

Beyond the Pleasure Principles of Work: *Anora* and the Trauma of Class-Awakening

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Abstract

Sean Baker's filmography is famously focused on the expanding role of sex-work in the current social landscape. His recent financial and critical success with *Anora* (*Id.*, Baker 2024) operates as a consolidation of this authorial path and project, which, clearly, not only aims to "reveal" the pervasiveness of different forms of sexualised labour, but also its capacity to capture and visualise anxieties and concerns of our age. This essay will attempt to unpack the reasons for this particular fascination and to examine what the dynamics of sex-work underscore about the transformation of labour in a more general sense. In doing so, the paper will try to think about Baker's production as a reassessed form of screwball comedy by taking into account the political and historical significance of this specific sub-genre of romantic comedy. At the same time, *Anora* will be employed as a central case study to analyse and comment upon a primordial sense of class-consciousness rising from the narrative and, more specifically, from the string of "bad luck" affecting its main character.

Keywords: Sex work; Screwball comedy; Affective labour and economy; Cinema and Neoliberalism; Becoming class.

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1 The old and new screwball comedy

Purpose of this essay is to understand Sean Baker's *Anora* (2024) as an updated screwball comedy, one that reflects and responds to the issues of the current political context and, because of this renewed sensibility, ends up radically challenging the inherent idealism of the genre. According to many scholars the screwball comedy could be understood as the key cinematic trend of the FDR Social Reform era (see the comprehensive study by Grégoire Halbout 2022: 253-73). With its usual recurring focus on the possibility of romance between couples coming from completely opposite social backgrounds, and related habits and beliefs, this Hollywood cycle embodied a specific social hope and idealism (Halbout 2022: 2-5). Often featuring class-diverging characters who could learn something from one another, embrace the complexity of a world moving beyond the closed boundaries of their social milieu, these films conveyed the promise of a social compromise, of a "new deal" between capital and labour (Halbout 2022: 251). From a sociological point of view, in fact, we could say that the cycle comes into life in combination with the harshest effects of the Great Depression biting the general population, as *It Happened One Night* (*Accadde una notte*, Capra 1934) is considered the first example of this specific romantic comedy. Against the first aftermath of the 1929 Wall Street crash, which was characterised by a series of austerity policy measures, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency (with the first mandate starting in May 1933), was seen as symptomatic of a need to shift trends. Indeed, what we call the New Deal is a set of Keynesian policies FDR "championed" aiming to react to economic recession through long-term public investment, progressive taxation on income and rent, and the implementation of welfare structure (Blakeley 2024: 42-4). With this economic planning, which found its "perfect" deployment in the WWII intervention, capitalist value accumulation and reproduction (the capital order) was granted by an increased demand and possibility of new industrial development (Mattei 2022: 145). At the same time, working class people would see the benefit of almost full employment and of improving living standards through increased public services and wages. The loving couple, often featuring a disgruntled working-class person with a spoiled but quirky upper-class partner, would, therefore, foresee the possibility of a social peace and of cooperation between classes, on the background of recognised divisions and conflict.

Ernst Lubitsch's masterpiece *Ninotchka* (et a. 1939), among the many examples to be discussed, even features a committed and fiercely independent communist Soviet agent (played by Greta Garbo in the title role) falling in love with the European decadent Count Léon d'Algout (Melvyn Douglas). Notoriously, (with comical effects) Ninotchka will find pleasure and joyfulness in some aspects of consumerism, appearing, in the end, less debouched as she thought it to be, while, Count d'Algout will genuinely become more aware of injustices and exploitation. In Istanbul – in the epilogue of the narrative – the main characters will find the idealised space where to negotiate and balance the two worldviews. The idealism that can be attributed to screwball comedies is closely associated with the promise of social mobility and progressive increase in democratic empowerment. This same social democratic prospect of a better tomorrow is what drives the post-WWII consensus¹ up to the so-called advent of neoliberalism, which we can identify with Richard Nixon's decision to break the Bretton Woods agreements (Blakeley 2024: 40-1). This period of 30 "glorious" years (roughly 1945-1971) is, in fact, labelled as the golden age of capitalism, and was characterised by constant growth and improving living standards, at least in the West. However, as for the New Deal moment, when looking more critically at the aftermath of the second global conflict, we get a more nuanced picture of specific transformations; workers' struggles and organising were central for socially progressive policies to be implemented, to the point that we should actually think about that historical phase as one characterised by a very productive conflictuality rather than by a long-sighted and benevolent capitalist governmentality (see Blakeley 2024: 41-4).

