**Critical Analysis of Films: Samples #2**

**Overview:** Below you will find 2 examples of professionals in different fields (psychology and sociology, respectively) writing about films in a context different from the sort of film reviews you see in newspapers and on sites like Rotten Tomatoes. In each case the writer is using the film to make a point about society. Although they are not organized around the 3 tasks I’ve asked you to accomplish in your Critical Analysis Project, they do accomplish those tasks as they make their specific point for their specific audience.

In class we will discuss *how* these arguments accomplish the three tasks in your assignment—offering specific **cultural and historical context**, discussing relevant **enduring human concerns**, and providing an **analysis/interpretation/response** from this particular writer that offers a unique insight into the film for a specific audience.

**Study Questions:**

1. Who is the **specific audience** for each article, and how can you tell?
2. What is the **thesis** for each? (This is the focus of the writers’ **analysis/interpretation/response** element.)
3. What **support** is offered for the thesis in each case?
4. Where do you find the writer offering **context** for the film? (Note: both set this film in a context of similar films, but there is more to it than that.)
5. What **enduring human concerns** does each writer discuss for his respective film?

[**Reel Therapy**](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-therapy) **(a regular column in the journal *Psychology Today*)** Unraveling the mind through film by Jeremy Clyman, Psy.D. **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Why We Love “Juno”:** The goal of therapy is to Juno-ize the mentally troubled.

Published on February 4, 2010

Some movies have a gravitational pull. Take *The Godfather* for example. I've watched it ten times the most recent of which involved mindlessly channel-surfing across Al Pacino's stoic face. The next thing I knew two hours had passed and the laundry was fast wrinkling in the dryer. We loved The Godfather for showing us intelligence behind the violence. Why do we love Juno?

We loved Juno so much that we turned a simple, low-budget story about a pregnant teen into an overnight box office sensation and Oscar winner that remains within the heart of the zeitgeist and is frequently cited by smart people making interesting points. How did this happen? Film critics might cite the well-written script, strong direction or rare talents. I suggest an alternative hypothesis of a much more subtle and psychologically-gratifying nature.

Most stories of teen pregnancy are dysfunctional tales of impulsivity, avoidance and interpersonal conflict. Take a troubled girl plus a bad decision, mix in a little adversity-induced stress and existential uncertainty and - bam - you've got an outcome of trepidation and ineptitude that makes for sold out theaters and, unfortunately, human behavior of the lowest common denominator. Indeed, many of us are not resilient in the face of stressors like teen pregnancy, especially those of us who become impregnated due to poor judgment and self-destructive tendencies (as I don't think we keep statistics on stupid versus unlucky birthing teenagers, the exact percentage cannot be referenced).

But Juno is not in that pitiful camp. She is very different. Her story is as far removed from the stereotypical teen-pregnancy narrative as is known - it's practically a different genre. In "Juno" we have an independent-minded teenager who is wise and secure beyond her years and just so happens to be pregnant. To watch her handle the subsequent and inevitable obstacles is to watch a model in optimal psychological functioning and it is that fact more than any mechanical aspect of storytelling that makes this film a uniquely inspiring and funny experience.

Bottom of Form

The movie begins with Juno fresh off her first sexual encounter. Let's note that Juno is not sitting in the puddle of distasteful regret that forms after a one-night stand with that drug dealing neighbor who never goes on a second date. Not by a long shot. "The doodle that cannot be undid" stems from a volitional, deliberately thought act with the benevolent Paulie Bleeker - the kind of person that grows into a supportive husband and enriching father. The mentally healthy are attracted to the mentally healthy and our thin-slicing now has some data to deduce that Juno is a role model. The running joke here is that if anyone was taken advantage of, sexually, it was the oh-so-effeminate Bleeker. After all, Juno is a strong, independent woman and Bleeker is a walking nerd association - passive, socially oblivious and left for dead by "The Mean Girls."

The next major plot point contains Juno discovering that she's pregnant. Everything about this discovery process represents the maximally adaptive response. She seems ahead of the game - testing for pregnancy not because a few months have passed and now there are physical signs but because she just had sex (protected) a few days ago and she knew enough to know that "you never know" about things like pregnancy. And while some might delay or deny in such a moment, Juno calmly and systematically tests the hypothesis of pregnancy. The running joke here is that she drinks enough Sunny Delight to use up a ridiculously high number of pregnancy tests. The reason this is funny is because she has received the harsh reality from the first test like any well-adjusted individual and she goes through the remaining tests in a transparent and harmless attempt to procrastinate.

