Ambiguous Human Existence and the Ethics of Authenticity

Exploring Tensions of Freedom and Solidarity in Contemporary Scandinavian Art Film and Beyond

Svane, Anette

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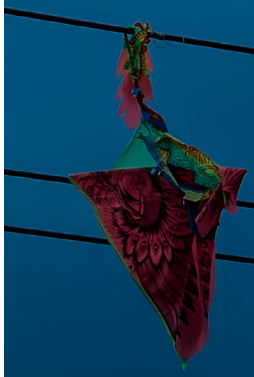

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Title and subtitle: Ambiguous Human Existence and the Ethics of Authenticity: Exploring Tensions of Freedom and Solidarity in Contemporary Scandinavian Art Film and Beyond.

Abstract: This thesis develops an ethical framework called the ethics of authenticity and puts it to work through concrete engagement with seven contemporary Scandinavian art films. It starts by tracing the contradictory developments of modern freedom, highlighting the tensions of freedom and solidarity and how this comes to the fore in ethics, politics and film aesthetics. Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist ethics and political Marxist theory, I develop the ethics of authenticity in response to this. I then explore and further develop this framework through engagements with films and the way they give form to – and handle – tensions of autonomy, authenticity, and standardisation in our contemporary moment.

Key words: Existentialism, film studies, ethics, authenticity, Simone de Beauvoir, aesthetic theory, art film, ideology critique, contemporary capitalism

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The 21st century has been characterised by disillusionment. Nearly 40 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy. What followed was a pervasive logic of what Mark Fisher (2008) called capitalist realism, shaped by modes of cynical distance and apathy: the notion that the current system may be imperfect, even bad, but there is no alternative, so we'd better make the best of it. This disillusionment harks back to the onset of modernity, when the concept of individual freedom took on new meaning. The break from earlier traditions meant that individuals were no longer seen as mere placeholders in a social system, but as subjects with rational capabilities, responsible for their own place in the world. The absence of earlier traditions and religion has resulted in an ethical vacuum that has defined the way we relate to each other ever since. Central here is the tension between individual freedom and the forming of social bonds and solidarity, stemming from the inherent ambiguity of freedom itself. Thus, the newfound understanding of individual freedom led to contradictory developments, especially with the onset of the capitalist mode of production, a social system characterised by competition, market coercion and fragmentation.

We find ourselves at a crossroads. The dominant liberal capitalist order has been unable to deal with the major problems of our time: the escalating climate crisis, the increased economic inequality and the ensuing despair. As a result, there are cracks in its pervasive ideological construction, with the rise of new populist movements[1] fed by political distrust, polarisation and the weakening

[1] Central examples here are the rise of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the success of various populist parties in Europe, such as SD in Sweden, AFD and BSW in Germany, and the FPÖ in Austria.

of liberalist principles[2]. A world without alternatives inevitably looks to the past. Contemporary post-liberalist visions often end up idealising a distant pre-modern past, where family, nationality and religion played a unifying role. From the perspective of its critics, the liberalism that was supposed to free us and make us equal has instead led to societies mired by material inequality and isolated and lonely populations. Against the background of fragmentation, many find themselves searching for a new sense of belonging, something to ground existence and give it meaning.

The predominant answer to these illiberal and authoritarian tendencies has been to double down on liberalist principles such as civil liberties, tolerance, individuality and diversity. From this perspective, freedom is to be realised by elections, formal political representation and a "rule based international order[3]". Safety and security become new guiding principles, as we make our national borders stronger and prioritise rearming over visions of peace or the health of our planet.

What we are left with are distorted ideas of freedom, far removed from the emancipatory potentials of its origin. This is what Enzo Traverso (2016) points to when he says that we are living through a second disenchantment, for after the collapse of communism, utopian energies have been conflated with its totalitarian downfall, leaving us without promising alternatives. From the perspective of the liberal status quo, emancipatory projects, especially those grounded in the notion of universal freedom, are seen as suspicious or authoritarian. As Samuel Moyn highlights in a recent critique, the liberalism of the last 50 years has been of a kind that has "abhorred mass politics", giving way to neoliberalism and neoconservatism (2023, p. 5).

An alternative answer is to redeem and centre on the ideal of individual freedom instead. This is the point of departure for this thesis: it aims to rethink and explore these tensions of freedom and solidarity in ways that can hopefully pave the way for visions beyond these oppositions. It starts from the problem

[2] Recent books like Patrick Deneen's Why Liberalism Failed (2018) and Regime Change: Towards a Postliberal Future (2023), Samuel Moyn's Liberalism Against Itself (2023) and Adrian Pabst's Postliberal Politics (2021) all point out the current crisis of liberalism, albeit advocating very different answers.

