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author:

Justyna Szklarczyk

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Justyna Szklarczyk

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Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz

1.

"Household wipes with a decorative motif," one of the many commodities adorned with the Minions, here making clumsy leaps, struggling to catch bananas, high-fiving each other. The seemingly playful mood is reinforced by the vivid color scheme: yellows and dark blues against a white backdrop. These wipes are available in Polish drugstore chain Rossmann and, in return for a small sum, offer the joy of looking at Minions while performing household chores. Their bodies will absorb the dirt from your counters, stovetops, and floors, all with a smile hinting at no small amount of pleasure. These household wipes are universal, just like the Minions, who embody the ideal workforce—they are standardized, highly interchangeable, and desperate for any job they can find.

Fig. 1

The Minions' predisposition to reproduction and their proclivity for proliferation is clearly visible in retail: Minion imagery adorns shampoo and body wash bottles, soap bars, band aids, towels, notebooks, pens, stickers, lollipops, candy, Kinder Surprise toys, mugs, phone cases, pyjama sets, socks, and T-shirts. The list goes on, endlessly, it seems. Most of these are available in the boys' aisles of the childrens' section.[1] You can, however, find Minion-embellished Moleskine notebooks (dark blue and yellow, offered in all sizes by the company) and even men's T-shirts sold by major retailers such as Peek & Cloppenburg. Therefore, the prospective audience of the franchise and the future buyers of Minion-related merchandise include more than just children (and definitely not only boys); additionally, not all of the prospective adult consumers that the franchise may aim for are necessarily parents. Thus, at least in terms of reception, the Minions strive for pervasive ubiquity.

The success of this attempt to broaden the fanbase is visible in the steadily growing popularity of the *Despicable Me* franchise. The studio behind the films, Illumination Entertainment, made nearly $895M from the release of the second installment, the 2013 vehicle *Despicable Me 2*, while the third installment, *The Minions*, raked in nearly $1.1B in profits.[2] The popularity of the Minions has been on the rise in Poland, as well: 2010's *Despicable Me* was seen by just 308,000 people, while the audience for the sequel, *Despicable Me 2*, grew to nearly 554,000. The third installment, *The Minions*, managed to pull in 1.67M viewers, while the last film in the series, *Despicable Me 3*, attracted 1.95M people.[3] The next installment in the franchise is slated for a 2020 release.

Fig. 2

"Minions have been on this planet far longer than we have," says the narrator, giving the child audience their first lesson in Minion history. Inclined to toil in the service of evil, they have attached themselves to one villain after another. Included in the third installment of the franchise (*The Minions*, 2015), a Minion genealogy provides the viewer with extensive knowledge on the subsequent overlords/employers of the titular protagonists. We learn that just before the Stone Age the Minions served a dinosaur, then toiled to build the Pyramids, labored hard under the bloodthirsty Dracula, and even served under Napoleon Bonaparte some centuries later. After the latter, the Minions decided to focus their labors on building their own Minion civilization. Frequent changes in employers and the Minions' willingness to take up any job offered stem primarily from their incompetence and lack of the necessary skills to carry out the tasks they are subsequently saddled with. Rejected by master after master, the Minions are ultimately forced to build their own settlement by themselves, without outside support. Their initial enthusiasm at building their own society is soon tempered by reality and quickly turns to boredom and stagnation. Successfully establishing their own civilization takes away the titular characters' primary motivation. And with considerable free time on their hands, the Minions are forced to suffer the bland tedium of everyday life. Thus form long lines to the therapist's office (Figs. 1 and 2).[4] "They felt empty inside. Without a master, they had no purpose. They became aimless and depressed. If this continued any longer, the Minions would perish," the narrator explains. The threat of the inexorable decline of the Minion civilization is dispelled, however, by one of the Minions themselves—in a fiery speech, the self-styled leader rejects his status as a docile member of the

Minion community, stripped of his own volition, and claims for himself the name "Kevin".