After this feat of urine production she turns immediately to the big confession. In most narratives the impregnated protagonist would drink herself under the table and pick fights with her parents about everything under the sun before she would dare confess to them of the perceived indiscretion. But Juno does not perceive this situation as shameful or indicative of a true and promiscuous character as the mentally unstable might. She recognizes that a statistically anomaly has occurred (condoms are only 97% effective) in all its simplicity and with as mature and wise a perspective as any parent could hope for, Juno discloses the news right off the bat. She even frosted the cake with thoughtful emergency response plans and an understanding that some trust-repairing lies ahead. In fact, Juno orchestrates her emotions with such coordination that she accomplishes the tasks of perspective-taking, sound analytical thinking and witty peanut gallery commentary simultaneously. You have to be socially, emotionally and cognitively intelligent for this - the psychological trifecta.

Following this, Juno finds and interacts with the couple to whom she'll eventually donate the baby. The parents-to-be worry about the moral mood swings and unreliability presumed in most teenagers, particularly the pregnant ones. And although this assumption is entirely ill-fitting to Juno's character she receives the implicit insults with a light-hearted scoff, which seamlessly transitions into a pleasant submission that she has no intention of misleading or deceiving. Moreover, she plans to deliver on the promised goods because she has accurately thin-sliced the mother-to-be's pure intentions like a crackerjack clinician. The psychologically sound are capable of this sort of empathic ability even in adolescence. She knows and loves the notion that her baby is going to be nurtured by the Michael Jordan of nurturance.

The next major segment of the story consists of Juno coping with the unbearable physical and psychic side effects of third trimester life. She balloons in fat cells, hormones and self-righteousness. But she's not out of control or overwhelmed. Developmentally normal adults, mind you, might start to fret as crunch time approaches. Self-doubts about adopting and fears about looming childbirth pain would undoubtedly whirl. Not our little ball of mental magnificence. Juno digests these frustrations with her best friend (as positive a coping strategy as there is) and clarifies her values in wanting to date Bleeker, which, of course, allows her to one-mindedly pursue the goal of actually dating Bleeker. Goal-orientation and living a life in-line with values is central to "the good life" and represents a resiliency that is particularly shocking considering the circumstances.

Add the ills of pregnancy and normal teenage hormones to the loneliness of a Bleeker-less six months and the betrayal of an abandoning father-to-be and you've got a recipe perfectly constructed for emotional dysregulation. This situation is rife with enough stress that defenses are likely to automatically flare up, which leads to unconscious rerouting of emotions and distortions of thoughts, which leads to things like kicking the dog, throwing the dishes, and confusing friends with enemies. But none of these mentally ill if not deliciously melodramatic things unfold with Juno. She's got every excuse imaginable to commit an "intelligence" hiccup and instead she reflects on her environment, generates some self-knowledge, fires up the emotional intelligence machine and commits herself to Bleeker with even-tempered genuineness. There's no last-minute race through traffic or paralyzing ambivalence. She marches up to Bleeker one day, plainly states her emotions, follows her mentally healthy father's guidelines for love (find someone who loves you for exactly who you are) and gives Bleeker an oh-so-tender kiss.

Here's the point and the answer to why we love Juno - healthy reality is more entertaining than great drama. Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, healthy reality is great drama. It's also the difference between mediocrity and inspiration in the movie business and a ringing endorsement of therapy. After all, the clinical psychology industry is what helps the non-Junos grow into Junos.

[**http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-therapy/201002/why-we-love-juno**](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-therapy/201002/why-we-love-juno)



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Note: This author bio is from the same page as the Juno analysis and is a regular feature of this column.

[**Is Kevin Costner’s "McFarland, USA" a White-Savior Film?  Well, Yes and No**](http://www.thesociologicalcinema.com/blog/is-kevin-costners-mcfarland-usa-a-white-savior-film-well-yes-and-no) 3/10/2015



Is Kevin Costner a white savior in "McFarland, USA?"

