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Hollywood liberalism: myth or reality? A study of the representation of race, gender and class in popular culture and its impact on the American society

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► To cite this version:

Mathilde Debrieux. Hollywood liberalism: myth or reality? A study of the representation of race, gender and class in popular culture and its impact on the American society. Literature. 2014. dumas-01021550

HAL Id: dumas-01021550

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Hollywood liberalism: myth or reality?

A study of the representation of race, gender and class in popular culture and its impact on the American society.

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Mémoire de Master 1 LLCE Recherche

Sous la direction de S. Berthier-Foglar

Année universitaire 2013-2014

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS :

I would like to thank Mrs Berthier-Foglar for agreeing to oversee my work and for providing me with guidance and advice; as well as Mr Besson for accepting to be part of the jury.

I am also very grateful to all my friends and relatives for their unwavering help and support.

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INTRODUCTION :

The entertainment industry is a relatively new one, developing in the early 1910s and steadily growing until becoming the multi-billion dollar business it is now. Its significance is all the more notable in the United States of America, the world leader in cultural exports. Since its inception in the beginning of the 20th century in the Los Angeles district of Hollywood, where most of the studios and production companies are still located, the American film industry has known constant and consistent growth. Despite the global financial crisis of 2008 and the huge blow it has dealt to the United States' economy, film production is still one of the most flourishing and profitable industries of the country. It employs more than 370,000 workers; in 2013 alone, the total domestic box office in the United States reached nearly 11 billion dollars for 659 films produced¹. But its influence on American society has spread far beyond mere economics. The cultural impact of cinema, television and other media is not to be underestimated; and while for several decades scholars and literary critics have overlooked the repercussions and significance of popular culture, the emergence of the academic field of cultural studies in the mid-1960s prompted researchers to explore its part within the social structure. As a result, several theories have been developed to explain this cultural phenomenon and its consequence on society. For example, the globalisation and homogenisation of a 'mass' culture over the last 50 years led the Marxist theorists of the Frankfurt School to elaborate the concept of 'culture industry', as illustrated by prominent philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1944 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno and Horkheimer describe mass culture as an industrial product, designed by the elites to distract the masses from their economic situation and avoid possible social consciousness. They also denounce the manufacturing of what they refer to as 'false' psychological needs (as opposed to 'true' needs such as freedom, creativity, happiness) which can only be satisfied by consuming capitalist goods². In 1970, French philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser, posited that culture, and the mass media in particular, is part of what he refers to as Ideological State Apparatuses (or ISA) which, along with the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) such as the government, the police, the judiciary system, are used by the ruling classes to assert their power and maintain their dominance over the rest of society³. While the RSA consist of oppressive and violent methods of coercion (legal discrimination, police brutality, racial profiling, hate crimes...), the ISA tend to use a more insidious approach to manipulate the ruled classes into internalizing the ruling ideology and accepting their social condition as the natural order

¹ Motion Picture Association of America Inc, *2013 Theatrical market statistics*.

² Adorno, Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944, pp.94-137

³ Althusser, "Idéologie et Appareils Idéologiques d'État", 1970

of things. This is notably done through religion, education, family, and popular imagery. Media critic John Fiske, however, argues that “popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorists would have it”⁴. Similarly, British cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall dismisses the idea of a linear model of communication such as the classical production model of sender and receiver, and instead developed the Encoding-Decoding model of communication, a system based on four independent and autonomous stages during which the receiver decodes and interprets the message based on their personal, social identity⁵. Hall and Fiske, and several other authors proponents of the reception theory⁶, argue that the crucial aspect of mass culture lie in its consumption rather than its production. Rejecting the concept of a passive audience, they stress the importance of the reaction and interpretation of the receiver in the creation of meaning and cultural significance. Based on individual cultural background and life experience, the audience decodes the message and either accepts and reproduces it, or rejects it and adopts an alternative reading. As Fiske explains: “culture is the constant process of producing meaning of and from our social experience”, and “culture (and its meanings and pleasures) is a constant succession of social practices; it is therefore inherently political, it is centrally involved in the distribution and possible redistribution of various forms of social power”⁷.

As a main part of popular culture, the entertainment industry, having a wider reach than any other cultural institution, has thus become a major actor in shaping the minds and opinions of generations since its creation a century ago, and not exclusively those of Americans. The United States being an economic, political and cultural superpower, the messages it chooses to promote also reach other countries, a process which has gained momentum and historical importance throughout the Cold War. The American way of life has thus been exported through popular culture to the greater part of the world and Hollywood, as one of the creators and contributors of the myth of the ‘American Dream’, has become the main vessel of its ideals and values. This global and almost total influence over the world’s cultural landscape also means that America has the power to set, promote or denounce certain values or ideologies. Cultural representation thus acts as a sort of validation: a social behavior which might at first be rare or frowned upon becomes, through exposition in films or TV shows or advertisement, common, ordinary, and eventually part of the normality. The evolution of the representation of a social group or practice often mirrors society’s attitude, and sometimes can even hasten the process of acceptance. For example, divorce used to have strong negative

⁴ Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, (1989) 1

⁵ Hall, *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973)

⁶ Literary theory developed in the 1960s by German author Hans Robert Jauss which focuses on the reader’s reaction to a literary text.

⁷ Fiske, *op. cit*, 1

connotations, often linked with loose morals and broken families. But as the mentalities towards sex and family changed, divorce soon became a commonplace practice, and lost the social stigma it used to carry. This cultural evolution can be seen in the depiction of divorce (and especially the figure of the divorced woman) in films and series: from morally reprehensible to mundane, it has now even become a genre of its own (the 'divorce movie'). Media and cultural representation therefore plays an important part in the evolution of America (and, to a greater extent, the Western world as a whole), its values and norms, which is why the film industry and its products are often scrutinized for any signs of political or social activism. Indeed, what Hollywood chooses to display as socially accepted and acceptable behaviour quickly gains legitimacy. More than just a dream machine or a trend setter, Hollywood is a window to American society, as well as a vector of value, meaning and identity. As American scholar Patricia Williams writes: "the media do not merely represent; they also create the world as desirable and saleable. What they reproduce is chosen, not random, not neutral, and not without consequence"⁸. This aspect has long been overlooked by scholars and writers who regarded popular culture as a less evolved form of art, and undermined its cultural value and significance. The distinction between 'high-brow', elitist, arts and the 'low-brow', vulgar, popular culture has long been an obstacle to the serious study of the importance of cultural representation. It has, however, become an increasingly popular subject over the last few decades, as several groups collectively began to denounce Hollywood's one-sided message and demand a more inclusive representation of their society.

There seems indeed to be divergent opinions about which principles are being endorsed by this globally influential industry. For example, while the American society is built on such values as freedom, democracy and equality of opportunity, it has ambiguous attitudes towards certain groups of people or behaviors, and overall seems to adopt a more conservative mind-set, hints of which can be found in its cultural products. On the other hand, the entertainment industry has also been known to challenge these values, break taboos and has initiated or furthered social change by presenting new dissident visions of certain historical events, concepts or demographics. Part of the reason for this subversive point of view can be explained by its environmental situation: a large majority of the production companies and studios are located in the city of Los Angeles, a notoriously liberal-thinking city. Indeed, California is known as one of the most progressive states, the starting point of many counter-cultures and social activism, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. The Beat poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, the hippie movement, the civil right movement, the anti-war movement, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transsexuals social movement, all flourished in the Golden State. Drawing from this tradition, it has long been argued that Hollywood was leaning towards a more

⁸ Williams, *The Rooster's Egg* (1997), 79

progressive ideology and that such ideals were translated into the content it produced. Conservative critics have often denounced the ‘liberalism’ of the Hollywood elites and their leftist agenda. It is indeed correct that a large majority of Hollywood celebrities (actors, directors, producers...) tend to position themselves left or center on the political spectrum. This tendency can be observed as early as the 1940s: the “Hollywood for Roosevelt Committee” was one of the main financial contributors to Democrat candidate Frank Delano Roosevelt’s presidential campaign, which ensured his re-election. A 2009 study of political contributions shows that prominent Hollywood figures overwhelmingly donate to Democrat politicians or organizations: \$2,558,346 in total between 1997 and 2004; 115 times more than to Republican candidates⁹. In another survey from 1993, 49% of Hollywood “opinion leaders” regards themselves as Democrats, 9% as Republicans and 40% as “independent”, many considering themselves too liberal to identify as Democrats¹⁰. But this political bias is not often converted into cultural content: the film industry being first and foremost in the business of making money, a lot of film-makers tend to avoid taking the risk of alienating their audience by making too strong a political statement or social criticism. As a result, most of the big-budget productions tend to stick to a distinctive, tried and tested format of narration, characters, and morality. Indeed, in our still mostly white-dominated, patriarchal, capitalist society, most movies tend to be aimed at the dominant or hegemonic audience¹¹, and thus often feature a strong, white, heterosexual male lead character achieving some sort of victory and happiness (usually symbolized by financial security) by overcoming obstacles and defeating antagonists. As a result, these characteristics have become synonymous with success (moral and material) and upheld as desirable, whereas others are considered as a hindrance, thus creating a norm of behavior to adopt and trait to acquire in order to become a functioning member of society. It is therefore unclear whether the message the mainstream film industry actually promotes is that of a society based on egalitarian values or whether it is a means through which the elites cement their position of power by reinforcing white, patriarchal, capitalist hegemony. Does it contribute to social change, does it merely represent society and adapt to the social landscape, or does it uphold the dominant ideology?

Considering the importance of the entertainment industry in the creation of meaning and values in America’s popular culture, and the reach of said culture in the Western World, Hollywood’s representation of the world, the significance it carries and how it resonates in the minds of the viewers, becomes a way to understand and interpret society’s attitudes, especially regarding issues such as race, gender and class. By analyzing the last two centuries’ most culturally significant (critically and financially) film productions as well as popular television shows, and examining how

⁹ Kendall, “An Empirical analysis of political activity in Hollywood”, 2009

¹⁰ Prindle and Endersby, “Hollywood Liberalism”, 1993

¹¹ Hall, *op cit*

film-makers chose to tackle these sensitive issues, this paper will try to define the importance of cinematic representation, its impact on the American society, and the role Hollywood plays in the shaping of society and the balance of power. The first part of this endeavor will be to present a short introduction to the Hollywood culture, the history of its involvement in the political and social issues of the last centuries, as well as its typical protagonists and antagonists. It will then address Hollywood's representation of American society, first by analyzing matter of how ethnicity, foreign cultures and race conflicts are represented in popular culture, and how it mirrors the American society's difficulty in creating a national identity that encompasses at the same time the unity and diversity of its population. It will then deal with the problematic subject of gender in the media, how gender roles and stereotypes perpetuated by popular culture have contributed to the subjection and objectification of women, and will study the way Hollywood chooses to deal with the social issues of class and economic disparities. To other nations, the United States evoke a land of opulence and opportunity, a place where the prospect social mobility is achievable for everybody. This view is furthered by popular culture in its depiction of rags-to-riches stories, the broadcast of the ostentatious lifestyle of the very wealthy, and the general idea of the American Dream. In reality, though, the United States is a critically divided nation. This issue is rarely addressed in movies or TV shows, however, and when it is, it is generally through the use of stereotypes and harmful clichés as way to further humiliate and alienate parts of the population. Finally, this paper will demonstrate the ways in which a new generation of filmmakers strives to present an alternative view of America which contrast with Hollywood's simplistic representation.

PART ONE :
THE HOLLYWOOD CULTURE

From a small rural town in the outskirts of Los Angeles to one of the country most iconic and attractive landmarks, Hollywood exemplifies the American success story. Home of the biggest production companies and studios from early 1900s until recently, its name has become synonymous with the US film industry itself. It is also used to refer to a certain type of film characteristic of American cinema. Its form, story, and characters usually fit a distinctive pattern, sometimes referred to as the Classical Hollywood Style which, over time, has been universally accepted as the norm of movie making. As for the content it produced, Hollywood has been known for creating works that reflected the socio-political issues and ideologies of the time, either endorsing or rejecting the opinion of the establishment.

CHAPTER I: THE LAND OF THE FREE

1) Hollywood: a success story

In early 1880s, real estate tycoon Harvey Henderson Wilcox and his wife Daeida moved from Kansas to Los Angeles and bought 160 acres of the fertile land west of the city, which he decided to subdivide and sell. The term 'Hollywood' appeared for the first time in official papers in 1887 when Wilcox, after a suggestion from his wife, used it when submitting a grid map of his land to the Los Angeles County recorder's office. By early 1900s, with its population of about 500¹², the hamlet could barely be seen on a map of the Los Angeles County. In 1902, real estate magnate and land developer Hobart Johnstone Whitley, dubbed the 'Father of Hollywood' began the construction of the famous Hollywood Hotel in order to attract tourists and prospective buyers. H.J. Whitley notably held shares in the Los Angeles Pacific Boulevard and Development Company, as well as a large portion of land on the Hollywood hills, which he developed into commodious, modern houses for affluent newcomers.

Meanwhile, in New York City, cultural and artistic center of the country and home of Broadway theatre, Thomas Edison's newest invention, the kinoscope, revolutionized entertainment and built the foundation of modern-day cinema. Small theatres, called nickelodeons because of their nickel (\$0.05) admission fee, were created to accommodate the waves of curious customers. Moving images remained an individual experience until the development of the Vitascope projector in 1896 which transformed cinema into a social phenomenon. The novelty and approachability of the new

¹² Ockun, *Hollywood, California, History and Information*, <<http://www.abouthollywood.com/>>, May 20, 2014

medium inspired a feeling of awe and fascination to the public, and transformed the social and cultural landscape of the times. As one of the first form of popular mass entertainment, motion pictures were one of the century's most significant inventions¹³. As professor Samantha Barbas claims:

At the turn of the twentieth century, motion pictures were to Americans what the Internet is to us today: one of many wondrous, new communication technologies—along with telephones, phonographs, and mass-circulation print media—revolutionizing social relationships, individual and group identities¹⁴

Edison rigorously enforced patent laws to make sure to maintain his control over what he sensed would be a fruitful industry. As a result, the Biograph Company, founded by his competitor and former employee William Kennedy Dickson, used different formats and techniques to shoot and show their own short features. Eventually, though, the company decided to relocate its production to the West Coast, after one of its most prominent directors, David Wark Griffith, stumbled upon the small town of Hollywood while on location for another movie. Impressed by the climate and scenery, D.W. Griffith decided to shoot what will be the first movie produced in Hollywood, *In Old California* (1910). California's sunny weather and landscape diversity offered optimal conditions for film production, as well as being far enough from Thomas Edison's lawyers to guarantee relative impunity from having to pay any royalty or fine. The move also made economic sense, since the price of land was much more competitive than on the East Coast, thus enabling filmmakers to build large studios to house their settings and stages. It also provided cheaper labor, as unionization and collective bargaining had not yet become common practice in this part of the country. In 1911, the New Jersey-based Nestor Motion Picture Company opened the first movie studio in Hollywood. Soon after, other production companies (Paramount, Warner Brothers, Columbia...) invested the area to build their own sets. With the Californian sun allowing moviemakers to shoot year-round and the fast improving film technology, production boomed. By 1926, advertisers' claims that Hollywood was the fifth largest industry of the country, though perhaps exaggerated, reflected its rapid expansion¹⁵. In 1915, D.W. Griffith's controversial epic *The Birth of a Nation* broke the record for the most profitable film at the time, with an estimate \$60 million box office gross¹⁶. This unprecedented commercial success and innovative techniques insured its place in American film history. Attracted by the success of its films, famous actors and talented filmmakers from the East Coast and Europe, such as Greta Garbo, Cary Grant, Marlene Dietrich, Hedy Lamarr, Ernst Lubitsch, or Charlie Chaplin, began to flock to

¹³ Barbas, *How the Movies Became Speech* (2011), 673

¹⁴ Barbas, op. cit. 672

¹⁵ Giovacchini, *Hollywood Modernism: Film and Politics in the Age of the New Deal* (2001)

¹⁶ Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life* (1996)

Hollywood. Over time, movie studios began to rely more and more on their lead to sell tickets, realizing that affixing a famous person's name to a production increased the audience's interest and attendance. Thus, the concept of 'movie star' was born. Famous actors were distilled into personas and brand names to promote movies, while their extravagant lifestyle increased the prestige of the industry. From 1920 until the late 1940s, the moviemaking business was a virtual oligopoly. Eight companies dominated film production, distribution and exhibition: the Big Five (Warner Brothers, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and RKO) and the Little 3 (Universal, Columbia and United Artists). They also held exclusive contract with movie stars and famous directors in order to capitalize on their fame. At the head of these companies, a group of mostly white males decided the tone and the angle of the content produced, which often reflected their personal ideology and identity.

