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Eat the Rich: Anti-Capitalist Thought in the Horror Film

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EAT THE RICH: ANTI-CAPITALIST THOUGHT IN THE HORROR FILM

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This thesis, written by Lyana Alexandria Rodriguez, and entitled Eat the Rich: Anti-Capitalist Thought in the Horror Film, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend it approved.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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As horror films once again gain popular and critical praise, horror film scholarship continues to expand in analyses of these films through the lens of now-prominent theoretical frames like intersectional theory, critical race theory, and fourth wave feminist theory. However, many analyses miss a class component. Therefore, this article demonstrates that a significant anti-capitalist history exists in horror film, that analysis of anticapitalist themes in these horror films is essential to a complete understanding of American genre film as an art form, and that these anti-capitalist themes can be important in the overall work of radicalization and consciousness-raising. I will be focusing on three films from various sub-genres and time periods: Alien (1979) a science fiction horror film; Society (1989) a body horror political comedy; and Ready or Not (2019) a supernatural horror comedy. The article concludes that all three of these films flip the category of monstrosity on its head, choosing to make the most privileged classes amongst us the monsters instead of those who are usually Othered such as racial others, gendered others, or working class others. Thus, anti-capitalism shows itself through both the monsters of these films and the working class, everyman heroes that populate them, creating a reliable and accurate picture of working Americans' anxieties in capitalist life.

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Introduction:

As the horror film surges in popularity once again, new scholarship on its many offerings blossom in our film and humanities journals. These analyses feature a whole host of discussion on disability, race, gender, and sexuality. However, class-analyses of the horror film remain incredibly rare. The one exception continues to be the work of George A. Romero, the maestro of zombie horror, whose anti-capitalist themes are simply too obvious to ignore. Scholarship abounds on Romero's work, specifically on his film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Analyses of the classic films focus on Romero's critique of consumerism, noting that the mall becomes a site of power. "Operating at the most base of levels, zombies are mindlessly addicted to consume," Matthew Bailey writes in "Memory, Place, and the Mall: George Romero on Consumerism" (3). The zombie as consumer has become a powerful image, and George Romero deserves so much credit for creating a film so iconic that even the average moviegoer to this day remembers the message of the film.

However, anti-capitalist critique has long been in the horror film, not just in Romero's movies. In fact, communist discourse and the imagery of horror have been linked for a good, long time. Karl Marx himself wasn't shy about using the language of horror to describe the denigration of capitalism. "Capital," he says, "is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx 257). In his most famous and accessible work, *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels famously call communism "a spectre" haunting the continent. Marx and Engels understood the power of

Gothic imagery, especially during a century when the Gothic novel had been sweeping the readership of Europe. The language of monstrosity and of the supernatural enforce the grueling practices of capitalists and the deleterious effects of the industrial revolution on many wage laborers.

Considering this tradition started by the founders of Marxist practice and theory, it's curious that, in a post-intersectional theory world, class continues to be mostly disregarded in popular analysis of film. However, anti-capitalist critiques are actually extremely common in many horror films, and they deserve to be a much more popular topic than they currently are. To show the influence of this anti-capitalist thinking, I will be looking at three horror films from different time periods and sub-genres: *Alien* (1979), *Society* (1989), and *Ready or Not* (2019). I focus on American films because fear is culturally-specific. The American horror film, therefore, can represent the anxieties of the American working classes.

The three films chosen all carry a similar thematic thread: the subversion of the depiction of monstrosity. Typically in a horror movie, the monsters represent more marginalized groups. The monsters in our films can easily represent queer, racial, gender, and disabled minorities with much of the scholarship pointing out the coding behind the monsters' creations. For example, much work has been done on the figure of Count Dracula, popular culture's most famous vampire. As a villain emerging from the East seeking to invade the West, with an added goal of seducing the women (and even some of the men) in Stoker's novel, Dracula often represents the quintessential Other. However, the creatures and villains in the films listed above represent America's elite: white, male, cis, heterosexual, and, most importantly, incredibly wealthy. By contrast, our heroes are predominantly working-class, hounded by the capitalist horrors of the film but, in every example, ultimately victorious in gaining vengeance over their rich oppressors.

While this is unique in the broad expanse of horror, this fact makes sense considering the time periods of these films. The seventies, eighties, and late tens all dealt with huge economic recessions and pressures. The gap between the wealthy and the poor significantly increased as the years passed. Specifically, during the 1970s, a huge spike in oil prices hastened the dispossession of many American citizens. Even worse, capitalists found that they could make great profits by moving manufacturing jobs outside the United States or automating the jobs altogether. Workers, used to striking or halting production, now have to face a reality where they must fight to keep the jobs that treated them so badly. The 80s continued this process of moving American jobs overseas, but it also introduced new forms of government austerity, the breaking of unions, and a revitalization of materialism in pop culture. Conspicuous consumption became less of a sign of waste or unnecessary risk. Instead, that increased consumption became a status symbol. Finally, in the 2010s, the seeds of the 70s and 80s continue to see fruit with a widening gap between the rich and the poor, the economic crises of 2004, 2008, and the 2015 Chinese stock market crash. These events are the culmination of a new economic and political movement, neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the newest incarnation of capitalism, what many Marxist, Anarchist, and Leftist scholars also call "late capitalism." As scholar Pierre Bourdieu writes, "The movement toward the neoliberal utopia of a pure and perfect market is made possible by the politics of financial deregulation. And it is achieved through the transformative, and it must be said, *destructive* action of all of the political measures…that *aim to call into question any and all collective structures* that would serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market…" (Bourdieu). Thus, neoliberalism can be seen as a particularly virulent strain of capitalism, a mutation that aims to completely destroy community.

Seeing that community and the collective are vital foundations in a social species such as humanity, it's incredibly easy to imagine that strain of thought and its adherents as monsters. After all, monsters are all about reflecting the fears, dangers, and problems that are currently troubling the collective psyche. As historian W. Scott Poole points out, "American monsters are born out of American history. They emerge out of cultural anxieties and obsessions that have been a part of the United States from colonial times to the present and from the structures and processes where those obsessions found historical expression" (Poole 4). Considering the popularity of horror films among the American public, then, it makes sense that horror films during this time period would seek to appeal to the working class' desire to strike back at the capitalists exploiting their labor. Considering the dire state of labor relations up until the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes sense that horror films provide a playing out of those real fears. There are simply no other outlets available, especially when valuable tools like the strike and the union have been disempowered through a neoliberal agenda.

