

5-2019

# The Portrayal of Income Inequality as Represented in American and Spanish Film

Chloe Riggs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/plscuht>

 Part of the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Riggs, Chloe, "The Portrayal of Income Inequality as Represented in American and Spanish Film" (2019). *Political Science Undergraduate Honors Theses*. 7.  
<https://scholarworks.uark.edu/plscuht/7>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact [ccmiddle@uark.edu](mailto:ccmiddle@uark.edu).

**The Portrayal of Income Inequality as Represented in American and Spanish Film**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors Studies  
in Political Science

By

Chloe Riggs

Spring 2019

Political Science

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences  
**The University of Arkansas**

## Acknowledgements:

I would first like to thank Dr. William Schreckhise for serving as my thesis advisor. I would not have been able to complete this thesis, if it was not for his patience, understanding, and guidance. I would also like to thank Dr. Janine Parry for agreeing to serve on my committee, but also her encouragement, support, and advice throughout this process. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Jacob Adler for agreeing to serve on my committee. Spending the last four years at the University of Arkansas has been a complete joy, and I am incredibly thankful for every opportunity that I have received. This thesis reflects my passion for my studies, Political Science and Spanish, my cherished time studying abroad, and the institution that has allowed me the environment to pursue my dreams. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their endless love and support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:	2
<b>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2 HISTORY OF FILM 1900 TO PRESENT</b>	<b>9</b>
AMERICAN FILM	9
SPANISH FILM	13
<b>CHAPTER 3 AMERICAN AND SPANISH FILM ANALYSES</b>	<b>17</b>
AMERICAN FILM	17
<i>Precious (2009)</i>	17
<i>The Wolf of Wall Street (2013)</i>	19
SPANISH FILM	21
<i>Techo y Comida (2015)</i>	21
<i>Zara: The World's Richest Man (2016)</i>	24
<b>CHAPTER 4 COMPARISONS</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>32</b>
REFERENCES	35

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

Wealth, or the desire to accumulate and become wealthy, is intrinsic to the composition of American society. This mentality is supported by an American cultural belief that those who possess monetary wealth also possess a plethora of other desirable characteristics, including an extreme work ethic. In turn, these qualities brought about endless amounts of cash to consume, and as result of consumption, overwhelming happiness.

In this thesis, I will examine the portrayal of wealth in film. Further, I argue that the portrayal of wealth in film has the power to shape the public's perceptions of income inequality, even going so far as to later impact their actions towards both their own and differing economic classes (Kendall 2011; Kenworthy 2007). With a film's ability to portray wealth, stressing the importance of an individual's position on the hierarchal economic ladder, the individual is led to view both success and failure as a personal matter, the latter with a scornful gaze. This belief is then naturally cycled through the governing body in place by way of publicly elected officials. Thus, policymakers perpetuate this by framing policy to benefit target populations, the wealthy favored by media framing (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Consequently, little is done for and/or harms other populations that are less favorable to the societal standard shaping income inequality (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

Research on the topic concludes that it is not the biases presented by the media that influences the general population, but instead it is the content that is selected and the framing of it that has an impact. I believe this is important because though the media

cannot singlehandedly create biases, it can to some extent establish the significance of an issue (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982).

This thesis examines the portrayal and framing of wealth and the effects that has on a society, their treatment of one another, and roles political institutions play in shaping these things. I do this by comparing income inequality as it is presented in American and Spanish film. I chose the United States and Spain as my cases because I studied abroad in Madrid, Spain in a semester-long exchange program during the spring semester of 2018. During this time, I was exposed to the differences in media framing in each country in regards to wealth. I also observed differences between how people in the two countries are treated as a result of an individual's economic status through complete immersion into Spanish culture by way of both school and homestay.

To begin my comparative analysis in this thesis, I first establish a historical timeline of film in both the United States and Spain from 1900 to present. My timeline includes the makeup of the audience, their reason for viewing, their general opinion of film, the content being presented, and the purpose of it with an emphasis as it is related to the political circumstance of the time. Additionally, I observe overall trends in film and the historical importance of the mass media productions. By doing so, the groundwork is set for examining the present state of film and its influence in United States and Spain today, a little over a decade after the 2008 financial crisis.

I then analyze two American films and two Spanish films. It is important to note that all of the four films I have chosen to analyze were made since 2008. I did this in order to assess attempts in film to present a sense of genuine reality to the audience, in terms of portrayal of wealth, poverty and all that is in between. It is evident that this was

a devastating and vulnerable time economically for a large number of citizens in both countries. It is reasonable to assume that film would serve as solace, providing hope for a happily-ever-after post crisis; however, as my research further illustrates representativeness is not always presented, especially in terms of income inequality. In fact, the pure absence of reality in my research of film signifies the magnitude to which it exemplifies lifestyles that glorify material possessions, often times conveniently forgetting to mention the hardship and potential losses that coincide with immeasurable greed.

Furthermore, my separate analysis of each of the four films looks in depth at the importance of economic status as it is portrayed. I begin broadly with the overall purpose of each particular film. This is followed by an observation of the main characters' outward appearances, looking at how they choose to present themselves to the world in terms of makeup, hair, and clothing. Then delving deeper, I evaluate the main characters by their most defining characteristics, including, but not limited to: their lifestyles, motivations, goals, the problems they face, the manner in which they overcome those issues, and the most prominent reason for their living circumstances. Finally, I approach aspects of humanity, looking at the nature of the main characters, their families, and communities presented. Their economic status is then analyzed based on a combination of the previously mentioned aspects of their lives as well as the extent to which their economic status defines them, whether or not their lifestyle appeals to the audience, the reason it is or is not desirable, and the techniques employed to illustrate these lifestyles.

