

A Film Analysis from Perspectives of Cultural Studies: *The Terminal*

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(Abstract)

The author attempts to analyze a Hollywood product by employing a cultural approach in order to reveal some of the concerns and preoccupations of US citizens: namely, progressivism and commercial consumerism and their discrepancies. Also, he attempts to lay out the relationships between social identity, national identity, mental state, and economic situation of the protagonist. Through such an approach, he hopes to examine to what extent the film reflects upon human reality in interpersonal/intercultural communication.

Keywords: Cultural Studies; representations; progressivism; commercial consumerism; identity (social and national) and identity crises

1. Introduction:

By bringing in its quarry of knowledge and critical perspectives from Cultural Studies (CS), one should be able to deploy a critical view in the studies of identity issues. One of the CS approaches is to make analysis of consumer products to interpret their representation systems and examine to what extent they reflect upon the concerns and preoccupations of a particular cultural/social group. The validity of such an approach applied to Hollywood products should be high because Hollywood films are a form of popular culture that attracts all walks of life and are enjoyed by broad cross-sections of society. In defining the social context of popular culture, Fiske argues that the capitalist system does try to dominate the market and the consumer, but the public, though clearly subordinate to the commercial interests, does have an active role to play in the actual creation of popular culture (Fiske, 1989: pp. 1-2). Horwood also points out, as in the case of *films noir*, that the film makers were being led by their audience: '*They are usually resolved in favor of the status quo*' (Horwood: 1999, p. 16). Moreover, films inevitably show what was on the mind of the public because of the nature of industry (Palmer, 1993: p. xi). In this sense, then, it is possible to adjust a focus on a Hollywood product and to re-speculate the underlying preoccupation of US citizens from the viewpoint of Cultural Studies.

A Hollywood product of a little over two hours, in fact, well illustrates typical identity crisis through intercultural encounters every sojourner experiences in an unfamiliar setting: namely, *The Terminal* (2004) written by Sacha Gervasi and Jeff Nathanson, directed by Steven Spielberg. The plot also reveals a hero in every detail, Viktor Navorski (Tom Hanks) who experiences his own (national) identity crisis because he, all of a sudden, became a man without a country due to political turmoil back home; he was kept under restraint and not allowed to leave the airport for

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nine months. Then, a question may arise: For what reasons did Spielberg fix on such a unique setting as the international transit lounge of a mammoth airport that situates in New York? In fact, *The Terminal* is not the only film that dealt with people who 'live' in an airport. *Tombes du Ciel* (1993 distributed by Alciné Terran), directed by Philippe Lioret, also featured people who were detained at an airport. What is unique about *The Terminal*, on the other hand, is that a man, who is struggling for his own life and national identity, comes into collision with the airport official, who considers Viktor Navorski a bureaucratic glitch--a problem he cannot control but desperately wants to erase (<http://www.theterminal-themovie.com/>). It is precisely at this point in this comedy film, where the author finds a form of cultural confrontation between the American ways of rationalism in efficient management styles and the discrepancy of existing conditions that the US minority communities face today.

2. Method

The method of analysis the author has employed in this present study is partially macro and micro.

First, it is a macro approach since the author attempts to analyze the film by interpreting some of the representations in order to evaluate to what degree the American ways of commercial consumerism, rationalism in efficient management styles, and the discrepancy of existing conditions that the US minority are brought out in relief reflect upon the reality.

Second, it is a micro approach because the author attempts to analyze the degree of identity crises by utilizing the time axis of the film and the identity axis of the protagonist. The time axis (horizontal) represents the passage of time during the film (approximately 120 minutes which represents a 9-month period of the plot), and the identity axis high to low (vertical) represents the degree of identity crises observed from the narrative and the stylistic elements of the editing, camerawork, lighting to project the story. Therefore, this study can be seen as observational since its approach is obviously based upon film semiology. In this article, three factors are to be analyzed: the national identity, the social identity, and the financial situation of the protagonist. Then these data are superimposed to be compared. By applying such analytical measures and observing the transitions of the protagonist's identities, the author hopes to reveal the correlations that occur during one's identity crisis while illustrating the image of minorities projected in the film.

3. The Summary of the Plot

The plot is said to be based upon a true story of Merhan Karimi Nasser, who has been trapped due to his lack of papers in Charles De Gaulle Airport of Paris, France, since August 26, 1988.

A man from a fictional Eastern European state, called Krakozhia, arrives at JFK, but after he departed from his country, a revolutionary war broke out, and Viktor Navorski (the protagonist) became a man without a country all of a sudden with his passport invalidated and condemned. Thereafter, he is denied entrance to the U.S. However, he also can't be deported so he is told by the Security Manager that he has to remain in the international transit area of the airport until his

status can be fixed.

