

## Commodification of Emotion in Pete Docter's Inside Out.

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### ABSTRACT

Disney Pixar's Inside Out (2015) is a movie directed by Pete Docter, and it presents the story of an 11-year-old girl, Riley's psychological and emotional development through personifications of primary emotions like Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust. The movie represents emotional regulation as the foundation for a balanced life. However, this paper argues that Inside Out (2015) envisions emotional regulation as a utopian idea, but in reality, this process of regulation leads to the commodification of emotions to meet societal and economic demands. This conceptual gap allows us to examine the film from a neoliberal paradigmatic perspective; it depicts how emotions are transformed from personal experiences into marketable products. This paper aims to establish how emotional regulations, represented as a way of utopian living, are transforming into a mechanism of control that reduces emotional freedom. The analysis highlights how negative emotions are trained to be regulated to construct personal behaviour and social structure, hence endorsing the film's critique of neoliberal capitalism, which would place emotional productivity above genuine expressions. The paper utilizes qualitative methodology to closely analyse the movie and apply the following theoretical perspectives: Affect theory, Marxist critique of commodification to study the market system, theories of emotional labour to link emotion with the real world, and Foucault's notion of governmentality to understand the power dynamics of capitalism. The movie concludes by presenting a utopian vision that regulates Riley's emotions to fit social and economic expectations. However, this commodification of emotions transforms authentic feelings into a market system, resulting in a performance-oriented cycle and ultimately leading to emotional dystopia.

### KEYWORDS

Commodification of Emotions, Emotional Dystopia, Emotional Regulation, Neoliberalism, Emotional Labor, Affect Theory, Governmentality.

## 1. Introduction

The film Inside Out (2015) by Pixar Animation Studios, directed by Pete Docter is rightfully hailed as a creative, imaginative depiction of the emotional landscape of an 11-year-old girl, Riley, trying to find her way in the world of childhood as she faces the challenges of life and reality. The movie presents five anthropomorphized emotions, including Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust, which manage the emotions of Riley when she experiences good and bad moments. Although at first glance



the movie appears to be making a case that emotional regulation as a means of personal health is an essential aspect of human life, by taking a step further, the viewer would find that the film criticises the process of emotional life, which is personal and multi-dimensional, being shaped and managed by the outer environment. *Inside Out* (2015) quietly examines the commodification of emotions as not spontaneous occurrences, but as the objects of neoliberalism which puts a premium on productivity, efficiency, and market-oriented objectives.

In the beginning of the movie, emotional control is portrayed as a near-utopian ideal. Riley's emotions are well-organized, and every emotion serves a certain purpose, which is why there is a balance in her psychological world. Joy as the leader is struggling to keep Riley happy which is a sign of a neoliberal worldview that views emotions as something manageable and measurable. The efficiency required in capitalistic systems is reflected in her words. Emotions in this world are not only handled to maintain internal balance but are also controlled to meet the external needs, and hence happiness is a commodity that needs to be maximized at all times.

As the story progresses, *Inside Out* (2015) leaves the idyllic vision of emotional control to show something more disturbing. The control of feelings, which is at first described as advantageous, quickly turns into an instrument of the commercialization of emotions. The fact that Joy insists that Riley needs to be happy at all costs (Docter, 2015) portrays how the happiness is not a natural reaction but rather a product that has to be produced. This transformation is a manifestation of the capitalist-minded ideology according to which feelings should be streamlined so as to comply with social demands and become instruments of efficiency. According to Illouz & Davies (2017), "the commodification of emotions in capitalistic societies is done to make sure that they satisfy the efficiency and social conformity requirements of the market" (37).

This emotional regulation process is further exaggerated as this film criticizes the treatment of emotions as discrete and manageable parts, and each of them functions in a specific way in the inner world of Riley. "The Headquarters" of the Riley mind in *Inside Out* (2015) looks more like a corporate office, with every feeling performing the role of a manager that manages the emotional performance of Riley. The purpose of Fear is to train Riley to be dangerous, the Anger manages her reaction to injustice, and Disgust makes everyone conform to the society (Docter, 2015). Such a system is indicative of the neoliberal agenda of managing emotional reactions to conform them to the demands of society and the market. Zwick (2023) emphasizes the fact that emotions are constantly controlled to be marketable in the neoliberal settings, which once again confirms the fact that this film criticizes the way emotional life is influenced by the capitalistic systems.

This psychological efficiency finally ventures into emotional dystopia. The problem that is revealed through compulsive pursuit of happiness in Riley is the repressed expression of negative emotions. Sadness, which was initially taken as a "malfunction" of the emotional system of Riley, is underestimated and disregarded as an obstacle (Docter, 2015). This is one manifestation of a society-wide tendency to undervalue any emotions that are not productive or happy, and continues to reinforce the notion that negative emotions are challenges to be conquered. However, later on in the story, one comes to understand that negative emotions must play an essential part in emotional well-being and development. Sadness, specifically, is later credited with the fact that it helped Riley to manage the mourning and reunite with her parents (Docter, 2015). This change, however, lacks its complications.

Although Sadness is permitted to exist, she is still a part of the bigger system of emotional regulation, but re-contextualized to serve the purpose of keeping Riley in balance and not to her inner emotional worth.

The movie critiques the commodification of emotions by demonstrating how they are continually shaped to meet social and economic demands, even when they are disruptive. Sadness is not allowed to exist freely as an emotional response; rather, she must serve a greater purpose within the system. Smoliak relates this concept in neoliberal lens, even emotions that disrupt social harmony are “transformed into productive labour under neoliberal governance” (2024). Such a shift of feelings into the instruments of productivity is what adds to the emotional dystopia that *Inside Out* (2015) implicitly critiques.

In *Inside Out* (2015), emotional regulation as a utopic vision is changing into an emotional dystopia where the process of achieving emotional balance turns into a regime of emotional surveillance and control. The film unveils the ways in which the emotional control process becomes less and less connected with authenticity, as Joy is consistently striving to ensure that Riley is happy. The emotional system does not help Riley to have her own natural emotional reactions, but rather to mould them by the outside demands. Finally, *Inside Out* (2015) demonstrates how emotional regulation, which is initially presented as a way to achieve psychological welfare, turns into a system of control and a world where emotions always have to be adjusted to the demands of society and economy.

