



# The Dream and Ideological Underpinnings in Gabriele Muccino's *the Pursuit of Happyness*

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**Abstract**— *The paper offers a critical examination of the film The Pursuit of Happyness vis-à-vis the American Dream set against the backdrop of 1980s San Francisco during a period of economic instability. Focusing on the life of Chris Gardner, an African American man striving for upward mobility, the film juxtaposes the ideals of rugged individualism and success with the harsh realities of systemic economic and racial barriers. Through theoretical frameworks provided by Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton, and Walter Benjamin, this study explores how ideology interpellates individuals into specific social positions, reinforcing class hierarchies and perpetuating economic inequality. Althusser's concept of interpellation is key in analyzing how Gardner's identity and aspirations are shaped by the cultural and ideological structures around him. By critically engaging with the film's portrayal of financial struggles, systemic oppression, and the illusion of the American Dream, this analysis highlights the ways in which capitalist ideology constrains personal fulfillment and reinforces societal inequities. The paper shows the film serves a broader commentary on the enduring structural inequalities in capitalist societies than just a as a narrative of individual perseverance.*



**Keywords**— *American Dream, capitalism, economic inequality, ideology, interpellation*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Set against the backdrop of 1980s San Francisco, the film under examination provides a captivating window into the American Dream during a pivotal era marked by the peak promises of capitalism. Unfolding within the Reagan era's economic downturn, the narrative delves into the struggles of a middle-class, African American, Chris Gardner, offering a poignant portrayal of a society grappling with both aspiration and disillusionment. At first glance, this film appears to be merely telling the classic "rags to riches" story. The film does more than suggest that with hard work and determination, anyone can become Chris Gardner. However, it also emphasizes the contrast between the rich and the poor in society and illustrates the tenuous grasp large numbers of people in society have on the American Dream and how this impacts family life. Despite the complications of his circumstances, he wins the coveted

job at the end of the internship experience. The happy ending of this movie, however, is illusory.

The film leaves the audience thinking long after it is over, about how things could have turned out much differently. The film also illustrates the structural conditions that continue to make it more likely that certain groups in society will struggle for a living wage. The economic slowdown since the 1970s has extensively cut manufacturing jobs and African American men, in particular, who did not have college educations found their economic prospects plummet (Nordhaus, 2004; Okun 1975). It is both the structural obstacles that Gardner encounters, as well as the challenges of everyday living that he meets along the way, that illustrate how easy it is for people in our society to be a paycheck away from poverty.

As the story unfolds, the film critically dissects the American Dream, presenting a less-than-rosy depiction of those at the economic summit. It keenly examines how the American Dream, far from fulfilling its utopian promises, actively contributes to the erosion of personal values. Class consciousness and financial quandaries emerge as central themes, serving as cornerstones in the intricate pursuit of the American Dream as portrayed in the film. The movie stands as a searing critique, dissecting the foundations of American capitalist culture and exposing the pitfalls of the sustaining ideology. Beyond individual characters, the narrative unfolds as a broader commentary on societal structures and the elusive nature of the American Dream, resonating with a message that transcends the screen.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The film *The Pursuit of Happyness* has gleaned extensive academic discussions, particularly regarding its depiction of the economic conditions during the Ronald Reagan era and its representation of African-American fathers. Dargis (2006) highlights the film's portrayal of Chris Gardner's struggle against poverty, framing it within a social Darwinian context that emphasizes survival of the fittest. This depiction suggests a broader commentary on the economic disparities and social mobility of the time. Heryanit and Kasih (2022) challenge prevalent stereotypes about African-American fathers by presenting Gardner as a responsible and engaged parent. Their analysis positions Gardner as a counter-narrative to the commonly held societal beliefs that African-American fathers are absent or neglectful. They argue that the film demonstrates African-American fathers' active role in their children's development and well-being, thus providing a more nuanced view of fatherhood within this demographic.