Navorski's command of English was severely limited at the time of arrival; therefore, no one could communicate with him efficiently, which caused social isolation for him. However, he could somehow manage to control and adapt to his unique environment. For instance, he remodeled an unused arrival gate of the airport into living quarters, earned cash for food by gathering luggage carts. Navorski makes friends with some of the staff members of the airport, and it may not be too much to say that the staff (supposedly illegal foreign residents) represents the America's salad bowl. These new friends he made have secret social lives in the terminal, feasting on airline food and playing cards in the middle of the night.

He also finds romance with a flight attendant Amelia (Catherine Zeta-Jones), who pendulates in a hopeless relationship with a married man. Viktor gradually acquires English proficiency through a New York travel guide written in English and his own language. He, at the same time, shows his resilience by repeatedly foiling the little plots of airport bureaucrat Frank Dixon (Stanley Tucci) whose conspiracy is to make Viktor leave the airport illegally so he can be arrested and out of his sight; however the filmmakers never seem to decide on whether Dixon should be a lovable foil or an absolute villain.

Navorski becomes the hero of the airport when he intervenes in a heart-rending, uptight scene: a man, supposedly from an Eastern European nation (linguistically shared with Navorski), has medicine that he needs to take home for his dying father in Canada, but Dixon says it must stay in the United States. The man goes berserk and is about to be conducted away and arrested, but Navorski mediates and finds a solution that would satisfy bureaucratic Dixon, declaring that the medicine is for his goat in stead of his father. Viktor's rumor is spread by Gupta (Kumar Pallana) who saw the image of a brave hero to save a member of minorities.

Eventually, Viktor accomplishes his goal to leave the airport with the help of Amelia and reaches a jazz bar where he receives the autobiography of a saxophone player of whom his father was a great fan.

4. The international transit lounge controlled by American management

The representations that appear in *The Terminal* are worth of attention from two cultural points of view: commercial capitalism and progressivism. First of all, commercialism plays a significant role in order to spice up the plot. In fact, infusion of commercialism combined with film production is not new at all in Hollywood industry.

'(in) I am Sam (2001), ... the audience is exposed to Starbucks logo approximately every 10-15 minutes of the film, until Sam gets a new job at Pizza Hut. The movie was not financially supported solely by the advertising of Starbucks and Pizza Hut; however conspicuous commercialism, global chain restaurants and coffee shops, for the first time in Hollywood history, plays an important role of popularization of cultures in this film, illustrating our everyday life.' (Nakamoto, 2005, pp. 19-28)

Once again, the Starbuck's logo appears in the middle background when Amelia and Viktor are in deep conversation.

During the past decade, globalization has made Hollywood film an ever more familiar and popular artifact throughout the world. Whereas Hollywood films have dominated the world market for decades, it is even more the case today with American global corporations playing an important role in distributing its products throughout the world. Hollywood films are the most capital intensive and thus have the most spectacular special effects; they are effectively marketed throughout the world and are popular everywhere.

(Kellner, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/MCKellner/HOLSOC.html>)

One can say in *The Terminal*, the souvenir shops and men's shops (designer brands) seem to be displayed more naturally or subtly than the chain coffee shops like Starbucks projected in *I am Sam* just because of its distinctive environment (an airport lounge). Nevertheless, it is not a deniable premise that some of the contemporary Hollywood products are utilized more as commercial media than as art works.



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It should be noted, on the other hand, that Spielberg partially and cynically ridicules such commercial consumerism and its inevitable superficiality in a scene: when Viktor was thrown into the abyss of despair without sufficient information about what had occurred in his country, the monitors above his head were meaninglessly displaying commercial message of a mail-order sporting product, which successfully makes him appear totally baffled. It is possible to interpret this particular scene as if commercial consumerism cannot pave the way to attract the audience and become weary unless the security of one's identity and the peace of mind are maintained.

Another noticeable point in terms of representations of the film is the management style of Dixon as the airport superintendent. Dixon obviously is responsible for designing the security management of the international transit area. What should be noted is the fact that his line of thought mirrors one of the American traditions: namely, progressivism. That is, Dixon's management style overlaps conservative progressive technocrats who advocate tradition and the status quo of the airport security management; therefore, the international transit lounge, although, in a strict sense, it is not the territory of the US, should be regarded as the US. Matsuo maintains that the American government of the 20th Century was supposed to embody its own objectivity and

to bear the criteria of universality based upon mathematical science of management efficiency that derived from rationalism (Matsuo, 2005, p.25).

'To put it rather extremely, government could be run on a scientific system, and compromise and acquiescence were to be seen as political corruption. This is exactly the pretension of the progressives and the advocates of the New Deal in the past century. Therefore, decision-making mechanism in which some of the minority groups value territorial connections and blood ties should be wiped out.' (Translated: *ibid.*)

In addition, Hattori of the Economic and Industrial Policy Bureau also insists that the early 20th century was characterized by progressives.

'In retrospect, during the era of progressivism, from 1870s through the beginning of the 20th century, the well-controlled society backed by progressivism scientific nationality was professed, and production management efficiency was enshrined. The most prominent issue of the time was the way to ostracize the depravation of political spheres. Also, in terms of economic policies, the application of scientific management to public administration was introduced by Walter Lippmann... The New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt was underpinned by political scientists such as Charles Merriam and reformers such as Luther Gulick, who became members in the executive office of the president, and the policy designing then was characterized by technocrats for the purpose of efficiency.'

