Film Diplomacy Under the Bush and Obama Administration: 
A Film Analysis of the American Film Institute’s Project: 20/20 and the Sundance 
Institute’s Film Forward Program

THESIS

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Abstract

The American Film Institute’s Project: 20/20 was a program sponsored by the State Department in which American and international filmmakers traveled with their films to domestic and international locations. The program, launched in 2006, ceased its partnership with the American Film Institute after its fourth year in 2009-2010 and was replaced by a new program, Film Forward: Advancing Cultural Dialogue. This paper examines the similarities and differences between the two programs by analyzing the themes and content of the selected films, in order to investigate how the selection of films may have been influenced by the political and ideological orientation of the presidential administrations, US foreign policy, and diplomatic objectives. The paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussion surrounding the use of film as a tool of public diplomacy.
To my parents,
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without my two committee members Dr. Margaret Wyszomirski and Dr. Wayne Lawson who have showed such great interest in my research and provided invaluable advice as I complete this project. I would like to say thank you to Dr. Wyszomirski who for too many times during the past three years, encouraged me and inspired me in my study and in my life with her intelligence and kindness, as an advisor but often times also as a friend. I am immensely grateful to my department, particularly Dr. Karen Hutzel and Dr. Debbie Smith-Shank, for extending my GTA appointment and giving me an opportunity to complete my study. I am grateful to all my friends who have helped edit my thesis or supported me in one way or another, and my parents, the two persons in the world who might not be able to completely understand this paper but must have been most interested in it.
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Field of Study

Major Field: Arts Policy and Administration
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The power of documentaries to persuade, influence and change one’s perceptions is not a new concept. Arguably, the strength of documentary filmmaking lies in the ideal of bringing out the force of true events, and for many, documentary film in itself is regarded as less significant as an art than its commitment to accessing reality. However, the ideal of pursuing absolute truth is unattainable.

“Truth itself never exists in a work of art,” says Zhang Ming, a Sixth-Generation Chinese filmmaker. Similarly, despite the common presumption that documentary film is eminently qualified to reveal the whole truth, a documentary is never fully objective or without preconceptions, because film as an art form is inherently susceptible to the subjectivity of the filmmakers. Nonetheless, a documentary exerts its impact when it exposes the audience to the subjective perceptions of the filmmaker, sometimes even though viewers may not appreciate these perceptions immediately.

For both Project: 20/20 and Film Forward, documentaries comprise a large proportion of the respective film lists. Film, together with other art forms, is seen as an important instrument of public diplomacy. Documentary film has been deemed as especially crucial as such a vehicle in the history of US public diplomacy due to documentaries’ social, historical, and political dimensions. However, very little literature is devoted to studying the role film plays in cultural diplomacy efforts. In particular,
research that investigates this subject by analyzing the film content is almost nonexistent. This paper explores the way in which film is used as a tool of public diplomacy through an in-depth content analysis of the films selected for both programs. I analyze the values and messages conveyed through the films by examining the films’ themes and content, in order to probe the impact of politics on US film diplomacy programs.

This paper also extends the inquiry into the role film plays in cultural diplomacy efforts found in Mary Erickson’s (2012) article titled “Cultural Diplomacy, Branding and the American Film Institute’s Project: 20/20.” Erickson discusses how the Bush administration constructed American identity through framing. Specifically, she examines the language used in press releases, official documents, and other promotional materials of Project: 20/20 and the official synopses of the films listed on the AFI website. The article concludes that the Bush administration’s Project: 20/20 and its films are used as an instrument to carry key values and messages, and to promote the brand of America.

In this paper, when comparing the films selected for Project: 20/20 and Film Forward, instead of looking at promotional materials and official press releases and documents, I delve into the films themselves. In this way, a contribution is made to the scholarly dialogue concerning film as an instrument of public diplomacy, but from a different perspective.

*American Film Institute’s Project: 20/20*

AFI Project: 20/20 was co-sponsored by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services
These US cultural agencies and the President’s Committee worked closely with US embassies overseas in organizing screening and other activities (AFI Project: 20/20 2008).

AFI Project 20/20 was announced in September 2006 at the White House by former First Lady Laura Bush as part of the Global Cultural Initiative (GCI). It was an outgrowth of the Symposium on Film, Television, Digital Media and Popular Culture in 2006, organized by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (Erickson, 2012). When announcing the GCI, Mrs. Laura Bush said, “One of the best ways we can deepen our friendships with the people of all countries is for us to better understand each other’s cultures by enjoying each other’s literature, music, films and visual arts.” (Global Cultural Initiative)

Participants in Project: 20/20 were selected from among the filmmakers invited to AFI FEST presented by Audi. American and international filmmakers in Project: 20/20 showcased their works at AFI FEST first before traveling in small groups to screen their films at universities, film archives, libraries or other institutions in the US and abroad.

Film Forward

Film Forward was launched in 2010, continuing the cultural diplomacy effort. Film Forward is an initiative of the Sundance Institute, in partnership with the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (Film Forward). Film Forward is solely devoted to independent films including narratives and documentaries.
Each year filmmakers travel to both international and domestic locations. For example, in 2014, the program traveled to countries including Bosnia & Herzegovina, China, Indonesia, Serbia, and Taiwan, and US states including California, Michigan, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Background: Public Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy, and Their Relationship with Soft Power

Traditional diplomacy is elite diplomacy in which government leaders communicate with each other in order to facilitate international dialogue. Edward R. Murrow defines public diplomacy as “interactions not only with foreign governments, but primarily with nongovernmental individuals and organizations, and often presenting a variety of private views in addition to government views” (Nye, 2008).

Public diplomacy is sometimes mistakenly seen as propaganda, however, the term public diplomacy is not merely a euphemism for propaganda, which lacks credibility (Nye, 2008). Public diplomacy and propaganda can be distinguished on a continuum ranging from “crude and manipulative propaganda aiming at short-term political effects” to “two-way public diplomacy for the ‘long haul’ based on dialogue with foreign audiences” (Melissen, 2005). This continuum can also be applied to cultural diplomacy (Mark, 2010).

Public diplomacy and public relations overlap each other in their meanings, but they are different. Dutta-Bergman (2006) cites Kunczik when pointing out that public diplomacy is public relations implemented by a nation-state targeted at foreign audiences and involves adopting public relations strategies and tactics. At the same time, the historical roots of public relations are situated in early public diplomacy efforts, such as
the public diplomacy carried out by the Committee on Public Information directed by George Creel (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). Nonetheless, public diplomacy is not simply a public relations campaign. Besides presenting information and selling a positive image, public diplomacy puts more stress on building long-term relationships between countries (Nye, 2008).

According to Nye (2008), public diplomacy involves three dimensions: daily communications, strategic communication, and lasting relationships. Daily communications refers to government officials explaining domestic and foreign policy decisions to both domestic and foreign press. Strategic communication involves developing a set of themes that are similar to those of a political or advertising campaign. The third dimension of public diplomacy relates to the development of long-term relationships over many decades through scholarships, exchanges, conferences, and media outlets, among others.

A closely related concept is cultural diplomacy. There is no one definition of cultural diplomacy, which is usually regarded as a subset of diplomacy and of public diplomacy (Mark, 2010). Mark defines cultural diplomacy as “the deployment of a state’s culture in support of its foreign policy goals or diplomacy”. Kushlis and Sharpe (2011) write that cultural interaction, when practiced with a purpose of advancing public diplomacy, is not simply “chummy chitchat”. But rather, it is a “carefully articulated, infinitely modulated, multi-media campaign for achieving essential national goals.”

Cultural diplomacy and cultural relations can be interpreted as two distinct concepts, although recent trends have brought in a new perspective in which cultural
diplomacy/public diplomacy overlaps with cultural relations. As Arndt writes, “cultural relations” refers to the relations between national cultures. Cultural relations occur naturally without government intervention. On the contrary, cultural diplomacy can only take place under circumstances when diplomats who are representatives of their governments interfere with cultural interactions for the benefits of national interests (Arndt, 2005). Melissen has a nuanced understanding on the relationship between the two terms. She argues that both traditional cultural relations and traditional public diplomacy directly aim to benefit national interests through straight-forward strategies such as selling messages and launching campaigns; whereas both modern cultural relations and new public diplomacy emphasize engaging with foreign publics and building trust in the long run. Therefore, the modern definitions of both terms contribute to the convergence between cultural relations and public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005).

Both public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy have deep connections to “soft power,” which can be clearly seen from Nye’s definition of the term. Nye (2008), who invented the term “soft power,” defines it as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants, through attraction rather than coercion or payment”. He argues that a country’s soft power is determined by its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies. Regarding the relationship between public diplomacy and soft power, he notes that the resources that produce soft power come from the values an organization or country present through its culture, the way it deals with its relations with others, and the actual policies and practices. Public diplomacy, as a tool of the government to leverage these resources to communicate with the public of other countries, does not necessarily
produce soft power. In addition, if the contents of a country’s culture, values and policies presented are not attractive, then such presentation of resources may have negative effect. For example, Hollywood movies depicting nudity and violence that are later exported to Muslim countries may stimulate repulsion rather than producing the “soft power of attraction”.

US Public Diplomacy’s Early Connections to Film and Cold War Public Diplomacy

It was during the Cold War that America most fully employed culture in the area of diplomacy in order to fight against its enemy — the former Soviet Union (Schneider, 2005), but cultural diplomacy has even deeper roots. In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson established a Committee on Public Information. It was the first US government’s attempt to spread information about America abroad (Arndt, 2005). The Committee directed by the newspaper man George Creel advocated Americanism through tours, a government-run news service Creel established, and regulations on films — they distributed wartime materials among motion picture producers, and made sure that the images of America portrayed through their films were positive. Despite Creel’s claims to innocence when arguing for their activities’ pure educational purposes, the Committee was deemed as producing propaganda and was abolished soon after the WWI ended (Nye, 2008).

Nonetheless, these efforts reflect US public diplomacy’s early connections to film.

Cultural diplomacy was first introduced to the Department of State in 1938 when State’s Division of Cultural Relations was founded. Arndt (2005) maintains that US cultural diplomacy efforts were first triggered by a desire to develop “mutual understanding”, a phrase cited by Roosevelt, with Latin America where centralized
government had been the tradition. Nonetheless, the designers of US cultural diplomacy began cultural diplomacy efforts by adhering to the principle and ideal of balance and bidirectional flow while definitely staying away from preaching and propaganda. Ben Cherrington, the founding director of the Division of Cultural Relations, regards cultural affairs as apolitical. Under his leadership, the Division of Cultural Relations coordinated educational and cultural exchanges between the US and other countries. The division also added three sub-committees within the division’s General Advisory Commission on Cultural Relations (GAC) specifically for exchanges in publications, translations, and film. The Interagency Coordinating Committee (ICC), one of the division’s coordinating agencies at the time, began to provide technical support to other countries including Latin America, by sending Americans abroad and allowing foreign technicians to work in the US. Nevertheless, Arndt calls this two-way mode “misleading”, labeling the program a one-way program — with Americans (teachers) going south and foreigners (learners) north.

However, it was not until after Cherrington had left office that the political dimension of cultural diplomacy became too obvious to be ignored. Cherrington’s ideal of fostering cultural internationalism in a less confrontational way was not embraced by his successors; President Roosevelt was not happy with the division’s slow pace; and at the same time, war was on the horizon. All of these factors pushed the division on a path to propaganda, the very thing its founders rejected from the beginning (Arndt, 2005).

In 1940, the Department of State established the Office of Inter-American Affairs with the purpose of promoting American culture and values to Latin America. In 1942,
Roosevelt established an Office of Wartime Information (OWI) to deliver “presumably accurate information.” The OWI took advantage of the Hollywood, suggesting that the producers edit some films the way they wanted while censoring others (Nye, 2008). The accomplishments of the OWI set a precedent for the postwar information activities developed by the State Department. In 1953, the OWI was detached from the State Department as a separate organization, the United States Information Agency (USIA), which continued the efforts in US public diplomacy (MacCann, 1969).

During the 1960s, a kind of “semi-military” cooperation and adjustment of films to local needs appeared, deriving from public diplomacy experiences during World War II. The US film officers in major capitals had several job responsibilities: screening informational movies in theaters, schools, churches and union halls; screening 16 mm films in different locations; and tailoring special film production to the needs of a specific country or area (MacCann, 1969).

The International Motion Picture Service within the State Department was deeply affected by the policies of the United States Information Agency during the Cold War. As the Cold War intensified, the agency’s role switched from introducing films that simply set the stage and the background to films that were purely propaganda. One of the reasons was that while the threat of the Soviet Union prompted the US Congress to allocate budgets of significant amounts to films, the Congressmen were not comfortable spending money on nice films without a clear message (MacCann, 1969).

The International Motion Picture Service as well as several of its heads were well aware of the impact of documentaries in general and the role documentaries could play in
counteracting the negative image of America. Hollywood movies project to foreign audiences. The Kennedy administration recognized the necessity for the government to make documentaries based on foreign policy themes, because no one would be motivated to produce such documentaries within a free market economy. After Edward R. Murrow became the director of the USIA, he recruited the well-known Hollywood film director George Stevens, Jr. as the head of the International Motion Picture Service. MacCann (1969) points out that it is important for the head of the Motion Picture Service to have a Hollywood label, because such a person is likely to be respected both within the industry and at various diplomatic receptions that oftentimes have connections with film festivals and film screenings.

The USIA communicated to the Motion Picture Service several aspects of the American way of life that should be emphasized in their films. They included “racial and ethnic progress, economic strength, economic democracy, scientific and educational strength, and cultural diversity.” The films should also reflect the USIA’s policy directives as well, which included “the pursuit of peace, strength and reliability, free choice, the rule of law, and support of the United Nations” (MacCann, 1969).

