Revisiting Class: Capitalism and Exploitation in Samira Makhmalbaf's Two-Legged Horse

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> "[...] people speak sometimes about the 'animal' cruelty of man, but that is terribly unjust and offensive to animals, no animal could ever be so cruel as a man, so artfully, so artistically cruel."
>
> Ivan Karamazov

Abstract

The argument presented in this essay highlights the need to reintegrate class condition analyses into academic discourse. As the object of analysis for the proposed ideological critique, we examine Samira Makhmalbaf's "Two-legged horse" to discuss the role of class conditions in sociocultural and historical analyses. The narrative, featuring two disabled children from different social classes, authentically captures the artistic cruelty of humanity and the relations of exploitation, alienation, and working conditions that underpin the capitalist system.

Keywords: *Capitalism*, *Film Studies*, *Disability*, *Social Class*

First Words

In the field of Cultural Studies, it has become almost obligatory to address the diverse and multifaceted aspects of identity—such as gender, race, disability, sexuality, and others. However, these studies rarely examine the complex

interconnections between these identity elements and the condition of class (Meiksins Wood, 2006). As Terry Eagleton (1998, 2006, 2016a, 2016b) has argued, many of these approaches operate on the assumption that Marxism—whether as an ontological analysis of humanity, a theoretical epistemological framework, or a revolutionary project—has failed. They presume that society has moved beyond history and beyond the social problems rooted in class stratification and labor exploitation, suggesting instead that we live in a world of fragmented identities and linguistic debates detached from individuals' class positions. This assumption understands class struggle as a problem of the past. Within postmodernist paradigms, language, identity discourses, and deconstructive approaches are often elevated above the material realities of class, privileging the differences of identity while overlooking their potential liberal, hedonistic, and narcissistic pitfalls (Eagleton, 1998; Meiksins Wood, 2006). Léger (2021, p. 9) argues that "[i]n the era of wokeism, the discourse of anti-oppression has become one of the ways through which postmodern academics and activists unwittingly collude with the neoliberal status quo", in that sense "[w]okeism is not committed to historical change but rather to the infinite forms of being. Like everything else about capitalism, it evades serious scrutiny." (Léger, 2021, p. 15).

Focusing on class relations, however, does not entail dismissing the significance of identity elements or the relevance of linguistic and discourse analyses in a world undeniably mediated by symbols, meanings, and practices (Williams, 1977; 1980). On the contrary, it is precisely the recognition of the importance of these elements that underscores the necessity of a materialist analysis. David Harvey (2023, p.162), for instance, points out that

> Over the last several decades, identity politics have had some very positive aspects. There is a problem, however, to the degree that identity politics are seen in isolation from the totality of the social process. The recent interest in intersectionality does not necessarily have an anti-capitalist content. For example, the gay rights movement in the U.S. has not been particularly anti- capitalist. On the contrary, it has often been pro-capitalist.

In contrast to the gay rights movement, Black Lives Matter, for instance, broadens its focus beyond a simplistic debate on identity, addressing systemic issues and structural inequalities. It incorporates historic, economic, social, and cultural elements; hence it is "[…] a form of identity politics that is connected to economic and labour struggles. This makes it different from some of the other identity movements" (Harvey, 2023, p. 163).

One must not be oblivious to the ontological aspects of these social movements: while the identity movements (LGBT+, feminist, anti-racist, disability etc) aim to eliminate the social and cultural oppression of these groups within the capitalist system, the anti-capitalist/class struggle movements seek to move beyond capitalist relations of class, human exploitation, and reification:

> The formal feature that makes class struggle exceptional is that it cannot be reduced to a case of identity politics: while the goal of feminism is not to destroy men but to establish new, more just rules as to how the two sexes should interact, and while the most aggressive religious fundamentalism wants to assert itself by way of destroying other religions, *proletarian class struggle aims at abolishing class difference, eliminating not only the ruling class but also itself* – the aim of proletarian struggle is to create conditions in which proletarians themselves would cease to exist. (Zizêk, 2023, p.47, author's highlights).

The discussion proposed hereafter claims the urgent necessity to bring back to the academy the connections of these so-called *intersectional analyses* with class condition. We take under examination Samira Makhmalbaf's *Two-legged horse* as a means to demonstrate how class will remain a fundamental category of sociocultural and historical analysis for as long as live under a class structured society. The story of two disabled children who belong to distinct social classes depicts Capitalist relations of exploitation, alienation, labour conditions, and the cruelty of man.

Before diving into this text, it is advisable to watch *Two-Legged Horse* to fully engage with the arguments and analyses presented here. While it is still possible to understand the points without having seen the film, much of the impact and nuance might be lost. Watching the film provides the visual and emotional context that enhances the reading experience, allowing the text to resonate more deeply. Without that context, the process of reading might feel less immersive, as the vivid imagery and emotional weight that shape the arguments are best appreciated through the lens of the film itself.

Films as Socio-Cultural Practices

Art, as a representation of the totality of human habits, customs, symbols, practices, and meanings, transcends being merely a mirror of reality. Rather than just reflecting the concrete organisation of society, it emerges as a product of it—rooted in the core of social relationships. Art serves as an artistic expression of the dialectical interplay between the human psyche and the surrounding social structures, mediating between the abstract frameworks of systems and the cultures,

emotions, and feelings they shape. This mediation is materialised in the creation of art itself (Vigotsky 1971).

Mediation, as a never-ending meaning-making process, offers a more dynamic, dialectic understanding of the role of art in society (Williams, 1977; Vygotsky, 1971; Kornbluh, 2019; Wayne; 2020). Never-ending because "[e]ven when a sculpture or a film is 'finished' it can circulate in new contexts, new times and places, and occasion new interpretations which reveal additional facets of the original work." (Kornbluh, 2019, p. 60).