2) The Pre-code era: 1920 to 1934

Taking advantage of the nebulous nature of the new medium, neither art form nor mere entertainment, early Hollywood film makers benefitted from a relative freedom as to what they chose to depict on the silver screen. As the popularity of cinema grew and more people were drawn to the movie theatres, several political and religious groups became worried of the influence it might have on the population, and fought to establish guidelines to define what was acceptable to show to the public. Indeed, until the instauration in 1930 of the Motion Picture Production Code, and more importantly until the Production Code Administration amendment in 1934, Hollywood films were regulated only by local state laws and public opinion. They often reflected the troubled context of the period and, as the film industry was born during a time of social changes, "many early silent movies took as their subject matter the major social and moral issues of the Progressive era"¹⁷. Known as the Pre-Code era, the 20 years or so between the technical innovation of the 'talkies' (movies with sound) and the enforcement of the 'Don'ts and Be Carefuls'¹⁸ and other guidelines, it is celebrated as the most liberal period of Hollywood history. Films of that time would often feature nudity, sexually explicit scenes or dialogs, violence, illegal drug use, as well as immoral characters and practices. Adulterous, uninhibited and independent female characters, people of colour, and gangsters became main characters and heroes. Homosexuality, miscegenation, prostitution, abortion were shown and dialogues flowed with profanity and sexual innuendoes. This has been partially

¹⁷ Mintz & McNeil, *Hollywood as History*. Digital History. Web. May 21, 2014

¹⁸ Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America resolution, 1927

attributed to the economic blow of the Great Depression of the late 1920s. High inflation and unemployment (reaching close to 25% in 1933¹⁹) meant people had less time, opportunity and money to partake in recreation activities. Movie attendance, despite the momentum created by the introduction of sound, dropped from 90 million in 1930 to 50 million weekly in 1933²⁰. To avoid bankruptcy, movie studios resolved to entice viewers with the promise of lurid and racy stories. Rather than releasing anodyne romance movies or comedy, film producers decided to capture the hopelessness and violence of their time. With the lack of work and the impact of the Prohibition, crime soared in urban areas, and the lack of decisive actions from the White House²¹ led to a general discontentment and resentment towards the ruling classes. As a result, films featuring criminals or gangsters and addressing social issues flourished. In 1927, Josef Von Sternbeck's *Underworld*, which depicted the twisted redemption arc of crime lord Bull Weed, was a commercial success, and paved the way for subsequent crime movies. The genre was as popular as it was controversial. As Hollywood historian Thomas Doherty writes:

No motion picture genre of the Pre-Code era was more incendiary than the gangster film; neither preachment yarns nor vice films so outraged the moral guardians or unnerved the city fathers as the high calibre scenarios that made screen heroes out of stone killers²²

Indeed, besides glorifying crime and representing mobsters as heroes, these movies also depicted very graphic violence, a fact that was advertised and used as promotional material by the production companies. Movie theatres displayed Thomson machine guns, or 'Tommy guns', a weapon commonly associated with gangsters (notably thought to have been used in the Saint Valentine Day Massacre in 1929)²³. *Little Caesar* (Warner Brothers, 1931), *Public Enemy* (Warner Brothers, 1931) and *Scarface* (United Artists, 1932), the three most influential crime films, exemplify the popularity of the genre. Besides the commercial success (*Public Enemy* was the first talkie to gross over \$1 million. It is believed to have earned almost seven times its budget costs²⁴), it propelled actors such as George Raft, Edward G. Robinson, and James Cagney to fame.

Other Pre-Code films shocked by their suggestive and sometimes explicit depiction of sexuality, especially women's. The end of the very conservative Victorian era in the early 1900s marked the start of a period of cultural and social change, especially concerning the status of women. Driven to

¹⁹ Margo, "Employment and Unemployment in the 1930s" (1993)

²⁰ United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (1976)

²¹ President Hoover (1929-1933) was heavily criticized for his 'laissez-faire' attitude and lack of initiative in the face of financial collapse. The slums erected by homeless people in the cities were derisively called 'Hoovervilles'

²² Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934* (1999), 139

²³ Doherty, op. cit. 153

²⁴ Snider, "What's the Big Deal?: The Public Enemy (1931)", Film.com, May 20, 2014

the workforce by World War I and influenced by the early feminism movement, women started to demand more rights. The figure of the Suffragette and the Flapper are closely linked to the climate of social emancipation and sexual liberation of the 1920s. Hollywood, playing with controversy in its usual provocative way, decided to use sex-appeal to boost ticket sales. Suggestive titles, sexually aggressive characters and posters displaying the female body, usually scantily clad, were used to promote movies and attract viewers. Family, success, sexuality were dealt in ways that infuriated the conservative critics. Female characters were depicted as in charge of their sexuality, while men were reduced to mere pawns in their game, driven to violence or crime by desire. The 1933 drama *Baby Face*, distributed by Warner Brothers and starring Barbara Stanwyck, is one of the most notorious Pre-Code films: the story of ambitious and attractive Lily Powers who uses sex to improve her social and financial situation. Manipulative and ruthless, Lily seduces man after married man and quickly makes her way up the corporate ladder. Similarly, Jean Harlow's Lillian Andrews, in *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), uses her charms to break up marriages and secure her place in high society. The two movies' protagonists are prominent examples of the 'bad girl' figure, an archetypal sex symbol Jean Harlow often portrayed. Hollywood actresses also displayed lifestyles which were deemed outrageous at the time. Louise Brooks self-identified as a "sexually liberated woman" and boasted several relationships with both men and women, while Marlene Dietrich challenged traditional gender roles by boxing and sporting men's suits.

Another widely popular genre of the Pre-Code era was the adventure movie, especially those depicting exotic lands and civilizations. Most of these movies used stereotypical representations of non-white peoples perpetuated by the colonial mind-set and represented people of color in an often patronizing or objectifying way. Exoticism and orientalism were used to amaze the audience with dazzling landscapes and eccentric characters, with great commercial success. As author Matthew Bernstein points out: "the representations of the East –typically titillating viewers with the thrills of unbridled passion, miscegenation and wild adventure in a raw and natural setting—were by the teens conventional constructions"²⁵. The depiction of interracial couples in the Jim Crow era was very risky and sensational, and was soon prohibited by the production companies.

Pre-Code movies also tackled social issues in a quite political way. In response to the Great Depression and the Wall Street Crash of 1929, several movies directly attacked capitalism, which many people considered responsible for the economic disaster. In Michael Curtiz's *The Cabin in the Cotton* (1932), greedy land owner Lane Norwood exploits his tenants and workers. Marvin Blake (Richard Barthelmess), son of a sharecropper, tries to better himself through education in order to

²⁵ Bernstein, *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (1997), 3

help his community, and with the help of Norwood's daughter Madge (Bette Davis), is hired in the company's store. There, he soon realizes that Norwood is ruining his tenants by charging high interest rates and prices. When tensions between the tenants and the plantation owner rise and a riot breaks out, Marvin intervenes and negotiates better contracts for the renters. The greedy businessman or evil banker is often used as the main antagonist, embodying the figure of the 'capitalist pig'. Doherty cites the example of 1934 *Success at Any Price* for what he considered to be a schematic "moral equivalence between crime boss and capitalist executive"²⁶. The protagonist, former criminal turned advertising executive Joe, is ruthless and destructive both in business and private. *Blonde Venus* (1932) also explores the dire financial situation of times by having Marlene Dietrich play a woman who has to prostitute herself to provide for her family. The plight of women, especially in the workplace, is also dealt with in films such as *Employees' Entrance* (1933) and *She Had to Say Yes* (1933). In both movies, the female protagonist is sexually harassed by her superior and made to either sleep with him or clients in order to save her job and the company. Some films were direct attack at the politicians and political leaders, like Alfred Green's *The Dark Horse* (1932) which depicts the electoral campaign of the moronic Zachary Hinks to the post of governor. Others advertise the merits of fascism, such as the eerie *Gabriel over the White House* (1933), in which the President of the United States, after going through a life-threatening accident, seizes the power and effectively turns the US into a dictatorship, thus bringing peace and solving the country's problems.

Finally, among the many films to feature people of color, some actually deal with the issue of racism. In *Massacre* (1934), Native American Joe Thunderhorse (played by white actor Richard Barthelmess) is exploited by his white employers and friends. When he comes back to the reservation where most of his family lives, he is appalled by their disastrous living conditions, and soon finds out that the white managers of the reservation are corrupt. When his sister Jenny is raped, he goes into a quest for revenge, and eventually finds justice when the leaders are convicted and punished. The movie also features African American actor Clarence Muse as Joe's butler whose intelligence is uncharacteristic of typical Hollywood black characters.

But as pressure from various groups on the production companies increased, film executives were forced to tone down the unorthodox tenor of its movies.

²⁶ Doherty, op. cit. 151

3) Regulation, self-censorship and political correctness

In the late 1920s, several attempts were made to define what was and wasn't suitable to depict on film. Several other states had already decided to enforce the 1915 Supreme Court unanimous ruling²⁷, a landmark decision which states that cinema is not an art form protected by the freedom of speech, but a business, and is therefore open to regulations. New York, for example, passed several censor laws until the creation in 1921 of a Motion Picture Commission. Later transferred to the State Education Department under the appellation of 'Motion Picture Division', it would review films and demand they be altered or reject them completely if they contained "obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, sacrilegious" parts which would "tend to corrupt morals or to incite crime"²⁸. As a result, some Pre-Code movie makers started practicing self-censorship, or altering their production in order to have them shown in the hundreds of theatres in New York City. For example, the indecent *Baby Face* was adapted for the New York audience and an audacious speech modified to please the censors. The original piece of dialog spoken by Lily's friend Adolf Cragg read as follows:

A woman, young, beautiful like you, can get anything she wants in the world. Because you have power over men. But you must use men, not let them use you. You must be a master, not a slave. Look here — Nietzsche says, "All life, no matter how we idealize it, is nothing more nor less than exploitation." That's what I'm telling you. Exploit yourself. Go to some big city where you will find opportunities! Use men! Be strong! Defiant! Use men to get the things you want!

It was rewritten into the more suitable:

A woman, young, beautiful like you, can get anything she wants in the world. But there is a right way and a wrong way. Remember, the price of the wrong way is too great. Go to some big city where you will find opportunities! Don't let people mislead you. You must be a master, not a slave. Be clean, be strong, defiant, and you will be a success²⁹

But this tendency had not yet reached Hollywood which still enjoyed unrestricted creative and artistic liberties. This changed by the early 1920s, when the wave of lewd and violent productions as well as several much publicized scandals involving prominent movie stars began to tarnish Hollywood's reputation and prompted several industry personalities to take actions. Until then, it had been established that the studios and production companies would self-regulate the content of their movies. In 1916, they created the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry to answer

²⁷ Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio, 236 U.S. 230. Supreme Court of the United States (1915)

²⁸ McKinley, *Consolidated Laws of New York Annotated*, 1953, Education Law §122

²⁹ Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (1999) 149

to the increasing demands for regulations, but in reality did little to censor their products and even fought the New York censorship laws. Meanwhile, the lavish and uninhibited lifestyle of the movie stars was also raising disapproval. In the true tradition of the Jazz Age, Hollywood celebrities would indulge in Gatsby-esque parties and luxury. Their extravagance would be related in popular magazines which, influenced by the mentality of the Roaring Twenties, idolized the rich and famous. This publicity only confirmed the industry's detractor's qualms about the excesses of the Hollywood culture and their wish to impose rules. "Stars, or so the new fan magazine mythology contended, lived better, freer lives than the rest of us. Such freedom, such prosperity, it seems, could not go wholly unregulated"³⁰ argues American professor Jon Lewis. The general public, fascinated by the stars and their sensational lifestyles, also relished in their downfall. In the early 1920s, a series of scandal shook the Hollywood star system. Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle's alleged rape and murder of fellow actress Virginia Rappe, director William Desmond Taylor's still unsolved murder, drug overdoses, divorces; all were relayed by the national press, and "testified to the perceived link between movies and immoral behavior"³¹. Social conservatives and religious groups, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, had always despised the entertainment industry, dubbing it "cheap amusements", all the while denouncing the danger it represented to society and sensitive viewers. The necessity to protect the vulnerable and impressionable was often used to validate the need for censorship. Those to be shielded from "the immoral, the obscene, the indecent, the sacrilegious and the crime-inciting" are of course the children, but also foreigners, as "the motion picture draws and enormous portion of its trade from children of immature years, from a great army of mental defectives and a vast number of illiterates and the ignorant. The non-English speaking foreigners contribute great numbers to every one of these classes"³². Hollywood was frequently cited as one of the causes of the moral decay and corruption of society (alcohol being another classic example), as Barbas explains:

The years after World War I saw a conservative backlash against the social upheaval caused by the war, and movies were blamed for a host of social ills, including increasing crime and juvenile delinquency, declining religious observance, a rising divorce rate, and growing popularity of a more fast-paced, materialistic life.³³

It soon became apparent that Hollywood needed to undergo changes and to compromise in order to wash away the taint of the past years, notably by moderating discourse and behaviors. Thus, "as a

³⁰ Lewis, *Hollywood V. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry* (2002) 93

³¹ Barbas, op. cit. 692

³² Hughes, *Movie Men Favor a Federal Censor* (1922)

³³ Barbas, op. cit, 690

means of maintaining good public relations, films executives began to take more seriously public pressure to regulate film content³⁴. Production companies began to include morality clauses in their contract with actors. In 1922, the studios recruited William Hays to the head of the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Created as a trade association to attract Wall Street investors and improve the image of Hollywood, the MPPDA edited in 1927 a list of so called 'Don'ts and Be Carefuls'. This collective effort of Hays and studio executives consisted in a list of eleven subjects best avoided and twenty-six to be handled carefully. In effect, though, the list was virtually ineffective as most filmmakers ignored the rules or exploited loopholes. The Studio Relations Committee established by Hays to oversee its application was too lenient, to the indignation of the conservative lobbyists, especially after the addition of sound improved immersion and realism. The Legion of Decency of the Catholic Church called for the "condemnation of vile and unwholesome moving pictures" and organized a boycott³⁵. As a response, Hollywood strengthened its self-censorship and in 1930 adopted the famous Motion Picture Production Code. Written by a Catholic layman and a Jesuit priest, the Code reiterated several of the 'Don'ts and Be Carefuls', such as the interdiction to depict homosexuality, profanity and miscegenation. It also set moral restrictions: the representation of morally reprehensible practices (like criminal activities, drug use or extra-marital sex) had to be rephrased and punished so as not to provoke sympathy or envy in the viewer. But again, the Code was largely ignored by directors and actors. Considered backwards and prudish, it was ridiculed by the liberal elites and filmmakers. The economic hardship of the time distracted most of the attention away from Hollywood, as the compliance to the Code was not considered a priority by political leaders. In 1934, however, as the effects of Franklin Roosevelt's progressive New Deal were being felt and the economy improved, an amendment to the Code created the Production Code Administration (PCA). The PCA was in charge of reviewing movies and award certificates to those which complied with the Code. Production companies had to submit their script for inspection, and distributing a movie which did not carry the seal of approval of the PCA was punished with a heavy fine. Joseph Ignatius Breen, a catholic layman, was appointed at the head of the PCA and, unlike his predecessor, was implacable in enforcing the code. As a result, Hollywood began to advertise more traditional values and characters. Women were again fully clothed and submissive, people of color were relegated to the role of servants or marginalized, and homosexuality was completely banned from the screen. Eventually, the Code became the norm, and more and more filmmakers decided to conform to it. Over time, even after its fall into disuse and abandonment for the Motion Picture of America Association current rating system in the late 1960s, its influence is still present today. Indeed, Hollywood characters and stories still tend to comply with traditional, conservative values,

³⁴ Lewis, op. cit. 93

³⁵ Barbas, op. cit. 695

and only very recently have filmmakers decided to challenge them and offer dissident representations.

4) Politics and Hollywood

Although the Production Code forbade movies to have strong political or social overtones, Hollywood movies have always reflected the political issues of the time, notably in its depiction of the last two centuries' most significant historical events. Besides the studios' campaign against censorship in the name of freedom of speech, and the sharp criticism of the government's response (or lack thereof) to the Great Depression, one of the finest examples of political bias in Hollywood film was during World War II. In the 1930s, tensions increased in Europe as fascism was gaining momentum. When Adolf Hitler rose to power in 1933, several prominent figures expressed concern. Hitler's territorial ambitions, aggressive foreign policy and his administration's racial laws were often cited as potential threat to the peace of Europe. However, the US was still in the midst of the worst financial meltdown in its history, and the disastrous economic and psychological consequences of World War I had on the country were still fresh in people's minds. The general attitude was a desire to look inwards and not intervene in other nation's conflicts. Thus, even after Germany's numerous violations to the Versailles Treaty³⁶, the US was reluctant to be openly antagonistic. The mood of the time was of isolationism. However, it became harder and harder to ignore that war in Europe was imminent, until it eventually broke out in 1939. Still, it wasn't until the attack on Pearl Harbor two years later that the United States officially entered the conflict. Although it took the death of American citizens and soldiers to reverse the public opinion, Hollywood movies were certainly instrumental in promoting the interventionist agenda. Most filmmakers were of European descent, and a lot were Jewish immigrants who were concerned by the oppression of their people. Giovacchini mentions those 'Hollywood Europeans' who were "European filmmakers who arrived in Hollywood from Nazi Germany and keenly aware of the importance of films in the international struggle against Nazi fascism"³⁷. Anti-Nazi and Pro-British movies, such as the 1939 *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, 1941 *Sergeant York*, 1942 *Casablanca*, and satires, like Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and The Three Stooges' *You Nazty Spy!* enraged prominent isolationist Senator Gerald Nye, who accused Hollywood, and especially the Warner Brothers, of attempting to "drug the reason of the

³⁶ The 1919 peace treaty which marked the end of World War I. It was particularly severe to Germany, which had to accept sole responsibility for the war and pay exorbitant reparation fees. Its army was also heavily restricted. Dubbed the 'Diktat of Versailles', it fuelled intense resentment and desire for vengeance amongst the German population. It is often listed as one of the factors which contributed to the rise of nationalism and eventually, Nazism.

³⁷ Giovacchini, op. cit. 2

American people”, and “rouse war fever”³⁸. After the US intervention, most movies were aimed at raising morale, as well as keeping the Americans convinced of the rightfulness of the conflict. War movies were mass produced by the main production companies. During the war, people on the home front had little other distraction than the movie theatre. As a result, weekly attendance soared, reaching 90 million, its highest since the 1920s³⁹. In the collaboration with the United States Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures, Hollywood began making propaganda films, such as the series *Why We Fight*, directed by famed Italian-born cineaste Frank Capra. Capra also produced *The Negro Soldier* in 1944 to prompt African Americans to enlist. After the war ended, social causes such as the desegregation of public institutions and other civil rights movements were getting more and more popular. As the post-war depression hit and the atrocities of the conflict became public, a sense of hopelessness and pessimism spread amongst the US population. The communist threat and the onset of the Cold War also contributed to the general anxiety of the time. In Hollywood, the social tensions and the cynical atmosphere of the times were depicted in a new crime film genre called ‘Film Noir’. Using stylistic techniques such as visual emphasis on light and dark contrast, and narrative devices like flashbacks and voiceovers, it features morally grey characters and evolving in a corrupt society filled with crooks and ‘femme fatales’. Notorious examples of film noir include Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce*, Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* and *The Wrong Man*, *D.O.A.*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, or *The Fallen Angel*. Emphasizing pessimistic atmosphere of the times, movies of that genre “reflect an existential, often despairing awareness of the impossibility of their own enlightenment and, by extension, of ever realizing the American Dream”⁴⁰.

