

ARTICLE

The False Promise of "Neoliberal Cinderella": Deconstructing Gender and Social Class Discourse in *Anora* (2024)

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ABSTRACT ENGLISH:

Film is a discursive sphere where cultural meanings are constructed and debated through visual storytelling. Therefore, it is significant to expose binary contradictions in neoliberal gender ideology and reveal structural violence against women hidden behind narratives of social mobility in film. This study, thus, aims to unravel the complexity of gender and class representations in *Anora* (2024) through a critical analysis of "Neoliberal Cinderella" discourse, which frames labour relations as romance and shifts the costs of social reproduction onto women's bodies. This research employs interpretive qualitative study with two mutually reinforcing analytical frameworks. First, *Derrida's Deconstruction* to identify and dismantle dominant binary oppositions (love versus money, spontaneity versus strategy, reality versus fantasy) through an in-depth reading of *mise-en-scène*, dialogue and material markers. Second, Marxist-feminist perspective is utilised to map the political economy of affective labor, the mechanisms of commodification through gifts and access, and the unequal distribution of risks and costs affecting the main character, Ani. The results show that *Anora* both produces and disrupts the neoliberal Cinderella myth by revealing the hidden costs behind the promise of social mobility (social climbing): fragmented time, exploited emotions, and commodified security. The movie reveals that social mobility is a lease, not a right, and that love is used to glorify labour contracts. This paper proposes a methodological bridge of Marxist-feminist and deconstruction for cultural criticism that demands structural redistribution and recognition of affective labour as real work that is entitled to protection, compensation, and dignity.

Keywords: Discourse, Gender, Class, *Anora*, Film

ABSTRACT INDONESIAN:

Film merupakan ruang diskursif di mana makna-makna budaya dibangun dan diperdebatkan melalui bahasa sinematik, sehingga mampu mengungkap kontradiksi dalam ideologi gender neoliberal dan mengungkap kekerasan struktural terhadap perempuan yang tersembunyi di balik narasi mobilitas sosial. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengurai kompleksitas wacana gender dan kelas dalam film *Anora* (2024) melalui analisis narasi "Neoliberal Cinderella" yang menggambarkan hubungan kerja sebagai romansa dan mengalihkan beban reproduksi sosial dalam tubuh perempuan. Metode penelitian menggunakan studi kualitatif interpretatif dengan dua alat analitis yang saling memperkuat. Dekonstruksi Derrida digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi dan membongkar oposisi biner yang dominan seperti cinta versus uang, spontanitas versus strategi, realita versus fantasi, melalui analisis mendalam *mise-en-scène*, dialog, dan tanda-tanda material di dalam film. Kemudian teori feminis-Marxis digunakan untuk memetakan ekonomi politik kerja afektif, mekanisme komodifikasi melalui hadiah dan akses kekuasaan, serta distribusi risiko dan "harga" yang harus ditanggung dan "dibayar" oleh karakter perempuan dalam film ini. Hasil dari analisis menunjukkan bahwa *Anora* membongkar fantasi Cinderella modern dimana mobilitas sosial yang dijanjikan hanya akan selalu mengorbankan stabilitas hidup, mengeksploitasi emosi dan menjadikan rasa aman sebagai komodifikasi. Film ini mengungkapkan bahwa mobilitas sosial adalah bersifat sementara, bukan hak yang berkelanjutan, dan cinta hanya digunakan untuk menghormati kontrak kerja. Penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka-metodologi teori baru (dekonstruksi-feminis-Marxis) untuk kritik budaya yang menuntut redistribusi struktural dan pengakuan terhadap pekerja emosional sebagai pekerjaan nyata yang berhak atas perlindungan, kompensasi, dan martabat.

