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**THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE SPOTLIGHT**

SANDRA LÓPEZ MILLS

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LIÑA DE TRABALLO: A HISTORIA COMO REFLEXO DA CULTURA DOS PAÍSES ANGLÓFONOS

DIRECTORA: DR. ELIZABETH ANNE WOODWARD-SMITH

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## **Abstract**

“The American Dream” is the concept of America that the founding fathers of the country, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin or Alexander Hamilton, among others, built during the early years of the United States of America: a land of opportunity for all men, who are regarded as equals and share the same inherent and inalienable rights, a land in which hard work is rewarded and in which anybody who is willing to work for it can succeed and pursue happiness.

The ideals embraced by “the dream” reached the rest of the world after the rise of global media in the early twentieth century, especially through the film industry that has portrayed the American ideals and way of life and shown them to the rest of us. Hollywood has filmed the evolution of “The American Dream” and the American life-style from the last century to the present day. By analysing two contemporary films that openly deal with the topic of “The American Dream”, I will attempt to describe the modern version of “the dream”, which is not the same as the one described by the founding fathers of America.

Today, not only American society but all societies that follow its ways, mainly the Western societies, have fallen into a consumer culture that has come to rule their lives. Wealth has become the final aim of “the dream”, now a world-wide dream, instead of the pursuit of happiness. We have all started to compete for wealth, in many cases in an unfair way, and have created for ourselves high levels of anxiety, stress and frustration. “The American Dream” has turned into a nightmare, but maybe we are still in time to “wake up” and return to the original idea of “the dream” which created a healthier society.

## **1. Introduction: Whys and Wherefores**

The objective of this piece of work is to delve below the surface of the topic of “The American Dream”, a very recurrent topic in the history of the United States, in its culture, in its literature and, more recently, in its film industry. The paper is divided into five sections: “Introduction: Whys and Wherefores”, “Historical and Theoretical Approach”, “Consumerism and Excess”, “A World- Wide Dream” and “Conclusion: Dream or Nightmare”.

This first section intends to comment on the details behind the writing of this piece of work, that is, commenting on the objectives and methodology used. As I said above, one of the objectives is that of delving below the surface of the topic of “The American Dream”; a second objective is that of offering a present-day description of the topic, which has changed during the years of the United States as a Nation. In the following lines I will explain how the piece of work was constructed.

In the next section, “Historical and Theoretical Approach”, I have commented on the historic evolution of “the dream” from its birth, when the first settlers arrived in America in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, up to the 1920s when “the dream” was living its greatest moment, which ended with the 1929 Wall Street Crash. I have tried to offer an ideological description of “the dream” by compiling the concepts that the founding fathers of America, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin or Alexander Hamilton, had of it.

In the section “Consumerism and Excess” I have commented on the important changes in American society that occurred in the twentieth century: the years of the Great Depression

that followed the 1929 Crash, World War Two and the Cold War. I have mainly commented on the post-war period, when a consumer culture developed and the concept of “the dream” started to tremble. I have also pointed out that this social change was partly responsible for the beginning of the Cold War, and how both the growth of consumerism and the Cold War threatened the continuity of a dream that was already changing.

“A World- Wide Dream” offers an overview of the history of Hollywood’s film industry, as it was very much responsible for the expansion of the ideals of “The American Dream”, as they were portrayed in many films that were later exported to the rest of the world. I have included in the section two subsections, “*The Pursuit of Happiness*<sup>1</sup>” and “*The Wolf of Wall Street*”, the titles of two recently released films that openly deal with the topic of “The American Dream”. I have analysed them in some depth in order to build a concept of what the present-day “dream” is.

The last section, “Conclusion: Dream or Nightmare”, offers the conclusions to all that has been written before. By reflecting on the history and evolution of the ideals of “the dream” and on how it has been and is portrayed in the film industry and by focusing especially on the two films analysed in more depth, taking into account that they are inspired by true events and therefore show a quite realistic vision of “the dream”, I have attempted to offer a personal description of the present-day situation of “the dream”, that differs from the original one as described by the founding fathers, and that is not, to my mind, anymore “The American Dream” but the nightmare of western societies.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the film is spelt in that way, and although orthographically incorrect, I have respected the original title.

