

The Road to Riches (A Film Essay on Employment and Benefits)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

Work and employment are most often the marker of societal success, allowing the characters in question to gain access to wealth and material fortune. In the study of three distinctly different films from different eras and locales, we will explore how characters in each narrative cope with unemployment, how they use their skills of deception or their networks of allies in order to maintain their higher standing, and even inflate their overall worth to access a contested inheritance.

In No Other Choice (1), Yoo Man-su appears to have a perfect life with an attractive wife, two kids and a fancy and spacious home. When he loses his employment as a manager in a pulp and paper corporation, he is soon faced with serious debt forcing him to severely cut back on some of his investments such as his wife's tennis lessons and even the family's Netflix subscription. Soon, Yoo Man-su hatches a sociopathic plot to outcompete other star candidates in his industry in order to reclaim his previous wealth and status.

In 1930s classic Trouble in Paradise (2), we meet Gaston Monescu, a high-profile thief who poses as a successful socialite to gain access to wealthy social circles and prey on vulnerable rich persons. After meeting another fellow thief in Venice called Lily, the duo plan to carry out their criminal escapades in Paris in order to rob from Madame Colet, the rich heir of Colet & Co., a fancy French parfumerie brand.

In Wes Anderson Oscar acclaimed film The Grand Budapest Hotel (3), we meet M. Gustave (a hotel concierge) and Zero Moustafa (his Lobby Boy) as they go about their work in the snowy peaks of the fictional town of Zubrowka. When Gustave's hotel guest of honor Madame D. passes away mysteriously and leaves him a priceless painting in her second will, the concierge and his young protégé embark on a mission to claim the artwork from Madame D.'s estate in Schloss Lutz, while trying to ward off pugilistic heirs to her fortune with the help of connections and allies in the hotel business.

While film characters in the three films in question go to great ends to (re)gain access to wealth and prosperity, a great deal of adversity accompanies their narrow road to riches. While some are ready to break rules and ethics to essentially tap in to another's fortune, others simply embark on a precarious path fraught with danger, uncertainty and jealous rivals. In the end, newly accessed wealth does not necessarily live up to its reputation of being the source of happiness, becoming less of a true benefit and often more of a curse.

Sources:

1. No Other Choice (2025). Dir. Park Chan-wook. CJ Entertainment. South Korea. 139 min.
2. Trouble in Paradise (1932). Dir. Ernst Lubitsch. Paramount Pictures. USA. 83 min.
3. The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014). Dir. Wes Anderson. Fox Searchlight Pictures. USA & Germany. 100 min.