Temenuga Trifonova

The Working Class in Contemporary British Cinema

Abstract

This article examines depictions of class and precarity in a number of representative films, including *TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997), *The Navigators* (Ken Loach, 2001), *This Is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006), *It's a Free World* (Ken Loach, 2007), *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009), *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016), *Ray & Liz* (Richard Billingham, 2018), *Sorry We Missed You* (Ken Loach, 2019), and *Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019) in order to illuminate the subtle changes that the tradition of British social realism has undergone over the last few decades and to rethink its political potential. The article poses the following questions: Do social realist films endow their precarious subjects with agency, or do they depict them as passive victims of socio-economic and political forces beyond their control? What new potential conditions of solidarity (if any) do the films envision? What are the dominant affective states that capture the dynamic of precarity in these films: anxiety, frustration, depression, anger, resentment, or resignation?

The terms 'working class', 'class struggle', and 'labour' have assumed a particularly archaic inflection in the last two decades (Mazierska 2020). Keith Wagner observes, somewhat cynically, that the attention to class in recent film scholarship 'has the nostalgic feel of the Marxist-inspired critiques found on the pages of the British film journal *Screen* in the late 1970s' (Wagner 2014: 316). While it is true that one of the effects of the transition from industrial to financial capitalism has been class decomposition, class hasn't miraculously disappeared; on the contrary, classificatory struggles have only intensified. The contemporary political orthodoxy that social class no longer exists is simply a symptom of what Colin Crouch calls 'post-democracy': 'In non-democratic societies, class privileges are proudly and arrogantly displayed, and subordinate classes are required to acknowledge their subordination; democracy challenges class privileges in the name of subordinate classes; post-democracy denies the existence of both privilege and subordination' (Crouch qtd in Koutsourakis 2019: 175).

On the other hand, the working class today is not the well-defined entity it was for Marx.[1] For British economist Guy Standing, for instance, the restructuring of global and national economies in the last 40 years has led to the increasing fragmentation of the working class and the emergence of a new, global class-in-the-making (rather than a class in the Marxist sense), 'the precariat,' which is characterized not only by insecure labour relations but by an even more fundamental rights insecurity whereby 'citizens' are demoted to 'denizens' and deprived of the essential 'right to have rights.'[2] Most contemporary sociologists, historians and philosophers no longer understand class in essentialist terms, which 'necessarily put into parentheses the struggle of which [their] distribution is the product' (Bourdieu 1984: 245). For example, sociologist Imogen Tyler argues that, 'the classification of people can never be contained within objective systems of measurement but is always the outcome of struggles over and against these systems of classifications as they are lived in practice' (Tyler 2015: 499). Jacques Rancière's distinction

between 'class' understood as 'a grouping of people assigned a particular status and rank according to their origins or their activity', and 'class' as 'an operator of conflict, a name for counting the uncounted' (Rancière 1999: 83) is similarly indebted to Bourdieu's critique of stratification approaches to class.

Although in 21st century UK films working-class characters still occupy a central place, they are increasingly juxtaposed with 'others' of similarly precarious social status—e.g., migrant workers and asylum seekers—with classic themes like the demise of the traditional working class and changing gender roles now supplanted by thematic concerns about globalization, exploitation, slavery, otherness and exile.[3] What can UK films made during the second and third stage of neoliberalism[4]—what Lauren Berlant refers to as 'the cinema of precarity'[5]—tell us about the working class, especially in the context of the critical re-evaluation of the British New Wave and social realist films made during the Thatcher era, both important predecessors to 'the new European cinema of precarity' (Alice Bardan)?

Beginning in the 1980s, film scholars began questioning the allegedly political nature of New Wave films. In *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (1986) John Hill charged the New Wave with 'political quietism', pointing to the centrality of adjustment[6] and compromise in these films, which exhibit 'less a protest against social and economic inequalities than a contempt for superficiality' and 'effeminacy' i.e., 'pettiness, snobbery, flippancy, superficiality, materialism' (Hill 1986: 24, 25), thus belying the deeply misogynistic nature of both the films and the works on which they were based (e.g., John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back in Anger* and Tony Richardson's 1959 eponymous film; John Braine's 1957 novel *Room at the Top* and Jack Clayton's 1959 film adaptation). Peter Stead and Leonard Quart suggested that New Wave films—the majority of which were made by educated, white, middle-class filmmakers—were, in fact, about people with working-class traits who were seeking a middle-class lifestyle (Stead 1989), and that they 'explored the consciousness and desires of their working-class protagonists and their ambivalent feelings about their own community, rather than the social texture and structure of that community itself' (Quart 1993: 15). A decade later, and along similar lines, Thomas Elsaesser questioned the political potential of Thatcher era social realist films in the absence of traditional leftist political alternatives. What did it mean to oppose Thatcherism with 'realism', Elsaesser asked. His answer highlighted the risk of miserabilism that often accompanies the representation of the socially disenfranchised: 'In Britain's case this would be a call for images of misery and degradation, of unemployment and urban blight, of pollution and police harassment, of violence and racism. But is this not a retreat to another kind of conservatism, no less nostalgic than Heritage England or Edwardiana, and no less demagogic than Enterprise Culture?' (Elsaesser 1993: 64).

