

## **Hollywood, Bike Messengers, and the New Economy**

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### **Abstract**

The sociological study of popular cinema provides an analytic entry point for exploring how economic realities are given meaning through cultural products. In this paper, I compare how two Hollywood movies about bike messengers, *Quicksilver* and *Premium Rush*, position their main characters in relationship to the new economy. Both films provide commentaries on work and social class, but, as products of unique socio-historical periods, I argue that their commentaries differ significantly. Produced in the 1980s, *Quicksilver* uses messengering as a form of middle class redemption, allowing the protagonist to return to the world of capitalist finance. By contrast, as a product of the Great Recession, *Premium Rush* offers a utopian vision of self-determination for low-wage service workers at the same time that it reifies the uncertainty, unpredictability, and riskiness that increasingly characterize American labor. I also show that both films converge in their portrayal of women and working class blacks.

### **Keywords**

bike messengers, culture, film, Hollywood, occupations, new economy, precarious work, sociology

## Introduction

“There will always be animal reserves and Indian reservations to hide the fact that they are dead, and that we are all Indians” – Baudrillard (1976 [1993]: 19)

*Premium Rush*, directed by David Koepp, is a wide distribution Hollywood movie released in the late summer of 2012. It is about a New York City bike messenger embroiled in a corrupt police detective’s scheme to steal a small fortune. Many critics responded favorably to the film—even if they found the plot uninspired, if not silly. Several of these critics, especially those writing from New York, insisted that the strength of the work resides not in its weak storyline, but in its truthful look and feel. For example, a reviewer for *The New York Times* approvingly commented, “The movie tries hard to look real” (Dargis, 2012). *The New York Post* went so far as to interview the actual bike messengers used in the making of the film, along with detailing some of the actors’ physical mishaps during the shooting, to emphasize its realism. “When you’re shooting a big-budget action movie and your leading man gets sent headlong into a car window and starts gushing blood, it’d normally be hard to find a silver lining in it. When that happened to Joseph Gordon-Levitt while shooting a scene for ‘Premium Rush’ in Midtown, though, it was more like [...] a badge of authenticity” (Erikson, 2012). In a similar vein a reviewer for *The New Yorker* noted, “The whole film sizzles with urban aggression” (Diones, 2012).

Bike messengers deliver time-sensitive package in the downtown core of major urban areas. They are typically found in older cities—places like Manhattan and London, with traffic infrastructure designed before the automobile-inspired sprawl of the post-WWII era.

Messengering is a tough job. Most riders are paid on commission. A talented bike courier in the U.S. might be able to earn over \$100 a day, but many more are making far less (see Kidder,

2011). Few riders receive health insurance or other benefits from their companies. Further, many messengers have nonstandard employment relationships (e.g., being listed as an independent contractor). In other words, messengering is what Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson (2000) would define as a “bad job.” Altogether, the low pay, combined with instability and insecurity, result in what could be considered precarious work (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011).

The precariousness of being a bike courier is not simply financial; it is also physical. Charged with meeting tight deadlines (as well as needing to cobble together enough commission to make ends meet), messengers speed through packed city streets. They dodge cars, truck, pedestrians, and potholes on vehicles that offer them no protection from the inevitable collisions that ensue (see Dennerlein and Meeker, 2002). Those with steely nerves spend their days squeezing through tight gaps in traffic, darting through red lights, and traveling the wrong way down one-way roads. To put it simply, the messenger on his bike is “an accident waiting to happen” (Mucha and Scheffler, 2009).

In many cities, bike couriers are predominately marginalized minorities and immigrants (i.e., workers with extremely limited employment opportunities). For these riders, the occupation is often little more than a “sweatshop of the streets” (Lipsyte, 1995). For all its bad qualities, however, messengering can also be an exciting job, and some cherish the risks of the occupation as an alternative to the doldrums of more stable workplaces (see Fincham, 2006, 2007; Kidder, 2011). Those most enamored with the thrills of urban cycling tend to be young men—in particular, young white men (see Kusz, 2004). One of the reasons for this is because working as a bike messenger can provide more than a paltry paycheck. Messengering can also offer opportunities for performances of masculinity forestalled in an increasingly service-oriented economy (see Nixon, 2009; also see Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody, 2006). Such

performances of masculinity—wrapped up in a cowboy image of riding roughshod through the city (Kidder, 2011)—are the essence of the action *Premium Rush* offers its audience.

The film, which grossed over \$20M domestically, is actually not the first movie to lionize bike messengers. Back in 1986—when the occupation was at its zenith—Kevin Bacon starred in *Quicksilver*, directed by Thomas Michael Donnelly. *Quicksilver* was panned by critics, but still brought in well over \$7M at the box office (adjusting for inflation that number would be closer to \$16M today).<sup>1</sup> Besides casting young white males as their leads, there are numerous other similarities between the two films. They both involve bad guys using cars to chase down the good guys (and a few gals) on bikes. There are romantic subplots involving beautiful female co-workers, and zany characters (many non-white) supplying comic relief. In short, both movies follow the basic Hollywood conventions, but offer a twist by having the action revolve around urban cycling. At the same time, as I will show in this paper, there is also an important difference between the two films: the heroes do not conceptualize labor, or their relationship to the job market, in the same way. And, for the critical viewer, this difference offers a useful analytic entry point for studying Hollywood’s portrayal of the new economy.

