FINAL MASTER’S PORTFOLIO

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A Final Master’s 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 and Textual Studies

April 2024

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Analytical Narrative

I graduated from Bowling Green State University with my bachelor’s degree in 2020, which was quite an unstable time. With the world under a global pandemic, I wasn’t sure if graduate school was the right choice for me. After working outside academia for about 2 years I decided to apply to BGSU and begin my master’s program in the fall of 2022. Upon entering the program, I naturally gravitated to visual media. I was interested in analyzing and critiquing film, photography, and digital media. My portfolio reflects my exploration of this niche through Marxist theory, neoliberalism, feminist theory, and analysis of digital subcultures.

My first revised paper, “Revisiting the Final Girl: Escaping Commodification and the Foodie Kitchen,” was written for my ENG 6070 theory course with Dr. Jolie Sheffer. In this course, I began to discover my academic research interests and found Marxism and feminist theory to be particularly interesting. I chose to write about the film, *The Menu* (2022) which presents a class-based of fine dining, the commodification of food, and the exploited labor of service workers. The feedback from Dr. Sheffer suggested that I refine my analysis by focusing on the film and that I need to work on my organization. It was my first paper working with multiple theories and it ended up being very clunky and unorganized. Upon revisiting this paper with Dr. Rachel Ann Walsh, she suggested that I should explore the film through the popularity of reality cooking shows, elaborate on my analysis of Margot as a sex worker, and apply Pierre Bourdieu to refine my Marxist critique of the film. With this feedback, I was able to refine my analysis of the film and explore the themes of reality cooking and the labor of service industry workers. The revised version of this paper effectively connects the themes of worker exploitation and commodification to a new version of the Final Girl.
The second paper in this portfolio is “Saved and Taken: Images of Erotized White Femininity and American Ideals of Heteropatriarchy” written for ENG 6800 Medieval Visual Culture with Dr. Erin Labbie. This was my first literature seminar at BG and it was difficult in ways I did not anticipate. During the last month of classes, Dr. Walsh stepped in to be the instructor for the course. However, this ended up being a greatly beneficial change as I began to build a relationship with Dr. Walsh and form my paper around my interests. I decided to write about the V-J Day Kiss photograph and the use of Joan of Arc’s image in politics and war. Upon revisiting this paper, I wanted to explore internet subcultures within the alt-right and White Christian nationalist movements. My research led me to analyze historical images through a post-#MeToo movement and post-2016 election lens. Based on Dr. Walsh’s recommendations, I omitted my sections on Joan of Arc and instead explored White femininity and domesticity within American national identity which led me to analyze the TikTok trend of Trad Wives. My revised paper explores eroticized White femininity within the body politic which stems from the infamous V-J Day Kiss photograph.

My third paper, “‘She’s So Heavy’: The Weight of American Exceptionalism and 1960s Nostalgia in Julie Taymor’s Across the Universe,” was written for Dr. Sheffer’s ENG 6750 course The 1960s in Contemporary American Culture. This course was interesting and allowed me to explore American history and culture. I decided to write about the film Across the Universe (2007) and its critique of American exceptionalism and the War on Terror. Dr. Sheffer’s main concern was to focus on the film and analyze what the film was saying about American politics during the 1960s and the 2000s. Dr. Walsh recommended I use Mimi Thi Nguyen’s The Gift of Freedom to refine my analysis of American exceptionalism. She also suggested that I refine my analysis of neoliberalism within the film by pointing out that the film is centered on an
individual love story. I expanded my analysis of the film by pointing out the echoes that the film has to Forrest and Jenny’s relationship in *Forrest Gump* (1994). My revised paper praises the film for its anti-war stance and ability to connect the 1960s and 2000s politics while remaining critical of its neoliberal lens.

The final artifact in my portfolio are cover letters written for jobs that I am interested in applying to. Dr. Walsh suggested that in place of a final revised paper, I research organizations and positions that I could see myself working for. I currently work in the nonprofit sphere, so to continue that path I searched for organizations that serve the community. I discovered positions at the Toledo Lucas County Library, Imagination Station, and the University of Michigan. Dr. Walsh helped me sell myself in these cover letters by presenting a strong thesis statement of why I am a good fit for these organizations. These cover letters represent what I have learned throughout this program and how my skills apply to the positions I am interested in.

My final portfolio has allowed me to refine my writing and research interests to present a collection of works that represent my time at BGSU. Working with Dr. Walsh allowed me to expand my writing and knowledge within my research interests, Marxism and feminist theory. Revising these three papers allowed me to explore and make deeper connections to contemporary literature and popular culture. I’ve deeply expanded each work to narrow my focus and engage in ongoing scholarly conversations. My time at BGSU has expanded my writing skills and ability to connect with larger cultural and sociopolitical contexts.
Revisiting the Final Girl: Escaping Commodification and the Foodie Kitchen

Late-stage capitalism brings conspicuous consumption and commodification of everyday elements such as food and labor. In a post-COVID-19 world, the imbalance of power has grown, further separating the elite from the working class. During much of the pandemic, essential workers in restaurants and grocery stores were forced on the front lines to ensure the needs of the ruling class were met. And while corporate profits grew, workers saw little increase in pay. In recent years, there have been a slew of films with differing critiques of class division. Films such as Saltburn (2023) and Parasite (2019) speak to the deep-rooted social stratification resulting from a neoliberal society. Audiences can no longer relate to or aspire to be the ultra-wealthy; they aspire to survive. Both films center around reclaiming wealth and completely assuming the lives of the elite. Parasite exposes South Korean injustices of capitalism through status anxiety, wealth inequality, and classism. Saltburn follows a middle-class Oxford student, Oliver, who aspires to achieve wealth akin to English royalty. These are foreign films that speak to the global pressures of class and race and aren’t unique to American economics. While both films are excellent critiques of the working class and capitalism, I want to focus my argument on a uniquely American film. Mark Mylod’s 2022 film The Menu speaks to the growing gap between the working class and the ultra-wealthy in the United States. This film explores the U.S.’s response to the global pandemic and the growing class divide caused by neoliberal policies and late-stage capitalism. The Menu critiques the idea that something as basic as food can be commodified as an experience for the ultra-wealthy and lead to further exploitation of the working class.

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1 According to the National Library of Medicine, “Consistent with the magnitude of labor market disruptions during the pandemic, many workers’ earnings declined. Relative to 2019, the share of workers age 25 and over with at least a 10 percent decline in annual earnings increased by between 7 and 8 percentage points in 2020.”
The film begins with a small group of dinner patrons boarding a boat to be taken to the ultimate dining experience at the fine dining restaurant, Hawthorn. Audiences are met with pretentious diners, ranging from actors to finance bros to food reviewers. We first meet the seemingly happy couple Tyler and Margot, portrayed by Nicholas Hoult and Anya Taylor-Joy. Tyler is a foodie fanboy who has made it his life goal to eat at Hawthorn and learn everything and anything about cooking. Margot is presented as an average American girl who feels far removed from spending $1,250 on a single dinner. However, the film sets her apart from the other characters early on through her smoking and lack of enthusiasm for this dinner—markers of a populist everyman character. Food critic Lillian Bloom, portrayed by Janet McTeer, and her devoted assistant Ted, portrayed by Paul Adelstein can’t help but feel particularly special in their invitation to Hawthorn. Hyped-up finance bros portrayed by Arturo Castro, Rob Yang, and Mark St. Cyr are excited to burn company money without repercussions. Older power couple Anne and Richard, portrayed by Judith Light and Reed Birney, stride on the boat expecting another notable dining experience. B-list movie star, portrayed by John Leguizamo, embraces his newfound foodie identity with his assistant Felicity, portrayed by Aimee Carrero. Through these interactions, audiences begin to see that Margot doesn’t belong in this ostentatious crowd.

As the diners sail away, we get glimpses of the island that houses the restaurant, Hawthorn Island. The island is secluded and seemingly deserted, giving the audience an innate sense of fear. The diners are greeted by Elsa, portrayed by Hong Chau, and subsequently given a tour of the island. The group learns that the staff stays in bunks on the island without much free time outside of work. The diners then enter the restaurant and are greeted by the world-renowned Chef Julian Slowik, portrayed by Ralph Fiennes. As the dinner progresses, Chef Slowik begins to unfold his plan for the evening, everyone must die. Margot realizes she doesn’t belong with the
other diners and must escape the island. She survives through her class relatability and rejection of commodities while the diners and workers burn with the restaurant. Margot becomes a Final Girl much different than those before her, ushering in a contemporary version of the Final Girl.

*The Menu* presents a compelling and satirical contemporary take on traditional horror films. As *New York Times* film review Jeannette Catoulis states, “Whisking splashes of horror into culinary comedy (‘Don’t touch the protein, it’s immature,’ admonishes the forbidding hostess during a smokehouse tour), ‘The Menu’ is black, broad and sometimes clumsy, attacking its issues more often with cleaver than paring knife.” The film questions the role of foodies and conspicuous consumption while incorporating the rise of social media and competitive reality cooking shows in a post-pandemic world. The film asks audiences to question who the true villain is, the working-class Chef, the selfish wealthy dinner patrons, or the kitchen staff who allow the horrors to unfold. *The Menu* is a response to a post-COVID-19 world, presenting the fears of elite capitalism and commodification. As Pierre Bourdieu argues in his seminal text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, “Popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life” (1590). The film outwardly critiques the horrors of overconsumption and commodification caused by capitalism.

Throughout the horrors of the night, audiences find a connection with the last girl standing, Margot. As first coined by feminist film scholar Carol Clover, the Final Girl is the sole survivor of a night of horrors and is saved by her ability to outsmart the villain. *The Menu* subverts and reinvents the traditional tropes of the Final Girl by subjecting her to the contemporary horrors of a neoliberal world. This film speaks on how foodie culture and capitalism have led to the commodification of food and labor while questioning if there can be an
escape. In this essay, I build off Laura Mulvey to present the main female protagonist Margot as a contemporary Final Girl who escapes the male gaze while connoting relatability through her class and refusal to conform. Building off Karl Marx, Fredrick Engles, and Pierre Bourdieu I also show how *The Menu* presents a post-pandemic world through the increased commodification of food and how the Final Girl can escape commodification and conspicuous consumption.

**Foodies in the Kitchen**

Within the past decade, there has been a rise of foodies in American culture. Reality shows like *Top Chef*, *Master Chef*, and *Chopped* have brought the inner workings of fine dining into American living rooms. As Michael Pollan outlines in his *New York Times* article “Out of the Kitchen, Onto the Couch” there has been a recent major shift in cooking shows since Julia Child’s *The French Chef*. Along with this change came an influx of people who loved food but not cooking. This created a space where foodies could critique and valorize the food and cultural capital assigned to certain cuisines without cooking themselves. Reality chefs like Gordon Ramsay and Bobby Flay brought the macho masculine personal into the kitchen while pushing female chefs like Rachel Ray and Martha Stewart to the softer side of cooking. As Pollan explains in his article, “The Food Network undergoes a complete change of personality at night, when it trades the cozy precincts of the home kitchen and chirpy softball coaching of Rachael Ray or Sandra Lee for something markedly less feminine and less practical.” Gendered cooking became very divided as female chefs were teaching easy meals to parents while male chefs created high-pressure environments to discover the next best chef. *The Menu* borrows stylistic devices from reality cooking shows through the macho head chef and the kitchen staff working as one machine. The dishes “Amuse Bouche,” “The Island,” and “Man’s Folly” mimic the
intricate details that reality cooking shows present as superior. The film plays with the ambitious tropes of reality cooking while centering itself on Marxist critique.

