

Capitalist exploitation and animal ethics in water for elephants: A Marxist and utilitarian perspective

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ABSTRACT

In early 2025, numerous cases of human rights violations in the circus industry emerged in Indonesia, bringing public attention to the exploitation of both workers and animals. This study explores the portrayal of exploitation in Francis Lawrence's *Water for Elephants* through Karl Marx's theory of labor exploitation combined with the animal ethics perspective of Singer and Regan, presenting an insightful dual perspective in film analysis. This qualitative research employs a literature study method, analyzing scenes, dialogues, and visual elements of the film. The findings reveal that *Water for Elephants* portrays various indicators of exploitation: hazardous work conditions, low wages, lack of healthcare access, abuse, and poor living conditions. These conditions reflect capitalist-driven oppression for profit maximization in circus environments. The study concludes that the movie serves as a critical commentary on the ethical implications of labor and animal rights violations, reinforcing the need for broader societal awareness and reform in the treatment of both humans and animals in entertainment sectors.

I. INTRODUCTION

Exploitation is a widespread problem globally, affecting millions of people across multiple sectors. In early 2025, the issue of exploitation took center stage in Indonesian circus. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), around 21 million people are victims of forced labor, subjected to jobs they cannot leave due to threats, violence, or deception. This form of exploitation, deeply rooted in capitalist practices, is reflected in various industries, including agriculture, manufacturing, and entertainment. In Marxist theory, exploitation occurs when capitalists take advantage of labor by paying them less than the value they produce. Exploitation often occurs to vulnerable groups such as undocumented immigrants or workers in the gig economy (Boris & Klein, 2010). As a result, exploitation reinforces the social and economic injustices that occur around the world (Harvey, 2014).

The film *Water for Elephants* (2011) directed by Francis Lawrence vividly depicts the exploitation of workers and animals in the American circus in 1930s. The story shows the injustice experienced by circus workers and the mistreatment of animals used as attractions for profit. The capitalist system in the circus shows how labor is utilized, and animals are treated as mere tools for economic gain. According to Triana (2019), the circus in the film *Water for Elephants* depicts how animals are forced to perform under duress and the threat of violence for human benefit. As Fatha et al. (2021) emphasizes, film as a form of literature functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural expression that reflects human behavior, beliefs, and social practices. Although the narrative is set in 1930s America, this historical Hollywood representation serves as a productive allegory for contemporary exploitative practices, including those in Indonesia's entertainment industry, showing how capitalist logic transcends time and geography. This film reflects criticism of the exploitative practices that still occur in the modern entertainment industry. To fight this oppression, film has the power to raise social awareness and encourage change, since mass media can widely reach society and function as a source of power (Leon & Schmidt, 2021; Tawakkal, Monix, & Watani, 2021; Suandi, 2024).

Karl Marx, a Prussian philosopher of the 19th century, introduced class theory as the basis for political struggle that drove the labor movement and social liberation (Suseno, 2000; 1999). He emphasized that in the capitalist system, exploitation occurs when the surplus value of labor is taken by capital owners, thereby causing economic injustice (Marx, 1967). Young (2014) explains that exploitation is one of five forms of oppression, while Burawoy (1979) argues that the law often hides this practice, which even resembles a form of modern slavery (Abas, Saud & Husain, 2020). Capitalism also exploits nature through industrialization that damages the environment and widens social inequality (Lefebvre, 2015). Labor relations in capitalism are unequal because workers are paid low wages for capitalist profits, but at the same time are expected to be customers (Elster, 2000). For Marx, emancipation means freeing people from economic oppression so that they can develop fully (Fromm, 2004), in line with Freire (1970) who rejects education as a tool for maintaining injustice. Therefore, Marx envisions socialism replacing capitalism, because the history of society is the history of class struggle (Marx, 1997). In the current context, ILO identifies signs of worker exploitation such as poor living conditions, excessive working hours, dangerous work, low wages, lack of access to education, and violation of labor laws (SAP-FL 4).