This paper does not intend to be more than an insight into what is a complex and extended topic. I have tried to widen my knowledge of a subject that I initially found interesting and offer a responsible, thoughtful and personal comment on the decline in the values of “The American Dream” in the present day.

## 2. Historical and Theoretical Approach

The combination of words “The American Dream” was first used in the twentieth century. It was the American writer, journalist and political thinker Walter Lippman who used it for the first time in *Drift and Mastery*, 1914. The term was later popularised by another American writer and historian, James Truslow Adams. In *Epic of America*, 1931, Adams described “the American Dream” as “that dream of a land in which life should be fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Jillson 6).

The phrase “The American Dream” may have not been used until the twentieth century, but the notion of the dream must have already been present in the minds of the first settlers in America, back in the early seventeenth century. The first settlers already dreamt of religious freedom, wealth, acquisition of social status and, eventually, political independence. They had, after all, fled from their countries of origin to escape oppression and persecution for their religious, social and political beliefs, as well as extreme poverty and a total lack of opportunities.

By the mid-seventeenth century a Colonial Government was already emerging. The establishment of a new financial policy for America by the British, based mainly on increased taxes, was considered by the Americans as a threat to their self-government. Their discontent resulted in their decision to enter into a war against Britain.

Ideologically, the philosophers and political thinkers Tomas Paine and John Locke contributed to the desire for independence in the Americans and the settlement of a more elaborated dream in their minds. John Lock's *Second Treatise on Government*, 1690,

demanded a government based on a contract and not on a divine right. Tomas Paine's *Common Sense*, 1776, demanded a self-sufficient independent republic.

The idea of the dream was put into words on 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1776 by Thomas Jefferson. The *Declaration of Independence* stated that:

(...) all men are created equal; that they are endowed with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted by men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness (US *Declaration of Independence*, paragraph 2).

In 1783 the American War of Independence came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Paris. The 13 initial American colonies (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Pennsylvania), now the United States of America, obtained their independence from Britain and world-wide recognition of their sovereignty over their lands. America became “the first nation in modern history to emerge from colonial dependence to national independence” (Jillson 49).

The dream was again put down in words with the signing of the United States Constitution, in 1787. The Constitution supported and reaffirmed the aims of the *Declaration of Independence*. George Washington, commander-in-chief during war time, was elected as the first US president in 1789. He promised to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States”. The United States of America was, at this stage, fully described and



organised as a nation. The Industrial Revolution was taking place and emigration from Europe was increasing. The ideal of individualism was beginning to be present in the minds of the inhabitants of the New World. The dream was beginning to be understood as something more, or something else.

A more modern definition of “The American Dream” included the notion of hard-work as a condition for success. The inclusion of this new variable in the equation of the dream could be attributed to the figure of Benjamin Franklin. “Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) was the central figure of American eighteenth century (...) Benjamin Franklin was what America and Americans were becoming (...) Both as author and exemplar, he consciously molded and shaped the broad outlines of the American Dream” (Jillson 16). As Jillson points out “Franklin described and exemplified the American Dream that has shimmered before each generation of Americans: learn, work, save, invest, keep an eye out for the main chance, and success will follow”.

The dream was also opening up to the rest of the world. The responsibility for the expansion of the notion of “The American Dream” to the immigrants could be attributed to the French-American writer J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. Jillson has pointed out that “his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) provided the first full articulation of the American Dream from the immigrant perspective” (56). According to Jillson, “Crevecoeur described and exemplified the dream that was beckoning the immigrant: get here any way you can, learn a skill or trade, study her ways, work hard, save, and America will make a place for you” (57).

The dream was also changing. Wealth seemed to be the leading variable now, and the dream seemed to become more and more individualistic. The American late eighteenth century

economist, politician and soldier Alexander Hamilton, George Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, considered as the father of America's Financial System, could be regarded as the ideological representative of the change. While Jefferson had thought of a "widespread" dream; "Hamilton saw it as a fair competition for society's best places" (Jillson 63).

