

# Neoliberalism and the Mutation of Social Realism in Contemporary European Cinema

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Over the last couple of decades film scholars have begun building a critical vocabulary to theorize the new kinds of social relations depicted in the new European cinema of precarity, from “flexible solidarity” and “precarious intimacies” to “the gift economy” and “cruel optimism”. Although the European cinema of precarity continues the legacy of older film traditions like French poetic realism, Italian neorealism and British kitchen sink realism, thus inscribing itself within a well-established European tradition of social realism, the realism of precarity films is often refracted through specific genre tropes or filmic devices—e.g., allegory, experimental cinema techniques, black comedy, cinema vérité cinematography etc.—as though social realism is no longer able to render visual the hidden pathologies of neoliberalism or to capture the complexity of Europe’s current political, economic, and moral crisis.

**Keywords**  
Precarity  
European Cinema  
Social Realism  
Work  
Genre  
DOI

<https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/20145>

## DEFINING NEOLIBERALISM

The difficulty of defining “neoliberalism” has less to do with the fact that it is an abstract concept and more with the fact that it has become common sense, fully ingrained in our daily lives: think, for instance, of slogans like “design your thinking”, “design your life”, concepts like “the creative entrepreneur” and, of course, the economics of well-being, from step counter apps to tools for measuring emotional and mental health and the ever-expanding market for self-help books. It is helpful to distinguish between three main approaches to neoliberalism: Foucauldian, Marxist, and epochalist (Hardin 2014). In theorizing neoliberalism, Foucauldians like Wendy Brown and Maurizio Lazzarato draw on Foucault’s fourth lecture in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008). Brown (2003) defines neoliberalism as a political rationality that extends and disseminates market values to all institutions and social action. Similarly, and contrary to the common but erroneous view of neoliberalism as a form of market fundamentalism, Lazzarato insists that “for neoliberalism, the market is not the spontaneous or anthropological expression of the tendency of human beings to exchange, as Adam Smith believed. [...] [C]ompetition, like the market, is not the result of the ‘natural play’ of appetites, instincts, or behaviours. It



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is rather a 'formal play' of inequalities that must be instituted and constantly nourished and maintained" (Lazzarato 2009, 116–17). Marxists like David Harvey dismiss the idea of neoliberalism as "a new economic theory or organization of world power [seeing it instead] as a variant of a very old concept: the current version of the dominant ideology that serves the class in power" (Harvey 2005, 160). Unlike Foucauldians and Marxists, epochalists use neoliberalism as one of a set of epochal concepts to describe recent economic developments in conceptual terms. Here neoliberalism loses some of its specificity as a term insofar as epochalists attribute different political, economic, cultural and social phenomena—e.g., globalization, financialization, deregulation, economic inequality, individualization, entrepreneurialism—to neoliberalism (Hardin 2014). The differences between these definitions notwithstanding, most scholars agree that neoliberalism, understood as a politico-epistemological program rather than simply free-market fundamentalism, as a particular production of subjectivity that constitutes individual subjects as "human capital" rather than simply as a way of governing economies or states, has led to the profound destruction of social bonds and to the production of economic, social, and political vulnerability and precarity.

Originally signifying a social condition linked to poverty, "precarity" refers to the reduction of welfare state provisions, the suppression of unions, the growth of the knowledge economy, and the rise in flexible and precarious forms of labour. The concept of "precarity" has become widespread in debates about labor conditions in the creative industries, e.g. the rise of "immaterial labor" (Lazzarato 1996), the collaboration between regional policymakers and global film industry corporations to use film and television production as a cure for sluggish economies by providing a steady stream of transient, low-wage workers for location shooting through legislated incentives (Mayer 2016), Hollywood's outsourcing of production to developing countries to realize cost advantages via flexible labor, low wages and tax incentives (Miller and Leger 2001), and the general exploitation of creative workers in the gig economy (Morgan and Nelligan 2018).

The term "precariat", on the other hand, was popularized by Guy Standing (2014), who argued that the restructuring of global and national economies in the last 40 years has produced a new global class characterised by chronic insecurity. While scholars initially welcomed "the precariat" as the latest incarnation of the "subaltern", a term that has allegedly lost its analytical power, "the precariat" remains a heavily contested concept because it "attempts to bring together too many different heterogeneous strata of the population and because it excludes segments of what Standing defines (too narrowly) as the working class, which still enjoys relatively stable and protected employment situations" (Fraser 2013, 11), in short, because it fails to acknowledge the various ways in which class is increasingly displaced by new modes of collectivization and social organization. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of "the multitude" (2005), which includes not only blue-collar labour traditionally associated with the working class but new forms of labour that have emerged in post-industrial society,

including “affective labour” and “immaterial labour”, offers an alternative way of thinking precarity beyond the type of identitarian or representationalist politics that Isabell Lorey criticizes in her compelling account of precarity as a form of political mobilization, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (2015).

