Bakalářská práce

In Pursuit of the American Dream

Autor práce:	**Eva Tomášková, DiS.**
Vedoucí práce:	Dávid Levente Palatinus, Ph.D. Katedra anglického jazyka

Zadání bakalářské práce

In Pursuit of the American Dream

Jméno a příjmení: **Eva Tomášková, DiS.**
Osobní číslo: P19000071
Studijní program: B0114A300068 Anglický jazyk se zaměřením
                           na vzdělávání
Specializace: Anglický jazyk se zaměřením na vzdělávání
                           Základy společenských věd se zaměřením na
                           vzdělávání
Zadávající katedra: Katedra anglického jazyka
Akademický rok: 2020/2021

Zásady pro vypracování:

Práce zkoumá fenomén amerického snu a sleduje, jak je jeho dopad na lidské chování ztvárněn ve vybraných filmových dílech. Teoretická část definuje mýtus o americkém snu v historickém kontextu se zaměřením na konzumní společnost. Rovněž představuje vybrané psychologické teorie, jejichž účelem je vysvětlit chování jednotlivce v kontextu amerického snu. Praktická část analyzuje a porovnává zobrazení amerického snu ve filmech Nouzový východ (2008) a Vlk z Wall Street (2013). Cílem praktické části je potvrdit názor, že honba za americkým snem hraje významnou roli v tragickém osudu hlavních postav.
..
The thesis explores the American dream phenomenon and observes how its impact on human behaviour is depicted in specific popular screen representations. The theoretical part defines the myth of the American dream in a historical context, focusing on consumer society. It also introduces several psychological theories, the purpose of which is to explain an individual's behaviour in the context of the American dream. The practical part analyzes and compares the American dream's depiction in the films Revolutionary Road (2008) and The Wolf of Wall Street (2013). Its purpose is to confirm the view that the pursuit of the American dream plays a significant role in the tragic fate of the main characters.

Rozsah grafických prací:
Rozsah pracovní zprávy:
Forma zpracování práce:　　　　tištěná/elektronická
Jazyk práce:　　　　　　　　　Angličtina

Seznam odborné literatury:

Revolutionary Road [česky Nouzový východ] [film]. Režie: Sam Mendes. USA/UK 2008.
The Wolf of Wall Street [česky Vlk z Wall Street] [film]. Režie: Martin Scorsese. USA 2013.
Adams, James Truslow. The Epic of America. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931.
Barthes, Roland, and Annette Lavers. 1972. Mythologies.
Cullen, Jim. The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped the Nation. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
Frankl, Viktor Emil. Man's Search for Meaning: an Introduction to Logotherapy. New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 2000.
Fromm, Erich. To Have or to Be? London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
Harari, Yuval Noah. Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind. New York: Harper Perennial, 2018.
Lipovetsky, Gilles. Paradoxní štěstí. Praha: Prostor, 2007.
Seeman, Melvin. On the Meaning of Alienation. American Sociological Review. 1959

Vedoucí práce:　　　　　　　Dávid Levente Palatinus, Ph.D.
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Katedra anglického jazyka

Datum zadání práce:　　　　　9. dubna 2021
Předpokládaný termín odevzdání:　29. dubna 2022

L.S.

prof. RNDr. Jan Picek, CSc.　　　　　　　　　　　Mgr. Zénó Vernyik, Ph.D.
　　　děkan　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　vedoucí katedry

V Liberci dne 9. dubna 2021

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že svou bakalářskou práci jsem vypracovala samostatně jako původní dílo s použitím uvedené literatury a na základě konzultací s vedoucím mé bakalářské práce a konzultantem.

Jsem si vědoma toho, že na mou bakalářskou práci se plně vztahuje zákon č. 121/2000 Sb., o právu autorském, zejména § 60 – školní dílo.

Beru na vědomí, že Technická univerzita v Liberci nezasahuje do mých autorských práv užitím mé bakalářské práce pro vnitřní potřebu Technické univerzity v Liberci.

Užiji-li bakalářskou práci nebo poskytnu-li licenci k jejímu využití, jsem si vědoma povinnosti informovat o této skutečnosti Technickou univerzitu v Liberci; v tomto případě má Technická univerzita v Liberci právo ode mne požadovat úhradu nákladů, které vynaložila na vytvoření díla, až do jejich skutečné výše.

Současně čestně prohlašuji, že text elektronické podoby práce vložený do IS/STAG se shoduje s textem tištěné podoby práce.

Beru na vědomí, že má bakalářská práce bude zveřejněna Technickou univerzitou v Liberci v souladu s § 47b zákona č. 111/1998 Sb., o vysokých školách a o změně a doplnění dalších zákonů (zákon o vysokých školách), ve znění pozdějších předpisů.

Jsem si vědoma následků, které podle zákona o vysokých školách mohou vyplývat z porušení tohoto prohlášení.

24. dubna 2023   Eva Tomášková, DiS.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Dávid Levente Palatinus for his expert consultation, constructive feedback and patience. I would also like to thank my family and friends who have always been a great support to me and have shown understanding during the many long hours I spent working on this thesis.

Anotace

Bakalářská práce "Honba za americkým snem" analyzuje, jak je fenomén amerického snu zobrazen ve dvou vybraných filmech: *Nouzový východ* (2008) a *Vlk z Wall Street* (2013). Práce si klade za cíl definovat americký sen v kontextu konzumní společnosti a nabízí vhled do způsobu, jakým filmový průmysl kritizuje mýtus amerického snu.

Klíčová slova: americký sen, USA, kolektivní mýtus, hierofanie, konzumní společnost, self-made man, melting pot, měkká síla kultury, odcizení, smysl života.

Annotation

The bachelor's thesis "In Pursuit of the American Dream" analyses how the phenomenon of the American Dream is portrayed in two preselected films, namely *Revolutionary Road* (2008) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). The thesis also aims to define the American Dream in the context of consumer society and offers insight into how the film industry criticises the myth of the American Dream.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The American Dream is a captivating concept that represents a way of life that promises prosperity, social respect, and transformation from poverty to riches. This culture has positioned itself as a manifestation of "soft power" (Nye, 1990) – an idea that attracts individuals without the use of overt coercion or violence. However, the true essence of the American Dream and its impact on human behaviour is still up for debate. This thesis aims to investigate the American Dream phenomenon and its portrayal in selected popular screen depictions, *Revolutionary Road* (2008) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

After watching the blockbuster *The Wolf of Wall Street* first thoughts started to appear. The main character seems to be a perfect embodiment of the American Dream until he gets arrested for stock market fraud. The film is based on the real story of Jordan Belfort who was a stockbroker in the 1980s. His story impelled me to think of the fact that popular perceptions of success are still very much predicated on the centrality of financial surplus and the ability to lead a life of privilege.

At the dawn of the 21st century, there is an increasingly pressing need to acquire financial resources. As posited by Lipovetsky (2005), the populace has a tendency to prioritise their preferences and sources of enjoyment above all else. Lipovetsky has labelled this era as the Hyperconsumption Society, wherein the acquisition of financial affluence holds the capacity to enable a contented and satisfying way of life.

The first part of the thesis focuses on the definition of the American Dream, its historical importance for society, and its perils in the form of soft power and the constant need for comparison typical of a consumer society. The section introduces relevant cultural ethnographic theories, namely those by Geertz, Harari and Eliade.

It also introduces a psychological theory of alienation that sheds light on the complex human needs that arise within the context of consumer society.

In the subsequent section, attention is turned towards two selected films, *Revolutionary Road* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*, wherein a textual analysis is conducted. The practical part analyses and compares the stories, themes, and the main characters' behaviour. Both films represent an extreme manifestation of the phenomenon to emphasise its possible negative consequences. The thesis offers insight into how the film industry criticises the myth of the American Dream and shows that the two selected films symbolise a re-creation of the myth.

Overall, this thesis explores the American Dream phenomenon and how it impacts human behaviour, as portrayed in popular screen depictions. It seeks to offer a critical understanding of the American Dream and its potential pitfalls in contemporary society.

1 Definition of the American Dream

The American Dream often refers to a lifestyle of affluence for a family living in a suburban house. The dream is achieved through diligence and career growth by the breadwinner of the family, typically the father. Although the mother may also have career success, her primary responsibilities involve managing the household, children, and family assets acquired through the father's earnings. This way of life conveys the impression of a stereotypical life, but sufficient family income provides various entertainments.