While these movies were likely created to bring catharsis to real anger in its audiences, the films carry a revolutionary potential in the simpler themes behind them. The working-class heroes and terrifying capitalist villains have the chance of raising the consciousness of American audiences even with the usually fantastical tools of horror filmmaking. After all, fear is an incredibly powerful emotion, one of the most primal functions of the human brain. While the themes behind these films might be dismissed by some critics as too didactic, they deserve to be analyzed and studied as an example of American art and of the popular response to some of the worst recent economic crises in the United States.

Alien (1979): Workplace Hazards and Dead Labor

Ridley Scott's sophomore picture, *Alien*, initially came out to mixed reviews. The film was called a B-movie on a blockbuster budget with outlets such as *Variety*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, and more comparing the film to 1950s low-budget affairs (Watkins). It took several years for the film to be vindicated, gaining a widespread fanbase, a million-dollar franchise, and crossover movies with another popular sci-fi horror classic, *Predator*. The film focuses on the plight of the crew of the *Nostromo*, a commercial ship owned by the corporation Weyland-Yutani. A strange SOS signal wakes the group up from stasis and, according to their contract, requires that they must check for any survivors. Once they arrive, there's no sign of any other human beings, only strange eggs littering the ground of an alien ship. After one of those eggs opens, one member of the crew becomes infected with an alien parasite that soon grows into a huge threat, eliminating each of the crew members one by one.

In terms of film scholarship, the film is often analyzed from a psychosexual lens no doubt thanks to the design work of H.R. Giger. The set design and monster's appearance lend the film perfectly to such a lens. The titular alien, later called a "xenomorph," blends anatomical elements from both the penis and the vagina. The sleeping pods our heroes awaken from resemble nothing less than pure white eggs. The ship's AI is only called "Mother," and the initial danger from the alien appears when the "facehugger" form impregnates one of the crew's own, a poor schmuck played by John Hurt.

However, it takes approximately forty-five minutes of the film's running time to finally reach the horror of the alien. Instead, the story focuses on getting the audience acquainted with the film's characters and the world. As the minutes tick by, the audience soon discovers that,

while the surroundings of the film are complete sci-fi as inspired by *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Star Wars*, they are in a familiar workplace environment.

The heroes of the film, the crew of the spaceship *Nostromo*, are staunchly working-class and are clearly in the middle of a job. Their costumes are work uniforms, specifically the sort of jumpsuits one would see on a mechanic or an engineer. All of the characters are referred to strictly by their surnames, enforcing the professional standards of the environment. Furthermore, the dialogue informs the audience right away that we're dealing with concerns of labor. "Before we dock, maybe we'd better go over the bonus situation," says Parker, the engineer played by Yaphet Kotto. "You two will get what you contracted for. Just like everybody else," replies Dallas, the captain of the *Nostromo* played by Tom Skerritt. The "shares" in the dialogue refers to the wages the crew members receive at the end of their journey on the commercial spaceship. How fitting for a Black engineer to fight for his right to a living wage. Yaphet Kotto's performance as Parker, the engineer who does the most to campaign for his own right to a bigger share and who later grows the most indignant at the crew's disposal by the company, makes perfect sense considering the racial character of capitalism. As Cedric J. Robinson points out in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, capitalism "was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism" (Robinson 9). However, while nationalism remains in question in the void of space, the racial elements in exploitation appear fully present in the world of *Alien*. However, this accuracy remains true for the rest of the film. Most of the first forty-five minutes of the film plays out like a workplace drama in space.

This depiction of corporate employment is well known to most reviewers of the film. The cast of the movie is often even referred to as "truckers in space." However, *Alien*'s main twist,

the reveal of the employer's vested interest in the deadly alien's transport, elevates the labor elements of the film into a revolutionary story. The audience gains this perspective through this film's company man, Ash, the chief science officer and an android played by Ian Holm. The movie makes clear that his status as an android makes him the perfect company man, a soulless yet intelligent automaton who is programmed to follow the company's orders, and only the company's orders, with no regard for the workers who make Weyland-Yutani's profits. "The damn company," Parker opines, "What about our lives, you son of a bitch?!" Parker, Lambert, and Ripley all stand or sit in a dark room, encased fully in shadow as the gravity of their plight increases. The only light in the room centers on Ash's broken body, his decapitated head covered in the strange white fluid an android bleeds. The film does well to set up this scene as Ash's moment in the spotlight, and he doesn't disappoint. "I repeat. All other priorities rescinded," Ash's robotic decapitated head replies in an emotionless monotone. His character makes for a chilling reveal, but it also illuminates the true purpose behind so many managers in the jobs we have labored.

Again, we return to Marx's declaration that capital profits from dead labor, much like a vampire must survive by draining the blood of its victims. Here, the fictional Weyland-Yutani requires the death of its workers in order to obtain the alien. Ripley comments that its acquisition is "probably for Weapons division," but the reason is truly superfluous and only for suspension of disbelief. The actual labor of bringing the *Nostromo* to the alien planet, encountering the egg, and bringing it back to Earth is what gives this alien value. Furthermore, as the creature decimates the crew of the ship, the violence and death of the crew actually proves the alien's value as an investment for Weyland-Yutani. This process is not an aberration. It's a part of the capitalist system. As Mark Steven puts it in *Splatter Capital: A Guide for Surviving the Horror*

Movie We Collectively Inhabit, the horror movie "reminds us of what capital is doing to all of us, all of the time - of how predators are consuming our life substances; of how we are gravely vulnerable against the machinery of production and the matrices of exchange… splatter nevertheless promotes an extant truth: capitalist accumulation is and always has been a nightmare of systematized bloodshed" (Steven 13). As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to barrel through lives without significant support from governmental structures and large boasting of the economy's growth, the events of *Alien* and Steven's description of capitalism feel like far less of an than their sci-fi trappings might suggest. In fact, Ripley's dedication to a quarantine guideline, only to be subverted by her superior Ash, has long become a popular meme in response to several state governors lifting COVID-19 restrictions.

