

HAVE A COLA AND SMILE, BITCH! COMMODIFICATION AND REVOLUTION IN BOOTS RILEY'S SORRY TO BOTHER YOU

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Source / Izvornik: **Zbornik radova Međunarodnog simpozija mladih anglista, kroatista i talijanista, 2020, 83 - 91**

Conference paper / Rad u zborniku

Publication status / Verzija rada: **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:172:122754>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-09-19**

Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of Faculty of humanities and social sciences](#)



ISBN 978-953-352-056-8

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET SVEUČILIŠTA U SPLITU

**ZBORNİK RADOVA MEĐUNARODNOGA SIMPOZIJA
MLADIH ANGLISTA, KROATISTA I TALIJANISTA**

**JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM OF STUDENTS
OF ENGLISH, CROATIAN AND ITALIAN STUDIES**



Zb. rad. međ. sim. ml. angl., kroat. i tal.

2020

Str. 127

Split, 2020.

**ZBORNİK RADOVA MEĐUNARODNOGA SIMPOZIJA MLADIH ANGLISTA,
KROATISTA I TALIJANISTA**

Izdavač / Publisher

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University of Split, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Poljička cesta 35, 21000 Split

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Zbornik se objavljuje prema odluci donesenoj na sjednici Fakultetskoga vijeća
Filozofskoga fakulteta u Splitu dana 11. studenog 2020. godine.

Izvorni znanstveni rad
Primljeno 22. veljače 2020.

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HAVE A COLA AND SMILE, BITCH! COMMODIFICATION AND REVOLUTION IN BOOTS RILEY'S *SORRY TO BOTHER YOU*

Summary

The 2018 film Sorry to Bother You marks the directorial debut of American hip-hop artist and activist Boots Riley. The film focuses on and critiques many different aspects of contemporary capitalism, from the destruction of the welfare state, a new management style with a friendly face, the reification of humans under late capitalism, and the dissolution of the difference between wage work and slavery to the numbing effect of the media and their tendency to either fully deface or commodify various forms of protest. In this paper I intend to analyze the latter aspect of the film, the commodification of protest and of potentially revolutionary acts on the examples of the TV spectacle created from the protests at Regal View, including the popularity of the "Have a Cola and smile, bitch!" incident, and the destiny of the supposedly revolutionary art made by the protagonist's girlfriend Detroit. Furthermore, taking a step back and considering the rise in popularity of socialism among young Americans, I intend to analyze the possibility of the film itself being a revolutionary act, and what kind of shift that could create in the current cultural hegemony.

Key words: commodification, recuperation, interpassivity

INTRODUCTION

The 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* marks the directorial debut of American hip-hop artist and activist-become-director Boots Riley, a well-known activist for workers' rights and self-described communist. The main focus of the film is the current state of the neoliberal economic system, as well as a bleak outlook on where its future might lie. For the main setup of the film Riley chooses a telemarketing company, the kind of work that explicitly connects the key components of contemporary capitalism in the film: human interaction, virtual sales, management 'with a friendly face', and technology. All those elements combine to create an environment of alienation from work and from one another, which leads to both the protests, which are the central point of the film, and to the reaction of the police and the public to those protests. In this paper I intend to analyze the commodification of protest and of potentially revolutionary acts on the examples of the TV spectacle created from the protests at *Regal View*, including the viral popularity of the "Have a Cola and smile, bitch!"

incident, and the destiny of the supposedly revolutionary art made by the protagonist's girlfriend, Detroit. In addition to that, I intent to analyze whether the revolutionary acts in Riley's film can be deemed a success or not based on the inclusion of the sci-fi/fantasy element of *Equisapiens* in the final third of the movie.