The origin of this two-word term seems to lie in the book "The Epic of America," published in 1931 by historian James Truslow Adams. It is an analysis of the American nation, or rather the American people, their attitudes, ideas and visions. Previewing these theses, Adams builds on American history, defining the American Dream as the idea of a country in which life is generally better and the situation offers opportunities for fulfilment to absolutely every capable individual. This is not purely material (high wages, automobiles, etc.), but a social order in which everyone – male and female – will be able to achieve the best position that their abilities will allow, regardless of their original background or the family they were born into (White and Hanson 2011, 2-3).

Jim Cullen (2005), however, points out that the term, American Dream, is by no means so young. Furthermore, its meaning is already described in the Declaration of Independence, it has functioned in society for a long time, and it was only in the 1930s that it came to be explicitly named.

An alternative possibility exists regarding the timeline of naming this particular phenomenon, which is the year 1914 when journalist Walter Lippmann published his book "Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current

Unrest." The book deals with the diagnosis of contemporary social turmoil. The term drift in this book refers to a lack of control over the rapidly changing forces in society. Lippmann addresses the tensions between consolidation and expansion, emotion and rationality, and the schism between traditionalism and progressivism. He argues that this drift can be supplanted by a form of existential mastery through meticulous attention to facts and proactive decision-making. Lippmann describes democracy itself as the possibility of exercising one's freedom and a firm grasp on an opportunity. According to Sitaraman (In Lippmann 2015, 3-4), this book became one of the most influential documents of the Progressivist movement in the United States and remains a highly valuable text for understanding political thought in early twentieth-century America.

Based on the information gathered, it appears that the American Dream embodies the concept of the possibility of self-fulfilment that is detached from an individual's initial wealth. This notion fosters a perception within society that nothing is predetermined and that origins or conditions of study do not guarantee an unchanging life course. The impression that even a poor man can work his way up to a wealthy individual through diligence (self-made man). This also disturbs the established idea of a caste society. In addition, this view also raises the question of whether it exacerbates unethical behaviour in society by implying that poverty is viewed as a life failure resulting from the incapacity of the impoverished individual.

The following subchapters will touch upon four key concepts that have contributed to the American Dream's development over time. Firstly, the notion of the melting pot, which emphasises the blending of diverse cultures to create a homogenous American identity. Secondly, the collective myth, which portrays the American Dream as a shared national aspiration. Thirdly, the semiotic myth, which

refers to the symbols and images that have come to represent the American Dream. Fourthly, the self-made man and consumerism, which have been central to the American Dream narrative. By examining these four key concepts, we can gain a better understanding of how the American Dream has evolved and the ways in which it continues to shape American society today.

1.1 Historical Context, Identity and Melting Pot

For a broader view of the origins of the American Dream myth and the historical underpinnings of the self-made man phenomenon, it is necessary to focus on the beginning of the USA as it is known today. The United States, with its mineral wealth, vastness, and initial lack of law enforcement, soon became of interest to Europeans, who felt that they would be much better able to make a life for themselves on the new soil. American democracy and the ideals of the new culture began to fascinate many people who came to America in pursuit of their life's dreams. As such, America was a land of great life chances, often portrayed as a land of prosperity or even paradise on Earth. Such a portrayal could not go unchallenged, and from the mid-19th century onwards, the United States saw a flood of immigrants originally from Europe. Everyone wanted to try their luck, to make it big, and work their way up from a shoeshine boy to a millionaire. For this image was reinforced by the Americans themselves – often still native Europeans. And it seems that their self-image often persists to this day. People come to this mythical land of plenty in the belief of a better life (Parafianowicz, 2003).

This phenomenon in the perception of one's own identity is the subject of symbolic anthropology, of which Clifford Geertz is a prominent representative and which is strongly associated with the term melting pot. The notion of national identity in the scale of the United States seems to be losing its meaning in some

respects, while in other respects this meaning is taking on unprecedentedly proud proportions. In other words, there is a dichotomy in the perception of national identity in the United States, with some aspects of identity losing significance while others are becoming increasingly important and celebrated. An adequate response to this split is symbolic anthropology.

Symbolic anthropology is not based on biological-anthropological standards but is concerned with the way in which people perceive the world around them and how this understanding is culturally conditioned. It is thus a kind of compromise between anthropological methods and philosophical approaches that can also be found in literary criticism or art history. Geertz stresses that the ways in which people understand the world around them are not based on their mental structures but on publicly available symbols. It is the symbols and their uniform interpretation that produce in people's minds the control mechanisms, rules, instructions, and plans that become the publicly shared determinants of the behaviour of people engaged in particular symbolic actions (Ortner 1984, 128-129). It can be summarised that immigrants from different countries became Americans under the symbols of the United States.

1.2 Collective Myth and Hierophany

The American Dream functions as a powerful symbol of potential, conveying the notion that any individual, regardless of their socioeconomic background, possesses the capacity to achieve prosperity through tireless effort. It attracts large numbers of immigrants. However, it is also charming for a large segment of the American population. This hypothesis must have been widely embraced by a significant portion of the population, resulting in an entrenched idea permeating throughout society. The high number of people is a crucial factor.

Yuval Noah Harari (2015) explains the concept of myth as a collective belief – a factor where a majority of the members of a given society succumb to a particular belief. When the author focuses on the Homo Sapiens, he emphasises the mental capacity of this species. This ability is the creation of myths but also the belief in them, i.e. a kind of (relatively) permanent sustainability of myths. Harari notes that myths are able – if they are still active in society – to keep entire transnational communities as well as state entities or giant companies running. Harari even states that people as individuals would not be able to function in large groups, in which, because of the size of these groups, they cannot all know each other personally or even cooperate unless they have a collective belief in a unified myth.

It can be stated that illusion, myth and collective belief are identical concepts that give people hope during their life in a particular group and in general for their determination to remain in that group. If illusions disappear, a sense of disillusionment commences, leading further to the erosion of morality and fragmentation of society. In this regard, Harari mentions human rights and the right to achieve happiness. Harari alludes to the fact that so-called human rights are simply constructed norms that provide a false sense of security and stability in society.

The second specific aspect is the right to achieve happiness, which corresponds to the myth of the American Dream. Although this myth may be based on a real event, the question remains how likely it is to be replicated in natural social conditions. However, this phenomenon has been noted and used as an established phrase. In Harari's point of view – a created illusion that Homo Sapiens cling to in the belief of a better future. Homo Sapiens seem to have a genetically encoded need to believe in some greater good or good that awaits the individual in the future.

Perhaps it is an intention connected with the instinct of self-preservation – trust in living in a group that can protect and help an individual.

One can also draw a comparison to the belief in the afterlife or eternal life in the form of the salvation of the soul by God. This belief has been transformed by development into the belief in a better life in the future of each individual. In this sense, another parallel is evident. Salvation can occur if one has lived an exemplary life. A better future can be achieved by one's efforts.

A similar approach is described by Eliade (1994) in his hermeneutical interpretation of religious studies (seventeen years prior to Harari's aforementioned work). Eliade deals with the emergence and development of religious thought in an exclusively autonomous sense, whereby every human encounter with the sacred becomes a religious experience and eventually a belief. In doing so, he emphasises that the sacred need not be of the character of a single chosen faith, but may be an enrichment of one faith or one religion by elements adopted or perceived in another religion. The adoption of such traditions leads to a renewal or re-creation of the original traditions, but now modified. Eliade holds the view that the synthesis of all the insights of the various religious approaches can lead to an overall understanding of the human mindset and its need for faith. He also describes the fact when an individual, through the influence of a different culture, acquires a completely different view of a certain fact. That is to say, that under the influence of another culture they change and only the experience of the sacred is enough to do so.

However, these manifestations described by Eliade are not inherent only in the old religions in today's global light, but can be caused by the transfer of certain truths or values from one culture to another regardless of religious foundation, which is also typical of the culture in the USA.

