

CHAPTER 4

The 1980s

Learning to Survive

The time of disembedding

The 1970s were turbulent years, filled with political struggle, whose outcome at the time was difficult to predict. Yet as David Harvey wrote in the introduction to the 2006 edition of his *Limits to Capital*: ‘The solutions that emerged victorious (though very unevenly) from the confusions of the 1970s were broadly along neoliberal, or so-called “free-market” lines, in which finance capital (in part because of the petrodollar problem) led the way’ (Harvey 2006a: x-xi). Neoliberalism, also known as monetarism, free market or global capitalism, is a version of capitalism, in which capitalists enjoy a high degree of freedom and protection from the state, while labourers are deprived of similar freedoms and state protection. The assumption of neoliberalism, as with that of the classical liberalism of Adam Smith, is that its hegemony will lead to the benefit of all: ‘a rising tide of capitalist endeavour will “lift all boats”’ (Harvey 2010b: 218). Yet in Harvey’s opinion, this system does not fulfil its promise.

Neoliberalism, as described by Harvey, boils down to ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Such accumulation is achieved by: 1) privatisation and commodification of public assets; 2) financialisation, in which any kind of good can be turned into an instrument of economic speculation; 3) the management and manipulation of crises and 4) state redistribution, in which the state becomes an agent of the upward redistribution of wealth, including the poor countries subsidising the rich (Harvey 2005: 160–62). The third point listed by Harvey, namely embracing crisis and chaos, rather than equilibrium, accounts for the main difference between neoliberalism and classical capitalism. As Melinda Cooper puts it, ‘What is *neo* about neoliberalism is its tendency to couple the idea of the self-organising economy with the necessity for continual crisis’ (Cooper 2008: 43–44). Harvey regards the upward redistribution of wealth as a systemic feature of neoliberalisation, not an unfortunate by-product of the march towards a better world for everybody. Elsewhere he writes: ‘An ethical, non-exploitative and socially just capitalism that redounds to the benefit of all is impossible. It contradicts the

very nature of what capital is about' (Harvey 2010b: 239). Neoliberalism can be seen as a model that European countries (or rather their elites) try to replicate, by purging the existing political and economic systems from socialism. Therefore it is often better to talk about neoliberalisation than neoliberalism, especially in relation to countries such as Sweden or Denmark, where there is still much left of the old system.

Harvey's diagnosis of the world in which we have lived since the 1980s, as he notices, chimes with the description of capitalism provided by Marx and Engels in this passage from *The Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. (Marx 2008: 36–37)

If we accept Harvey's interpretation, which is echoed in the work of other authors, such as Naomi Klein (2000, 2007) and even, to some extent, Joseph Stiglitz (2002), then we have to conclude that neoliberal policies damage the vast majority of the inhabitants of our planet and the Earth itself. Why then have they been so widely adopted? An important factor was the behaviour of financial elites, who used all available means to protect and enhance their power, curbed by Keynesian rules (Harvey 2005; 2006a; see also Chapter 3). The shift was also affected by the dissatisfaction of the traditional supporters of the left with the situation that occurred in the 1970s. A large section of them saw in the turn to neoliberalism a solution to high inflation, crippling strikes and insufficient opportunities for the workers.

These factors are discussed by French sociologists, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in their influential book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, published for the first time in France in 1999. They do so by comparing two periods in French and

European history, 1968–75 and 1985–95. The year 1968, in their view, led to a profound crisis in capitalism, which in Europe jeopardised its very survival. Yet it was precisely by regaining some of the oppositional themes articulated during the May events that capitalism was able to disarm its critics and gain new dynamism. Boltanski and Chiapello identify two types of critique of capitalism, which they describe as ‘social critique’ and ‘artistic critique’, reflecting the fact that not only workers, but also students, artists and intellectuals took part in the May protests. The workers spoke the language of capitalist exploitation, of confiscating the fruits of their labour; the students of alienation, of decreasing chances for autonomous and creative work. The first group demanded more economic equality and security; the second more autonomy, flexibility and scope for creativity. Capitalist organisations successfully disarmed both groups. They addressed artistic critique by changing their structures and modes of operating, becoming open to creativity and flexibility, becoming post-Fordist. At the same time, the social critique was thwarted by capitalist corporations and states, which withdrew from responsibility for the workers’ wellbeing, pronouncing that the natural laws of economics and workers’ own skills should ensure their prosperity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 184). Assuming such a position was helped by the fragmentation of the workforce, which diminished its ability to bargain with employers (*ibid.*: 215).

A similar diagnosis of France post-May is offered by French communist intellectual, Régis Debray, who, writing on the tenth anniversary of May ’68, presents May as a means through which French capitalism rejuvenated itself, using workers’ own hands:

The old France paid off its arrears to the new ... The France of stone and rye, of apéritif and the institution, of oui papa, oui patron, oui chérie, was ordered out of the way so that the France of software and super-markets, of news and planning, of know-how and brain-storming could show off its vitality to the full, home at last. This spring cleaning felt like a liberation and, in effect, it was one.
(Debray 1979: 47)

These views are shared by Paolo Virno, except that what Boltanski and Chiapello term ‘artistic critique’, Virno regards as being in fact a ‘social critique’, shared by workers who demanded more scope for individualism and did not want to possess the state but to defend themselves from the state. Accordingly, for Virno the

social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s were profoundly antisocialist (Virno 2004: 111); an idea to which I will return in due course.

The transformation from a Keynesian to a neoliberal version of capitalism was achieved by continuous change, in which not only the traditional right-wing parties participated, but also the left-wing ones. In the United States, the long-standing commitment to the Keynesian fiscal and monetary policies with full employment as the key objective was abandoned under Democratic President Jimmy Carter in 1979 (Harvey 2005: 23). In Europe, the neoliberal turn was introduced during the rule of the Socialist Party under François Mitterrand in France and the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher. Neoliberalisation led to a polarisation of societies into rich and poor, unknown since the time of the greatest economic crisis in the 1930s. Again, Harvey observes:

In volume 1 of Capital, Marx shows that the closer a society conforms to a deregulated, free-market economy, the more asymmetry of power between those who own and those excluded from ownership of the means of production will produce an ‘accumulation of wealth of one pole’ and ‘accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole’. Three decades of neoliberalization have produced precisely such an unequal outcome. A plausible argument can be constructed, as I sought to show in A Brief History of Neoliberalism, that this was what the neoliberalizing agenda of leading factions of the capitalist class was about from the very outset. Elite elements of the capitalist class emerged from the turmoil of the 1970s having restored, consolidated and in some instances reconstituted the power worldwide. (Harvey 2006a: xi)

To account for the negative effects of neoliberalism, as listed in this quotation, which are represented in some 1980s films, I will draw on concepts developed by authors such as Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. Foucault’s ‘biopolitics’ and ‘biopower’ concern the impact of political power on all aspects of human life, and ‘governmentality’ refers to the means by which governments and other institutions of power produce citizens who largely self-govern themselves (Foucault 1991a). Although Foucault’s concepts were meant to capture phenomena that began in the eighteenth century¹ or even earlier, they proved particularly well suited to examining the neoliberal era, when Western, and in due course also Eastern states, withdrew from taking responsibility

for the welfare of their citizens, simultaneously perfecting the means through which citizens became the tools of their own oppression, as demonstrated by numerous studies building on Foucault's concept (Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991; Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996). Giorgio Agamben elucidates Foucault's ideas in such terms:

According to Foucault, a society's 'threshold of biological modernity' is situated at the point at which the species and the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society's political strategies ... What follows is a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques. For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize the holocaust. In particular, the development and triumph of capitalism would not have been possible, from this perspective, without the disciplinary control achieved by the new bio-power, which, through a series of appropriate technologies, so to speak created the 'docile bodies' that it needed. (Agamben 1998: 3)

Agamben develops Foucault's work by elaborating the concept of 'homo sacer' – a sacred person who 'can be killed and yet not sacrificed'. This paradoxical position befalls a man without any rights, who has only 'bare life' and can be killed with impunity by a sovereign power (on bare life see also Arendt 1951; Rancière 1981; Benjamin 2004). Agamben regards modernity and especially Nazi Germany as a hotbed of 'bare life'. However, although he does not focus on the connection between the production of 'bare life' and unrestrained capitalism experienced since the late 1970s, his examples of violence, drawn from contemporary eugenics and colonialism clearly point to this link. I argue that the Keynesian system and state socialism attempted to transform the 'bare life' of people deprived of almost everything by the Second World War (which was itself a product of capitalist crisis of the 1920s and 1930s) and its aftermath, into a 'good life', as defined by Aristotle. The production of 'bare life' is a consequence of abandoning this project. Many neoliberal traits, such as an exaltation of personal freedom and a promise to curb the power of large organisations, including trade unions, professional associations, local government, universities and even the state (although in reality neoliberalism relies on the state as an instrument of the protection of its interests), appealed to the electorate as a means of democratising society, bringing more justice and

power to the people. Instead, however, as the critics argue, neoliberalism reduced it to an atomised and disempowered mass society.

Nowhere in Europe was the victory of neoliberal capitalism more rapid and more contested than in Britain. It was personified by Margaret Thatcher, who became the leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 and Prime Minister in 1979 (two years before Ronald Reagan became President of the USA). Thatcher's ascent to power excellently reflects the political and cultural contradictions of the late 1960s and 1970s. She can be regarded as a beneficiary of feminism, which criticised male-dominated society for excluding women from power. The fact that the traditional party of capital chose a woman as its leader confirms Chiapello, Boltanski and Debray's diagnosis that during the crisis years of the 1970s the forces of capitalism (often described as the New Right) reinvented themselves. Yet, Thatcher, with her traditional views on women and family, embodied many features against which the feminist movement fought in the 1960s and 1970s, and continue to fight to the present day.²

While the New Right triumphed in Britain, the Labour Party suffered a profound crisis of identity, programme, membership and ultimately, electorate. Its traditional supporters were dissatisfied with the functioning of the Keynesian paradigm, such as high inflation, excessive bureaucracy, as well as perpetuating male exclusiveness. Writing about Britain, but in a way that could be applied to other Western democracies, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques observed:

In the face of industrial struggles which fail to generalise themselves for society as whole, which are as much for low-paid, the unskilled, the black or women workers as they are for the advanced sectors of skilled, white, male labour, it is possible to represent the trade unions as a sectional interest. In circumstances where the commitment to 'welfare' fails to redistribute wealth or to increase real changes in the balance of power, it is possible to make the return to possessive individualism and competitiveness look like 'common sense'. In conditions where benefits are administered by a gigantic state bureaucracy and the content and forms of decision-making remain deeply undemocratic, individualism and 'freedom' can be made to appear attractive. It invaded and seized territory from a Labourism which had lost its popular-democratic connections and which appeared increasingly as, simply, a less and less efficient or convincing manager of capitalist crisis. (Hall and Jacques 1983: 14)

In this fragment Hall and Jacques locate the failure of the left in its rejection of universal socialism, of privileging the welfare of only one group. Such an attitude inevitably leads to dissatisfaction for those left behind, on which the right builds its capital, pitting one group against another – an art that Thatcher perfected. This is a motif we can find in Marx's writing, including in his call for workers to unite – unite on the terms of the most unprivileged.

The Labour Party and the mainstream Western organisations of the left elsewhere failed to register and appropriately react to the creeping transition from Fordism to post-Fordism – a shift from large factories to small units of production and a lean and flexible, casualised workforce, hence to the workforce becoming more dispersed and ‘invisible’; from production of things to ‘immaterial’ production of services, information, ideas and symbols, which requires intellectual and ‘affective’ labour rather than the exertion of muscle (on post-Fordism see Virno 2004; Liu 2004; Hardt and Negri 2006; Lazzarato 2006; Kirn 2010; Gregg 2011). One consequence of this shift has been a melting of boundaries between work and nonwork. Under post-Fordism, working time, places of work and mental states pertaining to work overlap and invade those previously belonging to nonwork. This leads to only ‘a few moments of human time being able to escape the money nexus’ (Nowotny 1994: 131) and to the collapse of personal and professional identities. The last aspect means that people’s capacities for friendship and intimacy are most regularly exercised in the pursuit of (capitalist) profit, leading to the danger of them being unable to appreciate or even seek the benefits of friendship or love for unprofitable purposes (Gregg 2011: 6).

