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Humcore Seminar

6 June 2021

Capitalist Mindset: Root of Speciesism and Sexism in *Okja*

A field of bodies, tightly packed as if fused together, stretch out as far as the eye can see. Sullen, lifeless gazes peer from behind the imprisoning fence. Towering buildings nearby emit a fearful aura that reeks of death and blood. We often drive by these dreadful sights, cognizant of the insinuating circumstances factory farm animals suffer. Images of bodies hooked up by an array of wires undergoing extraction are more or less hidden to the public eye. Notions where slaughterhouses erase an animal's individuality and existence are absent in anthropocentric thought and discourse. So, as we advance past and leave behind the unspoken horrors and pungent stench of the factory farm, we make a choice of indifference to buy into the veil of normalcy projected onto meat production. And this plague of conventionality does not cease within the confines of the factory farm. Social constructs such as gender and race fall victim to society's normalizing corruption drilled into social consciousness. Women are trapped and suffocated by walls created by the gender norms established by patriarchal rule. The advancement of technology has only exacerbated the exploitative nature of a patriarchal capitalist society, in which bodies that are distinct from the hegemonic white male are the first to feel its consequences. Cinema offers an ideally malleable and experimental space to look behind the curtain of capitalist thought and engage in a greater, illuminating political conversation. The groundbreaking film *Okja* manifests this exploratory environment. Rather than avoid controversial topics, the film embraces ambivalence in its portrayal of conflicting binaries of

imagination and realism, conformity and deviance, and hegemony and rebellion. It's difficult to believe Director Bong Joon Ho achieves all of this through the simple narrative of a young girl named Mija whose intimate bond with her larger than life pig, Okja, becomes challenged when the profit-seeking motives of the Mirando Corporation rips them apart. *Okja* presents an explicit message of factory farming that denounces slaughtering and imposing cruel conditions onto sentient animals. For instance, Director Bong Joon Ho dramatizes a bleak environment utilizing dim lighting and a sullen atmosphere to emphasize the endless expanse of pens. These vivid, evocative visualizations carry a message not only difficult to ignore, but works at breaking down the human psyche for moral compassion. At first glance, the film's message seems heavily centered around factory farming and voicing the suffering of animals within this mechanized industry. However, the perspective the film takes encompasses a strong feminist stance that is demonstrated through empowering female characters and their alliance with non humans. It also portrays the intersectionality between different social movements and the involvement of other actors, groups and conflicting sides in response to the conscientiousness of industrial food production. I want to explore the exploitation of animals and women alongside non-white people that is fueled by an interwoven relationship between the capitalist system, technology and the food industry. I will use the narrative and visualizations of the film *Okja* to investigate how humans control, conform to and deviate from social, economical, political and ethical power relations with non-humans.

Director Bong's conceived world with genetically enhanced animals and monopolizing industries is not unlike today's technological society, nor its possible future advancements in GMOs. Replicating a diegetic space so close to our own world while dramatizing key attitudes, such as the CEO's power hungry motives, allows for a mirrored look into our own capitalist

society. What's reflected is a monstrous image that humans may not wish to see. This disturbing revelation of the human may coincide with Crittenden's findings on modern capitalist ideology that promotes an egocentric and individualistic culture that prioritizes financial gain and maximizing profit. As a result, transnational corporations develop tunnel vision in which profit becomes the sole driver of their motives and values (Crittenden 53). Embodying this business mentality is the film's meat-producing villain, the Mirando Corporation, which can be seen as a filmic representation of present-day capitalist enterprises. Capitalist greed becomes personified through the character, Nancy Mirando, who later replaces her twin sister as the corporation's executive. Nancy believes that Okja and other farm animals are property, prized only for their monetary value. Not only are living animals perceived as commodities, but are also physically transformed into meat in their state of death. In other words, throughout their whole existence, their death, and even well after it, animals are and will always be strictly viewed as a commodity (Adams 272). The animal was never an animal to begin with. This ability of avaricious humans to objectify animals demonstrates an abusive, glorified power in which they reshape and manipulate the world to how they see fit. In exploiting animals, labor and natural resources, humans redefine their meaning, value and physicality unanimously. Later on, we will explore how capitalism degrades female bodies of their dignity and integrity. Another example within the film that is also the initial source of conflict, presents itself when the Mirando corporation hosts an international competition for developing nations to raise the biggest, most profitable super pig. This allows the Mirando Corporation to capitalize other countries' research and reap the benefits of their work. Capitalism has an amplifying effect that globally reshapes the world into an inanimate realm. Animals, nature, and even other humans are perceived as tools and stepping stones to add an extra zero to their profit margin. Life becomes only valued for its profit

