

Labor Exploitation in *The Menu* (2022)

Ellen Rahmania

English Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya
ellen.21003@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji penggambaran eksploitasi tenaga kerja dalam *The Menu* (2022) menggunakan teori Marxis. Dengan berfokus pada hubungan antara Chef Slowik dan staf dapurnya, studi ini menganalisis bagaimana kondisi kerja yang eksploitatif dapat menyebabkan alienasi dan bunuh diri. Menggunakan metode kualitatif, film ini dianalisis secara tematis melalui dialog, visual, dan interaksi karakter. Studi ini mengacu pada teori Karl Marx untuk mengeksplorasi tema nilai lebih, kesadaran palsu, dan berbagai bentuk bunuh diri. *The Menu* menunjukkan bahwa dalam kapitalisme ekstrem, kematian bukan sekadar akhir dari kehidupan, tetapi juga bisa menjadi simbol kritik, penolakan, dan pembebasan, dengan menggunakan konsep alienasi. Ketiga kematian ini, meskipun berbeda dalam bentuk dan konteks, memiliki pemahaman yang sama bahwa ketika pekerjaan, identitas, dan nilai hidup sepenuhnya diambil alih oleh sistem kapitalis, alienasi dapat mendorong individu dan kolektif menuju kehancuran yang tak terelakkan. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bagaimana tekanan kapitalis dalam lingkungan yang penuh tekanan dapat menyebabkan gangguan psikologis dan konsekuensi yang fatal.

Kata Kunci: Eksploitasi tenaga kerja; surplus value; alienasi; bunuh diri

Abstract

This study examines the depiction of labor exploitation in *The Menu* (2022) using Marxist theories. By focusing on the relationship between Chef Slowik and his kitchen staff, this study analyzes how exploitative labor conditions can lead to alienation and suicide. Using a qualitative method, the film is thematically analyzed through dialogue, visuals, and character interactions. The study draws on the theories of Karl Marx to explore the themes of surplus value, false consciousness, and different forms of suicide. The menu shows that in extreme capitalism, death is not simply the end of life, but can also be a symbol of critique, rejection, and liberation. Using the concept of alienation. These three deaths, although different in form and context, share the understanding that when the capitalist system completely takes over work, identity, and the value of life, alienation can push individuals and collectives towards inevitable destruction. The findings reveal how capitalist pressures in a stressful environment can lead to psychological disorders and fatal consequences.

Keywords: Labor exploitation; surplus value; alienation; suicide

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of labor exploitation leading to suicide reflects a deeper form of social inequality that continues to persist both at the individual and systemic levels. According to Tomaskovic Devey & Avent Holt (2019), exploitation involves one party gaining an undue advantage through manipulation or coercion. At its core, pressure on workers.

When such conditions persist, they do not merely result in material deprivation but also lead to mental and emotional exhaustion. As Monge & Hsieh (2020) describe, exploitative systems have evolved to include not only economic injustices but also cultural and identity-based exploitation. In extreme cases, the constant dehumanization, alienation, and loss of autonomy under exploitative conditions can result in suicidal ideation or acts of self-destruction. Various studies have begun to

the theory of exploitation emphasizes profit as a central indicator, where profit reflects the capitalist mechanism of extracting social surplus and labor. As noted by Yoshihara & Veneziani (2011), this exploitation has increasingly been normalized and even rationalized by those who suffer under it. Manifestations include wage theft, resource misappropriation by corporate elites, and systemic power imbalances that create chronic psychological issues.

examine how labor exploitation, when internalized over time, becomes a silent but powerful driver of suicidal behavior among vulnerable individuals.

The aim is to expose the harsh realities of the world, although in some cases, this can be considered exploitation of certain suffering or trauma. However, in reality, in certain sectors, including the culinary world, labor exploitation is often hidden behind the glitz and glamour (Di Marco, 2023). This sector, often perceived as glamorous and classy, actually harbors a variety of

challenges related to working conditions, especially for workers at the lower levels, such as chefs, servers, and restaurant staff. However, in the capitalistic world, this ideal is often overshadowed by exploitation. *The Menu* (2022), directed by Mark Mylod, offers a chilling exploration of labor exploitation, particularly within the elite restaurant industry. Through its satirical portrayal of a fine-dining experience, the film critiques the exploration of workers within the restaurant industry and the ways in which labor relations dehumanize individuals, not only physically but psychologically.