[3] A good example of this is a speech held by NATO secretary Jens Stoltenberg in 2023 on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the threat of authoritarian regimes that "they are coming closer together", "so we must stand together for the rules-based international order". (NATO, 2023). The Western response to the genocide in Gaza that started in October 2023 exemplifies the limitations and contradictory ideology of this dominant liberal order with regards to this ruled-based order.

that I have sketched out in very broad strokes above, that we find ourselves at a crossroads, characterised by ideological contradictions and that we need new visions and ethical values to guide us. As a response, I formulate an ethics of authenticity, preconditioned by the ambiguity of human existence, inspired by the existentialist ethics of Simone de Beauvoir and Marxist theory. It starts from the value of freedom, both as an ontological form and as a principle that gives direction, and proposes a way beyond determinism and fragmentation, allowing for the concreteness of the now as well as the movement of freedom.

Artworks give form to these tensions, for their materiality places them in a relation to their outside that is distinct from human existence. They can grasp the thickness of the now and allow for manifestations of the singular and distinctly ambiguous character of existence. Film has always been placed in a specific relationship with reality. The oppositional force of availability and autonomy mark film's relation to society up until this day, placing it in a bind between mainstream and art, capitalism and its opposition.

*

This study develops the ethics of authenticity through three stages. It starts from the modern idea of freedom and traces some of the contradictory developments that ensued, especially with the advent of the capitalist mode of production. As a response to the tensions of freedom and solidarity I then formulate an alternative framework, the ethics of authenticity. Thirdly, I take the ethics down to earth and engage seven contemporary Scandinavian art films in their particular expressions. Pushing the singularities of the films against the totality of contemporary capitalism allows me to explore some of the intricacies and contradictory forms of freedom and authenticity in our contemporary moment.

Theory, Social Ontology, Reflections

This thesis starts from the premise that the meaning of film as an ethical form cannot be separated from the ethical tensions of the world. In the first two chapters of the thesis, I lay the foundation, emphasising the oppositional pull between subjectivity and objectivity from a distinct critical perspective. I start with a theoretical exploration of the tensions of freedom and solidarity in its ethical, political and aesthetic manifestations. Then I develop an ethical engagement and framework as a response, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir and

Marxian political thought[4]. I propose that bringing together this existentialist conception of subjectivity with Marxian capitalist critique, contribute valuable critical perspectives to studies of art, culture, and the ambiguous connections between film, ethics, and the world.

Beauvoir and Marx are humanist thinkers[5]. They both maintain that freedom is an inherent part of human existence and draw attention to the way that individual freedom is constrained by material conditions. Secondly, they both understand subjectivity as relational. It is the mediated relation between the individual and society, the thing and its totality, that grounds their methods in concrete historical conditions. To engage with Beauvoir and Marx today, then, means that I want to draw renewed attention to core tenets of humanism and a dialectical understanding of the world. The ethics of authenticity is preconditioned by this relational understanding of freedom, and this is why the framework starts from a detailed emphasis on social ontology. These concerns with social ontology permeate the thesis and connects notions of human freedom and solidarity to the tensions of art's autonomy and the world.

My framework is most firmly grounded in Beauvoir's existentialist ethics and critical philosophy, and my engagement springs from her conception of freedom. First and foremost, I draw on her early ethical and political writings from the 1940s and 1950s, what she herself calls the 'moral period' of her thinking (1992, p. 433). I flesh out the distinct ethical and political consequences that arise from her conception of the ambiguity of human existence: that we realise ourselves as freedoms in the world, but at the same time, we experience ourselves "as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things" (1976, p. 5). In this study, I draw attention to Beauvoir's materialist and Marxian roots and put it into contact with aesthetic theory and film. While her philosophy has had a certain renaissance over the last few decades, her political thinking "has not received the attention it deserves", as Sonia Kruks argues (2012, p. 3). I take inspiration from a wide range of Beauvoir

[4] The framework fleshes out distinct aspects of both traditions that I find useful, which means that it is necessarily selective, and it does not in any way outline all the various aspects of their thinking.

[5] I draw inspiration from Kevin Anderson (2017*)*, Mau (2023) and Hägglund (2019), who all centre their contemporary Marxian analysis around Marx's conception of human freedom. Sonia Kruks (2012) and Tove Pettersen (2015) highlight the humanist aspect of Beauvoir's thinking.

scholarship[6], but I primarily draw on American philosopher Sonia Kruk's various engagements with Beauvoir's political thinking.

This thesis also argues that Marxian thought has something to contribute to our contemporary moment. Marx was, and still is, the most well-known critic of capitalism, and the tradition following his thought has been highly controversial and long since rejected as a dominant theoretical framework[7]. It is not the aim of this thesis to settle these debates or outline them in detail, but rather to evoke some specific aspects of his thinking and put it to work. Thus, this thesis builds on a distinctly political aspect of Marxian capitalist critique. I take inspiration from recent studies on Marxian humanism and social ontology in this work, but I mostly rely on Ellen Meiksins Wood[8]'s (2000, 2012, 2016) advancements of Marx's thought and thorough historical studies of the development of capitalism and democracy, up until recent times.