Specifically, I argue that *Quicksilver*—produced in the heady days of the 1980s—uses messengering as a form of middle class redemption, allowing the protagonist to return to the world of capitalist finance. By contrast, as a product of the Great Recession, *Premium Rush* offers a utopian vision of self-determination for low-wage service workers while it implicitly glorifies the uncertainty, unpredictability, and riskiness that increasingly characterize American labor. Beneath its masculine, gritty, and urban “authenticity,” *Premium Rush* is a 90-minute exegesis akin to Bourdieu’s (1979 [1984]: 1978) aphorism that “[W]orkers eat beans [...] because they have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to.” In other words, *Premium*

*Rush* provides an illusion of individual efficacy, but the film actually reifies the ever-shrinking alternatives and deteriorated conditions of labor within the new economy. Differences aside, both films converge in their marginalization of women and negative portrayals of black working class males—points that highlight middle class white men’s particular anxieties and Hollywood’s symbolic amelioration of them (Jameson, 1979 [1990]).

### **Cinema and critical sociology**

According to Giroux (2001a), popular cinema is a form of public pedagogy. It is a method by which individuals learn about the world around them. Thus, irrespective of their intellectual depth or artistic merit (or lack there of), films provide social commentary and teach viewers lessons about society (also see Cassano, 2008a; Denzin, 1995; Frymer et al., 2010; hooks 1996). The question I ask in this paper is how do *Quicksilver* and *Premium Rush* make use of a “bad job” (ala Kalleberg et al., 2000) in constructing stories about work and class? I am particularly interested in analyzing *Premium Rush* as a social allegory (see Dickens and Lausten, 2007) about uncertain, unpredictable, and risky employment (ala Kalleberg, 2009). As I will expand on below, unlike his predecessor in *Quicksilver*, the main character of *Premium Rush* does not use his experiences as a bike messenger to return to the world of stable middle class employment. Instead, the protagonist of *Premium Rush* relishes his bad job and champions precarious work. As a social allegory, therefore, *Premium Rush* comments on the vagaries of an increasingly deregulated market, and reifies these economic tribulations as inevitable and empowering for the individual (see Smith, 2001; Uchitelle, 2006). Further, it positions the rush of urban cycling as a status wage in lieu of material rewards (see Cassano, 2009a).

Ultimately, I contend that uncovering the ideological content of popular cinema allows for a more complete understanding of how culture works in contemporary society (e.g., see Dowd, 1999; Giroux 2001b; Jameson, 1976 [1990]; Žižek, 2007, 2008, 2013). As more jobs become bad and as the precariousness of labor redefines social relationships (Beck 2000; Bauman 2005), researchers must explore how the material consequences of these changes are given meaning through cultural products. In particular, much has been made of the role of neoliberalism in economic restructuring (see Albo, 2010; Kalleberg, 2011; Palley, 2011). However, economic logic also influences popular culture (Harvey, 1989; also see Eyerman and Ring, 1998; Witkin, 1995, 1997), and the sphere of leisure is interconnected with the sphere of work (Bauman 1988). Cassano (2008b, 2009b, 2010), for example, analyzes the classic films of director John Ford in relationship to changing American views on corporate power and unionization during the turbulent periods of the mid-1900s (for related class analyses of film see Dittmar, 1995; Stricker, 1990). Similarly, *Quicksilver* and *Premium Rush* can be understood as more than fantastical stories about bike messengers. They are cultural products of two distinct socio-historical periods, and they speak to the moments of their production. Most importantly, juxtaposing *Premium Rush* with *Quicksilver* brings the cultural meaning of our present day economic situation into sharper focus.

### **Precariousness and hegemony in the new economy**

Over the last several decades, there has been a growing consensus among academics, journalists, and the general public that the economic relationships that defined America in the post-WWII era have fundamentally transitioned. If the shrinking inequality of the middle of the last century could be characterized as the “Great Compression” (Goldin and Margo, 1992), the following

time period represents “the great divide” (Smith, 2001). That is, the relatively high wages, employment security, and economic stability offered by unionized factory work were upended by the economic deregulation and globalization of manufacturing starting in the 1970s (Cappelli, 1999; Hollister, 2011; Kalleberg, 2011). Over the last forty years, income and wealth disparities have expanded and financial risks have increasingly shifted back from employers to their employees. Kalleberg (2011) attributes these new realities of work to the rise in nonstandard labor arrangements. The demise of Fordist production, flexible work schedules, temporary employment, and independent contracting—as well as a general transition from manufacturing to service work (also see Elfring, 1989; Sassen, 1991)—have not offered the same level of remuneration for workers as those of the Pax-Americana period.