When it comes to film, its power lies in the image, movement, and representation of everyday life. By capturing and reproducing the image, the voyeur is enraptured in the feeling of reality and a process of reflection that may adhere to or question those same practices and symbols and meanings - a mediation between the ideas that "[...] uphold the ruling class, and [the] ideas [that] critique the ruling class" (Kornbluh, 2019, p. 57). As sociocultural productions, films must be analyzed within the context of their political and ideological dimensions.

In that sense, Wayne (2020, p. 186) indicates that a "[f]ilm can play a modest role in helping us with that, by, for example, staging scenarios that explore characters struggling to break with their iterative habits and adjust their consciousness to the real circumstances and experiences they are having". This seems to be true in the film presented here as our analysis seeks to demonstrate.

As social beings, our lives are continuously produced and reproduced through the idiosyncrasies of everyday life (Heller, 2017), shaped by both macro- and micro-structural forces. It means to say that our simplest actions are deeply influenced by

hegemonic, social, and historical elements. Every day, we are flooded with signs, symbols, and practices that convey meanings, shaping our thoughts and actions—meanings that we either reproduce or resist in the course of our daily lives (Marx; Engels, 1996). From a materialist perspective, the social structure is subjected to material relations of production and distribution. For consciousness is conditioned to the real existence of men in the economic structure, their material conditions will impose limits on their real existence (Marx, 1990; Marx; Engels, 1996; Williams, 1985). That is:

> [...] you start from the activities of production and trading, and increasingly those are seen as the essential purposes of the society, in terms of which other activities must submit to be judged. All forms of human organization (sic), from the family and the community to the educational system, must be reshaped in the light of this dominant economic activity. (Williams, 1992, p. 131).

Marx and Engels (1996) establish the dominant characteristic of the economic system when scrutinising the relations between the hegemony, ideology, and political and social practices. In a Marxist perspective, ideology is not just a mere imposition of rules, laws, and morals and notions that can be simply ignored or cancelled, Williams (1980, p. 38) argues that the hegemonic system in fact "[...] constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of society to move [...]". In other words, as many Marxists understand it, the core ideology of capitalism is to be seen, lived, accepted as the only and natural form of social organisation (Heller, 2017; Wayne, 2020; Williams, 1977; 1980; 1989; 2011).

As political beings, the core to revealing the practices of men, in their attempt to guarantee their survival and reproduction as both a species and a society, is in the scrutiny of their material activity, for "[...] the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men [...]." (Marx; Engels, 1996, p. 47). Marx and Engels are indicating that our consciousness embodies the dominant ideologies that forge our society. Ideologies that are unconsciously lived and reproduced and aim to sustain and guarantee the continuity of the dominant system. They are dominant because the ideas, values and practices of a concrete social organisation will be those of the class that exerts material and economic power. In other words, the ruling economic class will be the ruling intellectual and ideological class.

Although powerful, the economic conditions are not to be an end in themselves, but they are the base, the starting point, from them the institutions of decision, learning, and communication will come together as a hegemonic unity of social and material reproduction. The totality of our social existence is the essence of hegemony as life organised, lived, reproduced, and reinforced every day (Williams, 1980). Culture is the central concept that brings all our practices together (Williams, 2011).

If the ruling ideas socially reproduced reflect those of the ruling material class, then art serves as a socially and historically constructed element. It simultaneously reproduces and reshapes the prevailing ideologies within a given social formation (Marx, 2003; Marx; Engels, 1996; Williams, 1983). Ideology, whether supportive of or opposed to the dominant system, will always find its ways in, so it also depends on both artists and consumers whether to reproduce and reinforce or question and criticise it. In this context, Wayne (2020, p. 154) observes that "[...]

much of the ideological work of film is achieved by negotiating the gaps, absences and lacks which constitute the social and historical experiences of the audience and promising satisfactions that seem to resolve those lacks within terms that do not challenge capitalism".

In fact, when we are analysing and discussing films, "[...] we may as well take the plunge and say that one criterion of a 'good' film is that it explores to some degree of complexity, cultural conflict and cultural contradiction as a dialogic process. How this is done of course would always be part of such evaluative judgements as well." (Wayne, 2020, p. 187).

Through narrative storytelling conventions, films inherently reflect and perpetuate sociohistorical ideologies, often aligning with hegemonically established norms. Those are not clearly exposed in the narrative and, as we shall see, will vary greatly depending not only on a multitude of narrative elements and on "[...] the discourses employed - the images, myths, conventions, and visual styles." (Turner, 1999, p. 173), but also on their social, political, and ideological purposes.

New Iranian Cinema and *Two-Legged Horse*

The movement often referred to as *New Iranian Cinema* emerged in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, navigating a landscape of repression and censorship while mediating the socio-political transformations experienced by the country and their impact on the Iranian population (Sadr, 2006). As a highly accessible and immediate form of art, Iranian filmmaking thrived in defiance of the perceived superficiality and aesthetic shortcomings of Western—predominantly Hollywood—cinema.

Samira Makhmalbaf, recognised by *The Guardian* (2003)[i] as one of the world's greatest living art directors, was born into this cultural and political context in 1980, in Tehran, Iran. As the daughter of renowned filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, she grew up immersed in a family of filmmakers. Her cinematic journey began at the young age of seven with her role in *The Cyclist* (1987), a critically acclaimed film directed by her father. Samira's artistic vision was hailed as bold and confrontational in 2003, an assessment she reinforced with her daring and provocative work in *Two-Legged Horse*.

Two-legged horse (2008), directed by Samira Makhmalbaf, is a tragic, critical, and disquieting depiction of the entanglements involving disability and class. As a work of art, it delves into human relations. Art as a process of creative communication has "[…] the capacity to find and organise new descriptions of experience." (Williams, 2011, p. 45). Art is "[…] the substantial communication of experience from one organism to another. […] When art communicates, a human experience is actively offered and actively received. Below this activity threshold there can be no art." (Williams, 2011, p. 44). This is a film produced in a complex sociopolitical background and which grows in the fertile ground of Iranian cinema, as a prolific thought-provoking cultural artefact (Rahbaran, 2015; Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2009).