At the same period, tensions between the two global superpowers emerging after World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union, culminated into the 4 decade-long conflict known as the Cold War. The war was mostly ideological and psychological, with propaganda and threats as the main weapons. Both powers were in possession of nuclear weapons and the ability to destroy the planet, creating the constant threat of mutual assured destruction. This resulted in the development of a pacifist, pro-disarmament and anti-nuclear weapon movement. The 1959 film *On the Beach* has a similar message. The cautionary tale of a world devastated by war and nuclear fall-out, it depicts the last days of the surviving few in Australia. The deadly radiations have not yet reached the country, but scientists are pessimistic, and the government issues suicide pills to offer its citizens a quicker death. None of the characters survive, and the movie ends with the image of a Melbourne church sign reading "There Is Still Time... Brother". The other main anxiety of the time was the fear of

³⁸ Gordon, *America First: the Anti-War Movement, Charles Lindbergh and the Second World War, 1940-1941* (2003)

³⁹ United States Bureau of Census, op. cit.

⁴⁰Hills, "Film Noir and the American Dream: The Dark Side of Enlightenment." (2005)

subversion. The anti-communist propaganda and the 'Red Scare', embodied by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his famous witch hunts, suggested the presence of Soviet agent within the United States, not only spying on their military and technology, but also converting people to communism. The general response to this was a reactionary attitude and a reliance on traditional values, like the nuclear family, virtue, and capitalism. The economic boom of the 1950s, enhanced by military production, contributed to a new society of mass production and mass consumption. Conformism, the wish to be part of the norm and thus avoid suspicion, was the prevalent mood. Cultural products were made to reflect that disposition. The social aspects of the film noir were soon abandoned for more anodyne stories. The radio stations and, more importantly, television, represented a new competitor in the field of mass entertainment, and movies soon began to suffer from the competition. Moreover, the 1948 Supreme Court⁴¹ ruling dismantled the major company's trust and marked the end of the studio system. Consequently, Hollywood cut back its production and focused on high-budget, crowd pleasing films.

Another way in which the Cold War influenced the movie industry was the notorious McCarthy crackdown on Hollywood. The senator was convinced that the industry was swarming with communists whose subversive movies were aimed at brainwashing the American population. The infamous House Un-American Activities Committee, commonly known as HUAC, held in 1947 very publicized hearings during which influential Hollywood personalities were tried and asked to 'name names', to denounce fellow filmmakers affiliated with the Communist party or any kind of leftist organization. Some invoked their constitutional rights and refused to talk. Known as the 'Hollywood Ten'⁴², they were charged with contempt of Congress and given prison sentences, as well as put on a blacklist, which meant they were shunned by the film industry. Other names were soon added to the list, which lasted until the 1960s. Eventually, with the downfall of Senator McCarthy, the HUAC lost its prestige and influence. In 1952, the Supreme Court reversed its 1915 ruling and declared that cinema was an art form and therefore protected by the 1st Amendment.

Another example of Hollywood political involvement was the various cinematic representations of the Viet Nam War (1955-1975). What started as one of the many surrogate conflicts of the Cold War between Soviet-backed North Vietnam forces and the South Vietnam government, supported by the United States, soon turned into a military and political disaster. It is still to this day one of the most unpopular conflicts in the American's History, and a critical part of the country's culture. The large majority of the population opposed the invasion, which they considered was unwarranted.

⁴¹ United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., 334 US 131. 1948, commonly referred to as 'Paramount Consent Decrees'

⁴² The Hollywood Ten consisted of: Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, Dalton Trumbo.

Moreover, the conflict was one of the first to be covered by journalists and photo reporters. The public was faced daily with images of the atrocities of war. The use of napalm and incendiary bombs on civilian populations, as well as military scandals such as the My Lai massacre⁴³ provoked general outrage. Besides a few propaganda war films, such as John Wayne's fervently patriotic and pro-Saigon *The Green Berets*, which presented a heavily simplified and stereotyped view of the war, Hollywood movies were generally critical of the war, especially in the years following the end of the conflict. Contrary to earlier war films, they depict the war in raw, realistic details. The most famous examples are *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon* and *the Deer Hunter*. The later *Rambo: First Blood* deals with the war veterans' difficulty to adjust to peacetime in a changed society who despised them for their involvement in the war, all the while experiencing severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Finally, another subject Hollywood seems to be willing to engage in over the last few years is the environment. Concerns about global warming and man's responsibility in the decay of our planet have been growing during the past decades. Disaster movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* take inspiration from the rising of the sea level and the recent climatic catastrophe to warn of the dangers of global warming. Disney Studio animated film *WALL-E* depicts the Earth of the future as a desolated wasteland. Even James Cameron's epic box office success *Avatar* denounced corporate greed and deforestation.

Over time, and as the mentalities evolved, Hollywood became more and more unrestricted and, although there still are some rules about what can and cannot be shown on screen, films are mostly free to openly tackle social or political issues. Nowadays, restrictions are mostly self-imposed so as not to offend or alienate too much of their audience.

⁴³ The 1968 mass murder of the entire population of two Vietnamese hamlets by American soldiers. It is estimated that between 347 and 504 men, women and children were killed. There was also evidence of mutilations and rape.

CHAPTER II : THE HOME OF THE BRAVE

1) The American Hero

One of the main characteristics of Hollywood movies is the figure of hero, and the way it is portrayed is representative of the values upheld by the industry, and society as a whole. During the 1970s and 1980s, a wave of new filmmakers learned in film history and techniques nicknamed the 'Film Schools Brats' began to take over Hollywood, such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, James Cameron, Martin Scorsese. Soon, a new type of movie emerged: the 'blockbuster'. The term originally referred to a powerful and destructive aerial bomb in World War II. It now defines a high-budget movie producing high box office gross. Steven Spielberg's 1975 *Jaws* is usually cited as the first Hollywood blockbuster. With its \$260 million of box office domestic gross (\$470 million in worldwide gross)⁴⁴ for a budget of \$9 million, it is one of the highest-grossing movies of all time. *Jaws* set an example for subsequent productions in its innovative use of techniques from classical Hollywood. The Film Schools Brats indeed reinstated and modernized some of the traditional Hollywood formulas, which had been abandoned in the previous decades due to the social and political climate. This was instrumental in the creation of the Hollywood hero. Coming back to traditional form and ideology, the classical Hollywood protagonist is typically male, Caucasian and heterosexual. He possesses admirable qualities and fights for the side of the Good. He is usually strong, physically and morally, brave, selfless, charming and witty. He is dedicated to protecting others, defeats the forces of Evil and restores the natural balance. To these traditional values, the filmmakers added a sensational amount of sex and violence, which was prohibited in classical Hollywood films under the Production Code⁴⁵. Blockbusters have become the norm in present day Hollywood. In the period between Memorial Day and Labor Day (May 26th to September 1st), known as Blockbuster season, the big production companies saturate the film market with dozens of epic, science-fiction or action movies⁴⁶. Film studios are competing between themselves to release more and more spectacular movies and attempting to outdo each other by generating the most profit. As a result, movies have become more action-based than story or character based. Emphasis is put on visual effects and action sequences, at the detriment of the narrative and the protagonists, who are usually reduced to stereotypes or archetypes.

⁴⁴ *Jaws*, Boxoffice.com, May, 22, 2014.

⁴⁵ Benshoff & Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the movies* (2009)

⁴⁶ Shone, *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* (2004)

The hero archetype has been declined in many formats and genres. Some examples include Luke Skywalker, from the *Star Wars* franchise, Indiana Jones, from the eponymous series of films, Eliot Ness in the movie *The Untouchables*, or the classic action hero John McClane in the *Die Hard* movies. The hero is usually aided by several allies, and courts a love interest, whom he will win over by the end of the movie. A typical occupation of the classical Hollywood hero is one which confers him authority, social and moral, usually in law enforcement. This is the case in the wide variety of detective movies and television series (such as the very popular *Law and Order*, or *Crime Scene Investigation* or *Miami Vice*) which feature a team of agents solving mysteries and almost always succeeding in capturing the culprit and bringing him to justice. Another popular classical Hollywood protagonist is the so-called action hero. This archetype, the epitome of traditional masculinity, is characterized by his physical capabilities and muscular strength. He undergoes a succession of adventures and trials, until eventually emerges victorious, usually after violent confrontations with enemy forces. Actors such as Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude Van Damme, are typecast as these brutal but righteous characters and often portray them on screen.

Another common type of action hero is the figure of the 'Superhero'. Typically adapted from comic books, superhero movies tell the story of average individuals beset with supernatural powers and using them to fight crimes and defeat their evil counterpart. Possessing superior physical abilities and a strong moral code, these idealized characters embody what society wants people to aspire to become. The two companies DC Comics and Marvel which hold a virtual monopoly over the genre, created most of the most popular superheroes such as Captain America, Superman, Batman or Iron Man. Superheroes soon became an integrant part of popular culture, and iconic figures such as Superman have come to be closely associated with the image of the US. The very patriotic Marvel hero Captain America, born in the midst of the Second World War, was used in propaganda to motivate the troops and reassure families back home. Eventually, the superhero craze became so endemic that movie executives decided to produce their own Superhero fictions based on characters and stories from comic books. What started in the 1940s with the release of *Captain Marvel* in 1941, *Captain America* in 1944, and *Superman* in 1948 became a staple of American cinema. The films were a success and more followed, as well as television series derived from the comic books. Its popularity has increased over the last decade with the reboot of old franchises. The 2012 movie *The Avengers* broke records for box office performance, with a profit of over \$1.5 billion for a budget of \$220 million⁴⁷. Some original superhero characters also enjoyed commercial success. The character of Robocop in the 1987 eponymous franchise, for example, mixes two hero archetypes: the police officer and the superhero.

⁴⁷ Corliss, "The Avengers Storms the Billion Dollar Club — In Just 19 Days" (2012)

The Hollywood hero is therefore representative of how America views itself: bold, dynamic, morally good. He embodies American exceptionalism and acts as the protector of the world.

2) The villain

The natural counterpart to the movie's main protagonist is usually depicted as the 'Villain'. Contrary to the hero, he has basically no redeeming qualities. His actions are motivated by sin, like greed, envy, or anger. Sometimes he is simply evil for evil's sake, enjoying the chaos and devastation he creates. He antagonizes the hero for standing in his way or representing that which he wants to destroy. He is cruel, deceptive, manipulative, and devious. Because he represents a threat to the order, his identity usually mirrors the socio-political concerns of the time. During the Great Depression, he was the evil banker and greedy capitalist (a figure which has reemerged in recent years due to the economic crisis, with films like *Margin Call*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*). During World War II, he was the Nazi German or the Japanese soldier. During the Cold War, he was a Russian spy. In the last decades, villains were Middle-Eastern terrorists, like in the popular television shows *24* and *Homeland*. The other villain which also reflects common unease is technology. Self-aware artificial intelligence has become the new monster. It is, of course, the same cautionary tale of the invention turning against its creator as displayed in the story of Dr. Frankenstein and most Supervillains' origins. Movies like *Alien*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or *I Robot* are examples of the projection of such fears. Technology improving at an ever increasing speed, it has become unclear whether man is creating a tool or fostering a dependence on electronic gadgets. Science, perverted in World War II by the Nazi experiments conducted in concentration camps and the invention of the cataclysmic nuclear bomb, was also seen as a source of evil. Space exploration and travel led to the fear of extra-terrestrial life and the anxiety of the possibility of yet another attack. The alien invasion has become a common trope in Hollywood, with movies such as *Mars Attacks!* or *Independence Day*. It is also prominently featured in the science-fiction genre.

PART TWO:
HOLLYWOOD'S AMERICA: RACE, GENDER
AND CLASS IN POPULAR CULTURE

CHAPTER I: RACE AND ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN FILM

One of the ways to assess Hollywood's attitude and values is to analyze the way it represents American society, in particular the way it deals with the complex issues of race, gender and class.

1) The issue of race in America

In the introduction of his 1964 book titled *A Nation of Immigrants*, President John F. Kennedy states that "every American who ever lived, at the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrants"⁴⁸. It is true indeed that it is several immigration waves to the 'New World', starting as early as the 16th century, which have shaped America. Following 'discovery' of the American continent by Italian navigator Christopher Columbus in 1492, European began exploring the land. Even though the continent was colonized by Spanish, French and Dutch settlers, the lasting Anglo-Saxon influence on the civilization of the United States has made it so that the 1607 Jamestown colony marks the beginning of the nation. Named 'New England', the region was mostly populated by Protestant dissenters, the Puritans, attempting to evade religious persecution. Mostly situated on the Atlantic coast, British settlements soon expanded and multiplied along the coast until, by the middle of the 1730s, thirteen colonies began to prosper. Eventually, the colonies began to revolt against the centralized British authorities and its high taxations and, in 1776, they declared themselves an independent state. European powers recognized the United States as an official autonomous nation in the 1783 treaty, and the prosperity of the land soon attracted people from all over Europe. To accommodate the influx of new habitants, the country began to expand further west, and in the process displaced the indigenous tribes who had been living here for thousands of years. The exploration of the wild, uncharted territories and the subsequent extermination of Native Americans were justified by the principle of Manifest Destiny. Formulated by journalist John L. O'Sullivan, this doctrine established America as the Promised Land and the God-given right of the Americans to inhabit it. It was their divine duty to spread the holy word and their virtuous civilization. Eventually, the colonists came to occupy the entire country. Religious diversity and liberty contributed to America's image as a harbor of peace and freedom where oppressed people could come find shelter. However, this tolerance only applied to a certain type of people. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (commonly shortened as WASP) dominated the cultural and political landscape. The very documents on which the bases of American civilization and institutions are founded

⁴⁸ Kenny, J.F. *A Nation of Immigrants* (1964)

effectively empower certain groups and marginalize other. Indeed, despite the Declaration of Independence statement that its writers “hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”⁴⁹, and the Constitution preamble which unite citizens under the phrase “We the People”⁵⁰, both texts exclude parts of the population. The Declaration of Independence makes no mention of women or people of colour (several Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson or George Washington, owned slaves). In its effects and words, the Constitution, which establishes the institutional frame of society, is restrictive in the fundamental rights it grants. It acknowledges the practice of slavery, denies the right to vote to women, people of African descent (who were considered as being worth three-fifths of a person), and men of a certain economic status (only landowners were allowed to vote). Therefore, at its core, the American society is deeply inequitable.

This is reflected in its long and problematic relation with the issue race and ethnicity. As a composite nation, America has often struggled to conciliate its diverse population into one people. The multiplicity of ethnicities which constitutes the American society complicates the issue of the creation of a single, uniting national identity. The concept of a melting pot of cultures is often used to symbolize America, but in truth, some groups are more likely than other to assimilate and integrate American society. Historically, the WASP political and social dominance has influenced the definition of ‘American’ by linking it to the notion of whiteness. Non-whites and non-protestants were often alienated and discriminated against. The new wave of immigrants in the early 1800s coincided with the rise of Nativism, the belief that established inhabitants of a country were superior to immigrants. Irish and Italian newcomers, the majority of whom were Roman Catholics, were targeted by xenophobic hate. Native Americans, whose traditions and culture were dismissed by ethnocentric discourse, were either forced to convert to Christianity or massacred. African Americans were brought into the country as slaves and denied their humanity until the Thirteen Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in 1865. And even then, the social progress of the African American population was hindered by the actions of decades of discrimination, hate-groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and institutionalized discrimination. The Jim Crow laws, for example, were a set of acts establishing the segregation of public institutions. The famous *Brown v. Board of Education*⁵¹ ruling and the Civil Rights Act⁵² brought an end to it. But the influence of ninety years of systematic inequalities lingered, and even today, people of color (African Americans, people of Latino or Asian

⁴⁹ *The United States Declaration of Independence* (1776)

⁵⁰ *The United States Constitution* (1788)

⁵¹ 1954 Supreme Court of the United States ruling. One of the main Civil Rights movement victory, it ruled that the segregation of schools was unconstitutional.

⁵² Legislative act passed in 1964 by President Lyndon Johnson. It banned discrimination based on race, sex, religion or origins.

origins) have more difficulty to achieve social and financial success than Caucasian Americans, since their access to employment and higher education is often still limited by prejudice. Several attempts have been made to bring an end to this phenomenon. Affirmative action, the practice through which the government encourages (and sometime mandates) to hire or admit workers and students from all ethnicities, is an example of steps taken by the administration to promote racial diversity. Ironically, this measure which was put in place because of rampant discrimination is considered unfair by white conservatives. After the 2002 election of Barack Obama as President, a wave of hope shook the nation. But the dream of racial equalities is not yet completely achieved, despite what some right-winged political and media commentators might say. Indeed, in recent years, several politicians, journalists and other public figures have claimed that racism was a thing of the past, and that the laws and actions taken against discrimination were obsolete. Bernard Goldberg, journalist and pundit at the very conservative television channel Fox News, argues that racism “creates a furor that drunk driving and domestic abuse don’t. That wouldn’t happen if we really were a racist country”⁵³. In June 2013, The Supreme Court struck down a section of the Voting Rights Act which required federal overview of new voting laws in 15 (mostly Southern). In her statement, dissenting Justice Ruth Ginsburg writes that “Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet”⁵⁴. Immediately following the decision, several states passed voting restrictions formerly banned by the VRA, specifically designed to keep certain voters from registering or exerting their constitutional right. This was particularly visible on a local level. For example, Jacksonville, Florida allegedly relocated a voting center from a mostly African American populated area to a site not reachable by public transportation⁵⁵. As for concerns about the effects of affirmative actions on the job market, a 2003 experiment which compared employers’ response to applications carrying a traditional ‘white’ name and resumes with stereotypically African American sounding names. It concludes that on average, “white names receive 50 percent more callbacks for interviews”⁵⁶. Another study shows that 34% white applicants with a criminal record receive a callback, whereas only 14% of African American with a similar background is solicited for an interview⁵⁷. This highlights a more general tendency in the American society. Although, as conservatives argue, institutionalized discrimination and overt racism are prohibited or mostly

⁵³ Goldberg, *The Good News about Racism in America*, April 2014

⁵⁴ *Shelby County, Alabama, Petitioner v. Eric H. Holder, Jr., Attorney General, et al.*, 570 U.S. ____, United States Supreme Court (2013)

⁵⁵ Liebelson, D. “Supreme Court Gutted the Voting Rights Act. What Happened Next in These 8 States Will Not Shock You”, 2014

⁵⁶ Bertrand, Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination” (2003)

⁵⁷ Pager, “The Mark of a Criminal Record” (2002)

frowned upon, race is still a predominant feature in determining the identity of an individual. Racism, albeit in less obvious, is still present in America, and notably through the existence of harmful stereotypes which are usually perpetrated and relayed by popular culture. Hollywood is notably complicit with the pejorative depiction of people of color in the media. Not only does it contribute to stereotypical representations of certain communities, it also excludes people of color from the industry itself.