Kevin and his companions, Stuart and Bob, reach New York City in the throes of the moral and social upheaval of 1968 (not as rebellious or cartoonish as it is often portrayed, its attendant imaginary dominated by carefree hippies). There, the Minions make an unexpected appearance at Villain-Con, a trade expo for villains, where the former have a chance to demonstrating their sinister abilities in front of prospective employers. At the convention, the Minions win what amounts to an audition for "new minions" held by one of the aforementioned employers, the evil genius Scarlett Overkill. Working for Overkill will be a fresh start for the Minions—in her employ, the creatures will begin their career in burglary and larceny (which they will continue when in the service of Gru, for whom they will steal the moon). Equipped with state-of-the-art inventions worthy of a secret agent, the Minions are tasked with coming up with a plan to deliver her the Imperial State Crown of Queen Elizabeth. Their triumph, however, is ultimately short-lived, as Overkill, somewhat intimidated by the proficiency of her minions, decides to lock them in a cell in the palace jail. Turning against their master, the Minions flee captivity and help the Queen reclaim her crown—only for it to be stolen again by Gru, their future employer, immediately after the Minions are awarded medals by the Queen in recognition of their actions (*Despicable Me*, 2010; *Despicable Me 2*, 2013; *Despicable Me 3*, 2017).

Employment in Gru's "diffuse factory"[5] will, however, bear the hallmarks of both permanent as well as dynamically shifting, unregulated and underdefined labor, a labor that is somewhat universal, as universal as the Minions themselves and the merchandise they sell. Under Gru, the Minions will both toil away at an assembly line, manufacturing the tools of the criminal trade, as well as use their own goods for the purpose of plunder. In time, they will also perform emotional labor as they will be saddled with taking care of Gru's three adopted daughters. Curiously enough, the latter form of labor will apparently be overwhelmingly boring for the Minions—during a general strike, the yellow-colored workers will openly demand they be given work that furthers evil and its goals. Eventually, they will abandon Gru and join up with his twin brother (*Despicable Me 3*, 2017).

2.

The Minions are a homogenous group of yellow beings, all of them working age males. They experience space involuntarily, at least to a certain extent, and collectively. Their yellow bodies are unaffected by fatigue or wear and tear—although they suffer multiple work-related accidents, they neither bleed nor break, they do not require healthcare, they are tireless, unaffected by growth or aging, they remain unchanging and unchangingly ready to work. Neither do the Minions use intelligible human speech—they mumble, stammer, spout gibberish, and pepper their occasional shouts with random words stemming seemingly from European languages, misusing them at that.[6] Depending on the sensibilities of their human master, Minion speech is either silenced (as overly emotional) or ignored (as infantile). In this respect, their portrayal resembles the collective portrayal of peasant mobs: the Minions either collectively stay silent or shout over one another (similar peasant portrayals can be found in *The Promised Land* (dir. Andrzej Wajda, 1974), *Nights and Days* (dir. Jerzy Antczak, 1975), and *Pan Tadeusz* (dir. Andrzej Wajda, 1999)). Despite the resemblance, however, the Minions have never been peasants. Not only that, the *Despicable Me* franchise does not feature any appearances by any members of the peasant class. From their earliest days, the Minions have been designed to mimic the proletariat, even if the relationship between them and their master/employer is usually embellished with quasi-feudalist trimmings.

Fig. 3

The fates of the Minions reflect the fates of the working class in a very interesting manner. In the 19th century, the titular characters toil for robber baron-style capitalists, the exclusive owners of the means of productions. But as they enter the 21st century, the Minions are still fully dependent on their master/employer. The type of labor they have to perform, however, changes rather fundamentally—and the change resembles the transition from material to immaterial labor, from labor organized and overseen by the factory owner towards labor organized and overseen by workers, the Minions, from labor performed during a specific period of the day towards labor taking up the entire day, from labor oriented at manufacturing towards labor oriented at the end result. Under the previous paradigm, the Minions were portrayed as a uniform mass of workers spilling across the factory premises.

The fear the "revolutionary masses" awoke in the hearts of the owners (Fig. 3) was then quelled by infantilizing them.

After the Minions are pushed out of the factory, they are increasingly often portrayed as individuals albeit in rather slapstick-themed scenes. But are they granted concrete individuality? Is theirs an emancipation offered by their new labor paradigm? What exactly does the new future of the Minions/workers hold and how does the franchise revolving around them (seemingly without end and being painfully repetitive, just like its yellow-skinned protagonists) tie into the very figure of the Minion—if that is even the correct singular form?

In his writing on film genres, Rick Altman brought up two critical tendencies that were pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s and that eventually rekindled interest, academic and otherwise, in popular culture. The ritual perspective, anchored in the work of Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss, was set against the ideological perspective, rooted in the work of Louis Althusser. The latter saw narrative texts as "the vehicle for a government's address to its citizens/subjects or an industry's appeal to its clients."[7] The structure of a story, therefore, would be designed to convince the target audience to accept notions or ideas either offered by the powers that be (not necessarily the authorities) or at least advancing their agenda. In my opinion, in this particular instance, the agenda would include inviting the working class to step into the field of visibility, but to do so only under precisely defined aesthetic constraints. "Ideologically oriented theorists treat genres as particularly soporific tunes in the overall ideological lullaby program,"[8] Altman adds. What sort of ideological lullaby are the Minions? What exactly constitutes their appeal? How do they reflect the global transformation of labor? Finally: if we presume that the Minions represent the working class (and its fates over the ages), what interpretation of the transformation of its fortunes does that leave us with? Is it possible to see male Minions as representatives of the modern precariat? And, finally, is labor gendered in the Minion universe?