## “UNBELONGING”: THE NEW EUROPEAN CINEMA OF PRECARIETY

In line with these developments in political and economic theory, over the last couple of decades film scholars have begun building a critical vocabulary to theorize the new kinds of social relations that define our neoliberal age, from Michael Gott’s “flexible solidarity” (2018), and Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber’s “precarious intimacies” (2020) to Martin O’Shaughnessy’s “gift economy” (2020). This new vocabulary of social relations is part of a more general tendency to rethink precarity as a political tool rather than a socioeconomic condition from which there is no escape, and thus to envision new forms of solidarity and collectivity, as Martin O’Shaughnessy does in *Looking Beyond Neoliberalism: French and Francophone Belgian Cinema and the Crisis* (2022), or as Francesco Sticchi does in *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (2022), in which he tries to identify ethical alternatives to the risk-taking, self-optimizing neoliberal “entrepreneur of the self”.

My aim in this article is not to discuss precarity in terms of government policies or changes in the conditions of film production but rather to consider some of the stylistic shifts in the representation of precarity in what has come to be known as “the new European cinema of precarity”, a term that might, at first glance, seem to resurrect a now obsolete notion of “European identity” which, up until the 1990s, still figured in studies of European cinema. However, recent studies of European cinema (Morgan-Tamosunas and Rings 2003; Berghahn and Sternberg 2010; Harrod, Liz, and Timoshkina 2015; Ravetto-Biagioli 2017; Trifonova 2020) have sought to rethink the idea of “European identity” and “European cinema” and to refigure positively the decline of “national cinema”—one of the three main categories through which European cinema has traditionally been theorized, the other two being “art cinema” and “auteur cinema”—as an opportunity rather than a sign of what Thomas Elsaesser calls European cinema’s “new marginality” (Elsaesser 2018).

For film scholars who explore European cinema in terms of different affective responses to the growing ethnic, racial, cultural and religious diversity in Europe, the question of identity (national and/or trans-national)—i.e., the constant writing and rewriting of the self, and thus the ongoing exploration of identity’s *conditions of possibility*—continues to be one of the distinguishing features of European cinema. However, in a growing number of recent European films, largely in response to what Lauren Berlant describes as the attrition of social fantasies like upward mobility, job security, meritocracy, and political and social equality,

questions of *national and trans-national identity and belonging* are increasingly displaced by a sense of *unbelonging* experienced by a growing number of Europeans, regardless of their national or citizenship status. This profound sense of *unbelonging* finds expression in the affective language of anxiety, contingency and precarity that pervades different national cinemas, both within Europe and beyond it, giving rise to a "cinema of precarity", whose precarious protagonists constitute a new "affective class" (Berlant 2011, 72). Importantly, in the films Berlant discusses precarity extends beyond the expression of an economic condition—and thus beyond a particular social class—to indicate an entire "affective environment" (2011, 201–02), a sense of individualised insecurity, and the loss of social and existential status. Ultimately, Berlant remains ambivalent about the political potential of the cinema of precarity: while she acknowledges the ways in which these films investigate "new potential conditions of solidarity emerging from subjects not with similar historical identities or social locations but with similar adjustment styles to the pressures of the emergent new ordinariness" (2011, 202), she is skeptical of the perverse adjustment strategy of "cruel optimism" that she locates at the centre of these films.

## THE POETICS OF THE NEW EUROPEAN CINEMA OF PRECARITY

The question what makes a film political has always preoccupied film scholars. While some locate the political significance of a film in its formal properties—e.g., the blurring of fiction and documentary techniques in *Life Is Ours* (*La vie est à nous*, Jean Renoir, 1936) is said to account for the importance of that film in the history of Left filmmaking in France (Buchsbaum 1988, 283)—others caution that an excessive focus on aesthetic form might divert attention from the political issues a film sets out to explore (Wayne 2001, 58). In the long history of this debate realism, specifically "social realism", has enjoyed a privileged status: to categorize a film as an example of "social realism" has generally meant to see the film as socially and/or politically engaged. The "new European cinema of precarity" (Bardan and O'Healy 2013) clearly inscribes itself within a long-standing European tradition of socially conscious realist cinema, building upon the legacy of late 1920s–1930s British documentaries of working-class life, 1930s French poetic realist films permeated by a sense of pessimism and fatalism, postwar Italian neorealist films featuring working-class characters, real locations and documentary style, 1930s and 1940s Hollywood melodramas populated by suffering protagonists dealing with conflicts between personal desires and mounting social pressures, the British New Wave, particularly kitchen sink films exploring the fragmentation of the working class, and French "New Realism".

