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Film and American Culture: My Four Years in College

Landon Shimpa
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The past four years have proven to be an interesting period for American culture. The political environment has seen dramatic shifts with the second term of a president and several events that have dramatically altered common political thought processes. 2016, being an election year, has been witness to an unprecedented electoral landscape, complimented by incredibly different candidates, motivations and ideologies. A variety of individuals, news sources and communities have been commenting on these “shifts” in cultural atmosphere, and this project’s goal is to examine these “shifts” through an analysis of film. Film and society reflect and influence one another. Because of this, film/media can often provide a retrospective lens to examine culture. Both the American public, who voted with their dollars, and the Academy (Oscars), have chosen to select and associate with movies that connect with their ideologies, and despite the two different ways in which these films were selected, they share very similar messages over a consistent range of topics. This suggests that certain elements of these movies have connected with the American public, and more specifically, those associated with the film industry. This paper and project will show, that by using this selection of films and by analyzing their stylistic choices, story content and other thematic elements, that American culture over the past four years focuses heavily on some specific topics. These topics will be segmented into chapters of this paper.

These chapters and items are as follows:

Chapter 1 - Americans are attempting to redefine the idea of a heroine within modern pop culture as shown in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, *Marvel’s The Avengers*, and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Chapter 2 - Americans are attempting to understand their role in international situations, along with the role of their military as shown in *Marvel’s The Avengers*, *Argo*, and *American Sniper*.

Chapter 3 - The strength and importance of family is shown to be incredibly important in American culture, shown through aspects of *Argo*, *American Sniper*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Birdman*, and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Chapter 4 - Specific industries and the importance of their existence in American culture are highlighted in *Birdman*, *Argo*, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, and *Spotlight*.

Chapter 5 - An American culture that is struggling with the idea of faith and the role of the bible in American life is shown in *12 Years a Slave*, *Spotlight* and *American Sniper*.

This paper and project is not attempting to argue that these are the only important or incredibly prevalent pieces of American culture, but that this selection of movies are significant in their success and share common elements that speak to these cultural values.

Methodology and Project Approach

These eight films were chosen for this project because of their established success. As mentioned before, being the highest grossing film or the selection for Oscar “Best Picture” establishes each of these films as the result of cultural selection. It should be mentioned that the only film to be nominated for best picture and to be the highest grossing film of that year was *American Sniper* (2014). To begin this project, each film was viewed over the course of two weeks. This viewing provided a quick glimpse of possible thematic emphasis provided by each film, and allowed the project/paper to develop a structure. Initially, the paper was going to be organized chronologically, with each film analysis being introduced as a separate piece. This idea changed, however, when it became apparent that these films have very similar and easily connected thematic elements. Each film was viewed another three to four times, and was written on independently of one another. This resulted in eight separate film analysis papers ranging from seven to eight pages in length. The final version of this paper is the culmination of the

individual analysis pieces, bringing together similar portions of the films that relate to one another and speak to a specific area of American culture.

In order for this paper to be written, other examples of film/media analysis were used as writing and thematic reference. The primary piece of text used to help write this paper was Robin Wood's "Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan". Wood states in his introduction that his book is "the attempt to grasp, in all its complexity, a decisive "moment", an ideological shift, in Hollywood cinema and (by implication) in American culture". Rather than have a straight forward thesis that encompasses his entire book, Wood uses different criteria for examining American culture through each chapter. His chapters are organized by genre, director, or thematic prevalence, and each stand alone to provide analysis on these "decisive moments" in both film and American culture. Much like Wood, though in a much less organized or qualified examination, this paper will speak on different areas of film and culture within the United States as well. The film analysis provided in each chapter of Wood's book gives historical background to bring context to the piece. This paper will differ in that regard, as it is concerned with four years (2012-2015) as opposed to the 20 plus years examined by Wood. Before the analysis chapters are introduced, this paper will give a brief description of recent American history, using different examples to show impactful and trending events that coincided with the movie releases. Robin Wood's work was used as a primary reference for style and construction, however, this paper is attempting to speak less politically on these American culture issues. Instead of providing a personal reflection or call to action, this project is intended to identify cultural stigmas existent within film and culture. Robin Wood's work is an inspiration to this piece and provided it with a format that has been proven affective.

Other pieces of literature used for this project include “The Millennials on Film and Television”, a collection of papers organized by Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally and “Fictions Inc.” by Ralph Clare. Both of these works provided different film/media analysis pieces that were used for reflection while piecing together this paper. “The Millennials on Film and Television” emphasizes the significance of different thematic representations of millennials in media, and the specifics of film interpretation by millennials. Being a millennial myself, it is important to recognize the specifics of this project that will be impacted. For example, each of the films in this paper were watched through a streaming service on a rather small screen. Betty and Margaret note in their introduction that the very nature of viewing film impacts the audience’s reception, and the overall goal of their collection is to provide an analysis on the millennial generation’s representation, understanding and absorption of film and media.

“Fictions Inc.” is mainly concerned with establishing connections in media to a specific construct in American culture. The construct in this instance is the representation and overview of “The Corporation”. This examination doesn’t hinge on a specific medium however, using different films (*Ghostbusters*, *Network...etc.*), situational comedies (*The Office*), or comic strips (*Life is Hell*) to establish a shift in ideological viewpoints. This work is used as an example that film and other entertainment mediums can be used to identify significant cultural ideologies when concerning specific constructs (corporations in America). Ralph Clare uses these ideas to show a postindustrial shift in culture, and though it also references a much larger timespan than this paper, it can be recognized as a significant example of media/cultural connection.

These three texts are not directly referenced in this paper, but were used as a stylistic and thematic example of this paper’s organization and goal. Through their example, this paper will attempt to link different areas of film to ideologies prevalent within American culture, along with

the recognition that my interpretation of these films as a millennial may differ from those of a separate generation.

Recognition of common genres and their significance

The films in this paper were selected because of their success, and despite this selection method, there were two very significant genres that need to be identified and addressed. Among these selections, both the genre of historical film and the hero film were among the most common. One half of the films selected identify as a historical film, while the other half could be considered a member of, or commentary on, the hero genre.

The films in this piece considered a part of the historical film genre are *Argo*, *American Sniper*, *12 Years a Slave*, and *Spotlight*. Historical film is significant for several reasons. By allowing past events to be re-represented through an artistic medium like film, the intricacies of human interaction and other thematic elements are often associated directly with the actual historic events. This is regardless of historical accuracy and is simply the result of a modern reception to historical recreation. This is unique to the genre of historical films, artistic objects that have the ability to shape a public opinion on the political, social, and cultural ramifications of events in United States history. This innate power, the ability to shape public perception, is recognized by each of these films, utilizing different methods to represent American sociopolitical constructs in different ways.

Three of these four films were the recipient of the “Best Picture” award, suggesting a propensity for historical film to be recognized critically more often than films being watched by the American public. Regardless of this, the three Oscar “Best Picture” recipients grossed a cumulative \$238 Million in the U.S. box office (Imdb.com, 2016) showing a commercial presence that is still strong relative to other genres. Historical film has inherent strength,

allowing for intricate multinational events to be symbolized within two hours of personal artistic work. This needs to be recognized as a significant piece of this paper and should be considered whenever one of these films is analyzed or referenced.

The hero film genre has been increasingly common within the Hollywood industry over the past several decades. This commonality has been driven by large corporations like Sony (*Spider Man, The Amazing Spider Man*), Marvel (*The Avengers, Iron Man, Hulk, etc.*), and D.C. (*Man of Steel, Batman V. Superman, etc.*) and these films have shown to dominate the box office. A hero film in this paper can be seen as a film centered on individuals with exceptional talents or abilities. Three of the films that can be considered a part of the hero film genre were the highest grossing films in their respected years. These films were *Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Marvel's The Avengers, and The Hunger Games: Catching Fire. Birdman*, rather than being a film about heroes, provides commentary on the industry of Hollywood and the proliferation of the hero genre in pop culture. These films are both significant for their reliance on individuals with incredible talent, and their incredible success within the United States. These four films grossed a cumulative \$1,610 Million in the United States box office (IMDB.com), suggesting an incredible propensity for individuals in American culture to relate with or enjoy hero centric film. It should also be noted that these are a remote sample of movies that can be considered a hero film releasing in the past 20 years.

The hero film signifies several important aspects of popular culture. Among these significant areas are admirable personal characteristics, villain characterizations and the importance of teamwork among exceptional individuals. These three commonalities are present within the most grossing films, whereas *Birdman's* thematic emphasis is based upon the commercial success of hero films. The persistent nature of these films and their ample success

within American culture should be recognized and noted as they are referenced/analyzed in this paper.

A Brief Historical Background

Rather than describe every historical detail relevant to these films, this section has the overall goal of introducing events and culturally significant aspects of the United States for the past several years. This section will be separated into two brief sections, one that uses trending/searched objects through Google.com as a reference and another that emphasizes several specific events and their impact on America.

Each of these years show that American citizens were concerned with a wide array of people, events and topics. Google.com provides a zeitgeist that emphasizes an array of search topics, along with the top 10 most searched items in that section.

