

Spring 5-2015

From King Leonidas to Lord Farquaad: Popular Culture and How Authority is portrayed in Popular Film of 2000-2009

Solai N. Wyman
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Other Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wyman, Solai N., "From King Leonidas to Lord Farquaad: Popular Culture and How Authority is portrayed in Popular Film of 2000-2009" (2015). *Honors Theses*. 284.
https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses/284

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

From King Leonidas to Lord Farquaad: Popular Culture and How Authority is portrayed in
Popular Film of 2000-2009

by

Solai N. Wyman

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Political Science

May 2015

Approved by

Allan McBride, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser
Associate Professor of Political Science

Edward Sayre, Ph.D., Chair
Department of Political Science

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

In a modern age dominated by technology, the role of entertainment such as film is steadily growing in American culture and politics. Film and politics “inform” one another, meaning that film reflects the politics within a society in which they are placed (Christensen & Haas 2005). Using this as justification, the central research question of this thesis is, "What is the political content of popular films of the 2000s in terms of authority, and what does this suggest about the culture and view on authority of the Millennials as a generation?" A content analysis of popular films from 2000-2009 was done to answer this question, and Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's *Cultural Theory* (1990), which aims to explain why people want what they do and why people perceive the world the way that they do, served as a basis for the research. The theory supports four main categories, or ways of life in which the role of government or lack thereof is distinguished: hierarchy, egalitarianism, fatalism, and individualism. Guided by this theory, twenty-one of the bestselling films from 2000-2009 were viewed, and six scenes from each were coded for the ways in which authority, as well as conflict, blame, and conflict resolution, were portrayed. The final product is a systematic analysis of popular film of the most recent decade, and it is concluded that American Exceptionalism is still an accurate description of American culture.

Key Words: film, politics, culture, popular, authority, content, millennials, exceptionalism, individualism, egalitarianism, hierarchy, fatalism

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, my savior, Henrietta, who has absolutely no idea what American exceptionalism even is.

Acknowledgements

I would not have completed this thesis without the guidance of my amazing adviser, Allan McBride. Thank you, Dr. McBride!

Table of Contents

List of Tables	viii
List of Figures.....	viii
Chapter 1:	
Introduction	1
Literature Review	2
Hypotheses	14
Chapter 2:	
Method.....	15
Findings	18
Chapter 3:	
Discussion	25
Conclusion.....	27
Bibliography	29
Appendices:	
Appendix A	31
Appendix B.....	33

List of Tables

Table 1. Cultural Biases (Authority, Blame, Conflict, Conflict Resolution).....	10
Table 2. Cultural Bias as depicted in Popular Film of 2000-2009	23

List of Figures

Figure 1. Cultural Categories Matrix	8
Figure 2. How was power wielded by Authority	19
Figure 3. What was attitude towards Authority	20
Figure 4. Who received Blame for Conflict.....	20
Figure 5. Who was Conflict between.....	21
Figure 6. How was Conflict Resolved	22

Chapter 1- Introduction:

Popular film is one of several agents identified by political scientists that may contribute to the socialization of the American people. Other agents include family, peers, school, and church. These few examples are arguably more influential than film, but there is more and more leisure time that Americans fill with entertainment, particularly movies. Thus, there is sufficient reason to investigate the political content of film since it may affect the way people think and behave, especially the younger generations.

The research question posed in this study is, "What is the political content of popular films of the 2000s in terms of authority, and what does this suggest about the culture and view on authority of the Millennials as a generation?" It is expected that American individualism, an ambivalence towards authority, and a laissez faire attitude will be a leading trend in the popular films considered for this project.

There has been much research on the factors of socialization and how those factors establish a culture within a people. Entertainment as a whole is one of those factors, especially in the media-dominated and internet-driven twenty-first century. This study, however, is focused on popular film specifically. The aim is to study and examine several popular films and use "Cultural Theory" (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990) to establish the role of authority and how it is portrayed in those films. The theory helps to discover which type of government, if any, a specific people desire.

Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's culture categories have been applied to each of the past five decades (Uscinski 2014). These categories include ways of life such as hierarchy and individualism. In this study, the most recent decade, 2000-2009, is analyzed.

Furthermore, only the most popular films with the greatest potential impact on those individuals who are coming of age during the designated time period are considered as part of the study because young people are arguably the most susceptible to the effects of entertainment and the most participative. It is a study exploring a decade of popular film and how it has shaped the culture of what is known as Generation Y, also known as the Millennials, who are people who matured around the turn of the 21st century.

A coding system was used to examine a list of twenty-one films which have banked record setting figures at the box office. The study targets the portrayal of authority in each film as well as the attitude towards the wielding of that authority and whether or not the authority is successful in its wielding. The conflict developed throughout the films, how it is resolved, and who is to blame will also be examined. The final product of this project is a systematic and unbiased analysis of popular film of the 2000s.

Literature Review:

Entertainment as agent of socialization

There has been much research done on the socializing factors of entertainment. Studies such as Feldman & Sigelman 1985, Lenart & McGraw 1989, McBride 1998, and Uscinski 2014 have aimed to uncover the role and influence of two major forms of entertainment: television and film. To illustrate the heavy influence entertainment can potentially have, in a 1986 TV Guide survey of 1550 Americans, more people noted that they found more pleasure in viewing television than other pleasures such as food, money, sex, and religion (Kottak 1990, p. 7). Furthermore, watching television was voted “most liked” as a way to spend time relaxing. It was chosen over alternatives such as doing

nothing, vacationing, and reading. Clearly, television and other forms of entertainment can have a discernable influence on people who place so much value in it.

Allan McBride has also done research on television and culture. His expertise is on how authority is portrayed on television and culture, and in one of his studies, he used a comprehensive coding system to determine the role of authority in different television programs of the 1990s. He aimed to determine if entertainment programming has created a long-term, “ubiquitous cultural bias” that has shifted the cultural (social and political) concerns of Americans by studying the *content* of television programs (1998, p. 542). With the images and stories of authority figures presented in television, McBride concluded that Americans have not fully dismissed authoritative power. However, they may have lost or changed some of their traditional adherence to hierarchy and given greater support to individualism, at least as evidenced in popular television program content (p. 547).

