

Dreamchasers: Examining the organizational structure of social institutions across  
communities & the inevitable cultural influences which comprise one's American Dream

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## DEDICATION

To my loving parents, that have supported me with love, patience, and support in my prolonged academic journey. I am forever grateful and in debt to you.

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In a nation indoctrinated with the notion that civil liberties are an expected set of rights, along with policies, presumably made to ensure the equality of all citizens; the idea of egalitarianism, (the belief that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities) it is critical to pose the question: how equally accessible is the American Dream for all Americans? Our predisposed congenital qualities such as gender and ethnicity, along with socioeconomic status, all contribute to the 'societal blueprint' which dictates one's social reputation, educational rank, and financial reach in this American nation. More specifically, we find that the journey to achieve the American Dream varies by community and major obstacles that impede on the access to key developmental resources. Often minorities and those who do not fit into the static image of '*The American Dream*' exhaust most of their time trying to bridge the gap, rather than focusing solely on community advancement. In other words, those who live in communities lacking proper infrastructure essential to modern growth and development are forced to play the hand their dealt, while still being expected to attain the heights of their privileged counterparts. The organizational structure of a community's social institutions will inevitably influence the resources, motivations, and competence of its members. With this, viewing all American's as having the same access to the 'American Dream' is unreasonable. Through comparing the background and livelihoods of characters from four different movies, I examine the depiction and actuality which media uses to highlight the American Dream; and how the challenges inhibit in the journey looks different across cultures.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: American Dream .....	1
The importance & why film tells us something about it.....	10
Chapter Two: Theoretical Lens for Analysis.....	10
Chapter Three: (Film) Analysis .....	20
Film 1 - The Social Network (2010).....	20
Film 2 - About Schmidt (2002).....	29
Film 3 - Higher Learning (1995) .....	37
Film 4 - Scarface (1983) .....	48
Semiotic Comparison.....	61
Chapter Four: Discussion/Conclusion .....	70
Works Cited .....	77
Curriculum Vitae	

## Chapter One: American Dream

### The importance & why film tells us something about it

We, the American public, are held to standards wherein this nation was founded upon – standards which serve as the basis for our freedom and empowerment. An encouraging guarantee of this freedom lies within our Declaration of Independence, stating: “...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are *Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*” (Jefferson et al., 1776). One’s ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ could also be equated to their journey towards prosperity and the American Dream. An individual's route to success, also characterized as their ‘American Dream’, varies based upon values and symbolisms created within one’s moral upbringing. On a hierarchical scale, as we get older, these values can continue to help identify our philosophy of life. Growing up, many of us were encouraged to ‘reach for the stars’ and ‘chase our dreams’; however, these small gestures were more than simple verbal boosts, but rather early forms of success stimulation. This stimulation, which incorporates emotional backing and support, emerges from those who choose to naturally motivate others, resulting in more directly invested community leaders who possess a yearning for educational excellence. Allowing citizens, the certainty in freedom, to pursue, and follow their passion, is a basic right which society grants its members. However, these liberties, although deemed to be constant and equal, structure themselves contingent to socio-economic division. One’s individual upbringing alone does not adjudicate their developmental future, but additionally, the environment in which one grows within. The aforementioned equal

liberties which America was founded inevitably subjects itself to the cultural factors within each particular community.

Across races, regions, and religions, the notion of the American Dream is one which is fluid and ever changing. The concept behind what makes a dream, the *American* dream is one which must be defined by the percipient in question. From birth (in America), we are seemingly trained to put value and success into physical property and material possessions. The problem with basing our goals and dreams off these fickle items is that not only do physical commodities lose value, but can be lost or stolen – and in remaining true to one’s dream, why would someone work to attain something which can be lost? In retrospect, I believe physical belongings increase the value in which we see our situations, however ultimately, comfort in one’s success and sense-of-self creates the most inalienable fortune for one’s life.

The American Dream is rooted in the belief, supported by the Declaration of Independence, that “all men are created equal”. The concept of the American Dream promotes prosperity and freedom for all individuals, regardless of race, religion, social class, or any other pre-established traits. The issues arise when communities comprised of culturally distinct groups are neglected and not allowed the same freedom of access to resources as their counterparts. Which inevitably makes the American Dream, for some, more of a journey based on overcoming barriers, rather than focusing on separation and elevation.

As the role(s) and power held by social institutions are discussed, we will examine the conformity, or lack thereof, which can be viewed across the cultural, economic, and political borders of a society. Although many of us may share common

goals and aspirations, the path which we take to reach these feats will in no way be the same. Given the aforesaid Declaration of Independence excerpt, why is it that two individuals from the same community, affiliated with the same institutions, governed by the same officials, will not only have two separate journeys, but two entirely different outcomes? According to American Sociologist Talcott Parsons, when analyzing a community's behavioral standards and how its inhabitants view said standards, we must assess two key levels of compliance - moral and utilitarian (Messner, et al., 2008). The major motive for obeying an institutional regulation "lies in the moral authority it exercises over the individual" (p. 166). In today's system, we see much of the heavier and more strict moral authority residing in the communities with high poverty/low opportunity. This historically recurring paradigm quickly establishes unfair treatment and a pattern of systematic imbalance, referred to as Institutional-Anomie theory. Institutional-Anomie theory (IAT) suggests that crime within the United States is heavily driven by capitalism, the institutional (un)balance of power, and the constant burden on material success (monetary and physical). The main points of anomie-theory were initially presented as part of an explanation of the comparatively high rates of serious crime in the United States. Through the years, as a result of contention and confusion, these arguments have now evolved into a theoretical framework which brings attention to the cultural and social structure as demonstrated in social institutions (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2007).

Naturally, we are exposed to communication and hierarchy systems for our entire lives, but most times the interactions may be so innate/visceral that we don't perceive them as such. Households, workplaces, and sports teams all have power structures and

ranking regimes which determine essential practices such as decision making, communication streams, and leadership privileges, to name a few. These more “basic” everyday hierarchies serve as the basis for lifestyle awareness and community adaption. A child raised without any distinct disciplinary backing may be brought up to question and oftentimes challenge authority. By society’s blanket class system, said child may be labeled an outcast, rebel or nonconformist – when in all actuality, this could simply be an empty vessel seeking acceptance and guidance from those around him. Either way, this example provides foundation for the importance of early communication competence within societal systems.

Although we are molded by our unique upbringings and exposure to real world events – we are not defined by the challenges we face, but rather how we adjust and adapt to these situations. “Norms” or the behavioral patterns expected by community personnel, are established using factors which include psychological influence, household upbringing, family lineage, and community oppression, to name a few. Those of whom represent a society’s social institutions must create “norms” of which may or may not reflect the community individuals it serves. In order to fully understand why this imbalance of power creates such a societal disruption – imagine a substitute teacher, filling in for their first day, who decides to teach curriculum and follow protocol that was self-developed. Without asking the students or referencing the notes left by the original teacher, the substitute employs their own “best practice” without considering yesterday’s lesson before moving forward. Instead, an ‘outsider’ or non-community individual was left in charge of determining the fate of those whom he/she is not vested. As a direct result of this imbalance, civilians can be subject to unfair treatment and classification by

default. Institutional-Anomie theory, as defined by Messner (2007), “is built upon the underlying premise that the ‘normal’ levels and forms of criminal activity in any society reflect the fundamental features of its social organizations” (p. 165). With this being the case, it is critical that community officials and organizations establish hierarchies based around regulatory norms that pertain to the individuals functioning within that particular system. Some of us come from communities where freedom is expected and enjoyed – thus allowing for extraordinary dreams of success; whereas other societies oppress their citizens to the point that the “American Dream” may be as wondrous as abandoning their very community.

Surely, one's surroundings will influence their decision-making ability, which affects practical judgement and rationality. From a holistic view, social institutions (schools, community centers, churches) serve as fundamental pieces in building one's character and defining their actions. Individuals create their own “subjective reality” from their perception of information and actions, better known as cognitive bias. As defined within *The Evolution of Cognitive Bias* by Martie G. Haselton, Daniel Nettle, and Paul W. Andrews, a cognitive bias is a systematic pattern of deviation from norm or rationality in judgment (2005). As stated by Dan Ariely, an individual's construction of reality, not the intended input, may dictate their behavior in the world (2008). The dated phrase “perception is reality” could not be more applicable to this notion of cognitive bias. In Chapter 25 of *The Evolution of Cognitive Bias*, the concept of cognitive bias is explained using the relationship of colors between humans and animals. Although we know that the sky is blue, our interpretation of such colors only span so far. Certain animals are able to see ultraviolet wavelengths beyond that of the human eye – thus creating a visual divide

amongst species. The chapter further clarifies, color is not an inherent property of an object; it is constructed by the interaction of reflected radiation in the environment with evolved visual mechanisms in the perceiver (Bennett et al., 1994). Using components of social perception, humans tend to construct images and process information of the social world in identical fashion. Similar to how a handshake or high-five is not recognized the same in all parts of the world, the environment which one comes from heavily influences their interpretation of information. This is where tragedy can occur in so many areas where community officials are not aligning themselves with community problems. As a result, communal issues are being perpetuated and ultimately creating greater challenges for the afflicted. To use the community as a resource, one must first be able to thrive in their own community. The ensuing film analysis will introduce characters who are chasing their dreams, whilst trying to 'find' themselves along the way. While on a contemporaneous journey for self-identity and self-fulfillment, these individuals will face complex social issues which arise from lack of community backing. In Chapter 8 of *Self, Identity, and Social Institutions* by Neil J. MacKinnon and David R. Heise, social theorist, George Herbert Mead claimed that institutions are a fundamental component in the development of individual selves, declaring:

Institutions are the primary basis on which a human community is organized, and they are what distinguish an organized community from a disorganized mass of individuals...without social institutions of some sort, without organized social attitudes and activities by which social institutions are constituted, there could be no fully mature individual selves or personalities at all. (p. 210)

The moral authority of institutional guidelines, however, is never perfect. The second compliance concept for utilitarian focus, mentioned earlier, conveniently accompanies the ongoing moral complex in today's societies. The balance of power within societal infrastructures is one that has been depicted in theatre for as long as I can remember. Whether the teacher at school or President of a nation; the struggle between righteous, selfless leading and inhumane tyranny seems to be a common trope in crime drama cinema. The ensuing plot then usually consists of 'lawful' civilians who attempt to rise above the oppression and liberate themselves; closely mirroring the actual social constructs of present day. Although each community's institutional construct is unique within itself, an eclectic representation of IAT can most accurately be found within crime drama or Noir-style film compositions. Film-Noir, or simply 'Noir' originates back to the post-World War II era, where Hollywood entertainment consumption was at an all-time high and adult audiences were eager for amplified mature views of the world. According to Frank Manchel (2000), Professor Emeritus of English and Film at the University of Vermont and Author of *Sink or Swim: Hollywood after World War II*, "Hollywood towered over the international movie industry. Its box-office figures were the highest in its history. Movies had become not only a national obsession, but also an insatiable passion for world audiences. Theater owners everywhere clamored for American movies." This surge in American entertainment resulted in the modernized crime drama structure known as Noir. Defined by the Film Noir Foundation (2005) as a blend between lost innocence, hard-edged cynicism, and desperate desire, Noir introduced Hollywood to a new social genre of life. The Foundation has specified that Noir is not an official genre used amongst film writers, rather, they have deemed it a 'social category' created within

the filmography world. In seeking a comprehensible meaning of the American Dream, we must recognize the significance, which attracts so much desire, is freedom. In the societal redistribution of wealth (often found among Noir/Melodrama storyline films), moral navigation usually spans from the ideological pathway which questions which is more important—making it to the top, or how you do it? When considering one’s quest towards success, it is key to first understand the cultural/social framework which comprise respective social institutions. American Sociologist and Author, Steve Messner (2007), suggested that the cultural pursuit for the American Dream oftentimes is an innate commitment to the goal of material success; this push for individual competition is a key driving force for American crime. Anomie theory suggests that cultural values encourage an “any means necessary” approach to success and achieving one’s goals. By examining the effects of this further, we notice that when an individual is placed in an economic divide, forcing them to evaluate their position in society – the economic dominance in the institutional balance of power is examined. To return to the language introduced above, institutional norms have little moral authority when the economy dominates the institutional balance of power. When society’s standards are imposed amongst the public, the community individuals comply with the “set schedule” behavior because it is expected and will always generate a “best case scenario” outcome, in other words, conformity breeds comfort.

Despite the fact that in America, we are given the freedom to (unless legally bound) shift, travel, and relocate as we see fit, we are always in organizational systems regardless of the specific community changes. Additionally, many of the unfortunate aforementioned societal norms would make it difficult for individuals/families to uproot

their lives and transition into another community. Finding a job which can support oneself, and household, academically fitting schools for the children, and scarce community resources, just to name a few, make shifting and readapting seem unthinkable. In February 2020, Chicago rapper, Herbert Randall Wright III, better known by his stage name, G Herbo, released an album titled *PTSD* which signifies the trauma endured during his 24 years of life, reflecting on his fallen friends and family. The cover art for this project displays Herbo holding what, at a glance, seems to be the American flag, but instead we notice blood streaks on a white blanket surrounded by bullet holes for red stripes. As for the 50 stars, Wright instead replaces each state-representing symbol with the face of a lost friend/relative. The award-winning album's final song, entitled "Intuition", closes with a statement from a young woman expressing her feelings towards society, declaring: "You can't separate or compare freedom from peace, because no one can be at peace unless they have freedom, and we're not even born free. At least that's where I'm from. Everything I've seen growing up was poverty stricken. Damaged. Taken from us or taken advantage of already. And this is what we were exposed to all day, that's what damaged us. If you don't understand what I'm talking about, then you've never been through it, I guess you're one of the people I'm saying this to and not for" (2020).

By critically analyzing films containing characters from different cultural backgrounds, I plan to examine how one's sense of organizational life facilitates or impedes their efforts to pursue their American Dream. Additionally, through a thematic analysis I intend to explore the experiences of organizational life these characters developed which may have shaped or reshaped how they cognitively view and construct the American Dream.