## 2. Literature Review

Most of the research studies and writings have been carried out on the philosophical branch of emotions, and there have been many critical studies exploring the different themes of the same. The majority of them are centred on emotional aspects, psychological levels, character, and education. The evaluation of some of the research papers is done below:

Dokic and Lemaire claim that emotions are a perception of values and specifically, they criticize the perceptual theses where emotions can be immediately evaluated just like any other sensory perception. Dokic and Lemaire (2013, p. 226) concentrate on “the phenomenology of emotions which is conciliated with the fact that the evaluative part of apparent emotional contents has been imported externally”. The writers do not hold that the values can directly be reflected by the emotions, and underline that the value perceptions are the results of extrinsic evaluative information that facilitates the non-evaluative content of emotional experiences. This wholly relies on the interpretation and external structures, as opposed to the intrinsic truths.

Emotions in this view are not pure responses of moral or aesthetic value; they are socially and cognitively determined responses that are provided with value by the outside systems. This analytical perspective, however, becomes essential to comprehend *Inside Out* (2015), where the experience of emotion is likely to be organised, quantifiable and ultimately a marketable system of value.

The movie describes Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust as being functional agents, with the only fact that they are useful in ensuring the psychological equilibrium of Riley making them valued. Having turned what Dokic and Lemaire (2013) define as interpretive and context-specific experiences into commodified depictions of emotional capital, by visualising such emotions as discrete and manageable entities, *Inside Out* (2015). The irrationality of the emotional control that is the order of the day in films, like the use of the command panels and the colour-coded memories, depicts capitalism,

which requires the need to systemise the affect into productive classes. At the same time, Dokic and Lemaire (2013) focused more on the emotional analysis that took place in the philosophical and ideological mechanism. Moreover, Dokic and Lemaire (2013) unveil the dystopian paradox of the movie by denying an emotion as a direct appearance of the values; a utopian image of emotional homeostasis that covers the capitalist transformation of emotion into the value of exchange.

In a second research article called the “*Defining Concepts of Emotion: From Philosophy to Science*” by Changqing Liu (2016), emotions are an action position, formal and behavioural, which links the desire to the action form. The philosophers, such as Frijda (2004), defined emotions as a concept of essential desire for something, e.g. desires to eat, flee, be with, wherein all of them show readiness to take action on it. This discussion demystifies emotions, making them observable patterns of reactions which could even be modeled in machines. By defining emotion in a mechanical and logical manner (S - A), Liu (2016) has made it measurable, predictable, and programmable as a scientific concept. The analysis of emotion, as done by Liu, focuses on the cognitive and computational study of emotion; however, it also foreshadows deeper paradoxes that were involved in *Inside Out* (2015). His model echoes the presentation of the film on emotions as a rationalized process: Joy, Sadness, and others act in the coded and programmatic mode to control the behavior of Riley. Through such a mechanism of emotions in a social and ideological way, capitalism manages to organize and influence in a regulated system of productivity. The concept of “action tendency” in the hands of Liu turns out to be a metaphor of the neoliberal demand of functional, productive, manageable feelings. Therefore, the main relevance of Liu's work to the meaning of emotion, and how it defines action tendencies and intensity, is useful in bridging the gap between philosophy and cognitive science, but it does not deal with the matter of commodification of emotions.

In another article, Kurth imaginatively thinks about emotions as being psychological and not biological universalism. According to his thinking, “he is in line with constructivist theorists such as Lisa Feldman Barrett and criticises the idea of emotions as a cultural artefact; which is a product of social learning and language labelling” (Kurth, 2019, p.1230). In the view of Kurth (2019), a cultural pattern defines the ways that emotions are manifested, yet, at the same time, there is an underlying sort of biology that renders emotional experience. His main point is, in fact, that, emotions are the product of applying folk concepts of emotion to experienced affective experiences; therefore, neither as natural as they are constructed. It is the most important implication of such theoretical interpretation to study *Inside Out* (2015). The biological imperative can be seen in the film through the way various emotions are presented as independent and autonomous actors. Meanwhile, film illustrates emotions as controllable factors applied to regulate the human well-being to establish dystopian factors of emotional harmony. However, the argument presented by Kurth (2019) is centered on the socially produced emotions; that is, the context, words, and ideology create around the emotions. Overlooking this cultural construction, *Inside Out* (2015) visualizes emotions into the systematic system of controls, where emotions became commodification.

As similar to this, there are other several critical analyses that are precisely scrutinizing the movie, *Inside-Out*, in the context of different themes and theoretical approach. Much of the critical analysis of *Inside Out* (2015) has been performed concerning the emotive aspects, the psychological

side, character, school subject matter and the like. A few of them are explored below, in an attempt to identify key aspects that are being explored by current researcher.

Moss-Wellington (2021) says that *Inside Out* (2015) is a tableau movie because of the way it visualizes and narrates about memory, emotion and imagination and their inward relationship with outward expression in society. It is primarily centered to the explanation of intricate human psychological behavior by memory, emotion, and imagination; and how these internal beings interact. An example is as follows: “the expression of emotions generates a memory, a colour of the orb, which is coded affect (in the case of Joy, yellow, happiness), which establishes an omnidirectional co-influence of memory, emotions and their expression” (Moss-Wellington, 2021, p.192). It provides a suitable filmic language to comprehension of the autobiographical imagination in a manner that individuals can create a sense of self and personal past with the help of recollection, emotion, and imagination. The author provides a mixture of psychology reading; at the same time the study does not focus on how the ‘cinematic language’ of the movie establishes emotional control as a socio-economic standard; this is the principal purpose of the research. It also expounds social expression in the sense of interior relationship; indicating unfolding insights which enable us to determine the effects of interior psychological landscape and how we interact with the external. However, the film *Inside Out* (2015) is to be considered as a deep illustration where cinematic art can be vocalized visually on the subject of autobiographical imagination; exhibiting the force of memory, emotion and imagination interacting. The Moss-Wellington (2021) work emphasizes the constructions of the self on emotional grounds, but does not enter into the processes of cultural and economic construction of those feelings.

