

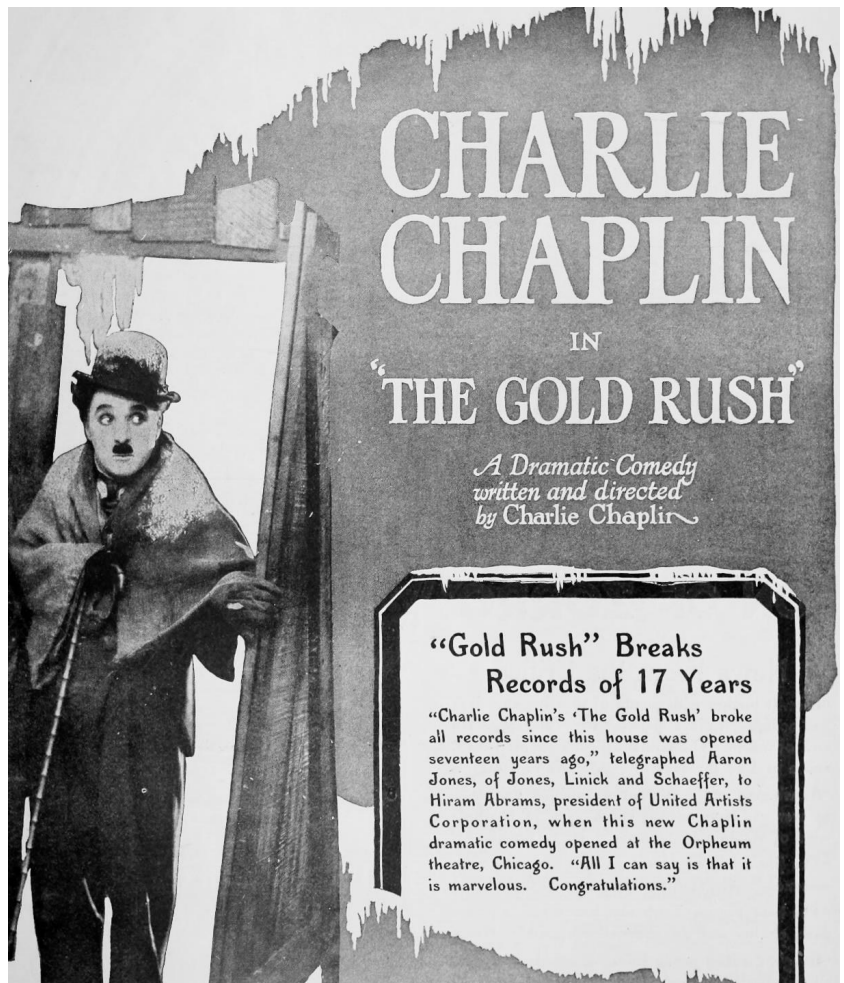
The Gold Rush

By Darren R. Reid
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There is a moment in "The Gold Rush" which captures the essential tone of the film. Having survived near-starvation, privation, and isolation, Chaplin's lone prospector, a barely-disguised reprise of his iconic 'tramp,' spears a pair of potatoes which he then transforms into a pair of dancing feet. There is a hint of fancy in the way that Chaplin manipulates his improvised props, a celebration of food in a world of want. The display he puts on is a show; and a show requires an audience, the creation of relationships. It is a moment in which the return of normalcy, the mundane, is celebrated. And so the film underlines its deconstruction of the American pioneer, reveling not in grand adventure, but the lived experience of the impoverished and the desperate.

Considering its name, there is remarkably little wealth on show in "The Gold Rush." There are dilapidated cabins, worn and broken equipment, and weather-worn faces aplenty but little evidence of that around which the film ostensibly revolves. Indeed, the early part of the film evidences murder, abandonment, and abject desperation - albeit wrapped in masterful and ironic comedic routines. The sight of Chaplin and his equally desperate interlocutor sharing a meal of boiled footwear with imagined and forced delight certainly adds laughter to the desperation; but it never entirely erases the underlying trauma at the heart of the scene. Behind every chewed piece of leather, every begrudging bite, lies murder in the Arctic wastes and an uncertain future. Seeing Chaplin turn into a chicken before the eyes of his starving companion is deeply humorous; the implied attempt at murder which it predicts, less so. So much for the gold.