It should be stressed that the move to post-Fordism did not cause the disappearance of Fordist-type labour. As Hardt and Negri admit, ‘workers involved primarily in immaterial production are a small minority of the global whole. What it means, rather, is that the qualities and characteristics of immaterial production are tending to transform the other forms of labour and indeed society as a whole’ (Hardt and Negri 2006: 65). The shift from Fordism to post-Fordism was abetted by neoliberalisation. This is because neoliberalism, as a more extreme form of capitalism than its Keynesian version, demands more surplus value, hence more work from its labour force, and its flexibility, fragmentation and invisibility are a perfect means to achieve this goal. At the same time, the alleged freedom offered to workers (or at least some workers) by liberating them from the shackles of the factory routine could be used to justify neoliberalism as a better, more socialist system (on this argument and its repudiation see Virno 2004; Rancière 2010).

Political and cultural life in the 1980s was also characterised by a harsh critique of Eastern European communism, both in the West and by dissident authors from the socialist world. The critics frequently applied the categories of totalitarianism to the realities of ‘crude communism’ without encountering the same resistance as in the 1950s or 1960s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 178). Such widespread criticism was facilitated by accelerating economic, technological and political crisis in Eastern European countries. While in the 1970s their growth rates (3.4 per cent) fell more slowly and were higher than in the OECD West (3.2 per cent), by the mid-1980s, they were lagging far behind the West (Mazower 1998: 369). This was in part because the 1980s saw many unwise decisions in the area of economy, such as, for example, in Romania, the ‘creation of monsters like oil refineries which operated at 10 per cent of capacity, or the aluminium complex which used up as much energy as the whole of Bucharest’ (*ibid.*: 370) and, in the GDR, embarking on an ambitious program in microelectronics, for which the country did not have sufficient financial and human resources (Stokes 2000: 193; on the structural problems of socialist economy in the late communist period see Burawoy and Lukács 1992).

In Poland, the weak state and emboldened, angered society led to Solidarity triumphs in the early 1980s, which was ‘the great rehearsal for 1989, when the communist regimes finally crumbled’ (Bunce 1999a: 32). Between this rehearsal and the ‘final show’, martial law was introduced – the last and unsuccessful attempt to halt an anticommunist opposition in Poland, which only strengthened the association of communism with totalitarianism. In the Soviet Union Brezhnev, who died in 1982, and his aged successors were eventually replaced by the youthful in age and spirit Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Unlike Brezhnev, the new leader of the Soviet Union proved unwilling to support the local authorities in their attempts to quash anticommunist opposition and openly admitted that socialism in the form practised from the Urals to Laba had not worked well and needed thorough reform in order to survive. His assessment proved right as socialism indeed did not survive beyond the end of the decade.

One consequence of neoliberalisation was a much higher risk of unemployment, due to governments abandoning the goal of full employment, regarding that as something outside their (new) limited remit and too heavy a price to keep inflation in check. Unemployment was also exacerbated by rapid technological changes and deregulation of the market, resulting in moving enterprises and whole branches of industry to cheaper places, where workers had less protection (Sennett 2006). This

process, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, gathered speed in the 1990s, not least because Eastern Europe opened itself up to Western capital.

Since the 1980s, in practically every profession, from cleaners to computer specialists, there have been many more workers available than the market can absorb. Consequently, from the 1970s family income in the First World has stagnated and decreased, although this trend has somewhat halted since 1995 (Harvey 2005: 25). The 1980s are also marked by the return of the sweatshop not only outside but also inside Europe (Harvey 2006a: xii–xiii), confirming the Marxist thesis that ‘in proportion, as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases’ (Marx and Engels 2008: 43). As it becomes easier to hire and fire, work also becomes more precarious, as much for those at the bottom as for those at the top of the pay ladder. An effect of neoliberalisation is also an increase in national and international migration, as more and more people leave their homes in search of work, following the frantic movement of capital. I shall also mention an increase in the length and cost of education, which is largely paid by students’ engaging in low-paid labour, which increases competition for available work and in a vicious circle, exacerbates the other negative effects already mentioned.

This paradoxical situation, in which there is less (paid) work available and workers have to work harder to earn enough to sustain them materially, led to a new, neoliberal work ethic, which included many elements of the work ethic preached to factory workers in the nineteenth century. Those who are employed are expected to be grateful to have work, as work is regarded as a special privilege. Those who are not employed are regarded as not deserving help from the state or social respect (Bauman 2005). To account for the unwillingness and, increasingly, the inability of governments to provide employment, the onus of finding work is put on the individual. As Harvey writes, ‘neoliberal theory conveniently holds that unemployment is always voluntary. Labour, the argument goes, has a “reserve price” below which it prefers not to work. Unemployment arises because the reserve price is too high’ (Harvey 2005: 53). Since that reserve price is partly set by welfare payments, neoliberal governments embark on reducing welfare payments (*ibid.*: 52–53). Neoliberal rulers shift the blame onto the unemployed for their condition, as in the scheme captured by Foucault’s ideas of governmentality and technologies of self (Cruikshank 1996). In Britain the opinion that the unemployed are responsible for their own plight was made famous by the minister in Thatcher’s government, Norman Tebbit’s call for the unemployed to ‘get on their bikes’ (Seabrook 1985: 88–108). Those who are entrepreneurial and ‘create’ work, even

if coupled with exploitation on a par with those described by Marx and destruction of places of work elsewhere, are presented as ‘charitable’ individuals and rewarded with state honours.

This shift in attitude to work is captured by language. In 1980s Britain ‘redundancy’ replaced ‘unemployment’, with the connotation of being ‘superfluous, supernumerary, un-needed’ (Bauman 2005: 69). Later in Britain ‘jobseeker’s allowance’ replaced ‘unemployment benefit’, where ‘jobseeker’ signifies a desire to find employment, as ‘allowance’ conveys something that is paid on much harsher conditions than a benefit. Changes in language also reflected the new, pseudo-egalitarian ethos of neoliberalism, according to which those earning millions were essentially in the same positions as those earning pennies, all belonging to the supposedly classless society. As Jeremy Seabrook noted in 1988, those who found themselves in privileged employment (managers, entrepreneurs, advertisers, researchers):

frequently borrow the language of more primitive forms of labour to express themselves, admiring each other’s ‘work’, attending endless ‘workshops’, discussing their ‘skills’, ‘crafts’, referring to themselves as ‘workaholics’; indeed, they often inhabit former places of far cruder toil: disused and converted warehouses and factories, with bright green rails, iron ladders, red-painted windows and decorative remnants of the building’s original function left as ornamentation. (Seabrook 1988: 4)

Processes not dissimilar to those in the West also took place, albeit unofficially, in the socialist part of Europe. During this period many communist *apparatchiks* became *entrepreneurchiks*, effectively privatising state assets (Bunce 1999a: 45; on the situation in Poland see Wasilewski 1995). Consequently, the 1980s was a period of greater economic polarisation of societies under socialism, which made the poor even more hostile towards crude communism and the rich less reluctant to make the transition to capitalism, indeed they sought it.

European cinema of the 1980s reflects the various trends pertaining to postmodernism. It mimics the economic polarisation and disappearing middle by moving in two opposing directions. On the one hand we observe an upsurge of spectacular cinema, exemplified by British ‘heritage films’ (Higson 1993) and, to some extent, French ‘cinéma du look’ (Harris 2004). This is a cinema of long takes and lavish mise-en-scène, which looks nostalgically into the past, displaying

national heritage as objects to be admired and consumed (for a price). On the other hand, the majority of remaining films, especially those dealing with work under a neoliberal regime and made from a more or less left-wing perspective, look cheaper and rougher than those made in the previous decades, as if they had suffered from underinvestment. Their frequent subject is decay, both material, caused by de-industrialisation and capitalists taking over the space used by the poor for new developments for the rich, branded regeneration or gentrification (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2003), and moral, resulting from social pathologies such as poverty and alcoholism. In the Soviet Union, Russian commentators disdainfully labelled this trend *chernukha* (dark stuff) (Faraday 2000: 172–79), a phenomenon that also has its equivalents in other Eastern European countries.

This and the fifth chapter in this book are particularly informed by the themes of Marx's third volume of *Capital* and *Grundrisse*, concerned with the process of capitalist production as a whole, such as depression of the wages of labourers as a means of sustaining profit, relative overpopulation and capitalist crises, as well as the diminishing demand for labour, caused by mechanisation.

Thatcher's winners and losers

Unlike in the previous chapters, where I jumped from country to country on one page to demonstrate the connections between realities and films made in different parts of Europe, this chapter will be in a large part devoted to the films made in one country: Britain, although not exclusively by British directors. This is because in the 1980s Britain underwent a greater political and economic change than any other country in Europe. It became a laboratory of neoliberalism, which in due course has been adopted practically everywhere across the world, including in postcommunist Europe. As Andrew Graham notes, what happened in the U.K. under Thatcher is therefore unusually interesting and important to any judgement about contemporary capitalism (Graham 1997: 117). Two reasons why Britain was in a neoliberal vanguard included a weaker working class/left-wing movement than in France, Italy or Germany, and particularly the deep crisis that Britain suffered in the 1970s. This crisis culminated in the 'Winter of Discontent' of 1978–79, marred by widespread strikes, including by those working in essential services, such as waste collectors and grave diggers. This situation laid bare the weaknesses

of the Keynesian model, which the left was not able to address. Inevitably, it paved the way to Thatcher's victory in the subsequent parliamentary elections.

Thatcher was in office between 1979 and 1990, making her the longest-serving British prime minister in history. Even if we take into account the peculiarities of the British voting system, which makes it difficult to create a coalition government, Thatcher's appeal was phenomenal and this was recognised by her fiercest critics, such as Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, who in 1983 noted that the 1979 election marked the penetration of Thatcherite appeal deep into the very heartlands of traditional Labour support (Hall and Jacques 1983: 10). This support was mobilised by a mixture of criticism and promise. Thatcher pronounced the Britain of the 1970s as sick – morally, socially and economically, describing the Winter of Discontent as a 'reversion towards barbarism' (Jenkins 1989: 66). In her narrative, the main culprit was Labour governments, whom she criticised for perpetuating the welfare state, leading to high inflation, low productivity, frequent strikes, as well as moral failures, such as collapse of authority and a high level of divorce, which created lazy and irresponsible youngsters (*ibid.*: 66–77). Thatcherism was grafted onto resentment of the 'little non-political person in the street' against the big, corporate battalions – big government and big unions – which characterised the statism of the social democratic era' (Hall and Jacques 1983: 10). Thatcher promised a 'free market, strong state, iron times', namely an authoritarian populism through 'marrying the gospel of free market liberalism with organic patriotic Toryism' (*ibid.*: 10). 'One after another the old landmarks – full employment, welfare state support, equality of opportunity, the "caring" society, neo-Keynesian economic management, corporatist income policies – have been reversed. In their place a new public philosophy has been constructed, rooted in the open affirmation of "free market" values – the market as a measure of everything – and reactionary "Victorian" values – patriarchy, racism and imperialist nostalgia' (*ibid.*: 11). Thatcherism perfectly confirms Polanyi and Harvey's views that a liberal and, by extension, neoliberal project could only be sustained by appealing to conservative values and, when necessary, by resorting to authoritarianism (Harvey 2005: 39–86).

Yet Thatcher's governments not only took away privileges from ordinary people but also gave them, or at least some of them, something in return. One such privilege was the chance to own one's home thanks to the extensive selling off of public housing to tenants. Thatcher's housing policies satisfied the working class dream of owning a house and introduced a new, often speculative dynamism

into the housing market that was much appreciated by the middle classes, who saw their asset value rise (Harvey 2005: 61), hence enrichment without extra work. Through the release of council tenants from ‘municipal serfdom’ the Conservatives projected the powerful image of a property-owning democracy (Monk and Kleinman 1989: 121). Thatcher also significantly reduced income tax and corporate tax, facilitating setting up businesses. Ordinary people were encouraged to invest their savings in shares, a process that became accelerated by the transformation of mutual societies into banks and the privatisation of utilities. In this way they linked their success with the success of the capitalist class. This helped to perpetuate the idea that class in Britain ceased to matter: Britain became a classless society, while in reality the gap between the rich and poor grew apace and the rights of the poor and medium-earners were eroded. Thatcher’s reforms concerning capital and labour relations have been characterised by the virtual absence of legal minimum standards, the replacement of collective employment rights with individual ones, and the decentralisation of bargaining at the plant and individual level. ‘Unemployment was now seen as the consequence of irresponsible collective bargaining or of misguided government interference in the market. As a result of the reforms, the system of determining wages was as uncoordinated as before, while changes in industrial relations clearly favoured the interests of employers’ (Koch 2006: 110).