Conversely, Ren's (2014) critique of the film suggests that it reinforces quintessential American values such as individualism, self-reliance, and the American Dream. Ren (2014) argues that Gardner's success story epitomizes these ideals, proposing that the film's portrayal of Gardner's ascent from poverty to success serves as a testament to the possibility of achieving equality and freedom through perseverance. This analysis delves into the cultural implications of Gardner's journey, portraying it as emblematic of broader American values. Similarly, Niemiec (2007) regards the film as an exemplary illustration of positive psychology, emphasizing virtues such as resilience, love, and hope. His analysis underscores the film's uplifting message and its focus on Gardner's strength and determination in overcoming adversity. The protagonist, Chris Gardner, embodies persistence, love, and hope while facing major challenges like homelessness

and unemployment. His journey highlights the process of overcoming obstacles by leveraging his strengths, suggesting that happiness is a pursuit rather than a permanent condition.

In a different vein, GC (2023) examines the film through the lens of critical race theory and Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, exploring the racial dynamics at play in Gardner's quest for the American Dream. This analysis underscores the systemic challenges faced by African Americans in achieving middle-class status and the impact of race and capitalism on Gardner's experience. By employing deconstructive logic, GC's work provides a nuanced understanding of the intersections of race, class, and societal expectations. Chris Gardner's experience illustrates double consciousness by showcasing his struggle to reconcile his identity as an African American within a predominantly white society. He navigates the tension between his spiritual aspirations and the material demands of life, often feeling the need to conform to societal expectations to achieve his dreams. This duality highlights the complexities faced by individuals like Gardner, who must balance their racial identity with the pursuit of the American Dream amidst systemic barriers. Nuryani (2019) contributes to the discussion by analyzing the semiotics of the film's poster. This study reveals how visual elements on the poster are used to convey thematic motifs and engage the audience, adding another layer to the film's interpretive dimensions.

Despite these varied analyses, a gap remains in the discussion: the ideological underpinnings of the film's portrayal of happiness and the American Dream. While much scholarly work has focused on the film's depiction of individual success and racial dynamics, there has been less examination of how the film's representation of happiness aligns with or critiques the ideological framework of the American Dream. This paper aims to address this gap by exploring how the film's depiction of happiness and success reflects or challenges prevailing ideological notions about achieving the American Dream.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs the theoretical frameworks of Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton, and Walter Benjamin to explore the role of ideology in shaping individual subjectivity and social structures. Althusser's conceptualization of ideology as a system of representations and practices that govern individuals' understanding of reality and their position within it is central to the analysis (Green and LeBihan, 128-29). Specifically, this paper operationalizes Althusser's theory of interpellation, which describes the process through which ideology hails individuals, influencing their

consciousness to the extent that cultural ideas become internalized and are perceived as personal beliefs (Althusser, 2004, pp. 693-4).

Althusser's theory of ideology, as central to this study, is understood as a system of representations and practices through which individuals comprehend their reality and position within it. Althusser (2004) views ideology as not merely a set of beliefs or ideas, but as a material practice that structures how individuals experience their conditions of existence. For him, ideology functions as a "lived relation" between people and the material world, encompassing both real and imagined aspects of social reality (Althusser, 1991, pp. 233-34). It is through these practices and representations that individuals are interpellated—hailed into specific subject positions—by the institutions of family, education, religion, and media (Althusser, 2004, pp. 693-95). Interpellation is key to understanding how individuals internalize cultural norms and social expectations, coming to perceive them as their own. This process ensures that ideology not only reinforces but also reproduces the existing social order by positioning individuals within ideological apparatuses that reflect the interests of dominant groups. Althusser's notion of ideology as both material and imaginary will be operationalized to analyze the mechanisms through which social institutions maintain and reproduce societal hierarchies, focusing particularly on how subjects are constituted within these ideological frameworks.

While Althusser emphasizes the structural and unconscious aspects of ideology, Terry Eagleton (1991) highlights its contested nature, arguing that ideology is not monolithic or static. For Eagleton, ideology is a dynamic and contradictory process marked by internal struggles among various social groups attempting to shape dominant narratives and meanings (p. 8). Ideology is thus a site of both oppression and potential resistance. Eagleton's focus on the role of language and discourse in ideology is particularly relevant, as this study explores how language mediates the construction and reinforcement of social realities. Language, in this view, is not merely a communicative tool but a critical means through which power is exercised and maintained, shaping individuals' perceptions and experiences of the world.

