

The Magical Bum

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Magical Negro / Magical Bum



Will Smith as the Magical Negro/Magical Bum

Over the past two decades, the trope of the magical negro has flourished in the American cinema. This mystical black character is depicted as wiser and spiritually deeper than the white protagonist and he often possesses supernatural or magical powers. His wisdom and powers are then used to save and transform tousel, uncultured, lost, or broken whites into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation. Slipping into the '90s lineup without much popular notice, the stock character entered into public consciousness only in 2001 when film-maker Spike Lee, addressing college audiences at Washington University and Yale, critiqued this trend as no more than a reincarnation of the same old stereotype of African Americans as the "noble savage" or the "happy slave" that had existed for decades in film and TV. Lee took on *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *The Green Mile* as the latest iterations of this archetypal drama wherein a white man's moral and emotional growth is made possible by the appearance of an angelic mystical black man: a black inmate cures a prison guard of disease simply by touching him and a black man with all these powers, teaches a young white male how to golf like a champion.¹

But the magical negro is not only black, he is also often poor - impecunious, uneducated, and in some way outwardly or inwardly disabled either by discrimination, disability, addiction, or social constraint. He is also often stuck in dead-end jobs of the modern day precariat – as bus drivers and janitors, or even worse, prisoners or homeless. For instance, two of the most recent Hollywood dramas taking on homeless protagonists, have centered on magical negroes. *Hancock* featuring Will Smith, tells the story of a

¹Taking place in Depression-era Georgia no less, a time when lynching of blacks in the South was commonplace. Lee stated, incredulously, "Blacks are getting lynched left and right, and [Bagger Vance is] more concerned about improving Matt Damon's golf swing!"

black, alcoholic, homeless superhero. At first, the public sees his heroics as a nuisance. Although he stops criminals in their tracks, he does so with immense collateral property damage due to his drunken carelessness. After ending up in prison and a subsequent rise in crime plagues LA (and not your Watts-style ghetto crime, but the kind that actually affects white people), Hancock is released by the police chief to save the day – not to mention the life and careers of the film’s white protagonists, played by Jason Bateman and Charlize Theron.

Of an entirely opposite genre, *The Soloist*, is based on the “real life” story of a (white) LA Times journalist Steve Lopez (Robert Downey JR) who discovers a mentally ill (black) homeless man Nathaniel Ayers (Jamie Foxx), who had been a Julliard phenom before suffering a debilitating condition of schizophrenia. As the film unfolds, Lopez helps Ayers rekindle his musical skills by getting him a donated cello, space to practice, and new apartment. In return, Ayers provides Lopez with a popular column and bestselling memoir. But Ayers offers Lopez far more than a profitable scoop. As Ayers remains mentally troubled and poor, Downey’s character concludes that “his courage, his humility, his faith and the power of his art” has taught him “the dignity of being loyal to something you believe in, to holding onto it, and above all else believing without question that it will carry you home.”

The magic in these two films relies not only, or even primarily, on the trope of the magical negro but on the equally prevalent cinematic cliché of the *magical bum*.² Although frequently working across archetypes, as in *Hancock* or *The Soloist*, there are important differences between the magical bum and magical negro. For one, they each derive from distinctive genres of stock characters: the minstrelsy and assimilationist precursors in the case of blacks and the sentimental, free-spirited tramps and philosophical-existentialist hobos in the case of the homeless. There are also numerous mystical negroes that don’t fit the underclass caricature. Take for example Morgan Freeman as God in *Bruce Almighty* or Laurence Fishburn a demigod in *The Matrix*, both must help white guys find their soul, less Bruce (Jim Carrey) won’t get the girl and Neo (Keanu Reeves) won’t become the next Messiah. At the same time there are plenty of white magical bums, who play the identical dramatic function as their homeless black counterparts, offering salvation, wisdom, and moral lessons to their wealthier foils. Yet, just like the magical negro films whose creators see the inclusion of positive portrayals of blacks as progressive in and of itself, the inclusion of magical bums implicitly function to reify negative dominant stereotypes and narratives of homelessness. In what follows I offer a sketch of the magical bum film: tracing the caricature’s genealogy, illustrating its key attributes, and interrogating the cultural myths they project.