In *The Menu*, Chef Slowik is akin to a Gordon Ramsay-type figure, leading a kitchen where the staff works as one machine. Each cook works under Chef Slowik’s command, willing to work through the pandemic and ultimately die with him. Chef Slowik’s treatment toward his kitchen staff comes into question with the dishes “The Mess” and “Man’s Folly.” The fourth course, “The Mess,” is where the night takes a sharp turn toward panic. As Chef Slowik begins to describe his sous chef Jeremy’s dish he points out that Jeremy will never be good enough. No matter how hard Jeremy tries, he will never get to Chef Slowik’s status. This is true for two reasons, one being that Chef Slowik will never allow anyone to outshine him and reach the same level of celebrity chef stardom. The second is that in a neoliberal society, it is nearly impossible to reach the same status with even more work. Neoliberalism rationalizes this type of violence as only the truly talented will ascend to the upper echelons of their professions. The diners watch as Jeremy shoots himself and watch as his body falls limp on a white tarp. Chef Slowik rationalizes Jeremy’s suicide as an escape from the neoliberal horrors he experiences in the food service industry. Viewers begin to question if Slowik is saving Jeremy from the unfulfilling pursuit of culinary perfection or if this is his way of removing competition. Dishes such as this one show how toxic masculinity grew in the high-level kitchen stemming from foodie culture and reality television shows.

The film also speaks to the 2017 #MeToo movement through the relationship between Chef Slowik and sous chef Katherine. The “Man’s Folly” dish reveals that Chef Slowik made several advances on his sous chef Katherine, all of which she denied, leading her time in the kitchen to become more and more toxic. As Chef Slowik reconciles with Katherine, she stabs
him in the thigh with scissors after accepting his past mistakes. After this, the men are given a chance to escape while the women are brought inside with Katherine to eat the “Man’s Folly” dish. As the men run off and get captured, they realize there is no escape from the consequences of their actions. As the women consume the dish, Katherine begins sobbing yet all the diners can do to comfort her is to compliment her dish. The women are unable to connect to her on a human level and only view her through the service she provides. It is revealed that Katherine came up with the idea to have everyone die in the end, yet Chef Slowik will be the one who receives the credit. The film uses the relationships between the male and female characters to show how power imbalances grow and may not always be understood by those with privilege.

When discussing gender dynamics in Chef Slowik’s kitchen it is important to understand the gender discourse in foodie culture. Researchers Kate Cairns et al analyze the performance of masculinity and femininity within foodie culture in their influential text “Caring About Food: Doing Gender in the Foodie Kitchen.” They find that foodie discourse “is still constrained by a broader system of conventional gender relations, a system that is also conditioned by the economic and cultural implications of class positions” (609). Female chefs are seen as more domestic while male chefs are viewed highly for their talent. The celebration of Chef Slowik is deeply tied to this notion of gender in the kitchen. Tyler connects with Chef Slowik because he is representative of the macho chef who has immense talent. And so, his relationship with Margot is very trivial and transactional because he doesn’t think that Margot, a sex worker, can understand the complexities of foodie culture. Tyler also represents the disconnect between true cooking and reality cooking shows. As Pollan states, “The Food Network has helped to transform cooking from something you do into something you watch.” As the night continues, Tyler becomes increasingly captivated by Chef Slowik and the dining experience.
Tyler by asking him to cook something for him, knowing his lack of applicable cooking skills. As Tyler cooks, he is unable to connect his knowledge of cooking to the dish he is making—further separating the foodie from the working-class kitchen staff. This scene is reminiscent of a reality cooking show like *Chopped* or *Iron Chef*. As Pollan states, “These shows move so fast, in such a blur of flashing knives, frantic pantry raids and more sheer fire than you would ever want to see in your own kitchen.” Tyler’s frantic cooking in this scene mirrors how reality cooking shows are not applicable to real-life cooking. He is lost in the kitchen, messily chopping vegetables and poorly searing lamb chops. The dish is named “Tyler’s Bullshit” and described as "undercooked lamb, inedible shallot-leek butter sauce, utter lack of cohesion.” This dish is the end for Tyler as the audience finds out that he knew that everyone was going to die at the end and still chose to hire Margot anyway. Viewers see Chef Slowik whisper something in his ear and Tyler walks off; Margot then finds his lifeless body hanging from the ceiling. We don’t know what Chef Slowik whispered to Tyler and it can be assumed that he wanted to deprive Tyler of experiencing the full menu. Tyler wanted to attend the dinner at Hawthorn even if it meant he would die in the end, he felt like the social experience was worth his life. The value foodies like Tyler place on dining at Hawthorn feeds into conspicuous consumption. Social media inflates the economic and social value of food.

When foodies and the elite class visit fine-dining restaurants they establish certain foods as culturally and superior. In *The Menu*, we see how the exclusive guest list and high price tag create a group of outsiders. Much like Bourdieu argues, the elite class uses taste as a social weapon which elevates their status. Tyler represents the foodie who loves cooking and fine dining, yet he himself cannot cook. Throughout the film, Tyler expresses his knowledge of cooking and how Chef Slowik’s menu always has a theme and deeper meaning. Margot, who is
completely removed from foodie culture, sees past the commodified food. Instead of embracing the dishes, she rejects Chef Slowik and his courses. Bourdieu argues that “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (1591). The foodies and ultra-wealthy establish themselves as the classifier based on their classifications—having money and an understanding of cooking.

The film presents an exclusive dining experience for the foodie and wealthy class through its erotic presentation of food and hefty price tag. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argue in their seminal text *Capital* that “a commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing” (667). Any product can become a commodity if it is capable of satisfying human wants. Marx and Engels argue that ordinary objects can be “changed into something transcendent” (668). In *The Menu*, food has changed from the ordinary to the exceptional. Foodie culture has inflated the value of one of the most needed resources in life. Eric Holt-Giménez argues in his transformational book *A Foodie's Guide to Capitalism* that “the commodity’s value is not determined by individual labor but by socially necessary labor time” (64). *The Menu* presents commodified labor leading to a devaluation of food and labor outside of fine dining. The kitchen staff’s labor is viewed as socially necessary because of the value the patrons place on the food. The staff works through the COVID-19 pandemic because they are essential to the wealthy dining experience. The wealthy patrons frequently visit Hawthorn because to them it has a greater value than traditional restaurants. In contrast, Margot sees Hawthorn as a commodity and rejects the entire experience. To Margot, the experience of being a sex worker commodifies her body; she understands the relationship between service workers and customers. Margot does not inflate the value of Hawthorn because Margot herself has been commodified.
**Margot, the Marxist Final Girl**

Traditionally, the image of the Final Girl in horror films tends to linger in memory as a survivor. She is the one who narrowly escapes death; someone who is clever enough to outsmart the killer all while being objectified by the gaze. Feminist film scholars such as Carol Clover argue that the Final Girl represents masochistic fantasies while reinforcing patriarchal values while other feminist film scholars Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak argue that the Final Girl must be revisited for the contemporary age. In *The Menu*, Margot presents audiences with a Final Girl who rejects and reinvents the traditional tropes of past Final Girls. To understand Margot as a Final Girl, audiences must understand the traditional tropes and characteristics of the Final Girl. Clover analyzes slasher films from the 1970s and 1980s in her groundbreaking text “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film” to find that the Final Girl in slasher films reinforces patriarchal structures through her traits, actions, and interactions with other characters. She explains that “The Final Girl is boyish… Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and all” (204). Margot is more complex because her agency is centered on her rejection of commodities. The way she is dressed immediately sets her apart from the other characters, her loose satin dress, leather jacket, and combat boots stick out among the business casual attire seen on the other characters. The film separates Margot from the other characters and places her in a populist role. Tyler reprimands her for smoking as she will “ruin her palate” and be unable to experience Hawthorn to the fullest. She does not fit into the world of fine dining yet is forced to experience

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2 Paszkiewicz and Rusnak argue that “this revisiting of the Final Girl does not happen in a vacuum and should be considered as part of wider trends in feminist horror scholarship, which reclaims the horror genre for female viewing pleasures, usually under the assumption that it provides its viewers an aesthetic access to violence and rage, released in a previously assumed male-orientated form.” Revisiting the Final Girl in contemporary horror aims to reclaim and recategorize the trope.
it while being scolded for not fitting in. Similar to Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Margot is an everyday person who wants to escape a horrific experience and return home. The audience can see themselves in Margot as the everyday person who just can’t fit in with the wealthy elite. Her relatability stretches beyond just the audience, as she also relates to the working-class kitchen staff. Margot relates to Chef Slowik because she understands the parasitic relationship within class structures. The film codes Margot as a populist character who relates to the everyday person and connects with the working class.

Past films separate the Final Girl from the other female characters, she then becomes the audience’s point of relatability. For Clover, slasher and horror films are inherently misogynistic so there can never be an escape from the gaze. Yet in *The Menu*, Margot is not as clear cut as the Final Girls before her. She is a sex worker who is hired to attend dinner at Hawthorn and is up against an entirely different villain, the invisible hand of capitalism. Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak urge critics in their influential text “Revisiting the Final Girl: Looking Backwards, Looking Forward,” to revisit the Final Girl in contemporary horror. They explain that “the number of films investigated by Clover in her formulation of the Final Girl trope is too small to generalize across the subgenre.” While Clover’s work remains influential to feminist film theory, the horror genre has evolved, it is an adaptive genre that changes with culture and politics. Post-2020, the world is grappling with the economic downturn caused by the pandemic and growing class division. Logan Brown argues in his influential text “‘They Have to Help Themselves’: Saw and the Horrors of Neo-Liberalism” that “the atomization of the neo-liberal social field produces a new class of monster” (266). Modern-day horror must present audiences with a Final Girl who has reliability against a common villain.
Margot creates a unique categorization of Final Girls through her profession of sex work; she faces the oppressive force of patriarchy and capitalism. In the middle of the film, it is revealed that Tyler hired Margot to attend the dinner at Hawthorn while knowing everyone will die in the end. To Tyler, Margot as a disposable sex worker and is viewed only as a body. He doesn’t respect her and gets increasingly agitated with her refusal to participate in Chef’s games. Roderick A. Ferguson argues in his influential text *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* that the sex worker destabilizes the heteropatriarchal norms and authority. Margot as the Final Girl represents how sex work disrupts the capitalist and heteronormative structures of the patriarchy under neoliberalism. She disrupts the heteronormative family structure through being hired by Richard to portray his daughter. By breaking these heteronormative structures, she is also breaking down the authoritative power of capitalism. Ferguson argues that “the prostitute proves capital’s defilement of man. She symbolizes man’s dehumanization or more specifically, man’s feminization under capitalist relations of production… the prostitute represents the ways that capital disrupts those connections” (8). We can view her capital disruptions through not only her rejection of Hawthorn but through her relationships with the wealthy men who hire her, Tyler and Richard. Through each course, Tyler becomes increasingly agitated with her and the more Margot begins to reject the experience and Tyler. His respect for Margot is limited to her ability to taste food. He wants Margot to be his docile dinner companion, meant to fill a seat and look pretty. Tyler uses Margot to bolster his own image while increasing his value as a man.

Conventional horror films use the camera to eroticize and gain pleasure from the Final Girl. The audience is meant to view each dish as an erotic experience and shift the pleasure of looking at the food. Laura Mulvey argues in her seminal text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that the pleasure of looking is traditionally split between the “active/male and
passive/female” with the male fantasy projected onto the female character (1959). *The Menu* subverts this trope by using the camera to portray the food as an erotic passive object as opposed to Margot, an active female character. Mulvey argues that “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (1959). *The Menu* subverts this by erotically showing the food and avoiding viewing Margot in the same way. Her date, Tyler, does not find her sexually attractive, he instead focuses on the food and the acceptance of Chef Slowik. He fetishizes the experience of dining at Hawthorn, making the food an erotic object. Tyler values the experience of dining at Hawthorn by documenting his experience through photos for social media and performing the consumption of the food; his taste is purely social. The food at Hawthorn represents commodity fetishism as the dishes have a social value rather than use-value. As Brown states, “The fetishism of commodities elides the social determination of value both of commodities and of human labour” (268). When the dishes at Hawthorn are viewed erotically, the dishes and the labor become commodified. Foodies and the ultra-wealthy inflated the social value of Hawthorn, creating commodities out of food and labor. The plating and camera work of these dishes push the commodification to audiences. The camera erotizes the dishes and presents them as salacious and arousing. Every dish has a shot that gives it an alluring quality. The first course named “The Island” is a rock with steaming food to mimic an island, giving it an erotic and intriguing feel. The dish features food harvested from the island, from the seaweed to the raw scallops all plated on a volcanic rock. This dish highlights the significance of the raw ingredients juxtaposed with the small human inhabitance on the island to foreshadow the end of the film. The camera tells audiences that the food is a passive object and it should be viewed with pleasure. The film rejects the erotization of the female characters by shifting the erotic impact
toward the food. Therefore, Margot escapes the gaze because she is not the object of erotic impact, it is the food.

