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Navigating Global Capitalism: Identity, Ambivalence, and Resistance in Cultural Productions

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Navigating Global Capitalism: Identity, Ambivalence, and Resistance in Cultural Productions

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the field of English
with a specialization in Literary & Textual Studies

April 23, 2024

Dr. Bill Albertini, First Reader
Dr. Rachel Walsh, Second Reader

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Analytical Narrative

“History tells us what people do; historical fiction helps us imagine how they felt.”

Guy Vanderhaeghe

I include this quotation at the beginning of my analytical narrative for a reason: what Vanderhaeghe asserts about historical fiction applies to all art forms. Storytelling, including visual narratives, gives us the sensory experiences to envision realities that exist at a distance, be it the distance of time, age, or geography. Writing an analytical narrative for a portfolio feels like zooming out on the zoomed-in perspectives of my research interests, condensing two years of work concisely in one introductory essay. My educational journey, particularly my pursuit of English as my major, started with a fondness for reading, instilled since childhood. My studies provided me with an understanding of the interactive nature of literature, where both the writer and reader play active roles in shaping the narrative. Following graduation, I was still determining the direction my degree would take me. I began applying for various positions, keeping my interest in reading literature alive, and eventually landing the opportunity to teach English.

As a teacher, I endeavored to foster inclusivity, interaction among students, and diverse perspectives. I started thinking about the connection between literature and the broader political questions, which has made pursuing literary studies a conscious choice for me.

I am multilingual and work in three languages. I acquired Punjabi as my mother language and learned Urdu and English as the languages of my education. Being able to speak three different languages gives me a certain kind of openness in my perspective—the openness to compare and contrast, to look beyond the perspective of one language. At the same time, I need to get well-versed in a particular language. The language and its sensibility come from living in

the culture and environment of the language. It reminds me of the lines from Kamala Das's "An Introduction Poem":

I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.
Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. (lines 5 -9)

The desire to be well-versed in all the languages I know keeps me motivated to challenge the boundaries of my limitations, and I seek to liberate myself from the limitations of one culture in a globalized world. That is how I envisioned my sensibility toward literature, and I think of graduate studies as an uplifting moment in my trajectory. My master's program at BGSU was a significant opportunity for my education with an informed perspective. The multicultural experience has provided insights that enabled me to explore diverse perspectives from the Global North to the South. My graduate studies experience has helped me grow in ways I never thought possible. One particular development I would like to highlight is my newfound appreciation for popular art forms such as music, film, and other visual narratives. I have never been so captivated by movies as I am now, to the point where I can engage in academic discourse about them. I have included four projects in my portfolio, three based on films and one on short fiction.

When I selected projects for my portfolio, I focused mainly on personal preferences, including those I enjoyed working on. However, upon revising them, I began to discern common threads previously unnoticed. One recurring theme across all my papers is my interest in the depiction of places and mobility. For instance, Rohinton Mistry's short stories span India and Canada, *Seberg* traverses France and the USA, and *L'Avventura* unfolds across mainland Italy and Sicily. *Sorry to Bother You* is an exception, set in Oakland, California, but it is also about class mobility's (false) promise. Another thematic consideration in my analyses is the marginality of characters within these narratives. Mistry's stories depict diasporic subjects across diverse locales, while *Seberg* highlights the targeting of Seberg for her non-conformity. *Sorry to Bother You* explores the exploitation of corporate sector workers, and *L'Avventura* delves into feminist themes and consumerism's alignment with patriarchal norms. These explorations delve into various facets of marginality—economic, intellectual, social, and cultural—with precision and specificity.

Another recurrent theme I have identified in my research projects is the critique of, or resistance to, power and capital. For instance, in Mistry's fiction, I find the depiction of home and foreign spaces and the unsettling notions attached to them intriguing, especially in migration as a condition of capitalism's evolution and globalization. A project on the film *Seberg*, which portrays the political life of Jean Seberg, especially her involvement with social activists during a period of significant social change in the United States, discusses how social activism challenged the dominant narratives of power and the state institutions reacted to nonconformity of such individuals. *Sorry to Bother You* critiques corporate capitalist notions, particularly regarding the workplace, employing a unique form and style to prompt viewers to question systemic manipulations. I discussed the elements of the movie that inform us of resistance and critique the

notions of power. Lastly, in my analysis of *L'Avventura*, I explore the shift in cinema post-World War II and its reflection on consumerism's detrimental effects on women. These concerns fall under the umbrella of global capitalism, reflecting how capitalism transcends local boundaries to become a pervasive social system worldwide.

While writing these projects and receiving feedback from my professors, mainly from my advisor, Dr. Bill Albertini, I noticed certain aspects of my work that required attention. One significant aspect I had to unlearn was my approach to academic writing. In Pakistan, passive voice is ubiquitous, and students are encouraged to use it regularly. Because of that, I used to write scholarly arguments, often using phrases like "aims to" or "this study intends to." However, feedback from my professors highlighted the importance of clarity in expressing my argument in an active voice. Through my experience at BGSU, I learned the nuances of academic writing. I realized the necessity of clearly articulating my thoughts while engaging with and responding to existing scholarly discourse. This process involved incorporating primary and secondary sources and effectively making my voice stand out. I am grateful to my professors, whose detailed feedback helped refine my writing skills. While proficient in referencing secondary sources, I struggled to assert my perspective effectively. I am incredibly thankful to Professor Albertini for his guidance in this regard.

My first project is "Cultural Crossroads: Rohinton Mistry's Diasporic Narratives at the End of the Century." I wrote it for Introduction to English Studies, which I took with Dr. Bill Albertini. Rohinton Mistry, a Canadian Indian writer, explores themes of cultural differences in his short fiction. His narratives present complex perspectives on the migration and settlement of South Asians in the West. His stories, such as "Squatter" and "Lend Me Your Light," the two works I examined in my essay, reflect the contrasts and paradoxes experienced by characters

struggling to acculturate to their host lands. These narratives, set at the end of the 20th century, deal with the concept of “home” for diasporic subjects and grapple with their anxieties about their connection—or lack of it—to their homelands. Mistry’s characters navigate complex diasporic situations, and his stories offer a viewpoint on migration distinct from fiction written in the 21st century, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. I highlight the attention to cultural discord in Mistry’s stories, which are often less present in more recent fiction, and argue that Mistry’s diasporic fiction offers insights frequently overlooked amidst the current hyper-political situations.

When I submitted the paper for the class, Professor Albertini highlighted my writing style. He noticed that I concealed my argument on Mistry’s works in the secondary scholarship on Mistry. While revising my project for the portfolio, I addressed this “they say, I say” concern. I also made a concerted effort to enhance the clarity of my voice and refined my analysis to more effectively complement and validate my central argument.

My second project is “Surveillance Shadows: Unveiling Ambivalence in Benedict Andrews’ *Seberg*.” I wrote it for the course The 1960s in Contemporary American Culture with Dr. Jolie Sheffer. *Seberg* provides a biographical exploration of Jean Seberg’s life during the critical period of civil rights activism from 1968 to 1971. The narrative mainly explores her association with the Black Panther Party, making her a target of J. Edgar Hoover’s COINTELPRO surveillance program. The film deals with the psychological implications of surveillance on Jean Seberg and the FBI officers involved. A distinct vision marks director Benedict Andrews’ portrayal of the 1960s sociopolitical milieu. Through close reading of Seberg’s narrative, I argue that the film elucidates the intricate and contradictory nature of the

era's socio-political dynamics, delving into the psychological ramifications of surveillance on both Seberg and FBI agents.

The feedback provided by my professor on this paper primarily addressed the need for clarity regarding whether I was analyzing the period's political history or examining the film as a cultural production of its time. She emphasized that I need to clarify between Benedict Andrews' portrayal of the 1960s and the historical events of that era and suggested examining 1960s events from the perspective of Jean Seberg's life as portrayed in the film. For my portfolio, I made significant adjustments to the paper. Specifically, I concentrate on exploring aspects of the film that depict the politics and life of Jean Seberg during the 1960s. I shift the focus towards analyzing how the film envisions the socio-political landscape of that period while also considering the director's perspective in shaping the cinematic portrayal and why it is significant to talk about Jean Seberg today. It has enabled me to rewrite a more targeted analysis of how film represents the politics of the 1960s.

My third project is titled "Equisapiens and Corporate Dystopia: Unmasking Capitalism in *Sorry to Bother You*." I wrote it for my Graduate Writing course with Dr. Lee Nickoson. When I submitted it for the class, I intended to present the paper on this film at a conference, which I eventually did in March 2024. The film navigates class disparity and labor exploitation, challenging viewers to question the relentless demands of capitalism. The film satirizes the market's social, political, and intellectual processes. It presents us with a vision of the system where privilege is akin to speaking in a "white" voice. I argue that the film critiques capitalist labor demands and how power, identity, and privilege operate within a capitalist society. To do that, director Boots Riley dramatizes the tension between conformity and resistance within a

system to unearth the bleak future, critiques the system that leads people towards it, and helps us understand the labor market, labor relations, and inhumane expectations of the capitalist system.

In revising this paper for my portfolio, my primary change is transitioning from a presentation format, where I showed movie clips and discussed sequences, to a written expression. I made my argument more straightforward for readers without visual aids, and for that, I provided more context and engaged with secondary scholarship on thematic concerns within the film.

My fourth project is “Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Avventura*: A Feminist Exploration of Emotion and Ambivalence.” I wrote it for British Romanticism and the Film, a course I took with Dr. Piya Lapinski. In this study, I argue that Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *L’Avventura* invites viewers to explore female experience under heteronormative social pressures, specifically examining the influence of patriarchy on shaping desires. The film’s portrayal of female characters simultaneously exposes their detachment and absence from society while offering potential avenues for liberation from patriarchal constraints. To substantiate this argument, I conduct a detailed analysis of Antonioni’s visual techniques and unconventional narrative approach.

When I received feedback from Professor Albertini on this paper, I was somewhat uncertain about my central argument. Professor Albertini pointed out that my paper primarily consisted of a sequential analysis of the film, with a focus on dissecting various scenes. While this aspect of analysis is essential, he emphasized the need to clarify the significance of these sequences and articulate what I aim to convey to my readers. This would enable me to carve out my niche in interpreting the film. While revising, I carefully consider my understanding of the

film and how I intend to enlighten my readers about its nuances. I realize the importance of utilizing scenes and sequences from the movie to substantiate the points I seek to convey. Through this approach, I ensured that my perspective on the film became more apparent and more pronounced.

Further, I revised my introduction, which initially discussed the transition from realism to neorealism in broad terms without considering the specific context of Italian cinema or post-war European cinema. I contextualize my introduction more effectively, providing a more transparent framework for the subsequent analysis. The analysis involves including shots from the movie; I paid particular attention to the formatting aspects to ensure coherence and readability.

I received rigorous academic training at BGSU, which has given me critical insights into scholarship and greatly enhanced my confidence in my writing abilities. Engaging in research and academic discussions has enabled me to approach topics in an informed manner. Now, I feel confident about the direction my program has given me. If I continue to pursue my PhD, I anticipate a more explicit focus on marginality and resistance. I plan to leverage my experiences at BGSU and seek a career path that will provide both success and economic stability. I am particularly drawn to opportunities with non-profits that will help me connect with non-mainstream sectors of society. My diverse coursework at BGSU has provided me with a broader perspective of my discipline. Before starting this degree, I considered academia and teaching as my only career options. However, after two years, I now recognize the potential for graduate students in the public humanities to contribute significantly in an everchanging social landscape where technology and innovation are transforming the traditional humanities and fields of social sciences.