Accepting a certain kind of sacredness into one's life, regardless of the culture from which the individual comes, is a spiritual technique that can easily change the quality of existence itself. The person of faith – and according to Harari, the person living in a group needs faith to live – seeks in their faith a form of escape or liberation from the world in which they are attached, located. In this world, they experience not only joys and satisfactions, but also – which he feels much more acutely – existential difficulties, whereupon they long for a momentary departure from this reality, for the liberation of themselves from the shackles of time and historical events. Every glimpse of the sacred then gives them the strength to continue living in those chains, or hope by which they can break them, or at least loosen them or make them lighter (Eliade 1994, 25).

Eliade characterises the experience of the sacred as a religious phenomenon, which for interpretive purposes in this thesis can be seen as "the phenomenon of belief in something." This phenomenon must not be examined in isolation but must belong to a system of associations, to a more complex structural whole. Once it is included in the whole, the role, function and significance of the particular phenomenon can be further assessed. In doing so, the system of associations must be judged according to the living space of the individuals being studied or of the individuals who are themselves studying the individual phenomena. They have the best insight into the situation.

Based on these insights, it is appropriate to add the way Eliade views the opposition of the sacred and the profane. He also defines the sacred as order, whereas the profane is chaos. The profane is characterised by constraints and the oppressive realities of life. In contrast, the sacred is perceived as a separate entity that has the ability to penetrate the mundane and chaotic aspects of human existence.

By doing so, it brings order and meaning to everyday life. This process is called hierophany.

Through Eliade's framework, it is possible to explore how individuals identify with specific types of soft power or associate themselves with a particular culture. For instance, a U.S. resident may consider themselves an American despite their religious or cultural background because they share the same opportunities as someone from a vastly different background or religion living in the United States. In this way, the United States, through the myth of the American Dream, becomes a melting pot where various elements can be added and, with the added energy of the myth, are transformed into a new, homogeneous alloy.

The American Dream of self-realisation can be understood as a dream of goodness, as a hierophany of the revelation of goodness in mortal life and the establishment of order in chaos. This dream, moreover, does not refer to God but places the individual in the role of the individual capable of shaping their future through their own efforts and choices. The individuals can therefore create the form of their better being themselves. The American Dream as hierophany gives rise to the hope of the emergence of an individual definable as a self-made man.

1.3 Semiotic Myth

Roland Barthes, the French semiotician, views the concept of myth differently. He perceives this concept as a concept of representation. Barthes focuses on media studies, where myth operates as an ideological tool for naturalising meaning. It involves the substitution of the original, natural meaning with a new one. Myth, as a form of communication, can be conveyed not only through language but also through visual media such as photography, theatre, reportage, art installations, films,

and others. The myth – as mythical speech – is processed deliberately and with regard to an already established mode of communication. The emphasis is not on the literal meaning, but rather on the intention behind the message. The aim and purpose of the myth is to attract and reach as many people as possible, the recipients of the message.

A myth never arises from the nature of things, but is created in relation to human history. It can be said that it transforms meaning into a form that puts reality in such a way that man can perceive it without contradictions, thus creating a coherent and unbreakable picture of the world – an idea suitable for ideology.

Barthes (1972) defines three ways in which a myth can be decoded or received in the recipient's consciousness. At a literal level, the myth is perceived as a straightforward message that portrays the object or event in question. The representation of the signifier (the image or sign) and the signified (the concept or meaning) is direct and without complication. On the symbolic level, the myth reveals a deeper message that is closely tied to cultural values and beliefs. This level of mythic interpretation is focused on the cultural significance of the signifier and signified. On the cultural level, the myth is comprehended as a cultural construction that serves to reinforce a particular ideology. At this stage, the myth is viewed as a component of a larger cultural system that encompasses social, political, and economic structures.

According to Barthes, the meaning of myths is not inherent within the signs themselves, but rather is constructed and imposed by dominant cultural and ideological forces. He argues that myths serve as a mode of communication that conveys cultural values and beliefs while concealing the realities of social, political, and economic influence that shape them.

In summary, a myth serves as a message with a specific purpose, such as shaping the mindset of a large group of people. When implemented in a manner that offers a means of escape from an otherwise unchanging situation, a myth can inspire hope and provide an explanation for those who have not yet achieved it. Ideally, people should feel that they have a chance for a better life, but only through their own efforts. This can motivate individuals to work harder, which, in turn, can boost the economy. However, this myth can also perpetuate the assumption that those who are poor are to blame for their circumstances. It is easy to accuse them of not trying hard enough or not fulfilling the myth of the self-made man.

1.4 Self-Made Man

American lawyer and politician Henry Clay first used this specific term in 1842 in the U.S. Senate to describe an individual, whose success was not shared by anyone other than themselves, regardless of the conditions in which they were located, lived or were born. Today, the term is considered a classic phrase (Swanburg, 2014).

Swanburg (2014) and Woodworth (ed.) (1993) characterise Benjamin Franklin as a quintessential example of a self-made man. As one of the founding fathers of the United States and an integral part of American democratic culture, Franklin was a successful businessman who rose from humble beginnings as the son of a poor soapmaker in Boston to become a renowned publisher of newspapers and magazines. He was also actively involved in the development of Philadelphia, serving as a branch postmaster and contributing to the establishment of the University of Pennsylvania. In order to acquire the skills necessary to run a publishing house, Franklin spent two years in London,

The achievements of Benjamin Franklin, characterised by his patronage and philanthropy, make him an easy candidate for the semiotic myth of the self-made man. As a founding father of the United States, Franklin's impact and influence on his contemporaries and future generations must have been far-reaching and inspiring.

It can be concluded that Benjamin Franklin was a typical example of a man who adulterated himself to perfection and became the embodiment of the archetype of the self-made man. His life story can – according to Eliade – be described as a hierophany. He became a sacred testament to the way of life, the possibility offered, as it is feasible and realisable in the life of every striving individual.

Noam Chomsky, however, in his book "Requiem for the American Dream," argues that the setting of American society has shifted over the years. The group of self-made men has closed ranks and is no longer willing to allow outsiders into its ranks. The world of America is divided into rich and poor, with different rules applying to each of these sets of people.

Chomsky observes that social mobility in contemporary America is substantially lower than in industrialised regions, resulting in fewer individuals capable of transitioning from a lower socio-economic status to a higher one. Yet in this democratic society, we have stopped talking about classes in society. It has even shifted to those who give orders and those who take orders. This is the only aspect by which class membership can be determined today (Chomsky 2017, 114).

In the preface to the annual edition of Lippmann's "Drift and Mastery," Sitaraman discusses the decline of the ideal and the actual realisation of the myth. Yet he argues that American society can regain control over the rapidly changing forces in society. By current drift Sitaraman means the financial aspect of the USA,

the social inequalities that have arisen, the relationship between workers and corporations, but also changes in social life (In Lippmann 2015, 3-4). Sitaraman's text shows that the myth of the self-made man is no longer feasible in the America of today and will not be realised again unless the overall setting in society changes.

The concept of the self-made man encompasses another dimension, namely the demonstration of one's success. This can be effectively conveyed through the acquisition of property, not merely in terms of possessing necessities, but rather through the display of extravagant ownership. This is a manifestation of the evolution of consumer culture.

1.5 Consumer Society

Gilles Lipovetsky (2005) defines this craze for things as a hyper-consumer society. Or a society for which the label "consumerist" is too little. In fact, he observed a phenomenon where people do not buy things as such, but through things or services they buy an entire lifestyle. He is talking here about a luxury that is available to all – you just have to pay. There is a growing desire for novelty – for something new, for variety, for immediacy, for new and new experiences. The need to enjoy now, without waiting, from anywhere and at any time, but of course also without regrets – one cannot spend money just like that, without regard for nature or society. Thus, a trend towards environmentally conscious and socially responsible consumption has emerged, where individuals feel that their purchases contribute to positive change. This perceived sense of personal fulfilment supersedes materialistic gains.

Related to all of this is the notion of commercialisation of experience, where the individual customer's wishes are prioritised over the product itself. On the other hand the company's brand image is placed above the image of the people

themselves. However, few people have the finances for this continuous, unnecessary expenditure.

Lipovetsky observes two phases in the constant effort to satisfy needs: the phase of increased need and the phase of saving, so that one has enough again and can spend almost unrestrainedly. The actual items being purchased become relatively unimportant; what matters most is the act of buying itself. When the accumulation of possessions becomes too much to bear, individuals engage in overselling. They sell their belongings to others who experience a heightened sense of satisfaction in acquiring an item that was previously owned by someone else. In this way, the emotional experience of buying is likened to that of hunting.

