



**Universitat de les
Illes Balears**

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau

Whiplash (2014): Work Ethic and Limitations in the American Dream

Alexandra Paniagua Fiol

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Any acadèmic 2019-20

DNI de l'alumne: 41571642Q

Treball tutelat per Dr. Rubén Jarazo Álvarez
Departament de Filologia Espanyola, Moderna i Clàssica

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Paraules clau del treball:

American Dream, *Whiplash*, work ethic, discrimination, failure

Abstract

There have been thorough studies on the importance and influence of the American Dream *ethos* within the history and cultural production of the United States of America. In this essay, another approach will be taken. The feature film *Whiplash* is analysed in order to decipher how the core values of the American Dream are followed in society and the possible impediments in achieving it. The results of this analysis mirror the current state of this North American country's society. When the characters, the setting and script are analysed the blind belief on the Puritan work ethic proves to be delusional. The American Dream does not solely depend on one's hard work since the ideology is not applied to an egalitarian society where everyone has the same opportunities. Limitations and barriers spawning from structural inequality – e.g. sexism, racism or homophobia – play a decisive role on the realization of the dream.

Keywords: American Dream, *Whiplash*, work ethic, discrimination, failure

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1. Introduction

In 1931, historian James Truslow Adams coined the term American Dream in what would become his bestseller *Epic of America*. The ideology behind the name had been around in the Land of Opportunity for centuries, but it was not until less than ninety years ago that an official title was given to this *ethos*, which englobes the core American values (Schneiderman 2012, xvi). This United States national *ethos* of the American Dream bases its attainability on the ground that anyone can prosper and succeed in life if the person puts in a lot of hard work. Its goal is mainly focused on obtaining material wealth and upward mobility through a very strict Protestant work ethic that is still strongly ingrained in the minds of citizens, residents and immigrants of this North American country (Wyatt-Nichol 2011, 258-9).

The history and impact of the American Dream has been studied for a long time by scholars as an inherent characteristic of the United States of America's culture (Boorstin 1962; Cullen 2003; Kasiyarno 2014). As a part of its lifestyle, this country eats, sleeps and breaths American Dream. It has undoubtedly become a trait of this nation. Because of this, we can see it reflected on different fields of its popular culture: music (Cashman 2013), literature (Cantor 2019), TV and reality shows (Angelone 2004), films (Winn 2007), etc. These authors study how this ideology influences these cultural products from the standpoint that the completion of the American Dream is always possible. There is never a doubt about it, believing in it comes natural to them. This belief is blind to factors that could hinder one's road to success such as structural inequality – including social class marginalisation, racism and sexism amongst others (Wyatt-Nichol 2011, 258-9). Consequently, it is not surprising that this country's artistic and intellectual productions also mirror the overlooking of these facts, still clinging on to the possibility of accomplishing the American Dream.

This essay will provide a new point of view in the analysis of this *ethos* on a cultural product. It will bluntly pinpoint the reasons people have low chances of succeeding by analysing a contemporary feature film. The film chosen for this purpose is the Academy Award-winning drama film, *Whiplash*. Written and directed by Damien Chazelle, it premiered in the Sundance Film Festival on January 2014, expanding to hundreds of screens across the world over the year. This film has been analysed from different points of view, mainly musical, but never regarding the American Dream's impact on the USA population. With the analysis of this work, the pouring of American

Dream's ideals on an unequal society will be pronounced guilty for the impossibility of its attainability.

The aim of this paper is to explore from a post-modern point of view the extent of the influence that this ideology has on its subjects, focusing on the main protagonist Andrew Neiman, as well as analysing settings, the script and other characters to determine the barriers people come across when trying to achieve their dreams. First, this essay will commence by expanding on the most important characteristics of the American Dream: motivation, ambition and, the core value, a diligent work ethic. Then, it will move on to explore the limitations and barriers, spawning from discrimination, that people encounter when trying to achieve their goals; such as sexism, homophobia, racism, etc. All of this, of course, will be done by analysing aspects of the film but also comparing them with actual data.