Burawoy (1983) refers to the new economy as a regime of hegemonic despotism. In contrast to the market despotism of early industrialization (in which individual workers were pitted against the tyranny of factory owners) and the hegemony of Keynesian concessions (in which owners capitulated to a certain degree of wealth redistribution in the form of higher wages and a social safety net), hegemonic despotism involves workers collectively offering concessions to their employers to stay competitive within the global market. Essential to Burawoy’s argument is that the methods previously used by owners and the state to ensure capitalist hegemony during the Great Compression are now being used to reverse the gains made by workers (also see Broad and Hunter, 2010). Which is to say, under a regime of market despotism it is apparent that the bourgeois and proletariat have opposing interests. Hegemonic regimes establish conditions that allow workers to believe their interests are tied to the survival of the company and the state. Immediately following WWII, hegemony was maintained by allotting the proletariat a greater share of surplus. Since the 1970s, however, hegemony has been

predicated on a growing fear on the part of workers that unless they agree to lower wages, fewer benefits, and nonstandard employment, their companies will be forced to relocate in cheaper labor markets (also see Jacobs and Newman, 2008; Smith, 2001; Uchitelle, 2006).

Of course, the Great Recession of the last decade helped to further entrench the political and ideological underpinnings of hegemonic despotism, and the precarious nature of work in the new economy was exacerbated (Grusky, Western, and Wimer, 2011; Newman, 2008; Palley, 2011). Today we live in a moment in which employers are reluctant to hire new workers (see Elsby, Hobijn, Sahin 2010), unemployed workers remain jobless longer (see Hout, Levanon, and Cumberworth, 2011), and those with jobs are likely to be receiving less in return for their labor (Kristal, 2010). Further, while there is no doubt that minorities and those with less education have fared the worst in the recession (see Newman, 2008; Smeeding et al., 2011), there is a rising disconnect between the skills possessed by college-educated workers and the jobs they hold (Beaudry et al., 2013). In other words, while a college degree greatly reduces a person's chances of unemployment, more and more college graduates perform labor that does not utilize their acquired skills. These "mal-employed" individuals earn far less than their equally educated counterparts in jobs necessitating advanced skills (Fogg and Harrington, 2011).

### **The messenger is dead, long live the messenger**

It is in the context of the neoliberal restructuring of the economy that *Quicksilver* and *Premium Rush* must be understood. Most importantly, when contrasting the two films, *Premium Rush*'s social allegory on labor relations should be located within the devastations wrought by the Great Recession. A good starting place for thinking about Hollywood's portrayal of messengers is the epigraph from Baudrillard (1976 [1993]) that opens this paper. Baudrillard states that, "we are



all Indians.” His point is that systems of power are built on false assumptions and illusions, and that such charades are essential aspect of a system’s reproduction (also see Debord, 1967 [1994]; Kracauer, 1927 [1995]). Thus, as capitalism expanded across globe, creatures and cultures that could not be put into the service of profit-generation were extinguished. But, Baudrillard argues, animal reserves and Indian reservations are not really to preserve them, for they are already gone. Instead, such places conceal the losses experienced by those that visit such places—the supposed beneficiaries of capitalism’s encroachments. In other words, as capitalism continues to tear the world asunder, those in the global north lament the demise of indigenous people—concealing how their own lives are also reshaped by (post)modernity.

In much the same way, *Premium Rush* brings the iconic urban cowboys from the 1980s (see Kugelmass, 1981; Smith, 1986) back onto the big screen. At the turn of the last century, Western Union had bicycle boys shuttling telegrams to and fro in every major American city (Downey, 2002; Perry, 1995). With the rise of the automobile and the invention of the telephone, the occupation seemed destined for redundancy. However, in what can only be considered an ironic twist in the saga of economic rationalization, the high-tech financial firms ruling the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century breathed new life into the bike courier business. In an age before fax machines and emails—and when millions of dollars could be lost in seconds—two-wheeled daredevils made a name for themselves connecting the local nodes of the global economy (see Kidder, 2011; also see Giest, 1983).

With the rise of electronic documents in the 1990s, the bike messenger industry began to disappear once again. Much of what messengers were delivering when *Quicksilver* was released has now been digitized (e.g., Green, 2006; Tommasson, 1991). Moreover, the real wages of couriers have fallen over the decades. But, it is at this moment—when the messenger business

seems to be in its death throes—that the bike courier is immortalized on the silver screen one more time. Perhaps, just like Baudrillard’s Indian reserves, *Premium Rush* hides the fact that we are all bike messengers now. Which is to say, in a wide range of occupations, individuals are increasingly subjected to the “bad” qualities that characterize messenger labor—low pay, few benefits, nonstandard work relationships, and precariousness. As portrayed on the big screen, however, messengering might seem like a good job—perhaps even a great one.

