

## Dreams of Today

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### Analyzing the American dream on film in the context of contemporary America

*The American Dream is a central component of American culture and image; its frequent exploration in popular culture means the concept is familiar to domestic and global audiences. However, in the context of a profound economic recession and internal social and political struggles, the American Dream is met with increasing skepticism, both within the United States' borders and abroad. In this paper, I investigate how contemporary representations of the American Dream on film are reflecting and dealing with this remarkable historical period when the Dream is in decline. I examine the concept's origins, exploring how it has evolved to mean domestic felicity and economic security. I discuss how it has been interpreted in popular culture, with a focus on more recent interpretations, and in particular a close reading of the 2011 film *The Descendants*. Employing textual analysis, personal observations, and an analysis of the film's wider cultural meaning in light of its box office performance, awards, and reviews, I argue that the film represents a reworking of the American Dream, emphasizing land and domestic felicity over economic security and the "good life." I suggest that this conception is likely a result of the current state of the Dream, particularly the impossibility of achieving the "economic security" component.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The American Dream is a concept so integral to the national culture of the United States, its history predates the country's independence, having been brought by Pilgrims leaving Europe in search of the "new world" and a better place (Cullen, 2003). Although the meaning of the American Dream has evolved over the course of the United States' history, the concept is generally understood to mean economic security and domestic felicity; a "deeply engrained pairing of the physical landscape of the United States with economic opportunity ... a dream that promises a fresh start, a new beginning, a brighter future" (Gabrielson, 2009). Because of its longstanding history and influence on the everyday lives of many

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Americans, it can be said that the Dream is a defining characteristic of the country's national identity (Winn, 2007). Its enduring role in US culture has meant that it has been a major theme in popular culture over the centuries. From the novel (and films) *The Great Gatsby*, to the television series *The Sopranos* and the Hollywood film *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the Dream has been explored in virtually every medium. Decades of the United States' dominance in the global media landscape has meant the core ideas of the Dream have spread far beyond the country's popular culture, and the pursuit is familiar to global audiences.

Today, however, the notion of the American Dream is met with increasing skepticism. Since the 1970s, economic conditions decreasing the quality of life of lower- and middle-class Americans have made achieving the Dream less possible, though it is only recently that large numbers of Americans have begun to question it seriously (Winn 2007; Courchene, 2011). In the context of a profound economic recession, weakening political might after the highly contested invasion of Iraq, and internal social and political struggles, the image of the United States is declining both internationally and within the country itself. Thus, those in pursuit of the American Dream are facing harsh realities, chief among them being global and national economic instability.

Yet the "American Dream narrative" remains as a key theme in popular culture (Gabrielson, 2009). In this paper, I examine how (or if) contemporary representations of the American Dream on film are reflecting and dealing with this remarkable historical period when the Dream is in decline, not just in realistic terms, but also in the minds of average United States citizens (Courchene, 2011). In the first section, I analyze the concept of the American Dream and its various meanings and manifestations, examining how it has changed in response to multiple cultural and historical developments. I also elaborate on the current state of the American Dream in United States culture, discussing how a number of political and economic forces and events have combined to construct a United States in which the possibility of the Dream is the bleakest it has ever been; and popular belief in it has drastically declined. In the second section, I briefly discuss how the concept has been interpreted in popular culture over the years, with a focus on more recent interpretations. In the third and final section, I perform a close reading of Alexander Payne's 2011 film, *The Descendants*, employing textual analysis, personal observations, and an analysis of its wider cultural meaning by examining its box office performance, awards, and reviews. I argue that the film represents a reworking of the American Dream, emphasizing land and domestic felicity over economic security and the easy "good life." I suggest that this conception is likely a result or a reflection of the current state of the Dream, particularly the near impossibility of achieving the "economic security" component thereof.

### **DEFINING THE AMERICAN DREAM**

Freedom, equality, upward mobility, “the good life,” a culture of consumption, home ownership, and the phrase “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” are all integral to the concept of the American Dream. The concept can be traced from its roots in Puritan Enterprise to our modern-day preoccupation with endless consumption (Cullen, 2003). Despite its prominence in our everyday vocabulary, the definition of the Dream is “virtually taken for granted. It’s as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands” (Cullen, 2003, p. 5). Therefore, in order to contextualize the use of the term throughout this paper, I will now discuss the evolution of the concept, keeping in mind that “beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no *one* American Dream” (Cullen, 2003, p. 7; emphasis in original). I principally draw from the work of Jim Cullen, and other scholars who have investigated the American Dream as a cultural construct.