The American panorama was also changing. Not all Americans shared the same social or political ideas, which resulted in the outbreak of a Civil War in 1861. There was a division of ideals and beliefs between the states of the North and South. Slavery was the driving force of the economy in the Southern States, while there was a growing abolitionist movement in the North, which eventually led to open conflict. The war ended in 1865, with the victory of the more liberal side of America. The end of the war brought with it the guarantee of new rights and liberties for the Americans, all Americans, black and white. The most remarkable of all was the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution that abolished slavery. The black population of America was now closer to being able to dream, although there were still many torturous years to come before real equality of opportunity was available to everyone. It is debatable whether complete equality of opportunity for all races in America exists even today.

Women, like the Afro-Americans, had also been left outside the dream. They had not had the rights or liberties that men had. After years of fighting for their rights they gained one of the most emblematic of them. In 1920 women's suffrage was achieved with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Women were now, also, closer to being part of the dream. A professional class of women emerged, struggling to make a place for themselves in American business and society. They too saw "The American Dream" as a possibility for themselves, not just for their husbands. Women began to influence changes in

education which were reflected in all walks of life and produced a slow but steady shift in values regarding their place in society.

The 1920s were especially prosperous years for America. Two years had passed since the end of World War I and economic and social stability had been restored. Anyone was able to make the dream come true, anything seemed possible. A period of increasing immigration into the United States from many parts of the world, which had started at the end of the previous century when Ellis Island had been established in New York as the entry point for new immigrants, illustrates that “the dream” had become a widespread principle. Thousands of Italians, Russians, Germans, etc. believed that America offered the opportunity of freedom, work, and prosperity if they were prepared to work hard and live an honest life. An ever increasing number of immigrants disembarked during the first half of the twentieth century.

However, the prosperity of the 1920s ended abruptly when speculation in stocks and property led to the 1929 Wall Street Crash which resulted in a world-wide economic crisis. The dream seemed to be coming to an end during the years of America’s Great Depression. As Arnold has pointed out, this historical period was the first “test” that “The American Dream” had to pass in order to survive, and it did (34). But this was not the only difficulty the dream had to overcome, as we will see in the following lines.

### **3. Consumerism and Excess**

America entered World War II in 1941. The world wide conflict became a fight for the supremacy of freedom, civil rights and liberties. Arnold has considered this war period as the second “test” that the dream had to pass (34). The conflict ended in 1945 with the victory of the Allies. Americans reinforced their national identity after the conflict and the country gained the status of world superpower that it continues to have today. America’s reality changed again, apparently for the better, and to dream seemed possible again. Arnold has considered that the war provided a context in which the dream could more firmly and thoroughly take root, and its rise after the passing of this test, and the previous one, was the deserved result (34).

But there was a third difficulty which the dream had to face, an uncontrolled wave of consumerism due to the economic recuperation after the war. Arnold has pointed out that soon after the end of the conflict the spoils of war stimulated the rise of a consumer culture unlike anything that had come before. A new way of life full of modern conveniences, such as washing machines, refrigerators and televisions, was created, and the middle class, now bigger, were devoted followers of this new way of life (5). But, as Arnold has also pointed out, people started to compare themselves to those around them, trying to “keep up” with the acquisition of those modern conveniences that were perceived as needs by them. This competitive attitude created, for the Americans of the time, high levels of stress. Nevertheless, the consumer culture “took hold”, even though it threatened the idea of the dream, and in many ways changed the American panorama (101). The rapid changes made society worry about the young generation, which appeared to be losing their way and falling into a “moral abyss of crime or drugs or illicit sex” (Arnold 102).

The picture of American life depicted throughout these lines is appreciably similar to that of today. Consumerism is a reality. Perceived needs become imploring necessities. Crime, drug abuse, or illicit sex, are words that we can daily read in the newspapers. The American Dream has turned out to be a reality difficult to cope with. The excessive competition for the socially best places and the imperative need for wealth have come to rule the lives of millions of people.

