



Do Hollywood Films Truly Reflect Life in America?

By Robert Eisele



After the release of *The Great Debaters*, Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, on which the movie is based, revived its debate team. © AP Images

“No, but they reflect the spirit of life in America”

In the film *Erin Brockovich*, the title character, played by Julia Roberts, evolves from a working-class, single mother into a heroic crusader for a town poisoned by industrial waste. In *Annie Hall*, the title character, played by Diane Keaton, is a distressed but gifted New Yorker who delights and haunts Woody Allen as his lover and muse. Though *Erin Brockovich* is based on a true story and *Annie Hall*

is fiction, both present women rarely seen in everyday life. Neither character is the typical American woman, yet both are quintessentially American.

Hollywood movies historically have portrayed a heightened reality that borders on myth-making. That’s why America’s film industry is still the world’s most profitable: Its purpose has always been to entertain. In

Hollywood, it’s show *business*, not show art.

Erin Brockovich was produced because of Erin’s dramatic transformation, not the morality of her quest. The New York *auteur*, Woody Allen, created a singular American woman in *Annie Hall* — the likes of whom you’d probably never meet on a Manhattan street corner. As different as Erin and Annie are,

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one drawn from life the other from imagination, they share one thing in common — they are uncommon. Yet they are woven from the American fiber. Though neither film reflects everyday life in America, both reflect the spirit of life in America.

Hollywood films seldom portray the everyday facts of American life. That is usually handled in documentaries. But even American documentaries are becoming entertainments, as seen in the political humor of *Sicko*, *Religulous*, and *Super Size Me*. These films seek to illuminate, and often so do Hollywood feature films. A movie like *Apollo 13*, for example, exalts the struggle of three astronauts on an ill-fated mission to the moon. By exploring the ingenuity and resilience of the crew members and their NASA colleagues on the ground, the film embraces the American spirit of invention

itself. A truth is revealed in a nearly mythic way.

Even Hollywood's grittiest films, like the Academy Award-winning *Crash*, seek to entertain — in this case with remarkable coincidences and the threat of violence. But does *Crash* truly reflect life in America? There now are millions of families of mixed race in the United States. Housing discrimination has been outlawed for more than 40 years, and people of different races now live peacefully with their neighbors. But the 1992 Los Angeles race riot remains in the nation's memory.

Hollywood has taken on the American family in films as disparate as *The Godfather* and *American Beauty*. Both are portrayals of families in crisis, but neither reflects everyday life in America. They do, however, strike deeply into the American psyche. *The Godfather* finds its appeal in the portrayal of a strong, though amoral, father figure — an expression of longing for fatherly protection in a disheartened family. *American Beauty* speaks to another kind of longing — the sense that the “American Dream” can dissolve into conformity. This film is a poetic portrayal of the American quest for meaning, an impulse echoed as long as a century ago in the writings of Thoreau and Whitman.

Ironically, Hollywood's animated features occasionally shine more light on the American experience than its live-action fare. *Up*, for example, deals with the realities of death, loss, and issues involving the elderly.

Do Hollywood films truly reflect life in America? They reflect the spirit of life in America, if not its everyday realities. They portray the nation's restlessness, imagination and longing.

Robert Eisele, a three-time Writers Guild Award nominee, wrote the screenplay for Denzel Washington's *The Great Debaters* (2007), nominated for a Golden Globe Award for best picture. *Courtesy Robert Eisele*



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