

The *Interregno* and the Role of Imagination

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One of the most abused refrains to define the current political and social landscape is the adoption of the Gramscian notion of *interregno*, where famously “the old dies, and the new is yet to be born, and the most varied and morbid phenomena take place” (Gramsci 1977: 311-313, *my translation*; Renzi 2026). Often associated with contexts of crisis, specifically of crisis of legitimacy of a certain political regime, the *interregno*, therefore, features the spread of conspiracies, which may include outlandish (but impactful) movements like QAnon; the search for apparently counter-cultural methods to map reality (a reality of capitalist relations that escapes the capacity to be encapsulated into a single formula, Fredric Jameson would say, see 1988: 356), understandably, meets also the sceptical rejection of official or mainstream truths or explanations of phenomena, whether social or scientific. Progressively and, more importantly, this trend favours a cynical and depressive retreat within the borders of a petty realism, accepting the “pure facts” of power relations, or of economic exploitation (Gramsci 1977: 312-313) as givens. Since the 2007/2008 Wall Street crash, then, the *interregno* has often returned to explain and frame the growing distrust in economic and political institutions (in the Global West, more poignantly) and the increasing lack of faith in the glorious promises of capitalism, in its neoliberal form, at least. The slow cancellation of the future, to follow Franco Bifo Berardi and Mark Fisher’s apt phrase (Fisher 2022: 2–10), that would come with the undermining of the rightfulness of a certain social order is also understood as the main motivation for the spread of fascistic, so-called populist, and reactionary tendencies; resentment, in the form of a vague desire for a vindication of the unattended prospects of a better or deserved future, moves masses towards the embrace of various forms of authoritarianism. In this sense, we see crystallised a social bargain, a trade of the pain, burden, and responsibility of a frustrating less and less effective democratic form of government in exchange of the perks of strong leadership.

Notwithstanding the fact that this picture may appear catchy, as rightly pointed out by Valerio Renzi, focusing too closely on the *interregno*, presented in the guise of a space in-between, or as an incomplete process, however, restricts the analyst from understanding contextual dynamics and the welding of specific power structures in front of our eyes (2026). Considering the historical work of economic research carried out by Clara Mattei, instead, we would be able already to paint a different picture and to look at the so-called crisis of neoliberalism as the consolidation of particular social strategies. Indeed, in the *Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascisms* (2022), Mattei identifies structural and repeated patterns

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in capitalist governmentality, which move beyond the typical and, if we want, reassuring separation between liberalism and fascism. By looking at the works of many liberal economists, which we would define today as technocrats, in past contexts of upheaval we can find clear analogies with the present in terms both of rhetoric and of actual policies implemented in the name of financial stability (Mattei 2022: 13-18). Austerity, more than any other fiscal approach (meaning cut to social services, increased tax on labour, and higher spending and support for wealth accumulation), is neither a mistake, nor an irrational step, but a strategy of social control: a mode through which, while capital accumulation remains granted and assured, society is progressively undemocratized, with the working-class becoming more dependent the market rule for survival, and decision-making, consequently, is increasingly centralised (as wealth). With this knowledge, it appears less surprising to read the first speech by Benito Mussolini to the Italian Parliament, boasting about the morality of austerity as a mode to enforce righteous work discipline on the population, while expressing the urgent need to balance the public budget (Mattei 2022: 205-206). Likewise, the common distinction between the State and the Market as opposed political agents, so common from the Reagan years, is completely overcome in favour of a more nuanced assessment of the co-dependency between institutional forces, even in nefarious and parasitic forms (Blakeley 2024: 47-78).

Moving closer to us, we can understand how despotic tech-lords such as Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Larry Ellison, Alex Karp, and Sam Altman etc. exist not as unexpected consequences and corruptions of the systems; they embody its essential hierarchical and despotic structure. Even the sudden shift to the current war economy, and to a global landscape of total conflict (with its own horrifying genocidal mechanisms), appears less surprising and shocking in the face of historical trends, such as the mentioned centralisation of capital (Brancaccio, Giammetti and Lucarelli 2022: 2-10; see also Lazzarato 2025: 2-12); in this way, we could identify in large scale military confrontations modes of responding to the fading of imperial unilateral might, but also to revert structural (or secular see Summers 2016) growth stagnation without shaking the system too much in favour of workers' bargaining power.