(Translated: *Social Innovation*: <http://cac-journal.seesaa.net/article/1814456.html>).

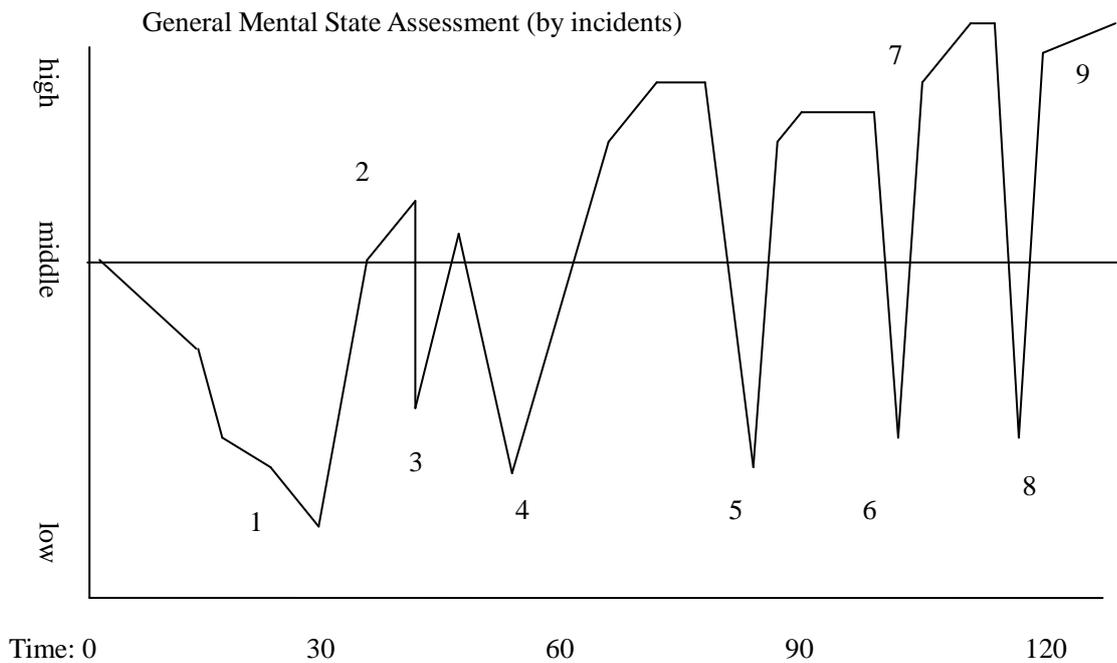
Perhaps, it is no exaggeration to say that Spielberg, in his *The Terminal*, would hope to make ironical criticism against traditional progressivism. In other words, however the management style may seem rational and efficient, uncontrollable intercultural conflictions exist in reality, and human factors cannot be dealt with mathematically. One can, therefore, generalize that the film well reflects on cultural pluralism that derives from the Counterculture Movement of the 60s.

5. The Degree of identity crisis that Viktor went through

It is frequently discussed that culture shock is the adjustment process in an intercultural setting or in an unfamiliar environment which may be drastically different from one's own. The individual can no longer find familiar signs, symbols, and surroundings such as language, food, landscapes, as well as people with whom he/she used to interact with frequency. *'This fish-out-of-water feeling'* (Rogers and Stainfatt, 1999, p. 212) is too overwhelming to be processed in the first phase of intercultural experience. Sojourners experience culture shock in varying degrees; some hardly notice it at all, while others take it in very hard and find it difficult to cope with. (education USA: <http://educationusa.state.gov/life/environment/culture.htm>)

In this section, the author would like to discuss to what extent the identity crisis and culture shock of the protagonist, Viktor Navorski, are illustrated in *The Terminal*. There are, as commonly known in a classic study of culture shock, four stages of culture shock that the first-time visitor to a new culture will experience: "Honeymoon" Stage or Initial euphoria; Irritability and

Hostility; Understanding and Adjustment; Integration and Acceptance. Still, another theory would describe the process of cultural adjustment as a U-curve (or W-curve including the re-enculturation back home). However, neither seems to apply in the story of Terminal.



(Key incidents)

1. Immigration is rejected.
2. Navorski starts earning cash by collecting the carts/Learns English.
3. Earning cash is no longer possible.
4. Job application is turned down.
5. Dixon stands in the way of Navorski's entry.
6. Navorski cannot meet Amelia.
7. Novorski becomes hero of the airport.
8. Navorski realizes that he needs the signature of Dixon for entry to the US.
9. Navorski is successfully out of the airport. /Gets an autograph from the jazz musician.