America's way of life in the years after the war was not admired or followed by all the rest of the world. The USSR had also reaffirmed its identity as a nation and became another world superpower after the conflict. Ideological, political and economical disagreements between the US and the USSR led to years of tension and fear between the two countries. The Cold War became a new threat to the dream. With the fall of the USSR in 1991 the "American Dream" had one obstacle less to face.

America's way of life has persisted after the years of the Cold War and has become the model for the rest of the world. This wide spread of American ideals could most certainly be attributed to the rise of global media, which, as we will see, from early in the twentieth century has been a major factor in the diffusion of American ideals, culture and way of life.

#### 4. A World-Wide Dream

As Herman and McChesney have pointed out, there were two main media technologies that contributed to the development of global media in the first half of the twentieth century: the motion pictures and the radio. Actually, the film industry was the first media industry that served a truly global market (13). Motion pictures played an important role in the world-wide diffusion of American ideals, such as those embraced by “The American Dream”, as we will see in the following lines.

During the 1930’s the film industry became really popular and influential in American culture. The films released during this period transported the viewers to other realities in order to evade everyday difficulties. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), both taking place in fairytale lands, where good triumphs over evil and where happiness and prosperity are the rewards of endeavour, are only two examples of the type of cinema released then (Arnold 22).

At the same time, films with a much more negative message were released, the kind that showed signs of the moral crisis that America may have been living then. Gangster films were a good example of this type of film, in which the characters acquired “The American Dream” but in a dishonest, immoral way. Howard Hawk’s *Scarface* (1932) is a good example of this genre. These films also reflect the perceived degeneration of a society damaged by the economic crisis, suffering from alcohol abuse and increased levels of crime, which prohibition was supposed to control (Arnold 23).

Another popular genre in this decade was the Western. “Such films provided opportunities to present the Old West as mainstream morality plays, with heroes and villains clearly delineated” (Arnold 22). The hero-villain delineation was not that obvious in Gangster films, in which the viewer could sympathize with the gangster.

As the economic situation improved, Hollywood turned its eyes to producing films to entertain people who now had enough money to enjoy going to the cinema, to watch films that portrayed a life of luxury, or mystery, or comedy. However, the onset of the Second World War forced the film industry to concentrate on supporting the war effort, while maintaining moral at home.

During the years of World War II Hollywood produced a large number of films that supported the war effort and reaffirmed the official attitudes towards it. Frank Capra, a critically acclaimed director, was commissioned by Washington to “serve” in the production of films that supported the war effort. In the years between 1942 and 1945 he produced a series of films that were known under the collective title of *Why We Fight*. The *Why We Fight* films were part of a successful domestic propaganda campaign in which the War Department participated (Arnold 31).

Of course, immediately following the war most films concentrated on portraying the victor’s role and helping American society to overcome the hardships of the post-war years. Life had changed in many ways, for both the victors and the vanquished. “The American Dream” was reinforced and Hollywood returned to films which portrayed it.

Films that portrayed the years of the Cold War were also released by the Hollywood industry, mainly with an anti-Communist message. Arnold points out in *Projecting the End of the American Dream* that the Science Fiction films, which started to become very popular after a UFO sighting in 1947, represent some kind of an analogy with the fear of a Communist invasion. “The theme of invasion by a powerful and mysterious enemy closely parallels the sense of anxiety that had developed in the United States at mid-century” (90).

The years of social change in the sixties continued into the seventies, with both negative and positive consequences for American society. The crime rate was rising and Hollywood portrayed it. In 1976 Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* was released. It was a perfect example of the sort of society that America seemed to be becoming and the sort of crime it had to face, which once again threatened the ideals of “The American Dream”.

Social chaos became a fear for Americans and the rest of the world. Hollywood created future societies where the fears had come true. *Mad Max* (1979), *Robocop* (1981) or *The Terminator* (1984), are only some examples of this type of almost apocalyptic view of future societies, while the fiasco of American participation in the Vietnam War and the stories of returning veterans, whose lives had often been disastrously changed, were also portrayed by Hollywood, very realistically, in such films as *Apocalypse Now*, 1979, and *Born on the Fourth of July*, 1989.

