

# *Posing* as Labour: Resisting The Anxious Condition of Post-Fordism in European Film Narratives by Dardenne, Loach, Petzold and Seidl

**Wim Peeters**

## **Abstract**

In an interview, filmmaker Christian Petzold highlights that post-Fordism not only changed economic activity but also the affective balance. Hope and optimism linked to future prospects appear as outdated sentimental attributes that do not match the *transition in affect* (Brian Massumi) people go through living on the threshold between inclusion and exclusion. Film makers such as Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne (*La Promesse*, 1996), Ken Loach (*It's a Free World...*, 2007), Christian Petzold (*Jerichow*, 2007), and Ulrich Seidl (*Import Export*, 2008) do not take the characters' struggle for social recognition and economic persistence through labour as a given. In their films, the fight for survival is no longer tied to a redeemable promise of happiness; instead, it is triggered by an immediate affective impulse within a perpetual state of anxiety. Only elusive, globally preformatted consumer events prove to be stable. *Posing* (Petzold) becomes the actual skill exercised here. Participating in this diminished realm of everyday life has a significant impact on interpersonal and, consequently, on employment dynamics. This paper will show, through plot analysis, how European cinema aesthetically captures this instable affective condition. The films depict the emergence of both violence and ethics from this situation, emphasising the protagonists' resilience against all odds within an adverse environment dominated by anxiety.

**Keywords:** Security, Anxiety, Identity, Affect, Precariousness, Labour, Post-Fordism, European Film

## **Introduction**

In films such as *La Promesse* (1996) by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, *It's a Free World...* (2007) by Ken Loach, *Jerichow* (2008) by Christian Petzold, and *Import Export* (2007) by Ulrich Seidl, the main characters find themselves ensnared on the precipice between city and province, the Western and global world, social exclusion and integration. They operate in deterritorialised liminal spaces, where there seems to be no room for protest against their precarious living conditions. According to the British labour economist Guy Standing "to be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle."<sup>1</sup> The French sociologist Robert Castel radicalises the concept by asserting that the state of precariousness is no longer a transitional phase but has become a permanent

---

Dr Wim Peeters is a literary scholar, currently working as *Akademischer Rat* at the Institute of German Literature and Media Studies of the FernUniversität in Hagen (Germany). There he took part in the DFG funded research project *Poetics of Success: Institutional and Narrative Dimensions of Self-Help Success Books (1900-1933)*. He wrote a dissertation on chatter in modern literature and philosophy. His publications cover various topics, including: representations of 9/11; social exclusion in literature and photography; Franz Kafka and waste disposal management; Robert Walser and the poetics of comment; W.G. Sebald and architecture; and the Sacrifice of Abraham.

<sup>1</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2011, ebook), Chapter 1 'The Precariat', subsection 'Precarisation', paragraph 1.

condition.<sup>2</sup> The deprivation situations are too heterogeneous to allow for a powerful social change movement that could unite the victims to form.

The depiction of precarity in contemporary European film is characterised not solely by objective factors, but also by “the *feeling of insecurity*, which is subjectively experienced as, transformed into, or articulated through affects and emotions.”<sup>3</sup> In his research on precarity, Standing differentiates between these affective states and identifies anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation as prevalent emotional responses.<sup>4</sup> Francesco Sticchi identifies anxiety, depression, and fear of expulsion as typical effects of post-Fordist life.<sup>5</sup> In an interview included in the DVD-edition of *Jerichow*, German filmmaker Ulrich Petzold raises the assumption that post-Fordism, prevailing in Europe after the Iron Curtain’s collapse, has not only altered economic activity but also disrupted the affective equilibrium: “Mich hat interessiert, wie die Leidenschaft, die Liebe, auch die Intrige heute ist, wie man das erzählen kann in Zeiten, wo die Lohnarbeit nicht mehr den Takt vorgibt.” (“It interested me, what passion, love and also intrigue are about today and how that can be narrated in times, in which wage labour does no longer set the pace.”)<sup>6</sup> While stable living conditions remain elusive, the pursuit of short-term desires persists: the film characters try to experience, as smoothly and frequently as possible, the privilege of middle-class agency; the autonomy to do things of your own choice for money. The individuals are ensnared in hegemonic capitalist discourses framing their aspirations for social belonging and family life. In essence, they chase a more substantial stake in middle-class consumer life: the right to diversify the ways of affecting and being affected while procuring commodities and services. Despite negative interpersonal consequences, they are unable to break their attachment to that kind of behaviour.