Kata Kunci: Film, Diskursus, *Anora*, Gender, Kelas Sosial

Introduction

In the contemporary cultural landscape, films serve as cultural reconstructions that codify the values and views of society into a visual form that is easily accessible to audiences (Kolker & Gordon, 2024). According to Rahman et al. (2025), film has a high symbolic power in conveying implicit messages through the use of visual signs and cinematic language. Through this medium, film can communicate social criticism or raise sensitive issues, such as gender-based violence and discrimination against women (Rutsyamsun & Sakinah, 2023; Wulandari et al., 2025; Wolf, 2014; Yudha, 2025; Ngcobo, 2015; Yuzar et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2025). As a cultural artefact (Kamei, 2019), film not only reflects social reality, but also shapes and negotiates the meanings that circulate in society such as class and gender (Benshoff & Griffin, 2021). In this context, studying gender and class representation in films is significant to understand how dominant ideologies are produced, reproduced, or even challenged through film narratives.

The film *Anora* (2024) depicts a young exotic dancer, called Ani, from Brooklyn meets the son of a wealthy Russian businessman and decides to marry him on the spur of the moment. When news of the marriage reaches Russia, their relationship faces a serious threat as the man's parents come to New York with the intention of canceling the marriage. *Anora* appears amid a pop culture and socio-political-economy landscape that marks a new wave of narratives of “social mobility” through love, a myth that beauty, emotional labor, and individual resilience can open doors to a higher class (Barnett & Allen, 2000).

Within the horizon of neoliberalism, “Cinderella” fantasy-stories have undergone a significant mutation (Song, 2023), no longer emphasizing aristocratic miracles or fairy godmother assistance, but rather normalizing “hustle,” personal branding, and women's ability to manage emotions and bodies as capital that can be exchanged for access, security, and social status. “Neoliberal Cinderella” refer to a modern interpretation of the Cinderella story through the lens of neoliberal ideology, often highlighting how the tale can be reframed to glorify entrepreneurialism, individualism, and a reliance on wealth for success. The term is not merely a reinvented classic fairy tale; it is an ideological scheme in which intimate relationships, affective labor, and feminine aesthetics are commodified and then marketed as a legitimate path to “social-class climbing”. In this narrative, women no longer wait to be saved, but are required to actively manage themselves as market-driven entrepreneurs that sell affection, attention, and intimacy in an economy that increasingly extends its reach into the private domain (Stardust, Albury & Kennedy, 2024). This transformation reflects how neoliberalism has reshaped structures of expectation and survival strategies, particularly for working-class women seeking social mobility within an increasingly unequal system.

Further, *Anora* places the audience in the blurred realm between love and contract, affection and accumulation, attention and compensation, reality and fantasy (Forcen, 2025). In nightclubs, hotel rooms, luxury cars, and tiny apartments, this film not only records the dynamics of intimate relationships; it also maps out how the market infiltrates every single fiber of social reproduction—from self-care and emotion manipulation to language and non-verbal communication (gesture, body language, eye contacts, etc). Every interaction, every

touch, every word spoken in this film carries a transactional trace that blurs the boundaries between the personal and the economic realities. This is where the relevance of Marxist-feminist studies is intensified, it allows us to reinterpret gender and class relations not merely as personal backgrounds or individual choices, but as material and ideological infrastructures that organize who has the right to dream, who pays the price, and who reaps the benefits (Ndonibi, Ben-Daniels & Owonibi, 2025). This approach opens up space to question the naturalization of reproductive and affective labor, which has long been considered the “nature” of women, and reveals how such labor actually becomes a vital pillar for capital accumulation in the neoliberal system.

The main questions this study seeks to answer are: how does *Anora* reproduce and simultaneously fracture the discourse of the “Neoliberal Cinderella”; to what extent are female figures—as affective/sex workers and subjects of desire (Vincent, 2025). The discourse that is shaped by market logic; and how is social class presented as a horizon of social mobility that is always promising but often turns out to be a “false promise”.