The film industry in the nineties continued in much the same line as it had done in the previous decades, offering a dark portrait of American life. A couple of examples of films following this line are Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* or Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, both released in 1994. However, the buoyant economic situation was of course



reflected in many films also released during these decades. “The American Dream” was seen as something attainable and desirable and even such films as *Wall Street*, 1987, and *The Firm*, 1993, while being openly critical of the pursuance of wealth, showed us that honesty and hard work are the ways to realise “The American Dream”.

At the same time, a new way of portraying reality in a less fictional way was becoming important in the Hollywood film industry. Film-documentaries, some as controversial as Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, became a new way of observing or reflecting on real life issues. At the same time, films based on true life stories, which have been made throughout the nineties and into the twenty-first century, have become a significant part of the film industry.

Two films of this last genre are *The Pursuit of Happyness*, 2006, and *The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2013. Both of them offer real examples of the achievement of the dream, and invite the whole world, as potential public, to reflect on what “The American Dream” is really about. They constitute interesting models of how to make the dream come true, and offer different ways of doing it. Both films have a lot in common, principally that they are both set in the eighties and their leading characters are both determined to make a career for themselves in the world of finance, which creates serious personal problems for them and their families. However, they differ in many other aspects, such as the honesty of each character, their views of happiness and their goals in life. By commenting on them the reader, and not only the viewer, will be able to reflect on what “The American Dream” is, and if it is what it is supposed to be.

#### 4.1. *The Pursuit of Happyness*

Gabriel Muccino's *The Pursuit of Happyness* is based on Christopher Gardner's autobiography, of the same title, released earlier that year. The story portrayed in the film takes place in San Francisco in 1981. Chris Gardner (Will Smith) is a family man married to Linda (Thandie Newton) and father to Christopher (Jaden Smith). Their economic situation is quite bad, they can barely pay their bills or the rent and they owe taxes. Chris has spent all his savings on the massive acquisition of revolutionary medical equipment that he cannot sell. His wife is forced to work day and night in order to be able to keep up with the payments. The tension between the couple, due to these problems, results in their separation. Linda decides to leave her husband and son and go to New York to try to get a job there.

Chris is left to look after his son alone. He enrolls for a training course in Dean Witter Reynolds to become a broker and be able to offer his son, and himself, a better life. The company allows twenty candidates to enrol each six months and only one gets a job. Although it is a risky bet for Chris he finally does it. He attends the course while trying to sell his medical equipment and look after his son. Both of them go through many difficulties, including homelessness, but finally their lives improve.

The film openly deals with the topic of "The American Dream". The protagonist, who also narrates the story, alludes on at least three occasions to Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, taking special interest in the quote that gives the title to the film. Actually, the title contains two meanings, that of the declaration, and another within the film; a graffiti, written in bad English and containing those words, is painted on the outside wall of Christopher's son's nursery.

Christopher Gardner is presented as a loving and caring father, capable of doing anything in order to provide a happy life for his son. He is also presented as a highly moral person, with values or ideals embraced by “The American Dream”. Gardner considers himself an intelligent and hardworking man, capable of doing anything that he can dream of. The type of man he proves to be is very much in the line of the “modern father of the dream”, Benjamin Franklin. Like his model, Gardner prospers and achieves his dreams, mainly by working hard and believing in himself.

Chris first starts to dream of a better life when he sees a man with an amazing expensive car parked in the street, in front of Dean Witter Reynolds. Chris starts a conversation with the man and asks him how he is able to afford such a car. The man says that he is a broker. Chris then asks the man how he became a broker, to which he replies that anybody can do it. Chris has a look around and observes that all the people in the area seem really happy. He then asks himself why he is not. That is the moment when he decides he will do the training course.

The night before his enrolment interview in Dean Witter Reynolds Chris gets arrested for not having paid his parking tickets. He is released the next morning and runs to the office, wearing exactly the same clothes as when he was arrested, not wearing a shirt and not even having had a wash or a shave. He does not lie in order to impress the bosses, he opts for telling the truth and by doing this he creates a good impression. He emphasises the fact that he has always been intelligent, in some matters autodidact and with a thirst for knowledge. The interview finishes with a joke that seems to prove to the bosses that they are in fact in the presence of a brilliant man. One of the bosses asks Chris what he would think if he told him that he had employed someone that was not wearing a shirt. To which Chris responds that he must have been wearing wonderful trousers.

