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## Schultz' Book Finds Movie Men

Kim Hill

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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## Schultz' Book Finds Movie Men "Soured on the System"

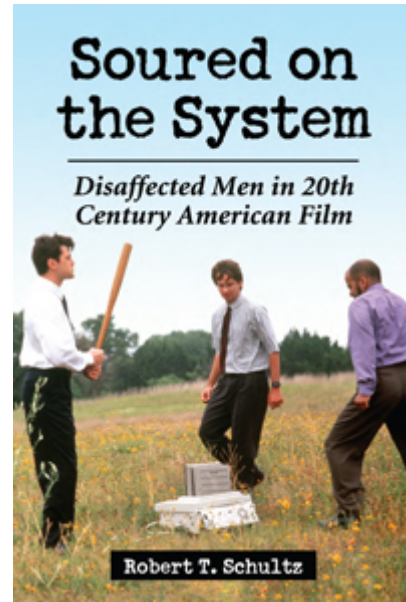
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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Do movies reflect American culture, or is American culture affected by depictions in film?

Illinois Wesleyan University Associate Professor of History Robert T. Schultz adds to the body of knowledge surrounding that debate in his new book *Soured on the System: Disaffected Men in 20th Century American Film* (McFarland, 2012). Schultz studied depictions of middle-class men in major motion pictures from the end of World War II to the end of the 20th century — a time when the American middle class expanded more rapidly and more broadly than at any other time.

"For films to be popular with general audiences, they must resonate in various ways with the realities of moviegoers' lives: with their social situations and relationships, with the values they hold, and with the desires and anxieties they often share," notes Schultz. "For this reason major motion pictures marketed to general audiences provide a revealing and important, albeit singular, cultural window through which to view and

understand discontented and disaffected men in American culture."



Robert T. Schultz

For Schultz, American movie themes and the characterizations within them are not a mere reflection of what some might see as established social and cultural norms. Rather, those norms are always negotiated and contested in various ways. Those situations, values, relationships, desires and anxieties are not static, Schultz said, and filmmakers must depict changing work routines, gender relations and other social and economic realities associated with the dynamic corporate capitalist economy of the second half of the twentieth century.

Schultz relates the images of "discontented and disaffected men" on the big screen to the social, economic and cultural trends of the postwar years. By studying films like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), *The Graduate* (1967), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *American Beauty* (1999) and *Fight Club* (1999), among others, Schultz sees men in the immediate post-war years depicted as negotiating their way through new organizational systems at work and within the new frontier of American consumer culture. How the male characters respond to unfulfilling work, declining autonomy, and increased materialism in the postwar years is the focus of

the book.

Schultz found that in more recent films such as *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* many male characters reject outright the system and the values of conformity and consumption associated with it. He noted these film themes resonated with

moviegoers' experiences and attitudes, evident, for example, by *Fight Club's* cult following and even in the organization of real fight clubs.

An associate professor of history, Schultz teaches, among other topics, courses at IWU on the transformation of American life and culture that resulted from industrialization. *Soured on the System* expands his interests in cultural history represented in his essays "Celluloid History: Postwar Society in Postwar Popular Culture" and more recently, "White Guys Who Prefer Not To: From Passive Resistance ("Bartleby") To Terrorist Acts (*Fight Club*)." He is also the author of *Conflict and Change: Minneapolis Truck Drivers Make a Dent in the New Deal* (Waveland Press, 2000). Schultz holds a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota.

Contact: **Kim Hill**, (309) 556-3960