The literary scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant characterises this affective condition as ‘cruel optimism’,<sup>7</sup> as it carries both utopian and situational aspects. She draws on the Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi’s concept of “affect as something other than simply a personal feeling,” viewing it as something that precedes emotion. Massumi focuses on “the body in terms of its capacity for affecting or being affected.”<sup>8</sup> We inherently possess the ability to affect our environment and to be affectively charged by it. For Massumi, affect signifies the passing of a threshold, seen from one’s capacity to register *a transition in affect*. When we live through this, personal emotions simultaneously emerge, “accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in tendency.”<sup>9</sup> Affect overcomes us beyond control and is then recoded in meaningful and containable emotions.

The Berlin-based philosopher and essayist Boris Buden envisions the post-Fordist affective condition similar to Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’ as ‘hope without society’ (*Hoffnung*

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Robert Castel, ‘Le défi de devenir un individu: Esquisse d’une généalogie de l’individu hypermoderne’, in Robert Castel, *La montée des incertitudes: Travail, protections, statut de l’individu* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2009, eBook), subsection ‘L’individu hypermoderne II: “individu par défaut”’, paragraph 5.

<sup>3</sup> Guido Kirsten, ‘Studying the Cinema of Precarity. An Introduction’, in *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses*, ed. Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten and Hannah Prenzel (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Standing, *The Precariat*, subsection ‘Anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation’.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Francesco Sticchi, *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television: Chronotopes of Anxiety, Depression, Expulsion/Extinction* (Cham: Springer and Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Petzold, *Jerichow* (Berlin: Schramm Film Koerner and Weber, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Zournazi, *Navigating Movements: Interview with Brian Massumi*, p. 1. At: <https://archive.org/details/InterviewWithBrianMassumi/mode/2up>. Accessed 11/09/2023.

<sup>9</sup> Zournazi, *Navigating Movements*, p. 2.

*ohne Gesellschaft*).<sup>10</sup> No longer tied to a promise of redeemable happiness or a realistic biographical project, it appears to be ignited by an instantaneous affective impulse in a social environment where moral and real economies have grown detached.<sup>11</sup> As Buden argues, hope and optimism no longer hold a visionary power in a globalised society and have been entrusted to art in general.<sup>12</sup>

In the films compared in this article, the main focus lies on the protagonists leading affectively constricted lives, as their aspirations for a better life appear to be perpetually on the brink of realisation. Within the film narratives, the affective condition is losing its implicit nature and is increasingly exposed as a source of violence. What the main characters undergo on an everyday basis has fleeting significance, since it fails to yield lasting changes for the better. Plot analysis will reveal how this affective state reverberates through their interpersonal relationships. Since the social realm is consistently filled with anxiety, stabilising one's sense of belonging within it requires constant performative labour: *Posing* on the threshold to stable living conditions is the actual survival skill exercised here.<sup>13</sup>

### ***La Promesse* (1996)**

In the film *La Promesse*,<sup>14</sup> by the Dardenne brothers, the protagonist is Igor, a 15-year-old boy who lives and works alongside his father, Roger. Together, they bring illegal immigrants into Belgium and forge residence permits for them. These immigrants reside in a decrepit house, for which they must pay Roger rent. Throughout the film, we witness Igor and Roger pulling all sorts of scams in order to collect money for a house they aspire to own. While they exploit the precariousness of these individuals to make a living, they themselves remain economically disadvantaged. Roger is unemployed, and struggles to tie up loose ends in order to finance the old house he is rebuilding.

Set in the grey landscape of Seraign near Liège, a region still reeling from the decline of one of Europe's oldest steel manufacturers, the characters appear affected by their environment. Some critics highlight the film's resemblance to nineteenth-century naturalism, characterised by its bleak perspective on life, emphasis on labour exploitation, and the focus on ugliness, bodily defects, or pollution.<sup>15</sup> Roger for instance wears a very conspicuous set of glasses, and there are indications of issues with his ears. Additionally, the film includes references like urination, the smell of excrement, and blood.