Animal ethics is a branch of philosophy that studies the moral relationship between humans and animals and how humans should treat animals. Its main principle is to respect animal life and reject exploitation that causes suffering (Francione, 2000). Peter Singer, through *Animal Liberation* (1975), introduced the concept of speciesism and asserted that animal suffering should be viewed as equal to that of humans. Tom Regan, in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), argued that animals are living beings with moral rights, and therefore cruel treatment of them cannot be justified. Taken together, Marxist theory of exploitation and animal ethics both critique the commodification of living beings under capitalist logic. They emphasize that

exploitation emerges when human or animal life is reduced to mere profit-generating objects. This synthesis provides a sharper analytical framework for examining the dual exploitation portrayed in the film.

Previous studies on *Water for Elephants* are divided into two major themes. The first theme is capitalism and human exploitation, discussed by Kartina (2013), Prihtani (2006), AlTaher (2021), Hidayat (2023), and Khoiriah et al. (2024). The second theme is animal rights and violence explored by Mol (2023), Triana (2019), and Yok et al. (2022). This study aims to fill the gap by using Marxist theory and animal ethics to examine how capitalist structures drive the exploitation of workers and animals in the circus industry. By examining the film throughout these lenses, this study will contribute to the discussion of how the exploitation of vulnerable groups-whether human or animal-is portrayed in fiction. Although previous studies have focused on ecocriticism and the treatment of animals in the film, this article will explore the connection between the exploitation of both humans and animals, addressing a gap in literature by providing a more comprehensive analysis of oppression in *Water for Elephants*.

II. METHOD

This study is using qualitative research. Qualitative research, according to Lim (2024) is research that provides in-depth, human-centered insights and offers diverse data collection and analysis techniques but faces challenges like constrained generalizability and potential researcher bias. It focuses on the 'why' and 'how' of decision making, not just 'what', 'where', and 'when'. In this study, the qualitative approach is used to examine the portrayal of worker and animal exploitation in the film *Water for Elephants*, revealing both economic and moral dimensions of injustice.

The data from this study are text, images, and audio from *Water for Elephants* movie. The data sources are divided into two categories, primary and secondary. The primary data is the film *Water for Elephant*. The secondary data comes from previous theses and articles related to *Water for Elephants* movie and books, journals, articles related to Marxism and animal ethics.

The data collection method used in this study is library research. A library research method involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or expert opinion on the research query, as well as learning and comprehending data that has close ties to the problems from books, theories, notes, and documents (George, 2008). The writer uses contextual methods to analyze the extrinsic aspects of the film. The contextual method is used to situate the film within its social, historical, and cultural background. The writer employs a theoretical framework based on Karl Marx's exploitation theory, along with Peter Singer's and Tom Regan's animal ethics theories, to analyze the extrinsic aspects of the film *Water for Elephants*. To ensure transparency and reproducibility, the selection of scenes, dialogues, and visual elements followed four main criteria:

1. Relevance to exploitation, only segments that explicitly or implicitly depict worker exploitation or animal exploitation.

2. Narrative significance, scenes that play a key role in plot development or in illustrating the power dynamics between circus owners and subordinates.
3. Representation and recurrence, scenes that stand out as powerful examples or throughout the film to reinforce exploitation themes.
4. Clarity for theoretical analysis, scenes with enough visual or dialogue-based detail to be examined through Karl Marx's exploitation theory and animal ethics framework.

Table 1. Theoretical Concepts

Theoretical Concept	Source	Definition
Surplus value	Marx (1967)	Workers receiving wages lower than the value of their labour output.
Class struggle	Marx (1997)	Conflict between circus owners and workers over power, control, and resources.
Speciesism	Singer (1975)	Treatment of animals as inferior beings whose suffering is disregarded for human benefit.
Inherent value	Regan (1983)	Recognition of animals as moral subjects with rights not to be treated as property.

