

CHAPTER 5

The 1990s, the 2000s and Beyond

Moving towards the Unknown

The age of mature neoliberalism

In Chapter 3 of my book I referred to David Harvey, who quoted Richard Nixon saying in the early 1970s that ‘we are all Keynesians now’. Harvey contrasts this pronouncement with the 1990s, when ‘both Clinton and Blair could easily have reversed Nixon’s earlier statement and simply said “We are all neoliberals now”’ (Harvey 2005: 13). In the case of Blair, this was symbolised in 1995 by his winning a battle over the abandoning of Clause IV in the Labour Party constitution, which had committed the party to national ownership of key industries. These Western leaders were joined by their Eastern counterparts, who, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, embarked on a programme of privatisation of state-owned assets, encouraging the accumulation of private capital and luring foreign investment by curbing the power of trade unions.

There is a paradox in the fact that the workers’ revolt in the 1980s, epitomised by the Solidarity movement in Poland, ultimately led to the defeat of the forces that were at the forefront of this revolt. But such a paradox is not exclusive to Poland or the socialist world at large. As I argued in the previous chapters, the workers’ revolt of the late 1960s in the West also facilitated neoliberalisation, leading to the undoing of the industrial working class and to the disciplining and pauperisation of the middle class. How does one explain the repetition of this trajectory, albeit in a different setting? According to one theory, neoliberal (‘pure’) capitalism was what the striking workers and their leaders genuinely wanted, regarding it as a highly superior system to the crude communism they had previously endured (Eyel, Szelényi and Townsley 1998). There is thus no contradiction between what happened in 1989 and what followed in subsequent decades, meaning that everybody ought to be content and enjoy their new freedom to sell their labour power inside and outside their countries. Such a view is espoused by the ruling elites in practically all the countries in question. The second theory can be summarised as a ‘betrayal of masses by their leaders’ (Ost 2005), which is reminiscent of the common narrative concerning the situation of

Soviet Russia after the October Revolution. According to the third theory, the labour-friendly Eastern European had no choice but to give in to powerful pressure from abroad to go the neoliberal way. As Valerie Bunce observes, 'We cannot understate the impact of this reigning ideology on the postsocialist world. With its weak states, shattered economies, and fragile regimes, this scared new world would seem to be unusually receptive to international guidance' (Bunce 1999b: 757), and the guidance was that 'there is no alternative'. Gay Seidman sketches an analogy between the situation in postcommunist Europe and countries such as Brazil and South Africa. There 'elected officials also came to power promising redistribution, and found themselves restructuring and privatizing instead' (Seidman 2007: 98). A few postcommunist politicians tried to preserve some vestiges of the socialist welfare system. In Poland, the prime example was Jacek Kuroń, the well-known dissident and the minister of social security in the first postcommunist government, who introduced unemployment benefit, popularly known as 'kuroniówka' and who is also remembered for distributing soup among the new (and old) Polish poor. Yet Kuroń's soup can be seen as an emblem of the neoliberal attitude to one consequence of its policies: growing poverty. Rather than regarding poverty as a matter for the state to solve, it renders it a problem for the poor themselves and for voluntary, charitable individuals and institutions.¹ Not surprisingly, the end of communism in Eastern Europe coincided with a mushrooming of NGO and charity organisations.

The advantageous position of the forces of neoliberalism in the postcommunist world has been facilitated by two factors, which were also of importance in Thatcher's seizing power in the 1980s (see Chapter 4). One is the failure of the past, communist in this case, which is used to explain any current problems as the legacy of communism and to blackmail anybody who resists the neoliberal solutions as being reactionary. By blaming communists for the hardships of capitalism, the myth of 'real capitalism' could be preserved intact (Ost 2005: 72). The second factor is an ability of political elites to exploit identity politics along the lines of nation, religion, language, gender, sexuality and so on, to introduce neoliberal (class) politics (Ost 2005; Greskovits 2007; Seidman 2007). The most extreme example is Yugoslavia, where to facilitate their transformation from the old communist *nomenklatura* to the new political and financial elite, the communist authorities manipulated the citizens into accepting the break-up of their country and the war (Allcock 2000: 429–31). In Poland, on the other hand, religious bigotry, homophobia and restrictive abortion law promoted by the parties that promise

some economic redistribution and protection of the most vulnerable sections of the society has been exploited by politicians of neoliberal persuasion to present themselves as the only ‘civilised’ alternative to these ‘forces of backwardness’.

The consequences of the neoliberal march in postcommunist Europe, as in the West, are the concentration of income and wealth in the upper echelons of society and the concentration of poverty and insecurity at the bottom, although, of course, there are geographical differences within the ex-Soviet bloc. Russia and the Baltic countries lead the way towards unfettered neoliberalism, while Slovakia and Poland cling to some remnants of a welfare state and so far have managed to avoid the worst of the capitalist crises of the twenty-first century.² There are also some important differences between the old East and the West, which might never be overcome, such as a larger proportion of the population of ex-communist countries being employed in agriculture. But this fact only confirms Harvey’s view that neoliberalism is not uniform – it is different in the United States, Chile and China (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalisation is accompanied by a decline in the political and economic sovereignty of nation-states, as epitomised by Eastern European countries joining the European Union, with East Germany being the first to join this institution as part of a united Germany. The year 2004 saw the European Union’s biggest enlargement to date, with countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and the former Baltic Republics all joining. The ‘surplus of sovereignty’, so to speak, resulting from a weakening of the nation-states, is also transferred to an amorphous body that Harvey describes as ‘neoliberal elites’ and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri label ‘Empire’ (Hardt and Negri 2000), epitomised by nondemocratic and secretive institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which use ‘remote control’ to avoid confrontation with the disaffected masses.

Since the late 1990s we have also lived in a period of perpetual crisis for capitalism, resulting from the over-accumulation of capital and lack of effective demand. To quote Harvey again, this time writing in 2010:

Real problems of finding adequate outlets for surplus capital began to emerge after 1980, even with the opening up of China and the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The difficulties were in part resolved by the creation of fictitious markets where speculation in asset values could take off unchecked by any regulatory apparatus. Where will all this investment go now? ... What spaces are left in global economy for new spatial fixes for capital surplus absorption? ... What

new lines of production can be opened up to absorb growth? There may be no effective long-term capitalist solutions (apart from reversion to fictitious capital manipulations) to this crisis of capitalism. At some point quantitative changes lead to qualitative shifts and we need to take seriously the idea that we may be at exactly such an inflexion point in the history of capitalism. Questioning the future of capitalism itself as an adequate social system ought, therefore, to be in the forefront of current debate. (Harvey 2010b: 217)

In this fragment Harvey echoes Rosa Luxemburg more than Marx, as Luxemburg regarded capitalist expansion as a conquest of the new markets: ‘accumulating at their expense and pushing them aside to take their place’ (Luxemburg and Bukharin 1972: 60). For Luxemburg, expanding capitalism prepares its own destruction, due to making further accumulation impossible and aggravating the situation of the working class to such an extent that it eventually rebels (ibid.: 60). Harvey, by contrast, is aware that an entirely dispossessed, thwarted and fragmented working class might be unable to rise; rebellion needs unity and strength (Harvey 2006b).

The continuous erosion of the welfare state and the onslaught on the have-nots are met with increased opposition. Political campaigns, rallies, marches, strikes and riots are on the rise. Typically they are an effect of mobilisation around a specific goal, such as protesting against introducing draconian emigration laws or changes in pension rights, and they are short-lived and lack charismatic leaders (Bucci and Tronti 2009). That said, there are also signs that new connections are forged thanks to new means of communication across geographical and class divisions, to prolong and give more shape to these protests. Such actions tend to operate outside the traditional organisations of the left and are rarely endorsed by them, for example the Labour Party in Britain, not least because these organisations created the very conditions of the protest by welcoming neoliberalisation.

The last years also brought debates about the future of capitalism, in which we can identify two principal positions. According to one, there is a need to return to Keynesianism, to curb the excesses of capital. According to the other, the accelerating crises are either a normal feature of healthy capitalism, which needs a fair dose of creative destruction to progress, or are an unfortunate aberration, but the neoliberal ideas should not be blamed for that, but rather external circumstances, such as too much state intervention in the working of the markets. Adherents of the latter position, who could be compared to the defenders of the

gold standard, as discussed by Polanyi, whom Slavoj Žižek describes as ‘market fundamentalists’, ‘demand nothing less than an even more radical implementation of their doctrines’ (Žižek 2009a: 19).

Even if one observes a growing disillusionment with neoliberalism, it does not feed into government policies. On the contrary, when I was writing the first draft of this chapter (summer 2011), the Greek government voted to approve the next wave of austerity measures and Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, announced that Italy would follow suit. In effect these changes, emulated across the whole of Europe, confirm the neoliberal logic of taking away from those who already have little, including their hard-won pension rights, to give to those who already have so much that they would not be able to consume it in hundreds of years. By and large, the current situation confirms the views of authors such as Rancière, Harvey and Tronti that ‘capitalism only produces capitalism’ (Rancière 2010: 135).

The ascent of neoliberalism, as I indicated in the previous chapter, was facilitated by technological changes, especially in communication and knowledge economy and conversely, neoliberalisation led to further changes in working practices. There is an immense literature tackling these links (for example Lazzarato 2006; Liu 2004; Rancière 2010; Gregg 2011) and it would be impossible even to summarise it. I would like, however, to point to the fact that new technology is effectively making workers the tools of their own oppression, forcing them to internalise guilt for being unable to meet the demands of their employment. Another effect of the technological changes is the increased speed of the circulation of capital, which adds to the privileged position of finance capital in comparison with other forms of capital, and is a factor in the acceleration of capital. To put it simply, the more immaterial is work and the ‘lighter’ the capital, the stronger is capitalism.

After several decades of hegemonic status, it is also clear that neoliberalism pertains to a specific form of popular culture – one driven solely by profit. It is not an accident, in my view, that the most commercially successful film of the last two decades, *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron, can be regarded as a symbol of mature neoliberalism. It is extremely ‘over-accumulated’, boasting a budget of \$237,000,000 (U.S.), and successfully colonised cinemas across the whole world, displacing the local product, while preaching respect for otherness, nature and the need for the strong to protect the vulnerable. Equally, I regard it as symptomatic that the last two decades are marked by a decline in auteurist cinema, both as a

production and promotion strategy and as an approach to studying cinema. As well as revealing a previously inadequate awareness of and insensitivity to the complexities of filmmaking, the shift towards non-auteurist cinema can be viewed as giving in to an idea that even in the sphere of artistic production individual talent is of secondary importance. Another media product that accurately captures the logic of mature neoliberalism is television shows such as *Pop Idol* or *X Factor*. They follow the same scenario, in which an ‘ordinary guy’ ruthlessly eliminates many competitors, as in a gladiatorial contest. Programmes like these inculcate viewers into the neoliberal world, where a few win a lot thanks to many losing everything. These changes pertain to Eastern cinema as much as to Western cinema and media at large. Focus on profit, deregulation and fragmentation, exacerbated in some cases by break-up of the countries, render postcommunist cinemas polarised and fragmented (Tsyrukun 2006; Mazierska 2007).

The new culture is also epitomised by what Marc Augé describes in his widely cited essay as ‘non-places’. In his view, we live in a world, where:

transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps); where a dense network of means of transport, which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral. (Augé 1995: 78)

Comparing the films from the 1960s on the one hand and the 1990s and 2000s on the other confirms this view. While the former come across as embedded in a distinct architecture, the locus of the latter are places of transit and ‘temporary abodes’. There is, of course, as Augé notes, a connection between the culture and identity of those submerged in it. Jean-François Lyotard, a thinker at the forefront of capturing social changes, in his late-1980s book entitled *The Inhuman*, aptly observes that the development of technology, characteristic of this period, does not lead to an increase of knowledge, sensibility, tolerance and liberty, but to their opposite: ‘a new barbarism, illiteracy and impoverishment of language, new poverty, merciless remodelling of opinion by the media, immiseration of the mind, obsolescence of the soul’ (Lyotard 1991: 63). Lyotard even goes as far as to point to the danger of becoming inhuman as a result of adhering to neoliberal logic

(which he describes as ‘development’) (ibid.: 2). Other authors, such as Lutz Niethammer, associate neoliberal capitalism with the world emptied of any new political projects and social ideals – with the end of history (Niethammer 1992). But, of course, there are others, like Francis Fukuyama, who regard it as a happy ending of history (Fukuyama 1992).

The theme of the inhumanity of neoliberal capitalism is a frequent motif of European films of the last twenty years. In contrast to the 1980s films, which pronounce that ‘something bad happens’, but are unable to find out what causes the problem, numerous films of the 1990s and 2000s attempt to account for systemic oppression suffered by people thrown into the neoliberal world. They give voice to the defeated characters or allow them to remain silent, if silence is regarded as more eloquent. They often turn to melodrama, in common with the films discussed in the previous chapter, but not to show that love is able to stop the economic tide, but rather to underscore the crushing force of economic circumstances and the need to unite beyond the borders of the family in order to counteract them. Melodrama, as O’Shaughnessy observes, drawing on seminal work by Peter Brooks, is also used to move beyond surface appearances, to allow for open confrontation between the characters and to restore moral legibility (O’Shaughnessy 2007: 132). For the same reason, some films discussed in this chapter depart from the realistic mode and move towards allegory. Many also revisit the past, but not so much as to nostalgically ponder on the ‘good old days’, but to draw lessons from history.

Scraping a living after the fall of communism

I shall begin my discussion with the films made in the Eastern part of Europe as this was the part most affected by the fall of ‘crude communism’. There it led to an increase in economic and social polarisation in the previously socialist countries, as observed in the West from the 1980s. Particularly strongly hit were communities built around the heavy industries, which were privileged during the socialist period, such as mining, shipbuilding and steelworks. I am emphasising the word ‘communities’ rather than workers themselves, because those who served them and were supported by them, their families and, to use O’Connor’s term, ‘competitive industries’ coexisting with them, experienced the negative effects of the neoliberal regime even more than the workers themselves (Kideckel 2002).

Working class women, in particular, had to suffer the brunt of the shift to the neoliberal order more severely than men and they constitute the majority of migrant workers, whom Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild describe as ‘global women’ (2003).

I will list three types of narrative used to describe the plight of ‘useless people’. One is a ‘compensation narrative’, which I discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Thatcherite cinema – stories about people who have very little and are tested by fate, but who triumph over their circumstances thanks to their nonmaterial resources, such as their essential goodness. The second can be described as a narrative of reduction to ‘bare life’; the third, resistance. Compensation narratives flourish in Polish postcommunist cinema (Caes 2005; Mazierska 2012b). Their ideological goal is to show humanistic concern for those who comprehensively lost out in the race for prosperity, while accepting the overall neoliberal framework in which they operate.

