Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*: A century after its release

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A century after its release, Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925) remains one of the most remarkable achievements in world cinema—a work in which the great filmmaker and actor fused his peerless pantomime with moving drama and a profound identification with the poor and dispossessed, for which Chaplin drew on his own childhood experience of hunger and extreme poverty in the slums of London.

In creating his Little Tramp character, Chaplin took a social type that was reviled by official bourgeois society—the vagrant, the unemployed man, the person without property—and turned him into arguably the most beloved character in the world, recognized by millions as the embodiment of humanity itself: resilient, tender, always yearning (for food, security or romance), and with a deep sense of justice that sometimes compels him to kick a cop in the rear, to the utter delight of working class audiences everywhere.

The Gold Rush also stands as a decisive step in Chaplin's artistic development, deepening the emotional and moral range of his work and preparing the way for his later masterpieces—among them, *City Lights*, *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator*.

As this reviewer observed during a recent Mexico City screening of the film's superb new restoration, *The Gold Rush* has lost none of its power to provoke uncontrollable laughter in children and adults alike—a testament to Chaplin's comic genius and his sympathy for the downtrodden. The film endures.

The story and its unforgettable moments

Set during the Klondike gold rush of the late 1890s, the film follows Chaplin's Little Tramp—identified here simply as "The Lone Prospector"—as he joins the mass of fortune-seekers trudging through the snowy wastes of the Yukon in northwestern Canada in search of gold (some 100,000 people migrated to the region between 1896 and 1899). What he finds instead is hardship, hunger and, ultimately, love.

Among those he encounters are Big Jim McKay (Mack Swain), a fellow prospector who strikes gold but loses his memory; Black Larsen (Tom Murray), a murderer driven mad by greed; and Georgia (Georgia Hale), a romantically frustrated dance-hall girl whom the Tramp pursues.

The Gold Rush unfolds as a series of expertly constructed comic and emotional episodes, each building on Chaplin's mastery of pantomime and comic-dramatic storytelling. Who can forget the desperate meal in which the starving Tramp boils and eats his leather boot, delicately twirling the laces as if they were spaghetti and daintily plucking nails like fish bones? Or the thrilling sequence of the cabin teetering on the edge of a cliff, swaying perilously as the Tramp and Big Jim crawl from one end to the other. Or the sublime "dance of the rolls," in which Chaplin, alone and waiting in vain for the arrival of Georgia and friends, imagines that he is entertaining his guests with two bread rolls skewered on forks into a pair of graceful dancing legs.

Versions, suppression, and restoration

Chaplin, ever the perfectionist, revisited *The Gold Rush* in 1942, adding a musical score, sound effects and his own narration. While his new version brought the film to new audiences, it also made some unfortunate deletions of material, including the removal of the film's original touching and amusing ending, in which the Tramp and

Georgia, unable to remain still when posing for a photographer, ruin the photo with a kiss.

With the release of the 1942 sound version, the 1925 silent version was withdrawn from circulation, and for decades it was difficult if not impossible to see the film as originally conceived.

Starting in the 1970s, scholars and archivists worked to restore the silent *Gold Rush* from surviving prints. A major restoration by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill in 1992, with a reconstructed score based on Chaplin's own notes, returned the film's original titles and sequences. The most recent 4K restoration, prepared for the 100th anniversary of the film's original premiere June 26, 1925 at the Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles, was screened at this year's Cannes Film Festival and has played around the world.

The artist and the age

Chaplin's ability to mix laughter and pathos was rooted in personal experience. Born in 1889 in South London to impoverished music-hall entertainers, he knew the humiliations of poverty firsthand. His father, who suffered from alcoholism, left the family; his mother, Hannah, was institutionalized after years of hardship. The young Charlie spent time in workhouses, surviving through performance—first as a child entertainer in the music halls, later as a vaudeville comedian with Fred Karno's troupe, which took him to the United States, where, in 1914, Chaplin began appearing in and soon directing short films.

Over the next few years, the comic cinematic exploits of the Tramp character would make Chaplin the most famous man in the world. Between 1914 and 1921, Chaplin directed over 50 short films, refining his art of physical comedy and pathos. With *The Kid* in 1921, Chaplin proved that a comic-dramatic story led by the Tramp could be sustained over a feature-length film that would move audiences not just to laugh but to be moved emotionally (As that film's opening intertitle proclaims, "A picture with a smile — and, perhaps, a tear.").

The Gold Rush developed further on this synthesis. It retains the anarchic energy of his earlier shorts, but over a broader social and emotional canvas.

Chaplin's art and the 20th century

Although *The Gold Rush* lacks the overt social criticism of *Modern Times* (the Great Depression and factory life) or *The Great Dictator* (fascism), it was a decisive step toward them. It taught Chaplin how to balance the comic and the dramatic within a single work, and how to create characters who mirrored the experiences of millions.

The film's success also confirmed Chaplin's independence from the Hollywood studio system. As the co-founder of United Artists and owner of his own studio, Chaplin retained full creative control—writing, directing, producing, scoring and starring in his own films. This autonomy allowed him a certain latitude in confronting the day's most pressing issues head-on, for a time.

Chaplin's life after *The Gold Rush* reflected the growing contradictions of his time. In 1952, while traveling to London for the premiere of *Limelight*, he was barred from re-entering the United States in what was a deliberate McCarthyite attack on the left-wing filmmaker. He lived the rest of his life in exile in Switzerland, returning to America only once, in 1972, to receive an honorary Academy Award.

***The Gold Rush* today**

A century after its release, *The Gold Rush* remains an astonishing achievement—poetic, hilarious and humane. Chaplin himself once said that it was the film by which he wished to be remembered. Watching it today, one understands why. Its images—of hunger and hope, of a man eating his shoe and dreaming of love—continue to move audiences to laughter and, perhaps, tears.

In today's world of ever deepening levels of social inequality, Chaplin's vision is again urgently relevant. Chaplin's genius lay in showing that laughter itself could be an act of defiance. To laugh in the face of the inhumanity of capitalism, not to downplay it, but to show the absurdity of the social order, and to imagine something better.