In a capitalist society, workers are alienated from the products of their labor, as Karl Marx famously argued. (Marx, 1867). In *The Menu*, this alienation manifests not only in the staff's physical work but also in their emotional and psychological states. By examining the impact of labor exploitation on the characters in *The Menu*, we can gain deeper insights into broader societal issues concerning class, labor, and mental health. The film's critique of elite industries such as haute cuisine reveals the destructive nature of an economic system that forces individuals into dehumanizing labor conditions. Many high-end restaurants, for example, employ chefs and kitchen staff to work extremely long hours, often more than 12 hours a day, without fair compensation for overtime or holidays (Peng & Ingber, 2011). Chefs are under high pressure to produce perfect dishes in a short amount of time, often with little regard for their physical and mental well-being. They work for relatively low wages compared to the high prices customers pay for their food. Even in some well-known restaurants, chefs are often forced to work for free in order to build their reputations or gain experience.

This phenomenon illustrates the capitalist expectation that high quality is produced at low cost, especially labor cost, to maximize profits (Terry Eagleton, 1996). Thus, the analysis of *The Menu* offers an important contribution to understanding how labor exploitation leads to self-destruction in contemporary society. Mylod's treatment of labor exploitation in *The Menu* is both unsettling and thought-provoking, as it exposes the mental and emotional cost of working within an environment where personal autonomy is stripped away in favor of corporate success (Welch, 2022). *The Menu* thus offers a modern lens through which to examine the psychological and emotional effects of labor exploitation, showing how capitalism's demand for efficiency and profit leads to suicide and alienation. The employees in the film represent the struggle of workers in capitalist industries, oppressed, alienated, and psychologically burdened by their labor. Marx's theory of exploitation and alienation is crucial to understanding the psychological (Ro, 2012). It seems that all the workers depicted in *The Menu* are forced into a system that requires them to abandon their desires and

identities in favor of fulfilling the demands of the capitalist elite. Their labor is not only physically taxing but also psychologically damaging, as they are alienated from their true selves. The emotional and psychological consequences of such exploitation are evident in the characters' increasing disillusionment and, ultimately, their destructive outcomes.

Researchers chose *The Menu* movie as an object of study because the author addresses an important social issue and brings attention to the psychological and ethical concerns surrounding labor exploitation in modern industries. It provides a lens through which both film analysis and Marxist theory can intersect, providing valuable insights for scholars, industry professionals, and the public. As references in writing theory, this study uses several previous studies. The first studies have explored *The Function of Dramatic Persona in The Film "The Menu"* (2022). This study analyzed the characterization in *The Menu* through the framework of Vladimir Propp's function of dramatic persona, by examining the roles of characters such as Chef Slowik, Elsa, and Margot. Munawaroh highlights how these characters fulfill functions such as the hero, villain, helper, and false hero.

The study also draws attention to how these roles represent different facets of labor exploitation, with Slowik symbolizing the controlling, oppressive authority, and the staff embodying the exploited working class (Munawaroh & Heriyati, 2023). The next study, *Class Exploitation in Ron Rash's 'Serena': A Marxist Criticism* by Muniralizah Nurman, examines the theme of labor exploitation in the context of class inequality (Nurman et al., 2021). Nurman's analysis reveals how the capitalist system oppresses the working-class characters in *Serena*, and how this exploitation leads to alienation, psychological harm, and ultimately tragedy.

This study is particularly relevant to *The Menu* because both works critique the way labor is commodified and dehumanized, leading to the alienation of workers from their true selves. This also happened in the previous study by Mardiana Al Ma'ruf entitled "*Suicidal Thoughts of the Main Character in the Logan Movie*". The main focus of this study was to identify signs of suicidal ideation, understand the psychological and social causes behind the behavior, and observe how Logan deals with his death. Symptoms of suicidal ideation in Logan are shown through behaviors such as alcohol addiction, irritability, and keeping adamantium bullets, which symbolically show his desire to die. The author concludes that Logan's character represents the psychological reality that even a hero can experience mental exhaustion and despair (Al Ma'ruf, 2018).

Drawing on concepts from performance studies, the study emphasized how food functions as a narrative

device, revealing power dynamics and cultural rituals. The restaurant becomes a symbolic site of social decay. At the same time, the dining experience is framed as both artistic and ritualistic, making food a central element in conveying the film's deeper sociological messages. *The Menu* depicts the exploitation of labor in the culinary world through a dark and tense narrative, showing how prestige and success in the restaurant industry are often built on the sacrifices and injustices experienced by its workers. By applying Marxist theory and drawing on previous studies on exploitation, the researcher formulated the title "*Labor Exploitation in The Menu (2022)*".