Understanding the significance of television on culture makes it easier to develop and discuss a study done on a different medium, such as popular film of the 2000s. Since 1965, the American people have devoted larger and larger amounts of their leisure time to watching television (McBride 1998, p. 548). The same can be said about film and teenagers since the 1950s (Uscinski 2004, p. 11). Therefore, it is important to understand this new-age form of social stimulus and the reactions that may arise because of it.

According to Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas in the book *Projecting Politics*, politics and film “inform” each other (2005, p. 4). Films and politics mirror the society in which they are placed and perhaps re-inforce values, so this study focused on the portrayal of authority specifically to gauge an observable relationship. Every film has political

significance and meaning (p. 4), so there may be a way to determine what content has the most observable impact. This study is dedicated to the content which portrays authority or lack thereof. Studying the role of authority in films is a way to conclude what exactly film reveals about politics and government and the way Americans view them with the result that one aspect of the total socialization process was illuminated.

Research conducted by Feldman & Sigelman (1985) and Lenart & McGraw (1989) attempted to determine whether television and film have measureable impact on the ways in which people think, decide what their interests are, and elect the role government should have in fulfilling those interests. Uscinski (2014) and others like Cantor (2012) and Christensen & Haas (2005) investigated the influence popular film can have on the same areas of discussion. There is a clear disproportion in studies about television over those that explore film, but there are definite similarities that can be drawn between the two.

Two studies published in the *Journal of Politics* sought to measure the effect prime-time television has on viewers (Feldman & Sigelman 1985; Lenart & McGraw 1989). In the study conducted by Feldman & Sigelman, a sample of residents of Lexington, Kentucky viewed a made-for-TV film called “The Day After” which depicted the aftermath of a nuclear attack on Lawrence, Kansas by the Soviet Union (1985). The survey research concluded that there was some impact of prime-time television on viewers who are less educated, but there was not significant change in their attitudes.

None the less, the film had the highest influence on the salience of issues and the level of concern viewers had for the issues depicted in it (Feldman & Sigelman 1985, p. 572, 576). It was a by-product of the agenda setting function television has by engaging

viewers in experiences they have not personally been involved in (p. 559). In other words, this case study of television had the effect of bringing issues to viewers' attention and making them aware of what was happening around them and what could happen to them unless proper precautions were taken.

While Feldman & Sigelman's study only showed limited effects of television on its viewers, the study done by Lenart & McGraw as a conservative answer to the liberal "The Day After" showed more conclusive results. "Amerika" was a week long program which premiered in 1987 and portrayed the Midwest ten years after a Soviet takeover of the United States. A sample of New York residents answered survey questions to measure the influence of the program. Lenart & McGraw concluded that there was some impact of prime television on ideological positions.

After watching the program, the attitudes of liberals and independents shifted and they began favoring traditionally conservative policy positions such as increased military strength (1987, p. 706). As a direct result of the depicted communist coup that liberal and moderate American viewers shifted towards more pro-active defense stances. While "The Day After" was a one night only event, "Amerika" spanned a week long period. Therefore, there was greater exposure to the conservative program material. This suggests that the length of time exposed to a media is a determinant factor of its influence. Regardless, both of these experimental studies are viable examples of the effects of television and possibly other forms of entertainment such as film can have on viewers.

Daniel Shae backed Christensen and Haas' deduction that film acts as a socializing agent for Americans. Shae also went a step further than content and studied the *effects* of

television as well. He examines the correlation between stimulus from popular culture (television, movies, music, etc.) and behavior. He gives three theoretical explanations for this relationship: 1) popular culture shapes attitudes and beliefs, thereby influences behavior; 2) individual attitudes and beliefs shape popular culture; 3) it is an interactive process where both acts are happening at the same time (1999, p. 8). This study concentrated primarily on the first theory.

Shae writes that while producers and directors often aim only to entertain and make a profit, people are most affected by television and film when they think they are merely being entertained (1999, p. 6). There is research, he notes, that shows that violence in cartoons and video games have undoubtedly influenced children and young people, and when violence became more prevalent in television and film, the rate of teen suicide increased (p. 4).

The influence of film and other forms of entertainment may be a product of the social learning theory as postulated by Albert Bandura (1971). This theory argues that behavior is often learned deliberately or inadvertently through the influence of example (p. 5). Film is arguably a viable model for observation and imitation. Though this is not a socialization study, it is worth discussing the potential socializing effects of entertainment as a genre. More importantly there are the long term effects of entertainment such as films. Shae writes that popular culture, specifically film, shapes political attitudes and perceptions over the long run (1999, p. 4). Individualism has been an overarching ideal in America since the nation's formative years (p. 5), and that is reflected in film.

Cultural Theory

As defined by anthropologists, culture is the “knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, expectations, values, and patterns of behavior that people learn by growing up in a society” (Kottak 1990, p. 5). It can be shaped by education, religion, and even mass media such as television and film. In the scope of this study, the attitudes, expectations, and values a society places in authority will be examined as guided by Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky’s Cultural Theory.

Cultural Theory (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky 1990), used in McBride's analysis of television as well as addressed in Richard Ellis' *American Political Cultures* (1993), attempts to explain why people want what they want and why people perceive the world the way they do. It gathers explanations to these questions and puts them into four main categories, or ways of life: hierarchy, egalitarianism, fatalism, and individualism¹.

Each of these is defined by the levels of integration and regulation, or group and grid (Thomas, Ellis, & Wildavsky 1990). Integration is measured by the "incorporation into a bonded society" where membership to the group is key (p. 5). Regulation, or grid, is measured by the "externally imposed prescriptions" that limit the interactions within a group (p. 5). A society that is high group, then, is heavily involved and accommodating to the group as a whole. A society that is high grid, for example, is greatly restricted by some type of authority that limits their individual freedoms. Each of Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's culture categories are signified by varying levels of group and grid.

Egalitarianism is a system rooted in strong group boundaries with minimal

¹ There is a fifth cultural category, the autonomous *hermit* who refuses to be controlled. It was not expected to show in this study, however, so it was not considered.

restrictions on social relations. No members are in control over others. A *hierarchy*, on the other hand, is one designated by strong group dynamics with high restrictions. Members are subjected to the control of others. *Fatalism* occurs when the majority of the population is excluded from group relations but is also under some restrictions. Finally, *individualism* is defined where no one is bound to any group, and there are few restrictions placed over them. These categories of culture are summarized in Figure 1.