One reason why British New Wave films are not truly political, Hill argues, has to do with the individualizing conventions of classic narrativity:

> [I]nsofar as the narrative is based on individual agency […] the endings of such films […] rely on individual, rather than social and political change. As a result, the resolutions characteristic of the working-class film […] conform to one or other of two main types: the central character either 'opts out' of society, or else adapts and adjusts to its demands. Alternative solutions, collective struggle or social upheaval are […] excluded by the conventions upon which the films rely. (Hill 1986: 57)

The political potential of New Wave films is further compromised by the epistemology of classic realism: like the 19th century novel, the classic realist film is 'apparently author-less i.e., omniscient, but unlike the novel it is on the basis of what we see—what the camera shows—that "the truth" of events is revealed' (60). This restricts the type of knowledge classic realist films can

provide since '[k]nowledge of social and political relations, for example, does not derive from any simple observation of what is visible, but also from an understanding of what is, in effect, invisible' (60). For Hill, the classic realist film can only provoke the viewer's indignation rather than awaken her political consciousness.

Are contemporary UK films exploring class and precarity open to the same charges of miserabilism and political quietism that New Wave films and Thatcher-era social realist films were? Do they continue to subscribe to the conventions of classic narrativity and classic realism, failing to represent the collective experience of the working class? In what follows I consider these questions by looking at a number of representative films, including *TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997), *The Navigators* (Ken Loach, 2001), *This Is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006), *It's a Free World* (Ken Loach, 2007), *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009), *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016), *Ray & Liz* (Richard Billingham, 2018), *Sorry We Missed You* (Ken Loach, 2019), and *Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019). Do these films endow their precarious subjects with agency, or do they depict them as passive victims of socio-economic and political forces beyond their control? What new potential conditions of solidarity (if any) do the films envision? What are the dominant affective states that capture the dynamic of precarity in these films: anxiety, frustration, depression, anger, resentment, or resignation?

As we shall see, the portrayal of the working class in these films reflects a declining sense of working-class unity and purpose in the wake of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher eras. While the earliest films considered here, *TwentyFourSeven* and *The Navigators*, still feature a collective protagonist and explore the obstacles to the formation of class consciousness and the reasons for its disintegration, more recent films increasingly focus on a single protagonist and displace questions of class consciousness and class struggle onto questions of national identity, rising populism, and anti-immigrant attitudes (*This Is England*), globalization (*It's a Free World*), gender relations and female empowerment (*Fish Tank*), civil and human rights (*I, Daniel Blake*), and neoliberal restructuring and the gig economy (*Sorry We Missed You).* Failing to imagine an alternative to the existing order and usually ending in disillusionment (*This Is England* and *Fish Tank*), metaphorical suicide (*It's a Free World, Sorry We Missed You*) or death (*I, Daniel Blake*), the films reflect the shrinking of political horizons.

The films of Shane Meadows, often considered a successor to Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, draw on his own experience growing up in Uttoxeter in Staffordshire. Unlike most British social realist films, Meadows' films, which focus on what Claire Monk calls the 'post-working class', have 'genuine origins in the working-class community [they depict] rather than observing it with the gaze of the socially concerned outsider' (Monk qtd in Fradley, Godfrey and Williams 2013: 5). *TwentyFourSeven* (1997) follows the attempts of Darcy, a middle-aged man who has fared badly in Thatcher's Britain, to inject a sense of purpose and self-respect into the disaffected youth of a Nottingham suburb—a bunch of underclass rogues, would-be hoodlums and drug addicts—by opening a boxing club similar to the one he himself was a member of in his youth. While the film inscribes itself in the British tradition of social realism, Meadows' choice of genre (sports dramedy) is original, though not without precedent (cf. Lindsay Anderson's 1963 kitchen sink drama *This Sporting Life*). However, unlike most sports films in which the underdog wins either the psychological or the physical fight, or both—e.g., John G.Avildsen's *Rocky* (1976), to which Meadows' film makes a reference—*TwentyFourSeven* ends with the underdog remaining just that, an underdog.

TwentyFourSeven explores the necessary and sufficient conditions for the development of class consciousness, which Meadows envisions as structurally analogous to recruiting players for

a sports club and building up their identity and morale by giving them a common aim. The film makes clear, however, that the mere fact that a number of people share the same socioeconomic position does *not* constitute a sufficient basis for a cohesive political identity. As Darcy realizes early on, none of the lads are strong enough to overcome their debilitating sense of powerlessness and impasse - it is only through group effort that they can understand their social position as contingent rather than predetermined, and overcome their deeply entrenched feelings of class shame/resentment and a fatalistic vision of life that reproduces itself from generation to generation, a bit like Jacques Lantier's mysterious hereditary disease in Jean Renoir's classic of French poetic realism *The Human Beast* (1938). Significantly, labour plays no role in Darcy's experiment in class emancipation: it is not through labour that the lads are supposed to develop class consciousness but through learning to respect themselves and to control their unfocused frustration and anger. There is no question of class conflict or class struggle in the film, which paints the lads and their families as their own worst enemy. As Tim's story makes clear, it is his father's resentment of his own working-class origins along with his resentment for Tim's attempt to break through the deterministic view of class as something one is 'born into', that ultimately cause Darcy's utopian community to fail. *TwentyFourSeven* focuses not on class conflict but on an internal, psychological conflict - the struggle of 'the underclass' to see their social position as historically contingent rather than predetermined. Although the struggle for self-respect is central to many of the other films considered here, its meaning fluctuates in significant ways: e.g., in the more recent *I, Daniel Blake,* self-respect is not necessarily tied to class identity/class struggle but rather to questions of human dignity and human rights.

