

Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

Cinematic Women as Warriors Against Capitalism

By Emily Jones

Dedicated to All of My Female Mentors

My Advising Committee: Professors Shakti Jaising, Sandra Jamieson, and Christopher Andrews

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor in Arts with

Specialized Honors in English

May 2022

Abstract

In this thesis on 21st century transnational and american films, I explore several character archetypes that comment on the exploitation of capitalism and also critique the marginalization of women within this larger system. These films attempt to contest dominant ideologies and stereotypes that naturalize globalization and capitalism's economic practices.

The first chapter analyzes the female migrant's journey in *Maria Full of Grace* and *Bread & Roses*. These films humanize normally criminalized characters and they propose that these characters' actions are consequences of harsh exploitation under globalization.

The second chapter moves to the commodification of the female body in *Dirty Pretty Things* and *Hustlers*. The sex workers in these films are humanized and portrayed as complex characters who seek to break out of the capitalist structure that views them only as objects.

Lastly, the third chapter focuses on the villainized professional working woman in *Snowpiercer* and *Michael Clayton*. These films expose the new feminist ideology that views corporate power as the ultimate achievement for women. They propose their characters as de-feminized women and intriguing villains: these women cause harm but the films expose the ways in which they are products of the system.

Table Of Contents

Introduction - Page 2

Chapter 1 - Page 6

Chapter 2 - Page 20

Chapter 3 - Page 37

Works Cited - Page 54

Introduction

In stereotypes and connotations of femininity, women are often depicted as weak and the empathetic gender. Femininity in American society has become a symbol of complex emotion, which has been twisted to different perspectives and ideologies. But the female gender has taken on unique burdens within contemporary capitalist societies, and as films attempt to engage with and concretize issues in society, femininity has taken a central place in cinematic criticisms of our economic structure. When I was a young girl, I was flooded with films of all types of female models that I believed to be social expectations. I believed they were expected to be the young teenage girl's role models, but as I made my own journey in the capitalist world, I found myself questioning the societal constructions of femininity. In this thesis, I examine the characterization of women under capitalistic control in 21st century transnational and US films. Each of the films I examine features female characters fighting for their survival and battling with the effects of economic globalization on gender roles and women's roles in particular. They depict how women must sacrifice their bodies in direct or indirect ways, as well as their ideas of traditional feminine roles, in order to maintain or gain status within capitalism. The films challenge traditional modes of representing women on screen and relate them to the real-world problems of women fighting against the patriarchal structure embedded in capitalist globalization.

So what kind of economic structure have women found themselves in? In recent years, a complex capitalist ideology and structure have taken hold in the global economy. Named "globalization," this ideology justifies policies and practices such as privatization, withdrawal of the state from public services—also known as austerity—and other trade policies. Many critics such as Silvia Federici and Ronaldo Munck have discussed the consequences of this ideology and the policies that it enables, and specifically its tragic effects on female labor. They both

argue that the global system is dependent on the labor of migrant women in the first world, feeding on their desperation for basic needs and more opportunities. Another critic Valentine Moghadam, in “Gender and Globalization,” argues that globalization has had a deep effect on female workers and their financial positions. She explains, “women have had to assume extra productive and reproductive activities in order to survive the austerity of adjustment and stabilization policies, including higher prices, and to compensate for the withdrawal or reduction of government subsidies of food and services.” (370) Moghadam, like the aforementioned authors, points out the increasing sacrifices and demands of women in the workplace.

Contemporary Hollywood and transnational films including *Dirty Pretty Things*, which I will discuss in this thesis, embody the different struggles of women under contemporary globalization. Thus, I will draw on theories about gender and globalization in conjunction with film theory in order to explore and assess the perspectives of these various contemporary films that focus on the effects of capitalism on women’s societal roles as well as inner experiences.

Gender Subjectivity and Racial Capitalism

A key piece to this discussion is the concept of gender subjectivity and how the inner experience of gendered bodies and women, in particular, is affected by the outer world. Essentially, how is gender situated in the films and how does it affect the different characters’ personalities and actions? In his *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger sought to discuss the positions of a woman under the eye of herself and the men around her:

“A woman’s presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her....she has to survey everything she is and everything she does because of how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of life.” (46)

Essentially, in his research on film and art, Berger came to the conclusion that women are not only subjects living under the male societal gaze, but because of this gaze, everything about themselves is under judgment and related to their gender, influencing their performance in society. From Hollywood films like *Michael Clayton* to independent films like *Dirty Pretty Things*, we see how characters' gender heavily affects their inner lives, their personal choices, and how they deal with the world around them. In the first chapter, I seek to understand the plight of the female migrant, a character archetype that has been explored in several contemporary films. I show how, departing from the criminalization of the illegal migrant, films like *Bread & Roses* (1999, Ken Loach) and *Maria, Full of Grace* (2004, Joshua Marston) portray their immigrants as empathetic victims of a callous system that refuses to acknowledge its dependency on their labor. The films depict the hidden or invisible transnational movement and labor of female migrants, who have been rendered impoverished by globalization and exploited for their desperation within the western capitalist market. Through these films, I explore the relationship between gender and the concept of "racial capitalism." As Jodi Melamed notes, capitalism has always depended on racial inequality and exclusion. Building on the work of race scholars like Ruth Gilmore, Melamed proposes that racial segregation is the "base algorithm for capitalism, which only exists and develops according to its capacity 'to control who can relate and under what terms'" (78). Both of these films expose the emotional costs of racialized characters and the internal sacrifices they make for their families within the global capitalist system.

Female Agency versus The Male Gaze

The second chapter turns to films that highlight sexual labor and the commodified transformation of the body. Films like *Dirty, Pretty Things* (2002, Stephen Frears), and *Hustlers*

(2019, Lorene Scafaria) raise questions about women's constraints within a capitalist market that renders them commodities through the commodification and sexualization of the female body. These films combat this process by exposing the inner subjectivity of sex work as forced by the market's treatment of women and the societal degradation of women who are sexually exploited. Their characters find sanctuary by forming connections with each other and acknowledging their invisibility, which they weaponize to escape from societal demands.

Ambition, Agency, and Gender

Lastly, the figure of the villainized professional working women within contemporary cinema will come under question in the final chapter. Many Hollywood films, like *Devil Wears Prada* (2006) or *Network* (1976), have suggested through their professional female characters that women have the choice to participate in the exploitative nature of capitalism and strive for a higher position within the economic system. Catherine Rottenberg refers to the feminism of these films as Neoliberal Feminism, which she argues denies fundamental issues with gender and economic structures and positions women's liberation and progress as merely a question of individual choice. However, *Snowpiercer* (2007, Bong Joon-ho) and *Michael Clayton* (2013, Tony Gilroy), on which I focus, expose neoliberal feminism and the corporate woman as a scapegoat for systemic corporate exploitation. The films suggest that the professional working woman does not have any actual control over her position or choices, but is simply conforming to expectations demanded by capitalist society. They prompt viewers to question neoliberal feminism's emphasis on the individual corporate woman and allow them to question corporate success as the ultimate goal for every woman.

Chapter 1 - Globalized Capitalism and The Female Migrant

When exploring films critiquing capitalism from the perspective of a female character, the trope of the migrant working-class worker stands as one of the most prominent conventions directors use. Through this character, filmmakers tacitly comment on the explicit violence used by the economic system and give faces to what are often hidden victims in the labor market.

This chapter focuses on this recurring trope in contemporary cinema as a way of exploring capitalism's overall effects on racialized women and to comment on how these films play out their characters' lifestyles. Typically set in films situated in the contemporary United States, these workers are predominantly from Southern American countries and immigrate to America in hopes of gaining a better financial position to support their families. In the transnationally produced films, *Bread & Roses* (1999, Ken Loach) and *Maria, Full of Grace* (2004, Joshua Marston), for instance, the connections between gender and globalization are concretized in the character of the female working-class migrant from Mexico and Colombia respectively. The main characters of these films are forced to fight for a better position for their families due to economic strife, and they are compelled to sacrifice a piece of themselves in order to survive in harsh conditions. The films allow their characters to take different paths for rebellion, though they accept the consequences of being set against the overwhelming system and the "tremendous economic and social costs" (Ruccio 40) suffered by poor migrant workers in the US. Through this refusal to villainize typically stigmatized characters and by empathizing with them, the films depict a global economic system that is founded on exploitation as well as the injustices of racism and misogyny.

Three Films on Gender, Exploitation, and Self-Sacrifice

Before delving into the meat of the films, we must first acknowledge the context in which the films were created. *Bread & Roses* (1999) was directed by Ken Loach, an English filmmaker known for his work depicting social issues, and *Maria Full of Grace* (2004) was written and directed by Joshua Marston, an independent director from the US. While *Maria Full of Grace* was directed by a white American man, he hired Colombian actors for the Colombian roles and even involved the real “Mayor of Little Colombia” from Queens to play the helping hand of Don Fernando, who helps Maria in the film. *Bread & Roses* took similar steps by hiring non-actors, a practice that disrupts the normative casting conventions of Hollywood. Through this casting of non-actors and people who have experienced a similar life to their characters, they challenge conventionalized stereotypes about illegal migrants in general and specifically, racialized female immigrants.

In *Bread & Roses*, we are given a view into the struggle for unionization by cleaning companies in Los Angeles. Rosa, a Mexico-born mother supporting her large family and an ill husband, sells her body when in desperate straits and rats out her fellow janitorial workers for a promotion. In the process, she not only loses her freedom under her employer but also her relationship with her sister and other coworkers who are organizing to form a union. Meanwhile, Maya, Rosa’s sister and an idealist who dreams of and fights for better working conditions is deported to Mexico after protesting for unionization and robbing a gas station to provide money for a coworker’s education. Rosa sacrifices because of her caretaking responsibilities and exploits her body for the sake of her family. On a different side, Maya gives up her ability to work in the US for others like her in the working class.

