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'The shipyard is dead': Ports, memory, and left melancholy in contemporary French cinema

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of ports and shipyards within contemporary French cinema, addressing three works whose narratives centre around port towns on France's Mediterranean coast: *L'Atelier* (2017), *La Ville est tranquille* (2000), and *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro* (2011). The analysis places theories of left melancholy in dialogue with these films in order to explore their representation of the relationship between the Fordist past, neoliberal present, and any possible beyond. Consequently, it makes a case for the importance of the port as a site through which fundamental questions pertaining to cultural, social, and economic changes are explored within contemporary work-oriented film.

Keywords

neoliberalism, Fordism, deindustrialisation, Laurent Cantet, Robert Guédiguian

Ports and shipyards are crucial points of tension within neoliberalism, and must be situated at the juncture of multiple contradictory forces. This article analyses the representation of ports within contemporary French film, paying close attention to one of these junctures in particular: the port's position between the Fordist past and neoliberal present.[1] In what follows, I place various theorisations of left melancholy into dialogue with three recent films whose narratives centre around port towns and cities on France's Mediterranean coast: Laurent Cantet's *L'Atelier* (The Workshop, 2017), Robert Guédiguian's *La Ville est tranquille* (The Town is Quiet, 2000), and *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro* (The Snows of Kilimanjaro, 2011). Theorisations of left melancholy are fundamentally concerned with the relation between past, present, and future, and thus represent a particularly productive avenue to pursue in this article.

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The positioning of ports and shipyards at the intersection between the Fordist past and neoliberal present is illuminated most clearly through an examination of the types of work that surround these loci. In one respect, the spectre of Fordist industrial labour looms over these spaces, which have traditionally been sites of heavy industry. This lingering presence is emblematised in the materiality of ports and shipyards themselves, which are deeply embedded into the landscape. Now, however, ports are more often centred around the service-sector work that is typical of neoliberal societies, while their former industrial sites are marred by processes of deindustrialisation and decline. These transformations are refracted not only through developments in the nature of work itself, but also in the cultures that are inextricably linked to different kinds of work: residual traces of Fordist cultures permeate the present day, even as deindustrialisation has taken hold. As such, ports stand at the juncture between these different modes of production, occupying an uneasy position between the two. Critically, ports and shipyards – in all their complexity – structure everyday experiences. They impose upon histories, cultures, and landscapes, and thus also upon the memories and identities of people. As a result, they function as cultural focal points whose meanings, values, and legacies are constantly contested.

L'Atelier, *La Ville est tranquille*, and *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro* are all engaged in this process of contestation: these films stage narratives that centre around France's ports and shipyards in order to probe their legacies. Each of these works takes place in the wake of the decline of the work and cultures associated with the Fordist era; each grapples in a different way with what has emerged in Fordism's wake, and what future the neoliberal present might possibly give way to. As a point of context, these texts form part of a body of French film that has emerged over the past thirty years that demonstrates renewed interest in the representation of work and the absence of work, attempting to come to terms with the socio-economic upheavals of the neoliberal era.[2] This article argues that the representations of ports within these films force complex questions about the relationship between past, present, and future to the surface. These are expressed through particular narrative, spatial, and temporal economies, reflecting distinctive directorial styles and, relatedly, very different constructions of and responses to the changes wrought by neoliberalisation. In order to cast light upon these issues, I will now introduce three theories of left melancholy which catalyse much of the discussion below.

Left melancholy

The term left melancholy first appears in the work of Walter Benjamin, who coined this phrase to describe particular shortcomings of contemporary political art.[3] Benjamin argued that this art tended towards a backwards-looking moralism that, while ostensibly deriving from noble intentions, leads instead towards debilitating inaction and complacency.

For Benjamin then, the left melancholic tendency manifests in a 'disarmed, hollow sentimentality': while the art he has in mind does cast its gaze upon inequalities and exploitation, it reifies these situations so that they appear static and unchanging.[4] Importantly, however, Benjamin does not see melancholy as a problem to be solved as such.[5] Rather, he argues instead for a politicisation of melancholy, and – while castigating the contemporary intelligentsia for the way they represent the past – perceives a confrontation with the lost battles of history as a political necessity. This forms part of a broader project of dialectical materialism that aims to reactivate the past in order to transform the present: Benjamin writes of the importance of 'fanning the spark of hope in the past', and that '[h]istorical materialism sees the work of the past as still uncompleted', for instance.[6] As Onur Acaroglu argues, then, 'Benjamin ridicules the melancholy of the intelligentsia as cynical detachment, while expounding on the redemptive potential of the vanquished in history.'[7]

