

## 5 Films to Explain American Culture

The five movies that I believe would best describe American Culture to someone not from this country are American Beauty, Crash, Boyz 'N The Hood, Traffic, and Mean Girls. I chose these movies because they demonstrate issues that Americans face in all aspects of life.

American Beauty demonstrates the struggles that many Americans face in a marriage, family relationship, and in work. Lester Burnham is drifting through life in an unhappy marriage and dislikes his job. Carolyn Burnham is also unhappy in the marriage and is constantly seeking perfection. This seems to portray the dissatisfaction that many Americans have with their own lives. Rather than address their issues, they both seek gratification elsewhere through drug abuse and infidelity. To me, this film demonstrates the lazy approach many people take toward life, seeking the quick fix, rather than an actual solution. The title itself is somewhat of an oxymoron in that it shows many of the ugly and dysfunctional aspects of American life, but as something of beauty.

The film Crash conveys the many different types and levels of prejudice, racism, and ignorance that are very prevalent in our society. The multicultural cast demonstrates the stereotypes associated with each race and the problems that each subculture faces within America. The racially charged responses given by many of the cast members usually stem from when a person feels anxious or insecure as with Sandra Bullock, or when frustrated with problems beyond their control like the shop owner, or when threatened. Because racial categories confer superior and inferior status, many use it to make themselves feel better in a situation that makes them feel uncomfortable. Regardless of race, social status, or occupation, racism can exist at any level.

I chose Boyz 'N The Hood because I believe it shows the adversity that surrounds many African Americans who grow up in the "ghettos" of our nation. Cuba Gooding Jr.'s character is raised in a neighborhood surrounded by sex, drugs, and violence, just like his friends. The main difference that allows for him to escape it all is his strong father figure. His mother sends him to live with Lawrence Fishburn as she knows that he will provide the guidance and discipline needed to help his son progress in life. Because his friends do not have the same father figure in their lives, they become involved in crime, violence, drugs, and some end up injured or dead. Without the proper tools and influences available, it is easy to see why many of the characters accept and internalize the stereotypes of the ghetto.

The film *Traffic* covers the never ending war on drugs that America continues to wage and lose. It covers the struggles and involvement from many different levels. The film covers the government's approach to the problem through Michael Douglas's character demonstrating the irony of his position as his own daughter struggles with drug addiction. I think this film does a great job of showing the struggle that will continue to exist as long as there is a demand for drugs and there are smugglers who are willing to take the risk to supply them.

While *Mean Girls* might not seem like the most logical choice, I decided to use this film because while my previous choices deal with more adult aspects of our culture and society, I believe this film clearly shows what life is like for many adolescents and teenagers growing up in America. Although Tina Fey makes light of all the scenarios in the film, she also shows how difficult it can be to fit in with others. In most high schools in America you will find the student body labeled or categorized into groups of jocks, nerds, geeks, cheerleaders, etc. Being defined at such a young age seems to greatly influence one's behavior and sense of self-worth. Not being accepted by others is a problem that many face daily while in school and I believe it is this dynamic in our school system that leads to the larger issue of bullying.

## **Bibliography**

***American Beauty***. Dir. Sam Mendes. DreamWorks,1999. Film.

***Crash***. Dir. Paul Haggis. Bob Yari Productions,2004. Film.

***Boyz 'N The Hood***. Dir. John Singleton. Columbia Pictures,1991. Film.

***Traffic***. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Bedford Falls Productions,2000. Film.

***Mean Girls***. Dir. Mark Waters. Paramount Pictures,2004. Film.