For a moment, let's go back to the character of Ash, that manager of managers. His status as an android and as face of the Weyland-Yutani company, the bosses of the *Nostromo*'s crew, remains fascinating. As pointed out in the introduction, monsters usually represent the marginalized. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his famous essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," describes this phenomenon around the term "difference." As he puts it, the monster "is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within" (Cohen 41). At first, Ash seems to buck this trend. He, or his actor, is depicted as white, cis, and male. He commands an authority over the ship that the female protagonist, Ripley, both resents and finds suspicious. However, his reveal as an android flips our preconceptions. It goes right back to Cohen's statement of the Other originating within even if we as a society wish to project it away from us. Much like the alien incubating inside John Hurt's stomach, Ash is the outsider among us, the

most basic of paranoid fantasies. Yet, for as much as an android is entirely outside the realm of possibility for most Americans, the idea of a manager being a negative, outside presence among employees in a workplace is very relatable. For all that bosses and managers claim to be just like the other employees or even insist that they're all "like family," most employees quickly figure out that the manager's loyalty is to the company and its ability to make money, not to them.

However, Ash is not just the boss. In fact, Ash provides an interesting foil for the rest of the crew. As an android, the science officer possesses no will of his own. He must follow the directives programmed into him by the company. He has no need for wages or shares, alleviating Weyland-Yutani of the need to provide real compensation for his labor. For a moment, we the audience receive a hint of the resentment engendered by this life. While being interrogated by the surviving crew members on how to destroy the monster, Ash reveals that he is fond of the alien destroying their lives. "I admire its purity," he comments. "A survivor. Unclouded by delusions of conscience, remorse, or delusions of morality." It's clear that Ash finds his own freedom in the alien's ferocity and existence as a wild animal. However, the crew of the *Nostromo* also shares in Ash's predicament. They are also exploited, unable to survive in the void of space without the company's provision and thrown to the metaphorical wolves on Weyland-Yutani's whim. Much like Ash, their continued existence is dependent on how willing they are to follow the company's orders. They might not need the fuel an android needs or mechanical repairs, but the shares provided by this venture ensure their survival under capitalism even in the depths of outer space. Nevertheless, it's also clear that Ash enjoys the momentary power he holds over the crew's lives. His immediate response to Ripley learning too much is to roll a magazine and use the now-phallic object to ram it into her mouth, choking her. Again, this is a callback to the alien whose distinct design evokes an erect penis. Even his last words, spoken with a sadistic smirk

and emotionless eyes, works as a final emotional wound to a struggling group of survivors. “I can’t lie about your chances, but…you have my sympathies.” In Ash, then, we have a cautionary tale about the consolidation of even a little managerial power. His control over the crew’s lives amounts to little more than table scraps given to him by Weyland-Yutanit, but the android treasures this power so much that he mistakes it for agency.

Speaking of agency, let us return to the psychosexual environment of the *Nostromo*. This is a company-provided commercial ship, yet, as stated before, its surroundings are designed to engender dependency on its functions. The food is owned by the company, the hibernation pods resemble nothing more than eggs, and the AI is called Mother by the crew. This is no coincidence even from a Marxist lens. As Sarah Jaffe points out in her book, *Work Won’t Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*, “the family as we know it actually serves to smooth the functioning of capitalism: it reproduces workers, without whom capitalism can’t function” (Jaffe 26). Jaffe goes even further in her analysis, pointing out that, actually, the family represents an actual job largely done by women. Hence, *Alien*’s environment and female protagonist makes complete sense. Through the eyes of a working class woman, after all, the metaphors of motherhood, pregnancy, and coercion in the working place are all too real fears. The alien’s main method of reproduction, an unwanted pregnancy that quite literally kills, also aligns with the basic analysis provided above. The workers of the *Nostromo* also serve as reproductive labor, their bodies the incubators for more aliens that the company wants.

Furthermore, Ripley’s character itself offers an interesting view into the representation of a working-class woman. The film’s imagery displays the darker aspects of the character’s psyche, but *Alien*’s plot and thematic resonance also portrays the unique pitfalls of being a

woman laborer. In *Bread and Roses: Gender and Class Under Capitalism*, Andrea D'Atri introduces the plight of women workers as a unique position in the labor movement. "The woman worker became a troubling figure, moreover, because her very existence questioned the image of femininity mandated by the dominant patriarchal ideology. She exposed a contradiction between the ideal of femininity and wage labor, marking an antagonism between the home and the factory, between maternity and productivity, between traditional values and capitalist modernity" (D'Atri 20). Thus, much like Ash, Ellen Ripley occupies a strange space, a liminal place. As a woman, she carries expectations and stigmas, but, as a worker, the company needs her to a certain extent, even as dead labor. This position is even illustrated in her interactions with the rest of the crew. Routinely, Ripley's fears and criticisms are dismissed as paranoia. When a crew member is first impregnated by the face-hugger around forty minutes into the film, it is Ripley who denies the crew entry. "Listen to me," she spells out in the microphone. "If we break quarantine, we could all die." Her cautious proclamation is received with hostility, the rest of the crew disappointed that she would sacrifice one member's life for the rest of them. Of course, Ripley is proven entirely right, but that doesn't dismiss this initial hostility. As a female worker, Ripley carries more of an expectation to carry out emotional labor, such as giving out as much sympathy as she can manage. Emotional labor can be defined as "the act of expressing organizationally desired emotions during service transactions…" (Feldman & Morris 987). Notice the purposefully vague definition here. While emotional labor is often described when working in a service industry, it also refers to the labor many individuals are expected to give during a relationship such as a friendship, a family, or a romantic partnership. Ripley, as a female officer on the Nostromo, carries the burden of emotional labor to her crew. Her failure to do so makes Ripley feel colder because society, as a whole, expects nurturing and warmth from its

female population rather than from the men. Yet Ripley's fears of quarantine aren't the only measure that gets ignored by the rest of her peers. As the xenomorph continues to kill more and more of the crew, it is Ripley who first notices that Ash appears to be protecting it. A small part of the movie consists of her questioning Ash's presence on the ship and asking Dallas about his credentials. This questioning is quickly reduced to sheer paranoia by the rest of the crew, particularly by Dallas and Lambert, the ship's engineer and the other female character in the movie. A film viewer gets the idea that, perhaps if Ripley looked a little more like Dallas or was, in fact, a white man like most of the crew, she would be listened to early on. Instead, most of her warnings get dismissed until near the third act of the film when she remains the sole survivor.

