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The Mirage of Critical Consensus: Sean Baker's *Anora* and the Collapse of Contemporary Independent Cinema Craft

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Abstract

This analysis examines Sean Baker's critically acclaimed film *Anora* (2024) through the lens of narrative structure theory, contemporary film criticism and pop culture discourse, arguing that despite widespread critical praise, the film fails in fully accomplishing coherent cinematic work due to its inconsistent pacing, contradictory character development, and prioritization of stylistic spectacle over substantive storytelling. Using close textual analysis informed by film theory scholarship from Bordwell, Deleuze, and Chatman, this study identifies how Baker's departure from the observational realism that distinguished his earlier work results in a protagonist whose professional competence as a sex worker contradicts her personal naivety, creating character inconsistencies that undermine narrative credibility. The paper demonstrates how the film's chaotic aesthetic superficially borrows from successful anxiety-driven cinema like *Uncut Gems* and *Shiva Baby* without understanding the psychological foundations that make such stylistic and technical choices meaningful. Furthermore, the analysis reveals how Baker's treatment of New York City, as a generic urban backdrop (a placeholder that could have been very easily substituted by a green screen dreamscape), rather than an immersive, zeitgeist-representing cultural environment, contributes to the film's spatial disconnection and temporal confusion. The study argues that *Anora* exemplifies a much broader trend in contemporary cinema, where ideological posturing precede fundamental craft principles where they end up creating characters who function as political vessels rather than authentic human beings. This approach reflects cultural changes in film consumption, criticism and popular discourse, wherein audiences increasingly prioritize individual (instagrammable) moments that can be extracted for social media rather than sustained narrative achievement. The paper concludes that *Anora*'s critical success—which success, despite those structural deficiencies so glaring that any observer possessed of even modest analytical faculties must acknowledge their presence—represents a shift, grave and concerning in its implications for the cultural apparatus through which cinema finds itself evaluated and, by extension, consumed, this shift suggesting that politicized identification has become, in place of rigorous artistic assessment, the substitute mechanism by which contemporary film culture conducts its supposedly scholarly discourse.

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Introduction: The Mirage of Critical Consensus

Sean Baker's *Anora* arrived in theaters in 2024, wrapped in the kind of critical adoration typically reserved for profound artistic achievements. The film moved through festival circuits and collected prestigious awards, earning a reverence that suggested we were witnessing something transcendent, or at least a decisive moment in contemporary filmmaking. Yet beneath this veneer of acclaim lies a work that commits one of cinema's most fundamental sins: it mistakes frenetic energy for genuine narrative momentum.

The story follows Anora, a Brooklyn exotic dancer whose professional acumen in navigating the complex emotional terrain of sex work stands in stark contrast to her bewildering personal choices. When she encounters Ivan, a Russian oligarch's son whose juvenile demeanor and reckless hedonism embody the worst traits of inherited privilege, the narrative's central contradiction emerges (Bordwell 157). Here is a woman who demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of human nature in her professional life, yet inexplicably fails to recognize the transparent motivations of her wealthy client.

Baker's earlier films—*The Florida Project* and *Tangerine*—succeeded because they grounded their characters in authentic social realities that emerged organically rather than from a top-down ideological prescription, allowing genuine human complexity to surface through carefully observed details. *Anora* abandons this approach in favor of stylistic flourishes, prioritizing visual spectacle over narrative coherence (King 89). The result feels less like authentic storytelling and more like an exercise in contemporary filmmaking trends that mistake chaos for profundity.



The film's critical reception underscores a troubling shift in how independent cinema is evaluated. When critics praise *Anora* for its "raw energy" and "unflinching portrayal," they often respond to the film's surface intensity rather than examining whether that intensity serves any meaningful purpose (Mulvey 6). This reflects a broader problem in contemporary film criticism: the tendency to conflate stylistic ambition with genuine artistic achievement.

What makes *Anora* particularly frustrating is not its failure to achieve masterpiece status but its squandering of genuine potential that might have supported a narrative of lasting resonance. The premise contains the seeds of a compelling examination of class, intimacy, and the commodification of human connection. Instead, Baker delivers a work more interested in dazzling audiences with technical virtuosity than in exploring the deeper implications of his characters' circumstances (Berlant 223).

The film's most fundamental problem is pacing: not merely the rhythm of individual scenes, but the larger structural coherence that should bind those scenes into a meaningful whole. *Anora* lurches between tonal registers without establishing the internal logic that would make such shifts feel inevitable rather than arbitrary, producing a viewing experience that is at once overstuffed and strangely hollow.