This analysis signifies the exemplary nature of a film upon the audience. As previously introduced, the thoughts and opinions of the main characters are not the most

influential aspect of film in molding the minds of the audience. In fact, a main character's opinion may aid in solidifying a viewer's opinion even more. However, the content of their personhood, more specifically their lifestyle, as presented is extremely influential to the impressionable audience. It is the filmmaker's choice of content that has the most impact on what the audience thinks about. Thus, a film can control the thought of the audience as to what is important to think about, but it cannot control or create particular biases.

With this information, I then compare the general trends found in the two American films to those in the two Spanish films, observing in depth the differing depictions of wealth, poverty, belief and/or lack thereof in the institution in place, and the connections, if any made between overall income inequality and the political establishment. More specifically, in terms of both wealth and poverty, I determine the differences between the United States and Spain. In examining the differences, I investigate what some of them are, why they exist, and what exactly they signify. Furthering my comparisons, I capture a snapshot of the portrayal of the political system in place in film as it represents the commonly understood helpfulness of the lawmaking body, the extent to which they are deemed willing to help a particular economic class, as well as the main characters feelings towards politics and economics, and their effects on the individual's life. This is important to the measure of depicted income inequality in each film because the main characters may or may not be a part of a target population. Whether policy benefits them or not based on their economic stature, will often determine their feelings towards the body as well as shape an assumption of the political body's feelings towards them.



Finally, I conclude that the influence of film has the ability to shape cultural norms in terms of views of income inequality that in turn shapes and influences public policy, in particularly in the United States today. For example, in American film, the media depicts income inequality in a manner that reveres immense wealth, conditions large portions of the society to interact in a way in which they feel a sort of intimacy to those in so-called superior classes through their longing to emulate them, while having little to no sentiment toward their own class or those considered less than, reinstating the class divisions of economic status. This then influences the political institution in place and the cyclical nature of an itching-desire for a life of extreme wealth that equates to extreme happiness continues, as previously mentioned.

Overall, the purpose of my thesis is to illustrate the way in which the media is able to frame what their audience finds important through film in regard to income inequality. The mass media is not often successful in convincing people of a particular persuasion, yet they are stunningly capable of telling their audience what to think about (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982, 848; Lippmann 1922). Thus, it is not hard to picture a filmmaker's work "like a searchlight beam moving restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness and into vision" (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982, 848; Lippmann 1922).

Moving forward, the next portion of my paper will provide a historical timeline of both countries, following that with analyses of four total films both American and Spanish, comparisons of the overall trends in the films, and finally my work will close with my understanding of media framing in film and how it differs between the United States and Spain today.

## **Chapter 2 History of Film 1900 to Present**

### American Film

American film throughout history has aided in both creating and maintaining consumer culture (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). First established in the films of the silent era, the continuity of consumerist content has portrayed wealth in such a way that it is ultimately equated to happiness (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985).

The first motion pictures in the U.S. reached audiences primarily made up of the recently arrived immigrant population (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). Later, as the movie business boomed, industry films broadened their appeal to audiences in the middle and upper classes also (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). With the immigrant audience, the entertainment medium's content was used as a form of consumer acculturation (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). Striving to become a true part of their new home, they were quick to both interpret and accept the messages of what it meant to be a true "American."

An American, as portrayed by early 20<sup>th</sup> century film, was honest and hardworking. More importantly, film during this time portrayed a typical American as having extremely exaggerated tendencies to compete, consume, and maintain ownership of their hard-earned money (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). As a result of the accumulation of that money, along with the seemingly endless number of possessions they were able to stockpile, the message to the immigrant audience was clear: American life was based on the ideal that purchasing happiness was possible through the pleasure that only material consumption could bring about (Kendall 2011). This representation of what the "good life" should really resemble as an American naturally encouraged the

immigrants to pursue freedom from their discontentment and the drudgery of working through consumption (Kendall 2011)

Further, in a country built upon the ideals of freedoms, the most important liberty portrayed in film was the power to purchase, which not so coincidentally required wealth. The influential nature of film, beginning with the silent era, presented wealth as if it were essential to being an “American,” highlighting income inequality and the disenfranchisement of the viewer with hyperbolic representation of how an “American” should live. Thus, the immigrant audience viewed the content of films as a way to “vicariously consume, but also make actual purchases too,” though many were beyond their reach (Kendall 2011, 211).

By 1910, “film had developed into a full-fledged industry,” encompassing an audience now including the middle class and beyond (O’Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985, 298). In fact, popularity had grown so that:

There were 10,000 movie theaters nationwide, attracting approximately 20% of the nation’s population weekly. In large cities this number approached 50%. With themes changing so as to draw a ““more respectable crowd,”” the focus on consumption was becoming even more distinct. After a brief bout with an effort to recapture the puritan work ethic and Victorian morality, the American motion picture began selling much more than tickets. (O’Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985, 298; Davis 1911, Merritt 1976).

Thus, with every segment of society now enjoying film, the influence of the presentations grew to reach a much larger audience with a similar message as the earliest silent films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This new period also saw American industry’s additional impact on the audience in terms of clothing style, home décor, and social conduct, developing what is known as mass merchandising (O’Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). This is an example of the framing of wealth in film. Because of their viewing experience, the audience received

the consistent messages of wealth and consumption. More importantly, they viewed it now as a somewhat inspirational idea of what they should desire. These material goods presented helped to enhance their appearance, furnish their home stylishly, and shape the conduct of the world around them in ways they can interpret as favorable or not, according to the establishment of what wealth should look like.