2012 shows a year of searches dominated by individuals and pop culture items. The most searched item on Google in 2012 for Americans was “Whitney Houston”, followed by individuals like “Kate Middleton”, “Amanda Todd”, and “Michael Duncan”. This list of individuals is diverse and shows an interesting range of American search for information. Several of these individuals are actors, searched for because of their death, along with the wedding of royalty and the death of a teenage girl. All but one of these individuals was searched in relation to their death, with “Amanda Todd’s” story of suicide showing to be the most personal searched item. Also among the top searches of 2012 are video games (“Diablo 3”), Apple products (“iPad 3”) and natural disasters (“Hurricane Sandy”). 2012 proved to be a diverse year for American political interests as well, with searches for presidential debates and Olympic news ranking among the top event searches for the year.

All of these searched items and other cultural events should be considered for the two movies in this paper that released in 2012, *Argo* and *The Avengers*. These films are similar in the sense that they show America interacting with a foreign threat, *Argo* with the Iranian Hostage Crisis, and *The Avengers* with a hostile alien race. The way that they utilize location, dialogue, and character development share several similarities, and they both were a commercial success. Interacting with a hostile foreign presence is a topic also discussed in several other films in this paper, but both of these movies share thematic elements that are comparable to one another.

Google searches during 2013 in the United States were very similar, with the number one search also being the result of an actor's death. Paul Walker was the most searched item, followed by four other individuals for a variety of reasons. These individuals range from "Nelson Mandela" to "Adrian Peterson". Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid political leader of South Africa, and Adrian Peterson, the NFL running back who was found to abuse his son, are two very different examples of searches and show a wide range of concerns for American citizens. The second most searched item, and perhaps the event that most largely shaped American foreign policy for the past four years, was the "Boston Marathon Bombing". This item, along with other searches like "Government Shutdown" show an American public very concerned with the functioning of its federal government and the safety of its people. It should also be noted that towards the final months of 2012, the #blacklivesmatter movement began, changing a large portion of political and social conversation.

Both *12 Years a Slave* and *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* released in 2013, covering a wide range of social issues and cultural challenges. *12 Years a Slave's* selection for "Best Picture" has been considered, more recently, a political move on the part of the academy. For the past two years, (2014 and 2015) there have been no African American actors nominated for

academy awards. Even *12 Years*, the only film nominated within the past 3 years with a minority-dominated cast, was directed by and acted by primarily English individuals. This lack of diversity has been a large point of contention for the academy in 2016 and should be considered when *12 Years* is analyzed as a film. Both *12 Years* and *Catching Fire*, though drastically different in terms of content, do share some thematic elements. Both films feature a protagonist (or group of protagonists) that struggle against a societal system pitted against them, and use different elements to highlight familial importance. In a year where Americans were searching for and becoming involved in a wide range of issues, these films were able to strike a chord.

In 2014, drastic changes in top trending searches became apparent. Instead of nearly half of the searches being on individuals, U.S. searches focused heavily on international events. “Robin Williams” is was the most searched item, but was also the only individual to make the list. His impact on the industry of film was apparent and his death affected many people within the U.S. This is followed by different international events like the “World Cup”, the growth/fear of “Ebola”, “Malaysia Airlines”, the rise of “ISIS”, the tragedy of “Ferguson”, and the situation in “Ukraine”. The culmination of these items show a much larger interest in international events than in previous years. 2014 was witness to both events that shaped its foreign policy future and the political landscape of upcoming elections.

Unlike other years in this analysis, 2014’s *Birdman* and *American Sniper* share very few thematic or cultural similarities. *American Sniper* proved to touch a large variety of individuals, being the only film on this list both nominated for an Oscar while being the most grossing film of that year. It was a movie that covered a very recent piece of history, centered on the Navy S.E.A.L. Chris Kyle and his death in 2013. *American Sniper* shows a piece of American foreign

affairs ideology that is fairly one dimensioned, but truly connected with an incredibly large audience. On the opposite end of the thematic spectrum, *Birdman* is almost strictly a commentary on the film/entertainment industry, concerning itself with very little in the way of international affairs. *Birdman* didn't do incredibly well in the American box office, and should be considered a love letter to the industry of film and its capabilities.

2015, the final year in this paper's analysis, was the most media centric year for google searches. These included Lamar Odom (basketball player), *Jurassic World*, *American Sniper*, *Straight Outta Compton* (movies), *Fallout 4*, and *Agar.io* (video games). These searches are more media centric than any previous year and show immensely popular pieces of American entertainment culture. The only internationally related item that was searched for was "Paris" in relation to several bombing events.

2015 was witness to the release of the most grossing film for American box offices. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* made an incredibly successful return, and much like other years in this paper, shares quite a few commonalities with *Spotlight*, the selection for "Best Picture". Where *Star Wars* successfully connected with fans from many different generations, *Spotlight* was able to depict the industry of investigative journalism. Both films utilize a select cast of characters, using their attributes to carry the story and its elements. Each movie also contains a commentary on political/social constructs that are limiting (The First Order in *Star Wars* and The Catholic Church in *Spotlight*). In tandem with the highly entertainment focused search results in 2015, both *Star Wars* and *Spotlight* were able to connect with a variety of issues and topics in American society and culture.

Each year covered by this paper is dominated by searches for events and prominent individuals. "Ronda Rousey" searches in 2015 show a concern for female sports, while searches

in each year emphasize the role of actors within American popular culture. The most important events that were searched for during these past four years include the “Boston Marathon Bombing”, “Paris”, “ISIS”, “Ebola”, “Ferguson”, and “Amanda Todd”. These events, organizations, and individuals highlight several aspects of American culture highlighted in this paper. The Boston Marathon Bombing, Paris, ISIS and Ebola have all contributed to shifting views of American international roles. They are events that have shifted the American political landscape for the past several years and show an American public concerned with the role of strong American military/political influence. Other events like “Ferguson” highlight rapidly changing political landscapes. “Ferguson” remains the most searched event related to “black lives matter” movements, and is indicative of largescale social anxieties. Lastly, “Amanda Todd” shows an American concern for personal experience and issues close to the family. Amanda’s suicide after being bullied resulted in a massively trending concern for children safety at school. These issues hold intricate ramifications for American culture and society, showing a wide range of topics and concerns. The films in this paper will now be sectioned into chapters highlighting their primary messages, as interpreted by a millennial (myself). Through their use of differing elements, each speaks to these past four years and provides an interesting lens into impactful and influential social “shifts”.

Chapter 1 - Defining a Heroine

An American ideological struggle exists when defining and utilizing a successful heroine character. The strongest examples of this are shown in *The Hunger Games*' Katniss Everdeen, *The Avengers*' Black Widow/Pepper Potts and *Star Wars*' Rey. These characters show a social desire to define an effective female lead who embodies powerful, relatable traits. American society and culture has been changing over the past several years, bringing specific attention to different issues relating to equality of sexes both economically and politically. 2016 has seen the first female presidential candidate with a likely path to the election, representing the political expression of social anxieties and the result of social movements that have not existed in previous generations. Utilizing a primary heroine figure in the film industry for the past four years has been common, and although each of these films also feature prominent male protagonists (in some cases more instrumental protagonists), they include and highlight a changing social landscape.

There are issues concerning these female representations however. Character introductions are a key element when establishing character expectations, and several of the movies don't know what they want to accomplish. Where female characters of prominence have long used their sexuality as power constructs, there has been an attempt to shift focus to other attributes. This shift hasn't been entirely successful though, shown through characters in both *Hunger Games* and *The Avengers*. The strongest example of this successful realization of female strength and independence rests with *Star Wars*' Rey.

Rey is first introduced as an isolated scavenger. Her rough lifestyle in the desert seems to foster very little social interaction and her days spent scavenging don't provide her many

resources. Her house is a destroyed Empire walker tank and her meals consist of “instant bread”. Each of these introductory scenes are shot in a way that emphasizes Rey’s resolve by focusing on her reaction to the events around her. When cleaning her “find of the day” before she trades it for food, she looks upon an old woman who looks like she is doing the same task. Her expression conveys both curiosity and a sense of compassion for the old woman, despite the dim future she represents. If she were to stay on Jakku, she would not find more than the life she currently has, a reality she seems to greet openly. When Rey trades her goods for “portions” and is offered little in return, she either accepts the news with a resolute expression of fights for more, “Last week they were worth a half-portion each”. These opening scenes are essential for understanding Rey’s character and for understanding the film’s position on her role. She harbors traits of resilience, independence, compassion and resolve, all adding to a well-rounded protagonist.

The Force Awakens continues to add to Rey’s character through her interactions with Finn. Finn first sees Rey as she is fighting off two thugs attempting to steal BB-8. This scene reveals the nature of their relationship for the rest of the film as Finn rushes to help her fight off her attackers. Instead of aiding her, however, he witnesses Rey deal with her problem alone. The cinematography here is also used to highlight character reactions. Finn’s face when initially watching Rey is one of concern, but after she knocks out the thugs his opinion of her clearly changes. When she sees his “stolen jacket” his expression shows nothing but dread. The First Order’s attack following their introduction to each other elicits more situations that enforce Rey’s independence. Finn’s instincts to “protect” Rey are seen in the way that he grabs her hand in order to “lead her to safety”. *The Force Awakens* makes another statement on her character through her dialogue as Rey constantly refuses to let Finn lead. “What are you doing? Let go of me! I know how to run without you holding my hand [...] Stop taking my hand”.