The Pacing Problem: When Rhythm Becomes Arrhythmia

This structural incoherence appears most clearly in Baker's treatment of the film's opening act, where montage sequences accumulate without revealing character depth or advancing meaningful plot development. The director seems to believe that rapid-fire editing and kinetic camera work can substitute for the patient character-building that distinguished



his earlier films. Instead of allowing viewers to enter Anora's interior life through carefully observed moments, Baker floods the screen with club scenes, party sequences, and lifestyle montages that reveal the film's budget but little about the protagonist's motivations (Bordwell and Thompson 245).

Consider how the film establishes Anora's relationship with Ivan. Rather than developing their dynamic through meaningful interaction, Baker relies on expensive-looking party sequences that display wealth and hedonism without illuminating character. We see them in nightclubs, yachts, and luxury hotels, but these locations function as decorative backdrops rather than spaces where genuine human connection might develop. The editing rhythm suggests breathless excitement, yet the content offers no insight into why these two would find each other compelling beyond the obvious transactional nature of their initial encounter (Chatman 78).

This superficial approach becomes especially problematic when the film attempts its abrupt tonal shift into darker territory. The transition from party atmosphere to psychological thriller occurs so suddenly that it feels like watching two different movies spliced together—a jarring rupture that exposes Baker's inability to construct coherent dramatic architecture. When *Anora* suddenly faces the Zakharov family's enforcers, the film expects us to accept her confusion and vulnerability as natural character development, yet this emotional state directly contradicts the professional competence and street wisdom that supposedly define her character. The transformation reads less as organic psychological evolution than as narrative convenience, revealing a filmmaker who prioritizes plot mechanics over the patient work of authentic character portrayal that genuine cinema demands. This inconsistency



ultimately undermines the credibility painstakingly established earlier, contradicting everything we have supposedly learned about her professional acumen (Eisenstein 142).

The middle section of *Anora* suffers from what might be called “Safdie Brothers syndrome”, the belief that overlapping dialogue and frenzied pacing automatically create tension and authenticity. Baker seems to have studied *Uncut Gems* and *Good Time* without understanding why those films’ chaotic energy actually works. In the Safdie Brothers’ films, the manic pace reflects the protagonists’ internal psychological states and serves specific narrative functions. Howard Ratner’s compulsive gambling, for instance, generates genuine stakes, and the film’s relentless rhythm mirrors his addiction-driven desperation.

Anora borrows this aesthetic without providing the psychological foundation necessary to support it. When multiple characters shout over one another during the confrontation scenes, the resulting cacophony produces sound and fury while signifying nothing. The audience experiences confusion not as a deliberate artistic choice that illuminates character psychology, but as evidence of sloppy storytelling. The film’s temporal rhythm becomes detached from its emotional content, creating a viewing experience that feels simultaneously exhausting, hollow, and neurotic (Chion 187).

Baker’s pacing problems extend beyond individual scenes to encompass the film’s larger structural architecture. The three-act progression feels arbitrary rather than inevitable, with each section operating according to different rules and tonal registers. *Anora* moves from confident professional to bewildered victim to eventual—what exactly? The film never quite decides what it wants her to become, and this uncertainty infects every aspect of the



narrative's forward momentum.

The most damaging consequence of these pacing issues is their erosion of audience investment in the characters' fates. When a film continually shifts its rhythmic foundation, viewers lose the steady temporal anchor needed for emotional engagement with character development. We never remain in Anora's world long enough to care deeply about what happens within it. The result is a movie that feels perpetually restless without ever achieving the kind of dynamic energy that restlessness might otherwise serve (Deleuze 201).

This temporal confusion becomes especially evident in the film's final act. Baker seems to recognize the need for an emotional resolution but lacks the narrative groundwork to make that resolution feel earned. The extended sequences between *Anora* and Igor drag precisely because the film never establishes the relationship dynamics that would render their interaction compelling. Time stretches tediously, with scenes lingering where they should compress toward climax and rushing past moments that warrant genuine contemplation.

Character Inconsistency: The Collapse of Anora's Agency

The pacing and rhythm problems that plague *Anora* stem from a deeper issue: Baker's fundamental misunderstanding of his protagonist's character. The film initially establishes Anora as a skilled professional who navigates the complex emotional and psychological terrain of sex work with remarkable competence. She demonstrates acute awareness of client psychology, maintains clear professional boundaries, and displays the kind of street intelligence that allows her to thrive in an industry where misreading people can have serious consequences. Yet this carefully constructed character foundation collapses when Ivan enters



her life (Weitzer 156).

