

# Sullivan's Travels (1941): The American Gulliver or Deconstructing the American Dream

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In my paper, I will focus on the director Preston Sturges' intervention in the Depression-era comedy, rooted in the satirical format of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in an attempt to highlight the ways in which his revolutionary approach to narrative and character undermined the coherence of representations of the American Dream. Preston introduced non-linearity and Naturalistic and Absurdist elements in typical comedy formats (like the screwball comedy), thus challenging the veracity of American Dream narratives. *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), in which socially conscious endeavors only prolong social misery and unrest, postpones narrative resolution to the point of becoming the ultimate deconstruction of the American Dream. Moreover, Preston Sturges' movies play with narrative in such a way as to unravel the constructedness of the American Dream. By choosing to foreground moral ambivalence over clear-cut categorizations, his films delight in the characters' misadventures without passing moral judgment. Rooted in genuine feeling rather than prescribed reactions, Sturges' movies lend a paradoxically empathetic skepticism to the interpretation of the American Dream, privileging humanity over stereotype.

## I. Depression-Era Comedy and the American Dream

The 1930s are deemed a revolutionary period in American cinema not only due to the advent of sound, but also in light of the “invention” and consolidation of a new film genre – the screwball comedy, a form of romantic comedy revolving around the well-known trope of the battle of the sexes, deeply rooted in the new possibilities of spoken language and dialogue. As movies transitioned to sound, their focus was recast on dialogue and its comic and satirical potential; conflictual relationships between characters from different socio-cultural backgrounds came to the fore, and their socio-linguistic differences were exploited for the sake of both entertainment and social critique (Beach, 2002: 1). Silent-era depictions of social class had also succeeded in creating long-lasting representations of working-class individuals, but visual icons like Charlie Chaplin's “Tramp” have entered collective mentality as romanticized depictions of the tragic poetry of poverty. As a result, “the Tramp” has become a “character type” devoid of the problematization of social issues which prompted its creation (2). If such caricature-like representations eluded geographical and socio-cultural categorizations, the introduction of sound enabled the complementarity between nonverbal elements (gestures, posture, facial expressions, dress), verbal components (grammar, vocabulary, accent), and paraverbal signifiers (pitch, rhythm, diction,

stress) (2). As a result, articulations of class by means of character and dialogue became more nuanced and allowed filmmakers to render the relationship between individual and community, on the one hand, and individual and American social order and mentalities, on the other.

Hollywood sound cinema also marked the emergence of the double role of film – both entertainment and critique of social mores. The “comedy film” was thus conceived as a form of comic relief from the dire reality of the Depression, but also as a critique of American capitalist institutions and capital-bound interactions (Sklar, 1994: 175). Ironically, the middle class became the foremost viewership during this period, so American cinema was also confronted with the challenge of offering “respectable” entertainment (Beach, 2002: 7). This is how a new comic format was born: the screwball comedy, where gender and class conflicts resulted in potentially dangerous misadventures which threatened the ethos of the American Dream only to reinforce it (Sands, s.p.). Highlighting the need for struggle in the name of the American Dream and relying on American myths (such as “the American Adam” and “the pastoral utopia”) to create larger-than-life characters, comedy film derived its humor from gender and class incongruities, but aimed to prove that American virtues could transform social tensions into gender and class harmony. Nonetheless, idealized narratives and characters were counterbalanced by the Depression-specific worry for excess, which prevented the complete espousal of the American Dream tenets. Consequently, nuanced dialogue and social observation gave way to an interrogation of American myths and ideals: film-makers cast a doubtful eye on recurrent cross-class romance and questioned the validity of excessive masculinity and/or capitalism to the fulfilment of the American Dream.

Thus, Depression-era comedies both illustrated and shaped socially acceptable American behaviors, contributing to the cultural “homogenization” of the diverse American society (Beach, 2002: 7-8). Consolidated in the 1930s as a means of preserving the democratic promise of socio-economic success and integration, the American Dream became a major force in the process of (re)fashioning American identities. With the aid of cultural, feminist, and Marxist theories, I will conduct a close viewing of *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) that should reveal the film’s rearticulation and interrogation of the American Dream. I will, therefore, take into consideration the formula of the American Dream as delineated by the main American myths.