Similarly, Mujani et al. (2024) describe emotion as an inward action, yet neither of them puts the questions on the external ideological circumstances that define the emotional manifestations. The paper is a critical analysis of the emotional landscape of Riley; with special focus on different mode of interpretation and the representation of the emotions in the film *Inside Out* (2015). An example of such can be found in the article "Dominant signs in the cutting scenes with given physical appearances and clothes specifications" (Mujani et al., 2024, p. 89). In this way, the emotions are formed as the result of the physical response and cognition of the outside stimuli. The paper establishes the grounds to comprehend the multifaceted emotional notions in the visually and narratively expressed movie; through the application of semiotic and psychological theories to interpret the description of the fundamental emotions and the mechanism behind them, but they fall short of exploring how such codes turn emotional discipline into self- management under a neoliberal context; which is of interest to this paper. It offers a visual account that dependence on the deep psychological theory e.g. the Schachter Singer Two Factor Theory to depict the feelings are heightened by the intersection of the psychological reaction and mental explanation of the occurrences.

Equally, a second article that correlates with the study of the psychological perspective, authored by Zaltina et al. (2022); primarily focuses on the analysis of the personality of the main character i.e. Riley using the Freudian tools of psychoanalysis i.e. id, ego, and superego. The movie *Inside Out* (2015) reveals her personality as caring, loving, and unyielding, which was analyzed through the prism of the id, ego, and superego. Nevertheless, Zaltina et al. offer invaluable information on how the personality of Riley was made, they do not reveal the existence of such emotional tracks to be romanticized in the light of a wider range of neoliberal principles.

Some authors are analysing *Inside Out* (2015) from an educational and moral perspective. The research paper mainly focuses on the ability of *Inside Out* (2015) to demonstrate the basic principles of human development, such as “normal and abnormal emotional development in children” (Benarous and Munch, 2016, p. 522). In this case, it is a simplified metaphor concerning the emotional functioning and claims that, in its most up-to-date usage, is a device that is outfitted well in serving young children, especially those with symptoms of mood dysregulation. The paper predominantly portrays how the movie *Inside Out* (2015) can provide a valuable understanding of the emotional development in children, which has become a meaningful educational instrument in helping children and parents a model of emotional regulation in a clinical situation. To illustrate, the film stresses the importance of certain socio-emotional acquired skills and the nurturing effect of parents in terms of children's development of such skills. Although Benarous and Munch (2016) consider *Inside Out* (2015) as an effective way of enhancing emotional education, they nevertheless do not relate emotional education to the neoliberal principles of subjecting emotions to self-control and emotional optimisation.

Moreover, another paper also provides the analysis of moral values in the film *Inside Out* (2015) authored by Sinarawerdhi and Utami (2023), which studies the kinds of moral values portrayed by the characters. It examines the ten kinds of moral values - honesty, courage, self-reliance and potential, fidelity and chastity, loyalty and dependability, respect, love and affection, unselfishness and sensitivity, kindness and friendliness, justice and mercy - that are in the film through application of the theory suggested by Linda and Eyre (1993).

The findings of this paper reveal that it has 10 moral values that are in the study and 3 most outstanding moral values, out of the 3 outstanding moral values that were obtained, the first is the moral value of Loyalty, which is exhibited when Joy attempts to do the best she can to make Joy happy, and keep Riley not to feel sad. The second is moral worth of Respect when Bingbong feels sad when his rocket is discarded, Sadness displays his care towards Bingbong without refuting the sad feelings of Bingbong and the third is the moral worth of sensitive and unselfishness, which was realized when Joy understands that sadness is not an emotion of which we must be afraid of and giving Sadness an opportunity to control the sad feelings of Bingbong. (Sinarawerdhi and Utami, 2023)

Despite the fact that Sinarawerdhi and Utami describe moral virtues, which include autonomy and loyalty, through another slightly different prism, it is not explained much how these attributes contribute to the neoliberal project of self-management and emotional labor.

Moreover, the article “*Inside Out: Education or Simply Entertainment?*” attempts to disseminate a profound theme of the mechanism of the child's mind, and also offers the child education in his comprehension of emotional balance and in the way of coping with feelings. “Sadness is factual; it is something we cannot get rid of and trying to deny it results in other issues. Other people should be able to assist us by allowing sadness to be demonstrated, which can teach parents to listen to their children when major changes take place in the family” (Marcarian and Wilkinson, 2016, p.377). In the meantime, to study the employment of emotional balance, this paper does not analyse the possibility of the commodification of emotion in its entirety to investigate the working mechanism of children's minds.

The technological structure of development of emotional dialogue systems is presented in the article by Savchenko, Andrey V. and Lyudmila V. Savchenko titled *Inside Out: emotional multiagent multimodal dialogue systems*. The artificial intelligence driven method of Savchenko et al. (2024) founded on the movie *Inside Out* (2015) shows how the idea of emotional agents in the movie, in its turn, is submerged in the dialectic of technology and, consequently, as a result, it becomes even more evident how emotions are being commodified and made systematized - which is the focus of the criticism in this study. Similarly to the movie, *Inside Out* (2015), "they suggest that they employ several emotional agents, which are powered by Large Language Models (LLMs), to generate responses to a query placed by the user" (Savchenko et al., 2024, p. 8784), and video-based facial expressions and recognition with more emotional reactions. The film-based paper helps to illustrate the video-based emotional understanding and response. Precisely, deep neural networks (DNNs) are used to detect facial recognition, predict expression, and ensure privacy (8785).

Another deep article authored by Manninen Alvarez (2016), consists soul-making theodicy by John Hick and its uses in *Inside Out* (2015) to say that film does not only depict emotional sorrow as instrumental but also as a necessity of the moral and spiritual growth. This scene symbolizes the emotional aspect of this film. Fights; and to be exact, the role of Joy and Sadness; and criticize the emotional input into. This idea is known as personal development and it is congruent with God allows suffering just to make a soul. Though this religious approach can be helpful in explaining the redemptive aspect of emotion, it spiritualizes the control of emotion and dissociates it with a socio-economic system. Her focus on moral development disregards an aspect in which the emotional display of the film could be in line with the neoliberal principles of self-control and efficiency, and that is what this study attempts to question.