Hobos to Street People: From Everyman to the Eccentric

Unusual magic, wisdom, and talents vested in the homeless are nothing new to Hollywood. In fact, the first homeless character in a motion picture debuted in the 1901 Edison short *Twentieth Century Tramp*, featuring a vagrant flying above a photographed panorama of New York City. His airborne contraption, a bicycle suspended from a balloon with a dangling railroad lantern. Neither is the trope of the homeless character as

² Like the “magical negro,” which uses the antiquated term for African American to denote the offensive nature of the trope itself, I use the word bum in a similar critical vein.

the personal or societal savior to the wealthier classes a novelty. Perhaps most famously depicted in Jean Renoir's *Lower Depth* (1936, remade in 1957 by Akira Kurosawa), where an impoverished thief teaches a destitute aristocrat how to enjoy life without material things. But these two themes come together in unprecedented combinations during the mid 80s and early 90s with astonishing frequency (*Trading Places* (1983), *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), *Emanon* (1986), *The Suspect* (1987), *Up Your Alley* (1989), *Life Stinks* (1991) *The Fisher King* (1992), *Grand Canyon* (1992), *With Honors* (1994)).

How to account for this rise of the magical bum whose powers assist wealthier protagonists? First, Hollywood began attempting to humanize the homeless in a different way, from the relatable everyman to the exceptional eccentric. John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) exemplifies the homeless everyman. Based on the classic Steinbeck novel about a family of itinerant farmers during the depression driven off their land by drought and changes in the financial and agricultural industries the Joad family is depicted as noble, humble, and altogether normal folk as they make their difficult trek across the hobo camps between the dustbowl and California. The film's closing lines crystalize this humanization through commonality as Ma Joad, the family matriarch proclaims, "Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids aint no good an' they die out. But we keep a'comin. We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out; they can't lick us. We'll go on forever Pa, 'cause we're the people."³ The shadier vagabond characters of early Hollywood were humanized in a similar way. Charlie Chaplin made a virtue of failure, making the tramp figure a loveable everyman with which his audience could identify (*The Tramp* (1915); *The Kid* (1921); *City Light* (1931)), and in Jean Renoir's *Lower Depth* an impoverished thief is well-dressed, well-spoken, and teaches the fallen aristocratic baron whom he adopts the manners and mores of the street as a gentleman bum.



Heroic Everyman

Heroic Eccentric

³ This humanization was also accompanied by a more general romanticization of poverty. While the book ends with the downfall and break-up of the Joad family, the film switches the order of sequences so that the family ends up in a "good" camp provided by the government, and events turn out relatively well.

However, by the 1980s homeless characters increasingly became portrayed as eccentric individuals playing on the new stereotypes of the era. Eddie Murphy combines nearly all of these traits in his initial appearance in *Trading Places*, panhandling as a legless, mentally ill, blind, sick, homeless vet only to be found-out by the cops to actually be a perfectly healthy street-performing con-man who is merely faking these maladies for a buck. It is hard to think of a contemporary film with a homeless character that does not take-on at least one of these qualities. Hancock is a drunk, Ayers in *The Soloist*, a mentally ill schizophrenic. Unlike earlier portrayals of the homeless, those in contemporary cinema play through stereotypes of the *other* – the outsider who represents some kind of threat to the community or embodies some chronic sickness, mental, physical, or addiction – and/or the *eccentric* – colorful, vibrant, care-free characters of the street.



Trading Places

Second, it's simply harder to romanticize the state of contemporary homelessness. Winston Churchill once observed that Chaplin's tramp was uniquely American in his upbeat, cheerful outlook. Unlike the "spiritless and hopeless" English tramp, Chaplin's tramp traces his origins back to the freedom-loving American hobo of the turn of the century who "was not so much an outcast of society as a rebel against it" and who "hated the routine of regular employment and loved the changes and chances of the road," according to Churchill. The rail-riding hobos with their philosophies of freedom, as espoused by Bumper, the happy-go-lucky hobo king who spends his time singing and enjoying himself without a care in the world in *Hallelujah I'm A Bum* (1933), represent a dying species among the homeless today. Even during the upbeat boom years, homelessness in the post-1970s era has taken on a different texture – a permanent fixture of our cities, increasingly consisting of the sick, addicted, mentally ill, and disabled;

increasingly contained in shelters, jails, and hospitals. It is within this permanent emergency of social suffering that sympathy through magical exceptionalism trumps the earlier Hollywood formulas of positive portrayals. Today's homeless heroes of the cinema are not rebels. They are rather heroic outcasts.