More recent theorisations of left melancholy extrapolate from Benjamin's initial focus on art, applying his theses to left-wing movements more broadly. Importantly, they are divided on the question of whether left melancholy might represent a potential resource, or whether it should simply be considered an obstacle to political action. Wendy Brown's well-known text 'Resisting Left Melancholy' is, as its title would suggest, exemplary of the tendency which sees this melancholy as something to be overcome. Writing in 1999 in the midst of a 'crisis of the left' that had been ongoing for two decades – effectively since the end of the Fordist era – Brown speaks of a leftist movement that 'has become more attached to its impossibility than its potential fruitfulness' and 'is caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past'.[8] The particular strain of the past that Brown refers to is communism, or 'traditional' socialism more generally – in effect, the dominant leftist ideals of the Fordist era. In Brown's theorisation, then, left melancholy refers to an attachment to this 'lost object' which inhibits action in the present day. The Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia that Brown draws upon is key: the melancholy she describes is a kind of pathological mourning, lacking the teleology associated with the mourning process. Trapped indefinitely in this melancholic impasse, the political possibilities of the present are wasted, and leftist movements are unable to uncover a new 'critical and visionary spirit' that might break with the current order.[9] Clearly, this theorisation of left melancholy differs significantly from Benjamin's. Perhaps most notably, Brown's text abandons wholeheartedly the dialectical vision of history that underpins the latter's work: there is little question of whether melancholy might be politicised, or whether the 'redemptive potential of the vanquished in history' might be put to use in Brown's text.[10] Rather, 'Resisting Left Melancholy' functions instead as a fairly straightforward rallying call for a clean break with the left's (communist) history and thus with the melancholic impasse of the present.

Writing nearly twenty years after Brown, Enzo Traverso also perceives the present to be characterised by an impasse, albeit one of a different nature. Evocatively describing a

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'transition from utopia to memory' that has gradually become cemented since the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of triumphalist 'end of history' narratives, Traverso writes, "The utopias of the past century have disappeared, leaving a present charged with memory but unable to project itself into the future." [11] Rather than incorporating memories of defeat into present-day struggles with a hope to making good on the dreams of the vanquished, left-wing movements have now succumbed to a 'a melancholic vision of history as remembrance'. [12] Consequently, we are overcome by a neoliberal moment which struggles to breach the narrow horizons of the present. It is the Benjaminian tradition of left melancholy that Traverso wishes to revive: a politicisation of memory and a confrontation with the lost battles of the past is vital.

Traverso and Brown both diagnose a contemporary impasse that acts as a brake upon left-wing movements, then, but there is clear water between the pair: while the latter perceives the left's melancholic attachment to the lost object of communism (or 'traditional' socialism in general) to be the source of the impasse, Traverso argues that it is the depoliticisation of this attachment – and of memory more generally – that is the problem. Thus, where Brown argues for the necessity of a clean break with the past, Traverso argues instead for a recalibration of our relationship with it, and a revitalisation of the dialectical tradition of history that strives to mobilise fragments of the past in order to transform the present. The nuanced differences between these thinkers function as a springboard for the filmic analysis that follows: each of the works discussed below deals with the legacy of left-wing defeat in different ways, and each stakes out differing relationships between past, present, and future. Importantly, these films all mobilise the figure of the port in order to effect this.

L'Atelier

Laurent Cantet is a director who has turned his attention to work and the absence of work on a repeated basis, employing a reflective directorial style to pose salient questions about the nature of the contemporary. [13] *L'Atelier* must clearly be situated within this oeuvre: it is a stylistically distinctive film which uses narrative polyphony and an ensemble cast to explore and unravel a number of grand narratives surrounding deindustrialisation and the legacy of Fordist cultures. The temporal economy of the film is also notable, and will be a key focus of the analysis below. The film dramatises the titular atelier, in which a number of unemployed young adults in the town of La Ciotat – close to Marseille – must collaboratively develop the plot of a novel, as part of a course intended to improve their limited employment prospects. The students are led in their pursuit by a well-known Parisian writer, Olivia Dejazet (Marina Foïs), who notably engages in a dangerous relationship of mutual fascination and disdain with Antoine (Matthieu Lucci), a disaffected workshop participant

with far-right political leanings. This culminates in Antoine's kidnapping of Olivia; he threatens to kill her but ultimately lets her go free.

The deindustrialised backdrop of the town's port and shipyards is of crucial importance. First, it is the locus around which much of the narrative revolves – most obviously because the unemployment and decline that it embodies frame the film's central conceit. On the other hand, many of the town's scant employment opportunities are to be found in its tourist industry or the remaining part of the shipyard, which now manufactures luxury yachts. We thus see immediately how the port is situated at the sharp intersection of the decline of Fordism and the neoliberal present.

The workshop

The workshop scenes are characterised by tense debate amongst the different participants, the conditions of which are established through particular stylistic choices. Notably, the characters are framed in close-up shots which emphasise their relative equality; in addition, there is no attempt to encourage audience identification through point-of-view shots. A two-camera setup is used so that the dialogue, which is frequently improvised, can flow uninterrupted.[14] Further, the cast is primarily composed of non-professional actors, which contributes to a certain impression of verisimilitude – albeit the star presence of Marina Foïs complicates this somewhat. This arrangement sets the stage for the extended periods of debate that comprise much of the film's runtime. The key question that dominates the discussions in the workshop is that of the relevance and legacy of the shipyards and their heritage: first to the narrative of the novel that the students are writing, but also by extension to their lives more generally. Notably, then, the film is engaged in a process of self-reflexive questioning: it is a text whose narrative centres on how narratives of the past might be retold or even re-experienced, while also engaging in a process of re-telling such a narrative itself. By extension these scenes, united around the figure of the port and shipyards, function as a springboard for broader considerations of the relation between the Fordist past, neoliberal present, and any possible beyond.