METHOD

The method of research in this study involves a qualitative approach that focuses on film analysis using Marxist theoretical frameworks. The primary source of data is the film *The Menu* (2022), a 106-minute psychological thriller directed by Mark Mylod and produced by 20th Century Studios. This film was selected due to its complex depiction of labor exploitation and ideological control within a hyper-disciplined culinary environment, which aligns closely with the themes of capitalist critique explored in this research. The film was analyzed in its entirety, with specific attention to key scenes that highlight the unequal power dynamics between the employer figure, Chef Slowik, and his kitchen staff.

Data were collected through a detailed scene-by-scene examination that included transcribing dialogues, taking selected screenshots, and observing visual and symbolic cues such as character posture, tone, and mise en-scène. The focus was especially directed toward scenes portraying worker submission, dehumanization, and emotional detachment. These moments were identified, categorized, and documented to support thematic analysis.

After collecting the data, the process adopted a thematic analysis method to uncover how labor exploitation, power, and alienation are represented through cinematic elements such as plot development, character interaction, and visual aesthetics. The theoretical foundation relied on Karl Marx's concepts of surplus value, alienation, and false consciousness. Surplus value was interpreted through the intense productivity demanded from the staff and the loss of ownership over their labor. Alienation was reflected in their loss of identity and personal agency, while false consciousness appeared in their acceptance of oppression without resistance. Through these analytical lenses, *The Menu* was approached not only as a cinematic work but as a critical reflection of capitalist labor relations and their psychological consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In many cases, workers have limited choices due to economic dependency, lack of alternative employment, or restrictive labor systems, which force them to accept substandard conditions. Labor exploitation not only affects workers physically, but also greatly affects their psychological condition. As a result, some characters choose suicide as an escape from the invisible suffering. This action reflects the severe psychological impact of exploitation, feelings of despair, loss of meaning in life, and the destruction of personal identity due to the oppressive pressure of the system. Therefore, this study raised the issue of labor exploitation and led to the condition of each character leading to suicide.

From a general point of view, labor exploitation refers to the condition where workers are subjected to unfair treatment within the workplace, typically characterized by receiving inadequate compensation, working excessively long hours, and lacking proper recognition, benefits, or protections in relation to the value they produce (Marx, 1867). This exploitation occurs when there is a significant imbalance of power between employers and employees, allowing employers to maximize profit by extracting more labor than they are willing to compensate fairly. In many cases, workers have limited choices due to economic dependency, lack of alternative employment, or restrictive labor systems, which force them to accept substandard conditions. Labor exploitation not only affects workers physically, but also greatly affects their psychological condition. As a result, some characters choose suicide as an escape from the invisible suffering. This action reflects the severe psychological impact of exploitation, feelings of despair, loss of meaning in life, and the destruction of personal identity due to the oppressive pressure of the system. Therefore, this study raised the issue of labor exploitation and led to the condition of each character leading to suicide.

Labor Exploitation

When analyzed through the lens of Karl Marx's theory, the film *The Menu* (2022) may portray a symbolic representation of labor exploitation within a capitalist system. The relationship between Chef Slowik and his kitchen staff could be interpreted as reflecting the dynamic between the bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) and the proletariat (the working class). It appears that the kitchen workers lack autonomy over both the products of their labor and the labor process itself, positioning them as potentially exploited subjects whose identities are subsumed under the authority of a single controlling figure. This practice, according to Marx, is not an exception but an inherent feature of capitalism. The wage system, he argued, masks this exploitation by turning

labor into a commodity, creating the illusion that workers are fairly paid. At the same time, they are systematically denied the full benefits of their work, including Surplus Value, Alienation, and False Consciousness. For the analysis, this study discussed several topics related to exploitation. Each will be explained according to Karl Marx's Marxist theory.

Surplus Value (Exploitation of Working Time)

This dynamic becomes most visible in the manipulation and control of labor time, where workers are forced to work long hours, often under intense conditions, while employers largely keep the financial profits generated from their productivity (Engels et al., 1995). The capitalist system thus sustains itself through the systematic extraction of labor time and energy, hiding the exploitation behind the guise of contractual employment and monetary wages that rarely reflect the real value created by workers. As in this clip, one of the staff deliberately informs the client about their working hours and what activities they do on a daily basis,

"Each day starts at 6:00, with five hours of prep work. We harvest, we ferment, we slaughter, we marinate, we liquify, we spherify, we gel. Dinner typically takes four hours and 25 minutes, and each day ends well past 2:00 in the morning. So yes, we all should live here."
00.08.25 -Elsa, the staff chef.

