

Looking Beyond

Neoliberalism

French and Francophone

Belgian Cinema and the Crisis

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(preliminary pages and introduction)

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Introduction

In his discussion of violence, Slavoj Žižek warns of allowing our attention to be drawn too directly to the obvious transgressiveness of what he calls subjective violence (crime, riot, war) in a way that would blind us to the systemic and symbolic violences that have become normalised as the apparently peaceful face of the status quo. To see violence more adequately, he suggests, we need to look at it askew or sideways (Žižek 2008: 1–7). The same might be said about the crisis, with or without a capital C, which erupted in 2007 to 2008. If we look at it too directly, we may only see its disruptiveness and be blinded to its complex connection to the status quo, its instrumentalisation as a governmental tool and its ‘outsourcing’ to ordinary people who are either forced to bear its cost or live under its more or less permanent sway. This is why, although I will not ignore the cinema that came out after 2008 and responded more or less directly to the crisis and its fallout, I will engage with a broader body of films, some from before 2008, that will allow me to look at the crisis ‘sideways’. In this, I follow in the footsteps of scholars like Berlant and Koutsourakis who adopt a similar procedure (Berlant 2011a: 10–12; Koutsourakis 2020: 60–1). I will consider films that engage with debt, austerity, the rationing of productive places and the murderous violence of competition as so many personalised crises already lurking within the neoliberal status quo. But I will also be drawn to less obvious films which help us, directly or indirectly, and more or less consciously, to look beyond neoliberalism, without necessarily seeing crisis as the *deus ex machina* needed to render some form of exit possible. To begin with, though, temporarily ignoring my own counsel, I will look at the crisis frontally.

In 2007, something often called the sub-prime crisis began to make itself felt. Initially associated with major American banks that found themselves holding mortgage bonds whose value was collapsing, and with other American institutions such as insurers caught up in the shockwave, the crisis quickly revealed its global nature as more and more financial institutions across different countries faced potentially catastrophic losses and economies tipped into recession. Governments around the world stepped in to save their banks and financial sectors from collapse but only at the cost of massive sovereign borrowing and deficit financing. Private financial debt was effectively transferred to populations who would be forced to pay for it through economic austerity and reduced social welfare spending. As celebrated Marxist geographer David Harvey notes, there have been many financial crises around the world since 1973, the time of the first oil crisis, compared to very few between 1945 and 1973. Yet, this one was much bigger (Harvey 2010: 6–8).

It seemed to confirm that an economic model was broken. With wage growth stagnant in the West, even as the gap between rich and poor grew ever wider, borrowing had become the privileged way for many to maintain access to housing and consumption. American mortgages were sold to people who

would struggle to pay them. They were then bundled up in complex derivatives, sold on through a globalised financial sector and speculated upon. Inflated by inequality, debt, deregulation and speculation, the bubble, at some stage, would inevitably burst. When it did, and when finance was bailed out at the expense of populations, political unrest grew. Occupy-style movements sprang up around the world in 2011 not simply in rejection of the existing financial system but in search of more participatory and horizontally organised ways of doing politics outside of traditional party structures that no longer seemed to offer a way forward. With only a small Occupy movement, France seemed relatively peripheral to the protest wave. It would have its own major occupations in the spring of 2016, in the form of the Nuit Debout (literally ‘night standing’) mobilisations. The most prominent of these were in Paris but they also took place across France and spread into other countries, notably Belgium. In the end, and in the face of police repression, both Occupy and Nuit Debout would peter out while a system whose days might have seemed numbered seems to continue relatively unscathed and perhaps reinforced. Discontent and mistrust of government are still prevalent but the nationalist and racist right, or parties of government moving in a similar direction, seem better able to direct it than the left.