A film's ability to frame wealth in a way in which it is highly desirable coincides with its ability to determine what the public deems to be of significance. This concept is framing and/or agenda setting, as previously mentioned, "the ability to determine what the public takes to be important," by choosing exactly what they are shown (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 848; Lippmann 1922). Applying this concept, it can be assumed that an audience constantly shown wealth as a means to achieve happiness contributes to their overall understanding of what is worth pursuing.

Media framing helps the audience to formulate their thoughts as to what is significant (Kendall 2011). For example, emulation framing in film finds its roots in this time period with the metaphor of Hollywood. Claiming quite obviously if one lives like a star, their life will be shiny and bright like one. "Tinseltown" and the shimmering superficial world that it represents consistently reiterates the values of self-indulgence and conspicuous consumption (Kendall 2011). Hollywood in its entirety is an extremely glorified aspect of American culture. This is because film has continuously portrayed celebrities as if they had both the wealth and material goods that were to be desired.

In contrast, film made in the United States during the Great Depression shifted away from this idea in a sense that working hard and not expecting too much out of anything was the primary push (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985, 298). Though fairly

different than the film before it, the change agrees with the historical context of the period.

As the United States joined the efforts of World War II in the 1940s, the film industry began producing film that agreed with the war effort in an attempt to further mobilize the nation. After both the Great Depression and the end of World War II, the freedom of the individual filmmaker developed more (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). As a result of this came smaller budgeted thought-provoking film, rather than focusing only on large epics, though the traditional genres remained intact (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985).

During the 1960s, Television replaced film as the most popular form of mass communication in the United States (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985). Yet, "the content of the 1960s and the following decades, the 1970s and 1980s, resembled that of the 1920s" (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985, 301). The themes shown were of "excessive lavishness and conspicuous consumption" (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985, 301). At this point, "acculturation to American values could take place by way of film and television, without the audience ever stepping foot on American soil" (O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice 1985, 301).

Throughout the century and beyond, American film has consistently provided the framing of wealth in such a way that a viewer can perceive American values in treatment of money, material goods, and consumption, but also to an extent feel the weight of its importance through a film's ability to shape wealth as a requirement for happiness. In turn, this leads to a sort of over-identification with those deemed wealthy and emulation of them.

## Spanish Film

Spanish film's historical portrayal of wealth conveys more class mobility, in comparison to that of the already urbanized and industrialized United States (Faulkner 2013). This is because in "1896, Spain was predominantly an agrarian nation with high levels of poverty and illiteracy" (Faulkner 2013; Pérez Perucha 1995). In fact, the peasant, or country-laborer, population "composed 68% of the nation's overall population, with illiteracy reaching 50% during this period" (Faulkner 2013; Pérez Perucha 1995). Due to slower-paced urbanization and industrialization for political reasons, my historical timeline of Spanish film as it pertains to the portrayal of wealth in film will primarily focus on the late 1950s development of *paleto*, the name used to refer to a country-laborer, a film genre built upon the country-laborer's historical mass migration into Spanish cities, and the introduction of consumer culture into Spanish society.

Prior to this period, beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with silent film, Spanish film was very minimal and did not have the same international impact, as was the case with Spanish films' French and German counterparts. By the mid-1930s, the recently established Spanish Republic (1931-1939) faced fascist-produced propaganda film of the National Movement or "The Movement" (Núria 2003). This was the party of fascist dictator, Francisco Franco, as tensions rose leading up to the Spanish Civil War. Franco took power with the support of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. From this point forward, film in Spain was neorealist. Artistic freedom of expression in Spanish film and most all forms of art did not return until after the death of Franco in the 1970s. In fact, many

artists, filmmakers, writers, and thinkers fled the regime, and many who stayed were imprisoned or killed.

The isolation of Spain under Franco caused the country to disappear from the world and even European stage. Franco maintained absolute control over the country with heavy-handed rule. However, between 1951 and 1970, 5 million Spaniards left Spain and 3.8 million were able to move to the cities of Spain from the countryside where they had previously faced extremely poor living conditions to the point of starvation (Richardson 2000). This dramatic shift led to the term *paleto*, meaning country-laborer or peasant, and a genre of film grew around their migration.

The audiences viewing these films “would have either been recent migrants,” surrounded by “second or third generation migrants themselves, having contributed to an earlier growth spurt of migration when the population of both Madrid and Barcelona doubled” prior to the Republic of the 1930s (Richardson 2000, 64). A stark contrast exists between the second and third generation migrants and the new *paleto* in that the rural worker seeking sustenance turned city dweller had been conditioned by the regime to view the countryside as essential to their identity. They had even been prohibited from leaving before Franco allowed the migration. Therefore, the intended interpretation of *paleto* films for *paletos* themselves differed in that the intent of the content was to “transform this entire generation of migrants traumatized by sudden geographic, economic, and cultural change into eager active consumers” (Richardson 2000, 62).

The concept, though not as clear cut as the development of American consumerism, transforms the *paleto*'s beloved rural lands into a commodity (Richardson 2000). Giving the migrants a sort of incentive to save their abandoned rural villages with

zero new growth by consuming a “promised better future filled with television sets, refrigerators, automobiles, and high-rise flats” (Richardson 2000, 64-65). Their consumption of such material goods then, in turn, would contribute to the Spanish economy to help “save” the seemingly unsalvageable lands (Richardson 2000, 65). Further, the overall content of the films communicated that by “accepting this urban system they could save rural Spain” (Richardson 2000, 65).