Cultural Crossroads: Rohinton Mistry's Diasporic Narratives at the End of the Century

Migration and settlement in the Global North are ingrained in the lives of South Asian people for economic, social, and political reasons. The primary driving force for South Asians to migrate to the Global North is the scarcity of economic opportunities in their home countries. In the process of migration and settlement, concerns over identity and a sense of belonging always remain relevant. The circumstances for expatriates have been undoubtedly transformed by globalization and the digitally connected world. Especially the immigrants of the last decades of the 20th century had to adapt to a rapidly changing world that has made the world more connected and complex. The immigrants have experienced backlash from conservative circles.¹ Nevertheless, the allure of the West among the citizens of the Global South persists in the same manner. The political economy and the cultural capitals of the Global North attract people to envision settlement in the West as a lifetime opportunity. While migrations may appear glamorous and success narratives may encourage positive attitudes towards migration, there are aspects of migration related to identity, perplexity, and constraints on diasporic subjects that are often obscured. Mistry's fiction deals with the overlooked aspects experienced by immigrants. In the process of acculturation, diasporic subjects reconstruct the ways of connecting with their home culture.² The transition from local to global contexts has prompted shifts in immigrant perspectives on globalization. Cultural exchanges of values and capital predominantly impact developing nations, with influence often flowing from dominant to subordinate cultures, a phenomenon termed cultural homogenization. As articulated by American sociologist David O'Connor, cultural

¹ Shaw, Gwyneth K. "Uncovering the Roots of Discrimination toward Immigrants." *Penn Today*, 29 July 2019, penntoday.upenn.edu/news/uncovering-roots-discrimination-toward-immigrants.

² Fuseini, Moses Naiim, et al. "Migration and poverty in the Global South: An integrated review."

homogenization denotes “the process by which local cultures are transformed or absorbed by dominant outside cultures” (391). Mistry’s fiction narrativizes the situations where characters are in a state of disjuncture towards their identity and left in a perplexed disposition. These short stories foreground the disjuncture and the way it works in both directions, towards the place of origin and the place of relocation. Mistry presents immigrant experiences with ambivalence, abstaining from endorsement or critique of migration. I argue that once the characters become diasporic, they remain in a state of flux, and their minds and bodies keep oscillating between the two worlds, the world of origin and the world of relocation. This intricate interplay between body and mind is a very distinct yet understudied aspect of his fiction. The impact of diasporic identity on the physical and psychological responses of Mistry’s characters offers a nuanced insight into the disillusionment experienced by immigrants.

Rohinton Mistry, a fiction writer born in Mumbai and now residing in Canada, studied English Literature at the University of Toronto. His works, which often explore themes of community, diaspora, identity, poverty, and human conflict, reflect his rich cultural background. In 1987, he published a collection of short stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, that includes interconnected stories. Mistry is conscious of his identity as a writer of Parsi descent. His narratives are not solely focused on the experiences of diasporic subjects, but also infuse them with a Parsi perspective, both in India and in diasporic spaces.³ Being Parsi, his characters are deeply rooted in

³ Parsi community migrated from the Middle East to India and adopted local culture while keeping their religious and social practices intact. They are, however, in fewer numbers and always remain private about their rituals.

the cultural traditions of his community.⁴ His fiction reflects a profound understanding of the Parsi subculture and the impacts of globalization on their culture.

In his book, *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, Vijay Mishra distinguishes between the classic and contemporary diaspora. According to Mishra, the old Indian Diaspora termed the “diaspora of exclusivism,” consists of individuals who migrated in earlier times, carrying with them the traces of “little Indias.” These individuals migrated with their families, settled permanently in the Global North, and preserved their culture in the host countries. Their idea of a home was firmly rooted in their countries of relocation. However, the contemporary diasporic community lives under the conditions of late capitalism, where they often had to migrate without their families but maintained connections with their homelands. Mishra refers to this contemporary diaspora as the “diaspora of the border.” This term also refers to unprivileged migrations when people flee from their home countries to find work in the Global North. Unlike the “diaspora of exclusivism,” these individuals are not relocated with their families, and their social experiences keep them connected to their homeland. The border diaspora’s presence in both host and home countries facilitates the transmission of cultural values, including Western-influenced lifestyles, which can alter perceptions of the home culture. Concerns regarding the homogenization of the dominant culture remain pertinent for border diasporas, highlighting ongoing cultural dynamics and challenges within these communities.

The feeling of estrangement from the origins or countries of relocation is continuously discussed in the films and fiction of contemporary South Asian writers. Addressing the question of identity, Mishra refers to Zizek’s idea of the “imaginary.” Zizek defines the “imaginary” as the

⁴ Soni, Anumpam. “Parsi consciousness in Rohinton Mistry’s fiction.” *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 5, no. 6, 28 Feb. 2021, pp. 223–228

state of identification with the image in which we appear likable to ourselves, representing what we would like to be. Mishra further connects the imaginary to nationality. He argues that nationality is an imaginative construct. Just as Lacan's "imaginary" is a fundamentally inaccurate sense of wholeness, "nationality" is a fantasy that erases differences. According to Salecl, the nation is a "fantasy structure," a scenario through which society perceives itself as a homogeneous entity.⁵ Diasporic subjects harbor the idea of nationality in the recollected moment, accompanied by a feeling of departure from the homeland. The distance from the home culture and the cultural alienation in the country of relocation create an "absence" that sometimes takes the shape of trauma. The existence in a foreign land and the timid assimilation of "nationality" into the fantasy world of diasporic subjects complicate the "absence" of something they adhere to. This "absence" manifests as repression, and diasporas often construct racist and nationalistic visions to maintain the connection with this "absence." I perceive these phenomena as manifestations of psychological processes, with discernible effects on the physical embodiment of diasporic individuals. Through an analysis of two chosen short stories authored by Rohinton Mistry, divergent perspectives on diasporic identity and its relationship with both the place of origin and relocation will be examined.

"Squatter," written in a nested narrative technique, contains two stories told by Nariman Hansotia to the boys of his Mumbai neighborhood. Mistry explains the storytelling technique of his character to set the tone: "...that unpredictability was the brush he used to paint his tales with, and ambiguity the palette he mixed his colors in. The others looked at him with admiration...Nariman sometimes told a funny incident in a very serious way or expressed a significant matter in a light and playful manner" (Mistry 147). The first tale is an allegorical story,

⁵ Salecl, Renata. "Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and Anti-Feminism in Eastern Europe." *New German Critique*, no. 57, 1992, p. 51, Mishra refers to Renata Salecl's essay that discusses the concept of the nation as a fantasy structure.

featuring a polymath athlete called Savukshaw, who has tested himself in different sports and proved his mettle in each of them. The first story by Nariman ends on a note for the listeners “[Savukshaw] kept looking for new experiences, and though he was very successful at everything he attempted, it did not bring him happiness. Remember this, success alone does not bring happiness. Nor does failure have to bring unhappiness” (Mistry 153). The ending of the first tale establishes the distinction between happiness and success and builds tension on two closely related ideas. The second tale is about a young Parsi man named Sarosh, who migrates to Canada but his ability to adjust himself to his new culture is challenged by an incapacity to use Western toilets without squatting in Desi style. The story begins at the point where “Sarosh has been living in Toronto for ten years. We find him depressed and miserable perched on top of the toilet, crouching on his haunches, feet planted firmly for the balance upon the white plastic oval of the toilet seat” (Mistry 153). In the beginning, this condition is termed “incommodious,” but it eventually caused him “grave anxiety” and prolonged failure for over ten years “began to torment and haunt all his waking hours.” Mistry has employed the humorous style to discuss the inability of the Sarosh to get acculturated. The term “incommodious” bears an etymological connection to “commode,” an archaic term for toilets. The narrative employs comedic elements to underscore the ironic predicament faced by Sarosh, grappling with physical limitations in Canada. Nariman continues, “Ten years was the time Sarosh had set himself to achieve complete adaptation to the new country. But how could he claim adaptation with any honesty if the acceptable catharsis continually failed to favour him? Obtaining new citizenship had not helped either. He remained dependent on the old way, and this unalterable fact, strengthened afresh every morning of his life in the new country, suffocated him” (Mistry 154). The condition of Sarosh affects his work life, and he consults Dr. No-Ilaaz, who is an expert on the issues of immigrants. The name “Dr. No-Ilaaz” is a blend of

English and Hindi words that means “No Cure (Ilaaz),” it also creates a humor effect. Dr. No-Ilaaz recommends the transplantation of *Crappus Non-Interruptus* (CNI) in the bowel and explains that this device works like an automatic garage door opener and warned Sarosh, “You will never be able to live a normal life again. You will be permanently different from your family and friends because of this basic internal modification. In fact, in this country or that, it will set you apart from your fellow countrymen” (Mistry 161). The process of CNI implantation serves as a response to the challenges posed by migration, which have compromised Sarosh’s body’s natural functions, and represents the support provided to facilitate his adjustment to life in Canada. Despite initially intending to return to India, Sarosh experiences a change of heart while aboard the airplane. Despite his efforts to persuade the flight crew to allow him to disembark, they resist, and he ultimately arrives back in his home country. Mistry employs the flashback technique to transport readers to the moment when Sarosh first announced his successful immigration to Canada, revealing the subsequent argument that occurred during his farewell. One faction viewed Sarosh’s decision to leave his homeland as a courageous choice bound to lead to remarkable success, while another believed it to be a decision fraught with lifelong unhappiness. Sarosh solemnly vowed to return if he did not achieve success within a decade. His mother says, “It is better to live in want among your family and your friends, who love you and care for you than to be unhappy surrounded by vacuum cleaners and dishwashers and big shiny motor cars” (Mistry 155). This sentiment underscores the complexity of the diasporic experience, which is influenced by a multitude of factors. On one hand, the allure of migration is undeniable, particularly due to the financial opportunities afforded to diasporic individuals in the West. However, this newfound prosperity is juxtaposed with a persistent longing for the homeland. Thus, diasporic individuals find themselves

in a perpetual state of flux, their thoughts oscillating between their country of origin and their adopted home.

By the conclusion of his narrative, Sarosh returns to Mumbai, only to find that the city he once knew has undergone irreversible changes— even the names of popular beverages have been altered “during his absence,” their labels now “different and unfamiliar.” Unable to reclaim his former place in the societal fabric he left behind a decade earlier, Sarosh is overcome with a sense of desolation and melancholy. However, as time passes, he gradually reacquaints himself with his cultural roots. Sarosh implores Nariman to recount his tale, evoking the lines of Othello: “When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, speak of me as I am; nothing extenuates, nor set down aught in malice: tell them that in Toronto once there lived a Parsi boy as best as he could. Set you down this; and say, besides, that for some it was good and for some it was bad, but for me life in the land of milk and honey was just a pain in the posterior.” From the story’s onset, Mistry challenges the notion of well-being and stability associated with the lives of diasporic individuals. While there is often a fascination with the experiences of those in diasporic spaces, Mistry subverts expectations by highlighting Sarosh’s misery.

Arjun Appadurai, in his book, *Modernity at Large: Dimensions of Globalization*, discusses the global tension between the cultural homogenization⁶ and cultural heterogenization⁷ created through globalization. In the complex global economy, the cultures of the Global South tend to homogenize the cultures of the Global North. In the intricate web of the global economy, cultures of the Global South often assimilate with those of the Global North. Appadurai proposes a

⁶ Cultural homogenization is defined, by David E. O’Connor, as “the process by which local cultures are transformed or absorbed by a dominant outside culture.”

⁷ Cultural heterogenization is a concept that underscores the coexistence of diverse cultural expressions, practices, and identities within a specific context.

foundational framework to explore the disjuncture of global cultural flows. For my analysis, the concept of “ethnoscape” holds particular relevance, as it offers insights into how diasporic communities engage with the global economic flow of late capitalism. Appadurai defines ethnoscape as “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals” (Appadurai 33). These individuals significantly influence the technological and structural advancement of nations, while concurrently shaping spaces where they emerge as agents of consumer culture economy. The economic constraints in the countries of origin of diasporic subjects fuel a desire for life in the West. People residing in the villages of the Global North not only contemplate migrating to urban centers but also seek opportunities to relocate to destinations like Dubai, Europe, or America for economic advantages. For the Global South, such communities serve as sources of inexpensive labor. The admiration for life in the West leads individuals to disdain their own culture, opting to embrace a culture they have never experienced. While migrating to other countries may seem like an easy escape, it comes at the cost of cultural adaptation and grappling with cultural homogenization.

In “Squatter,” the choices made by two characters, Sarosh and Savukshaw, offer parallel perspectives on the possibilities of life in developing economies. Sarosh spends a decade in Canada but fails to acclimate to the culture, describing his experiences in the West as “a pain in the posterior.” However, on his return to Mumbai, he struggles to reconnect with his former life. In contrast, Savukshaw opts for life within familiar cultural confines, consistently prioritizing choices that promise personal happiness over potential success.