The American frontier, the pioneering experience, so often one of the most celebrated parts of the American mythology, is here broken down into a study of depression, of the human spirit pressed against the limit of reasonable endurance. Naturally, Chaplin finds comedic gold in the situation, but so too does he explore other facets of the human experience. Friendship and comradeship is forged in the heart of desperation, the essential interpersonal spir-



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it is reinforced even in the face of abject failure, but rarely is it glorified. Chaplin's prospector survives but he can hardly be said to flourish - and when he does it is the product of blind luck rather than skill, an uncharacteristically sympathetic world bending to accommodate its most lovable buffoon. It is a fortuitous turn of events, and an extraordinary one. In the end, the pioneer succeeds. He attains riches, finds hope for the future and, of course, gets the girl. But that attained happiness feels like a fevered dream, the delirious, self-indulgent fantasy of the starving and desperate pioneer first encountered by the audience. Perhaps somewhere the real pioneer lies starving and unconscious, dreaming about, rather than attaining, his goals.

The singularity of the escape, and the harshness of the climate in which the pioneer searches for riches provides an analogy with the desperation of poverty. The inhospitable snow-topped mountains provide the metaphor for hopelessness and isolation; the crisp white snow and the searing storm provide little hope of food, nor shelter. The power of the elements and the frailty of the cabin, coupled with the danger

of the appearing bear allude to the human struggle for material gain. Much of Chaplin's work is replete with biography and lived experience. Chaplin's childhood themes are replicated in "The Gold Rush" – help is a distant dream; Chaplin's pioneer is marooned on the storm-swept mountain teetering on the edge of a cliff, secured only by the knot of a rope and the placement of a rock. Chaplin's skillful use of imagery betrays the struggle for life while living on the edge, often oblivious to the lurking perils. The unsustainability of life, the lack of food, company and love speaks of the perennial movement around poverty stricken East London that Chaplin experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a child.

Separated from his mother as a result of her mental instability, Chaplin was subjected to the harsh realities of the late Victorian children's home before the genesis of a selective British welfare state in 1906. State help in the Victorian economic and social model was anathema; state welfare was in influential works such as Samuel Smiles' "Self Help" (1858) the precursor to laziness and dependence – the development of wealth and happiness was achieved by hard work, dedication and an ascetic lifestyle, much like the search for gold on bleak mountain pastures. Relief from its scourges was more likely to be found in personal relationships and the unity of communities than from striking gold. Chaplin's comedic ballet atop the mountain resonates with communal efforts of escapism from treacherous surroundings. He and his companion are saved from certain death by personal relationships – the same narrative of surviving the harsh conditions for working class Victorian Britain.

A film about the American pioneer becomes instead a study of universal poverty underwritten by firsthand experience. Careful, if not always perfect, execution gives life and levity to those otherwise weighty themes. There is beauty in the film's photography, particularly the rich, busy, but elegantly composed shots within the tavern. In that space Chaplin's pioneer is framed by pillar and post, his form standing in the lonely foreground; in the back, a happy ensemble dances and drinks and carouses. The comedy is almost perfectly realised. Confrontations emphasise the pioneer's inherent cowardice, his unsuitability for life on the wilderness, whilst luck (and at least a little guile), once again, happily carry him through the day, turning the disaster that is the life of the impoverished into the stuff of working class laughter and escapism.

Still, for all its successes, the film does not always succeed in attaining the depth of some of Chaplin's other feature length films. It is certainly funny, and it has a heart – but not one as large as 1921's "The

Kid." There is a social commentary, but it does not cut with the same razor sharp acumen as 1941's "The Great Dictator," nor does its pathos come close to touching 1952's "Limelight." But, if "The Gold Rush" fails to succeed without qualification it is a reflection more of Chaplin's other successes than it is any failures he made with this film. If the social commentary here is not always as sharp as in some of his other films, the comedy redeems it. If the setting is not always as vibrant as those Chaplin had attained in the past, a new set of camera tricks and special effects compensates for that shortfall.

"The Gold Rush" is not, then, an unqualified success – but that does not mean that it is not wonderful. Like so much of Chaplin's work from the 1920s and 1930s it combines whimsy and pathos with a sharp appreciation for life below the poverty line. It revels in expertly realised humour to draw out sympathy for its characters and, ultimately, all of those who suffer as Chaplin did during his childhood in London. Despite being a film about the life of American pioneers, it remains unable to escape the shadow cast by its creator's own history of poverty and desperation. It is an escapist fantasy, rooted in traumas of the past, deeply felt and never set aside. It is, then, a film about space and character; and it is a gentle revenge fantasy, the dramatisation of blind luck and the buffoon. It is, in other words, quintessentially Chaplin.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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