Equally, in, "Text Analysis: Microstructural Dimension of the *Inside Out* Animated Movie 2015" the paper is able to introduce *Inside Out* (2015) as a textual text to analyze how the children may adapt in the new environment and mode of emotional engagement through analysis of a critical discourse by Van Dijk to establish how the psychological messages in the text are linguistically expressed in it (Indahsari et al., 2022). This paper analyzes the way memory, emotion and imagination are configured to enable the adaptation of children into new environments using a microstructural analysis. The argument by Indahsari et al. (2022) in favor of *Inside Out* (2015) holds water because the ability of emotional intelligence to form memories, store memory, express emotions, and think imaginatively; specifically, influence by early childhood experience in shaping the personality of a person. It also articulates the movie script to decipher psychological messages by micro structural textual analysis; and demonstrates that it is effective to convey complex emotional, cognitive processes especially to young audience. The study explains the way emotions have been introduced instead of questioning why such representation of emotional regulation has been introduced as a necessity. It does not consider the ideological labor that emotions are gaining through; especially in the larger apparatus of control and social adaptation by emphasizing language as a means.

The next article will discuss *Inside Out* (2015) in terms of the visual elements of shape and colour of the characters. It, nonetheless, critically examines the sound that introduces the likes of leitmotifs and moods of the character in the form of audio. Lastly, it also does further analyses of the character and scenes, in the perspective of the psychological and psychoanalytical theories (Son, 2020).

It analyses the defence mechanism of the emotional and psychological component of Riley's human emotions. This is because “the color, music, and speech patterns are employed in this film to denote personalities and emotions; to expose the relationship between Joy and Sadness” (Son, 2020, p. 238). However, these expressive strategies in the reading of Son are dealt with as psychological realism and not as an ideological design. By doing so, it ignores how Pixar’s emotional aesthetics may normalise the ideal of balance and self-discipline, core values aligned with neoliberal emotional governance.

In another article by Naufal Nafis (2025, p. 270), Suhartawan Budianto, and Kusuma Wijaya; is the philosophical conception of the linguistic semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure argues that “emotions are manifested through language” (*Inside Out*, 2015). The conversation shared by Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger serves as a symbol that depicts the emotional state of Riley, in which language is a system of signs. Naufal Nafis et al examined the dialogue patterns of each character to describe the emotions of these characters themselves – “Joy with excitement, Sadness with sorrow, Fear with anxiety, Disgust with rejection, and Anger with frustration - depict the emotional journey of Riley” (Naufal Nafis et al., 2025, p. 276). Moreover, the study stipulates the significance of context in the process of making meaning; for example, the verbal exclamations, such as the Anger shouting "GAAAAAA!!!!" show how the mode of speech may denote the degree of feelings is not merely expressed by the words in a set arrangement. Although their analysis highlights the communicative aspect of emotion, it is limited to structural semiotics and is not interested in the ideological connotations of such emotional scripting. The commodification of emotion as an expression of feeling as a sign system disregards the possibility that the expression of emotion can be commercialised, disciplined, and sold as a commodity in a capitalist culture of affect.

John Gulys (2017) researches *Inside Out* (2015) through the lens of allegorical personification; in line with literary notions of the Plowman and the Pilgrim progress, by William Langland and John Bunyan respectively. He pays attention to the fact that the film embodies various personified abstractions, in particular, Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust; and that their functions are defined by their action. This way, contemporary allegory will give audiences a chance to realise that their behaviour is formed and dominated by emotions, thus *Inside Out* (2015) may be approached as an appropriate pedagogical device to isolate the distinction between classical and contemporary methods of narration. The focus of John Gulys (2017) on utopian elements of *Inside Out* (2015) in the teaching profession is an embodiment of the feelings that dominate all of the actions of Riley to create a dystopian emotional state of affairs. In the same manner, the author disregards the potential emotional control based on the emotional personification, which assists in naturalising the neoliberal fantasy of emotional regulation.

After comparing and contrasting these studies, the majority of the scholarly works revolve around a vivid thematic study of emotions, and they adopted different theoretical lenses to analyse the multidimensional perspective of *Inside Out* (2015). The same has been argued in some research articles to interpret the philosophical branches of emotions. Nevertheless, they did not pay attention to the commodification of emotions caused by emotional regulation. Thus, some attention has been paid to the rise of emotional dystopia through market-driven emotional regulation and governance. This gap is crucial because contemporary society increasingly transforms emotions into forms of productivity, value, and social control. Therefore, this study explores the *Inside Out* through the lens of emotional

commodification, and also explores how the film reflects on how the potential emergence of a regulated emotional order can lead to an emotional dystopia.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design to conduct in-depth textual analysis of *Inside Out* (2015) as a primary text, directed by Pete Docter and produced by Pixar Animation Studios. Most of the studies that rely on textual analysis of primary text and secondary sources like books, articles, reviews and so on. The qualitative approach in research is to develop in-depth insights and interpretations, and their impacts on personal and professional interactions. This paper applies various conceptual principles in understanding the way *Inside Out* (2015) envisions emotional controls as utopian living, but the process entails changing emotions into commercialization. The process of expression of emotions in *Inside Out* (2015) brings in a bigger picture of the cultural terrain of neoliberal capitalism. Only in such forms is the affective life organized in the case of modern subjects. Emotional visualization as a management state of a company headquarters in the human head, nearly allegorically, provides the principles of the doctrine of hegemony of improvement, control and output.

### **4. Theoretical Framework**

In this section, the theoretical frame is examined based on the Affect theory, Marxist critique of commodification, theories of emotional labour, and Foucault's conceptualization of governmentality.

#### **4.1 Affect Theory: Feeling as circulation and Economy.**

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2013) came up with the term “affective economics”. It is on this critical ground that this theory offers an essential background of the realization that emotions are not objects of privacy or interiority but are objects of social-political circulation, accumulation and a source of regulation. Ahmed (2013) proposes that feelings cannot be intrinsic to the person but rather an affective economy in which they are expressed among the body and signs; learn how to remain attached to the correct objects and, in this way, elicit value out of that circulation. She claims that emotions are the ones that form the surface of bodies. The expression of our subjective experiences is the result of the constant process of being affected by the world.