If *TwentyFourSeven* follows the struggle of the underclass to perceive itself as possessing agency, the group of track-maintenance workers at the center of Ken Loach's *The Navigators* (2001)—set in South Yorkshire during the period when British Rail was being privatized—already possess a well-established working-class identity. Although the conflict here is no longer internal, as it was in *TwentyFourSeven*—the workers are *not* fighting for self-respect—*The Navigators* is not concerned with class struggle either; rather, at stake is the internal cohesion of the working class, which the film shows to be no longer assured by its historical position or by any shared values and ideals. In the course of the film, the workers' camaraderie disintegrates into mutual betrayal, with tragic consequences, under the strain of new work practices that introduce competition and freedom as central organizing principles and force individual workers to compete with one another for work under the guise of free choice: they are 'free' to choose their own subjugation. In an early exposition scene, which anticipates the opening sequence of *Sorry We Missed You*, the depot's field supervisor informs the workers of the dramatic changes coming their way: doing the job is not enough anymore; workers must now 'bid' for a job by actively marketing their skills and competing with one another. When, following the company's privatization, a worker from a competing company tries to continue working with his former colleagues, he is ordered to leave. His colleagues object that 'he is one of the lads', a phrase that invokes a secure sense of class identity emerging from a shared historical position, shared values and loyalties. This sense of a shared class identity is fractured when the workers are forced to give up their jobs and work flexible hours for different contractors, often 'bidding' for the same job. Nothing sums up better the dissolution of working-class identity and solidarity than the scene in which the workers show up for a contract job only to find out that the other contracted workers are deskilled, having bought their union cards on the black market.

Although some of the workers try to resist the new working practices, their attempts rest simply on the assumption and valorization of existing class identities, while the majority of workers simply accept that they need to learn to navigate in, and adjust to, the new work order. With the power of the union compromised, the workers adapt differently to the change, some taking redundancy money and risking it on the open market, while others remain in the depot, playing along with the new management, fully aware that safety standards are being compromised in the new regime where all that counts is doing a job fast and cheap. Like *TwentyFourSeven*, *The Navigators* starts out as a comedy but ends on a tragic note. While the film's tragicomic tone and its focus on the absurdities of the new work order (the workers are made redundant but are still expected to clock on and off) anticipate the Kafkaesque world of benefits assessment in *I, Daniel Blake*, the two films could not be more different. Whereas *The Navigators* still explores the attempts of a group of workers to navigate the transition to neoliberal work practices, *I, Daniel Blake* centers on the conflict between a single man and an overbearing, anonymous state institution i.e., the film is mostly concerned with questions of civil and human rights, self-respect, and integrity in the face of an increasingly dehumanized system, rather than with questions of class and class struggle.

In *TwentyFourSeven* Tim's father's mentally abusive relationship with his son and physically abusive relationship with his wife i.e., his resentment for Tim's attempt to transcend his father's class shame, is ultimately the reason for the disintegration of the boxing club and Darcy's eventual death. By filtering the story about disaffected post-Thatcherite working class youth through the prism of a generational conflict Meadows underscores just how difficult it is to challenge the myth of class identity as some kind of hereditary condition. *The Navigators* follows a more conventional direction, presenting the reason for the fracturing of workers' camaraderie and solidarity as external rather than internal. If Meadows' film revives the fatalism of 1930s French poetic realist films like Marcel Carné's *Le Jour se lève* (1939), Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (1938), and Julien Duvivier's *La belle equipe* (1936), pointing up the ways in which the characters' social environment circumscribes their lives, Loach starts from the idea of an unassailable working-class identity so that anything that fractures or dissolves this organic sense of 'being together', being 'one of the lads', is positioned as an external threat: in *The Navigators*, new work practices threaten the utopian community of 'the lads'; in *I, Daniel Blake*, a punitive[7] social system challenges the natural solidarity presumed to exist between characters with a shared social position; in *Sorry We Missed You*, too, working-class people, by default hard-working, honest and supportive of one another, are driven to ethically or morally compromised choices by external factors.

Contrary to John Hill's argument, classical narrative films do not always focus on an individual protagonist. *TwentyFourSeven* and *The Navigators*, both of which revolve around the failed attempt to constitute a collective subject, are particularly illuminating in this respect. The two films function as reflections on agency and class identity, on the difficulty of imagining a collective identity (Meadows) and sustaining that collective identity in the face of political and economic change (Loach). Despite the failure with which these films end, however, I would argue that they *are* political films insofar as in charting the gradual composition and decomposition of a collective subject they clarify the necessary and sufficient conditions for, as well as the obstacles to, collective struggle. By contrast, more overtly political approaches to working-class subject matter, like Ken Loach's recent films *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*, which focus on individual protagonists disengaged from collective struggle, tend to preach to the converted and

thus remain within the confines of what Nathalie Rachlin and Rosemarie Scullion call 'cinema indigné', which they distinguish from 'cinema engagé'.