At its 2008 premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival[ii], Samira Makhmalbaf's *Two-Legged Horse* elicited strong reactions from the audience. Some attendees stood up and shouted that it was "a stupid, insulting and sadistic film," while others simply walked out. In response to these criticisms, Makhmalbaf clarified that the film is not specifically about Afghanistan or Iran; rather, it is an exploration of the limits of human exploitation and the dynamics of oppression.

Williams (2011) proposes that culture and art comprise three complementary and inseparable elements: (a) the ideal, which investigates universal human feelings and sensations; (b) the documentary, serving as a historical record; and (c) the social, examining the sociohistorical processes and actors involved in the creation and reproduction of cultural expressions. Applying these categories to *Two-Legged Horse* helps illuminate why Samira Makhmalbaf asserts that this is a story that could happen anywhere. The film aims to access the roots of human relationships, pushing capitalist exploitation to the verge of madness and cruelty.

Both Mohsen, who wrote the film, and Samira, who directed it, explore the entirety of human relations, treating art as an exercise of human consciousness and viewing it as a process of interaction with others, oneself, and the material world (Marx & Engels, 1996; Williams, 2011). In terms of the **ideal** aspect, the film scrutinizes emotions such as superiority versus exploitation, cruelty versus necessity, and power versus despair. This exploration extends into the **social** sphere by establishing a connection between the dominant and the exploited. Additionally, the film functions as a **documentary** by illustrating how capitalist societies create social contracts that place property and means of production owners in positions of sovereignty, while relegating those with only their labor power to submission. It also exposes the impacts of this social structure on individuals' lives (Marx, 2012).

The divergence from traditional story-telling triggers feelings of uneasiness and discomfort in the audiences. This is reiterated in the limited reviews online. Some of the reviews available adhere to the idea that the film is disturbing but that it is a rewarding portrait of human nature. It is a profound and dark analysis of the dynamics of power and how it is rooted in our social structure and in our social relations. At the same time, some suggest that it is a vision of the underdeveloped world and that “Perhaps the most human response to ‘Two-Legged Horse ’is just to

look away"[iii]. We would like to argue otherwise, that identifying it as a *vision of the underdeveloped world* is a perspective that reveals itself to be oblivious to history and to the sociometabolic system that sustains capitalism (Mészáros, 2011). Foreshadowing our final argument, Materialist analysis emphasizes that social disadvantages associated with varied identity elements—such as gender, race, or sexuality—are intensified or alleviated depending on one's class position. This perspective has been highlighted by numerous Marxist scholars, including Terry Eagleton (1996; 2003; 2006; 2011); Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (2006), as well as by Deirdre O'Neill and Mike Wayne (2017), to mention a few.

Analysing the Film *The Two-Legged Horse*

It has been our concern not to cross the boundaries of what may be considered a plausible analysis of this film; evidently knowing that others may feel otherwise but attempting to provide our reader with a materialist perspective of it. From our perspective, it is a comprehensive and deep scrutiny of the dialectics of power based on profit, money, private property, the relations between dominants and dominated, commodification, and fetishism that feeds the sociometabolic system of capitalism.

Samira's and Mohsen's objective is to explore human nature and go as far as possible with their experiment. It is not the first time that cultural manifestations delve into human nature, contrast it with relations of power and money and turn a human into an animal of capitalism. Kafka, for instance, has also investigated the matter and provoked his readers when he turned Gregor Samsa into a disgusting insect in *Metamorphosis* and nearly drove him mad because he could not go to

work. While the parallels between Kafka's work and *Two-Legged Horse* are evident, the film ultimately takes a different approach. Kafka's focus lies in the internal, psychological toll of dehumanization, whereas the Makhmalbafs place their emphasis on the external and relational dynamics of power, domination, and exploitation. *Two-Legged Horse* exposes the physical and social mechanisms that reduce individuals to tools of labor and control, situating its critique firmly within the visible, material realities of systemic oppression. This shift in focus allows the film to interrogate not just the effects of dehumanization, but also the structures and relationships that perpetuate it.

The young Master is the ultimate representation of a dominant class, who uses his power to rule, manipulate, exploit, and subjugate. Guiah, in contrast, embodies a desperate working-class in thrall to a bourgeois dominion. Up until the end, he is the opposite of Melville's *Bartleby*. The Master boy may at times struggle with feelings of both sympathy and hatred towards Guiah, but in order to extract from him everything that he wants, to exert his power over him, he has to dehumanise him, transform him into something beastly, something as far as possible from his own image. The dominant has no other interests but his own (Marx, 1988; 2013).

The director's cinematographic techniques and artistic style bring the audience closer to the characters, establishing a bond between the viewers and the boys. The telephoto lenses trigger a cloistering feeling, nearly suffocating us, as if one could not escape it, as if one could not move beyond that relationship – is this not the general feeling promoted by Capitalism itself? We could suggest that here there is a dialectic relation in this feeling between form and content (Eagleton, 2011 [1976]), perhaps, it was this claustrophobic feeling that made so many leave the cinema before the end of the film in Toronto. Guiah's beastly transformation is the

reification of the individual, his alienation (*Entäusserung*). He may feel desperate to free himself from the chains that imprison him, but he sees no exit. Williams (2011, p. 112, author's *italics*), when analysing the positions we occupy in relation to the social structure, states that "The *subject*, at whatever violence to himself, has to accept the way of life of his society, and his own indicated place in it […]. It is not *his* way of life, in any sense that matters, but he must conform to it to survive.". Samira manages to seduce and repulse us from beginning to end while we ride on a rollercoaster of feelings - from pity to hatred - which is intensified by the fact that we are watching a physical and a symbolic violence between two disabled kids. If one *looks away*, as a reviewer suggested, they ignore their own rollercoaster of feelings and probably avoid acknowledging the system of oppression that feeds capitalism and its general law of accumulation.