		Group	
		Low	High
Grid	Low	Individualism	Egalitarianism
	High	Fatalism	Hierarchy

Figure 1. This matrix organizes the cultures based on the high or low levels of group and grid.

Each category of culture is backed by distinct values. Egalitarians place high value on equality and the virtue of the group. The community and the equal share of responsibility and wealth is of the utmost importance under this type of culture where authority is the blame for conflict. In a hierarchy, by contrast, inequality reigns. Value is placed on order by way of dividing the people, some in roles of authority and others underneath that authority, and those who disrupt the system, deviants, are responsible for any conflict that arises (p. 59). Fatalists are in a similar situation, though to an unquestionable extreme. In this culture, value is placed in submission and obedience.

Apathy is a leading feeling under this kind of authority where nature and fate are to blame for their subservient situation (p. 6, 60).

The individualistic culture values true independence and the freedom to do without the restriction of government. Success or failure and status in the culture is determined by one's own will and actions as well as their negotiations with others (p. 60). Furthermore, there are limitations on the pressures from authority and the power granted to it.

Each of these categories present different ways of viewing government and authority and creates a pattern by which people can or will interact with that authority. For example, the 1950s and 1960s as described by Uscinski can be considered a system of hierarchy, where the people were under some control of the government with some rules and regulations. They were comfortable with it. In opposition, the 1980s and the 1990s may be thought of as individualism or egalitarianism, both low grid, when people did not trust the government and did not want any restrictions that would impede upon their individual liberties and freedom.

Ellis elaborated on the culture categories by assigning them to Albert Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty model to further distinguish the culture categories (1993, p. 89-90). By *exit*, it is meant that the individual withdraws from society in order to escape authority which is impeding upon their rights. This is blatant individualism with low group. A group will use *voice* to speak out against authority and move to change their unfair system. This is egalitarianism with high group. In a hierarchy, exit and voice are considered dishonorable and disrespectful, because regardless if it is right or wrong, the system and those with the highest power are wise and just in their judgement. Therefore,

the ruled people should remain loyal. *Loyalty* suggests that a people will stay under its given authority with the belief that the authority will do what is best in their interests. This is a form of hierarchy, according to Hirschman's model. Each of these signifies a more descriptive illustration of Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky's culture types.

Cultural Theory does not allude to specific entertainment or as any agent that would lead a society to one of these ways of life over another. It does, however, speak of culture biases (illustrated in *Table 1* (McBride 2015)), which are shared values and beliefs (1990, p. 1). It is reasonable to connect this theory with film or other types of media to study what type of authority or lack there-of a people value or prefer over another.

Table 1. Cultural Biases.

	<i>Authority</i>	<i>Blame</i>	<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Resolution</i>
<i>Egalitarianism</i>	Anti-authority, charisma leads to success	Society and its institutions	Group vs. Society	Cooperative efforts of group
<i>Individualism</i>	Limited authority, achievement leads to success	Individual fault	Individual vs. Individual	Independent actions of individuals
<i>Hierarchy</i>	Authority is high and is ascriptive	Dissidents, outsiders	Institution vs. Institution	Impositions by authority
<i>Fatalism</i>	No opportunity for authority	Fate	Individual vs. Fate	<i>Deus ex machina</i> ²

Table 1. The cultural biases of egalitarianism, individualism, hierarchy, and fatalism are outlined in this table based on four variables: authority, blame, conflict, and resolution.

The Creation of Culture

² *Deus ex machina* is a term that signifies the intervention of a higher power or deity in order to resolve human conflict (McBride 1998).

John Fiske, author of *Understanding Popular Culture*, also provides an interesting understanding of culture. He understands popular culture as a result or creation of the people's use of the resources provided to them by the system, not so much an agent that influences the people or something is imposed upon them (p. 25). Commodities, "texts" that have potential meanings, are a major example of those resources produced by capitalism (p. 27). Culture industries produce these commodities, and the people can either use or reject them. Popular culture, in deduction, is an active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures based on commodities within a social system (p. 23).

In terms of authority, Fiske writes that popular culture must contain both domination and subordination (hierarchy) (p. 46). However, the opportunity to speak against and oppose the dominant must be present for the subordinated (p. 25). This "structure of power relations" is created by the struggles of everyday life in capitalistic society. The placement of culture allegiances, which are determined by several social categories such as class, gender, race, age, etc., is not "with whom" but "against whom"; Fiske calls this "nomadic subjectiveness" (p. 24). He focuses especially on class as a factor. To summarize his conclusion, capitalism creates domination/subordination and a class system. This power structure in turn creates culture.

Fiske is relevant to this study, because he brings forth the importance of culture in a society, specifically that which is generated by the production within capitalism. Culture "is a specific activity inherent in the mode of existence", and it is an aid to the totality of a society's operative existence (p. 37). Film is undoubtedly a product of a capitalistic society, and it is part of the culture of a country like the United States. This study will be useful in drawing unsuspected conclusions between culture and authority.

A Generational Effect

Joseph Uscinski, a professor of Political Culture at the University of Miami, has done similar research to McBride. They both write about authority and what role it plays in shaping culture. Uscinski, however, did his 2014 study with specificity. He investigated the influence of popular films on one specific group of people, teenagers and young adults. Furthermore, he did his study with a generational approach. He argued that film is a definite factor in socializing the minds of young people who are malleable, adaptable, and susceptible to political messages presented in them just as family structure and economic status are (2004, p. 3). He studied each generation and evaluates what historical events shaped their political behavior and thinking.

Here is a review of his findings:

1950s- The 50s saw the rise in film targeted to those coming of age. (p. 11)

1960s- Carrying over from the 50s, the 1960s were a time full of affirming messages about authority figures, government and politics. These sprang from major events including the Great Depression and WWII which saw the government playing a proactive role that people as a collective believed necessary (p. 7). The end of the decade, however, was marked with cynicism and dissatisfaction (p. 8).

1970s- Young Americans of the 70s had to contend with social problems including a failing educational system, joblessness, crime, and the AIDS epidemic. Very few of them held support and optimism for the government and authority. (p. 8)

1980s- This was a time known as the "Me Decade". People were less involved in community groups and there was a decline in "social capital". (p. 12)

1990s- This is defined by a bias against government and authority. It can be assumed that

problems with the Bush Sr. and Clinton administrations helped create this anti-authority view.

