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HINWEIS

Diese Diplomarbeit hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbstständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen der Beurteilenden nicht eingetragen sind und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist daher nicht erkenntlich mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Die Habilitierten des Instituts für Anglistik und Amerikanistik bitten diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten.

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*Happiness does not come from doing easy work
but from the afterglow of satisfaction that comes after
the achievement of a difficult task that demanded our best.*

- Theodore Rubin

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1 Introduction

The American Dream is an ambiguous myth deeply rooted in US American history and culture. The idea of getting rich and famous, perceived as integral part of the concept, can be traced back to the very beginning of the United States' existence that started with Puritan settlement. There, the idea of the Dream might have been understood in a different way and the focus was not so much on becoming a millionaire (or getting rich in general); however, the core essence of the American Dream has not changed since then. Depending on the specific time one looks at, different facets of the Dream were emphasized more whereas others were neglected. Numerous aspects and elements have cumulated in the past in order to create the manifold idea of the American Dream.

How the American Dream can be defined will be dealt with in the beginning of this paper. I will try to provide a definition of the concept where it will become visible that a single-sentence description of the term is not sufficient. Even if an overall definition of the term can be found it has to be kept in mind that the American Dream is also something very personal and subjective. The term *American Dream* is used worldwide and everyone seems to know what it is but regardless of that each American can entitle his or her own American Dream.

I will continue with a historical overview of the concept and describe which aspects developed at what time (decade) until the present idea of the American Dream has been established. It will be made clear that the American Dream is neither fixed nor stable; the imagination of it changes continuously and will continue to do so in the future.

The epoch this paper focuses on specifically is the time after the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001. Links from the historical background and roots of the Dream as described in chapter two to the present will demonstrate how aspects of the American Dream that came into being in the past are still valid and make up integral elements of today's perception of it.

I would like to find out how the American Dream is represented in contemporary American movies, which aspects of the concept are thematized in particular and which are left aside in modern Hollywood productions. Especially after 9/11 when the

American Dream got shattered and fragmented, primarily positive aspects of the Dream were promoted through the media and film industry. With the help of the media, films and politics, the American Dream experienced a reactivation or at least it was tried to bring up the idea, the myth of the Dream, again. The big question is why a reinterpretation of the American Dream has taken place after 9/11 and how it can be described. In my opinion, the concept of the American Dream has suffered a lot from injury of the attacks. It had and still has to face challenges that became visible only through that day when it was demonstrated internationally that the United States are vulnerable just as any other country in the world. Some people claim that the American Dream has died on that day but one could also argue that a rebuilding has taken place and that we are now looking at the Dream from a new and refreshed perspective.

My main area of research is film and as already mentioned I will concentrate on the post-2001 era by looking at movies made after 9/11. However, in order to support my argumentation, I will also provide examples taken from other contexts such as politics, particularly from Barack Obama's famous 2008 "Yes, We Can" campaign.

Regarding the films, I decided to take three films that were shot after the 9/11 terrorist attacks which are showing a diverse range of aspects that are inevitably connected to the American Dream. The reason why I decided on films and not books or other culturally relevant material is that 9/11 has been a very memorable event. Photos in newspaper articles, clips on YouTube and books filled with pictures of that day turned the attacks into something 'special'. Everyone of us immediately retrieves specific pictures of that day when thinking or talking about it. No matter whether it is the image of a plane crashing into the World Trade Center, the dirty firefighter trying to save an unconscious person or the old man running exhausted through the dusty streets of downtown New York, specific images are connected to that day.

It does not play a role whether the actual diegesis of the films take place before or after September 2001 as the main focus will be on the ideas that are transported through the setting, characters and storyline. These ideas are always the result of a filmmaker's (and society's) perspective and thoughts on a specific issue at a specific time in history. In this case, this powerful idea is called American Dream and represents the post-9/11 mood even if the action of the film takes place in earlier decades.

As I do want to represent a holistic picture of the American Dream after 9/11, I will not exclude the negative aspects that are mentioned in connection with the Dream as well. The films I chose cover a broad range of elements that are integral parts of what became known as the American Dream. Some of these aspects trace back to the historical roots of US American history, namely the Puritans, some of them were added at a much later stage in history or are recent inventions and endorsements of the American Dream.

The films I chose are *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), *The Blind Side* (2009), and *Into the Wild* (2009). The first one tells a story where the protagonist, after striving for it for some time, finally reaches the American Dream and gets rewarded for his efforts in the end. It focuses on the struggle and the quest for something without knowing whether this struggle will lead to a happy ending. *Blind Side* generally deals with the same matter apart from the fact that not the main character pursuits the American Dream but the family (especially the mother) he is staying with. The latter represents positive aspects as well as the downturn of living the American Dream. The main character in the film is living the Dream already but in the course of the action the story more and more reveals negative aspects of living a “happy” life (the connection of happiness and the Dream will be explained at various points within the paper). All of the films are based on or inspired by a true story which is clearly indicated either in the beginning or at the end. Credibility and closeness to reality seem to be an essential part of movies dealing with the great myth of the American Dream.

Since the term “myth” has already been mentioned twice and the fact that this paper deals with the exploration of the mythical character of the American Dream and the question why it is so important for the idea to be regarded as myth, I would like to introduce the central aspects of myths right here in the introduction. The French founding father of Poststructuralism, Roland Barthes, was very much concerned with the different aspects of myths. He identified myths as “a way to argue” which means that myths are not to be seen as the argument, the idea as such but rather as methodology how to talk about something. (Schnicke 19) Roland Barthes’ summary of essays called *Mythologies* which came out in 1957 explored and described the powerful idea of myths. Although he wrote the book in a completely different context

than post-9/11 USA, some of the general statements on myths he made can easily be transferred to today's US American society and culture.

Here is a brief summary of Barthes' key points: A myth is nothing natural but a (socially) constructed phenomenon, stimulated by a society's signifying practices.¹ Myths are incredibly instable and therefore have to be nourished on a regular basis. Every myth fulfils a "double function" and is deeply ambiguous (as the American Dream as such) because it is empty on the one hand and full of imposed elements on the other. (Ibid. 115) In order to keep a myth alive, motivation to continuously fill it with new values (apart from the fact that "the meaning of the myth has its own value") seems to be absolutely essential. (Ibid. 116) A myth's main function in Barthes' words is "to distort" (Ibid. 120), to recur (Ibid. 134) as well as to simplify matters. (Ibid. 143) Applying this methodology to the American Dream, Lance Bennett's quote sums it up quite well:

[Myths] are like the lenses in a pair of glasses in the sense that they are not what people see when they look at the world, they are the things they see with. (Bennett in Schnicke 19)

I will come back to Barthes' key elements outlined here as well as myths in general in more detail in the analytical chapter dealing with the three movies. I will demonstrate that films like to highlight the mythical aspect of the American Dream as it is a very powerful idea that provides room for interpretation.

Another issue that will be raised within the chapter dealing with the American Dream in the 21st century is the question of the exceptionality, the *Americanness* of the Dream. What makes the American Dream essentially *American*? Could one argue that it is simply a concept applying to general welfare in every society without being particularly American? Although literature reveals contradictory opinions on that issue I will argue in favor of the *Americanness* of the Dream. Due to the reason that the whole US American society and history is build up on American people who helped to shape and define the American Dream it can, at least in my opinion, clearly be argued that there is something uniquely American about that Dream. Politicians and historical figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Horatio Alger, Thomas Jefferson and numerous other Americans were determinative for what we understand as the American Dream today. Moreover, the fact that the 9/11 attacks "helped" to put the

USA in the spotlight militates for the USA's exceptional character. After 9/11 the focus that was put on the USA helped to revitalize and reinterpret the American Dream again.

A further concept I will be talking about is Benedict Andersons' phenomenon of Imagined Communities because it can be linked to the imagination of the American Dream very well. What Anderson was mainly interested in was the question how the idea of nationality or "nation-ness" as he likes to call it has changed over time. He claims that each community where people do not know each other face-to-face is an imagined one. Nation-ness can be perceived as ideology and this is where the connection to the American Dream can be drawn because every idea must be accompanied by an ideology of some kind. It will be outlined that especially in the time after 9/11 a new sense of community – in other words an ideology – was established in order to keep the nation together.

What I hope to demonstrate in my diploma paper is that the American Dream is a dynamic and ever-changing concept that took on a new spin after 9/11. The positive sides were promoted and the imagination of the Dream being a myth became even more important than it used to be. It will be contended that the driving force behind the American Dream's positive promotion was media and political speeches. A closer look at Obama's election campaign in 2008 as well as on Hollywood movies that support primarily positive representations of the Dream will explain in how far the promotion of the Dream has changed after the terrorist attacks and why it was necessary to put a new spin on the American Dream.

¹ This argument clearly reveals Barthes as a structuralist.

2 Defining the “American Dream”

At a time like this, the American Dream becomes a kind of lingua franca, an idiom that everyone – from corporate executives to hip-hop artists – can presumably understand. (Cullen 2003, 6)

What Jim Cullen points out with this quote, “American Dream” has become a term everyone seems to understand. It is widely used in today’s political speeches, news magazines and advertisement. The term as such was spread by James Truslow Adams who published *The Epic of America* in 1931 (Matterson 10). In this book he used the phrase extensively and so it “rapidly entered common parlance as a byword for what he thought his country was all about” (Cullen 2003, 4).

Before going into detail how the American Dream has changed after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a definition of the term itself will be made. This is not an easy task as numerous aspects and elements make up the American Dream as a whole. David Schnicke points out:

The ‘dream’ cannot be defined narrowly, since one of its most important characteristics has always been its openness to reinvention and reinterpretation. (7)

This reinvention and reinterpretation of the American Dream happened more than once throughout US American history as will be elaborated in the subsequent chapters. Here, the core elements, the most basic and underlying principles of what is known as the American Dream – today as well as in former times – will be resumed. Moreover, it has to be said that these key elements are in no sense static and unchangeable. As a result of the ever-changing ideas that make up the American Dream, it develops continually. The constant evolution of the Dream sometimes referred to as “moving target” can be seen as its one and only constant. (Caldwell 35)

A range of attempts has been exploited in order to classify and describe the American Dream. Many scientists agree that it consists of different layers. Michael C. Kimmage opens up his article about the politics of the American Dream with the following passage:

The American Dream has physics and metaphysics, a material and a spiritual component. The material component concerns wealth or well-being, with citizenship shading into ownership: One step[s] closer to the American Dream by buying a house or owning a car. The material component suggests class mobility or simply the pleasure of economic opportunity [...] The spiritual component, the metaphysics of the American Dream, is a blend of optimism and happiness, alluded to the Declaration of Independence, in which happiness is a thing to be pursued. (27)

Kimmage's explanation is a comprehensive definition indicating many components of the American Dream that have either been historically important (e.g. Declaration of Independence) or have come to be important facets of it in the course of history (class mobility, ownership, optimism, happiness). He further does not neglect controversial issues such as immigration which are of special importance as they defined characteristic moments in the development of the American Dream.

Wilber Caldwell agrees that there are diverse sides to the Dream. He claims that it is made up of an idealistic as well as a materialistic layer. Within the following chapters the distinction between these two "faces" as he calls it will surface numerous times, therefore, a detailed description shall be provided:

[...] beginning with Jamestown and Plymouth, there were two sides to the American Dream: an idealistic side and a materialistic side. While the former represented high-minded, romantic concepts of liberty and democracy, the latter remained unshakably pragmatic, representing real-world, practical concepts of security and property. American history is a record of the struggle between these two sides of the national dream. The Declaration of Independence championed the rights of man and the idealistic side of the dream, while the United States Constitution championed the rights of property and the materialistic side of the American Dream. (Caldwell 69f)

Kimmage and Caldwell agree very much in their perception of what the American Dream is made up of. Both state that a material and a non-material (whether one calls it spiritual or idealistic) side go hand in hand. Especially Caldwell's definition, however, shows that clear cuts between all the individual concepts mentioned above are not easily possible. Although one can simply argue that the material side applies to everything that has to do with money, when looking at it from the other side, the material side, it is clearly very difficult to argue that wealth, material success or property are in no way interconnected with liberty or democracy. A further common understanding of Kimmage and Caldwell is the fact that American history plays a crucial role in the evolution of the American Dream. For this reason a brief summary of the US American history in connection with the most important concepts of the American Dream will be displayed below. Other scientists entered the discourse of defining the Dream differently. In his book *The European Dream* the sociologist Jeremy Rifkin argues for an earthly and a transcendental dimension of the American Dream. He writes that "it [the American Dream] speaks to the most basic human desires – for happiness in this world and for salvation in the next world." (25) He continues this rather abstract explanation by saying "the former required

perseverance, self-improvement, and self-reliance, and the latter unswerving faith in God.” (Ibid.) Therefore, striving for the Dream on the transcendental level is necessarily connected to believing in God which reminds of the Puritan notion of the American Dream that shaped the nation’s idea of the concept first of all and will soon be examined in more detail.

A further division into different layers of the American Dream is suggested by David Schnicke. He claims that three levels, the individual, the social and the religious level, make up the American Dream. (8) He states that all three layers are connected, but he also identifies one basic attitude to all of them, namely the “people’s optimism and their willingness to dream.” (9) Optimism will soon be identified as one core element of the American Dream and gains special importance when it comes to political speeches and a community feeling of the US American citizens. In a way it is a rule that presidential candidates have to be optimistic in order to be politically successful. The more they incorporate the Dream the better the chances to become (and stay) successfully in office.

The best and most profound understanding of the term “American Dream” can be gained by looking at the history of the United States. Although this paper focuses especially on the post-9/11 era, as explained in the introduction, the events that happened before 2001 must and cannot be excluded entirely as some of them are essential in order to comprehend the idea of the American Dream completely.

2.1 Historical overview – A myth that made its way

The American Dream is not a concept with clear-cut boundaries. Depending on the century and decade, particular of the Dream’s dynamic elements become more and less important. The history of the United States of America starts with the protestant movements of the Pilgrims and Puritans and so does the idea of the American Dream.

2.1.1 Religious foundations of the Dream in the 17th century

[A]n understanding of the Puritan experience in America will explain every aspect of America’s mature national character just as knowledge of a baby’s behavior will disclose the sum of his future personality. (Kessler 780)

Numerous scientists agree on the fact that the first white people who arrived on the eastern coast of what is known today as the United States of America were Protestants

who fled from England and Holland. The Pilgrims arrived in 1620 as “separatists who had left the Church of England because they disapproved of its doctrines and had suffered persecution.” (Mauk 352) They settled down in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and were the first European settlers who started an own colony on the shores of Northern America. Ten years later came the Puritans with the main interest to “purify the Church of England”. (Ibid.) In relation to this paper, the Puritans are of greatest importance due to the fact that, as Caldwell vividly puts it: “With them they carried the seeds of the American Dream.” (59)

As Perry Miller and others have shown the Puritans must not be understood as one unified group of religious people who had one and the same vision when leaving Europe. “[E]ven the relatively homogeneous world of the Puritans was marked by factions and sectarianism.” (Cullen 2003, 26) However, as many of the individual differences came into being only after they had left England and settled down in the new world, they did have – at least to some extent – a shared worldview and mutual characteristics.

One of these joint aspects was that “Puritans thought that by leaving England they were leaving an immoral society.” (Wells 596) Their main interest was to practice their religion in freedom without any high authority guiding them. And this is already where the American Dream comes in. “For Europeans of the sixteenth century the New World itself appeared to be a kind of dream.” (Caldwell 55) They had a vision of a country that offered the chance to live a life in (religious) liberty. To start over new, one of the core elements of the American Dream was one of the ingredients added to the history and the development of the American Dream at the very beginning.

But what was it the Puritans actually believed in? What was their main belief that determined how they lived their lives and why they felt urged to leave Europe? The answer to these questions show an ambiguity of their religious conviction which is of great importance when connecting Puritanism to the American Dream. As Jim Cullen explains:

The Puritans descended from the Calvinist branch of Protestantism, which meant that they were predestinarians: they believed individuals’ fates were sealed from the moment they were born, and there was absolutely nothing they could do to affect their ultimate salvation or damnation. (2003, 18)

Interestingly, this interferes with the origins of all forms of Protestantism, namely seeing the world as “a corrupt place, but one that could be reformed.” (Cullen 2003,

15) The controversy is easy to detect: If Puritans thought the way their life turns out is an already forgone conclusion it does not make sense to live according to specific rules or regulations of the community. If they think their destiny lies in God's hands and is determined before they even start speaking, why would they try to adhere to specific conventions that showed that they were good Christians? If, as they believed, "salvation or damnation" is predestined it is wondrous that "they constructed an entire way of life based on their religious principles." (Kessler 779) However, the "faith in reform became the central legacy of American Protestantism and the cornerstone of what became the American Dream." (Cullen 2003, 15) A faith seemingly ambiguous to us was described as "deeply paradoxical" by Andrew Delbanco who argued that it does not make sense if "you cannot chose the body in which you are born" whereas you are "entirely responsible for your fate" on the other hand. (42ff.)

