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Zwigato

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Zwigato

Abstract

This is a film review of *Zwigato* (2022), directed by Nandita Das.

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Zwigato (2022), dir. Nandita Das

Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival, Nandita Das's latest film *Zwigato* provides a glimpse into the everyday lives of India's working class as they deal with the economic downturn following the Covid19 pandemic, and the growth of digital labor platforms which are propelling the gig economy in new directions. Set in Bhubaneswar, India, the film follows the daily struggles and frustrations of Manas (played by Indian stand-up comedian Kapil Sharma), a delivery driver who works for a major food app, Zwigato. Manas was once a factory-floor supervisor but was laid off during the pandemic. Now his life is shaped by the demands of the service provided by his new company, with its delivery quotas, customer reviews, and star-ratings looming over his daily life as he tries to balance work and family responsibilities. His wife Pratima (Shahana Goswami) is also a member of the gig economy taking on a new position as a cleaner, helping to make ends meet while trying to find a place for herself outside of the domestic sphere. The film is a sociopolitical critique of the exploitation of India's disadvantaged workers, and Das highlights the everyday trials gig workers must face: gas prices, bad treatment from customers, the demands of

employers, and the lack of jobs and opportunities outside of the exploitative positions with which they currently contend.

Das's portrayal of the control Zwigato has over the lives of its employees and the ways the company measures their value through constant and efficient service brings to mind Walter Benjamin's textual fragment "Capitalism as Religion" which claims that capitalism is a religion with its own morals and values, and measures human existence in relation to individuals' utility to the system.¹ The company Zwigato can be interpreted as a stand-in for the larger capitalist system which Minjung Noh calls "today's ubiquitous religion."² According to Benjamin, capitalism serves to ease anxieties and provide answers for its adherents. There is no central doctrine, but merely utilitarian practice, and morals and values are dictated by the demands of the system. It is a cult "*sans rêve et sans merci*" [without dream or mercy]; without pause, every single day is dedicated to the accumulation of capital. Capitalism is guilt or debt producing without expiation of that guilt/debt. Its final effect is the general spread of despair.³ Zwigato represents the demands corporations can make on lower classes who are presented with few choices. Though it claims to put its employees first and provide great opportunities, it presents them with hollow incentives that are almost impossible to reach, places time and geographical restrictions upon employees' work, and makes them vulnerable to the varying moods of customers. Manas's life is regulated by constant app notifications on his phone, calling out to him with the demand for new deliveries, and his labor and worth are measured in 'likes' and customer ratings.

The exploitation workers at Zwigato face is represented in one poignant scene in the film depicting a conflict Manas has with a manager at the company who will not heed his complaints about working conditions. The manager insists the company places employees first, hiring across religion and caste distinction, providing independence and flexible working schedules. But as

Manas knows well, the only way to remain afloat in this system is to be of great utility to the company. Yet, greater utility means that he must stretch himself beyond his limits. And the message at the end of this conflict Manas receives is that the company believes it is of great benefit to all, and if he cannot work within its bounds, he is replaceable. *Zwigato* remains almighty, unmovable; Manas must submit and be a ‘good boy’ or lose. The moments of despair are palpable as he cannot seem to find other alternatives as the traditional breadwinner of his household.

But the movie is not entirely about the despair: Manas exhibits an increasing consciousness of the labor rights and activism in his city demanding job security for workers and his cynicism towards this type of activism recedes through the film. There are also shifting dynamics in his position as breadwinner, as he must learn to accept his wife’s role in helping to provide an income for the family. The possibility of working outside the home brings new hope to Pratima who longs for opportunities to expand her experiences beyond domestic demands.

In contrast to a film like *Parasite* (2019) which deconstructs class and capitalism through contradiction and destruction, the message of *Zwigato* is more subtle, and Das chooses instead to depict the everyday and mundane, with a slow burn without gripping story-arc. That does not mean, however, that the story is not compelling as there are complex layers of storytelling. Though a dramatic role, actor Kapil Sharma injects comedy into the film, providing moments of laughter and reprieve for the audience amid scenes of hardship and struggle. The advantage of such a film is that it brings into view a realistic depiction of the often forgotten and overlooked classes of workers, in India and internationally, that now provide many of the services on which we have come to depend.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol 1 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 288-289; Minjung Noh, "PARASITE as Parable" *CrossCurrents* 70, no. 3 (September 2020), 251.

² Noh, "PARASITE as Parable," 248.

³ Benjamin "Capitalism as Religion," 288-289.