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@KarlNarcs: A Comedic Critique on the Digital Age

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**@KARLNARCS: A COMEDIC CRITIQUE ON THE
DIGITAL AGE**

by
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL
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Abstract:

An outline of the pre-production, production, and post-production of a five-minute comedic short on the digital age and its influence on Generation Z using Marxist theory.

Key Words: Production, Marxism, Digital, Media

@KarlMarx: A Comedic Critique

Film holds a complicated position in the art world. On the one hand, artistic cinema can be composed of irreplaceable masterpieces, and on the other, many films are now created using generic formulas that allow films to be easily consumed by the masses. The film industry has been a prominent part of America's economy for approximately a century now. Many factors have contributed to the success and global prominence of American cinema, and there are several key elements of American films that set it apart from the cinema of other nations. Throughout the course of my education at Scripps College I have learned about the strict rules that American films are subject to, and I have become very interested in the Code era in Hollywood specifically. I have come to understand that film in this country is used as a way to escape reality and keep consumers pleased as opposed to as a way to critique reality and spread ideas. As a result, we as a society fail to see the many consequences of the advanced media that we all face in the contemporary digital age. I will therefore be making a short film that externally takes on the identity of a studio-Hollywood model, while the deeper context of the film will be a critique on the digital age.

My short film will be working within the Hollywood model as it is inspired by the great comedy filmmakers of the 20th and 21st century who worked to communicate socio-political and socio-economic ideas to audience members without punishment from production studios. Since the classical Hollywood cinema of the 1920's and 30's, visual codes in film such as continuity editing, standard shots and camera angles, eyeline matching, and adherence to the 180-degree rule, were used alongside norms such as plot resolution, accessible narratives, and sympathetic characters (Film Histography 54). My editing style will follow the continuity editing system in order to resemble a studio film. I will follow the visual codes of the Hollywood model, such as

eyeline matching and standard shots like mediums, wides, and close ups. However, I hope to challenge the studio-model by denying the audience a plot resolution. Instead, the problem at hand in my film will be anything but resolved and the hero (Karl Marx) will fail. While having the hero fail is a direct challenge to the dominant model of filmmaking in America, it is my characters themselves who will make my film inherently political. Four of the five characters in my film are prominent cultural figures in history: Karl Marx, Adam Smith, God (the Christian God), and Jesus Christ. My choice to include figures from the Christian religion is based on the infamously strict production code that controlled Hollywood until the 1960's. It was Joseph Breen, a conservative Catholic, who enforced the Code in the first place (Complicated women 100). Because of his ties to the Catholic Church, leaders in the Church became increasingly more vocal in protest of the entertainment industry (101). The Code, following strict Catholic values, was intent on preventing the spreading of liberal ideas and was specifically strict with the roles that women could play. It was therefore primarily focused on dramas and romance films, and thus comedy became the vehicle for expressing anarchic impulse for many filmmakers (110). Because of comedy's historic role in carrying the leftist ideas within mainstream Hollywood, I have chosen to make my film a comedy. I believe that in order to laugh at something, one must have an idea as to why they are laughing. Sometimes it is the horror or fear of the subject matter that makes it all the more amusing, like Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* of 1940, where America's favorite comedy actor took on the role of making fun of Hitler in an effort to get the US to join World War Two. In my case, not nearly as extreme, I am asking people to become aware of the ways in which we are controlled by invisible forces of the digital age.

The context of my film's plot, which is a critique on digital culture, is strongly influenced by theorists Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, and Arturo Escobar. Arturo Escobar is primarily