The most celebrated example of the compensation narrative is *Edi* (2002) by Piotr Trzaskalski. *Edi* is a homeless scrap collector who lives in Łódź, a city that before the fall of communism was the main centre of the Polish textile industry (known as the Polish Manchester), as well as a symbol of the Polish capitalist past. After 1989 Łódź undertook the same path as British industrial centres under Thatcher – de-industrialisation, leading to high unemployment and poverty. *Edi*’s situation is harsh, therefore the film can be regarded as an indictment of the capitalism that caused it. Yet capitalism is also presented as beneficial for *Edi*, as the ‘crumbs from the rich people’s table’ allow him to survive. *Edi* and his companion *Jureczek* virtually live on what the consumer society discards. The more affluent people buy and throw away, the more the dispossessed salvage. As *Edi* tells *Jureczek*, ‘There is no point looking for scrap on the estates where poor people live. We should go to the places where the affluent classes dwell.’ *Jureczek* himself is surprised that people throw away functioning refrigerators and television sets but, ultimately, he is glad that they do so, as wealthy people’s rubbish is their livelihood.

Edi survives emotionally thanks to a large collection of books, most likely also discarded by the new rich. His knowledge and good character, however, lead to further deprivation, when a local gangster asks him to tutor his sister for a final college exam. In due course the young woman accuses her teacher of raping and impregnating her. Her brother and fellow gangsters punish *Edi* by castrating him and forcing him to look after the young woman’s baby son. Soon the gangsters

reach him again, upon learning that the baby's mother lied, and take away the child, leaving Edi with neither the child nor the physical ability to conceive one. The gradual dispossession of Edi of everything he has, and the ruthless, criminal behaviour of his masters can be viewed as a metaphor for the 'mafia capitalism' ruling the postcommunist world. Yet Edi does not fight with the status quo, but like a true saint he accepts his lot, telling Jureczek that he still has his life and he can do anything he wants with it. On several occasions Edi also preaches to his homeless friend that in a fundamental sense all lives are equal, because every person is unique. There is no point being envious of the success of others or trying to change the world. Capitalists should be allowed to go on amassing their wealth by dispossessing the poor, because in a fundamental sense such behaviour does not affect either those at the top or the bottom of the pile: they will always remain who they are. As in Leigh's compensation narratives, discussed in the previous chapter, Trzaskalski also reveals a distaste for 'new money', represented here by Polish gangsters. The house where the gangsters live is filled with tawdry ornaments and several large television sets. Their quantity and sheer size, poignantly contrasting with the lack of books in their house, draw attention to the superficiality and, ultimately, worthlessness of postcommunist culture. By contrast, the pristine landscape of Edi's home village, where the scrap collector moves for a short while with his adopted son, shot in long takes and long shots, is presented as a true treasure, to which Polish capitalists have no access. Such representation, by rendering the rewards of participating in postcommunist economy unattractive, and its most severe deprivations bearable, can be seen as advocating accepting the status quo. However, although *Edi* was widely praised for its humanism and accomplished style, rarely seen in directors' debut productions, the critics wondered if in contemporary Poland there exist people able to behave like Edi (Sobieszek 2002; Piotrowska 2002).

Other filmmakers were less eager to portray poor but content Eastern Europeans. Instead the norm shifted to showing how desperate they became after the neoliberal flood destroyed their livelihood, as in *Elvjs e Merilijn* (1998), directed by Armando Manni, *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002), directed by Lukas Moodysson, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), directed by Stephen Frears, *Rezervni deli (Spare Parts)*, 2003), directed by Damjan Kozole, *Grbavica (Emma's Secret)*, 2006), directed by Jasmila Zbanic and *Iszka utazása (Iska's Journey)*, 2007), directed by Csaba Bollók. A majority of them concern Eastern European sex workers. Their proliferation in cinema, as well as in press and literature (Goscilo 1995), can be viewed as proof

that the ‘East moved West’: socialism was replaced by capitalism, as according to Marx and Engels prostitution is a common fate for ruined female proletarians, and a metaphor for the condition of labour under capitalism (Marx 1977).

Édes Emma, drága Böbe – vázlatok, aktok (*Sweet Emma, Dear Böbe*, 1992) by István Szabó inaugurated the trend about postcommunist ‘bare life’. The film is set in 1989 and concerns two teachers of Russian, Emma and Böbe. They live in a shared room in a squalid, cramped hostel and have to get extra work to supplement their meagre wages. They perform body work: Emma works as a cleaner and Böbe as a part-time prostitute. Böbe also auditions as an extra in a film that will depict a scene in a harem. The parade of naked flesh acts as an indictment of the new type of body discipline, replacing the earlier bondage of mind, and as a sign of a loss of individuality under the new order, despite its championing individualism. All women seeking this work are nurses or teachers, pointing to their miserable wages despite the importance of their work for the physical and cultural survival of society. To add insult to injury, Emma and Böbe’s human capital becomes obsolete following the crumbling of the Soviet Union. They have to undergo intensive retraining to be able to teach English – a transition acting as a metaphor for the reduction of the once proud socialist East, willing to export its allegedly superior communist system to the world, to the position of a humble student of capitalism.

Both women are able to survive emotionally thanks to their mutual support and romantic illusions. Emma is having an affair with the director of the school where she works, while Böbe hopes that one of the affluent men with whom she has affairs will turn out to be her prince. This, however, leads to her arrest and imprisonment for illegal currency dealing and prostitution, and finally to her suicide, by throwing herself out of a window, in a scene anticipating Marie’s death in *The Dreamlife of Angels*, discussed later in this chapter. The film ends showing Emma reduced to selling newspapers in a Budapest Metro station. Although the ending of the film is grim, the director claimed that it contains a kernel of hope because Emma is still alive. John Cunningham, who quotes these words, finds Szabó’s utterance bizarre, wondering how preserving bare life can be regarded as a happy ending (Cunningham 2014: 92). It is unacceptable in the context of socialist or humanistic values, which the film evokes, but under neoliberal conditions, whose birth in Eastern Europe *Sweet Emma, Dear Böbe* bears witness to, this indeed might be regarded as a success, because in this world only the fittest survive.

While Szabó renders the situation of Hungarian teachers as pertaining to the socialist East, Ulrich Seidl in *Import/Export* (2007) sees it in a wider, pan-European

context. He also illuminates the workers' resistance to the crushing neoliberal machine. His film tags onto the heels of two characters: Olga from Ukraine and Pauli from Austria. We see first Olga trudging through snow from her socialist apartment block to her work as a nurse, where she is only paid forty per cent of her wages. Seidl does not explain why her salary is reduced, but we can guess that this is a consequence of the budgetary restraint as a means to fight high inflation, for which the most vulnerable have to pay – the poor and the public sector. Olga works on a ward with newborn babies, saving prematurely born children. The fact that she and others like her are not paid adequately can be translated into the state's lack of care for its weakest citizens, as well as its future. We are thus faced with the neoliberal life-death economy, where the good life of the strong few is paid for by the death of the weak. Seidl also shows that by not being adequately paid for saving other people's children, the nurse cannot provide for her own baby.

Olga then undertakes different jobs, which, unlike work as a neonatal ward nurse, require her body rather than her mind. She tries her hand at internet porn, joining a group of Ukrainian women who respond to the calls of Western men. In this new form of colonial exploitation the employers are physically removed from the workers, yet in total control of their bodies for the duration of their sessions. Unlike viewers of old-fashioned pornographic films, who after buying a ticket to the cinema have no influence on what they watch, they can demand from the actresses specific behaviour, leaving them no scope for invention or showing their 'human' side. At the same time, due to the use of digital cameras, which are operated by the actress herself, it appears that she is the tool of her own abuse. As the customers pay per minute, they do not want to waste their money on looking at what they can get for free, such as the women's faces, or on following even a rudimentary narrative, but only to see the women's genitals in extreme close-ups, which apparently represent the best value for money. Consequently, in online pornography the rule that the performer's body is fragmented and reduced to its erotic parts (Kuhn 1985: 36), is applied in an extreme way. The final sign of the subjugation of the performer to a distant power is the request to speak her clients' language. Indeed, Olga loses her job because she does not understand the commands barked at her by the German-speaking customer. Leaving her child behind, Olga then goes to Austria where she works a number of menial jobs, again under the close supervision of her colonial masters, who do not lose any opportunity to humiliate her. Eventually she becomes a cleaner in a hospital for old and demented patients, as despite her qualifications she is unable to get work

as a nurse. There Olga provokes the anger of her co-workers when, breaking the rule to remain silent, she attempts to make contact with the elderly patients.

Meanwhile we meet Pauli going through training as a security guard. Working in security, protecting private property against the attack of the ‘hungry masses’, became a paradigmatic job for the former male industrial working class. The move from production to security signifies the growing social divisions between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ and the use of the ‘have-nots’ to police other ‘have-nots’, which



Figures 5.1 and 5.2 Olga's work in *Import/Export*

adds to the fragmentation of the working class. As with internet porn, this is a job that involves much more violence than the old-style work in service or industry, bearing a resemblance to the role of the kapo in Nazi concentration camps. Pauli turns out not to be fit for his 'profession' – he is fired after being beaten up and humiliated in a car park. Seeming to owe money all over town, he takes the opportunity to go to the East with his stepfather Michael, to sell outdated videogames. While Olga goes to the West essentially to serve, Michael and Pauli go to the East to exploit and penetrate. Olga goes as 'labour'; Michael and Pauli as 'capital'. This is underscored by the fact that Michael combines business with an encounter with a Ukrainian prostitute. Their session goes beyond ordinary sex services, as Michael asks her to behave like a dog; a scene that recalls Pauli's training as a security guard and Olga's training in internet pornography (Goddard and Halligan 2012: 181). Seidl, like Szabó, thus sketches a world in which work comes across as life-long learning, in which the worker never achieves the position of a craftsman who is a master of his skills, and which involves a high degree of violence. It is worth mentioning that life-long learning is a particularly neoliberal concept, whose advocates give it a positive spin by stressing its liberating potential. Its obverse, however, is a hidden demand to forever be capable of paying for new skills, and the ever-growing, and increasingly likely prospect of unemployment, and its 'educational', namely disciplinary role (Dooley 2011). Yet both Olga and Pauli resist the pressure to accept this inhuman logic, even if their resistance is purely personal and does not have wider repercussions. The extreme exploitation of a prostitute by Michael disgusts Pauli so much that he decides to leave his company. Olga resists the inhuman rule that she should not talk to patients, makes a real connection with one of them and fights back when one of the nurses attacks her in a fit of xenophobic resentment.

By showing the similarity between the situations of Pauli and Olga, Seidl illustrates a tendency for capital to become spatially homogenous. The more advanced capitalism is, the more it looks and feels the same both to its victors and its victims (Lash and Urry 1987: 85). Seidl represents this growing uniformity as a negative phenomenon, responsible for the lack of genuine culture in either Austria or Ukraine. The only type of culture available is mass culture, offered by television and the internet, which renders its consumers passive or 'cannibalistic', feeding on others' misery. The decline of culture understood in positive terms, and its replacement with one that is sterile and morbid is symbolised by a collection of stuffed animals in one of the houses where Olga works.

Producing the same despicable conditions in the old and ‘new’ Europe and among people of different levels of education and types of occupation, neoliberalism (as previously state socialism) creates masses of disaffected people: in Ukraine and Austria, among nurses and industrial workers, and especially among young people. The challenge for those opposing the current system is to enable them to meet or, to use Harvey’s term, ‘fix them spatially’, so they can form new communities of resistance. On the level of diegesis this does not happen in *Import/Export* – Olga and Pauli do not meet, nor do they even learn about each other’s existence. Yet the fact that Seidl places them in the same film suggests that such a meeting might happen one day.

In a sense, Ken Loach’s *It’s a Free World...* (2007) synthesises the three narratives that I mentioned previously, drawing attention to the bare life of Eastern Europeans, experiencing the shock therapy of neoliberalism, pointing to love as something that can compensate for material deprivation and resistance to the forces of capital. The title of Loach’s film refers to equating the fall of the Berlin Wall with Eastern Europeans regaining their freedom. However, it is imbued with irony, because the new freedom means not only freedom to travel, but also to be exploited, as observed by Marx.

Loach’s main characters are two young owners of an employment agency, Angie and Rose, acutely interested in migrants. The pair make their living by finding casual employment for them. Of this group Poles are in a relatively privileged position because, thanks to Poland being part of the European Union by this point, they can work legally. Others, such as Iranians, have to arrange false documents and put up with despicable wages and working conditions. Nevertheless, all foreigners in Loach’s films end up being exploited by the agents, ruthless employers who take every opportunity not to pay them, the Mafia and the capitalist system as a whole. Moreover, Loach shows that exploitation carries ruthlessness and the need for revenge on both sides, an example being the Poles who beat up Angie and later kidnap her son to force her to pay them a large sum of outstanding wages. This can be seen as an act of political resistance by the new proletariat against the forces of capitalism, or as an act of self-exploitation, because the harmed workers take revenge on those who are in a position not much better than themselves. Of the migrants special attention is granted to a young Polish man named Karol, with whom Angie spends the night in the Silesian town of Katowice and whom she later meets in London. Karol is open-hearted and generous, despite being poor and unlucky. He helps Angie in her dealings with the

migrants and invites her to his caravan, where he offers her Polish alcohol. Handsome and articulate, he awakens sexual attraction in Angie. However, their romance does not blossom because, as the woman puts it, they met at the wrong time. This statement most likely refers to the fact that after numerous romantic disappointments and ending up as a single mother, hardly able to look after her son, Angie associates romance with trouble. The impossibility of their romance might also symbolise the insurmountable gap between the exploiters (even as inept as Angie is initially) and those who are exploited. Neoliberal exploitation, as shown by Loach, spreads and deepens over time. While at the beginning Angie is most interested in Poles (or rather their labour power), later she casts her eye towards even more desperate and work hungry people from the ex-Soviet Union.

Loach employs a *mise-en-scène* that conveys a sense of the restricted lives of the emigrant. Most of them live in a caravan park and such accommodation is depicted as desirable, as the alternative is squatting in cold, disused factories, or complete homelessness. The caravan park renders the lives of migrants claustrophobic and tightly controlled. The very space of a caravan is limited; there is hardly enough room to eat or sleep there. Moreover, the caravans stand close to one another, leaving practically no space for privacy. The caravan park is surrounded by a wire, which, on the one hand, serves as protection from hostile English neighbours, and on the other, marks its territory as a confined place, bearing a resemblance to a concentration camp. While the lives of the emigrants come across as restricted and claustrophobic, Angie and Rosie are extremely mobile. Angie in particular is always on the move, criss-crossing the whole of London several times a day on her motorcycle. The women are also in charge of vans that take the migrants to their work places; the workers have to wait there passively until the vans are full. Moreover, Angie and Rose ‘penetrate’ Eastern Europe, as shown in the last scene, where the two women are recruiting people from Ukraine to work in London. In accordance with his credentials as chief socialist realist in British cinema, Loach assesses this movement utterly negatively, as leading to the exploitation and misery of migrants and the lowering of moral standards on both sides of the divide: host country and donor country.

Beyond bare life

While in the East, as shown in the aforementioned films, the condition of bare life befalls unprepared characters, in the West it is represented as the order of the day, as a permanent state. The challenge is to learn to live with it rather than overcome it. One such example, the full-length feature debut of television director Peter Cattaneo, *The Full Monty* (1997), concerns the case of unemployed steelworkers from Sheffield. The film begins with a kind of advert, which using documentary footage encourages viewers to work and settle in Sheffield, not much different from those advertising life in Nowa Huta, as presented in Wajda's *Man of Marble* (see Chapter 3). It shows this Yorkshire town at a peak of Fordism–Keynesianism, when it was prosperous thanks to the production of steel. The steelworks served as a springboard to other types of industry, such as building new housing estates in place of Victorian slums. Its success allowed for a rise in consumption and entertainment, enjoyed by the whole city. After this short coda we are transported to a period '25 years later'. At this point fiction cinema displaces documentary and the representation of the life of the whole city gives way to a story of only a handful of people. Framing fiction with a documentary suggests that the former is firmly embedded in the latter: the fiction is true. Or, perhaps, the documentary coda is meant to introduce irony into the film, suggesting that everything shown on screen is ultimately propaganda.