These principles were taken from Puritan's interpretation of the Bible which was the most important guide for their life. Not only did it instruct on religious matters, it was also "a great influence on the development of Puritan law." (Wells 597) In his article *Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding*, Sanford Kessler describes the individual components of Puritanism. He more or less summarizes the opinion of the 19th century politician Alexis de Tocqueville's on Puritanism. Kessler claims that Puritanism consists of two spirits, the "spirit of religion" and the "spirit of freedom". (Kessler 781) These two spirits had its foundation in the Bible. The Old Testament "provided the theological framework which shaped the Puritans' understanding of their exodus from Europe" (Ibid.) and therefore the basis for the "spirit of religion" whereas the "spirit of freedom" is grounded in the New Testament as Christ was the first historical figure to teach that all human beings had an "equal right [...] at birth to liberty". (Ibid. 782) Especially the "spirit of freedom" had the task "to lift the hopes of human beings". (Ibid.) This already started with Martin Luther during the time of the Reformation in Europe. As a matter of fact, "Luther's concept of Christian freedom democratized the ecclesiastical structure of the faith by rejecting a hierarchy among believers." (Ibid. 783) The denial of hierarchy is fundamental not only for understanding Puritan life but becomes even more meaningful when looking at later decades such as the 18th century where individualism and the self-made man as one of the key components of the American Dream were born.

The Puritans came with hope for a better life, had a vision of a country where they could live in freedom and started over new. All of these elements laid the foundation, the primary layer of a complex and ever-changing construct that has become known as the American Dream. The individual concepts and their interpretation, for instance freedom, have changed repeatedly over time. Today, the common sense of feeling or being free does not necessarily include any kind of religious aspect whereas back then the wish to break free in a religious sense was the essence of the term. But even the Puritans did have more than one interpretation of freedom: On the one hand it could mean “subjection to authority” as John Winthrop, founder of the Massachusetts Bay colony, put it on the other hand freedom meant “to cast off such tawdriness and sloth”, meaning the hierarchical rule of Great Britain’s authorities, two contradictory ideas at the same time. (Cullen 2003, 21) The more Puritan split groups came into being, the more individual ideas and visions emerged in the newly founded land.

In many ways “Puritanism contributed much to the evolving political, social, and economic design for the framework that was to later support the American Dream.” (Caldwell 59) Of course, Puritanism must not be seen as the one and only defining movement that shaped the dream but its general “formative influence on America’s national character” is essential. (Kessler 776) Subsequent decades will reveal linkages to this defining and formative historical epoch of US American history.

As they felt more and more at home, Puritan leaders also started to structure their colonies politically. Important historical documents that were not written until the next century have their roots in Puritan politics that “formed the basis for American constitutionalism.” (Kessler 784) Furthermore, the mythical character of the American Dream that becomes increasingly evident also in later decades traces back to Puritanism due to the fact that even at that time people were willing “to gamble everything for the sake of a vision.” (Cullen 2003, 18) When they left England, they did not know what their imagined, free land would look like. The only thing they had on their side was a strong will and the belief in God. ”In the process, they accomplished the core task in the achievement of any American Dream: they became masters of their own destiny.” (Ibid.) The aspect of being one’s own master leads directly to the 19th century, the time when self-made men gained the upper hand of the country. But before going into detail here, the chronological order will be maintained and the 18th century, a time of change on the one and stabilization on the other hand

will be examined. One last quote sums up the events of the beginning of US American history quite well:

Everything was then slowly cooked in the crude cauldron of a new continent while the vast new land added its own unique, frontier ingredients to strongly flavor an already complex brew. The American Dream would simmer for over 300 years. (Caldwell 55)

2.2 The 18th century

During the 18th century several important occurrences helped to shape the American Dream. This chapter will introduce three essential events in order to understand the Dream better. Firstly, the frontier movement that started soon after the first immigrants came to America shall be unfolded. Secondly, the importance of the Declaration of Independence for the American Dream will be explained. Finally, the significance of individualism in connection to the American Dream will be discussed. Furthermore, it shall be illustrated that the ambiguity of the American Dream that started with the Puritans in the 17th century, draws through the 18th century, too. The fact that this ambiguity is an inherent element of the mythic character of the American Dream will be discussed in chapter 5.

2.2.1 Westward movement

The 18th century was a time of movement in the United States. As more and more groups of immigrants landed on the eastern parts of the country, the western expansion was nonavoidable. Eastern colonies started to occupy more land; the frontier movement got started and lasted for many decades.

From the founding of the first colonies until the Census Bureau in 1890 stated that there was no longer an area or line of unsettled land left in the United States, there had been Americans living on the frontier. (Kellogg 320)

The term “frontier” as explained in the *Oxford American Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus* refers to three different statements. In this case, point two, “the furthest part of land that has been settled” and three, “the limit of what is known about a subject or area of activity“ apply likewise. (328) Stories of the frontier always describe living there as “dangerous and difficult”, still, the fascination of discovering new, untouched land certainly was a great motivation for people to explore the West. (Kellogg 312) Furthermore, the vision of a better land at the end of the frontier raised

hope. Westward expansion was understood as the chance to start over new. For many, westward movement represented “escape from the bonds of the past [...] scorn for older society” (Turner quoted in Caldwell 38). But soon the termination of the “bondage of the past” was not the only reason to explore the western regions of the country. (Caldwell 60) The new exploited parts of the country and as the other side of the continent seemed to offer treasures of the soil in large numbers.

[D]iscoveries of such highly valuable natural resources as gold and oil suggested a place of endless opportunities ready to be seized by subsequent generations. (Schnicke 15)

In a nutshell, the frontier movement indicated a break with the past and the discovery of untouched land simultaneously. As the historian Frederick Jackson Turner described it, the frontier had an influence on the American people and helped to shape the American personality due to the fact that it offered the chance of “continually begin[ning] over again.” (Turner 2) He describes:

This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities [...] furnish[es] the forces dominating the American character. (Ibid.)

Until today, the West of the United States is seen as a (more) special place than any other area. Nowadays, as every corner of the country has officially been explored it is still the West that is believed to be sublime in various ways. Truly, the West bears special powers because many people want it to be special. The representation of Western landscapes in many modern films or TV-series often presents it as extraordinarily beautiful and stunning. As Limerick claims:

[...] Americans wanting the West to be a remedy, a cure and a restorative, wanting the West to make them feel young, vigorous, clean, and replenished again. (287)

In addition, going westward in the United States and achieving the American Dream often accompany each other. Caldwell claims that “we can see the importance of the frontier in the shaping of the American Dream”. (60) The display of the western landscape via movies or TV-series very often helps to get the idea of the Dream across, to fully understand its dimension as the West is as vast and diverse like the American Dream.

2.2.2 The Declaration of Independence

While the frontier moved into the Western parts of the land, others engaged in laying written foundations of US American history. Although British colonists

decided to leave Great Britain, they had – at least in the beginning - been proud of remaining part of the British Empire. Laws introduced by the British Government such as the Stamp Act in 1765 and the Declaratory Act one year later, however, led to several revolutions by the new settlers. After numerous battles, thirteen American colonies that had been established by then officially broke away from the British Empire by signing the Declaration of Independence. (*Liberty* Episode 1)

This declaration became one of the, if not *the*, “founding document of the American regime” and “articulates the American philosophy of government” up to the present day. (Gerber ix)

The regenerating influence of our Declaration of Independence has proved far greater than they could have foreseen who first subscribed it. Thirteen colonies of America, three millions of people, in shaking off the yoke of British allegiance, only began the work of which a single century opens the vista realization. (Schouler 82)

This “regenerating influence” was a milestone in the former US American history and is used as never-ending motivator in political campaigns and speeches of today’s leading American politicians. The Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4th in 1776, was formulated and written exclusively by the Virginian Thomas Jefferson who was described as being

skilful with the pen, familiar with all the points in controversy, eminently able to make the better reason appear so and withal the youngest member of the committee. (Ibid. 78)

Although 56 people from altogether 13 colonies signed the Declaration, “[n]ot a ringing phrase or word in it, except possibly in the two closing sentences, clinks of other metal” than Jefferson’s. (Ibid. 81) Some people think of Jefferson’s words as personal self-fulfillment, others state that he only brought ideas to paper that had already ruled the country for a long time.

In his view, the basic principles of our national government were “spread throughout society before its time, existed independently of it, and only had to be modified” to call to life. (Kessler 784)

His vision for the country might have existed before, but it was him who “crystallized these “self-evident truths,” and John Adams who contended earnestly for them in discussion.” (Schouler 84) Jefferson probably had not thought that the words he chose to explain why New England should become independent and not stay under the rule of British government anymore would gain immense popularity even to people in the 21st century. Especially the beginning of the second paragraph has

become extremely familiar in numerous forms, the original one as well as those who add new meaning to it by (re)interpreting it.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.²

By formulating this phrase the way he did he was, according to Caldwell, “simply giving voice to the American Dream.” (69) His belief that “all human beings have an equal right to freedom” (Kessler 777) makes the presence and link to primal components of the American Dream such as hope, freedom and liberty.

Nonetheless, it has to be said the terms Jefferson described, for example “all men”, have never been clarified and defined. This term, for instance, meant only “civilized white males” (Cullen 2003, 51) and this meaning has neither been changed radically nor been interpreted in a new way for a very long time. On the one hand the Declaration guaranteed the same rights to everyone on the other the question was who is everyone? The general term “all men” is only one of those articulated by Jefferson that led to numerous debates about its interpretation. Due to the fact that the “deepest promises at the center of American political life” are anchored in this document, it is important to think about its original meaning. (Burt 731) Although there might have been “a logic to their [Founding Fathers] American Dream”, the Declaration of Independence is deeply ambiguous the closer one looks at it. (Cullen 2003, 51) In short, “their American Dream and the suppositions that underlay it are largely beside the point.” (Ibid. 53) What Cullen is referring to might be the issue of slavery. In the first draft of the Declaration Jefferson criticized the British King George for continuing slave trade and furthermore restricting the slave’s liberty in various ways. (Finkelman 140) For reasons that the colonies wanted to reach agreement concerning the separation from Britain as soon as possible, the passage on slavery was simply left out in order to avoid any debates on that issue. Apparently two completely different opinions on the matter of slavery were opposed as some of the signers of the Declaration were slaver holders themselves which contradicted others who signed it. To be exact, the Declaration of Independence did not apply to every human being, not even to every white American in the same way. (Burt 742) Therefore, it was only a

² <<http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/index.htm>>

question of time when issues such as slavery and racism would come up again and unfold to full extent.

2.2.3 Benjamin Franklin and the myth of the self-made man

Benjamin Franklin was 70 years old and the oldest member of the Continental Congress when he signed the Declaration of Independence. Apart from being a member of the Congress and signer of one of the most important documents in American history his personal life story has become “one of the best, and best-known, of all American success stories.” (Milhollen 162)

Franklin was brought up in a big family and not very well educated, yet, with the help of self-determined principles, hard work and a focused mind he worked himself up and therefore, “[m]ore than any other Founding Father [...] embodied the ideal of upward mobility.” (Cullen 2003, 62) He played a key role in the Revolutionary War and became a famous publisher. The author Jim Powell claims that Franklin can be perceived as the inventor of the American Dream. Franklin’s “personal responsibility, intellectual curiosity, honesty, persistence, and thrift”³ were the principles incorporated by him and the core of any self-made man which again becomes one of the key elements of the American Dream. Franklin’s conviction was the fact that every person had the ability to shape one’s own life according to his or her personal visions regardless of the family you are born in or the education you received. Strong will and motivation could get you anywhere you want.

Benjamin Franklin laid the foundation for the self-made man of America. Within the next centuries many others followed his example and further defined the American Dream. If one tries to classify Franklin’s American Dream according to the levels already discussed in the first part of this chapter, it can be located somewhere between individual and social level “with a particular focus on the social significance of a person as the ultimate key to individual happiness.” (Schnicke 16)

Certainly there are more aspects of the 18th century American Dream than the ones I discussed here. However, in order to understand the evolution of the Dream and how it changed over time, the frontier movement, the Declaration of Independence and

³ <<http://www.thefreemanonline.org/features/benjamin-franklin-the-man-who-invented-the-american-dream/print/>>

Benjamin Franklin as popular “self-made man” can be regarded as particularly influential. In addition, during the 18th century there

was growing something of great importance: the psychology of American individualism that would form the underpinning of the American Dream. (Caldwell 2011, 62f)

This individualism somehow replaced the 17th century feeling of community as it allows to “isolate [oneself] from the mass” and to follow individual dreams and ideas. (Kessler 787) In consequent chapters, individuality is again turned into community thinking, an idea especially the 21st century and the time after 9/11 is built on.

2.3 The 19th century

The 19th century did not add many completely unknown elements to the already complex construct of the American Dream. America was “on its way to becoming a world power” (Caldwell 45) and the time between 1800 and 1900 brought a “shift in priorities” and turned specific key features of the Dream upside down. (Kessler 788) Materialism became more important to people than the idealistic vision of freedom and liberty, economic changes led to the Industrial Revolution and Horatio Alger became the master of the idea of the self-made man who brought Franklin’s concept to perfection.

2.3.1 The Industrial Revolution – Materialism and the American Dream

As already described, the 18th century highlighted the idealistic side of the American Dream with core elements that had been part of it since the very beginning of US American history. However,

[b]y the end of the Virginia Dynasty in the 1820s, economic changes in America had shattered the Arcadian dreams of Jefferson and his followers. (Caldwell 76)

Although the dream of material wealth, precisely, getting rich was nothing new (e.g. the frontier movement that aimed at exploiting natural resources for increasing personal prosperity), the 19th century seemed the right time for it to flourish.

When the term “American Dream” was tried to be defined in the beginning, a material side was juxtaposed an individual side. For the first time in history this

material dimension gains more attention than any other side of the American Dream. Needless to say without critic from countless people:

[...] the material aspect of the dream is a corruption of its social vision; [...] it is an illusion through which inequalities are maintained and class realities are concealed; [...] it fosters individual achievement at the expense of social progress; [...] it supports ruthless plutocracy; [...] it equates personal fulfillment with material gain, and [...] it results in a narrowly selfish definition of success. (Matterson 10)

The “social vision” alluding to the idealistic or non-material side of the dream, however, would not be destroyed forever. The debate on equality would rise soon in order to reinstate the question of whether the material or social side of the Dream are more important.

The frontier movement existed until the year of 1890 when there were officially no unsettled places in the United States anymore. (Kellogg 321) Still, the 19th century has been a time when immigrants from all over the world arrived in the United States to make it their new home. (Barney 257) With the continuous stream of immigrants cities started to grow. Additionally, new technological inventions swamped over from Europe and led to drastic changes of life and work in the United States. America soon offered new systems of transportation, machines that relieved farmers and new jobs in mining, the textile industry and various others.

The Industrial Revolution had arrived in America, and with it came a new kind of American Dream. The new dream was material to the core, and it promised enormous wealth. (Caldwell 78)

The new American Dream described a completely new lifestyle that ended up in (personal) success and went hand in hand with materialism. (Caldwell 77) Having said that, let us take a brief look at the issue of individualism and how the concept of the self-made man continued to develop throughout this century.

2.3.2 Horatio Alger’s *Success Narrative* – The era of self-made men

The 18th century notion of “individual success was consistently exemplified and embodied by successful Americans” also throughout the 19th century. (Schnicke 15)

[S]elf improvement, cut loose from its original Calvinist moorings, remains a recognizable trait in the American character and is considered an indispensable means for the achievement of any American Dream. (Cullen 2003, 31)

The idea of working oneself up “from obscurity to success” was portrayed vividly through the stories of Horatio Alger. (Caldwell 42) Alger was born in 1832 and

counts as “one of the most widely read of all American authors”. (Matterson 8) He published over 130 novels that revolved around the orphan Ragged Dick who works as a shoe polisher in the city of New York. The gist of the stories is “that honest hard work can overcome poverty.”⁴

Ragged Dick tells of an orphaned shoeshine boy, Dick Hunter, who lives on the streets of Manhattan but eventually achieves a respectable position through determination, hard work, thrift and the ability to seize good fortune when it appears. (Matterson 8)

Alger’s special kind of novel became popular under the name “success narrative” and became popular through Alger’s narratives. Success narratives can include certain key elements “such as concentration on the decision to leave home, a consideration of the alternative life” and/ or “a contrast of two points in the protagonist’s life”. (Ibid. 216) They are inevitably connected to the American Dream as they represent “the American ideal of self-achievement” (Ibid. 9), “a location associated with failure or poverty” (Ibid. 216), “a character’s rise in the world” (Ibid. 215) and other aspects or occurrences that are part of or define the American Dream. Alger’s sense of self-achievement or self-improvement focuses in the individual only. He is exclusively interested in the person’s own progress and never in the concomitant circumstances, for instance, the social environment the character lives in. (Ibid. 9)

Tocqueville argues that US American citizens of the 19th century were “self-centered rather than community-oriented and considered their fate to rest entirely in their own hands.” (Kessler 787) The community feeling was something very basic to the American Dream and came along with the Puritan settlements of the 1620s/ 30s and would return at a later point in history. During the 19th century, however, the individual stood in the middle of the concept of the American Dream.