**The Breadless Bread Plate**

Chef Slowik introduces the second course as a dish for the poor, “flour and water, what could be simpler?” He continues by stating that bread is the food of the “common man,” yet the guests are no common man, so they don’t receive any bread. Each of the patrons has different reactions to this course. Guests like Lillian Bloom take to looking for errors in the dish, representing the foodie critic who perpetuated the commodification of food. Audiences later learn that Bloom caused a surge of restaurants to close, increasing job loss within the working class. Other patrons like the Movie Star try to enjoy the dish to separate himself from the “common man,” while Tyler finds the dish to be brilliant and delicious. The second course represents how a food like bread, or lack thereof, can be commodified. As Bourdieu argues, “The very seriousness (or naivety) which this taste invests in fictions and representations demonstrates a contrario that pure taste performs a suspension of ‘naive' involvement which is one dimension of a 'quasi-ludic' relationship with the necessities of the world” (1590). Food like bread becomes socially superior to the classifier rather than a necessity. Some guests try to enjoy the breadless bread plate because it is being marketed as a dish for the wealthy while others feel entitled to the bread. The classifier's relationship to bread, and food in general, gets enervated by Chef Slowik’s decision to refuse the patrons’ bread.

Margot rejects the dish; she refuses to take from Chef Slowik as the other guests do. This sparks Chef Slowik’s interest in Margot as he begins to wonder if she truly belongs with “them,” the other dining guests. Upon her rejection of this dish, she is separating herself from the takers. Margo views the breadless bread as a patronizing joke and rejects the dish entirely. Tyler
mistaking her refusal, ridicules Margot for supposedly not understanding the concept of the dish or the menu. As Bourdieu states, “and nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common'” (1591). Food has become common and banal for the wealthy; they crave the elite experience of dining at restaurants like Hawthorn. Bread is common yet Chef Slowik won’t allow the guests to eat bread thus creating an aesthetic status on the bread. Bread is a deeply symbolic food that spans centuries through its religious and cultural use. It represents life and peace, something that Chef Slowik is depriving the diners of. He won’t allow the simplest of foods to be commodified by the foodies and the wealthy. The wealthy class and foodies give everyday foods a higher social status through cultural capital, yet Chef Slowik doesn’t allow this distinction to happen to one of the most common foods in the world.

Tyler perpetuates the foodie culture Chef Slowik has grown to despise. Chef Slowik was flipping burgers for people who could barely afford the food they needed and now he cooks for people who can afford the food they don’t need. Holt-Giménez argues that “vast differences in wealth and income in our society. Food to hungry people has a huge use value, but they don’t have enough money to purchase it” (60). The dishes disseminate into an all-consuming culture that moves away from enjoyment and leads toward exploitation. The kitchen staff at Hawthorn experiences a wealth gap as well because they are expected to always be on the island. They don’t have the free time or ability to spend the money they earn from working at Hawthorn. The staff were also expected to work during the pandemic, subjecting them to further danger under capitalism.

The film presents a post-pandemic atmosphere through the various interactions during the second course. The trio of male EchoBrite employees, or finance bros, are the only guests who
ask for bread. They plead with Elsa, Chef Slowik’s right-hand person, requesting bread by asking if she knows who they are. They work for Doug Verrick, the president of EchoBrite and the angel investor at Hawthorn, who as they state kept Hawthorn open through COVID-19. Holt-Giménez argues that “if enough people want it and have the money to buy it, someone will turn it into a commodity and sell it” (57). Doug the angel investor knew people would pay for Chef Slowik’s craft, so he turned his food into a commodity. We later see Doug dressed in angel wings being lowered into the ocean to drown. Not only do the three men use their money to escape problems but they are part of the reason Chef Slowik has lost his creative edge. Adding to that, they most likely grew their wealth during the pandemic as we find their fraudulent invoices printed on the tortillas during the third course. The need for capitalist growth forced the kitchen staff to work during the pandemic which in turn endangered their health. Neoliberalism justifies and endorses this behavior because it aims to reward the wealthy rather than protect the collective. Rather than accept the breadless bread plate like the other guests, they try to use their wealth to get what they want. Elsa whispers in one of their ears “You will eat less than you desire and more than you deserve” proving that their money cannot help them, but it is rather the cause of their future death. Elsa, Chef Slowik, and the kitchen staff do not view the diner patrons as deserving of their craft. Giving them a breadless bread plate further signifies that they don’t belong with or understand the working class. The guests are denied the ability to commodify one of the simplest foods—bread.

**Just a Well-Made Cheeseburger**

In order to survive, Margot must find relatability in Chef Slowik. Film reviewer Noah Berlatsky states “we are alienated from real want and real satisfaction, we feed a hunger that devours emptily and without cease” through the overconsumption of commodified food. Chef
Slowik’s labor has become alienated, losing his sense of real food. Survival for Margot is rooted in rejecting Chef Slowik’s commodified food. Before the final dessert course, Margot tells Chef Slowik “I don’t like your food and I would like to send it back.” In this moment she is rejecting his commodified food, establishing herself as different than the other patrons. She tells him that he’s “taken the joy out of eating” and each dish is not enjoyable. Margot tells him she doesn’t taste the “love” in his food. As Holt-Giménez argues “food embodies different forms of value… Because food is indispensable to human labor, and since human labor is a part of the value of all commodities, the value of food permeates the entire economic system” (58). Chef Slowik’s food is deeply connected to the value of labor. The line cooks create food in an almost machine-like manner, presenting the idea that their labor has become so disconnected from the product that they have no other choice but to die.

When Margot asks Chef Slowik for the cheeseburger, she understands that she must reject the commodities at Hawthorn. Margot tells him his food has lost its purpose and he’s failed as a chef. Holt-Giménez argues that “food has a use value (to feed people) and an exchange value (as a commodity)” and this is understood through the dishes on the menu versus Margot’s cheeseburger (60). The cheeseburger has value because it feeds and leads Margot to survival. Chef Slowik understands the value it holds as his labor was directly linked to the creation. As he makes the burger, the kitchen staff surrounds and watches him create the burger with “love.” When he creates this dish as opposed to the other dishes on the menu, it has the value of feeding Margot. The other courses are commodities because they are not made to feed, they are made to critique and overconsume. Cheeseburgers are an integral part of American culture and cuisine, representing an affordable food option for the working class. The Atlantic writer Suzy Swartz states “The burger, shake, and fries—'enduring icons of American cuisine’— are used to
symbolize abundance, accessibility, and dominance while ignoring the dark side of those values.” The cheeseburger is accessible to Margot because of neoliberalism in the US—while the cheeseburger is a symbolic American dish, it also holds many individualistic values. Margot connects with Chef Slowik’s past career as a burger cook and knows his joy of cooking lies in the burger. Chef Slowik created the menu with the end goal of killing everyone in the restaurant, the buyers of his commodities. The food Chef Slowik was making previously was created for the guests who only take away from the joy of cooking. The moment that Margot asks for the cheeseburger, she is giving rather than taking.

The burger is the dish that holds the most value. Marx and Engles argue that if commodities could speak, they would say “our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects” (675). The commodity has value because of the human labor behind it, it is not dependent on the potential to satisfy needs. In the film, each dish is presented as a commodity, painstakingly harvested and created by the cooks in the kitchen. Every dish involved intricate plating and exotic ingredients, showing the value of the labor. The film presents the course dishes as having a greater social value than meals meant for nourishment. Margot’s cheeseburger has a use-value of survival and hunger. The dinner guests pay the hefty price tag of $1,250 a person because they view the meals at Hawthorn as having a greater social value and use-value. Margot rejects this idea because she understands the true use-value of food is from the joy of eating.

Rather than daintily eating the burger, she takes a large and messy bite. The previous dishes are deconstructed and avant-garde, their form does not allow for proper eating. Her messy eating further separates her from the other patrons. Her eating is coded as masculine and working-class which places her on the path of survival as the Final Girl. Her apartness from the
other characters and adaptability allow her to escape Hawthorn. The other guests are far removed from relating to the working class and the only way they know how to save themselves is through their wealth. They view the cheeseburger as lowbrow and lower class because of the aesthetic statuses they’ve created. As Margot eats the cheeseburger, Chef Slowik feels connected to the joy of cooking and eating. Margot is a populist character, the film's politics are focalized through her to represent there must be a break in class division. She is the Final Girl who can outsmart and reject the commodified food everyone was so eager to accept.

Margot then asks for the cheeseburger to go, at this moment Chef Slowik understands that she shouldn’t be punished for the wealthy commodifiers. As she leaves, she looks around the room at the other dinner guests. All of them cannot escape and reject the commodities presented during the film; they are unable to resist as Margot did. Holt-Giménez argues that “production, appropriation, and accumulation of value determines the system itself” (69). The value of the dinner to the patrons is equated to their life yet Margot rejects this idea. The Final Girl “is intelligent and resourceful in extreme situations” which ultimately leads to her survival (Clover 204). In The Menu, Margot does not accept Chef Slowik’s meals or attitudes toward the patrons. She recognizes that acting as they did throughout the dinner would not garner her survival. But rather she acted the opposite, she connected with Chef Slowik through his working-class background. Margot sparked the joy he once had while cooking, the joy he had before his labor was commodified and alienated. During the final course, Chef Slowik literally feeds the guests to death by turning them into s’mores. The simplicity of the final course speaks to the idea that any food can be commodified through the right economic and social conditions. S’mores are commonly thought of as childhood innocence and memories and not as fine dining desserts. Chef Slowik is reclaiming the idea that simple foods can bring joy by making the guests die as
s’mores. He gains his autonomy back by killing those who made him lose it. Margot takes her burger to go and sails away on the boat that brought her to the island. Once she’s safe, she finishes her burger on the boat, watching the restaurant become engulfed in flames.

**Conclusion**

Hawthorn is an ever-present reminder of our neoliberal capitalist world that creates commodities out of the simplest necessities. Margot complicates the traditional heteronormative family under capitalism as the film places her in a position to conform to the standards around her, yet she never does. The film exposes the growing gap between the wealthy and the working class. Chef Slowik's growing disconnect from his labor and love for cooking is caused by foodie culture and the ultra-wealthy’s status. Bourdieu states that “The pure intention of the artist is that of a producer who aims to be autonomous, that is, entirely the master of his product” (1589).

Chef Slowik has become a master of his cooking, yet the only people who can enjoy are the elite class, he is no longer autonomous. Margot is the only character that can relate to Chef Slowik as she is a rejection of commodities and alienated labor.

Margot is a contemporary Final Girl who has the ability to escape the commodification of food through her populist framework, relatability, and working-class status. While rejecting the food at Hawthorn, she is also rejecting erotization and the male gaze. The film presents a contemporary version of the Final Girl which uses the traditional tropes of intelligence and resilience while bringing a new sense of relatability. Instead of accepting death like the other patrons, she refuses to play Chef Slowik’s game. Asking for the cheeseburger is the defining moment of relatability and rejection of commodification, further establishing her lower-class status. The true villain of the film is not Chef Slowik, but rather the elite capitalist patrons who inflated the use-value of food. Living in a post-pandemic world further disconnects the wealthy
from the working class. The wealthy dinner patrons do not have the potential to escape in the same way that Margot does. They do, however, quite literally pay for their death.