In the fictional part we see the empty shell of the old steelworks, from which two men, its previous employees and a boy who is one of the men's son, Gaz, attempt to steal some metal bars. Their theft, however, is interrupted by a brass band that passes the factory when the men try to load the bars. The brass band, consisting of factory workers, is a symbol of an old culture, pointing to the fact that the 'superstructure' (culture) might outlive the 'basis' (economic arrangement), a theme elaborated on in *Brassed Off*, which I will discuss later. It turns out that the thieves lost their jobs when the steelworks was closed. Other ex-steelworkers cast in the film include their old foreman, Gerald, who still pretends to his wife that he is working and every day leaves his house with a briefcase after breakfast. His inclusion in the group is a poignant sign that untempered capitalism leads to polarisation, transferring to the proletariat the bulk of those from the lower middle class.

Initially Gerald keeps his distance from those who used to be his subordinates, but eventually he joins them, as if to confirm that material situation affects class

consciousness, if not immediately, then after some time. The men recognise that the closure of the steelworks will lead to their extinction, not only as a class but also as physical beings. One of them reaches this conclusion earlier than the others and attempts to commit suicide, but is rescued by his ex co-workers and they form a small circle of mutual support. The men themselves link their demise to the rise of women's power. Such a conclusion is supported by their being surrounded by women apparently doing better in life than they, and taking over what they regarded as their space and property. They see that the men's club has become a women's club, and that Gaz's ex-wife lives in a detached house and is threatening to deprive Gaz of his paternity rights due to falling behind with child support. This antifemale sentiment is a replica of the antimale sentiment bursting in the wake of the late 1960s feminist movement, which was, as I argued in Chapter 2, a reaction to privileging the male-dominated 'monopoly sector'. On each occasion, however, the objects of resentment of the oppressed group are not those who establish the rules (the capitalist class and the government), but those whom the workers regard as their immediate competitors for capitalists' favours. Likewise, the film does not look for the real culprits of the characters' demise, but pits emasculated men against powerful women, which blunts and twists its political edge. We see that Gaz's son has become so used to the affluence provided by his mother and stepfather that initially he is scornful of his dad, who cannot afford to buy him a ticket for a Manchester United match or even the food he likes.

Yet the story does not end with the men perishing. Inspired by the Sheffield success of the Chippendales, the male troupe specialising in erotic dance, they come together and set up a Yorkshire Chippendales, whose act includes baring themselves completely (the eponymous 'Full Monty') in front of an audience consisting solely of women. As unemployed industrial labourers they have nothing but their bodies – they are only bodies. But rather than lamenting how low the men have sunk, the film shows that their work fulfils many conditions of nonalienated work. One advantage is the men's taking responsibility for the whole process of work – from planning to execution. We see the 'core' of the group auditioning additional performers, learning new skills, putting posters up for their act. They do everything together, practically without any division of labour or hierarchies. Unlike in the old-style leftist establishments, which were white and heterosexual, the group embraces heterogeneity. Among the performers there are gay men, an older man and a black man. Finally, they do not allow others to



Figure 5.3 Body work in *The Full Monty*

appropriate the fruits of their labour but plan to divide it among themselves evenly. Ultimately, their work gives the men purpose and pleasure, as well as providing the means for material survival.

The Full Monty is a comedy and Cattaneo respects its rules by furnishing his film with a happy ending, showing that the performance of the Yorkshire Chippendales attracts crowds of women. Yet he does not present the full show, as the frame freezes at the very moment the men are about to bare their genitals. Thanks to this discretion the performance comes across more as a traditional dance act than sex work, in this way tacitly admitting that the latter is degrading.

During the course of the film we see what employment opportunities await the 'Yorkshire Chippendales' if their stripping act is unsuccessful or if they decide not to pursue this particular path. Except from Gerald, who eventually gets a job as a manager, the career prospects of the remaining men are unappealing, financially and morally. Gaz is offered work for minimum wage in a factory, where his ex-wife works as a supervisor. The majority of ex-steelworkers are employed in security. One is guarding the empty shell of the steelworks and another gets a job as a guard in a supermarket. As I already mentioned, the move from production to security signifies the deep division of society and the need to police the dissatisfied masses.

Guarding the disused factory can be viewed as a purely ideological activity because its purpose is to prevent workers from salvaging what will be useless for the new owners of the factory. This fact illustrates a wider rule of neoliberalism: everything has to belong to somebody and even if the owners cannot put their property to use, it should be off-limits to those who might need it. This focus on security points to the contradiction of neoliberalism – although it preaches freedom, it has to rely on a huge apparatus of repression (army, police, private security firms) to ensure its existence (Polanyi 2001; Harvey 2005: 64–86; Hardt and Negri 2006).

Out of a group of six men only Gaz is a father and he fights to retain his paternity rights which he is about to lose due to his inability to pay child support. Such a situation, contrasting with that offered by Mike Leigh in the films discussed in the previous chapter, where the working classes and those on the left proliferated and the upper classes were rendered sterile, can be regarded as symbolic of the decline of the traditional industrial working class. It appears as if the working class drew the right conclusion from the fact that their reproduction would only lead to the production of ‘useless people’. Gaz intuitively grasps this situation but articulates it as a gender issue: instead of talking about the extinction of the working class, he talks about the extinction of men – because he equates men with the privileged monopoly sector of the industrial working class and this sector with the working class as a whole. In light of the fact that the working class (or men in Gaz’s sense) is sentenced to extinction, non-reproductive sex appears to be the best method of fulfilling one’s sexual needs, as proved by the immense popularity of the Yorkshire Chippendales’ performance and the gay affair between two of its members. On the other hand, the fact that Gaz manages to regain the affection and respect of his son during the course of the narrative and Dave overcomes the crisis in his marriage and his impotence might suggest that there is a future for the working classes. Such an optimistic message, however, can be attributed to the film’s need to conform to the convention of a comedy.

La vie rêvée des anges (*The Dreamlife of Angels*, 1998) was Erick Zonca’s first feature after many years of working in documentaries. Unsurprisingly, the film has a documentary feel, thanks to the use of a ‘documentary camera’, with many episodes shot on location and naturalistic acting, for which the actresses who played the main parts were rewarded at Cannes. According to the director, *The Dreamlife of Angels* was also rooted in reality as it was based on the lives of two women who he met, including one who auditioned for an earlier short film (Zonca 1999). His two main characters have struggled with their precarious positions

practically since they reached adulthood. Isa is in her early twenties and moves from town to town with all her worldly belongings in her backpack. In her life as a traveller she resembles Mona from Varda's *Vagabond*, but unlike Mona, who chose life on the road because she disliked regular employment, Isa is moving from place to place because she has no home and no permanent job and she yearns to have both. Her life takes a turn for the better when she gets work in a textile factory and meets Marie, another young woman without a stable job. Marie allows Isa to stay in the flat that she is 'sitting' since its occupants, a mother and daughter, have been involved in a car accident. During this period they become friends and attempt to improve their lot, developing two distinct strategies. Isa reveals what can be described as a nascent socialist consciousness. She socialises with people of her class, such as bouncers working in a club for 'rich kids' and a girl who is doing another part-time job with her. Although her friendships do not lead to political activity, one can conjecture that this is where political activity begins: with exchanging grievances and having fun together. Isa also repeatedly reminds Marie about the importance of adhering to the principle of reciprocity and showing



Figure 5.4 Isa searching for work and a place to live in *The Dreamlife of Angels*

solidarity with those who suffer. For her even bare life is a precious gift, as expressed in her last letter to Marie.

While Isa remains embedded in her social milieu of working class people, reduced to ‘flexible’ – and in reality precarious – employment and privileges friendship over love, Marie has an affair with a rich playboy named Chris, the owner of a club where Isa’s friends work. Chris, however, only exploits her, offering her neither emotional nor financial support, and eventually abandons her. He does not even have the courage to tell Marie that their relationship is over, preferring to simply disappear from her life, which is emblematic of the way bad news is conveyed to the working classes nowadays – by silence. It is only when confronted by an angry Isa that he admits his guilt. Isa’s verbal attack and his remorse is a small victory for the have-nots. For Marie, however, being abandoned by the man whom she loved is a final blow. She commits suicide by jumping out of the window, mirroring the fate of Szabó’s Böbe. In the last scene we see Isa in a similar scene as that shown at the beginning of the film – on her first day in a factory. This time, however, it is not a sewing factory, but one producing electronic components and she is not shouted at by a supervisor but praised for doing her work well, as if she has been doing the job all her life. Isa’s trajectory thus shows some improvement, thanks to both moving to the higher sector of production and being treated more gently. Martin O’Shaughnessy, however, interprets this scene as pointing ‘towards an alienation that has become so total that it can no longer be spoken of’ (O’Shaughnessy 2007: 84).

Isa and Marie’s different trajectories have much to do with their families. Isa remarks that her father left her mother for another woman when she was young. This fact inevitably affected her life prospects, as poverty befalls single-parent families more often than those with two parents, but it also made her stronger and more self-reliant. Marie had an abusive father who victimised her mother, which made her repeat her mother’s mistakes by falling for an abusive man. The film thus shows that for people like Marie the price of surviving is breaking with their family’s legacy. Yet this renders their situation even more difficult, as it means reinventing their lives with a lack of material resources and almost non-existent cultural capital. This lack is underscored by showing Marie as if she did not know what to do with her body, as if she had superfluous limbs. This contrasts with Isa, who is always busy, moves with a natural grace and usually holds something in her hands: a notebook, a tray of food or a pair of scissors. Comparing the young women brought to my mind a description of life in a concentration camp by Primo Levi.

He maintained that those who kept busy and remained curious about the surrounding world, who refused to be reduced to bare life, like himself, had a higher chance of survival. Those who resigned, perished (Levi 1988).

In common with other directors discussed in this chapter, Zonca shows that for working class males, the most common available employment in the neoliberal world is in security, as demonstrated by the case of Isa's bouncer friends. Zonca is even more conspicuous than Seidl and Cattaneo in showing that a poor man's job is protecting the world of the affluent from the intrusions of the 'underworld', as we see the bouncers not allowing Marie, Isa or others of their kind to attend concerts and night clubs. Such security work has two advantages from the perspective of neoliberal 'masters': it insulates them from the unwelcome intrusions of the have-nots and prevents solidarity among the working class by making the proletarians inflict violence on each other. However, Zonca shows that the process can be subverted, for example by allowing those who have no ticket for the concerts to come in through the back door.

It would be difficult to omit *Rosetta* (1998) from this section, the most celebrated film about bare life at the centre of industrial Europe, made by Belgian filmmakers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, probably the most famous European directors documenting the dismantling of the working class by neoliberal conditions. We meet Rosetta when, despite her protests, she is sacked from her trainee job in a food-processing plant. The teenage girl is not made redundant because she works badly, but because the factory does not need more staff, or perhaps prefers to employ another trainee, who can be paid less than a regular labourer. Rosetta returns to the caravan where she lives with her alcoholic mother. She keeps asking for work in the nearby businesses and develops skills to help her to survive without money, such as catching fish with bait put in a bottle. In this way the Dardennes show that while life for the affluent might get more and more saturated with technology, for those at the bottom of the pile it means retreating to a primitive stage. Rosetta wants to get work at any cost; she does not mind if her employment would result in making somebody else redundant. At one point she even hesitates over whether to rescue the drowning Riquet, a man who helped her in her struggle to find employment. The girl seems to reason that his death might increase her chance of getting his job at the van selling waffles. The reduction of Rosetta's existence to bare life also leads her to question her identity, as shown in a scene when she speaks to herself when lying on a couch: 'Your name is Rosetta – My name is Rosetta. You have found a job – I have found a job'. This dialogue

reminds me of Irena in Holland's *A Woman Alone* asking herself 'Who am I?' and answering 'Nobody'. And yet, it feels like Irena's life, despite all the disappointment, was richer than Rosetta's, who feels that she must kill to save herself.

Rosetta is filmed in the old Belgian industrial heartland town of Seraing, the setting for most of the Dardennes' films. According to Luc Dardenne, it was meant to be 'the portrait of an epoch', tapping into the employment malaise of 1990s Europe (quoted in Mai 2010: 65). In 1998, the year *Rosetta* was shot, more than half of Belgians under twenty-five had not found a job six months after finishing their schooling, with the worst figures in French-speaking Wallonia (ibid: 65–66). Yet, as Martin O'Shaughnessy notes:

There is little or no sense of this historical working class heritage. The working class past is simply not available as a resource or a reference. In the same way as Rosetta is trapped in her circumstances, she is locked into a pure present. Collective narratives of class struggle have given way to a story of competing and colliding atoms. Although work retains its centrality, the old inclusive order has given way to the institutionalized struggle of all against all. If unemployment implies a social non-being, and if employment means the displacement of the other, then social life becomes murderous or suicidal. (O'Shaughnessy 2012: 162–63)

This conclusion is confirmed by Jean-Pierre Dardenne:

Employment today is like a game of musical chairs. There are seven chairs, and eight people. When the music stops, the person who can't find a seat is eliminated. So it is with work. The only way to find a job is to take someone else's. So when Rosetta sets out to look for work, it's as if she's going off to war. For her it's a matter of life or death. She thinks that if she doesn't find a place in society, she'll die, she'll simply cease to exist. (quoted in Camhi 1999)

If we look only at *Rosetta*, we have to reach such a conclusion. However, turning to a secondary character of the film, Riquet, shows another, less murderous possibility for survival. Riquet, who works in a van selling waffles, earns extra income by cheating his boss. He suggests to Rosetta that she joins him in this 'sabotage' and they split the earnings between them. His behaviour resembles the way of letting penniless friends attend events for the rich through the back door, as shown in *The Dreamlife of Angels*. In a Marxist reading, depriving the capitalist

of part of his surplus value is morally justified by the fact that surplus value is expropriated from the workers – morally it does not belong to capitalists. However, Rosetta rejects Riquet’s reasoning, saying that ‘moonlighting is not work’.

As with Isa and Marie, for Rosetta family is not a resource to draw on, but a burden. She has to take care of her mother, which is as draining for her as looking for work. In common with the heroines of Zonca’s film, we also get the impression that Rosetta will not get pregnant easily, knowing what it means to be a ‘useless person’, threatened with extinction. This refusal or inability to proliferate is underscored by the motif of the recurring stomach cramp Rosetta suffers. Luc Dardenne describes Rosetta’s cramps as the ‘birthing pains that deliver no child’ (quoted in Mai 2010: 74). It appears that women like Rosetta are deprived of all the joy of having children, but not the pain, not unlike ‘subaltern women’ hired as surrogate mothers by rich women, to which I will turn later on in this chapter.