Elsa's statement in *The Menu* (2022), describing the extraordinarily long and intense working hours beginning each day at 6:00 a.m. and continuing well past 2:00 a.m. along with the fact that the kitchen staff live on the premises of the restaurant, can be thoroughly examined through the lens of Marxist theory, which critically analyzes the systemic exploitation of the working class (proletariat) by the ruling capitalist class (bourgeoisie) (Marx, 1867). This daily grind of more than 18 hours reflects a severe distortion of labor relations in which workers are subjected to unrelenting physical and psychological demands, all while remaining completely dependent on the very institution that exploits them. According to Tyson, Marx assumed exploitation is rooted in the extraction of surplus value, that is, the difference between the value a worker produces and the wages they receive (Tyson, 2006). This critique aligns with Karl Marx's concept of surplus value, which refers to the extra value produced by laborers beyond their wages, thereby creating a source of profit for capitalists. In the film *The Menu* (2022), this phenomenon is visualized through the extreme work system of the kitchen staff under the control of Chef Slowik. They devote their energy, time, and even their personal lives to creating a luxurious and exclusive culinary experience for elite guests. Although they are the direct creators of the aesthetic and economic value of the

restaurant, they have no control over their product or labor. The workers receive neither recognition, compensation, nor freedom, but instead are trapped in a system that demands perfection and total devotion. This reflects how the capitalist system not only physically exploits workers but also absorbs their emotional, artistic, and personal identity (István Mészáros, 1970). This condition can be categorized as a disguised form of forced labor, where ideological domination and social pressure replace physical violence. In terms of surplus value, the film shows that the high value enjoyed by elite consumers is obtained through the overwork of exploited staff. Thus, *The Menu* succeeds in illustrating how exploitation occurs in the modern world of work.

Alienation (Control Over Workers' Lives)

The concept of alienation refers to a condition in which workers are alienated from the fruits of their labor, from the work process itself, from their fellow workers, and ultimately from the essence of their humanity (Marx, 1867). This alienation is not only economic, but also touches the emotional, spatial, and existential aspects of human life. In this movie, the staff operate in an environment that resembles a total institution, where all their daily activities are regulated by military discipline and closely monitored. This is reflected in the statement of Elsa, the head of the kitchen staff, who says:

"Each day starts at 6:00, with five hours of prep work. We harvest, we ferment, we slaughter, we marinate, we liquify, we spherify, we gel. Dinner typically takes four hours and 25 minutes, and each day ends well past 2:00 in the morning. So yes, we all should live here."
00.08.25 -Elsa, the staff chef.

The data on alienation reveals that workers have no free time, opportunities to build a personal life, or space to explore their identity. Their existence is fully functionalized to support the production of luxurious culinary delights consumed by the elite, the results of which they do not even enjoy themselves. It reflects the process of reification in Marxist theory, where human social relations are reduced to mechanical functions in the capitalist system (Marx, 1867). In this movie, the workers are treated not as individuals with thoughts, emotions and will, but as instruments of production that are subject to the will of the chef. Their activities are performed with robotic precision and without emotional expression, reflecting the loss of personal agency and subjectivity. They do not cook as a form of self-expression or art, but rather to fulfill the expectations of perfection from elite guests. In this structure, Chef Slowik becomes a symbol of the capitalist class that controls and exploits workers for its profit and reputation (Munawaroh & Heriyati, 2023). He is the only figure to be recognized for the success of

the restaurant, while the hard-working staff remain invisible and unappreciated. This is in line with Marx's concept of surplus value, where the capitalist takes advantage of the labor of others without providing an equal reward. This inequality creates a deep alienation, not only from the fruits of labor but also from oneself as a human subject.

Through this representation, *The Menu* presents a sharp critique of the capitalist system that reduces humans to machines of production for profit. The emotional and psychological burden faced by workers is severe: they lose their autonomy, creativity and identity. The film thus becomes a cinematic reflection on Marx's theory of alienation, showing how capitalist control in the extreme is able to turn humans into soulless means of production for the sake of efficiency and perfection that is only enjoyed by a handful of elites.

False Consciousness (Blind Loyalty)

The concept of false consciousness refers to the tendency of modern work cultures and systems to view suffering as a natural, even noble, part of achieving professional success. This allows the capitalist system to continue without meaningful resistance from those who are oppressed. In the context of modern work culture, false consciousness is also seen when suffering or sacrifice is considered part of the journey to success, when in fact it is the result of a system of covert labor exploitation. In this view, extreme stress, physical exhaustion, sacrificing personal time, and even losing one's identity are often seen as forms of dedication and love for one's work. Their suffering is portrayed not as a problem, but as proof of dedication, benefiting only those in power. The illusion hides the reality of exploitation and turns passion into a tool for control. This analysis can be seen in the incident below.

"He is good. But not great. He will never be great."

"This is what you are meant to do. This is what greatness looks like."

