CHAPTER 7

Afterword

We are living through an irrational phase of neoliberalism, defined by fictitious growth, incompetent leadership and an imperviousness to critique. The political response to the 2008 financial crisis was to use taxpayer money to bail out the banks and pump trillions into the financial sector through quantitative easing. This has resulted in zombie banks that are overleveraged and would not be viable were they not propped up in this way. Because the underlying economy is not sound, banks have not favored investments in the productive sector, instead channeling their excess liquidity to risky financial instruments in the shadow banking system. Speculation and stock buybacks have fueled asset bubbles that destabilize the global economy and decouple executive pay, bank profits and stock market gains from the living standards of workers (Harman 2009, 282–289, 303; van Zon 2016, 11–24, 42–48, 149–155). The zombification of the banking sector has merely kicked the can down the road rather than resolving the problems that caused the 2008 crisis, rebuffing any attempts to restructure financial capitalism or to reassess the tenets of free market ideology (Davies 2016, 133; Milburn 2019, 35).

The current irrationality of neoliberalism is most evident in the insistence on austerity as the appropriate response to the 2008 financial meltdown, which has magnified the catastrophic social consequences of the crisis and widened popular discontent with neoliberal governments.
During the past decade, the zombification of the world economy has been facilitated by the zombification of political governance, as Keir Milburn explains:

The key characteristic of zombies is brain death … The zombie is a body stripped of its ability to alter course and decide on a different future … Similarly, the distinguishing characteristic of post-crisis neoliberalism is its inability to reform itself, despite a decade-long stagnation. Neoliberalism has stopped making sense, even on its own terms, yet the project hasn’t stopped. Neoliberal ideology has lost its coherence, yet its policies roll out unabated. (Milburn 2019, 50–51)

William Davies describes this as a state of exception that suspends the critical judgment needed to address the underlying causes of crises (Davies 2014, 177). The leadership vacuum created by the intransigence of neoliberal politicians has been exacerbated by the recent electoral victories of right-wing demagogues whose continued adherence to neoliberal policies, coupled with their corruption and negligence, have further eroded the effectiveness of policy responses to the 2008 crisis and its aftermath. As Wolfgang Streeck aptly summarizes, “[t]he utter destruction of national institutions capable of economic redistribution and the resultant over-reliance on monetary and central bank policy as the economic policy of last resort have made capitalism ungovernable, whether by ‘populist’ or technocratic methods” (Streeck 2017, 168).

The other defining feature of the current phase of neoliberalism is its punitiveness. The imposition of austerity on people who lost their homes and savings in 2008 seemed to serve no macroeconomic purpose since it deepened the recessionary effects of the crisis. According to William Davies, austerity’s assault on the impoverished masses after 2008 was an act of vengeance: “those crippled by poverty, debt and collapsing social-safety nets … have already been largely destroyed as an autonomous political force. Yet somehow this increases the urge to punish them further” (Davies 2016, 132). The punitiveness of contemporary politics is enabled by the increasing authoritarianism of neoliberal governance, which takes three primary forms. First, there is “constitutional authoritarianism” in which neoliberal policies are forced on resistant populations through international treaties, currency agreements and debt repayment schemes (Ayers and Saad-Filho 2015, 606). Second, there is an expansion of executive power, especially in the aftermath of crises when emergency
conditions are used to impose unpopular measures on other branches of government (Davies 2014, 27). Third, popular discontent with the neoliberal order and the suppression of left-wing alternatives have enabled the resurgence of right-wing authoritarianism: “Without a left … the maelstrom of capitalist ‘development’ can only generate liberal forces and authoritarian counterforces, bound together in a perverse symbiosis” (Fraser 2017, 47). The punitive phase of neoliberalism has pronounced racial characteristics, not only due to the neocolonial dynamics of contemporary capitalism but also because people of color comprise a significant portion of the working class in many countries that have been devastated by austerity and right-wing populists blame immigrants for the economic failures of neoliberalism (Hong 2015, 57–62). The demand during the Covid-19 pandemic for workers to prematurely return to farms, factories and schools despite the obvious health risks reveals the increasingly necropolitical dimensions of neoliberalism.

