

The Evolution of The Dream

Representations of The American Dream in Two Films from the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper debates the current state of the American Dream, once central to the identity of the United States, based on contemporary representations of the Dream that have taken root in the 21st century. These arguments are founded in the cultural analyses of Muccino's *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), due to their diametrically opposing representations of the concept. Through these analyses, I find that the Dream has evolved from a debate on whether it could be real, to a debate on whether it should be pursued in the first place.

Introduction

The American Dream is an ideal deeply rooted in American culture. The term was originally coined by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1931), wherein he defines the Dream as, "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement." (Adams, 1931, p. 415) To Adams, in other words, the Dream signified above all a sense of equal opportunity regardless of sociocultural class or status. This opportunity Adams presents is founded both in material wealth (Adams, 1931, p. 421), and wealth of individuality and identity. As much can be gathered from his previous statement, emphasizing individual persons and their capabilities, and being eluded to multiple times throughout, in such statements as "the nation is only an aggregate of individual men and women" (Adams, 1931, p. 421), and, "until countless men and women have decided in their own hearts ... what is a genuinely good life, we need look to neither politicians nor captains of industry" (Adams, 1931, pp. 426-427), as well.

Since its conception, the Dream has been viewed by many to be at least a pleasant thought, if not indeed a vision worth pursuing, though others grew to become pessimistic of the notion. This clash of views has been repeatedly represented in texts and literature throughout the 20th century for scholars and critics to analyze. Harold Bloom, in his book *Bloom's Literary Themes: The American Dream* (2009), collected various examples of these representations of the Dream and used them to categorize this dichotomy. As Bloom explains it, he finds that these texts root themselves in one of two key perspectives (Bloom, 2009, pp. xv-xvi): The first, where Bloom finds the author to have, regardless of their method, conceived, produced, and presented the Dream as a realistically feasible achievement (Bloom, 2009, p. xv). The second, which Bloom dubbed "the American Nightmare", has authors instead presenting the impossibility of the American Dream due to, as he puts it, "our

addiction to violence ... and ... our constant involuntary parodying of hopes for a more humane life” (xv-xvi).

This paper reconstructs this discussion on the American Dream that Bloom first brought to light, as well as approaching it from a new angle, in discussing class identities as they are represented in relation to the dream. This paper discusses these notions more contemporaneously as well, with a focus on how the Dream is represented in the 21st century, using Gabriele Muccino’s *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) as the cultural artefacts forming its foundation. This allows for the ability to compare and note any evolution on the topic at hand.

Theoretical Concepts

The reconstruction of this discussion must begin here, with a rundown of the theoretical concepts that make its foundation. That rundown is what the following few pages are used for, beginning with Max Weber’s ideas on class structure, followed by Erik Olin Wright’s exploration of power and exploitation in capitalism, and concluding on a discussion of class identity.

Max Weber’s approach to the concept of class in the ‘class-situation’ is in many ways inspired by Karl Marx and the two-class model, which simply depicts the opposing relations between the lower class and the higher class (Resnick & Wolff, 2019). Weber describes the notion of ‘class-situation’ in his article, “Class, Status, Party” (2011), wherein he explains that the class-situation is a number of conditions that must be met in relation to class. Though, prior to stating them, he makes explicit that, in his use, ‘classes’ are not communities, but rather bases for communal action. Explaining, then, the concept of class-situation, he constructs three criteria to be met:

“We may speak of a ‘class’ when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities of income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets.” (Weber, 2011, p. 57).

This idea demonstrates class as a conditional circumstance met under three criteria. These conditions require that a variable number of individuals (higher than one) share at least one exclusively economic life ‘component’ that is represented through commodities or the job market.

Weber additionally describes class as necessarily dependent on the concept of power, a concept he defines as “the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action” (Weber, 2011, p. 56). Furthermore, he explains that economically conditioned power is not as such identical to ‘power’. In his words, “man does not strive for power only in order to enrich himself economically” (Weber, 2011, 56). He contributes social honor to being another driving factor in power, though he also explains that honor can be achieved through other means, and indeed can itself even be the basis of political and economic power.