Shopping equals participation in a game. This game does not carry any risks, but everyone can shine with what they have just "hunted." There is emotional enrichment. The act of shopping is capable of compensating for an absence of affection.

1.5.1 Life in Comparisons

Moreover, Lipovetsky's (2005) reflections point to another phenomenon of the American way of life, or rather the American suburban dream: the need to constantly compare oneself and one's possessions with what others have. Somewhere between making money and shopping with almost morbid symptoms, there is a pressure to make the most of oneself, to outdo others, to excel, to fulfil one's individual potential, which is certainly great and should not go unused.

When an individual abstains from acquiring new things, whether they are costly items or experiences, it can result in feelings of restlessness, fear, or frustration. The acquisition of "something," regardless of its monetary value,

is deemed important. Individuals are frequently plagued by a sense of limited time, and are consistently advised by the media that they may experience missed opportunities for enjoyment.. The media serves as a prominent source for such warnings, illuminating the potential consequences of inaction. In the context of consumerism, advertising and social networks foster the illusion that others are better off in terms of their material consumption and fulfilled lives.

Consequently, the resultant social comparisons engender feelings of depression, which can only be alleviated through further consumption. When this option is unavailable, a second phase of consumerism may ensue. During this stage, the person is inclined to search for drugs or other substances that can regulate their mood, alleviate negative feelings, suppress them, and boost their self-confidence. People in a hyper-consumerist society control their feelings and experiences of pain, anxiety or fatigue by chemical means. In doing so, they deny the authenticity of their own lives and, moreover, they construct a kind of illusion. The illusion that everything can be solved conveniently. Without inconvenience, without disappointment, without excessive or strenuous effort or thought. Individuals in a hyper-consumerist society desire comfort, but not at the cost of discomfort. They desire comfort that is easily accessible and enhances their pleasure and experiences, artificially if necessary.

Over time, the aspiration of achieving success through hard work and determination has devolved into a desire for a life of abundance, where one's own prosperity is constantly compared to the prosperity, or perceived prosperity, of others. The concept of sufficiency has evolved to encompass a broader meaning beyond the mere absence of scarcity. Sufficiency can become insufficient when it is not regularly replenished and expanded to excessive levels. Nevertheless, the

appearance of prosperity is what matters, as it represents what everyone aspires to achieve. This illusion is perpetuated by the positive influence of cultural norms and values, while the negative consequences are not emphasised.

1.5.2 Soft Power of Culture

Joseph Nye used the term soft power for the first time. The term correlates with political power and especially with international politics. It says the culture of one state (movement or party especially in the sense of East and West) has the power to influence the preferences of representatives of other groups (cultures, inhabitants of states, representatives of movements) by its principles, ways or habitual settings. This is not a coercive power. Coercion here is fully replaced by the attraction of a particular lifestyle through the sympathy that people of other cultural groups have for a particular culture's dominant soft power (Nye 1990, 13).

American culture is a significant example of soft power. As Nye (1990) notes, soft power is characterised by zero coercion and persuasion, the effect of outreach, the spread of culture beyond the original territory, and the adoption of political values or foreign policies by states whose cultures are spread through soft power. Soft power can be seen as a form of propaganda that operates without direct coercion, which distinguishes it from traditional propaganda.

Zahran and Ramos (2010) comment thematically on Nye. They indicate that the spread of soft power need not be a matter of political power or political control, as Nye suggests. In fact, culture can spread through corporations that portray the American way of life in their advertisements and style of communicating with customers. They name companies such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Starbucks (Zahran and Ramos 2010, 19-20). Their insight is consistent with the popularity of

American brands and lifestyle symbols portrayed in the former Eastern Bloc countries.

The American Dream and the solitary desire for it can also be considered a soft power gradually finding its place in many other countries along with the strengthening of the global nature of American culture. The myth of the goodness of life, hierophany, the experience of the sacred, the hope for a better life regardless of its foundations – these factors appeal to the masses. They draw them into the arms of American culture to live their American Dream. Hyper-consumerism and the concomitant psychological challenges it engenders are given inadequate consideration. Their realisation occurs mostly ex post, if at all. Indeed, this interconnectedness is hidden, indistinct, and illogical at first glance. Is it possible for personal success, an ostensibly positive achievement, to entail drawbacks?

In contemporary society, a significant number of individuals aspire to increase their wealth, possessions, and experiences. This desire for more is often driven by a primary objective to attain heightened financial prosperity. However, many individuals have not considered the purpose behind this constant desire for more. According to Nye, Zahran, and Ramos, the essence of soft power lies in its ability to exert appeal without generating any interrogative hesitations.

Within a capitalist society where the hierophany of the myth of the self-made man and the living of life in the form of the American Dream can give people meaning as well as lead to social alienation or outright tragedy, it is useful to look at the theory of alienation.

1.5.3 Alienation

The theory of alienation, first introduced by Karl Marx, suggests that modern societies create a sense of disconnection and estrangement between individuals and their work, their products, and even their own sense of self (Seeman 1959, 783-791).

In the context of a consumer-driven society, an excessive fixation on material possessions can potentially foster a disconnection from one's labour and sense of self. The societal pressure to consume and accumulate material goods may incline individuals to prioritise their acquisition of possessions above their own work and contributions to society. This emphasis on consumption can further result in a devaluation of labour, as individuals are encouraged to focus on their material consumption rather than the intrinsic value of their work. This phenomenon may engender a sense of alienation from one's own labour, as individuals may struggle to discern meaning and worth in their contributions to society. Consequently, individuals may experience difficulty in finding a sense of purpose and satisfaction in their work and may become estranged from their own sense of self.

Theory of alienation highlights the impact that consumerism can have on social relationships. The excessive focus on material possessions can lead to a prioritisation of individual consumption and accumulation over communal and social connections. As people become more consumed with their possessions, they become more isolated from others. This can lead to a sense of disconnection from the community, and a decrease in social cohesion. In turn, this can have detrimental effects on the well-being of individuals and society as a whole. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the role that consumerism plays in creating and perpetuating these forms of alienation.

To conclude, the theory of alienation, along with the previous explications of the American Dream, provide the fundamental groundwork for a more comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of the American Dream in the selected cinematic pieces.

2 The American Dream as the Originator of Human Tragedy

The selected films under analysis depict the phenomenon of the American Dream which constitutes a central element of the entire plot in each of the stories.

Aumont (1997) states that while film can construct fictional worlds, it can also be used to represent reality and convey non-fictional messages. Aumont discusses how film has the ability to depict both the real world and imaginary worlds, and how it can be used to convey different types of meaning depending on the intentions of the filmmaker.

In "Anatomy of Criticism" (1957), Northrop Frye argues that works of literature cannot be evaluated solely in ideological terms because each work is embedded in the culture and civilization from which it emerges. Frye also emphasises the importance of considering the literary and historical context of a work, as well as the context of its audience, in analysing its meaning and significance. Frye focuses on the various elements that contribute to a work's overall meaning and significance, including its use of symbolism, imagery, and narrative structure.

Aumont (1997) argues that a viewer's ability to perceive the visual component of a film is influenced by their prior knowledge of the setting depicted in the film. In addition, Monaco (2004) expands on this idea by explaining that a viewer's ability to "read the film" is closely connected to the filmmaker's perception of a model viewer

who has a deep understanding of the environment portrayed in the film. This means that a viewer's ability to fully comprehend and appreciate a film is affected by both their own prior knowledge and the filmmaker's intended audience. These insights suggest that the selected films are intended for audiences from the Western world who have firsthand experience with aspects of consumer society or have a comprehension of the American Dream, the vision of the self-made man and the environment of consumerism.

2.1 Historical Context

The historical context of an artistic message encompasses both the period represented in the work and the period in which the work was produced. Firstly, Berger (1972) notes that every work of art is a product of its time, influenced by the social, political, and cultural climate of the era in which it was created. Berger suggests that viewers should examine the film's production history, including the motivations of the filmmakers and the social, political, and cultural climate of the time, to fully understand the meaning of the work.