One of the theoretical principles made visual in *Inside Out* (2015) is that of literal workers; the workers in the movie are literal workers, and their work is the continual maintenance of Riley's psychology. Commodities of this economy are the shinier, orbs like memories, and the colour-coated and stored in the giant warehouse literally depict how Ahmed describes emotion as a unit of value circulating. Ahmed (2013) connects this affective economy directly to the logic of capitalism through this statement that even the non-normative desires and pleasures can be assimilated because none of the non-normative is external to existent circuits of exchange, but may even exacerbate the flow of commodities, which becomes capital. Within the context of the movie, *Inside Out* (2015) is a crisis of the breakdown in the process of marketisation, as well as the identity of the character of Riley as a subsidiary company across multiple islands. Riley is porously formed with an unstable market of emotional commodities as the core self.

#### **4.2 Foucault's Governmentality: The Internalization of Control**

Together, it is possible to see that the theory of governmentality by Michel Foucault (2010) and its exposition through the analysis of neoliberal rationality by Wendy Brown, expose the form in which psychology is governed by the oppressive force; it is also the manner in which the inner economic reason

changes the nature of human experience into capital. According to Foucault, 'governmentality' refers to art of 'government (Foucault, 2010, p. 10)'; government is behavior, or, more specifically, is conduct of conduct and it therefore falls under the description of a term that oscillates between governing the self and 'governing' the rest in this sense people are led to "govern themselves safely". This power became more productive rather than prohibitive to the institutions, epistemes and normative apparatuses that make their subjects themselves. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault (2010) elaborates how this art of government is becoming more and more pegged on an economic model and laid down by neoliberalism. The theme will be re-evaluated as Homo oeconomicus. Meaning is that an individual is required to invest in his or her own sources of human capital; his or her ability, health, and above all, in the area of this study, emotional well-being. The self becomes a small business, which may be determining how to get the maximum out.

This discussion is also extended by Wendy Brown (2015) in her book *Undoing Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, in which she claims that the major characteristic of neoliberal rationality is that it follows the procedure of generalizing and carrying out the propagation of market values to every institution and social action. It is a severe alteration of subjectivity according to which all things are equated to its market measure. This is because such logic comprehensively or exhaustively programs human beings as actors in the market, constantly and omnipresently as homo oeconomicus (Brown, 2015). It is moving towards a dystopian perspective where all political, moral, and social aspects of human life are emptied and replaced with a kind of economic calculation. According to the very eloquent words of Brown, neoliberalism transforms all the realms of human activity and endeavor, as well as human beings themselves, based on a particular vision of the economic (Brown, 2015). This implies that all things in life, including emotions, risk being subjected to the process of rendering in economic terms and in market measures.

### **4.3 Marxist Critique: Commodification and Alienation of Emotion**

Commodification of emotions can be explained in Marxist way; the theory of Karl Marx (1901) about alienation and commodity fetishism should be developed further. In her idea of emotional capitalism, through the work of Illouz and Davies (2017), the cultural logic of capitalism is idealized. This indicates that though utopian imaginaries give rise to a certain feeling of an emotionally harmonized state in the film, in reality, they are aimed at masking the logic of organization, instrumentalisation, and market rationality of emotions.

According to Marx (1901) theory of alienation during capitalism, the human capacity is identified as an external influence without any reference to the person. This division is then transferred to the emotional life, which can be useful components of an effective machine and not manifestations of the self. This perception of the situation is well-imagined in *Inside Out* (2015), and it presupposes the process of turning feelings that are flowing and experienced into individual working bodies.

Perhaps one of the simplest models to regard the emotional economy is discovered in *Cold Intimacies*, the book of Eva Illouz. Illouz (2007) argued that the contemporary capitalistic culture was blending the aspects of economic rationality with the actual life of feelings. The result, according to her, was what she referred to as emotional capitalism, which was a culture where emotional and economic discourses and practices also defined one another. Very closely connected to that, it is possible to observe this fusion in case one sees how emotions play a role in performance within a controlled system

where stability is associated with success. Affects are means, and the workings of emotions ought to be appropriate, and also ought to be well coordinated in their working and ought to be effective. Illouz (2007) continues to address such a wide-sweeping tendency that has seen the introduction of affect as an inherent element of economic action. It may be said that the psyche of Riley is a moving one. Joy imposes a positivity regime that is similar to the call of emotional flexibility, resilience, and self-management in modern society. Emotional life will be an organized category of human activity that actively works on constant monitoring, regulation, and maximization.

#### **4.4 Emotional Labor and the Neoliberal Affective Order**

*The Managed Heart* by Hochschild (2003) offers a powerful ground on which to comprehend neoliberal emotional economy. Hochschild proposes such a concept as “emotional labor”, which means “the control of feeling to produce a socially visible facial and physical expression; she emphasizes that this form of labor has a price, i.e. the value of exchange” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 8). This makes the emotions themselves a component of the labor process. Capitalist workers have no choice but to smile, reassure, care and empathies in one way or another. Companies, as Hochschild (2003, p. 8) rightly describes, “tend to stake their claims not only on her physical moves, but also, as she puts it, on her emotional moves”. This is one reason why *Inside Out* (2015) is able to project their own emotions as employees in the psychological world of Riley.

The idea of emotional labor proposed by Hochschild is directly related to the concept of emotional capitalism shown by Illouz. Illouz (2017, p. 5) claims that “contemporary society gathers economic and emotional life into a system; discourses and practices are mutually constructive to one another in emotional and economic”. *Inside Out* (2015) is reflective of this fusion because it depicts the internal life of Riley as a kind of well-organized work environment. The headquarters is a control Centre of a great corporation, and employees have to adapt and conform to work like machineries of this system. Illouz (2017) goes on to explain that modern contemporary life is even more organized into “commodified social forms” that revolve around emotionally organizational schemas. Within the context, *Inside Out* (2015) replicates this amalgamation by the fact that it eventually portrays the interiors of Riley as a disciplined workplace. The headquarters are like the control centre of some big company, and the manner in which the employees should feel is that it has to adapt themselves accordingly to run the machinery of that system. Illouz (2017, p. 49) continues to assert that the current life today is shaping its form of life into an ever more organized system of “commodified social forms” around emotionally organizational schemas. The movie goes further and institutionalizes feelings in highly uniform roles, duties, and obligations that resonate with a service economy.