Later in 2004, *Maria, Full of Grace* tells the story of Maria, a migrant, abandoning her home in Colombia for possible opportunities in America. Living with her grandmother, sister,

and her niece, Maria and her mother work to support her family on a rose plantation. After being refused any leniency by her strict boss and learning that she is pregnant, Maria quits and sets off to find a better position. She discusses her future with her detached boyfriend, who attempts to propose, but wishing for more, Maria concedes they are not in love and departs. She is later convinced to become a drug mule and travels to New York City, hoping for more beyond her impoverished life in Colombia.

Race, Gender, and Capitalism

While race is not overtly discussed in either *Bread & Roses* or *Maria Full of Grace*, it still plays an indirect role in constructing the characters' place within a capitalist society. The films implicitly comment on the idea of "racial capitalism," which critiques the ways that the logic of race fuels the exploitative nature of the economic structure. Jodi Melamed, in her "Racial Capitalism" explains,

"Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups.... These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. Most obviously, it does this by displacing the uneven life chances that are inescapably part of capitalist social relations onto fictions of differing human capacities, historically race." (77)

Melamed suggests that racism, or the alleged superiority of ethnicities over others, naturalizes inequalities that capitalism "requires" for maximum accumulation of capital. It creates a fiction in which unequal positions economically are understandable or acceptable. Both films comment on how the history of race and imperialism has set back the Global South, including places like Mexico and Colombia.

If we connect racialization to a gendered theory about globalization, we see a relationship between vulnerable positions and capitalism's demands for social reproduction. Silvia Federici, a

famous proponent of the connections between female labor and globalized capitalism outlined the issue arising from globalization and capitalism's need for exploitation preying on third-world countries. In her chapter "Emigration, Reproduction, and International Feminism", of *Revolution at Point Zero*, she makes the claim that wars, massacres, and refugees are not just the consequences of impoverishment, but "necessary complements of the privatization of land relations and the attempt to create a world in which nothing escapes the logic of profit." (69) Female labor power from former socialist and Third World countries make a majority of the metropolitan workforce in the advanced capitalist countries of the global North and is needed for maximum capital accumulation. Because of this, capitalism and globalization have created a structure of violent social reproduction that provokes stories like Maya's, Rosa's, and Maria's.

Victimization, Not Stigmatization

The histories and cultures of Southern American countries, Colombia, and Mexico, play a key role in shaping the characters of Maria and Maya, as do present-day racist and xenophobic practices in the US, which the films depict. While Mexico is barely seen in *Bread & Roses*, it sets the stage for the film's plot in Los Angeles, and the audience and Maya are forced back to it at the end of the film. *Bread & Roses* (1999) finds its Mexican-born protagonists in the US combating capitalism in different ways with different mindsets. In one beginning scene, Maya has just illegally immigrated to Los Angeles and is set on gaining a job beside Rosa as a cleaning maid. When she first arrives at the office building, the first shot allows the buildings and pillars to dominate the young Maya. She looks up to the shadows of the building and the light seems to fade as she walks closer. A guard attempts to stop her, but Rosa vouches for her. She gains access to a basement full of dark artificial light and the audience feels closed in. Her fellow workers

seem to be all vulnerable members of society, the old and the illegal, and mostly of Hispanic ethnicity.

A major point to Maya's story is her illegality in America and her sense as an outsider to US capitalism. In the scene of Maya joining the ranks of the maids, the viewer gets a sense of optimism through the eyes of Maya. The beginning of the film finds her running through the deserts of Mexico and the abundance of Los Angeles serves as a refreshing change from the desolate feeling of Maya's journey with the coyotes. Wide shots of the city and the upward angles of the corporate buildings fill the audience and Maya with both the feeling of powerlessness and power. Before she enters the building, her eyes are filled with wonder and awe of where her sister works. *Bread & Roses* goes against the stereotype of the criminalized alien by allowing the audience to connect to Maya's optimism for her job as a maid.

While the film does not blame Maya for her illegal status, Rosa is also not given the normal stigmatization of sex workers. Near the end of the film, she angrily confesses to Maya the desperate lengths she is forced into. This follows when Maya confronts Rosa for telling their employer, Perez the activities and members of the union strike. The camera widens on the two women facing and oscillates between Rosa's anger and Maya's surprise. With barely any cuts, the audience feels right in the middle of the space with the confronting women, being prompted to identify with both. At first, Maya takes on the subject role of the camera and the audience empathizes with her anger towards Rosa's seemingly selfish actions. Rosa, however, argues that Maya has no understanding of real-world risks and the burden of supporting a family on her own. She then becomes the central character of the viewer's attention and her own anger at the system is felt throughout. As a result, it is not Rosa who emerges as the one to blame; rather, the

system of the cleaning company, the offices, and capitalism, in general, become the objects of critique for their role in pushing Rosa to the brink.

Sex work in *Bread & Roses* does not feel like work chosen by a shameless person, but akin to sexual exploitation by the system. The viewer becomes empathetic towards Rosa's plight of supporting a sick husband and her children. This is furthered by Maya refusing to blame her sister anymore for her actions. She is sickened but understands and knows she herself benefited from Rosa's sex work. As Rosa explains, Maya would not even be a janitor in Los Angeles if Rosa did not give Perez what he wanted. The film exposes not only each woman's subjectivity and the constraints they live within but also the structures and the system that has created this subjectivity. As Valentine M. Moghadam explains in "Gender and Globalization," their gender has set female workers even lower in capitalism. She brings attention to prejudiced ideologies with globalization: "Gender and racial ideologies have been deployed to favor white male workers and exclude others, but they have also been used to integrate and exploit the labor power of women and of members of disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups in the interest of profit-making." (371) Maya and Rosa both belong to ethnic and gender identities that have been exploited by the capitalist system that depends on their cheap and desperate labor.

Bread & Roses demonstrates that these choices of Maya and Rosa are necessary for the sake of their survival and that of others around them. They do not stigmatize Maya's illegal entering of the country or Rosa's sexual labor but create an empathetic connection between them and the audience. As Maya is deported in one of the final scenes of the film, the sun shines and the workers wait for her bus to depart. They are neither sad nor angry but grateful for her work in their cause. On the other side of the road, Rosa stands and attempts to avoid her ex-coworkers, who call for her to join them. The workers do not blame her either for her previous actions. The

camera switches between Maya's bittersweet emotion, the workers' cheering goodbye, and Rosa's care for her sister. We are forced to watch as Rosa runs after Maya's bus and helplessness runs through the characters, but the film finishes with a mere knowing smile of reconciliation between the fallen sisters. The film presents this ending as almost inevitable and leaves the audience with a bittersweet feeling of both victories—for the unionization effort—and loss—on a personal level for both Maya and Rosa. All of this loss, from Maya's deportation and Rosa's confession, feels like collateral damage from participation in the economic side.

If we look to a later film, *Maria Full of Grace* (2004), this criticism of capitalist globalization and its effects on women from the global South is furthered through the depiction of drug mules. In an early scene when Maria's sister attempts to buy medicine for her son, the audience is privy to a moment of family dependency. The camera's perspective flips from Maria's confession, concerning her termination, to her mother & sister and their anger with her ambition. They blame her for the loss of financial stability and do not understand her difficulty over the hard nature of her work. The audience is conflicted with their empathy for Maria's situation and anger at her family for their dependence on Maria's work, but there is also a sense of desperation as Maria is one of the only workers in a family in which Maria's sister is caring for a sick child and Maria's mother is shown working long hours in the opening of the film.

Earlier, I denoted Maria's choice as ambition and Maria's mother claims that she is simply being rebellious against the society they live in, but is it so wrong for Maria to hope for a better life? Throughout *Maria Full of Grace*, Maria's actions are disregarded by the other Colombian characters, except the film's perspective and Lucy and Carla. Maria's mother and sister seem to be the main proponents in Maria's life to argue against Maria's dreams. They serve as reminders of Maria's future in Colombia and what she would be if she were to stay as a single

mother working in the rose plant, which is the only source of employment in her town. Federici notes the harmful effects of the Colombian flower industry and of staying in these impoverished nations that are being taken advantage of within the system of global capitalism.

“It is an illusion to think that working in these industrial zones may be a good temporary solution for young women on the way to marriage. Most of them end up spending their lives locked up in jail-like factories, and even those who quit find that their bodies have already been harmed. Take the case of the young women working in the flower industry in Colombia or Kenya, who after a few years or even months on the job go blind or develop deadly diseases because of constant exposure to fumigation and pesticides.” (87)

While many believe and argue, like Maria’s mother and sister, that it is possible (or just necessary) for one to survive in these exploitative conditions, Federici reminds us that there exist long-term and harmful effects that haunt these women. In the case of Maria, there not only seems to be a generational history of single motherhood but an emphasis on a child’s economic value over their individual happiness, as seen in Maria’s discussions with her own mother. They depend on Maria’s youth and strength to support the family; they depend, in other words, on her sacrifice.

As she delves into the drug smuggling world, Maria meets another more experienced drug mule, Lucy, who teaches her how to properly swallow the cocaine packets. In this scene, Lucy and Maria share a heartfelt moment as Lucy tells Maria about America and the dangers of drug smuggling. Lucy describes America as “too perfect” and in the country, everything is too perfect to be believed. When the film transitions to New York, everything does seem possible for Maria, where she eventually obtains a new job and a doctor for her pregnancy. The narrative voice at the outset appears to agree with Lucy’s estimation, as they compare the desolate background of Colombia to the abundant and modernized New York City. Through Lucy’s patience and comfort, the sense of risk feels not so great, and America feels as if it provides

opportunities for them both. However, when the viewer witnesses Lucy's brutal death, we also come to see the costs of being a drug mule. The film simultaneously proposes this crime of smuggling is necessary for Maria's survival and provides a new space for her to grow as a caretaker-- but not without sacrifice.