The American Dream dates back to the Puritans, a small group of religious dissenters from the Church of England, who had a dream and crossed the Atlantic Ocean seeking a way of worshipping God as they saw fit (Cullen, 2003). They landed in what is now known as the United States of America; and their Dream involved creating a new society, building a community, making the world a holier place, and having their children lead better lives with less corruption compared to how they had lived back in England (Cullen, 2003). The Puritans also wanted freedom, which to them meant the freedom to cast off the “tawdriness and sloth” of corrupt churches and “complacent rulers” (Cullen, 2003, pp. 21-22). While their dream was unsuccessful overall, many of the Puritans’ key ideas remain integral to the American Dream concept as it is known today. In particular, the idea of becoming “healthy, wealthy, and wise” has transformed from its initial usage by the Puritans as preparation for their fate in the afterlife, and has become an end in itself (Cullen, 2003, p. 41).

After the Puritans, the basis for the American Dream was essentially codified in the 1776 Declaration of Independence, a document that Cullen argues was a “piece of wishful thinking composed in haste ... [but] lives as the charter of the American Dream” (2003, p. 69). The key phrase in the document is, of course, “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776, para. 2). The dream of the Founding Fathers was freedom from British rule and a “natural aristocracy” in which men of morality and talent led the nation (Cullen, 2003, p. 62). While the Declaration was only meant to give freedom and equality to white males, its legacy remains, contributing a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo and constant desire for improvement to the American Dream (Cullen, 2003). Cullen suggests the document provided a “hardware” for which different “software” could be used at different times and contexts to mean different things to different people, shaping Americans’ lives and behaviour (2003, p. 66).

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For example, the words of the Declaration have been re-contextualized and invoked by politicians, advertisers, civil- and women's-rights activists for their own interests and version(s) of the Dream (Cullen, 2003).

Aspiring for upward mobility is a key component of the American Dream. This desire is connected to early Euro-Americans seeking riches, economic self-sufficiency, and an esteemed profession; important US figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln personify this aspect of the dream (Cullen, 2003). Upward mobility is the dream of the "good life," and its earliest incarnations saw overcoming poverty through human agency as the means to achieve it (Cullen, 2003). There was a belief in the ability of individuals to make their own destiny. This belief is a critical component of the Dream, which Winn summarizes eloquently: "the United States is considered the land of opportunity despite one's race, color, creed, or national origin. ... Most Americans believe that the American Dream allows individuals to succeed without unfair limitations ... [social] mobility is the most basic aspect of the American dream" (2007, p. 1).

However, some believe that the "achieving the good life" aspect of the Dream has gone from being realized through ambitious hard work to the desire for its luxuries specifically without having to do any work at all—to get "something from nothing" (Cullen, 2003, p. 167). This transformation in work ethic has been created by Hollywood, celebrities, and the "California Dream" of the easy life, or a life that at least appears easy (Cullen, 2003, p. 172). It is this version of the "good life" that has a "culture of consumption" at its heart (Cullen, 2003, p. 179).

Two other central components of the American Dream are equality and home ownership (Cullen, 2003). The Dream depends on equality because Americans need to believe in its existence in order for the American Dream concept to have any veracity. As Cullen argues "if [the promises of equality do not extend to everyone] then not everybody is eligible for the American Dream—and one of the principal attractions of the American Dream, and its major moral underpinning, is that everyone is eligible" (p. 108). Thus, the principle of equality has been the reasoning and basis for achieving the American Dream for many systematically underprivileged and marginalized groups; and has been incorporated into several socio-political advancements, including the Civil Rights Movement, women's suffrage, and increased civil liberties for queer peoples, among others (Cullen, 2003). Home ownership has also long been part of the American Dream, evolving from land ownership and crossing the Western frontier, to rural dwellings, to owning homes in cities, and most recently to acquiring detached houses in United States' suburbs (Cullen, 2003). It is this part of the Dream that has the broadest appeal and is the most widely realized (Cullen, 2003).

The perception of the American Dream has declined in recent years, as United States citizens increasingly express doubt in the possibility of ever achieving it. Trillion-dollar deficits, unsustainable Social Security entitlements for an aging

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boomer population, increasing political polarization, the erosion of the middle class, the financial collapse, the mortgage debacle, the Great Recession, and near-double-digit unemployment are just some of the reasons for “broader societal concern over America’s future” (Courchene, 2011, p. 1). Added to this is the growing clout of China, which is rivalling the United States’ role as dominant global economic power. Escalating numbers of Americans losing their homes, a widening income gap between the richest one percent of the population and the other 99 percent, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement also attest to a growing problem and concern. Public confidence in the United States is understandably declining as well, as recent polls show. For example, one poll states 47 percent of the United States’ voters believe that the “nation’s best days are in the past” (Friedman, as cited in Courchene, 2011, p. 1), and a 2010 Pew Research Center Poll states that 61 percent of respondents thought the United States was in decline, while only 19 percent “trusted the government to do what is right most of the time” (Nye, as cited in Courchene, 2011, p. 2). Therefore, the American Dream is in dire need of some “rekindling” (Courchene, 2011).

