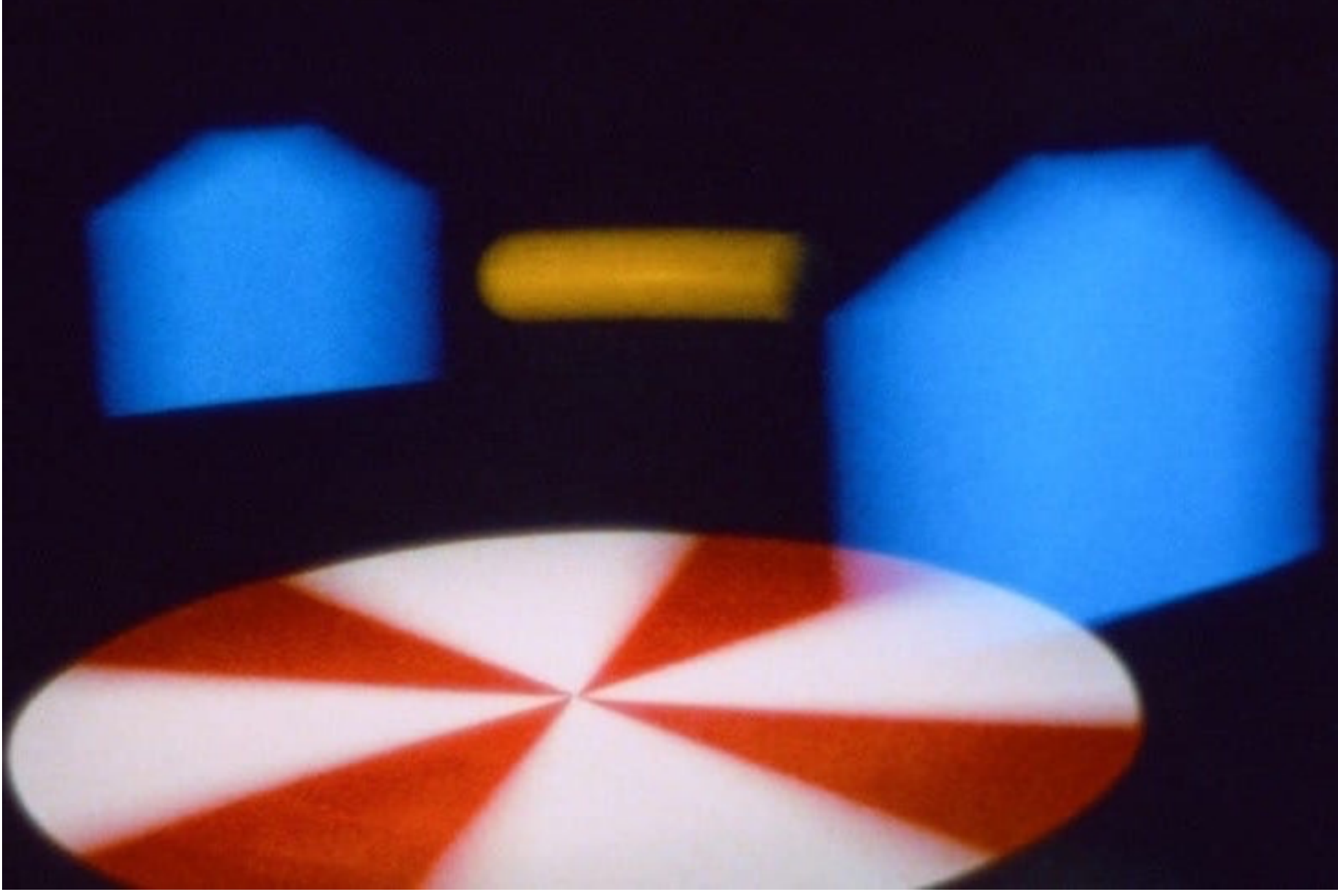




Appropriating the visual and musical aesthetics of a low-budget kids' program, Beckman produces one of the great films about capital. *You The Better* is a joyful nightmare, a hallucinatory romp. For most of the film, we watch a group of uniformed players in a pitch-black space. They navigate a series of games, which share elements in a free-associative manner, but which otherwise have few clear rules or objectives. Sometimes the players are all on one team, playing against a depersonalised opponent; other times they all seem to be out for themselves. The film abounds with imagery of houses and real estate developments, roulette wheels and coins, roller coasters and bowling balls. Beckman's ever-shifting imagery invites all manner of metaphorical associations. To take just one: the house as a dwelling, the house as a 'goal' which the players sometimes try to reach, without success, the house as a Monopoly-esque 'piece' in the game of capital accumulation, the 'house' as a euphemism for the operators of a casino or gambling racket. In this way, Beckman takes a single word or metaphor and lets it mutate again and again, colliding with other mutating metaphors to produce a remarkably dense text from the film's relatively sparse plot and setting. The persistent themes of skill and chance, points and goals, evoke everything from real estate speculation to the derivatives markets where capital bubbles most intensely, all through the progression of ingeniously simple ball games.

Life, the film says, is a game, and a gamble, where the rules are never clear and the odds are never in your favour. For this is the true message of the film: no matter the sense, the house always wins. Capital, that depersonal agent embodied here by an endless succession of spinning wheels and glowing icons, continuously tricks and outmanoeuvres the human players. As Beckman sings, "it's got its own motion ... By standing in the same place, I keep moving closer ... to where I failed before." Like Alice in Carroll's tales, the players can't keep still for fear of sliding backwards, wiping out what little progress they've made. The capital-player sets the pace and makes the rules. It is both player and game. It seems even to constitute the very universe the players inhabit, their literal home. Because of this, it can be comically flagrant in its manipulation of the rules, as when the players take turns aiming to dunk a basketball through a yellow, coin-like hoop. Yet whenever they approach the hoop, it flies into the air until even its base is several feet above their outstretched arms. The players are relentlessly optimistic about their chances against such a cruel opponent, though a mounting frustration does lead to divisions between them. They begin to blame each other for not playing well enough or smart enough, still seemingly oblivious to the real cause of their constant failures.




