

Capitalist Critique: Exploring Citizen Kane and Midnight Cowboy Through Cinematic Geography

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Abstract. This research underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in film analysis. By juxtaposing films like *Citizen Kane* and *Midnight Cowboy*, it illuminates nuanced critiques of capitalism, revealing how different social classes perceive and interact with this economic system. This promotes a reconsideration of the influences of capitalism and symbolism in cinematic geography on a personal level. This essay analyzes these two films alongside several scholarly articles and studies that explore similar themes, offering fresh insights from renowned thinkers. Furthermore, this essay highlights the role of cinematic geography, indicating its potential to serve as a powerful tool for deeper film analysis. These insights offer a valuable lens through which individuals can reflect on their own experiences within capitalist societies.

Keywords: Film studies, capitalism, poverty, cinematic geography.

1. Introduction

Citizen Kane, one of the greatest movies of all time and a representative of the golden age of Hollywood, and *Midnight Cowboy*, the only X-rated film to win Best Picture at the 42nd Academy Award, are both influential in American cinematic history [1, 2]. Though they are almost three decades apart and seem to discuss different topics, the eras they reflected show economic unsettlement. Therefore, the themes of both movies share some similarities, particularly in how their characters respond to the volatile capitalist world. Considering this similarity, this essay explores how these films, combined with cinematic geography, demonstrate the impact of capitalism on individuals and the experiences of those living in a capitalist-dominated society.

New York City has always been a symbol of capitalism because of its strategic location as a great port, the establishment of Wall Street in the early 20th century, the development of iconic skyscrapers, and people's lives in this capitalist modern city. Since both films have their main settings in New York City, they provide a compelling medium for examining the influences of capitalism at the individual level.

A notable philosopher Ayn Rand focuses on the importance of individuality within capitalism in her article *What is Capitalism?* She distinguishes capitalism from collectivism. She argued that collectivism is based on a tribal premise that demands negligence to individuality and asks its tribal members to sacrifice for the "common good", while capitalism is the only system that not only operates on the basis of justice but also has its core rooted in an "objective theory of values" [3]. However, E. G. West provides a contrasting perspective. In his article, which discusses the relationship between the political economy and alienation based on Karl Marx's and Adam Smith's theories, he points out that many people's struggles in the capitalist society can be summarized into three sections: "the feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement" [4]. Those sentiments, argues West, are mainly caused by the ruthless laissez-faire system [4].

This essay utilizes the sources mentioned above and other film analysts' works to examine how these two films, *Citizen Kane* and *Midnight Cowboy*, serve as poignant criticisms of capitalism by depicting its influence on individuals' growth. This essay analyzes the idea of capitalism implanted unconsciously into the minds of Charles Kane and Joe Buck, tracing significant life events in chronological order. While studying both characters' mindsets and emotional states is indispensable, it is equally crucial to uncover the symbolic meaning of the physical spaces they reside in via

examining the cinematography. This is essential, as “A keen observation of landscape revealed the essence of people’s interactions with the environment” [5]. Finally, the focus of this research shifts to Kane and Buck’s futile attempt to leave New York, which shows the most substantial critique of capitalism.

2. Childhood Trauma and the Ideological State Apparatuses

2.1. A Profit-Oriented Family

In both films, the childhood experiences of the two protagonists appear as flashbacks. Those scenes show audiences their problematic family relationships where their families function as what Louis Althusser terms “Ideological State Apparatuses”. These apparatuses introduce and influence them with capitalist ideas [6]. Kane and Buck have a traumatic childhood, where the allusion to money is recurring, resulting in their fragmented psyches. In *Citizen Kane*, the word money is repeatedly mentioned, which is the main reason for Kane’s mother sending him away. Though Kane’s mother appears proactive in her decision, her initiative raises questions. She bases her action on the belief that only an affluent environment can provide an appropriate upbringing to a child – it is more important than the love from one’s family. This reflects that Kane’s mother accepts capitalist ideas that belong to the hegemonic ideology of “the ruling class”, or in other words, the social elites who hold wealth and power [6]. Because of this belief, Kane’s mother serves a repressive role secondary to the primary ideological function. As a cold and unquestionable figure, she sends her son away to the bank – a significant organization in capitalist society. Therefore, from Kane’s perspective, he is separated from his parents and seized by the bank, a physical representation of capitalism and wealth. From here, Kane is thrust into an artificialized world unconsciously. This “rapture of his youthful happiness” eventually transforms him into “a kind of monster who lives on beyond his time to misshape his own children [in Kane’s case, it is his second wife Susan], and contribute to a society that reflects his own unnaturalness” [7].