"There is no way to avoid the mess. The mess you make of your life, of your body, of your sanity, by giving everything you have to pleasing people you will never know." - 00.40.29 Chef Slowik to Jeremy

The data reveals a key moment during the dinner service, where Chef Slowik introduces Jeremy to the guests and tells him, "This is what you are meant to do. This is what greatness looks like." Although the statement may seem like praise on the surface, it becomes chilling in context. Chef Slowik then reveals that Jeremy will never be great, he lacks the unique brilliance required to stand out in the culinary world. Moments later, Jeremy tragically ends his life by shooting himself in front of the diners and staff, as part of the planned menu experience. Passion is

portrayed as a tool of control, where Chef Slowik manipulates Jeremy's dedication to cooking by linking false consciousness with suffering. Jeremy's suicide is not framed as a failure of leadership, but as a necessary artistic sacrifice, highlighting how toxic work cultures often glorify pain in the name of excellence. From a Marxist view, this reflects ideological control, where exploitation is disguised as opportunity. Jeremy's dream is used against him, turning passion into a path of false consciousness to self-destruction.

The next analysis reveals another false consciousness that leads to total obedience. The uniform, ritualistic, and unquestioningly obedient behavior of the kitchen staff reflects a condition in which individuals lose their freedom to think and act autonomously. They no longer question the orders or systems that govern them, but instead follow Chef Slowik's instructions like followers of a cult. From a Marxist perspective, this phenomenon is a manifestation of false consciousness, a psychological condition in which the working class is unaware of the form of oppression they experience because their outlook on life has been shaped by the ideology of the ruling class (Marx & Engels, 1845). In this film, workers no longer see themselves as victims of exploitation, but as part of Slowik's grand vision (Munawaroh & Heriyati, 2023). They internalize the values and goals of their employer, even when it leads them to destruction. This unquestioning loyalty creates the illusion that they have meaning or value in the structure, when in fact they have lost their autonomy and self-identity.

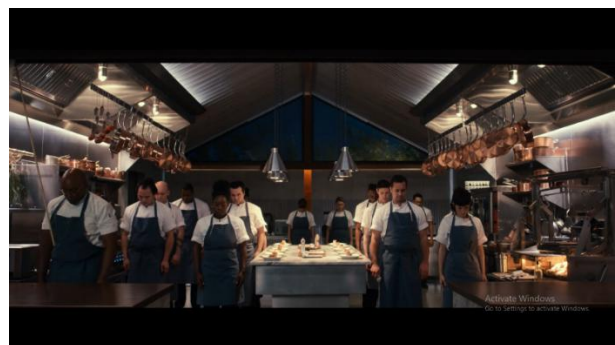


Figure 1 00:41:39 The workers showed no reaction to Jeremy's death

The data shows that none of the staff react with shock or protest after Jeremy's suicide. They continue with their work silently and precisely, as if nothing happened. A chilling moment in *The Menu* (2022) occurs when Jeremy, the sous-chef, commits suicide in front of the restaurant's guests and fellow workers. Rather than reacting with panic, grief, or horror, the kitchen staff continued with their duties in complete silence and discipline, as though nothing had happened. This eerie calmness in the face of

death reveals a deeply disturbing level of psychological conditioning and emotional suppression. It is not simply professionalism or discipline that keeps them from reacting, it is indoctrination. The workers have been psychologically trained to remain passive and obedient, regardless of how extreme the situation becomes. The lack of emotion or protest following Jeremy's death underscores the cult-like control that Chef Slowik holds over his staff. Their emotional detachment is not a natural coping mechanism, but the product of long-term mental manipulation and ideological domination. This false consciousness reveals the devastating effects of systemic exploitation, where laborers are conditioned to prioritize duty and performance over their moral instincts and emotional well-being. The staff no longer act as autonomous human beings; they behave like programmed extensions of Slowik's will. Their behavior also mirrors cult psychology, where personal judgment is surrendered to a charismatic leader.

Exploitation Leads to Suicide

In this context, suicide may not be solely an individual psychological crisis, but rather a symptom of deeper structural oppression. When the system consistently deprives workers of their autonomy, recognition, and dignity, it can be assumed that the resulting emotional and existential emptiness can lead to extreme responses, alienation, and even self-destruction. Therefore, it is important to examine whether suicide in narratives steeped in exploitation can be understood not only as a personal tragedy but also as a symbolic form of rejection of the system that creates such suffering. Thus, *The Menu* highlighted how labor exploitation wrapped in the romanticization of professionalism can create psychological devastation that leads to death.