This study examines four crucial dimensions: first, the practice of commodifying the body and affections as feminine “capital” that can be invested and exchanged in the market of social relations; second, explicit and implicit contractual mechanisms—in the form of gifts, protection, access to exclusive spaces—that require gender compliance and regulate women's behavior; third, class representations manifested in aesthetics ranging from poverty to glamour as commodity fetishism, which show how visual appearance becomes both a marker and determinant of social position; and fourth, narrative cracks that expose the “promise” of mobility, whether the film ultimately reinforces or deconstructs the myth of the Neoliberal Cinderella. Through these, the study seeks to uncover the complexity of representations that are not always coherent, which may contain internal contradictions that actually open up space for critical readings.

Theoretically, this research is based on a Marxist-feminist framework that highlights how reproductive work such as nurturing, caring, listening, fulfilling emotional needs—supports capital accumulation, even though it is often unpaid or considered “natural” for women. Federici (2019), Vogel (2023), and Bhattacharya (2017) developed a framework that social reproduction is a material condition for the sustainability of labor: without reproductive work, there would be no workers to work, no capital to accumulate. Fraser (2020) adds the dimension of the care crisis under neoliberalism: when the state withdraws public support and the market expands its reach into previously non-commercial spheres, the burden of care is shifted to the private sphere and the feminization of work extends to various sectors.

Meanwhile, MacKinnon underscores how “consent” is often shaped by structural power imbalances—in the labor market as well as the sexual sphere—that make it difficult to draw a clear distinction between free choice and implicit pressure—pattern of controlling behaviors disguised as care or love (Marasco & Cole, 2023; Cahill, 2024; Snyder, 2025). In this context, what appears to be an individual choice is in fact shaped by unequal material conditions. On the other hand, Jacques Derrida, through deconstruction, teaches us to read binary oppositions—love or money, private or public, choice or coercion, feminine or masculine—as unstable constructions, full of traces, and fragile due to Derrida's (1982)

différance. With deconstruction, I look for moments of *aporia* where the text (film) states one thing but reveals another: when a gift turns into a contract, when romance resembles a transaction, when the promise of freedom actually establishes a new discipline (Rahman & Kholid, 2025). Relying on these two theoretical frameworks, *Marxist feminism* and *Deconstruction*, enable an analysis that not only maps material and ideological structures, but also dissects the internal instability of the text, opening up space for criticism.

However, this study offers a different and more critical contribution. First, this study compares Derrida's deconstruction with Marxist feminism, so that I not only map the material structures of power relations, but also dissect how those structures are articulated, how the film speaks with two voices at once, affirming and challenging its own myths. Second, this research conceptualizes the “Neoliberal Cinderella” as a discourse that regulates the audience's perception of work, love, and class, not merely as a narrative theme but as a discursive formation that has a material effect in shaping subjectivity and social expectations. Third, this study draws broader political implications: if the promise of social mobility is built on unpaid affective labor and the commodification of the self, then criticism must be directed at the institutions and markets that produce this logic, not at individual moral failures or personal choices. In other words, the problem is not women “choosing” a particular path, but rather a system that limits choices and exploits reproductive labor as a source of profit (Alam & Lakshmi, 2023). Through these approaches, the study seeks to contribute to critical film studies, contemporary feminist theory, and a deeper understanding of how neoliberalism is transforming the discourse of gender and class in today's visual-cinematic culture.

Method

This research is an interpretive qualitative study that uses two mutually reinforcing analytical tools to dissect the complexity of gender, class, and affection representations in the Sean Baker's film, *Anora* (2024). The first theoretical framework used is Derrida's deconstruction, applied at the levels of discourse, narrative, and cinematic form of the *Anora*—including *mise-en-scène*, dialogue, objects, and the cinematic rhythm (Aker, 2022). These include dating scenes accompanied by gift-giving, negotiations of personal and professional boundaries, moments of crisis such as jealousy, symbolic violence, or eviction, and shifts in space from nightclubs to hotels, homes, and luxury cars, each of which carries different meanings of class and access. Key objects such as dresses, jewelry, cell phones, room keys, and credit cards are analyzed as markers of affective economy that transcend their material functions.

