

Maggie Leaf
Professor Anker
AMST 1100: Politics and Film
15 December 2020

Uncut Gems as it Pertains to Late-Stage Capitalism

The erosion of society's autonomy, psychological wellness, and financial capital is rooted in late-stage capitalism. Any institution that prioritizes profit ahead of the needs of its subordinates has fallen subject to a system of apathy. *Uncut Gems* serves as a prime example of how the institutions of surveillance, necropolitics and violence, and neoliberalism affect people on an individual level by way of capitalism. Howard Ratner, the deeply afflicted protagonist, finds himself under the weight of crippling debt, a tumultuous family dynamic, and a gambling addiction with no apparent remedy. The common denominator of the chaos that dictates the *mise-en-scene* and Howard's life is the existential dread of a materialist-driven society. The entire film revolves around Howard's most prized possession, the opal. Its mystic nature coupled with its potential as a status symbol showcases how society's inner workings are programmed to base one's worth on their possessions. Howard's neuroticism, seen in nearly every aspect of his life, reflects the suffocating stronghold that capitalism has on everyday Americans. What is seemingly a film about an individual and his efforts to get rich, *Uncut Gems* embodies the much greater theme of the innately merciless reality of America's economic system.

Surveillance, as an institution, ideally serves a population through proactive forms of discipline: exhorting an individual to subconsciously adjust their behavior without physical coercion from the state. In this system, those who hold the power force the subjugated into compliance with virtually no resistance. As Foucault describes, this system does not occur by democratic means, but through subconscious indoctrination that takes place at the societal level allowing the powerful to manipulate the powerless into the surrender of the body. As a result,

individual autonomy is a myth if one is forced to act in accordance with a system they're indebted to. Foucault's assessment of discipline asserts the political investment of the body is bound up with its economic use. This evaluation, in turn, dissociates power from the body. He writes, "But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." In a capitalist society, people are inherently unable to act in their self-interest. In return for one's forced surrender of their time, freedom, and livelihood, they are only compensated for a minuscule fraction of their labor's worth. The American people, preyed on by creditors and institutions profiting off of their debt, are accustomed to rules that keep them in low-paying jobs with little benefits; the state's leveraging of imprisonment and retributive punishment for defiance coerces its citizens to act in the opposite of self-interest. Foucault also explains that this system forces one to internalize an exterior gaze. In *Uncut Gems*, Howard's growing debt subjected him to the ever-present surveillance of his sister-in-law's husband, Arno, and his two cronies, Phil and Nico. The film first introduces this main group of antagonists when Phil and Nico find their way into Howard's jewelry store in New York's diamond district and start listing their grievances against his unscrupulous business practices. Each financial and social transaction Howard makes thereafter is done in the interest of retrieving Arno's money. With no regard for Howard's family or medical issues, they psychologically torment him, creating a hostile enough environment that he no longer possesses autonomy over his own body. This is depicted in the scene where the Ratners attend their daughter's school play only for Howard to be stalked by Arno, Phil, and Nico. Threatening every personal freedom to which Howard should be entitled, they strip him of his clothes, hold a knife to him, and then lock him in the trunk of his car. Foucault finds the means of production, in this

case, Howard's efforts to pay his debts, to be an investment of power and domination stating, "The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself."

Under the veil of "hustle and ambition," American society's perception of success only functions through necropolitics and violence. It is impossible to build wealth in a capitalist system without abusing the sovereignty of its citizens. In this sense, exploiting workers' wellbeing for capital is inherently violent. Mbembe's work, "Necropolitics," expounds on power and its relation to life and death. More specifically, who kills and who dies. He states that the concept of sovereignty hinges on the notion of an individual as the master of their own meaning: "a process of self-institution and self-limitation." However, this over-simplified definition does not account for "the material destruction of human bodies and populations," Mbembe postulates. This power structure shifts the autonomy of the subject into the hands of the state and under the jurisdiction of the wealthy. In *Uncut Gems*, the most glaringly obvious example of this is the opening scene showcasing the miners in Ethiopia. Dealing with potentially fatal physical ailments and psychological distress, the workers are at the mercy of necropolitics. The extraction of valuable resources concentrated around certain enclaves (like Ethiopia), "turned the enclaves into privileged spaces of war and death," Mbembe suggests. The continuation of dehumanization for the sake of profit is perpetuated by people like Howard. Later in the film, an exchange between him and Kevin Garnett (the buyer of Howard's treasured opal) encapsulates the fundamental nature of capitalism. He asks Howard, "You gave some Ethiopians \$100,000 for something you thought was worth \$1 million?" Summarized by Mbembe, "The extraction and looting of natural resources by war machines goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to

immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people.” In this context, the war machine is capitalism, and the militia is the actors who justify the institution for their benefit.