Colonizing Women's Bodies

Maria Full of Grace compares its protagonist to the religious figure, Mother Mary, not only in name but also in their sacrifice for the world. Paintings of the Madonna are often depicted as looking beyond the canvas with light behind, which the movie flips in their infamous cover with Maria gazing up at a cocaine packet. This image is also seen when Maria goes on the anticipated flight to America or New York City, just before Lucy becomes extremely sick from possibly broken cocaine packets. In her essay, "The Intimacies of Globalization," Emily S. Davis notes this comparison and connects her to the whore Mary Magdalene. She points out a doubleness to Maria's pregnancy: "Maria also functions as a sort of Christian Mary among us, whose success can be read as a product of her being divinely blessed and of her graceful compassion toward others. But she is certainly no saint, and her unrepentant joy in her unwed pregnancy positions her as a double for both the Marys of Catholicism: the virgin mother and the so-called whore Mary Magdalene." (63) Davis suggests that writer-director Joshua Marston acts out a conflict between purity and corruption through the comparison to Mary Magdalene, and nature versus modernization of capitalism through Maria's choices. She is happy with her pregnancy and sacrifices herself for the child by becoming a drug mule and a single mother. Maria comes to represent the border between capitalism's potential for modernization and its destruction of natural labors. As we move through the airplane with Maria and Lucy, Maria forgets who she is supposed to be for immigration and Lucy offers up her sister as an excuse for

Maria's journey. In both scenes in the bathroom and with the two women, the camera peers over Maria's shoulder and the viewer feels active participation in the world, which seems cold and artificial. The plane has glimpses of natural light, but the space feels small and confined, trapping the audience and Maria in this terrifying situation. It acts as a metaphor for these women's situation, feeling as if there is only one path of action the women can take.

Emily S. Davis also sought to tie in the physical sacrifice of the body for globalization. She makes the claim that *Maria Full of Grace*, like another contemporary film, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2004, Stephen Frears), is concerned with visualizing globalization's "penetration of and movement through bodies" (34). Davis notes uncomfortable physical intimacies demanded throughout Marston's film as Maria is sacrificing not just her physical body, but her dignity as well. Lucy becomes a tragic victim, and her body is desecrated for the retrieval of drugs. As Davis explains, they both become "cargo vessel(s) for mass-produced commodities." (61) Transporting widely demanded commodities and fetishes to the Global North, these women give up their bodies to be transformed into capitalist tools for the consumption of others. Their bodies are not theirs but means of distribution for commodified products. Capitalism has commodified their bodies to be bought and sold. This transformation is a damaging and dangerous risk for them to take, which we come face-to-face within *Maria, Full of Grace*.

Contradictory Class Locations

As we near the end of *Maria Full of Grace*, Maria is confronted by TSA agents, who suspect her of drug smuggling. The viewer is filled with a feeling of suspense, worried about Maria being arrested or deported, like Maya's fate. This is also the first case of Maria's actions being criminalized from the perspective of the viewer. However, the scene empathizes with Maria rather than exposes her criminality. The female Hispanic officer seems almost snobbish at

the lower class woman and seems different from her male white counterpart, who believes she is going too much after Maria. The officer asks no questions of Maria and simply assumes she is a criminal to be detested. She does exhibit some signs of sympathy, but she maintains an air of authority. This is indicative of Erik Olin Wright's theory of "contradictory class positions," which asserts that individuals are able to appear to be in "*simultaneously in two classes*: they are workers in that they are exploited and dominated by capital; they are capitalists in that they dominate" (710). Workers, like the female TSA agent, simultaneously occupy these minority and subordinate positions which allow them to appear higher than the lower class, who they may share more traits with.

The female TSA agent does share a similar position to Maria, as seen in her male officer's overrule of her. Her subjectivity is dominated by what is allowed by the system and instead of turning to drug smuggling or other illegal means like Maria, she finds power in dominating the lower class. Silvia Federici discusses the social position of this sort of higher-class working woman: "For the image of the uniformed woman, gaining equality with men through the right to kill, is the image of what globalization can offer to us, which is the right to survive at the expense of other women and their children, whose countries and resources corporate capital needs to exploit." (90) She claims that if women were to gain power under globalization's structure, they would be culprits in their own exploitation and violence against fellow women. In this movie, the TSA agent represents this group of women that sacrifice their morality to maintain a place within the exploitative capitalist system.

In this interrogation between Maria and the agent, the narrative voice sets them across from each other and they seem to find no understanding in each other's positions, though they share a gender identity. The camera is almost an agent alongside them changing from the agents'

fed-up faces to Maria's fearful expression. The viewer is simultaneously an agent in Maria's interrogation, but sympathetic with her position. We have seen where she has come from and the circumstances surrounding her. The movie has humanized the drug mule position and asked us to not blame her individual actions, but the system that has led to her crime. It makes us be put off by the TSA agent's efforts versus agreeing with her degradation of Maria. At the end of this scene, Maria escapes from punishment as the male agent sees nothing to elicit anything and her pregnancy stops them from x-raying her. The film puts forward that her female power protects her and her actions. It refuses to criminalize her in the eyes of the system partially because of the normalized systemic exploitation of her gender and the destruction of her country by globalization.

The Loss of Home

This ideology is the situation for many migrant workers and explains that they do wish to go home, but if they were to, they would lose out on the little support the Global North provides. Through these women's sadness and homesickness, the viewer connects to the migrant plight and feels conflicted as Maria does. A scene of massive importance to the message of the film comes when Maria attempts to tell her friend and host Carla that she is returning home to Colombia. She feels like a fish out of water in a different world, and believes she is taking advantage of Carla's good graces. Maria sits on a lower chair with the nursery behind her looking up at the older mother, who sits in front of warm lighting in the darkness. The scene invokes a comfortability in the viewer and Carla feels like a caring mother believing in Maria's abilities. She understands Maria's longing for home, but Carla argues that there is something more in supporting their families. They are the providers and the breadwinners, who give all of themselves to support the ones back home. They are to sacrifice their own happiness in order for

the family to survive. She recalls the first time she sent money over; “All I wanted to tell them is how much I missed them. But it gets better, trust me...I’ll never forget walking into that office to send money home for the first time.” She confesses that her child will have so many more opportunities and will be able to live his life free unlike in Colombia. Does she stay in America where she is unwanted and alone or does she go back home to an impoverished and dying landscape?

Giving a Voice to the Criminalized

Both, *Maria Full of Grace*, and *Bread & Roses* connect to the audience by humanizing normally stigmatized female migrant characters and by exposing the cruel economic system that has set them onto these paths where they must sacrifice their bodies as well their ties with their countries of origin. The films refuse to criminalize them and allow them the voice to expose their constructed positions within the structures of global capitalism. The narrative voice of both films demonstrates that these women are not just in a position by themselves but are caretakers for others in their family and class. They are the mothers of their communities, the martyrs for the system to exploit. Nearing the end of her article, Davis proclaims this about *Maria Full of Grace* which can also apply to *Bread & Roses*.

“Maria is a xenophobe’s nightmare, and she is doubly dangerous in that she carries not only drugs but unborn foreign children too. The film’s doubling of Maria with the Virgin Mary provides an ideological counterpoint to negative depictions of the unwed mother as a welfare queen, posing her fetus as not only a potential US citizen but the very son of God. We could not be further from the Right’s portrayals of Latin American immigrants as agents of moral contagion.” (“The Intimacies of Globalization” 64-65)

At the outset, Maria, Maya, and Rosa are terrifying subjects that are normally vilified in the media via both racial and gender-based prejudice. However, their films humanize them and connect them to the audience through empathetic subjectivity. These women’s actions are not

villainized or criminalized, and their films accept their means of labor power as justifiable in their position. They were driven to their actions by the uncaring economic system that exploits their desperation and poverty. Instead of being depicted as destroying the order of the capitalist system in the US, they are exposed as a community of hidden and stigmatized labor power emanating from the global South.

Women are often believed to be the social reproducers of traditions and values, but we also have an important role to play in the modes of production for globalized capitalism. Silvia Federici, in her theory about capitalism's effects on women, discussed this conflict between women's societal role and globalization's oppression. She explains that this is often "because lack of access to healthcare and childcare for them means the difference between life and death." (87) Both *Maria Full of Grace* and *Bread & Roses* suggest that migrant women's caretaking roles in their families are affected by their position in the global economic system. These women must make great sacrifices to survive under capitalism's racial oppression and gender-based exploitation. The films propose that we must break out of the stigmatization of racialized migrant women like Maya, Rosa, or Maria and investigate the systematic factors that have created the conditions in which they live.

Chapter 2 - Humanizing the Sex Worker

As we further explore the portrayal of women in contemporary cinema, a controversial issue arises in the capitalistic depiction of sexual labor and its effects on female power. Like the migrant worker, the sex worker is another key character and recurring trope in much of contemporary world cinema. In recent decades, the stereotype of the sex worker has been popularized through a number of blockbuster Hollywood films including *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Showgirls* (1995), and *Cabaret* (1972). In these films, the sex worker is portrayed sympathetically, while at the same time being objectified and fetishized. In *Pretty Woman*, the prostitute is glamourized in shiny dresses and natural beauty, eventually being rescued by a rich and handsome patron who fell in love. *Cabaret* (1972) portrays cabaret dancing as an exotic form of pleasure for the women rather than a desperate job for a female to take.

Departing from these popular representations of the female sex worker, a number of works of independent cinema have attempted to address the hidden exploitation of the global market and commodity fetishism represented in sex work. Independent films like the US film, *Working Girls* (1986), and the British film, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), reveal that these women are much more complex than stereotypes with complicated lives, usually in an impoverished position. In these films, female sex workers are depicted as victims of a harsh and cruel world, compelled to sell their bodies for financial support and survival. They are more than archetypes conforming to the perspective of a male audience.

The Roles Sex Workers Perform

Russell Campbell, in his *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in Cinema*, discusses western cinematic representations of the sex worker from the 1930s to the 2000s and how sexual labor is treated in discussions of world cinema and capitalism. He introduces many archetypes of

prostitutes, such as “happy hooker” films, “which depict prostitutes doing the work voluntarily and with high satisfaction, propos[ing] by implication that society be less hypocritical and openly endorse the profession.” (230) The happy hooker is happy to oblige male desire and enjoys her job, like Sally Knowles in *Cabaret*. Another archetype of interest is the “siren,” a woman who allures men and leads them to the men’s destruction” (61). Underlying each of his chapters on different prostitute archetypes, there is an recurring trope of male domination and how women appeal to their “consumers.”