The myth of America as the Promised Land is strongly linked to how early American studies scholars envisioned America – the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony as the founding fathers and New England as the “cradle of American civilization” (Paul, 2014: 138). This vision of America stemmed from the idealization which imprinted the Pilgrims’ and Puritans’ religious and social discourse: they were mostly Calvinist refugees who saw themselves as the “chosen people,” elected by God for the reenactment of the Kingdom of God on Earth. They believed that their journey across the Atlantic mirrored the Biblical journey into the Promised Land; likewise, their experience in the New World was meant to restore the prelapsarian order.

This image of America as an Edenic utopia has its roots in the Renaissance rhetoric of the first British explorers to the New World. The discourse of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan theology transformed the cult of the “elect” who entered a “covenant with God” into the grand narrative of American exceptionalism. Amplified in times of historical turmoil such as the American Revolution and the Civil War, the myth of the Promised Land paved the way for the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and the imperialistic expansionism of the Frontier (Paul, 2014: 176). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, works like Perry Miller’s *Errand into Wilderness* (1952) further placed the quest for the Promised Land and the self-created utopia at the heart of American culture

and history, thus leading to the acknowledgement of the Promised Land as “the myth that made American studies” (Paul, 2014: 19, 140). This vision of America as the Promised Land, on the other hand, has been contested ever since the Civil Rights and Feminist movements outlined its white male supremacist overtones (140).

The myth of the self-engendering American hero is inseparable from the myth of the Garden of Eden. America as the second, or regained Paradise embodies the American continent as an agrarian utopia, where the innocent, evil-free American Adam, unshackled by heredity or history, can start humankind anew. The first explorers of the age of “discovery and exploration” projected their Renaissance ideals of a perfectible land and nation on the New World, thus lending Biblical and pastoral dimensions to the new continent. In the field of American studies, Myth and Symbol School founder Henry Nash Smith argued that the American Garden was peculiar in that it was linear and progressive, as opposed to the circular and static Eden: the American Paradise was best represented by the ever-moving, permeable Frontier, constantly regenerating itself through the incorporation of new territory (Smith 254).

Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) depicts the American Garden as a site that makes possible the reconciliation of chaos and order, wilderness and civilization. As an illustration of the tensions between the pastoral and the technological, the Garden and its open Frontier appease the intrusive effects of technology and industrialization upon the chaste, eternally young American psyche (Marx, 2000: 26). It can be said that for both Smith and Marx, the Garden embodies the American ideal of peaceful self-sufficiency and communion with nature, but this vision was not free of its problematic ambiguities. In the 1980s, Richard Slotkin theorized the clash between Adamic absolute freedom and American egalitarian values, showing that the ever-expanding Garden encroached upon the land and freedom of other populations, such as the Native Americans. The myth of the Garden was further challenged by the New Americanists, who tried to debunk the image of a paradisiacal America by building on Slotkin’s idea of “regeneration through violence” (Slotkin, 1998: 51).

Frederick Jackson Turner’s *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893) propounded the Frontier as a foundational myth and the West as a foundational topos for American culture and civilization. According to Turner, the experience of the Frontier had had a major role in shaping American democracy and political and social institutions, but also on the typically American features of the American Adam: egalitarianism, self-reliance, and resourcefulness (Turner qtd. in Paul, 2014: 311). The Frontier thesis emerged during the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era, a time where America had re-become whole and was striving to reassert itself as an international power (Paul, 2014: 313). The Frontier thesis allowed America to break away with its European heritage and reconfigure its culture and geography along an East/West border (311).