In real life, bike couriers find satisfaction in their labor because it allows for creative, spontaneous action (Kidder, 2011). This is the type of meaningful activity structured out of most low-wage, entry-level jobs (see Leidner, 1993; Sennett, 1998; also see Dubin, 1992). The creativity and spontaneity of messengering is also bound within Western notions of manhood. In particular, Connell (1979, [1983]) posits masculinity as an embodied combination of force and skill (also see Connell, 1995; Johnson, 2005). Force is about the occupation of space, and skill refers to the ability to successfully utilize objects or bodies within space. In a very direct sense, bike messengers force their way through traffic by bringing to bear their skills in urban cycling. In fact, it is this masculine deployment of force and skill that forms the foundations of the messenger’s cowboy imagery—the paradigmatic symbol of American manhood (Kimmel, 2005). To quote Kugelmass (1981: 67), “[Messengers] all share a kinship with the heroes of the Wild West. They are romantic adventures who prefer the exhilaration of danger to civilization’s deadening routine” (67). Or, as Smith (1986: 40) writes, “The bicycle messenger might even be regarded by some as the ultimate urban man—tough, resourceful, self-contained, riding against the odds the city stacks against everybody.”

Conversely, most forms of service work in the new economy are bereft of what Willis (1979: 196) calls “masculine expressivity.” Unlike the male-dominated factory floor of the

past—in which workers could find consolation in a claim to their status as men (because sex segregation provided the illusion that women lacked the force and skill to endure such labor)—young men in the service sector today must engage in gendered negotiations to develop meaningful work identities (Nixon, 2009; also see Kenway et al., 2006). In other words, many contemporary labor options do not easily allow for culturally valued performances of manhood and lack a clear narrative of masculinity. However, this is not the case for messengers.

Regardless, riding a bicycle at breakneck speeds through the city is an occupation few people (male or female) actually want, even fewer people can get, and fewer still can sustain as a viable career path. In fact, even people that *think* they want the job usually don't want it for long (see Kidder, 2011). As a form of Hollywood escapism, though, a movie about messengers allows for a storyline seemingly about finding meaning and manhood in one's labor, at the same time it glorifies the worst aspects of hegemonic despotism.

Essential to this escapism is what Cassano (2009a) calls a status wage. That is, material exploitation can be symbolically compensated through appeals to the status conferred upon the exploited. For example, white workers in the Antebellum South—despite their own meager position vis-à-vis the owning classes—benefitted from a racial hierarchy that subjugated blacks (Roediger, 1999). Likewise, American workers—regardless of their declining share of the nation's surplus—can gain a sense of pride and purpose through appeals to nationalism (Cassano, 2006). With *Premium Rush* this status wage comes by identification with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995). Specifically, messengers exchange stable labor relations and material rewards for the status of the “ultimate urban man”—a symbolic position increasingly important for young white men (see Kusz, 2004).

### **Jack and Wilee hit the street**

In *Quicksilver*, Kevin Bacon plays Jack. Viewers are introduced to Jack on his way to work at the Pacific Stock Exchange in San Francisco. He's sharply dressed in an expensive suit. Riding in a cab, he is passed by a black bike messenger (played by former New York courier and Olympic silver medalist, Nelson Vails). Jack offers the cabbie \$50 if he can catch the cyclist. The scene accomplishes two things. First, it positions Jack as rich, cocky, and willing to use others to enhance his own status. We also see that, beneath his cool exterior, he is a bit insecure. Second, Jack's interest and admiration in urban cycling is established, a matter reinforced when the cabbie fails to catch the messenger. Later that day, Jack's yen for success costs him his fortune—as well as his parents' lifesavings. Falling into a depression, he roams the streets and, at his nadir, sees a bicycle in a pawnshop. Jack is reborn as a messenger, and he is good at the job. He relishes its physicality and its simplicity. Perhaps more than anything else, Jack likes his new occupation's insularity. The only person he can hurt as a bike messenger is himself. It is the antithesis of his former job as a trader.

Jack is involved in three overlapping dramas. First, a murderous drug dealer is stalking Jack's paramour and fellow bike courier, Terri (Jamie Gertz). Second, Jack's co-worker, Hector (Paul Rodriguez), dreams of opening a hotdog stand, but cannot get a startup loan. Third, Jack must battle his own self-doubt after his failures on the trading floor. In the end, all these matters are satisfactorily resolved. The drug dealer dies, Jack gets the girl, and he summons the courage to once again enter the Exchange—this time with Hector's lifesavings. Thus, *Quicksilver* follows the trajectory of a typical boy's adventure film (e.g., *Home Alone*, *Never Ending Story*, etc.). Jack, having made a moral transgression (i.e., unbridled greed), is thrust into a strange new reality (i.e., life among the great unwashed) where he must rebuild himself as a moral agent. The

rebuilding of the self is the purpose of the adventure, and once his morality is re-established the adventure can end. In Jack's case, he learns to appreciate physical labor and weigh the pursuit of material wealth against the value of social relationships. It is the sociality of wealth that is the difference between Jack's initial hubristic demise on the trading floor (where he was gambling his parents' money for his own selfish gain) and his humble triumph in the end (where he is selflessly working to help Hector).

