FILM COMEDY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the generational renegotiation of the American Dream as projected in popular comedic films that center on issues of upward mobility throughout the post-WWII era. Through a combination of narrative and thematic analyses of select motion picture comedies, contextualized within a dynamic historical framework, I build on the assertion that these movies essentially serve as time capsules of dominant cultural anxieties, offering invaluable insights into the social fabric of American culture of the past seventy years. Ultimately, I argue that this proves to be a tattered patchwork tapestry at best comprising individuals who are bound only by a shared belief in the ideals of meritocracy, equal opportunity and progress, even despite consistent patterns of systemic exclusion. Fundamentally, this is the story of what made audiences laugh and why, and what this says about the changing shape of the American Dream since the end of the Second World War. It is history as witnessed through the lens of the humanities, told chronologically and from multiple points of view. Throughout this project, I describe how even something as steadfast and resilient as the American Dream has repeatedly had to adapt to changing social contexts and can mean very different things according to one's race, socioeconomic class and gender, among other variables. Through a consideration of these underrepresented dimensions of the American experience and by covering a broad historical landscape in my research, I seek to supplement existing scholarship in film studies, American history and cultural studies by offering novel understandings of the interrelated dynamics of film comedy and public discourse.

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CHAPTER I: THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Don't Try This At Home

The first narrative film ever produced was a comedy. In 1895, the Lumière Brothers' *L'Arroseur Arrosé* earned the distinction of being the first motion picture to tell a story, complete with a beginning, a middle and an end. Prior to this, the motion itself was the novelty. With a runtime of just over a minute, *The Waterer Watered* offers its audience exposition, conflict and resolution in the familiar form of a setup, complication and punchline. The rudimentary plot consists of just this one joke, that of a man being tricked into spraying himself in the face with a hose and then spanking the culprit, so we can safely presume that its central purpose was to elicit laughter from an audience. Over the past hundred and twenty years, cinema has proven to be remarkably effective in this regard.

Throughout the history of motion pictures, comedies have commonly found vast resonance with mass audiences, often outperforming their more celebrated and spectacular counterparts at the box office. In spite of this, comedic films tend to receive considerably less scholarly attention and critical acclaim. Since the end of World War II, as of this writing, only three comedies have won the Academy Award for Best Picture: *Tom Jones* (Richardson, 1963), *The Sting* (Hill, 1973) and *Annie Hall* (Allen, 1977), which reflects a widely held prejudice that if it makes us laugh, then it is not to be taken seriously as a work of cinematic art. However, as one of the broader goals of this dissertation seeks to make clear, to understand the appeal of popular comedic films is to gain valuable insights into the cultures that consume them.

Anecdotally, I can attest this to be the case. Many years ago, I saw *Jackass: The Movie* (Tremaine, 2002) while in my final semester as a film student, which is to say that I was fully

prepared to hate this movie in no fewer than five hundred words. On the other hand, it is also reasonable to consider this Spike Jonze-produced docu-comedy to be the modern equivalent of *L'Arroseur Arrosé*, as both involve pranks being pulled on unsuspecting people with the audience in on the joke. *Jackass* simply reflects how far the envelope had been pushed up to this point.

All value judgments aside, I had never particularly enjoyed the MTV series upon which the movie is based. I just happened to have a free ticket. That said, had I not consumed this film in a dark, crowded room that was almost constantly filled with laughter, then I might not have found the on-screen antics so entertaining. To view a motion picture in its theatrical exhibition can certainly be a communal experience, and for eighty-seven minutes, I found my comedic sensibilities unexpectedly aligned with a room full of strangers. Despite the diversity of our perspectives and life experiences, we were an inside group. Each utterance of laughter was a voice in the choir.

In widescreen and surround sound, we witnessed the rules of civilization being flagrantly disregarded for the sake of cheap laughs, but by the time the end credits rolled, it was evident that those rules exist for a reason, if only so that nobody gets hurt. When we left the cineplex, the world we entered was one in which every decision we made seemed wise by contrast. After all, this is a film and a franchise that effectively draws the bulk of its humor from people doing things that they are not supposed to do, whether for their own welfare or for the continuity of a civil society. As an audience, while we were explicitly advised to not try this at home, we were then invited to laugh at these “jackasses” who break the rules and behave like juveniles. Through these personas that were presented as larger-than-life, we had just vicariously participated in the resolution of commonly experienced anxieties about maturity as expressed through comedy.

Some might call it a catharsis.

What's So Funny?

The ancient Greeks believed that laughter is the breath that animates the soul. Aristotle claimed that it was on a baby's fortieth day of existence that the miracle of laughter transformed this creature from a human into a human being (Sanders 3). Just as babies develop an awareness of their surroundings, they begin to laugh. This is not a coincidence. Even at this age, humor requires a familiar context, which is then interrupted by a sudden, unexpected contrast. As noted by scholar and screenwriter David Misch, "Peekaboo is everybody's first comedy routine" (2). It is a momentary rupture in a baby's perception of reality. When this reality is suddenly restored, the infant laughs.

Anthropologists believe that the reason human beings laugh at all is because it served as a prelinguistic form of communication, just as it is with infants. Similar behavior in chimpanzees has also been well-documented (Falk 495). Involuntary laughter, which is mimicked in social laughter, is a way of signaling to others that a moment of tension has passed, that an intellectual incongruity has been resolved. Essentially, it is a way to let others know that everything is okay. An evolutionary remnant of this is tickling. When people are tickled, they laugh because they subconsciously recognize their own vulnerability to attack while also maintaining an awareness that they are not in any immediate danger (Nye).

Comedy prompts a similar physiological reaction because it too commonly draws from very real anxieties, perceived weaknesses in ourselves or in the cultures to which we belong that are exaggerated for effect while rendered harmless to the individual. To understand what makes people laugh can therefore tell us a great deal about the reality that has been disrupted, as well as

the dominant underlying concerns of a society, which is why comedy proves to be an invaluable resource in the study of cultural history.

As Misch suggests, “Surprise is the key to all humor,” as well as, “the key to all art and entertainment” (2). If art fails to surprise us, then it is a cliché. In comedy, this translates as a stale joke. In order for any work of art to intellectually engage its audience, it must offer an unexpected perspective of something familiar. With comedy as with peekaboo, we laugh at the incongruity between our expectations and reality. A skilled practitioner of comedy sets us up to expect one thing and then presents us with something else. This leads us to make connections where they did not previously exist, which causes us to incrementally adjust our perceptions of the world. This is comedy and this is art.

As it pertains to this study, I am particularly interested in film comedy because it is shared by a broad audience and functions as a complex historical archive of dominant cultural anxieties. Laughter is indeed a strange involuntary response that is more or less the same in every language, but comedy often requires a dynamic exchange of ideas between an individual and the social environment to which that person belongs. Not only can understanding humor tell us what it means to be a part of a particular culture of a certain time and place, but it can also yield fascinating insights into that fundamental question of what it means to be human, offering uncommon perspectives of the humanity behind the humanities.

As Scott Weems notes in his recent study on laughter, “Humor isn’t just about being funny; it’s also about how we deal with complex and contradictory messages” (14). He also claims that “it is a process of conflict resolution” (8). Comedy, in this light, can be seen as a coping mechanism through which we attempt to make sense of our world. In a joke, we engage

with two or more concepts that appear to be incompatible but are then connected by the punchline in a way that only makes sense in retrospect.

Often, these contrasting ideas represent some fundamental difference between one's sense of reality and the world encapsulated within the joke. In the real world, for example, we all know that it could not possibly take that many academics to screw in a light bulb. It is our existing neural pathways that prevent us from expecting the punchline, but when the payoff is finally delivered, this creates another connection within the vast network of the human mind. In other words, it is our knowledge of reality that allows us to identify with the joke while keeping the punchline hidden, which may in turn augment our sense of reality.

This is why people are much more likely to laugh at a joke for which they have a frame of reference but have never heard before. It also explains why laughter is a common reaction to a magic trick or a horror movie. These things all represent benign contrasts between expectations and reality. Comedy shows us another way of looking at what we think we already know, which is why it lends itself so well to political discourse. If politics is the art of ideological alignment, then comedy is one of its most valuable instruments of persuasion. At the same time, this also explains why if people participate in enough racist or sexist jokes, then they might start to believe them. Every punchline represents the synthesis of an intellectual incongruity between conflicting realities, which is precisely why research in this field offers such fruitful terrain in the study of American culture. By connecting history with comedy, we can solve for x .

In the United States, audiences of comedic films commonly anticipate a happy ending while witnessing the protagonist's recurring moments of tragedy. These everyday antiheroes are often painted with broad strokes, their flaws fully on display. This allows the audience to vaguely

identify with them, but because of the emotional distance that comedy allows, viewers are never truly concerned for their immediate well-being. The Three Stooges, for example, never sustained any serious eye injuries and audiences knew it, but they did achieve the height of their popularity during and immediately after the Second World War: a time when many Americans were trying to reconcile the absurdity and the reality of “good” violence. More often than not, comedy represents a culture trying to make sense of itself.

While the world within a comedic film is never quite reality, a keen observer may note that it does bear a rather striking resemblance, and as I explain throughout this dissertation, it is within these overlaps between subjectivity and objectivity that a movie’s themes are typically articulated, just as with a punchline. As we shall see, the most popular of these films are often exaggerated tales of sacrifice and fulfillment, and comedy, as a mode of presentation, allows for an emotional detachment from big ideas. Once the laughter has been expressed, all that remains is the idea.

Building upon these assertions, I seek to examine the discourse of the American Dream as represented in film comedy in order to highlight the ways in which the Dream has remained steadfast over the years, as well as how audience perception of it has evolved in relation to a changing social context. At its core, this is the story of how comedic films that center on issues of upward mobility reflect prevalent anxieties about the shifting fault lines that exist between reality and myth, which is one of the characteristic contradictions that defines the American experience.

The Good Life

The American Dream is the promise of opportunity to pursue a better life. It is an idea, an ideal and an ideology through which this nation has historically defined itself, often in contrast to some other political power, whether the British monarchy or Soviet communism, to cite just two examples. Although the term was first coined in the depths of the Great Depression, most scholars whose work I shall discuss acknowledge that the Dream had existed as a concept since the first English settlement in the Americas. In its earliest incarnation, it represented the Puritans' hope for what they believed could be an ideal society, one that promised a better life for their children if not themselves. In the New World, they were free to pursue and ultimately attain success as they defined it. For them, as with the Quakers that soon followed, this meant living in accordance to their interpretation of the Bible, unshackled from the corrupt institutions of their homeland.

For many Europeans who crossed the Atlantic throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, the Dream represented hope for a different kind of success. Optimistic entrepreneurs and adventurers with nothing to lose dreamt of fast riches through the exploitation of the continent's vast resources. America was heralded as a land of opportunity, but as these early settlers quickly learned, hard work was also an implicit component of the Dream. As political scientist Cal Jillson notes, "If they came as adventurers in search of quick wealth, they were almost invariably disappointed. Most died anonymously or returned home without leaving much of a trace" (16).

Nevertheless, the Dream persisted, aided in no small part by the slave trade that allowed landowners to reap the bounty of the earth without the investment of their own labor. An added

dimension to the American Dream therefore indicated that while hard work was indeed a virtue, it may in fact be superseded by the power to delegate such labor to other hands. Access to the Dream has historically been afforded to some through the exclusion and exploitation of others.

In spite of this, by the mid-eighteenth century, the ideas of opportunity and meritocracy were so entrenched in the colonial ethos that Jefferson included the phrase “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, building upon the work of John Locke in proclaiming these to be our fundamental human rights, as well as the core values of our embryonic nation. Historian Jim Cullen refers to this document as the “charter of the American Dream” and posits that, “If there is one constant in the Declaration of Independence, it lies in the way no version of the status quo is ever completely acceptable. It provides us with (often imperceptibly shifting) standards by which we measure success but simultaneously calls attention to the gap between what is and what we believe should be, a gap that defines our national experience” (58).

The American Dream is the proverbial carrot on a stick that incentivizes us to move forward; it is the creed of the middle class. Cullen adds, “Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals” (7). It is precisely this ambiguity that has allowed the Dream to readily adapt to changing cultural contexts, taking on new meanings for different times while maintaining the core principles that make it so resilient.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the American Dream came to represent the glorified aspirations of the common man, as figures such as Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln helped expand the idea of the Dream within the public imagination to include the prospect of upward

mobility through their mythologized representations of this ideal. The United States was celebrated as a place where any landowning Protestant white man could achieve greatness.

After the Civil War, however, notions of equality regarding race, religion and gender increasingly became a part of this discourse as more people vocalized concern over just whose Dream this was. While the Statue of Liberty promised a “golden door” to the “tired, poor and huddled masses” who were “yearning to breathe free,” for many immigrants who passed through Ellis Island, the opportunities to pursue a better life simply did not exist.

Granted, there were always exceptions, individuals who exemplified the realization of the American Dream, including Andrew Carnegie and many of the pioneers of early Hollywood, who did in fact achieve astonishing financial success in this country despite their humble beginnings in other lands, but this was by no means the norm. Still, the Horatio Alger story was indeed a reality for enough Americans that the mythology of the Dream lived on. Ironically, Alger himself died in poverty and relative anonymity (Samuel 65).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the urbanization and industrialization of the United States brought forward a more dynamic economy, and as the old frontier disappeared into statehood, new opportunities for sudden wealth appeared in the stock exchange. The American Dream became deeply entangled in the machinations of high finance and consumer capitalism. By the end of the First World War, optimism mixed with speculation and easy credit, which led to an unregulated economic boom that we can now see was all but certain to bust. In the decades that followed, the Great Depression and World War II brought with them a drive for a unified national identity, and after the war, this translated to a mindset of conformity that was fueled by the perpetual threat of communist infiltration and nuclear annihilation.

The postwar American Dream thus emphasized ideals of home ownership and limitless consumption in contrast to the second-world propaganda of the Soviet Union. It also served as redemption for sacrifices made, both before the war and during. Consumerism came to be seen as the ultimate expression of freedom, and this version of the American Dream was increasingly marketed to the working and middle class as an equal-opportunity enterprise: a journey of self-improvement. It was a storyline made for Hollywood, and it is here that our story begins.

For many at this time, the Dream came to mean that America was a place where anybody could accumulate vast wealth and achieve happiness through consumption. Consumerism was linked with patriotism in the public imagination, while success was increasingly viewed as a relative term. The United States was not just producing cars, prefabricated homes and household appliances after the war; the booming advertising industry was also producing consumers with voracious appetites. According to historian Lizabeth Cohen, “As each family refurbished its hearth after a decade and a half of depression and war, the expanded consumer demand would stoke the fires of production, creating new jobs and, in turn, new markets. Mass consumption in postwar America would not be a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility designed to provide full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation” (113).

The postwar period also marked the first time that the concept of the American Dream achieved relative consensus in the public imagination. This was due in large part to media representations, but also because the Dream seemed to validate all that made this country exceptional as the United States redefined its role in world affairs. Just as John Winthrop had declared theirs to be a “City upon a Hill” that could serve as a shining example for those who

followed, in the Cold War era, the American way of life was being pitched as nothing less than the greatest achievement of human civilization. The era of the American superpower had begun.

According to scholar Donald Pease, “After World War II, the U.S. government propagated the belief that America was the fulfillment of the world’s aspiration for the ‘Nation of Nations’ by constructing the threat to the attainment of that ideal in the image of the Soviet Empire” (20). In the most robust economic climate that this nation had seen in thirty years, accompanied by the proliferation of the middle class, the Dream was indeed a reality for more Americans than ever before, and the immediate future only served to validate their optimism. For many, it was a good time to be a citizen of the burgeoning American empire.

Analyzing the Dream

The term “The American Dream” first appeared in historian James Truslow Adams’ book *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, but this central guiding ideology has been the subject of many books since. Among those that I reference in this project include Jim Cullen’s monograph, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, in which he identifies the central thematic strands of the Dream and traces their reappearance throughout U.S. history. Cullen claims that certain aspects of the Dream tend to be a dominant part of the national discourse in some periods more than others, but that most interpretations of this central ideology are variations of these same basic ideas of freedom, upward mobility, home ownership and personal fulfillment. He also notes that, “The American Dream has functioned as a shared ground for a very long time, binding together people who may have otherwise little in common and may even be hostile toward one another” (189). It is the unification behind this idea that allows me to

speak of American culture as a singular entity at various points in this project, despite the diversity of perspectives that comprise it.

Building upon this understanding, in *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries*, Cal Jillson argues that, “The American Dream is the spark that animates American life. It is the promise that this country holds out to the rising generation and to the immigrants that hard work and fair play will, almost certainly, lead to success” (7). Jillson then spends the remainder of the book looking at which groups have truly been afforded this opportunity (wealthy, white Protestant men) and who has been excluded from pursuit of the Dream (virtually everyone else, but particularly women and people of color). Much like Cullen, Jillson traces the evolution of the American Dream over a broad historical tapestry, but his focus is primarily on the moments in which this promise of opportunity was extended to others through conflict.

Scholar Jennifer L. Hochschild makes similar observations in *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, claiming that the systematic exclusion of minorities and the working class from the American Dream has resulted in what are essentially two Americas: one in which the promise of opportunity holds true and one in which the Dream is a myth at best and a delusion at worst. Combining quantitative data with qualitative analysis, Hochschild paints a sobering portrait of a nation that has consistently failed to live up to the ideals upon which it so proudly defines itself.

In *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, Lawrence R. Samuel looks at the defining characteristics of the American Dream and its constant renegotiation since the end of World War II, from the conspicuous consumption of the 1950s to the current obsession with achieving fame

without any discernible talent. Although this book only addresses films tangentially and comedy not at all, Samuel lays out a useful intellectual framework for developing the social context within my own work. As Samuel claims, “No other idea or mythology—even religion, I believe—has as much influence on our individual and collective lives, with the Dream one of the precious few things in this country that we all share” (2).

In *Projecting the End of the American Dream: Hollywood's Visions of U.S. Decline*, media and cultural scholar Gordon Arnold looks at films that seem to draw on anxieties regarding the end of the United States as we know it, situating his argument within the social contexts of the times in which these films were made. However, comedy is hardly mentioned in Arnold's study, as he dedicates most of his attention to science fiction and disaster movies, as well as some action and drama films. His focus is not so much on the American Dream as an ideology of upward mobility; rather, he examines films that appear to express a commonly held anxiety about the social, political or physical collapse of the United States throughout the Cold War era.

Another book that explores similar intellectual terrain is *The American Dream and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* by J. Emmett Winn. In this monograph, Winn looks at how popular films have helped maintain the social hierarchies of the status quo while projecting mythologies of upward mobility. Again, comedy films are hardly mentioned, and the author divides his work into detailed analyses of films that moralize mobility, failure, and materialism, with a chapter dedicated to each. Winn effectively uses narratology as a central methodology to analyze the films in question, which I see as one of the primary strengths of this work, as this

approach is considerably less speculative than trying to ascertain what the filmmaker or the audiences may have been thinking through close reading or joke analysis alone.

Collectively, the different understandings of the American Dream put forth by these authors provide the foundation for many of our commonly held but seldom disputed expectations: that hard work will lead to financial success, that socioeconomic background is not the central determining factor in the trajectory of a person's life, and that each subsequent generation will have the opportunity to live better, however one defines the term. In short, the American Dream implies meritocracy, equality and progress. However, as numerous scholars have noted, the Dream is also a myth, and one of the goals of this dissertation is to examine the disparities that exist between our common ideals and the realities of daily existence, the so-called "gap" to which Cullen refers. It is my hope that this research will initiate new dialogues, both academic and otherwise, regarding these fundamental principles that define us as a nation.

History unequivocally reveals that there have always been people who were systematically excluded from this promise of opportunity and for whom the American Dream remained nothing more than an empty projection. As noted by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. in "The Great American Joke," this incongruity that exists between how things actually are versus the way we perceive that they should be, "lies at the heart of the American experience. It is emblematic of the nature and the problem of democracy" (35). As numerous filmmakers have demonstrated, the anxieties caused by this incongruity can also be a fruitful source of humor.

Inside Jokes

In his seminal work, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, originally published in 1900, psychologist Henri Bergson claimed that, “The comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human” (4). Human beings, he believed, are the only animals capable of laughing at their own folly, which he argued is fundamentally the source of all comedy: the limitations of humanity in spite of our imaginations and ambition. Bergson also said that, “To understand laughter, we must put it back in its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one” (5). To Bergson, comedy is the negotiation of perspective between the individual and society. In this process, an idea becomes detached from its emotional underpinnings so that the audience’s engagement with it is purely intellectual. The unspent emotion is then redirected and expressed as laughter.

In *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, first published in 1905, Sigmund Freud took a similar stance on the matter. To him, comedy, like most things, represented a point of tension between the id and the superego as expressed through the ego — an incongruity between the desires of the individual and the demands of civilization. Laughter, in this sense, functions as a sort of steam valve, a release of repressed emotion in a socially acceptable manner. Freud also offered a distinction between jokes that are completely innocuous and those which contain a hidden agenda, arguing that the latter serve a “social purpose” and tend to speak more of a culture than they do of an individual. “Tendentious” jokes, as he called them, imply that the speaker is seeking to intellectually align the audience with the perspective presented in the joke (89). In other words, this type of comedy is inherently political. Comedy, Freud contends, can

form a common identity through a shared understanding, but it can also be a way of shaping this perception of reality, as well as a means of exclusion.

Drawing on more contemporary research, David Misch notes, “Only by recognizing the underlying shape or rhythm of a joke or funny story can we be taken by surprise when the rhythm is interrupted or the pattern altered” (99). He refers to this as the “rapid juxtaposition of dissimilar concepts,” which he points out is also the formula for drama and metaphor (134). On a physiological level, this pattern recognition causes the human brain to release dopamine as part of a built-in reward system, and to disrupt that pattern momentarily puts us on edge, which causes our bodies to produce adrenaline. When we then make the intellectual connection between setup and punchline, our brains reward us with more dopamine. This potent combination of neurotransmitters then causes the involuntary response of laughter.

Comedy effectively highlights our preoccupation with pattern recognition, which is one of the defining characteristics of being human. Our developed frontal lobes allow us to think abstractly, which is one of the primary cognitive attributes that distinguishes us from animals. The setup to a joke establishes a pattern, which is then suddenly disrupted by the punchline, which creates a momentary departure in the way we perceive something. These two components typically maintain a certain proportion to one another: a long setup requires a substantial payoff, et cetera, which is why stereotypes and caricatures are often used as a form of shorthand in the setup for a joke. In fact, the word “humor” takes its modern definition from its reference to the *commedia dell’arte*, a style of traveling theatre company popularized during the Italian Renaissance in which each of the stock characters had his own stereotypical flaw, or *humor*.

One such character was the fool, a manifestation of the Trickster, who has appeared in one form or another in the literature and folklore of nearly every civilization throughout recorded human history. He is Loki, the coyote and the court jester. He is Br'er Rabbit, the Yankee and the Backwoodsman. On screen, he is the persona played by Groucho Marx or Charlie Chaplin. This character uses comedy to subvert authority, and in many traditions, he provided a metaphorical conduit between the mortal and the divine through his unapologetic recognition of an objective truth. According to Misch, "Some say Trickster's travels between base existence and the ethereal realm mirror the eternal but hopeless desire of our limited minds to explain the universe... While the specifics of his role varied by civilization and culture, Trickster seems to both mediate and celebrate the divide between human and divine, individual and society, meaning and absurdity" (9). In a number of card games, the joker can take any form.

Literary scholar Andrew Stott adds to this debate by suggesting that the Trickster "provides an integral check on beliefs to prevent them from becoming too secure in themselves" (52). The Trickster has been a recurring archetype throughout human history because comedy, as a form of checks and balances, is absolutely vital to the maintenance of civilization. This, we shall see, is particularly true with one that prides itself on its democratic and egalitarian ideals.

In his essay "History and Humor," Joseph Boskin claims that, "As a cultural index, a reflector of social change and conflict, humor provides an unusual historical ray into the complex connection between society's concerns and issues. Comedy and change are inextricably entwined, and the related varieties of humor make their points both small and writ large" (17). Comedy films, as a mass medium aimed at highlighting common tensions and then resolving

them, serve as historical records of everyday politics that remain largely untapped within the academic community. With this project, I seek to make significant contributions to the breadth and depth of knowledge in this field. Boskin continues, “As a device of social analysis, humor illuminates the expectations and contradictions of society, its anxieties and confusions, and offers perspective into any historic moment... Humor’s role has been vital in ameliorating social conflict, facilitating social change, and forging a national identity” (20).

Building upon this understanding, in *Film Comedy*, media scholar Geoff King looks at the relationship between film comedies and their audiences through his consideration of contemporary films as well as their antecedents. In this book, the author looks at sub-genres of comedic films, such as the gross-out comedy and the romantic comedy and he argues why these films resonate with their respective audiences. He claims that, “Film comedy, like all popular cultural products, is rooted to a large extent in the societies in which it is produced and consumed,” and “The norms from which departures are dramatized in comedy are defined to a large extent at the social-cultural level. Such acts of comic departure can provide revealing insights into the underlying and often taken-for-granted assumptions of the society in question” (17). Arguably, one of the most taken-for-granted assumptions in our society is that of the American Dream. To see how it has been treated humorously is to better understand how it was perceived by its audiences.

King also notes that, “Comedy has the potential to be both subversive, questioning the norms from which it departs, and affirmative, reconfirming that which it recognizes through the act of departure; or a mixture of the two” (8). In other words, comedic films can be either progressive or reactionary, or a combination therein, depending on form and content. Further,

King claims that throughout the history of comedic film, there have been two basic narrative templates: the comedian comedy and the romantic comedy. The former involves an anarchic disruption of cultural norms and the latter typically ends with a reconciliation of the individual with the traditional institutions of society (26). In my own research, I examine numerous examples of both types of films in order to understand the broader debates in which they engage from multiple angles.

In his book *On Humour*, Simon Critchley makes a similar argument about the nature of comedy to be either progressive or reactionary, suggesting that the distinction offered by this basic taxonomy is “between laughing at one’s self or laughing at others” (94). Reactionary humor tends to involve the “superiority theory” put forth by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century, which posits that humor may be used to belittle others, often for the sake of maintaining social power structures. Racist or misogynistic jokes, for example, would fall under this category. Conversely, jokes that highlight faults in ourselves or in the culture of which we are a part can in fact demonstrate the potential for personal and societal progress. As Critchley contends, “In laughing at a joke, I am also consenting to an ideal image of the world” (90), and “Humor lets us view the folly of the world by affording us the glimpse of another world, by offering... a signal of transcendence” (17). In *Jackass*, for example, the young men in the audience were shown a fantasy world where people like them could do whatever they want and suffer no consequences for their irresponsible actions.

For better or worse, humor can be used to call attention to our perceived faults. This can be used to perpetuate cruel stereotypes, but it can also offer a form of cultural criticism. According to Critchley, “Humor is a form of critical social anthropology, defamiliarizing the

familiar, demythologizing the exotic and inverting the world of common sense” (65). He also notes that, “Humor reveals the depth of what we share,” and it is, “a universal human activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives” (18). Laughter, in this sense, can be a precursor to change.

Christopher Beach makes a similar argument in *Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*, suggesting that “sophisticated” or romantic comedies tend to align with more conservative ideologies, resolving their plots with the obligatory happy endings that often serve to reinforce the status quo, whereas “anarchic” comedian comedies tend to include satirical elements that may be thought to promote a more progressive agenda. According to Beach, the former was typically designed to appeal more to the upper class, whereas the latter tended to be aimed more to a working- and middle-class audience (18). For example, the comedies of Ernst Lubitsch would often smooth over class divisions, usually by means of an inter-class romance where all differences would be resolved by the end of the film, whereas the films of the Marx Brothers often used class signifiers as a primary source of comedy. Beach also points out that both types of comedies relied heavily on dialogue to indicate the socioeconomic status of their characters, which was often directly related to ethnicity.

In this sense, comedy has often been used to define insider and outsider groups, reinforcing an “us versus them” mentality that has historically been a pervasive component of American culture. Just as Henri Bergson argued that, “Laughter appears in need of an echo” (5), in “History and Humor,” Boskin suggests that, “Societal laughter, then, mirrors both personal and generational mindsets, transcending time and place and at the same time reflecting time and place” (18). “As universal as humor is, it is bounded by a cultural code” (19). Our senses of

humor are often defined to a certain degree by the groups to which we belong, as well as those from which we wish to differentiate ourselves. Often, this alignment takes the form of generational or class divides, and so it is at these intersections between media and culture that much of my own research is focused.

Nancy Walker contributes to this understanding by suggesting that, “Humor, like all forms of communication, requires *context*: to find it amusing, the audience must have certain knowledge, understanding, and values, which are subject to evolution from one century to the next or even one decade to the next” (4). With these factors in mind, it stands to reason that the inverse is also true, that to study the comedy of a particular time and place can tell us something of the changing social context from which it emerged and was consumed.

As Gerald Mast succinctly posits in *The Comic Mind*, “Inevitably, the comic film ‘says’ something about the relation of man to society” (20). One of the central purposes of this study is to explore what exactly is said, particularly as it relates to the concept of the American Dream. To achieve this, I examine how comedic films have reinforced dominant ideologies, as well as offered voices of dissent.

The Punchline

Popular comedic films, as a form of media that resonates with a broad audience (albeit one that is often divided between inside groups and outside groups — that is, people who laugh at the joke and those who do not), provide an important historical record of dominant cultural anxieties. What people thought was funny can tell us a great deal about the civilizations and the subcultures of which they are a part, allowing for more clearly defined understandings of their lived experiences.

That said, because I tend to think of genre as more of a marketing tool than a term that is particularly useful for film analysis, this study does not seek to classify whether a film is or is not a comedy; for that, I shall rely on other sources. I also accept that what one considers funny is often highly subjective and contingent upon social context. As such, I make no claims as an arbiter of good humor. This is a study of ideologies and historical context, not aesthetics.

By limiting the scope of this project to only include comedic films that can be considered culturally significant, whether indicated by box office figures, industry trends or audience reception, my research seeks to identify the changing perceptions of the American Dream within the public imagination. This work supplements existing scholarship in the study of film, American history, comedy and culture by offering new understandings of how we have renegotiated the terms of this central, guiding ideology from one generation to the next and how we have reconciled the disparities that exist between our common ideals and the realities of quotidian existence. By using select comedic films as a mirror and a lens through which to view the American Dream, this study seeks to offer novel insights into the hopes and fears of the audiences for whom these movies, as cultural products, were designed to entertain.

American comedy films typically feature one central protagonist, often portrayed as an everyman (and in fewer cases, everywoman), who in the course of the narrative has to grow in some way in order to achieve the dramatic goal, which is thematically linked to a particular notion of success. There are of course exceptions, but this accurately describes a vast majority of American comedic films made since the end of World War II. Throughout the story, numerous obstacles are presented, designed to prevent the hero from achieving this objective, but ultimately, the dramatic goal is typically achieved in some capacity. By definition, this is what

separates comedy from tragedy as a narrative structure. With this in mind, the protagonist's goal, as well as how and to what degree this goal is achieved can tell us a great deal about the ideologies within these films, which, in turn, can tell us something about the audiences that consumed them. To this end, in this study, I focus in large part on the aforementioned narrative elements as they appear in comedic films in which the protagonist's idea of success is articulated in terms of upward mobility.

As one of the central defining characteristics of the American Dream is the notion that each subsequent generation will have more opportunities for self-improvement than previous generations, and because comedy films of the past seventy years have generally been aimed at younger audiences, the discourse surrounding the American Dream in these movies often manifests as a conversation of sorts between the members of a certain generation. These films and the humor within them create bonds among audiences by defining them as a group of like-minded individuals, and the narratives contained within these films typically either prescribe a path to achieving the American Dream or draw humor from the apparent impossibility of this goal, or a combination therein. Comedy and ideology, as we shall see, go hand in hand. By covering a broad historical landscape, this work seeks to trace the renegotiation of the American Dream from one generation to the next, as well as the ways in which people have historically had to fight for access to the same opportunities that others considered to be their birthright.

In terms of methodologies, I primarily employ cinematic analysis by way of comic theory and narratology, in conjunction with historiography and industry studies. By using comic theory, I aim to elucidate the incongruities and points of tension between myth and reality, and through the lens of narratology, I highlight the underlying ideologies present in these films by

considering how the themes within these works are posed at the beginning of the movie and then validated at the end. By examining both the narrative structures as well as the jokes contained within these films, my research seeks to illuminate the ways in which commonly held assumptions about the American Dream were either reinforced or challenged. This multifaceted perspective, I believe, yields unique and important insights into U.S. cultural history of the past seventy years.

Throughout this study, I rely on other sources, including the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), to determine whether a film has been identified as a comedy by the studio that produced it. Further, in deciding which films to include in my research, my selection criteria is based upon box office figures, when available, as well as audience and critical reception. Each of the films that I have included in this dissertation was either in the top ten highest grossing comedy films produced in a given year, was representative of broader industry trends, or achieved cultural significance as a “cult film” upon its release on video. They also feature central characters whose dramatic goals involve rising above or maintaining the socioeconomic class to which they were born, and these movies were all designed for consumption by American audiences.

This project seeks to highlight connections between select American comedy films of the postwar period and the changing character of our national ethos. As conduits of a common reality, I explore how these films have served to maintain the hegemonies of the status quo. Antithetically, I also consider how these films have used comedy to call attention to the disparities that exist between the American Dream and the American reality. By plotting the historical trajectory of the Dream as reflected in comedic films, patterns of exclusion emerge that suggest deep systemic faults, as well as continued opportunities for meaningful discourse.

In my research, I analyze how the central characters in these films have conceived, pursued and ultimately attained a better life, or not, by transcending their social positions or failing in the attempt. At whose expense have audiences been invited to laugh? And have these films reflected an increasing disillusionment with the prospect of economic self-improvement? This project builds upon the belief that to understand what was widely accepted as funny in a particular time and place is to better comprehend what was in the hearts and minds of the people who lived that experience. This is history as viewed through the humanities.

My study begins in the post-World War II period because this was a time when most Americans underwent a major reevaluation in how they perceive themselves in relation to one another and the rest of the world. The American Dream thus came to be thought of almost entirely in terms of upward mobility and monetary success, and for many, it was indeed a reality. Since that time, however, there has been a growing chasm between the haves and the have-nots, and for those without, the American Dream itself has either become or has always been somewhat of a cruel joke. Numerous comedic films over the past seventy years have reflected both sides of this ongoing debate. While some movies indicate a growing disillusionment with the American Dream, others shamelessly propagandize its merits. Through these films, we can also witness attempts to expand the inclusivity of opportunity.

The chapters that follow are structured around periods between which there were significant cultural and generational shifts in the United States. The years that I include shall provide a point of reference with the caveat that this work can only be divided as neatly as history itself. That said, the story will unfold chronologically, with each chapter demonstrating how the Dream was commonly perceived at the time and how it was actively being renegotiated.

I also discuss how comedic films have been used to call attention to various forms of exclusion and reflect an increasing disillusionment with this nationalistic myth. Each chapter includes: a concise overview of cultural events and developments in the motion picture industry that are pertinent to this study; close readings of select films that either reinforce or challenge the central precepts of the American Dream, coupled with a consideration of the influence of these movies as represented in broader industrial and cultural trends; and synthesis of the conclusions made evident through these examples, contextualized within a dynamic historical framework.

In chapter two, *White Picket Fences (1946-1962)*, I begin with the effects of McCarthyism on film comedy and upon popular culture in general, and I look at how the American Dream was redefined in contrast to Soviet communism. I consider how the film *Harvey* (Koster, 1950) explores themes of nonconformity in direct response to this, which leads into a discussion of how the American Dream came to be represented through the ideal of conspicuous consumption, as witnessed in the film *Father of the Bride* (Minnelli, 1950). I also examine how the Dream was gendered through the prescribed roles of the nuclear family. Throughout this era, women were told that their only path to upward mobility was by marrying a rich man, a point made explicitly in films like *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Negulesco, 1953) and *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954), for which I offer detailed textual analyses. I then close the chapter by looking at how movies aimed at younger audiences challenged the desire for conformity to certain standards of success, evidenced through an examination of Frank Tashlin's career and culminating with a detailed analysis of *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957).

In chapter three, *Wake Up! (1963-1979)*, I turn my attention to how even some of the most taken for granted assumptions of the American Dream are in fact based in myth. Through

an analysis of the 1963 Stanley Kramer film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, I discuss how the quest for immediate financial success was viewed as an exercise in absurdity if not futility, as was the idea of meritocracy. I also look at the 1967 film *The Graduate*, directed by Mike Nichols, and talk about how this film illustrates an unequivocal rejection of the previous generation's idea of success, a stance that was bolstered by the hope of a new American Dream just over the horizon. I then discuss how *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks, 1974) calls attention to the exclusion of people of color from pursuit of the Dream while offering commentary on the debate of affirmative action. The chapter then concludes with an in-depth analysis of the 1979 Carl Reiner film *The Jerk*, which is what you might call a rags-to-riches-to-rags-to-lower-middle-class story, and that I argue is very much an absurdist critique of the myth of upward mobility.

In chapter four, *Class Clowns (1980-1996)*, I discuss the rapidly changing motion picture industry in the age of home video. I also consider the impact of Second Wave Feminism on the discourse surrounding the American Dream with close readings of *9 to 5* (Higgins, 1980) and *Mr. Mom* (Dragoti, 1983). I then look at the intersections of black identity and the American Dream as represented in a number of films from Eddie Murphy's early career, including *Trading Places* (Landis, 1985) and *Harlem Nights* (Murphy, 1989), which I contextualize and contrast. In the conclusion of chapter four, I discuss the conflation of coming-of-age with the achievement of the Dream as represented in films like *The Secret of My Succe\$s* (Ross, 1987) and *Weekend at Bernie's* (Kotcheff, 1989), followed by a thematic analysis of *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), a film that equates one's inability to achieve the American Dream with a lack of intellectual and emotional maturity.

In the final chapter, *It's the End of the World as We Know It... And I Feel Fine* (1997-2016), I discuss how a different iteration of this same man-child archetype has been celebrated in the films of Adam Sandler and other alumni of *Saturday Night Live*. I also note how a similar version of this character has repeatedly appeared in the morality tales of Judd Apatow, which ultimately serve to validate the white male pursuit of the the American Dream in spite of its waning aura. I then turn my attention to the works other prominent comedic filmmakers from this era, including Mike Judge, the Coen brothers and Wes Anderson, and my analysis focuses on how they reject and renegotiate the terms of the American Dream in their movies. In the section that follows, I argue that the slew of comedies in recent years about the end of civilization, including *Zombieland* (Fleischer, 2009), *Warm Bodies* (Levine, 2013) and *This is the End* (Goldberg/Rogen, 2013), are representative of a collective anxiety about the end of the American Dream. I then conclude with a brief discussion about how the current prevailing business model in Hollywood is driving comedy toward other outlets, but that Americans will always need comedy as a way to address cultural crises.

Laughter, as we shall see, is power

CHAPTER II: WHITE PICKET FENCES (1947-1962)

Family Values

The end of the Second World War marked a seismic shift in American national identity. It was a time when the American Dream changed shape in the public imagination from the Rooseveltian sense that we are all in this together to the notion that every family can enjoy the consumer goods that signify a middle-class existence. Products, houses and suburbs were stamped with a comforting sameness, while American freedom was reimagined in binary opposition to communism. The postwar American Dream was the right to buy whatever a person worked hard enough to afford and citizenship was increasingly defined in terms of consumption. This mindset led to stark generational differences between people who grew up before the war and those who had only ever known their nation as a cultural, economic and military superpower. The Dream of the younger generation was therefore substantially different from that of their parents. As I discuss in this chapter, the conflict between these contrasting visions of the American Dream, as well as its constant negotiation within the national discourse are evident in many of the most popular comedic films from this period. These movies capitalized on the hopes and anxieties that were prevalent among the booming middle class, including issues of stability regarding economic status and the delineation of gender roles.

Without a world war to fight, a new social order was built. Ideological analyses of these films reveal that comedy was overwhelmingly used as a machination to support this latest incarnation of the American Dream, implicitly understood to be the idea that any white man who conformed to the new societal norms could earn enough money to live comfortably. Meanwhile, the women who married these men were blessed with the freedom to populate their homes with

consumer goods, as well as the next generation of consumers. The American Dream in the postwar economy was therefore gendered in the myth that it was dependent upon men and women working in tandem within their predetermined roles to produce and consume respectively. As I discuss in this chapter, many popular comedic films from this era offered models of thought and behavior that served as step-by-step guides to conforming to these ideals.