Jeremy's Suicide (Self-Estrangement): The Collapse of Individual Identity under Capitalism

Self-estrangement is a state in which the worker becomes alienated not only from the product of their labor, the act of labor itself, and other people, but ultimately from their self, or what Marx calls their "species-being". As a result, workers no longer feel they have their own life, and they become foreign to their existence and lose their relationship with themselves (Marx, 1844). This is what Marx refers to as self-estrangement, a situation in which an individual no longer recognizes who he is outside the functional role determined by the capitalist system. This analysis can be seen in the incident below.

• Before



Figure 2 00:40:39 Slowik gives a message to Jeremy

"He is good. But not great. He will never be great."

"This is what you are meant to do. This is what greatness looks like."

"There is no way to avoid the mess. The mess you make of your life, of your body, of your sanity, by giving everything you have to pleasing people you will never know." 00.40.29 Chef Slowik, describing Jeremy's worthlessness

• After



Figure 3 00:41:35 Jeremy shoots himself

One of the most emotionally jarring moments occurs when Jeremy, a young sous-chef, takes his own life during a live service in front of diners. This shocking event is not just an isolated act of despair, it is a deeply symbolic representation of how high-pressure environments and perfectionist ideals can drive individuals to psychological collapse. Jeremy's suicide is introduced as part of a planned "course" in the dining experience, referred to as "The Mess." Chef Julian Slowik presents Jeremy to the guests and, with a calm but condescending tone, says, *"This is what you are meant to do. This is what greatness looks like."* Immediately after this statement, Jeremy shoots himself in the head.

The data highlighted that Jeremy's suicide occurred shortly after this statement, carried out publicly and ritualistically in front of the restaurant guests. This act was not only a form of personal despair, but also a symbol of the existential destruction caused by a work system that had eliminated human values. Within the framework of Marxist thought, Jeremy had reached the pinnacle of self-alienation or self-estrangement, where he no longer recognized himself outside the role imposed on him by the system. He had become an object of production, stripped

of his subjectivity. Thus, his suicide reflected not only psychological collapse but also the logical consequence of alienation within a capitalist system that completely negates individual freedom.

As described by Maslach and Leiter, individuals in high-stakes professions often internalize unrealistic standards and equate their self-worth with achievement (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). When these expectations are not met, they experience profound guilt, shame, and hopelessness. Jeremy, under constant pressure to reach an unattainable ideal of “*greatness*,” likely felt that failure made him fundamentally worthless. The kitchen’s environment, structured, hierarchical, and cult-like, offers no emotional support or room for imperfection. In such spaces, suffering is not only normalized but glorified, framed as the price of artistic excellence. Through the character of Jeremy, *The Menu* demonstrates that work within the capitalist system is not only economically exploitative but also psychologically and existentially destructive. The film asserts that in a state of total alienation, where the logic of production has erased identity and the value of life, death may appear as the only remaining form of control and resistance.

Tyler's Suicide: Alienation in the Capitalist System

Alienation in the capitalist system is usually triggered by constant mental stress, repeated failures, and an environment that does not provide recognition or appreciation for the efforts made. In a psychological context, this phenomenon can be related to burnout, depression, and self-esteem disorders, where individuals feel helpless in meeting social and professional demands (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). When viewed from a Marxist perspective, Tyler’s suicide is a form of alienation experienced by workers in a capitalist system.

• Before



Figure 4 01:11:41 Tyler gets criticized by Slowik

“It is actually bad.”

“You are why the mystery has been drained from our art.”

“You see that now, don’t you?” 01:11:30 - Chef Slowik

“Sorry, Chef” - 1:11:41 - Tyler

• After



Figure 5 01:13:08 Tyler’s Off-Screen suicide in the back of the kitchen

The data shows that Tyler’s case, his suicide, reflects the collapse of his ego that results from the destruction of his false self-image, which was entirely built around external validation. Throughout the film, Tyler presents himself as an elitist foodie and devoted admirer of Chef Julian Slowik. He is obsessed not only with high-end cuisine but also with the status and prestige associated with culinary elitism (Munawaroh & Heriyati, 2023). However, his identity is performative and fragile based not on true skill or knowledge, but on a desperate need to feel special and superior. A pivotal moment occurs when Chef Slowik confronts Tyler’s shallow persona by forcing him to cook in front of the restaurant’s entire staff and guests. Knowing Tyler has no culinary skills, Slowik publicly humiliates him, shattering the illusion Tyler has built about himself. This public humiliation leads to a complete collapse of his identity, and because Tyler has no deeper sense of self outside of this curated image, he becomes psychologically unanchored.