It is difficult to point out that Viktor experiences any of honeymoon stage; one could imagine that he was excited at the time of entry, while a bit worried about visiting New York for the first time of his life. However, his mental status hits the lowest after his passport was forfeited by the U.S immigration. It is also clear that his mental stability and adjustment heavily depend upon his financial situation and the personal relationship with Dixon who becomes the key figure for Navorski's legal status and social relationships with those around him. One of the entertaining elements of Hollywood products is that the audiences are expecting the protagonists to escape from various crises. In this sense, the film is not an exception; in fact, five crises are set up for Navorski during the 9-month period of stay, and they are closely related to his legal status and survival. As a result, the mental state assessment does not resemble U-curve theory of culture shock process;

however, a question still remains: if the U-curve theory stands for cross-cultural adjustment for sojourners, are crises the points for enculturation? More specifically, it is possible to hypothesize that personal crises are the key factors for repeated enculturation processes of his identity. Therefore, it should be worth examining to what extent his mental state is affected by his identity and identity crisis.

6. Dimensions of Identity

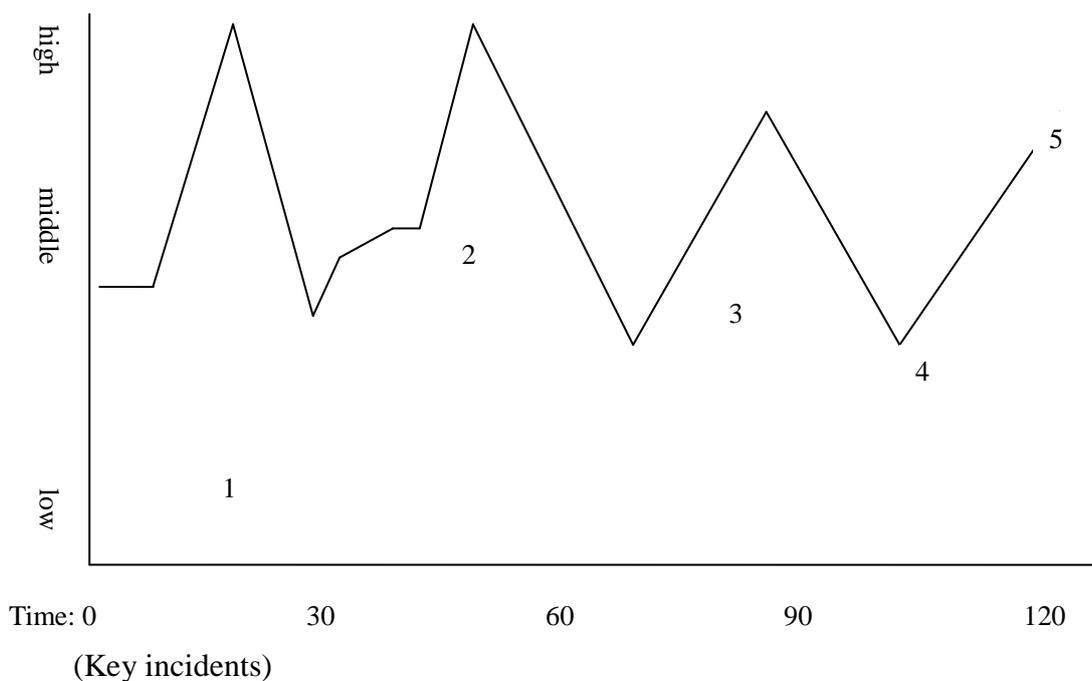
Identity crisis occurs because of the dilemmas between what is supposed to be unchangeable and fixed and the mutation of reality that brings about drastic abrupt changes in one's economic, cultural, or social environment. As Gauntlett maintains, fluidity of identity is experienced practically by any individual.

'Even those who would say that they have never given any thought to questions or anxieties about their own identity will inevitably have been compelled to make significant choices throughout their lives, from everyday questions about clothing, appearance and leisure to high-impact decisions about relationships, beliefs and occupations' (Gauntlett, David, 2002: *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York. (Extracts also available: www.theory.org.uk).

In other words, it should be noted that identity is not fixed. It is a personal understanding of one's lifestyle. Indeed, this lifestyle has certain continuity; however, one's ambulation or mobility itself ceases its continuity (Giddens, 1991), which results in psychological uncertainty. The experience of doubt and uncertainty is adaptive to stressful life of sojourners. Any of these stressors may become a cause of identity crisis. According to the *Acculturation Curve* introduced by Hofstede, some individuals remain in the negative state: those who continuously feel discriminated and believe to be unaccepted. Indeed, all human societies are characterized by 'uncertainty avoidance' (Hofstede, 1991). The state of uncertainty is defined both individually and socially; in addition, it is synonymous with the degree of threat, which is felt by members of a certain culture, over as-yet-unrecognized factors (ibid.). Therefore, intercultural encounters bring about uncertainty—a cause of identity crises—on both those who are native of the host culture and the sojourners.