In Belgium Rosetta prompted a debate on employment problems for young people. Belgium’s then minister of labour, Laurette Onkelinx, conceived the ‘Rosetta Plan’ to help young, unskilled people enter the labour market (Hessels 2004: 244). While the idea of helping the unemployed is commendable, I am critical of its execution, which focuses on the victims of neoliberalism, the poor, unemployed and disempowered, rather than on the culprits: the rich and powerful, who accumulated their wealth by dispossessing the poor.

The three films discussed in this part conform to a realistic tradition, but they reveal a different attitude to their characters and surroundings. In *The Full Monty* the characters are figures in a landscape and the landscape is represented in a way that harks back to the tradition of the British New Wave, with the obligatory image of the city from a hill, as a place that the character is hoping to conquer. Although the film’s main character is Gaz, other men from the team of strippers are almost as important and we often see them together and in smaller assemblies, as if they were a community made up of smaller groups. The purpose of such representation is to underscore the connections between the characters and their natural and cultural environment. By contrast, the young women, represented by Zonca and, to an even larger extent the Dardennes, are cut out from their wider environment. They are unable to think about themselves historically, or to link their personal stories to the histories of their city, country or region.

Analysing the change

A number of films from the last two decades examine the shift from Keynesian capitalism to neoliberalism. Two films that conform to this model are *Brassed Off* (1996) by Mark Herman and *Ressources humaines* (*Human Resources*, 1999) by Laurent Cantet. They are set in industrial towns where the future of the factories is at stake, and they focus on young and upwardly mobile characters from working class backgrounds who return to their roots to work with the management for what, they believe, will be a better future for everybody.

Gloria in *Brassed Off* is a newly qualified surveyor who in 1992 comes to the Yorkshire mining town where she was born, to conduct a survey on the economic viability of the local mine threatened with closure. Gloria comes to the conclusion that the colliery is profitable, yet her study does not affect the decision to close the pit down, which was made two years previously. Her work is used only to cloak the management's actions with the appearance of apolitical rationality. Outraged, Gloria denounces her employers and protests against such immoral appropriation of her labour by handing the money she earned to the local brass band, consisting of the now unemployed miners. Yet, as Paul Dave observes, 'What is given in this film cannot contain the destructive forces of what is taken' (Dave 2006: 63). This, of course, confirms the neoliberal logic of accumulation by dispossession and the idea that some of its most negative consequences should be alleviated by acts of charity, as is the case.

As the ultimate goal of neoliberalism is upward redistribution of wealth and consolidation of class power, not preservation and development of efficient enterprises, and especially not of those with strong unions, it does not matter that the colliery is profitable, as is the case on this occasion. In a British context, as Dave observes, drawing on Seumas Milne's book, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners* (2004), the:

Tories' 'economic' arguments against the miners were hostage to their anti-union political project. Ironically, given the principles of neo-liberal capitalism, to finally bury the miners and establish the futility of resisting market imperatives, it had been necessary to 'fix' the energy market. Thus, in the period after 1984 subsidies had been provided to gas and nuclear power companies so that they could compete with coal ... If for the New Right coal was 'history' this

was first and foremost because of its determination to see through to the bitter end a political struggle with the working class. (ibid.: 64)

The industries that replaced coal production were much more convenient to the neoliberal elites, as they required a leaner workforce and thus were less susceptible to unionisation. *Brassed Off* also shows how neoliberal realities force those on the receiving end to collaborate in their downfall. The case in point is Phil, a miner and father of three children, who is so indebted after the strikes of 1984 that he votes in favour of his own redundancy. His situation suggests that, contrary to Marx and Rosa Luxemburg's assessment, the more advanced a society is on its road towards the capitalist extreme, the more difficult it is to divert from this path, because the wretched, downtrodden proletariat does not have the strength to fight. Yet this is not the case here yet. Most of the workers do not passively await their extinction but resist it. Two interconnected strategies are presented as a means of counteracting the status quo. One is the everyday solidarity between workers and their families, represented by paying for each other's drinks in the pub and the local women keeping a vigil in protest against the plan to close the pit. The second strategy, favoured by Danny, the old conductor of the local brass band, is focusing on music. For Danny, playing in the brass band is a way of transcending oppression and publicising the plight of the miners, as demonstrated in his final performance when he addresses the audience criticising the Tory government. However, although the miners respect Danny, they regard him as detached, unable to see what is going on or react appropriately. His age and fatal illness, a sign of which is coughing blood, symbolises the futility of his noble strategy. Danny's insistence on putting music first increases the misery of his own son, Phil. This is because Phil, in order not to disappoint his father, buys a new instrument, rather than paying for more pressing needs. What is missing among the miners is any straightforward political action involving large left-wing organisations, such as the Labour Party. But this is not due to the miners shunning such organisations, but rather to the mainstream left betraying their cause – a widely known fact at the time Herman made his film. *Brassed Off* is essentially a melodrama, full of love stories presented with pathos. The use of this genre is meant to illustrate the link between political and personal: the break-up of families and death due to fulfilling the neoliberal project. At the same time, showing Phil and his wife reconciled in the last episode points to the importance of personal bonds in resisting the political.



Figure 5.5 Brassed off in *Brassed Off*

Franck in *Human Resources* returns to his home town from Paris, where he has studied economics, for a work placement in the human resources department in the mechanical factory where his father Jean-Claude and sister work. In his first talk with the head of HR Franck muses on the time when he was a child and used to receive Christmas presents from the company and went on the subsidized *vacances* (holiday camps for the workers' children). Such memories point to the Keynesian order, marked by paternalism, redistribution of wealth from the top to the bottom and the existence of spheres of social life that were not subjected to financial regimes. These reminiscences are interrupted by the head of HR who claims that all these perks for the workers had to be stopped because things are now less rosy: the company was recently forced to let twenty-two people go. Gradually Franck familiarises himself with the new regime. His trajectory is that of disenchantment. In common with Gloria, he begins his work by naively assuming that the management and workers collaborate for the common good, which is the prosperity of the factory and the country at large.

Franck himself takes on the task of helping the factory management and workers by promoting a new working regime, which allows for a shorter working

week of thirty-five hours and greater flexibility, through organising a referendum among the workers, bypassing the unions, which he regards as forces of conservatism. This idea is met with enthusiasm by the factory director but, inevitably, not by the unionists, who see it as a means of undermining their function within the factory and splitting the workforce. It is also treated with distrust by Jean-Claude who prefers to continue working in a 'Fordist way'. In due course, Franck learns that the new shorter week is to be used by the factory management as an alibi to sack more workers, including his own father. Franck thus learns that under the conditions of neoliberalism every form of rationalisation of work is used to shift power from labour to capital.

On learning about his father's dismissal, Franck joins forces with the union leader and organises a strike in the factory. Franck's father, however, does not support the strike. We get the impression that Jean-Claude would rather sacrifice his survival for his son's success as a manager. This is because he too, finally grasps and accepts the neoliberal logic, which states that one's advancement must be at somebody else's expense. Cantet, however, does not limit himself to revealing the moral dilemmas befalling the old industrial class and their families, but also the logic of (post)modern management. This is reduced to turning the screw on the workers in search of what is described as higher productivity and sustaining foreign competition, but what amounts to increasing the wealth of the capitalist class, overaccumulation of capital, economic crises and a need to turn the screw even more to 'balance the sheets', which according to Marx cannot be balanced. To ensure the success of the neoliberal project, the management have to work in secrecy, while conveying the fiction of openness and cooperation. This is shown by a motif of including Franck in some meetings at the top, while excluding him from others – the most important ones, in which the future of workers is at stake. Cantet shows that disrupting the play of visibility and concealment, as in a scene when Franck illegally accesses his boss's computer and finds a list of the workers who are to be fired, is a necessary condition to challenge the status quo in the workplace. The split between the superficial openness and benevolence and real secrecy and viciousness of the management can be compared to the way in which important political and economic decisions are made in the neoliberal world. Those less important decisions are still made by democratically elected governments; those which matter more by unelected and secretive institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, who further the interests of the financial elites.

The director of the factory is aware of the morally unappealing position of the factory's management and warns Franck that if he wants to succeed in his profession, Franck will have to be as ruthless as he. Franck, like Gloria, decides not to follow this example, but we do not see further consequences of his action. *Brassed Off* and *Human Resources* can be seen as merciful works, sparing the viewers the pain of witnessing their characters' defeat or as pre-revolutionary works, showing that progressive social movements can be created not only by horizontal, but also vertical unification of workers and managers, or people with low and high human capital, united in a desire to live in a more just and stable world. I shall add that such a possibility was discussed by Karl Polanyi as a reaction to the introduction of the gold standard and, by extension, at any other attempts at disembedding economy from society. This line of thinking has been continued by Hardt and Negri in their discussion of 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2006). It was also shown by Wajda in his *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* (see Chapters 3 and 4). It was recently examined by Andrew Ross, who drew attention to the joint interests of the well educated 'creatives' and migrant workers, employed in sweatshops, together constituting the new proletariat – or 'precariat' (Ross 2008; Berardi 2008).

Deadly postcommunist world

While *Brassed Off* and *Human Resources* compare the neoliberal order with an earlier, gentler version of capitalism, *Komornik* (Bailiff, 2005) by Feliks Falk and *Stara škola kapitalizma* (*Old School Capitalism*, 2009) by Želimir Žilnik compare it with Eastern European socialism in its two versions, Polish and Yugoslav. *Bailiff* premiered sixteen years after communism's collapse in Poland, when the new political and economic system solidified. The film attempts to show how this happened and what the consequences were. The vehicle of this exploration is an ambitious character from a humble background named Lucjan Boehme, who during his climb up the social ladder exposes various types of malaise in the surrounding reality. Such a character bears a resemblance to those in *Brassed Off* and *Human Resources*, yet unlike Gloria and Franck, who are uncorrupted by their work for those in positions of power, Lucjan begins his cinematic life as somebody who 'sold his soul to the devil' a long time ago.

Falk previously used a similar character in his two best known films, *Dance Leader* (discussed in Chapter 3), and its sequel, *Bohater roku* (*Man of the Year*, 1986). They featured Lutek (diminutive of Lucjan) Danielak, who tried to make a career first in the 1970s, gnawed by greed and corruption and then in the post-martial law 1980s, which were no less ‘rotten’, but more chaotic. Falk’s Danielak was a living incarnation of late socialism. He took and paid bribes, acted as a pimp for his girlfriend and prostituted himself. From time to time he also had pangs of conscience, but silenced them, regarding his misdemeanours as a condition of his survival. Danielak, like ‘real socialism’ in its final stage, was also very malleable and social. He tried to adjust to different circumstances and craved popularity; his very profession as a ‘dance leader’ testified to that. People who knew him despised him, but were able to live with him.

Naming *Bailiff*’s protagonist Lucjan suggests that in Poland history repeats itself – the sickness, pertaining to late communism, poisons Polish society under the postcommunist order. However, Lutek matured and has to be treated with respect, which points to an opposite trajectory of history to that offered by Marx: not from tragedy to farce, but from farce to tragedy. His German surname Boehme reflects the fact that *Bailiff* is set in Wałbrzych in Lower Silesia, a town that before the Second World War belonged to Germany, and makes its bearer appear more menacing. Wałbrzych was prosperous during the communist period thanks to its rich seams of coal, but after 1989 declined; the coalmines were closed, leading to high unemployment, poverty and a high level of crime.

Lucjan’s profession of bailiff nominally existed in the People’s Poland, but then there were fewer bailiffs than after 1989 and their actions were conspicuous due to the ideological dogma that every citizen in a socialist country has the right to a dignified existence free from economic worries. In Polish cinema, the figure of a bailiff was first tackled in the documentary *Urząd (Office)* by Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz, made in 1986, when socialism in Poland was crumbling and the filmmakers attacked the myth more boldly of a decent life enjoyed by working people in the workers’ state. During the postcommunist period bailiffs cropped up as secondary characters in many films. The figure of a bailiff can be seen as a literalisation of Harvey’s idea of neoliberalism as accumulation by dispossession, demonstrating that many must lose in order for one to gain. Often it appears that the loss and punishment of the poor is a more important goal than the gain of the wealthy, as shown by piles of repossessed furniture and household utensils, which

had great value for their previous owners but for those who expropriated them are worthless garbage.

The deadly character of a bailiff's actions are nowhere presented more effectively than in the first scene of Falk's film, when Lucjan repossesses life-saving machines in a hospital, causing the death of some patients. Lucjan's subsequent decisions have comparable gravity. Determined to prove that the signature of an elderly woman who had taken bank credit and then disappeared was falsified, he digs up her corpse buried in a field belonging to her family. His discovery ruins the fraudulent family, including a promising footballer who then commits suicide. Lucjan also repossesses the accordion of a disabled child, which is tantamount to the girl's 'spiritual death'. Wherever Lucjan appears, he awakens fear and disgust, but nobody can resist his power. On each occasion we see individuals or small groups of people looking passively at him doing his job or protesting without effect. These images can be viewed as a reflection of the state of the working class (or rather all working people of low human capital irrespective of being blue or white collar) after the fall of the Berlin Wall as fragmented, powerless and dispirited (Bunce 2000: 124; Kideckel 2002). They provide a poignant contrast to the old, strong, united and fearless Solidarity, as shown in Wajda's *Man of Iron*.

The difference between the late socialist past and early capitalist present is also reflected in the contrast between Lucjan and his old mentor Robert, who is now terminally ill. Robert claims that he was no angel and always worked to have a good life, but he also respected the need of others to survive. As he says, he would never switch off a life-support machine. Thus Robert stands for a world that was far from perfect, but bearable and comprehensible. Lucjan represents a new world, which is frightening and impossible to grasp, and which is not even fully understood from within, as demonstrated by the fact that Lucjan cannot explain what prompts him and whom he serves, except by referring to an abstract value of 'keeping his files in order'. Needless to add that in such a world only the fittest survive. The connection of Robert with the old system and Lucjan with the new one is augmented by casting. Robert is played by Marian Opania, an actor whose popularity was at its peak in the 1970s and 1980s, who played Winkel in Wajda's *Man of Iron* (see Chapter 4). Falk cast in the role of Lucjan Andrzej Chyra, whose most memorable role was that of a menacing collector of debts in *Dług* (*Debt*, 1999), directed by Krzysztof Krauze, who in the end is killed and dismembered by the men he had tormented. While Opania's character stands for the old world of

small crooks who inhabited a grey zone between legality and criminality, conformity and dissidence, Lucjan represents a polarised world, in which one either wins or loses everything. That said, Lucjan conforms more to the individualistic model of early capitalism than corporate capitalism, which Fredric Jameson associates with late, neoliberal capitalism, as he works alone and is accountable only to himself, rather than to any organisation or corporation (Jameson 1983: 115). As such, he represents the ideal of an ‘entrepreneurial individual’, promoted in the official rhetoric after the collapse of communism in Poland and Eastern Europe at large. His individualistic attitude is contrasted with that of the other lawyers working in Wałbrzych, who act as a corporation, representing a united front and curbing individualistic excesses on the part of any of them. Falk compares their modus operandi with that of the late socialism of the 1970s, when those seeking power formed cliques and, consequently, corruption and nepotism reigned in Poland. Thus in Falk’s conceptualisation, what was worst in Polish history returns, because postcommunist elites are made up of the old *nomenklatura* (on this hypothesis see Wasilewski 1995).