## Chapter Two: Theoretical Lens for Analysis

From birth, we are shown symbols of representation for success, which inevitably shape our value and behavioral patterns accordingly. As a black male growing up in America, there are distinct signs and symbols which media outlets highlight across film, text, and internet platforms which are meant to determine, or at least display success and the American Dream. Many historical narratives from the masculine lens tend to associate power and possession with success, generally depicted by cars, clothes, women, wealth & unfortunately, the sexualization of women meant to empower men, better known in film as the ‘male gaze’. Additionally, our society glorifies those who have achieved great materialistic fortune while living inglorious lives; we call them celebrities. While success is relative and celebrities tend to have copious amounts of the aforementioned cars, clothes, and money, the same semiotic figures of success can appear on an everyday basis. The ‘household’ American view of success usually involves wealth, education, children, and contentment/happiness.

Inside the 2004 publication, *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*, we are introduced to the ‘King’ of Semiotics, Roland Barthes, as well as fellow semiotic pioneers, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Charles Sanders Peirce. Chapter 6, “Visual Semiotics Theory” examines in-depth the characteristics that make up visual text, and the elements of semiotics associated with them. As defined by author Sandra Moriarty, semiotics refers to the study of signs and codes: signs that are used in producing, conveying, and interpreting messages and the codes that govern their use

Saussure, a Swiss linguist, is known as the father of European semiology, and is credited for his attempt to answer the question, “How does something come to stand for

something else?” The primary theme within semiotics focuses on the difference between a signifier and the signified, as coined by Saussure. He defined these Signifiers as signs that float above the ‘signified’ with the concept/idea refusing to be anchored or constrained. In other words, he created a format to explain the various ways there are to express an idea or depict something. Comparatively, Peirce views these two concepts as points of “determination”, in other words, he believed the sign determines the interpretant (or translation of the original sign). For example, the way that smoke looks, develops in the air, smells and functions will create/determine the interpretant – fire. Ultimately, the sign signifies its object/ interpretant by understanding features of relation between both sign and object (Atkin, 2022).

This kind of communication structure can be dated back as far as hunters and trackers who were able to understand the signs of nature. Within Oseni Afisi’s, *The Concept Of Semiotics in Charles Sanders Peirce’s Pragmatism* (2020), American philosopher Charles S. Peirce developed a ‘model of knowledge’ which displayed the way reality is represented in mind and thought. Peirce discovered that reality/thought can only be known through representation via signs. Simply, a sign is anything that stands for something else, such as an object, concept, or place. However, as regarded by Peirce, there are three inner components which are essential to its function: icon, index and symbol. An icon refers to an entity which resembles another, for example, a portrait. The index can be defined as an object that plays as an indicator, such as smoke to fire or a grumbling stomach to hunger. Lastly, a symbol represents a connection or convention within a particular society – most times their meanings must be explicitly taught, for instance a traffic sign or a country’s flag.

Regarding Barthes' theories concerning semiotics, society and culture are texts that can be analyzed for their structures, significance, and effects. His 1957 book called *Mythologies*, examined the tendency of contemporary social value systems to create modern myths. It was in this text where he coined the term naturalization (as it pertains to semiotics), which he defined as media shaping society's ideology through repeated signs. In an October 2015 publication of *The New Yorker*, author Christy Wampole attempted to consider late-philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes' hypothetical reaction to a commemorative scarf manufactured in his honor. On what would have been Barthes' 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, French luxury brand, Hermès, released a Barthes' inspired silk cashmere scarf which retailed for £840. In her article entitled, *What Would Barthes Think of his Hermès Scarf*, Wampole examined elements of modern society which she believed created influence for this item. Specifically, she felt as though Barthes would appreciate the amount of sign and symbol inclusion in today's modern life. The Barthes scarf was crafted with special detail which highlights his ideologies through fabric, a minging of "text" and "textile" if you will. A fragile, expensive object which should be handled with care, as he handled all his bodies of work. Wampole wrote, "Perhaps silk is the best material with which to honor Barthes. It is a natural fiber, exuded by a living thing and thus containing something of this life within it; its history represents the encounter between East and West; and its invitation to touch puts it in the same category as human skin" (para. 8). Furthermore, Barthes felt that when a sign was used consistently, it would eventually become an accepted dominant connotation, also known as a myth. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Pembroke Welsh Corgi dog breed has been a part of the royal family for 8 decades now. British locals have even pushed the agenda that

owning a Corgi will bring great prosperity and wealth, like that of the Queen. Due to the long-standing elite stature of these canines, they became a sign to the public of luxurious fortune, which Barthes would cite as a myth. With the help of naturalization, the “conventional” American Dream is easily acquired from everyday multimedia platforms. Wampole indicated, “Nearly everyone in the middle class, particularly those under forty or so, spends a significant amount of their waking hours consuming and critiquing television shows, commercials, apps, objects, designs, political performances, celebrity behavior, and brands on the Internet” (para. 2)

In Chapter 10 of *Social Cognition: How Individuals Construct Social Reality*, authors Klaus Fiedler et al. (2004) discussed their findings regarding the environmental constraints within an individual. They explored the relationship of environmental and cognitive factors that characterize human interaction in distinct situations and institutions. Consider your favorite TV family sitcom for example, most times, the location is set in a rather big city to establish financial backing for the family, a family which includes children (usually a mixture of genders), the hard-working husband, and an authoritative at-home wife/mother. This mold for the ‘American family’ has been around for decades and serves as a visual representation of what constructing a family “should” look like. Popular TV shows *The Simpsons*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* - which have a combined televised running-time of over 50 years (1969-present), were highlighted in Conrad Phillip Kottak’s (2008) publication, *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*. These three shows, ranging in production format, cultural diversity, generational eras, and target audience, were all deemed as staples in the modernization of the American (TV) family. Kottak’s literature stressed the importance

of cultural environment to students, why it should matter to them, and how they can use that field to understand themselves. Looking deeper into the foregoing shows, we examine three families which represent different time periods, cultures, and dynamics in America. Although comparing the likes of a white blended family (*The Brady Bunch*), a black extended family (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*), and a yellow nuclear family (*The Simpsons*), the household stereotypes remain constant. Each sitcom features a domestic arrangement whereby the father works full-time, the mother maintains order at home, and both parents support their (numerous) children all-while living in an affluent community. None of these families display a yearning for wealth, instead the ‘daily’ conquest tends to focus on ensuring the happiness of everyone at home. This conquest also constitutes the development of the plot for any given episode, resolving character drama or conflict in order to restore household happiness/satisfaction. The commonalities these televised programs possess align with the signs and symbols associated with mainstream media’s expression of the American Dream.

By definition, signs are polysemic, implying they have several meanings as transcribed by different cultures. For example, just as how certain hand gestures can be misinterpreted through various countries, it can also be done with communication across cultures. To examine the sign and symbol barrier transcription further, I explored the realm of American Sign Language (ASL) as it pertains to American cognitive development. Most notably, ASL has become increasingly popular as a means to bridge baby talk and conversational English, according to a 2013 *Washington Post* article written by Michael Chandler. Experts claim that sign language promotes early brain development and parent-infant bonding while giving babies a way to communicate their

wants and needs a little earlier. Recently, the growing trend in baby sign language has constituted more parents investing, with the hopes that this skill will assist in early communication. However, with nominal research to support their concerns, some parents worry that introducing signs or gestures competes for a baby's attention and working memory which can potentially interfere with spoken-language learning (Chandler, 2013). We teach children signs because they are useful, easy to understand, and help us communicate when there are no other viable options. As quoted by Arthur Asa Berger (2005) in the publication, *Media Analysis Techniques*, "because nothing has meaning in itself, the relationship that exists among signs are crucial" (p. 53). The issue regarding baby sign language past the point of infancy, is it tends to leave out contextual meaning and situational certitude. Because meanings are socially produced, society must teach individuals what signs mean. In Jonathan Culler's 1986 publication entitled *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Saussure argued that "behavior is made possible by collective social systems individuals have assimilated, consciously or unconsciously" (p. 87). We are unaware of the extent to which culture shapes our feelings, actions, and even our identities. 'Meaning', then, is always social. As sign language allows for key communication barriers to be broken with those who cannot fully engage – this does not encompass the entire intercommunication scope.

Ferdinand de Saussure had a very unique view of distinguishing between *language* and *speaking*. Language, defined as a "social institution, made up of rules and conventions that have been systemized, that enable us to communicate" (Berger, 2005, p. 15). Comparatively, speaking is based on the language and rules that everyone learns. While these signs have demonstrated to be effective tools in society, I prefer to think of

them as just that – tools. Without proper knowledge or historical context of a society, one cannot expect to simply understand or have an affinity with its community individuals. Some societies derive from oppression and struggle, for example the deplorable conditions which can be seen in some third-world countries can create negative self-perception and vulnerable minds among its citizens. Now couple these already weakened citizens with arduous living conditions and an overbearing government structure that does not work to improve community life, but rather imposes laws, set in place to yet further increase the societal gap of education and other developmental resources. These unfortunate conditions represent a continuous pattern within American society and its institutions across cultural bounds.

The interdependence among many social institutions suggests that in order for society to “work” at all, there must be some coordination among organizations. The requirements for the effective functioning of any given institution, however, may conflict with the requirements of another (Messner et al., 2008). The potential for conflict presents itself when communities must give priority to either the institutions of the market economy or the family. Furthermore, family relationships are expected to be regulated by the general norms of society, whereas standards in the economic marketplace are governed by universalism (p. 168). In most instances, where a community stands on its prioritization of ‘Family vs. Finances’ is pretty apparent. The accessibility and agenda of social institutions determines the influence which comes from the very community. Without funding and established community values from which to build principles upon, there is no foundation from which to foster a nurturing society. Provided this information, we are able to correlate community influence and social

stature to lifestyle perception. Within Frank Hagan and Leah Daigle's *Introduction to Criminology: Theories, Methods, and Criminal Behavior*, American sociologist Robert Merton stated, "Crime originated in the American Dream itself...a strain between generally accepted criteria for success and the lack of adequate means for many to achieve this success" (2018, p. 200). Merton further explained, "Criminality is learned and culturally transmitted due to social disorganization in pathological environments. Crime is viewed as a presenting problem for other deeper, underlying problems in society, and addressing crime alone without examining the social system as a whole will be ineffective." (p. 201)

If you remove language, where we gather most of our perception of meaning from, how much can we understand from other signs in literature, more specifically, moving-image text? Throughout Oseni Afisi's *The Concept Of Semiotics in Charles Sanders Peirce's Pragmatism* (2020), several important elements of analyzing film were examined. For most visual text there is a singular, preferred reading—that is, one which was created by the author/producer; oftentimes there are more meanings, sometimes so profound they require a different perspective of thinking to uncover. Once we understand the role of semiotics in media language, we can begin to realize subtleties like newspaper font, which does more than merely reflect meaning, but add it. Roland Barthes (1957) outlined four categories of 'media language' which establish a semiotic presence in television/film: mise-en-scene, sound, camera and editing. Sound analysis can range from melodic background music to the raspy, cold voice of the antagonist. As for camera and editing, these categories imply a certain cinematic scrutiny which focuses on camera angles, character motion, color filters, and brightness, to name a few elements. Finally,

mise-en-scene, French for “placing on stage”, involves everything within the scene, including make-up, set location and costume. When examining the media, Barthes may have asked, “What is the reason for a wide-angle opening shot?” or “What does the director want us to infer from their relationship?” He has stated that “we are made to believe [that] what we are watching is unmediated reality,” which, given the relationship between social institutions and media platforms, is valid. In Chapter 6 of *Understanding Media Semiotics*, author Marcel Danesi (2018) stated that by simply turning on our TV, visiting websites, and using social media, we tend to feel connected to others in an abstract rather than real fashion. The environment in which we interact, create, and express ourselves is no longer just physical space, but has evolved, now including electronic space where sensation and comprehension are mostly virtual. As reading books requires some degree of critical reflection, processing TV images does not. This has led to a generalized passiveness and indifference for how people receive and understand messages. Television has produced a means of visual literacy that informs and engages more people than any other medium before its time. Because of its reach and ubiquity, many say TV programming is responsible for entrenching materialistic and shallow culture into society. Scientific research studies on the effects television has continuously had on society were once common, giving way to Internet studies only in the last decade or so, which raises the question, “Has television spawned a ‘psychologically toxic’ world” (p. 175)? One which depicts a life using subtle signs and narratives to push bigger agendas which we hold value to within our real world? “If everything in the universe is a sign, semiotics becomes extremely important, if not all-important” (p. 4) Barthes has proclaimed. In reviewing various films which display diverse institutionalized struggle, I

am hoping to create an emphasis surrounding economic dominance in the institutional complex, (including but not limited to Schools, Churches, and Banks) and the perceived unbalance of power which dwells in the minds of American citizens.

### Chapter Three: (Film) Analysis

As detailed in the last chapter, I have created semiotic informed analyses covering four award-winning productions which range in publication date from 1983 to 2010. These movies have received some of the highest accolades in film, including 6 Golden Globe awards, 4 Critics Choice awards, 3 Los Angeles Film Critic awards, and an NAACP Image Award. The main characters across these films span from first year college students to businessmen and retirees. Understanding the cultivation of one's American Dream is critical due to the environmental influences which have been proven to mold one's perception of success. How we subconsciously view our future and align our life's wants and needs all originate from our cultural upbringing and surroundings. By not limiting the scope of the American Dream, these motion pictures manage to embody many of the varying demographics in today's society such as wealth, age, race, gender, and sexuality. From *Higher Learning* (1995) and *The Social Network* (2010) which depict college students' innate struggle to find themselves and their destiny, to *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Scarface* (1983) which view the American Dream from a capacity of "When have we done enough"? From this analysis, it is my hope that you will be able to understand the varying obstacles, struggles, and journeys which comprise the American Dream. The film texts which I have chosen to examine explore the cultural, political, racial and socioeconomic elements of societal institutions which hinder, and can inevitably impede one's pursuit of happiness.