As already stated, at the same time Gardner is doing the training course, he continues to sell the medical equipment he has invested in. He has no income apart from that as he does not get paid for attending the course. During the film someone steals one of the machines Gardner is selling and he loses another. The lack of income means Gardner is unable to pay the rent and consequently father and son are forced to abandon their home. Thankfully, after they spend their first homeless night in the metro toilets they get some help from a church that provides lodging for vagrants.

Miraculously, Gardner recuperates his lost and stolen equipment and sells it. Things seem to get better until one day his bank account is blocked for not having paid his taxes. He loses all his money again.

It is evident that Gardner has to face various adversities throughout the film. The ones listed above are only some of them. The protagonist faces adversities, almost always, in an admirable way, but there are moments in the film that represent for him a moral conflict. The most remarkable of all is a scene in which he is forced to run away from a taxi without having paid for his ride, he has to do this after sharing the taxi with one of the bosses in Dean Witter Reynolds who assumes he has the money to pay for it, which is not the case. The positive side of it is that he got to impress a member of Dean Witter Reynolds while sharing the taxi. As a result of that opportunity he is able to do the training course because of this man's recommendation which will later on result in his working as a broker. Also he sees himself forced to ask a friend to give him back some money that he had previously lent him, in a quite aggressive way. He also gets irate with a man that tries to enter the church lodging before him. In quite a few scenes, Gardner lies in order to make a good impression, but his lies are never harmful. Overall Gardner proves to be an exemplary individual, constant in his efforts,

someone who never gives up and always tries to do the best he possibly can. Thanks to his integrity he is able to make his dream, “the dream”, come true.

The dream achieved by Gardener is that of happiness. He aspires to it throughout the film and finally obtains it by being the one who gets the job in Dean Witter Reynolds. He feels appreciated by his bosses in the company and proud of himself because he has worked hard and has proved himself to be the best for the position. Also he is now able to pay his bills, live more comfortably and offer his son a better life. But mainly his happiness comes from his self-fulfilment and not from the acquisition of wealth, which he, by the way, has acquired through fair competition.

## 4.2. *The Wolf of Wall Street*

Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* is based on Jordan Belfort's memoirs, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2008 and *Catching the Wolf of Wall Street*, 2009, written by Belfort himself. The story takes place in the late eighties, in New York. The young, and recently married, Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio) has gone to Wall Street to become a broker. On his first day as a broker there is a stock market crash, the biggest since 1929. It is October 19<sup>th</sup> 1987, "Black Monday". Jordan starts looking for another job. He finds one in a small investment centre in Long Island. There, they sell the shares of those companies that are not wealthy enough to sell on the stock market. Jordan soon becomes a "hero" for the rest of the employees as he proves to be a brilliant seller.

Things are going fine for Jordan. He is earning around seven thousand dollars per month. He decides to fund his own corporation. He starts off with a friend (Jonah Hill) and people from the neighbourhood who he trains, and soon the company grows. Jordan decides to embrace a bigger market, the real stock market. He creates Stratton Oakmont, the company that will make him rich.

Jordan becomes really popular as he appears in newspapers and magazines. People start to know him as "the wolf of Wall Street". The company grows and grows without control. Belfort and his workers become so rich they do not even know what to do with their money. They spend most of it on drugs, alcohol, parties and prostitutes.

Jordan's wife does not approve of her husband's job. She thinks what he and his employees do is dishonest as they lie to their clients in order to get their investment. Eventually, Jordan

divorces his wife and falls in love with another woman (Margot Robbie), whom he marries soon after his divorce. He buys his new wife a yacht, specially made for her, and they move to an impressive mansion house. So much ostentation makes the police suspect that some illegal activity is taking place in Stratton Oakmont. They start to investigate Jordan and his circle.

Jordan then decides to send his money to Switzerland in order to protect it from police confiscation. He goes through all kinds of crazy and ridiculous moments during the film, due to his drug abuse. His drug addiction makes it difficult for him to act in an intelligent way considering he is being investigated by the police. He finally gets caught and accused of money laundering and fraud. They invite him to implicate his employees in exchange for a reduction in his prison sentence. He accepts and is only sentenced to three years in prison.

