

Creative Work is Work: Precarious Artistic and Intellectual Labor in *The World After Us*

Elisa Cuter*

Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf (Germany)

Submitted: February 20, 2026 – Accepted: March 26, 2026 – Published: July 30, 2026

Abstract

This article analyzes *The World After Us* (*Le Monde après nous*, 2021), the debut feature by Franco-Tunisian director Louda Ben Salah-Cazanas, as a rare cinematic portrayal of precarious artistic and intellectual labor that explicitly frames creative work as work. Focusing on the figure of an aspiring writer struggling to survive through a succession of insecure service jobs, the article argues that the film deploys realism as a discursive strategy to claim artists' and intellectuals' legitimate belonging to the working class. Through an analysis of the film's handheld camerawork, frantic pacing, and fragmented narrative structure, the article shows how realism produces a *mise en phase* that mirrors the temporal and affective conditions of precarized cultural workers. The article further situates the film in contrast to the contemporary proliferation of autofictional narratives of social mobility, reading *The World After Us* as a materialist critique of autofiction as a market-oriented genre that capitalizes on marginality. Finally, drawing on feminist social reproduction theory, the article conceptualizes creative labor as a form of reproductive labor, highlighting its embodied dimension and its political potential to challenge neoliberal narratives of individual responsibility and self-blame.

Keywords: Creative labor; Precarity; Cinematic realism; French cinema; Autofiction.

* ✉ elisa.cuter@gmail.com

“All artists are hustlers, my mother used to say. We have to be. This was an essential part of my education as an artist,” recalls American writer Eula Biss (2020: 71). Juggling several different jobs, managing time in order to buy room for creativity, and facing straightforward financial insecurities is something that many people who could (or would) describe themselves as artists or intellectuals have to face. Despite this, it is rather uncommon for narratives centered on artists or intellectuals to devote much space to the ways – often difficult and not necessarily connected to their creative work – in which they earn their living. In this respect, the debut feature film by Franco-Tunisian director Louda Ben Salah-Cazanas, *The World After Us* (*Le Monde après nous*, 2021), is a rarity.

Its protagonist, Labidi (played by Aurélien Gabrielli), is a thirty-something aspiring novelist who had left Lyon – where his Tunisian mother and French father run a modest café – to study literature in Paris. Although he has an agent and a publishing option, he struggles financially, sharing a tiny apartment with a friend and working as a food delivery driver. During a visit home he meets Elisa (Louise Chevillotte), a younger student, and their relationship pushes him to seek better income through various side hacks, which take time away from his (unpaid) writing task. He eventually finds work as a clerk, but money problems continue to strain both his life and his relationship. His parents offer to help, but they too cannot face the exorbitant cost of living in Paris. Following his father’s unexpected death, Labidi reevaluates his writing aspirations, but instead of delivering the agreed-upon novel on the Algerian war, he submits an autofictional essay. The book, called “Le monde après nous,” is released on the day of his wedding, yet his and Elisa’s future remains uncertain, with limited prospects for financial stability.

The core theme of Salah-Cazanas’ film is its protagonist’s economic hardships and the necessity for him to engage in multiple precarious jobs, sometimes bordering on illegality. As this article intends to demonstrate, this insistence serves a specific discursive purpose (Kirsten 2022): to argue that artists and intellectuals can legitimately belong to the working class. To highlight how the film offers a compelling portrait of the contemporary precarization of cultural labor, I will first analyze its distinctive use of a realist representational style, closely tied to a pacing that mirrors precarized cultural workers’ frantic relationship with time. I will then demonstrate that the choice of realism sets it in contrast to the widespread recourse to autofiction in narratives of social mobility and precarity. I will show how the film advances a subtle critique of autofiction, materialistically unmasking it as a market-oriented trend that capitalizes on stories of marginality and insecurity. Finally, through parallels with care work, as framed by feminist social reproduction theory, I will demonstrate how the film aims to deromanticize cultural work, anchoring it to its material and embodied dimension, while at the same time highlighting the dialectic of creative expression as a fundamental aspect of any political project.

1 Anti-capitalist realism

Figuratively split between two identities – that of an aspiring author and that of an unstructured worker engaged in various service-related jobs – Labidi could be considered a bridge, a meeting point between different segments of the precariat (Standing 2016). *The World After Us* dedicates in fact considerable attention to the precarious concrete reality of its protagonist. From the film’s outset, for example, the issue of money is consistently addressed in various ways. Labidi’s smartphone, frequently framed with its broken screen, constantly displays his deepening negative balance, which he obsessively monitors (reaching –843 Euros, while his Deliveroo app urges him to make “five more runs!” for a meager 20 Euros).

His card is rejected at ATMs, and even during his first date with Elisa, he bitterly admits: “I’m not an artist at all... anyway, to sum it up: you have to pay for the salad.” Labidi epitomizes the working poor, facing struggles not only in his work but also in the time he must invest in basic survival. Everything seems interconnected, and something always seems to be lacking, be it money or, especially, time – for writing, for his relationship, or for labor itself.