Despite the suppression of virtually any public discourse that could be deemed un-American in the decade and a half immediately following the Second World War, a handful of comedic films made during this period were able to effectively use humor to subvert some of the presumptions upon which this conformity relied. These movies offered quiet voices of dissent and had the audacity to suggest that the new American Dream was flawed, a particularly bold assertion in the jingoistic era of the early Cold War. Evoking the spirit of the Trickster, these films reminded Americans that there was still plenty of room for progress toward a more egalitarian society, that it was their imaginations and individuality, rather than their opportunity to be or to marry an executive that defined them as Americans. By no small coincidence, it was precisely these qualities that were also thought to differentiate them from the Soviets. In the age of McCarthyism, Sputnik and Jerry Lewis, comedy occasionally found a voice through which to express a common chord of discontent. As I argue, these moments indicate shifts in the popular perception of the American Dream.

In this chapter, I discuss how the film *Harvey* (Koster, 1950) found resonance with its themes and humor, as well as the implications of these findings in the context of the communist purge that was taking place in Hollywood and indeed throughout American culture at the time. The section that follows then looks at how conspicuous consumption and gender roles were

celebrated in *Father of the Bride* (Minnelli, 1950) and how the Cinderella myth was reimagined in films such as *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Negulesco, 1953) and *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954). I also consider what this says about the gendering of the new American Dream. In my conclusion, I then discuss how teenage marketing fundamentally changed cinema, citing the movie *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (Tashlin, 1957) as an example, offering analysis of what its themes say about the changing shape of the Dream in an age of boundless entitlement and limited opportunity.

These films, I argue, offer keys to understanding the anxieties and ideals of a nation that was rapidly redefining itself in a period that was dominated by paranoia, conformity and a muted desire for social progress. By recognizing the humor that drives these movies, my research aims to offer valuable insights into the perspectives of their audiences, which, in turn, allows for a deeper understanding of the often unspoken ideologies that large segments of American society were willing to agree upon, whether purposefully or otherwise. Through this work, I seek to connect the dots between comedy, culture and history as viewed through the lens of cinema. In this chapter and indeed, throughout this dissertation, I also discuss how the American Dream not only changes over time, but means very different things according to one's socioeconomic class, race and gender.

Joe vs. Harvey

About six months after the United States Congress declared war on the Axis powers, the newly formed U.S. Office of War Information (OWI) commissioned a number of propaganda films aimed at bolstering public support for the Allied military campaign (Parry-Giles). As the wounds from the First World War were still relatively fresh in the public mind, many Americans

were reluctant to send another generation of young men to fight in what they perceived to be another foreign conflict. Even those who supported the war in theory were undoubtedly aware of the toll that it would take and the absences it would create on the home front.

Just as Leni Riefenstahl had done to promote German nationalism with films like *Victory of the Faith* (1933) and *Triumph of the Will* (1935), so too were American filmmakers using their craft to stoke the flames of patriotic fervor. As Walter Benjamin noted in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, which he wrote in 1936 while in exile from Nazi Germany, “The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (237). Film, he argued, as an immersive and kinetic medium, has the power to change hearts and minds, whether consciously or unconsciously... and so it was used by the War Department for precisely this purpose. According to Benjamin, “Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise” (240). As the Soviet formalists had proven years earlier using techniques that were later adopted by the West, moving images and the speed at which they relay information to the audience can allow them to do so without the discriminative filter of critical thought. Advertisers would soon capitalize on this phenomenon as well.

During the war, the most widely distributed of the American propaganda films were the *Why We Fight* series, directed by Frank Capra, who was known up until this point in his career primarily as a director of comedies. In fact, he is the only director to date whose comedic films have earned him two Best Picture Academy Awards — the first for *It Happened One Night* in 1934, and the second for *You Can't Take It With You* four years later, each of which also won him

an Academy Award for Best Director. Suffice to say, Frank Capra was at the top of his game when he was hired by the OWI to make films like *Prelude to War* (1942), which explained the differences between fascist and democratic values (and earned Capra yet another Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Feature), or *War Comes to America* (1945), which foreshadowed the proclamations of the Truman Doctrine regarding the role of the United States as the moral arbiters of the world (Gunter).

Comedy separates emotion from intellect, which is why it can be inherently political without appearing overtly polemical. With this in mind, it makes sense that the OWI would hire the foremost director of comedic films at that time to persuade the viewing public into supporting the war effort. Indeed, much like war itself, “Comedy is often disruptive. It messes things up and undermines ‘normal’ behavior and conventions” (King 19). Propaganda films, in much the same way, seek to subconsciously disrupt and reshape one’s perception of normality, and by most measures, these films were deemed to be highly effective. Echoing the sentiments of Benjamin, the head of the OWI claimed that the “easiest way to inject propaganda ideas into most people’s minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize they are being propagandized” (May 142). As we shall see, comedy has proven to be a remarkably effective vehicle for the transmission of such ideas to a wide and unsuspecting audience, but it has also served as a potent countermeasure in resisting this kind of manipulation.

After the war, Capra enjoyed moderate critical success with *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *State of the Union* (1948), though in this rapidly changing social environment, it became increasingly difficult for his films to find and entertain an audience. This new generation of moviegoers was proving to have very different comedic sensibilities than their parents, arguably

because the social context to which they belonged was also quite different. As a seemingly inevitable consequence, Capra's cultural relevance quickly faded as he now seemed to be out of step with the mainstream, despite still being widely recognized as one of the greatest comedy directors of all time (Siegel 54). He had even lived his own rags-to-riches story as a poor Italian immigrant who achieved astounding success in the United States through his own diligence and volition. According to film historian Ian Freer, Frank Capra was "the American Dream personified" (40).

Although he was a lifelong member of the Republican Party, thematic analyses of Capra's films suggest that he was more closely aligned with the New Deal era version of the American Dream, which many scholars argue was more of a collective Dream rather than one that reflected the ambitions of the individual (Gunter, Smoodin, Poague, et al.). Frank Capra seemed to believe that success is only obtainable if the culture at large, often represented through the mechanizations of government, levels the playing field on behalf of the working class. However, as the United States entered an era of postwar prosperity in which interclass struggles were no longer considered by many to be a dominant social issue, audiences showed little interest in this particular brand of optimism, pejoratively termed "Capra-Corn" by his critics.

Meanwhile, Jimmy Stewart, who had achieved much of his popularity starring in the films of Frank Capra, also struggled to reignite his career after the war, despite his return as a combat hero who had successfully flown numerous bombing raids over Germany and who had recently been promoted to the rank of colonel. Earlier in the war, he had also acted in some propaganda films of his own, including *Winning Your Wings* in 1942, which was used as a recruitment tool to encourage young men to become pilots in the Army (Eliot).

Four years later, in an effort to recreate the success that they had known before the war, Stewart once again teamed up with Capra to make *It's a Wonderful Life*. Although the film received mostly favorable reviews by critics, it was somewhat of a disappointment in terms of ticket sales. According to RKO, the studio that produced and distributed the film, box office receipts fell short of the production costs by about \$525,000. Indicative of the political environment of the time, even the FBI weighed in with criticisms of the film, particularly regarding its negative depiction of bankers, which they deemed to be a form of communist propaganda (FBI Vol. 100-HQ-138754).

Capitalizing on this growing paranoia, in February of 1950, a relatively unknown Senator from Wisconsin chose to make a name for himself by claiming to possess a list of two hundred and five known communists within the ranks of the U.S. State Department. In his now infamous address to the Ohio County Republican Women's Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, Senator Joseph McCarthy tapped into what was apparently a commonly held but seldom articulated anxiety about communist infiltration of American public institutions while offering no substantive evidence to support his claims. In the weeks that followed, even the number of supposed communists varied significantly depending on the audience that he was addressing Herman (97).

McCarthy, of course, never showed this list to anyone, but with these accusations, the second Red Scare was now in full swing. According to historian H.W. Brands, "He waved papers he said documented the conspiracy; when reporters asked to examine the documents, he explained that he couldn't release them without revealing state secrets or spoiling his ongoing investigations. If Democrats demanded to see the evidence behind his allegations, he accused the

demanders of being part of the conspiracy themselves” (52). Despite and undoubtedly because of his sensationalist methods, McCarthy’s efforts proved fruitful, and he quickly became a household name. In the general election that year, Republicans picked up twenty-eight seats in the House of Representatives and five seats in the Senate, including that of Richard Nixon in California, who used similar fear-mongering tactics in his own campaign.

Although the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) is often thought to be synonymous with the red-baiting of the 1950s, it was originally born out of a committee established in 1934 to investigate what became known as the “Business Plot,” an alleged political conspiracy in which a retired military officer told Congress that wealthy industrialists were planning to stage a *coup d’état* to overthrow President Franklin Roosevelt and install a fascist government in his place. Retired Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler testified before the HUAC, claiming that he had been approached by representatives of J.P. Morgan and the DuPont company, who had asked him to lead a private army of over five hundred thousand soldiers through the streets of Washington D.C. Although some of Butler’s claims were in fact substantiated by the committee, no charges were ever filed (Denton 211).

By 1945, however, as the United States entered a very different political climate than that of the previous twelve years, the House Un-American Activities Committee turned its attention to the purveyors of alleged communist propaganda. Recognizing the persuasive power of motion pictures, much of the HUAC’s investigation focused on Hollywood and on screenwriters in particular. According to H. W. Brands, “Chairman John Parnell Thomas had never forgiven Franklin Roosevelt for hiring leftist (and other) writers during the depression as part of the Federal Writers’ Project; Thomas’s revenge was to launch an investigation of Hollywood

screenwriters for alleged subversive activities” (51). This resulted in the blacklisting of over three hundred individuals who had been working in the motion picture industry, as well as what became known as “The Hollywood Ten,” a group of prominent screenwriters and directors who refused to cooperate with the committee and were thus fined \$1,000 each and sentenced to prison for periods of between six months and a year. For most of these men, as well as the others who were blacklisted, this investigation also unceremoniously marked the ends of their careers in the motion picture industry.

In many ways, the House Un-American Activities Committee was directly responsible for the dearth of controversial comedic films produced in the decade and a half following the Second World War. As almost any material that was deemed to be politically subversive was also thought to be communist propaganda, studios generally chose to play it safe. Not only was the industry purged of virtually anyone with leftist leanings, but with very few exceptions, the major studios only released films that served to support the conservative values that already dominated mainstream American culture at the time. In an age of rapid and dramatic societal change, conformity was the name of the game. The country was rife with incongruities.

The motion picture industry was also undergoing a major metamorphosis during this period, itself conforming to new standards of existence. In the 1948 Supreme Court decision in *The United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, commonly known as the Paramount Decree, the Court ruled that the extremely profitable studio system was in violation of antitrust laws. As a result, the five major studios: Paramount, MGM, Warner Brothers, RKO and 20th Century Fox were forced to sell off their theater chains to allow for fair competition. This effectively ended the oligopoly of vertical integration in which the Big Five controlled every aspect of filmmaking,

from production to distribution to exhibition. The Court's decision also put an end to the practice of block-booking, through which studios were guaranteed profits — even from low-quality films that had not yet been produced — by forcing independent theaters and competitors to buy them as a package deal along with the A-films that would top the marquees (Schatz).

The antitrust lawsuit had actually been filed back in 1938, but Hollywood's symbiotic relationship with Washington throughout the Second World War prevented the case from proceeding until after the war was over, at which point the film industry and the federal government were once again at odds with one another. Many film historians refer to the Paramount Decree as marking the end of Hollywood's Golden Age and the decline of the studio system, and indeed, in terms of market share, the motion picture industry has never fully recovered (Schatz). However, as I explain in chapters four and five, the major studios have since found other ways to dominate the film industry that have proven to be just as effective.

Television also played a considerable role in declining ticket sales in the postwar period as TV sets quickly became one of the hottest household goods in the nation at a time of unprecedented consumer spending. People were less inclined to go out to the theater when they could be adequately entertained within the confines of domesticity. Further, as noted by Lawrence R. Samuel in *The American Dream: A Cultural History*, "By endorsing traditional gender roles, popular television shows of the 1950s such as *I Love Lucy*, *Make Room for Daddy*, and *Father Knows Best* served as lessons in a somewhat different but equally powerful Dream, with happiness and success seemingly waiting for those Americans who conformed to what a postwar family should look like" (52). As I discuss in the pages that follow, this realignment of prescribed roles within the nuclear family was clearly a source of general anxiety, as this was a

topic that also found its way into a significant number of comedic films that were produced and distributed during this period.

From a technical standpoint, one of the reasons that there were fewer humorous movies being made at this time relative to the decades that had preceded it was because studios generally took a bigger-is-better approach in competing with this new medium. Movies began to be shot and exhibited in widescreen for the first time, and color film became increasingly popular, offering immersive experiences that could not be replicated on the small screen (Lev). Comedy, with its general lack of spectacle, was relegated primarily to the whitewashed sitcoms of the era, whereas film studios tended to favor historical epics, melodramatic musicals and grandiose westerns, largely in an attempt to offer more screen for the money relative to television. As the newly minted middle class moved out of the urban centers, where the great movie houses were located, and relocated to the suburbs, where theaters remained sparse, this mass migration also severely impacted ticket sales in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Lev).

Another explanation for the limited number of comedic films made during this period put forth by cinema historian Nora Sayre is that, “Screen comedies thrived during the Depression due to the very harshness of the era, which augmented the public’s appetite for amusement, for laughter as an engine of survival. But in the Fifties survival was hardly at stake” (141). While I agree that during the Depression, communities came together so that the individual could survive, I would argue that in the fifties, while the United States and the Soviet Union traded hostilities and propagandized their respective ideologies, survival was reimagined more broadly as an existential crisis regarding the American way of life versus the antagonistic Soviet other.

While the U.S.S.R. and the United States were never officially at war, capitalism had unilaterally declared war on communism well before the Second World War was even over. In the years following the declaration of the Truman Doctrine, it is no coincidence that audiences were inundated with westerns. The protagonists in these movies and TV shows can be thought to serve as stand-ins for American foreign policy if we consider these gunslingers whose only ally in a hostile world was their own sense of righteousness. Every cowboy with a six-shooter was in the business of promoting a particular brand of morality, and an overwhelming majority of these stories involved defending the rights of white property owners. While tangential to the focus of this dissertation, it can be argued that the themes of these films and television shows were presented to audiences as though the wartime propaganda never ceased. The lone cowboy represented the exceptional United States, promoting an ideology that justified acts of violence in a kill-or-be-killed world.

Television and movies were in a similar state of competition. In an attempt to lure middle-class patrons back to the movies while they reconceptualized and restructured their industry, studios made concerted efforts to restore the legitimacy of cinema as an art form. Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan had effectively retired from starring in B-movies to serve as a public relations representative for General Electric and host of a weekly television show while also the head of the Screen Actors Guild. He drew a third paycheck as a secret informant for the FBI. Throughout much of the fifties, Reagan toured the country, speaking on behalf of a morally cleansed, All-American Hollywood. As noted by biographer Jeffrey D. Howison, he also “advertised and represented the lifestyle of the modern American consumer” (5).

The film industry's desire to change its image is also one of the reasons why this era saw a significant increase in the number of movies that were adapted from stage plays. Cinematic adaptations allowed people living outside of New York to participate in the cultural currency of Broadway productions, which could be viewed as a mark of status among the booming middle class. Like so many things that were popular at this time, it was even mass produced to maintain a perfect uniformity of consumption. After all, when a play was adapted to film, no matter where that movie screened, the audience would see the exact same performance and production as everyone else. In the context of 1950s America, what could be better than that?

One of the most popular plays in the years immediately following the war was *Harvey*, a lighthearted comedy about a benevolent alcoholic who befriends a mythical Pooka, who was a six foot, three-and-a-half-inch rabbit that only he could see. Mary Chase started the script in 1942 and spent two years writing it; *Harvey* debuted on Broadway in November of 1944 (Chinoy). At that point, the tides had turned and the Allied forces were clearly winning the war, which now seemed to be drawing to a close. A new American Dream was on the horizon, and the future seemed limited only by people's imaginations. *Harvey* almost certainly appealed to this optimism, and the play proved to be extremely successful, even earning a Pulitzer Prize for the playwright (Craig 99).

It was such a hit that Universal Pictures spent a record one million dollars to purchase the rights to it, even with the stipulation that they would have to wait until the Broadway run was finished before the film could be made (Craig 99). This was essentially so that it would not be in competition with itself, which implies that audiences might prefer to go to the movies. The

play ran for 1,775 shows before it was over. Production on the film then began almost immediately after, in April of 1950, just two months after McCarthy's speech in Wheeling.

Henry Koster was hired to direct the movie. He was an established filmmaker who was primarily known for his light comedies and musicals, and he had been nominated for an Oscar two years earlier for directing the film *The Bishop's Wife*. Meanwhile, Chase was hired, along with Oscar Brodney, who had most recently worked on an Abbott and Costello film, to write the screenplay. The primary difference between the theatrical script and the screenplay was the number of locations. Beyond that, the material remained almost entirely in tact in terms of plot, character and theme (Craig). Most of the principle actors from the play even starred in the movie, the most notable exception being Jimmy Stewart, who had only performed in a limited off-Broadway run in Chase's hometown of Denver for seven weeks in 1947 (Craig).

Another major difference in the film versus the play was that in the movie, the central character is never actually shown drinking. This is because the Production Code forbade presenting alcoholism in a positive light. Rather, it is merely suggested throughout the film that Elwood P. Dowd is a jovial drunk, an otherwise saintly character if not for the fact that he drinks to the point of hallucinating a giant talking rabbit, which serves to explicitly emphasize his apparent disconnect from reality.

Nearly all of the jokes in *Harvey* are the result of miscommunication between characters. On screen, intentions are repeatedly misunderstood, while the audience is invited to find humor in the dramatic irony that this creates. Meanwhile, the central plot revolves around determining who should be committed to the sanitarium, whether Elwood or his sister Veta, and this is linked thematically to the broader question of "Who decides what is normal?" This was, after all, a time

when the United States was rapidly redefining itself both domestically and in world affairs. The American Dream was fundamentally being reimagined as a journey of upward mobility and its ultimate fulfillment was now seen as inclusion to the burgeoning middle class. The question of defining and conforming to this new normal was very much on people's minds.

In the context of this film, however, Elwood P. Dowd is introduced to the audience as undeniably upper-class. His regal estate, manicured lawn and a wrought iron gate serve as clear signifiers of his status, and it is by no coincidence that he is first defined through the visual representation of his house, as the ideal of homeownership was then being marketed and sold to the masses as an inseparable component of the American Dream.

Elwood is further marked as upper-class through his manner of dress and his leisurely lifestyle, and his first characterizing action in the film is to allow his invisible friend to pass through the gate first. He may be delusional, but he compensates for this with good manners. Throughout the narrative, it is Elwood's geniality that prevents him from being committed, and there is even a scene much later in the film in which the police come to an alley to take him away, where he is engaged in conversation with the psychiatrist and the nurse that he had invited out for a drink. The officers look them over and one of them asks, "Which one is Elwood?" indicating that they cannot tell the difference between an alleged crazy person and a doctor of psychiatry.

In another scene, Elwood and Dr. Chumley, the lead psychiatrist of the sanitarium, have essentially switched roles, as the doctor discusses his problems from a supine position on a leather couch while Elwood listens intently from the chair beside him. Dr. Chumley admits that he now believes in Harvey and confides in Elwood that if Harvey would stop time for him and

allow him to go anywhere with with anyone, as Elwood claimed he could do, then the doctor would spend two weeks at a cottage near Akron with a beautiful woman who would let him unload his problems and say nothing in response but, “You, poor, poor thing.”

Hardly missing a beat, Elwood smirks and says, “I can’t help feeling, doctor, that you’re making a mistake not allowing the woman to talk. If she’d been around at all, she might have picked up some very interesting news items.” This is just one example of progressive politics finding subtle expression in the film’s subtext, under the radar of McCarthy and his disciples. Had it not been couched within a narrative that was intended to evoke laughter, such commentary would not likely have escaped the attention of those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Comedy was therefore able to make serious points about matters that more dramatic films were unable to address so directly.

In the 1950s, psychoanalysis was enjoying a popularity in American mass culture at this time not even seen when Freud was still alive. This period also saw a sharp increase in people being committed to psychiatric institutions, both voluntarily and involuntarily. Further, as Ed Sikov points out in his analysis of 1950s film comedies and culture, “Patients in mental hospitals formed only part of the tranquilizer market, for the pressure to perform and conform in urban business and suburban leisure was difficult if not impossible for many people to bear” (8). That is to say the psyche was very much on people’s minds at the time, and it was commonly believed that conformity to the demands of the superego created an imbalance with the repressed desires of the id, and this was the cause of all neuroses. That was the story, anyway.

Harvey appears to tap into this anxiety, but it also comedically examines the notion of the American Dream as it pertains to people who already enjoy the consumer comforts of modern

life. If inclusion to the middle class is the ultimate goal for most, then how does this affect the so-called leisure class? What does it mean for them to live a fulfilling life? Once a person's material desires are fulfilled and they still feel empty, what then? The answer can best be summed up in the Elwood's line to Dr. Chumley near the end of the movie, "Oh, doctor... You know, years ago, my mother used to say to me, she'd say, in this world, Elwood... you must be oh, so smart or oh, so pleasant. Well, for years, I was smart... I recommend pleasant."

Happiness, he contends, is more important than intelligence and the financial success that it may bring. Elwood is undeniably a unique individual whose eccentricities are celebrated in this film. As such, audiences are invited to laugh at the conformity that he diametrically opposes. He is the id, and he does as he damn well pleases — at least within the reasonable bounds of civility.

Most of the central characters of this film are part of the upper class, all of whom are initially presented in the film as unlikeable human beings, the exception of course being Elwood. Rather, he shows no interest in materialism or class posturing, as he just wants to make people, including himself, happy. In the film, he is presented as idealistic and in many ways the ideal model for human behavior, aside from what may or may not be his recurring visual and auditory hallucinations. Just as he looks up to Harvey, both literally and figuratively, the audience is meant to look up to Elwood. Money, we are led to believe, merely affords him the luxury of his eccentric lifestyle, but it does not serve to define him.

Furthermore, Elwood does not seem to believe in class distinctions, as he proves to be just as interested in talking to members of the working class as he is to engage in conversation with a judge or a doctor. Through Elwood's eyes, we are offered a vision of a classless society, and although Harvey is never shown in the film (and was only briefly and disastrously made

visible in a few productions of the play), by the end of the movie, we are meant to believe that he is indeed real, for he is the spirit of imagination, individualism and congeniality that Americans must not lose in the face of overwhelming conformity: the antidote to the vitriol and paranoia of Joseph McCarthy and his ilk.

Happily Ever After

The United States emerged from World War II a global superpower. The temporary militarization of industry during the war had generated an immensely productive period in U.S. manufacturing, and the war effort had generated enough jobs, whether military or civilian, to lift the country out of the Great Depression. For the first time in recent memory, Americans were making more money with fewer opportunities to spend it, investments in war bonds notwithstanding. When the war ended, in order to maintain full employment, consumerism became the national creed. This was largely in an effort to keep American factories operating at or near capacity, but also as a marked contrast to the ideologies of the Soviet Union.

According to Lawrence R. Samuel, “As the Cold War escalated in the early fifties, the American Dream was viewed as kind of a secret weapon, something that was stronger than any army even though it was just an idea” (50). American freedom was reimagined as the right to buy whatever a person desired, and with the explosion of consumer credit, it no longer even mattered if people could immediately afford it or not. As noted by H.W. Brands, “So great was the pent-up demand for the houses, cars, washing machines, sofas, radios, sinks, and myriad other items large and small that had been unpurchased during the depression and unpurchasable during the war, and so great was the pent-up purchasing power from all the unspent war wages, that the

economy shifted from war production to peace production without losing any appreciable momentum” (70).

For the first time in history, a majority of Americans had disposable incomes and access to easy credit, and consumerism was increasingly viewed as a way of demonstrating one’s social standing within the robust middle class. According to cultural historian Lizabeth Cohen, “For the next quarter century consumer spending indeed helped secure an historic reign of prosperity, longer lasting and more universally enjoyed than ever before in American history. National output of goods doubled between 1946 and 1956, and would double again by 1970, with private consumption expenditures holding steady at two-thirds of the gross national product” (121). Just as owning land had traditionally been a major factor in the idea of achieving the American Dream, by the 1950s, this translated to owning a house along with all of the modern amenities that went with it. The suburbs were the new American frontier. “National income rose by more than a third during the 1950s. Home ownership, for many Americans the hallmark of prosperity, soared until six out of ten homes were owned by their occupants” (Brands 71). These factors helped crystalize the idea of the middle class, one of the core tenets of consumer capitalism, which became more widely realized after the war than it had ever been before.

Father of the Bride, which was also released in 1950, serves to highlight this changing social landscape, as well as the shifting concept of the American Dream. Directed by Vincente Minnelli near the end of his own brief marriage to Judy Garland, this movie was the highest grossing comedy of 1950 and the fifth highest grossing film of that year. It was also one of the only comedies made in the 1950s to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture, and it is number eighty-three on the American Film Institute’s 100 Funniest American Movies of All

Time. *Father of the Bride* is premised on the assumption that it was the parents' responsibility to offer their children the material comforts that economic depression and war had until recently denied them in their own lives. This new generation was different, because they only vaguely possessed any secondhand knowledge of the sacrifices made by their parents.

However, as conveyed in this film, this was as it should be, as this sense of entitlement that was known by the younger generation was generally seen as a mark of the progress that epitomized the American Dream. According to Brands, "Nearly all the parents and grandparents recalled the depression; many wanted their children to have what they were compelled to do without... [these children] grew up with a sense of entitlement, a feeling that the world existed for their benefit" (70). Throughout *Father of the Bride*, the audience is continually asked, either implicitly or overtly, if the younger generation needs or deserves such conspicuous displays of consumption and if happiness can in fact be achieved by doing so. The answer, ultimately, according to the film, is a resounding yes, not only for the children, but for the parents as well.

The film centers on a middle-aged suburban lawyer named Stanley T. Banks, played by Spencer Tracy, whose daughter Kay, played by Elizabeth Taylor, is about to get married. Most of the humor in the film draws on the conflict between what Stanley wants for the wedding, fully aware that he will be the one paying for it, and what everyone else wants. We are also invited to laugh at Stanley's inefficacy in deterring what are ultimately the wishes of Kay's mother. Ellie Banks, played by Joan Bennett, functions within the narrative as the antagonistic force to Stanley's dramatic goal of saving money on the rapidly escalating wedding expenses. This is made clear in an exchange between Stanley and Ellie in which he responds to her claim that all of Kay's friends are having extravagant weddings by saying, "If her friends want to go out and

bankrupt themselves, that's their business, not mine. We've always lived very simply, within our means. Now here, what are we going to do? Put on a big show, a big flashy show that we can't afford?" Ellie replies, "Stan, there's only one time in a girl's life that she can be married in a bride dress. Just once. And I don't want Kay to miss it the way I did." After this conversation, Stanley acquiesces to Ellie's desires for the wedding, explaining in voiceover, "From there on, I was a dead duck." At this point, even the film's protagonist recognizes that he is powerless to stop the forces of change that were happening all around him.

This punctuates the sentiment of an earlier scene, where a guest at Kay and Buckley's engagement party says to Stanley, "From now on, the gals take over. You think they can't add two and two, but when it comes to weddings... giants of industry. From now on, your only function is to pay the bills," to which Stanley responds, "Oh, no. This is going to be a very simple wedding." As the narrative progresses, however, what begins as a critique of rampant consumerism ends with an acknowledgment that such extravagance on their children's behalf is the right thing to do. A visual gag about halfway through the film even serves as a metaphor for Stanley's outdated ways of thinking. As he struggles to fit into his old tuxedo as way of saving money, he is pleased to find that it does indeed fit, though it is very much out of fashion and appears to be far too tight, thereby making him appear foolish in the eyes of his family.

Throughout the film, the Banks family is marked as part of the struggling middle class. In the opening voiceover narration, Stanley says, "We own our own home in the suburbs... at least, we almost own it." The suburb in question is never named, leading the audience to understand that it could be just about anywhere. Later in the film, Stanley comments, "Only two syllables,

you know, from Banks to bankruptcy,” indicating what he perceives to be their precarious standing in the middle class.

When the Banks are introduced to Kay’s soon-to-be in-laws, Stanley immediately begins making comparisons between the Dunstons’ living situation and their own. The audience is invited to find humor in Stanley’s apparent envy, exemplified by the fact that the Dunstons live in a bigger house in a better neighborhood. In line with the casual racism of the day, the Banks have an African-American servant named Delilah, while the Dunstons’ servant is white, which proves to be yet another source of jealousy. Throughout this sequence, the audience is reminded that success in this new postwar economy is an increasingly relative term. This echoes Lawrence R. Samuel’s assessment of several prominent books written during this period, in which he claims that, “the American Dream had taken a wrong turn, its spiritual qualities reduced to a futile exercise in status seeking” (58).

Although the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 effectively scaled back much of the bargaining power that unions had gained during the war, there was a general belief that both blue collar employees and white collar executives were part of the same middle class, only separated now by the distinction of belonging to one end of the spectrum or the other. According to Lizbeth Cohen, “What social scientists have since labeled the ‘embourgeoisement’ of workers also implied a trade-off: rewards of material prosperity and social integration in return for ceding shopfloor control and company governance to management, and for accepting private corporate welfare such as pensions and health insurance in place of an expanded and more social democratic state” (155).

As more people entered the ranks of the middle class, further delineations were made between its various degrees, which were generally marked by status symbols that included houses, cars and extravagant weddings. In *Father of the Bride*, when Ellie tells the wedding planner that they want assorted sandwiches, ice cream and little cakes for the wedding per Stanley's desire to save money, the wedding planner responds, "Of course, you can have just what you wish, madam, but that's what we usually serve for children's parties." They are thus humiliated into selecting the more expensive option as an indicator of class.

When Stanley arranges to grill Kay's fiancé as a way of getting to know him, Stanley's concerns all center on Buckley's finances and prospects for upward mobility. Kay tells her father that, "Buckley is a wonderful businessman... he makes something. Does it really matter what it is?" At no point in the movie is it ever revealed what he does make, nor are Kay's career plans ever discussed, as the assumption seems to be that her role is merely to be that of wife, mother and homemaker. In the context of this film and the era in which it was produced, it is nonetheless made clear that Stanley has Kay's best interests at heart, which manifests explicitly as a concern over Buckley's ability to provide financial security for her.

By the end of the film, Stanley has accepted that his role as Kay's provider has now been handed off to Buckley. In the last line of the movie, Stanley says to Ellie, "Nothing's really changed, has it? You know what they say... My son's my son until he gets him a wife, but my daughter's my daughter all of her life... All of *our* life." Indeed, Stanley maintains every bit of affection for his daughter, but his dramatic goal has been reimagined and achieved now that the wedding has passed and her financial well-being is no longer his responsibility. It is now up to Buckley to take care of her.

This understanding had its basis not only in the reactionary gender politics of the day, but in actual government policy as well. While the G.I. Bill helped stagger the number of people re-entering the job market and provided training for middle-class careers, it also provided low interest home loans to servicemen, and new houses could hardly be constructed fast enough to keep up with demand. However, as Lizbeth Cohen notes, “Until 1968... if a married woman veteran applied for a VA loan, her own income was not even considered among the criteria used to determine the couple’s eligibility as a good credit risk, despite her vet status; she was treated no differently from the non-working or working wife of a male vet, whose income, if she had any, was viewed as supplemental and unstable” (143).

Even with the introduction of joint tax returns in 1948, Cohen argues that, “The joint return favored traditional married couples where the wife did not work,” which de-incentivized women from remaining in the workforce by creating a significantly higher tax burden for families with two income earners (145). This created “a structure of taxation that rewarded the traditional household of male breadwinner father and home-maker mother, thereby making women financially dependent on men at a time when the transformations of depression and war might have encouraged alternatives” (146). Whereas women joined the workforce in record numbers during the war, most were once again consigned to domesticity or menial labor in the growing service industry at the war’s end. Despite the limited progress which had only recently been made toward gender equality, men and women were shown two very different paths to follow in pursuit of the American Dream. While Rosie the Riveter’s ambitions had been used for propaganda purposes during the war, women were increasingly being told that their presence in the American workforce was no longer welcome.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court was deciding whether motion pictures were primarily an art or a business. In the 1952 case of *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, known colloquially as the “Miracle Decision,” the Court ruled in favor of art, overturning the 1915 ruling in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, which claimed that motion pictures are above all, a business, and therefore not protected under the Constitutional guarantee of free speech (Butters).

The 1952 case centered on a short film by Italian neorealist Federico Fellini called *Il Miracolo* (“The Miracle”), which is about a peasant woman who is raped and impregnated and who believes herself to be the Virgin Mary. As could probably be expected, the film was condemned by the highly influential Catholic Legion of Decency as being sacrilegious. According to film historian Gregory D. Black in *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies*, picketers of the movie held signs outside of theaters with slogans such as “Don’t be a communist!” and “Don’t enter that cesspool,” which in many ways only added to the film’s appeal to the moviegoing public (95). Martin Quigley, co-author of the original 1930 Motion Picture Production Code, went so far as to claim that, “It is intolerable that a film such as *The Miracle* should be shown in an American theater. Its logical birthplace in the modern world is the Soviet Union.” Ironically, this film was actually banned in the Soviet Union, where it was considered to be “pro-Catholic propaganda” (96).

However, despite the loosened restrictions on film content now that it was protected by the First Amendment, throughout the 1950s, studios still rarely made films with controversial subject matters or that challenged the hegemonies of the status quo. In fact, quite the opposite was true, as there were a significant number of movies produced in this decade in which the

Cinderella myth was reimagined in the patriarchal age of postwar prosperity, suggesting that the ultimate goal of women who hope to achieve the American Dream should be to marry a wealthy man. Building on some of these same ideas that were alluded to in *Father of the Bride*, movies such as *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Negulescu, 1953) and *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954) were representative of a broader trend in film comedies, which posited that marriage is indeed women's only true path to upward mobility. Even as the country slowly began to embrace the racial desegregation of public institutions, women were relegated to a secondary role in pursuit of the gendered American Dream. They were encouraged to be mothers, wives and homemakers, advised to stay in the kitchen making bread while their husbands were out winning it.

As such, women's role in the American Dream was in many ways imagined as being complementary to that of their husbands, as for both men and women, the family unit was an inseparable component of the Dream. The "man of the house" made the money and had access to easy credit, including home loans. He was therefore able to enjoy the relative freedom and power that this granted him. Meanwhile, the women were shackled to a life of domesticity, often only free to purchase what their husbands allowed. As Lizbeth Cohen points out, "Women could—and did—break from these norms every day. But even as they held jobs or undertook unconventional roles outside of their homes in the heyday of the Consumers' Republic, they inevitably did so in the shadow of these norms, which made it that much harder to negotiate a different path" (150).

Fulfillment of the American Dream as it was conceptualized in this period generally required both parties to perform their respective roles, but through this arrangement, men enjoyed a great deal more agency and opportunity to improve their lives, whether financially or otherwise. According to Lawrence R. Samuel, "With all the linking of pluralism to the Dream in

the postwar years, precious little of it had anything to do with women” (48). Rather, women were treated as second-class citizens, and their subordinate social status was normalized in the punchlines of popular jokes.

The first episode of *The Henny and Rocky Show* aired on ABC in June of 1955. Geared toward a male audience, it was created to fill airtime after boxing matches and starred Henny Youngman, who is credited with the line, “Take my wife... please.” Like many other popular comedians of the day, most of Youngman’s routines focused almost entirely on disparaging women (Niemi). As we shall see, this was also true in many of the comedic films of this era. Virtually any progress toward social equality that women had made during the war was diminished almost immediately after.

Women were encouraged to shop but not work, so consumerism was coded as feminine, while men were celebrated as the chief producers in the postwar economy. Women were thought to be responsible for the home and the family, two major components of the 1950s American Dream, while the workplace and any opportunities for advancement within it were typically thought of as the man’s domain. One of the running jokes of the era was that it was men’s job to make the money and women’s duty to spend it (Boskin, 1997). There were, of course, plenty of goods produced during this period that were marketed toward men as well, namely big ticket items like automobiles, but this was largely how the gendered Dream of postwar America took shape in the public imagination.

Illustrating this point, *How to Marry a Millionaire* was the top grossing comedy of 1953 and the fourth highest grossing film of that year, taking in approximately \$7.5 million, not adjusted for inflation (*Variety*). It opens with a six-minute orchestral piece, presumably to remind

the audience that movies maintain an air of class that TV so sorely lacks. From there, a curtain is raised, as the movie takes on the feel of a stage play, again in what seems to be an attempt to distance the medium from the banality of television, granting audiences the pretense of participating in a Broadway show without even having to leave the suburbs.

The plot of *How to Marry a Millionaire* centers on three “gold-diggers” whose one articulated ambition in life is to marry a wealthy man. In the first scene of the movie, Schatze Page, played by Lauren Bacall, arranges to sublet an expensive New York apartment, as the owner is currently out of the country to avoid having to pay back taxes to the IRS, which is portrayed as an antagonistic bureaucracy. This anti-big government theme is consistent with the ultra-conservative values that dominate both the film and the decade. Later in the movie, another character claims to be having problems with the IRS as well, claiming that he does not expect the government to understand, as they will simply think that he is a crook for having failed to pay his taxes. The federal government is made to seem like the real thief.

As Lawrence R. Samuel points out, “Only 148 Americans made \$1 million or more in 1955 (annual income was frequently used as the measure of a millionaire), down from 219 in 1950 and a whopping 513 in 1929” (62). He then notes, “Higher tax rates and a higher cost of living were making the purely monetary version of the American Dream almost impossible to attain, an unfortunate turn of events for people viewing wealth as the primary barometer of success” (63).

Movies, of course, tend to be the product of an audience’s desires and anxieties about reality more than they are an accurate reflection of it, and so this film has no shortage of characters who are millionaires, along with plenty of opportunities for the central characters to

meet and become romantically involved with them. According to this film, it may indeed be harder to become a millionaire in this economy, but this only makes the women who hope to marry them all the more conniving in their desperation. For the millionaires, it is a buyer's market. This movie essentially presents its audience with love through the lens of capitalism.

In *How to Marry a Millionaire*, Schatze works as a fashion model, implying that the only way a woman can make a decent living is through her looks. This is supported by the fact that the two other female leads who soon move into the apartment with her are also models. Loco Dempsey, played by Betty Grable, and Pola Debevoise, played by Marilyn Monroe, make a pact with Schatze to use this apartment to essentially lure wealthy men who they hope to marry. According to Schatze, despite being characterized as the most cynical of the three women, "Of course I want to be married again. Who doesn't? It's the biggest thing you can do in life." Loco then echoes Schatze's sentiment and articulates one of the central themes of the film with the line: "Ever since I was a little girl, I've had the same dream. To marry a zillionaire." Meanwhile, Pola, whose apparent lack of intelligence is the source of numerous jokes, refuses to wear her glasses around men, despite being almost completely blind without them, because, according to her, "You know what they say about women who wear glasses..." As the narrative progresses, all three of these women eventually achieve their goals, albeit somewhat scaled down in the cases of Pola and Loco, reinforcing the underlying theme that money does in fact lead to happiness, and the only way women can get any substantial amount of money is through marriage.

Despite the chauvinism that characterizes this film and its many imitators, there was a certain degree of truth to this notion. As Simone de Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*, published in 1953, the same year that this film was released, women have been oppressed by

many cultures throughout history by being defined as the “other” in binary opposition to their male counterparts. The institution of marriage has thus served to reinforce this otherness (441). According to de Beauvoir, whereas men have traditionally fulfilled the role of essential subject, women have historically been treated as inessential objects, thereby occupying a subordinate position in patriarchal societies (96).

This book also includes the first mention of the phrase “women’s liberation,” and it is often thought of as marking the beginning of Second Wave Feminism, arguing that many of the negative characteristics that were generally thought of as distinctly feminine are a consequence of women’s subordination rather than its cause. In many ways, *The Second Sex* therefore functions as a direct response to the pervasive male chauvinism in films such as *How To Marry a Millionaire*, as de Beauvoir takes the position that only through her own work can a woman achieve the financial independence that is essential to her liberation and autonomy.

With this in mind, de Beauvoir undoubtedly would have also taken issue with the film *Sabrina*, released just one year after the aforementioned book was published. In 2002, *Sabrina* was included in the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress for being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.” Directed by acclaimed comedic director Billy Wilder, this was his last film with Paramount and was adapted from *Sabrina Fair*, a successful Broadway play by Samuel A. Taylor that had opened the previous year. Although there are numerous differences between the film and the stage play, notably differences in the cast of characters and their motivations, the fundamental plot remains basically the same.

Sabrina Fairchild, played by Audrey Hepburn, is the daughter of Thomas, a chauffeur who drives a limousine for the wealthy Larrabee family. He is introduced in the film as little

more than a possession of the rich, as it is explained that he was “imported with the Rolls Royce.” Meanwhile, young, naïve Sabrina believes that she has been in love with David Larrabee all of her life, and when she returns from having attended culinary school in Paris for five years with a newly refined sense of class, David, the quintessential playboy, played by William Holden, finally begins to notice her.

