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Rezension im erweiterten Forschungskontext: Precarity

Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten, Hanna Prenzel (Eds.): Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses

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In sociology, the term ‚precarity‘ has been used since the 2000s to describe a particular state of poverty that is characterised by a short-term, but recurring state of poverty, and more by a possible – rather than a realised – descent to an entrenched poverty situation. The concept encompasses insecure employment relationships in fixed-term, part-time, temporary work, contract working, and bogus self-employment as well as the accompanying uncertain living conditions and the relationships of the people affected. These working conditions are not so much the result of the much-cited globalisation but of tangible decisions of labour market policies and socio-political regulations within the EU and worldwide. Precarity differs from the concepts of ‚exclusion‘ or ‚marginalisation‘ because it still includes the hope of belonging to society and being able to catch up. Nevertheless, these living conditions lead to stressful circumstances for those affected, such as exceeding expenses, debt, withdrawal from society, and depression.

Against this background, it is sensible and, to a certain extent, ethically required to examine the representation of precarity in European film, as undertaken by the editors of the anthology at hand. The book is part of the Emmy Noether Research Project „Cinematic

Discourses of Deprivation“, established at the Filmuniversität Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF. The examination of precarity in the media, which takes place at the crossroads of communication science and sociology, has only been established over the past few years (cf. Bardan 2013; Clini 2021; Decker 2003; *Image [E] Narrative* 2021; Kirsten 2021; Loiperdinger/Vogl-Bienek 2013 [see also projects mentioned there]; Pimpare 2017; Sticchi 2021).

The book *Precarity in European Film* discusses fictional as well as documentary films. The 18 country-centred chapters, that critically reflect upon the cinema in approximately 30 European countries, are preceded by a 30-page contribution by project leader Guido Kirsten in which he introduces the subject of precarity in European cinema. The avenues pursued in the book are the following: First, it researches poetics, in other words topics related to composition, aesthetic choices, stylistic means, and their functions as well as the influence of the conditions of production on the content. Important questions are, for example, whether there is a new iconography of precarity that is different from that of poverty and how aware the film makers are of the subject of precarity. However, the book focuses neither on precarious working conditions in the media industry nor on the

question how the film makers develop their beliefs and opinions. The second avenue follows the emotional and societal impact of the movies. As an emotion-triggering media, the cinema is especially well suited to convey feelings of insecurity as part of precarity. The fact that in Belgium, a law was named ‚Rosetta‘-law, referencing an eponymous movie about a struggling young woman (*Rosetta* [1999]), shows that movies might even have a direct impact on politics and society (cf. p.7). The third avenue of research pursues the discourse on precarity and related questions such as: What message does the film transmit? From which point of view do the characters argue? Who do they address? What remains unsaid? What aspects of precarity do they address? Whereas the analysis of the narration focuses on the logic of the story itself, the discourse analysis rather focuses on the argumentative structure of a story. This differentiation might provide an insight into the political effect of cinema. Even if spectators recognize a movie as fictional, they will be open to accept the underlying ideas and argumentations that imbue the story with societal or political meaning. This assumption is pursued in the country-specific contributions – particularly in the contributions about German-speaking countries.

In her chapter „Individualization as a Shared Experience?“, Hanna Prenzel investigates German cinema. She analyses not only the implications of the Hartz-IV activation policies of the first decade of the century but also the difficult times for East Germans after

the fall of the Berlin Wall. Thereby, Prenzel focuses in particular on two films. *Eine flexible Frau* (2011) represents an individualistic fictional case study of an unemployed woman who leads a somewhat clumsy fight against the impositions of the working world. The second film, *Miete essen Seele auf* (2016), is a documentary on collective tenant struggles in Berlin (a subject which is also taken up in the Spanish contribution by Manuel Garin). Various tenant groups, which are differently affected by precariousness, organise collective resistance against reckless landlords – the film being part of this project. The field of tension that is opened up by the two films represents the thesis of political desolidarization, as discussed in particular in French sociology and in analyses of the rise of extreme right-wing movements.