“Lend Me Your Light” opens with a quote from Rabindranath Tagore, “...your lights are all lit – then where do you go with your lamp? My house is all dark and lonesome, - lend me your light”

(Mistry 209), evoking a metaphorical need for “light” in a dark and lonesome house, which echoes throughout the narrative. The story is about Kersi (narrator), his brother, Percy, and Percy’s friend, Jamshed. After completing high school, Percy and Jamshed went to different colleges. Percy, along with his group of friends starts working with a charitable agency that collects funds for destitute farmers in a small Maharashtrian village. Jamshed shows a superficial interest in the activities of Percy and always favors the option of leaving the country as he sees “absolutely no future in this stupid place.” As Percy becomes aware of Jamshed’s disdainful attitude, he refrains from discussing social work matters with him, instead focusing on trivial topics. Eventually, Kersi immigrates to Toronto, and Jamshed to New York. The narrator receives mixed responses to the announcement of his immigration. But everyone appreciates him for his decision. Jamshed writes a letter to Kersi after a year about his recent visit to India and complains about the attitude of Percy. He writes, “Can’t understand what keeps him in that dismal place. He refuses to accept reality. All his efforts to help the farmers will be in vain. Nothing ever improves, just too much corruption” (Mistry 181). He ends his letter by describing the city where he lived most of his life, “Bombay is horrible, seems dirtier than ever, and the whole trip just made me sick. I had to fill of it in two weeks and was happy to leave” (Mistry 181). Kersi finds himself at odds with Jamshed’s patronizing attitude towards India. Subsequently, he joins the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario and begins participating in events organized by the Parsi community residing in Ontario. However, upon attending these events, he becomes disillusioned with the limited scope of their discussions. The conversations predominantly revolve around mundane topics such as flight prices, and the community members exhibit an exaggerated enthusiasm towards encountering Indian food or familiar items as if they were discovering them anew. Discussions about Mumbai primarily center on shopping experiences, often portraying shopkeepers in a negative light, and emphasizing

strategies for securing good deals. Within diasporic communities, individuals often experience lives starkly contrasting those they left behind in India. While they sought refuge from their home countries, they found themselves envisioning home cultures in Western spaces. Despite adjusting to the sociality of the West, they maintain a cultural allegiance to India, longing for spaces that resonate more with Indian culture than the Western environment.

After a few days, he receives a letter from his brother, Percy, who informs him about their progress in obtaining interest-free loans for farmers and the challenges they face. After reading his brother's letter, Kersi contemplates the lives of both himself and his brother. "There you were, my brother, waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada TV" (Mistry 184). Kersi considers discussing his feelings with his brother upon his return to India. After four months, he returns to India and finds Bombay dirtier than ever, having an experience that echoes what Jamshed described in his letter to Kersi.

While contemplating his visit to Mumbai, Kersi imagines a version of sixteenth-century morality play:

"A crowd clawed its way into a local train. All the players were there: Fate and Reality, and the latter's offspring, the New Reality, and also Poverty and Hunger, Virtue and Vice, Apathy and Corruption. The drama began when the train, Reality, rolled into the station. It was overcrowded because everyone wanted to get on it: Virtue, Vice, Apathy, Corruption, all of them. Someone, probably Poverty, dropped his plastic lunch bag amidst the stampede, nudged on by Fate. Then Reality rolled out of the station with a gnashing and clanking of its metal, leaving in its wake the New Reality. And someone else, probably Hunger, a matter of factly picked up Poverty's mangled lunch, dusted off a *chapati* that had slipped out of the trampled

bag, and went his way. In all of this, was there a lesson for me? To trim my expectations and reactions to things, trim them down to the proper proportion” (Mistry 187).

Kersi feels estranged from the familiar settings and experiences he has always known. During his stay in India, his brother Percy undergoes a traumatic experience when one of their colleagues is murdered by local groups in the village. Despite Kersi’s insistence on leaving India for a better future, Percy avoids arguments and immerses himself in his work. After some time, Kersi returns to Toronto. “Gradually, I discovered I’d brought back with me my entire burden of riddles and puzzles, unsolved. The whole sorry package was there, not lightened at all. The epiphany would have to wait another time, another trip...I mused, I gave way to whimsy: I Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me...” (Mistry 192). This story underscores the constraints faced by diasporic individuals. The parallel perspectives of Jamshed, residing in New York, and Kersi, in Toronto, towards India reveal a shared condescension towards their homeland, shaped by the belief that life in the late capitalist societies of the Global North is the only viable option. However, their decision to not reside in India does not fully detach them from it. Kersi’s choice of life in Canada leaves him grappling with existential perplexity, existing in a liminal state where he is neither at ease in New York like Jamshed nor inclined towards Percy’s commitment to residing in India and contributing to society.

In “Squatter,” Sarosh, in Canada, struggles to adjust but is determined to live there, evident when he insists the airplane crew offload him. The character is mentally prepared and makes a careful decision to move to Canada, but his body struggles to adapt to the environment. In “Lend Me Your Light,” Kersi loves living in Toronto and, in all respects, prefers the life of an expatriate. However, his mind keeps him in a state of perplexity. He feels annoyed in the

gatherings of the Parsi community in Ontario and continually compares himself with his brother, who is working for the welfare of destitute farmers.

In these works, the characters grapple with subjective chaos stemming from their perspectives on life. The dilemma of whether to leave their home and the constraints of living in the West both contribute to their inner turmoil. Mistry complicates the seemingly straightforward notions of migration as a path to success and prosperity by introducing layers of complexity beyond social, political, and cultural issues. He intricately connects these narratives to the psychic and physical conditions of diasporic subjects. These characters exist in a liminal space, experiencing discomfort both in their country of origin and in their adopted country. However, their misery in the diasporic space does not necessarily imply a longing for their homeland as a solution. Rather, they must grapple with the consequences of the choices they make in both settings.

The notion of home for Mistry's characters is intricate; while they yearn for home, they experience discontent upon their return, partly due to the idealized image of "home" they cultivate when physically distant from it. Sarosh and Kersi grapple with fragmented and disrupted perceptions of their homelands. Salman Rushdie, in his work *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, delves into the sense of loss experienced by exiles, emigrants, and expatriates, arguing that physical detachment from India often leads to an inability to fully reclaim what was lost. Over time, familiar places and memories distort, and fragments of recollection gain heightened significance. This fragmentation imbues trivial elements with symbolic value, while the mundane takes on sacred qualities. Upon migrating to the Global South, Kersi and Sarosh initially envisage home as they leave it, but upon their return, their perspective shifts. They now perceive their home culture through a lens influenced by the reference point of their country of relocation. For Mistry's characters, the longing for home is rooted in their cultural restraint in the West. In "Squatter,"

physical restraint hinders Sarosh, while in “Lend Me Your Light,” Percy grapples with guilt over the privilege of the West while his brother fights for the fundamental rights of oppressed social groups.

Revisiting Mistry’s late 1980s works becomes imperative in today’s context due to the resurgence of fascist and nationalist regimes and the resulting attention by postcolonial thinkers on the political implications of diasporic literature and the political prosecutions experienced by so many diasporic people. While many diasporic narratives predominantly address issues such as racism, harassment, and politics related to the Global North, Mistry diverges by presenting narratives that delve into the everyday aspects of being a diasporic subject. Particularly, Mistry skillfully explores the implications of migration at a deeply emotional level. Facilitating an understanding of the personal turmoil experienced by diasporic subjects is a crucial aspect of Mistry’s narratives.

These narratives underscore the predicament of individuals from the Global South who, while still attached to their homeland cultures, strive for a prosperous future in the developed world. Their identity remains confounded as they oscillate between the limitations of homeland and host-land, local and foreign, origin and relocation. This indecisiveness in acclimating to either creates a perplexing situation where identity lacks a concrete footing. The absence of economic stability gives rise to cultural disaffection in the home country, while the lack of cultural recognition makes adjustment challenging in the country of relocation. Cultural success does not necessarily translate into economic success in the home country, just as financial success does not necessarily result in cultural fulfillment in the country of relocation. However, the existence of diaspora in Mistry’s fiction operates bidirectionally. Once a character enters the diasporic space, their identity remains in a state of flux. The feelings of estrangement and foreignness reverberate and prompt us to

contemplate a “space” where the essentialist meanings attached to the ideas of homeland and hostland no longer apply. His characters acquire a sense of localness in foreign lands, and foreignness can manifest even in local settings. This is how he negotiates for a more viable diasporic space, which is not just physical but also psychological.

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Equisapiens and Corporate Dystopia: Unmasking Capitalism in *Sorry to Bother You*

“S.T.T.S (Stick to the Script),” declares Mr. Anderson at the close of the first shot in *Sorry to Bother You*. In this scene, Cassius Green, whose ironically resonant name (“cash is green”) suggests a focus on financial gain and who is being interviewed for a telemarketing position, has embellished his resume with fictitious accomplishments. He secures the job not because of these augmented credentials but because of the market’s indifference to the qualification of workers if they are willing to stick to the prescribed script. This initial sequence establishes the backdrop for Boots Riley’s debut project as a writer and director, a surrealist black comedy. In *Sorry to Bother You* the telemarketing world serves as a microcosm of capitalist society. Cassius Green’s journey from struggling caller to “power caller” exposes the dehumanizing effects of conformity, symbolized by adopting a “white voice.” The film navigates class disparity and labor exploitation, challenging viewers to question the relentless demands of capitalism. The film satirizes the social, political, and intellectual processes of the market and presents us with a vision of the system where privilege is akin to speaking in a ‘white’ voice. I argue that the film critiques the capitalist labor demands and how power, identity, and privilege operate within a capitalist society. To do that, Riley dramatizes the tension between conformism and resistance within a system to unearth the bleak future and critiques the system that leads people towards it, and helps us understand the labor market, labor relations, and inhumane expectations of the capitalist system.

Sorry to Bother You revolves around Cassius, who is struggling and living in his uncle’s garage. He got a job as a Telemarketer at Regal View. While working, he gets promoted to the status of Power caller when he starts speaking in a “white voice.” He grapples with the choice to side with his friends who are trying to organize labor against exploitation or to enjoy his elevated status as a power caller. Cassius wishes to be part of Worryfree Solutions which offers attractive

incentives that include lifetime employment and housing by signing away their freedom. By the end, we see Equisapiens, the new project of Steve Lift, CEO of Worryfree Solutions to genetically engineer horse-human hybrids. On this revelation, Cassius joins the protestors and starts sharing the hidden intent of Steve Lift in the media. We see Cassius turned into Equisapiens by the end of the movie breaking into the house of Steve Lift.

Sorry to Bother You is largely seen as an anti-capitalist film because of its political commentary on the system by combining dark humor and magical realism. Riley in an interview mentions that the idea of “white voice” came from the political campaign of Barack Obama’s presidency. The success of Obama depended in part on his adoption of white behavioral and rhetorical traits. Riley employed this usage of “white voice” through the African American characters working in the telemarketing firm to emphasize the notion that the success and economic advancement for a black individual hinge significantly on embodying whiteness in behavior and attitude. This observation, highlighted by several reviewers, underscores a clear thematic element⁸ in the movie (Tallerico; Travers; Bradshaw). It is complemented by various innovative visual elements to highlight recurring motifs as Tallerico writes, “But a movie doesn’t work, even a satire, if we don’t have anything human to hold onto...” As we see Cassius’s enduring challenges to gain economic stability and the corporate enslavement advertised as a form of pervasive lifestyle connect to the broader issues of exploitation and exhaustion addressed in the movie.

The film effectively combines standard social commentary with hysterical comedy, delving into the character’s journey through a vicious cycle of transformation, where success is contingent

⁸ “Boots Riley on Why You have to Watch ‘Sorry to Bother You ... - YouTube.”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbezWUwOlnY>.

on adopting a persona contrary to his true self. As the narrative progresses, the film takes a sci-fi turn, portraying the exploitation of individuals in the corporate hierarchy, culminating in a dystopian future where humans transform into horses due to oppressive labor conditions. Cassius Green realizes and decides to resist, offering a compelling exploration of the human desire to confront and change the bleak state of affairs. With powerful visuals, the movie interweaves comedic elements, making a concerted effort to provide perspective to its audience on labor efforts and exploitation.