Meanwhile, David’s workaholic brother Linus, played by a much older Humphrey Bogart, worries that David’s sudden interest in Sabrina may jeopardize his forthcoming wedding to Elizabeth, who belongs to another very wealthy family. Linus believes that this union between David and Elizabeth could potentially lead to some key business arrangements between their respective companies, so Linus feigns interest in Sabrina in order to distract her from pursuing a relationship with his brother. As a representative of the older generation, it is implied that Linus knows what is best for everyone.

Over time, Linus’s plan works, and in the climactic scene, which takes place in a board meeting at the Larrabee Corporation, David announces that he has decided to marry Elizabeth after all, which prompts Linus to then reveal his true feelings for Sabrina. In the film’s final moments, Sabrina and Linus then sail off to Paris together. Their complementary components of their American Dream have now been realized (albeit in France), as he may soon have a wife, and she may now have the financial stability that she could not otherwise attain. In the context of this film, as well as the culture from which it emerged and was consumed, once again, everybody lives happily ever after because the status quo has been maintained.

Convolved as the plot may seem, the thematic elements are arguably even more so. Essentially, this is yet another take on the Cinderella story, once again positing that women’s

only path to upward mobility is through marriage. Unlike *How to Marry a Millionaire*, however, which at least contemplates the notion of marrying for love instead of money before ultimately dismissing it, Sabrina Fairchild has to choose between two men who are both equally wealthy. She only superficially transcends her social class through cultural refinement, thereby making her appear considerably more attractive to the rich men who had previously ignored her. Sabrina may come from a working class background, but this is obfuscated by her apparent social graces.

As is often the case in romantic comedies, her dramatic conflict is in deciding which of these men is most deserving of her affection. Does she choose the hardworking Linus or the freewheeling David? Despite the substantial age gap and complete lack of chemistry between her and Bogart, in the context of 1950s America, her choice seems rather obvious, as is the fact that it is not she who ultimately decides her fate, but rather Linus. In the end, she is still essentially a possession with no agency of her own.

The closest the film comes to showing any kind of self-awareness in this regard is in Thomas Fairchild's monologue toward the end of the movie. He tells Sabrina, "The papers would have said how fine and democratic for a Larrabee to marry a chauffeur's daughter. But would they praise the chauffeur's daughter? No. Democracy can be a wickedly unfair thing, Sabrina. Nobody poor was ever called democratic for marrying someone rich." Indeed, in the gendering of the American Dream between the symbiotic components of female consumers/homemakers and male producers/homeowners, a chasm is exposed between our democratic ideals and the reality of living in a stratified culture.

These Kids Today

In the late 1940s, an ambitious young man named Eugene Gilbert worked as a clerk at a shoe store in Chicago, where he soon realized that he could sell a lot more shoes if they were marketed toward teenagers. Ever the entrepreneur, this marked the beginning of his career, not in shoe sales, but in marketing research. In the decade that followed, he began referring to himself as the President of the Gilbert Youth Research Company, as well as the “George Gallop of the teen-agers.” Drawing on polling research conducted at high schools around the country, Gilbert wrote a weekly syndicated column for the Associated Press called “What Young People Think,” designed to offer advice to companies who wanted to sell their goods and services to this newly conceptualized demographic (Fischer 64).

The word “teen-ager” had only first entered the vernacular in a *Life* magazine article published that claimed to understand the life and the mindset of American high school girls, which the accompanying photos revealed to be all white and middle-class. According to the author, “There is a time in the life of every American girl when the most important thing in the world is to be one of a crowd of other girls and to act and speak and dress exactly as they do. This is the teen age.” He also notes, “American businessmen, many of whom have teen-age daughters, have only recently begun to realize that teen-agers make up a big and special market... The movies and the theater make money by turning a sometimes superficial and sometimes social-minded eye on teen-agers” (“Teen-Age Girls,” 91). For the first time in recent history, teenagers had disposable income and the freedom to spend it as they liked, and their numbers only continued to grow exponentially throughout the fifties. In 1956, an article in the

Wall Street Journal claimed that the sixteen million American teens that were born during the baby boom spent between seven and nine billion dollars annually (Kraar 1).

Never one to miss an opportunity, in 1957, Gilbert published a book called *Advertising and Marketing to Young People* that encouraged advertisers to develop specific strategies that would allow them to speak directly to this coveted demographic, and these firms wasted little time in attempting to earn teenage loyalties to the brands that they were promoting. Thus a new, more manipulative form of advertising was born, designed to appeal to the pathos of an adolescent mind. In August that same year, *American Bandstand* starring Dick Clark made its national television debut, which inundated its teenage audiences with paid advertisements targeted directly at them. Both the show and the marketing campaigns that kept it on the air were unmitigated successes (Broven 419).

As movie studios struggled to reclaim audiences in postwar America, they too learned to capitalize on this demographic and made movies that were geared toward the younger generation. While the comedies of the early and mid-1950s appear to have been made primarily for an older audience, as many of these films referenced the war in one way or another, by the end of the decade, teenagers were watching films that aligned with their comedic sensibilities. Arguably, these were the same sensibilities that they had developed as children, at least in part, by watching cartoons produced by Warner Brothers and Walt Disney. With this in mind, as I shall explain, director Frank Tashlin's career developed parallel with the tastes of the generation first acquainted with his work.

In the 1930s and early forties, Tashlin worked in animation, where he wrote, directed and produced *Looney Tunes* shorts starring Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig. He was also briefly

employed by Disney, where he helped organize the animators to form a labor union, which then went on strike in 1941. This led to his return to Warner Brothers, where he continued to make *Looney Tunes* shorts while also working on propaganda films for the U.S. government, including the *Private Snafu* series, which was a collaboration between himself, Frank Capra and Theodore Geisel, later known to the world as Dr. Seuss (Tasker).

Among the notable Warner Brothers cartoons that Tashlin made during this period was “The Swooner Crooner” in 1944, which mocked women defense workers through representations of chickens laying eggs on a factory farm. When the hens are mesmerized by two crooning roosters in the mold of Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, first they stop producing eggs altogether, but then the sexually charged performances of the roosters stimulate the chickens to overproduce. At the end, even Porky Pig is swooned over by their performances and starts laying eggs, arguably a nod to some of the anxieties that were common at the time about redefining gender identities. These were anxieties upon which Jerry Lewis, with whom Tashlin would later collaborate extensively, built his entire career — first as the clownish foil to Dean Martin and later as the effeminate man-child. “The Swooner Crooner” was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Short Subject, Cartoons, but it lost to a Tom and Jerry short called “Mouse Trouble,” a slapstick comedy about a working-class house cat who predictably dies in pursuit of an impossible goal.

In 1946, Tashlin turned his attention to writing what would become a series of children’s books, beginning with *The Bear that Wasn’t*, a story about a bear who learns to conform to the beliefs of others that he really is just an exceptionally hairy human being who needs to go to work and be an active member of society. By the end of the book, when he returns to his cave to

hibernate, even he no longer believes that he is a bear. This could certainly be read as a metaphor for the fact that Tashlin himself was struggling to find his place in postwar America. After this project, he briefly returned to animation and made an eighteen minute stop-motion film called *The Way of Peace*, which was a parable about a Christian apocalypse brought about through nuclear warfare. Nothing about it was intended to evoke laughter.

In 1950, as many of his contemporaries in the motion picture industry were being interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, Tashlin wrote *The 'Possum That Didn't*, another children's book, this one about a group of picnickers who discover an opossum hanging upside down from a tree and mistake his smile for a frown, so they take him into the city where they teach him the joys of consumerism. This makes him sad, which they mistake for a smile, and so the picnickers live happily ever after. One can only speculate what inspired Tashlin to write this, but it bears a notable resemblance to his career in animation. That is, in making other people laugh, he made himself miserable. Tashlin then wrote the final book of the series in 1951, called *The World That Isn't*, which is a nihilistic children's book about nuclear obliteration. According to Tashlin archivist Howard Prouty, "This is not a book that any rational parent would read to their child" (Tasker 242).

That same year, he was hired to replace director Sidney Lanfield on the Bob Hope vehicle *The Lemon Drop Kid*, marking his directorial debut in live-action feature films. It has often been said of Frank Tashlin that his cartoons were like live action and his live-action films were like cartoons (Tasker 241). Indeed, as he continued to work as a feature film director, his movies maintained a style and aesthetic that were reminiscent of his earlier work in terms of their

frenetic energy and characterizations that bordered on caricatures. Tashlin had a tendency to exaggerate reality to the point of decontextualizing it, thus rendering it cartoonish and absurd.

In 1956, he directed *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts*, a movie about a discharged serviceman who intends to re-enlist but fails the physical because of a bad knee. Meanwhile, his wife also enlists so that they can be together, but she passes the medical exam, leaving him relegated to the status of “house husband.” Unhappy with this arrangement, he flies to Hawaii in an attempt to get her discharged. His plan backfires, but in the meantime, his knee heals, he is called back to active duty, and his wife is honorably discharged because she is now pregnant. Once again, the gendered American Dream has been realized on-screen and presented as a shining example to moviegoers. Despite the lukewarm reviews that this film received from critics, it proved to be one of the most successful comedies of that year (*Hollywood Reporter*).

For Tashlin’s next project, which was also produced in 1956, he turned his attention to this emerging youth market that was being heralded by Gilbert. *The Girl Can’t Help It* is about a washed up talent agent, played by character actor Tom Ewell, who is hired by a mobster for the purpose of transforming the gangster’s girlfriend, played by Jayne Mansfield, into a singing star. The problem is that she has no desire to be a star, as she claims that she would rather be a homemaker who cooks meals for her husband. This characterization clearly echoed some of the more reactionary sentiments toward feminism at that time. The agent also learns that she has no singing talent, thereby complicating his dramatic goal of producing her as a celebrity in order to achieve his American Dream of financial success. Per the gangster’s request, the agent remedies her lack of ability by introducing her to the world of rock and roll, where she (and the audience) is reminded that a trained voice is not a requisite to stardom.

Through these remarks, this movie lampoons this style of music that was just beginning to find its way into suburban white America. At the same time, *The Girl Can't Help It* also contains several performances by popular contemporary rock and roll bands, an element of the film that was used to help market it to younger audiences. By both parodying and celebrating this kind of music, it makes the movie feel somewhat disjointed, but this approach undoubtedly served to broaden its appeal. It was able to entertain the older audiences that had seen Tashlin's work on some of Bob Hope's films, while also catering to a younger crowd who were more interested in this film for its music than for the narrative. In either case, the movie's themes were still being communicated, whether they registered consciously with the audiences or not. By the end of the film, Mansfield's character proves to have talent after all but still prefers her role as a housewife, ultimately reinforcing the notion that marriage and family are key components of the American Dream and that domesticity trumps a woman's career aspirations, even if they are not her own.

This movie is significant because it clearly had an impact on popular culture. John Lennon's biographer suggests that Lennon himself once referred to this film as "the most potent celebration of rock and roll ever captured on celluloid," and claims that it was seeing this movie that inspired Lennon to form his own rock band (Norman 99). This film also marked a turning point in Tashlin's career, not because his style had really changed all that much over the years, but because there was now a wider audience for his particular brand of comedy, a crowd comprised largely of teenagers that he was able to reach through popular music.

By the late 1950s, just as the black leather jacket was an icon for teenage rebellion, the white-collar employee was a symbol of the American Dream. Numerous polls at the time,

including those administered by Eugene Gilbert, indicated that executive status was indeed a career ambition for a majority of young men (Samuel 45). However, as cultural historian Lawrence R. Samuel points out, “Only 3 percent of all jobs could be considered ‘professional,’ meaning that many were in for a rude surprise when they graduated from college” (45). There was therefore a great deal of anxiety that arose in this precipice between desires and reality, which was particularly acute at a time when status was so important to a majority of Americans. Even as the American Dream shifted from getting rich to simply living comfortably, for many, their opportunities fell short of their goals by a rather wide margin. Success therefore came to be measured relative to one’s neighbors and coworkers rather than as an absolute. Keeping up with the Joneses became a national pastime.

Capitalizing on this anxiety, Frank Tashlin’s comedy *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* is yet another movie from the era that was loosely based on a popular stage play, although Tashlin took numerous liberties with the original script, including tacking on a first act featuring the protagonist’s teenage daughter to serve as a point-of-view character for the younger audience. *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* was the top grossing comedic film of 1957 and the seventh highest grossing film of that year, taking in nearly five times its production budget (IMDb). This movie was also inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress on December 27, 2000 for its “cultural significance,” and around the time of its release, Jean-Luc Godard wrote an article in the influential French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in which he boldly suggested that the term “Chaplinesque” be henceforth referred to as “Tashlinesque.” Godard would later argue that Tashlin’s collaborations with Jerry Lewis were particularly brilliant (Seife).

Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? is fundamentally a satire of television advertising and fan culture. It opens with a series of TV commercial parodies, and at one point in the movie, the main character even interrupts the narrative and breaks the fourth wall to tell viewers, “Ladies and gentlemen, this break in our motion picture is made out of respect for the TV fans in our audience, who are accustomed to constant interruptions in their programs for messages from sponsors. We want all you TV fans to feel at home and not forget the thrill you get watching television on your big twenty-one inch screens.” This was, of course, a not-so-subtle reminder of the ever-heightening competition between these two forms of entertainment.

The plot of the film follows Rockwell P. Hunter, played by Tony Randall, who is a low-level employee of the La Salle advertising agency. Like so many people who saw this movie in its original theatrical run, he dreams of climbing the corporate ladder, which is complicated by his persistent fear that he may be fired at any moment. In a bid to prevent losing an account with their biggest client, Stay-Put Lipstick, and to save his job in the process, he proposes that they hire the popular actress Rita Marlowe, played by Jayne Mansfield, to endorse their product. Her character is, in many ways, a parody of the character she played in *The Girl Can't Help It*, which is even referenced by Tony Randall at the beginning of the film. When she agrees to sign on with Stay-Put on the condition that Rock pretend to be her “Lover Doll” in order to evoke jealousy in her ex-boyfriend, fictional television actor Bobo Branigansky, Rock quickly ascends the ranks at La Salle due to his sudden popularity in the media.

When Rock is called into the company president's office, Mr. La Salle confides in Rock that he is, “Frightened. Frightened because I'm a success by the dubious route of inheritance. Being the son of an illustrious parent is far from an easy road, Mr. Hunter. You see, Mr. Hunter,

I'm constantly on my mettle trying to prove I'm as worthy as my illustrious parent. And behind the big desk, camouflaged behind the custom tailored gray flannel, I pretend I am." In his eyes, only a self-made man is of any worth. He then confesses to Rock that his true ambition in life was to be a horticulturist. "My success would have been taking first prize at a flower show, perhaps having a new rose named after me." His goals are thus presented as being more modest than the expectations he inherited.

Shortly after this meeting, Rock is unexpectedly promoted, which grants him access to the "executive powder room," ironically referred to as such even though all of the executives at the La Salle company are men. When Rufus, a fellow executive, gives him the golden key, which is adorned with a jewel encrusted crown, Rock says that he wishes that Jenny, his former fiancée, could be there, to which Rufus reminds him, "No women allowed." In the context of this film, Rufus is referring to both the bathroom and the executive ranks of the company, an accurate reflection of corporate America in the 1950s.

Meanwhile, as the charade of his fake relationship with Rita comes to dominate his life, Rock is ultimately promoted to company president, at which point he is provided with his own private bathroom. "You're in solitary from here on," Rufus tells him. Much like the key that came with his other promotion, these marks of status are seen as highly significant to the protagonist, even as the audience is led to find humor in the triviality of these gestures. As film scholar Ed Sikov notes in his discussion of this film, with which he draws parallels to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, "Given two of the central, flip-sided obsessions of America in the fifties — enforced domesticity and its simultaneous Freudian undercutting — the era's sense of good and bad taste couldn't have found a more appropriate site of terror and laughter than the

bathroom” (235). Sikov then describes the company restrooms in Tashlin’s film as “an idiot’s paradise... a sublime (*read* sublimated) space, Rock’s bathroom is idealized and therefore sacrosanct” (236). The joke here is that Rock should not be so excited about a bathroom, which is a meaningless token of status. The implications, however, are that the benefits of moving up the corporate ladder in the real world are equally void of significance. Tashlin thus invites the audience to see the futility of blind ambition.

Indeed, Rock soon comes to the realization that he would actually be happier without all the empty desires that drove him here. At the end of the movie, he reunites with Jenny and tells her, “All my life, I’ve fought against being a failure. And I didn’t have sense enough to know that I’m not a failure. I’m the largest success there is. I’m an average guy, and all us average guys are successes. We run the works! Not the big guy behind the big desk. He’s knocking himself out trying to figure out how to please us. Please you and me and all the other usses like us.” Here, Rock is making the case that it is better to conform to a middle-class existence, because beyond that, there is little that can truly make a person happy. He continues, “Who do they try to sell with advertising? Nobody but us. Who gives a television series a good Trendex? We do.” Rock then draws a direct parallel between consumerism and democracy by asking, “Who elects the presidents? Nobody but us.” After boldly declaring the virtues of an ordinary life, he asks Jenny to marry him that day. She agrees, and so they leave it all behind to pursue what Rock has always wanted to do for a living, which is to raise chickens in the country, even though, as he claimed earlier in the film, “It just didn’t seem important enough.”

This character arc, when taken into consideration with the cultural resonance of this film, reflects the notion that the American Dream was continuing to evolve from a desire to be rich to

an aspiration to work a white-collar job to simply living a life that conformed to certain social standards that included marriage, children and a steady job. Further, as articulated in the final line of the movie, “We learned that success is just the art of being happy, and being happy is... well, being happy is just the living end.” This was a marked shift from the conformity that Elwood stood in opposition to in *Harvey* or that was celebrated as the new cultural norm in *Father of the Bride*.

Success as defined by personal happiness, at least for those who were afforded the opportunity, was a new kind of American Dream that would continue to take shape in the decades that followed. As we shall see, it is precisely the mutability of this myth that makes it a dream as opposed to a memory.

CHAPTER III: WAKE UP! (1963-1979)**The Times They are A-Changin’**

By the early 1960s, the gendered, family-oriented American Dream of middle-class suburban existence was eroding away in the public consciousness and being replaced with a more egocentric version of the Dream that implied the promise of another kind of opportunity. The United States was reimagined as a place where, hypothetically, anyone could attain personal happiness. For many, the Dream took on a spiritual or psychological connotation, whether this meant identifying with the growing youth counter-culture movement and the idea of finding one’s self, or subscribing, as a growing number of people did, to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and its ultimate goal of self-actualization. The Dream was in the mind of the beholder.

Upward mobility was no longer seen as a promise, but as a possibility. For many Americans, the concept of the good life had come to include getting as rich possible as quickly as possible and never having to work again. This idea gained traction because it was widely believed that it could happen to anybody. Clearly, this was quite different from the understanding held by the previous generation, who maintained their belief that the only path to upward mobility was through hard work and perseverance, and that the basic unit of a productive civilization was the family, not the individual.

For reasons that I discuss in this chapter, this newest iteration of the American Dream speaks of the idealism held by many young people at this time, but it is also marked with a certain degree of existential anxiety, and this contrast between their aspirations versus those of their parents illustrates a stark ideological divide between these generations. These differences surfaced throughout popular culture at the time, and these competing visions of the American

Dream became a significant component of the national discourse. As one generation renegotiated the terms of their social contract, the American Dream adapted to reflect the changing times, just as it has since its inception. Meanwhile, as restrictions were gradually lifted in terms of what could be shown on screen, comedic films proved to be a remarkably effective medium for communicating these ideas for mass consumption.

In this chapter, I examine how the film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (Kramer, 1963) offers a scathing critique of this new understanding of the American Dream. The immense popularity of this movie suggests that its themes resonated with a wide audience, and the timing of its release evidences the beginning of an ideological shift in mainstream American culture. I then consider the ways in which this renegotiation of our national ethos is communicated in *The Graduate* (Nichols, 1967), which I explain is fundamentally about choosing the values of one's own generation over another. This film also proved to be incredibly successful, particularly with a younger audience. I then shift gears and discuss how the Dream has been racialized for the sake of maintaining existing power structures, thereby limiting access for many to the promise of upward mobility. The 1974 movie *Blazing Saddles* exemplifies this point and makes important contributions to the discourse of institutional racism. Finally, through a close reading and narrative analysis of the 1979 comedy *The Jerk*, I discuss how for many Americans, belief in the Dream had deteriorated into a toxic stew of cynicism and disillusionment, which I argue is the central point of this film and explains why it was able to find and entertain the vast audiences that it did. Steve Martin's particular brand of nihilistic absurdism spoke to the younger crowd, and by the end of the 1970s, the shape and the substance of the American Dream were once again up for debate.

Free Enterprise

In the United States Presidential election of 1960, John F. Kennedy won the popular vote by a margin of less than one fifth of a percent. In the electoral college, it was Illinois and Texas that put him over the top. The race was so close that Nixon did not concede until the following day, after which Republicans requested recounts in eleven states, claiming rampant voter fraud. Many commentators have argued that Kennedy only won because he appeared more photogenic than his rival in the first ever televised debates, which was watched by over seventy million viewers and gave him a four percent boost in the polls (Warren). According to historian H.W. Brands, “Nixon seemed part of the tired status quo, while Kennedy cast himself as the vigorous exemplar of the new generation” (103). It is also unlikely that he would have carried Texas or much of the deep South had his running mate not been a fixture in Dixieland politics.

Despite these factors, in his inaugural address, Kennedy boldly proclaimed that, “The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed.” He was, of course, referring to his own generation, not to the young people who were largely responsible for his recent electoral victory. Kennedy then famously concluded his speech with a reminder that success in the Cold War era is only attainable when an engaged citizenry puts their country before themselves. “Ask not,” and all that.

Kennedy inherited the ill-advised plan to invade the Bay of Pigs in Cuba from his predecessor, as well as the military effort in Vietnam to suppress the communist revolution. He had also won the election on a platform of being tougher on issues of foreign policy than the

incumbent party, and Kennedy held true to his campaign promise to contain the spread of communism in the eastern hemisphere. When he took office, the U.S. had about nine hundred troops stationed in Vietnam, and by late 1963, there were over sixteen thousand (americanwarlibrary.com). One generation inherited our public institutions as another generation was sent off to war. As Kurt Vonnegut would soon write, “So it goes.”

Meanwhile, Berlin was a city divided, nearly serving as a flashpoint for direct military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The wall that separated East from West was built just months after Kennedy took office, and in October of 1961, what began as an armed escort for an American diplomat in East Berlin soon escalated to a military standoff between U.S. and Soviet tanks positioned just seventy-five meters from one another on either side of Checkpoint Charlie (Harrison 214). Both sides had orders to fire if fired upon; it is therefore no exaggeration to say that something as simple as a hair-trigger could have been the catalyst for World War III. Even after sixteen hours, when the situation was finally resolved diplomatically, tensions lingered for months to come as Khrushchev and Kennedy exchanged veiled threats wrapped in increasingly hostile rhetoric. The world remained on edge.

The following year, in what many have interpreted as an attempt to recover lost ground in the ongoing battle against communism, the CIA staged a failed coup of Fidel Castro by training and arming fourteen hundred Cuban rebels for the now infamous Bay of Pigs fiasco. When the siege was launched, the rebels were almost immediately overwhelmed by the Cuban military. To make matters worse, U.S. air support stationed in Nicaragua failed to account for the time difference and arrived an hour late, at which point almost all of the rebel soldiers had either been captured or killed. The 1,209 survivors were then held for ransom in exchange for about fifty-

three million dollars worth of food and medicine, which the United States meekly obliged, but only after about twenty months of negotiation (Rasenberger).

To Khrushchev, and indeed, to much of the world, the Bay of Pigs fiasco made Kennedy appear foolish and inexperienced in matters of international relations. In this sense, it seems that the youthful persona that got him elected was now his biggest weakness. This impression was only reinforced at the Vienna Summit, where he and Khrushchev argued about the fate of Berlin and Laos. Even Kennedy knew that the invasion of Cuba was an unmitigated disaster, a wrong move that only heightened tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union (Kempe). As the Cold War continued to heat up, total nuclear annihilation was no longer just a vague hypothetical in the minds of many Americans. It was now a very real possibility.

For fourteen days in October of 1962, such a scenario seemed all but imminent. When U.S. spy planes collected evidence of Soviet-built medium range ballistic missiles in Cuba, the world's two nuclear powers nearly took arms (Kempe). The crisis quickly escalated and humanity soon found itself looking down the barrel of a loaded gun. Kennedy and Khrushchev had their fingers on the trigger and each was fully prepared to counterattack, but to the benefit of everyone, that first shot was never fired.

However, one should not underestimate the significance of this event upon an entire generation of Americans. The Cuban Missile Crisis was not only a moment of truth for humanity, but it fundamentally changed the way many Americans thought about their future prospects. This was a generation who grew up participating in "duck and cover" drills throughout elementary school, who now faced the very real threat of absolute global destruction. Armed only with the knowledge that the world could end at any moment, it stands to reason that many Americans at

this time also became more myopic in their ambitions. “Live for the moment” was thus more than a mantra. It was now a principle component of the American Dream.

A corollary of this ethos was the notion that every American deserved the opportunity to obtain wealth as quickly as possible — to enjoy it while they can. Opportunity was no longer thought of so much in terms of inclusion but in the idea that it could potentially be achieved by nearly anyone. The next big thing could happen anywhere at any time to any person, whether that meant inventing a best-selling gadget, becoming an instant celebrity or winning enormous cash prizes on television game shows. Throughout this period, opportunity, as a crucial element of the American Dream, was increasingly thought of as a game of chance.

According to historian Jim Cullen, this new version of the Dream, “does not celebrate the idea of hard work, instead enshrining effortless attainment as the essence of its appeal.” He then notes, “It’s less about accumulating riches than about living off their fruits, and its symbolic location is not the bank but the beach” (160). As people sought novel methods for obtaining sudden wealth, the American Dream came to mean that with a little bit of luck and perhaps a clever idea, you too could get yours. This idea remained an illusory beacon of hope among an increasingly cynical society. American culture was rapidly changing, and so if the Dream was to survive, it too had to adapt.

The 1963 film *It’s A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* reflects this shifting perception, as it is fundamentally a satire of white, middle-class men and their ultimately foolish pursuit of unearned, tax-free wealth. As I argue in the pages that follow, at its core, this wildly successful comedy is very much a critique of this new American Dream, situating it as the cause of so much madness. MAD was also the acronym in common parlance for mutually assured destruction.

Director Stanley Kramer had been known up to this point in his career for making so-called “issue” films. Even his obituary in the New York Times referred to him as a “Filmmaker With [a] Social Bent,” and in 1949, Kramer himself noted, “I firmly believe that the independent producer today can select material which will return vitality to the motion picture industry. I think people are completely fed up with the pattern. The independent has simply got to destroy that pattern. If our industry is to flourish, we must break away from formula thinking” (Lyman). He was never one to shy away from disrupting the status quo, and his films often served as precursors to the acts of social progress that they depicted.

High Noon (1952), which he produced but did not direct, was a western that also served as a thinly-veiled critique of McCarthyism. It is about a U.S. Marshal who stands by his morals in spite of the cowardly townsfolk who allow themselves to be manipulated through their irrational fears. His next film, *The Defiant Ones* (1958) was the story of two escaped convicts who overcome their racial differences to find a common humanity, an obvious allegory for the fledgling Civil Rights movement. These men are literally chained together throughout the film, forcing them to work together in order to survive. Kramer’s next movie, *On the Beach* (1959), was about the devastation of nuclear war, a harrowing glimpse at the consequences of mutually assured destruction, and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) was a dramatization of the Nazi war trials, a reminder about the dangers of fascism and in following orders that contradict one’s conscience.

At the 1961 Academy Awards Ceremony, Kramer was awarded the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award for his contributions to the art of cinema over the course of his early career. Prior to that, he had been nominated twice for Best Director and three times for Best Picture, but

throughout his life, this honorary statuette was the only Academy Award that he ever received. That same year, he also received a noncompetitive Golden Globe award for “Artistic Integrity” because of his willingness to take on controversial social issues in his films (Kramer and Coffey).

It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World was the first comedy that he ever directed and one of the only. In fact, the original working title of the film was *Something a Little Less Serious*, and Kramer himself claimed that it was meant to be a departure from his usual fare. He wanted to make “a comedy to end all comedies” (Miller). However, as I discuss, the themes of this film articulate common concerns about prevailing issues of the day, and the humor very much spoke to specific anxieties about this newly imagined American Dream.

Increasingly, it seems, people asked not what they could do for their country, nor what their country could do for them, but rather, what they could do for themselves. Meanwhile, citizens were haunted by the constant fear of dying in the name of their nation, whether by being drafted to fight in Vietnam or through nuclear war with the Soviets. It was a dangerous time to be an American, and it seemed to many that the old rules of citizenry no longer applied. Suburbanites who had found patriotism by way of xenophobia and conformity throughout the fifties were now stocking their bomb shelters with supplies.

An episode of *The Twilight Zone* that first aired on September 29, 1961, highlighted this anxiety with remarkable precision. Rod Serling opens “The Shelter,” which he also wrote, with the following narration: “What you are about to watch is a nightmare. It is not meant to be prophetic. It need not happen. It’s the fervent and urgent prayer of all men of goodwill that it never shall happen. But in this place, in this moment, it does happen. This is the Twilight

Zone...” The story that follows is about a group of neighbors who fight each other for the limited space and supplies in one man’s bomb shelter after a false alarm prompts them to think that a nuclear attack from the Soviets is imminent. The anxiety it projects is palpable.

People needed to laugh, and it is indeed significant that one of the primary outlets for that laughter was a nearly three-hour satire of American greed. It would be another year yet before Stanley Kubrick addresses Cold War hysteria directly in *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, which is not so much about the death of the American Dream directly as it is about the end of the United States as a political entity, and so — important film though it is — it does not warrant inclusion in this project. *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, on the other hand, is indeed about the changing shape of the American Dream.

It was written by the husband and wife team of William and Tania Rose. He was an American who, as a young man, went to serve in the Finnish Army when the Soviet Union invaded their country. A few years later, he joined the Canadian army to fight the Germans in World War II because the U.S. had not yet entered the war. It seems reasonable to infer that he was eager to fight. This spirit later found expression through screenwriting. Throughout the war, Rose was stationed in England, during which he spent some of his deployment money on a training course to teach him how to write films, which he later did successfully in the U.K. for nearly twenty years (Sellers). During the war, he also married a British woman named Tania Price, who served as a Labor member of Parliament for nearly thirty years, as well as the head of the Race Relations Board (Lentz 304). William Rose only returned to the country of his birth so that he and Tania could make this movie. It was the first screenplay that they wrote together

while living in the United States, where she had never lived and where he had not resided since before the war (Sellers).

With this in mind, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* is in many ways told from the perspective of an expatriate and a foreigner whose perception of the United States paints it as a strange, crude place that had changed dramatically in the past twenty years, creating a striking incongruity between their understanding of the American Dream and its manifestation in contemporary society. In this sense, it would seem that the point-of-view of the screenwriters was most closely aligned with the British character of J. Algernon Hawthorne, who offers a lengthy and impassioned response when asked whether or not he has something against America:

“Against it? I should be positively astounded to hear of anything that could be said for it. Why, the whole bloody place is the most unspeakable matriarchy in the whole history of civilization! Look at yourself and the way your wife and her strumpet of a mother push you through the hoop! As far as I can see, American men have been totally emasculated. They're like slaves! They die like flies from coronary thrombosis, while their women sit under hairdryers, eating chocolates and arranging for every second Tuesday to be some sort of Mother's Day! And this positively infantile preoccupation with bosoms! In all my time in this wretched Godforsaken country, the one thing that has appalled me most of all is this this preposterous preoccupation with bosoms. Don't you realize they have become the dominant theme in American culture: in literature, advertising and all fields of entertainment and everything. I'll wager you anything you like that if

American women stopped wearing brassieres, your whole national economy would collapse overnight.”

This idea of men being emasculated by women is a recurring theme in this film, arguably a byproduct of the gendered American Dream discussed in chapter two as it was rapidly being redefined in the public imagination. Increasingly, the family unit was seen less as a component of the Dream as it was a hindrance to its attainment for white, middle-class men who may have resented the financial burden of supporting the consumption habits of their wives and children. As a work of social satire, it is therefore no coincidence that *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* draws a vast majority of its humor from middle-class, middle-aged white men behaving foolishly and indignantly, motivated only by their own self-interests, while the women in this movie conform to crude stereotypes: a comical deconstruction of what the gendered American Dream discussed in chapter two had become. It is precisely this contrast between ambition and opportunity that drives the narrative forward and sustains the audience's interest in what might otherwise seem like a very long movie.

As a cinematic experience, *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* is pure spectacle, fully designed to engross its audience. In fact, it is the only comedy ever shot in Cinerama and the first film to ever do so with only one camera. Rather than use three cameras to capture the enormous 2.59:1 aspect ratio, the cinematographer implemented a prismatic lens with which to compress the image onto a single 70mm film negative. This original version of the film clocked in at 186 minutes and could only be played at the handful of theaters that had the proper equipment, whereas the 35mm prints that went to most theaters had a running time of just over two and a

half hours (Lev 115). Some critics felt that even this was too long, but audiences ate it up. According to a columnist at the New York Times, “*It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* is everything, down to redundant, that its extravagant title suggests” (Crowther).

The 154-minute version of the film opens with the song “It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World,” which runs for three minutes accompanied by a black screen. This was the cue for the audience to take their seats and let the experience begin, and it is followed by four full minutes of animated titles that were created by the many of the same people who made *A Charlie Brown Christmas* two years later. During this sequence, the animated figures are constantly rearranging the order of the actors’ names. Some film historians claim that this was the result of negotiations with the numerous A-list stars who appear in the film, but for reasons that I will explain shortly, I believe that this cinematic sleight of hand was also meant to obfuscate the audience’s sense as to who the main character of this film might be.

The title sequence ends with a smash cut to a car chase on a winding mountain road. The vehicles erratically weave through oncoming traffic until one of them misses a sharp turn and plunges off a cliff. Four cars arrive on the scene almost immediately: the first is a convertible driven by J. Russell Finch, a failed entrepreneur played by Milton Berle. He is accompanied by his nagging but morally superior wife Emmeline, played by Dorothy Provine, and his caricature of a mother-in-law, Mrs. Marcus, played by Ethel Merman. According to Kramer, her role was originally written for Groucho Marx, who declined the part, so he asked the Roses to change the gender and disposition of the role. Immediately behind Finch, the second vehicle that arrives at the accident site is a truck driven by professional furniture mover Lennie Pike, played by Jonathan Winters in his film debut, while the third car is a sedan driven by a dentist named

Melville Crump, played Sid Caesar, accompanied by his wife Monica, played by Edie Adams. They are currently on their second honeymoon. Finally, the fourth vehicle is a Volkswagon Beetle driven by Ding Bell, played by Mickey Rooney, who is accompanied by Benjy Benjamin, played by Buddy Hackett. They are two friends on their way to Las Vegas, presumably in pursuit of fast riches. All four cars arrive on the scene at more or less the same time.

From the very beginning, the women are told to stay behind while the five men go down to check on the survivor. Beside the wrecked car, they find a man named Smiler Grogan, played by Jimmy Durante, who tells them about three hundred and fifty thousand dollars of stolen money that he claims is buried in Rosita Beach State Park under a big W. "You just drive down and dig it up. Dig it all up," he tells them before breaking into an exaggerated cough. "And then, and then you fix yourselves all up. Fix yourselves all up. Walk down the street like a king, back to the old neighborhood. See the fellas. The dames. The dames all with a big hello, a big hello for old Smila'. Good old Smila', everybody's friend. Everybody's friend..."

As Grogan's consciousness seems to slip away, we can see in the expressions of everyone else who is present that they all like the idea of having this money for themselves, as well as the perceived popularity that apparently comes with it. Just when they think Smiler is dead, he suddenly sits erect and says, "Aunt Belle, I didn't mean to do it. Please, please say it don't make any difference, Aunt Belle. Please, you gotta say, you gotta tell me it don't make any difference." Concerned, Ding Bell shouts, "For heaven's sake, tell him!" After a moment, Crump says, "It don't make any difference." With that, the old guy smiles, then keels over and literally kicks a bucket, a visual gag that reminds the audience to not take his death too seriously. Although we never learn who Aunt Belle is, by the end of the movie, of course, we do learn that Grogan was

actually right, that the futile pursuit of easy money fails to make any positive difference in any of their lives, and in fact, they would have been better off had they not pursued it at all.

When the police show up at the scene of the accident, the central characters all make excuses about why they have to go and none of them say anything about the money. Once on the road, of course, they soon realize that they all have the same idea about going to Santa Rosita, so they pull over and try to work out a reasonable deal about how to divide the money fairly if any of them happens to find it. However, none of the proposed arrangements makes everybody happy. As Crump does the math, Pike chimes in. As this film's representative of the blue-collar middle class, he feels cheated by the way that these figures are being calculated. "Then what happens next? I'll tell you what happens: Then they all decide that I'm supposed to get a smaller share! That I'm somebody extra special stupid, or something! That they don't even care if it's a democracy! And in a democracy, it don't matter how stupid you are, you still get an equal share!"

When Crump goes on to suggest that they would all be better off not claiming this money on their taxes, Pike sees that as equivalent to stealing from the government. "Everybody has to pay taxes," he says, "Even businessmen who rob and steal and cheat people every day, even they have to pay taxes." Indeed, there appears to be an inverse correlation in this film between one's position within the middle class and the extent of that person's ethics. When the characters cannot agree on a solution, Benjy Benjamin says, "Look, we figured it seventeen different ways, and every time we figured it, it was no good because no matter how we figured it, somebody didn't like the way we figured it. So now there's only one way to figure it, and that is every man, including the old bag [Mrs. Marcus], for himself." Ding Bell then adds, "So good luck, and let the best man win."

Fundamentally, this is indeed a contest between a steadily increasing number of white, middle-class men. Each character represents a different stratum of the middle class, and they have all have proven themselves unable to achieve the traditional American Dream of upward mobility through their own labor and perseverance. Finch is a small business owner whose edible seaweed company failed to take off as he thought it would, a fact that his mother-in-law is keen to remind him at any opportunity. Melville Crumb is a dentist who is criticized at multiple points in the film for not being a real doctor, and Pike seems to believe that his hard work and honesty will get him ahead in life, even though this has yet to materialize. Meanwhile, Benjamin and Ding Bell are headed to Vegas, presumably with the hopes of attaining quick wealth with the absolute least effort necessary. As Jim Cullen notes in *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, “Not until 1945 did gambling replace the [Hoover] Dam as the principle source of tourist traffic” (165). In many ways, postwar Vegas can be thought of as a synecdoche of this new American Dream.

Although none of the characters that I have described really stands out as the protagonist of this film, Captain T.G. Culpepper, played by Spencer Tracy, in many ways serves as the point-of-view character for the audience, as he witnesses these men behaving foolishly throughout the narrative, repeatedly breaking the law in pursuit of this money that he too hopes to keep for himself. Captain Culpepper, however, is made to seem justified in his actions, as he is presented as a good cop who played by the rules throughout his career, and now that he is close to retirement, it looks as though he might not have the pension that he feels is rightfully owed to him. That said, returning to my earlier point, I believe that the reason that no particular character stands out as the protagonist of this movie is because the filmmakers wanted the audience to

choose their horse, so to speak. That is, people likely rooted for whomever seemed to be the most closely aligned with their particular positions within the broad spectrum of the middle class, and none of these characters is presented as having any clear advantage over the others at any point in the film.

Meanwhile, virtually every character who is not a middle-class white man is presented as somewhat of a caricature. The only wealthy character in the film is portrayed as a dangerously incompetent alcoholic who passes out drunk while trying to fly his own plane, while the younger generation, represented by Mrs. Marcus's son Sylvester and Captain Culpepper's daughter, are characterized as lazy and irrational. Women in this movie are commonly portrayed as nagging harpies, and the only African-American actors who even appear in this film are driven off the road by the main characters for the sake of cheap laughs or are thrown into the arms of a visibly surprised statue of Abraham Lincoln at the end of the movie. Stanley Kramer, William and Tania Rose would arguably make up for this years later with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1968), the only other comedy that Kramer made and which they all worked on together, a controversial and critically-acclaimed film about interracial marriage.

At the end of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, of course, the central characters do find the money, but as they try to evade the police, they soon find themselves hanging from a fire escape, where someone accidentally opens the suitcase, causing the money to rain down on the faceless crowd below. Ultimately, the money finds its way into the hands of ordinary citizens, the message being that it is better to spread the wealth. Meanwhile, the characters who succumbed to their greed all end up in the hospital ward of the state prison.