The blow of Thatcher’s politics and rhetoric was so hard that it took British filmmakers some years to be able to represent it from a bird’s eye perspective. The few films that attempted to construct a synthetic image of Thatcherism, such as *Britannia Hospital* (1982) by Lindsay Anderson, *The Last of England* (1988) by Derek Jarman and *The Cook, The Thief and Her Lover* (1989) by Peter Greenaway, failed, in my view, due to being either unable to pinpoint Thatcher’s political project or too esoteric for the general public. Many films offering a larger picture of the changes to the labour-capital divide, such as *Brassed Off* (1996) by Mark Herman were made some time after Thatcher’s demise. By contrast, films of the 1980s typically focus on the microscale, investigating the effects of Thatcherism on a specific individual or family. In this way they reflected Thatcher’s famous words that society does not exist, only men, women and their families, which can be seen as a summary of her political program, which included dismantling the vestiges of society. The ‘mini-narratives’, often made for television, focused on redundant industrial workers, the nouveaux riches and young people. Such characters populate the 1980s films of Mike Leigh and Stephen Frears, which for many authors best illustrate

Thatcherite cinema (Hill 1999). I will discuss here Leigh's *Meantime* (1984) and *High Hopes* (1988) and Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), as they deal specifically with work and its shortage in Thatcherite Britain.

Leigh's two films adhere to what I label a 'compensatory narrative' due to presenting characters whose material circumstances leave much to be desired, but who nevertheless triumph over those who are better-off, thanks to possessing personal qualities that the others are missing. In *Meantime* we get insight into the lives of two sisters and their families, childless Barbara Lane and mother of two, Mavis Pollock, who live in different parts of London. Barbara went to university and used to work in a bank, and is now living with her husband John in a neat, middle class, West London suburban semi. Mavis, an uneducated housewife, shares a council flat on an unappealing housing estate in the East End, with an unemployed husband and jobless adult sons, Colin and Mark. The film starts at the end of a visit by the Pollocks to the Lanes. The Pollocks, who do not have their own means of transport, are taken home by John Lane in his car. The tenement blocks on their housing estate look shabby and dilapidated, with litter blown about everywhere and colourless, anaemic grass on the public square. Not far from the Pollocks's house bulldozers are destroying some blocks, described by a council worker as 'development work'. The image acts as a reference to the effects of Thatcherite housing policies, which led to the neglect of many working class dwellings and displacing the poor from places that the rich found attractive (Wright 1991: 31–36; Monk and Kleinman 1989). This practice can be viewed as a sign of what Harvey describes as accumulation through dispossession. Yet while Leigh recognises the precariousness of the Pollocks's position, he suggests that in reality the Lanes are hardly any better, as their estate is also anonymous, grey and marginal, and the same melancholic atmosphere envelops their respective houses.

Most of the remaining part of the film is filled with images of the Pollocks's life on the dole with occasional cuts to the Lanes's house. We see the Pollocks queuing for unemployment benefit, the menfolk occasionally visiting their local pub and Mavis playing bingo, and most of the time they all watch television. Lack of money and an abundance of time, exacerbated by 'natural disasters', such as the breakdown of their new washing machine, lead to frustration and aggression. Barbara is sympathetic to the hardship of her sister's family and takes their side in arguments with her husband, Yet equally she is exasperated by their passivity and disregard for their material surroundings, in a way reminiscent of Tory politicians, including Thatcher herself, who tended to regard the British working class, reduced

to an underclass by her policies, as victims of their own laziness and lack of enterprise. Barbara ridicules Mavis's addiction to bingo, reproaches the Pollocks for 'living in squalor' and forbids her sister from touching her immaculate kitchen. Her greatest sympathy is for myopic and slow-witted Colin. Barbara's desire to help Colin manifests itself in an offer to pay him for renovating her bedroom. However, the proposal arouses no enthusiasm among the Pollocks. Frank regards the wages Barbara offers as miserly and Mavis points out the danger of Colin losing his unemployment benefit if anybody finds out about the job. Mark is the most critical, regarding Barbara's proposal as insulting not only to Colin, but to the whole family. 'Charity, as Mark knows, is hard enough to take from the servants of the Crown, let alone from one's own family', explains John Pym (Pym 1983/84: 62). Pym's words point to the fact that work in the 1980s started to be perceived as a gift from those who 'create jobs' to the unemployed, rather than the product of the exploitation of workers by capitalists. At the same time, they suggest that taking up work given in 'charity' was then still widely resisted by the working class.

Despite misgivings, Colin accepts Barbara's offer and visits her in her suburban home, only to be dissuaded by his brother, who also finds his way to the Lanes's house. Mark treats his aunt with disdain, mocking her posh accent and jokingly comparing her to Princess Anne. He suggests that by moving upward on the social ladder, Barbara has betrayed her family and her true identity, recollecting the criticism of the upwardly mobile from the 1960s films (see Chapter 2). He also reproaches Barbara for her childlessness, thus suggesting that her affluence does not make up for the loss resulting from not having children. It seems as if Barbara herself accepts this analysis, feeling lonely in her home, her marriage and on her estate. The only connection outside the family that the Lanes appear to have is with John's boss and his wife. Barbara does not like them and it is suggested that their relationship is based on John's professional interest rather than a genuine friendship, as if to confirm the rule that under neoliberalism all relations are in the last instance financial relations.

The Pollocks are also, as I indicated, locked in their world. They represent a post-Fordist post-working class, or the new poor: an abstract group of people sharing a common fate, but no longer communicating with each other. The crucial factor in the old Pollocks's isolation is their unemployment, and the lack of money and stigma attached to it. The young Pollocks, who have never worked, but spend their lives on the housing estate, have more of a social life than their parents. Never having had a respectable, working life, they are less ashamed to share their

misery with people in a similar position. Their principal friend, a skinhead named Coxy, perfectly suits Jeremy Seabrook's description of the new poor living in rich countries who live 'a life of recklessness and spontaneity ... a here-today-gone-tomorrow fatalism; a saga of feuds and passions ... lawlessness, excitement ... and boredom' (Seabrook 1985: 91–92; see also Bauman 2005).

Ultimately the Pollocks come across as more fortunate than the Lanes because their family proves more cohesive, 'genuine', spiritually richer than its middle class counterpart thanks to having children and having to rely on each other to overcome their misfortune. Paradoxically, the fiasco of renovating Barbara's house brings the Pollocks closer together. After the incident, Colin, known to everyone as 'Muppet' or 'Kermit', resolves to stand up for himself, thus gaining some respect from his parents and his brother and making the whole family happier.

High Hopes conforms to the pattern of showing the rich as spiritually impoverished and the poor as spiritually richer, only increasing the moral distance between the economic beneficiaries of Thatcherism and those who lost materially due to her policies. It was made in 1988, five years after *Meantime*, when it became clear that Thatcherite policies led to an economic polarisation of British society unknown since the end of the Second World War. The film makes us identify with a couple in their thirties, Cyril and Shirley. Cyril is of working class background; his widowed mother, Mrs Bender, is the last council tenant on the street, which became 'gentrified' as a result of the sell-off of all the other houses to private owners. The very fact that there are no more working class people in Mrs Bender's neighbourhood is a powerful symbol of society's transformation during the Thatcher years. We can imagine that some of the people who lived on Mrs Bender's street were promoted to the middle class thanks to owning their house, while others relocated to poorer areas and joined the lumpenproletariat – a phenomenon that would gain in speed in subsequent decades. Cyril works as a despatch rider, delivering parcels on his motorcycle to London businesses, while Shirley works for the council as a gardener. Leigh suggests that it is on account of Cyril's socialist principles, rather than due to lack of education, resourcefulness or the government's neoliberal policy, that their flat is modest, they own no car and have 'lowly occupations'. One critic described Cyril as 'a very marginal, bohemian member of the working class and a very English sort of socialist. His socialism derives more from his moral revulsion to capitalist greed and upper middle class living styles than from an adherence to a set of ideological positions' (Quart 1989: 57). Moral revulsion with capitalist greed and upper middle class lifestyle is a

distinct ideological position, but what this quotation conveys is a lack of will to engage in politics on the part of people like Cyril.

If it were not for their worries about the millions of people dying of hunger all over the world (the root of Cyril's initial unwillingness to have children) and their disappointment at the state of British society, Cyril and Shirley could be described as a model happy couple. Importantly, they both like their jobs. It amuses Cyril to visit the tall, claustrophobic offices of banks and business corporations, where people live in constant stress and even have no time to look at each other. For Shirley, who loves flowers and plants, her work is an extension of her hobby. Even after living together for ten years, they still show each other affection. They also care for Cyril's ageing mother and offer shelter to a stranger, Wayne, an unemployed young man from the provinces, who came to London looking for his sister and got lost.

Leigh contrasts Cyril and Shirley with Cyril's sister, Valerie Burke, and her husband, Martin. They are well-off thanks to Martin's business as a burger bar owner and second-hand car salesman – a byword for unscrupulousness and the profession of one of the most unpleasant characters in British New Wave cinema



Figure 4.1 Cyril, Shirley and Karl Marx in *High Hopes*

– Peter in Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961). Martin's idea of work is 'to have people working for you and you only collect the dosh', which can be viewed as a vulgar articulation of the values of neoliberalism, which celebrates the role of the renter (Harvey 2005: 187). Martin clearly stands for the nouveaux riches, a group that Mrs Thatcher particularly supported, seeing in it dynamism able to lift the country from economic decline. Valerie is a housewife who spends her days shopping, doing aerobics and looking after her Afghan hound. The Burkes have two cars, one of them a Mercedes, and they live in a spacious, detached house in an affluent suburb of London. Their house is full of shiny ornaments and the house number is lit in neon. The Burkes are obsessed with sex. Valerie wants her husband to emulate the style of Michael Douglas in the bedroom, then known best for his roles in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Wall Street* (1987). Martin, on the other hand, prefers to indulge in extra-marital affairs. Leigh's critique of the Burkes thus combines the new leftist criticism of Thatcherite neoliberalism as leading to greed and insensitivity with the old leftist critique of the upwardly mobile working class as untrue to itself (see Chapter 2).

The ultimate crisis in the relationship between the siblings and their respective families takes place at a birthday party organised for Valerie and Cyril's mother. The meeting is a scene of multiple discords, finishing with Cyril, Shirley and Mrs Bender's departure. The couple take the old woman to their apartment and she stays with them during the night. This is also the night when they make love without using contraception. After the fiasco of the family gathering at the Burkes's, family attitudes and feelings eventually triumph – there is a chance that Mrs Bender will move in with Cyril and Shirley and also become a grandmother. Thus, again, it is only the working class family that has these noble, redeeming features (Mazierska 2004; Watson 2004: 85–100). The other families are the locus of vulgarity, greed and insensitivity, of which the lack of children is an emblem. The unappealing features of the non-working class families are even conveyed by their names: Burke and Boothe-Braine, connoting respectively stupidity and pretentiousness.

While exalting a working class family as the antithesis of and a buffer against the cultural penetration of Mrs Thatcher's 'pet class', the nouveaux riches, Leigh looks with a sceptical eye at other types of bonds among the working class by identifying himself with 'bohemian and marginal' Cyril. Cyril's distance from the 'ordinary' working class is exemplified in his and Shirley's relationship with Wayne, the simple man previously mentioned. They care for him, but cannot hide that Wayne is a cultural stranger to them. For example, they giggle in bed when Wayne

is lying in his sleeping bag in the next room, listening to loud music on his ghetto blaster. Equally, they have little sympathy for their politically radical neighbour, Suzi. Her talk about the coming revolution in England and the need for international cooperation between those on the left is dismissed by Cyril as pure nonsense. He also accuses Suzi, who plans to have a stall on the market, of hypocrisy – having socialist views, while wanting to live as a small-time capitalist. Suzi is also scorned by Shirley, who dreams about having a child, for her pro-choice views on abortion. Differences in manner of speaking (Suzi's language is driven by Marxist clichés, while Cyril and Shirley's is natural and individualised) and body language (she is hyperactive and neurotic, while Cyril and Shirley have an upper-class poise), demonstrate that there is little in common between Suzi on the one hand, and Cyril and Shirley on the other. However, rather than proposing how to overcome the gap between the various sections of British society disadvantaged by Thatcherism, Leigh discourages such a project by suggesting that his favourite couple, Cyril and Shirley, are happy with what they have. Leigh also panders to the idea that class as an economic category has lost its relevance; what matters are people's manners and tastes.