Rey doesn't just shake off the overprotective actions of Finn, she takes charge. She is the pilot, the mechanic, and ultimately, the Jedi Knight. Despite Finn's protective nature, Rey is the constant hero. She pilots the Millennium Falcon away from the first order, she saves him from the rolling Rathtars, and her ultimate show of power is through her final escape from Star Destroyer Base and her fight with Kylo Ren. After resisting Kylo's attempts to penetrate her mind and recognizing her control of the force, Rey finds Han, Finn and Chewy attempting a rescue. The first words out of her mouth, instead of elation or gratitude are "What are you doing here". Her demeanor suggests that she had never lost hope of finding her own rescue, further cementing her strength to stand alone. Rey's final fight with Kylo Ren shows the film's final portrayal of her Heroine figure. She fights off a more experienced adversary and takes full control of the force. Rey even helps Chewbacca lift a defeated Finn to safety, confident in her abilities and her role in the events around her. (perhaps too much on Rey's impact for Heroine definition, though arguably the largest statement made by *The Force Awakens*)

These scenes, through their dialogue and cinematography, show that *The Force Awakens* is making a statement through Rey's character. Not only is she tough, resolute and confident, but she is acted upon by the male figures around her and openly defies expectations by refusing their aid. This statement is important for an analysis on American culture because of the film's incredible success in United States theaters. Not only did *The Force Awakens* succeed, it remains the highest grossing film of all time in the United States. In contrast, *The Hunger Games'* Katniss Everdeen shows many empowering characteristics, but is ultimately reliant on the male figures around her.

The first *Hunger Games* film (not analyzed in this paper), established Katniss as an independent and competent heroine. She hunts, encourages and helps her family, and volunteers to take her sister's place in the games. *Catching Fire* emphasizes these "tough" characteristics as well, but the source material and direction also reveal a reliance on the male figures around her. This begins with the very first scene of *Catching Fire*, establishing a contrast and struggle of character definition. While hunting with a stoic gaze, Katniss releases an arrow into a group of Turkeys. The scenario here maintains her previous character definition. She is shown to be alone and strong in a tough, cold environment. This changes, however, when the arrow that she releases hits an imaginary Peta. This hallucination is complimented by the sudden embrace and reassurance given to her by her hunting pal/boyfriend Gale. This moment of isolation and stoic composition is supported by a male counterpart, limiting the independence of her female character. This theme returns as she asks Peta to keep her company during the nights in the capital, and is emphasized in the way that she concerns over Peta in the games. This reliance becomes a statement on her characterization and limits her role of defining a "new" heroine.

Though relatively little emphasis is placed on Katniss's appearance, it is referenced and used to empower her on several occasions. The primary of these is her appearance on the Capital's talk show. Prior to her interview, she is required to wear her "wedding" gown by president snow. She is commented on several times, with her team manager Effie commenting "Go show them what true beauty looks like". Her dress, once spun around, lights on fire and is used as the symbol of a Mocking Jay, showing her character as its most influential, all hinging on her "beautiful" characteristics. This show of strength is not necessarily emphasizing her sexuality, but does use her appearance as a source of power. This sexualization of heroine characters is far more apparent in *The Avengers*, and although it's heroine characters share

relatively small roles compared to their male counterparts, it should be considered a recognition of a continued struggle to define this heroine figure.

Despite both Pepper and Natasha being “strong” female characters, they both rely on the men around them. This might not be a message that is taken from the way that Natasha handles the situation she is introduced in, but from the way that she is convinced to join the agents at S.H.I.E.L.D. Instead of monetary interests or personal gain from working with S.H.I.E.L.D., she is drawn out of her mission due to an emotional attachment to Agent Barton (The Hawk). This emphasizes an emotional reliance on the wellbeing of a male figure and downplays the importance of the situation as a whole. The first words out of her mouth concern the safety of Agent Barton. Loki even comments later on this devotion stating “Your world in the balance, and you bargain for one man.” By constraining Natasha to a woman who revolves around her male counterpart, her ability to impact the situation is diminished. Her character isn’t given much screen time through the film either. This is not specifically the film’s fault, *The Avengers* as a comic series is the source material the movie is based upon and this influence must be considered. Natasha’s reliance on male figures, despite her incredible skills, show that her role as a strong heroine is confusingly represented.

Other subversive gender representation is shown in the introduction of Pepper Potts. Pepper Potts is the single character that can stand Tony Stark’s behavior. Despite Pepper doing many of the menial tasks assigned to her by Stark and organizing his life behind the scenes, she is inexplicably attracted to him. The visuals used to depict her character in *The Avengers* highlight her sexuality more than any other trait and are noted in Mary Louise DeMarchi’s paper “Avenging women: an analysis of postfeminist female representation in the cinematic Marvel’s Avengers series”. She shows that “dominant patriarchal ideology is epitomized as a system of

visual representations of sexual differences that determines active/passive gender roles...” (DeMarchi 40) Pepper Potts is a stark example of “postfeminist repackaging” where body language, comfort and quick come-backs are a false example of “power” within the female character. The camerawork that dominates her initial scene focuses on both Tony’s and Agent Paul’s viewpoint as Pepper walks away. By highlighting the sexuality of Pepper instead of her intellectual position in the scene, *The Avengers* highlights a primary message that reinforces a social construct of American culture. Feminist movements have gathered an increasingly large presence within American society, but American culture as a whole is struggling with defining the new heroin image. Constructs that are reinforced through immensely popular pieces of media like *The Avengers* suggest an immediate and pressing issue reflecting American culture.

Defining a heroine character in the most grossing films has had several different levels of success in the past four years. It should be noted that these releases have shown a consistent improvement in the industry, utilizing independent and strong female leads. America is struggling to define what exactly how a heroine looks/acts in a realm dominated by male figures, but is doing so more effectively than ever before. The fact that all three of these films were the highest grossing in their respective years shows a propensity and interest for this kind of character, representing a trend that is attempting to reach a universal conclusion.

America and its International Role

As discussed in the brief history section of this paper, American foreign affairs have been a subject of rapid change and interest for the past several years. The role of military, social power, economic influence from America is under question by its citizenry, and this concern is a topic spoken on in several of these films. These movies include the introduction of foreign threats, brief historical lessons, different ideological positions, and a variety of political statements. Several of them are also “historical” films, using their ability to represent past events and characters in the context of international events. Through these films, American influence and purpose abroad are addressed in a multitude of ways.

The Avengers begins with the introduction of the primary enemy, the significant size of their forces, and their obvious ill intent for the human race (i.e. America). This is made apparent with the imposing final piece of alien dialogue “... and the humans, they will burn!” This sets up *The Avengers* as an invasion film and gives motivation for the actions of the U.S. military following the first scene. The existence of an existential threat is shown to validate secretive military investment in nuclear technology, a program designed to unite superheroes, and an attitude that intensive military investment can prepare modern society to react to unforeseen threats.

The introduction of the film's primary villain Loki is filled with dialogue and technical direction to support the importance of U.S. military. Loki emerges from a ball of energy to the disgruntled and confused onlookers of Director Fury, The Hawk (agent Barton) and several scientists. The camera angles in this scene rapidly change and are used to emphasize the power of Loki's abilities. Low positioning for the camera work paints Loki as a large presence both in terms of physical size and powerful nature. These same techniques are used in later scenes

involving Loki, primarily shown in the sequence where he invades the small German city of Stuttgart.

Loki introduces himself as a god that “is burdened with glorious purpose”. When approached by Director Fury, who states that they have no quarrel with the beings of Azgard, he smoothly responds that “An ant has no quarrel with a boot.” This superior mentality and the justification for his arrival, to enable “freedom from freedom”, are at direct odds with what Americans associate with peaceful foreign interaction. “Freedom is life’s great lie. Once you accept that in your heart, you will know peace.” (Loki). The protection of freedom from an invading source is an instant call to action, and one that resonates with the heroes, uniting them, the United States military, and the audience. This is despite the sketchy and backhanded nature of the military’s investment in futuristic weapons under the guise of sustainable energy.

The military involvement takes a back seat towards the end of the film until a nuclear strike is mandated by the mysterious authority of “the counsel”. The very nature of this discrete group of individuals suggests a higher command with intentions that are at odds with sanity. These characters, through the dim-lit monitors they are represented by, enable the launch of a nuclear missile aimed directly at the heart of New York City. In The Counsel’s eyes, this is the last possible way to stop the alien threat. This action, coming on the heels of heavy resistance from Director Fury, shows that even those with military power and immense influence struggle against their superiors.

The Avengers’ commentary on American foreign interactions is somewhat limited to its view on the military. It openly justifies different levels of military action and defends the secrecy of this entity. This is a less direct example than other films, but still shows an American connection to military/war centered films. *American Sniper* stands as the largest example of a

film in this analysis that directly addresses military interest in foreign affairs. It does so through the personal interactions of Chris Kyle and his military comrades.

How are terrorist organizations to be identified? How are their motivations and ideologies separate from those of the countries in which they operate? What is the correct course of action for the United States military to take regarding these hostile entities and what does this say about American home life? Many of these questions are messages that *American Sniper* hopes to answer through its portrayal of Chris Kyle and his presence in Iraq. Throughout his four tours in the film, Chris balances many emotional influences, reacting to situations differently and openly expressing his interpretation of events. It is through his dialogue and character that the audience (the American public) are given answers to these questions.