He comes to argue the paradoxical independence and dependence of such women, who are condemned to filling a role that is highly demanded of them. Campbell explains the different subjectivities the prostitute can be seen through.

“As a sexual *object*, fucking machine, the prostitute is created and sustained by patriarchal society to service men’s desires: she is required to make her body available to men on demand, and then condemned for doing so. As a *subject*, the independent woman contemptuous of the hypocrisy of the system, she poses a threat to that society.” (*Marked Women* 3)

This quote makes the distinction between an object and a subject; an “object” denotes dehumanization and the woman is simply a product. Subject, on the other hand, implies humanity and character, though under submission to an influence or some force. If you were to view sex work simply based on its capitalistic and economic value, these women become physical machines to fulfill men’s desires and are expected to be available at a whim’s notice. Yet, subjectively their work is considered shameful and harmful. The appropriateness of the work is called into question and disavowed as “real” work. However, if we were to look deeper into the internal context and subjectivity of these workers, the hidden necessity of their work becomes exposed as foundational to capitalism, and through solidarity with each other, they gain the power to rebel against the structure.

Being Seen As Only An Object

Fetishization comes from a concept in Karl Marx's critique of capitalism. He maintained that in the creation of capital, there exists in everything a use-value and an exchange value. The *use-value* is determined by what the commodity can be used for, while the *exchange value* is factored on what the commodity can be sold for or "exchanged" for. This can incorporate the production time and costs, the *potential* use or exchange value, even how customers view the commodity and other factors that could change how people perceive the use-value. ("Use Value and Exchange Value" 16-17) However, with these social factors and a capitalist shift to private accumulation, exchange value has elevated in public perception versus the actual use-value. In his "Use Value and Exchange Value," David Harvey used the housing bubble every several years as an example of how the inflated exchange value of houses leads to housing becoming fetishized and being estimated as much more than the use-value. *Commodification*, another Marxist theory, is when a natural asset or other public essentials becomes privatized and becomes capital with an exchange value and use-value. While land and housing are some of the biggest examples of commodification, our bodies and our labor have also become commodities to barter and sell.

Exposing the Male Gaze

In both Hollywood and independent cinematic representations of sex work, the audience is prompted to ask themselves why sex workers continue such degrading labor and how they deal with the consequences. In this chapter, I will focus on the response to this question provided by two especially thought-provoking contemporary films—the first, an independently produced British film, *Dirty, Pretty Things* (2002, Stephen Frears), and the second a more recent mainstream US production *Hustlers* (2019, Lorene Scarfaria). *Dirty Pretty Things* is an overt

critique of the “happy hooker” trope, and it connects sex work to other forms of labor exploitation under capitalism. *Hustlers*, although a Hollywood film, also complicates this trope by emphasizing the ways in which sex workers are expected to *perform* happiness in order to survive.

If we were to compare these films side-by-side, we would be able to explore the perspective of sex workers and their handling of commodification in both. *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), directed by Stephen Frears, was a film produced by BBC Films and sought to depict the life of illegal immigrants in Britain stumbling onto the illegal organ trade. Years later, Lorene Scarafaria and STX Entertainment produced a film, *Hustlers*, about a crew of New York strippers teaming up to drug and rob corporate businessmen. Both movies were made on a relatively small budget, \$10 million and \$20 million respectively, with differing cinematography and offering multiple paths for their characters.

These films are respectively set in Britain and the US and are directed by male and female directors. Their production styles are also markedly different, in that *Dirty Pretty Things* deploys experimental film techniques and de-glamorizes sex work, while *Hustlers* by contrast presents a more visually striking and somewhat glamorized portrait of sex workers. But notwithstanding these differences, both films attempt to not villainize the female characters for their choices and tell a story of their pushing through hardship. The dominant ideology disavows these women as greedy and dirty, but the films depict the women as victims of a cruel world and are desperate for survival. Their main female sex workers are presented as flawed and full of mistakes, but understandable in their present situation. They attempt to find their own way in the world, unable to find any other path and suffer tragic exploitation at the hands of capitalism.

Forced into Submission

The women, in both films, surrender their physical bodies for upward social mobility. They battle with the consequences of the male gaze and the subject's position under male dominance. In her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey explained that women are "bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." (716) Sex work finds women being forced to exchange their bodies to suit this gaze and male desire. Mulvey goes beyond sex work and includes all female positions as under submission to a patriarchal perspective. Through several factors of alienation or a refusal to work within the limits of capitalism, the women are cast out of society and sex work becomes their only labor power. This exile brutalizes the women and forces them to fight "illegitimately" to reclaim their control over their bodies. Senay, in *Dirty Pretty Things*, steals the money from an illegal organ surgery, which Juliette (the labeled prostitute) aids in. In *Hustlers*, the girls rob and blackmail their victims into supporting their survival. Destiny, in the final act, sacrifices her relationship with her friends in order to live free with her daughter. These films depict these women, not as "happy hookers", but rather as victims of a larger system that demands fetishization and commodification of the (female) body.

While it is true women are intensely sexualized, objectified, and fetishized in current society, they are also feared for their innate "otherness" by men. They are depicted as everything men cannot or should not be in a patriarchal society, which capitalism greatly uses to its advantage. In traditional Hollywood media, the prostitute or sex worker is often a figure who uses this fetishization to her advantage, which in turn triggers anxiety in men. To dissuade this worry about female power, films tend to take a conventional route by rendering the prostitute

non-promiscuous and giving her a love story or plaining killing her off (*Marked Women* 27).

However, *Hustlers* (2019) and *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) contest this tradition by depicting their characters as victims of a patriarchal and exploitative system. They refuse to villainize their female characters based on stereotypes or stigmatization of sex work and instead show them as part of a larger, hidden, exploited workforce within contemporary global capitalism.

Two Films That Fight Back

A story of sexual labor and organ trafficking, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) depicts a harsh and cold London in fluorescent lighting with the characters sacrificing their bodies for a chance of financial stability. While the film mainly follows Okwe, a Nigerian doctor working under the table in a hotel, it also centers on Senay, a Muslim Turkish woman attempting to find asylum in Britain. Both are without visas and are unable to work legally, but they are able to find work in a seedy hotel, where Okwe discovers illegal organ operations taking place on immigrants. A point to be mentioned is that all the central characters—except Juliette, an Afro-British woman and a prostitute who works in the hotel— appear to be immigrants. The narrative voice identifies this immigrant labor as the hidden workforce sustaining the higher classes' wealth and the profits of big business in London, which is seen in Okwe's caring for the hotel guests and Senay's cleaning of their dirty secrets. From the title, "dirty pretty things," the film signals the hypocritical nature of the hotel and its dirty secrets paralleled to capitalism's own illusion hiding the nature of exploitation and fetishization.

In this position, the film depicts the immigrant workers as vulnerable to capitalism's need for exploitation in order to secure profits and depicts them as doomed victims of desperation for capital. In the case of Senay, sexual exploitation takes hold of her at every turn, which allows her to ultimately bond with Juliette. Both introductions are close together, but the film sets them up

as opposites. We meet Senay shuffling in, head down, dressed demurely, with a line of older maids who do not say a word. She does not encourage Okwe to talk with her, cutting straight to the intent of their conversation. Okwe describes her to the crude doorman as having “rules,” referring to her guarded interactions with him. She is first seen being watched on a camera, a sense following her continually in the film. Minutes later, we meet a seemingly opposite female image, Juliette stumbling downstairs with her head high. She loudly introduces herself in a revealing leopard print dress and laughs at Okwe’s shyness, with no shame at clarifying her prostitution. While the costumes suppose that they are different in appearance and personality, they are viewed similarly by the male characters around them. Ivan, the Eastern European doorman, sexualizes Senay and tells Okwe that if she is Muslim, she must be a virgin. Although one appears to be a virgin and the other the “whore”—as Juliette suggests early on— the film suggests through the juxtaposition of these scenes that their subjectivity is intrinsically linked to their sexual value and whether they would suit male desire through fetishization. They become sexual commodities in the eyes of those around them. Their true difference might just be Juliette’s acceptance of the fact that she is being asked to become a sexual commodity in order to survive, whereas Senay is uncomfortable with and unable to accept the ways in which she must become a commodity for the purposes of survival.

The film connects these characters’ labor power to sexual identity and how they are viewed by men. The male gaze takes hold of the characters’ position within society and consequently, how they are treated. Throughout *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), Senay’s life and financial position evolve to the male perception of her. Two male police officers are the gatekeepers for her asylum and life in the western first world, threatening deportation if they believed her to be breaking the law. Her employers objectify her and blackmail her for sexual

favors. Male desire underlays Senay's choices and she fights to escape from male domination, proclaiming "But, today I bit." She realizes that she cannot look to the system or to others for protection, but to herself.

In her rebellion against male authority, she is helped by Juliette, who stands as twisted comedy relief and appears resigned to her prostitution. She is, as are the other characters, aware of her invisibility and the perception of her job. She also serves as an opposing parallel to Senay's idealism and strict self-values. When they first meet, Juliette makes clear their difference and labels them, "the Virgin & the Whore." Even after Senay is taken by Juan, they both consider Senay to still be the opposite of Juliette's choices, a position Juan nor the film seems to share. He convinced Senay to join him by offering her to become "one of them," which he does not clarify to be the prostitutes in the hotel or the guests. I argue Senay takes the same position as Juliette, subservient to male pleasure, however, she differs in the end by refusing to give more of herself to be commodified and instead sacrifices someone else's body.

Later in the movie, the viewer and Okwe take a peek into a fight between Juliette and an aggressive customer. As she prepares herself to be comfortable and presentable to him, he becomes impatient and hits her. In this scene, Juliette is not just a victim, though. The camera is positioned behind the corner of the bed, angled up at the two as Juliette crashes to the floor. We see her gather herself and rise to return the attack. The scene is filled with a sense of power and excitement as Juliette demonstrates not only physical power to dominate a taller and stronger man, but an internal one to have the self-esteem to not lay down and refuse to be degraded. Scenes like this one give us insight into Juliette's point of view—into her subjectivity and not just her objective position under the male gaze. Juliette, and eventually Senay, embody a paradox

that grants them an internal power, agency, and independence, even as they submit themselves to fetishization and domination.