Among the films produced by prestigious film directors specifically for the USIA were Invitation to India and Invitation to Pakistan, by Leo Seltzer; United in Progress, Nine From Little Rock, and Night of the Dragon, by Charles Guggenheim; Bridges of the Barrios, Five Cities of June, and The President, by Bruce Herschensohn; and The March, by James Blues.
Stevens also searched for young documentary filmmakers, particularly recent graduates of university film programs, and assigned them to single projects on specific themes. The goal was to communicate with other young people in the rest of the world through film. Among the films produced by young documentary filmmakers were *A Skill for Molina*, by Kent Mackenzie; *Born a Man*, by Gary Goldsmith; and *Beyond This Winter’s Wheat*, by Carroll Ballard.

Supervision from Stevens included selecting the director, and approving preliminary treatment, script, and final edited film. At the same time, the USIA had divisions for major regions and the head of each division had the responsibility of going through each proposal, script, and finished film (MacCann, 1969).

*Public Diplomacy After the Cold War*

The US public diplomacy during the Cold War was a great success (Schneider, 2005). However, after the Cold War, Americans seemed to become indifferent toward public diplomacy until September 2001 when they were reminded of its importance. In fact, post-Cold War US public diplomacy had been declining and was actually in crisis during the Bush administration. The USIA was abolished in 1999 and its functions were integrated into the State Department. The consolidation resulted in a reduction in budget and personnel and therefore undermined the effectiveness of public and cultural diplomacy (Schneider, 2005). On the other hand, this integration reflects the major principle of today’s cultural diplomacy that connects cultural diplomacy to its major goal of enhancing understanding and support for US policies (Schneider, 2005).
9/11 has led to the omnipresent question, “Why do they hate us?”, a question that really indicates another question, “Why do the Muslims/Arabs hate us?” (Stam & Shohat, 2007) Research shows that resentment toward America seems to be a typical response among the public in the rest of the world, particularly in the more developed countries or areas where people are more well-educated (Entman, 2008). During the Bush administration, global opinion about the US was at its lowest point. Negative views concentrated on the US government’s policies, particularly the Iraq war, instead of the American people and Americans’ pursuit of their ideal society (Schneider, 2005).

Public Diplomacy Under the Bush Administration

Despite numerous innovative public diplomacy efforts, US public diplomacy under the Bush administration has generally been deemed as failing to find a way to effectively communicate with the people from the Arabic and Islamic countries (Zaharna, 2009), a region on the world map that the State Department mainly focused on during the years immediately after September 11, 2001.

The Shared Values Initiative, launched right after September 11, 2001 by the first Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Charlotte Beers, was created as an international advertising campaign that comprised radio, television and print advertising, speeches and “town hall-type events” (Erickson, 2012) in order to brand and sell America to the Muslims. Charlotte Beers equated public and cultural diplomacy to advertising and public relations campaigns, and her adopting a one-way message flow resulted in the Initiative being interpreted by the local publics as state propaganda. The Initiative was generally seen as a “communication disaster” (Erickson, 2012).
In 2005, Karen Hughes was hired as the new Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Hughes organized a “listening tour” to the Arab and Islamic worlds (Zaharna, 2009). The tour was also perceived as unsuccessful or ineffective.

The reasons for these failures include a lack of two-way communication, a lack of understanding and appreciation for the targeted audiences, and a disconnect between US public diplomacy and its foreign policy (Zaharna, 2009). Specifically, the Bush administration’s adoption of a mostly one-way communication style in its public diplomacy strategy proved ineffective (Comor & Bean, 2012), even counterproductive (Zaharna, 2009). Furthermore, a series of policy changes after September 11, 2001 such as the Guantanamo Bay detentions, visa restrictions, and stricter illegal immigration regulations suggest that policy, not culture, was the root of the problem (Erickson, 2012). US foreign policy is what counts in the end and the US government should adjust its activities in response to foreign preferences and opinions (Comor & Bean, 2012).

**Public Diplomacy Under the Obama Administration**

The new style of public diplomacy under the Obama administration features a focus on listening and engagement. A White House report (White House, 2009: 3) specifies that programs aiming to communicate and engage with the public should be “strategic and long-term, not just reactive and tactical.” Comparing the strategic purpose of public diplomacy now with the fifty years of fighting the Cold War, James Glassman, President Bush’s final Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, says that “strategic engagement” is the official term (Public Diplomacy in the Obama...
Administration’s Second Term, November 13, 2012). The general attitudes toward public diplomacy practices have switched from direct preaching to more indirect and collaborative approaches that aim to stimulate global engagement (Hayden, Walsanen, & Osipova, 2013). Although the communication practices and elements that would actually constitute the right message content and what would qualify as a desired way of communication are still underspecified (Hayden, Walsanen, & Osipova, 2013), the overall image of US public diplomacy looks more like “open hands” than “clenched fists” (Zaharna, 2009).

Riordan (2005) argues for a dialogue-based engagement, noting that simply advocating for Western values is unlikely to work, even when those advertised values are human rights or democracy. Instead, this kind of public diplomacy strategy may provoke rejection simply because Islamic values often by definition conflict with Western values. On the other hand, not all Western values are in real sense incompatible with Islamic values, an argument backed up by the fact that most Arabs support democracy. Therefore, successful public diplomacy has to be grounded on sincere dialogues that recognize the legitimacy of Islamic values while not abandoning Western values. Riordan also points out another reason for adopting new dialogue-based public diplomacy policies — there has even been a lack of agreement both among the public and the experts on a set of political, economic, and social values that can work for every country on the Earth.

The acceptance of a new approach that puts an emphasis on listening, communicating, and engaging is partly due to a realization of the limits of only using public diplomacy as a tool for short-term strategic communication. For example, a simply
better argument targeted at countries where public resentment toward the United States is very strong may not end up being influential (Hayden, Walsanen, & Osipova, 2013). Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff member and former State Department Foreign Service Officer Paul Foldi argues that public diplomacy ought to be directed towards long-term benefits that eventually lead to “the benefit of the doubt,” without which any of the short-term goals can hardly be achieved anyway (Public Diplomacy in the Obama Administration’s Second Term, November 13, 2012).

However, J. Michael Waller does not favor a focus on listening, arguing that the core of strategic communication is strategic influence and that the mission of public diplomacy must not be communication for communication’s sake. Yet, as is smartly pointed out by Hayden (2011), Waller’s standpoint for “strategic influence” excludes the possibility that the ethics of US public diplomacy shown through the communication and engagement practices may be influential themselves. He also notes that the US government has already started to acknowledge the role “communication ethics” play in pushing public diplomacy forward.

Additionally, the US public diplomacy in the Obama era emphasizes a holistic view of the relationship between the US and the rest of the world, rather than only focusing on the Muslim countries. Furthermore, there has been an increasingly strong awareness of a role for public diplomacy in shaping foreign policy formulation (Zaharna, 2009), because ultimately what public diplomacy can do is to explain the policy-making processes in the least confrontational way.
Public diplomacy 2.0, also known as cyber diplomacy, is another key feature of new public diplomacy. This focus on digital communication in contemporary engagement activities was first brought in by James Glassman (Comor & Bean, 2012). Under his leadership, the State Department has been keen on using technology such as social media to advance public diplomacy. Edward Comor and Hamilton Bean (2012) believe that the success of using social media in Obama’s presidential campaign contributed to the administration’s choice in public diplomacy 2.0. James Glassman speaks of the importance of taking advantage of technology to encourage “a large, broad, and deep conversation where American messages are injected or distributed among other messages” (Public Diplomacy in the Obama Administration’s Second Term, November 13, 2012). For example, the first social media site created by the federal government is called ExchangesConnect, and it is still being run by the State Department. American Film Showcase is among the programs that are listed on the ExchangesConnect official website that are linked to their respective social media pages in order to encourage people to interact on social media platforms (Public Diplomacy in the Obama Administration’s Second Term, November 13, 2012).

In the arena of new public diplomacy, “messages” themselves are not as central to public diplomacy programming as the rhetorics used and the communication approaches adopted. However, there exist few standards regarding the right communication elements such as communication methods, or even contents/messages/symbols (Hayden, Walsanen, & Osipova, 2013).
Hypotheses, Predictions, and Research Questions

Hypothesis 1

The selection of films for both Project: 20/20 and Film Forward may have been influenced by the political and ideological orientation of the two administrations. Therefore, the values/messages conveyed through the films of the two programs or the themes represented in the films may reflect the differences on the political and ideological orientation of each of the two administrations.

Research Question 1

What values/messages/themes are distinctive of Project: 20/20 and Film Forward respectively? How closely do these values/messages/themes mirror the political and ideological orientation of each administration? Do they reflect the US domestic and foreign policies at the time?

Hypothesis 2

Due to the relative stability of US foreign policy, US public diplomacy is not so much susceptible to the switching of administrations as to the shared goals across different administrations of presenting an attractive image of America and spreading fundamental American values. Therefore, the essential values and messages revealed in those films may not be much different.

Research Question 2

What American fundamental values are portrayed in the films of both programs?
Hypothesis 3

Since the State Department currently takes a less confrontational stance, adopting a two-way engagement strategy that emphasizes the importance of listening, instead of a one-way preaching style, the films that are selected for Film Forward are likely to reflect this nuanced understanding of what works and what does not work in the public diplomacy sphere.

Research Question 3

To what extent (if any) do the films in both programs express appreciation or acceptance of local cultures, values or perspectives, especially when these values or opinions may tend to conflict with western values/public opinions in the West?

Hypothesis 4

The ultimate goal of US public diplomacy is nonetheless to advocate for American values, regardless of the strategies adopted in order to achieve this goal. Therefore, it is speculated that when searching for the ideal participating foreign film directors, the State Department may have favored the films that embrace American values, rather than the values of the directors’ home countries.

Research Question 4

Do documentaries/narratives by foreign directors have a tendency to be critical of their homelands, thus becoming messengers of American values?

Hypothesis 5

Because the Obama administration directs much attention to women’s rights, there may be a greater number of films in Film Forward that deal with the topic of women’s rights and gender issues.
Research Question 5

Is there a greater number of films in Film Forward that focus on gender issues or women’s rights? Are there more female film directors in Film Forward?
Chapter 3: Methodology

Out of all films from Project: 20/20 and Film Forward, I selected only those films that were available to watch, either in DVD format or as an online video (see Table 1 and Table 3). I exclude those that were not available to watch (see Table 2 and Table 4) in order to ensure the correctness and objectivity of the analyses in this thesis. Also excluded from the analyses are 5 films that do not belong to any major categories, but I will very briefly talk about these 5 films in the end.

I classify all available films into four thematic categories: American values; dealing with differences; traditional vs. modern society; overcoming hardships; and dimensions of mutual understandings/shared values. The films are categorized based on the information from a combination of the descriptions of movie cases (video program notes) as well as the syntheses provided on IMDB and Wikipedia web pages. Under the circumstance when after having gathered all the information from the above-mentioned sources I still was not able to obtain a good sense of a film’s themes, or when less than two of these three sources were available (see Table 1 and Table 3), I watched the film until I reached a conclusion.

Based on Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4, Project: 20/20 screened 40 films, out of which 22 are available to watch, 18 are not; Film Forward has 36 films in total, out
of which 25 films are available to watch, 11 are not. I watched 11 out of the 22 available Project: 20/20 films, and 16 out of the 25 available Film Forward films.

Table 1 Info Sources — Project: 20/20 [AVAILABLE FILMS]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Film Name</th>
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<th>IMDB</th>
<th>Wikipedia</th>
<th>Viewed</th>
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Grey Cell: Film that were screened in multiple years
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The following is a run-down of all the available films based on their themes and the thematic category (or categories) they fall into (see Table 5). Some of the films fall into more than one category, indicated by the colored cells in Table 6. The red cells refer to a film falling into a thematic category and that theme is the most prominent theme in the film; the blue cells refer to a film falling into a thematic category and that theme is a secondary theme in the film. The films that are not put into a colored cell are films that only fall into one thematic category.

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</table>

Red cells refer to a film falling into a thematic category and that theme is the most prominent theme in the film; blue cells refer to a film falling into a thematic category and that theme is a secondary theme in the film.

Example: Afghan Star's most important theme is "democracy — free and fair election", but it also deals with issues such as "gender equality", "civic participation — voting", and "appreciation of art and culture".
The American values category includes 4 key American values (see Table 5): *democracy, equality, freedom and civic participation*. Democracy originally refers to government by the people as opposed to by the minority with powers. In America, democracy is an indirect democracy in which representatives are elected in order to represent the mass of people. A related concept is majority rule, which means that everyone has the right to vote and the person who is given the most votes wins. Social mobility is a democratic value in America that has been firmly believed in. Mobility refers to the ability for people to move around in a society both in a geographical and socio-economic sense (Cummings & Wise, 2005).

*Equality* is a concept that everyone is created equal and is of equal worth, despite their differences in gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. Other basic values/rights include individual *freedom* such as freedom of expression, freedom of pursuing one’s dreams, and individualism — the idea of valuing a great deal the worth of each individual and the freedom of action for individuals (Cummings & Wise, 2005). *Civic participation* is a separate category within “American values” but is also a concept related to American democratic values. Civic participation refers to the idea of encouraging people to get involved in a public cause, and that the final say lies on the people who have the rights to allocate public resources.
In this thesis, democracy is further divided into two sub-categories: mobility and free & fair election. Film Forward’s Bones Brigade: An Autobiography discusses social mobility by documenting the story of six teenage boys who used to be very insecure and disappointed about themselves becoming the most successful skateboarders.

