

In the Arms of Unconsciousness: Capitalism, Creative Economy, and the End of Rest in Gustavo Vinagre's *Unlearning to Sleep*

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The aim of the article is to explore the relation among capitalism, creative economy, and the end of rest in Gustavo Vinagre's movie *Unlearning to Sleep*. The main argument indicates that, in the context of the imperatives within the inhumane temporalities of the 24/7 society, sleep and rest may represent an inevitable and anomalous resistance to the demands of the capitalist order in which creative economy is immersed and exposed in the movie.

Keywords: capitalism, creative economy, Gustavo Vinagre, *Unlearning to sleep*, Brazilian cinema, rest, sleep

Introduction

The movie *Unlearning to Sleep* (“Desaprender a Dormir” in Portuguese), released in 2021, is a Brazilian experimental comedy in which Flávio (played by Gustavo Vinagre, who is also the film director) loses his sexual appetite editing porn videos. José (played by Caetano Gotardo), his partner, is trying to determine when humans will colonize Mars. Flávio is focused on a more internal journey, and José is trying to find ways to bring Flávio's sexual desire back. Meanwhile, Hypnos, the god of sleep and a youtuber, tries to give people back the art of rest. The film—shot in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic—follows Vinagre's liberating style, in which the bodies transit in a mixture of real dreams, trances, and sex, which he does not renounce to make explicit. The subversive proposal of the movie brings the consequences of modern behavior and the relationship of a life cycle that cannot disassociate pleasure from work, consciousness from unconsciousness (Cruz Jr., 2021). In line with Crary (2016), Vinagre makes a dizzying panorama of a world whose logic is no longer tied to the limits of time and space and society works under an order that tests even the need for rest of the human being—the last frontier crossed by the action of the market. The narrative is based on a couple of two men who are involved in their jobs and missions and see their relationship become less intense, which seems to have been enhanced by the anxiety of moments of unproductiveness and the confinement imposed by the sanitary measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, that made them stay at the same place, with little possibility of leaving their own home. Flávio is a pornographic film editor and sees his libido being tamed by professionalism day by day. José is further away from an automated job. Between research and creativity, he wants to convincingly prove that Mars is a colonizable territory—because in the 21st century Earth, in the process of being destroyed by the actions of humans, just reaching a new planet would not be enough. Flávio and José share their difficulties in sleeping and increasingly confused and absurd dreams. While the search for abolishing sleep or making their time useful does

not bring results, they show the dilemmas and the guilt for these moments. Then a youtuber proposes to help his subscribers sleep. The couple's narrative is interspersed with women who expose their problems and traumas in relation to the sounds of urban spaces. There is also a record of the exhausting work of cam boys, who have difficulty disconnecting from work when they close their eyes to rest (Cruz Jr., 2021).

Unlearning to Sleep preserves Vinagre's path of following obsessions in a closed environment, where fears, desires, and fetishes are mixed with constant delusions, many of them inspired by science fiction in the movie (Velloso, 2021). The aim of the article is to explore the relation among capitalism, creative economy, and the end of rest in *Unlearning to Sleep*. The main argument indicates that, because of their uselessness and passivity, sleep and rest collide with the demands of the 24/7 capitalism, because they do not generate profits and take the form of anomalies in a round-the-clock labor system. In the context of the imperatives within the inhumane temporalities of the 24/7 society, sleep and rest may also represent an inevitable and anomalous resistance to the demands of the capitalist order in which creative economy is immersed and exposed in *Unlearning to Sleep* during the COVID-19 pandemic. The act of relaxing and resting can be seen as an act of subversion to the impositions of the 24/7 capitalism, which can be achieved by affection and sexual desire.

The Capitalist Order, the Creative Economy, and the End of Rest

According to Crary (2016), sleep goes against the exploitation associated with contemporary neoliberal economics. Parry-Davies (2016) argues that, in many examples cited by Crary (2016)—such as research in Wisconsin on the brain activity of migrating birds that can go for up to seven days without sleep; an unrealized 1990s Russian-European space scheme that aimed to use sun-reflecting satellites to create a constant state of daylight on Earth; and sleep deprivation used in torture at Guantánamo Bay —, war-related innovations were assimilated into a broader social sphere, and the sleepless soldier would be the forerunner of the sleepless worker. Crary (2016) shows that leisure, sleep, and rest have been translated as weaknesses that needed to be minimized or absorbed into the more exploitable consumption and marketing time. The 24/7 society is based on the elaboration and modelling of one's personal and social identity, which has been redefined to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, and information networks. This society is characterized by activity, networking, project building, and productivity. According to Boltanski & Chiapello (2007), any halt to the extension of this network is negative in the capitalist order, and the hierarchy and stasis of the corporation give way to project-based work, the zero-hour contract, and the formation of a precariat, deprived of sleep and rest.

The sleep deprivation is a fundamental aspect that characterizes the work of many creative professionals based on talent, technology, and tolerance (Florida, 2002; 2014; Jesus, 2017a). The occupational activities in the creative economy—that involves the generation of ideas and products and creative problem solving—include design, entertainment, and media; computer sciences; architecture and engineering; life, physical, and social sciences (Jesus, 2011, 2014c, 2018; Jesus & Kamlot, 2017); education; and super-creative occupations such as professors, thought leaders, actors, musicians, dancers, novelists, and poets (Florida, 2002; 2014). The adverse work conditions of the creative professionals became more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as precarious contracts with no social guarantees, unemployment, the management of fear and moral harassment, the imposition of unattainable production goals on workers, and job insecurity (Druck, 2011; Jesus, 2020, 2021). These professionals need to work a lot, which sometimes eliminates the borders between their work and leisure

times and promotes their sleep and rest deprivation. In the context of the imperatives within the inhumane temporalities of the 24/7 society, sleep and rest may also represent an inevitable and anomalous resistance to the demands of the capitalist order in which creative economy is immersed. Many dilemmas of precarity and automation of creative activities are exposed in *Unlearning to Sleep* by Flávio, who is a creative professional that edits porn videos and is confined with his partner at their home. The act of relaxing and resting can be seen as an act of resistance to the impositions of the 24/7 capitalism, which can be achieved by affection and sexual desire.