In *Premium Rush*, Joseph Gordon-Levitt plays Wilee. He first appears flying through the air and crashing onto the asphalt, having just been smashed into by a car. The collision, though, is just part of a day's work for Wilee. He is an unrepentant adrenaline junkie, which is why he loves the job. When Wilee is sent to make a pickup at Columbia University, though, it is revealed that he has recently graduated from their law school. As the film progresses, we discover more about Wilee's philosophy on life and why he's not currently ensconced in a downtown law firm. Namely, Wilee cannot stand the idea of sitting behind a desk as his former classmates are now forced to do. For Wilee this is a specifically sexualized and gendered aversion. "When I see a guy in a grey business suit [...it] makes my balls shrivel up into my abdomen." Lawyers do not share a kinship with the heroes of the Wild West; they are not ultimate urban men. Wilee's bravado is so extreme that it gives other messengers pause, but his talents on a bike are renowned throughout the city.

Wilee faces two main challenges in *Premium Rush*. He must deliver an envelope that Detective Monday (Michael Shannon), a maniacal police officer, is determined to intercept. The envelope contains a ticket that will either pay for the safe passage of a child out of China, or (should the dirty cop get a hold of it) erase a substantial gambling debt. As this plot unfolds, Wilee is also preoccupied with regaining the affections of Vanessa (Dania Rameriz), another

courier working at his company. Unlike its predecessor, *Premium Rush* is not a boy's adventure tale. Wilee does not remake himself as the movie progresses. Instead, Wilee uses his pre-existing characteristics to overcome the obstacles before him. Thus, it is the other characters that must learn to appreciate him as he already is. Detective Monday, Vanessa, and a slew of others all come to realize that Wilee's mantra of "brakes are death" is what is required to save the day. As Wilee says, "Can't stop; don't want to."

The most obvious example of Wilee's philosophy reshaping others comes when Vanessa (reeling from a collision caused by stopping too fast) throws her bicycle brake into the trash. Fixed-gear bicycles became popular among New York messengers in the early 1980s (Kugelmass 1981; Lyall, 1987). Because these bikes cannot coast, skilled riders can forgo using handbrakes and control their machine's speed entirely through the pedals. While riding brakeless is originally positioned as proof of Wilee's foolishness, he insists that brakes cause more collisions than they prevent (as the scene with Vanessa illustrates). Thus, when Vanessa removes her own brake after crashing, Wilee's risk-taking ethos is vindicated. Which is to say, it is by skirting past the boundaries of safety that Wilee manages to stay alive—"alive" here being both literal and figurative. Most importantly, it is by riding fixed that Wilee successfully asserts his masculine, cowboy image. The film ends with Wilee, once again, espousing his love of the job—it is a non-stop thrill ride that he has no plans for ending. Whereas the beginning places Wilee on the ground after being hit by a car, the end shows Wilee darting through an intersection as two cars collide behind him. He pedals on unscathed.

## **Finding the utopian in the new economy**

### *Self-determination in Premium Rush*

Throughout *Premium Rush*, Wilee proclaims his love of urban cycling. His passion for earning a living dodging cars is always contrasted with the loathing in which he views more staid employment options. To the movie's credit, Wilee's attitude is endemic among messengers (Kidder, 2011). But, when Hollywood makes a movie about an obscure subculture, objectively accurate depictions of reality are less important than verisimilitude. In other words, a veneer of authenticity that resonates with a much wider audience is what really matters. The commentary Wilee, as the protagonist of *Premium Rush*, provides appears straightforward: wage labor (especially office work) is drudgery. Thus, viewers can be inspired by Wilee's refusal to settle down into the workaday routine. No doubt, this message resonates with many. For people stuck in jobs that are dull, mindless, or overly routinized (e.g., Leidner, 1993; Sennett, 1998), speeding through the city on a bicycle might seem like a satisfying change of pace—at least when the weather is nice and before the hardships of injury and piece-rate employment set in. Financial stability and security, thus, are exchanged for the status wage of messengering's Wild West imagery of riding against the odds.

Taken less literally, Wilee's commentary does not have to be about choosing physical risk over stability. The risk can be financial, social, or emotional. That is, *Premium Rush* offers itself as a commentary on refusing to settle for mediocrity and the mundane. Wilee can be interpreted as an archetype of the American hero (the ultimate urban man). He's anti-establishment, daring, and fiercely independent, and these qualities—the qualities that enable him to be a successful bike messenger—allow him to succeed in saving the child and defeating the corrupt cop. The resolution, however, does not come with the child's rescue or Detective

Monday's death. It comes when Wilee is shown back on the streets—still careening through traffic. The *real* victory is Wilee (in spite of his law degree) continuing to live life on his terms (earning a status wage)—against those that would have him trade excitement for a comfortable salary.

There is more to *Premium Rush* than its overt commentary. Specifically, one should ask why Wilee has a law degree at all. While the film makes multiple references to it, at no point is the information necessary for the plot. Wilee never utilizes his skills at litigation, taps into his former network of powerful friends, or even demonstrates an above average mental capacity. His education is brought up repeatedly to indicate his *potential* mobility within the job market. Wilee, the bike courier J.D., represents supreme self-determination. Beneath its overt commentary on resisting mediocrity, therefore, *Premium Rush* also contains what Jameson (1976 [1990]) calls a utopian dimension. This dimension is developed in the representation of workers having control over their labor in the new economy. While few workers have only one choice in employment, most have only a handful of options in the types of labor they perform (e.g., office temp or sales clerk). *Premium Rush*, however, provides a much rosier picture—a person choosing a seemingly bad job because it is actually a good one. Wilee is not depicted as trapped in a dead end job; he is liberated by it (primarily because it allows him to enact the culturally valued trope of the cowboy).