The film, however, does not escape the neoliberal implications it critiques. As Margot sails away to freedom, audiences are left wondering what her escape means. Margot is separated from the rest of the guests early on through her smoking and unwillingness to participate in Chef Solwik’s game. Her escape is deeply rooted in a neoliberal individualist framework as the kitchen staff don’t have the opportunity to escape. While Margot is a populist-coded character, she doesn’t quite represent everyone. The Hawthorn employees are forced to work through the night and ultimately die in the end with the guests; there is no well-made cheeseburger for the staff. Similar films like Rian Johnson’s Glass Onion (2022) and Knives Out (2019) use an Agatha Christie-style mystery to critique systemic class oppression while using a populist character, portrayed by Daniel Craig, to call out the injustices and crimes the wealthy have committed. These films speak to a broader issue but can’t quite manage to escape their own critiques. The Menu presents an individualist response to a collective problem, we can’t escape the horrors of capitalism on our own. The filmmakers intentionally filmed in Georgia at the height of the pandemic to avoid restrictive COVID-19 protocols. The Menu is in conversation with Marxism yet is still indebted to American capitalism.

The film presents neoliberal horrors that speak to audiences who no longer aspire to be ultra-wealthy but aspire to survive neoliberalism in a post-pandemic world. “The dilemma, though, is that you have to eat” (Berlatsky). As Margot steers the boat to safety, she is left to wonder what commodification awaits in her freedom. The film echoes the anger at growing wealth divides through its violence directed toward the wealthy yet keeps the service industry workers unprotected. After the pandemic, the economy asks more and more out of the working
class without affording them the ability to escape. However, the film does reinvent the Final Girl for a contemporary audience and makes strides to avoid the male gaze. It effectively critiques foodie culture and the toxic environments presented in reality cooking shows. *The Menu* presents a compelling Marxist critique of foodie culture and class division in a post-pandemic landscape.
Works Cited


Saved and Taken: Images of Erotized White Femininity and American Ideals of Heteropatriarchy

Many of the most widely disseminated photographs of post-World War II American society contribute to purity, heteronormative whiteness, and prescribed feminine roles for women as caregivers and objects of men’s desires. The V-J Day Kiss in Times Square (1945) remains one of the most recognizable photographs ever taken and has been reproduced on a massive scale. The photograph was taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt in Times Square on August 14, 1945. It features a celebrating sailor, who recently returned from World War II, kissing a nurse dressed in all white. The sailor dressed in his dark navy uniform, is tightly locking the nurse dressed in all white, against his body while the nurse is clutching her purse with her right hand while her left hand grasps her dress with a fist. The discourse surrounding the image varies; while it was once regarded as the photo of the Greatest Generation because of its depiction of a heroic soldier returning to his lover, it is now understood as a sexual assault. Feminists such as MacKenzie Cockerill read this image’s popularity as symptomatic of feminist movements her formative text “Convergence on Common Ground: MRAs, Memes and Transcultural Contexts of Digital Misogyny” that “the idea that this woman’s consent or lack thereof can be ignored in the face of this man’s inability to control his physical impulses is itself evidence of misogyny” (103). During this time, women were expected to fulfill the roles of mothers and wives as the war ended. The photograph “Girl Gets Whistled At Along The Way” collected by archivist Otto Bettmann, appears to be taken sometime during the 1950s and shows Nancy Ziluck being catcalled by a group of male classmates on her way to school. Though there is little information on the photographer or date of this image, it has sparked online debates about sexual harassment. The conversation surrounding this image varies with men explaining that women should be grateful to be viewed as attractive while women reject this level of objectification. Viewing these images,
we see how White women are used to reframe the national identity by accepting objectification. As these images implore White women to fulfill their prescribed role, they exclude women of color from participating in rebuilding the nation and creating the body politic. As these images are romanticized, they affirm the far right’s threat of the great replacement theory. To these groups, the White Christian nation is under siege and the only way to overcome this threat is to reproduce the next generation of White Christians. These images represent the idea that White women’s bodies are a resource for the nation and are thus expected to reproduce the nation.

Living in a post #MeToo movement world, the images of women come deeper into question. The movement expanded the public's understanding of sexual harassment and violence, critiquing how women have been treated in the public and private spheres. Hollywood became the center of the conversation, with actresses and actors sharing their experiences with powerful executive producers like Harvey Weinstein. Just as the #MeToo movement gained traction in 2015-2016 with the Women’s March on Washington, the anti-feminist movement began to grow. At the center of the anti-feminist movement were internet subcultures incels, involuntary celibates, and self-proclaimed alpha males. Criminal justice researchers Brenna Helm et al’s “Examining incel subculture on Reddit” takes a deep dive into incel culture and groups on Reddit. They state that “Inceldom is built upon an ideological foundation of gender essentialism dictating superiority over women and traditional gender roles that reiterate male entitlement” (29). During the #MeToo movement, these groups found community within Reddit subcultures to stand up for men’s rights. Now with figures like Andrew Tate, the characterization of the alpha male has grown into the mainstream. These men’s groups hold alt-right political ideologies and misogynistic views toward women that push against women’s autonomy and freedom.
Viewing post-World War II photographs with a contemporary, anti-feminist, and incel discourse lens allows us to deepen our understanding of the role women play in national identity. Images that portray women as submissive further associate women with domestic and homemaking roles. With the popularity of TikTok, the image of domesticity has grown into an aesthetic that primarily, but not exclusively White, middle-class women should strive for. Women are closely tied to American national identity because they are expected to birth the new generations within the White heteronormative family structure. As feminist theorist Kate Manne states in her recent book, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, “Misogyny hence functions to enforce and police women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance, against the backdrop of other intersecting systems of oppression and vulnerability, dominance and disadvantage, as well as disparate material resources, enabling and constraining social structures, institutions, bureaucratic mechanisms, and so on” (19). Her work builds on the #MeToo movement and aims to reform the public’s understanding of misogyny. As images like the V-J Day Kiss are commonly viewed as romantic depictions of a triumphant nation, they further uphold misogyny and male dominance. I argue that during and post-WWII, American national identity is deeply connected to how women are portrayed in photography and pop culture. I also argue that select men's groups are longing to fortify the nation by returning to the heteropatriarchal structure and normative gender roles. By analyzing this archive, I show how these images and their reception are deeply related to the rise of the White Christian nationalist movement. These images reaffirm White women’s role in the nation, rebuilding the White Christian family and upholding the bourgeois family.

**Reconstructing National Identity Post-World War II**
The V-J Day Kiss photograph portrays the enduring association of whiteness with purity. American art historian Alexander Nemerov’s influential book *Wartime Kiss: Visions of the Moment in the 1940s* includes a quote from the photographer “Then suddenly, in a flash, I saw something white being grabbed” (5). The photo shows the sailor returning from winning the war to claim his tribute. The nurse is not given the option of consent as the sailor grasps her tightly in his arms, this action takes away any choice. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argues in her seminal text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). Mulvey presents us with a way to analyze this photo through a cinematic lens. In the V-J Day Kiss photograph, we see a cinematic representation of a woman being put on display for the pleasure of a man. Mulvey’s essay argues that men in film are the active viewers and women are passive subjects; her insight has a strong application to this image as well. The woman’s profession is also a source of erotic impact, nursing as a profession remains one of the most sexualized forms of labor. The kiss that the sailor entraps her with further erotizes her. The sailor in the V-J Day photo forces the nurse to be looked at and displayed; their kiss has an erotic impact. With this grasp, the sailor removes any opportunity for the nurse’s consent. Cinema portrays similar images to the V-J Day couple, as seen in the *Gone with the Wind* (1939) movie poster. Film shows romance through heteronormative couples embracing, the sailor in the V-J Day Kiss photo is performing his masculinity.

The photograph represents the eroticization of White women and their wombs. As Mulvey argues, “Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire” (837). The nurse in the V-J Day Kiss photo was taken by the sailor, he erotized her
by forcing a kiss. American public culture scholars Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites build off Mulvey in their formative text “The Times Square Kiss: Iconic Photography and Civic Renewal in U.S. Public Culture” and argue that the kiss implies an even greater sexual release to come. The whiteness of her dress and race implies a deep level of purity and as the sailor grabs her, she is erotized. The nurse represents virginity while simultaneously being erotized by the sailor assaulting her. With this, those who have viewed the photo as romantic or heroic play into the idea that women are displayed for erotic pleasure. The nurse has little agency, she is only an object to be admired and taken as a tribute after the war ends.

The identities of the nurse and sailor have been contested over time, with dozens of men claiming to be the sailor. Through expert photography analysis and investigation, the sailor and nurse's identities were determined to be George Mendonsa and Greta Zimmer Friedman. Lawrence Veirra and George Galdorisi’s book The Kissing Sailor: The Mystery Behind the Photo that Ended World War II sought to discover the identity of the couple. Veirra stated in an NBC 10 WJAR interview that “the fact that we were able to make sure that during his lifetime he gets the recognition that he deserves was the purpose of the book.” The sailor, Mendonsa, is regarded as an American hero who is deserving of the iconic status the photograph has reached. Even with the #MeToo movement, there is still a deep level of pride in the figure of the sailor. Friedman doesn’t achieve this level of iconography as her submissive status grounds her as an objectified figure.

The objectification of the nurse is representative of women’s lack of agency during this time. Hariman and Lucaites build off Mulvey and argue that “The photograph also draws on the

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3 George Mendonsa was in a theater with his wife and heard the commotion outside, he then ran over to a woman dressed like a nurse, Greta, and kissed her.
dominant ideological structures of its time: women are acted upon, rather than acting; relations of class are masked by focusing on individuals; race is effaced as the world worth saving appears to be a white world” (124). The nurse and the sailor represent women’s expected role, which is to submit to men within a White heteronormative world. When the sailor kisses the nurse, he represents the dominant structure in America taking the away option consent. The nurse shows purity in whiteness through her pristine white dress, the sailor grabbed the nurse rather than a woman factory worker. Through this photograph, we can analyze the gendered view of labor. Nursing is viewed as feminized labor while factory work was commonly viewed as masculine until Rosie the Riveter. Her image introduced the idea that White women could be feminine while working a masculine job. Propaganda images like Rosie the Riveter are threatening to the patriarchy because they show a strong woman who isn’t dependent on men or tied to their housework. Maureen Honey argues in her formative book, Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II that the dominant image of working women portrayed in media was a “self-sacrificing patriot who would return to traditional female concerns at the end of the war, women's war work produced strong egalitarian images” (184). Women’s ideal primary job was to bear children and take care of a home and so recruiting married women created temporary job replacements. Rosie’s image undermined the idea that women were only homemakers and dependent on men; Rosie was representative of women’s contributions to the war effort. The V-J Kiss photo was misread as portraying a female worker welcoming her soldier back home, this image reestablishes women’s ideal role in America. The woman in the photograph is a feminine worker who does not threaten the spaces men inhabit. She can assume the domestic role ascribed to her as the men return from war.
Images such as this one, exclude women of color from performing their citizenship the same way as White women. Honey explains that “the predominant media portrayal of women war workers was that they were young, white, and middle class” (19). The white couple in the photograph represents the expected heteronormative relationship in America. Honey argues that “the racist treatment of black women in propaganda demonstrates that their gender failed to outweigh the negative stereotypes attached to their race” (214). Women of color were only seen for their race, their gender was irrelevant to the war effort because of white supremacy. Whiteness was the standard in heteronormative relationships, had the sailor been a black man this photograph would be viewed as an assault. The nurse in the photo would then be classified as a victim, not a woman swept away by a romantic gesture. Honey exemplifies these wartime images highlighted a positive image of white female workers and minorities were often excluded or negatively portrayed. Women of color lacked the agency to perform the prescribed role as mothers because white supremacy excluded them from rebuilding the American identity.

The photograph depicts a violent and forceful kiss which has been misread as a romantic gesture. Nemerov argues the sailor’s act is violent and we see his force within his grasp of the woman’s body, he is “locking the woman’s head into place” (8). The photograph shows the soldier is using a great amount of force for this assault, yet the photo is published in Life magazine with the caption “In New York’s Times Square a white-clad girl clutches her purse and skirt as an uninhibited sailor plants his lips squarely on hers” (Nemerov 9). The sailor is described as “uninhibited” rather than an aggressor or assailant. This implies White men can be so overcome with emotion that they cannot be held accountable for their actions. However, if the sailor were a Black man, rather than being described as “uninhibited” he would be labeled as a dangerous Black man attacking an innocent white woman. In the photo the couple’s faces
disappear into each other’s, the sailor’s mouth covers the nurse’s mouth and nose, it looks as if he is eating her face. The kiss eroticizes the woman’s innocence while the sailor takes the woman for his pleasure; there is implied sexual pleasure after the kiss. Additionally, sailors are associated with the threat of queerness and the sailor’s assault reestablishes the heteronormative relationship after the war. With this photograph, the image of sailors is effectively reconstituted as masculine and heterosexual.