The Subversive Effects of Affection, Sexual Desire, and Rest

Vinagre's work lives in a very specific field in the relationship between real life and a sexual impulse as if this impulse were the most genuine act to escape, in this case, from the despairing boredom caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. When it tells the stories of a pornographic video editor and an idea researcher looking for unexpected solutions that come from the outer space (Jesus, 2012), *Unlearning to Sleep* is built on the tension among the difficulty of sleeping, the absence of sexual desire, and the paranoia of an unpredictable future (Gadelha, 2021). Vinagre also investigates the human figures in their rawness and spontaneity. He is even more incisive in this style in a film shot during the COVID-19 pandemic at his home. In *Unlearning to Sleep*, the couple played by Vinagre and Gotardo experiences a feeling of anaesthesia typical of a strained relationship. In addition to the couple's dynamics, there is also the narrative about the difficulty of sleeping. By bringing reports of sleepless characters, the film paves the way for the discussion of complex emotions of human beings, their hidden afflictions, and intense desires, while revealing the existence of a vicious circle, with similar sequences for all of them. Boredom and confessional speeches reveal the lack of motivation of both the protagonists and the supporting actors who seek help from Hypnos to get to sleep. The decoupage reveals all the paralysis and emptiness of José and Flávio, as well as details of what arouses their sexual interest, such as Flávio's fetish for dildos and his willingness to be penetrated and fisted and José's sex with men from apps. The complicity and delivery of the performers bring significant moments to the film, as in the sex scene between José and Nivaldo (Rafael Rudolf), which seems to be edited by Flávio. Instead of interacting with both men, Flávio simulates editing the scene, which develops in front of him (Pontes, 2021).

Unlearning to Sleep reflects what bodies feel in such a catatonic and hopeless moment and exposes contemporary processes related to human anguish and life in confinement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Anzolin, 2021). Flávio and José have had problems in their relationship due to their current activities. Flávio has researched and edited porn movies, and José is trying to create a theory that justifies the human presence on Mars. In the very first interaction between the two characters, José tells Flávio of a strange dream he had, complains that a banana seems rotten, and is interrupted when he tells his story, a Flávio's habit. The film shows their discontent and dissatisfaction with each other. Throughout the movie, the discontent is not momentary; if it is not necessarily a great crisis, the couple faces a difficult moment in the relationship, and the solution may come from the satisfaction of sexual desires and affection (Carbone, 2021). The characters' bodies and feelings are exposed and strip themselves physically and mentally with their acts and statements. At the same time, the characters fail to create strong bonds among them (Bonez, 2014). In the context of the demolition of affective spaces (Jesus, 2009, 2010), the recovery of the sexual desire and interaction between Flávio and José—when José brings the pleasure back to Flávio satisfying his lover's desire—reconstructs their intimacy and

destabilizes the capitalist notion that bodies should be organized for work. It also allows the existence of alternative sexual experiences in relation to the ones imposed by heteronormative rules (Foucault, 1986, 1996; Jesus, 2014a, 2014b, 2017b), and both men can finally rest.

Vinagre manages to set up an internal and an external conflict. In the internal conflict between Flávio and José, the intimacy that is so constantly aggressive is never as impressive as the fragility of their eyes, with two interpretations which show the complexity of meanings and intentions. José needs Flávio's presence, but he also needs to have his voice respected and desperately seeks contact with the man he loves, as in the scene in which José crosses the screen with an evident erection and asks Flávio to put a headset on to work. Flávio automated a relationship and does not notice that he is empty. In the external conflict, Vinagre turns to questions of pandemic times. He questions, for example, where people were when everything went wrong in their lives and what they did to recreate a relationship that seemed to have fallen apart (Carbone, 2021; Velloso, 2021). Everything in the film goes through a pandemic scenario, linked to exhaustion and confinement. The movie brings, for example, the intersection of characters such as a kind of French youtuber that howls for the sleep revolution and a hypnotic therapist who makes the most varied bodies come out of the depression of a remote world to put them to rest. The ability to switch between spaces and narratives is like a trance or a dream. People appear, such as the main characters and strangers, like those with overwhelming problems, those from a place like that of the spectator, and then disappear (Anzolin, 2021).

Final Considerations

The impact of *Unlearning to Sleep* comes from the changes of the dramatic structure into the frontal staging, the ambiguities of dealing with desire and overcoming sexual interdictions and the precariousness of the subjects' belonging in a turbulent world. The same kind of impact is seen in other Vinagre's movies, such as *New Dubai* (Oriente, 2014). The real or simulated eschatological sequences and the explicit sex allow exploring the delusion and the unconsciousness and invite the viewers to test their perceptions and limits (Cruz Jr., 2021). *Unlearning to Sleep* is a film of recognition for both Vinagre as a filmmaker and Gotardo as an actor. The movie is about seeing themselves in the other and the boredom that the other can represent, recreating themselves with other names (Flávio and José) so that they can finally deal with the harsh image of themselves, the one that makes Vinagre amaze when he recognizes himself in his own porn video. More than unlearning to sleep, the film seems to deal with the ability to relearn how to look at oneself and the others and find, in this process, a torpor riding between reality and despair (Anzolin, 2021).

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