ANALYSIS

In order to begin this analysis, one first has to define the key concept used throughout this paper: commodification. Referring to Karl Marx, Ziłkowski writes that "a commodity is a product or service or, even more broadly, any social relation - which has exchange value and can be bought or sold on the market. In other words, commodification is the process whereby an object becomes a commodity, with a price of its own, and is put on the market." (2004: 387) Following this line of reasoning, the commodification of protest and of revolution would be the placing of the act of dissent on a market where it loses its revolutionary potential and becomes just one of many commodities, perhaps best exemplified by the popularity of T-shirts with the figure of Che Guevara on them. Such T-shirts have become a sign of protest and of opposition to the prevailing regime, but an utterly weak sign, a total commodification of the actions of a popular revolutionary figure with the aim of draining any active revolutionary potential from his figure and his actions - wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt could be considered as much an act of revolt as staging a protest.

The protagonist of the film, Cassius Green, his name a pun on the phrase 'cash is green', works at a telemarketing company called *Regal View* along with his girlfriend Detroit and his friends and coworkers Salvador and Squeeze. Cassius struggles with his job at first, unable to convince any of his customers to buy the products he is selling, until his older coworker Langston reveals to him the secret of *white voice*¹, described by Boots Riley in an interview with *Democracy Now* as follows: "White people don't even have it. They use it, and it's a performance. There's a performance of whiteness that is all about saying that everything is OK, you've got your bills paid, and that—and, you know, this kind of smooth and easy thing." (*Democracy Now 1*, 2019) The white voice serves as a commodifying instance throughout the film; once Cassius adopts it, he suddenly becomes the top salesman in the office and is soon given the chance to join the upper echelon of telemarketers, the so-called 'Power Callers', a group of elite telemarketers who specialize in selling arms and the labor force of a company called *WorryFree*, where the workers work under lifetime contracts with accommodation and with no pay, a form of work and life arrangement eerily

¹ The racial suggestion of *white voice* is made explicit in the film, and once Cassius adopts it he starts 'blending in' with the mostly white 'Power Callers.' His superior, Mr. _____, is another black man who uses white voice in the film, and the suggestion is that he has been doing so to the extent that he has lost his own name in the process and what remains is Mr. *Bleep*. The racial suggestions of *white voice*, however, are not the topic of this paper and as such will not be discussed in further detail.

resembling that of slavery. However, at the same time as Cassius' career takes an upward turn, his colleagues at *Regal View* form a union and demand higher wages and better working conditions. They stage protests in front of the company headquarters and form a picket line to try and prevent management and the Power Callers from getting inside. With the assistance of an aggressive police squadron, the latter, including Cassius, manage to enter the building. The conflict between the protestors and the police is televised and soon becomes the top news on TV, with the workers' demands and actions trivialized in favor of capturing the physical conflict between the protestors and the police. A similar course of events can also be seen in the TV reports of another protest taking place at the time, the protest against the slavery-like accommodation and working conditions at *WorryFree*. The two protests become TV spectacles and the violence displayed in them is juxtaposed to the most popular entertainment show in the film, *I Got the Shit Kicked Out Of Me*, in which contestants endure various kinds of beatings in exchange for money. In a sense, the news reports of the protests compete for viewership with each other and with the entertainment show, with the show being the clear winner with 150 Million viewers per episode.

Forms of violence are displaced onto the screen and the act of protest becomes a spectacle, a model in which images and representations are accumulated and mediate the relationship between people and which, according to Guy Debord, has become dominant in the contemporary world (2005: 7-8, 11). Following the theory of the spectacle, what happens with the protest once it becomes a TV spectacle – a series of images of violence which at the same time satisfy the displaced desire for violence and create an image of the protest movement as both violent and unable to seriously harm the assaulting police force – is that it undergoes recuperation, a process defined by Chasse et al as “the activity of society as it attempts to obtain possession of that which negates it.” (*Situationist International Online*, 1969) By recuperating² the act of the protestors, it becomes part of the existing system instead of being an attempt of its negation. The protestors, the group of telemarketers who want to form a union and demand better working conditions, become active members of the existing system and their actions are recuperated to serve as entertainment to the passive majorities watching the conflict on TV. It is a course of action which, expanding on the situationist tradition, Baudrillard defines as a society of control which replaces the pre-existing society of surveillance and discipline expressed by Foucault. Baudrillard defines it as a “switch from the panoptic mechanism of surveillance (*Discipline and Punish*) to a system of deterrence, in which the distinction between the passive and the active is abolished. There is no longer any imperative of submission to the model, or to the gaze. 'YOU are the model!' 'YOU are the majority (1994: 29)!” Such an analysis follows Baudrillard's analysis of the very fundamentals of the systemizing process which he describes in his first book, *The System of Objects*, as follows: “the system splits into two in order to strike a balance between terms that are formally