Two films from Project: 20/20 (Please Vote for Me and Iron Ladies of Liberia) and one from Film Forward (Afghan Star) are put into free & fair election. Please Vote for Me documents an election for a class monitor at an elementary school in the city of Wuhan in China. With the help of their parents, the final three candidates — two boys and one girl — exhaust all strategies in order to win. The film sheds light on the concept of a free and fair election and China’s one-child policy (Edkins & Chen, 2007).

Iron Ladies of Liberia is a documentary on Liberia’s transformation from an authoritarian state to a democratic country as Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first freely elected president in Africa in 2006. The film also serves as a “testimony of the political power of women’s leadership and diplomacy” (Ansbacher, Schafer, Junge, & Johnson, 2007).

Afghan Star documents an Afghan version of American Idol called “Afghan Star” in Afghanistan, a country where popular culture such as singing, dancing and watching TV is highly discouraged, especially among women. The contest is open to everyone in the country, and everyone could participate by voting for their favorite star via cell phone. The film features four finalists including two women as they competed for the winner. For Afghan people the contest was a fresh experience of democratic process and for this country, it symbolizes its “ongoing struggle for modernity” (Herring, Lerner, Marking, &
Marking, 2009). In addition to democracy & modernity as well as civic participation & voting, the documentary also explores issues of gender equality and the values of art and culture.

Equality can be focused on gender equality, ethnic equality, immigrant equality, and disability equality. 6 films from the two programs deal with gender equality, which is the most important theme in the film Offside. In Iran, Islam does not allow women to participate in or even watch sports. But the film tells a story of a few brave Iranian girls who make great effort to go to the Tehran soccer stadium just to watch the football game. They are caught by some male soldiers and are kept outside of the stadium (Panahi & Panahi, 2006). Other themes that show up in the film include a contrast between traditional values in Iran and Western values (traditional society vs. modern society); individualism that is reflected through the protagonist who fights for her right of participating in sports events like men; and a possibility of coexistence between the adversaries — the girls and the male soldiers that symbolize modernity and tradition, or the modern day and traditional Iran— that despite their disagreement, they nevertheless share the same dreams and a “sense of national pride and humanity” (Panahi & Panahi, 2006).

Sita Sings the Blues is an animated film produced by Nina Paley that combines the storylines from the Indian epic poem the Ramayana and Nina Paley’s personal life. The director calls the film “a tale of truth, justice and a woman’s cry for equal treatment.” (Sita Sings the Blues).
Winter’s Bone features a heroic character who keeps his family intact through her determination, individuality, and courage. New Yorker critic David Denby regards it as “one of the great feminist works in film” (Winter’s Bone).

The Light in Her Eyes is a documentary that features a Muslim preacher and the founder of a Qur’an school for girls in Syria Houda, who advocates the importance of pursuing education and career to women while also being faithful of the Islamic values that first and foremost position women as wives and mothers. Therefore, the film expresses a certain level of tolerance of Islamic values as it argues for women’s rights. At the same time, the documentary also records different levels of progress toward modernity within the country. For example, some women who are walking on the streets wear traditional clothe and hijab, and some dress in a more Western style. Therefore, this film has also been put into the “traditional vs. modern society” category.

The World Before Her is a documentary about two groups of Indian girls, one striving for winning the title of Miss India, the other being trained at one of the Durga Vahini camps. The film explores issues of women’s rights and gender equality in India—a country that is becoming increasing modern and Westernized (The World Before Her, IMDB).

The Loving Story and Freedom Riders from Film Forward are put into the ethnic quality category. The Loving Story is a documentary about an interracial couple who fell in love and got married during the Civil Rights Movements when interracial couples were not yet allowed to get married in Virginia. They were sentenced to a year in prison. The
film documents how with the help of two lawyers they fought for their rights and freedom and called for social justice (The Loving Story).

*Freedom Riders* is a historical documentary film about the story of the civil rights activists who proclaimed themselves as “Freedom Riders” and rode interstate buses in interracial groups in order to challenge racial segregation and fight for equal access to transportation, restaurants and waiting rooms (Freedom Riders, Wikipedia).

*Under the Same Moon* (*immigrant equality*) selected for Film Forward’s 2013 screening list depicts the story of an illegal Mexican immigrant Rosario and her son who stays in Mexico as well as their attempts to reunite with each other in the US despite many obstacles (Under the Same Moon). The film is sympathetic toward the illegal immigrants in the US.

*Blindsight* is a documentary that discusses *disability equality*. The documentary is about six blind Tibetan teenagers climbing the Lhakpa Ri at the foot of Mount Everest (Blindsight). *Blindsight* explores the themes of disability equality, overcoming difficulties and pursuing dreams, and the importance of friendship and a sense of togetherness.

6 films from the two programs focus on the theme of *freedom*. AFI’s *Stephanie Daley* discusses the issue of teenage pregnancy and *abortion*. The 16-year-old girl Stephanie Daley delivered her baby in a bathroom and her baby died. She was charged of murder even though she insisted that the baby was a stillborn. The pregnant forensic-psychologist Lydia Crane was assigned to the case in order to find out the truth. The film ends with Stephanie telling Lydia that after she delivered the baby, she killed her in her
mind and the baby died. The film has an “open-ended portrayal and ending” (Stephanie Daley).

Three films from the two programs touch upon the issue of **freedom of expression**. Both *Beautiful Ohio* and *Last Train Home* have an implied theme of freedom of expression. In *Kassim the Dream*, “freedom of expression” is explicitly mentioned when Kassim commented on the fact that Uganda does not have the kind of freedom of expression America does that allows people to do things like drawing a picture of George W. Bush and the Uganda president, the way his boxing manager did. People are not even allowed to show pictures of old presidents.

In *Beautiful Ohio*, which will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter, the mother, in a family conversation, quickly mentions China’s Cultural Revolution that is going on at the time (the story is set in the 1970s in Ohio) where violins are being burned.

Film Forward’s documentary *Last Train Home* touches upon the issues of globalization and the path China is currently embarking on as it transitions from a traditional society to a modern society with an implied theme of freedom of expression. The Montreal-based director Lixin Fan tells a story of Chinese migrant workers by following a family as they begin their trip back to their hometown in Sichuan Province for the Chinese New Year. The theme of freedom of expression is implied in this film because *Last Train Home* has a limited release in mainland China due to its filmed subject, and by supporting such a film the Film Forward program gives the director a voice overseas.
Project: 20/20’s *Kassim the Dream* also deal with the topic of *American dream*. It is a documentary on the Uganda-born world champion boxer Kassim Ouma. He was kidnapped at age six and then became a child soldier. But he “found his ticket to freedom” later when he managed to come to the US in 1998 where he eventually became the Junior Middleweight Campion of the World. Now that he has realized his “American dream”, he wishes to return to Uganda where his family stays (Davidson, Silver, & Davidson, 2008). Other themes of this documentary include overcoming difficulties while pursuing one’s dreams, and courage & determination as one of the common values.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild (individualism)* selected for Film Forward is a fantasy drama film featuring a 6-year-old black girl Hushpuppy who through her tribulations and plight learns “the ways of courage and love” (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, IMDB). A. O. Scott from *The New York Times* comments on the heroic character, “…Hushpuppy is an American original, a rambunctious blend of individualism and fellow feeling.” (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Wikipedia) This film is also put into the category of *Dimensions of Mutual Understandings — Love* since ultimately love is what has sustained Hushpuppy through the difficulties.

Two Film Forward films focus on the theme of *civic participation*. One is the documentary *If Your Build It* that tells a story of community action; the other is *Afghan Star* discussed earlier in the *Democracy* category. It documents a national singing competition in Afghanistan where viewers could vote for their favorite singers with their cell phone.
If You Build It follows a high school design program in Windsor, a very impoverished town in North Carolina. Two architects were invited to create a design-based curriculum named Studio H that was meant to deal with the community’s problems and create a “sense of possibility”. Studio H is named after its target on “humanity, habitats, health and happiness,” and the curriculum is to empower “young people to become creative problem solvers and at the same time encourage them to become more active citizens”. The two architects worked with the students from Bertie Early College High School for a year to design and build a farmer’s market pavilion, which ended up becoming the only farmers market pavilion in the US which was designed and constructed by high school students (If You Build It, Wikipedia).

Dealing with differences category is further divided into three sub-categories based on the causes of differences — the differences in our values, ideologies or opinions can be attributed to the differences in our ethnicity, sexuality, and identity. Films that discuss tolerating and dealing with differences caused by ethnicity include London River from Project: 2020, as well as Grbavica, Dancing in Jaffa and The Light in Her Eyes from Film Forward.

London River is a narrative story between Elizabeth Sommers, a Guernsey farmer, and Ousmane, a West African Muslim who lives in France as they come to London after the July 7th terrorist attacks in 2005 in order to find their missing children. When Elizabeth first comes to London, she is surprised when she finds out that her daughter Jane lives in a Muslim neighborhood. Later she meets Francophone African Muslim Ousmane who is also searching for his son. They discover that their children were a
couple, and Jane was converting to Muslims, which further frustrate Elizabeth. Gradually Elizabeth’s prejudice toward Ousmane lessens and she invites him to live together with her in Jane’s flat in order to save him some money. They support each other during the search, but eventually they are told by the police that their children were on a bus that exploded in Tavistock Square. In addition to the impact of terrorism, the film reveals the deep-seated prejudice toward Muslims in UK and calls for ethnic tolerance and peaceful co-existence. The plot is rather predictable and the theme of dealing with ethnic difference is very obvious.

*Grbavica* (narrative) tells a story of a single mother Esma in Sarajevo and how her life is still being influenced by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Esma lives with her teenager daughter Sara. Whenever Sara asks her mother how her father died in the war, Esma always responses evasively. Later Sara needs a certificate to prove that she is an offspring of a war hero in order to go to a school field trip for free. Esma has to lie to her that her father’s corpse was missing during the war which is why she does not have a certificate. However, Sara eventually finds out that her father is not a war hero because her name is not on the list of the students who are children of war heroes. Finally Esma has to admit that she was one of the raped women by Serbian troops, and Sara is the child of a Chetnik. Sara eventually accepts this fact, and her mother’s confession ends up bringing them closer (*Grbavica*, Wikipedia). The film uses a fictional and a quite extreme example, the child of a Bosniak woman and a Chetnik Sara, to advocate for peaceful coexistence and ethnic tolerance and to oppose wars.
Dancing in Jaffa is a documentary about a famous ballroom dancer called Pierre Dulaine who is half Irish, half Palestinian. He returns to the city of Jaffa in Israel with the intention of teaching ballroom dance to both Arab and Jewish school children (Dancing in Jaffa, IMDB). He firmly believes that dance is the common language between people with different cultural backgrounds. The story ends with a successful dance competition and new friendships.

4 films in total deal with the issues of tolerance of difference in sexuality/sexual orientation. Among them La Mission and Valentine Road focus more on tolerating the differences in this aspect and Beautiful Ohio and Beginners tend to be more focused on identity.

La Mission centers around the relationship between the father Che and his son Jes as Che finds out that Jes is gay. Che was an alcoholic but now he works hard to support Jes whom he has raised since the death of his wife. They live in the Mission District in San Francisco which is a Latino neighborhood. Che has a very difficult time accepting the fact that his son is gay because he has always been a masculine man. Jes is also laughed at by his friends, and even shot by a gun by one of the guys he plays basketball with. Later Jes goes to UCLA and moves away from home. Che starts drinking again, but finally decides to stop and drives to LA to see his son. The film raises questions of homosexuality and homosexual identity as well as violence in the Latino community. La Mission was regarded by Latino media to have portrayed many aspects of American Hispanic cultures authentically. The film also include scenes that point at
environmentally friendly themes; the film was made on an eco-friendly movie set in San Francisco (La Mission, Wikipedia).

*Valentine Road* is a documentary about a campus shooting in Oxnard, California triggered by the growing tension between a gay biracial boy Lawrence King and his classmate Brandon Malnerney who is a white supremacist. The film explores issues surrounding LGBT teens, hate crimes, campus violence as well as what could be possibly done in order to prevent such tragedies and protect the school children once such violence does happen (Alpert, Schmidt, Cunningham, & Cunningham, 2013).

*Beautiful Ohio* selected for the Project: 20/20 2006-2007 screening list is a story depicting a family, set in the 1970s in the US. The elder brother who is a math prodigy is discovered to be gay at the end of the movie, and the film has an open ending with a scene many years later where he died in hospital because of his sexuality.

*Beginners* from Film Forward is a comedy about an old man who after the death of his wife begins to explore his true identity by coming out of the closet and fully enjoying the rest of his life as a gay man. Because of this, his son Oliver decides to open himself up to embrace a new relationship with a girl he had encountered (Beginners, Wikipedia).

4 films from Project: 20/20 and 3 films from Film Forward are put into the “Identity” category. *Beautiful Ohio* centers on a family in Ohio, mostly the two brothers and the story is set in the 1970s. William is a young teenager who is always overshadowed by his brilliant older brother Clive who is a math prodigy. Clive has a pretty girlfriend and as the film goes on William finds himself having a crush on her.
Each member of this family has their own personalities — Clive is portrayed as more masculine and popular and William as more sensitive and caring. Toward the end Clive is discovered to be gay when he is found in bed with another male teenager. The family is very much humiliated. At the same time, Clive grows detached from his parents and speaks his own language. Many years later, a scene reveals that Clive, an already grown man, dies in bed in hospital probably because of his sexually orientation and William accidentally finds out that the language Clive used to speak when he is a teenager is simply Hungarian. The film has an open ending.