2) People of color in the entertainment industry

Hollywood has frequently been criticized for being an overly white-dominated business. And evidence shows that these allegations are not completely unfounded. Even today, minorities are not often represented in the industry, in front or behind the camera. African Americans represent only 4% of the Director Guild of America. Of the 600 top-grossing movies of the past 6 years, 33 were directed and 30 written by African Americans. Denzel Washington is the only African American actor to make Forbes magazine list of highest paid actors of 2013⁵⁸. A study of casting announcements shows that “69% of available roles were reserved for white actors. Actors of color were limited to between 0.5% and 8.1% of roles, depending on their racial/ethnic background, and could compete with white actors for the 8.5% of roles that were open to white and nonwhite actors alike”⁵⁹. The same study also states that 81.9% of lead roles are portrayed by Caucasian actors, 11.1% by African Americans, 1.8% by Asian and 1.2% by Latino actors. This is furthered by Hollywood’s historical disposition to hire white actors to depict characters of color, a practice known as ‘whitewashing’. Studios had to resort to methods such as heavy makeup or prosthetics to mimic the physical features of the race of the character, rather than simply hire an actor from that ethnicity. Not only does it take roles away from people of color, it also confirms racist, stereotypical representations. The extreme of this practice is the blackface, a technique used by white actors to portray black characters in the theatre and the cinema, usually consisting of blackening the skin with makeup and wearing fake, big lips. The physical modifications were often coupled with mannerism and language supposedly representative of African American. Blackface has now mostly been abandoned, and its use is usually considered highly offensive. However, there are still numerous instances where Hollywood studios have cast white actors to play a role, adapted from fiction or inspired by real people, which was clearly meant for a person of color. The 1937 film adaptation of the Nobel Prize winning novel *The Good Earth*, although taking place in China and involving Chinese people, had an

⁵⁸ New York Film Academy, “Looking at Black inequality in Film: an Infographic” (2014)

⁵⁹ Robinson, R. “Casting and Caste-ing: Reconciling Artistic Freedom and Antidiscrimination Norms” (2007)

all-white cast, all wearing makeup and prosthetics to make them look Asian. The production felt that the American public was not ready for a movie featuring an entirely non-white cast. Although that might have been true in 1937, subsequent cases of whitewashing show that this reasoning is groundless. In 1961, America was apparently still not ready to face ethnical diversity on screen, as it was white actor Mickey Rooney who portrayed a stereotypical Japanese character in the iconic *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. In 1963, legendary Egyptian queen Cleopatra was played by Elizabeth Taylor in the eponymous movie. Even more significant, revered Shakespearian actor Laurence Olivier sported a blackface as the namesake character in *Othello*, in 1965, at the height of the Civil Rights movement. More recently, most of the main characters of the movie adaptation of the video game franchise *Prince of Persia* were white, although the action took place, as the name suggests, in the Persian Empire. The studio used fake tan on Jake Gyllenhaal, the protagonist, in order to make him look more middle-eastern. The strong-willed heroin of the high-grossing first installment of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, adapted from a popular series of books, is portrayed by young actress Jennifer Lawrence, despite her description in the source material giving her olive skin and dark features. In 2013, Johnny Depp played Native American character Tonto in *The Lone Ranger*.

Whitewashing has often been rationalized as mere common-sense from film executives who prefer casting a famous and 'bankable' actor as a lead than to be true to the racial identity of the person or character the role is based on. And while that may factor in the casting decision, its consequences on the audience are not negligible. Considering the importance and the impact of cinema on the population, especially the younger generation, people of color can sometimes experience what is known as symbolic annihilation. The concept was developed by George Gerbner who writes that: "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation"⁶⁰.

It is also interesting to notice that when the situation is reversed and an actor of color is hired to play a canonically white character, people tend to react more strongly. The announcement that African American actor Michael B. Jordan would be playing Marvel superhero Johnny Storm, also known as the Human Torch, in the upcoming reboot of the *Fantastic Four* franchise raised a roar of reactions on the Internet and social networks from fans of the comic books. The same thing happened in 2010 when British black actor Idris Elba was cast as the Norse god Heimdall in another Marvel adaptation, *Thor: the Dark World*. Racist groups even organized a boycott of the film. When asked about the controversy, Elba expressed his incredulity at the fact that some people's ability to suspend disbelief when it comes to the laws of nature or the existence of superheroes does not extend to skin color:

⁶⁰ Gerbner and Gross, "Living with Television: the Violence Profile" (1976)

"Hang about, Thor's mythical, right? Thor has a hammer that flies to him when he clicks his fingers. That's OK, but the colour of my skin is wrong?"⁶¹. Ironically, the people who protested Elba or Jordan being cast on the basis that the original characters were depicted as white stayed silent when Caucasian actress Rooney Mara was recently chosen to play Tiger Lily, the daughter of a Native American chief in the upcoming adaptation of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

Whitewashing, no matter how 'justified' by commercial reasons, contributes to white iconographic dominance on popular culture. Actors of color rarely feature on screen as main character or leading role, and when they do, it is usually to embody various racial clichés associated with their race. These roles, most of the time written by white filmmakers for a white audience, reassert a biased and racist representation of certain groups, and make actors of color complicit in the process. Seeing an actor of color play a stereotypical version of his ethnicity not only perpetuates this vision of his culture, but it also reinforces ego-destructive feelings among the audience of color who will internalize what they see on screen. It will then reflect on their sense of self and their status in society.

3) Misrepresentations and stereotypes.

American movies have a tradition of distilling characters of color into a very simplistic set of features. Their entire identity and character development are reduced to their ethnic or cultural background. As a result, they tend to become archetypes and stock characters with none of the depth of their white counterparts. But the depiction of these characters are also useful in understanding the evolution of society's attitude towards the issue of race, as they give insights into the societal sentiment and social power-structure of the times.

Derogatory representations of People of Color in film, as in all other medium, were generally used to reinforce the idea of white supremacy, and justify hostile attitudes towards non-white and the treatment of minorities. Angel Nelson proposes a definition of stereotypes as "oversimplified, standardized images or ideas that one person or group holds of another group and uses to justify or rationalize its dislike of that other group"⁶². As a result, early cinematic depiction of people of color would often present them as evil villains, especially African Americans and Native Americans. This was the case of D.W. Griffith's work, which would often depict "the inability of nonwhites to fully assimilate into white culture and society [his films] provide a justification for their servitude,

⁶¹ Jones, "Idris Elba defends Thor film role". *The Guardian* (2010)

⁶² Nelson, "African American Stereotypes in Prime-Time Television: An Overview, 1948-2007" in *African Americans and Popular Culture* (2008), 185

segregation and punishment”⁶³. Griffith was one of the most influential figures in film history, credited with having created the framework of modern cinematic narrative fiction. His innovative techniques were imitated and adopted by most filmmakers and soon became the mainstream style of Hollywood movies. But he is also known for being very controversial in his themes and especially in his representation of racial minorities. Indeed, his movies often pictured people of color (African American and Native Americans especially) as either vile and immoral brutes, or faithful and loyal servants. Professor Daniel Bernardi comments that “through the stories of servitude, colonial love and the white family (and white women), [D.W. Griffith] casts People of color, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, as threats to the normality and superiority of whiteness”⁶⁴. Griffith most famous film, *The Birth of a Nation*, set in the Reconstruction era, has been particularly criticized for its racist discourse. Indeed, not only does it depict African American as oppressors and rapists, it also presents the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic group who defeats the black villains, restores white supremacy and the natural order of things. The film was met with vehement protests, especially from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People who organized a boycott. The movie’s glorification of the Ku Klux Klan was partly responsible for the return of the terrorist group which had dissolved in the late 1800s. The KKK used *The Birth of a Nation* as a recruiting tool, and several African American were lynched in reaction to some of the actions of black characters in the movie⁶⁵. The fact that the movie and its director were so influential in the making of the Hollywood style and is now considered a classic of early American cinema sometimes overshadows the fact that it also contributed to the diffusion of a stereotypical representation of minorities. Bernardi writes that “*The Birth of a Nation*, in its representation of the KKK as heroes, of blacks as either loyal slaves or rapist renegades, and of mulattos as lecherous villains, is one of the most racist – indeed, white-supremacist – film in history, the source of many of the stereotypes we see lingering even today”⁶⁶. Griffith’s response to the allegations of racism in *Birth of a Nation* shed a light on his own opinion on race:

Most well informed men know now that slavery was an economic mistake. The treatment of the Negroes during the days of the Reconstruction is shown effectually and graphically in our picture. We show many phases of the questions and we do pay particular attention to those faithful Negroes who stay with the former masters and were ready to give up their lives to protect their white friends. No

⁶³ Bernardi, “Blacks in Early Cinema”, in *African Americans and Popular Culture* (2008), 29

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 35

⁶⁶ Ibid. 25

characters in the story are applauded with greater fervor than the good Negroes whose devotion is so clearly shown.⁶⁷

The distinction Griffith draws between the 'good' and 'bad' Negro is representative of the ideology of the time and the dichotomist view of the African American population. Indeed, characters of colors of early cinema were either libidinous savages, usually threatening the purity of the white woman (a common trope in Western movies), or they were faithful, complaisant servants. These stereotypes were personified in several archetypical figures: Sambo, the loyal but lazy and dim-witted servant, and Nat, the brutal, vengeful savage. These stock characters were also present in female form. The archetype of the mammy, for example, is the devoted mother life figure, often appearing under the traits of an overweight, outspoken, asexual middle-aged woman. She is usually a maid in a white household, and takes care of the children of her master. In her book *Clinging to Mammy*, Micki McElya writes that "stories and images of the slave as a faithful and loving dependent, of which the mammy has been the most popular representation, drenched American culture and politics throughout the 20th century and persists to this day"⁶⁸. Content and docile, the mammy exemplifies the pervasive figure of the happily compliant slave, which permeated into collective imagery. McElya later explains that "the myth of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, in which the injustices themselves –of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing structural racism—seem not to exist at all."⁶⁹

A famous example of this figure is the role portrayed by Hattie McDaniel in the antebellum romance *Gone With the Wind* (1939), simply referred to as "Mammy". When confronted with allegations that she was contributing to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, McDaniel retorted: "why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn't I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one"⁷⁰. This highlights the social situation of African American women in the 1930s and the lack of opportunity for emancipation. For her role in *Gone With the Wind*, Hattie McDaniel received the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress. Another example from another medium of popular culture is Aunt Jemima, the face of the pancake mix brand of the same name. Here, the figure of the mammy is used to vouch for the homemade like quality of the product, thus further underlining the association of African American women with the idea of domestic servitude.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 25

⁶⁸ McElya, *Clinging to Mammy* (2007), 3

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Banks, "Women in Film", in *African Americans and Popular Culture* (2008), 70

The other prevalent African American female archetype is the figure of the Jezebel. Jezebel, originally a biblical figure who is gruesomely punished for her transgression, is often associated with prostitution and sexual promiscuity. Contrary to the matronly mammy, the jezebel was highly sexualized, a lascivious woman in complete opposition to the traditional white Victorian lady. As is often the case with racial archetypes, the jezebel was used to justify white men's attitude towards women of color, and notably explain the numerous cases of sexual assaults which took place during slavery. As miscegenation was considered taboo, society decided to shift the blame to the African American women by casting them as uninhibited, sexual temptresses: "women with such salacious desires could never be sexually abused, because having plentiful sex was central to their identity as African American women. In essence, the jezebel image presented the black woman as the quintessential whore"⁷¹.

Hollywood typical depiction of other racial minorities is as derogatory and damaging. Latino Americans, people of Middle-Eastern origins and Native Americans usually portrayed villains. Native Americans were the natural enemy of the white man in Western movies, where they would attack wagons or abduct women. Latino Americans, especially of Mexican descents, were represented by the figure of the 'greaser', a mustachioed criminal. Actors of Middle-Eastern origins almost exclusively portray radical Muslims or terrorists. As for female characters of color, they are usually depicted as exotic sexual objects. Hollywood movies have also been accused of recurring to the practice known as 'tokenism', "the placing of a non-white character into a film in order to deflate any potential charge of racism"⁷². These token characters are usually flat and are almost always killed off in horror or action movies. One example of tokenism is the genre of movies targeted towards a black audience called 'Blaxploitation'. These movies were initially perceived as a step forward and a sign of black empowerment, but they have since been criticized for their use of racial stereotypes. Blaxploitation, indeed, seemed more and more like a representation of how white people imagined African Americans. "Despite occasional and usually hollow declarations of Black empowerment and revolt, few of these films were political, and those which claimed to be presented a political agenda that was quite suspect"⁷³. The genre fell into demise after several associations started to openly denounce it.

Racial stereotypes have long been deeply engraved in the collective consciousness of the society which created them. And although they are mostly outdated and condemned now, the practice of characterizing an entire group or community with a set of derogatory features is still used to

⁷¹ Ibid. 71

⁷² Benshoff and Griffin, op. cit. 72

⁷³ Housley "Hollywood and The Civil Rights Movement" (2004)

establish a hierarchy of race, with Caucasians on top. Today, the nature of stereotypes is more social and economic than moral. For example, in film and television, African Americans often occupy low-status and blue collar jobs (house cleaners, postal workers...) ⁷⁴. African Americans, as a whole, have been culturally associated with low socio-economic status. Over the 20th century, segregation and limited work opportunities in the country have led African Americans to move to big cities, where the prospects of finding work were somewhat better. This led to the creation of specific black neighborhoods, usually situated in the center of town where housing prices were more affordable. Several culturally significant artistic movements emerged from this phenomenon, such as the Harlem Renaissance and the development of what is referred to as 'urban culture', such as hip-hop and street art. However, the degrading socio-economic conditions in these areas led to a negative view of the inner-city and the people inhabiting it. Nicknamed 'ghetto', these neighborhoods soon gained infamy for their apparent poverty and decrepitude. High unemployment level and the lack of access to education contributed to the rise of crime rates. The consequence of these social factors was the association of African Americans with the figure of the criminal, or thug. Thus a new cultural archetype emerged in the second half of the 20th century, though its origins are probably rooted in old stereotypes, like the Nat. Influenced by the hip hop culture, the so called 'war on drugs' and its policy of racial profiling, this stereotypes embodies a new kind of urban criminal. Unlike the figure of the white mobster made popular in the crime movies of the 1940s, black criminals are associated with social problems such as broken families, drug addictions and gun violence. Contrary to the white gangster who is glorified despite his crimes, the thug figure is vilified and feared. Policies of racial profiling, biased media coverage and popular culture play a big role in the identification of young African American males as dangerous criminals who present a threat to society. As a result, a 1996 study shows that Caucasian people are more likely to fear aggression from African American individuals than people from their own race ⁷⁵. These prejudices, spread by the media and internalized by the public, are thus reflected in people's behavior towards African Americans. It damages their chances of achieving upward social mobility and traps them in an unfavorable socio-economic situation.

⁷⁴ Punyanunt-Carter, "The Perceived Realism of African American Portrayals on Television" (2008)

⁷⁵ St John & Heald-Moore, "Racial Prejudice and Fear of Criminal Victimization by Strangers in Public Settings" (1996)

CHAPTER II: GENDER(ED) ROLES: FEMALE CHARACTERS IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

1) The feminist movements in America

Historically, Western civilization (and, one could argue, most civilizations) has always been patriarchal. Patriarchy, the “form of social organization in which a male is the head of the family and descent, kinship, and title are traced through the male line”⁷⁶, usually refers to a society which is placed under male authority and power. As a result, women are considered inferior and endorse a lesser role in the family and, by extension, society. This mentality, which is still prevalent today despite considerable advancement in the status of women, has its origins deeply rooted in the foundations of our civilization. Indeed, patriarchy as a societal system was observed as early as the Antiquity. Greek philosopher Aristotle, who is generally credited for the conception of Western Philosophy, quite unequivocally sets men as superior beings and *de facto* head of the social structure (familial and political). He characterizes women as “mutilated males, devoid of the principle of soul”⁷⁷. When describing the power structure of the household, he states that “the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has it, but it is immature”, and concludes by saying that “the courage of man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying”⁷⁸. The other highly influential source on which Western civilization is based is the Judeo-Christian religion. The Scriptures, the holy texts which establish the principles of society, describe the status and role of women as inferior and subordinate to men. Thus, in the First Epistle of the Corinthians, Paul the Apostle writes that “the head of man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God”⁷⁹, and that while man is “the image and glory of God”, “woman is the glory of man”⁸⁰. The New Testament also dictates that women ought to be submissive to their husband: “Wives, be subject to your husband, as to the Lord”⁸¹, “as the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands”⁸². This subjection is justified by the fact that womankind is born out of man, created by God from one of Adam’s ribs: “The man said, “This is now

⁷⁶ Collins English Dictionary (2014)

⁷⁷ Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy, Volume 1* (1986), 207

⁷⁸ Ibid. 208

⁷⁹ *New International Version*, 1 Corinthians 11.3

⁸⁰ Ibid. 1 Cor. 11.7

⁸¹ Ibid. Colossians 3.18

⁸² Ibid. Ephesians 5.22

one of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man"⁸³. The Bible, by depicting Eve as a temptress and a transgressor, perpetrator of the original sin, also asserts that women carry the taint of that transgression and can only be saved by motherhood and humility: "yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty"⁸⁴. Thus the duty of a woman is to assist and submit to her husband, and her role is reduced to a biological function of producing offspring.