2.2. Sexual Abuse within the Family

Similarly, in *Midnight Cowboy*, Joe Buck’s grandparents’ home also functions as an Ideological State Apparatus. An old lady Buck meets on the bus says some authoritative words to him, which triggers Buck’s memories of his grandmother and the song “Hush, Little Baby” she sang (10:50-11:39). Taking out of context, it is just a sweet lullaby well-known to many American families. However, combined with Buck’s disturbing flashbacks of his childhood, it reveals a darker reality. These memories contain scenes like lying naked with his grandparents in the bed, implying that his grandma seems to subdue little Buck to do sex-related things as she wishes. She achieves this by buying him “presents”, as the song’s lyrics suggest. As a result, Buck has developed this sex-present transaction at that early age, leading him to trade sex for money as he gets older. Moreover, the flashback is accomplished solely by the song’s soundtrack. The echo effect attached to that soundtrack makes the song unreal and delivers an omnipresent feeling, indicating that Buck can never escape from what he is indoctrinated with as a child. In Joe’s later flashbacks, he reminisces that his grandma wants him to become a great “cowboy”. Similar to the song, his grandma’s wish is murmured numerous times in the background, signifying his mission of being a hustler. That is the origin of Joe’s hilarious but tragic dream of being the best hustler in New York and offers a rationale for his actions. By restating his dream of being the best hustler, he attempts to reconcile his disordered upbringing and find his worth in society by associating the sex business with financial success.

3. Environments and their Symbolic Meanings

These protagonists’ traumatic childhoods drive them toward New York City, seemingly an unconscious decision to find a cure for their past. Yet, does NYC provide them with the remedy? This remains an open question. Their quest for healing takes them on a perpetual journey of vagrancy,

whether out of their personal will or not; they change from place to place, both on a physical and spiritual level.

3.1. Capitalism as a Hallow Herbarium

In Kane's later years, he exiles himself to Florida, where he builds a grandiose castle, Xanadu. As a cinematic representation of the allure and pitfalls of capitalism, the scenes at Xanadu often emphasize the vastness of the estate and its luxurious interior, reflecting the immense wealth Kane has amassed through his newspaper empire. It serves as a metaphor for the excesses of wealth and the social and emotional isolation driven by the unbridled pursuit of material gain. Xanadu is a euphemism for the hole inside Kane. The greater Xanadu becomes, the more unfillable the void becomes. As Clipper notes, everything in Xanadu is either constrained or frozen in some way: animals are "in slings while being carried, used as beasts of burden, placed in pools, or cages, or behind fences"; even plants are "twisted into the frozen forms of artificial designs in the grillwork fence that surrounds Xanadu" [7]. Coupled with innumerable lifeless statues Kane buys from Europe, this whole castle is a herbarium of physical manifestations of his childhood trauma. Xanadu is so vacant and so packed at the same time that it cannot even rest a wandering soul.

Seen as a dead herbarium, Xanadu reveals its cold and lifeless nature. It can also be seen as a gilded fortress that isolates Kane from the outside world and distances him from genuine human connections. The director uses this important space as "characters or as foils for characters' emotion" [5]. The grandeur of Xanadu is contrasted with the solitude that pervades it, and the cavernous halls and echoing chambers emphasize Kane's alienation from society. The scene where Susan sits in one of the splendid rooms in Xanadu and plays jigsaw puzzles well demonstrates this emptiness. Though she attempts to complete the puzzle, the camera reveals that it is a mere picture cut into countless disconnected pieces. This symbolizes the fragmented nature of Kane's identity, which his pursuit of wealth and success inherent in capitalism has torn apart. Like the shattered puzzle, his life comprises disjointed fragments that fail to create a coherent whole. His journey from an idealistic young man to a power-hungry magnate showcases the disintegration of his authentic self. Capitalism's emphasis on individualism and competition encourages Kane to prioritize his personal ambitions over interpersonal bonds, ultimately leading to a fractured sense of self. Nevertheless, this sense of alienation and fragmentation will cause worse effects on Kane's intimate relationship with Susan in the following scenes.

The camera moves from an over-the-shoulder shot of Susan and her Jigsaw puzzle to a medium shot as she hears Kane's footsteps and turns her head towards the door. Then, a cut shows Kane walking into the room. The room's vastness is almost overwhelming when he comes in, and the camera follows him in deep focus, allowing audiences to see the foreground, middle ground, and background clearly. After a short intercut of Susan dropping puzzle pieces on the table, the camera cuts back to Kane and does a pan as Kane slowly walks toward Susan. This cinematography once again lets audiences see the vast room. This visual also makes the echo effect of the characters' dialogue more astounding. In fact, the repeated conversation between Susan and Kane about the time in New York adds another layer of tension and anxiousness. Their futile endeavor to answer a simple question side-steps the enormity of the space and his inability to cultivate an intimate relationship.

