message, perhaps an even more influential and consequential one than the content conveyed (McLuhan). A film will always carry with it its method of production, a method that succeeds on an efficient entertainment model: one film to millions of paying viewers. The underdog archetype mirrors film's dissemination model by providing one main protagonist character type for the masses to witness. The irony here lies in

the lowly character of an underdog being paraded and exalted by film-borne fame; his state of perpetual non-success secures Hollywood's success.

Whether the masses or a single spectator experience a film, highly influential psychological processes occur that film theorists have unpacked throughout the 20th century. Christian Metz famously compared film to a mirror. Film is a mirror in the sense of the psychological mirror stage, only lacking in the presence of the spectator's own image. Still, Metz argues that the spectator must identify with something on screen, since, "identification in its primal form has ceased to be a current necessity for him [the viewer], but he continues, in the cinema—if he did not the film would become incomprehensible—to depend on that permanent play of identification without which there would be no social life" (23). Though it would seem that the location of the spectator's ego would be with a figure on screen, Metz claims that since there is not always a figure to identify with, "the spectator identifies with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every *there is*" (25). So, according to Metz, a spectator watching Charlie Chaplin incessantly putting himself in the frame in *Kid Auto Races in Venice* (1914), much like a stray dog might (and does in the film) run around in the way, might experience some identification with Chaplin in a personal way. However, the ego is placed in the act of perception and identification with the camera, not the figure onscreen. *Kid Auto Races in Venice* demonstrates this quite simply. Since the only premise or joke of the short film is that Chaplin keeps getting in the way of the camera's view, the audience feels the otherness of Chaplin as their own view of the races is obstructed. The film also reveals the cinematic apparatus, or camera, orienting the viewer to relate and identify with the camera.



Kid Auto Races in Venice

This relation and identification produces its own influence that acts on the viewer's interpretation of an ideology. In the case of the underdog, the camera, and the viewer's identification with it, produces both a sympathetic ideology as well as a relatable ideology.

In the 1970s Jean-Louis Baudry tackled the role of the camera in producing ideological effects. In "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Baudry argues that film's perspective correlates with that of Renaissance painting, that is, a perspective involving a single vanishing point that reflects back to the viewer. He writes, "Monocular vision, which as Pleyner points out, is what the camera has, calls forth a sort of play of 'reflection.' Based on the principle of a fixed point by reference to which the visualized objects are organized, it specifies in return the position of the 'subject,' the very spot it must necessarily occupy" (37). It seems to follow, then, that while content, that is, the underdog character, may play a role in the viewer's

identification with the film, it is mainly the film itself and the viewer's identification with the camera and the projection that creates the most influence. Baudry goes on to clarify,

The "reality" mimed by the cinema is thus first of all that of a "self." But, because the reflected image is not that of the body itself but that of a world already given as meaning, one can distinguish two levels of identification. The first, attached to the image itself, derives from the character portrayed as a center of secondary identifications, carrying an identity which constantly must be seized and reestablished. The second level permits the appearance of the first and places it "in action"—this is the transcendental subject whose place is taken by the camera which constitutes and rules the objects in this "world." Thus the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees; this is exactly the function taken over by the camera as a sort of relay. (42)

The protagonist, or character on screen, then, offers some amount of identification to the viewer, but not nearly as much as the perspective offers. Internal identification of character (or content) and internal identification the viewer has with the camera merge to fully engage an audience. The underdog under this internal identification is both relatable and seen from the outside, like looking into a mirror. Baudry explains, "Just as the mirror assembles the fragmented body in a sort of imaginary integration of the self, the transcendental self unites the discontinuous fragments of phenomena, of lived experience, into unifying meaning" (42). A culture steeped in a belief of an American Dream will bring fragments of that dream to a film, and the underdog protagonist will arrange them into coherent and perpetuating meaning.

