

Class in the New European Cinema of Precarity

EURAC Research Seminar

November 15, 2023

Project objectives

- 1) To situate historically the new European cinema of precarity (late 1920s-1930s British documentaries of working-class life, 1930s French poetic realist films permeated by fatalism and pessimism, 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)
- 2) To analyze the poetics of the new European cinema of precarity - genre and stylistic variations
- 3) To ask where these films locate the potential for social and political change

Theorizing neoliberalism

Neoliberalism: “‘Neo’ signals the return of ‘free’ market after the post-war interlude of social democratic regulation. ‘Liberal’ signals that any such regulative, welfarist tampering with the market is to be viewed as an infraction of the ‘liberty’ of capital” (xiii).

Paul Dave, *Visions of England: Class and Culture in Contemporary Cinema* (2006)

Foucauldians (e.g., Wendy Brown) draw on Foucault’s fourth lecture in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979)

Brown: neoliberalism is a political rationality that extends and disseminates market values to all institutions and social action

Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2003)

Marxists (e.g., David Harvey): neoliberalism is not a new economic theory or organization of world power but “a variant of a very old concept: the current version of the dominant ideology that serves the class in power” (Harvey, 160).

David Harvey, 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, 2011

The 7 classes that make up the class structure of contemporary capitalist societies:

- 1) the elite or plutocracy (the ruling class in the classical Marxist sense)
- 2) the salariat (people in stable full-time employment)
- 3) proficiens (those with bundles of skills they can market, earning high incomes on contract as consultants or independent workers)
- 4) the old “core” working class (proletariat) defined by its reliance on mass labor, reliance on wage income, absence of control or ownership of the means of production
- 5) the precariat (a class in the making rather than a class in the Marxist sense (having attained class consciousness))
- 6) the unemployed
- 7) the lumpen-precariat (or “underclass”), a detached group of “socially ill misfits” living off the dregs of society

Guy Standing - 3 groups of precarious workers

Atavists - former working-class members who have lost their access to secure or meaningful work and, thus, have lost their 'past'

Nostalgics - migrants and ethnic minority members who have left their home countries and, unable to find meaningful work in their new countries, lack a 'present'

Progressives – educated members of the precariat who do not have access to a career path, thus also lacking a 'future'

*'the precariat' as a transitional class or a 'class in the making', rather than a class in the Marxist sense

*emphasizes the precariat's insecure position and its limited possibilities for organized struggle

*precarity refers to what workers lack: e.g., labour security, including labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security


*defines 'precarity' only in relation to insecure work, making it a historically specific phenomenon traceable back to the post-1970s period as a product of market-driven globalization



Critiques of Standing

*the term 'precariat' brings together highly disparate groups under the same denominator, failing to show where the boundaries between the precariat and other, non-precarious groups lie

*the material interests of people in the precariat and in the working class are not sufficiently opposed to each other for these to constitute two distinct classes

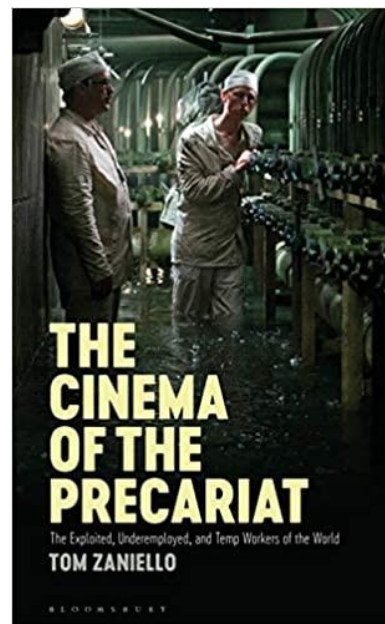
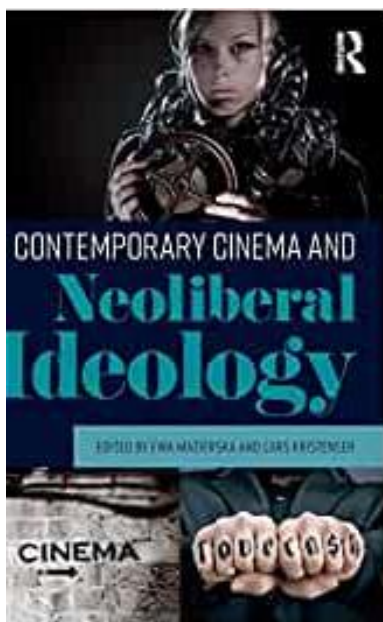
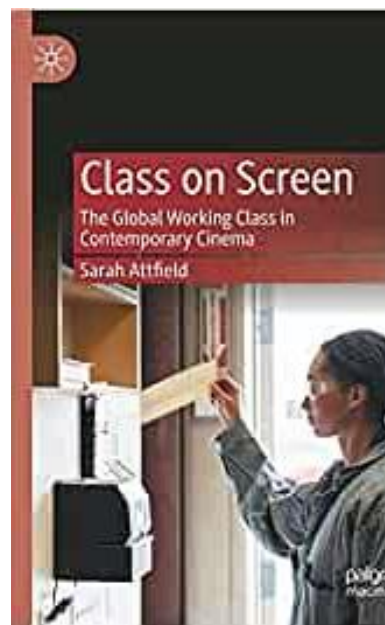
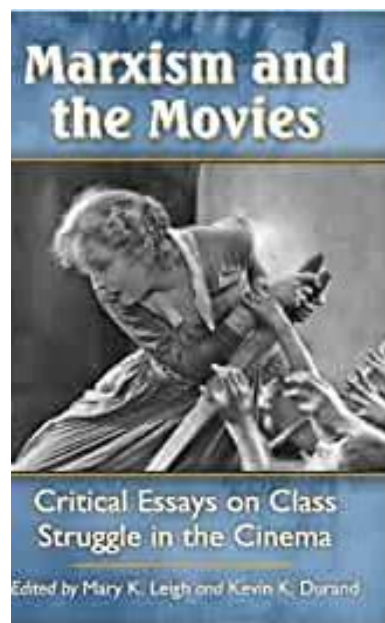
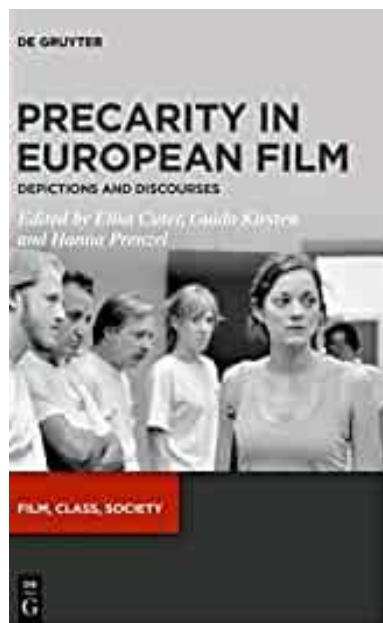


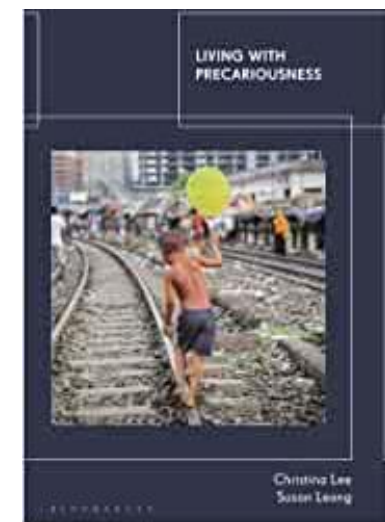
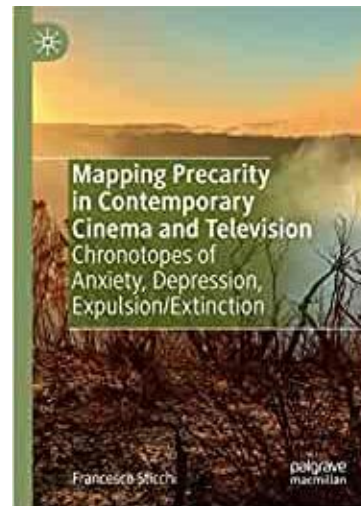
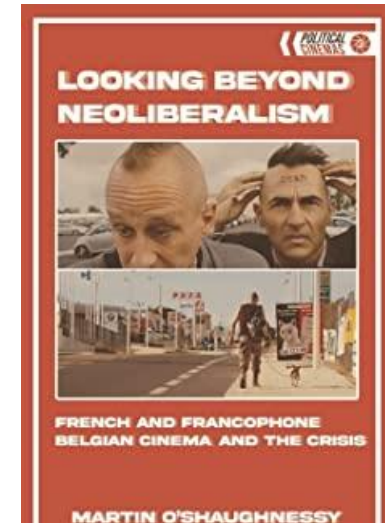
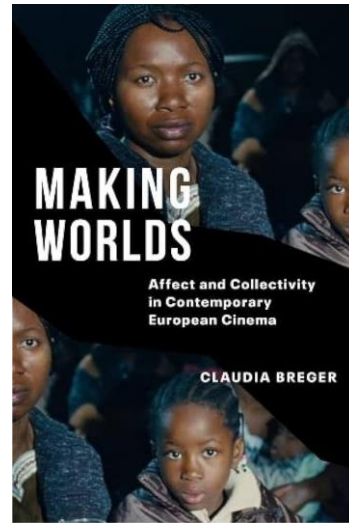
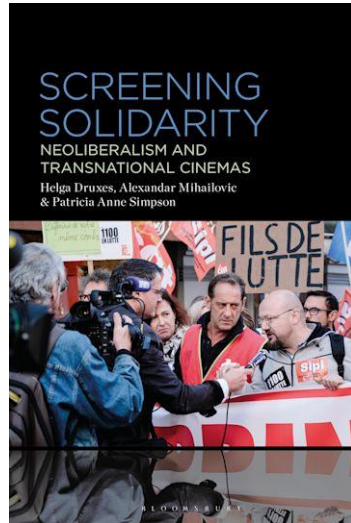
Originally signifying a social condition linked to poverty, 'precarity' refers to the growth of the knowledge economy, the reduction of welfare state provisions, the suppression of unions, the association of migration with illegality, and the rise in flexible and precarious forms of labor.