That said, more relevant for our discussion is emphasising how the fading of the Keynesian compromise corresponds with a different trend in politics and economic management, which sees up to our days, an endless spiralling of inequality. The dominion of finance and speculation, monopolistic takeover, increased private debt, rent extraction, and destruction of collective bargaining are all connected with the affirmation of neoliberal governmentality (see Blakeley 2024: 134-40). With this comes also a new cult of economic responsibility and individualism, where workers are to be considered "entrepreneurs" pitting their human capital against one another. To put it with Margaret Thatcher's infamous apt phrase "Economics are the methods, the object is to change the heart and soul" (Butt 1981; Sarkar 2025: 144-5). It is not incidental that by the 1980s, new types of

1. Even Republican president Eisenhower considered the New Deal as a bipartisan reference point for US policies.

stories and romantic comedies emerge, ripe with myths and images of economic empowerment, celebrating financial independence, resilience, and self-reliance, while still abiding by acceptable gender/sexual identities and codifications (see Halbout 2022: 309-11). This latter aspect has been a key feature of postfeminist media culture, thinking about emancipation exclusively in the capacity for women to break the glass ceiling and affirm their productive uniqueness, while defending femininity against too unsettling disruptions (McRobbie 2007: 27-39; Rottenberg 2018: 5-13).

Naturally, the still persisting effect of the 2007-2008 crash and of the consequent everlasting secular stagnation (Summers 2016) has put to test these ideas and contemporary cinema and television seem to adhere to a more disenchanted look at the promises of the market. Among the many examples to report, even Greta Gerwig's coming of age narrative *Lady Bird* (*Id.*, 2017) or her lead role in *Frances-Ha* (*Id.*, Baumbach 2012) seem to directly tap into this different sensibility. In these case studies, the agency of women, either working or in their educational formation, is clearly determined by undeniable material forces (such as indebtedness intertwined with class positioning) and by the perception of a relentless precarisation or worsening of economic conditions and exploitation (see Rottenberg 2018: 134, 166, 175-7). Though Gerwig's films have been defined reparatory and somewhat conciliating in the way they attempt to solve the social divisions at their core, they still display a disenchanted look at the aspirational drive of women trying to join the "creative industries" (Benson-Allot 2023). Sean Baker's stories, following this line of thought, could be understood as a return to the sensibility of the Great Depression. *The Florida Project* (*Un sogno chiamato Florida*, Baker 2017), not incidentally, has been already compared to Hal Roach's series *Our Gang* for his balance between comedy and social commentary taking as main focus a group of little rascals trying to scrape a living and find a way out of their marginalisation (Porton 2017). Concurrently, all his main characters, from the aspiring pornstar Jane-Tess (Dree Hemingway) in *Starlet* (*Id.*, Baker 2012) to the decaying adult films icon Mikey "Saber" Davies (Simon Rex) in *Red Rocket* (*Id.*, Baker 2021), compose a strange gallery of aspirational figures.

All trying to find their place in the sun, a way outside of precarious existence and insecure work, these characters also constantly dream of climbing the social ladder, to be part of a successful milieu distant from the spaces of their everyday life, even though the promises of realisation are less than probable. It comes with no surprise, then, that the films of Sean Baker are pervaded by fairytale images and references: *The Florida Project* is purposely set in the outskirts of Disneyland, and features a very distinctive ending (shot with iPhone) displaying the final imaginative attempt of the little Moonee (Brooklyn Prince), running with her friend Jancey (Valeria Cotto), in the theme park to escape the forced separation from her mother (Sticchi 2021: 231-3). In *Red Rocket*, Mikey's opportunistic machinations and stratagems to exploit those who surround him are associated with hallucinations of enlightenment and transcendence. The possibility of having found the perfect new sensation, a young woman, the seventeen years old Raylee (Suzanna Son), embodiment of all the fantasies about American teenage sexuality,² and the prospect to champion her as a rising pornstar, are, in the ending, materialised as a vision: as her, in bikinis, coming out of a dejected house in suburban Texas covered in salvific light, ready to conquer L.A.'s adult scene with the help of a newly found mentor.

Similarly, the name Sin-Dee Rella (Kitana Kiki Rodriguez) for the main character of *Tangerine* (*Id.*, Baker 2015) evokes a hopeful path of abundance, joy, and love for them: a trajectory free from the constant struggles and dangers of street sex-work. The same *Anora*, which will be examined in more details, has been received by many reviewers as a "new" *Pretty Woman* (*Id.*, Marshall 1990, per se a revisionist screwball comedy), as the hope of marrying one's own way out of precarity (see Barber 2024). This idealistic and even mythical dimension clearly clashes and dialogically interrelates with the crude lives of these characters, often lying in the shadows of the American Dream: living in neglected suburban areas, many times unable to afford a stable accommodation, or left over to deal with industrial waste (the fumes surrounding the horizon in *Red Rocket*). However, this dialectical relation does not work by simply stressing, once again, the detachment of the protagonists from wealth and from their own dreams. The use of the iPhone in *Tangerine* or in the final section of *The Florida Project* may seem to stress the "difference" embodied by the characters (see Malone 2020); however, this same social realist account never shies away from the apparently paradoxical blending of comedic tones

2. Not incidentally, one of the first revelations of Raylee-Strawberry's talent for the main character comes with her singing the "adolescent" hit *Bye Bye Bye* by NSYNC on the piano.

and situations with disturbing accounts of life at the margins, making Baker's films both textbook bittersweet tales and emblematic of the values and ambiguity of what I would define as a new screwball comedy.

