

# Ratatouille is Capitalist Propaganda and Alarmingly Racist

Pixar's 2007 animated film *Ratatouille*, directed by Brad Bird, presents itself as a heartwarming, rags to riches tale, featuring a talented and tenacious rat named Remy who pursues his culinary passions, following the motto of his idol, the late, wildly successful, Chef Gusteau: "Anyone can cook." The message this film would have its audience digest is that with talent you can overcome any obstacle and achieve your dreams, should you have the passion and conviction to see it through. However, when consuming this movie with Marxist and post-colonial cutlery, what we bite into is a complex critique of Meritocracy and capitalist ideals. *Ratatouille* argues that true success is built not on privilege but on talent.

In *Ratatouille*'s narrative, rats are representative of the 'other'. Remy, embodying aspects of both the proletariat and the marginalized outsider cannot utilize his talent to its full potential or create socially recognized value with it without having credited his labor to his privileged human companion, Linguini. This dynamic reinforces class and racial hierarchies that become increasingly concerning as the movie progresses.

The narrative masks ideological contradictions beneath a simple underdog story. Our tale follows Remy, a rat gifted with an extraordinary sense of smell and a passion for haute cuisine, who becomes separated from his colony. He finds his way to Gusteau's, a once-renowned fine dining restaurant, founded by the illustrious chef for whom it's named. There, he forms a bizarre and unlikely alliance with Alfredo Linguini, the clumsy, talentless garbage boy who, unbeknownst to anyone including himself, is the restaurant's illegitimate heir.

By hiding under Linguini's toque and controlling his movements, Remy uses his culinary expertise which allows Linguini to rapidly gain popularity in the Kitchen and beyond. Their success is rattled by several factors; Chef Skinner, the petulant chef and current owner of Gusteau's restaurant, who represents the exploitative nature of capital (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* 22), Remy's pack, which serve as a frequent reminder to his origins as a rat, a status which Remy can never remove himself from, and the foreboding critic, Anton Ego, a gatekeeper of the bourgeois standard.

This crossroad of inherent privilege (Linguini) and marginalized talent (Remy), provides rich text for analyzing how systems of power co-opt and neutralize potential, reflecting the sentiment that all history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social evolution." (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto, Preface, p.6*).

## Part I: "Anyone Can Cook" (The Myth of Meritocracy)

At the outset the film's central ideology is disseminated via a television broadcast, a modern tool for disseminating dominant cultural values. This broadcast establishes an immediate hierarchy: "the best food in the world comes from France... the best food in Paris comes from Gusteau's." At the top of this capitalist hierarchy sits Gusteau. The narrative emphasizes Gusteau's idealization, not as a person, but a symbol, whose perceived success is paramount. The first half of his message, "Anyone can cook," at face value, felt like a sincere democratic invitation to me, For anyone who may be inclined to create, regardless of background has the inalienable right to do so. Remy, the marginalized protagonist, resonates with this message. Even on my most recent watch, as someone from a lower-class home who wishes to create and express through various mediums of art, I can't help but feel this message resonate. But it's the second half of the message I find troubling. "but only the fearless can be great," from here, the sentiment that anyone can cook falls into the meritocratic logic that anyone can achieve their goals should they be; a. skilled enough, and b. passionate enough to do so, overlooking what Frederick Engels called

"...conditions which were wholly independent of the will and direction of individual parties and entire classes" (Engels, *Principles* 48).

The film sees Gusteau appear as a visual and auditory projection of Remmy's subconscious and moral compass, bouncing ideas off nudging him to make the 'right' decision when the situation calls for it. Gusteau is elevated to a near messianic figure, a benevolent, spectral, capitalist Jesus. A point that's made even more evident when you realize that this apparition of Gusteau only appears once the audience learns of his death and Remmy finds himself at his lowest point. Without home, without family, without means to support himself, this "holy ghost" offers Remmy a message of capitalist salvation, to be lifted from the literal sewers, should he only try.