3.

> In the 19th century, many in the West called factory labor "wage slavery." The only freedom the worker enjoyed was the freedom to change employers, but as soon as they signed a labor contract with a new employer, they were thus entering into a coercive hierarchical relationship. Graeber said: "A wage-labor contract is, ostensibly, a free contract between equals—but an agreement between equals in which both agree that once one of them punches the time clock, they won't be equals any more." [...] In ancient times, no one was at once master and slave; The owner of the slave body decided when it worked and for how long. Hired laborers differ from slaves in that they can negotiate the terms according to which their freedom will be curbed. In this sense, we—the hired hands—stand apart as both master and slave.[9]

wrote Kacper Pobłocki in *Kapitalizm. Historia krótkiego trwania* [Capitalism: History of a Brief Phenomenon]. Minions, compulsively looking for a master-employer, seem a testament to the tension between free and unfree labor. In his book, Pobłocki suggests a subversive, revolutionary gesture—to reject the Europe-centric understanding of capitalism as a system based on free labor and the free market and instead adopt an approach that sees capitalism as a system founded on the institution of indentured servitude and slavery:

> Societies based on unfree labor and virtual money (i.e. debt) have been in existence since conditions arose that allowed their formations, as far back as 12,000 or even 15,000 years ago, when the climate first stabilized enough to permit the emergence of lasting settled societies. In this sense, capitalism is as old as humanity itself, because both money and work have since time immemorial been immaterial, fictional in nature.[10]

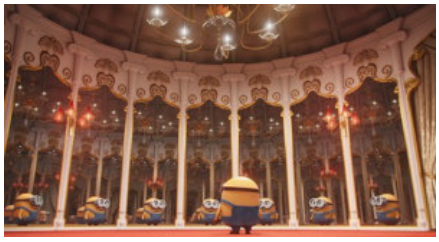

Fig. 4

This endurance of capitalism, defined here as a social, rather than economic system, is well reflected in the nature of the work performed over subsequent centuries by the Minions. Although labor conditions, and the environment that labor takes place in, shift before the audience's eyes, the nature of labor itself remains essentially unchanged: under enduring capitalism, flesh remains unfree.

Condemned to incessant, unending labor (due to their external and internal imperatives), the Minions all exhibit qualities—to some extent regardless of the era—that we would expect of both slaves and members of the precariat, simultaneously. In the 21st century, however, the precarity of the Minions' condition is amplified manifold. Simultaneously, due to its portrayal as a specific (illusive) form of freedom, capitalism is supposed to seem an affirmative, supportive regime, because it is only under capitalism that the titular characters are able to fully actualize themselves.

Initially, Minions are commissioned to perform creative labor (designing weapons for early man) and given control over the entire production cycle (in the effort to construct their civilization). Under such circumstances, the Minions work together, in unison, and are collectively happy with the results of their work. Up until this moment, the Minion community exists as a monolithic entity without clearly distinct individuals. But as the Minions grow increasingly listless, frustration in one of them eventually boils over. As it does, he claims a name for himself, "Kevin", and is thus granted a form of agency. Then, he takes the non-normative Stuart and a Minion baby, Bob (the only Minion child we see and already a worker), and together they set out to look for a new master/employer. After reaching New York, they discard their outfits and amidst a heap of old clothes they find the get-up that will serve as one of their most distinctive features. From now on, the Minion uniform will consist of jeans overalls, black worker boots, gloves, and sturdy safety goggles. The titular characters, therefore, will always look at the world through the lens of welder goggles or eye protection worn by high-altitude workers.[11] And because of that, theirs will never be a privileged gaze.