Many (e.g. Standing) see 'precarity' as specific (at least in the developed capitalist countries of the west) in that it comes *after* a period of relative well-being (the welfare state)

However, postcolonial and feminist scholars have questioned this narrative of precarity as coming *after* a period of stability – this argument takes the 'standard employment' in Western countries of the second half of the 20th century as an implicit norm and overlooks that this was historically connected to a white, male-centered model of wage-labor

Many workers, notably women and ethnic minorities, have for a long time been excluded from the Fordist regime of labor security.





- recent studies invite us to see precarity as a political tool rather than a socioeconomic condition from which there is no escape, moving away from the traditional understanding of 'precariousness' as something one 'endures'/'suffers' passively

- try to envision *ethical* alternatives to neoliberalism's ideal of the risk-taking, self-optimizing neoliberal 'entrepreneur of the self'

- imagine new forms of solidarity among individuals or groups without a shared identity or history

- the cinema of precarity is not about neoliberalism's "victims", addressing a liberal minded, middle-class audience, whose primary intended affects are pity and guilt, but is an attempt to envision a radically new relationship to work

For example, films like *Rooftops* (Demian Sabini, 2011) and *Crash Test Aglae* (Eric Gravel, 2017) follow characters who have lost their jobs, seek to reframe what initially appears as a depressing state of impasse into a period for self-examination and reflection that allows the characters to rethink who they are and what they want

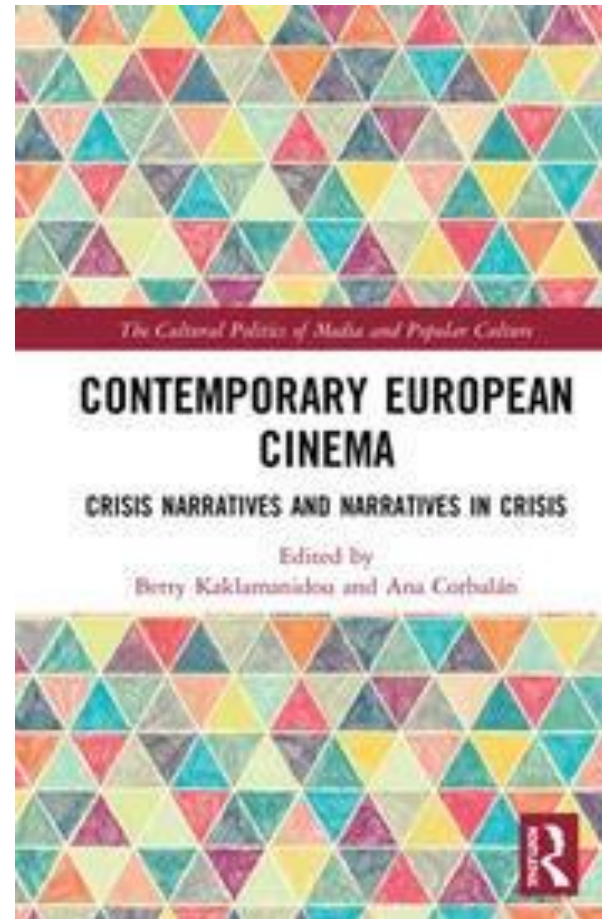


How to render visual the abstract logic of neoliberalism –
the search for a new cinematic language
narratives of crisis
and
a crisis of narrative

Contemporary European Cinema: Crisis Narratives and Narratives in Crisis (2019) and *Cinema of Crisis: Film and Contemporary Europe* (2020) depict Europe in a seemingly indefinite crisis as a result of neoliberalism's aggressive dismantling of the postwar social democratic consensus.

Here 'crisis' refers both to European cinema's 'narratives of crisis'—films narrating the crisis—and 'crisis narratives', films whose narratives of crisis can no longer be contained by classical forms of narrative or by particular styles/genres within which 'crisis' used to be negotiated, e.g. social realism.

The new cinema of precarity is constantly searching for a new cinematic language to capture the elusive processes of financialization that have replaced the familiar materiality of productive and reproductive labor.



The New European Cinema of Precarity (1980s- present)

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011)

the attrition of social fantasies like upward mobility, job security, meritocracy, political and social equality

'precarity' extends beyond the expression of an economic condition to indicate an entire 'affective environment', a sense of individualized insecurity, and the loss of social and existential status

characters cut off from futurity, a sense of impasse

Optimism is 'cruel' "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

For example, in the Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta* (1999) 'cruel optimism' takes the form of aspirational normativity, which Berlant sees as a sign of the widely shared "collective attachments to fundamentally stressful conventional lives in late capitalism"

- With the figure of the worker pushed to the margins contemporary European culture is infused with post-industrial nostalgia in response to the waning of the collective and of labor solidarity, as well as 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.” (Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*, 2005)
- The cinema of precarity opposes two different conceptions of work—work as a core part of one’s sense of identity versus work as mere occupation—and the two different types of work to which they correspond:
 - 1) manufacturing work, which is in decline not just in the literal sense of the term but in a more general sense of moral decline (*The Measure of a Man*)

and

- 2) service sector occupations, which are depicted as soulless and inauthentic and treated as shorthand for the neoliberal flexibilization and precaritization of personal and social relations (*Bait*, *Glory*).
- Films charting processes of deindustrialization and the decline of manufacturing work present the threat of losing one’s job as an existential rather than a strictly financial crisis (*The Nothing Factory*, *Early One Morning*)





Screening solidarity

Films set in the workplace (*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, *Of Snails and Men*, *Two Days, One Night*, *7 Minutes*, *The Nothing Factory*, *The Measure of a Man*, *At War*) consistently imagine class solidarity in the narrow context of industrial labor posited as the last outpost in the struggle against the neoliberal technocratic order.

From *collective bargaining to individual hustling*

In contrast to the obsolete identification of 'labor' with the white, male industrial worker, female characters are emblematic of the vanishing of political possibilities for collective struggle under the conditions of neoliberalism

In recent films "female characters often struggle in solitude, in contrast to the traditional iconography of labor, which emphasized the collectivity of the industrial working class. Women lend themselves to embody the neoliberal labor regime because of the association of femininity with flexibility and adaptability"

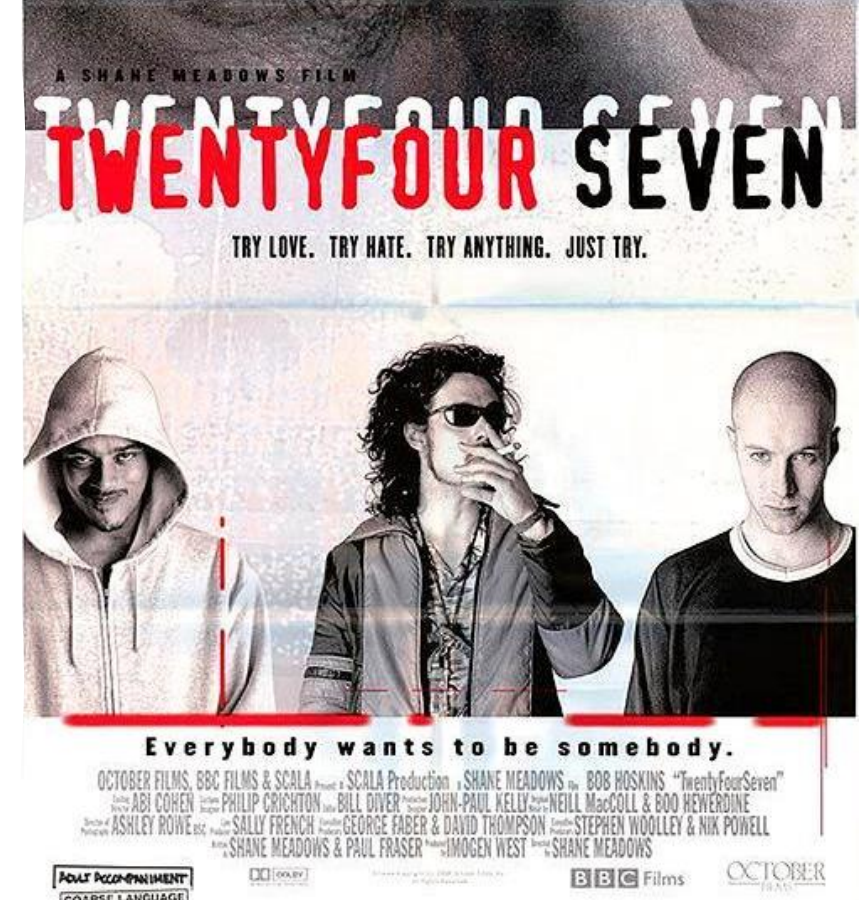
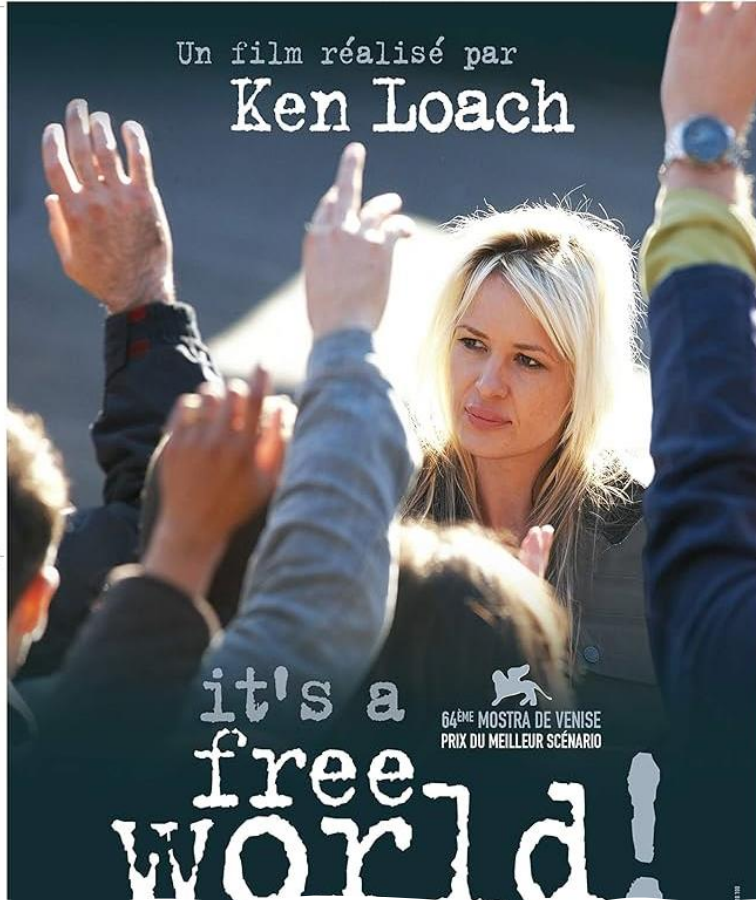
For example, Ken Loach and the Dardenne brothers have "moved from their postwar emphasis on solidarity among the industrial working class to a focus on solitary female figures who struggle under the conditions of post-Fordism and neoliberalism."