In addition to Althusser and Eagleton, Walter Benjamin's (2004) theory of postmodern Marxism provides a critical framework for analyzing the cultural dimensions of ideology, particularly concerning mass media and popular culture. Benjamin argues that capitalist societies are characterized by the commodification of culture, which leads to the creation of a "culture industry" that perpetuates dominant ideologies (pp. 1256-222). The proliferation of images and mass-produced cultural forms

obscures authentic human experience, instead promoting a superficial engagement with reality that serves the interests of capitalist production. Benjamin's work underscores the importance of critically engaging with media and popular culture to uncover the underlying contradictions of capitalist ideology. This study draws on his critique of the culture industry to examine how media and cultural production function as tools for ideological reproduction, while also considering the possibilities for resistance and alternative expressions.

By integrating the insights of Althusser, Eagleton, and Benjamin, this methodology provides a comprehensive approach to studying the operation of ideology in contemporary capitalist societies. Althusser's structural account of ideology, combined with Eagleton's emphasis on ideological contestation and Benjamin's critique of cultural production, offers a nuanced framework for analyzing the interplay between ideology, subjectivity, and social power.

#### IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

##### *Ideology, Individualism, and Happiness*

Gardner's relentless pursuit of the American Dream reflects the film's celebration of rugged individualism. Gardner is enticed by the ideology of happiness that if he can act on his rugged individualism, he can be happy. The study analyzes how the ideology of the Dream perpetuates the belief in upward mobility, despite its failure for many individuals.

The American Dream, much like state lotteries or big-bucks sweepstakes, offers the illusion that anyone can succeed, and people hold on to this hope, akin to gambling addicts (Tyson 58). In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Gardner embodies this belief, striving to rise to the top of the success pyramid, which represents happiness for him. His desire to work at Dean Witter symbolizes the promise of the American Dream, with the company reinforcing this ideology under the flag's patriotic symbol. A key scene emphasizes Gardner's journey as the camera lingers on his steps toward the Dean Witter building for over thirty seconds (18:20-18:57). The sequence ends with Gardner submitting his internship application, underscored by the American flag waving in front of the towering building. This visual imagery reinforces the idea that achieving success is tightly bound to the ideals of the American Dream and national identity.

The towering Dean Witter building, covering vast space and rising high, symbolizes the grandeur of the American Dream. Its immense height and luxurious interior, captured prominently in the camera shots, reflect

the product of financial success. The camera emphasizes the building's dominance, representing the allure of wealth and accomplishment. Gardner is shown with his head lifted, eyes focused upward on the flag and building, with a close-up of his neck offering the viewer his perspective. This imagery highlights the seductive promise of the company and the dream it represents. His gaze reflects both ambition and aspiration. By entering the building, Gardner symbolically steps into the heart of capitalism, marking the beginning of his association with the American financial system, where success is measured by material wealth. The building becomes more than just a structure—it is the physical embodiment of Gardner's pursuit of the American Dream.

As the film unfolds, the economic laws of a free market and capitalism are seen maintaining class divisions, making it nearly impossible for Gardner to escape poverty or fully nurture his aspirations. While the U.S. claims to be nonracist, its promise of equal opportunity often falls short for Black citizens (Lewis and Jhally, 1995, p. 135). The film never refers to race as an operative category in pursuing the dream. However, offering “an amnesiac picture of the history of racial oppression toward African Americans”, Schmitt (2010) notes, erodes race as an important part of social reality and this “takes a particularly dangerous political turn”—perpetuating the relegation the black body and preserving a white racial hierarchy (pp. 3-4). In Lewis and Jhally's words, it is much like joining a “Monopoly game halfway”, Black individuals face significant economic disadvantages unless luck and strategy align perfectly (Lewis and Jhally, 1995, pp. 135). Regarding this, Lewis and Jhally argue:

The game of Monopoly is instructive here. If three white people begin a game of Monopoly, a black player who is invited to join them halfway through enters at a serious disadvantage. Unless blessed by an unlikely combination of good luck and good sense, the black player will be unable to overcome these economic disadvantages and compete on equal status. (Lewis and Jhally, 1995, pp.135)

In the film, Gardner represents the middle-class struggle, achieving his dream through a rare combination of luck and perseverance. However, this success comes at a significant personal cost, symbolizing the high price often attached to chasing the American Dream. Gardner's decision to join the Dean Witter internship leads to family disintegration and cultural loss. His wife, Linda, leaves him and their son, mocking his aspirations of becoming a stockbroker by asking, “Why not an astronaut?” This moment highlights the skepticism surrounding the American Dream's promises. Additionally, Gardner sacrifices his roots, leaving Texas and assimilating into the urban life of San

Francisco in pursuit of success. His journey mirrors the broader experience of many Black Americans, who are enticed by the idea of equal opportunity but often find themselves paying a steep price. The promises of equality fail to provide him with the means to achieve it, forcing individuals like Gardner to make painful sacrifices in their pursuit of economic and social mobility.

The desire for homeownership in capitalist culture is often portrayed as a natural aspiration, with the notion that every family inherently wants to own property. However, this desire is shaped by the very capitalist society in which people live, which instills the belief that personal prosperity is tied to ownership. In *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Gardner embodies this struggle to provide stability and success for his family, despite ongoing financial hardships. From the film's outset, the tension in Gardner's household is evident, driven by their economic struggles. A pivotal moment occurs when Gardner meets his wife, Linda, at the laundromat, where a heated argument over unpaid taxes escalates. Surrounded by laundry, Linda highlights their dire financial situation with frustration, saying:

Linda: Do you remember that rent is due this week?  
Probably not!

We are already two months behind.

Next week we will be three months.

I have been put to double checks for four months,  
Chris.

Just sign what is in your contract and get outta your  
business.

Chris: That is what I am trying to do.

That is what I am trying to do for my family, for  
you, and for Christopher.

The ideology that blinds the middle class to socioeconomic inequalities is rooted in the belief that financial success is solely a result of hard work and determination. This deeply ingrained idea—central to the American Dream—leads people to believe that those who are poor must be lazy or lacking initiative. The middle class aspires to “get ahead,” constantly seeking a better house or better clothes, where “better” means not only improving one's situation but also surpassing others. In *The Pursuit of Happiness*, Gardner's family belongs to this middle-class structure, and their struggles reflect this ideology. Linda is dissatisfied with their stagnant life and wants to leave for New York in search of something more fulfilling. While Gardner is focused on improving their lifestyle, Linda's frustration with their financial situation boils over. She exposes her unhappiness when she decides to leave, making it clear that life on the streets is unbearable:

Linda: You know! I am not happy anymore. I am not just happy.

*(Irritatingly)*

Chris: Then, just go get happy Linda! Christopher lives with me.

The film also highlights another critical aspect of the American Dream: its celebration of individualistic efforts as the primary path to success. This idea ties directly to the principle of rugged individualism, a cornerstone of the American Dream that glorifies those who, against the odds, pursue difficult and risky goals on their own. It promotes the belief that anyone can achieve economic success through hard work and determination, while those who fail are dismissed as lazy or lacking ambition (Tyson 57, 59). This ideology pushes individuals like Gardner to bear the emotional and physical toll of relentless striving. In line with this belief, Gardner refuses to let circumstances define him. Despite constant setbacks, he embraces the "Ego" required to pursue financial success. His determination is exemplified during his internship, where he works tirelessly, calling clients without even pausing for a drink. A contrasting shot shows a woman drinking water while Gardner continues working non-stop, symbolizing the sacrifices required for individual achievement in pursuit of the American Dream. He says:

I was not hanging up on the phone between calls. I realize by not hanging up on the phone, I will gain another eight to ten minutes to the day. I was also not drinking water. So, I did not waste any time in the room. (1.04.52 – 1.05.19 minutes)