It becomes clear from early on that the closing of the town's shipyards has marked all of the students' consciousnesses. This gives a clear impression of the ways in which these loci function as a structuring force, impacting upon everyday experiences even many years after their decline has set in. The ways in which different members of the group react to these events vary widely. Amongst the most important (and conflicting) voices in the workshop are those of Malika (Warda Rammach) and Antoine. Malika, whose father and grandfather worked on the docks, is keen to recount tales of militancy and stress the bravery and dignity of the shipyard's workers in their struggles against deindustrialisation. She places a constant

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emphasis on the valour of the battles the workers fought, demonstrating clearly how mythologies of struggle are passed from generation to generation. Yet it is often unclear precisely what such narratives offer to Malika – or the other students – in the present day, beyond a somewhat cloying nostalgia. Some of Malika's peers bristle at the sentimentality of her speech – one expresses a certain incredulity at being proud of 'welding in the dark and breathing in asbestos', for instance – and question the ongoing relevance of these events, many of which took place before they were born.[15] In this respect we might consider Malika as epitomising the left melancholic tendency that Brown describes in such negative terms. Brown writes that the archetypal subject of such a melancholy is 'attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present'.[16] Malika's backward-looking outlook, which reifies the left-wing mythologies that surround the port, certainly resonates with this description.

At times, Antoine seems almost attuned to Brown's critique of the attachments of melancholy, striving to cut the ties of La Ciotat's Fordist past. Early in the film, for instance, he dismissively states, 'you want to speak about the shipyard – it's dead'; some other students nod in agreement. Here we witness echoes of Brown when she writes of a left that is 'caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past'.[17] Further, in his final monologue at the workshop, Antoine speaks frustratedly of the crane in the shipyard being 'religiously preserved, like a work of art in a museum', recalling Brown's description of the past being rendered as 'thinglike and frozen' in left melancholic practices.[18] Notably, at this moment the film permits Antoine a long, uninterrupted speech that diverges from the polyvocality of the other workshop scenes. I address the camera's identification with this character in more detail below. Antoine makes clear that he perceives Malika's melancholic attachment to the shipyard as stultifying; like Brown, he strives to make a clean break with the Fordist past and look towards a different future. That said, it should be noted that his disaffection comes from a very different place than Brown's leftist intervention; further, his attraction to nationalist politics represents an attachment to (imagined) ideals of the past in a way that mirrors the melancholic attachments that Brown critiques. At points Antoine also acknowledges a more complex connection between the town's industrial past and its present, which hints towards the difficulty of making a neat disarticulation between the two. Again in his final speech, for instance, Antoine speaks of 'the shipyard that no one can escape'; thus, even as he has throughout the film disavowed the relevance of the port and its legacy, he admits here its lingering, interminable presence in the town's present day. The only moment at which he is able to break from this presence is by sailing away from La Ciotat in the film's final scene.

The film's use of montage reinforces this complex relation. At a key moment early in the film, for example, we witness Antoine watching a video of Luc Borel, a far-right nationalist politician inspired by the real-life figure of Alain Soral.[19] The first element of the montage

sees Antoine watching this footage on a tablet; after a swift cut comes the second – a promotional video of local shipyards from some period around the 1960s. This archival footage emphasises the range of new technologies utilised in the shipyard, portraying an era of prosperity; its final shot depicts thousands of smiling workers running out of the shipyard gates at the end of the working day. The camera tracks the swarm of workers, creating a sense of movement. The final element of the montage, which follows the archive footage, is crucial: a series of static shots of the shipyard in the present day. Here, the cranes and various other pieces of fixed capital loom over the landscape as monoliths, as decaying remnants of a distant past. At this moment, Cantet plays with the diegetic sound: the noise of the bustling workers from the archive footage continues over these shots, creating an obvious juxtaposition with the empty and motionless images of the present day. This use of montage must be read as effecting a simultaneous disarticulation and articulation of past and present. In the first respect, the stark contrast between the movement and action of the archival footage and the stillness of the present day would seem to suggest that ‘the shipyard is dead’ – past and present are thus disarticulated. Yet, the continuation of the workers’ voices over the final element of the montage sequence suggests instead that the shipyards and their legacies retain a connection of some sorts with the contemporary that is impossible to sever. The shipyard is not completely dead, then. Rather, as the film argues here and elsewhere, it continues to structure the events of the present day.



Figure 1.1: Antoine watching footage of Luc Borel (Artificial Eye)

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Figure 1.2: Workers leaving the factory (Artificial Eye)



Figure 1.3: The static shipyard of the present-day (Artificial Eye)

In this respect, we also need to bear in mind the fact that this montage draws a connection between the process of deindustrialisation and Antoine's attraction to the far-right. Rather than a straightforward correlation between material decline and the rise of these nationalist politics, however, this sequence makes a more nuanced argument. Once more, the final montage element – the static shots combined with the voices of the (former) workers – is instructive. This combination of sound and image serves as a kind of reanimation of the past spirit of the port in the present day. When considered in combination with the footage of Borel, it could be read as suggesting that when only nostalgic, left melancholic forces – represented through the archival sound – attempt to revitalise the port and shipyards, this leaves a void within which the far-right can emerge. It is important that Antoine is the only

character who is drawn towards these politics, however; indeed, the other workshop participants largely treat his views with disdain. This stands in contrast to a certain, well-worn, narrative that straightforwardly links deindustrialisation to the rise of the far right. This rejection of historical determinism is a key part of the film's political thrust, and importantly is made possible by the complexity of the social structure of the shipyard and the students' differing relationships to it.