Working Under Commodification

A scene that gives the viewer insight into Senay's commodification but also the development of agency comes when she takes work in a sweatshop. After being cornered by the government agents and blackmailed by her employer, she is forced to perform oral sex on him in order to not be exposed. Emily Davis connects prostitution to the commodification of the body.

“To sell parts of one's body, whether kidneys or genitalia, exposes exchanges taken as gifts among equals for the economic exchanges of commodified bodies they really are. Sexual penetration becomes a visual rhetoric in *Dirty Pretty Things* for the most horrific kinds of these body commodifications and dangerous intimacies.”

(*Camera Obscura* 53)

Dirty Pretty Things, she argues, connects sex work to the corruption of the body for labor and commodity production. As Senay becomes more desperate and has no way to escape from the apparatuses that seek to deport her, she turns to Juan's exploitation. He offers her the deal she cannot turn down, legal freedom, but demands her to perform sexual labor and give up her body for capital. By pairing this corruption of the body with immigrants and foreigners, globalization is exposed as not only the organizing of countries and labor but of the body. How we define our bodies has become founded upon their use of it and how it benefits or hinders us.

As we watch Senay at arguably one of her lowest points two-thirds into the film, Juliette comforts her in a scene that takes place in a hotel bathroom, and the women find comradeship in their shared position. This is the first real interaction between the two main women, and both of them appear in white hotel robes and share a cigarette. The light from the mirror shines in the room, creating a sense of warmth. The camera allows the viewer to feel as if they were in the same room with them by their side at their eye level and pointed over their shoulders. They

appear as opposites, the virgin and the whore, but the scene suggests that they are the same and under submission by the same economic forces. They are sexual laborers, either exploited or making calculated transactions between consumers and sacrificing their bodies for capitalist purposes. “Sexism aligns women with the body and breaks them down into parts that act as sexual fetishes—in other words, aside from a literal traffic in organs, they are already ‘organized.’” (“The Intimacies of Globalization” 53-54) Societal notions of women have organized them into a submissive and sexualized position in which they give themselves physically to the capitalist system.

Performing the Sexual

In *Hustlers* (2019)—a title that invokes both gangsters and the name of a famous pornographic magazine—Lorene Scafaria directs a story of a female gang attempting to elevate themselves from stripper-dom to more stable finances. Dorothy, or as she goes more by Destiny, narrates the tale to a white female journalist, who seems to already have the facts. From the comfort of an upper-middle-class couch, she attempts to glamorize her relationship with Ramona, the eventual ringleader of their pursuits. Throughout the film, scenes are lit up by colorful lighting, glitter, and glamorous outfits—a style that is markedly different from that of *Dirty Pretty Things*, with its harsh fluorescent lighting that explicitly de-glamorizes the environments in which sex work takes place.

At times, the camera seems to take the perspective of the men sexualizing the women’s assets, but the context of these women’s jobs, their desperate situations, their seemingly small dreams, and their violence clarify that their actions are merely performances to feed capitalist demand, allowing them to become subjects in the viewer’s eyes. The perception of women as objects has been the dominant ideology in cinema for years and directors, like Lorene Scafaria

and Stephen Frears, have started to set out to expose women's inner subjectivity, which is obscured behind the male gaze. Mulvey explains that "traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen." (*Sexuality and Gender in Cinema* 719) Mulvey believed that women are to be the subjects of a patriarchal gaze that objectifies them not only in the perspective of the narrative but as well the audience. *Hustlers* (2019) completely dismantles these traditions by exposing the erotic performances women take as simply performances and allowing Destiny to take on the role of the narrator, giving the film a more female perspective.

At the beginning of the movie, Destiny performs for one of the first times and feels awkward chasing after customers' attention. She wanders around, offering herself, but Destiny soon becomes hypnotized by an older and more experienced stripper, Ramona. The younger performer takes on the role of the spectator and watches as money rains on her future role model. This motif can be found again and again in *Hustlers*, and not only glamorizes the following events but allows the audience to question the perception of these women. It gives space to understand the performances of these women as performances of gender identity, which recalls Judith Butler's notion of how gender is produced through repetition. When Judith Butler attempts to understand gender, she explained that "performativity is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition." (*Bodies that Matter* 12) How these women act is based on the repeated performance of conventional norms dictating not just their identities as women but also their labor and how they must perform in the capitalist world. Their performativity and appearance are founded in the

rules and ideologies, which are naturalized and hidden from scrutiny. But *Hustlers* (2019) forces the viewer to question these rules and ideologies, and who is really in control of our bodies.

Dorothy or Destiny opens the movie with the statement, “this is a story about control.” Each of the girls are products, with commodified names (ex. Destiny, Mercedes, Diamond, etc.), offering something different and playing a role to pretend they have control over how they act. The film reveals and comments on this illusion of control.

Awaking From a Violent Dream

Scenes that oppose these nightly shiny images of glamorized women performing control over their bodies—even as they ready themselves for exploitation— appear as cold faded cinematography when Dorothy takes care of her grandmother, deals with the fallout of her crimes, and eventually, the final discussion between Ramona & Destiny. These appear as “real” moments to the artificial nature of the past and show us the tragic nature of the events. We may share the idealism of the girls, but these call us back to the truth underlying the danger. Mercedes needs money for a lawyer to keep her boyfriend out of jail, Annabelle has no home to call her own, Ramona is a single mother, and Dorothy is the sole caretaker for her dying grandmother. In each of the scenes with her and her family, the drastic contrast wakes the audience from the dream state of sex and money. There are consequences and lives at stake being cared for in an unstable and weak system.

As to the victims of their drugging, Ramona explains the difference between them and their clients, wealthy and aggressive businessmen from Wall Street. She separates them into three different groups: the worker, the middleman, and the boss. They take the most time to demonstrate the aggression of the CEOs and CFOs relating them to “ax murderers,” as Ramona jokes that they just come directly from the “crime scene.” She clarifies that these men suffer no

consequences of their violence and all of it is “just another deal,” however she believes their transactions with the sex workers are more honest than their capitalist positions. She monologues over a red-lighted room with the camera oscillating from Ramona stripping Destiny enticingly to a businessman throwing bill after bill down, remarking “you just have to play them at their level.” While the scene in the club appears a willingly sexual exchange, the monologue demonstrates a condemnation of the corporate world and how capital is exchanged. It implies dirtiness and violence to the transaction between them.

The Female Threat

In justifying their violence against the men, the film proposes the 2008 crisis when millions of people had their living savings lost in the wall street crash, while many brokers and corporate executives kept their money and stayed in the higher class. This was a time when capitalism crashed and the lower class were seemingly the only ones suffering the consequences of the higher class’ mistakes. The women place themselves as rectifying this massive economic inequality and fighting back against the thievery of the elite. Ramona reunites with Destiny and reveals that she, with several other women, has started to drug customers to fish out more money, arguing that their businessmen clients have stolen from everyone with no consequence. The camera is propped over their shoulder masked with ambient lighting and the scene almost glimmers, better allowing the viewer to connect with the plan. The audience feels compelled to join this “crusade” against the wall street businessmen as if our main figures are robin hood and little john.

When it comes to the girls’ own violence, the film reinforces this evil in their “victims” by depicting them as moronic, drug-addicted, pompous, and focused on the beauty of the girls. We are shown images of men being sexually assaulted, robbed, and hurt under the influence, but

through the women's lack of attention, the pumping music, and the extravagant clubroom, these acts of violence are played for laughs and the viewer feels aligned with the women's delight. However, this becomes broken when Destiny is forced to bring a victim to the hospital by herself and she rushes to walk her daughter to school. We follow her, as the sun rises on her blood-stained crop top, rushing to pick up her daughter. The wide cinematography brings the full image to life as Destiny's tiny frame runs through middle-class suburban streets and past judging onlookers. In a wave of horror, Destiny then arrives home to find her grandmother passed away. The background noises fade as the camera zooms to Dorothy's agonizing face. In this procession, we are confronted not only with the risks the group is taking and the internal toll but also with the tragic circumstances they are stuck in. Destiny/Dorothy appears in a cycle of exploitation and sacrifice. At times, she is successful and happy, but never in a stable position.

Fighting for Stability

A motif that cannot be ignored is Destiny's and Ramona's continual notion of dependence and independence reliant on financial stability. Throughout scenes in which they discuss their goals for life, Destiny reinforces that she is dependent on capitalism to benefit her and her loved ones, which terrifies her as she compares it to a runaway car that is doomed to crash. This desire is also shared by Ramona, who seems to be very aware of the future waiting for her child. American capitalism has come to be believed as a free market and through fetishization & commodification, individuals will be able to rise through the class system, but capitalism maintains massive inequality through dispossessions, advantages for the rich elite, and "naturalized" differentiation, such as gender and race. Many of the actresses playing the sex workers are minorities, including Ramona and Dorothy, hinting at the disproportionate effect on women of color.

David F. Ruccio, in his definition of capitalism, names several of the factors that lead to the setting years of the film;” “the exponential growth of inequality (Collins, di Leonardo, and Williams 2008), the role of economists in creating the crisis (Grossberg 2010b), the increasing importance of the financial sector (R. Martin 2010), the continued racialization of the housing market through subprime lending practices (Lipsitz 2011), and the heightened role of communication technologies and culture in processes of capital accumulation (Fuchs et al. 2010).” (“Capitalism” 42) *Hustlers* (2019) sees several of these factors play out and set back the women of the film, such as the massive difference between the clients and Dorothy’s own wealth. A point that may also be missed is Dorothy’s constant changing from house to house, which may represent the housing crisis instability and the cycle of financial accumulation.