Yet the realism of the new cinema of precarity is often refracted through particular genre tropes or filmic devices—e.g., allegory, experimental cinema techniques, black comedy, cinema vérité cinematography—suggesting



Fig. 1  
*Early One Morning* (*De bon matin*, Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011)

that traditional social realism might no longer be sufficient to capture the complexity of Europe's political and moral crisis. The post-industrial nostalgia that permeates much of the new cinema of precarity points to the vanishing—or, more precisely, the mutation—of both the traditional working class, whose experiences and struggles used to constitute the main subject of social realist cinema, and of the tradition of social realist cinema itself now that the latter has lost its main subject. Furthermore, films centered around white-collar protagonists tend to explore the reasons for, and the experience of, precarity not within the framework of social realism but rather through the conventions of what appears to be an emerging hybrid genre—what I would call the “workplace thriller” or “corporate psycho-thriller”—which combines elements of film noir, psychological thrillers and corporate melodramas and privileges subjective over objective approaches to storytelling. Think of the opening sequence of *Early One Morning* (*De bon matin*, Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011), in which Paul, manager at the International Credit and Trade Bank, arrives in the office as usual, takes out a gun, shoots his boss and another employee, locks himself in his office and, as he waits for the police to arrest him, reflects on the events leading up to this day [Fig. 1]. The film engages directly with the 2008 financial crisis—the dialogue is full of references to sub-prime loans, refinancing, and foreclosure—and reveals the deepening psychopathologies of neoliberalism through the recurring motifs of psychotic breakdown (Paul's hallucinatory visions of his boss), suicide (Paul's suicidal thoughts following his demotion to another position in the “middle office”), and murder (Paul's murder of his boss). Like *Early One Morning*, films made after the 2008 global financial crisis reflect the deepening pathologies of neoliberalism: Vincent's symbolic or metaphorical suicide in *Time Out* (*L'Emploi du temps*, Laurent Cantet, 2001) gives way to Kessler's psychotic breakdown in *Heartbeat Detector* (*La Question humaine*, Nicolas Klotz, 2007), Gregoire's real suicide in *Father of My Children* (*Le Père de mes enfants*, Mia Hansen-Love, 2009), Paul's murder/suicide in *Early One Morning*.

Many of the films representative of the new cinema of precarity hark back to

older film traditions that are not necessarily part of their own respective national film histories: e.g., Cornish director Mark Jenkins' *Bait* (2019) invokes silent cinema, British kitchen sink realism and Luchino Visconti's early neorealist film *The Earth Trembles* (*La terra trema*, 1948); *Happy as Lazzaro* (*Lazzaro felice*, Alice Rohrwacher, 2018) combines elements of time-travel and ghost story films with the magic neorealism of the Taviani brothers; *White God* (*Fehér isten*, Kornel Mundruczo, 2014) updates the tradition of allegorical, socially critical Hungarian films of the 1960s and 1970s with elements of fantasy and horror films; *The Nothing Factory* (*A fábrica de nada*, Pedro Pinho, 2017) combines British kitchen sink realism with French Nouvelle Vague influences; *The Measure of a Man* (*La Loi du marché*, Stéphane Brizé, 2015) and *At War* (*En guerre*, Stéphane Brizé, 2018) recall neorealist working-class chronicles of unemployment; *Glory* (*Slava*, Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov, 2016) continues the legacy of pre-1989 subversive comedies while recalling the darkly absurdist films of the Czech New Wave. The particular way, in which these films imagine precarity—as a state, an event, or a process—has bearing on where the films locate the possibility for social and political transformation—in a particular class, in fighting for a particular good or cause, or in a particular political stance. For instance, while one film might present precarity as a historical contingency, a consequence of the replacement of one political utopia (communism) with another (capitalism)—e.g., *Glory*—, another might depict precarity as an endless, sustainable apocalypse (*The Nothing Factory*).

## BEYOND SOCIAL REALISM

The new European cinema of precarity is thus distinguished by a wider range of genre and stylistic responses to the precarity of life under neoliberalism: from allegory and magical realism (*White God*, *Happy as Lazzaro*, *Transit*, Christian Petzold, 2018), experimental films (*Bait*), comedies (*Glory*, *My Piece of the Pie*, *Ma part du gâteau*, Cédric Klapisch, 2011; *Crash Test Aglaé*, Eric Gravel, 2017), social dramas (*The Measure of a Man*, *At War*), psycho-thrillers (*Early One Morning*, *The Origin of Evil*, *L'Origine du mal*, Sebastien Marnier, 2022) and factory musicals (*The Nothing Factory*).

In Kornel Mundruczo's *White God* 13-year-old Lili and her mixed-breed dog Hagen are subject to a large mongrel fee imposed by the Hungarian government, which permits only pure "Hungarian" breeds. Lili's estranged father refuses to pay the fee, drives Hagen to the outskirts of Budapest and abandons him there. The film follows Hagen's journey through the city as he befriends other street dogs before being caught by a homeless man who sells him to a dog fighting ring. During his first fight Hagen kills his opponent and runs away but is caught by animal control officers and taken to the city dog pound, from where he eventually escapes but not before freeing the other dogs, who follow him into the city, where Hagen methodically kills everyone who had harmed him. In the film's climactic scene Hagen is about to kill Lili and her father when