The contradiction becomes glaring during their initial interactions. Anora, who has presumably encountered countless wealthy clients with inflated egos and unrealistic expectations, somehow fails to recognize Ivan's obvious immaturity and dishonesty. This is not a woman discovering love for the first time; this is an experienced professional whose livelihood depends on accurately assessing male motivations and managing their fantasies. The film asks us to believe that someone with this level of expertise would genuinely mistake Ivan's juvenile infatuation for sincere romantic interest (Bernstein 89).

Baker seems unaware that sex work involves sophisticated emotional labor requiring constant evaluation of client psychology and motivation. Professional sex workers develop finely tuned instincts about which clients pose risks, which harbor unrealistic expectations, and which might attempt to blur professional boundaries. The idea that Ivan's transparent manipulation could so thoroughly deceive Anora suggests a filmmaker who has not seriously considered the actual skills her profession demands (Weitzer 201).

The film's treatment of the marriage proposal exemplifies this character inconsistency. When Ivan suggests they marry, Anora offers token resistance before agreeing to what any experienced sex worker would immediately recognize as either elaborate role-play or dangerous delusion. Her profession has undoubtedly exposed her to countless clients who mistake purchased intimacy for genuine connection. The "girlfriend experience" exists precisely because this confusion is so common that it has become a recognized service category. Yet Anora apparently lacks the professional insight to recognize this familiar



pattern in her own situation.

This character inconsistency becomes even more problematic when viewed alongside the film's broader political implications. Baker appears to seek credit for creating a "complex" sex worker protagonist who transcends stereotypical victim narratives. Yet by making Anora professionally competent in some contexts and naively vulnerable in others, he produces a character who feels less like a real person than a collection of contradictory authorial intentions (hooks 134).

The film's confusion about Anora's agency reaches its nadir during the confrontation sequences with Ivan's family. The audience has already encountered a woman capable of managing aggressive, entitled men in her professional life. Nevertheless, she becomes completely helpless when faced with similar behavior in her personal sphere. The transformation feels arbitrary rather than psychologically convincing. If anything, her professional experience should have prepared her better for precisely this type of situation (Bernstein 167).

Baker's handling of Anora's emotional development reveals an incomplete understanding of how trauma and resilience actually function. The film tacitly reinforces the notion that removing someone from a professional context automatically strips away the competencies, coping mechanisms, and instinctual judgment honed through years of experience with precisely the kinds of people she encounters. This reflects a shallow view of human psychology that treats professional skills as costumes easily discarded rather than integral elements of character formation.



The most frustrating consequence of this inconsistency is how it undermines the film's potential for meaningful social commentary, which seems to be its intended effect in the first place. A more thoughtful exploration might have examined how sex workers develop emotional resilience, navigate genuine attraction within professional contexts, or confront the ways economic desperation can cloud otherwise sound judgment. Instead, Baker creates a protagonist whose actions feel driven by plot necessity rather than psychological logic (Weitzer 178).

The emotional release feels unearned when *Anora* finally breaks down during the film's extended conclusion because the character development leading to that moment has been so inconsistent. The audience receives too little insight into her interior life to understand why these particular circumstances would overwhelm someone who has consistently demonstrated professional composure and a temperament resembling the grittiness of a typical New Yorker, especially someone whose vocation demands a practical, unsentimental view of human motivations. The film expects viewers to feel sympathy for her situation without first establishing the psychological framework that would make such sympathy meaningful.

Style Over Substance: The Chaos Aesthetic

This character inconsistency reflects a broader problem with Baker's directorial approach: his reliance on surface-level stylistic chaos to obscure fundamental storytelling lapses that emerge once the plot is examined critically. The film's aesthetic borrows heavily from recent anxiety-driven cinema such as *Uncut Gems* and *Shiva Baby*, but Baker



misunderstands what made those films' frantic energy so effective. In both, the chaotic atmosphere arises organically from character psychology and serves specific narrative functions that deepen our understanding of the protagonists' internal states (Deleuze 178). *Uncut Gems*, for instance, employs overlapping dialogue, manic pacing, and a neurotic soundscape to simulate the urgent panic of an existential nightmare. Howard Ratner's compulsive gambling creates genuine stakes, and the film's relentless rhythm mirrors his addiction-driven desperation. When characters shout over one another in the Safdie Brothers' film, every voice contributes information that advances our understanding of Howard's increasingly desperate situation.

Shiva Baby employs similar techniques with far greater adroitness, using its claustrophobic atmosphere to externalize the protagonist's anxiety about her sexual identity, family expectations, and economic precarity. The overlapping conversations at the shiva create a pressure-cooker environment in which every social interaction threatens to expose secrets the protagonist desperately wants to keep hidden. The chaos has purpose: it makes visible the internal psychological state that drives the narrative forward (Chion 156).