The viewer's perspective also plays an important role in offering trustworthy authority from a film. The strong, Renaissance-styled one-point perspective that Baudry refers to is crucial

to constructing a film that will offer not only identification but also authority. Because film carries with it a documentary nature in terms of imprinting real occurrences (even if they are fictionalized), there is a sense of objectivity that legitimizes what plays out on screen. Audiences, of course, know that a film is “just a movie,” but they cannot entirely disengage from the psychological impacts of information presented in film form. Any ideology will leak through, whether through content or medium, blend with a cultural ideology of capitalism and American Dreaminess that the audience has brought to the film, and the viewer’s identification with the camera will legitimize and authorize, personally, the world occurring on screens. Baudry argues that “The cinema can thus appear as a sort of psychic apparatus of substitution, corresponding to the model defined by the dominant ideology” (43). As we take into account the pervasiveness of the film medium, then, the profound spread of certain ideologies can spread quickly and convincingly. Most people would consider themselves savvy consumers of media and are capable of resisting or decoding a film’s ideology in a variety of ways. This is particularly true, it seems, among filmgoers to drama genres. Drama, as self-described “serious” film, may be assumed as the most provocative and influential genre. Horror or comedy films rarely, if ever, win Best Picture at the Academy Awards, but it is precisely these genres that slide under the radar of filmgoers’ skepticism. Comedy in particular is, by definition, “not serious.” However, comedy’s influence is far-reaching because of that very non-seriousness. An underdog comedy team is thereby a robust and formidable match for perpetuating an American Dream myth.

⁵ For more on the process of acquiring meaning from media, see Stuart Hall’s *Encoding/Decoding*.

Part 3: Charlie Chaplin and the Authority of Underdog Comedy

Administrations, regimes, monarchies, and empires have used the power of comedy for thousands of years to reinforce the establishment. However, comedy was originally used as a way to undercut establishment. Indeed, comedy depends on subversion. Long before Chaplin's Tramp shuffled in, comedy was found in ancient Greek theatrical productions and festivals. Aristotle famously named comedy as one of the four literatures of his *Poetics*, lending credence to comedy's legitimacy as a literary form. Such legitimacy was perhaps required in the face of comedy's more common and earlier dwelling among the raucous Greek festivals of Dionysus and scatological and satirical productions of Aristophanes.

Comedy's identity was composed and proliferated in both the festival and the theatre as the state in which "the low" became "high" (still a common backbone of comedy into the 20th and 21st centuries). Mikhail Bakhtin thoroughly articulates this essential comedic device and its relationship with the establishment in *Rabelais and His World*, exploring the medieval traditions of the carnival as portrayed by Rabelais' *Gargantuan and Pantagruel*, during which a fool could be a king for a day. Bakhtin argues that the role reversal of the ancient and medieval carnivals that elevates fools to positions of royalty and magnify functions of the lower bodily stratum is a device used by the upper classes to momentarily release the tensions of the lower working classes. By elevating the lower class for even a day, the nobility is able to, as comedy scholar Kerry Soper describes, create "a social safety valve that releases pent-up social discontent or psychological tension in a harmless manner" (Soper). The manner is harmless because the carnival has an end-date and because the nature of comedy invokes innocence as a way of speaking or behaving that is somehow outside "the real world." Fools, clowns, and comics are given much more allowance socially than a doctor or a politician. Bakhtin points this

discrepancy out, saying, “The barker of a show would not be accused of heresy, no matter what he might say, provided he maintained his clownery” (164). Comedy claims a special allowance to behave outside the lines. Therefore, comedy is at once subversive and used to reinforce those things it seeks to subvert. Linda Hutcheon, in her *Theory of Parody*, describes this underlying paradox of comedy; though comedy is a transgression, it is an authorized one. In fact, comedy may therefore be understood as reinforcement of a cultural or political dominance (Hutcheon, 26). The thought is unsettling because laughter is easily trusted. Walter Benjamin approached the future of comedy more optimistically, viewing slapstick comedies such as Chaplin’s as ways of “immunization against such mass psychoses” (244). His claim that laughter, particularly in groups, is a way to defend audiences from the political influence of technologically reproduced media may be true to a point, but Chaplin’s films and other comedy outlets have yet to accomplish total subversion. Further inquiry into comedy for large audiences in the later 20th and early 21st centuries could measure and consider the accuracy of Benjamin’s predictions.