Concepts like naturalism, pessimism, and determinism can only partially explain the film's dynamics. For Jean-Pierre Dardenne 'naturalism' "is something picturesque, like a

---

<sup>10</sup> Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> Heinz Bude, *Die Ausgeschlossenen. Das Ende vom Traum einer gerechten Gesellschaft* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Buden, *Zone des Übergangs*, p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Tobias Zielony, 'Then it gets light. Christian Petzold in conversation with Tobias Zielony', in *Story/No Story*, ed. Maik Schlüter, Florian Waldvogel and Jan Wenzel, trans. Rebecca van Dyck (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, *La Promesse/The Promise* (Liège: Les Films du Fleuve, 1996). Cf. Martin O'Shaughnessy, 'Precarious Narratives in French and Francophone Belgian Cinema', in *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses*, ed. Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten and Hannah Prenzel (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 31-47.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Dave Kehr, 'FILM: Their Method Is to Push Toward Moments of Truth', *The New York Times*, 5 January (2003), p. 2.

historical TV miniseries – it’s when you pile on the details. We call our cinema ‘realism’ because it’s inspired by the everyday world we live in.”<sup>16</sup> The unpredictable sequence of events, limited dialogue and minimal facial expressions of the characters make it challenging to attribute the film’s fatal logic to a specific cause. *La Promesse*, only at first glance, tackles illegal employment activities in Belgium. Berlant developed the idea that this film portrays the precarious affective condition of being consistently exposed to collective aspirations and memories of a better life, all while being perpetually excluded from it.<sup>17</sup> From the exploiters’ standpoint, the immigrants hold the promise of progress and societal inclusion. Easy money from their tenants allows the protagonists, Roger and Igor, to experience the temporary illusion of living the life of a social climber. Therefore, they have to take into account sharing the affective state with the immigrants, who live in constant anxiety and fear of being caught by the authorities.

Luc Dardenne, one of the filmmakers, describes the social climate in their film as follows:

We’re dealing with people who are alone in an area that’s collapsing economically around them. How do they try to find a connection, to meet someone else, to come together with another person? It’s as if there’s been a major catastrophe and there are only a few survivors, and they try to make contact with each other to re-create some kind of society. The main moral question is, do I kill you to advance my own interests or not? Do I let you have your life or not?<sup>18</sup>

These individuals are willing to take morally questionable actions to secure their livelihoods. They do not operate as sovereign subjects making well-thought-out decisions; instead, they improvise, carrying out actions without a clear understanding of the potential consequences. As a result, the dynamic between Roger and the illegal workers lacks the typical contrast between a malevolent boss and presumed virtuous employees. This description also applies to Igor, Roger’s son, who not only inherits his environment but also his father’s influence. Igor doesn’t merely follow his father’s instructions; he blurs the line between good and evil on his own account.

In *La Promesse*, the construction of a family home involving illegal labour fails to secure the family situation. The improvised life takes a tragic turn when Amidou, an illegal worker, falls from a scaffold while renovating Roger’s house. Fearing prosecution, Roger ignores Igor’s pleas to take Amidou to the hospital for proper medical attention, leaving him to die, and later buries him at night under the porch. Amidou’s presence under the porch becomes an imaginary obstacle to Roger’s pursuit of a better life, as, right before he dies, Amidou makes Igor promise to take care of his wife Assita and their child. This promise, obviously related to the film’s title, becomes a dilemma that Igor must grapple with throughout the rest of the narrative. However, it is only a moral dilemma at first sight. It is notable that the promise is bothering Igor at all,

---

<sup>16</sup> James Quandt, ‘Too Good to Be True: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’, *Artforum*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2014). At: <https://www.artforum.com/print/201408/too-good-to-be-true-the-films-of-jean-pierre-and-luc-dardenne-48221>. Accessed 11/09/2023.

<sup>17</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*’, *Public Culture*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2007), p. 275.

<sup>18</sup> Bert Cardullo, ‘The Cinema of Resistance: An Interview with Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne’, in *World Directors in Dialogue: Conversations on Cinema*, ed. Bert Cardullo (Lanham, MD and Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2011), p. 101.

who typically lacks moral qualms about his actions. This raises the question why he does not persist in his machinations.