The data analysis in this study follows a qualitative content analysis approach that includes four main steps: data reduction, data display, theoretical application, and interpretation. First, the researcher conducted data reduction by filtering raw film material using the established selection criteria to obtain relevant segments. Next, the selected scenes, dialogues, and visuals were organized together with related secondary sources in the data display stage. This was followed by the theoretical application stage, in which the data were examined through Karl Marx's exploitation theory and the animal ethics theories of Peter Singer and Tom Regan. In the interpretation stage, the findings were synthesized to draw insights into the broader social and ethical implications of exploitation as depicted in the film. In line with qualitative principles, the researcher acknowledges a background in English education and literature with a particular interest in film studies. This stance, including a critical view of exploitation, informed the interpretive lens of study.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Workers Exploitation

Bad Living Condition

In the *Water for Elephants* film, the living conditions of circus workers are depicted as very poor, reflecting the difficulties in fulfilling their basic needs. They live in cramped and shabby train carriages, with very minimal facilities. The clothes they wear are often shabby and inappropriate, reflecting the limited fulfillment of basic needs. The food provided is very limited and of low quality, often insufficient to provide adequate nutrition. Their living arrangements, which move from one location to another, do not provide stability or comfort, adding to the physical and mental stress they face every day in the harsh and exploitative circus life. This deprivation mirrors the surplus value principle, in which resources for labor are minimized to maximize profit.



Picture 1. Walter's room (*Water for Elephants*, 29.54)

From the scene above, Walter's carriage is described as very plain and uncomfortable. The floor had only a thin cloth laid down, which offers minimal protection against the rough wooden conditions of the train. The walls were lined with newspapers, furthering the impression that the place was temporary and uninhabitable. Without any window ventilation, the inside of the carriage was stuffy and poorly ventilated, adding to their poor living conditions. The dark lighting makes it depressive, oppressive, suggesting that the lower-class workers, like Jacob and Walter, live in conditions that are far from decent compared to those who hold higher status in the circus.

The differences between the upper and lower classes are very visible, especially through the condition of the dining tents and the type of food served. The upper class, which consists of circus officials such as August and the stars of the show such as Marlena, enjoy the comfort of the dining tent with higher quality food such as meat, bread, sausages, and luxury drinks such as champagne. On the other hand, the lower class consisted of manual laborers like Camel, who had to eat filthy food and drink Jake, a cheap alcoholic concoction that contains dangerous substances that can cause paralysis.

Excessive Working

In the *Water for Elephants* film, circus workers are portrayed as experiencing excessive work, where they are forced to work under extremely harsh conditions and non-stop. They are faced with inhumane work expectations, where fatigue and declining physical condition are ignored by circus management. The circus is led by August, who implements a brutal work system, utilizing workers without giving them proper time or facilities for physical or mental recovery. This reflects how workers are constantly exploited for the benefit of the circus business.

Jacob: "I've never seen so much manure."

Worker: "They pack them in 27 a car."

Jacob: "How do you stand the smell?" (*Water for Elephants*, 16.47-17.00)

One scene that shows this overwork occurs when only two people, Jacob and Camel, are ordered to clean 27 circus train carriage. The scene shows them working non-stop, cleaning each carriage from animal feces and garbage, while having to complete the task in a very short time. This emphasizes the unfairness of the demands placed on them, as it is impossible for two people to complete such a large task in a reasonable amount of time. Their sweat, fatigue, and physical strain are clear evidence of the excessive workload, reflecting the poor conditions the workers endured under August's authoritarian control.

Hazardous Work

Water for Elephants film shows that working conditions in the circus industry are extremely dangerous, especially because workers must train wild animals without professional supervision. They face great risks every day, especially when interacting with elephants, lions, and bears. Training these animals is often done without adequate safety equipment, making injury or even death a real threat. Attractions involving fire, ropes, and other dangerous materials exacerbate these conditions, where accidents can easily occur, putting the lives of workers and performers in danger. The use of flammable materials and complex choreography increases the risk of fatal accidents, but the pressure from circus owners keeps performers risking their lives for the sake of a spectacular show.