#### **5. Textual Analysis**

In *Inside Out* (2015), the emotional regulation is depicted as a key process to control the emotional state of Riley, wherein the five emotions she has, Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger and Disgust, operate in harmony to regulate the state and stability. The movie, however, criticizes this apparently peaceful system by showing how emotional control, which is first presented as a means of self-improvement, turns out to be a control mechanism instigated by social and economic factors outside. This description reveals the neoliberal emotional economy, in which the emotional is maximised and packaged to suit the requirements of the market and productivity targets. Finally, the movie also criticizes the notion that emotions should always be controlled in order to be efficient, showing how the

necessity to control them results in a certain emotional dystopia, in which authenticity is squandered in the name of productivity and the need to fit in.

Emotions are an inseparable component of human experience that determines how people understand, react to, and navigate the world. As Frijda explains, “we define emotions as multifaceted, whole-body responses that involve coordinated changes in the domains of subjective experience, behavior, and peripheral physiology” (2004, p. 349). Even though the emotions are a result of subjective internal states, and differ very much separately in individuals, it does not mean that societies do not seek to bring order, form, and predictability to the subjective states. Emotional life, a thing fluid and deeply personal over the ages, has been redefined by the social, psychological, and political systems which attempt to control, coordinate and optimize emotional expression.

According to Gross and Thompson (2006, p. 3), emotion regulation can be described as the “process of changing how and/or how long an emotion is shown, and how the societies believe that emotional expression should be”. Gross continues with this thought, “explaining emotional regulation to be the processes through which humans have control over the emotions that they experience, when they experience them, and display them” (2006, p. 13). In this view, it can be seen that emotions are not merely personal events; they are influenced by personal growth and environmental conditioning. Emotions, as Gross and Thompson (2006, p. 5) point out, “in most cases occur when a person pays attention to a situation and considers it as interconnected with his or her objectives”. Goal-directedness, then, what people desire, appreciate, or pursue, is thus central in the stimulation or inhibition and re-definition of emotions.

Nevertheless, the point of concern is how the goals of emotion regulation are determined by *whom*. Are such objectives individual or have they been appropriated by the larger social structures? Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, neoliberalism has been increasingly determining not just economic life but also emotional life. By referring to the neoliberal concept of the human being as an economic entity, whose freedom should be authorized by the state, Mullins (2018) turns to one of the potent issues: neoliberalism extends the market rationality to the psychological sphere. Economic usefulness gets mixed up with emotional expression. According to this model, all emotions that enhance productivity, flexibility, and efficiency are rewarded, whereas all that disregard social or economic order are discouraged or pathologized. Illouz and Davies (2017) summarizes this change in just a few words, in which they define emotional regulation as a form of self-management that is guided by economic efficiency and social adaptability. In this regard, societies tune the emotional norms on a scale that is reflective of neoliberal objectives of maximizing emotions, just as businesses maximise labour.

This normalization is so prevalent that emotional regulation tends to be seen as a normal and desirable occurrence. Even such scholars as Morris and Reilly (1987) refer to emotional regulation as a daily routine: “Emotional regulation is a common experience in everyday life” (Morris and Reilly, 1987, p. 215). Communities and academic language support the development of structured emotional management over the life span of a person, through repetition and social reinforcement, entrenching it in everyday life, institutions and expectations.

It is important to note that the regulation of emotions is not likely to occur in isolation. According to Gross, “the majority of the emotion control incidents occur in social situations” (Gross et al. 2006). This implies that the manner in which people control their feelings is not only determined by

their individual needs but also influenced by the need, expectations, and norms of society at large. This is formalised by Roskam, Gross and Mikolajczak, who define emotion-regulation goals as two broad categories: self-focused and other-focused (Roskam et al., 2024). Self-focused regulation is used in preserving psychological well-being, whereas other-focused regulation is used in preserving social harmony, meeting expectations or avoiding conflict.

This difference brings up a critical point of stress: are self-centered aims self-determined or have they been influenced by the neoliberal ethos of productivity and adaptability? According to Bonanno, emotional regulation should be healthy and, therefore, “flexible and consistent”, which implies that well-being is the result of implementing a repertoire of adaptive responses (Bonanno et al., 2019). His model seems personalized and harmonised, but even in this case, where the focus on adaptability is placed, it is rather neoliberal-friendly, i.e. it was rather a social demand to be ‘emotionally’, ‘resilient’, ‘flexible or productive’.

This is the contradiction that is central to *Inside Out* (2015). The first thing that the movie advocates is a dream of emotional harmony, with five main emotions, Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust, collaborating to enhance the psychological development of Riley. This seems on the face of it to be an expression of emotional diversity and collaboration. But, behind this music is the hidden yet strong message that emotions have to be controlled, fine-tuned and reflected to ensure inner order. The neat organization within the mind of Riley is likened to the wider neoliberal requirement of emotional control. By making this system seem natural and introducing emotional control as the key to well-being, as the movie does, it reflects the tendency of neoliberal societies to romanticize emotional optimization, and do so when regulated emotions are indirectly contributing to productive capitalism.

So, it is through *Inside Out* (2015) that one will be ready to realise that emotional control, which seems harmless or even healing, gets mixed up with the commodifying measures of neoliberalism. This exploration gets more in-depth in the following section, which demonstrates how emotions are made marketable, sortable, measurable and ultimately designed into commodities that fit in with the expectations of capitalism.

The *Inside Out* (2015) by Pixar presents not only the inner emotional struggles of the young girl but is a highly nuanced critique of the process of reshaping emotional life in neoliberal societies into the system of management, performance and productivity. On the surface, what seems to be a cute illustration of emotions turns out to be, on closer inspection, a visual metaphor to the neoliberal emotional economy, an economy where emotionality is no longer a spontaneously experienced affect, but a resource that has to be optimised optimally at all times.