The working-class uniform clings to the Minion body. Working in Gru's factory resembles what we have come to expect from Fordism—mostly assembly line work, with stable employment near the home, as the workers' lodgings are situated more or less on the factory premises. The Minions' strike against their master/employer—called when he refrains from advancing his evil agenda—is akin to exile (and, over the course of the story, to imprisonment). When the titular characters eventually leave the factory premises, they set out, homeless and hungry, to look for another employer. Thus, for the Minions, the strike is far from a celebration of worker rights and a spectacle of emancipation; on the contrary, they see it as a failure. The subsequent economic migrations of the Minions, on the other hand, are reminiscent

of the exorbitant expectations imposed on the post-Fordian worker. Highly mobile, flexible in their own expectations, and determined in their quest to secure employment, the Minions start to resemble the contemporary worker, always pliable and ready to adapt to the vagaries of modern global capitalism.

The long period of Minion labor in Gru's service that preceded the strike included many a deed that took place outside the factory: they fought Gru's nemeses, stole the moon, cleaned their master's house, took care of his gardens and his daughters. Gru's management style also included a ranking system based on merit and skill; those lowest in rank were tasked with childcare, whereas the more demanding, dangerous tasks were given to Minion pioneers and high-achievers. In exchange for access to luxury goods, the bodies of the latter were supposed to be always ready, flexible, and supremely loyal. The post-Fordian notions of immaterial and affective labor, therefore, hold considerable sway over Minion attitudes—as expectations shift, the Minions become virtuosos ready to make whatever sacrifice is required of them. In light of the infinite amount of these virtuosos available, however, the narrator's assurances that all Minions are different and bound together primarily by their common desire to serve the vilest master possible sound like hollow half-truths. The Minions are nearly identical and when Stuart finds himself in a hall of mirrors (Fig. 4), he sees himself multiplied endlessly, thus exemplifying a wellspring of self-reproducing, cheap workers. This intra-Minion rivalry promises the ability to exist as both worker and consumer as its ultimate prize. The less appreciated Minions will have to contend with being relegated to the manufacture of goods and emotions without the possibility of consuming either. In consequence, the Minion community is undermined and their revolutionary potential nullified. Working in Gru's service, therefore, reflects the transition period between archetypal factory work and the promise of individualization, to be achieved through work outside the factory, work that is ostensibly flexible in the hands of freelancers who, despite seeing themselves as unique and exceptional, are ultimately nearly indistinguishable from the homogenous Minions.

Gru, Dru, and Scarlet Overkill are all owners of capital. Their everyday lives unfold aboard gleaming private jets, in luxury cars, palaces, and surrounded by works of art.[12] They are members of the transnational jet set, the notorious one percent, the global elite whom Pobłocki describes with the following words: "they cross barriers and borders effortlessly and can expect, more or less in every corner of the globe,

infrastructure tailored to their particular lifestyle. Each and every one of them inhabits a small, exclusive Dubai where everything is designed to cater to their every need."[13] The jet set lifestyle, however, can only come to fruition at the expense of those laboring to service the infrastructure that facilitates that luxurious, opulent way of life. That burden is shared by the Minions, too.

The portrayal of said owners of capital, however, varies rather wildly. The main source of Dru's income, pig husbandry, discredits him in the eyes of the franchise producers.[14] The "provincial" Dru is set against Gru, an evil genius. The latter, building his wealth through thievery, does not need an institution to legitimize his position: he lives in a suburban home, rather than a palace, and his devices are effective rather than visually impressive; finally, secure in the belief of his own genius, he does not want the royal crown for himself. The crown is, however, the ultimate object of desire for Scarlet Overkill who wants nothing else than legitimacy in a world dominated by male villains. In such company, Gru serves as an example of a rather good-natured villain: he adopts three girls and over the course of the franchise we eventually see him join up with the "good" guys.

4.

Pop culture portrayals of the working classes aimed at adult audiences usually belong, at least according to Sianne Ngai, to one of three aesthetic categories: zany, cute, or interesting. Ngai, author of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, points out that representatives of the working class in these portrayals are either overexcitable fools (zany), saccharine darlings (cute), or fascinating "others" (interesting).[15] The scholar depicts the categories as being separate; in the case of the Minions, however, all three seem to be intertwined and appear simultaneously.

The titular characters shout a little too loudly, poke each other a little too hard, joke and prank each other too often, and laugh too much. Everything they do is slightly exaggerated. Their bodily practices scream class affiliation. Minions, therefore, are definitely overexcitable fools (zany). Ngai claims that this proclivity for getting overly excited, a staple of portrayals of the working class, stems from the necessity to stay in constant motion. Built upon such a compulsion, the condition of precarity

manifests itself most pronouncedly in the bodily practices of the titular characters. It seems, however, that the Minions enjoy their own precarity.