Picture 2. Rosie rebelled, almost harming Marlena (*Water for Elephants*, 01.03.53)

One of the most dangerous scenes in *Water for Elephants* takes place when Rosie, a new elephant bought by the circus, first appears on stage with Marlena. Rosie, who has not been properly trained, becomes stressed and begins to run amok during the performance. Initially, Marlena, with her glamorous costumes and grace, guides Rosie around the stage in front of an enthusiastic audience. However, Rosie suddenly lost control, stopped following Marlena's direction, and started swinging her trunk wildly, almost injuring Marlena. Rosie then fled the arena, escaping into a crowded market. There, Rosie smashed the vendors' stalls, creating mass pains among the people. Marlena and the circus workers run after her, trying to calm the terrified elephants. This scene shows how dangerous attractions with wild animals can be, which can get out of control at any time, posing a real threat to the workers and the audience.



Picture 3. Female performer carriage at night (*Water for Elephants*, 23.16)

Female performers in circuses are also victims of sexual exploitation. There are scenes of exploitation of female performers who work on stage in the morning. In the evening, they must serve the lust of male workers in a special carriage. Some of the female performers are seen mesmerizing the audience with glamorous costumes and performances. Their real masks are revealed when night comes. They are forced into cramped train carriage full of drunk and abusive male workers. The female performers have no choice but to serve the workers. Refusing could lead to violence or expulsion from the circus. The train carriage becomes a place of exploitation at night. These women are forced to live a life of exploitation without protection.

Camel: "Hey, don't be messing with Blackie! Throwing people off trains is one of the perks of his job. We don't need bums on this train. Everybody, calm down here. Grady, put that damn pistol away. Blackie, let him go. And I mean on the inside of the train." (*Water for Elephants*, 12.17-12.30)

There is one scene highlighting the brutality of life in the circus. Jacob, who has just joined the circus, is suspected of being an intruder by August after being caught riding the circus train without permission. Jacob is arrested by the guards and confronted by a suspicious and angry August. August accused Jacob of being an intruder and smuggler who tried to profit from the circus without permission. Without saying much, August orders his workers to "throw him over the rail," a cruel method often used to get rid of unwanted people. Jacob is pulled to the edge of the train carriage and almost thrown onto the tracks, which would have left him seriously injured or even killed by the moving train. However, at the last moment, Camel, one of the senior workers at the circus, came and saved Jacob. Camel, who sees Jacob's potential as veterinarian, defends him and takes him safe inside the train. This scene shows how brutal life in the circus can be, where a person's life can be considered worthless and thrown away if they are deemed useless or disruptive.

Jacob: "We had to cancel shows in three towns. The rumor was, four men got tossed to save money. And we might go belly up. Dead circuses were common in '31." (*Water for Elephants*, 39.54 - 40.05)

It also depicts scenes of how people could easily be thrown out of their jobs without notice of severance pay. That would be the case when a circus financially strained must trim unnecessarily expenses by suddenly firing its workers with no notice at all. Some of the

workers in the circus were thrown off in the middle of the journey with no compensation or protection. This scene depicts a heartless and unfair scenario wherein many workers had to face several humblings during the Great Depression, since firms often favor cost savings instead of the welfare of their employees.

Low Salary

The circus industry in *Water for Elephants* is portrayed as a low-paying workplace for its workers that reflects the exploitation of labor. Circus workers are often paid very minimal wages, not even enough to cover their basic needs. These low salaries reflect a lack of appreciation for the physical and mental contributions they make in keeping circus operations running. Characters in the film, such as Jacob and other circus workers, show how hard it is to work for little reward, often forced to endure dangerous and precarious working conditions. This reflects the capitalist system that extracts surplus value from workers by paying them less than the value they produce, leaving them trapped in economic dependency.