focused on the way technology has integrated itself into human modes of communication. Escobar argues that the majority of human social interactions are now either online or influenced by the Internet (Escobar, 212). He also argues that the driving force of history is no longer the human conscious but instead the technology that we are producing is operating in tandem with our consciousness to produce a new reality. While his argument is complex, I am specifically focusing on the notion that socio-cultural constructions are no longer set in motion by humans but instead by digital technology (Escobar, 214). It is this specific argument, that human interaction, and culture, is predominantly online now, that inspired me to use social media as the medium on which Karl Marx decides to spread his philosophy to the people of the Internet. I chose to use Karl Marx as my main character because of Heidegger. Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher of the 20th century, made the argument that technology has allowed capitalism to commodify more and more things. He also argues that technology in some ways has allowed humans to think that we are no longer in the nexus of capitalism, but that this notion is very untrue and we are still operating under a hegemonic-capitalist system that has spread from the western world to the rest of the globe (Smith, 443). I will note that Heidegger was infamously a member of the Nazi party and therefore it is not out of respect for him that I use his argument. Another prominent influence on my film is the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher of the 20th century. Deleuze is famous for his theory on 'control society.' What Deleuze means by control society is the realization that society now operates under power technologies and technological institutions, like school and the marketplace, in order to modulate 'dividuals' as opposed to individuals (Patton, 194). All 'dividuals' are marked by race, age, income, lifestyle, etc., and their information can be tabulated and recorded along with others to form a mass data bank to be analyzed and exploited by corporations and/or the government

(195). Both Heidegger and Deleuze have Marxist-influenced arguments which of course lead me to the idea of using Karl Marx as the means by which I critique the digital age. Heidegger and Deleuze provide the theories that I am using to justify my film's conclusion. Because digital technology is used as a means to control the masses and keep them at bay, I will have Karl Marx enter the digital age (present day) as a millennial (age: 23). He will attempt to spread the word of Marxism across social media, but in order to do so, he must gain a large following. By the end of the film, Marx will have become so lost in the world of social media, and the consumer-vanity it produces, that he will forget what he originally set out to do, and instead put all of his energy into gaining more followers. He will be brainwashed into becoming a consumer of the very thing he hates.

My short film, inspired by comedy films and neo-Marxist theory alike, is intended to present audiences with a modern and relatable critique on the use of internet and social media. I hope that after watching my film, people will think about their time spent online, what about that time is valuable to them, and why. Because my film is a comedy that stars two college-aged men who use a very popular social-media platform, I believe that the narrative will be very accessible. It must be accessible to the general viewer in order to combat the complexity of the theories I am focusing on, because using comedic narrative-style and relatable characters will allow the critique to be easily digested by the general public. This film very much serves as a test-drive for my future professional career; I hope to work in the studio-industry of Hollywood while simultaneously making films for the purpose of spreading ideas and cultural critiques as opposed to just making money. Perhaps that statement is an oxymoron, but that is the point of this experiment.

Process of Production

At the start of the semester, after the initial idea for my project itself had been conceived, a production schedule that covered the length of the semester needed to be created. I designated each relative month, September, October, and November, to three different stages of production. September was focused on pre-production, October on production, and November on post production. Smaller and more detailed sub-schedules and tasks were then created in each month's respective larger schedule, in order to ensure an efficient realization of my thesis. With strong planning at the beginning of the semester, accompanied with the proper research, the production of my senior thesis is going according to plan.

Because my thesis is a narrative inspired by comedic internet videos, but also serves as a social commentary on the digital age, I used the month of September to write a screenplay that could incorporate both elements into my film. Creating the screenplay meant understanding what arguments from which theorists I would be including in my project. In my first paper, I mentioned the arguments from Arturo Escobar, Martin Heidegger, and Gilles Deleuze, all of whom use Marxist-based theory to comment on the advanced technology of the modern world. I used Deleuze's theory of 'control society' while constructing my protagonist, Karl Marx. Because Marx was never alive for the 20th century, we cannot ever know for certain what he would think of the modern institutions in our neo-capitalist society. In my script, we are introduced to Karl Marx while he is in 'heaven' and therefore observing earth from the afterlife, and in order to justify my plot I needed Marx to have a concrete theory on the modern age of technology. Deleuze (1925-1995) was heavily influenced by Marxist theory while critiquing modern institutions for operating under new power technologies that allow the masses to be observed, and inevitably controlled, like a data-bank for the benefit of corporations (Patton, 195). Karl Marx, in my script, therefore believes in this theory, which is what jump-starts his plot to

overthrow the digital age of capitalism. Arturo Escobar's argument that socio-cultural realities are no longer set in motion by humans but instead by digital communication platforms like social media, (Escobar, 214), inspired my decision to use social media as the means by Marx attempts to unite the masses. I did not form what would be the conclusion to my narrative until the last week of September, when I re-discovered Heidegger (a German theorist heavily influenced by Deleuze). Heidegger argues that internet technology has made it easier for the public to cast a veil over reality and ignore the consequences of capitalism. It has also allowed capitalism to commodify things that were not previously commodifiable without digital technology. However, due to the nature of social media and internet usage, it has become increasingly difficult to actually realize the hegemonic extent of digital capitalism (Escobar, 214). It is Heidegger's argument that inspired me to conclude my script with Karl Marx becoming so brainwashed by his heavy social-media use that he loses sight of his original intentions, and instead only cares about maintaining his large Instagram following.