Barbara Mennel, *Women at Work in Twenty First Century European Cinema* (2019)



- A factory worker (Sandra) has only two days to convince her fellow workers, who have accepted a 1000-euro bonus in exchange for her dismissal, to give up their bonuses so that she can keep her job. Sandra ultimately succeeds in convincing them, but when her manager offers to give her back her job in exchange for firing a contract migrant worker, Sandra refuses.
- The film's spectators are the only ones to witness Sandra's "gesture of resistance and her subsequent transformation. The audience is privy to the act of solidarity in the boss's office, which differs from the traditional depiction of the strike as icon of the collective" (Mennel 64).
- Not only are the only gestures of resistance that the film is capable of imagining singular, private, and invisible, leading at best to a personal, spiritual or moral transformation rather than to organized collective struggle, but the quasi-entrepreneurial form that Sandra's individual struggle takes in the film seems to mirror the very system it opposes. Sandra spends her weekend visiting her fellow workers, in their homes, and trying to persuade them, one by one, to give up their bonuses. To do that she has to appeal to their individual personalities, while also taking into consideration their particular circumstances (e.g., if they are married, single, with or without kids, paying off debts or mortgages etc.), in short, Sandra has to 'tailor' her plea for solidarity to each individual fellow worker, rather than appeal to them on the basis of a shared past and shared values (class).





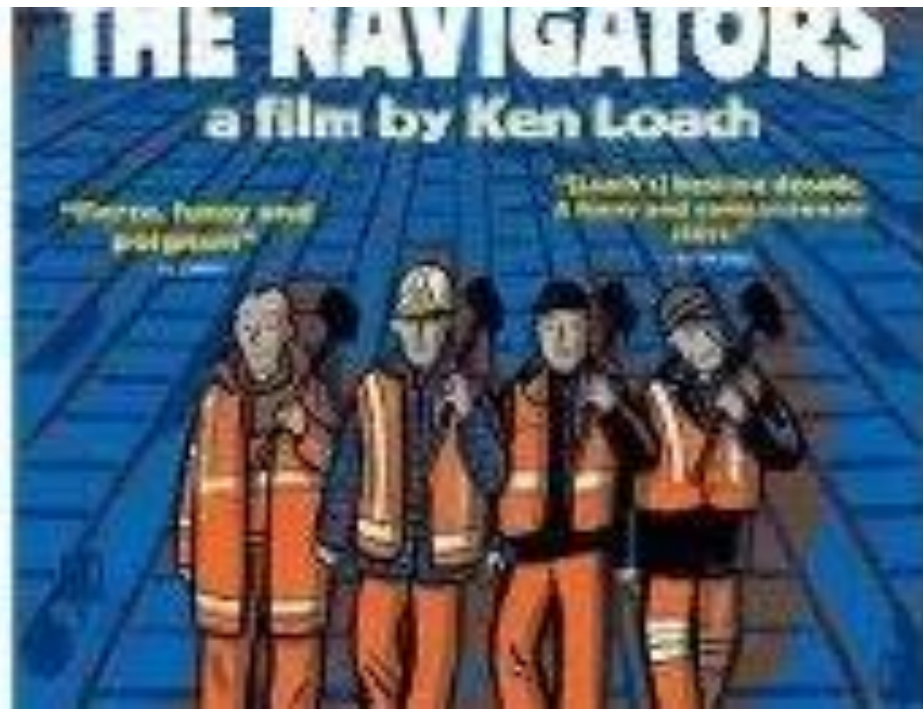
Contemporary British Cinema

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 can these films 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?



What are the dominant affective states that capture the dynamic of precarity in these films: anxiety, frustration, depression, anger, resentment, or resignation?

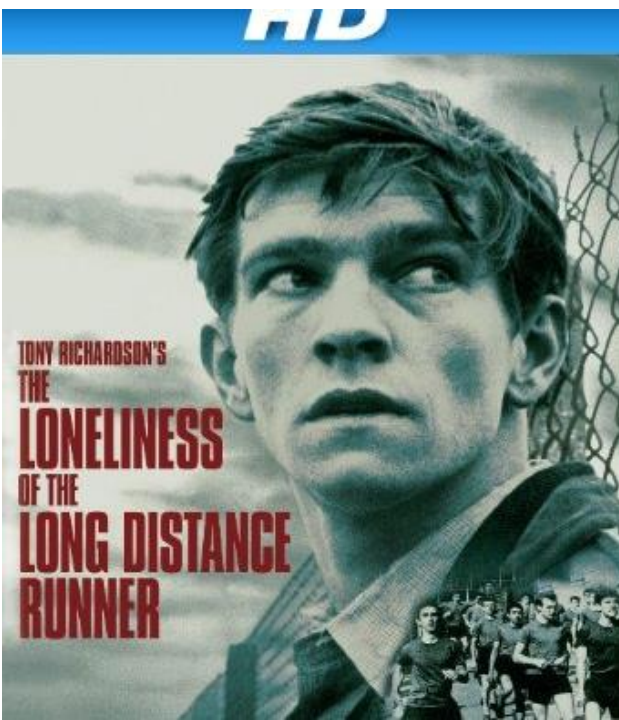
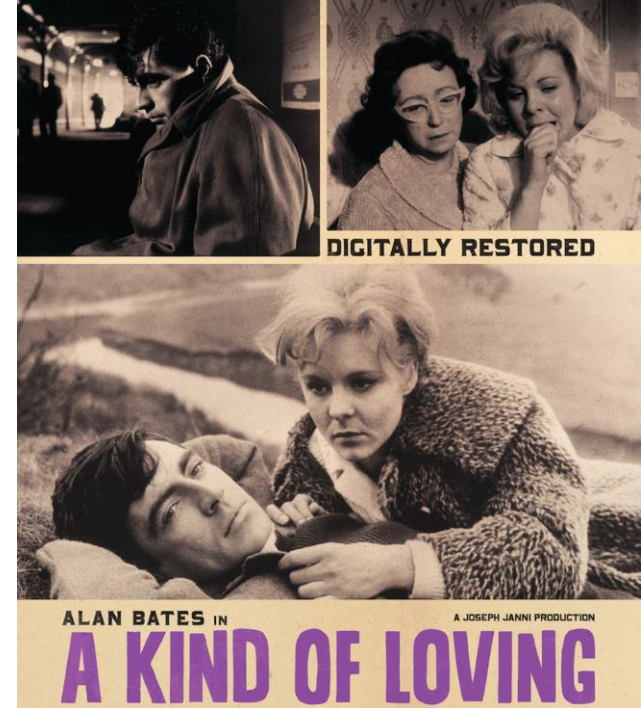
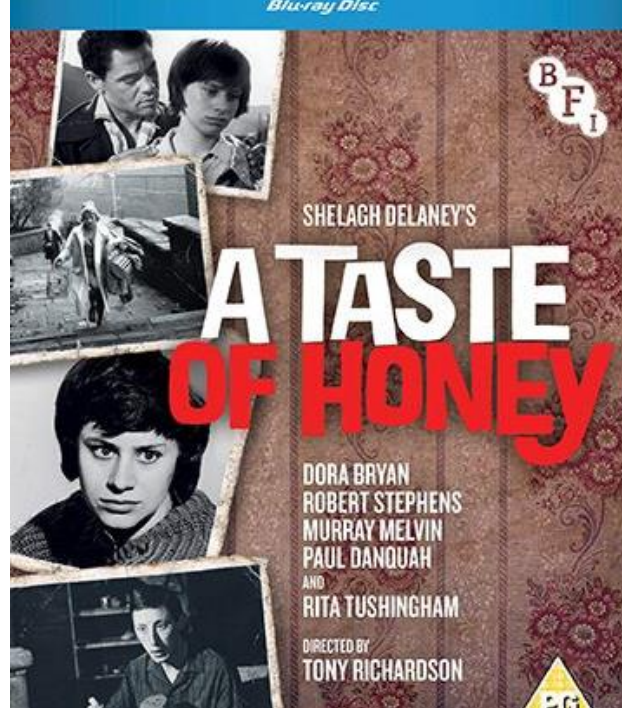
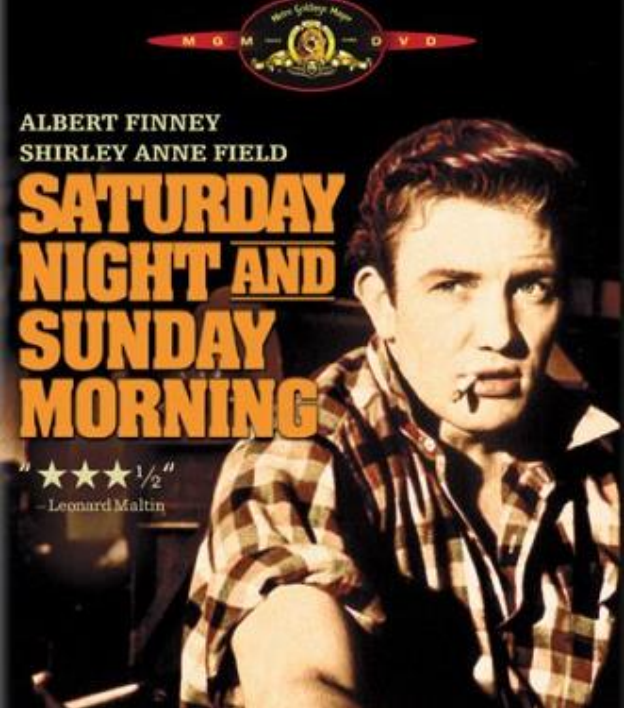
Class