August: "I can't get a new Liberty Horse mid-season. So, you make sure this horse performs and the job is yours. Nine bucks a week." (*Water for Elephants*, 28.35-28.45)

The low wages condition is experienced by the main character, Jacob. Jacob Jankowski, a veterinary student, was forced to work in the circus after his life was shattered by a tragic accident that killed both his parents. He was close to completing his studies, but economic constraints prevented him from getting a diploma to show he was certified in veterinary medicine. At the circus, Jacob was hired as a veterinarian, but his salary was very low. In one scene, Jacob negotiates with August, the circus owner, who offers him a salary of only 9 bucks a week. This amount is very incomparable to the salaries of veterinarians in the United States in 1930, which on average could reach 60 to 100 dollars per week. Jacob, desperate with his life without having money and home. He was forced to accept the offer even though he knew the salary was far below standard. August takes advantage of Jacob's uncertified skills. For August, he has no obligation to pay Jacob properly because Jacob has no written proof of his expertise as a veterinarian. This exploitation mirrors Marx's concept of the reserve army of labor, where vulnerable workers are forced to accept any wage due to lack of alternatives. It also illustrates alienation where Jacob is alienated from the value of his labor, from his professional identity as a veterinarian and his ethical compass when he must comply with August's demands that conflict with his moral values.



Picture 4. The chaos of the Benzini Brothers circus uprising (*Water for Elephants*, 01.47.24)

There is also a scene where August delays employees' salaries after deciding to buy Rosie, an elephant, to replace the dead Silverstar. This decision angered the workers as they did not receive their promised pay. August introduced Rosie as a new attraction to save the circus, but the circus was in a financial mess. The workers in the circus finally rebelled against August after being mistreated for years. Already tired of the lies and empty promises, it was even more frustrating when Rosie did its thing in front of the audience, raking in huge profits. Rather than awarding them the bonuses he had promised, August continued with increased pressure and exploitation. The tension escalated until chaos erupted as the workers attacked August and destroyed the control he held. This marked a turning point that would destroy the Benzini Brothers' circus. This rebellion represents Marx's notion of class struggle, where the oppressed workers eventually resist exploitation when the capitalist's contradictions and injustices become unbearable.

No Access to Health

Water for Elephants depicts the harsh life in a circus that is not only physically demanding for the workers, but also ignores the importance of health care. The absence of adequate health facilities in the circus adds to the heavy burden of the workers who have to survive under inhumane conditions. In fact, the presence of health facilities is crucial in a dangerous environment like a circus, where physical injuries and illnesses can easily occur. Health workers can provide proper care and ensure the safety of workers, as well as prevent further risks that could arise from neglecting their health. Without medical support, workers are vulnerable to workplace accidents and illnesses that endanger their lives. The following is evidence of the absence of medical facilities at Benzini Brothers Circus. It shows how capitalists disregard workers' well-being to maximize profit, treating labor as disposable rather than valuable human life.

Marlena: "Wade and Grady hit soft ground, and they found Walter and Camel. They had hit the rocks. They didn't make it." (*Water for Elephants*, 01.44.29-01.44.33)

One of the strongest pieces of evidence that health facilities in the circus are inadequate is when Camel, a 60-year-old worker, suffered from Jake Leg—a paralyzing condition caused by the consumption of Jamaica Ginger or Jake, a cheap, bootleg alcohol that was rife during the Great Depression. When Camel fell ill from the poisoning, the other workers had to treat him secretly

and hide him from the circus management. They feared Camel would be dumped on the train tracks if caught sick, because in the Benzini Brother Circus, workers who were deemed useless or unable to work anymore would be immediately ignored or eliminated. In the dark night, without mercy, the circus guards bring the frail Camel to the edge of the train tracks. Roughly, they drag him out of the carriage, and without explanation or resistance, Camel is thrown onto the cold and dangerous tracks. It is a shocking scene, as Camel is not only thrown out of his job, but also discarded like a worthless item that no longer has value. This makes it clear that no health care is provided by the circus, and workers are left to bear their own health risks without medical protection or assistance. The laborers are valued only for their productivity and discarded once they can no longer generate profit.