This switch is already indicated by the way Riley's mind is designed. “Headquarters” with its glowing memory balls, control panels, alarms, and management checkups, resembles a business premises. Joy acts as the unofficial boss, overseeing efficiency, assignment of roles, and fixing anything that can undermine the performance of Riley. One of the first instances comes at the moment when she orders, “Alright, everybody! A great day--we ought to make Riley cheerful!” (Docter, 2015). This framing is congruent with the argument by Byung-Chul Han (2015) to the extent that neoliberalism transforms human beings into self-managing workers who are continually trying to make the most out of their internal conditions. He or she turns into “the prison guard and a prisoner”, which is to patrol his or her own feelings in the illusion of freedom (22).

In this respect, *Inside Out* (2015) denounces neoliberalism that relocates emotional life into the category of internal labor. Happiness is more a goal and not a state that is sustained with the vigilance of the finger. Joy incessantly states that depression, frustration or fear are malfunctions in the emotional system, and these challenges should be kept to a minimum to guarantee a successful emotional performance. She tells Sadness, when she says, we just need Riley to be happy--focus! She represents what has been defined by Lauren Berlant (2011) as a cruel optimism: the necessity to believe in an unending positive attitude as the key to success, even in cases when the chase after happiness turns out to be an energy-consuming process. The pressure to be seen as glad is therefore placed in the movie as a way of emotional self-exploitation.

Eva Ilouz (2017) extends this attack by suggesting that capitalism commodifies emotions and makes them measurable, exchangeable and manageable. The colour-coded memory orbs of the film work precisely in such a manner that the experience of emotion is catalogued as data, it is sorted and stored to be accessed in the future. Emotional existence is measurable. Joy regularly has a culling of what kinds of memories qualify as decent, thus perpetuating the neoliberal ideology that other emotions are worth more than others.

There is also a resonance of the concept of “the happiness mandate” that was developed by Sara Ahmed. According to her, societies appreciate individuals who exhibit positivity and punish those who do not conform to the joyful patterns (Ahmed, 2013). Joy does the same to Sadness: Sadness is shown as an asset, a liability, a burden on the system. At a certain moment, Joy literally circles a chalk circle on the floor and tells Sadness not to leave it there, another strong visual metaphor of the way neoliberalism punishes negative emotion, making it invisible and/or reducing it to a mere shadow (Docter, 2015).

But the movie is also pointing in the direction of emotional resistance. When Riley cries after attempting, and failing, to work on her fear and grief, the story of emotional authenticity as something impossible to completely domesticate, comes out. Sadness is not a failure, but a crucial aspect of emotion that helps Riley to again relate to her parents and herself (Docter, 2015). Berlant (2011), as well, proposes negative emotions as being political and relational, particularly when they affect the unproblematic operation of neoliberal demands. *Inside Out* (2015) gives a moment to Sadness to show this dimension, and it proves that emotional healing needs vulnerability, not acting.

Nonetheless, the movie ends up replicating the same neoliberal reasoning it attacks. It is not her emotional truth but her utility that is accepted, that she assists in restoring the stability of Riley, and hence, the emotional system is put back on track. According to Smoliak (2024), negative emotions are even “productively reabsorbed” in systems of affective governance in the neoliberal context (7). That is, Sadness is useful only, as she makes the system run more smoothly. The system remains strong, and her acceptance does not undermine it.

According to Han (2015), neoliberal power works best when it is held that people are freely managing themselves. Towards the conclusion of the movie, the feelings of Riley work together in more unified way, yet they remain guided by the managerial logic as well. Emotional balance is demonstrated as the best performance- not emotional liberation. The modified memory orbs, which are currently combined with various emotions, are similar to a more complicated yet controlled system of emotions. Emotional economy is not freer, but more advanced.

Finally, the film *Inside Out* (2015) represents the existence of the world where emotional life is determined by the silent mechanism of neoliberal governance. Within the mind of Riley, the emotions are on overtime creating balance, stability, and productivity. What seems to be self-care is at some points self-surveillance. What is being perceived as harmony is usually obedience. The self is in this emotional economy the location of continuous production - controlling, regulating and optimizing the feelings, in order to make them acceptable by society and have some economic value.

The process of commodifying emotions causes a kind of emotional dystopian world which is subtle and strong at the same time, in *Inside Out* (2015). The movie starts with the image of the mind of Riley, a well-organized mechanism, with each emotion, Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust, having a specific and purposeful role. Although this seems to be in favor of emotional balance, the context that is captured here is that emotions are not supposed to be genuine and spontaneous but are directed and dictated in respect to society expectations. What started as a personal well-being tool turns out to be a mechanism of repression and self-monitoring, which under the requirements of neoliberal capitalism.

The most influential part of this change is the manner in which the feelings in the mind of Riley are minimized as means to an external end, instead of it being an expression of itself. As an illustration, the predominant emotion, Joy, works continuously to ensure the happiness of Riley and it fits the capitalist-inspired concept of maximizing emotions to achieve the positive results. Joy being obsessed with happiness of Riley, as it is depicted by her constant order to ensure that Riley is always “happy” (Docter, 2015) shows how even personal and complicated emotion of happiness is turned into a product that should be constantly controlled. This can be seen as a direct transfer of neoliberal logic, in which personal emotions are to be controlled and adjusted to the demands of productivity, success, and social approval in the market.

As the story moves on, the film *Inside Out* (2015) continues to develop its criticism with the idea that the control of emotions becomes an emotional work of labor, a work that eventually suppresses true emotionality. In this case, when Joy tries to push Sadness out of the system because she thinks that without unceasing happiness, the emotional system of Riley will not die, it serves as a metaphor of how negative emotions are denied and undermined in neoliberal societies. At the beginning, sadness is seen as something that is disturbing the system, which is malfunctioning and must be prevented, at any cost (Docter, 2015). It is a manifestation of the neoliberalist opinion that only “positive” emotions, i.e., those that correspond to productivity in society, are welcome. But once the significance of Sadness is unveiled later in the movie, it is shown that negative feelings, rather than destructive and useless, are the key to true emotional development and recovery. This change shows one of the major aspects of emotional dystopia: they are proven to exist, but even then, they are redirected to benefit the system, and not to exist as they are.