#### **Film 1 - *The Social Network* (2010)**

In *The Social Network* (2010), written by Aaron Sorkin, we follow a hybrid between a biopic and the trial reenactment of Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg. The

tech-giant which spans over generations of users, gets broken down to its roots as we materialize the concept to completion which came behind Facebook. In addition to learning the social platform's backstory; Zuckerberg, and his rise from miscreant to mogul are delineated through interpretative flashbacks and reenacted court scenes. The movie opens with a dinner scene, featuring Mark and his then girlfriend, Erica Albright. "Did you know there are more people with genius IQ's living in China than there are people of any kind living in the United States...How do you distinguish yourself in a population of people who all got 1600 on their SAT's?" a concerned, fast-talking Zuckerberg asked Erica. Early on we are introduced to Mark Zuckerberg, the distinguished Harvard University student who, while amassing the top of almost every academic list, continued to seem dissatisfied in his journey, always yearning for more. In this opening scene, a calm evening between Mark and Erica brought about a heated discussion when explaining his take on why "*There's a difference between being obsessed, and motivated.*" The night ended following a fiery Erica telling Mark, "One day you'll probably become a very successful computer guy, and you may think girls don't like you because you're a nerd, and I want to let you know that won't be why. It's because you're an asshole," and proceeded to break up with him. As the movie progresses, Mark's stereotypical 'nerd' complex became more apparent - technologically infatuated, talking/typing a mile per second, always qualitatively analyzing situations, etc. When it came to solving complex issues, real and technology-based ones, Mark rarely showed signs of panic or unrest; instead he would adjust. Rather than try to break down the wall, Zuckerberg's character would analyze the room and look for surrounding walls which were weak enough to break down and go around.

As a lifelong outcast, Mark often felt as though the world was against him and as a result, used this as fuel to separate himself from his peers and elevate his mind and corporate stature. Following the initial verbal attack from Erica, Mark was seen alone, visibly upset and confused. Although having disrespected Erica, Mark viewed his comments as more “truthful” than “hurtful” and thus couldn’t quite quantify her anger. Immediately following Mark and Erica’s breakup, he began drunk blogging online and created Facemash.com. Facemash.com was an impulsive website idea Mark brought to life, whereby website visitors would be able to vote on who was more attractive between pairs of female Harvard students. Early on, Zuckerberg demonstrated he understood that in order to establish mass dominance, you must first find and acquire a strong supporting base. This base was Facemash.com. After a few hours of the website’s nighttime launch, Harvard’s entire online network crashed, registering 22,000 hits in under two hours. Validating his own power and influence, Mark was overjoyed. Following this opening scene, the rest of the film dedicates itself to Zuckerberg’s Harvard legal case and “present day” which consists of Mark building his Facebook empire. Mark, along with other movie characters can be seen giving their depositions and accounts of the events as the film develops.

Zuckerberg’s introvert lifestyle was established early as he adamantly put programming duties and solidarity before all else, and even stated, “I would rather be amongst my thoughts than friends.” Although socially withdrawn, Mark demonstrated early his “obsession” with being accepted. In the aforementioned dinner date with Erica, Mark explained the wondrous places and people he would be associated with if accepted into the right ‘Final Group’. The Final Groups are essentially social clubs at Harvard

which have mutually exclusive membership regulations. Being accepted into one of these clubs will inevitably align one with a prosperous future beyond their wildest dreams.

During the opening dinner scene, Mark mentioned to Erica that his friend Eduardo who had, during the summer, made \$300,000 doing oil refinery work, would not even have a chance of getting into the Final Clubs. He stated, "He won't come close to getting in. The ability to make money doesn't impress anybody here." This scene, and better yet quote, plays as a major foreshadowing initiative as later in the film we see Eduardo get called upon to join the Phoenix Final Club, while Mark does not.

Olympic qualifiers, Harvard star students, and twin brothers Nick and Cameron Winklevoss approached now "campus famous" Mark Zuckerberg with hopes that he would assist in coding a website for an idea they had been developing for some time. The Winklevoss brothers were a part of the esteemed Crew rowing team which held very high status at the University. The idea was for a social network which was exclusive to college campuses (Harvard initially) and would serve as a connectivity platform for students. After being approached by the Winklevoss twins, Mark's body language and short responses would lead one to believe he was uninterested in helping further their concept – however, after revealing the idea, Mark said, "I'm in." This is where the deposition and court case scenes initiate from – copyright and intellectual theft of what is now Facebook.com. We notice Mark's manipulative strategy for the first time when he convinces Eduardo to become his development partner and create an exclusive friend gathering site, thefacebook.com. However, thefacebook.com was simply a repackaged version of the idea the Winklevoss twins presented him with but repurposed as his own.

Throughout the film, Mark is never shy when exploiting Eduardo's vulnerability. During the early build-up stages of Facebook, Eduardo was called upon to pledge into the Final Club called "Phoenix." On a few occasions when brought to his attention, Mark was sure to point out that "It may have been a diversity thing" and "Don't be surprised if this is the last letter you get from them;" keeping in mind, this is Mark's best friend and newly formed business partner. This form of manipulation allows for Mark to maintain assertive dominance and, despite what it's worth, keep Eduardo aware of who's boss. Soon after his final Phoenix meeting, Eduardo met Mark at his dorm for what he thought was about to be more time spent constructing the website – but it turned out Mark had finished it and was ready to make it public. Before publishing thefacebook.com, he revealed the masthead to Eduardo which read, "Eduardo Saverin, co-founder and CFO." In a somber voice Eduardo said, "You have no idea what that's gonna mean to my father," thereafter Mark replies, "Sure I do." After having re-watched this short exchange, I concluded this gesture was highlighted due to its manipulative positioning. Mark knew this action would give him critical leverage in the long run, not to mention the boldness to assume the "meaning" a CFO son would carry for a minority father. This same scene is also the first time we see any distinct emotion from Mark-- silent and almost brought to tears when the site was made live. Once viral on campus and the Winklevoss twins were made aware of Mark's launch, thefacebook.com had already registered 650 students. The twins went back and forth between wanting to fight, sue, or publicly slander Mark – but instead chose to "play it calm" because "This is Harvard where you don't plant stories and you don't sue people."

A few short weeks following the website's launch, Eduardo confronted Mark about a cease-and-desist letter issued by the Winklevoss twins. Eduardo panicked at the fact that the letter was ten days old and had not been brought to his attention earlier; to which Mark responded that it was him they addressed it to, and Eduardo had nothing to worry about. Once convinced, Eduardo took Mark out for a drink, where Mark ran into his ex-girlfriend, Erica, who wanted nothing to do with him. After constant attempts at a civil conversation, Mark left visibly upset, but not before telling Eduardo "We have to expand." The following scene showed Mark, Eduardo, and a couple other colleagues, Dustin and Chris, in his Harvard dorm room planning the very expansion. Mark instructed them to expand to Yale and Columbia campuses. In addition to these expanded locations, Mark wanted targeted press in the Boston University (BU) Campus Newspaper. All in attendance were confused as to why he wanted BU press since he was not expanding to their school, but this was merely another manipulative tactic from Zuckerberg. Erica, who had berated him earlier that night at the bar, attended BU, and having press cover the expansion on thefacebook.com would only ensure that she was undeniably exposed to his growth. Soon after their initial campus success, Eduardo brought it to Mark's attention that the focus needed to shift from expanding, to creating revenue. As the CFO, this was Eduardo's main day to day duty, and he stressed the immediate need to Mark. He wanted to rent out web space for companies to pay for Facebook advertising, however Mark saw this as a hindrance for users and thus did not have much enthusiasm moving forward with ad meetings. The film provides a montage of meetings where we see an unengaged and uninterested Zuckerberg accompanying a well-poised and proper Eduardo. The final meeting was with the founder of Napster,

Sean Parker. During this discussion, we see a 180-degree turn in demeanor. Mark can be seen lively, talkative, and at the edge of his seat - so engaged that Eduardo must cut the two of them off in order to make any directional progress. Sean spent the meeting talking about himself, his fortune, and selling the boys a dream of luxury to come...a dream that Mark was ready to live. The scene breaks back to the deposition room, showing the Facebook founders opposite each other, where Eduardo states: "He owned Mark after that dinner." When we cut back to the dinner scene, Sean asked the boys, "When you go fishing, you can catch a lot of fish, or you can catch a big fish - have you ever walked into a guy's den and seen a picture of him standing next to 14 trout? No, he's holding a 3,000lb marlin." Eduardo wanted to focus on the small wins, but encouraged by Sean, Mark wanted to chase the grand prize. Sean continually forced Mark's already willing hand to chase the trout, asserting, "A million dollars isn't cool. You know what's cool? A billion dollars." An immediate cut back to the deposition room shows Eduardo solemnly saying, "That shut everybody up." Sean Parker's character, played by Justin Timberlake, depicted the greed and unsettling satisfaction which comes with American business. The incessant demand for more has proven to be a recurring internal flaw for those characters who strive solely to acquire great wealth. Within their journey they lose sight of the value or motives established when they began. A mission fueled by financial gain will never be complete.

The next scene began with Zuckerberg's lawyer asking Eduardo if he had "ever done anything that would be considered legitimate grounds for termination (from Facebook)?" After refusing that he had done so, Mark's lawyer revealed that during Eduardo's time at the Phoenix Final Club, as a part of his initiation he had to, for one

week, carry with him at all times, and take care of a chicken. During his week of poultry supervision, he found himself in the café, with a hungry chicken in his backpack and decided to feed it chicken nuggets. A classmate witnessed the act and reported him for forced cannibalism. This scene seems random in its initial introduction, but in closing scenes of this movie we find that Mark himself planted this evidence early and was the root cause of the cannibalism story being leaked. This demonstrated another subtle play by Zuckerberg to maintain his strong arm over Eduardo and the company. Per Sean's advice to Mark to relocate to California in order to expand Facebook, he made the move and brought a couple interns from Harvard with him in hopes of reaching new heights. Eduardo, however, went to New York for the summer to pursue an internship; this news made Sean happy, allowing him to move in and continue corrupting Mark's mind with luxurious dreams of fame and fortune. Mark and Sean's relationship grew, as he continued his manipulative course, claiming "It may not be good business, but it pissed a lot of people off. Isn't that what you want to do? The industry is scared of me pal, and they're gonna be scared of you. This is our time, This time you're gonna hand them a business card that says I'm CEO, bitch." Shortly after this lecture, a lonely, naïve Mark told Sean that if he ever needed a place to stay in California he can always stay with him – and he swiftly moved in.

Towards the end of the film, Eduardo flew out to California where he was surprised to see the mess of an organization the company was slowly becoming. Eduardo quickly realized that much of the focus and efforts had shifted since adding Mr. Parker to the team. Since Eduardo was still enrolled in school he had been traveling back and forth semi-frequently to California, but Mark took a semester off and chose to work full-time

on Facebook. Sean was able to secure the company a half-million-dollar investment from an angel investor which thrilled Eduardo and brought him back to California to sign some equity documents and manage the closing. He thought he was coming to California to close on the deal and celebrate 1-million registered users, but after meeting with the company lawyer, he was informed his share in the company was diluted from 34.1% to a measly .03%. A livid Eduardo smashed Mark's computer and scolded him in front of his colleagues and Facebook team. Amidst the emotional confrontation, Eduardo revealed that he knew that Mark planted the chicken story both in order to have leverage over him in later years and due to his jealousy of his Final Club membership. Before storming out of the office, Eduardo declared, "I'll bet you just hated that they identified me as a co-founder of Facebook- -which I am! You better lawyer-up, asshole, because I'm not coming for my 30%, I'm coming after everything." Sean, interns and others left shortly after the incident to celebrate having surpassed 1 million registered Facebook users. As we transition to the party scene, we notice Mark is nowhere to be found; in fact, he is still at Facebook headquarters working on new code. Sean and a few other guests disappeared upstairs; soon after, the police arrived. Sean was arrested for cocaine possession and Mark was left speechless when he received the call from Sean. Mark's main concern surrounded the media aspect of Facebook; Sean's arrest was sure to make headlines, and inevitably would give the media major control over the public's perception of Facebook.

As *The Social Network (2010)* came to a close, one of the deposition witnesses, a sit-in law student named Marilyn, returned to the courtroom to find Mark by himself on his computer. After rejecting his request to take her to dinner, Mark disclosed that he is not in fact "a bad guy," to which Marilyn replied, "I know that. When there's an

emotional testimony I assume 85% of it is exaggeration, and the other 15% perjury.”

After her validation, Mark curiously inquired, “What happens now?” To which Marilyn told Mark that his lawyers were creating a settlement agreement to present to him. She followed up by adding it would be best to issue a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) to protect him from any slander from those involved in the case. At this point, Marilyn revealed her gift of “voir-dire” defined by her as, “critical jury selection - what a jury sees when they see a defendant.” She continued, “Clothes, hair, speaking style, likability...I've been licensed to practice law for all of 20 months and I could get a jury to believe that you planted the story about the chicken. You know how? Just by asking the question. Watch. Why weren't you at the celebration party that night?” Mark interjected, “You think I'm the one who called the police?” Whereby Marilyn informed him, “It doesn't matter, I asked the question and now everybody's thinking about it. You lost the jury in the first 10 minutes.” After her lecture to Mark she advises him to just “pay them” (Winklevoss' and Eduardo) stating that “In the grand scheme of things, it's just a speeding ticket.” In short, Marilyn's preverbal ‘fly on the wall’ role towards the end of the movie shows her objective view of Zuckerberg despite his greed and disloyalty – further validating the his actions, and ignoring the plight which comes with chasing the American Dream.