The punitiveness of neoliberal governance lends a renewed relevance to the aesthetic principles of Antonin Artaud’s theater of cruelty. According to Angelos Koutsourakis, Artaudian techniques can reveal the systemic cruelty of the existing social order by favoring physicality over psychology, making the body a locus of social conflict, situating violence in the mundane, making the audience viscerally experience the suffering of characters and using theatricality and uncommunicative language to denaturalize representation (Koutsourakis 2018, 190–216). We already see Artaud’s impact on the films of Ulrich Seidl, Yorgos Lanthimos and Lars von Trier and we can expect his influence on art cinema to grow given the punitiveness of the current phase of neoliberalism. The apparent inescapability of contemporary capitalism produces what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism, an attachment to fantasies of the good life that allow us to endure the harsh conditions of existence under neoliberalism but also suture us further into a destructive social order that no longer provides us with mobility, security or equality (Berlant 2011). The impossibility of escaping the current system is captured in the situation tragedy, which Berlant describes as a “marriage between tragedy and situation comedy where people are fated to express their flaws episodically, over and over, without learning, changing, being relieved, becoming better, or dying” (Berlant 2011, 176). The increasing irrationality and illegitimacy of neoliberal governance may allow art cinema to move past the cruel optimism theorized by Berlant to a more radical break with the current order. We can expect future art films to oscillate between bewilderment and contempt,
irreverence and indignation at the incongruities and injustices of contemporary capitalism, with filmmakers adapting art cinema style to the demands of this new phase of neoliberalism.

While right-wing populism has been the main beneficiary of capitalism’s post-2008 legitimacy crisis, there have also been important left-wing challenges to the neoliberal consensus during this period, first in the form of anti-austerity, anti-racism and pro-democracy street protests and occupations in 2010–2013 and then via the electoral gains made by socialists or social democrats like Podemos, Syriza, Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Young people have been a driving force of these extra-parliamentary and electoral contestations of the neoliberal order, with electoral results in many countries showing an unprecedented polarization of voting preferences by age (Milburn 2019, 1–6, 57–103). Older generations that accumulated wealth before or in the early days of neoliberalism have been largely insulated from its worst effects: indebtedness, unemployment and precarity. These generational differences have been accentuated by the neoliberal response to the 2008 crisis, which created asset bubbles that favor older people who own more stocks and property (Milburn 2019, 37). This is an era of lost youth, in which most young people “are trapped working long hours at badly paid jobs just to make enough money to pay the rent,” their living standards and prospects squeezed by the rentierism of financialized capitalism that extracts value parasitically from their contingent labor, student debt and online interactions (Milburn 2019, 114).

Youth has been associated with art cinema since successive new waves of the 1960s posed generational challenges to their respective national film industries (in France, most famously, against le cinéma du papa). Many new wave films featured young protagonists, thematized youthful rebellion and were directed by young filmmakers. James Tweedie has shown, for instance, that French, Taiwanese and Chinese new wave films captured the social upheavals visited upon youth culture by the twin processes of globalization and urbanization in the 1960s, 1980s and 1990s (Tweedie 2013). We can similarly expect the recent divergence of life prospects and political beliefs along generational lines to exert pressure on the aesthetic conventions of art cinema. A mode of filmmaking that continues to be associated with bourgeois audiences and to cultivate an air of distinction is unlikely to resonate with the political sensibilities of today’s beleaguered youth. The paradox that this generational realignment creates is that it situates radical politics in an age group immersed in the
commercial forms of popular culture. It is likely then that genre revision will become more prevalent in art cinema, combining popular forms familiar to young audiences with anti-establishment messages and a confrontational style.