For example, the *paleto* film, *Sucros*, by José Antonio Nieves Conde, follows Tío Agustín, a man who has lived his life on the Spanish countryside, but seemingly chooses to move to the city with his son’s family in Madrid (Richardson 2000). It is important to note that the choice to move was not the reality of the situation. *Paletos* had to move because they lacked essential resources. Tío Agustín is simple, kind and quick to remind his son that he works too much (Richardson 2000). Often, he reflects on the rural countryside, drinking wine and playing cards. However, this was not the reality either, but an example of transforming the rural land into a commodity by creating a sense of nostalgia, appealing to the homesickness of the *paleto* audience. Furthermore, the film places the value of rural lands on the sustainability of the urban market (Richardson, 2000).

Tío Agustín works to help his family in the city, including: teaching his son to be freer with his money and time, assisting his daughter in finding renewed appreciation for her husband, his rural origins, and showing his granddaughter the value of her youth (Richardson 2000). After this, he decides to return to the rural countryside he loves so much. This is another example of depicting the rural lands in a way that influences the *paleto* to do their best in the city by providing hopes of leaving and returning to the



countryside someday. However, in order to save the lands and be able to return, one must participate in the consumption of life-improving, but also frivolous goods, “like a television, refrigerator, summer vacations, and private schooling for children,” supporting the Spanish economy (Richardson, 2000, 66). The film finishes with an overdramatized exemplification of the happiness that will soon be the case in rural living; children are singing in the street a song about how everyone is happy and content in the town (Richardson 2000).

In the mid-1970s, militant dictator Francisco Franco died followed by King Juan Carlos’s assumption of power. This brought about democratic change. Elections were held. A constitution was made. Spain became a democracy.

History of Spanish film in regards to portrayal of wealth can be found in the attempt to influence the *paleto* to act as a consumer in city life, appealing to their emotional longing for home and hope to salvage their now abandoned villages for what they once were (Richardson 2002). Further, the history of Spanish film depicts wealth in such a way that industrialization and urbanization work simultaneously alongside consumerism to produce class mobility.

### **Chapter 3 American and Spanish Film Analyses**

#### American Film

In this portion of my thesis, I analyze the portrayal of wealth in film today by determining the importance of economic status, as it is shown in the modern American films *Precious* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. These two films, though drastically different in nature, represent variations in American life based on income inequality. By analyzing these films and comparing them to how contemporary Spanish films depict wealth, and the lack thereof, I am able to examine the extent to which the films aid in framing the concept of wealth and the continuation of a society's focus on economic prosperity.

#### *Precious (2009)*

*Precious*, a drama based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire is set in 1987, follows Precious, a 16-year-old living in Section 8 tenement housing with her mother in Harlem, New York as she struggles to survive poverty, and physical, verbal, and sexual abuse from her parents, Carl and Mary. Her two pregnancies as well as an HIV diagnosis are due to the sexual abuse of her father.

Precious has two children, Mongo, short for Mongoloid, a girl with Down syndrome who is cared for by her grandmother, though Mary cheats the welfare system and receives the money for both Mongo and Precious, and Abdul, a boy Precious gives birth to during the film. The teen's life has begun on a dark note, but with the help of a concerned teacher, Ms. Rain, and a caring social worker, Ms. Weiss, she is able to learn to read and write. She eventually plans to complete a GED program and start a new life away from her abusive parents. *Precious* represents a reality many Americans do not

want to acknowledge let alone view on the big screen. The film demonstrates the sheer hopelessness that can be found among poor young Americans.

To evaluate Precious in terms of her outward appearance seems trivial with all that she faces. Nevertheless, she is a young, overweight, African American woman. Her clothes do not appear to be expensive by any means, but there is obvious effort with her matching headbands and jewelry. The audience could potentially interpret her make-do-with-what-you-have style as a longing for the recognition, acceptance, and love of others.

Precious's life reflects the uncontrollable aspects of what a person is born into, producing a sense of empathy from the viewing audience who would generally prefer to focus on their individual worries and plead ignorance. Her problems are real, and though it is extremely unfortunate, lives like this are being lived every day in the U.S. It is interesting to think that if more films like *Precious* were made that depicted the overwhelming cruelties of circumstance, audiences may understand poverty with more sensitivity.

The contradiction of Precious is that she has not been treated as if she lives up to her name. She has had to endure brutalities no human being ever should. Further, the film presents humanity with an obvious harshness; however, characters like Ms. Rain and Ms. Weiss, who removed her mother from welfare after finding out about the various forms of abuse, provide a bit of light amidst the consuming darkness of Precious's reality.

It is evident that a life like this is not desirable to the viewer, but it is also important to note an underlying message that in the absence of wealth, there is no happiness. There is sexual abuse and violence, an extremely poor living condition, and an

illiterate teen that will navigate the world, bearing the effects of these things over which she had no control.

*The Wolf of Wall Street (2013)*

Based on the true story and life of main character, Jordan Belfort, *The Wolf of Wall Street* depicts his rise to the status of a Wall Street millionaire with an illegal approach to stockbrokerage, and the greed it took to achieve his so-called success, glamorizing a somewhat meaningless lifestyle of sex, money, and drugs. Belfort can be described as a prosperous conman. After losing his job as a stockbroker on Wall Street early in his career, he later sells penny stocks and makes commissions off of American's uninformed desire to get rich quick. Belfort ultimately opens his own firm by the name of Stratton Oakmont, emphasizing the art of the "hard sell."

