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The Cinema of Discontent

In his new book *Soured on the System*, History Professor Robert Schultz shows how tensions of modern corporate life are expressed in some classic films.

By KIM HILL



Whether you're male or female, if you have ever spent your workday in a cubicle, you may find some shared experiences in the new book *Soured on the System: Disaffected Men in 20th Century American Film* (McFarland, 2012) by Robert T. Schultz.

Schultz, associate professor of history, deeply analyzes some of the most iconic films in American movie history — from *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to *Fight Club* — to make observations of what these films reveal about American culture and people's places in it. And, the commonality the majority of people share is work — what we do with our lives from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Although many books have addressed how men are portrayed in modern American culture, those works “tend to focus on race and gender issues, especially since the 1970s,” Schultz writes in his introduction to *Soured on the System*.

From a historian's perspective, Schultz “saw there was a place for a book” that, instead, explored cultural representations of white-collar labor as experienced by middle-class men. For his book, he analyzed films released in the decades following World War II, “when the middle class expanded more rapidly and more broadly” than at any other time in U.S. history.

“These were decades when more Americans achieved middle-class status and stability, but when, ironically, men are often depicted [in films] as being significantly discontented and disaffected,” Schultz writes in his introduction.

The source of this dissatisfaction, Schultz writes, is a realization among middle-class men of their “declining agency” — a feeling they had lost control of their own destinies as a result of conforming to “the increasingly organized and centralized corporate-capitalist society” of America's post-war years.

The film characters Schultz examines in *Soured on the System* suffer from “the boredom and frustration” of “mindless and repetitive” white-collar jobs. These jobs provide security and material comforts in exchange for having to “spend so many hours of their lives and with so little control of what they do and

how they do it.” How middle-class men cope with, or try to change, the reality of this exchange is a common theme of the post-war movies Schultz explores in his book.

Schultz used movies as a primary source for his analysis because they provide “a revealing and important, albeit singular, cultural window through which to view and understand discontented and disaffected men in American culture. ... For films to be popular with general audiences, they must resonate in various ways with the realities of moviegoers’ lives.”

The following are four such films, as analyzed in Schultz’s book.

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1956)

Based on the 1955 novel of the same name, the film cemented the term “gray-suited yes-man” into the American vernacular. *Gray Flannel Suit* stars Gregory Peck as Tom Rath, a former World War II soldier who is hired to work as a public relations writer at a New York-based TV network. A key plot point is Tom’s assignment to write a speech for the head of the network. He is stymied at every turn by middle managers (gray-suited yes-men) as he negotiates his way “within a corporate structure that demands conformity of thought and behavior, and he is disaffected because of it,” Schultz writes.

“In the new corporate structure that evolves in the post-war period, the individual is becoming increasingly insignificant,” Schultz notes. “Tom Rath doesn’t have any agency or any control over what he does or how he does it — a situation he feels pressured to accept in exchange for the comfort and security of a middle-class existence for him and his family.”

Schultz draws parallels between Rath and a 1955 commencement address at Smith College by two-time Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson II (whose grandfather attended Illinois Wesleyan and served as Grover Cleveland’s vice president).

“In Stevenson’s commencement address he told some of the most highly educated young women in the country that the Western world was in ‘crisis,’ and that crisis was one of ‘collectivism colliding with individualism,’” Schultz writes in his book. Men’s values were no longer shaped by their individualism; instead, those values were being shaped by “the homogeneity of behavior and values in the corporate bureaucracies where men lived from nine to five.”

“Tom Rath is that person Stevenson is talking about,” Schultz explained in an interview. “Stevenson is telling the young women who are graduating, ‘There is a new corporate reality, and you have to create a haven in your homes. That will make up for the lack of agency or creativity men have at work.’”

However, Stevenson is not just referring to women in American society. “He’s talking about men, too,” says Schultz, “in referencing this new reality where working in these large organizations where gray-suited yes-men walk around, afraid to talk to anybody, afraid to say what they feel, collecting a paycheck.”

While Tom Rath works on most of his problems by the film’s conclusion, movies released in later decades reflect tensions that are less easily resolved.

The Graduate (1967)

Talk about disaffected. In Mike Nichols' *The Graduate*, protagonist Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) has no agency whatsoever, according to Schultz. "What do you want to with your life?" Braddock is asked shortly after his graduation from an East Coast college. "Something different," he answers. Trouble is, he has no idea what that is or should be.

"The film is a cultural critique of post-war affluence and the limits associated with the upper-middle-class life depicted by the Braddocks and their friends," writes Schultz. Braddock exists among middle-aged affluent men and women who are living mundane lives and engaged in inconsequential activities. Though he can't articulate exactly why, it is obvious that nothing about their lives appeals to him — but neither does the prospect of going to work or graduate school.

