

**EURAC Global Fellow Lecture 1**  
**June 28, 2023**  
**Bolzano, Italy (online)**

**Visions of Neoliberal Europe:  
Fragmented Struggle and Ethical Dilemmas in Contemporary European Cinema**

**SLIDE** 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 a way of governing economies or states, neoliberalism 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 rise in flexible and precarious forms of labour, the growth of the knowledge economy, the reduction of welfare state provisions, the suppression of unions, and the association of migration with illegality. While many scholars trace the emergence of ‘precarity’ as a concept of socio-economic struggle to the late 1990s anti-globalization protests in Seattle and Genoa, driven by nostalgia and anger towards the disappearance of Fordism, others remind us that the main reason “precarity has received increased attention is that its distribution has come to affect the once-privileged subject of both capitalist production and colonial extraction: the middle-class white male.” While ‘precariousness’ constitutes “a shared condition that makes human bodies dependent on social and political infrastructures,” ‘precarity’ is “the effect of social and political apparatuses that seek to compensate for precariousness by distributing its effects unequally” (Van Milders). **SLIDE** The term ‘precariat’ was popularized by Guy Standing, 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. Standing considers ‘the precariat’ a ‘class in the making’ rather than a class in the Marxist sense and emphasizes the precariat’s limited possibilities for organized struggle.

Over the last two decades studies exploring neoliberalism, precarity, labor and class in cinema have proliferated. **SLIDES 2 and 3** These studies adopt a comparative approach to uncover similarities and differences in the iconography of precarity across national cinemas. Some of the subjects they explore include precarious labor, downward mobility, the gendering of precarity and intersectional struggles, the social invisibility of ‘the precariat’, individual refusal and collective agency etc.

**SLIDE 4** Precarity extends beyond the expression of an economic condition to indicate an entire ‘affective environment’, a sense of individualised insecurity, and the loss of social and existential status—consider, for example, Sianne Ngai’s discussion of envy, anxiety, irritation, resentment and paranoia in *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Guy Standing’s emphasis on the precariat’s anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), and Lauren Berlant’s analysis of ‘post-Fordist affect’, the affective language of anxiety, contingency and precarity in *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Berlant traces the shift in the meaning of ‘precarity’ “from limited structure to pervasive life environment” to the period of neoliberal restructuring in the guise of flexible labor from the 1980s onwards and identifies an emergent aesthetics she calls ‘the cinema of precarity.’<sup>1</sup> Featuring characters cut off from futurity, and often articulating impasse,<sup>2</sup> the cinema of precarity explores social problems like unemployment, labor unrest, class conflicts and our various ‘adjustment strategies’ to neoliberalism’s extension of economic logic to non-economic areas of life.<sup>3</sup>

**SLIDE 5** Historical predecessors. Unlike its predecessors, the new European cinema of precarity is distinguished by a wide range of genres and styles, traditional ‘social realism’ being no longer sufficient to capture Europe’s political, economic and moral crisis. **SLIDES 6, 7 and 8** It includes allegorical and magical realist films [*Happy as Lazzaro* (Alice Rohrwacher, 2018); *Transit* (Christian Petzold, 2018)], experimental films [*Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019)], black comedies [*Glory* (Kristina Grozeva and Petar Valchanov, 2016); *My Piece of the Pie* (Cédric Klapisch, 2011); *Crash Test Aglaé* (Eric Gravel, 2017)], social dramas [*The Measure of a Man* (Stéphane Brizé, 2015) and *At War* (Stéphane Brizé, 2018)], psychological thrillers [*Early One Morning* (Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011); *The Origin of Evil* (Sebastien Marnier, 2022)], and factory musicals [*Dancer in the Dark* (Lars von Trier, 2000), *The Nothing Factory* (Pedro Pinho, 2017)].

I will now look at a small sample of representative films to make four claims:

**SLIDE 9** 1) The cinema of precarity depicts precarity as an experience shared by very different subjects, urging us to imagine potential conditions of solidarity among individuals *without* a shared identity or history.