Finally, the homeless protagonist bursts to the screen in the late 80s and early 90s at the exact moment homelessness becomes a common spectacle of the urban experience. During the 1980s, homelessness tripled or quadrupled in many US cities. The number of people visibly un-housed shocked most Americans, who had thought sleeping in the street was as obsolete as the horse and carriage. The movement to close huge and often inhumane mental health hospitals led to the dumping of thousands on the street, affordable housing production came to a standstill, and the return to a fiscally conservative ideology spearheaded by Reagan ushered in unprecedented reductions to public assistance.⁴ As Los Angeles quickly became the homeless capital of the developed world, Hollywood responded. In 1991, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* staff writer noted that "Homelessness has gone Hollywood," reviewing nine feature length dramas and comedies centering on homelessness.⁵ Just as urbanites became increasingly trained in screening-out the beggars and scenes of suffering in their everyday lives, they simultaneously ushered into theatres to watch them in the anonymity of a darkened room.

It's within this context of shifting stereotypes and portrayals that the "magical bum" emerges; to anesthetize and soften the blow of the increasingly visible poor to the masses with a bit of movie magic. No longer are the homeless humanized through a conversion into moral monuments of the everyman. Instead, through exceptional talents and wisdom in light of their individual deficiencies they offer lessons and rewards to non-homeless individuals and society at large. As if to be saying that although someone may be disabled, sick, crazy, or just dirt-poor, by virtue of special qualities of their own, they have something to offer the rest of us.

The Powers of the Magical Bum

Four shared features of the magical bum coalesce between the mid-80s and early '90s. While the era has its share of more down to earth portrayals of homelessness, as well as gripping documentaries, an astonishing number revolve around a magical bum. *Trading Places* (1983), *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), *Emanon* (1986), *The Suspect* (1987), *Up Your Alley* (1989), *Life Stinks* (1991) *The Fisher King* (1992), *Grand Canyon* (1992), *With Honors* (1994) all include a seasoned sage of the street with a lesson and helping hand for the housed, the working, and the millionaires. What follows are four common features in these tales of the magical bum.

⁴ In the 1980s the proportion of the eligible poor who received federal housing subsidies declined. In 1970 there were 300,000 more low-cost rental units (6.5 million) than low-income renter households (6.2 million). By 1985 the number of low-cost units had fallen to 5.6 million, and the number of low-income renter households had grown to 8.9 million, a disparity of 3.3 million units.

⁵ As one production exec with ties to the major studios is quoted in this article: "Homelessness is a social issue of great concern to people right now. Any savvy screenwriter is going to look around and say here's an issue I can milk in some way, shape or form."

Street Wisdom

The magical bum always possesses some sort of folk, natural, or street wisdom, contrary to the wealthier character's cultivated intelligence. In the film *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, Nick Nolte plays a homeless man who, after attempting suicide on the swanky property owned by the Whitemans (Bette Midler and Richard Dreyfus), is invited into their home to get back on his feet. Soon we find that the real miserable characters are the angry and anxious upper class Whitemans along with everyone in their domain: their sexually confused son, anorexic daughter, and sultry maid. While they seek solace in their material comforts and professional experts – including a dog psychologist for their anti-social pup – Nolte's character cures all of them by providing lessons from experience. He shows Mr. Whiteman how to enjoy the simpler things in life, taking him to spend a night on the beach, smoking pot and drinking beers with his fellow tramps. He speaks frankly to their son of “just being yourself,” giving him the courage to come out of the closet. And he cures the mental anxieties of all three women in the household through a combination of practical wisdom on stress, relationships, work, and the sort of primal sex that only a free-spirited bum can offer. A similar tale of moral education underlies *With Honors*. In the film, Joe Pesci's homeless character holds a Harvard student's thesis hostage for favors and ends up providing him a “real life” education in humility and humanity, the courage to ask out a girl he's long loved, and the inspiration for a revised thesis.



Down and Out in Beverly Hills

Although most of the folk wisdom of the homeless provides a sort of moral enlightenment for the wealthier protagonists, it also serves the practical material gains of the wealthy, such as saving their life or increasing their riches. Both are the outcomes of

Eddie Murphy's street smarts in *Trading Places* – a modern day Prince and the Pauper Tale wherein Eddie Murphy a ghetto con-man is given the life of a top commodity firm banker played by Dan Akroyd, who is simultaneously thrown penniless onto the streets as part of an elaborate bet between Akroyd's employers the Duke Brothers. When Murphy uncovers the Duke's diabolical scheme, he comes to Akroyd's rescue, first by saving his life and then by using his skills as a petty thief to orchestrate a complex con in train robbery and commodity trading to make both he and Akroyd rich and the Dukes dirt poor.