In this light it is not surprising that, whilst dismissing their neighbour's radicalism, Cyril and Shirley do not present any alternative to Suzi's utopia. Cyril admits that he himself does nothing to change his country or the world; he is not even a member of a trade union, most likely due to his individualistic taste, rather than because his job is on the margins of unionism. As in *Meantime*, Leigh shows disapproval and distaste towards Thatcherite order but as an alternative he proposes withdrawing into a private sphere. Such an attitude, which can be compared to 'internal exile' as practised by the citizens of Eastern Europe, was more convenient for Thatcher's government than active resistance, as shown in the strikes against mine closures, or riots in inner cities against introducing the poll tax. It allowed for neoliberal capitalism to wreck the world, while those disagreeing with it quietly enjoyed their moral and intellectual superiority. Such an attitude can also be linked to a postmodern mindset, with its idea of 'utopia limited', conveying the view that small spaces of resistance or difference can be carved out or inhabited within 'the system' and even that the self and everyday life can be sites of political dissent and transformation (DeKoven 2004: 249–87). Of course, such views can be held only if macropolitics do not encroach on everyday life too much, while life is still bearable. With the growing triumphs of neoliberalism, it will become more difficult to behave like Cyril.

This is already the case with *My Beautiful Laundrette*. This film represents people who cannot afford to stay aloof – detachment in their case would be tantamount to sinking. This might be explained by its setting in a Pakistani milieu (thanks to the influence of the film’s scriptwriter, Hanif Kureishi), as emigrants, their descendants and ethnic minorities tend to have a lower human capital than the rest of the population. Such a milieu also allows an examination of the interstice between race and class under Thatcher (Hill 1999: 208–18). Frears’s film is a new version of an old narrative about a young working class man who is offered a chance to leave his marginal position by embarking on a new career, but at the price of complying with the patriarchal and capitalist authority. Such a situation was presented in *This Sporting Life* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, in which sport was a way out of a difficult predicament (see Chapter 2). The situation in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is different, reflecting the circumstances of the 1980s and the peculiarity of the situation of Pakistani immigrants in Britain. Omar, the main character, does not come from the traditional working class, but from the milieu of impoverished Pakistani intellectuals. His widowed father was a famous dissident journalist who, disappointed with Britain, now lives an idle life in a small and dilapidated apartment near the railway line.³ Omar acts as a carer to his father until he gets a chance to work for his entrepreneurial uncle Nassar. Yet unlike Colin in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, who rejected the chance for social advancement as a tribute to his working class father, for Omar the demise of his father acts as a disincentive to follow his idealistic path. He eagerly throws himself into his uncle’s businesses and those of his extended family, including his cousin Salim, who controls a large drug-dealing operation. Apart from being a way out of poverty, the work Nassar offers Omar appeals to the young man because it requires versatility and creativity and offers autonomy, hence it conforms to the type of work the disaffected youth demanded in the 1970s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 175). For Nassar, the ascent of Thatcher, with her reduction of income tax and corporate tax, was a gift from heaven. As Susan Torrey Barber observes:

The Pakistanis now form part of the privileged class in the eighties, many holding positions of power in South London. As the new landlords, they reversed the traditional imperial/colonial hierarchy by displacing the native British. Frears dramatically demonstrates this dynamic at the film’s beginning when Salim and his henchmen throw out ‘squatters’ Johnny (Daniel Day Lewis) and

Genghis (Richard Graham) from a run-down building Salim purchased, depriving them of their only home. (Barber 1993: 224–25)

The reversal of colonial positions is poignantly conveyed by Omar saying about Johnny, ‘He is of lower class. He will not come to [Omar’s uncle’s] house without permission’. The clearance of what was effectively slums to be ‘regenerated’ for occupation by more affluent dwellers (who also might eventually be dispossessed), without offering the squatters any alternative housing, confirms the neoliberal logic of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, to which Leigh also alluded. It is worth quoting Harvey, who coined this term, saying: ‘It seems sometimes as if there is a systematic plan to expel low-income and unwanted populations from the face of the earth’ (Harvey 2010b: 245). Barber notes that Salim employs Jamaicans to do his dirty work, which furthers the resentment that the young unemployed white males harbour towards both sets of immigrants, and reinforces decades of racial tension between the communities (Barber 1993: 25).

Despite their ethnic and class differences, Omar and Johnny form professional and personal alliances and might expand on them, creating a chain of laundrettes. Their relationship, although based mostly on sexual attraction, is also a fruit of Thatcherite policy, which allowed for greater flexibility and creativity than traditional Fordist work order, and forced people to transcend ethnic rivalries to create successful businesses (*ibid.*: 226). Such a mechanism, as I noted in the previous chapter, can be also observed in Fassbinder’s films, where German greengrocers and cleaners overcame (or hid) their distaste for gastarbeiter in order not to lose their profit. The Pakistanis in Frears’s film, like Fassbinder’s gastarbeiter, are aware that their acceptance into the ‘host’ society depends on their economic usefulness. As Nassar observes, without money he is nobody.

Although Frears’s film points to the advantages of Thatcherism for the young and people of colour, its overall tone is critical. One way is by playing on the association of cleaning (clothes) with ethnic cleansing and money laundering. We see that much violence is involved in setting up Omar’s business: he and Johnny roughly throw some children out of the laundrette and there are numerous beatings between Omar and ‘his people’ and Johnny’s old friends. Moreover, Salim’s affluent style is financed by his drug operations. He can be regarded as an early incarnation of a new breed of capitalists, whom Slavoj Žižek labels ‘liberal communists’ (Žižek 2009b: 13) and whom I describe as ‘postmodern’ businessmen. Salim does not invest in one area, but many; some of them legal, others less so.

Some of his business operations are confined to Britain, others, such as drug dealing, are international. He is extremely ruthless in his business operations, but he also engages in philanthropy, boasting about possessing ‘one of the best collections of modern Indian painting’. His appearance suggests that he wants to look like a Westerner (unlike Nassar, who is comfortable with his Eastern ways), but he has a Pakistani wife and his social life revolves around his extended family, in a way associated with Asians.

Omar’s joining the pole of capital, despite coming from a left-wing background and an ethnic minority, and his father’s disenchantment with Britain and his own life, is an indictment of the British mainstream left’s inability to attract underprivileged sections of the population, as noted by Stuart Hall. For people like Nassar and Omar, Thatcher, despite her bigotry, is a better choice than the Labour Party. Frears does not agree with this opinion, but poses it as a challenge to the left, which in the 1980s was not met and, in my view, nor was it met in the subsequent periods.

If the situation of the indigenous working class, as represented in 1980s British cinema was difficult, the situation of foreign workers was even worse, as shown in Aki Kaurismäki’s *I Hired a Contract Killer*, the film made in 1990, but representing well the themes of 1980s British cinema. *I Hired a Contract Killer* tells the story of a middle-aged French man named Henri who works as a clerk in a British state utility company. According to the economic principle of the 1980s, the company is to be privatised and for some workers this means redundancy and for others (the ‘lucky ones’) worsening conditions of employment. Henri falls into the first category. He is told that the reason he is picked out is his foreignness: strangers are first to go. This is only natural to the logic of capitalism, according to which the periphery is sacrificed for the centre. This rule was shown at work already in *O Lucky Man!*, discussed in the previous chapter.

Henri’s demise is foretold in a sequence showing him still at work. His office is huge, employing many clerks, sitting at their desks. This is a Fordist factory, although one that produces information rather than material goods. When sitting at his desk, Henri merges with the crowd of workers, but when he goes for lunch, he sits alone at the table, while his fellow workers are chatting and laughing, not unlike a Yugoslav cleaning woman in Fassbinder’s *Fear Eats the Soul*. Henri himself adopts a neoliberal work ethic: work is for him the only reason to live, without paid employment he is human waste even in his own eyes. Deprived of work, he does not fight back, but internalises the blame and decides to commit suicide.

Henri is played by Jean-Pierre Léaud and this is probably his most important role in the 1980s, when his stardom diminished due to Truffaut's death and Godard's turning to a new crop of actors. His role is imbued with symbolism – Léaud brings memories of his earlier parts. In films from the previous decades Léaud's characters botched every job they were offered, but they always got a second and third chance or did not work at all and somehow survived. In *I Hired a Contract Killer* Henri works hard, but it does not matter – he is dismissed. Comparing these films illuminates the shift in the position of working and non-working people from the 1960s to the 1980s. This shift is excellently captured by a fragment from Charles Péguy's *L'Argent* (1912), in which the author compares the past with the present, 'modern' times, when 'those who do not gamble lose all the time even more assuredly than those who do' (quoted in Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: xvii).

Solidarity and beyond

While the films made in Western Europe in the 1980s lamented the fragmentation and weakening of the working class, Poland at the beginning of this decade saw the production of a film that pointed to a different trajectory: from fragmentation and weakness to unity and strength. This was Andrzej Wajda's *Człowiek z żelaza* (*Man of Iron*, 1981), a sequel to *Man of Marble*. This consolidation takes place around the traditional centre of working class struggles: the factory, in this case a shipyard on the Baltic coast of Poland. The film documents the triumph of Solidarity in 1980, which, albeit interrupted by the martial law of 1981, ultimately led to the crumbling of crude communism in the whole socialist bloc at the end of the 1980s. In hindsight, Wajda's film also foretells the ascent of a new, neoliberal and patriarchal order in Poland, which occurred after 1989. Ironically, Polish workers triumphed when their British counterparts suffered the greatest defeat in their postwar history. This irony was strengthened by the fact that at the time the bulk of Polish strikers heralded Margaret Thatcher as a hero and Britain under her rule was regarded as a model that Poland should follow as soon as communism fell.⁴

As Valerie Bunce observes, it was no accident that Poland laid the groundwork for the subsequent collapse of socialism. This was thanks to the relative success of earlier protests in Poland, such as in 1956 (unlike in Hungary), the lack of experience of Soviet intervention (unlike in neighbouring Czechoslovakia) and

the strength and autonomy of the Catholic Church (unlike in any other country of the Soviet bloc), which allowed for the flourishing of antigovernment opposition in Poland (Bunce 1999a: 32). Wajda does not refer to the first two factors, as his goal is not to show the relative freedom but the deprivations Poles suffered, but he does draw attention to the moral power of the Catholic Church.