Ridley Scott's *Alien* is thus a perfect example of a consciousness-raising film. The movie depicts workers' plight under capitalist structures. While the science fiction environment and extreme plot exaggerate the stakes, Ripley and the crew's exploitation as Weyland-Yutani puts them through the grinder are a perfect reflection of American labor. Behind the many psychosexual designs of H.R. Giger's design work and the new sheen of a film that was, years later, labeled the start of a blockbuster franchise is a film that deserves to be credited for its honest look at exploitation.

***Society* (1989): All in the Family**

When first released worldwide, *Society* (1989), directed by producer of the *Re-Animator* series Brian Yuzna, was a mixed success. It grew to acclaim in Europe, especially in a UK fresh off the rule of Margaret "The Iron Lady" Thatcher. In the United States, where it was filmed and where its social commentary focuses on, however, the film was shelved for three years and released to tepid reviews. American reviewers initially considered the film a mess. One reviewer

from 1992, Marc Savlov, writing for the *Austin Chronicle*, cited the film's class commentary as one major detraction, saying, "While the Brits may go ballistic over the notion that their class-heavy society is indeed a plot against the everyman, here in the States we tend to be more wary of the electorate than the greed-mongers who finance them" (qtd. in *Jacobin*). Thus, *Society* as a film provides an interesting testing ground for the cultures it touches. The more an audience becomes class-conscious, the more they tend to enjoy the film. Society as a film is dependent on a realization of the broader truth of capitalist exploitation. During the Reagan era, many Americans saw themselves as possible millionaires in the making. This might be the reason the film has gained more of an audience in America as time passes and late capitalism's crisis begins to grow.

For the film is indeed unsubtle about the social commentary. Bill Whitney, the teenage protagonist played by Billy Warlock, seems to have it all as a young rich man. He's the star basketball player, he has full freedom to do what he wants, and he's just won student body president. However, the film opens immediately on his sweaty, terrified face, the camera on a side-angle shot to emphasize how unsettled our protagonist is. Strange sounds, voices, and laughter haunt his home, and he even feels the need to carry a knife around his own home. His psychologist, older sister, and parents all dismiss his fears: that his parents don't view him with the same affection as his sister, that they hardly view him as a son at all, and, as the film progresses, that strange incestuous orgies and a conspiracy possibly rule his life. Famously, the movie proves Bill's fears all true in its infamous last thirty minutes, depicting a body horror orgy with several practical effects by the famous Screaming Mad George, a special effects artist lauded for his disgusting SFX work. Body horror refers to a specific subgenre in the horror film

dedicated to the molding or destruction of the human form. This subgenre gets particularly prominent in the 80s with such films as John Carpenter's *The Thing*, *Re-Animator*, and *The Fly*.

The movie's aesthetics also fit wonderfully with the time period, the 1980s. Pastel colors, big hair, and mullets abound in every scene. Perhaps more importantly, the film reflects the sheer materialism that was celebrated in the time period, especially by the elite. Sports and luxury cars are everywhere in the movie, glossy and new. The McMansions made popular during the Reagan presidency make up every character's abode. These markers of consumption work incredibly well in a movie about the literal and metaphorical consumption of the poor by the uber wealthy. This focus on consumption is no accident. In many respects, the 1980s represents the time period when neoliberalism really takes off. The Reagan administration contributes to that huge take-off with the implementation of Reaganomics, the decimation of welfare and affirmative action, and the deregulation of several industries, including the airlines. Famously, at this point, President Reagan even quips that, "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem" (Reagan). Unions lose even more power, and the public education system starts seeing its first real challenges from Reagan's huge evangelical audience, the segregationists that never really stopped after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, and many other lobbyists finding their places in the White House. While this makes the film very much a product of its time, the influence of Reagan's neoliberal policies continues to this day. Therefore, the themes and metaphors still resonate.

Society might be best summarized as *Gaslight* (1944) with a Marxist and 80s twist. This old psychological thriller features a man trying to make his wife doubt her reality, make her go insane, and therefore take her fortune from her. In much the same way, Billy's wealthy family and authority figures want him to doubt his perception to keep him off-balance and weak to their

predations. The film is not at all subtle about its critique of the bourgeoisie and its intentions for the poor. From the very opening of the film, the audience gets to hear a strange rendition of the "Eton Boating Song," spelling out exactly what the film is going to present:

> Oh how we all get richer
>
> Playing the ruling game.
>
> Only the poor get poorer
>
> We feed off them all the same.
>
> Then we'll all sing together
>
> Society, we'll be true.
>
> Then we'll all sing together.
>
> Society waits for you.

The Eton Boating Song is notable for being a tune that collegial British students enjoy. It's named after the famous and exclusive Eton school, its notoriety due to its regular turnout of Britain's prime ministers. The school, therefore, has a very "posh" reputation, accepting some of the richest and most "well-bred" English students in the UK. Perhaps this reference overall to the UK is no mistake. After all, even in the 80s, most Americans can identify that the class system of Britain is particularly rigid. Perhaps the filmmakers wish to make that America is not so different from its former colonizer. The film decides to open up with a riff on the song as a clear commentary on the true, macabre intentions of the old rich, parodying the rather grotesque attitudes and behaviors the rich display towards the vast majority of the planet, the working class.