As discussed above, the foundations that provided for a relatively affluent working class and expanding middle class in the United States has long since crumbled away. The financial meltdown of 2007 and subsequent recession exacerbated already degraded employment relationships. Service sector jobs—already poor financial substitutes for the halcyon days on the factory line—also deteriorated in quantity and quality. At the same time, with high



unemployment, employers are able to increase the qualifications necessary to be hired in low-level occupations. Thus, those with little education are forced out of the viable labor pool and those with advanced skills find themselves languishing in occupations that pay little and offer even less in intrinsic rewards. It is in the midst of this economic morass that *Premium Rush* provides a story about an advance degree holder that *chooses* to work in the service industry. In other words, at the very moment when the film's youthful target audiences have very little agency in their economic future, they are provided with a utopian vision for their lives.

In this sense, *Premium Rush* offers a subtle counter-narrative to Occupy Wall St. discontent. Perhaps the disappearance of unions, the extended hours, the shrinking pay, and the lack of benefits can be resolved by individual self-determination. Maybe real satisfaction in life cannot be found in stable employment, and maybe if everyone tried hard enough they could—like Wilee—find a way to get more out of the workday than just the material gratification of a paycheck. This sort of romanticized individualism, of course, is ubiquitous in American cinema (e.g., Dowd, 1990; Stricker, 1990). Undoubtedly, many viewers will find the possibility that they can resolve their dissatisfaction in the labor market through their own efforts far more appealing than the more realistic notion that employment will probably not cease to be toil, and that elites benefit from this hegemonic despotism.

#### *Physical labor and social bonds in Quicksilver*

The social allegory of *Premium Rush* is best understood in relation to its predecessor. Like Wilee, Jack is a messenger of a particular pedigree, and, like Wilee, he is choosing mal-employment over more prestigious opportunities. In the end, though, Jack only dabbles in messengering. As described above, it is an adventure for rebuilding his character. *Quicksilver*

has an overt commentary about financial speculations. In the wrong hands, financial markets are shown to be cold and callous. Jack's initial quest for wealth costs his parents their retirement funds because he has yet to learn this essential life lesson. As he rebuilds his moral worth, Jack discovers the dignity of working men—freeing him to eventually return to a white-collar occupation and leave the hoi polloi behind. Further, throughout the film, we see that Jack's fellow messengers are going nowhere fast, and Hector only advances a notch up the class ladder because of Jack's patronage. While the film feigns solidarity, therefore, the working class is shown as impotent (Dittmar, 1995; Van Heertum, 2010). Instead of critiquing financial speculations, the film actually valorizes them (see Denzin, 1991), as it is Jack's bourgeois knowledge that is essential to the film's resolution.

The utopian dimension of *Quicksilver* is that the inhumanity of the market can be overcome through social bonds. At the very moment when economic restructuring was sweeping the feet out beneath the working class, *Quicksilver* offers an image of a kinder, gentler capitalism (e.g., see Cassano, 2009b; Stricker, 1990). Of course, there was nothing kind or gentle about this transition. For the purposes of this argument, what is instructive is that unlike Wilee, Jack returns to the middle class, and his class position is key to overcoming the challenges presented by the plot. In *Premium Rush*, however, Wilee's middle class background is superfluous to defeating Detective Monday. And, Wilee, as much as his co-workers, is stuck in place. It is only Vanessa—perhaps naively—who yearns for class advancement. The utopian dimension of *Premium Rush*, therefore, is that workers can find satisfaction in the vagaries of the new economy. Further, unlike *Quicksilver*, there is no pretext to a kinder, gentler capitalism in *Premium Rush*—quite the opposite. It is the precariousness of labor that makes it worth the while for Wilee (i.e., a status wage over material rewards).

## **Reifying the new realities of labor**

### *Quicksilver and the righteousness of the middle class*

Just as films have a utopian dimension, Jameson (1979 [1990]) also argues they have a dimension that reifies existing power relationships. In *Quicksilver* it is the righteousness of the middle class that is reified. First and foremost, class mobility is positioned, more or less, as a consequence of personal choice. Jack is catapulted into the elite through his talent and drive, and his plummet into financial ruin is the result of his personal failings. Jack becomes a bike messenger because he can no longer stomach the risks involved with trading on the Exchange. But, this is not positioned as a critique of capital. Rather, it is shown to be a flaw in Jack's character. By working as a messenger, though, Jack regains the gumption needed to succeed in the market. Second, the speculative nature of contemporary capitalism is championed when Hector's dream is realized through Jack's winnings on the Exchange.