Each of these decades illustrated a discernable bias against authority. Government officials, educators, professionals and parents were all depicted in negative light in the popular films that were aimed at teenagers and young adults and were investigated by Uscinski. These films included classic hits such *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Footloose*, and *Risky Business*.

What about the new millennium and the beginning of the 21st century, years that Uscinski does not measure? Paul Cantor (2012), for example, addressed some of the years that follow Uscinski's study. In his book, *The Invisible Hand of Political Culture*, Cantor discussed the changes in film after the terror attacks on September 11th, 2001. Right after 9/11, Cantor concluded that films (and television) were filtered and void of any and all criticism against the government so not to disturb the distraught and traumatized nation. However, there was a change in the years following 9/11 which showed more cynicism than ever towards government and its authority (2012, p. 294). Furthermore, there was an overriding theme of "Trust no one" in popular culture that defines the 2000s and its young, coming of age generation (p. 282). This study will discuss the changes, if any, that have occurred from earlier decades to the most recent and conclude what that signifies about the culture of the young people of 2000-2009.

Hypotheses:

As mentioned previously, it is expected that American individualism, which includes an ambivalence towards authority and a laissez faire attitude, will be a leading trend in the popular films considered for this project. Individuals will be free to act as they choose, without the restraints of the state, but they will also be responsible for their success as well as their own problems.

However, there may also be some illustration of an individualistic society that has heavy egalitarian influence, in which people share some level of equality and regret the intervention of state or any type of authority. Egalitarianism has been present in American culture since the days of the colonies as a way to escape the British feudal system which was dominated by hierarchy and to insure religious and economic freedom (Lipset 1997, p. 31). In order to obtain this freedom, America placed high value on the individual who, according to the prevailing political ideology of the era, has inalienable liberty and equality. This combination of individualism and egalitarianism is known as American exceptionalism, as discussed by Ellis (1993) and Lipset (1997) and mentioned by Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky (1990, p. 4), and it is expected to appear in the results of this study.

Animated Films

It is also predicted that the lower rated films, G and PG, specifically the animated ones, will show more support for authority, at least by the conclusion of the films. Children, teenagers, and young adults may rebel against authority, but in the end, they generally learn a valuable lesson and return to their rightful place under authority, usually

their parents. These films are likely to have a fairytale trend throughout based on the intervention of fate and uncontrollable forces, which is an indication of fatalism. By this, it is believed that protagonists simply have to be patient, and some knight or superhero will come, rescue them, and solve their problems.

British Films

A distinction between the films that are told from an American perspective and those set elsewhere in British settings is hypothesized as well. As mentioned previously, American individualism is expected to be prominent, but there may be some exceptions to this trend. Films with British themes or those based on novels written by British authors are likely show more support for authority in hierarchical culture, such as the *Harry Potter* series and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. This confidence in a structured government and authority represent significant variation worthy of exploration and inclusion in this project.

Chapter 2- Method:

The first step of this project was to determine which films would be viewed and examined. The films chosen were some of the most popular releases of the 2000s and those with high potential of being viewed by people coming of age, or transitioning between childhood and adulthood, during the time (see Appendix A.) For this study, children from the ages of 13-16 and young adults from the ages of 17-25 were considered. The two age groups were understood as distinct from one another because of the restrictions placed on some films by the American Film Institute. Those films rated R are generally not seen by children under the age of seventeen at the initial release in theatres without the presence of

a parent/guardian. The *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) was used to locate lists of popularity based on box office sales.

21 films were chosen as part of this study:

X-Men

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Shrek

Finding Nemo

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

The Day After Tomorrow

The Incredibles

The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

King Kong

War of the Worlds

300

Night at the Museum

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End

Ratatouille

Spiderman 3

Transformers

The Dark Knight

Iron Man

Slumdog Millionaire

Avatar

New Moon

In order to determine how authority is portrayed in each of these films, the coding system developed by Allan McBride was adopted, because it provided a way of measuring research of similar interests. McBride researched the role and effects of television on culture rather than film, but it is presumed that television and film have much of the same cultural significance. With his coding system, McBride was able to deduce what type of authority (boss/manager, parent, teacher, police official, government official, or professional such as a doctor or lawyer) was presented in a television program and what type of success the authority figure had in wielding his/her authority. Furthermore, he questioned if there was a conflict between the authority and the people and if the authority

was challenged. Finally, was the conflict solved and how? (See Appendix B for example of coding scheme)

For this study, each film was broken up into sections in order to code in a systematic way. At ten minutes into each film, a three minute long scene was coded for authority, conflict, conflict resolution, and blame. Beyond that, three minute long scenes were coded at 30, 50, 70, and 90 minutes into each film. If the film exceeded that time duration, the final twenty minutes at the height of the action was coded in a sixth category. In a one instance, *Finding Nemo*, the film was not long enough to generate the sixth category. In other cases, such as *X-Men*, *Ratatouille*, and *Night at the Museum*, the fifth category was voided in order to code of the sixth and finale category instead. This meant that the film had twenty minutes remaining at the 90 minute mark.

So to review, the questions posed in coding were as follows, for example:

- Is there an authority figure present?
- What type of figure is presented?
- Did authority attempt to wield authority?
- Was authority successful?
- Do those under the authority challenge its power?
- Was conflict apparent? Was it resolved?
- Was any actor/set of actors blamed for the conflict?

For the sake of this study in which a substantial number of characters were portrayed with some type of superhero power and status, a seventh category was added to accommodate for that type of authority figure. Therefore, if a superhero from the comic

book film productions of *Marvel* and *DC* (such as Spider-Man or Batman) was shown wielding his super powers, understood as authority for this project, it was coded as a 7.

All of these questions were posed in attempt to gain an understanding of the role of authority and other cultural values in each film. In order to make some sense of the data and to develop a comparative analysis, the data program known as *Stata* was used to produce graphs and tables that organized the data in several ways. For example, those films that were live-action were compared to animated or cartoon films so to conclude whether or not authority is depicted differently in the two genres and how. Comparisons were also generated to relate American films with those films with more British themes. These two variables (*liveact*, *britam*) were measured, because there was an expectation of distinctions between the categories. American films are predicted to be different from films such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* that are based in British culture which is dominated by hierarchy, aristocracy, and social division (Lipset 1997, p. 36). The potential differences in the portrayal of authority in these films were worth investigating as part of this project.