Suspended in a body cast, a disgraced Captain Culpepper laments, “My wife is divorcing me, my mother-in-law is suing me for damages, my daughter is applying to the courts to have her name changed, my pension has been revoked, and the only reason that you ten idiots will very likely get off lightly is because the judge will have me up there to throw the book at. I’d like to think that sometime, maybe ten or twenty years from now there’ll be something I can laugh at. Anything...” At that moment, Mrs. Marcus enters the room, yelling at all of them. In the middle of her tirade, she slips on Benjy Benjamin’s banana peel, causing everyone else, including Captain Culpepper, to break into hysterical laughter. Although they lost the money and are now hospitalized and facing criminal charges, the one thing that unites them is the fact that they find humor in the pratfalls of the film’s comic foil. In a similar respect, the underlying theme of the movie seems to be that the American Dream may be a joke, but at least we can laugh about it... at a woman’s expense, no less.

Different iterations of this same basic premise have been made into several feature films in the decades since, and each version features a very different ending that offers key insights into the time in which it was made. *Scavenger Hunt* (Schultz, 1979), for example, also follows the tribulations of an ensemble cast who are engaged in a heated race to find hidden wealth and stars Dirk Benedict, known at the time as Starbuck in the popular TV show *Battlestar Galactica* and later as “Faceman” in *The A-Team*. At the end of *Scavenger Hunt*, the virtuous characters all share the money, while the corrupt antagonists get nothing, arguably a catharsis for anyone who played by the rules and still could not get ahead because of the changing shape of the world economy in the late 1970s.

Similarly reflecting the era in which it was made, in *Million Dollar Mystery* (Fleischer, 1987), a group of mismatched characters are tasked with finding four million dollars. In the course of the narrative, despite a number of false leads, they eventually locate three million of it, leaving the remaining million dollars to be awarded as part of a promotional tie-in with Glad-Lock bags. The entire movie was essentially a ninety-five minute commercial for a specific brand of housewares products. It even starred Tom Bosley, who was the official spokesperson for this company for over a decade. Reflective of the pro-corporate mentality that dominated the eighties, this movie took product placement to an entirely different level, as its *raison d'être* was to sell plastic bags. Upon its release, a film critic at the New York Times referred to it as “an afterthought” and a “harmless copy of *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*” (Maslin).

In a similar respect, the 2001 movie *Rat Race*, directed by Jerry Zucker and starring Cuba Gooding, Jr, Rowan Atkinson and Whoopi Goldberg, follows a remarkably familiar storyline about a collection of strangers who find themselves engaged in competition with one another in search of a large sum of money. When this movie came out, Stanley Kramer's widow Karen even did an interview with *People* magazine in which she claimed that, “The sad truth is that Mr. Zucker tried to build a better mousetrap and failed — exploiting a brilliant classic that was the daddy of its kind to create an inferior, unauthorized imitation” (Silverman). Although the film does contain numerous similarities to its antecedent, in the dramatic conclusion of *Rat Race*, the characters donate all of the money to charity at a Smash Mouth concert, ending in a way that only a movie made in early 2001 could possibly end. After all, not only was this the pinnacle of Smash Mouth's brief popularity, but such a resolution reflects an optimism about the future that many lost after the New York City terrorist attacks of that year.

Clearly, much like the primary cinematic texts upon which this study focuses, these movies are all very much products of the times in which they were made. However, none of them achieved anything close to the success of their predecessor. *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* was the highest grossing movie of 1963. It is listed as number forty on the American Film Institute's 100 Years...100 Laughs list and remains one of the top hundred highest earning movies of all time when adjusted for inflation (boxofficemojo.com). It was also nominated for six Academy Awards but only claimed the Oscar for Best Sound Editing.

It seems that this film resonated with audiences who recognized the greed and the absurdity in their own futile pursuit of easy money. As the country was rapidly changing, the American Dream came to mean something else to a new generation, many of whom saw where the Dream was headed and ultimately rejected that course, instead pursuing the more subjective notion of personal fulfillment over the objective appeal of instant riches. As Smiler Grogan indicated in his dying words, this movie served as a reminder that when it comes down to it, wealth did not equal happiness.

Fifteen days after the release of this film, the nation changed once again when President Kennedy, a generation's hope personified, was assassinated in Dallas. His American Dream ended in what may be the most tragic way possible, and with it, so did the Dreams of many Americans, as they plunged forward into an increasingly uncertain future. Meanwhile, in cities throughout the United States, people undoubtedly read the grim headlines in their local newspapers before turning to the movie listings, only to be reminded that it was a mad, mad, mad, mad world indeed.

This is Not Your Parents' Dream

The Vietnam conflict was the first ever televised war in which the U.S. was involved. Weekly casualty reports came out of Saigon every Thursday and American news networks were keen to keep score of the approximated death tolls on both sides. By late 1967, over twenty thousand U.S. troops had died in combat, and this figure had seen a twofold increase since the previous year. Nearly half of a million U.S. troops were now stationed in Vietnam, about a third of whom were drafted (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History).

At this point, most Americans thought that the war was a mistake, and protests were occurring on college campuses around the country. Meanwhile, images that highlighted the atrocities taking place in Southeast Asia increasingly circulated in American media, evoking a visceral response in viewers, many of whom then joined the voices of protest. Draft cards were burnt, ROTC programs were being driven out of college campuses, and young people throughout the country expressed anger at being drafted to fight in a war that many of them did not ideologically support. They vocalized their resentment of living in a country that could send them off to combat when they turned eighteen, but that did not grant them a voice in the electoral process until they turned twenty-one. A generation of Americans who were marginalized by the status quo now found their numbers approaching a critical mass (Fischer). The idea of what the United States was and could potentially be seemed up for debate, and as the voices of discontent grew louder, the counterculture movement eventually became the vocal majority, at which point even prominent military advisors acknowledged that the war in Vietnam may in fact be unwinnable.

Arguably, at no other point in the twentieth century was there such a vast ideological divide between two adjacent generations. For many of those who remembered the Second World War as a valiant fight against fascism, the Cold War was framed in a similar mentality of “us versus them,” and American involvement in Vietnam was seen as a necessary intervention in global politics. Their children, however, had come of age in the era of the American superpower, in a world that may have seemed as though it was designed just for them. Never before in American culture had children been so celebrated or sheltered, nor, as discussed in chapter two, had the concept of a teenager really existed in the public imagination until it came into being as a marketing demographic in the late 1940s and 50s. These same teenagers were now being drafted to fight that faceless enemy known only as communism.

As previously discussed, this generation grew up under the constant threat of nuclear obliteration from that same faceless enemy, so it no doubt seemed to many that any war with the Soviets, even by proxy, could be the end of it all. It also seemed illogical to a lot of Americans that we would demonize Ho Chi Minh’s plight to gain independence from colonial rule, especially considering the parallels with America’s own early history. For all of these reasons, as well as a general animosity directed toward the generation who controlled the institutions that were deciding their future, young people vocalized their unwillingness to die for a cause they did not believe in, asking instead what their country, a nation that many believed was desperately in need of a new direction, had ever done for them.

Of all of the films for which I offer analysis within the scope of this dissertation, none has received so much scholarly attention as Mike Nichols’s 1967 film *The Graduate*. Papers and books have been written about its then controversial portrayals of female sexuality (Cavell,

Stevens, et al.), as well its use of popular music — which, much like with *The Girl Can't Help It*, as discussed in chapter two, was used to help make the film appeal to a younger audience. In the pages that follow, I examine how this film illustrates the changing concept of the American Dream, as control of popular culture and the institutions of American society were wrestled from the hands of one generation to the next.

The Graduate was not only the most successful comedy of 1967, it was also the highest grossing American film of that year in terms of domestic box office receipts. When adjusted for inflation, it is the twenty-second highest earning American film of all time. It was nominated for six Academy Awards, including Best Picture, but the only Oscar that the film received was for Best Director. In Roger Ebert's original review, written when he was twenty-five years old, he proclaimed *The Graduate* to be "the funniest American film of the year," and noted that, "Dustin Hoffman is so painfully awkward and ethical that we are forced to admit we would act pretty much as he does, even in his most extreme moments." His character, Benjamin Braddock, is remarkably ordinary, which is precisely what made him a perfect stand-in for an entire generation. This movie struck a chord with audiences because young people saw something of themselves in him. As Ebert notes in the last line of his review, "Benjamin's acute honesty and embarrassment are so accurately drawn that we hardly know whether to laugh or to look inside ourselves" (Ebert, 1967).

The original theatrical poster featured the tagline, "This is Benjamin. He's a little worried about his future." That was all people needed to know about the film, because this was an anxiety with which much of the film's target audience could easily identify. The only certainty that young people had about the future was that it was not going to resemble the past. Consider that

this movie is about a young man who literally has to choose between his parents' generation and his own as he reluctantly moves forward into an adult life of overwhelming uncertainty.

In his first interaction with his father, Benjamin confides that he is indeed worried about his future. "I want it to be... different," he says, before being coerced into coming downstairs to socialize with his parents' friends, many of whom want to know his plans now that he has graduated. How exactly does he plan to pursue the American Dream of suburban existence so eagerly embraced by his parents' generation? This is the scene where Mr. McGuire takes him aside and offers him that one word of advice: plastics, a commodity that can be molded into virtually any shape and is representative of the superficial, throwaway culture that Benjamin comes to resent.

He seemingly has no friends that are his own age, at least not in Pasadena, and he is constantly alienated by the older people with whom he associates, including, of course, Mrs. Robinson. Even as they pursue their illicit affair with one another, they quickly learn that they have nothing substantive to discuss, and in fact, they have very little in common with each other beyond their mutual desire for casual sex. They do not share the same values, she forbids him from interacting with her daughter, Elaine, and Benjamin's central conflict, much like that of the generation he represents, ultimately comes down to figuring out what his values actually are and pursuing them instead the ill-conceived notion of success espoused by his parents.

By the end of the film, his relationship with Mrs. Robinson has fermented into something that they both recognize to be toxic, which is only complicated further when he escorts Elaine away from her own wedding. As they exit the church in a hurry, he locks the door with a cross. The people inside are literally trapped by their own archaic traditions and sanctimonious belief in

self-sacrifice. Having narrowly escaped them, Ben and Elaine board a city bus, taking the backseat while staring idly forward into the unknown future before them. As the past slowly disappears through the rear window, for the first time since the film began, Benjamin seems truly at ease. He may not know what the future holds, but now at least he has some idea as to what he is willing to leave behind. He laughs before his composure turns solemn.

Benjamin Braddock rejected the American Dream of his parents: graduate school, a well-paying job, a nice house in the suburbs, a family, etc., in favor of an alternative that was far less materialistic. Benjamin just wants to be happy and to have the opportunity to pursue the things that are important to him, whatever they may be, and no matter how egocentric this makes him. Throughout the film, he shows little interest in following in his parents' footsteps or accepting their generation's values, aside from taking Mr. Robinson's advice to, "Sow some wild oats," and "Have a good time."

However, as Benjamin finds his affair with Mrs. Robinson to be an emotionally empty experience, he eventually understands that he will not attain happiness through the advice of anyone who has not lived his experience. Ultimately, the message of the film appears to be that Benjamin, much like the generation that he represents, must follow his own path, a theme which is validated at the end as Elaine and Benjamin embrace the uncertainty that lies before them, for better or worse. The audience is left with an ambiguous resolution as to how this story ends, which mirrors their own vague hopes as to what shape their own American Dream might take in the coming years.

I do not believe it is a coincidence that Benjamin goes to Berkeley to find Elaine, as this was, in many ways, the epicenter of the youth counterculture movement at this time. In fact, all

of the scenes that were supposed to take place at Berkeley were actually filmed on the campus of USC, not far from where the rest of the movie was shot and is set (Whitehead). It seems that the only reason for creating the illusion that this took place at Berkeley at all was to cash in on some of the cultural currency that surrounded that particular institution in the late 1960s.

This film was released theatrically in the summer of 1967, commonly referred to as the “Summer of Love,” during which nearby San Francisco was the site of an anti-war protest that involved more than ten thousand activists. Singer Joan Baez was arrested at this event, as were dozens of others. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Florence Beaumont, a mother of two, lit herself on fire in front of the Federal Building in protest of the draft. Throughout the country, those who were discontent with the status quo increasingly made their voices heard and their faces seen. By hell or high water, the people would force their nation to change (Grunenberg and Harris).

The motion picture industry was also changing at this time, increasingly offering a gritty realism that could not be replicated on television. *The Graduate* is often thought of as one of the films that marked the beginning of the “New Hollywood” era, a period characterized by directors whose last names evoked an edgy style that could reliably sell tickets. By 1967, the MPAA had lost much of its effectiveness in censoring film content, and a new generation of independent directors were thereby able to pursue new ideas in terms of what made it on screen.

Mike Nichols, whose real name was Mikhail Igor Peschkowsky, was born in 1931 in Berlin, but he emigrated to the U.S. when he was seven to escape Nazi Germany. Beginning in 1953, he studied method acting under Lee Strasberg, and he went on to have a successful career as a Broadway performer. In 1962, Nichols and comedienne Elaine May made a recording of their show “An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May,” and it won the Grammy that year

for best comedy album. In 1963, he was chosen to direct Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park* on Broadway, and three years later, he made the transition to Hollywood. Nichols's first film was *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), which is about the disintegration of marital bonds between two verbally abusive alcoholics. Many scholars have noted that it is largely because of this film and its use of explicit language and realistic characterizations that Jack Valenti, former aide to Lyndon Johnson and new president of the MPAA, instituted the letter rating system, which officially went into place in 1968 (Lewis 136).

The Graduate was Nichols's second film. It was based on the novel by Charles Webb, which was first published in 1963, not long after its author had graduated from Williams College. It is a story written by a member of the younger generation that successfully articulated some of the anxieties that many of them felt about finding their place in a world that was quite different from that of their parents' youth. Comedian Buck Henry wrote the screenplay adaptation and is largely responsible for the dry tone of much of the humor. Unlike most comedies of the day, *The Graduate* drew the bulk of its comedy not from sight gags and punchlines, but from awkward situations and dramatic irony. This is one of the elements that allowed it to appeal to the younger generation: it was an altogether different style of humor from that with which their parents were most familiar. To laugh at this film created an inside group of people who were in on the joke, offering some cohesion to what was otherwise a very diverse generation of Americans.

When Roger Ebert revisited this film thirty years later, his review was far less positive, not because the movie had changed at all, but because he was now looking at it through the eyes of an older man. He wrote, "It is a good topical movie whose time has passed, leaving it stranded in an earlier age... to watch it today is like opening a time capsule. To know that the movie once

spoke strongly to a generation is to understand how deep the generation gap ran during that extraordinary time in the late 1960s... Today, looking at *The Graduate*, I see Benjamin not as an admirable rebel, but as a self-centered creep whose put-downs of adults are tiresome” (Ebert, 1997).

This is the value of a cultural and historical perspective of American film comedy.

There’s a New Sheriff in Town

On October 1, 1962, James Meredith achieved a crucial step in his attainment of the American Dream when he became the first non-white student to ever register at the University of Mississippi. Eight years prior, the Supreme Court had ruled that because taxes do not discriminate according to race, then admission to the public universities that receive those tax dollars must not either. In spite of this, the campus of Ol’ Miss remained fiercely segregated, a position that was rabidly defended by Governor Ross Barnett, as well as scores of other Southern racists, thousands of whom descended upon the university in late September to virulently voice their bigotry (Eagles).

They were met by one hundred and twenty-seven U.S. Marshals, as well as four hundred and eleven deputy law enforcement that were comprised primarily of National Guard troops and U.S. Border Patrol agents. After three days of brutal riots in which two people were killed and over three hundred people were wounded, Attorney General Robert Kennedy offered the governor an ultimatum: either admit James Meredith or Barnett himself would be arrested and pay a fine of \$10,000 per day for violating federal law. The governor and his supporters soon acquiesced, which was seen by many as a significant victory for the growing Civil Rights movement (Brands 111).

In neighboring Alabama the following year, Governor George Wallace declared in his inaugural speech, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever,” vowing to preserve institutional racism by whatever means necessary while situating himself squarely on the wrong side of history (Carter 11). In response, Martin Luther King, Jr. organized a peaceful protest in Birmingham in which he and thousands of his fellow marchers, including many children, were beaten with nightsticks, attacked by police dogs and assaulted with a fire hose. According to historian H.W. Brands, “The brutality was captured on television and broadcast around the country. Kennedy, watching from Washington, acknowledged that one image in particular, of a police dog viciously biting a boy in the stomach, made him physically ill” (111).

Six months later, in what became known as the “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door,” Wallace personally blocked the entrance of Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama in a grandstanding attempt to deny entry to two black students. Under direct orders from the President, the National Guard compelled Governor Wallace to step aside. In private, Kennedy noted, “The people in the South haven’t done anything about integration for a hundred years, and when an outsider intervenes they tell him to get out — they’ll take care of it themselves, which they won’t” (Brands 111).

Throughout the nation, the Civil Rights movement was slowly but steadily gaining momentum, and with Kennedy and then Johnson in the White House, they had the vocalized support of the federal government. However, King and his supporters demanded more than just rhetoric, so on August 28, 1963, he led the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” which was the largest organized public protest in American history up until that point. An estimated quarter of a million people showed up to the march, where King delivered his speech at the

Lincoln Memorial in which he famously declared that opportunity and freedom were the rights of all Americans, regardless of race. His Dream, much like that of James Meredith, was the American Dream (Le Blanc). Nonetheless, as he knew from his own experiences, the American reality was that institutional racism was still denying these fundamental rights to millions, while the hearts and minds of far too many Americans remained closed to the notion of true racial equality.

In what was termed the “Freedom Summer” of 1964, a campaign was launched to register and mobilize black voters, to give them a voice among the electorate. People from all over the country travelled to the deep south in order to volunteer, going door-to-door, while facing hostility at nearly every turn. Three volunteers were even killed in what later turned out to be a coordinated effort between the local police and the Ku Klux Klan (Watson). Later that year, Congress passed a comprehensive Civil Rights Act, which prohibited “discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” in any “public accommodations,” but while this was a significant victory in theory, in practice, the law often remained unenforced (Grofman).

In 1965, a similar measure was passed that prohibited discriminatory voting practices, which did have a noticeable impact on minority voting rates. Meanwhile, different forms of institutional racism were entering the public discourse, particularly as racially motivated riots were no longer limited to the deep south and started breaking out in places like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Los Angeles, nearly all of which were sparked by instances of police brutality. Over the next few years, hundreds of race riots occurred in cities around the nation as people fought back against systemic oppression (Bayer). The institutions of law had failed them, and so they broke the law.

These riots led to the phenomenon that is often referred to as “white flight,” which was the mass migration of white, middle-class Americans from the cities to the suburbs that ultimately led to the infrastructural and commercial neglect of inner-city neighborhoods, particularly in the Midwest (Woldoff). For every two steps forward made by the Civil Rights movement, it seems, progress toward their cause took at least one step back. By the late 1960s, affirmative action measures were implemented to counter the effects of institutional racism, but these too addressed the symptoms and not the cause, so while they did have an impact superficially, these laws did little to promote substantial cultural change (Kennedy, 2013).

As a growing number of white, middle-class Americans dreamt an American Dream that involved personal happiness and the possibility of one day becoming a millionaire, for many non-white Americans, the Dream remained little more than a mirage. Much like the carrot before the horse, the Dream encouraged minorities to strive for something that in all likelihood would only leave them hungry. As noted by historian Jennifer L. Hochschild, “For the well-off, being able to pass on one’s status to one’s children is a critical element of the American dream. For the poor, *not* passing on one’s status is equally critical. But it is an element of the dream that eludes many poor African Americans” (47).

She also points out that between 1962 and 1973, whereas the number of white men whose sons held similar “lower manual” jobs as they did declined from forty-three percent to forty percent, the number of black men whose sons were unable to achieve upward mobility from lower-working-class jobs went from seventy-one percent to sixty-one percent (47). In other words, although more African-Americans were able to obtain employment during this period that required skilled labor, for over half of these individuals, the American Dream remained as

elusive as ever. In spite of this, as Hochschild notes, more African Americans at this time believed in the promise of opportunity than ever had before (69). Their Dream, if nothing else, was the freedom to hope for a better future, even if the present was just an echo of the past.

Civil Rights laws allowed for some progress toward equality, as did affirmative action measures, but for many, despite having the path cleared of legal obstacles, racism was so entrenched in American cultural institutions that true equality of opportunity simply did not exist. According to Hochschild, “A massive survey in 1962 found race to be ‘such a powerful variable that even the more modest of the class effects that stratified whites were cancelled by the skin color of blacks.’ Blacks, in other words, ‘experienced a perverse sort of egalitarianism’ — neither the disadvantages of poverty nor the advantages of wealth made much difference in what they could achieve or pass on to their children” (44). In the eyes of white America, they were simply perceived as black, which prevented them ever from being confused with those damned Joneses who live next door. That is to say that while some African-Americans at this time could indeed afford the material comforts of the middle class, few would ever be afforded the social status that came with it. As noted in a 1962 article in *The New Yorker* by cultural scholar James Baldwin, “People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior.” Just as the American Dream had been gendered to the benefit of the existing patriarchy throughout the 1950s and beyond, so too was it racialized to the overwhelming advantage of whites.

This discourse plays out in Mel Brooks’s 1974 film *Blazing Saddles*, which I explain in this section as fundamentally being a satire of the institutional racism that restricted minorities’ access to the American Dream. The American Film Institute ranks this as the sixth funniest

movie of all time, and in 2006, it was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Film Registry because of its cultural significance. *Blazing Saddles* was also the number one movie of 1974 in terms of box office receipts, taking in nearly one hundred and twenty million dollars with a production budget of only around two and a half million.

The success of this film, as well as that of *Young Frankenstein*, which was released later that same year, was enough to announce Mel Brooks as a major voice in American film comedy, and as a director who could make the studios an obscene amount of money. Although there is a line of dialogue in the movie where Harvey Korman's character accurately laments that he was "risking an almost certain Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor," *Blazing Saddles* was in fact nominated for three Oscars, including Best Supporting Actress, Best Film Editing, and Best Original Song, although it did not win any.

The original draft of the screenplay was written by Dr. Andrew Bergman, whose dissertation about Depression-era Hollywood was published three years earlier under the title *We're In the Money*, in which he examines how films of the 1930s helped maintain the myth of upward mobility despite a reality that would seem to prove otherwise. It is a kindred work of scholarship to this dissertation. His original title for what became *Blazing Saddles* was *Ted X*, a nod to the assassinated Civil Rights activist. After this film, Bergman went on to have a successful career as a writer, director and producer of motion pictures, most of which are broad comedies that center on issues of social and economic justice.

While somewhat outside the chronology of this chapter and only tangentially related to the project as a whole, it is worth briefly discussing some of Bergman's other films, if only to inform the reader of the perspective from which *Blazing Saddles* was written. Years later, for

example, Andrew Bergman made *The Freshman* (1990), which is about a naïve film student played by Matthew Broderick who gets a summer job with his uncle, who may or may not be the Godfather, but who is certainly played by Marlon Brando in a satirical reprisal of the famous role. At its core, this movie is an examination into the gray areas of business ethics, drawing direct parallels between organized crime and the institutions of capitalism. Four years later, Bergman made *It Could Happen to You* (1994), starring Nicholas Cage, Bridget Fonda and Rosie Perez. It was based on the true story of a police officer who went to a diner in Queens but did not have money for a tip, so he promised the waitress that if his lottery ticket was a winner, then he would split the jackpot with her. In the movie, when the officer wins, he maintains that his promise should be kept, despite the vehement objections of his spouse. She ends up divorcing him, and a jury awards her all four million dollars of the jackpot. Through this conflict, the true nature of each these characters is revealed, and the underlying theme is highlighted: money itself is neither good nor evil, but it can bring out the best and the worst in people. In 1985, *New York* magazine dubbed Bergman “The Unknown King of Comedy.” In the related interview, he claimed that his movies are projections of “my worst paranoid fears — you’re stepping into a puddle, and it’s the Amazon River” (Pooley 42).

Blazing Saddles was the third feature film that Mel Brooks ever directed. His filmography at the time only included *The Producers* in 1967 and *The Twelve Chairs* in 1970. Like many of his later films, *Blazing Saddles* is a genre parody; it lampoons the conventions of the revisionist western. Shortly before production began, Richard Pryor was brought onboard to do significant rewrites of the dialogue, notably including most of Mongol’s lines. Brooks had originally wanted Pryor to play the lead role, but Warner Brothers would not hire him because of

his drug use and perceived mental instability, so the part of Black Bart went to Cleavon Little, a relative unknown at the time.

In this film, the corrupt State Attorney General, played by Harvey Korman, wants to drive out the residents of the frontier town of Rock Ridge in order to take the land and sell it to the railroad company. When his group of thugs fails to scare off the townsfolk, they ask the governor, played by Mel Brooks, to send them a new sheriff. He complies by sending them a man who was due to be hanged for hitting a bigot on the head with a shovel. This character's defining action was to bravely express his intolerance toward racism, and he is perfectly capable of performing the role of sheriff... except, of course, that he happens to be black. As such, he is met with hostility from the moment he arrives in town, and in order to escape his own "welcoming" party with his life in tact, he has to outsmart the citizens by pretending to take himself hostage at gunpoint. By this point in the film, it becomes abundantly clear whose side the audience is supposed to be on. Despite all of the racial slurs being thrown at him from every direction, Sheriff Bart keeps his cool and gradually proves his worth to the ignorant townsfolk, whose shared last name of Johnson not-so-subtly suggests multiple generations of inbreeding.

Although it has often been suggested that this movie could not be made today because of its "political incorrectness," it is important to point out that the racially charged jokes in this film are made entirely at the expense of the racists and not meant to perpetuate this bigotry, but rather, to call attention to the ignorance that keeps such racism alive. To be offended is to miss the point. On the commentary track of the twenty-fifth anniversary DVD release, Mel Brooks claims that when this film was first screened for the executives at Warner Brothers, they thought that it was

offensive to the point of being terrible and that they should not release it for theatrical distribution. They demanded that the word “nigger” be removed from the dialogue track entirely.

However, according to Brooks’s anecdote, his contract stated that he had final cut, and when he showed it to some of the lower-level studio employees, they loved it. Supposedly, this was how the executives knew that it would be a hit. Whether this story is true or not, *Blazing Saddles* does indeed bury highly subversive political commentary within some pretty lowbrow humor, so it is not hard to imagine it playing better to a production staff and their friends than to a studio board room. After all, this was not only the first movie to ever feature audible flatulence, but to the best of my knowledge, it still holds the record for the most farts ever included in one scene. Either way, when taken into account with the success of this movie, Brooks’s story lends credence to the notion of films such as this speaking directly to the anxieties of the middle class. It seems likely that the executives had less of an issue with the fart jokes than they did with Brooks’s willingness to address institutional racism.

Shortly after becoming sheriff, Bart befriends the Waco Kid, played by Gene Wilder, who, in many ways, serves as the point-of-view character for a white middle-class audience. From his perspective, we see Bart as a good man who has to put up with a lot of nonsense in order to do the job that he has been tasked to perform. Cleavon Little’s character has no significant flaws. He is intelligent, articulate and adored by open-minded women, but it is only after he develops clever plans to stop the bad guys that the townspeople begin to accept him, and even then, they are generally reluctant to publicly acknowledge this. When an old lady who accosted him earlier with racial epithets brings him a pie to thank him for defeating one of the

Attorney General's goons, before she leaves, she comments, "Of course, you'll have the good taste not to mention that I spoke to you..."

Once she is gone, Bart turns to the Waco Kid and says, "I'm rapidly becoming a big underground success in this town," to which the Kid facetiously replies, "Gee. In another twenty-five years, you'll be able to shake their hands in broad daylight." Despite performing exceptionally well at a job that has traditionally excluded people of color, Bart continues to endure racism wherever he goes. Through the use of incongruity and exaggeration, as well as the audience's willingness to empathize with the protagonist, this film makes the point that Civil Rights laws and affirmative action mean very little as long as racial bigotry continues to be such a prominent part of American culture.

In the third and final act of the movie, the townspeople, led by their heroic sheriff, thwart the invasion of Rock Ridge, and the ensuing skirmish literally breaks through the fourth wall as the action carries over into a Hollywood musical that is being produced on the adjacent sound stage. From there, the chaos only escalates, leading to a pie fight in the studio commissary, through which the antagonist escapes and then hides out in a theater that is screening the movie that they are currently in. As the film that he is watching reveals, the sheriff is closing in on him, and when Korman's character goes back outside, Bart shoots him in the groin, causing him to fall over beside Douglas Fairbanks's handprints on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Incidentally, at an event celebrating the fortieth anniversary of this movie's release, Mel Brooks himself had his handprints memorialized in the pavement in front of Mann's Chinese Theater, complete with a prosthetic sixth finger on his left hand ("Mel Brooks Joke").

With the film's dramatic climax now behind them, Bart and the Waco Kid decide to go back inside the theater to finish watching the movie. "Gee, I sure hope it has a happy ending," the Kid says, articulating common audience expectations for comedy films. "I love a happy ending..." Back to the film on screen, the heroes ride off into the sunset, first by horse, and then by Cadillac, the ultimate expression of the 1974 American Dream. Throughout the third act, the lines between reality and the world encapsulated within this movie have intentionally been blurred. Although the film is ostensibly about equal opportunity in the Old West and combatting racism in another historical moment, by the time the end credits roll, this theme has been carried over to the real world as it existed in 1974, where it was every bit as pertinent.

Rags-to-Riches-to-Rags-to-Lower-Middle-Class

By the mid 1970s, many believed that the American Dream was dead. The President of a new generation had been killed in Dallas and his successor did little to end the war in Vietnam. The "Great Society" promised by Lyndon Johnson was hardly any better off than that of the previous generation; the social safety nets were improved but the economy only continued to get worse (Samuel 102). Rampant inflation mixed with stagnant wages led to a decline in consumer spending, particularly in terms of house sales, which had traditionally been a cornerstone of the American Dream. Nixon's administration untethered the dollar from the value of gold in an effort to combat inflation rates that were as high as ten percent annually, but this did little to address the energy crisis that was crippling America. As U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam eventually decreased, Nixon escalated the war on domestic drug use, which he saw as a national epidemic, but which many Americans saw as a war on youth and minorities. When Nixon and his Vice President resigned in 1974 amid charges of corruption in the Watergate scandal, many

Americans lost what remaining faith they still had in their public institutions (Bowles). The American Dream of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, that any child could one day be President, lost much of its appeal.

As the nation celebrated its bicentennial, many hoped that the ubiquitous reminders of all that makes the U.S. exceptional would help restore people's sense of patriotism, as well as the faith that ordinary citizens had in the promise of the American Dream. However, the reality of a situation that was only getting worse provided ample fuel for their cynicism. By the end of the 1970s, it seemed as though the American Dream might go the way of disco, and the average citizen was powerless to stop it, which only added to their growing frustration.

These themes play out in the 1979 movie *The Jerk*, directed by Carl Reiner. We are first introduced to the character of Navin Johnson as he explains the title in the film's opening line: "Huh...? I am not a bum," he says directly to the camera. "I'm a jerk." Surrounded by other homeless people, he offers a distinction between himself and someone who lacks the drive or the ability to work. In fact, he is quite the opposite. He is not a vagrant, he is just another poor sap who fell for the Great American Joke. Incidentally, the original title was *Easy Money*, then *Money to Burn*; Martin claims that the title that they settled on was inspired by Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Navin continues, "I once had wealth, power and the love of a beautiful woman. Now I only have two things. My friends... and, uh... my Thermos." That is, he has the companionship of other homeless people, as well as his one remaining material possession. "My story? Okay... It was never easy for me. I was born a poor, black child..."

In his autobiography, *Born Standing Up*, Steve Martin claims that it was this last line, taken from his stand-up act, that inspired the movie. At this point in his career, Martin was one of

the most popular comedians in the world. His stand-up material was composed of absurdist humor, jokes that often lacked punchlines, which invited audiences to laugh throughout the set. This particular style of comedy proved to be immensely popular with the younger generation, while their parents, Martin claims, often failed to see what was so funny.

When Navin's African-American mother informs him that he is not their natural-born son, he responds by saying, "You mean I'm going to stay this color?!" This marks the beginning of his character arc. Later that night, he hears a song by the Roger Wolfe Kahn Orchestra on the radio, white music by most standards, broadcasting out of St. Louis. "If this is out there, just imagine what else is out there! This is the kind of music that tells me to be somebody!" It is here that Navin's odyssey begins. In fact, there are numerous parallels between Carl Reiner's 1979 film and Homer's epic poem. I shall explain.

Excluding the first four books of *The Odyssey*, which are about Telemachus, not Odysseus, they follow the same narrative structure. Both begin with foreshadowing through flashback. In *The Odyssey* as well as in *The Jerk*, their stories begin when they venture out into the world, which in itself, represents the central antagonistic force. The only significant difference in this respect is that in the former, the cruel world that Odysseus is now a part of is personified in part by the gods. This conflict becomes apparent in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus recounts the story of his adventures, beginning with the Cyclops.

In *The Jerk*, the audience witnesses the world begin to actively reject Navin when he is pursued by a maniac who "hates cans." When this man fires his rifle, of course, he squints one eye. In the sequence that follows, Navin is offered an illusory love through Patty and then Marie, just as Odysseus is swayed by Circe and then held captive by Calypso. In neither story do they

give the protagonist the sense of fulfillment that they are seeking, but in *The Jerk*, they do help him to find his “special purpose.” Similarly, Odysseus’s destiny at once becomes clear after his involvement with these women.

In both stories, the heroes are then superficially transformed before reuniting with their romantic partner, who does not recognize them at first. Odysseus then proves his worth and once again wins Penelope’s hand in marriage, while In *The Jerk*, Marie is shocked to think that the age-defying makeup that she is selling actually works. After being on top of the world, Navin loses everything but a Thermos, but discovers that all he really needs is the love of his family, at which point Marie takes him back. Odysseus reclaims the throne for his father, which brings peace to the kingdom, and Navin goes home to Mississippi with Marie at his side. The protagonists return to a reality that is familiar, though significantly different either in form or perception than it was when they initially embarked on their respective adventures.

Made on a budget of approximately four million dollars, *The Jerk* earned nearly seventy-four million, making it the eighth highest grossing film of the year (boxofficemojo). It is also number eighty-nine on AFI’s list of the top one hundred comedies. I believe that this film resonated with people because it is a satire of the American Dream as it existed in the popular imagination in 1979. In many ways, this film serves as a warning so that others might not fall for the same sad joke. By infusing ancient Greek literature with a critique of the American Dream as personified by one of the most popular comedians in the world, the movie was an unmitigated success.

As I have suggested, Navin’s journey begins with a recognition of his own whiteness. First his mother tells him that he is going to stay that color, then he hears music on the radio that

seems as though it was made just for him. This is enough to send him out on his adventure to see what else the world has to offer him. Before Navin leaves, his family offers the advice: “The Lord loves a workin’ man, don’t trust whitey, and see a doctor and get rid of it.” His adopted father also explains the difference between horse manure and shoe polish.

These nuggets of wisdom all surface in the film’s themes and storyline in one way or another. For example, later in the movie, when Navin finds out that the white people with whom he is doing business have a racist agenda, he attacks them with karate moves. “You sir, are talking to a negro!” In other words, he learns to distrust whitey. In an earlier scene, Navin gets a lesson in being a bit more discerning when he names his dog Lifesaver only to be told that Shithead might be more appropriate, which is to say that he eventually learns to distinguish between shit (the ugly reality) and Shinola (superficiality that masks what is underneath).

Once Navin gets to St. Louis, he is offered a job by Mr. Hartounian, played by Jackie Gleason, who also lets him live in the storage room of the service station rent-free. Opportunity, while not glamorous, is handed to Navin without his even asking. The American Dream is indeed his birthright. However, he soon learns that being a part of this world means facing other kinds of dangers. Despite Navin’s excitement at seeing his name in the phone book, we soon learn that this is how a homicidal maniac who just quit smoking apparently chooses his victims.

A throwaway joke that only appears on screen for about two seconds, Navin’s address is listed as 253 1/8 Elm St., which is to say that the room he lives in only accounts for a very small part of the property occupied by the service station. He is one-eighth of the way toward renting an apartment of his own and further still from homeownership, that ultimate expression of the American Dream. Incidentally, it is no coincidence that the root-word of mortgage is *mort*, which

means death. Mortgages were conceived as contracts intended to stay with people through the ends of their lives.

When Navin escapes from the gunshots, he soon finds himself on a carnival train headed to California, where he is offered yet another opportunity for income. He is no longer a lowly car service technician; he is now a weight guesser. Again, this film satirizes the idea of the American Dream as we witness Navin Johnson moving up in the world from the very bottom of the social hierarchy to something only incrementally better. Until luck strikes, it is abundantly clear that upward mobility through hard work alone is a slow and steady crawl at best. A relative newcomer to this world of competitive capitalism, Navin is the ringleader's mark, just as the carnival patrons are intended to be his. Oblivious to his own exploitation, when his boss explains the economics of carnival attractions, Navin says, "Oh, so it's a profit game, eh?"

Now that he is making more of an income, a fact that is made evident in the increasing amounts of money that he sends home, he is able to attract the attention of Patty, the carnival motorcyclist, and later Marie, played by Bernadette Peters. In a dryly satirical tone, this film reminds the audience that marriage is also a traditional component of the American Dream, but that personal wealth must come first. In other words, no woman wants an unsuccessful man, and at this point, Navin comically meets the absolute lowest standards of success. He works at a carnival, he lives in the back of a semi-trailer, and his diet consists entirely of Pizza-in-a-Cup. Like so many elements of this movie, Navin's carnival food of choice has been exaggerated just enough to render it absurd. His world is our world, but taken up a notch.

While Navin is shown to be a diligent employee, this is not what allows him to achieve success. Rather, it is because of an idea that he happened to have at just the right time in the

presence of just the right person. Back when Navin was an employee at the service station, he came up with an idea to fix a customer's glasses. That customer then patented it, developed it and marketed it as the Opti-Grab. Months later, he hired a private investigator (the reformed attempted killer who hates cans), to find Navin. The developer of the Opti-Grab then fulfills his end of their agreement and gives Navin fifty percent of the profits. He is now instantly and absurdly wealthy, the 1970s American Dream come true. Just when Navin had hit rock bottom, where he was donating blood in exchange for the sustenance provided by cookies and juice three times a day, claiming, "I had to quit when I cut myself shaving and nothing came out but air," he is suddenly richer than he ever thought was possible.

Marie even takes him back now that he has money, and there seems to be no shortage of people who wish to exploit his newfound wealth, whether to end cat-juggling in Latin America or to be a constant fixture at his disco parties. Meanwhile, Martin's character satirizes the nouveau-riche through his absurd purchases, including a stuffed camel in an all-red billiard room and a spinning bed shaped like a clam. He also has a glass water carboy that he uses to dispense champagne into disposable stemmed glasses. Evidencing his descent into alcoholism and vulgar self-indulgence, he puts an umbrella in his drink to emulate a magazine advertisement. The text in the ad reminds him to "Be Somebody!" while the subtext makes it clear that Navin Johnson may have it all, but he is still not happy.

His American Dream quickly becomes a nightmare when the film's director, Carl Reiner, launches a class-action suit against him because the Opti-Grab makes its users go cross-eyed. This caused a stunt in one of his movies to go terribly wrong. Reiner further condemns Navin in his accusation that he did not even have the decency to test this product on criminals. When

faced with a judge and a jury who all suffer from strabismus, presumably as a result of the Opti-Grab, Navin is forced to pay the full settlement, which completely drains his finances. He has lost everything but nonetheless maintains his optimism that he will make a comeback. As Navin writes out personal checks for each individual listed in the class-action suit, he tells Marie, “I’m going to buy you a diamond so big, it’s going to make you puke,” to which Marie replies in tears, “I don’t want to puke! I don’t want wealth. I just want you like you used to be.”

Navin tells Marie that there are plenty of places where people will believe in him, and she recommends that he goes to find one of those places. In response, he yells, “I don’t need this stuff! I don’t need you! I don’t need anything! Except this...” On his way out, thoroughly intoxicated with his pants around his ankles, he grabs an ashtray, a paddle game, a remote control, a book of matches, a lamp, a chair and a magazine. “And that’s all I need!” In the scene that follows, he then trades all of these things with a homeless woman in exchange for her red and white striped Thermos, an object alluded to earlier in a song. By decontextualizing these possessions, he has rendered them absurd. None of these items are of any particular use to him, aside from the Thermos, which in the end proves to be his one material possession. The rest is just meaningless junk.

At this point, the flashback that opened the movie comes to an end as Navin finishes recounting his story to the camera. Coincidentally, this is right when Marie, along with Navin’s family from Mississippi, shows up in a rented station wagon. They explain that his adopted dad had been investing all of the money that Navin sent home. “Turns out dad’s a whiz on the stock market!” This proclamation foreshadows the changing shape of the American Dream in the decades to come, which I shall explain in more detail in chapter four. Navin is then forced to ride

in the back with the dog for the long drive back to Mississippi, as his current state of poverty has led even his family to dehumanize him.