This briefly outlined frontal look might seem to make the task of this book straightforward. It would give us an object, the crisis, to which we could seek cinematic responses, films that were either directly marked by it and its aftershocks or which sought to capture and prolong the spirit of Occupy and Nuit Debout as movements which responded to it and the austerity and rising precarity that followed it. But perhaps a more sideways theoretical and cinematic look will allow us to view the crisis and the context which produced it more productively. Cautioning against a frontal approach, theory asks us to stand back from the concrete and empirical and to question and justify the concepts and methods we use to approach a given problem or issue. Cinema takes raw materials from the world around it and probes and refines them, asking us to see afresh, finding new possibilities where none seemed to exist, making us question what we think we know, challenging us to think again. Theory works upon the conceptual and the abstract. Cinema upon the concrete, affective, sensuous and aesthetic. Cinema and theory cannot be collapsed into one another. Nor should one be used simply to illustrate the other. But they can and should be placed in productive dialogue, as this book seeks to do. And, in their difference and convergences, they can help us see afresh or sideways.

Looking sideways at the Crisis

In 2013, in a dialogue in *Radical Philosophy*, and in the context of Greece’s sovereign debt crisis and the Syntagma Square occupations that followed it, French philosopher Jacques Rancière and Paris-based Greek philosopher Maria Kakogianni discussed the notion of crisis and whether it makes sense to talk of the Crisis, with a capital C. Kakogianni argues that the meaning of crisis is subject to struggle and adds, ‘there’s no such thing as The Crisis. Our crisis is not theirs’ (Kakogianni and

Rancière 2013: 20, emphasis in the original). Rancière agrees about the contested nature and shifting meanings of the concept. He reminds us of its medical origins as the positive or negative resolution of a mortal challenge to health. He then notes the modern slippages of the term, the way in which it shifts from indicating a resolution of pathology to naming the pathological state itself. The question then arises as to whether the sickness is something beyond the normal functioning of contemporary capitalism, simply part of it, or instrumentalised by it. Apparently leaning towards the first interpretation, Rancière initially observes that, in what we call the Crisis, 'there is something excessively pathological, with its Ponzi schemes, its high-risk speculation and the bubbles or snowballs that grow and grow until they collapse'. But, leaning towards the second understanding, he adds that the normal operation of the system is itself pathological, 'because it causes suffering for such a great number of people' (Kakogianni and Rancière 2013: 19). Bringing the third understanding into play, he points to how the notion of crisis as systemic dysfunction enables 'the situation of exception which allows drastic measures to be taken to destroy everything that obstructs the competitiveness of labour'. Everyone is made to take responsibility for, and, by implication, pay the price of the economic sickness, including the poor who want to eat, own property or have access to credit (Kakogianni and Rancière 2013: 20). Anti-systemic voices can themselves reinforce the performative power of the notion of systemic crisis by allowing it to structure and dominate their thought. On the one hand (following a long-standing tradition in leftist thought), there are those who consider that the crisis must be deepened by radical forces to bring it to its tipping point. On the other, there are those who see the way in which systemic forces instrumentalise crisis as proof that 'the enemy is all-powerful, [and] everything we do ends up profiting them' (Kakogianni and Rancière 2013: 20). Despite the best intentions of those who put it forward, this fetishised understanding of the crisis thus tends to validate, as Rancière notes, 'the dominant description of the crisis and the radical changes that it obliges' (Kakogianni and Rancière 2013: 21). Similarly, rather than being seen as part of a longer and continuing history, attempts to live differently are understood as beneficial effects of the crisis, dependent on its effects and, by implication, its duration (Kakogianni and Rancière 2013: 20–1).

Despite their different theoretical grounding, other important contemporary thinkers agree about neoliberalism's instrumentalisation of crisis while refusing the idea of the crisis as something which simply occurred in 2007 or 2008. For example, Dardot and Laval, two important thinkers of neoliberalism who draw on both the Marxist and Foucauldian traditions, consider that the crisis signalled not an end to neoliberalism but a reinforcement and radicalisation of it. They conclude, like Rancière, that it has become part of the machinery of neoliberal governance. This, they argue, widening the timeframe, was already emergent at the end of the 1970s when governments used the 'difficult times' to justify 'courageous' policies, following up each apparently necessary but scandalously harsh measure with another, never allowing their opponents to take breath. This

initial experimentation with punitive policies driven by the proclaimed urgency of the situation has hardened up into neoliberalism's preferred system of governance. Crisis has become a normalised part of a war machine wielded by the powerful to crush any opposition to neoliberalism and to severely restrict any margin of manoeuvre to which democratic states might pretend (Dardot and Laval 2016: 17–44).