Gardner's unwavering commitment and devotion to his work further emphasize the individualistic nature of the American Dream. While other interns take breaks to drink water or chat, Gardner maximizes every moment, using even his ten-minute breaks to study the internship materials and find solutions for his malfunctioning scanner. This tireless dedication illustrates his belief in the power of personal effort to overcome obstacles. When he fails to sell the scanner taken by a homeless man, Gardner doesn't give up. He is shown working on the stairs, using the available light to keep reading, even when the electricity is cut off. In one powerful shot, he stands against a wall, reading by the faint light coming through the window's small holes—a symbolic representation of his determination to carve out a brighter future. The light signifies hope and his relentless drive to succeed, despite the odds. This emphasis on self-reliance is echoed by the manager's lecture to the interns, reinforcing the idea that success comes from individual effort. The manager says:

Some of you guys are here because you know somebody. Some of you guys are here because

you think you are somebody. There is one guy here who is gonna be somebody. That person gonna be the guy who can turn this (showing a book) into this (bill-books) into 800 dollars. (57.56 – 58.57 minutes)

In his lecture to the interns, the manager emphasizes that only one person among them will be chosen based on their competence and ability to transform potential into success, underscoring the ruthless meritocracy of capitalism:

This highlights the capitalist ideal that only those who excel will be rewarded, leaving others behind. In the broader capitalist system, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue in a capitalist society, the "culture is hardened enough either to poke fun at the old wishful dreams, the paternal ideal no less than unconditional feeling, or to invoke them as ideology, as the occasion demands" and the this "ideology has the world as such as its subject [:] It exploits the cult of fact by describing bad existence with utmost exactitude to elevate it into the realm of facts" (p.119). This lack of real choice is mirrored in Gardner's dilemma. After his interview in ragged, paint-stained clothes, Gardner contemplates quitting the internship, as it offers no salary and no guaranteed future. However, the fear of being "left behind" drives him to continue. Though his circumstances worsen after his wife leaves, he cannot abandon his dream. Jay Twisle convinces him to stay, and the camera's focus on the slamming lift doors symbolizes the closing of all other alternatives, forcing Gardner to embrace the harsh reality of capitalism.

### *Struggle and Economic Disparities*

The film vividly portrays the dichotomy between the affluent and the economically struggling exemplified by characters like Mr. Ribbon and the homeless population. The contrast underscores the societal challenges faced by those pursuing the American Dream. In other words, the film portrays a society that ostensibly denies the presence of class structures and their impact on racial disparities (GC 2015, p. 89). Despite this denial, the film reveals moments where these inequalities become undeniable. There is a clear ideological expectation that wealthy white children will outperform poor Black children, receiving better education, living in more comfortable environments, and accessing greater opportunities. The rare success of children who transcend these expectations is depicted as exceptional and glamorous precisely because it defies the entrenched ideological norms.

In a specific scene, from 1.10.30 to 1.10.50 minutes, Christopher's experience on a bus highlights this ideological divide. He observes a white boy of his age playing basketball in a lush, well-maintained yard. This observation brings a stark contrast. He attends a poorly

maintained daycare center where the environment is marked by crude language and misspellings, symbolizing his disadvantaged position. The sunlight in this scene accentuates the disparity between the two classes. Christopher's silent acknowledgment of his inferior circumstances, as he looks down at his father's shoulder, underscores the experience of the class divide.

Another poignant moment in the film illustrates the harsh reality of class disparities. When Chris and Christopher are evicted from their apartment with their belongings locked inside, Chris's frustration peaks. He responds to his son's distress by shaking him and shouting, reflecting the immense pressure he feels. Later, as they sit despondently on a subway bench, Chris tries to comfort Christopher by inventing a game where they imagine they've traveled back to the age of dinosaurs. He transforms a nearby restroom into a makeshift cave for the night, and as his son drifts off to sleep in his arms, Chris stands guard, covering his son's ears from the outside world's disturbances, and silently weeps. The space they belong to exemplifies the ideological divide as part of systemic barriers (D'Adamo 19).