Embedded with *Quicksilver*'s story of middle class redemption is an insidious theme of white male privilege. As is often the case in Hollywood productions, women are given limited and limiting roles (see Smith, Choueiti, and Gall, 2010; Smith and Cook, 2008). Aside from two still photographs in an opening montage, Terri is the only female messenger, and she's not shown to be particularly competent at her job (e.g., she depends on Jack to fix her bike after a collision). Jack is also disparaged by a black messenger, Voodoo (Laurence Fishburne). Unlike Jack, who enjoys urban cycling, Voodoo appears to be motivated only by the money—so much so he works as a drug courier on the side. Eager to prove that he's the best on a bike, Voodoo goads Jack into a street race. Through underhanded tactics Voodoo almost beats Jack, but at the

finish line Voodoo's involvement with the narcotics trade catches up to him and he is murdered by Gypsy (Rudy Ramos), the film's main villain.

Ultimately, the reification of a righteous middle class in *Quicksilver* is filtered through a lens of gender and race. The labor in the film is men's work, and deserving whites are threatened by black co-workers jealous of their success (see Giroux, 1996; Gray, 1995; hooks, 1996; also see Van Heertum, 2010). *Quicksilver* is a story about transitions in the American economy during the 1980s. It taps into fears about the declining significance of manual labor and the wild fortunes amassed by a new breed of capitalists. However, these fears are symbolically resolved with a utopian appeal to compassionate capitalism. The status of white middle class males is reified through portrayals of an incapacitated working class, marginalized women, and vilified blacks. Thus, the utopian theme of the film reveals a world singularly controlled by white men of the bourgeoisie. And, most importantly for the present argument, this is a world to which Jack returns.

#### Premium Rush *and the rejection of the middle class*

Unlike *Quicksilver*, there is no return to the middle class in *Premium Rush*, and the reasons for this are indicative of current economic realities. In other words, *Quicksilver* is a morality tale about an economy transitioning from manufacturing to service. *Premium Rush*, on the other hand, is about a service economy shedding the vestiges of former labor relationships (e.g., union contracts and livable wages). Whereas Jack slums around with messengers to rebuild a moral sense of self, Wilee starts off as a bike messenger and continues to work as one. In fact, as the story progresses, Wilee's character must continually assert the necessity of rejecting the middle class because his moral sense of self comes from his willingness to stay a bike messenger. He

relishes the risks such work entails, for these confer a symbolic status that a suit and tie job cannot.

The overt commentary of *Premium Rush* is that there is more to life than material wealth. What the movie reifies, though, is the new normal of deteriorated working conditions. Herein lies the symbolism of the bike messenger in *Premium Rush*. It is an occupation that exemplifies precarious work in the new economy: low pay, few benefits, high employee turnover, physical danger, and job insecurity. However, unlike most jobs, it can also be fun and exciting. Thus, the unrepresentative quality of bike messenger labor (i.e., its potential joy) can be used as a colorful façade over what the job really represents (i.e., increasing levels of exploitation within the service economy). While Wilee might get a buzz from his work, this is simply not the reality for the vast majority of *Premium Rush*'s viewers. What is a reality, though, is that, like Wilee, many have formal training that far exceeds the meager skills required to perform their job (Beaudry et al., 2013). Like Wilee, most are also not represented by a union, many work more hours but receive less in remunerations than their parents did at their age (Kristal, 2010, 2013), and many will live out occupational careers with little in the way of security or stability (Kalleberg, 2011).

Wilee's rejection of bourgeois comforts for the thrills of urban cycling has no practical application in most people's everyday lives. There never were many bike messengers and today there are even fewer. And, the same could be said for countless other formerly good jobs that have been rationalized into drudgery (see Sennett, 1998). Alas, *Premium Rush* places the dying occupation of bike messengers on a pedestal as if to hide the fact that such work is really no longer an option. But, more importantly, by memorializing the positive aspects of the job, it helps to conceal the fact that we are all bike messengers now. That is, we are all increasingly subjected to the brutalities of the market. Unfortunately, most workers do not get the

independence and excitement that comes with being a bike courier. The reified dimension of *Premium Rush*, therefore, is in making the vagaries of the new economy something that should be desired. Just as Bourdieu (1979 [1984]) describes workers liking the beans they are condemned to eat anyway, the film provides the ideological foundation for workers embracing the risks they are condemned to anyway—providing a glimmer of symbolic worth beneath the crush of inequality.

As in *Quicksilver*, gender and racial inequalities seep into *Premium Rush*'s storyline. Thankfully, Vanessa plays a more active role than Terri, and in what might be an intentionally critical homage to *Quicksilver*, Vanessa is shown fixing her own bicycle as Wilee flirts with her. More women also populate the screen in *Premium Rush*. But, these women are only extras, and like Terri before her, Vanessa is treated as little more than a sexual reward for the employees at her company. In one scene, which certainly reflects the experiences of many female couriers on the job (Kidder, 2011), Vanessa's dispatcher, Raj (Aasif Mandvi), observes that since she's already been romantically involved with two couriers at the company, "When does Raj get to climb Mount Vanessa?" Vanessa is disgusted by the proposition, but it's presented as just one more of Raj's whacky comments—not the type of pervasive, demeaning sexual harassment that pushes women out of male-dominated occupations (e.g., Chetkovich, 1998; Eisenberg, 1997).