At the end of the day, *Ratatouille* is a celebration, and perpetuation of the myth of Meritocracy. John Mark Comer said, "The most effective lies are the ones that are mostly true." This film selects and isolates specific aspects of our social and economic systems and demarcates them as the 'bad parts' of Capitalism. The furthest group from capitalist this propaganda may reach and placate are those Marx describes as 'Bourgeois Socialists,' "adherents of present-day society who have been frightened for its future by the evils to which it necessarily gives rise. What they want, therefore, is to maintain this society while getting rid of the evils which are an inherent part of it." (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* p.53)

Anton Ego, a critic, who by the nature of his job, reinforces the hierarchical structure of capitalism using the power granted to them by that structure to determine and distinguish the value produced by the common man from "great cooks," reinforcing capitalist zeitgeist and consolidating the critic's power in a recursive loop. Chef Skinner, Gusteau's successor, embodies the rampant greed inherent to Capitalism. He seeks to profit off of Gusteau's name by using his likeness to sell frozen industrial food to a commercial mass market for self-gain, ultimately undercutting and cheapening the value of Gusteau's Restaurant and the work of those who depend on it for their income and points to the bourgeoisie's inevitable "augmentation of capital" (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* p.21).

The movie doesn't shy away from such problematic figures and even dissects the privileged role of critics in a pivotal scene toward the end of the film. You may be asking "If Ratatouille is truly capitalist propaganda, isn't it defeatist to so overtly call out these parts of the capitalist system?" And to that I say, "Not at all!" The opposite, in fact. The same way these two characters serve as examples of what 'bad capitalism' looks like, Gusteau and Remmy are presented to us as what "good capitalists' looks like. Driven by passion and elevated through skill, Remmy shows the indomitable pursuit of greatness. Gusteau, our north star, whose wild success paired with his unifying and an empowering slogan to pursue greatness, incites the viewer to root not just for the proletariat *running the rat race* as it were, but for our ethereal capitalist savior as well. Ultimately, however, the moral distinction between these characters' roles in the narrative is superficial and serves to obfuscate by pointing out certain folk as bad players in a game that is itself inherently bad. They all operate within a system defined by capital and wage-labor

The plot undermines its own message when Linguini's success at the restaurant comes not from merit, not even from great talent, but inheritance. The knowledge that he is Gusteau's son results in a drastic and immediate jump in social status from proletariat to the heir to Gusteau's and of course, a member of the bourgeoisie. And this is celebrated as a high note in the film, his success only being donated as something to criticize when he becomes arrogant at his success.

## Part II: A Rat in the Kitchen (Social Mobility and the Racialized other)

The rats in Ratatouille are an allegory for marginalized groups in the narrative and are presented as a racialized "other," subject to insurmountable social barriers set in place by humans (Klages, Literary Theory, The Complete Guide, ch.7 p.120). Remy desires social mobility, aspiring to the human world of creation and discovery, a world built and defined by the bourgeoisie. We see him attempting assimilation many times throughout the film through various means; walking upright, learning to read, and trying to distance himself from his family's perceived lower status, even so far as casually walking past and greeting a human stranger on the street with a laid-back finger-gun, none of which lead to full acceptance. Remy by the nature of his born circumstances can never cross the barrier of the other. He will never be met as an equal in the eyes of human led society. Foucault's panopticon "self-regulating subject," (Klages p.113)

Ghost Gusteau's response to Remy's perfect recitation of each cook's title and role in the kitchen is "*Ah, you are a clever rat,*" Remy's capitalist idol casually insinuates his status as other. Remy isn't just clever, he's clever for a *rat*. At face value this line doesn't mean much, but when held up to the story's themes in larger scope, any deployment of the term "rat" by the film becomes spectacularly dicey. The movie itself is aware of this and employs it often. I encourage you to watch this film in its entirety and pay close attention to where, when, and why the word is used throughout. One could write an entire essay on the matter.

While Remy is perched outside, in the skylight above the kitchen, he is relaxed, casual, and even a little arrogant when breaking down how the kitchen works. And the music reflects this with gentle sophistication. When Gusteau points out Linguini and asks who one member of the kitchen staff is, Remy's response is "Him? He's nobody." Remy's desire for assimilation is potent here, allowing himself to play the role of the bourgeoisie as he asserts that Linguini's status as garbage boy denotes him as subservient, hardly worth acknowledging unprompted. But the moment Remy falls from the higher vantage point of the skylight and into the kitchen sink below he's reminded of where he sits in the order of things. 'Nothing but a rat.' Even a garbage boy has more agency and right to be in the kitchen