In the case of the Terminal, too, the feeling of uncertainty is well illustrated as the protagonist's identity crisis. It should be noted that identity is multi-pronged; which means that one produces and shifts sub-categories of identities to meet with socio-economic situations; *'Or rather, identity is iridescent.... Identities can be hypothesized as something similar to a filterable projector screen that is versatile in color just like a cinematograph that is defined in the field of illuminating engineering or a lighting system in theater arts'* (Nakamoto 2004). Then, it is true that identity crises are also multiphasic. Therefore, identity shifts of Viktor Navorski are examined from three dimensions in this present study: national identity shift, economic (financial) situation shift, and social identity shift by incidents.

6-1: National Identity Shift

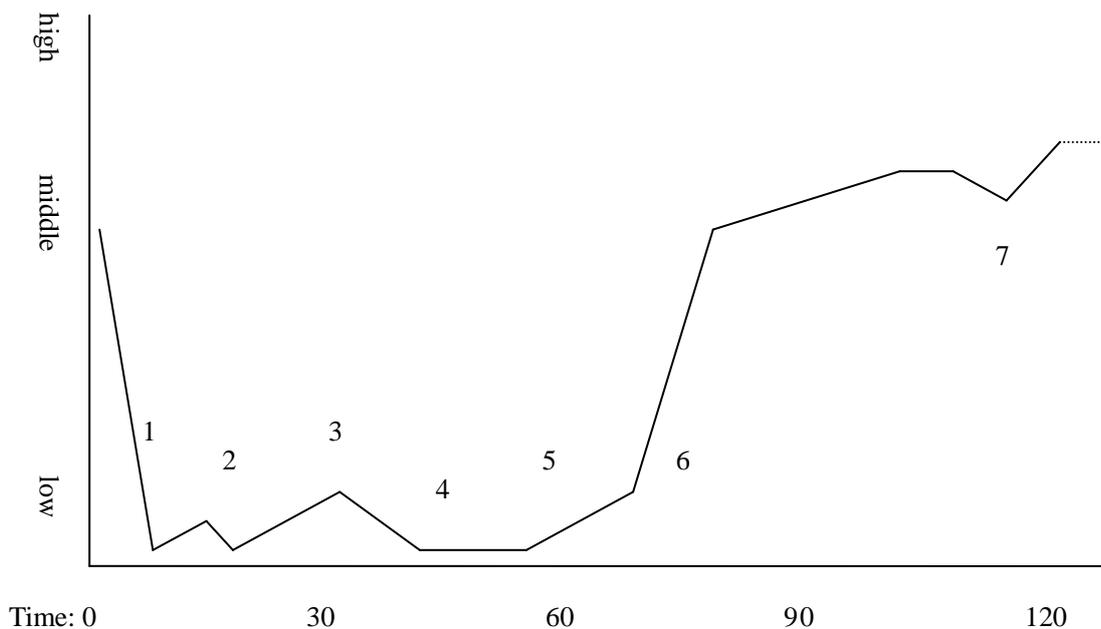


1. Navorski hears the news about a revolutionary war in Krakozhia, but he can do nothing about it.
2. Dixon gives Navorski a leading question 'Are you afraid of Krakozhia?'; he answers 'No.'
3. As an interpreter, Navorski saves a traveler from Eastern Europe Speaking Russian.
4. Amelia helped him leave the airport, but he loses her at the same time.
5. He is on the way back home (talks with cab drivers).

National identity refers to the individual's sense of belonging to a nation state. Of course, there are cases in which two individuals in a same nation state may be differentiated in personalities, belief systems, geographical locations, time and language, yet regard themselves and be seen by others, as members of the same nation. National identity means to share duties toward other members in a political sense, and responsibilities for the actions of the members of the same nation.

Immediately after his arrival, Navorski was captured by the airport security, and his national identity plunges into crisis with his passport confiscated and voided. When he heard the news that a revolutionary war broke out in his home country as in 1, his national identity lurched into crisis and reaches its peak. Generally, his national identity remains high in average during the rest of the film as well. There are a couple of more moments when his national identity reaches its peak as in 2 and 3. Perhaps, it is plausible that his national identity does not rise only when he is preoccupied with social relationships with friends, especially with Amelia. One can easily conclude that this is a film characterized by the theme of national identity.

