

The New European Cinema of Precarity

June 3, 2022

**CY Advanced Studies
CY Cergy Paris Université**

Conference abstract

‘Precarity’ has become one of the buzz words in studies of neoliberalism’s restructuring of the global economy and of the entire human sensorium. Originally signifying a social condition linked to poverty, precarity has come to refer to the rise in flexible and precarious forms of labour, the reduction of welfare state provisions, the suppression of unions, and the association of migration with illegality. Described by Lauren Berlant (2011) as the dominant structure and experience of the present moment, ‘precarity’ refers to the experience of a new generation of Europeans who find themselves unable to rely on the type of employment opportunities, economic security, and social benefits that previous generations might have been guaranteed. The urgent need for an in-depth study of the cinema of precarity cannot be overstated, especially in our current circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has simply illuminated the extent to which precarity has already become ingrained in our lives as a result of forty years of structural adjustment policies that have affected the ‘precarious multitude’, which now includes ‘the new coronavirus poor,’ newly unemployed citizens, furloughed workers, people on medical leave etc. The value of precarity as an analytical concept lies in the way it allows us to bring together concrete, situated experiences of insecurity and vulnerability—and their cinematic representations—with larger social and political debates about the psychological and physical effects of neoliberalism and the possibilities for resistance to it.

Given the long history of socially engaged European cinema the aim of this one-day conference is to explore the stylistic features of the new European cinema of precarity and the political and social values embodied in it. How does the new cinema of precarity conceive class in relation to race, religion, sexuality, and gender? What ethical questions does the new cinema of precarity raise? Lauren Berlant analyzes post-Fordist affect in terms of what she calls ‘cruel optimism’, a new ‘adjustment strategy’ to the increasing precariousness of life under neoliberalism, which is no longer perceived as a crisis since crisis itself has become mundane. What ‘adjustment strategies’ does the new European cinema of precarity dramatize, and are they inherently politically regressive, as Berlant seems to suggest? Where does the new European cinema of precarity locate the possibility for social and political transformation—in a particular class, in fighting for a particular good/cause, or in a particular political stance?

Program

9:00-9:45 Introductory remarks

Temenuga Trifonova (York University, Fellow-in-residence at the Institute for Advanced Studies, CY Cergy Paris Université and Héritages: Culture/s, Patrimoine/s, Création/s (UMR 9022)

9:45-10:45 Narratives of Precarity and Precarious Narratives: The Case of French and Francophone Belgian Film

Martin O'Shaughnessy (Nottingham Trent University)

Abstract

This presentation starts with two observations: on the one hand, there has been an obvious rise of a thematics of precarity across French and Francophone Belgian cinema since at least the mid-1990s; on the other, the films which centre on precarity are tremendously diverse. This diversity is multi-faceted. It relates to their style, genre and budget, the kinds of stories they tell and the figures at their centre (from the older male worker to the younger woman worker, to the homeless person, the *banlieue* resident or the migrant). But, crucially, it also relates to their politics and their capacity to open some sense of a future that is not simply a decaying repetition of the present. Drawing on thinkers such as Maurizio Lazzarato, Isabell Lorey, Ronaldo Munck, Wendy Brown, Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler, the presentation will seek to make sense of this diversity. It will suggest that because precarity functions to create a continuum of positions differentially exposed to vulnerability, and because it relates not simply to the workplace but to an assault on systems of care and social reproduction, it necessarily produces a diversity of figures and narratives. It will also discuss how films centring women workers, immigrant workers, migrants or other figures can provide an implicit critique of the previous centrality of the white male worker and of a spatio-temporal understanding of precarity that too easily extends a Eurocentric, Fordist-Welfarist narrative to a global frame. Turning to the films' politics, it will ask how, if at all, they are able to move beyond the temporality of nostalgia, the impasse or the dead end which they themselves reveal, deliberately or inadvertently, as their narratives struggle to open a sense of futurity.

Speaker biography

Martin O'Shaughnessy is Professor of Film Studies and research leader for Media and Communications at Nottingham Trent University. He is the author of *Jean Renoir* (2000), *The New Face of Political Cinema* (2007), *La Grande Illusion* (2009) and *Laurent Cantet* (2015). His research focuses mainly on the politics of cinema. He has just completed *Looking Beyond Neoliberalism: French and Francophone Belgian Cinema and the Crisis* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming, 2022). He is also part of a European Union funded project on cinema, hospitality and migration.