Weaponized Gender Stereotypes

When Destiny first realized she was pregnant, she wished for it to be a boy, which may cause the audience to ask why. However, if we look closely at the gender dynamics in the movie, boys may have a better future. Men are primarily the power in the film, representing the authority figures watching the women, such as the police, and the clientele that they are dependent on. As a male victim compiles evidence against the group, he struggles to prove the crime as societal notions of gender superiority paint him as weak and as shameful for his involvement with strippers. The women exploit their stereotypical inferiority and shame by blackmailing victims with their relationship and the fact that they were tricked by a woman. They twist forms of dispossession that typically are used against them. Destiny and Ramona become an embodied “female threat,” disrupting the patriarchal notions of capitalism and using their stigmatization to their advantage. Finally, when they are confronted with their crimes, we are shown a montage of the women isolated with a crowd of men overshadowing them,

demanding answers. Wide shots of the girls being detained and interrogated while surrounded by taller and bigger men. This portrays the girls as tiny compared to the large rough bodies of their interrogators and eventually, Destiny gives in to their demands.

Building Solidarity

Capitalism thrives on their isolated and alone positions with no support to turn to, which forces people into more desperate situations. David Harvey pointed out this effect stating that “monetization dissolved other ways of forming community with the result, as Marx put it, that ‘money became the community’.” (“Private Appropriation and Common Wealth” 55) While Juliette & Senay came together over shared sexual exploitation, Ramona and Destiny become bonded over a parental relationship founded on Ramona’s financial success. Eventually, both cinematic connections end in either capitalistic gain or the loss of freedom for the working women, but also opportunities for solidarity between them.

As we look at these endings between different sex workers, both films seem to agree that capitalism thrives on forms of violence that exploit the body for capital whether willing or unwilling. Women are one of the most fetishized groups that are forced into positions that require the commodification of their bodies and are seen as products in the larger system. In the endings of Destiny & Ramona and Juliette & Senay, each of these women sacrifices a body for their success; Destiny with Ramona, Ramona and herself, and the *Dirty Pretty Things* girls turning the tables against Juan. These women’s subjectivity is embedded in how they must perform for capitalism’s demands, which forces them to either work for minimum wage or give into the patriarchal and sexual demands. They find rebellion against the system through solidarity with each other and carve out a path for themselves to combat sexualization & submission. The films’ narrative voice supports this by exposing the glamourization of the work as superficial and an

illusion to suit the male gaze. *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002, Stephen Frears) and *Hustlers* (2019, Lorene Scafaria) allow the viewer to look inside the subjectivity of the sex worker and humanize them.

Chapter 3: The Professional Woman's Dilemma

As the mothers of the world, how much should women strive for in a career? This is a question and luxury offered to many women in the global north, who have the power to rise much further than most women from the global south. Cinematic depictions of this group of women often serve as a foundation for directors to discuss how women battle with stereotypes of femininity and an economic structure favoring masculine traits. Underlying this chapter is a key question: How does contemporary Hollywood cinema portray this working woman—particularly women in the corporate world— and how does this cinema thereby influence our understanding of the relationship between gender and capitalism?

A recurring stereotype in contemporary Hollywood cinema is that of the cold calculating professional woman in an executive role. Examples include Diana Christensen in *Network* (1976), Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), or in the comedy genre, Alison Davis in *What Men Want* (2019). Each of these films draws on the stereotype of the cold professionalized woman to explore the relationship between femininity and the demanded brutality of the corporate sector by depicting these women as not only workers but also mothers or sexual beings battling with the expected masculinity in their fields. They are given the choice to either be devoid of emotion and disconnected from morality or in touch with their emotions and their intimate relationships. In *Network*, Diana ultimately chooses to be devoted to her work, disregarding a possible relationship with Max Schumacher, and murdering a man driving her network to low ratings. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda neglects her relationships to maintain her professional position, sacrificing her long-time right-hand's possibility of being promoted. Alison, on the other side, chooses to pursue romantic connections and leave her business to try to start out on her own.

In each of these contemporary films, corporate women come face-to-face with the emotional neglect demanded by their work and deal with their predicament in different ways; however, a key character trait is these women making the conscious and deliberate choice to be unemotional and to disinvest in human contact. Hollywood films have put forward the notion that corporate women choose to gain an influential position in capitalism at the cost of their personal relationships, but they have mostly missed the structural factors shaping the plight of first-world corporate women.

Neoliberal Feminism and its Denial

In her book, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Catherine Rottenberg discusses a form of feminism that is dominant in first-world nations like the United States, which follows neoliberal values and claims that the market is not at fault for social inequalities, and that if the market were less restricted, women would have more of a chance to succeed. In her definition of neoliberalism, Rottenberg explains that she understands “neoliberalism not merely as an economic system or a set of policies that facilitates intensified privatization and market deregulation, but as a dominant political rationality or normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents” (7). In other words, Rottenberg defines neoliberalism not just as a structure or set of laws that dictate privatization, but also as an ideology that believes the individual as capital-producing agents of their own free will. Later, she critiques this new form of feminism as a denial of capitalism’s dependency on the exploitation of the lower classes and globalization’s overall transformation of the Third World countries as labor producing for the First World. Building off of Rottenberg, I argue that this ideology is concretized in Hollywood

films' depiction of the professional working women as being in charge of their own destiny and free to act to their own desires.

Feminists Looking At the World

If Rottenberg focuses on the First World, then Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild highlight the globalized labor market in which large numbers of Third-World women migrate to become domestic care workers in the First World. Domestic care work has historically been the “woman’s job.” It was expected, and arguably still is, that women would occupy the domestic sphere; however, there has been a massive global migration of impoverished female workers from the Third World, which has allowed First World Women to leave the domestic sphere and enter more freely into the job market. In their words,

“Affluent career women increasingly earn their status not through leisure.....but by apparently ‘doing it all’ - producing a full-time career, thriving children, a contented spouse, and a well-managed home. In order to preserve this illusion, domestic works and nannies make the house hotel-room perfect, feed and bathe children, cook and clean up -- and then magically fade from sight.” (*Global Woman* 4)

In *Global Woman*, Ehrenreich and Hochschild argue that career women are not doing it all by themselves but have the ability to do so because others are caring for their private sphere. These women are partially able to enter the work system because there is a hidden labor system fueling the larger economic structure. Professional Women in the First World might argue that they are in control of their position within capitalism, but their very status relies on the exploitation of the labor of care workers, often from the Third World. This character of the professional woman follows Erik Olin Wright’s “contradictory class position” from the first chapter, similar to the agent that attempts to enforce the law over migrants. These women maintain the social order of capitalism in the form of ideology through arguments like “neoliberal feminism.”

A Debate of Class

In a sense, Catherine Rottenberg, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Arlie Hochschild are participating in a debate about the relationship between first-world professional women and working-class immigrant women. Rottenberg claims that there has been a surge in popular culture representations, such as self-help books, the discourse of cultural and political female celebrities, and “mommy” blogs that have promoted a form of first-world feminism that ignores foundational issues with capitalism and which victimizes the lower class. Meanwhile, “global feminists” or anti-capitalist feminists focused on the globalized economy, like Ehrenreich and Hochschild, argue that globalization has pitted women against each other. Professional women and lower-class women have been positioned as opposites or separated due to class status. Higher-class women are often shamed for either ignoring the plight of the common woman or benefiting from major inequality. Ehrenreich and Hochschild argue that first-world women and third-world women have “come together as mistress and maid, employer and employee, across a great divide of privilege and opportunity.” (*Global Woman* 11) The effect is unquestioning the others’ issues and the belief that first-world women do not have the luxury to doubt their privileged position. While films like *Network* and *The Devil Wears Prada* internalize neoliberal feminism, other films, *Snowpiercer* (2013, Bong Joon-Ho) and *Michael Clayton* (2007, Tony Gilroy), have attempted to expose the individualistic solution and offer a global perspective on the problem with capitalism. They align more with anti-capitalist feminism, portraying corporate women as having a terrible path ahead of them.

Exposing the Illusion of Choice

While *Snowpiercer* and *Michael Clayton* feature a prominent white western female executive, they differ from most Hollywood films in exposing the economic system’s effects on

the character's subjectivity. Minister Mason in *Snowpiercer*, and Karen Crowder in *Michael Clayton*, are depicted as intriguing villains: they cause harm but the films make clear the ways they are products of exploitative system. At the end of the film's narratives, these characters become scapegoats and suffer the consequences of capitalism's exploitation and inequalities. These characters' words and fates help to uncover the problem with the neoliberal feminist argument that women are individually responsible for carving out their positions in the market system. The characterizations challenge the societal denial of capitalism's foundational issues and reveal how women are forced to conform to and burdened by capitalism's demands.

In *Network* (1976) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2019), we see this professional working woman villainized for taking advantage of her higher position over vulnerable groups and sacrificing her private life. To construct this villainized character, these films place an opposing character—Max Schumacher for Diana Christensen and Andrea Sachs for Miranda Priestly—as a moral compass. Both Max and Andrea are on the precipice of choosing the same path as their antagonists and sacrificing others for their own gain; however, they ultimately decide to go against their businesses and seek a new life. Schumacher and Sachs are positioned as heroes of their stories, with Schumacher taking a stand against his network's shady practices and Sachs renouncing her mentor's teachings and taking a new job at another company. When Schumacher leaves Christensen after becoming tired of her cold actions, the film posits it as based on mutual understanding between the two of them. Christensen recognizes it as differing choices for their lives, with Max choosing to return to family and Christensen devoting herself to work. Similarly, Priestly is disappointed at Sachs' choice but acknowledges her skill, and we catch a glimpse of her smiling when Sachs finally leaves. These films portray an illusion of choice within the

capitalist market and argue that these professional working women are ultimately free to be part of a ruthless capitalist system and exploit the people below them.

Rendering Neoliberal Feminism Alien

This character trope is seen again in *Snowpiercer* and *Michael Clayton*, which villainize their main female figures and cast them as opponents to the humanity of the film. The characters of Minister Mason and Karen Crowder are also unsympathetic; however, in *Snowpiercer* and *Michael Clayton*, the exaggerated portraits of their unscrupulous actions produced an alienation effect rather than a moral indictment of the professional woman. This alienation stops the viewer from empathizing with the characters and allows them to think critically about who the characters are and who they represent. While they are of a higher class, they are not in a leadership position, but messengers or middlemen for the owners and merely act out the desires of the elite. They maintain the social order, as it is beneficial currently for them, and resist a rebellion for the fear of losing their status. So, while they do maintain a higher class status, this position is incredibly unstable and they share a similar dilemma to lower-class positions, as Minister Mason and Karen Crowder seem to owe their existence to their respective employers and would give themselves to keep this loyalty. The films portray them as disembodied in their position and acting as mouthpieces for their employers.