This scene starkly contrasts with the film's depiction of the divide between the affluent and the impoverished. The film portrays a troubling gap between those who embody the American dream, such as the executive from Dean Witter enjoying a lavish lifestyle, and those struggling for basic survival, exemplified by the long lines of homeless individuals seeking shelter for the night. This disparity underscores the systemic inequalities that the film critiques, highlighting how deeply ingrained class structures affect the pursuit of the American dream. Mr. Ribbon, a high-ranking individual, exemplifies the stark contrast between the social classes depicted in the film. When Gardner visits Mr. Ribbon's opulent home to apologize for missing a previous appointment, both he and his son are visibly taken aback by the grandeur of the surroundings. Before their arrival, they pause to take in the house's impressive exterior. The camera captures the luxurious details of the residence, from the sparkling garden fountains to the meticulously maintained grounds, with sunlight enhancing the opulence. This visual representation highlights the profound class divide.

Gardner's reaction, marked by raised eyebrows and a sense of unease, underscores his awareness of the social gap. The camera zooms in on the pristine white house, emphasizing the impact of this disparity on Gardner. After their visit and a shared football match, Gardner and Christopher look back at Mr. Ribbon's house, now shrouded in a misty hue. This perspective, from Gardner's point of view, conveys his confusion and sense of disconnection from the affluence that defines Mr. Ribbon's

world. This scene vividly illustrates the ideological divide and Gardner's struggle to reconcile the disparity between his circumstances and those of the wealthy.

The film critiques the capitalist system by highlighting how class divisions perpetuate social inequality and marginalize the majority of Black individuals. The class system in place effectively keeps most people "in their place," reinforcing the notion that the American Dream is an elusive fantasy for the many, rather than a realistic goal for all. As Lewis and Jhally argue, "The American Dream is a fantasy that the few can or will ever realize. It is an idea sustained by anecdotes that focus on the exceptions, not on rules" (Lewis and Jhally 135-36). This perspective suggests that achieving the American Dream is more about exceptional cases than a common reality.

The film critiques this capitalist ideal by demonstrating how Gardner's worth is evaluated solely in terms of his economic productivity. The value of a person is measured by their ability to generate profit. This reduction of human value to economic exchange aligns with George Lukács's concept of "reification," where the products created by workers come to overshadow the individuals themselves (Seldon & Brooker, 2005, p. 106). In the film, Gardner's human worth is only validated when he successfully converts the book *Security Analysis*—referred to as the company's "Bible"—into tangible financial value. The scene where the manager, holding the book and a ledger, demands that an intern transform the book into dollars highlights how individual worth is reduced to its economic output. This portrayal underscores the dehumanizing effects of a capitalist economy that values people primarily for their ability to contribute to profit rather than for their intrinsic human qualities.

### *Identity amidst Financial Impediments*

Gardner's journey in the film is a poignant illustration of Althusser's (1991) concept of interpellation, where individuals are continuously hailed or positioned within specific ideological frameworks that shape their experiences and identities (693). The film portrays Gardner's struggle with financial insecurity as a recurring theme that disrupts his pursuit of the American Dream, leading to significant personal sacrifices and family strain.

Financial insecurity acts as a persistent barrier to Gardner's aspirations. As a member of the middle class, his attempts to navigate life in San Francisco during the 1980s are fraught with economic anxiety. According to Wilkerson, "Unlike the most middle-class whites, they [the blacks] live with daily personal reminders of the poverty and desperation they are trying to put behind them, as the loved ones back home who have not fared so well turn to

them for help with rent, use of a car, a place to stay” (Wilkerson 114). This statement underscores how systemic class ideologies continuously interpellate Black individuals, reinforcing their subordinate position and perpetuating economic struggles.