Oppression

This oppression practiced by the officials of the circus on workers is another form of exploitation, where workers were threatened after they refused orders. Workers work under threats of losing their jobs along with other grievances. Moreover, workers are treated according to rank. Workers of lower ranks face worst conditions at their workplace. They are paid less than what is entitled to them, while at the same time they are treated as less valuable by officials of circuses who abused their powers by oppressing workers to satisfy their self-interests.

Camel: "musicians and sideshow people are above us roustabouts, but below the specialty acts, which, of course, are below the ring stock animals. And everybody, everybody, is below the bosses. Don't ever forget that." (*Water for Elephants*, 22.55-23.09)

In *Water for Elephants*, Camel's dialog depicts the clear oppression in the circus environment with a strict social hierarchy. Workers such as manual laborers and musicians are treated with a difference in status, with manual laborers being seen as inferior even to the performing animals. All workers are under the control of the boss who has complete power, leading to inequality and exploitation of labor. Manual laborers are only considered as tools without appreciation, even lower than animals, showing how strong dehumanization and oppression in the circus system is.

August: "Your gut tells you to shoot my star attraction? No treatment, no hoof tester, just your Cornell gut. You know how a circus survives? You said it yourself, kid. On blood, sweat, pain and shit. When a circus begins to die and animals eat garbage, you know what men eat? Nothing." (*Water for Elephants*, 33.50-34.10)

There was also August's blatant threatening of the vet, Jacob. It is a dramatic scene when August confronts Jacob, who prepares to shoot Silverstar, a seriously ill circus horse. August, his voice full of threat, warns Jacob that grave consequences are coming his way. A glance into Jacob reveals two sharp angry eyes glinting from August, warning him that shooting Silverstar is not morally right and will bring Jacob into harm's way. He pressed the tip home, reminding Jacob of his power in the circus and making it plain that if he defied his wishes, his life and future were at risk. This scene reflects tension between authority, mercy, and difficult choices faced with death.

Animal Exploitation

Abuse

The movie *Water for Elephants* depicts the physical abuse that animals face in circuses because of their use of entertainment. Wild big animals, such as elephants, lions, and tigers, among others, are treated harshly to bend them to do tricks and other shows that are unnatural to them. Abuse occurs not only during training but also in day-to-day care, whereby these animals are normally controlled through brutal and very inhumane ways. They are kept obedient through physical intimidation and torture, which demonstrates how circuses of the time used animal exploitation for business without respect for animal welfare or human rights.



Picture 5. August injures Rosie while training her with a sharp stick (*Water for Elephants*, 59.44)

The movie *Water for Elephants* vividly illustrates the physical cruelty the animals endure from their trainers, especially in those scenes when August is training Rosie, the new elephant bought into substitute for Silverstar. In the scene, August appears visibly frustrated that Rosie is not responding to his instructions. He keeps making Rosie follow his instructions; however, Rosie appears to be confused and does not comprehend what he wants. Whereas he does not, August later starts tormenting Rosie with a sharp stick. The specific scene depicts how August repeatedly sticks his sharp stick at the back of Rosie's ear in front of Jacob and Marlena. Jacob, being new in the circus, looks astonished, while Marlena is terrified but could do little while watching. Rosie vocalized a pained noise, but August continued the violation until Jacob had to intervene to restrain him. The above scene really drew the interest that hard training and violence are August's major methods in taming the wild animals in the circus. Rosie's abuse symbolizes the denial of animals' rights and welfare. Rosie's suffering reflects how circuses justify cruelty by framing it as discipline, turning sentient beings into mere tools for human entertainment.



Picture 6. August laughed, showing Jacob the toothless lion (*Water for Elephants*, 33.42)

Another scene is when Jacob was outside the cage ordered by August to feed the lions. Jacob opened the lion's cage door but the lion bit Jacob on the hand. Jacob was so shocked that he fell to the ground. August burst out laughing. Jacob looked at his hand, and there was no scar. He realized the lion had no teeth. The toothless lion opened his mouth, and Jacob saw that his teeth were cut out. Jacob was shocked and took a closer look and found all the wild animals of the circus to be treated this way. August laugh seeing the shocked expression of Jacob, that lion was no more dangerous as it could not bite due to not having teeth. He did not show any compassion, neither repentance over the action and just laughed over the toothless situation of the lion before Jacob as though it was a usual practice in the circus to keep trainers safe from the attacks of the animal. From an animal ethics perspective, this reveals how animals are stripped of their natural integrity and autonomy, reduced to powerless objects for human control.