By the 1830s “self-interest properly understood” had virtually replaced Christian love as the generally accepted basis of American virtue. (Kessler 787)

Christian love, nevertheless, has always been an integral part of US American culture and society. As will be referred to later, politicians such as Barack Obama and modern Hollywood films like to highlight Christianity as one of the country’s cornerstones that has always been there.

⁴<<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/Alger%2C%2BHoratio?q=Horatio+Alger>>

To come back to the rise of self-made men, an example for a non-fictional self-made man would be Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of the United States. He was famous for representing the rights of the common man and therefore gave the American Dream a broader meaning in the sense of being less specific and potentially applying to everyone. As a democrat and the first President who did not come from Virginia or Massachusetts, he defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans and became a national hero. Thousands of people came to see his inauguration in 1828 because they felt he was one of them, a common man.⁵ Jackson was at least as important in defining the American Dream as Benjamin Franklin half a century earlier. Even at his lifetime he was described “as the quintessential embodiment of upward mobility.” (Cullen 2003, 66) What people loved about him was the fact that he started out poor and ended up being the head of the nation. He demonstrated that no matter where you were born or how you were raised, strong thoughts and an iron will can help you to get anything and become anything you want.

In the course of American history there are countless other examples of self-made men. These days, the most famous and relevant person certainly is the current President of the United States, Barack Obama. Though he has been very well educated, as the first black Head of State he addresses people on a different, one could say an additional level. But before turning to Obama let us glimpse at the presumably most influential black African-American who laid the foundation for equality in the United States as well as the upcoming century in general.

2.4 The 20th century

Americans born in the 20th century experienced an exciting decade. The beginning was labeled by wealth whereas from 1929 onwards a great economic crisis marked the US American nation. Hand in hand with the rapidly changing economic and political situation the American Dream took on even more multifarious dimensions. Influences from Europe did not only lead to the “American Renaissance” but to the creation as well as the spread of the term “American Dream” itself. Completely new movements, for example the transcendentalists, tried to highlight the idealistic side of

5 <<http://www.biography.com/people/andrew-jackson-9350991>>

the American Dream while the materialistic side seemed to have come to an end all alone.

2.4.1 The Roaring Twenties

In the 1920s the economy of the United States was denoted by remarkable growth. The era is sometimes referred to as “the beginning of modern America”⁶. The work of new writers, architects and musicians flourished, for many the twenties have become famous as “Golden Age” or “Jazz Age”. The Industrial Revolution kept on spreading, the population grew and the nation got richer and richer.

As the nation grew and prospered in the twentieth century, the myth of American superiority supported the American dream of Progress. The United States of America saw itself as victor over nature, over material wealth, and finally over other nations [...] (Caldwell 45)

This period offered a lot of material for the scientists’ discourse about the American Dream. One of the most famous books that have been written in the twenties was F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Interestingly, he does not praise America and the American Dream for its greatness, in fact his “scrutiny of the American dream is sharp – and pointed directly at the heart of American ideology.” (Hearne 189) His analysis of the American society of that time revealed the duality and ambiguity of the Dream. It illustrated how hard and unrealistic it actually is to reach it “as we are ceaselessly borne back into the past”. (Ibid.) There are countless interpretations of Fitzgerald’s analysis, for instance, that the American Dream in the *Great Gatsby* is described as something “withering” in modern society but that it used to be uncorrupted. (Matterson in Dähling 4) Another view would be that Fitzgerald criticized the always unrealistic illusion of the American Dream. (Ibid.) Confidently, it can be argued that he wanted to express the contradiction(s) within the idea of the American Dream, “the conflict between illusion and reality that is intimately connected within American identity.” (Hearne 192) *The Great Gatsby* must be seen as groundbreaking work not because of its storyline or characters (which are in no sense fatuous and naïve) but because of its inherent critique of a widespread myth, the American Dream, packaged in a nice language with numerous allusions to its beauty on the one hand and remarks on its negative aspects on the other. Fitzgerald vividly

⁶ <<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1564.html>>

described “the duality inherent in the American dream”. (Ibid. 194) This duality will especially be dealt with in chapter 5 but now another important 20th century aspect connected to the American Dream will be examined.

2.4.2 Not only free but equal

After 1862 and President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation slavery ceased to exist in the United States. The reasons why he was against slavery and that his decision (together with other matters that had long divided the country) led to the bloodiest war in US American history, the Civil War (1861-65), will not be discussed here. Important for the development of the American Dream is the fact that after slavery was prohibited, segregation started and deeply cleaved the population in two. (Nolen 1) For one hundred years colored people had to use different waiting rooms, were restricted to specific places on busses, not allowed to serve Whites in the restaurant and much more. Since the beginning of history white men (and after Lincoln’s presidency *all* white men) were superior to colored members of society. In order to change this Dr. Martin Luther King Junior was convinced that after slavery was abolished, “[s]egregation, which remained alive, could only be conquered by equality.” (Cullen 2003, 125) King wanted to make the American Dream accessible to “all men” including Blacks as well as women.

In 1963 King delivered his famous “I have a Dream” speech and explained that his personal dream is “deeply rooted in the American dream.” (Echols 7) With references to the Declaration of Independence (“all men are created equal”) he questioned the words the nation was built on almost 200 years ago. He contended he hoped “that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed” that was written down in the Declaration. (Echols 16) The reason why he cited the Declaration of Independence is simple:

[...] equality is one of the core values of everyday American life, [...] its promises extend to everyone. If they don’t, then not everybody is eligible for the American Dream – and one of the principal attractions of the American Dream, and its major moral underpinning, is that everyone is eligible [...] (Cullen 2003, 108)

Furthermore, King addressed the issues of segregation and oppression of the black man by bringing numerous examples of according his wishful thinking and dream to the individual states of the US.

One aspect Martin Luther King had in common with the religious founders of America was the idea to pass on freedom and equality to the next generation. When the Puritans arrived on the eastern shores they also hoped to find a country where they and their children could live in freedom and liberty.

In comparison to the last century where materialism gained the upper hand of the American Dream, the vision of the 20th century – at least in terms of equality – seemed to be more idealistic and closer to the original Dream.

2.4.3 The “American Dream” – a term is finally coined

Although the vision existed since the first New Englanders settled down in America, the term “American Dream” was coined in 1914 only. The book *Drift and Mastery* by Walter Lippmann included the term “American Dream” for the first time. (White and Hanson 2f) Later, in 1931, the historian James Truslow Adams published *The Epic of America* where he described the frontier as source of the Dream and popularized the phrase by excessively repeating it. (Guimond 107) Until Adam’s book the term “American Dream” was not common or widely used but soon became incredibly popular. (Cullen 2003, 4f) This has not changed until today as political speeches, advertisements and popular culture are dripped with either allusions to the term or usage of the “American Dream” as such. What Adams wanted to describe with the “American Dream” in the first place was the “die-hard optimism” that “carried the nation from its primitive beginnings into the twentieth century and remained the source of its continued success.” (White and Hanson 3)

The moment when the term became popular for the first time can be identified as very important. It was a moment when political as well as economic uncertainty and instability ruled the nation. (Keil 32) The years between 1929 and 1933, also known as the Great Depression, indicate the greatest economic downturn the United States had experienced so far. (Robbins 11) Hartmut Keil argues that it is exactly at times like this when a society’s traditional values are questioned. (32) He further explains that “American Dream” is an emotionally loaded term that appeals to our emotional level. (Ibid. 14ff) Additionally, the three times, past, present and future coincide in this one term. (Ibid. 33) As will be referred to in the next chapter, especially the future

plays a crucial role when it comes to using “American Dream” in political speeches and (optimistic) debates about the development of the nation.

Another important term that became popular approximately at the same time (1940s) which is inevitably connected to the American Dream was “American Renaissance”. Renaissance in general means “a revival of or renewed interest in something”.⁷ Unlike in Europe, the American Renaissance characterized a time when America became more self-confident about itself and independent from Europe. According to Francis Otto Matthiessen the American Renaissance is defined by five main authors: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. All of them actually lived in the 19th century but their ideas and thoughts increased in importance during US American history, especially in connection to the American Dream. The so-called Transcendentalists consisting of the five (and more) authors mentioned before vehemently refused the material side of the Dream. The basic idea of Transcendentalism is the following:

People, men and women equally, have knowledge about themselves and the world around them that "transcends" or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel.⁸

As can be seen this notion has nothing to do with material goods. The aim of the Transcendentalists was a truly democratic America and this could not happen, at least according to Ralph Waldo Emerson “until the idealistic side of the American Dream reassumed its rightful place above its materialistic other half.” (Caldwell 85) Moreover, the transcendentalists demanded that in order to reach democracy government should be abolished. (Caldwell 86) Henry David Thoreau was the one who labeled the period of Transcendentalism forever by experimenting on himself.

For two years Thoreau [...] went to Walden Pond, built a hut, and tried to live self-sufficiently without the trappings or interference of society. Later, when he wrote about the simplicity and unity of all things in nature, his faith in humanity, and his sturdy individualism, Thoreau reminded everyone that life is wasted pursuing wealth and following social customs. Nature can show that "all good things are wild and free."⁹

This passage reveals individualism to be an integral part of Transcendentalism. What will be demonstrated in one of the succeeding chapters is that some Hollywood

⁷ <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/Renaissance?q=renaissance>>

⁸ <<http://www.ushistory.org/us/26f.asp>>

⁹ <<http://www.ushistory.org/us/26f.asp>>

movies dealing with the American Dream put individualism (in the sense of being and feeling free) at the fore of the action. One of the films that will be discussed in detail presents the main character living self-reliantly in the wilderness without having contact to neither his family nor friends. The reference to Thoreau and his experiment cannot be denied as he tries to live on his own in harmony with nature.

We can conclude that “[t]he physics of the American Dream, in the late twentieth century, clearly reflected progress and decline” at the same time. (Kimmage 33) Progress clearly in terms of equality and the issue of de-segregation. Decline in terms of materialism and wealth of the country as a whole. The century can be resumed as dynamic and changing. In the beginning, the material side of the American Dream was predominant, from the 1930s onwards more attention was paid to the idealistic side. Although the struggle between these two sides of the Dream has always been integral to it, the 20th century displayed it more blatant than other decades.

2.5 The American Dream in the 21st century

If farmers and blacksmiths could win independence from an empire, if immigrants could leave behind everything they knew for a better life on our shores, if women could be dragged to jail for seeking the vote, if a generation could defeat a depression and find greatness for all time, if a young creature could lift us to the mountain top with his righteous dream, and if proud Americans can be who they are and boldly stand at the altar with who they love, then surely, surely, we can give everyone in this country a fair chance at that great American Dream. (Michelle Obama, DNC Speech 2012, 25:26)

The historical overview of the American Dream demonstrated that in some decades the material side was more present and sometimes the spiritual or idealistic side. The question now that we arrived in the 21st century is: How is it today? Which elements of the Dream seem to be most important? How and what do people think about the American Dream and is it still perceived as target that needs to be aimed for? Apart from all these general questions there is also one aspect that will be looked at closely, namely the development of the American Dream after the terrorist attacks of September 2001. What will be examined is what exactly happened to the idea, the concept and the myth “American Dream” after 9/11. Due to his actuality, the current President of the United States, Barack Obama, will occupy a special place in this chapter as he can be described as the most prominent person who pro- and reclaimed the American Dream currently.

John K. White is very much interested in the American Dream in the 21st century and “wondered whether the “American century” had come to an abrupt and premature end.” (43) With the attacks on September 11th in 2001, the United States demonstrated to the world that it was a country vulnerable and able to be attacked as any other nation in the world. Some people argue that on that day, the American Dream died forever, others claim that it was shattered but would never die and that the time has come to prove even more that the American Dream does exist and can be an anchor for people in any situation.

The most crucial role of what to think and how to feel towards the American Dream is played by the head of the nation, the current President of the United States. From Washington to Obama, the American President has always represented an ideal the American society could follow. (Atwater 121) In his article *Twilight's Gleaming: The American Dream and the Ends of Republics* Cullen contended that “[a]ctually, no one is more aware of his status as an embodiment of the American Dream than that president” (22).

Before looking at Barack Obama and his attempt to reclaim the American Dream, the time shortly after the 9/11 attacks should be analyzed as this was a threatening moment not only for the country as such but even more so for the American Dream.

3 The American Dream after 9/11

[...] the events of September 11 dominated Bush's administration, and in the wake of this trauma Bush failed to articulate a vision beyond fear: His optimism about projecting the American Dream into the Middle East, of bringing democracy and prosperity to Iraq, was shown to be a false and possibly a phony optimism. [...] Bush had neither a biography nor an agenda in coherent harmony with the American Dream, something especially evident when September 11 fears started to dissipate in his second term. (Kimmage 35)

This passage shows that as President of the United States, you do not only have to promote the American Dream optimistically but the way you "articulate" it has to be authentic and trustworthy as well. George W. Bush Jr. apparently was not the best President to deliver convincing speeches on the American Dream and to motivate a whole nation not to give up because "in no way did [he] embody the American Dream" (Ibid. 34). Barack Obama, by contrast, was – and still is – a convincing public speaker. At the moment, this role is being tested on a regular basis as it is election time. Furthermore, he is one of those Presidents whose personal story proves that the Dream exists and that, if you work hard and never give up, can even become President of one of the most powerful countries in the world. The question how the events of 9/11 interfere with presidential candidates can be answered by referring to Kimmage who explained how endangered the American Dream was after the attacks:

The progressive nature of the American Dream – more homes, more value, more opportunity – ran up against a bitter reality at just the moment Americans were going to the polls. At no time since the Second World War had the physics of the American Dream been so bad. (Kimmage 36)

Physics here indicate not only material aspects of the Dream; it certainly means that the whole great myth American Dream has suffered from 9/11. Numerous studies of the American Dream show that "pessimism [is] increasing across all demographic groups." (Zogby 115) The Dream is no longer seen as a realistic idea that merits to be aimed for. Here are three examples from surveys of the last years:

- 75 percent claim the American Dream is not as attainable today as it was when George W. Bush was elected president in 2000. (Zogby International 2008 in White and Hanson 11)
- 54 percent believe the American Dream has become "impossible" for most people to achieve. (Opinion Research Corporation 2006 in White and Hanson 11)

- In 2010 less people think that they can still reach the American Dream than in 2001. (Zogby 114)

Hence, it is very important that the president persuades with “credible optimism” which is definitely one of Obama’s biggest strengths. (Burnham 1989 in White 46) He incorporates various elements that are essential ingredients of the American Dream: Hope and optimism, belief in a brighter future and a personal life story as proof of the Dream. Moreover,

Obama understood that one of the most important functions of any chief executive is to “speak American”, as former Bill Clinton speechwriter David Kusnet so memorably stated (Kusnet 1992 in White 41).

This aspect is closely connected to the previous mentioned one as it means “paying homage to the American Dream and using his personal story to illustrate its staying power.” (Ibid.) As his wife Michelle Obama pointed out in her 2012 DNC¹⁰ Speech on September 5th: “Barack knows the American Dream because he’s lived it.” (17:40) In times like this, it seems to be especially important to look up to a President who has been through many hard years but neither stopped believing nor gave up on the vision that one day all his struggle would be rewarded.

In some way, Obama can be compared to the former President Franklin D. Roosevelt who became the country’s leader in 1933, four years after the stock market crash. Roosevelt understood it to be “provisional[ly]” optimistic towards the US citizens and declared that “[t]he American Dream would come in the future, when the Depression was over.” (Kimmage 31) As has been brought up earlier, “[a]t the core of many American Dreams [...] is an insistence that history doesn’t matter, that the future matters far more than the past.” (Cullen 2003, 184) As Roosevelt, Obama also became President when the country was heavily indebted and as Roosevelt did he focused on the future. Due to his personal story, his enthusiasm as well as authenticity “[o]n the terrain of the American Dream, neither McCain nor Palin could compete with Obama.” (Ibid. 36) Another important aspect of the person Barack Obama as such is his roots. Since his father was born in Kenya and his mother in Kansas, USA, he is the first Afro-American President of the United States.¹¹ As elaborated in the

¹⁰ Democratic National Convention

¹¹ <<http://www.biography.com/people/barack-obama-12782369>>

Note: The term ‘Afro-American’ will not be discussed here in more detail as it is of minor importance for the specific focus of the paper.

previous chapter, the story of African Americans and the American Dream has always been a special one.