potential. Ironically, what humans do not realize is that the material objects they cherish are actually the ones controlling them. Their material greed and desire for capital power dictates their every action, not only at the cost of other beings, but also themselves.

Unsurprisingly, the temptation of capital wealth seems to succeed in alluring not solely business executives. From materialistic consumers to developing factory farms, McMullen explains how they are roped into participating in a capitalist framework as a means for survival. In order to stay afloat, small-scale local farmers must keep up with burgeoning food industries that are supported by the capitalist system. Monopolizing livestock businesses force smaller local farmers to jump onto the industrial bandwagon. However, the odds of reaching equal prosperity are deceptively low due to the political influence and subsidization that international corporations have (McMullen 129). We see that even Mija's grandfather submits to the bribes of the Mirando Corporation and allows them to take Okja, the super pig winner, back to their headquarters, conforming to capitalist behavior. In doing so, he jeopardizes Mija's happiness and allows himself to be taken advantage of now that the corporation can profit off Okja to produce more pigs like her. As a low-income rural farmer, he is not really left with other options but to accept that fate. This demonstrates the penetrating extent to which capitalist mindset is integrated into our way of life. The imperceptible negative effects of capitalism that deceive farmers comparably mislead consumers. Individuals are stuck in an endless cycle, working at a labor-wage for the purpose of partaking in a consumerist economy. As McMullen implies, powerful companies are able to direct how consumers spend their money through marketing ploys that brainwash them in a big brother fashion (McMullen 130). The capitalist system is designed to conceal the corrupt, behind the scenes activity of huge industries that threaten environmental sustainability and consumers' trust. Crittenden explains how livestock enterprises

get away with their exploitative practices by purporting that their high productivity and yields benefit the whole of the economy (Crittenden 53). Lucy Mirando, the corporation's CEO, demonstrates that she is no exception, claiming her genetically tampered meat will solve world hunger for the greater good. A destructive theme forms in which dominating parties portray a falsified angelic image that covers their true money-grubbing agency. The food industry masks the truth by fabricating a world that appears light and wholesome. Capitalism cultivates a world that is not real. Through satire, Director Bong Joon Ho exposes capitalism for what it really is, a joke. While these filmic elements may be intended for entertainment, the festive background music and the over the top, eccentric characters seem to ridicule New York City's capitalist atmosphere. Bong Joon Ho makes Okja's metropolitan world glaringly fake to stress the make-believe reality we live in.

The unfathomable scale that factory farming has grown into, which scholars have dared compared to a genocide, raises concerns about the morality of factory farming. Much of the scholarship exploring ethics of factory farming draws on the theories of Foucault who studied the relations of power fostered by oppressive institutions. Taylor utilizes Foucault's theories on biopower—the power that systemic oppressors use over bodies and populations—within the context of factory farming. He develops his argument by specifying Foucault's distinction between relationships of power and domination. Taylor explains that in power relations, the oppressed actually have the capacity to resist, a different case for animals who are in fact utterly and completely dominated by humans (Taylor 548). One explanation behind characterizing Okja in an exaggerated size could be to emphasize how an animal of that might lacks the ability to fight back, yielding to a relationship of domination. Director Bong Joon Ho further portrays this relation of domination when the slaughterhouse is still left standing after Okja is spared.