Fig. 5

The overexcited Minions are also exaggeratedly visible. It is not just their bodily practices, but also their very bodies that make them so hard to ignore. The bright yellow skin of the Minions makes it impossible for them to reject or abandon their class identity. More than that, the creators of the franchise seem to have precluded the possibility of individual upward social mobility by having the Minion universe ruled by determinism and social essentialism. The only way for the Minions to experience such mobility is by having the entire Minion community undergo class advancement. The latter option, however, has already been portrayed—back in the episode dealing with the Minions' struggle with self-determination and establishing an independent society—as regressive (instead of progressive) and destructive for the Minions themselves (although that was once again determined by the franchise producers).

"Adorable little freaks," "Oh, you look so great! I feel like a proud mama with three dashing evil sons," "Three tiny, golden, pill-shaped miracle workers" – this is what non-Minion characters say about the eponymous characters. Sweet and cute, the Minions can occupy the field of view with considerable impunity. Their cuteness also implies a degree of immaturity or childishness, a formal simplicity, weakness, irresponsibility, impulsiveness, and a proclivity for play (and altercations). This makes the Minions only partially realized subjects in the eyes of non-Minion beholders as well as the audience. Moreover, the Minions voluntarily accept that imposed subordination and willfully abandon their own agency in return for a promise of stewardship.

Minions take a stand against their master/employer only once, but even this single act of rebellion is paradoxical in nature. Striking in Gru's factory, the Minions weild banners bearing slogans including: "Go Dark," "Be Bad," "Watz Fo Lunch," "Go Back to Villainy," and "Follow Mell." Instead of loudly delivering their demands, they stick their tongues out at the owner of the factory. Their gestures are uncertain, seemingly unfinished, and essentially flippant. Portrayed as trivial and unserious, the Minions' act of rebellion against their master/employer is thus invalidated and the very notion of worker resistance ridiculed. This, in turn, is also possible due to the "zany" nature of the characters which, in situations involving matters as serious as

general strikes and worker riots, may be read and portrayed as hysteria and irrationality.

> At the turn of the twentieth century, medical, psychoanalytical, and sociological discourses came together to produce a rather repressive image of hysteria, portraying it first as a sexual disorder afflicting women, widely believed to be feigning their symptoms, and later as an inherent quality of the proletariat. This cultural phantasm may be seen primarily as a prolific source of repudiations aimed against emerging historical actors who, in the early twentieth century, were being granted ever more agency —women and workers,[16]

write Dorota Sajewska and Dorota Sosnowska in the introduction to their book, *Robotnik. Performanse pamięci* (*The Worker: Performances of Memory*). Essentially, however, hysteria was more or less a concealed form of protest against traditional patriarchal culture, as well as a "means to transgress against social norms."[17] Regardless, the hysterical female workers fainting during the September 1947 textile mill strikes in Łódź, and the hysterically zany Minions, are equally "inhuman." By definition, inhuman non-subjects cannot undergo successful emancipation.

5.

The marketing campaign for the fourth installment in the *Despicable Me* franchise included the slogan "Yellow is the New Black," a direct reference to Jenji Kohan's smash TV hit, *Orange Is the New Black*. The eponymous orange is a reference to the color of the jumpsuits worn by prison inmates. Locked inside a federal prison, a handful of women became a homogenous group inside which homoerotic relationship sometimes emerge. Minions, on the other hand, are already part of a homosocial community and do not need the extreme of imprisonment in order to form one. And, paradoxically, the titular characters refrain from making any attempt to express their sexuality when they eventually are imprisoned.

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the term "male homosocial desire" applies to:

> "male bonding," which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the "homosocial"

> back into the orbit of "desire," of the potentially erotic… is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.[18]