Findings:

Authority

Of the twenty-one films viewed for this project, all of them portrayed authority in some type of way and each of them dealt with conflict at some point in the film. Of 121 scenes coded across the films, 99 of them (approximately 81%) portrayed authority. Significantly, 61% of the films had five or six scenes with authority. Only two films (*Shrek*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, 9.5%) showed as few as one scene of authority. The mean for

the authority variable was calculated at 4.417 with a standard deviation of 1.55. This means that on average, each film had about three to six scenes in which authority was presented in some fashion. The type of authority mostly represented were government officials, parents, and bosses/mangers/supervisors. 25 instances of government officials, 21 parents, and 14 bosses were coded across the 21 films evaluated.

Of the 99 scenes that were coded portraying authority, 82 of those showed the authority attempting to wield its power (approximately 82.8% total). 18 out of the 21 films examined showed that wielding to be of an active

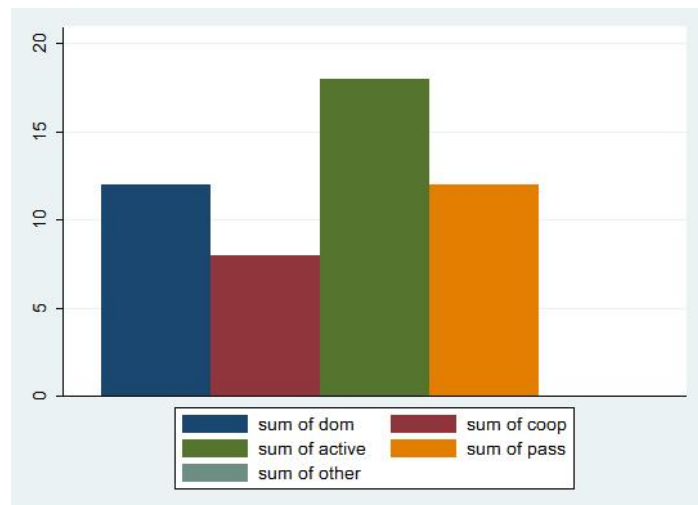


Figure 2. This graph shows how authority wielded its power. The highest level recorded was active wherein the authority was supported by those under their command.

nature (~85.7%). This means that the authority wielded its power in a manner that was not entirely domineering, but rather, it was often supported by those under its authority. An example of this is King Leonidas giving orders during the battle sequences in *300*. His authority was not shown in a negative connotation. Instead, his wielding of his power was unquestionably supported by those under his command. Only 46 of the scenes coded that showed conflict presented a challenge to the authority from the people (~56%). Furthermore, 59 scenes showed that the authority was successful in wielding its power (~71%). (See Figure 2 for visual summary of wielded power.)

The attitude of the people towards authority and the wielding of its power was

predominantly supportive. 17 out of 21 films demonstrated a supportive attitude towards authority and its power (~80.9%). This is a significant 80% of all of the films coded. Calculated by the number of scenes in which authority was portrayed with a

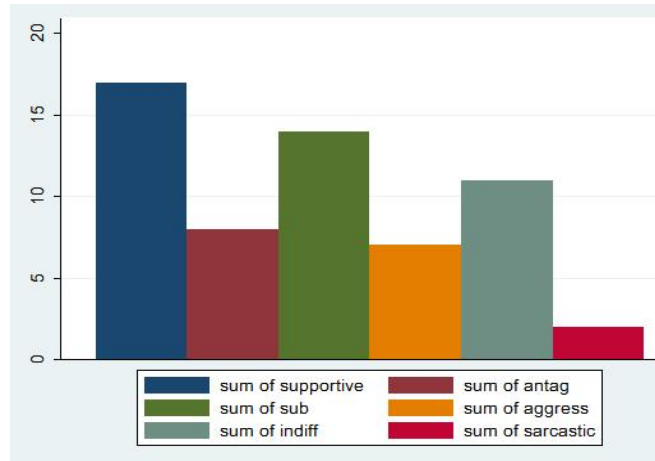


Figure 3. This graph shows the attitude towards authority. This highest frequency was supportive, followed by subservient and indifference.

supportive attitude, 99, the percentage stands at 35%. However, 14 films also showed signs of subservience (14% of the scenes) and 11 showed signs of indifference towards authority at some point or another. These are all significant figures worth looking into. (See Figure 3 for visual summary of attitude.)

Blame

Of the 21 films, 19 of them blamed the central conflict on some actor or actors (~90.5%). Three films placed the blame on dissidents/outside who disrupted the system (~15.8%). Another three films blamed God, fate, or uncontrollable forces such as Mother Nature for the conflict

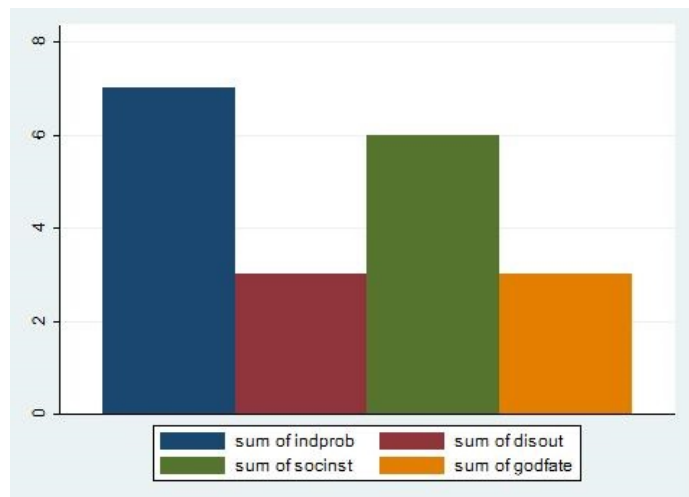


Figure 4. This graph shows who was blame for conflict. The highest frequency was the individual at fault for their own problems, followed by society as a whole.

(15.8%). Most significantly, in seven films, conflict was seen the problem of the

individuals (36.8%). It was their own fault for their problems. Furthermore, six films put the blame of the central conflict upon society and its institutions (~31.5%). These statistics show higher levels of individualism and egalitarianism through the placing of blame on individuals themselves or society as a whole. (See Figure 4 for visual summary of who received blame for conflict.)

