

## **Luck and Delirium (A Film Essay on Wealth and Social Status)**

**(By Toshio U.-P.)**

Through the study of three classic films and a future classic, we will show how wealth and social status play a pivotal and unique role in the narrative. For instance, characters in these narratives may risk losing their social and financial advantages to the throes of addiction, may become wealthy and rise in the social ladder through instant prospecting riches, may turn their life around to help fellow brothers and sisters in need, and may even struggle to come to terms with their own frailties, flaws and imperfections in a busy upscale world with limited downtime.

In Billy Wilder's serious drama The Lost Weekend (1), we meet Don Birnam, a writer struggling with alcoholism whose binges and addiction come to a severe low, when he misses a chance to go away for a weekend trip planned by his loved ones to help him regain his sobriety and to fix already heavily compromised relationships. In a series of flashbacks, we learn about Don's descent into delirium, as he steals to fund and satisfy his addiction, spends time in the alcoholic's ward of a sanatorium, and even contemplates suicide with a gun acquired illicitly at a pawn shop. While Don at first lives a life of ease and even social privilege, his penchant for rye and his destructive habit of always needing a bottle of liquor close-by, threatens to take away all of these advantages and stifle his efforts to be a successful and accomplished writer.

In Charlie Chaplin's classic silent movie The Gold Rush (2), we follow the adventures of 'The Lone Prospector' as he tests his will and luck to strike it rich in Alaska's 'Great Gold Rush'. Braving the perils of severe snowstorms, intense competition from cutthroat rivals and poverty paired with famine, Chaplin the prospector finally leaves Alaska lucky to have reaped the rewards of the American Dream, trading in his poor mining attire for the fancy clothes of an instant mining millionaire, worthy of damsel Georgia as his soon-to-be bride.

In La Cava's talkie classic My Man Godfrey (3), 'forgotten man' Godfrey, who lives in 'City Dump #2' by New York City's East River, is hired by the Bullock family to be their new butler. Godfrey soon becomes the civilizing influence amid the mayhem and family circus of the upper-class household and even saves them from reckless financial ruin. Upon leaving the Bullocks at the film's conclusion, Godfrey uses his savvy business and interpersonal skills to help others from 'The Dump' find employment and adequate housing.

In Östlund's future classic Force Majeure (4), we meet an upper-class family of four on a short trip at a fancy ski resort in the French Alps. On 'Ski Day Two', while on an outdoor patio overlooking the ski slopes, an avalanche representing the film's evocative title, crashes over their dining table, causing the husband Tomas to rush off to safety without shielding his wife and kids. This incident soon begins to plague the family's holiday time, when Tomas' wife Ebba criticizes her husband's flight instincts. At the end of the ski vacation, Östlund reveals how fragile the bonds of a family unit can be

when confronted by unexpected, challenging and hazardous forces that deviate from the desired comforts and luxuries of an upscale life.

While wealth and fortune seem at first to be a path towards a more fulfilling life, social standing and social pressures faced by elite members of society can lead to a downward spiral of addiction, depression and even moral breakdowns. While Chaplin's proverbial 'rags to riches' character of 'The Lone Prospector' appears to live out the glory of the American Dream, ascending from a poor miner to an upper-class millionaire, La Cava suggests that it is the wisdom of 'forgotten men' like Godfrey that should be acknowledged in a world where wealth is just material and not a true measuring stick or indicator of a person's inner worth and capabilities.

Film Sources:

1. The Lost Weekend (1945). Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures. USA. 101 min.
2. The Gold Rush (1926). Dir. Charlie Chaplin. United Artists. USA. 95 min.
3. My Man Godfrey (1936). Dir. Gregory La Cava. Universal Pictures. USA. 95 min.
4. Force Majeure (2014). Dir. Ruben Östlund. TriArt Film and Bac Film. Sweden and France. 119 min.