Weber is not alone in considering aspects of power to be apparent in class. In “Class Counts” (2011), Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright depicts capitalism and its reliance on class as exploitative. He

illustrates this claim with a comic strip from the 1940's *Li'l Abner* series (Wright, 2011, pp. 48-49). The comic strip concerns a rich capitalist, P.U., and his manager traveling to Dogpatch, the poorest place in America, in order to hire inhumanely cheap labor. This venture would seemingly have been successful too, as the populace of the area at first appear interested in the proposal of six dollars a week for eighteen-hour workdays, up until they introduce P.U. to the shmoo. The shmoo is a creature that seeks to please humans by turning itself into whatever basic necessities they may need, such as food or drink. This revelation has P.U. and his manager drive off in a panic, making such exclamations as, "free food for everybody? That's horrible!" (Wright, 2011, p. 49).

Wright's argument lies in the class relations that are depicted in the comic strip. As he argues, there are two main classes within the comic: the capitalists who own the means of production, and the workers who do not. The capitalists, who rely on workers for production, have their ability to exploit said workers crippled due to the appearance the shmoo (Wright, 2011). This is because the deprivation of the poor, their lack of proper accommodations and food is the primary factor in capitalists' efforts of exploitation. Once the bare necessities for life have been met, here by the shmoo, that factor dissipates. This does not result in there being no workers at all. As Wright explains, people will still have desires beyond the necessary components for living. However, the existence of the shmoo has given the working class much stronger bargaining power, as their need to work no longer extends as far as life or death (Wright, 2011).

Wright does make note of how loaded the term 'exploitation' is, as it suggests an immoral action worth condemning, rather than being a simple tool for analytical description. Therefore, Wright demonstrates three criteria to be met in class exploitation. First, that, "the material welfare of one group depends on the material depravations of another" (Wright, 2011, p. 50), second, that, "the causal relation in [the first criterion] involves the asymmetrical exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources" (Wright, 2011, p. 50), and third, that, "the causal mechanism which translates exclusion into differential welfare involves the appropriation of the fruits of labor of the exploited by those who control the relevant productive resources" (Wright, 2011, p. 50). So, in other words, the conditions for class exploitation are met when one group's material and economic gain relies on another group's lack thereof, when that relation results in the deprived group being excluded from particular resources, and when said economic and material difference and exclusion of resources involves the acquisition of labor of the deprived group by the wealthy group.

Yet while class relation is one key aspect in the concept of class identity, it was proposed by Adams to be a larger part of the American Dream. Though, according to sociologist Fiona Devine, the extent to which class is truly salient in social identity has been a point for vivid debate. In Devine's article "Social Identities, Class Identity and Political Perspectives" (1992), she approaches this debate from two sides. On one side, a scholar named Marshall and his colleagues released statistics related to a questionnaire they had given to the general public, which showed class as the most salient identity (Devine, 1992, pp. 230-231). From the other side, this quantitative data was challenged by several scholars who criticized the method in which the data was gathered, believing that the questionnaires' immediate focus on class would, of course, have individual responders find it hard to relate to other social identities in that moment. Such an argument, alongside Marshall's own response, stating that their findings had been misrepresented (Devine, 1992, 232), led Devine to conclude that both sides do agree on a number of aspects relating to class as a social identity, particularly on the importance of context (Devine, 1992, pp. 232-233).

Devine extrapolates from these gatherings that qualitative interviews may overcome some of the methodological issues that the quantitative data gathering had, though she admits this solution is not necessarily perfect, nor will it alone likely solve the issue (Devine, 1992, p. 233). Nevertheless, most of the rest of her article depicts the methodology in her interviews as well as her findings (Devine, 1992). Through her data, she concludes that class must be a salient part of social identity. Perhaps more importantly, however, she finds that class identity can (and usually does) coexist alongside and even influence other salient identities, such as politics, religion, and nationality (Devine, 1992, pp. 248-249).

An article written by Evans, Stubager, and Langsæther (2022) covers the individual aspects they find apparent in class identity, and evidently, they arrive at a similar conclusion to Devine in terms of class identity existing alongside other social identities. They relate class primarily to economy and politics. According to them, you can distinguish broadly between two emphases of class identity (Evans et al., 2022, p. 1181). The first perspective is of class identity as an economic identity based on the individual's experience of social inequality. Here, Evans et al. argues that one's identification with class relates back to one's socio-economic situation, and additionally reflects onto one's economic-political preferences, particularly differentiating between interventionism and pro-market policies (Evans et al., 2022, p. 1181-1182). The second perspective with emphasis on culture concerns social status, where they argue that associating or being associated with a lower class is reflective of attitudes reflective of a low status, and vice versa. They specify in this example how the lower class associates itself generally with authoritarianism and socially conservatist preferences (Evans et al., 2022, p. 1182).