Cultivating immense wealth in a very short period of time, the FBI begins investigating Stratton Oakmont. Belfort's egotistical greed inflates his self-confidence to the point that he considers himself above the law. Thus, he can continue the illegal activity of his choice without consequence. However, after a chain of unfortunate events, including his best friend and business partner giving him up to the FBI, Belfort serves three years in prison for his crimes at Stratton Oakmont. It is obviously not a tough sentence for a man who was able to create and live a life of over-the-top-so-typically-American-excess by cheating wealthy investors.

A young attractive white man, his style is exactly what one would expect of a Wall Street "success." Leonardo DiCaprio plays the role of Belfort with a charming air, but also a hint of his Long Island roots with a sort rags to riches quality; he has a thick

accent and flashy white Lamborghini to prove these things. He later carelessly wrecks the latter as a result of substance abuse.

Belfort's lifestyle offers very little moral value, but this is hard to pay attention to among the opulence of his expensive clothes, cars, houses, yachts, and endless other possessions representing his extreme wealth. His lifestyle is fast, to put it lightly, and it is portrayed in a way in which it seems like a blur of living for overindulgence in every vice that money can buy. His biggest problem is the FBI investigation and it potentially bringing down his livelihood. However, he does not pay much mind to these issues because of his inability to recognize his own personhood. Although he is a young, rich, white, male in America, his privilege does not make him entirely invincible.

The nature of the main character and the environment of Wall Street can be described as lacking substance. Naomi, his wife, with whom he was previously engaged in one of many affairs during his first marriage, and the others with whom he surrounds himself are concerned with nothing more than luxury. There is a reason these individuals are not found helping the homeless or acting in any way outside of fulfilling their own selfish desires.

Belfort's father symbolizes the only true emotion in the film other than greed and an immense desire to indulge. When he gets word, that things are not looking good for Stratton Oakmont, Belfort's father tries to persuade him to pull back and work out a settlement deal so he is not sent to prison. Other than that, the film exemplifies nothing but an every-man-for-himself approach to business and life, alike. Thus, it is clear why the American viewer can identify with Belfort because they too want to get ahead and become rich and powerful (Kendall 2011). This is then extended further by emulation of

an elite role model, like Belfort, while simultaneously shunning his or her own or lesser class (Kendall 2011).

Economic status is the end all be all for Jordan Belfort. He truly thrives off of his monetary success that in turn allows him to lead a life of conspicuous consumption. In general, wealth is portrayed as a factor so important that every whim can easily be fulfilled, even the illegal ones. To Belfort and those like him, the law no longer applies.

### Spanish Film

Additionally, I analyze the portrayal of wealth in the Spanish films *Techo y Comida* and *Zara: The World's Richest Man*, to examine the overall importance of economic status as presented by modern Spanish film. Doing so will allow me to make comparisons between the United States and Spain.

#### *Techo y Comida (2015)*

*Techo y Comida*, translated to English means “food and shelter.” The film takes place in the Spanish city of Jerez de la Frontera in the southern region of Andalusia. It is 2012, the height of the financial crisis’s impact on the nation’s economy, causing socio-economic deterioration throughout Southern Europe (Serrano et al. 2017). Single mother, Rocío, is applying for government benefits that are in such high demand they could take six months to a year to receive, while admitting to already being eight months behind on rent and receiving unemployment pay for over three years. Her life is spiraling out of control as she tries to provide for her now physically malnourished eight-year-old, Adrian, in a failing economy with no job prospects and no familial support. The water has been turned off. The electricity is spotty. She has been served an eviction notice, and

there is absolutely nothing she can do except wait to see how far she can fall before losing custody of her son.

The film captures the raw pain of poverty as well as the social stigma Rocío faces as if she can control the 26% unemployment rate in Spain, the highest it has ever been in Spanish history. The other mothers at Adrian's school plan weekly breakfast gossip sessions, looking down on Rocío's inability to provide. Yet, she is by no means the only one. During this time over 500 people a day in Spain lost their houses. The Spanish banks were bailed out for over 100 billion Euros. But when the film poses the question, "who will rescue you?" though never verbalizing it, the answer is clear and without hesitation, no one.

Rocío feeds her son with all the money she has to buy food. For this reason, she is terribly skinny. At one-point Adrian responds to her various excuses for not eating, telling her that she will "turn into a skeleton." A friend's mom at school mentions that her hair does not look good. Later, she spends time in the grocery store longingly smelling the shampoos and soaps she does not have the money to buy.

*Techo y Comida* perfectly illustrates the unimaginable difficulty that comes with not being able to afford the simplest of necessities. Because of this, Rocío covers her head out of shame and begins to go out at night to dig through the trash for food and small items to sell on the streets. A combination of absolute desperation and love is shown in its most pure form, a way that is the result of only the most extreme forms of poverty, in the lengths Rocío will go to provide for her son, fighting back to survive the crisis.

The Spanish government is blamed primarily for Rocío and Adrian's living circumstance. The film is a powerful critique of the Spanish government's inability to provide for its citizens most basic needs in times of crisis. Throughout the film, she leaves her resume with anyone who will take it, begging for any sort of work. It is almost a pitiful joke, when an employer's claim that all those who came in for an interview will more than likely receive a job, gives her a false sense hope.