2. American Dream in *Whiplash*

2.1. Role Models in the American Dream

This *ethos* is so rooted within the country's identity that it soaks American popular culture – its music, books and films. The country's film industry is the perfect reflection of this blind belief in the American Dream. Whilst there is still one story from rags to riches to tell or remember, the dream will still be alive, people will still try to conquer it. These influences are very important, as they are the proof that the dream is feasible and encourage people to try their best as to achieve it (Winn 2007, 1). The main character of the film, Andrew Neiman, is an ambitious young drummer who only has one aspiration in life: to become one of the greatest jazz drum players of all time. Because of this, he decidedly enters Professor Fletcher's Studio Band – Shaffer's Conservatory top jazz orchestra, the best in the country. Neiman directs all his efforts towards practice. His objective is to become as good as the best jazz performers and to be remembered for eternity because for him "being the greatest musician of the twentieth century is anybody's idea of success" (Chazelle 2014, 46:15).

To keep the dream vivid in his mind and his fiery ambition going, he is constantly surrounding himself with objects or music of world-class jazz musicians. In the scene when he dines with his family, he states that he "would rather die drunk, broke at 34" and be remembered than "live to be rich and sober at 90" with people not knowing who he was (46:25). Mentioning such specific dying age is no coincidence, it is a nod to the

popular late saxophonist Charlie Parker who he brings up shortly after (46:36). Having influences and someone to look up to is very important in the American Dream. In the case of Andrew, it is his source of hope since his family do not have anything to do with music and do not understand his passion. Since he lacks moral support from his loved ones on his decision to succeed in this artistic field, he keeps motivated by surrounding himself with the stories of the people that did make it. His bedroom is the perfect example of it. The first glimpse we get of this space is when he gets up early and rushes to his first day of practice with Studio Band. It is a second-long quick full shot in which the spectator is presented with a dimly lit room in which the walls are saturated with neatly distributed posters, photos and magazine clippings related to the jazz world (14:56). In this first shot, only the contents of two posters can be discerned, both of them are of Buddy Rich. The name or picture of this artist will pop up several times during the film when Andrew needs it. In the practice room, there is a black and white picture of him which he looks up to when he is exhausted or hopeless to regain strength (09:45, and 31:14). Nonetheless, in another bedroom scene, more posters of other jazz artists are found such as the poster for Ken Fowser and Behn Gillice's album *Top Shelf*, which was released around the time of the film's production, or the one for the Grammy nominated Captain Black Big Band (31:12). Role models and their stories are very important to keep one's motivation going when pursuing a dream. For Andrew Neiman, this proves especially true since these become his sole inspiration to work harder.

2.2. Work Ethic

The devoted work ethic that characterizes this *ethos* goes way back in time and it is rooted within the country's history and culture. Whilst in Judeo-Christian beliefs, work was considered to be a punishment for Adam and Eve's disobedience, during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, there was a shift of perspective regarding the act of working. According to John Calvin, the concept of work behaviour and religion were connected; a person's work was connected to God's work. People had to labour hard and unceasingly in order to comply with God's wishes, even though this did not secure one's place in heaven. On the other hand, idleness was seen as a way to damnation. This idea of an unending labour life was brought to the new continent, to the area that later became the United States of America and was further reinforced by the harsh conditions of the land. These hardships gave the settlers a sense of self as well as of purpose (Porter 2010, 537). This Protestant work ethic favoured long hours of work with little time for leisure.

They saw themselves as an example of diligent work and commitment to God. “Puritans embraced Governor Winthrop’s proclamation that the Massachusetts colony would be as a “City upon a Hill”” (537) since they wanted their political and social order, their rightful living, to be an example for the rest of the world.

Today’s American Dream, a combination of capitalism, as an economic system, and democracy, as a political system, is fuelled by this Protestant work ethic (536). Back then, it meant to go with the commands of God but with time this religious connotation was lost. The Protestant work ethic went from being an individual religious “calling” for people, to simply become a trait that defined that nation’s society and duty. Furthermore, in the last century, it has become to be understood as an instrumental value to improve one’s life rather than as a quality as an end on itself (538). This quality being remarkably embedded within this country’s history, it is no wonder, that it has a great effect in its people’s lives. This can be appreciated in the protagonist of the film, Andrew Neiman. To accomplish his ambition, he gives everything he has. From this work ethic spurs his obsession in perfecting his technique. Trying to become as great as the best will take him to extremes that will put at risk both his physical and mental health.

