Capitalism hasn't had much good press lately, and when it comes to the movies capitalism never seems to get a fair shake. In the movies, capitalists are almost invariably cast as villains. Has someone been murdered? Are the residents of a small town dying of cancer? Is an environment being despoiled? Look no further than the CEO of some large corporation. Quick, name as many movies as you can that feature capitalists as heroes. "Batman Forever" and "Iron Man" do not count. There are a few ("The Edge," "You've Got Mail"), but it's a short list. Now name as many movies as you can that feature mass-murdering corporations and corporate villains? That one is easy: "The Fugitive," "Syriana," "Mission Impossible II," "Erin Brockovich," "The China Syndrome" and "Avatar," to name only a few.

In the 'Star Wars' films, the grotesque character Jabba the Hutt represents commerce.
Even when a corporation is not the primary villain, Hollywood lets its dislike of commerce be known. The most grotesque character in the "Star Wars" films represents commerce, Jabba the Hutt, a literal business worm. And just in case the message in the movie wasn't clear the graphic novel featuring Jabba is titled "Jabba the Hutt: The Art of the Deal." "Star Trek," by the way, is no better. The capitalists in "Star Trek" are also represented by ugly, money-grubbing creatures called Ferengi who make their money by following rules such as "Employees are the rungs on the ladder to success—don't hesitate to step on them."

Hollywood's anti-capitalism is not accidental. It stems from three sources: the rage of directors and screenwriters against their own capitalist backers, the difficulty of using a visual medium to depict the invisible hand, and an ethical framework which Hollywood shares with most of our culture that regards self-interest as inherently immoral or, at best, amoral.

The capitalists in 'Star Trek' are represented by ugly, money-grubbing creatures called Ferengi. In the big picture, art and capitalism work well together. The greatest periods of art history were often times of relative wealth and economic growth, as economist Tyler Cowen discusses in his book "In Praise of Commercial Culture." It's capitalism that creates the wealth that supports artistic creation, and it's capitalism that provides artists with new technologies and media to work with. But when it comes to making particular movies, capitalism and art stand in conflict.
"Economics," wrote director Sydney Pollack, "is the most inhibiting factor for a mainstream director making a film." Hollywood needs capitalists, but with millions at stake the capitalists have little choice but to constrain writers and directors when their vision conflicts with profit. If the public wants a happy ending, then the capitalist will demand a rewrite regardless of whether the screenwriter thinks it violates artistic integrity. (The pressure put on filmmakers to produce happy endings is memorably pilloried by Robert Altman in "The Player.")

Directors and screenwriters see the capitalist as a constraint, a force that prevents them from fulfilling their vision. In turn, the capitalist sees the artist as self-indulgent. Capitalists work hard to produce what consumers want. Artists who work too hard to produce what consumers want are often accused of selling out. Thus even the languages of capitalism and art conflict: a firm that has "sold out" has succeeded, but an artist that has "sold out" has failed.

Painters don't resent the capitalists who sell them paint, because they don't need their backing. But filmmakers need capitalists for financial support, and so their resentment toward capitalists is especially strong. University of Illinois law professor and movie analyst Larry Ribstein has written a paper arguing that filmmakers enter "a Faustian deal" in order to produce their art. Filmmakers see themselves as selling a part of their artistic soul to make their movies, and naturally they rage against the devil doing the buying. It doesn't take a Freud to see that some of this rage comes pouring out on the screen.

20th Century Fox / Everett Collection

Giovanni Ribisi and Sigourney Weaver in 'Avatar,' which features a genocidal corporation.
Consider the two highest grossing films of all time: James Cameron's "Avatar" and "Titanic." The former features a genocidal corporation and the latter a capitalist who sends more than 1,000 people to their doom by demanding speed over safety in the name of profits. In fact, despite his commercial success, Mr. Cameron is a notorious corporate basher. In "Aliens," for example, a corporation sacrifices people in an attempt to profit from the alien monster. Mr. Cameron is also notorious for his hatred of the studio system and the executives who try to constrain his artistic vision or his budget.

Although Hollywood does sometimes produce leftist films like "Reds," it has no deep love for socialism (check out the Porsches in the Hollywood Hills). Hollywood's communist and socialist period was based on the promise that in the socialist paradise artists would be liberated from the yoke of capital and freed to fulfill their visions. Even in Hollywood, however, few people take this promise seriously today. But Hollywood does share Marx's concept of alienation, the idea that under capitalism workers are separated from the product of their work and made to feel like cogs in a machine rather than independent creators. The lowly screenwriter is a perfect illustration of what Marx had in mind—a screenwriter can pour heart and soul into a screenplay only to see it rewritten, optioned, revised, reworked, rewritten again and hacked, hacked and hacked by a succession of directors, producers and worst of all studio executives. A screenwriter can have a nominally successful career in Hollywood without ever seeing one of his works brought to the screen. Thus, the antipathy of filmmakers to capitalism is less ideological than it is experiential. Screenwriters and directors find themselves in a daily battle between art and commerce, and they come to see their battle against "the suits" as emblematic of a larger war between creative labor and capital.