Moved by the plight of the child of his ex-girlfriend, whom he deprived of an accordion, Lucjan tries to undo his actions by financially helping those whom he caused misery. For this purpose he uses money that one of his rich customers, a dishonest businessman, attempted to bribe him with, dividing it between his victims. Yet nobody wants Lucjan’s money; poor people avoid him as much in his new Robin Hood costume as they avoided him in his ‘punishing angel’ garb. The refusal to take Lucjan’s money can be seen as proof of the honesty and dignity of working class Poles, a sign that they should not be helped by acts of charity, but by structural changes in the economy. Or it might suggest that this class is beyond help – it is condemned to extinction. Lucjan’s attempt at a charitable redistribution of his earnings leads him to jail. He is freed thanks to the effort of local lawyers, who help him in the expectation that from now on he will conform to their ways and become ‘corporatist’. Yet in the last episode Lucjan angrily disrupts Robert’s funeral, as if rejecting their values. What path Lucjan will ultimately choose is impossible to predict, as the film finishes there – in a gesture of refusal. By extension, Falk’s film offers no positive vision for postcommunist Poland. It rejects as unworkable and/or immoral three different political-economic systems: the individualistic, ‘modern’ capitalism, represented by Boehme at the beginning of the film, the ‘new socialism’, encapsulated by the contrived and reformed bailiff, and the new, corporatist capitalism, represented by the members of the Wałbrzych

establishment, which Falk regards as a continuation of the old ‘real socialism’. This comprehensive criticism, without offering any positive solution might be explained by Falk sticking to his pessimistic formula, developed during the period of Moral Concern and a reflection of the lack of any positive political scenario for Poland and Eastern Europe at large (Zarębski 2005: 33).

I regard *Old School Capitalism*, shot and set in Serbia about a decade after the end of the Balkan wars, as a companion piece and critique of Falk’s *Bailiff* because it privileges the plight of the workers following the fall of communism as opposed to focusing on the agents of their downfall. The different representational priority of Žilnik can be explained by his background. Throughout his career his mission was to give a voice to those who were ignored in official discourses. In 1967 he directed a documentary short called *Žurnal o omladini na selu, zimi* (*Journal on Village Youth, Winter*) because he was interested in people in the countryside who were ignored due to the accepted Marxist thought that the peasant class would naturally disappear as a result of communism. In 1968 Žilnik made another documentary, *Nezaposleni ljudi* (*The Unemployed*), about migrant workers and those who were struggling to find employment both in Yugoslavia and abroad. In contrast to Falk, he showed little concern for the class of intellectuals that he himself represented, regarding them as sufficiently equipped with rhetorical powers to speak for themselves. Through blending fiction with documentary, cinema with theatre, film with television, employing amateurs from different walks of life to play either themselves or characters invented by the director, switching between pathos and comedy, Žilnik created a unique political cinema. He does not patronise his characters by treating them with pity, nor does he situate the viewer in the superior position of one who knows what is happening and can help the underprivileged. Rather he forces the viewer to reflect on his or her own position in the world. For Žilnik the economic situation has always been the most important criterion dividing people, but he does not ignore other factors such as ethnicity and sexuality (DeCuir 2010).

Old School Capitalism summarises Žilnik’s assessment of the period he depicts in his film – it comes across as a repetition of the old style capitalism, as depicted by Engels at the beginning of the chapter on ‘The Great Towns’ in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England*:

What is true of London, is true of Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, is true of all great towns. Everywhere barbarous indifference, hard egotism on one hand, and

nameless misery on the other, everywhere social warfare, every man's house in a state of siege, everywhere reciprocal plundering under the protection of the law, and all so shameless, so openly avowed that one shrinks before the consequences of our social state as they manifest themselves here undisguised, and can only wonder that the whole crazy fabric still hangs together. (Engels 2009: 69)

Žilnik's take on neoliberal capitalism is not dissimilar to that of Harvey, as conveyed by the film's title. But as Marx aptly observed, every repetition of history is a repetition with a difference, and Žilnik is as interested in what links the situation in Serbia in 2008–09 with that of Manchester, as in what divides them. His point of departure is the idea and reality of Yugoslav type cooperative (self-managed) socialism, in which the workers invested in their own factories. Yet new laws, introduced under Milošević, only recognised state ownership. As Žilnik himself puts it:

Everything was privatized and then given to the new capitalist buyers and most of those, as we can now see, had been either criminals or those who gained their wealth in Milošević's system, when during the sanctions the state gave privileges to some functionaries. These new owners are aware that the legitimacy of their ownership is questionable. What is going on now in Serbia is very close to a class war. (quoted in DeCuir 2010)

The main characters in *Old School Capitalism* are just such dispossessed workers, not unlike the dispossessed people shown by Falk. Branislav Dimitrijević compares them to the lumpenproletariat from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Dimitrijević 2010). However, Marx regarded the lumpenproletariat as a margin of the proletariat, and as a reactionary force. Žilnik, on the other hand, suggests that under postcommunist neoliberalism, or at least its Serbian version, the lumpenproletariat expanded – practically the whole old communist proletariat 'lumpen-proletarianised'. Yet unlike in Falk's film, which represents the dispossessed people as passive, dispersed and apolitical, in Žilnik's film they do not lend themselves to such easy categorisation. They are not passive, but fight back, literally trying to force the owner of the factory to return what he owes them. They dismantle the factory building in order to sell the bricks, and visit the house of the factory's owner to demand that he pays their salaries. However this strategy does not bring the expected fruit as the capitalist is absent and all they get is bags of

groceries from his wife – typical neoliberal charity. Subsequently a group of young anarchists approaches the disgruntled workers claiming that its members share the workers' objectives. The workers challenge them to kidnap the factory owner and his associates to prove that they are on the same side. They do so, bringing them to the workers' base, but in the end the workers reject the anarchists' programme of taking over the factory and govern it by themselves, as a workers' cooperative. Instead, they agree to work in a new enterprise of their dishonest boss, this time on a large farm, which most likely is another privatised cooperative. The farm becomes the scene of a final tragedy – the leader of the group of anarchists is killed by a plough operated by a worker, on the request of the owner of the farm. The capitalist asks the workers to keep the act secret or risk being prosecuted for murder and, reluctantly, they give in to his demand. The story of the rebellion and defeat of the workers, due to their lack of confidence in their ability to govern themselves, their distrust of any pro-labour ideology (here represented by anarchists) ultimately links them, as Dimitrijević observes, to the lumpenproletariat, as defined by Marx: a social stratum open to manipulation (Dimitrijević 2010). Their intervention can be seen as a metonymy of the recent anticapitalist actions across the world, which tend to be short-lived and suffer from a weakness of ideological underpinning, and hence are presented by the media as blind and unnecessary violence by unruly 'subalterns', who need more discipline.³



Figure 5.6 Workers and postcommunist capitalists in *Old School Capitalism*

The narrative of the rebellion and the pacifying of the workers is enriched by – typically for Žilnik’s essayistic cinema – subplots that locate the main story in a wider political context. We see documentary footage of demonstrations by the workers against the privatisation of their factories, discussions about the plight of the workers in Tito’s Yugoslavia and the presentation of the anarchists’ vision of society. All these motifs help us to understand why the Yugoslav workers are defeated and the capitalists win over and over again. As in Marx’s scheme, crucial factors are the competition between workers, here represented by the competition between different trade unions, and the power of the dominant ideology, which makes the workers act against their vital interests. By including a scene depicting the burning of an American flag and a character who returns from the United States to Serbia, as well as businessmen from Russia who offer their troubled Serbian comrades assistance and protection, Žilnik points to the international situation as an important factor in promoting neoliberal policies in Serbia and bringing back memories of the recent war, which acted as a means of speeding up neoliberalisation. As in the schemes offered by Harvey, Žižek and especially Hardt and Negri, Žilnik emphasises the importance of force in preserving the neoliberal order. The capitalists whom he shows employ a private army of bodyguards, and they themselves carry weapons. There is not much difference between private and state forces because, unlike in previous times, when armies protected national borders, they are now employed to protect capitalist elites and maintain internal order. This is shown in an episode when the captured capitalists assume that they are freed by the police, but in reality they are liberated by the private security force of one of them. Of course, the tight security lays bare the fragility of the current order and the fear and bad conscience of those who use it. Žilnik obliterates the difference between honest and dishonest capitalists – all of them come across as criminal or, to use Harvey’s adjective, ‘feral’ (Harvey 2011a) – in common with the political authorities that align themselves with business, sidelining the welfare of ordinary citizens. By the same token, the conclusion from Žilnik’s work is that in order to ensure justice for workers (for Hardt and Negri’s ‘multitude’) the whole political order has to change. This is a difficult task, as Žilnik demonstrates time and time again, and it will not be achieved without a change in human consciousness. Yet, *Old School Capitalism* can be seen as a step in this direction.

Bringing the 1970s back

My last example of a film that compares the current situation with the better past is *Potiche* (2010) by François Ozon. The film is set in the 1970s, the decade dividing the pro-labour 1960s and neoliberal 1980s. As the director explains, keeping the action in the 1970s provided distance and allowed him to make references to the current economic crisis in a humorous way: ‘Setting the action in the present would have made for a heavier film. And it wouldn’t have made sense for the Babin character [the Communist Party politician] to be so important: in France back then, the Communist Party carried 20 per cent of the vote’ (Ozon 2011). The film tries to capture the specificity of the 1970s through the story of a family owning an umbrella factory in northern France. The factory was founded by the father of Suzanne Pujol and is now run by Suzanne’s husband, Robert, with Suzanne being relegated to the role of a decorative (trophy) wife – the eponymous *potiche*. The history of the factory thus illustrates the disinheritance of women by men, an attitude against which the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s protested.

The film begins with the factory in crisis. According to Robert Pujol, this is due to the excessive demands of the workforce, which he is unable to meet. In the opinion of the workers, the guilty party is the management who refuse any negotiation, leaving them no option but to strike. Such a dispute brings to mind many films from the 1970s, such as *Coup pour coup* and *Carry On at Your Convenience*, as discussed in Chapter 3. The disgruntled workforce even locks the owner up, in the same way as in Karmitz’s film. There, however, the similarities end, as Robert suffers a heart attack, is forced to go to hospital and take a long holiday. During his convalescence, Suzanne takes over running the factory and makes it a great success. Her management style takes us back to the 1960s and 1970s, when there was some balance of power between capital and labour, but also offers a recipe for overcoming the perpetual crisis and human misery, resulting from applying neoliberal rules. Suzanne’s approach to work is collective. She meets the striking workers and is prepared to compromise, but finds their demands so modest that she accepts them entirely. She also allows the employees creative freedom, mixing business with art, as seen in a new line of Kandinsky umbrellas and raincoats, thus diminishing the threat of alienation at work. Unlike her husband, who has an affair with his secretary, blatantly abusing his position as the owner of his workforce, Suzanne treats the secretary with respect and does not expect the woman to work

for her beyond normal office hours. Finally, against the advice of her daughter, she refuses to relocate the factory to the Third World, where the workforce is cheaper, because she regards her own harmonious and prosperous life and that of her workforce as a superior value over maximising profit.

Despite her successful management, Suzanne is pushed out of the business by her newly returned husband and her daughter Joëlle, who conforms to her father's wish as a means of ensuring her husband's position in the Pujols' business. Ozon thus shows that Suzanne's daughter proves more conservative than the eponymous 'potiche'. The joining of forces between Robert and Joëlle in a campaign to oust the workers' friendly, 'Keynesian' Suzanne can be seen as a symbol of the coalition of the old patriarchal capitalist elites and the young managerial class, who since the late 1970s have systematically dismantled the Keynesian order. Yet Suzanne does not give up. When she loses her factory, she moves into politics and becomes mayor of the town where she lives, promising to protect local businesses and secure a better deal for women. She is supported by her gay son and her former secretary. In this way Ozon shows that identity politics can further rather than fragment the leftist cause. *Potiche* taps into the feminist slogan that personal is political, as well as showing that political is personal, arguing for following the same moral rules in private and public lives. By contrast, neoliberal capitalists tend to separate these spheres: while they boast about their charitable work, reflecting their personal side, they tend to keep quiet about their (predatory) business practices, which they regard as having nothing to do with them personally.

Potiche can be seen as an invitation to contemporary capitalists to change their ways: curb their greed by imposing limits on their capital, treat workers with respect and become all-round individuals rather than vulture-dove hybrids. Fifty or forty years ago these demands were regarded as modest, but this is no longer the case; today they appear almost revolutionary. The shift is underscored by the film's form – *Potiche* looks like a nostalgic, 'bourgeois' movie, an impression given by a nod to *Les parapluies de Cherbourg* (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*), the 1964 Jacques Demy musical, in which a young Catherine Deneuve, who plays Suzanne, worked in her mother's umbrella boutique. Yet such a style makes its 'revolutionary' message more palatable and suits the film's idea that happiness is achieved not by promoting competition and individualism, but cooperation. For example, *Potiche* shows the characters in groups, rather than separately, sitting in one room or dancing as if they truly existed only through interaction with others. A song started by one person is taken over by another, suggesting the need for communication

and collaboration. Such style pertains to musicals and soap operas, to which Ozon's film was compared, but also brings to mind the 1970s 'militant films', such as *Coup pour coup* and *Tout va bien*. The use of musical conventions in *Potiche* discussed in this book, in common with melodrama and comedy in other films, support the opinion that a progressive message can be conveyed by different types of films. Of course, there is a question as to whether the use of a familiar, and for this reason conservative, form does not rather bland the film's political message. This question, however, as I have indicated, cannot be answered by a simple yes or no. The answer should always be 'it depends on the context'.

The culture industry then and now

European films of the last twenty years concerning popular music, film production and the media are also often set in the 1970s, the last decade before the triumph of the neoliberal order and a period of great artistic ferment, thanks to breaking the barrier between high art and popular culture and developing an ironic, self-referential style. Examples are *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), directed by Todd Haynes, *Le pornographe* (*The Pornographer*, 2001), directed by Bertrand Bonello, *24 Hour Party People* (2002), directed by Michael Winterbottom, and *Control* (2007), directed by Anton Corbijn. These films are about memory rather than (solidified) history; they openly adopt a contemporary perspective, comparing a usually innocent past with a corrupted present. I will focus here on *24 Hour Party People* and *The Pornographer*, as they clearly demonstrate the contrast between then and now.

24 Hour Party People shows the rise and fall of the music enterprise of Tony Wilson, the founder of Factory Records and the Hacienda club in Manchester. The film is narrated by Wilson himself, who addresses us as an omniscient narrator, with knowledge of what would happen to him and his friends in due course. Sometimes he reveals that he is not the real Wilson, but his impersonation, as in the moment when we see the real Wilson along with Steve Coogan, the actor playing Wilson. Such distancing techniques, however, do not undermine the realism of Winterbottom's film but rather add to it, like the documentary introduction in *The Full Monty*.