*Life After Tomorrow* interviews more than 40 women who played orphans in the Broadway show *Annie* when they were still children, the experiences they had as child actresses, and how these experiences affected them later on in their lives. The documentary explores the way in which being a child star shapes one’s identity.

*Shoot the Messenger* (narrative) is about a black teacher’s journey of discovering his own identity. He discriminatorily gives black students extra tuition, and later is called “a Ku Klux Klanman with a black face” for a false and laughable charge by one of his students. The whole plot is a bit comic as the black teacher turns racism against his own people, until a black church and a girlfriend change his mind.

*Skin* is a biographical film about Sandra whose parents are white Afrikaner parents but she unexpectedly has dark skin. She studies at a boarding school where her white brother Leon also studies in, but later she is reclassified as colored and expelled from school. She begins a love affair with a young black man; her father disapproves of the relationship so she elopes with him. She separates with her parents since then. Later
when her marriages fails she leaves him and raises the two children by herself. She marries again later on and has more children who are all classified as colored. Eventually after her father dies she reunites with her mother. The film is based on the book *When She Was White: the True Story of a Family Divided by Race* (Skin, Wikipedia).

*Somewhere in Between* is a documentary about four Chinese adoptees in the US who attempt to search for their own identities through meeting with other adoptees, going back to China to look for their birth parents, or helping other orphaned girls. The documentary brings about “issues of belonging, race and gender” through these very specific cases of personal experiences that yet “can be universally relatable”. It also touches upon the issue of China’s One Child Policy — around 80,000 girls have been adopted from China since 1989 (Knowlton & Knowlton, 2011).

*Amreeka* is a comedy about a family of Palestinian immigrants in the US and features a Christian Palestinian single mother who has just immigrated to the US with her teenager son. The film brings out the issues of the identity of Palestinian immigrants, the tension of living with one’s own heritage in a new modern world, and peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Arabs, between American Jews and Palestinian American immigrants, and between American people and the Muslim world (Piovesan, Barkin, & Dabis, 2009).

2 films from Project: 20/20 (*The Road & Offside*) and 4 films (*Last Train Home, Amreeka, The Light in Her Eyes, & The World Before Her*) from Film Forward touch upon the issues surrounding the transition of a society from a traditional to a modern one (*tradition vs. modern society*). *The Road* (narrative) depicts the tragic life story of a
Chinese woman Li Chunfen and the film spans over 5 decades of her life (The Road, AsianWiki). Chunfei sells tickets on a bus. The driver Old Cui likes her but she has a crush on a young doctor Liu Feidou. During the Cultural Revolution, Li visits Liu and their affair is found out and they are punished by the Party. Liu swears to the Party that he would never want to be associated with Li, which breaks Li’s heart. During the 1970s, the Party arranges that Cui marries Li, so they get married right away. Later it turns out that Cui has impotency problems but Li never leaves him, even when Liu comes back and wants to reunite with her. Cui is angry at first but later decides to help them see each other again. However, when he secretly drives to pick Liu up, he gets into an accident that puts him into bed for the rest of his life. Liu takes cares of Cui till he dies, and even after he passes away she refuses to remarry. One day in the 1990s Li drives Cui’s wrecked and then renovated bus to the street; the bus stops functioning in the middle of the road. This bus, something from decades ago and surrounded by modern cars, attracts crowds of people. The film has people think about the negative consequences of old-fashioned thoughts and traditions that may have never been challenged at the time through a deeply personal, albeit fictional, story.

*Last Train Home* reveals the price the ordinary Chinese people have paid as China is entering a new age of modernity and facing the opportunities and challenges globalization brings to her.

*The World Before Her* explores the tension between traditional Indian cultures and modern thoughts by documenting the stories of two Indian girls — Ruhi Singh who goes to Bombay in order to win the title of Miss India, and Prachi Trivedi, a drill sergeant at
the Hindu national group Durga Vahini who is fiercely against Western culture, Islam, and Christianity (The World Before Her, IMDB). The documentary presents a contrast between these two groups: the Pageant industry in India that is one of the few industries that gives equality to women, and the Hindu nationalists.

Many of the films in the overcoming hardships category have overlapping themes of “courage and determination”. To Play and to Fight is a documentary about the Venezuelan youth Orchestra System that is made up of the orchestras from all over Venezuela’s towns and villages. The system is designed to offer poor children in the rural areas an opportunity of being exposed to music. The documentary interviews many famous musicians in the world who have been trained by this Venezuelan orchestra system. This is a story of “courage, determination, ambition, and love” that proves that only those who dream can succeed (To Play and to Fight, IMDB).

Afghan Muscles documents the young bodybuilders in Afghanistan specifically Hamid’s determination to fight for their dreams of winning the championship in order to have a better life in a country filled with war and chaos (Afghan Muscles, IMDB).

Buck is a documentary about the “horse whisperer” Buck Brannaman who experienced child abuse but later transferred that experience into a loving sensitivity toward the horses when he became a well-known horse expert (Buck, IMDB).

Twenty Feet from Stardom documents the stories of African-American back-up singers and dancers, some of whom aspire to eventually become solo artists, and some content with singing along with the lead singers. The documentary focuses on their
struggle and frustrations to support themselves while pursuing the dreams, their firm belief in their own worth, and their determination to never give up on their ambitions.

The *Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Shared Values* category include themes of *appreciation of art and culture, honesty, love, courage & determination*, and *good deeds*.

5 films that touch upon the theme of *appreciation of art and culture* include *Throw Down Your Heart, Guy & Madeline on a Park Bench, Afghan Star, Unfinished Space, and Dancing in Jaffa*. The documentary *Throw Down Your Heart* follows the famous banjoist Bela Fleck as he returns to Africa in order to find his instrument’s lost heritage. In African, Bela Fleck travels from places to places, researches banjo’s history, and makes an album with African musicians. The documentary shows the audience the way “music transcends languages, cultures and continents” (Fleck, Paladino, & Paladino, 2008).

*Guy & Madeline on a Park Bench* is a jazz musical film with a verite style. It is about a story of the couple Guy, a jazz trumpeter, and a shy girl called Madeline. They have been dating for a few months, and then Guy starts falling in love with another woman Elena. Madeline tries to start a new life and later she decides to travel to New York where she ends up meeting a new guy Paul. (*Guy & Madeline on a Park Bench, Wikipedia*). By this time, Guy has began to feel regretful of letting Madeline go as his new relationship is not going well — Elena is not very interested in jazz music, and when Guy plays, Elena feels it is noisy. Guy tries to look for Madeline and win her back. The film has an open ending but implies that the couple is going to get back together.
Unfinished Space is a documentary about how Cuba’s National Art Schools was constructed and abandoned due to the Revolution, as well as efforts to restore them in recent years. The documentary features Fidel Castro who commissioned three young architects to build the National Art Schools in 1961, and also re-invited them to return to Cuba for their unfinished dream (Unfinished Space, IMDB).

Afghan Star expresses an appreciation of music, dance and popular culture of Afghan people despite government pressures.

Dancing in Jaffa reaffirms that dance, just like any other forms of art, is a common language that can transcend social boundaries and reconcile the differences in people’s cultural backgrounds.

Amal (honesty) features a story set in New Delhi about a poor but honest and hardworking autorickshaw driver Amal Kumar. In this story a billionaire G. K. Jayaram who has been searching for an honest man sits in his truck without telling him who he really is. He is impressed with Amal’s honesty he has discovered through his interactions with him including the fact that Amal is not willing to accept his tips, and decides to leave his entire estate to him. Later G.K. dies, and if G.K.’s lawyer, who is not aware of the fact that Amal is actually her son’s auto rickshaw driver, cannot find Amal, the inheritance will be passed onto G.K.’s family members. This situation leads to lots of twists and turns surrounding the money with everyone craving for it. Amal finally is given G.K.’s letter stating the inheritance, but because he does not read, he accidentally gives the letter to a homeless girl who needs a piece of letter to draw on. Then Amal goes on to pick up his regular client and the film ends with them having a pleasant
conversation with smiles on their face (Amal, Wikipedia). This fictional story explores shared values in a New Delhi man such as a belief in honesty, hard work and the fact that happiness is not contingent on one’s wealth — all these values can be universally related to.

3 films touch upon the theme of love in different ways. Both Boy and Buck somehow deal with troubled relationship between father and son. Boy is a New Zealand feature film; the story is set in 1984, and Boy is a teenager who lives with his younger brother Rocky, his grandmother, and his cousins. He is happy when his father Alamein, who has not been living with them, is finally back. Later Boy finds out his father is not the way he has always dreamed him to be — he comes back in order to look for a bag of money he had hidden before. Eventually the disappointment starts to hit him that he breaks down and hits his father. But in the end he decides to come to terms with the reality and starts to accept it as it is (Boy, Wikipedia).

In the documentary Buck, the horse whisperer also experienced a very difficult childhood of serious abuse from his father. He recovers through transferring his painful experience into a love and sensitivity toward horses and becomes an expert on interacting with horses.

In both cases, love becomes a remedy of accepting the reality and imperfections in life.

Many of the films that have a theme of courage & determination also fall into the “overcoming difficulty” category. Beasts of the Southern Wild also include a major theme of “individualism”.
A Small Act is a documentary about a Holocaust survivor Hilde Back who once sponsored a Kenyan kid Chris Mburu by giving him a quarterly donation of $15. Because of the seemingly insignificant financial assistance, Chris eventually becomes a Harvard Law School student, and after he graduates, a United Nations human rights lawyer fighting against genocide and discrimination. He is astonished when finding out his benefactor is herself a Holocaust survivor. Inspired by this, Chris creates a foundation named after Hilde Back that aims to provide financial assistance to Kenyan students. The film illustrates the power and the “rippling effects” of a small act of kindness (Arnold, Lee, Soros, Huang, & Arnold, 2010).

5 films are not put into any of the categories in Table 6, although they can be found in either Table 1 or Table 3 since all of them are available to watch. Icons Among Us (Project:20/20 2009-2010) is a documentary about jazz in modern times in the US; On the Ice (Film Forward 2012) is a drama film that also provides the audiences with some knowledge about the Alaskan culture; Big Rig (Project: 20/20 2007-2008) is about the life of American truck drivers; Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo (Project: 20/20 2009-2010) is a documentary about Japan’s fascination about insects; and Chasing Ice (Film Forward 2013), a documentary about global warming effects, sheds light on environmentalism.
Chapter 4: Film Analyses

In this chapter I chose the films from both programs that fall into multiple thematic categories as shown on Table 6, watched them closely, and conducted a thematic film analysis on these selected films.

**Film: Offside [AFI 2006-2007]**

**Genre:** Narrative

**Director:** Jafar Panahi

**Story Location:** Iran

**Origin of the Director:** Iran

**Theme:** American Values — Equality — Gender Equality; Traditional vs. Modern Society; American Values — Freedom — Individualism

**Subject:**

The story is set in 2005 in Iran when the football teams of Iran and Bahrain were competing with each other in order to qualify for the 2006 World Cup.

**Storyline:**

In Iran women are not allowed to participate in men’s sporting events. But a girl, disguised as a boy, sits on a bus together with a bunch of boys in order to go to the game anyway. She tries to sneak in but cannot get a ticket at first. Eventually the ticket seller agrees to sell her a ticket at a higher price.
Her attempt of passing through the security fails and she is arrested with several other girls who also try to watch the game. They are trapped in a spot outside of the stadium and watched by some soldiers. Some girls try to get rid of the soldiers such as pretending to go to the bathroom, but none of their attempts are successful. The girls are so eager to watch the game that they persuade the soldiers who can walk around and watch the game through an entrance to tell them what is going on with the game. When Iran wins points based on the soldiers’ commentary, they start chanting.

In the middle of the game, the girls are brought to a bus and being taken to the Vice Squad Headquarters together with some boys who have brought fireworks to the stadium. Even on the way there, they try to glance at the game broadcasted on TV when the bus stops at a bar, or they try to listen to the game on radio. When Iran finally wins, the girls start celebrating with the soldiers with sparklers from those boys on the bus. Later when the bus is stuck in a traffic jam, the girls are released and they all get off the bus joining the people who are celebrating on the street.

Analysis:

*American Values — Equality — Gender Equality*

The film criticizes the Islamic customs in Iran that prevent women from participating in sporting events.

*Traditional vs. Modern Society*

It could come as a shock to Western viewers who are not quite familiar with the local cultures in Iran that women are not even allowed to watch a football game there. Compared to the Western way of life, Iran is still mostly confined within its own world of
Islamic values. Nevertheless, those women who are brave enough to break the rules represent a new trend of modernity and social progress within this traditional society.

_American Values — Freedom — Individualism_

The women the film features embody a common America value — individualism by showing that they have the courage and freedom to pursue what they believe to be true.

_Co-existence_

While the film argues for gender equality in Iran, it does not exactly demonize the adversaries — the soldiers. Despite their differences, the soldiers and the women are united through a sense of national pride when they both decide to celebrate for Iran’s victory with sparklers.

_Additional Comments_

As a foreign movie, _Offside_ represents certain fundamental American values as it argues for gender equality, pursuit of modernity, individualism, and peaceful co-existence.

The narrative is very straight-forward, and the film has a documentary feel.

**Film: Blindsight [AFI 06-07]**

**Genre: Documentary**

**Director: Lucy Walker**

**Story Location: Tibet**

**Origin of the Director: UK**
Subject:

Six blind Tibetan teenagers climbing the 23,000 foot Lhakpa Ri at the foot of Mount Everest.