The main theme of *Man of Iron* is creating Solidarity, a movement in which Polish society is unified against the authorities and which, through strikes and negotiations with the government, succeeds in breaking the communist monopoly of power first in the workplace and then in the public sphere at large. This movement is encapsulated by the figure of Maciek Tomczyk, the son of Mateusz Birkut, the ‘man of marble’ of Wajda’s previous film and Agnieszka’s husband. The film takes the form of a series of retrospectives, which demonstrate Maciek’s maturation from a young student, concerned with what was regarded as ‘student issues’, such as freedom of speech, to a worker who cares about the whole country. As Kristi Long observes, Maciek exemplifies the union of the working class and the intelligentsia in his person as well as in his personal relations:

He is a university student who becomes a worker and marries an intelligentsia filmmaker (and KOR-style activist). The turning points in Tomczyk’s life are moments of crisis in which there is a refusal of solidarity ... Early in the film, we see Tomczyk demonstrating as a student in 1968 and his worker father refusing to support the student demonstration. Two years later, Tomczyk and his fellow students stand by as shipyard workers’ strikes on the Baltic coast turn violent. Tomczyk’s father is among the victims. His father’s death provokes a crisis in Tomczyk’s life, and he abandons the life of the intelligentsia to work in the Gdańsk shipyard. Fragmented, Tomczyk is first an intellectual, and then a worker. As a worker, though, he becomes unified with the liberal intellectual opposition (i.e. KOR, ROPCIO) in his marriage to an opposition filmmaker. She guides him into the life of the Free Trades Union activist in the 1970s. Transformed into an icon of the unified Poland, Tomczyk becomes the centre of the Solidarity movement. (Long 1996: 164–65)

Almost everybody in the film identifies with Maciek’s plight and his final triumph, marked by the signing of an agreement between the government and Solidarity, which allows for the official existence of the workers’ union. His success is rendered as a victory for all working people, confirming the reading of Solidarity as

'the twentieth century's response to the Paris Commune' (Burawoy and Lukács 1992: 115). Yet foregrounding Maciek's story is at the expense of sidelining other characters, most importantly women. As many authors have observed, the role of Agnieszka in *Man of Iron* is hugely reduced in comparison with *Man of Marble* (for example Roszkowska 1992; Falkowska 1996; Mazierska 2002; Ostrowska 2006b). At the time of the strikes in Gdańsk, which transform Maciek into an icon, she is imprisoned and cannot participate in the antigovernment conspiracy or become a media celebrity. Wajda foregrounds the role of 'real' male politicians such as Wałęsa, but cuts out from his story well-known female Solidarity activists, such as Alina Pienkowska and limits the role of other Solidarity women to the preservation of the memory of earlier struggles (Long 1996: 165–66; on Pienkowska's role in Solidarity see Starski 1982: 238).⁵ The masculine character of *Man of Iron* is sealed by the fact that the part analogous to that of Agnieszka in *Man of Marble*, of the investigator of the country's past, is given to a man: a radio journalist called Winkel. In the summer of 1980, Winkel is sent to Gdańsk to collect material that would discredit Maciek.

Winkel is usually neglected in the critical discussions of *Man of Iron*, but deserves closer examination due to being the main character in the film and encapsulating a large section of Polish society who joined Solidarity in the 1980s and, no doubt, affected the course of Polish and European politics post-1989. Not unlike Maciek, he was a political dissident, involved in antigovernment protests, which led to his imprisonment. He was freed, but at the expense of working for the authorities. Nevertheless, he did not entirely lose his youthful ideals, as signified by his working on state radio, as opposed to television, where the pressure to conform to the official line was greater. Winkel also shuns promotion and at his work, somewhat schizophrenically, attempts to serve two 'gods': communism and anticommunism. We see it in an early scene of the film, set in a radio recording studio, when he first records a poem by a famous émigré anticommunist poet, Czesław Miłosz, recited by an actress played by Maja Komorowska (who was herself involved in anticommunist opposition), and then records a group of 'ordinary women' who read from a script about their opposition to the strikes. Winkel does not put much heart into either of his tasks, which testifies to the fact that such an inconsistent political position lowered the overall working standard in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Winkel also has a penchant for alcohol, most likely as a means to numb his discomfort from being ostensibly on the side of the authorities, while deep down feeling like a dissident.

The authorities allowed such closeted, half-hearted dissidence, regarding it as a price worth paying for keeping the citizens quiet. Yet, in a time of political crisis, as shown in this film, the danger that people like Winkel would swing towards the opposition increased. Various people attempt to ‘discipline’ Winkel, reminding him to whom he should be loyal. Their threats ultimately work and he is punished within the narrative for being two-faced, but this punishment comes when he is truly converted to the side of Solidarity. In reality, during the 1980s, as Slavoj Žižek observes, many party members, who were nominally on the side of the authorities, switched sides and joined Solidarity, becoming part of a heterogeneous ‘multitude’ (to use Hardt and Negri’s term), which led to the destruction of the ‘evil empire’ of the Soviet bloc (Žižek 1997).⁶ The creation of the Polish multitude happened through comparing grievances towards the state and realising that they were systemic. This phenomenon was perfectly captured by the leader of Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa:

The whole working society has a common denominator of losses and limitations. For the worker it means that he earns little and is cheated; for the writer, that he is not allowed to write or told to write as he doesn’t wish to; for the teacher, that he must say things that are untrue, that he does not believe in. Thus all are in some way oppressed by the system. (quoted in Singer 1985: 764)

Wajda not only shows the victory of Solidarity but foretells and endorses what will happen once the victory is achieved, namely sidelining and new forms of oppression of women, of which a potent symbol became the anti-abortion law, introduced in 1993 and the dominant position of the Catholic Church in Polish politics and social life. This can be deduced from Wajda’s marginalisation of women, as previously mentioned. Unlike Mateusz Birkut who, although remaining a Catholic, assimilated Marxist values, his son comprehensively rejects Marxism, replacing it with his devotion to the Catholic Church. Ironically, the term used to name the anticommunist trade union, ‘Solidarity’, strongly evokes Marxist discourse – Marx himself talked about solidarity as the principle of the International and the main weapon of the working class against capital (Marx 1978b: 524). Yet for Maciek and the whole of Solidarity, the great hero of the working people is the Polish Pope, John Paul II, who was an ardent critic of Marxism. He was also a critic of the excesses of capitalism, and urged capitalists to be charitable; the call was answered by many neoliberal capitalists, yet without giving up their overall

approach of expropriating surplus value. Nevertheless, he accepted people's right to private property, free trade and the capitalist organisation of the economy. Another sign of things to come is a positive representation of the West in *Man of Iron*, which functions in the film as the chief ally of Polish struggles to overcome communism and as a model to follow. Finally, Wajda represents the workers as a crowd that needs to be guided by the leaders. This idea is conveyed in the documentary footage included in the main narrative, in which the workers admit that they need wise leaders; without them they will not achieve anything. Unlike *Man of Marble*, which conveyed a profound distrust in the documentary form, *Man of Iron* transmits a seemingly naïve confidence in this medium. Such confidence can be attributed to the situation in the 1980s, when political and cultural discourses polarised and films and television programmes, as much as political speeches, were scrutinised for their truthfulness, measured according to how much they supported or rejected the communist rulers.

Kobieta samotna (*A Woman Alone*, 1981) by Agnieszka Holland is set at around the same time as *Man of Iron*, but offers us a markedly different insight into the material circumstances and consciousness of a Polish worker. Irena, the eponymous 'woman alone', works as a postwoman. Postal workers did not belong to the privileged section of the working class, because they did not produce, they only served and, being dispersed, hardly constituted a threat to the political authorities. For this reason they were paid less than shipyard workers or miners.⁷ Although a postal worker is by no means a new profession, by choosing a postwoman as her heroine, Holland pointed to the future of the working class in Poland as being dispersed, mobile and thus having little chance to communicate with each other. Irena is, indeed, depicted in this manner. As Elżbieta Ostrowska observes, 'She is always seen alone, walking along long corridors, being observed by her colleagues, who are talking to one another gathered in two-or-three-person groups' (Ostrowska 2006a: 201).

Irena brings up an eight-year-old son; the child's father is serving a jail sentence and does not provide for his offspring. Unlike the higher echelons of the working class, who by the 1970s usually acquired cooperative apartments in newly built blocks, she lives in a room without running water or heating, in a house on the outskirts of town. Even in this modest place she does not feel at home, as another poor family hopes that she will move out, so they can take over her room. Clearly, in this world there is not enough room for poor people – survival is at the expense of one's neighbour. Irena is barely able to survive materially when she learns that

she has to move to a less attractive department. To add insult to injury, her hopes to inherit an apartment and savings from her aunt, whom she cared for all her adult life, are shattered. Moreover, neither the party nor Solidarity are willing to solve her housing problem; her loneliness and economic marginality render her marginal on their list of priorities. These organisations privilege the monopoly sector, as in the previous decades.

Abandoned by everybody, Irena asks herself ‘Who am I?’ and replies ‘I am nobody’. In a sense, she is right, as her circumstances have stripped her of all resources. She has practically nothing and nobody, she has become a ‘bare life’, as described by Agamben. Yet love offers Irena a chance to escape from her predicament. She becomes romantically involved with Jacek, a man who lives less than modestly on incapacity benefit, being disabled after an industrial accident. Jacek is able to survive emotionally thanks to believing that one day he will emigrate to the West. For him the West is a utopian place, where, as he puts it, ‘people are respected’. Of course, this utopia stands for what socialism failed to bring. Jacek infects Irena with his dream and to fulfil it, she steals money from work and embarks with Jacek on a car journey that is cut short when they suffer an accident. In a hotel where they stop, Jacek strangles her and proceeds on his own to the American embassy. There he threatens an employee that he will detonate a bomb if he is not granted asylum in the United States. As one might guess, the people in the embassy have no desire to grant him his demands. After all, the richest capitalist country in the world is hardly a paradise for disabled ex-workers. Thus Jacek’s last source of hope is about to disappear. The ending, with a car abandoned in the middle of a journey, a woman killed by the only person who seemed to love her, and her lover about to be arrested, is symbolic of what Hobsbawm describes as the chaos, confusion and misery that happened after the affluence of the three decades of Keynesianism. In her unsympathetic representation not only of the communist regime, but also of Solidarity and the West, as noted by a number of authors (for example Marciak 2005: 7; Ostrowska 2006a: 201) Agnieszka Holland was a unique figure in Poland. However, in this respect she was similar to many Western directors who since the 1970s have been scathing about the institutions and leaders of the left. She also predicted the growing mutual violence and exploitation among the working poor, as shown in films such as *Rosetta* and *The Dreamlife of Angels*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Authors writing about Holland’s film noticed an accumulation of unattractive objects and tight framing. Such style on the one hand contrasts *A Woman Alone*

to *Man of Iron* and, on the other, links it with many films of this and subsequent decades, for example those made by the Dardennes (see Chapter 5). It appears that Holland, in a postmodern fashion, privileges the ‘small narrative’ of a disenfranchised individual and cuts out a wider picture of political, social and cultural reality. Such a style reflects and, in some measure, facilitates the political fragmentation of the left, by denying it a grand narrative. In Katarzyna Marciniak’s view, Holland’s style, which ‘binds the audience gaze at the diegetic tonality of oppression and desperation’, renders the film very honest (Marciniak 2005: 7). Such an opinion reflects on the widespread tendency to link realism with the representation of misery and suggests a belief in an ‘ahistorical realism’ which, as indicated in the previous chapters, I do not share.

The idea that Polish workers are helpless when dispersed and lacking strong leaders, suggested by Wajda, is tested in two films by Jerzy Skolimowski, *Moonlighting* (1982) and *Success Is the Best Revenge* (1984), set during martial law, when the Polish march towards overthrowing communism was temporarily halted. However, Skolimowski’s films are not set in Poland, but in London, where the director lived in the first half of the 1980s. They can thus be seen as a bridge between two countries undertaking profound political change: Poland and Britain. *Moonlighting*, on which I will focus, shows a group of Polish workers, led by Nowak, who at the end of November 1981 travel to London to renovate the house of his Polish boss – the Boss. The Boss, played by Skolimowski himself, remains mysterious throughout the film, but he fits well the model of an *enterpreneuruchik*, a high representative of the political elite, the *nomenklatura*, who used his position to amass wealth and transferred some of his assets to the West, here represented by his house in London.

In order to fulfil their assignment, the workers have to live in appalling conditions in the very house that they are meant to renovate, work extremely hard to save for their families, as well as suffer isolation, due to not knowing the language or the people among whom they live. Being unable to manage the financial resources allocated to him by the boss, Nowak is forced to drastically limit their needs and their contacts with the outside world. He changes the time on the workmen’s watches so they think they slept more than they actually did, steals food from a local supermarket, as well as clothes and cosmetics from department stores, so that they do not need to spend any money on gifts for their families. During their stay martial law is announced, about which, however, only Nowak learns. He hides this knowledge from his co-workers, convinced that they

will work better if kept in ignorance. He tells them about the situation in Poland only when the renovation of the house is completed.

By showing the lives of Poles in London to be more miserable than if they had stayed in Poland at a time when there is ‘war’ at home, Skolimowski, in contrast to Wajda, who in *Man of Iron* exalted capitalism, suggests that this system offers Polish workers no hope. Under capitalism, or at least the version introduced by Thatcher, they will be treated more like slaves than they were under communism. We can see that the methods Nowak uses in relationships with his subordinates replicate the methods Polish authorities applied in their dealings with Polish society during the same period, and the methods neoliberal rulers employ towards the working class. They both attempt to lock the workers in their ‘home’, deprive them of any agency, restrict their access to information and cheat them. They also share justifications for their action, trying to convince themselves that by applying all these drastic measures they act in the best interest of the workers. By and large,



Figure 4.2 Polish workers in London in *Moonlighting*

no matter whether one works for an Eastern or Western boss, the result is the same: exploitation and misery.