## **Film 2 - *About Schmidt* (2002)**

In *About Schmidt*, we meet Jack Nicholson's character, Warren Schmidt, who recently retired from his life's work, but still questions his happiness, purpose, and destiny in life. Of the four films, *About Schmidt* gives perspective to life reflection and realizing one's purpose. The film opens with the retirement ceremony, one where Ray

Nichols, long standing friend of Warren, claimed, “Warren and I go way back, to the horse and buggy days at Woodmen,” and stood up to give a heartwarming toast, declaring, “I know something about retirement. And what I wanna say is all those gifts over there don't mean a goddamn thing. And this dinner doesn't mean a goddamn thing. And the social security and pension, don't mean a goddamn thing. None of these superficialities mean a goddamn thing.” At this point, we see Warren, who’s soft smile slowly turned bitter as Ray continued, “What means something? What really means something, Warren? Is the knowledge that you devoted your life to something meaningful? To being productive? And working for a fine company, hell, one of the top-rated insurance carriers in the nation?” Looking visually upset, the camera slowly zoomed on Schmidt’s face as Ray finished his toast, “...to raising a fine family. To building a fine home. To being respected by your community. To having wonderful lasting friendships. At the end of his career, the man can look back and say ‘I did it. I did my job’. Then he can retire in glory and enjoy riches far beyond the monetary kind. So all of you young people here. Take a good look... at a very rich man.” As the two embrace, we understand that Schmidt, although retired, does not feel complete in his life’s journey.

While at home channel surfing, Warren passed an ad which cautioned, “If all you feel is pity, or perhaps even guilt...” After processing what he had heard, Schmidt returned to the channel, which was showing an advertisement for Child Reach, an organization creating the opportunity for one to sponsor a child in less fortunate parts of the world. The commercial highlighted that for only \$22/month one could ‘make a profound difference’ and personally touch the life of a needy boy or girl overseas. The call to action at the end of the commercial asked, “Now that you have watched, what are

you going to do?” As we understand that Warren is in search of a new sense of fulfillment, we can assume, as the scene ends with Warren slowly reaching for the phone, that he called Child Reach. A few days later Warren, bored, chose to visit Woodmen, looking for any reason to hang around the office and keep busy. Much to Warren’s disappointment there was no need for him there, as his replacement had been fully acquainted and moved in.

After returning home, Schmidt opened what later is revealed to be a letter from the Child Reach organization. Warren had been assigned a six-year old child named Ndugu, to which Warren promptly made his introductory letter, disclosing his hometown, siblings, age and other information to Ndugu. Throughout the movie, as Warren wrote to Ndugu, we hear his voice narrate the letter. As he continued his opening letter he grew with rage, inking: “And goddamnit if they didn't replace me with some kid who, all right, so maybe he's got a little theory under his belt, and can plug a few numbers into a computer, but I can tell right off, that he doesn't know a damn thing about genuine real-world risk assessment or managing a department for that matter. Cocky bastard!” He quickly came to his senses and scratched out ‘cocky bastard’, and calmly returned to his peaceful introduction. This early scene alludes to Warren’s subconscious and the idea of a pen pal serving as therapy, to which he spoke his mind and disclosed his fears, thoughts, and obsessions. In a later letter, Warren introduced Ndugu to his daughter, Jeannie, documenting, “She's our only. I'll bet she'd like you, she gets a big kick out of different languages, and cultures and so forth. She used to get by pretty good in German. She'll always be my little girl.” Jeannie, at the time, lived with her fiancé Randall in Denver, CO, whom Warren and his wife were planning to visit soon.

While preparing for an RV-style road trip from Nebraska to Denver for Jeannie's wedding, we are taken through a montage featuring Warren complaining in detail to Ndugu about his wife. He explained his wife, Helen, was annoying, talkative, and controlling: "Helen and I have been married 42 years. Lately...every night I find myself asking myself the same question: Who is this old woman who lives in my house? Why is it that every little thing she does irritates me? Like the way she gets the keys out of her purse long before we reach the car..." By the end of this scene, we grasp Warren's apathetic feelings towards Helen. A short while later, after a quick run to the store, Warren returned to find Helen face down, having just suffered from blood clots in her brain. An already dejected Schmidt can be seen, demoralized and deflated, as a montage of expenses were read to him in the following scene. For the first time, we meet his only child, Jeannie and her fiancé as they embrace after she arrives in town for the funeral. The next time Schmidt wrote to Ndugu, he was somber in narration, informing Ndugu of his recent loss of Helen. He wrote, "...the smoke is clear, it's just me and my thoughts knocking around in this big old house. I believe I mentioned in my previous letter that I was an actuary at Woodmen of the world insurance company. If I'm given a man's age, race, profession, place of residence, marital status and medical history -- I can calculate with great probability how long that man will live. In my own case now that my wife has died, there is a 73% chance that I will die within 9 years, provided that I do not remarry. All I know is, I've got to make best of whatever time I have left. Life is short, Ndugu. I can't afford to waste another minute." At this moment it was confirmed that although retired, Warren was not content with his life's work, and still possessed the personal fortitude to embark on another enriching journey.

Visibly bored and antsy to find something to do, Schmidt packed the RV and began on his expedition to Denver for Jeannie's wedding, weeks early. Reminiscing about Helen, Warren pens a new letter to Ndugu, disclosing, "I miss her. I miss my Helen, I guess I just didn't know how lucky I was to have a wife like Helen until she was gone. Remember that young man, you have to appreciate what you have while you still have it." Shortly thereafter, Schmidt, while he organized Helen's old belongings, found romantic letters between herself and his aforementioned long-time friend, Ray. Disgusted by both his friend and late-wife, he tossed her things out by the dumpster and began on his voyage North. The first stop on Schmidt's trip was his hometown of Lawrence, Kansas where he visited his alma mater, Kansas University. He returned to campus to explore and re engage with students in his old fraternity, Beta Sigma Epsilon. After strolling down memory lane, Warren advised Ndugu during his newest narration that he should join a fraternity when he goes to college. One evening when parked at a local RV lot, a man by the name of John from Eau Claire, Wisconsin knocked on Schmidt's door and introduced himself, having been intrigued by his '35-footer' RV. After coming on and taking a look around, John extended an invitation for Warren to join himself and his wife for dinner later in their RV, claiming his wife, Vicki, is "one heck of a cook". As the three enjoyed a pleasant evening of laughs and drinks, John stepped away to get more beer. Vicki and Schmidt began to connect deeper, as she stated that "despite your good attitude and positive outlook, inside, I think you're a sad man." As she continued to analyze Warren further, she pointed out that she saw something deeper than grief and loss inside him: "anger, fear, and loneliness," she suggested. As Warren began to inch closer,

he laid his head on Vicki's shoulder and proceeded to kiss her. She immediately jumped up and demanded he leave.

Later this same night, unable to sleep, Schmidt laid atop the RV. As he stared at the stars and spoke to his late wife, he expressed, "What did you really think of me? Deep in your heart. Was I really the man you wanted to be with? Was I? Or were you disappointed, too nice to show it. I forgive you for Ray. I forgive you. That was a long time ago and I know I wasn't always the king of kings. I let you down. I'm sorry, Helen. Can you forgive me?" The next morning Warren, appearing revitalized, narrated his daily letter to Ndugu. In this, we hear high-spirited tones in Schmidt's voice, as he mentioned, "I must say it's been a very rewarding trip and this morning, I woke from my night in the wilderness completely transformed. I am like a new man. For the first time in years, I feel clear. I know what I want. I know what I have got to do, and nothing is going to stop me ever again. Meanwhile along with the usual check, I'm enclosing a little something extra to spend as you please." After arriving in Denver, Schmidt joined Jeannie in a dinner scene at Randall's parents' house, two nights before the wedding. From the beginning of the movie, Schmidt has shown resentment towards Randall, as he marries Warren's only daughter, leaving him solitarily confined with nothing more than his thoughts, having no family left by his side. After dinner, pulled Jeannie aside telling her, "I'm begging you not to marry Randall!" to which she responded, "All of a sudden, you're taking interest in what I do? You have an opinion about my life now? I am getting married, the day after tomorrow and you are going to come to my wedding, and you are going to sit there, and enjoy it, and support me, or else you can just turn right around right now and go back to Omaha," before storming off. Throughout the wedding ceremony, which involved

prayers, jokes, vows, and speeches, we see an uninspired Warren, appearing to be dazed, thinking about his life, as he maintained a blank stare during the event. We hear Warren narrate:

“Dear Ndugu, you'll be glad to know that Jeannie's wedding came off without a hitch. Right now, she and Randall are on their way to sunny Orlando, on my nickel, of course. As for me, I'm headed back to Omaha. I'm driving straight through this time, and I've made only one stop- the impressive new archer over the interstate in Corney, Nebraska. An arch that commemorates the courage and determination of the pioneers who cross the state on their way west. You've really got to see it to believe it. And it... kind of got me thinking, looking at all that history and reflecting on the achievement of people long ago kind of put things into perspective. My trip to Denver, for instance, is so insignificant compared to the journeys that others have taken, the bravery that they have shown, the hardships they've endured. I know we are all pretty small in the big scheme of things. And I supposed the most you can hope for is to make some kind of difference. What... what kind of difference have I made? What in the world is better because of me? When I was out in Denver, I tried to do the right thing, tried to convince Jeannie she was making a big mistake, but I failed. Now she is married to that and there is nothing I can do about it. I am... weak. And I am a failure. There is just no getting around it. Relatively soon, I will die. Maybe in 20 years... maybe tomorrow, it doesn't matter. Once I am dead, and everyone who knew me dies too, it'll be as though I never even existed. What difference has my life made to anyone? None that I can think of. None... at all. Hope things are fine with you. Yours truly, Warren Schmidt.” The film closes once Warren has

returned home, satisfied with the venture, to a letter addressed from “The Secret Heart” where Ndugu’s program was funded:

“Dear Mister Warren Schmidt,” the letter opened, “My name is sister Nadine Gautier, of “The Order of the Sisters of the Secret Heart.” I work in a small village near the town of Embeya in Tanzania. One of the children I care for is little Ndugu Umbu, the boy you sponsor. Ndugu is a very intelligent boy, and very loving. He is an orphan. Recently he needed medical attention for an infection of the eye. But he is better now. He loves to eat melon and he loves to paint. Ndugu and I want you to know that he receives all of your letters. He hopes that you are happy in your life and healthy. He thinks of you every day. And he wants very much your happiness. Ndugu is only 6 years old and cannot read or write. But he has made for you a painting. He hopes that you will like his painting. Yours sincerely... sister Nadine Gautier.” Once read, Warren immediately broke down in tears after seeing a hand-drawn image of himself and Ndugu, represented by two stick men, holding hands. For the first time we see strong emotion pour out from Warren - not during the wedding ceremony or the funeral proceedings did we examine this, but when the impact of changing a life was made, Warren could be seen losing control of his casual demeanor. We can quantify this as Schmidt’s actualization point - having made a lasting effect in a child’s life, one less fortunate than himself, one that money could never build.

Jack Nicholson’s character faced challenges throughout the film which triggered emotionally tied memories and allowed for personal reflection. Although implicit, we understand that Warren has plenty of love to give, but has channeled much of his life’s energy towards work and thus has neglected creating fruitful relationships. With less

focus on financial gain, and more on the fulfillment of life's journey, this film considers a more outward focus of the American Dream which supports one's journey for inner, true happiness. Remaining in line with the intrinsic search for one's self, John Singleton's *Higher Learning* (1995) aims to exploit America's social institutions, as well as the predisposed biases associated with cultural differences.

### **Film 3 - *Higher Learning* (1995)**

*Higher Learning* (1995) is a 1995 drama which follows the lives of three first year college students at the paradoxically named Columbus University. Malik Williams, Kristen Connor, and Remy – black varsity athlete, timid loner, and socially awkward rebel, respectively, remind us that classrooms only account for a small portion of college interactions and experiences. This film demonstrates many of the racial, sexual, and financial struggles which accompany adolescence. Through significant character development, each character brings a story which creates a constant unique plotline for viewers. Of the four films, John Singleton's *Higher Learning* (1995) explores distinctive social institution mismanagement, including racial barriers, stereotypes, and hidden motives. Early in the film we notice Malik's impulsive and young mind in full effect when he chose to hang with friends over making it to track practice on time. After arriving late and unprepared, Malik's coach promptly scolded him, asking, "Why are you trying to showboat? You think because you're a superstar rookie freshman you don't have to work? I got guys on this field who'll clean your clock in five seconds," at which point Malik sarcastically responded, "Who?" Fed up with his attitude and lack of motivation, Malik was duly dismissed from practice - but not before catching the eye of star women's athlete, Deja. After various romantic montages throughout the film, we understand the

“student-athlete” relationship whereby both students motivate one another by practicing and studying together.

Kristen and her new black roommate, Monet, got well acquainted on move-in day as their personalities seemingly mirrored each other's. As ‘welcome week’ ensued, we are introduced to two new classmates turned friends of Kristen’s, Claudia and Nicole. On their way to a fraternity party, Claudia and Nicole bragged about how nice their new apartments were going to be when they had finished decorating. Kristen, dimly, disclosed not being able to afford an apartment, and her friends were even more shocked when she revealed she couldn’t “just ask her parents” for money. This scene depicts the “spoiled” spirit of such ‘friends’ Kristen has chosen. Furthermore, during the same conversation we hear Nicole say, “My roommate's a Mexican, so I bet she got a scholarship, ugh.” This microaggression adds to the prejudice and predisposed hostility exhibited by so many Columbus University students. Once they arrived at the fraternity party, Kristen, Claudia and Nicole met a few of the fraternity members, one of which, Billy, showed early fondness in Kristen. Mid-party we transition to another function – a house gathering the same night, where we are introduced to Malik’s colleague and fellow Black associate, Fudge. Fudge, a 6-year student played by actor/rapper Ice Cube, maintained brief but powerful screen time throughout this film; as the laid-back demeanor, coupled with his mature wisdom continually challenged Malik and helped guide his journey. Fudge’s first on screen words read, “Man, governments, ain't running things no more. Financial institutions, they controlling the whole thing.” As the house party ensued, Remy is shown unable to sleep, as we notice at this time that Remy and Fudge are roommates. After refusing to turn the music down, Remy frantically left the dorm to find security,

reporting, “They’re playing their music man. It’s like frickin’ soul train in there.” Once the police shut the party down, they advised Fudge to “show some respect” to those trying to sleep. At this time, Fudge approached the cop, Officer Bradley, and replied, “but you don’t hear that down the hall?” referring to the fraternity party nearby – whereafter the officer responded, “I dig Rock and Roll.”

