

Introduction

I believe that we live at a time when technological and cultural inventions should save the vast majority of people from unpleasant and dangerous labour, and ensure a prosperous life for everyone. I am not alone in this conviction. Eric Hobsbawm writes in his last book, 'Our productive capacity has made it possible, at least potentially, for most human beings to move from the realm of necessity into the realm of affluence, education and unimagined life choices' (Hobsbawm 2011: 12). Yet, these ideals, even in traditionally affluent Europe, appear further away than fifty, forty or even twenty years ago. Unemployment and poverty are growing, and the majority of those in employment are expected to work longer hours and have more years of service before being able to retire on a smaller pension than the generation of their parents. They earn less in relative terms and their work is less stable than their parents' was, as demonstrated by the extraordinary career of the word 'precariat' (Ross 2003, 2008; Berardi 2009; Standing 2011), which blends 'precarious' and 'proletariat'. Young people are especially affected, with the highest level of unemployment, lowest wages and level of security, and the smallest chance, even for those with graduate education, to enter so-called professions.

A desire to understand and assess this paradox lies at the root of this book. I wanted to explore whether there was ever a golden age for work and, if so, did it feel that way then, and when, why and how has the situation changed, and again, how was it experienced 'on the ground': in factories, offices and places where information is processed and art created? Because I regard film as a privileged medium for registering and commenting on changes in society and their subjective meaning, I decided to seek answers by examining cinema in conjunction with histories and theories of work.

The fact that my initial assessment of the social reality was critical and that the book argues in favour of overthrowing the current system affected my choice of films and concepts. I turned to Marxist theories and films that lent themselves to Marxist analysis. I chose Marx for two reasons. First, I regard his criticism of capitalism, as well as that of state socialism – which I treat as a version of capitalism – as still valid, and even more convincing now than forty or fifty years ago. Marxist thought is thus a perfect tool to conduct the ideological critique that is one of the main goals of my study. The second reason is, as Hobsbawm notes, quoting

Jacques Attali, ‘the universal comprehensiveness of his thought. It is not “interdisciplinary” in the conventional sense but integrates all disciplines ... Philosophers before him have thought of man in his totality, but he was the first to apprehend the world as a whole which is at once political, economic, scientific and philosophical’ (ibid.: 12). I am not alone in finding Marx both comprehensive and contemporary. My study should be regarded as one of a number of recent attempts to revive Marxist thought in film studies and cultural studies at large, along with works such as *The Politics of Contemporary European Cinema: Histories, Borders, Diasporas* (Wayne 2002), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (Boal et al. 2005), *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture and Marxist Critique* (Kapur and Wagner 2011) or *Music and Marx* (Burckhardt Qureshi 2002), which refer to Marxist thought explicitly or through intermediaries.

As this project proved very wide, I had to be selective, both in relation to the aspects of films singled out for close analysis and the choice of films. I privileged text, because I regard text as the main source of information about the film’s ideology.¹ I paid less attention to the specificity of film production, distribution and reception. However, ‘as every film ... internalizes the conditions of its productions, it makes itself an allegory of them’ (James 1989: 12), these aspects are also implicitly tackled by the way I organise my material, by dividing the history of European cinema into four distinct periods. This division is motivated by my conviction that in each period film production and reception was different from that preceding and following it (with the exception of the 1960s, which I see as a continuation of the 1950s). In the introduction to each chapter I describe the economic and political situation in a given period, in this way presenting and commenting on the production context of the films discussed.

I decided to focus on European cinema for pragmatic and essential considerations. As the vast majority of my research concerns European cinema, I felt competent to tackle this area (as opposed to, for example, South American or African cinema). It was also easier to contain the results of my investigation in a book-length study this way than if I were covering more continents. I chose Europe of the last fifty years or so also because this spatial-temporal entity contains several different political and economic realities: first the Western European version of Keynesian capitalism or ‘embedded liberalism’ and the Eastern European version of socialism or ‘crude communism’, then Western and postcommunist versions of neoliberal capitalism. Consequently, it provides ideal material with which to find out whether and to what extent political and economic

conditions affected the experience and meaning of work for people living within these systems, and what varieties existed within them, as testified by films made in different decades and different countries. Finally, Europe appeared to me to be the right place to start because this is also where *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* begins, with the words ‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism’. I wanted to gauge how much life is left in this distinguished ghost, hoping that I would be able to contradict my countryman and great authority on Marxism, Leszek Kołakowski, who once famously said, substituting a skeleton for the ghost: ‘This skull will never smile again’ (Kołakowski 1999: 418).

My decision to start in the 1960s rather than in 1945 was also prompted by pragmatic and essential considerations. First, adding fifteen years of European cinema and history would greatly extend the size of the book while forcing me to go over, in the case of Eastern European cinema, already well-trodden territory. This is due to the fact that a large proportion of scholarship concerning this period focuses on films about work, which is not the case with studies on later decades. Secondly, in terms of the approach to work, I see the 1960s as a continuation of the 1950s, because in this period Western economy was informed by Keynesianism and the foundations of state socialism were barely questioned, even though some Stalinist policies were rejected and the composition of the ruling elites significantly changed.