As Roger plots to send Assita away, involving her in a prostitution slave trade, Igor is faced with a test of loyalty to his father and to the promise he made. The moral complexity in *La Promesse* is heightened due to the central character, Igor, being an adolescent caught between his desire for simple pleasures like driving go-carts and the exploration of his sexuality. He seems to long for a mother figure while also embracing a partnership in crime with his father, marked by the tattoos his father stung on him. He is an ‘individual by default’ (*individu par défaut*),<sup>19</sup> to use a concept by Castel. Individuals like Igor often are trapped in a situation of permanent precarity. His life trajectory is intertwined with a climate of constant anxiety and a ‘culture of randomness’ (*culture d’aléatoire*),<sup>20</sup> even alienating him further from society ‘by default’. The absence of sufficient support from his immediate environment hinders the ability to realise his potential and exercise his individual liberty.

Without going into too much detail, Igor’s attempt to rescue Assita from his father’s grasp becomes a pivotal moment. Is this the tale of Igor’s evolution toward compassion and personal responsibility? Unravelling Igor’s decisions to specific emotional motives or urges is challenging. His motives remain unclear – why does he care about Amidou’s wife at all? The film’s opening scene reveals Igor’s opportunistic nature. We observe him, an apprentice in a local garage, stealing an elderly woman’s wallet under the guise of fixing her car. After taking the money, Igor buries the wallet behind the shop, much like his father buries Amidou’s body. One might ask what is the big difference in Igor’s world? Before Amidou’s accident, Igor spies on Assita and her husband, witnessing their care for the baby. Whether his interest is sexual or rooted in the motherly role remains ambiguous. The absent presence of Igor’s mother is undoubtedly palpable in the film.

The film title may also stand for the promise of a solid future. Several high-risk strategies for securing future stability are being exposed in the film, including the grey exploitation economy represented by his father and the family model embodied by Assita. Lacking social recognition for his undertakings, Roger’s relations with women refrain to merely pub acquaintances, serving as a mere substitute for genuine connections. The alternative model considers Assita as either a devoted wife or a mother, taking into account the risk of losing her civil rights, and disappearing against her will. Igor opts for the promise Assita stands for. Is it her as a person that intrigues him, or the haruspex practices she relies on to administer future contingency, or is he simply occupied by Assita’s white teeth? After having assisted his father by manipulating some immigrants’ passports with typing correction fluid, Igor uses the same product to whiten his own teeth in front of a mirror.<sup>21</sup> Maybe she stands for a more attractive form of familial love, that seems to promise more stability. The film refrains from a definitive answer. “Nothing happens as a result of this moment of play; it is ordinary, forgettable, forgotten,”<sup>22</sup> as Berlant comments on the scene. The film’s ending at Liège-Guillemins train station, where Igor informs Assita of her husband’s death, is poignant. Perhaps he desires to uphold his promise, or maybe he fears the prospect of losing her.

---

<sup>19</sup> Castel, ‘Le défi’, paragraph 1.

<sup>20</sup> Castel, ‘Le défi’, paragraph 8.

<sup>21</sup> Dardenne, *La Promesse*, 19:12.

<sup>22</sup> Berlant, ‘Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal’, p. 281.

Igor's future strategy is to "misrecognise the bad life as a good one,"<sup>23</sup> as it does not significantly matter which source of future optimism Igor chooses. The death of Assita's husband has exposed all sources of future optimism as highly phantasmatic and cruel, since they all include violence, anxiety, and the grey economy with little potential of future success.

The tracksuit jackets worn by Igor and Roger symbolize this cruel form of hope for the time being.<sup>24</sup> The affective condition materializes itself through a vestimentary code. Christian Petzold recalls his friend and filmmaker Harun Farocki discussing "how the light-weight tracksuit reached England's working class."<sup>25</sup> Initially designed to keep athletes warm during competition breaks, it conveyed the message "keep me warm, because it'll soon be my turn again." In the current low-wage economy, it emblematically represents an ongoing cycle of "it'll soon be my turn again." Often, the allure of easily accessible, globally marketed consumer products, such as a jacket, enables individuals to present themselves as participants on the journey toward an appealing and promising way of life. The Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz refers to this phenomenon as an 'emodity,' whereby emotions are intensified through their transformation into commodities, marketed as purchasable emotional experiences.<sup>26</sup>

### *It's a Free World... (2007)*

Ken Loach's film *It's a Free World...*<sup>27</sup> is based on a similar premise, with the main character exploiting the precarious situation of immigrant workers. Angie, an ambitious young blond single mother from London, is determined to overcome the challenges of making ends meet. After losing her job at a recruitment agency that exploits Eastern European workers within the minimum wage market, Angie, along with her friend Rose, decides to start their own recruitment business. They capitalise on the vulnerable immigrant workforce to maximise profits, showing little concern for social security and health insurance for the workers they hire. As their initial success drives them to pursue ever greater profits, Angie becomes increasingly reckless, subjecting the workers to unscrupulous subcontractors and inhumane housing conditions.