One exerts so much power over the other, that he manages to take everything from him – from his feelings to his identify as a human being. Guiah protests, argues that he is doing everything he can to satisfy the boy, but he still beats him, chokes him, mistreats him. The boy does not see Guiah as a companion, rather he is his inferior in every way. He is so articulate that Guiah himself seemingly fails to recognise himself as human at some point. He falls to ground, tosses, and turns, behaving and screaming like an animal, until he meets his own redemption. Disability here is the last element that would bring the two boys together. It has been a common postmodern misunderstanding of the dialectics of class structure to consider that other characteristics - race, gender, disability - would have a greater impact on an individual's social disadvantage than class. However, Samira's keen eye demonstrates otherwise, in accordance with studies that still emphasise the importance of studying and analysing class when considering race, gender and disability (Dorling, 2018; Santos, 2020). In Meiksins Wood's words:

> the ‘politics of identity ’reveals its limitations, both theoretical and political, the moment we try to situate class differences within its democratic vision. Is it possible to imagine class differences without exploitation and domination? The ‘difference ’that constitutes class as an ‘identity ’is by definition a relationship of inequality and power, in a way that sexual or cultural difference need not be. A truly democratic society can celebrate diversities of lifestyles, culture or sexual preference: but in what sense would it be ‘democratic ’to celebrate class differences? (1995: 258)

There is no indication that the young Master has found or even sought any kind of redemption, he is in internal conflict because of his father’s absence, because he lost his mother and his legs, but that has nothing or very little to do with Guiah, nevertheless, Guiah becomes the aim of his hatred, in a kind of Freudian displacement.

Two-legged horse does not follow an established, traditional structure (Wayne, 2020, pp. 137-157). First, although it deals with disability from a class perspective, the focus is not disability, but the clash of classes and the power one exerts over the other. Secondly, it lacks redemption and reconciliation between the two binary oppositions. Perhaps, we may point out only two moments that could almost suggest redemption, when Guiah and the Master play and dance together and when Guiah decides to quit the job and is found by the camera wandering around. Audiences driven by traditional narratives will certainly wait for the moment when one will apologise with the other and the boys will become friends, but that does not happen. Breaking with the idea of individualisation, neither of them has any kind of outstanding abilities, that usually suggested by disabled characters. Samira invites two disabled kids to be part of the film, they do not have to *act* disabled, they are what they are. In terms of focalisation, the film differs from traditional narratives in the sense that it does not follow the perspective of

dominant sectors - it is a film produced by Iranian directors, in Afghanistan, with non-professional, non-white, actors. And, lastly, the film does not offer any kind of closure. In the end, it suggests a repetition of the same process of dominance when Mirvais goes to the sewer pipes to look for another boy - the hegemonic, dominant culture will continue to reproduce itself for as long as we maintain the elements that feed it (Wright, 2019).

In the opening scene, the camera is positioned at eye level, capturing a desolate landscape of abandoned sewer pipes emitting smoke. Amidst this barren setting, a man named Mirvais yells out towards the pipes:

> I want a boy. One dollar a day. A clean, strong boy. I only need one boy.
> (Mirvais)

Suddenly, like ants emerging from an anthill, dozens of boys pour out of the pipes, surrounding Mirvais in a desperate scramble for the yet-unknown job. The camera then cuts to the entrance of one of these sewer-pipe dwellings, where a boy named Guiah emerges from the darkness. Amidst the chaos, Mirvais is jostled by the mob of boys, all clamoring to be chosen. This imagery of boys emerging from their sewage homes evokes Marx's observations on the violent exploitation exerted by the dominant class over the working class: “Light, air, etc – the simplest *animal* cleanliness – seizes to be a need for man. Dirt – this stagnation and putrefaction of man – the *sewage* of civilization (speaking quite literally) – comes to be the *element of life* for him. Utter, and *unnatural* neglect, putrefied nature, comes to be his *life-element*.” (Marx, 1988, p. 117, *author’s highlights*).

The job interview is a test: each boy must bend "like a camel" before the Young Master—a boy who lost both legs in a mine explosion—and carry him around the muddy courtyard in circles, echoing traditional horse-taming practices. This scene establishes the power dynamics, illustrating how one individual exerts control over others, and highlights the absurdity of this relationship. The imagery can be interpreted as a reference to the violence inflicted by capitalists on laborers. The boys are brought into the Young Master's domain, where he rides them around his courtyard, demonstrating his power over them. They are subjected to his eccentricities because their survival depend on him – as Marx puts it, "[…] The extremity of this bondage is that it is only as a *worker* that he continues to maintain himself as a *physical subject*, and that it is only as a *physical subject* that he is a *worker*" (Marx, 1988, p. 73).

This scene may be perceived as an allegory of the organic composition of the labour force and the redundant working population produced by the movements of accumulation and concentration of the Capital. A labour force which will at times be absorbed and at other times be made redundant, the Industrial Reserve Army of Capitalism (Marx, 1992), that is, "[…] What Marx calls 'an industrial reserve army 'is therefore a necessary condition for the reproduction and expansion of capital. This reserve army needs to be accessible, socialised, disciplined and of the requisite qualities (i.e. flexible, docile, manipulable and skilled when necessary)".

As Harvey (2017, p. 60) puts it: "[…] labourers, like capitalists, 'freely 'trade the commodity they have for sale in the marketplace. But labourers are also in competition with each other for employment, while the work process is under the command of the capitalist.". They are part of the dialectics that maintain and regulate the labour market, *bending like camels* to the will of capitalist. And while

some may argue that this no longer a reality of the Global North, analyses of the working-class conditions in the 21st century have demonstrated that "[i]n recent years, every effort has been made to bring the working classes of the different European countries into conflict with one another, exacerbating the competition arising from the globalisation of trade." (Hugree, Penissat, and Spire, 2020, n.p.).