### THE AMERICAN DREAM AND POPULAR CULTURE

But how has popular culture, and in particular film, dealt with the American Dream concept generally and its current state specifically? Many scholars argue that rather than interpret or reflect on the concept, Hollywood films have done more to *create* it by depicting illusions of reality and “perfect” movie stars (Springer, 2000; Charyn, 1989). More recent films, however, have probed the American Dream and its successes, failures, and morals. It has been suggested that contemporary Hollywood cinema has moralized success, failure, and the material (Winn, 2007). Popular films support this position because they show hardworking and moral citizens achieve upward mobility, a preference for the moral high ground over economic success through immoral means, and cross-class relationships that reward distressed upper-class characters with personal happiness and impoverished lower-class characters with material wealth; examples of these themes on screen include *Working Girl*, *Wall Street*, and *Pretty Woman*, respectively (Winn, 2007). Contemporary Hollywood films thus do much to reaffirm the primacy of the American Dream, and translate its political-economic structural limitations to the level of personal inadequacy associated with the individual (Winn, 2007).

But the cracks in the American Dream are showing in some popular culture products, which question how realistic achieving it actually is. Gabrielson conducts insightful textual analyses of three contemporary television shows, *The Sopranos*, *Weeds*, and *Lost*, that illustrate this shift. She argues that these programs reposition the American Dream narrative “in such a way that results in a common skepticism regarding the possibility, and perhaps even the attractiveness, of the [Dream].” Although she examines television and not film, Gabrielson’s argument

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offers an interesting interpretation of the American Dream in popular culture that opposes—or, perhaps more accurately, updates—the work of earlier scholars such as Winn (2007). It is also worth noting that Gabrielson writes in the middle of the recent recession, which began in late 2008, while Winn’s work was published just before it, in 2007. I now turn to my own textual analysis of an even more recent Hollywood production, the 2011 film *The Descendants*.

### **THE DESCENDANTS: A CLOSE READING**

I will now analyze and interpret *The Descendants*, and argue that it represents a portrayal of the American Dream that emphasizes family and land over economic security, ambition, and consumption. I use textual analysis, a methodology often used in communication studies to refer to the in-depth, qualitative analysis of media texts.

*The Descendants* is the story of a man, Matt King (played by George Clooney), who, at first, seems to be living the American Dream—he is a white male in the upper or upper-middle class; is an accomplished lawyer; makes enough money not to have to use his family trust; has a detached home with a pool; is married with two daughters; and lives in what many consider to be paradise, the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Closer examination and a few scenes from the film bring to light that this is not true, but an illusion that even King himself has bought into. When his wife slips into a coma after a waterskiing accident, it is revealed that she has been having an affair. His eldest daughter has been shipped to boarding school after becoming involved with drugs and his youngest daughter has been having trouble in school with her peers, lashing out at them because she cannot handle her mother’s accident. It is clear that King has lost touch with his family; in fact, he even calls himself the “back-up parent,” admitting to viewers that he has no idea what to do with his kids without his wife. King also learns that his wife’s affair had been the result of her loneliness and feeling that there had been something missing in their relationship. In short, King had chosen his law practice, which symbolizes hard work, ambition, and power, over his family, and now his family has physically and emotionally fallen apart. These conflicting forces—domestic felicity and economic security—highlight some of the key ideas related to the American Dream. However, in King’s case, economic security does not necessarily mean that he must work hard, as he is the descendant of a powerful Hawaiian family and could live comfortably off his trust fund. Instead, King has *chosen* to work, compromising his family situation. This fact simultaneously questions the Puritan work ethic and early version of upward mobility via individual agency to which King has always strongly adhered; as well as the later version of the American Dream which emphasizes the “good life” without much hard work at all.

In the film, the resolution to the struggle between economic security and domestic felicity adamantly stresses the latter over the former, as King works hard

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to “fix” his family. He does this while travelling from Oahu to another Hawaiian Island with his daughters in order to meet his wife’s lover and gain some closure. In the process he learns the importance of family, while strengthening his relationships with his daughters by reconnecting with them. King (temporarily, at least) gives up working in order to do this, realizing that his energy and time should be with his kids, especially when he learns that his wife will never come out of her coma and that he must terminate her life support. The last scene, which movie critic Elbert Ventura (2012) considers “perhaps the movie’s most celebrated scene,” shows a reconciliation in King’s family and domestic felicity restored, as he is seen peacefully watching television on the couch with his two daughters while they share ice cream.