The Austrian chapter by Melanie Letschnig on „Pandemic (Dis)Proportions“ investigates films on workers in precarious circumstances who earn their living in sectors with bad working conditions such as harvesting, seasonal work in the restaurant business, cleaning, sex work, and caring for the elderly. According to Letschnig, the working conditions are „continuously becoming worse under the influence of an amalgamation of neoliberalism, increasing nationalism, sexism and classism in Austria“ (p.217) – fueled by the effects of Corona. In line with feminist sociologists Susanne Völker, Brigitte Aulenbacher and Fabienne Décieux, Letschnig brings in a feminist perspective on precarity: In the labour market, in everyday life, and

in personal relations the situation of women has always been more precarious than the situation of men. Therefore, the proclaimed Fordist life style has always been a myth that implies the othering of „women, trans and inter persons, migrants, Black persons and People of Colour“ (p.218). One of the films mentioned by Letschnig is *Kurz davor ist es passiert* (2007), which addresses the issue of the area between documentation, reported reality, and fiction when telling the stories of women who are victims of human trafficking. Those who knew the victims recite the women's interview texts on original locations. This mode of alienation makes clear that human trafficking takes place within our social environment – and not somewhere else.

Marcy Goldberg begins her chapter with a reflection on poverty in Switzerland. As a hotspot of international capital (not always legally acquired) and business, this very rich country profits and „is likely to be viewed as a culprit in perpetuating poverty, precarity, and inequality abroad, as the flip side of the affluence and security enjoyed within the borders“ (p.233). Goldberg explains that this has led to a series of movies that deal with the „maintenance of the external borders“, with „affluent anomie“ (ibid.), and the use of a slightly ironical distance towards the Swiss prosperity rather than with a confrontation of poverty within the county or elsewhere. The very successful film *Die Schweizermacher* (1978) perfectly represents this genre. This doubtfully funny comedy shows bureaucrats who scrutinize the private lives of people app-

lying for Swiss citizenship. Goldberg underlines that the underfinanced film funding of a government subjected to the market economy and the multi-language situation further hinders the production of films that critically investigate subjects related to precarity. Nevertheless, Goldberg discusses some films in detail. For example, in the film *Nemesis* (2020), Thomas Imbach filmed the changes taking place in front of his office window near the railway lines of Zurich for seven years – an old freight depot has been replaced by a prison, representing the organized precarity of its inhabitants.

Even the contributions about German-speaking countries are so diverse that it is not easy to draw simple conclusions. Different cinematic traditions like the Cinema del reale in Italy, New Wave or the Documentary Movement in the UK or – more generally speaking – neo-realism evolve, starting from different points but end in the topic of precarity. This poses problems for a systematic comparison and might be the reason why there is no concluding chapter. It is excusable, as the misery of the poor in each era and region must be newly discovered (cf. Schwarz 2007) and further research might be able to differentiate more easily. At best, a common European perspective on the problems and dangers of precarity could help to trigger a collective awareness and a European perspective on solidarity. So far, social policy is one of the least unified policy fields.

As far as the impact on society is concerned, an important mission left to be completed is a profound discussion

of the representation of poor people in ‚scripted reality TV‘ (or, more suitably termed, ‚faked reality TV‘), as the producers try to make spectators believe that the content is an exact image of reality (cf. Klug 2016). This is beyond the thematic scope of the book (though the chapter on Great Britain touches on the subject), but these formats have a huge impact on the imagination of precarity and poor people in our society (especially that of young people). Producers and TV-channels, which have been criticised for inventing stories and showing ‚poverty porn‘, started a ‚war‘ on truth (e.g. Jensen 2014). A ‚real‘ documentary on scripted reality might be a worthwhile project. The fact that

affected people should be represented more carefully in film projects (as well as in research and in the public sphere), and how this can be done, is discussed in the Swiss contribution under the notion of ‚collaborative filmmaking‘.

In future research on precarity (and poverty), media science (e.g. Harkins/Lugo-Ocando 2018), sociology, and literary studies may work together hand in hand even more. Only then, the discussion on precarity in cinema could be seen as part of a broader discourse on poverty, including for instance criticism on the charity economy (cf. Kessler 2017).

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