The shipyards' bearing down upon the present day is also reflected in the way in which they are figured in the film's landscape more generally. Often, they are to be found at the rear of the frame – looming over the landscape even as they are largely absent from the primary narrative. At one point, for instance, Antoine has met with a group of friends, all of whom share his political allegiances. They spend the night shooting guns in a forest and discussing their hatred of various groups, heading down to the seafront when the sun rises. Importantly, the port is in the background of the shots of this meeting, and thus frames the group's actions. This pattern is repeated after the film's final moment of dramatic climax, in which Antoine kidnaps Olivia. Crucially, the port and shipyards are also visible from the workshop itself, although are rarely framed by the camera directly. Thus, the port is at a point of simultaneous closeness and distance from the film's diegesis. In terms of the former, its omnipresence is crucial: it is rare that the port is far from the camera's – and the characters' – viewpoints. This highlights once more the sense of the interpenetration of past and present that the film develops, and the bearing down of the history embodied in the port upon the future. Yet its distance is also crucial: comparatively little of the film's runtime takes place within the confines of the shipyard itself. To return to the question of left melancholy, we should interpret the omnipresence of the port and shipyards as representing the film's acknowledgment of the necessity, or at least inevitability, of some kind of attachment to the past. Conversely, their distance could be read as affirming the difficulty of politicising this relation, or perhaps more simply the distance between the town's industrial past and the present day.

Ultimately, *L'Atelier* explores diverse interpretations of the meanings and legacies of La Ciotat's Fordist past. Indeed, its narrative often centres around clashes between characters whose experiences of the social structure of the port and shipyards differ widely. The film places these different viewpoints under scrutiny in its workshop scenes; significantly, its camera setup emphasises the relative equality between these characters and their viewpoints. That said, the film does not remain entirely neutral. Notably, the unbridled sentimentality of Malika's storytelling, which centres around a nostalgic vision of the shipyards and their cultures, is repeatedly called into question. Her melancholic attachment to the ideals of the past is treated with ridicule by many of her peers, and the film suggests that her proud tales of romanticised militancy are disarticulated with the conditions of the present day, unable to be put to use in the contemporary. *L'Atelier* thus unravels some of the key mythology surrounding the great leftist movements of the twentieth century; the battles

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of the past seem to offer little to the students, who are now faced with very different problems. In this respect, the film explores a critique of left melancholy – when considered as the obstinate attachment to the dominant ideals of the Fordist era – in a way that is quite clearly aligned with Brown. Antoine is of course the character whose views contrast most harshly with those of Malika. He has a fundamentally different impression of the shipyards as social structure, and wishes to make a clean break from the lingering influence of these loci and their associated cultures. Again, this bears clear similarities to Brown's critique of left melancholy, which also calls for a break with the Fordist past; unlike Brown, though, Antoine has no allegiance to left-wing movements. It should be noted that Antoine receives extensive focalisation in the film: the camera follows him more closely than any of the other characters, establishing an intimate relationship with him. Further, in spite of his vocal racism, Antoine's moral complexity is emphasised through drawn-out scenes of his family life; he is thus humanised more than any of the other workshop participants.[20] Indeed, Cantet's intention to portray Antoine sympathetically is something he has alluded to in interviews.[21]

Yet, while *L'Atelier* is undoubtedly sympathetic towards Antoine and by extension his desire to break from a seemingly interminable, melancholic attachment to the shipyards and their cultures, it ultimately stops short of wholly endorsing his viewpoints, suggesting instead that a clean break from this history would be impossible. Rather, the film's aesthetics – its use of montage and space in particular – suggest a complex interweaving of past and present that cannot be easily undone. This sits uneasily with the temporal relations established in Brown's critique of left melancholy, hinting instead towards the dialectical understanding of history to be found in Traverso's and Benjamin's writings. Cantet's work can thus clearly be seen to channel multiple, potentially conflicting, strands of different theorisations of left melancholy. Importantly, however, there is one relation between past and present that does seem markedly absent: the call for the politicisation of memory that is found in Benjamin's and Traverso's theorisations of left melancholy. *L'Atelier* does not foreclose the future, but the lost battles of the past – emblematised in the shipyards – function almost solely as a burden in the film, rather than a potential resource that might enable action in the present. In this respect, *L'Atelier* distances itself from polemic or political rallying call. The works of Guédiguian, on the other hand, differ in this respect, attempting to put the past to use in a variety of different ways.

La Ville est tranquille

James S. Williams argues that '[n]o other contemporary filmmaker in France has been so identified with one particular city as Guédiguian with Marseilles'. [22] As such, the figure of the port looms over many of his works; *La Ville est tranquille* (2000) is no exception to this.