Rocío is portrayed as if she is falling without a parachute. The world continues to go on around her, and she has absolutely no control of her own fate. A small saving grace is Maria, her next-door neighbor, who provides them with jugs of water, the occasional casserole, and small bits of guidance and support. In contrast, her landlord is nasty and money-hungry. He tells her she has no shame for not being able to pay him the rent and later evicts her knowing that both she and Adrian will be on the streets. There is both bad and good in the world, but at this point, the good is few and far between for Rocío.

Further, Rocío is not the only one the financial crisis is impacting. Rocío and Adrian reflect individuals and families alike throughout Spain. Her economic status completely defines both her and Adrian's lives because she is not able to afford to live and take care of herself, let alone Adrian. She is at a point of living in a constant state of fear, not knowing what to do because there is not much else she can do. The film does not portray a desirable lifestyle; however, in terms of wealth, some form of livelihood is deemed a necessity.



*Zara: The World's Richest Man (2016)*

The documentary, *Zara: The World's Richest Man*, describes what little is known about the extremely private life of Amancio Ortega, the creator of the largest textile company in the world, Inditex. Born in A Coruña in the Spanish region of Galicia to a poor family of rail workers, it is said that at 13-years-old when his mother was no longer allowed credit for food, humiliating and worrying her, Ortega was propelled to get his family out of poverty. Ortega then quit school to begin working as a tailor. He later developed the concept of democratizing fashion by learning from the customer's preferences then producing it in that particular style, with reasonable quality, and price. As of today, due to his invention of "fast fashion," he is worth 66.5 billion U.S. dollars.

Ortega is viewed as a visionary that revolutionized the fashion world and his model is taught in business schools globally. However, his model of producing cheap clothing quickly comes at the price of stealing ideas, outsourcing, and environmental harm. During the Spanish economic crisis, with unemployment at over 20%, Inditex continued to increase its profits by outsourcing their production to the cheapest possible labor, which in many instances could be considered a form of slavery. For example, in Bangladesh, Inditex employees work seven days a week for ten Euros a month. Then Inditex sells the manufactured products at three times the original production cost. Harmful dyes used in the making of garments are not disposed of properly, causing environmental issues and contaminating water in places like Tunis, Tunisia. Additionally, due to the "fast fashion" concept, high-end designers around the world are copied, or at least "inspire" Inditex-made fashion. Most other designers require an average of 40 weeks between the time an item is designed and sold. By contrast, Inditex has the

infrastructure to produce an item only two to four weeks after it has originally been designed. Therefore, an Inditex item can be on the sales floor two months before the actual original made by the high-end designer.

Ortega is an 80-year-old man now, and he has come a long way from an idea he had in his brother's dining room. He has only participated in one interview with a journalist and requires that Inditex employees do not talk to the press. There has even been question of his actual existence, compelling the company to release an official photo of him. He is often portrayed as a very savvy successful businessman that created a big business in Spain. However, though many people believe the majority of Inditex products are manufactured in Spain, crediting Ortega with Spanish job creation and as a result stimulation of the nation's economy, it is a myth. It is as if the whole world wants to buy fast, cheap, and stylish clothing, but they do not want to have to see the slavery that goes in to making it. Ortega, like the almighty Oz, has both seamlessly crafted the art of hiding both himself and the reality of his company behind a velvet curtain. With products manufactured in slave-like conditions, he then unveils them in designer-like showrooms, like his 300 million U.S. dollar Fifth Avenue storefront.

Economic stature is definitive of Ortega, because it is his life's work. He is said to work like a mule alongside his employees to this day. Amancio Ortega represents an extreme work ethic, something not usually noted to be common in Spanish culture, and the outcome of preparedness meeting both innovation and opportunity.

By analyzing both American and Spanish film in terms of the portrayal of wealth, and the lack thereof, it has been established that the consumerist nature of film has developed in a way in which economic status is presented in modern film as definitive of

a character's quality of life. The next portion of this thesis will compare and contrast this development in the films of the two countries more thoroughly.

## Chapter 4 Comparisons

From a historical standpoint, the timeline of American and Spanish film from 1900 to the present day demonstrate the way in which films in the two countries differ greatly in terms of the political environment of the country and the influence it had on the films being produced. However, in both cases, it is evident that the development of consumer culture, though during differing decades, developed the viewing audiences' perception of wealth and the significance they placed upon it. Further, in the previous chapter of this thesis, it was noted through analyses of two American and two Spanish films that the consumerist nature of film has progressed. Consumer culture in film has developed such that wealth (or lack thereof) is portrayed in a way that is largely definitive of the quality of the main character's life. To clarify, the main character's economic stature first defines their lifestyle. Their lifestyle determines how they are viewed socially, and ultimately how they are categorized as a member of an economic class and treated by the political institution in place. This portion of this thesis compares the differing depictions of wealth and poverty, the lifestyle and level of social acceptance that is a result of economic status, belief and/or lack thereof in the governing institution in place, and the connections, if any made between overall income inequality and the political establishment.

To begin, the American film, *Precious*, and the Spanish film, *Techo y Comida*, both present poverty and fit into a sort of genre of drama in film that can be deemed unsettling to watch. Both are women, Precious and Rocío, each with at least one child. However, the two characters differ in a couple of ways. Precious is an illiterate African American teen born into poverty. She has been subject to a life of physical,

mental, and sexual abuse. Her little to no education and the effects of abuse make it that much more difficult to escape the cycle of poverty (Gottschalk and Smeeding 1997).