In the film, this ideological positioning is vividly illustrated in a scene where Gardner and Linda discuss their financial troubles, particularly regarding paying taxes. Linda's frustration reflects the strain of their economic situation. Gardner's subsequent decision to sell a scanner to doctors highlights his attempts to overcome these hurdles. Meanwhile, a car being inspected by white police officers serves as a visual cue of the broader socio-economic and racial surveillance that interpellates Gardner, reinforcing his marginalized status and the systemic barriers to achieving financial stability and the American Dream. A voice-over accompanies his walking:

You see that car.

That's mine.

There is no parking in the Hospital.

That is what happens when you are always in a rush. (05.2-05.35 min.)

The film vividly depicts how systemic economic pressures continuously shape Gardner's reality and identity. After the car is seized by the police, Gardner faces escalating financial stress. He has set a goal to sell at least two scanners each month to cover rent and daycare expenses, and an additional sale to replace his windshield wiper. The gravity of his financial predicament overwhelms him, leaving little mental space for anything beyond immediate survival. The scene where Gardner watches his car being towed captures his despair. His grim expression, coupled with tears on the brink of falling, illustrates the emotional toll of his economic struggles. This moment encapsulates how financial insecurity can penetrate deeply into one's personal life and sense of self.

Further emphasizing the economic strain, the film depicts the kitchen as a symbol of their dire situation—poor and bleak. The tension around paying taxes escalates into a heated argument between Gardner and Linda. Linda's scornful remark, “Why not Astronaut?” in response to Gardner's aspiration to become a stockbroker, underscores the systemic dismissal of his ambitions. The argument concludes with Linda leaving for work, and Gardner, with a somber demeanor, distracts himself by attempting to solve a Rubik's Cube. This act of playing with the puzzle symbolizes his struggle to piece together solutions amidst the chaos of his financial and personal life, highlighting how economic and ideological

constraints continually interpellate and constrain his potential and aspirations.

The film not only portrays Gardner's financial struggles but also reflects the broader economic turmoil of the nation during the 1980s. In Gardner's apartment, a TV news broadcast highlights the dire economic situation, emphasizing the widespread impact of the recession. The reporter's grim update provides a snapshot of the economic crisis:

“A few days ago, I was presented with a report, comprehensive order if you will, on our economic condition. You do not like it, I did not like it. But we have to face the truth. Then go to work, and return the things around. And make no mistakes about it. We can turn them around. The Federal Budget is outta control. We face a runaway deficit of almost \$80 billion for this part of the year, with Sep. 30th. That budget is larger than the entire Federal project in 1957” (From 07.25.00-08.05.00 minutes).

This report underscores the severe economic depression affecting Americans at the time. The film visually parallels Gardner's financial despair with the national crisis. Gardner's desolate expression as he fiddles with the Rubik's Cube, shown in a yellowish-gray hue, symbolizes his struggle amid the broader economic downturn. Medium shots of Gardner emphasize the gravity of his financial anxiety, underscoring its pervasive impact on his life.

The film further illustrates the relentless nature of financial strain in a night scene (from 14.50 to 14.55), where Gardner and Linda lie in bed. Despite Linda's urging to get some sleep, Gardner remains wide awake, unable to escape the financial gloom that haunts him day and night. This scene reflects the constant worry and sleepless nights caused by their financial woes, capturing the pervasive impact of economic hardship on both personal and national levels.

Muccino highlights the challenges of pursuing a dream amidst fluctuating financial stability. Gardner's journey to overcome financial difficulties is fraught with setbacks. After managing to sell the remaining scanners, Gardner feels a brief sense of relief, only to be dismayed when the government seizes almost all his money for taxes. His primary means of income depends on selling at least two scanners a month, and he had hoped that selling the rest would alleviate his financial woes. He even goes so far as to fill out checks and deposit money into the bank, thinking he is finally secure. However, the joy is short-lived as he receives a letter from the tax commission informing him that his account has been drained, leaving

him with just \$23.33. Gardner reflects on this crushing blow:

After four months we sold all our scanners. It seemed we were making it. Seemed, we were doing good until one day. That day, a letter brought me back to earth. This part of life is called paying tax. If you do not pay, the government sticks its hands into your account and takes your money, no warning. Nothing. There was only \$21.33 left in my bank account. I was broke. (From 1.16.55-1.17.56 minutes)

The film uses medium shots of Gardner in a public telephone booth, grappling with the tax collector. His disjointed dialogue and incomplete sentences convey the emotional toll of his financial plight. The camera then pans to Christopher, whose worried expression mirrors his father's distress. The pursuit of a secure lifestyle is paradoxically undermined by the constant threat of financial instability.