Secondly, Berger argues that our perception of art is heavily influenced by our social and cultural contexts, and that art is not an isolated object but is interconnected with the world around it. The American Dream can be seen as a product of American culture, where success and material possessions are highly valued. However, both films challenge this ideal by showing its negative effects on the characters and exposing the underlying emptiness of this cultural construct.

Regarding the theme of the American Dream and its portrayal in the selected films, it is notable that they share a similarity in their period of creation, with *Revolutionary Road* produced in 2008 and *The Wolf of Wall Street* in 2013.

Moreover, the year 2008 holds significance in the historical context due to the economic crisis that shook not only the American economy but also had global ramifications.

The films differ in their portrayal of the American Dream. *Revolutionary Road* focuses on the tragedy of human destiny in a world driven by great ambitions. The film is set in the mid-1950s, a period marked by significant societal changes and transformations, particularly in terms of gender roles, family dynamics, and individual identity (May 2008). Whereas *The Wolf of Wall Street* features the crash of the stock market and subsequent resurgence, providing a sense of hope. The film draws on the historical event of Black Monday on October 19, 1987, when the stock markets crashed, causing the stock prices to plummet. The protagonist, Jordan Belfort, experiences this event during his early days as a stockbroker, which influences his career and personal life thereafter. *Revolutionary Road* had its world premiere in mid-December 2008, so its story could hardly have been influenced by those events and perhaps that is why it depicts a world without major external turbulence, which may include the financial crisis.

The message of a piece of art is not only influenced by the historical and cultural context in which it was produced but also by the elements and techniques used in the work itself, which constitute its textual level.

2.2 Textual Level

The textual level of a film refers to the various elements and techniques used in the film to convey its message and create meaning. This chapter does not focus on all of them, but tries to highlight only the significant ones which develop the argument of this thesis. These elements include the composition of the work, the

title, and the means of expression, among other things. The way these elements are combined and presented have a significant impact on how the audience perceives and interprets the artwork.

Composition itself refers to the way in which individual thematic devices are structured and connected. In the selected films, repetition, variation and gradation are particularly evident. *Revolutionary Road* repeats the same situations in different variations, with different opinions reached by the main characters in the course of the plot. This leads to an escalation – a gradation of the whole story.

The specific feature of this film is symmetry and asymmetry. The film includes several symmetrical shots, such as the opening scene that displays a suburban street with identical houses arranged in perfect rows. Another scene where April and Frank are sitting at opposite ends of the dinner table, highlighting the growing emotional distance between them. Additionally, the party scene employs many symmetrically framed shots of characters dancing together. This creates a sense of order and conformity within the party, contrasting with the chaos and disorder that is brewing underneath the surface. The concluding shot of the film captures the identical suburban street featured in the opening shot, albeit from a different angle, disrupting the symmetry established earlier. This visual element signifies the characters' unsuccessful endeavour to escape conformity and attain a more significant purpose.

In contrast, the film uses asymmetrical shots, such as the scene when Frank and April are arguing in the kitchen, the camera takes on a low angle shot that is asymmetric, making April appear bigger and more powerful than Frank. This shot highlights the power dynamic between the two characters and their struggle for control. Another example of asymmetry is clear when April is waiting for Frank to

come home after a night out, she is framed asymmetrically in the corner of the shot, emphasising her sense of isolation and vulnerability.

Moreover, the lengthy scenes leading up to the film's catastrophic ending create a sense of unbearable tension and torment, as the audience is forced to witness the breakdown of April and Frank's marriage in excruciating detail. The use of slow, deliberate camera movements and long takes in these scenes heightens the sense of oppression and confinement that the characters are experiencing, as if the camera itself is trapping them in their unhappy lives.

The Wolf of Wall Street employs gradation to great effect, with a steady increase in wealth and the growth of Stratton Oakmont's reputation. One scene that employs gradation is the scene where Jordan is introduced to the world of penny stocks. It begins with Jordan's initial scepticism and disdain towards penny stocks as he witnesses a shady salesman successfully selling worthless stocks to gullible investors. However, after being convinced by the salesman's charm and confident sales pitch, Jordan begins to see the potential profits in penny stocks and decides to pursue them himself. This marks the beginning of his rise to wealth and power, as he creates his own firm, Stratton Oakmont, and begins manipulating the stock market to his advantage.

Another scene that uses gradation is the one where Jordan and his colleagues celebrate their newfound wealth by indulging in excessive drug use and partying. This scene starts with a relatively tame party, with Jordan and his friends snorting cocaine and drinking alcohol. However, as the night goes on, the party becomes increasingly wild and debaucherous, with more drugs and more people joining in the festivities. This scene illustrates the idea of "more is never enough" as Jordan and his colleagues continue to push the limits of their wealth and excess.

Then, in one scene, Jordan and his colleagues charter a helicopter to fly to a luxurious yacht, where they party with wealthy clients and prostitutes. In another scene, Jordan buys a mansion that is so large it requires a staff of dozens to maintain. These scenes demonstrate the idea of gradation by showing the steady increase in Jordan's wealth and power, as well as the increasing risks he takes to maintain it.

Another key component is the parallel progression of addiction to drugs, pleasure, and the substitution of wild experiences for reality. The gradation in the film is dualistic, encompassing both an upward and downward trajectory, with subsequent events representing better or worse variations of prior occurrences.

Regarding the narrative structure, *Revolutionary Road* employs a chronological structure, with the main characters' key moments presented episodically. In contrast, *The Wolf of Wall Street* utilises a frame-based approach, immersing the viewer in the midst of the action during the Stratton Oakmont era, and subsequently recounting the events leading up to Jordan Belfort's self-made success. The film gradually builds up to the opening scene, where employees toss a man with a growth disorder onto a makeshift target, a scene viewed in a vastly different light later in the narrative. The plot then progresses chronologically, culminating in an episodic afterword reflecting the protagonist's current life.

The title of a film serves to capture the viewer's attention and entice them to watch the film. *The Wolf of Wall Street* serves as a metaphor for the predatory and ruthless nature of the characters, who are compared to wolves preying on their victims. The title *Revolutionary Road* serves as a metaphor for the protagonists' aspirations to break free from societal norms and conventions, and forge their own path towards a meaningful existence. The word "revolutionary" suggests the idea of change, rebellion, and transformation, which are all prevalent throughout the film.

The term "road" connotes a journey or a path, and in this context, it implies the journey taken by the main characters.

The theme of conformity is evident in both films. Characters in *Revolutionary Road* are trapped in a conformist suburban society that stifles their individuality. The opening scene sets the tone for the rest of the film, with a long shot of the Wheelers' suburban street, where every house looks identical. This shot highlights the monotony of suburban life, as everyone is expected to live the same way. Furthermore, the characters' clothing choices also reflect their conformity to societal norms. For example, April's clothes are more adventurous and daring in the beginning of the film when she is still pursuing her dreams, but as the film progresses, her clothing becomes more conservative as she succumbs to the pressure to conform.

Whereas the theme conformity in *The Wolf of Wall Street* is depicted differently. On one side, in one scene, Belfort and his colleagues engage in a ritual full of drugs and prostitutes to close deals. Belfort initially resists, but soon finds himself conforming to the ritual, which becomes a regular part of the firm's culture. This is an example of how conformity can lead to the normalisation of destructive and unethical behaviour. On the other side, Belfort's eventual downfall is due in part to his inability to conform to the demands of the FBI. He refuses to cooperate with their investigation, and his lack of conformity ultimately leads to his arrest and conviction. This illustrates how conformity can have both positive and negative consequences, depending on the context in which it is applied.

However, the most significant theme in both films remains the pursuit of the American Dream. It is presented as a seductive yet unattainable goal, which causes the characters to experience frustration and disillusionment. The central theme

highlights the challenges and complexities of achieving success in modern society. The following part of the thesis focuses on the analysis of each film.

2.3 Analysis of Revolutionary Road

The yearning for the American Dream is prominently displayed through the female character, April, within the story. Her fervent aspiration to become a renowned actress is palpable as she endeavours to diligently progress towards that pinnacle. However, her efforts are crowned with failure. The myth of the "rich shoeshine boy" does not come true for her. April has been provided an opportunity which, regrettably, was not seized, resulting in her relegation to a subordinate role amongst the other characters. Her endeavours were conspicuous, and her lack of success cannot be solely attributed to her own actions. Rather, she appears akin to an object, subjected to the whims of destiny, only to be returned to a state of stasis alongside her spouse, who seemingly lacks motivation to pursue their own opportunity for advancement. According to Seeman (1959), Frank experiences all degrees of alienation because his work lacks intrinsic motivation. Frank Wheeler works only to make money. He is not trying to get as much as he can, he has set limits. His lack of predation is blamed on his lack of masculinity. Frank has no regrets, his father lived an identical lifestyle – it is here that the success of the self-made man's pursuit of self-realisation is shown to be exceptional.