The emotional dystopia of *Inside Out* (2015) is most evident when we consider how the emotions of Riley are managed as an employee. There is a task designated to each emotion, and when one does not comply with the “rules”, he/she is punished or the system is disrupted. The emotions are organised in the form of a corporate control room, the “Headquarters” of which is the source of emotions, and the emotions are managers that control the performance of Riley. An example is that Fear prepares Riley to be in danger, Anger to deal with injustice, and Disgust that makes sure that

people will comply with the directions (Docter, 2015). Such an arrangement is indicative of an agenda of neoliberalism in which emotional reactions are no longer spontaneous or authentic but are, instead, carefully controlled to be as productive and conformist as possible. According to Zwick “emotions under neoliberalism are being constantly controlled to achieve success in the market (2023, p. 428). The emotional system of the movie, *Inside Out* (2015), does not concern itself with equilibrium or individual well-being; rather, it is a system that makes sure the emotional reactions of Riley are synchronized with the social norms, and emotional life is a kind of work.

This emotional dystopia is compounded by the fact that the obsessive nature of Joy in ensuring that Riley is happy causes emotional control to an extreme. The constant emphasis that Joy puts on the idea that “we have to make Riley happy” (Docter, 2015, 00:39:05) reveals the fact that the way that a person pursues happiness turns into a sort of emotional repression and a task that needs to be accomplished, at the cost of what can be called real emotional experiences. The movie criticizes this by presenting the effects of this quest to achieve continuous happiness, which results in the emotional burnout, which can be outlined as the idea of cruel optimism as explained by Lauren Berlant (2011). According to Berlin, the pursuit of a happy life in the neoliberal societies may turn into a trap, an unstoppable success and happiness, which eventually diminishes the very emotional satisfaction. In *Inside Out* (2015), it is possible to see how Riley is emotionally drained because she cannot express her grief and fear to replace it with the socially “acceptable” emotion of happiness, which results in a collapse that is unavoidable.

Lastly, the emotional dystopia of *Inside Out* (2015) is cemented by the fact that although negative emotions are openly embraced in the movie, such as Sadness, they are still merely appreciated only because they are useful in the system. Her emotional value is not valued as sadness is accepted because it will assist Riley rejoin her parents and give her the emotional equilibrium (Docter, 01:10:20). Negative emotions in a neoliberal setting are converted to productivity and social compliance instruments, as opposed to being permitted to be manifested as legitimate emotional states per se. According to Smoliak (2024), even emotions which break social harmony are turned into productive work under the neoliberal rule. The embrace of Sadness shows how capitalist systems manage to internalize resistance without questioning the bigger picture, and even feelings of resistance are picked up to become an emotional regulation system.

Finally, *Inside Out* (2015) shows how emotional regulation, when commodified, results in an emotional dystopia, a condition of raised feelings having to fit all the time to exterior requirements of efficiency, productivity, and social conformity. What the movie first offers as a method of making emotional balance becomes, through time, a control mechanism, whereby the emotional has no freedom to be as it is. Rather, they are continuously fashioned, streamlined and commodified to benefit a neoliberal society where emotional performance is favoured over emotional authenticity.

## 6. Conclusion

*Inside Out* (2015) ends up positioning itself as a moral lesson on emotional balance, but there is more to the story than that meets the eye because of a detailed critique of the controlled emotions to feed neoliberal capitalism. What might seem like a mundane exploration of psychology at first sight turns out to be an outline of the corporate management of affect. This language of balance, harmony and inner order of the film reflects the logic of a neoliberal emotional economy, one where feelings

should be measured, maximized, and adjusted to the outside forces of productivity and social conformity.

Emotions in this world are converted into laborer. Joy is made a manager who needs to maintain productivity. Sadness is a malfunction in a case she can be converted to a productive tool. Anger, Fear, and Disgust are specific departments that need to regulate, control, and manage risk. Even memory is turned into a commodity - ordered, coded in colour, and stored like records in a corporate archive. What the movie portrays as psychological well-being is similar to a managerial system of monitoring oneself all the time.

The more profound level of dystopia in the film is the way the film normalizes this emotional regulation. The film *Inside Out* (2015) convinces us that it is a moral duty and ability to control feelings and the path to personal stability. However, it is this identical message which redefines a neoliberal paradigm of the self, a paradigm where people are forced to constantly undergo emotional labour in order to stay functional and socially acceptable. The emotional life becomes a place of self-surveillance as opposed to self-discovery. Authenticity is replaced by performance in such a system, spontaneity becomes disciplined to predictable behaviour, and even vulnerability has to be used to its advantage. This specific commodification of emotion is indicative of the most personalized growth of capitalism: it does not work exclusively with physical labour anymore, but rather more so with affective labour - the exploitation, expression, and rationalization of emotion. By the instrumentalization of Sadness through the incessant search for positivity by Joy, the movie shows the suppression of emotions to serve the larger social and economic agenda. Happiness becomes an ethical responsibility, sadness a means of productivity and the human mind is envisioned as a corporate workspace.

The situation inside the mind is not presented in the film *Inside Out* (2015) as something problematic; conversely, it introduces emotional control as the answer to the internal disorder. But through the logic of efficiency, hierarchy and control, by imagining emotion the film highlights a main paradox in the neoliberal culture, which is the goal of emotional utopia is bound to create emotional dystopia. The further one is trained to control the emotion, the more the demands of the market-driven expectations are internalized.

This film might not offer a break out of this system but it does shed light on how it works. In revealing the inward circuitry of contemporary emotional existence, *Inside Out* (2015) reveals the hidden circuitry of the corporate architecture of the mind. It shows the extent to which the capitalist rationality has infiltrated the inner world of things- not only of what we do, but also of how we are affected, why we affect and how we think we should affect.

Ultimately, the question that the film poses is broader: If emotions are continually shaped to serve productivity and social order, can emotional life ever be truly free? More than that, *Inside Out* (2015) leaves us with quite warning that in the neoliberal economy, even our most feeling that are expected to perform to create the utopian society is nothing more than our faster pace to dystopia.

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