

US Culture and Society: cinematic reflections on "American Dream Varieties"

Amerikai társadalom és kultúra BBNAN13400 D2

Lecturer: Balogh Beatrix, balogh.beatrix@btk.ppke.hu
Time and place: Wednesday 14:30-16:00, D218

All mandatory-item movies are viewed at home. The movies must be watched by the time indicated in the syllabus.

Availability: Wednesday 16.00-17.00 in Room 102, or by appointment

Purpose of the course is to gain further insight into American culture and society through investigating how the concept of the *American Dream*—both specific and elusive—is underscored, challenged, or criticized in a series of American films that have now become 'cult' and/or popular TV items worldwide. Whereas some of these make explicit commentary on the contours, evolution, transformation, or corruption of this myth or American ideal, we will also explore how a specific understanding of the dream is inherently present in all. Attendant to this investigation we will encounter distinct regional identities and institutions as well all-American ideals.

You will note that certain movies become cultural icons or iconic culture products on their own with an impact beyond catering to a particular American audience. Thus the attendant question we will ask is what role the movie industry plays in not only reflecting on but also forming culture and society.

Format and Requirements: class participation, response notes, presentation, end-term test

The main format of the seminar is discussion. After an introduction to a "main theme" you will watch the assigned movies at home and come to class with your remarks and questions. Short texts to familiarize students with the social or political background of the movies may accompany the viewing (see reading list).

Response notes: partly to demonstrate your familiarity with the movie (to show that you have indeed watched it) you are to write a short informal 'reaction' and submit it via **unipoll** two days before class. (What you liked/disliked, found interesting/difficult, in what way you found the movie instructive/informative/distressing/funny; in other words, your personal reaction as an audience) Add to it observations about the movie's perspective on the American Dream, notes on perceived social-cultural clichés and norms, and one or two questions you would like to raise in class. You are to watch the movie and write a response note even if you cannot come to class (see below at "attendance and grading policy").

Presentation: Choose a movie/theme and prepare a short talk (ppt and/or handout aided) in which you explore a question or explain the social/historical background.

End-term test: short essay questions (list of possible questions will be distributed) to be answered in 3-5 sentences in which you will give account of your familiarity with class discussions.

You find below a preliminary syllabus with movies, readings, and proposed presentation topics. Bear in mind when signing up for the course that occasionally you will have to watch two movies for a given class (appropriate time must be set aside), submit response notes by Monday evening, and prepare an in-class presentation.

1	Introduction , goal orientation. Cinema and society: cinema as entertainment, social record, artistic project. Introduction to "The American Dream." Read '10 movies'
2	Cosmopolitan dreams and social expectations; LA scenes and characters, social norms: Valentine's Day
3	Critical approach to the American Dream: Revolutionary Road
4	The American Dream and Conservative Perspectives; Southern scenes I. Commenting on history. Forrest Gump
5/6	Contested Native American and Cowboy Identities; Brokeback Mountain Native American Dreams Smoke Signals and a choice of a Western movie
7	Racial and Cultural Identities, Melting Pot, Salad Bowl or Masala? Mississippi Masala
8	Race, class, and equal opportunity, Legacy of Brown Hidden Figures
9	Race, class and equal opportunity 2 Youth culture and inner-city school, Freedom Writers
10	The myth of modern-day David and Goliath; Legal America and the Environment; Gender and class stereotypes. Erin Brockovich
11	Gown v Town. The Boston scene Good Will Hunting
12	End-term test: short essay questions based on class discussions

Attendance, class work, and evaluation:

1. You should prepare for each class. Watch the movie and read the assigned text before the class discussions. **Missing a class does not exempt you from watching the movie assigned for that week** or preparing for the next.
2. You may miss a **maximum of 3 classes** during the semester. That means a total of 30% of the workload. Since you may be bound to miss classes due to an illness, do not miss a class for an alluring alternative activity. If you miss more than 3 classes, your course may be marked "incomplete". To help prevent such an occurrence **2 classes can be missed at the students' own convenience and without any consequence**. However, a formal notice is required for the third occasion. **Response notes should be turned in notwithstanding**.
3. **Evaluation:** your final grade will be based on the following components. Class work: meaningful participation in class discussions and presentation, authentic response notes, end-term test.

Readings:

- Murphy, Emma. "10 Films That Represent the American Dream" *Culture Trip*. November 16, 2016. <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/california/articles/10-films-that-best-represent-the-american-dream/>
- Johnson, Scott. "The American Dream is Too Loud in 'Revolutionary Road'" *Charlotte Viewpoint*. February 6, 2009
- "Conservatism and the American Dream in *Forrest Gump*" (Student essay, March 2, 2015) <https://einblogvonvielen.wordpress.com/2015/03/02/conservatism-and-the-american-dream-in-forrest-gump/>
- Kedong Liu & Hui Zhang. "Self- and Counter-Representations of Native Americans: Stereotypical Images of and New Images by Native Americans in Popular Media" *Intercultural Communication Studies* XX: 2 (2011). <https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/09KedongLiuHuiZhang.pdf>
- Boyd, Julia. "An Examination of Native Americans in Film and Rise of Native Filmmakers". *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, Vol. 6, No. 1. Spring 2015. <https://www.elon.edu/docs/e-web/academics/communications/research/vol6no1/10BoydEJSpring15.pdf>
- Arena, Jenny. "Hidden Figures and Human Computers" Digital Experiences. *Smithsonian Air and Space Museum*. January 26, 2017. <https://airandspace.si.edu/stories/editorial/hidden-figures-and-human-computers>
- Sylvia Foster-Frau. "In the town 'Erin Brockovich' made famous, residents still fear dirty water." *The Washington Post*. December 1, 2024 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/12/01/erin-brockovich-town-dirty-water/>
- "The Role of Film in Society" *Thought Economics*. June 2011. <https://thoughteconomics.com/the-role-of-film-in-society/>