Tyler’s suicide in *The Menu* (2022) is a powerful reflection of Marx’s concept of alienation in capitalist society. As an individual who does not produce, but only consumes elite cultural capital, represented by his obsession with high-end cuisine, Tyler is alienated from the production process, from authentic human relationships, and ultimately from himself. His self-worth is entirely constructed through external validation, particularly from Chef Slowik, a symbol of authority and mastery within the capitalist hierarchy. When Tyler is publicly exposed as incompetent and worthless, he experiences a collapse of self-worth: the destruction of an identity formed solely through capitalist ideals of recognition and status. His inability to accept this loss drives him to suicide. From a Marxist perspective, this moment occurs due to the collapse of self-worth resulting from the inability to maintain a false identity constructed by the capitalist system through social disconnection

(Engels et al., 1995). His death serves as a critique of how capitalist ideology reduces human worth to mere appearance and validation, creating a fragile identity that crumbles if it fails.

Alienation Existential Crisis in Capitalism: The Symbolism of Self-Immolation as a Form of Revolutionary Consciousness

The term existential crisis in capitalism refers to a condition in which individuals experience a profound loss of meaning, disconnection from their identity, and a sense of purposelessness in life arising not merely from internal or psychological conflict, but as a direct consequence of structural forces within capitalist society (Engels et al., 1995). Here, the existential crisis seems to refer to self-immolation. Hypothetically, self-immolation in this context can be seen as the pinnacle of alienation, when an individual no longer feels connected to the world around them, including themselves. This analysis can be seen in the incident below.

- **Before**



Figure 6 00:46:50 Slowik assures Margot that today, everyone will die.

“And then you will let me live?”- Margot
 “Let you live? No!. Of course not.”
 “Can’t you see that would ruin the menu?”
 “We are all going to die tonight. This was always the plan. Isn’t that right?”-Chef Slowik
 “Yes, Chef!”- Staff 00.46.54

- **After**



Figure 7 01:39:18 everything in unison burned themselves

The scene in the movie *The Menu* (2022) where Chef Julian Slowik says, “*We are all going to die tonight. This was always the plan,*” and the entire kitchen staff responds in unison, ‘*Yes, Chef,*’ reflecting a tangible form

of altruistic suicide as described by Émile Durkheim. In this context, the workers showed no fear or attempt to escape. Instead, they accept death as part of their final responsibility towards the leader and the system they have served so completely. According to George, in one of his studies, he found that the theory of Erving Goffman, as described in his theory of “total institutions,” suggests that environments that dominate every aspect of life can erase personal identity and enforce collective obedience (Ritzer, 2012). Similarly, the staff in *The Menu* live, work, and think in uniformity, showing cult-like devotion. The collective suicide led by Chef Slowik and the entire kitchen staff is not simply a dramatic climax, but rather a symbol of the most extreme existential crisis within the capitalist system, where the working class, having reached the peak of alienation, chooses self-destruction as the ultimate form of liberation. This moment represents more than despair; it marks the birth of revolutionary consciousness, a key concept in Marxist theory that describes the shift from passive awareness to radical political action (István Mészáros, 1970).

The kitchen staff, after years of serving the elite through labor that denied them recognition, creativity, or autonomy, no longer saw the value in maintaining life within a system that commodified their humanity. The decision to die with the fruits of their labor, the restaurant itself became a powerful symbolic gesture: if their lives had been consumed by capitalist production, then their deaths would destroy that system in return (Marx, 1867). This was not a nihilistic act, but an act of liberation. As Marx argued, revolutionary consciousness is born when alienation reaches its maximum, and the working class no longer seeks reform but a complete break with the mechanisms of oppression.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, the researcher concludes that *The Menu* (2022) portrays a complex and layered depiction of labor exploitation within a hyper-controlled and elitist work environment. The film reflects Marxist critiques of capitalism, particularly through the concept of surplus value, as seen in the extreme regulation and manipulation of the kitchen staff’s working time under Chef Slowik’s authority. Workers are subjected to long hours and intense conditions, emphasizing how labor is exploited for maximum profit. This exploitation is deepened by alienation, where the staff loses personal autonomy and becomes mere instruments of production. Additionally, the film illustrates false consciousness, where the workers exhibit blind loyalty and emotional detachment, even in the face of violence and death, most strikingly in their passive response to Jeremy’s suicide.