For much of our history, African Americans and women were excluded from its promise. It would be left to Martin Luther King and feminist leaders to enlarge the American Dream to include themselves and to encourage their constituencies to have a stake in its success. (White and Hanson 1)

Obama made it clear, and due to his skin color more than any other President before him, “that the American Dream was not given to one race and denied to another.” (Kimmage 38) He demonstrated with his speeches that there is not just one American Dream shared by everyone, but that there are many Dreams, consisting of different aspects that overlap to some extent but are “deeply personal” and subjective on the other. (Cullen 2011, 20) “In some important sense, there have been as many American Dreams as there have been Americans” (Ibid.). To give all American citizens an equal chance of reaching their personal American Dream is one of the motives of promoting it. (see quote Michelle Obama)

For Obama, hope was (and still is) one of *the* defining terms of all American Dreams. As Atwater described it “[n]ow with the advent of Barack Obama, hope may be on the horizon again.” (123) *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, published in 2006, is one of the President’s books that deal with numerous positive sides of the American Dream. In this book, Obama talks about “self-reliance, self-improvement, risk taking, drive discipline, temperance, hard work, thrift, and personal responsibility”, all aspects that are positively connected with the Dream. (White 41) Throughout his 2008 “Yes, we can” campaign Obama “expresse[d] an unfailing, steadfast sense of optimism and hope.” (Atwater 128) But even before that, in 2004, he purported the importance of hope in his political speeches and books. (e.g. “Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or do we participate in a politics of hope?” (Obama 2004 in Atwater 125) or “It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs. The hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores.” (Ibid.).) Hope and future are inevitably connected because the first necessarily implies the latter. Hope for Obama means that “all of us will one day prosper.” (Atwater 125)

An additional feature stressed by all political leaders in the past and fundamental in terms of the American Dream is religion.

Since Obama had propelled to national public attention as possible Democratic candidate, he repeatedly spoke about his personal faith and his relation to Jesus Christ [...]. (Cortiel Introduction IX)

Christian faith as basic belief of the whole nation will always have a special place in history, politics and other (cultural) areas. No matter how many immigrants bring contrary religious views and beliefs with them, Christianity is what the nation is built on. In one of the contemporary films analyzed in the next chapter, Christianity with values such as Christian charity and family significantly defines life of US American people. It is demonstrated that the belief not only in oneself but also in a (Christian) God is somehow related to achieving the American Dream, that living one's life according to Christian values can improve the chances to reach it.

To return to the role Presidents played in the past it can be concluded that

[t]he political party in closer touch with the American Dream is more likely to acquire and to hold on to power. The same cultural aspirations that aided Ronald Reagan in 1980 later aided Barack Obama in 2008. (Kimmage 28)

Whether it was Reagan who defied Carter in 1980 because he was more convinced of the Dream, Bill Clinton in the 1990s or Nixon, both being specifically optimistic and motivating by proclaiming it (Kimmage 31ff), two identifying characteristics can be determined in the President-American Dream correlation: One, the more optimistic the President is about the American Dream, the more popular he becomes. This very often goes hand in hand with the personal past of the political candidate as he can be identified as good or bad embodiment of the Dream. Two, the more power to convince and proclaim the Dream a President has the better.

Obama certainly fulfils both characteristic and furthermore has the chance to prove that his abilities are needed and visions for the country are great. As John Zogby explains:

Presidents only attain greatness when the nation is under duress. Obama has that opportunity. Perhaps his most important measure will be whether he helped preserve the American Dream and steered it further in the direction of personal fulfillment. (116)

John K. White and Sarah L. Hanson agree with Zogby by claiming that when Obama came into office in 2008 it was one of those moments in US American history when "the American promise has been threatened once more" (Obama 2008 in White 5) because "the nation was mired in a recession judged by most economists to have been the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s." (Ibid.) Obama became

President in the middle of an already existing (economic) crisis that he had to pay much attention to. (Zogby 113) In contrary to his predecessors “Obama is navigating in waters different than any other US leader.” (Ibid.)

The hope expressed by Obama that became obvious in his DNC Speech in 2012 again, finds an echo in the US American people who see Obama as the living proof of hope. The big hope before the 2008 election was that “Obama would reclaim and revitalize the American Dream once more” (White 43) and that he is able to “renew the American Dream” (White and Hanson 12). It would leap to the conclusion to assert whether he managed to reactivate the Dream or not, however, he clearly “brought a new element to its meaning.” (Kimmage 37) After 9/11 the American Dream took on a new spin and with Obama’s election this spin gained even more speed. In which direction the “new American Dream” of the 21st century will lead Americans and their nation will become clearer soon as new Presidential elections are approaching. (Zogby 106)

3.1 9/11, Exceptionalism, and the American Dream

One question necessarily comes up when talking and writing about the American Dream that deals with its exceptionalism. In how far the American Dream can be defined as typically American and not as, for example French or Spanish, will be elaborated in this chapter with the main focus on the time after 9/11 and the examination of how the attacks influenced the American Dream’s exceptional character.

If the Dream includes aspects such as having a family, getting rich and being successful, one has to admit that these are more or less goals everyone pursuits in life. However, the American Dream is often described as being typically American and not universal or applying to other nations in the same way.

As the historical overview suggested, the American Dream has been an integral part of US American history and culture since the Puritans’ arrival. Since then, several events, e.g. Vietnam War, endangered the exceptional role of the nation’s holy Dream. 9/11 was by far the greatest attack on the United States, great in the sense that there was a immediate worldwide distribution of the videos and pictures that came into being on that day. As I already explained the reason why I chose movies as tool

to analyze the American Dream after 9/11 is that they are made of thousands of images and images have the ability to stick in our minds with great intensity. At least this is what happened on 9/11. Every person is able to easily retrieve pictures from his/ her memory that were taken on that day. Due to the fact that these images burned into our minds immediately, the attacks will never be forgotten. That day is accompanied by countless pictures and these might trigger specific emotions such as the feeling that the USA's special role was in danger.

The question of exceptionality also ties in with the analysis of the Hollywood films. A positive promotion of the American Dream through movies can help to make up the decline, the role in danger of the American Dream's exceptionality. The millions of pictures that make up final films help to promote the American Dream as they are often equipped with a range of positive connotations. There must be a reason why films portraying the American Dream in a positive way are much more popular than those dealing with negative facets of it. The close link to the mythical aspect of the Dream comes in here; people are seeing the Dream as distant goal, not knowing whether they will reach it or not which is not even important. What counts is the whole myth build up around the idea of the Dream. This mythical surrounding makes it again to something exceptional, something very special.

The reason why it is important for the USA to be seen as exceptional seems to be a complex topic that could probably be answered by looking at the combination of philosophical, economic, social and/or psychological elements. Due to the fact that in this paper exceptionality should only be evaluated according to the post 9/11 era, the historical development of the USA's exceptionality will be skipped.

A quite general explanation of the American Dream's exceptional character provides the following statement:

What makes the American Dream American is not that our dreams are any better, worse, or more interesting than anyone else's, but that we live in a country constituted of dreams, whose very justification continues to rest on it being a place where one can, for better and worse, pursue distant goals. (Cullen 182)

What Cullen refers to is the hope, the belief in something that makes the nation exceptional. "A country constituted of dreams" cumulates all imaginable dreams that make up the big fuzzy idea of the American Dream. The fact that one can "pursue distant goals" has of course nothing to do with actually reaching it but it is the vision one can hold on to that counts, a vision that stabilizes a whole country and helps

defining its exceptional character. Even President Obama said when he gave a speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 (before he was elected as Head of State) that “in no other country on earth, is my story even possible.” (Obama in Atwater 124) Hence, the USA’s special role is something public figures play with and promote in order to make the audience believe that they live in a very special place where anything is possible. Obama’s statement is a clear reference not just to the American Dream as such but to the nation that helps to keep it up.

A poll carried out in 2008 concluded that “America is unique among all nations, because it is founded on the ideals of freedom, equality, and opportunity”. (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research 2008 in White and Hanson 8) Although certainly not all (but many) nations are build on values such as “freedom, equality, and opportunity” the remaining question is in how far or why this should be regarded as something uniquely American. According to Kammen, there are at least two reasons. Firstly, the United States has an exceptional environmental situation. The Puritans thought of the country as “a site specially favored by God”, a place that “had [been] chosen to initiate the millennial Kingdom of Christ.” (8) The idea of the country as something special and extraordinary was created even before the first settlers arrived. Secondly,

the mode of production of material life in the United States has been so different from what it has been anywhere else that the social and political life here is conditioned in a unique, characteristic form and function. (DeVoto 1936 in Kammen 9)

What counts to the “mode of production” might be a reference to work on the assembly line that added a unique flavor to US American (material) life. It speeded up production and led to the USA becoming a wealth and rich country.

A fact that must be emphasized is the exceptional role America received through the representation in TV series and films. It was in the States where making movies initially gained incredible popularity and it seems natural that films shot in the USA were primarily dealing with the USA. As topics such as the economic situation with, for instance, new modes of labor were interesting for the people who watched TV as well as for those creating shows, series and film, a certain picture of and about the United States was presented via television. A representation that, for reasons that the contents dealt with almost exclusively regarded the US, highlighted its exceptional and outstanding character.

After 9/11 specific features of the American Dream were highlighted through films so that the public eye develops positive connotations to the concept of the Dream and to keep the myth alive. The same is true for the beginning of television and the targeted representation of the USA. Pictures, the basic ingredient for every film, are always an impressive way of creating opinions among a group of people. They have a huge power when it comes to designing (or adding value to) ideas in people's minds. Therefore, political campaigns are always accompanied by impressive and colorful pictures that express moods and contents better than any linguistic fine-tuning of speeches. It is the TV with its splashy advertisements and glamorous series about the US that meanwhile provides the whole world its exceptionality. For people from "outside", and by this I mean people who do not live in the US, this particular character comes across as very special, either in a positive or negative way. However,

[w]hen we examine the meaning of Americanism, we discover that Americanism is to the American not a tradition or a territory [...] but a doctrine – what socialism is to a socialist. (Higginson 1870 in Kammen 10)

After the attacks in 2001, many people claimed the American Dream was dead. Kammen who generally described "exceptionalism as a cultural phenomenon" (33) argued that the United States has never been exceptional but just different as any other country in the world differs from the rest. (Ibid. 15) An interesting statement, and with it I would like to finish the chapter on exceptionalism is Kammen's idea that after drastic events such as 9/11 "links between ideology and American exceptionalism become considerably clearer than they once were." (Ibid. 29) As ideologies are leading doctrines that help people to orientate themselves, 9/11 demonstrated how important it was to revitalize the myth of the American Dream in order to hold on to something. An ideology, in this case the belief that America was special and hard times could be overcome, has the power to stabilize a nation on the one hand and to become something substantial, almost concrete on the other. It is exactly this, a stable vision to build on to, people need after their country has been assailed.

3.2 From individualism to mass society

A further interesting evolution that happened only within the last sixty years was the trend from individualism to a common "national identity" which got strengthened

by eloquent politicians as well as advertisements. (Caldwell 43f) “Barak Obama uses the rhetoric of hope to reach a wide American audience.” (Atwater 122) In this comment two relevant aspects can be found: the significance of hope that has already been discussed and the “wide American audience” as the receiver of proclamations of everything new.

The Obama campaign’s emphasis of hope and its mantra of “yes we can” were statements of optimism translated into the language of mass politics. (Kimmage 38)

The purpose of activating US American mass society must not be discussed here as it seems to be obvious that reaching as many people as possible is the principal aim of any political campaign. But what Obama created with his “Yes, we can” campaign was not only a feeling of personal strength (i.e. to be powerful enough to reach far-off goals) but a joint sense of community. The feeling – and here we talk about an emotional condition – to belong to a group that can (or at least has the will to) change the world gives enormous power to people. At this place, Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities shall be explained in more detail.

Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* deals with the idea of “theoretical generalizations about the nation form and its future”. (Cheah viii) The gist of Anderson’s book is the concept of ‘nation’ that he describes as “imagined political community.”(Ibid. 6) He argues that each member of a society imagines him-/herself to be part of something greater, a bigger conglomerate of people who all share the same idea of a specific community, “in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.” (Ibid.) He further explains that all communities which consist of people who do not have personal contact with each other (“primordial villages of face-to-face contact”) are imagined but that they have to be differentiated according to their imagined “style”. (Ibid.) Across the planet one can find countless examples showing that societies imagine themselves in various ways, the examples Anderson provides often apply to belonging to a specific social class such as French aristocracy. Interestingly, all these imaginations share not to be “coterminous with mankind.” (Ibid. 7) This implies that each imagined community considers itself as standing apart from the rest of all other human beings in a sovereign way. Moreover, the unity all members anticipate (in thought) is believed to be “a deep, horizontal comradeship.” (Ibid.) Here, Barack Obama’s “Yes, We Can” campaign and the general concept of the American Dream fit in perfectly as it unites

heterogeneous people spread all over the country. It has always been (and will always be) the Dream “by which Americans have defined themselves in contrast to other nations.”¹² (Matterson 10) Without looking at a person’s origin, education, religious faith, family situation and race, the American Dream “permits individuals to develop their potential without reference to their background or origins.” (Ibid.) The Dream helps to keep up a specific “vision of a society” for everyone no matter whether this vision is shared by each member in the same way, an aspect that is very hard to measure (Ibid.) and a general inherent problem as Cullen suggests: “The problem with pursuing dreams, even shared ones, is that not everyone sees them in quite the same ways.” (2003, 25) In his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* he concludes that there are more American Dreams and not just one shared and static concept that pertains to all American citizens to the same extend. He repeatedly uses the phrase “American Dreams” also in his later articles. (e.g. Cullen 2011, 20)

Benedict Anderson further refers to Ernest Gellner who contends – and this seems to be evident in political campaigns in general – that “[n]ationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist.” (Gellner in Anderson 6) With the help of new slogans such as “Yes, We Can” Barack Obama did not only (re)unite the democratic population of the country, in addition he managed to create a whole new credo (promoted through the best media coverage one can imagine) for all Americans. As Michelle Obama pointed out in her DNC Speech this September, her husband cares for all people living in the States because “for Barack there is no such thing as us and them, he doesn’t care whether you’re a democrat or republican”. (22:11) The idea of struggling for a vision (the American Dream) without any kind of proof that you will ever succeed in reaching it and the concept of being part of an imagined community can definitely be compared. Both conceptions are more dynamic than stable; both imaginations are blurred with fuzzy endings and no clear-cut boundaries. It is the idea, the myth that surrounds these perceptions that makes you hold on to. As Cullen put it: “Explicit allegiance, not involuntary inheritance, is the theoretical basis of the American Dream” and maybe it

¹² The question whether or not the American Dream can be regarded as something uniquely and originally American will be treated in chapter 4.

is enough when allegiance happens on an imaginative level only. (2003, 6) As mentioned before, political candidates in the US, but the President most of all, need to be very optimistic about the nation's future and community. Obama is one of those Presidents who very much believe in the American Dream, moreover, "he expresses the need for all of us to share in the American Dream" by promoting "a sense of belonging to a broader inclusive community". (Atwater 125) He expressed the importance of being part of a community in his book *The Audacity Hope* where he substantiated the necessity to "restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict." (Obama 2006 in Atwater 126) He further contended the power of "common hopes [and] common dreams" that need to be seen as "a bond that will not break." (Ibid.) Summing up Anderson's idea in relation to Obama's campaign and the American Dream I would like to allude to where I started from, namely the 21st century shift from individuality to mass society (which started much earlier but is very popular and widespread today) as well as to what has been written in this paper so far that might lead to the conclusion that the American Dream is a cluster of countless distinct features because "whatever we perceive the individual parts of the Dream to be doesn't really matter. What matters is the overall idea." (Caldwell 36) This is true for an imagined community and applies in the same way to the American Dream even if the individual parts might look like completely different.

In summary, it can be stated that after the terrorist attacks on September 11th in 2001 the American Dream was considered to be more unrealistic and much harder to reach. Generally speaking, "[p]erhaps the twenty-first century is not a time of increasing progress toward the American Dream." (Hanson 78)

Some scientists claim "the American Dream was not dying; it was just changing." (Caldwell 36) But this seems not to be a very meaningful statement as the concept of the American Dream is dynamic and continuously changing. Today, as the present economic situation reminds of the 1930s, it can clearly be argued that especially

economic security continues to define the American Dream, the Dream itself has been broadened to include a greater sense of personal well-being and quality-of-life issues (such as having access to quality health care, working toward world peace, and reducing the harmful effects of global warming). (White and Hanson 10)

Therefore, the many American Dreams that Cullen identified at some point in his analysis develop individually, taking on more and more branched (and complex) forms and spread into countless areas of life.