The film prominently puts on display how the main character is led astray by her longing for a more fulfilling life. It reveals that the affective condition, "the formal and informal sense of social belonging"<sup>28</sup> that underlies the aspiration for social integration, has also become precarious. Existing at the fringes of social recognition, subjects find it difficult to reconstruct their social identity; the part of identity shaped by "aspirational normativity,"<sup>29</sup> the desire to belong to a family or a group. Due to her history of setbacks and anger over the absence of social support, Angie has grown disconnected from the sense of social cohesion, rendering her anomic. Consequently, she becomes entangled in socially irresponsible and even criminal behaviour. This can be seen as a desperate attempt to escape the unchanging present, where she

---

<sup>23</sup> Berlant, 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal', p. 284.

<sup>24</sup> For Example Dardenne, *La Promesse*, 48:10

<sup>25</sup> Tobias Zielony, 'Then it gets light', p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> Eva Illouz, 'Introduction: Emodities or the making of emotional commodities', in *Emotions as Commodities: Capitalism, Consumption and Authenticity*, ed. Eva Illouz (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ken Loach, *It's a Free World...* (London: Sixteen Films, 2007). Cf. John Hill, 'Working-Class Precarity and the Social-Realist Tradition in British Cinema', in *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses*, ed. Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten and Hanna Prenzel (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 340-341.

<sup>28</sup> Berlant, 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal', p. 274.

<sup>29</sup> Berlant, 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal', p. 275.

is merely treading water, devoid of the means to anticipate the future according to a long term plan, ultimately leading to her alienation from social mainstream.

Apart from exploitation there is another parallel to *La Promesse*: the film also addresses the welfare of the children in this grey economy. Roger's illegal efforts to make a living as a single father go unrecognised by society, and negatively impact the attempts by the instructor at the car repair shop to provide Igor with a proper education as a valid starting point for his life. Angie faces the possibility of losing custody of her own child due to neglect. Jamie has troubles at school, and after a further incident where he breaks a classmate's jaw, the youth welfare office questions Angie's suitability as a single mother. In the words of Lauren Berlant, characters like Roger or Angie keep on "moving between having a little and ejection from the social," or in line with a distinction made by the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, teetering on the edge between human value and disposability,<sup>30</sup> as a mother or an employee.

Loach is a rather conventional storyteller. Unlike the Dardenne brothers' way of narrating, we learn more about the protagonists' personal history. The film shows her as a "lieutenant" on the battlefield of post-Fordist working conditions, transforming from being "exploited to exploiter," from "amorality to immorality," as the critic Manohla Dargis puts it.<sup>31</sup> Not only do we learn Angie's backstory, shedding light on her driving force and dilemmas, but we also gain insights into the working world in which her retired father was socialised. He is the traditional representative of the working class, still wearing the typical flat cap. His outfit symbolises the achievements of the labour movement. Her disregard for Angie's own child's needs while capitalizing on the struggles of others leads to a generation conflict with her father.<sup>32</sup> The tragedy of the confrontation lies in their inability to find a common language to conceptualise the shift in the affective climate and to share their fears with each other. In contrast to her father, she wears an imitation leopard fur jacket and rides a chopper bike, ostensibly representing her embrace of a fast-paced, aggressive lifestyle. Her attire helps her project an image of strength, as someone who can overcome any challenge.

The bubble Angie lives in shatters when she becomes entangled in a corrupt deal. Faced with financial difficulties after being let down by a contractor, she struggles to pay her workers. Her anxiety about returning to a life of insecure, self-exploitative jobs without a supportive work environment to build a meaningful career, drives her determination to persist. This unwavering resolve leads to violent confrontations, including being beaten up and even taken hostage. However, these challenges fail to deter her from pursuing a fresh start for her business. As the film concludes, Angie and Rose journey to Ukraine to recruit a group of undocumented workers, who lack the protection of EU labour legislation.