Of course, it is impossible to discuss every film about work made in Europe. What were the criteria for my selection? First, I privileged films that show characters engaged in work and those in which their relation to work (working or being unemployed, performing a specific task with joy or suffering due to it) affects the course of the narrative in a profound way. Second, taking a cue from David Harvey (a Marxist author who, after Marx, will be the main guide in my trip through countries and decades), who advises tackling the core (dominant institutions and phenomena), I focused on films that enjoyed significant critical or popular acclaim. A large part of them belong to a canon of European cinema and auteurist tradition, represented by directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Lindsay Anderson, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Dušan Makavejev, Andrzej Wajda, Jerzy Skolimowski, István Szabó, the Dardennes, Konrad Wolf, Jean-Luc Godard, Miloš Forman, to name just a few. However, I also recognised the fact that the more closely we approach the current time, the more fragmented European cinemas become and the more difficult it is to assess whether a specific film belongs to the canon or not. Hence, my choices might come across as

increasingly arbitrary. Devoting much space to British and Polish cinema reflects the fact that I have lived in these countries and have taught about their cinemas. Moreover, both Britain and Poland represent very specific economic and political systems. My modest engagement with the cinema of the Soviet Union and later Russia results from my conviction that the country constitutes a liminal case, and its vastness and complexity require a separate study.

I chose a case study approach rather than trying to analyse all the films belonging to a specific wave or author, as this allowed me to look at certain issues in detail and make comparisons between films produced in different countries. I must also add that some key names are missing or represented to a lesser degree than one might expect. However, such omissions are unavoidable in a study covering such a vast area and hopefully will be eradicated in subsequent studies on work in European cinema.

The need to account for the changes in the realities of work between the 1960s and contemporary times and their representation in film is reflected in the structure of my book. The first chapter is devoted to theories of work, which also means in some measure the history of working, the question of ideology and the relationship between work and cinema. This chapter also provides an ideological grounding for the subsequent chapters, by summarising the critique of capitalism offered, most importantly, by Marx and David Harvey. In addition, I briefly discuss the concept and postwar history of Europe. Chapters 2 to 5 focus on four periods in European history: the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s up until now, as each period is characterised by a different situation for workers and their employers. The 1960s is presented as the last decade in which Keynesian principles were implemented in the West, which were meant to lead to the creation of a prosperous, stable and relatively egalitarian society, largely as a means of preventing an economic crisis of the sort that led to the Second World War. In the East, the 1960s were marked by a desire to expand the industrial base, largely as a means of competing with the West and proving that state socialism was a better system. Consequently, this was a period when workers in both Eastern and Western Europe enjoyed some power over their employers and were entitled to welfare. The 1970s is rendered as a turbulent period in the West, when the foundations of Keynesian order were questioned by both the left and the right. In the East it was a period of economic shift from building infrastructure towards producing consumer goods and, in the second half of the decade, a period of economic decline, marking the beginning of the end of the East European version of socialism. In the chapter on the 1980s I

focus on the victory of neoliberal capitalism in the West and, in the East, on the workers' rejection of state socialism as a system that did not further workers' prosperity and political standing but, on the contrary, rendered them second-class citizens in the supposedly workers' state. The final, fifth chapter, covering broadly speaking contemporary times, discusses the time when neoliberal capitalism matured in Western Europe and was adopted in the postcommunist countries, paradoxically leading to a worsening of the situation for those who fought to overcome state socialism as a regime that was not socialist enough. In each chapter I also look at work from another angle, so to speak, by analysing films about idleness, as in my opinion the shifts in representing this state provide an important insight into the changing attitudes to work.

Writing a book of this kind poses the dilemma of whether to focus on films whose setting is contemporary with the time of their shooting, or whether also to include movies set in the past because, as historians know all too well, historical representations are contemporary, due to reflecting on current events and ideological struggles. After consideration, however, I decided to privilege contemporary films, with one exception. I allocated a small part of each chapter to films about enforced labour set in the past, especially in Nazi concentration camps. This is because camp work is an extreme form of labour; it marks a boundary between the most alienated work and torture and the annihilation of a human. By looking at the changing representation of camp life in film we can detect shifts in the meaning and assessment of 'normal' work. The same dilemma regarding films about the past also concerns films about the future, most importantly science-fiction films. Again, on this occasion I decided to leave them out, planning to tackle them on another occasion.

Each chapter is organised differently, to reveal the aspects of work that best reflect a given period or the work of a specific director. For example, when discussing 1960s films I offer an explanation as to why most of the characters appear blasé or dismissive of their work. I elucidate why characters in the films of the 1990s and 2000s are more pliant and eager to work, despite a significant worsening of their working situation in comparison with their 'cinematic ancestors' depicted in 1960s films. In the chapter about the 1970s I pay special attention to the work of women and ideological struggles around their work, reflecting the rise in the women's movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s. The chapter about the 1980s is in a large part devoted to an analysis of the situation in Britain and Poland as both countries acted as a kind of laboratory for the new, neoliberal order,

introduced elsewhere in the following decades. When discussing the period after the 1990s, I foreground the condition of workers as akin to what is described as that of ‘bare life’. However, a number of tropes and ideas undergird and are explicitly referred to across all the chapters, most importantly the economic categories of capitalism, socialism and surplus value, as well as alienation and idleness. The result is a study that should allow readers to see certain trends in representing work, which can be mapped onto the changes affecting European societies and cultures at large.