A further depiction of Gardner's financial desperation occurs when he consults Mr. Jay Twisle about his application. Gardner manages to secure a ride with Twisle, using the opportunity to impress him by recounting his experience in the Navy and his decision-making skills. During the ride, Gardner attempts to solve a Rubik's Cube, symbolizing his struggle to piece together solutions amid his financial crisis. However, when they reach their destination, Gardner faces another setback. The cab fare is \$17, and Twisle informs him that he is not responsible for paying it. Gardner, unable to cover the fare, decides to flee. The ensuing struggle with the cab driver results in Gardner running away, but not before losing a scanner when the train doors close on him, leaving it behind. A homeless man, seemingly mentally distressed, picks up the abandoned scanner. This sequence, from 24.20 to 35.42 minutes, underscores the harsh reality of Gardner's financial instability, showing how each step forward is marred by another setback.

Amidst his financial struggles, Gardner reflects on Thomas Jefferson's words from the Declaration of Independence:

It is right then. I started thinking about Thomas Jefferson. In the Declaration of Independence, he talks about our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I remember thinking how did he know to pursue part in there, maybe happiness is something that we can only pursue or maybe we can never have it, no matter what, how did he know that?" (31.55-32.25 minutes)

This contemplation reveals Gardner's disillusionment with the notion of happiness as articulated by Jefferson. He

questions whether happiness, as promised in the Declaration, is ever truly attainable for people like him or if it is merely an elusive goal that can only be pursued but never achieved. Muccino visually underscores Gardner's emotional turmoil through a series of powerful shots.

In one scene, Gardner is shown in a phone booth during a rainstorm, desperately trying to reach his wife because he is running late to pick up his son from daycare. The camera captures a close-up of Gardner's face, etched with fatigue and desperation, as water drips down his cheeks, amplifying his sense of despair. The juxtaposition of the rainy weather with his grim expression emphasizes the weight of his financial and personal struggles. Simultaneously, Gardner is seen running through the rain, as Linda's ultimatum—that she is leaving him and taking their son—adds to his stress. The running shots are interspersed with close-ups of Gardner's anguished face, visually reinforcing the relentless pursuit of an ideal that seems perpetually out of reach. This sequence effectively conveys Gardner's sense of futility and the crushing weight of his circumstances, aligning his struggle with the broader theme of the unattainability of happiness.

## V. CONCLUSION

In *the Pursuit of Happiness*, Gardner's relentless quest for the American Dream epitomizes the film's endorsement of rugged individualism and the belief that success is attainable through sheer determination. The film underscores how the ideology of the American Dream, much like state lotteries, creates an illusion of upward mobility and happiness accessible to all. Gardner's journey, marked by significant personal sacrifices and financial struggles, illustrates the harsh reality that this dream is not equally achievable for everyone, particularly for those facing systemic disadvantages.

The film critiques the capitalist ideals of self-reliance and meritocracy, revealing how they perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities and blind the middle class to the systemic barriers faced by many. Gardner's pursuit, symbolized by his drive to secure a position at Dean Witter, highlights the seductive yet often elusive nature of the American Dream. Despite his relentless effort, the film shows that the dream's fulfillment often comes at a steep personal cost and may remain out of reach for those disadvantaged by the existing economic and social structures. Through powerful visual imagery and narrative, *the Pursuit of Happiness* exposes the disparity between the promises of the American Dream and the harsh realities of economic struggle, particularly for marginalized individuals. The film ultimately suggests that the Dream, celebrated for its ideals of equality and success, often



masks the persistent and systemic inequalities that make true upward mobility a challenging and often unattainable goal for many.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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