The Prophecy of Materialist Mystification

Often this natural wisdom is premised on a fetishization of poverty – the idea that material detachment provides some sort of spiritual enlightenment and sense of self-worth that is unrealizable in our consumer-saturated society. Whether they actively lecture on this or simply lead by example, the magical bum teaches rich characters to eschew rampant materialism and things of this earth and to instead to embrace a spiritual attitude toward the world. In Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King*, Jack Lucas (Jeff Bridges) a wealthy talk radio show host wants to help out Perry (Robin Williams), a schizophrenic homeless man, who saves his life. Jack finds Perry on the street, gives him \$50, and like the tithing catholic imagines that this monetary exchange will set all right in the universe. But when Perry quickly hands the money over to a blind and elderly homeless man in greater need, Jack becomes furious. Yet, Perry insists, "If you want to help, don't give me money." What follows is a series of moral trials, where the duo help a handful of struggling homeless out of hospitals and horse-shit, along with didactic moments in enjoying the simpler things in life, like sprawling nude and watching the shooting stars in Central Park's Sheep's Meadow.



The Fisher King

In a similar act of monetary denouncement, Simon (Joe Pesci), a homeless man living in the boiler room of the Harvard library, refuses to accept a check for the senior thesis that has fallen into his hands of the aspiring government student Monty (Brendan Fraser). Instead, Simon exchanges personal favors for single pages of the thesis, leading to a series of acts of kindness and an unexpected friendship. Monty slowly realizes the humanity of the poor through Simon's wisdom of love and freedom as well as an array of exceptional mechanical, epicurean, and intellectual talents; fixing Monty's van, cooking an extravagant Christmas meal, and astutely challenging a Harvard professor's conservative lecture on the constitution in class. The climax of the film occurs the day before the thesis deadline when Simon falls deathly ill and asks Monty to drive him to visit the son he abandoned decades ago. Knowing that submitting the thesis late will deprive him of graduating with honors, Monty doesn't hesitate in coming to the aid of his friend. Not only does the magical bum teach Monty that there's more to life than money, Simon also cures him of his status-obsessed neurosis and unquestioned worship of his neocon adviser. In the end, Monty ditches his original thesis supped-up on conservative ideology and instead submits a progressive manifesto of expanding opportunity and equality.



With Honors

Finally, is the lesson of the fall: when wealthy characters themselves end up down and out and learn a thing or two from the experience. Like Dan Akroyd's fall from high finance to lowly drug dealing in *Trading Places*, Mel Brooks' *Life Stinks* similarly

mocks, with far less taste and humor, Twain's classic Prince and the Pauper tale. Goddard Bolt (Mel Brooks) is introduced as the callous developer, showing little regard for people and the environment with an eye on tearing down LA's skid row to construct a modernist fantasy of urban renewal. But in order to get the remaining plots of property needed for his development, Bolt is challenged by his biggest rival, who will sell out only if he can survive on those streets for 30 days. While homeless, Bolt learns important lessons, namely that life is not about accomplishments and material wealth, but rather the integrity of the human spirit and the meaning of love. Once returned to his position of wealth, he marries a lady "from the street," but instead of a wedding in extravagance and show, the film closes with an exchange of vows in a simple chapel in the slums.

Powers and Talents Depend on the Wealthy for their Realization:

In all of these films, the powers and talents of the homeless depend on the wealthy for their realization. In the dozens of films I've scoured depicting homelessness in the post-80's period – far beyond those featuring the magical bum trope – fictional plots never told the tale of exceptional homeless individuals coming to the rescue of the poor and unsheltered.⁶ In *Trading Places*, it is only when the Duke Brothers lift Murphy's character into the world of high finance that he begins to work his magic. Why didn't Hancock use his powers to fight the homeless' class enemies, or Robin Hood it for his buddies on the street? Instead he colludes with the same police force that had harassed him and his fellow homeless nightly. Furthermore, redemption through love never occurs between the homeless themselves, but rather in the rags to riches Cinderella fashion. In *The Fisher King*, *Life Stinks*, and most centrally in *Up Your Alley*, when a news reporter after having bad luck with men discovers her true love in a homeless man featured in one of her stories, wealthy protagonists realize the magic of love in the unlikely trenches of the poor. Thus a key feature of the magical bum is not their exceptional qualities alone, but their alchemical reaction with the upper classes.