Presidents as Obama who took office in (economically) difficult times have to believe in the positive contents of the American Dream. One of their main functions lies in motivating people not to give up the illusion of the Dream but to pay even more attention to it. (Keil 12)

The American Dream has always been and will always be an integral part of US American society and culture. It changes as people's thoughts change, develops in different directions all at once and is highly ambiguous. As Limerick sums it up, "The dream is unending, even if it changes its shape." (301)

The core of the Dream is made up of considerable documents as well as significant historical incidences that have happened in the past. As we are dealing with a dynamic concept the heart of the American Dream will continue to develop. What Caldwell said about the Dream in the 21st century shall be shared here as the concluding statement of the evolution of the Dream:

The new American Dream is clearly the most unrealistic dream of all: a shallow fantasy of impossible celebrity, gratuitous reward, and unwholesome heroes. (Caldwell 48)

The reference to the Dream being a "shallow fantasy" has already been touched upon when Benedict Anderson's imagined communities were explored. Due to the fact that the fantastic or mythical aspect of the Dream is of special importance, it will be referred to at several points within the next pages. Furthermore, a separate chapter will describe how the myth of the Dream is played with in contemporary Hollywood movies.

To continue with an analytical (and also more practical) look at the American Dream, the next part of this paper will deal with the representation of the Dream in selected Hollywood movies. Apart from the mythical aspect that will be examined, several cross-references to the historical development of the American Dream will be made. Each of the films contains key elements that have already been discussed and together they cover pretty much all aspects that define the American Dream. Film number one exemplifies the modern implementation of the "self-made man" and identifies hope and a strong will as core elements of the Dream. The second movie

demonstrates the importance of Christian values and family which are to be seen as an indispensable part of the modern American Dream. It further shows how the issues of equality and sports can be related to the construct American Dream. The last film approaches Transcendentalism and addresses numerous other key facets of the Dream the other two movies treated in a different way. As the most critical movie of the three it also uncovers negative sides of the Dream.

4 The American Dream in Hollywood movies after 9/11

Films generally offer the chance to promote ideas that exist in society in most impressive and specifically effective ways. Today, films make up an indispensable part of popular culture, nowhere so than in the United States, the birthplace of Hollywood movies. One of the reasons why I decided to analyze films in order to describe the American Dream after 9/11 is that the attacks are connected to specific (shocking and negative) images in our minds. That day will be visually remembered forever and a film is a visual representation of thousands of pictures having the power to counter the powerful negative images that have been created on that day. Another reason why Hollywood movies seem to be a good choice in regard to 9/11 is that they are part of “popular culture [which] has given the American Dream a powerful voice.” (White and Hanson 2) This voice is heard by millions of people because Hollywood films are aimed at the broadest audience possible. David Mauk described “*film industry* (and Hollywood) [as] the most influential American artistic form. (384) He explains that within the last years, “Hollywood [has become] both an American institution and a part of international popular culture” that tries to sell products (Ibid.) This very often happens via the repetition of “successful formulas such as Westerns, gangster films, comedies and musicals.” (Ibid.) The American Dream is one of those formulas repeatedly used in films, books and pictures. In order to sell the Dream successfully it has been adapted to the current political, cultural and social situation. Schnicke argues:

Hollywood has traditionally had a strong interest in the American Dream. In return, Hollywood movies have also helped to promote the American Dream – not only in America but worldwide. (21)

I would argue that there is a strong difference between Hollywood movies that are made for a broad audience and Independent films created with low budget. The first do not only represent the filmmaker’s idea on a certain topic but numerous parties (director, producer, script writer etc.) are involved in the process and the main goal is to make the film as successful as possible in terms of selling it with the best possible profit. Low budget films on the other hand do not consist of such a big team of associates that all have a say in the filmic process. They do not aim exclusively on selling tickets but very often represent marginal positions that are not that popular in

mass culture and therefore do not sell well. This is especially interesting when looking at the representation of the American Dream in contemporary Hollywood movies. In order to present a relatively holistic picture of the American Dream which means including positive as well as negative aspects that are portrayed through movies, I chose two films that can be categorized as mainly positive and one that shows negative sides of the American Dream.

The previous chapters offered an insight into the historical development of the American Dream and pointed out that it is a cultural phenomenon and construct, sometimes also referred to as myth, that allows people to identify with and, furthermore, strive for. Due to the fact that movies are an important part of our everyday life and contribute to the construction of cultural meaning, it makes sense to look at the representation of the mythical American Dream in films.

The main question that should draw through the analysis of all three films is how the American Dream is depicted in these Hollywood movies after 9/11. Which aspects are foregrounded, which are neglected? One reason why I chose Hollywood films, namely that they are aimed at a broad audience, was already mentioned. A second reason is the fact that they are available to the general public. Mainstream films are a good way to demonstrate actual viewer's preferences as they are designed for the average man going to the movies. Depending on how successful a film is (in terms of how many people go to the movies to watch it) can reveal important and interesting aspects about people's preferences at a certain historical time. Interestingly, the film that represents more a downturn of the American Dream and emphasizes negative sides as well was not as successful and broadly promoted than the two dealing with a more (or exclusively) positive picture of the Dream.

The analysis of the three movies will focus on specific key elements that are inevitably connected to the American Dream. These elements design the Dream in a specific way that constitutes our contemporary understanding of it.

4.1 *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006)

Film number one, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, reveals many aspects of the American Dream that came into being much earlier than the 21st century. This represents the immortality of certain key facets of the Dream and that they are still

valid today. Having said that, what will be highlighted during the analysis most is the link to the present post-9/11 comprehension of the American Dream.

4.1.1 Plot summary

The Pursuit of Happyness tells the story of Chris Gardner, a father and businessman who seems to be out of luck. The action takes place in 1981 San Francisco. Chris desperately tries to sell bone density scanners to medical practices in order to improve his (and his family's) living conditions. His wife Linda who has been working double shifts for the last four months is at the end of her rope and decides to leave her husband and son Christopher to go to New York where her brother-in-law might offer her a job. Chris, as he had no happy childhood, would never let his son be taken away from him and therefore decides to care for him without Linda. The story for Chris and Christopher continues to be a nightmare. Chris cannot afford the rent for his apartment so they have to move out. After some months of struggling the situation seems to improve, however, it only lasts until Chris gets arrested for one night because he never pays his parking tickets. While still trying to sell bone density scanners Chris applies for an unpaid internship at Dean Witter, a popular brokerage firm in San Francisco. After six nerve-racking months he finally gets the job as a stock broker he has longed for.

The Pursuit of Happyness is divided into different chapters introduced by the voice-over narrator (Chris) at specific times of the movie. The following analysis will deal with all of these chapters individually as they are connected to different elements of the American Dream. Even the fact that the film is structured into sections can be interpreted as a reference to the American Dream when we think of Benjamin Franklin's structured lifestyle habits which are again reflected in Chris's way of organizing the day (planned exact to the minute).

4.1.2 Riding the bus

The first chapter is called "Riding the bus". Throughout the whole film Chris spends a lot of time on the bus. After his car gets towed away the bus, subway and especially his feet remain the only means of transportation. Every day he walks his son Christopher to daycare. Education and a good father-son relationship are very

important to Chris. He says in the beginning that he never had a dad and therefore promised to himself that “my children should know who their father is.” (*Pursuit of Happyness* 4:48)

From the beginning of the film Chris is presented as clever man. The first hint of Chris being an intelligent person is offered in one of the first scenes. On the wall next to his son’s daycare a graffito says “happyness” with “y” instead of “i” and he asks the person cleaning up the street when the spelling will finally be put right. One can assume that he already got annoyed by the spelling more than once. Spelling generally seems to be of special importance to him as he teaches his son how to write and pronounce words correctly at various times.

The word “happy” is used in different scenes and draws through the whole film. When Chris gets in contact with the world of stock brokers for the first time he is really keen on the happiness in their faces. (*Pursuit of Happyness* 9:16) He cannot believe how happy they look. At minute 38:55, after Linda informs Chris about her leaving he is angry and shouts “Just go, get happy!” A bit later he explains to his son that as long as the two of them are happy everything is good. The last chapter is referred to as “happiness” and Chris introduces the last minutes of the film by saying: “This part of my life, this little part, is called happiness.” (*Pursuit of Happyness* 1:46:40) Being happy – an exact definition of the term is as difficult as narrowly defining the American Dream – is closely linked to the American Dream. Jim Cullen purports “the pursuit of happiness” to be

a phrase that more than any other defines the American Dream, treating happiness as a concrete and realizable objective (Cullen 38).

Selling vague elements of the American Dream as “realizable objective” is one of the most promoted ideas of movies in order to keep the American Dream reachable for everyone as will be explained a bit later. The phrase which is anchored in the Declaration of Independence is, as already examined in the historical overview, one of the most repeated and widely used ones. Even the Founding Fathers thought of happiness as especially important and inherent element the nation should be build on. The film definitely promotes happiness, which is a hard-to-define emotional state, as something concrete, almost material. Although happiness is not pretended to be easily achievable some links purport the view that by, for instance, buying a car or being a stock broker, life automatically gets upgraded by (more) happiness. To be happy is

one of the timeless ingredients of the American Dream. After 9/11 the exact meaning of what happiness refers to probably deviated from the meaning expressed in the Declaration of Independence, however, it still serves as broad cover term that indicates many aspects of everyday life.

This leads to another aspect of the American Dream that appears in *Pursuit of Happyness* and was mentioned in the historical overview as well, namely materialism. Chris Gardner, though caring for his son and paying attention to his education and spelling mistakes, in the end yearns for material wealth. As somebody who loses his wife, car and apartment he hopes that by getting the job at Dean Witter he finally has the means to afford everything he wants, especially on a material level.

Some people claim that living the American Dream in the 21st century means being rich and having the ability to buy everything you want. *Pursuit of Happyness* represents US American society of 1981 and this could be the reason why the main character has such a fixation on earning a lot of money. After 9/11 the materialistic side of the Dream has reduced its importance due to the fact that “the American economic dream has begun to evaporate” (Biden in White and Hanson 11). Especially during the time of the economic crisis the spiritual and the material perception of the Dream switched places. (Zogby 107) It would be too much to argue that materialism at some point just stopped being important to the US American people, as well as all that mattered after the terrorist attacks and during the country’s second big economic crises was spirituality, it was rather that

[a]ll of old the dreams, both idealistic and materialistic, were collected and then simmered and stirred in the great new stew-pot of the gathering modern American consciousness. (Caldwell 43)

This new consciousness only partly relied on materialism; the other part understood the idealistic side of the Dream as at least as important.

4.1.3 Being stupid

The second chapter, “Being stupid”, starts with Chris’s trust in a hippie girl while applying for the internship. He leaves one of his precious bone density scanners with a guitar playing woman on the street while he enters the building in order to fill in the application paper. As the office is glassed to the street side he is able to watch the woman starting to run away with the instrument. After a short exhaustive chase he realizes the expensive scanner is gone and is angry. The title “being stupid” however

only refers to “stupid” actions like this because from the beginning of the film Chris is portrayed as smart guy. He attracts Jay Twistle’s (one of the Board members at Dean Witter) attention by demonstrating that he can solve the Rubik’s Cube during a taxi ride, a task no one seems to be able to accomplish. Chris further is presented as man with good moral values. The way he educates his son (he never gets mad at him no matter how desperate he feels inside) as well as his honesty (he does not lie at the job interview about his outfit) almost glorify the character of Chris Gardner. He is presented as heroic man able to manage every situation, still, Chris is a common man and exactly that makes him likeable to the audience as it made Andrew Jackson likeable to the American population of the 18th century.

A further link to the American Dream is demonstrated by his never-ending optimism. Chris never gives up. During the entire film he stays optimistic and his iron will helps him to finally achieve his goal. Schnicke writes: “His motivation is particularly impressive because of his little chances of actually selling a scanner.” (27)

It has already been referred to in this chapter, but the comparison between the character Chris Gardner and the historical figure Benjamin Franklin have to be pointed out in detail as it is an important reference regarding the American Dream. What the two have in common is not only a strong will and focused mind but the conviction that everyone can shape his/her own life according to personal visions, dreams and ideas. When defining Franklin’s American Dream according to the material and non-material (spiritual or ideological) side in a former chapter, we came to the conclusion that his Dream is located somewhere in the middle of the two. Chris Gardner seems to embody both parts of the American Dream, too. He dreams of a well-paid job, a house and a car while at the same time having the moral conviction that a person has to act in certain ways (e.g. being respectful, honest) in order to get rewarded in the end. Both, Franklin as well as Chris Gardner very much focus on themselves, on the individual person as “ultimate key to individual happiness.” (Schnicke 16) They agree that it is very much in their own hands how their life turns out. Depending on the effort you put into a dream you can get anything you want. Especially after 9/11 self-fulfilling prophecy and the American Dream have taken on an interesting form. In 2008 Barack Obama told the people in his victory speech:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who

still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. (Obama 2008 in White 42)

It has already been explained in detail that hope and optimism are utterly important when it comes to convincing people that the American Dream is still alive. Especially after the terrorist attacks in 2001 and the economic crisis in 2008 this optimism was put to the fore by politicians and other public spokesmen.

4.1.4 Running

Chris constantly runs. There is no single scene in the movie that shows him walking slowly; he is always in a rush. The reason for his rush is explained in the beginning when Chris says that he has to sell at least two bone density scanners per month in order to afford life and one more to pay off his debts. The fact that he has not sold any for a while makes him run. He runs to sell scanners, he runs to deliver Christopher to daycare, he runs to his (unpaid) internship, runs to the homeless shelter so that they have a place to sleep at night and so on. It is obvious that this permanent life-sprint can be seen as metaphor for his general struggling in life in each imaginable area. His wife left, his actual job has not turned out the way he thought it would, he is very unhappy with Christopher's daycare, he lost his apartment and got kicked out of their motel room, has neither car nor money.

His optimism and belief help him to keep on pursuing his dreams. At one point in the movie he thinks about Thomas Jefferson and wonders how Jefferson knew to put the word "pursuit" in the phrase "the pursuit of happiness":

It was right then that I started thinking about Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence, and the part about our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And I remember thinking: How did he know to put the "pursuit" part in there? That maybe happiness is something that we can only pursue and maybe we can actually never have it. (*Pursuit of Happyness* 30:02)

The word "happiness" and the significance it plays throughout the movie have already been taken into consideration. The more interesting allusion this quote reveals is the reference to the word "pursue". As Chris says, Thomas Jefferson apparently was clever enough to realize that happiness is something that can only be pursued but not possessed. By pursuing something, the vision, the idea, the dream is held upright. No one is able to destroy or demolish your personal dreams, your imagination, it is something that can neither be damaged nor spoilt. This is exactly what Chris explains to his son Christopher in the middle of the movie (*Pursuit of Happyness* 52:52):

Chris: Don't ever let somebody tell you, you can't do something. Not even me. Alright?

Christopher: Alright.

Chris: You got a dream, you gotta protect it. People (who) can't do something themselves, they wanna tell you, you can't do it. You want something, go get it. Period.

To come back to the word “pursuit” there is one additional aspect of the American Dream that I would like to point out. The chapter on the American Dream in the 21st century stated that after 9/11 the Dream took on a new spin. With this spin (e.g. the excessive promotion of the positive sides of the American Dream) also the critical thinking, if not to say negative attitude towards the Dream increased. One of numerous recent studies shows that

84 percent agreed that the American Dream is “a never-ending pursuit [and] I can always do more to achieve it”. (Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates 2008 in White and Hanson 12)

The “more” is vividly described by Chris Gardner's struggle. Throughout the whole movie he tries to do more and give more (of himself). He could be the main character in Horatio Alger's success narratives because he embodies the typical ideals of the self-made man. Chris, as *Ragged Dick*, eventually earns what he deserves because he showed that through hard work everything is possible.

4.1.5 Internship

The next chapter that Chris introduces as “Internship” exemplifies in detail how much “more” he gives and again provides an obvious reference to Benjamin Franklin's structured lifestyle. He has a very dense, not to say unrealistic, daily schedule. During the internship he has to manage to get done the workload of nine hours within six. Therefore, he stops hanging up the phone in between calls as this saves eight minutes per day. Moreover, he never drinks any water so that he does not spend precious time at the bathroom. As a viewer one gets the impression that it would not be possible for Chris to do more. Still, many obstacles unnecessarily impede his road to happiness. One of his bone density scanners gets robbed twice and he spends valuable time on chasing it through San Francisco, he misses (unindebted) a meeting with an owner of a company which might have led to a profitable business connection and so on. The important thing again is that Chris optimistically looks into the future and never loses his temper. The internship time is portrayed as very

stressful and the main problem during these six months is that one cannot say whether all his efforts will eventually turn out to be worthwhile.

4.1.6 Paying taxes

This chapter has a strong link to both, the material and the spiritual side of the American Dream. Several references to talks about taxes and other money-related issues can be found. Money plays an essential role of today's American Dream. The ability to afford the life you want for yourself and beloved ones often goes hand in hand with material goods. The reference to the color green (son Christopher says that this is his favorite color) could be interpreted as linkage to the Dream. The color green does symbolize money on the one hand¹³ and hope on the other.