10:45-11:00 Coffee break

11:00-12:00 Precarity in Contemporary French and Francophone Belgian Cinema

Gabriel Bortzmeyer (Classe préparatoire aux grandes écoles, Rouen)

Abstract

In his famous study *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale* (1995) sociologist Robert Castel diagnosed a 'mutation' in the status of the worker: what Marx, Proudhon and Blanqui had called 'the prolétariat' – defined by its alienation but also by its integration into a class and an industry – was now replaced by 'a précariat', a much more unstable, marginal and inconsistent group that bid farewell to class solidarity as well as to class warfare. Both French and Belgian cinema reflect this 'mutation'. The Dardenne brothers' characters, the suburban sociolect of Abdellatif Kechiche's 'accented cinema', Bruno Dumont's and Jean-

Charles Hue's mystic fables situated on the margins of the Republic represent a few attempts to represent this new social and political subject characterized by its exteriority to every institution and by a language that tramples the rules of grammar and correctness.

Speaker biography

Gabriel Bortzmeyer (PhD in Cinema Studies, BA in Philosophy and History of Art) teaches cinema and literature in Classe préparatoire aux grandes écoles. He serves on the Editorial Board of the online cinema journal *Débordements* and has contributed articles to *Trafic*, *Vacarme*, and *La Furia Umana*. His research explores the relationship between cinema, politics, and ecology. Bortzmeyer is the author of a book of interviews with Raymond Bellour—*Dans la compagnie des oeuvres* (Rouge profond, 2017)—and of the monograph *Le peuple précaire du cinéma contemporain* (Hermann, 2020).

12:00-13:00 A Gender Studies Approach to the Representation of Precarity in Italian Cinema

Maria Elena Alampi (University of Exeter)

Abstract

In 2007-2008 the world faced a significant financial crisis, giving rise to a phenomenon that would become known as 'precarity' - the widespread condition of temporary, flexible, contingent, random, intermittent work in post-industrial societies. This term has also been used to highlight precarious life experiences characterized by a lack of predictability and financial security due to the lack of a stable job, with implications for material or psychological well-being. The critical literature on contemporary cinematic representations of precarity suggests that it should be considered as a new political and social commitment. Given the great number of recent Italian films that explore the theme of precarity, this paper focuses on contemporary Italian popular films as case studies to examine how overriding heteronormative structures, based on hegemonic patriarchal ideologies, influence filmic representation of femininity and masculinity in contemporary Italy. The paper provides an overview of the contemporary Italian cultural context and discusses the place these films occupy in larger political and social discourses.

Speaker biography

Maria Elena Alampi completed her MA in Modern Languages, Literatures and Translations cum laude at the University of Messina (Italy) with a thesis focused on Malcolm X and his cinematographic representation by Spike Lee (1992). She obtained her PhD at the University of Birmingham with a thesis entitled "The New Italian Cinema of Precarity". In 2020, she set up, together with Dr Francesco Sticchi (Oxford Brookes University), an academic international network called "Cinematic Precarity Research Network" and with the Italian Studies dpt of the University of Birmingham a series of academic events called "Let's Queer It(aly)". She is currently working on girlhood and media at the University of Exeter as Postdoctoral Research Assistant for the AHRC project "A Girls'Eye-view: Girlhood on the Italian screen since 1950s."

13:00-14:00 Lunch

14:00-15:00 British Cinema, the Working Class and Precarity

John Hill (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Abstract

This presentation will situate contemporary representations of precarity in relation to a lengthy social-realist tradition within British cinema stretching back to the 1930s when the documentary movement in part 'heroised' manual labour but also associated the working class with poverty, poor housing, ill-health, unemployment and economic insecurity. It will go on to identify the new kinds of cinematic imagery and

socio-cultural discourses that emerged in the wake of the economic neo-liberalism, de-industrialisation, unemployment and changing labour regimes that characterised the post-1980s period. Drawing on a range of examples, it will consider some of the ways in which British films of the last three decades have drawn upon and adapted the conventions of social realism in order to map the changing contours of class and work, the decline of social housing and erosion of traditional solidarities. It will then conclude with some reflections on how this British ‘cinema of precarity’ has addressed the possibilities for political action and social change.

Speaker biography

John Hill is Professor of Media at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author or editor of a number of books including *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* (1986), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (co-ed 1998), *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999), *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics* (2006), *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television* (2011), *Film Policy in a Globalised Cultural Economy* (co-ed 2018) and *A Companion to British and Irish Cinema* (ed. 2019).