Equally important, configurations and gestures such as acts of care, listening, wiping away tears, or applying makeup are treated as signs of emotional and reproductive labor that is often invisible but essential in the relationships depicted. Given the nature of this study as a film text analysis, data collection techniques included repeated viewings to ensure a deep understanding of narrative and visual details, systematic recording of dialogue and nonverbal cues, taking screenshots of meaningful visual frames, and creating scene matrices that recorded the time, location, actors key actions, objects that appear, and the emotional effects they evoke. The main objective of *deconstruction* approach is to identify the dominant binary oppositions in the film, such as love versus money and lower class versus upper class. More than just identifying, this analysis explores how films play with, suspend, or even reverse

these oppositional hierarchies, revealing internal instabilities that open up space for critical readings—reading film as a text (Nnamele & Nnalue, 2020). The techniques used include close reading of key scenes, tracking metaphors, tropes, and material markers such as gifts, dresses, luxury cars, and room keys, as well as careful observation of pauses, silences, and repetitions as meaningful marking strategies.

The second lens is a *Marxist-feminist* perspective that focuses on the levels of political economy and social reproduction. This approach maps the forms of labor depicted in the film. Both paid and unpaid (affective, aesthetic, and sexual), as well as the mechanisms of commodification that operate through gifts, protection, access to exclusive spaces, and social visibility. Equally significant, feminist-Marxist analysis also examines the distribution of risks and costs that female characters must bear, including risks to safety, reputation, time, and health, and maps institutional schemes such as platforms, social networks, and formal and informal laws that shape the arena in which the film's characters operate (Saragih, Zuhriah & Purwarno, 2025).

The analysis procedure was carried out in five interrelated stages. First, identification of the dominant binary oppositions and mapping of their hierarchy in the film. Second, careful reading of scenes to find moments of rupture or aporia, that is, points where transactions pretense as romance or vice versa, where the boundary between the two becomes blurred and unsound. Third, map affective and reproductive labor by identifying who does what, for how long, with what compensation, and what consequences must be borne. Fourth, an analysis of commodification that examines how bodies, emotions, and access become negotiable values, and how gifts function as instruments of contract that bind parties in unequal relationships. Fifth, a synthesis that formulates the “Neoliberal Cinderella” logic dramatized by the film, then shows how the film itself—through internal contradictions, irony, or subversive moments, shakes or deconstructs the logic it creates.

Result and Discussion

The binary opposition: promises that are always postponed

Deconstruction finds that *Anora* positions love as an “authentic” horizon that overshadows transactions. At the level of dialogue, rhetoric of intimacy—*trust, honesty, spontaneity*—often appears, suggesting a distance from calculation. However, visual signs such as gift-giving, moving to luxurious spaces, and commitment to schedules demonstrates a similar contractual arrangement. Key scenes present the “gift” as ambivalent: it is both affection and contract, care and control. Derrida states that “pure” gift-giving is impossible because it always leads to exchange which involves debt and responsibility. The film materializes this paradox: every dress, ride, or security protection comes with an unwritten bill in the form of time, obedience, and affective performance (Kolker & Gordon, 2024).

From a Marxist-feminist lens, this means that *Anora's* affective labor—listening, soothing egos, maintaining the mood—provides useful benefits to her partner, while also alleviating her exchange value in the relationship. Her wages often take the form not of a salary, but of “symbolic compensation” such as status, luxurious experiences, and a temporary sense of security. This is where the false promise lies: love is promised as a cancellation of

the transaction; in reality, love works as an “oil” for the transaction, making rules and control feel less harsh, so that it feels like a “personal choice.” The binary opposition between love and money, which appears clear on the surface, actually constructs each other in a neoliberal logic that turns affection into a field of capital accumulation (Freeman, 2020).