Storyline:

Under the influence of Buddhism, the blind teenagers in Tibet are believed to be possessed by demons in their local culture, which has made their lives even harder. These blind children are not only ostracized by the Tibetan society, but also doubted by their own families. The blind German social worker Sabriye Tenberken sets up the first school for the blind in Lhasa Tibet, the Braille Without Borders, and she and her students invite the blind mountain climber Erik Weihenmayer who has climbed to the summit of Everest. Erik, together with Sabriye and a group of Westerners, leads the six Tibetan teenagers as they embark on a kind of climbing expedition that may have never been experimented before.

As the group reaches the 21,000 foot of Lhakpa Ri, Sonam Bhumtso became very sick, and the group decided to send her, Tashi, and Kyila down. Shortly after the three teenagers were sent down, the group decided to give up on getting to the summit and go down as well, after settling some disagreement within the group regarding whether to continue or not.

Tashi is in fact not half-Tibetan as he first claims himself to be; he had lied about the fact in order to join the team because he thought they might only take Tibetan
children. He is actually from a village in Sichuan, China and was abandoned by his family at a very young age. The group took him back to his hometown where he and his family finally reunited.

The trip transformed these 6 six teenagers’ lives. Gyenshen became much more outgoing compared to before the trip when he rarely talked and cried easily. Now Gyenshen is the only Braille publisher in Tibet. Kyila was invited by the Totnes School of English in the UK to attend a general English course; she had finished her one-year study there and is running the Braille Without Borders school in Lhasa. Sonam Bhumtso says that she likes translation, and she thinks that “she has many many opportunities”. She graduated top of her class, and her new ambition was to become a writer. Dachung won a scholarship in Beijing. Tenzin and Tashi are running the biggest massage clinic in Tibet where cold drinks are also served, which had been Tashi’s original plan.

**Analysis:**

*American Values — Equality — Disability Equality*

Despite all the obstacles the blind people face, they are equal human beings who have the freedom and the ability to accomplish whatever they want to accomplish, just like everyone else. They can have the confidence, and they do not have to be ashamed of being blind.

*Overcoming Hardships/Courage and Determination*

The trip was made almost impossible by the fact that the 6 teenagers are blind. Yet, the difficulties these teenagers encounter in their everyday lives could only be more
formidable. Nonetheless, they have not only conquered Lhakpa Ri, but are also striving to fulfill their dreams. They have succeeded in many ways, with courage and firm beliefs.

Sabriye and Eric are portrayed as having become very strong, confident, and happy people despite being blind and having gone through extremely difficult life circumstances.

Sybil Robson Orr, producer of the documentary, says: “Blindsight is about so much more than just blindness; it’s really about pursuing your dreams.”

**Additional Comments**

*Friendship & Togetherness:* Based on what Sabriye says in the film, what she thinks the kids ultimately want by joining this trip is to be together with the group and make friends. Therefore, this mountain climbing is not only about standing on top, but also about a sense of togetherness and a possibility of friendships.

Sabriye (when suggesting that the group give up on the goal of reaching the summit): “The most important thing for me, at least, that the kids learn about solidarity, and that they really get into the whole thing, that we should look out for the weakest, that we should really be concerned about the weakest. And therefore, I would have wished very secretly that we would have all gone down today, and down as a team. They’re not here really because they wanted to climb on a top. They wanted to be with us, and they wanted to be with the team. They wanted to get to know Erik. They wanted to get new friends. It’s exactly what we wanted with this whole trip…. And the kids, they climbed their mountains already. And they have proved that they can survive in this world as blind people.”
Eric: “We were only 1,500 feet from the top of Lhakpa Ri. We had done 99% of the journey. We just had 1% to go. We weren’t that far, but we were done. For me, I’m a traditional mountain climber. I want to get to the summit. So part of me felt like a failure. But for these kids, I think it was different. And I kind of had to change my perspective. … I think the kids have experienced the mountains to the fullest. And they worked as hardest as they possibly could, and they gave everything they had, and that’s all you can ask for. It’s funny, because people always talk about the freedom of the mountains and how it makes you feel so free. But when I stand on the summit, I don’t feel free. The mountains make me feel human. It connects me to all those human frailties, you know, like the warmth that I need and the food and the water and the friends around me. And Sabriye said something that’s really sunk in over the last few days, and it’s the idea that, you know, when you suffer together, that’s when you make the closest connections with the people around you. And so for me, this trip has been a little different from what I thought, because it was a lot more about friendship and about togetherness than it was about mountains.”

Blindsight is a very emotionally poignant documentary. The film features Sabriye and Erik, giving them more time compared to the teenagers. It may simply be the director’s choice, or it may be because the teenagers do not speak very good English, although they do seem to be able to listen and understand well.

Blindsight is a British documentary, however, it spreads several American values such as disability equality as well as perseverance, courage and determination when facing hardships and difficulties.
Film: Beautiful Ohio [AFI 2006-2007]

Genre: Narrative

Director: Chad Lowe

Story Location: USA

Origin of the Director: USA

Theme: Dealing with Differences — Identity; Dealing with Differences — Sexuality;

American Value — Freedom — Freedom of Expression

Subject:

The story centers on a family, particularly two brothers, that lives in Cleveland, Ohio in the early 1970s.

Storyline:

The film revolves around a family that lives in Cleveland, Ohio, and the story is set in 1973. The film features two teenager brothers, a math prodigy Clive and his younger brother William who has always been overshadowed by Clive’s talents. In the film Clive has won several math championships, plays electric guitar, has a girlfriend Sandra, and speaks a weird language sometimes that nobody understands. William is more into things such as history and music, and learns playing the piano from his mother Judy who always talks about composers like Chopin. Both William’s parents Judy and Simon tell him that he does not have to be like Clive; he should just be who he is.

Clive gradually drifts away from his parents; in particular, the fact that he always speaks his own language and that he never explains to anyone what he speaks of makes things worse. Simon is especially frustrated about his relationship with Clive and the
difficulty of communicating with him. There might be conflicts between Judy and Simon but the film is not very clear about this. The family assumes that there must be a dictionary or code to the language Clive speaks, and William tries to find that dictionary. Later he finds a note that is hidden in the bathroom and there are words on this note that he cannot decode; he confronts Clive and his friends about it but he is told that he has only found one part of the whole thing; there is another part and this note is not the dictionary. They even lets him keep the note.

William develops a crush on Sandra, who is very sexy and free-spirited, and lives secretly behind the furnace in this family’s basement. Eventually they sleep together on the beach. After that Sandra is still with Clive and that makes William jealous. One day William decides to tell his mother that Sandra has actually been living in their basement, but it turns out that Judy had already known this, and thought that it could be quite romantic. Seeing that his mother is Okay with the situation, William brings his father to the basement by inviting him to play ping pong there, and then purposely lets him find out about the space Sandra lives in. At the moment, Judy is asking everyone to come and eat dinner, when when nobody comes, she comes to the basement as well, and everyone ends up being shocked when they see that Clive is in bed with another boy, both naked. Extremely angry and humiliated, Simon hits Clive.

The film turns to a day many years later when William has become an adult. He comes to the hospital and enters a room where Clive is dead in bed, Simon sitting besides him. William hugs Clive, and cries.
Then the camera switches to the beach and as William and his wife are walking side by side, William overhears the word “servoo”, a word that he always heard Clive say when he was still a teenager, from two old women who happen to pass them by. He stops them and asks them what “servoo” means. The women tell them that it is Hungarian. Totally surprised, he decides to have a conversation with them, and that is when he tells them the story of his late older brother, and his note that he has kept for all these years. As one woman starts reading the note, she tells William that this is not a dictionary he thought it is; it is a poem titled “Love and Courage”.

**Analysis:**

*Dealing with Differences — Identity*

Each of the family members has their own character and lives as a different individual. Particularly the film emphasizes that we do not have to be the same; William and Clive are different people and have strengths in different areas.

*Dealing with Differences — Sexuality*

The film also touches upon how homosexuality could affect a traditional family in the US in the 1970s.

*American Value — Freedom — Freedom of Expression*

Clive and William’s mother, in a family conversation, quickly mentions China’s Cultural Revolution that is going on at the time (the story is set in the 1970s in Ohio) where violins are being burned. There is a slight and subtle criticism about the historical event, but this detail is also very negligible in the film.
Additional Comments

The film ends with Clive dying in a hospital, and implies that this is due to the fact that he is homosexual. The discovery that the language Clive used to speak is actually not some weird language but simply Hungarian and the confession William makes in the end that deep down he has always had regrets for doing what he did that day brings out a sense of tolerance. The film has an open ending.

Film: Kassim the Dream

Genre: Documentary

Director: Kief Davidson

Story Location: US/Uganda

Origin of the Director: USA

Theme: American Values — Freedom — American Dream; American Values — Freedom — Freedom of Expression; Overcoming Hardships; Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Shared Values — Courage & Determination

Subject:

The documentary features the world champion boxer Kassim “The Dream” Ouma, who originally comes from Uganda.

Storyline:

Kassim Ouma is a well-known world champion boxer, but he had a very difficult childhood in Uganda before he came to the US in 1998. He was kidnapped by the Rebel Army at 6 years old, which ended his normal childhood. Simply following orders in order to survive, he started killing people at the age of 8. Two years after he was kidnapped, the
Rebel Army took over the government, so he became a child soldier. That was when he began learning boxing with the military boxing team. He became an amateur champion at age 15. Later his team was given visa to come to the US for the World Military Boxing Championships. He took his visa but escaped from the army. He had not been able to return to his country ever since; the army went to his village to look for him, and when they could not find him, they killed his father.

When Kassim Ouma first arrived in the US, he did not speak any English. He went to a boxing club and they took him. Nassim fought his first professional boxing competition in 1998, and became successful shortly after. With no family and friends, Kassim built his own circle of friends in his own way, and later on he took his mother here in the US. He has a kid in the US, and one in Uganda.

While Kassim is very successful in the US, he has been dying to return to Uganda where many of his family members live. Together with the manager of his boxing team, he visited congressional men in DC in order to seek aids from the US governments. They also visited the Uganda ambassadors in the US to arrange his visit back home.

When he finally returned to Uganda, what he saw made him very sad: people were living in camps due to domestic conflicts; kids were still being abducted and forced to become child soldiers; even his own grandmother lived in a place where there was no electricity.

The film ends with him saying that he is working hard hoping that his own kids would not have to go through what he had gone through.
Analysis:

*American Values — Freedom — American Dream*

The story of Kassim Ouma is an “American dream” coming true.

*American Values — Freedom — Freedom of Expression*

The manager of Kassim’s boxing team painted a painting where George W. Bush was placed next to the president of Uganda. He also made George W. Bush have an artificial leg. Nassim commented that Uganda does not have this kind of freedom of expression that would allow people to mock a president; people are even forbidden to show pictures of old presidents.

*Overcoming Hardships/Courage & Determination*

It is remarkable that Kassim has ended up becoming a very successful and joyful person despite his experiences in Uganda in his early years. Although there have been some dark sides of his story — that he had to kill people in order to keep himself alive and when he was a little kid, he thought it was fun to torture people — his courage and strength did contribute a great deal to the life he is living right now.

**Film: Afghan Star [Film Forward 2011]**

**Genre:** Documentary

**Director:** Havana Marking

**Story Location:** Afghanistan

**Origin of the Director:** England

**Theme:** American Values — Democracy — Free & Fair Election/Voting; American Values — Equality — Gender Equality; American Values — Civic Participation —
Voting; Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Shared Values — Appreciation of Art and Culture

Subject:

The film follows 4 final contestants of Afghan Star, an Afghan version of American Idol, as they compete for the first prize.

Storyline:

During the Taliban time, playing music was regarded as impolite and sinful in Afghanistan. Since 1996 it was illegal to listen to music, dance, or watch TV. In 2001 the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was founded, and the ban on music and dancing was removed, but it is still unacceptable for women to sing and dance. “Afghan Star” is a very popular television show in Afghanistan that has the style of American Idol where Afghan people vote via their cellphone for the singer they like best. The film follows the competition’s final 4 contestants Rafi and Hameed as well as two brave women artists Lema and Setara who the film mostly focuses on. Later on Afghan Star attracted attention of the Western media.

For Afghan people, Afghan Star symbolizes democracy because it encourages wide participation across the nation. Despite government pressures, Daoud Sediqi, Presenter & Director of Afghan Star had been an active advocate of art and culture, despite government pressures. On the other hand, although “Afghan Star” was revolutionary, it was still not allowed for Setara to dance while singing in this Islamic society. While she was singing her final song, she danced to the song and removed her head scarf. One week later Cabinet Minister and former warlord Ismail Khan announced
on TV that a women should have never gone to stage to dance. Ordinary Afghan people expressed their negative comments on Setara’s behaviors, calling her “a loose woman”, some even saying that she had brought shame to the Herati people and “deserved to be killed”. Setara had been having safety problems since then and was evicted from her Kabul apartment, but she never regretted expressing her emotions through music. Lema received death threats from the Taliban, and was later protected by the city’s governor. Afterwards, under the influence of the Ullema Council, the government restricted dancing on television.

Rafi, Hameed and Lema were the top 3 with Rafi winning the “Afghan Star” title. After the final Setara went back to Kabul and recorded an album.

Analysis:

*American Values — Democracy — Free & Fair Election/Voting; American Values — Civic Participation — Voting*

The Afghan people get to vote for their own favorite singer through texting. It was their first experience of a modern democratic process.

*American Values — Equality — Gender Equality*

The film documents the two unbelievably audacious Afghan women, particularly Setara, as they express themselves through music and even dance when these activities could easily put their lives in danger. In this way, the documentary condemns the current Afghan regime and Islamism while advocating for women’s rights and gender equality.
Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Shared Values — Appreciation of Art and Culture

The documentary reveals an determination from some Afghan people such as the presenter of “Afghan Star” and independent television networks such as Tolo TV to achieve a higher level of art and culture in Afghanistan despite government pressures.