The West as a mythical space epitomized by the Frontier rendered the exceptionalism of the American Adam in his formative and creative first-hand incursions through the New World. The Myth and Symbol scholars further consolidated the Frontier myth into a national narrative (Paul, 2014: 312). The West thus became the new Garden of Eden, a space where conquest underpinned a forward-looking approach to American history and progress (314-315). The West also spoke to the American preoccupation with an idyllic, pastoral version of the New World, which preserved the genuinely American agrarian way of life against the threat of exaggerated industrialization (312). More than anything, the West and the Frontier myths forever ingrained the land in the American psyche as a crucial element of Americanness (311). The West and the Frontier are conflicting dimensions of American culture, because the

peaceful, agrarian utopia of Western farmers seems to be at odds with the expansionism of the Frontier, never fixed, always moving westward so as to conquer more and more territory (314). However, both visions stem from the exceptionalism of the American Adam character and his civilizing powers over nature and land.

The myth of the American Adam has been associated with the American cult for a rural, agrarian past and the cultural depictions of America as a pastoral garden to be cultivated through the energy and ingenuity of a typically self-fashioned American male hero (Paul, 2014: 314). The self-reliance of the American hero, which was to become a cornerstone of both Transcendentalist and American philosophy, was anticipated by Thomas Jefferson in his account of America as a republic of exceptional, self-determined farmers, thus reiterating the myth of Adamic prowess in the American Garden (315). The Transcendentalist philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman infused the Adamic hero with “man-God” powers and reinforced the potential for self-creation of this second Adam (317).

Celebrating the endless potential of (American) human nature, Emerson and Whitman positioned the American Adam as both Creator and Creation – the Garden was thus constantly shaped and renewed by the Creator’s will (Lewis, 1955: 23). All these features coalesced into Americanist scholar R. B. Lewis’s theorization of the American Adam as an epitome for the original settlers and their active process of creation of the New World (27). According to Lewis, the Adamic hero predicated the creation of America on the premise of novelty and youthful energy (29). America is a micro-cosmos of pre-Fall Creation and the endless possibilities of this unblemished space. The American Adam has absolute power over both American land and history, as he is unencumbered by genealogy or history. It is this exceptional American individual, “standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling”, who can give shape to what America and Americans become, by virtue of his godlike qualities (inner spirit and absolute freedom) (Lewis, 1955: 5). However, the image of the American Adam as a beacon of light for the American nation was contested as early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Dark Romantics started shedding light on the tension between America’s democratic ideals and the underlying individualism and egotistical pursuits of the American Adam and the American Dream (Paul, 2014: 319).

Taking into consideration these introductory ideas that define American identity and its connection to innocence, freedom and the Frontier, I intend to uncover the interplay between American mythologies and cinematic form, with a view to illustrating how 1930s cinema both consolidated and reshaped American typologies of social, cultural, and economic success. The study of these films remains relevant to the contemporary viewer, in that they represent a form of American cultural production seeking to ask questions about American identity, while also negotiating the demands of both entertaining and educational aims.

## **II. *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941): Gulliver’s Satire and the Ultimate Deconstruction of American Dream Narratives**

There is no better deconstruction of story-telling and narrative-based industries than *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), a work whose title alone suggests Sturges’ ambivalent, elusive attitude towards story-tellers. Borrowing its name from a novel where the protagonist’s perspective is constantly warped by the places he visits, *Sullivan’s Travels* promises to both undermine and endorse the phantasmagorical nature of both movies and movie-makers. The main character, John L. Sullivan, comfortably resides at the very center of the movie industry, thanks to his brand of happy-go-lucky comedies, which he has been directing for a number of years to great

success. Young and hopeful, he wishes to displace this trend (which he had followed himself) by directing a documentary-like drama which realistically reflects the hardships of the working classes. Sullivan believes that movie-goers wish to see an expression of their struggle onscreen so as to render their experience, thus far sugar-coated by comedy, more visible. However, the studio head does not deem Sullivan's proposition a lucrative one, since they have received confirmations that the period they work in (the Great Depression) calls for an uplifting type of movies. Film scholars have consistently documented the fact that the comedy and melodrama trend was rarely challenged during the Depression, due to how profitable it was to present the public with entertainment that would offer them a form of katharsis (Sklar, 1994: 175). Nevertheless, Sturges does not pass judgment on either Sullivan or the studio head yet, because they are both depicted as working from a standpoint which requires, above all, the public's sympathetic reaction:

Sullivan: I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. Stark realism. The problems that confront the average man.