The style and camerawork of the film reinforce a sense of constriction and limited agency by featuring the typical hand-held tracking of characters of *cinéma vérité* and frequent use of over-the-shoulder shots that is typically associated with Dardenne brothers’ social dramas. The hand-held tracking approach, observes film scholar Francesco Sticchi (2021: 65), by limiting the visual space, conveys a sense of urgency, discomfort, and threat, and, being tied to the body of the character, it can evoke what it means to constantly live in

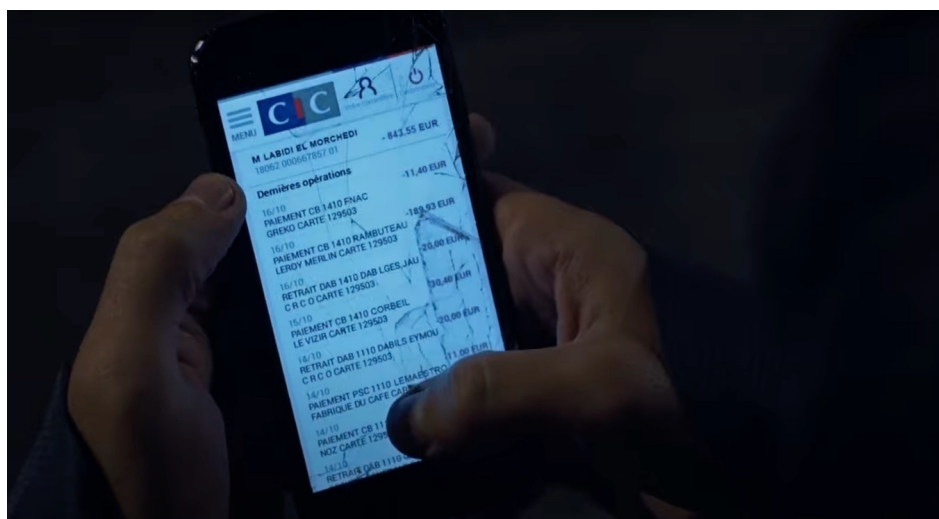


Fig. 1. – *The World After Us*, 2021.

the now, without the possibility of orienting oneself in the world surrounding it. Such pervasive insecurity, British economist Guy Standing (2016: 20) observes, in the case of the precariat stems not only from the circumstances where a single misstep or stroke of misfortune could plunge the subjects from modest stability into abject poverty, but also from the paradoxical state they inhabit of both underemployment and *overemployment*. Similarly, the narrative of the hustles Labidi must resort to conveys both the feeling of downtime (wasted time compared to his ambition) and that of a race against time – a proof that the temporality of the poor is often more rapid, convulsive, and dictated by urgency than commonly believed. Significantly, in fact, Sticchi includes anxiety among the typical chronotopes of cinematic depictions of precarity.

Interestingly, the same sense of urgency and being pressed for time used to illustrate Labidi's struggles is used to depict also what in the typical coming-of-age novel structure would be the pivotal moments. An example of this is the sequence in which Labidi signs a contract with the publishing house. Significantly, this happens quite early in the film and is therefore shown as an opening moment and not as a triumphant achievement. The hurried atmosphere of the meeting, indicative of a tight schedule, is accentuated by the handheld camera, tracking Labidi, his agent, and the publisher as they ascend to her office in what looks like a modest office space. Such setting is in itself significant. It does not convey an idea of a big power disparity but rather insists on the repercussions of a general and systemic precarity. In such an informal and somewhat low-key setting, Labidi's perceived inferiority is all the more telling. To him, the meeting feels akin to a pitch or a talent show exhibition: he must make an impression within the brief timeframe allotted. The exchange with the young publisher consists of a tight edit of details and close-up shots. Labidi is nervous, sweating, his hands trembling; the publisher is brusque and curt, and even mispronounces Labidi's name. She asserts that the novel aligns with their editorial direction and sets a tight deadline, demanding a manuscript within six months. She proposes starting with an option, indicating their willingness to withdraw if expectations are not met. Labidi's agent's look, authoritative beneath the encouraging appearance, emphasizes that this is an offer he cannot refuse, and in fact Labidi signs the contract immediately. The entire sequence lasts less than two minutes, a proof of how the traditional milestones of Labidi's growth and social ascension are shown as just one moment among others: the viewer recognizes them by virtue of clichés used in mainstream discourse, not by the way they are represented in comparison to moments of hardship, blockage, and uncertainty.

The film's intention to mock the genre of coming-of-age novels (and their typically bourgeois ideology of confidence in social ascendancy) makes it impossible to read Labidi's journey as one of upward social mobility. The character's journey is depicted as discontinuous, lacking coherence and foresight, a characteristic identified as common among knowledge workers. Italian sociologists Emiliana Armano and Annalisa Murgia (2013: 491) suggest that many of them suffer because their lack of credible long term goals make them extremely vulnerable to the urgency of the moment: "the greatest suffering caused by precariousness seems to be their

difficulty in shaping a coherent narrative, defining a story, recognising a ‘plot’ in their activities, identifying a goal to be achieved, and consequently the means to do so”.

Salah-Cazanas chooses to transmit such feeling of plot-lack by piling up different episodes in Labidi’s life in a shared frenzied fashion. One of the most immediately noticeable features of the film is precisely its peculiar pace, consistently tight whether portraying milestones in Labidi’s life or detailing his idle times, impediments, and hustles. We can better understand this aspect by introducing German film scholar Guido Kirsten’s use of Roger Odin’s concept of *mise en phase*. Kirsten defines the *mise en phase* of a film as its experiential dimension, akin to “immersion” or “becoming synchronized” (2013: 28) with the rhythm of the narrated events. It allows for an exploration of viewers’ reactions, such as empathy and sympathy towards the characters and their struggles, as well as the cognitive and affective understanding of the narration. The *mise en phase* in *The World After Us* intends to depict Labidi’s life as something different from a linear and directional progression: his journey is rather a struggle for survival.