2) The cinema of precarity registers the disintegration of working-class identity and a declining sense of class solidarity. In the absence of radical universalizing discourses of class-based struggle and traditional leftist political alternatives, the cinema of precarity focuses on individual protagonists struggling on their own and is often unable to envision new forms of *collective* struggle.

3) Inasmuch as it focuses on individual protagonists and their struggles, the cinema of precarity tends to reframe class struggle in moral or ethical terms.

4) The cinema of precarity is stylistically and generically diverse i.e., it goes beyond the familiar conventions of ‘social realism’.

## 1. Imagining potential conditions of solidarity among individuals *without* a shared identity or history

A growing number of studies invite us to see ‘precarity’ as a political tool rather than a socioeconomic condition from which there is no escape, trying 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).<sup>1</sup> In *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (2022)<sup>1</sup> Francesco Sticchi also tries to identify new *ethical* alternatives to the risk-taking, self-optimizing neoliberal ‘entrepreneur of the self’. Drawing on feminist and decolonial affect theories in *Precarious Intimacies: The Politics of Touch in Contemporary Western European Cinema* (2020)<sup>1</sup> Maria Stehle and Beverly Weber probe the tension between the experience of political and economic vulnerability depicted in contemporary European films and the precarious intimacies that arise out of such vulnerability.

**SLIDE 10** Let me provide some examples. [*Princesas* (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2005), *It’s a Free World* (Ken Loach, 2007), *Amador* (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2010), *La Nostra Vita* (Daniele Luchetti, 2010), *Shun Li and the Poet* (Andrea Segre, 2011), *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialesi, 2011), *My Piece of the Pie* (Cedric Klapisch, 2011), *Three Worlds* (Catherine Corsini, 2012), *Eat Sleep Die* (Gabriela Pichler, 2012), *Two Days, One Night* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 2014), *Mediterranea* (Jonas Carpignano, 2015), *Twin Flower* (Laura Luchetti, 2018) etc.] foreground the structural and affective affinities between disenfranchised European citizens, non-citizens, and non-Europeans, inviting us to envision new conditions of solidarity between individuals *without* a shared identity or history.

*Princesas* explores transnational reciprocity and female solidarity between Spanish working girls and Dominican immigrants through the relationship between a middle-class Spanish woman and a Dominican sex worker. *Amador* focuses on the friendship between a precarious Bolivian ‘illegal’ immigrant Marcela, the middle-class Spanish man for whom she is a caretaker, and a precarious Andalusian neighbor and sex worker. *It’s a Free World* centers on a working-class British woman who, after losing her job, sets up her own recruitment agency, through which she hires ‘illegal’ workers from Eastern Europe. *La Nostra Vita* follows Claudio, who, following the unexpected death of his wife in childbirth, negotiates a deal with his boss to give him his own construction site to supervise, in exchange for which Claudio promises not to report the death of an illegal Romanian worker that his boss is covering up. His site workers—mostly illegal migrants—quit when Claudio finds himself unable to pay them. The film depicts the Italian working class as sharing the

same precarious existence as that of immigrants, both ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’. *Mediterranea* traces the friendship between an ‘illegal’ migrant from Burkina Faso working as an orange picker in Italy and Pio, an Italian Romani boy of lower-class origins, a relationship rooted in their shared socio-economic disenfranchisement. *Terraferma* examines the affinities between a family of fishermen in Lampedusa and a group of African refugees. *Twin Flower*, set in Sardinia, follows the romance between two teenagers on the run: a girl running away from the human trafficker for whom her father used to work, and a refugee from Cote d’Ivoire. The film draws a parallel between the experience of refugees and various socially disenfranchised Italians (sex workers, transvestites, beggars, human traffickers). *My Piece of the Pie* draws a similar parallel between the precarious existence of a French woman, a single mother named France recently laid off, and migrant workers, one of whom finds her a job on the condition that France speak with a foreign accent since the job is meant for migrants. *Eat Sleep Die* paints a realistic picture of the equally precarious existence of working-class Swedes and migrants, both laid off from the factory where they all work. *Cover Boy* centers on the friendship between a young Romanian man who travels to Rome in search of work, and a 40-year-old Italian man working as a cleaner at Rome’s Termini station.