When the couple moves to Revolutionary Road, it heralds a turn of events in the Wheelers' expected future. Incidentally, their surname itself is a semiotic metatext referring to functionality and constant use. Something that cannot function on its own without set mechanisms. There is thus a thematic contrast with the surname of the main characters and the name of the street they live on.

The contrast continues to permeate their intentions. The concept of the American Dream has long been associated with achieving affluence and prosperity, often epitomised by the image of a family residing in a suburban house. In Chapter 1, I mention this idealised image as a common symbol of the American Dream. However, despite living in a suburb that fulfils this image, the Wheelers' seek to challenge this notion. They decide to move to Paris, aiming to shatter the idyllic image of the American Dream and its associated lifestyle. There, their current social roles would be reversed – April (the housewife) would work, self-realise, and earn money, while Frank (the breadwinner) would stay home, develop his skills in private, and his main task would become childcare. The reason for this decision to break all socially set norms is their insecure belief in the American Dream and its apparent goodness. Their disbelief is crowned by their voiced criticism of such a way of life, which, moreover, is continuously supplemented by hypocrisy. Evidently, the depicted characters living the American Dream are shown to be mostly unhappy at heart, and thus have to reassure themselves that what they are living and what they have dedicated their lives to is the real good. They are lost in the empty concept of a dream that fails to bring them contentment.

This aspect is related to the uncritical acceptance of soft power, but also to the blind trust that what is happening to them is really good and not chaos masquerading as order. The film conveys soft power through its depiction of the characters' struggles to achieve their own vision of the American Dream. The neighbourhood itself serves as a symbol of the American Dream and the ideals that it embodies, including stability, comfort, and prosperity. However, as the characters confront the reality of their lives, they begin to question the value of these ideals and the cost of pursuing them. This is evident in scenes that show the characters' dissatisfaction

with their lives, such as when Frank quits his job or when April tries to convince her husband to move to Paris. The music in this scene is subtle but powerful. As April begins to describe their life in Paris, a soft and romantic melody begins to play in the background. The music creates a sense of longing and nostalgia, underscoring the dreamlike quality of April's vision for their future. The language used in this scene is poetic and lyrical, conveying April's deep desire for a more fulfilling life. She speaks in vivid and descriptive terms, painting a picture of Paris as a place of beauty, freedom, and possibility. Her diction is full of passion and urgency, reflecting her belief that this move is their only chance for happiness. April's dream of moving to Paris represents longing for something more authentic and meaningful. The scene also highlights the gap between Frank and April's dreams and the reality of their situation. While April sees Paris as a place of opportunity, Frank sees it as a fantasy that is impossible to achieve.

The American Dream is then further shattered when Frank is unwittingly promoted, even though he did not ask for it and his promotion is the result of a mere prank by a man who no longer cares about anything at work. There is a realisation of the myth of the self-made man, which surprisingly proves that great effort does not have to mean anything at all. On the contrary, the accidental use of the right tools can launch a career. The scene takes place in the office where he works. The camera begins with a close-up shot of Frank's face as he stares off into the distance, lost in thought. The sound of typing on keyboards and the chatter of the office workers can be heard in the background, creating a bustling atmosphere. As Frank is lost in thought, a co-worker Jack comes over to him and congratulates him on his promotion, which catches Frank off guard. Jack reveals that he had submitted Frank's name for a promotion as a joke, and to his surprise, the higher-ups approved

it. The camera then zooms in on Frank's face as he processes the news, conveying his shock and disbelief. The sound of the office suddenly becomes muffled, as if Frank is in a state of shock and unable to process what has just happened. The silence is broken by the sound of Jack laughing, which further emphasises the absurdity of the situation. Frank's thoughts are not explicitly conveyed, but his facial expressions and body language suggest a mix of emotions - shock, confusion, and a hint of anger. The camera captures Frank's frustration as he storms into his boss's office to confront him about the promotion.

In this scene, Jack's behaviour highlights the indifference and lack of care in the corporate world, where promotions can be made on a whim and without much consideration for an employee's qualifications or merits. The camera and sound design convey Frank's realisation that the American Dream, where hard work and determination can lead to success, is a myth, and that even a promotion can be the result of a mere prank. The scene effectively conveys the themes of disillusionment and shattered expectations, and the impact of unexpected events on one's career and life.

Then the plot arrives at the next analysed element – Frank feels appreciated. He experiences feelings of happiness and satisfaction that he now does not want to leave. His life indeed finds meaning in the American Dream. The music in this scene is upbeat and energetic, reflecting Frank's newfound sense of happiness and excitement. The music also creates a sense of momentum and possibility, underscoring Frank's belief that he can finally achieve success and recognition in his career. The language used in this scene is optimistic and positive, conveying Frank's excitement and sense of purpose. He speaks in confident and assertive terms, expressing his belief that he can achieve great things if he is given the opportunity.

His diction is full of energy and enthusiasm, reflecting his newfound sense of purpose and direction. While Frank's promotion represents a moment of success and achievement, it comes at the expense of April's dreams and desires. The music in the scene where April finds out about Frank's promotion is slow and melancholic, creating a sense of foreboding and sadness. The music underscores the tragedy of the situation, as Frank's promotion represents the culmination of his acceptance of a life that he once rejected. The music also reflects April's growing sense of despair, as she realises that her dream of a life in Paris is vanishing.

The lustre of the American Dream gradually fades, as evidenced by the couple's eventual alienation from one another. The acquisition of material wealth proves to be an inadequate substitute for the requisite emotional fulfilment. The absence of the need for social comparison yields neither comfort nor satisfaction, but rather a sense of hollowness and emotional isolation akin to Seeman's concept of isolation.

Barthes' semiotic myth is thoroughly exposed as a prison with no means of escape. The tragedy of the fate of the characters drawn into the American Dream is fully revealed. According to Northrop Frye's theory of tragedy, a tragic story involves a protagonist who is initially full of hope and potential, but ultimately meets an unfortunate end due to a combination of internal and external factors. A scene that exemplifies the tragic elements of Frye's theory is when Frank and April attend a party hosted by their neighbours, the Campbells. At the party, Frank becomes increasingly intoxicated and, as a result, starts to act inappropriately towards the other guests. April tries to control him, but her efforts are ultimately unsuccessful, and they depart from the party feeling embarrassed and ashamed. This scene illustrates the internal factors that contribute to the couple's tragic downfall.

Frank's drinking problem, which is a reflection of his discontent with his life and his inability to attain his aspirations, leads him to act impulsively and to verbally attack those in his vicinity. April's attempts to control him and to maintain appearances only exacerbate the situation, leading to a breakdown in their relationship and a further sense of isolation and hopelessness. This scene also highlights the external factors that contribute to the couple's tragic fate. The social pressures and expectations of their suburban community, with its emphasis on conformity and material success, have left them feeling trapped and unfulfilled. The party scene is a clear example of this, as Frank and April's attempts to fit in with their neighbours ultimately lead to their humiliation and ostracization.

The scene where April attempts to terminate her pregnancy underscores the tragic consequences of the couple's failed attempts to escape the constraints of their suburban life. April's decision to terminate her pregnancy is a direct result of her disillusionment with her role as a housewife and her inability to pursue her own ambitions. Her frustration and hopelessness have driven her to take this drastic step, highlighting the tragic conflict between her desires and the limitations of her social environment. There is no dialogue, and the only sound is the music playing in the background. The music, a haunting and mournful melody, adds to the sense of despair and hopelessness that April is feeling.

Furthermore, the scene also demonstrates the external factors that contribute to the couple's tragedy. The lack of access to safe and legal abortion options, due to the restrictive social and legal norms of the time, forces April to resort to dangerous and potentially deadly methods to terminate her pregnancy. This emphasises the manner in which oppressive social norms and institutions can constrain personal autonomy and add to the tragic outcome of the main character. From April's perspective,

renouncing societal conventions is seen as a victory, even though it ultimately leads to her demise.