The director of this documentary is British, but the film spreads American values such as democracy, gender equality, and appreciation of art and culture.

Film: Last Train Home (2010) [Film Forward 2011]

Genre: Documentary

Director: Lixin Fan

Story Location: China

Origin of the Director: Chinese-Canadian

Theme: Traditional vs. Modern Society; American Values — Freedom — Expression

Subject: The life of Chinese migrant workers and the cost of China’s globalization and modernization

Storyline:

Director Lixin Fan followed the Zhangs as they began their trip back home for the Chinese New Year, together with 130 million other Chinese migrant workers. 16 years ago, the couple left their hometown, a small village called Huilong in Sichuan Province and came to Guangzhou; they had been working for a garment factory since then. They factory produces clothes to be exported to western countries such as the US. The couple
travel back home once a year to reunite with their children and other family members, but in an interview Fan conducted but did not include in the movie, another migrant worker tells the director that he can only go back home once every 6 years because of his low salary.

But the film revolves around the couple’s daughter Qin, her conflicts with her parents, and the misunderstandings and mis-communications between them. Qin, a rebellious teenage who does not believe in her parents’ love toward her, drops from school and goes on to work in Guangzhou, with a hope of becoming more independent financially. Her life in the new city does not meet her previous expectations, and her parents’ dream of raising her well so that she is able to have a good life, one that would be different than theirs, collapses.

Analysis:

*Traditional vs. Modern Society*

The documentary discusses the problems China is confronted as it is becoming an increasingly modernized country that is also in many ways connected to the rest of the world.

*American Values — Freedom — Expression*

Chinese migrant workers are an underrepresented population in Chinese media. Although *Last Train Home* is not censored or banned in China, it does have a limited release. By including it in the 2011 Film Forward screening list, Film Forward supports the freedom of expression, allowing a voice from Chinese migrant workers to be heard in China and in the rest of the world. At the same time, because Lixin Fan is of Chinese
descent, he becomes an ideal messenger of American values when he is critical of his homeland in the film.

**Additional Comments**

*Last Train Home* is sympathetic toward development countries like China. The film offers insight into the impact of globalization in developing countries — while globalization has made it possible for people in the western countries to have access to cheaper products, and has deprived some people in the West of many job opportunities, the people from the developing countries have also paid a price.

This Chinese documentary speaks about American values such as modernity with an implied theme of freedom of expression.

**Film: Amreeka [Film Forward 2011]**

**Genre:** Narrative

**Director:** Cherien Dabis

**Story Location:** West Bank, USA

**Origin of the Director:** USA

**Theme:** Dealing with Differences — Identity; Traditional vs. Modern Society

**Subject:**

The film centers on a mother and her son who move from the West Bank to Illinois and how their life has changed since.

**Storyline:**

Muna is a Palestinian Christian divorcee who lives with his teenager son Fadi, and her mother. Her husband left her for a younger, pretties, and skinnier woman. She wins
the lottery and is given an American green card. Fadi is very excited about the opportunity, so she decides to move to America despite the initial hesitation.

The story is set sometime after America invaded Iraq in 2003. After they arrive in the US, they live in Muna’s sister Raghda Halaby’s house together with her husband Nabeel and their three children Salma, Rana, and Lamis.

Muna puts all her money in a cookie box, but she does not realize it until later that the cookie box has been taken by the security officers at the airport in Chicago. Muna and Fadi’s arrival also brings more financial burdens to her sister’s family, so she decides to look for jobs. The job hunting does not go very well, and the only job she is offered is a position in a White Castle store. But she decides not to tell anyone, pretending that she works in a bank next to White Castle. An employee at the bank is confused at first when Muna pretends working there in front of her sister but later decides to help Muna to keep the secret.

Fadi successfully enrolls in a local school where one of her cousins studies too. At school he is often made fun of because of where he is from. Once he gets into a fight with some of the boys and because of that Muna comes to the school to meet with the principal Mr. Novatski, who is an American Jew whose grandparents moved to the US from Poland. They become friends, but later accidentally Mr. Novatski accidentally finds out about the fact that Muna is actually working at White Castle instead of the bank. So he eats some food there, and tells Muna that he is divorced, too.
At the same time, Raghda’s family receives anonymous notes in the mail that threaten them for being Palestinians. This has even affected Nabeel’s business in medicine.

The tension between Fadi and the boys from school escalate when those boys come to White Castle and get into an argument with Muna. One of the boys spill some drinks that make Muna fall down. Another staff Matt contacts her family and everyone finds out about Muna’s secret.

Fadi tries to get back at the boy who makes his mother fall down, so he goes to the boy’s house and when he opens the door, Fadi hits him. He is subsequently brought to the police station. Later the charge is dropped but the police insists that they need to investigate more about the issue and Fadi cannot go home for the night. Muna is worried, so she calls Mr. Novatski, who eventually helps get Fadi out.

Back home, Muna is angry at Fadi, questioning him how he had changed since he came here. Fadi says that he has changed his mind about America; he wants to go home because he does not feel like belonging here. Muna tells him that he should not let anyone make him question who he is or determine his fate for him, and he should always be proud of who he is.

The family goes to an Middle Eastern restaurant to have dinner. When they first go to White Castle to pick up Muna, they end up buying hamburgers there. At the moment, Mr. Novatski happens to come in, so Muna invites him to join them. The film ends with everyone having dinner together happily with Arabic music in the background.
Analysis:

*Dealing with Differences — Identity*

The audience gets a sense of what it means to be a Palestinian Christian who lives in the US. It is indicated in the film that many people cannot tell the difference between people from different areas in the Middle East, or even between the ordinary Middle Eastern people and the terrorists. Additionally, there are many stereotypes here in the US toward people in the Middle East. For example, once after Muna's meeting with the principal because Fadi gets into a fight with the boys who laugh at him, the principal offers to take her back. In the car he assumes that she is Muslim at first. Muna explains that she is actually Christian, which makes her a minority in both the West Bank and the US.

As Muna and Fadi have stayed in the US for a while, Fadi begins to be influenced by the American culture he is surrounded with. Later when his conflicts with the school boys intensifies, he becomes frustrated about the fact that America is not the way he thought it is, and he is confused and upset about not knowing exactly where he belongs. His mom tells him that he should just be who he is, and be proud of it, and just like everyone else who lives in the US, they have the right to live here.

Other scenes that involve identity issues include one where Muna asks Matt why he chooses to dress the way he does, and Matt says that he thinks this is cool and he wants to be different, and he even drops out of high school because he does not want to have to worry about whether he could fit in or not.
Moreover, sometimes Raghda’s children have disagreement with Raghda about things such as dating because they think they are Americans, but Raghda thinks that they are always Palestinians.

*Traditional vs. Modern Society*

The film takes the audience from the West Bank to Illinois as the story unfolds, creating a contrast between a traditional society and a modern society. Within this family of Palestinian American immigrants, there are times when their traditional values conflict with modern thoughts, especially when the children behave more like Americans instead of Palestinians.

*Additional Comments*

The film is very sympathetic toward Palestinians. West Bank, Palestinian territories, is currently occupied by Israelis soldiers. In the film, Muna mentions that because of the checkpoints it takes her far more time to get to work each day. The film also portrays how at the checkpoints, the Israeli soldiers’ attitude toward Muna and Fadi are very bad.

When the relationship between Muna’s sister and her brother-in-law worsens, for a while they separate and Nabeel lives in the basement. Once while Muna and Nabeel are having a conversation, the news on TV is covering the Iraq war — 31 Iraqis were killed when they were sleeping and it is claimed to be due to an “accidental bombing”; 13 homes were demolished in Rafah and three Palestinians lost their lives. Nabeel says that this kind of news is never broadcast by American TV networks.

The conversations in this film are oftentimes humorous.
Film: Beginners [Film Forward 2012]

Genre: Narrative [Comedy]

Director: Mike Mills

Story Location: California, USA

Origin of the Director: USA

Theme: Dealing with Differences — Sexuality; Dealing with Differences — Identity

Subject:

A mostly autographical movie that features how graphic designer Oliver’s way of dealing with his own relationship is inspired by his late father who came out of the closet at the age of 75, four years before he died of cancer.

Storyline:

The story is told as series of flashbacks of the times before and after Oliver’s father Hal passed away. After Oliver’s mother Georgia died, his father came out and started fully exploring the rest of his life as a gay man. He gets himself a new boyfriend, have gay parties, and starts actively participating in activities that promote gay rights. After Hal died, Oliver meets a French actress Anne, and begins a relationship with her. While Oliver is depressed about his father’s death, Anne is dealing with her own father issues (the movie reveals that her father has attempted suicide). The relationship goes well at first until it gets a little overwhelming later on when they are not sure about whether to continue to not. Things are not made easier by the fact that generally Oliver has reservations about relationships because he does not want a life that resembles his father’s. His father finds out that he is gay at the age of 13, and later is diagnosed as
mentally ill for his homosexuality while being told that it can be cured but not everyone gets cured. In a conversation between Hal and Oliver, Hal tells Oliver that his mother proposed to him while being aware of him being a gay all this time. Georgia says, “That doesn’t matter. I’ll fix that.” Hal is touched and decides to do anything to make it work. But their marriage does not turn out to be exactly a happy one.

After Oliver let Anne go, he regrets doing so, as he looks back on the way his father spent the last few years of his life with courage, openness, and energy. He decides to get her back, and they get back together in the end. The movie is very much autobiographical, inspired by the director Mike Mills’ own father who came out at the age of 75 after his mother’s death.

**Analysis:**

*Dealing with Differences — Sexuality*

Hal’s attitude toward life as a gay man during the last few years of his life is a central theme of the film that also helps to lead the development of Oliver’s relationship with Anne. The topic of homosexuality is explored in the film in a very lighthearted, witty, humorous, and artsy manner. Rather than focusing on the obstacles of being homosexual and how that has transformed Hal’s life and marriage, the film chooses a tone of optimism that is quite different than many of other gay films by concentrating on the last few years’ Hal’s life that is full of laughter and vitality of a beginner. Even the unhappiness of Hal and Georgia’s marriage is brought up with humor.
With a lot of creativity, footages of historical events including the first Gay Right movement in San Francisco is inserted into the storytelling of personal stories without making the film seem overly political.

**Dealing with Differences — Identity**

Another theme of the film that parallels with the theme of dealing with differences in sexuality is a calling for fully exploring one’s identity regardless of one’s age, and having the courage to see ourselves as a beginner and staying true to oneself. Hal’s attitude eventually influences Oliver as he finally realizes after he had let Anne go that things did not work out because he had never thought that things could work out in the first place.

**Additional Comments**

Politically, this is a very liberal film that touches upon the issue of gay rights in a lighthearted way without making a political statement. There is a scene where Oliver paints a wall on a street when going out with a friend and it reads, “1985 BUSH FINDS JESUS”; another scene depicts a day during Hal’s last few years when Hal is re-writing Jesus’ death and everyone laughs about how funny it is.

**Film: Buck**

**Genre: Documentary**

**Director: Cindy Meehl**

**Story Location: Montana, Wyoming, California, Texas & North Carolina**

**Origin of the Director: USA**
The documentary features the famous horse trainer Buck Brannaman who had a difficult childhood when he had been abused by his father before he and his brother left home and lived with their foster parents.

**Storyline:**

The director spends most of the time filming how Buck trains horses, and how he treats them. Buck amazes people that he can ride on any horse and make the trickiest and most dangerous horses do things he wants them to do because there is a kind of humanity and gentleness in the way he treats them. Buck thinks that there are a lot of similarities between horses and humans. For example, Buck understands that horses do not want to feel threatened just like the fact that he himself does not like living in an environment where he feels threatened.

Buck suffered from serious domestic violence from his childhood, and things became worse after his mother died. Later he and his brother moved to live with their foster parents and developed a very good relationship with them.

Buck says that none of his positive virtues are attributed to his dad, and he never really gets over the pain his father had caused him. But he decides to live in the moment, and consciously makes a choice to be not like his father. He does recognize that his past experiences, however difficult they are, have made who he is now, and contribute to the way he treats horses.
Buck is happy that his own children do not have to go through what he has gone through. He mentions if little kids had similar experience, they are most likely to shut down and not talk to anyone in order to not be noticed, and that is simply one way for them to protect themselves. The same holds true for horses: when horses are treated badly, they could mentally shut down as well.

**Analysis:**

*Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Shared Values — Love*

The documentary focuses on the love and respect Buck has for horses as a “horse whisperer”.

*Overcoming Difficulties*

Although the film does not spend a lot of time talking about the details of Buck’s childhood, his past has clearly shaped the way he treats horses and his attitude toward life. It is also left for the audiences to imagine what kind of transformation Buck must have gone through to become such a gentle, humane, and positive person. The film mentions that he is very shy in the beginning and does not even dare to look into people’s eyes, but he makes great efforts to overcome that. Buck also says that despite all the dark memories, he realizes that he cannot blame everything to others; he has the responsibility to not let things repeat and choose to be the kind of person he wants to be.

**Film: The Light in Her Eyes [Film Forward 2013]**

**Genre: Documentary**

**Director: Julia Meltzer & Laura Nix**

**Story Location: Syria**
**Origin of the Director:** USA

**Theme:** American Values — Equality — Gender Equality; Dealing with Differences — Ethnicity; Traditional vs. Modern Society

**Subject:**

The documentary features a Muslim preacher, the founder of a Qur’an school for girls in Syria, who advocates the importance of pursuing education and career to women while also being faithful of the Islamic values that first and foremost position women as wives and mothers.

