

SOC 172  
Fall 2021

Prof. Akos Rona-Tas

## Films and Society

### The American Dream through Films

T-Th 3:30-4:50  
CSB 004

Office Hours: TTh 10-11 or by appointment  
on Zoom

The class is synchronous and in-person. Please observe [campus rules](#).

#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

One of the most distinctive features of American culture is the widely held belief that anyone can achieve happiness through material and social success, and can attain success through hard work, courage and determination. The American Dream is supposed to unite our diverse society through a set of common beliefs and goals. Using feature and documentary films as well as scholarly readings, the course explores various aspects of the American Dream. In this class, we will use films to make central sociological themes come alive. The films will serve as springboards to understanding general social processes in American society.



This year we will have a special class on October 26 with filmmaker Ori Elon. He is one of the creators of *Shtisel*, the hugely successful Israeli series on Netflix. *Shtisel* is a story of an Orthodox Jewish (Haredi) family living in Jerusalem. The world of *Shtisel* is poles apart from the world of the American Dream (even though, in some ways, you will find the situations and characters oddly familiar). Peeking into a radically different world will reveal the strangeness and uniqueness of our own. It allows us to see that what we take as normal and for granted is

only one of many ways people can live. Elon is visiting San Diego as a guest of the Murray Galinson San Diego-Israel Initiative.



There will be ten **movies**. All will be on reserves for streaming except for *Shtisel*. *Shtisel* is available through *Netflix*. The movies range from 42 to 200 minutes in length.

Note:

To access the films from off campus you will need to have a proxy server. Click here:

<http://libraries.ucsd.edu/resources/course-reserves/> and follow the instructions.

To set up the proxy server you will need your UCSD userid and password.

The **articles** will be on e-reserves as well. There is no textbook for this course. You have to do the reading and watch the assigned films in their entirety **before** class. In class, we will watch only excerpts from the films.

When you watch the films and read the articles take notes. The midterm and the final will both have questions about the content of the films and the articles along with the content of the lectures.

Before each class, when the movie is listed, you have to pick a scene from the film you like and would like to talk about. Two hours before class the latest (by 1:30pm T and Th), you submit your scene pick through Canvas, the title of the movie, the **time stamp** of the scene (from MM:SS to MM:SS), **your title to the scene** (you come up with a descriptive title), and a sentence about what you want to talk about. You can make it longer. It is up to you.

For instance:

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

In class, I will randomly call on you and ask you to tell us why you picked that scene and what is interesting about it.

I will put my lecture on the web as we go. Advice: Don't try to take in everything the last minute, just before your exams! Don't fall behind!

The *midterm* will be three short essay questions and you will get a time window of 24 hours to answer them and upload your answers. It will be due on Tuesday, **November 9, 3:00 pm**. The final will be four short essay questions. I will release the questions on Friday, **December 3, 9:00 am** and you have to upload your answers by Monday, **December 6, 11:59 pm**.

For the midterm and the final, you should be able to answer each question in 250-600 words. This is a ballpark; you can go a bit under or over this limit. I care about content and good writing, not word count. I expect text that is well written. That means; it should be written as continuous text not as bullet points, ideas should be clearly formulated, spelling and grammar should be checked. That also means; PROOFREAD and revise it if necessary before you hand it in.

There cannot be any quotations -- everything must be written in your own words. If you paraphrase someone you must reference it. Rules about references:

- 1) You do not reference me or my lecture.
- 2) You can reference readings on the syllabus by putting the authors' name in parentheses (Krugman) or if you want to point to a particular page (Krugman:55).
- 3) I don't expect you to cite work not on our reading list but if you do, give name and date (Gladwell 2006) and include the full citation after your answer in APA style (Gladwell, M. (2006). The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference. Little, Brown.) Again: you can get an A+ without a single outside reference.
- 4) References are not included in your word count.

You must work alone but you may use your notes or any other sources you find. Needless to say, **plagiarism** is a very serious violation of university rules, and anyone caught committing it, anytime, will have to face the consequences.

Your **grade** will be determined as follows:

Assignments (10% each)	30%
Midterm	20%
Final	30%
Scene picks (you can skip 1)	10%
Class participation	10%

Assignments and exams should be submitted electronically via Canvas through Turnitin.

## **OFFICE HOURS**

Meeting with your professor outside the classroom environment is very important. Learning happens in many ways. Seeing me one-on-one and asking questions or just talking to me can be a good way of clarifying ideas, picking up new information and integrating the material to your own thinking.

My office hours are Tuesdays and Thursdays 10-11 or by appointment in my Zoom room:  
<https://ucsd.zoom.us/j/5581794498>

## YOUR INSTRUCTOR

I am Akos Rona-Tas (pronounced Ahkosh Ronatash). I have been a professor at UCSD since 1989.

There are classes where you teach students about things they never heard of. This is a different class. Here we will talk about things that are already familiar to most of you, and the goal of this course is to make you think about them in new ways. Of course, you will learn new things, but my goal is to provide you with new perspectives.