3.2. Capitalism as House Demolition

On the contrary, in *Midnight Cowboy*, Buck and Ratso do not and cannot live a splendid life like Kane. The squalid living conditions of Ratso and Buck's home mirror the bleak side of capitalism that often remains hidden beneath the glitz of cities. Set against the backdrop of New York City, a symbol of capitalist ambition, the abode highlights the stark contrast between those who succeed within the system and those who fall through its cracks. The mise-en-scène accentuates the dilapidation: peeling wallpaper, broken furniture, and dim lighting create an atmosphere of decay. The light in those scenes is often hard and gray, providing a chill and oily texture to everything on the screen. The characters' struggle to survive within this environment speaks to the limitations and failures of capitalism. While

Joe Buck initially arrives in the city with dreams of material success as a gigolo, he quickly discovers that the pursuit of wealth and prosperity often leads to disillusionment. The setting of their home serves as a visual reminder of the inherent inequality perpetuated by capitalism, where some thrive while others languish in desolation.

Moreover, Buck and Ratso are also being alienated by society. What can people expect from a combination that contains an out-of-date cowboy and a disabled gay? Though they do not choose these traits for themselves, in the movie they seem to be seen as some kind of sin that forbids Buck and Ratso from standing at the normal level as everybody else. Their situation is like the big “X” that sticks on the window of their home – a sign for houses that will be torn down. The good thing is that they do not have to pay for their rent, but this sign also signifies their marginalized physical and social locality that is going to be demolished. This rundown and squalid home reflects their marginalized and impoverished existence, illustrating the harsh realities of urban life for those on the fringes of society. They do not seem to fit into the general appearance of the landscape of New York City. Kevin Floyd notes, “The film’s stylized, critical representation of the metropolis includes a persistent juxtaposition of words and images registering similarly extreme degrees of commodification and destitution” [8]. This contraction is blatant in the scene following Buck and Ratso’s loss of their home.

After they get evicted by the authorities to leave their only shelter – this condemned and dilapidated building in New York City, there is a low and wide-angle shot where Buck and Ratso are walking on the flyover. This type of cinematography makes both characters appear tiny in the lower left corner of the screen and provides a sense of weightlessness and insecurity. On their right, a huge poster reads: “Steak for everybody every lunch and dinner”, which creates a strong irony juxtaposing Buck and Ratso’s condition – two marginalized men who just become homeless and do not know whether they can get the next meal or not (1: 12: 37-1: 12: 43). However, despite their homelessness and uncertain future, they share a robust bond. The scene when Buck wipes Ratso’s sweat with his shirt on the narrow staircases is captured with a sense of tenderness and vulnerability. The camera focuses on Buck and Ratso in close-up, emphasizing their facial expressions and body language, which convey their emotional connection. The use of soft lighting and a subdued color palette adds to the intimacy of the moment, drawing the audience's attention to the emotional depth of the characters' relationship. It shows that in the midst of their struggles and hardships, Buck and Ratso find comfort and solace in each other's company, transcending the harsh reality of their circumstances.

A study on the psychological effects of money points out that people with wealth and prioritize monetary gain tend to be less socially connected because those people are self-sufficient and expect others to be the same [9]. Nonetheless, this is exactly why money is considered “both the greatest and evil” [9]. Taking a general look at these two films, what is presented to people seems to be an extreme dichotomy: to be rich but lonely or poor but accompanied. Yet, examining Kane and Buck’s story more closely, it becomes clear that the ideological influence of capitalism is the main reason for Kane’s obstinate personality and Buck’s distressed condition. In the capitalist society, rich people like Kane will become corrupted by the privileges they enjoy through their wealth; poor people like Buck and Ratso are always neglected and deprived of opportunities to improve their lives, leading to burglary and death.