Not only does laughter form connections between strangers in a movie theatre or on a bus in the middle of Russia (speaking from experience), according to Bakhtin and Bergson, laughter renews and heals (Bakhtin, 71), as well as functions socially exclusively among humans (Bergson, 65). Laughter provokes catharsis, neutralizing uncomfortable or awkward circumstances, while somehow escaping standard consequences of such situations. It is here, again, that laughter and comedy provide the golden ticket to getting away with anything. Comedy is able to remain immune from the consequences of poking fun at authority or taboo subjects by the laughter it causes. It is under this guise of flippancy that comedy gains its power. Bakhtin reminds us that comedy and laughter are far from being purposeless or trite, saying,

True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete, and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the history development of culture and literature. (122-123)

Though this may be accurate of “true ambivalent and universal laughter,” it is difficult to encounter such laughter. More often, particularly in the Hollywood dominion, laughter comes at a monetary price, an indication of the value of comedy among a society.

Bakhtin and Hutcheon’s analysis of comedy’s political and social functions begins to clarify just how formidable and influential comedy and laughter can be. These same analyses, applied to Hollywood comedy film of the early 20th century (and beyond), dredge up similar conclusions as to those found in Rabelais. Though any explicit evidence of political monarchy or tyranny was absent in the United States at the point of Charlie Chaplin, there are similar claims of false consciousness made (and underway in this very thesis) by the economic elite upon the social masses and cinematic consumers. After all, we must keep in mind that those creating films about a lower class individual rising to economic success had already reached a fairly measurable degree of success. Chaplin himself gained an astounding amount of wealth by playing an impoverished sad clown. In a simplistic comparison, it would not be a stretch to equate the king of the medieval carnival to the big wigs of Hollywood productions. Just as the king allows the fool some time in the limelight in order to reinforce his own rule, so does Hollywood use the stories of the lower class to ensure their fiscal survival and affluence.

Elevation of the base or insignificant (though usually temporary) to ground of higher social or political standing is a common method or theme of comedy as it sets up an unexpected class contrast. This distinction and socially inappropriate switching of roles strikes a chord that throughout history has been considered humorous, a consideration that may more darkly clue us into the deeply rooted class systems we inhabit and their profound influence on our psyches. Comedy's roots in the carnival or festival are crucial to its ability to exert powerful influence on its film viewers because of its inherent inclusiveness of those viewers. On this subject, Bakhtin states, "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it...and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (7). Thus, because of communal laughter, the viewers of comedy film are not so much viewers as alienated participators. Participation by laughing augments the degree of audience identification, even if it is at another's expense (though *schadenfreude* is laughter at another's pain, the laugher is still acknowledging that *they* could be in pain, and thankfully, are not). It is here at the cusp of slapstick comedy, a form that reliably brings in the laughs across borders and incomes, where Chaplin and the other silent clowns of the early 20th century become critical in setting a standard for underdog archetypes and narratives for the next century.

Charlie Chaplin was one among a few other silent comedy film stars who had success in the burgeoning world of Hollywood film. Actors such as Charles Chaplin, Harry Lloyd, Mabel Normand, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, Raymond Griffith, and the blue-collared Laurel and Hardy fashioned the earliest comedy archetypes. Comedy directors such as Mack Sennett, founder of Keystone Studios, the California studio that employed many of the aforementioned comedians beginning in the 1910s, Alfred Goulding, Ted Wilde, and Clyde Bruckman also share the responsibility for laying the foundations of what American comedy

would follow. To the audiences of the day, many of the comedians listed here would have been recognizable, but the lasting legend is Charlie Chaplin, whose persona as the Tramp has become a symbol for comedy worldwide, and the foundation of what we understand to be an underdog character.

Chaplin the man is a subject on his own in terms of underdog experience. Indeed, his persona came through the screen, which in part is what makes him so relatable, charming, and exciting to watch. Walter Kerr describes it this way, “He did not wish to be known in third person, or as a figure in another world. He wished to communicate with his audience in the first person, and belong to its world—not to the world of the characters. Essentially, Chaplin established himself as one of us, not one of them, whoever they might be” (77). This is how an underdog narrative succeeds: the protagonist underdog feels familiar to the audience and acts in resistance to a seen or unseen Other, “whoever they might be.” It is a narrative built and dependent upon a dichotomy of “us and them.” Chaplin claims 82 films to his name as actor, director, screenwriter, producer, editor, and even composer between 1914 and 1967, many of which feature his nameless underdog Tramp. While some of the earlier films with Keystone, Essanay, Mutual, and First National included the Tramp, it was Chaplin’s feature-length opuses with United Artists (the studio he helped to co-found) that still sustain a bright spotlight on the Tramp in films like *The Gold Rush* (1925), *City Lights* (1931), and *Modern Times* (1936). However, the underdog narrative changes from the 1920s to these later films. Earlier works like *A Dog’s Life* (1918), and *The Kid* (1921) lack a glossiness that would come later, in which the Tramp felt more like a costume put on than the genuine article. Chaplin’s earlier films had a variety of outcasts in addition to the Tramp such as immigrants, convicts, drunks, janitors, and a fireman. Later these would all be replaced by a version of the Tramp or an intellectual role like