In his *Governing by Debt* (2015), Italian philosopher and social theorist, Maurizio Lazzarato rehearses some similar arguments and shows some of the same hesitation about the timeline of crisis. He lists 'crisis' as one of the key words of his book and initially specifies that, when he uses it, he means 'the crisis which began with the collapse of the American real-estate market in 2007'. He immediately comments, however, that the definition is too limited as the crisis has been ongoing since the 1973 oil crisis. Broadening his point, and converging with Rancière, he then suggests that neoliberal governmentality involves moving from one crisis to the next, creating a permanent and fearful sense of crisis. 'Crisis', he concludes, 'is the form of government of contemporary capitalism' (Lazzarato 2015: 10). Like Rancière, he then complicates his own argument as he moves to another key term, 'human capital or the entrepreneur of the self'. Explaining the evolution of this figure and pointing to a dimension of crisis that cannot simply be instrumentalised, he suggests that the crisis is not simply economic, social and political but is also and above all a crisis of the neoliberal subject. The project of replacing the Fordist worker with the individual entrepreneur of the self, he suggests, has collapsed in the subprime crisis (Lazzarato 2015: 14).

Dario Gentili also makes the connection between crisis neoliberalism and the crisis of the neoliberal subject, although not tying the latter specifically to debt as Lazzarato had done. Under conditions of neoliberalism, he suggests, the discourse of the market and what it demands 'controls conduct by means of the constant threat of "mortal danger" [. . .] This includes marginalization, poverty, unemployment –the risk of not surviving if one is not able to compete in the "meritocracy" of the market.' In the same way as neoliberalism uses a sense of crisis to drive through its policies at the macro level, it cultivates a constant sense of precarity, of individualised crisis management, to shape the behaviour of apparently freely choosing subjects. He comments, 'crisis as art of government forces decisions from individuals who want to survive in the market [. . .] Precarity is first and foremost the form of life in the age of crisis as art of government' (Gentili 2021: xviii).

Pulling together lessons from these different thinkers, we can better see the complexity of the crisis as an object of analysis. Something undoubtedly happened in 2007–2008 that sent tremors, whose effects still continue, through the financial, economic and political systems and through our broader societies. However, we would do well not to focus on it too frontally at the risk of normalising what came before it and from which it arose, and of only seeking ways beyond it, neoliberalism or capitalism more generally, in the crisis itself and not in the many untold stirrings that already lie hidden in the folds of our societies, waiting to be brought

into view and developed. This is the spirit which guides this book in its sideways approach to the crisis. It has two main foci. Taking its cue from Lazzarato and Gentili, it first probes filmic responses to the crisis of the neoliberal subject, a crisis that was certainly exacerbated by the financial crisis and its fallout but did not begin with it. It then explores film's crucial capacity to bring into view forms of being and relating that help us look past neoliberalism and thereby reawaken a sense of possibility.