4. Capitalism – An Inescapable System

4.1. Fatality of Being Attracted by Capitalism

An interesting similarity between *Citizen Kane* and *Midnight Cowboy* is that both films have their primary setting in New York City, whose portrayal in popular culture, literature, and films has often emphasized its association with wealth, ambition, and capitalist success. Such depictions have further solidified its reputation as a symbol of capitalism. Therefore, by letting those stories happen in New York, the landscape of this city actively participates in the characterization, reconstruction, and manifestation of the cultural and social environment of the real world instead of being a “passive stage” for the story to take place [5]. For example, in *Citizen Kane*, many essential scenes happen

inside a building, whether it is the hectic headquarters of *The Inquire*, the party hall filled with laughter, or the flashy theatre. They are all metaphors for Kane's wealth, power, and ambition. From Kane's perspective, he is able to look down at the whole city from up high. Those countless streets and roads are his sources of news information and a physical representation of human and monetary connections. Unfortunately, the longer and happier Kane enjoys the power of being the huge media magnate, the quicker and deeper he is to be dragged into the web of capitalism. With unstoppable aspirations, Kane steps into politics and starts running for governor. His newspaper, *The Inquire*, becomes a propaganda tool that aims to help him win the political campaign. This move suggests that Kane is nothing like the high-spirited and vigorous young person whose Declaration of Principles declares that *The Inquire* will always provide its readers with truth and "a fighting and tireless champion of their rights as citizens and as human beings" (38: 45-38: 50).

However, it is crucial to consider the economic disparity in New York City. After all, poverty is the other side of the coin named capitalism. The same city also represents Buck and Ratso's impoverished lives, but similar elements used in *Midnight Cowboy* illustrate different meanings. For example, the streets no longer demonstrate networks; they are just dirty land they have to stumble through every day to get a chance for hustler work or an opportunity to steal. Crowds and people no longer symbolize kindness or politeness; they are hostile and often indifferent. Most of the time, crowds in this movie seem like unstable obstacles obstructing them from a smoother and easier life. Here, the film presents the cruelty of capitalism: for people who do not have any capital to begin with, this society will ignore and finally abandon them without anyone's attention.

4.2. Fruitless Attempt to Escape

Those characters have troubled lives in the capitalist society, so they try their best to escape. Interestingly, they all chose Florida as their ideal place to go. Some scholars of film geography believe that in every person's mind, there exists an internal and personal map of the landscape, which is constructed through the owner's emotional and creative perception of that particular place [10]. This statement also holds true in Kane and Buck's situations. They consider Florida a potent symbol that encapsulates the yearning to escape from the inescapable grasp of capitalism and a substitute for their long-gone childhood. Thus, a great irony appears because Kane and Buck come to New York to realize their American Dream, but no matter whether they achieve this goal or not, they decide to leave the city that can represent the American Dream. However, their escape is destined to fail - Kane confines himself in Xanadu until his death, and Buck's best friend, Ratso, dies on the bus to Maine. Neither of them gets to their imagined land free from the suffering caused by capitalism.

The image of Florida in *Citizen Kane* and *Midnight Cowboy* is a poignant symbol of escapism and the pursuit of happiness within the confines of a capitalist society. While both films explore the yearning for a better life beyond the clutches of capitalism, they offer distinct perspectives on the feasibility of such dreams. *Citizen Kane* critiques the emptiness of material success, suggesting that even an idyllic memory like Florida cannot alleviate the isolation bred by capitalism. In contrast, *Midnight Cowboy* portrays Florida as a beacon of hope for the marginalized, only to reveal the stark realities of a capitalist system that perpetuates desperation. These films illuminate the complexities of the human experience within a capitalist framework, challenging the notion that escapism can provide an easy solution to life's hardships. As viewers engage with the image of New York and Florida in these films, they are prompted to contemplate the broader implications of the toxic influences of capitalist society and a hopeless attempt to escape this system. After all, though "realities can never fully appear in the realm of perception, we find symbolic remnants of them in the reproducible technology" [10]. Like a color within a larger kaleidoscope, the connotations from these two films are enough for people to rethink capitalism and the society built based on this system.

5. Summary

Through Kane and Buck's stories, one can see how capitalism negatively affects personal growth, primarily through the "Ideological State Apparatus". This influence not only reshapes the characters' personal geography but also changes how audiences perceive the cinematic geography. By comparing and contrasting these two films, this research tries to reconsider the balance between material pursuit and forming human relationships. On the one hand, the pursuit of economic success may alienate individuals from one another, resulting in the loss of human companionship. On the other hand, while some may form unbreakable bonds with others, they face a pressing dilemma of determining what takes precedence: death or intimate company.

By revisiting the two insightful movies from the restless 1920s and 1960s, this essay once again highlights the perils and drawbacks of capitalism. This seemingly cliché critique of the capitalist system should be taken more seriously in this post-pandemic era in which people have an unrestrained desire to consume while the world, at large, suffers from economic regression.

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