The way that Chris Kyle is introduced to the people of Iraq begins with the very first scene. A damp overtone of gray color correction paired with mysterious changing music introduce a woman and child who plan to grenade his battalion. Chris Kyle interprets this introduction with mixed emotions and Clint Eastwood uses this scene to impress upon the audience the same understanding that Chris Kyle comes to. When later asked about “popping his cherry”, Chris says that he was disappointed that it had to be a woman and child, but he recognized the situation as completely evil. “Dude, that was evil like I’ve never seen before... and I fuckin killed him”. This horrific experience impacted Chris and its significance is twofold. Primarily, it gives the audience the ability to be impacted with Chris and develop their own reaction. This scene also allows Clint Eastwood to follow up with “explanation”. “Explanation” in this scenario meaning a 5 minute sequence of Chris shooting enemies that are more familiar with “terrorist expectations”. Instead of women and children these scenes include men running across streets, planting bombs and preparing ambushes. They are used as a way to establish a

singular interpretation of the events, allowing Chris and the audience to simultaneously group them together. By showing this sequence in this specific way, *American Sniper* connected with Americans by exposing them to horrific and complex emotions and following up with a guide on how to interpret them.

A scene directly following Chris's initial sniping sequence involves him being questioned about one of the men that he shot and killed. An army officer tells him that "His wife says that he was carrying a Koran". This, once again, gives an example of a situation in which Chris Kyle was forced to make a split-second choice while in a "gray" situation. He responds with "Now I don't know what a Koran looks like, but I can tell you what he was carrying... it was made out of metal and looked just like an AK-47." Ignoring the cultural disconnect and ignorance, Chris is able to rationalize his action. The very action of pulling the trigger is thought to be a second nature, an object not worth consideration. While attending training for the S.E.A.L.S, Chris's instructor says "this is our ritual. Pulling the trigger will be an unconscious effort." By introducing these situations in this manner, *American Sniper* establishes a method for interpretation. If American culture is craving for a way to interpret their purpose abroad, *American Sniper* provides it through the characterization of Chris Kyle and the rationalization of his actions. Because Chris Kyle is meant to be a sheepdog, it is America's duty to follow through with "protecting and serving".

Other military personnel begin to question the role of America in Iraq as well throughout the film. Chris Kyle's attitude and determination are used to address these concerns however and provide a continued position throughout the movie. When on his second tour he is greeted by a man who is questioning their purpose in Iraq: "War is like the electric fence. Put's lightning in our bones and makes it hard to think about anything else". Despite this hesitation, a quick

reassurance from Chris Kyle that they are there to protect “not just this dirt” is all the soldier needs. He responds directly afterward with “Well then let’s go get these fuckers…” as if the idea of concern was completely misguided to begin with. The last questioning is through his fallen friend’s funeral. At the funeral, Mark’s wife read a letter that he had written. It stated “Glory is something that some men chase and other have bestowed upon them. When does glory fade away and become a wrongful crusade”. This letter mirrors current social questioning of the U.S. role in Iraq. Once again, Chris Kyle provides an ideology that explains this internal conflict: “emotion killed Mark. The letter killed him. He let go and he paid the price for it.” Because Mark had stopped believing in serving and had lost vision of the sheepdog way, he paid the ultimate price.

Chris Kyle’s personal characteristics are used to show *American Sniper’s* position on American foreign interaction. Where in reality there has been an air of confusion and uncertainty with America in Iraq and its surrounding nations, *American Sniper* and Chris Kyle give resolute, easy to understand answers. How Chris, and many Americans became involved with Iraq and its surrounding countries began with emotional news coverage on September 11th, 2001. *American Sniper* uses primary footage from 9/11 to introduce Chris’s character to military involvement and is an effective use of primary footage/coverage. The film techniques used in this sequence are similar to those of *Argo*. Primary source news coverage/footage are used to command attention and direct the audience to interpret foreign affairs in a specific way. *Argo’s* introduction sequence and use of primary footage comment on both America’s international role and the power of media/film.

Largely reminiscent of the introduction sequence within *Munich*, *Argo* fully addresses the importance and power of visuals. Constant use of source material audio, television segments,

the use of smaller aspect ratios, and grainy film effects all are utilized to place the viewer into a specific period of time. Even “Warner Bros. Pictures” and “GK Films” are given the treatment, using old logos and old film effects when introduced. By using these methods, Argo wants the viewer to take its messages with historical weight. Every action of its characters, every detail within the scenery, is to be taken at face value for a one to one recreation of actual historical events. The significance of this introduction and the importance of its message, that film/media are quintessential to historical understanding, cannot be understated.

People connect over film and media. They use it for comfort, to inform themselves, and to connect. After the six Americans escape from the U.S. embassy in Iran, all of these impacts become apparent.. The government uses news coverage to brief themselves, parents bond with their children by watching movies, and storyboards convince hostile airport security to let Canadians board a plane. Film is shown to be the antithesis of human connection, an entertainment medium that has few boundaries and can be used to communicate and inspire.

The power of film and media is the first statement Argo makes concerning American culture. A sense of false nationalistic pride dominates the first half of Argo, showing that media can be used to rouse and impact individuals who may not understand complex international situations. This recognition is first seen through the introduction sequence in Argo. The narrator makes it clear by explaining the historical context that much of the situation in Iran is due to American foreign action. Instigating a que de ta, implementing a Shah that protected American oil interests, and allowing for a period of horrific turmoil in Iran were all situations caused by American foreign affairs. The raging crowd that overtook the U.S. embassy demanded that the Shah be given to them for public execution, despite his safe harbor within the U.S. This insanity is complemented by interviews of American citizens ready to “bear arms if need be”, calling for

action against an enemy they helped to create. The hostages awaiting rescue in the Canadian consulate's house agree that "Justice (for the Shah) is not a bad thing". Every enraged veteran being interviewed, Iranian being publicly beaten, and coverage of the hostage situation, shaped the minds of the American public. *Argo* shows that there is more to the situation, but recognizes the reality of public consumption, no matter how misguided. "If you want to sell a lie... you get the press to sell it for you." (Lester and John, played by Alan Arkin and John Goodman)

The power of film goes beyond interaction with news however, and *Argo* recognizes that its ability to connect people surpasses different ideologies. The first example is shown when Tony Mendez (Ben Affleck) calls his son in what seems like a weekly ritual, watching T.V. after homework. The concept of a busy father reaching out to his son is not new to movies, but the brilliance of the "Argo operation" comes to fruition through this weekly interaction. The ability of film to inspire and empower resonates with Tony and is the very reason his mission succeeded. This same connection is shown through the final sequence when the airport security refuses to let them board the plane. It takes a slideshow, an incredible imagination and the inspiration of film to convince the guards, who at the end of the sequence are smiling at their storyboard gift. *Argo* shows that film has strength, an inherent ability to influence, and demonstrates the American ingenuity that supports its abilities.

Media can drastically influence domestic opinion on foreign affairs. Cultural concerns have shown to exist in American political atmosphere, as well as concern for international events in google searches for Americans. Each of these films provide an attempt at connecting with these concerns, either through the military, individuals, or use of media. Cultural significance is quite apparent in these areas and has dominated a large portion of these films and their message.

Chapter 3 -Family as an Important Social Construct

A consistent narrative construct and thematic emphasis used by almost every film in this selection, hinges on the concept of a family. Characters are motivated, tormented, inspired and concerned with their family members and several films use this to great extent. Because of its presence in these films and the time that several of them take to emphasize its role, family is proven to be socially and culturally important. The “American Family” has changed in appearance over the past several decades. Legislation to legalize gay marriage has been met with waves of backlash, bullying has impacted youth and family programs, and countless other cultural movements have shifted the American family landscape. These events reflect the emphasis that these films place on the familial construct, and although their commentary isn’t politically motivated in most cases, their success both critically and commercially speaks to the importance of family in America.

12 Years a Slave’s representation of family and its commentary on its importance is limited but powerful. This strength is emphasized through the first half hour of the film, followed by Solomon’s spiritual and physical isolation until the final moments. The primary instances featuring Solomon’s family occur during contrast sequences. After Solomon’s introduction as a free man in New York, his connection with his family is shown to be key to his character. He kisses his children and tucks them into bed, thanks them for their musical contributions, and ensures that they are mindful of their mother while he is away. This calm environment is used in one of the films primary technical attributes as things drastically shift from family centric to Solomon’s enslavement. The second contrast sequence highlights the moment Solomon is given the name of Plat. This moment reinforces Solomon’s family centric daily life. The care free

shopping with his wife and children contrast the chains that restrict his movement and the simplicity of his new title.