## **2. From collective to individual struggle: the declining sense of class identity and solidarity**

Contemporary European films reflect a declining sense of working-class unity and purpose. **SLIDE 11** If we look at British cinema, for example, we see that not only do most recent British films focus on individual protagonists, but they also displace issues 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.

Even the most recent films of a committed left-wing filmmaker like Ken Loach, *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), fail to envision new forms of collective struggle. While *I, Daniel Blake* was mostly positively received, some called it ‘misery porn for smug Londoners’ (Long 2016). After suffering a heart attack at work, Daniel 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 he can’t take. When the absurdity of his predicament drives him to defiantly

spray paint the walls of the Benefits centre, Daniel is arrested. Far from offering a coherent vision of collective struggle, the film depicts revolt 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 young black man, with a sympathetic Job center employee, and with the precariously employed single mother Katie.<sup>4</sup> However, the film fails to challenge conventional narratives of the gendering of precarity—Daniel's relationship with Katie establishes him as a protective male figure<sup>5</sup> while Katie is presented with typically gendered alternatives to precarity (sex work).<sup>6</sup> Daniel's 'revolt' does not challenge the system but only its inefficiency – it is a *personal* struggle to preserve his integrity and self-respect rather than a collective struggle targeting an inherently unjust social and political system: his autograph beneath his spray-painted revolt reads 'I, Daniel Blake', not 'We, Daniel Blake'.

Recent French films also focus on individual protagonists disengaged from collective struggle. **SLIDE 12** Erik Gravel's *Crash Test Aglaé* (2017) tells the story of a young, socially awkward woman (Aglaé) working in a car crash test laboratory. When the company suddenly moves the entire factory offshore Aglaé decides to follow her job to Kolkata rather than face the prospect of redundancy. Although the film starts out as an industrial action story as soon as Aglaé hits the road her story is reframed as a *personal* quest: her self-emancipation from a work-slave to an independent woman comes at the cost of class emancipation. Her absurd journey to India becomes an instant media sensation and forces the Swiss owner of the factory to rethink offshoring and to offer Aglaé her job back. Invited to give a press conference for the sake of her co-workers in France, for whom she has become a symbol of class struggle, Aglaé refuses, choosing instead to stay in India, where she 'feels more herself'. The film's critique of offshoring as a principle of global neoliberal capitalism devolves into an acceptance of the neoliberal discourse of precarity as an 'opportunity' to 'reinvent' oneself.<sup>7</sup>

**SLIDE 13** With a propulsive editing style and an ominous electronic score *Full Time* (Erik Gravel, 2021) follows Julie, a 40-ish single mother living in the suburbs of Paris, from the moment when she gets her kids ready for school, through her long commute to Paris, interrupted by transport strikes, to her evening journey back home, which depends on replacement bus services and hitched rides. In the absence of any safety nets Julie is dependent on a precarious support network: an elderly neighbor is reluctantly minding her kids; her co-workers occasionally cover for her but only when it suits them; strangers give her rides to Paris. The film foregrounds the difficulty of precarious subjects to organize themselves politically: it's not an accident that the event that disrupts Julie's daily commute and her attempts to secure a full-time job is a transit strike, which she supports but in which



she cannot afford to participate. All she can do is look for partial individual solutions to her own problems. [cf. *Run Lola Run*, Tom Tykwer, 1999]