This conception of femininity has become embedded in our society and reflected in the status of women. It has, however, been challenged with the development of the feminist ideology. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a movement known as First Wave Feminism emerged as women began protesting the unfair treatment of women during Victorian times. During that period, women had very limited access to jobs and education. Marriage, which was the only prospect in the life of a Victorian woman, was in effect the transfer of a wife's (limited) rights and property to her husband. The two became a single entity, of which the man was the head. Before she was transferred under the authority of her husband, the woman was the responsibility of her father. Female sexuality was extremely taboo and repressed. Victorian morality based a woman's worth on her purity, and any sexual relations outside of wedding lock was considered a social transgression, and reflected on the woman (exclusively) who was henceforth referred to as 'ruined' or 'fallen'. Woman's place was within the domestic sphere. Her role was to love and support her husband and raise his children. She was, as poet Coventry Patmore calls it in a famous poem, 'The Angel in the House': "Man must be pleased; but him to please is woman's pleasure"⁸⁵. By the middle of the 19th century, however, several groups of women began to actively campaign to obtain civil rights such as vote, employment and the property rights. Inspired by the emerging figure of the independent-thinking and educated 'New Woman', early feminists began to engage in social and political protest. The enfranchisement movement, led by the 'Suffragettes', began to gain more and more influence. In the United States, activists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth C. Stanton were instrumental in the enactment of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920 which granted women the right to vote. Early feminism also protested the rigid Victorian conception of femininity. Known as 'flappers', these women sported short hair, short dresses, danced in public, smoked cigarettes, drove automobiles, and advocated sexual liberation. The movement also pressed for the development of birth control, led by famous reproductive rights activist Margaret Sanger. Eventually, women managed to gain a more important position in society. Over time, with popular attitudes towards sex and family evolving, feminists started to question gender roles and male dominance on society. Simone de Beauvoir's highly

⁸³ Ibid. Genesis 2.23

⁸⁴ Ibid. Timothy 2.15

⁸⁵ Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (1854)

influential book *The Second Sex* (1949), which treats of the oppression of women, was partly responsible for the development of the Second Wave Feminism in the 1960s. Contrary to the earlier movement, Second Wave Feminism did not focus on civil rights so much as social causes, like reproductive rights, inequalities in the workplace, discrimination and violence against women. It started as a response to the social situation of the 1950s when, after being employed during World War II, women were forced back into domestic occupations by the return of veterans. The 1950s, with their emphasis on normality and traditional values, presented few opportunities for women. Social mobilization arose to protest the treatment of certain groups, including the African American and gay civil rights movements, and feminism⁸⁶. In 1953, *The Second Sex* was translated into English and published in the United States. In 1963, Betty Friedan publishes the *Feminine Mystique*, a book which is widely credited for instigating Second Wave Feminism. In her book, Friedan criticizes the idea of the nuclear family and the social expectations put on women to choose motherhood over their own personal accomplishment. The Second Wave movement achieved major victories in several different areas, like the 1963 Equal Pay Act, which aimed at reducing the wage gap between men and woman, was ratified by the federal government, or the landmark Roe V. Wade Supreme Court ruling in 1973 which extended women's rights to abortion.

The changing role of women in society led feminist theorists like Judith Butler to analyze the concept of gender itself. This new academic field, named gender studies, explores the concepts of gender identity and gender representation. Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote: "one is not born a woman, but becomes one"⁸⁷. Influenced by the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva and, of course, Simone de Beauvoir, Butler formulated in her 1990 best-selling book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* the idea that gender is a social construct, as is the apparent correlation between sex, sexuality and gender, and by doing so challenges society's views about sexual identity. "For instance, if sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, 'woman' need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and 'man' need no interpret male bodies"⁸⁸. Gender would therefore be an artificial notion, and not, as previously thought, the natural realization of the biological sex, and characteristics associated with gender are thus arbitrary. De Beauvoir has also articulated the notion that woman is only considered in relation to man, who is the default being: "Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male"⁸⁹. This is reflected in how woman is perceived: "she is defined

⁸⁶ McLean, *The American women's movement, 1945-2000: a brief history with documents* (2009)

⁸⁷ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (2009) 340

⁸⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)

⁸⁹ De Beauvoir, op. cit. 90

and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other”⁹⁰.

Thus, women are posited as inferior, and the qualities associated with femininity are less valued than masculine characteristics. Hélène Cixous elaborates a list of binary oppositions which are culturally applied to gender, such as activity/passivity, culture/nature, head/heart, intelligible/palpable, logos/pathos⁹¹. This duality is the root of many stereotypes about women: they are considered passive, relying on their intuition rather than reason, more emotional. These preconceptions are instrumental in the creation of prejudices, and they are usually relayed by cultural images.

2) A man’s world

Despite the numerous advancements to the cause of women’s rights over the last two centuries, there is still no doubt that our society is deeply patriarchal. Even though women have gained basic civil rights and are more present on the employment market than before, there are still important socio-economic disparities between men and women. For example, according to the 2012 census, women constitute roughly 51% of the population of the United States⁹² and about 47% of the workforce⁹³, but there is still evidence of what is commonly referred to as a ‘glass ceiling’, a metaphor used to describe the inability for women to access certain positions. It is an “impermeable barrier that blocks the vertical mobility of women: Below this barrier, women are able to get promoted; beyond this barrier, they are not”⁹⁴. As of 2012, women still only make 80.9% of men’s annual average wage⁹⁵, which is more than the 62% of men’s earnings women made in 1979⁹⁶, but still not the parity which was envisioned by the Equal Pay Act. This of course varies according to several factors, such as age, level of education, number of children, and the job category. For example, in the judiciary system, women only make 53.8% of what men earn⁹⁷. Men still hold the majority of positions of power in the country and are prominently feature in the legislative and executive branch of government. Not only has the United States never had a female president, but of the 535 seats of Congress, only 18% were occupied by women in 2013, ranking the United States 76 out of 136 countries in terms of female-to-male ratio in parliament, well after countries like Pakistan

⁹⁰ Op. cit. 31

⁹¹ Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (1986) 63

⁹² U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, (2012)

⁹³ Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), *Current Population Survey (CPS)* (2012)

⁹⁴ Baxter, Wright, *The Glass Ceiling Hypothesis: A Comparative Study of the United States, Sweden, and Australia* (2000)

⁹⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

(69), Saudi Arabia (56), Ethiopia (35) and Senegal (3)⁹⁸. In 2013, women only held 16.9% of board seats in Fortune 500 (the annual list of the 500 highest-grossing American corporations published by the magazine *Fortune*), and 14.6% of executive officer positions⁹⁹. The situation is even worse of women of color who only hold 3.2% of board seats¹⁰⁰. This discrepancy can partly be explained by the pervasive notions of gender roles, such as the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the mother. In this regard, the American society has difficulties catching up with its fast socio-economic changes. And while traditional family values are being challenged by the increasing number of working women and working mothers, there remains at core the belief that women belong in the domestic sphere: “men and women may disagree on the characteristics of the ideal woman, but there has generally been consensus that the major goal of a woman’s life is to raise well-adjusted children”¹⁰¹. This has been furthered in the 1970s and 1980s when, under an increasingly conservative leadership, female empowerment began to be perceived negatively by the population. Under the Ronald Reagan’s administration, in the late 1980s, liberal attitudes were demonized as an extension of America’s worst enemy of the time: socialism. Feminism was seen as a radical ideology set to destroy the foundation of American society, especially the traditional family structure. This manifested itself during the campaign against the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in the early 1970s. The amendment, which would guarantee equal rights for women, was met with vehement opposition from conservatives. In an article attacking the amendment and women’s liberation movement, conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly wrote: “women’s lib is a total assault on the role of the American woman as a wife and mother and on the family as the basic unit of society”¹⁰². This negative perception of the feminist movement, relayed by the media, delegitimizes attempts at reforming society or challenging gender roles. To this day, feminism carries a negative connotation. Coined by conservative radio pundit Rush Limbaugh, the term “femi-nazi” is often used to discredit feminist activists by presenting them as fascists. In a fund-raising letter aimed at defeating a piece of Iowa legislation which would have extended constitutional protection to women, tele-evangelist Pat Robertson wrote that: “the feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians”¹⁰³. While this extreme view is shared by only a small minority of the population, this rhetoric has been successful in tarnishing the image of the feminist movement as well as reinforcing conventional

⁹⁸ The World Economy Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2013* (2013)

⁹⁹ *2013 Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Board Directors* <www.catalyst.org> (2013)

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Russo. “The Motherhood Mandate.” (1976)

¹⁰² Schlafly, “What’s Wrong With ‘Equal Rights’ for Women?” (1972)

¹⁰³ Pat Robertson 1992 Iowa direct mail fundraising, letter cited in the *Washington Post* “Equal Rights Initiative in Iowa Attacked,” (1992)

gender roles. These socially constructed notions of how men and women should behave which are inculcated from childhood and to which individuals are required to conform or face social scrutiny, are not easy to do away with. These thousand-year old conventional conceptions of masculinity and femininity are often internalized and viewed as the natural order of things, and despite the recent progress in women's status, attempting to change mentalities may not be as easy. "Experience has demonstrated that the formal barriers to women's emancipation –votelessness, educational and occupational discriminations, and the like—are less serious and more susceptible to change than the domestic, institutional, and social customs that keep women in the home"¹⁰⁴. As a result, the few women to actually reach a status of political power face intense scrutiny which most of their male counterpart don't seem subject to. The 2011 documentary on gender bias *Miss Representation* highlights this phenomenon by comparing the way male and female politicians are represented in the media. While news coverage of male politicians tends to focus more on content and policies, female politicians are mostly judged on their physical appearance, or ridiculed as bossy and nagging.¹⁰⁵

3) You've come a long way, baby: female agency in film

This popular slogan was created by cigarette brand Virginia Slims in an advertising campaign aimed at women in the 1960s and 1970s. The premise of the advertisement was to highlight the advancement of the feminist cause and the progress towards gender equality which had been achieved in the previous decades (for example, the evolution of social attitudes towards female tobacco consumption: from a sign of low standards and sexual promiscuity to a symbol of female emancipation). Virginia Slims' slogan seems to suggest an improvement in women's status, which, as discussed in the previous section, is only partially right. Woman's place in society is still firmly kept in the background, and this is notably done through the use of popular culture.

Gender bias is very visible in the representation of female characters on film and television. Hollywood, as most industries, is mostly male-dominated. Of the 100 top-grossing films of 2013, only 15% had female protagonists, and only 30% of speaking characters were women. Women represented only 6% of the directors and 10% of the writers of the most successful 250 films of 2013¹⁰⁶. But, even though Hollywood has been historically run by men, a few women still managed to break through and made an important contribution to early American cinema. Lois Weber is

¹⁰⁴ William O'Neill, cited in Russo (1976)

¹⁰⁵ Siebel, Jennifer *Miss Representation* (2011) <missrepresentation.org>

¹⁰⁶ Lauzen and Siebel "To Hollywood, Men Are the Bigscreen Heroes" (2014)

considered one of the most influential cineaste of Hollywood history. Along with filmmakers such as D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille, she is credited with the creation of classical Hollywood style and widely recognized for her innovative techniques. Her movies dealt with the social issues women faced at the time, notably contraception and abortion, like in her movies *Where are my Children?* (1916) and *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1917), which were said to be inspired by the life of activist Margaret Sanger. Both movies broke attendance records at the time. Another film, *Shoes* (1916), is a sharp criticism of the materialism of American society and its consequences on working class women. Dorothy Arzner was probably the most famous and powerful female director of the classical Hollywood era. She would often wear masculine clothing and adopt manly manners in order to integrate the increasingly misogynist industry. She directed films with highly controversial themes. In *Christopher Strong* (1933), for example, she had Katharine Hepburn fall in love with a married man, and the 1936 *Craig's Wife* which depicted a woman whose love for material wealth clearly outweighed her affection towards her husband. With the establishment of the studio system, the increasing pressures to regulate content and the onset of the Great Depression, female filmmakers were progressively forced out of film production as opportunities began to shrivel. Women were still present in the industry, but in another capacity: they were relegated to more 'feminine' jobs, such as secretaries, seamstresses, or screenwriters. 'Script girls' were indeed very common, as women were deemed to have more moral virtue, which is something Hollywood aspired to at the time. As a result, several female writers gained notoriety, such as Frances Marion, who was the first person to win two Academy Awards in the same category. Frances Marion wrote over 300 scripts and helped launch or cement careers, like that of Mary Pickford, Marie Dressler and Greta Garbo¹⁰⁷. Similarly, Anita Loos wrote a multitude of scripts, notably the 1932 sultry *The Red-Headed Woman*. D.W. Griffith employed her frequently. Despite such accomplishments, the masculinization of the film industry still kept women from accessing important positions. Even activities which were often considered feminine, such as make-up or costume design, were more and more reserved to men. Women's contribution to cinema was lessened and films were even re-edited with female filmmakers or writers' names having been replaced with that of their husbands¹⁰⁸. By the 1930s, most directors, producers and screenwriters were male. This disparity is reflected in the content of the movies produced by these companies, which often lack well-constructed, complex female characters. Most of the time, they would act as the love interest of the hero, or a relative in need of protection. Just as historically a gender division of roles led women to depend on men for survival, women in films have also depended on men's control of the narrative. As author Carmen Indurain Eraso notes:

¹⁰⁷ Beauchamp *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* 8-9

¹⁰⁸ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film* 265

This identification of gender with the active/passive dichotomy became a stock feature in classical films where men portrayed dynamic characters in constant evolution, while women remained static spectators of male action-makers.¹⁰⁹

Women in early Hollywood films would often fit into the dichotomy of the traditional Victorian classification of women: they were either the 'good', pure, angelical woman; or the 'fallen' women. The former would usually appear under the traits of a kind daughter, a faithful wife, or a caring mother. She would often be infantilized in her demeanor or treatment, depicted as a helpless victim. Her innocence is her main defining quality. While the main male character would be an active, central figure of the film, this female character would often act as the 'damsel in distress', a mere plot device in the story of the hero who will have to save or protect her from danger. Her counterpart on the virgin-whore continuum is the figure of the vamp. Unlike the subdued, chaste and morally good woman, the vamp is the overly sexual temptress who corrupts the hero with her loose morals. The distinction was also made explicit by visual contrast: the 'good' woman was often portrayed by a white, blond blue-eyed actress, such as Mary Pickford, and 'bad' women usually had darker traits, like famous vamp Theda Bara. They were also most likely to be pictured as women of color, thus confirming the trend of orientalism and the representation of women of color as lascivious and exotic. The Roaring Twenties, however, provided women with more money to attend the movie theater and, with the feminist movement gaining momentum, women began to contest this simplistic, reactionary depiction of female characters. A series of audacious films, dubbed 'sex comedies' were produced as a result. Female characters became more independent and more active. Films began to tackle controversial issues, such as adultery, unmarried motherhood, and class disparities. The very fashionable figure of the flapper became recurrent in these movies, the most famous example being actress Clara Bow. In her most notorious role in *It* (1927), she plays the role of Betty Lou Spence, a feisty single mother from a modest social background who is infatuated with her rich boss and tries to seduce him. The name of the film was used to describe the magnetism and charm of Betty Lou, earning Bow the nickname of "It Girl". However, sexually explicit films were very risky, and in all the popular genres of the time, most female characters were reduced to the good/bad binary, where good girls are rewarded and bad girls are punished. Pre-Code movies were still largely centered on male characters and women were relegated to the background. In the trendy gangster film genre, women were either obedient wives or prostitutes. Similarly, female characters in Western movies are usually 'saloon hussies', or the helpless girl who is captured by Native-American savages or tied to a train track, waiting to be rescued. This representation was carried out through the 1930s and furthered by the Production Code. World War II offered a change of perspective,

¹⁰⁹ Carmen Indurain Eraso, "Thelma and Louise, 'Easy Riders' in a male genre" (2001)

however. With the men gone to the front, women and children became the main audience. Once again, women were encouraged to join the workforce and support the war effort. This was partly achieved through popular culture. The figure of Rosie the Riveter was used to rally women into going to work at a factory. Movies like *So Proudly We Hail!* (1943) and *Cry 'Havoc'* (1943) depicted strong women, usually nurses, on the battlefield. But this empowerment was tempered by the development in the 1940s and 1950s of the film noir genre. The woman in film noir is usually an updated version of the early cinema vamp: the femme fatale, or black widow. Actresses Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner, Lauren Bacall and Barbara Stanwyck built their careers playing this kind of roles. Veronica Lake, another classical example of the figure, was so popular that the US government asked her to change her trademark 'peek-a-boo' hairstyle because they felt it endangered female factory workers who copied it and whose hair would be caught in the machinery. The film noir femme fatale is manipulative, independent and seductive; lures men, seducing them in order to get what she wants. Her aggressive sexuality and transgression of social norms are usually punished by the end of the movie (often by her death), which therefore reinforces the idea that a woman who misbehaves exposes herself to dangerous repercussions. The film noir woman embodied the social tension of post-war America, when women who had enjoyed work and being autonomous were suddenly forced back into domestic lives. Self-sufficiency, which was seen as admirable during the war was then reprehensible. In order to advertise the joys of the household, movies of the 1950s promoted middle-class domestic bliss. The housewife became the new female hero and ideal. She embodies the archetype of the obedient wife and caring mother, satisfied in her role as the modern angel in the house. She takes pride in her clean, proper suburban home furnished with the latest appliances, and her perfect traditional family. This ideology was particularly present on television, which was gaining in popularity and significance. Television shows like *Father Knows Best* idealized this suburban lifestyle.

The 1950s also saw the rise of the so-called 'blond bombshell'. This highly sexualized woman, made famous by sex symbols like Marilyn Monroe or Jayne Mansfield, was Hollywood's response to an ever increasing loosening of the sexual mores. But unlike the femme fatale, the blond bombshell was naïve and not very bright, blissfully unaware of her charms and the effects she has on men (usually for comic effects). This was a way to channel female sexuality into a titillating yet respectable figure. This airhead, harmless pretty girl knows her righteous place and desires nothing more than to fit in society's expectations and find a husband.