his parody of Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940). The Tramp thus became an established role as time went on, losing some of the nuanced lower class representation it had previously.

For example, *The Kid*'s Tramp shares some environments and characteristics with the Tramp, or "Lone Prospector," of *The Gold Rush*. In *The Kid*, the Tramp and the kid live in a low ceilinged shack-like apartment that includes one scrappy bed, a wobbly table, a grisly stove, and a number of shoddy chairs. It is the picture of poverty. Similarly, *The Gold Rush* features a shack in the wintry mountains that also holds scrappy beds and a wobbly table. The Tramp (or Prospector—though he is credited as "The Lone Prospector" in the film, he dresses and acts much like the Tramp) later acquires a small cabin in the town that likewise is furnished modestly, though not nearly as poorly as the mountain cabin or the house in *The Kid*. There is an air of increased affluence to the character with *The Gold Rush* and all the films Chaplin did with United Artists. In both films, the Tramp encounters other people who at times live with him in the squalor. In *The Kid*, the Tramp's livelihood and quality of life becomes largely connected to the kid's. They are very much a team with each other's interests in mind. This communal attitude is even apparent in earlier films like *A Dog's Life*, where the Tramp, Scraps, and the girl (Edna Purviance) take care of each other, even to the point of petty crime.

The Tramp and the kid also act in cahoots as glass sellers, with the kid breaking windows with rocks and Tramp conveniently showing up to the damaged house with new panes. This doesn't bother the audience; they are fully invested in the Tramp and his friends, likewise shrinking from the wandering cops that make life harder than it already is for them. In *The Gold Rush*, however, competition and dividedness dominate the relationships. Even the Tramp's love interest Georgia divides herself from him. In this film and many others, the Tramp is often confronted by a large, beefy man that he must fight. He, like David, fights with quickness,

cleverness, and a little bit of luck, further reinforcing the idea that even what seems impossible can be overcome with creativity and hard work.

There is fighting in *The Gold Rush*, but the main struggle for achievement is downplayed. While Chaplin's earlier films kept the underdog Tramp a community-oriented character who often sought the success of others as well as himself, the later Tramp is much more self-interested. In *The Gold Rush*, when the Tramp/Prospector and Jim are able (mainly through luck) to strike it rich together, they achieve wealth quickly and are "Homeward bound on the good ship success," where the wealthy Tramp/Prospector is reunited with Georgia, winning it all in the end. The Tramp's success in *The Gold Rush* is contingent upon fast wealth, and very little work to acquire that wealth is actually shown in the film. The success of *The Kid*'s Tramp is contingent upon being reunited with the kid (and the kid restored to full health), as well as reuniting the kid with his mother. Even in the Tramp's dream, his neighborhood is simply filled with angels, though the socio-economic circumstances seemingly haven't changed among them. These two films were four years apart, but couldn't be further apart in the brand of underdog, though the character uses the same devices.

Chaplin's Tramp mainly uses slapstick to carry his character and to increase the appeal of the underdog. He walks funny, like a danseur scuffing around in first position, except there is little else about him that hints at ballet. He rolls in the dirt, hides under tables, kicks people, barely dodges oncoming trains, nearly falls off a cliff in a teetering house, and wiggles his eyebrows in exaggerated ways. Slapstick is universally appealing not only for its *schadenfreude* but because everyone relates to having a body. A spectator will laugh at the Tramp's fall because she or he too knows the precariousness of having a fallible body that can be just as unreliable as economic circumstances. Comedy and the underdog are a perfect team. Along the path of

struggle for success is a goldmine of humorous situations that Americans of a depression and war age could relate to and revel in. American culture had been groomed to appreciate the underdog from its beginnings, and thanks to Hollywood's comedy films, Tramps became the national heroes.

