

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 6

2016

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Recommended Citation

Sculos, Bryant W. (2016) "Capital Revenge: Ideologiekritik and The Revenant," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.4.1.16092139

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol4/iss1/6>

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Capital Revenge: Ideologiekritik and The Revenant

Abstract

Though superficially *The Revenant* is an expertly written, acted, and directed new age Western about one man's wild quest for revenge. It is all of those things to be sure, but this critical review essay goes deeper and explores the ideological dimensions of the film, arguing that the film's main antagonist is actually a capitalistic hero representing the mindless application of the endless drive for profit and wealth. Furthermore, this essay concludes with the dialectical assertion that it is precisely because of the audience's situatedness within the ideological confines of capitalism that they are able to view the antagonist as the villain of the film.

Keywords

The Revenant; Film Review; Critical Film Review

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“After all, they ain’t wolves, just humans out for money”¹



(Google Images)

When we watch a film, how do we know who the protagonist and antagonist are? While these terms have technical meanings in a narrative, our recognition of them often comes down to who the “good guy” is and who the “bad guy” is. The Western genre has a history of throwing that heuristic out the window with their notorious anti-heroes—protagonists with major moral flaws and whom often commit crimes and other acts of disrepute. In his first Academy award winning performance in *The Revenant*, which takes place in the mid-nineteenth century in the north-central United States, Leonardo DiCaprio portrays our protagonist Hugh Glass, and we know he is the protagonist because it is his story that the movie follows, his trial and tribulations, but really, come on, it’s Leo, we knew he was the protagonist before the movie started. His character is a “good guy” as well in that he clearly lacks the imperial racism of every other white character in the movie and other than his completely understandable quest for revenge on which the movie centers, he never commits an act that would make us question his moral standing (besides maybe that moment towards the beginning when he considers killing that adorable CGI bear cub). However, watching this film from within the confines of a capitalist society, I was compelled to ask myself, why isn’t Tom Hardy’s incredibly performed John Fitzgerald—the chief antagonist, a fairly obvious narcissist, and all-around murderous sociopath—the “good guy”?

Fitzgerald, despite being a fairly pervasive scum-bag throughout the entire movie is hardly the obvious “bad guy” that I think most viewers realize. He is the perfect embodiment of the psycho-social norms pathologized within a capitalist system. Those are our norms, and yet when applied in a semi-fictional context, the character is perceived as evil. That’s an interesting enough fact, and it is a point that I will return to in the end, but first I want to make the case that if capitalism could watch movies, it would be very confused about who the “good guy” is and who the “bad guy” is here. Most, if not all, of Fitzgerald’s most blatantly evil acts throughout the film are explicitly justified through capitalistic arguments. Glass’s nobility, even in the face of horrific circumstances, comes from his desire for survival, revenge and possibly justice for the death of

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), Scene 3, p. 37.

his half-Pawnee son Hawk at the hand—well knife—of Fitzgerald. Profit is all Fitzgerald cares about, even at the expense of his own life. Glass wants to survive so he can avenge all of the acts that Fitzgerald did in pursuit of his profits.

There are six noteworthy examples of Fitzgerald's near-perfect embodiment of a capitalistic mentality in the film:

- (1) "*Grab the pelts!*" The opening scene features a Native American attack (more like an aggressive defense) on a fur-trapper camp that results in dozens of men being brutally killed. Many of the Natives are murdered as well. The trappers are outnumbered though and Glass and the non-fictional captain of the camp, Andrew Henry (played by Domhnall Gleeson) attempt to gather as many men as they can onto their river boat to escape. While the axes are flying and arrows raining down on the camp in a scene that is quite reminiscent of the storming of the beach on Normandy from *Saving Private Ryan*² or the pre-D-Day parachute scene from *Band of Brothers*, Fitzgerald is running around killing "savages" (as he and the other trappers often refer to them) and yelling somewhat incomprehensibly "Grab the pelts!" Just a few seconds before, when Glass sees men trying to grab the bundles of stacked pelts, he screams for them to leave the pelts behind and rush for the boat. For Glass, his own survival, but just as importantly, that of his fellow men is crucially important. Fitzgerald on the other hand cannot seem to get past the profit-motive—even when that thinking is literally putting his own life at risk as well as those of his colleagues.

- (2) "*Life? What life are you talkin' about? I ain't got no life...*" Several of the men, including the Captain, Fitzgerald, Glass, Glass's half-Native son Hawk, and a few others make it to the boats and head down the river. They know the Natives are following them on the shore. They are sitting ducks on the boat, so the Captain and Glass decide to scuttle the boat and move in-land where they'll be more mobile and better able to defend themselves. Fitzgerald knows that they won't be able to carry all of the pelts that he and the others managed to salvage from the initial raid by hand without the boat. The Captain orders them to bury the pelts off shore and mark the spot so that they can return latter. Fitzgerald begins to mutter under his breath "This ain't right. This ain't right. We all know these pelts ain't gonna be here by the time we get back." The Captain assures him that while that may be true, they have no other choice if they want to survive and make it back to the Fort. "Would you rather hold onto the pelts or your life?" the Captain asks. Fitzgerald responds with his nearly-proletarian and deeply ideological snarkiness, "Life? What life are you talkin' about? I ain't got no life. I just got livin' and the only way I get to do that is through these pelts...Fuck!" While Fitzgerald is certainly a lower class worker whose life is objectively precarious, based on the behavior of the other trappers, there is no reason to think that his livelihood would be permanently threatened if he didn't keep *these* furs specifically. He *wants* them. And why shouldn't he? He worked for them after all....