Hope was one of the most basic principles the American Dream was built on in the 16th century. It describes the vision of a desired state of mind: "the prospect of achieving the American Dream has been slim, but the promise has been huge". (Seelye 2009 in White and Hanson 6) The interesting thing about hope is that it does not play a crucial role whether the desired state of mind is actually achieved; it is the longing, the craving for something that counts. From the beginning of the movie Chris hoped to be a stock broker, an idea his wife did not like at all. Linda thought it to be very unrealistic and asks: "Stock broker? Not an astronaut?" (*Pursuit of Happyness* 10:48) For her, it the idea of Chris becoming a stock broker is an unrealistic dream that will never come true. It seems to be absurd to even think of it. As Cullen contended, "[t]he notion of a better life lies at the core of the Dream." (2011, 17) This notion might be more or less realistic; the important thing is that one believes in it and belief is something nobody can take away from you. One of Chris's strengths is exactly this belief (in himself as well as in the future becoming brighter) as well as his imagination. Even at the hardest time when he has no place to sleep and no money to spend Chris imagines to travel back in time and flees with his son Christopher from dinosaurs in a cave (men's bathroom in the underground).

A reference to the American Dream that must not be neglected appears on screen even before the actual storyline begins. The sentence "inspired by a true story" indicates that the action happened in reality. In addition, the last shots reveal how the

¹³ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehjTS6AhMJ8>>, reference to the interpretation of the color green in *The Great Gatsby*

real story developed and what happened to the characters. These links to reality are to be found in many films about the American Dream. One reason for that could be the fact that the myth of the Dream, very hard to grasp, define and describe, needs a stronger link to reality in order to be seen as something more down-to-earth. Demonstrating a story that has actually happened to “one of us” necessarily makes it more applicable to the average human being. The main characters in films about the American Dream – independent of the picture presented, i.e. a positive or negative one – very often are “common men”, for example, Lester Burnham in *American Beauty*, Vivian Ward in *Pretty Woman*, and Forrest Gump in *Forrest Gump*.

4.1.7 Summary

Overall, the picture of the American Dream represented through *The Pursuit of Happyness* is a positive one. The film shows that hard work and a strong will in connection with appropriate moral values eventually get you rewarded. Due to the fact that the main character is depicted as “one of us”, the viewer can identify with him which leads to feeling sympathetic to him. What this film demonstrated very well is how the American Dream has changed within the last thirty years. As the action of the movie takes place in 1981, the film as such was shot in 2006 and this interpretation happens now, the continuous development becomes visible. On the one hand the film is aimed to portray the American Dream’s position of the Eighties; on the other hand the filmmaker’s own interpretation and opinion about the Dream cannot be left out completely. Therefore, two different views of how the American Dream must be seen in society and what it stands for are mixed together.

The politics of the American Dream, from 1980 to 2000, mandated optimism about the American future and enthusiasm about American-style capitalism. In 2008, with the economy in shambles and a charismatic Democrat in ascendancy, the Right finally lost its grip. (Kimmage 28)

The optimism about the future addressed here was certainly evident in 1981. After the 2001 attacks it had to be promoted convincingly by the Presidents because the belief of the American people in the glorified Dream got unsettled.

One negative aspect that could bring up doubts and questions about the positive portrayal of the American Dream is the fact that Chris is an extraordinarily smart man. The ability to solve a Rubik’s Cube does not apply to the average human being, not even to big bosses of financial companies as revealed in the film. In this place and

to conclude the analysis of the first film I would like to quote Bill Clinton who once said:

If you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you. (Jillson 2004, 7 in White and Hanson 6)

Having said this, the question that remains is whether it is fair to measure how “far” you can actually go if your “God-given ability” varies to those of others by nature.

4.2 *The Blind Side* (2009)

The second movie that I would like to analyze came out in 2009 and was extremely successful in the United States. The main female actress Sandra Bullock was awarded the Golden Globe and the Academy Award for her role as mother Leigh Anne Tuohy.

4.2.1 Plot summary

The Blind Side represents a clash of two worlds. The Tuohy’s, a very rich, white family consisting of mother Leigh Anne, father Sean and the two kids S.J. and Collins accommodate Michael, a huge black teenage boy who has neither family nor money and who lives on the streets of Memphis. Michael’s teachers are on edge with his lack of knowledge as he seems to be a hopeless case in almost every subject. Interestingly, he gains an outstanding score (98%) in protective instincts at the annual school test. Soon after the Tuohy’s decide to adopt Michael he starts training with the high school football team and it turns out that Michael, with the help of useful advices by Leigh Anne, is an incredibly talented left tackle (i.e. position that protects the Quarterback’s “blind side”). By hiring a personal tutor in order to fill Michael’s gaps of knowledge the Tuohy’s try to prepare him best for the upcoming drafting season so that Michael can attend the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), the college everyone in the family went to or will go to. Finally, his grades improve and he can actually chose which college he wants to attend. His decision falls onto Ole Miss because his whole family has been going there. The narration of the film is based on a true story.

4.2.2 The role of the family and the American Dream

The American Dream can be found in *Blind Side* in numerous ways. Both, the material as well as the idealistic layer is represented. The overall picture of the

American Dream depicted through the movie is positive as the main character, like in the *The Pursuit of Happyness*, is working himself up “from rags to riches”. Michael gets rewarded in the end, but he would not have had the opportunity to live a life as a football player if the Tuohy’s had not supported him and this is why the Tuohy family as well as the issue of having and belonging to a family in general play a key role throughout the whole movie.

The Tuohy’s live a big house that is beautiful outside as well as inside thanks to Leigh Anne working as a designer. She cares a lot about furniture and the material of curtains. The way she dresses suits her profession and lifestyle; she is never seen in cheap or untidy clothes. Her hair and makeup are always in excellent shape no matter whether she watches Michael’s football training, visits potential customers at their house or is at home. Her outfit is at least as organized as the rest of her life. She is the manager, the arranger of the family and seems to be in control of everything (from the shopping list to her daughter’s kick toe). Some scenes display her as dominant person whereas others show a more sympathetic side of Leigh Anne.

All family members seem to be strong-willed and ambitious in their own way: Collins is a cheerleader, Sean used to be a very famous basketball player and now runs around 100 Taco Bell restaurants, Leigh Anne works as a respected interior decorator and S.J. does – according to himself – “it all” (*Blind Side* 51:30). The family is always shown in a very love, peace and harmony way. They spend a lot of time together and never have any troubles. Everyone is happy about the fact that Michael enters the Tuohy family. Especially S.J. has a lot of fun with his new brother, teaches him football rules and helps Michael to train his body. None of the Tuohy’s is disturbed by Michael’s presence. In fact, they invite him to be on their annual Christmas card they are sending out each year to their friends and families. Not even changing their usual Thanksgiving habit of eating dinner while watching the National Football League (NFL) on TV to sitting around the dining room table bothers them. Instead, they immediately like it and say grace to the Lord. (*Blind Side* 26:40)

One day, the whole family gathers around the dining room table and Leigh Anne and Sean ask Michael whether or not it is okay for him to become his legal guardians. He responds that he thought he has already been part of the family. From that moment on Michael is officially seen as family member. He is presented with a black truck, a very precious gift that expresses the Tuohy’s love and affection for Michael. This

present is a clear reference to the American Dream's material side which is paid attention to at various points in the film. One part of the represented modern American Dream is that materialism plays an essential role. The white, rich family with their beautiful house and children is portrayed as happy example of living the post-9/11 American Dream. However, when looking at the traditional family scenes of the movie (e.g. Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas card shooting, football game visits etc.) it has to be said that they remind more of family pictures known from the Fifties and Sixties. The whole concept of families has changed dramatically within the last decades, Caldwell portended that "[t]he traditional American family was disappearing, and traditional values were adrift in a sea of ambiguity" (48). What Caldwell presumably refers to is the fact that nowadays there are various forms of family life and a growing number of broken homes. *Blind Side* depicts a kind of the traditional family by depicting them eating together and projecting a unified family sentiment.

Coming back to the materialism in *Blind Side*, I would like to point to John Green, an American writer and comedian, who once claimed that living the American Dream generally means being rich.¹⁴ In *Blind Side* richness and poverty is juxtaposed at many times. One scene shows Leigh Anne sitting in a restaurant with her ladylike girlfriends. She asks them whether they have ever been to the other part of Memphis, the poor part.

Leigh Anne: Have you all spent much time on the other side of town? [...] Alabama Street, Hurt Village. [...]

woman 1: I think it might hurt me to go there.

woman 2: It would hurt your reputation to go there.

woman 3: Actually, I'm from there but didn't mind hard work and look where I am now. (*Blind Side* 33:37)

This clearly indicates that the part of Memphis where all of them live (now) is the good, rich and wealthy part where everyone wants to be. It is made very apparent that

[i]n no country is the voyage into the middle class and upper-middle class as intoxicating as it is in America, whatever statistics may say about the country's actual class structure, actual poverty levels, and actual stagnation of opportunity. (Kimmage 27)

¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehjTS6AhMJ8>

“Intoxicating” certainly does not mean realistic or easy to achieve, but rather refers to an unachievable enigma everyone is eager to reach. Class differences are not easy to be overcome except you have someone from the upper class who lifts you up and introduces you into this different world that is, at least for people from the lower class, perceived as something better. Exactly this lifting up is the main role of the Tuohy family in the movie. They adopt Michael, buy him a truck, give him an own room, offer him the chance to improve his grades by hiring a personal teacher and provide him with everything else he needs. As one of their children he needs to get the same chances as the other kids (and because they want him to attend him a college).

One of the questions that comes up after reading the analysis so far is why do they do this? Why does Leigh Anne decide to accommodate Michael and to make him their new son and brother? The answer to these questions can be found in the next section dealing with Christian values.

4.2.3 Religion and the post-9/11 American Dream

A further aspect drawing through the film is religion, Christianity to be more precise. The two kids of the family (later also Michael) attend a Christian high school and there are numerous hints to Christian values. First of all, the director and the heads of the school accept Michael as a student, although his grades are very low, not only because of the physical advantages he might bring for the football team but also due to their Christian orientation. On the entrance stone arch to the school a Christian motto is written in big letters: „With Men This Is Possible, With God All Things are Possible“. (*Blind Side* 8:54) Secondly, when Leigh Anne decides to adopt Michael she feels responsible for visiting Michael’s real mother (who is or used to be a drug addict) in order to tell her about the decision. Michael’s mum says to Leigh Anne: “You’re a fine Christian lady” and Leigh Anne responds “Well, I try to be.” (*Blind Side* 58:15) So, for the family or at least Leigh Anne it seems to be important to act in a way compatible with Christianity. Some scenes show Leigh Anne’s golden cross necklace, a further hint to Christianity. We know already how the American Dream and religion are interrelated, Kessler sums up that “Christianity [is] the primary source of American principles” (778). Leigh Anne’s good will and care (two elements that could be interpreted as Christian values) are also demonstrated in scenes that

show a restaurant conversation between her and some female friends. When she tells them about her family providing a home for Michael Leigh Anne encounters rejection and astonishment likewise. Her friends do not really understand why someone from their social class cares about a homeless boy unless it has something to do with a charity project. After Leigh Anne made clear that she is no longer interested in this kind of conversation one of the women claims regretfully: “I think what you’re doing is so great, to open up your home to him. Honey, you’re changing that boy’s life.” All she can respond to that is: “No, he’s changing mine.” (*Blind Side* 46:03) This is one of the moments where the viewer realizes that the situation affects Leigh Anne at least as much as it does affect Michael. Through Michael she becomes aware of the fact that she has a pretty amazing life and she feels deeply touched by his destiny. Although she never complains about anything it the situation with Michael makes her recognize that there are numerous things she can and should be happy about and thankful for. Michael in return receives a lot from the relationship to the Tuohy’s as well. He, for example, has never had an own bed let alone a room or a family who really cares for him. He is provided with a car and education and has the same opportunities in life as everyone else in the end.

What is represented through *Blind Side* is the fact that Christianity is an essential ingredient of the post-9/11 American Dream. It is still illustrated as integral part of US American society and culture and not restricted to an archaic religious foundation the nation was built on centuries ago. Especially after 9/11 and the economic crisis politicians consciously chose to refer to Christian values and its importance for the nation.

At a cultural moment when apocalyptic visions of national doom, in presidential speeches as well as in popular cultural expression [...] Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton – although both are affiliated with the mainstream Christian tradition – felt the need to address the general religious sentiment. (Cortiel *Indroduction* IX)

Public speakers understood it as their duty to proclaim and reflect their religious origins as well as their unshaken faith in Christian values and this helped to reactivate, rebuild and reinterpret the American Dream after 9/11. It has been said before that the American Dream took on a new spin after the attacks in 2001, Christianity as recycled element of the original American Dream, contributed very much to an ideological return.

4.2.4 Equality after 9/11

Today as well as in former times the issue of equal opportunities and rights has always been a very important aspect of the American Dream. In the chapter on Martin Luther King his famous *I have a Dream* speech was brought up and it was mentioned that the nation was badly affected by the problem of segregation and race differences. In *Blind Side* Whites are represented as generally superior to Blacks. This is specifically indicated by the Tuohy family who is portrayed as the great helper in time of need for (black) Michael. One hint to the circumstance that the issue of racism still exists in modern America is provided by the scene where a relative calls the Tuohy's after they sent out their Christmas cards with Michael on it. The man says: "Did y'all know there's a colored boy in your Christmas card?" (*Blind Side* 44:48) In addition, the city of Memphis is divided up into two parts. Especially the part where Michael used to live is inhabited by Blacks only. Michael feels very uncomfortable when Leigh Anne wants to get out of the car in order to get his clothes from his old apartment. He forbids her to leave the car because the area is dangerous for white women. As the issue of equality split up the US for a long time it divides modern Memphis in the *Blind Side*. There are black parts and white parts, the black ones being poor and the white ones rich and prosperous. Michael as orphan boy from the black part transcends the (in)visible border and, with the help of Whites, settles down in the "better" area. What *Blind Side* shows is the fact that race still matters in the post-9/11 society. The superiority of Whites is reinforced by demonstrating the Tuohy's power to change a poor (black) boy's life.

A further element around the matter of equality that can be found in the movie is the wish to pass on freedom and liberty to the next generation.

From the very beginning [...] a notion that one's children might have a better life has been a core component of the American Dream. (Cullen 16)

Martin Luther King as well as Leigh Anne Tuohy want "their" children to have better chances in their future lives. The fact that Michael gets this chance only by staying with the white family, however, again adds to the perception of white superiority. Only with their help it is possible for him to get access to advantages usually reserved for the white upper class.

4.2.5 Sports and the American Dream

Sports take on an incredibly important role in US American life. Today, there is such a broad range of sport that it is impossible to avoid getting in contact with it. Whether you are a fan of a baseball team or following the NFL, sport is promoted by the media extensively. One reason why I chose *Blind Side* in order to analyze the American Dream of the post-9/11 era is that football (together with baseball, basketball and ice hockey) is the “most popular spectator and participatory sport[s] in the US” (Mauk 387). For this reason, the examination of a blockbuster movie dealing with a popular sport can serve as good example when it comes to representing mass society’s opinion.

Interestingly, movies dealing with sport very often tell the story of an outsider person who reaches the American Dream via profiling in one particular game. Becoming a good football player very often gets connected to living the American Dream. What helps the media in order to sell sport as something attractive are often “state university systems, which have served as vessels of the American Dream.” (Cullen 2003, 161) The college choice of Michael in *Blind Side* makes up a considerable number of scenes. The Tuohy’s invite countless college representatives to their home in order to interview them. All of them try to sell their football team and university best. They offer Michael (and his brother S.J.) all kinds of goodies so that he ultimately decides for their school. Even the final decision scene of the movie, when Michael publicly reveals which college he is going to attend, is thrillingly staged. He sits on a big wooden table with three football caps (representing three possible colleges) in front of him and the camera follows his hand full of expectation which cap he is going to choose.

In my opinion, sport as meanwhile essential part of the American Dream has become one of the elements that were added to the concept relatively late. Or let me put it that way: Sport might have always been an important element of US American life but the ideology that is build up around it, the way how it is praised and glorified, is new. As Mauk resumes:

Americans probably still sees sports as a wholesome and positive means of enriching their lives. They are highly involved in their sports as participants and spectators and are dedicated to the success of their particular teams. (387)

In the 21st century and especially after 9/11, sport was used to compensate for the lack of community-based belief in something positive. When the nation was demonstrated to be vulnerable it was necessary to find a unifying dream that everyone regardless of standing in life can hold on to. The great thing about sport is that it is not only accessible to high social classes; every person can become a fan and support a team.

In his article *The Black Man as Fictional Athlete* Wiley Lee Umphlett claims that films often like to use sport as pretext “in order to suggest the ramifications of a larger, more complex issue” (73). In the case of *Blind Side* one of these “larger” issues is identity. The movie not only shows a typical success story of a young boy becoming a sensational football player, it also uncovers the boy’s inner feelings. The fact that Michael has a deep identity crisis is shown by the poem he writes during one of his school classes. It is entitled *White Walls* and ends with the words „This is not Michael Oher.“ (*Blind Side* 13:50) Due to the fact that Michael does not talk much this poem is one of the only closer insights enabling the viewer to get an insight into his feelings. By watching Michael spending most of his time on his own one can assume that he feels alone, however, the poem is the only real proof for his lonely state of mind. That is why the Tuohy’s are of special importance for Michael. They fill the gap of loneliness he suffers from.