Unlike *TwentyFourSeven*, Meadows' *This Is England* (2006), made almost ten years later, not only displaces questions of working-class identity, class struggle and class solidarity onto questions of cultural politics, but also frames the protagonist's conflict between personal loyalties and national discourses as an ethical one. Set in 1983, against the backdrop of a politically divisive war in the Falklands and a rise in National Front membership, the film resonated with the public on its theatrical release in 2007 as the far-right British National Party gained election victories, while British troops remained firmly entrenched in the Middle East (Fradley, Godfrey and Williams 2013: 9). Although conflicted identities and mutual betrayals continue to occupy a central place in *This Is England*, as they did in Loach's *The Navigators*, now Meadows both expands his cinematic canvass by tracing the disintegration of the British working class as only one of the effects of neoliberalism, along with rising nationalism, populism and racism, and at the same time shrinks the canvass by following the particular genre conventions of the coming-of-age story.

Paralleling Meadows's simultaneous expansion and contraction of the cinematic canvass—from the local feel and group protagonist of *TwentyFourSeven* to the state-of-the-nation and single protagonist of *This Is England*—in *It's a Free World* (2007), Loach expands the story from the specificity of South Yorkshire in *The Navigators* to 'the free world' of the title (referring to the 'free market') in order to explore the struggle of the working class in the larger context of racism, nationalism, populism, and anti-immigrant attitudes, but he explores this struggle through a single protagonist (Angie). Unlike the protagonists in *This Is England* and *The Navigators*, Angie is neither torn between conflicting personal or class loyalties nor facing a moral/ethical dilemma: in the 'free world'/free market she inhabits there is no room for ethical or moral ambiguities. While *This Is England* still ends with a gesture of refusal—Shaun throwing the English flag into the sea—there is no room for gestures of resistance or for any ideas of class solidarity in *It's a Free World*, which ends with Angie traveling to Ukraine to knowingly recruit illegal workers. If *The Navigators* debunks the neoliberal promise of 'freedom' by showing the toll it takes on working class identities and loyalties, *It's a Free World* limits itself to the moral and ethical effects of neoliberal restructuring on a single individual against the background of waning collective labour and union power (embodied by Angie's father, an old Union man whom the film depicts as a relic from the past).

Like Meadows, Andrea Arnold has often been seen as a successor to Loach's brand of social realism. Although the stylistic comparison between Loach and Arnold is justified, there is another, perhaps more significant continuity between Arnold's work and Loach's more recent films, from *It's a Free World* to *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*, namely the focus on single protagonists and on the moral/ethical or psychological repercussions of neoliberalism rather than on class conflict and class struggle. Consider, for instance, Arnold's coming-of-age drama *Fish Tank* (2009), the story of 15-year-old Mia, who lives with her unemployed mother Joanne and younger sister on an East London council estate made up of scrubby vacant lots and broken chain-link fences. Like the disaffected young men in *The Navigators*, Mia's future is already sealed: broken family home, alcoholic mother, no proper schooling, no job prospects. Her life is disrupted when her mother gets a new boyfriend, Conor, a tender, sexy man, who represents not only a possible father-figure but also a romantic interest, as well as the possibility of another life outside the confines of Mia's socially depressed world. As their relationship drifts past that of a quasi-father and daughter, Mia struggles to manage her longing for a father-figure with her

budding erotic desires. Ultimately, however, the promise of cross-class solidarity vanishes with Conor's romantic deception of both Mia and Joanne, a romantic deception that doubles as class deception and frames any fantasies of social mobility as just that, fantasies.

In its emphasis on Mia's struggle to find something to believe in, a source of self-respect (whether urban dance or love) that will help her transcend the entrenched feelings of self-hatred and class shame that prevent her from trying to challenge her social position, *Fish Tank* recalls *TwentyFourSeven*. Like Meadows, the only potential bonds of solidarity Arnold envisions are those drawn along gender lines (cf. the final scene in which Mia joins her mother and sister in a family dance) while the chances for social mobility remain slim (at the end of the film Mia leaves on a road trip to Wales, but there is no guarantee that the life that awaits her there will be better than the one she is leaving behind). The film consistently attributes Mia's sense of impasse not to her family's economic circumstances but rather to the moral and emotional effects of these circumstances: the absence of love and tenderness, the paralyzing sense of resignation, ennui, and fatalism that Mia's mother tries to suppress by getting drunk and partying. Ultimately, Arnold's film, which ends with Mia renegotiating her conflicting relationship with her mother—something she does through empathizing with her mother in the wake of their shared deception by Conor—subordinates any potentially incisive social commentary on class struggle and social mobility to the problem of gender relations and female emancipation.