the 'structural location' model vs the 'social relation' model (Marxism and historical materialism)

class understood as a location vs class understood as a determining relation

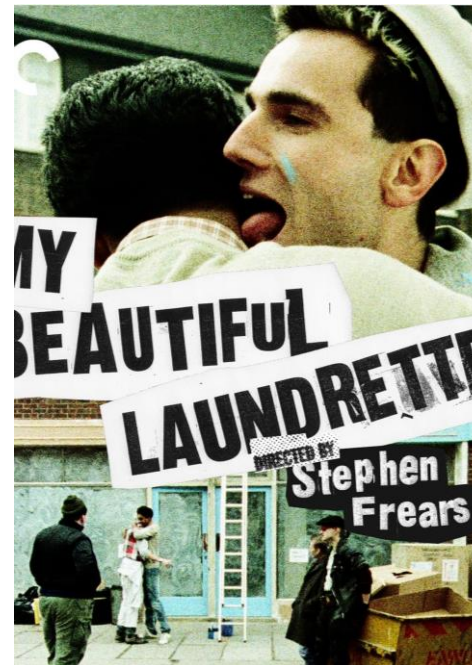
“In the former class is imagined in terms of social layers, strata, identities and groupings. [...] In the social relation model, class is understood as the force or relationship which shapes such identities and groupings” (1).

Paul Dave, *Visions of England: Class and Culture in Contemporary Cinema* (2006)



British New Wave (1959-1963)

- Angry Young Men (1950s) - British novelists and playwrights of working class or of lower middle-class origin, resentful of the established sociopolitical order and the British class system, scornful of the hypocrisy of the upper and middle classes
- 'political quietism' - the centrality of adjustment and compromise in the films
- made by educated, white, middle-class directors
- working-class characters seeking a middle-class lifestyle
- imagine the nation as white and predominantly English



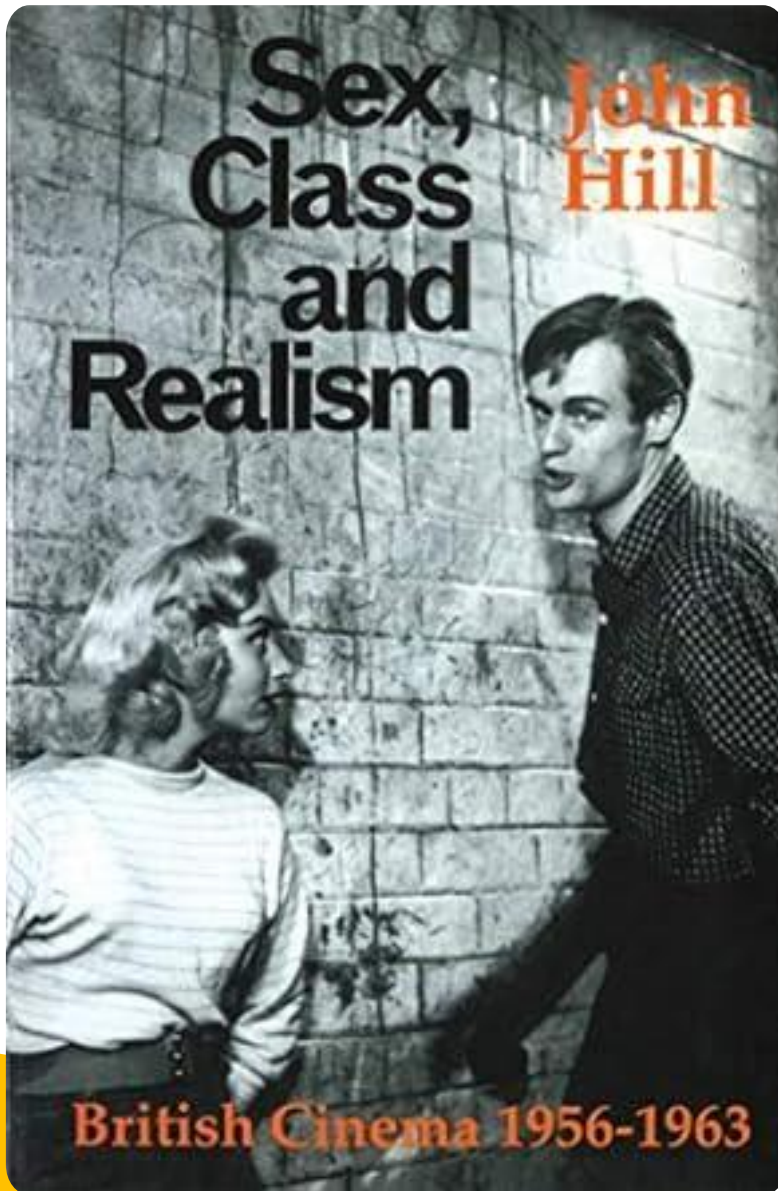
Thatcher era social realist films (1979 – 1990) - What did it mean to oppose Thatcherism with ‘realism’?

“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)