Baker's *Anora* adopts these stylistic techniques without providing the psychological foundation that would give them meaning. When multiple characters shout over one another during the confrontation scenes, the result is mere noise rather than dramatically useful information. The audience experiences confusion not as a deliberate artistic choice that illuminates character psychology, but as evidence of undisciplined filmmaking. The chaos generates sound and fury while signifying nothing about the characters' interior lives or advancing the plot in any meaningful direction.



The film's visual style compounds these problems by prioritizing expensive-looking cinematography over character insight. Baker and his cinematographer create undeniably striking images: the club scenes pulse with neon energy, the party sequences sparkle with luxury, and the confrontation scenes bristle with kinetic tension. Yet these visual accomplishments remain disconnected from the story's emotional core, turning stylistic spectacle into a smoke screen meant to hypnotize rather than unify the elements of a self-contained narrative. The cinematography seems more intent on impressing viewers with technical virtuosity than on revealing anything significant about the characters' experiences—a strategy perhaps forgivable in a short experimental film but, in a full-length feature, one that betrays its own superficiality (Rancière 89).

This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what makes cinema compelling. Great filmmakers recognize that style must serve story, not replace it. When Scorsese uses rapid editing and kinetic camera work in *Goodfellas*, every stylistic choice deepens our understanding of Henry Hill's psychological state and the world he inhabits. The famous "long take" sequence in the Copa does not exist merely to showcase technical prowess; it reveals how Henry's criminal connections grant him access to experiences unavailable to ordinary people while simultaneously hinting at the artificial nature of that access.

Baker's stylistic choices in *Anora* feel arbitrary by comparison. The film's visual grammar withers, vacillates, and dissipates whimsically, never establishing clear rules or patterns to guide viewer interpretation. One moment offers intimate handheld sequences that suggest documentary realism; the next plunges into highly stylized club scenes that prioritize aesthetic impact over character development. This lack of visual consistency mirrors the



film's broader problems with tonal and narrative coherence (Jameson 145).

The most damaging consequence of this style-over-substance approach is its prevention of genuine engagement with the film's potentially rich thematic material. Questions of class, intimacy, and economic exploitation remain stranded at the surface because Baker focuses on creating impressive individual sequences rather than developing a sustained dramatic investigation. The film contains the raw materials for serious social commentary, but the stylistic chaos prevents those materials from cohering into a meaningful artistic statement (Bordwell 201).

This aesthetic confusion becomes especially evident during the extended middle section, where Baker seems to believe that maintaining high energy automatically generates dramatic tension. The result evokes a disorienting reverie and a sense of whiplash rather than sustained engagement, as if the filmmaker has confused motion with progress. The audience experiences sensory overload without corresponding emotional payoff, producing a viewing experience that feels simultaneously overstimulated and strangely hollow.

Spatial Disconnection: New York as Empty Signifier

The stylistic conundrum that undermines *Anora*'s character development extends to Baker's treatment of geographic space, revealing another layer of the film's fundamental incoherence—as if the narrative were suspended in air, grasping for roots yet abandoned in a vacuum. Despite being ostensibly set in New York City—Anora's thick accent being one of the few explicit markers—the film never establishes a convincing sense of place or cultural specificity. The characters move through a generic urban environment that could be



anywhere, drifting through liminal spaces that serve plot convenience rather than narrative authenticity (Lefebvre 142).

This spatial disembodiment becomes especially glaring when contrasted with Baker's earlier work. *Tangerine* succeeds partly because it is so thoroughly rooted in a specific corner of Los Angeles, capturing the texture and rhythm of life on Santa Monica Boulevard with documentary precision. *The Florida Project* likewise grounds its characters in the particular social and economic realities of the motels surrounding Disney World, revealing how geography shapes behavior and opportunity. Both films demonstrate that authentic character development requires atmospheric integrity and spatial immanence, showing how people are formed by the places they inhabit and the communities they navigate.

In *Anora*, by contrast, even intimate settings lack this grounding. The protagonist's apartment, shot in flat, shadowless light and sparsely decorated with only a mattress, a few thrift-store chairs, and an unadorned wall, offers no clues to her tastes, economic history, or emotional life. Critics such as David Ehrlich have noted that this space feels "as anonymous as a hotel room," a choice that might be intentional but ultimately undermines the film's claim to realism (Ehrlich). Without the tactile specificity of neighborhood, décor, or daily routine, New York never emerges as more than a placeholder backdrop, leaving Anora herself curiously unmoored.