A second and surprising reason that Hollywood fails to understand capitalism is rooted in its tried-and-true manner of telling a good story. Movies focus on individual character, choice and action because that's where the drama lies. It's true that entrepreneurs are a key aspect of capitalism, and a handful of movies such as Francis Ford Coppola's "Tucker" do focus on entrepreneurs. But to really understand capitalism we must
transcend the level of character to see the hidden forces that coordinate the actions of millions of individuals across the world.

In the television series 'The Wire' the entrepreneurs are drug dealers. The production and delivery of even the simplest products involves the efforts of thousands of people dispersed around the globe, none of whom may understand but a tiny portion of the entire process. It's not the hand of any single entrepreneur, but rather the "invisible hand" that delivers a rose from the fields of Colombia to the great flower markets of Aalsmeer, Holland, and on to the Chicago florist who sells it to a young romantic who gives it to his sweetheart on Valentine's Day.

It's hard to present the profoundly nuanced and intricate latticework of capitalism in two hours, which is one reason why one of the few works to attempt this is the five-season television series "The Wire." As with so many other movies and television shows, the capitalists are vicious murderers. "The Wire" simply makes the stereotype more realistic by making its entrepreneurs drug dealers. But although it uses character, "The Wire" is ultimately about how character is dominated by larger economic forces: drug dealers come and go, but the drug market is forever. "Capitalism is the ultimate god in The Wire. Capitalism is Zeus," says David Simon, the show's creator.

Over its five seasons, "The Wire" shows how money and markets connect and intertwine white and black, rich and poor, criminal and police in a grand web that none of them truly comprehends—a product of human action but not of human design. It's the invisible hand that's calling the shots, as Mr. Simon subtly reminds us in the conclusion to the third season, when Detective McNulty wondrously pulls a book from the shelf of murdered drug dealer Stringer Bell, and the camera focuses in on the title: "The Wealth of Nations" by Adam Smith. Smith's metaphor of the invisible hand, like Mr. Simon's invocation of Zeus, tells us that to understand the world we need to look beyond the actions of individuals to see the larger forces at work. But Zeus is an
arbitrary and capricious god whose lightning bolts fall out of the sky without reason or direction. Smith's "invisible hand," however, is that of a kinder god, a god that cares not one whit for individuals but nevertheless guides self-interest toward the social good, progress, and economic growth. So Mr. Simon understands that the Baltimore dockworkers lost their jobs because of the relentless change that capitalism brings and not through any fault of their own. But Adam Smith sees what Mr. Simon does not, namely that it was capitalism that brought the Baltimore stevedores their high wages in the first place and it is the relentless change of capitalism that slowly raises wages throughout the world.

Hollywood wants its heroes to be virtuous, but it defines virtue in a way that excludes any action that is self-interested. If virtue means putting others ahead of self, then it's clear that most people, let alone most capitalists, aren't very virtuous. As a result, the one Hollywood defense of capitalism that everyone knows is Gordon Gekko's speech from "Wall Street": "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works." But even if Gekko's defense has an element of truth, it's uninspiring, which is why Gekko remains the villain of "Wall Street," and not the hero.

A better defense of capitalism is to focus on capitalist virtues. In "The Pursuit of Happyness," for example, Chris Gardner, a struggling salesman played by Will Smith, confronts adversity with hard work, creativity,
ambition and intelligence. "The Pursuit of Happyness" is syrupy at times, but the story of Gardner's rise from homelessness to a successful job as a stockbroker is full of drama and uplift, which makes it all the more surprising that more films don't use the business world as the setting for great cinema.

Lots of movies feature people in soul-destroying jobs who finally escape to realize their true selves, but how many feature people who find their true selves in productive work? Not many, which is a shame, since the business world is where most of us live our lives. Like many works of literature, Hollywood chooses for its villains people who strive for social dominance through the pursuit of wealth, prestige, and power. But the ordinary business of capitalism is much more egalitarian: It's about finding meaning and enjoyment in work and production.

Michael Moore didn't have to worry that anyone would misinterpret the title of his film, "Capitalism: A Love Story," because in Hollywood no one loves capitalism. That's too bad because Hollywood is one of capitalism's greatest successes. Hollywood brought high quality entertainment to the masses in the same way that Henry Ford brought high quality cars to the masses. Hollywood is great at telling stories but it has yet to tell one of the greatest stories of them all, the story of capitalism, the most humane and productive economic system the world has ever known.

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