² Or coopting, in the more common terminology of the contemporary left.

antithetical yet fundamentally complementary.” (2005: 86) Summarizing that position, Mark Fisher defines it as “a vision of control and communication [. . .] in which subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate.” (2009: 12)³ That vision of control is quite visible throughout the film, most notably in a scene where Cassius is hit by a can of Cola thrown by a young protestor who yells “Have a Cola and smile, bitch!”. The video of that event quickly becomes viral, and soon the act of protest becomes completely commodified by the film’s version of *Coca-Cola* itself in a TV commercial in which the same young protestor again yells the same words, but this time she walks over to a man resembling Cassius and shares the Cola can with him. Thus, the element of protest is removed from what was originally a revolutionary act, and the young protestor is herself an active participant in the system of her own control. That scene is quite clearly an ironic take on a similar commercial, the 2017 *Pepsi* ad starring Kendall Jenner, in which she walks through a group of happy protestors whose demands appear to be nothing but the abstract ideas of peace and happiness, and gives a can of Pepsi to a police officer. That ad was heavily criticized upon release, and Boots Riley seems to imply that it was the motivation behind the inclusion of the Cola scene in the film. He says in an interview: “there’s a thing that happens with a cola ad, that is somewhat — well, anyway, I don’t want to talk about it, but it kind of paid tribute [inaudible]...” (*Democracy Now 2*, 2019)

After being assaulted by the can, Cassius wears a bandage around his head. With the popularity of the video, he gets recognized on the streets as the guy who got hit by a Cola can. After a while, he notices children walking around wearing wigs resembling his afro with Cola cans glued to them. A whole trend of wearing merchandize themed with the viral act of protest develops, much like the above-mentioned popularity of Che Guevara-themed T-shirts. The commodification of the act of protest and the subsequent popularity of promoting it can be read in terms of Robert Pfaller’s concept of interpassivity, described by Fisher as an act in which, in this example, the wearing of protest-themed wigs “performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity.” (2009: 12) The film, however, subverts that notion as well – at the end of the film, in the final clash between the striking workers and the police, the former all wear those same wigs. And while in the film the protestors manage to win and seem to have their demands accepted, Cassius fails to get out of the grasp of the aggressive capitalism he was part of. After the apparent success of the strike and after he has managed to ‘purify’ himself of the white voice and his habit of viewing everything in terms of commodities, he becomes an *Equisapiens*, a hybrid of human and horse developed by *WorryFree* to serve as a new and improved labor force. The final twist in the film reveals the grand ploy of the very capitalist society Cassius assumed he had defeated – the moment when he thought he finally managed to escape

³ While this formulation signals a departure from the situationist tradition, that tradition is still necessary to fully grasp the concept of an interactive form of control through visibility and participation.

it all was the moment when he got completely incorporated into it. Returning to the notion of recuperation, it can be said that Cassius' transformation into a horse-man is the moment in which he fully becomes a part of the system which he almost successfully manages to negate. In that sense, it remains questionable whether the protest in the film was successful or not.