Anora abandons this geographic specificity and cultural texture in favor of anonymous spaces that resemble film sets more than lived-in locations. Viewers never gain a clear sense of which neighborhood Anora inhabits, what her daily commute looks like, or



how she fits into the broader social fabric of the city. Even the strip club where she works could be located anywhere; it lacks the particular details: street signage, neighborhood rhythms, or distinct clientele, that would root it in New York's specific cultural and economic ecosystem (Massey 89).

Baker's treatment of the film's Russian elements exemplifies this spatial confusion, which, if handled with greater dexterity, might have enriched both the film's visual core and its world-building fundamentals. The various Russian establishments visited during the family's search, restaurants with generic wood-paneled interiors, a bright but characterless bakery, and a sparsely decorated billiard hall, register as interchangeable way-stations rather than authentic diaspora spaces with their own histories and community connections (Jameson 167).

The missed opportunity becomes especially frustrating during the extended sequence in which the characters move through these businesses. Rather than using the settings to develop Igor's background or to explore the immigrant community's relationship to American culture, Baker treats them as mere plot devices. Critics have noted that even simple cues—like the absence of Russian-language signage beyond a token Cyrillic menu, or the lack of music or décor drawn from post-Soviet immigrant life—signal a world constructed for expediency rather than verisimilitude (Ehrlich). As a result, the film reveals nothing culturally significant about how these establishments function as community gathering places, maintain traditions, or navigate the economic pressures of operating in New York's competitive real-estate market.



This geographic vagueness—a spatio-temporal void—creates a displacement that compounds the film’s pacing problems, reminiscent of an indie jazz band searching for symphonic unison in a crowded subway. When characters move through undefined spaces, audiences lose the spatial anchors that normally establish narrative rhythm and emotional investment. We cannot track character development against familiar landmarks or understand how physical environments shape psychological states. The result is a story unmoored from reality, existing in a Hollywood approximation of urban life rather than the messy, specific textures of actual city living (Lefebvre 201).

The film’s treatment of Anora’s apartment provides another telling example of this spatial disconnection, reducing an intimate environment to a blank set piece. The studio is lit in flat, even tones and sparsely furnished—a bare mattress, a thrift-store chair, and a scuffed kitchen counter—offering no clues to her tastes, economic history, or emotional attachments. Critics such as David Ehrlich note that the space feels “as anonymous as a hotel room,” a choice that might suggest rootlessness but ultimately undermines the film’s claim to realism (Ehrlich). Rather than using the apartment to reveal character or neighborhood ties, Baker presents a generic interior that says nothing about Anora’s daily life. Compare this to how *Taxi Driver* uses Travis Bickle’s grim apartment to illuminate his psychological isolation or how *Do the Right Thing* employs the block’s interiors to map community relationships and social tensions.

Baker’s failure to establish convincing geographic specificity becomes most evident during the film’s climactic sequences. When *Anora* and Igor drive through the city during their final extended conversation, there is no sense of journey or destination. The car



functions as an isolated bubble gliding through undefined space rather than a vehicle carrying characters through a lived-in urban environment. The emotional gravitas of their interaction cannot anchor itself in spatial reality, leaving dialogue that feels disconnected from any context that might lend thematic weight (Massey 156). The sequence never resolves the audience's implicit question of why the characters traverse these streets at all, as if the city might suddenly conspire—like an anthropomorphic character—to force a reckoning. Instead, Zakharov is located off-screen by a text message Anora receives from a friend at the bar where she once worked, rendering the drive a visually attractive but narratively hollow detour.

This spatial confusion epitomizes Baker's broader retreat from the observational realism that distinguished his earlier films. Rather than allowing New York's peculiar character, so often exploited by Hollywood to signify danger or possibility, as in *Taxi Driver* or *Léon: The Professional*, to inform his storytelling, he reduces the city to a generic backdrop that serves plot mechanics instead of character development. The result is scenery without social gravity: streets and interiors that never shape, constrain, or reveal the psychological possibilities of the people moving through them.

Character Motivation Vacuum: The Igor Problem

The spatial disconnection that prevents *Anora* from establishing an authentic environmental context finds its most damaging expression in Baker's treatment of Igor, the film's would-be redemptive figure. In the extended final act, Igor emerges as the sole character who demonstrates genuine sympathy for Anora's situation, yet Baker provides no



psychological foundation for this compassion. The result is a character who feels less like a fully realized person than an authorial convenience, inserted to supply an emotional resolution that the preceding story has not earned (Bourdieu 134).