The idealistic and fantasising tendencies of the characters, indeed, should not necessarily be interpreted as a metacommentary, as a one-sided satirical take on the American Dream of self-realisation and class upgrade; as a matter of fact, the films, while clearly differentiating themselves from a traditional cohesive social realist tone (the one we could swiftly attribute to Ken Loach's or the Dardenne Bros' works, for instance) for their comedic elements, do not operate as observational tales. On the contrary, the often-confrontational style of Baker's films is examined exactly for its capacity to defy any politics of respectability and facile empathetic connection (see Macintosh 2023; Malone 2020) complicating our alignment and sympathetic engagement. In the same way of classical comedy, through the use of humour and irony, we are invited to both critically evaluate the characters' flaws and to "appreciate" their worldviews, to pity and reprimand them in equal amount based on differing circumstances and the paradoxes they present (see Eitzen 1999: 98-9). Even though different from the classical screwball comedy in not necessarily using couples or processes of remarriage (see Cavell 1981) as the focal point of the narrative, we could consider Baker's films as following this canon in reason of their foundational "idealism". American pop-culture and references are never dismissed: new trends in music or visual culture, or entertainment at large are rather embraced as part of the fabrics of the surrounding world, as surfaces and parts of a network of images-ideas in which the characters are immersed. Indeed, it would be possible to argue that the films of Sean Baker constitute a sort of postmodern celebration of pop culture; thinking, in particular, about his first feature *Four Letter Words* (Id. Baker 2000), we see the surprising and provocative "recuperation" of pornography and of its icons, or of trap and club music later on, while many among the people that inhabit these storyworlds embrace, with varying comical effects, a *gangsta* look and posture.

The attention to the cultural features of a larger social reality also allows for the expression of shared beliefs, (confused) ideological standpoints, and value systems. No matter their predicament, all Baker's characters, because of their dreams of social mobility, accept (making Thatcher proud) the idea of being entrepreneur of their own self. For this same reason, they may appear distant from the working-class heroines/es we find in realist cinema, since they do not seem to express any inclination towards political organising or complex awareness of injustices. As already mentioned, Mikey's explicit egotism – underscored by many events and despicable actions throughout the narrative – makes of him a quite unsympathetic and questionable protagonist; however, even Halley (Bria Vinaite), Monee's mother in *The Florida Project*, with her unflinchingly confrontational attitude demonstrates a reluctance to build relations of solidarity outside of a very minimal and fragile network of care. More than being connected with ignorance or wilful oblivion, this individualist outlook, at times leading to social isolation, exists, again, as a symptom and manifestation of a wider social milieu, of ideas and notions operating over and through the protagonists.

In this sense, the desires and objectives these figures express, no matter how absurdly displayed and ironically commented upon, still capture the hope and trust in the prospect that if you follow the rule of the market game, you will be rewarded: you will have a chance to find economic redemption, to be among the saved of social slaughter and grant a good life for yourself and those you love (see Blakeley 2024: 166, 185; Read 2024: 198). In many ways, the idealism expressed by Baker's films deviates from the discussed social optimism of the classical screwball comedy and renounces to moral aims of social cohesion and interclass cooperation. Instead, negative solidarity, the transformation of a sense of injustice into a further push for competition and generalised social hardship, becomes the foundation of their affective life (Read 2024: 10). That said, these stories still convey, through hopeful and ambitious faithful characters, an undefeated perception of possibility for economic self-fulfilment and the connected willingness to "dream" the American way.

2 Sex work and its uses

Together with stressing Baker's lineage and adherence to some aspect of the classical Hollywood comedy, his returning focus on sex workers also needs unpacking and further discussion. Such fascination could be, again, attributed to a desire to tackle, through irony and "shock", one of the most pervasive components of contemporary media culture and labour by putting it on the same level of any other cultural phenomenon and

profession, while attempting to understand its function. In this sense, Baker's films can be attributed the double merit of not resorting to moralistic portraits of sex-workers, in particular, and to avoid a useless confinement of porn into a vague outside of our ecology of screens. On a minor excursus, Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (*Id.*, 2024) worked exactly by demonstrating the contiguity between pornographic film style and mainstream media culture, while subverting it through its endless slaps of body horror gore (both genres being centred on unrestrained focus on physicality). That said, I would argue that the attention presented by Baker's films also allows us to use and think about sex work as a key component of contemporary economy: to analyse it not only in terms of quantitative magnitude (the size and role of the industry) but for the mechanisms it entails and for the way it complicates points mentioned about the neoliberal turn.