Aside wanting to construct a new and different unitary explanation for the current state of affairs, the vantage of understanding dynamics of the present as structural or as tendencies (Marxists would poignantly add) removes also phenomena like precarity, or the growing precarisation of labour from vagueness (Mattei 2022: 290). What is the growing insecurity on the workplace, so common in our media narratives (Zaniello 2020: x-xiii), let alone its pervasiveness in contemporary existence, if not the effect of expanding extractive practices, or modes to increase the perniciousness of surplus value creation? The transformation of the worker into an entrepreneur, the subject of collective struggle into an atomised human capital can likely be understood as a fiction functional for the regimentation of a workforce, becoming more and more unable to organise on the collective level (Read 2024: 82-86). We would add to this brief commentary on current power relations that, as pointed out already by many scholars, neoliberalism, to identify the governmental model of our age, significantly relies on the role of debt as disciplinary and domination strategy (see mainly Gago 2020: 112-114, 130-136; Lazzarato 2012: 13-20; Stimilli 2019: 26-30). Individualised debt not only propelled growth from the very beginning of this age (see the Volcker shock) leading to the above-mentioned housing market crash; it also configures particularly neocolonial relations between various financial centres and peripheries across the globe (Gago 2017: 169-75). Together with these fundamental features, debt is exactly the means through which workers are pushed through ever-growing waves of isolation; this naturally comes in tune with the understanding that every decision each member of the workforce makes is to be evaluated in terms of successful or misleading investments. Through these disciplinary strategies, the worker is, thus, invited to become a living and breathing start-up (Cicarelli 2021: 143-147). According to Verónica Gago, debt is also the tool to capture our relational life and care work, in the broadest sense of the world, within the spires of accumulation, overcoming once and for all any distinction between productive activities and free time (2020: 129-33); concurrently, it is easy to understand how being passionate for one's own profession becomes a supplementary double-edged sword (Jaffe 2021: 9-15).

More could be added to this overview, which, so far, has not really touched one of the central features of this special issue: that is exactly the affective economy of neoliberalism. Indeed, what stayed outside of the discussion so far are the tensions, struggles, conflicts, and contradictions that define subjective experience. Lauren Berlant's reflection on the "good life", for instance is closely linked to the theme of precarity in contemporary societies (2011). In her book, Berlant explains that many people remain attached to the idea of a "good life" –

economic stability, secure employment, housing, personal fulfilment – even when social and economic conditions make it increasingly difficult to achieve (2011). This attachment becomes what she calls “cruel optimism”: a desire that promises well-being but, in practice, keeps people frustrated and unstable. Precariousness, with temporary jobs, uncertain incomes, and a lack of social security, highlights this tension: we continue to pursue inherited models of success and security, while neoliberal reality produces fragmented and vulnerable lives. In this sense, for Berlant, precarity is not just an economic condition, but also an emotional and cultural experience, which changes the way people imagine the future and construct their expectations of happiness.

Similarly, if resentment, as mentioned before, is clearly one key component in the tides of social malaise that seem to constantly flow across our social bodies, this same effect and complex feeling should be unpacked in more detail. According to Jason Read, for instance, to better read this “vibe”, we should look more closely at notions such as negative solidarity, or how the individualisation of workers has turned hardships and economic struggles into virtues (2024: 176); thus, a sense of social injustice coming from lived individual destitution and privations is coloured as a narcissistic wound rather than an instrument to raise shared political consciousness. Similarly, desire, status, aspirational drives all exist in a complicated manner within the space of our everyday relationality and interactions, and are clearly part of the productive infrastructure (Read 2024: 82-83). As Jason Read would put it, we should never underestimate the desiring, affective, and imaginative drives (and narratives) surrounding the nature of work itself (2024: 92-97).

Here, the role of the arts, and connected analyses and studies, with varying methodological approaches, becomes central and inescapable. To put it with Cornelius Castoriadis, indeed, the arts allow us to map and to engage the imaginary institution of society (1988: 146-156) and cinema, moving to Edgar Morin, with the formation of subjectivity as a composite, complex, and even magical magma of affects and perceptual states (2005: 83-90). What this implies, essentially, is that cinema (together with all artistic expressions) provides us with the tools to explore and stay in-between the modes in which the subject both exists as the space where contextual power dynamics are embodied and subsumed, and as the core nexus of resisting affective patterns to these same mechanisms. In a way, arts and cinema allow us also to think about the individual, the characters of narratives we should empathise with, as something existing as part of an entanglement, or as ecological objects. Spaces, architectures, and entire visual geographies emerge in all their centrality as articulate and living (and, therefore, dynamics and moving) producers of meaning, and the diegesis itself as an environment to continually explore and enact (Hven 2022: 28-35).