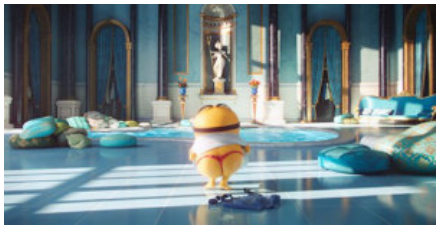

Fig. 6

If we were, therefore, to accept Segdwick's assertion postulating the existence of said continuum, then all the ridicule, the rebukes, and the hateful comments pertaining to the Minions' highly inventive wardrobe choices would be a gesture of rupturing that continuum. Let us take a look at some of these situations. When one of the Minions covers his nipples with starfishes, the narrator says: "He's an idiot." When Kevin, Stuart, and Bob finally reach New York, they decide to look for appropriate clothes; at one point, Stuart pulls on oversize pink pants so big that the fly eventually locates itself around his mouth. Seeing this, Kevin reproaches him while Bob glances with delight at the undone fly (Fig. 5). Seeing Scarlet Overkill kissing her partner, Stuart tries to copy the intimate gesture. When Stuart pulls off his overall at the pool, we realize that he is wearing a pair of red thongs underneath (Fig. 6). Stuart also has a tendency to kiss yellow water hydrants that resemble Minions. The franchise also features a running gag where one of the Minions, wearing a bra made of halved coconuts, has the area its breasts are supposed to be covered up by another Minion whenever the bra falls off. All of these scenes are supposed to be slapstick gags, but when combined with the proscriptions of the heteronormative Kevin, they come together to form a strategy pushing the repudiation of male homoerotic desire.

Fig. 7

Manifestations of homoerotic desire, however, are not limited solely to the Minions. During their attempt to steal the crown of Queen Elizabeth II, the Minions hypnotize three guards. Mesmerized, the guards begin to move like burlesque dancers: they strip their clothes off and playfully smack their private parts (Fig. 7), the gestures either an expression of the guardsmen's suppressed desires or the desires of the Minions projected onto the men. Or perhaps the world portrayed in the *Despicable Me* franchise is a space of repression for both "human" and "inhuman" characters. In the end, the Minions dress up as a woman in order to infiltrate the royal palace;

additionally, back in their homeland, many of the Minions play roles we stereotypically associate with women, such as cheerleaders (Fig. 9).

Portraying the Minions as merely cute creatures rather than fully-fledged subjects also strips them of any right to their own sexuality. The behaviors outlined above can, therefore, be considered attempts at establishing their subjectivity anchored in an ownership of their own bodies and their own sexuality. There is a problem, however, in the fact that in the course of this process, the Minions are reproached by both their normative leader, Kevin, as well as the narrator, the external voice whose assertions we may very well consider to be equivalent to the beliefs of the creators of the franchise. Thus, the Minions remain cute, zany creatures without any subjectivity or agency, whereas their sexuality is subverted by being labeled infantile (it remains to be seen, however, whether it is possible to actually do that successfully) and homosocial desire is ridiculed from a rather unassailable position.

6.

Pixarvolts (an amalgamation of the English words "Pixar," for the production company, and "revolt") are childrens' films which offer a formal and thematic revolution. According to Jack Halberstam's diagnoses, computer-animated feature films often undertake to explore revolution and transformation, two themes that are rather absent from pictures intended for adult audiences.[19] In a host of kid-oriented animated movies (including *Toy Story* (1995), *Chicken Run* (2000), *Shrek* (2001), and *Finding Nemo* (2003)), Halberstam notices: the desire to be different, shifting and ambiguous genders (*Finding Nemo*'s protagonist is a transgender fish), amorphous or polymorphous sexuality (the homoerotic relationship between Spongebob and Patrick in *Spongebob Squarepants*), and the body as object of interest for the characters (Nemo's underdeveloped fin or Shrek's oversized proportions). Using inhuman characters, Pixarvolts broaden queer spaces and simultaneously critique existing labor standards and practices (because their inhuman protagonists rebel against the typical human models of work).[20] The Minions' inhuman nature, however, fails to bring the movies comprising the franchise anywhere near the Pixarvolt genre.

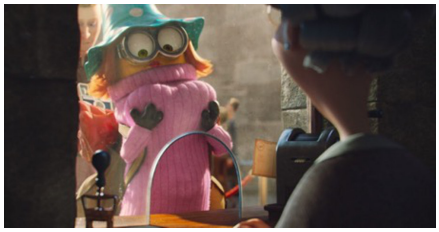

Fig. 8

The tale of the Minions is told by, and because of, adults.[21] According to Halberstam, children are not yet fully socialized creatures and therefore can identify with non-normative characters to a much greater degree than adults. But children are not the sole target audience of the *Despicable Me* franchise. The adult gaze precludes rebellion and the normative framing of the animation strips the Minions of any potential for change.

Neither do the Minions broaden the field of visibility—their presence is sanctioned by the normative social order, and their "maladjustment" is explained away using class (classist) rhetoric. Simultaneously, the titular characters fail to rebel against such treatment. Their prominent position in the labor market is supposed to compensate them for the symbolic violence that they are systematically subjected to. Because Minions do not have a sex drive (as they are cute), they do not need free time, a social and legal safety net, and nor do they even need to be remunerated for any work rendered—and as such, their situation serves as an ominous foreshadowing of the future of work and the worker. The gender of the Minions is also significant, as it matches the gender of the labor market and the cultural gender of work itself. The world inhabited by the Minions is no place for a female worker. Neither does it have any space for critique—of precarity, economic uncertainty, hyperexploitation, social mobility, and social hierarchy. Thus, the inhuman characters end up legitimizing the inhuman system.

