ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

Finally this hour, we've recently been exploring what the American dream means in politics, in the economy and the culture. Well, today, Bob Mondello takes a look at the folks who have been selling the American dream here, and around the world, for more than a century: Hollywood - the dream factory.

BOB MONDELLO, BYLINE: Tinseltown didn't invent the American dream, but it sure put it out there for the world to see. A dream lit by the perpetual sunshine of Southern California, steeped in the values of the immigrant filmmakers who moved there in the early 1900s, and got enormously rich. It was their own, outsider experience these Italian, Irish, German and - often - Jewish moviemakers were putting on screen; each optimistic, escapist fantasy a virtual American dream checklist. Hard work carries the day in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON")

JAMES STEWART: (as Jefferson Smith) I'm going to stay right here and fight for this lost cause.

MONDELLO: Little guy makes good in the oil-rich world of "Giant."

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "GIANT")

JAMES DEAN: (as Jett Rink) My well came in, Bick.
DEAN: (as Jett Rink) I'm a rich boy.

MONDELLO: Character matters more than birth, as no one knows better than Luke Skywalker in "Star Wars."

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "RETURN OF THE JEDI")

MARK HAMILL: (as Luke Skywalker) There is good in him. I felt it. He won't turn me over to the emperor. I can save him. I can turn him back to the good side.

MONDELLO: You make your success as an individual, says rugged individual John Wayne, in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance."

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE")

JOHN WAYNE: (as Tom Doniphon) Well, I know those law books mean a lot to you - but not out here. Out here, a man settles his own problems.

MONDELLO: And parents sacrifice so that their children will do better, in the boxing movie "Body and Soul."

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "BODY AND SOUL")

ANNE REVERE: (as Anna Davis) I did it to buy myself fancy clothes? Fool - it's for you! To learn, to get an education, to make something of yourself.

MONDELLO: Hollywood's not called a dream factory for nothing. It manufactures optimism and in the process of selling it, can make it feel wondrously real. During the Depression, for instance, the silent comedy "Modern Times" had Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp imagining not great wealth but an idyllic middle-class existence, in a house with orange trees so nearby, he could pluck fruit right through his window. This was a life of ease in a land of plenty. And though the little tramp was an outsider, even he could dream.
So could the showgirls, gangsters and cowboys who populated early Hollywood fantasies. In big-sky Westerns, every man was his own boss; in organized-crime flicks, entrepreneurs turned to bootlegging, where life was short but glamorous. And in the Depression, was the Hollywood musical depressed? No way. Chorus girls were turning into stars, and upward mobility was everywhere.

(SOUNDBITE OF SONG, "WE'RE IN THE MONEY")

ROSEMARY CLOONEY: (Singing) We're in the money. Oh! Come on, my honey. Let's lend it, spend it, send it rolling around.

MONDELLO: And yes, there were millions who were left off the dance floor. African-Americans, for instance, rarely got to watch their dreams get realized on screen until decades later.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "MALCOLM X")

DENZEL WASHINGTON: (as Malcolm X) We don't see any American dream. We've experienced only the American nightmare.

MONDELLO: Also, Asian-Americans, Latin-Americans, gay Americans - the list of people who were left out of Hollywood's dreams in the first half of the last century, is appallingly long. It wasn't until after World War II that the film industry took more than a glancing interest in the aspirations of minorities - the transplanted Puerto Ricans in "West Side Story," for instance, who knew exactly why they'd left San Juan for New York.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "WEST SIDE STORY")

FILM CAST: (Singing) I like to be in America, OK by me in America. Everything free in America - for a small fee in America. Ole!

MONDELLO: Hollywood had long been inspiring immigrants to come to the U.S., with images that filled them with unrealistic optimism about what they'd find here. The Italian film "Golden Door" depicts the dream in all its glory. Made in 2006 but set
a century earlier, its hero is an Italian immigrant who's lured here by trick photos that show American rivers flowing with milk, onions the size of wheelbarrows. By the time he gets to Ellis Island, traveling in steerage, he's figured out that these are false hopes. But then he sees Manhattan's skyscrapers glinting in the sun. Someone calls them golden houses, 100 floors high.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "GOLDEN DOOR")

MONDELLO: And his face lights up again. That is the power of the American dream.

There is, of course, a catch to all this dreaming. The movie industry tends to stack the deck, treating wealth - or at least, financial security - much the way it treats youth and beauty. The vast majority of happy characters in movies are good-looking, young and well-off. So the subtext is that those qualities all go hand-in-hand. Never mind that the story is telling you that what matters is what's in your heart. Never mind, in fact, even when it tells you that not everyone makes it - because the folks who aren't making it on screen are still movie stars.

(SOUNDBITE OF MOVIE, "ON THE WATERFRONT")

MARLON BRANDO: (as Terry Malloy) I could have been a contender. I could have been somebody instead of a bum, which is what I am. Let's face it.

MONDELLO: Well, sure, but he's still a young Marlon Brando and has a movie star's salary. And that speaks to why Tinseltown's version of the American dream became so seductive. Chaplin, who played the Little Tramp, was a millionaire - a fact that was not unknown to the public. For decades, there has been no greater glamour than that bestowed by Hollywood. Even when fame is fleeting there, it's flashy. And you don't hear about the big star who lives in an ordinary house, or drives an ordinary car, because that's not part of the fantasy.

By leaving out the caveats, Hollywood can make the American dream seem a persuasive American reality, even if it's not the reality that most of us experience. Which is why when people come to visit from overseas, they often remark on
something that seems kind of unremarkable, if you live here. All the cars are new, they say. It looks like a movie. What they can't see, of course, is the monthly car payments, or the maxed-out credit cards. But they're right; the image is like the movies. It does look American - and kind of dreamy. All filmmakers are doing is making what they know, and then doing a little editing.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MONDELO: I'm Bob Mondello.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

You're listening to ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, from NPR News.