Soon after this sequence, Solomon and the other captured individuals are placed in an auction house, a scene used to horrific affect in *12 Years*. Plat and Elisa are purchased by Master Ford and Elisa is separated from her children. *12 Years a Slave* uses several technical methods to highlight the importance of family in this scene. The entirety of the auction house is done in one take, weaving between rooms to rest behind the pensive character of Master Ford. This stylistic choice is different from almost every other scene of *12 Years* which utilize primarily static camera angles and simple transitions. By choosing to use a single, dynamic shot, the scene is unchanging in pace or tone. The auction master swerves between customers and slaves, highlighting their “admirable” attributes, speaking about them like livestock at a trade show. Instead of cutting from each slave or each room, the choice for one continuous shot puts the audience in the shoes of an auction goer. *12 Years a Slave* forces the audience to walk through the situation, look upon the slaves with an eye for “purchase worthy characteristics”, and ultimately shows the dehumanizing attitude that this fosters. Lighting is also used to great effect. Each room is dominated by windows full of sunlight that paint the rooms in a glow, creating a natural dichotomy of colors next to the dark skins of the auction victims. The scene ends with the separation of Elisa and her children, a separation that causes her to plunge into deep despair. Solomon shares this desperation, but he chooses to internalize it. When speaking of his family to a wailing Elisa, he states “I survive. I will not fall into despair [...] I will make myself hardy until freedom is opportune.” This is Solomon’s first recognition that he must “survive” in order to be free again. Solomon recognizes that living as a slave is not truly “living”, and that he must endure until his freedom and life are returned to him.

Until the end of the film, Solomon's family is not directly referenced again. They have become an illusory reality that no longer dominates his mind and the film chooses to do this purposefully. The final scene of *12 Years*, as Solomon rejoins his family in New York, is not a happy occurrence. Although he is once again with his family and has his freedom, his mind and character must come to grips with the time that is lost. Instead of being encouraged at their gaze, he is dazed and concerned. *12 Years a Slave* ends with a family embrace, though the distance his slavery has created between them dominates their attempts at comfort. *12 Years*, by establishing family as imperative to Solomon's character and demonstrating its destruction through slavery, emphasizes the importance of racial-issue resolution among today's family life.

Many of the characters in *The Force Awakens* are driven by their relationships, or lack thereof, with family. These family centric story arcs are paramount to the film and show an American obsession with a family entity much like those shown in *Argo*. In many ways, *Star Wars* began as a series based on the power of family even in the vastness of space. Luke Skywalker was motivated to travel the galaxy and learn from Obi Wan through the death of his Uncle and Aunt, his sister was destined to be among him throughout the entire series, and the relationship between him and his father drive the events of the first three films. Even Anakin Skywalker became a Sith due to the dreams he had of his wife and mother. *The Force Awakens* continues this trend and its success shows an America that can recognize and connect with a story driven by family.

The family focus begins with Rey and her isolated situation on Jakku. The film takes great interest in establishing her isolation and a few key shots direct the audience to some of her internal motivations. The first of these is seen when she enters her desert home and scratches another line into the wall, signaling to the audience for the first time that she is waiting for

something to happen. Rey continuously references returning to Jakku, even turning Han Solo down on a job offer, and the purpose of this is shown in her “light-saber-dream”. One of the primary shots in this scene show a young Rey, being left by her “parents”, to live a life on Jakku. Rey desires to await their return, despite the extremely important events around her. Kylo Ren, Han Solo, and Leia are also motivated by family ties throughout the film. Kylo desires to return to his parents and be free of his bonds to Snoke, Leia constantly reminds Han to reach Kylo and return with him, and Han confronts Kylo in the final scenes.

Han Solo’s death at the hands of his son is the scene that most intimately portrays the power of family and is the one scene that establishes Kylo Ren as the ultimate evil villain. This scene is highlighted by an incredible use of lighting, used to emphasize Han and Kylo’s dynamic relationship. As Han steps onto the walkway and calls to his son, the final glares of the dying sun paint the scene in a blue, welcoming hue. This provides the audience the glimmer of hope that Han’s attempt to reach out will connect with his troubled son. Over the course of their conversation, however, the sun is drained of its energy and the red accent lights dominate the scene. Without dialogue or extreme camera movement, the tone conveyed through the lighting shows the relationship between Han and his son reach its final moments. Kylo, by stabbing his father while painted in the iconic “sith” red, cements himself as a betrayer of the most sacred *Star Wars* characteristic of family.

The Force Awakens, through character motivations and pivotal scenes, tells a story driven by the importance of family. This aspect of the film connected deeply with American audiences and shows a cultural propensity for family oriented content. The First Order or The Empire are known for their horrendous, world-ending acts, but the screen time given to these instances is

minimal. *Star Wars* instead chooses to focus on the intricate personal relationships between main characters, revealing a social landmark in American culture.

Argo promotes the idea that family matters above all things. Almost every character, from the hostages in Iran to the producers in Hollywood, reference their family or the connections they have with other people. This concept is first addressed through Tony's call to his son and presents itself throughout the rest of the film. Directly after haggling for the rights to *Argo's* script, for example, Tony and Lester take a taco break. Instead of discussing the hilarious quality of *Argo's* script or the weather, they ask each other about family. This scene is paramount because it takes a seat back from the large-scale events and forces two characters to revert to the family (or lack thereof) that they have. Both characters recognize that they don't have the greatest relationships with Lester admitting "Yeah, I was a shitty father". This scene would seem completely out of place if the message wasn't constant, but *Argo* insists on the importance in family connection. This specific example highlights the detriments of an incredibly busy work life for American fathers and forces the audience to connect with the plights of the two main characters.

The importance of children and family even extends to the upper divisions of the U.S. government. The only way for Brian Cranston's character to do his job is to get in contact with his superiors. Doing this through the bureaucratic systems in place seems impossible, but he finds his solution by bringing family into the picture. The threat of something gone wrong for his children brings the Secretary of State to listen, allowing for action to take place and the protagonists to complete their journey home.

Family importance is carried through Tony's character primarily and even though he takes on a fake title when in Iran, he can't complete his mission with an impersonal attitude.

Several of the individuals living with the Canadians refuse to follow Tony's plan of escape. In order to get them to cooperate he doesn't intimidate or harm them, but rather explains who he is. They are able to connect and motivate one another not due to their similarities, but their understanding that family is important. A desire to return to these comforts pulls them together and reinforces *Argo's* message on family importance.

The final moments of *Argo* demonstrate the importance of family in both character action and self-reflection. Instead of focusing on the political impact post *Argo* or the remaining Iranian hostages, *Argo* solely concerns itself with family connection. Lester and John go about their business in Hollywood, the agents in the pentagon have a drink, but Tony returns to his separated wife and child. What is most important in these scenes is the framing, which is used to highlight the imagery. An American flag flaps in the front yard, somber expressions recognize a long-lost love and children's toys litter a bedroom. These final scenes, their location and cinematography specifically, are used to make sure that the audience feels "at home", emphasizing the importance in familiar sights. The ending credits like many other historical films finish with information describing future and current events. The last of these is the most significant however, stating that "He (Tony) lives in rural Maryland with his family". The fade to black is highlighted by this text and the final storyboard of *Argo*, showing the hero of the space adventure clutching to a young boy, the only thing that matters.

American Sniper uses contrasting sequences and character motivations to highlight family, much like those in *12 Years a Slave*. Chris constantly struggles with his role in a family setting. It is because of his title, "sheepdog", that he perpetually has internal conflicts. His wife constantly reminds him of his duty to her, but his desire to "save more men" or "avenge" them overrules her desires. His domestic life has never been fulfilling either. The portrayal of his life

as a ranch hand is anything but glorious, surrounded by booze and cheating girlfriends. His fighting spirit, his “need” to protect the sheep of the world, is obtained through his enlistment in the military. His own marriage takes place in tandem with the call summoning his battalion to Iraq. For Chris, there is no separation between the military and “true family”, but the domestic aspects of his life are undoubtedly affected. This family struggle is one of *American Sniper*’s primary elements and is also shown through Chris Kyle’s wife.

Taya Kyle (played by Sienna Miller) provides the audience with relatable struggles of domestic life and a way to connect with the family representations within the film. Her first interactions with Chris are temperamental. She constantly reminds him of the “arrogance” associated with S.E.A.L.S., and claims that by nature, those in his position are selfish. He directly addresses that assertion stating “Why would you call me selfish? I lay down my life for my country...” and with this statement her mind is completely changed. By doing so, the film allows for people of her disposition come to the same conclusion. *American Sniper* constantly connects both domestic life and the heat of battle as well. Chris and his wife always seem to speak at inconvenient times on the phone. The topic of his call will often begin with great family news, only to be complimented by the sound of gunfire. This method is used to show that both family and war are immediate issues that demand personal attention.

Ultimately, Chris Kyle and *American Sniper* speak to the importance of family in the United States. At the apex of his 4th tour in Iraq, Chris calls home to tell his wife that he is finally ready to return. His slow descent into madness has been propelled by his desire to protect his comrades but the successful shot of the enemy sniper has Kyle feeling accomplished enough to return home. After his impact has been made, after he has successfully fulfilled his role as “sheepdog” and hunted the wolf, he can return home and tend to the needs of his family.

American Sniper's final scenes are of Chris fulfilling his role of father. He is hunting with his son, embracing his wife, and living the “dream” domestic life. Despite his traumatizing experiences and everything that he has been through, he finds solace in the comfort of family, an entity that has been a primary story element throughout the film.