The period of martial law, when Skolimowski's film is set, in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, constitutes the last stage of the socialist mode of work, marked by privileging heavy industry and large-scale Fordist production. After the end of martial law, a shift could be observed in Poland, from Fordism to post-Fordism, from heavy industry to a service and knowledge economy, both in reality and in the official discourses on work. The workers employed in heavy industry were among the first victims of the rationalisation of the Polish economy, losing jobs in their hundreds of thousands, as well as numerous privileges granted to them by the previous system. The heroic figure of the miner or ship-builder was pushed from the pedestal to make space for the new heroes: managers and entrepreneurs. In not much time, manual labour in Poland had become 'the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye' (Žižek 2001: 133). Such undermining of the dignity of manual work is exemplified in *Moonlighting*. Nowak's 'brigade', working according to the rules: 'no strikes, limited freedom of movement for the work force, low wages' (*ibid.*: 134) became a model for the organisation of work in Poland in the years to come, and of the position of Poles working abroad. In this sense *Moonlighting* foretells Poland's postcommunist future.

Skolimowski's film is also prophetic because it draws attention to the physical distance between the places where, on the one hand, manual labour is performed and on the other, where it is planned, controlled and taken advantage of, which characterises neoliberal capitalism. He shows that the physical distance between the worker and the capitalist works to the advantage of the latter, because it frees him from direct involvement in class struggle and any moral or aesthetic displeasure such involvement might bring him. The 'dirty work' is performed by Nowak on behalf of his absent boss. Neoliberal society, not unlike a concentrationary universe, is thus rendered as a society in which the poor and the oppressed police each other for the sake of their masters.

Although London in *Moonlighting* is full of posters proclaiming the solidarity of English people with Poles suffering as a result of the military coup, the real British people in contact with real Poles come across as bigoted and hostile. In the end the London neighbours of the 'Boss' call the Polish workers 'communists' and demand that they leave England immediately. The director strips his characters of any agency or sense of tragedy; they come across as a nameless and passive herd, whose desires are reduced to animal needs, to preserving 'bare life'.

This unsentimental portrayal of foreigners' attitudes towards Poles chimes with that proposed by Agnieszka Holland in *A Woman Alone*, in which the American embassy shows no desire to help Jacek, but it poignantly contrasts with that offered by other Polish filmmakers tackling Polish migration in the 1980s, for example *Ostatni prom* (*The Last Ferry*, 1989) by Waldemar Krzystek and *300 mil do nieba* (*300 Miles to Heaven*, 1989) by Maciej Dejczer. In these films the host countries show Polish emigrants compassion and offer them practical help. This difference in approach can be attributed to the 'inside' knowledge that Skolimowski enjoyed when making his film, resulting from his living in London in the first years of Thatcher's rule. In this time he befriended some of the new Polish emigrants (such as Eugeniusz Haczkiewicz, who played one of the workers in *Moonlighting*) and lost his house in London, which forced him to emigrate again, this time to the United States.

Opera, punk, the old working class and the new capitalist

I mentioned at the beginning that the cinema of the 1980s, especially that produced in the West, comes across as a cinema divided between high-class spectacles and films that look rough, poor, even amateurish. The two most celebrated full-length feature debuts, respectively in France and Spain, *Diva* (1981) by Jean-Luc Beineix and *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom*, 1980) by Pedro Almodóvar, illustrate this division. Each film was associated with a profound political change in the country where it was made: Beineix's with the first socialist government in France for thirty-five years; Almodóvar's with the end of the Franco regime.

Diva, as the title suggests, concerns high art. Cynthia Carter is a famous opera singer and is regarded as very capricious, because she refuses to make records, believing that her performance only has sense when she sings for a live audience. Her position, challenged during the course of the narrative by her manager, can be linked to Marx's dichotomy of alienated and nonalienated work. Unrecorded performance approaches the ideal of nonalienated art, as it gives an artist control over the process of production, unlike work in a studio, where it is affected by and subordinated to the demands of the producer and the machinery of recording. It is nonalienated also because it does not lead to producing a material product, hence cannot become an object of exchange, although post-Fordism challenges

this idea (Vishmidt 2010). Cynthia's choice to perform for the sake of performance also evokes Paolo Virno's concept of a 'virtuoso' (also in part inspired by Marx), whose activity finds its own fulfilment (that is, its own purpose) in itself (Virno 2004: 52–55). Finally, it brings to mind Walter Benjamin's concept of original art, furnished with 'aura', which disappeared in the age of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 2007).

Cynthia's insistence on performing without recording, which brings with it the risk of flooding the market with pirated versions of her work and losing a large chunk of her income, is a utopian gesture, expressing a desire to return to premodern times when art was not integrated into a regime of generating profit. But Beineix shows that Cynthia can behave in such a premodern way because she is a diva – her performances fill the opera theatres and pay for luxurious hotels. That said, she also behaves as a Fordist worker, for whom the time of work is clearly separated from that of nonwork, as shown in a scene when she asks to be left alone, because she wants to rehearse in peace, and her wearing different clothes at work and after work.

Cynthia's art is an object of utter devotion, indeed obsession by a postman, Jules, who follows her performances throughout Europe and illegally records her singing for his own benefit, which eventually puts him in trouble with the mafia. Fredric Jameson claims that Jules represents the old working class, with its Popular Front connotations (Jameson 1992: 77), but in my view, he stands for the new one: de-unionised and fragmented. Jules is better educated and has a more refined taste than 'a woman alone' in Holland's film but he is also ultimately helpless. When attacked by the mafia, Jules seeks help not from the representatives of the traditional left or the state, but from a capitalist named Gorodish. Gorodish encapsulates all the values identified by Boltanski and Chiapello as pertaining to 'reformed', 'cool' capitalism. Fredric Jameson describes him as a 'zen millionaire' (*ibid.*: 76). He meditates and listens to Third World music and is happy to devote his time to domestic tasks, such as buttering a baguette, which he treats as art. His name sounds Eastern or middle European (Powrie 1997: 109), connoting global, as opposed to French (national) capitalism. Jameson suggests that Gorodish got his fortune from the media. This might be the case, but we do not learn it during the course of the film. The point is that his financial operations are kept off-screen, as is the case with contemporary capitalists who enrich themselves through financial operations rather than industry. They might not even know how their capital is used. This fact also keeps safely off-screen any oppression that capitalist activities

involve, such as building sweatshops in Asia or destroying natural environments in South America. Gorodish is also a benefactor of the oppressed – he rescues Jules from the mafia henchman and he helps the Third World, personified by his Vietnamese girlfriend, Alba. Alba appears to be still a child, which might suggest colonial exploitation by Gorodish, but such suspicion is diffused by the way their relationship is depicted. We do not see any sex between Gorodish and Alba and they are represented as a happy couple, matching each other with style and sophistication. Gorodish allows Alba to be independent; she is even allowed to bring men to the huge loft she shares with him. Finally, unlike Jules and the police, who come across as clumsy in their operations, Gorodish gets rid of his adversaries effortlessly, traverses modern and postmodern spaces of the underground shopping arcades and the disused hangar with ease. He thus fully deserves to be in charge of the underprivileged of the world. Without people like him, we are to believe, they would perish, fighting with each other and incompetent and corrupt state institutions. The production of *Diva* coincided with the socialist ascent to power in France, as Jameson noted, and reflects on the direction the European left took in France and elsewhere in the 1980s by trusting, almost blindly, the new capitalists. The style of the film, with its fetishistic cult of the surface, typical for the ‘cinéma du look’, which *Diva* inaugurated (Harris 2004: 219–20), supports the idea that new capitalists are ‘cool’ and the rest of society should learn from them, and suggests that it is reconciled with the film’s glossy, ‘commodity’ status.

Pepi, Luci, Bom, along with another of Almodóvar’s early films, *Laberinto de pasiones* (*Labyrinth of Passion*, 1980) shows characters seizing an opportunity for artistic and cultural inventions. Although Almodóvar does not refer directly to political change as a condition of these inventions, those familiar with Spain’s history know that this is the case – Franco’s death allowed a new type of culture to flourish. This is, according to the director, a popular culture. Its value lies in uniting Spanish society, fractured by the divisive policies of Franco, and allowing those who were excluded from participating in art, members of the working class and women, to take active roles as art’s creators.

Almodóvar focuses on *movida*, a cultural movement that came into existence in the late 1970s and gained momentum in the first half of the 1980s (Allinson 2001: 14). ‘Movida’ means movement, although it can also be translated as ‘stage’. The word is also an ironic travesty of Franco’s party, *Movimento* (Toribio 2000: 275). *Movida* offered an alternative to the existing trends in music, fine arts and cinema, and proposed new models of behaviour for young people. It promoted the do-it-

yourself spirit of British punk, cultural recycling and all sorts of hybridity, including artistic and cultural mixing. Almodóvar himself did not passively observe movida's flourishing but became one of its leading figures (Allinson 2000; Toribio 2000), which is reflected by him playing small parts in his films, including the director of a competition for the largest penis in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. Social barriers in these films either do not matter or are overcome in the course of the narrative. The rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, all gather in private places and public spaces to celebrate their freedoms, including sexual ones. In this world money matters, but it is rather easily obtained, for example by using a rich gay voyeur, who pays handsomely to observe a movida-style party from a window of his house, complete with the aforementioned competition. The party can be seen as a perfect form of nonalienated yet profitable work, in which not only does everybody involved get pleasure, but also surplus value is produced (money paid by the rich voyeur), which is appropriated and consumed by the 'workers' on the spot.

In *Pepi, Luci, Bom* Almodóvar also shows that this road of social advancement through art in post-Franco Madrid is open to those previously unprivileged. This is, however, because of the wide rejection of the values celebrated in *Diva*: originality, exclusiveness, professionalism, refinement, beauty, wholeness, putting in their place their reverse: the cult of reproduction, amateurishness, vulgarity, ugliness, fragmentation. Pepi, who lived off her father but suddenly became forced to support herself, finds work in the media without any difficulty. She sets up her own publicity company, designing adverts for multi-purpose underwear and sweating, menstruating dolls. She also begins to write a script about lesbian lovers, her friends, Luci and Bom. Although Pepi's career is overshadowed by romantic trials and tribulations, we are led to believe that she will succeed, as will Bom, who is a singer in punk band Bomitomi, and various other people belonging to their circle. All of them shamelessly reproduce trashy novels, imitate beauty pageants or model themselves on British punk. And yet the products of their work come across as fresh and captivating, as does the film that documents it, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, which kicked off Almodóvar's career as one of Europe's best directors.

The idea that everybody can be an artist is reinforced in *Labyrinth of Passion*, as shown in a scene when Riza, a young man without any formal training or experience in music goes to a gig and replaces on the spot the lead singer who has broken his leg. Another example is Queti, the abused daughter of the owner of a dry-cleaning store, who has plastic surgery to look like Sexi, a musician daughter of a rich gynaecologist. After her operation, Queti practically becomes Sexi, able

to take her place in a girls' band. What Paul Julian Smith describes as the 'multiplicity of identities and their tendency to uncontrollable reproduction' (Smith 2000: 24), exemplified also by Sexi's father, who specialises in cloning, allows art to be accessible to people from all walks of life and, indeed, inescapable. This endlessly reproduced art is, again, not worthless. It reflects accurately on its times, gives pleasure, breaks social barriers and enriches lives. We also get a sense that there is no place for 'high art' in post-Franco Madrid. On the rare occasions when it is alluded to, as in an episode in *Pepi, Luci, Bom*, when a dramatic actress appears during the concert, it produces discord.

However, with the passage of time Almodóvar's attitude to media and popular art has changed. In *Kika* (1993), media become associated not with emancipation, but with exploitation of the most vulnerable. Almodóvar's own films have become more lavish and polished, more like those of Beineix. This shift can be interpreted as a sign that popular art did not fulfil its emancipatory potential in Spain or that Almodóvar simply lost interest in it. Before it happened, however, he made one more unpolished film, *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto!! (What Have I Done to Deserve This?)*, 1984), which undermines the optimistic message of his movies discussed in this section.