The film deals explicitly with the topic of “The American Dream”. Jordan Belfort states at one point in the film that Stratton Oakmont is America, the land of opportunity, a place where everyone is accepted, no matter their origins or status, as long as they are capable and willing to work. Belfort adds another indispensable quality for those interested in working for him, ambition. For him, those that are not rich deserve to be poor because they are not ambitious enough and that is the reason for their poverty.

The attitude of the protagonist towards the rest of the world is that of superiority. There are several instances of behaviour and comments in the film that confirm this impression. For example, when he first starts working in the small investment centre in Long Island and gains a big investment from one of their clients, causing amazement among the rest of the employees, he says that they looked at him as if he had discovered fire, which somehow implies that Belford saw them as “prehistoric”, intellectually inferior, and he, in that sense,

intellectually superior. Also, talking about his investors, he says that he sells trash to trash collectors, and that their money is better off in his hands and not theirs as he knows how to spend it well.

Jordan Belfort seems to regard money as the best, and almost only, way of obtaining happiness. Near the beginning of the film, while talking about the drugs he takes, he states that money is the best of them all. He says that with money one becomes invincible, capable of world domination, the world's master. In an interesting scene in which he is training the team with which he will create Stratton Oakmont, he says to them that their business is a safe one as everybody wants to be rich. They only have to convince their potential clients that they will help them to become so. One of the members of the team states that the Amish people or the Buddhists do not want to become rich, to which Jordan replies that he refers to common middle class people and that that was a stupid comment to make.

Jordan's employees end up adopting their boss's attitude towards life: money is the way to happiness and everybody should fight for it, those who do not are stupid, inferior, and they deserve not to be wealthy or happy. There is a very shocking scene that illustrates the thirst for money Jordan has inculcated in his workers. He offers one of his assistants ten thousand dollars if she shaves her head completely, which she accepts.

Jordan and his workers' life style becomes something unsustainable. They are all on drugs, party all the time and have sex with prostitutes. Meanwhile they run a multimillion dollar business that is being investigated for illegal activity. All of this leads to moments of real ridiculousness in the film. On several occasions Jordan is almost caught and even comes near to death. He crashes his helicopter when landing in his own yard, sinks his yacht, gets arrested



for driving having consumed so many drugs that he almost goes into cerebral palsy and gets arrested again for indecent assault of a flight attendant on a regular flight.

Belfort's apparently perfect life, full of comfort, is bound to come to an end. His wife, tired of his irresponsible behaviour, leaves him. In a rage attack he decides to kidnap one of the children they have in common, and almost kills her and himself in a car accident while running away. His life is collapsing and it does so totally when he gets arrested and accused of fraud and money laundering. He then betrays his colleagues without contemplation, after having told them only a few days before, literally, that he loved them.

There are many examples of Jordan's dishonest, selfish, immoral and uncivilized attitude throughout the film. Although in a rather deformed way, he somehow emulates Hamilton's idea of the dream, that is the fight for society's best places, but in this case the competition for those places is unfair.

Belfort's idea of happiness differs much from that of Gardner. He also succeeds in the professional world, but that seems not to be enough for him. His self-fulfilment relies only on the acquisition of wealth, not in his hard-work or the positive value of his qualities. In fact he does not need the approval of others as his opinion of himself is higher than anyone else's. His aim is to prove to be the cleverest, when it comes to money-making, and to earn as much as possible at whatever cost. He says at one point in the film that he always wanted to be rich, that his life's dream was only that, to be rich. However, we the audience realise that money does not bring happiness, although he mistakenly believes it does.

## 5. Conclusion: Dream or Nightmare

The two films analysed above deal openly with the topic of “The American Dream”, previously described from an historical, and also ideological, point of view. Now it is my intention to reflect on the present day status of the idea of “The American Dream”, taking into account Hollywood’s visions of it, but with the necessary dose of reality guaranteed by the choice of two films that are inspired by true stories.