Sexualised labour, Marxist-Feminist scholars like Silvia Federici have highlighted, has been always at the heart of Capitalism, to the point of being the object, since the origin of this social relation, of a never-ending process of primitive accumulation (2009: 12-7). The work of care or reproductive labour, historically assigned to women, operated as one of the vital unwaged aspects of value extraction; in its unrecognition and diminishment, care-work always existed, and keeps existing as a source of power allowing for the capitalistic machine to persist (Federici 2009: 115). What is more, this gendered division of labour which has always operated in tune with its removal from the foreground, also favoured a separation (at least theoretical and ideological) between productive or measurable activities and relational or affective ones.

However, as we have seen, one of the effects of the neoliberal turn was to think about the worker as human capital, as a subject whose all self exists in an extended assembly line: here the separation between production and relationality, as well as for life and work, blurs and value extraction pervades most aspects of everyday routines: we can simply think about the creation of marketable social media selves, online posting, consumption, and evaluation as examples of unwaged actions, which, nonetheless (or in reason of their gratuity), massively contribute to the reproduction of capital (see Ciccarelli 2021: 50-6). With this comes the connection between contemporary labour and a constant performative anxiety: to work means to put the self, in its entirety, on the stage and, concurrently, to feel under constant scrutiny and observation, to be repetitively judged worthy or not of a comfortable space on the social ladder above and/or in company with a multitude of fellow competitors-performers (see Ciccarelli 2021: 148-56). Sex-work, then, assembles all these features while also highlighting the ambiguity of being a labour of "love". The competitive mindset we discussed is often emphasised through mechanisms of self-subjection, or by the willingness to sacrifice oneself completely in honour profession of one's own dreams (Cuter 2025: 84-5; Rottenberg 2018: 103-4). Fulfilling personal deep aspiration, in fact, further individualises the burden of success and failure, of wealth and poverty, while pushing to extreme consequences the prospect of dedicating the subjectivity, in its totality, to the job: only those who love their work enough to be ready to sacrifice everything will, in the end, become worthy of it (Ciccarelli 2021: 70-6).

Extreme responsabilisation and affective readiness are, by all means, central to sex-work, whose obvious relation to pleasure and enjoyment underscores the (at least perfunctory) open-hearted commitment it requires. It is interesting to notice that the development of the contemporary porn industry, and also of different updated forms of adult entertainment, is simultaneous with the spread of neoliberal policies. David Simon and George Pelecanos' series *The Deuce* (2017-2019), in fact, observes this historical linking through the radical transformation of the homonymous neighbourhood of New York. Indeed, what this specific series does is stressing the nature of sex-work as part of the service-industry, which constitutes one of the principal sectors developed in major Western cities from the 70s (Sticchi 2021: 81-94). While *The Deuce* can be purposely examined for its presenting a lucid and analytical sociological account of the adult entertainment industry and its explosion, Baker's films seem, as discussed, to aim for a more immersive and personal experience; in these storyworlds the lives of precarious workers do not exist on a distant periphery; in their marginality, they end up acting as a measure and reference point to look at a general transformation of subjectivity, and for the way it operates in a context of neverending crisis.

3 Cinderella at work, with all the others

With these theoretical premises in mind, we can, then, move to the case study at hand in more details. The film's opening sequences are notably focused on the working life of the main character (Mikey Madison), reporting, in many details, on her routine, professional praxis, and on the public persona she puts on as adult entertainer in a fancy New York night club (Headquarter). The capacity to interact and please costumers, to tailor herself based on the circumstances, is intertwined with moments with her co-workers, sharing uncomfortable experiences and tactics to accommodate to the unusual requests and behaviours of clients during private dances; together with that, already in this section we see Ani displaying a very pragmatic and assertive posture, being able and willing to confront her boss or showing, in different ways, agency on the workplace. These aspects would support the image of a worker who does not idealise or over-identify with her own job, who endorses it even with the right amount of cynicism in trying to get the maximum out of her clients by learning about their weaknesses, quirks, and fetishes. Such focus, what is more, has been welcomed with praise for its "accuracy" including an appreciation for Baker's longstanding collaborative involvement of real sex-workers in his productions³ (Broey Deschanel 2024). At the same time, seeing the main character's long journey back home to the periphery of the Big Apple, in a small apartment unwillingly shared with her sister, where she solely recharges to be ready for the next shift at the club, adds to the dichotomy between her work-related existence and her real-life experience.