6-2: Transition of Economic Situation



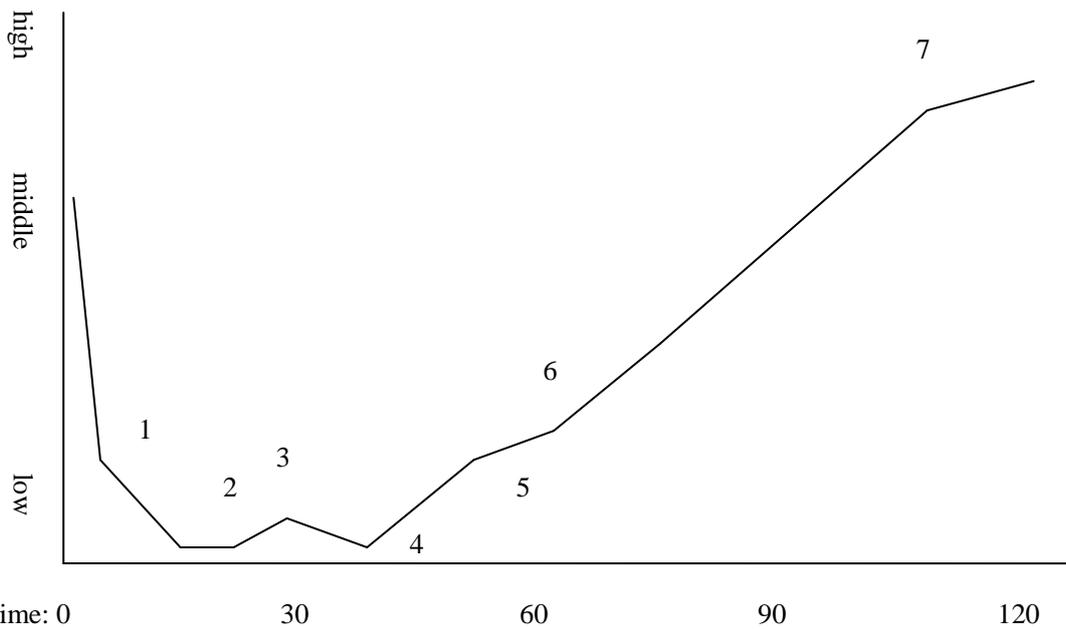
(Key incidents)

1. Cash and the passport are taken away.
2. Meal Coupons are given.
3. Navorski starts cart business (earns cash by collecting airport carts).
4. He lost the job in 3.
5. Free meals are provided by an airport janitor who became a friend with Navorski.
6. Construction work is provided for 19 dollars per hour.
7. Navorski purchases an expensive suit for his date, Amelia.

For the first half of the film, Viktor Navorski's economic situation remains relatively low since his cash as a tourist to the US was confiscated, and meal coupons were lost accidentally. However, he finds a creative way of earning cash for living—collecting quarters from airport carts.

Viktor is projected as persistent in this film. He repeatedly parleys with an immigration officer, Torres (Zoe Saldana), which has been carefully observed by Diego (Enrique Cruz); Viktor's persistence of frequent appearance in front of Torres has led to the situation of 5. His creativity and dexterity saves himself as in 6, and his economic stability has been remained stable ever since.

6-3: Social identity shift



(Key incidents)

1. Passport is taken away.
2. Novorski becomes a man without an official nationality.
3. Navorski starts cart business (earns cash by collecting airport carts).
4. He had to face the bullying of Dixon, losing his work in 3.
5. Navorski was able to communicate with Amelia.
6. Navorski is accepted as the same breed by the airport janitors.
7. Navorski enters the US.

Generally speaking, the emphasis is on difference from others when personal identity is focused; on the other hand, the similarities with others are stressed when one discusses social identity, and one's social identity is closely linked to categorization.

'We categorize objects in order to understand them, in a very similar way we categorize people (including ourselves) in order to understand the social environment. We use social categories like black, white, Australian, Christian, Muslim, student, and bus driver because they are useful. If we can assign people to a category then that tells us things about those people, and as we saw with the bus driver example we couldn't function in a normal manner without using these categories; i.e. in the context of the bus. Similarly, we find out things about ourselves by knowing what categories we belong to. We define appropriate behavior by reference to the norms of groups we belong to, but you can only do this if you can tell who belongs to your group.'

(Kellner, <http://www.anu.edu.au/psychology/groups/categorisation/socialidentity.php>)

Viktor was isolated when he was thrown into the international transit lounge where he came to learn about the political reality back home. Without sufficient English proficiency, he was not able to communicate efficiently, which means he could not relate to others; therefore, his social

identity remained low. However, it should be noted that he begins to identify himself with the airport janitors whose constituent members consist of minority groups in the US society as his English improves, and he is recognized as a comrade by the members. In other words, he fits into the classification system of this airport community.