I want to emphasize the second of these two perspectives, as I find it relates back to the American Dream directly. As a nation-wide ideal, the Dream is inherently political. Debates on which side of the political spectrum the ideal swings towards have been rampant throughout the last few decades, with the right claiming the ideal as conservative (Johnson & Barr, 2020), and the left claiming otherwise (Rowland & Jones, 2007). Regardless of these differences of opinion, this paper will demonstrate its points under the notion that the American Dream should be considered a conservative ideal, for two reasons: One, I find it reasonable that an ideal, which name was coined almost one hundred years ago, but which's presence can be linked back to ideas of Thomas Jefferson (Beach, 2007, p. 148, Gillon, 2020), be considered conservative in so far as the core of conservatist ideology is the philosophy of preserving and promoting traditional ideas. In other words, the right's attempts at claiming the American Dream are a result of the ideal's presence in traditional American values. And two, as scholars Robert Rowland and John Jones point out in their article, there is "a version of the American Dream privileging individual over communal responsibility has dominated political discourse" (2007, p. 427). There has been a shift in the interpretation and enacting of the Dream which emphasizes the individual rather than political, economic, and opportunistic equality within a society, a point that goes against the parts of liberal philosophy that emphasizes equality. In summary, the American Dream will be considered a part of conservatist ideology in this paper, an important point to note as the cultural perspective of class identity, as covered earlier by Evans, Stubager, and Langsæther. (2022), reflects upon lower-class identification and its association with characteristics of social conservatism. Deeper importance of this distinction is also made clear through the upcoming analysis.

This preliminary theoretical segment illustrates the topics that will take precedence in the upcoming analysis of *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2006) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). From definitions of class and class structures to power and exploitation and identity, this paper will from here approach

the representation of the American Dream analytically as a culmination of those themes within these two films. This method of approach to the problem formulated in the introduction has its drawbacks, particularly in the amount of data analyzed. One could critique this approach as not covering enough caveats of the discussion with simply two individual films as data, or that using more than one film for analysis lessens the reach of the discussion due to the analysis possibly not going far enough in-depth with the topic. Yet this paper attempts to cover both flaws exactly by using two cultural artifacts. After all, if the aforementioned arguments are true, this is one logically sound approach, in finding that one cultural artifact could mean that the cultural aspects of the discussion would remain too narrow, while having too many artifacts could take away from the overall analysis.

The American Dream in Film: *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006)

The Pursuit of Happyness (2006), directed by Gabriele Muccino, is based on the life events of American Businessman Chris Gardner during the early 1980s. The story depicts Gardner's constant pursuit of the American Dream, which begins already with him as a salesman of new medical technology. His decision to buy into and sell this product wound up with Gardner and his family in a dire economic state following a lack of interest from potential customers. Low on options, Gardner becomes inspired to pursue a job as a stockbroker to provide for his family. This journey holds in store several obstacles for Gardner, including a divorce between him and his wife, caring for his toddler son while working towards his position as stockbroker, and struggling with homelessness.

Gardner's position in the working-class becomes readily apparent within the first few minutes of the film. Director Muccino wastes no time in that regard, using the very first scenes which introduce Gardner to show him leaving his son at what, based on the immediate visual environment, appears to be an underfunded kindergarten (Muccino, 2006, 00:04:18), followed by scenes of him using public transport rather than his own car (Muccino, 2006, 00:05:10). Though while these aspects are not exactly a representation of overflowing wealth, the true economic disparity of Gardner's situation comes to light in the scenes that follow, which depict his attempts at selling his medical apparatus (Muccino, 2006, 00:05:42). Here, the viewer comes to understand the nature of Gardner's situation, helped along by the film's use of self-narration. The product he is selling, a portable bone-density scanner, has proven only slightly more effective than run-of-the-mill x-ray images at a much heftier price, which has left Gardner's potential costumers disinterested, calling it "unnecessary and expensive" (Muccino, 2006, 00:05:47).

In scenes that follow, the viewer is shown an additional client denying the product, as well as Gardner's ticket-covered car towed away (Muccino, 2006, 00:06:39), but perhaps most telling of Gardner's economic problems is the discussion he has with his wife immediately prior (Muccino, 2006, 00:05:58). From this scene, the viewer learns two things: Gardner has to work overtime trying to sell his machine, and Gardner's wife, Linda, has to work overtime to make up for Gardner's lack of sales. This not only results in neither parent really having time to take care of their son, the issue of unpaid tax-bills was also brought up, meaning that the extra work done is still not enough. Including this one, all arguments between Gardner and his wife lead back to their financial issues in one way or another, which adds to shaping their relationship in a perspective of class primarily.