After suffering a heart attack at work, Daniel, the protagonist of Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) is instructed by doctors to rest. Since he doesn't have the requisite number of points to be deemed eligible for employment and support allowance, Daniel must apply for jobseeker's allowance and continue looking for jobs that he cannot take. When the absurdity of his predicament drives him to defiantly spray paint the walls of the Benefits centre, Daniel is arrested and issued a caution that if he reoffends, he will be charged. *I, Daniel Blake* was mostly positively received as another addition to the canon of British social realist drama. Like *Cathy Come Home* (1966), which sparked a political debate that spread to the Houses of Parliament and led to the formation of the charity Crisis in 1967, and to the passing of the Homeless Persons Act in 1977, *I, Daniel Blake* was a public talking point in the discussions that led to Employment and Support Allowances reforms. Nevertheless, some criticized the film for 'hitting a populist nerve' (Koresky 2016), calling it 'misery porn for smug Londoners' (Long 2016), and describing it as 'schematic and predictable […] aggressively stack[ing] the deck against Blake and Katie in a way that makes it more effective as social activism, and less so as drama' (Mac 2016). In a *Daily Mail* article Toby Young mocked Loach's 'absurdly romantic view of benefit claimants': 'Daniel is a model citizen. At no point do we see him drinking, smoking, gambling, or even watching television. No, he is a welfare claimant as imagined by a member of the upper-middle class metropolitan elite' (Young 2016).

Unpacking Daniel's final words, written in preparation for his appeal of the government's decision that he is ineligible for Employment Support Allowance and read by Katie at Daniel's 'pauper's funeral', reveals the ambivalent nature of a film that, while widely acclaimed for its left-leaning politics, is surprisingly conservative in its rhetoric:

I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user.
I am not a shirker, a **scrounger**, a beggar, nor a thief.
I am not a national insurance number, nor a blip on a screen.
I paid my **dues**, never a penny short and **proud to do so**.
I don't tug the forelock, but look my neighbour in the eye.

I don't accept or seek charity.
My name is Daniel Blake, **I am a man, not a dog**.
As such, **I demand my rights**. I demand you treat me with respect.
I, Daniel Blake, am a **citizen, nothing more, nothing less**. Thank you.

Several words stand out in this quasi-manifesto: 'dues', 'scrounger', 'charity', 'man', 'rights', 'citizen', and 'I'. Refusing to be considered 'a client, a customer, or a service user," "a national insurance number' or 'a blip on a screen',[8] Daniel professes to be 'a citizen', apparently unaware that a 'citizen' is precisely 'a national insurance number', not a particular person that the government knows by their proper name. The anonymity Daniel objects to is not the result of several decades of neoliberal restructuring but part of the very definition of a *legal subject* recognized by the state and entitled to the state's protection. As a legal subject, Daniel further reasons, he is endowed with certain civil rights, which he equates with human rights. Importantly, he believes he is entitled to those rights because he has paid his dues, "never a penny short, and proud to do so," the implication being that those who have not "paid their dues"—scroungers, beggars, and thieves—deserve neither the state's protection nor basic human rights - they are 'dogs' who do not deserve to be treated with "respect." Daniel's manifesto of the disenfranchised perpetuates the myth of the undeserving welfare scrounger, from whom Daniel claims to be distinguished by virtue of his human and civil rights as well as by his duties as a legal subject. Disturbingly, the film defines citizenship in market terms and suggests that the sanctions with which the state punishes Daniel and Katie are not inherently unjust but unjust only because they target the wrong people, hard-working people like Daniel and Katie, rather than undeserving 'scroungers and beggars.'

Indeed, the film does not really challenge Britain's social and political system but merely its mechanisms: the whole story revolves around the absurd situation Daniel finds himself in as a result of the lack of coordination between the two arms of Britain's welfare system, medical and employment bureaucracy. As Daniel himself acknowledges, he was getting his benefits just fine before he had a heart attack - it was the glitch in the system caused by his unexpected heart attack that derailed his life, which he didn't have any reason to complain about up until that point. Katie's predicament is also presented as the result of bad luck (she is late for her appointment at the Jobcentre) rather than a systemic problem. Presumably, if she had made it to her Jobcentre appointment on time, she would not have been forced to resort to stealing and prostituting herself.

In one scene Daniel asks Ann, a sympathetic Jobcentre employee, why the Jobcentre has been giving him the runaround, refusing to provide him with the correct forms to fill out, obliging him to prove his eligibility online without taking into consideration that many citizens lack computer skills, and obliging him to continue applying for jobs he cannot take because of his medical condition. All this, he argues, is part of the government's plan 'to grind him down', words spoken 60 years earlier by factory worker Arthur Seaton in Karel Reisz's quintessential New Wave film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1961). 'Don't let the bastards grind you down! What I want is a good time. All the rest is propaganda', insists Arthur, the Nottingham angry young lathe worker in the film's opening scene. Arthur, who embodies a new, individualized anti-hero and the gradual disintegration of a cohesive working-class culture in the postwar era, does not know his place: he is a skilled worker with a good income, interested in satisfying his personal needs rather than defending working-class values and interests. Determined not to end up like his parents, tied down to a life of domestic drudgery, Arthur spends his wages having a good time on weekends, which involves lots of drinking and an affair with the wife of an older colleague. At the end of the

film, however, he is about to settle down into the same kind of quietly desperate domestic life he was so adamantly against (hence the often remarked upon centrality of 'adjustment' in New Wave films).