Such *mise en phase* is one of the elements that enable us to speak of “realism” in the sense identified by Kirsten, based on Odin’s semiopragmatics. According to Kirsten, films that encourage a realistic reading “when viewers can construct a diegesis that is structurally homologous to the everyday world, when they narrate realistically, and when they engage with realistic characters, problems, and narratives.” (2013: 28) Viewers engage with their narratives under the assumption that the cinematic world aligns with their understanding of physical, perceptual, social, and moral realities. While they recognize characters and events as fictional, they still perceive them as subject to constraints that reflect aspects of the reality they inhabit. Evidence that this is what happens in *The World After Us* can be found in reviews praising how it addresses “contemporary issues such as the gig economy, lifestyle brands, or the ludicrous cost of Parisian life” (Kiang 2021) or the “modern, unglamorous Paris” (Pillet 2021). Salah-Cazanas’s film presents various kinds of visual material (e.g., the montage scenes from YouTube videos, the text messages overlays, and the almost documentary-like handheld camera shots typical of much cinema of precarity) and an eclectic stylistic approach, but Kirsten’s semiopragmatic definition of realism, according to which viewers process the narrative assuming that the constructed reality aligns with their expectations about external reality, allows us to understand how this variety does not prevent the film from being “realistic.” Its frantic pacing and erratic structure can be read as a “reality effect” – a recurring feature of realist narratives wherein seemingly superfluous events contribute to the overall narrative texture, enhancing the portrayal of reality within the film. The fragmented nature of the narrative, in this case, appears to be connected to the film’s internal focalization and therefore as diegetically motivated as a marker of the protagonist’s perception.

As Kirsten explains, often realism is not pursued for purely aesthetic reasons but serves a discursive purpose: films received in the realist mode (which Kirsten differentiates from Odin [2011]’s documentarizing mode) are more likely to be attributed socio-critical intentions, since the social problems they fictionalize are assumed to exist not only in the diegesis but also in reality (2013: 180-181). The association between realism and social engagement is quite evident in film history, and contemporary filmmaking is no exception, especially when it comes to precarity. Film scholar Joseph B. Entin (2023: 9) speaks, in fact, of the emergence of what he defines as “precarious realism: a novelistic and cinematic realism about precarious life, and a realism that is itself precarious, [...] interwoven with other modes, [...] in an effort to show the often volatile and perilous state of social life for itinerant workers.”

Will Higbee (2004: 238), specifically in reference to “the return of the political in French cinema,” speaks of a “New Realism,” whose films tend to be characterized by “naturalistic *mise-en-scène*, combining a documentary-like approach with intimate camerawork (often handheld) that suggests empathy for the characters.” These are characteristics that can be identified in *The World After Us*, and it should be noted that empathy as a key effect of realist films is stressed also by Kirsten (2013), according to whom a film’s political dimension arises from its ability to enable audiences to participate in the experience of individuals facing problematic situations. In this case, realism is deployed with the goal of revealing the material condition of precarity of the creatives – which is often overlooked and normalized, not recognized as an emergency, leading to its invisibilization in the media.

Such invisibilization has been recently challenged by the emergence of a distinctive narrative stemming from what French sociologist Chantal Jaquet (2014) has defined as the transclasses: subjects who leave their class

of origin, often in the trajectory of upward mobility. The examples she discusses mainly concern subjects from working-class backgrounds who enter intellectual or cultural fields, where the effects of social rupture become particularly visible. Labidi himself, in his autofictional novel, refers to himself as “a transclass, a class traitor.” Yet, the purpose of the film to challenge any idealization of social mobility tends to assimilate Labidi and his parents, rather than insisting on Labidi’s supposed privileges as an intellectual. Of course, Labidi retains a different cultural capital than his parents, as highlighted by a tender yet misaligned exchange at the beginning of the film in which Labidi’s mother inquires about his writing, to which he responds vaguely that he is writing a novel. She persists, “Can I know what it is about?” He deflects, “It’s complicated, you wouldn’t like it.” She suggests, “Then write something else! You should write the stories of Inspector Jack, that’s good.” He dismissively answers, “That’s for kids, it doesn’t have any literary value.” This dialogue seems to encapsulate Labidi’s transition from the working class to the intellectual one. Yet, the portrayal of the obstacles thwarting the dream of social ascent underscores the continuity with the previous working class’ generation, symbolized by the tight relationship of Labidi to his parents, emphasizing the struggles inherent in both experiences.

While many self-narrative accounts stemming from transclasses’ experiences focus on social ascent, Salah-Cazanas’s film deliberately portrays a situation where creative work fails to resolve subsistence issues, and self-narration itself is viewed from the outside, as something imposed by the cultural industry, particularly on precarious subjects. *The World After Us* traces the biographical experience of its director: Salah-Cazanas said that his debut film was meant to convey the challenges of living in Paris without the privilege to solely focus on artistic pursuits that he experienced in first person – specifically using the term “autofiction” speaking of it (Lemerrier 2021). However, this adherence to his personal experience is never explicitly articulated in self-narrative terms within the film, and we would not have access to it were it not for the interviews.