## SCHEDULE

### September 23 Introduction

**The American Dream: Main Themes**

**The Historical Roots: Joyless Puritanism and the American Dream**

[Here is a recent opinion poll about the American Dream](#)

[And here is another one](#)



Reading: James Truslow Adams. 1931. The Epic of America. Epilogue pp.401-417

**First Assignment:** Answer the following questions: Are there any people of color in Modern Times? If yes, how are they depicted? How are women portrayed? Then choose one scene and explain what you find interesting about it.

### September 28 The American Dream from Below

**Battles of the Little Guy and the Precariousness of the American Dream**



Film: Modern Times (88 min) (directed by Charlie Chaplin) F= Feature Film



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

**September 30                      The American Dream from Above**

**The Battle of Giants: Success vs. Happiness**



Film: Citizen Kane (119 min) (directed by Orson Welles) F



Reading: Cal Jillson, Pursuing the American Dream, Chapter 1. Pp. 1-15

Did you notice something oddly familiar in the movie? [Click here](#)

*First assignment due* and should be submitted electronically via Canvas through Turnitin.

**October 5                      The American Dream from the Outside I**

**Mafia and the American Dream: Crime and Success**



Film: Godfather Part II (200 min) (directed by Francis Ford Coppola) F

**October 7                      The American Dream from the Outside II**

**Ethnicity**



Reading: Malcolm Gladwell, The Crooked Ladder, New Yorker August 11, 2014

**October 12                      The American Dream and the Construction of Identity**

**Race and Gender: Inclusion and Exclusion**



Film: Imitation of Life (125 min) (directed by Douglas Sirk) F



Reading: Cynthia Deitch, Gender, Race, and Class Politics and the Inclusion of Women in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, *Gender and Society*, 7/2 (Jun., 1993), pp. 183-203

## October 14 The African American Experience



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



Reading: Reskin, Barbara. "The race discrimination system." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (2012): 17-35.

## October 19 Immigration I

### Who Do We Welcome?



Film: Becoming American: The Chinese Experience Part III (by Bill Moyers) (82 min) D= Documentary



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

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

**Second Assignment:** Take Rumbaut's article's short Conclusion. Re-write it *in your own words*. Make sure you include everything important and that you use your own words and sentence structures. Then take his Tables I, II and III. Pick one ethnicity (say, your own). Tell me what these three tables say about that ethnic group. What does Zhao have to say about the ethnic group you chose. About 2-3 pages.

## October 21 Immigration II

### The Asian and the Hispanic Experience



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

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

[Here is an article about Chinese parenting and "Tiger Mothers"](#)

*Second assignment due* and should be submitted electronically via Canvas through Turnitin.

## **October 26            A Different World**



Film : Shtisel Season 1 Episode 1 (*Please note: this film is available ONLY through Netflix*)

Our guest is Ori Elon, the creator of Shtisel.

## **October 28            Social Class**

**How to Think about the World of Social Inequalities**

**Trends of Inequality**



Film: People Like Us Parts I-IV (124 min) (by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker) D



Reading: Leslie McCall and Christine Percheski, Income Inequality: New Trends and Research Directions, Annual Review of Sociology 2010

[An excellent article on income inequalities in the US by Slate Magazine with links to important scholarly articles and great visuals](#)

[Warren Buffett \(the 2nd richest person in the US\), Stop Coddling the Super-Rich](#)

## **November 2            Social Mobility**

**Opportunities and Outcomes**



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

## **November 4            Social Mobility II**

**Moving Up and Moving Down**



Film: Trading Places (1983) (118 min) (by John Landis) F



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

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

## November 9 Consumerism

### From Puritanism to Consumerism



Reading: The New Politics of Consumption Debate in the Boston Review, Summer 1999, pp.1-26.

**Third Assignment:** Take one response to Schor's article from the reading. Explain in your own words what the author's central claims are, whether they agree or disagree with Schor and what your positions are on the issues. About 2 pages.

**MIDTERM due at 3:00 pm**

## November 11 Veterans Day

## November 16 The Pursuit of Happiness I

### Many Faces of Happiness



Reading: Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, If We Are So Rich, Why Aren't We Happy? pp. 821-7, *American Psychologist*, 1999

*Third assignment due* and should be submitted electronically via Canvas through Turnitin.

## November 18 The Pursuit of Happiness II

### Can Money Buy Happiness? Freedom and Happiness

[Here is an article on happiness and winning the lottery](#)



Reading: Kahneman, et al, Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer, A Focusing Illusion. pp. 1908-10, *Science*, 2006

Schwartz, Tyranny of Choice, *Scientific American*, December 2004, pp.44-49



[Here is an article on happiness and winning the lottery](#)

**November 23**                      **The American Dream in the Cyber Age I**  
**Cyber Dreams: Real and Virtual Lives**



Film: Her (126 min) (by Spike Jonze) F



Reading: Lundquist, Jennifer Hickes, and Celeste Vaughan Curington. "Love Me Tinder, Love Me Sweet." *Contexts* 18.4 (2019): 22-27.

**November 25**                      **THANKSGIVING**

**November 30**                      **The American Dream in the Cyber Age II**  
**Race, Ethnicity and Gender in the Cyber Age**



Reading: Gonzales, Amy L. "Disadvantaged minorities' use of the Internet to expand their social networks." *Communication Research* 44, no. 4 (2017): 467-486.

**December 2**                      **REVIEW**