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Napoleon Dynamite

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Abstract

This is a review of *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004).

For many of us, high school was a time in our lives we'd rather not dwell on too much. Embarrassed by our own bodies, by the bodies of those lovelier and more athletic than ours, by bullies, by the humiliations of gym class, by speaking in front of our peers, by working at our first jobs, by love, and by our families, we suffered through those few short years, glad to come out relatively whole. The story of Napoleon Dynamite, whose name is only a little more embarrassing than he is himself, works out as a comic reversal of all that can make a misfit teen want to run and hide from the world

Napoleon is a tall, lanky high schooler who wears moon boots, sports large glasses and a red afro, and nearly always avoids eye contact with anyone, even his few acquaintances. He lives with his grandmother and older brother, Kip, a slightly built computer nerd who chats with women online and dreams of developing lethal martial arts skills. As a teenager, Napoleon faces the typical perils of small town life, including finding someone to go with him to the prom. In the midst of his isolation, he befriends the boy who is to become his only true pal, Pedro Sanchez, a recent immigrant from Mexico. Pedro decides to run for school president, and his alliance with Napoleon helps both of them to achieve a measure of self-respect in their otherwise constricted lives.

The pains of late adolescence are familiar to many Americans, but this movie goes far beyond a comic rendering of teenage awkwardness. The quirky

cinematic style, the dead-pan delivery of simple lines, and the offbeat, low key humor of most scenes take *Napoleon Dynamite* beyond any familiar territory, investing Napoleon's journey into self-confidence and wholeness with a kind of archetypal resonance.

The Mormon writer and director, James Hess, learned filmmaking while a student at Brigham Young University, and though this may account for the lack of profanity and explicit teenage sexuality in the movie, *Napoleon Dynamite* evinces no propagandistic intention. Religion of any kind remains muted, with Pedro's Catholicism being the only obvious exception. For instance, Pedro promises in his campaign speech to place images of the holy Saints in the school hallways. Neither mocking nor affirming Mexican Catholic piety, such a scene exemplifies the rather random quality the characters' lives.

The movie neither promotes the Mormon faith nor even shows much of any overt religious iconography or speech (unaccountably, Uncle Rico wears a cross even though his highest aspiration is to travel back in time to 1982 when he could help win a high school football game). Yet even with no overt religious themes or images, *Napoleon Dynamite* creates a sense of peace by its end. Napoleon risks total failure and abysmal embarrassment in front of the entire school by dancing, surrendering his own dignity to make up the lack of a skit required as part of Pedro's

presidential campaign. Napoleon dances flawlessly and effortlessly, reversing everyone's expectations of him for the sake of his friend.

The end of the movie amplifies this success by arriving at a kind of comedic closure, comedic in the traditional narrative sense. Napoleon plays tetherball with his new girlfriend, although he had played it alone before; Uncle Rico, the prideful athletic has-been, accepts with humility the friendship of the girl on the bike [who?]; Grandma is out of the hospital and back home doting on her beloved llama; and obnoxious Kip gets married to a big, beautiful African American woman whom he met online and who inspires Napoleon's "sweet" dance moves that win the election for Pedro.

Napoleon Dynamite demonstrates how a movie filled with ostensibly secular themes can shade into a satisfying narrative that produces a sense of balance and harmony. The movie is not mawkishly sentimental, yet neither does it deal with tragic depth or grand ideas. Instead, it manages to delight and to satisfy in ways that few movies about teen life can by showing how it is within our utterly ordinary lives that we can discover signals of transcendence.