The social unrest of the 1960s and 1970s severely shook the foundation of American society. As a result, Hollywood had no choice but to adapt its message to its new audience. In the subsequent decades, the image of the woman underwent a drastic change. With the conventional family unit

being questioned by feminists, female characters became more and more emancipated from the restriction of the domestic sphere. However, many films which featured independent working women actually presented a stern criticism of woman's liberation. In the late 1970s and 1980s, in particular, movies depicting ambitious working women as cold and selfish abounded. These films, like the 1987 *Baby Boom*, insisted on the mere impossibility for women to conciliate their work with their family life. About this phenomenon, Elayne Rapping writes:

What was most significant about the direction of this genre in the later '70s and early '80s was the switch from the focus on women to the problems of men. In most 'family breakdown' movies of that time, it is the father and husband who suddenly becomes the 'heroine,' the good guy who is seen to change and grow into a responsible, nurturing provider/parent, while the estranged wife is the heavy.¹¹⁰

Kramer vs. Kramer (1979) is an example of such film. It depicts the story of a couple going through a divorce and the ensuing custody battle. Dustin Hoffman's character, Ted Kramer, is pictured as a good father, ready to sacrifice his career for his child; whereas his soon to be ex-wife, played by Meryl Streep, is depicted as distant and selfish.

Another way in which the establishment's distrust and distaste for feminism and the newfound liberty women enjoyed is translated into the screen is the increase of violence directed towards female characters in both films and television shows. A new kind of horror movie, known as 'slasher film', gained popularity in the 1980s with films such as *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), or the iconic pioneer, *Psycho* (1960). This genre attracted criticism from feminist film critics because of its underlying misogyny. Indeed, it features a crazed serial killer, usually male, gruesomely murdering people, usually women. The female victims, yet again, are often pictured as sexually active and morally reprehensible. This is the case of Marion Cane in *Psycho*, or the various victims of Michael in *Halloween*. As Carol Clover notes:

In the slasher film, sexual transgressors of both sexes are scheduled for early destruction. The genre is studded with couples trying to find a place beyond purview of parents and employers where they can have sex, and immediately afterwards (or during) being killed¹¹¹

By contrast, the 'Final Girl', a name given to the last surviving character who most of the time manages to run away or defeat the killer, is usually depicted as virginal, thus further reinforcing the prevalent notion of the 'bad' woman needing punishment and the 'good' woman triumphing.

¹¹⁰ Rapping, Elayne. "Hollywood's New "Feminist" Heroines" (1986)

¹¹¹ Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" (1987)

Female characters are also often victimized in popular crime television drama. Shows like *Law and Order*, *Special Victim Unit* demonstrate a strong gender bias in the representation of victims, 69% of which are female (and predominantly white)¹¹². And although these statistics reflect a general tendency in New York City crime (and crime in general), it is the problematic representation of these victims which is often criticized by feminists:

Feminist scholars have long argued that the media frequently misrepresent sexual assault by replicating common rape myths, which either blame the victim for the crime or show images of “innocent” victims who are savagely brutalized by monstrous (less than human) offenders¹¹³

This victimization of female characters further negates their agency. It is commonly used to advance the development of male characters. This has been denounced by comic book writer Gail Simone who in 1999 coined the term ‘Women in Refrigerator’¹¹⁴ to describe this trope. The name refers to a 1994 *Green Lantern* comic book in which the hero’s girlfriend is killed by his archenemy and stuffed in his refrigerator. In her website, Simone created a list of all the instances when a female character is killed, raped or depowered in order to motivate the male protagonist to defeat the villain. This plot device is predominant in comic books, but is also found in a lot of movies or television shows.

In the rare instances when female characters are the protagonists and heroes of the movies, it is usually in the movies marketed to women, often referred to as ‘chick flicks’, ‘soap operas’ or ‘tearjerkers’. These usually take the form of sentimental comedies, or romantic comedies (shortened as ‘romcom’) and accentuate the preconception that women are sensitive and more emotional than men. Although these movies are centered on female characters, their story actually reinforces conventional gender roles and stereotypes. Woman’s films usually revolve around men and the female character’s quest to find love. Most of the time, the happy ending involves the female character finding happiness in the form of domestic bliss with her love interest. They do little to advance the cause of feminism and barely acknowledge some of the issues women are faced with. Instead, they depict women as stereotypical figures: shallow, emotional, dependent, obsessed with appearances and material possessions: “women’s issues [...] became good selling points for old stereotypes. These movies did not promote women’s issues; they attacked them”¹¹⁵. Although some movies do feature female friendships, most insist on enmity between women by setting them as rivals. This aspect is relayed by reality TV shows such as *The Bachelor*, where women literally compete for a man’s attention. In recent years, people have started to criticize this superficial

¹¹² Britto, Hughes, Saltzman and Stroh, “Does “Special” Mean Young, White and Female? Deconstructing the Meaning of “Special” in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*” (2007)

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Simone, “Women in Refrigerators” (1999)

¹¹⁵ Movshovitz, “The Delusion of Hollywood’s “Women’s Films”” (1979)

representation of women and criticize the shallowness of the majority of female characters. For example, the Bechdel Test, named after cartoonist Alison Bechdel, is usually used to highlight gender bias in film. It originated in one of Bechdel's cartoons in 1985 and has since been used to analyze female characterization. In order to pass the test, a movie must fulfill three requirements: it must have at least two named female characters, there must be at least one instance of these female characters interacting with each other, and they must be talking about something other than a male character. Unsurprisingly, very few Hollywood movies pass that test.

At first glance, it thus seems that female characters in Hollywood movies have gained agency and independence, which most of the time mirrors society's changing attitude and social movements for women's emancipation. However, that advancement to women's status is often followed by reactionary backlash and a return to traditional gender roles, which is reflected in the image of women on screen. Contemporary female characters may be more self-sufficient and stronger than their earlier counterparts, but only in appearances. In fact, most women characters are actually old archetypes, updated and modernized to fit today demographic. It is therefore more an attempt to please the discontented female and feminist audience than a real contestation of the patriarchal hegemony. Most female characters are mostly one-dimensional, passive, and are present on screen only to complement the male protagonist.

CHAPTER III: CLASS IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

1) The USA : a divided nation

Class is a sociological and political concept which organizes individuals into hierarchical categories according to socio-economic factors such as level of employment, education, income or type of profession.

The United States of America constructed itself on the concept of liberty and equality. The Thirteen Colonies declared independence from England because its strict class system and heavy taxation was impeding social mobility. As a result, America has always prided itself on being a classless society, where success was achievable to anyone. Individualism, the belief that each individual was responsible for their own destiny and accomplishment, is also a predominant ideology in the American society. This philosophy contributed to the idea of the American Dream. In the early 1930s, author James Truslow Adams introduced the concept in his book *The Epic of America*. This notion of

a “land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” , based on the Declaration of Independence definition of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” as “inalienable Rights”, has been inherent to American culture ever since. Ken Hills describe the American Dream as the idea that

by dint of hard work, a modicum of education, "natural" intelligence, and luck, people may achieve a measure of self-advancement and prosperity. Each American is raised within this hybrid ideology of Enlightenment utilitarianism, fatalism, social Darwinism, and aspects of Calvinist and Puritan belief systems about the self, the meaning of personal gain, and the supposed abiding competitive advantage available to Americans and newcomers hoping to become citizens.¹¹⁶

The myth of the self-made man, the aspiration towards upward social mobility and equality of opportunity have been upheld by centuries of ‘rags-to-riches’ stories, either fictional or factual. This contributed to the international prestige of America, which was seen as a place where the streets were literally paved with gold and attracted waves of hopeful immigrants fleeing hardship. The enticement of the West, with its cheap land and the lure of Californian gold contributed to the development of capitalism in this land of opportunity, and fortunes were made. As a result of this, the pursuit of material goods became a main concern for most Americans who have, over time, come to equate happiness and worth with ownership. This became instrumental in shaping the society of the United States which, despite the Founding Fathers’ aspiration to build a country where everybody could succeed, grew steadily more unequal. Individualism and capitalism fostered a need to outdo one another and constant competition. The doctrine of social Darwinism which emerged in the 1870s used the influential biological theory of natural selection and applied the notion of survival of the fittest to economics. Therefore, ‘laissez-faire’ capitalism and competition between individuals (or corporations) was encouraged as a way to distinguish the worthy from the losers. Moreover, the power structure based on free market and capitalism establishes a system in which the rich get richer and the poor stagnate. Better access to higher education, healthcare and heavier political influence allows the higher classes to maintain the status quo. Today, income inequality is higher than it has ever been since the 1920s¹¹⁷. In 2012, the top-earning 20% of the population held 51% of the total income of the country¹¹⁸. American reliance on finance and the stock market led to some of the most disastrous economic catastrophes in history, such as the 1929 Wall Street crash and the subsequent Great Depression. These failures of capitalism are often dismissed or attributed to external factors (such as mass immigration). Instead of challenging the institution, the blame is put

¹¹⁶ Hills, op. cit.

¹¹⁷ Piketty Thomas and Saez Emmanuel “Income Inequality in the United States, 1913–1998” (2003)

¹¹⁸ *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2012*, Central Bureau of Census 2013

on individuals (such as bankers or powerbrokers). Popular culture contributes to this phenomenon by the perpetuating racial stereotypes as way to avoid criticizing capitalism, notably the idea that minorities are inherently lazier, more ignorant or corrupt than white people¹¹⁹.

As one of the countries where the gap between the rich and the poor is the widest, the United States has historically been divided. In the first half of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution reshaped the socio-economic landscape of the country, as agriculture became more and more superseded by industry as the main economic force. The attraction of factories and higher employment rates drove people to massively migrate towards the more industrial and more urbanized North, especially to towns along the East Coast. Eventually, rural areas in the South became more and more desolate and the geographic division of the country became even more pronounced. Eventually, the country erupted into a 4-year long Civil War which cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of men and destroyed the country (especially the South, where most of the fighting took place).

The industrial revolution also divided the workforce between workers and employers. Mechanization and scientific management increased efficiency and production, but it also led to the exploitation of workers. As a result, the labor force decided to organize in order to obtain better working conditions and stricter workplace regulations. Trade unions used strikes or collective bargaining to put pressure on companies to reduce work hours and improve safety measures. However, unionism carried a negative connotation, relayed by the press and the federal government which passed laws to reduce their influence and limit their actions. The labor movement was considered 'un-American', as it aimed to restrict capitalism and therefore hinder its development. In spite of this, unionism grew steadily more popular, especially during the Great Depression and the following years under President Roosevelt's administration. After the Second World War, however, unions' influence started to decline, partly because of the association of the labor movement to socialism and communism, the country's ideological antagonists of the times.

The post-war era was a period of unprecedented affluence. The military-industrial complex of the Cold War provided the country with a steady flow of income which largely profited the higher classes. However, the middle classes also thrived in the 1950s and 1960s. White-collar, skilled workers greatly improved their lifestyle as a result of the economic boom, and another population movement occurred, but this time out of the cities and towards the peripheries. Middle-class families moved towards more spacious and quieter houses in the suburbs and created a mostly white and Christian community sharing similar values. Because the remaining population was largely composed of lower-class and immigrant people, the inner-city soon became associated with the ideas of

¹¹⁹ Benschhoff & Griffin, 202

insecurity, poverty and bad living conditions. This geographical division is also found on a larger scale: there indeed remain cultural stereotypes about Southern and rural states, which are seen as generally poorer, less educated and less tolerant than urbanized, Northern states. The figures of the hillbilly and the redneck are examples of these stereotypes, describing a bigoted, ignorant, working class person, usually speaking with a heavy regional accent. The term 'white trash' is also used to derogatively refer to the predominantly white, lower class population of these states.

As a whole, the United States is therefore a deeply divided country. Even though politicians refute the idea of a classist society and class warfare, there definitely are socio-economic disparities within the country which support the idea of a hierarchical social structure in which the people on top control most of the wealth and power. Materialism and capitalism has led Americans to rely heavily on material possession as an indicator of worth and success, thus contributing to a society defined by mass consumption of goods and services. The entertainment industry, as one of the main ideological forces of the nation, largely contributes to the idea of ownership providing happiness and finality.

2) Hollywood, the dream machine

At its inception, cinema was mainly a popular, low cost entertainment. The nickelodeons and peep shows were mostly situated in working-class neighborhood, on boardwalks or amusement parks. Consequently, motion pictures soon gained an unsavory reputation within the upper classes as a dangerous place where people of low status and questionable morals would meet and partake in reprehensible activities, such as alcohol or drug consumption. Moreover, the content of some of these early films displayed a populist inclination and often ridiculed the higher classes or the establishment. In the 1910s, however, film producers and exhibitors decided to change their tactic and market their produce towards a more affluent audience. In order to redeem the prestige of cinema and attract a more respectable audience, large and imposing theatres, dubbed movie palaces, were built in middle-class neighborhoods. The critical aspect of the movies was toned down in favor of more conventional themes, insisting on Christian values and morals. Stories took on a more optimistic tone as the classical Hollywood narrative took shape. This style, based on ambitious characters achieving success through their own volition, was heavily influenced by what is known as the Horatio Alger myth. Alger was a 19th century author who published many cheap novels which generally depicted rags to riches stories of a (usually male) poor protagonist who manages to rise to more comfortable social position through hard work and determination. These stories, echoing the American Dream, were very popular and were adapted by several filmmakers and over time became the traditional narrative format. Movies thus started to be centered on the uplifting adventures of a

penniless but commendable hero, and generally closed on a happy ending. One of the most iconic examples of this formula is the 1923 silent film *Safety Last*, in which Harold Lloyd impersonates an ambitious salesclerk whose social ascension is represented as a literal climb up the façade of the corporate building. The Horatio Alger myth was also applied to female characters, although in a socially acceptable way: lower class women would achieve upward mobility by marrying a wealthy man. This is the case of Clara Bow's character in *It*.

The association between the entertainment industry and the concept of the American Dream was also furthered by the real-life Horatio Alger stories of some of its most popular figures. The stories of movie stars coming from modest background and achieving the status of Hollywood royalty fascinated the public. The movie-fan magazines were filled with success stories like those of Joan Crawford, Lana Turner or Rock Hudson, who all grew up in low income families and 'made it' in Hollywood. The entertainment industry also comprised a lot of immigrants, especially of Jewish descents, who rose up from managing nickelodeons to the being at the head of production companies.

A lot of films and television shows are based on the principle of escapism and endeavored to produce distractions through which people could forget about the unpleasantness or mundanity of their lives. To accomplish that, filmmakers rely on the appeal of material wealth, featuring actors clad in expensive, beautiful clothes driving fast cars and living in opulent houses. The 1950s, in particular, with their emphasis on conformity and material possession, saw an increase in the display of abundance and affluence in popular culture. Even today, escapism remains an intrinsic part of popular culture, and the Horatio Alger myth is more alive than ever. The success stories of the dotcom millionaires in the 1990s and internet sensations have resurrected the idea of easily reached notoriety, and the attraction of Hollywood stardom is even stronger now that its reach has globalized. Fairy tales narratives are still being used in a lot of movies, especially in films targeted towards women. The Cinderella format, in which a mousy or poor girl is remade into a glamorous woman who marries rich, is very popular. The myth of ordinary people becoming rich and famous overnight is strengthened by the development of reality television and game shows, such as *American Idol*, or *Deal or No Deal*, in which hopeful candidates can win money through talent or sheer luck.

3) Representing class and social issues

Although the large majority of movies did support and encourage the myth of the American Dream and focused on wealthy characters, some filmmakers proposed an alternative view on the American society. The Great Depression of the late 1920s dealt a violent blow to the United States and severely shook people's belief in the possibility of social mobility. As a result, several movies started to diverge from the established Hollywood formula and instead focus their story on destitute characters trying to survive outside of the system. Gangster movies and social problem films grew in popularity. Charlie Chaplin's famous character, the Little Tramp, was a prime example of figures which stood against traditional Hollywood style. In his movies, Chaplin depicts the hardship of the lower classes and offers a sharp criticism of the reality of the American Dream. For instance, in *The Gold Rush* (1925), he plays a hopeful prospector who is forced to eat his own shoe; the 1917 *The Immigrant* depicts the hardship of a newly arrived European immigrant and the ruthlessness of American society. In one of his most famous performances, Chaplin denounces the excess of capitalist society, the exploitation of workers in the iconic *Modern Times* (1936). His light tone and comic style allows his film to keep being distributed. Even though his little tramp keeps being arrested or fired and facing difficulties, he remains hopeful that things will improve, and his adventures generally end on a happy note.

In the second half of the 1930s, the enforcement of the Production Code restrained filmmakers' creative freedom and established limits to the political and social issues which could be pictured on screen. As a result, the rare movies which tried to denounce inequalities or corruption had to do it in a way that would put the blame on individuals rather than on the system itself. That way, societal evils were depicted as the result of the actions of a marginal group of people:

With few exceptions, such oversimplification of social problems tended to provide a rather reactionary political message, a nostalgia for an older, simpler world. It is not the economic or the political or the legal systems themselves that are at the root of any breakdown, but rather individual corrupters from within the system - crooked capitalists, politicians and shysters. Once the hero has ferreted out these villains, then the system itself can be restored, the common man and the little fellow can again receive their just and bountiful desserts, and the older values of laissez-faire, fair play, and equal opportunity for all can once more stand as the cornerstone of society.¹²⁰

This is the case of most film noirs, despite their cynicism and pessimistic view of society. The 1940 cinematic adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning John Steinbeck novel *the Grapes of Wrath* is also

¹²⁰ Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, "The Worker and Hollywood" (1978)

an example of such diminishment of political overtones. Steinbeck's novel is a stark representation of the dire living conditions of rural workers in a time of growing industrialization and environmental catastrophe. It follows the Joad family on their journey from their farm in Oklahoma, which they have to abandon when the Dust Bowl destroys their crops, to California, where they have been enticed to go by deceitful accounts of available work. It depicts the dreadful trip and the family's delusion when they finally reach their destination and find that the market is already saturated with workers and that the lack of regulations have led the exploitation of workers and the ruin of small farmers by large agrarian corporations. Although the John Ford adaptation tries to remain as close as possible to the original work, some alterations were made in order for the movie to appear less political and more like a historical rendering of the ordeal of rural families in the early 1930s. For example, the people or organizations causing the Joads' distress are never explicitly named, but rather referred to by a vague "they". The family's misery is also mainly attributed to the Dust Bowl, and not to the bank which repossessed their farm, nor the agricultural companies which exploited them. Finally, the socialist sentiment of the book is also reduced in favor of family values¹²¹.