In the film, part of this competition is depicted when all the other boys speak at the same time, protesting and boasting their skills:

I am fast. I'm agile, take me. (Boys)

This shot is a representation of how "[…] Labour produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a **commodity** - and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally." (Marx, 1988, p. 71, my highlights). Mirvais and the Master select the boys to take turns carrying the young master while he dismisses them for a variety of reasons:

Too skinny. His bones stick into me. His breath stinks. Not that one. He's too small. No way. He's too small. (Young Master)

The camera alternates between shots of the anxious boys waiting in the crowd and close-ups of each boy undergoing the test, with the background intentionally blurred to emphasize the intense effort of these "two-legged horses" striving to satisfy the Young Master. In a shot/reverse shot sequence, we see Guiah standing

among the other children before he is selected to take the test. The camera follows them in a medium shot, capturing both characters while keeping the background out of focus. As they move in circles, the spinning world around them symbolizes the formation of their initial bond. Guiah is chosen and the other boys are dismissed in protest, however, "[…] individual labourers are powerless to resist because they too are locked in competition with each other" (Harvey, 2017, p. 60).

The scene cuts to the entrance of the courtyard as the boys, Mirvais, and the Master leave. The camera slides back into the courtyard and Guiah is galloping with the young Master on his back. *His process of reification* has started. Regardless of the work conditions and salary, the selected worker will then be obliged to express their gratitude, as expressed by Mirvais:

To Guiah: You are lucky to get a dollar a day. To the other boys: You'll find work too. (Mirvais)

Mirvais's statement captures the dynamics of the job market which reflects Marx's concept of the industrial reserve army, where a surplus of unemployed workers allows employers to offer minimal compensation, knowing that many are eager for any opportunity. This situation is exacerbated by the concentration and centralization of capital, which consolidates economic power and limits employment options, further disadvantaging workers.

After his father departs for India for 40 days with his sister, the narrative centers on the two disabled children: the Young Master, who lost both legs in a mine explosion, and his new horse Guiah, who appears to have an intellectual disability.

This introduces a dual contrast between the boys, highlighting differences in both class and the *nature of their disabilities*, which can be interpreted allegorically. While Guiah possesses physical strength, the Young Master holds the means and acts as the controlling intellect or head that controls the body. This dynamic mirrors the working class as the horse—the physical power sustaining production—an analogy also explored by George Orwell in *Animal Farm*.

Guiah's position reflects the sociohistorical constraints imposed upon him due to his disability and class. Denied opportunities to transcend these limitations, he becomes a product of his circumstances—marginalized and left in destitution (Marx, 1990). This dynamic is illustrated in the school scenes.

At the 00:07:10 mark, the film cuts to Guiah carrying his master to school, trotting like a horse. As they arrive, the master clings to Guiah's ears for balance. The classroom is already in session as Guiah leaves the master on a bench and moves away from the improvised classroom, heading instead to the stables. This sequence highlights Guiah’s exclusion from education and underscores his relegation to a life of servitude, reinforcing the systemic barriers that keep him bound to his class and condition. In the background sound, we hear the boys answering the questions of the teacher, as the camera captures the young Master’s profound look staring at Guiah. His eyes seem to reveal a hurricane of feelings, they carry a mixture of doubt, pity, compassion, superiority, and hatred. Seemingly because of his disability the young Master is rejected by his colleagues in the school.

At the 00:08:17 mark, Guiah is shown in the center of the stable, where the students leave their donkeys. The subsequent scene, constructed through a shot/reverse shot sequence, alternates between Guiah standing among the animals

and a mare with her newborn foal. The mare is seen licking the foal, removing the placenta, while Guiah, positioned in the foreground, stares toward the classroom and the other boys. In the background, the donkeys appear blurred, out of focus. For over a minute, the film alternates between shots of Guiah and the mare with her foal, accompanied by the sounds of neighing horses and braying donkeys.

This sequence serves as a prelude to Guiah's symbolic bestialization. His posture and demeanor in the scene evoke the image of a horse being born—marking his figurative "birth" as a member of the working class, embodying the physical labor and servitude expected of him.

In summary, while the Young Master sits in the classroom, actively participating in the lesson, Guiah remains confined to the stables, observing the proceedings from a distance. While the Young Master's physical disability does not impede his access to privilege and education, Guiah's intellectual disability and class relegation mark him as unworthy of the same opportunities. This exclusion not only marginalises Guiah but also reinforces his bestialization, as he is symbolically associated with the animals in the stable rather than the students in the classroom. The juxtaposition of their disabilities—the Young Master's physical limitations contrasted with Guiah's intellectual challenges—highlights the broader dynamics of power, privilege, and exploitation under the structure of Capitalism. Where the Young Master retains the ability to assert control and dominance despite his physical condition, Guiah is reduced to the role of a laboring "beast," deprived of both human dignity and intellectual development.

Further in the film, the mare and the foal will reappear and again be used in comparison with Guiah as the process of commodification intensifies. The images

alternate between the mother nurturing the little foal and Guiah amongst the horses. The horses smell Guiah in the same way they do with each other, as if recognising him as one of their own. The scene is a cruel portrait of the violence of humanity, contrasting three categories here: (1) Guiah, the object; (2) the young Master, (3) and the boys in the classroom that reject the disabled classmate.

The Young Master's escalating violence toward Guiah reveals a relentless cycle of cruelty, devoid of any possibility of a redemption arc. In one instance, while urinating, he writes Guiah's name on the wall with urine—a symbolic act of degradation—before subjecting him to physical abuse, verbal humiliation, and psychological torment, including taunting him with false promises of a dollar. To the Young Master, Guiah is nothing more than an object, fully subjected to his will, to be used, ridiculed, and discarded at his whim. In one particularly brutal scene, the Young Master forces Guiah into a horse race, promising ice cream as a reward if he wins. During the race, he beats Guiah with a stick, chokes him, and demands that he run faster.