**SLIDE 14** The first half of *Zero Fucks Given* (Julie Lecoustre and Emmanuel Marre, 2021), which centers on Cassandre, a flight attendant for a low-cost airline company, is shot in cinema verité style, featuring real flight attendants. The combination of dynamic editing, impressionistic shots framed in a quasi-home movie style, and a soundtrack that alternates between elevator music and Eurotrash hits, captures the repetitive, disorienting existence of flight attendants and precarious workers in general. Like Julie, Cassandre is suspended in a perpetual, scavenging present, unable to project herself either in the past (and thus unable to find solace or inspiration in historical revolutionary struggles and in a shared sense of working-class identity) or in the future (by envisioning a different order of things). In one scene the flight attendants are invited by striking airport employees to join their fight for better pay and working conditions, but the flight attendants are too busy working to think about the future. “I don’t even know if I will be alive tomorrow!” Cassandre laughs as she runs to catch her next flight. While the film dramatizes the production of neoliberal subjectivity through rhetoric, training, surveillance and self-surveillance, like *Crash Test Aglae* it filters its potential critique of precarious work through the protagonist’s personal trauma when, in a moment of drunken stupor, Cassandre tells another flight attendant that her mother died a few years ago in a tragic car accident. Cassandre, we are meant to understand, has freely *chosen* the exploitative, emotionally destructive, and precarious work for a low-cost airline as a way of dealing with personal trauma.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. One result of the declining sense of class unity and solidarity is that precarity is increasingly framed as an ethical or moral issue rather than a class issue.**

**SLIDE 15** In the absence of *universalizing political* ideals, the cinema of precarity often frames class conflicts and class struggle in terms of *moral or ethical* dilemmas, which seem to provide the only *universal* framework within which we can envision possible alternatives to neoliberalism. In many of these films the ‘price’ one has to pay to stay financially afloat is repeatedly framed in ethical or moral terms. In Catherine Corsini’s *Three Worlds* (2012) the protagonist accidentally kills an illegal Moldovan immigrant and has to cover up his death if he wants to get the promotion he has been working for; in *The Measure of a Man* (Stephane Brizé, 2015) a recently unemployed man lands a job as a security guard in a supermarket where he is forced to spy on his co-workers, one of whom commits suicide after she is caught stealing; in *Saint Georges* (Marco Martins, 2016) an unemployed factory worker and boxer struggling to keep his Brazilian wife and son from leaving Portugal is forced to become a debt collector and intimidate his fellow countrymen who have defaulted on their loans.

Paolo Virzi's *Human Capital* (2013) also displaces questions of class and structural injustices onto *ethical* questions about the 'value' of human life. The film begins with a hit-and-run accident: a waiter riding his bicycle home gets run off the road by an SUV that flees the scene of the crime. After the crash, the film flashes back six months and shows the events leading up to the crash from three different perspectives, introducing us to a wealthy hedge-fund manager, his wife, their teenaged son (who might or might not have been driving the car), his girlfriend, and her father, a small-time real estate agent with ambitions to climb up the social ladder. The film's title refers to the insurance industry's term determining the worth of a human life when negotiating a settlement, a formula based on the person's age at the time of death, their earning capacity, the quantity and quality of their emotional bonds i.e., their 'human capital.'

In Massimo Venier's *Generazione mille euro* (2009) Matteo, a math graduate, is forced to accept a job in the marketing office of a telecommunications company, which is about to cut back on personnel. Matteo is faced with an ethical choice between moral integrity and capitalist profit, between remaining precarious but preserving his humanity and integrity as a person, friend and romantic partner, and climbing up the social and career ladder by accepting a lucrative job in Barcelona his seductive female boss offers him. *I Can Quit Whenever I Want* (Sydney Sibilia, 2014) could be seen as a sequel to *Generazione mille euros*, finding the characters of the earlier film later in their lives—in their early 30s—and working manual labor jobs for which they are overqualified. The story follows Pietro, a brilliant molecular biologist who fails to secure a permanent university contract. Unable to break the news to his girlfriend, and skeptical about the usefulness of participating in yet another protest of university adjuncts in front of Parliament, Pietro stumbles upon a brilliant scheme of making a new recreational drug and selling it in nightclubs and puts together a team of former university friends, unemployed or forced into badly paid manual jobs.<sup>9</sup> After allowing himself to be seduced by the 'high life' of a successful drug dealer, Pietro is arrested and sentenced to a year in prison. What matters most, the film suggests, is that Pietro remain a 'good guy' and a reliable partner/future father, that he doesn't 'sell out'.