The film concludes as Navin explains in voiceover, “As much as we loved the old house, with all the additions to family, there just wasn’t enough room, so we tore down the old house and built an even bigger one.” In the last visual gag of the film, it cuts from a shot of the old house to another shot of the exact same house from a different angle. In other words, they are exactly where they started, and Navin’s attempt to pursue upward mobility was an exercise in futility. The American Dream as presented in this film is itself a joke, and it reflected a growing cynicism that many Americans had about their future. Nonetheless, they also knew that something had to give, and with the dawn of the Reagan’s “Morning in America” just over the horizon, a new American Dream was taking shape in the public imagination.

CHAPTER IV: CLASS CLOWNS/CORPORATE CULTURE (1980-1996)**Straight-to-Video**

By the late 1970s, motion pictures were an increasingly risky investment. Hollywood was undergoing significant systemic changes, the scale of which had not been seen since the advent of synchronized sound or the end of vertical integration. At this point, most of the major studios had been reduced to some of the least profitable subsidiaries of multinational corporate conglomerates. Universal was now the filmmaking branch of MCA, the primary business of which was consumer electronics. Paramount was owned by the petrochemical company Gulf and Western, and Warner Brothers was a subsidiary of Warner Communications, Inc., which made most of its money off music and toys. In a similar respect, Fox's primary sources of revenue were its Pebble Beach luxury resorts and Deluxe General, Inc., which processed film negatives and prints, mostly for other studios, while MGM, the most consistently successful studio throughout much of film history, scarcely made movies anymore, as their diversified holdings in casinos and hotels had proven to be considerably more profitable. For many of these corporations, the filmmaking aspects of their investment portfolios were often little more than tax shelters for some of their more lucrative ventures (Prince).

While ticket sales continued to falter, studios were increasingly taking chances on a new generation of filmmakers who they hoped would appeal to a younger audience. In some cases, their gambles paid off and these films earned unprecedented box office returns. Movies like *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) were the first to make their studios over one hundred million dollars each on rentals, which is the industry term for the income generated from leasing film prints to theaters for exhibition. At the box office, these movies made over \$260

million and \$307 million respectively, figures otherwise unheard of at this point. Before long, all of the majors wanted a piece of the action. Thus a new business model was developed in an effort to save an otherwise struggling industry. Hollywood, much like Wall Street, had entered an era of high stakes gambling. The studios were all trying to get into the business of making blockbusters, as most of the majors were producing fewer films each year with increasingly immodest budgets. Studio executives were desperate to find the next George Lucas or Steven Spielberg, someone who was capable of making them a product with broad appeal that would eagerly be consumed by the masses.

From the perspective of the top brass at United Artists, Michael Cimino seemed like a safe bet. In 1978, he wrote and directed the film *The Deer Hunter*, which was a critical and commercial success. It won five Academy Awards, including Best Director and Best Picture. When Cimino proposed an epic western melodrama for his next film, United Artists essentially wrote him a blank check. This ultimately proved to be their undoing (Bach).

The budget for *Heaven's Gate* started at a generous \$11.6 million and eventually ballooned to over \$44 million by the time production had wrapped. Cimino reportedly shot about two hundred and fifty miles worth of film, totaling nearly two hundred and twenty hours of raw material, which he then cut down to a three hundred and twenty-five minute motion picture (Bach). When executives at United Artists refused to release a film that was almost five and a half hours long, Cimino reluctantly trimmed it down to three hours and thirty-nine minutes for the film's wide release, which had been pushed back from December of 1979 to March of 1980 in order for the film to be reedited (Stevens).

After only two weeks in theaters, marred by a scathing critical consensus and an audience that showed little interest in tragic revisionist westerns, *Heaven's Gate* was pulled from exhibition. It had taken in a paltry \$1.3 million in ticket sales, and United Artists never recovered from the loss (Bach). Just as with most other Hollywood studios at this time, UA was a subsidiary of a much larger corporation; its parent company, Transamerica, was focused primarily in investment banking. In 1980, Transamerica's board of directors voted to dissolve their holdings in the entertainment sector after the colossal failure of *Heaven's Gate*. What was left of United Artists, the once great studio that had been created in 1919 by Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., D.W. Griffith and Mary Pickford, was dismantled and mostly dissolved, at which point it became nothing more than a distribution arm of MGM, who were trying to reposition themselves in order to gain a foothold in the expanding home video market (Prince).

In Cimino's defense, at least part of the escalating costs of *Heaven's Gate* had to do with the price of silver. This is because silver halide is one of the primary components used to make film stock, and in 1979, the indexed value of this commodity increased nearly tenfold over the course of just a few months when Nelson and William Hunt, heirs of Texas oil billionaire Haroldson Lafayette Hunt, made a concerted and nearly successful attempt to corner the market in silver futures. They bought up everything they could, mostly on credit, and as a direct result of their manipulation of these derivatives, the price of shooting, developing and printing film increased enough to create a panic in Hollywood as well as on Wall Street (Williams).

Studio executives were rightfully concerned that the cost of film stock would only continue to rise, just as other production and marketing expenses had in recent years. Film historian Stephen Prince notes, "In 1979, the average negative cost [all the expenses incurred in a

film production prior to release and distribution] of a feature film was \$5 million. In 1980, it jumped to \$9 million” (20). When the added marketing and distribution costs are also taken into account, the studios were barely breaking even.

Meanwhile, as the Hunt brothers inflated their already vast fortunes using mostly borrowed money, in January of 1980, COMEX, the organization that regulates the trade of precious metals futures, finally closed the loophole that the Hunt brothers had been exploiting. This had an almost immediate effect on the price of silver, and when its value dropped below that which they had put up as collateral, they could not make the margin call. Consequently, COMEX forced the Hunts to liquidate their holdings in silver futures, which meant that they lost over a billion dollars, much of which had been a product of the commodity’s artificially inflated value. Several years later, the Hunt brothers also faced a related civil lawsuit that forced them to pay out an additional \$134 million to a Peruvian mining company, and this ultimately led them to declare bankruptcy (*Los Angeles Times*). However, despite the market correction that eventually occurred, the temporary panic over the value of silver had given the studios an additional incentive to streamline their industry and pursue other means of distributing their product.

Back in 1975, Sony had introduced the Betamax, and that same year, HBO began to lease a slot on the Satcom 1 satellite, which allowed them to transmit their signal to more homes than ever before (Prince 26). The following year, JVC came out with the VHS player, and in 1978, MCA created the first consumer laserdisc player, which they called DiscoVision (Prince 109). Ironically, much like its namesake, it faded from existence by the early eighties, by which point nearly all of the studios had entered the home video market. This was a major development that fundamentally changed the way that Americans consumed movies. Cinema spectatorship was no

longer something that took place in a dark public place with a projection on a screen. Rather, the consumption of Hollywood entertainment was becoming an increasingly personal experience, and one that could be repeated ad infinitum.

We must remember that prior to this, a majority of movies, particularly comedies, were only available to the public for their original theatrical runs. While studios would rerelease some of their more popular titles or lease them to be aired on television, studios and the networks were still competing for audiences, so this was somewhat of a rare occurrence. Exceptions to this included holiday classics like *Miracle on 34th Street* (Seaton, 1947) and films that aired on the *Wonderful World of Disney*, but before 1980, it was relatively uncommon for a person to watch any new comedy film more than once. However, as more people began to own VCRs and subscribe to cable television, they could now watch the same movies repeatedly in the privacy of their own homes.

With this in mind, it therefore stands to reason that in the case of comedies, this allowed audiences to internalize the humor within these films to a greater degree. That is, the cultural phenomenon of parroting humorous dialogue from movies was almost certainly nurtured by the proliferation of home video in the early 1980s. As people quoted these lines, it undoubtedly informed their own senses of humor as well as those of their acquaintances in the same way that standup comedy records had been doing for over a decade. For many, memorization of these jokes could be like a secret handshake, as to know bits of dialogue from movies like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam/Jones, 1975), *The Jerk* (Reiner, 1979), or *Airplane!* (Zucker/Abrahams/Zucker, 1980) almost certainly helped define people to themselves and others as being part of an inside group. These are the people who were in on the joke. If we also consider how

expensive early VCRs and tapes were, then it would seem that any middle-class American who owned these commodities would only have a few titles in their personal libraries, thus maximizing the likelihood of repeatability, and in the case of comedies, the potential for internalizing the humor on screen.

Even as video stores popped up all over the country in the early 1980s, it was not until the studios divested themselves of unrelated industries and began to coalesce into the behemoth media conglomerates of today that they fully embraced this new technology. Once home video units had been on the market for a few years, increased competition drove prices down considerably, making them more affordable to the average consumer. Further, anyone who could afford two video cassette recorders had the capability of duplicating these tapes, which meant that a lot of people rented videos and then added the copies that they made to their own libraries, thus increasing the potential for repeatability.

Anecdotally, I can confirm that this was an extremely common practice by the end of the decade, and part of the reason for this was because of the pricing structure adopted by the studios. When a popular movie was first released on video, the distribution divisions of the major studios would often charge eighty to a hundred dollars per tape, so if a video rental chain wanted to buy fifty copies per store, the idea was that the studios made enough profit from this transaction to effectively counterbalance any lost revenue from duplicated tapes. Then once rentals started to die down, the movie would be released for purchase to the general public at a lower price, usually between twenty and thirty dollars per tape. Disney further adopted the strategy of only having movies available intermittently, thereby increasing demand by limiting the supply of their products. They also experimented with various forms of copy protection that

would cause the brightness of duplicated tapes to fluctuate sporadically in an attempt to discourage the piracy of their products. Other distribution companies took similar measures.

By the mid-1980s, Hollywood studios had their hands in all forms of mass media, and ancillary markets officially surpassed theatrical exhibition as their primary source of revenue. As Stephen Prince points out in his detailed history of the motion picture industry during this era, studios no longer made films, per se; rather, they were now in the business of making cross-platform entertainment products (92). With this in mind, despite the precarious standing of the film industry at the beginning of the decade, the 1980s quickly proved to be the most profitable period that Hollywood had ever seen up until this point in its history, largely due to the aforementioned expansion of ancillary markets in home entertainment (Prince 92).

Comedies in particular performed extraordinarily well throughout the decade. In 1981, seven of the ten highest grossing films in the United States were comedies, and in 1988, eight of the top ten were (boxofficemojo). However, as noted above, box office figures from this point forward are admittedly a less reliable metric through which to gauge a film's popularity, as they do not take into account the profits generated through home video distribution. As such, it seems that it may be most effective to also consider a film's broader cultural resonance, as this period also demonstrated the studios' increasing tendency to rely on past successes in order to determine the shape of future projects.

For example, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Heckerling, 1982) proved that there was a lucrative market for teen comedies, a notion that was further validated by the success of John Hughes movies like *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Pretty in Pink* (1986) and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986). This era also witnessed the rise of franchise film comedies like *Porky's* (Clark, 1981),

Beverly Hills Cop (Brest, 1984), *Police Academy* (Wilson, 1984) and *Revenge of the Nerds* (Kanew, 1984), as studios sought to minimize marketing costs by selling familiar products to their audiences, which is not unlike the fast food culture that had come to define the suburbs. It was all about homogeny and predictability. That is, a person could watch *Police Academy 5: Assignment: Miami Beach* (Myerson, 1988) without having seen the first four films in the series and not be completely lost in terms of the narrative unfolding on screen. In the same respect, a Big Mac is a Big Mac no matter where you go, and the main avenues of most American suburbs are lined with more or less the same franchises. Comedies, just like any other type of film that was produced by the major studios during this period, were commonly designed to have broad appeal so that they would be easily accessible to mass audiences.

The most financially successful comedic films of this era were those that were driven by high concepts and recognizable stars. Even though comedies had historically been one of the most cost-effective genres in terms of the ratio between production expenses and net revenue, the 1980s proved that comedies were no more immune to the studios' growing proclivity for trying to outspend each other than any other kind of motion picture. Free-market competition during Reagan's presidency was every bit as ruthless in Hollywood as it was on Wall Street, as greed was increasingly celebrated as a virtue and corporate synergy was routinely implemented as a reliable method for generating unprecedented profits. The social value of comedy took a backseat to its perceived marketability.

When the major studios divested from other industries during this time, they also merged with other companies within the entertainment sector, thereby allowing their filmed entertainment products to reach broader audiences through multiple forms of media while

earning additional revenue at each step of the way. This was the beginning of a new golden age in Hollywood. Deals for ancillary markets were often set-up before a film even went into production, practically ensuring that even a movie that did not fare well in its original theatrical run would eventually generate a profit in the long term — which the reader may note bears uncanny parallels to the practice of block-booking that took place during the era of vertical integration. Movies could also now be distributed direct-to-video, thus eliminating the exorbitant costs of film prints, which led to a boom in low-budget independent film production during this period (Prince 117). Some of these movies were even able to gain a cult following through word-of-mouth promotion because of the expanding video market and the increased availability of these titles. New audiences were sprouting up where they had never before existed.

Hollywood responded to the influx of outside competition by creating bigger, more spectacular films with marketing budgets that would often rival the production costs of these movies, which were increasingly being sold to the American public as cultural events, complete with cross-promotional tie-ins. At the same time, talent agents were rapidly becoming a major force in the industry, often “packaging” their clients together for motion picture projects and demanding increasingly exorbitant salaries on their behalf. As an agent’s standard rate is ten percent of each client’s salary, which is itself often a percentage of the film’s budget, they are therefore incentivized to get the people that they represent involved in the most expensive productions that they can. This only served to reinforce the blockbuster model of production as the new industry standard. Throughout this period, movies were increasingly designed around their stars instead of the studios taking chances on hiring talent who might bring something unexpected into the part. Familiar faces, as proven time and again, were what sold tickets.

In this chapter, I examine the changing shape of the American Dream throughout the 1980s and much of the nineties as reflected in a number of popular film comedies. In each section, my analysis focuses upon particular themes that were circulating within the public discourse at the times that these movies were produced and distributed. I then examine the ideological content of select comedic films in order to determine their contributions to these broader national conversations. In the first section, I look at the gendered American Dream and the debate about women's role in the workplace as manifested in films such as *9 to 5* (Higgins, 1980) and *Mr. Mom* (Dragoti, 1983), which offer two very different perspectives of this same basic argument. I then turn a critical lens on the racialized components of the Dream, tracing the career of Eddie Murphy, with particular attention on *Trading Places* (Landis, 1982) and *Harlem Nights* (Murphy, 1989). I discuss how Murphy's trajectory to stardom throughout this period was seen by many as a prime example of the colorblind American Dream in action, while paradoxically, *Harlem Nights* calls attention to some of the vast differences between White America and Other America in terms of access to opportunity. In the third section, I then examine the conflation of coming-of-age and achieving the American Dream that became particularly common during this time, as witnessed in movies like *The Secret of My Success* (Ross, 1987) and *Weekend at Bernie's* (Kotcheff, 1989). I then consider the inverse of this trope as manifested in *Dumb and Dumber* (Farrelly Brothers, 1994), which is representative of a number of other comedy films from the mid-nineties, where the protagonists are infantilized and exhibited for public ridicule because of their inability to achieve the American Dream.

Patriarchy is No Malarkey

Between 1960 and 1980, divorce rates in the U.S. more than doubled, from 9.2 per thousand married women over the age of fifteen to 22.6 per thousand (Wilcox). Considering the Reagan administration's emphasis on "restoring family values," it is ironic to note that Reagan himself had actually played a major role in shaping the divorce laws in this country. In 1948, his first wife, actress Jane Wyman, had divorced him on the grounds of "mental cruelty." Twenty-one years later, Reagan, now governor of California, signed the nation's first no-fault divorce law, and the rest of the country soon followed suit. By 1985, every state but New York had adopted statutes for no-fault divorce proceedings, which, for the first time, granted American women the freedom to get out of bad marriages without having to prove any specific wrongdoing on the part of their husbands.

This marked a major legislative victory for the Second Wave Feminist movement. As more states adopted these laws, the women who lived there suddenly had a role in determining what was best for their families. Prior to this, a vast majority of divorces were filed by the husbands, who were also the prime beneficiaries, but by 1975, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, 71.4% of divorces were initiated by women if there were children living in the household, and it was becoming considerably more common for women to be granted sole custody of any dependents (Kuhn).

To many social conservatives, these skyrocketing divorce rates were seen as indisputable proof regarding the damage caused by the women's liberation movement. The nuclear family was widely believed to be in a state of critical meltdown. Women, through their newfound autonomy, were perceived by many to be destroying the sacred myth of the American Dream,

which had been gendered since its conception. All thanks to what was now being termed the “me” generation, the individual was threatening to supersede the family as the basic unit of Western civilization.

Meanwhile, back in 1965, the Supreme Court had ruled in the case of *Griswold v. Connecticut* that married people cannot be denied access to contraceptives, as to do so was determined to be a fundamental violation of their privacy. Then in 1972, in *Baird v. Eisenstadt*, the Supreme Court built upon this decision and ruled that birth control must be made available to everyone, whether married or not. These were also seen as major victories in the ongoing battle for women’s rights. In the Court’s opinion, Justice William J. Brennan referenced the prior statute, claiming, “If the right of privacy means anything, it is the right of the individual, married or single, to be free from unwarranted governmental intrusion into matters so fundamentally affecting a person as the decision whether to bear or beget a child.” This landmark decision effectively granted women more self-determination in terms of when and if they wanted to have children, thereby allowing them greater freedom to pursue other ambitions beyond domesticity (Rowland).

By this point, there was already a national panic that the nuclear family was in crisis, as the American economy of the 1970s had, in many cases, proven the need for a two-income household. As stagflation continued to strangle the middle class throughout the decade, an increasing number of women entered the workforce, whether by choice or by necessity. With this in mind, I do not think that it is a coincidence that many popular comedic films and sitcoms from this period centered on the dissolution of the family unit, and in an overwhelming majority of them, it was the mother who was absent. This, I believe, reflected a broader cultural anxiety

about the end of the family as an integral component of the American Dream, a point which I discuss in more detail in the pages that follow.

In further support of this notion, in 1981, Gary Becker's book *Treatise on the Family*, in which he essentially argued that families function most effectively when men go to work and women are left at home to attend to domestic matters, became a national bestseller. That same year also saw the highest divorce rates in the U.S. that have ever been recorded, either before or since, at 24.3 per thousand married women over the age of fifteen ("Marriage and Divorce Patterns"). As we shall see, prescribed gender roles of dominance and subordination were both reinforced and challenged in popular media. In all of the turmoil, the family unit was widely believed to be in a state of crisis, and by extension, so too was the American Dream.

The motion picture comedy *9 to 5*, starring Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton was one of the highest grossing movies in 1980, second only to *The Empire Strikes Back*. It earned over a hundred million dollars at the box office, and it was one of the first movies ever released on VHS, where it continued to generate revenue (boxofficemojo.com). Adjusted for inflation, it is the twentieth highest grossing comedy film of all time and it ranks at number seventy-four on AFI's list of the top one hundred American comedy films. Fundamentally, this movie is a satire of the white collar workplace as viewed through the lens of Second Wave Feminism. At its core, it is a critique of the gendered American Dream as described in chapter two.

Immediately following the opening credits, the audience is provided with exposition that establishes Judy, played by Jane Fonda, as having recently gotten a divorce. Her husband left her for his younger secretary, which she recognizes as the cliché that it is. Without anyone to provide

for her, Judy is now entering the job market for the first time. She is the newest employee at Consolidated Companies, Inc., itself a parody of corporate synergy. Meanwhile, Lily Tomlin's character of Violet explains that she wishes that her husband had not died, if only so that she could have divorced him. Violet has worked at Consolidated for twelve years and keeps getting passed up for promotions, despite being characterized as someone who is very good at her job.

Their boss, Mr. Hart, played by Dabney Coleman, is the exact opposite in this respect, as his incompetence is continually put on display. Throughout the film, he is regularly described as a "sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot," and although he is somewhat of a caricature in this regard, his character is indeed a personification of the worst elements of a chauvinistic work environment. Not only does he fail to recognize how valuable Violet is to the company, but Mr. Hart is constantly harassing his secretary, Doralee, played by Dolly Parton — in her debut performance in a feature film, for which she also wrote and performed the title song — and he falsely claims to be having an affair with her. Although Judy and Violet do not like Doralee at first because they suspect that she is "sleeping her way to the top," once they discover that the rumors are not actually true, she becomes an ally in their dramatic goal of ridding the workplace of rampant sexism, arguably as noble of an ambition in 1980 as it has ever been.

When Mr. Hart explains that the promotion that Violet should have received was given to a man with less experience, he says that it is because, "He does have a family to support." Violet is visibly upset by this. Mr. Hart then adds, "The company needs a man in this position. Clients would rather deal with men when it comes to figures." To this, Violet explains that she also has a family to support, and Mr. Hart callously responds with, "Spare me the women's lib crap, okay?"

Now I know how you feel and I understand..." A moment later, he qualifies this by adding, "I understand that I'm still the boss here."

Violet reacts and angrily tells him to never call her his "girl" again. In her diatribe, she effectively articulates the theme of the movie. She says, "I'm no girl. I'm a woman. Do you hear me? I'm not your wife or your mother, or even your mistress. I am your employee, and as such, I expect to be treated equally, with a little dignity and respect." At its core, that is precisely what this movie is all about. It is about the barricades that block women's access to the American Dream, including its dependence upon an archaic conceptualization of gender roles.

As the film progresses, the audience witnesses these women prove to be exceptionally good at their jobs, with Violet ultimately running the company far better than Mr. Hart ever could, all while simultaneously balancing the demands of being a single mother. The message here is that people should be judged on their abilities and perhaps even their ethics, rather than on an arbitrary classification based upon the functions of their reproductive organs. Through the validation of this theme, this movie was at least able to shine some much needed light through the glass ceiling, thereby bringing this topic to the forefront of the national discourse.

Three years after this film was released, *Mr. Mom*, starring Michael Keaton and Terri Garr, entered into this same conversation about the role of women within a male-dominated workplace, as well as men's responsibilities within the home. Ostensibly, this movie is about a husband and wife learning mutual empathy through the reversal of their traditional roles within the nuclear family, but as I shall explain, a thematic analysis of this film reveals that ultimately, it only serves to reinforce the reactionary gender politics of its day, and one may consider this movie to be little more than a backhanded backlash to the Second Wave Feminist movement.

As was the case with *9 to 5*, *Mr. Mom* also happened to be competing against an installment of the *Star Wars* franchise in the year of its release, and *Mr. Mom* still managed to be the ninth highest grossing film of 1983, taking in approximately \$65 million in box office receipts. It was also the second highest grossing comedy of that year (only *Trading Places*, which I will discuss in the next section, earned more).

Both *Mr. Mom* and *National Lampoon's Vacation* (Ramis, 1983), which was also released that year, were written by John Hughes, and the success of these films is what secured him a three-picture deal that would also give him the opportunity to direct. Those three subsequent films that he made for Universal Studios were *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Weird Science* (1985), and the combined success of these films was enough to cement his reputation among mainstream audiences as the quintessential director of teen comedies throughout much of this period.

However, as I have suggested, *Mr. Mom*, much like *9 to 5*, is fundamentally an examination into the gendered American Dream, but from the opposite perspective. This is not a critique of gender roles so much as it is a validation of their place within the domestic and professional spheres of contemporary American life. The film even opens with a static shot of a quaint house in suburban Detroit that is surrounded by a white picket fence. The title cards are accompanied by soft jazz on synthesizer and saxophone, the sedate soundtrack of 1980s domesticity.

Inside the house, an alarm clock goes off and Catherine, played by Terri Garr, gets up to begin her day as a homemaker. A little while later, she wakes Jack, her husband, played by Michael Keaton, who gets ready for his job as an engineer at the Ford Motor Company. They are

signified as being part of the upper-middle class, as he wears a three-piece suit to the breakfast table but then carools with his co-workers to save on gas money.

The filmmakers also make it a point to differentiate Jack from what may be considered the lower-middle class. When he arrives at the factory, he tries to engage in small talk with some of the assembly line workers, who see through his attempt to empathize with their concerns, most of which are economic. When Jack asks them if they are worried about the Detroit Lions, one of the men responds by saying that they are “more worried about the lines... Unemployment lines, welfare lines, food lines. You know, all those lines.”

Jack awkwardly changes the subject to the movie *Rocky*. “There’s something about this movie that reminds me of the situation at work,” he says. When the line workers ask him which *Rocky* movie he saw, Jack describes the first installment of the franchise, although he is not entirely sure which one it was. In parting, he reminds them to “Hang tough... just like Rocky.” After he leaves, one of the workers comments, “Man, he ain’t never seen *Rocky*.” Indeed, if he had, he would have known that in the first *Rocky* film, Sylvester Stallone’s character does not actually win the big fight; rather, he just refuses to stay down, which, of course, is rather ironic in consideration of the point that Jack was trying to make.

In the scene that follows, he and his fellow engineers learn that they are all being laid off, or “furloughed,” as his former boss points out, at least until the economy recovers. “People just aren’t buying cars,” he says, exasperated, only before blaming the Japanese for flooding the American market with inexpensive, fuel-efficient vehicles. When Jack returns home that evening with his box of personal effects in hand, he is greeted at the door by Catherine and their three children. The older boy says, “We heard you got fired.” After he is corrected by both parents, his

little brother speaks up, “You’re not going to be a bum, are you daddy?” Jack replies, “No. But I’m working on it.” In the context of 1980s America, as represented in this film, he is either a middle-class success or an abject failure, as the middle ground that supported the unemployed and working class was rapidly eroding beneath their feet.

When Catherine suggests that she looks for work as well, this is clearly played as a blow to Jack’s ego, so he then bets her one hundred dollars to her one dollar that he can find employment before she does. Of course, the matter is promptly resolved in the next scene, and before Catherine leaves for her new job downtown, she runs through the list of Jack’s responsibilities as the *de facto* homemaker. She reminds him that, “You know, a lot of men would love to have this time to spend with their kids,” to which he replies, “Honey, you’re looking at one. I’m a regular Phil Donahue,” a reference to the daytime talk show host of the 1980s who taught men how to be more in touch with their feminine sides. As she leaves for work, she thanks Jack for loaning her his briefcase, an obvious metaphor for her status as the family’s new breadwinner.

Jack’s ineptitude as a caregiver is immediately put on full display as he drives the wrong direction when trying to drop off his son at school. Meanwhile, both of his boys tell him that he is “doing it wrong,” and the crossing guard condescendingly explains the protocol for pickups and dropoffs, just like she does for “all the new mommies.” In a scene that follows, Jack makes it clear that he has inexplicably never set foot in a grocery store before, as he knocks down displays at every turn and first loses one child from his grocery cart, then the other. The bulk of the humor in this sequence, and indeed, throughout the first half of the film, is drawn from Jack’s incompetence at performing the basic responsibilities that Catherine had handled with relative

ease. This is further exemplified in a later scene, when Jack is changing a diaper, and he requires an apron, a garbage bag, rubber gloves, safety goggles, tongs and a clothespin on his nose in order to complete this simple task.

Meanwhile, upon arriving at her place of employment, Catherine takes the glass elevator all the way to the top, then follows the corridor to the Richardson/Frankel Advertising firm where she now works. As the short-haired receptionist leads her to the board room, she offers Catherine the advice, “Keep your mouth shut and your ears open and you might just learn something.” The cigarette smoke in this room is as thick as the testosterone. There are only two other women present, both of whom are also of European descent and coded as masculine by their wardrobes; the other dozen or so people are all middle-aged white men in dark suits, including the company president, Ron Richardson, played by Martin Mull.

Catherine takes a seat and absentmindedly begins to pick up some of the trash on the table. “We have people to do that,” Ron reminds her, before asking her opinion regarding advertising mockups for a canned tuna company that he claims is “the cornerstone of all our accounts.” She considers the sketches, relying on her experience as a homemaker to articulate how they might be able to better connect to women like her.

Mr. Richardson is impressed, and the following day, much to Jack’s dismay, Ron picks her up from their home in a limousine, and then they board his private jet to fly to Los Angeles. En route, he confesses, “The way I see it. You have two things going for you. One, your experience as a homemaker...” Ron then pauses to have his champagne glass refilled. “And two, you’ve got a... well, let’s just say that you’re an extremely attractive lady.” As is made abundantly clear in this sequence, although she is steadily achieving success in the male-

dominated world of advertising, Mr. Richardson indicates that it is only because of her looks and her experience as a housewife that her opinion is of any value to the company.

Back at home, Jack is waging and losing a war with his appliances. His suburban home and its modern amenities have turned on him. His American Dream has become a nightmare, as he finds himself mercilessly trapped within the confines of that white picket fence. The vacuum cleaner that the kids refer to as “Jaws” seemingly has a mind of its own as it chases them through the house, consuming drapes, blankets and anything else along the way. Downstairs, the washing machine that Jack overfilled with soap violently frees itself from the plumbing, while in the kitchen, one of the kids was cooking something that he soon neglected — it catches on fire, which sets off the smoke alarm.

Meanwhile, three separate technicians show up at almost exactly the same time to perform various services within the house. One is there to check the pilot light on the water heater, another is there to fix the horizontal hold on the television, and the exterminator is presumably there to spray for insects, though this is never made clear. Amidst all the chaos, the baby eats chili out of an open can. After the television repair woman admonishes Jack for his terrible parenting skills, the service technicians all leave in a hurry. The message is clear: men are just not cut out for this kind of domestic labor. The idea of men performing duties that have traditionally been relegated to women is made to seem ridiculous.

However, as the story progresses, the primary source of the film’s humor gradually shifts. As Jack develops his own parenting style and is able to gain control of the domestic situation, the jokes increasingly come at the expense of his inability to project a traditional representation of masculinity. In the second half of the movie, Jack starts watching soap operas, gossiping with

neighborhood women and becoming increasingly self-conscious about his body. Through this experience, we are led to believe that he learns empathy for the plight of suburban housewives.

Meanwhile, as Ron Richardson pursues an intimate relationship with Catherine more aggressively, she proves her worth as a professional by presenting an ad campaign that speaks directly to the instability of the middle class. According to her pitch, "Schooner Tuna sympathizes with those hit so hard by this trying economy. To help you, we are reducing the price of our tuna by fifty cents a can. When this crisis is over, we'll go back to our regular prices. Until then, remember that we're all in this together. Signed Howard Humphries, President, Schooner Tuna. The tuna with a heart." Her presentation is enough to win over Mr. Humphries, thereby securing the account for Richardson/Frankel. "Where in the hell have you been hiding this little girl?" Humphries asks. "She's not just selling Tuna, son. She's selling America! Tuna with a heart! I love that bleeding heart shit! That's... that's American, that's what that is."

When Ron then takes Catherine to Los Angeles to film the commercial, he offers to promote her to full partner of the advertising firm, but only if she leaves Jack and marries him. When Ron fails to take no for an answer, she punches him in the face, thereby expressing her inner masculinity in direct contrast to Jack's femininity, further highlighting the notion of role reversal and making it seem all the more absurd. Meanwhile, back home, Jack's suspicions are piqued when he calls Catherine's hotel room and Ron answers but then immediately hangs up. Jack responds by taking out his frustrations on some of those appliances that populate his home, first destroying the phone, then the television. Next, he nearly destroys his marriage by almost having an affair with Joan, a divorced woman from the neighborhood who is characterized throughout the film as a conniving predator.

When Catherine and Jack confront each other face-to-face about their almost indiscretions, their argument is soon interrupted when both of their former employers show up at their door. In yet another moment of remarkable timing, Jack's old boss begs for him to come back to work just as Ron appears a moment later with flowers in hand, pleading with Catherine to stay with the company. If not, he says, Schooner Tuna is pulling their account. Upon hearing this, Jack expresses surprise that she quit her job, to which Catherine responds, "I didn't like that job. I'm gonna get another job, a better one! Anyway, I miss my family." The film then concludes with Jack getting his old job back and negotiating some additional fringe benefits, while Catherine resumes her role as a homemaker... and through the lens of 1980s conservatism, everyone lives happily ever after.

Obviously, the discourse about women achieving the Dream in a patriarchal society was not limited to these two movies, although I believe that they do serve as excellent counterpoints in terms of representing both sides of this debate as it existed at the time. As another potential subject for analysis, in 1988, Mike Nichols's *Working Girl* took a similar stance as *9 to 5* regarding women's role in a male-dominated office environment, and it too made it clear that women are every bit as capable as men in this respect. As noted by media scholar J. Emmett Winn, "*Working Girl* is the story of a working-class woman who achieves upward mobility. In the end, she is rewarded with mobility because she is a moral and hardworking individual. In other words, her motives are pure and demonstrated as the correct reasons for mobility; and thus she is awarded with the American Dream" (14). However, while both *Working Girl* and *9 to 5* problematize the systemic chauvinism of many white collar work environments, they also

suggest that women in 1980s America can only achieve executive status through deceptive and illegal practices.

Meanwhile, the Cinderella narrative that I discussed in depth in chapter two saw a resurgence in the early nineties, exemplified by the fact that *Pretty Woman* (1990), a story about a prostitute who is rescued from poverty by a highly successful corporate raider — a man who literally finds love through capitalism — remains as of this writing the highest grossing romantic comedy of all time, having earned over \$463 million at the box office. As Winn notes, “*Pretty Woman* is replete with dichotomous signifiers of class and social status” (90). It is a cross-class romance that he claims moralizes poverty while celebrating the opulence afforded by vast wealth.

Even five years after the release of *Pretty Woman*, the Cinderella myth continued to prove popular when Sydney Pollack directed a remake of *Sabrina* starring Harrison Ford, Julia Ormond and Greg Kinnear. As we have seen, the American Dream as it exists in the public imagination does not change over time so much as it simply adds layers, while alternately emphasizing some elements over others in direct response to dominant cultural anxieties.

“Live from New York, It’s the Eddie Murphy Show!”

It was December 11, 1982, and so ended the cold opening on the first episode of *Saturday Night Live* ever to be hosted by a current cast member. He was twenty-one years old. Murphy had joined the show two years prior after already achieving success as a standup comedian. In his routines, he often joked about growing up in poverty, and one of his most famous bits centered on the premise that food stamps cannot be used to make purchases from an ice cream truck. Although interviews support that his comedy was indeed drawn from personal experience,

his comic persona and caricatured impressions of cultural icons like Stevie Wonder and Muhammad Ali also reinforced stereotypes that painted African-Americans and their communities in a negative light. In what Spike Lee and others have insinuated to be nothing short of selling out his race (Fuchs 41), Eddie Murphy achieved unparalleled financial success as an African-American actor, and by the mid-1990s, he was one of the wealthiest people in Hollywood (Morrow).

If we are to consider the trajectory of his career throughout this period, as he rocketed from the slums of New York to an Egyptian-style mansion in Beverly Hills formerly owned by Cher, as well as his role in projecting and perpetuating the myth of a post-racial American culture, then it seems reasonable to suggest that Eddie Murphy is, in many ways, the Reagan-era myth of the American Dream personified. As such, Murphy's career in film comedy throughout this period provides a pertinent narrative thread in the story of upward mobility and race in 1980s America.

Edward Regan Murphy was born in Brooklyn to working-class parents in April of 1961. They divorced when he was three, and his father died when he was eight, at which point his mother also became very ill. Eddie and his older brother Charles were sent to live in a foster home for a year while their mom recovered. Shortly thereafter, she remarried, at which point they all moved to Roosevelt, Long Island, a predominantly poor, black community that was one of the early casualties of the "white flight" purge of city of resources in the 1950s.

According to Murphy's own account, he spent most of his childhood in front of a television set, where he developed an ear for impressions by mimicking the voices of cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny and Bullwinkle. In an interview with Byron Allen that is featured as

bonus material on the *Eddie Murphy: Delirious* DVD, Murphy claimed, “My mother says I never talked in my own voice,” and that, “I knew early on that if I was trying to do something funny, I could get a reaction from it.” Starting at age fifteen, he began performing at local comedy clubs at every opportunity. Within a few years, he would branch out to the city-at-large, where he continued to hone his craft for increasingly diverse audiences.

It was during this time that he developed the prototype of the standup persona that would launch him to superstardom. Murphy's on-stage character was vulgar, crude, over-sexed, homophobic and misogynistic, combining an overdriven libido with an unfiltered vocabulary and a propensity for providing mixed-race audiences with opportunities to laugh at things that might otherwise be off limits. This included the debasement of homosexuals, women, and working-class African-American communities (Sanello). His routines arguably did more to reinforce stereotypes than to dispel them, but perhaps he knew that the best way to make mainstream audiences laugh in 1980s America was to validate their unspoken beliefs about race. Popular comedy, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation, draws upon dominant cultural anxieties, which in this case arose from the fault lines between White America and Other America. In his standup routines, Eddie Murphy presented a comic perspective that acknowledged these realities while also exaggerating them for effect. This effect, as I shall explain, was twofold.

Murphy claims that a considerable amount of his standup material comes directly from his own experiences of growing up in New York City, in housing projects and on welfare, where the TV would serve as the de facto babysitter while his mother and his step-father were at work (Sanello). On stage, his presence was every bit as animated as the cartoons he watched, while his humor allowed him to connect with a broad audience that could relate, if not to the truth of his

experiences, then to the stereotypes they perpetuated. That is, Murphy's comic perspective was almost certainly seen by some as not only a validation of their prejudices, but also as an opportunity to laugh directly in the face of racial inequality, thereby minimizing the perception of its social significance.

As noted by Larry Kart of the *Chicago Tribune*, his standup material was particularly popular with the younger generation, which one can presume is because they, like Murphy himself, had come of age in an era when the Civil Rights Movement had already been relegated to the pages of history. Like most Americans, he almost certainly knew what it was, but he was not quite old enough to have been part of the movement himself, and so Murphy's style of humor represented something quite different than that of someone like Richard Pryor, for example, who Murphy claims was his inspiration for going into comedy in the first place. While Pryor used humor to call attention to issues of racial inequality, Murphy effectively parodied racial stereotypes with a lack of satirical edge that many critics found to be rather disconcerting.

Kart goes on to describe Murphy's early body of work as "brash, profanity-filled routines and his similarly foul-mouthed movie roles — with their constant emphasis on the kind of sexual and scatological themes that appeal to adolescents of all ages and offend a good many adults." He later adds, "What Americans of all sorts detect in Murphy's humor is a man who is saying that for him, race is no longer a burden or even an issue but something to be toyed with — another 'fun' choice on the lifestyle menu that one may dig or not, as the mood takes you" (Kart). This is one of the ways in which Eddie Murphy helped substantiate the false notion that race was no longer a concern in American society. Meanwhile, in direct contrast to this

position, as I have suggested, many of his impressions, characters and standup routines only served to perpetuate negative racial stereotypes.

If nothing else, *Saturday Night Live* has always been a good place to showcase stereotypes. In 1980, at the age of nineteen, Eddie Murphy was hired as a “featured player” on the show, earning seven hundred and fifty dollars a week to work as an extra that may or may not have lines in any number of skits. When NBC cleaned house for the 1981-1982 season, he and Joe Piscopo were the only cast members who were asked to return. Now a full member of the cast, Murphy began appearing regularly in sketches, which notably included his version of Buckwheat from the *Little Rascals*, as well as Mr. Robinson, a parody of Fred Rogers as reimagined in a poor urban community. Much like Murphy’s standup persona, both of these characters drew heavily on crude racial stereotypes and were tremendously popular with mixed-race audiences (Hill and Weingrad).

In a later sketch, called “White Like Me” (a parody of the very serious nonfiction book and movie *Black Like Me*, about the apartheid conditions of the deep South), Murphy disguises himself as a white man to expose the world of white privilege, then exaggerates this privilege to the point of absurdity. A white man gives him a newspaper for free when nobody else is around. On the bus, when the only other black person gets off, they turn on swing music and serve cocktails. At the bank, while the African-American loan officer rejects his application for fifty thousand dollars, his white colleague then steps in and tells Murphy’s character, Mr. White, to take whatever he needs, no need to pay it back. By rendering the idea of white privilege nonsensical, it effectively disarms the opposition. At the end of the sketch, Murphy speaks directly to the camera and says, “I’ve got a lot of friends, and we’ve got a lot of makeup...”

suggesting that all black people must do to enter this world of privilege is disown their racial identity.

Murphy's appearances on *SNL* were largely responsible for launching his career as a standup comedian into uncharted territory. This was when, as a professional joke-teller, he graduated from comedy clubs to sold-out arenas. In 1982, his self-titled debut comedy album sold over five hundred thousand copies and reached number ninety-seven on the Billboard Top 100 Albums. Later that year, when Nick Nolte had to back out of his commitment to host *Saturday Night Live* at the last minute due to a sudden illness, Murphy, still a member of the cast, stepped in to take his place. Nolte had intended to promote his new film *48 Hours*, which co-starred Murphy in his debut performance on the silver screen, so from the perspectives of both Paramount and NBC, Murphy was a logical replacement to both host the show and promote the movie (Hill and Weingrad).