Most of the film's runtime is spent in the mind of Bill Whitney as he perceives more and more that his life is not what it seems, that both his fellow students and his authority figures are

indeed profiting off the suffering of the working classes, and that he himself does not belong in the bourgeois society. At several key moments, Bill also finds evidence of the rich's literal inhumanity. On a sunny day, his two parents giggle and coo over the gardener's caught slugs. The mollusks are propped up on a glass platter as if ready to serve for a dinner, and the two praise what a fine "crop" the gardener has found. In another scene, Jenny, Bill's sister, moans erotically in the shower as her body is literally twisted the wrong way, her posterior and breasts facing the same side through the foggy window of the shower. At every moment, Bill attempts to confront these discrepancies head on only to be gaslit back to submission. Indeed, when watching the film with the twist in mind, it becomes clear that several members of the titular Society, the secret organization the rich are part of, love reminding Bill of his actual rung on society's ladder. "If you don't follow the rules, Billy, bad things happen," his psychologist, Dr. Cleveland, loves to remind him. "Now some people make the rules, and some people follow the rules. It's a question of what you're born to." Interestingly enough, the capitalist class in this film doesn't ever repeat some of the most infamous propaganda in American capitalism. There are no speeches of self-made men, no exhortations to Bill that this place in society is earned. This is partially due to the general twist of the film, the reveal of their literal inhumanity, but it works beautifully for the message of the film. In fact, the only one who seems to try and believe in a myth of meritocracy or democracy in the face of overwhelming struggle is Bill himself. "I have rights! I'm almost eighteen!" he declares when he's forcefully drugged minutes before the movie's famous climax. It's almost as if the movie itself works as the protagonist's consciousness-raising, a mirroring of what the film might do for its own audience.

For a brief moment, let's consider one of the most intriguing aspects of the film besides its infamous body horror: its thematic connections between family and capitalism. The analysis

of *Alien* briefly touched on this idea, pointing out that capitalism and capitalist realism is first produced in the family unit. Indeed, this isn't a new analysis. Marx and Engels point out this connection as far back as "The Communist Manifesto," stating, "On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie" (Engels & Marx). *Society* actually delivers very well on this form of analysis not only through its subversion in Bill but also in the development of side character Jenny Whitney, Bill's older sister. By the film's end, Bill discovers that his family is part of a strange cabal of terrifying, inhuman creatures who regularly engage in murderous orgies that target the lower class. These creatures, in a way, both eat and copulate with humanity, merging their bodies with their victims. An early part of the film details Jenny Whitney's "coming-out" as a member of Society, the name of the cabal that titles the movie. In a rather shocking reveal, Bill listens to the moment Jenny is advised on how to continue the role of Society through a tape recorder. "Remember the schedule," the father reminds her on the recording. "First we dine, then copulation. Someone your own age first. Then your mother and me. Then in comes the host." In case the audience mistakes what copulation could possibly mean, the recording ends with a cacophony of moans and terrified male screaming.

At this moment, *Society* delivers the literal reproduction of capitalist values and therefore capitalism itself through an unsubtle metaphor. Nor is it only in this scene. The voyeur of this scene, Dave Blanchard, is Jenny's ex-boyfriend, a working class young man. Throughout the film, his terrible anxieties over the monstrosities ruling Beverly Hills are also gaslit as the over-the-top revenge of a jealous ex. Furthermore, Jenny and the other rich denizens of the city consistently comment that he's "not her type" and that the two are "too different." The status quo

is literally reproduced and protected over and over again with only Bill Whitney becoming aghast at the seeming coldness of those around him.

Additionally, the dynamics of capitalist society are also reproduced by authority figures who are not literal inhuman monsters but nevertheless serve the interests of the ruling class. For example, the police of Beverly Hills regularly act out in the interests of Bill's parents. The cops plant evidence of a fake car crash, ensure that evidence of the secret society disappears, and even violently ensure Bill's participation in the orgy, or the "shunt" as characters in the film call it. A particularly poignant moment in *Society* is when the main officer we see in the film fastens a lasso around Bill's neck, forcibly dragging him around the place he has known as home like a rabid dog for the amusement of the rich. Again, the metaphor here is obvious. In Kristian Williams' book *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America*, the true purpose of policing, and its relationship toward capital, is explored in depth and spelled out for readers:

> When the police enforce the law, they do so unevenly, in ways that give disproportionate attention to the activities of poor people, people of color, and others near the bottom of the social pyramid. And when the police violate the law, these same people are their most frequent victims. This is a coincidence too large to overlook. If we put aside, for the moment, all questions of legality, it must become quite clear that the object of police attention, and the target of police violence, is overwhelmingly that portion of the population that lacks real power. And this is precisely the point: police activities, legal or illegal, violent or nonviolent, tend to keep the people who currently stand at the bottom of the social hierarchy in their "place," where they "belong"—at the bottom. This is why James Baldwin said that policing was "oppressive" and "an insult" (Williams 158-159).

Williams' analysis is both succinct and entirely correct. Even in the logic of a body horror film, the police's role is still presented as the enforcer of capital's interests. Nevertheless, it must be said that *Society* is a very white film. The film's premise necessitates its main character's belief, even if only for a moment, that the rich white family nurturing him for eventual feasting is biologically his own. On top of that, Beverly Hills itself remains an incredibly segregated city. However, it must be said that the imagery of capitalist exploitation and police brutality on the white cis male nouveau riche Bill is mostly for the sake of allegory to a mostly white audience. In reality, the film's depiction of police officers and Williams' analysis are far more likely to happen to Black and Brown people. A substantial critique of the film might be that its focus on a white middle-class audience erases the concerns and points of view of lower or middle-class people of color.

Despite this concerning omission, eventually, Society gets into the real meat of the capitalist problem as presented by the plot. Bill gets captured, paraded through the mansion like a prize. The guests of this mansion party are all the old rich, decorated in jewels and designer clothes. Champagne sparkles in their glasses. The live slugs that Bill's parents were previously excited over are placed on trays carried by waiting staff and offered around as living appetizers, a grotesque preview of the horrors awaiting Bill. Eventually, the horror accelerates into a kaleidoscopic terror. Dave Blanchard, Bill's friend, is laid out as a meal. All the guests of the party strip down, and the film's lighting turns a stark crimson red. Johann Strauss II's "The Beautiful Blue Danube" Waltz starts to play as the rich guests start feasting upon Dave Blanchard's body and grisly transformations begin. The faces of the guests melt into Blanchard's body, extending out like a fleshy beak or melted cheese. A woman feasts on an eyeball. Arms,

legs, and breasts melt together as more of the guests converge into one bubbling, groaning mass. All the while Dave Blanchard screams in agony as he is devoured.