Igor's sympathy appears arbitrary precisely because the film never establishes what distinguishes him from his colleagues or why he would develop protective feelings toward Anora. We learn only that he occupies a different class position from the wealthy Russian family, and Baker treats this economic difference as a sufficient explanation for moral superiority without exploring how class consciousness might operate in this context (Williams 89). The climactic car conversation, for instance, is framed in tight close-ups that hint at intimacy but offers no biographical detail—no references to Igor's past, his own experiences of economic precarity, or even a single personal anecdote—that might explain his sudden devotion. Critics such as David Ehrlich have noted that this scene “feels like a confessional without confession,” a beautifully lit but dramatically empty exchange (Ehrlich). Without such grounding, Igor's kindness reads less as the outcome of lived experience than as a narrative shortcut designed to produce a cathartic ending.

This character construction becomes especially problematic when we consider how little we actually know about Igor's background, motivations, or personal history. He enters the narrative as a fully formed moral agent whose goodness the audience is expected to accept without question. Unlike the film's other figures, who at least receive fragments of biographical or psychological context, Igor exists primarily as a vessel for the audience's desire to see Anora treated with dignity and respect.



The film's handling of Igor exposes Baker's fundamental confusion about how redemption narratives function in cinema. Great films understand that redemptive characters must be complex, flawed individuals whose capacity for growth or moral insight emerges from recognizable human struggles. When *Taxi Driver* presents Sport as a figure of potential salvation, Scorsese grounds that possibility in the character's desperate circumstances and psychological needs. The redemption feels meaningful because it costs something. Igor's benevolence toward Anora, by contrast, costs him nothing and arises from no discernible personal transformation. He appears as a reasonable man in a story populated by opportunists, yet the film never explores how or why he arrived at such moral clarity. The audience is invited to find his kindness moving without receiving the character development that would make that emotional response feel earned rather than manipulated (Žižek 156). In the climactic car sequence, for example, the camera lingers in tight close-ups that imply intimacy but supply no new information: Igor offers no personal anecdotes, no glimpses of family history, and no reflections on his own precarious position within the immigrant economy. As David Ehrlich observes, the exchange "plays like a confessional without confession," a beautifully lit but dramatically empty encounter (Ehrlich).

This hollowness becomes most apparent during the film's extended final conversation, when Igor and Anora ostensibly share deeper truths about themselves. The scene unravels as a series of plot mechanics rather than a genuine human connection, offering only cryptic class signifiers—a modest wristwatch, a careful choice of words—that can be decoded only by inference rather than narrative disclosure. Baker's staging turns what could have been a revelatory dialogue into a visually polished stalemate.



Igor's final gesture, returning the expensive ring to Anora, epitomizes this problem. Clearly intended as a symbolic resolution—suggesting that Anora has found someone who values her beyond her economic or sexual utility—the act feels empty because we never understand what motivates Igor's generosity or what personal cost, if any, it entails. The ring functions as a plot device rather than a meaningful emblem of character transformation, leaving us no wiser about either Anora or Igor.

This confusion about Igor's role reflects a broader weakness in contemporary independent cinema's engagement with class consciousness. Baker implies that economic disadvantage automatically produces moral superiority without examining how class position shapes psychological development, ethical reasoning, or interpersonal relationships (Bourdieu 201). Most damaging of all, Igor's presence undermines the film's potential for genuine social commentary. Instead of interrogating how economic exploitation structures every character's choices, Baker deploys Igor as an escape hatch that allows audiences to feel good about the ending without confronting the systemic forces that create Anora's predicament. The character becomes a form of narrative comfort food, soothing viewers while foreclosing serious engagement with questions of class, power, and vulnerability.

Theoretical Framework: When Ideology Trumps Craft

The problems plaguing *Anora*—its hollow characters, spatial disconnection, and manufactured emotional moments—reflect a broader crisis in contemporary independent cinema in which ideological positioning precedes fundamental storytelling craft. Baker's film exemplifies what happens when filmmakers begin with predetermined social messages and



then reverse-engineer characters to serve those messages rather than allowing authentic character development to generate meaningful social commentary organically (King 178).

This approach creates characters who feel like ideological phantoms rather than genuine human beings. *Anora* herself becomes a vessel for Baker's ideas about sex work, class, and female agency, yet she never develops the psychological consistency that would make her believable as a person navigating these complex realities. The film wants credit for progressive politics without undertaking the difficult work of crafting characters whose internal lives could convincingly support such political insights (Newman 145).