Both films use the technique of creating an “estrangement effect” or “alienation effect” through their main female characters. M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham explain that this tool, popularized by Bertolt Brecht, renders the familiar unfamiliar and consequently, allows the audience to act on and criticize familiar social habits and patterns. In the case of *Snowpiercer*, the genre of science fiction and the absurd appearance of Minister Mason, who dresses in a fake military uniform with medals, sets the viewer to receive a futuristic representation of capitalist

fascism. *Michael Clayton* dramatizes a corporate coverup and paints Karen Crowder as a desperate villain willing to go to extreme lengths to maintain her company's reputation. Both films do not allow for the viewer to empathize with the characters' plights and instead, create a connection between the viewer and the criticism of the capitalist structures they inhabit.

Speaking to the films' conceptions of the characters and their underlying similarities, Tilda Swinton plays the part of both, Minister Mason and Karen Crowder. Swinton was physically transformed in *Snowpiercer* with makeup, oversized dentures, and a cheap wig. Minister Mason feels like a comical exaggeration of a boss who the audience is supposed to detest. When she first appears in the film, she is the enforcer of order and the voice for Wilford, the engineer of the train. The train is a mile-long creation by Wilford traversing an apocalyptic freezing landscape after the death of the sun. Sorted into classes going up to the engine, residents in the back of the train are treated like cattle and hope to revolt against Wilford's violent police force. In an opening scene, several children have been taken by Mason's subordinates just before, which elicited an attempt to stop them by a worried father. After having her assistants detain him and expose his arm to the extreme cold of the outside, Mason recites a prepared monologue about the structure of the sections and for the suffering back section to respect their place in the train. Throughout, Mason makes references to the goodness of the conductor and creator, Wilford, and attempts to reinforce that the lower class should be grateful for their position.

Violence as a Tool

Mason takes on the voice of the elites on the train, proclaiming the word of Wilford and she justifies it as the natural order: "so it is," she declares. The movie uses this to point to the naturalization of capitalism's exploitation and Marx's "primitive accumulation." Karl Marx

argued that capitalism, our current economic system, was founded upon violent dispossession that transformed “labor, land, and money” into private capital (David Harvey, “Private Appropriation and Common Wealth” 57). He argued that these forms of private appropriation never disappeared and are ingrained in capitalism’s practices and naturalized by ideology, hence Mason’s violent enforcing of the rules, seen in her forcing a father to hang his arm out into the cold and having one of her bodyguards shatter it into pieces. This private accumulation, as David Harvey explains in “Private Appropriation”, “puts in place of all of this variety of being and living in the world a doctrine of the universal, self-evident and individualized ‘rights of man,’ dedicated to the production of value, that effectively masks in universalistic and naturalized legal doctrine.” (59) Essentially, Minister Mason’s speech puts forward violence and exploitation not only as natural to the environment but also as a right tied to humanity and to the ruling class. Another scene finds her the leader of a blade-wielding battalion, who battles with the tail section and slaughters several of the characters. Violence appears as the elite’s tool for control over the tail section, which backfires when Mason is taken.

Exposure of Absurdity

When Mason is finally captured, she confesses to two parents looking for their kidnapped children that she has no control over the treatment of the back of the train, proclaiming to Everett that “it’s not me.” In this scene, we see Mason at her lowest with the only harsh light shining on her face and on her knees. The camera stays eye-level with her and oscillates between the towering captors, and Everett & his compatriots, who sit in the dark. Mason pleads that they want Wilford, not her, and explains that she is willing to give them the path to him, even demonstrating that her teeth are fake. Bong Joon-ho, the director, presents this as a make-shift trial of Mason and the dominant ideology that she channels. He comments on the superficial

nature of Mason's control through her appearance, exposing it as another attempt to conform to patriarchal notions of femininity. Mason makes the claim that her words and actions are not her own, but controlled by the man above her. She is simply conforming to what is expected of her. The film villainizes her but at the same time, suggests that she is simply the middle-woman or mediator between the elites in front of the train and the lower classes at the back. Her position is not only dependent on how she appears to the male elite but is also founded on the gap between her and the lower class.

As mentioned above, Mason tries to convince Everett of her lack of freedom and the true master of her words, which points to a larger issue within neoliberal feminism. This form of feminism makes the claim that the worker is in control of their actions and their journey if they stay within the confines of the system. Rottenberg, in her dissection of neoliberal feminism, claims that this feminism shifts attention from the structural issues of the market economy to the personal choices and moral character of the individual woman. She clarifies, "energy... is not being steered toward the toppling of a political order that discriminates against women or even about coming to an awareness of systemic male domination, as was the goal of liberal feminism in the 1970s, but rather such energy is transmogrified into ambition and metamorphosized into the nurturing of each individual woman's desire to reach the top of the power pyramid." (*The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* 68). By shifting the effort to fix gender inequality from addressing structural issues to self-monitoring and internalizing dominant discourse, feminism becomes a justification for the neoliberal mentality. Professional working women excuse their ignorance of the exploitation of the lower class by upholding the power of their own internal choices.

Are You Really a Hat?

When the rebels enter the aquarium and plant section of the train, Mason implores them to try hand-made sushi that she claims is in limited supply and only made a few times yearly. She attempts to make them feel honored for the food and that they are lucky to receive it. This gives more of a glimpse into Mason's own feelings about her position and why she does not question the violence perpetrated by the train's elites. In an earlier scene, where Mason explains her position, she argues "I am a hat and you are a shoe." This absurd metaphor attempts to demonstrate how above Mason originally sees herself compared to the rebellion. She believes this to be the natural order of the structure and would be wrong to try to step outside the system. At the end of her character arc, Minister Mason pays the price for Wilford's exploitation and retribution against the rebellion. The minister is executed by Everett after his mentor is killed with no hesitation, and despite her pleas that she had no role to play in the killing. In a final shot of her, we see Mason kneeling under the butt of the black gun firing, as the camera tilts up to Everett's tired face. Mason begs, "Curtis my friend. We understand each other. Please it's not me." There is a momentary connection between Mason and Everett in their lack of freedom and submissive position in the market. She has no control over Wilford's actions or the structure of the train. She is simply a subject benefiting from her higher position and a victim of the consequences of the exploitation suffered by the back of the train, however, Everett gives her no sympathy. He executes her for the crimes she has been complicit in and the film renders her a scapegoat for foundational issues within the capitalistic structure, and the film reveals her position as such.

Always Subversive to A Man

That said, the audience is set against the Minister and she represents a stark contrast to the hero of the film, Curtis Everett, who acts similarly to the previous heroes, Max Schumacher

or Andrea Sachs. Everett comes across as an everyday working man, dark and dirty who seems desperate to create a better place. When Everett kidnaps Minister Mason, their conversations become an integral part of the exposure of Mason's hypocrisy and delusion. Everett, like the audience, cannot seem to understand Mason's perspective nor her exploitation of himself and his compatriots. However, a key difference between Everett and Schumacher & Sachs comes when he sacrifices himself in choosing to fight against capitalism. At the end of the film, he is offered to become "Wilford" and almost falls into the trope of the hero who exercises his moral freedom within the confines of capitalism; however, when reminded of the exploitation his people face, he sacrifices himself to save the remaining children. He makes the choice to step against the naturalized capitalist order and pays the ultimate price by destroying this order. Though his character shows that there is choice involved, the film suggests you must be prepared to give yourself wholly to the fight against the system itself. Nevertheless, Mason becomes a foil to the male hero who dominates the connection between viewer and narrative.

The Poison Capitalism Secretes

The uncomfortability with the capitalist structure is again apparent in *Michael Clayton*, which overtly compares capitalism to something that creates sickness and disease within people. Arthur Edens, originally a lawyer for the subject law firm, tells the audience at the beginning of the film that the point of his company is "an asshole to excrete poison to destroy the miracle of humanity." Edens suffers from an undisclosed mental illness that makes him take medication and when he refuses to take them, he claims that he is able to see the problems with being a corporate lawyer. Michael Clayton, the main hero of the film, is a degenerate gambler, who relapses after choosing to hide U/North's, an agricultural company, culpability in poisoning a whole town. Addiction and sickness take hold of the film, parallel to the plot of U/North's lawsuit and

Clayton's ethical struggle with his job. These allow us to view the male heroes as human, albeit flawed, characters, who invite us to empathize with them, however, Karen Crowder is seemingly the only character without some type of sickness or addiction, as she appears oppositional to the moral inquiry of her company.

Defeminized Versus Absurd

In *Snowpiercer*, the absurdity of Minister Mason is overtly obvious in her appearance and personality; by contrast, Crowder in *Michael Clayton* seems to appear as a cold and immoral woman in the professional world. Nothing truly stands out about her and her actions seem almost normal in the corporate world, but in her attempts to cover up the billion-dollar case, the narrative voice villainizes her and pits Crowder against the hesitating Michael Clayton, who shares a similar position and starts doubting the morality behind their actions. The film refuses to give us any detail of Crowder's personal life except for her anxiety surrounding what is expected of her. Her body language and facial expressions are filled with distress and worry. The cinematography never allows her to directly address the camera and eye contact is never made; her eye-line always appears off in the distance. The film also shows us the level of attention she pays to her work, carrying a large pile of documents to the gym and pouring over the details. She is never seen without a reference to her work or position, always focused on the position of the company. Because of this lack of intimacy versus the emphasis on Clayton's life, the audience feels disconnected from understanding Crowder and views her entirely in the context of her job. She appears almost detached from the rest of humanity and the ethics of her actions.