On the contrary, self-narration is explicitly undermined by the narrative, as demonstrated by its opening. The film begins with what seems to be a voice-over: while we hear the sound of a pen scribbling on paper, we hear Labidi’s voice declaring, “I have no idea why I write.” However, this is not a voice-over, but a voice-off: Labidi is actually speaking with a psychoanalyst, whose hands are taking notes while listening to him. While trying to reflect on what motivates him to write, Labidi states that when he writes he comes to understand what he is doing wrong, and the scene concludes with the analyst asking: “Wrong?” Like any probing inquiry of a psychoanalyst, the film challenges comforting self-narratives: in this case, the prevailing neoliberal notion of individuals as inherently responsible and self-determined subjects. The sense of guilt that many transclasses feel toward the class they have left behind is consequently already called into question in this brief introductory dialogue and the film resists Labidi’s self-criticism impulse (“what I do wrong”) by foregrounding the material reality of precarity – indeed, the narrative unfolds highlighting Labidi’s very limited agency. While elucidating the complexities of navigating a dual identity, as an artist and as a working class member, the director states that it “can complicate life in terms of tastes, lack of understanding, etc., and it can bring you down because you can end up blaming it on others *or on yourself*” (Lemerrier, own emphasis). As his words show, self-blame is identified as a way to conceal a systemic issue. The fact that, in the opening scene, Labidi is speaking with an analyst – a bourgeois status symbol – could signal his social ascension, but at the same time it highlights the psychological distress that accompanies him even at this stage.

Salah-Cazanas insists that depicting his experience of precarity while it was still unfolding helped him eschew the temptation to craft a conventional “success story”: he was not looking for any narrative

revolving around a form of hindsight where you look back on the past and say: ‘Oh, it was a brilliant time, look how much we struggled!’, but rather a film that’s anchored firmly in the present, at a time when we’re still struggling. (Lemerrier 2021)

This had a direct impact on the production of the film itself, shot with “no equipment at all [...] The producer told me that it was a film about my current situation, about now, that we shouldn’t wait, so we made it on a very tight budget” (Moutot 2021). Salah-Cazanas explicitly questions to what extent some of his stylistic choices were themselves shaped by the budget limitation. The necessity of focusing on one’s own personal story as a result of production conditions is a theme that is also present within the film itself, particularly in Labidi’s final decision to write an autofictional essay rather than the historical novel he had initially agreed upon with the publisher. Notably, French novelist Serge Dubrowsky (1977) observed that “Autobiography [is] a privilege reserved for the most influential people of this world, approaching the end of their lives in good fashion.” This

is why, as he explained on the back cover of his novel *Fils*, he chose to use the term ‘autofiction’ in what is considered its first occurrence: autofiction seems to lend itself more readily to the (self-) narration of non-prominent lives (as are those of most precarious cultural workers). According to French writer Philippe Vilain (2005, 477), autofiction is any “homonymous or anominal fiction that an individual creates from his life or a part of it.” Italian novelist Claudia Durastanti (2024) has hypothesized that such a personal approach to narrative is often more affordable for precarious writers in terms of effort compared to writing complex novels that require extensive research, as seen in several scenes of the film where Labidi is in the library but distracted by other concerns.



Fig. 2. – *The World After Us*, 2021.

Later in the film, Labidi’s agent complains about the autofictional manuscript he has handed in: “It’s a piece of shit. You should’ve started a blog. Do you really think people want to read that? We all have problems!” The dynamic unfolding between the two can be seen as an example of the complexities involved in managing creativity and art in the context of its intricate tension with the market: the space for creative autonomy shrinks due to precarity and the need to please the commissioning party, who in turn regards the creative worker with suspicion when they don’t fulfill their branding expectations. Labidi’s perception of his agent embodying the market demands is constantly reinforced, a circumstance that clashes with the very nature of supposedly “creative” work. Conversely, maintaining good professional relationships becomes increasingly vital, as demonstrated in the film by the fact that, despite their tense relationship, Labidi’s agent is one of the very few guests at his wedding.

The publishing market, however, proves to be eager for first-person narratives, especially when they talk about difficult experiences, as demonstrated in a scene where, after the discussion with the agent, the situation at the publishing house takes a turn. Labidi is there with him to find out the publisher’s decision about whether to accept his manuscript. In her typical haste, the publisher remarks, “this isn’t conventional. I’ve never seen such a reversal, ever. But I have to say, I’m very impressed. It was a long shot. Autofiction is a genre that constantly needs to be reinvented. And here, the contemporaneity of the situations and their immanent character exalt the words. The coming elections are going to showcase the novel as a testimony of today’s youth. And we’re in great need of that right now.”

She suggests to start with a small print run, “to test the waters. If the novel resonates with readers, we’ll proceed with a larger print run, accompanied by enhanced marketing efforts.” Once again, the scene is very brief, with close-up shots and counter shots following one another, allowing the viewer to capture Labidi’s micro-expressions of alternating relief and dismay.

The prosaic nature of this moment seems to aim at demystifying the culture industry, and, more specifically, the market dynamics underlying the recent wave of interest in working-class stories, especially those told in

the first person (Kornbluh 2024). Salah-Cazanas' film thematizes how stepping in the trend of self-narration can be advantageous in terms of cost and benefits for precarious writers, but at the same time it opts for a form that is not explicitly self-reflective, a choice that can be interpreted as an attempt to frame the situation from a more materialist standpoint.

Italian semiologist Bruno Surace (2022: 197) wrote that autofiction responds to the urgency of transforming oneself "from an impalpable subject to a tangible object." Salah-Cazanas goes a step further, framing his characters as products of a systemic problem. In an interview, the director states to be "a great believer in inheritance and *social determinism*. You do what you can with what you've got" (Moutot 2021, own emphasis). The reference to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept serves to frame the system that shapes subjectivities and to observe its material dynamics, fostering the understanding that people are first and foremost products of material processes. This awareness serves as a critical tool against the imperatives of individual entrepreneurship that are typical of neoliberal ideology.