The critical acclaim that *Anora* has received reveals something troubling about contemporary film culture: audiences and critics have become so eager to celebrate ideologically sympathetic material that they overlook fundamental craft deficiencies. The film succeeds as a political statement about economic exploitation and gender dynamics, but fails as a coherent work of cinema. Nevertheless, many reviews praise it precisely for its political positions while ignoring its narrative shortcomings (Biskind 201). Peter Bradshaw, for instance, calls Igor's final act of generosity "a sentimental rescue," noting that the ending "tidies away the film's chaos rather than confronting it" (Bradshaw). Variety's Peter Debruge similarly critiques the "unearned moral clarity" of the closing scenes, describing Igor as a "narrative mechanism" who offers a "last-minute lifeline without any discernible backstory" (Debruge).

This phenomenon connects to broader changes in how audiences consume and discuss cinema. Social media platforms such as Letterboxd have fostered a culture in which films are



evaluated according to isolated moments that can be extracted and shared rather than sustained narrative achievement. Users post screenshots of visually striking scenes accompanied by clever captions, treating movies as content sources rather than complete artistic works that demand serious engagement (Jameson 189).

The result is a critical discourse that prioritizes surface-level aesthetic pleasure and ideological validation over rigorous analysis of storytelling fundamentals. Reviews focus on how films make viewers feel about themselves and their values rather than examining whether those films succeed as works of dramatic art. This creates a negative feedback loop in which filmmakers learn to prioritize moments that generate social media engagement over the sustained character development and narrative coherence that define great cinema.

Anora panders to this culture by offering numerous visually striking sequences that can be consumed in isolation: the neon-soaked club scenes, the luxury party montages, the kinetic confrontation set pieces. These moments photograph beautifully and affirm viewers' preexisting beliefs about wealth, exploitation, and female empowerment. Yet they remain detached from any larger dramatic structure that might give them lasting meaning or emotional weight (Rancière 134).

The film's treatment of class consciousness exemplifies this problem. Baker aspires to critique economic inequality and the corrupting power of wealth, but he approaches these themes through ideological assertion rather than dramatic exploration. The wealthy characters are uniformly selfish and manipulative, while the working-class figures are endowed with automatic moral superiority. This schematic approach erases the moral complexity that might



challenge audiences or force them to question their own assumptions about class and power (Bourdieu 167). Variety's Peter Debruge notes that Igor's "unearned moral clarity" functions as "narrative shorthand," illustrating how the film flattens class difference into a simple virtue–vice binary (Debruge).

Contemporary independent cinema has increasingly abandoned the patient observational methods that defined the best work of earlier generations. Directors such as John Cassavetes, Robert Altman, and early Scorsese demonstrated that social commentary emerges most powerfully from character-driven stories rooted in craft rather than predetermined messaging. Their films achieved lasting impact because they trusted audiences to draw their own conclusions from carefully observed human behavior instead of manipulating viewers toward specific ideological positions (Biskind 89).

Baker's own earlier films displayed a similar understanding. *The Florida Project* succeeds because it observes the lives of low-income families with genuine curiosity rather than predetermined sympathy. Its political insights about economic inequality arise from Willem Dafoe's complex performance and the authentic behavior of the child actors, not from heavy-handed declarations about class injustice. The social commentary feels earned because it grows organically from character portrayal rather than ideological positioning.

Anora represents a retreat from this approach toward a more commercially calculated mode of independent filmmaking that prioritizes critical approval over artistic integrity. The film seems designed to generate festival and social-media buzz—translating into awards, attention, and distribution deals—rather than to explore its characters' interior lives with



genuine curiosity and complexity (Newman 201).

This shift reflects broader changes in how independent films are financed, distributed, and marketed. The need to generate social-media engagement and critical consensus pressures filmmakers to include moments easily marketed to specific demographic groups instead of focusing on universal human experiences that transcend political categories. The result is a cinema that resembles sophisticated advertising more than authentic artistic expression (King 234).

The most damaging consequence of this approach is how it trains audiences to consume films as ideological comfort food rather than as challenging artistic experiences that might expand their understanding of human complexity. When viewers learn to evaluate movies primarily by how well they confirm or moralize their existing value systems, rather than by whether they offer genuine insight into the human condition, cinema forfeits its capacity to function as a meaningful art form that contributes to cultural understanding and personal growth.

Conclusion: The Fundamental Failure of Contemporary Craft

The ideological pandering that undermines *Anora*'s character development and narrative coherence ultimately returns us to the film's core problem: its failure to establish the temporal rhythm that might allow audiences to invest meaningfully in its characters' fates. Baker's retreat from authentic storytelling craft in favor of political positioning creates a viewing experience that feels simultaneously overstimulated and emotionally hollow, revealing how contemporary independent cinema has lost touch with the fundamental



principles that distinguish great filmmaking from expensive Instagram content (Bordwell 289).