The sailor and the nurse in the V-J Day photograph attempt to fulfill the expected White heteronormative family structure after the war. Feminist theorist Alys Eve Weinbaum argues in her seminal book *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* that “the interconnected ideologies of racism, nationalism, and imperialism rest on the notion that race can reproduced based social hierarchies and racial superiority” (4). The V-J Day couple represent the White heteronormative generation to come, further supporting white supremacy. Weinbaum identifies the “race/reproduction bind” which argues that race and reproduction are impossible to separate. The nurse must submit to the sailor, she is expected to be a homemaker and bear White children. Weinbaum discusses how the eugenics movement swept through the U.S. and Europe and peaked during the genocide during WWII. The sailor uses the nurse’s body to fulfill the national imperative to reproduce after the war, his assault is the first step in reclaiming traditional gender roles. As he grabs her, she is forced into a submissive and domestic role. The nurse is then viewed for her potential to birth the next generation of White babies. The sailor represents virility in the men who are returning home from war to rebuild the national identity and body politic.

Additionally, Nemerov argues the sailor and the nurse’s “embrace anticipates the link between sexuality and atomic destruction” (10). He explains their kiss and the celebration of
peace was a flash just like the nuclear bombs were in Japan. Their kiss signifies the end of the war through destructive nuclear bombs. The sailor’s assault on the nurse represents destruction and patriarchal oppression. The end of WWII was caused by nuclear bombs and while this ended the war it opened up the threat of future more destructive wars. Fear of war subsides when new threats are introduced, in this case, the fear of patriarchy grows. Nemerov explains “violence is the medium of their encounter, the grace and arc and weaponry of it” as the couple is literally brought together by violence. The sailor is violent towards the nurse and the reason for his violent celebration was the violence of war. He saved the nurse, and women of America, from the violence of war only to be led back to a violent attack. Nemerov also points to the unification of the white flash of the bombs and the flash of the photo itself. This flash is representative of whiteness causing violence and destruction among the innocent. The photographer, Alfred Eisenstaedt, stated that “in a flash, I saw something white being grabbed” and this flash was violence (Nemerov 11). Eisenstaedt was able to capture this flash of white with his camera, documenting violence as it happened. The couple in the V-J Day photo is representative of race and reproduction, the creation of the American body politic.

“The War on Men”: Memes and Misogyny in Incel Cultures

The digital age has enhanced misogyny, eroticization, and heteronormative whiteness through memes and online discourse. Cockerill argues that “a global culture of misogyny is growing and flourishing thanks to the internet and its unprecedented potential for connecting people and their ideas” (87). Throughout her text, she analyzes various memes from the growing cultural phenomenon of men’s rights activism (MRA), a feminist countermovement. The discussion of misogyny within internet culture brings more iconic photos into question. As Manne argues, “we should instead understand misogyny as primarily a property of social
environments in which women are liable to encounter hostility due to the enforcement and policing of patriarchal norms and expectations” (19). Political figures like Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Jair Bolsonaro are calling to return to the Christian heteropatriarchal family. Their platforms center on family and traditional gender roles in hopes of affirming patriarchal control. The V-J Day photograph can then be reframed to its intended meaning, a romantic gesture that centers on White heteropatriarchy. The global threat of misogyny centers on patriarchal structures that force women into submissive roles.

The V-J Day Kiss photograph has been discussed at length for its iconic status and celebratory nature, yet it was only recently understood as problematic. Cockerill explains the issue with the photo is it is “recognizable enough to be described as iconic” (104). The V-J Day Kiss photo is a violent attack on a woman, yet it is deeply tied to its iconic status. Internet subcultures analyze historical and iconic images to feel connected to a time when women were commonly objectified. Cockerill includes a V-J Day Kiss meme in her text with the text “today, he would be called a rapist” on the image (103). While this forced kiss does not constitute an act of rape, it is a sexual assault. Cockerill’s article was published in 2019 and does not make mention of the #MeToo movement, one could assume this meme was created before the movement was mobilized. If this is the case, the MRA feels as though their grandfather’s generation is being categorized as rapists while they believe the photo is romantic. The men who created this meme feel that women’s consent and bodily autonomy aren’t issues if a man wants to celebrate victory. The MRA views the feminist critiques of this photo as overreactions and feels that this photo should be celebrated. The caption for the V-J Day Kiss photograph comes back into focus, “an uninhibited sailor plants his lips squarely on hers.” These male groups are trying to reclaim this kind of masculinity as they reject the #MeToo movement. Incel groups and the
MRA view iconic photos such as the V-J Kiss photo as romantic and a glimpse into a much simpler time.

The woman in the photo is used for pleasure and she is erotized because the sailor is celebrating. She is diminished to an object for pleasure and the sailor takes away the option of consent. The sailor and the nurse are living in a sexually imbalanced world, which leaves the nurse to be displayed as a sexual object for male pleasure. Another iconic historical photo that presents gender imbalance is “Girl Gets Whistled At On The Way.” The photo features a girl walking with a coy smile walking past a group of ten men as they whistle, call out, and smile at her. There is not much information on the context of this photo, but it represents Mulvey’s pleasure of looking. The woman walking takes a passive role in walking past the group of men while they take on the active role of looking. The spectator takes on the active role of looking, viewing the woman as an object that gives pleasure.

These photos also celebrate the masculine White middle-class in America and blue-collar workers. These photos represent the American dream, if you work hard, you can achieve your goals and desires. The photos enforce the idea that women should be men’s reward for attempting to achieve social mobility through the public sphere and marketplace. Honey explains that “the woman in uniform as a symbol of wartime was thus featured in advertisements, but the rest of the magazine gave little encouragement to blue-collar women to join the service...nursing, like teaching, was an accessible profession for working-class women and because it involved the nurturant aspects of the female role” (189). The two photographs show how women were placed into traditionally feminine roles and were submissive to working-class masculine men. The nurse in the photo performed her nurturing role during the war and is now expected to nurture a husband and children. The girl walking past the blue-collar men is submissive to their calling, she
Packman

is performing her femininity. These images represent how women are expected to perform their femininity as their identity and thus create a larger sense of American identity after the war.

These images represent an idyllic time for White heterosexual men and amassed multiple internet threads and discussions. Helm et al’s research analyzed several incel Reddit groups and found that “misogyny and racism in society...were the most frequent type of discriminatory comments, followed by anti-trans and homophobic comments” (40). These internet groups create a space where the discourse is led by hate speech and romanticizing the past. The V-J Day Kiss photograph is representative of the culture that incels and anti-feminists feel is threatened by the #MeToo movement. Upon researching the photo “Girl Gets Whistled At On The Way,” I found multiple Reddit threads and Quora questions. This image has been discussed at length, with women stating the photo is insulting and men asserting any girl should enjoy being given attention on the street. One anonymous commenter stated, “Is it okay as a middle-aged man to give teenage girls a whistle when walking behind them in public?” This question and the photograph attempt to reclaim the use of women’s bodies for pleasure. With the #MeToo movement came a large pushback to men showing women admiration, or what they believe it to be. As catcalling was rejected and called out, some men returned to historic images longing for a simpler time when young women were objectified for pleasure. Older generations felt that their behavior was acceptable and romantic and so they felt entitled to comment on women’s appearances. The romanization of this photo attempts to further affirm the domestic and objectified roles of White women. The discourse around this photo introduces a larger question of what America thinks about women. Manne argues that there is “no supposition of some notional universal experience of misogyny... she may or may not actually face these hostile potential

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4 The link to the Quora page can be found here.
consequences, depending on how she acts” (19). Misogyny presents itself differently for women and with the recent increase of internet subculture, it has evolved past what we understand as misogyny. Every woman can experience misogyny differently and this can be read through the photographs. The girl walking past the group of men has little agency to react to the men whistling at her, doing so could put her in danger. In comparison, the nurse in the V-J Kiss photo doesn’t have a choice to reject the kiss. Both photos represent the dangers and inability to escape misogyny under the patriarchy.

As political discourse grows in the mainstream, some incels take to internet subcultures like Reddit and Quora. Helm et al include a quote by an anonymous Reddit user:

“Females do not deserve equal rights because they are not equal. They do not contribute as much to building and maintaining society. Yet they draw more benefits from having a society. Males sacrifice the freedom of violence to build and maintain society. Females sacrifice the freedom of sexuality to build/maintain society. Females are not nearly as gifted at violence, nor do they need it. They can manipulate and trade their sex for endless things. Childbirth is NOT a contribution since female humanoid organisms would do that in the wild without a society…” (34).

The fundamental understanding of women that incels have is based on the idea that they are inherently less deserving of respect because they aren’t men. In the context of the V-J Day photo, the incel groups view themselves as the sailor, building society and maintaining freedom through their war contributions. Incels expect women to birth children yet don’t view this as a decision for women to make, like the nurse being assaulted. Politically, incels tend to fall into the far-right extremist view because they view women in this way; and to maintain this control, they result to
violent acts. Reddit discourse allows ideas such as this one to flow between groups and further ascribe domestic and submissive roles to women.

The Desperate Trad Wives of TikTok

The push to return to a heteropatriarchal family structure presents itself as an aesthetic lifestyle that primarily White, middle-class women should aspire to. With the popularization of the social media app, TikTok, comes an influx of young softspoken primarily White women who praise the domestic and submissive lifestyle. Trad Wives, as they are commonly known, present a domesticated hyper-feminine lifestyle where the woman’s purpose is to serve their family. New York Times contributor Annie Kelly argues in her insightful article “The Housewives of White Supremacy” that “the existence of tradwives points to a more nuanced reality. Female fears of objectification and sexual violence remain as potent as ever; the tradwife subculture exploits them by blaming modernity for such phenomena, and then offers chastity, marriage and motherhood as an escape.” Trad Wives are an anti-feminist response to the ongoing women’s movement and #MeToo movement that push for traditional roles with an undertone of White supremacy.

The Trad Wives of TikTok offer a bridge between the alt-right response to the women’s movements and a gentle entrance into domestic roles. Some of the most notable Trad Wives are Nara Smith, Estee Williams, Aria Lewis, and Jasmine Dinis. Most of the Trad Wife TikTok videos portray a homesteader lifestyle, Christian values, and creating meals from scratch while maintaining a hyper-feminine appearance. Estee Williams, username @esteecwilliams, has over 180 thousand followers and creates videos showcasing everything women need to do to become a Trad Wife. She is White, blonde, thin, and dresses reminiscent of a 1950s housewife. Her videos consist of explaining the Trad Wife lifestyle, tips and tricks to achieve a hyper-feminine
appearance, ways to submit to your husband, and cooking advice. At the core of her videos is the same message being spread by the White Christian nationalist movement, return to the heteropatriarchal structure. In the video entitled “What is Tradwife,” she states, “Trad wives also believe that they should submit to their husbands and serve their husbands…trad wives just believe that they are here as women for a different role.” This sentiment is carried through almost every Trad Wife TikTok, though some are more overt than others. Jasmine Dinis, username @jasminedinis2, is a homesteading Trad Wife with over 52 thousand followers who uses her platform to show the simplicity of Trad Wivery and raising Christian children. One of her most controversial videos reads “I’m teaching my daughter that it’s perfectly acceptable to depend on a man” as she stands with her daughter over a KitchenAid. Her platform reaffirms the White heteropatriarchal nation, building off religion and feminized domestic labor. Most of her videos center on the idea that women should want to have children and take care of a home, it’s their duty. As Kelly states, “the deliberately hyperfeminine aesthetics are constructed precisely to mask the authoritarianism of their ideology.” The Trad Wife is deeply rooted in White Christian nationalism and portrays the idea of domestic labor as ideal and necessary.