Outcome Always Result for Success of the Wealthy:

Not only are the homeless' powers defined in relation to their wealthy protagonists, but they always end up serving the wealthy, as well. Although the magical bum often gets a fairer shake than the magical negroes of the cinema - who tend to end up dying, disappearing, or remaining in their same old dead-end job – like his mystical cousin, the magical bum serves to repair the soul or career of the wealthier protagonist. In *Trading Places*, Murphy could have schemed against the Duke Brothers all on his own, but redeems the fallen millionaire in doing so. Nick Nolte's character gets a brief holiday from the streets at the Whiteman mansion, but the Whiteman's have all their varied socio-, psycho-, and sexual ailments cured. In *With Honors* the homeless Simon dies without forgiveness from his son, but Monty gets the girl and the degree. The billionaire developer Godard Bolt rewards his friends from the street with nice apartments, a private school, and minimum wage employment, but makes his own millions in the process – not

⁶ The exceptions to this trend being documentaries and docudramas– *Streetwise* (1984), *On the Bowery* (1956), *Dark Days* (2000). As soon as the *reality* of homelessness is dealt with, it is the stories of friendship among the homeless and mutual struggle – the only wealthier characters being the social workers, police, and doctors who tend to their plight.

to mention the massive gentrification of his project that will inevitably screw over the rest of skid-row's residents.

In the *Fisher King* the homeless Perry gets the girl, but Jack gets a girl too along with a multi-million dollar radio-contract. After all, the Arthurian parable from which the film takes its name is not the tale of redemption of the poor, but rather that of a king wounded for the sin of his pride. The fisher king, having lost the grail he was charged to protect, spends years searching for it, only to find the magical goblet back in his hands when offered a charitable cup of water by a simple-minded fool. What is made clear across these films is that exceptional homeless protagonists are not positively portrayed merely for the sake of their own character development or tale of triumph. The homeless are instead, first and foremost, deserving vessels of charity that provide the moral means for redemption of wealthier protagonists. Thus the didactic kernel in the moral tales of the magical bum is aimed not so much at celebrating the self-worth and value of the homeless characters themselves, as much as the charitable acts and kindness performed by the wealthy who are always rewarded with wealth, love and happiness that often exceeds that of their new homeless friend.



Life Stinks

The Dark Magic of Mythological Individualism

Film critics, and art critics more broadly, take aim at the portrayals of poverty along three lines. First is the critique of the *romanticization* of poverty, leveled against films that feature a heartwarming tale, comedic episodes, or loveable poor characters, which anesthetize the rest of us from the real hard pain of poverty. On the opposite end is the critique of the *vilification* of the poor in films with unsympathetic portrayals of the deviant, criminal, and perverted poor people that ignores the structural violence, social constraints, and economic deprivation that condition these ugly qualities. Third, there is the critique against *harsh exposure*, when films depict only poverty's pain and suffering,

often with a kind of political agenda, but in turn neglect the moments of happiness, resistance, and community in poor people's lives. Finally, encompassing all three critiques – each beginning where the other ends – is a pejorative term that has been bandied about by film critics since 2008's *Slumdog Millionaire* and most recently *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, namely “poverty porn,” which may be applied to, as far as I understand, any film that portrays poverty at all. The critique asserts that the graphic portrayal of human misery and destitution, usually represented in stereotypical or clichéd images, is more exploitative than edifying.

The result is an inevitable trap in the politics of representation that seems to be asking filmmakers to walk ever-thinner lines between the three poles or simply to stop telling the stories of the poor altogether. What is perhaps more problematic to me in these films of the poor though is the dark magic of mythological individualism at work.