2 Creative labor as social reproduction

In the last decade, the figure of the delivery driver became in the collective imagination an epitome for exploited labor, often associated with migrant workforce. The choice to depict Labidi as a delivery driver is therefore very meaningful. As such, Labidi embodies both a racialized unskilled worker *and* a demoted and misaligned creative. It is crucial to note that even Labidi's non-cultural jobs, since they belong to the tertiary sector of "services", fall under the umbrella of what Italian sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) called "immaterial labour." American political scientist Jodi Dean (2025) has elaborated on the post-Fordist phase of Western capitalism as an economy marked by a dramatic increase in inequality, in which the working class is no longer involved in production but rather in services that benefit the ruling one. She calls this new era "Neofeudalism." Despite the undeniable difference between service jobs typically associated with this kind of subordination and creative/artistic work (which still echoes the modern rhetoric of the "genius"), both can be framed as "immaterial" work.

As Standing (2016: 37-38) writes, the shift to services of tertiarization "summarises a combination of forms of flexibility, in which divisions of labour are fluid, workplaces blend into home and public places, hours of labour fluctuate and people can combine several work statuses and have several contracts concurrently." In this sense, Labidi's dual professional identity should be understood not as a clash or an ambivalence, but as a continuum: cultural and non-cultural labor blend into each other. Understanding cultural works as service jobs among others allows for an update of the categories of "worker" and "working class" that diverges from an identification with laborers or the proletariat. The professional composition of these services is extremely varied: it includes clerical work in companies, those employed in the tech industries, the entire logistics sector (including food delivery), care work, and finally also precarious cultural jobs and creative professions.

According to Italian researcher Salvatore Cominu (2023) "the distance between an upper stratum (itself uneven in wealth, prestige, power) and a large lower stratum of cognitive workers has widened." In common perception, however, a distinction based on actual and material conditions loses prominence, while a separation based primarily on the professional field intensifies, regardless of the level of security experienced – a perception that seems to be encouraged by creative workers themselves: "Technicians, pseudo-creatives, serialized consultants, social workers, translators, data inputters, agents, even when abused and/or poorly paid, think (except for a critical thinking few) that they belong to a different species from warehouse workers, clerks, counter workers, cleaners, telephone operators". Such self-perception stems partly from the historical privilege associated with culture and the romanticization of the bohemian lifestyle, and partly because creative labor serves as a key source of value for neoliberal Western economies. This reflects in the lack of unionization despite the ongoing precarization of the sector (Gill and Pratt 2008: 28), a lack of unionization that stems from the belief in the "myths of 'coolness, creativity and egalitarianism'" (29) associated to creative fields and occupations. On the contrary, the deromanticization of cultural labor observed in *The World After Us* works toward deconstructing these myths, while its overlapping of cultural labor and low-status service jobs alludes to the potential for political organization and association among different workers.

Such political organization might though look different from traditional unionism: in a context where life and work intertwine, and the category of labor dissolves, labor protection not only seems difficult, but is also no longer desirable, as it is no longer sufficient. For this reason, “precarity politics quickly expanded to encompass a variety of struggles, including those relating to migration, citizenship, LGBT and feminist movements” (Gill and Pratt 2008: 14). Greek sociologists Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos (2006) call this kind of political praxis “biosyndicalism,” a praxis that bases on the embodied experience of precarity. The discursive argumentation of *The World After Us* insists precisely on such embodied experience.

Presenting Labidi as a delivery driver in the film is not intended to provoke indignation over the downward mobility of an intellectual, but rather to demonstrate that in many cases, willingness to work, even in humble jobs, is not sufficient for mere survival. Against discourses of blame or those that frame cultural work as a privilege, *The World After Us* asserts its protagonist’s precarity primarily by highlighting the illegal strategies Labidi resorts to in order to make ends meet, such as stealing food from a supermarket to prepare dinner for Elisa, or, while employed in the eyewear shop (a position that demands not only his time but also his psychological acumen to master target demographics and marketing strategies), pilfering money from the cash register. Remarkably, the store’s turnover renders Labidi’s transgression inconspicuous, as can be glimpsed by the daily sales targets (consistently surpassed) hung on a wall of the store. Or again, when he defrauds an insurance company by falsely reporting his backpack, containing an iPad and a camera, as stolen and subsequently selling the items online. The inclusion of these expedients in a story of mundane life rather than a crime narrative underscores Labidi’s struggles: he experiences these moments with anxiety, and they seem to harm him first and foremost. A particularly emblematic moment is the sudden insertion of a compilation of online videos in which individuals feign accidents to extract compensation from motorists and insurance companies, culminating in Labidi lying in pain on his bed.



Fig. 3. – *The World After Us*, 2021.

A startled Elisa inquires about his condition, prompting him to recount a failed attempt to stage an accident. This abrupt shift in cinematic tone signifies a nadir for Labidi: a material demonstration of the toll precariousness takes on the body and health of the subjects.