Conflict

Conflict was portrayed in 98 of the coded scenes, about 80% of the total material coded. A little over 66% of the films showed five or more scenes of conflict, and only two films (*Night at the Museum*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, 9.52%) had fewer than two scenes which displayed some form of conflict. The mean for this variable was measured at 4.667 with a standard deviation of 1.42. So similarly to authority, on average, each film had three to six scenes in which conflict was presented to some degree.

Fourteen out of 21 films portrayed conflict between two or more individuals (nearly 34.6% of the scenes coded that had conflict). Only 18.3% showed of scenes with conflict that was between individuals and institutions, and 19.3% was between individuals and nature. (See Figure 5 for summary of conflict.) Twenty out of 21 films showed conflict

that was centered on self-interests, which is approximately 47% of the total number of scenes that coded some form of conflict. This means that the conflict was

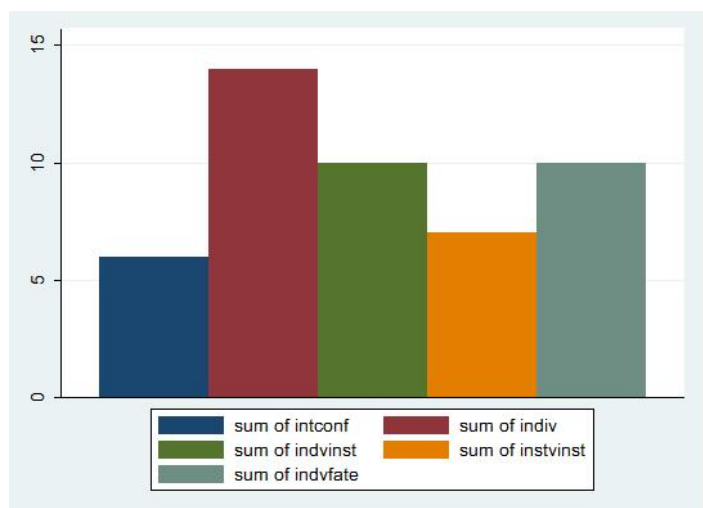


Figure 5. This graph shows who the conflict was between. The highest frequency was conflict between several individuals.

focused on preserving or securing some type of benefit for the individual.

Furthermore, 18 of the 21 films portrayed the nature of benefit, whether for the individual, institution, or society, as physical welfare. Based on the number of scenes in which conflict was actually depicted, 40% of them were centered on physical well-being. In other words, in a large number of cases, conflict was fought between two or more individuals who wanted to secure their own physical safety.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution was measured fairly evenly across the possible variables. In the twenty cases in which the overall conflict of the film was resolved in some manner (the overall conflict of securing the freedom from the Persians in *300* was not resolved in the duration of the film), five were resolved by the independent actions of individuals (~25%). Three were resolved by the cooperative efforts of a group of characters (~15%), four were resolved by the impositions of authority (~20%), and eight were settled with the intervention of God, fate, or something other “Deus ex machina” (~40%). These calculations are also worth mentioning and considering for the final conclusions of this study. (See Figure 6 for summary of conflict

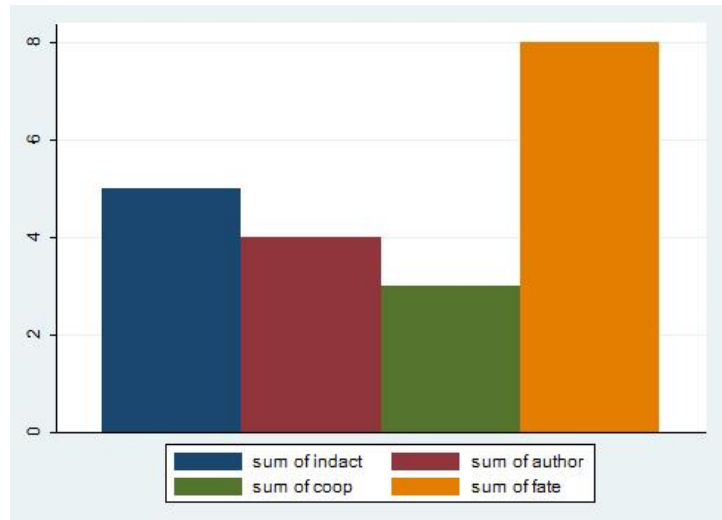


Figure 6. This shows how the overall conflict was resolved. The highest frequency was fate, God, or Deus ex machina.

resolution.)

Each of the four main variables (authority, blame, conflict, and conflict resolution) were tallied together in the following table (See Table 2). For example, every occurrence of an attitude that showed support towards authority was counted as a sign of hierarchy, while antagonism or aggression towards authority was recorded as egalitarianism. As further example, if the conflict was resolved by individual actions then it was marked as individualism, while the intervention of a *Deus ex machina* was counted as fatalism. The total percentages of each cultural category was calculated to create this comprehensive table.

Table 2. Cultural Bias as depicted in Popular Film of 2000-2009

	<i>Authority</i>	<i>Blame</i>	<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Resolution</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Egalitarianism</i>	21 (23.9%)	6 (31.6%)	18 (18.4%)	3 (15%)	48 (21.3%)
<i>Individualism</i>	15 (17.0%)	7 (36.8%)	43 (43.9%)	5 (25%)	70 (31.1%)
<i>Hierarchy</i>	34 (38.6%)	3 (15.8%)	18 (18.4%)	4 (20%)	59 (26.2%)
<i>Fatalism</i>	18 (20.5%)	3 (15.8%)	19 (19.4%)	8 (40%)	48 (21.3%)
<i>Total</i>	88	19	98	20	~100%

Table 2. This table summarizes the percentages of observations of each culture category based on authority, blame, conflict, and conflict resolution.

While a combination of individualism and egalitarianism was expected in the

outcomes of this study, it is shown in Table 2 that significant levels of hierarchy and fatalism were also found. Individualism has the highest percentage of representation in the 21 films studied (~31.1%). However, this is balanced with high levels of each of the other three categories. Approximately 26.2% of the data collected portrayed hierarchy. This is an unexpected figure in primarily American films.

Both egalitarianism and fatalism represented about 21.3% of the data each. It is believed that fatalism only showed up so prominently is because of the large number of superhero and fantasy films that was extremely popular during 2000-2009. Most of these characters are only super or fantastic because of a *Deus ex machina*, intervention from God, fate, or uncontrollable, higher force. Their super abilities which distinguish them from other individuals and give them authority are that higher power, such as Spider-man getting bit or Aslan, the powerful lion, helping Peter and his siblings defeat the evil White Witch.