Family and its impact on character motivations/actions exists in other movies as well. Each of the films in this analysis incorporate it to some degree, and this suggests it is an important piece of American entertainment. Although many of these movies represent family and their influence differently, they are consistent in its use. With so many social and cultural issues hinging on family, it is unsurprising that these films take the time to address it. Americans are grasping for an idea of family connection.

Chapter 4 - American obsession with Media/Entertainment Industries

Several of the films that were selected for this paper focus exclusively on industries surrounding media and entertainment. Both *Birdman* and *Spotlight* specifically address issues within their industry and speak towards them. Other films like *Argo* include character commentary on industries like Hollywood, using characters and their interactions to speak on its cultural significance. In recent years, both media and entertainment economies have been undergoing rapid change. Newspapers are disappearing, Hollywood is running thin on original ideas, and other entertainment mediums are replacing cable (Netflix, Video Games). Actors and different forms of entertainment have remained on the top of American minds through Google search results, and these industries continue to remain impactful and important, despite their changing status. *Birdman* most directly addresses these recent changes, challenging the current status of the Hollywood and Broadway districts of entertainment. It recognizes financial issues that plague the industry and the existence of dichotomies that exist within closely related professions.

Birdman differentiates itself from all other movies on this list through both thematic and technical elements. Instead of telling an epic tale of heroes, or a team of individuals accomplishing greatness, *Birdman* looks directly at the issues facing artists, either on film or on stage. It is a commentary on the differences between popularity and relevance within “respectable art” culture, and it does all of this by trapping the audience inside the mind of a delusional actor. The specifics of Riggan’s (Michael Keaton) character provide ample opportunity for the film to address several issues facing Hollywood. Some of these questions/issues include: Is it better to be respected in the field or successful in the box office?

Does the superhero genre destroy the sanctity of other visual art? Does personal investment in a production truly impact the final product? Does art only “succeed” if accepted by a third party? What is the difference between living and acting? *Birdman* isn’t afraid to be different than other movies and although it is sometimes hard to understand, it continues to make bold statements on the condition of the Hollywood industry, the overly righteous attitudes of individuals within it, and the complexity of the human spirit when creating art.

When considering why *Birdman* was awarded the Oscar choice for Best Picture, it is important to understand the other awards that it was nominated for and received. In total, *Birdman* was nominated for nine academy awards and was given four. It was chosen for “Best Achievement in Directing”, “Best Writing, Original Screenplay”, “Best Achievement in Cinematography” and “Best Motion Picture” (IMDB, 2016). The stylistic pairing of Alejandro Inarritu’s directing and Emmanuel Lubezki’s world class cinematography is incredible. *Birdman* is a love letter to both the capability of film and the real-time intensity of a live stage performance. The characters and their actions blend seamlessly, and although the film takes place over the course of a week or so, the transitions and tone remain consistent throughout. The film also received nominations for the intricately woven sound design and drum heavy soundtrack. The complexity and sporadic nature of the drums mirrors the strange and crazy scene transitions, only adding to the confused state in which Riggan Thompson resides. *Birdman*, because of its nature and content, was a choice for Best Picture that astonished few people and continues to be an isolated and unique experience.

Riggan Thompson is a tormented individual and looking at his personal characteristics from an outside perspective provides some interesting context for the events of the film.

Although he is a director of a stage performance during *Birdman*, Riggan has held wildly popular roles in Hollywood through his *Birdman* – Super hero films. These performances helped put Riggan in the spotlight of media attention while his films dominated the box office. The “Birdman” character became a part of Riggan, and reveals itself as an alternate ego he continuously converses with. In fact, this alternate personality provides its own interpretations of events, and provides a lens for the movie to speak on film and art culture. Riggan is floating in the middle of a room as his “Birdman” ego is taunting his situation. “How did we end up here? This place is horrible [...] we don’t belong in this shit hole”. This grungy birdman personality continuously appears throughout the movie and reinforces one of the films dialogues on the Hollywood industry. He is consistent in his criticisms of Riggan, reinforcing the notion that success is only recognizable in admiration, popularity and dollar signs. “We grossed billions. Are you ashamed of that?” Riggan fights this internal voice, wanting to redefine himself and his personal definition of success. “There is no we. I’m Riggan fucking Thompson”.

Riggan’s attempts to re-write, direct, and star in “What We Talk About when We Talk About Love” will never provide him the material success he has experienced through “Birdman”. This fact is constantly reinforced by his internal “Birdman” persona, who insists that if Riggan continues to invest in this passion project, he will be destined to fade into oblivion, lacking the fame and fortune he “truly” craves. Riggan sympathizes with this mentality when speaking to his ex-wife after a botched performance. He describes an airplane he once shared with George Clooney, ironically an actor who once played batman, and his description of George focuses on his physical attributes. These traits include apparent wealth and stature, while emphasizing that if the plane were to crash and everyone on it were to die, George Clooney’s face would dominate the headlines. He is deathly afraid of dying without fame or recognition and in this sequence,

Birdman is beginning to address the concept of fame vs. reverence. His wife states when leaving, “That’s what you always do. You confuse love for admiration”.

For the next 20 minutes, *Birdman*’s characters and Riggan’s internal voice continue to debate this question, pointing directly at the Hollywood industry, daring it to support some sort of conclusion. Mike (Edward Norton) is obsessed with the concept that the truth can only be shown through performance. A play is, by definition, a dramatic composition or piece (dictionary.com, 2016), an imaginative recreation of circumstances or events used for entertainment. Mike continuously speaks of performance as the only possible way to convey the truth, and his opinion on popularity vs. respect follows suit. He states “Popularity is the slutty little cousin of prestige [...] reputation is worth a lot”. He refers to Riggan’s work in the Super Hero genre as “cultural genocide”, taking advantage of the masses of individuals who will “line up to see it”, while he is breaking his back and earning a living on stage. Riggan’s internal and external voice echo that popularity and admiration determine the quality of an actor, while Mike is of the complete opposite mindset. The conclusion to this question is multifaceted and is addressed as such throughout *Birdman*.

Everything for Riggan is dependent on his new play’s success, both commercially and critically. This concept is shown throughout the film and provides a complicated answer to the question of popularity vs. respect. In order for his play to happen, he needs the funding and in order for his mind to be at ease, he needs to succeed in the eyes of New York critics. Mike is shown to be of a similar mindset, reinforcing the incredible strain that the industry places on artists to succeed in the face of critics. While grabbing a drink at the bar with Riggan, Mike says “Do you see the woman, at the far end of the bar? [...] The only thing that matters is what she

writes about us in 500 words [...] if she likes us we run, if she doesn't, we're fucked". Mike's obsessive nature concerning the critic's opinion is to justify his own situation. He is a stage actor, and industries like Broadway place incredible strain on performance in the eyes of a critic. Complimenting his thoughts, Riggan is approached in the bar by a fan, glowing over his roles in the "Birdman" superhero films. *Birdman* makes a statement in this scene, showing that both Hollywood and Broadway rely on/define success in different ways. On his way out of the bar, Mike is stopped by the critic who asks in a snobbish demeanor "You headed to Hollywood Mike"? He responds with "No. Hollywood is heading here Tabby [...] a man becomes a critic when he cannot become a performer". Mike openly distains the power that Tabby has over their success and openly criticizes her lack of justified influence.

There is a notecard on Riggan's makeup desk that states, "A thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing". This phrase could be considered a mental self-preparation for Riggan and a statement to artists everywhere concerning "critique failure". It suggests that a play's meaning and success are derived from the individuals who create it, not on the words of an audience or critic. This simple card that is shown throughout the movie and gives *Birdman's* closest thing to an answer of defining success. The industry of performance, be it on the screen or on the stage is subject to intense forms of scrutiny, but the real success is found in the individuals who invest in it, not in the words of onlookers.

Several other films in this paper are a part of the hero genre, a genre of film that commands a large portion of the current Hollywood industry and a large portion of *Birdman's* commentary. These "blockbusters" include both Marvel's *The Avengers*, and to some extent, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*. In 2014, the year in which *Birdman* released, there were other

largely popular films that can also be included in this genre including *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (BoxofficeMojo, 2016).

The hero genre has been incredibly prevalent in American entertainment culture for several decades, the impact of which is directly visible in *Birdman*'s critique of the genre. It is unclear what aspect of hero films makes them so disdainful in *Birdman*'s commentary however. It criticizes their popularity, though arguably with a rationale that is counter intuitive. Much of Mike's personal vendetta against hero films is the attention that is drawn away from live performance. He sees no visible "truth" in hero films and states that they are the equivalent of "cultural genocide" while Riggan's internal voice craves the attention and recognition that comes with superhero fame. Films like *Iron Man*, and *The Avengers* are referenced several times throughout the movie while highlighting actors that Riggan aspires to be associated with like Robert Downey Jr. (*Iron Man*).

Much like *Birdman*'s commentary on defining success, *Birdman* addresses the superhero genre in much the same way. The technical traits of *Birdman* only change at the beginning and ending of the film, utilizing direct cuts and extra visual effects instead of fluid cinematography to emphasize the differences from the rest of the film's content. Riggan begins to drink after a confrontation with the critic Ms. Dickenson and soon after he passes out, the movie degenerates into Riggan's insane superhero dream. He flies across the city of New York, basking in the sunlight and convincing himself of his powerful superhero nature. His internal voice continues to emphasize the power of popularity, hidden behind the mask and cape of a superhero outfit. After Riggan shoots himself, the movie degenerates into a montage sequence of cuts from his first suicide attempt on the beach and dancing actors wearing superhero costumes. Art is, often times, all-consuming for those that create it, and Riggan's connection to his work is lethal and potent.