Art cinema techniques such as nonlinearity, subjective narration and ambiguity have been selectively appropriated by Hollywood for many years now (such as in the films of David Fincher and Christopher Nolan), and conversely, popular genres and styles have influenced the work of contemporary art cinema directors like Jacques Audiard, Park Chan-wook and Wong Kar-wai (Andrews 2013, 87–89, 148; Kiss and Willemsen 2017, 144; Kovács 2007, 60; Ndalianis 2007, 87; Taylor 2017, 4; for a discussion of art cinema’s engagement with popular culture in earlier periods, see Corrigan 1983, 3–12, 25–41; Elsaesser 2005; Lev 1993). However, while this cross-pollination has blurred the stylistic distinctions between Hollywood and art cinema, it has not eliminated their ideological differences because Hollywood films rarely reproduce the critical perspectives found in art cinema. Even though the mixture of high and low cultural forms is usually associated with the ahistorical depthlessness of postmodernism, the tradition of popular modernism from Sergei Eisenstein to Abraham Polonsky to Spike Lee demonstrates that “popular forms” can be used to “make the dialectical portrayal of social contradictions pleasurable” (Koutsourakis 2018, 82; see also Aitken 2001, 155–157). New varieties of popular modernism are needed to expand the reach and extend the relevance of art cinema by engaging with the political radicalization of today’s youth. As James Harvey has said: “politically fertile art films … address an us, a we, a people … not with the intention of exclusively reinforcing the us that already exists, but of insisting upon its expansion” (Harvey 2018, 19).

In order to “address an us, a we, a people,” art cinema will need to challenge the individualism that lies at the heart of neoliberal ideology. The promotion of the entrepreneurial self has been used to absolve the neoliberal state of the need to ensure the welfare of its citizens. Personal responsibilization naturalizes social inequality, moralizes indebtedness and heightens economic insecurity (Bloom 2017, 6–17, 30–35; Bonanno 2017, 190; Masquelier 2017, 47–52; McGuigan 2016, 129–133). Milburn argues that in order to counteract the atomization of life under neoliberalism, youth-led political movements should reinvigorate the tradition of the commons:
This will involve incentivizing forms of collaborative production, disincen-
tivizing business models based on rent, and socializing the benefits of auto-
mation, data creation and the positive externalities of network effects …
Governing the commons is the diametric opposite of neoliberal managerial-
ism. It constitutes a training in democracy. Instead of isolated, competitive
and hierarchized individuals it produces more connected, collaborative and
powerful collectivities. (Milburn 2019, 117–118)

Communal alternatives to the current order have not been fully explored
in contemporary cinema, with many films about neoliberalism “strong in
making criticisms, [but] much weaker in offering solutions” (Mazierska
2018, 18). Koutsourakis notes that “what connects” filmmakers “who
address questions of social inequality in contemporary neoliberal societ-
ies … is precisely their mourning for the lack of a collective spirit that can
enable us to envisage alternatives” (Koutsourakis 2020, 63). Given the
increasing illegitimacy of neoliberal governance and the radicalization of
young people in many parts of the world, we can expect future art cinema
to engage more extensively with communal alternatives to neoliberal indi-
vidualism. But such engagements carry their own risks, since in the absence
of real-life corollaries they may merely produce a phantasmatic transcen-
dence of existing social conditions. As Berlant states, while there is an
“affective sense of solidarity that might come through a collective detach-
ment from the normative world,” “[n]eoliberal interests are well served by
the displacement of so many historical forms of social reciprocity onto
emotional registers, especially when they dramatize experiences of free-
dom to come that have no social world for them yet” (Berlant 2011, 222).

A system as profoundly antisocial as neoliberalism relies on real or imag-
ined acts of communal solidarity to mitigate the consequences of its own
neglect. Martin O’Shaughnessy points out, in reference to the gift econo-
 mies thematized in the films of the Dardenne brothers, that we should be
weary of any mode of solidarity that is “dependent on that which it
opposes;” that “needs neoliberalism’s murderous logic to found its own
commitment to the Other and offers no meaningful way to move beyond
this opposition” (O’Shaughnessy 2020). It will be important for future art
cinema to conceive of forms of communality that do not reinforce the
dominance of neoliberalism.