Like Arthur, Daniel refuses to be 'ground down' and, like Arthur's rebellion, which is not motivated by collective but by purely personal interests, Daniel's mini rebellion does not challenge the system but only its inefficiency - he would have been perfectly satisfied with his humble widower's life if his heart attack had not exposed the inefficiency of the system's mechanisms. If Arthur revolts against the drudgery of factory work, Daniel's sense of identity and self-respect are deeply intertwined with work. For instance, when he gets a call from a 'mate' offering him a job and has to explain to him that he is only looking for a job so he can receive his benefits, the mate takes him for a 'welfare scrounger', causing Daniel to passionately protest that he is not 'asking for charity'. In short, Daniel is not a critic of waged labour: for him being outside the relations of waged labour is, in fact, the greatest possible offence or humiliation. Sharing the conservative anger of 'angry young men' like Arthur Seaton, the angry old man Daniel is ultimately fighting a *personal* struggle to preserve his integrity and self-respect rather than a collective struggle targeting an inherently unjust social and political system. Tellingly, the point at which Daniel breaks—when his mockery of the absurdities of the system is no longer sufficient to alleviate his frustration—does not transform his frustration into anger but causes him to withdraw in order to preserve whatever traces of self-respect he has left.

Far from offering a coherent vision of collective struggle, *I, Daniel Blake* depicts revolt as 'both raw and dispersed' (O'Shaughnessy 2007: 199) in the shape of individual gestures of kindness and solidarity that cut across racial and gender boundaries, from Daniel's moments of camaraderie with his neighbor China, a black young man with entrepreneurial online skills, and with other working-class 'mates', to strangers on the street who applaud Daniel's spray painting of the Jobcentre walls and a sympathetic female Jobcentre employee (Ann). Although Katie doesn't seem to have the daily moral support Daniel enjoys she too experiences small gestures of solidarity, e.g., when a grocery store manager catches her shoplifting[9] he lets her keep the stolen items and does not call the police. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it focuses on a white, male protagonist who experiences precarity as potentially emasculating, *I, Daniel Blake* fails to challenge conventional narratives of the gendering of precarity. Daniel's relationship with Katie, a precariously employed single mother whom he takes under his wing, establishes him as a protective male figure.[10] Katie is presented with typically gendered alternatives (sex work) and, in the final scene, made to ventriloquize Daniel's words instead of telling her own story. While Loach emphasizes the dignity and respect Daniel and Katie deserve, he frames these as human rights rather than as objects of class struggle. Rather than explore the potential solidarity between working-class people like Daniel and Katie and white-collar workers like the Jobcentre employees, for instance, the film reduces the latter to one-dimensional caricatures whose sole *raison d'etre* is to perpetuate the unjust system of which the likes of Daniel and Katie are victims. Thus, Daniel's struggle remains a personal affair, as his autograph beneath his spray-painted verbal revolt testifies: 'I, Daniel Blake', rather than 'We, Daniel Blake'.

Loach's most recent film, *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), only confirms what many critics have noted about his career, namely that since the early 1990s the director's work oscillates 'between melancholic celebrations of past revolutionary struggles (in Ireland, Spain, and Nicaragua) and stories of isolated workers suffering under contemporary capitalism, disengaged from collective struggles' (Hall 2022: 149).[11] The failure of *Sorry We Missed You* to envision any possibility for resistance is reflected not only in the story, which ends with the protagonist—Ricky,

a delivery driver trying to make a living under constant pressure in the gig economy—driving back to work, desperate and powerless, right after being physically assaulted, but in the film's narrative structure itself, which reflects the structure of the neoliberal system it so fervently criticizes. While Loach clearly aims to critique the neoliberal logic that has infiltrated all areas of life—the logic of the market, which transforms all human needs, feelings and experiences into quasi-metric aggregates—this constant process of calculation and conversion contaminates the very structure of the film. Consider the following order of narrative events: when Ricky reaches the end of his tether, he explodes and hits his son Seb; a few scenes later Ricky 'pays' for it by being assaulted by a gang of thugs who steal his scan gun; and soon after Ricky's violent outburst, his wife, Abby, reaches the end of her tether and breaks down in the hospital, verbally assaulting Ricky's boss on the phone. This 'tit for tat' structure, which mirrors the neoliberal logic of translating intangible, incalculable experiences into quasi-metric aggregates—thus, neoliberalism's *structural* violence, of which Ricky is a victim, is immediately 'converted' into Ricky's *physical* violence against his loved ones—is perhaps inevitable in the absence of any mediating public realm that would diffuse the immediate effects of neoliberalism on individuals (all scenes in the film are set either in the family home or in the characters' place of work).

