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Consumed by the Carbuncle of Capitalism: Bagley's Boil as Social Sanctioning Personified

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Abstract: The fantastical film *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* has most often been considered for its comedic critique of dubious marketing practices. Yet insight provided by writer-director Bruce Robinson intimates his intention that the film serve, instead, as a larger socio-political statement – as an allegorical critique of Margaret Thatcher's style of capitalism. In this paper I argue that Robinson's admission calls for a sociological interpretation of his film – specifically, of his portrayal of the struggle between converted ad man Dennis Bagley and the capitalist carbuncle that orchestrates his demise. By employing this broader scope of interpretation, I demonstrate how Bagley's boil serves to both personify and provoke the social sanctions of medicalization (through social iatrogenesis) and ostracism (both social and institutional) that are used to pathologize and alienate dissidents of the status quo, while simultaneously lending credence to the inherent insanity of consumer capitalism.

Keywords: allegory, consumer capitalism, medicalization, ostracism, social sanctions

Dennis Bagley, advertising executive extraordinaire, seems a perfectly rational fellow at the start of Bruce Robinson's *How to Get Ahead in Advertising*. In fact, Bagley's calculated rationality and considerable dexterity in the art of manipulation have facilitated his professional success thus far. Having secured a high paying and prestigious position in his field, the affections of a beautiful wife, and a luxurious lifestyle, it seems that Bagley has climbed the corporate ladder to 'the good life'. All appears to be going swimmingly for this capitalist conqueror until a crisis of conscience hits him square in the – uh – neck. Spurred on to the pursuit of a higher moral standard by, of all things, an ad for pimple cream, Bagley sees the error of his ways, grows a social conscience, and vows to spend the rest of his life denouncing the very lies he once propagated. Perhaps this plan would have worked for the newly idealistic ad man, if only a supremely blocked oil duct hadn't been so intent upon his nightmarish demise. Instead, as Bagley struggles against the mass manipulation he deems unequivocally malignant to society, another force grows with equal fervour, and with antithetical intent. Enter, the boil.

Bagley's Boil is generally considered to be the projection of its bearer's own dissociated depravity. This may be the case, for Bagley's previous convictions would admittedly have much to reconcile with his newly adopted value system. Yet the nature and role of the boil lend themselves to a wider scope of assessment – one in which the boil's manifestation is not organic to our protagonist at all. Instead, the boil can be interpreted as both the personification and catalyst of societal foils, or sanctions, meant to derail Bagley's dissent from the status quo. As his digression from the dominant ideology of consumer capitalism grows, so also do the boil's increasingly intrusive efforts to fight back. Striving to quash Bagley's campaign against a lifestyle of manipulated consumption, the boil invokes the social sanctions of medicalization and ostracism, proceeding to pathologize and alienate Bagley in an effort to either force him back into cultural norm conformity or eliminate him altogether.

Though some have erroneously construed *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* as simply a scathing review of all things marketing (see Moore 34), the film's director, Bruce Robinson, tells a different story. According to Robinson, he conceived the film as a political statement that was meant to illustrate the "indomitable evil" lurking in Margaret Thatcher's capitalism (Gold 1989). Fearing that overt criticism of this implied collusion between materialism and nationalism would prove a dangerous endeavour, Robinson instead crafted this allegorical tale to convey his cautionary message. But what exactly caused Robinson to view consumer capitalism with such contempt? Has Western society not attained nirvana through a multiplicity of packaged foods and foot deodorizers?

What Robinson seemed to realize, Bagley was written to expose: The materialism that drives consumption does not engender happiness, nor was it designed to do so. Contrary to the marketing propaganda that sells hope and happiness in every diet plan, the perpetuation of unhappiness is the very sustenance of a consumer capitalist society (Hamilton 5). As Bagley explains to his wife, "Nobody in advertising wants to get rid of boils, Julia. All we want to do is offer hope of getting rid of them." This empty promise of hope is highly advantageous to the national GDP, yet its price is the wellbeing of consumers. Numerous studies have shown that those who subscribe to a "materialistic value orientation" (Kasser et al. 11-28) endure higher levels of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, while they enjoy lower levels of life satisfaction and overall vitality (Kasser 866). The pursuit of 'the good life', by way of the 'goods life', is taking a heavy toll.

Despite these decidedly negative accompaniments, consumer capitalism remains the dominant ideology in Western societies. Earning and spending are integral cultural norms and are rewarded with the positive sanctions of increased status and inclusion. Because we are highly social creatures, these reinforcements appeal to our intrinsic psychological need to be both respected and liked (Olsen, Breckler, and Wiggins 288-289). Those who will not, or cannot, adhere to these norms, however, are afforded no such luxuries. Negative sanctions such as medicalization and ostracism are employed to discourage the adoption of competing value systems. Those who challenge the status quo are disciplined into embracing conformity or marginalized through exclusion in order to maintain the accepted social order.

Post-transformation, Bagley encounters only ripples of social distaste for his non-conformity. His public outbursts are unappreciated, but considered simply a sign of stress. The boil's development, however, causes Bagley's erratic behaviour to escalate to, what seems to others, a frenzied paranoia. Along with his boil, Bagley's socio-political convictions are medicalized and come to be considered part of an overarching mental illness. Medicalization is a "process by which certain behaviours or conditions are defined as medical problems... and medical intervention becomes the focus of remedy and social control" (Chang and Christakis 152). Bagley's struggle with the boil can be viewed as an illustration of this conformity-maintaining mechanism as well as a commentary on the contextual nature of deviance. Though both he and his peers agree the boil is a problem worth addressing, their conceptualizations of the nature of its deviance are diametrically opposed. While Bagley pursues the boil's excision in order to finally escape and unmask materialism, members of his social system encourage its removal to free Bagley from his 'madness', enabling his return to the very lifestyle he rebukes. Though Bagley views the boil as an agent of a larger social and political evil, his peers regard both boil and convictions as a biological and psychological illness that must be dealt with. Because Bagley's convictions reject the cultural norms so unquestioningly accepted in society, his peers devalue his revelations, and, instead, view this rejection as a sign of mental illness. He

is tranquilized, prescribed psychoanalysis, and surgically skewered into compliance without anyone stopping to consider that the man, so recently valued for his astute observations, could possibly be speaking the truth.