Notably, the film shares a polyphonic narrative structure with *L'Atelier*. One of its most important storylines centres around Paul (Jean-Pierre Darroussin), a shipyard worker who takes redundancy payment while his union peers are still engaged in organised struggle. The workers go on to lose their fight; thus, as in *L'Atelier*, the film takes place in the shadow of the defeat of left-wing movements and Fordist decline more generally. Paul subsequently becomes a taxi driver, although later loses his licence. Through a chance encounter, he finds himself engaged in a relationship with Michèle (Ariane Ascaride), a fish market worker whom he pays for sex. Michèle's daughter, Fiona (Julie-Marie Parmentier), is addicted to heroin; the former must source it for her from an old lover, Gérard (Gérard Meylan). Other important characters include Viviane (Christine Brücher), a musician married to a putatively left-wing politician, and Abderramane (Alexandre Ogou), a reformed prisoner with whom she has an affair. This is not an exhaustive list of the interwoven narrative threads that characterise the film but gives an impression of the complex web of social relations that the film portrays. Importantly, these relations are united around the figure of the port, albeit somewhat haphazardly, as Mike Wayne argues.[23] One further point of note is that these narrative threads all conclude on a fatalistic note: Michèle administers a fatal dose of heroin to Fiona, Paul is left questioning how far he has fallen, Gérard commits suicide, and Abderramane is shot dead. This necessarily bears down upon the film's politics (more on that later).

Importantly, *La Ville* stresses the variety of work that centres around the port and shipyards much more clearly than in *L'Atelier*, in which the shared experience of unemployment was foregrounded more straightforwardly. The sweeping opening scene captures the fixed capital of the shipbuilding yards, but also passenger ships which embody the service sector work of the neoliberal present, for instance. Michèle's work at the fish market receives the most repeated focalisation. The camera pays close attention to the physicality of this work; this is emphasised through repeated shots of Michèle's arms and hands as they manoeuvre heavy, nearly freezing-cold fish. The rhythmic pace of the editing reflects the repetitious nature of this work, while isolated shots of Michèle's exhausted body and weary face embody Guédiguian's humanistic concern with the grinding nature of manual labour. This highlights the fact that Michèle is the character with whom the camera identifies most clearly (more below).

When Michèle finishes her night shift, we gain a brief glimpse of fishermen leaving for the day; the different temporalities of these jobs is made clear but so too is their interdependency. One other crucial early representation of work takes place at the shipyards themselves; this scene opens up a broader questioning of the relationship between the Fordist past and neoliberal present. Here, we see a crowd of dockers mobilising against job cuts, chanting slogans affirming their solidarity. Notably, in comparison to *L'Atelier*, this demonstrates that the militant politics of the shipyard workers are not wholly confined to the past in the film; the fifteen years between these texts is perhaps notable here. However,

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the cracks in this movement are certainly beginning to show: several of the workers appear weary of the slogans ('We say that every time'), thus reflecting the kind of critique – or at least fatigue – of a melancholic attachment to the ideals of the Fordist era that we see embodied in Antoine from *L'Atelier*, or encounter in Brown's theories. Notably, Paul stands amongst the workers, nodding along but not engaging fully. We soon discover, however, that he has agreed to take the redundancy payment – betraying the solidarity pact of the union of which he was a part.

The changing face of work

Paul, as a former docker turned taxi driver, stands at the intersection of the Fordist past and neoliberal present. Consequently, he is used to explore the legacy of organised leftism and Fordism more generally, as well as the changing nature of work in the neoliberal era. Relatedly, he also functions as a vector of the exploration of left melancholy in this film, albeit not necessarily a straightforward one. We never witness Paul's work at the docks; thus, it functions as a structuring absence here, creeping into dialogue or into the edges of the camera frame much like in Cantet's film. His new chosen profession – taxi driver – is of crucial importance; the individual nature of this work is counterposed with the collective nature of dock work, the mobility of driving is contrasted with the relative stasis and permanence of the shipyards, and the more flexible temporalities of this service work are implicitly contrasted with the routine of industrial labour. This aligns with broader shifts in the shape of hegemonic labour between Fordism and neoliberalism.[24] One further point of note, this time on a subjective level, is that Paul takes pride in being his 'own boss'; this clearly resonates with dominant ideals of neoliberal subjecthood, including those of self-reliance and entrepreneurship.[25] Paul's exit from the employment of the docks thus functions as a lens through which the film explores broad-scale developments within neoliberal societies.

At an important moment, Paul picks up Michèle in his taxi. Here, he elaborates upon his decision to cut ties with the union. He states, 'the workers' struggle, solidarity, and so on... That was fine for our parents', before extolling the virtues of his newfound life. In this moment, then, the port and shipyards emerge once more as a common focal point that structures identities and subjectivities, and whose meaning is contested. Paul's characterisation bears parallels with Antoine's here – he clearly wants to break with the Fordist past and look towards a different future. However, Paul is not dogged by his peers' (melancholic) attachment to the port and its cultures in the same way as Antoine is. In fact, he goes on to sing the Internationale in several different languages to Michèle. A memory of the workers' movement thus lives on in Paul, but only as a kind of curious relic that he treats with cynical detachment. In terms of Paul's relation to theories of left melancholy, his standpoint finds most resonance in Brown's thought in terms of its attempt to break from

Fordist cultures. Yet, while Paul has clearly spent significant amounts of time engaged in left-wing movements, he could hardly be said to be aligned with the left in the present day; instead, he seems to strive for a break from a melancholic attachment to the past tout court. The camera encourages a certain amount of identification with Paul through its close framing of his face during this scene, although the viewer is aware that Paul is exaggerating the scale of his personal success. However, after this journey concludes the camera takes some distance, framing Paul from behind as he follows Michèle; he eventually comes to a halt and looks down on her from a hidden vantage point. Here we develop a certain image of Paul as predatory and voyeuristic, complicating any identification that might have been established thus far.