Other Trad Wives use their platforms to demonstrate their wealth covertly to establish their status within the leisure class. These women share videos on making cereal from scratch while avoiding sharing themselves doing essential domestic labor. Their labor acts as a class distinction, they can spend eight hours making every component of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich because their class allows them to. The labor of the Trad Wife is performative and collects an aesthetic status, inviting other women to try the Trad Wife lifestyle. Nara Smith, a model by the username @naraazizasmith, is arguably one of the most popular accounts with over five million followers and is notably set apart from the other Trad Wife accounts. As a woman of
color with a proximity to whiteness and rumored ties to Mormonism, her domesticity is set apart from other Trad Wives. Many of her videos begin with her stating that her children or husband are craving something, so she then spends the next five to eight hours creating that meal. One of her most popular videos is making her children grilled cheese from scratch. Nara Smith’s TikTok videos portray symbolic labor that affirms her and her family’s position in the leisure class. Pierre Bourdieu argues in his seminal text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgment of Taste* that “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (1591). The Trad Wives establish the classifications in which higher class individuals belong to, feminized and performative labor. Feminized labor gets broken down further whereas traditional domestic labor is part of the working class and Trad Wive’s labor is performative and belongs to the leisure class.

The true labor of these women comes from filming, editing, and uploading their TikToks. The platform serves as an opportunity for women to earn money from within the home. The value of Trad Wives comes not from her ability to care for a home but rather from the ability to be recognized as their husband’s socioeconomic prowess. As their accounts gain more followers and their videos get more views, they assert their value to their husbands. As Bourdieu states, “the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’” (1587). Trad Wives use consumerism and performative labor to establish class markers that are distinctly separate from the working class. Their distinction of taste separates them from the working class, yet they portray a domestic homesteading lifestyle. With the creation of the Trad Wife aesthetic, the domestic bond between the sailor and the nurse is reaffirmed. The anti-feminist backlash to the #MeToo movement and the rise of White Christian
nationalism created the Trad Wife. The far-right rhetoric is deeply connected to the image of a Trad Wife. As Kelly states, “There has since been such a surfeit of women beginning careers off such networks, many infusing their particular brand of far-right ideology with ‘trad’ rhetoric, that it now seems irresponsible not to think about them, their roles and what they reveal.” The Trad Wife explores domestic labor that reaches back to the White feminized labor of the post-WWII era.

**Conclusion**

The archive discussed in this paper shows how the depictions of women perpetuate purity within whiteness and represent an objectified role to men and their country. The digital age has resurfaced historic photographs in hopes of reclaiming them as romantic. The incel subculture speaks to the growing far-right movement in the United States that is inching toward a Christian White heteropatriarchal identity. The post-Trump presidency has brought a heightened sense of religious conservatism to American politics. With this came a conservative view of women and the roles they were expected to fill. The overturning of Roe vs. Wade and increasing bans on reproductive freedoms question the role that women play in national identity. The images discussed in this paper represent what these groups expect from women. Women of color are excluded from participating in the national identity while White women are expected to submit their wombs as a resource to the nation. The dichotomy of sterilizing migrant women at the border and banning abortion is representative of the body politic in the United States. As conservatism in the US grows, there is an urgency to save America from the threat of evil at the border. In doing so White women become symbolic borders of the United States. From there, far-right conservative rhetoric places White women as the victims of all crimes involving purity or sex crimes.
With the rise of internet subculture and the figure of the alpha male, misogyny is an ever-present growing threat. Helm et al explain that “the nonviolent nature of most incels did not prevent the justification of deviant and criminal behaviors, as well as rampant misogyny and other forms of discrimination in the subreddit” (40). Incel discourse is a gateway to more extreme thoughts and behaviors, leading to violent rhetoric and acts of terrorism. These subcultures and internet groups create a space where misogyny runs rampant and images within American iconography become the ideal. These men view the V-J Day Kiss as an ideal relationship that is representative of a simpler time. The identity that these images hold presents itself much differently in contemporary media. Social media apps like TikTok romanticize the image of the Trad Wife. The Trad Wife aims to bridge the gap between the far right and women, creating a stronger White Christian identity. These videos ask women to create a nurturing space for men while keeping the traditional role of homemaker. Living under neoliberalism, women are looking for an escape from the capitalistic pressures and assume the role of wife and mother. Young women and girls leave hundreds of comments under each Trad Wive TikTok, hoping that they too can be a Trad Wife. The image of the ideal wife is softened with calming cooking videos and grocery shopping vlogs. Women are expected to perform domestic labor under capitalism while not receiving the same benefits as their male counterparts. Trad Wives use performative domestic labor to show their status within the leisure class and access to capital.

In a post-Roe world, women are at risk of losing their bodily autonomy. The V-J Day Kiss photograph is representative of men taking away women’s bodily autonomy. The nurse is assaulted and is forced to fulfill her prescribed role as a mother to the next generation. Today, women in America still lack agency when it comes to motherhood, the government is reaffirming their roles as domestic laborers. The image of the Trad Wife aestheticizes feminine gender roles
and presents it as an obtainable and ideal lifestyle to young girls. The archive discussed in this paper is representative of eroticized White femininity, purity, and submissiveness in the modern day. In a post #MeToo movement world, women are still exposed to misogyny due to growing White Christian nationalist ideology and incel culture. These images enforce the idea women are expected to fulfill their prescribed roles as mothers while lacking the agency to choose what happens to their bodies.
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‘She’s So Heavy’: The Weight of American Exceptionalism and 1960s Nostalgia in Julie Taymor’s Across the Universe

Julie Taymor’s Across the Universe (2007) builds off the nostalgia for The Beatles and the psychedelic memory of the Sixties, drawing familiar parallels between the anti-war movements of the 1960s and opposition to the U.S.’s occupation of Iraq. The film uses The Beatles’ discography to tell the tale of star-crossed lovers, who represent the geopolitical state of the long 1960s, living in the political and cultural unrest of the 1960s. The 1960s were a turbulent decade that spawned political movements and activism that would both shape the American political landscape and serve as a foundation for future activist movements. However, there is a deep connection between the long 1960s and early 2000s as both were periods of political polarization. These decades draw deep parallels to one another through anti-war movements, a surge of youth activism, questionable leaders, and influential media. They relate to political mistrust of the LBJ and Nixon eras and the idea that America was an expectational nation. The U.S. invaded Vietnam to stop the spread of communism that threatened American capitalism and freedom. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks enacted the United States War on Terror as the Bush administration hoped to eradicate terrorism. Both conflicts were also a response to enacting American exceptionalism, imperialism, economic gain, and foreign policies. The beginning seeds of neoliberalism grew during the 1960s and emerged during the 1970s after the nation was trying to rebuild after the Vietnam War.

Films like Robert Zemeckis’ Forrest Gump (1994) and Tate Taylor’s The Help (2011) center whiteness and political issues as individual experiences rather than structural phenomena. American studies scholar Robyn Wiegman argues in her influential text “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity” that Forrest Gump’s “overall trajectory is of the most reactionary
political kind, it fulfills the cultural desire to forget what we don't know how to remember by remembering in haphazard and incoherent ways the images of racial trauma and social dissent that we can't yet forget the physical violence that attended desegregation, the street protests of the '60s, the bloodbath of the Vietnam War, the murder of national political leaders” (124).

*Forrest Gump* typifies how Hollywood reimaginings of the 1960s and 1970s represent a neoliberal understanding of the 1960s that aims to downplay the political action and injustice of the decade through individualistic storylines that center the protagonist. These films focus on individual characters that present a narrow worldview that suggests that the issues of the long 1960s can be solved through individual acts rather than collective change.

In this paper, I argue that Julie Taymor presents *Across the Universe* as a critique of the United States military in post-9/11 America, yet her message becomes lost in the film’s inability to separate itself from neoliberalism. The film centers on a love story meant to encapsulate the 1960s as an individualistic issue that can be solved through love. The relationship mirrors that of Jenny and Forrest in *Forrest Gump*, the male counterpart represents apolitical innocence who must save the girl he loves from dangerous radicalism. However, she effectively makes connections between the Vietnam War and the War on Terror through their controversial justifications, protest movements, and impacts and legacies on American culture and society. The film leads audiences to question the government’s decision to invade and occupy Iraq and Afghanistan. Building off David Harvey’s theorizations of neoliberalism and using several scenes and musical numbers, I demonstrate how Taymor effectively critiques American militarism through her elaborate mise-en-scène, costumes, and reimagining of The Beatles’ music. Taymor uses the 1960s to effectively engage in the anti-war movement to critique the controversial rationale and significant military interventions by the US in foreign countries.
The film tells a brief story of the 1960s through a group of friends living in vibrant New York City. Some of the characters are surrogates for famous icons of the 1960s, Jude (Jim Sturgess) closely resembles Paul McCartney, Sadie (Dana Fuchs) as Janis Joplin, and Jo-Jo (Martin Luther Mccoy) as Jimi Hendrix. Taymor uses iconic figures of the 1960s to draw connections to the impact media and music have made in contemporary culture. Lucy (Evan Rachel Wood) and Max (Joe Anderson) are siblings meant to represent the revolutionary American youth of the Sixties. Prudence, an Asian American lesbian (T.V. Carpio) acts as a way to briefly nod to the existence of queer people in the 1960s. Audiences follow as Lucy leaves her suburban home for a gritty New York City to join her brother and the others, forming a romantic relationship with Jude. The film effectively draws on the idea that ordinary people can create waves of change; Lucy symbolizes the change that can be made by individuals organizing politically. The group navigates living through some of the most influential moments in American history while developing deep connections with one another. Max receives a draft notice for the Vietnam War and this acts as a catalyst for Lucy to become more engaged in the anti-war movement. Jude is apolitical and drifts apart as Lucy becomes more devoted to radicalism, leading to their breakup. Their relationship strongly echoes that of Forrest and Jenny in Forrest Gump, as Forrest and Jenny drift apart because of her activist involvement. Sadie and Jo-Jo navigate relationship issues while trying to break out in the music industry. Prudence struggles to find her identity as a lesbian woman at a time when gay liberation was not yet achieved and still wasn’t achieved at the time of the film’s release. In the end, all the characters come together with Jude to sing “All You Need is Love” in hopes of winning Lucy back and healing the turbulent feelings of the nation. The film blends The Beatles' music and whimsical
style to build the relationships between characters while centering itself in the historic moments of the 1960s.

Taymor achieves a highly calibrated dream-like state in the film, from the colorful iconic Sixties fashion to the handmade puppets to the acid trips. The film garnered a mixed reception with some audiences loving Taymor’s style and others getting lost in her grotesque puppetry and exaggerated choreography. Variety film reviewer Justin Chang called it an “audacious, idiosyncratic creation” that appealed to “baby boomers and young female audits.” While Entertainment Weekly reviewer Owen Gleiberman called it a “goofy, pompous, annoyingly boomer-myopic Fab Four musical.” While the film does build off nostalgia and uses bold artistic direction, it can’t be diminished based on its aesthetic and instead should be analyzed through an anti-imperialist and anti-war lens. Taymor uses her stylistic direction to effectively engage in the anti-war discourse in the early 2000s. The film drew on the nostalgia of the 1960s and the psychedelic rock of The Beatles; coupled with Taymor’s unique stage style, it seemed to be lost on the American public. To understand Taymor’s direction for the film, audiences must understand her distinctive style. Theater scholar Eileen Blumenthal states that “she draws on an enormous pool of forms, genres, traditions. She grasps the center of each form, how it works in its home context and how it might resonate somewhere else” (7). She integrates film and the stage to create meaning beyond simple character storylines and sets. Her use of exaggerated puppets and masks blends the real with fantasy to create a new meaning. What Taymor effectively does in Across the Universe is hold a mirror that reflects the same struggles we faced in the 1960s—entering a war with a country under deceptive pretenses in the name of American exceptionalism.
To understand Taymor’s critique of the War on Terror, it is important to understand the impact of American exceptionalism. Mimi Thi Nguyen's book *The Gift of Freedom* explores the concept of American exceptionalism within the context of U.S. imperialism. She states that the “liberal empire claims an interest in improving, and prolonging, the life of a subject of freedom as a rationale and a target for governance, even while the lethal circumstances that make this claim possible” (14). During the Vietnam War, much of the antiwar discourse centered on the idea that America could bring freedom to countries that were suffering under communist rule. Like the War on Terror, the U.S. attempted to end terrorism and usher in American freedom to those living in the Middle East, no matter the causalities. David Ray Griffin analyzes American exceptionalism in the political and public sphere in his influential text *The American Trajectory: Devine or Demonic* and argues that while the idea of American exceptionalism wavered as the Vietnam War ended, “the 21st century began with American exceptionalism alive and well” (16).