² <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/the-revenant-2015>

That's not the point though. The point is that once again, Fitzgerald is willing to risk his own safety and that of his buddies for the promise of a distant pay-day. He wouldn't have to wait long for another scummy chance at that.

- (3) *"Seventy dollars won't buy me a new setta ears."* After attempting to shoot a bear cub, Glass gets mauled nearly to death by the mother bear. The men eventually find him, but Glass is horribly wounded. They attempt to mitigate the bleeding, and do it well-enough that they drag him on a makeshift sled as they continue their journey. Glass's condition worsens as does the terrain. They can't bring him along anymore, and they are certain he is going to die in the next few days. The Captain decides to offer \$70 to the men who decide to stay with Glass and bury him once he dies. Fitzgerald is quick to point out that \$70 isn't enough for him to risk his life staying back. Henry offers \$100. Bridger, one of the other men, offers to stay back but to give Fitzgerald his \$100 share. Fitzgerald shamelessly accepts. Once again, profit over people—including himself.



(Google Images)

- (4) *"Just gimme a blink if you want me to do it."* Fitzgerald, Bridger, and Glass's son Hawk stay behind with Glass until he dies of his wounds. Fitzgerald is not only greedy but also impatient. What, is he supposed to sit in the cold woods while he keeps his word and allows Glass to die naturally? Ha! Good one. There's no profit in keeping your word. Fitzgerald approaches Glass, who still cannot speak and cannot move, and asks him to blink if he wants to be put out of his misery. Glass is clearly struggling to keep his eyes open (which is a testament to the superb acting of DiCaprio. How do you act so well that I can tell you are trying with all of your might to keep yourself from blinking, but really you're just staring up at a camera?). Eventually Glass closes his eyes and doesn't open them. Good enough for Fitzgerald, who immediately begins to suffocate Glass. Hawk sees what is happening and attempts to stop it. Fitzgerald kills him in the process, while Glass watches. After burying Hawk, Fitzgerald tells Bridger that he hasn't seen Hawk but that he heard savages coming. They must quickly bury Glass (who is still alive mind you)

and flee. Bridger resists, but Fitzgerald convinces him that this is the only way that they will survive. The only thing Fitzgerald didn't say was, "Keep your eye on that prize!" Because, of course, remember, Fitzgerald gets Bridger's pay too. For the rest of their journey, Fitzgerald keeps reminding Bridger, who is wracked with guilt, "We did what we had to do." "We did what we had to do."

The capitalist cop out for everything—we had to do it. Did you really need to cut those extra employees because the minimum wage went up fifty cents? Well of course, if we didn't our profit margin would have dropped from \$45 billion to \$37 billion over five years. Oh yes right. Good point...I think we know who Mitt Romney and Donald Trump rooted for in this movie.

The last two examples are a bit more superficial, but still speak directly to Fitzgerald's sado-masochistic drive for more, for more's sake, against Glass's motivation for revenge and justice, after somehow surviving being buried and working his way back to the camp, about a week or so after the rest of the crew.

- (5) "*He went to Texas.*" After hearing from another trapper that Hawk may be alive—which Fitzgerald knows could not possibly be true since he killed him—Fitzgerald robs the Captain's safe and flees the camp—presumably to Texas to reenlist. I wouldn't say that kind of theft is inherent to capitalism as such, but more like finance capitalism. He leaves Bridger to face the responsibility for their actions alone. What a guy. This reminded me of the scene in *Fun with Dick and Jane* where Alec Baldwin's character bankrupts the company and puts Jim Carrey's character on TV to lie about the stability of the company while Baldwin plans his getaway. Classic business move.
- (6) "*We had a deal.*" In the final scene of the movie, Glass finally catches up with Fitzgerald. They try to outsmart each other, but in fairness to Fitzgerald, it is hard to outsmart anyone when you're wearing a badger on your head. Are badgers even warm? I digress... After a brief scuffle, Fitzgerald is walking towards Glass and says, "We had a deal... We know what happened out there." For real? This guy legitimately thinks that Glass is going to be cool with him killing his son and trying to kill him because they had a blink-based gentleman's agreement—an agreement that Fitzgerald obviously knows that Glass knows didn't actually happen? This is the kind of bold leadership in the face of adversity we expect from our CEOs, not a lowly fur-trapper. Like Donald Trump trying to convince us he doesn't think Mexicans are rapists or that he didn't accuse Megyn Kelly of being on her period. Dude, we have you on fucking film! Yes Fitzgerald, you'll probably get Glass to accept the sanctity of "the deal" and forget the whole thing ever happened. I can see Glass saying "Damn. I mean you tried to kill me and you did actually kill my son, but fuck if we didn't have that deal..." Right.



(Google Images)

Now, this is not to suggest that people within a capitalist society cannot recognize Fitzgerald as the “bad guy.” They clearly can and have—otherwise the movie wouldn’t be comprehensible. However, this is precisely why the movie fails politically, because of the ideological mechanism that allows people to look at Fitzgerald’s explanations and justifications for his behaviors and still say, “no way, he’s definitely the bad guy.” Fitzgerald is a bad egg. It’s not a system of imperial profit-seeking that has encouraged him to be this way. He is just personally, individually evil. He is responsible for his own choices. If greed and profit-seeking are really so bad—and so obviously bad—why is it that we continue to base an entire economic system on these norms? If you can see Fitzgerald as evil, you should also be able to see capitalism as evil. Most people cannot, and it is precisely this possessive individualism that allows the moral narrative of *The Revenant* to be comprehensible, and indeed compelling, within our late capitalist system.

“Aye, unselfishness is a rare virtue, cause it just don’t pay.”³

³ Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Scene 9, p. 71.