Nevertheless, the Minions manage to pursue a formal revolution, one affecting the very essence of the narrative rather than the level of the plot: by transitioning from an individual protagonist that the audience can identify with to a collective one, the franchise producers introduce a considerable paradigm shift in the portrayal of the protagonist/protagonists, at least in mainstream animated films if not mainstream cinema in general. Although there are named individuals in the Minion collective, namely Kevin, Bob, and Stuart, these three are actually not that much different from the rest of their seemingly infinite brethren. The Minions are nearly identical—and reproduction is an essential part of their identity. The Minions are reproduced by their authors, the producers of the films, but they reproduce themselves, too. They are, essentially, a *perpetuum mobile* of reproduction.

In *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, W.J.T. Mitchell writes: "Biocybernetic reproduction is, in its narrowest sense, the combination of computer technology and biological science that makes cloning and genetic engineering possible."[22] According to Mitchell, the cybernetic era (i.e. today) is producing a new generation of biomorphic entities—intelligent machines. And the creation of a biocybernetic form of life would essentially boil down to "the reduction of a living being to a tool or machine, and the elevation of mere tool or machine to the level of an intelligent, adaptable creature."[23] The Minions are both biomorphic entities and biocybernetic images: they reproduce spontaneously, akin to digital copies although they remain biological-yet-indestructible (meaning "improved"). Their market strategy derives from their form—they are to spread far and wide, become the universal toy, their sales self-sustained by the interchangeability of the Minions, the films in the franchise, and Minion-themed merchandise.

7.

"Finding a boss was easy. But keeping a boss, therein lies the rub," the narrator says as he begins the story of the Minions. And indeed, the titular characters make it a habit of quickly parting ways with their employers. They themselves are, however, often to fault for the split: in trying to help their masters, they always inadvertently end up causing them harm, sometimes even leading to their actual demise. The timeline of the Minions' history aligns rather neatly with historical changes in the nature of work itself and, more broadly, changes in societal power relations. Thus, if we assume that the titular characters genuinely represent the working classes, then their subsequent unintentional divestment of their masters can be seen as an unwanted revolution that has been rather "sleepwalked" through. Minions, therefore, offer a sort of metacommentary on the worker masses' attempts at emancipation. Sajewska and Sosnowska write that "after the experiences of the 1917 revolution, the effort to deny the existence of new identities ultimately petrified into a permanent dread of the 'hysteria of the revolutionary masses'."[24] The Minions' hystericism stems from these compulsive gestures that bring them ever closer to a revolution that none of them actually want. The story of the Minions is also a tale of how emancipation is precluded by the ostensibly limited cognitive capabilities of the working classes. Thus, the toil of the nascent subject is ultimately

ridiculed. But the compulsive nature of the gesture nullifying, negating that toil suggests that the emancipation and empowerment of the working class is ultimately inevitable. Thus, the Minions would also function as a testament to the fear of social change and a symbol of a belated reaction to said change. Maybe this is why children were ultimately chosen as the target audience of such a message, seeing as they are less critical and more susceptible to manipulation.

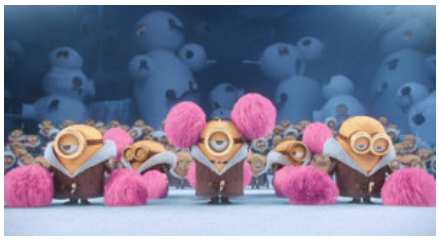

Fig. 9

"Minion" means underling, favorite, servant, flatterer, lackey. Minions enter the field of vision bearing a distinct feudal mark—the hypervisible, maladjusted, hysterical (zany, cute, interesting), and "inhuman" non-subject, denounced because of its class *habitus*. In this particular case, the visibility of the working class does not produce a breakthrough; its representation is of dubious service to itself.

The first, second, and fourth installments of the franchise are called *Despicable Me*, Parts 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The eponymous despicable individual is obviously Gru, a member of the notorious one percent, with the Minions as his feudal subjects. The franchise, however, fails to function as a critique of exploitative and predatory employment practices, because Gru is ultimately a good master who cares for his workforce. Thus, the franchise is also an attempt at conditioning children to live in a world where pervasive inequality is the norm. In such a world, those failing to side with Gru are considered misled, mistaken, or plainly wrong. Minions are perfectly aware of this fact, given their rise beyond the role of comic foil in an animated movie —their likeness now adorning figurines, stickers, and T-shirts. As capital continues to reign supreme over the world, representations of the working classes have been capitalized on as well. The rules are ultimately rather simple—everything happens just as capital wants it to happen.