When Guiah collapses from exhaustion, unable to continue, the Young Master cruelly assaults him. This dynamic is repeated in another competition, where the Young Master seeks to assert his dominance by fighting against the other boys in the school, continuing the cycle of dehumanization and unchecked power. He challenges the boys saying that *his horse* is strong and boasts that no one would be able to win against him. Please note how he refers to Guiah as *his horse*, an animal that belongs to him. After he wins the first fight, thanks to Guiah of course, his eyes are filled with pride. He uses his stick to demand silence and challenges another boy, but this time they lose. This unrelenting violence highlights the

deeply entrenched exploitation and objectification of Guiah, underscoring the systemic inequalities of capitalist relations at the heart of the narrative.

Losing the fight is unacceptable to the young Master and, when back at home, he orders Mirvais to get rid of the boy and buy him a wheelchair. Guiah cries in protest:

> I'll ride you on my back and run. I'll wash your clothes but you hit me. You grab me by the throat and choke me. Get out. You were not good. You hurt my feet. You have no feet. You can't walk. You ate five carrots. I didn't eat anything. But you did. Don't fire me. **You ate bread and became fat. Too heavy to carry.** You, you… I'll wipe your nose. I'll wash your body. And your face. Didn't I wash you today? But you hit me. I carry you on my back and run
> but you keep eating bread. You're heavy. Don't fire me master. For God's sake don't throw me out.
> (Guiah)

Guiah begs for another chance to prove that he can carry him, wash him, wipe his nose, etc. He is a worker who loses his job and who is now in despair for he has nowhere else to go or how to survive if he does not sell his body to the employer, the unemployment disciplines the workers

Guiah's desperate plea for another chance reveals once again his profound vulnerability as a worker entirely dependent on his employer for survival (Marx, 1988). His despair mirrors the plight of laborers who, upon losing their jobs, face not only immediate destitution but also the crushing realisation that their very survival hinges on their ability to sell their physical labor. This dynamic reflects the disciplining effect of unemployment, as articulated by Harvey (2010), where

the threat of unemployment reinforces the workers' submission to exploitative conditions. For Guiah, this dependency reduces him to a commodity, stripped of agency and dignity, highlighting the broader mechanisms of control within capitalist structures. (Harvey, 2010). The boy feels no empathy and dismisses him and gets a tricycle to replace Guiah – a poignant symbol of the machine supplanting the worker. This act highlights the commodification of labor, where workers are valued only for their utility and are easily discarded when a more efficient alternative becomes available. The tricycle, as a mechanical replacement, embodies the dehumanizing logic of capitalism, where human labor is rendered expendable in the pursuit of convenience and efficiency, further reinforcing Guiah's marginalisation and disposability. However, the Young Master is soon to discover that the capitalist cannot go far without the workers: “in the labour process, however, the capitalist is ultimately dependent upon the labourer. The worker produces capital in the form of commodities and so reproduces the capitalist (Harvey, 2010, p. 102)”.

The next day, on his way to school, the Young Master meets Guiah, who desperately begs for another chance to serve him. Demonstrating his manipulative and cunning nature, the boy softens his voice to a lower, sweeter tone and adjusts his facial expressions, his eyes almost convincingly gentle and forgiving. He instructs Guiah to collect some stones for him, only to cruelly use them to pelt Guiah, yelling, “Go away, jackass.”

When the Young Master arrives at school on his new tricycle, he quickly realises that none of the other boys regard him as a friend, and they all refuse to assist him. His attempt to replace Guiah, his "horse," with a machine fails to satisfy his need for dominance or gain him the respect he craves. Power is a relational construct—

dependent on both the oppressor and the oppressed. In his sadistic craving for control, the Young Master turns back to Guiah to demonstrate his superiority and attempts to project authority to the other boys.

This dynamic is vividly illustrated at the 00:25:00 mark, when Guiah carries the Master so he can use the board to answer questions in class. The camera pans around the room, capturing the amused faces and laughter of the other boys. This scene, along with later moments, suggests that the Young Master is not genuinely accepted as part of the group. His efforts to assert dominance through Guiah highlight the performative and fragile nature of his power, underscoring his dependence on exploitation to maintain a sense of superiority.

Between the 00:50:25 and 1:00:00 marks, their relationship briefly flirts with friendship – they dance, shower, and enjoy ice cream together. However, the Young Master quickly reverts to his psychological games of dominance. Their relationship, bordering on sadomasochism, is fueled by mutual fear: the Master fears losing his power and control, while Guiah is terrified of losing his job and only means of survival.

The dynamic becomes even more complex when Guiah falls in love with the beggar girl, whom the Master also desires. Guiah's affection for the girl humanises him, as do his dreams, such as the one in which he imagines shaking his back and throwing the Master to the ground. Yet, this burgeoning humanity provokes further exploitation. Their relationship is pushed to the extreme, where the Master’s need for control extends beyond Guiah's physical body to his mind—seeking to possess his dreams, thoughts, and desires entirely.

At 1:08:00, they look for the beggar girl and when they find her, the Master gives her some coins and her eyes water. Guiah leaves him on the floor and refuses to carry him. In despair, he cries and follows Guiah, using his hands to move his body. All his power crumbles.