In the scene which follows the tragic death of April, the camera focuses on Frank as he walks through the hospital corridor, his face etched with shock and despair. The scene is accompanied by sombre music, which emphasises the gravity of the situation and intensifies the emotional impact of the tragedy. As Frank tries to come to terms with his loss, he is forced to take on the role of single-handedly caring for his children. The scene depicts his struggle to balance his job, which is essential for his livelihood, with his newfound responsibility as a caretaker. The dialogue is delivered with a tone of hopelessness, as Frank realises that his American Dream has been destroyed by his loss. This is demonstrated in his words as he struggles to understand how he will deal with the loss of his wife and the new role he is forced to undertake. His identity, which was rooted in his role as a husband and provider, is cast aside as he grapples with the new reality of his life. The fragility of the American Dream is exposed as Frank's role as a husband crumbles under these dire circumstances. The scene showcases the limits of the American Dream in the face of tragedy, as it is unable to provide solace or direction in times of great personal loss. The loss of April shatters Frank's plans and newfound identity, leaving him to confront the harsh realities of life without her.

In addition to the tragedy of the Wheelers, the film uses another character to critique the American Dream, specifically its aspect of consumer society. John Givings serves as a voice of dissent against the conformist and consumerist values of American society in the 1950s. Givings is portrayed as a mentally unstable individual who has been committed to a mental institution for his refusal to conform to societal expectations. The film portrays Givings as a tragic figure, who is

misunderstood by society. His mental instability is linked to his rejection of consumerism and his refusal to conform to societal norms. The film suggests that the pressure to conform to consumerist values and the lack of alternative perspectives can have a damaging effect on mental health and well-being.

One scene featuring John Givings occurs during the Wheelers' dinner party. John begins to make brutally honest and critical comments about the guests and their shallow, conformist lives. The camera often focuses on his face, which is twisted into a manic, almost deranged expression as he speaks. As he continues to speak, the music becomes increasingly tense, creating a feeling of discomfort and unease. The other guests, who are initially amused by John's unconventional behaviour, gradually become more and more uncomfortable as he directs his criticism towards them. The camera angles also change, becoming more claustrophobic and tight as the tension builds. He mocks the guests for their conformity and their obsession with material possessions, calling them "the hopeless emptiness" of the suburban lifestyle. He also challenges the Wheelers' own self-image as "different" or "special," calling them out for their hypocrisy and their inability to escape the same traps as everyone else. The camera work and music effectively create a feeling of tension and discomfort, highlighting the social pressure to conform and the fear of those who deviate from the norm.

Moreover, the final scene reinforces the critique of the whole concept of the American Dream. It takes place in another household, where a couple (the broker and her husband) silently sit, their faces unexpressive and their body language tense. The broker attempts to maintain the facade of contentment and conformity to the American Dream, while her husband remains silent, his discontent festering beneath the veneer of the myth. He refuses to engage in the conversation and his eyes dart

around the room, avoiding any form of eye contact. The tense silence between them signifies the hollowness of the Dream and the painful reality that not all individuals can attain it. The use of silence in this scene is particularly effective, as it emphasises the tension and unease that lies beneath the surface of the American Dream. The absence of music or dialogue serves to underscore the emptiness and futility of this ideal, as the characters sit in silence, unable to express their true feelings or desires. This scene highlights the power of the American Dream's soft power, which encourages individuals to present themselves as successful and content, even when they are not. It also exposes the hypocrisy and futility of striving for a myth that cannot be realised by most people. The scene underscores the idea that it is a seductive but ultimately empty promise, perpetuated by the pervasive influence of American culture and its ideals.

2.4 Analysis of The Wolf of Wall Street

The protagonist of the story is an exemplary embodiment of a self-made man, moreover, from his own perspective. This point of view is very important for the analysis, because the concrete image of the world is shown by the person who is part of that world. That is to say, he is part of the collective myth according to Harari, and at the same time he is wrapped in the sacredness of Eliade.

The plot of the story is predictable in terms of the theory of the American Dream and the myth of the self-made man. It begins with a man whose motivational experiences awaken his ambition to become a successful man, even though he himself does not come from a well-to-do background. This rather sudden surge of motivation persists even at moments when it may seem that his entire career is irretrievably buried by the stock market crash. But Jordan is not to be deterred. He gets advice from a friend. But his momentary insecurity eases once he gets into the

hustle and bustle of the office. Jordan finds a relatively simple way to make more money in a short period of time by lying.

The sequence begins with Jordan at his desk, surrounded by his coworkers, as he explains his plan to sell stocks in a failing company. As he speaks, the camera lingers on his face, which is a mix of excitement and fear. The music in the scene is upbeat and fast-paced, which heightens the sense of excitement and urgency. This is also mirrored in the sound design, with the chatter of the office workers in the background adding to the chaotic energy of the scene. Jordan's language is confident and persuasive, as he convinces his colleagues that the scheme is foolproof. He uses terms like "guaranteed returns" and "risk-free investment" to sell the idea. The language is an important aspect of the scene, as it highlights Jordan's ability to manipulate and deceive. As the scene progresses, Jordan's thoughts are revealed through voiceover. He describes the thrill of making money and the power it gives him. He says, "I was hooked. I was making money hand over fist. I felt like a god." This shows that Jordan's motivations are purely financial, and he is willing to compromise his ethics to achieve his goals.

The scene also marks the beginning of Jordan's social alienation. As per Seeman's model, social alienation is characterised by a swift erosion of ethical values, and Jordan's actions in this scene reflect this. He bypasses established social norms for one purpose: to make money. In terms of alienation, the camera work is crucial. As Jordan speaks to his colleagues, the camera moves away from him, emphasising his isolation. This is further emphasised by the fact that Jordan is the only one who benefits from the scheme. His colleagues are left with worthless stocks, while Jordan makes a fortune. The scene sets the stage for Jordan's descent into a world of greed, excess, and social isolation.

The concept of social alienation continues to manifest itself in the protagonist's behaviour, particularly in his universally antisocial tendencies, whereby women are merely objects of satisfaction and dangerous substances a desirable form of diversion. Such behaviour only serves to confirm the degradation of moral values. The protagonist alienates himself from society. The way he squanders money on experiences or intoxicants can be described as the very essence of consumerism. Lipovetsky's perspective clearly elucidates how he forsakes all his social ties – including healthy familial, partnership, and other social relationships – in favour of acquiring and exhibiting material possessions.

One scene initiates with a close-up shot of Jordan's face, as he snorts cocaine off of a hooker's back. The camera then expands its scope to reveal a lavish party in his mansion, with people dancing, drinking, and indulging in debauchery. The music playing in the background is a fast-paced, upbeat electronic track that accentuates the frenzied and hedonistic ambiance of the party. Throughout the scene, Jordan squanders money, acquiring lavish cars, yachts, and other extravagant objects. The camera focuses on these material possessions, lingering on them to highlight their opulence and extravagance. The music continues to play, further fostering a sense of euphoria and excess. Notwithstanding the chaos and excitement of the party, there is an underlying sense of emptiness and isolation that pervades the scene. Jordan is encircled by individuals, yet he remains disconnected from them, consumed by his own world of materialism and self-indulgence. The camera intermittently cuts to shots of Jordan's empty bedroom or his deserted office, stressing his detachment from reality and emphasising his isolation.

From Lipovetsky's viewpoint, Jordan's behaviour epitomises the adverse aspects of consumerism, where material possessions are valued above all else,

including personal relationships and emotional contentment. The scene portrays Jordan as subservient to his desires, preoccupied by the need to amass and exhibit his wealth, at the expense of his well-being and social connections.

Notably, the protagonist, Jordan, views the American Dream as a positive end in itself, regardless of the means through which it is achieved. This perception can be regarded as a hierophany, or a manifestation of the divine.