According to Italian philosopher Franco Berardi (2013: 57), recognizing that cognitive labor involves “the body, sexuality, perishable physicality and the unconscious” of the subjects who engage in it, is a fundamental requirement to articulate political demands. The sociological separation between creative/cultural/intellectual labor and not needs to be questioned: What holds political struggles together is not the nature of specific tasks nor degrees of social prestige but the mere fact that workers have a body – a vulnerable body, subjected to the violence of capital. Considering creative labor in its material effects means therefore also questioning the implicit hierarchy between material and immaterial labor and anchoring the latter to material conditions. As Italian researcher Fabio Mengali (2023:103), observes, it is common to “think of intellectuals through the lens

of the mind alone, assuming that ideas are universal and contextless.” On the contrary, “these individuals inhabit a body and, as bodies, they endure the power relations inscribed in social and labor organization,” which allows their work to be considered from a materialist perspective. This perspective must concern both the labor required to produce the work and the work itself: as Spanish activist Brigitte Vassallo (2021: 70) notes, the cultural product “is the result of labor and must be discussed in terms of capital, labor rights, speculation, and inflation.” The sacralization of cultural products, she contends, only exacerbates the precaritization of the sector, which remains dominated by social classes that can afford them through inherited wealth. Immaterial labor, too, must then be recognized as labor in its own right: at present, especially, as German political theorist Isabell Lorey (2015: 83) puts it, new immaterial labor relations are “based on a broad concept of creativity, which can by no means be considered ‘unproductive.’” Cultural labor generates profit, i.e. surplus value: those who perform it must be regarded as part of the working class by right.

Nonetheless, in the realm of total subsumption, opposing the capitalist regime implies considering human lives as value in themselves and not simply as workers: in byosindacalism, the material vulnerability of the body is opposed to the logic of profit. The claim to the status of “workforce” by artists appears in a 2008 manifesto by the group W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), which demands compensation for the service of “making the world a more interesting place.” This aspect is crucial: while asserting the “usefulness” of creative labor, this usefulness is not the same kind that the proletariat once claimed during the era of trade unionism. It is a usefulness not (or at least not only) from the standpoint of capital, but from that of the working class aspiring to a “good life.” This is a dialectical moment that follows the recognition that creative work is, indeed, work. As we said, from the standpoint of neoliberal valorization, cultural labor is labor in every respect, and as such it is essential to demand that it be protected; yet, from the standpoint of the working-class cultural labor, rather than resembling productive labor, more closely resembles *reproductive* labor, as we will now see – and as *The World After Us* demonstrates.

Reproductive labor refers to the set of activities that restore and maintain the workforce outside the sphere of production: it regenerates active workers, sustains those who are temporarily or permanently outside the labor market, and produces new workers through childbirth (Bhattacharya 2013). Care work and cultural/creative labor share a common history within capitalism (despite the fact that the latter has always belonged to a small group of elites, while the former has been practiced by almost the entire female population): both excluded from the productive sphere for centuries, they have recently been valorized for profit-driven purposes. This subsumption does not exhaust the emancipatory potential of reproductive labor; on the contrary, it highlights a fundamental contradiction within capital itself. As Italian philosopher Gigi Roggero (Gallo Lassere 2020) puts it, “while capital needs the proletariat, the proletariat doesn’t need capital, and in the end neither does it need itself as a product of that social relationship.” Capital, of course, requires labor power, from which it extracts surplus value through exploitation, and therefore it depends on reproduction. However, this reproduction stands in contradiction with the very extractive logic that drives this economic model. Although necessary for capital to extract surplus value, the reproduction of labor power is also its limit and its opposing force, as it ultimately serves the interests of the working class itself. Summarizing Marx on reproductive activities, American political scientist Bertell Ollman (1971: 141) observed how, in capitalism, basic human activities such as eating, drinking, and procreating are reduced to purely functional acts. Yet, he contended, despite this reduction, individuals retain more agency in these spheres than in work, which is supposed to define them as human beings. “As unsatisfactory as eating and drinking are from a human point of view, the worker feels at least he is doing something he wants to do. The same cannot be said of his productive activity.”

Among the activities enlisted by American activist Tithi Bhattacharya as those that regenerate workers, are included “also care in psychical ways that keep a person whole”, within which artistic and intellectual production and consumption can also be included. Not by chance, as Standing (2016: 150) summarizes, “‘reproductive’ activity, work done for its own sake” was what the Greeks called *scholē*, and observes how (and why) leisure is an important part of the demands of what we called byosindacalism:

One form of leisure is participating in demanding cultural and artistic activity. To appreciate fine music, theatre, art and great literature, and to learn about our history and that of the community in which we are living, all take what in popular parlance is called ‘quality time,’ that is, time in which we are not distracted, nervous from insecurity or spent from labour and work, or by the

sleeplessness induced by it. A result is a leisure deficit. The time is perceived as unavailable. Or those in the precariat feel guilty about devoting time to such activities, thinking they should be using their time in networking or in constantly upgrading their 'human capital,' as all those commentators are urging. Where are the incentives to allocate time to leisure?

The dynamics highlighted by Standing are perfectly represented in *The World After Us*, in which the relationship between Labidi and Elisa emerges as a symbol of resistance to precarity through their struggles with a lack of money and, above all, time. Salah-Cazanas' is certainly a film about the frustration of not being able to fulfill one's dreams, but nothing suggests that Labidi's dreams are any wilder than building a family. This choice once again reflects a firm refusal to succumb to a discourse of self-blame, like one that attributes the low birth rate in the West or the dissolution of family bonds to individual responsibility. Labidi is not among those who could be considered responsible for this; it is the precarity in which he lives that hinders these projects. Note that this aspect is at the heart of the issue of reproductive rights, which are precisely in opposition to the guilt-inducing rhetoric regarding declining birthrates. As observed by Bhattacharya, reproductive rights are "tied to the most fundamental questions of our society: Who labors, for whom and for how long", therefore the "right to choose is not just about the right not to have babies but *the right also to have them*."