> Where are you going? Why did you leave me alone? Stop. Stop. Why are you leaving me alone? Why are you leaving me alone? My dad left me with you. Don't leave me alone. Where are you going? My dad left me with you. Why are you leaving me alone? My dad asked you to look after me. My dad left me with you. Don't leave me alone ... my God. Don't leave me alone. My dad left me with you. Stop I'll kill you. I'll give you to the police. Stop I'll kill you. I'll kill you if I catch you. Stop my horse.
> (Young Master)

This excerpt is layered with complex emotions that reveal the Young Master's deep-seated fears, dependency, and insecurities. The repetitive phrasing—"Why are you leaving me alone? My dad left me with you"—reflects his sense of abandonment and betrayal. While his words outwardly demand control over Guiah, they simultaneously expose his vulnerability. The Master's repeated invocation of his father's authority suggests a reliance on external structures to assert his own power, highlighting the fragility of his dominance.

The shift in tone, from pleading ("Don't leave me alone") to threats ("Stop I'll kill you. I'll give you to the police"), demonstrates the Young Master's escalating desperation as he faces the potential loss of his horse, his source of power and control. His plea, "Stop my horse," reduces Guiah to an object, reinforcing the dehumanization and bestialization that permeates their relationship. However, the intensity of his emotional outburst hints at more than cruelty—it reveals the

Master's fear of losing not just his servant but also his constructed identity, which relies on his ability to dominate and exploit.

This scene also highlights the relational nature of power. The Master's identity as a figure of authority is wholly dependent on Guiah's submission. Without someone to control, his sense of superiority collapses, leaving him isolated and powerless. The Master's cries for Guiah to stop serve as a symbolic cry against his own powerlessness, making this moment a striking commentary on the precariousness of hierarchical relationships and the human cost of oppression.

Between the 1:10:00 and 1:12:00 marks, the Young Master chases after Guiah, moving on his arms and amputated lower limbs in a manner that strikingly resembles the gait of a horse. As Guiah retreats, the Master yells, "Stop, my horse!" The camera tracks their movements, sliding from right to left, cutting between one character and the other, emphasizing the tension and desperation of the chase. When the Master finally reaches Guiah, he forcefully pulls him to the ground and mounts him again, reasserting his dominance.

In the following sequence, a dramatic soundtrack sets the tone as the Master rides Guiah among other horses and horsemen. This moment marks the height of Guiah's oppression and the culmination of his symbolic metamorphosis into a horse, fully embodying the bestialization of the working class. The scene abruptly transitions to a wide shot of a cemetery, visually connecting this process of dehumanization to death and finality. Upon their arrival at the cemetery, Guiah bends down to allow the Master to dismount, further reinforcing his complete submission.

In the foreground of this shot, the Master, Guiah, and a horse occupy the same frame. All three are positioned on four limbs, drawing a deliberate visual comparison. Guiah and the horse exist on the same symbolic plane, equated through their shared position and function as laboring bodies, while the Master stands apart as a contrast. Interestingly, the earlier portrayal of the Master mimicking a horse during the chase suggests a complex dynamic. This moment blurs the lines between master and laborer, hinting at the precariousness and constructed nature of power hierarchies.

In the cemetery, the Young Master displays a moment of vulnerability, which serves as a narrative precursor to the acts of pure cruelty that follow. The film draws a stark parallel between this cyclical behavior and the Young Master's escalating actions. This dynamic may symbolise the periods in which capitalists appear to coexist peacefully with the working class, only to precede intensified exploitation and oppression, a recurring mechanism of the ontological reproduction of the sociometabolism of the Capital.

He continues to exploit Guiah, using him not only to gain attention from other boys but also to generate profit, charging a fee for others to ride him. At 1:21:56, this exploitation reaches a new level of dehumanization when one of the wealthier boys brings a saddle, further solidifying Guiah's transformation into a literal "beast of burden." This act symbolizes the extent to which the working class is stripped of humanity and reduced to a tool for the amusement and benefit of the ruling class, illustrating the perpetuation of systemic oppression and the commodification of human labor.

The humiliation intensifies as they saddle Guiah and ride him while he screams, making him the subject of public ridicule. He is debased in front of the entire town, including the beggar girl, who rejects the Young Master's offer to ride Guiah for free, symbolizing her refusal to participate in his dehumanization. The degradation culminates during a town festival, where the Young Master rides Guiah among adults on horses competing to capture a calf. His authority remains unquestioned, highlighting the normalized acceptance of his dominance mirroring the capitalist's unchallenged supremacy.

The Master climbs up a tree and from the top of the tree, like a leader brought up to dominate, he teaches the boys how to command the horse - "*pull the right ear and he will go right*". This chilling moment illustrates the full extent of the Master's control and his deliberate perpetuation of Guiah's degradation. Back at home, the boy feeds Guiah alongside the cows with hay in the stable, further solidifying his complete reification into an animal. The climax of this transformation occurs when Mirvais delivers a horse-head costume, marking the final stage of Guiah's metamorphosis. In this moment, Guiah becomes not just a laborer but a fully objectified figure, stripped of all humanity and individuality, embodying the ultimate consequence of systemic exploitation and oppression.

Mirvais: Hello master. Young Master: I've brought you two presents. How beautiful! Mirvais: I searched the whole town to find it.

By introducing Guiah to symbolic degradation, such as placing the horse's head on him, Mirvais reinforces existing power dynamics and normalizes the exploitation and dehumanization of the working class. Rather than questioning the Young

Master's abusive behavior, Mirvais actively facilitates it, underscoring his role as an enabler within systems of oppression. His actions serve to embed Guiah further into his role as a "beast of burden" and perpetuate the cultural norms that sustain the Master's authority. Mirvais represents the complicit figure who, rather than challenging domination, plays an active role in sustaining and reproducing it. His character reflects how dominant ideologies are not only imposed from the top down but are also maintained and reinforced by individuals within the system, even those who might otherwise appear neutral or uninvolved. Through Mirvais, the film highlights the insidious ways cultural norms, social behaviors, and power dynamics are upheld by those who participate in the mechanisms of oppression, knowingly or unknowingly.