In the film, he plays a petty criminal who teams up with a tough cop, played by Nolte, and they have forty-eight hours to solve a crime before Murphy's character has to return to jail. This movie is often credited with being the seminal buddy-cop film that would inspire imitation throughout the decade and beyond. It was also the seventh highest grossing movie of that year, taking in almost eighty million dollars on a budget of approximately twelve million (boxofficemojo). Studio executives undoubtedly recognized that Eddie Murphy's comic persona contributed significantly to the success of the movie, and so Murphy and Paramount formed a symbiotic relationship that would prove to make them both a lot of money through a string of successful films.

Despite his meteoric rise to stardom, though, as I have suggested, Murphy was by no means universally adored throughout this period. In a review written in *Variety* regarding one of Murphy's standup performances, the author argued, "His laughs are caused by the obscenities he utters... without them, he has no act" (Kart). In a similarly condescending tone, as written in an article in the *Village Voice*, author Michael Williams claimed that Murphy, along with Joan Rivers, were nothing more than "phony rebels who really pander to majority interests. The key to their comedy is middle-class prudery filtered through an upper-class cruelty toward a legion of unlucky outsiders." Williams then goes on to describe them as "the perfect court jesters for Ronald Reagan's America — a pair of minority superstars who have gleefully sold out" (Kart).

Public criticisms such as this may very well have influenced Murphy's decision to kill off the character of Buckwheat on *SNL* the following year, although he later claimed in an interview that it was so that people would stop calling out the character's name during his standup performances. That said, while 1983 was indeed a tragic year for Buckwheat, it turned out to be a very good year for Eddie Murphy. After the resounding success of *Eddie Murphy* (the comedy album), Eddie Murphy (the comedian, actor and singer) worked out a deal with HBO to film his standup material and broadcast it to their continually growing pool of subscribers. *Eddie Murphy: Delirious* solidified his status as a rising star and the audio-only version of this production earned him a Grammy for Best Comedy Album (Sanello).

That same year, he starred in his second feature film, *Trading Places*, which is where his career first officially aligns with the parameters of this project. This movie was directed by John Landis, who was primarily known for directing such reckless comedies as *National Lampoon's Animal House* in 1978 and *The Blues Brothers* in 1980 — that is, until 1982, when during the

filming of his segment of *Twilight Zone: The Movie*, three of his actors were accidentally killed by a helicopter during what was later determined to be an unnecessarily dangerous stunt. As a result, Landis and four of his crew members were charged with involuntary manslaughter. While the director maintains that no one on his crew made any irresponsible decisions in this regard, his next movie involved considerably less stunt work.

Trading Places was the fourth highest grossing North American movie of 1983, earning over six times its budget in box office receipts (boxofficemojo). On the surface, *Trading Places* is a film about race, opportunity, privilege, and equal access to the American Dream, but ultimately, as I shall explain, much like the commonly waged criticism of Murphy's standup material, the underlying themes of this film only serve to validate the myth of a post-racial United States. While this film does superficially address issues of race, class and gender, a thematic analysis demonstrates that it more closely aligns ideologically with the Reagan-era myth of the American Dream, which suggests that such "identity politics" merely creates inconvenient but permeable barriers that any individual with enough intelligence, perseverance and ruthless ambition can easily overcome.

Trading Places opens with a montage of working-class Philadelphia, set to the tune of Mozart's Overture from "The Marriage of Figaro." From the opening credits, we are introduced to the stark contrast between the two definitions of class that this film will explore: socioeconomic class and class as a measure of cultural capital. This incongruity is emphasized through shots of homeless people as the opera music, highbrow by most standards, continues. In fact, the music only loses this note of irony when the scene finally switches to the home of Louis Winthorpe III, played by Dan Akyroyd, as he casually engages in his morning routine. Coleman,

his butler, played by Denholm Elliot, prepares freshly squeezed orange juice and croissants for his sanctimonious master. When Winthorpe's limousine driver drops him off at Duke and Duke, the commodities trading firm for which he works, everyone he passes wishes him a good morning, while Winthorpe acknowledges but makes eye contact with none of them. In his mind, he clearly believes that he is better than them. The only person Winthorpe does speak to briefly is an employee of the firm named Fosley, likely because this character happens to have been played by the film's executive producer, George Fosley, and even this I suspect was an inside joke to show that Winthorpe indeed knew his place within the chain of command.

This class arrogance is taken a step further in the next scene when Randolph and Mortimer Duke, played by Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche respectively, completely ignore the politeness of their servants as they step into their limousine. Inside the car, they argue about "heredity versus environment," hinting at one of the movie's central themes. Ultimately, this film questions the role of eugenics in one's pursuit of the American Dream. When the Duke brothers arrive at the company that bears their name, the audience is then introduced to Eddie Murphy's character of Billy Ray Valentine, who pretends to be a blind veteran who lost his legs in Vietnam. His first defining action on screen is to sexually harasses a woman as she walks by, even going so far as to grab her legs and then call her a bitch when she walks off. When the Duke brothers step out of their limousine, Valentine begs them for money, anything they can spare. Repulsed by this man, Randolph says "I have no money for you." Indirectly, he might as well have been speaking on behalf of the Reagan administration's position on domestic poverty.

As numerous scholars have noted, in many ways, this film can be thought of as a modern retelling of the Mark Twain book *The Prince and the Pauper*, as it follows a very similar

storyline (Budd, Vera and Gordon, et al.). In the film, the plot is set in motion when Randolph bets Mortimer that they can switch the lives of a rich person and a poor person and the results will be exactly the same. While Randolph claims that people are products of their environment, Mortimer believes that genetics determine one's character and aptitude. "Same as in racehorses," he says. "It's in the blood."

After the Duke Brothers have entered the building, Valentine bumps into Winthorpe, knocking his briefcase out of his hand. Winthorpe automatically assumes that this man must be a thief and reacts with exaggerated cowardice. Inside the building, a chase ensues, culminating in six uniformed police officers drawing and cocking their pistols point blank at Valentine's face. Emboldened by his peacekeeping allies, Winthorpe says he wants to press full charges, that "people like this are a menace to decent society." In other words, he does not believe that poor black people and rich white people should ever have to cross paths. When Valentine leaves and everyone else returns to work, Randolph says to Mortimer, "That man is a product of a poor environment. There's nothing wrong with him, and I can prove it." His brother reacts incredulously and responds by saying, "Of course there's something wrong with him... he's a negro! Probably been stealing since before he could crawl."

The Duke brothers thus decide that they have found their guinea pigs, that they will go about ruining Winthorpe's life while elevating Valentine to the status of an executive at their company. They contend that this will finally end the debate of nature versus nurture, and so they bail Valentine out of jail and pick him up in their limousine, luring him into the car with the promise of whiskey and cigars. "My brother and I run a privately funded program to rehabilitate culturally disadvantaged people," Randolph says. They then present Valentine with the instant

realization of the 1980s American Dream: a fully furnished home, a car with a driver, personal servants, and a considerable salary for a job at their firm. Maintaining his homophobic persona, Eddie Murphy's character leans forward and asks the African-American limo driver if these guys are "a couple of faggots" before cautiously agreeing to their proposal.

Meanwhile, Winthorpe goes to The Heritage Club, where the gold plaque informs the audience that it was "Founded in 1776 - with liberty and justice for all. Members only." Inside, every member is white, male, upper-class and middle-aged, and the walls are adorned with dozens more portraits of the same. Among the hundred or so men featured in this scene, there is not a single person of color. When their meeting commences, Winthorpe is framed for stealing \$150 from the coatroom and is promptly arrested. At the police station, the arresting officer, played by Frank Oz, finds PCP in Winthorpe's jacket pocket that had been planted there by Mr. Beeks, who secretly works for the Duke brothers. Beeks is played by Paul Gleason, later known for his role as the school principal in *The Breakfast Club*.

When Winthorpe is released, Beeks gives a prostitute named Ophelia, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, fifty dollars to pretend that Winthorpe is her drug dealer and that the two of them are intimately involved. The scene that she creates causes his fiancée to leave him, but then Ophelia immediately feels bad and takes Winthorpe in, offering to help him get his life back together in return for an unspecified amount of money in the tens of thousands. She is not doing this for charity, we are reminded — she is doing this for personal financial gain, because Ophelia wants and deserves her own realization of the American Dream just as much as anybody.

As the narrative progresses, Valentine proves to be remarkably adept at his job, while Winthorpe rapidly descends into a life of self-destruction and crime. He hits rock bottom when

he gets thoroughly intoxicated and brings a gun to the company Christmas party while dressed in a filthy Santa Clause costume, where he then proceeds to blatantly plant drugs in Valentine's desk. After Winthorpe further embarrasses himself and leaves, Valentine says to the Duke brothers, "I know it's none of my business, but that guy belongs behind bars." When the Duke brothers suggest that maybe he should consider that Winthorpe is unemployed, broke and hungry, Valentine responds, "That's no excuse," before parroting the common refrain made popular during the Reagan years, "He has money to buy drugs, though, right? Listen, you can't be soft on people like that. Take it from me..." Indeed, take it from him. Murphy's character was effectively serving as a spokesperson for the social conservatism of the time.

With Valentine's success and Winthorpe's failure, Randolph has therefore won the bet, and when Mortimer pays him the one dollar that he owes as a result of their wager, Valentine overhears their conversation, now realizing that he has been little more than a pawn in their game all along. "Do you really believe I would have a nigger run our family business?" Mortimer asks, to which his brother replies, "Of course not. Neither would I." Valentine then joins up with Winthorpe, Ophelia and Coleman as part of a plot to make them all instantly rich while decimating the fortunes of the Duke brothers. In order to accomplish this, though, they must first obtain the confidential orange crop report that Beeks intends to leak to the Dukes before it is officially announced, thereby giving them an edge in the market for frozen orange juice futures.

Each disguised as various racial stereotypes, Valentine, Coleman, Ophelia and Winthorpe board a long-distance commuter train and each take a seat near Beeks. Valentine claims to be "Naga Boko, an exchange student from Cameroon," repeatedly offering beef jerky to Beeks and others. Moments later, Coleman enters as a drunk Irish priest, and then Ophelia sits down beside

them, claiming to be Swedish in her best attempt at the accent, despite her Austrian attire. Topping them all in terms of racial insensitivity, Winthorpe then arrives to this train car in blackface and fake dreadlocks, speaking in a caricatured Jamaican accent.

Beeks soon catches on, but only after they have already switched the briefcases. When he pulls a gun on them and escorts them to the cargo area, they are inexplicably saved by a caged gorilla who happened to be standing right behind him. Adding to this remarkable coincidence, Beeks had also just accosted Jim Belushi's unnamed character, who was attending a New Year's Eve costume party that was taking place on another train car and who happened to be dressed up like a gorilla. After the real gorilla knocks Beeks unconscious, they tape his mouth shut and put him in the costume. Off camera, they then somehow get him in the cage with the real gorilla, who subsequently attempts to mate with him, all of which adds up to a tremendous amount of set-up for a punchline that consists entirely of bestiality and anal rape.

Once Valentine and Winthorpe have the crop report, they switch it with a counterfeit, which they exchange with the Duke brothers. This transaction takes place in a parking garage so poorly lit that the brothers cannot see that Beeks is actually Valentine. As the report leads them to believe that orange juice futures will increase in value once this information is made public, the Duke brothers commit to investing their entire fortunes in this venture. This could very well be a reference to the Hunt brothers' attempt at cornering the silver market that I discussed earlier in this chapter.

Meanwhile, Valentine takes the briefcase full of cash that the Duke brothers thought they were giving to Beeks and pools it with the money in Ophelia's and Coleman's life savings, which Winthorpe and Valentine then use to buy orange juice shares at their opening value of \$102.

When the Duke brothers direct their broker to invest heavily in this commodity, others suspect that they must know something and quickly follow their lead, thereby dramatically inflating the price. Once they have reached \$142 per share, Winthorpe and Valentine then turn around and sell their shares for a profit. Moments later, when the crop report is announced on the trading floor, the price plummets, and Winthorpe and Valentine then buy back all the orange juice futures they just sold at less than a quarter of the price for which they sold them. Their profit is the Duke brothers' loss. When they cannot make the margin call, their assets are all seized, and they are effectively broke.

Winthorpe, Valentine, Ophelia and Coleman, on the other hand, all retire to a tropical island, where even Coleman has his own servant now, and they are all equally wealthy. While race is superficially addressed at various points in this film, ultimately, this movie only serves to reinforce the belief that in the face of hard work, cleverness and the right opportunities, race does not inhibit one's pursuit of the American Dream, nor does class or gender. Moreover, this film suggests that upward mobility can be achieved by anyone through the miracle of the stock exchange, which, much like the title suggests, was commonly believed to wield the power to make poor people rich and rich people poor, all in a New York minute.

According to the filmmakers, the key to success in America is in having some valuable insight into how our institutions truly work and being ready to exploit any opportunity that presents itself. In this case, the loophole that Winthorpe and Valentine take advantage of near the end of the story in order to multiply their fortunes while drastically diminishing that of the Duke brothers actually did in fact remain legal until 2010, when a clause in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act that is often referred to colloquially as the "Eddie Murphy

Rule” finally articulated that such acts constitute insider trading and must therefore cease (Lanchester).

Ultimately, this movie makes the case that the American Dream is an equal opportunity enterprise, where people can obtain success no matter their race, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic class. After all, not only can a poor, black reformed criminal achieve the American Dream, but so can Coleman, an immigrant who spent most of his life as a servant, as well as Ophelia, who once earned a living as a prostitute. All three are presented as redeemable characters because they understand the intricacies of high finance so brilliantly. Even Winthorpe, after hitting rock bottom, was able to recover his fortune, because in America, we are led to believe, overnight success is possible for anyone who is smart enough and brave enough to engage in the bloodsport of high stakes capitalism. While Randolph had indeed won the bet, thus proving that nurture won out over nature, the two characters who represented these concepts joined forces at the end of the movie to prove that neither of these things ultimately matters. The American Dream, the filmmakers seem to be saying, is perfectly accessible to anybody who is willing to work for it... and of course, who happens to have the capital to invest in the first place.

Eddie Murphy’s career seemed to validate this notion. The following year, when the Dudley Moore vehicle *Best Defense* (Huyck, 1984) screened unfavorably for test audiences, the producers hired Murphy to be in a number of tacked-on scenes in order to make the film more marketable. Despite that movie’s overall poor reception, Murphy went on to star in *Beverly Hills Cop* (Brest, 1984) later that year, which is the role that would cement his status as a motion picture superstar. This movie about a streetwise Detroit cop pursuing a criminal operation all the way to Beverly Hills was made on a budget of about fifteen million dollars. During its

astounding eight-month theatrical run, it took in approximately \$234 million at the domestic box office, making it the highest grossing American movie produced in 1984. It then made another \$82 million in international distribution, plus undisclosed figures in ancillary distribution (boxofficemojo.com).

Murphy was one of the biggest stars in the world at this point. His next movie, *The Golden Child*, (Ritchie, 1986) was even promoted with the tagline, “Eddie Murphy is the chosen one.” Indeed, it no doubt seemed to many as though he was an extraordinary example of the American Dream in action. His own rags-to-riches story rendered him the epitome of colorblind upward mobility in the minds of many, as he served as living proof that with enough hard work and perseverance, anybody, regardless of race, could achieve astounding wealth and fame in this country.

Meanwhile, though, as previously discussed, his comic persona was perceived by many to be mocking the very idea of blackness through his extensive use of stereotypes and exaggeration. Every one of Murphy’s most successful movies throughout this period could be accurately described as “fish-out-of-water” comedies, where he played a stereotypical black man who finds himself placed in a strange and unfamiliar cultural context. In *48 Hours* (Hill, 1982), he was a criminal paired with a white cop, and the film drew most of its humor from Murphy’s character being placed in environments where it would seem that he does not belong, as well as the incongruous idea of a black criminal holding a badge. While not overtly racist, this film did reinforce certain negative stereotypes. Similarly, in *Best Defense*, considering that his part had not yet even been written by the time the film was initially done with post-production, he was literally placed within a narrative in which he did not belong, just as in the *Beverly Hills Cop*

franchise, much of the humor came from the idea of a black man pursuing white-collar criminals in Beverly Hills. In *The Golden Child*, it was the same formula, but in a Chinese community.

Two years later, in *Coming to America* (Landis, 1988), he took his stereotyped African caricature of Naga Boko from *Trading Places* and presented a slightly different iteration of this character as the lead role in his own movie, and most of the humor that drives this film is drawn from the perceived incongruity of a rich and powerful black man in working-class Queens, New York, where we are led to believe that wealthy and black are mutually exclusive descriptors. Basically, Murphy plays an African prince who comes to a place where black men are not treated with the respect to which his character is accustomed. According to an interview at the time, he claimed, “I’m back on the right track now as an actor. For three years I did movies that made a lot of money, and it was like, ‘Okay, we got the formula.’ But I’m 27 years old now. I have to grow. I can’t spend the rest of my life screaming and hollering” (McBride).

It seems however that it was only after *Coming to America* that Eddie Murphy broke out of his mold, not by altering his comic persona, but by changing the context in which he appears. No longer would he be a black man in a white man’s world. Rather, he would be a black man in a black man’s world, complete with all the prejudices that come with it. In 1989, at the peak of his career, he wrote, directed and starred in *Harlem Nights*, a movie that celebrated blackness while using humor to shine a spotlight on institutional racism. Whereas *Trading Places* treated race as if it was no longer an issue in American culture, *Harlem Nights* took its audiences to another time and place in order to remind them how deeply embedded this racism is within our social fabric. Even though this film takes place in the 1920s, the forms of systemic discrimination that this movie calls attention to were just as relevant in 1989 as they were back then.

Harlem Nights is a gangster comedy starring Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, Della Reese and Arsenio Hall, as well as Murphy himself in the lead role. As the writer and director, he was providing opportunities for many of the black performers that he most admired. It was also, of course, a chance for him to work directly with them, and just as his own career represented one kind of American Dream, with this film, he hoped to use his clout in the industry in order to boost the careers of other black comedians that he respected, thereby potentially expanding the inclusiveness of the Dream.

Harlem Nights is fundamentally about a group of highly skilled innovators who face unfair challenges in their chosen profession based entirely on the color of their skin, which, of course, also describes the careers of virtually every one of Murphy's co-stars within the film. While he believed that these individuals should be at the top of the world, in reality, their careers had each been reduced to a position well outside of the spotlight, where they were hardly able to make ends meet. This is a movie that celebrates these comedians and their various contributions to the idea of blackness. Meanwhile, most of the white characters in this film are portrayed as cartoonish in terms of their corruption and incompetence. It is like watching a negative print of classic Hollywood cinema, and this, I believe, was the point of caricaturizing these characters. By reversing the stereotypes, the inherent absurdity within them is revealed.

Despite having earned over twice its budget at the box office, this movie was reported by Paramount to have been a resounding failure. It grossed over sixteen million dollars on the weekend of its release, making it the number one movie in North America at the time. It was then number two in its second week and number three in the third (boxofficemojo.com). However, on November 17, 1989, the opening night of its wide release, two men were shot and killed inside a

Detroit theater that was showing this movie, and so the news story that dominated the headlines was that this movie was inciting violence in African-American communities.

Only adding fuel to the fire, news outlets also reported that a fight had broken out in a Sacramento theater that same night, as well as one in Boston and another in Richmond, California, in which a 17-year old was shot and killed. As these stories gained traction, theater owners got increasingly nervous. After an article in *People* magazine quoted a mall security guard as saying that this movie glorifies violence, it was soon pulled from half of the first-run theaters after its fourth week and the rest of them by week seven.

Meanwhile, *Driving Miss Daisy*, a movie that essentially gives systemic racism the Hallmark treatment, where a patronizing old white woman teaches her African-American driver how to read, came out on December 7 and went on to make over one hundred million dollars in box office revenue. It also won four Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay. The mall security guard apparently had nothing newsworthy to say about it.

Critical reception of *Harlem Nights* was also less than kind. Gene Siskel said it was one of the worst films of 1989, and Roger Ebert said of Murphy, "If he wants to realize his potential, he needs to work with a better writer and director than himself" (Ebert, 1989). Murphy was also nominated for two Golden Raspberries on behalf of this movie, one for Worst Director and another for Worst Screenplay, the latter of which he won. As of this writing, he has still not directed another film, and in many ways, this film marked the beginning of his declining public image. Case in point: his next movie was *Another 48 Hours* (Hill, 1990), the critical consensus for which was essentially that it lacked the originality of the original.

With *Boomerang* (Hudlin, 1992), he achieved somewhat of a return to success in a role that more or less parodied his stand-up persona, where he plays a womanizer who meets his match. Over the years, his self-assuredness had morphed into arrogance within the public imagination, and so he lampooned the perception of who he had become in *Boomerang*. Similarly self-reflexive, the premise for his next film, *The Distinguished Gentleman* (Lynn, 1992), was that a black con-man from the ghetto decides to run for Congress when the incumbent whose name he shares suddenly dies. Running on the slogan, “The name you know,” Eddie Murphy, that is, Thomas Jefferson Johnson, wins the election, but then he learns that Congress is far more corrupt than life on the streets. From Murphy’s perspective, this could also be considered to be a metaphor for the politics of Hollywood as he saw it.

In 1994, hoping to recreate his earlier success, he took two previous elements that had worked for him in the past and put them together when he once again teamed up with John Landis in order to make the third installment of the *Beverly Hills Cop* franchise. This movie was received so poorly that as of this writing, they have not made another film in this series since, despite the astronomical success of the first two movies. In an interview from around this time, Landis said of Murphy, “He seemed like he just wasn’t interested in being funny anymore” (*Entertainment Tonight*). Meanwhile, Eddie Murphy’s career continued to decline, particularly after his name began regularly appearing in tabloids. In 1995, David Spade made a joke on *Saturday Night Live* in which he showed a picture of Eddie Murphy and said, “Look children, it’s a fallen star... make a wish.” The audience booed, and Murphy refused to return to the show for almost twenty years because of this joke, including when he declined to attend the twenty-fifth anniversary special (Spade 155).

Murphy spent the remainder of the 1990s making comedies in which he unleashed his acerbic wit on other easy targets, including a number of movies in which he wore prosthetic fat suits for comedic effect, and most of these films proved to be even more damaging to his reputation than the one that preceded it. In some respects, though, Murphy had the last laugh, because every once in a while, he made a movie that was a hit, and the multi-picture deals that these moments of success would bring ensured that he would earn unprecedented sums of money, even with films like *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* (Underwood, 2002), *Norbit* (Robbins, 2007) and *A Thousand Words* (Robbins, 2012), all of which performed horribly at the box office. On the website Rotten Tomatoes, as of this writing, these movies have critic approval ratings of 5%, 9% and 0% respectively, yet he remains one of the highest paid actors in Hollywood (Pomerantz).

Eddie Murphy achieved the most financial success of his career outside of the parameters of this chapter, however, beginning in 2001, when he played the voice of an ass without a name in a cartoon about a flatulent, antisocial ogre (boxofficemojo.com). By denying a visual expression of his blackness altogether, Murphy reached new heights in his career that were previously unimagined. He was also nominated for an Oscar for his dramatic performance in *Dreamgirls* (Condon, 2006), which, even ten years later, at a budget of \$80 million, remains the most expensive film to ever feature an all African-American lead cast (Goldsmith 94).

Throughout his career, Murphy has juggled a public identity that allows him to appeal to mixed-race audiences through caricatured stereotypes while occasionally acknowledging the positive attributes of blackness. This is the contradiction that has haunted Murphy since he first entered the limelight, and it mirrors one of the harshest incongruities that lies at the heart of the

American Dream: the promise of opportunity versus the reality of systemic racism. As of 2014, Eddie Murphy's films have cumulatively earned nearly four billion dollars, and although most critics would not believe this to be his best film by any means, *Shrek 2* (Adamson/Asbury/Vernon, 2004), where he reprises his role as a donkey named Donkey, remains his highest grossing film to date, having earned over \$324 million at the box office (boxofficemojo.com). While to many, Eddie Murphy is an exemplar of the American Dream in action, the sad reality is that he has had to sacrifice and even condemn much of his racial identity in order to achieve this.

Grow Up Already

Throughout the 1980s and early nineties, the Reagan and Bush administrations worked to convince the American people that the government they led only served as a hindrance to the Dream, while the free market was pitched as the panacea to all that ailed us as a nation. These men of privilege effectively lead the chorus that unequivocally evangelized the neoliberal creed, and through its continual reinforcement in mass media — including many of the movies discussed in this chapter — this ideology came to be normalized in the public imagination. The basic idea was that the harder a person worked in the name of self-interest, the richer that person could become, while the inverse of this postulate only dehumanized and victimized the poor.

This led to a renewed emphasis on representations of socioeconomic class as it became increasingly difficult for Americans to achieve upward mobility, and status symbols provided opportunities to advertise one's standing within the social hierarchy. Meanwhile, throughout this period, the middle class continued to deteriorate while an increasing number of white American men came to believe that they were being unfairly discriminated against through affirmative action laws and other products of the Civil Rights movement.

This was made evident in the comedy *Soul Man* (Miner, 1986), as just one particularly egregious example, the premise for which involves a middle-class white man who pretends to be black in order to qualify for a scholarship that will allow him to attend Harvard Law School. The tagline, in a distorted twist on the title of the 1967 Stanley Kramer film about interracial relationships, was “Guess who’s coming to college?” This film was protested by the NAACP and seen by many as racist, even though at one point in the movie, the protagonist justifies his actions by saying, “It’s the Cosby decade! America loves black people!” Many years later, a columnist for the *New York Press* went so far as to credit *Soul Man* for predicting the rise of Barack Obama’s career, citing the fact that he actually did enter Harvard Law School two years later as proof that the accomplishments of minorities tend to be seen as “racial exceptionalism” in stark contrast to when the same feats are achieved by white Americans (White).

There was indeed a great deal of anxiety about the white male American Dream during this period, but this was more a result of the dwindling middle class than it was a product of divisive racial politics. As witnessed in *Trading Places*, as well as a number of other movies, both comedic and otherwise, the stock market was seen by many as the great equalizer that could turn fortunes around in an instant, and all it took was connections, hard work and a little bit of luck, plus enough capital to play the game.

The Secret of My Success (Ross, 1987) — spelled *SUCCE\$S* in the title sequence — is a comedy about a white, middle-class young man in his quest for upward mobility within the high-stakes finance industry. Reflecting a broader aspect of American culture, as well as the general theme that I explore throughout this section, this film conflates coming-of-age with the American Dream, paradoxically asserting that not only does a person have to grow up in order to achieve

the Dream, but that a person is not considered to be an adult until they have achieved certain agreed upon standards of success.

The movie opens with a shot of a barn in Kansas, then the protagonist's father speaking to the camera: "New York City..." he says. In a similarly framed shot, the mom adds, "He wants to see what's there," to which the dad says facetiously that he can tell him what's there. She then gets the last word with, "I don't know how, when you've never been..." The movie then cuts to city traffic, where the audience is presented with a sea of yellow cabs and fast-walking pedestrians, accompanied by the title song and opening credits. Beneath the New York skyline, a cross-country bus glides through traffic; behind one of the windows sits an awestruck Brantley Foster, played by Michael J. Fox, the film's protagonist. He is here to prove to his parents, himself and the audience that he can and will achieve extraordinary wealth in the finance capital of the world.

As a twenty-six year old actor, Fox had already achieved enormous success, first as the young Republican Alex P. Keaton on *Family Ties*, and more recently, as Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*, which had been the most successful movie of 1985, a time when mythologizing the ultraconservative fifties was very much in vogue. When this movie came out, Michael J. Fox was, in many ways, the public face of an entire generation of white male suburbia.

Back on the farm, as relayed through flashback, Brantley's dad laments, "I just can't figure out why you'd want to go off to New York when we've got everything here," to which Brantley unflinchingly replies, "It's just something I have to do." In the following scene, he explains to his mother, "There's a whole world out there... I've got a nice small apartment lined up, a great job, and I want to make lots of money... this is just as much for you as it is for me,

mom. All those years of college, they're going to start paying off." In the city, a number of tracking shots that could function as textbook examples of Laura Mulvey's male gaze — that is, cameras lingering on parts of women's bodies — are set to the screaming chorus of the theme song: "The secret of my success is that I'm living twenty-five hours a day!" Echoing one of the central themes of this movie, if a person wants to get ahead, then he or she has to be prepared to not only work for it, but work harder than everybody else. The reader may note that this "survival of the most ambitious" mentality bears disconcerting parallels with social darwinism.

When Brantley arrives for his first day of work, he is fired as a result of a hostile takeover. When he applies for another job, the personnel director tells him that his college experience is of no value without real world experience, which he cannot get without first having some real world experience. When Brantley asks him, "Then why did I go to college?" he responds, "Well, you had fun, didn't you?" then laughs in his face. Discouraged, Brantley decides to lie on his resume for the next interview, where the personnel director tells him, "You're perfect for the job, except..." Brantley cuts her off, practically begging her for the job, saying that he can be whatever it is that they need. "Can you be a minority woman?" she asks, effectively crushing his hopes and ending the interview. Another theme of the movie therefore suggests that it is because of the likes of affirmative action and other legislative efforts toward equality that the white male American dream is in a state of crisis.

After witnessing two minorities rob a convenience store while talking on a payphone to his mom back in Kansas, Brantley considers his round trip ticket home. In another flashback, he tells his parents, "I'm not going to need it, because when I come back, I'm coming back in a private jet," while back in the present, he appears considerably less optimistic. Remembering

something else that his mother told him, he decides to visit his Uncle Howard Prescott, CEO of the Pemrose Corporation, who only reluctantly gives him an interview because of the ingenuity that he demonstrated in spontaneously photocopying his face, signing it and offering it to the receptionist as his business card.

“Clever,” Uncle Howard says while holding the crude black and white reproduction of his nephew’s face. “So you’re one of the Kansas Fosters, huh? Shirttail relative, to say the least... Do you have any idea what we do here?” Brantley then proves that he has done his research: “Pemrose is a multinational conglomerate with twenty-seven different divisions, products ranging from dog food to guided missile systems.” In other words, this is not a company that is driven by any particular principles or ideals beyond unadulterated capitalism. Mr. Prescott takes the opportunity to brag: “Last year, we borrowed more money than Mexico.” Reflecting the perverse explosion of consumer credit in the 1980s, a time of increasing economic instability and inequality, credit is perceived to be of higher value than actual assets. When viewed in this light, it appears that the most significant commodity that the Pemrose corporation and its ilk actually produces is consumer confidence.

In a similar respect, when his uncle asks what experience he has, Brantley responds, “Practically none. But I believe in myself. Doesn’t that count for something? Deep inside, I know I can do anything if I just get a chance...” Here, he articulates the American Dream as it existed in the public imagination in the twilight years of Reaganism and the Cold War. If given the right opportunity (through nepotism, incidentally) and supposedly without consideration of race or gender, the American Dream was alive and well. Mr. Prescott tells him, “You’re in the

front door, kid. What you do on this side of it is up to you.” From here, there is nowhere to go but up.

On Brantley’s first day in the mailroom, his boss says that he hates college kids and tells him to take off his tie. In another scene, Melrose, his mentor, tells him that the job actually takes about a half an hour, but the boss thinks it takes seven. He also tells Brantley, “Never consort with the suits unless they consort with you first.” Class delineations are seen as rigid and their signifiers are made explicit throughout this movie. When Brantley breaks that rule, Melrose admonishes him, saying, “He’s not a person, he’s a suit. You’re mailroom... No consorting.”

We soon learn that twelve executives were recently fired and that Brantley is infatuated with Christy Willis, the only woman on the board of directors. He falls in love with her at first sight while watching her get water from the drinking fountain — in slow motion, mind you. Brantley thus decides to pretend to be an executive by the made up name of Carlton Whitfield. In order to lend credibility to his con, he uses his connections in the mailroom and assumes the old office of a recently terminated employee. An amendment to this version of the American Dream therefore suggests that the ultimate goal of achieving wealth is more important than the means required to obtain it, up to including deception and outright fraud. The secret to his success is lying about who he is and where he came from. Brantley does not even collect a paycheck as Carlton Whitfield, instead working both jobs for the meager salary of a mailroom clerk. This happens to be right around the time that unpaid internships were becoming the normal entry point into careers in the motion picture and finance industries.

Later in the film, Brantley has sex with an executive’s wife, who turns out to be his Aunt Vera, wife of Howard Prescott and direct heir of the company’s founder. After the comic

treatment of their incestuous affair, she offers to have her husband give him “a leg up at Pemrose,” to which Brantley replies, “No thanks. I’m going to make it to the top by myself.” Indeed, he proves to be a talented executive by reading the reports, analyzing the figures, and much of the other stuff that he learned in college. As he quickly ascends the company ranks as hotshot executive Carlton Whitfield, Christie inevitably falls in love with him because of his amazing business acumen. Not only that, but he has also won her over with his concern for the working class, as he repeatedly argues against closing factories in the Midwest, suggesting instead that Pemrose reinvests in their own company in order to make the stock so valuable that nobody wants to sell it. Howard fails to heed this advice, not knowing that it came from his nephew, who still maintains the charade of a double life, and they soon become aware of an imminent hostile takeover by the infamous real estate robber baron Donald Davenport.

Even after Brantley is exposed as a fraud and he and Christie are fired from the company, they continue to show up to the office without pay. Working well into the night, they concoct a plot in collusion with Vera and some of their banking friends to buy enough company stock in order to gain control of the Pemrose Corporation, as well as make a hostile takeover bid on Davenport’s company, thereby preventing his own takeover from happening. Now that Vera is the majority stockholder, she appoints herself to be the new CEO of the Pemrose company, and the story mimics a narrative where the rightful heir to the throne regains control of the kingdom.

She promptly fires Howard, demands a divorce and appoints Brantley to fill his position. Now that he has proven himself with experience provided on the job without being paid, he is officially given the executive position that allowed him to gain that experience in the first place, thus rendering the words of the personnel director from the beginning of the film ironically

prophetic. In the film's final scene, Brantley takes Christie to the opera, that universal signifier of the upper class in 1980s America. The limo driver is his former boss from the mailroom, who utters the last line of the movie: "Yes, sir..." Brantley, we are reminded, is now a man, and he has risen above the working class by lying about his background and by working harder than they ever proved willing or able, a perfect crystallization of the yuppie American Dream.

In stark contrast to this perspective, *Weekend at Bernie's* was released two years later and offered a significantly darker take on the Dream. Although it did not achieve the astonishing box office figures of *The Secret of My Success* — \$30 million versus \$111 million respectively (boxofficemojo.com) — *Weekend at Bernie's* is considered by many to be a cult hit, a status that it acquired primarily through video distribution and word-of-mouth marketing. While most of the plot centers on the two main characters pretending that their dead boss is still alive, their dramatic goal is expressed early in the film: upward mobility, plain and simple.

Larry Wilson, played by Andrew McCarthy, and Richard Parker, played by Jonathan Silverman, are low-level employees at an insurance corporation in New York City. Larry lives in what is coded as a "bad part of town" through the use of sirens in the background and homeless people drinking on the sidewalk in mid-afternoon. Richard, on the other hand, is ashamed to admit that he still lives with his parents. They both want a better life than that which they currently know, and to achieve this, they are even willing to go into work on a summer weekend, when the air conditioning in the building is off. In a brief moment of foreshadowing, while sitting at his desk, Larry checks his lottery numbers in the newspaper but is disappointed to find out that he is in fact a loser. In this system, as we are reminded throughout this movie, he will always be a loser, and he is a sucker for ever thinking otherwise.

Now working from lawn chairs and an inflatable swimming pool on the roof, Richard discovers a discrepancy in the records of a life insurance policy, which appears to have been cashed on four separate occasions and was only taken out after this person had already died. Larry confirms it. On Monday, when they point this out to Bernie Lomax, their boss, he claims that they are wrong at first, but then he thanks them and invites the two of them to his beach house for Labor Day weekend. They can hardly contain their excitement.

Bernie then goes to his mafia connections, including a former hitman named Vito, and asks them to kill Larry and Richard on his behalf. "Let me explain something to you," the mobster tells him, offended by the audacity of his request. "We don't do that anymore. We're a corporation now. We're in the market. We invest: real estate, car rental parking lots..." The line between organized crime and legitimate entrepreneurship is blurred. Still, his associates like the idea of killing somebody again for old time's sake and they eventually agree, but then Vito tells them to kill Bernie instead.

Once they get to the beach resort, Paulie, one of the hitmen, stabs Bernie with a hypodermic needle and kills him with a drug overdose, made to look accidental by the drugs he then plants in Bernie's desk. When Larry and Richard discover the body, Larry convinces Richard that they should just pretend he is still alive for the remainder of the weekend, because they both know that this is as close to the good life as they are ever going to get. This nihilistic perspective suggests that the American Dream is already dead, exemplified by the bloated, artificially animated corpse of the previous generation who lives better in death than they ever will in life. Ultimately, the heroes never do really get ahead, either. All they have is this one weekend to live as if they were millionaires, and so they choose to enjoy it for all it is worth. In

the end, Richard decides to take a vacation, while Larry decides to stick around on the island and try to keep the party going for as long as he possibly can. They did not move up at the company. They just got to be free from the burdens of poverty, if only temporarily.

In 1993, the filmmakers managed to resurrect this premise for a sequel that takes place immediately after the events that transpired in the first installment. At the beginning of the film, Richard and Larry are fired after being suspected of helping Bernie commit the fraud from the first movie. Now that they lack any other means to support themselves financially, they decide to search for the money that Bernie stole, which they believe to be hidden in a safety deposit box on an island in the Caribbean. Meanwhile, another character who wants the money affects Bernie with a voodoo curse that makes him dance whenever he hears music. This is how he ultimately leads them to the underwater buried treasure. At the end, Richard and Larry reluctantly give most of it up to the police, but Larry secretly left out a million dollars for them to keep. The underlying message here is that the only way for poor people to gain wealth by stealing it, never mind all the witchcraft nonsense. At this point, however, even the filmmakers knew that the original movie's central idea, if not the titular character, was already showing serious signs of decay. In many ways, the same could be said for the American Dream.

Just as the Dream had become conflated with coming-of-age, the opposite was also true. According to this backwards logic, if a white, middle-class heterosexual American male cannot achieve success in this country, it is because they lack intellectual and emotional maturity. This is the underlying point of *Dumb and Dumber*. Released in 1994, it was the debut feature film of the Farrelly Brothers, and along with *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (Shadyac) and *The Mask* (Russell), both also released that year, this film cemented Jim Carrey's status as a movie star. *Dumb and*

Dumber is about two hapless losers named Harry and Lloyd — their names almost certainly a nod to the silent film performer — whose lack of intelligence prevents them from ever achieving upward mobility.

As articulated early in the film, they are aspiring entrepreneurs who dream of one day opening their own small business, which they intend to call “I’ve Got Worms” and that will specialize in pet worm farms. The implicit source of humor is that their dream is a ridiculous dream that nonetheless remains well beyond their grasp. After they both get fired from their respective jobs for varying degrees of incompetence, Lloyd complains that, “There are no jobs in this town... not unless you want to work forty hours a week.” Much like Larry in *Weekend at Bernie’s*, they live in what is coded as a poor, working-class neighborhood, their position in life presented as the product of bad choices, chronic laziness and an overall lack of maturity.

When the opportunity arises to drive to Aspen to return the briefcase to the woman with whom Lloyd is infatuated (not realizing that it was intentionally left at the airport as a ransom for her kidnapped husband), Harry says he would rather stay, because he believes that he can only accomplish something significant if he stays in one place and continues to work at it. He believes in the old-fashioned American Dream. Besides, he adds, “I don’t know about you, but I am sick and tired of running from creditors.” In response to this, Lloyd sets the plot in motion while stating the film’s central theme: “You know what I’m sick and tired of, Harry? I’m sick and tired of having to eek my way through life. I’m sick of tired of being a nobody. But most of all, I’m sick of having nobody.” With that, Harry acquiesces and they head off to try and find Aspen.

Despite making a number of terrible choices along the way, Lloyd and Harry do find the woman whose briefcase they possessed and then unknowingly serve as bait in an FBI sting

operation that leads to the arrest of the kidnappers. She and her husband are reunited and Harry and Lloyd are the same as they have always been, having learned nothing from the story that just unfolded. They are still both nobodies, and neither of them has anyone but each other.

Underscoring this point, as they walk along the empty highway in the film's denouement, a bus full of bikini models pulls up beside them, one of whom claims that they "need two oil boys who can grease us up before each competition." Hardly missing a beat, Harry tells her that there is a town up the road. As the bus drives off, Lloyd runs to catch up with it, only to explain that the town is actually in the opposite direction. He then says to Harry, "Wow. Two lucky guys are going to be driving around with those girls for the next couple of months." Sad though this may seem, this represents a happy ending for the audience if we consider that these characters' only realization is that they *are* nobodies. Harry nods, then delivers the final line before the end credits roll: "Yeah, don't worry. We'll catch our break, too. Just got to keep our eyes open..."