Footnotes

1 Egmont, a Polish publishing house, has since 2017 been publishing *Gru, Dru, and the Minions*, a 32-page children's magazine featuring puzzles and riddles related to the events and characters from the *Despicable Me* franchise. Detailed information about the movie characters is supposed to facilitate reader immersion and

familiarize the reader with the *Despicable Me* universe. Additionally, the editors have seemingly been making efforts to distinguish issues of the magazine aimed at girl readers (*Gru, Dru, and the Minions. Agnes Loves Unicorns!*) from those intended for mostly male audiences (*Gru, Dru, and the Minions. Your Secret Guide to Vehicles, Gadgets, and Other Super Stuff*).

2 Profits were calculated using the following basic formula: total box office minus production budget. Data source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2293640, accessed June 2, 2018.

3 Data source: https://www.sfp.org.pl/2016/wydarzenia,5,25640,0,1,Rewelacyjne-otwarcie-Gru-Dru-i-Minionkow.html, accessed June 2, 2018.

4 Elements of a culture of individualism apparent in Minion culture foreshadow the shift from a class-based paradigm towards an identity-based paradigm. In the case of the eponymous characters, the simultaneous examination of class arguments (about the impossibility of advancement) and individualistic arguments (about the personal responsibility of the individual) seems to be key. See: Małgorzata Jacyno, *Kultura indywidualizmu* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007).

5 Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 135.

6 The Minion language features random words of European origin: "bello," for "hello," "papaye" for "goodbye," "e, luka" for "look here," "porkele" for "why," while "banana" is rather self-explanatory. The human characters in the Minion universe do not understand their language—"No no, don't say anything. I won't understand," says Scarlet Overkill to Bob.

7 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, Palgrave–Macmillan, 2012), 27.

8 Altman, *Film/Genre*, 27.

9 Kacper Pobłocki, *Kapitalizm. Historia krótkiego trwania* (Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2017), 343.

10 Pobłocki, *Kapitalizm*, 71.

11 In the second installment of the franchise, the Minions eat breakfast sitting on a metal beam high above the factory floor. The scene is a reference to the famous 1932 picture taken by Charles Ebbets, commonly known as *Lunch atop a Skyscraper*, which depicts workers eating lunch on a metal girder high above the New York streets during the construction of the Rockefeller Center. In contrast to Ebbet's subjects, however, the Minions have to eat their meal within the confines of Gru's factory.

12 When the Minions look at Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* in the Overkills' living room, Herb, Scarlet's partner, says to them: "Checkin' out my can? We stole that because finally someone expressed my love of soup in painting form."

13 Pobłocki, *Kapitalizm*, 503.

14 Dru's palace resembles the Sistine Chapel, the difference being that the human figures in the frescoes are here replaced by the likenesses of pigs. The picture of opulence is rounded off by the twenty-six cars in his possession (each one candy apple red) and a helicopter.

15 Sianne Ngai, *Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

16 Dorota Sajewska and Dorota Sosnowska, "Wstęp: symulacje i stymulacje" in *Robotnik. Performans pamięci*, ed. A. Adamiecka-Sitek, Dorota Sajewska, Dorota Sosnowska (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, 2017), 14.

17 Sajewska and Sosnowska, "Wstęp," 13.

18 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction" in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1.

19 Jack Halberstam, "Animating Revolt and Revolting Animation," in *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2011), 29.

20 Jack Halberstam, "Pixarvolt–Animation and Revolt," *Flow*, July 30, 2007, http://www.flowjournal.org/2007/08/pixarvolt-%E2%80%93-animation-and-revolt/, accessed June 2, 2018.

21 The pleasure adults derive from the *Despicable Me* franchise is clearly visible in reviews for the films; see: http://www.filmjournal.com/reviews/film-review-minions, http://time.com/4838675/minions-despicable-me-3-review/, http://cojestgrane24.wyborcza.pl/cjg24/1,13,22032215,148674,-Gru--Dru-i-Minionki---Pora-na-odswiezenie-formuly.html, accessed June 2, 2018.

22 W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction" in *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 312.

23 W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Work of Art," 313.

24 Sajewska and Sosnowska, "Wstęp," 14.