Part 4: Social Consequences of the American Underdog Archetype

During the early summer of 2015, two inmates serving life without parole for murder escaped from the Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York. David Sweat and Richard Matt were on the run from their confinement and from their sordid pasts rife with murder and theft. These men were not the Robin Hood type of criminals. They were considered very dangerous; though their escape was quickly compared to the masterminded prison break depicted in Frank Darabont's 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption* (Siemaszko). Locals in the area were certainly afraid and some left their homes, but after Matt was shot dead by authorities and Sweat was apprehended, an interesting narrative developed surrounding the whole event. *The New York Times* ran an article titled "Twinges of Disappointment Amid Sighs of Relief at End of Manhunt." According to the article, locals of upstate New York found themselves conflicted by the real danger they felt by the escaped killers and the connection they felt to an underdog narrative. One resident, Courtney Lord, was one such conflicted local. The *Times* reports:

"I'm not glad it's over," Ms. Lord said. "That's the most excitement this town has seen!"

The two men were murderers and considered very dangerous: Richard W. Matt, 49, a second-time escapee, had killed and dismembered his boss, among other crimes; David Sweat, 35, had shot and killed a sheriff's officer and run over him with his car. Still, Ms. Lord, who has a young daughter, found herself rooting for them to make it to Canada and turn the manhunt into an international dragnet. "I wanted them to keep running," she continued, adding, after some thought, "But I also wanted them to be caught." (Semple)

This conflicted reaction should not be surprising considering the number of popular television shows and motion pictures that likewise place criminals as protagonists in the name of "the most excitement this town has ever seen." Popular sagas such as *The Godfather* (1972-1990) trilogy,

the Netflix series *Narcos* (2015-), and even the milder *Ocean's* trilogy (2001-2007) focus on criminals as protagonists. There has been some recent pushback against *Narcos* by Pablo Escobar's son, Sebastian Marroquin (born Juan Pablo Escobar), who told a Spanish newspaper, "Series about narcos have turned my father into a hero and given young people the idea that it is cool to be a drug trafficker" (Ardehali). Though recent studies have focused on the influence of first person shooter violent video games (a medium in which the identification process of placing oneself into the role of the protagonist, unseen, is quite literal), less work and attention is given to popular films or television shows such as those mentioned above, likely because they, particularly the *Ocean's* trilogy, dampen their criminal narratives under lighthearted comedy or personality charisma. The criminal protagonist (even in relatable innocence, like Chaplin's thieving Tramp) is redeemed by his or her placement as an underdog—a status is so sacred to American culture that it overpowers most dreadful behavior in media and narrative.

The underdog narrative as portrayed in popular film reinforces a belief that it is impossible to fail in America with adequate work ethic and heart. The object of success, whether it be to pass a bill in congress, to escape to the Canadian border, to "get the girl," or to steal an entire casino, matters less to Hollywood productions than the process of success itself—in this case, the process of the underdog. That process may be almost always fruitful in the movies, but it is not always rewarding outside of them. Though an in-depth sociological survey would be useful to parse out the details of a discrepancy in underdog narrative consumption as it relates to real-life "success" rates, it is not necessary in order to establish some basic and revealing comparisons. A simpler way of stating the question would be: How much truth is there to an American Dream that promises the opportunity of success to all? Comic scholar M. Thomas Inge

addresses some cultural implications of the underdog, illustrating his point by using Charlie Brown as an example,

The power of Charlie Brown, and the timid souls who preceded him, lies in his resilience, his ability to accept and humanize the dehumanizing forces around him, and in his eternal hope for improving himself and his options in life. One day the kite will fly and escape the clutches of the trees. Some year Lucy will not pull away the annual football at the last moment and allow him to kick it. Eventually he will get up enough nerve to approach the little red-haired girl. In his state of suspended pre-adolescence, everything remains possible. This is the kind of faithful innocence and stubborn resistance to repeated and demonstrable failure that sustains belief in the American dream. (99)

The consequences of such an ingrained belief in the American Dream are drawn out in actual events. It influences political thought—perhaps suggesting that governmental welfare or aid is not a useful or necessary contribution to the nation. It influences societal beliefs concerning others from a lower class. One does not have to look far to hear claims that if jobs are scarce, people should just move elsewhere, or if a person is homeless, they should just get a job. There is often, though admittedly not always, a disconnection within cultures that value the promise of hard work leading to success and the reality of poverty.