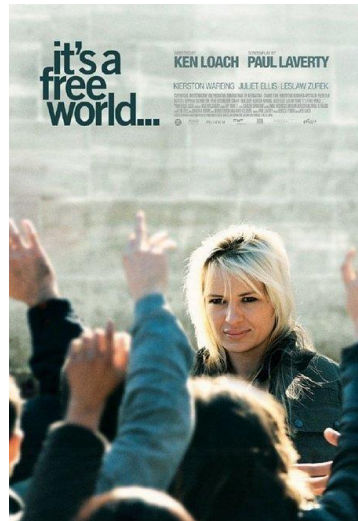
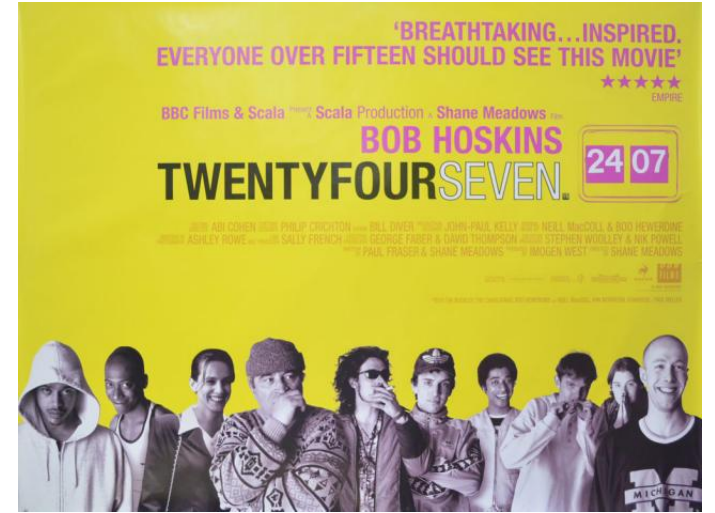
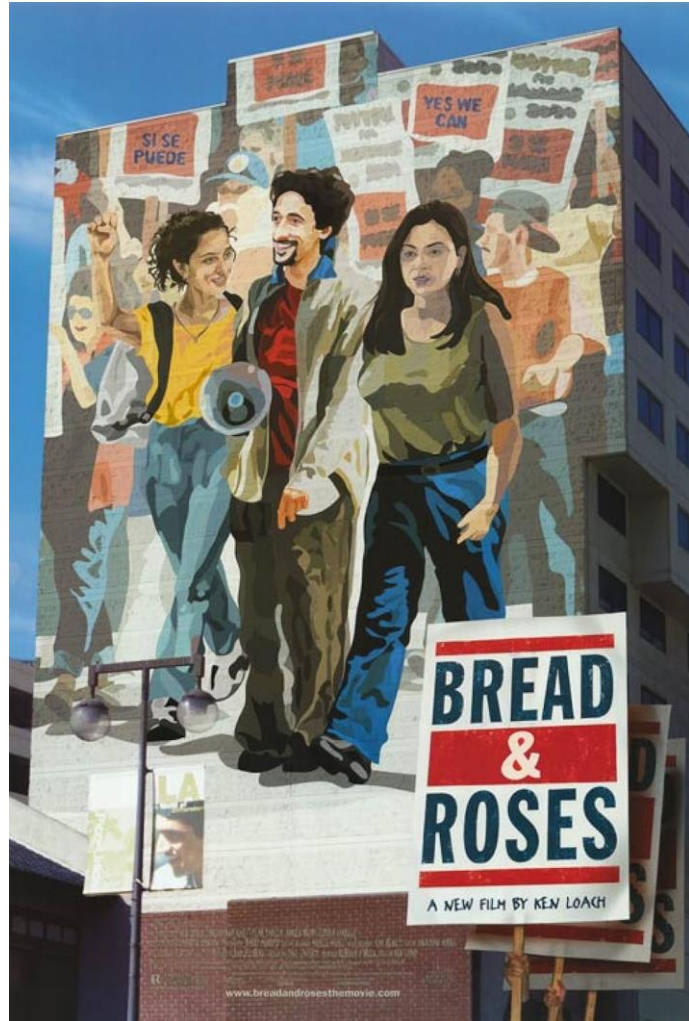
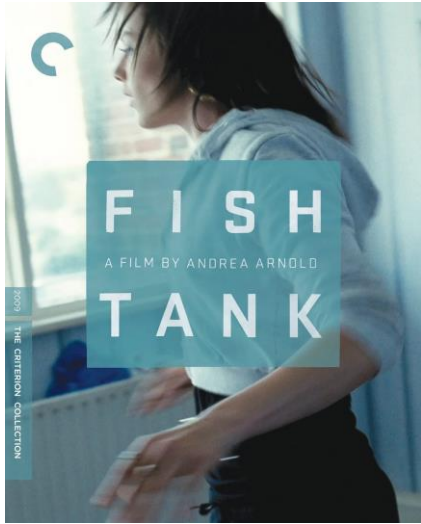
Thomas Elsaesser, “Images for Sale: The “New” British Cinema”

Social realism: realistic characters and locations + the effect of the social environment on individuals

Social realism’s representation of the socially disenfranchised – the danger of miserabilism, images of misery and degradation, unemployment and urban blight



- 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 classic realist film can only provoke the viewers’ indignation rather than awaken their political consciousness



*A declining sense of working-class unity and purpose in the wake of the Thatcher and post-Thatcher era

* Shift from a collective protagonist and an exploration of the obstacles to the formation of class consciousness and the reasons for its disintegration (*TwentyFourSeven* (1997), *Bread and Roses* (2000), *The Navigators* (2001))

to

* A single protagonist, and a displacement of 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*).



TwentyFourSeven

- sharing the same socioeconomic position does not constitute a sufficient basis for a cohesive political identity
- does not focus on class conflict but on an internal, psychological conflict - the struggle of 'the underclass' to see itself as possessing agency, to see their social position as historically contingent rather than predetermined
- the reason for the fracturing of camaraderie and solidarity is internal to the underclass (generational conflict)

The Navigators

- explores the attempts of a group of workers to navigate the transition to neoliberal work practices
- at stake is the internal cohesion of the working class, which, under the strain of the neoliberal restructuring of work, is no longer assured by its historical position or by any shared values and ideals
- the reason for the fracturing of the working class and of class solidarity is external (neoliberal restructuring)



Ken Loach

I, Daniel Blake (2016)

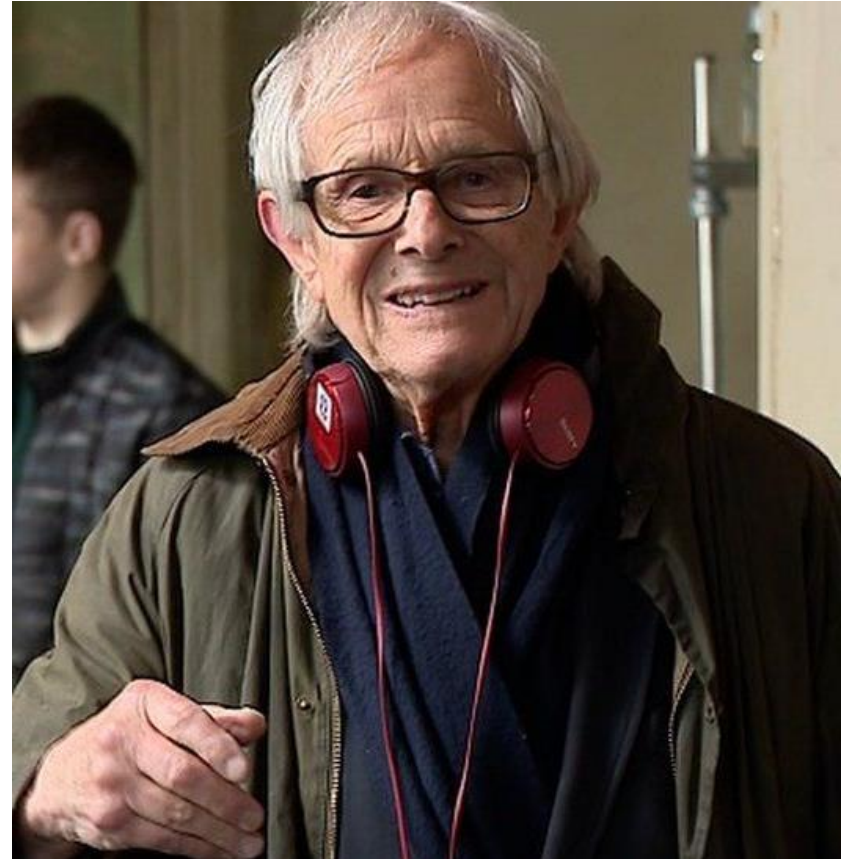
After surviving a heart-attack, a 59-year-old carpenter must fight bureaucratic forces to receive Employment and Support Allowance.

Sorry We Missed You (2019)

Ricky, a former construction worker in Newcastle, who has lost his building work and his chance of a mortgage after the 2008 economic crash, gets a job as a delivery driver on a quasi-freelance basis, with none of the benefits of conventional employment. The film follows the attempts of Ricky, his wife Abbie, a contract nurse and in-home carer, and their 2 teenaged children to survive in the gig economy.

Loach always 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 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.