Chapter outline

The first three chapters focus on the crisis of the neoliberal subject. Placing the films of Jacques Audiard, perhaps France's most internationally successful filmmaker, in dialogue with key theorists of neoliberalism, Chapter 1 explores how, across a range of genres, Audiard's films repeatedly confront and contain crisis tendencies within neoliberal subjectivity by showing characters exposed to precarity in violently competitive worlds but prospering by becoming successful entrepreneurs of the self. The chapter also considers the 'queering' of the films' subjects and analyses how, in another form of containment, reinvented gender and familial relations are put to work for neoliberal flexibility. The next two chapters explore groups of films which refuse such a containment of the crisis of the subject. Chapter 2 considers indebted subjectivity. It brings Lazzarato's seminal work on debt (2011, 2015) into dialogue with Cantet's *L'Emploi du temps* (Time Out, 2001), the Dardenne brothers' *Le Silence de Lorna* (Lorna's Silence, 2008) and Hansen-Løve's *Le Père de mes enfants* (The Father of My Children, 2009), and a cluster of 'crisis films' from 2011, to explore how debt forecloses the entrepreneurial subject's future and erases the memory of past resistances, trapping them in the management of ongoing crises. Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011a) is also called upon to probe the films' exploration of the gestural and affective economy of filmic debt. Radicalising the sense of foreclosed futures but also probing films' capacity to reveal an exit, Chapter 3 centres on the successful and failed worker suicides that have become increasingly common in Franco-Belgian cinema. Most of the works discussed postdate 2008 and include Stéphane Brizé's *la Loi du marché* (The Measure of a Man, 2015), the same director's *En guerre* (At War, 2018) and the Dardenne brothers' *Deux jours, une nuit* (Two Days, One Night, 2016). They are analysed using Žižek's account of the interplay of subjective, symbolic and systemic violences (2008) and Cederström and Fleming's essay (2012) on work-related suicide. I argue that, while the films very effectively use the embodied violences of suicide to force hidden systemic violences into view, they struggle to open ways out of neoliberal labour and are effectively trapped in a left moralism (Brown 2001: 18–30) or an ethics frozen in opposition to what it opposes. I finish the chapter by bringing together Kervern and Delépine's anarchic comedy, *Le Grand Soir* (2012), and Foucault's (2011) discussion of parrhesia to probe what a filmic exit from labour involving a killing of the worker in the self (and not the self in the worker) might look like.

The search for exits moves the book towards its second core focus, film's capacity to bring alternatives into view and reawaken a sense of possibility.

The next two chapters pursue that task. In some ways encapsulating the core thrust of my argument, Chapter 4 places Louis Althusser's late essay on the materialism of the encounter (2006) and Catherine Malabou's reading of that famous text (2015) in dialogue with the films of Abdellatif Kechiche and Céline Sciamma, two of France's most important contemporary directors. It argues that the aleatory or deconstructive materialism discussed by the two thinkers speaks productively to the way in which the filmmakers pit the desiring encounters and embodied mutability of their characters against social and institutional contexts that limit their becoming. Through attention to constantly emergent possibilities and obstacles to their realisation, the films bring into view the contingency of the existing order and the possibilities bubbling away beneath its surface. Continuing this exploration of contingency, of nascent forms of being and relating repressed by existing contexts, Chapter 5 focuses on the largely unremarked upon gift economy that runs through the Dardenne brothers' films. Marcel Mauss's famous anthropological account of the gift ([1925] (2012)) has been criticised for the conditionality of the practices it discusses and how it would disqualify them as gifts (Derrida 1992). I argue here that it is precisely the conditionality of gifts in the Dardennes' films that allows them to generate social connections and open futures. I further argue that the films' gift economy renders visible the essentially social nature of human gestures and the plasticity of objects as, rescued from mere commodity status, they become embedded in evolving human relationships, shifting in meaning and function in the process. Of course, under current conditions, gifts are incorporated within the capitalist economy and serve as a sentimentalised supplement to it. But, giving something more to us, the Dardennes' gifts point to potentially different ways to relate to each other, our gestures and the object world around us.

Bringing together the book's two foci, its sixth and final chapter returns to the neoliberal subject but only to show it being shattered and made available for reimagining. Contemporary subjection, Lazzarato notes, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, has two faces. On the one hand, it relies upon our subjectification, named subjects being necessary to anchor hierarchical relations, social and economic roles and property rights. On the other, through processes of machinic enslavement, it tears us apart, turning our gestures, intellectual capacities and affectivity into cogs of different machineries. If our subjectification requires the signifying semiotics of language, our machinic enslavement relies upon the asignifying semiotics of graphs, charts, accounts, algorithms and the digital more broadly. Ignored by much critical theory, the machinic is central to our contemporary condition (Lazzarato 2014: 13–17).