American vs. British

As anticipated, there were some noticeable differences between films with American themes and their British counterparts. The four British films (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Slumdog Millionaire*- the last film was included because it was set in India and was expected to have themes more related to British ones than American) coded no blame against the individual. Blame was placed elsewhere on dissidents, society, and fate. 75% of the American films, however, established blame primarily within the individual or society and its institutions.

Conflict resolution was also a distinguishing variable between British and

American films. Three out of the four of the British films presented conflict that was resolved by the intervention of God, fate, or a “Deus ex machina.” Only two of the seventeen American films did the same. The American films were primarily resolved by the imposition of authority or independent actions of some of the characters (~62%). The conflict resolution prompted by authority and the actions of individuals as well as placing of blame on the individual and society and its institutions are both examples of American exceptionalism, which was expected to show up in the results of this study.

Live vs. Animated

The blaming of fate or heavy dependence on fate was not found in the coding of the four animated films examined in this study. Instead, blame in animated films was placed on the individuals and his/her own problems. Therefore, the fairytale trend that was hypothesized was not found. It was the live films that actually generated the blame of fate but only about 20%. The majority of blame in these films were placed on the individual but also society and its institutions (60%).

A majority of the conflict resolution presented in animated films were prompted by the cooperative efforts of some of the characters. Two out of four of the films showed this type of resolution while only one live film did. Approximately 93% of conflicts portrayed in live films were solved by authority, society, or the intervention of fate. The distinctions between live and animated films in conflict resolution as well as blame are worth mentioning, because they show that are differences in the culture represented to children and that represented to young adults.

Chapter 3- Discussion:

The prevailing culture that was most represented in this study was individualism. That is clear. However, there was also strong signs of hierarchy found in the support for authority as well as some tendencies towards egalitarianism as seen in the assigning of blame on society's institutions. Therefore, it can be concluded that Generation Y is exposed to high levels of individualism in popular film while also witnessing the influence of the state through hierarchy and the distrust of the state through egalitarianism. This generation may be one full of individuals who understand their freedoms, liberty, and equality, but they may also respect authority in some cases while being weary of them in others.

Evidence was also found in this study that conflict is often fought between two or more individuals, and the center of conflict is usually based in self-interests for physical welfare. Individuals are responsible for their own problems, but it is also the individual's actions that resolve the conflict. However, there were also signs of hierarchy found in the results. Most of the individualism was balanced with a support for authority. Also worth mentioning is the high levels of fatalism that was found in conflict resolution. These findings do not reflect the exceptionalism of American culture which is theorized to be a mixture of individualistic and egalitarian principles where support for authority is incredibly lacking. None the less, this configuration of all four cultural categories only adds to the uniqueness of America as a country and a political system.

It appears that the anti-authority attitude of that 1990s, as mentioned by Uscinski (2014), has shifted into a more supportive view of authority in the 2000s, at least in films for younger people. The 2000s may be a combination of the culture that defined the authority affirmative 1960s and the self-centered 1980s. Furthermore, the cynicism of the

early 2000s, as described by Cantor (2012), may not be entirely accurate. It is clear that American film and popular culture remains one defined by individualism. However, this study has concluded that there is significant support of authority when it is presented and actively wields that authoritative power. In other words, American popular culture is full of individualistic themes, but individuals are willing to be guided under some type of authority in some cases.

Conclusion:

It is important to mention that there were some films in which authority did not show up in coding (*Avatar*, *Shrek*). This does not mean that there was a total absence of authority in the films. *Shrek's* Lord Farquaad, for example, was a royal figure who domineeringly wielded his inherited authority in other points of the film that were not coded. The high levels of egalitarianism and fatalism that were portrayed in *Avatar* by the Na'vi clan and its leaders, Eytukan and Mo'at, did not show up in the coding also. Therefore, more coding could be done to further evaluate authority in these films. The absence of authority in the scenes that were coded are not depictive of the entire film in cases such as these. This is an error that may have skewed the results to some degree.

It may also be beneficial in future studies to have a more extensive array of films to formulate more accurate results. Adding more British or animated films or creating a more proportional list of films based on ratings may have altered the results in one direction or another. None the less, the twenty-one popular films chosen were thought to be most representative of the decade and the results demonstrate that level of representation.

If film is truly an agent of socialization, which this research supports that it is and that it shapes the ways in which people think, how they behave, how they view government and decide what they want from government and other forms of authority, then it is important to understand what exactly is being portrayed in the popular films of the time and conclude what that means for American society. So, further research on this topic would definitely be worthwhile. Looking at the last five years, 2010-2014, there is already a visible shift in the major political themes in popular films that can be explored. With blockbusters like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, it appears that popular culture in films is transforming into one defined by distrust in government, aggression towards authority, and eventual revolution led by the unfairly ruled. With the fall of *S.H.I.E.L.D.* in the huge summer hit of 2014, *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, even the favored comic book genre of film is showing a change in cultural themes. No longer is the authoritative power of superheroes and super-institutions simply accepted. They too can be flawed and corrupt.

The trend of individualism with traces of egalitarianism may continue throughout American culture and popular film, but there may also be a slight rise in the tendency towards hierarchy. Whatever the change is, if any, it would be well worth a look into in future studies.

Bibliography

Bandura, Albert. 1971. *Social Learning Theory*. New York City: General Learning Press.
1-45.

Cantor, Paul. 2012. *The Invisible Hand in Political Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV*. Lexington, KY. The University Press of Kentucky.

Christensen, Terry and Peter Haas. 2005. *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in Political Films*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe.

Ellis, Richard. 1993. *American Political Cultures*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Feldman, Stanley and Lee Sigelman. 1985. "The Political Impact of Prime-Time Television: The Day After." *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47. 556-578.

Fiske, John. 1989. *Understanding Popular Culture*. Routledge: New York and London.
Unwim Hyman. 23-47.

The Internet Movie Database. IMDb.com, Inc.: An Amazon.com Company. 1990-2014.

Kottak, Conrad Phillip. 1990. *Prime-Time Society: An Anthropological Analysis of Television and Culture*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

The MPAA. Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. 1922-2015.