Regarding his physical health, it is compromised when he starts practicing non-stop. He had been training religiously before, but it is when Professor Fletcher humiliates him for the first time in front of the class that he starts obsessing over being perfect, which takes a toll on his physical well-being (Chazelle 2014, 27:20). It is in this scene, that he is thrown a chair by his teacher and is nearly hit by. From this moment onwards, his life will solely revolve around practice. His fixation on this activity will directly or indirectly cause him physical pain. His practice sessions become so demanding that he won’t stop even when gets injured (31:37). He gets wounds on his hands when playing for a long period of time but instead of taking a break, he uses band aids to cover the wounds and continue practicing (31:40). These do not prove to be practical since he is still in pain as can be seen in Neiman’s sweat dripping painful face (32:07). Because of the constant friction with the drumsticks, the plasters detach from the skin causing the wounds to become greater and blood to splatter on the drum set (32:34). The distress this action may have caused to the public is nothing compared to the one they might feel when contemplating the brutal accident he suffers later on in this feature film. On the day of the Dunellen competition, he has a car accident because of his reckless driving on his way to the venue (01:06:32). His car gets hit by a truck and it is left flipped over. After such an unfortunate mishap, he probably sustains some injuries, however, because of his fixation

to make it on time and prove his value to the world, he tries to make it to the competition. The truck driver asks for his well-being, since he is covered in blood and probably suffers a concussion, but he turns a deaf ear to his question. He approaches the flipped car, gets in it again to get his sticks and starts to run towards the theatre (01:07:30). Whilst in physical pain and covered in blood, he gets his presence up on stage and tries to perform at his best. Because of his injuries, he is incapable of playing the song correctly. He starts playing with a shaking hand, misses beats and even drops the drum stick (01:08:23). This idea of never giving up, no matter one's situation, is another characteristic of the very demanding work ethic of the American Dream, its consequences and the toll it might take on people who will sacrifice their health in order to succeed (Reynolds 1992, 21).

Undoubtedly, the physical and mental pain he suffers go hand in hand. Because of his fixation on achieving his dream, changes in his mentality and the way he sees the world, triggered by this unforgiving *ethos* and work ethic, can also be appreciated. At the beginning of the film, before entering the competitiveness of the music world, he is seen as a sweet, innocent boy who naively believes that he can make it. This fact is portrayed in his appearance. In the first scenes, we see a relaxed face and corporal position. He wears loose cotton white t-shirts or shirts that rest on his curved shoulders giving him an air of innocence and youthfulness (Chazelle 2014, 02:43, 09:50, 12:00, and 15:54). His image is strongly contrasted with the one of his instructor's, Professor Fletcher. He always dresses professional, black, fitted clothes. He also possesses a slim face with sharp features that, together with his bald head and muscular body, exhibit a bold image of authority and superiority (03:36). By the end of the film, this situation changes. Andrew Neiman's confidence has been thrown and beaten to the ground by his mentor. On account of this, he becomes a gloomy, tired and unstable-looking boy who sports darker clothes which fit his state of mind (48:50, 1:01:10, and 1:14:52). Mentally, it scars him to think that he is failing at his only purpose in life. When this reality finally dawns on Neiman, he becomes mentally unstable just as millions of other Americans on their quest to achieve their dreams. Real success numbers are never given when discussing the American Dream which makes the act of accepting failure more difficult. People's sanity become so troubled in their road to success, that a portion of them even consider suicide as a way out of their lack of success. In fact, increasing rates of suicide in the United States in the last decades have been directly linked to people's frustration and feeling of hopelessness that the impossibility to attain the American Dream produces (Coghlan 2018, 22-23).

