US Culture and Society: American Society on Films

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| *Az Amerikai film: társadalmi és kulturális reflexiók* | BBLAN09100 S1 |

**Lecturer**: Balogh Beatrix

**Time and place**: Home viewing and reflections/virtual classroom discussions. Three discussion forum sessions: February 27, March 13, April 17. Should we return to in-person teaching any time this semester, our classroom is Sop 503. All mandatory-item movies are viewed at home. The movies must be watched by the time indicated in the syllabus.

**Availability**: via email: [trixiebalogh@yahoo.com](mailto:trixiebalogh@yahoo.com)

**Purpose** of the course is to gain further insight into issues of American society through movies. Far from presenting a comprehensive survey of the contemporary social, political and cultural reality we will choose a few important themes and 1, discuss how these issues/realities are present and presented in cinema 2, and what particular insight we can gain about American identity and American society through these representations. In this respect, the course intends to revisit key features of American society you learned about in an introductory survey/lecture course, albeit through a specific medium.

Every movie, irrespective of topic or genre, is a window into society and culture: it tells us about social patterns and customs, class and race issues, dreams and anxieties, cultural clichés, gender norms and stereotypes, regional differences, landscapes and cityscapes. You will also be exposed to regional varieties of language, or the special lingo of certain professions or subculture. We will also explore why and how certain movies become cultural icons or iconic culture products with an impact beyond catering to a particular American audience; and what role the movie industry plays in not only reflecting on but also forming culture and society.

**Format and Requirements:** response notes in unipoll, forum participation, home paper. After an introduction to a “main theme” you will watch the assigned movies at home and will reflect on how they depict or represent US culture and social norms. Short texts to familiarize students with the social or political background of the movies may accompany the viewing (see reading list). We will attempt a short conference call via MS Teams on February 27 (exact timing will be communicated in advance). Discussions most likely take place in a closed FB work group in condensed fashion (since you are to study handouts and ppts beforehand (that are normally distributed/played in class), there will be only one official 15-minute break, and small group discussions are replaced by simultaneous Q&A, the actual FB time will most likely be condensed into 3 hours from 9 to 12 on the three given days. Relevant course material will be posted to both FB and NMS/Teams prior to class. Should we return to the classroom, we may resume the normal format and time-slot.

**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 via a Neptun/unipoll task. (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 comments on perceived social-cultural perspectives or a question you would like to raise in class. You may write your response notes directly into the Unipoll form or in a word.doc but only feedback entered in Unipoll before the set deadline counts (no emails or other late submissions).

In one of these “response notes” (longer in format but written in a semi-formal, no-nonsense style) you will compare how two movies of your choice reflect on the same theme. Deadline for this Compare and Contrast paper is **April 24**.

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| class/  date | | Discussion topic | |
| Feb 27 | Introduction, goal orientation. Cinema and society: cinema as entertainment, social record, artistic project. Introduction to “The American Dream.” Misconceptions and various interpretations. Value system, social norms, and localities within the American Dream.  Cosmopolitan dreams and social expectations; LA scenes and characters, social norms: *Valentine’s Day;* Critical approach to the American Dream: *Revolutionary Road,* the Suburban American Dream. Family and gender roles of the American Dream*: The Stepford Wives.* Conservative or Liberal perspectives of *Forrest Gump.* | |
| March 13 | Race, class, and minorities in American film. Racial and Cultural Identities, Melting Pot, Salad Bowl or Masala? Institutional, systemic, and intra-community racism. Representation of Native Americans. Class divisions or Irish vs English? *Mississippi Masala, Hidden Figures, Freedom Writers, Good Will Hunting.* One western movie of your choice*.* | |
| April 17 | This last class session seemingly addresses two different themes: timely apocalyptic visions of pandemics (in fact an action-thriller view in *Outbreak* and a slow-moving dystopian rendering in *Contagion*) and government responses; and legal-legislative responses to health issues and gun rights in *Erin Brockovich* and *Miss Sloane* respectively. The broader scheme is “institutions in crisis”. | |

**Movies and Reflection deadlines:**

* Valentine’s Day: **February 15** (TV program for Valentine weekend)
* *Revolutionary Road; The Stepford Wives; Forrest Gump*: **February 25**
* Your choice of Western Movie: **March 6**—watch any of the classics or recent Western (*The Last of the Mohicans, Dancing with Wolves, Lone Ranger, The Revenant, or other*) and point out the mode of Native American representation discussed in the studies in your reading list (Kedong, or Boyd).
* *Mississippi Masala, Hidden Figures, Freedom Writers (optional), Good Will Hunting*: **March 11**
* *Outbreak, Contagion, Erin Brockovich, Miss Sloane:* **April 15.**
* Again, the feedbacks are short genuine reactions to the movie in 5-6 sentences relative to the main theme of upcoming discussion. **No** plot summaries (unless to make a specific point), artistic reviews, or “composed” analysis. Takes no more than 5-10 minutes to produce. However, watching the movies is time-consuming. Set aside 3 hours a week for this purpose, or integrate the movie into your “leisure” time.

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/forum time does not exempt you from watching the movie(s) assigned for that class** or preparing for the next. You may miss one discussion forum but are expected to visit the page and review the Q&A.
2. **Evaluation:** yourfinal grade will be based on the following components. Class work: meaningful participation in class discussions (participation in/comments posted to forum (virtual classroom), the chat board tracks your active presence—being signed in does not count for participation; authentic response notes, Compare and Contrast ‘essay’. You need to complete all three components to earn a grade.

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 (this article will be posted to class forum site)
* “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>
* Paul, Crystal. “From ‘Outbreak’ to ‘Contagion’: What post-apocalyptic movies can teach Seattle about coping with the coronavirus pandemic” *Seattle Times*. March 19, 2020. <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/from-contagion-to-pandemic-what-post-apocalyptic-movies-can-teach-seattle-about-coping-with-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Recommended (FYKP):

* Wollersheim, Ruth Emelia, "Retrograde Returns of the American Housewife: Reimagining an Old Character in a New Millennium" (2015). Theses and Dissertations. 1094. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/1094>. pp ii-iii, pp26-31, 36-39,
* *Mona Lisa Smile* (Mike Newell, 2003) End Credits <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLYAUQx8WEg> and David Hoffmann, *America in 1957. What A Time It Was!* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6bHs8Vm3EQ> 2:16 – 7:02 we would watch these cultural backdrop clips in class.
* 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>
* *Erin Brockovich. My Story.* [*https://www.brockovich.com/my-story/*](https://www.brockovich.com/my-story/)
* “The Role of Film In Society” *Thought Economics. June 2011.* [*https://thoughteconomics.com/the-role-of-film-in-society/*](https://thoughteconomics.com/the-role-of-film-in-society/)