At one point Tony quotes Scott Fitzgerald saying that in America there are only first acts, meaning that those who lose their first chance are deprived of a second. But he adds 'We do things differently here'. He means Manchester, but

we should regard it rather as a spatio-temporal unit: Manchester in the late 1970s–early 1980s. Pronouncements of this kind abound in *24 Hour Party People*. Tony insists on doing things his own way, claiming that history is made by innovators, who disregard existing trends and go it alone, to be gradually followed by the crowds.⁴ Whenever he is criticised for not being able to attract enough people or not extracting enough profit from a business opportunity, he retorts by saying ‘How many people attended the last supper?’ or ‘Did they have tickets for the Sermon on the Mount? Of course they didn’t, people just turned up because they knew it would be a great gig’. Like Jesus, Tony also wants to be known by his name, not by his profession and he gives credibility to this ambition by becoming the subject of a legend.

Although Winterbottom avoids linking the story of Tony Wilson to a wider political, economic and cultural situation, it can be mapped to the changes that took place between the 1970s and 1990s in Britain and Europe: de-industrialisation, profit-driven cultural democratisation and first the weakening, then the strengthening of the centre. Inspired by the first concert of the Sex Pistols in Manchester in June 1976, Wilson starts to organise gigs of his musical protégés in a disused factory (most likely previously producing textiles) and names his record label ‘Factory Records’. In this way he prolongs the life of industrial sites, provides the performance of his bands with an aura of authenticity and reflects the continuity between Manchester as a ‘cottonopolis’ and its later character as a centre of popular culture (Haslam 1999; Redfern 2005). That said, such practice confirms and adds to the decline of the Fordist model. ‘Factory’ with a capital ‘F’ is also a nod to Andy Warhol’s ‘Factory’, the project that was informed by the idea of making art on an industrial scale and bridging the gap between artistic production and consumption. Drawing on the work of Dave Haslam, Nick Redfern argues that such cultural democratisation was the specificity of a wider Manchester cultural scene in the 1970s:

The popular music scene that developed in Manchester in the wake of the Sex Pistols transgressed traditional cultural boundaries. It was comprised of a mixture of people from diverse backgrounds, and included working class Mancunians (e.g. Rob Gretton), art school graduates (e.g. Malcolm Garret, Peter Saville), and the self-conscious Situationism of university-educated intellectuals (e.g. Tony Wilson). It also mixed musical genres, bridging the divide between rock and dance music, as punk was crossed with electronica (e.g. New

Order) or Northern Soul (e.g. Happy Mondays). The development of Manchester as ‘pop cult city’ also blurred the distinction between producers and consumers of cultural products, and created opportunities to aestheticise everyday life. People began to see it as increasingly more viable to work in the production of their leisure time as managers, promoters, visual designers, fashion designers, DJs, sound technicians, lifestyle journalists, bar and club architects and designers ... Fans have become bands, consumers have become producers. (Redfern 2005: 291)

Wilson and others of his ilk created conditions in which it became typical for bands to remain in their hometowns and become closely identified with them (e.g. Joy Division and Manchester, The Specials and Coventry, The Farm and Liverpool). In doing so, they created a powerful voice for those outside London. However, despite his successes as a music producer, fashion-setter, and even politician, Tony failed in business. The crucial factor in his demise was his disregard for money. He did things ‘differently’ because they pleased him, and he regarded his actions as a service to the arts, not as a way of producing surplus value. A case in point is his release of the single ‘Blue Monday’ by New Order. The record sleeve was so expensive to produce that it exceeded the price charged for each record. Tony commissioned such a sleeve because he perceived the record as a work of art, not as a commodity, and he believed that an artwork should sometimes be subsidised.

He also claimed it would not matter that instead of profit the record would produce loss, as Factory Records would sell only a few copies. Instead, the single went on to become the biggest-selling twelve-inch record of all time, generating a huge loss and crippling Tony’s enterprise. The second example of when a hugely successful cultural plan failed to bring financial rewards was the operation of the Hacienda club. It took off when Tony discovered the indie dance band Happy Mondays. Their performance filled the Hacienda with young people; Manchester became Madchester and its rave scene became famous all over the world. Yet the fans, instead of buying alcohol, sold officially in the club, preferred to buy drugs, sold there illegally. The drug gangs had no desire to share their profit with the owners of the Hacienda and caused a lot of problems for them, as the drugs’ revenue fed a gun culture. To halt the gun problem, the gangs were given the task of policing the club. As a result, Tony lost control of drug deals made in the Hacienda and of the entrance to the club. The penetration of the music scene by the drug business acts as an analogue of the neoliberal penetration of culture by

capital, small businesses overtaken by big ones and displacing honest enterprises with, to use Harvey's term, 'feral' ones. In this case we see that big capital first attaches itself to successful enterprises as an ally, but only to devour it. At the same time, the rise of gun and drug culture reflects the onslaught of Thatcher on the working class, which resulted in an increase in criminality, as shown in films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, discussed in the previous chapter.

24 Hour Party People finishes with the selling of Factory Records to London Records. This act symbolises the subjugation of the English regional music scene to the centripetal forces of London in the 1990s, and of privileging the wealthy metropolis over the more socialist, working class North. Yet Tony's encounter with the man from London is also an act of resistance to the neoliberal order, as it turns out that Factory Records was not really a company, but as Tony puts it, 'an experiment in human nature'. It did not act according to any conventional business plan, in which the capitalist owner has exclusive rights to the labour of his employees. There were no contracts with the bands and the only written rule about the way Factory Records operated stated that the musicians owned everything, the company owned nothing. Such a description comes across as a fulfilment of the Marxist ideal, in which power and freedom is on the side of labour. In his conversation with the man from London interested in buying Tony's company Tony says that he protected himself against the dilemma of selling out by having nothing to sell out. This statement can be seen as advice to future generations of entrepreneurs, who would like to avoid a slide towards unabated greed whose ultimate consequence is, as Harvey argues, poverty and misery at the labour pole. The case of Tony also shows that although there is a historic link between post-Fordism and neoliberalism (regarded as a shift from production of things to production of signs), this link is not causal – post-Fordist work can be performed in various macroeconomic settings. Such an idea is also conveyed by Winterbottom's putting a highly self-reflective, postmodern style in the service of an old-style socialist ideal.

In one of the last episodes of the film we see Tony mixing with a crowd of guests at the Hacienda in the last concert taking place there. Among the crowd we see people from Tony's happy past, including his ex-wife, Lesley and Ian Curtis, all showing Tony affection. Later the music Svengali talks to God, who looks like him and praises his achievements. These scenes, by their mock-religious connotations suggest that for his legend, Tony's financial failure matters little. After all, Jesus is not remembered as a successful entrepreneur, but as a religious and moral leader.

From the closing titles we learn that Tony attempted to revive his music business in the 1990s, but failed. Winterbottom spares us any closer encounter with Wilson's 'post-heroic' period, most likely in order not to spoil his legend.

By contrast to *24 Hour Party People*, *The Pornographer* is most preoccupied with a failed artist's 'after-life': his struggle to survive in new circumstances. By looking at the life and career of the eponymous pornographer, it also attempts to account for the wider transformations in French and Western society. Most critics, however, argue that this ambition remained unfulfilled – Bonello's film is merely pretentious (Williams 2002). Even if this is the case, it lends itself perfectly to my investigation, beginning with the choice of the actor playing the famous pornographer: Jean-Pierre Léaud. Léaud's Jacques came to Paris in 1967 from Lyon and started making films soon after 1968. He regards himself as a child of '68, in common with Léaud's earlier characters, most importantly Alexandre in *The Mother and the Whore*, discussed in Chapter 3. He tells his son, almost repeating the lines from Eustache's film, that 'when people demonstrated in May '68, it was beautiful, romantic'. He also says that then sex was regarded as revolutionary, hence why he became a pornographer. On another occasion he reminisces about how easy it used to be to make films: people met by chance, exchanged ideas and immediately started to put their projects into practice. Finding actors for pornographic films was not difficult, because his friends regarded them as more pleasant than orgies and young women from bourgeois families preferred to play in such films to becoming secretaries; pornography thus at the time epitomised nonalienated work. Yet Jacques stopped working in the 1980s, after his abortive effort to shoot *An Animal*, a film in which a woman is chased like a fox by a hunting party. The cause of this failure is not explained, although it is implied that the subject was not acceptable in the morally conservative 1980s. Following his withdrawal from the film business Jacques became a 'kept man', supported by his architect wife, again not unlike Alexandre in *The Mother and the Whore*. Financial problems forced him to resume work in the new millennium.

One can notice a similarity between Jacques's biography and that of the Polish-born filmmaker, Walerian Borowczyk. Borowczyk also came to Paris as an outsider and mixed with people for whom the year 1968 was crucial for their careers, most importantly so-called Left Bank directors, such as Chris Marker and Alain Resnais (Owen 2014). However, while they devoted their efforts to making political films, Borowczyk was practically confined to 'erotic films' (albeit not to

the same extent as Jacques), regarding making them as a revolutionary pursuit. Like Jacques, he also had his heyday in the 1970s and made a porn film with a narrative suspiciously similar to that of *An Animal*, titled *La bête* (*The Beast*, 1975). In the 1980s, Borowczyk's career declined, yet he continued working to support himself, on account of his reputation as somebody who created the genre of 'art pornography', marked by shooting in picturesque châteaux and using a sophisticated *mise-en-scène*. Equally, near the end of his life he became somewhat bitter and disengaged from reality, as suggested by his memoirs, published in Poland, which intermingle anticommunist prattle with the condemnation of globalisation, domination of culture by business, and a desire to return to a past of simpler work, which uses people's minds and hands, rather than technology (Borowczyk 2008) (a sentiment shared by many emigrants from the communist part of Europe, including this one). In my view, an equivalent in Bonello's film to Borowczyk's incoherent 'book of thoughts' is Jacques's rather unsuccessful attempt to build a house for himself with his own hands.

Somewhat paradoxically, what puts Jacques off the new porn industry (as it presumably disgusted Borowczyk) is that it is not pornographic enough, because it does not believe in what it sees. By contrast, he always wanted the viewers to see natural, 'raw sex'. The difference between Jacques's and the new pornographers' attitude to their craft is shown in an early part of the film, when Jacques instructs an actress to wear no nail varnish on the set and not to engage in any dirty talk, and then starts shooting with a static camera and no music. His producer, who is also Jacques's assistant, stops shooting, puts on sappy music, asks the actress to polish her nails and simulate excitement and moves the camera to get close-ups of her erotic parts. He thus, effectively, wants Jacques's film to look like internet porn, even if, as some critics noted with derision, the film appears unaware of the changes that took place in this genre as a consequence of the use of the new medium. Not surprisingly, Jacques finds himself unable to adjust to the new regime and quits. Of course, even present day pornography, as rendered by Bonello, comes across as gentle in comparison with that offered in Seidl's *Import/Export* or by a film like *Demonlover* (2002) by Olivier Assayas, where the theme is not sex and pleasure but torture and death, and when it is an arena of corporate warfare rather than cottage industry squabbles.

Jacques's story is juxtaposed with that of his son, Joseph, played by Jérémie Renier, an actor who in French-speaking cinema, largely thanks to the films of the Dardenne brothers, gained in the 1990s and 2000s a position similar to the one

that Léaud enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s. (Renier also plays in *Potiche*.) Joseph would like to emulate the generation of his father, as shown by him joining a small group of political protesters, living in a rented flat in Paris, not unlike the cell shown in Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967). Yet the young man is aware that this has become futile. He asks what sense does it make to protest against the constraints of work when work becomes rarity? What purpose is there in shouting political messages when nobody denies people's right to voice their political programmes, but nobody pays attention to them? Faced with the difficulty of revolutionary action, Joseph chooses silence, believing that it is the best political weapon in the new circumstances. This decision is followed by his withdrawal from the city into a rural, bucolic space, not dissimilar to the environment where his father used to shoot his 'blue movies'. The last time we see Joseph is in a night club, where he practically dissolves during a solo dance into a stream of colourful lights, a symbol of the ultimate futility of 'postmodern rebels'. By contrast, the bulky shape of Jacques-Léaud with his distinct hairstyle lingers on, preventing us from forgetting the rebellious 1960s and 1970s.

Neoliberal capital on trial

The representative of the capitalist or managerial class is a common character in European cinema of the last twenty years. In this part I will discuss three films that include such a figure: *White Material* (2009) by Claire Denis, *L'emploi du temps* (*Time Out*, 2001) by Laurent Cantet and *Püha Tõnu kiusamine* (*The Temptations of St. Tony*, 2009) by Veiko Õunpuu. These films represent different national traditions and personal styles, with the first two leaning towards realism and the third being surrealistic. Yet all three are auteurist endeavours, showing an ambition to create an allegory and, as much as the capitalist in question is concerned, they represent important connections. Each shows a 'post-world': postcolonial, in the case of *White Material*, postcommunist (and no less postcolonial for that) in *The Temptation of St Tony* and postnational in *Time Out*. They ask what the 'post' means: what economic, social and cultural opportunities are closed and opened by the ending of one epoch and the beginning of a new one. Together they represent a wide spectrum of possible positions for a capitalist (and his sidekick, the manager) in a neoliberal world. They include the manager of a large coffee plantation in Africa, a financial speculator/embezzler and dealer in counterfeit

products operating between France and the rest of Europe and the manager of a factory in Estonia, which previously belonged to the state.

Maria in *White Material* looks after a coffee plantation, which belongs to her father-in-law, somewhere in Africa, and hopes to inherit it when the aged patriarch passes away. She begins her cinematic existence alone on a road, 'already divested of whatever colonial aura she once may have possessed' (Martin 2010: 50). The black inhabitants of the country refer to people like her scornfully as 'white material'. Ironically, this term calls to mind the period of slavery, when black workers were bought and sold as if they were merely bodies, and evokes the biopolitical idea of people reduced to bodies, to bare life. The end of the colonial era and a civil war are compelling reasons for the white people to return to their home country – France. Maria, however, obstinately refuses to do so, because the coffee crop is ready to be processed and she counts on a handsome profit. In addition, the plantation allows her to engage in, to borrow from the title of another Denis film, 'beautiful work' – nonalienated work. Maria claims that she would not have such an opportunity in France, where she would be out of place and grow lazy. It is also likely, as Denis herself noted, that in France Maria's human capital would not be recognised – unlike other white people living in Africa, such as teachers, doctors or writers, she does not have transferrable skills. Instead, she has many possessions that practically cannot be transported, such as seeds and machines. Her case brings to mind Doris Lessing, whose life and novel *The Grass Is Singing* inspired the director, because Lessing returned from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to France, unlike her farming parents and brothers, who remained in Africa (Denis 2009).