Work is a very broad concept, a fact summarised by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s saying that ‘the world is labour’ (Hardt and Negri 1994: 11). It is objective and subjective; it comprises processes, experiences and ideals of work, its infrastructure and spaces, such as factories and offices, tools, such as bodies and computers, fruits, such as commodities and capital, working relationships, such as cooperation and competition between workers, the politics of work, namely workers’ subjugation by and struggle against those who possess the means of production, ideologies of work, and specific cultures born by work or, increasingly, its lack. Although initially I planned to restrict myself only to some of these aspects, in the end I decided to address all of them, as they appeared to me so connected that excluding any of them would be arbitrary and impoverish my argument. I became especially interested in how macropolitics and macroeconomy are reflected in the representation of experiences of work and working relations, which include work and class struggles (in and about work) and workers’ identities. Equally, I tried to tease out what these experiences and relations tell us about macropolitics and macroeconomy. Thus in my investigation I constantly move between the general and the particular, between macroeconomy and politics on the one hand and the experience of the characters on the other. At the same time, I attempt to account for the fact that I deal with cinematic, not ‘real’ or literary characters, situations, spaces and objects, which are shaped by discourses pertaining specifically to cinema.

While writing this book I noticed that increasingly I write less about work and more about life. Initially I tried to force myself to stop digressing and focus on the main subject of my investigation, but not only did I fail to do so, but I realised that I should not try. This is because the shift in my focus reflects the change in the ‘real’ world and cinema’s response to it, namely that in the period known as neoliberalism, there is less and less work to be done (or paid for), but also that the boundary between home and the factory, life and work, is dissolving. The second

phenomenon is excellently summarised by Melinda Cooper, who in her book *Life as Surplus* argues that:

Neoliberalism reworks the value of life as established in the welfare state and New Deal model of social reproduction. Its difference lies in its intent to efface the boundaries between the spheres of production and reproduction, labor and life, the market and living tissues – the very boundaries that were constitutive of welfare state biopolitics and human rights discourse. (Cooper 2008: 9)

I see my refusal to delineate the realm of work as a political gesture, whose aim is to show work as affecting and being affected by everything else, yet in a way that is obscured by the dominant ideology, which attempts to subordinate work to economy and divorce economy from the needs of a society. This fact was, again, observed by Marx and elaborated by some post-Marxist thinkers, such as, for example Leopoldina Fortunati (1995), but gains special significance in the neoliberal period. I also see my book as a step towards elevating work to a universal category of research in cinema, in the same way that gender, national identity and postcolonialism have become universal categories. The fact that everybody is gendered, belongs to a specific nation and is postcolonial, does not undermine the usefulness of these categories in researching cinema and culture at large. On the contrary, it renders them especially effective in examining the changes in history and human consciousness.

In this book I draw on the work of numerous philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and historians, especially, but not exclusively those with an interest in work, as well as film histories and theories. I use these various sources and methods as texts. This means that different histories and philosophies serve me to explain films and, conversely, I use film to reflect on given histories and theories. My study thus belongs to the widely understood field of intertextuality (Stam 2000a; Aragay 2005; Mazierska 2011). Authors following an intertextual approach propose to treat film and other texts, such as literature, not as ‘original’ and ‘adaptation’, but as equal partners, existing in a complex and unstable web of relationships with other texts. In common with this approach, my aim is not to decide whether the films chosen for discussion tell us the truth, but whether they adhere to a particular discourse, and to suggest the reasons for their specific ideological positions.

As I indicated at the beginning, for the majority of workers in Europe the conditions of work, which were always far from the Marxist ideal, have deteriorated

significantly in the last three decades or so, while the rewards of work have diminished. At the same time, as David Harvey and many other commentators observe, the causes for this change and even the very fact that the change is for the worse are obscured by the hegemonic neoliberal ideology, which pronounces that the 'have-nots' are solely responsible for their misfortune and those in a slightly better position have no reason to complain. I regard my book as a contribution to counter this view and propose a recipe with which to overcome the current situation. The recipe is simple, yet difficult to put into practice. It is conveyed by the words from *The Communist Manifesto*: 'Working men of all countries, unite!', where 'working men' are all those whose interests are antagonistic to those of capital. Unity is needed more than ever, yet this unity is undermined by political and legal instruments, such as anti-union legislation, the destruction of spaces such as factories where workers can unite, and dispersing of workers, as well as rendering class divisions less important than those pertaining to other aspects of people's identity such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or age. The challenge is thus, 'to build a political movement at a variety of spatial scales' (Harvey 2000: 52) and use political means to redress the balance of power between capital and labour, and make identity politics work in favour of class politics, rather than against it. For that, however, we need education, especially for those who are about to enter the world of work and I hope this book, even if only in a small measure, fulfils this function.