Films like *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *12 Strong* (2014) aim to justify the US government’s decision to engage in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Patriotic films such as these worked to support American exceptionalism and reject anyone who opposed the War on Terror. *Across the Universe* uses the Vietnam War to show the destruction that American exceptionalism can bring.

**Post-9/11 Helter Skelter**

*Across the Universe* draws parallels between the anxieties surrounding radicalism and the foreign enemy of the 1960s and the early 2000s. The film takes place in the late 1960s, around the time the Vietnam War was escalating after the events of 1968. The film opens on a blue and grey beach where Jude sings “Girl” and asks the audience to listen to his story. With this song, the film is centered on Jude’s relationship with Lucy, and its anti-war message becomes disrupted. The waves start as water crashing on the shore but quickly change to newspapers and
newsreels as the song blends into Sadie singing “Helter Skelter.” Taymor uses the waves to show a natural balance being disrupted by political unrest; showing flashes of protests, riots, and military occupation. The waves are literally and metaphorically helter-skelter. Much like the waves, the 1960s began calm and then turned chaotic as political movements gained traction and communities organized. “Helter Skelter” and “Girl” blend into “Hold Me Tight” and the camera pans to Lucy’s 1950s-esque suburban high school dance. Lucy is presented as a hyper-feminine girl, dressed in a fluffy gown singing and dancing joyfully. This version of Lucy is who Jude falls in love with, the girl he was longing for at the beginning of the film. Juxtaposed with the more chaotic view of the Sixties, we see how many white Americans chose to exclude themselves from political movements. Lucy and Max’s parents represent the conservative older generation who don’t understand the injustice happening around them.

Through analyzing Lucy and Max, we can see how Taymor represents the Boomer generation in the early 2000s. After the attacks on 9/11, the country was seemingly more patriotic than ever, and thus began the War on Terror. During this time, there was a growing population of youth who opposed entering the war under controversial rationale. Taymor mirrors the Greatest Generation’s apprehension of protesting and speaking out against the Vietnam War to the Boomer Generation’s support of the War on Terror. Lucy and Max’s parents can't and won’t understand the radical paths their children have chosen. The film shows Max away at college creating havoc with his friends, he disagrees with his parents’ idea of success which entails finishing college and climbing the corporate ladder. As Max returns home after dropping out, his parents are very upset with him and ask him what he is going to do. With this, Max responds with “why is it always about what will I do” versus who am I. Through Max, Taymor builds on the 1960s thought of self-discovery and rejection of societal norms. Lucy, rejecting the lives of
her parents, states that having children is one of the purest forms of narcissism. The film supports this statement through Lucy and Max’s parents’ lack of understanding and attempt to force a conservative lifestyle on them. The parents of the Boomer generation expect their children to follow in their footsteps, yet the global events of the 1960s cause rifts in continuing that path. Similarly, in the early 2000s, the Boomer generation is the parents of the youth who disagree with the response to the 9/11 attacks. Taymor mirrors this sentiment to appeal to younger views and hopes to connect with the Boomer generation. Across the Universe represents American identity in the 1960s and the 2000s through the relationship between the parents and the children.

Post-9/11 films portraying war speak to a particular degree of the American identity, most featured a strong message of patriotism and support of the war. Political scientist Cynthia Weber’s influential text Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film analyzes post-9/11 war films and argues that they speak to a greater theme of American morality. Her book builds off four parts “who we think we were/are; who we wish we’d never been; who we really are; and who we might become” to piece together American morality within war (5). In the early 2000s, there was a growing sense of American exceptionalism and anyone who questioned that was classified as un-American. Much of post-9/11 film aimed to grapple with the morality of war and trying to correct the wrongs of the past. Across the Universe subverts the common theme of American exceptionalism and draws ties between the Vietnam War and the Bush Administration’s War on Terror while centering Weber’s concept of morality within war. Max gets drafted into the Vietnam War because he decides to drop out of college and while he rejects the war, he is still forced to participate. Taymor uses the Vietnam War to look back at how American identity was formed through rejection of war. David Harvey outlines in his influential text “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction” that the student movements of the 1960s spoke to
greater freedoms of free speech and liberty and “these ideals have proven again and again to be a mighty historical force for change… appeals to freedom and liberty surround the United States rhetorically at every turn and populate all manner of contemporary political manifestos” (25). Across the Universe centers itself around protests and radical youth organizations in hopes of connecting to the youth today.

**American Propaganda and Uncle Sam**

The notion of American exceptionalism has heavily influenced Hollywood films and saw a sharp increase post-9/11. The Department of Defense (DOD) saw film as a way to increase the government’s decision to engage in war while projecting America as a global hero. Christopher Conye and Abigail Hall argue in their book Manufacturing Militarism: U.S. Government Propaganda in the War on Terror that if films go against the DOD, the films “which may have once had a critical or thoughtful message related to U.S. foreign policy, instead promote an uncritical or wholly positive view of the activities of the U.S. government” (155). Across the Universe centers itself on critiquing the War on Terror by mirroring the Vietnam War protests. This film was set apart from the other films at the time as it used the Vietnam War to metaphorically critique the U.S.’s War on Terror. Through Max’s draft physical, we can see how impactful American military propaganda is.

The film takes a more mechanical feel with the song “I Want You (She’s So Heavy)” as Max enters the draft office. The camera pans down to show a bleak brick building and as Max enters the building, the colorful world of New York City disappears into stiff army-green G.I. Joes. The Uncle Sam poster becomes animated and sings, “I want you, I want you so bad” to Max and the other draftees. Reimagining a scene of seduction as a moment of coercion between Uncle Sam and a conscripted soldier, Taymor subverts the original song’s intent from longing for
a significant other to show the desperate need the U.S. has for militarism. Colleen Dunagan and Roxane Fenton argue in their influential text “Across the Universe and Nostalgia: Re-Presenting the Beatles through Moving Images and Dancing Bodies” that Taymor uses the hybridity of sound and image to build nostalgia to understand the turbulence of American history. They build on Andrew Goodwin’s influential theory about the role of audio and visual media in contemporary culture, they argue that Across the Universe uses dance as a visual language. The draft office choreography is very stiff and calculated, making viewers feel uneasy about Max’s position. Each military member resembles a G.I. Joe, stiff with plastic-like faces and bodies. Taymor uses the choreography during this scene to represent the uneasiness of the draft process, building on this feeling with each move between the dancers. No matter how the draftees try to escape, the G.I. Joe-like figures pull them back and force them to comply. This dance represents the fear the draft and the War in Vietnam caused for many young men.

When Max enters the examination room the shot changes to green military artillery boxes sliding and opening across the screen. As each box opens it reveals the various procedures of the medical examination. This illustrates how the US military views soldiers as commodified products to use in war. Dunagan and Fenton argue that “the choreography illustrates how the physical training of the body both shapes individual identity and defines the individual as a member of the larger socio-cultural body in ways that reflect a given moment within cultural history” (195). Their bodies no longer belong to them, they become products of war, stripping down to their underwear, and literally being packed into a box. They all assume the identity of a soldier and are destined to become the G.I. Joe figure. The forced dancing shapes their identity around war and diminishes individualism, portraying the military as one collective figure. Max and the other draftees perform a stiff choreographed dance where the military men are in control
of their movements. Their forced dance represents the draft process, the men are unable to escape being sent off to war. The draftees are then sent to Vietnam unprepared to carry freedom for the United States. The draft process does not prepare them for what protecting the freedom of the US is like. At the time of the film’s release, the US military welcomed anyone who wanted to defend American exceptionalism.

A key moment in this scene is when Max and the other draftees carry The Statue of Liberty through a desolate foreign land. The film turns toward dark realism as the soldiers enter a barren, fiery land. There are no inhabitants or civilians, implying the military has cleared the land of the perceived enemy. As they carry Lady Liberty through what looks to be Vietnam, the men struggle to carry her singing “She’s so heavy” as they destroy the land around them. As they hold up The Statue of Liberty, audiences are left pondering what it means for freedom to be this heavy. Nguyen argues that “the United States as the uncontested superpower on the world stage today instrumentalizes an idea of human freedom as a universal value, and intensifies an administrative and bureaucratic legality as its rational order to reinforce a politics of war, terror, and occupation” (xi). The United States government uses freedom as justification for entering and invading other countries, that American freedom is a gift. The scene mirrors the War on Terror by implying that American freedom is a gift that must be delivered, no matter the consequences. The Vietnam War and the Iraq War have brought lasting impacts that Nguyen states are “cumulative repercussions of enduring freedom” (xii). The use of Uncle Sam propaganda speaks to the idea that Americans should protect freedom at all costs. As Coyne and Hall argue, “propaganda contributes to the adoption and persistence of policies that are not in the interests of many citizens” (163). Taymor asks audiences to understand what freedom meant during the 1960s through an American imperialist lens. The use of propaganda implies that the
government is making decisions that they believe citizens wouldn’t understand or support. Uncle Sam propaganda presents an idea of self-sacrifice for the greater good yet there is a deeper level of unpreparedness. Weber explains that in order to rectify our immoral past in Vietnam, we must make “peace with our Vietnam-era ghosts by supporting our troops as they fight the war on terror” (152). But as we try to silence these ghosts, Weber reminds us that “the more morally dangerous it is for us” (152). Rather than attempt to silence the immorality of the past, Taymor chooses to highlight the government’s missteps in the past and present. Max experiences what the government is expecting him and the other soldiers to do, invade countries to protect the United States.

**Reinventing The Beatles**

*Across the Universe* uses The Beatles' music to reframe the music surrounding American identity and morality surrounding war. Film scholar Phoebe Macrossan argues in her text “A double-layered nostalgia: ‘The Sixties,’ the Iraq War and The Beatles in Julie Taymor’s Across the Universe (2007)” that for Taymor to successfully reinvent the Sixties she had to separate the band from the music. Macrossan states that “Taymor’s reinvention of ‘The Sixties’ is an attempt to reinvigorate contemporary young people through an endorsement of this archetypal ‘Sixties Youth’ that incorporates youthful awakening” (7). The Beatles music is commonly regarded as the soundtrack of the long 1960s and Taymor’s choice of using the soundtrack connects nostalgia to action. Her portrayal of the 1960s appeals to younger generations who haven’t yet experienced adulthood. It plays on the innocence of youth while centering on social and political change. She tries to emulate the counterculture movement’s struggle with identity and politics through music and choreography. The music of *Across the Universe* bends and changes to fit the plot and
characters of the film. Much of the sound is diegetic as the characters are immersed in the disruptions of the 1960s.

Taymor blends and subverts the meanings of The Beatles' discography which had a strong political impact at the time of their release. “I Want You (She’s so Heavy)” becomes a politically charged song while it is written to show desire. As Max returns home from the draft physical, we see how the "I Want You (She’s So Heavy)” is used in the intended meaning of longing between Sadie and Jo-Jo as they slowly dance in the kitchen. Taymor’s use of the song speaks to “the ways in which the sound-image relationship creates multiple parallel meanings” (Dunagan and Fenton 198). The juxtaposition of Max’s draft experience and Sadie and Jo-Jo's bond comments on the innate humanness of the antiwar movement. Taymor uses both versions of this song to present how different groups of people are impacted by war. When the original meaning of the song is subverted, Taymor is creating parallel meanings in relation to war. Taymor also subverts gender expectations in “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” by having Prudence sing about a girl she has a crush on. As Taymor changes the gender of the singer, she is changing how the song impacts identity and relation to the 1960s; creating new meanings and identities surrounding these songs.

