



# Do Hollywood Films Truly Reflect Life in America?

By Sheril Antonio

**“Most Hollywood films do not represent typical American life.”**

**D**o Hollywood films truly reflect life in America?

Yes, in that the stories in Hollywood films tell how a few Americans experience or witness life, or wish or fear life is in the United States. Take the 2004 film *Crash* by Paul Haggis; real “American” experiences are presented, but because they are so personal, the film does not represent typical American life.

Certainly, some details in some films have happened to someone somewhere at some time, but since only a small percentage of proposed films are made — and many that are made never make it into theaters — the real answer, unfortunately, is no.

During the first half of the 20th century, the perceptions of generations of Americans were influenced by the romantic characterization of life in America’s “Wild West” in Hollywood’s most popular feature film category of the time. Many of these films set “cowboys,” as the “good guys,” against “Indians,” the “bad guys,” shaping attitudes toward Native Americans for many years to come.



The name of actor John Wayne, shown in the 1969 movie *True Grit*, became synonymous with the American Western feature film. © AP Images

## Do Hollywood Films Truly Reflect Life in America?

One reason Hollywood films cannot truly reflect life in America is that the most talented directors seldom have the opportunity to make a Hollywood film. The film business is just that — a business requiring a great deal of money, and because making films is so expensive, many people cannot make them. Also, each director views America differently; even if all the directors were asked to tell the same story, they probably would tell it differently.

Let us take a look at the early days in Hollywood, when the Western was a popular genre. According to Bob Stam and Ella Shohat, “One-fourth of Hollywood features between 1926 and 1967 were Westerns, and the Western played a crucial role in forming the sensibilities of generations of Americans.” Those films gave audiences only one view of Native Americans, and Native Americans were not making films

telling their stories and points of view about America.

Thinking about the past 40 years, we can say that some of Martin Scorsese’s films have given us ideas about Italian-American life; Amy Heckerling’s films have offered us a woman’s perspective; Spike Lee’s films have offered views about African-American life; Todd Solondz’s films have shown us his view of America; and John Waters’ films have told us about his hometown of Baltimore.

But even if we gathered all views of American life presented by Hollywood, we would not get a single idea. Instead, we would get a collection of ideas that offer many views of an “American” lifestyle.

Even more complicated is the idea of America being a “melting pot” of many diverse cultures. This means that life in America depends on many different things, and since “American life” cannot be called one single thing, I would argue it could not be represented in a single film or even a series of films.

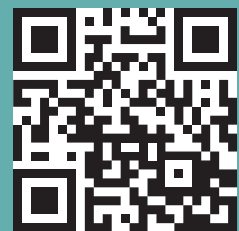
All the visual elements and characters in a film are about delving into a story and getting to know a character. Yes, the story and the situations are located geographically in a place, a country, a culture, but that culture is, more

often than not, a setting or backdrop; it’s not the story itself.

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