Camel: "Oh, they just love booze. One whiff of this, and she ain't thinking about corn anymore! Got this from Wade and Grady. Bastards been holding out on me." (*Water for Elephants*, 01.05.22-01.05.34)

In fact, giving Jake liquor to animals is a serious violation of animal rights, thus yielding results in which the animal becomes drunk and suffers from strong physical and mental pains. The animal cannot give their consent or choose to refuse the drink. It is uncalled for and inhumane abuse towards an animal. Animals should be treated with dignity and protected against any treatment that may cause pain or distress, including forcing them to ingest harmful substances like alcohol. Within the scene, Camel drinks Jake to Rosie so that she obeys her master. Such practice has been carried out many times in Benzini Brothers. Such treatment disregards animals' dignity and inflicts unnecessary suffering.

Bad Living Condition

Water for Elephants portrayed miserable living conditions for the circus animals, where they stay. The poor animals are made to live in a very crowded and unhygienic area. Their supposed places of stay were old, dingy train cars, which were uninhabitable. Food was often not enough, and the daily care was highly insufficient. Elephants, horses, and lions are subjected to such harsh and dangerous conditions that their exploitation, without any regard for welfare,

is brought into the open. Their enclosures are also frequently not relocated or cleaned, which makes living conditions even more deplorable.



Picture 7. Rosie's cramped cage doesn't fit her size (*Water for Elephants*, 01.00.26)

One evidence of such worse conditions is incompleteness of the sizes of the cages. In the scene inside the car, the animals are confined in a small compass. The elephant Rosie is cramped and has little room to manage. The cages are filthy and smell foul. During the backstage, they were confined to a tiny area full of dirty straws and lacking air circulation. When the circus stopped somewhere, it would leave the animals in squalid cages without almost any care; also, the staff of the circus do not seem to be concerned about cleaning their cages, which further aggravates the health condition of the animals. From an animal ethics perspective, such neglect denies animals their basic right to proper welfare.



Picture 8. Rotten goat meat filled with flies and maggots (*Water for Elephants*, 32.08)

In another scene, it is directed that August is to make rotten meat ready for the lions, which is to be immediately replaced with fresh mutton. Sure enough, this meat was still rotten and completely unfitted for consumption. The meat is infested with maggots and green flies. One could observe that keeper on duty is hastily pushing pieces of meat into the cage of lions without much attention paid. The animals eat meat whatever the badness of their condition. This scene shows that animal food budgets are being cut as a method of economizing, even when it could have adverse effects on the health and welfare of the animals.

No Access to Health

The movie *Water for Elephants* depicts how circuses do not care about animal health due to destitute economic states and lack of access to proper care. People in the circus were more interested in the show and profit than health concerns of the animals. Animals are viewed as tools to bring in audiences in this situation; hence, their health can often be negligible. In cases of sickness, they are forced to work since there are no veterinarians who can look after them. Treatment is also viewed as a cost. This kind of attitude reflects the ways in which economic hardships and a struggle to subsist can lead humans to override the code of ethics in animal care.

Jacob: "I'm sure Ringling has his own vet."

August: "Cornell, come with me." (*Water for Elephants*, 27.50-28.00)

Ringling Circus has a veterinarian, Benzini Brothers Circus doesn't. Since there are several animals and very high mobility in circus tours, it should at least be a prerequisite to have a full-time veterinarian on board for every circus. Jacob came into the circus as a veterinarian. He was initially just looking out for any job for survival, but when he came to know that Jacob had studied medicine for the treatment of animals, August asked the man to take over the care of the circus animals. August took him round and introduced him to the animals, asking him to get down to work. Jacob accepted in hope that he would be better able to provide greater care to the animals, which were visibly getting inadequate medical attention. He initiated his work by observing the condition of some of the animals and found that even basic care was not given to them.