This moment and the ensuing twenty minutes into the climax cement *Society* firmly as a cult body horror film. According to Xavier Aldana Reyes in the chapter "Body Horror," "body horror as a gothic filmic mode still relishes the capacity for transformation and mutilation as a form of corporeal transcendence" (Reyes 56). Thus, it makes sense that, in the world of *Society*, the actual profit off of dead labor is presented through the terms of the body horror genre. The Society members transcend class lines as well as species lines by engaging in their shunting, literally feasting off the poor in that transcendence. Furthermore, the film links the sexual body and the act of consumption together extremely well. In the film itself, it's made clear that the act of eating Blanchard is extremely sexual to the Society members. As they feast, individuals in the flesh mass stroke themselves and other spare body parts, essentially masturbating and moaning as Blanchard is digested. Steven again makes it clear in *Splatter Capital* that "sexual desire acts as a medium for capitalist accumulation. But, once again, the desire proper to capitalism is presented as utterly horrific" (Steven 114-115). The desire is horrific because the rich's desire to transcend, to remain above the rest of humanity, depends upon the exploitation and deaths of the lower classes. *Society* just makes the reality more explicit by literally depicting the consumption of the poor by the wealthy.

Ultimately, this ability of the Society members ends up being the undoing of one of their own. Ted Ferguson, the wealthy bully that targets Bill in school, ends up in a one-on-one duel with Bill in the orgy. This outcome is seen as a form of entertainment by the rich. "Ooh, a slave revolt!" declares Dr. Cleveland. The entire party, still either naked or in their underwear, circles the two fighters, cheering on their representative in Ted. However, by attempting to eat Bill

during the fight, Bill gains the advantage and uses Ted's transformation abilities to pull him inside out. This even allows Bill to escape with his friend and girlfriend for a time. However, this individualization of the final conflict delivers the final message of the film. Ultimately, Bill's escape is implied to be precarious. Society still wields power not just in Beverly Hills but throughout the country, possibly the world. The rich have the police in their pocket. One of their numbers has been killed, but his position can easily be filled once again. The Judge's final comment even hints to this, saying, "Well, we have an opening in Washington." This signifies that Ted's death is not at all consequential for the Society. After all, there will always be more heirs.

This finale illustrates neoliberalism's goal: the full destabilization of collective identity and action. The working class is not safe. Not even the family in its full form is safe. In *Society*, it is impossible for Bill to successfully escape or dethrone his oppressors as an individual. Class warfare cannot be waged without collective support. However, the valorization of the individual is in full force. Even as a target for the upper class, Bill has absorbed this valorization. Much of the film consists of Bill attempting to go one-on-one with his parents, his psychologist, his friends, his love interest, and finally Ted himself. However, as *Society* shows, so long as the poor and the working class accept the fight on neoliberalism's terms, the capitalist class will forever remain on top.

Ready or Not (2019): Richer or Poorer

With the new millennium comes brand new films and brand new problems. The presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump all continue the neoliberal policies of the 80s and the 90s. This leads to an ever more dramatic wealth gap between the rich

and the poor along with disasters such as the 2006-07 Housing Bubble Collapse, the 2008 Recession, and the longest war in American history in Afghanistan. With manufacturing and most good union jobs being offshored, the vast majority of the jobs in the United States begin to convert into retail, service, hospitality, and the gig economy. Websites such as Patreon boom as freelance work becomes far more common. With all these crises, neoliberalism continues in its evolution a concept known as the "economization of life" (Agenjo-Calderon 185). As scholar Astrid Agenjo-Calderon explains, "contemporary neoliberalism operates as a 'governing rationality' characterized by the economization of every dimension of life. This rationality does not refer to the commodification (or monetarization) of objects, things, or activities, but rather to the omnipresence of the market model and the nightmarish configurations of human beings as market actors always and everywhere… In other words, within the neoliberal order, all of us are 'interpolated' or 'hailed' to the positions of consumers and entrepreneurs. In consequence, market criteria come to be the ultimate justification for the individualization of risk, soaring inequality and increasing polarization" (Agenjo-Calderon 186). The "governing rationality" described here essentially adds a new layer to the concepts of alienation and dead labor. Even the personal facets of workers' lives, once separated from the workplace, can become a source of revenue, monetized and used as leverage for a personal brand. With this latest iteration of capitalism, the American horror film offers a chance for us to once again observe working-class anxieties in its art form.

The 2019 film *Ready or Not* is a supernatural horror-comedy movie that serves to do just that. It begins with a common fantasy: falling in love and marrying into an incredibly wealthy family. Grace, the protagonist, relaxes on her wedding day with her new husband, Alex Le Domas. The Le Domas family are billionaires with a family legacy in creating board games that

children enjoy. However, this happy fantasy is quickly derailed when the Le Domas family reveals that new members must participate in a game night. When the game chosen is "Hide and Seek," the film reveals the twist: the Le Domas family is Satanist, having sacrificed their souls to gain their wealth, and Grace must now be sacrificed to keep the family alive and thriving. The rest of the movie becomes a cat-and-mouse chase where Grace must fight back against homicidal family members, their maids and butler, and the general apathy of the outside world to her plight.

Much like *Alien*, the film's female protagonist allows viewers to explore the intersection of both class and gender. Grace's position, from the point of view of the Le Domas family, is a sacrificial lamb. Her bridal gown, pure white and symbolizing innocence, works perfectly with that sacrificial image. Her very name, "Grace," denotes purity and goodness. As the film goes on, this gown becomes more and more disheveled and bloodstained due to Grace's needing to defend herself. This can symbolize a loss of innocence, but this transformation might also represent a deeper character change, such as the reclamation of agency. As more of the LeDomas family and their servants die, their control gradually lessens over Grace's life. Furthermore, with every attempt on her life, Grace continues to see how little the family views her as a person, eliminating the emotional hold they once held over her.