The final transformation from man into an *Equisapien* is, however, not a sign of complete failure of the revolutionary act. The *Equisapiens* are a product of genetic engineering conducted by *WorryFree*, hence they can be considered commodities produced by the company and there to have their labor power consumed by the company's clients. By turning against *RegalView*, and by extension against *WorryFree*, the *Equisapiens* provide an alternative reading of the revolutionary act in the film. Although they are produced by the hypercapitalist system and the act of turning people into horse hybrids is widely embraced by the government and some members of the public in the film, they do not leave their mark on society in the way that was intended. Instead, they help the protestors fight the police and in the final scene of the film they show up at the door of the mastermind behind the *Equisapiens* project, *WorryFree* owner Steve Lift, clearly intending to kill him. Hence the commodity establishes itself within the system, opposes it, and in the end helps change something in the system. The horse-people are therefore an example of the opposite of recuperation, *détournement*, where the commodity is turned against the hegemonic system and manages to break its hegemony and change it from within. Therefore, the *Equisapiens* plotline in the film can be seen as Riley's attempt of providing a somewhat positive ending to the film. What betrays that ending, however, is the fact that it was solely through the intervention of the *Equisapiens* that the protestors managed to win the battle with the police. This element of fantasy, or science fiction, depending on one's belief in technology, is the condition for the success of the protest which regular workers alone are unable to achieve. One reading of that would be Riley's attempt at saying that workers need to undergo a transformation of themselves, of their own subjectivity, to successfully fight for their rights. Another reading would be that the workers have been so dehumanized by the working conditions on the contemporary market that they turn into pure horsepower keeping the system of consumption running. A third, more cynical reading would be in line with Jameson's famous quote that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." (2003: 76) In this sense, it is easier to imagine human DNA being mixed with that of horses to create a new interbred species than it is to imagine a group of workers winning a strike in America.

The act of strike is not the only form of protest in the film. In fact, the character who could be described as the most revolutionary of them all is Cassius' girlfriend Detroit. Throughout the film she takes part in protests against *WorryFree*, on the picket line at *Regal View*, and she creates artwork with revolutionary implications, most notably sculptures in the form of Africa as a means to protest against the exploitation of

Africa's natural resources. During an exhibition of her art she encourages the visitors to throw balloons full of goat blood and pieces of old cellphones at her as a symbol of the exploitation of Africa, from where many resources crucial for the creation of modern communication gadgets are taken. However, when Cassius enters the exhibition area and spots Detroit, she is talking to a group of upper-class potential buyers and is using her own white voice, the only time in the whole film that she does so. At that moment it becomes clear that regardless of its revolutionary implications and intentions, her art is still for sale – it still functions as a commodity. Jameson points out that “economics has come to overlap with culture: that everything, including commodity production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural; and culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented.” (1998: 73) It is important to note here that her art, even though it is commodified, still does not belong to what would be considered pop culture. At display in this moment in the film is what Fisher refers to as *precorporation*, on which he writes:

Witness, for instance, the establishment of settled 'alternative' or 'independent' cultural zones, which endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time. 'Alternative' and 'independent' don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream (2009: 9).

While Detroit seems to be convinced of the subversive nature of her art, she is still embarrassed when Cassius witnesses her using her white voice to try and sell her artwork. Her work, however, suffers the same fate that the works of many artists and authors opposed to the commodification of art suffer – in order to get their message across, they need to find an audience, and in order to find an audience they become commodities in the market. It is a tautology from which the film, and indeed the majority of today's whole culture industry, does not seem to be able to break free.

At this point, the question of the revolutionary potential of the film and the commodification of it shifts from the film's content to the film itself. Marshall McLuhan famously claimed that “the medium is the message”, which he explains is “because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.” (1971: 16) If we were to consider the film itself as a medium, more specifically in relation to the genre of the film, described by Boots Riley as an “absurdist dark comedy, with magical realism and science fiction, inspired by the world of telemarketing” (*Democracy Now 1*, 2019), the question arises of how such an unconventional, anti-capitalist film can succeed as much as *Sorry to Bother You* did and what effect can the success of such a film have on its viewers and the culture industry. What makes this film especially interesting is the fact that it was published in a time when the popularity of socialism, or at least what is considered to be socialism to the wider US public, is on the rise. With figures like Bernie Sanders becoming dominant in the US political landscape and teenage magazines like *Teen*

Vogue publishing articles on Karl Marx, it would be easy to make the claim that there is a growing sense that change is necessary within the American public, especially among the youth.