The representation of suicide in the film *The Menu* (2022) is a manifestation of the alienation and existential devastation caused by exploitation within the capitalist system. Through an analysis of three forms of death, the suicides of Jeremy, Tyler, and the kitchen staff, the film depicts the spectrum of human suffering inflicted by an oppressive production system. Jeremy represents a worker alienated from himself (self-estrangement). He works within a system that demands totality but offers no room for recognition or development. His suicide reflects extreme individual alienation when life as a worker becomes unbearable. Meanwhile, Tyler represents a consumer who has completely internalized the ideology of capitalism. He loses his reason for living. In this case, his death serves as a critique of how capitalist ideology reduces human worth to mere appearance and validation, creating a fragile identity that crumbles if it fails. Ultimately, the kitchen staff, along with Chef Slowik, committed collective suicide as a final act of resistance against the system. By Self-Immolation as a form of revolutionary consciousness, their collective death in the fire was a symbolic act of destroying the system that had absorbed their energy, time, and humanity. In a Marxist context, this represents a form of revolutionary consciousness, when acute alienation drives the working class to reject and destroy the system that has robbed them of their autonomy.

SUGGESTION

Based on *The Menu* 2022, the writer has analyzed how exploitative systems can result in psychological collapse and radical acts like suicide. Future research could further explore how labor exploitation in films, viewed through Marxist and psychological lenses, leads to self-destruction, an area still underexplored in film studies. While capitalism's emotional toll has been studied, less attention is given to how it pushes individuals toward despair, as seen in *The Menu* (2022). For creative industries, these findings emphasize the need to reject the glorification of overwork and prioritize well-being. Filmmakers and audiences alike are encouraged to engage critically with representations of labor and support ethical, humane work environments.

REFERENCES

- Al Ma'ruf, M. (2018). *SUICIDAL THOUGHT OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN LOGAN MOVIE A FINAL PROJECT*. https://eprints.undip.ac.id/63672/1/Project_-_Suicide_in_Logan_Movie.pdf
- Christ, O. (2015). *THE CONCEPT OF ALIENATION IN THE EARLY WORKS OF KARL MARX* (Vol. 11, Issue 7).
- Di Marco, A. (2023). The 'normality' of labour exploitation: The right to fair and just working conditions in the Union's social market economy. *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, 41(4), 235–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09240519231208306>
- Engels, F., Zodiac, T. :, Kuhls, H., Thurrott, A., McDorman, B., Schultz, B., & Gimenez, M. (1995). *Capital A Critique of Political Economy Volume I Book One: The Process of Production of Capital*.
- Gupta, G., & Vijayaraghavan, A. P. (2024). "Nothing in this kitchen is unplanned." *Food as performance in Mark Mylod's The Menu*. 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13950052>
- István Mészáros. (1970). *Marx's Theory of Alienation*. https://www.academia.edu/16876353/Istvan_Meszáros_Marx's_Theory_of_Alienation
- J Overholser, C McGovern, C Silva, & S Gomez. (2022). Suicide as a public health concern Confronting the means, motives, and opportunity. *15th European Public Health Conference 2022*. <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2210512.pdf>
- Khafifah, A., Isnaini, N., & Tagunu, A. (2023). *Open Journal Systems THE PHENOMENON OF LABOR EXPLOITATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW*. 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.15408/empati>
- Marx, K. (1844). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/epm/epm.pdf>
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital Vol 3*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/>
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, 15(2), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>
- Munawaroh, S., & Heriyati, N. (2023). *THE FUNCTION OF DRAMATIC PERSONA IN THE FILM "THE MENU" (2022)*.
- Nurman, M., Daru Kuncara, S., & Mujahir, F. (n.d.). *CLASS EXPLOITATION IN RON RASH'S SERENA NOVEL: A MARXIST CRITICISM* (Vol. 5).
- Pekyaman, A. (2023). *THE MENU MOVIE ANALYSIS WITHIN THE SCOPE OF MOBBING IN FOOD AND BEVERAGE ESTABLISHMENTS*. *Route Educational and*

Social Science Journal.
<https://doi.org/10.17121/ressjournal.3449>

- Peng, L., & Ingber, J. (2011). *The Myth of Worker Exploitation in the Chinese Manufacturing Sector*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3326608>
- Ritzer, G. (2012). Encyclopedia of Social Theory. In *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412952552>
- Ro, C. (2012). *Social Interaction and Marx's Theory of Alienation*.
<https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ro2012.pdf>
- Terry Eagleton. (1996). *The Illusions Of Postmodernism*.
<https://archive.org/details/illusionsofpostm0000eagl>
- Tomaskovic-Devey, D., & Avent-Holt, D. (2019). Relational Inequalities: An Organizational Approach. In *Relational Inequalities*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190624422.001.0001>
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today : a user-friendly guide* / Lois Tyson.-- 2nd ed. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Yoshihara, N., & Veneziani, R. (2011). *Exploitation of Labour and Exploitation of Commodities: A "New Interpretation."*
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0486613412475192>