Over time, with the effects of the Great Depression subsiding under the New Deal, optimism returned to the USA. During World War II, the country was united in supporting the troops and defeating the common enemy. Propaganda war movies stressed the unity of the American army and the camaraderie of the soldiers which transcended class (and racial) lines. The post-war era and its renewed sense of optimism and economic wellbeing brought back the American Dream to the screen. The Red Scare and the tensed climate of the 1950s dissuaded filmmakers to tackle social issues. The only poor characters depicted on screen usually achieved financial success by the end of the film. Feel-good movies celebrating materialism and idealizing the perfect suburban life multiplied. Comedies such as *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) or *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), both depict the extents to which some ambitious women (so-called 'gold diggers') are ready to go in order to secure a comfortable situation, notably by marrying into the high society. In the 1957 *Silk Stockings*, Soviet agents are so enthralled by the luxuries of the Western world that they decide to betray their own country and embrace the American way of life.

The protest movements of the 1960s and the 1970s led to more socially conscious movies. The influence of the Beat movement and other countercultures were at first ignored by Hollywood which continued to produce content according to its classical formula. However, with plummeting attendance due to younger generations disinterest in mainstream culture, populations moving away from the cities (and away from movie theatres), the increasing popularity of television and the

¹²¹ Benschhoff and Griffin, p222

collapse of the studio system, Hollywood had to reach out to new demographics. In order to appeal to the coveted audience, younger filmmakers, themselves influenced by the social movements, were hired and produced movies which addressed some of the issues of the times. The disaster of the Viet Nam War and the Watergate scandal severely shook the population's belief in their leaders and institutions, and this distrust was reflected in popular culture. The focus of Hollywood films shifted from uplifting stories to gritty representations of the lives of the have-nots. Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) expose the disastrous effects of capitalism on the lower classes and their attempts to achieve the American Dream, or simply survive. Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) uses techniques from the film noir genre to denounce the corruption and greed of the powerful¹²².

The 1980s and their crackdown on liberalism weakened once again the political dissent in Hollywood. The economic ideology of the times, called 'Reaganomics' in reference to President Reagan, stipulated that the wealth of the upper classes would benefit the lower class through 'trickle-down economics'. The country was going through another recession, and as a result, the administration cut income taxes and reduced government regulations to promote the free market. The government also limited federal spending in order to reduce the national deficit. President Reagan, himself a former Hollywood actor, was a fervent believer in the American Dream and promoted it as being patriotic. The figure of the 'yuppies', short for young urban professionals, became a symbol of social success and upward mobility. Capitalism and consumerism once again were established as absolutes. This resulted in the commercialization of cinema, with the development of lucrative movie franchises like *Star Wars*, *The Godfather*, *Indiana Jones* or *Jaws*.

Between escapism and realism, Hollywood's representation of social issues seems to vary depending on the socio-political context of the times. As a whole, though, the movie industry considers itself as being primarily in the business of making money by entertaining people, and has therefore often favored feel-good stories of good things happening to good people. Even though some films do present a challenge to the hegemonic ideology, they are vastly outnumbered by the thousands of Horatio Alger-like stories upholding the American Dream. Today, the lower classes are still widely unrepresented in mainstream media, and when they are, the image is usually derogatory. The development of reality TV is a good example of this media bias. The popularity of shows which glorify material wealth and idealize the rich and famous, like *The Real Housewives*, *My Supersweet Sixteen* or *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*, is almost a match to those which proclaim to display the 'real' America, but actually alienate certain groups of people and reinforce negative cultural stereotypes.

¹²² Benschhoff & Griffin, 234

Shows like *Jersey Shore*, or *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* depict lower class people as ignorant and vulgar.

**PART THREE:
NEW VISIONS**

CHAPTER I: NEW AUDIENCE, NEW HEROES

The commercialization of cinema led filmmakers to rely heavily on old, traditional formulas and stock characters. Movies with the sole purpose of generating revenues are mass produced by using and recycling old recipes, and in doing so strip film of its thought-provoking nature. Instead, it promotes the well asserted white male dominance, keep women into well-defined and restrictive roles and alienate minorities. However, as society changes and more people become critically aware of cultural representation, audiences have begun to favor more complex and ambiguous content.

1) Challenging protagonists: likeable villains and unlikely heroes

This revival of Hollywood traditions and reinforcement of conventional values of race, gender, class and sexuality is counter to the generally more progressive attitudes of the population. As a result, audiences began to tire of predictable storylines and flat characters. This provoked a renewed interest for independent productions, that is to say, companies outside of the studio system. Before that, independent movies had always been assimilated to low-budget, obscure, badly made productions. The almost 3 decade-long oligopoly of the major Hollywood studios and their control on the entire motion pictures industry (production, distribution and exhibition) have made it difficult for independent filmmakers to produce and promote their films. And since Hollywood practiced self-censorship on a regular basis, any opinions which differed from the hegemonic view were rarely broadcasted. After the 1952 Paramount Consent Decrees and the effective end of the big studios trust, independent cinema was made more accessible. However, the socio-political climate of the 1950s did not particularly encourage people to openly express dissident or alternative views. The anxiety of the Cold War drove people to the safety of the establishment. Over time, though, as the baby boomers reached early adulthood, they started to question the ideology and doctrines they were being inculcated. This new generation, born in a time of relative peace and economic affluence, began to repudiate the values transmitted by their parents or society. The stagnation of the ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union led to a gradual disenchantment of the younger generation, as well as a distrust of political leaders. The military disaster of the American invasion of Cuba in the Bay of Pigs in 1961 reinforced the view of politicians as war-mongering incompetents. Several anti-establishment movements began explicitly criticize American culture. Civil Rights movements fought against the ostracization of non-white and non-heterosexual

from society by organizing a campaign of non-violent demonstrations, environmentalism denounced the consequences of industrialization on Nature, and counter-cultural artists like the Beat poets or Andy Warhol publicly denounced excessive capitalism and consumerism. The 1960s were also marked by a renewed interest for other cultures: esotericism and Eastern philosophy grew particularly popular, as did foreign films like the cinema of the French New Wave. This movement, which emerged in the late 1950s, consisted in several filmmakers, themselves influenced by Hollywood directors like Orson Welles or Alfred Hitchcock, who produced experimental and critical movies, usually with existential themes.

With the younger generations losing interest in traditional Hollywood, studio executives began to worry about the future of their companies. Faced with the competition of television and foreign films, American cinema was heading towards financial ruin. Consequently, a new breed of cineaste, film-school educated and influenced by countercultures, took charge of movie production. In order to attract the coveted younger audience (who had the most disposable income) filmmakers like Martin Scorsese, Stanley Kubrick, Francis Ford Coppola or Robert Altman began to address more directly the social issues of the times in their movies. Dubbed the New Hollywood, post-classical Hollywood, or even American New Wave, this movement promoted the authorial role of the director and the need to value a distinctive creative vision over pre-established style. New Hollywood films thus reflected the director's personal aesthetics and broke away from classical Hollywood traditions. This consisted in a rejection of classical film structure but also a focus on more complex characters. The conventional opposition between the morally good hero and the evil villain was tempered by the emergence of new heroes. The line between the 'good guy' and 'bad guy' became more and more blurred as movies and television shows started to depict morally grey or corrupt protagonists, and charismatic antagonists. The New Hollywood hero usually lacks the traditional qualities associated with film protagonists. He is no longer selfish, brave and noble in his righteous quest, but instead shows signs of weakness, greed, moral ambiguity or confusion. For example, the protagonists of the earliest and most significant instance of New Hollywood cinema, the infamous outlaws Bonnie and Clyde in the eponymous 1967 movie demonstrate absolute remorselessness when committing robbery or murder. The movie, which created controversy due to its graphic depiction of violence and sexual innuendos, was a commercial and critical success. The other very influential film of the same year, *the Graduate*, features a confused young man who begins an affair with a married older woman, falls in love with her daughter, whose wedding he ends up interrupting before running away with the bride. Although the movie is a romantic comedy, it does not offer a typical happy ending, as the film ends on a shot of the two runaway lovers staring ambiguously into nothingness in the back of a bus, thus casting uncertainty on their future. The commercial success of these two movies and

their iconic characters shows that the new direction taken by Hollywood was successful in reaching out to new audiences and representing the sullen mood of the times. “Taken together, both films affirmed the discontent of the young, and, in the case of *The Graduate*, underlined that dissatisfaction by locating it precisely at the moment when the American Dream seemed at its peak of material fulfillment, thus creating a paradigm for the type of Sixties film which attempted to subvert the values that had dominated American film since the Forties”¹²³.

In the years following these two films, more and more movies began to feature more and more morally ambivalent lead characters. Michael Corleone in Francis Ford Coppola’s epic *the Godfather* (1972), Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (1971), Tony Montana in *Scarface* (1983) or Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*, all display violent behaviors and take part in illegal activities, and yet the viewer is made to empathize and even identify with them. This tendency to root for the bad guy can be explained by a variety of factors, notably the fact that the protagonist’s actions can sometimes seem justified. Travis Bickle’s violent outburst are directed at the moral decay of New York City and its inhabitants, Harry Callahan’s unorthodox investigating methods (which spawned the ‘loose-cannon cop’ archetype in cop movies) help him kill a dangerous serial murderer, Michael Corleone has no choice but to kill the people sent to assassinate his father.

This phenomenon has also been explained using psychoanalytic theories. For example, Keen, McCoy and Powell posit that identifying with a violent or criminal character allows the viewer to project his own aggressive and sexual urges generated by the id onto the screen: “we propose, at least according to Freud’s approach, that vicariously experiencing aggression and violence in movies, television, and books may serve as an outlet for our aggressive tendencies (i.e., catharsis)”¹²⁴. The satisfaction of seeing characters display more realistic, and more humane emotions, such as fear, anger, or uncertainty also contributes to the audience being able to identify more easily with them than with the infallible, righteous classical heroes. For example, Harrison Ford’s charismatic Han Solo in the original *Star Wars* trilogy is a widely preferred to the mythical hero of the franchise, Luke Skywalker, despite the fact that he is greedy, selfish, sarcastic and crooked (some might even argue it is because of these characteristics).

Over the last few decades, there has been an increase in the popularity and visibility of these characters on screen and on television. Whether they are victims of circumstances or their environment, like Michael Corleone who is forced into the violence of organized crime when his family is in danger, and becomes progressively corrupted by his actions and those of the people around him; or mere opportunists with low principles, like the gang of 11 bank robbers in the 1960 *Ocean’s Eleven* and its subsequent remakes and sequels, the antiheroes have become the new

¹²³ Auster and Quart, “American Cinema of the Sixties” (1984)

¹²⁴ Keen, McCoy and Powell, “Rooting for the Bad Guy: Psychological Perspectives” (2012)

champions of popular culture. Television in particular has helped cement these dubious personalities as fan-favorites, with popular shows like *House M.D.*, *Homeland*, or *The Sopranos* featuring misanthropic, unstable and criminal protagonists. The critically and culturally acclaimed series *Breaking Bad*, in particular, depicts the downward spiral of Walter White, a middle-aged chemistry teacher diagnosed with terminal lung cancer who engages in the production and trade of methamphetamine in order to pay for his treatment and provide financial security for his family after his death. Besides offering a sharp criticism of the American healthcare system, *Breaking Bad* depicts the moral decay of Walter White and his young partner, Jesse Pinkman, as they go from small, local dealers to international drug lords. Despite having enough money to secure a safe and comfortable existence for him and all the members of his family, and his cancer being in remission, White seems unable to give up his criminal empire. The shy, kind middle-class teacher slowly turns into a coldblooded mass murderer, and yet the audience continues to root for him and hope the law, incarnated by his brother-in-law, DEA agent Hank Schrader, never manages to catch him. Similarly, the character of Dexter Morgan in the eponymous television show is a violent sociopathic serial killer who hides as an average man, working as a laboratory technician at the Miami Police Department by day and dismembering people by night. *Dexter* uses and distorts many conventional comic book hero characteristics: like most superheroes, Dexter has a secret identity which he protects by creating a socially acceptable alter-ego; a tragic backstory and a moral code. Indeed, he satisfies his violent homicidal urges (which stem from the psychological trauma of witnessing his mother's brutal murdered as a toddler) by killing, but he chooses his victims according to the strict set of rules imposed by his police officer adoptive father: he can only kill murderers who have evaded justice, and only if he possesses the irrefutable proof that they are guilty. Like with Walter White, the audience sides with the criminal and against the law.

Another example of crooked hero is the ruthless politician Francis Underwood in the dark *House of Cards*. Starring renowned film actors Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright, and produced by Hollywood director David Fincher, the series follows the political ascension of a charismatic Democratic representative, from Congress to the highest office. Unlike Walter White or even Dexter Morgan, Underwood does not have redeeming qualities or circumstances to justify his actions. It is his ambition and thirst for power which motivates him to intimidate, blackmail, and even murder his opponents. And yet, the use of first-person narrative and the frequent breaking of the fourth wall when he addressed the audience directly, manipulate the viewer into, if not sympathizing, at least wishing for Underwood's success.

Besides the multiplicity of morally reprehensible protagonists, New Hollywood movies also created a new type of villain. Even though they mostly remain in essence evil, antagonists have become more prominent in films, sometimes even eclipsing the hero in notoriety. The cannibalistic serial killer

Hannibal Lecter, for example, interpreted by Anthony Hopkins in the 1991 thriller *Silence of the Lambs* has had a lasting influence on the collective mindset and has been named the greatest film villain of all time by the American Film Institute¹²⁵. Similarly, the main antagonist of the *Star Wars* trilogy, Darth Vader, has also become a major cultural icon, as is the eponymous villain of *The Terminator* franchise. The latest villain to achieve such a significant cultural impact is the late Heath Ledger's depiction of the Joker, one of Batman's main antagonists in the 2008 *The Dark Knight*.

Thus, the confusion between protagonist, antagonist, hero and villain has helped to create more complex and more three-dimensional characters who break away from traditional Hollywood archetypes (even though the classical hero figure is still used in some story-driven blockbusters). The 1999 film by David Fincher, *Fight Club*, highlights this phenomenon: in the movie, the antagonist and protagonist are revealed to be the same person, as the hero's rival is actually just a fragment of his imagination.

2) No taxation without (cultural) representation: empowering minorities

This deconstruction of the nature of the typical hero has also opened the way to more diverse protagonist. Women, people of color, and even homosexuals have become more visible in popular culture. After a long struggle against the lack of representation in mainstream cinema, minorities now have more and more characters they can relate to, even though there still remain a lot of disparities.

Throughout film history, female characters have often been relegated to the role of love interest to the male hero, sexualized or infantilized and basically stripped of their agency. With the development of the feminist ideology, however, the mentalities and social expectations regarding gender have changed, yet the representation of women in popular culture seemed to lag behind and still function under the traditional, Victorian-inspired values of femininity. Over time, though female characters have gradually gained independence from their male counterpart and acquired a personality of their own. Strong female lead characters began to appear in mainstream productions, and not just in movies destined to women. The most significant example is probably the 1991 road movie *Thelma and Louise* which featured two women as the main protagonists. Although the movie was a commercial success and won six Academy Awards, it also sparked a lot of controversy due to its feminist subtext. The film offers an interesting mix of several genres: somewhere between the chick

¹²⁵ The American Film Institute, <www.afi.com>

flick, the road movie and the gangster film, it depicts the story of two friends, Thelma Dickinson and Louise Sawyer who decide to take a two-day vacation away from their unsatisfying routines. However, the journey soon takes a turn for the worse when Louise kills a man and the two women have to flee to escape the law. *Thelma and Louise* is innovative in its choice to feature two female protagonists in a genre which is predominantly male-dominated, but also in the message it conveys. Critics have often decried or praised the movie as being feminist, as it shows the effects patriarchal society has on women. Throughout the movie, the systematic victimization of women is denounced, from abusive relationships to attempted rape: “on a week-end getaway from male partner domination, they get to the road only to find ill-treatment from yet again, other men: rapists, a cheating hitch-hiker, a harassing lorrydriver, suffocating policemen”¹²⁶. The two women eventually have to run from the authorities after committing crimes such as murder, bank robbery or arson. However, unlike basic gangster movies, these crimes are not motivated by greed, they are “always the result of men's crimes, which somehow justifies the female leads' actions and vindicates the unfairness of the current legal system.”¹²⁷ Indeed, it is the attempted rape of Thelma which drives Louise to shoot and kill the man; it is the theft of Louise's money by the hitchhiker which forces Thelma to rob a bank; and it is the repeated abuse of the truck-driver which strains the women's patience and prompts them to blow up his vehicle. This rare depiction of acts of revolt against male dominance is a good example of cinematic female empowerment: “through this depiction of dynamic, decision-making women as full protagonists who show pleasure and desire and are empowered by an inherent female bonding, [Ridley] Scott's film vindicates women's right to choose and to fight patriarchal oppression for women”¹²⁸.

Another example of the many strong female protagonists to have appeared on screen in the last few decades, this time aimed at a younger audience, is the character of Buffy Summers in the popular late 1990s television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The show's hero, a young woman gifted with extraordinary fighting abilities, is entrusted with the task of ridding the world of all its evil creatures (vampires, demons, malevolent gods...), all the while dealing with the difficulty of being a seemingly average teenager, and later of handling the responsibilities of adulthood. The show's popularity and influence has made its heroin one of the cultural icons of the 1990s, and has even spawned a new academic discipline: known as 'Buffy studies', these university courses and scholarly articles discuss the cultural significance of the series, usually in terms of gender representation.

More recently, the character of Merida in the 2012 animated film *Brave*, which was co-directed by a woman, has also been celebrated as a good example of strong female protagonist. Merida, a feisty

¹²⁶ Eraso, "Thelma and Louise: 'Easy Rider' in a male genre" (2001).

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid

young Scottish princess who refuses to conform to the passive role which is expected of her, was seen as a welcome deviation from Walt Disney traditional protagonists who were usually traditional princesses waiting for a man to rescue them or set them free.