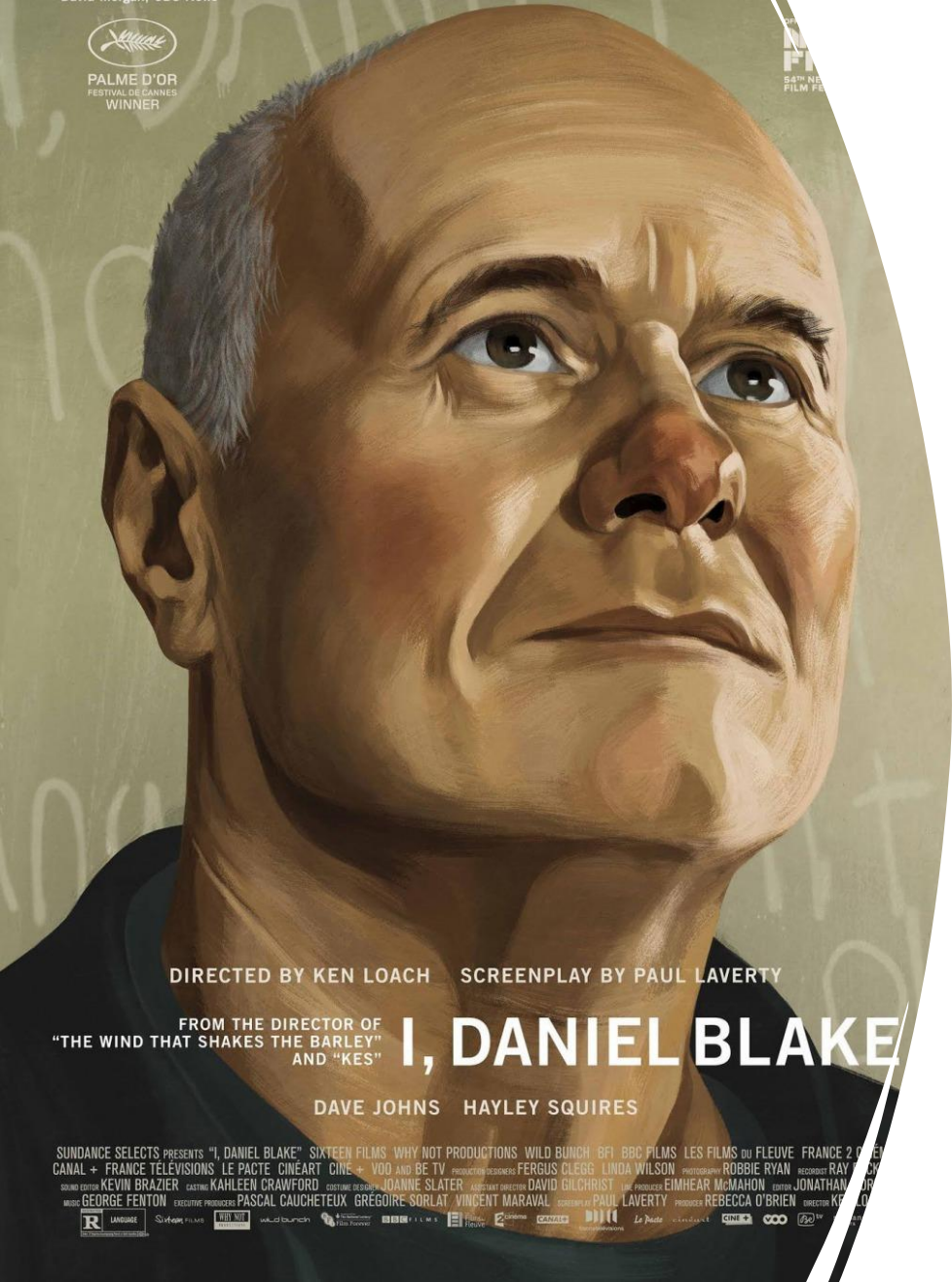


"A masterful cry
for human decency
from Ken Loach."
- David Morgan, CBS News



"Magnificent. One of Loach's very best.
DEMANDS TO BE SEEN."
- Pamela Hutchinson, Sight & Sound

"F...
fears...
- Deborah...



DIRECTED BY KEN LOACH SCREENPLAY BY PAUL LAVERTY

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF
"THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY"
AND "KES"

I, DANIEL BLAKE

DAVE JOHNS HAYLEY SQUIRES

SUNDANCE SELECTS PRESENTS "I, DANIEL BLAKE" SIXTEEN FILMS WHY NOT PRODUCTIONS WILD BUNCH BEI BBC FILMS LES FILMS DU FLEUVE FRANCE 2 OCEAN
CANAL + FRANCE TELEVISIONS LE PACTE CINEART CINE + VOD AND BE TV PRODUCTION DESIGNERS FERGUS CLEGG LINDA WILSON PHOTOGRAPHER ROBBIE RYAN RECORDIST RAY
SOUND EDITOR KEVIN BRAZIER CASTING KAHLEEN CRAWFORD COSTUME DESIGNER JOANNE SLATER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR DAVID GILCHRIST EXECUTIVE PRODUCER EIMHEAR McMAHON EDITOR JONATHAN
MUSIC BY GEORGE FENTON EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PASCAL CAUCHETEUX GREGOIRE SORLAT VINCENT MARAVAL PRODUCED BY PAUL LAVERTY PRODUCED BY REBECCA O'BRIEN DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY KEVIN
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“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.”

Toby Young (2016), “Why Only Lefties Could Go Misty Eyes at a Movie That Romanticizes Benefits Britain”



I, Daniel Blake (Ken Loach, 2016)

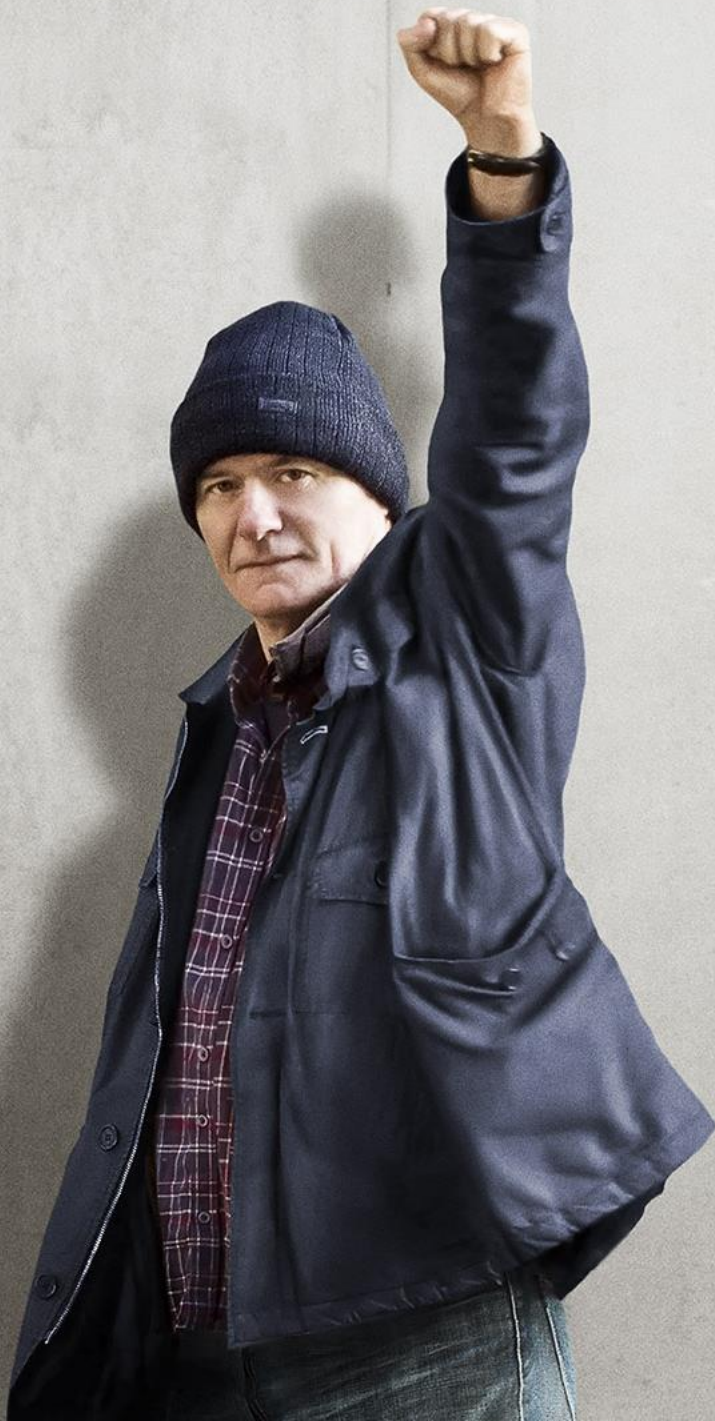
“misery porn for smug Londoners”

Camilla Long (2016), “I, Daniel Blake and Keeping Up with the Joneses”

Daniel is fighting a *personal* struggle to preserve his integrity and self-respect rather than a collective struggle targeting an inherently unjust social and political system.

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 struggle.





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.**

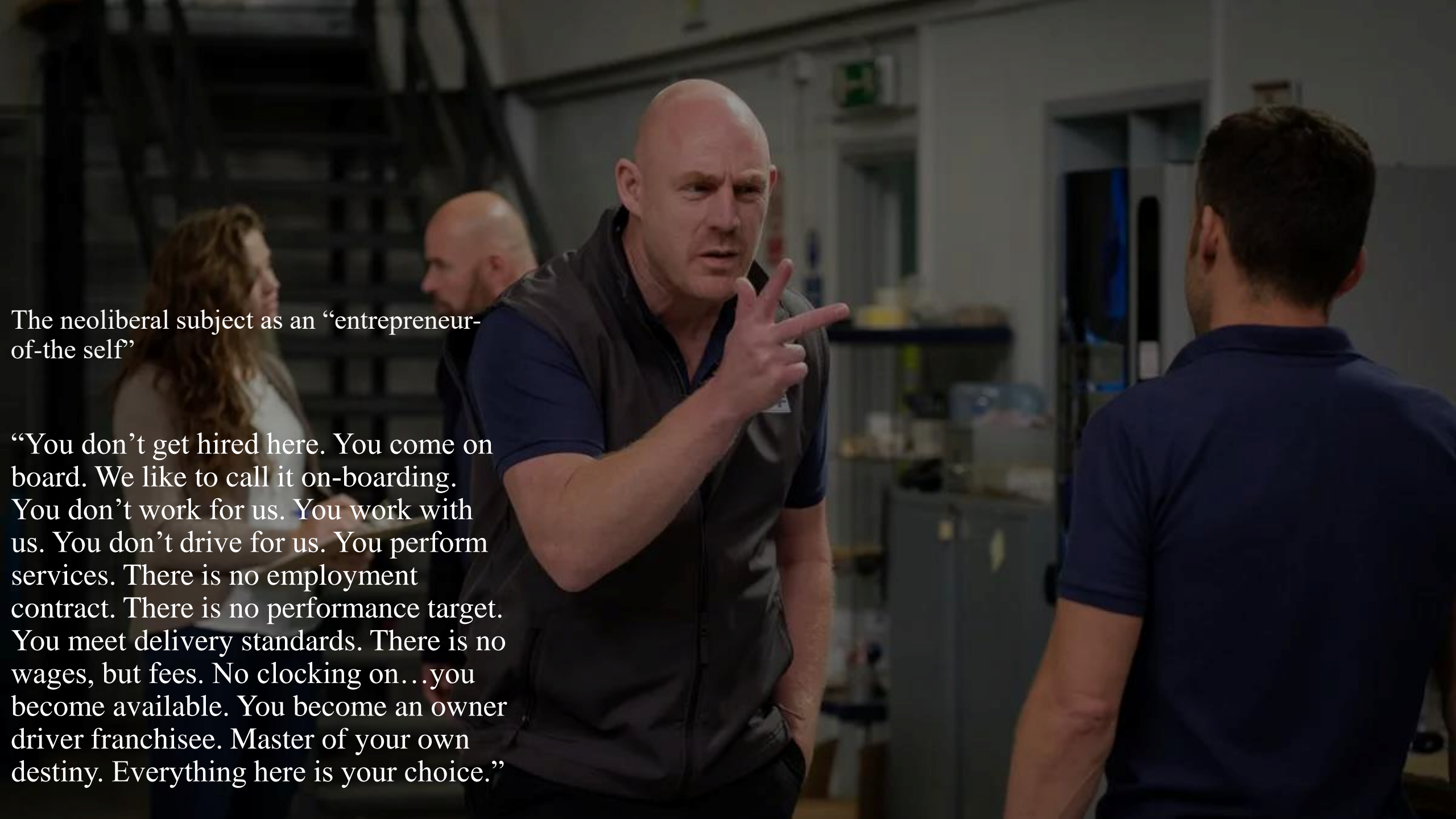
As such, **I demand my rights.** I demand you treat me with respect.