Another example is that Silverstar, a circus horse badly injured, was refused proper treatment as the circus had no veterinarian before Jacob's arrival. August is forced to continue having Silverstar work even when she's in a worse condition. August can only hope the horse dies by herself, continuing to force Silverstar to perform in the show. In this scene, August would not listen to any excuse about the condition of Silverstar and claims they do not have the money to treat her. Meanwhile, the rest of the circus staff can only stand and watch as August has absolute authority on such matters.

Marlena: "I should have taken him out of the show."

Jacob: "It's not your fault. It happens. It's not uncommon, but he is suffering. And the pain is only gonna get worse. The right thing to do would be to put him down."

Marlena: "That's not going to happen, is it? Not when August can get a few more shows out of him. Around here, everybody works till they're run into the ground. Nobody stops, nobody dies until August says so." (*Water for Elephants*, 35.00-35.40)

When things get to a breaking point, Jacob does an act of mercy to the poor tortured Silverstar. Heartbroken, he shoots Silverstar so that the animal wouldn't have to go through more torture from a job she should no longer be doing anymore. Jacob cannot stand to see how Silverstar is still kept working until her death comes along very slowly and painfully. In

this scene, Jacob faces a moral dilemma in which he knows that the only way to end the suffering for Silverstar is by taking her life since there are no other options available.

At this circus, there is also the use of alcohol for the treating of ailing animals. It is evident in Rosie's case, the elephant abused by August to the extent that she gained grave injuries due to severe beatings. Worse of all, for the treatment, they gave her wine as an emergency antibiotic to treat her. There was one scene where Jacob and other workers were drinking wine directly into Rosie's mouth. They believe this alcohol will heal Rosie's injury, which indeed is far from medical standards. Using alcohol as an antibiotic substitute is an abuse that underlines the lack of proper access to health care for the animals in the circus.

Camel: "We need to get a lot of whiskey."

Jacob: "Are you sure that's not too much? She might get drunk."

Camel: "She weighs four tons. She just gets sleepy."

Jacob: "She can't barely move as it is."

Camel: "She'll be fine." (*Water for Elephants*, 01.10.57-01.11.06)

IV. CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Water for Elephants* reveals forms of exploitation experienced by both workers and animals within the circus environment, reflecting broader capitalist oppression as theorized by Karl Marx. The depiction of worker exploitation in the film encompasses multiple facets, including poor living conditions, excessive working hours, hazardous work environment, low salaries, lack of access to healthcare, and systemic oppression. These representations align with Marx's concept of surplus value, where the labor force is subjected to harsh conditions while the profits are concentrated in the hands of the capitalists.

Animal exploitation is portrayed through scenes of abuse, poor living conditions, and the absence of medical care. This mirrors Peter Singer's argument against speciesism, how animals are commodified and deprived of basic rights for human benefit. The dual analysis of human and animal exploitation shows that capitalism's drive for profit creates a hierarchical system of value where both human and non-human lives are reduced to their monetary worth. In this way, oppression in the circus is not isolated but interconnected and systemic, illustrating how capitalist structures normalize domination across species.

This study is limited by its reliance on a single film as the primary data and the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis. First, its reliance on film analysis may introduce subjective interpretation of exploitation. Second, the study's focus on cinematic representation lacks engagement with historical archives or firsthand accounts of circus life, which could provide stronger empirical support. Third, the analysis is primarily grounded in Marxist theory, potentially overlooking other critical lenses such as feminist or postcolonial perspectives that could further illuminate dynamics of oppression. Future research could benefit from a broader methodological approach, incorporating historical records and testimonies from circus performers and animal rights activists to validate findings. Comparative analysis with other

literary or cinematic works depicting exploitation could further contextualize capitalist oppression. Integrating feminist or postcolonial perspectives would deepen the critique of power imbalances, offering a more intersectional understanding of exploitation within capitalist framework.

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