After the party, Kristen was approached by campus Junior, Taryn, who offered to walk her home, claiming it “isn’t safe to be walking alone on campus at night.” Kristen informed her that she had been with her friends earlier, but they ditched her as the night prolonged. During their walk, Kristen pointed out the fluorescent floor bulbs which bordered the sidewalk, calling them “pretty blue lights.” Taryn educated Kristen of the campus ‘blue light system,’ whereby a phone was located at the end of every block which connected students to campus security in the case someone ever tried to assault them. Once walking her home, Taryn handed Kristen an invitation to a campus event sponsored by the Students for a Non-Sexist Society (SNSS) in order to hopefully help her connect with some new, more wholesome friends.

Malik’s Political Science professor, Maurice Phipps, played by Laurence Fishburne started the year off by calling upon Malik to read a list of names aloud to the class, his being among these. Once completing the list, Professor Phipps stated that, “Those persons whose names were called, the university instructed me that your financial bill hasn’t been paid. Leave and settle your debts. You may not return until you have done so. There are no handouts in the free world and, appropriately, none in my course. Thank you and good day.” An angry Malik stormed from class and headed to the Financial Aid office where he was notified that his full-athletic scholarship had been downgraded to a

partial scholarship. As a result, we see Malik, humbled, return to the track dressed and focused. As he stretched and practiced, we heard a narrated conversation between Malik and his coach, “You want a what? A full scholarship? Man, you got some nerve. Alright, I’ll see what I can do. I don’t wanna hear you’re lax in your studies or fucking up on the field. You got that? Do I make myself clear?” This conversation serves as fuel as the practice montage accelerates as the conversation transpires.

After another late night of music and studying that didn’t seem to mix for Fudge and Remy, Remy chose to pack his belongings and move out of the shared dorm room. This same evening, we see Malik and Fudge playing Monopoly, which I conclude is strategic integration to highlight the role of capitalism in America, and more importantly transition to the forthcoming conversation. Fudge inquisitively asked Malik about his motivations to attend Columbus University to which Malik replied, “Well, because that’s what they say you need to do to make it in the country.” Unsatisfied with his answer, Fudge further asked “What’s ‘make it’?” A confident Malik responded, “You know, getting a degree...making that long dough.” Fudge, discontent, leaned forward, “So are you in it for the money or the knowledge?” At this point Malik, quiet, sat back and listened to what Fudge had to say. After encouraging him to find his purpose at the University, the scene ended once Fudge considered Malik’s athletic status, remarking, “If you don’t run you don’t get no tuition, right? That’s how the system goes. Run, nigger, run.”

Later in the semester we revisit Kristen’s character who at this point has a noticeably new hairstyle, as she dyed it blonde and cut it shorter to fit in with her ‘friends’ more. Then Kristen, Claudia, and Nicole ended up at a campus bar with the

fraternity boys from earlier in the film. The night of drinking shortly thereafter came to an end, but not before a stumbling Kristen left the bar with Billy to head to his house. It is later revealed that Kristen was not an avid drinker, and her friends even considered not letting her go home alone with Billy but were too drunk to care otherwise. When back at his dorm, the two began to get intimate; once the two started moving in the direction of sex, Kristen advised Billy to use a condom. After numerous faint attempts to tell Billy, he finally commanded her to shut up and continued anyway. Once finding the strength to slip away from Billy and the frat house, she finally made it back to her dorm where she sobbed alone in bed. Returning home shortly after, Monet immediately sought to find out what happened. While she comforted Kristen, Billy called the dorm room, where Monet repeatedly told him Kristen was not home. Once exceeding his tolerance level in numerous attempts to speak with Kristen, Billy scolded Monet, calling her a 'black bitch.' From this moment, we recognize a quasi-campus clash of races when Fudge and other black students gather with Kristen and Monet, as they all rally to head over to Billy's fraternity. When arrived, Kristen pointed Billy out from the crowd of fraternity boys and Fudge carried him into the front lawn, forcing him to apologize to Monet. With Fudge on top of Billy, Officer Bradley and the campus police arrived, ending the dispute. During a comforting embrace from Monet, we notice Kristen lock eyes with Claudia and Nicole, who are inside at the frat house, comforting Billy. After a long glare, the two girls said, "I don't understand why *they* always have to start all this trouble," referring to Fudge and the other black students - unconcerned with the reality that they in fact ignited the evening.

Following this scene, we once again see Malik at Fudge's dorm room, but this time, to Fudge's delight, studying. Nearing the end of his studies, Malik asked if he happened to have the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, which he did. An excited Fudge asked Malik how he got "turned on to Douglass," but much to his disappointment, Malik confessed it was merely for class. "For a class. That's the only reason you're reading it?" "Yeah, why else?" Malik asked, to which Fudge informed him, "To feed your brain, fool." On his way out, Fudge insisted that Malik keep the book, but "Read it for yourself and not for no damn class." Later this same night, Remy, while reading in front of the American flag in the courtyard, was approached by Aryan leader/White Supremacist, Scott Moss. Presumably recruiting Remy, Scott invited him to get a drink while meeting a few people alongside him. Once introduced to the other members of the Aryan crew, Scott declared, "We're white, in America, what more do you need to have a good time?"

Next, we transitioned to what is our first-time hearing Professor Phipps lecture, he chose to focus on the topic of democratic theory, announcing, "You should know that democratic theory did not begin with Rousseau's contract. No. Its origins, in fact, lie in the subject of land ownership. The common people became aware that the upper classes owned the land upon which they lived and labored. This incensed them inspired them to seek sovereignty of their own homelands. However, the social order of the day did not permit land ownership by the common man. Therefore, these people felt the need to leave their homelands to flee in an effort to escape political and social persecution. Hence, the creation that is America." Phipps concluded, "Therefore, the basic premise of democratic theory is that each and every citizen living within that society is entitled to what? We are

entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What you people have to realize is that despite having these rights very few people exercise them. It is that type of apathy that corrodes our country from within.” After months of tough grading, Malik felt as though Professor Phipps, who was also Black, was giving him an especially hard time in class because he was one of the only 'familiar' faces. Phipps assured Malik that he treats all his students the same and would continue to give him a difficult time until he has proven otherwise. Phipps instructed Malik to get rid of the attitude assuming that the world owes him something, that he must strip himself of that mentality, “It breeds laziness.” Malik revealed that he felt as though Phipps was acting as his enemy, due to the fact that he felt as though Phipps was getting in his way of making progress. Phipps assured that he is not in Malik’s way, nor is it his job to motivate him, stating that “Your own presence should be motivation enough. I have nothing to prove unlike you.” Feeling offended by this, Malik promptly asked who he has something to prove to. “Yourself,” Phipps stated.

The next transition brought us to the Aryan living quarters, flooded with swastika flags and symbols of anarchy. At this point it seems as though Remy has joined the crew, as Scott asked the group, “How do you feel knowing this country doesn't belong to you any more? How do you feel knowing that when you graduate from college you might not get a job because of the color of your fuckin’ skin?” Remy admits he “never thought about it like that.” A confused Remy disclosed that he doesn’t know anyone on campus, and notices how everyone seems to stick to their own, mentioning, “All I have is myself.” At this point, it’s obvious that Scott has chosen the right weak mind to corrupt, honing in on his vulnerability, declaring, “We're brothers by blood. Pure Aryan blood. This is

brotherhood, Remy. Welcome home. And if there should be anything at all that you wanna talk about then I want you to come to us. If there's one thing I want you to leave thinking about tonight it's that we take care of our own.”

After returning his latest paper, Professor Phipps, impressed with his recent work, sat Malik down to find out more about his freshman year, asking, “Are you having any problems here at Columbus?” Malik revealed that he could notice the difference in apathy among students on campus, and that he felt this prejudice was being applied by other Professors and thus affecting his academic standing. In order to relate more closely to Malik, Phipps posed the scenario, “You are running a race and you suspect the opposing team has a member who is faster, stronger, more big-time than yourself. What do you do then?” To which Malik replied, “Run faster.” Immediately his eyes widened, and Professor Phipps' smile broadened, as we appreciated Malik’s understanding and association of the reference. We are reassured of this in the subsequent scene, where Malik is displayed at his desk studying at early hours in the morning.

Our next time seeing Remy, he is in the library reading, but quickly distracted as a nearby student clicks numbers on their calculator. When Remy raises his head to inspect the origin of the sound, he maliciously stares at the Black student working at his desk; followed by 3 other ethnic students sitting nearby. His spiteful glare and Iron Cross necklace give much evidence to his Aryan transformation; we are convinced further when the scene ends with Remy removing his hat, revealing his newly shaven head. In the following scenes, we see Remy start to develop a personality, one of corrupt mind, body, and spirit. Through a short montage we are shown members of the Aryan crew assaulting innocent black men on campus who are engaged in relationships with white women.

Back at the apartment shortly after, the boys celebrated and laid all their guns out, comparing weapons and cheering rowdily. Remy, while looking visibly more comfortable around the guys, disclosed his close relationship with guns, stating that he's been around them since age 9. Thrilled by the rush, Remy took out his Glock 9 millimeter, and showed it off to Scott, claiming, "This is power."

"Columbus disgusts me. Fool wasn't nothing but a thief, mass murderer. He slaughtered millions of Native Americans and we have a holiday *and* a University named after his honor?" Malik proclaimed as he and Deja stood near the Christopher Columbus statue in the courtyard. At this time, Deja noticed Remy standing behind Malik, as he interrupted them. Remy made a point to comment on Malik's Black Panthers t-shirt labeling it as "reverse racism," then calling him a 'coon' before running off. Deja was only able to hold Malik back for so long until he finally chased down and confronted Remy at his dorm room and called him a coward. After Malik left him to his own misery, Remy had a manic episode and destroyed his dorm room, which included his roommate David's belongings as well. When David arrived and confronted Remy about the damages, he took out his aforementioned Glock and loaded it. After an argument ensued which could be heard down the hallway, Malik arrived to intervene; however, this time, Remy scrambled for his gun and held it to Malik's head. After threatening his life, Remy packed his bags and left campus, seemingly dropping out of University to live with the Aryan crew. In the next moments, Fudge and other black students are seen embracing Malik as he is clearly disturbed by what took place. Following the event, Malik moved out of his dorm and in with Fudge where he felt "safer and more comfortable" around his own people.

During a campus wide inclusion and spirit assembly curated by Kristen and Taryn, the Aryan group planned a mission that would distract campus police, while allowing Remy to sneak onto a nearby roof and gun down students of color. In the process, Remy shot Malik's girlfriend Deja, along with one other student. Malik, infuriated after having just watched Deja die in his arms, immediately raced for the roof where he met Remy and the two engaged in a barrage of punches and slurs. Soon thereafter, the police arrived to break up the fight, only to apprehend Malik and allow Remy to run off. During the film's proceedings, Fudge and Malik experience severe police bias as they are constantly asked for their IDs in situations of innocence such as walking at night or heading to class. Officer Bradley, the main police official in every campus security incident is always shown undermining the comments Fudge makes about his obvious racial discrimination. The difference in the interactions between Officer Bradley, innocent Malik, and mass murderer Remy are very telling as the film continues. Although Remy just shot numerous innocent students and continued to run from the cops, Officer Bradley pleaded with him generously and even coerced him with dreams of a bright future in order to give himself up. After panicking while cornered into a back hallway, Remy lifted the gun, placing it in his mouth and ending it all. Moments after, stumbling out of the building, Malik fell into the arms of Professor Phipps who held him, as the two lay on the floor, sobbing. As campus cleared out, we were brought back to the iconic Christopher Columbus statue in the courtyard; this time surrounded with flowers, cards, and a sign reading: "Peace Together." The once symbolic oppressive and discriminatory monument was now converted into a place of remembrance for those lives lost. A distraught Kristen, (who arranged the spirit assembly), and Malik, (mourning the

loss of Deja) both found themselves sulking by the memorial. When the two briefly speak, Malik assured her that she cannot blame herself for the tragedy which took place, as it was out of her control. After introducing one another, Kristen stated that it was “funny we never met before” to which Malik delayed, “Yea, funny.” After re-watching this scene a few times for context, I remembered back to the opening moments of the film when Kristen and Malik both entered the elevator, and without so much as a word spoken, clutched her purse and held it tight. It's obvious that Malik remembers this interaction when he mentions he's ‘seen her around’ before, although she doesn't. The irony sets in once you realize that after a brief conversation, Kristen has not only met but been comforted by Malik, the same person she presumed a threat.

In closing scenes, Professor Phipps can be seen in his office, reading what we assume is Malik's final paper, as we hear his voice narrating: “It's my belief that if the Dred Scott decision was retried in contemporary American courts, the decision would be the same, meaning that a black man, no matter what his class status, would still have no rights that a white man, by law, would be bound to respect. The result would be the same no matter what the law states, because it was not written by and for the benefit of African-Americans. The credo ‘And liberty and justice for all’ is a falsehood that has been widely ignored and needs to be addressed.” Once finishing this page, we see Phipps close the document and look out the window, in a state of delight and satisfaction.

“In spite of the recent tragedy here, you have persevered. You have overcome many obstacles this semester. For those reasons, you have my utmost respect and every confidence that you will make a wise decision concerning your future.” Professor Phipps encouraged Malik in the final moments of this film. Following a montage of the

graduating class, including Fudge, Malik can be seen on the campus sidewalk, sprinting...to class? Possibly, or better yet onward towards his dreams and aspirations, farther than a track could ever take him.