I, Daniel Blake, am a citizen, nothing more, nothing less. Thank you.

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 .



- *I, Daniel Blake* fails to challenge conventional narratives of the gendering of precarity.
- 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.

A man in a dark vest and blue shirt is pointing his finger at another man in a blue shirt. They are in a warehouse or industrial setting. There are other people in the background, including a woman with long hair and another man. The scene is dimly lit, with some equipment and shelves visible in the background.

The neoliberal subject as an “entrepreneur-of-the self”

“You don’t get hired here. You come on board. We like to call it on-boarding. You don’t work for us. You work with us. You don’t drive for us. You perform services. There is no employment contract. There is no performance target. You meet delivery standards. There is no wages, but fees. No clocking on...you become available. You become an owner driver franchisee. Master of your own destiny. Everything here is your choice.”

The vanishing of “the third place”
(sociologist Ray Oldenburg)

In the absence of a mediating
public/community realm or social space
(outside of home and work)
neoliberalism’s *structural* violence is
immediately ‘converted’ into Ricky’s
physical violence against his loved ones –
which also reaffirms the stereotypical
association of the working class with
violence



- *TwentyFourSeven* and *The Navigators* are classical narrative films, but they do not focus on an individual protagonist.
- Both films explore the difficulty of imagining a collective identity (Meadows) and sustaining that collective identity in the face of economic change (Loach)
- Though they both end in failure, this does not make them apolitical: 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, Ken Loach's recent films *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*, also classical in their form, focus on individual protagonists disengaged from collective struggle.
- Is a film that merely registers the exploitation of the working class under neoliberalism and provokes our indignation a political film? Is seeing images of attempts to constitute a collective subject and to engage in collective struggle, even if those attempts end in failure (*TwentyFourSeven*, *The Navigators*), preferable to presenting the atomization of precarity (*Sorry We Missed You*)?
- Does a film have to have a concrete effect, like *Cathy Come Home* (Loach, 1966, made for BBC; charting the descent of a young couple into poverty and homelessness), which led to the formation of the charity Crisis in 1967, and to the passing of the Homeless Persons Act in 1977, to be considered political?

The poetics of the new European
cinema of precarity: Questions of
style



Varieties of realism: Social realism, Neorealism, Psychological realism, Poetic realism, Kitchen sink realism, Socialist realism, Magical realism, Neo-neo-realism

“Realism” - historically contingent, not a simple, unmediated representation of ‘things as they are’

“Social realism is a discursive term used by film critics and reviewers to describe films that aim to show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity. Traditionally associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social policies or structural change in society, social realism tends to be associated with an observational style of camerawork that emphasises situations and events and an episodic narrative structure, creating ‘kitchen sink’ dramas and ‘gritty’ character studies of the underbelly of urban life.”

Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (2000), p.184

Ken Loach

didactic, explicitly political stories exploring the relationship between economic forces and socially marginalized characters

characters represent identifiable social classes and political systems of beliefs

straightforward narratives driven by dialogue and centered around a particular societal problem

rhetorical strategies: “discussions, meetings among co-workers, speeches, interviews, recollections, confrontations” – a clear dialectic framework that dramatizes the protagonists’ struggle against economic forces over which they have no control [Deborah Knight in *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach* (ed. George McKnight, 1997), p.66]

- *Poor Cow* (1967)
- *Kes* (1969)
- *Family Life* (1971)
- *Looks and Smiles* (1981)
- *Riff-Raff* (1991)
- *Land and Freedom* (1995)
- *Bread and Roses* (2000)
- *The Navigators* (2001)
- *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006)
- *It's a Free World...* (2007)
- *I, Daniel Blake* (2016)
- *Sorry We Missed You* (2019)
- *The Old Oak* (2023)



Merchant Ivory Productions presents
Ratcatcher
A Film by Emma Dargatzis



THE UNLOVED



Starring Paddy Considine/Dina Korzun/Artiom Strelnikov
Last Resort
A film by Pawel Pawlikowski



Beyond Ken Loach's brand of social realism



Fish Tank: a rebellious teenager living with her party-loving mother in a public housing estate falls in love with her mother's boyfriend, who seems to offer an escape from her bleak life

The Levelling: trainee vet Clover returns to the family farm in Somerset (falling apart after the 2014 floods that devastated the area) after hearing the news of her brother's death (suicide) and is forced to confront her father

Bypass: after his mother dies and his elder brother is sent to prison, a teenager is pushed into a life of crime to take care of his younger sister and himself

Better Things: set in a small, rural community, the film follows a group of young drug addicts trying to deal with their addiction problems

Beyond Loach's brand of realism - Duane Hopkins, Shane Meadows, Richard Billingham, Mark Jenkin, Andrea Arnold, Clio Barnard and others

- poetic realism vs Loach's didactic realism; departs from the didacticism and instrumentalism of Ken Loach – more ambiguous, indirect, lyrical
- poetic because of their heightened aestheticism that foregrounds the cinematic aspects of the films (e.g. long takes, the use of space not only as a setting for action but as important in itself)
- use cinematic techniques to provide oblique social commentary (rather than making that apparent in the dialogue)
- examination of the relationship between environment and identity – beyond a deterministic account of social, economic and cultural forces
- a type of realism that foregrounds sensory engagement: a poetics of quotidian sound and imagery (images of the mundane, the quotidian, the unremarkable); attentiveness to lived experience (the banal moments of everyday life) –
- intimate, participatory, experiential films
- generally young protagonists (often children or young adults)
- authenticity - directors drawing on their personal experiences or their personal, regional geographies (outside London)
- frequent use of non-professional actors
- landscape - distinctly domestic (regional) iconographies, poetic treatment of locations vs the emphasis on narrative and visual clarity in Loach's films
- despite the progressive tendencies of these films, the nation is imagined as overwhelmingly white, and almost always English
- with a few exceptions (This Is England, Fish Tank) not commercially successful (though successful at film festivals)

Institutional and production context

- partly funded by the UK Film Council's 'New Cinema Fund' intended to support "cutting edge films which were not expected to make a profit but actually were meant to encourage filmmakers who didn't really fit into the normal commercial bag"
- the role of regional film infrastructure:
 - growth in regionally based short film schemes to support new writers and directors
 - creation of nine Regional Screen Agencies following New Labour's election victory in 1997
 - the Regional Screen Agencies invested in low-budget feature film production, films produced by small independent production companies and funded through co-production deals mostly between a RSA and a broadcaster.

2011 – closure of 9 RSAs and of the UK Film Council (its functions were taken over by the British Film Institute film fund)



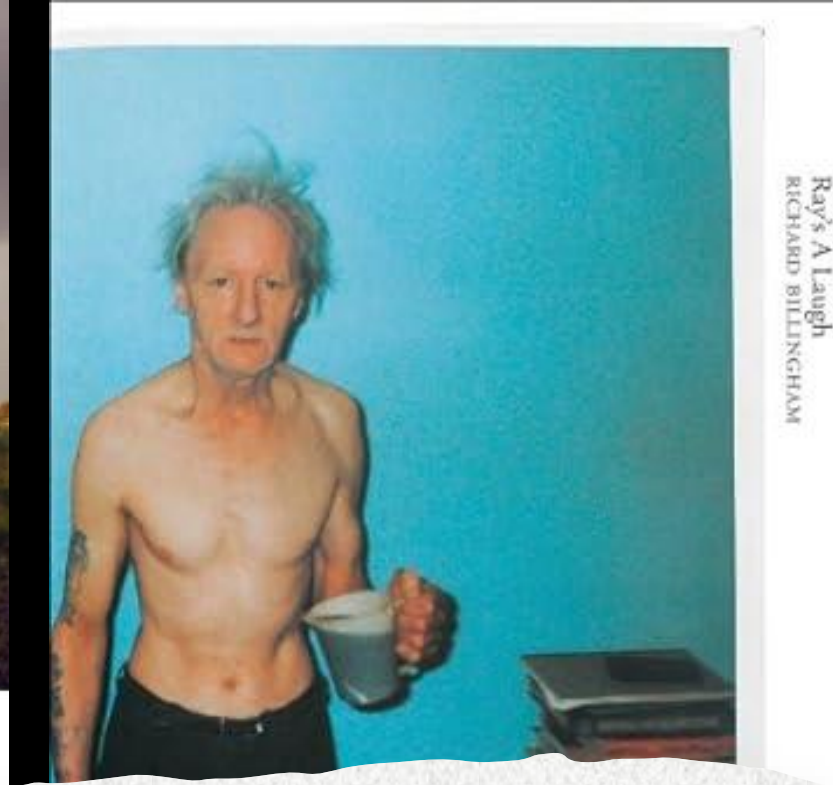
Shane Meadows

- *Small Time* (1996)
- *Twenty Four Seven* (1997)
- *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999)
- *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2002)
- *Dead Man's Shoes* (2004)
- *This Is England* (2006)
- *Somers Town* (2008)
- *Le Donk & Scor-zay-zee* (2009)
- *This Is England '86* (2010) (TV series)
- *This Is England '88* (2011) (TV series)
- *This Is England '90* (2015) (TV series)
- *The Virtues* (2019) (TV series)
- *The Gallows Pole* (2023) (TV series)

the value of lived experience (autobiographical), low-budget, DIY approach to filmmaking, improvisation, a more nuanced version of social realism combining art cinema with oblique sociopolitical commentary