The family and the football team are constituted as parallel counterparts throughout the whole movie. He is not a good left tackle until Leigh Anne explains to him that he has to treat the team in the same way he treats his family, namely, protect them from anything harmful. As soon as he associates his family members (Leigh Anne, S.J., Collins and Sean) with members of the team he turns into a remarkably good football player. Leigh Anne realizes, unlike his coach, that Michael’s understanding of football needs to be related to his outstanding protective skills. Here, another aspect of the American Dream which has been related to, in the historical overview as well as during the analysis of *Pursuit of Happyness*, comes in, namely, the portrayal of the main character, Michael, as “common man”. In the beginning, Michael has no idea what the rules of football are about, he does not know where to look or how to move. His attention is easily distracted and his strategic knowledge is zero. The world of football has not yet entered Michael’s life. As any other average person (“common man”) he does not know very much about the rules until the family explains it to him.

Eventually, he becomes an incredibly successful player and gets numerous offers from prestigious colleges to play with them. The way he accumulates knowledge about the game does not only present football in a very positive way (in the sense that it is open to the public and anyone can enter it), it further merchandises the modern American Dream.

Even today, success stories of individuals are a common way to sell the likeliness of the American Dream. (Schnicke 17)

What has been said about the film so far might arouse the impression that the post-9/11 American Dream is reserved for the white, upper class. Whether or not this is the case, Michael's personal story should act as example that the Dream is in fact achievable for everyone, even the poor, orphan boy from the "bad" part of Memphis. Today, stories like Michael's serve the needs to sell the American Dream worldwide. No matter whether the semi-fictional character from *Blind Side* or former President Bill Clinton, stories dealing with the "from rags to riches" issue are still convincing and touching and help to sell American Dream.

4.2.6 Summary

Family, religion, equality and sports were illuminated as the main elements drawing through *Blind Side* and portraying the American Dream today. Some of these concepts like Christianity are basic principles of the Dream since the 1600s, others such as sport were added much later.

Blind Side as well as *Pursuit of Happyness* do mark a happy ending, however, from the movies alone it cannot be said whether the stories really turn out to be successful. One can only assume that the main character's life turns out to improve as all signs point to it. For that reason, the viewer is presented with short paragraphs blended in after the actual film. In *Blind Side* it tells the audience about the drafting season and how Michael's career has gone so far as well as what the other family members, Michael's tutor and ex-coach of the High School football team continued to do. This information and the way how it is presented (in a documentary-like style) contributes to the connection of an incredible success story to the myth-like, unachievable American Dream. The importance of the representation of the American Dream as a myth will be discussed in the very last chapter of this analysis as it is an integral element joined by all three movies.

4.3 *Into the Wild* (2009)

Unlike the two movies analyzed before this one critically displays the negative sides of the American Dream. In no excessive way but through the ongoing journey of the main character, the viewer detects dark sides of living the Dream in freedom and on your own step-by-step.

4.3.1 Plot summary

Into the Wild is a film about a college graduate (Christopher McCandless) who decides to leave home and friends in order to go to Alaska. What he hopes to find there is personal freedom, liberty and most of all truth. When he starts his journey soon after his graduation ceremony he does not tell anyone, neither his parents and sister nor his friends that he sets out for Alaska. He takes his car and drives northwest, burns all his money and starts his adventure. On his journey he meets several people who he spends some time with: The young, dynamic farmer Wayne Westerberg, a hippie couple (Jan and Rainey) that drives around in a truck and the old man Ron who teaches him how to manufacture leather. “Alexander Supertramp”, how he calls himself, finally ends up in Alaska where he finds an old, empty caravan that he turns into his new home. For some time he is quite happy living there alone. He hunts his own food and keeps a personal diary. After some time he decides to continue his trip but the problem is that the land where he is located is cut off from the rest of Alaska by water. Due to the thaw the once small stream has become a rapid river that he is not able to cross. He has to stay where he is and finally ends up dying because of eating a poisonous plant. His last handwritten note makes up the final shot of the film and goes as follows:

I HAVE HAD A HAPPY LIFE AND THANK THE LORD. GOOD BYE AND
MAY GOD BLESS ALL! Christopher Johnson McCandless

Like the two previous films, *Into the Wild* is based on a true story. The last note just cited, which existed in reality as well, made it possible for Chris’s parents to finally find him. Long before the film was shot Chris McCandless’s life story was turned into a book, only ten years later Sean Penn got the permission to turn the story into a movie.

4.3.2 Going west, living the American Dream

In the beginning of his journey Chris says that living the freedom of the American Dream “has always led west” (*Into the Wild* 22:12). The US territory of the West declares many allusions to both, the material as well as the spiritual side of the American Dream. Since the beginning of history it has been famous for precious mineral deposits such as gold and oil. But at the same time the idea of going west to become a millionaire was accompanied by the myth of becoming a millionaire. The dream and vision that the American West offered the chance to improve your personal situation has been present in people’s minds until nowadays. *Into the Wild* plays with this vision throughout the whole film. The main character Chris (or “Alexander “Supertramp”) actively chases the dream of going to Alaska (which is actually Northwest but the idea is the same). He thinks of this place as being exceptionally special. When people ask him why he wants to go just there and what he hopes to find there he responds

I’m gonna be all the way out there, all the way fucking out there. Just on my own. You know no fucking watch, no axe, no nothing. Just be out there. Just be out there in it. You know big mountains, rivers, sky, game. Just be out there in it you know? In the wild. [...] you’re just living there. You’re just there in that moment, in that special place and time. ... getting out of this sick society. (*Into the Wild* 44:50)

Jim Cullen dedicated the last chapter of his book about the American Dream the *Dream of the Coast*, a term that cumulates all dreams in connection with the Western parts of the US, especially in relation to its coastal areas. In his opinion the American Dream has a very strong “geographic orientation” towards west (160). He argues that “the Dream of the Coast rests on a quest for placidity” (Ibid. 167). Placidity is the main driving force behind Chris’s journey. He yearns to find a calm place somewhere in Alaska where he can live in harmony with nature without anyone disturbing him. Especially in the 21st century people might want to find a calm place where they can live in freedom. No matter where we are, we are permanently barraged with images and noises coming from various sources. We (people living in developed countries) have to endure a steady exposure to advertisement and irradiation in all imaginable forms. Christopher’s choice to leave all this behind is more than comprehensible for many people living in the 21st century.

4.3.3 Chris “Alexander Supertramp” and relationships

Christopher’s relationship to his parents is very complicated. He rejects the material life they are living and claims of himself: “I don’t need money.” (*Into the Wild* 28:31) After graduation they want to present him with a new car but he refuses to take it because he hates material things. Whereas Chris is in no way demanding in terms of material wealth he is more challenging in other areas. He does not want to be rich but prefers to try out extremes on a different, namely, the physical and spiritual level. Once he is asked by Jan where his parents are and he responds “Living their lies somewhere.” (*Into the Wild* 28:55) His sister Carine, on the other hand, is described as the one who understands Chris better than any other person. She shares his world view because she has been through the same family story as Chris. Carine does not like her parents’ attitude towards life either. She totally understands why Chris feels the way he feels and why he has to leave home, nevertheless, she is very sad that he does not tell her neither where he is nor if he is okay.

Another “quite magic” person Chris meets on his trip is the teenager Tracy Tatro who falls in love with him immediately. She blatantly offers Chris her body but he rejects to have sex with her as he knows it would be an act against the law. He prefers spending some time with her without a physical relationship. The scenes with Tracy show that he is morally right. Carine, Christopher’s sister once describes him like this: “Chris measured himself and those around him by a fiercely rigorous moral code.” (*Into the Wild* 20:05) In the same way as Chris Gardner in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Chris McCandless is portrayed as valuable member of society.

Although he seems to be an individual, maybe even strange guy looking for risks and adventures, he would never hurt somebody nor act illegally. To some extend he is a self-made man who shapes his own destiny without relying on anyone else. This on the one hand makes him independent but on the other it makes him lonely.

Chris also crosses the way of Ron Franz, an old man who later proposes to adopt him. With sentences such as “the core of man’s spirit comes from new experiences” (*Into the Wild* 1:56:31) Chris tries to convince Ron that even when you are old you should live the life that you choose for yourself and go out and experience new and exciting adventures. Discovering nature and enjoying life is what he can identify with and what he aims to do for the rest of his life. Although he has a specific (final) goal throughout the whole movie, namely to reach Alaska, he seems to enjoy the journey

very much and incorporates the “carpe diem” (seize the day) motive. This becomes clear through all the advices he gives to the people he meets. He does not know when he will finally reach Alaska, but as long as he is enjoying what he doing and whom he is with he is happy.

What I found especially interesting while watching the movie was that although Chris is alone all the time and deliberately chooses not to have any contact with his family and friends he reads many books that deal with relationships. Director Sean Penn did not stress the scenes where he reads these books; however, if one pays attention to it, the titles can easily be spotted. (e.g. *Dr. Zhivago* or “*Family Happiness*” by Tolstoi) The role of the family and relationships in the context of the American Dream became crucial when it was custom for every family to possess an own TV which was, and if we look at today’s living rooms still is, the main attraction in the household. A picture we are all used to from older films and series shows the whole family who gathers around the TV and is exposed to a constant stream of advertisements, quiz shows and football games. When we examined the family’s role in *Blind Side* we heard that after 9/11 this initial family situation has changed. But what also changed was the content of the individual TV-series and ads that became more “pro-American”. The sense of unity, of community transported through the media on all levels (e.g. Obama’s political campaigns, movies, radio shows etc.) is exactly what Chris wants to break through. He rejects what most people would assume to be more or less typically American values such as living in a family, being a Christian or possessing material goods.

4.3.4 Transcendentalism and the idealistic side of the post-9/11 American Dream

Chris is inspired by writers such as Jack London, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He is presented as avid reader and thinker. As mentioned in the chapter on Transcendentalism, Thoreau and Emerson were groundbreaking in bringing a new spirit to the USA and to revitalize the ideological side of the American Dream. As Chris rejects materialism they rejected it and as Chris seeks freedom in the nature they tried to live in harmony with nature. His life can be especially compared to Thoreau’s who spent two years alone in a small hut in the woods. With the help of books about flora and fauna Chris gets to know nature better and better. He once

paraphrases Thoreau as he speaks to Jan and Rainey about his personal worldview: “Rather than love, than money, than faith, than fame, than fairness – give me truth.” (*Into the Wild* 29:14) Truth is the core element of life Chris is searching for. He understands truth as something that he has never had the chance to experience because of his parent’s lies (his father was already married to another woman when he started to settle down to family life with his mum). He thinks that living a “true” life would finally lead him to happiness. Regarding truth, *Into the Wild* is also based on a true story. It is indicated in the beginning and has the same effect as the reference in *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Blind Side*. A further stylistic element that makes the film more real, more “true”, is the documentary line it is filmed in. Elements such as hand-held camera shots and little dialogue add a very specific flavor of trueness to the movie.

After Chris reaches Alaska he turns a desolate caravan into his new home. In the beginning he seems to enjoy the loneliness, the idyllic landscape and the fresh air. He clearly appreciates everything this new life offers him but still comes to an interesting conclusion. One of the last notes he writes down between the lines of the book *Doctor Zhivago* says “HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED” (*Into the Wild* 2:12:15), a statement that might come surprisingly for the viewer as solitude has always been what he was looking for. However, this statement is kind of reversed in the dying scene when he looks up into the sky and wonders whether one would be able to see what he sees now, in the very last seconds of his life, if one would not die alone. Happiness, hence, is depicted as ambiguous concept.

An aspect that relates to the modern, post-9/11 American Dream and that is much more evident in this movie than the other two is the extensive highlighting of the idealistic side of the Dream. In *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Blind Side* the non-material aspects (good moral, Christian values etc.) were seen as addition to the whole construct of the (material) American Dream. Here, however, the idealistic side is put much more emphasis on with all its positive but also negative elements (e.g. to feel lonely, to die without anyone knowing etc.). It is the only film of the three that explicitly depicts negative aspects of the non-material layer of the American Dream. Furthermore, by demonstrating a failed attempt of pursuing the Dream it does not entirely support the argument that the American Dream’s spin taken on after 9/11 is necessarily good. Thus, *Into the Wild* is definitely the most critical movie of the three.

4.4 Summary

Into the Wild describes how a young college graduate tries to escape the overstimulation of modern US American society and culture and the ability to experience “real” truth. The material American Dream is portrayed negatively to the core.

The film presents a new American Dream that neglects anything material in order to focus on personal realization. What Zogby once said about new generations seems to fit here quite well:

They will also keep the American Dream alive and continue the path that defines it not as material but as personal and spiritual fulfillment. Carpe diem. (Zogby 116)

When comparing the main characters of *Into the Wild* and *Blind Side* an interesting idea makes itself felt. Chris, coming from a rich family and just graduating from college, overall a very smart young man decides deliberately to break off contact with all the people he knows, no exception made. Michael, a poor orphan on the other hand yearns for a family and regulated environment. When he gets the truck (i.e. a material good) he is very happy, Chris by contract refuses to replace his old car by a new one. Both of the characters, and this applies to Chris Gardner from *Pursuit of Happyness* in the same way, want the exact opposite from what they already have. And exactly this is the core essence of the American Dream, in former times as well as today. This is what keeps the Dream alive no matter how hard the times and hopeless the life situation. Due to the fact that this crucial aspect of the American Dream must be illuminated in more detail, the following chapter deals with the examination of the mythical post-9/11 American Dream and how it is represented in all three movies.

4.5 The never-dying myth of the American Dream in Hollywood movies after 9/11

If the American Dream were dead, how would we know? (Cullen 2011, 25)

The previous examinations dealt with three relatively different movies but there is one aspect shared by all of them. It is actually not a combining element but rather a superordinate one, applying to all three films and representations of the American Dream within the films to certain extend.

The fact is that the American Dream is deeply embedded in American mythology and in the consciousness of its citizens. (White and Hanson 7)

This core essence of the American Dream, namely the fact that it is a myth and that via referring to the Dream as a myth, the legendary character is strengthened, was briefly touched upon in the introductory chapter. With a short summary of Roland Barthes' key elements this paper was started and in order to round it out I would now like to come back to Barthes and how his definition of a myth can be found in post-9/11 movies.

Generally speaking, "the essence of a myth is not about rational thought, but rather about attitudes, values and emotions." (Schnicke 17) One of the attitudes represented in *The Pursuit of Happiness* and one which is often connected to the American Dream is the "myth of hard work rewarded". (Kimmage 36) Chris Gardner, Michael Oher and many other main characters of movies dealing with the American Dream often embody this myth. Hard work can apply to both physical and mental effort as well as the combination of the two. The three reviewed films all embody the myth of hard work rewarded. In the *Pursuit of Happiness* Chris Gardner reaches his personal American Dream by being fit on all levels: clever and smart in the one side, physically strong on the other. It is the combination of these two sides that make him succeed in the end. *Blind Side* focuses on both aspects as well. Michael Oher gets better and better in playing football while improving his grades (and therefore his mental capacity) at school. Both characters represent the full package of strong, ambitious men. Chris McCandless (*Into the Wild*) is also portrayed as powerful individual. If he was not strong he could not survive in the wilderness. His smartness is introduced by his sister when she talks about Chris's excellent grades he got in his final college report (24:40).

As was explained before, fewer and fewer people believe in the existence of the American Dream in general. This is one side. On the other hand, most people think that it is very much up to yourself whether or not you reach the Dream as you can always struggle more in order to achieve it. But what exactly are you ending up with after all this struggle? Happiness? Freedom? Liberty? This is the essential question when analyzing the American Dream. All the terms that make up the American Dream are very vague and therefore it can be argued that exactly this vagueness is the determinative core, the force of the Dream. (Kammen 28) Roland Barthes claims:

[m]yth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other. (116)

A myth can be everything and nothing, full and empty of meaning likewise. Schnicke adds that “it is possible to use the same myth for two opposing statements.” (19) The Democrats as well as the Republicans can use the same idea of the American Dream in their political campaigns and speeches for the simple reason that it is such a fuzzy concept that everyone has the chance to adapt it to their own imaginations. Furthermore, “the content of a myth is arbitrary not definite, it is dynamic not static.” (Ibid.) We already heard about the American Dream’s dynamic for reasons that it consists of so many ever-changing, interrelated and overlapping concepts that could never be stable. A further aspect that contributes to the myth’s vagueness is that “myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images”. (Barthes 125) To give these incomplete images a more concrete basis, the myth of the American Dream is very often tried to be concretized and realized. The more the myth is described as realizable goal, the more realistic it seems to reach it. All of the films turn the myth into something real, concrete as this quote from *Into the Wild* suggests: “If you want something in life, reach out and grab it!” (1:39:44) Or when Chris Gardner at one point tells his son: “You got a dream, you gotta protect it.” (*Pursuit of Happyness* 52:54) These statements make the American Dream appear as something you can just touch.