#### **4. The Poetics of the new European cinema of precarity: beyond social realism**

The expository, often didactic, approach to social issues has always been a hallmark of social realism. However, unlike previous film movements or styles of committed cinema, which generally follow the conventions of social realism, the cinema of precarity is stylistically and generically diverse—from psychological thrillers through comedies to crime films—and increasingly transcends the limits of social realism. This is especially visible in British cinema, which used to be virtually

synonymous with the tradition of social realism. **SLIDE 16** While British filmmakers continue to explore pressing social issues, they do so in a much more self-conscious and often intimate<sup>10</sup> way than Ken Loach's brand of social realism, for example by moving towards a hybrid of art cinema and sociopolitical commentary [*TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997)], commenting on the medium of film itself [e.g., *Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019)], or exploring the intermedial relation between film and other visual arts [e.g., *Ray & Liz* (Richard Billingham, 2018)].

Many European migrant films try to dramatize the experience of migrants or refugees by implicitly structuring their stories as responses to the question "How far would migrants and refugees go to make it to "Fortress Europe"? Similarly, when the cinema of precarity enters genre territory it often borrows the elimination logic of reality shows like *Survivor* (2000) and *Squid Game* (2021), which divide the world into 'winners' and 'losers', to ask: "How far would one go to 'win' or simply to survive?" Unsurprisingly, mental breakdown, suicide and murder, both among blue-collar and white-collar workers, feature with increasing regularity in the cinema of precarity [Mrs. Anselmi's suicide in *The Measure of a Man*, Vincent's (symbolic) suicide in *Time Out*, Gregoire's suicide in *The Father of My Children*, Laurent's suicide in *At War*.] **SLIDE 17** For example, in Francesca Comencini's *I Like to Work* (*Mi Piace Lavorare* (*Mobbing*), 2004) a firm tries to force a woman to resign from her job by using increasingly humiliating tactics that push her to the edge of a mental breakdown. In *Father of My Children* (Mia Hansen-Love, 2009) a French film producer who has his own film company learns that he is 4 million euros in debt and that his catalogue of films, already mortgaged, is only worth less than a million euros. After he commits suicide, his wife tries, and fails, to honor his memory by completing the work in production. In *Early One Morning* (Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011), Paul, a senior executive at an investment bank, arrives in the office, takes out a gun, shoots his boss and another employee, locks himself in his office and, while he waits for the police, reflects on the events leading up to this day, starting with the arrival of his new ruthless boss, under whom Paul increasingly finds himself sidelined and eventually made redundant because of his "poor metrics." In *Heartbeat Detector/La question humaine* (Nicolas Klotz, 2007) Kessler, a psychologist employed by a company to evaluate the mental health of its employees and advise on firings and hirings, uncovers disturbing connections between the workings of the corporation and the Holocaust, as a result of which his perception of reality becomes skewed.

Against this morbid background of suicides and murders, the unreliable narrator and the femme fatale, staples of film noir, have recently resurfaced in thrillers centered on precarious female characters. **SLIDE 18** Unlike the female protagonists of films like Silvio Soldini's *Days and Clouds* (2007) and Paolo Virzi's *Tutta la vita davanti* (2008), who are depicted as resourceful and capable of



adapting to their precarious circumstances—in contrast to the men around them, who tragically fail to adapt—the female protagonists of Sébastien Marnier’s *Faultless* (2016) and *The Origin of Evil* (2022) are equally if not more resourceful than Elsa (*Days and Clouds*) and Marta (*Tutta la vitta davanti*); however, their ‘adaptation strategies’ (to use Lauren Berlant’s term) push them closer and closer to the verge of a psychotic break.