This effectively punctuates the central theme of the movie, which is that opportunities abound for those who are smart enough to seize them and who are diligent enough to see them through. Harry and Lloyd will never achieve any modicum of success because they are dumb and dumber, which in turn, makes voyeurs of their misadventures feel smart and smarter. This film draws humor from the superiority that its audience is allowed to feel relative to these characters because of the emotional distance that comedy allows. To laugh is to know better than they do, and this movie effectively reinforces the myth of the American Dream by exemplifying its failure at the hands of fools.

CHAPTER V: THE LAST LAUGH (1997-2016)**The Dream is Dead, Long Live the Dream!**

As reflected in popular comedic films throughout the post-World War II era, the myth of the American Dream is nothing if not resilient, even in the face of increased disillusionment with its central precepts. Over the past seventy years, comedic filmmakers have repeatedly engaged in the discourse surrounding the viability of the Dream, taking various positions on both sides of this often contentious debate. While some filmmakers indicate in their work that the American Dream is indeed alive and well, others are keen to point out that it is and has always been little more than a cruel joke, a fact made all the more evident by the ever-shrinking middle class.

However, for many Americans, it took until the twilight years of the twentieth century before the Dream was more broadly considered to be an empty promise, as even those who had maintained their nationalistic faith in this guiding ideology found it to be increasingly difficult to find gainful employment, regardless of their diligence or aptitude. As Barbara Ehrenreich accurately predicted in her 1998 autoethnography on minimum wage survival: “In the coming months and years, economic conditions for the working poor are bound to worsen, even without the almost inevitable recession... The influx of former welfare recipients into the low-skilled workforce will have a depressing effect on both wages and the number of jobs available. A general economic downturn will only enhance these effects, and the working poor will of course be facing it without the slight, but nonetheless often saving, protection of welfare as a backup” (52). As more Americans felt defrauded by the Dream, their disillusionment fermented into cynicism, a shift reflected in the changing styles of popular comedic films.

Underscoring a broader historical motif, the producers of American popular culture tend to ignore contentious and deep-rooted issues, including that of class mobility, until these factors begin to affect their most sought after demographics adversely. In the 1950s, for example, while many Americans were still living under the dehumanizing restrictions of Jim Crow laws, popular culture projected a whitewashed, classless society. Nearly seventy years later, as the neoliberal economy continues to erode the foundation of the middle class while spreading the gospel of upward mobility around the world, on the domestic front, the American Dream has once again entered a state of crisis. The chapter that follows offers a perspective of how the renegotiation of the Dream has manifested in some of the most popular comedic films to be released in the U.S. over the past two decades, picking up approximately where *Dumb and Dumber* left off, while allowing some overlap with the previous chapter in order to establish context.

In Thomas Frank's exposé on contemporary socioeconomic signifiers, he notes, "The suburban ideal of the 1950s, according to 'The Organization Man,' was supposed to be 'classlessness,' but the opposite ideal is the brick-to-the-head message of the dominant suburban form of today." Coining the phrase, he adds, "The McMansion exists to separate and then celebrate the people who are wealthier than everybody else; this is the transcendent theme on which its crazy, discordant architectural features come harmonically together... Inequality is the point of the McMansion and the McMansion is also, to a certain degree, the point of inequality; it's the pot of pyrite at the end of the rainbow of shit that we as a nation have chosen to follow... This is the reward of thirty-odd years of economic policy" (Frank, 2014). Frank's "McMansion" is the story of rising inequality and a shrinking middle class, and it too provides context for the story that follows.

In the final chapter of this project, I broaden the scope of my analysis, focusing more on industry trends and the application of auteur theory rather than on specific films. Auteur theory, first developed by the French New Wave critics, examines a film as a work of art by assuming a singular vision behind it, which is generally attributed to the director. While I recognize the severe limitations of this approach in the analysis of a medium as inherently collaborative as film, I do believe that it is helpful to think of the director as the creative decision-maker whose choices unite the work of all of the other artists and technicians involved. Fundamentally, directors solve problems, and they are responsible for the stylistic and tonal cohesion of the movies that they direct.

With this in mind, it seems reasonable to suggest that if a film appears to offer arguments in support of a specific ideology or political stance, then one can be relatively certain that the director is aware of this particular element of the film and has almost certainly made conscious decisions to allow for its inclusion. After all, these filmmakers must be aware of the power of their chosen medium — just like the Office of War Information had been during the Second World War — so if they do have an agenda, there is hardly any reason for them not to promote it, even if it only appears within the subtext of their movies.

By recognizing consistencies in the creative choices made by some of the most popular comedic filmmakers of this era, this will allow me to extrapolate the common themes that their movies explore. While some of the relevant works by these directors do overlap the chronology of the previous chapter to a certain extent, the bulk of their most popular work to date does fit within the period that I am discussing. Throughout this chapter, I also offer analysis of some of the broader cultural implications behind certain highly successful sub-genres of film comedy,

including those that center on the end of the world or life as we know it as a central narrative device, as well as the various incarnations of the familiar man-child archetype as reimagined for a millennial audience. As I explain, these movies all draw on anxieties about the death of the American Dream as the primary source of their humor.

By the late 1990s, as American culture entered headfirst into the digital age, the motion picture industry once again underwent a period of profound change, another tectonic shift with ramifications at least as significant as those experienced in the switch to home video. Just as VHS tapes and DVDs eventually gave way to streaming media, the immense costs of film prints has largely evaporated due to the fact that a vast majority of all motion pictures distributed in the U.S. are now sent to theaters as “digital cinema packages.” DCPs, as they are more commonly known, are metal-encased hard drives that are specifically designed to deliver digital content to movie theaters, which saves the studios millions of dollars on film prints for every movie that is widely distributed (Spangler). The downside, from Hollywood’s perspective, is that this has also opened up the door for new kinds of piracy. While studios are no longer as likely to impose a quarter million dollar fine on someone who makes a VHS copy of an out-of-print movie by connecting two tape decks, with this new technology, all it takes is one theater employee with the will and the know-how to leak a copy online and then anyone in the world can download it for free. They can and they often do, and it is almost impossible to trace.

Whether viewed on legitimate streaming services or accessed illegally, it seems reasonable to suggest that consumption habits change when the object of consumption is rendered intangible, screened privately, and not paid for on an individual basis, if at all.

Audiences experience movies differently as new technology is implemented in their exhibition.

With these factors in mind, I believe that the way we look at and think about these paradigm shifts in the motion picture industry must also be adjusted accordingly, and so throughout this period, while box office figures are still pertinent, they are a less reliable metric with which to gauge a film's popularity and social significance. Further, since ancillary sales records of motion pictures have never been made public, and streaming services and illegal downloads would be nearly impossible to quantify, the focus of this project shall now shift to a more qualitative examination of pervasive trends in motion picture comedies and the synthesis of their cultural implications, rather than on detailed analyses of specific films.

To borrow common film terminology, throughout this chapter, I use a wider lens in order to broaden the perspective, offering a big-picture view of contemporary American film comedy by analyzing the collective works of some of the most successful comedic filmmakers from this era and contextualizing them within the sociopolitical climates in which they were consumed. I then explain how disillusionment and apathy regarding individual prospects for upward mobility has mutated into apocalyptic paranoia within the public imagination, which is, of course, reflected in a number of comedic films released in recent years. In conclusion, I offer some remarks about comedy's place in the modern blockbuster business model of Hollywood production, as well as a brief consideration of the future of American film comedy within the international mass media marketplace of the twenty-first century.

As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, dominant cultural anxieties are often the basis of popular humor, and generational conflict is one of many perennial sources of anxiety. Children tend to see the world differently than their parents, due to the fact that subsequent generations often experience contrasting cultural environments during their formative years. This

point was made abundantly clear in Neil Howe and William Strauss's book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*, originally published in 1991, where they offer a useful intellectual framework for understanding recurring themes in American history. While I maintain a healthy degree of skepticism that any historian can accurately predict the future, the authors do make a compelling argument regarding the cyclical patterns of this nation's past, the common denominator of which, they claim, is the generational cohort, defined as such by shared life experiences and a similar perspective of world events.

As a result of this adaptive alignment between culture and environment, adjacent generations may have very different ideas of what it means to find one's place in the world because the world itself has changed considerably by the time they come to understand it as adults. Success therefore takes on new meanings, and when children fail to achieve their parents' ambitions, this creates a great deal of anxiety, both on a personal and a cultural level. As discussed in chapter four, the American Dream was already irrevocably intertwined with the concept of adulthood, an uneasy coexistence which generated a considerable amount of anxiety among the masses.

It should therefore come as no surprise that comedies aimed at teen audiences tend to draw a great deal of their humor from these specific points of tension. Teen comedies, which gained enormous popularity during the 1980s and nineties, exploit the friction that exists at the boundaries between immaturity and adulthood, which could also be thought of as the id and the superego in terms of psychoanalytic theory. In the narratives of these films, the difference between the protagonist finding a path to the American Dream or failing in the attempt usually comes down to whether or not this character chooses to grow up. These movies are about young

people finding a compromise between what they want to do and what they should do, which is precisely the anxiety that their target audiences are most likely to experience on a daily basis.

In *American Pie* (Weitz/Weitz, 1999), for example, in what many consider to be a throwback to films like *Porky's* and *Revenge of the Nerds* from the early eighties in terms of its raunchy humor and “coming-of-age” narrative arc, sex represents the passage into adulthood. Sex with a pie represents a comical regression to some earlier stage of psychological development, and within that incongruity, its audience finds humor. In the end, the protagonist has heteronormative sex and has been accepted to a prestigious college, which are two items that he now can check off in the social contract implicit in the American Dream. Incidentally, in *American Pie 2* (Rogers, 2001), the protagonist of the series falls in love with the woman with whom he had a one-night stand in the first movie, they then get married in *American Wedding* (Dylan, 2003), and by the fourth installment in the franchise, *American Reunion* (Hurwitz/Schlossberg, 2012) the couple has a home, successful middle-class careers and a child. While audiences were invited to laugh at the immature antics of these characters, they were also being shown a path to the American Dream. All of the film comedies that I examine in the first two sections of this chapter explore similar tensions that exist between adolescence and adulthood.

Men Will Be Boys

When viewed quantitatively, it would appear as if the U.S. economy in the late 1990s was booming. Unemployment was down (in part because the qualifications became stricter), house prices in most markets maintained their seemingly endless ascent, and for the next four years, the United States government had a budget surplus for the first time in nearly two generations. Addressing Congress at the beginning of his second term, President Bill Clinton said, “Four

years ago, we began a journey to change the course of the American economy. We wanted this country to go into the 21st century as a Nation in which every American who was willing to work for it could have a chance — not a guarantee, but a real chance — at the American Dream.” No President had ever before so explicitly called attention to the element of luck that is embedded in the American Dream. He then asserted, “We have worked hard to achieve that goal, and today our economy is stronger than it has been in decades” (1997 Economic Report of the President).

In reality, though, average wages adjusted for inflation were actually lower than they had been in decades and the middle class was continuing to disappear at an alarming rate (DeSilver). Meanwhile, the notion of a steady career was gradually being replaced by the concept of intermittent jobs and independent contractors. “Unskilled labor” was increasingly being exported to other nations, particularly after the passage of NAFTA in 1993 (MacArthur). Many economists note that this was a major contribution to the collapse of the U.S. manufacturing sector, and the Midwest was now coming to be known euphemistically as the Rust Belt for precisely this reason. Factories throughout the United States were closing down at unprecedented rates, taking down local economies with them and shuttering working class prospects for upward mobility.

While the expanding service industry offered millions of displaced workers low-paying jobs, which were often part-time and without benefits, college degrees were steadily becoming a requirement for any employment beyond menial labor. One could certainly argue that this was an effective way to maintain the artificial boundaries between the lower and middle class in this changing economy, particularly as the cost of college degrees inflated at roughly the same rate as their perceived value in the job market. The common refrain was that good jobs were out there,

but only for the well-educated, and so millions of students accumulated over a trillion dollars in outstanding educational debt in less than two decades (Berridge).

These freshly minted college graduates had grown up being told repeatedly that opportunities abound for those who believe in themselves and persevere. Consider just about any mainstream American children's movie of the past thirty years and its underlying theme of following one's dreams. As Luke Epplin noted in *The Atlantic*, "For all the chatter about the formulaic sameness of Hollywood movies, no genre in recent years has been more thematically rigid than the computer-animated children's movie. These films have been infected with what might be called the magic-feather syndrome. As with the titular character in Walt Disney's 1943 [sic] animated feature *Dumbo*, these movies revolve around anthropomorphized outcasts who must overcome the restrictions of their societies or even species to realize their impossible dreams" (Note: *Dumbo* was produced in 1941). Discussing the protagonists in these films, he adds, "It's enough for them to simply show up with no experience at the most competitive races, dig deep within themselves, and out-believe their opponents. They are, in many ways, the perfect role models for a generation weaned on instant gratification" (Epplin).

This is the same generation that was now being reminded that their student loans were due and that their expectations for meaningful employment should in fact be much lower. In the years since, this trend has only continued, creating a vast segment of American culture that is well-educated but underemployed and underwater in student debt. According to a 2014 article by the Pew Research Center:

Fully a third of older millennials (ages 26 to 33) have a four-year college degree or more — making them the best-educated cohort of young adults in American

history. Educational attainment is highly correlated with economic success, even more so for this generation than previous ones... However, the new generation of college graduates also have their own economic burdens. They are entering adulthood with record numbers of student debt: Two-thirds of recent bachelor's degree recipients have outstanding student loans, with an average debt of about \$27,000. Two decades ago, only half of recent graduates had college debt, and the average was \$15,000 (pewsocialtrends.org).

As children, they had been led to believe that no matter who they were or where they came from, they could be absolutely anything when they grew up, a notion that was almost constantly reinforced in popular media. This was their American Dream, and according to the myth, it was theirs for the taking. As I explain in this chapter, this continues to be a popular theme in American film comedies.

Sometimes, however, it is the recognition of this myth that provides the source material for much of the film's humor. This often brutal conflict between youthful aspirations and the unglamorous lives of adults was made explicit in Ben Stiller's 1994 romantic comedy *Reality Bites*, as well as numerous other movies from this era that capitalized on this pervasive anxiety and the cynicism that accompanied it. In a general sense, it can be argued that American comedy was becoming increasingly sarcastic, which could be interpreted as a sort of social commentary on the disconnect between reality and ideals in terms of this generation's pursuit of the American Dream. According to Penny Pexman, a psychologist at the University of Calgary who has been studying sarcasm for over twenty years, "A sarcastic comment is a way to simultaneously express our expectations as well as our disappointment" (Chin). This is precisely what makes it

an effective tool for reconciling a generation's conflicting hopes and fears about the current state of the American Dream.

In the opening scene of *Reality Bites*, Lelaina Pierce, played by Winona Ryder, succinctly articulates the concerns of many within her generational cohort as she delivers the valedictorian speech at her university graduation. To the familiar sound of "Pomp and Circumstance," Lelaina is seen through the viewfinder of a handheld camcorder, that ubiquitous consumer product of the mid-nineties that provides much of the movie's point-of-view. From a temporary stage at the center of a baseball stadium and surrounded by a sea of cheering extras, she offers the first lines of the movie: "And they wonder why those of us in our twenties refuse to work an eighty-hour work week just so we can afford to buy their BMWs. Why aren't we interested in the counterculture they invented? As if we did not see them disembowel their revolution for a pair of running shoes. But the question remains: What are we going to do now? How can we repair all the damage we inherited?"

In the crowd that Lelaina is addressing, another student's graduation cap has the words 'Will Work 4 Food' spelled out in masking tape on the top. Lelaina's voice echoes in the stadium. "Fellow graduates, the answer is simple. The answer is..." She fumbles through her notes, lost and unsure how to continue. "The answer is... I don't know." As I discuss throughout this chapter, this self-aware uncertainty about the future, both personally and collectively, is a thematic element that is prominently featured in many of this era's most popular film comedies. In *Reality Bites*, Lelaina's central dramatic conflict involves not only finding her place in the adult world, but in choosing between the responsible Michael, who could also jumpstart her career at the cost of her artistic integrity, or the immature Troy, who lives for the moment and

encourages her to do what makes her happy. In the end, she chooses the latter, settling for a scaled-down but more personalized version of the Dream. She has defined herself as an adult, but on her own terms.

Of course, the conflation of coming-of-age and the achievement of the American Dream was by no means a new phenomenon in the early 1990s. It is merely part of a waxing and waning cycle in which different types of comedy go in and out of style in a way that effectively mirrors the audience's changing perception of itself. The character who has to learn to behave like an adult has been a archetype of American comedy films throughout cinema history. Lelaina Pierce notwithstanding, he is typically a middle-class white male, and he has achieved heights in popularity at times when gender roles were rapidly being redefined in the public imagination, often when the accepted ways of proving one's masculinity no longer appeared to be viable.

Whether there was no longer a "good" war to fight, or decent jobs and affordable mortgages become much harder to obtain, the idea of American masculinity periodically enters a state of crisis before eventually reemerging as something else. This is the incongruity that man-child comedies typically seek to resolve in their dramatic conclusions. The protagonist in these films is the man (and occasionally woman) who is afraid to grow up, usually because he fears that there is no place for him in a society shaped by his parents' generation, and his dramatic goal often hinges on his ability to overcome this fear, at least in part, by conforming to what is expected of him or in changing his ideas of success and masculinity accordingly.

In the past, these characters have included such figures as Harry Langdon, Harold Lloyd, Bud Abbott, Jerry Lewis, Steve Martin and John Belushi, and by the mid-1990s, Tom Hanks, Martin Short and Jim Carrey had joined their ranks. Throughout film history, these movies have

provided a catharsis for the people in the audience who may experience anxiety about not only the contemporary demands of adult life, but in the fluid cultural definition of masculinity, which I believe is why they are so popular, particularly with young male audiences. Ever since *Star Wars* — which is, of course, about an adolescent man who has to go out into the world to prove his masculinity through faith and/in violence — teenage boys have become an increasingly coveted demographic for the motion picture industry, and the prevalence of home video in the eighties and nineties, as well as streaming media and digital downloads in the new millennium, has made this audience all the more accessible.

Adam Sandler figured this out at an early age and has built a career from playing his generation's version of the man-child persona. In his films, Sandler's character almost invariably has to achieve some higher level of maturity by the dramatic conclusion. In *Billy Madison* (Davis, 1995), for example, he has to repeat all twelve grades of school in order to prove to his father that he is competent enough to take over the family business, thereby reminding the audience of both the value and ultimately the pointlessness of his education. Billy is eventually able to pass every grade, but he only wins the academic olympics when Eric, the antagonist, cannot answer a question about business ethics. When Eric draws a gun, he is then shot by someone to whom Billy only recently apologized for bullying back in high school.

While this demonstrates that his character has indeed matured somewhat, he does not appear to be any more intelligent by the film's conclusion. In fact, Billy's responses to some of the quiz bowl questions suggest that he still knows very little about even the things that he has now had two full opportunities to learn. More importantly, though, at least as far as the story is concerned, he now has direction in his life. In the final moments of the movie, Billy proves

himself to be worthy of inheriting the company, but then he hands the family business over to the only person there who showed him any respect. Billy tells his extraordinarily wealthy father that he does not want to run a multinational hotel chain. He wants to go to college so that he can one day be a teacher. In other words, he learns to be happy in pursuit of a more realistic version of the American Dream, with the caveat that it is still more important to believe in one's self than to possess any particular knowledge, ability or disposition.

As evidence of this film both reflecting a dominant anxiety and sparking a broader trend, the Chris Farley vehicle *Tommy Boy* (Segal, 1995), released that same year, features a remarkably similar plot, where an incompetent man-child has to grow up and prove his worth in order to save the family business, which in the end is resolved by genetics when he is proven to be the rightful heir to his father's estate. In other words, heredity and believing in oneself matter more than ability, just like in *Billy Madison*.

In Farley's next movie, *Black Sheep* (Spheeris, 1996), he plays the socially inept brother of a man who is running for governor. In contrast to *Tommy Boy* and *Billy Madison*, this film makes it abundantly clear that there is more to a person's character than mere genetics, as the fact that he and his brother could hardly be more opposite of one another is a recurring source of humor throughout the movie. Meanwhile, Farley's character arc begins and ends in roughly the same place, where he works in a less-than-glamorous job at a public recreation center, which fits both his personality and his aptitude. His American Dream is not upward mobility. It is a stable job that he enjoys and can do, and in the end, the audience is left to consider their own prospects as well.

Released that same year, *Happy Gilmore* (Dugan, 1996), features Sandler reprising his already familiar role, this time as a hockey player turned golfer with severe anger management issues. In order to acquire quick wealth, save his family home and gain the affection of the film's love interest, he has to buckle down and take his career seriously. Fundamentally, the message in this and in all of these films is that if you want to achieve the American Dream, then you must abandon some (but not all) of your childish idiosyncrasies in order to do what needs to be done, which may mean settling for far less than you originally expected.

In movies such as this, maturity is ultimately acquired as the result of external conflict, while the protagonist's internal conflict focuses on an innate reluctance to grow into someone else's idea of a responsible adult. In the the third act of these films, where the thesis posed by the thematic question and the antithesis offered by the central conflict form a synthesis — a formula so tried and true that Aristotle wrote about it — a compromise is typically reached between representatives of adjacent generations regarding their contrasting views of success. Here, we can see the negotiation of the American Dream taking place on both an individual and a cultural level, and this same basic phenomenon occurs in each of the films that I have discussed so far in this section.

Thematically, these narratives all suggest that as long as people get steady jobs, start families, and do more or less what is expected of them, then they can still maintain some of the qualities that may have been overly nurtured as children, which is to say that everyone is a special snowflake (a derogatory term made common in popular literature about the so-called millennial generation) and it is the combination of individuality and conformity that was thought to be key to achieving this newest incarnation of the American Dream.

While still a myth for many, this ethos was evidenced in the dot com boom of the late nineties, where the key to becoming an instant millionaire was to offer consumers something familiar but with an innovative angle. Meanwhile, internet startup companies were decoupling the idea of achieving success later in life, as well as the notion of what a full-time job should look like. This newest incarnation of the Dream, which fused childlike individuality with a willingness to conform to certain adult expectations was also evidenced in the careers of many of Sandler's former cast mates at *SNL*, including Chris Farley and David Spade, as well as Norm MacDonald, Rob Schneider, Chris Kattan and Will Ferrell, and Andy Samberg, all of whom used this same basic template of the man-child growing up in order to achieve varying degrees of success in their own feature films.

Meanwhile, throughout the nineties, the Farrelly brothers continued to push the envelope in terms of what audiences were willing to stomach for the sake of cheap laughs. With the blockbuster success of films like *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), *Kingpin* (1996), *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and *Me, Myself and Irene* (2000), this particular brand of gross-out humor inspired imitation in movies like the Tom Green vehicle *Freddy Got Fingered* (Green, 2001), as well as the *Jackass* franchise that I discussed in chapter one. This sub-genre developed into a sort of teenage male equivalency to the romantic comedy in terms of how the marketing of these films is gendered.

Just as man-child and most gross-out comedies reinforce the idea that some degree of maturity and work ethic are required in order to achieve the American Dream, romantic comedies typically bolster the notion that heterosexual romance is also a key component. As film critic David Denby notes, "Romantic comedy is entertainment in the service of the biological

imperative... Romantic comedy civilizes desire, transforms lust into play and ritual — the celebration of union in marriage.” In terms the narrative, Denby adds, “Romance becomes romantic *comedy* only when there is delay.” (161)

The dramatic tension in these films is built upon the anticipation and postponement of a happy ending, while at the opposite end of the spectrum, audiences of a Farrelly brothers movie can expect that the main characters will endure nearly constant humiliation in their foolish attempts to achieve what ultimately proves to be beyond their ability. The point is to laugh at them, not with them. This oppositional positioning between the characters and the audience serves to define masculine ideals through the lampooning of their absence on screen. To watch these characters relentlessly suffer is like bullying them vicariously, where the audience is absolved of any need for remorse.

Just as with the films of Adam Sandler and those of his contemporaries at *SNL*, most gross-out comedies also feature immature men as protagonists, but the primary difference in these films is that the central characters typically fail to grow up in order to achieve their dramatic goals. As mentioned in my discussion of *Dumb and Dumber* in chapter four, sometimes mental and emotional maturity proves to be just too difficult for the protagonists to achieve, and this presents audiences with repeated opportunities to feel superior without feeling guilty. That said, the underlying statement that these films are all making about the American Dream is fundamentally one in the same, which is that if you want to achieve any measurable degree of success in the often compassionless world of adults, then you must learn to think and behave like an adult. If you cannot, then your ultimate failure is nobody’s fault but your own, and the fiasco you will have endured will only make you appear foolish in the end.

Unlike most trends in American motion picture comedies, where the humor eventually becomes stale to its intended audience, this particular sub-genre of the man-child comedy has proven to have considerable staying power over the past twenty years, which I suspect is due to the fact that the anxiety that feeds it has only intensified and proliferated. More college graduates are living with their parents today than ever before, while those who do live on their own are increasingly renting as opposed to buying a house.

With these factors in mind, it is no coincidence that virtually every motion picture project that Judd Apatow has been involved with builds upon a single premise, which proposes that the good life is there for the taking whenever a person is mature enough to handle the responsibilities that come with it. When viewed collectively, his work all ties back to this one central theme. In Apatow's worldview, opportunity for upward mobility unequivocally exists, but only for those who are willing to grow up in order to seize it. Consider *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Apatow, 2005), *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (McKay, 2006), *Knocked Up* (Apatow, 2007), *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007), *Step Brothers* (McKay, 2007) and *Pineapple Express* (Green, 2008), all of which he produced and/or directed. As just six movies that represent a much deeper theme that is present throughout his entire body of work, these films all feature white, middle-class men who need to accept some form of adult responsibility in order to achieve their dramatic goals. This is Judd Apatow's version of the man-child archetype, which David Denby describes with an uncanny accuracy:

His beard is haphazard and unintentional, neither full nor designer-stubbled, and he dresses in sweats, or in shorts and a t-shirt, or with his shirt hanging out like the tongue of a Labrador retriever. He's generally about thirty, and he spends a lot

of time with friends who are like him, only more so — sweet-natured young men full of foul mouths, odd hair, and wanker-mag reading habits. When he's with them, punched beer cans and bongos of various sizes lie around like spent shells; alone, and walrus-heavy on his couch, he spends time watching football, basketball or baseball on television, or spends time memorializing his youth — archiving old movies, games and jokes... a sullen, back-of-the-classroom guy, who breaks into brilliant tirades only when he feels like it... Essentially, he plays all the time, even at work, which is usually just a more organized form of play. Whatever he does, he hardly breaks a sweat, and sometimes he does nothing at all (107).

Offering only a slight variation on this same basic formula, *Bridesmaids* (Feig, 2011) and *Trainwreck* (Apatow, 2015), both films with which Apatow was involved as a producer and director respectively, are essentially the same movie as the rest of his filmography but with women in the principle roles. In *Bridesmaids* and *Trainwreck*, as well as the Amy Poehler and Tina Fey vehicle *Sisters* (Moore, 2015), it is the women who behave like adolescents because they experience anxiety about achieving the American Dream, and just like their male counterparts, these characters ultimately have to grow up and overcome their fears in order to obtain some scaled down idea of success.

Despite repeatedly presenting audiences with the parable of the stoner who gets his (and occasionally her) act together, nearly every one of Apatow's films has been extremely popular with wide audiences, and I believe that this is largely because his work continually reinforces

commonly held beliefs about the American Dream while also tapping into audience anxieties about its potential realization. These movies explore the myth only to validate it at the end, which has proven to be a winning formula for selling tickets. As of this writing, Judd Apatow's movies have earned a combined box office revenue of over two billion dollars, and based on recent successes, his career shows no signs of slowing down (boxofficemojo.com).

One truism about Hollywood is that once the studios figure out what works, they tend to recycle what they assume to be the key to this success until it proves otherwise. Illustrative of this point, though somewhat tangential to this project, as of this writing, there have been four feature-length *Shrek* movies with another currently in production, as well as a theme park ride, two holiday specials, a feature-length spin-off with its own sequel awaiting release, and a Broadway musical. This is a franchise that offers a market-tested synthesis of bathroom humor and fantasy, a fairy tale world populated by characters who have entered the public domain — which, from a producer's standpoint, means license-free familiarity. As discussed briefly in chapter four, *Shrek* also features a central recurring character that the eight credited writers did not bother to name, while the protagonist is a misanthropic ogre voiced by a Canadian actor who inexplicably chose to deliver his lines with a caricatured Scottish accent. Despite all of this, in terms of box office receipts, *Shrek* is currently the highest-grossing animated franchise of all time, having earned over three and a half billion dollars to date (boxofficemojo.com). This figure eclipses the nominal gross domestic product of some countries, and it does not even factor in all of the money made from ancillary distribution, merchandise sales and licensing fees.

Meanwhile, the *Hangover* movies (Phillips, 2009/2011/2013) have proven that even R-rated comedies about grown men behaving like adolescents can achieve blockbuster status,

which I suspect is because the kids who grew up on Adam Sandler movies were now technically adults by the time these movies hit theaters. This franchise is fundamentally about grown men making irresponsible decisions, and the three films to date have earned a combined total of over six hundred and fifty-million dollars in ticket sales, making them among the only non-animated comedies to make the top ten in terms of box office receipts over the past twelve years (boxofficemojo.com).

Incidentally, the other two comedies to earn this distinction were *Ted* (MacFarlane, 2010) and *Wedding Crashers* (Dobkin, 2005), both of which rely on the same basic formula outlined above and feature characters that align remarkably well with Denby's description, which is to say that these movies are also about middle-class white men behaving like adolescents. They are the *schlemiel* that David Buchbinder describes in his article about the recent popularity of this character, which he suggests is due to "a re-evaluation of gender performance and of masculinity in particular," referencing Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* and applying it to his analysis of what he calls "the inadequately or incompetently masculine male" (Buchbinder).

I would only add that because the American Dream is gendered and racialized, when white masculinity enters a state of existential crisis, so too does the Dream as projected in popular media. As this key media demographic became increasingly anxious about their future prospects, it is no coincidence that this apprehension manifested in an overwhelming majority of the most popular comedic films to be produced in the United States during this period. That is to say that the American Dream is in a constant but escalating state of crisis, and film producers recognize this and exploit audience anxieties accordingly.

Even Wes Anderson films, which are typically considered highbrow by the standards of most critics, are all essentially about adults acting like children and children acting like adults, and they draw the bulk of their humor from the blurred lines that exist between these social constructs of “childhood” and “adulthood.” Furthermore, as noted by cultural scholar Rachel Dean-Ruzicka, “Anderson often seems to include a variety of racial and ethnic characters, but the ways in which he does so ultimately underline and emphasize the unmarked whiteness and white privilege of the primary characters” (25). Essentially, she argues that non-white characters function as mere elements of the *mise-en-scène* within the colorful tapestry of white privilege that Anderson painstakingly crafts in his films.

Wes Anderson’s directorial feature debut, *Bottle Rocket* (1996), was based on a thirteen-minute short film that he had made as a student at the University of Texas at Austin two years prior. Both versions of the movie center on three young white men who decide to live out their childhood fantasy of turning to what they perceive to be an exciting life of crime, which seems like an especially appealing option to them since they are presented as lacking the drive or the skill to achieve success by any other means. In addition to the juxtaposing of their childish mentalities within the context of very serious situations, it is the incongruity between their comfortable middle-class existence and their engagement in criminal behavior that renders this film a comedy, as these elements of contrast provide most of the movie’s humor.

Beginning a trend that would continue throughout his career to date, Dean-Ruzicka claims that “Anderson’s ongoing performances normalize whiteness and white privilege. In a culture where people often disavow the continuing existence of racism, Anderson’s films are the perfect example of how white privilege is reinscribed at the expense of others” (28). By the end

of *Bottle Rocket*, Luke Wilson's character has fallen in love with a Latina cleaning woman with whom he can hardly communicate and has resigned himself to a life of middle-class respectability, while Owen Wilson's character ends up in jail. Just like Happy Gilmore, Billy Madison, the 40-Year-Old Virgin and McLovin from *Superbad* (Mottola, 2007), they learn to find their place within the strange and sometimes cruel world of adults.

Exploring similar terrain, Anderson's second film, *Rushmore* (1998), is about the relationship between a young man who behaves like an adult and an adult who behaves like an adolescent. Max Fischer, played by Jason Schwartzman, is white middle-class student at a private school called the Rushmore Academy, while Bill Murray's character of Herman Blume is a wealthy industrialist and functions as the antagonist in the story, as both of them are competing for the unrequited affection of Rosemary Cross, an elementary teacher at Rushmore played by Olivia Williams. The second act is an escalating battle of wits that ultimately proves pointless, and at the end of the film, Max and Herman's central conflict is resolved by means of a compromise that takes place between these representatives of their respective generations, much like the aforementioned sequences which conclude nearly every Adam Sandler movie.

As Ruzicka-Dean points out, both *Rushmore* and *Bottle Rocket* feature the line, "I guess you've just gotta find something you love to do and then... do it for the rest of your life" (28), which is advice that Anderson himself seems to have taken to heart. Revisiting the already familiar themes of youthful ideals in harsh contrast with adult realities, in his next film, *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), the central characters all struggle with personal issues stemming from various childhood traumas, while the two children in the film present themselves like adults and the family patriarch behaves the most childish of them all.

Anderson's films all draw a majority of their humor from this same basic incongruity between a child's perspective and that of an adult. Consider *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* (2004), which uses a remarkably similar formula, with Bill Murray reprising his archetypal role as the immature delegate from adulthood. Anderson co-wrote this movie with Noah Baumbach, another independent writer and director who explores very similar ideas in his work. In the years since, Anderson has revisited these themes with *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007), *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), all of which are fundamentally about the conflicting coexistence of childhood innocence and adult responsibility.

Although Wes Anderson's films are very different in terms of style and tone compared to those of Judd Apatow, Adam Sandler or the Farrelly brothers, the anxiety that he exploits in his work is nearly identical. His white male protagonists all seem to live in a purgatory where they remain suspended between maturity and immaturity until the film's climactic moments, when they learn to grow up while still maintaining their childlike perspectives. This idea of finding one's place within the strange and often depressing adult world while maintaining some of the immature attributes that allow these individuals to find happiness appears to be a matter of great significance to all of these filmmakers, as it is a theme that they have explored time and again in their work. These movies, as cultural products, resonate with broad audiences who can almost certainly empathize with the dramatic plights of the characters, at least to the degree that they too may find it difficult to forge an adult identity from what amounts to little more than a collection of childhood dreams that failed to materialize as expected. This is the specific anxiety upon which all of these filmmakers have built their entire careers to date, and through the cultural conflation of maturity and success, it is certainly something akin to the American Dream.

The Virtues of Being a Slacker

Mike Judge claims to have created the characters of Beavis and Butt-Head after watching his neighbor cut the roof off a car with a chainsaw in order to make it into a convertible, although from this description, it seems that “converted” would be more accurate (Robinson). From Judge’s perspective, these characters represent the worst of everything that was wrong with the youth culture of the 1990s. Beavis and Butt-Head are buffoons. They only know what they see on television, which they watch incessantly as though they are physically addicted to the stimulation. These characters represent the extremes of vulgarity, interpersonal violence, self-absorption and idiocy, exaggerated to the point of absurdity, thereby providing continual opportunities for their audiences to feel morally and intellectually superior. Audiences were never meant to empathize with Beavis and Butt-Head. Rather, these characters are clearly intended to be laughed at, effectively reminding people to shut off the TV and get off the couch once in a while, a message delivered ironically through the medium of television.

The irony seems to have been lost on many, however, as a number of parents voiced concern that these characters were influencing their children to imitate bad behavior, a point that received national attention in a 1993 news story about a five-year-old boy who burnt down his house, killing his two-year-old sister, all supposedly because he saw Beavis playing with fire and thought it was funny (“Cartoon on MTV”). In spite of this tragedy and the negative publicity that it generated, this show was also subversive if we consider that in some cases, these characters were essentially caricatures of their own audience members, their flaws spotlighted for comedic effect. Their exaggerated physical features even appeared as though distorted by funhouse

mirrors. Beavis and Butt-Head were not meant to inspire imitation. They were intended to encourage precisely the opposite.

In 1996, when Mike Judge directed his first feature film, it was an adaptation of the popular MTV animated series, and it opens with a dream sequence in which a giant Beavis and Butt-Head are terrorizing a metropolis in the style of Godzilla. In other words, they are literally introduced to the audience as monsters, which, as I have suggested, is a point that many of show's most rabid critics seem to have missed. *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America* has been the biggest commercial success of Mike Judge's directorial career to date, and perhaps even more surprisingly, it was also generally well-received by critics, even appreciated as a work of art.

For example, in his review of the film, Roger Ebert wrote, "To study Beavis and Butt-Head is to learn about a culture of narcissism, alienation, functional illiteracy, instant gratification and television zombiehood." He also notes that, "Judge stripped them of all redeeming qualities... Beavis and Butt-Head represent an extreme version of people we see around us every day, and because the movie is radical and uncompromising: Having identified Beavis and Butt-Head as an extreme example of grunge, disaffection and cheerfully embraced ignorance, the movie is uncompromising in its detestation of them" (Ebert, 1996).

The storyline features these two stand-ins for the worst of America's youth engaging on a cross-country journey in order to recover their stolen television set, all while inadvertently and unknowingly getting caught up in a biological weapons smuggling operation and a Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms sting — which the reader may note is remarkably similar to the plot device used in *Dumb and Dumber*. In the end, President Bill Clinton makes them

honorary ATF agents, which Beavis refers to as the “Bureau of beer and cigarettes and fire!” This was the first time he had used that word since the reports of the boy who burnt his house down.

In the film’s climactic moments, Beavis and Butt-Head recover their stolen television from a sidewalk in front of a motel, where it had fallen out of the back of a van earlier in the movie, cracking the screen in the process. In other words, they are right back where they started, and even though they accomplished their goal, it is of little if any value. The film then ends with a parody of a western cliché as they carry their broken TV into the sunset, constantly arguing along the way. In that sense, nothing has changed.

If we are to take this film at face value, Judge contends that this was the cultural waste product of our modern consumerism: two characters with no ambitions in life beyond watching television and indulging in the hedonistic pleasures of the id, whose journey ultimately got them nowhere, nor did they learn anything from their experiences. These are representatives of a generation whose American Dream is that of limitless consumption achieved through the least possible amount of work, a goal it seems that can only lead to failure.

Mike Judge's next film, *Office Space*, released in 1999, takes this theme a step further, suggesting that the ambition to pursue the American Dream within the cold anonymity of cubicle culture should itself be the subject of satirical critique. In other words, maybe all the hard work required to be successful within the ranks of corporate America really is kind of pointless, too, because ultimately, it fails to make us any happier. Much like Beavis and Butt-Head’s cross-country journey that led them right back to where they started, in *Office Space*, Judge seems to posit that one’s earnest pursuit of the American Dream can be just as futile. While Beavis and Butt-Head were clearly portrayed as losers, *Office Space* asks: what are realistic aspirations for

the working class? That is, even if the youth culture that Judge had so ruthlessly satirized actually wanted to amount to something, what does this even mean within the changing global economy? Judge's view of the matter appears to be rather cynical.

The limited marketing of *Office Space* included the tagline "Work Sucks" on the movie poster. It barely broke even at the box office, but then this film went on to become a cult classic upon its release on home video. The narrative centers on a computer programmer named Peter Gibbons, played by Ron Livingston, who is overworked and overstressed, so he agrees to his girlfriend's suggestion of being hypnotized so that he will be more relaxed. When the hypnotist dies of a heart attack mid-session, Peter finds himself stuck in that tranquil state of mind, leading him to no longer feign interest in the banality of his job. Providing moments of catharsis to all the corporate drones in white collar American culture, Peter does what they only wished they could do, including telling his bosses what he really thinks and knocking down the cubicle walls in which he finds himself trapped, freeing himself from meaningless routines.

Despite Peter's increasingly erratic behavior, he is soon promoted for his innovative thinking. However, even once he has joined the ranks of middle management, Peter continues to find his work unfulfilling, so he joins forces with two of his coworkers in order to embezzle money from the company by using a computer program that they made, as all three of them recognize this as the only way to comfortably retire from their employment here and move on to something better. The characters also note that they are stealing a plot device from *Superman III* (Lester, 1983). In most films, the dramatic climax is that moment that is reserved for the final conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist, where only one will emerge victorious, thereby validating the theme. In *Office Space*, the climactic peak of the narrative occurs with the

slow-motion destruction of a much hated copy machine, set to the tune of gangster rap. This is the point in the story at which the protagonist achieves his dramatic goal of finding happiness at work (albeit through anarchy and destruction), despite also realizing that they will probably be caught for the embezzlement.