While the audience does not know the exact reasons why Rocío does not have the support of her family, she is in contrast a Spanish single mother in her mid-twenties with the high unemployment rates of the Spanish economy to blame for her difficult economic situation. Thus, the two women both face poverty in their respective country, but the reasoning for their economic position differs completely.

In the film, *Precious*, poverty represents a cycle (Carasso, Reynolds, and Steurele 2008). Though Precious has had no choice but to endure being born to both poverty and abusive parents, the ultimate underlying message of the film is that it is a matter of her own to solve. Furthermore, poverty in American film, as exemplified by *Precious*, is portrayed as if when the circumstances become horrendous enough, an individual will be strong, fight back, and break the cycle; the measurement of “enough” is dependent upon the person. This is drastically different to the poverty Rocío faces in *Techo y Comida* because it is made clear that this is the fault of the Spanish government and the Spanish economic system.

This primary difference that can be found in the portrayal of poverty is a result of varying beliefs between countries regarding the purposes of the welfare state. First, the general “redistribution of wealth from rich to poor is much more extensive in Europe” as a whole (Alesina and Glaser 2004, 13). In comparison, in the United States “income mobility is used to vilify the poor” (Alesina and Glaser 2004, 23). This is due to an American belief that “working hard in the land of opportunity” can make anyone rich beyond measure; those who are not are to blame for their own economic conditions

(Alesina and Glaser 2004, 23; Shammass 1993). There is little understanding beyond this with no recognition of differing privileges as a result of systematic forms of discrimination (Alesina and Glaser 2004). Thus, Rocío is able to be more reliant on government intervention and support than Precious, because in Europe the poor are unfortunate, whereas in the United States the poor are lazy (Alesina and Glaser 2004).

American poverty is a self-matter, while Spanish poverty is an indicator and issue of a failing government (Boinca et al. 2013). As a result of the differing roles of a welfare state, the political system's willingness to shape policy that is helpful to this particular economic class differs as well. In *Precious*, her mother cheats the welfare system for their livelihood. The representation of Precious's mother, Mary, an alcoholic and drug addict that admits to being jealous of her daughter for "letting" her father rape her, is framing in film. It is not surprising that the American public views those in poverty as at fault for their situation, if those in lower economic classes are all perceived as some form of Precious's mother. This is then further perpetuated into laws that do not favor them as a class because of the public and policymaker's perception (Schneider and Ingram 1993). As a group policy benefitting those in poverty is put into law sparingly. When it is, the policies are justified as if they are acts of charity (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Additionally, policy in the United States is not made to benefit the poor because the poor, like Precious, are also led to believe their economic status is a personal problem, and they cannot rely on the government for help (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

Rocío in contrast is simply bewildered by her state. Amidst instances of her struggle, news stations play in the background, as heads of state discuss legislation to aid the poor during the crisis. The issue for Spain during this time was the lack of preparation

if and/or when something like this was to occur. The later developing welfare states of southern Europe, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, all of which had been occupied by prolonged dictatorships during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, simply did not have the infrastructure to reduce poverty during a crisis of this magnitude (Serrano et al. 2017).

In contrast, to the portrayal of poverty in American and Spanish film, the American film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and the Spanish film, *Zara: The World's Richest Man*, illustrate the differences between the United States and Spain in terms of portrayal of wealth in film. Obviously, they are very different men, yet Jordan Belfort and Amancio Ortega both could be considered self-made successes, with somewhat questionable morals. Belfort went about his business in a way that was blatantly illegal, while Inditex has evaded major legal trouble up to this point for their hand in slavery, environmental destruction, and blatantly copying the work of others.

The primary difference between Belfort and Ortega is their choice in lifestyle, or better yet, how they present their lifestyle to others. Belfort used his illegally obtained wealth in an overly self-indulgent manner, making it appealing to American audiences. The lavish pomp that made Jordan Belfort what he symbolizes in American society, extreme wealth to the point that he is above the law and therefore can have all the sex, drugs, and material possessions he so chooses, is not employed by Ortega at least publicly. In contrast, Ortega seems to care about nothing more than the work itself and amassing more wealth.

In terms of their interactions with the government, the two both do not have much interest. Belfort more openly regards the federal government as pesky and out to get him, with the latter being true. It is documented in *Zara: The World's Richest Man* that when

then Prince Felipe VI of Spain came to Inditex, Zara sent his business partner to greet him. Further, he allows himself to be seen with heads of state for the sole reason that he views it as means to assist with the growth of his company. Belfort and Ortega's lack of involvement in the political realm portrays men so wealthy that they are not worried about influencing policy, because they are above the law regardless.

Further, this is reiterated in American policy made to benefit the wealthy in a roundabout way in order to maintain their vote in elections, but also in an attempt to not disrupt the idea of a seemingly fair system in the U.S. (Schneider and Ingram 1993). That so-called fairness would be debunked if the common citizen were made aware of all the policy that benefitted the elite (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

Overall, by comparing the portrayal of both wealth and poverty in Spanish and American film, it is made clear that regardless of economic status wealth defines the main character's lifestyle, level of social acceptance, belief in the governing institution, and how they interact with it. Thus, wealth is definitive of an individual's quality of life in developed consumer cultures.



## Chapter 5 Conclusion

It has been established that the framing of film throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century aided in both the creation and the lasting developments of consumer culture in both the United States and Spain. From this, it was then determined through analyses of *Precious*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Techo y Comida*, and *Zara: The World's Richest Man*, all of which are American and Spanish films made after the 2008 financial crisis, that the portrayal of wealth, and the lack thereof, is definitive to the quality of a character's life. Through in-depth comparison of these films, it is concluded that regardless of economic status, wealth is representative of the character's lifestyle, level to which they are socially accepted, their beliefs in the governing institution in place and what, if anything, policy can do for them.