she decides to play Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* on her trumpet, bringing Hagen and the other dogs to their knees. *White God* continues the tradition of allegorical, socially critical Hungarian films of the 1960s and 1970s, but it expands the genre palette to include elements of revenge fantasy, adventure film, melodrama, Soviet cinema, Alfred Hitchcock, and post-colonial literature (it was inspired by Coetzee's *Disgrace*). The film received mixed reviews: e.g., while Michael Sragow objected to the hypocritical depiction of Hungary's and Europe's outcasts as both "naturally loyal and affectionate" (like dogs) and as potential terrorists once they decide to rebel,<sup>1</sup> Samuel La France pointed to Mundruczo's ignorance of the implications of his choice of Liszt's piece—written by a German composer who "infamously overstated the piece's roots in Gypsy folk songs and downplayed its actual heritage in Hungarian verbunkos, recruitment songs used for nationalistic-militaristic ends"—as evidence of "the wrongheadedness of his allegorical construction".<sup>2</sup> Mundruczo has spoken at length about his dissatisfaction with what he calls dismissively "sociological films": "I couldn't tell the story of a gypsy family in Hungary even if I wanted to. I think that if you make a sociological film, you move even farther away from the truth. [...] [F]olktales and fables say more about our reality and life than realism can. Of course, I can watch a realist, minimalist movie, but I always have a sense of 'Yes, but that's journalism.'"<sup>3</sup> Mundruczo's words, which recall Michelangelo Antonioni's reflections on his break from neorealism—"Nowadays it's no longer important to make a film about a man whose bicycle has been stolen. It's important to see what is inside this man whose bicycle was stolen, what are his thoughts, his feelings"<sup>4</sup>—suggest that it's no longer sufficient to make a social problem film about the precarious lives of minorities. Leaving aside Mundruczo's reluctance (or inability?) to distinguish "realism" from "reality", one wonders whether by leaving the terms of his allegory about racial relations and rising nationalism in Eastern Europe broad enough to accommodate any marginalized, dispossessed and victimized group—including the "precariat", Hungarian ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, and the homeless—the director invites us to see them as interchangeable. The *allegorical* approach to precarity—a subject Mundruczo apparently sees as interchangeable with related subjects like immigration policies, racism, colonialism, and class struggle—ultimately determines the film's vision of a possible response to the political and ethical crisis the film depicts. Insofar as allegories, like fables and parables, have a pedagogical value, they appeal to common sense and *presuppose* the existence of shared universal

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1 <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/white-god-kornel-mundruczo-review/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

2 <https://cinema-scope.com/currency/white-god-kornel-mundruczo-hungary-germanysweden/>. On how Hungarian Liszt actually is, see <http://faculty.ce.berkeley.edu/coby/essays/liszt.htm> (accessed March 1, 2023).

3 <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/ndnf-interview-kornel-mundruczo-white-god/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

4 <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/category/directors-antonioni/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

Fig. 2.  
*Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019)



values like “humanity”, “hospitality”, and “love”; yet it is precisely *the absence* of such shared values that the film seeks to expose. Ironically, Mundruczo’s allegorical approach, which deliberately challenges traditional social realism’s implicit didactic tendency, ends up simply rendering that tendency explicit.

If Mundruczo’s reluctance to make “a social problem film” pushes him in the direction of allegory, Mark Jenkin’s strategy of escaping the social problem film “ghetto” in the visually experimental *Bait* is to tap into the melodramatic address of silent cinema (expressive close ups, Eisenstein-inspired editing, post-dubbed dialogues), the mythic quality of *The Earth Trembles*, the visual poetry of Robert Bresson’s partial images, and the realism of British kitchen sink drama, and to refract the “social problem”—the disappearance of Cornwall’s traditional way of life—through an aesthetic one, the obsolescence of 16mm film. Shot on 16mm film and hand-processed, *Bait* centers on Martin Ward, a taciturn fisherman who resents the gentrifying intruders taking over his once-thriving Cornish fishing village. Martin and his brother Steven have been forced to sell their father’s harborside cottage to the Leighs, posh Londoners who have transformed it into a holiday retreat. While Martin still scrapes a living selling his catch of fish and lobster door-to-door, Steven has adapted to the new times by using their father’s boat for sightseeing trips. The escalating tensions between the two brothers, and between Martin and the incomers, threaten to boil over into physical violence, while the Leighs’ daughter Katie hooks up with Steven’s son Neil, with tragic consequences. Unlike Mundruczo’s allegory, which distances us from the story and the characters insofar as it asks us to split our attention between the story and the allegorical frame, Jenkin’s marriage of form and content—the fishermen’s precarious life is rendered visual through the precarious status of film in the digital era—is both aesthetically and narratively satisfying.

The post-industrial nostalgia that permeates *Bait*—numerous close ups





Fig. 3.  
*Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019)

of Martin's hands lowering lobster traps, coded visually as "authentic" and "beautiful", are repeatedly contrasted with shots of Steven's boat full of drunken tourists [Fig. 2 e Fig. 3]—is a recurring motif in the new European cinema of precarity, which repeatedly imagines class solidarity in the narrow context of manual or industrial labour posited as the last outpost in the struggle against the neoliberal technocratic order. Charity Scribner reads post-industrial nostalgia as a response to the waning of the collective and of labour solidarity, as well as to the waning of material history in the age of the virtual, which leaves us "longing for History itself—for the touch of the real that post-industrialist virtualization threatens to subsume" (Scribner 2005, 9). A distinguishing feature of the new European cinema of precarity is the consistency with which it maps two different conceptions of work—work as a core part of one's sense of identity versus work as mere occupation—onto two different types of labour: manufacturing labour, whose decline is linked to moral and spiritual decline and, on the other hand, service sector occupations, which are generally depicted as inauthentic and degrading.

