Films and Society
The American Dream through Films

COURSE DESCRIPTION

One of the most distinctive features of American culture is the widely held belief that anyone can achieve happiness through material and social success, and can attain success through hard work, courage, and determination. The American Dream is supposed to unite our diverse society through a set of common beliefs and goals. Using feature and documentary films as well as scholarly readings, the course explores various aspects of the American Dream. In this class, we will use films to make central sociological themes come alive. The films will serve as springboards to understanding general social processes in American society.

There will be ten movies you have to watch. All will be on ereserves for streaming. The movies range from 72 to 200 minutes in length.

Note:
To access the films from off campus you will need to connect to the campus VPN. Here is the information you need: https://blink.ucsd.edu/technology/network/connections/off-campus/remote-desktop/index.html

The articles will be on Perusall. There is no textbook for this course. You have to do the reading and watch the assigned films in their entirety before class. In class, we will watch only excerpts from the films.

When you watch the films and read the articles take notes. The midterm and the final will both have questions about the content of the films and the articles along with the content of the lectures.

Before each class, when the movie is listed, you have to pick a scene from the film you like and would like to talk about. A half hour before class the latest (by 1:30 pm), you submit your scene pick through Canvas, the title of the movie, the time stamp of the scene (from MM:SS to MM:SS), your title to the scene (you come up with a descriptive title), and a sentence about what you want to talk about. You can make it longer. It is up to you.

For instance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film title</th>
<th>From</th>
<th>Till</th>
<th>Scene Title</th>
<th>Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modern Times</td>
<td>6:15</td>
<td>13:30</td>
<td>The feeding machine</td>
<td>Do we have to make everything efficient? What happens to human dignity?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will draw randomly from them. If your entry is selected, you will have to tell us why you picked that scene and what is interesting about it.
You have to do the reading. All readings are on Perusall. As you read on Perusall, you will see the questions (in red) and my comments. You will have to answer at least one question for each reading: you write your answer below the question or below the earlier answers.

To make it a bit easier, I let you skip four readings. In other words, you have to answer one question for twenty of the twenty-four short readings. I prefer you do all twenty-four and answer several questions for each, but I know you are busy people. I want to give you the heads-up, that Perusall is sneaky. It records the amount of time you spend reading.

I will put my lecture slides on Canvas as we go.

The midterm will be old school. It will be in-class on November 3, and you have to bring a bluebook and a pen. No phones or laptops, in fact, no electronic devices are allowed. You will be given four short essays, three of which you will have to answer. If you answer four, you will get credit for the best three. For the in-class exam, you are allowed to bring a cheat sheet. The cheat-sheet is a single, letter-size sheet that you can fill on both sides with handwritten notes. You can write whatever you want, but you cannot use printed sheets. When you turn in your exam, you will have to turn in your cheat-sheet too.

The final on December 13, 3-5:59 will be the same format and rules, except, because you will have more time, you will get five essay questions and have to answer four. Same rules as for the midterm, a cheat-sheet is allowed.

Your grade will be determined as follows:

- Answering questions for readings on Perusall: 20%
- Midterm: 20%
- Final: 35%
- Scene picks (1% each): 10%
- Class participation: 15%

OFFICE HOURS
My office hours are Mondays and Wednesdays 1-2 (Social Sciences Building 488) or by appointment in my Zoom room: https://ucsd.zoom.us/j/5581794498

YOUR INSTRUCTOR
I am Akos Rona-Tas (pronounced Ahkosh Ronatash). I have been a professor at UCSD since 1989.

There are classes where you teach students about things they have never heard of. This is a different class. Here we will talk about things that are already familiar to most of you and the goal of this course is to make you think about them in new ways. Of course, you will learn new things, but my goal is to provide you with new perspectives.
SCHEDULE

Sept 29  Introduction: Main Themes

Oct 2   The American Dream I
       The Origins
       Here is a recent opinion poll about the American Dream
       And here is another one

Reading: James Truslow Adams. 1931. The Epic of America. Epilogue pp.371-386

Oct 4   The American Dream II
       The Historical Roots: Joyless Puritanism and the Spirit of Capitalism


Oct 6   The American Dream from Below I
       American Dream in the Industrial Age

Film: Modern Times (88 min) (directed by Charlie Chaplin) F= Feature Film


Oct 9   The American Dream from Below II
       Battles of the Little Guy and the Precariousness of the American Dream

Oct 11  The American Dream from Above I
       The Battle of Giants: Success vs. Happiness

Film: Citizen Kane (119 min) (directed by Orson Welles) F

Did you notice something oddly familiar in the movie? Click here
Oct 13  The American Dream from Above II
   The Media and Fame


Oct 16  The American Dream from the Outside I
   Mafia and the American Dream: Crime and Success

Film: Godfather Part II (200 min) (directed by Francis Ford Coppola) F


Oct 18  The American Dream from the Outside II
   Ethnicity and Social Mobility

Reading: Malcolm Gladwell, The Crooked Ladder, New Yorker August 11, 2014

Oct 20  The American Dream and the Construction of Identity
   Race and Gender: Inclusion and Exclusion

Film: Imitation of Life (125 min) (directed by Douglas Sirk) F


Oct 23  Immigration I
   Who Do We Welcome?


Oct 25  Immigration II
  The Asian Experience

  Here is an article about Chinese parenting and "Tiger Mothers"

Oct 27  Immigration III
  The Hispanic Experience

  Film: A Better Life (98 min) (directed by Chris Weitz) F


Oct 30  Social Class I
  How to Think about the World of Social Inequalities


Nov 1   Social Class II
  Trends of Inequality

  Reading: Leslie McCall and Christine Percheski, Income Inequality: New Trends and Research Directions, Annual Review of Sociology 2010

  An excellent article on income inequalities in the US by Slate Magazine with links to important scholarly articles and great visuals

  Warren Buffett (the 2nd richest person in the US), Stop Coddling the Super-Rich

Nov 3   In-class midterm
Nov 6   Social Class III
   Film: Sorry to Bother You (112 min) (directed by Boots Riley) F

Nov 8   The African American Experience
   Film: 13 (100 min) (by Ava DuVernay) D

Nov 10  Veterans Day

Nov 13  Social Mobility
   Opportunities and Outcomes

Nov 15  Social Mobility II
   Moving Up and Moving Down

Nov 17  Social Mobility III
   Rags to Riches in the Movies
Nov 20  Consumerism I
    From Puritanism to Consumerism


Nov 22  Consumerism II
    Buying a Stairway to Heaven


    Film: Captain Fantastic (118 min) (directed by Matt Ross) F

Nov 24  THANKSGIVING

Nov 27  The Pursuit of Happiness I
    Many Faces of Happiness

    Film : Happy (72 min) (by Roko Belic) D

    Reading: Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, If We Are So Rich, Why Aren’t We Happy? pp. 821-7, American Psychologist, 1999

Nov 29  The Pursuit of Happiness II
    Can Money Buy Happiness? Freedom and Happiness

    Here is an article on happiness and winning the lottery

    Reading: Schwartz, Tyranny of Choice, Scientific American, December 2004, pp.44-49

    Here is an article on happiness and winning the lottery
Dec 1  The American Dream in the Cyber Age I
   Cyber Dreams: Real and Virtual Lives

   Film: Her (126 min) (by Spike Jonze) F

Dec 4  The American Dream in the Cyber Age II
   Happiness and Solitude


Dec 6  The America Dream in the Cyber Age III
   Surveillance and Control


Dec 8  REVIEW