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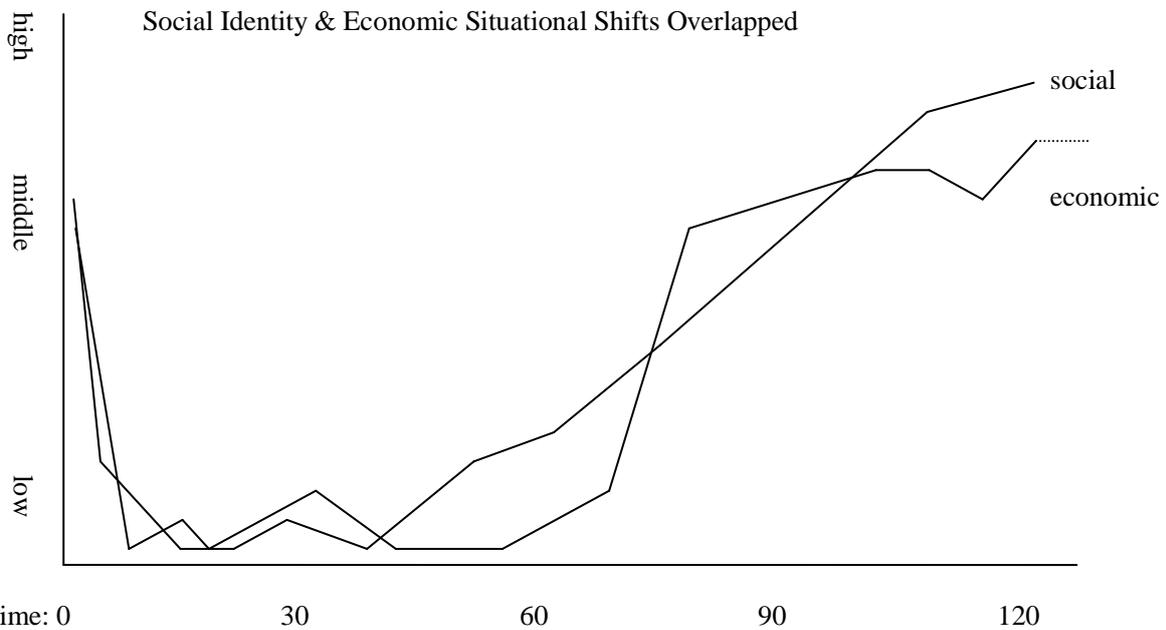
Still, significance lies in the fact that Viktor's identification with this airport staff group shapes his attitudes toward others in important ways, usually building intra-group trust, and distinguishing his disposition towards out-group or enemy that is reciprocally necessary for strengthening his social identity. Accordingly, the relationship between Dixon and Viktor has shifted from 'a single tourist without a visa and the airport commander' to 'a minority resident and an autocratic enemy.'

7. Conclusion:

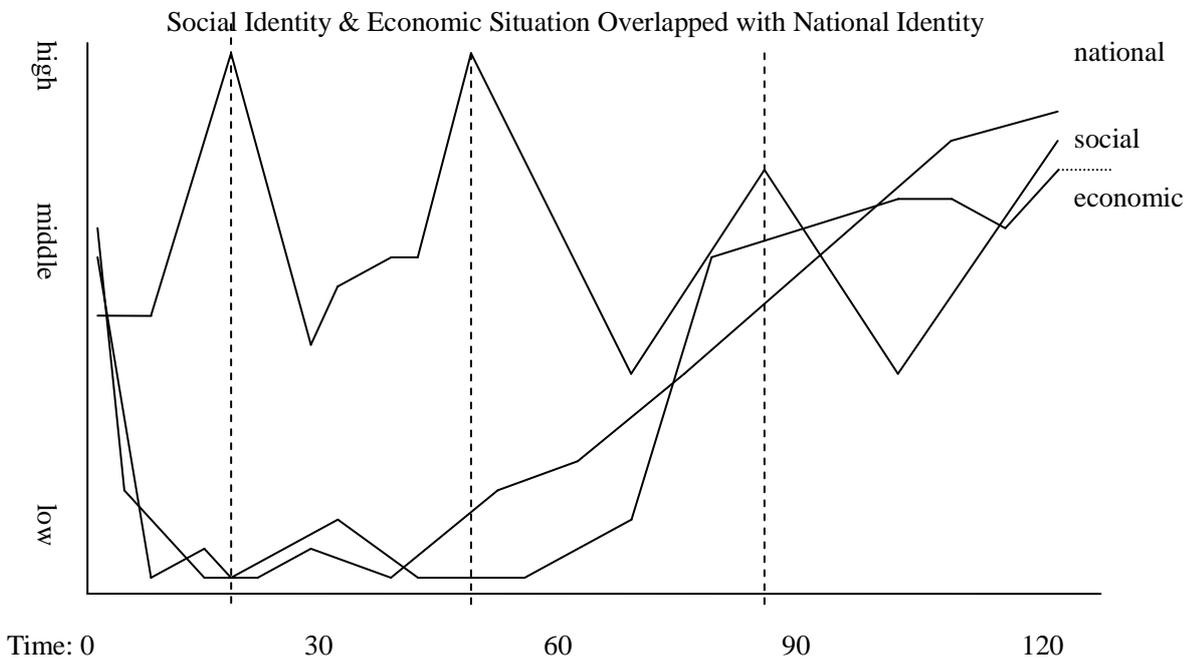
This particular work of Spielberg may have been pretty much an impact on American citizens because the setting was reminiscent of the 9/11 terrorist attack. The setting is the JFK terminal that is thronged not only with international tourists, but also with immigrants and working class employees of the fast-food restaurants and gift shops who attempt to earn minimum wage paychecks. Also the experiences of identity crises Viktor Navorski went through were parallel to those of the immigrants and sojourners. Ironically speaking, the film has a message that a nation founded by immigrants originally is closing its doors to visitors.