The release of the movie [*McFarland, USA*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2097298/?ref_=nv_sr_1) has generated quite a bit of criticism due to its perpetuation of the “white savior” myth.  Yet again, Hollywood has given us a tale about a white hero who enters a community of color and motivates non-white characters to achieve things beyond their dreams. This white-savior theme finds particularly fertile ground in films about high school. High school is the last moment in the life-course before we send children off to be adults. This is society’s last chance to get the socialization messages right before we potentially lose touch with a generation. Hollywood loves the potential of this moment. We have seen the basic white-savior dynamic in high school films such as [*Freedom Writers*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0463998/?ref_=nv_sr_1), [*Dangerous Minds*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112792/?ref_=nv_sr_1), and [*Blackboard Jungle*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047885/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1). In these films, Erin Gruwell, Louanne Johnson, and Richard Dadier, (played by Hilary Swank, Michelle Phifer, and Glen Ford, respectively) are white teachers who enter the “dangerous jungles” of classrooms filled with mostly non-white students and convince these students to believe in themselves, to make better choices in their lives, and to work hard in school. Hollywood is more than happy to cast popular and bankable white actors to portray characters who rescue non-white characters from lives of poverty and desperation. Such films stir audiences with “feel good” happy endings and serve to cleanse white audiences from the guilt of racism. In *McFarland, USA*, Kevin Costner is the latest actor to play a white teacher (Jim White, if you can believe it) who saves students of color from their difficult and dreary lives.  
  
Jim White transforms a group of seven poor, rural Mexican-American boys into championship cross-country runners. He also motivates them to attend college, at times against the wishes of their parents who would rather have them earning extra money picking crops in the fields. Along the way, he gains respect for the culture and work ethic of the boys. The white hero is personally transformed as he comes to appreciate the humility, tenacity, and integrity of the residents of McFarland. *McFarland, USA* tells the tidy Hollywood story of how racial chasms in the United States can be bridged by the efforts of individual heroes, and that the agents of this racially progressive change can be white people.

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| However, I would argue that there is much more to *McFarland, USA* and similar high school films than this “white savior” dynamic. To explain these films narrowly as “white-savior” narratives is to ignore the underlying assumptions of class privilege that too often go unremarked in our popular culture. Of course, race and class intersect in complicated ways that make a simple debate about the relative importance of these two social forces impossible. Still, the language of “class” often gets lost when the language of “race” is used to analytically frame films such as *McFarland, USA*.  As Americans, we are often uncomfortable talking about class differences. In fact, we like to think that class, as a social category, isn’t that important in our lives.  We are much more likely to see race as an issue that permeates everyday life.  However, under the surface of the “white-savior” trope in many high school films is a class-based story of middle-class heroes rescuing poor youth. | **I would argue that there is much more to McFarland, USA..than this “white savior” dynamic. To explain these films narrowly as “white-savior” narratives is to ignore the underlying assumptions of class privilege.** |

For instance, let’s take a look at a few other “savior” films in the high school film genre to see if we see similarities between them and *McFarland, USA*. As I noted, there are white savior teachers rescuing non-white students in *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers*, and *Blackboard Jungle*. But let us not overlook the Latino-savior Jaime Escalante rescuing low-income Latino math students in [*Stand and Deliver*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094027/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1), the black-savior Mark Thackeray rescuing white working-class students in [*To Sir, With Love*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062376/?ref_=nv_sr_1), the black-savior Ken Carter rescuing multi-racial high school basketball players in [*Coach Carter*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0393162/?ref_=nv_sr_1), the black-savior principal Joe Clark rescuing an entire inner-city school in [*Lean on Me*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097722/?ref_=nv_sr_1), and the black teacher Blu Rain who saves a desperately poor and troubled black student in [*Precious*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0929632/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1). I do not point out these examples to say that the heroes of films like *McFarland, USA*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Freedom Writers* and *Blackboard Jungle* are not examples of white saviors. They certainly are. But they are more than that. Our understanding of these films falls short if we limit the analytical categories we use to describe and criticize them.  
  
Despite their racial differences, the cinematic heroes Jim White, Erin Gruwell, Louanne Johnson, Mark Thackeray, Richard Dadier, Jaime Escalante, Ken Carter, Blu Rain, and Joe Clark all have something in common. They are all adult members of the middle or upper middle class. They all enter a low-income community as middle-class outsiders. They exercise their middle-class privileges and assumptions as they “save” low income students from a culture of poverty and despair.   There are certainly plenty of racial overtones, assumptions, and examples of the white-savior complex in many of these films. But there is much more in these films that we need to understand.