John Singleton's depiction of America's most prestigious institution, college, results in cultural understanding from various perspectives. As we follow multiple characters through the movie, Malik's undeniable growth from stubborn athlete to knowledge-seeking, poised student is one that cannot go unnoticed. Similar to Malik's path to actualization, in Brian De Palma's 1983 classic, *Scarface* (1983), we follow Cuban-immigrant, Tony Montana, whose depiction of the American Dream looks different from one's of earlier. In this storyline, we must consider Montana's impoverished background and oppressive government experiences when following his actions.

#### **Film 4 - *Scarface* (1983)**

The 1983 film, *Scarface* (1983), details the life of a Cuban immigrant who struggles to find happiness and the American dream within the harsh communistic reign of Cuba and the unavoidable capitalism of America. Throughout the film we are shown profound signs which allude to the successful empire which protagonist, Antonio (Tony) Montana, (played by Al Pacino) has built. As we follow Tony's "Money, Power, Respect" driven ego, we are given the opportunity to view the criminal enterprise as it relates to societal development and economic independence. Coming from a life of poverty and unfair treatment, we are encouraged to see Montana's actions from a stance of "desperation" or "imprudence". One of the most prevalent indexes from *Scarface* (1983), is the reoccurring "The World Is Yours" motto, which can be seen on various

statues, blimps and jewelry through the film. This sentiment is first introduced when Montana and his best friend, and fellow Cuban-immigrant, Manolo (Manny), are discussing their future plans in the United States. While Montana vocalizes his early dissatisfaction with “Americans”, Manny reminds Tony “...last year this time we were in a cage...I say be happy with what you’ve got”. Montana replies, “You be happy. Me? I want what’s coming to me”, by which Manny quickly asks, “Well what’s coming to you Tony?” Montana responds, “The world, Chico...And everything in it.” Following this scene, comes a fade to black screen which leaves viewers in ‘darkness’ to resonate with Montana’s enduring words. As this analysis develops, I plan to examine the Semiotic structure which outlines Montana (and implicitly America’s) struggle for capital gain. De Palma enmeshed Al Pacino’s character with values of strength and dominance, but configuring the course of his journey is left mostly to audience interpretation. Although initially impoverished, Montana was rich in opportunity when given freedom and a second chance. The social constructs of ‘success’ are weighed, as Oliver Stone and Brian De Palma’s cocaine-induced production demonstrates the cultural norms associated with the American dream and the ceaseless desire to achieve it.

The opening frame of *Scarface* (1983) displays a rolling message which enters from the bottom and leaves atop the screen, reading: “In May 1980, Fidel Castro opened the harbor at Mariel, Cuba, with the apparent intention of letting some of his people join their relatives in the United States. Within seventy-two hours, 3,000 U.S. Boats were headed for Cuba. It soon became evident that Castro was forcing the boat owners to carry back with them not only their relatives but the dregs of his jails. Of the 125,000 refugees that landed in Florida, an estimated 25,000 had criminal records.” Following a short black

screen, Fidel Castro is shown expressing his disgust with criminals in Cuba, declaring they are “holding back the revolution” in his country.

As defined within Hector Reyes’ (2000) “Cuba: The Crisis of State Capitalism” article of the *International Socialist Review*, socialism is a system of shared abundance accomplished by unleashing the productive potential created by capitalism on a world scale. In Cuba, socialism was seen as widespread rationing, including the unavailability of many basic goods, the lack of housing, child-care facilities and public transportation. When reviewing this film, it is important to be aware of the real-world happenings that lay as influence for the movie’s structure. Having been both filmed and set in the 1980’s, many of the government references throughout this picture hold true to the conditions at the time. In his article, Reyes noted the early 1980s represented the highest level of success for the Cuban regime during this period. However, he detailed that this timespan also brought forth “the early cracks in the system, as evidenced by the massive emigration of some 100,000 Cubans through the port of Mariel (shown in the beginning scenes of *Scarface* [1983])...given the green light by Castro himself, who saw it as relieving some of the pressure on the economy.”

Looking deeper within Reyes’ article review, we examine the Cuban revolution as it took place through the late 20th century. National records, as stated by Fidel Castro reveal “700,000 workers were unemployed, while another 500,000 were seasonal farm laborers who starved for part of the year. Castro represented the oppressive system which the country was fighting so hard to gain independence from. Although a real dictator, Castro’s character role was a key driving force for Tony throughout the film. Through a semiotic lens, Castro is portrayed as ‘the man’ – which can also be interpreted as the

brutal tyranny which comes from overbearing governments. The child mortality rate was 60 out of every 1,000 births, while life expectancy was 55 years.” In the section titled, “The quest for national development”, Castro’s socialistic ideals and desire for a liberal democracy are reviewed. The text further detailed an excerpt from a 1959 speech given by Castro, attesting, “Our revolution is neither capitalist nor communist! Capitalism sacrifices the human being, communism with its totalitarian conceptions sacrifices human rights...Our revolution is not red but olive green.”

Following the intro slide, we next examine a short montage featuring families and prisoners being boated to the U.S. from Cuba. Once arrived in the U.S., Immigration and Nationalization officials can be seen interviewing the Cuban immigrants as they assess and relocate accordingly. Through this process, we meet Cuban immigrant, Antonio (Tony) Montana. As the interview progressed, hurling questions including, “Where'd you learn to speak the English?” and “What kind of work you do in Cuba?” After a closer examination, the officials came across a small tattoo symbol on his hand – a pitchfork etched inside the image of a heart. Upon lying about the meaning of the symbol, the officials threatened to send him to the detention center, at which time it was revealed the image was a branding mark meaning “assassin”. Tired of their constant badgering, Montana urged, “How would you like it if they tell you all the time what to think, what to do? You wanna be like a sheep, like everybody else? You wanna work eight hours a day and you never own nothing? I ate octopus three times a day, fucking octopus is coming out my ears, fuckin' Russian shoes are eating through my feet. What do you want? You want me to stay there? I'm Tony Montana and I'm a political prisoner here from Cuba and I want my fucking 'Human Rights' just like President Jimmy Carter says, okay? Having

heard enough of his sly remarks, the Immigration official commanded nearby guards to take Montana to “Freedomtown”, an immigrant detention camp. While being taken out the room, Montana told the interviewers, “Send me here, send me there. This. That. Nothing you can do to me that Castro didn't do – nothing!”

Once earning their green card, Tony and his Cuban traveling mate and best friend, Manny, set out for their new life in Miami. After getting tired of washing dishes and watching big time spenders roll around the city, the two men conspire with some local criminals and configure a drug mission which would give them enough money to get on their feet.

Author, Steven Messner, wrote an article inside the International Journal of Conflict and Violence, which examined the core theories and relationships surrounding institutional anomie. Within the Institutional-Anomie theory, it is suggested that crime within the United States is heavily driven by the constant burden on material success – that of monetary and physical well-being. Messner raised the point that the cultural quest for the American Dream often times is an innate commitment to the goal of material success; he believes that this push for individual competition is a key driving force for American crime. A related framework which parallels anomie and aids much of the interpretation for Montana’s actions lies in relativism. As defined within the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, relativism is the idea that truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and assessment (Baghramian & Carter, 2015). When interpreted by an audience (regardless of text form), the implicit authority is (often) restricted to the context giving rise to them. Institutional-Anomie theory suggests that cultural values

encourage an “any means necessary” approach to success and achieving one’s goals. Specifically, Messner brought attention to the rise of economic dominance in the institutional core, and the perceived unbalance of power from a citizen’s point-of-view in America. Messner’s article helps interpret the breakdown of the crime structure as it relates to individualism, universalism, and success within one’s culture. When viewing the crime and success correlation within *Scarface* (1983)’s film composition, we can conclude that the government oppression which Montana was under for years propelled him into a life of greed and unattainable happiness. Tony’s ‘Family First’ and ‘Loyalty over Everything’ mantras can be observed in scenes where he demonstrates selflessness and zeal by showing enormous respect for others.

Once under the wing of his new Drug-boss, Frank Lopez, Montana quickly learns the rules associated with the organized crime business. “Lesson number one”, Frank outlined, “Don’t underestimate the other guy’s greed!” While continuing to educate Tony, he asked, “You know what a Haza is? It’s Yiddish for pig. It’s a guy who’s got more than what he needs, so he doesn’t fly straight anymore. That’s the problem in this business Tony, there’s too many ‘hazas’ and they’re the ones you got to watch out for.”

For a film such as *Scarface* (1983) that highlights the pursuit of the American dream, there are several tacit signs which represent “success”. Some of these signs are not merely to showcase wealth; but setup visible impurities and fallacies in Tony’s morality. Barthes (2018) has stated, “We are made to believe that what we are watching is unmediated reality”, which is a perfect preface for another Barthes’ excerpt, “If everything in the universe is a sign, semiotics becomes extremely important, if not all-important” (p. 5). “This is paradise. This is paradise” Tony exclaimed to Manny as they

arrived in Miami. "I'm telling you. I should've come here years ago. I'd have been a millionaire by this time. By this time, I'd have had my own boat, my own car my own golf course. You know what I want? I thought of this the other day. A line of blue jeans. With my name written on the back of chicks' asses. How's that?" From early on we are shown the capitalistic views which so often come paired with the American Dream.

In essence, Tony represents a self-made man; having come to the United States with nothing, overcome oppressive obstacles, societal boundaries, and still found a way to riches. However, none of this seemed to ultimately bring Montana happiness. An iconic restaurant scene towards the end of the film highlights the fact that the American Dream comes at a price. After an argument with his wife, Elvira, turned public, Tony proclaimed to those in attendance about how much of cowards they were for not "doing what they really want" in life. Tony further contended that the only difference between himself and those bystanders was their obsession to hide who they are. American-Italian Filmmaker, Martin Scorsese, warned De Palma that he would get critical backlash and 'Hollywood' would hate him due to the portrayal of Hollywood, stating the film was "*about them*" (and the capitalistic enterprise themes shown within the film). This exact scene was a representation of what Scorsese meant. The scene leaves viewers wondering if Tony's rant was valid. If two men commit the same crime, but one man accepts it and the other hides and denies it, what is to be said about these individuals? Is one more righteous than the other? Does one have a stronger moral code? The recurring question which I ask myself is: Was Tony's quest for success or his unsatisfied pursuance ultimately to blame for his catastrophic demise while chasing the American Dream?

In revisiting the “*Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*”, the section titled, “*Chains*” shed light on an important element of analyzing *Scarface* (1983). For most visual text, there may be one preferred reading—that is, which was created by the text producer; but there are often more meanings, sometimes so profound that they require a different perspective of thinking to uncover. From the opening scenes in the movie, we watch Montana work his way from flatline poverty to immense riches through a regime of criminal capitalism. Montana’s poor immigrant status and subsequent entrepreneurial rise resonates differently among viewers. For some, they are merely watching a man who makes poor decisions; however other viewers may be able to extract meaning from Tony’s actions. For example, surface level interpretations could range from “Crime pays”, as we see Tony amass millions via drug and crime involvement - to “all Cubans are gangsters” as we see Montana’s on-going “above the law” actions and behavior. With these values, we (the audience) are able to view Tony as a symbol for independence, as well as a token for “outsiders” to identify with the struggle that must be endured on the road to success.

Written by Ronald Bogue, “*De Palma's Postmodern Scarface and the Simulacrum of Class*”, examined, in-depth, the cultural approach into postmodernism - specifically focusing on screenwriter Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* (1983). De Palma’s depiction of capitalism and the American dream ties in factors that examine personal desires and cultural psychology. It is within the context of postmodernism that this article refers to *Scarface* (1983) in; detailing its themes and metanarratives as created by De Palma. Brian De Palma’s 1983 remake of the original *Scarface* (1932) released in 1932, explores and in ways uses Tony Montana’s “gangster” personality as a symbol

representative of capitalism. Within this article it is stated that De Palma proclaimed, “there is no difference between legal capitalism and the drug trade; both are exploitative and destructive.” A recurring theme in this film is Montana’s perpetual desire to become as rich as possible, which reinforces capitalism. Amidst the violence, drugs and women exploited all throughout the movie, many may interpret the capitalism references as subtle, but to an analyst, the signs are constant across production.

While breaking down De Palma’s rationale behind the heavy cocaine inclusion in *Scarface* (1983), Bogue (1993) reported, “Unlike other major substances of abuse, cocaine, in moderated usage is not considered a distraction from work, but as an enhancer of cognitive functioning. Health professionals have stated that with most drug addictions, work is the first thing addicts give up, but with cocaine, work is the last thing they surrender before giving up their drug,” (p. 124). Contrasting reports have been made regarding the effects, some stated that "vision seems sharper; sounds are clearer and the drug ‘enhances social relationships’” while others have deemed this the most unsatisfying drug of all the major substances of abuse - as it induces ecstatic experiences, but it does not/cannot produce satisfaction. Cocaine, in this film’s scope, represents capital. All of the treasures which Montana enjoys span from his involvement and investment into the cocaine business. In other films by De Palma, (*Wise Guys*, *The Untouchables*) there are clear parallels between organized crime and legitimate business, but what sets *Scarface* (1983) apart from some earlier works is the addition of cocaine to the equation of ultimate power. In a classic montage featured in the movie, accompanied by the song “Take it to the limit”, we are shown Tony's rise to the top. A quick presentation of money counters, Tony laughing on the phone, duffel bags of cash being carried inside the bank,

newly purchased Montana Properties building, and Tony's wedding at his new mansion reveal cocaine is the ultimate capitalist fantasy (as portrayed by De Palma).

After growing tired of listening to Frank, he plotted to not only get over on him, but take his wife and ultimately his empire. Once Frank realized the strong threat Tony posed to him and his superiority, he conspired to have Montana killed. After the hired assassination failed, Tony, along with Manny confronted Frank for his fraudulent and double-dealing ways. While confronting him, Tony asked, "Do you know what a Haza is Frank?" Montana mocked Lopez. This question brings us back to early scenes when Frank first began to mentor Tony. "You remember what a 'Haza' is Frank? It's a pig that don't fly straight. Neither do you, Frank. I stayed loyal to you, Frank. I made what I could on the side but I never turned you, never, but you? A man that ain't got his word, is a cockroach!" Tony said to Frank moments before ordering Manny to kill him.