In almost perfect replication of *Quicksilver*, Wilee is also harassed by a boisterous and unscrupulous black co-worker, Manny (Wolé Parks). Manny is even more desperate than Voodoo to be acknowledged as the best courier—a point that echoes hooks (1996: 84) assertion about fictional representations of black males being "individuals tortured by [...] unrequited longing for white male love" (also see Denzin, 2002). And, like Voodoo, Manny forces Wilee into a street race. The hero has no interest in it, but the antagonist is willing to cheat at it to win.

Like *Voodoo*, though, Manny's would-be triumph is foiled at the last moment by another of the film's subplots.

Gray (2000 [2005]: 122) claims that blacks shown in the mainstream media frequently “[function] as the cultural and moral image through which white America [is] reminded of its deeply vexed relationship to race, sex, and power.” As in *Quicksilver*, in *Premium Rush* this vexed relationship is illustrated in black co-workers seething with untoward jealousy in the shadows of the white protagonists' well-deserved success. In this sense, both films provide a reactionary commentary on affirmative action at the same time that they naturalize the precariousness of modern labor. In other words, it is not the conditions of the labor that is shown to be problematic. The low pay, the dangers of riding a bike in city traffic at high speeds, and the lack of health insurance: Jack and Wilee are not troubled by these things. If anything they are part of the occupation's charm. What does seem to matter is the lurking threat of the dark Other (hooks, 1996; also see Collins, 2004). In *Premium Rush* this is multiplied by Manny not only stealing Wilee's commission, but also attempting to seduce Vanessa.

While Wilee does not return to the middle class, he, as the film's main white middle class male, is positioned as the deserving moral agent. Thus, in its support of hegemonic despotism, *Premium Rush* offers a utopian dimension in which white males dominate their occupational space. This is achieved through reifications of racist stereotypes of undeserving blacks willing to finagle and steal to obtain the hard-earned rewards of others (e.g., see Weis and Lombardo, 2002).

## Conclusion

The critical analysis of popular cinema offers valuable entry points for examining contemporary culture. Whatever else films may be (e.g., mindless entertainment, stunning visual achievements, compelling stories, etc.), they are a form of public pedagogy. Within their lessons, movies can support or critique existing social relationships. However, Hollywood films—while often given the dressings of rebellion—tend to reify capitalism and the inequalities that benefit middle and upper classes white males (see Giroux, 2001b).

Comparing and contrasting *Quicksilver* and *Premium Rush* provides an opportunity to analyze Hollywood productions in relationship to the new economy. Both films use the masculine, gritty urbanism of bike messengers to provide a commentary on the middle class. *Quicksilver* champions the righteousness of the bourgeoisie (white males in particular). Alternatively, *Premium Rush* valorizes white middle class males, but disregards the possibility of a return to the democratic spoils of the Pax-Americana period. These differing commentaries arise from their specific socio-historical conditions. *Quicksilver* is about the continued contraction of the industrial economy and the expansion of the service sector in the 1980s, while *Premium Rush* is about the ever-increasing precariousness of labor relations and the tribulations of work exacerbated by the Great Recession.

By thinking about *Premium Rush* in terms of utopia and reification (Jameson, 1979 [1990]), the economic realities of the new economy can be understood within a cultural context that underscores how neoliberal ideologies are given meaning in everyday life. That is, Hollywood movies are one way that the despotism of uncertain, unpredictable, and risky employment becomes hegemonic. In other words, *Premium Rush* depicts Wilee's situation as one of personal agency—the thrill of the streets over the monotony of the office cubical.



However, most bad jobs have very limited good sides—a point highlighted by the increasing disparities in wealth between those with truly good jobs and most others (Kalleberg, 2011; Smeeding et al., 2011). At the same time, both films intersect with how they portray gender and race. While Jack and Wilee have very different relationships to the job market, they are shown to have very similar relationships to women and minorities. That is, female co-workers are the sexual rewards for those most skilled at their manly jobs, and undeserving black co-workers envy the talents of whites and long for their approval. Thus, the structural factors behind precarious labor are ignored while gender stereotypes and racial antagonisms are slyly emphasized.

In the end, *Premium Rush*'s glorification of bike messengers only shows that this type of satisfying physical labor is nearing extinction—just as Baudrillard claims that Indian reservations hide the extinction of indigenous populations. In the shifting seas of the new economy most workers will be left with only the worst aspects of risky employment. There are, of course, myriad reasons that individuals take bad jobs and acquiesce to the conditions of precarious work. A lack of tangible options is the most obvious explanation. But, material conditions and the options one has within them always become wrapped in meaning. In contemporary society, popular cinema plays a distinctive part in the formation of individuals' cultural toolkits. With movies like *Premium Rush*, the new economy is fashioned as a positive change for workers. That is, the regime of hegemonic despotism is reified through utopian dimensions of individual self-determination. Alternatively, a critical sociological view can be used to deconstruct such social allegories to highlight the ways inequalities become taken for granted within popular culture.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Box office numbers provided by Box Office Mojo ([www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com)). *Premium Rush* earned another \$11M internationally. The foreign gross for *Quicksilver* is not listed.

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