Andrew Neiman's behaviour transforms drastically during the film. He even leaves behind the woman he loves, Nicole, simply because she has no goals, they do not share the same level of ambition. This dramatic change is palpable in the way his conduct towards her has been altered. On their first encounters, he demonstrates shyness when engaging in conversation – e.g. when asking her for a date (Chazelle 2014, 13:44) – but later on, he resentfully and bluntly admits that he does not want to be with her because she will hold him back on his plans (52:23). Andrew Neiman transforms into a hateful, insecure human. Because all of this, he also becomes the perfect example of believing in the American Dream and doing everything one can to achieve it but failing. He is a virtuous player and he devotes his life to music. According to the *ethos* in question, this should be enough. But, is it really enough?

All in all, he follows the requisites for the American Dream to be achieved. He has a set objective, to become one of the best jazz drum players, and he has determination, he dedicates great part of his day to practice and his mind is solely occupied with music. Nonetheless, by the end of the film, his achievements come down to being just a member of Studio Band, where his position is constantly threatened. This *ethos* proves not to be true since he does not get what he deserves. Despite this, the film has a satisfactory ending since, in the closing scene, we see the protagonist playing a solo in full splendour, making the spectator forget about his real dream. Director Damien Chazelle does not provide a flashforward scene since he does not want to incur in the possibility that he might not make it, which is the most probable outcome. Apart from the strike of luck one might have, the American Dream is, in general lines, almost impossible to attain, but it is especially difficult for some people. There are limitations and barriers within society that humans have to face, and try to fruitlessly overcome, in order to have a chance at it.

3. Limitations of the American Dream

As previously mentioned, people of the United States of America believe in hard work as the primary aspect to achieve one's dreams. Then, based on the sole merit of one's work, people will get or not to where they want, only if they deserve it. Nonetheless, this thinking has a flaw, since meritocracy, the assumption that only one's merit is accountable for one's success, purposely decides to ignore the role social origin, race and gender may play (Granalia 2019, 285). When analysing the film, a true depiction of this North American country's society and beliefs can be delineated. A country known for its freedom and opportunities crumbles before the reality of the impossibility of entering a

world ruled by privileged cis-gender white men. People believing this *ethos* tend to blame individualistic reasons for not succeeding in life rather than social or economic institutional/systematic limitations or barriers. It is sustained that everyone can enter this race to success, naively supposing that everyone starts on the same level and faces the same difficulties (286). In the film, Professor Fletcher picks on several students. To do so, he uses strong language together with sexist and homophobic remarks. For him, these are degrading insults and it perfectly portrays how difficult it is for people not belonging to the heteronormative white male class to be included, accepted, and treated as equals on their quest to achieve their dreams. This is caused by the construction of dominant masculinities by heterosexual men, which hold the ability to claim authority, power and status over people not included in that group (Dean 2013, 534).

3.1. Patriarchal Society in America and *Whiplash*

3.1.1 Sexism towards women

There have been great advances towards gender equality in the last few years in all spheres, but it is not a secret that women are still in clear disadvantage in today's world compared to their male counterparts. This is caused by gender stereotypes and sexist beliefs about women. They suffer discrimination when trying to occupy positions that are not typically thought to fit their gender, such as leadership positions, or when they simply do not comply with the stereotypes attributed to them. Because of this, when trying to pursue their dreams, they may encounter more obstacles (Shook et al. 2020, 2). This film is a clear example of the discrimination the "weaker sex" suffer. In real life, this prejudice is not as obvious as one might think and for some viewers, it might not even have been noticeable in the film.

First of all, there is a clear lack of female characters present in the feature film which serves as a mirror to the American male dominated academic society (Carter et al. 2018, 3). This film is about trying to achieve one's dreams and it focuses around the main male protagonist, Andrew Neiman. There are only two female characters which have a dialogue in the whole film. Both are given little screen time and are not important to the story. Only one of them makes appearances throughout the film, Neiman's prospective girlfriend. She is presented as a weak person who does not have ambitions in life (Chazelle 2014, 34:05). Later on, the protagonist leaves her because he sees her as an obstacle for his career. Nicole feels angry because of the reasons he provides to excuse

himself and his harsh treatment of her. Nonetheless, with exasperated tearful eyes, she agrees that they should break up:

NICOLE. “I barely see you any way. And when I did see you, you treat me like shit, because I’m just some girl who doesn’t know what she wants, and you have a path, and you’re going to be great, and I’m going to be forgotten, and therefore, you won’t be able to give me the time of day because you have bigger things to pursue” (52:00).