After Max is drafted, Lucy becomes politically motivated to end the war. With her political motivation comes a more gritty and less traditionally feminine look. She joins a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) type organization where Jude gives her pushback and she states “we’re in the middle of a revolution, Jude. And what are you doing?” Their relationship strongly echoes the relationship between Forrest and Jenny in Forrest Gump. Forrest remains apolitical and seeks to save Jenny from what he understands to be an unprincipled lifestyle. Jude plays the role of a White immigrant pursuing the American dream and avoids becoming politically active. He buys into the idea of American exceptionalism while Lucy
adamantly disagrees. Jude serves as a way to uphold the idea of American exceptionalism while Lucy actively protests against the war. Lucy and Jude show the disconnect between Americans and non-Americans on war. To Lucy, the political is personal as she is directly impacted by the Vietnam War while Jude can’t be drafted. Jude bursts into the SDS headquarters singing “But when you talk about destruction don't you know that you can count me out” from the song “Revolution 1.” His clash with the SDS stems from his distaste for the male leader and not the political actions of the group. Much like Wiegman argues that in Forrest Gump “Jenny has functioned as the traumatized female body who is rescued by Gump” (132). Jenny was abused and exploited by the radical men in her life, this echoes the fear Jude has for Lucy. Jude feels that he must protect Lucy from the harmful activists and that their forms of protesting are immoral and wrong. The film presents the SDS as a male-centered organization, where primarily White men and a few Black Panthers control the group. In doing so, it presents the female members as passive objects that only follow what the men say. This framing makes Jude’s actions somewhat justified because he is in a position to save her from oppressive men. With his outburst, Lucy breaks up with him and decides to stay with the group. As Lucy continues with her work in the group until the SDS organization follows the path of the Weather Underground. This is the point where she decides to leave the group, the film presents these protesters as bad and violent. Before the organization changed to become militant, it was male-centered but nonviolent. Taymor makes the distinction between good, nonviolent protestors and bad, violent protestors through Lucy’s decision to leave the organization and Jude’s general rejection. The film’s categorizations of protesters portray non-violent protesters as the only good way to combat oppressive forces and that violent protests are never acceptable.
Taymor is selective in her choices to show the racial movements of the 1960s, though they support her critique of American militarism. The catalyst for Jo-Jo to come to New York is the 1967 Detroit Riots. The scene shows heavy military occupancy with tanks rolling down metropolitan streets and Black Americans running to safety. At the beginning of the film, “Let It Be” is sung by a young Black child hiding from the confusion and destruction. Shortly after this shot, the audience is met with the grim fate of the boy losing his life during the riots. This scene represents the implication of heavy military presence in non-White neighborhoods and is set apart from other film portrayals of the Civil Rights Movement. Taymor uses this scene to show the negative impacts military occupation has on American soil and audiences experience this scene through Jo-Jo. The White characters are separate from Jo-Jo’s experience and do not claim to understand the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. We then see Lucy receive news that her boyfriend, predating her relationship with Jude, was killed while fighting in Vietnam. “Let It Be” acts as an allegory for loss during the 1960s; though loss is viewed much differently for Black Americans. The destruction of Detroit is a much different reality than soldiers fighting in Vietnam. “Let It Be” represents how destructive the United States military can be in both foreign and domestic lands. Taymor chose to portray the Detroit Riots to display how racial issues and military occupation are connected. We see MLK Jr.’s assassination on the TV and the camera pans to Jo-Jo somberly singing “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.” Jude is heartbroken about Lucy and Jo-Jo is distraught by the assassination and his breakup with Sadie. In Jude’s interaction with Jo-Jo, he states he doesn’t have a cause, further separating himself from Lucy’s activism and connecting him with whiteness. To add to his indifference, he is the character that sings “nothing’s gonna change my world” from the song “Across the Universe” which is overlaid with Lucy at the protests at Columbia. Taymor presents Jude as the failed movements in the
1960s, his indifference and unwillingness to change caused the political movements to fizzle out. Jude is also representative of the U.S.’s relationship with England, British troops were stationed in Iraq. The U.S. and England remain strong allies and supported the war on terrorism. Taymor connects and reworks the influential music of The Beatles to issues that were born in the 1960s, overlaying them with deeper political meanings.

Conclusion

Taymor stated, “I debated many times the idea of a happy ending. It had to be earned” (Blumenthal 273). The ending of the film is fairly open and leads the viewer to question how the rest of the 1960s played out for the characters. We see Lucy alone, standing on the rooftop of a building across from Jude singing “All You Need is Love” with the rest of the group. The film is grounded in a neoliberal framework that suggests individuals can solve the issues of the world through love. The film returns to the love story of Jude and Lucy, which overshadows the anti-war message of the film. While the ending of the film offers an individualistic view of ending war, it extends a loose thread to the next generation. Taymor’s film asks the millennial generation to speak out against the wrongdoings of the United States government. The last shot shows Lucy’s face blending into rippling water; we are transported back to the beach. But this time the water is calm and invites the next generation to make the waves. Taymor is asking the youth of today to speak out against the injustice of United States imperialism and American exceptionalism. The characters of the film act as vehicles for projection for the generation coming of age in a post-9/11 world.

Julie Taymor’s Across the Universe has a strong antiwar message but gets entangled in the film’s inability to separate itself from neoliberalism. While the characters connect on an interpersonal level, they fail to connect to the global implications of war. Lucy becomes involved
in the antiwar movement after Max gets drafted. Jude tries to end Lucy’s involvement in the SDS-like organization because of his apolitical nature and need to save her. There are global political implications of war brought on by American exceptionalism and neoliberal ideologies. The film avoids connecting these points when critiquing national identity within war. The message of the film seems to be “All You Need Is Love” but political conflict can’t be solved through individual love. Taymor uses this song in conjunction with its original meaning, love can end all war. The song was released in 1967 and was received as one of the most political Beatles songs yet. However, this song speaks to a simplification of conflict that implies everyone should be putting flowers in guns and hugging one another. While hopeful, the song fails to connect to the deeper issues involving the United States military-industrial complex and capitalist intentions. The film fails to separate the iconography connected to this song and in turn, can’t separate the neoliberal ideology it represents.

In 2007, America had deep-rooted neoliberal policies and heightened American exceptionalism. Nguyen argues that “It may be freedom’s task to banish the specter of misery or captivity, but it accomplishes this only by enforcing equivalences impossible to recompense because all is given, and foreclosing upon a presence invariably compromised through its giving” (32). Across the Universe offers a critique of the weight of American freedom and imperialism throughout the decades of U.S. military occupation. Reimagining The Beatles offered the youth of the 2000s to resonate with the activism of the Boomer generation and counterculture. Reviewers like Gleiberman state “the story is all protests, rainbow crash pads, and solarized acid trips — a Hairy cliché fest” fail to make the larger connection to the United States military-industrial complex. While the film centers on an individualized love story between Lucy and Jude while taking a critical stance on anti-war protesters, it engages in a larger conversation
about American freedom. The end of the 1960s brought the beginning threads of neoliberalism that weaved through deep-rooted American imperialism to form unwavering American exceptionalism in post-9/11 America. The United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, marking the end of the twenty-year conflict. Over twenty years later, Americans are still grappling with the morality of freedom, war, and politics. *Across the Universe* critically analyzes American exceptionalism and imperialism through nostalgia and surrealism to create a reflection of the 1960s to the present day.
Works Cited


Irene Blue
Director of Human Resources and Organizational Development
Department of Human Resources
Toledo Lucas County Public Library
325 N Michigan St, Toledo, OH 43604

Dear Irene Blue,

I am writing to express my interest in the “Events and AV Specialist” position at the Toledo Lucas County Public Library. I am currently working as a Marketing and Digital Media Specialist at WGTE Public Media and I am a recent graduate from Bowling Green State University with a Master of Arts in English Literary and Textual Studies. This position at the TLCPL intrigued me because I have experience in collaborating with community members to organize events, the ability to tailor messages for multiple audiences across various platforms, as well as balancing working full-time while pursuing my master’s degree.

As a nonprofit professional who is passionate about education and community engagement, I am excited about the opportunity to contribute to your team and use my skills to promote the library’s mission. The library is one of the last public institutions that fulfill societal holes by offering services such as connections to food assistance programs and new American services. My experience in researching and planning events would assist in growing these
services by connecting with the communities that would benefit from them. If offered this position, I can bring a perspective that aligns with the TLCPL’s foundational mission and values by promoting a welcoming, innovative, objective, accountable, and collaborative culture. My current position at WGTE Public Media allows me to collaborate with the community through event planning, build deep relationships with community members and membership base through special events collaboration, and assist in TV and radio production.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my application. It would be an honor to work at the Toledo Lucas County Public Library. I am eager to further discuss my qualifications and I look forward to hearing from you soon. Please feel free to reach out to me with any further questions.

Sincerely,

Savannah Packman

spackma@bgus.edu
April 25, 2024

Leslie Roth
People and Culture Officer
Department of Human Resources
Imagination Station
1 Discovery Way, Toledo, OH 43604

Dear Leslie Roth,

I am writing to express my interest in your “Grant Writer” position at Imagination Station. I am currently working as a Marketing and Digital Media Specialist at WGTE Public Media and I recently graduated with my master’s degree in English Literary Textual Studies. This position intrigued me because I have experience in researching and writing grant projects through my experience working at a PBS and NPR station, the ability to tailor messages for multiple audiences across various platforms, as well as balancing my schedule to accommodate working full-time while completing my master’s degree.

As a nonprofit professional, I firmly believe that nonprofit organizations are needed to support education and engagement and remain a valuable resource within our community. If offered this position, I can bring a perspective that aligns with the foundational values of Imagination Station: service and collaboration, responsibility, empathy, passion, and innovation. I will accomplish this by applying the knowledge gained in my current position at WGTE Public Media and my time at BGSU. Working at a PBS and NPR member station, I have experience
researching and writing grants that support the educational mission of the station, writing and editing literature for various audiences across multiple platforms, and encouraging diversity and engagement through community events. Ultimately, the importance of education and engagement within the community motivates me to seek out ways to further my connection to the local area and its people.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing more about the “Grant Writer” position and all that the Imagination Station team has to offer. I am eager to further discuss my qualifications and I look forward to hearing from you soon. Please feel free to reach out to me with any further questions.

Sincerely,

Savannah Packman

spackma@bgsu.edu
April 25, 2024

Human Resources Department
Institute for Research on Innovation and Science
University of Michigan
Institute for Social Research
330 Packard St, 2354 Perry Bldg Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2910

Dear Hiring Manager,

I am writing to express my interest in your “Communications and Membership Coordinator” position at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. This position for the Institute for Social Research interested me as I support your mission of making social science research more accessible to the public. I would be an excellent choice for this role as I pursued my master’s degree at Bowling Green State University alongside working full-time as a Digital Marketing Specialist at WGTE Public Media. My studies at BGSU and work at a PBS and NPR member station allow me to understand complex literature and frame the information in a way that multiple audiences can connect with and understand.

As a recent graduate of the arts, I want to serve an institution that provides invaluable services to communities within the population that may not have access to educational resources. At my current position at WGTE Public Media, I maintain the organization’s website, draft and edit written content for various platforms, connect with the member base through community outreach and organizing events, and create targeted marketing materials to grow WGTE’s educational mission. My time at BGSU has prepared me to understand the vital role that
academia plays in innovation and the importance of higher education. If offered this position, I can bring a perspective that aligns with the foundational mission and values of the IRIS—being a trusted force for high-quality research that supports innovation in service of public interest.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my application. It would be a privilege to be a part of the innovative team at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. I am eager to discuss the “Communications and Membership Coordinator” role with you. Please feel free to reach out to me with any further questions.

Sincerely,

Savannah Packman

spackma@bgsu.edu