With the issue of labor exploitation, the movie contends the class difference based on the historical difference manifested in race discrimination. The difference of Cassius was not just of the economic class, but it is further complicated because of his African American heritage. Bernard Beck, in his article, “The Next Voice You Hear: *BlackKlansman*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*,” notes that in the dominant white culture, the minority groups are imposed by “contradictory necessities on minority groups” of adhering to the norms of white culture. With these contradictory necessities, there also develop a subculture of scorn (Beck 20). Cassius uses his “white voice” to achieve success in a telemarketing job, leading to involvement in a grotesque plan related to genetic engineering and high-tech slavery. The struggles of Cassius to achieve success while dealing with the questions of his African American heritage, and the implications of all this within the context of social interactions and group identity are very complicated. His deprivation is multifold as he must deal with the economic, social, and racial aspects. The anxiety of Cassius is evident in the moments when he must interact with white people, like, when he was invited to meet the CEO of Worryfree Solutions. He was othered, looked at with contempt, and treated humorously.

Building on the historical and generational precarity of Cassius, and understanding his situation in modern-day capitalism, it is important to point out how narrative deals with the race relations that determine the class relations and the way it is intertwined with the conditions of the economy. In her dissertation on *Sorry to Bother You*, Kara Brummel presents the rhetorical analysis of whiteness, capitalism, and their intersection. She argues that the film uses satire to critique the forces that control an individual's ideology. By exaggerating the "capitalism" and "whiteness" in the narrative of the plot Riley underscores the difference. The structure of the *Regal View*⁹ depicts the discrimination between the working class, upper middle class, and elite. The film portrays Whiteness as an invisible framework within American society that often goes unnoticed and therefore unchallenged (Brummel 30). However, Riley's depiction keeps this aspect of capitalism at the forefront.

The existence of hybridity in the characters and the plot structure also informs us of the dilemma that Cassius goes through. His constant struggle to deal with his 'own' voice and 'white' voice and later in the movie, when Steve Lift, CEO of Worryfree Solutions asks him to join him to become Equisapiens, the evolved form of the half-human and half-horse. These hybrid humans' idea extends corporate exploitation by dehumanization. effects of corporate exploitation on workers, who are treated as disposable commodities. Along similar lines, Leshu Torchin in her article, "Alienated Labor's Hybrid Subjects," makes a point about the hybridity and the act of going about the concerns of identity and resistance. The hybrid nature of Cassius's identity as he straddles different social and cultural contexts raises the concerns of economic rights and that is consistently accentuated by the sequences in the movie to expose the class disparity.

⁹ the telemarketing firm where Cassius is employed.

The scholarly perspectives presented through Leshu Torchin's analysis, Brian Tallarico's visual exploration, Bernard Beck's examination of identity, and Kara Brummel's rhetorical critique collectively enrich our comprehension of *Sorry to Bother You*. Torchin's foundational insights into economic rights and hybridity set the stage for a nuanced understanding of the film's socio-political commentary. Tallarico's scrutiny of visual elements and recurring motifs accentuates the film's unique blend of social critique and comedy, while Beck's examination of identity politics and group dynamics provides a lens through which to appreciate the nuanced layers of societal privilege and compromise. Brummel's rhetorical analysis deepens our understanding of how the film satirically dismantles hegemonic forces. Together, these perspectives weave a comprehensive tapestry of interpretations, underscoring the film's relevance in contemporary discussions about race, capitalism, and social justice.

It is challenging to categorize the movie into a specific genre or technique from the outset. It blends various elements simultaneously, incorporating humor alongside darker aspects of comedy, serving as a compelling satire on market dynamics. Notably, it is not only the movie's content or dialogue that stands out but also the form employed by Riley. For instance, character names play a pivotal role in conveying deeper meanings. Each name reflects the persona and context of the individual. The protagonist, Cassius "Cash" Green, grapples with financial instability. His name mirrors his struggle, as he lives in his uncle Sergio's garage and works as a telemarketer. Cassius's transformation occurs when he discovers the power of using his "white voice" during calls, propelling him toward success. Cassius's girlfriend, Detroit, embodies resistance and rebellion. She defies the conventional idea of success, labor, and hard work. Detroit's name symbolizes her refusal to conform and her active participation in anti-WorryFree activism. Another character, Squeeze, serves as the office rebel. He formed a union,

advocating for better salaries and basic facilities. His name reflects his determination to “squeeze” justice out of an oppressive system.

Central to the film is a tension between the pressure to conform and the desire to resist, a tension that structures the film from the start. Before embarking on his inaugural workday, Cassius encounters a Worryfree Solutions advertisement on his television, offering assurances of enduring employment and housing. The advertisement depicts confined living spaces reminiscent of a student dormitory, replete with bunk beds, coupled with enticing promises of food satisfaction and professions marked by both contentment and serenity. While presented as an idyllic realm, we see a utopia of content presented to the public. A place to work where you will get lifetime contracts, and in return, you will live in accommodation (marketed as guaranteed housing) provided by Worryfree Solutions so that you do not have to go home after work. While staying at your workplace you will be provided with the best food. There was a great appeal in that advertisement for anyone experiencing economic precarity. However, amidst these promises, the ad overlooks capitalist exploitation. Even when Cassius applies for the telemarketing job at Regal View, he understates this exploitation, focusing solely on the material gains of employment rather than considering its drawbacks. During an exchange with Detroit, Cassius broaches the subject of Worryfree Solutions, prompting her incredulous response, which indicates her divergence from the idealized rhetoric of the advertisement. The exchange on the idea of joining Worryfree captures the tension between Cassius’s aspirational pursuit of success, juxtaposed against his partner Detroit’s contrary disposition, embodied in her very name, suggesting a distinct inclination. Detroit’s name signals resistance, as in the Detroit uprising of 1967. It parallels with the factory-style labor (Detroit was home to the car industry, the most famous symbol of US Fordist industrial production); and points us to structural inequality and abandonment of Black citizens (the white

flight from Detroit, the money pulled from the city and spent on white suburbs and interstate highway system).

The operations of Worryfree Solutions expose capitalist exhaustion and elicit disconnection from normal life by projecting an ambiance evocative of an industrial factory. By exploiting basic human needs, Worryfree Solutions curtails individual freedom. They do so by deciding and providing them with what they need and presenting corporate enslavement as a promise of stability. They manifest a predetermined trajectory for employees, wherein their autonomy is preserved through the commitment to lifelong employment and housing. A parallel can be drawn to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where a dystopian society imposes predetermined roles on individuals, resulting in an exploitative distribution of classes bereft of personal agency. This predetermination is driven by an impetus to cultivate compliant workers, thereby accentuating a system that prioritizes efficiency over individual autonomy.

The film employs dark humor to underscore Cassius's challenges in telemarketing. As he calls individuals, he becomes entangled in their private lives. The first person abruptly ends the call while dining and the next call interrupts a private moment between a couple. The visuals humorously and tragically highlight the irony of telemarketers' predicaments. Cassius encounters an elderly lady who, despite sobbing about financial struggles, is dealt with by the prescribed script by Cassius Green, emphasizing the conflict between empathy and corporate protocol. Facing initial challenges to engage customers and being unsuccessful at cracking deals, Cassius receives advice from a colleague to adopt a "white voice." This strategy, he learns, is not about tonal changes but projecting an indifference born from financial security, revealing a systemic advantage favoring those naturally aligned with such traits. The suggestion to use a "white voice" in the film is a commentary on the systemic advantages that white individuals possess compared to other

communities. It suggests not only adopting the privileged way of speaking but also internalizing the carefree attitude associated with privilege, wherein one behaves as if unconcerned about the importance of their proposition to the listener. In coaching sessions for telemarketers, trainers emphasize the need to believe that the money being sought belongs to ‘you’ and must be acquired, showing a mindset of entitlement and rationalization typical of privilege.

During the introduction by the new manager, Diana Debauchery, emphasis is placed on teamwork and familial camaraderie. However, when questioned about increased salary, she dismisses the notion, highlighting the supremacy of social currency. Diana emphasizes the trendiness of this “social currency” in the modern-day workplace and highlights its benefits where people work as a family. I read this as an important tool of exploitation in a modern-day work setting as employees are diverted to be content on this non-material currency that serves no material benefit to the employees, instead, they are expected to feel good about their challenging financial situation. This managerial approach reflects a deliberate divergence designed to retain employees, emphasizing the employers’ strategic use of non-monetary incentives. Riley deals with it with humor, however, the concept of the social currency reflects a mindset aimed at controlling workers’ concerns and promoting performative empathy within the system. In doing so underplays the deprivation of workers’ basic needs for a fulfilling life, juxtaposed with the emphasis on familial bonds and viewing the organization as a family. The focus on social currency over financial benefits underscores contemporary trends in management practices. This scene navigates the tension that Riley aims to build, revealing the deliberate undermining of workers’ concerns.

Power callers hold an elevated status and enjoy greater privileges and higher pay than their fellow telemarketers. This elevated status is attributed to their exceptional ability to engage, persuade, and manipulate customers using the “white voice.” Cassius, upon embracing the white

voice, achieves unparalleled success in telemarketing, earning a promotion to the coveted position of a power caller. Remarkably, this elevation occurs precisely when his colleagues are collectively unionizing to demand fair wages due to financial struggles. Cassius, despite earlier support for the unionizing efforts, distances himself from the cause after his promotion. When Cassius is offered the position of a power caller and informed of the privileges he will enjoy, including being shifted to the upper floor designated for power callers, his desire for elevated status and upward mobility seems to be fulfilled. Before getting promoted, there is a scene where Cassius standing before the elevator with golden doors, observing dignified individuals entering, symbolizes not only a promotion but also a longing for upward mobility and a shift in social class. This transformation signifies more than a mere promotion; it represents the fulfillment of Cassius' lifelong internal desire to overcome deprivation and achieve a higher status. In his interactions with Detroit, he is constantly preoccupied with the notion of such success in his mind. The choice of positioning power callers above ordinary telemarketers emphasizes a hierarchical class system. Employers motivate telemarketers to strive for power caller status, illustrating an upward progression that symbolizes societal divisions. This division echoes socialist notions of materialism, where the privileged status of power callers mirrors the bourgeoisie's position. Additionally, the spatial separation, with power callers on the upper floors and ordinary telemarketers on the ground floor, symbolically signifies the class divide, reinforcing the privileges enjoyed by the upper echelons. The privileged team of Power Caller is a group of people incentivized by the company to reinforce working hard and contribute to the company's success, enjoying leadership privileges. Cassius distances himself from his colleagues because of the class divide that he thinks he has achieved because of his hard work. But for the corporation, he is among the group of people who have wholeheartedly conformed to their motives. Riley helps us see that the power callers are the

employees who are profiting the corporate giants better than ordinary employees by engaging them in more extensive work where they hardly have any time left for themselves and this promotion has made them silent on this exhaustive labor.

After meeting the CEO, Steve Lift, it is revealed that WorryFree Solutions, the company Cassius admires and credits for its economic success, is involved in creating “Equisapiens.” These Equisapiens are the degenerated form of humans, who have the blend of human and horse characteristics, and they are made to enhance mass production profitability and obedience to meet capitalistic market expectations. While meeting Lift, Cassius accidentally sees the transformed humans in deplorable conditions, begging for help. They were speaking like humans, but their bodies had changed into something like horses. Lift attempts to rationalize this transformation to Cassius, highlighting a documentary on TV that justifies the exploitation by referencing human evolution. During the meeting with Steve, Cassius is offered the opportunity to transform into an “Equisapiens” and is promised \$100 million over five years. This transformation aims to address potential resistance among the transformed humans who are now Equosapiens and possess increased capacity and efficiency for work. Steve’s strategy to deploy Cassius as a leader among the Equosapiens mirrors an attempt to appropriate the critical voices among Equisapiens because Steve has sensed the potential threat containing potential backlash from mass transformations.

The film intricately explores themes of conformity, exemplified by the expectations of corporate heads for uniformity in work performance, contrasted with resistance demonstrated by employees like Detroit, Squeeze, and other protesters. The promotion of power callers highlights individual success through conformity, while resistance embodies communal struggle. The film critiques inhumane expectations for increased efficiency, exemplified by Cassius' tireless work ethic post-promotion and then the transformation of humans to Equosapiens to enhance global

productivity, demonstrating the limitless ‘unhuman’ tendency of the corporate giants. This concept closely resonates with Jonathan Crary’s *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, where Crary argues that contemporary capitalism operates incessantly, eroding traditional working hours and imposing constant labor shifts. The argument here extends beyond racial considerations, delving into the movie’s exploration of capitalist expectations, revealing how the exploitative system perpetually raises expectations, making individuals feel inadequate and fostering a cycle of heightened demands. As Cassius grapples with these revelations, warned by friends about the consequences of his upward mobility and complicity in the company’s actions, the narrative underscores the intricate web of exploitation and the individual’s role in perpetuating the capitalistic agenda. All these elements converge to underscore the film’s broader commentary on capitalism’s insatiable demands and its impact on human agency.