Desensitised workers at Europe's margins

I already drew attention to the impoverished lives of Polish workers represented in the films of Holland and Skolimowski, approaching the condition of Agamben's 'homo sacer'. The resources and choices of the characters in Almodóvar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* and Aki Kaurismäki's *Ariel* (1988) have also diminished so severely that their lives become reduced to 'bare life'. This reduction is a function of the combination of multiple marginalities: economic, social and geographical.

What Have I Done to Deserve This? and *Ariel* are both comedies, but their humour does not result from adding something 'funny' and 'improbable' to the situations of their protagonists, but rather from the contrast between what was expected from life at the end of the twentieth century and what we see on screen. This contrast produces surprise and laughter, exacerbated by the fact that it appears to be overlooked by the characters, who come across as if desensitised to the misery that befalls them (on desensitisation of workers see Mihailovic 2013). What is shocking is represented as normal, which makes it even more shocking.

What Have I Done is set less than a decade after Franco's death, among the Madrid poor. Due to its plot and visual style, it was compared to the works of Italian neorealism, a movement representing the Italian working class after the Second World War (Smith 2000: 58). No doubt there is a parallel between the predicament of the Italian working class following the fall of Mussolini in Italy and the Spanish working class after Franco.⁸ Both groups were particularly disadvantaged by the totalitarian authorities and improvement in their situation was slower than among other groups. Gloria, the main character, is married with two children and lives with her family in a drab apartment on a working class estate in Madrid, at the city's periphery, near a motorway. She works as a cleaner, does all the housework and occasionally assists her prostitute neighbour. Gloria usually goes to offices and private houses when nobody is there and even when there are other workers or customers, they treat her as if she were invisible or as a vehicle to fulfil their 'extra' needs. The film begins when she cleans the gym and is called by one of the men who subsequently has sex with her in the shower. He does not talk to her, does not even ask her name, as if for him she is less than a prostitute. This situation is repeated at home. Nobody asks what Gloria wants; she is only there to fulfil their needs: feed them, clean the house and provide sexual services for her husband Antonio. Antonio, who works as a taxi driver, does not help Gloria with the housework and nor does he give her any money – to get it, she has to steal it from his purse.

Gloria takes any work available, but she never earns enough to meet the basic needs of her family, of which a poignant sign is an empty fridge. The similarity between drudgery and the lack of appreciation and visibility she suffers at work and at home renders her life an unhappy continuum.⁹ In this way she fits the model of a post-Fordist worker: flexible yet alienated, overworked yet poor. She even decides to sell her son Miguel to a paedophilic dentist, prompted by her realisation that he will have a better life with the wealthy pervert than with his own mother. This act demonstrates that in order to eke out a living, for those with bare life it is not enough to work, however hard. They have to extract surplus from their own lives or those of their families: exploit themselves. Although selling one's child is regarded as one of the gravest crimes a woman can commit, we do not see Gloria pondering on her act. She comes across as desensitised from everything she experiences (which is the main source of the film's dark humour) and to sustain this state, she uses cheap drugs, snuffing detergents and taking prescription pills. Numbness is a coping strategy for her condition of being a 'homo sacer'. However,

while it helps her to survive materially, it further robs her of humanity. Gloria is not alone in accepting this reality of forcing poor people to exploit themselves and each other. Her son, whom she sold to a paedophile, accepts this solution with matter-of-fact sobriety, making sure that his new ‘father’ meets his material requirements.

Why is Gloria so unfortunate? An important factor is Franco’s legacy. This is evoked by Gloria’s admitting to being illiterate. At the time the film was made Spain had the highest level of illiterate women in Europe and the lowest percentage of those working outside the home or having positions of power. This resulted from patriarchy and severe exploitation of the working class under Franco’s regime, facilitated by the position of the Catholic Church, which entrusted women with the responsibility of safeguarding the morality of their families and spending their husbands’ money wisely while giving them practically no rights (Coverdale 1979: 130–33; Montero 1995: 381). Antonio, with his laziness and conviction that he is entitled to everything women are not, comes across as an eponymous ‘Francoist man’, as are all other men with whom Gloria enters any relations. If we are to believe Almodóvar, this despicable position of working class women was not reversed by the time he made his film.

The entire environment in which Gloria moves comes across as a concrete desert, with identical-looking, soulless blocks of flats, no greenery and no cultural facilities. In this neighbourhood the apartment of Gloria’s prostitute friend Cristal looks like an oasis of warmth and beauty, and Cristal herself ‘seems almost respectable’ (Allinson 2001: 53). The only sign that somebody ‘from outside’ cares about this environment is a camera crew shooting a film on Gloria’s estate. This ‘Godardian moment’, as Almodóvar himself put it, is typically represented as a sign of Almodóvar’s postmodern sensibility, of his distrust in the power of cinema showing life as ‘it really is’ (Smith 2000: 51). However, such a moment might also suggest Almodóvar’s allegiance to ‘committed’, political cinema, which attempts to document and intervene in social reality, in the vein advocated by Comolli (see Chapter 1). The very fact that Smith mentions Godard in this context, namely a director who never ceased making ‘political films politically’, points to such an interpretation.

Ariel begins with the destruction of a coalmine in Lapland. Although the reason for such action is not provided, we can deduce that Finland’s coalmining stopped being profitable, economically and politically, and was outsourced, possibly to South America, which is evoked later in the film. The remaining part of the movie

presents the human cost of closing the mine and introducing neoliberal policies in Europe. Two workers, possibly father and son, react differently to the news about their redundancy. The father commits suicide (as Henri would later attempt in *I Hired a Contract Killer*), thus confirming the idea that the unemployed are waste. He leaves the younger man, Taisto, his Cadillac, a typical sign of the eccentricity of Kaurismäki's 'travellers' (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2006: 18–20), but also of a relatively high standard of living of industrial workers in the old monopoly sector.

After collecting his redundancy payment, Taisto travels in his car to Helsinki, seeking a better life there, but this hope is not fulfilled. His new life is full of misfortune and misery. His money is stolen, most likely by somebody driven to the world of crime by unemployment. The only employment Taisto can find is casual work in a shipyard, shown to be very dangerous, as workers perish in industrial accidents day after day, which can be seen as an effective way of dealing with surplus population. Yet even this work dries up and Taisto has to sell his most precious possession – his car. When at risk of becoming homeless, he attempts to retrieve his money from a man who stole it from him, and ends up in jail. If not for a conflict with a prison warden, living behind bars would almost make Taisto happy because prison is a 'Fordist universe'. Here the inmates have to follow specific routines, including working in an old style factory for prescribed hours. In return, they have a place to live, enough to eat and from time to time can even meet their loved ones. Nevertheless, encouraged by the man with whom he shares a cell, Taisto decides to escape, sentencing himself to more anguish and an uncertain future. Taisto's trajectory is that of being gradually stripped of his possessions until he is reduced to his bare body. The ex-miner reacts to misfortune in the same impassive way as Gloria; his desensitisation can be seen as a strategy for coping with adversity. That he is 'bare life' incarnated is also revealed by his negative answers to a series of questions he is asked in prison: 'Address?' 'None.' 'Closest family members?' 'None.' 'Previous convictions?' 'None.' Yet precisely thanks to the lack of any distinctive features, Taisto acts as a kind of common denominator of humanity and his plight evokes the idea of human rights, of universal entitlement to a minimal welfare, which is universally accepted but without providing any framework for implementing it.

The only happy event in Taisto's existence is a romance with a single mother, Irmeli. Irmeli's life is also hard, but while neoliberal politics caused the miner to be unemployed, it caused Irmeli, like Gloria, to be overworked. She juggles several jobs, all of them 'flexible': she is a cleaner, a car park attendant and a machine

operator in a meat factory. The flexible character of these jobs does not allow her to be creative, but only maximises her exploitation by allowing her employers to colonise her time to the extreme. Flexibility requires mobility, but this only adds to her constraint. She has no time to develop any interests, shop or cook; if she wants to fall in love, she has to do it during working hours, because she has no spare time for private passions. Such a gruelling routine is a correlate of neoliberal politics, consisting of lowering wages and encouraging consumption and, hence, debt, as demonstrated by the fact that everything in Irmeli's apartment is purchased on credit. Debt ensures that Irmeli and others like her will never free themselves from the clutches of their invisible masters, and it minimises the danger of political action on their part.

Yet Irmeli is not desensitised; she supports Taisto during his ordeal and helps him to escape from jail. Together, on a ship named 'Ariel', they sail to Mexico. The name 'Ariel' can be interpreted as a reference to an essay of the same title, written by Uruguayan author José Enrique Rodó Piñeyro in 1900, which draws on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In it, Ariel represents Latin America, whose spiritual values are contrasted with the crude materialism of North America (which neoliberal Europe adopted) (Jon 2007). Yet Kaurismäki is far from suggesting that



Figure 4.3 Escaping the fate of 'homo sacer' in *Ariel*

Taisto and his new family would find these values in South America. We are rather to believe that preserving their ‘bare lives’ there would be a success.

Defending ‘our gulag’

I mentioned earlier that in the 1980s censorship in socialist countries was eased, which allowed filmmakers to touch upon previously taboo subjects or represent them in a bolder way. *Kornblumenblau* (1988), directed by Leszek Wosiewicz and *Kholodnoe leto pyatdesyat tretego* (*Cold Summer of 1953*, 1987) by Aleksandr Proshkin are fruits of this new approach. Wosiewicz’s film concerns life in a Nazi concentration camp, and in line with ‘camp tradition’, focuses on a single character, a young Polish man named Tadek, an engineer and a musician, who is sent to the camp as punishment for an anti-Nazi conspiracy. Yet Wosiewicz’s film diverges from the earlier filmic accounts of camp existence made in socialist countries by representing it in a naturalistic way. An example is an ‘initiation rite’ consisting of shaving men’s pubic hair and a nail pricking the protagonist’s bottom after his photograph is taken. We are continuously exposed to naked male bodies, tormented, as well as used for (homo)sexual pleasure. The camera focuses on bodily functions: eating, defecating, vomiting, copulating, in other words, on the bare life of the inmates. Fittingly, the camera is situated near the floor, so as not to miss the lower parts of their bodies. Wosiewicz’s interest in the body – trained, disciplined and tormented – chimes with the ideas of Foucault and Agamben, who argued that the body is the main subject of modern (bio)politics. Wosiewicz underscores the primacy of the body in the camp – the state of a body determines the way the prisoner is treated. Those with weak bodies are deemed worthless and disposed of.

Yet in this cruel and reduced world one can still progress or even make a career. Tadek’s story is a narrative of his climbing the ‘Auschwitz career ladder’. It starts, literally, at the bottom of the human pile and in a horizontal position. Tadek’s first job is to take part in a medical experiment, testing an anti-typhus vaccine. Many inmates die as a result of being injected with typhus germs but Tadek survives and his life improves. This incident provides a pattern: Tadek enters a situation that proves deadly for many other prisoners, but he manages to survive thanks to a mixture of good luck and versatile skills. Each survival leads to an improvement in his work conditions and overall situation. After surviving the typhus experiment

he is moved to heavy manual work but thanks to being able to play the accordion he is chosen by a German kapo to entertain him by playing the titular German song *Kornblumenblau*. Although in due course the kapo leaves the camp to fight on the Eastern front, prior to his departure he makes sure Tadek is taken care of by another overseer and thus Tadek lands the privileged job of peeling potatoes for the Germans. The next stage is getting work as a waiter and a piano player, serving and entertaining SS men. Tadek even gets ‘camp money’ and is able to venture beyond the main camp to use the sexual services of female prisoners dwelling there. At this stage he lives in a bloc for artists that looks more like an army barrack with proper beds covered with bed linen. Each step, however, brings not only advantages, but also unpleasant surprises. The worst moment comes when he is punished for not informing his superiors of the escape of some prisoners working in the kitchen and ends up in a hunger bunker.