Studio head: But with a little sex.

Sullivan: A little, but I don't want to stress it (*Sullivan's Travels* 00:03:24 – 00:03:31).

Thus, from its very first scenes, the film tackles the opportunism of the movie industry by humorously presenting the process whereby studios take advantage of the disenfranchisement of the working class for their own profits. The narrative of the American Dream as equally promising and accessible to “the little man” is strongly undermined when the little man is pandered to by a person whose job is to actually fabricate these narratives. Furthermore, Sullivan's noble pursuit to speak to the common man is rendered pretentious and naïve by the preposterous nature of his project: he wishes to become a tramp so as to live through and understand the plight of such people first-hand, in other words, he is ready to become a disenfranchised person for a limited amount of time so as to perfect the quality of his artistic product. The fact that he regards poverty as a performative act which can be exploited for veracity is laughable enough, but the first few glimpses into Sullivan's lavish lifestyle quickly transform the character from a visionary director into a bitterly delusional, yet sweetly childish megalomaniac. Sullivan's well-spoken British butler also weighs in on the matter, by giving a highly cultured speech on the demeaning quality of a film that purports to present the reality of poverty as it truly is. Sturges' penchant for deconstruction reaches an apex in this scene, as this first sequence of the movie covers not only a trend and a “revolutionary” response to that trend, but also a critique of this supposedly “revolutionary” response: “If you'll permit me to say, sir, the subject is not an interesting one. The poor know all about poverty, and only the morbid rich would find the topic glamorous... [The poor] rather resent the invasion of their privacy” (*ST* 00:08:54 – 00:09:07).

Sturges' deconstruction of the American Adam is aided by his use of the picaresque mode. Initially, the main character dresses up and tries to perform the role of a typically low-class character in a picaresque narrative. The colorful cast accompanying the protagonist on his journey is also present, here in the shape of the studio staff comically stifling his artistic project. True to a picaresque story, the hero takes on a journey replete with humorous challenges, but if the usual stakes of a picaresque narrative are a socially coherent, fully respectable life at the end of the strenuous adventures, Sullivan's aim is a purely artistic one, and his travels are entirely fabricated. The American Garden turns from source of adventure, discovery, and challenging

experiences, into an anodyne navigation of self-imposed constraints. Unlike his inspiration, Gulliver, whose work as a seaman confronts him with a number of extraordinary situations, Sullivan deliberately rids himself of all means of comfort (his Hollywood staff included) and wishes to enjoy full freedom to explore hardship on his own terms. Just like Lewis' (and, later on, Slotkin's) American Adam, Sullivan is a hero who creates himself from determination and painstaking efforts, but Sullivan's pain is a fabricated one, which disenchants the viewer from idealistic renditions of the American Dream. The car chase, in which the protagonist rides in a race car driven by a child in an attempt to get away from his assistants, paints a ridiculous picture of the relationship between Hollywood personnel, ready to indulge the whims of movie directors, and the fanciful creators, who place their vision above the economic and social security of the people who work for their success (Wexman, 2015: 51). Unlike the potential adventures in the Garden, these ridiculous interactions do not result in progress, but in a circuitous return to origins – Hollywood – which forces Sullivan to cope with the idea of his own meaninglessness. In spite of all the clandestine freight trains he might board, Sullivan cannot help ending up in Hollywood time and time again. Even when he does manage to get away from Hollywood, he still finds himself in the vicinity of the movie industry.

Therefore, the first person Sullivan meets once he is finally free from Hollywood and roaming through Los Angeles is a young actress who has just left Hollywood and who, unlike him, could not find a job there. A practical counterpoint to Sullivan's populist flights of fancy, the girl (who remains unnamed for the rest of the movie) takes the director for a genuinely poor tramp and offers to buy him breakfast. Willing to return the favor, the protagonist befriends the girl and offers to take her to his Hollywood mansion after admitting that he is a well-known movie director. The repartee between Sullivan, who keeps citing his works, and the young actress, who is not impressed with his catalogue, complements the scathing commentary on the superficial value of celebrity and the irrelevance of Sullivan's journey of self-creation to the "ordinary" people Sullivan wants to represent. Once Sullivan became famous, he achieved the American Dream in its purest form – that is, fame lent him self-reliance and the possibility to explore and expand the Garden freely – but the girl does not care:

Sullivan: [This car] belongs to a picture director... a guy named Sullivan.

