Films and Society

The American Dream through Films
Review
Films

• Feature Films
  – Charles Chaplin, Modern Times (1936)
  – Orson Welles, Citizen Kane (1941)
  – Godfather II (1974)
  – Joy Luck Club (1993)
  – Little Miss Sunshine (2006)
  – A Better Life (2011)

• Documentaries
  – People Like Us (2001)
  – Hoop Dreams (1994)
  – Affluenza (1997)
Protestantism

Worldly (economic) success as a sign of being predestined / chosen to go to heaven – not being greedy or avaricious

This shifted the focus from the afterlife to this world

Before Calvinism: *Worldly hedonism* vs. *spiritual asceticism*

Calvinism: *Worldly asceticism* – one can focus on material things with the force of religious righteousness (Max Weber)
Protestant tradition

- Calvinism removes the active God from human life (predestination)
- People must find out if they are meant for salvation through their acts on earth
- Worldly success through industry and wealth creation becomes signs of being selected – money is not good
- A new way of life emerges based on self-reliance and worldly asceticism
  - Benjamin Franklin: The value of
    - hard work,
    - saving, frugality
    - self-improvement, education,
    - self-reliance (but also charity)
American Creed

• “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

• The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

  – Liberty
  – Egalitarianism
  – Individualism
  – Populism
  – Laissez-faire
    • (Seymour Martin Lipset)
The American Dream

• American dream is built on and balances the elements of the American Creed. It is a

• “promise that everyone, regardless of ascription or background may reasonably seek success through action and traits under their own control.” (Jennifer L. Hochschild)

• “everyone who steadfastly practices certain practical virtues will find a place at the table… These virtues – self control, discipline, effort, perseverance, and responsibility – stand at the core of our idea of good character.” (John Schwarz)
Main Themes

- Immigration
  - The promise of worldly success -- the American Dream
  - History left behind -- “History is bunk” Henry Ford
  - Cultural diversity
- Social Class
  - Egalitarian denial of class
  - Class reflecting achievement
- Social Mobility
  - Anyone can be successful regardless of ascription or background
  - Costs of upward mobility are denied
- Work
  - Valorization of work, discipline
  - Path to success
- Entrepreneurship
  - Valorization of creativity, independence, control
  - Great individuals
  - Path to success
- Consumerism
  - Shift from Puritanism to hedonism
  - Shift from saving to spending
  - Success measured by possession of consumer items
- Happiness
  - Objects vs. relationships
  - Money can buy happiness
  - Choices – freedom to choose
  - Control
  - Liberty
  - Home and nuclear family
  - Synthetic happiness and flow
# Themes and films

- Charles Chaplin, *Modern Times*  MT
- Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*  CK
- Godfather II  Gf
- Trading Places  TP
- A Better Life BL
- Little Miss Sunshine LMS
- Joy Luck Club JLC
- People Like Us PLU
- Hoop Dreams  HD
- Affluenza  A

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