One scene occurs during a company meeting in which Jordan attempts to rally his employees and convince them to stay with him despite the FBI investigation into their activities. His speech is a masterful example of persuasive rhetoric, using a combination of flattery ("You're all smart, you're all talented, you're all winners."), cajoling ("If you leave now, you may never get a chance to be a part of something like this again."), and guilt-tripping ("I'm not asking you to do this for me, I'm asking you to do it for yourselves."). He also employs repetition, using the phrase "I'm not leaving" multiple times to emphasise his determination and conviction. The camera work in the scene is dynamic and energetic. The camera moves quickly and unpredictably, cutting rapidly between close-ups of Belfort and shots of the crowd. The camera also captures the reactions of individual employees, highlighting the emotional impact of Belfort's speech. The sound of the chanting and clapping of Belfort's employees also adds to the sense of group solidarity and shared purpose. The chanting and clapping of Belfort's employees create a sense of tribal unity and shared purpose, while the use of the phrase "I'm not leaving" stresses the idea of commitment and dedication.

When Jordan Belfort is arrested, there is a glimmer of hope that he may reform and restore his social ties. However, contrary to expectations, his wealth and status have elevated him to a position where he is able to give orders, according to

Chomsky's class analysis. Jordan's affluence has propelled him into an echelon of society where he is virtually untouchable, and thus, the ideal of the self-made man is fully realised. His elevated status is indicative of the American Dream's emphasis on material success and social mobility, which ultimately reinforce social class distinctions.

In one scene, the FBI agent is riding the subway and reading the newspaper - the article about Belfort's sentence. There is a song "Mrs. Robinson" by Simon & Garfunkel featured in this scene. The song serves as a commentary on the corruption and excess depicted in the film, as well as the moral decay of society more broadly. One possible symbolic interpretation of the use of "Mrs. Robinson" in this scene is that it represents the disillusionment and cynicism of the era in which the film is set – the 1990s. The song was originally written and released in the late 1960s, during a time of great social and political upheaval in the United States. It is often seen as a critique of the hypocrisy and corruption of the establishment, and a reflection of the disillusionment and frustration felt by many young people at the time.

Despite the consequences of Belfort's actions, including his imprisonment for 36 months, Jordan remains unrepentant and unchanged. His immersion in the particular manner of the sacred, characterised by a desire for mystical moments and an almost religious devotion to wealth and success, prevents him from seeing the error of his ways. This is a clear example of social alienation, where Jordan is cut off from his own sense of morality and the broader societal norms.

The ending scene of the film is a message to the audience about the cyclical nature of the financial industry and the dangers of unchecked greed. The scene shows Jordan teaching a sales seminar, suggesting that he has learned nothing from his experiences and is continuing to perpetuate the same unethical practices that led

to his downfall. The music used in the scene, "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" by Allen Toussaint, is an upbeat and optimistic jazz track that contrasts with the dark themes of the film. The use of the music creates a sense of irony and underscores the ongoing cycle of greed and corruption that the film is warning against.

It is important to note that, despite its general popularity, *The Wolf of Wall Street* may not be a testament to soft power, but rather a tool for its own creation. The film's portrayal of Jordan's life may have contributed to the normalisation and glorification of unethical and illegal practices in the financial industry, leading to a potential reinforcement of the myth of the self-made man and the culture of hyper-consumerism.

Conclusion

GREAT are the myths – I too delight in them;

Great are Adam and Eve – I too look back and accept them;

Great the risen and fallen nations, and their poets, women, sages, inventors, rulers,

warriors, and priests.

Great is Liberty! great is Equality! I am their follower;

Helmsmen of nations, choose your craft! where you sail, I sail,

I weather it out with you, or sink with you.

(Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass.* 1900. 317. Great are the Myths)

The thesis discusses the phenomenon of the American Dream from several angles. The first is to define it in its historical context, taking into account the perception of identity in the United States. A crucial idea in this context is the concept of a melting pot, where distinct elements combine to create a unified whole. For this unified whole to effectively operate in its multi-dimensional form, it requires a guiding principle that can drive its functionality and also provide a reason to remain in this fused state. That core idea is – according to Harari – the collective faith, the universally accepted myth of hope for a better life: The American Dream. The American Dream is not limited to individuals of wealth or inherited status. Rather, it is achievable by anyone who is willing to work hard and climb the ladder of success through their own effort – also known as the self-made man. This creates the appearance of the sacred – the hierophany that Eliade describes. In the case of the American Dream, the most famous self-made man is Benjamin Franklin. He became the embodiment of that sacred, proof that hierophany can be realised in the lives of many other striving individuals.

However, myth is also a tool, in its semiotically conferred meaning, in which it was created artificially and purposefully for the representatives of the majority society, thus creating in them the impression of the fulfilment of the American Dream, which in turn gave rise to a collective belief. Moreover, this collective belief did not stop at the borders of the United States or the Western world, but became a soft power through which American culture was able to take hold even in completely ethnically different areas. At the same time, economic success has followed it, as the American Dream has brought with it a wave of hyper-consumerism. But the whole phenomenon has its pitfalls in the form of alienation.

With these specific propositions in mind, an analysis of two films dealing with the theme of the American Dream was subsequently conducted: *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Revolutionary Road.* Both films share numerous theoretical motifs, such as the concept of creating myths as postulated by Harari, the use of semiotic myth in society as explained by Barthes, and the role of soft power in society as defined by Nye, Zahran and Ramos. In addition, both films depict a society that has collectively embraced the pursuit of a better life as its core aspiration, leading to a transcendence of its original diversity in line with the standards of social anthropology established by Geertz. This pursuit of the American Dream has become a hierophany according to Eliade, resulting in the elevation of consumer society to Lipovetsky's hyper-consumer society, which is characterised by factors of mutual alienation in society as discussed by Seeman.

In light of these findings, it can be concluded that popular culture and media representations can both reinforce and critique the American Dream. While the American Dream has traditionally been seen as a symbol of success and prosperity,

the selected films present a critical perspective on this ideal by showing the negative consequences of pursuing wealth and power at all costs. By analysing these films through the lens of cultural ethnographic and psychological theories, the thesis seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of the American Dream and its impact on human behaviour in contemporary society. Ultimately, this thesis highlights the importance of critically examining the values and ideals that bolster the culture and media representations in order to better understand their effects on people's lives.

Bibliography

Adams, James Truslow. 2012. *The Epic of America*. Somerset, USA: Taylor & Francis Inc.

Aumont, Jacques. 1997. *The Image*. London: British Film Institute.

Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang.

Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books.

Chomsky, Noam. 2017. *Requiem For The American Dream: The Principles of Concentrated Wealth and Power.* New York: Seven Stories Press.

Cullen, Jim. 2005. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press Inc.

Eliade, Mircea. 1994. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion.* Orlando: Harcourt, Inc.

Frye, Northrop. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism.* Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvct0080.

Hanson, Sandra L. and John Kenneth White. 2011. *The American Dream in the 21st Century.* Philadelphia, USA: Temple University Press.

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2015. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. 2005. *Hypermodern Times*. Translated by Andrew Brown. Oxford: Polity Press.

Lippmann, Walter. 2015. *Drift And Mastery: An Attempt To Diagnose The Current Unrest*. Sagwan Press.

May, Elaine Tyler. 2008. *The Impact of the Cold War on American Family Life, 1945-1960.* Basic Books.

Mendes, Sam, director. 2008. *Revolutionary Road*. United States: DreamWorks Distribution.

Monaco, James. 2004. *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia.* 4th ed. Oxford University Press.

Nye, Joseph S. 1990. *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power*. New York: Basic Books.

Ortner, Sherry B. "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (1984): 126–66. http://www.jstor.org/stable/178524.

Parafianowicz, Halina. 2003. Americký mýtus a amerikanizace Československa po první světové válce. "*Lidé města*" *no.* 5 (9). https://lidemesta.cuni.cz/LM-484.html.

Scorsese, Martin. 2013. *The Wolf of Wall Street.* United States: Paramount Pictures.

Seeman, Melvin. 1959. "On The Meaning of Alienation." *American Sociological Review* 24, no. 6: 783–91. https://doi.org/10.2307/2088565.

Swansburg, John. 2014. "The Self-Made Man." *Slate*, November 17. https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/11/the-self-made-man-history-of-a-myth-from-ben-franklin-to-andrew-carnegie-and-today.html.

Woodworth, A. S. (ed.). 1993. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.* New York: Penguin Classics.

Zahran, G., & Ramos, L. (2010). "From hegemony to soft power: implications of a conceptual change." *Soft power and US foreign policy* (pp. 24-43). Routledge.