The expository, straightforward approach to social issues has always been a hallmark of Loach's brand of social realism, which generally follow the Hollywood mode of narration: scenes are arranged in a question-and-answer order (each scene ends with a question that the next scene takes up); the narrative is distinguished by its redundancy (the same narrative information is provided through dialogue, mise-en-scène, and action); and characters face increasingly insurmountable obstacles as the story moves towards its inexorable climax. Although younger filmmakers like Shane Meadows, Mark Jenkin and Richard Billingham, all born in the 1970s, continue to work within the British tradition of social realism, which Loach's films are seen to embody, they tend to approach social problems in a more oblique and less expository way. While Meadows remains nostalgic for the 1980s' sense of political oppositionality, leaving him vulnerable to accusations of 'reactionary sentimentality and conservatism' (Fradley, Godfrey and Williams 2013: 14), his films are generally positively received by critics, who praise their authenticity.[12] In Meadows' films a particular social problem is not so much 'observed' as it is 'lived through', in part because of the strongly autobiographical nature of his work and the low-budget, DIY approach to filmmaking that foregrounds improvisation. Although critics situate Meadows within the national tradition of social realism, they also view Meadows' version of social realism as more nuanced. David Forrest, for instance, sees the director's work as moving beyond a didactic model towards a synthesis of art cinema and oblique sociopolitical commentary. Along similar lines, in the autobiographical photographic and film work of Richard Billingham social issues are interweaved with intermedial concerns about the relationship between photography, painting, film and video. Finally, in Mark Jenkin's *Bait* (2019) the social issue is not presented 'head on' but through a reflection on the film medium itself (see below).

Reminiscent of the work of cinematic photographers like Nan Goldin, known for her painfully intimate photographs of herself, her lovers and friends, and Jeff Wall, known for his exploration of the space in-between photography, painting and film, the autobiographical photographs and films of Turner-nominated Richard Billingham privilege questions of authenticity[13] and truth over the measured, objective exploration of pressing social issues *a la* Loach. Originally Billingham began photographing his father with the intention of making paintings from the photographs, but he became increasingly interested in the composition, mood, and texture of still images. His debut photobook *Ray's A Laugh* (1996), whose snapshot aesthetic

of squalid realism documents the life of his parents Ray and Liz, was shot on out-of-date 35mm film using a cheap instamatic camera. The raw, uncomfortably intimate and often painfully cruel photographs depict the poverty and deprivation of the artist's early life in a high-rise council estate in the West Midlands.[14] *Ray's A Laugh* was followed by the short films *Fishtank* (1998), a study of his father filmed with a handheld camera, and *Ray* (2016), a single-channel video installation later adapted into the feature *Ray & Liz* (2018). Billingham's work treads a thin line between vulnerability, voyeurism, and social critique, and between deliberate aesthetic choices and a reliance on misadventures and accidents.

While some have criticized what they see as Billingham's tendency to miserabilism, film and art critic J. M. Tyree reminds us that in its original artistic context of Modernist European painting, miserabilism was used to describe Isidre Nonell's late 19th century paintings of the poor and marginalized, which specifically rejected 'picturesqueness or religious sentimentalism' (Tyree 2019: 34) and were permeated with 'the artistic sensibility of despair and protest' (35). While miserabilism seems to be 'a bit of an English specialty, having been traditionally associated with perennial iterations of the homegrown "kitchen sink" drama of working-class life' (35), unlike kitchen sink dramas directed by middle-class filmmakers and based on novels by middle-class authors, *Ray & Liz*, 'like the artist himself, does not 'represent' poverty; rather, it emerges from it' (35). Not only is *Ray & Liz not* miserabilist, because it reflects the artist's lived experience, but it is, in fact, more deeply political than an overtly political and socially conscious film like *I, Daniel Blake*, whose success, argues Tyree, is partly due to its 'embrace of a culture-industry cliché: the quiet heroism and unfailing decency of Loach's protagonist in his noble but ultimately tragic fight against petty bureaucrats and the powers that be' (40-41).

Like *The Levelling*, Mark Jenkin's *Bait* (2019) explores the precariousness of living off the land—in this case, off the sea—in a small fishing community in Wales, and rather than offering an exposé on precarity paints an oblique picture of the precarious lives of fishermen, filtering the social commentary on the fate of manual labor in neoliberal Britain through the symbolic, quasi-Biblical story of broken family bonds, in this case the bond between the families of two brothers, whose attitudes to their inheritance—their father's fishing business—are diametrically opposed. Shot on 16mm film and hand-processed, the film 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. *Bait* is infused with post-industrial nostalgia, depicting Steven's work in the tourist industry as a 'selling off': close ups 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. 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. Jenkin's strategy of escaping the social problem film 'ghetto'—to which Loach's films can more easily be relegated—is to tap into the melodramatic address of silent cinema (expressive close ups, Eisenstein-inspired editing, post-dubbed dialogues), the mythic quality of Visconti's neorealist *La Terra Trema* (1948), 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 precariousness/obsolescence of 16mm film.[15] 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—achieves a synthesis of detachment and sensitivity similar to that with which Billingham endows *Ray & Liz*.