However, while the film seems to offer a quite deconstructed or unglamourised image of sex-work, this same perception is associated with ideas and stimuli that dialogically counteract this cynical outline. Indeed, the very opening titles, associated with a glowing Ani (in close up) dancing in slow motion in the club, feature a cover of Take That's hit *Greatest Day* (with Robin Schulz and Calum Scott) as extradiegetic score. Lyrics and music, hinting at a dimension of enjoyment and accomplishment, in combination with the mentioned shots, imbue Ani and her world with a certain allure, both stressing her sensuality and commitment: characteristics that were highly deployed for the marketing material of the film itself. The paradoxical combination between these elements may hint at a gullibility or vulnerability of the main character, not so street-smart in the end to avoid "falling" for the wealthy Ivan "Vanya" Zakharov (Mark Eydelshteyn), the friendly though visibly childish son of Russian oligarchs with business in the US.

However, it is worth remembering how the beginning of their love relationship is built upon a strict and dry economic calculation. Vanya is ready to spend huge sums (up to 15000 dollars) for a week of "exclusive girlfriend experience" with Ani. The main character as well approaches him as anything more than a client, having a hidden secret laugh at his rushed teenage sexuality (mixed with videogames and pot-smoking). In addition to this, the sound nature of her business strategy comes across from a minor confrontation with her boss: Anora defends her choice to be exclusively serving Ivan and neglecting the nightclub schedule on the account of lack of healthcare, workers' compensation, and a higher salary. This short dialogue points out, what is more, how the protagonist is a freelance, whose employer simply offers a basic if not inexistent wage and a space where to operate, whereas tipping and private activities are those that grant her a proper living; concurrently, while some of the relationships on the workplace may indicate mutual support and minimal solidarity, her coworkers are by all means competing with her for costumers' attention.

By quickly looking at Anora's professional life, therefore, we have further evidences of how sex work embodies many quintessential features of neoliberal labour: the more the activity is based on relational and affective efforts, the more it appears associated with performance or gig related compensation; such positioning in turn, motivates the inclination of workers to perceive themselves as individualised subjects and a consequent dismissal of collective organising (see Ciccarelli 2021: 121, 145). For these reasons, Ani's apparent weakness, which would lead her to believe in the trustworthiness of her abrupt Las Vegas' marriage with Vanya, does not come across in any different weight from any other forms of beliefs and hopeful prospects that we could attribute to most professional choices. As a matter of fact, the possibility of finding in a rich partner a permanent employer (or husband granting a sort of stable wage), under contractual obligation to provide for her, would

3. Apparently, the actors were offered the support of intimacy coordinators for the shooting but preferred working without them in reason of an already established comfortable work environment (Ritman and Shafer 2024).

constitute one of the ultimate professional and existential goals for Ani, as for many of her colleagues.⁴ Indeed, even their engagement is, initially framed as part a business pitch: Vanya would obtain American citizenship by marrying Anora, and so technically become independent from his “strict” parents, while the main character would enjoy the perches of being introduced to opulence: naturally, the connected financial security would imply a definitive exit from precarity, access to housing, and most importantly, quitting the chain of service provisions to ultimately become the object of attention and care. Ani’s pragmatic mindset is revealed also by the fact that she initially dismisses Vanya’s proposal as a childish move, while, she finds some additional persuasive argument in the accepted request of an expensive engagement ring: a valuable object, which, we could say operates as a sort of deposit and capital reserve on the marriage “investment” (Broey Deschanel 2024).

However, this transactional dimension, as Broey Deschanel/Maia Wyman rightly emphasised, is not deprived of a more “idealistic” if not naively optimistic account on the events (2024). Ani appears automatically attracted to the young man from their very first encounter at Headquarters, or, at least, seems to enjoy his goofy company beyond the need to please a client; similarly, the access to his wealth is connected with a series of relaxed meetings at his family mansion in New York; together with that, Vanya essentially introduces the main character to a care-free lifestyle: enjoying massages (from other sexualised workers, it could be possible to add), passing from one luxurious venue to the other splashing money and receiving all the consideration possible from subservient members of staff trying to please the oligarchs’ kid in the best way they can. A bit like Ninotchka starting to appreciate champagne after having been “raised on goat milk and vodka”, and in line with the screwball dynamics (Halbout 2022: 102), Ani fully embraces the chance of a class upgrade.