These points, alongside Chris Gardner's later struggle with homelessness, frame his 'class-situation' quite clearly as in the working-class. The criteria Weber constructed of the 'class-situation' are met in Gardner through his applicably similar situation to his wife, of course, as well as is friend Wayne,

to whom Gardner lent money that Wayne did not give back (Muccino, 2006, 01:17:25). You can also more generally relate Gardner to the homeless attempting to find housing similarly to Gardner himself (Muccino, 2006, 01:30:38).

A perhaps more interesting topic the film illustrates is the stark differences between classes, which comes up several times throughout the film. It is initially a romanticization of the higher-class from the perspective of a lower-class individual, as can be noted in Gardner's comment on the successful people walking around a stockbroker firm, "I still remember that moment. They all looked so damn happy to me. Why couldn't I look like that?" (Muccino, 2006, 00:10:07). More than romantically, this line from Gardner also displays envy to an extent, though not an envy to be understood in a negative sense. Rather, this interaction between Gardner and the capitalist-class is framed in the film as what inspires Gardner to become a stockbroker in the first place.

As the film progresses, however, the presentation of this relationship changes from this romanticization to one of that seems more mocking of Gardner's class-situation. There are several scenes that communicate this. One example is in the interactions between Gardner and his 'competitors' in the internship. They can be assumed to be at least more well off than Gardner himself, as Gardner comments on all the extra work he has to complete on top of his internship, while all other interns get to dedicate all of their allotted time to their work at the firm (Muccino, 2006, 01:03:52). Gardner's relation particularly to the other interns are shown multiple times in fact, another one being after Gardner loses his shoe due to being hit by a car. Upon his return to work (rather than seeking medical attention), Gardner is greeted with backhanded comments rather than concern for his well-being (Muccino, 2006, 01:01:34). Besides that, other showcases of the shift in the film's representation of the higher-class can be seen in a very short clip around the end of the 2nd act, where the shot showing a long queue of homeless people, with Gardner among them, waiting to get into the Glide 5 homeless shelter is momentarily obstructed by a car full of high-class individuals, laughing hysterically. One can determine their class through their clothes and the car. That short shot can be seen as a mocking of Gardner's situation, though a different point can also be gathered in, from Gardner's perspective, jealousy of sorts.

Additionally, Gardner's relations to the higher-ups at the firm display a different relation in Erik Olin Wright's concept of exploitation. Several times throughout the internship, regardless of his current workload, Gardner's supervisor asks him to perform menial tasks, such as getting coffee (Muccino, 2006, 01:02:32) or moving his car (Muccino, 2006, 01:05:38). These instances by themselves do not affirm capitalist exploitation, but they are part of the cycle. The internship is reliant on individuals who, as in Gardner's case, are desperate enough to accept no pay for the work they do for a chance at becoming a stockbroker, a position presented as having high wages. Relating this to Wright's idea of capitalist exploitation, it is the deprivation of workers like Gardner that the firm is, at least in part, reliant on, in how, while keeping away access to certain resources from the deprived class (e.g., Gardner), the resources being any wage at all rather than the promise of a chance at a high-paying job, they 'gather' the produced labor, such as the deals the interns make and, of course, the menial labor that Gardner is put through.

All of these aforementioned details go into defining Gardner's class identity as well. There is value to be found in ascribing Gardner his class status from an economic perspective. As can be gathered from his recurring arguments with his wife (Muccino, 2006, 00:07:37, 00:11:22), his hunt of the fourteen dollars owed to him by his friend Wayne (Muccino, 2006, 01:16:58), and his initial attempt at becoming a salesman (Muccino, 2006), economy is a large part of his focus on the day-to-day. But

in the case of Chris Gardner, it may be more relevant to discuss his class identity in a cultural perspective due to the very close relation between his identity and the American Dream. As discussed through concepts of Evans et al., Gardner's position as a member of the lower-class makes him more likely to relate to socially conservative characteristics. Additionally, as discussed at the end of the theory segment, this paper finds the American Dream generally an ideal that is part of conservative philosophy. Gardner being, in accordance with his class-situation, more prone to show socially conservative characteristics is, then, functional as an explanation for how of Gardner's class identity can in many ways be traced back to his near constant pursuit of the American Dream. His initial failed attempt, spending all of his life savings on new medical technology to sell himself, as well as the work he put towards becoming a stockbroker are both examples of Gardner's pursuit of the Dream, of Gardner, using his own skills and abilities, regardless of his current life situation, to provide for himself and his family.