It was also at the heart of the subprime crisis, when individualised debts and properties were bundled up, speculated upon and reworked as so many insignificant cogs in the machinery of global financial speculation. With its own machinic powers and plural semiotics, cinema might seem ideally placed to engage with this machinic enslavement. As Lazzarato notes, however, its machineries are typically subordinated to the production of centred subjects (Lazzarato 2014: 108). Looking at a range of films, from post-2008 social realist, crisis-related works, through *Lucy* (Besson, 2014), a

contemporary French blockbuster, to Sylvain George's avant-gardist documentaries about migrants and contemporary protests, I will probe how they put cinema's machinic powers to work to engage with our subjection. I will firstly discuss how, if we read the social realist works ex-centrally, we can find the machinic around their edges, its marginalised presence an unacknowledged recognition of both its contemporary centrality and the difficulty that subject-centred mainstream cinema has engaging with it. Turning to Lucy, I will look at how, in its creation of a semiotically super-powered cyborg heroine, it foregrounds yet resolves the tension between centred subjects and disempowered human cogs while paradoxically mobilising cinema's digital powers to re-centre human perception. Finally, looking at George's films, I will discuss how they use cinema's plural semiosis to engage with the machinery of the Occupy and Nuit Debout demonstrations in a way which suggests cinema might become the self-consciousness of a new collective actor beyond the individual subject. I will also consider how, mobilising the machinery of montage to create collisions between past and present and between precarious migrants and European struggles against precarity, such films ask how we might reinvent our politics beyond a narrowly national frame.

Discussing filmed images of the different Occupy movements in an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Rancière suggests that they reveal the tentativeness of the people in them: a desire to be together but uncertainty as to what form that being together might take. He finds a similar tentativeness in Sylvain George's *Vers Madrid* (2012), his film of the Spanish *Toma la Plaza* (Take the Square) mobilisation and notes the parallel 'between the difficulty of finding political forms and the difficulty finding fictional forms' (Delorme and Zabunyan 2015: 87, my translation). This is a lucid summation of where we find ourselves. We are not at a moment where there is a cohesive political cinema which, drawing on a formal repertoire of presumed effectiveness, places itself in the service of established political movements. As Rancière suggests later in the interview, we are at a time where a more diverse body of films can provide aesthetic resources to stimulate thought. Certainly, there are many pre-formatted works which offer nothing new, but other works retain the capacity to propose gestures, looks, bodily movements and ways for bodies to relate that it falls to politics to incorporate (Delorme and Zabunyan 2015: 92–4). In a similar spirit to Rancière, this book seeks to bring into view resources that cinema offers us for rethinking our politics.

The book's unity comes from its two central thrusts: a probing of the crisis of the neoliberal subject, on the one hand; an exploration of film's capacity to reveal potentially new forms of life pressing against the containment of the status quo, on the other. The range of theorists used is varied but, hopefully, this variety is justified by the use to which they are put and the insights they help generate. Those brought into the discussion of neoliberalism and the crisis of the subject tend to come from a Marxist and / or Foucauldian tradition. Those used to tease out the films' capacity to explore emergent possibilities (Lazzarato, Mauss, Althusser, Malabou) are more eclectic but converge nonetheless on some form of aleatory materialism: machinic assemblages, including those of cinema, which

bear a constant potential for reassemblage (Lazzarato); gifts which carry the potential for alternative forms of relation between people, gestures and things (Mauss); a materialism of the encounter (Althusser) or a deconstructive materialism (Malabou) which, refusing determinism, reopen a sense of historical openness. This shared sense of contingency speaks productively to the films' probing of possibilities and how they help us see something beyond the capitalist present.