Benjamin seems to understand these choices "would ensure he lives a monotonous, mind-numbing and uneventful life similar to the lives represented by his parents and their friends," Schultz writes. However, "except for Ben's eventual realization that he wants to marry Elaine Robinson and his determination to do so, he exhibits no affect."

Despite the film's strong association in viewers' minds to the sixties' rebellious counterculture, Schultz notes that Benjamin "is not countercultural because he has no values to counter those instilled in him by his parents and the upper-bourgeois society they represent." Still, his refusal to engage in the conformity and conspicuous consumption associated with corporate life "has deep roots in American culture," Schultz writes. Benjamin wants something different "but never explores alternatives because he does not have a bone of 'difference' in his upper-middle-class body."

Dirty Harry (1971)

The film that turned the words "Do you feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?" into a national catchphrase might seem a curious choice in Schultz's list.

"Dirty" Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) is a San Francisco homicide detective who attempts to negotiate a system that seems to favor potential suspects more than the rights of victims. "Harry is a disconnected, disaffected lawman in an increasingly organized society" filled with "middle-management bureaucrats who keep him from doing his job," Schultz explains. However, unlike many of the other characters portrayed in films analyzed for his book, Harry "certainly has agency," Schultz says. "His agency is the reason audiences liked him."

"When Harry finally gets his man at the end of the first film, for example, he does so by ignoring the authority of the mayor and the police chief, disobeying orders that would restrain his actions and keep him from getting his man," Schultz writes. At the end of the film he throws his badge into a pond, symbolically separating himself from society and the restraints it puts on him in capturing a serial killer.



Dustin Hoffman in a scene from "The Graduate."

“As government bureaucracies grew, the Dirty Harry character represented the discontent with government,” Schultz says. He believes the Dirty Harry series of films continue to resonate with viewers because Harry’s unorthodox methods give him agency in an increasingly organized society where people feel they don’t have agency.

While Harry struggles against a system with weak bureaucrats depicted as the antagonists just as much as the criminals, protagonists in the nineties struggled increasingly against a ramped-up consumer culture.

Fight Club (1999)



Protagonists in films such as "Fight Club" share common frustrations with modern society.

“I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who’ve ever lived. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy [expletive] we don’t need,” says a main character in *Fight Club*.

Perhaps no quote more accurately describes the overarching theme of director David Fincher’s film centering on a nameless “psychologically disturbed, schizophrenic protagonist (Edward Norton) who leads an empty life of routine, unfulfilling and, arguably, morally reprehensible work,” writes Schultz. The protagonist’s job is to crunch numbers for an auto manufacturer to determine which will save more money: recalling and repairing vehicles with design flaws that will cause death and injury, or settling with victims’ families if the vehicles are not repaired and accidents occur.

“This white, male, white-collar, college-educated and well-paid protagonist attempts to fill his meaningless and empty life with consumer goods,” Schultz writes. Norton’s character then meets his alter ego, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who is “everything the Norton character admires,” says Schultz. “He has agency, he has control over his life, and he knows what he wants.”

The protagonist organizes similarly disaffected men in “fight clubs” throughout the country that develop into gangs and morph again into paramilitary cells. These cells, Schultz writes, “carry out an organized assault on capitalist institutions and the institutional history of the American society that produced the conspicuous consumers, the immoral auto company, and the meaningless lives of the men who join the fight clubs.”

“*Fight Club* has been called many things, including misogynistic and masochistic, as well as fascist,” says Schultz. “I went to see it in 1999 and said to myself, ‘Here is a real critique of consumer culture.’”

In writing his book, Schultz was inspired to delve deeper into this analysis and “began to see what (Adlai) Stevenson was saying in 1955 — that there is a new reality — and the *Fight Club* guys are working in it 40 years later.”

As a historian who has published a book on labor history and articles on work, culture and society, Schultz also sees parallels between the themes of disaffection he addresses in *Soured on the System* and events occurring around the world in recent years. Tensions between a desire for independence and pressures to conform to the demands of corporate life and consumer culture continue to play out in our national politics and our daily home and office lives.

In his book’s conclusion, Schultz notes that *TIME* magazine named its Person of the Year in 2011 “The Protestor: From the Arab Spring to Athens, from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow.”

Schultz writes: “This discontent has not lain dormant in the United States or elsewhere. The only people who have been asleep are those who take for granted the compliance of others over whom they have authority.” Perhaps viewing a few of the films featured in *Soured on the System* might provide a wake-up call.

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