All of the magical bum films reflect the notion that homelessness is an individual problem with individual solutions. None of the magical bums are on the streets due to the shortcomings of social institutions or the policies and powers of the dominant social groups. Magical bums are homeless because they have gone crazy (*Fisher King*, *The Soloist*), committed a crime (*Trading Places*), gotten sick (*With Honors*), or for untold reasons, leading the viewer to merely assume it must be their drinking or laziness (*Life Stinks*, *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, *Emanon*). Nonetheless, all of the magical bums, through their unique and varied talents, wisdom, and powers manage to lift themselves out of destitution with a little help from their wealthy friends. While the wealthy protagonists do much to help their anointed bums, they do nothing to solve homelessness. Despite all the lessons they learn from their poor companions, they learn nothing of the deeper causes or broader solutions to homelessness. Thus magical bum films reflect and feed the neoliberal fantasy of private solutions to public problems, and its unabashed celebration of the charity among wealthy elites.

These films invite us to celebrate the good deeds of the wealthy and the exceptional capabilities of a few extraordinary individuals able to enact the American Dream on steroids: From bum to billionaire! All the while, sweeping under the carpet the structural causes of homelessness such as welfare-state retrenchment, labor deregulation, and urban redevelopment projects. For instance, what could be more ironic than the “happy ending” of *Life Stinks*, where a wealthy developer levels the homeless capital of the US with a luxury development through the help of a few of his homeless friends? It is here that the broader paradox of the exceptional individualism of homeless protagonists squarely sits in contemporary cinema: on the one hand it counters the popular portrayal of the deviant incurable bum, and on the other, it silences the structural violence of our society that perpetuates homelessness on America's streets.⁷

Another paradox of the positive portrayal of the exceptional homeless individual is the bi-partisan political applause he receives from both the right and left. The most poignant example is in the reception of the *Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), featuring Will Smith and his son Jaden. The film depicts the (semi-) true-story of Chris Gardener, an on-and-off-homeless salesman-turned stockbroker. Gardener is no magical bum. His rise

⁷ Between 2.3 and 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness during the year (1% of the population, 10% of its poor) though 30% hold regular jobs, 13% are veterans, 39% 49% report some period of incarceration, report some form of mental health problems.

in the business world is instead fuelled by good old fashion hard work (and exploitation) as an unpaid intern at one of the country's most profitable firms. There is also no wealthy protagonist taking on a homeless guy as a charity case or for personal gain. The brokerage partner takes on Gardener because of his exceptional social acumen and he rises to the top despite the challenges of his poverty and (un-discussed) racial status. Yet the film crystalizes the same narrative of exceptional individualism as the magical bum and its truth only heightens the inspirational impact.

Upon the film's release the *Pursuit Happiness* received the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Motion Picture. That same year it was rated in the National Review as one of the "top 10 conservative films of all time." Who would have thought that a group founded by a bunch of Marxists would share such similar cinematic tastes with today's neocons? For the NAACP, Will Smith's character represents a rare cinematic depiction in providing positive and true-to-life portrayal of a black father, committed to his son, breaking into the white world of high finance. As Linda Chavez, chairman of the Right Wing think tank of the Center for Equal opportunity, writes:

Based on the life of self-made millionaire Chris Gardner (Will Smith), this film provides the perfect antidote to Wall Street and other Hollywood diatribes depicting the world of finance as filled with nothing but greed. After his wife leaves him, Gardner can barely pay the rent. He accepts an unpaid internship at a San Francisco brokerage, with the promise of a real job if he outperforms the other interns and passes his exams. Gardner never succumbs to self-pity, even when he and his young son take refuge in a homeless shelter. They're black, but there's no racial undertone or subtext. Gardner is just an incredibly hard-working, ambitious, and smart man who wants to do better for himself and his son.



The Pursuit of Happiness

In the hope Gardner's story would inspire the down-trodden citizens of Chattanooga, Tennessee to achieve financial independence and to take greater responsibility for the welfare of their families, the Republican mayor organized a viewing of the film for the city's homeless. The viewing added a didactic component to Oscar Wilde's observation that the majority of people "try to solve the problem of poverty, for

instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor.” It also made great political theatre for the working citizenry: a symbolic commitment to the homeless problem amidst material retrenchment in local health and social services.

The real magic of these films is not in the magical or exceptional homeless characters themselves, but rather the very real assumptions and cultural myths that they project. In veiling the social causes and highlighting only individualist redemption of the homeless through some combinations of charity and personal talents, magical bum films reflect and reinforce the dominating ideology that homelessness is but an individual trait that can be addressed through private charity. As US society continues struggling with the prevalence and visibility of destitute individuals, the cinema offers a venue of visual relief: to look directly at in the theatre what one finds insufferable or shameful on the street – and Hollywood continues to provide us with a loveable antidote through the tales of the magical bum.