This is evident in the Bulgarian black comedy *Glory*, which begins with the stuttering railroad technician Tsanko coming upon a large amount of money on the tracks and duly notifying the local authorities. The cynical, ambitious, and literally and symbolically impotent PR executive Julia (who is undergoing IVF treatment) jumps on this opportunity to use the country bumpkin's good deed



Fig. 4.  
*Glory* (Slava, Kristina  
 Grozeva and Petar  
 Valchanov, 2016)

to distract the public attention from a corruption scandal involving Bulgaria's Minister of Transport. Her PR team organizes a sham ceremony in honor of Tsanko's working-class hero [Fig. 4], at which he is rewarded with a digital watch, while his own Russian Glory/Slava-brand watch—a gift from his deceased father—is taken away from him. The rest of the film alternates between Tsanko's unsuccessful attempts to reclaim his watch and Julia's attempts to prevent him from exposing the corruption scandal at all costs (including blackmail). After a series of absurd situations, the abrupt and tragic end (Tsanko kills Julia with an axe) comes as a shock. Here post-industrial nostalgia—evident in the contrast between Tsanko's "honest" manual labor and Julia's PR shenanigans—is complicated by post-communist nostalgia for communism's stereotype of "the ordinary man" (Tsanko) who used to be "one of us" and who is now no more than a relic from another era, a part of Bulgarian history of which the neoliberal present is a malformation, "a misshapen branch extending far beyond the trunk".<sup>5</sup> The film suggests that the communist past is not dead but simply "dressed up" in neoliberal garb: the award ceremony sequence, "curated" in exactly same way as communist ceremonies, shows that "Big Brother" is still watching, party politics giving way to the politics of the image (PR). The parallels with *Bait* are unmistakable: there the brothers' family cottage is sold to wealthy Londoners, forcing Steven to abandon fishing and sell his soul to the tourist industry; here an "honest and poor" railway technician is deprived of his family heirloom and offered, as part of a cunning PR campaign, a "better" digital watch, which has no

<sup>5</sup> <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/glory-review-slava-1201831700/> (accessed March 1, 2023).

personal value for him. While *Glory* continues the legacy of Bulgarian pre-1989 subversive comedies, the film's re-coding or re-enchantment of the communist past from "authoritarian" and "ideological" to "authentic" and "real"—in contrast to the morally and spiritually sterile and precarious neoliberal present—betrays the nostalgia of many post-communist Bulgarian films for the supposedly classless communist past.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, while the potential of genres like black comedy and satire to engage critically with the neoliberal present is unquestionable, the risk of re-mythologizing the past—whether the past in question is a communist one, or one that represents an earlier stage of capitalism—is equally real.

Populated by nonprofessional actors, Pedro Pinho's quasi-musical *The Nothing Factory*, an unlikely mix of avant-garde and neorealist elements, explores the struggle of workers in an elevator factory on the outskirts of Lisbon after they learn that the factory is about to be closed. The film calls to mind kitchen sink dramas like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), but while Reisz's film depicts manufacturing work as dehumanizing and oppressive, Pinho presents it as something to fight for, rather than fight against, and as constitutive of personal identity, with workers speaking of "their" machines as extensions of their bodies ("Factory, your neck veins are here, pulsating") or addressing them as interlocutors ("Machine, you are going to get out of this torpor and get back to work"). As the workers debate possible lines of action—strike, occupation, or self-management—the factory, with its imposing silent machines, transforms into a surreal space in which to revisit the history of labor, the legacy of communism and trade unions, and the after-effects of postcolonialism. In a series of Godardian voiceovers Daniele, an Italian filmmaker interested in documenting the workers' strike, discusses precarity as the legacy of Cold War politics (the welfare state was merely an ideological response to the "threat of Communism") and colonialism ("The present crisis is not a classic crisis [but] an endless end, a sustainable apocalypse. [...] 200 years ago, European elites accepted the end of slavery only because capitalism promised much cheaper and better qualified labor"). Importantly, in the film "precarity" refers not just to precarious employment in Portugal and beyond (an Argentinian factory, also self-managed by workers, calls to place an order) but also to precarious intimacies (Zé's relationship with his Brazilian girlfriend disintegrates) and precarious national identities (there is a discussion of the decline in fertility rates across Europe and the increasing reliance on Danish sperm banks). Like the other films discussed above, *The Nothing Factory* departs from the conventions of social realism, alternating between Godard-like sequences, in which a voiceover comments on the social, economic and political effects of neoliberalism, extended dialogue scenes reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's chamber dramas, and hyper self-aware scenes in which the workers burst (unnaturally) into song. There is no attempt to synthesize these very different—stylistically, tonally, and narratively—parts of the film; instead, the director foregrounds the Frankensteinian, collage-like

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<sup>6</sup> <https://vagabond.bg/sweet-power-nostalgia-854> (accessed March 1, 2023).

nature of his film to underscore the difficulty of producing an objective, logical, coherent reading of our neoliberal present.