In the film’s narrative, two opposing forces, conformity, and resistance, shape the characters’ actions and decisions. Conformity aligns with market forces, reinforcing systems of exploitation, exemplified by Cassius’ willingness to sacrifice authenticity for success, as seen in his adoption of the “white voice.” Conversely, characters like Detroit and Squeeze advocate for collective rights through unionization, prioritizing community well-being over individual gain. Cassius’ eventual reluctance to transform into an Equisapiens marks a turning point, suggesting a reevaluation of his actions. The film’s humorous depiction of the struggle against Worryfree Solutions and the support of Equosapiens suggests the potential for change through collective action and unionization. Mark Fisher, in his book *Capitalist Realism*, discusses the dystopian future of capitalism, emphasizing the difficulty in envisioning its end due to its self-sustaining nature. He contends that capitalism perpetuates itself in an ongoing cycle where the motive is not to stabilize human institutions but the capitalist system itself. This perpetual cycle contains human

agency, conditions liberty, and compromises well-being, as the focus is on making the world more profitable for capitalist production. *Sorry to Bother You* not only addresses white privilege and economic disparities but fundamentally critiques the impossible expectations imposed by capitalism. The film provides a perspective on capitalist exhaustion, showing how it dehumanizes human potential. The film also incorporates narratives that acknowledge racial tensions within the capitalist system. Boots Riley, the director, skillfully presents a narrative that exposes the exploitation perpetuated in the name of capitalist success. The movie parallels the efforts of individuals to unionize against inhumane actions, demonstrating how the system sustains itself. The film serves as a sharp critique of capitalist exhaustion and impossible labor conditions. Building the tension between resistance and conformism, and employing humor, exposes the irony inherent in the capitalist model of success.

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Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura*: A feminist Exploration of Emotion and Ambivalence

1. Introduction

L'Avventura, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, is a widely celebrated Italian drama film released in 1960. The film is known for its complicated narrative, non-linear plot, and distinct cinematography. It was released during a time when cinema was beginning to be recognized as a genuine art form. Antonioni had a reputation as a difficult and intellectual director and, throughout his career, he made many films that were commercial failures. However, *L'Avventura* immortalized Antonioni for his skillful understanding and use of avant-garde techniques. The film subverted film traditions and added density to the visual language of cinema, coining a new grammar of film. It shifted the focus from dialogue to body, camera angles, and other factors involved in the composition of the visual image in the movie. A shift from 'telling' to 'showing' of the narrative and communicating through objects, places, ambiance, and gestures. In this study, I argue that Michelangelo Antonioni's film, *L'Avventura*, serves as a lens through which we can explore the female experience within heteronormative social constructs, specifically examining the influence of patriarchy on shaping desires. I posit that the film's portrayal of female characters simultaneously exposes their detachment and absence in societal narratives while offering potential avenues for liberation from patriarchal constraints. To substantiate this argument, I conduct a detailed analysis of Antonioni's visual techniques and unconventional narrative approach, elucidating their contribution to themes of detachment, absence, and feminist emotion within the film.

2. A Shift in Cinema

The postwar period marked a significant shift in Italian cinema. The devastation wrought by World War II profoundly affected Italian society, leading to widespread poverty and the physical destruction of infrastructure. This tumultuous backdrop catalyzed a transformation in the Italian film industry. To understand the societal conditions of the era, one must acknowledge the aftermath of the war, wherein the fabric of society lay in ruins. The pervasive poverty rendered it challenging for people to envision a return to their pre-war way of life, fostering a sense of discontent. Amidst these circumstances, a shift occurred in the filmmaking landscape. Traditionally, Italian cinema had been dominated by studio productions, often associated with an elite class. However, a new wave of directors like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Zavattini, and Michelangelo Antonioni emerged. They were intent on reshaping the visual narrative and sought to capture the essence of everyday life by venturing beyond studio confines, depicting rural landscapes, and urban environments in their raw authenticity (Bondenella 32). This cinematic departure from the polished studio aesthetic mirrored the harsh realities of post-war Italy, where economic hardship and uncertainty prevailed. Through the lens of New Realism, audiences were confronted with the stark realities of poverty, economic instability, and social upheaval, offering a poignant reflection of the era's collective experience (Bondenella 31).

The development of modern psychology, the exhausting conditions of labor in growing capitalist industries, and the resulting disparity because of rapid industrialization, along with the consumerist life of urban spaces, led to the deterioration of the methodical, linear narratives that for quite some time informed character-centered stories. It was during this time that neorealist cinema emerged, shifting the focus from character-centered narratives to presenting the banality of life on screen. This narrative experimentation opened up new perspectives on how cinema could

address complex issues” (Rodriguez, “Arcadia”). It has redefined the grammar of cinema, enhancing the modes of expression through which films can speak and address the concerns of life. Non-conventional camera angles, real locations, amateur actors, and accentuating the space by long shots, along with absences and silences, inform many of how these films speak to audiences about life. These avant-garde narrative techniques were later termed by critics as “Neorealism.” It presented us with stories that were not centered on characters, but rather on the environments and social conditions that shaped them. This movement created a new way of approaching reality on screen, offering a more authentic and sincere representation of the world.

3. Literature Review

L'Avventura is a story of a group of Italians on a cruise in Sicily when one of the characters, Anna (played by Lea Massari) disappears. The reason behind her disappearance remains unclear. Her boyfriend, Sandro (played by Gabriele Ferzetti), and her friend, Claudia (played by Monica Vitti) search for her. Later, Sandro and Claudia fall in love with each other. This simplistic and evasive storyline is set apart by the narrative experimentation of Antonioni. The film failed to get public attention but was lauded by the critics. The failure of the film to get a public response initially was because of unexpected experimentation with the form as the film lacked a definitive outcome and the logical relation among the sequences was suspended as a narrative technique. It was difficult for audiences to connect with the narrative logic of the film (Nowell-Smith). Peter Brunette, in his book, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, argues that ambiguity in Antonioni's films causes the films to become vast blackboards on which individual critics scrawl their desires and obsessions while thinking that they are describing the films (Brunette 5). The film made the viewers reflect on their interpretations and reactions to the films, which can be frustrating and rewarding at the same time, and it has made it difficult to pin down the definitive meaning or

outcome of the film. To contextualize Antonioni's work, it is important to understand the two concepts about modes of cinematic expression by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze¹⁰. The narrative technique employed by Antonioni invites a certain openness to the audience to formulate their perception rather than be guided by the didactic representations presented as reality.

Antonioni's style is more introspective and experimental, and there are times when the plot is playing around the narrative; at times, his narrative is suspended in the plot, and like life, it is hard to create any meaning out of the action that is happening on screen. As we see in the movie after the disappearance of Anna, the film follows random sequences that do not convey any concrete movement of the narrative. As noted by Laura Rascaroli and John David, in their article, "Antonioni and the Place of Modernity: A Tribute," Antonioni challenged traditional narrative structures and experimented with new forms of storytelling (2). They argue that his characters embody alienation and ennui, as an effect of modern life, and explore the human conditions through it.

In *L'Avventura*, the figure of a woman as a puzzle engages with the image of a woman as a mystery figure. Through the depiction of women characters, the film problematizes the notions of femininity. As discussed by Clara Orban in her article, "Antonioni's Women, Lost in the City" the female characters in Antonioni's movies are "alienated and lost in the urban landscape" and represent the anxieties of modern life where excessive consumerism and obsession with wealth

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze introduced the terms "movement-image" and "time image" to describe two distinct phases or modes of cinema expression. According to Deleuze, cinema should be viewed as an event rather than a representation and should be understood in terms of time and temporality. The movement image dominated cinematic expression before World War II and was characterized by a coherence of filmic space and temporal causality. The perception of these films derived from action and causal logic, with characters working towards a definitive outcome. On the other hand, the time image characterizes modern cinemas of the postwar period, marked by the presence of mental processes such as memory and dream, which are expressed through temporal ellipses and discontinuities, and accentuate filmic time and duration. (Kuhn and Westwell, ch. M)

and status, exists with paranoia over the threat of a global nuclear holocaust. She notes that Antonioni's female characters tend to be found wandering through empty spaces, looking for spiritual and emotional fulfillment. The women characters are absent from spaces inhabited by men, and men are mostly oblivious to the pain and suffering of female characters (Orban 3). The detachment and absence of something (unrecognizable) persists in the portrayal of Claudia and Anna in the movie. By implying this technique, Antonioni raises complex philosophic questions about gender, sexuality, and vision (Orban 5).

Héctor Pérez and Fernando Canet in their article, "*L'Avventura*: Emotions, Engagement and Inconclusiveness of an Experimental Plot," utilized Murray Smith's concept of the "structure of sympathy" as a system of analysis to define the relationship between on-screen characters and audiences. They argue that the film's innovative narrative disruptions and emotional engagement with the characters contribute to its unique aesthetic qualities. The film deals with two plots and gradually transitions from the initial plot of Anna's disappearance to the second plot of Sandro and Claudia's affair. This transition is not abrupt but very meticulous and random and naturalizes the twist (Perez and Canet 5). This argument helps to understand the narrative of the film and demystifies the randomness of the sequences and suspended plot.

4. Analysis

Antonioni's use of metaphor in *L'Avventura* exemplifies how a director can push the limits of visual storytelling on screen. Rather than relying on straightforward narrative exposition to convey the emotional state of the characters, Antonioni uses the landscape and distant shots to communicate their inner turmoil. This was a radical approach at the time of the movie's production, and it set a new standard for visual storytelling in cinema. Jacques Lacan, in his essay "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious," posits that psychoanalytic experience reveals not only instinctual

drives but also the underlying structure of language itself. He distinguishes between the “letter” (spoken or written words) and the broader structural framework of language, asserting that language predates the subject’s engagement with it. Lacan contends that language operates at a discursive level, exerting control over the subject, and he proposes a ternary conception of the human condition encompassing nature, society, and culture. By linking language to this threefold framework, Lacan emphasizes its role in shaping society and culture, moving beyond mere communication to influence power dynamics and ideology. Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of signifier and signified, Lacan elucidates a complex system of differential elements and closed orders, viewing language as imbued with power and subject to contestation. By foregrounding this idea, Lacan discusses the concept of metaphor, illustrating how poetry and surrealist literature push the boundaries of language to challenge conventional meanings and create unexpected connections between words and images (Lacan 1118, 1122, 1125).

Antonioni’s metaphors are intense and concrete, serving as symbols while also occupying the physical space of the characters. The desolate and barren islands serve as the film’s primary setting and are a powerful metaphor for the hollowness and emptiness that the characters experience. The rocky terrain represents the challenges of human relationships and the struggle to connect with others. Water is another important metaphor in the film, representing vastness, openness, and threat all at once. The characters’ gazes at the water reflect a sense of liberation from the burdens of everyday life, but also the looming sense of uncertainty and precarity that they face. In one scene, Anna expresses her discomfort and unease about the nature of her relationship with Sandro while surrounded by water. This setting underscores the sense of isolation and disconnection from others that permeates the film. These metaphors elevate the film beyond its simple plot to explore the complexity of human relationships, isolation, and emotional alienation.

For example, the metaphor of a mirror uniquely reflects the innermost thoughts and feelings of his characters. The act of looking into a mirror becomes a tool for characters to face the transitions they are going through, confront the meaninglessness they feel, and strive to find meaning (Fig. 10). For example, when Claudia looks at herself in the mirror and puts on a wig of black hair (*L'Avventura* 01:19:05), this moment can be seen as an attempt by Claudia to become the object of Sandro's desire, as Anna had black hair and Sandro was involved with her. By putting on the wig, Claudia tries to replace Anna and becomes desirable to Sandro. When viewed in conjunction with the scene where Anna and Claudia are seen from the back (Fig. 4), the spectacle of Claudia as Anna becomes a powerful visual abstraction that highlights the complexity of their relationships. The use of the mirror metaphor by Antonioni not only reflects the characters' inner turmoil but also serves as a means of conveying the director's vision of the human condition in a visually striking way.