When visiting his mother and sister for the first time in 5 years, he is met with opposite attitudes. As he embraced his sister, Gina, his mother stood close by glaring at Tony. During dinner he pulled out a bundle of money and gifted it to the women, when the following dialogue ensued:

**TONY:** Yeah, your son's made it Mama, he's a success. I wanted to surprise you. That's how come I didn't show my face around before. I wanted you to see what a good boy I been. That's a thousand dollars right there, Mama, for you.

**MAMA:** Who'd you kill for this Tony?

**TONY:** C'mon Mama. Things are different. I'm working with this anti-Castro group. I'm an organizer now, we get a lotta political contributions.

**MAMA:** Sure you do Tony with a gun sticking in somebody's face. All we read about in

the papers is the animals like you and the killings, what about the Cubans who come here and work hard and make a good name for themselves? What about...

**GINA:** What are you saying Mama! He's your son!

**MAMA:** Son? I wish I had one. He's a bum! He was a bum then and he's a bum now! Who do you think you are, we haven't heard a word from you in five years and you suddenly show up here and throw some money around and you think you can get my respect? You think you can buy me with jewelry? You think you can come into my house with your hotshot clothes and your gutter manners! No, no, that's not the way I am Tony and that's not the way I raised Gina to be. You're not going to destroy her. I don't need your money, thanks. I work for my living -- and I don't want you in this house anymore and I don't want you around Gina. So leave us alone, go on, get out! And take this lousy money with you, it stinks!

After the dispute, Tony stormed out the house, Gina following. As he comforted her and encouraged her to, "Go out, do some things, have some fun. You gotta get some fun out of life", as we see Manny, waiting in the car, staring at Gina lustfully. After assuring Tony that his sister was "beautiful", he screamed at Manny to "Stay away from her. She is not for you" From this point onwards, we see subtle but clear moments of attraction between the two. For example, during Tony's wedding scene, the camera pans between Manny and Gina's faint smiles as they gaze at each other during the ceremony. We even experience a car ride during the movie where Manny expressed his interest in Gina, but was not able to make a move. "Are you afraid of Tony? You're scared of Tony's kid sister?" She taunted Manny. As shown throughout the film, Tony's moral code (despite how it may be viewed) is tight-knit and held very close to the chest. Tony

repeatedly tells those around him that he will not break his word or integrity for anyone. Although he engages in violent acts throughout the film, he makes it known that there is no room for women or kids in that field and was even forced to kill one of his associates due to their conflicting views with this. Loyalty and family first.

Looking back on my high-school tenure, I was able to compare the story of *Scarface* (1983) to another American classic in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* tells the story of an 11<sup>th</sup> century Scottish soldier whose lust for power and royalty results in not only the death of himself but all those close to him. In *Scarface* (1983), Tony kills his best friend and right-hand man, Manny – similarly, *Macbeth* kills his best friend, Banquo. However, in line with his pattern of situational escalation - Montana eventually kills his best friend who eloped with his sister, not because he felt no one deserved her, but due to the breached loyalty of his partner. Manny's relationship to Montana was that of a brother, or his "better half". Once arrived in Miami, Montana turned to his companion Manny and declared: "In this country, you gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money, you get the power. Then when you get the power, then you get the women!" This early quote not only shows Tony's strategic focus for his journey; but forces the audience to internally evaluate the structure of society and conclude whether this in fact *is* how 'success' is generally quantified. For those viewers who may not be conscious of the capitalistic values implied within the film, the message still resonates for those of who are persisting through hard times in harsh environments (especially ones like those portrayed in the movie). Along his journey of control and supremacy, Montana forcibly takes the money and power which are integral to the American dream. In this temporary redistribution of wealth through crime, drugs, and extortion, the appeal

remains for those who feel disenfranchised without disrupting the fundamental belief in the justice of the capitalist system.

Prince (2009) labeled Tony Montana an “urban superhero” who died in oppositional resistance to the tyranny of a criminal corporate structure (p. 78). During his time researching De Palma, 1980’s Cuba, and American crime, Prince (2009) discovered that viewers’ reactions to ‘Scarface (1983)’ were more reliant on their social class, rather than race. In a passage from, “*Race in American Film: Voices and Visions that Shaped a Nation*”, author Daniel Bernardi acknowledged Rapper, P. Diddy’s reports to having watched the movie “over 63 times” (p. 772). In the text, Diddy indicated the film’s meaning (to him) was less of a raw depiction of drugs and violence, and more so a representation of the societal “come up” which speaks to both immigrant and minority circumstances. Prince (2009) indicated, “criminal behavior is very likely to be accepted by an audience if that audience itself needs money to solve its real-life problems,” (p. 41) suggesting that the viewer’s acceptance of Montana’s actions/behavior directly correlates to the dissatisfaction viewers feel regarding their own financial situation. Prince’s (2009) analysis further characterized Montana as a nonconformist who challenges oppressive hierarchies by declaring that, “*Scarface* offered them a hero who represented the militant opposition to the white male hegemony which oppresses them.” (p. 146).

The film concludes with an iconic scene showcasing Montana’s final moments before he falls into his pool face down after being shot in the back. Tony’s lifeless body floats in the water, surrounded by what is left of his empire, slain friends, piles of cocaine, and a statue bearing the recurrent phrase ‘The World is Yours’ hovers over him – This symbolic death is a sheer warning about the price of chasing the American Dream.

Al Pacino's character displays immense focus and ambition, but that ambition is so great that he never truly gets anything he wants; as he's missed the goal - happiness and the American dream.

### **Semiotic Comparison**

When taking a semiotic lens to each of these films, the subtleties which each producer incorporated from sound to character composure, add to the understanding and overall impact of the film. Throughout the reenacted deposition in *The Social Network* (2010), we notice Mark Zuckerberg clad in a casual zip-up jacket, sweatpants, and open-toed sandals with no socks, while those around him can be seen wearing three-piece suits and corporate business attire. The slow camera angle which rises to showcase his outfit places emphasis on his nonchalant manner towards the case and those present. At several points during the proceedings Mark intently looks down, as if writing detailed notes – however anytime he flips his page, we see a new sheet of what are actually drawings and senseless scribbling. Mark's attire was not the only indication of his low desire for attendance; as he often shifts his facial expressions, contorts his body language and does not hesitate to show attitude. Zuckerberg's tunnel focus exuberates confidence while showing a complete disregard to the emotions of those around him. Mark's side comments and sarcasm towards Eduardo, Sean, and even towards lawyers, allows viewers to peek into the humility, or lack thereof, which he exhibits. *The Social Network* (2010) themes itself around big business, power, greed, deception, and social detachment. This film does not exist solely to portray the rise of the social phenomenon known as Facebook, but rather an internal struggle between chasing one's dreams, chasing wealth, and maintaining healthy relationships through ego, manipulation and ambition. Although

business partners throughout the movie, Mark and Eduardo are mostly seen together (in-shot) at moments of positivity or triumph for Eduardo. This frame inclusion allows us to identify the jealousy and expressions which Zuckerberg exhibits, giving us depth into the foundation of their friendship. As far as Mark's solo shots, there is a constant usage of medium level zoom angles which contain solely Mark's face and soften those who are around him. This special type of focus creates the aura of solitude and seclusion.

In many non direct-dialogue scenes involving the Winklevoss twins, the camera angle shows them from the neck to waist - excluding their faces, while everyone else in the shot can be fully scene (either sitting or standing far enough to be seen standing) to highlight their incredible stature. The Winklevoss twins are portrayed as athletic, brilliant star students from their film's introduction. After flaunting their size and abilities several times, once stating, "We can do that ourselves, I'm 6 foot 5, 220 lbs., and there's two of me" in response to one of their friends suggesting they should hire someone to beat up Mark. Finally, the music of this film maybe compliments its content best of the four. The melodic tunes which calmly outline this movie accompany the subtle scenes and balance the tone of the college campus. Including classical thematic music between transitions, faint chimes at points of triumph, and slow piano keying preceding suspenseful moments in the film which allow us to presume difficulties which lay ahead.

*About Schmidt* (2002) opens with a dry, quiet montage featuring clips of downtown Omaha; ending with the American flag, shown waving outside the labeled "Woodmen" building. When we meet, inside, Warren Schmidt, its apparent his demeanor is one that reflects a tired, overworked man. As the title fades onto the screen shortly after watching Schmidt leave his packed-up office; the plain white text, sets the dreary tone for

the film's mood. At his retirement party, as past friends and coworkers step up to speak on their relationships and history, Warren is slow to show any emotion to what is said – until his old friend, Ray Nicholos, stood up to remind those in attendance that, “none of these superficialities mean a thing” referring to the dinner, the gifts and the material substance that comes with much of life. Early in the film, Warren’s wife, Helen, can easily be distinguished as his *better* half, as she constantly serves as the voice of reason for Warren through his day-to-day monotony. During dialogue between the two, Schmidt often comes off short and uninterested; to where Helen is seen overcompensating in conversation by continually asking follow-up questions such as “Why not?” And “How come?”

By the time Warren began to write his first letter to his foster child, Ndugu; it was evident he took his time journaling as a means to help find purpose for his life, post-retirement. As he showed genuine compassion to foster child Ndugu, his emotions and thoughts also began to show. After the sudden passing of his wife, Warren’s visual appearance turned gloomy, as he began to experience very vulnerable and lonely tendencies. He even said to his daughter, “But who’s going to take care of me?” To where she responded, “You know you are going to have to take care of yourself right?” Although he acted distant and spoke ill of Helen, post-humous, we acknowledge that Helen was Warren’s stronghold and foundation for which maintained his happiness and daily order in life.

The recurring transitions showing the desolate land amidst Warren’s road trip, and frankly throughout the entire movie, help add to the somber and dull scenes which the movie facilitates. While Schmidt made his stops along the road trip, the narrative voice of

Jack Nicholson picks up excitement. It's clear that some of the smallest and most everyday tasks, such as visiting his old school and making pottery overjoyed Warren, although his loneliness only seemed to amplify as the film progressed. As the journey to Denver prolonged, we watch Warren analyze his life's decisions and come to terms with his life's current direction. Schmidt's selfishness reached a visible peak once begging his daughter not to get married...the day before her wedding. Schmidt claimed he had a dream, Helen was there, and a blimp filled with weird creatures shaped as her husband (Randall) emerged and took her away. Schmidt's sorrowful attitude coupled with his lack of excitement during his daily life are themes which viewers may see as relatable. Writer Alexander Payne created a powerful empathetic message which creates a barrier divide so the audience can identify more closely.

In the film, *Higher Learning* (1995), the camera opens with a full screen zoom shot of the American flag, as we hear triumphant band music nearby. Shortly after, it's revealed the school assembly which was being held in the courtyard. In the opening minutes, we meet two of the movie's three main characters, Malik and Remy. Although the two do not manage to cross paths in this opening scene, we notice Malik confidently entering the crowd, followed by a slow rising shot of Remy, seen opening his red flannel shirt to reveal a large skull garment underneath. From semiotic review, the color red is often contextually associated with themes of anger or evil intent. This assumption is confirmed from the demonic shirt laid under the red garment. As if there were not enough semiotic tone-setters in the first few minutes of this film, the school in which they attend is deemed Columbus University. Named after Christopher Columbus – the revered voyager who by many is the founder of our United States of America; while others know

him for encroaching, stealing and exploiting those whose land he found. Regardless of where one's stance is on Columbus, naming the University after such a pivotal figure helps draw more attention to many of the racial and cultural undertones throughout the motion picture.

Early on we meet Malik, as he caught the elevator to the dorms along with (white) classmate, Kristen. After being visibly uncomfortable by his presence, Kristen clutched her purse and shied to the corner, establishing early racial tension. As the movie progresses, we notice several of these behavioral and verbal prejudicial acts, better known as microaggressions, which stemmed from students to campus officers. While unpacking their boxes and setting up their respective rooms, we are given small hints as to the lifestyle and “values” of which each main character possesses. Malik can be seen hanging posters of supermodels and sorting through athletic wear while rap music plays in the background; as for Kristen, she decorated her room with old family photos, overlaid by soft piano melodies. And finally, we watch Remy pump his fist as he rocks out to Heavy Metal and tapes band photos to his wall.

Slow camera shots of student's dorm rooms helps to give context to character's motives, beliefs, and moral compass. For example, in a particular scene where Malik was completing homework in Fudge's dorm, we see historical African American biographies on the shelf, Black Panther movement posters on the wall, and incense candles on his desk, validating his peaceful, yet knowledgeable mind. In fact, in this scene, as Mailk was preparing to leave Fudge's dorm, we temporarily switch to a wide angle shot which shows Fudge's desk. Among the array of books and posters stood out one in particular – a white, vertical poster with man pictured and in gold read: “Casual drug users ought to

be TAKEN OUT AND SHOT" whereby the word "SHOT" can be seen crossed out and instead the word "BEATEN" replaces it. Following a quick database search, I uncovered the popular phrase belongs to ex-Police chief of Los Angeles (1978-1992) Daryl Gates. While battling the war on drugs during his term as L.A. Chief of Police, Gates made severely rash statements which were not only generally jarring to hear, but coming from the Chief of Police the situation took new bounds. As quoted from the Los Angeles times, "We're in a war," Gates said, and "even casual drug use is treason." When discussing his harsh remarks with the Senate Judiciary Committee, he claimed his criticism was aimed at those "who blast some pot on a casual basis" despite the illegality. Following the notable LAPD beating of Rodney King in 1991, many LA residents began sharing the poster seen in Fudge's dorm with the edited slogan to read "Casual drug users ought to be TAKEN OUT AND BEATEN" to reflect the recent unlawful acts. This poster, although shown for mere seconds, speaks bounds for not only the movie's collegiate climate, but also gives insight for why Fudge strives for his Black brothers and sisters to educate themselves beyond the classroom.