But while *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) displays a difficult journey and what it takes to pursue the American Dream, *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), another film depicting true events, directed by Martin Scorsese, presents a narrative in which The Dream had in many ways already been achieved. The story presents a stockbroker by the name of Jordan Belfort who, after being laid off, starts his own financial firm, Stratton Oakmont, from the bottom which quickly became a wealthy stand-alone firm. As the firm grows, so does Belfort's wealth, of which he spends much on various kinds of drugs, alcohol, and prostitutes. Belfort's greed and materialism lead him to financial crime, two divorces, and finally imprisonment.

The American Dream in Film: *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013)

The representation of Jordan Belfort's 'class-situation' is in many ways starkly opposite to Gardner's. The film's narrative introduction to Belfort is as an already established stockbroker. His conversation with Mark goes to emphasize this, and additionally adds some information about the individuals Belfort shares his 'class-situation' with, appearing economically flourishing (Scorsese, 2013, 00:08:08). The only time Belfort might be considered part of the lower-class in the film is after he loses his job as a stockbroker at the beginning of the film (Scorsese, 2013, 00:15:41), after which Belfort's work at Investor's Center and later creation of Stratton Oakmont keeps him financially stable until his own firm takes off and his wealth then grows exponentially. Spending several thousands of dollars on a meal (Scorsese, 2013, 00:46:27), to later when he buys an entire yacht for personal use (Scorsese, 2013, 01:10:45), Belfort's economic situation becomes rather self-evident in expressing that the 'class-situation' he belongs to throughout most of the film is that of the higher-class.

Where the results of Belfort's pursuit of the American Dream really shine through are in the film's representation of Belfort's power. Recall back to the definition of power, "the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action" (Weber, 2011, p. 56). In many ways, the entirety of *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) displays Belfort's realization of his own will. From his near constant abuse of illegal substances (Scorsese, 2013, 00:14:03, 00:50:48), and hiring prostitutes (Scorsese, 2013, 00:48:04), to bribing police officers (Scorsese, 2013, 01:04:59), illegally smuggling millions of dollars out of the United States (Scorsese, 2013, 01:48:34), and not least his relationship with both of his wives.

Belfort's relationship with his wives can particularly illustrate his social power, and use of it. The split between him and his first wife, Teresa, occurred due to him having an affair with a woman named Naomi (though several other affairs remained unmentioned). One could argue that the split between Belfort and his first wife was also in ways an act of his own will, as there appeared no attempt to mend his mistakes, but actually more resolutely a determination to get together with his new lover, Naomi. Additionally, there are no traces of remorse in his actions, which can be gathered from he himself stating that it took a mere three days after his split with Teresa before Naomi moved in with him (Scorsese, 2013, 01:01:51).

Due to Belfort and Naomi spending the majority of the movie together, several examples exist of Belfort's use of power over Naomi, but one scene especially illustrates it. In it, Belfort and Naomi learn of the death of Naomi's aunt, whom Belfort had been using to keep most of the money he had smuggled out of the US safely within Europe (Scorsese, 2013, 02:21:58). Upon realizing this, Naomi's initial reaction is to travel to England where her aunt resided, whereas Belfort's priority is to travel directly to Monaco to have the deceased aunt's signature forged, or risk losing millions of dollars. Whether or not one choice was generally more important than another was a moot point. In the end, Belfort took control of the yacht he had gifted Naomi and had it sail toward Monaco, even with the captain stating that a strong storm would hit on the route there, which they coincidentally get hit by. The point here is simply that, regardless of who owned the boat, what the wishes of the other passengers were, and what recommendations the captain had, in the end Belfort was the one who made the decision.

Much of Belfort's power comes from the immense amount of wealth he accumulates during his venture as the CEO of Stratton Oakmont, but Weber's depiction of power in social honor is evidently equally relevant. Belfort arguably gets together with his second wife, Naomi, only on the basis of his social honor, as they met at one of his parties through acquaintances (Scorsese, 2013, 00:53:49). Furthermore, everyone that works for him celebrates his efforts and his work as CEO, which is shown on several occasions, but especially during his speech on why he was going to leave the firm (Scorsese, 2013, 2:10:33). In this scene, his usually loud and rambunctious colleagues were completely silent for the majority of his speech. Additionally, congratulating how far one of the firm's employees had gotten was responded to by her with, "I fucking love you Jordan" (Scorsese, 2013, 02:14:00), alongside cheer from everyone in the room, as well as even more cheer at Belfort's decision to remain CEO of his firm. The love and respect Belfort's coworkers, colleagues, and friends held for him was undeniable, which in the end lead to him being, as mentioned, able to, for example, smuggle millions of dollars into Switzerland on the backs of self-same friends and families, as well as have his right-hand man, Donnie Azoff, promise to help Belfort out after Belfort was arrested.