The density of the space on the screen complements the characters' sensibility. The film's



Figure 1 *L'Avventura* 00:03:04

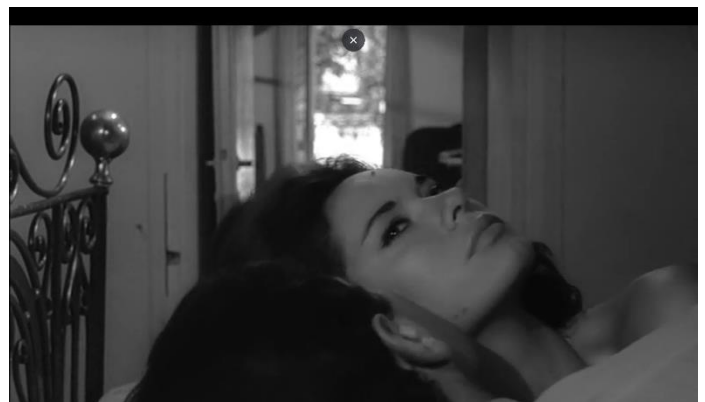


Figure 2 *L'Avventura* 00:09:13

opening scene features Anna walking towards her father, who is in conversation with a worker. They are positioned in a way that emphasizes the contrast between old and new: Anna stands amidst newly constructed buildings, while her father is framed against a dome that symbolizes the “old world” (Figure 1), It is a threshold moment that sets the stage for the film's exploration of

shifting societal values. The director's use of concrete symbols makes this feel more like a metonym than a metaphor. During their conversation, Anna's father expresses resentment towards a boy, which is conveyed through his behavior, body language, and position in the scene rather than through dialogue. The position of the father with the dome at the back represents the tradition that conflicts with changing times, Anna (new generation) with the newly constructed building at the back conveys the shifting worldview across generations.

Antonioni's female characters negotiate physical space with a mixture of detachment and contradictory emotions that suggest their discomfort with patriarchal social norms. In Figure 2, Antonioni uses close-up shots to depict the intimacy between Anna and Sandro, with one shot showing Anna in the frame. However, despite initiating the sexual encounter, Anna is seen constantly looking around and appearing disconnected from the moment. This sense of detachment reflects her discomfort and unease with her surroundings. For instance, in the scene where Anna meets Sandro, she initially expresses her desire to leave, but then unexpectedly follows him back to his apartment. Without any dialogue, she opens the window of the apartment, which seems to suggest a desire to escape. The conduct of Anna is also performative because she feels obligated to have sex with Sandro or because she believes it is what Sandro wants from her. And we see her rather not being truly present in the moment.



Figure 3 *L'Avventura* 00:19:01



Figure 4 *L'Avventura* 00:19:54

In addition to the detachment and alienation in the character of Anna, we see her in a very different outlook when she interacts with Claudia. During their cruise ride, Anna frightens everyone that she has seen the shark. Everyone on the ship becomes alert but no one sees the shark except Anna. After the incident, Claudia and Anna run into each other and Claudia, with a smile on her face, asks Anna about the truthfulness of the event. Anna also smiles and tells her that it was a lie, and they begin changing their clothes. For the first time in the film, we see Anna truly enjoying the company of another woman (Fig. 3). This scene has very definite queer undertones suggesting that Anna is a lesbian. However, nothing happens further in this respect. Following this scene, there is a photo of Claudia and Anna from behind. In this close-up shot, they look quite similar to each other. It is an example of Antonioni's visual abstraction to foreshadow the exchange of roles that will happen in the later part of the film. Claudia eventually falls in love with Sandro.

The sense of detachment in the relationship of Anna and Sandro is also because of the monotony of traditional intimate relations. Anna is not satisfied with the state of things among them. In the scene before Anna's disappearance, she and Sandro have a conversation about their relationship. Anna expresses her dissatisfaction with the way things are between them, and she is not interested in discussing their sexual relationship. Instead, Anna is seeking a deeper connection that goes beyond sexual compatibility. During the conversation, they avoid looking at each other, and Anna's unease is evident in her body language and gaze. She struggles to articulate what is missing in their relationship, but it is clear that she feels a disconnect. In Fig. 6, Sandro lies down, and Anna looks at him. This can be interpreted as Sandro's ignorance of the discomfort that exists in their relationship and his inability to understand Anna's needs. The scene focuses on the emotional distance between them and the difficulty of communicating their true feelings.



Figure 5 *L'Avventura* 00:25:28



Figure 6 *L'Avventura* 00:25:55

After the disappearance of Anna, the film's visual language conveys the randomness of human actions and the unpredictability of life. The characters are seen doing different things without any apparent connection to the narrative or progression of the plot. This is intentional on Antonioni's part, as he wants to show the audience that life can be unpredictable and that sometimes things happen without any apparent reason or explanation. The absence of narrative here is also an intentional choice by Antonioni. He wants to convey the feeling of uncertainty and confusion that the characters are experiencing. No one knows where Anna has gone or what the probable reason for her disappearance is. The situation is conveyed through the turbulence of the waves in the sea, the gusty winds, and the characters confronting the designs of nature. The characters are left to grapple with their own emotions and reactions to the situation. They are forced to confront their own fears and uncertainties in the face of an unpredictable and often hostile environment. The lack of clear answers or explanations creates a sense of unease and tension that pervades the entire film. Antonioni explores the complexity of human relationships and the often unpredictable nature of life. The film is a meditation on the nature of existence and the challenges that we all face in navigating our way through a complex and ever-changing world.

Sandro and Claudia start to develop understanding, and the camera lingers on the two characters, capturing their gestures, facial expressions, and subtle movements to emphasize the emotional connection that is forming between them, as they navigate their grief and confusion.

Despite Claudia's initial reluctance to engage with Sandro, we can see that she is drawn to him, both physically and emotionally. At the same time, she is grappling with her moral code, trying to reconcile her desire with her loyalty to her friend Anna. Antonioni uses visual symbolism to convey Claudia's internal conflict and her eventual decision to let go of her restraint and pursue a new adventure. The shot from behind as the girls walk through the closed corridor creates a mirroring effect, which is a reflection of Claudia's inner turmoil. When they enter the room, Claudia momentarily gets caught up in the spectacle of the nude sketches and portraits, but then she avoids watching the portrait and opens the window and looks out at the mountains and sky. However, when her friend starts kissing the artist, Claudia's expression changes and she suddenly stops them. This is the moment of change in her heart as the restraint that was previously there in her mind is no longer there. Through her facial expressions, it is evident that Claudia has made a decision to get involved with Sandro, and this marks the start of a new turn in the plot. The visual symbolism used by Antonioni effectively conveys Claudia's internal conflict and her eventual decision to embrace a new adventure, the moment of the struggle between giving in to desires and maintaining restraint.



Figure 7 *L'Avventura* 01:21:03



Figure 8 *L'Avventura* 01:22:20

We have experienced twofold transitions in the narrative. The transition from Anna's disappearance to Claudia and Sandro's situation. As discussed earlier, the detachment and ambivalence of the two female characters, we see Claudia going through that situation in the second half of the book. Claudia grapples with her attraction towards Sandro and her choice of being with him conflicts with her moral position being a friend of Anna. After leaving the room, Claudia's change of heart is visibly evident in her facial expressions and body language. She stops by the mirror and looks at herself (Fig. 10). It is an act of self-reflection and the moment of coming to terms with her innermost thoughts and feelings. This shift detaches her from all past moments



Figure 9 *L'Avventura* 1:25:03



Figure 10 *L'Avventura* 1:25:38

and frees her from the moral stigmas attached to her thinking. This is the time to accommodate herself to a new vision, get rid of the emotional baggage of Anna's friendship, and give personal emotions the utmost importance. In this scene, the mirror serves as a metaphor for Claudia's inner self. By looking into the mirror, Claudia is facing herself and acknowledging her desires. The shift in her body language and expressions suggests that she has come to terms with her feelings and has decided to act upon them. The act of looking into the mirror can also be viewed as a symbolic moment of Claudia breaking away from societal norms and expectations and choosing to follow her heart instead.

After the shift in her emotion, it is important to highlight the sequence when she confronts Sandro on the hill, with a backdrop of buildings. The length of the scene is significant here as it

parallels the emotional state of Claudia and Sandro, and Antonioni continues with his peculiar use of close shots. Claudia and Sandro were there to look for Anna. Claudia is becoming more assertive with each passing moment; the narrative progression is also the journey of self-transformation of Claudia. The involvement with Sandro has not removed her self-doubt, which I see as the choice of Antonioni. We see Claudia's character evolve from a reserved and passive observer to a more assertive and confident person. The use of long takes and close shots creates a sense of intimacy and emotional intensity, capturing the internal turmoil of the characters. It also emphasizes the physical distance between the characters and the sprawling urban landscape, highlighting the characters' isolation and emotional disconnect from their surroundings. This further reinforces the theme of alienation, which is a recurring motif in the movie.

While Claudia and Sandro were on the search for Anna, there was a scene that reminded me of Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In her essay, Mulvey argues that the visual apparatus of mainstream Hollywood has a male gaze that objectifies women in many ways. This objectification, through the sexualization and fetishization of the female body, subordinates the position of women to the audience and other characters in the movie. Mulvey identifies two contradictory pleasures in cinema: the pleasure of looking (scopophilia) and the pleasure of making others the object of one's gaze. The display of women in mainstream movies functions at two levels: as an erotic object for characters within the screen story and as an erotic object for the spectator in the auditorium. This objectification of the female body leads to female characters being traditionally positioned outside the narrative of the story, while male characters take center stage as the main subjects and driving forces behind the progression of the story. The

use of zoom shots and the display of the female body reflect the structures of erotic fantasies that are prevalent in society and result in a male gaze. This gaze is closely linked with patriarchal designs in society, and men are not primarily portrayed as objects of spectacle in the film. By the end of her essay, Mulvey calls for freeing the camera's gaze from "fetishistic scopophilia" and presenting women as subjects in the narrative of the screen, liberating their personas from the male



Figure 11 *L'Avventura* 1:38:57



Figure 12 *L'Avventura* 1:39:50

gaze on the camera. *L'Avventura* explores relationships and human interactions, as well as the patriarchal power dynamics that contribute to alienation and loneliness. In Fig. 11 and 12, Claudia is objectified by the men around her who view her as an object of sexual desire. This objectification is a form of patriarchal power that contributes to Claudia's sense of isolation and loneliness. Antonioni's approach aligns with Mulvey's suggestion that filmmakers should aim to challenge the traditional representations of women on screen. Throughout the film, Anna undergoes a transformative journey, where she experiences the tension between being in love and being an autonomous woman. This tension is evident when Anna doubts Sandro's confession of being in love with her and rejects his marriage proposal. Antonioni's portrayal of Anna's character shows that she is affected by patriarchal power dynamics but is not consumed by them.

Figure 13 is a prime example of Antonioni's meticulous attention to detail and its impact on the film's meaning. In this scene, Claudia is positioned on higher ground with ropes hanging

between her and Sandro, highlighting her elevated status. Sandro proposes marriage, but Claudia refuses, as she does not believe that a three-day love affair is enough to constitute love. Additionally, Claudia has the perception of Sandro as a womanizer, which further contributes to her skepticism towards him. Despite her feelings for Sandro, Claudia resists the conventional choice of marriage and chooses to prioritize her autonomy. The scene captures the tension between the desire for romantic love and the desire for independence.