He responds ruthlessly to this, admitting to her that those were his exact thoughts (52:23). The other woman that gets a chance to speak is Andrew Neiman’s aunt. She appears but once, in the family dinner, only to congratulate the rest of the attendants, all men, on their achievements (44:50).

For the rest of the scenes, there is a clear lack of female presence. Both bands – the one for the first-year students and the professional one – gather a significantly higher number of men in their ranks. In Studio Band, there are no female members at all (16:58) whilst in the first one, there is only one girl, whose talent is questioned by the professor. Fletcher requests her to play by saying the following: “Well, you’re in the first chair. Let’s see if it’s just because you’re cute” (11:40). For women, it is more difficult to gain a position in bands or orchestras because of their gender and the stereotypes it accompanies. Professor Fletcher’s comment is out of place, but it truthfully depicts the reality of the sexist selection process in these academic environments; what is more, it has been proven that women benefit from blind auditions since only their talent is taken into account and their identity remains unknown, dodging discrimination (Goldin and Rouse 2000, 715-716). When women occupy important positions, or ones that are not associated with their gender, a threat appears to men’s power. The angry response of men towards female occupying these positions is called hostile sexism and that is exactly what we can see in Professor Fletcher’s aforementioned intervention (Shook et al. 2020, 2). He questions her talent and position by implying that her appearance is what got her there which would be following the stereotype that women are only supposed to be pretty and appealing to the eye but incompetent in everything else (Felmlee, Rodis and Zhang 2019, 18).

On the other hand, there are other instances in which this dislike toward women is used in the making of insults catered to men. In one of his classes, Neiman is unable to play at Professor Fletcher’s tempo and because of his superior’s evil treatment, he starts crying. The musical director screams and tries to embarrass him by shouting that he is

crying “like a nine-year-old girl” (Chazelle 2014, 29:30). This was meant to humiliate him. By calling him a girl he was calling him “weak” following the feminine stereotypes. This idea is further reinforced by him asking to switch drummers, leaving Neiman with nothing to do but watch, and demanding all of the participants to play “big boy tempo” (30:02), which would be the correct way to play – on time.

Being called a “little girl” acquires a bad connotation when said to a male child or adult. A little girl or woman would not be reprimanded for crying, because this supposedly act of weakness is expected of them as they have been categorized over the centuries as emotionally weaker people (Réaume 2005, 558). However, there are more direct and harsher ways to hurt men’s feelings: by comparing them to the worst of their female counterparts. In a scene in which Neiman’s part in the band is threatened, his replacement moves forward as to steal his position, but he puts him in his place by saying: “You turn my pages, bitch” (Chazelle 2014, 1:05:25). By calling him that, he is placing his companion below him. He is not only calling him a woman, which, in a patriarchal society already holds a lower place than a man, but also a bitch, denoting that he should, not only conform to what is expected of him, as any woman, but obey him as if he owned him; which endorses detrimental feminine stereotypes (Felmlee, Rodis and Zhang 2019, 18-19).

3.1.2. Homophobia

Hegemonic masculinity is hierarchical, and it has the figure of the white heterosexual male sitting in a shrine. Because of this, people who do not fit in this mould such as women or LGBT members are considered to be inferior. Consequent practices and behaviours would spawn from this belief. Nowadays, the visibility of LGBT community is growing, which has sparked a reaction in a fraction of heterosexual men. This group, fearing their leading position and status would be in danger, engage in homophobic practices in order to keep a clear separation between them and this community. In their efforts to keep this group in a lower position as to not let them steal any power, they embark in a quest to make them feel inferior, worthless and sinful. (Dean 2013, 535-536).

Professor Fletcher is the epitome of this behaviour. There is a gay student in his class, Parker, and every time he has to correct his playing, he makes a remark of his sexual orientation as to embarrass him, as if it was something to be ashamed of (Chazelle 2014, 19:02 and 58:56). His fixation on this student’s sexual preference is so strong than even when he just steps in to play he has to remind everyone what he is: “Well, if it isn’t Mr

Gay Pride of the Upper West Side himself” (58:50). He does this in a devilish way, as he earnestly believes that being gay is something to be ashamed or made fun of.