### ***Import Export (2007) and Jerichow (2008)***

In Christian Seidl's film *Import Export*,<sup>33</sup> the action unfolds at the convergence of Eastern and Western Europe, oscillating between marginal living conditions in both regions, without any

---

<sup>30</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'Exploitation's Wheel Spins in London: Movie Review "It's A Free World..."', *The New York Times*, February 19 (2008). At: <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/movies/29free.html>. Accessed 11/09/2023.

<sup>32</sup> Loach, *It's a Free World...*, 56:05.

<sup>33</sup> Ulrich Seidl, *Import Export* (Wien: Ulrich Seidl Film Produktion, 2007). Cf., from a feminist point of view, Melanie Letschnig, 'Pandemic (Dis)Proportions: On the Depiction of Precarized Work and Living Conditions in Austrian Film', in *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses*, ed. Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten and Hanna Prenzel (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), p. 219.

clear demarcation.<sup>34</sup> Olga, a single mother and trained nurse, grapples with providing for her only child in Ukraine, leading her to take a second job involving internet pornography. Unable to endure this occupation for very long, she entrusts her baby to her mother's care and seeks a better life in Vienna, Austria. Starting as a housekeeper, she loses the job due to the lady of the house's intolerance towards her bonding with the children. Subsequently, Olga becomes a cleaning lady in a geriatric hospital, where a terminally-ill pensioner expresses interest in her and proposes a marriage, only to pass away shortly thereafter. Following a carnival party dance with a male nurse who appears fond of her, a female colleague turns hostile and attempts to assault her in the basement.

In a contrasting scenario, Paul from Vienna loses his security guard job following an altercation with a gang of intoxicated immigrant youth in a parking garage during his patrol. Left destitute, Paul and his Austrian stepfather, Michael, travel to desolate locations in Slovakia and Ukraine in the middle of winter. There, they attempt to establish themselves as business partners in the distribution of video gambling and bubble gum machines, or at least strengthen their father-son-relationship. Their driving in an old delivery van through empty landscapes in a snowstorm with poor visibility underlines the bleak prospects of their business plan. Tensions arise when Michael wants to include affairs with local women in their business plan, culminating in a humiliating incident involving a prostitute in a run-down Ukrainian hotel. The following day, Paul leaves Michael's company and seeks a day job at a local market, leaving the market vendors somewhat puzzled, as they would rather work for him. In the final sequence, Paul is hitchhiking on a country highway in the middle of nowhere, walking on the threshold of what is to come next. The film's irony lies in Paul's attempt to secure employment in a region that cannot even guarantee a nurse's livelihood. What is Paul, whose body language remains unchanged since the film's beginning, like Olga, hoping for in that situation?

Not only his economic position is precarious: so is his affective state. Observing Paul reveals a discord between his body language and the self-marketing and self-help narratives society offers individuals in his situation. This shared aspect links Paul and Olga. The inverted structure, with Olga fleeing Eastern Europe to escape precariousness and Paul heading to Eastern Europe for the same goal, highlights the transgressive nature of the affective transactions. Paul's façade of invulnerability and Olga's calculating demeanour repeatedly provoke irritation, leading to affective overload. These reactions indicate that they do not quite fit in and compel them to move on, confronting the next situation. Olga has to deal with a jealous nurse assuming that the 'beautiful Olga', presumably like 'all' Ukrainian women, is eager to marry an Austrian for a residence permit. Paul must deal with his stepfather's expectations. When Paul declines to assist him in pursuing women on the road, Michael accuses Paul of lacking enthusiasm for life, implying having no aptitude for seizing business opportunities. The living potential of Paul and Olga, along with their "vitality and affective capacities," is reduced to some sort of "capitalist tool,"<sup>35</sup> devoid of the ability to extract any benefit from it.

Ulrich Petzold's film *Jerichow*<sup>36</sup> is set in the East German back country, another area plagued by economic decline. But in contrast to *La Promesse* or *Import Export* this plays only

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Stefan Grisseemann, *Sündenfall: Die Grenzüberschreitungen des Filmemachers Ulrich Seidl* (Wien: Sonderzahl Verlagsgesellschaft, 2007), p. 217.