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Figure 13 *L'Avventura* 1:39:50



Figure 14 *L'Avventura* 2:10:10 – 2:10:56

the desire for romantic love and the desire for independence. In the build-up to the climax of the movie, we witness Claudia caught in a Catch-22 situation over the nature of her relationship with Sandro. After rejecting his marriage proposal, she notices a change in Sandro's behavior, and his advances reveal his instinctual beastly nature. She is not comfortable with physical intimacy and finds herself in a state of ambiguity about her relationship with Sandro. At this point, Claudia's character is more assertive and confident at a personal level, but her relationship with Sandro is making her feel detached and suffocated from her responses to the situation. In Antonioni's depiction, nothing can be said with complete certainty, but these scenes build on the tension between a new world of autonomy and an old world of submissiveness to a dominant structure. The plot of the movie takes another turn here. Before this point, it may have seemed like the mystery and eeriness of the narrative, the randomness of action on the screen is turning into something certain and causal, but by the end, it appears that the movie began with certainty and eventually led to mystery. The viewer is left wondering about the true nature of Sandro, Claudia, and Anna. It is difficult to decide who the main character is, but Claudia becomes the central figure

in the narrative, and her existence remains mysterious. Although it is the journey of Claudia in gaining agency, the question of the overall meaning and purpose of the film's narrative remains unattended. In these scenes, we see Claudia in a state of emotional distress, struggling to come to terms with the conflicting feelings she has for Sandro. The moment occurs when she is in the main hall of the hotel, and finds Sandro making out with another girl. This sight is too much for Claudia to bear, and she leaves the hotel, running to a nearby location where she can deal with her emotions. Sandro follows her, and we see him sitting on a bench with tears in his eyes. The use of close shots and distant shots, coupled with the sounds of rustling leaves and wind, creates a poignant atmosphere that conveys a certain density to the sequence.

As Claudia approaches Sandro, he sits with his back towards her, clearly ashamed of his behavior. However, Claudia gains the moral high ground by placing her hand on Sandro's shoulder. This act symbolizes the nature of the relationship that Antonioni establishes between the two characters. While Sandro may have structural dominance over Claudia in the patriarchal system, ethically she is elevated above him. Moreover, I view Claudia's hand on Sandro's head (Fig 15), as a maternal gesture, further emphasizing her moral superiority over him. There is a shift of the power dynamics between men and women in relationships and during such times Antonioni presents a fresh perspective on gender roles.

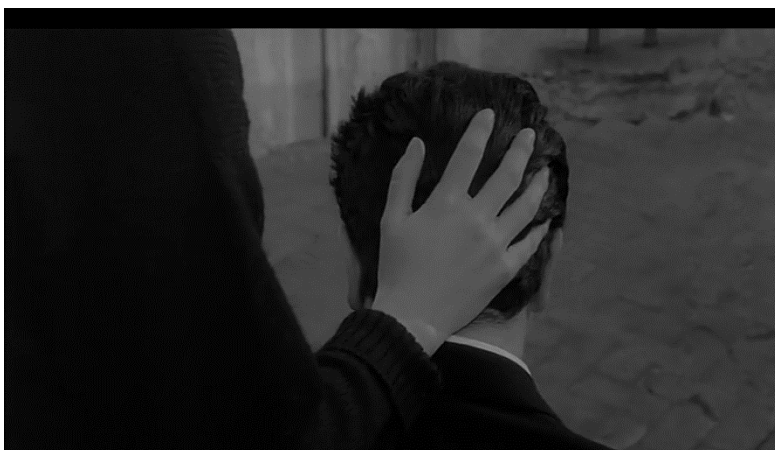


Figure 15 *L'Avventura* 2:22:02

5. Conclusion:

Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* not only proved to be a shift from a cinema of spectacle to a cinema of behavior and emotion but also presented a nuanced understanding of patriarchal power dynamics and female autonomy. Through the character of Claudia, Antonioni explores the complexity of relationships and the tension between love and autonomy. The film portrays how patriarchal power dynamics contribute to alienation and loneliness, objectification of women, and emotional distress. Antonioni's attention to detail in depicting the emotional and psychological states of the characters makes the movie a feminist work of art. The film's emphasis on the emotional and psychological aspects of the characters' experiences creates a space for the inclusion of women's voices and perspectives. The character of Claudia gains agency through her choices and actions and is elevated ethically over Sandro, who embodies patriarchal dominance. The film's inclusivity extends to its visual style, where Antonioni uses images, composition, and environment to speak to the psyche of the people. Antonioni's use of the image as the telling apparatus of the movie and the nuances of ambivalence in his portrayal and depiction dismantle the definitive structure of the patriarchal system. In doing so exposes the banality of an urban space for a woman. Antonioni's attention to detail and his use of image as a telling apparatus create a nuanced lens to see the ambivalence of the visual language and liberate the feminine position.

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Surveillance Shadows: Unveiling Ambivalence in Benedict Andrews' *Seberg*

State surveillance has long served as a pivotal strategy for governments, enabling them to manage non-state entities and assert control within a social polity. From the government's perspective, surveillance operations are initiated to maintain order and ensure compliance. While these operations align with governmental objectives, ethical concerns surrounding surveillance persist, often unaddressed. Art often expresses and draws attention to these ethical dilemmas. *Seberg*, a film released in 2019, provides a compelling commentary on surveillance culture. It offers a critical vantage point, inviting viewers to draw parallels between historical surveillance practices and contemporary concerns over privacy, surveillance, and civil liberties. The movie delves into the life of Jean Seberg, a prominent figure during the late 1960s, particularly her active support for funding the Black Panthers. Under the direction of filmmaker Benedict Andrews, *Seberg* weaves together Jean Seberg's personal history and the challenges faced by FBI officers engaged in surveillance operations. The emotional impact of surveillance on characters like Jean Seberg and FBI officer Jack Solomon highlights the toll it takes on both surveillants and the surveilled. By presenting the psychological ramifications of surveillance as a reciprocal process, Andrews prompts us to view it as a complex interplay rather than a one-sided imposition. The reciprocal dynamic of surveillance repercussions sheds light on the sociopolitical uncertainties of the 1960s, while simultaneously shifting attention away from exploited figures like Jean Seberg, towards the actions and perspectives of FBI officers.

Before delving into the film analysis, it is important to mention Jean Seberg's prowess as an actor. To avoid confusion between *Seberg*, the film, and Jean Seberg the person, I am using 'Jean' when I refer to her as a person. Jean gained prominence with her portrayal of *Joan of Arc* in 1957. Following that, she worked in the French classic *Breathless*. She collaborated with notable

directors such as Jean Luc Godard, solidifying her status as an iconic figure in cinema and the star of the French New Wave.¹¹ The film's treatment of Jean's persona as a movie star remains somewhat cursory. *Seberg* delineates the tumultuous life of Jean, accentuating the disruptions induced by her political convictions while alluding to her status as a movie star. The film does not explicitly delve into Jean's personality, her choices, or her political inclinations. For instance, Jean resided in France during periods of civil unrest and the May 68 protests, the film initially depicts her departure from Paris to Los Angeles, accompanied by her husband's comment on student protests. However, this aspect is not further examined in relation to Jean's own political beliefs. While *Seberg* portrays aspects of her life in America, the narrative overlooks elements that likely influenced her political inclinations. Jean's unconventional career choices as an actor and her advocacy for social causes, such as her support for the Black Panthers, often thrust her into the media spotlight. Andrews conscientiously addresses the controversies surrounding Jean's life in the film. However, the portrayal of Jean contributes to her sensationalized public image. The public perception of Jean bears similarities to that of Marilyn Monroe in terms of the public memory of the actress, as articulated by Smith and McGee, who assert, "As with Monroe, somehow the disparate elements, political and personal, would unite to take a lasting hold on the popular imagination" (213). This statement emphasizes the enduring significance of both the personal and political facets of Jean Seberg's life within her public image, a thematic motif that is notably echoed in Benedict Andrews's cinematic portrayal.

¹¹ The **French New Wave** was a film movement from the 1950s and 60s and one of the most influential in cinema history. Also known as "Nouvelle Vague," it gave birth to a new kind of cinema that was highly self-aware and revolutionary to mainstream filmmaking. Maio, Alyssa. "Watch: Directing Techniques of the French New Wave." *StudioBinder*, 25 Aug. 2020, www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-french-new-wave/.

To build the context of the film's narrative, I would like to discuss the main characters first. Jean Seberg, the central figure, the iconic movie star of the French New Wave. Alongside her, among other main characters, one is Jack Solomon, an FBI officer tasked with surveilling Seberg, who grapples with the weight of his duty and his innate humanistic inclinations. His internal conflict mirrors the broader tension between professional obligations and personal ethics raised by the film. Hakim Jamal, initially portrayed as a steadfast civil rights activist advocating for equality, takes unexpected turns. His flawed motives revealed through his connection with Seberg, challenge simplistic notions of heroism. Karl, another FBI officer, embodies self-contradiction. He despises the violent behavior of the Black Panthers, yet he is violent at home. His complexity underscores the moral ambiguities faced by those enforcing state-sanctioned surveillance. By portraying these characters as vacillating and multifaceted, *Seberg* sheds light on the uncertainty of the 1960s. Perplexing situations equally marked this era of liberation and emancipation for civil rights activism. The characters, faced with political upheaval, grapple with the tension between rebellion and conformity. They navigate a world where ideals clash with practical realities, and where the desire for change intersects with the fear of consequences. Director Benedict Andrews employs a nuanced lens to capture the intricacies and contradictions that defined the politics and life of the 1960s. Through these characters, the film invites us to consider the enduring relevance of that tumultuous period in shaping our present understanding of surveillance, ethics, and personal agency.

In the narrative technique, the "perplexity" functions as a motif to cultivate an inherent ambivalence within the major characters. Jean Seberg, a political activist, and longstanding NAACP member since the age of 14, embodies this ambivalence. Her open support also seemed like an act of publicity stunt and her financial contributions to Hakim Jamal follow the trope of

‘White Savior.’ But her inclinations toward Hakim, driven by his visionary ideals, lead to a romantic entanglement. Yet, beneath the surface, her character harbors internal contradictions, conflicting loyalties, desires, and moral dilemmas. She has a son with Romain Gary, she is romantically involved with Hakim Jamal, yet at the same time funding Black Panthers. She wants to stay in the relationship with Romain Gary and also cannot resist the temptation of Hakim Jamal. She is informed of the consequences but does not stop funding the Black Panthers. The film positions Jean Seberg in a way that makes her an incarnation of ambivalence. Seberg’s choices become more than mere plot points; they reveal the intricate web of emotions and conflicting motivations that define her. Her actions straddle the notions of what is “right” and “honest.”

In psychoanalysis, the concept of ambivalence occupies a central position. It refers to the simultaneous coexistence of contradictory emotions or feelings toward a single object or person. While Sigmund Freud initially explored ambivalence, Melanie Klein’s theoretical framework significantly expands our understanding of this phenomenon. Kleinian theory, an extension of Freudian ideas, delves into the intricacies of early object relations—the emotional bonds formed with significant others. According to Klein, ambivalence is not merely a conflict between love and hate; it runs deeper. Love for an object (whether a person, idea, or ideal) becomes inseparable from a latent desire to destroy it. This inherent tension between attachment and aggression generates what Klein terms an “anguished form of guilt” (Macey 12). Jack initially views Jean Seberg as a potential threat. His role as an FBI officer demands complete access to her life, yet as he delves deeper, sympathy develops. He grapples with the weight of his duty versus his growing understanding of Jean Seberg’s humanity. His resentment toward the obligations imposed by his role adds another layer of ambivalence. Jack’s evolution—from suspicion to empathy—mirrors the broader tension between institutional duty and personal compassion. The framework of

ambivalence mentioned above provides a lens for examining the psychological experiences of characters and their intricate interpersonal dynamics.

Scholarly discussions around *Seberg* predominantly revolve around the eponymous character—Jean Seberg. These analyses delve into various facets of her portrayal, including the film's treatment of her personality, the depiction of her trauma, and the reshaping of her cultural memory. In Estella Tincknell's article titled "Tragic Blondes, Hollywood, and the 'Radical Sixties' Myth: *Seberg* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* as Revisionist and Reparative Biopic," the author dissects a contemporary trend observed in Hollywood. This trend involves a retrospective exploration of cinematic history, specifically framing the politics of the 1960s. While these biopics aim to rectify past neglect of female stars, they inadvertently perpetuate a mythic discourse of the 'radical sixties.' In this discourse, masculine agency and homosocial bonds take precedence, overshadowing the female star's agency. Tincknell contends that *Seberg's* narrative logic diminishes the agency of Jean Seberg. Further, the film adheres to familiar biopic conventions, often portraying the blonde female star as a tragic victim. Jean Seberg, despite her historical circumstances, becomes emblematic of presumed inherent frailty. This portrayal reinforces existing narratives about female stars, perpetuating their victimhood. Expanding on Tincknell's perspective, I concur that the film leverages Jean Seberg's figure in the movie to garner media attention. However, the narrative largely elucidates the turbulent socio-political landscape of the 1960s which was filled with complexities of civil rights movements, government surveillance, and public dissent.