The tension between the tradition of social realism and the difficulty of rendering visible the abstract logic of neoliberalism is particularly evident in the recent films of Stéphane Brizé—often called “the French Ken Loach” because of his dedication to stories about working-class struggles—especially in the trilogy made up of *The Measure of a Man* (2015), *At War* (2018), and *Another World* (*Un autre monde*, 2021).

In the first few scenes of *The Measure of a Man* Thierry, an unemployed factory worker, meets with an unemployment agency employee, a financial advisor, who tells him to sell his apartment so that his loved ones are taken care of “after he is gone,” and a HR recruiter who confirms Thierry’s willingness to work flexible hours for less money only to inform him that he has no chance of getting the job he is interviewing for. Such scenes—already a genre trope of the new European cinema of precarity—foreground the central role that formerly supporting characters—bank advisers, unemployment agency employees, recruiters, often present as nothing more than disembodied voices on phone/computer platforms—now play in sustaining/determining our lives, while another scene, set at a performance management workshop during which Thierry’s peers dutifully dissect his poor body language, rhythm of speech and vocabulary, dramatizes the value of “performance” i.e., the self-management and disciplining of the neoliberal self. Once Thierry gets a job as a supermarket security guard [Fig. 5]—in another instance of post-industrial nostalgia his personal crisis follows the loss of factory work and his “demotion” to the service sector—his work life is presented as a series of ethical tests as he is asked to monitor and discipline both customers and co-workers, one of whom (Mrs. Anselmi) commits suicide after she is caught stealing coupons, or risk losing his job. The scene in which Mrs. Anselmi is fired

Fig. 5.  
*The Measure of a Man*  
(*La Loi du marché*,  
Stéphane Brizé, 2015)



(her dismissal is conveniently framed in psychological terms—she “betrayed” the company’s trust—making downsizing appear no different from a “break up”), and the scene in which HR organizes a grief management workshop to deal with feelings of guilt among employees, give the lie to an earlier retirement party scene, in which Management was seen sending off another worker with a “heartfelt” goodbye. The HR Director’s speech seeks to psychologize away the structural violence to which all employees are subjected: work did not define Mrs. Anselmi’s identity, he tells them, and so no one can really know the reason (i.e., be accountable for) for her decision to end her life. If the retirement scene celebrates the importance of work to one’s sense of self, the grief management session simply denies the feelings of dehumanization and derealization that accompany the loss of work.

Throughout the film Brizé’s hand-held camera follows Thierry from behind. In the three crucial scenes set in a little back room in the store—where “store thieves” are taken for “processing”—Thierry is positioned off to the side, the camera remaining behind him, denying us access to his face and thus to his reactions to what is happening. The camera puts the viewer in the position of an observer, a position that mirrors Thierry’s own position in these scenes, forcing us (just like Thierry) to ask ourselves what we would do in his situation. By framing every encounter in the film as an ethical test Brizé’s camera provides an alternative to neoliberalism’s reduction of social relations to quasi-metric aggregates.

*The Measure of a Man* is not “about” unemployment but about the human limits or costs of neoliberalism: as Thierry tells the agent in the office of unemployment, “You cannot treat people like this.” “You”, in this case, is not synonymous only with “the boss” or “management”—it includes everyone: e.g., when Thierry and his wife are forced to sell their mobile home by the sea, the family interested in buying it try to get Thierry to lower the price, framing their demand as an opportunity to “plan for the future, move on to other things”, echoing the way in which management usually presents the loss of jobs as an exciting opportunity to pursue new plans. Every conflict in the film is motivated by the extension of economic logic and market values (such as “performance”) to social and personal relations: selling the family mobile home at a heavily discounted price means putting a price tag on the many happy years Thierry spent there with his family; mock job interviews are about disciplining bodies to make them marketable (measuring rhythm of speech, amiability, expression).

In *At War* an automotive parts plant in Agen is deemed non-competitive and ordered closed by its German CEO (Hauser). The workers, having agreed two years prior to forego bonuses and work additional unpaid hours, vote to strike, led by Laurent. Alternating between negotiation scenes filmed like TV debates, protests and their news coverage [Fig. 6], and long stretches of waiting, the film explores the nature of collective identity and solidarity under neoliberalism. One of the biggest obstacles to the workers’ Kafkaesque struggle is identifying and gaining access to the authorities before which they can make their demands: they spend most of their time trying to identify the seats of real versus symbolic



Fig. 6.  
*At War* (*En guerre*,  
 Stéphane Brizé, 2018)

power, demanding of various government officials: “What is your purpose?” It doesn’t take them long to find out that a CEO has more power than the president but, as their union rep argues, although the State might not be all powerful, it has a moral right to side with the workers—it’s a matter of social dialogue, which takes place *outside* the justice system. What is the ultimate authority, the film asks, that dictates the resolution of such conflicts? Is it the Kantian imperative, which describes how things ought to be, or the justice system, which describes how things are? Hauser’s response is clear: he dismisses the workers’ demands as “fantasy” or “utopia”, preferring instead to “live in this world and follow the rules of this world, not the utopian one you imagine”. But as Jean-François Lyotard has argued (1989), this is not merely a matter of litigation, for these two regimes—the unwritten moral law and the judicial system—can never be reconciled.