The girl: Oh.

Sullivan: You never heard of him?

The girl: No.

Sullivan: He's made quite a few pictures. *Ants in Your Pants* of 1939 (...) [D]id you like it?

The girl: Not much.

Sullivan: Some people thought it was pretty good.

The girl: I don't care for musicals. They hurt my ears" (ST 00:28:10 – 00:28:30).

If this were a classical screwball comedy, the couple would come across a number of roadblocks and conflicts that would eventually prove the strength of their connection, but *Sullivan's Travels* deromanticizes idealized versions of love promoted by 1940s cinema by rendering incident and interest the only two forces that keep Sullivan and the girl together (Beach, 2002: 96). Similarly, if picaresque shenanigans provide the protagonists with growth, the current couple's adventures are deliberately designed by themselves and only become dangerous and unpredictable when characters refuse to see their own limitations. However, their adventures start with a lull in action and a carefree discussion by Sullivan's swimming

pool, who is dissatisfied with the progress of his artistic project, while the girl laments the loss of his charm upon re-becoming a rich man: “You [made fun of me], with your stories of being a washed-up director, you big clunk (...) I liked you better as a tramp” (*ST* 00:33:21 – 00:34:03). Their problems are definitely not the problems of the impoverished people that Sullivan seeks to bring to light in his picture, but the girl is somehow motivated to continue the “common man” journey by the director’s whimsical approach. Reversing the masculinity of the American Adam, she is resourceful enough to disguise as a boy and, as opposed to Sullivan’s expectations, she turns out to have more stamina and ingenuity than the male protagonist.

On the road again, the director gets more acquainted with his experiment and manages to gain better insight into the harsh reality of indigent Americans. The film itself can no longer be accommodated by the comedic form and Sullivan and the girl lose any chance at comic relief as their adventures become a struggle for survival in the actual world of the destitute. As it was to be expected, Sullivan cuts the experiment when it is no longer convenient for him – ironically, when he feels there is no more left to be discovered about the world which he arduously tried to emulate (Wexman, 2015: 52). Ironically or not, in another nod to the fabrication of American “dreams”, specifically, and stable meanings, in general, the couple’s lunches in meal centers and nights in homeless shelters become the object of the film studio’s publicity stunt for Sullivan’s upcoming picture. Having made a successful team through so much toil and trouble, the girl wishes to remain with the director, but her desire for romantic fulfillment is outweighed by economic concerns. Someone who pleads for the relevance of art to the public, in favor of profit and success, should not regard wealth as such an important matter, but the irony lies precisely in Sullivan’s careful preoccupation with money in his private life. Further using economic greed as a source of humor, the movie places the protagonist’s research into the struggles of the poor next to his past attempts to cut down on his income taxes by getting married. When the married couple realized their joint taxes were even higher, Sullivan’s wife entered a relationship with his business manager. The satirical tone here regards the money-making machine that is Hollywood as much as the individual thirst for profit, which drives some people to commit their life to anyone who has the least connection to money or money management, thus undermining the connection between “common men” and their aspirations that lies at the core of the American Dream.