Concluding the film on this bittersweet note demonstrates that despite Mija and Okja's journey, the efforts of the film's American Liberation Front and the audience's desire for a happy ending, capitalist enterprises decide the fate of non-humans. In this conflict with animals, humans have nothing at stake to lose. The moment humans declared this "war against animals", they had already won (Taylor 540). This does not give moral grounds for humans to mistreat animal lives and succumb to ontological views of animal inferiority, nor continue to carry on in this brutish manner. It instead raises the question of whether these institutions should possess this type of totalitarian power over animals that is unwavering and absolute. To understand how humans self authorize the debasement of animals in the factory farm, we shall explore how technology acts as a helping hand in exercising biopower over animals.

Technology and industrialization has played a key role in driving the expansion of factory farming and the booming capitalist economy. Responsible for exacerbating the mechanization and slaughter of non-humans are technological developments ranging from genetic modification, research and testing, to antibiotics and tools of death and extraction. Consequently, factory farm animals and the environment itself have become reconfigured into an artificially mechanized apparatus. Leder explains how formerly rural farms that once embraced an openly natural environment, are manufactured into a sealed, mechanized institution (Leder 74). Animals who were once unapologetically wild in the past, as Okja once roamed her sacred forests, are transported to an industrialized hell. Through abusing the power of technology, humans are able to reduce animals into what Foucault calls docile bodies that are "subjected, used, transformed and improved" as noted in Theirman's work (Theirman 96). "Docile bodies" are the umbrella term for genetically altered bodies like Okja, along with those that are automated, objectified or commodified. Looking at Descartes' theory of the machine-body, which McMullen draws on, can

help to explain how humans are capable of creating docile bodies. Humans reason that their occupation of a mind and soul gives them the authority to control animals as they please (McMullen 81). By establishing their superiority through separating themselves from animals, humans are able to justify the factory farming system. This outlook in seeing animals as machines without a soul allows humans to distance themselves from non-human beings and treat them as such (Leder 80-81). Other scholars like Crittenden agree that objectifying animals allows them to emotionally disconnect from non-humans and subject them from their moral consciousness without guilt (Crittenden 59). Expanding on Foucault's work, Theirman suggests that those who work in slaughterhouses particularly, often impoverished people of color, are sentenced to a similar mechanized fate as animals (Thierman 103). Taylor summarizes Theirmann's argument in that "the spatial partitioning, hierarchical observation and arrangement, surveillance, and assessment of workers" has alienated laborers to the point that they become docile bodies (Taylor 546). The products they produce are foreign, as correlated to Marxist theory. Laborers working long hours become alienated to human and animal interaction. Not only is their work isolating, but it also strips them of their ability to empathize with other beings and dehumanizes them. In the film, the worker that Mija pleads to in order to spare Okja from being killed seems to have a moment of dissonance. He becomes conflicted by the idea of perceiving an animal as more than an entity that he mechanically shoots each day. Working in a factory farm causes humans to lose their humanness and transform them into docile bodies. In a similar manner, consumers are distanced from animals because they do not witness non-humans in their live state nor through the process of their death. Consumers must turn off their humanity consistently in order to be ignorant to the immense suffering of animals. Ultimately, utilizing these advantageous tools of mechanization to generate power and wealth at the expense of other

animals and people turns humans into the very machines they are creating. In an ironic sense, anthropogenic capitalist forces are responsible for stripping humans of their humanness.