In *The Measure of a Man* Thierry is fighting to put food on the table, while preserving his personal integrity. In *At War*, when the workers finally meet Hauser, Laurent declares forcefully that the aim of class war is not a paycheck at the end of the month: “We have come here for money? No, we don’t care about money. We want work!” Laurent is fighting for the fundamental right to have rights, including the right to work i.e., for the workers’ right not to be treated as second-hand citizens. While Brizé’s dynamic *vérité* cinematography paints the industrial debate as a class conflict, with workers and management in a perpetual face off, he is attentive to the ways in which the nature of the struggle has changed. In an early scene Laurent lectures another worker on the importance of fighting “intelligently”, a strategy illustrated by numerous scenes set in meeting rooms and hallways, during which Laurent demonstrates the importance of knowledge capital: it is because he is knowledgeable about the

company's operations in a transnational context that he is able to argue that the factory is not "non-competitive", that the real reason for closing it is to relocate operations to Romania, in a factory with fewer workers, working for less. In fact, Hauser, the CEO of the German group Dimke, of which the French company is a subsidiary, is so impressed by Laurent's knowledge of "the Market" that he tells him he would make a great CEO. To fight "intelligently" workers must think like accountants and political economists and understand the workings of global capitalism—*la loi du marché*. In fact, the failure of the strike and Laurent's symbolic act of self-immolation can be attributed precisely to the fact that the workers understand all too well *la loi du marché* inasmuch as many of them see their struggle in merely financial terms: having internalized the logic of neoliberalism, they fight for a bigger paycheck or severance package, and see their relation to other workers not in terms of a shared past, values and goals, but in economic terms. Tellingly, in *The Measure of a Man* the depressing scenes dramatizing the extension of the economic logic of neoliberalism to social and work relations alternate with intimate family scenes, in which Thierry is seen preparing dinner, dancing with his wife, and taking care of his disabled son. The absence of such intimate scenes of care from *At War* points to a failure to imagine an alternative to the cut-throat logic of neoliberalism. For a while, convivial scenes of workers drinking or celebrating together suggest the possibility of such an alternative realm of care and solidarity, but eventually even this realm is invaded by market logic, splitting the workers into factions.

Brizé closes his trilogy with *Another World*, which reverses the perspective of the previous two films. Here Vincent Lindon (who also plays the protagonist in the previous two films) plays Philippe, a regional plant's Executive Manager overseeing his multinational corporation's new layoff plan. Philippe must answer to the Paris office, whose efficiency-minded head Claire Bonnet-Guérin has, in turn, to please her US-based conglomerate. The pressures at work that Vincent Lindon's character experiences in the first and last film of the trilogy are strikingly similar: in *The Measure of a Man* a former factory worker-turned-security guard must discipline and punish those whose precarious status he himself shares; in *Another World* an executive manager is expected to act as an enforcer, punishing rather than managing those under him. Opening with a tense scene of domestic crisis, a divorce hearing, *Another World* brings the personal front and center. Following years of marital discord, Philippe's wife (Anne) has finally asked for a divorce, with her lawyer demanding a payout of €375,000. The couple's lawyers' heated deliberations about the proper way to calculate the damages suffered by either party and properly "compensate" Anne for sacrificing her career to motherhood set the tone for the film's exploration of the real human costs of neoliberal work practices.

Narratively, *Another World* picks up the thread of the previous two films: Thierry (*The Measure of a Man*) is happily married with a young disabled son; Laurent (*At War*) is separated, his grown-up daughter living in another city; Philippe (*Another World*) is in the process of a painful divorce while his disabled son Lucas, who has recently suffered a nervous breakdown, is recovering from

mental fatigue in a mental health facility. There are also echoes of other films dealing with precarity, notably the Dardennes' *Two Days, One Night* (*Deux jours, une nuit*, 2014). Philippe, essentially an honest man, tries to avoid downsizing by developing a plan that would require all managers, including him, to give up their bonuses, just as, in *Two Days, One Night*, Sandra can keep her job only if her co-workers give up their bonuses. In both films sacrifice is defined in utterly unheroic and literal—monetary—terms. Just as many European films about migrants and refugees test the ethical limits of belonging to Europe by presenting a white European citizen with the dilemma of evaluating, literally, the value of a migrant's or refugee's life against that of their own, in the new cinema of precarity the protagonist must often choose between themselves and another European: Thierry is forced to spy both on his fellow workers and customers, while Philippe is asked to denounce a colleague to prove his loyalty to the corporation. The question of the "price" one has to pay to stay financially afloat is framed in ethical or moral terms i.e., monetary debt is "translated" as ethical/moral debt, highlighting the dependence of neoliberalism's ostensibly objective, empirical socio-economic nature on normative/ethical presuppositions. Of course, the logic of neoliberalism is to deny the validity of any ethical limits to the unbridled accumulation of capital: Claire informs Philippe, in response to his critique of downsizing, that "everything is precarious: romance, love, and work", while the American corporate chief reminds him that "No one cares about your attempt to act like a Samaritan. The only law is that of the market".