After numerous close campus run-ins, including Remy pulling a gun on Malik in the dorms, the Black student group and the Aryan nation finally clashed into each other on campus. This scene, which quickly turned violent, is accompanied by loud congo drum hand rolls and other sounds indicative of primitive/jungle nature. In addition, the punches, flips and body shots were all displayed in slow-motion, accentuating the force and impact made by each student.

Malik's transition once Deja was killed went from distant, indistinguishable voices accompanied by soft and somber music almost instantly to staccato, fast tones; as

he charged to the roof to confront Remy, who he had seen fire the last shots from his assembled sniper rifle. After a short scuffle, Malik, as seen so many times in the film, was wrongfully apprehended by police, allowing for Remy to make an escape. This recurring theme of authoritative prejudice by the campus police seemingly worsened as the movie progressed. In this final standoff between the two students, the police, equipped with an all-white staff, quickly seized Malik, because like most of the movie, they instinctually doubt the actions and behaviors of black students on campus – all while assuming the white man’s innocence at every opportunity. After another chase which ends with police cornering Remy - he drew his pistol, aiming it at law enforcement. In this final standoff, we surprisingly see the police chief prompt his fellow deputies to not shoot, showing more concern for Remy’s murderous well-being than Malik’s innocent one. Before putting the gun in his mouth and taking his own life, we notice that the door behind Remy reads “NO EXIT”. Which, although many could regard as a common label, this door and its direct placement next to Remy's head during this final scene assists the “end” of Remy’s journey. The camera switches to Malik and other officer’s faces just before he pulls the trigger, though we are affirmed of his death by the simultaneous blast and breaking of the ‘No Exit’ glass.

*Higher Learning* (1995) opens and closes with full screen shots of the American flag, overlaid by the National Anthem. The recurring American flag throughout the film preserves the focus of the all-so illustrious “American dream” and the freedom associated with it. However, in the film’s closing scene, we watch the word ‘unlearn’ typewritten, letter for letter, as it covers the flag and the screen fades to black. Once the screen fully transitions dark, the white ‘unlearn’ text becomes bright red, as this is our final sentiment

before the credits. Although 'Higher Learning' is a phrase commonly associated with next-level education, (e.g. College and University), for this film, 'Higher Learning' denotes a message aimed at *unlearning*. Film director and producer, John Singleton, has described this term as "a message which urges the audience to step away from hegemonic thought, preconceived ideas and biases." Although best known for his Oscar-nominated film, *Boyz N the Hood*, in his 1995 interview with PBS he made clear he wanted to show his growth as a screenwriter and director. "He hoped it would reinvent him. Because unlike his previous films, *Higher Learning* (1995) was not about him. It was much larger. *Higher Learning* (1995) was about America. American college campuses are the only place you can see America in its purest form."

America, proclaimed to be the land of the free, where anybody can go into business for themselves, prosper and make money - created an illusion of riches and unyielding power which Tony Montana could have only dreamt. In the blockbuster movie, *Scarface* (1983), Tony Montana is theoretically chained down by his never-ending desire to acquire everything...the woman, the money, the power and the world! But Tony will not be satisfied until he has everything, and without everything, he begins to feel as though he has nothing. A reoccurring idiom associated with the film, which can also be found on most *Scarface* (1983) propaganda, including movie posters is: "*He loved the American Dream. With a vengeance.*" The phrase, which contains a message within a message, can be broken down by its literal and implicit meaning. Literally, the expression reads as: He (Tony Montana) loved the American Dream with a vengeance. However, taking a closer look at the sentence structure, we understand that "With a vengeance" stands alone, symbolizing the individual importance of the phrase.

Throughout the film, you can see Tony chasing his dream of luxury and success; and although we do not tend to associate “love” with vengeance; this foreshadows the militant and contentious path of which Montana journeys. In the redistribution of wealth which is often found within gangster storyline films, moral navigation usually spans from the ideological pathway which questions which is more important– making it to the top, or how you do it? As the movie progresses, we watch Tony obtain the beautiful woman, build a lavish empire, and spend more money than he could have imagined, which ultimately leadsto his demise.

## Chapter 4: Discussion/Conclusion

When analyzing the structural components each of these films possess that not only makes them unique, but relatable to one another, I found that the best parallels for comparison come from evaluating *Scarface* (1983) against *Higher Learning* (1995) and *About Schmidt* (2002) against *The Social Network* (2010). At a glance, *Scarface* (1983) and *Higher Learning* (1995) both present us with fresh-minded, naïve characters, new to the notion of the American Dream. Bringing with them only their predetermined ideas of success, we watch as society molds these character's biases, behaviors, and beliefs. Following each student as they embark on respective journeys towards educational achievement and cultural understanding proves fulfilling in its production. As for *About Schmidt* (2002) and *The Social Network* (2010), I found the contrast between these two motion pictures can be examined through two scopes: one whereby Warren Schmidt's life after retirement emulates the life of Zuckerberg but in 40 years, and the other where we observe two affluent, white businessmen who determine their life's worth by their working hands.

In the opening scenes of *Scarface* (1983) and *Higher Learning* (1995), the tone is set for the cultural climate and attitude of the respective domains. Tony Montana's journey to the United States was prefaced with detailed accounts and clips from Fidel Castro's communist regime, which inevitably caused Montana's departure and relocation. Although not as explicit, *Higher Learning* (1995) opens with a dynamic first day of school assembly scene at Columbus University. Named after historic voyageur Christopher Columbus, controversially viewed as a figure synonymous with cultural genocide, exploitation and abuse, the opening moment shows hundreds of white students

surrounding the monumental campus statue of Christopher Columbus, creating an implicit racial barrier. However, during this introductory school yard scene, we follow Malik as he makes his way through the crowd of chanting students – seeming to represent the forced integration or assimilation which he must exhibit in order to fit in. Each film laid emphasis to the racial/cultural barriers awaiting these characters before beginning their respective journeys. Despite each person's fresh start in a new community, we observe early on the genuine guild and grouping which takes place in each society. Ice Cube's character Fudge offered Malik a "trip around the world" where he pointed out the different cohorts of students on campus. Near the Christopher Columbus statue stood a group of white students, which he called "DisneyLand." He followed up by pointing out a circle of Asian students and labeling their area, "Chinatown," the Mexican-dominant group "South of the Border," and finally ended by labeling their own meeting grounds as the "Black Hole" because "we black folks." In *Scarface (1983)*, the cultural grouping began in Cuba as the refugees were boated to the United States, labeled 'political prisoners,' and dumped into overcrowded immigration detention centers. Ironically deemed "Freedomland," the immigration camp housed the Cuban refugees exported as ordered by Castro. Uninformed and unconcerned with their cultural background and heritage, these immigration officials characterized individuals based on nothing more than their roots.

As both movies progress and our main characters delve deeper into uncovering their life's purpose, they must assess their respective circle of friends and the benefit/value they present. In *Higher Learning (1995)*, Remy, despite his physical stature, appeared innocent, weak and primitive. After numerous failed attempts at making friends

on campus, he was approached and promptly recruited by an egregious Aryan nationalist group. Once falling victim to the group's tyrannical leadership, Remy dropped out of school and transformed himself into a vicious, hatred-filled killer. In earlier scenes, Kristen disclosed that she was not much of a partier and did not drink much back home. Having accompanied her to the bar, Claudia and Nicole still allowed Kristen to get noticeably drunk and soon thereafter leave with flirtatious classmate Billy after whispering to one another, "You think we should let Kristen go with Billy? Because she doesn't even drink." In the following scene we revisit Kristen, who was raped due to her "friends'" gross negligence, and forced to yet again enter solitude along with a quest for new peers.

Malik, once affiliated with the black student group, fell under the wing of "professional student" Fudge. Although everyone else in the group seemed to be a 'Yes' man, Malik was the only one who challenged, questioned, and ultimately intrigued him. For these reasons, Fudge constantly tested Malik and his moral code in order to help build his mind beyond the classroom. Of the three main characters, all were introduced into new affiliate groups willingly, in the hopes of fitting in with "their kind." Despite this, the closing scene of the film shows Kristen and Malik, wiser, stronger and standing tall as they reintroduce themselves. This scene depicts a moment of growth and self-actualization where these once wide-eyed students have now found purpose and drive within themselves to progress towards their dreams.

Similar to Fudge, Montana's circle was comprised mostly of Yes-men and soldiers operating solely off fear. The only true relationship Tony seemed to foster was the one between himself and his best friend Manny. The way Fudge seemed to watch

over Malik, guide his actions, and protect his mind is reminiscent of how Manny tried to police many of Tony's rash and impulsive decisions throughout the film. Although Tony was Manny's elder, this did not deter him from trying to bond with Montana as his equal. The main difference between Malik and Montana was their willingness to learn and adapt. Malik, although advised by his professor and Fudge, took it upon himself to find purpose outside the classroom and value outside of financial gain. Montana could not take orders from others due to his high-strung ego and personality. This eventually caught up with him when after he thoughtlessly killed Manny, he repeatedly asked himself "why?" The experiences these characters forego demonstrate their willingness to grow and develop amidst one's journey.

In analyzing these four films and the impact they created during their respective debuts, it's clear the motive behind each was the same – to inspire. After exploring the inherent semiotic value each movie possessed, I categorized the experiences as they pertain to organizational communication, hierarchical structure, and the portrayal of the American Dream. Unintentionally, I chose four films which each fit the scope for one of the organizational communication theories: Classical Management, Systems, Human Relations and Human Resources.

*The Social Network* (2010), whilst maintaining its "big business" motif, takes place primarily on Harvard's campus. Before acquiring business partners and angel investors, Zuckerberg's team consisted of a 4-man unit: Mark (CEO), Eduardo (CFO), Dustin (Vice President), and Chris (Director of Publicity). Human Resources Theory establishes the workplace structure as a 'team' relationship. This relationship is intended to promote a belief where increased participation is expected to ultimately strengthen

overall performance. When operating with his in-house team there was a high-level of comradery and open communication between the former classmates, even when they moved to California and added more workers. The time spent building the company from the ground up established fellowship amongst the core four which continued to permeate through the addition of new employees over the years. This team element is prominently depicted during points of major achievement, specifically the collective countdown as Facebook neared 150-thousand registered users.

In *About Schmidt* (2002), although we meet Warren on the day of his retirement, there are several sentiments within the movie which allude to the Human Relations structure of management which Woodmen company exhibited. Through dialogue and cinematic art within the film, we understand that Warren has worked at Woodmen for most of his laboring life, and is an esteemed, tenured employee at his time of departure. In an organizational communication context, Human Relations Theory speaks to the relationships within a company and how the increase of individual morale and satisfaction create healthier work environments. Warren's smooth transition out of the office, his retirement party filled with loving co-workers, his 'replacement', and the conversations that follow all add to the strong, communal workspace which thematically consists of an all-white staff.

*Higher Learning* (1995) follows your typical college complex with Greek life, upper/lower classmen, classroom lectures, courtyard assemblies, and other campus gatherings. Watching as students navigate through these sectors and adapt helps link the hierarchy demonstrated in this movie most closely to Systems Theory. Best defined as increased openness between upper management and other employees (similar to that of

the upper/lower class systems in educational institutions), this style of management reduces the ambiguity in task delegation and overall work expectations. This theory originates from the World War II era; it emulates the function of a machine, whereby all involved parties work cohesively to reach one common goal. This government-influenced style of inclusive growth was demonstrated by conversations between Professor Phipps/Malik, Kristen/her financial aid advisor, and Fudge/Malik, to name a few.

In *Scarface* (1983), Tony Montana, despite how one may feel about his actions, was a proven leader who carried himself from poverty/low-class status to riches and corporate infamy. Along his journey, the mantra surrounding Montana's organization was built upon loyalty and honor for thy brother. In this Classical Theory of management, the hierarchical structure employs communication as a device to instruct and control, whereby the organization works under a rigid structure led by distinct management and supervisor roles. As mentioned earlier, Montana's personnel consisted primarily of Yes-men who did not dare criticize nor correct "The Boss." Working under strict guidelines, the brotherhood quickly turned into a regime, with former partners now taking orders from Montana without hesitation. Prior to Montana's rise to leadership, he was in a similar structure of classical management whereby Frank was the boss and Montana was a subordinate worker of his. However, a flaw of this system arises when those workers closer to the bottom of the hierarchical ladder are tired of feeling oppressed and demand more of a voice. At this point, due to the "Me vs. Everyone" position this places the organization's leader in, we are left awaiting a revolt from workers or a sentencing from the one in charge.

In each of these films, despite the character's moral history/ethnic background, it was demonstrated that where we come from is not important in comparison to where we are going. Every day, across all spectrums, we are reminded of how some groups and communities have suffered and still suffer from the sheer inconvenience of life, from segregation in U.S. history, to the modern day 'Pink Tax'. Author of the book *Pink Tax and the Law: Discriminating Against Women Consumers* Alara Efsun Yazıcıoğlu (2018), suggests that women, who already suffer from an economic disadvantage due to the gender wage gap, are put in an even more detrimental position by means of 'discriminatory consumption taxes,' some examples being tampons, razors, and deodorant, to name a few. In a land where the creed assures "all men are created equal" and promised "certain unalienable Rights" (Jefferson, 1776), it's disheartening to see the societal issues of yesterday still prevalent today. Communities governed by individuals who do not have the public's best interest at heart create a substantially larger threat to communal development than anyone else. Governments are designed to be "for the people, by the people," however when social institutions refuse to build steadfast communities, the impact is bigger than face value. The individuals within a community begin to settle for what is available and what they have access to. The key to growth and development is not only knowledge, but access in order to further one's stride from concept to completion.

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

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Undergraduate Degrees in Marketing and Supply Chain Management

IU Degree: Earned at Kelley School of Business Indianapolis (IUPUI)

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