**Storyline:**

Houda founded a Qur’an school for girls in Damascus, Syria where she provides an intensive summer program for the study of Islam. She also supervises Islamic studies at some mosques. Her husband, who got engaged with her before even knowing her, expresses reservation about her work as a Muslim preacher, although he very much supports her work.

Houda holds firmly to the Islamic values and believes that the most important duty for women is to take care of their husbands and children. However, surprisingly she has a very liberal take on women’s right to be educated and pursue their dreams. When interviewed by a Syrian female journalist Nawara Mahfoud, Honda argues that Islam does not prevent women from working, but rather, extremism may have contributed to the situation that it is becoming increasingly more unacceptable for women to work in Syria.
One of Houda’s friends goes back to school and becomes “unmarried” at the age of 38. She is in her third year in college studying Arabic literature. Houda’s daughter Enas would like to go to a university, but given the fact that girls in Syria get engaged when they are in the 11th or 12th grade, she hopes to keep studying after getting married with her parents’ support.

Enas and her friends agree that the most significant challenges for them as women are customs and traditions. They think that because of their customs and traditions that are oftentimes justified by religious authority, the Islamic countries are left behind by other countries in the world.

**Analysis:**

*American Values — Equality — Gender Equality*

While being a Muslim preacher, Houda strongly encourages women to receive education and pursue their careers. She holds that Islamic values do not conflict with women’s rights to work.

*Dealing with Differences — Ethnicity*

The documentary is tolerant toward Islamic values. Houda is deeply committed to Islam as a religion and is portrayed positively in this documentary.

*Traditional Society vs. Modern Society*

Syria is filmed as a combination of tradition and modernity. On the streets there are women who are wearing traditional clothes and hijab, and women who dress themselves the way Western women do. The film also depicts different levels of progress toward modernity as well as the awareness of the issues within the society. For instance,
compared to Houda and her peers, Houda’s daughter and her friends seem a bit more progressive when discussing the importance of education and how the Islamic world is being threatened by a lack of it.

Additional Comments

What is unique about the documentary is when it successfully reveals an underlying tension within the Syria society that is ruled by a repressive regime, the two female directors from the US have also shown through their film a great sympathy toward Islamic values by giving a lot of time in this documentary to the students in Houda’s school studying Islam.

Film: Dancing in Jaffa [Film Forward 2014]

Genre: Documentary

Director: Hilla Medalia

Story Location: Israel

Origin of the Director: Israel

Theme: Dealing with Differences — Ethnicity; Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Shared Values — Appreciation of Art and Culture

Subject:

The famous ballroom dancer Pierre Dulaine returns to the city of Jaffa in Israel with the intention of teaching ballroom dance to both Arab and Jewish schoolchildren. The story ends with a successful dance competition and new friendships.
Storyline:

Pierre Dulaine is a well-known ballroom dancer who is half Irish, half Palestinian. He intends to teach ballroom dancing to Jewish and Palestinian Israeli schoolchildren in Jaffa, the city where he was born. With a firm belief that dance is a common language that could possibly facilitate communication between these two communities, and with no intention of getting involved into politics, he chooses dancing and starts with kids from five schools.

In the beginning Dulaine is confronted with many difficulties — it is even very hard to have a girl and a boy hold hands in order to dance, not to mention having a Jewish kid and an Arab kid dance together. In a conversation with a taxi driver where he talks about who he is and what he is doing in Jaffa, he mentions that he understands the feelings both sides feel due to the history. The driver expresses deep doubt about Dulaine’s ambitions given the history of the area and the feelings of distrust and hatred between Jews and Arabs — he himself lost four of his best friends in Gaza during the wars.

However, despite all the frustrations Dulaine faces, he makes great progress gradually through communicating with both the kids and their parents. By the time he selects a few pairs of children who are going to participate in the final dance competition, those who are not selected are very upset that they are not able to join. The competition turns out to be very successful. In particular, during the time when the kids are preparing for the competition, true friendships have developed between the Arab and Jewish kids. For example, Noor, one of the Arabic girl the film features, tells her teacher that the
Jewish girl Lois came to her house and they practiced dancing and ate watermelons together. She says that it felt great, and it was the first time her classmate came to her house. Lois was invited by an Arabic boy she danced with to go sailing with him in his father’s boat. When she tells this story to her teacher and classmates, another girl says that that sounds like a date. There is also a scene where the boys are giggling while talking about if they have been “in love with” the girls they dance with.

The story gets a bit touching toward the end, where the kids are saying goodbye to Dulaine and telling him that they love him. When he asks the kids what has been the important thing they have learned Lois says, “To trust one another.” The dance program continues after Dulaine leaves, and in two years, over 1000 children have participated and learned to dance.

**Analysis:**

**Dealing with Differences — Ethnicity**

Dealing with differences between Jewish and Palestinian Israelis is a focus throughout this documentary. The film also offers good insights into the local cultures especially the conflicts between the two communities for audiences who might not be very familiar with the Middle East history and cultures.

**Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Common Values — Appreciation of Art and Culture**

The documentary serves as a proof that dance, as art form that everyone can relate to, can transcend the differences in languages, histories, and cultures.
Peaceful Co-existence

The documentary also calls for peaceful co-existence throughout the film. In particular, there are a few scenes in the film where the Right Wings are protesting and claiming that Israel is Jewish. Their violent protests on the street scared Noor. A teacher from the Weizmann School, a school that teaches Arabic and Hebrew to children in both communities, tells the children that using protests is one of the most effective ways of achieving democracy, but she also argues for peaceful protests while pointing out the cruelty of wars — she had seven cousins who were killed during the wars.

Additional Comments

Politically the film is framed to be sympathetic toward the Palestinian Israelis. More opinions from Israeli Arabs are included in the film than the Jewish Israelis. The film includes a trip a boy’s family takes to Gaza to visit their family. His mother says that usually they become very nervous when passing through the checkpoints. On the way there his mother mentions that the Jews only allow them to stay for 3 days and that is not going to be enough. Last time she stayed longer and they punished her, but she had not been able to see her family for ten years. She says that she longs for a peaceful world where they could come and go as they wish.

It is possible that the political leaning of the documentary has contributed to its inclusion in the Obama administration’s Film Forward program.

The director of this documentary is from Israel, but Dancing in Jaffa expresses certain American values such as calling for ethnic tolerance and peaceful co-existence between ethnic groups.
Film: The World Before Her [Film Forward 2014]

Genre: Documentary

Director: Nisha Pahuja

Story Location: India

Origin of the Director: Indian-Canadian

Theme: Traditional vs. Modern Society; American Values — Equality — Gender

Equality

Subject:

The documentary parallels two completely different worlds in India: the pageant industry and the Durga Vahini camps.

Storyline:

Women have extremely low social status in India, and the pageant industry is one of the few industries that offer women an opportunity to be seen equal as men. The film features some Indian girls who participate in a pageant training camp and who aspire to eventually become Miss India, and a girl who works as a trainer at one of the Durga Vahini camps. The model girls dress themselves the way girls dress themselves in the West; they believe that models are not only just about appearance, but rather, being a model allows them to have their own voice and identity, and to be respected and valued. The girls in the Durga Vahini camp are teenagers or even younger; they learn traditional Indian cultures and values, and they are trained to be physically and mental strong.

Historical footages of Hindu extremists are inserted in the documentary, such as scenes of them destroying houses, beating women who were believed to have not been
adhering to Indian values (such as going to a bar or going out with a man); or burning the missionary Graham Staines in 1999.

**Analysis:**

*Traditional vs. Modern Society*

The documentary brings into light the two extremes of the tradition v. modernity continuum in today’s India by introducing the pageant industry and the Durga Vahini camps.

*American Values — Equality — Gender Equality*

The documentary questions the issue of the way women are treated in India and calls for gender equality. Some of the phenomenons can be quite shocking to Western audiences. For example, the mother of one girl who competes for Miss India says that she left her husband because when her daughter was born, her husband asked her to kill the baby. And this is not uncommon. The documentary indicates that many girls are aborted, and many are killed at birth.

*Additional Comments*

In the film, the girls in the pageant training camps look happy and confident, whereas many girls in the Durga Vahini camp do not look very excited, if not unhappy and confused.

This Indian documentary mostly speaks to Western audiences and demonstrates American values such as gender equality and modernity.
Chapter 5: A Comparison Between Project: 20/20 and Film Forward

This chapter is devoted to a comparison between Project: 20/20 and Film Forward in terms of the similarities and differences between the two programs in their film selections over their 4 years of screening respectively.

Regarding the thematic category *American Values — Democracy* which is further divided into two sub-categories “mobility” and “free & fair election/voting”, only one film from Film Forward (*Bones Brigade: An Autobiography*) talks about social mobility and therefore falls into the “mobility” category. While none of the films from Project: 20/20 touch upon the issue of mobility within a society, 2 films from AFI 20/20 and 1 from Film Forward explore the topic of free and fair election or voting. All three films approach the topic in a relatively straight-forward way: all of them have a very clear theme regarding what constitutes a free and fair election. While *Iron Ladies of Liberia* from AFI 20/20 documents a woman’s leadership, *Afghan Star* from Film Forward explores issues of gender equality in Afghanistan on a deeper level.

*American Values — Equality* is further divided into “gender equality”, “ethnic/racial equality”, “immigrant equality”, and “disability equality”.

While 2 films from Project: 20/20 touch upon gender issues, one being an animation (*Sita Sings the Blues*), 4 films from Film Forward fall into this category.
Among these 6 films, all but one set their stories in a foreign country; only one film from Film Forward, *Winter’s Bone*, is an American film that discusses feminism.

None of the Project: 20/20 films fall into “ethnic/racial equality” or “immigrant equality”. In contrast, 2 Film Forward films deal with issues of equality between different ethnic groups in the US with one talking about interracial marriage (*The Loving Story*) and the other talking about Civil Rights Movements (*Freedom Riders*), and 1 Film Forward film (*Under the Same Moon*), through a fictional story, alludes to immigrant equality.

So it does seem like compared to Project: 20/20, Film Forward has been paying more attention to the issue of ethnic equality. If we jump ahead on Table 6 and take a look at the category *Dealing with Differences — Ethnicity*, which could be interpreted as another way of seeing the ethnic equality issue, but with an emphasis on dealing with their differences instead of stressing on the fact that everyone is created equal, it is easy to notice that again, Project: 20/20 has only one film that falls into the category of dealing with the differences between ethnic groups, whereas Film Forward has 3 films that touch upon this topic.

In terms of the way these films speak on dealing with ethnic differences, the 4 films from the two programs all take on an approach that emphasizes ethnic tolerance. Among them, *London River* from Project: 20/20 as well as Film Forward’s *The Light in Her Eyes* and *Dancing in Jaffa* either set their stories in Muslim countries or revolve around Muslims living in the West: *London River* raises the issues of how people treat African Muslims living in Europe; *The Light in Her Eyes* documents a female Muslim
preacher in Syria; Dancing in Jaffa features a Palestinian-Irish dancer who teaches dancing in Jaffa, Israel.

London River is a narrative film and it emphasizes the importance of personal experiences in combating prejudice against Muslims; both The Light in Her Eyes and Dancing in Jaffa are documentaries. London River receives mixed reviews; the plot has been commented by some film critics as predictable, and film critic Jay Weissberg from Variety mentioned that this film “trumpets political correctness far more loudly than this intimate drama can stand. Though the ending proves effective, Bouchareb and his co-scripters employ simplistic stereotypes and obvious counterpoints that shouldn’t need to be spelled out so literally….” (London River, Wikipedia). When it comes to the two documentaries, The Light in Her Eyes mostly focuses on gender equality through the Muslim preacher Houda’s advocacy for women’s rights to work, but this film, directed by two US female directors, is also very sympathetic in its narration toward Islamic values Houda holds on to. In this sense, the film perfectly reflects the current cultural diplomacy policies that put emphasis on “listening” and strive for two-way dialogues instead of one-way preachings. At the same time, Dancing in Jaffa demonstrates current foreign policies of the Obama administration by showing great sympathy toward Palestinians Israelis.

To sum up the two category Ethnic/Racial Equality and Dealing with Differences — Ethnicity, the former mostly focuses on the equality between ethnic groups in the US, and the latter concentrates on dealing with ethnic difference outside the US and particularly the Muslim countries and calling for ethnic tolerance and peaceful co-existence. The Film Forward films outnumber Project: 20/20 films in both categories.
Going back to the “American values” category, *American Values — Freedom* is further divided into “abortion”, “freedom of expression”, “American dream”, and “individualism”. The distribution of films in this category is pretty balanced in general. Project: 20/20’s *Stephanie Daley* deals with issues of teenage pregnancy and abortion. The film is a narrative; the ending is open-ended and invites different interpretations from the audience. Film Forward’s *Last Train Home* has an implied theme of expression of speech: this documentary has a very limited release in Mainland China, and by including it in their screening list, the program gives the Montreal-based director Lixin Fan a bigger voice both in China and especially overseas. At the same time, the documentary explores the issue of the impact of globalization in developing countries, offering important insights into an aspect of the issue that many Westerners may not have been aware of — while globalization has caused serious job loss in the West, the ordinary people in the developing countries have also paid a price. In this sense, the documentary demonstrates a sympathy toward developing countries and a consciousness of listening to the perspectives of local people, which again, is in accordance with the current cultural diplomacy directives of the State Department. In *Beautiful Ohio*, China’s Cultural Revolution is casually mentioned during a dinner conversation; specifically it is implicitly criticized that China at the time was devoid of freedom of expression when the government was burning all violins. *Kassim the Dream* documents an Uganda-born world champion boxer’s journey of realizing his “American dream”. In the documentary this world champion also mentions that Uganda does not have the freedom of expression like here in the US, so the film has been put in both “expression” and “American dream”
categories. 1 film from Project: 20/20 and 1 film from Film Forward include a theme of individualism, although for *Offside* from Project: 20/20, individualism is only a secondary theme in the film.