To conclude this thesis, both contemporary American and Spanish film have evolved to portray wealth as if it is of the utmost significance. This portrayal causes the audiences to “over-identify with the wealthy, socializing them to believe that elites are better, happier, and more successful” (Kendall 2011, 211; Bell Hooks 1964). Further, this sort of intimate identification with the upper class, in turn, “suggests that no allegiance is owed to the viewers own class or the less fortunate” (Kendall 2011, 211; Bell Hooks 1964). This is reiterated with the concept that the American public receives the exact same opportunity to live like the wealthy; the poor are all lazy and failing to work hard enough.

This thesis disproves this American ideal by defining the cyclical nature of poverty and providing *Precious* and her suffering from uncontrollable circumstance as an example. In comparison to *Techo y Comida*, though they both offer a glimpse into the

more than uncomfortable aspects of poverty, government policy and their inability to properly provide for their people's most basic needs is at fault in Spanish film. This example stresses the importance of framing in film between the two countries. In the U.S. today, not only are we more likely to be exposed to a Jordan-Belfort-like character when going to the theater, but also in the rare instance that poverty is presented it is a self-matter.

This sort of framing in regards to poverty perpetuates the constantly increasing issue of income inequality in the United States. The media is able to "exert persisting effects on the judgments the public makes regarding the country's most important problems" (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982, 855). Films placing emphasis on wealth have shaped Americans as consumers, but also "contributed to the conception of citizenship, the citizen's orientation towards one another, voter behavior, policy formulation, and style of participation" in the governing institution (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 334). Thus, an American is not going to vote for politicians who support policy that is in favor of the abused 16-year-old or the struggling single mother, redistributing wealth. Rather, wealth in the United States is to be accumulated. Wealth symbolizes an incredible work ethic, success, and most importantly happiness. Yet it is important to note with this every-man-for-himself approach, the large majority spend their lives working without reaching the pot of gold.

I conclude this thesis with the understanding that what we are choosing to view has a direct influence on what we later think about and deem to be of importance. We, like the main characters in the films we view, lack substance in our search for purpose

through conspicuous consumption. We, like the main characters in the films we view, are now defined by our wealth.

I believe that though “people looking at identical content can come to idiosyncratic, often opposing, judgments,” the content itself is what holds the importance of influence (D’Alessio 2003). Thus, we must be more careful with what we consume because it is what we become.

## References

- Alesina, Alberto, and Edward L. Glaser. 2004. *Fighting Poverty in the U.S. and Europe: A World of Difference*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University.
- Bonica, Adam, Nolan McCarty, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2013. *Why Hasn't Democracy Slowed Rising Inequality? The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27 (3): 103-123. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41955547>
- Carasso, Adam, Gillian Reynolds, and C. Eugene Steuerle. 2008. *How Much Does the Federal Government Spend to Promote Economic Mobility and for Whom?* Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts.
- D'Alessio, Dave. 2003. "An Experimental Examination of Readers' Perceptions of Media Bias." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80, (2): 282–94. Doi: 10.1177/107769900308000204.
- Faulkner, Sally. 2013. *A History of Spanish Film: Cinema and Society 1910-2010*. New York, New York, USA: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gottschalk, Peter, and Timothy M. Smeeding. 1997. "Cross-National Comparisons of Earnings and Income Inequality." *Journal of Economic Literature* 35, (2): 633-87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2729789>.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Mark D. Peters, and Donald R. Kinder. 1982. "Experimental Demonstrations of the "Not-So-Minimal" Consequences of Television News Programs." *The American Political Science Review* 76, 848-58. Doi: 10.2307/1962976.
- Kendall, Diana. 2011. *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield. <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=669803>.
- Kenworthy, Lane. 2007. "Inequality and Sociology." *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, (5): 584–602. Doi: 10.1177/0002764206295008.
- O'Guinn, Thomas C., Ronald J. Faber, and Marshall Rice. 1985. *Popular Film and Television as Consumer Acculturation Agents: America 1900 to Present. Historical Perspective in Consumer Research: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Jagdish N. Sheth, and Chin Tiong Tan, 297-301. Singapore: Association for Consumer Research. <http://acrwebsite.org/volumes/12163/volumes/sv05/SV-05>
- Richardson, Nathan E. 2000. "Paleto Cinema" and the Triumph of Consumer Culture in Spain: The Case of Pedro Lazaga's "La Ciudad no es para mí. *Arizona Journal*

*of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 4: 61-75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20641495>.

Richardson, Nathan E. 2002. *Postmodern Paletos: Immigration, Democracy, and Globalization in Spanish Narrative and Film, 1950-2000*. London, UK: Associated University Presses

Schneider, Anne, and Helen Ingram. 1993. "Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy." *The American Political Science Review* 87, (2): 334-347. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2939044>

Serrano, Pedro José Gómez, Ricardo Molero-Simarro, and Luis Buendía. 2017. "The Impact of the 2008/9 Crisis on Inequality and Poverty in Southern Europe: The Case of Spain." *The Journal of Australian Political Economy* 78: 87-114.

Shammas, Carole. 1993. "A New Look at Long-Term Trends in Wealth Inequality in the United States." *The American Historical Review* 98, (2): 412-31. Doi: 10.2307/2166841.

Triana-Toribio, Núria. 2003. *Spanish National Cinema*. London, UK: Routledge.