We see Maria overseeing and performing all the tasks required for processing the coffee, such as finding the workers, driving a tractor to the fields, collecting and washing the beans, using complex machinery. We sense the woman's pleasure in touching the coffee beans and seeing how they change colour in different light and during their processing; even before making this film Denis is renowned for creating 'a cinema of the senses' (Beugnet 2004: 132–96). In the 'happy colonial past', when life was more predictable, Maria probably went to sleep in peace, satisfied that her work benefited herself and the workers whom she paid a 'just wage' (meaning exploiting them in a moderate way). The latter is suggested by the reasonably friendly attitude of the black workers towards her, as well as her providing shelter to Boxer, the leader of the rebels. Yet in her cherishing of work so highly she is alone. The three men in her family, Henri, her father-in-law, André,

her ex-husband and Manuel, her son, all shun work. Henri does so because he is old and he comes to the conclusion that the days of colonial masters are numbered – soon they will lose their land, home and possibly their lives. André is of the same opinion and wants to return to France at all costs, as demonstrated by his attempt to sell the plantation to a corrupt local politician. Finally, Maria's son sees no point in working or even going to school. He eventually joins the rebels, not because of political convictions, but rather to have a more adventurous, new life. The black people are not hostile to work, as shown by Maria's success in assembling a handsome group of them, but they regard it merely as a means to earn money. As they put it, they will not die for work. Maria's work ethic ultimately proves fatal, as all the members of her family die because of her stubborn attachment to her farm. Denis thus makes us believe in the ennobling character of work, only to shatter this belief in the end. If there is any lesson to draw from her film, it is that in order to assess the value of work, it is not enough to look at work itself: one has to locate it in a wider socio-political context. It is worth adding that not for the first time Denis shows the gap between 'work in itself' and 'work in a political context'. Such was the case in *Beau travail* (1999), where the French Foreign Legion carries on with routines consisting of, among other things, building roads that are already built, 'unaware ... of the folly of its labour, the meaninglessness of its industry which the indigenous people watch speechless and perhaps bemused' (Hayward 2001: 162).

Denis's preoccupation with gestures of work brings to mind the feminist theory and practice of the 1970s, most importantly *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (*Jeanne Dielman*, 1975) by Chantal Akerman, which was renowned for edifying ordinary women's gestures (Quart 1988: xiii; Owen 2013: 237). Denis's film can be regarded as a mirror image of Akerman's film. Both directors define their characters by work – work fills their lives, giving it purpose, as well as causing them disappointment. Yet while Akerman cuts her heroine off from any wider socio-political reality, Denis foregrounds Maria's relationship with the outside world. Akerman entraps Jeanne in the domestic space; Denis situates Maria in the open air. Jeanne is passive, Maria is hyperactive. The difference might be regarded as reflecting the three and a half decades that passed since Akerman made her film, marked as much by female liberation as a growing necessity for women to work and be mobile. Yet ultimately, both female directors present their characters as losers, which can be viewed as an indictment of the social realities in which these women operate.

Vincent in *Time Out* also begins his cinematic life on the road, in his own car. Yet unlike Maria, who is seeking a way back to her place of work, Vincent tries to escape it. He used to work as a financial consultant, a profession encapsulating the current dominance of financial, speculative capital over any other form of accumulated surplus value. Vincent could not stand the requirements to keep appointments, meet clients, persuade them to invest in specific projects, work in a team and rise to the challenge of creating profit for his company and customers. He admits that he most liked the moments in-between, for example when he was travelling to meet clients. He wanted to prolong those intervals and kept missing appointments. He stopped being useful to his company and was sacked. This story of a successful and then failed professional would not be so fascinating if Cantet had finished it there. But Cantet asks what happens after the failure – what options await his protagonist and, by extension, those immersed in the neoliberal game.

The first choice Vincent makes is to hide from his family that he has been made redundant. His secrecy, reminiscent of the behaviour of Gerald in *The Full Monty*, demonstrates that the pressure to win is so great that failure cannot be revealed even to loved ones. Vincent's concealment of his failure is also emblematic of a persistent denial by the leading economists and politicians of any deeper, structural problem in the neoliberal project. All failures are presented as failures of weak, incompetent individuals or a necessary milestone to move to a better position. This is also the tag Vincent adopts when the truth about his job loss is revealed. Rather than admitting that he was sacked, he claims that he gave up on his work in order to work in the United Nations' headquarters in Geneva, in a team advising developing countries. In reality however, to keep going, literally and metaphorically, Vincent convinces his relatives and friends to entrust him with their savings, which he promises to invest, but instead embezzles. Vincent's 'progression' from legal to illegal advising can be seen as a metonymy of the way neoliberalism has matured, by moving from 'ordinary' businesses to shady and highly risky schemes, such as hedge funds, ensuring great income for a few and impoverishing masses who invest their hard-earned savings in them. Cantet, however, does not exonerate Vincent's victims, rendering them as naive in their trust that capital will multiply forever, and greedy, seeing in Vincent a means to enrich themselves.

Vincent then strikes up a friendship with Jean-Michel, a man smuggling counterfeited goods, who suggests that he joins his business, thanks to which the failed financial advisor recuperates some of the losses resulting from his 'investment

schemes'. This man, played by Serge Livrozet, an ex-convict, journalist and media personality who collaborated with Michel Foucault to introduce prison reform (Vincendeau 2002: 30), is the most sympathetic character in *Time Out*. Unlike Vincent's family and friends, Jean-Michel is able to understand and help Vincent. Also unlike the others, who strive for maximum profit, Jean-Michel is an instinctive socialist, dividing the fruits of his and his collaborators' labour evenly and even agreeing to give Vincent much more than he earned, as in the Marxist slogan, 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need'. There is a human touch to everything Jean-Michel does. He knows the names of the people who work in the hotel, while for other customers they are anonymous, barely visible serving bodies. Due to his counterfeited trade and previous involvement in business and politics, which led to his imprisonment, Jean-Michel better understands the nature of the whole neoliberal economic-political complex.

As he puts it in his talk with Vincent's wife, it is practically impossible to differentiate between true and counterfeit goods because they look the same and tend to be produced in the same factories. The 'true' article is only different from the 'fake' in how it generates profit. It is likely that fake articles benefit the workers who produce them for their own advantage using capitalists' machines, and small businessmen who subsequently smuggle them and sell them for less than in official 'designer outlets', allowing people on low incomes to buy necessary commodities. It is also possible that fake goods increase exploitation by forcing producers of the 'real goods' to lower the prices at the workers' expense. Nevertheless, presenting the counterfeiter as the most positive character in the film can be seen as Cantet's criticism of the neoliberal enforcement of private property rights, especially in the form of the TRIPs agreement, which, as Melinda Cooper observes, 'generalizes the exorbitant price demands of the United States' most profitable and politically influential industry: Big Pharma' (Cooper 2008: 55). Such stringent protection of 'real products' has tragic effects for HIV sufferers in the Third World and for practically all the world's poor. Ultimately, one conjectures, under capitalism, all production is fake because it is based on a concept of surplus value (see Chapter 1). If Vincent got a job in the United Nations, it would also be within the neoliberal framework because helping developing countries amounts to forcing them to accept rules, which leads to an increase in social inequalities and the destitution of already poor people by making them pay tribute to the countries that supposedly helped them. Vincent finishes his cinematic journey being interviewed for a job similar to that from which he was sacked at the

beginning. Hence his travel proves to be circular, suggesting that there is no escape from the neoliberal shackles or at least that this is impossible for people like him.

From Vincent's UN manuals and his journeys between France and Switzerland we conjecture that wherever capital reaches with its tentacles, it imposes certain working practices and functionalist architecture. Architecture and interior design serve to enhance competition between the workers and ensure a separation between insiders and outsiders. Examples are guard booths fitted with CCTV cameras and open-plan offices with huge windows, allowing scrutiny of workers from corridors. The anonymous, functionalist architecture renders the workers interchangeable and intimidates outsiders. This neoliberal order not only permeates the world of adults, but also of children. Their education by teachers and parents follows the same pattern as disciplining their parents. This is shown in an episode in which Vincent peers at his son's judo training in an equally soulless building as the one in which he dwells himself, and his excitement during the tournament when the boy beats his opponent. Neither Vincent, his wife, nor their son show any concern for the boy who lost the game. It transpires that the purpose of the culture in which they operate is the production of obedient, yet competitive bodies. We also see Vincent telling his younger son never to sell anything for less than he can receive. The way Vincent's children are educated, and everybody talks about profit on their investments and career prospects, testifies to the dependence of capitalist development on people's real and emotional investment in the neoliberal project, which blinds them to other possibilities.

The Temptation of St Tony by the leading and most arthouse-minded Estonian director, Veiko Õunpuu, casts as its main character an affluent manager who enjoys many privileges of the European East taking a neoliberal turn, including the privatisation of state assets. Such a character not long ago was the 'new man' of Eastern European cinema, signifying the new vitality of this part of Europe, but by the time Õunpuu embarked on his project, this 'new man' had lost most of his charisma. The eponymous Tõnu (Tony), played by the leading Estonian actor, Taavi Eelmaa, signifies the postcolonial power of Estonians (or rather its elites) over Russian workers living in Estonia liberated from Soviet rule.

The film is elliptical, leaving the viewer the task of filling the gaps in the narrative, which refer especially to Tõnu's work as managing director of the factory. Such omissions are in the tradition of Godard (one might think of *Vivre sa vie*, which is about work, but hardly shows work), which most likely inspired

Õunpuu, but equally they can be seen in the context of excluding industrial work from cultural discourses in Eastern Europe, a phenomenon that I discussed in the previous chapter. We see that Tõnu's boss assigns him the task of shutting down a supposedly inefficient factory, because it creates a profit of 19.6 per cent rather than the required 20 per cent. However, we do not see how Tõnu goes about this assignment, instead we only get a brief image of morose men exiting the plant's gates. The brevity of this episode which, however, appears to have a crucial influence on Tõnu's subsequent state of mind, might be seen as Õunpuu's reflection on the fact that workers ceased to matter in the postcommunist world. It should be mentioned that Russians in Estonian contemporary cinema play the main victims of the postcommunist turn to neoliberalism, not least because they constituted a high proportion of the industrial working class in Estonia.

By the time Tõnu sacks the workers, he comes across as a spiritual zombie, as shown in a party sequence in his large, functionalist villa located in the middle of nowhere, where he dances in a mechanical way, wearing a morbid expression on his face. Yet following his decision to close the factory down, he undergoes a moral awakening, reminiscent of Dostoevsky's characters. He embarks on a journey, in space and in his imagination, which includes an attempt to save Nadezdha, a daughter of one of the redundant Russian workers. Õunpuu, like Cantet, shows that redemption and escape from the clutches of modern business are impossible; the more the fugitive tries to redeem his act, the more he harms himself and those around him. Tõnu becomes estranged from his wife and daughter and precipitates Nadezdha's downfall. He cannot prevent her abduction to a grotesque club, ironically named *Golden Times* (*Das Goldene Zeitalter*), where together with a herd of other young women, Nadezdha is to serve as a sex slave to rich customers. Later Tõnu looks on passively as Nadezdha commits suicide.

The *mise-en-scène* adds to the apocalyptic character of the narrative. Wherever Tõnu turns he encounters corpses, such as human limbs in the forest and the body of a friendly dog he brought to his home (Tõnson 2010). Even Tõnu himself is about to be chopped to pieces and perhaps sold for a profit at a hospital turned into a dissecting room. Such a fate can be seen as a literalisation of Agamben's view that in the contemporary world human life does not have an autonomous value, but is used to prolong and improve the quality of the lives of others. Tõnu, however, manages to escape when a man with an electric saw, about to dismember the hapless manager, slips and kills himself. The film finishes with Tõnu in the middle of nowhere, not knowing what will happen to him or the world.

Characters shown by Õunpuu use a plethora of languages, such as Russian, German, English and, of course, Estonian, a reference to Estonia's past as an object of numerous colonisations and a sign that the grim diagnosis offered in *The Temptation of St Tony* concerns not only Estonia or even Eastern Europe, but the world at large.

All three films discussed in this section offer us a vision of a chaotic world, in which even the supposed winners, those with significant monetary and human capital, are disempowered, unhappy and lost. They provide a stark contrast to the bourgeoisie from *The Communist Manifesto*, which 'has played a most revolutionary role in history'. Their attempts to change their lives prove even more disastrous than if they had flown with the tide. The lesson is that if there will ever be deliverance from this world, it will not come from 'their headquarters'.

Camp as new factory, new factory as old camp

In the previous chapters I discussed films about Nazi concentration camps and Soviet-type work camps as commentaries on the character of work in periods concurrent to their making. In this chapter, alongside a film set in the Nazi past, *Pramen života* (*Spring of Life*, 2000) directed by Milan Cieslar, I will discuss one set in contemporary France, Nicolas Klotz's *La Question humaine* (*Heartbeat Detector*, 2007) about modern day business, as they appear to comment on each other. It is worth adding that Klotz's work belongs to a growing body of films comparing contemporary capitalists to the Nazis; another notable example of this trend is the Greek production, *Kynodontas* (*Dogtooth*, 2009) by Giorgos Lanthimos.

Spring of Life recollects an early Nazi experiment in eugenics coded 'Lebensborn', whose purpose was to breed perfect children, able to carry on the Nazi project well into the future. Lebensborn is thus an extreme example of what Foucault and Agamben term biopolitics – politics whose objective is deciding which lives are worth living and which should be eliminated. We know all too well now that Nazi politics was biopolitics *tout court*. Yet as Melinda Cooper persuasively argues, biopolitics is also central to the neoliberal project. It promises life beyond death for those who can afford it, while neglecting environmental damage caused by capitalist penetration (Cooper 2008).

Cieslar shows that for the fulfilment of the Lebensborn programme the Nazis chose predominantly Slavic girls who conformed to the specific physical and

mental criteria, being fit, healthy and blond. In the film the selected girls are sent to a special camp, situated in an old spa, where they undergo an indoctrination programme, combined with extensive physical exercise and, prior to their impregnation, surgically performed defloration. Subsequently they are assigned their mating partners: German soldiers, who after a very short courtship, lasting just one afternoon, take the girls to their bedrooms, where they have sex with them, only to abandon them the next day to fight in the war and most likely die. The children born from these relationships are briefly cared for by their mothers and then placed in the families of 'true Aryans'. The villages from which the mothers come and the 'insemination camp' are set in apparently tranquil rural locations, suggesting the premodern times of pacified social order. But Cieslar uses this location to underscore the depth of penetration of the Nazi order into the tissue of Europe, indicated also by the plethora of languages used in the film.

The story focuses on one victim of Lebensborn: a young orphaned Slovak girl from the Sudetenland called Gretka. She accepts her assignment to become mother to an Übermensch due to her naivety and because she has no choice – the Nazis do not ask their victims for their opinions. Yet upon arriving in the camp, Gretka discovers that the programme is closely linked to the elimination of those whom the Nazi assigned the role of *Untermenschen*, the Jews. This category is represented by a boy her age called Leo, whose father was the chief doctor in the spa before the Nazi takeover. Leo is first reduced to performing manual jobs around the camp and then sent to a death camp. Before this happens, however, Gretka has an affair with him and instead of becoming impregnated by her Nazi lover, she gives birth to a Jewish child. As punishment, she is sent to a labour camp and loses contact with her child. However this tragic story, pointing to the danger of people selling their own bodies during the times when 'ordinary' labour is devalued due to an extreme imbalance of power between the rulers and the ruled, is undermined by the romantic character of the film, which finishes with a semi-happy ending. Gretka survives until the liberation, and although she does not find her son, she becomes reunited with a girl handed to her by an unknown woman before her own departure to the spa: another victim of Lebensborn.