This film’s message is to affirm that the American Dream is real and can be achieved by working hard. Despite this, by not including female characters, and verbally attacking them, as well as other socially deemed weaker collectives, it portrays, confirms and reinforces the misogyny and intolerance America’s patriarchal society inherently holds. By doing this, they are securing and perpetuating a legacy of hegemonic toxic masculinity in post-industrial America (Shaw 2014, 44). Hence, their odds to strive are reduced, since they are not given the same treatment or opportunities, resulting in unfulfilled and shattered dreams.

3.2. Socioeconomic Status: Class and Race

It has been examined how one’s gender and sexuality play an important role in society and how they affect people’s lives in their quest to making their dreams come true. Another barrier that does not contribute to achieving the American Dream is the socioeconomic status a person holds. For instance, issues of race and class are barriers in one’s way to success, but these are greatly ignored, both in the film and in the *ethos* discussed.

Focusing on the issue of race, at present, overt and traditional forms of racism are not socially accepted, and other more subtle ways have raised, such as supporting political movements that disadvantage these racial minorities (Shook et al. 2020, 3). Because of this, in *Whiplash*, we don’t see racist insults or slurs. Notwithstanding, the film is a realistic example of the lack of representation of non-white people in films, especially those that take place in higher education environments. This is an accurate reflection of the United States of America’s situation. As female or LGBT, poor or racialized people also struggle to achieve upward mobility or succeed in their fields of choice. In fact, belonging to a race minority and having a low economic status, more often than not, coincide (Williams 2018, 67). The percentage of White Americans who achieve their goals is greater compared to their Black counterparts. This is due to the latter’s lack of training, poorer quality education and/or stereotypical perceptions; which in return overthrow the possibilities of acquiring a promotion, salary raises... (Worsley and Stone 2011, 69-70). In *Whiplash*, a few black musicians can be seen playing for Studio Band throughout the film (Chazelle 2014, 16:17, 37:16 and 42:57). They do not hold or engage in conversation with any of the main characters of the story, they remain in the

background. This is proof of the invisibilization they suffer in real life, which becomes more significant when we take into account the setting of the film and the genre of music it revolves around.

First of all, the story is set in New York, one of the most diverse cities in the USA holding the highest number of African American people in the whole country – a total of 2,3 million people living there identify as Black, making up almost 25 per cent of the population of the Big Apple (Census Bureau 2001). In addition to this, Jazz is the music genre chosen for the film's white male protagonist to pour his heart and soul into. This type of music has its roots in African American culture and history (Tipton 2019, 15). It developed through the 1800s and early 1900s among these communities in New Orleans – Louisiana – and rapidly spread throughout the rest of the country and Europe in the 1920s (Gioia 2011, 380-382).

Because of these two facts, a greater number of Black American people should be expected to be present throughout the film, at least to hold a conversation, but they are paid no attention. This can only be explained by acknowledging the discrimination they suffer which unable them access to quality education, positions of power... This invisibilization is just another proof of the limitations and barriers Black American people, together with other racial minorities, go through when trying to thrive in fields in which they are not welcomed – e.g. academic settings.

4. Conclusion

After analysing the film, there is no doubt that director Damien Chazelle tried to portray the core values of the American Dream in a positive light. Qualities as ambition, motivation and hard work as seen as a step towards achieving ones goals and Andrew Neiman embraces them. Nonetheless, the truth is that for Neiman, and millions of other Americans, these only prove to be a step into insanity and endless hours of work that will not necessarily transform into success and the awarding of upward mobility and material wealth.

An apparent happy ending makes the viewer forget about him not achieving his goal. Even when the theory of the American Dream is strictly followed, most people do not achieve it. This has to do with the arbitrariness of luck, but for some other people it also involves the institutional discrimination that one might encounter in today's society based on gender, sexual orientation, race... All in all, *Whiplash* truthfully reflects the reality of the American society and the limitations and barriers people not belonging to

the hegemonic group undergo. In the film, they are vexed which draws a truthful image of USA's race for the American Dream and how, in reality, few can achieve it.

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