**SLIDE 19** *Faultless* (Sébastien Marnier, 2016), which mixes elements of the crime film, psychological thriller, and film noir, follows 40-year-old Constance, who, after losing her job as a real estate agent in Paris, returns to her hometown in rural France hoping to get a job at the small real estate company where she used to work before moving to Paris. However, her former boss hires a younger woman (Audrey), who is willing to work for less than a living wage. Constance becomes obsessed with the idea of getting rid of her rival. She begins stalking Audrey, posing as an apartment hunter under an assumed name to infiltrate her life.<sup>11</sup> The film was generally received as a psychological thriller about a sociopath “intent on getting her old job back, no matter what it takes.”<sup>12</sup> What I think is most important about the film, however, is the way it depicts precarity as indicating an entire ‘affective environment’ rather than merely an economic condition.<sup>13</sup> Constance’s obsession with getting a job is not motivated entirely by the pressing need for money but by a *deeper psychological need*, which the opening scene hints at. Constance wakes up from a nap, in her Paris apartment, and lights a cigarette but is interrupted by a real estate agent who is showing the apartment to a young couple. Constance quickly comes up with an excuse, collects her belongings in a small suitcase and leaves the apartment. It is this painful sense of shame and failure that motivates her subsequent actions. Unable to actively change her circumstances, the only way she can exercise agency is in the form of verbal persuasion (she tries to convince Audrey to leave her job and join her fiancée in Russia) and pranks (she deletes appointments from Audrey’s agenda, turns off the power in her house so Audrey doesn’t hear her alarm clock in the morning, etc.) There is a long history of pranks as a political tactics (the Situationists were particularly fond of them)<sup>14</sup>; Constance’s pranks, however, are not so much a form of resistance as an indication of her loss of agency, which she desperately tries to reclaim by literally trying to ‘be’ Audrey: she breaks into Audrey’s house, lounges in her bedroom, eats her food, showers in her bathroom, sleeps in her bed.

**SLIDE 20** Nathalie, the protagonist of Marnier’s next film, *The Origin of Evil* (2022), also tries to reclaim her sense of agency by literally assuming the identity of the person she wants to be. The pitch - a woman on the verge of financial collapse attempts to reconnect with her wealthy, estranged father and his new family - seems straightforward enough; however, nothing about the story is straightforward. Some critics called the film “an homage to Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*,

with echoes of Agatha Christie.<sup>15</sup> **SLIDE 21** I would argue, however, that the obvious predecessor to Nathalie's (and Constance's) die-hard investment in "the fantasy of the good life" (Berlant) is *Rosetta*, from the Dardenne brothers' 1999 eponymous film, though there are important differences between the three characters. In *Rosetta*, a teenager living with her alcoholic mother in a caravan park makes numerous attempts to secure a stable job. Twenty-five years later Nathalie, a middle-aged woman equally deprived of a support network (she is an orphan) is barely making ends meet as a worker in a fish canning factory and living out of her suitcase. If *Rosetta*'s 'cruel optimism' manifested itself in her determination to secure a job at any cost, Nathalie's 'adaptation strategy' is to succumb to the fantasy of the good life completely, ultimately believing that she really *is* the wealthy Serge's real daughter whose identity she has assumed, just as Constance (in *Faultless*) tried to assume Audrey's identity.

Nathalie takes a huge risk, but there is nothing revolutionary about her project of infiltrating Serge's wealthy family: she has no intention of challenging the system of social relations that upholds the class inequalities that produce precarity. The films are also radically opposed in terms of genre and style: *Rosetta* is a social drama shot in a neo-realist style, episodic in structure, centered on character rather than plot, with attention to the details of everyday life; *Faultless* and *The Origin of Evil* are thrillers filled with many plot twists and revelations. *Rosetta* is a supremely ethical character who, driven by circumstances and by despair, does the unthinkable: she betrays the very person who helps her get a job in order to obtain *his* job, and suffers the moral consequences (she quits the job she stole from her friend and tries to commit suicide). In *Faultless* and *The Origin of Evil* such *ethical questions* and *internal conflicts* are replaced by *plot* questions—Will Nathalie and Constance get away with it? Will they win or lose?—indicating the growing impotence of the political imagination.