Recent films such as Toni Erdmann (Maren Ade, 2016), The Florida
Project (Sean Baker, 2017), The Favourite (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2018),
Atlantics (Mati Diop, 2019) and Parasite (Bong Joon-ho, 2019) contain
some, if not all, of the prospective elements of a politicized art cinema discussed in this chapter: a young director, young protagonists, engagement with popular culture or mainstream genres, criticism of the systemic cruelty of contemporary capitalism and the exploration of affective dispositions and social relationships that challenge the antisociality of neoliberalism. The fact that these films have been met with acclaim in film festivals as well as more popular venues demonstrates how critiques of neoliberalism are being integrated into mainstream production, distribution and reception circuits in ways that complicate any attempt to assess contemporary art cinema’s oppositionality. The broad appeal of these films is based on their ability to unsettle familiar modes of spectatorship by embedding critical messages within recognizable genres and popular forms: *The Favourite*, for instance, repurposes the middlebrow entertainments of the monarchy genre toward an unvarnished critique of undemocratic systems of governance. Despite its historical subject matter, the film’s stylistic continuities with Lanthimos’s earlier work (see Chap. 3) give credence to an interpretation of *The Favourite* as an allegory of the disenfranchisements of the neoliberal era. The endemic cruelty of social relations in Queen Anne’s court and the incompetent leadership of the capricious monarch at the center of the narrative allow us to better understand the irrationality and punitiveness of neoliberal governance. The film’s ending provides an example of how to combine criticism of contemporary capitalism with a symbolic expression, however tentative, of a communal alternative to neoliberal individualism.

The final scene of *The Favourite* shows Abigail Hill performing a degrading act of servitude on Queen Anne: kneeling down in front of Anne and rubbing her gout-ridden legs while Anne roughly grabs Abigail’s hair. This scene is unsettling for many reasons. The film has followed Abigail’s climb to a position of high status in the royal court so this moment of abjection serves as a harsh reminder of Abigail’s continued subordination within the court’s rigid social hierarchy. Anne was previously portrayed as a pathetic victim of others’ manipulations, which makes her sadistic humiliation of Abigail shocking for the audience. A Manichean interpretation of this incident is complicated by preceding scenes that show Abigail neglect and deceive Anne in various ways. This depersonalizes the film’s critique of hierarchical social arrangements by implicating both Anne and Abigail in the depravity of the royal court, whose diseased body, we come to realize, cannot be healed from within. The visceral discomfort that we feel as we watch this scene is based in part on how it is
shot: its excruciating duration, the low angle that places us in a subjugated position and the placement of Anne’s legs offscreen which forces us to imagine, or to try not to imagine, the actions taking place out of frame. The unpleasantness of what we are watching (or imagining) shatters the thrill that monarchy films usually provide by allowing us to identify with powerful court figures.

The Favourite concludes with a superimposition of several shots: respective close-ups of Anne and Abigail in the midst of the act of servitude and one or more shots of the queen’s rabbits, which we can interpret as a symbolic representation of the British peasantry: relatively powerless, perceived paternalistically and subject to the whims of those in charge (Fig. 7.1). The appearance of the rabbits reminds us of the masses whose lives are affected by the machinations of the royal court that have been the focus of the film’s narrative. We eventually no longer see the two women so that the rabbits now fill the frame, the superimposition of multiple shots giving the impression that they are proliferating and that in time this will place sufficient pressure on the system that keeps them in cages. This closing sequence allows us to pay attention to two things at once: the film’s indictment of an inequitable and exclusionary system and the symbolic portrayal of its demotic replacement. Striking such a balance between an

![Fig. 7.1](image-url) Superimposition is used to divide our attention between a critique of the political system and its symbolic transcendence in The Favourite (Film4 Productions and Waypoint Entertainment, 2018)
unequivocal critique of neoliberalism and the exploration of communal alternatives will be the great political and representational challenge of the coming years in art cinema and beyond.

Notes

1. There are, of course, plenty of contemporary auteurs who produce work that is radically different from mainstream cinema, many of them part of the slow cinema movement. Directors such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Jia Zhangke, Pedro Costa, Lee Chang-dong and Cristi Puiu make films that deviate from conventional narrative causality and continuity editing, defy generic categorization and encourage active spectatorship.

2. According to Peter Bloom, “alternative values can serve to strengthen a status quo, even when they are ostensibly seeking to resist it” because “values of reciprocity, care and social responsibility are prioritized as a means of adequately coping with and to some degree ‘fixing’ the subjective and material problems caused by neoliberalism” (Bloom 2017, 30, 38).

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