*The Pursuit of Happyness* may show a more “idyllic” vision of the dream. In the film the protagonist proves to be an honest hard-working man who believes in himself and through fair competition obtains his just rewards. *The Wolf of Wall Street* shows a more realistic, even “naturalistic”, vision of the dream. The protagonist, by being a man of little integrity or honesty, although hard-working and with belief in himself, obtains through unfair competition undeserved rewards. What is common to both films is that success derives from competing and winning, in a fair or unfair way.

Present-day societies, not only American society, but all the societies that follow its model, that is to say western societies, have made success in terms of riches an indispensable element in the achievement of happiness, which should be the ultimate aim of “The American Dream”. Life has become a competition in which wealth is the prize to win and human beings are fierce competitors. Each competitor must disregard the feelings and misfortunes of the others, which is acceptable or even necessary in order to win. We are selfish, but it seems to be ok, or even what is expected of us. This modern day version of “the dream” is not exactly what the “founding fathers” foresaw.

In some way it is normal to presuppose that success in general does in fact lead to happiness, and it does when it brings with it personal welfare or self-fulfilment, as in the case of Christopher Gardner. However, the idea of success has changed to something exclusively materialistic. Today success is about earning money, having the best car, wearing the best clothes and, on top of that, being as handsome as possible. The type of success described is what Jordan Belfort boasted of. It is questionable whether it brought him happiness or not. Sadly, success today does not seem to include non-materialistic values, such as solidarity, honesty, loyalty or a sense of civil duty, values that Gardner did include on his way to success and that guaranteed his self-pride and consequent happiness. Those values were embraced by the original idea of “The American Dream” but are not embraced by the present day idea of the dream.

Western societies seem to be living a moment of deep crisis in values and this may be the reason why there are so many unhappy people. Every day we fight to prove that we are better than others, and if we are not we feel stressed, anxious and frustrated. We want to climb up the ladder of society without caring if we make others fall down a step on the way, if that is the price we have to pay to stop feeling frustrated and supposedly feel happy. The dream is now what Alexander Hamilton said it was in the eighteenth century, a competition for society’s best places, but it is no longer a fair competition but an unfair one, and that is why the dream has turned into a nightmare.

The fact that we have to live a constant nightmare does not make any sense. It should not be like this because there should not be such things as society’s best places. Thomas Jefferson stated in the *Declaration of Independence* that all men are created equal, and for me that is completely true. Therefore there is no need for us to prove ourselves better than others

because simply no one is better than another person. We are equals and have an equal right to achieve happiness. It seems incredible that now that we have achieved so much in the fight against racial, religious and gender discrimination, to a point where, at least in western societies, we are all equal in law and should be in professional and social life, we should still not really feel that all of us are equal and struggle to be better than others.

However, as I said in previous lines, we are going through a deep crisis of values and we value wealth over everything else in life. Wrongly, we think that there is not enough wealth for all of us, so we adopt a selfish attitude and want to have our bit of it at any cost, and if it is the biggest bit, all the better. With this ruling individualistic mentality it seems difficult to think, or act, in a different way, and go back to those values that were embraced initially by “The American Dream” and which guaranteed the dream coming true.

Sadly, I would dare to say that there is no such thing as “The American Dream” anymore. There may have been once, when the American Nation was first built, and “the promised land” proved to be so. Maybe there was a time in which the dream came true, in which every man had an equal opportunity to succeed. I feel sure that for many who suffered in their lands of origin to the point that they were forced to undertake a difficult journey to reach “the promised land” of America the dream did come true. They found peace, freedom and prosperity in comparison to the hardships they had left behind. Many became successful businessmen, scientists, doctors and leaders of society, not necessarily rich men, but able to live a full and happy life. And, it is true to say that many people in non-western societies in the world today are still suffering from the same or similar oppressions and discrimination that caused so many to flee to America at that time. Perhaps those of us who live in the

western world should try to help implement the traditional values of “The American Dream” in those countries where people are suffering.

With regard to our western societies where rivalry for wealth has made the dream become a nightmare for those of us who do not win the competition, let’s just hope the competition will end and then we will all win again.

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