The film follows the quasi-neorealist, ciné-vérité style of the previous two films in the trilogy, while also departing from it, particularly in the extended scenes of characters arguing from behind conference tables [Fig. 7] and in the extensive use of close ups, which underscore the irreducibility of affective relationships to the logic of the market, but also prioritize a psychological over a social

Fig. 7.  
*Another World* (*Un autre monde*, Stéphane Brizé, 2021)





reading of the film's central conflicts. Thus, questions of class struggle become subordinated to a character study: the film is mostly interested in *what kind of man* Philippe is, rather than in questions of class interests and class struggle. In the closing scene Philippe, reunited with his family, reads (in voiceover) a letter he wrote to Claire, in which he rejects "the deal" she offered him: "What you call 'courage', the courage to do whatever is necessary to make a company profitable for the shareholders, I call something else. The fact that you thought I would accept your 'deal' means you assumed I had become the kind of man I would not want to have as my father, son, or husband." Like *The Measure of a Man*, *Another World* ends with a gesture of refusal and redemption, affirming human values and emotions, which cannot be monetized, over neoliberal logic, without however exploring the very real and no doubt unpleasant consequences of the protagonist's moral victory.

Although the second film in Brizé's trilogy is inspired by a true story, the trilogy stakes its claim to reality and authenticity not on this fact but rather on the stylistic and ideological characteristics it shares with Italian neorealism: the focus on ordinary people, the preoccupation with current socio-political events and debates (the neoliberal restructuring of national economies, the 2007–2008 Great Recession and its repercussions), the abstention both from narrative closure and facile moral judgments, the emphasis on emotions rather than abstract ideas, the preference for a cine-verité style, and the use of the same non-professional actors across all three films, who take turns impersonating different government and corporate figures, as though Brizé meant to suggest, through this intertextuality, the mutual imbrication of corporate and state interests. Brizé's trilogy shares the episodic structure of quintessential neorealist films like *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, Vittorio De Sica, 1948). De Sica's film follows Antonio, played by a non-professional actor, as he searches for the bike stolen from him on his first day of work. Structuring the film as a (fruitless) search for the stolen bike allows De Sica to comment on various Italian institutions, including government bureaucracy, political parties, the Church, popular beliefs, the divisions within the postwar city, the decline of family values, and even sports (soccer). The "search structure" of Brizé's trilogy—the first film follows Thierry's search for a job, the second tracks Laurent's attempts to secure a meeting with the CEO of the company for which he works, and the third focuses on Philippe's attempts to negotiate between his employees and his bosses—allows Brizé, like De Sica, to paint a detailed picture of life under neoliberalism from the perspective of diverse players and institutions, from workers, trade unions and unemployment agencies, to executive managers, corporate lawyers, CEOs, and government officials.

Yet Brizé's films are no longer traditional social realist dramas. They are not set on the shop floor, like earlier social realist chronicles of unemployment, but in soulless boardrooms and various institutional settings, testifying to the director's awareness of the new context in which struggle takes place. Furthermore, while Brizé's cinema verité cinematography reveals his dedication to the search for objectivity that has traditionally distinguished social realist films, the director's

decision to cast the same well-known actor (Vincent Lindon) alongside non-professional actors, to have him occupy what were previously assumed to be mutually opposed class positions—that of a working class man and that of an executive manager in the last film of the trilogy—and to create a thematically unified trilogy that invites us to read it as a self-contained commentary on the current stage of neoliberalism and underscores *the parallels* between different social classes' experiences, ultimately endows the trilogy with a *self-reflexivity* that is not typical of traditional social realist dramas.

## CONCLUSION

All the films considered here are concerned not so much with representing a particular social problem, along the lines of "social problem films", but rather with exploring "adjustment strategies"—usually the *failure* to adjust—to "the new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Regardless of whether they focus on office workers (e.g., in workplace thrillers) or on working-class protagonists, the films share a deepening concern about the ethical/moral/human costs of neoliberalism and a keen awareness of the dramatic ways in which the nature and the location of class struggle has changed. In the wake of the dissolution of the traditional working class, and the emergence of the new affective class of "the precariat", which is difficult to define in classic Marxist terms, the generic/stylistic frame of "social realism" within which European films have traditionally explored pressing social issues is proving increasingly limiting, prompting filmmakers to bend it in new genre (and hybrid genre) directions. As a result, social realism has begun to mutate beyond its traditionally didactic model (exemplified by Ken Loach's films) towards a more nuanced—although, as we have seen, not without its aesthetic problems and challenges—synthesis of genre cinema (including genres typically seen as un-realistic or anti-realistic e.g., black comedy, thriller, musical), art cinema, avant-garde cinema, allegory, and sociopolitical commentary.

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