The academic literature on the portrayal of Jean Seberg is relatively sparse. However, film reviews shed light on notable aspects of the movie. *The Guardian's* review of the film critically examines its historical inaccuracy. The review highlights the politicized image of Jean Seberg and

her perception within the context of misogynistic Hollywood politics and reactionary Washington politics. The introduction of a fictional FBI agent, appalled by the agency's actions against Seberg, creates a liberal balance in the narrative and this aspect gains significance in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement. The concern for maintaining a liberal balance in portraying the 1960s seems crucial. *The New York Times*, in its review, underscores the film's overarching themes of "fire" and "destruction." It describes the portrayal of Seberg as a distressing and occasionally distracted portrait of a woman haunted, hounded, and ultimately pushed to the brink of mental collapse due to relentless surveillance. *Rolling Stone* delves into the narrative of Seberg's political destruction, particularly her alignment with civil rights activism. The review explores the devastating consequences of the FBI's COINTELPRO program. Through a detailed examination of Jean's journey toward a tragic ending, the review underscores the profound impact of FBI surveillance on the actor and the resulting shattered consequences. These reviews complement the point that I make about the movie.

I start with how Benedict Andrews opens the narrative of *Seberg* in the first ten minutes of the movie. He begins the film with the gasps of Jean Seberg in the background, accompanied by on-screen production details. The gasps persist as Jean Seberg appears, bound to a pole in chains—a cinematic echo of *Saint Joan*.¹² The scene unfolds with a twist of fate, as the fire accidentally spreads, leaving Seberg marked by burns. This opening shot encapsulates Andrews' perspective on three pivotal years of Seberg's life, portraying her as a suffocating subject engulfed in the metaphorical fire of the 1960s. The next shot is of the media reporting of Black Panther Party's protests and clashes with police in Los Angeles and Oakland. These shots are shown on the zoomed TV screen placed in the lounge of an FBI officer, Jack. As the camera zooms out, we see Jack

¹² "The Burning of Saint Joan | Saint Joan | Warner Archive - YouTube." 25 Jan. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4S7viMBmPw>.

getting ready for work while conversing with his wife as he discovers the comic in the dustbin that is a 1941 Jack Kirby origin issue, and he explains to his wife that Steve Rogers became Captain America after an experiment with Super Soldier Serum in 1941, and how the serum was intended for the entire US Army but was sabotaged. This scene captures the idealistic ethos and steadfast commitment that Jack associates with his role as an FBI agent. The next shot shows a meeting of Jack with the director of the FBI explaining to Jack about those who do not like the way the government does things. Jack's boss points to the file photo of Hakim Jamal who is involved in a plan, according to the FBI, of gathering all radical groups of revolutionaries to overthrow the government. In the final sequence of the first ten minutes, we see Seberg in an airplane ready to take off when she encounters Hakim Jamal for the first time as he urges the crew of the plane to seat the wife of Malcolm X in first class. Later, after the flight, Jean shows solidarity in front of the media for the Black Panthers when the Panthers are being watched by FBI officers. In the first ten minutes, we are introduced to the ambitious officer Jack, the idealist Hakim Jamal, and Jean Seberg asserting her desire to make a difference in the world (a reference to the dialogue she had with the manager about the choice of films that she is making). In these opening minutes, Andrews introduces all the major characters through interconnected sequences. This deliberate narrative strategy sets the stage for subsequent developments. The interconnections are evident: Jack prepares for work while a Black Panthers protest unfolds on his TV screen. Jean Seberg departs for the USA, leaving behind her son and husband Roman Gary in France, and encounters Hakim Jamal on a plane. This blending of political and personal elements from the outset and the use of these interconnected sequences not only establishes character dynamics but also hints at the unfolding plot. The viewer is drawn into a web of relationships and events, setting the stage for deeper exploration as the film progresses.

While surveilling Hakim Jamal, FBI agents Karl Kowalski and Jack Solomon document Jean's late-night visit. This scene explains the complexity of Jean's connection with both, the Black Panthers and Hakim. In conversation with Seberg, Hakim describes education in idealistic terms "One mind at a time. If you can change one mind, you can change the world. Education creates understanding. Understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity. But education costs money. Come down to the center. I'd love to show you how we're changing minds" (Andrews 0:17:25). Seberg's response, "You saw me get on that plane. Come on, all that bullshit about white seats for white money. You were trying to get to me. Well, was it my money you were chasing or... Or was it me?" (Andrews 0:18:08). These dialogues point out Jean's revolutionary aspirations, intertwined with a subtle romantic tension. Hakim's response emphasizes the transformative power of education in changing minds and fostering unity. This conversation raises intriguing questions about the motivations and intentions of Seberg and Hakim. Seberg's arrival at Hakim's place late at night unsettles the other Black Panther Party members, as her presence as a white woman is unusual. The subsequent conversation between Seberg and Hakim on education for social change and then financial requirements for successful activism, makes Seberg suspicious of Hakim's motives, questioning whether his actions are genuine or performative, and the culmination of the scene in intimacy, adds complexity to Seberg's intentions, too.

The film depicts the dual lives of FBI officers, contrasting their official, seemingly brutal, and mechanized demeanor with the personal challenges they face, grappling with the burdens on their conscience. At a family dinner at Karl's house, Jack and Karl discuss plans to distribute obscene caricatures of Hakim and Seberg. Afterward, they sit with their families to eat. The tension in the scene escalates, when Karl's daughter, resembling Seberg with a blond haircut, sits in disquiet and abruptly leaves the table after a threat from Karl. Karl's rude behavior towards his

wife, labeling her a ‘big mouth,’ informs us of the emotional turmoil within the lives of FBI officers but also underscores the unintended consequences of their intrusive actions on their households. Karl’s aggressive conduct serves as a poignant indicator of the toll these agents endure, providing a sobering glimpse into the collateral damage wrought by surveillance practices. It invites a dual perspective—one that extends beyond the basic narrative. On one hand, we witness the misogynistic and racist behavior of Karl, consistent both at home and in his professional life. However, there’s an intriguing counterpoint: the character of Karl’s daughter, with her blonde haircut strikingly reminiscent of Seberg’s, becomes a focal point. Karl’s condescending gaze upon his child raises questions about his underlying emotions. Is it merely a reflection of the system they operate within—a system steeped in hate and destruction? Or does it reveal a more personal bias and disgust that permeates his actions, affecting not only their surveillance targets but also their own families? This leaves us pondering the intricate interplay between institutional forces and individual prejudices. On the other side, we see Jack, portrayed as an ambitious and dedicated FBI officer, undertakes surveillance of Jean Seberg with a focus on her association with Hakim Jamal, as well as her financial support and involvement with the Black Panthers. Jack has uncertain working hours, and because of that, we see him in a state of rush, such as the moments of intimacy while leaving for the office. Similarly, during a gathering of FBI colleagues, scenes unfold where Jack and Karl’s families engage in conversation, revealing the complexities of their personal lives. A noteworthy instance occurs when Jack and his wife, Linette, plan to leave for home but a sudden emergency interrupts their departure, leaving Linette in a state of distress. Initially, Jack approaches with a sense of duty, but as he delves into Seberg’s life and history, he starts falling in love with the image of Jean Seberg. His fascination is palpable while watching footage of her, particularly when technical issues lead him to enter the Black Panthers’ party at Seberg’s house.

He stands by the pool during a conversation between Hakim and Seberg, Jack shares a tender moment with Jean, receiving her half-lit cigarette and experiencing a brief but impactful physical interaction. Eventually, Jack faces accusations from his wife, who suspects him of having an affair with Seberg. Her judgment is based on pictures that Jack has retained of Seberg, suggesting a collection that transcends mere surveillance and takes on the unsettling characteristics of a stalker. Perhaps, as a viewer, it is compelling to examine how these biases manifest and echo through both professional duties and personal relationships. In the film, we observe the lives of two FBI officers, Jack, and Karl. Both are tasked with similar duties. While Jack grapples with perplexity and guilt regarding his actions, Karl embodies the institution's fury and harbors prejudices against groups or individuals entangled in racial politics. Andrews' portrayal of these characters severs their connection to the institution, depicting their actions as individual rather than institutional, thereby diverting attention away from the institution itself.

Following the development of intimacy between Hakim and Seberg, the invitation to visit the school, which is dedicated to the education of people of color, introduces a dynamic exchange between Seberg, Hakim, and Dorothy (wife of Hakim). The dialogue not only highlights the evident excitement surrounding Seberg's visit but also unveils a complex undertone as discussions about supporting children and a substantial donation unfold. Dorothy's emotional response, coupled with Hakim's subtle intervention, subtly hints at the perception of Seberg's involvement as a potential material transaction. The scene navigates the boundaries between activism, privilege, and the socio-economic dimensions of social change. This scene in the film portrays a moment in the narrative that intersects personal engagement and socio-political responsibility:

HAKIM. Call a child a nigger enough times, he'll start to believe it. We're teaching this generation to grow up with a sense of self-worth.

DOROTHY. This is something we've had to do for ourselves. We have no grants, no government funding at all. But you have a son, though, don't you?

SEBERG. I do.

DOROTHY. You should invite him, introduce him to the other kids.

SEBERG. I would, but he's in Paris with his father. Who's wonderful with him, thankfully. You know, I work a lot, so it makes it easier.

DOROTHY. Yeah. I guess the movie business pays pretty well.

SEBERG. Yes. It does. But compared to what you're doing, it feels so frivolous.

DOROTHY. You're wrong. The revolution needs movie stars. That's a responsibility right there. We have to wave a shotgun to get people's attention. You get your hair cut and you're on the cover of Life magazine.

SEBERG. Well, I would love to help. Really, any way that I can. You just have to let me know. I mean, would 5,000 be enough I have my checkbook.

DOROTHY. Five thousand dollars?

HAKIM. Do you have time to stop by the foundation?

SEBERG. Sure. (Andrews 0:29:08)

Andrews frames the sequences in a way that imbues the actions of characters with layers and a two or three-fold perspective within the narrative. This complexity distinguishes between 'appearance' and 'reality' of their interactions. For instance, Hakim's interaction with Seberg in the presence of Dorothy, his wife, is performative. He also exercises caution regarding Dorothy's interaction with Seberg, expecting her not to exhibit enthusiasm for Seberg's funding efforts. The conversation is complicated by the visual tension in the gestures and expressions of unease of the characters while talking with each other.

In the final scene, as Jack, under the burden of guilt, meets Jean Seberg in a restaurant and shares FBI surveillance documents, claiming it as the truth, Seberg rebuts, asserting that he, omnipresent, knows the falsehoods he has propagated about her. The concluding shots provide details on COINTELPRO, its condemnation by Congress for illegal surveillance, and activists breaking into the FBI office to expose the program, all against the backdrop of Bob Dylan's "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues." The fictionalized narrative's attempt at reparation by Jack continues the pervasive perplexity seen throughout the movie.

The increased prevalence of narratives from the 60s reckons the contemporary societal reckoning with historical injustices and systemic inequalities. The *Black Lives Matter* movement has spurred renewed attention to issues of racial injustice, oppression, and surveillance, prompting a revisitation of historical events and narratives from the civil rights era. The film's exploration of FBI surveillance, activism, and the impact on individuals' lives could resonate with contemporary discussions on racial justice, civil liberties, and the enduring consequences of state surveillance on marginalized communities. *Seberg* re-envision the political life of Jean Seberg, and by showing us the perplexed disposition of different characters on screen, the film presents the uncertainty of the 1960s. However, Benedict Andrews' interpretation of the 1960s juxtaposes the disturbed lives of FBI officers with the tumultuous experiences of Jean Seberg. The film provokes an ambivalent perception of J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO, suggesting its reciprocal psychological ramifications for those conducting surveillance and those subjected to it. In doing so, the film intentionally downplays the exploitation and turmoil inflicted on individuals by the FBI and shifts the focus from Jean Seberg's exploitation to the ambivalent atmosphere of the time. I assert that Jack's act of revealing surveillance details by the film's conclusion serves as a form of filmic

justice, reshaping the audience's perception of him from a representative of a repressive institution to a victim within the situation.

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