Further, this film also shows that a clear gap between money matters and personal feelings is an ideological illusion. Every moment of intimacy that appears “free” from economic calculation actually covers a more subtle and deeper mechanism of exchange (O’Hara, 2014). For instance, when *Anora* receives gifts or protection from the billionaire boyfriend-husband, she not only receives material objects, but also enters a system of symbolic debt that binds her body, time, and affections. Thus, the promise of “authentic” love is perpetually deferred—not because it has not yet been realized, but because its very structure is contaminated by a transactional logic that can never be completely removed.

This paradox reveals that in the modern economy that trades on feelings and emotions, love and money are not two opposing poles, but two complementary elements within the equal system. The emotional connections and care that *Anora* performs are not genuine personal relationships—they only happen because they’re being paid for—in a relationship that constantly negotiates the boundaries between intimacy and commodification. The film cleverly visualizes how every attempt to transcend transactional logic actually reinforces its existence, making love a promise that is structurally impossible to fulfil without betraying itself.

Climbing and falling on the social class ladder: the aesthetics of commodity fetishism, networks, and the "informal laws"

Anora maps social class through highly detailed aesthetics: the way the material grips onto the body, the dazzle of club lights reflecting luxury, the architecture of luxurious spaces contrasting with the narrow corridors of lower-class housing (Mascia-Lees, 2011). Each shift in space is not merely a geographical transition, but a symbolic journey laden with promises of social mobility. The film visualizes how these spaces function as markers of class that shape identity and determine one's value in the social hierarchy (Zulia & Rahman, 2024). The nightclub with its luxurious interior becomes a stage where *Anora*'s body is displayed and judged, while the modest apartment serves as a reminder of her vulnerable starting position.

However, the hope of moving up in society through these changes in location actually requires an act that you have to keep doing over and over: maintaining physical attractiveness, handling the emotions and jealousy of partners, instructing the body according to upper-class standards. Marx called this phenomenon commodity fetishism, luxury items seem to have a magical aura, as if magical powers are attached to the objects themselves (Harman, 2017). The film shows that designer dresses, sports cars, and five-star hotel rooms are not merely material objects; they contain a “promise” such as social recognition, economic security in a certain elite class. However, this aura is very fragile and conditional: once performance fails to meet expectations, once the body no longer meets the set standards, access to these luxurious spaces can be quickly revoked. The promised social mobility turns out to be only a temporary occupancy, not a permanent right that can be owned. *Anora* must continue to pay—

with her body, time, and affection—to maintain her *entrée* to a world that appears open but is actually full of hidden gates.

Through a feminist-Marxist lens, we can see the invisible costs that accompany each step of this mobility (Walkerdine & Ringrose, 2006): the time spent on intensive self-care, mental health eroded by constant demands for emotional performance, the ever-present risk of physical and psychological violence, and “drained affect” (the emotional exhaustion) resulting from never-ending affective labour (Farrugia, Threadgold & Coffey, 2018). All of these are costs of social reproduction that are rarely factored into the calculus of neoliberal mobility. The dominant narrative of “upward mobility” only counts income or material access (Jones, 2003), but ignores the investment of body and soul that must be made to maintain that position.

Further, the film also reveals that for every moment *Anora* spends in a luxurious space, there are hours of unpaid reproductive labour: managing her appearance, regulating her emotions, learning the codes of upper-class behaviour, negotiating its ever-shifting boundaries. This work is not only physically exhausting, but also drains emotional and psychological capacity. Furthermore, the promised mobility carries uneven risks such as violence from clients, social stigma, isolation from her/his community of origin, and constant economic uncertainty. While upper-class men can buy access to *Anora*'s body and affection, she herself must pay with her entire being just to approach their world. This asymmetry reveals that class mobility in the affective economy is not an equal exchange, but rather a systematic extraction of value from the bodies of working-class women (Sohl, 2017).

