

Films and Society

The American Dream through Films
Review

Films



- Feature Films
 - Charles Chaplin, *Modern Times* (1936)
 - Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)
 - *Imitation of Life* (1959)
 - *Godfather II* (1974)
 - *A Better Life* (2011)
 - *Her* (2013)
- Documentaries
 - *People Like Us* (2001)
 - *Becoming American: The Chines Experience* (2003)
 - *Hoop Dreams* (1994)
 - *Happy* (2011)

reprise

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)

reprise

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)

reprise

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)

reprise

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

- Identity
 - People are unique but they can join categories
 - Identity is up for choice
- 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
- 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
- Technology
 - Technology as a solution to social problems and conflicts
 - Technology is unstoppable
 - Progress
 - Equalizer

Themes and films

	Identity	Immigration	Social Class	Social Mobility	Consumerism	Happiness	Technology
Modern Times			X		X	X	X
Citizen Kane			X	X	X	X	
Imitation of Life	X		X	X		X	
Godfather 2	X	X	X	X		X	
Hoop Dreams			X	X		X	
Better Life	X	X	X	X		X	
People Like Us	X		X	X	X	X	
Becoming American	X	X		X		X	
Happy						X	
Her	X					X	X