After my script was finalized, I needed to plan how I would follow the style of Hollywood's studio comedic films. I gave myself the last week of September and the first week of October to create the shot-list and floor plan in order to prepare. In my first paper I mentioned some standard elements of classical and neo-classical Hollywood cinema. I used these elements, including continuity editing, standard shots and camera angles, eyeline matching, adherence to the 180-degree rule, accessible narratives, and sympathetic characters (Film 54), to create a shot list compiled of 34-shots over the course of six 'scenes' in total. I place scenes in parentheses because three of the scenes, although they involve location change and dialogue, are part of a single montage. I stick true to the standard shooting style of Hollywood by only including wide, medium, and close-up shots in my short film with no unique or extreme angles

and limited camera movement. Floor plans were created for each scene in order to ensure that each shot is set up to follow the 180-degree rule, and match-on-action is ensured during the editing process. My floor plans were created on Google Drawings so that they could be easily edited, or shared with my actors. While shooting, I used the Canon Mark III DSLR camera along with the RODE shotgun microphone. The DSLR camera provides opportunity for clear image and neutral lighting while the shotgun mic ensures clear audio, both of which are important when making a standard studio-style film. I used a tripod to provide a steady and consistent shot, also important in a studio-style film, and followed my shot list as planned. Shooting took place during the month of October on weekends. However, the first and final scene require re-shoots as my actor for Karl Marx changed half-way through October. Re-shoots will take place on November 23rd and 24th. Besides this set back, the entire month of November is dedicated to post production.

Post production consists primarily of ensuring that I meet the standards of the continuity-editing system and the style I am hoping to achieve. Continuity editing is a style that hopes to ensure the editing of the film is as invisible as possible. A lack of jump-cuts, short shot-lengths between cuts, and ensuring actions are matched between cuts are the rules I am following during post-production. The first and last rules have already been ensured thanks so my shot list and floor plan. I follow the second rule by ensuring that there is no more than eight to ten seconds between each cut. What will need to happen besides the general compilation of my footage is color-correction and audio-correction. Color correction will be necessary in order to maintain a consistent lighting and mood throughout the film, which will help keep audiences focused on the narrative. As of now, my rough cut is not color corrected and therefore some shots are warmer or of a higher contrast than others. Color correction should fix the extreme differences between

shots. Audio-correction will require that audio levels stay consistent throughout the film, with no one shot or scene playing louder or quieter than others. I will also need to deal with the levels of white noise in my footage, because it is louder in some shots compared to others. Eliminating as much white noise without affecting the quality of the audio itself will be one of the most important tasks for my audio-corrections, which will take place in the second half of November, alongside color-corrections. All editing is taking place on Premiere Pro. With my schedule, techniques, and goals all thoroughly researched and laid out, I have been on track and have enjoyed the process of realizing my thesis.

Final Thoughts

A film never turns out as the maker originally expected. I knew that from the start. While making my capstone project, I consistently kept an open mind and accepted any adjustments that needed to be made. When I first wrote down my original idea for a comedy sketch involving Karl Marx, it was obvious that five minutes was going to be a very tight squeeze. Finding the space to land jokes and make an academic critique on the digital age of our economy is a difficult task - even more so than I had originally anticipated. The capstone project was also my first time directing actors. Although my actors are my friends who were doing me a favor, and had minimal acting experience, they did put in a lot of effort and I am thankful for that. Of course, working with young men who are not in school can have its set-backs, which became a very large bump in the road during the production/filming process itself. Lastly, post-production went as I anticipated. While I enjoy editing, computers and technology are not my strong suit and therefore I could easily identify what I would and would not be able to do from the start of the semester. Overall, during the project process, I learned specifically what types of problems or barriers can occur during film production, and how a great attitude can overcome them.