As generous as he is parsimonious, when necessary, Sullivan wishes to reward the friendliness of the homeless people that he encountered in the shelter and give them each five dollars, but one of those same homeless people attacks him and steals all the money. Unconscious, the director ends up in a freight car which drives him to another city, while the vagrant is run over by a train. Since the thief also stole his shoes, which bear an identification card which marks them as Sullivan’s, the dead body of the thief is mistaken for Sullivan. The director is declared dead; consequently, his death, highly publicized in the written press, becomes public knowledge and, thus, eerily real, rendering the narrative more impactful and meaningful than life itself. When Sullivan does wake up in a different city, no one is there to recognize him and to restore his former comfort – it is at this moment that he finally loses his identity as a privileged movie director. The sarcastic undercurrent in this scene exposes the pretentiousness of Sullivan’s claim to authenticity by subjecting him to real, unvarnished cruelty (Dickos, 1985: 77). When the film switches from Sullivan’s constructed narrative of impoverishment to bleak circumstance, his pursuit of reality renders him vulnerable, unprotected, and confused, in stark contrast to the control and freedom he could exert in the movie studio in the heart of Hollywood, “the dream factory”. As a meta-cinematic note to

viewers, this sudden change of pace and tone also alerts them as to the misleading eye of the camera. Accused of trespassing and treated violently by a railway worker, Sullivan responds with violence and consequently receives a sentence of six years in labor camp.

This series of mutually conflicting absurd incidents culminates with the physical hardships which the protagonist has to endure in labor camp, and which seem to override all the philosophical concerns illustrated in the movie so far. Hungry, thirsty, and over-worked to near-death, he ironically becomes the embodiment of human suffering himself, fulfilling the narrative of self-creation inherent in the American Dream, albeit in a macabre manner. The butler's comment on the undignified nature of poverty representations is more than confirmed the moment both Sullivan and the viewer realize the sheer physicality of suffering. The question of what a disenfranchised person wants or needs is recontextualized when the prisoners are allowed to watch a Disney cartoon on a weekend night, as a surprise reward for good behavior. Walking together with the other chain gang prisoners, the newly alienated, marginal Sullivan speaks best to the unexpected nature of tragedy and the consequent fragility of identity. When the chain gang trudges into the chapel and sits down to watch the movie, the moment acquires an almost sacred, ritualistic aura, and categorizations of good and bad art are no longer the question. When imprisonment and freedom (even in the form of a childish cartoon) collide, notions like superficial or unrealistic entertainment become irrelevant, because anything that can restore freedom for a number of minutes can also restore humanity. At last, Sullivan realizes that stories carry an elusive power, and that Creators lack the means to fully control their own narratives, which debunks American myths of exceptional protagonists, while also nuancing the conversation on the American Dream. In a way, by deconstructing the American Dream, the film ends up by upholding the visceral necessity for stories.

Overall, the film dismisses moralistic interpretations or any attempts at labelling it a higher, more cultured brand of comedy in light of its critical apparatus. By being skeptical of its own critical assumptions and premises, the film deconstructs theories about making film or comedy and thus eludes value judgments that would deem it better or deeper than other Hollywood comedies of the era. Not only is the ending a conventionally happy one, but it is also brought about by a miraculous solution involving both luck and generosity. Determined to recover his identity, the protagonist confesses to having killed John L. Sullivan in order to gain access to the outside world. In a subtle commentary on the validity of news and media investigations, Sullivan's photograph is recognized by the girl, the director is released, and his identity, restored. If anything, Sullivan's absence has only benefited the people in his circle: the girl has become a regular actress with the studio, while the director's wife has finally married his business manager. Likely to be accused of bigamy, the wife has to grant him the divorce, which allows the couple to be reunited at the end of the story and confirm the classical screwball pattern. In the greatest stroke of irony in the movie, Sullivan rejects the studio's offer to shoot his socially conscious project, not bothered by the conclusion that a conventional formula can often be more effective: "There's a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much, but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan" (*ST* 01:29:30 – 01:29:40).

Naturalistic and absurdist, rather than trite and stereotypical, Sturges' revisions of the comedy genre undercut the coherence of American Dream representations, and challenged the social viability of American Dream narratives. By stressing the morally problematic social mobility of his protagonists, his work called attention to the artificiality of Depression-era definitions of success, and questioned the relationship between social success and humanity, an



issue equally explored by its satirical forefather. Thus, by foregrounding *Gulliver's Travels* as satirical blueprint for its interpretation, *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) delivered the ultimate critique of American idealism and mythologies of reinvention and regeneration.

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