Birdman shows that the superhero genre dominates Riggan's subconscious, remaining an "artistic" entity that remains a piece of himself, important, even in death.

Birdman's final prospective on the Hollywood industry circles around the concept of personal sacrifice when pursuing any art form. Riggan's dysfunctional relationship with his daughter and the unstable way he relates to the women in his life are all a result of his personal connection to his performance and success. He continuously refers to his personal investment, revealing the strength of his character and the impact such personal investment can have on an individual. Ms. Dickenson says that "I hate you and everyone you represent. Entitled, selfish, spoiled children [...] untrained and unable to attempt real art." She attempts to undermine his play by judging his Hollywood background. Riggan responds by criticizing her ability to truly critique, ensuring that she understands the difference in labeling and sacrifice. "You risk nothing, nothing, nothing. I am a fuckin actor. This play cost me everything". Riggan's personal investment and Ms. Dickenson's unforgiving demeanor provides the true and final commentary *Birdman* provides for the industries of Hollywood and Broadway. Sacrifice for entertainment or art is a potent reality, but the labels often provided by critiques often diminish the impact of this personal sacrifice.

Rather than speak on larger, or long-reaching American values, *Birdman* addresses more directly, the intimate ideologies within the entertainment industry. Heroes dominate headlines and individuals continue to risk everything they have to make art succeed. *Birdman* shows that the academy wants to address the complex issues of their industry, evaluate what defines success and encourage the pursuit of powerful visual art. *Argo* also provides an

examination of the Hollywood industry and uses its different characters to highlight important differences to other industries.

Argo's concern with media is complimented by its depiction of two very different cultures, Hollywood and Government. Supporting actors are used to highlight these differences, but *Argo* is most concerned with showing that even these two very different societies have similarities. Brian Cranston's character is the epitomized version of a government official. He judges his superiors for being inadequate and follows their orders regardless, curses quite often and does what he is expected to. On the other end of the spectrum, the bombastic and unpredictable character of Lester is used to represent Hollywood characteristics. Lester is confident, deceitful and concerns himself with an air of quality that doesn't exist. His mansion is covered in awards but houses no family and he confusingly demands excellence. "If I'm going to make a fake movie, it's going to be a fake hit".

Color correction and set design are used in tandem with these characters to highlight differences in the cultures as well. The office spaces of the government are grey and uninspired, but the Hollywood scenes shimmer in sunlight. When walking through Hollywood, characters are loud and interact with the scenery. The prime example of this is Lester's attitude at the end of the film when he walks through a shoot-in-progress: "Sorry pal we are gonna be in the movie. Call my agent". This demonstrates a confident character, lack of regard for other works and the nature of the Hollywood environment. On the other end of the spectrum, the hallways of government buildings are hollow and vacant, dominated by a silver color correction and muted pallet. Despite these set and character differences however, *Argo* proves that these two social constructs sometimes operate in much the same manner. The only difference in their results is the concept of recognition.

The ability for the government to operate is hindered by overcomplicated systems of command. This is demonstrated through meetings, phone calls and deadlines. There isn't one moment of calm or fun in the government buildings with the single exception of a completed mission. Even with the protagonists returned safely from Iranian airspace, the government officials are not able to receive credit for their work. Brian Cranston, when asked if the CIA can take any credit for their involvement he states, "Involved in what? [...] Thank you Canada". This is followed by primary television footage showing the public reaction to "Canada's excellence". There is no CIA ownership. The emphasis on chain-of-command is apparent too. Plans get approved, canceled and changed all throughout upper management and it is impossible for things to happen otherwise. This system of inefficient bureaucracy is not unique to the government however. Hollywood players must follow a system that hinges on lies and ideas of influence.

The process of making a fake movie proves complicated for Tony, Lester and John. The logistics allow for it to happen, but the system makes it much more difficult. Lester and Tony lie to script licensors, John leads a fake reading of the script and Tony follows orders. All of these necessities show an ecosystem that is also difficult to be productive in. Hollywood is so concerned with its "image" that common sense and honesty often take a back seat. The decrepit nature of the Hollywood sign shows the true state of its industry, supposedly glamorous but falling apart. The success of *Argo's* mission can't be openly claimed by those in Hollywood, much like those in the CIA. Lester, however, takes ownership in his own personified way, taking ownership for things that he had any kind of involvement with.

These two constructs and their portrayal in *Argo* are important to its commentary on American culture. Both Hollywood and big Government are common bodies in film, but *Argo* represents them in interesting ways, forcing them to work together despite their very apparent

differences. It is because of their representation and nature that they are important to *Argo*'s message. It shows that two very different aspects of American culture can work together and achieve amazing things. It provides a statement on American ingenuity and the fact that these cultures can exist cohesively. Though less direct than either of these films, *Star Wars*' intentional use of nostalgia show an America that relates to Hollywood products on an immense scale.

There are few things more nostalgic or impactful than the introduction of a film in a long running series, complimented by the sweeping tones of a John Williams score. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was introduced to the American public on December 17th of 2015 and nearly grossed 1 Billion dollars in the United States alone, making it the single largest box office release in the U.S. Americans are desperate for a reminder of the past. The slow scrolling and yellow text, accompanied by instantly recognizable music is an introduction used for every *Star Wars* movie, and *The Force Awakens* is no different. This familiarity is seen through many aspects of *The Force Awakens*, including its story arch, technical details and setting, showing an American craving for nostalgic feelings that only Hollywood can provide.

The similarities to other films in the Star Wars series continue directly after the introduction sequence. The audience is firstly greeted with a cocky pilot for the resistance, Poe, and his personable droid BB-8. Both Poe and BB-8 allowed the audience to invest in the film, reminding them of a young Harrison Ford and quirky R2-D2. The setting for these first scenes is also reminiscent of the first planet explored in *A New Hope*. Jakku, the desert planet where Poe and BB-8 are retrieving the map to Luke Skywalker, directly resembles the planet of Tatooine where Luke once resided. Minute details also convey a sense of familiarity. When BB-8 is sent out to the desert, he is watched by strange desert aliens. This is done in almost the exact same

way when R2-D2, also carrying information vital to the resistance in *A New Hope*, is exploring the deserts of Tatooine.

The drastic similarities to *A New Hope* are established at the very beginning of *The Force Awakens* and continue throughout the remainder of the film. Rey has never left Jakku despite her desire to do so (much like Luke), the empire-esque “First Order” controls a weapon capable of destroying planets, Kylo Ren wears a foreboding black mask (like Vader), Chewy and Han Solo are running from debtors, the resistance attempts “The Impossible” during the film’s final acts and countless other details are reminiscent of the old films. The smaller details are important and prove a sense of direction. All of these callbacks, similarities and familiarities were implemented for a reason and they connected with audiences with the incredible power of nostalgia. This stylistic choice was both simple and effective and shows an American public that is yearning for familiarity. Media and news sources are industries that have seen, potentially, the most change over the past decade. *Spotlight* intentionally tells a story about media and its capabilities, all through the example of investigative journalism.

Spotlight, at its core, is a story about the power of media. When motivated individuals get behind a project and connect with it personally, their ability to shape the world around them is exponential. *Spotlight* directly references different forms of media as well, despite the vast majority of the film focusing on the medium of newspaper. September 11th news coverage was used as a way to demonstrate that media/news consumption can drastically shift priorities and focus. Despite being close to writing on the victims of sexual abuse in Boston, the Spotlight team was instantly reassigned to different 9/11 coverage. This emergent issue shifted priorities at The Globe, but despite the attack’s impact on the U.S., the Spotlight team’s coverage

was non-impactful. The characters and their attitudes were affixed to the issues in Boston, highlighting *Spotlight's* primary message on media capabilities.

Spotlight's commentary on the power of media hinges largely on the aspect of personal connection. Multiple times throughout the film, characters refer to different opportunities to release coverage on their findings. These suggestions fall through until the end of the film because each character recognizes the importance of telling a complex story in the most thorough way possible. After receiving the first round of incriminating documents, Mike's connection to the subject matter causes him to break down. "If we don't rush to print, somebody else is going to find these letters and butcher the story [...] they run this and they get it wrong, the church will bury it"! His conviction to tell the story in the correct way represents a motive that *Spotlight* carries throughout the entire film. Media can be the most impactful when individuals who connect with the material ensure it is told effectively. Robby (Michael Keaton) echoes this sentiment and delays the story until he is satisfied that the message is whole. Instead of rushing to print and putting a dent into the image of the church, he intends to be thorough, aiming for social change. During the Oscar acceptance speech, producer Blye Pagon Faust resonated this message stating "We would not be here today without the heroic efforts of our reporters. Not only do they affect global change, but they absolutely show us the necessity for investigative journalism".(Oscars, 2016)

Spotlight's representation of The Boston Globe during the early 2000's represents the strength in media during a time of rapid change within the industry. Baron mentions during his introduction that online readings are digging into the number of readers for the Boston Globe, and the movie is aware that this kind of journalism has changed over the past several years. No longer do individuals, specifically millennials, receive their primary news coverage from

newsprint, but rather from trending pictures and videos through Facebook and Twitter. *Spotlight* addresses this generation and their differences in media consumption by showing the importance of a story well told. Intense research, thorough fact checking, and a team of compassionate individuals result in coverage that is impactful, meaningful, and indicative of the work ethic that brought it to life.

