

SOC 172
Fall 2023

Prof. Akos Rona-Tas

Films and Society
The American Dream through Films

MWF 2-2:50
CSB 004

Office hours
MW 1-2
SSB 488

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 reserves 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:

Film title	From	Till	Scene Title	Issue
Modern Times	6:15	13:30	The feeding machine	Do we have to make everything efficient? What happens to human dignity?

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



Reading: Wolak, Jennifer, and David AM Peterson. 2020. "The dynamic American dream." *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 4: 968-981.

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



Reading: Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal*, Chapter 3, *The Great Compression* pp. 37-56

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



Reading: Park, Robert E. 1923. "The natural history of the newspaper." *American Journal of Sociology* 29, no. 3: 273-289.

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



Reading: Haller, Mark H. "Organized crime in urban society: Chicago in the twentieth century." *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 2 (1971): 210-234.

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



Reading: Aiken, Juliet R., Elizabeth D. Salmon, and Paul J. Hanges. 2013. "The origins and legacy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 28: 383-399.

Oct 23 Immigration I
Who Do We Welcome?



Reading: Rumbaut, Ruben G., "Origins and Destinies: Immigration to the United States Since World War II." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 9, No. 4, Special Issue: Multiculturalism and Diversity. (Dec., 1994), pp. 583-621.

Zhao, Xiaojian. "Immigration to the United States after 1945." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. 2016.

Oct 25 Immigration II
The Asian Experience



Reading: Min Zhou, Are Asian Americans Becoming White? Contexts Feb 2004, Vol. 3, No. 1: 29-37.

[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



Reading: García, María Cristina. "Latino Immigration." *The Oxford Handbook of American Immigration and Ethnicity* (2016): 67.

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



Reading: Mijs, Jonathan JB. "The paradox of inequality: Income inequality and belief in meritocracy go hand in hand." *Socio-Economic Review* 19, no. 1 (2021): 7-35.

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



Reading: Torchin, Leshu. 2019. "Alienated Labor's Hybrid Subjects: Sorry to Bother You and the Tradition of the Economic Rights Film." *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 4: 29-37.

Nov 8 The African American Experience



Film: 13 (100 min) (by Ava DuVernay) D



Reading: Bart Landry and Kris Marsh, The Evolution of the New Black Middle Class, *The Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 37, (2011), pp. 373–94

Nov 10 Veterans Day

Nov 13 Social Mobility

Opportunities and Outcomes



Reading: Emily Beller, Michael Hout, Intergenerational Social Mobility: The United States in Comparative Perspective, *The Future of Children*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Opportunity in America. (Autumn, 2006), pp. 19-36.

Nov 15 Social Mobility II

Moving Up and Moving Down



Chetty, Raj, et al. "The fading American dream: Trends in absolute income mobility since 1940." *Science* 356.6336 (2017): 398-406.

Sandel, Michael J., The Rhetoric of Rising. Chapter 3 in *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2020

Nov 17 Social Mobility III

Rags to Riches in the Movies

Nov 20 Consumerism I
From Puritanism to Consumerism



Reading: Theodoridis, Konstantinos, and Steven Miles. "Young People and Consumption." *The Oxford Handbook of Consumption* (2019): 253.

Nov 22 Consumerism II
Buying a Stairway to Heaven



Reading: Brown, Halina Szejnwald, and Philip J. Vergragt. 2016. "From consumerism to wellbeing: toward a cultural transition?" *Journal of Cleaner Production* 132: 308-317.



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



Reading: Twenge, Jean M., Jonathan Haidt, Andrew B. Blake, Cooper McAllister, Hannah Lemon, and Astrid Le Roy. 2021. "Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness." *Journal of adolescence* 93: 257-269.

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



Reading: Walsh, James P., and Christopher O'Connor. 2019. "Social media and policing: A review of recent research." *Sociology compass* 13, no. 1: e12648.

Dec 8 REVIEW