Tadek’s progression is depicted against the wide panorama of camp life. Wosiewicz oscillates between close-ups and long takes to allow us to see the connections between camp (macro)politics and (macro)economy and individual experience. We see different types of productive work, such as on a construction site, in service, in the kitchen or a restaurant, in transport, professional work, in an accountancy office and finally semi-artistic and artistic work, as a photographer and painter, performing in a small orchestra and playing solo on various instruments. Much of the work is a form of torture, as it is done under duress, in haste, without paying attention to the quality of the final product. However, on occasion prisoners enjoy their work. This happens when they are promoted, for example from work on the construction site to the kitchen. On this occasion work is described as ‘pure heaven’. They also enjoy their work when they manage to cheat their superiors by stealing food from the restaurant or spitting into the soup served to the Nazis. Most importantly, however, the film shows pleasure yielded to prisoners by holding positions of power: giving orders to fellow prisoners and managing their work. This almost absolute power renders kapos sadistic and vulgar – as sadistic and vulgar as the Nazis were portrayed in the earlier ‘camp films’. One prisoner with a Star of David on his striped suit ecstatically rides a cart, pulled by a group of fellow prisoners, who are driven by him with cries and a whip.

The camp in *Kornblumenblau* looks practically like a self-governing world, with the inmates ensuring that it works to their invisible masters’ satisfaction. Although we see walls with barbed wire at the beginning of the film, most of the time it looks like an open city, with normal streets, whose inhabitants clear snow in winter and

decide for themselves how to organise their lives. Such a representation, coupled with the epigraph from Montaigne pronouncing that one always plays roles in one's life, encourages us to see in this film not only a description of a specific, camp experience, but a metaphor of living under any circumstances, because under every circumstance one has to perform and conform (Wróbel 2000). However, the fact that conformity is achieved mostly by what Foucault describes as technologies of the self and the enforcement by the camp's lower and middle-management, shows a special affinity between 'Wosiewicz's camp' and the neoliberal, post-Fordist world. Another point of correspondence between these two systems is the lack of any political activity on the part of the prisoners or, indeed, the camp's leadership. Nobody talks here about communism, Nazism or patriotism. Nobody mentions Hitler, Stalin or any other leader. Politics is all but forgotten amongst the camp's routines. This interpretation is confirmed in the last episode of the film, showing that the Germans, who forced Tadek to play their favourite 'drunken' song on the accordion, 'Kornblumenblau', have been replaced by Russians, who have brought with them to Poland their most beloved song, 'Kalinka', and teach it to Tadek and others like him. The passage from a Nazi to a Stalinist order feels somewhat regressive, as it means being thrown out from an almost mastered universe and having to start again from the beginning, learning to fight for the positions of power in the new order. Taking into account that Wosiewicz's film had its premiere only one year before the fall of communism in Poland, it can be regarded as a premonition of the Soviet rule being replaced by a new, neoliberal regime.

Superficially, *Cold Summer of 1953* fits the trend of films condemning the Stalinist past, as it focuses on the fate of two men who found themselves in the gulag not because of their vices but because of their virtues, such as fighting against the Nazis during the Second World War. Yet, contrary to expectations, Proshkin's gulag is not a bad place. It is not a prison, but a village, primitive, yet beautiful, on the edge of a huge lake (possibly Baikal), made of wooden cottages. The use of long takes underscores the pristine landscape, untouched by modernity. Its inhabitants are not punished with hard work, but practically left to their own devices and they take advantage of living in autarky – doing enough to ensure their physical survival and having time to enjoy lengthy, philosophical conversations. This is a male world, where men are served by women, who cook and do laundry for them. The crux of Proshkin's story concerns not liberating the inhabitants from the inhuman conditions of the gulag, but defending the gulag from intruders:

criminals freed from prison thanks to an amnesty, introduced after Stalin's death. The only man who proves able to stand up to the force of the attackers turns out to be one of the prisoners. His behaviour suggests that, although his life is hard, the future, encapsulated by the attack, is even worse. The sense that he defends something precious is reinforced by Proshkin's framing his story in the conventions of a western. The narrative brings to mind *High Noon* (1952) by Fred Zinnemann, with the brave prisoner looking more like Henry Fonda in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) by John Ford than a Soviet captain (Brashinsky 1992: 324).

Proshkin's film can be read allegorically as an expression of anxiety about the future of the 'land of gulags', the Soviet Union. This anxiety is justified in the light of Gorbachev's reforms and, subsequently, the dismantling of the Soviet Union. As Michael Brooke argues, quoting the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the choice left for Russians, as presented by Proshkin, appears to be either submit to brutal totalitarian rule or allow crime to flourish unfettered. And by positing the latter as the logical consequence of removing the former, *Cold Summer of 1953* prophesied the period following the collapse of the USSR just three years after its release (Brooke 2007), when 'mafia capitalism' replaced socialism. Proshkin suggests that the older system was better, even for those who were its principal victims.

Leisure without pleasure

In the seminal book on British cinema of the 1980s, *British Cinema and Thatcherism*, *Withnail and I* (1986), directed by Bruce Robinson, is mentioned only in an essay by Leonard Quart, who lists it, alongside John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) and *Turtle Diary* (1985) by John Irvin, as films 'untouched by Thatcherism' (Quart 1993: 25). Other authors, primarily on account of the fact that it is set at the end of the 1960s, discuss it in the context of the 1960s counterculture (for example Self 1995; Smith 2005). A 1960s reading is also encouraged by its use of costumes (Smith 2005) and even by its financial backing by Handmade Films, a firm owned by 1960s cultural icon, George Harrison. For me, however, *Withnail and I*, as with all historical films, reflects more the time when it was made: the 1980s in this case, and the film even discreetly professes Thatcherite values.

Withnail and I (or Marwood, as he is described in the script) live in London, in a Camden town flat and do not work. Yet they are not drop-outs who shun any remunerative activity, as the adherents of the 1960s counterculture did, but

unemployed actors waiting for an opportunity to work. For *Withnail and Marwood* work is a privileged way of living, as promoted in the Thatcherite work ethos, yet being educated and not of working class origin, they do not want to take any job available, and especially not those pertaining to the working class. As Paul Dave observes, the film pervades an aura of upper class contempt for the proletariat, expressed, for example, by the grotesque portrayal of working class people visiting London pubs and cafés (Dave 2006: 112–15). Not only is there a clear class distinction between *Withnail* and *Marwood* on the one hand, and the working class on the other, but also between the two protagonists. *Withnail*'s posture is distinctly aristocratic; he looks like Byron, drinks excessively and self-destructively, excludes women from his world and in a moment of crisis quotes Shakespeare.¹⁰ The middle-class *Marwood* drinks less, is more humble and pragmatic in his dealings with the external world and for most of the film patiently endures *Withnail*'s excesses. The relationship between these two men reflects Victorian and Thatcherite affirmation of class positions. *Marwood*'s devotion to irresponsible *Withnail* bears a similarity to the devotion of Charles Ryder to Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited*, and its screen version (1981), directed by Charles Sturridge and Michael Lindsay-Hogg, who also drowned his frustrations (resulting, however, from his homosexuality rather than the lack of a job) in alcohol. It is not an accident, in my view, that both *Brideshead Revisited* and *Withnail and I* were made during the Thatcher era. Although on both occasions the relationship between the men of different classes is depicted as a genuine friendship, it is not based on equality, but on the acceptance of superiority and impunity of a man of a higher class by a man of a lower class.

The pristine countryside of the Lake District, where the friends go, tired by their lack of prospects in London, is represented as a place where Victorian divisions prevail to an even greater extent than in London. Here the upper classes enjoy themselves, while the 'natives' work and attempt to minimise the damage caused by the unwanted visitors, although some of the natives are also well-to-do. There is little communication between the guests and the villagers and *Withnail* puts the natives off by his arrogance. When asked by a café proprietor to leave the premises due to being drunk, the man from London protests that they are not 'drunkards, but millionaires', apparently regarding it as an excuse for offending the country folk. And yet, although *Withnail* and *Marwood* indulge in leisure, their leisure is without pleasure, because even if they nominally live in the 1960s, they belong to the 1980s. Their leisure has no support in any ideology alternative to

capitalism (cooperative socialism, ecology, New World, psychedelia). Instead, they identify with two ideologies and lifestyles embraced by Thatcherism: one pertaining to the old rich, in the case of Withnail, one to the new entrepreneurial ethos, in the case of Marwood. This latter attitude is also embraced by their friend Danny. Although he is a tattooed drug dealer, whom we can take for a hippie, he presents himself not as somebody who opted out of materialistic society, but as a man who aspires to reach its higher rungs, only using short cuts by trading in risky goods. This is seen when Danny informs Withnail and Marwood of his new toy-making business, showing them a doll, the head of which comes off to reveal hidden drugs. This episode bears similarity to the way Salim in *My Beautiful Laundrette* went about his business of smuggling drugs. It is only natural that the film finishes with Marwood getting a job as an actor, embracing Thatcherite values and Withnail drifting off, in the ‘best British aristocratic tradition’ of Waugh’s Sebastian Flyte. This is because for somebody like Marwood there is no alternative to paid employment, while the Withnails could still rely on the helping hand of their parents and uncles.

The hypothesis as to whether ‘we’, who have no inheritance or rich uncles, can survive in the 1980s is tested in Agnès Varda’s *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985). At the same time, the film allows us to see the differences between England and France of the 1980s, with the second being somewhat behind in the race to the neoliberal ideal of total privatisation, financialisation and commodification. The main character is Mona, a young homeless woman, wandering through southern France in winter with a backpack containing a tent and a sleeping bag. Mona eventually freezes to death in a ditch and her body is found by a rural worker. The film takes the form of an investigation into Mona’s identity, most likely conducted by the director herself. She interviews people who encountered the young woman in the last two weeks of her life. Mona talks about herself very reluctantly and the only words she uses to sum up her life are ‘I move’ (Smith 1998: 115). Such words convey the postmodern, flexible and fleeting identity, as theorised, for example, by Bauman (1996). Mona was a secretary who hated her bosses and work. We can guess that she chose life on the road to escape such a life, not unlike how nineteenth-century vagabonds tried to escape the life of factory toil (Pollard 1963; Bauman 2005: 7–8). At the same time she belongs to a large group of people who from the 1970s chose the life of marginalisation as an alternative to succumbing to a life lacking in creativity, flexibility and autonomy (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 174–75). In the 1980s, as represented by Varda, one could still exercise such

a choice. For her female followers, such as Isa and Marie in *The Dreamlife of Angels* (which I will discuss in the following chapter), even life as a secretary is too beautiful to be true.

Mona's wandering through the French countryside is marked by occasional work, which allows her to buy food, find shelter and carry on travelling. Her occupations point to the choices available to migrant workers, such as rural work, sex work, washing cars and stealing. All of them come across as unsatisfactory, as they are only seasonal, poorly paid and involve subjugation to hierarchy, which includes male power over women. Nobody for whom Mona works treats her as an equal or gives her any rights. The leisure she enjoys is also very limited because there is no pleasure without money or a roof over one's head. Camping is especially difficult in winter, as is its alternative – sleeping in other people's homes – as nobody wants to keep her for longer than a couple of nights. The main reason why she is ejected or leaves 'voluntarily' is her rejection of the work ethic, professed by practically everybody whom she meets. They cannot stand the fact that she does not want to create surplus value and save for the future, but chooses to consume what she purchases or receives on the spot. Meaningfully, she is criticised not only by representatives of the capitalist classes (although she hardly meets any), but by those whom we might expect to be sympathetic to Mona's lifestyle, such as truck drivers, ex-hippies, servants and even fellow vagabonds. Their lack of sympathy points to the gap between supposed postmodern ideals and the prevailing values of Western society. As John Durham Peters observes, 'The nomad is explicitly a hero of postmodern thinking', but 'actual nomads arouse disdain and disgust from nation-states and their citizens' (Peters 1999: 36). This position is conveyed by the original title of Varda's film: 'Without roof or rights'. Having no roof automatically deprives the worker of rights; hence migrant workers suffer the greatest exploitation. To alleviate it, they try to exploit each other, as shown by a homeless man (possibly a middle-class drop-out) who dreams about using Mona in prostitution or porn. The most sympathetic person to Mona's plight is a university professor, looking after diseased trees. Only she is able to save her, perhaps suggesting – too optimistically, in my view – that knowledge is the best defence against capitalist exploitation.