Consumed with his own guilt while also realizing that the money is not going to make him any happier, Peter returns the stolen funds with a note confessing to the crime, but then a disgruntled, displaced former employee burns the entire office down before anyone has the opportunity to collect the money or read the note. As the building goes up in flames, Peter is relieved. He is off the hook from his job, as well as from the crime that he and his friends committed. In the end, rather than pursue a similar vocation, Peter gets a job in construction, where he is finally happy. His life now has purpose, meaning and value.

The underlying theme is that not everyone shares the same understanding of success, and that it is up to the individual to do what Peter did — not through hypnosis, but by consciously deciding what matters and pursuing it. This idea apparently resonated with a significant number of Americans, as *Office Space* was able to find and entertain a relatively broad audience through a marketing campaign that consisted almost entirely of word-of-mouth promotion. In the years since its release, some critics have even noted how this film has directly affected certain aspects of American culture, as in many ways, it functioned as a cautionary tale to members of this generation who may have been thinking about pursuing a similar career path. The restaurant chain featured in the movie even stopped requiring its employees to wear “items of flair” in direct response to the ridicule that they received in this film.

Over the next several years, Mike Judge continued to work as the show-runner of *King of the Hill*, which is a low-key animated series about a conservative middle-class family in Texas. It aired for two hundred and fifty-nine episodes on the Fox television network and quickly became a cornerstone of their primetime Sunday schedule, even sharing the eight o'clock hour with *The Simpsons* for several years.

Judge did not direct another feature film until *Idiocracy*, which was produced by Fox in 2006. However, as the result of growing tensions between Mike Judge and the studio, this satire of anti-intellectualism and modern consumer culture opened on a mere one hundred and thirty screens nationwide, none of which were in major markets. Upon its theatrical release, *Idiocracy* could be viewed in Atlanta but not Miami, and in Austin but not New York. After just two weeks in theaters, the film's exhibition was reduced to only thirteen screens in the entire country, and it disappeared completely from movie listings just a few weeks later. *Idiocracy* received no official promotion and was immediately considered to be a flop by the studio that produced it. A reviewer for the *L.A. Times* referred to it as "The Funniest Movie You Can't See," and notes her suspicion that its limited release was because, "It may mirror Rupert Murdoch's blueprint for a Fox-fed nation of fat, dumb and happy" (Morrison). Much like *Office Space*, it has since gone on to have a cult following upon its release on home video.

In terms of the plot, *Idiocracy* is about Corporal Joe Bauers, played by Luke Wilson, who is told that he is the most statistically average person in the U.S. Army and has therefore been selected to participate in a top secret cryogenic experiment. However, due to the researcher's personal indiscretions, the program is shut down the following year, leaving Joe and Rita, his female counterpart in the experiment, played by Maya Rudolph, in a state of suspended

animation for the next five centuries. During this time, the worst aspects of American culture from Judge's perspective have only gotten worse, as "Average" Joe wakes to find that he is now the smartest person alive and is destined to be the nation's savior because of his superior intellect. Basically, Judge has created a dystopia in which Beavis and Butt-Head have become the new normal.

As a work of social satire, this film does not pull any punches. Rather, it paints a grim portrait of an America in steep decline. At its core, *Idiocracy* is about valuing art, intellect and the environment, as it serves as a compelling argument against the alternative. In terms of its contributions to the discourse of the American Dream, this movie seems to suggest through the rough waters of its thematic undercurrent that, much like in *Office Space*, it is up to the individual to take responsibility, not only for his or her own happiness, but for the betterment of Western civilization. In addition, just as with *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America*, this movie calls attention to some of the systemic faults that it seems Judge wants his audience to address, while also offering a rather pessimistic prognosis regarding continued inaction on these fronts. *Idiocracy* represents an improbable but frighteningly possible outcome of America's declining standards of culture and intellect.

Four years after the extremely limited release of *Idiocracy*, Mike Judge chose to independently produce *Extract*, which is his most recent film to date. Whereas *Office Space* satirized the workplace from the perspective of an employee, *Extract* assumes the boss's point-of-view, which indeed may have made it a harder sell to its potential audience, particularly for those who expected something more in line with Judge's previous work. With this in mind, just as the film's perspective is somewhat inverted, so too was its reception, which is to say that it

broke even financially, but critics and fans were fairly ambivalent about it as a standalone film and as a component of Mike Judge's larger body of work. As such, *Extract* has not been elevated to the cult status of his previous films and arguably did more to damage his reputation than promote it because of the way this movie alienates working-class audiences. While *Office Space* made a hero out of a low-level employee standing up to his employers, *Extract* vilifies the employees for attempting to collect worker's compensation and join a union. The audience is meant to empathize with how hard it is to run a successful company full of selfish employees while also trying to maintain a healthy marriage.

Despite the considerable tonal differences between *Extract* and his other films, it is nonetheless a continuation of a larger trajectory, and when considering Judge's four movies to date, a common theme emerges which suggests that people are ultimately responsible for their own happiness and success, as well as their understandings of these terms. In *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America*, it was up to them to find their television set, which turned out to be broken by the time they stumbled upon it, but it merely served as a centerpiece for their arguments anyway. In *Office Space*, Peter was responsible for his own happiness and sense of personal fulfillment, which he found by looking outside of his own preconceptions about meaningful employment. In *Idiocracy*, audiences saw that even the most average person can make a difference in the world, but only when he takes the initiative and thinks critically, while in *Extract*, Jason Bateman's character of Joel Reynolds learns to be happy with what he has, recognizing on some level that he has already achieved success. In each of these films, audiences witness a white male protagonist in pursuit of and ultimately realizing his own version of the American Dream.

Echoing the films discussed in the first section of this chapter, the underlying message is that the Dream is still a realistic goal, but only if one's expectations have been scaled back considerably.

The Coen Brothers explore very similar terrain in their work, but arguably with a greater degree of cynicism. Their protagonists seldom accomplish anything that even remotely resembles greatness, and if they do, it is typically because of a stroke of dumb luck. Much like Wes Anderson, the Coen Brothers are often given considerably more credit as legitimate artists of the cinema than most other contemporary comedic filmmakers. As of this writing, their films have been nominated for forty-two Academy Awards and have won seven, including Best Original Screenplay for *Fargo* in 1996, as well as Best Picture and Best Director for *No Country for Old Men* in 2007. While their body of work is far too extensive and diverse to cover in detail here, they have made a number of films that explore themes of upward mobility, all of which come to more or less the same conclusions. As I shall explain, the Coen brothers repeatedly make movies about underachievers whose aspirations outshine their abilities.

In *Raising Arizona* (1987), Herbert I. "Hi" McDunnough, played by Nicolas Cage, is a convicted felon who is attempting to give up his life of crime so that he can start a family with a police officer named Edwina "Ed," played by Holly Hunter. Together, they hope to live out some compromised realization of the American Dream. However, they soon learn that Ed cannot have children, while Hi's criminal record prevents them from adopting. In their desperation, and because they see the American Dream as their birthright, they decide to steal a baby from a wealthy family that just had quintuplets. In terms of the narrative, this movie is about Hi kidnapping a baby and trying not to get caught, while thematically, this is, in many ways, yet another story of a white man facing difficulties in accepting the responsibilities of adulthood in a

culture that already views him with prejudice because of his checkered past. In the end, Hi faces his demons and emerges victorious, then realizes that the right thing to do is to give the baby back. Just like in much of the Coen brothers' filmography, by the time the final credits roll, the main character is essentially left with the feeling that he would have better off if he had never pursued this unrealistic ambition in the first place. Failing at his dramatic goal, Hi's only true success comes in the realization of his own limitations.

The Coen brothers revisited this same theme in *Fargo* (1996), where the key element that unites the disparate storylines is that these are all individuals who are aiming for something that is clearly beyond their abilities. These characters all want to improve their stations in life but ultimately prove to be comically incapable of doing so. Jerry Lundegaard fails at embezzling money and in staging the kidnapping of his wife. His father-in-law fails at his attempt to stop the kidnappers, while the kidnappers continually get themselves in deeper trouble while trying to collect the ransom, including killing their hostage. By the end of the movie, one of them even kills the other, and Officer Marge Gunderson only arrests the surviving kidnapper after nearly a dozen innocent people have died and the million dollars in ransom money has been lost, buried somewhere in the endless Minnesota snow. In the final scene, the only person that achieves any modicum of success is Marge's husband, who says that his duck painting was chosen to be on a three-cent stamp. The message here is that only by setting his sights absurdly low was he able to accomplish what he set out to do. All of the other characters in this movie were blind to their own limitations and therefore failed in their attempts to improve themselves.

The Hudsucker Proxy (1994) takes this idea further and suggests that success is fundamentally about being in the right place at the right time with the right idea. Although this

movie was considered to be a failure at the box office, it is very much a story about upward mobility in the postwar boom, and it speaks to a broader theme in the Coen brothers' *oeuvre*, so I shall include a brief discussion of it here. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is the story of Norville Barnes, a recent business school graduate played by Tim Robbins, who quickly ascends from the mail room to the president of the company as part of a plot by the shareholders to make it so that when the stock goes public, nobody wants to buy it.

To the board's satisfaction, Norville soon proves his ineptitude at running the company, but then his invention of the hula hoop changes everything, causing the stock prices to soar, which leads to a rising conflict between himself and the other executives. Norville is characterized as a fortunate fool throughout the movie. In the end, he once again saves the company by taking his same idea (a circle drawn on a piece of paper) and developing it into a Frisbee-like flying disc. The message here is that the American Dream in the post-war economy is primarily about luck, timing and having one good idea that you can milk for all it is worth.

It is therefore with a twinge of irony that the Coen brothers have explored this same idea time and again in their own work. Almost every one of their movies, whether comedic or otherwise, is about someone who is coded as a failure and who ultimately proves to be worthy of this distinction when he foolishly attempts to rise above his situation. Just as it can be argued that the Coen brothers have never fully subscribed to the blockbuster model of production, instead making smaller films for smaller audiences, this recurring theme in their movies seems to suggest that the key to achieving success is in people recognizing their own limitations and then maintaining a pragmatic alignment between their ambitions and reality.

Arguably, nowhere do they make this point more explicitly than in *The Big Lebowski*. Although this film was produced in 1999, it takes place in 1991 — before Bill Clinton's welfare reforms would have almost certainly rendered the central character homeless. "The Dude" is described by the narrator as "The laziest man in Los Angeles County, which quite possibly puts him in the running for the title of laziest man worldwide." He does not work for a living. The Dude only exists. Like so many of their movies, *The Big Lebowski* is about a loser who tries to be something more than that and fails in the attempt. On another level, this movie is also a parody of the 1946 Howard Hawks film noir *The Big Sleep*, reimagined as a private investigation being conducted by three individuals who are profoundly ill-suited to the task.

At the end of the film, the Dude never even gets his rug back and Donny, the only character in the movie who is presented as likable, dies of a heart attack during a brawl with the nihilists in a bowling alley parking lot. Once again, the underlying theme is that when a person tries to accomplish that which is beyond his or her capabilities, the only possible outcomes are failure, embarrassment and death. The audience is reminded of this point throughout *The Big Lebowski*, but the theme is most clearly punctuated in its final moments with the repeated line, "The Dude abides." In other words, he accepts the inevitability of failure with aloof detachment. He accepts his fate and says, "Fuck it. Let's go bowling," thus proving that he had more in common with the nihilists than he thought.

It's the End of the World as We Know It... And I Feel Fine

Zombies have seen a resurgence in popularity in recent years — a rise from the dead, so to speak — and a number of cultural critics have noted a distinct correlation between the ubiquity of this particular sub-genre and a rising dissatisfaction with the tenets of modern

capitalism. As noted by cultural scholar Kyle William Bishop, “The insatiable need to purchase, own, and consume has become so deeply ingrained in Americans that their reanimated corpses are relentlessly driven by the same instincts and needs” (234). Zombies can be thought to symbolize mindless consumers who blindly subscribe to the neoliberal ideology and who desperately want to convert others by spreading their sickness. Contributing nothing of value to society, these creatures represent those among us who live only to work and work only to consume: humanity as viewed from the inhumane perspective of the market-driven economy.

Through this lens, these individuals are effectively dead to the world, infected by a sickness that drives them forward in endless pursuit of consumption for its own sake. The fundamental difference with zombies is that their vocabularies are often monosyllabic and the decay of their character is plainly visible. Since these creatures are already dead and are generally no longer considered to be human, the heroes of zombie films and television shows need not feel guilty when they destroy them. This holds true even if it was someone that they once knew and loved, because once a person is infected, there is seldom a cure.

In a similar respect, it must seem to many that there is no way out of the current economic system, even though modern consumerism is clearly showing signs of its own decomposition, all while seemingly maintaining a limitless appetite to undermine the critical thinking ability of the general public (i.e., eating their brains). To many Americans, zombie movies are arguably a way of accepting the inevitable demise of late capitalism. In this sense, the notion of corpses feeding on the living can be viewed as a manifestation of the idea that the most valuable commodity that this country produces at this particular moment in its history is

consumers, many of whom accumulate vast debt in order to buy products that are manufactured elsewhere, all of which can be thought of as a cannibalistic and ultimately unsustainable cycle.

In these films, capitalism is metaphorically eating itself alive, taking the form of animated human remains who are void of empathy and reason, uncritical representatives of the “free market” ideology. These creatures may vaguely resemble one’s neighbors or loved ones, but through the various traumas inflicted by the neoliberal economy, they have now become something else and can no longer be trusted. They exist only to consume, which they do reflexively and often without any specific motivation beyond the act itself.

According to the common trope, order can only be restored to civilization when all of the zombies have been destroyed, even though these films rarely offer any indication as to what such a future may resemble. The only certainty is that it will be a divergence from the past. In a similar respect, even as the current dominant economic model fails so many, it may appear as though there are few viable solutions to replace it, even though imminent change might seem inevitable. In this sense, zombie movies represent a darkly optimistic view of the American Dream, suggesting that the Dream as we know it may already be dead, but it continues to haunt us and must be deconstructed once again so that a new collective ideal can take its place. Only then will the Dream itself be resurrected.

Both horror films and comedies rely heavily on setups and payoffs, as well as the element of surprise, so there tends to be a lot of structural overlap between these modes of filmmaking. That is to say that horror and comedy can fit together remarkably well, a point that has been proven repeatedly throughout cinema history and particularly so in recent years. The modern “zom-com” sub-genre began to infect mainstream comedy films around the end of George W.

Bush's first term, beginning with *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2003). Although this film was produced in the United Kingdom, it did receive wide release in the U.S. and was distributed in North America by Universal Pictures. Since the primary goal of this project is to offer novel insights into the hearts and minds of American audiences as understood through the comedic films that they consumed, this movie therefore warrants inclusion in my study.

The common parallels between consumerism and zombies as represented in *Shaun of the Dead* are made explicit in the first few minutes of the film. As the credits roll, scenes of cashiers and customers at a grocery store are juxtaposed with images of the walking dead, followed by people waiting in line at a bank, mindlessly checking their phones, and then a scene with more zombies. Much like *Dawn of the Dead* (the 1978 George Romero film that it parodies and pays tribute to), *Shaun of the Dead* is an examination into mindless consumption, the key difference being that is played for laughs as opposed to shock value.

Shaun, played by Simon Pegg, is the familiar man-child character, as is his best friend Ed, played by Nick Frost. Shaun is twenty-nine years old, he works at an electronics chain store with a bunch of teenagers who have no respect for him, his stepfather treats him like a child, and Liz, his girlfriend, is tired of going to the Winchester tavern every night to watch Shaun get drunk. She is also annoyed by the fact that they feel obligated to bring Ed and her flatmates along with them whenever they go, which she rightfully suspects is because Shaun is afraid of commitment. When he forgets their anniversary, that is the last straw, and Liz finally breaks up with him. Depressed, Shaun returns to the Winchester with Ed to drink away their troubles. By the next morning, when zombies have begun to wreak havoc throughout the city as the result of an infectious disease, Shaun is too hungover to even notice. In his current state, he also walks

and sounds like a zombie himself, another not-so-subtle reminder that the zombies are already among us.

As the story progresses, Shaun eventually proves his masculinity and newfound maturity to Liz and the others by leading them to safety from the hordes of ravenous zombies. Through acts of physical violence, he proves himself to be a man. While holed up in the Winchester, the heroes continue to fight these monsters, many of whom were people they once knew but have since been infected. Shaun and Ed get a certain satisfaction in killing these individuals now that they are no longer human. In the end, even Ed gets bitten by a zombie, but then in a sudden moment of *deus ex machina*, the military arrives just in time to clear the scene of danger.

Flash forward to six months later, when life has pretty well returned to normal, except now the zombies form the lower class of society, providing cheap labor and what is literally mindless entertainment for the humans. Ed, now a zombie himself, remains chained up in a toolshed, where he and Shaun continue to play video games together as if nothing ever changed. Once again, the parallels between the fictional world of this film and the reality of our own come into uncanny alignment. Basically, the idea is that if a person is not doing something productive with his or her life, then in many ways, that person is already little more than a walking corpse.

As discussed in chapter two, after World War II, mainstream American culture, which was co-sponsored by U.S. government, propagandized the virtues of consumerism in order to maintain a productive economy and to highlight the ideological differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. At this time, the American Dream was reimagined as part of a broader campaign to drive citizens toward increased consumption as a means of avoiding widespread unemployment and inflation after the war. Initially, for many Americans, it worked,

aided in part by the G.I. Bill, which helped limit the number of young men entering the workforce all at once and provided low-interest home loans to male veterans. However, in the decades since, college costs have skyrocketed, while manufacturing jobs have continued to be exported to other countries to the point where American consumption habits no longer benefit American workers. Even more recently, the United States has even begun to lose its grip on the title of “world’s best consumers” as booming emergent markets have risen elsewhere.

I will discuss the implications of this expanding global marketplace on American film comedy at the close of this chapter. For now, let us consider the changing spending habits of middle-class Americans in the post-World War II era. In the fifties, as I have indicated, consumerism was alive and well, fluent in the language of advertising and nurtured by a strong manufacturing sector. Meanwhile, the perpetual threat of communist infiltration and nuclear warfare fostered a mindset of conformity that, ironically, centered on the concept of the nuclear family. Success was increasingly viewed as a relative term, and the grass was always greener behind somebody else's white picket fence.

In the sixties and seventies, the youth counterculture by-and-large rejected the materialism of their parents, instead focusing on a more personalized version of the American Dream. The nation’s public institutions were visibly corrupt, and the inability to achieve any sustainable version of the Dream had nurtured a deep cynicism in many. Meanwhile, the combination of stagnant wages and inflated commodity prices, particularly in the energy sector, were crushing the middle class, and the voices of those who had historically been excluded from pursuit of the Dream grew progressively louder in their demands for equality.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, the U.S. economy became increasingly competitive among the shrinking middle class, and materialism once again came into fashion as a way of advertising one's status within the broader social hierarchy. Aided by a number of trade agreements, as well as significant losses in collective bargaining power, the American middle class endured a slow and steady collapse throughout this period, while patterns of consumer spending continued virtually unchanged. Even as inflation outpaced wage growth, credit was increasingly available to the masses, which helped maintain the illusion of a healthy economy — analogous to an animated corpse, mind you. However, creditors never forget and only rarely forgive, which is to say that the middle class was living on borrowed time.

In the first decade of the new millennium, economic inequality continued to rise to levels not seen since the late 1920s. As of this writing, the sixty-two richest people in the world hold as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity, a ratio of over fifty-eight million to one. In the U.S. alone, the top one-tenth of one percent controls as much wealth as the bottom ninety percent. (Hardoon). As Paul Taylor of the Pew Research Center notes in his qualitative study of the generation gap between baby boomers and millennials, there is also a considerable age difference in wealth distribution. “Young and old in America are poles apart,” he claims. “In 1984, the typical household headed by someone 65 or older had 10 times the net worth of the typical household headed by someone under the age of 35. By 2011, that ratio had ballooned to 26:1” (29).

If the middle class is indeed meant to represent the plateau of a bell curve between the richest and the poorest among us, then the numbers do little to support the myth of its existence. Rather, what continues to be thought of as the middle class would appear to have considerably

more in common with the working poor than with the wealthiest citizens. The American populace is disproportionately divided among those who have more money than they could ever possibly spend and those who never have quite enough, while any middle ground that once filled the vast landscape between these poles continues to erode at an alarming rate. In spite of this quantifiable reality, with the help of the American Dream and its projected representations within popular culture, many of those within the middle class maintain their propensity to imagine themselves as one day rising above their socioeconomic status, thereby distancing themselves from those whose political interests they may otherwise share.

The false prophets of neoliberalism relentlessly propagate the belief that the invisible hand of the market can cure all of the world's problems with little more than its magic touch. Money, according to this ideology, is the great equalizer, because it does not discriminate. Rather, it only favors the best and the brightest among us, thereby asserting a strong correlation between riches and virtue. The wealthy have acquired their wealth, we are told, because they work hard and persevere — never mind their aristocratic inheritances and networks of nepotism. Meanwhile, this same economic system demonizes the poor by assuming the opposite, that their social standing in life is entirely the product of their own laziness and/or incompetence. As we have seen, this too is reinforced in popular media.

With these factors in mind, the movie *Zombieland* (Fleischer, 2009) in many ways represents a coming together of the lower and middle classes in order to fight a common enemy and to change what remains of their civilization for the better. This film takes a more “realistic” approach to the hybrid sub-genre of zombie comedy, while contributing to a much larger discourse regarding the changing shape of the family unit at the center of the American Dream,

as well as the inherent flaws of late capitalism. As Bishop notes in his analysis of this film, “Rather than being a schlocky, low-brow knockoff, *Zombieland* cleverly challenges audience expectations and offers viewers a glimpse of how the zombie sub-genre can function as a positive social force within both the comedy and horror traditions” (25).

From the opening scene, it is made clear that this is a movie about the death of the American Dream, as the audience witnesses the image of an upside down American flag, followed by scenes of a destroyed White House. In voiceover narration, Columbus, played by Jesse Eisenberg, laments, “Oh, America. I wish I could tell you that this was still America. But I’ve come to realize that you can’t have a country without people. And there are no people here. No, my friends... this is now the United States of Zombieland.” Neoliberalism, it seems, has finally done us in.

Columbus explains that he recently left his dorm in Austin and is about to embark on a cross-country trip to see if his family is still alive. As in *Shaun of the Dead*, humans have become infected by a contagious virus that changes them into walking corpses, which in *Zombieland* is explained as a mutation of mad cow disease that spread to humans due to a critical lack of health and safety regulations. “It’s been two months since patient zero took a bite out of a bad hamburger from a Gas and Gulp,” Columbus relays to the audience in voice-over. As the story progresses, he soon encounters a number of other characters, all of whom also assume the names of the places where they are going, where they each hope to find for some tangible component of the American Dream.

Tallahassee, played by Woody Harrelson, is coded as lower-class through his speech, wardrobe and mannerisms. He is on a single-minded quest to find any Twinkies that remain in

existence. To him, this processed junk food is all that remains of the country he loved, and Twinkies, according to popular belief, never decay. In other words, they are a vital part of his perception of America, and if he ever finds one, it will live on forever... or until he decides to consume it himself. Meanwhile, Emma Stone's character of Wichita, along with her younger sister Little Rock, played by Abigail Breslin, are on a mission to acquire survival supplies. They see this as a kill-or-be-killed type of situation, which is how they justify trying to con the others for their own personal gain. In fact, throughout the first half of the movie, none of the characters trust each other, because much like the neoliberal model of economic policy, they are all motivated entirely by their own self-interests. It is only when they abandon this mentality about halfway through the movie that they are able to move forward in their dramatic quests. In terms of the narrative structure, the forging of this bond of trust represents the point of no return. Life cannot go back to the way it was before these events transpired, because they now see the importance of community over the individual.

Even Bill Murray, who plays himself in this film, only pretends to be a zombie so that he can leave the house every once in a while and play golf. He, too, is motivated primarily by his own self-interests. In some ways, this could also be read as a commentary on his acting career, considering that Murray only stars in big-budget blockbuster movies every once in a while in order to afford him the luxury of doing the films that he really wants to do. In other words, he does not have a problem "pretending to be a zombie" by making mindless entertainment with emotionally vacant dialogue (i.e., *Garfield: A Tail of Two Kitties* — a movie so objectively terrible that it has two puns in the title!) so long as it allows him to spend the majority of his

career making films that explore the complexities of the human experience (*Lost in Translation*, *Broken Flowers*, *Hyde Park on the Hudson*, etc.).

Like an overwhelming majority of post-apocalyptic movies, whether comedic or otherwise, on a thematic level, *Zombieland* is ultimately about abandoning one's own selfish desires for the creation of a better society and a positive realignment of broader cultural values. With the exception of Bill Murray, who Columbus accidentally shoots, these characters all achieve some scaled-down version of the American Dream by the film's conclusion. Tallahassee gets his Twinkie, while Columbus, Wichita and Little Rock come to terms with the loss of their own families while accepting that the bonds between them have created a new kind of family unit — which, on the surface, bears little resemblance to the nuclear family of the 1950s. Still, as Bishop notes, “The film thus ends on a happy note; the future may still include roaming zombies and a post-apocalyptic wasteland, but at least these four people have found each other. They each have someone to love and trust, and that paradigm represents a surprisingly conservative and traditional outlook on human society, a society in which the honorable boy gets the attractive girl, and in which the dedicated father adopts the lovable daughter.” As we have seen, the American Dream may change in shape but it seldom changes in substance.

Warm Bodies (Levine, 2013) is yet another take on the zombie comedy. Dubbed a “zom-rom-com” by some, this is arguably the most optimistic of the three films included in my analysis of this sub-genre. Taking place in a post-apocalyptic future where zombies already roam the earth, this is a movie about one zombie in particular named R, played by Nicholas Hoult, as he gradually regains his humanity after falling in love with a human. In what is clearly intended to be a contemporary spin on *Romeo and Juliet* — complete with a balcony scene — these star-

crossed lovers live on opposite sides of the wall that has been erected to separate the humans from the “corpses” and the “boneys.” The boneys are described as corpses who have just given up, allowing their flesh to rot, thereby becoming indiscriminate consumers of both humans and corpses. They are essentially humans who have not only died and been reanimated, but also stripped of all that once made them human. They are merely skeletons and dark tissue.

In terms of how this film relates to the analogy of late capitalism, the boneys are the most ruthless practitioners of this creed, perpetual consumers who are void of empathy, love or any other positive human emotion. They represent the lost souls of neoliberalism, just as the corpses represent its many casualties. Meanwhile, the humans have only come together as the product of an “us versus them” mentality, finding common ground in the desire to rid the world of both boneys and corpses. Beyond this, humanity has lost its purpose, while the younger generation, including R, has been robbed of their aspirations. “So much for dreaming,” he says. “You can’t be whatever you want. All I’ll ever be is a slow, pale, hunched-over, dead-eyed zombie. What did I think was going to happen...? It’s hopeless. This is what I get for wanting more. I should just be happy with what I have. Things don’t change. I need to accept that. It’s easier not to feel, because then I wouldn’t have to feel like this...”

Despite his fatalism, throughout the narrative, R steadily comes back to life by remembering all that was positive about humanity. He falls in love, he helps others, he listens to music, he collects odd memorabilia, and in the end, he follows his heart, literally regaining his pulse in the process. The corpses then join forces with the humans to destroy the boneys, and together, they clear the way for a new, better world. The wall that separates them is demolished,

allowing the re-assimilation of the other corpses who have regained various degrees of their humanity back into mainstream society, which is itself mutating into something new.

It seems that people are attempting to communicate more directly with one another and to be more open-minded toward the differences of others. The main characters find purpose in each other and in seeking out vocations that actually help one another. While this film does not lay any claims as to what a post-neoliberal future may look like, there is an underlying optimism which suggests that this debilitating sickness that infects our culture may in fact be curable after all, if only we can remember the virtues that define our common humanity.

According to film scholar Robert Lamm, apocalyptic comedies — of which he even includes the 1946 Capra film *It's a Wonderful Life* as an example — serve to dispel the unspoken fears of their audiences. He claims that they function as an assertion of faith, whether in humanity or in the omnipotence of a higher power (83). Apocalyptic comedies have never been so common as in recent years. Consider that the same year that *Warm Bodies* was produced, there were two other comedies about the finish line of the human race that saw wide release in the United States: *The World's End* (Wright, 2013) is in many ways a companion piece to *Shaun of the Dead*, while *This is the End* is essentially a Judd Apatow film that was written and directed by two of his protégés: Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg.

While the parallels with capitalism are made explicit in *Shaun of the Dead*, Wright spells it out even clearer in *The World's End*. In this film, Simon Pegg reprises his role as the man-child who is reluctant to face his adult responsibilities, this time as a functioning alcoholic named Gary King, who pressures a group of his old friends from high school to accompany him on what will be their second attempt to complete a twelve-tavern pub crawl, culminating at the one bar that

eluded them last time: *The World's End*. While Gary's friends have all moved on with their lives, it is exceptionally clear that he has not. Through various methods of manipulation, however, Gary is able to convince them all to go with him, including Andy, played against type by Nick Frost, who claims to have given up alcohol completely several years ago.

Echoing the paranoia behind the movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956) except where communist infiltration has been replaced by consumerist ennui, the central characters in *The World's End* spend the second act of the film fighting off alien robots that have assumed the identities of many of the humans that they once knew. Meanwhile, they also continue forth on the "Golden Mile" pub crawl, all getting increasingly intoxicated along the way, including Andy. Before long, they even suspect each other of being aliens, leading them to reveal some of the darker aspects of their own humanity to one another.

At the same time, it appears that the aliens may be benevolent, as it turns out that they were responsible for all of humanity's recent advances in telecommunications technology. However, while the aliens designed smart phones, text messages and the internet to bring people together, Gary learns that they only did so in order to make the human race easier to control. At the dramatic climax of the narrative, when offered the choice to become robots themselves — which would also mean never having to get any older — Gary refuses, valuing his flawed humanity over this race of alien machines, who he sees as being void of any real personality.

In the film's closing sequence, we see that the defeat of these creatures has also led to a rejection of modern technology, effectively resulting in a new Dark Age for humanity. At the same time, the absence of these devices appears to have also made people more personally connected to one another. Much like at the end of *Warm Bodies*, people now seem more inclined

to relate to each other as fellow human beings and without the mediation of technology. Even Gary displays a newfound level of maturity, having given up alcohol completely. When he enters a tavern with the robot versions of his old friends and orders five glasses of water, the bartender refuses to serve them, which leads to a barroom brawl in the movie's final moments. Not only has Gary changed, but the world has now transformed into something that better fits the person that he has become. With no recognizable Dream available to pursue even if he possessed the inclination to do so, Gary now seems to be more self-actualized than ever before.

This is the End (Goldberg/Rogan, 2013), on the other hand, features the fictionalized versions of several character actors trying to learn how to be altruistic in the midst of the biblical apocalypse. Jay Baruchel, Seth Rogan, James Franco, Jonah Hill, Danny McBride and Craig Robinson are all introduced as friends who have come together for a housewarming party. However, as the evening wears on, they realize that the biblical rapture is occurring outside. They soon begin to wonder why they have been left behind as the world they know is consumed by fire and brimstone while demons now walk the earth. The audience is thus invited to experience the apocalypse in the private company of many of the actors that populate Judd Apatow's films, minus the contact buzz.

In his discussion of religious and secular apocalypse movies, Robert Lamm succinctly notes, "In both, humankind is flawed; but whereas in religious comedy humanity is compared somewhat humbly with God, in secular comedy humanity has become God" (89). Viewed in this light, *This is the End* is clearly an example of the latter, as the main characters eventually come to the realization that in order to get into heaven, they must each commit a single act of selflessness. Just like Judd Apatow's cumulative body of work, it is also the story of a bunch of

irresponsible stoners getting their acts together in order to move forward toward a better existence. This film was originally called *The Apocalypse*, and later *The End of the World*, but at the request of Simon Pegg, who co-wrote the screenplay of *The World's End*, the title was changed with the hopes of avoiding any potential confusion between these two films that happened to be distributed to theaters nationwide within about a month of each other.

The phenomenon of the apocalyptic comedy was a particularly pervasive trend in the years following the collapse of the U.S. housing market in 2008, which I believe offers some significant insight into that historical moment. Homeownership, after all, has long been a key component of the American Dream, and when the dust cleared from the housing crisis, for many, owning a home no longer seemed like a worthwhile or affordable investment, which could certainly be viewed as the end of the Dream as they know it. Capitalizing on this anxiety, within that same five-week period that the two previously mentioned films received wide distribution, Lionsgate released a film called *Rapture-Palooza* (Middleditch, 2013), which was also a comedy about the Christian apocalypse (and which also happened to star Craig Robinson). Meanwhile, *It's a Disaster* (Berger, 2012) and *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Scafaria, 2012) had both been released the previous year and center on interpersonal relationships at a time of imminent global destruction. While not nearly as successful as *The World's End* or *This is the End*, these latter two films tap into similar anxieties regarding the end of the American Dream, and so I shall offer brief analyses here.

It's a Disaster is about four couples at a brunch party that they regularly attend, except this time it is interrupted by news of dirty bomb explosions in a number of major U.S. cities, including their own. When they learn that the bombs contained nerve gas, they realize that their

own mortality is imminent and try to make the most of their remaining time. Nearly everything that they once valued now seems to be without meaning, and vice versa. What really matters, this film suggests, is not what you do or what you own, but the people with whom you surround yourself... which in this case happen to be unlikeable characters who all hate each other.

Exploring a very similar theme, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* is about facing an unavoidable fate that takes the form of an asteroid that is about to collide with the earth. While all of the characters in this film seem to handle the news differently, Dodge Peterson, played by Steve Carell, persists with his daily routines just like he always has. Dodge even continues to go to work, which is particularly meaningless now that the world has absolutely no use for insurance sales. Over time, he comes to realize what really matters to him, which is human interaction, and in the film's final scene, he spends the last remaining moments of life on earth with a woman who he has come to love through the course of the narrative.

Fundamentally, while less direct about it than some of the other films that I have discussed, these movies both suggest that the status quo is going to kill us all, whether by acts of war or environmental disaster, and maybe the best we can do is to make the most of what we have left. Each of the movies that I have discussed in this section are about acknowledging on some level that the values of our culture have gone askew and that a new recalibration of our collective ideals may in fact be necessary for the continued survival of human civilization.

At a time when the neoliberal world economy has failed so many of its practitioners by distancing them from their own humanity, comedic films have once again entered into the debate about a new American Dream. These films remind their audiences that the world as we know it is rapidly changing, and that the effects of this metamorphosis may be disastrous in the short term

but ultimately beneficial if policymakers are able to learn from past mistakes. There must be a winter before there can be a spring. Most of these movies are about the transformation of crippling despair into something that vaguely resembles hope.

Much like how apocalyptic comedies posit that in one way or another, consumerism is destroying humanity, I must note that the current dominant business model in Hollywood also threatens the immediate future of American film comedy. As studios continue the trend of spending more money on fewer films with a growing interest in international markets, comedies released by the major studios are becoming increasingly rare. Studios have proven to be far more interested in a safe bet than in taking a gamble on an unexpected hit. According to film scholar David Denby, “It has come to this: A movie studio can’t risk making good movies. Doing so isn’t a *business*. The business model depends on the assured audience and the blockbuster. It has for years and will continue to do so for years more... Nothing is going to stop such business from laying waste to the movies as an art form. The big revenues from such pictures rarely get syphoned into more adventurous projects; they get poured into the next sequel or a new franchise. Pretending otherwise is sheer denial” (7).

While there are of course exceptions, some of which I discussed, most comedies that center on issues of upward mobility do not lend themselves to sequels in the way that other films do, as their episodic narratives do not usually offer much in terms of setup for the next movie. After all, if a character has proven to be a responsible adult by achieving some scaled-down version of the Dream at the end of the film, then what is left to do in the next installment? It is rather difficult to imagine a *Little Miss Sunshine II*, for example, or a *Hamlet III* for that matter, as the punctuation of theme that concludes their antecedents renders any further exploration of

the subject beside the point. We must also consider that in comedy, familiarity often means a tired joke. A punchline is seldom as funny the second time.

The 1992 Robert Altman movie *The Player* even features a running joke about the idea of making a sequel to *The Graduate* precisely because the concept seems so absurd. Granted, there have always been exceptions, including the *Shrek*, *American Pie* and *Hangover* franchises that I discussed earlier in this chapter, but more often than not, comedy seems to be the one mode of filmmaking that has largely been spared the fate of recycling the same material ad nauseam. Unfortunately, in the business model that currently dominates Hollywood, that also means that fewer comedies are being made.

When film historians look back at this period in the history of American cinema, I suspect that they will indeed refer to this as the era of the franchise film, as it has increasingly become common practice to make a sequel to just about any film that exceeds a certain profit margin, and studio executives have demonstrated a compulsion to keep doing so until these movies no longer make money. The reason for this has to do in part with the immense marketing costs of distributing a film internationally in order to achieve the highest box office figures possible on opening weekend, which is generally seen as a bellwether for its success or failure. When a film is first released, theaters are also less likely to be competing with illegal download sites as a mode of distribution, whereas this might not be the case three weeks into its theatrical run. From the perspective of studio executives, not only is there less financial risk with sequels, prequels, reboots and adaptations, but they also require less promotion because the marketing departments are selling familiar concepts with proven track records to their intended audiences.

As suggested earlier, in the twenty-first century, this audience only partially resides in the United States, which is also why fewer comedic films are being made each year by the major Hollywood studios (Faughnder). Not only would the studios have to sell a wholly unfamiliar concept to a foreign audience, but there is also the distinct possibility that the movie would fail because of the cultural specificity of humor. Since most comedies rely heavily on the nuances of language in order to convey their intended meanings, many of the jokes may be lost in translation when these films are distributed internationally. That is to say that movies like *Jackass*, which I discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, tend to play much better to a foreign audience than something like *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton/Faris, 2010), which is driven in large part by humor that might only make sense to American audiences. Incidentally, like many of the other films that I have discussed, *Little Miss Sunshine* is also about defining one's own idea of success and then pursuing it to the best of that person's ability, and its writers won an Oscar that year for Best Original Screenplay. However, despite the moderate success of this film and some of the others that I have mentioned, it seems there is little room for comedy within the international blockbuster business model.

That said, I am inclined to believe that other modes of distribution and exhibition will replace much of the current system in coming years, particularly as digital production continues to become less expensive and offer better quality, while online distribution provides a viable outlet for independently produced movies that may otherwise not be able to reach an audience. For the first time in history, filmmaking is truly being democratized to the point that anyone with a digital video camera, a computer and a sense of humor can make a comedic film, and the internet promises boundless avenues for online distribution.

Americans need comedy. Despite the zombie-like state of the contemporary Hollywood business model and its sick preponderance for resurrecting the rotten corpses of existing properties, it is nonetheless becoming easier for people to find things online that make them laugh. This includes that fabled white elephant of Hollywood: low-budget comedic films. As this type of movie is increasingly shut out of the mainstream motion picture industry in favor of films that can play to a global audience and generate endless sequels, I suspect movies that are distributed entirely online will increasingly serve to pick up the slack, providing the comedic expression that American society so desperately needs. Eventually, Hollywood will no doubt catch on and seek to absorb these talents, as this is a practice that has proven to be financially rewarding in the past. While history does not repeat itself, as Mark Twain once noted, it certainly does rhyme. For as long as there have been narrative films, there have been comedies, and that seems unlikely to change anytime soon. Only the modes of production and delivery change form.

Consider that without film comedy, we would stand to lose a critical arena of our public discourse, as well as the cultural artifacts that allow future generations to better understand their history. Our identity in relation to others, both on an interpersonal and a cultural level, is defined in part by that which prompts our laughter. As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, film comedy is also one of the primary methods through which the American Dream has been renegotiated from one generation to the next throughout the past seventy years. As we have seen, these movies play a crucial role in how we make sense of our world, our place within it, and the incongruities that riddle our civilization. Comedies can show us where there is room for improvement, both personally and collectively, thereby allowing us to move forward toward a better future, but they can also serve to reinforce the status quo by normalizing the hegemony.

For better or worse, comedic films help us to sort out the shared values of our society, creating inside groups comprising people who subscribe to a common ideology, at least momentarily.

These movies bring people together while separating them from everyone else through the novel articulation of a common worldview.

Comedy, it has been argued, is a vital component of any functioning democracy, as it forms part of a larger system of checks and balances that maintains a keen eye on societal power structures, as well as a willingness to undermine these hierarchies as necessary. Comedic films help the viewing public to separate the American Dream from the American reality, regularly calling attention to the disparities that exist between myth and lived experience. As the seasons of history change, so do the shapes of common culture. While for many, the end of the Dream as they know it may be a hard realization to swallow, this is precisely why comedy serves to make it all the more palatable. As George Carlin once said, “It’s called the American Dream because you’d have to be asleep to believe it.”

Perhaps then it is our laughter that shall awaken us.

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