Truthfully, whether or not Grace was meant to be a new member of the family or a sacrifice to uphold the family's wealth and power, the Le Domas family primarily see her as an object or a means to proliferate and succeed. This corresponds to Marx and Engels' analysis of marriage. For example, in "The Communist Manifesto," Marx and Engels write, "The bourgeois can see his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point

aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production" (Engels & Marx). This is exactly what Grace represents to the Le Domas family, and the film shows us through the representation of family members by marriage and several pieces of dialogue. For example, near the end of the film, Tony Le Domas, the patriarch, yells at Grace, "Where do you think you're going, bitch? Who the fuck do you think you are? Our family's weathered worse than you. You're just another sacrifice. You're another goat." Here, Tony makes Grace's commodification extremely specific. Furthermore, earlier in the film, Charity Le Domas, the wife of older son Daniel Le Domas, makes it clear that she needed to acquiesce to the Le Domas' standards in order to keep their wealth. In a scene in the mansion's study, Charity Le Domas stares into Daniel's eyes with the fire from the fireplace highlighting her position as she stands firm by her decision to sell her soul. "You know where I came from and what my life was like before. I would rather be dead than lose all this." Charity's position and Tony's implication of the bride being "just another goat" show that, really, Charity and Grace's positions aren't too dissimilar. As women marrying into the family, they are both judged and measured by their productive value as assets. One is valued by her loyalty and willingness to step into the family's norms. The other is valued by the profit of her death.

The depiction of the Le Domas family is notably more comedic than the other representations of the capitalist class this thesis has explored. Part of this can be attributed to the genre of the film, horror-comedy. Indeed, the Le Domas family's general incompetence, even when they outnumber their chosen victim, makes for great comedy. For example, Emilie Le Domas keeps accidentally killing the maids in the mansion. At one point, she shoots a maid in the face with an ancient shotgun, excitedly screaming, "I got her!" In another scene, Emilie mistakenly shoots a maid through the face with a crossbow's arrow when simply accepting the

weapon. This is attributed in the film to a severe drug addiction, specifically to powder cocaine. Fitch Bradley, Emilie's husband, is similarly incompetent. One scene in the film focuses on him in a darkened bathroom, studiously watching a YouTube tutorial on how to fire his own crossbow. Becky Le Domas, the matriarch of the family, is played more seriously, yet, when she catches up to Grace, Becky misses her own shot with the bow and arrows. Compared to the hyper-effectiveness of the Society members in *Society*, the Le Domas family come across as stooges. Yet this may just be another reflection of anxieties at the time. After all, in 2019, the United States was still dealing with the presidency of Donald Trump. Trump has long been a representative of the materialistic, vapid yuppie culture that swept the nation in the 80s and 90s along with the "renaissance" of neoliberalism (Marcotte). However, with him firmly in the Oval Office, American citizens had to deal with a president who, over and over again, displayed general buffoonery and incompetence to a degree never seen before. For example, at one point, the Trump Administration listed Wakanda, the fictional African country from the Marvel film *Black Panther*, as a free trade partner (*Slate*). In the height of the Trump presidency, a film depicting a rich, incompetent family that still exerted a scary amount of control over the life of one woman, representative of the audience and the working American, makes complete sense.

Furthermore, much like Ash contrasting with Ripley in *Alien*, *Ready or Not* likes to play with character foils that speak to the greater anti-capitalist themes. For example, early on, the movie introduces the character of Aunt Helene. In the film's opening flashback, Helene is the sobbing bride being restrained as the masked family kills the groom. In the present, however, Aunt Helene is completely changed. Instead of the white bridal gown, Helene wears a deep purple gown with matching dark make-up. It makes her stand out from the rest of the family, marking her as the sinister stain during Grace's moments of contentment and bliss. This holds

especially true when Grace notices Aunt Helene consistently glaring daggers at her throughout the day. Whereas Grace's name highlights her innocence in the beginning of the film, Helene's name is the French variant of the Greek Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world in myth and the face that launched a thousand ships. Furthermore, it is Aunt Helene who is most eager about the prospect of human sacrifice and serving the demon, Mr. Le Bail. "We must kill the bride before dawn," Helene insists, brandishing an ax with crazed intent. When the family attempts to use security cameras to track Grace, Helene scolds the family, shouting, "You have no respect for tradition!" Despite Helene losing her husband, she clings tightly to the traditions that cost him in the first place. Instead of feeling sympathy for Grace and Alex facing the exact same terror she once faced, Helene, at the prospect of Grace's impending sacrifice, expresses pure glee. Part of it is some variation of the sunken cost fallacy. Helene's husband is gone forever. If the same belief system and power structure that took Helene's husband from her is eventually dismantled, it's then possible that he died for nothing, and Helene cannot accept that. However, another aspect of this character is the open sadism encouraged by the class struggle. Helene has been wronged and indoctrinated to accept that tragedy as a cost of her future ability to police and lord over other people. Much like Ash, the power given to the Le Domas family by a literal demon and by their own wealth, as temporary as it might seem to the existence of the human soul, tempts Helene. Instead of seeking solidarity, Helene wants the systemic power the Le Domas family wields because it gives her control where she previously had none.

As for Alex Le Domas, the film initially tries to paint him as the token good Le Domas family member. After all, he is the one Grace is in love with. When he finds Grace again after the Le Domas family purposely locks him away to keep her ignorant of the danger, he tries his hardest to help her. He huddles behind a hiding place with his wife and keeps her silent when his

family accidentally murders a maid thinking it was Grace. He explains the rules of this ritual when the rest of the family want to keep her as ignorant as possible. He even mentions trying to manipulate his family so he can keep his wife out of danger. However, several parts of the film foreshadow a deeper selfishness and, ultimately, a dehumanization of his wife. For example, in that initial scene where Alex is warning his wife of the full danger, the movie reveals he kept his family's depravity a secret from Grace. "You knew that I would pull that card…" whimpers Grace, rocking back and forth with tears streaming down her cheeks. Cold, blue lighting shines on them both. "You brought me here. You didn't warn me." A dismissive look enters Alex's face. "You wanted to get married." After a repeated back and forth, Alex finally reveals why he didn't tell her: "If I told you, you would have left." The film initially plays this as a sort of sweet love confession. Soft, dramatic music plays in the aftermath of this revelation. Grace's face softens, and she allows herself to be led by Alex.