Thus we are invited to understand capital not as a player like the other, human players, but as a game-player which is both everywhere and nowhere, which is capable of shaping the humans' reality towards its own inhuman interests. As game, it permits individuals to score and accumulate 'points' (tokens of its own power) only to the degree that they turn against their ostensible teammates. As player, only it truly wins. As Deleuze and Guattari note, capitalism is the game in which all other games, all local organisations of production, become isomorphic. Even socialist states participate in global capitalism. (ATP 436-7) In this way, inconstant and inconsistent modes of production are joined into a smooth stratum. It finds equivalences between heterogeneous terms; the terms themselves form series which constitute its body, though it itself appears nowhere among them. It does not seek to transform what is pre- or extra- or even anti-capitalist; rather it depends on them for its own existence. All it needs is to assign every thing, every activity, and every production a 'score', to distribute 'points' in a way that cements its own authority as the game of games.

It is this logic which Beckman captures so well. One moment, the players hit a glowing green house to score a coin. The next moment, they hit it to stop a spinning wheel. Next, they have a choice: to hit the green house, or the red? And what if they miss altogether? Are the coins winnings, or merely tokens to be spent on additional plays? The players devise strategies of their own, but the capital-game enfolds every strategy into itself. Take two points further apart in the series, and they seem to have nothing in common. Yet each links to the next by a lateral translation, and the totality has a certain, surreal coherence. It is essential, for the game to retain its significance, that it remain unpredictable, that it incorporates emergent strategies as markets do, and mutates toward a new form in which such strategies are nullified. In this way, the game is perpetually unknown; the winning strategy is always the next one. *You The Better* ends on a surprisingly chipper note. The players seem to have made some progress, and may even have reconciled with the player-game, which now manifests as a big smiling house: the friendly face of capital. Yet there is something purgatorial about the end, as though it feeds back into the beginning. Have the players really won, or have they just circled the board once more?

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