Audiovisual arts, then, allow to perceive subjective existence as something constantly unresolved and undetermined, never set once and for all. It is true, of course, that cinematic experiences exist also as a never exhausted vehicle or as a force for hegemonic discourses to be reinstated or reaffirmed; together with that, they trace ideas of morality and of individual existence that operate as imaginary and aspirational models; if not, films and TV series may simply offer us viewers reassurances and consolations about the righteousness and validity of our behaviour, choices, and status (see also Read 2024: 114-117). However, from the points above we also understand that this same ideological (which in retro terms would have been labelled superstructural) function does not work exactly as an ossified mechanism for the creation of consensus. Cinema and the arts operate, once more, as collectors of contextual tensions and as battlefields, where anxieties, fears, longing, and, possibly, even counter-cultural imaginaries and subjective perceptions may find their space. Role of the media scholar, then, becomes that of attempting to travel through these affective waves, trying to capture their nuances, contradictions, even absorbing the flood of negativity they may embody, while also catching the points of ruptures that these same visual expressions may entail.

With these objectives, film and media theory also display a power that moves beyond their alleged disciplinary borders and categorisations. Indeed, going back to previous points about the nature of precarious labour, and its difference from a more traditional and stable wage compensation (based on collective national contracts), cinematic experiences become essential to give a body to an always moving and scattered workforce. According to Zaniello, again, the cinema of precarity (or of the precariat) is one that aims to provide faceless masses with a form of recognition and perceivability and, concurrently, give viewers a visceral testimony of a social reality existing beyond the borders of their personal experience (2020: 3-15). Because of this function, therefore, cinema operates as a vital tool exactly to take into account the difference personified by an extremely divided and heterogeneous working-class, while attempting to identify a transversality across this everchang-

ing and multifaceted social body. Care work, sex work, intellectual labour, for instance, can be examined for the unique world of meaning that they put forth; for the quality of subjective experience of characters involved in these sectors, including the conflicting emotional bond that may be entailed in particular activities, while also highlighting some common characteristics between these apparently separated worlds. The mentioned fields, indeed, all feature contradictory craving for attention and appreciation on the side of the worker (because of the relational and affective nature of these activities), while also being informed by a considerable amount of unwaged or unpaid practices. Concurrently, the same idea of a collective body of “traditional” factory workers can be complicated with considerations about growing anxieties concerning identity, status, belonging, community building and loss; thinking about the latest works of Ken Loach and Stéphane Brizé, just to mention very well-known names of political cinema, we can underscore how the same issue of collective consciousness appears far more as a constant effort of becoming and solidarity building rather than a granted acquisition connected with situated productive dynamics. In the case of series such as *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Better Call Saul* (2015-2022) or the recent film *Palazzina Laf* (Riondino 2023) we can even witness a paradoxical individualist and narcissist vindication of working-class status in entrepreneurial terms; where the subjects assumed to be more socially predisposed to collective organising embrace a managerial pride mixed with exceptionalist claims (Read 2024: 120-134). In addition these works, other contemporary filmmakers – both internationally and in smaller national cinemas – have begun to address precarious employment and new forms of unstable work. A prominent, even though perniciously ambiguous, example is Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland* (2020), which depicts the lives of people forced to constantly move across the United States, accepting temporary and seasonal jobs, highlighting a form of existential as well as economic precarity. Similarly, directors like Bong Joon-ho in *Parasite* (2019) have brought the themes of social inequality and job insecurity to the forefront of global cinema. These examples demonstrate how contemporary cinema, even in diverse national contexts and sometimes marginalized from the dominant industry, is developing a growing interest in living conditions marked by economic instability, transforming precarious employment into a shared and recognizable global theme.

Therefore, the very notion of working-class is liberated from concerns about identity codifications and can be adopted, instead, to identify power relations and positioning in relations to capital. Such theoretical and analytical shift allows also for a more insightful application of ideas around intersectionality, understanding them not simply as the combination or addition of forms of oppressions, but as organic modes in which a situated subjectivity is moulded. Capital, then, becomes the assemblage or the coincidence of different and moving forms of oppressions – aiming at its own constant reproduction (Fraser 2022: 78-80) – and each worker, consequently, a relational agent in a constantly moving and conflictual field, capable of forming new collective bodies at every step of the way. Once more, the arts can do what other disciplines cannot and map the differences existing within stable tendencies expressed by power structures, while also opening the route for forms of counter-subjection, exactly by showing the complexity of our affective and political experience.

This special issue, in fact, is the outcome of a collective work carried out the Cinematic Precarity Research Network, and a direct development of the workshop carried out at Oxford Brookes University in January 2024. The group, in accordance with methods that vary from film-philosophy to economic analyses of film and media industries, attempts to bring together the complexity and variations of different forms of exploitation, marginalisation, and power enforcement; in this aim, we look also for breaking points and futures to be explored and built against the constant flood of fatalism in which we are stuck, with, going back to Gramsci and his *interregnum*, the optimistic aim of building a new culture, one substituting and responding to the undeniable failures of the present one (1977: 312).

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