Some reviews of the film set Labidi's desire to start a family against his creative aspirations. Wendy Ide (2021) writes, for instance:

Artistic aspirations collide with the realities of survival in an unforgiving city like Paris even before struggling writer Labidi meets Elisa. But falling in love both elevates his life and derails it – his commitment to the relationship seems, at times, to be at direct odds with his nascent career as a novelist.

"Suddenly Labidi is a lover, not a writer," writes Jessica Kiang (2021). On the contrary, I contend, the film aims to show precisely the overlap of the two subplots: the relationship is likened to the creative task, both as paths to fulfillment. The coincidence of the book's publication with the wedding day is very telling in this regard. The film explicitly clarifies that a juxtaposition occurs because work and survival interfere with *both* writing *and* romance: it is economic necessity that imposes the choice and makes it virtually impossible to have it all. "Being in love is not a job, is it?" Labidi's agent mocks him, yet demands that he delivers a novel within a few months without providing any advance. Similarly, writing, just like being in love, is not a job: it does not pay the bills, it requires enthusiasm and passion to potentially no avail (McRobbie 2015). "The faster you write, the faster you get paid," Labidi's agent tells him. But, as Ide effectively comments in her review, "writing starts to feel like a luxury when there's not enough money to buy food." By focusing on the representation of "manifold conflicts over the reproduction of everyday life – over food, health, housing," (Entin 2023: 8), *The World After Us* fully belongs to the category of "narratives of living labor," which are a form of proletarian literature, but only when the proletariat is understood not conventionally as the industrial wage labor force, but rather, more fundamentally and capaciously, as people subjected to manifold processes of economic and political dispossession, exploitation, and immiseration.

Such narratives, he contends, do not necessarily focus on work itself as an activity, but rather depict a broader fabric of personal, relational, and collective life within, around, and beyond work. This perspective, he observes, resonates with Marx's concept of "labor as subjectivity," which emphasizes the social and political relations, historical conditions, and communal contexts that shape both how individuals engage in work and how they understand themselves as workers.

Unlike productive labor and the alienation attributed to it, creative work involves the most human qualities of individuals, mobilizing the whole person. This is what happens also in reproductive labor, and particularly in care work, where emotional bonds put workers "in a vulnerable position, discouraging them from demanding higher wages or changes in working conditions that might have adverse effects on care recipients. A kind of emotional hostage effect occurs" (England, 2005: 390). To oppose this dynamic, French sociologist Danièle Linhart (2015) asserts that it is important to re-professionalize all that, in neoliberalism, seems to be "no longer labor." Putting work back at the center of the discourse means insisting on recovering the dignity of the working class and being able to assess its needs.

The World After Us discourse operates in this direction. Recognizing that work is work even when it involves placing value on what is considered private – such as spare time, feelings, emotions, ideas, affections, and so on – is not only the first form of protection for the working class but also a promising political strategy. Recognizing cultural labor as labor becomes a necessary step in order to formulate a radical critique of the system. Nonetheless, in the film, creative work is deemed a more desirable career, and Labidi's ambition, despite being submitted to capitalist extraction, appears legitimate and positive. The viewer is led to identify and sympathize with the protagonist and hope that he can achieve his dreams of social advancement through creative work, a goal that thus seems more akin to a right than a privilege. The same dialectic identified by social reproduction theory can at this point be retraced in creative labor under neoliberalism: creativity and self-expression are simultaneously exploited by the culture industry and still remain legitimate aspirations, especially because they represent a critical opportunity. As Roggero (2022) puts it, under capitalism, the product of cultural labor is necessarily "a commodity like any other" but "with peculiarities that can be understood, inverted, and repurposed for critical ends." The materialist approach of *The World After Us* challenges both traditional and neoliberal notions of creative labor, and emphasizes both its inherent challenges and its desirability – also as a political tool.

References

- Armano, Emiliana and Annalisa Murgia (2013). "The Precariousnesses of Young Knowledge Workers: A Subject-Oriented Approach." *Global Discourse* 3(3): 486–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2013.865313>.
- Berardi, Franco (2013). "What Does Cognitariat Mean? Work, Desire and Depression." *Cultural Studies Review* 11(2): 57–63. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v11i2.3656>.
- Bhattacharya, Tithi (2013). "What Is Social Reproduction Theory?" *SocialistWorker.Org*. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v11i2.3656> (last accessed 30-01-26).
- Biss, Eula (2020). *Having and Being Had*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Cominu, Salvatore (2023). "Che cos'è la composizione di classe?" *Machina*. <https://www.machina-deriveaproduci.com/post/che-cos-è-la-composizione-di-classe> (last accessed 30-01-26).
- Dean, Jodi (2025). *Capital's Grave: Neofeudalism and the New Class Struggle*. London / New York: Verso.
- Dobrovsky, Serge (1977). *Fils: roman*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.
- Durastanti, Claudia (2024). "Cheap Lit." *TL/TH*. <https://tlth.co.uk/cheaplit> (last accessed 28-01-26).
- England, Paula (2005). "Emerging Theories of Care Work." *Annual Review of Sociology* 31(1): 381–399. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.31.041304.122317>.
- Entin, Joseph B. (2023). *Living Labor: Fiction, Film, and Precarious Work*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Gallo Lassere, Davide (2020). "'A Science of Destruction': An Interview with Gigi Roggero on the Actuality of Operaismo." *Viewpoint Magazine*. <https://viewpointmag.com/2020/04/30/a-science-of-destruction-an-interview-with-gigi-roggero-on-the-actuality-of-operaismo/> (last accessed 30-01-26).
- Gill, Rosalind and Andy Pratt (2008). "In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (7–8): 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097794>.
- Higbee, Will (2004). "'Elle Est Où, Ta Place?' The Social-Realist Melodramas of Laurent Cantet: *Ressources humaines* (2000) and *Emploi du temps* (2001)." *French Cultural Studies* 15(3): 235–250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009715580401500303>.