LANDSCAPES 2001-2003 RICHARD BILLINGHAM



Ray's A Laugh
RICHARD BILLINGHAM



BLACK COUNTRY
RICHARD BILLINGHAM

Richard Billingham

- Candid, autobiographical work
- Photobook *Ray's a Laugh* (1996) documenting the life of his alcoholic father Ray and his heavily tattooed mother Liz (the photos were originally intended as studies for paintings)
- Photobook *Black Country* (2003) documenting the post-industrial landscape of Cradley Heath where Billingham was born and grew up
- Other photobooks: *Zoo* (2007) and *Landscapes, 2001–2003* (2008)
- short films: *Fishtank* (1998) and *Ray* (2016), which he adapted into his feature film *Ray & Liz* (2018)



Ray and Liz

“It is certainly not my intention to shock, to offend, sensationalise, be political or whatever. Only to make work that is as spiritually meaningful as I can make it. Whatever the medium.”

Richard Billingham, May 1996



social issues are filtered through his interdisciplinary art practice (photography, painting, film)

autobiographical, intimate, privileges questions of authenticity over the measured, objective exploration of pressing social issues *a la* Ken Loach

loose, episodic narrative rather than classical narration



denies the viewer access to the characters’ inner life, letting us instead observe them from a distance - an aesthetics of detachment vs Loach’s melodramatic tendencies



Mark Jenkin, Cornish filmmaker

- Shorts
 - 2003 *The Man Who Needed a Traffic Light*
 - 2009 *Aurora's Kiss*
 - 2012 *Last Post*
 - 2013 *Cape Cornwall Calling / All the White Horses*
 - 2015 *Bronco's House*
 - 2016 *Enough to Fill Up an Egg Cup*
 - 2016 *Dear Marianne* (short)
 - 2016 *The Essential Cornishman*
 - 2017 *The Road to Zennor*
 - 2017 *Tomato*
 - 2018 *Vertical Shapes in a Horizontal Landscape*
 - 2019 *Hard, Cracked the Wind*
- Features
 - 2019 *Bait*
 - 2022 *Enys Men*

a synthesis of the melodramatic address of silent cinema (expressive close ups, Eisenstein-inspired editing, post-dubbed dialogues), the neorealism of Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948), and the realism of British kitchen sink drama

refracts the social problem—the disappearance of Cornwall's traditional way of life—through an aesthetic one, the precariousness/obsolescence of 16mm film

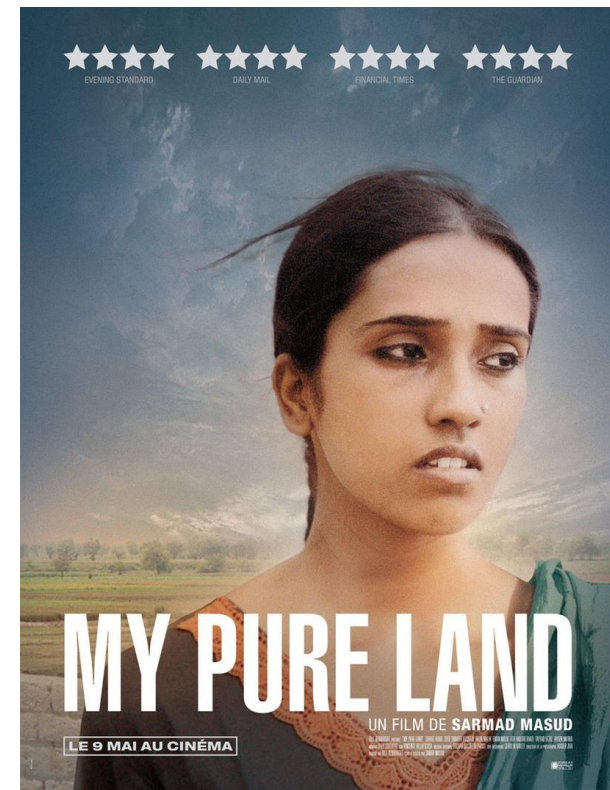
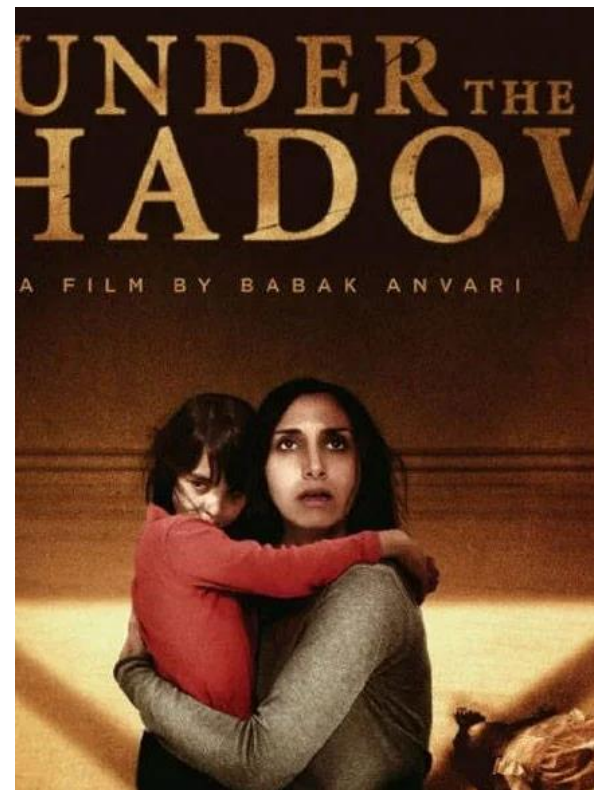
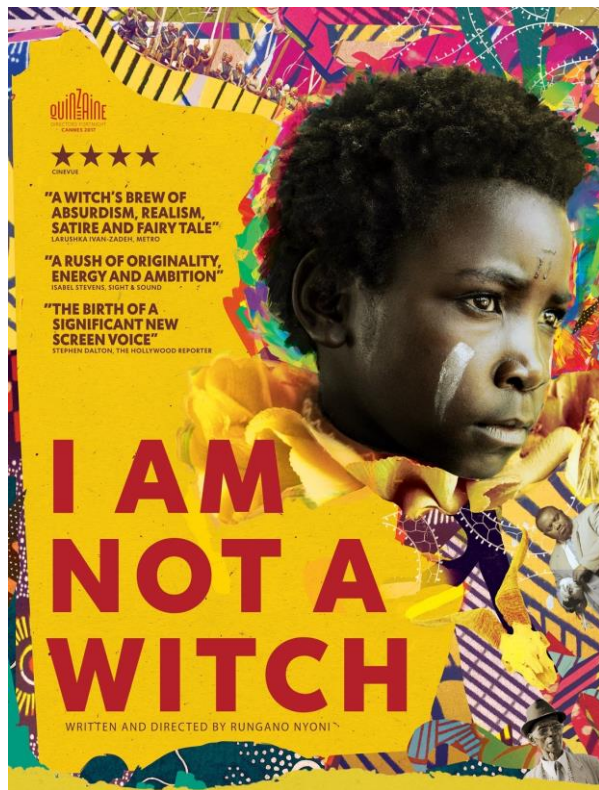
The end of British social realism or a new beginning?

Clive Nwonka, *Has the fire burnt out?: New Labour and the end of British social realism* (PhD dissertation)

--valorizes Ken Loach's brand of explicitly committed realism vs the new poetic realist films which are "politically neutral," "sentimental" and "escapist", complicit in a "decontextualization of poverty, which reduces the filmic narrative of inequality to a behavioral rather than a socio-political consequence"; "complicit in an erosion of social collectivity replaced by individualism, personal agency and the supposed disintegration of class identities"

--For Nwonka (drawing on the Brechtian tradition) emotional responses to a film trap us into the perspective of individual characters and serve as a barrier to critical reflection

--Does appealing to emotions - through intense identification with the protagonist and through a lyrical style that eschews didacticism - lead to the effacement of politics?



The next wave of realism in British cinema?

Shola Amoo (*A Moving Image*, 2016)

Babak Anvari (*Under the Shadow*, 2016)

Rungano Nyoni (*I Am Not a Witch*, 2017)

Sarmad Masud (*My Pure Land*, 2017)

Thank you!