The programme of creating superhumans for the privileged members of society, using fit 'subalterns', as presented in *Spring of Life*, resonates in contemporary times, when many young and poor women rent their bodies to produce children for rich women, who are too old or unwilling to undertake the pain of pregnancy and giving birth and, in a wider sense, points to sex and

reproductive work as a means of supporting one's family (Brennan 2003). The difference between the Czech, Slovak and Polish girls as represented by Cieslar, and those who choose to be surrogates under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, lies in the different tools used to coerce them. The Nazis had to use a distinct ideology and appeal to the girls' patriotic spirit; the current very rich do not need such 'niceties' – it is enough that they are able to pay the desperate women several thousand dollars for their labour. German eugenics was comprehensively condemned; the current practice of 'womb-renting' is typically presented as morally neutral because undertaken under conditions of 'freedom'. Yet as Giorgio Agamben argues, comparing medical experiments on the prisoners of Dachau and those in 'free countries', such as the United States, on prisoners sentenced to death, the difference is meaningless, as on both occasions the people subjected to such experiments are coerced (Agamben 1998: 181–88). The fact that such experiments are undertaken in democracy does not condone the German Nazi doctors (as their defenders argued during the Nuremberg Trials); rather their importance for the Nazi project demonstrates that they should be forbidden under any circumstances.

While *Spring of Life* is set during the Second World War but alludes to practices common in contemporary times, *Heartbeat Detector*, whose literal title is 'The question of a human' or 'A human question', is set in the present but points to the past. It draws comparisons between the present dominated by corporations that reduce governments to the role of strengthening and legitimising their power, and the Nazi past dominated by politicians and the military class, yet assisted by German industry. For both of these systems the question of producing the right type of people, able to carry on their projects, is paramount. Both embark on this task by educating promising candidates and eliminating the unfit.

Klotz's film is set in a fictitious global conglomerate called 'SC Farb', a thinly veiled reference to the German chemical company, the IG Farbenindustrie AG, the first civilian firm in Nazi Germany that used the labour of the prisoners of Auschwitz. The film begins with a high-angle tracking shot of a series of faded numbers on concrete or tarmac. It probably shows the company car park, but its movement seems to set the numbers in sideways motion to summon up the phantom of numbered railway wagons. This impression of a ghostly haunting is reinforced by its echo of the famous tracking shots of Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (1956) (O'Shaughnessy 2011: 432). Subsequently we see smoking factory chimneys, people lying on the street, as if they have been shot or died of hunger,

although they are only drunk or drugged after a night of clubbing, others mopping the courtyard as if after an execution and a woman in a warehouse taking some shoes from a large pile, again as if they belonged to those who have been gassed.

The Nazi past is also evoked by including two characters with direct connections to Nazi biopolitics. The director of the company, Mathias Jüst, is the son of someone who took part in the Final Solution, and Karl Rose, his second-in-command and the voice of cold, economic rationality, is one of the *Lebensborn*. Their 'heritage' points to two poles of Nazi biopolitics: the cleansing of the undesirables and the creation of the right race. Klotz demonstrates, confirming the ideas of Giorgio Agamben, that these two eugenic strategies have their contemporary equivalents. The first, negative eugenics, is repeated through rounding up illegal, black immigrants in cafés, most likely to be deported to places where they will be sentenced to death or utter poverty, and through discussing placing heartbeat detectors in the lorries in which illegal immigrants are likely to be smuggled to the West. The detectors represent immense progress, in comparison with the Nazi methods, in identifying and preventing *Untermenschen* from reaching places that are ascribed to people of a higher social order.

Simon, the psychologist employed by SC Farb, receives the task of cleansing the firm during its restructuring or downsizing to remove those who show such faults of mind or body as a penchant for alcohol, weak nerves or even having a family, which prevents them from committing themselves entirely to serving their employer. Again, in comparison with the crude methods of the Nazis, Simon's procedures are refined, of which the clearest sign is the fact that the subjects of his investigation are not aware of his objectives and treat him as an ally. Simon is also instrumental for the second, 'positive' strategy of creating a new man by working with the company's lower cadres to help them overcome their personal limitations to become, as he puts it, 'competitive subalterns' (*des subalternes compétitifs*), again evoking Foucault and Agamben's theory that the objective of sovereign power is the creation of people who collude with violence inflicted upon them.

The overall message of the film is that the neoliberal world of corporations is like the Nazi universe, only more sophisticated. The closest cinematic predecessor to the 'camp' offered in *Heartbeat Detector* is that shown in *Kornblumenblau*, as discussed in the previous chapter, where the prisoners run the camp practically by themselves. This is a sad place, even for those in power, as shown by the fragile mental state of Jüst, Rose and Simon. Although it is oppressive and its inhabitants are aware of that, they are unable to leave it – it becomes their inner prison.

Heartbeat Detector has all the markers of a thriller, including solving a mystery, but it does not provide a resolution. The world, as represented in the film, does not change when the culprits are discovered.

It is worth mentioning that not long after Klotz's film it was widely revealed that Ingvar Kamprad, the founder and owner of one of Europe's most famous and successful furniture companies, IKEA (a 'perfect immobile equivalent of Volkswagen', due to being known as practical and affordable), was a member of the Swedish Nazi party. Some of the newspaper articles on this subject even showed Kamprad in a woolly hat, looking like an aged Nazi criminal, hunted by the international police and eventually brought to justice; an image that brings to mind the popular novels of Stieg Larsson. In the Swedish context, Kamprad's appearance of self-effacing modesty is regarded as proof that there is no meaningful difference between the richest capitalists and ordinary people. However, as I indicated in the introduction, in my view people like Kamprad constitute the most dangerous type of capitalists, because their ascetic lifestyle allows them to accumulate more and to exploit more than if their lifestyle were less frugal, and they successfully project an image of a billionaire who is 'one of us' and innocuous.

In the case of Kamprad, there was no attempt to compare him to the captured Nazis. If anything, the press only reported his anger that nosy journalists would not leave his past alone. There was also no attempt to connect Kamprad's supposedly immature *Weltanschauung* with his mature views, despite the fact that IKEA, along with corporations such as Walmart, was added by labour rights group International Labor Rights Forum to the infamous Sweatshop Hall of Shame. Kamprad's frame of mind suggests that the stories of tormented capitalists, discussed in this and the previous part might be merely 'compensation narratives'; in real life capital feels no remorse and has no desire to change.

The toil of leisure

Trainspotting (1996), directed by Danny Boyle, is one of the most analysed films of the 1990s, both due to its subject – the use and abuse of drugs – and its sophisticated, hyperrealistic style, drawing on both arthouse and popular cinema (Smith 2002). Based on the acclaimed novel by Irvine Welsh about the lives of Edinburgh drop-outs in the 1980s, it can be seen, however, as a metaphor for life under the neoliberal condition not only in the 1980s but also in subsequent decades.

The main characters, all in their twenties, Renton, Spud, Sick Boy and Begbie, reject a mainstream lifestyle in pursuit of drugs. Several times the film's main protagonist, Renton, utters the words 'choose life', adding 'choose a career' and 'a three-piece-suite' and 'an electric tin opener'. This is a combination of a slogan, used to encourage a rehabilitation programme for drug addicts, with fake adverts for various consumer goods. Such fake mottos mock Thatcherite ideology, which pronounces that life is about consumer choice and is itself an object of consumer choice. The irony results from the assumption that there should be more to life than collecting gadgets (an idea conveyed also by the film's ironic title; 'trainspotting', a byword for trivial pursuit) and that life itself should not be compared to material objects. The slogan 'choose life' also evokes Foucault's preoccupation with technologies of the self, understood as an 'exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one's self and to attain a certain mode of being' (Foucault 1988: 2) and further elaborations of this concept, which point to the shifting of responsibility for any deprivation and misfortune experienced by the poor from society to the individuals concerned (Cruikshank 1996).

That said, it is a matter of interpretation how critical of Thatcherism and its later incarnation, Blairism, *Trainspotting* really is. Carl Neville sees in it an affirmation of the individualist and consumerist ethos, claiming that it casts poverty as a 'consequence of individual lack of graft or get-up-and-go' (Neville 2011: 10) and that 'for the protean middle classes, everything is fluid and opt-into and out-able' (ibid.: 11). It is also worth adding that while the film attacks neoliberal culture as consumer culture at the level of content, it partakes in it and promotes it through its form, by presenting itself as a perfect consumable object. Even introducing the characters by their nicknames, which became a recurring trait in British 'youth cinema', resembles a kind of consumer 'branding', mocked by Renton. On the whole, in Boyle's film we can find both disgust for the Thatcherite reduction of life to monetary exchange and fascination with its cult of a successful individual, whose success is confirmed by his wealth and his ability to consume in style. The character of Renton epitomises these contradictory impulses. This was also, in my view, one of the factors that ensured the film's popularity.

Renton began his career as somebody who chose not to choose worthless material goods and decided instead to take drugs. After choosing drugs one has only one option – more drugs. He opts for the hard core end, heroin, which further reduces his choice, because after heroin one does not want to switch to softer options. Yet Renton's choice, and the one to which the advert 'choose life' lures

naive consumers, are similar in important ways. Taking heroin is an act of absolute consumerism. This drug, like the objects of many adverts, such as new cars, fashionable clothes or mobile phones is expensive and ages quickly, disappearing rapidly in the veins, leaving a desire for more and compelling its user to go to great lengths to procure the precious substance. Mark and his friends, despite their professed rejection of a life of work, thus have to work a lot, using a variety of skills, to earn enough to afford their favoured object of consumption. They have to cheat, rob, extract, sell, exchange, and do it all with increasing speed, mimicking capital's frantic pursuit of profit. In these circumstances, decency, as Renton comments, is a luxury one cannot afford. Such toil of idleness also pertained to the characters in *Withnail and I*, as I argued in the previous chapter, but in *Trainspotting* it is greatly exceeded. Comparing these two films suggests that the art of idleness deteriorated over the decades, reflecting the changes in the lives of British people.

The link between selling and taking drugs and 'normal' capitalist behaviour is also underscored by Renton's career following his overcoming of a drug addiction. He becomes an estate agent in London, as he puts it, 'letting, selling, sub-letting, subdividing, cheating, screwing others'. Again, his job reflects the character of neoliberal capitalism, where the greatest profit is made not by the production of goods, but by financial operations. Such a practice pertains especially to Thatcher's times, when property speculation was the most common way to make money (until it gave way to more 'abstract' speculation, such as dealing with 'futures'). Commenting on this period, Renton says that 'he almost felt happy', pointing to the pleasure of high earnings and endorsing the Thatcherite ethos. Yet this stage ends when his pals Sick Boy and Begbie visit him, disrupting his lifestyle and bringing him back to Edinburgh. The negative influence of a group upon a successful individual is, again, in tune with Thatcher's edification of individuals and scorn for communal bonds.

Renton's last job consists of carrying a large amount of heroin to London with his three pals and selling it at profit to a professional drug dealer, and then running away from his friends with all the money they earned. His behaviour brings to mind the stories of many capitalists, who amassed a great fortune by robbing their customers and collaborators, and disappeared, either physically, by moving to faraway places or simply by transferring their fortunes to places that their victims could not reach. Also, like many of them, Renton redeems himself by an act of charity, namely leaving some of the stolen money for Spud, who plays in the film the role of a 'deserving poor' (ibid.: 12). To show the similarity between legal and illegal business, the drug

dealer, who buys the heroin from Renton and his friends, looks and behaves like a normal businessman and acts with impunity, unlike the small crook Begbie, whom the police catch when the big dealers are already far away.

It is suggested that the authorities want to rehabilitate Renton and his friends by forcing them to work. But the choices young people have in this respect are very limited. This is reflected in the episode of Spud's interview for a job in the leisure industry. Although he claims that 'others people's leisure is his pleasure', he does not really want the job because 'leisure industry' is a byword for the lowest rung of the capitalist economy, reflecting the Marxist idea that the capitalist's leisure is the working man's hardest work. We are shown places of leisure rather than of work: night clubs, Princes Street in Edinburgh, which is the city's main shopping area, and the touristy part of London. Although the characters of Welsh's novel all come from Leith, once the industrial centre of Edinburgh, there are no signs of any material production there. One meaningful detail in this respect was offered by Danny Boyle himself. He mentioned that the episode of Renton's visit to the worst toilet in Scotland was shot in an old cigarette factory, the disused Wills factory in Glasgow, commenting that most British films of the 1990s were shot in such decayed industrial spaces and that in due course the one where his film was made was transformed into an area of luxury flats (quoted in Solomons 2008).

Although *Trainspotting* is about low life – its authors even indulge in describing its sordid features – there is something larger than life about the story. It feels like a Greek tragedy, recreated in distinctly unheroic times. The source of its pathos is precisely the gap between the stature of the cynical yet human Renton, and the everyday 'postindustrial' gutter in which he and his friends float. However, the way out, as suggested by Boyle, is an individual escape, which will strengthen capitalism, rather than collective work to change things at the bottom.

Beli beli svet (*White White World*, 2010), a Serbian-Swedish-German coproduction, directed by Serbian director Oleg Novković, is based on a similar premise to *Trainspotting*: it attempts to furnish lowly lives with pathos. This ambition is conveyed by the choice of its setting: Bor in Eastern Serbia, the same location where almost half a century earlier Dušan Makavejev set and shot his first and one of his greatest films, *Man Is Not a Bird* (see Chapter 2). Back then Bor was a tough, yet lively place, boasting the largest copper mine and processing plant in Europe. In Bor, as Makavejev made us believe, passions ran deep, leading to betrayals and murders. In Novković's film, unlike in *Trainspotting*, industry is not extinct, as demonstrated by the smoke coming from tall chimneys, enveloping the

town in white fog and hundreds of men still wearing helmets. Yet the film follows those who never properly started their working lives or left the industrial working class a long time ago. The principal character is a young woman, Rosa, brought up by her grandfather, as her mother serves a jail sentence for killing her husband. Rosa does not work and fills her days searching for drugs, alcohol, sexual partners and, as we also learn, meaning. The people whom she meets are ‘fellow travellers’, who also lost hope of a better life and numb their pain by alcohol (in the case of the older generation) or drugs (the young ones).

Novković portrays Rosa and those close to her as if they were characters from an ancient tragedy. This effect is achieved by choosing for the role an actress of unusual beauty and a Sophoclean twist in the narrative. Rosa falls in love with, becomes pregnant by and, finally, kills a man who turns out to be her own father. The ancient feel is added by the characters singing songs about themselves as if they were a chorus, possessing knowledge of their future and from this perspective assessing their current situation. The sense of tragedy also comes from the unique *mise-en-scène* of Bor, where everything appears to be of superhuman proportions: deep pits, huge tips, tall chimneys, melted metal flowing down the pits as if it were a wound in the tissue of the town. The industrial or postindustrial landscape, with its labyrinth of artificial mountains and holes, imprisons the characters. Unlike people in the 1960s, who were immediately sucked up by the factories, they cannot find their place there any more and cannot find it elsewhere either. Novković employs jump cuts, splicing together one shot with another almost identical one, only the characters and objects in it are in slightly different positions, or the camera angle is just a little off. This gives the impression that time has skipped, that the proceedings have jumped five seconds – or five minutes or five hours – from the previously perceived moment (Petkovic 2010). The characters thus appear to be trapped in the present – unhappy in it, yet unable to transform their fate.

To conclude, these two films condemn neoliberal conditions for sentencing young people to idleness and, at the same time, validate a neoliberal ethos that presents idleness as unhealthy for an individual and dangerous for society. They also suggest that if their characters find a way out of this conundrum, it will be through individual action rather than cooperation; their success will not change the status quo but confirm it.