The second triumph over economic security in *The Descendants* is won by land. The film’s subplot focuses on King as the descendant of a powerful Hawaiian family that began with the marriage of a missionary and a Hawaiian princess. This ancestry has left him and his many cousins with 25,000 acres of untouched and undeveloped Hawaiian land that the family considers selling. A sale would make them rich, and unlike King, many of his cousins need the money. However, a sale would also mean the land would be turned into a resort and golf course. The decision of whether or not to sell the land therefore pits vast, unexplored land against economic riches, greed, commercialism, and potential corruption. The land also has a connection to King’s nuclear family, as it was the place where his wife took his eldest daughter camping, an opportunity his youngest daughter looked forward to but had yet to experience at the time of the accident. This theme connects to the dream of land ownership and westward expansion of an earlier version of the American Dream, and perhaps questions what would have happened to the United States had it not “sold out” its beautiful land to corporations for exploitation and profit. In the end—and against his cousins’ wishes—as the sole trustee King decides to keep the land, realizing that he was simply lucky to have inherited it, and that he has the duty to preserve it. This choice emphasizes responsibility, natural land, and hard work over easy money and commercialization.

In sum, *The Descendants* represents an older version of the American Dream, one where family is more important than power and economic security, and nature and land are more important than riches and the “good life.” This conception of the Dream relates to Winn’s analysis of contemporary Hollywood cinema moralizing working-class values such as honour, loyalty, and family (2007). He argues that this serves to maintain the hegemonic order by presenting a United States in which the lower classes maintain a higher moral ground and are more “virtuous” (and implicitly better) than the higher classes, thus reinforcing their current social status.

*The Descendants* may be in line with this, but it also reflects the current state of the United States and the American Dream, in which economic security and stability are increasingly difficult to achieve for all but the “one percent.” Since

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Winn's analysis was published in 2007, a year before the recession began in late 2008, it is certainly possible that now more than ever there is a need for a re-examination of the American Dream, and popular representations that more accurately reflect the possibilities and expectations of average Americans. Admittedly, this may reinforce the status quo, but it at least does little to offer audiences false hopes of upward mobility, as earlier films have done (Winn 2007).

Analyzing the impact and effect of *The Descendants* on society, however, also requires careful consideration of its wider cultural appeal, not just its textual messages and implications. The film was a critical darling, garnering rave reviews and receiving nominations for dozens of prestigious awards. Its key wins were an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, and two Golden Globes, one for Best Picture, Drama, and another for Best Actor, Drama, for Clooney's performance. The film was also a commercial success, making \$171,362,709 worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2011), well above its \$20 million budget (IMDb). Yet, these facts and statistics must be put into perspective, as by no means was the film *the* movie of 2011, either critically or popularly. Critically, that honour would likely go to *The Artist* because of its triumph at the Oscars;<sup>1</sup> while the top films in terms of box office performance were *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 1*, which grossed \$1,341.5 million, \$1,123.8 million, and \$712.2 million worldwide, respectively (Box Office Mojo, 2011). Thus, while *The Descendants* may serve a hegemonic role textually, it did not necessarily have that effect on audiences, who instead seemed to favour more open texts that invited them to participate through fandom and familiarity.

### CONCLUSION

In this essay I have analyzed the concept of the American Dream and explored its role in film, specifically with a close reading of *The Descendants*. I have argued that the film represents a reworking of the American Dream narrative by emphasizing family and land over economic security and the "good life." I recognize this reworking can be interpreted in a variety of ways: it can either be a response to the current state of the United States and the American Dream, or it can serve to maintain the hegemonic social order. At the same time, I suggest that greater attention should be paid to the film's wider context before any conclusions can be drawn about its overall impact on society. Further work could include audience research to understand how audiences have interpreted the film; or, perhaps more interestingly, investigate why it is that contemporary films generally support the American Dream concept, in one version or another, while contemporary television questions its possibility and attractiveness. The answer could lie in audience expectations for each medium, or the different economic requirements of film and television.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Artist* won Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, Best Costume Design, and Best Original Score at the 84<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards.

<sup>2</sup> This suggestion was made by my Professor, Dr. Andreas Kitzmann, while commenting on an earlier version of this paper produced for his course. Here I wish to thank him for his ideas and support in developing this paper, as well as Dr. Nathan Rambukkana for his lasting lessons on communications methodologies.