The fairytale of this contemporary Cinderella is punctuated by a rapid succession of moments of entertainment: from the Coney Island piers, with its roller coasters and candy shops, passing from several (almost identical clubs) to the strip of Las Vegas in all its iconic features, the honeymoon between the two main characters seems to condense a gallery of contemporary “attractions”. The aggressive and fragmented nature of Anora’s enjoyment seems to reinforce the validity of Tom Gunning’s famous points on the aesthetics of astonishment and cinema of attraction as essential features of the experience of modernity (Gunning 2009: 742-50). In this sense, we could argue that the film helps highlighting a continuity between the fairs of the early 20th century and contemporary clubbing (etc.) in being expressions of similar forms of consumption based on constant elicitation of awe and agitation (see Singer 2001: 108-10). Furthermore, the interchangeability between New York and the most exclusive hotel suite in Las Vegas may induce us to think about the places the characters inhabit as impersonal: as the materialisation of Auge’s non-places (see 1997: 82-89) of mindless fun deprived of a deep collective anthropological structure if not their connection to capital; cathedrals in the deserts for money gambling as well as the tackiest shopping malls would be then revealed both in their vacuity and in their complicity for supporting a passive consumerist mindset. These images would impact our perception of the marriage as well, making of it nothing but another tedious form of entertainment (what the event ultimately constitutes for Vanya). However, in the economy and ecology of the film, these “real” places of enjoyment and luxury exist, on the one hand, as an undeniable part of the general infrastructure (see also Singer 2001: 292-4) and, more importantly, embody a promise, one that Ani holds close; a fairytale every worker needs to believe in (Read 2024: 91-5): that of a way out from the everyday grind which would act both as reward for the hard work and as an assurance of protection in a context of uncertainty. It is not incidental that the marriage celebration sequence is the only other moment of the film in which the opening song is repeated, as if to emphasise the sense of accomplishment connected with it.

In this sense, Ani’s prospect to be liberated, via Vanya, from her current job position, does not operate as a moralistic diminishment of sex work: as a denunciation of its being an inherently dehumanising profession, which automatically deprives those who perform it of a dignity to be recuperated solely through some form of individual redemption⁵ (Weaver 2024). Sex work is presented to us simply as a form of labour; however, this statement and the perspective we get from the works of the filmmaker, at large, do not tend to flatten out all the specific characteristics of this -or any other- professional environment. A complex and articulate

4. “Catching the whale”, essentially, to put it with the words of Ani’s least favourite colleague and, allegedly, main competitor, Diamond (Lindsey Normington).

5. Thinking about frequent narrative tropes such as the hooker with a heart of gold or a gallery of cinematic pure victims (see Weaver 2024).

engagement with the reality of the character emerges, as we have seen, through the blending of many registers: from the comedic and romantic, imbued with fairytale imagery, to more direct and disturbing realistic filmmaking choices (see also Broey Deschanel 2024). The mixture of tonalities, leading also to a hybridisation between genres, comes across from a specific use of the cinematography (Drew Daniels): largely adopting high saturation and contrast, the camerawork (mostly close to the characters and restraining from long shots perspectives) can ambivalently convey the extreme excitement coming from moments of relax and fun, while expressing the claustrophobic entrapment these same figures may feel with changing contextual circumstances (Adlakha 2024).

Indeed, because of this closeness, which, many times may verge to direct over-the-top situations, we can appreciate also the rapid shift in moods that *Anora* as all other Baker's films offer: as soon as Ani's dream rapidly falls apart with the simple news of his parents coming to the US to get the marriage annulled, and with the arrival of Igor (Yura Borisov), Garnik (Vache Tovmasyan), and Toros (Karren Karagulian) to Vanya's house, their romance is interrupted by a succession of slapstick/screwball situations. In line with a comedic mood, the three goons in service of the Zakharovs are, in fact, introduced as a series of complementary and unthreatening inept figures: Toros, officially appointed as Vanya's tutor in the US, notwithstanding his elderly status and bullish attitude towards his subordinates, appears unable to manage any situations; he is introduced to us while acting as godfather in a baptism ready to embarrassingly leave the ongoing ceremony only because of the order by Vanya's parents to intervene and stop their son's bogus marriage. Later on, with the arrival of the Zakharovs, he will completely be unmasked in his comical obedience to the oligarchs, trying not to upset them and be reassuring in any way or form; Garnik, his younger brother, acts as an even less efficient version of Toros: more inadequate than him, receiving a broken nose by an untameable Ani, Garnik's hilarious failures are the only motivations for Toros' sense of legitimacy as goons' leader. Igor (meaning warrior, as he cares to remark), last but not least, operates as the valiant knight in a shining armour; even though at the orders of Toros and of the Zakharov to stop Anora, ready to gag her and tying her up when she puts on an impressive resistance, Igor is the only character showing real empathy for the main character. Apart from demonstrating an immediate attraction to Anora, he understands, very early on (as the audience does in many ways), that Vanya will not keep faith to their bond and will abandon her at the first signs of danger. While feeling pity and trying to be thoughtful, he also caters to Ani's needs, from time to time, finally managing to recover her engagement ring and giving it to her, at the end of the film, as a sort of limited compensation for the harm received by the Zakharovs.