Finally, television shows like *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives* or the recent *Girls* have contributed to the sexual liberation of women, by depicting female characters engaging in casual sex. *Sex and the City* follows the lives of Carrie Bradshaw and her three best friends in New York City. Although the show has been criticized for its glorification of materialism and its somewhat sexist rhetoric, it was innovative in its representation of female sexuality, as well as some of the issues women face, such as abortion or miscarriages, sexual harassment and body image. *Desperate Housewives* perverts the myth of middle-class suburban bliss by presenting the mostly white suburban community as a cesspool filled with thieves and murderers. Behind the white-picket fences and the perfectly mown grass lay dark secrets which every resident tries to keep from his neighbors. Centering its focus on the lives of five women, all representative of a certain background and fitting a certain archetype of female character, the show offers a cynical view of traditional family values, gender roles and the deceptively fulfilling lives of the suburban housewife. *Girls* has often drawn comparisons with *Sex and the City* because of its similar premise and its sexually explicit content: the series revolves around a group of young female friends living in New York City. However, contrary to *Sex and the City*, the protagonists of *Girls* are mostly middle-class young adults, struggling financially and professionally. Although it has been praised for its dry humor and blunt realism, the show's lack of racial diversity has been perceived as inconsistent with its settings: New York City being such a multi-cultural metropolis, it seems odd that so few people of color are present¹²⁹. *Broad City*, which debuted in 2014, is a comedy series with similar themes but with a more inclusive and realist representation of the lives of two low-income women in their twenties in New York City.

Like women, racial minorities have also gained more visibility and agency in the entertainment industry over the last decades. The 'bankability' of actors like Will Smith, Lucy Liu, Benicio Del Toro, Morgan Freeman, Jessica Alba or Whoopi Goldberg, has encouraged film executives to produce more movies with a racially diverse cast. African American actors began to take on more prominent roles in Hollywood productions, in a large variety of genres. For example, *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Color Purple* (1985), *Glory* (1989) or *Men in Black* (1997) all have an African American lead character. The critically acclaimed television miniseries *Roots*, which ran in the late 1970s, depicts the story of a black family through several generations, from slavery to the 1960s. In 2009, the Walt Disney studios released their first animated feature with an African American protagonist, Tiana in *the Princess and*

¹²⁹ Makarechi "Girls' Reviews: New HBO Show And Lena Dunham Face Backlash On Racism And More", (2012)

the Frog. People of color are also more and more present behind the camera: directors like Tyler Perry, Alfonso Cuarón, Ang Lee, Guillermo Del Toro, M. Night Shyamalan or Spike Lee have all produced movies which were commercial or critical successes. Besides his commercials and music videos, African American director Spike Lee is known for his controversial independent films which deal with race issues such as colorism, discrimination and inner-city crime. His 2000 movie *Bamboozled*, for instance, is a piquant satire of the entertainment industry and its treatment of people of color.

Finally, Hollywood has recently started to alleviate its decade-long taboo on homosexuality, as more and more public figures come out as homosexual or bisexual and society grows more acceptant of sexual orientations. Homosexual characters have thus occupied a central role in movies like *Milk* (2008), or *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and in television shows like *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *the L Word* (2004-2009). It thus seems that, even though it still perpetuates harmful stereotypes about racial and sexual minorities, Hollywood has adopted a more liberal and inclusive approach to representing the American society. While in most cases characters of color have a tendency to remain in the background or be relegated to the white protagonist's friend, and homosexual characters tend to be defined by their sexuality, new protagonists have emerged and contested the white, heteronormative, patriarchal cultural hegemony. The new and much talked about comedy-drama *Orange is the New Black*, for example, which takes place in a female prison features an almost all-women cast of well-rounded and complex characters of all ethnicities and sexual orientations.

CHAPTER II: DECONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN MYTH: HOLLYWOOD REALISM

1) Realism as protest: representing the 'real' America

The enfranchisement of the movie industry from the studio system and the general loosening of the regulation on the content of films have allowed cineastes to produce more realistic films and therefore present a more hard-hitting criticism of America.

The concept of realism, the inclination to represent things as truthfully as possible, has had a large influence on the arts throughout History. The 19th century Realist movement in literature and painting developed as a protest against the grandeur of Romanticism. Writers like Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, Emile Zola, and artists like Gustave Courbet or Edouard Manet thus

chose to abandon epic, baroque or mythical characters and stories and focused instead on the everyday life of the average people. Similarly, realistic films often stand against the pomp of some Hollywood productions. Classical Hollywood films indeed have a tendency to favor style over content, displaying extraordinary characters in a heavily stylized and subjective way, all the while maintaining an illusion of reality to facilitate believability and the viewer's immersion. Realist films, on the other end, tend to rely more heavily on an external, honest and more genuine depiction, similar to the documentary genre. However, one must bear in mind that realist films are still works of fiction, for the most part, and still reflecting its author's views and opinions. The images it projects may appear real and unaltered, but they are the result of careful *mise-en-scène* aimed at provoking an emotional reaction from the viewer.

A good example of the ways in which sensational Hollywood cinema differs from a more realistic approach is the representation of the Viet Nam War in movies. In 1968, the anti-war movement was at an all-time high as the number of wooden coffins sent back to America increased and televisions all around the nation broadcast gruesome images of the war. It is in this context that John Wayne, a notorious Western and war movies hero, released his patriotic film *The Green Berets*. The movie has since been criticized for its historical inaccuracy, obvious pro-Saigon and pro-war message, and glorification of warfare. The movie follows journalist George Beckworth as he decides to go to Vietnam in order to report on the war from a firsthand perspective. There, he meets the Colonel Mike Kirby (played by John Wayne) and decides to accompany him and his troops of highly trained soldiers on their mission. At first very skeptical of the rightfulness of the invasion, the journalist (who represents the public opinion and especially the opponents of the war) gradually finds his opinions swayed by the cruel and evil behavior of the North Vietnamese. The movie's oversimplification of the conflict and vilification of the North Vietnamese Army drew a lot of criticism. Legendary film critic Roger Ebert, in his review of the movie, writes:

The *Green Berets*" simply will not do as a film about the war in Vietnam. It is offensive not only to those who oppose American policy but even to those who support it. At this moment in our history, locked in the longest and one of the most controversial wars we have ever fought, what we certainly do not need is a movie depicting Vietnam in terms of cowboys and Indians.¹³⁰

He also denounces the film's propaganda aspect. Oliver Stone's 1986 *Platoon* was written as a reaction to *The Green Berets*. Based on Stone's personal experience of the war, *Platoon*, with its gritty and dark realism, counters the tendency of recent war movies to produce entertainment by sensationalizing the war and glorifying violence. Instead, it exposes the horrific conditions on the

¹³⁰ Ebert, "The Green Berets review", (1968)

battlefield and the dishonorable behavior of the American soldiers, from drug use to the killing of civilians (in a scene reminiscent of the infamous My Lai massacre). The main antagonist of the movie isn't the North Vietnamese Army, but the despicable Staff Sergeant Barnes. Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) also relies on realist storytelling to depict the atrocities of war and their consequences on the soldiers' psyche, from boot camp brainwashing to killing enemy soldiers.

A similar case of successful realist fiction is the HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008). Although it received only average ratings when it aired, the show has reached cult status and is often referred to as 'the greatest show of all time'. This is partly due to its popular set of characters, from the maverick detective Jimmy McNulty to the entrepreneurial drug dealer Stringer Bell. Created by a former *Baltimore Sun* journalist who spent a year in the Baltimore homicide police department to research for his book and a former Baltimore police officer turned inner-city teacher, the show's five seasons each focus on a particular aspect of Baltimore, microcosm of the American society: the illegal drug trade within the city's poorest neighborhoods, the shipping industry, local politics, education and the print media. Its faithful representation of social issues such as inner-city crime, the inefficiency of the police forces due to the lack of resources and inadequate direction, political corruption, or the sensationalism of the print media. Unlike many social problem films, *The Wire* exposes these problems as institutional, not the result of individual actions. The series end on a montage of the city, as riddled with crime and drugs as it was one the first episode, thus highlighting the futility of the characters' endeavors to change things.

2) Cinematic representation of the national shame: *Django Unchained* and *12 Years a Slave*

The United States' long and problematic history with slavery is still a sensitive subject in America. Therefore, cinematic depictions of this lucrative, 2-century long systematic exploitation of African Americans have often been controversial. Many movies have tried to recreate the barbarism of this practice; the dehumanization, the physical and psychological torture, the forced assimilation. Recently, two films have tackled this issue, in two very different manners: Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) and the Academy Award winning *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013).

Quentin Tarantino is a prominent Hollywood director, known for his controversial use of graphic violence, profanity; and the intertextuality of his movies. Tarantino is known for his larger-than-life characters and flamboyant style which associates striking photography with unexpected musical score. The *Palme d'Or* laureate and fervent cinephile has experimented with a large variety of genre throughout his work: gangster movie (*Reservoir Dogs*, 1992), samurai cinema (*Kill Bill*, 2003), war

movie (*Inglourious Basterds*, 2009). In *Django Unchained*, Tarantino uses the characteristics of spaghetti western to depict the quest of his eponymous character to rescue his wife and take revenge on those who have wronged him. Revenge is a theme which is recurrent in Tarantino's body of work. Several of his previous movies have featured it as a plot. In *Kill Bill* for example, the character known as 'the Bride', a fearless woman assassin, sets out on a killing spree to punish the people who have betrayed and almost killed her. In *Inglourious Basterds*, a division of Jewish American soldiers are dispatched in Nazi-occupied France with the only objective of "killin' Nazis". And in *Django Unchained*, former slave Django takes his revenge by joyfully shooting slave masters, plantation owners, or overseers.

By contrast, *12 Years a Slave* presents a much softer, but no less horrific, representation of the national shame. The film by British director Steve McQueen is an adaptation of the memoir of Solomon Northup's twelve years spent in slavery. Northup was a freed slave living with his family in antebellum New York City in who is tricked, abducted and sent to New Orleans, where he is sold as a slave. The film follows Northup as he tried to fight his captivity, then submitted while still clinging to his identity, endures physical and psychological violence and is finally freed after twelve years. Steve McQueen's films often disturb by their brutal realism and powerful stories. His previous movies, *Hunger* (2008) and *Shame* (2011) are both unrelenting in their depiction of the lives of Irish prisoners during the 1981 hunger strike and sexual addiction. Similarly, *12 Years a Slave* is a frank exposition of slavery as a systematic and implacable evil.

Unsurprisingly, the two films show a great deal of difference in their style and objectives. *Django* is an epic buddy movie filled with dark humor and graphic outburst of violence, while *12 Years a Slave* is a drama on bravery and the endurance of the human's spirit in the face of misery. While Tarantino uses violence and copious amounts of blood as a cathartic experience for the viewer, McQueen's depiction of corporal punishment has no other motive than to expose the reality of slavery. For example, the scene where the young Patsey, played by Lupita Nyong'o, is whipped until her flesh is raw, is excruciatingly long and "the camera lingers [...], calmly taking in the abhorrent spectacle, as if to say, "This was how things were during antebellum times""¹³¹. This produces an emotional reaction much deeper than the mere glorification of violence Tarantino is so famous for.

The characters of *Django* are, in true Tarantino style, a colorful assortment of individuals. However, the director's emphasis on action and visual is sometimes detrimental to the character's depth. Indeed, besides the affable Dr. Schultz, the characters of *Django*, including the eponymous hero, feel quite one-dimensional. Broomhilda, for example, Django's wife who is held in the property of the evil

¹³¹ Distefano, "Django Unchained and 12 Years a Slave: Two Takes on America's Dark Past" (2013)

Calvin Candie and the object of his quest has a very limited number of lines of dialog and appears quite briefly on screen. The other characters seem to fall in a distinct dichotomy of right and wrong, whereas the protagonists of *Twelve Years a Slave* all display a very human tendency to fall somewhere in between. It is the complexity of the cruel plantation owner Edwin Epps which makes him even more dangerous and disturbing. Insecure, jealous, weak, he is far from the common Hollywood villain which, according to Andrew Urban, is what drives the film's condemnation even further: "any interpretation that denies Epps's humanity excuses his behavior by way of ignoring it as representative of the species"¹³².

One of the main objections voiced against *Django Unchained* was its historical inaccuracy. Tarantino is no stranger from taking liberties from history: for example he has his Jewish Americans soldiers riddle Hitler with bullets in *Inglourious Basterds*, however, as Andrew Urban points out, "Django's greatest flaw is perhaps assuming that the history of slavery is well-known enough to allow for (at times bloody and satisfying) flights from historical reality altogether"¹³³. Indeed, one of the main argument critics of that film have raised is that it proposes a simplified and problematic image of slavery, especially in its opposition between the active, rebel Django and the servile Stephen (played by Samuel L. Jackson). As Jelani Cobb writes: "Django's true nemesis is not the slaveholder who subjects Hildy to cruel punishments but Stephen, the house slave devoutly allied with the slaveholder. The central conflict is not between an ex-slave and a slaver but between two archetypes—the militant and the sellout"¹³⁴. This opposition between the active and passive is reminiscent of classical Hollywood's representation of African Americans as either savages or servants. Cobb also argues that Stephen's behavior is consistent with repetitive abuse and oppression, adding that "a response to slavery—even a cowardly, dishonorable one like what we witness with Stephen—highlights the depravity of the institution"¹³⁵. Furthermore, the fact that Django manages to free himself and his wife Hildy through sheer force and masterful gunplay is inconsistent with the nature of slavery itself. Indeed, slave-owners were terrified at the prospect of a slave rising up and killing their master. Slaves were not all submissive and compliant, as demonstrated by the several slave rebellions, such as the Nat Turner 1831 Rebellion. However, the film ignores this aspect and depicts almost every slave but the eponymous character as docile and weak. To Cobb, "it is precisely because of the extant mythology of black subservience that these scenes pack such a cathartic payload"¹³⁶. The fact that the movie ends on a happy note disregards

¹³² Urban, "Art as an Ally to Public History: 12 Years a Slave and Django Unchained" (2014)

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Cobb, "Tarantino Unchained", New York Times (2013)

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

the fact that slavery would still be part of the American society and economy for years. By opposition, *12 Years a Slave's* ending hints at that fact. Although Northup does obtain his freedom by the end of the movie, the ending is not particularly joyful. As he leaves on the carriage of his friend, Solomon looks back at the plantation and sees Patsey and the other slaves, still very much at the mercy of the despicable Epps. Even as he is reunited with his family, Northup's joy is bitter-sweet: he has lost twelve years of his and his family's life.

The differences between these two films highlight the plurality of points of view in Hollywood. Here, two approaches to a same subject produce two very distinct reactions: while *Django's* fast-paced revenge fantasy is a satisfying experience to the viewer who enjoys the empowerment of a helpless figure, *Twelve Years a Slave's* slow and painful display of Solomon's suffering presents the audience with the reverse narrative. A freedman whose identity and liberty is taken from him for 12 years, Northup has to rely on his abilities to survive and find a way to reconstruct himself.

CONCLUSION

Over the last two centuries, cinema has gained and played a significant part in the history of American society. From nickelodeon shows to big-budget blockbusters, film has always been an intricate part of the American culture. Provocative or conservative, Hollywood has often taken a direct approach to representing society. At its origins, cinema was a very liberal industry, but the combined actions of the socio-political context and conservatives have made it difficult to act on those tendencies.

While many critics may argue that the entertainment industry is leaning towards leftist and more progressive ideas, it is in fact quite traditional in the way it considers race, gender and class. The large majority of its heroes are white, as are most directors, producers, screenwriters, and other figures of power and influence in the industry, and the country. Even though people of color are starting to figure more prominently in popular culture, the persistence of racial prejudices and stereotypes diminish some of these accomplishments. Similarly, women's role on screen and in society may have drastically changed over the last few centuries, but at core, the same conceptions of gender still prevail and keep women from achieving equality. Female characters are only considered worthy if they exhibit typically male's qualities, such as physical strength or fearlessness. Women's body is objectified and sexualized, yet feminine or sexual active female characters are usually dismissed as vain, shallow or promiscuous. In fact, female agency is still restricted by stereotypes and social norms. Hollywood also hides under the extravagant lifestyle of movie stars and uncountable stories of the American Dream coming true the deep gash in American society between the very rich and the very poor, and the obsolescence of the myth in a time when social mobility is less achievable than ever.

The emergence of alternative ways of thinking and the development of independent movies, the television and, more recently, the Internet have led Hollywood executives to be more attentive to its audience. As a result, a larger portion of the society is being represented, albeit quite superficially. However, as a whole, it does seem evident that the mainstream American film industry is more preoccupied with producing bankable movies than wondering how the way it chooses to portray an individual or a phenomenon might affect its public, especially if those concerned are minorities. Hollywood caters to a predominantly Caucasian, heterosexual, male middle-class audience, and therefore creates content with which it can relate. In doing so, Hollywood contributes to the white,

patriarchal and capitalist hegemony. On the rare occasion it breaks away from that rule, it is often to create controversy and publicity. This cynical approach to representing America explains why more and more people are turning to independent or foreign movies in search of a more authentic view. Hollywood's history of walking the line between the politically correct and the socially acceptable also shows the willingness of some filmmakers (most of whom are liberals) to challenge the status quo, and the trajectory of the entertainment industry as a whole is generally one towards progress.

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KEYWORDS

Cinema

Hollywood

American society

Class

Gender

Race

SUMMARY

This paper aims at defining the role and influence of the entertainment industry on American society by analyzing the representation of the concepts of race, gender and class in film and, to a lesser extent, television. Through the study of several movies from the beginning of Hollywood cinema to recent films, it examines how Hollywood's attitude towards some social issues impacts mentalities and in what ways it can either trigger or hinder social change.

MOT-CLES:

Cinéma

Hollywood

Société Américaine

Classe

Genre

Race

RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire vise à définir la fonction et l'influence de l'industrie du cinéma sur la société américaine par l'analyse de la représentation des concepts de race, genre et classe dans les films et, dans une moindre mesure, à la télévision. Basé sur l'étude de plusieurs œuvres cinématographiques, du début du cinéma Hollywoodien jusqu'aux productions des dix dernières années, cet essai examine l'impact que peut avoir le cinéma sur les mentalités et son rôle dans le progrès social.



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