Meanwhile, deconstruction reveals the internal contradictions in the myth of mobility perpetuated by this film: the “Cinderella” narrative, which is supposed to be about salvation through romantic love, is instead entangled in strict market protocols. Further, it controls that limit freedom, dress codes that discipline the body, endless expectations of emotional service—all of which serve to preserve class hierarchies rather than disrupt them (Rahman et al., 2025). The promise of transformation through love conceals a more fundamental mechanism of class reproduction. Every element that appears to be a gift or an act of generosity—luxurious dresses, access to exclusive parties, security protection—is actually a tool to maintain control and ensure that *Anora* remains in a subordinate position. As explained by Kosoy & Corbera (2010), commodity fetishism works by concealing the social relations that produce these luxury objects; in this context, it also conceals the power relations that enable access to these objects. *Anora* may wear designer dresses and sleep in luxury hotels, but she never truly owns that world—she is only granted access as long as she continues to provide the value needed by the men who pay for it.

Moreover, although not always explicit, informal networks—friends, managers, club bouncers, drivers, “people in the know”—form a shadow governance regime that regulates *Anora*'s life. Reputations can rise and fall through locker room whispers or text messages; the risk of violence can be reduced by connections to immediately the right people; jobs can be lost because of a single rumour. This is the non-state ideological apparatus that naturalizes exploitation: there are no written contracts or formal legal protections, but the rules of life are even harsher and the consequences more straight. Through deconstruction, we could see how

the “freedom” of the market is actually a series of unwritten norms that are never explicitly stated but are more required than formal law because the sanctions cannot be challenged or appealed (Rosenfeld, 2016; Bloom, 2018). This network operates as a hidden rating system that continuously measures and evaluates *Anora*'s exchange value in the affective economy.

For Marxist-feminists perspective, this explains how contemporary capitalism outsources discipline to social networks—making uncertainty an effective instrument of control. *Anora* moves within a “hidden rating” ecosystem that measures her attractiveness, compliance, and ability to meet expectations without protest (Oksala, 2018). Unlike digital platforms with transparent algorithms, this rating system is completely opaque and subjective, yet it determines her access to clients, security, and income. This confirms that neoliberal mobility is a skewed game of reputation, where the upper class holds complete control as the gatekeepers (those who judge without being judged), who set standards without having to meet them themselves. This structural uncertainty is not a weakness of the system, but rather a feature designed to maintain hierarchy: when the rules are never immediately clear, power remains in the hands of those who can define the rules according to their interests (Zurriyati et al., 2023).

The False promises of the “Neoliberal Cinderella”

What is the substance of the false promises offered by the “Neoliberal Cinderella” narrative? First, that romance can neutralize gender and class structures; second, that the right identity performance will permanently elevate us to the upper class; third, that affective labour will be rewarded with fair recognition and return.

The film systematically breaks all three promises. Romance does not destroy contracts; it merely covers up and normalizes the exploitative terms of the contract behind it. Performance does not secure class membership; it only rents a temporary seat that can be revoked at any time without notice. Affective labour—emotional investment, care, and controlling of other people's feelings does not result in ownership, rights, or stability; it instead produces new, deeper, and more fragile dependencies (Veldstra, 2020; Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021). Deconstruction tears apart the rhetoric that promises redemption or escape: every “happy” moment is overshadowed by deferred costs that must be paid later. Meanwhile, Marxist-feminists link this to social reproduction: even when *Anora* appears to “move up in class,” the burden of self-care, managing her partner's emotions, and social risks remains entirely hers to bear without structural compensation. Thus, on a narrative level, the film places the audience in a position of longing for a fairy-tale resolution, but at the same time shows that this resolution can only be achieved by erasing or ignoring the costs that have already been incurred—something that market logic never does.