Mirvais's role reflects the concept of hegemony as described by Williams (1980; 2011) earlier in the essay, wherein individuals internalize and perpetuate dominant ideologies, becoming agents of the system even when they are not directly in power. By bringing the horse's head for Guiah, Mirvais actively contributes to Guiah's dehumanization, reinforcing his subjugation and bestialization. His actions demonstrate how the oppressed or those within the same socioeconomic strata can be co-opted into upholding the exploitation of others, either out of self-interest, fear, or conformity.

Furthermore, Mirvais represents the insidiousness of cultural capital, as his actions subtly reinforce the norms and values of the ruling class. His involvement in moments like the suggestion of bringing a prostitute to the Master also highlights his complicity in the commodification of human relationships, exposing how systems of power rely not just on direct domination but on the complicity and participation of those who act as intermediaries within the hierarchy. Ultimately,

Mirvais's character is a reminder that oppression is sustained not only by the oppressors but also by those who, knowingly or unknowingly, enable and reproduce its structures.

Immediately after this act, the narrative takes a darker turn. The Young Master hand-walks back to the house as the camera shifts focus to the legs and feet of the beggar girl climbing the stairs and entering the house, with the Master following her. This shot is eerily reminiscent of earlier moments at 19:46 and 29:50, which subtly suggest that Mirvais may have previously facilitated the Master's access to a prostitute while he was away. This parallel adds another layer of critique to the story, as it highlights the ways in which even interpersonal relationships and sexuality are commodified and manipulated within this oppressive system. Together, these scenes expose the mechanisms by which dominance and exploitation are normalized, upheld, and perpetuated across various domains of life.

Guiah completes his transformation as an animal. The shot is reminiscent of Marx's words when he states that as a result of processes of *Enfremdung* and *Entäusserung,* "[…] man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions - eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal." And he closes the paragraph with the final statement "[…] What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal." (Marx, 1988, p. 74). Guiah goes to his sewer pipe house and the horse's face on his head disappears in the shadows – labour's realization is complete, the objectification of the labourer, the *loss of reality, the loss of the object,* and *the object-bondage – Enfremdung* and *Entäusserung* (Marx, 1988).

The following scene represents a pivotal moment of potential redemption for Guiah. Refusing to return to the Master the next day, he is found wandering, now without the horse mask—a visual rejection of the dehumanization imposed upon him. The narrative then circles back to its beginning, with Mirvais standing at the seemingly abandoned sewer pipes, once again offering a one-dollar-a-day job for a strong boy. This cyclical framing underscores the systemic and repetitive nature of exploitation of capitalism, suggesting that while individuals like Guiah may seek liberation, the larger oppressive structure remains intact.

In this final scene, Guiah is shown in close-up against a backdrop of a clean, blue sky. The stark contrast between the purity of the sky and Guiah's dirty clothes, dusty hair, and grimy skin emphasizes his suffering, but the possibility of resistance. The framing isolates Guiah, bringing him to the foreground and closer to the viewer, while obscuring the surrounding world, symbolizing his break from the Master's cruelty. The sky, free from narration or dialogue, becomes a silent metaphor for freedom. For a fleeting moment, Guiah is liberated—not just from the physical dominance of the Master, but also from the systemic violence that sought to reduce him to a beast. This moment offers the closest the film comes to redemption, leaving the audience to grapple with the fragility and ambiguity of such liberation in a world that continues to perpetuate cycles of exploitation.

Summary of the Analysis

Returning to the epigraph, *Two-Legged Horse* serves as a striking illustration of Ivan Karamazov's assertion. The film's unflinching portrayal of the "artful and artistic cruelty" of humanity is so disturbingly realistic—particularly in its use of children to amplify the emotional impact—that it has driven some viewers to look

away or even leave the cinema. This reaction mirrors our collective tendency to avert our gaze from the harsh realities of capitalist relations in daily life. The discomfort it provokes stems from the film's raw exposure of the processes of oppression, segregation, exploitation, and exclusion that underpin this system, revealing their stark obviousness and their complicity in our existence.

The denial of these truths often manifests in distancing mechanisms, such as dismissing the film's depiction as extreme or relegating such cruelty to "the other"—the so-called third world. These strategies enable viewers to avoid confronting the deeper truth: that we, too, are implicated in the reproduction of this system. The film's brilliance lies in its ability to break through this denial, forcing audiences to grapple with the limpidness of human cruelty and their role within the oppressive structures it lays bare. In this way, *Two-Legged Horse* becomes an uncomfortable mirror, challenging viewers to acknowledge their own complicity in the "artistic cruelty" that Dostoevsky so powerfully describes.

Beyond its artistic and ideological power, the film invites further reflection on how educational systems often reproduce the same processes of objectification, dehumanization, and reification explored in Two-Legged Horse. The dynamics between the two boys — one who controls, another who serves — resonate disturbingly with institutionalized educational practices that impose roles, hierarchies, and standards that alienate students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. When Guiah is denied access to schooling while his labor is exploited, the film mirrors the exclusionary tendencies of formal education systems, especially regarding students with disabilities, where inclusion is often reduced to tokenistic presence without structural transformation.

A critical education policy agenda, therefore, must go beyond the liberal premise of inclusion (Martins, 2012) and embrace a materialist critique that interrogates the capitalist logic of schooling itself. The reification of students, particularly those marked by disability, race, or poverty, cannot be addressed by adjustments in curriculum alone. Instead, we must ask what kinds of human beings schools are expected to produce, and for what societal ends (Mészáros, 2016). As the film warns, without disrupting the sociometabolic logic of exploitation, education risks becoming yet another mechanism to tame, train, and discard — producing two-legged horses rather than emancipated subjects. This necessitates educational policy research committed to unveiling and confronting the ontological violence embedded in current schooling structures.

Notes

[1] Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/nov/14/1 on May 16, 2023.
[1] Retrieved from https://offscreen.com/view/two_legged_horse on January 10, 2025.
[1] Retrieved from https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/two-legged-horse-126018/ on January 10, 2025.

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