Director Bong Joon Ho's visionary configuration of cinematographic elements and technology works soundly to convey a blending of the human and animal in the form of *Okja* that, however, does not produce a docile body as seen in industrial farms. A confounding variable is how computer generated technology plays an interesting paradoxical role in humanizing *Okja* while at a controversially anthropomorphic level. Many human qualities are translated onto *Okja* including her human-like eyes, her ability to cry and feel pain, and her sense of reason and emotion. This allows the audience to connect with *Okja* especially since animal narratives are not as accessible or imagined in real life as they are in film, which Mayer implicates (Mayer 30). On the other hand, *Okja*'s humanization can diminish her animality and reinforce human supremacy over animals by glorifying what is deemed as humanness. Not only that, but *Okja*'s character is modeled and acted out by a human, invoking doubt in whether *Okja* can stand for and represent the animal. While human technology does modify and create an entirely new deanimalized animal, it ultimately has a positive effect by bringing awareness to the horrors of factory farming. I would like to argue that constructing *Okja* into this frankensteinian, multi-dimensional creature only works in her favor. Computer imagery depicts *Okja* as an ambiguous creature who is also raised in the wild, treated as a pet, and can be consumed as food on top of that. *Okja* can act as a representative for all creatures, establishing this anti-speciesist perspective. As an animal-human hybrid, *Okja* also serves as a cross between human and animal boundaries which is very much in line with Donna Haraway's cyborg that embraces "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities" (Haraway 154). Later, we will explore the political implications of this transspecies fusion on gender.

In a patriarchal capitalist society, women and animals are victimized by the food industry. The commodification of animals, as we talked about earlier, demonstrates unsettling continuities to the sexual objectification of women. Where their exploitation overlaps can be seen in the promotional media of food businesses that Carol Adams brings light to. In these sexualized advertisements, images of bare women and animal bodies, often fused together, erase their former being and reduce them to sexual objects (Donaldson). In consuming the visual depiction of objectified women and animals is, as Adams states, “the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity” (Adams 272). Accepting this commodifying culture causes humans to yield to oppressive systems, normalize their subjugation which only further reinforces it, and in doing so, lose the little power that they once had, their free will. However, when it comes to sustaining a patriarchal capitalist society, women and animals must pay the costs. Examples of these exploitative practices can be found in *Okja* when the Mirando Corporation takes advantage of Mija to advance their agendas. Through coercion and appropriating her Korean heritage, the meat enterprise uses Mija’s innocent, feminine and exotic image to bolster their corporation’s reputation for diversity and inclusiveness. In fabricating their respective image, the corporation not only exploits Mija, but establishes what the model female, minority or even animal should look like—obedient.

On the contrary, Director Bong Joon Ho presents Mija with numerous diverse identities to become the ultimate weapon against the capitalist patriarchal society. As a young female foreigner, Mija does not fit within Americanized society, which Director Bong Joon Ho visually and narratively shows. In her interactions with people of greater power and privilege, Mija is constantly underestimated and looked down upon. Mayer explains how in mainstream media, little girls are often seen and belittled as tiny naive pets. Likewise, feminist were seen as

animal-like and uncivilized (Mayer 29-30). However, even as she is oppressed, she defies the social expectations and stereotypes associated with her appearance and leaves a defining mark on New York City. Mija takes on the role of a strong, young female minority, adding fuel to the chaos and raising hell for the Mirando Corporation in order to free Okja. While the head of the Animal Liberation Front attempts to aid Mija in her plan, which can be seen as stemming from a white savior complex, Mija does not depend on it. Despite having to adapt to an entirely new culture in the big city as well as battling the language barrier, she is able to quickly assess the situation and environment around her dependently on what she sees. The attributes that make her animalized and alien benefit her and allow her to overcome the capitalist forces working against her. By her own merit, intellect and determination, and against great odds, Mija stubbornly fights for her friend. The empowering feminist stance the film takes can also be seen in the girl boss culture demonstrated by Lucy and Nancy Mirando despite their immoral tactics. Directing their own corporation after generations of male ownership, forges the path for female leadership and deviance from restrictive gender roles and norms. Circling back to Mija's multi-dimensional character, I suggest that Director Bong Joon's intention behind creating such a fierce, independent and diverse character was to include the audience. The ability for viewers to see themselves within the narrative demonstrates how Mija may represent a general symbol for the vulnerable and oppressed that all have the potential for agency. This sets the stage for bridging the feminist and animal movement.