Thus, it is important to note that the film does not reduce *Anora* to a passive victim without agency. She keeps negotiating, making choices, and exploiting the loopholes in the existing system. However, her agency is pragmatic and tactical, relying on risk calculus and timing, not “radical freedom” or structural transformation. This is the aporia presented by the film: we see actions that are both autonomous and conditioned, free yet limited. Derrida reminds us that true ethical decisions occur in absolute uncertainty; the film portrays this

uncertainty as the normal state of precarious life—no guarantees, constant trade-offs, every choice carrying consequences that are not entirely predictable. A Marxist-feminist perspective helps us measure agency without blaming individuals: *Anora*'s micro-strategies are a rational response in a structurally unjust ground. Criticism must be directed at the structures that force agency to constantly patch and survive, not transform material conditions. As argued by Gershon (2011), agency in neoliberalism is often agency to manage crises, not to end them.

Further, dialogue in films often functions as a mediation of contradictions: words of love, promises, and seduction soothe the friction of the underlying economic transaction. But films also strategically give space to silence, gazes, and pauses—spaces where the meaning of the transaction seeps through without a name, without verbal articulation. In the tradition of deconstruction, silence holds traces of the unspeakable or the unmentionable: a sense of threat, affective exhaustion, constant class anxiety (De Schryver, 2021). Emotional exchanges happen through small, subtle details: cosmetic choices, musical tempo, body choreography, and micro-expressions of the face. Here, affective labour is most obvious yet least visible: keeping conflict from erupting into open violence, keeping expectations channelled without explosive disappointment. All of this represents the psychological pride paid to maintain the structure of relations (Mercadante, Witkower & Tracy, 2021)—a cost that never appears in formal accounting but is very real in lived experience. This affective labour is the social reproduction work that keeps the economy running, yet it is never adequately recognized or compensated.

Furthermore, Neoliberalism produces subjectivity through fast pace, 24/7 availability, and the necessity to always be “on” and ready to work. The film inserts this logic through a narrative rhythm that mirrors the rhythm of precarious life: sudden calls in the middle of the night, tight schedules without preparation, transitions between spaces and roles without pause. Rest becomes a scarce commodity—one that must be bought with money or stolen from other needs. From a Marxist-feminist perspective, deprivation of time is a fundamental form of exploitation: social reproduction time (sleep, recovery, self-care) is sacrificed to maintain productive performance (Barrett, 2014). *Anora* lives under a “clock discipline” that normalizes habitual fatigue, progressively increasing her physical and emotional vulnerability. A tired body is a body that is easier to exploit, more difficult to resist, more vulnerable to violence. This is where class operates as a determinant of the time horizon: the upper class buys flexibility and control over their own time, while the lower class can only rent that flexibility intermittently at a high price (Ndonibi, Ben-Daniels & Owonibi, 2025).

The neoliberal Cinderella promise, after all, is a promise of social mobility without redistribution, of individual transformation without structural change (Smelser & Lipset, 2018). The film exposes this illusion by showing that every apparent “upward mobility” is temporary, transactional, and full of hidden conditions (Zawu, 2020). *Anora* does not fail because she tries too little or plays too poorly; she is hindered because the game itself is designed to never immediately be won by those who come from subordinate positions. The promised mobility is mobility within a system that remains hierarchical, not a transformation of the system itself (Zulia & Rahman, 2024). In neoliberal logic, failure is always privatized, and considered an individual shortcoming, while success is claimed as proof of the system's

fairness (Huber & Solt, 2004). The film rejects this logic by showing that it is structures, not individuals, that determine the limits of possibility. Feminist-Marxist critique and deconstruction open up space to imagine alternatives beyond the false promises constantly reproduced by neoliberal popular culture.