Figure 2.1: Paul sings the Internationale (Artificial Eye)

Paul's characterisation is placed under more straightforward scrutiny through the general narrative trajectory he takes. Critically, Paul's efforts to capitalise on the new individualist model of neoliberalism – and to break from his past – are in vain; towards the end of the film, his taxi licence is revoked as a result of his overcharging of tourists. He is thus left only with the option of picking up illegal, poorly-paid journeys. Significantly, Paul became heavily indebted in order to buy his taxi. His creditor becomes increasingly threatening as Paul's debts are left unpaid, but he bears a loyalty to Paul's father; consequently, he is unable to collect his debts through forceful means. In this respect, the film makes clear that Paul's newfound individual freedom is dependent on a web of others. This effects a critique of individualism and also establishes another link of dependency between past and present. By extension, Paul's desire to cast off the solidaristic past of the docks is itself critiqued.

Rather than break from the past, *La Ville* suggests, albeit implicitly, that we need to retrieve those values that have been lost with the decline of the port's cultures – in particular those

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of solidarity and integrity. Wayne affirms this view, arguing that the film 'believes in the necessity, but not the capacity, for collective resistance'.^[26] The figure who most embodies the spirit that Guédiguian wishes to revive is Michèle. She acts with a stoicism that Guédiguian ontologises as the essence of the traditional working class. Her identity is related to a particular experience of the social structure of the port and shipyards, one which is associated with dignity and hard work in the face of adversity. We have already seen how Michèle's work at the fish markets is repeatedly focalised, but equally important are the long takes that depict her selflessly caring for her granddaughter. Stylistically, the camera often frames Michèle in close-ups that clearly encourage identification and empathy, even at her most morally compromised moments.



Figure 3.1: Michèle in a characteristic close-up (Artificial Eye)

The film makes its clearest reference to the intertwinement of past and present in two flashback scenes. The first of these depicts Michèle and Gérard as children in the bar that Gérard now owns. In the busy bar of the past, the young Michèle and Gérard share an innocent moment of attraction; this scene is interspersed with shots of the present day in which the bar is nearly empty and Michèle is approaching Gérard to buy heroin for her daughter. Another comes directly before Gérard's suicide. This sequence depicts Gérard and Michèle as a happy couple, passionately kissing by the seafront; a swift cut to the present day sees Gérard turn a gun on himself and commit suicide. While there is little explicit commentary on the legacy of the port and shipyards here, these sequences recall the use of montage in *L'Atelier*, charting a trajectory of decline but also highlighting the interpenetration of past and present. The difference between the two films is that *La Ville* locates its only real moments of happiness and hope in the past; in *L'Atelier*, on the other hand, history is primarily burdensome. The temporal economy established here thus differs

from that found in Cantet's film, erring more closely the one that we encounter in Benjamin and Traverso, which strives to reactivate the past in order to transform the present. *La Ville* evinces what could be described as a left melancholic attachment to the ideals of the past, and hints towards the sense that this attachment might represent a resource in the present. Yet the film still leaves open little potential for change, instead depicting a generalised landscape of decline in which characters remain divided from one another and the future appears bleak. The sense of futurity that is stressed in Benjamin's and Traverso's accounts of the potentialities left melancholy is thus largely absent. Guédiguian's later film, *Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro*, both repeats and diverges from this pattern.

Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro

Les Neiges du Kilimandjaro, released in 2011, has the most straightforward narrative structure of the three films, lacking the polyphony that characterises *L'Atelier* and *La Ville est tranquille*. Consequently, the complexity of the figure of the port is emphasised less clearly than in the other two texts. This work is also set in Marseille, and centres on Michel (Jean-Pierre Darroussin), a middle-aged shipyard worker and union shop steward, and his wife of 30 years, Marie-Claire (Ariane Ascaride), a carer. The film commences with Michel announcing a spate of redundancies; like the other two films, then, this work's diegesis is framed by Fordist decline. Michel draws names out of a hat to decide who must face unemployment, notably drawing his own name and thus announcing his own redundancy. The moral fortitude and dignity of Michel – who had the option to exclude himself from these proceedings – is a key feature of the film, and develops the character archetype we have already seen embodied in Michelle in *La Ville*.

Michel and Marie-Claire's colleagues and friends organise a party for the couple's anniversary, at which they gift them a trip to Tanzania and a significant amount of money. The central driver of the storyline is that Christophe (Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet), a former shipyard worker who was made redundant at the same time as Michel, later organises an ambush of Michel and Marie-Claire, stealing the money and plane tickets out of desperation and jealousy. Christophe is much younger than Michel; his breaking of the union's solidaristic pact and the broader generational division that this entails is one of the film's key problematics. Importantly, Christophe acts as carer for his two young brothers; their mother works on passenger ships and is thus frequently absent. The situation of these children perturbs Michel and Marie-Claire; in the film's conclusion, they adopt them as Christophe is sent to prison.