Ultimately, though inspiring and heaving with compelling values, worship of the underdog may lead to a culture that separates, as de Toqueville suggested, and accuses one another of simply not working hard enough in a society's economy that depends on stratification of wealth and disparity. The reality is, of course, that not every underdog will succeed. Lucy will, in all likelihood, always pull the football away from Charlie Brown. To continue the analogy, then will not only Charlie Brown experience failure in kicking the football, he will also

be told by the media and culture that he should keep trying to kick the football, which may lead to self-damaging behavior or thoughts. In reality, Charlie Brown might need to find some new friends, instead of doing the same thing over and over, expecting things to change. Media, particularly Hollywood film, has encouraged the hope in an American Dream and the “stubborn resistance to repeated and demonstrable failure” (Inge, 99) that both rouses and blinds a culture. This is not to suggest that the Underdog archetype and culture is a force of evil or is useless, nor is it suggesting that all underdog narratives imply such consequences, but its unrelenting implementation in the American narrative tends to allow for one area of cultural growth and perhaps may stunt other areas. Perseverance is valued in American culture often to the point of shaming groups or individuals who are legitimately stuck in one way or another. Whether it is even possible for every individual in a capitalist society to achieve wealth, status, love, or fame, is another concerning point of the American Dream myth. The Dream is like a game that invites all and fetishizes “winning” over any other healthy and community-oriented lifestyle. The underdog is a pawn in the game—used to draw in acceptance of the established terms.

CONCLUSION

Charlie Chaplin's filmography is an influential contribution to selling an American Dream to the public in the 20th century. His films helped spawn an entire film industry that would appropriate the comedy Tramp and simply cast him in different roles and costumes for the next hundred years and more. Underneath every Garth and Wayne, every Lloyd and Harry, and every Napoleon Dynamite, there's a Tramp. There are other kinds of stories that don't glorify the struggle of the underdog, even entertaining ones, yet Hollywood has chosen to use the underdog narrative over and over. Some of the most recognizable and favorite American fictional heroes are Rocky Balboa, Charlie Brown, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and of course, the Tramp himself. Atticus Finch is listed as number 1 on AFI's American Heroes list—a more complex character but also simply a lawyer fighting for the underdog (AFI.com). Even superhero films or science fiction blockbusters such as *Star Wars* include groups of underdogs that rebel or resist a threat of dominance, often with fewer resources to their advantage. Romantic comedies practically would not exist without an underdog in love. Comic scholar Robert Harvey acknowledges the presence of the underdog in media and suggests, “most American readers cheer for the underdog out of cultural habit” (43). This cultural habit is born of a nation derived from underdoggedness in war, social and economic reform, and enterprise, and nurtured on an economy that rewards or promises to reward the efforts of the underdog. However, efforts are not always rewarded, and if they are, there are fewer films around concerning the aftermath of the underdog's achievements.

Overcoming difficulties through hard work, perseverance, and passion is an admirable determination, and the underdog archetype embodies that effort. In American culture, that effort has been heavily distilled into a straightforward, self-interested goal that often presents itself in

Hollywood film, largely due to the films of Charlie Chaplin and his ingenious and globally famous Tramp. While the Tramp was initially presented with a community in mind, the underdog archetype that arose became much more self-interested as time went on. The idea of the underdog, so inspiring and relatable to American audiences that cling to a belief and trust in the American Dream myth, is reliably vended by the Hollywood industry, perpetuating the ideal and endlessly opening the door for sequels that essentially tell the same underdog story again, under different wrapping. Film is the perfect medium for the job. Its medium and reach provides the most efficient economy for spreading cultural beliefs quickly. Comedy subverts just enough to gain trust while reinforcing an established standard. Together, comedy and film reach into hearts, nourishing hope in a system so integral to American identity, it seems blasphemous to question. There are other kinds of stories and other kinds of protagonists. There are stories without protagonists. What stories could be told that establish community while acknowledging the reality of circumstances? What stories could progress without the presence of a dichotomy? While narratives that answer these questions are being explored, they have a long way to go to overcome the Goliath that the underdog archetype has become.

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