15:00-16:00 “Ugly Feelings” in Tatjana Turanskyj’s Narratives of Precarious Female Characters

Alice Bardan (Mount St. Mary’s University, Los Angeles)

Abstract

As a feminist filmmaker, Tatjana Turanskyj relentlessly grapples with the question of how an ethically engaged cinema can explore questions about women’s agency and solidarity. Inspired by a longer West German tradition of feminist filmmaking that sought to create a women’s cinema able to function as “an oppositional public sphere” (*Gegenöffentlichkeit*), her films eschew the conventions of dominant cinema, relying on non-didactic, non-cathartic, circular narratives. The filmmaker challenges viewers to ask a range of questions about the ambiguous distinction between victimhood and empowerment in postfeminist times, about the role of performance and masquerade in her protagonists’ lives, and most important, about new ways in which feminist filmmakers can help viewers reflect on the legacy of neoliberal culture. Her artistic practices rely on various alienation effects, nonlinear narratives with multiple strands, and documentary-style sequences as well as feminist metacommentary. My paper unpacks the role of these aesthetic strategies in *Drifter* (2010) and *Top Girl* (2014), which center on an alcoholic and a prostitute. My analysis argues that these films critique neoliberalism’s narratives of free choice and autonomy that compel women to render their lives knowable and meaningful. Drawing on Sianne Ngai conceptualization of “ugly feelings,” a phrase that encompasses a range of dysphoric feelings and emotional negativity, I show how Turanskyj’s work visualizes dynamics of refusal to conform to neoliberalist demands.

Speaker bio

Alice Bardan holds a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles and is now an Assistant Professor at Mount St. Mary’s University, Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in several edited collections, including: *The Berlin School and Its Global Contexts: A Transnational Art Cinema* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 2018); *Prostitution and Sex Work in Global Visual Media* (Palgrave, 2017); *Work and Cinema: Labor and the Human Condition* (Palgrave, 2013); *The Cinemas of Italian Migration: European and Transatlantic Narratives* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); *Not Necessarily the News? News Parody and Political Satire across the Globe* (Routledge, 2012); *Entertaining the New Europe: Popular Television in Socialist and Post-Socialist Europe* (Routledge, 2012); *The Blackwell Companion to East European Cinema* (Blackwell, 2012); *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* (Palgrave, 2007), and in the refereed journals: *The European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2017), *The Journal of Popular Television* (2017), and *New Cinemas* (2008).

16:00-16:15 Coffee break

16:15-17:15 The Cinema of Precarity, Revised

Guido Kirsten (Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, Potsdam)

Abstract

In my paper I suggest a critical discussion of Lauren Berlant's concept of the 'cinema of precarity'. After sketching the outlines of Berlant's theory, I will raise three critical points: the strong tie between the 'cinema of precarity' and the notion of 'cruel optimism'; Berlant's auteurism; and her affective 'formalism'. My re-definition will then differ in three aspects from Berlant's original ideas: First, I do not assume that relations of cruel optimism are an essential part of all films belonging to the cinema of precarity. Second, for the cinema of precarity it does not matter whether the makers of films that portray situations of precarity are considered "authors" in the cinephile sense, whether they dispose of a signature style or an original vision of the world. Third, my understanding of the cinema of precarity will be far more pluralistic in regard to matters of form, style, mood, and genre. As cases in point I will discuss the depiction of joblessness in two the Spanish films in a comparative matter: *Los lunes al sol* (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2002) and *Terrados* (Demian Sabini, 2011). Generally considering unemployment a key paradigm of precarity in Capitalist societies, my aim is to work out the differences of the two filmic discourses in terms of their implicit presuppositions and the audiovisual and narrative means of persuasion that they deploy.

Speaker biography

Dr Guido Kirsten is Principal Investigator of the Emmy Noether Research Group "Cinematic Discourses of Deprivation" at the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF (Potsdam). He is the author of books on cinematic realism (2013) and on the history of the notion of *découpage* in the cinema (2022). Together with Margrit Tröhler he edited *Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema* (2018); together with Elisa Cuter and Hanna Prenzel the volume *Precarity in European Film* (2022) which is the first in the newly created book series "Film, Class, Society" at DeGruyter (Berlin/Boston).

17:15-17:30 Closing remarks

Temenuga Trifonova and Julie Amiot-Guillouet (Héritages: Culture/s, Patrimoine/s, Création/s (UMR 9022))

19:30 Dinner at Bouillon Racine (3 rue Racine 75006 Paris)