Well known animal rights activists like Carol Adams, strongly defend the link between the animal rights and feminism movement, declaring an end to patriarchy and racism that are characteristic of traditional hegemonic behavior. Okja and Mija's relationship represents a partnership between feminism and animal liberation that counters patriarchal capitalism. In

support, Mayer explains how women and animals are united by the biotariat, “shared stakes for the exploited and enclosed life of the planet” (Mayer 32). Both groups may experience their own unique, distinct forms of oppression, but their shared exploitation, victimhood and lack of political agency creates this level of understanding and obligation to the other that leads to an ethics of care toward animals. By highlighting communication through the body rather than verbal language in *Okja*, Director Bong Joon Ho creates an intimate and vulnerable setting which is an essential factor in care ethics that bonds species together. Furthermore, minimizing or exempting the dialogue between Okja and Mija, a trait associated with human superiority, allows for a non-anthropomorphic look at human animal relationships that portrays the body in a new light. In opposition to Descartes’ ideology, Bong Joon Ho portrays the body with the ability to hold its own, transforming the mind and body antithesis into an interdependent relationship. For Okja and Mija, the body is where political action originates from, as Mayer notes (Mayer 37). Their shared inability to be heard or understood triggers a reaction in the body to speak for them. Even though their voices are silenced, their bodies help tell their story. Cinema offers them a space, along with other animals and women as equal counterparts, to use their bodies to tell a narrative that advocates for their political agency, while simultaneously uprooting sources of their oppression—capitalism and the white patriarchy. Mayer explains that “Effective relationships run counter to heteropatriarchal capitalism, and even act as a form of resistance to, or way out of, its narrow confines” (Mayer 31). Just through finding their way to each other, Okja and Mija end up exposing the Mirando Corporation of their torturous animal experiments without it even being their intention. They have no concern for power or material wealth, only deep concern and care for the other’s well being which is more than enough to drive their sense of agency. Interspecies relationships defy the ontological classification and cultural limitations of

both animals and females and break away from the social restrictions that are imposed on them. They create a mark in the political world and erupt a movement for the progress of their rights. Okja and Mija are the paragon of interspecies coexistence, demonstrating a human-animal relationship that has disintegrated the animal-human binary and transcended human and animal boundaries.

To combat capitalist oppression, Crittenden argues for an ecofeminist-inspired reformation of modern capitalism. He explains how ecofeminist capitalism emphasizes an inclusive, morally-driven environment that differs from regular capitalism by accounting for environmental costs in the production of goods and services (Crittenden 60). He makes a strong stance that ecofeminist beliefs can grow into acts of change and action that become reality. Okja and Mija's relationship embodies the foundational beliefs of the ecofeminism movement. They act as messengers of Crittenden's aspirations to transition into ecofeminist capitalism within the filmic space hoping to translate them into reality.

I would like to conclude with Director Bong Joon Ho's final scene depicting Okja and Mija back home together in their secluded paradise as the film initially began with. I suggest that the transition Bong leads us through setting, space and scenery invokes a call to return back to a simple, transparent way of living. This is not to say humans should rid themselves of civilization, but embody a free, boundless spirit inspired from nature and animals that is not restricted by boundaries and dualisms as Haraway's cyborg is not. Bong Joon Ho demonstrates through New York's overwhelming setting of densely clustered buildings and stores lined with material goods that humans surround and imprison themselves with consumerist culture. Humans need to disorient themselves from materialistic greed or pay the consequences of capitalist power which are evident in the destruction of the human essence as well as animal life. Like the openness of

the environment, we should establish transparent relationships between networks of producers and consumers, uncover capitalism's normalizing veil by recognizing the imbalances of power fostered by capitalism, and use the continuity between political movements along with an ethics of care. Through Mija and Okja's relationship we learn that interacting with animals acts as a constant reminder to break from capitalist society that perpetuates normalcy, indifference and oppression. They teach us to not let society dictate us, change us, or transform us into docile bodies. While we may all be pigs under a capitalist society, we can shape each other so that it has a new meaning.

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