Meadows, Jenkin and Billingham explore pressing social issues, but they do so in a much more self-conscious, even intimate,[16] way than Loach, either by moving towards a hybrid of art cinema and sociopolitical commentary (Meadows), commenting on the medium of film itself (Jenkin) or exploring the intermedial relation between film and other visual arts (Billingham), suggesting that the didacticism and the search for objectivity typical of traditional social realism might no longer be able to capture the complexity of Britain's—and Europe's—social, economic and moral crisis. Tracing chronologically the transformations of social realism across the series of films considered here reveals a decreasing sense of working-class agency in UK film and a gradual displacement of questions of class consciousness and class struggle onto questions of personal and moral integrity and/or female agency. If *TwentyFourSeven* is still concerned with the tension between stratification approaches to class and the idea of class as the object of struggle, *The Navigators* demonstrates the disintegration of the idea of class as a historical entity in the wake of the neoliberalization of labour conditions, and *It's a Free World* shifts the attention to the *moral* and *ethical* effects of neoliberalism. In *Fish Tank*, *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You* questions of class identity and class struggle are replaced by concerns about gender, civil and human rights. While in the more personal (even autobiographical) brand of social realism practiced by the likes of Meadows, Jenkin and Billingham the dominant affect of social realism, indignation, gives way to anger and/or a debilitating sense of impasse, it remains debatable whether that affective transformation is enough to transfigure British cinema from 'cinéma indigné' into 'cinéma engagé.'[17] The 'precariat' depicted in UK films is hardly the 'new, dangerous class' Guy Standing believes it to be.

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Notes

[1] For an overview of the dramatic changes in the image of the working class produced by the deindustrialization of the West, see Attfield.

[2] Standing identifies seven classes that make up the class structure of contemporary capitalist societies: 1) the elite or plutocracy; 2) the salariat; 3) proficiens; 4) the 'old core' working class; 5) the precariat; 6) the unemployed; and 7) the lumpen precariat (or underclass) (Standing 2011: 13).

[3] See Lay (2007) and Trifonova (2020).

[4] William Davies provides a useful periodization of neoliberalism, distinguishing between three phases: (1) "the spread of neoliberalism from around 1979, which lasted for roughly a decade leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and was led by neoconservative parties of the right, notably Reagan and Thatcher"; (2) "the application of neoliberalism which lasted nearly two decades, between the demise of state socialism and the global financial crisis", and (3) "punitive neoliberalism."https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii101/articles/william-davies-the-new-neoliberalism

[5] In *Cruel Optimism* Berlant analyzes a range of European films that dramatize the attrition of social fantasies like upward mobility, job security, meritocracy, political and social equality, and identifies an emergent aesthetics that she calls "the cinema of precarity."

[6] Berlant also underscores the centrality of adjustment strategies in the cinema of precarity. 'Cruel optimism', which Berlant deems apolitical and even regressive, is one such affective strategy of adjustment. Optimism is 'cruel', Berlant explains, "insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming" (Berlant 2).
[7] William Davies provides a useful periodization of neoliberalism: combative neoliberalism (1979-1989), normative neoliberalism (1989–2008), and punitive neoliberalism (post-2008).
[8] The tendency to present working-class characters as the last bastions of basic human solidarity in a dehumanizing, market-driven society is not limited to Loach's films. Sarah, the working-class protagonist of Marc Munden's 2021 pandemic-set film *Help*, refuses to call the residents of the senior citizens home Bright Sky Homes where she works "patients" or "clients," insisting that they are her "friends."
[9] Katie resorts to shoplifting after her daughter is mocked at school for wearing shoes that are falling apart, a narrative motif that (perhaps intentionally) calls to mind neorealist films like *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio de Sica, 1948).
[10] When Daniel finds out that Katie has started working as an escort, he confronts her and tries to dissuade her from a job he clearly considers equivalent to losing one's integrity and self-respect.
[11] In *Looking Beyond Neoliberalism: French and Francophone Belgian Cinema and the Crisis* O'Shaughnessy observes a similar move away from collective resistance towards individual, ethical dilemmas in the films of the Dardenne brothers.
[12] For instance, writing of *Small Time* (1996) Claire Monk argues that unlike most British social realism, the film "had genuine origins in the (non-)working-class community it depicted rather than observing it with the gaze of the socially concerned outsider" (qtd in Fradley, Godfrey and Williams 5).
[13] When making *Ray & Liz* Billingham rented a flat in the same block of flats, on the same floor, where his father used to live. He used the photographs from *Ray's A Laugh* to reconstruct the wallpaper and the furniture down to the last detail.
[14] All the photographs in the series are untitled and many of them have been released as large-scale prints.
[15] Shot on 16mm film and hand-processed by the director himself, Jenkin's most recent feature, the folk horror *Enys Men* (2022), revolves around a woman who is apparently the sole inhabitant of an island off the Cornish coast. However, while in *Bait* the grainy 16mm film complemented the film's themes of gentrification and the increasing precariousness of traditional lifestyles, *Enys Men* fails to establish the same unity between form and content.
[16] Meadows has acknowledged that his TV mini-series *The Virtues* (2019) is his first work since dealing with repressed memories of his own childhood sexual abuse. See Sawyer (2019).
[17] See Rachlin and Scullion (2014).