Semiologically speaking, infusion of commercialism is characteristic of this film as well like other Hollywood products, and comedian touches deployed in this film ridicule the management system that derives from rationalism and progressivism, and specify the definite ceiling to it. The limit of such management becomes obvious when value conflicts come to the fore front; the film reveals an aspect of cultural politics of minority issues of the US as well. Dixon's management blunder attributes to the disregard of human factors such as cultural differences, ethnic backgrounds, and significance of identity politics.

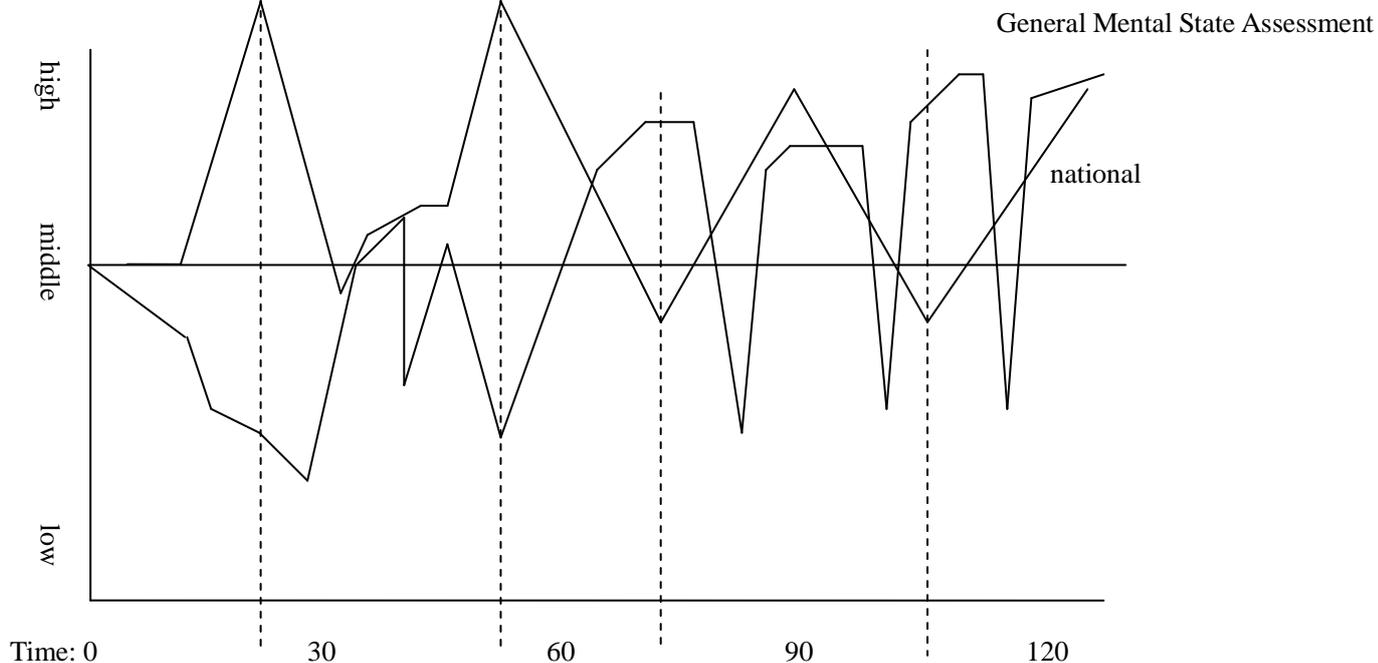
Next, identity shift charts show a striking overlap between social identity and economic situation of the protagonists. It seems as though the rise of social identity would help that of economic situation or vice versa.



Whether or not it should be typically characteristic of capitalism needs further research; however, the result of analysis indicates that these two factors are interrelated. In any rate, the construction of social identity with intra-group trust is clearly illustrated in the film. Navorski has won trust from the airport janitors to be able to identify him with those around and from Amelia as his human relation skills improve. He has also won heroic recognition of his companies by saving a minority immigrant.



Furthermore, as contrasted to the striking overlaps between social identity and economic situation, the transition of national identity of the protagonist shows different moves. An obvious finding is that the national identity curve extends to the highest when social identity and economic situation remain at the lowest. In this film, one can generalize that one's national identity tends to be intense when his/her economic situation/social identity is in crisis.



Regarding the comparison with the U-curve theory, the most resembled sequential line has been the social identity; whereas, this film is outstandingly characterized by patriotism or national identity of the protagonist. The overlap of sequential line graphs above shows that, during the first half of the film, the shifts, of his national identity and mental state assessment, are inversely proportional; quite a contrast to each other. Especially when his national identity soars up, the mental state assessment is low; this well illustrates an identity crisis. Eventually, all the sequential lines (social, economic, national, and mental) are being aggregated towards the end of the film for staging a happy ending. A key finding of this study is that one's intercultural adjustment process parallels the social relations with his/her personal environment, which mirrors Martin Buber's existential approach. Perhaps, it is fair to say that one needs to reconsider what the U-curve represents: whether it is depression or social identity crises.

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