Determining Belfort's own class identity requires a different approach to that of determining Chris Gardner's. While the two are arguably relatively similar, in their occupation but also in regard to their individual pursuits of higher wealth and status, of the American Dream, to provide for themselves and their families, Belfort's representation in the film places him further along the journey of this pursuit. Rather than working toward his desired position, Belfort has already made it there. As such, due to Belfort's now much larger focus on economy, defining his class identity through an economic perspective becomes more a fruitful endeavor. This importance of wealth for Belfort also becomes clearer in the progressively more common occurrences of Belfort breaking the law for the sake of increasing his wealth (Scorsese, 2013, 02:29:43), as well as when he completes his plot of smuggling millions of dollars across the globe. It seems safe to say, from his avoidance of, if not blatant disregard the law, the government goes a long way to shape Belfort's class identity in preference of the market

and distaste for government intervention. His ideal world is one which emphasizes economic independence, one in which the strong survive.

Discussion

These two films, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), are both different perspectives on the presence of the American Dream as a national ideal. *The Pursuit of Happyness* is a perspective on its supposed representation in low-class culture, demonstrating the Dream in Gardner's story, from having no income and struggling with homelessness to achieving a well-paying job and financial stability. Critique towards the story in regard to the true meaning of the American Dream can be constructed, as Gardner did rely on the generosity of homeless shelters and had to rely on higher-ups within the firm he was seeking to work at in order to receive and maintain the position he had sought after. Though, as was mentioned at the end of the film, Gardner kept pursuing his vision representative of the American Dream, as he founded his own investment firm some years later (Muccino, 2006, 01:52:25). Regardless, representation of the American Dream in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) illustrate a positive perception of the ideal's presence in a working-class situation, and a valuable part of one's class identity in the way dedicated work may save one from financial despair.

On the other side of the hypothetical coin is *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). The actual act of pursuing and achieving the Dream was only a small part of the beginning of the film. Instead, the points on representation of the American Dream in the film culminate in a sort of aftermath, an illustration of what comes of reaching the Dream. Jordan Belfort acts as the catalyst for this. As an individual who managed, through his own merits, to make the life he wanted for himself, and the slow descend into greed and financial crime stand as a critique from the film toward the ideal that has come to be a part of defining American society. But more than that, after representing Belfort's class identity as that of a self-indulgent higher-class, the film concludes on Belfort after being released from prison, doing a seminar on how to sell (Scorsese, 2013, 02:51:21). This, more than anything, is the film's real representation of the American Dream in culture, showing how Belfort's years of immorality has not changed the public's perception of him as a key example of what it means to reach the American Dream.

Conclusion

In essence, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), both released within a decade of each other and both depicting retellings of true stories, present two opposing perspectives of the American Dream, and show, based on those representations, a split in the perception of the American Dream in American culture. A split of one side wishing to celebrate and romanticize notions of hard work and effort as a means of reaching one's ideal life situation in terms of wealth and social status, while another demonstrates the dangers of idolizing the ideal, as the adoration of the concept has resulted in the conclusion of Belfort's story being one of interest in his methods, regardless of the true immorality of his actions. This split is evident in more than the general representation of the Dream as well. By keeping Gardner within his pointed lower class and depicting genuine struggles, Muccino portrays Gardner in a way that is intended to produce sympathy, if not even empathy, and uses that in order to construct this vision of the Dream. On the other hand, Scorsese never portrays Belfort as someone financially unstable, nor someone whose problems can truly be thought of as caused by anyone other than himself.

Scorsese's and Muccino's films contrast each other, more than anything, in how, though both of their protagonists are conduits for the Dream, only one of them is ever due to be viewed sympathetically. So, indeed different from the discussion Bloom first initiated, concerning whether the American Dream as an ideal could truly exist at all, these two films illustrate that the debate has shifted to an altogether new, contemporary focus; a question, concerning whether it is defensible to truly pursue the Dream in the first place.