Nostalgia

In many ways, the representation of the shipyard in the film is clearly aligned with the past. Most straightforwardly – as in the other two films – it is the embodiment of a declining type of employment and culture: in addition to the redundancies announced at the start of the film, Michel's son was also left unemployed in recent times, as were many others. This trait is reinforced through the film's *mise-en-scène*; the paintwork on the union headquarters is fading, for instance. Further, when Michel is clearing out his belongings, he ruefully takes down a faded black-and-white picture of Jean Jaurès, his hero, from his locker, recounting a quote as he does so. Nearly every reference to socialism which surrounded the docks is backwards-looking and the film utilises a warm colour palette and music from the 1970s and 1980s to impart a more generally nostalgic aesthetic. All of this serves to stress the fact that struggle is confined almost entirely to the past in the film; the wellspring of left-wing resources that Michel draws upon often seems to have little bearing upon the future or even the present, beyond a fairly straightforward moralism. In this respect, Michel can be perceived as embodying Brown's description of the left melancholic subject: he is clearly on the left, but bears an attachment to ideals and tactics that appear to have only minimal use in the present. Indeed, at many points, socialism appears to be 'a finished experience and an irreplaceable loss' for him, in a similar way to Malika in *L'Atelier*.^[27]

The breakdown of the solidarity pact that is embodied in the relation between Michel and Christophe further develops this association of the port's cultures with the past, but also complicates Michel's position as a subject of left melancholy as per Brown. A notable scene in this respect comes after Christophe has been detained by the police. When Michel and Marie-Claire go to the police station, the investigator allows Michel into the interrogation room where Christophe has been detained. Here, Michel frustratedly stresses the betrayal of the bond he feels he and Christophe should share; they worked together and were made redundant together. Yet, he soon turns to the clear divisions between them: 'I'm not like you. You won't make me become like you.' Michel's denunciation of Christophe's abandonment of the principles of solidarity stresses a generational division that, in a certain sense, signals a disarticulation of the solidarity values of the port's past from the realities of the present day. Yet, this detachment should not be read as affirming Brown's call for a break from these cultures; rather, the film's message, embodied through its heroes Michel and Marie-Claire, is that such values should inform people's actions in the present.^[28] Notably, Michel and Marie-Claire, despite some minor character faults, are presented almost unambiguously as positive in the film. The former is afforded a number of monologues in which he expounds upon his moral sensibilities; the couple are often framed closely in shots that emphasise our proximity to them. In this sense, we begin to gain a clearer idea of the relation between past, present, and future that the film calls for. As we will come to see, *Les Neiges* strikes clearer resonances with the thoughts of Benjamin and Traverso than either of the other two works,

calling for a reactivation of the past in order to transform the present and look towards a different future.

This scene is insightful in other ways, utilising the common focal point of the port to expound upon generational divisions that go beyond individual political sensibilities. Later in the conversation, Christophe chastises Michel for his bourgeois life, making repeated reference to the comfort that the union has afforded him. The film acknowledges a certain truth in what Christophe says through formal choices; notably, Christophe is tied to a chair, while Michel is framed standing above him, in a position of relative power, privilege, and freedom. Further, Michel's and Christophe's apartments look down upon the port from opposite sides of Marseille: the former's home is well-kept and located within l'Estaque, a picturesque enclave, while the latter's is cramped and situated in a dilapidated high-rise block. This points towards material developments which are clearly intertwined with the political conflict and generational divide that the film depicts; the employment associated with the ports is no longer any guarantee of prosperity or even relative comfort. Yet, the degradation of the material conditions of younger workers is only a peripheral concern of the film. This is emphasised through this conversation's dramatic climax, in which Michel strikes Christophe after the latter has accused him of corruption; Michel's outrage at this affront to his morality is what triggers this unseemly display of violence.



Figure 4.1: Michel and Christophe (Cinéfile)

We have discussed in some detail the film's alignment of the port and its cultures with the Fordist past; I will turn now to the attempt it makes to orient itself towards the future by mobilising the figure of the port and shipyards. Notably, as in *L'Atelier*, the shipyards are often framed in the background of shots; this serves as a visual metaphor for the way in which they bear down upon the present day. In Cantet's film, this looming figure signified a

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history that was burdensome – impossible to confine to the past but also impossible to put to use in the present. In *Les Neiges*, however, the situation is different: rather than functioning solely as a drag upon the contemporary, the figure of the shipyards represents an embodiment of a solidarity that must be revitalised. This is emphasised through their figuration in key moments of interpersonal conflict: for instance, Michel and his closest friend Raoul notably fall out in the middle section of the film, but Raoul – having contemplated this breakdown while the shadow of the shipyard looms over him – revitalises their relationship and revives the bond of solidarity that defines it. The scale and materiality of the ports thus come to represent the importance of their legacy; consequently, their inescapability is figured in a positive sense, rather than a negative one as in Cantet's film.