However, this tenderness only lasts so long as Grace wants to stay with Alex. Near the end of the film, after the sacrificial death of Alex's brother Daniel and Grace's defensive killing of Alex's mother Becky, both Grace and Alex face each other once again. Unlike the previous scene, they are distanced from each other. Grace stares up at Alex in complete fear and shock, blood staining her wedding dress. Alex is in tears, having just witnessed Daniel's death and seen his mother's corpse. When he attempts to embrace her, Grace steps back from Alex, shaking, and simply utters, "I'm sorry." Alex recognizes that Grace is clearly traumatized, yet, after confirming his brother's death, Alex's first question is, "You won't want to be with me after this is all over, will you?" When Grace won't answer, Alex takes hold of her and screams, "She's in here!" He ensures that his family will be able to sacrifice her all for the crime of Grace's not

wanting to be part of the Le Domas family. Alex's love and support is conditional on his desires, meaning that he never really saw Grace as a full human being.

Traditionally, Marxist and Anarchist thinkers oppose marriage as an institution for a variety of reasons. The two most common bases of critique are marriage being the origination of private property and marriage upholding inequalities that include but are not limited to sexism, homophobia, and racism. Anarchist Emma Goldman puts both critiques into full light in her essay "Marriage." As Goldman explains, "What is it that causes all these people to uphold marriage? What makes them cling to its prejudice? (For it is nothing else but prejudice). It is because marriage relations are the foundation of private property, ergo, the foundation of our cruel and inhuman system… It always gives the man the right and power over his wife, not only over her body, but also over her actions, her wishes; in fact over her whole life" (Goldman). Goldman's critique is classic here, but, with the advent of no-fault divorce and more egalitarian legislation, calls for the abolition of marriage have largely quieted down.

However, *Ready or Not* presents a substantial anti-capitalist critique of marriage that's still applicable to the contemporary moment. Grace is a perfect example of a woman still disadvantaged by the institution of marriage. Having been in the foster system most of her life, she has no family support network of her own. Grace's knowledge of the family is entirely reliant on what Alex is willing to give her, and Alex shows he's willing to be as deceptive as possible to ensure Grace remains with him. Essentially, Grace's position in the film shows the paradoxical position of being in an unequal marriage during a time when the law is supposedly egalitarian while a misogynist, capitalist culture still prevails. Clare Chambers in her article "Against Marriage" puts it succinctly, "Sociological research shows continuing associations between marriage and gender inequality: married women do more housework than both married

men and unmarried women; married women are unhappier than married men; marriage renders women more vulnerable to some sorts of domestic violence. Marriage remains a powerful pull towards patriarchy" (Chambers). The same thing happens with Grace here. Alex's determination to keep the family's evil secret insures that Grace enters a partnership uninformed and alone. Grace and Alex's relationship is inherently unequal, the power dynamics ensuring that Grace has no freedom and perhaps even no real consent. According to the Marxist and Anarchist critiques analyzed, this is inherently baked into the structure of marriage as an institution.

Yet *Ready or Not* misses a golden opportunity in the casting of Grace. Samara Weaving gives an excellent performance in the role. The themes of the film, however, would make infinitely more sense if Grace were played by a woman of color. In Ruby Hamad's book, *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color*, Hamad posits that womanhood as a concept is dependent on white supremacy: "Only white men were Man and only white women were Woman. For hundreds of years, excluding women of color from womanhood has been key to maintaining this racial hierarchy, and white women have been both privileged and subordinated by it. It seems clear to me that this is why it is women of color who remain most marginalized and most at risk of violence and discrimination" (Hamad 99). White womanhood is seen as the default form of *all* womanhood. Considering that *Ready or Not* presents a world where Grace is dehumanized by capitalism in a way unique to her position as a woman, Grace should be played by a woman of color. Everything in the film, from her background as a foster kid to her comparison to a sacrificial goat to being determined as undeserving of a family, makes more sense in the context of racialized womanhood. Even Alex's determination to keep her at his side, to the point that it feels more like a sense of ownership than any romantic feelings of love, would become more explicit if Grace were played by a woman of

color. Overall, *Ready or Not*'s themes are still potent and reflective of socioeconomic anxieties. However, the film misses the opportunity to display the multifaceted oppressions under capitalism by the female racial subject.

Conclusion: To Eat The Rich

Much as activism springs from the material conditions of people in a society, the films discussed here present their critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism depending on the context of their times. *Ready or Not* presents a dark yet comedic critique of bourgeois marriage adapted to the post-feminist gender relations of the 80s onwards. *Society* gives its audience an 80s twist on the old trope of a conspiratorial secret society controlling the world with its stark materialism and allusions to the unprecedented control of the rich in the political economy. *Alien* still carries the remnants of old working-class solidarity before neoliberalism destroyed the power of unions in the United States.

With the popularization of intersectional theory and the tradition of Marxist theory, film scholarship has a real chance to present a more complicated picture from all films but especially the genre film. While Marxist thought has the potential to reveal the anxieties of the working class, its traditional application often focuses on class to the detriment of all other inequities, creating a race-specific framework that is not applicable to every working person in the United States. Intersectional theory as developed by Kimberle Crenshaw carries a revolutionary potential, offering theorists the chance to properly analyze the structures of power. However, as the theory gains in popularity, its name becomes used more as a signifier, heralding the presence of "diversity" and "inclusivity." Its power becomes muddled and appropriated. Hopefully, this

analysis offers an opportunity to film scholars to connect intersectional theory and Marxist theory in new ways, offering brand-new insights into the interpretation of genre film.

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