Here, however, one can return to the already defined notion of interpassivity: Fisher refers to Žižek⁴ and mentions that “anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism. [...] Far from undermining capitalist realism, this gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it.” (2009: 12) It is a similar vision of an interactive society of control as defined by Baudrillard – watching the film has the feel of a revolutionary act in itself, but fails to produce any revolutionary potential outside of the film. Boots Riley describes the role he envisions for the film as “getting a lot of people talking about it.” (*Jacobin Mag*, 2019) Riley’s claim that rebellion has been edited out of the world of film (see interview for *Jacobin Mag*), however, does not ring completely true: one only has to think of the success of Jordan Peele’s 2017 movie *Get Out*, or in fact the viral popularity and critical acclaim of the 2019 Korean film *Parasite*. In addition, in his interview for *Democracy Now* Riley stresses the need to organize people into movements and to perform strikes through work stoppage, both of which are to be seen in his film. He claims that “we’ve gone away from class struggle in favor of spectacle, and hidden in the arts and academia.” (*Democracy Now 2*, 2019) Similarly to how the *Equisapiens* in the film still manage to record some sort of victory, so too does the film manage to break from the constraints of interpassivity, even if only on a very small scale. As reported by *Medium*, the film and its focus on organizing labor unions inspired the Salt Lake Film Society’s front-of-house staff to organize their own union and demand better working conditions, a move supported by Boots Riley himself in a video message to the union organizers. (*Medium*, 2019) Although it is but a small example, it still shows how art, especially film and TV, can be subversive and inspire people to oppose working and living conditions which they consider unacceptable. And while that small victory was inspired by the film, on the greater scale of things, it appears that the film has succeeded only in satisfying the phantasies of those believing that there has to be some change without actively doing much to achieve it, and has been more or less successfully recuperated into the dominant neoliberal hegemony as a means of criticizing hypercapitalism without being able to challenge it. It falls into the same trap Detroit’s art in the film falls into.

Riley’s own life and work have been the subject of attempts of recuperation following the film’s success. The most obvious example of that can be seen in the discourse used in an interview he gave to *CBS*, in which the line of questioning referred less to the film⁵ and more to Riley’s life as a typically neoliberal rags-to-riches story of a self-made man. Following Srnicek and Williams’ claim that “neoliberalism creates subjects” who are defined by “perpetual education, the omnipresent requirement to

⁴ Funnily enough, during a recent visit to Zagreb as a guest of “Filozofski teatar” Robert Pfaller complained that Žižek had ‘stolen’ the idea of interpassivity from him without giving him any credit for it.

⁵ The moment Riley starts talking about his self-described communist ideas the interview stops.

be employable, and the constant need for self-reinvention” (2015: 47), it is clear that the discourse of the self-made man is in fact a neoliberal discursive strategy. In the *CBS* interview, the questions focus on Riley’s own experience as a telemarketer, suggesting his way from telemarketer to renowned screenwriter and director as a story of the individual success of a competitive man, a proper neoliberal subject. The focus on Riley’s own persona and the way the interview is basically cut off the moment he starts talking about work stoppages gives away the picture of Riley the viewer is supposed to get from seeing this interview: the ideal of what Dardot and Laval call the *entrepreneurial man* who is “capable of seizing opportunities for profit and ready to engage in the constant process of competition.” (2017: 103) In doing so, the film’s revolutionary message is reduced to empty signifiers like bold, fascinating, and unapologetically brilliant, and it is substituted for the success-story of a black man who came from nothing to create what is simply referred to as one of the most interesting films of 2018.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Boots Riley’s 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* deals with, among other topics, the commodification and recuperation of protest and revolutionary potential. While Riley’s goal was for the film to inspire the creation of movements which would organize people to fight against the dominant economic system, the film itself can be seen as being subject to the same form of recuperation evident in it.

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