- Ide, Wendy (2021). “‘The World After Us’: Berlin Review.” *Screen Daily*. <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-world-after-us-berlin-review/5157284.article> (last accessed 30-01-26).
- Jaquet, Chantal (2014). *Les Transclasses, Ou, La Non-Reproduction*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Kiang, Jessica (2021). “‘The World After Us’ Review: Charming but Aimless Lessons in Parisian Life, Love and Literary Ambition.” *Variety*. <https://variety.com/2021/film/reviews/the-%20world-after-us-review-1234922724> (last accessed 27-01-26).
- Kirsten, Guido (2013). *Filmischer Realismus*. Marburg: Schüren.
- Kirsten, Guido (2022). “Studying the Cinema of Precarity. An Introduction.” In *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses*, edited by Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten, and Hanna Prenzel, 1–30. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter. <https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/398489/>.
- Kornbluh, Anna (2024). *Immediacy, or The Style of Too-Late Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio (1996). “Immaterial Labour.” In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 133–47. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lemercier, Fabien (2021) “Louda Ben Salah-Cazanas, Director of The World After Us.” *Cineuropa – the Best of European Cinema*. <https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/398489/> (last accessed 28-01-26).
- Linhart, Danièle (2015). *La comédie humaine du travail: de la déshumanisation taylorienne à la sur-humanisation managériale*. Toulouse: Èrès éditions.
- Lorey, Isabell (2015). *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. London/New York: Verso.
- McRobbie, Angela (2015). “Is Passionate Work a Neoliberal Delusion?” *openDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/is-passionate-work-neoliberal-delusion/>. (last accessed 30-01-26).
- Mengali, Fabio (2023). “Sul merito dell’intellettuale: uno studio preliminare su neoliberalismo, conoscenza e forza-lavoro.” In *L’accademia e il fuori: Il problema dell’intellettuale specializzato in Italia*, edited by Vincenzo Mele et al., 89–116. Naples: Orthotes.
- Moutot, Marine (2021) “[INTERVIEW] Louda Ben Salah-Cazanas.” *PHANTASMAGORY*. <https://cinephanta.smagory.com/2021/03/06/interview-louda-ben-salah-cazanas/> (last accessed 28-01-26).
- Odin, Roger (2011). *Les espaces de communication*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- Ollman, Bertell (1971). *Alienation: Marx’s Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pillet, Firouz (2021). “Berlinale 2021 – Panorama: Le monde après nous, de Louda Ben Salah-Cazanas, brosse le portrait d’une génération en puisant dans son propre parcours.” *j:mag*. <https://j-mag.ch/berlinale-2021-le-monde-apres-nous-de-louda-ben-salah-cazanas-brosse-le-portrait-dune-generation-en-puisant-dans-son-propre-parcours/%20> (last accessed 27-01-26).
- Roggero, Gigi (2022). “Dentro e contro l’università di ceto medio (Prima parte).” *Machina*. <https://www.machina-deriveapprodi.com/post/dentro-e-contro-l-università-di-ceto-medio-prima-parte> (last accessed 30-01-26).
- Standing, Guy (2016). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* [2011]. Revised edition. London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sticchi, Francesco (2021). *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television: Chronotopes of Anxiety, Depression, Expulsion/Extinction*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Surace, Bruno (2022). “Ermeneutica dell’autobiopic cinematografico: il caso Charlie Kaufman.” *Cinergie – Il Cinema e le altre Arti* 22: 189–199. <https://doi.org/10.6092/ISSN.2280-9481/14672>.

Tsianos, Vassilis, and Dimitris Papadopoulos (2006). "Precarity: A Savage Journey to the Heart of Embodied Capitalism." *Transversal Texts*. <https://transversal.at/transversal/1106/tsianos-papadopoulos/en?hl=tsianos> (last accessed 30-01-26).

Vasallo, Brigitte (2021). *Lenguaje inclusivo y exclusión de clase*. Barcelona: Larousse.

Vilain, Philippe (2005). *Défense de Narcisse*. Paris: B. Grasset.

W.A.G.E. (2008). "WOMANIFESTO." <https://wageforwork.com/womanifesto#top> (last accessed 30-01-26).

Elisa Cuter – Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf (Germany)

✉ elisa.cuter@gmail.com

Elisa Cuter is a PhD candidate at the Filmuniversität Konrad Wolf Babelsberg, where she has been affiliated with the DFG-funded research project "Cinematic Discourses of Deprivation." She is part of the editorial board of the Associazione Italiana per le Ricerche di Storia del Cinema. Together with Guido Kirsten and Hanna Prenzel, she co-edited *Precarity in European Film* (De Gruyter, 2022). For De Gruyter, she co-curates the book series "Film, Class, Society." Alongside her academic work, she is the author of *Ripartire dal desiderio* (minimum fax, 2020) and works as a film programmer and editor of *Il Tascabile*, published by the Treccani Institute.