Media and entertainment industries remain important pieces of American social interaction and cultural development. Even though Sunday comic strips have been replaced by meme threads on Reddit, newspapers have gone mostly digital, and actors are struggling with artistic/monetary relevance, these industries are incredibly important. The sheer amount of media focused content in this selection of films, shows this to be true.

Chapter 5 – Faith and the Bible in American culture and Politics

Separation of Church and State is a phrase used to express the intent of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment. The separation of these two entities is established as a necessity for both free speech and governments to operate like they should. *Spotlight* establishes that The Catholic Church is not subject to these clauses through their actions in the legal system of Boston. Christian ethics have long been associated with different levels of importance/power within sociocultural aspects of American life. The films in this selection offer a variety of viewpoints on this connection, showing that there is a drastic difference in thought processes within America.

Lawyer Mitchell Garabedian (Stanley Tucci) says to Mike Rezendes (Mark Ruffalo) in *Spotlight*, “If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.” This quote extends towards the rest of the film as it discusses the interconnected nature of the Catholic Church and local governments. The very first scene shows the Catholic Church as an entity with immense political and institutional power. Placing the viewer in a police department during the 1970’s, introducing the assistant D.A., and the attitudes of the police officers present, all emphasize that the influence of the church is nothing new. Their systematic procedures suggest that abuse cases are a recognizable event, with the new officer being the only one to question the proceedings “It’s gonna be hard to keep the press away from the arraignment”. His questioning of the situation is brushed aside and the power of the church is cemented with the only response being “What arraignment”?

The Catholic Church is shown to be powerful both institutionally and within the families of Boston. To emphasize this, *Spotlight* shows two sides of the church and their family influence. Several shots during montage sequences are used to demonstrate the amount of people

attending services, and Sacha's (Rachel McAdams) Nanna is used as the prime example of a person who lives through the church. She attends three times a week, encourages Sacha to join her and lives through her community there. Old women aren't the only individuals attending service, however. Spotlight utilizes a brief sequence featuring a children's choir to show that the church's influence spans generations, extending the impact of the film's subject matter to the lives of children today. The victims that highlight Spotlight's investigation were involved with the church from a young age, and the film continues to emphasize that life in Boston is a life in the church. Sacha and her first victim interviewee end their walk in a park full of children, dominated by the church next door. When going through the list of rehabilitating priests, Matt Carroll recognizes a center is just down the street. The characters and their actions show that The Catholic Church is portrayed as an invasive presence that dominates the family through involvement and location.

The intensity of The Catholic Church's influence is most visible through the dialogue of Spotlight's characters. Several times over the course of the film, people refer to a conversation with a priest being akin to "Speaking with God". Both of the first victims interviewed told stories of priests that were present during times that they were incredibly vulnerable. The church was a source of comfort and provided an "atmosphere of safety". The interviews and the dialogue of the victims show a very graphic reality that originates from a feeling of trust and reliance. The people of The Boston Globe show that the church maintains a large part of their life as well. Workers at The Globe constantly reference the fact that their new editor is a Jew instead of Catholic, and are afraid of running stories that may seem offensive to the church. Several individuals interpret Baron's investigation to be a targeted effort against the institution and rationalize his actions with a lack of understanding. The city of Boston is used several times as

the face of the Catholic Church through dialogue as well. When a person is from Boston, they belong to the church and if they are an outsider, they are placed outside the social circles.

“People need the church. More than ever right now [...] Baron doesn’t care about the city the way we do. How could he?”? Baron is both an outsider and a Jew, and his actions are received with nothing but hostility from the church and the people of Boston, despite their genuine intentions.

This portrayal of the church is powerful to many American citizens. A Gallup poll from 2006 suggests that nearly a third of individuals in Massachusetts attend church weekly, placing it well below the average of 42% in the 48 states that were included. This average shows that over 40% of U.S. citizens are familiar with the workings of the church, and though the numbers are somewhat dated and include other areas of the Christian/Jewish religion, their conclusion suggests that many U.S. citizens can relate to the characters and their personal involvement with the material. The Catholic Church is an entity with power and influence, able to shape the minds of its citizenry and impact the lives of many U.S. citizens. *Spotlight*, recognizes this connection and brings it full circle. It relates to the audience with its subject matter, shows them familiar situations in home life and forces the viewer to recognize that familiarity can harbor insidious reality.

12 Years a Slave's commentary on biblical representation is similarly profound. Each scene in which a bible is used highlights the incredible differences of modern day interpretation, and biblical understanding/justification of the 1800's. Through specific camera work and dialogue, *12 Years* speaks to modern American values by creating dynamic interpretations of the bible.

The first of these scenes, and the first mention of the bible in *12 Years a Slave* is provided on Master Ford's plantation. In what seems like a weekly ritual, Master Ford reads scripture to his family, workers and slaves. These scenes use several different framings to highlight the insane reality they represent. While Master Ford reads, the camera is either positioned at bleacher level, placing the audience in the position of the slaves and family, or is used to frame the entire scene to give context to the surroundings. When using the later angle, *12 Years* simultaneously creates a beautiful backdrop and a disgruntled reality. The scenic surroundings compliment a gathering that was used throughout the south to rationalize the ownership of slaves. The bible is simultaneously used as a judgement of character, and a book of law, distinguishing the appropriate actions among servants and lords. Though the passages may have been selectively chosen, they highlight a dangerous reality in current American politics. As mentioned in the analysis of *Spotlight*, modern American politics often struggle with the separation of church and state. When justifications for actions are linked to the words that govern spiritual growth, the ability to distinguish right from wrong is incredibly difficult. *12 Years* points at this reliance on religious text and establishes the fault in its simplistic beauty.

Readings of scripture go beyond Master Ford's estate and into other locations as well. Master Epp's is introduced to the audience and Solomon through a decidedly close reading of scripture. Michael Fassbender's eyes match the intensity of the scripture, and the scene is framed to demonstrate the reliance individuals placed on the bible's content. Although this might have been the case, Master Epp's actions with his slaves and within his property are anything but consistent. He fails to draw clear and concise meaning from his readings, ultimately being controlled by his wife and liquor.

As mentioned in a previous section, a large portion of *American Sniper* references the bible and its importance to family and governmental action. Chris Kyle constantly references his connection to the bible, carries one with him on all of his tours in Iraq, and defends his faith in the face of questioning. A “conservative Christian” faith drives Chris throughout most of the film, and his experiences as a child in the church are used as rationalization for his motivations and actions. Each of these examined films show an American questioning of the role of religious faith. Its influence in the family, through the government, and personal rationalization are all shown to be issues that Americans connect with.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

The past four years have been entertaining, worrisome, and dramatically different from one another. Despite this, the messages and thematic elements in the eight most successful films has been surprisingly similar. In an era where industries like film, media and entertainment are changing so rapidly, it isn't surprising to see the emphasis these films place on their industry and the events that have shaped American culture for the past several years. Through an analysis of these films, multiple viewings and a comparison of each film there are some commonalities that they share. These common elements are shown throughout the chapters in this paper, but are not the only elements of these films. Quite a bit of content from the original analysis pieces was removed in order to recognize these primary thematic elements, but it must be recognized that these separate pieces existed.

Many of these movies use story elements like teamwork to push forward plot points. This team-centered story element was so common that it suggests a new cultural emphasis moving apart from the individualism often associated with American culture. Movies like *The Avengers* exist because of these team centered characteristics, and even new hero centered movies are aiming for long-term success through this mentality. *The Hunger Games*, *Argo*, *Spotlight*, *Birdman*, all contain some element of teamwork, and such a common story driven characteristic should be recognized as a common element in these films.

There are a variety of other individual elements presented within the films as well, including commentaries on music, cultural representation, and freedom. Although these may have been particularly large pieces of individual films in this paper, they were not an element that shared the consistency of any of these chapters.

These films succeeded for several different reasons. Some of the highest grossing films (*Hunger Games*, *Avengers*, *12 Years a Slave*, *American Sniper*) are connected in some capacity to other third party material. These include books, news stories, or comic strips, and all contributed to their commercial success. These things, however, cannot account for the entirety of their financial/academic performance. Each one of these movies struck a chord with American audiences and proved to be a source of national connection. Because of their accolades, both economic and academic, these films can be used to analyze characteristics of American culture for the past four years. It would be interesting to observe the range of thematic elements discussed in films of prior years, but these specific movies illustrate several important cultural entities in America. These include an American culture centered on defining the role and identity of a heroine, understanding complex international situations and America's role within them, a cultural desire to recognize the strength and importance of family, a cultural obsession with the entertainment/media industries, and a sociocultural questioning of Christian faith/doctrines in social and governmental entities. The United States is an incredibly diverse and infinitely confusing amalgamation of ideologies. These intricate and complex constructs are discussed and recognized in these film pieces, and provide a unique perspective of dynamic American sociocultural values.

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