The three goons, in their comical and romantic function seem to reaffirm the consistency of the screwball tone throughout the narrative; the middle section of the film, dedicated to a series of failed attempts to find Vanya, who has escaped the mansion (leaving Ani alone with them) out of fear of his parents' retaliation and punishment for his childish behaviour, is filled with gags and hilarious accidents. Garnik's declining awareness, due to the injury and the abuse of painkillers, Toros' increasing despair, and Igor's failed attempts at seriousness all hit against a wall of unexpected circumstances ending up with the finding of Vanya at Headquarters, completely drunk, having a dance with none other than Ani's rival (Diamond). These seemingly funny and comical situations, however, hide more nuanced affective and dramatic dynamics, as they delay Anora's realisation of Vanya's betrayal. Notwithstanding her continuous boasting in defence of the couple, and claims on the veracity of their bond, the behaviour of her husband reveals a complete lack of care, an unwillingness to recognise her, which reaches the point of not proving any shame in getting services from Ani's least favourite colleague.

In a classical screwball comedy, all these challenges could constitute the main moment of misunderstanding, of climactic separation between the couple, preceding and prompting a final resolution, which would sign and seal the triumph of true love (a ritualised trial of genuine feelings see Halbout 2022: 78-87). In the case of *Anora*, instead, the misunderstandings and incidents only postpone an already set outcome, deconstructing the fairytale perspective imagined by the main character. This same reversal, however, should not be understood as a complete abandonment or ironic take on the screwball comedy. According to Wyman (Broey Deschanel 2024), Baker's realism or grimmer look at the economic context eventually liberates the fairytale from the need of providing conciliating happy endings, thus bringing the genre back to its more tragic and, at times, horrific roots. As previously discussed, the negative perspective of the story rather emphasises the impossibility for the idealism of the classical rom-com to be reaffirmed and, at the same time, underscores an unfulfilled ideological

lack. Instead of interclass cooperation and compromise, an old dark ghost comes back haunting the characters and their world: that of class conflict.

4 Becoming-class as a traumatic awakening

The social divisions and power relations revealed in *Anora* do not come across only from the disenchantment and defeat of the main character in the realisation of her aspiration. We see her being used, humiliated, and abandoned by Vanya and, then, forced to accept the annulment of the wedding with a limited 10.000\$ compensation; together with that we can perceive the direct threat of pure annihilation by the hands of the Zakharovs, who are willing to employ all their power in order to erase their son's unpleasant deed. However, the antagonists do not operate simply out of their egregious and unique vileness as stereotypical Russian oligarchs. As a matter of fact, while the matriarch as Galina (Darya Ekamasova) goes a long way to show her anger and disappointment, the father, Nikolai (Aleksei Serebryakov) constantly looks at his smartphone and appears quite amused by Ani's rants against Vanya. Therefore, the Zakharovs simply materialise a power relation; they operate, as new rentier (feudo)capitalists, in a space where everything and everyone is there to serve them, in one way or the other. From cleaners to goons and entertainers, passing through a variety of bureaucrats or white-collar workers greasing the system to their demands or cancelling off a wedding in a matter of minutes, we gather that the world is simply at their feet. The Zakharovs, what is more, can fly across continents or destroy everything they touch, as Galina cares to remark to put Ani in her place, while leaving their subjects to deal with the debris of their passage.

Images of the aftermath of new year's party underscore these ideas by displaying the mansion in total chaos left to a group of cleaners to fix up. In this occasion, the camera lingers in an observational long shot, disrupting the immersive and close style that characterises the film more in general, enlarging the perspective on the storyworld. Interestingly, Ani appears always aware of the presence of other workers, also showing occasional embarrassment when they are taking care of their employers, who barely notice them. This particular point leads us to one of the major contradictions of the film: notwithstanding the individual differences and postures of specific characters, they all fulfil their expected duties; even Igor, who may be appreciated as holding the moral ground in the narrative, explicitly putting himself on the spot against the Zakharovs demanding Vanya's apologies to Ani, loyally completes every task he is asked to carry out (see also Broey Deschanel 2024). Furthermore, while taking into account the numerous comical situations involving him, Igor technically participates in the kidnapping of the main character and reinforces the ongoing blackmail to abandon her nuptial project.⁶ Igor also seems to enjoy having to deploy his martial prowess against some of Vanya's uncooperative friends as if demonstrating a keenness to his role. These remarks, however, are not meant to stress an inherent passivity of the characters, who, as subordinates in a capitalist power relation, are left with the sole options of obeying and accepting their fates.

The consciousness of a subaltern position, instead, both reverses every myth of self-accomplishment through work – with its related strata of competitive individualism – and dialogically counters the dream Ani cultivated (see also Read 2024: 132-133). In this sense, while we may identify the main character as a competent worker, professional, and able to protect her interests, these qualities do not make of her an iteration of the girlboss (Cavallo and Collins 2023). She may fit, with her bravado, frequent boasting, and competitive attitude, the ideal of the neoliberal empowered self-made entrepreneur, who, again, because of her worth as sex worker, has found a way out of economic instability. However, as the tides turn, she is constantly reminded of being “just” a worker. In the final moment of confrontation between Ani and Vanya, on the stepladder of his family's private jet directed to Vegas, the main character desperately asks him to defend their marriage one last time. Vanya looking down on her, dismisses her concerns as simply stupid, though thanking her for making his last trip to the US fun. This heartbreaking moment, on the one hand, reveals the childish immaturity of the spoiled rich kid, his incapacity to see her pain; more importantly, nonetheless, the dialogue stresses how Vanya never stopped looking at Ani as nothing but the product of her work. She exists only for the labour she can provide: an escort, whose professional status can be carelessly used to dismiss her both with his friend or with Galina.