<sup>35</sup> Zournazi, *Navigating Movements*, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Christian Petzold, *Jerichow* (Berlin: Schramm Film Koerner & Weber, 2008).

a minor role, as highlighted by the sunlit landscape and summer beach images in the film. Ali, a successful supplier for fast-food restaurants, leads a somewhat isolated life. He is taking advantage of the fact that only low-price retail discount markets and inexpensive fast-food restaurants can flourish in his area. His substantial income allows him to design a life aligned with his sense of home, complete with a wife and a beautiful house. Although economically prosperous, he nevertheless leads an inherent precarious life, as he can only keep up a façade concealing his social detachment. For Ali to ‘pose’ as a fully integrated and generous family man, depends on the help of parasitic individuals who exploit his situation for their own gain.

His wife Laura, burdened by a dark criminal past, remains with him in the first place because he has taken over her debts. This arrangement becomes void in the event of a divorce. In the film, Ali attempts to exploit the unequal distribution of economic and social precariousness to his advantage. However, he underestimates the fact that there is little control over the variations among individuals sharing their precarious lives with each other. Here, two dimensions of what Isabell Lorey envisions as the ‘precarious’ come into conflict. The first dimension, ‘precariousness’, underscores that life is inherently precarious and that this “is always relational and therefore shared *with* other precarious lives.”<sup>37</sup> The second dimension, ‘precarity’, signifies differences in the distribution of precariousness, encompassing “inequality, the hierarchization of being-with that accompanies the processes of *othering*.”<sup>38</sup> Troubles arise, when a third party becomes affectively involved in Ali’s constructed reality.

When her husband employs Thomas, a dishonourably discharged and financially ruined Afghanistan war veteran, as his driver, Laura becomes intensely attracted to him. However, Laura cannot envision a normal life or love without financial security. Therefore, she and Thomas hatch a plan to murder her husband and start anew. After Ali reveals his terminal illness to his wife, he discovers he has been deceived by those closest to him and commits suicide. Just moments prior, he had expressed his intention to bequeath his business to her and assume her debts. In Petzold’s film, the three protagonists adopt a “affectively pragmatic” stance on the precipice between passion and anxiety, “being bodily attuned to opportunities.”<sup>39</sup> It is apprehended that their alliance ends here. Predicting what will occur five seconds after the final scene we witness as spectators remains impossible.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The attention currently directed towards social exclusion in Western Europe reflects a sense of social uncertainty; fears about potential loss of opportunities for social survival or advancement due to economic globalisation. Within the realm of film fiction, the characters’ sticking at any cost to middle class modes of social and economic attachment is not taken for granted; instead, it is often depicted as a compelling affective urge. These films reside in the political, in the sense, that they depict different precarious constellations as spaces of failure stemming from a state of constant anxiety and affective struggle, deliberately avoiding the transition into

---

<sup>37</sup> Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, transl. Aileen Derieg (London and New York: Verso, 2015, eBook), opening chapter ‘The Government of the Precarious: An Introduction’, subsection ‘Three Dimensions of the Precarious’, paragraph 4.

<sup>38</sup> Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, paragraph 5.

<sup>39</sup> Journazi, *Navigating Movements*, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Jonathan Rosenbaum, ‘Buried Clues, True Grit: On *La Promesse* and *Rosetta* (*Chicago Reader*, 22 August 1997 and 14 January 2000)’, in *Committed Cinema: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. Essays and Interviews*, ed. Bert Cardullo (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p. 8.

ideology, critique or pity. The protagonists face the threat of exclusion, and their affective condition is confined to a hopeful longing for a better life without a realistic chance they will succeed at all in the near future. They find themselves suspended on the threshold to alternate existence.

In the new global context, the hope and optimism traditionally associated with future prospects seem outdated and sentimental, no longer aligning with the affective reality of the people in question. The films discussed here present an unfiltered portrayal of individuals intricately involved in the dynamics of caregiving and finding a sense of belonging. European cinema aesthetically captures this fragile affective condition, depicting the emergence of both violence and ethics from it. The films highlight the protagonists' resilience in the face of an adverse environment dominated by anxiety. Their refusal to give up, can be perceived as a passive form of protest or, at the very least, an affective manifestation of resistance through persistence.