

Book Review: Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses

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Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses

Edited by Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten,
and Hanna Prenzel

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The 17th edition of the European *Barometric Study on Poverty and Economic Precariousness* tells us that, in 2023, more than one in four Europeans grapples with precarious financial situations. To be specific, 29 percent of the 10,000 respondents included in the survey characterized their financial status as precarious. Conversely, according to the 2023 Oxfam report, *Survival of the Richest*, the wealthiest one percent globally holds nearly two-thirds of all wealth generated since 2020. In fact, in the past decade, the fortune of billionaires has almost doubled, while the combined wealth of the poorest 50 percent of the world's population has only grown by a quarter. On top of that, figures like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg constantly imprint their omnipresence on our daily existence. We know what they wear, we know their convictions, their political stances, we read about what they think, what they work for, what they care for, and who they love. Their influence is as inescapable as it is ever-present, shaping our world, both figuratively and literally.

Even though we might encounter the laborers of the precariat on a daily basis, they remain mostly *invisible* to us. Research shows "there is a real danger" (Zaniello 2020, x) to this invisibility, as "[n]onrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning

someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (Taylor 1994, 25). One way of fighting this oppressing invisibility is simply by telling the stories of people that live precariously. However, while we may find ourselves in an era characterized by a multiplicity of images and audiovisual narratives, this does not necessarily equate to diversity in the stories told and the representation of various voices within them.

Should there be any lingering skepticism regarding the role that cinema can assume in an era marked by the deepening socioeconomic disparity and the burgeoning experience of precarity, the open access volume *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses* (2022) stands as a compelling answer to this question. Already in the volume's introduction, Guido Kirsten advocates for a broader understanding of the concept of "cinema of precarity", expanding it to encompass "the whole of the corpus of filmic works that centrally engage with aspects of precarity in society" (15). By doing so, Kirsten emphasizes the significance of examining the cinema of precarity across its diverse formal and thematic dimensions while disassociating it from the notion of "auteur cinema", thereby opening the concept to include mainstream or popular European cinema as well. A welcome and possibly more inclusive perspective, not

in the least because much research on cinema audiences shows that auteur cinema tends to be predominantly consumed by audiences from middle and upper-class backgrounds.

The editors consciously chose to not focus on a sociological micro analysis of the precarious working conditions in European film sectors, instead prioritizing a cultural studies approach. Comprising 19 chapters contributed by various authors, each addressing a specific country or region, the volume unravels the concept of precarity in cinema, encompassing analyses of both fiction and documentary films, with some delving into more experimental forms and television series. Following Kirsten's call, the book examines the audiovisual portrayal of precarity in Europe from diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. Moreover, the editors clearly emphasized the importance of accentuating diversity within European cinema, as they endeavored to have authors scrutinize a wide array of countries and regions across the European mainland. Indeed, the volume delves into films spanning from Belgium to Turkey, and from Slovakia to the UK. Together, they offer novel insights into the multifaceted portrayal of these socioeconomic issues, underpinned by their unique socio-cultural, historical, and political backgrounds. Separately, each contribution, in one way or another, illuminates how films are able to depict various facets of precarity – think of issues related to social exclusion, precarious labor conditions, economic uncertainty, housing, migration, gender, and ethnicity. Several authors also explore the diverse political implications conveyed by these films, ranging from moralism and individualism to solidarity and resistance. *Grosso modo*, the volume looks into two overarching queries that are respectively related to the concepts of representation and discourse.

First, the editors put forward that in the realm of contemporary European cinema, the portrayal of precarity is intrinsically linked to the creation of particular visual systems. Doing so, they prompt an investigation into the identities represented

as precarious in the films under analysis and the visual attributes and characteristics ascribed to them. As such, they equally raise the question of whether we are witnessing the emergence of novel iconographies distinct from the traditional imagery associated with “classical” poverty. Looking at this in the context of contemporary Greek cinema since 2007-2008, Ursula-Helen Kassaveti contends that there is a discernible transition towards the portrayal of precarity. The author shows how Greek films have increasingly focused on the diversity and intensity of manifestations of precariousness within Greek society, departing from traditional modes of cinematic storytelling. Films like *45m2* (Stratos Tzitzis, 2010) or *Standing Aside, Watching* (Yorgos Servetas, 2013) challenge conventional resolutions, opting for open endings while transcending the link between precarity and specific social or cultural backgrounds. They employ a realistic visual style, often with handheld camera work, highlighting the authentic portrayal of characters and their environments. Importantly, these films equally engage with the underlying influence of the neoliberal framework that exacerbates precarity, suggesting the potential for transformative agency within the precariat.

The latter brings us to the second objective of this volume, as the editors also wanted the contributors to look into the persuasive intentions and target audiences of these films, as well as into the perspective from which their implicit or explicit arguments are made. Which deliberate or inadvertent omissions contribute to the nuanced portrayal of the subject matter, and, beyond that, how do these films actively engage with other audiovisual texts, contributing to the ongoing discourse within the broader public sphere. This second focus can be clearly found in Ewa Mazierska's chapter on the representation of precarity in post-communist Polish cinema. Central to her analysis is the premise that cinema serves as a conduit for engaging with social and political realities, albeit not by mirroring these

realities directly. Instead, filmmakers always strategically accentuate or conceal specific facets of the narrative. Mazierska argues that the cinematic portrayal of poverty frequently leans towards strategies involving either masking, amplification, or dramatic representation. This inclination arises from the perception that an unadorned, straightforward depiction of poverty is considered unremarkable and could cast an unfavorable light on the government or the societal elites. Mazierska's research reveals that distinct approaches have been adopted in various historical epochs to convey the ordeals associated with poverty and precarity.

After reading this book, one is convinced that the power of cinema is not merely confined to

the screen but extends to the broader realm of socio-political discourse. The interplay between recognition and misrecognition, as well as between representation and misrepresentation (or even non-representation), serves as a reminder of cinema's role as a powerful force in reshaping our understanding of the human experience and the imperative of addressing the complex challenges that accompany life in precarious situations. In the cinematic realm, stories untold become the catalysts for change, forging new paths to understanding, empathy, and, ultimately, action.

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