6. There are hints that he would be the one threatening Anora and her loved ones in the eventuality she tried legal actions against the Zakharovs.

Where in the classical screwball rom-com people get acquainted with the alien social world of their love interests, Vanya is completely shielded from it, and, as his parents, unable or unwilling to break out of a convenient self-enclosure. On this note, the debated closing sequence (see Broey Deschanel 2024) of the film allows us to observe a peculiar dynamic of class awakening: driven back home to the snowy periphery by Igor, in a bleak atmosphere (no score, plus lengthy close ups and shot reverse shot composition) Ani takes advantage of the final occasion to mock the goon once more. However, the more sombre tone of this sequence downplays this relational dynamic we have seen deployed throughout the narrative accentuating the process of mourning and coping the main character is undergoing as she ends up where the narrative started. After Igor returns the infamous engagement ring, Anora's first reaction is that of sexually approaching him clearly knowing of his attraction. As they start making love, the camera stays fixed on them, depriving the moment of the rhythm and overexcitement associated with the moments of intimacy at the club or with Vanya. As Igor tries to kiss her, slightly forcing her head, Ani first hits him and, then, finally bursts into tears, ending up hugging him (cut to final credits).

This final breakdown scene can adapt and effortlessly become object to multiple responses; it shows her acceptance of reality and the abandonment of the façade of aggressiveness and self-confidence she has put on for the entire film: a social shield, which clearly allows her to be ready to respond in her own conflictual and competitive social world. This moment, however, can also hint at an impossibility to commodify her sexuality, and subjectivity, once more. Indeed, her conceding to Igor could be seen as a dry and almost depressing transaction: the ring in exchange for sex. Similarly, Igor's more aggressive push for emotional intimacy, coming from a rollercoaster of emotional and physical trauma, may appear to reinforce a pattern of abuse over Anora. At the same time, the starting approach from the main character highlights a need for care – a symptom and effect of her emotional distress, and of an existential failure – she does not really know how to tackle (see also Broey Deschanel, 2024). While the sequence dwells on this disturbing affective ambiguity exactly to point out the sense of loss and defeat of both characters, it is possible to see something else emerging from this failed romantic closure. Beyond a moralisation of sexuality and denunciation of the inherently cursed sex work, which, as we have discussed, is something that Baker's films constantly avoid (see Weaver 2024), the ending punctuates the impossibility to revive the fairytale. The dream of self-accomplishment collapses or, to use Read's account, the mythocratic dimension associated with work, with the possibility of being awarded for your own effort and fatigue (2024: 176-9), cannot stand anymore.

We have seen how even other Baker's characters, notwithstanding the dire circumstances they found themselves in by the end of each movie, still cultivated and nurtured a hopeful ideological dimension. *Anora*, with its specific undermining of the screwball rom-com conclusion, signals the void attached to this aspirational space; a lack, which, however, comes with a bleak realisation of passivity and subordination. Work, in all his forms, cannot operate as the means of emancipation in a reality that has completely abandoned any idea of social compromise and tools for class mobility (key features of the past Keynesian "deal"). The realisation of being a subject comes, therefore, with the acknowledgement of a foundational impotence: to be determined by the forces of capital, instead of operating in the guise of an autonomous agent; a worker in a chain of command, instead of an entrepreneur wielding her human capital against her competitors in a fierce but ultimately fair marketplace. Anora's cry and conflictual reaching out to Igor may be seen as a fatalistic reckoning with this materialist dynamic, mixed with the knowledge that what is left to her is nothing but to accept the point-less everyday grind each worker is forced to abide by. A shift on a large assembly line making no distinctions between care workers, entertainers, and blue or white collars, and where existing as working-class member implies being constrained in a social relation rather than possessing a specific identity marker (see Ciccarelli 2021: 17). Exactly because of this realisation, and of her conflictual reaching out to Igor, the final moment can also be seen as connecting the trauma of mourning for her lost self with the beginning of a collective becoming. The construction of class consciousness, far away from providing automatic empowerment, is acted as a problematic mutation, as a process; as the shattering awareness of individual limits, of failure on the level of subjectivity that can only be overcome through the generation of new bonds. In the encounter and organisation with others new subjectivities can be formed and a new imagination, a new dream can arise substituting the never-ending nightmare of today's capital order.

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