One aspect that plays a crucial role in Barthes’ *Mythologies* is that myths always signify something; they represent something while at the same time forcing us to create a specific picture of that “something” in our minds. In Barthes’ opinion a “myth has [...] a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and imposes it on us.” (115) He further claims that it is not important what the myth exactly stands for or represents or imposes on us due to the fact that “the meaning of the myth has its own value” (Ibid. 116). Importantly, and this is something all three movies play with “a myth is at the same time imperfectible and unquestionable; time or knowledge will not make it better or worse.” (Ibid. 130) Sometimes one gets the impression that time might be a factor that helps to bring you closer to the American Dream but in fact it is the striving for the Dream, the yearning and hope that makes the American Dream the myth it is. Knowledge, if we talk about intellectuality does not play a big role either. Michael Oher, who is not smart in the

beginning of *Blind Side* because he has never learned how to accumulate knowledge and remember it, reaches his American Dream in the end. He lives with a family, attends college and plays football. Of course, the white family plays a crucial role here by accompanying him and providing everything he needs, however, this does not touch upon the mythical aspect of the American Dream; the idea as such has never been restricted to a specific group of people with certain capacities, “myths last because they are dreams fulfilled in our imaginations. So it is with the American Dream.” (White and Hanson 7)

Barthes defined the myth as something constructed that “cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things” (108). In the films, the various American Dreams the main characters are striving for are always constructed by the society they live in. *Into the Wild* represents that this construction carried out by society might not conform to the personal vision of the American Dream. Chris McCandless is striving for the exact opposite American Dream suggested by society and lived out by his parents. The other two main characters, Chris and Michael are much more oriented towards the mass society’s Dream(s). Chris is amazed by the life of stock brokers who earn a lot of money and drive expensive cars; Michael follows the Dream suggested by his white host family.

In addition, Roland Barthes argues that the myth of the American Dream is very instable and therefore needs to be nourished. (Ibid. 116) Films, political campaigns and advertisements help to reactivate the American Dream regularly and did so especially after the terrorist attacks in 2001. The Dream is a permanently rebuilt topic in our society consisting of so many elements recurring in diverse forms that everyone can apply it. “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them” (Ibid. 143). This is exactly what films like these three do, they “talk about” the myth *American Dream* after 9/11. Especially the positive examples of the movies and by that I mean *Pursuit of Happyness* and *Blind Side* “illustrate to the subject how to live a lively, healthy, and culturally meaningful life.” (Semmerling 4f in Schnicke 20) Furthermore, “mythological references also help to establish and strengthen public consciousness and a collective identity” which plays a crucial role in regard to the American Dream as has been pointed out when the focus was on Obama’s 2008 election campaign. (Ibid.)

One “good example for the effective use of both mythological and historical references” is the Declaration of Independence. (Schnicke 13) The importance of this document signed in 1776 has been explained in the historical overview as well as in the analysis of *Pursuit of Happyness*. Referring to the myth-issue it has to be stressed again that the American Dream’s essential character had always had a mythical core thanks to this Declaration. And especially after 9/11 “[m]odern-day market capitalism has certainly put a distinctive spin on the Declaration of Independence” as well as the American Dream in general. (Cullen 2003, 40) As “there is no fixity in mythical concepts [like in the American Dream]: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely.” (Barthes 119)

The last aspect that I would like to address in relation to Roland Barthes is motivation. In his words “[m]otivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth”. (Ibid. 125) In all three movies the main characters are highly motivated (by themselves or by others) to follow their goals. Chris Gardner has a strict time schedule and runs all the time to adhere to it, Michael Oher trains his mind and his body extensively and Christopher McCandless ambitiously follows his path to Alaska. All of them are motivated by the vision of finally reaching their personal goal in life. As Barthes argues that “every myth can have its history and its geography” the American Dream certainly has its origin in the United States (Ibid. 151). It all started with the vision of the “Promised Land” (Ibid. 158) shared by the Puritans and ended up the complex construct of post-9/11 Dream we are experiencing now. America, especially the film industry, “with its open, free, no-limits immigrant-friendly society – is still the world’s greatest dream machine” (Friedmann 2009 in White 56). One just has to look at the name of one of the biggest film companies endemic to Hollywood (Dreamworks).

To emphasize once again the purpose of the myth and what it means for the post-9/11 American Dream I would like to quote Cullen:

Is there reason to think that the American Dream will endure longer than the United States does? yes, because: [...] the strongly personal and private dimensions of the American Dream, diffuse and contradictory as they are, are not easily manipulated or even affected by larger events. (2011, 23f)

This answers the question what the 2001 attacks have done to the American Dream quite well. Although the nation certainly was in shock and the USA was publicly demonstrated to be vulnerable, 9/11 and any other event of such extend would never

have the power to simply destroy a Dream that is deeply personal on the one and mythical on the other hand.

This mythical *American Dream* is exactly what the first part of my title refers to. “Yes, I Can” should indicate the belief in own ambitions to reach something without knowing whether one will ever reach it. It expresses the hope and the will to hold on to a vision likewise. Whereas Barack Obama chose “Yes, We Can” as official slogan for his 2008 campaign and therefore indicated a sense of community, I think that “Yes, I Can” alludes even better to the fact that each of us has a very own perspective of seeing and believing in the American Dream. It is an individual Dream, a myth, created in our minds, its existence unable to be stopped if any to be modified.

5 Conclusion

What this paper primarily dealt with was the American Dream after 9/11. The first part provided a historical overview of how the Dream developed over time whereas the second part practically analyzed it in three contemporary Hollywood movies. The main insight this thesis produced was the change of the American Dream's representation after 9/11 which can clearly be stated as drastic. Hollywood movies and other publicly accessible media as well as political speeches highlighted positive aspects of the Dream for the main part. Successful movies (such as *Blind Side*) emphasized the immortality of the American Dream. After 9/11 the population was yearning for an affirmative image of the Dream and this was – and still is – provided by Hollywood as well as by leaders of the nation such as President Obama whose main target seems to be the reclamation (in the hope) of the American Dream.

After presenting the different layers of the American Dream (material and non-material or idealistic) it was tried to find an overall definition of the term. Therefore, a glimpse at all centuries, beginning with the 17th, as well as various decades was taken. Light was shed especially on those historical times that had an impact on today's perception of the American Dream. Religious foundations were laid by the Puritans who arrived in around 1600; the expansion of the population to western territories, the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the birth of the self-made man were events happening during the 18th century. Along with the 19th century came the Industrial Revolution and the concept of the self-made man was brought to perfection. The Roaring Twenties introduced the 20th century, followed by the discussion about equality. In addition, the term *American Dream* began to spread worldwide during this era. The beginning of the 21st century was mainly dealing with the question whether the Dream has come to an end or not. It was explained how 9/11 added an exceptional flavor to the American Dream and that it further led to a vision kept alive by mass society and promoted very much through the media in various forms. Especially Barack Obama's role was taken as example of personal embodiment of the American Dream and how important it is to have somebody with his private story leading the United States in order to demonstrate the Dream's immortality. During all these decades the material and idealistic side of the Dream battled each other.

Depending on the specific time and development going on in society it was either the material or the non-material layer that gained the upper hand.

The main thesis that the American Dream has undergone a drastic change after 9/11 was investigated through the Dream's depiction in three Hollywood movies that were shot after the terrorist attacks. *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Blind Side* and *Into the Wild* all came out between 2006 and 2009. On the one hand it was explained that Hollywood as such plays an essential role in terms of repeating the successful formula of the American Dream worldwide, on the other hand the films explicitly showed how and why. The importance of the historical overview provided in the first chapter became especially obvious when timeless elements of the American Dream such as religion, money and equality were discussed. The analysis of the movies further portended the view that the concept *American Dream* is to be seen as dynamic and ever-changing. Integral elements of the Dream (e.g. family and the tendency of going west) have always been and will always be integral parts of the whole idea, however, they are made up of details that change permanently and therefore the Dream as such continues to change.

This paper clearly showed that today's media dealing with the American Dream still like to highlight success stories, maybe even more than it did decades ago. Especially after 9/11 when the nation's community feeling was in danger and the country was in a bad condition, the American Dream was reactivated and reinterpreted at length. Politicians, TV commercials and most of all Hollywood movies aimed at a broad mass helped to reclaim the positive sides of the American Dream. A new spin was created and media provided the best opportunity to reactivate the nation's sense of community and *Americanness*.

Roland Barthes' understanding of myths was applied to the American Dream and defined to be a superordinate element and essence of the Dream represented in all three movies. Films in general are, however, only one way of nourishing this complex myth. The post-9/11 era required nourishment of the American Dream on every imaginable level as the attacks and the time after it engulfed the nation in an economic crisis.

The very last chapter dealing with the mythical aspect of the American Dream led to the conclusion that no matter how hard the times, the pure vision of the Dream and the hope that is necessarily connected to that vision cannot be entirely destroyed. The

whole myth is built up of a handful of ideas which might be ambiguous but at the same time incredibly productive in terms of producing powerful imaginations a whole nation can hold on to. The important thing is that these powerful and primarily positive visions are transferred to the public non-stop. This happens via politicians, TV advertisements as well as Hollywood movies which are of special significance as they have, by using sentimental music and appealing images, the ability to project an entirely beautiful world onto the viewer and therefore cover the negative images connected to 9/11. Because the events of 9/11 are attached to very specific images in our minds the attempt to overcome these shocking and heavy-hearted pictures by deluging society with positive representations of the American Dream makes sense. Especially if US American people seem to yearn for a positive reclaim of the Dream as it strengthens the spirit of a community-based belief in something great.

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7 Appendix

7.1 Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Der *Amerikanische Traum* gilt als einer der größten Mythen, der von der amerikanischen Gesellschaft aufrecht erhalten wird. Seine Wurzeln sowie Ambiguität sind tief in der amerikanischen Geschichte verwurzelt und reichen bis zu den Puritanern zurück, die im 17. Jahrhundert aus England geflohen sind um sich an der Ostküste der USA ein neues Leben aufzubauen. Danach hat jedes Jahrhundert einen Beitrag zu dem mittlerweile facettenreichen und komplexen Konstrukt des *Amerikanischen Traums* geleistet. Abwechselnd, je nachdem welches Jahrzehnt betrachtet wird, gewinnt die materielle oder aber die ideelle Seite des Traums die Oberhand.

Diese Arbeit fokussiert sich auf die Zeit nach den Terror-Anschlägen vom elften September 2001. Durch die weltweite Demonstration der Verwundbarkeit des Landes wurde die Glaubwürdigkeit des *Amerikanischen Traums* stark erschüttert. In dieser Arbeit wird mit der Analyse von drei Hollywood-Filmen, die nach dem elften September entstanden sind, untersucht, in wie weit sich der Mythos, der den *Amerikanischen Traum* umgibt, verändert hat. Die Terroranschläge und im Besonderen die Berichterstattung über diese waren von gewaltigen Bildern und Videosequenzen geprägt, die sich tief ins Gedächtnis der Menschen eingebrannt haben. In dieser Arbeit soll untersucht werden, ob und in wie weit diesen negativen Bildern filmische Erzählungen zum Thema *Amerikanischer Traum* gegenübergestellt werden. Hollywood-Filme, da für die breite Masse generiert, bieten eine gute Möglichkeit Tendenzen in einer Gesellschaft - das heißt den Wunsch, wie bestimmte Themen aufbereitet sein sollen - zu erkennen und untersuchen. *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), *The Blind Side* (2009) und *Into the Wild* (2009) waren die drei Filme, die als Analysegrundlage dienten. Die ersten zwei „verkaufen“ ein durchwegs positives Bild des *Amerikanischen Traums*, letzterer zeigt auch negative Seiten des Traums auf. Die Analyse der Filme und die dort beschriebenen Elemente des *Amerikanischen Traums* sind eng verflochten mit der historischen Entwicklung des Konstrukts, die eingehend im ersten Kapitel beschrieben wird. Elemente wie Religion, Familie, Gleichberechtigung oder die Entstehung des „Self-made man“

haben über die Jahre Eingang in die Idee des Traums gefunden und sind heute integraler Bestandteil davon. Dies lässt schlussfolgern, dass bestimmte Facetten des *Amerikanischen Traums* unsterblich sind und - unabhängig davon, wie dynamisch sich der Traum selbst entwickelt - immer ein Teil davon bleiben.

Mit Hilfe der Filme sowie einer näheren Betrachtung der Rolle des derzeitigen US amerikanischen Präsidenten Barack Obama in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft wird gezeigt, dass der *Amerikanische Traum* ein wichtiger und produktiver Mythos ist, der es schafft immer wieder neuen Halt zu geben.

Die Bereitschaft – trotz unsicherem Ausgang – nach etwas Höherem zu streben, an den Erfolg zu glauben und in diese Hoffnung zu investieren sind wichtige Bestandteile des Traums, nicht unbedingt der Traum selbst.

Nach dem elften September 2001 wurde, durch Medien aller Art, durch Politiker und durch die Filmindustrie versucht, die positiven Seiten des *Amerikanischen Traums* wieder aufleben zu lassen und zu reaktivieren. Diese Wiederbelebung ist deutlich in zumindest zwei der drei analysierten Filme sichtbar, die ein sehr positives Bild des Traums zeigen. Ebenso trugen politische Kampagnen wie etwa „Yes, We Can“ (2008) zu einer Reaktivierung des Traums bei. Nach den starken Erschütterungen durch die Anschläge von 2001 hat der Traum, angekurbelt durch Medien und Politik, eine neue Richtung eingeschlagen. Der Mythos der mittlerweile um den Traum herum aufgebaut ist, ist so stark, produktiv und in den Köpfen der Menschen verankert, dass es unmöglich erscheint ihn auszulöschen.

Der letzte Teil dieser Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit Roland Barthes und wie seine Definition von Mythos auf den *Amerikanischen Traum* umgelegt werden kann. Obwohl Barthes seine Analyse von Mythen in einem anderen Kontext (Nachkriegs-Frankreich) zu einer anderen Zeit (1957) verfasst hat, gibt es doch einige Elemente die für die amerikanische Gesellschaft und ihren Traum geltend gemacht werden können. Zum Beispiel, dass ein Mythos – der *Amerikanische Traum* – ernährt werden muss, wie es durch Medien passiert. Oder die Tatsache, dass ein Mythos für zwei (oder mehrere) verschiedene Ideologien benutzt werden kann, da er viel Raum für Interpretationen lässt, was erkennbar ist durch die gleichzeitige Verwendung des Terminus *American Dream* im republikanischen als auch demokratischen Wahlkampf. Außerdem liegt jedem Mythos eine individuelle, sehr persönliche

Dimension inne die ihn subjektiv zu dem machen kann, wonach sich der Einzelne sehnt.

7.2 Curriculum Vitae

SONJA SCHLESER, Bakk. phil

PERSONAL DATA

Date of Birth October 27, 1987

Place of Birth Vienna, Austria

Citizenship Austria

EDUCATION

October 2012 **Bakk. Phil (*Communications- & Media Studies*, University of Vienna)**
 September 2010 - **Exchange semester at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK**
 January 2011 Major fields of study: *English Linguistics, Literature & Culture*
 June 2010 **First part of studies finished (*English & American Studies*)**
 since October **Bachelor program *Communications- & Media Studies*, University of**
 2008 **Vienna**
 Specialization: Print, Advertisement, Film studies
 since March 2008 **Diploma program *English & American Studies*, University of Vienna**
 June 2006 **Graduation with excellence**

JOB EXPERIENCE

Since October 2012 **Board Assistant & Association Officer** at MSF-AT
 March 2011- **MSF - Doctors Without Borders (administration)**
 September 2012
 September 2009 - **Univ. Prof. Dr. Christoph Scholda (personal assistance)**
 August 2010
 July - August 2009 **Steininger GmbH, Korneuburg (office assistance)**
 March - May 2009 **MAFOS – Institut for Systemic Market Research (recruitment)**
 May 2008 - **ADC – Amon's Delicious Catering (service)**
 March 2009
 May 2007 - **Flyniki (stewardess)**
 February 2008

February - April 2007 **SHC - Siemens Home and Office Communication Devices (product management)**

July - September 2006 **Sensor – Institute for market research (interviewer)**

Summer 2003, 2004 & 3005 **Internships at Siemens AG Austria & Cosmos Unterwart**

SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE

EDV-skills: - **MS Office 2010** (Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Outlook)
 - **Graphics** (MS PhotoDraw)
 - **Typo 3**

Foreign Languages: - Fluent in written & spoken **English**
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09/ 2011: **USA West coast/ Canada**

09/2010-01/2011: **United Kingdom, Scotland**

11/2006-01/2007: **Australia**