In other words, in *Michael Clayton*, Tilda Swinton plays a more realistic corporate villain running damage control for a large corporation that manufactured a carcinogenic weed killer. We first see her in a quick glimpse when she has hidden in a bathroom stall and attempts to calm

herself down before returning to a settlement meeting between her company and their law firm. Light is encroaching into the stall, with the camera at eye level, as she pads her soaked armpits with toilet paper and her head leans on the walls. Her eyes close and her face sinks into a tired expression with heavy breathing, the only noise. Throughout, Karen Crowder is depicted as soft-spoken, demure, and the face of the U/North under the CEO, with intense pressure weighing on her. Later, she next appears in a promotional interview with the film cutting between her rehearsal in her apartment and her final reiteration to the journalist side-by-side with her boss watching over. Her apartment is gray and neat, with no obvious personal items in the frame. To the viewer, it may appear as a hotel room. She emerges from a dark bathroom with carefully laid clothing and the frame cuts to a camera light towering over her and a journalist interrogating her job. Sitting closely, a taller and bigger man listens happily to her commending him. When questioned about the balance between her work and personal life, Crowder comments nervously and on the verge of stuttering, “who needs balance?”. She rambles further, arguing that if you are uncomfortable with the level of responsibility, to get out and that it is your responsibility to answer for the company.

The Relationship Between the Corporate and the Personal

The implicit commentary that the films make about Crowder’s subjectivity, and Minister Mason’s, is that these characters have internalized capitalism’s dominant discourse. Crowder believes that it is her responsibility to conform to capitalism’s demands, which determines the fate of the company. To this end, she judges herself in several scenes where she has isolated herself in private settings, particularly bathrooms, and rehearses what is expected of her over and over. These scenes posit her in places of exposure, where we are only given glimpses of the internal consequences of capitalist ideology. Here she demonstrates conformity to not just

capitalism but also what John Berger describes as gendered “ways of seeing.” Berger explores the relationship between the (male) viewer of Western paintings and the female subject of these paintings and explains that this relationship has informed female subjectivity in the West. John Berger explains that; “To acquire some control over this process [viewing], women must contain it and interiorize it. That part of a woman’s self which is the surveyor treats the part which is the surveyed so as to demonstrate to others how her whole self would like to be treated” (46). Just in the way that women internalize masculinist ways of seeing, Crowder internalizes a way of looking at and controlling the presentation of the feminine self that has been popularized by neoliberal feminist notions of success. Her character represents how women cope with the patriarchal demands placed on them in the corporate world by internalizing what is expected and by treating themselves as viewers of their own bodies and behavior.

Being Watched

As we saw Minister Mason’s submission to Wilford, Karen Crowder’s relationship with her boss, Don Jefferies, is also very comparable in Crowder’s clear need to prove herself to Jefferies. In nearly every scene when Crowder displays some power within the company, he sits side-by-side watching her every move. She tells a journalist that Jefferies raised her up in the company, keeping her under his wing, during the interview about her position. When informing the investors of the settlement, he sits behind her, conveying the sense of authority behind her actions. Even when she is on her own, his influence lies underneath her actions. Jefferies was the one to introduce Crowder to the hitmen and the one to sign the memo acknowledging the carcinogenic side effects of their product & still selling the weed killer. He ultimately makes the choices leading to the company lawsuit and leaves Crowder to deal with the aftermath. When questioned as to why Jefferies does not help with the cover-up, Crowder remarks resentfully,

“Don’s *busy*.” Crowder is expected to take responsibility for the larger issues within the company. However, the film makes clear that her male employer is truly the one with the power.

Where The Hell Is Karen Crowder?

In a similar end to Mason, Karen Crowder faces the consequences of the company’s actions and while the company does face financial repercussions for the poisoning, it is left up to interpretation if she is the only one to be arrested. If one were to assume that only Crowder suffered and Jefferies escaped due to “plausible deniability,” there would still be a miscarriage of justice in the lack of consequences for the system that created figures like Crowder. Crowder was expected to take illegal measures to secure the company’s reputation by her boss and was not the only character to use illicit violations to maintain her position. In one scene, Marty Bach, Michael Clayton’s boss, suggests admitting Arthur Edens, the character attempting to expose the lawsuit and stigmatize him as insane in order to stop him from blowing the case. Later, Bach admits that he knew U/North was corrupt, but glazes over it as “part of the job” and is like many of their clients. Through the character of Edens, *Michael Clayton* makes clear this moral issue with corporate society. Crowder becomes a tool for male characters, like Jefferies, to hide this destruction and the film seeks to expose these ethical issues with companies like U/North. While the audience may view Crowder as a villain and are unable to empathize with her, the film simply concretizes through her character the exploitative and patriarchal expectations within corporations of their professional employees. Moreover, through her character, the film exposes how rising up the corporate ladder requires women to ignore and also participate in the structure of exploitation.

Falling to the Male Hero

Karen Crowder does have a moral and gendered opposite in Michael Clayton, the film's central character. In personality, they appear to share similar traits in the beginning as Clayton shared the same position; however, he has become fed up with the ethical complications of covering up capitalism's exploitation. The film creates parallels between them throughout and for example when Clayton is deciding between taking money for the cover-up or exposing the memo, we see Crowder walk by with the decision of killing Clayton or leaving it be weighing over her. He eventually decides to turn her in and Crowder attempts to murder him. Their job is similar, being compared to janitors for their companies and believed to be responsible for their companies' fate. However, the film, like *Snowpiercer*, posits its male subject to be the true hero of the film and creates through Crowder a foil to be dominated. While the film articulates a critique of the corporate world, it also maintains a patriarchal anxiety about women in power. Clayton is given much more complexity to his life beyond his work and through his characterization, the film further alienates the out-of-touch Crowder from the viewer. He is allowed to be flawed and exploitative, but able to change and move beyond his corporate submission. Crowder, on the other hand, is villainized and given no sympathy. Crowder acts a shell for the exploitation and violence of the elite, while Clayton acts as a masculinized martyr with a son equally questioning the system.

Looking Beyond

In order to focus on systemic factors, both films emphasize the potential of children to create social change. *Snowpiercer* leaves the audience with Yoma and Timmy, who appears as the only survivors when the train crashes. They see a distant polar bear, signaling the possibility of life outside the protection of the train. *Michael Clayton* ends with a scene between Clayton and his son, where he proclaims him to be stronger than Clayton and his addicted brother. The

effect is the hope for the future brought by children who have seen the consequences of exploitation in capitalism, but who may not have internalized its ideology as deeply. They can break out the naturalization of capitalist dominance over social reproduction and life in general.

Through such characters these films point to systemic causes and solutions to current social problems. Catherine Rottenberg argues that the internalization of an ethic of personal choice is not enough for women to contest the patriarchal values, which are assumed to be natural in the current capitalist culture. She believes we must look beyond assumed problems with ourselves to the clear problems with the system. *Michael Clayton* and *Snowpiercer*, through their characterization of absurd and inhuman professional women, expose neoliberal feminism as a denial of foundational exploitation within the economic system, even if they also express anxiety about women in power. I argue for a truly liberatory feminist perspective, we need more than just the villainizing of corporate women. We need to understand the forces that shape these women and their actions. What *Snowpiercer* and *Michael Clayton* offer is the first step in thinking systemically: they suggest, that we must question the idea that corporate success is necessarily the ultimate achievement for women.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "Alienation Effect." *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 9th ed, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009. Pgs. 6, 81, 181-187.
- Berger, John. "From Ways of Seeing" in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, eds. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, Meta Mazaj, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.114-124.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter : On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.
- EBSCOhost,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04465a&AN=drew.a263204&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Campbell, Russell. *Marked Women : Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. EBSCOhost,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=336096&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Davis, Emily S. "The Intimacies of Globalization: Bodies and Borders On-Screen." *Camera Obscura* 62, Duke University Press, Volume 21, Number 2, Pgs. 32-73.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Arlie Russell Hochschild. *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. 1 Jan. 2003. EBSCOhost,
search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED481010&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero*, Autonomedia, 2012.
- Frears, Stephen, director. *Dirty Pretty Things*. BBC Films and Buena Vista International, 2002.
- Gilroy, Tony, director. *Michael Clayton*. Warner Bros. Pictures & Summit Entertainment, 2007.

Harvey, David. "Introduction." *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.

---, ---. "Contradiction 1: Use Value and Exchange Value," *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, OUP, 2014, Pgs. 15-24.

---, ---. "Contradiction 4: Private Appropriation and Common Wealth," *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, OUP, 2014, Pgs. 53-61.

Loach, Ken, director. *Bread and Roses*. FilmFour Distributors, 2000.

Joon-ho, Bong, director. *Snowpiercer*. CJ Entertainment & The Weinstein Company, 2013.

Marston, Joshua, director. *Maria Full of Grace*. HBO Films and Fine Line Features, 2004.

Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labor." *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd Edition, edited by Robert C. Tucker, published by WW Norton & Company, Pg. 70-81.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Gender and Globalization: Female Labor and Women's Mobilization." *Journal of World-Systems Research*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1999, pp. 367–388. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fyh&AN=MRB-WRI0257812&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Critical Visions in Film Theory*, eds. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, Meta Mazaj, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 714-725.

Prügl, Elisabeth. "Neoliberalising Feminism." *New Political Economy*, vol. 20, no. 4, Aug. 2015, pp. 614–31. EBSCOhost, doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614.

- Rohman, Arif. "The Changed and Unchanged Situations in the Representation of Women in Contemporary Cinema." *Humaniora*, vol. 25, no. 2, Aug. 2013, pp. 175–183. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.22146/jh.v25i2.2360.
- Rottenberg, Catherine A. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. : Oxford University Press, 23. *Oxford Scholarship Online*.
- Ruccio, David F. "Capitalism." *Keywords for American Studies*, Eds. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, New York: NYU Press, Third Edition, 2020, Pgs. 40-43.
- Scafaria, Lorene, director. *Hustlers*. *STX Films* and Gloria Sanchez Productions, 2019.
- Shohat, Ella & Robert Stam. "Stereotype, Realism and The Struggle Over Representation" in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Routledge, London, 1994, Pgs. 178-219.
- Wright, Erik Olin, et al. "The American Class Structure." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 47, no. 6, [American Sociological Association, Sage Publications, Inc.], 1982, pp. 709–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095208>.