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Bardan and Áine O'Healy, 'Transnational Mobility and Precarious Labour in Post-Cold War Europe: The Spectral Disruptions of Carmine Amoroso's *Cover Boy*', in *The Cinemas of Italian Migration: European and Transatlantic Narratives*, ed. S. Schrader and D. Winkle (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp.69-90.

<sup>2</sup> Berlant, 202

<sup>3</sup> Although she takes her examples mostly from French and Francophone cinema, Berlant argues that the cinema of precarity is a 'global style' (evident, for example, in the films of Hooman Bahrani, Cristian Mungiu, Fatih Akin, Jiǎ Zhāngkē, Kelly Reichardt, Mike White, Courtney Hunt, Debra Granik etc.)<sup>3</sup> that combines politics, melodrama, and new forms of realism she describes as

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reticent, semi-minimalist, understated and pervaded by a sense of fatigue and a weariness of the present, and by what Berlant calls “cruel optimism”, an apolitical ‘affective strategy of adjustment’, which no longer develops within the familiar model of trauma, for trauma has now lost its extraordinary character and become mundane. ‘Optimism is ‘cruel’, she 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).<sup>3</sup> In the cinema of precarity ‘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” (Berlant qtd in Kirsten 13).

<sup>4</sup> Although Katie doesn’t seem to have the daily moral support Daniel enjoys, she also experiences small gestures of solidarity: e.g., when a grocery store manager catches her shoplifting, he does not call the police and lets her keep the stolen items.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> These are 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 his funeral:

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.**

As a legal subject, Daniel reasons, he is endowed with certain civil rights, to which he believes to be entitled 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. Daniel’s ‘manifesto’ perpetuates the myth of the undeserving welfare scrounger, suggesting that the sanctions with which the state punishes Daniel and Katie are not inherently unjust but unjust only because they target hard-working people like Daniel and Katie rather than undeserving ‘scroungers and beggars.’

<sup>7</sup> This is not the only film that frames precaritization as an opportunity for self-reinvention: e.g., see *Terrados/Rooftops* (Demian Sabini, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> In the film’s second half Cassandre violates company policy regarding in-flight purchases and is forced to return home to Brussels, where she tries to reconnect with her sister and father, whom she abandoned after her mother’s death.

<sup>9</sup> Alberto, a chemist who has been washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant, is put in charge of producing the new drug; the semiotician Mattia and the Latin scholar Giorgio, currently gas station attendants, will take care of sales and distribution; Andrea, an anthropologist who has been trying unsuccessfully to get a job in an auto repair shop, becomes the team’s advisor on ‘subcultural camouflage’; Arturo, an archeologist, becomes the designated driver, and microeconomics expert Bartolomeo the chief business advisor.

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<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> It is later revealed that Constance's stalking of Audrey is not the first time she had exhibited that kind of behavior. Constance meets a lawyer who is supposed to defend her in a sexual harassment trial against her former boss in Paris. Up until now, based on what Constance tells other characters, we had assumed that Constance is suing her boss for firing her after their affair came out in the open, and for allegedly making it impossible for her to find a job at another real estate agency. However, Constance's defense attorney informs Constance that it is her former boss who is suing her—rather than the other way around—for stalking him. It was not Constance's boss who had stalked her and sent her hundreds of texts and phone messages; on the contrary, it was Constance who stalked him and sent him hundreds of messages, demanding that he does not abandon her and threatening to expose their affair if he does.

<sup>12</sup> <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/faultless-rome-film-review-1201917372/>

<sup>13</sup> She moves back into her family home with no electricity (unable to pay the bills), is forced to eat canned corn (cannot afford anything better), steals money from her lover, steals food from a hospital food cart, and spends most of the time wears the same knockoff Versace blouse (cannot afford to buy new clothes).

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product\\_detail&p=599](https://www.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product_detail&p=599)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-origin-of-evil-venice-review/5173334.article>