than him. His knowledge and talent are irrelevant in the face of the hostile environment he romanticizes. Following Remmy as he narrowly evades detection and death several times, we see how the kitchen doors sharply divide the intense workspace (proletariat labor) from the luxurious dining experience (bourgeoisie consumption), this stark contrast is shown many times throughout the movie, which manifests as the kitchen being a space of class antagonism. Robin Burrow describes elite kitchens as sites of "organizational isolation" physically and socially separating workers. (Burrow, Robin, "*Where 'The Rules Don't Apply': Organizational Isolation and Misbehaviour in Elite Kitchens.*" et al.,) Gusteau's kitchen embodies this, creating a "geography of deviance" where conventional rules are suspended (Burrow et al.) The high-pressure and isolation allowed for the cruel Skinner's harsh and abusive behavior towards his staff and particularly toward Linguini. This geography is also responsible for the seething hatred and aggression the cooks have towards even the sight of Remmy, blemishing the refined image they desperately need to uphold to sustain their reputation and careers. "Boundary distortion and rule suspension in kitchens was variously linked with the invisibility afforded by the isolation of the kitchen environment. It was found that being and feeling isolated set the scene for chefs to 'play up' (Jen) because it led chefs to feel out of sight...isolation created a closed back-stage space where misbehaviour could happen. They explicitly described how feelings of isolation combined with the invisibility afforded by the kitchen environment effectively delimited behavioural constraints within that environment" (Burrow et al.)

### Part III: Systemic Complacency

Linguini and Remy's dynamic demonstrates the exploitation that is inherent to the capital-wage labor relationship (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* p.22-23). Linguini, the white human male proletariat, possesses the privilege necessary for social mobility, but lacks skill or talent. Remy, the racialized "other," holds immense talent, or labor power (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* p.14) but lacks social standing. Remy is the hidden labor force creating value, while Linguini is the public proxy accruing the benefits. The difference in personal risk for each highlights the hierarchy they live in. Simply put: unemployment for Linguini, death for Remy. And once Linguini takes on the Gusteau name and inherits his father's restaurant, he becomes the bourgeoisie. Now a capitalist, the sudden influx of power leads Linguini to take Remy's labor for granted.

The film's climax offers a brief vision of radical change. When Linguini stands in the way of the human staff from killing Remy for being in the kitchen, he reveals the truth that he had nothing to do with the cooking that critics and customers had been raving about. That in fact a rat had been responsible for all of it. And one by one they all turn in their aprons and leave, unable to believe or accept the "other" could possibly be the source of production of such high social value. This inadvertently gives us a glimpse at what a reconstitution of society within the kitchen might look like (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* 14). Remy's family, the previously marginalized rat colony, arrives not as scavengers but rather as organized labor. They seize control over the means of production within the kitchen, and operate it collectively, demonstrating a level of efficiency and arguably skill unseen in the film up to this point. Even the arrival of the health inspector, an authority state power, fails to stop their collective effort. This is only a temporary seizure, however. Remy's choice of Ratatouille, a "peasant dish," to serve to Ego connects with him and his own humble past, breaking through the critic's hardened exterior. Ego's review promotes the idea that "a great artist can come from anywhere," seemingly validating Gusteau's (and the film's) initial premise. However, his individual transformation does not save their coalition from the bourgeoisie as a whole. Gusteau's is shut down due to the health code violation, i.e. the presence of rats. Ego loses his job and credibility within the established system.

The resolution leaves an odd taste in the mouth, even as a casual viewer. Remmy is not only okay with the closing of Gusteau's but completely understanding of it. In his own words "Of course they *ratted* us out." Just accept this as it is. Which once again begs the question of how much we should advocate for the marginalized. Why does Linguini not advocate for this new paradigm shift? Why is Remmy so content to work in the back of a kitchen, albeit in a new, smaller restaurant with special accommodations, but he is still physically separated from human diners. It's never made clear whether Remmy was allowed to come out publicly as a chef, let alone does it attempt to address how he'd be received amid the status quo. Instead, we see his family living peacefully above and hidden away, the "other" is re-contained within a separate sphere once more. The film gestures towards revolutionary potential and collective action, breaking class barriers, recognizing marginalized talent, but allows them to fizzle out with a solution that preserves the current social order rather than overthrowing it. With Remmy being completely content with this outcome "Anyone can cook," perhaps, but the film ultimately demonstrates that the rules of capital, class, and prejudice dictate that not everyone can cook in the same kitchen or receive rewards or recognition they are due.

What makes me the most concerned about all this is this; Even going in as a casual viewer, applying surface level observation. We watch a human learn that. Species he's looked down on his entire life are actually sentient, intelligent, loving, and even capable of artistry and they're being commercially killed at genocidal levels every single day, often by horrific and painful methods. And by the end of the end of the movie, beyond Remmy and his immediate clan, it's every rat for themselves as far as Linguini, Collette, or Remmy are concerned. With the logic the movie has presented so far we can only assume that it's either just "the the way things are" or too much of a hassle to try to rectify or amend. Anyone can cook, but only the privileged can be assured amnesty from ethnic cleansing.



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