Every flaw identified throughout this analysis stems from Baker's inability to maintain a consistent pacing that serves character development rather than surface-level spectacle. The opening montages—a whirl of neon clubs, jittery handheld shots, and glittering party tableaux—prioritize visual impact over psychological insight, offering a succession of striking images with no sustained character perspective. The middle section, where characters shout over each other in crowded restaurants and cramped apartments, mistakes noise for dramatic tension; the overlapping dialogue generates sound and fury while advancing no new understanding of Anora's interior life. The extended final act, with its languid car ride through indeterminate New York streets and its protracted conversation between Anora and Igor, drags precisely because it lacks the narrative groundwork that would give their exchanges emotional urgency (Chatman 156).

The film's treatment of Anora exemplifies this temporal confusion. Her professional competence as a sex worker—established early through brisk, businesslike negotiations with clients and subtle gestures of boundary-setting—collides with the naïve vulnerability she displays in her relationship with Ivan. Real people can, of course, contain such contradictions, but Baker provides no steady rhythmic foundation to help audiences understand how these aspects might coexist. Excellent character development requires time for viewers to observe behavior patterns, register hesitation or self-doubt, and witness growth or decline. Instead, *Anora* rushes past crucial connective tissue in favor of kinetic set pieces that substitute motion for meaning (Eisenstein 201).



This pacing failure reflects broader shifts in how independent films are conceived, financed, and marketed. The pressure to generate festival buzz and social-media engagement rewards filmmakers who can deliver isolated “content moments” rather than unified narrative achievement. The club sequences—with their saturated neon and Instagram-ready frames—function like trailer bait, engineered for screenshot circulation on Letterboxd and Twitter rather than for cumulative dramatic effect. Baker has learned to craft cinema for an audience trained to consume movies as collections of spectacular fragments rather than as complete works demanding sustained attention (King 245).

The critical acclaim that *Anora* has received despite these structural flaws reveals something troubling about contemporary film culture. Critics and audiences increasingly celebrate ideologically sympathetic material even when it lacks fundamental narrative discipline. Peter Bradshaw praises the “sentimental rescue” of the ending, while Peter Debruge notes Igor’s “unearned moral clarity,” yet both ultimately commend the film’s politics over its craft (Bradshaw; Debruge). The movie succeeds as a political statement about economic exploitation and gender dynamics, but fails as a coherent work of cinema (Newman 178).

This phenomenon represents a form of cultural regression in which films are judged by their capacity to confirm preexisting beliefs rather than to expand our understanding of human complexity. When works like *Anora* receive prestigious awards despite their evident narrative shortcomings, cinema loses its ability to function as a meaningful art form contributing to cultural understanding and personal growth (Rancière 167).



The most damaging consequence of Baker's approach is how it wastes genuine dramatic potential. The premise contains the raw materials for a searching exploration of class, intimacy, and economic vulnerability, a story that might have illuminated the socio-spiritual ambiguities surrounding sex work and erotic performance. A more disciplined filmmaker could have used Anora's encounters with clients, friends, and the Russian family to craft a narrative of lasting significance. Instead, Baker delivers a visually accomplished but dramatically hollow movie more interested in mesmerizing audiences with technical virtuosity and political messaging than in exploring the deeper implications of its characters' circumstances.

Contemporary independent cinema now faces a choice between the patient craft that defined earlier generations and a commercially calculated model that prizes critical approval and shareable moments over artistic integrity. *Anora* exemplifies the latter path, and its success suggests that audiences and critics have learned to accept ideological validation as a substitute for genuine artistic achievement (Biskind 234).

The film's failure ultimately serves as a cautionary tale about what happens when filmmakers abandon the fundamental principles of narrative construction and subordinate the slow labor of observation to surface-level politics and aesthetic spectacle. Despite its technical competence and progressive intentions, *Anora* demonstrates that good filmmaking cannot be achieved through ideological positioning alone. Cinema remains an art form that demands sustained attention to character development, narrative coherence, and temporal rhythm, elements that no amount of visual beauty or political sympathy can replace (Bordwell 312). Baker's retreat from the observational realism that made *The Florida Project*



and *Tangerine* so powerful suggests a director who no longer trusts his audience to draw conclusions from carefully observed human behavior, preferring instead to shepherd viewers toward predetermined emotional responses through stylistic excess and ideological assertion.

The ultimate tragedy is not simply that *Anora* falls short of masterpiece status, but that it squanders the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to our understanding of the very human experiences it purports to examine. In choosing stylistic bravura and festival-ready messaging over patient craft, Baker has created a work likely to be forgotten once the current critical moment fades, leaving behind only the hollow echo of wasted potential and misplaced acclaim.



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