Lenart, Silvo and Kathleen M. McGraw. 1989. "American Watches 'Amerika': Television Docudrama and Political Attitudes." *Journal of Politics*. Vol. 51, No. 3. 697-712

- Lipset, Seymour M. 1997. *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- McBride, Allan. 1998. "Television, Individualism, and Social Capital." *PSOnline*. University of Southern Mississippi. 542-552.
- McBride, Allan. 2014. "Agents of Socialization: Television." Lecture. University of Southern Mississippi: Hattiesburg.
- Shae, Daniel M. 1999. *Mass Politics: The Politics of Popular Conflict*. New York, NY: Worth Publishers, Inc.
- Thompson, Michael, Richard Ellis, and Aaron Wildavsky. 1990. *Culture Theory*. Boulder, San Francisco: West View Press. 1-67.
- Uscinski, Joseph. 2004. "The Portrayal of Authority Figures in Popular Teen Cinema: A Generational Approach." *Western Political Science Association*. Tuscon, AZ. University of Arizona. 3-23.

Appendices:

Appendix A

Film List:

Film:	Year:	Genre:	Rating:
X-Men	2000	Action	PG-13
Harry Potter	2001	Adventure/Fantasy	PG
Shrek	2001	Animated/Comedy	PG
Finding Nemo	2003	Animated/Family	G
Lord of the Rings 3	2003	Action/Fantasy	PG-13
The Day After Tomorrow	2004	Action/Adventure	PG-13
The Incredibles	2004	Animated/Family	PG
The Chronicles of Narnia	2005	Adventure/Family	PG
King Kong	2005	Action/Adventure	PG-13
War of the Worlds	2005	Action/Sci-Fi	PG-13
300	2006	Action	R
Night at the Museum	2006	Action/Adventure	PG
Pirates of the Caribbean 3	2007	Action/Adventure	PG-13
Ratatouille	2007	Animated/Comedy	G
Spiderman 3	2007	Action	PG-13
Transformers	2007	Action	PG-13
The Dark Knight	2008	Action	PG-13
Ironman	2008	Action	PG-13
Slumdog Millionaire	2008	Drama/Romance	R
Avatar	2009	Action/Fantasy	PG-13
New Moon	2009	Fantasy/Romance	PG-13

Box Office Sales:

Film:	Opening Weekend \$	Total \$
X-Men	54,471,475	157,299,717
Harry Potter	90,294,621	317,557,891
Shrek	42,347,760	267,652,016
Finding Nemo	70,251,710	339,714,978
Lord of the Rings 3	72,629,719	377,845,905
The Day After Tomorrow	85,807,341	187,739,919
The Incredibles	70,467,632	261,441,092
The Chronicles of Narnia	65,556,312	291,709,845
King Kong	50,130,145	218,080,025
War of the Worlds	77,061,953	234,280,354
300	70,885,301	210,575,491
Night at the Museum	42,212,651	250,863,268
Pirates of the Caribbean 3	139,802,190	309,402,425
Ratatouille	47,027,654	206,445,654
Spiderman 3	151,116,516	336,530,303
Transformers	70,502,384	318,246,193
The Dark Knight	158,411,483	533,345,358
Ironman	102,118,668	318,412,101
Slumdog Millionaire	360,018	141,319,195
Avatar	77,025,481	760,507,625
New Moon	142,839,137	296,623,634

(The Internet Movie Database)

Appendix B

(Sample coding sheet)

Title of film: *300*

Year: 2006

Genre: Action

Rating: R

Length of Program: 116 mins.

Total Sale (Box Office): \$210,575,491

Is there an authority figure present?

1 2 3 4 5 6

X X X X X X

Yes.

No. (Go to Section II.)

If yes, what type? (most prominent)

1 2 3 4 5 6

X X X X X X

Boss/manager/supervisor (1)

Parent (2)

Teacher (3)

Police official (4)

Government official (5)

Professional (Doctor/lawyer, etc.) (6)

Superhero/villain (7)

What sort of portrayal?

1	2	3	4	5	6	
X	X				X	Main character (1)
		X	X	X		Supporting character (2)
						Bit part (3)

Did authority attempt to wield authority?

1	2	3	4	5	6	
X		X	X	X	X	Yes.
	X					No.

How?

1	2	3	4	5	6	
			X			Domineering way. (1)
						Cooperatively. (2)
X		X		X	X	Actively. (3)
						Passively. (4)
						Other. (5)

What was attitude toward authority?

1	2	3	4	5	6	
X		X		X	X	Supportive (1)
						Antagonistic (2)
			X			Subservient/Intimidated (3)
						Aggressive (4)

Indifferent (5)

Sarcastic (6)

How as attitude portrayed?

1 2 3 4 5 6

Humorously (1)

X X X X X

Dramatically (2)

Realistically (3)

Was authority successful?

1 2 3 4 5 6

X X X X

Yes.

X

No.

Was the authority challenged?

1 2 3 4 5 6

X X X

Yes.

X X

No.

Section II:

Was conflict apparent?

1 2 3 4 5 6

X X X X X X

Yes.

No.

The conflict was between which of the following?

1 2 3 4 5 6

						Internal conflict of one character. (1)
						Two or more individuals. (2)
X						Individuals and institutions. (3)
	X	X	X	X	X	Institution vs. institution. (4)
						Individual vs. Nature (fate) (5)

Upon which of the following was the conflict centered?

1 2 3 4 5 6

						To secure personal benefit for self or another individual. (1)
X	X	X	X			To secure benefit for an institution or organization. (2)
				X	X	To secure benefit for society. (3)
						Unable to determine. (4)

What was the nature of the benefit being sought?

1 2 3 4 5 6

						Tangible (monetary, material goods, etc.) (1)
						Emotional (love, friendship) (2)
X	X	X	X	X	X	Psychological (power, freedom, status) (3)
						Physical welfare (4)

Conclusion:

Was the conflict resolved?

1

Yes.

X

No.

If yes, how?

1

Imposed from above or resolved by actions coordinated by authority.

Resolution by independent action of characters.

Resolved as a result of cooperative efforts of some of the characters.

Resolved by intervention of "Deus ex machina" (fate)

During the course of the conflict, was the cause of the conflict blamed on any actor or set of actors?

1

X

Yes.

No.

If there was a conflict, which sorts of characters were blamed for causing the conflict?

1

Individuals were blamed for their own problems. (1)

Dissidents/outside (2)

X

Society or its institutions (3) -The Persians?

God, Fate, or uncontrollable forces.