Based on the analysis, we can define “Neoliberal Cinderella” as a discourse device that operates through four main mechanisms (Azmy et al., 2024). First, it packages labour relations and contracts as romance and personal opportunities, making exploitation difficult to identify as exploitation (Christian-Smith, 2019). Second, it shifts the costs of social reproduction (time), emotions, physical and psychological security (onto women's bodies), while claiming that compensation comes in the form of experiences, temporary access, and the possibility of class mobility. Third, it relies on informal apparatuses such as networks, reputation, and class etiquette to enforce discipline without appearing coercive or structural. Fourth, it promises future payoff (promise of arrival) that is perpetually deferred, so that subjects continue to work on themselves relentlessly, improving their performance, managing their image, and bearing risks.

Anora, at the same time, produces and disrupts this apparatus through ambivalent narrative strategies. On the one hand, the film must tell the myth in order to critique it effectively—displaying the glamour of luxurious spaces, the intensity of romance, the glitter of gifts and promises of mobility. On the other hand, the film systematically carves cracks in the narrative through the ambivalence of gifts that are always conditional, the psychological costs that continue to accumulate, and the fragility of access that can be revoked at any time. Deconstruction opens the way to finding traces of cancellation and contradiction within the dominant discourse itself; Marxist-feminism provides an analytical language to name who pays the hidden costs and who enjoys the surplus value of uncompensated affective labour and social reproduction

This study proposes a theoretical and methodological bridge between deconstruction and Marxist-feminism for the study of contemporary film. Deconstruction maintains sensitivity to the instability of meaning, narrative ambiguity, and avoids the dogmatism of a single reading; Marxist feminism grounds the reading in the concrete material labour, class, and gender infrastructures. This mix of elements prevents the interpretation from being reduced to just one simple explanation: we do not stop at “it's just love” or “it's just money,” but rather map out how love works as a device of capital accumulation and, conversely, how money is hidden in the language of affection. This integrative approach allows for richer analysis, capturing the complexity of power relations without losing the sharpness of structural critique of mutually reinforcing capitalism and patriarchy.

This paper invites critical scepticism towards the narrative of upward mobility through self-fulfilment that floods neoliberal popular culture (McGuigan, 2014). Further, it encourages policy demands that shift costs from individuals to collective structures: legal protection for affective and sexual labour, economic security guarantees, rights to rest and social reproduction, and regulation of the entertainment industry, which often relies on informal and unwarranted labour (Mgbako, 2020; Al-Othman, 2025; Ferguson, 2008). At the cultural level, this reading encourages the production of alternative narratives that reject

trading safety and dignity for temporary “access” or promises of social mobility that are always deferred. Criticism of the neoliberal Cinderella is not a rejection of agency or desire, but a rejection of a system that forces agency to function only as a survival strategy, not as a means of transformation.

Conclusion

Anora (2024) shows how old fairy tales find new life in neoliberalism: Cinderella is no longer a peasant who meets a prince, but an affective worker who negotiates her way between gifts, schedules, and stares. The promise of social mobility is displayed in the shop windows of dresses and hotel rooms; yet behind the glass lies an invisible cost: fragmented time, exploited emotions, and security commodified. Through deconstruction, we could see how the film both makes and withholds promises; through Marxist feminism, we discover who pays the bills and who enjoys the surplus value of social reproductive labour that is never fairly compensated and “worth it”. Thus, this paper is not merely a diagnosis of one film, but an invitation to question the affective labour/economy that shapes everyday life. If social mobility is a rent, not a right; if love is used to polish contracts; if gifts open doors while also locking them; then the task of criticism is to open up collective options, not just teaching individuals to negotiate more skilfully, but to restructure the very institutions that make such negotiations so costly. This film reminds us that true transformation requires more than just identity performance or individual strategies; it demands a structural re-distribution of time, safety, and recognition of affective labour as real work that deserves protection, compensation, and dignity. Cultural criticism, ultimately, must become a gateway to a socio-political imagination that refuses to accept precariousness as a permanent condition and demands collective guarantees as a right, not a privilege.

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