Sontag’s views on war and violence in *Regarding the Pain of Others* somewhat echo Mbembe’s thoughts. She contends that while few people believe violence is never justifiable, there is a vacuum in who determines what is justified. Sontag argues, “Men (most men) like war, since for men there is ‘some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting.’” In the final minute of *Uncut Gems*, the shocking nature of Howard’s death by gun violence is a testament to the fragility of the male ego, especially when their authority is called into question. Phil’s sudden decision to kill both Howard and Arno was his mechanism to exercise the little sovereignty he possessed, as the rest of his life was controlled by systems out of his reach. “What matters is precisely who is killed and by whom... To the militant, identity is everything,” Sontag writes.

Neoliberalism bolsters inequality. With its dawn in the seventies and eighties, the narrative shifted from emphasizing a state-regulated economy to placing the responsibility on the individual for their own success. Every decision one makes in such a system must consider their return on investment for it to be validated. That way, when an individual falls victim to poverty or social injustice, the governing apparatuses can absolve themselves of the blame. In a country where inequality is at the root of every single societal issue—wealth, income, race, health—the equal opportunity capitalism supposedly provides ceases to exist. Stiglitz explains that the wealthiest one percent of Americans own thirty-five percent of America’s wealth, and that “Inequalities of outcomes perpetuate themselves.” In turn, the notion of trickle-down economics spewed by ‘individual freedom’ capitalists has eroded the middle class, created an oligarchy of America’s democracy, and diminished any form of equitable competition. “In virtually every domain, the United States has made decisions that help to enrich the top at the expense of the

rest,” Stiglitz argues. Free markets, in the age of transnational corporations, and a consumer-driven society prohibit morality from factoring into the neoliberal ideology. How Howard treats his employees in *Uncut Gems* proves this point. His jeweler, Yussi, has to face Phil and Nico directly because of Howard’s insufficiency. They drag him over the counter, ripping his shirt and causing significant bodily harm. In return, Howard throws a new shirt at him and tells him to get back to work. Symbolic of the way corporations treat their employees, Howard is completely ignorant of the depravity he inflicts on his employees by putting them in harm’s way for his personal benefit. They are disposable utilities whose only purpose is to make a profit. And as Stiglitz admits, “An economic system that only delivers for the very top is a failed economic system.”

A “New World Order” has completely hindered the valorization of global civilization, according to Von Werholf in “Neoliberal Globalization.” Every transaction is processed through the lenses of cost-benefit analysis, profit maximization, and competition as the driving force of growth, deifying the abstract concept of the ‘market.’ By exonerating the state of any meaningful intervention, neoliberalism claims “the common good depends entirely on the uncontrolled egoism of the individual,” Von Werholf posits. “Freedom for corporations hence consists of a freedom from responsibility and commitment to society.” Through corporations’ monopoly on the global economy, politics, and essentially every sector of civilization, commodity fetishism now dictates human thought, action, and principle. This phenomenon serves as the basis for many thematic elements in *Uncut Gems*. From the diamond-encrusted Furby showcased in Howard’s store, to Howard’s sexual reaction when seeing the opal for the first time, to Kevin Garnett’s seemingly sacerdotal connection with the opal, to Howard’s deeply-rooted gambling addiction, humanity’s entire existence revolves around the

commodification of life itself. Von Werholf writes, “In its neoliberal stage it is not enough for capitalism to globally pursue less cost-intensive and preferably “wageless” commodity production. The objective is to transform everyone and everything into commodities.” As a result, capitalism and democracy are, in fact, mutually exclusive, proven by neoliberalism’s “monetary totalitarianism.”

Intrinsic to modern American society, late-stage capitalism proliferates itself through the institutions of surveillance, necropolitics and violence, and neoliberalism. Countries, like America, that coerce their citizens into debt for their very survival condemn them to a system of repressive power and punishment as a political weapon. Capitalism wields death by wage-slavery as the optimum form of power, creating an environment where the population lives to die. As a result, Western economics has transformed from an ideology of freedom and competition to an institutionalized system of mass destruction. *Uncut Gems* reify these constructs through its commentary on American society as it pertains to late-stage capitalism.