The medical treatment of Bagley's non-conformity illustrates social iatrogenesis, a method of societal control described by sociologist Ivan Illich (9). Illich argues that disease is a social construct that is highly contextual. What can be classified as disease varies between cultures and is largely determined by the values of the dominant group. Illich believed that social iatrogenesis occurs when medicalization is used to obfuscate the political conditions that make society itself unhealthy. Because Bagley critiques the very heart of a capitalist society – consumerism – his own rationality is determined to be dubious by societal agents who have internalized this ideology. Doctors prescribe medication and psychoanalysis to rid Bagley of his 'delusions', but both methods fail to resolve the issue of the boil. Finally, the ghastly thing is set to be surgically removed, with Bagley the fiercest supporter of its beheading. As a product of his society, he, too, seems to have internalized the idea that medical intervention can biologically address issues that require political and social consideration.

Bagley's decision to lance the nefarious nodule turns out to be a monumental mistake. Aware of its impending reckoning, the boil abandons the soft sell tactics and, instead, appropriates Bagley's body in the ultimate act of exclusion by ostracism. Like the actual experience of ostracism, Bagley's exclusion follows a progressive course that begins in the arena of his social relationships. As his erratic behaviour increases, so too does the psychological distancing of the members of his social group. Because group members are strongly motivated to maintain their cultural norms through the marginalization of dissenters (Dixon 5), Bagley's peers become increasingly unwilling to engage in an unguarded relationship with him. His wife, former co-workers, and even the maid are unable to reconcile his 'outrageous' claims with their normative world-view, becoming noticeably agitated and uncomfortable in his presence. Bagley's wife, Julia, is the most discernibly distraught by her husband's behaviour, and redefines her relationship with him, moving from a relatively intimate partner role to that of a maternal caretaker.

Ostracism, a process by which social beings are rejected or excluded (Gruter and Masters 2), is a notoriously effective method of social control, though its agents are often unconscious of precisely what motivates their actions. Bagley's ostracism is likely the result of his peers' unobjective reconciliation of two dissonant cognitions. If his peers accept the belief that Bagley continues to be a rational individual, they must also accept his claim that they have been outrageously and destructively manipulated through the design of consumer capitalism. The cognition conflicts with a second, specifying that they, themselves, are rational individuals who could not have been duped by such a scheme. These two competing notions are evaluated unequally because of Bagley's peers' need to view themselves in a positive light (Tesser 291-292) as well as their desire to maintain acceptance from the dominant group (Olson, Breckler, and Wiggins 289). It is not surprising, then, that both Julia and Bagley's peers are inclined to label his convictions as a sign of mental duress and not the sage warnings of someone who sees through the propaganda. Consequently, he is discredited and marginalized.

Though the social repercussions of the Bagley-boil duo become increasingly extreme, the most egregious assault by ostracism is made by the boil itself. Previously, the boil worked indirectly, invoking the reactions of others to incur its desired effect. Now it switches tactics, taking a more active role. In the ultimate act of alienation, the boil commandeers Bagley's body, steals his agency, and appropriates his life. Where Bagley has dissented, the boil veers back,

manipulating and consuming with insatiable voracity. Because Bagley has refused to comply with the prescribed agenda, his freedom to participate in a meaningful way has been revoked entirely and awarded to the materialistic 'moloch'.

The depiction of the boil's triumph over Bagley is reflective of the formally institutionalized sanctions of incarceration and involuntary commitment. When collectively agreed upon and codified standards of behaviour are violated in a manner considered to be severe, incarceration and commitment can be used to discipline the body and mind of the transgressor (Roach Anleau 24). In institutions, inmates and patients are denied personal agency and are, instead, made to conform to the wishes of those who retain social control. Just as Bagley is physically alienated from the determination of his own body, those who are institutionalized experience similar – if less mythical – restrictions on their physical autonomy. Both prisoners and patients are ostracized from the general population, confined to a determined physical space, and relegated to institutionally approved activities. Like Bagley, who suffers extreme alienation from his autonomy as a consequence of his non-compliance, societal deviants can be institutionalized to maintain the social order – in this case, the order that normalizes the insane assumption that the power to purchase is the key to self-actualization.

From a sociological perspective, Bagley's boil can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the social backlash suffered by deviants of dominant ideology. Bagley's persecution by the boil serves to illustrate common sanctions employed to prevent dissenters of consumer capitalism from disrupting the social order. Like Bagley, vocal critics of values that are collectively accepted can be painfully ostracized from the relationships central to social beings. Their convictions are often invalidated and even considered a sign of mental illness. When the rejection of accepted cultural norms is determined to be extreme, dissenters can be incarcerated or involuntarily committed, with the focus misdirected towards individual pathology rather than on the scrutiny of a problematic socio-political order. It seems, then, that Robinson had good reason to present his critique in an allegorical manner. If those who reveal consumerism's maniacal nature are perceived as maniacal themselves, then Robinson's covert message seems to serve as a way to get people thinking, without them also thinking of him as unsound.

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