In "Lean on Me," Joe Clark is a middle-class savior

To help reveal the class-based assumptions of movies like *McFarland, USA* it is important to analyze them not only as individual pieces of art, but as part of a larger genre that reveals cultural assumptions about social class, adolescence, and education in the United States. (I analyze 177 films about high school in [*Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture*](http://www.amazon.com/Hollywood-Goes-School-Robert-Bulman/dp/1464171696/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1425491204&sr=1-2&keywords=Hollywood+Goes+to+High+School). The updated and revised second edition will be released by Worth Publishers on March 13th, 2015.) When we contrast films like *McFarland, USA* with films that feature middle-class students we begin to see that social class is an explanatory variable at least as prominent as race. In these middle-class high school films such as [*The Breakfast Club*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088847/?ref_=nv_sr_1), [*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091042/?ref_=nv_sr_1), and [*Clueless*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112697/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1), the teachers, coaches and principals are never depicted as heroes. In fact, the adult characters become either antagonists or side-show buffoons. In school films about middle-class students it is the students who are invariably the heroes. Middle-class students know how to rescue themselves. Ferris Bueller doesn’t need the help of any adult. He is just fine on his day off. The kids in *The Breakfast Club* have problems, but they solve them on their own, in spite of adult intervention.  Middle-class kids in high school films need no savior -- even when they are flawed, even when they need help, and regardless of their race. It is only poor students who need a savior. The poor students are often black, Latino, or Asian. They are also sometimes white.  
  
The multi-racial poor students in *Dangerous Minds*, for instance, need Louanne Johnson. They depend upon her. She is, in every real sense, their savior. And she is white.  But she is also an adult middle-class outsider with middle-class cultural assumptions about individual responsibility and success. When she tells her students, “You have a choice. It may not be a choice you like, but it’s a choice” she is echoing the sentiments of Coach Ken Carter, a middle-class African-American, when he says to his multi-racial poor basketball players, “Go home and look at your lives tonight. Look at your parents’ lives and ask yourself, ‘Do I want better?’” Jim White knows the odds are stacked against the kids on his cross-country team. But he also admires their work ethic and he has been impressed by how they have responded to his coaching. He tells his team, “There's nothing you can't do with that kind of strength, with that kind of heart." The post-script of the film proudly reveals that all seven team members attended college, most graduated, and they currently have middle-class jobs such as police detective and school teacher. We are even told that several of them are now “landowners.” It is a happy capitalist ending.  
  
In Hollywood’s worldview, only poor students need saviors – and the saviors are always adult members of the middle-class. And sometimes they are white. But regardless of their race, the salvation offered is always one that reinforces middle-class cultural assumptions about individualism, hard work, the importance of education, and the possibilities for upward class mobility.  
  
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<http://www.thesociologicalcinema.com/blog/is-kevin-costners-mcfarland-usa-a-white-savior-film-well-yes-and-no>

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1. diversity is crap ---6/6/2015 05:10:17 pm

more like another Costner white guilt flick.

1. disney can suck my \*\*\*\*\* 9/6/2015 11:20:40 pm

seriously,in the movie all the white are mocking them, not congratulating them, etc. etc. good grief what an anti-white fest. it did NOT happen that way at all, but hey never let the truth get in the way of a white-guilt, bash whitey fest, hey Disney?

1. debbis2792 --9/11/2015 08:01:47 am

I don't know if I totally agree with this statement. Im hispanic living in the US and yes I do see some discrimination even today, but sadly Im a white hispanic so the discrimination is not towards me but towards those of my race. I didnt get that "white savior" idea while watching the movie but now that you pointed out it kinda does make sense, the thing is that thats what educators should have as their mantra, making their students allow themselves dream, and aspire for the life they dream to have. Effort, thats all that is needed.

1. This Movie Is Lame Disney Nonsense ----9/25/2015 11:49:27 am

White was a dedicated and compassionate McFarland educator for 17 years before he ever coached at the high school, and it took him another seven years of cultivating running talent as the XC coach before they won their first state title.

1. Jaime Guzman ----1/23/2016 11:58:42 am

I am Latino and I just finished watching the film just about 45mins ago. I thoroughly enjoyed the film but it got me thinking. Are there films where a person considered a minority saves an all white school/white class of students? To Sir, with Love is the only film that I can think of that may fit the savior narrative in films. It is an interesting topic and it has me question the state of American film. Especially since an issue of the Oscars has been so recently brought up.