While writing the screenplay, I did not anticipate changing the plot as often as I did. My original idea was to have a college student build a time-machine with his best friend and bring Karl Marx to the 21st century to help them write their thesis. However, this idea did not wrap up within five minutes. It would have taken much longer to actually have a plot unfold and conclude within the incredibly small amount of time given. I therefore decided to scratch the time-machine idea, because that was taking up a lot of space. I instead switched to the idea of having the first scene take place in heaven, and instead of the original Karl Marx coming to earth, God would send Karl Marx's consciousness into the mind of a twenty-year-old guy. It was not my first choice, and I do wish I had more time so that I could have done the other one. However, I rolled with the punches, and having God as a character allowed me to get away with explaining less of the logic behind certain actions, like Karl coming to the 21st century in the first place. Finalizing the script took about one month.

Production proved difficult because I shot my film in Los Angeles, and my actors were two friends doing me a favor. I drove to LA every weekend for five weeks. I was not expecting it to take as long as it did, but unfortunately, I was unprepared for how much time my actors needed to memorize lines and actually act them out. I made sure to send the script ahead of time and text each one shooting plans and schedules. However, we always started late and they would memorize their lines on-site. They would also get burned out and want to stop after about an hour, which is not a lot of time to nail a scripted scene. I am not placing any blame on my actors for anything, because they do not go to school and were taking time to do something for a friend. It makes sense that they did not take it as seriously as I did, and I am thankful for the challenge of learning how to organize people and learning how to stay alert and ready to capture what could be a one-time moment, because most of the time on one or two of the takes were

usable. This project was also my first time using a shot-gun microphone. I was unprepared for the amount of white noise in my shots, and wish I knew how to solve that problem. I also found that one weekend the production center gave me one of the oldest microphones, and it was very faulty. Only about half of my footage from that scene had audio, and so I had to work with what I got. It was at times disheartening that I do not have the same skill with a camera as other students in class. I also realized that the students whose films appeared to look so much cleaner than mine had their own cinematographers who were separate from the directors. I reached out to my camera savvy friends, but they unfortunately are all working professionally now. I made do with my basic knowledge and in the process learned the basic handling/operation of a DSLR camera.

Post-production went as planned, for the most part. As I stated before, I know my strengths and was therefore prepared for what I knew I could handle in the editing process. The largest bumps in the road proved to be two different situations: the first was my lack of audio for the first scene due to a faulty microphone, and the second was trying to fit a coherent narrative into five minutes. For the first scene, all of “God’s” audio was lost. I had all of his close-ups and medium shots, but none of his lines to go along with it. I took one wide that day, because the actor who played God was in a very bad headspace and wanted to leave. I therefore took one wide at the end, which looking on it back now, I should have taken more. I used the audio from the wide shot and placed it over his close-ups. I tried to get the volume to match the close-up shots of Karl Marx and Adam Smith, and match his lips to the words. The tricky part about the later process was that in the final wide, the actor was so done filming that he did not say his lines properly and skipped over many of them. Thankfully, the beard of his costume masked his mouth, and I ended up having to match words with overall actions or facial expressions as

opposed to really focusing on the lip syncing. The second downside to the audio fiasco was rearranging the whole first scene due to “God’s” actor only saying about half of his real lines. I thought this would be stressful, but it actually ended up cutting the scene in half, which I would have had to do anyway because of the time limit. As for the other scenes, I ended up cutting the second scene (which I showed in class) and the montage sequence both in-half. Each one was about two minutes pre-time cut, and by the end of post-production, each one was a little over a minute. Through this process I learned how to cut-up and rearrange a narrative while still successfully communicating the original tone or goal to the audience. I did however have to cut out many of the jokes that were not necessary to plot development. Leaving out my jokes was somewhat sad because we (the actors and I) really did enjoy filming them, but it had to be done to fit the project guidelines. I therefore learned to let go of personal preferences for the preferences of the “producer”.

In the end, I felt as though my project turned out a little rougher around the edges than I had originally anticipated. The largest contributing factor to this outcome was the time restraint. I learned my lesson and, in the future, should I be given five or less minutes to make a film, I may not choose a narrative. And if I did, I would choose a smaller idea that does not involve time travel.

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