Figure 5.1: Raoul and the shipyards (Cinéfile)

We see in this respect how the film seems to align with the writings of Benjamin and Traverso in its vision of history. Like these authors, the film argues for the necessity of a confrontation with the past, which represents not only a burden but also a 'promise of redemption'. [29] Yet, it is important to examine more thoroughly the nature of the solidarity that *Les Neiges* wishes to revive. Crucially, the film dwells little on the organised struggle that surrounded the docks. Rather, it suggests that what defines the figure of the dignified working class – embodied through Michel and Marie-Claire and associated with the cultures of the port – is a shared moral sensibility, a kind of unconditional solidarity. The most important story arc in this respect emerges in the final third of the film, in which Michel and Marie-Claire selflessly adopt Christophe's young brothers. In the climactic moments of the film the couple sit by the seafront, agreeing on their plan to adopt the children; slightly wistful but nonetheless satisfied extra-diegetic music rises in the background. Marie-Claire asks, 'Have I done the right thing?'. Michel nods, and the four characters are framed tightly, smiling at one another. The film's resolution is thus made clear.

This message clearly stands in opposition to the social norms of competitive individualism that are dominant in neoliberal societies; but the political limitations of it are clear, and complicate the film's relation to Benjamin's and Traverso's theorisations of left melancholy.[30] In one respect, *Les Neiges* does call for a reactivation of memory, and is more hopeful that 'fanning the spark of hope in the past' will transform the present than either of the other two films; in this regard, it is clearly more future-oriented than *La Ville est tranquille*. [31] Yet, this sacralisation of the port's history is not articulated with any collective project; rather, it emphasises the importance of a particular moral sensibility that is expressed largely on an individual basis. Thus, the film calls for a moralisation, rather than a politicisation, of the memories of the Fordist past that the port symbolises. This clearly conflicts with the traditions of left-wing remembering that Benjamin and Traverso value, which rile against the depoliticisation of memory. Indeed, if we take this argument further, we might suggest that *Les Neiges* embodies the 'disarmed, hollow sentimentality' that Benjamin castigated the contemporary intelligentsia for. [32] Certainly, the overwhelming atmosphere of the film is one of nostalgia, something we have identified in its aesthetic as well as its narrative. As Joseph Mai writes, then, '[t]he mawkishness is thick, and eyes are misty; this is almost self-parody'. [33] This is a tendency which is mostly absent from *La Ville*, and almost totally absent from *L'Atelier*.

Conclusion

The legacies of the working and political cultures of the Fordist era are clearly complex. Indeed, they are a key topic of division amongst recent theorists of left melancholy, whose arguments also extend to broader considerations of the relationship between past, present, and future. The argument made in this article is that ports and shipyards function as an important lens through which filmmakers explore this relation, and by extension critique the developments of the neoliberal era. Utilising Brown's, Benjamin's, and Traverso's theorisations of left melancholy, we have seen how these works establish complex articulations and disarticulations of past and present. In spite of the common focal point of the port, these representations lead to very different political emphases – ranging from *L'Atelier* and its rejection of historical determinism to the pessimism of *La Ville* and the nostalgia of *Les Neiges*. This heterogeneity is important and underscores the value of representations of ports and shipyards to scholars of contemporary political film and media; it is clear that these loci concentrate a range of tensions that are felt in more diffuse form across the broader corpus of contemporary work-centred films.

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Notes

- [1] As a point of historical note, while Fordist cultures have been more resilient in France than in many other European countries, neoliberalism has arguably been ascendant in the country since the 1980s. France has undergone profound socio-economic developments over the last thirty years in particular; these amount to a decisive shift towards the neoliberal era. See Lane 2020.
- [2] Cadé 2018.
- [3] Benjamin 1995.

- [4] Acaroglu 2021, p. 98.
- [5] Flatley 2008, p. 65.
- [6] Benjamin 2007, p. 255; Benjamin 2008, p. 124.
- [7] Acaroglu, pp. 90-91 (emphasis mine).
- [8] Brown 1999, p. 26 (emphasis mine).
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Acaroglu, p. 91.
- [11] Traverso 2016, p. xiv; 7.
- [12] Ibid., p. xiv.
- [13] O'Shaughnessy 2015.
- [14] Macaulay 2018.
- [15] All dialogue is translated from the original French.
- [16] Brown 1999, p. 20.
- [17] Ibid., p. 26 (emphasis mine).
- [18] Ibid., p. 22.
- [19] Soral is a one-time employee of the Front National whose internet presence attracts legions of primarily young followers; he has been convicted of a range of hate crimes including incentive to racial hatred and holocaust denial. Notably, the discourses that he employs incorporate residual elements of anti-capitalism alongside the incitement of racial hatred; this is mirrored in the film's depiction of Borel.
- [20] See Toohey 2020 for a critique of this tendency in relation to Cantet's 2008 film *Entre les murs*.
- [21] Rapold 2017.
- [22] Williams 2013, p. 102.
- [23] Wayne argues that the film lacks an aesthetic and formal logic which draws this web of relations together. See Wayne 2002, pp. 224-225.
- [24] Lane 2020, p. 32.
- [25] Dardot & Laval 2013.
- [26] Wayne, p. 223.
- [27] Traverso, p. 45.
- [28] That Michel and Michèle in *La Ville* have such similar names is surely not a coincidence.
- [29] Traverso 2016, p. xv.
- [30] Dardot & Laval 2013; Brown 2015.
- [31] Benjamin 2007, p. 255.
- [32] Acaroglu 2021, p. 98.
- [33] Mai 2017, p. 124.