2 Film Forward films and none of Project: 20/20 films discuss the topic of *civic participation*. *If You Build* is a documentary about “community action”; *Afghan Star*, which has previously been discussed in this chapter under “gender equality”, explores the role “voting” plays in this national singing competition in Afghanistan and in making it a big progress for this country on its journey toward democracy and modernization. In summary, over the four years since Film Forward was launched, the program selected one American film and one foreign film on civic engagement, a topic that was not covered in Project: 20/20’s programming.

Since we have already discussed “dealing with differences — ethnicity” earlier in this chapter together with “ethnic/racial equality”, let us continue on to take a look at how the topic *dealing with the differences in sexuality* is represented in both programs. The number of films in Film Forward that discuss the questions of sexuality and sexual orientation exceeds that of the films covering this topic in Project: 20/20: 3 Film Forward films and only 1 Project: 20/20 film fall into this category. *Beautiful Ohio* (AFI 20/20) is a fictional story about a family drama set in the 1970s in Cleveland, Ohio. The older brother Clive is a math prodigy but turns out to be gay toward the very end of the film. The film implies that he has eventually died from a disease that is associated with his homosexuality. The film also shows some sympathy toward that in a very subtle way through his younger brother William’s actions after Clive had died when William
discovers that the secret language Clive used to speak is actually Hungarian. While homosexuality is portrayed negatively in this movie, the attitudes the family has toward Clive’s being gay is in accordance with the time the film is set in when the question of homosexuality had just been raised, and people were certainly not as comfortable talking about it as today.

For all of the three Film Forward films in this category, the films either portray the issue of homosexuality positively (e.g. Beginners takes a comic approach that makes this serious topic very lighthearted) or attempt to call for more tolerance toward the LGBT community (e.g. La Mission & Valentine Road).

**Dealing with Differences — Identity** is in some way related to the “dealing with the differences in sexuality/sexual orientation” category, as some of the films that raise the questions of sexuality also inevitably allude to the issues of identity. For instance, the theme of identity almost parallels with the theme of dealing with the differences in sexuality in Beautiful Ohio and Beginners, so that they appear in both “sexuality” and “identity”categories. Overall, the number of films in both programs representing the topic of identity is pretty much the same, with 4 films from Project: 20/20 and 3 films from Film Forward. On the other hand, Project: 20/20 films seem to be more focused on racial identity (e.g. Shoot the Messenger & Skin), whereas Film Forward films cover topics such as immigration (e.g. Amreeka), sexual orientation (e.g. Beginners), adoption (e.g. Somewhere Between) while exploring how identity is shaped in these different contexts (although in Beautiful Ohio, the older brother Clive’s homosexuality plays a big part in
ending the film, the film nevertheless does not spend a lot of time on this. Thus this is more of an “identity” film instead of one that focuses on sexual orientation).

In the category Traditional vs. Modern Society, the number of Film Forward films doubles that of Project: 20/20 films (2: 4), and all of the six films are foreign films. Out of all these films that touch upon the issue of a society transitioning from a traditional to a modern one, 3 films also talk about gender issues (e.g. Offside from Project: 20/20, as well as The Light in Her Eyes and The World Before Her from Film Forward). Among the three films that cover topics other than gender issues, Last Train Home helps raise the questions of globalization, documenting the difficulties China is currently being confronted with on its way to a more modernized and globalized society. Amreeka has a major theme of the identity of Palestinian immigrants in the US and how traditional values and western values conflict in an immigrant family. The Road from Project: 20/20 is a fictional story that tells a tragedy that happens to a Chinese woman that traces back to certain traditional values the Chinese society held on to at the time.

The theme of overcoming hardships to a great extent overlaps the theme of courage & determination under “dimensions of mutual understandings/shared values”.

More Project: 20/20 films represent this theme than Film Forward films do: 4 Project: 20/20 films fall into this category, and only 2 Film Forward films deal with this topic. All of these films have mentioned somehow the importance of courage, determination, perseverance or confidence for us to get through the hard times and realizing our dreams, although the Project: 20/20 films may be stronger in this sense — that these films really focus on the obstacles and how they have been conquered, whereas the two Film Forward
films are comparatively weaker. There is an emphasis on self-esteem in Twenty Feet from Stardom, and in terms of the documentary Buck, while it is true that the horse whisperer has gone through serious child abuse before and it has surely impacted on how he had become who he is now, this aspect of his life is not emphasized in the documentary.

The last thematic category is Dimensions of Mutual Understandings/Shared Values, the commonalities as opposed to differences. Regarding the sub-category Appreciation of Art and Culture, an almost equally good amount of films from the two programs touch upon this theme (Project 20/20: 2 films; Film Forward: 3 films), although here Film Forward seem to have chosen films that directly deal with music and art (e.g. Afghan Star: singing and dancing; Unfinished Space: architecture; Dancing in Jaffa: dancing), whereas only one of the two Project: 20/20 films directly addresses the topic of art and culture (e.g. Guy & Madeline is more of a fictional love story). Additionally, in this category for all the films from both programs there is a great emphasis on art transcending the boundaries of languages and cultures.

Amal (AFI 20/20), a story set in New Delhi, alludes to the theme of honesty as a common value. 3 Film Forward films have a love theme: two of them (e.g. Boy and Buck) involve family conflicts and how love, or at least not hatred, serves as a remedy. Beasts of the Southern Wild has an implied theme of love toward the community one lives in.

Most of the films in Courage & Determination also appear under “overcoming hardships”, except for Beasts of the Southern Wild.

One Film Forward film A Small Act documents how a small, seemingly insignificant good deed ends up having a rippling effect that is far from insignificant.
Going back to the research questions, regarding the values/messages/themes that are distinctive of Project 20/20 and Film Forward (research question 1), the topics that Film Forward covers but are not included in Project 20/20 include social mobility, ethnic equality (mostly focused on ethnic equality within the US), immigrant equality, civic participation, environmentalism (*Chasing Ice*, which is not included in Table 6, and *La Mission*, which includes environmentally friendly themes).

In contrast, there are not that many themes that exclusively appear in Project: 20/20 films, although some of their films deal with issues such as abortion (*Stephanie Daley*, with an open ending and portrayal), American dream, and disability equality that Film Forward did not choose to cover. On the other hand, there is an absence of films in Project 20/20 that discuss ethnic/racial equality within the US, and a lack of films, compared to Film Forward, which deal with topics of peaceful co-existence and ways of dealing with the differences between ethnic groups outside the US.

Additionally, a closer look at the films reveals that some films, especially those in Film Forward, do demonstrate certain domestic and foreign policies of the administrations; different stances taken by films from these two programs also mirror the differences on the political and ideological orientation of each administration.

For instance, films such as *Dancing in Jaffa* and *Amreeka* show great sympathies toward Palestinians, be it Palestinians living in Israel or Palestinians living in the West Bank (Palestinian territories); this kind of political stance in the films is in line with the foreign policies of the Obama administration. In *Amreeka*, there are conversation
regarding the Iraq wars and criticisms in terms of its launching as well as the censorship when it comes to this topic in American media. This film would have by no means appeared in any of Project 20/20’s screening lists. Two Film Forward films, *Under the Same Moon* and *Amreeka*, help raise the questions of immigration, which also reflects the Obama administration’s pro-immigration policy. At the same time, an absence of Project 20/20 films on immigration might have something to do with the Bush administration’s relevant policies as well. In terms of films on homosexuality and the LGBT community, Film Forward has clearly been more active in selecting films on this subject, and all their films portray the issue in a positive light while calling for more tolerance and acceptance. The only Project: 20/20 film *Beautiful Ohio* that touches upon this subject portrays homosexuality negatively, although the tone of the film could have been influenced by the period of time the story is set in. This kind of contrast between the two programs may be attributed to the differences on the political and ideological orientation of the two administrations. Similarly, environmentalism is a theme that only appear in Film Forward films, which is not exactly surprising given the same reason.

Regarding research questions 2, the hypothesis proves mostly correct that generally both programs give equal weight on choosing films that present American values to the world. These American values include American democracy; a belief that everyone is created equal; and other basic rights such as freedom of speech, the right to vote, individualism, etc.

When it comes to research question 3 that asks to what extent (if any) the films in both programs express appreciation or acceptance of local cultures, values or
perspectives, it might be difficult to reach a definite conclusion without watching all the films, not to mention that any answers possibly provided would inevitably be subjective in the first place. For now, based on the information I have gathered, I have noticed that some Film Forward films such as *Last Train Home* and *The Light in Her Eyes* do reflect this nuanced understanding of what works and what does not work in public diplomacy that had resulted in the current State Department’s public diplomacy strategies of emphasizing listening, dialogue-based communication, and strategic engagement. *Last Train Home* provides important insights into the perspectives of the Chinese immigrant workers as they are confronted with the difficulties brought by the country’s increasingly globalized economy. Thus, it serves as a reminder especially for Western audiences that in the process of globalization, no one is a 100% winner or loser; globalization provides opportunities to everyone, and in the mean time, is also a common concern. The documentary *The Light in Her Eyes*, directed by two US directors, expresses a lot of acceptance of the Islamic values the Muslim preacher Houda firmly holds on to while she advocates strongly for women’s rights to pursue their careers.

Regarding research question 4, it proves correct that the State Department does seem to have favored foreign films that embrace American values rather than the values of the directors’ home countries; moreover, the speculation that documentaries/narratives made by foreign directors have a tendency to be critical of their homelands is also correct. Therefore, these foreign directors have become messengers of American values. One observation that is worthy of mentioning is that for the majority of foreign films (films that were shot in a foreign location other than in the US), especially those foreign
films that express criticisms of certain traditional values in the directors’ home countries, the “foreign” directors have moved to a country either in Europe or in North America; and some of these foreign films are directed by western directors. For example, *The World Before Her* (Film Forward) takes place in India and is directed by the Indian-Canadian director Nisha Pahuja; Lixin Fan, the director of *Last Train Home* (Film Forward), is Chinese-Canadian based in Montreal; *The Light in Her Eyes* (Film Forward) is an Indian documentary directed by two female US directors; *Afghan Star* (Film Forward)’s director is British; *Kassim the Dream* (Project: 20/20)’s story location is Uganda and is directed by US filmmaker Kief Davidson; *Afghan Muscles* (Project: 20/20) is directed by Andreas Dalsgaard from Denmark; *Iron Ladies of Liberia* (Project: 20/20) is a cooperation between a US director and an African director. These films that offer opinions and insights that are likely to deviate from local public opinions tend to, but not always, speak to Western audiences instead of audiences from their home countries.

Research question 5 is about a comparison between the number of films in the two programs that deal with gender issues. Table 6 shows that there are more films that explore women’s rights and gender equality in Film Forward (4 films) than in Project: 20/20 (2 films), which is an observation in accordance with the Obama administration’s policy that directs much attention to this issue.

Additionally, more female directors were selected in Film Forward than in Project: 20/20. From 2011 to 2014, 17 female directors’ films were selected, whereas during the same length of time from 2007-2010 there were only 9 female directors whose films were selected into Project 20/20’s screening lists.
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper examines the similarities and differences between two US film diplomacy programs: Film Forward, an ongoing program and an initiative of the Sundance Institute sponsored by the US State Department, and its precedent in the era of the Bush administration, the American Film Institute’s Project: 20/20. This paper takes a look at the films screened during a 4-year period of time for each program: from 2007 to 2010 for Project: 20/20, and from 2011 to 2014 for Film Forward. It concludes that while the two programs share a lot of similarities, the selection of films have indeed been influenced by the political and ideological orientation of the presidential administrations, US domestic and foreign policy, as well as diplomatic objectives of the time.

The films selected for both programs spread certain fundamental American values such as democracy, equality and freedom, and deal with themes such as “dealing with differences”, “traditional vs. modern society”, “overcoming hardships” and “common values”. These basic American values and major themes shared by the films of Project 20/20 and Film Forward set the tones for these two programs; ultimately they are programs sponsored by the US government with a purpose of presenting a desired image of America to the world.

In terms of the differences between the two programs, Film forward, in particular, has selected films that cover issues that would potentially help push forward the agenda
of US domestic and foreign policies of the Obama administration. Such topics include immigration, environmentalism, and issues related to dealing with the differences between Islamic and Western countries or the differences within Islamic cultures. At the same time, Film Forward films do sometimes, albeit not frequently, demonstrate the new US public diplomacy directives which are based on strategic engagement and two-way communication instead of a one-way preaching style. When it comes to Project: 20/20, it is not in certain themes that are exclusive of the program’s selected films but in the absence or lack of films that discuss certain issues that we may find the agenda of the Bush administration. In addition, quite a few Project: 20/20 films involve Islamic countries as well, but those films tend not to focus on “dealing with the differences”, but rather, they are more of examples/channels of spreading American values such as gender equality, hard work, or the pursuit of American dream.

This study certainly has limitations. While gathering information on the films through a combination of sources such as Wikipedia, IMDA and video program notes, combined with selectively watching a small sample of films is a feasible way of conducting the study for this thesis, it is nonetheless a compromised solution as well, and more knowledge and perceptions would have been added to the analysis if I had had more time and had been able to watch all the films. The fact that not all films are available to watch has also added certain bias into the research. It would be helpful if the State Department could keep records of such films, or at least a sample of them, for possible future research purposes. This study may have also been more interesting and insightful if film techniques and aesthetics are incorporated into the existing research.
methods, and this can be something worthy of consideration for researchers who are interested in such US film diplomacy programs.
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