The dissertation starts with a theoretical exploration of freedom from a distinct critical background, inspired by these perspectives. I spend much time on these historical and theoretical developments because the ethical engagement that I propose is preconditioned by this concrete attention to the tensions of freedom in the world. While I obviously cannot – and will not – give a detailed overview of all developments of freedom and its many entanglements with aesthetics and critical theory, I have fleshed out some key aspects that I found to be particularly pertinent for ethical engagements with artworks in our contemporary moment. This is motivated by the perspective that the inherent ambiguity of freedom has led to contradictory developments and distorted notions of autonomy, and that this is the cause of the major ethical tensions of our time. Tracing these tensions and the intricate ways that they come to the fore in philosophy and critical engagements with art has thus become a central part of the study, in ways I did not foresee. I started out with the intention of developing a framework for film analysis that would place Beauvoir's existentialist ethics alongside other film-philosophical developments, but the research led me away from these initial plans. Instead, the exploration pointed

[6] Toril Moi, Tove Pettersen, Meryl Altman and Jonathan Webber are among prominent sources here, in addition to Kruks.

[7] Capitalist critique has had somewhat of a comeback in the last few years, as commented by Nancy Fraser in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022): "capitalism is back!". And of course, in certain spheres it was never gone. However, it is still marginal within main streams of academia and theory.

[8] Wood was a Marxist historian, most known for being one of the primary developers of political Marxism – a strand of theory characterised by an emphasis on historical specificity, lived praxis and a focus on class as relations and process.

me toward concrete human subjectivity, freedom, and the material conditions of capitalism. The result is a study where I primarily lay the groundwork for the ethics of authenticity: I explore and trace tensions of freedom and formulate an ethical response. Then I propose some possible directions for film engagements by putting the ethics to work in four chapters.

Aesthetic theory and film studies

This thesis is motivated by an observation in my engagement with contemporary arthouse[9] films: I was struck by their distinct relation to capitalist standardisation and the contradictory forms of freedom that came out of this tension. Turning to film studies, I could not find the necessary tools to encapsulate the intricacies of this specific relation. This is what led me down a path of theoretical exploration, to Beauvoir's ethics and Marxian capitalist critique. Marxian aesthetic theory and its concrete engagement with artworks' relation to capitalism helped me expand my initial observations.

My engagement with film starts from the dialectical understanding of artworks as both social and autonomous. They are born out of a distinct society and concrete historical conditions, but they have their own specific ways of relating to these conditions. I have taken inspiration from a variety of Marxist aesthetic thinking to form a distinct critical perspective alongside Beauvoirian ethics. Central thinkers here are Walter Benjamin, George Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Fredric Jameson, and Theodor Adorno[10] – but also newer Marxist engagement with art, such as Nicholas Brown (2019), Anna Kornbluh (2023), Dave Beech (2019), Stefanie Bauman (2021), Gernot Böhme (2017), and Mike Wayne (2015). They all start from the premise of art's mediated relation to capitalist totality, even though they end up embracing entirely different aesthetic styles and strategies. This and the fact that all these thinkers started from Marxist capitalist critique but ended up on opposite sides in various debates of aesthetic

[9] I define arthouse cinema in chapter 3 as "the kind of film that is situated on the creative and economic spectrum between mainstream cinema and what we call the avant-garde, low budget or art film". This is a bit more specific than 'art film', which can include films without any institutional or economic backing.

[10] Of these, Theodor Adorno has been especially inspirational for my understanding and conception of art's ontology and authenticity. In chapter 2, I lay out my conception of art's social ontology.

strategies has served as inspiration for my exploration of art's autonomy and how it stands in tension with capitalism.

The specific characteristics of artworks designate them a status as a possible 'other' to capitalism, which starts from the modern idea of art's autonomy[11]. This is why I centre my theoretical engagements around concerns with art's social ontology rather than film ontology, because art's movement to freedom is not designated by medium specificity but by the specific tension of singular artworks to their conditions. This does not mean that film's specific way of being does not factor into this relation. Film's specific relationship with reality is characterised by being a child of the era of technological reproduction and the breakdown of barriers between art and people (Benjamin, 2008). The distinct mimetic quality of images led to a critical emphasis on film's specific obligation to reality (Bazin, 2010) as well as the potentiality of mass appeal. This oppositional force of availability and autonomy marks film's relation to society up until this day. 'Film' as such is neither pure representation, democratic or deceptive, of course, for as with any art form, its autonomy is relational and particular in each instant. But the distinct character that gives form to the mass appeal of images[12] does, however, characterise film's concrete way of being in the world. These attributes act as a basis for my critical engagements with film.

In the 1960s and 1970s, ideology critique became a main concern for film theory, inspired by Althusserian structuralism, but also psychoanalysis and text-oriented semiotics. These various critical engagements started from Marxian capitalist critique, but its entanglements with structuralism and psychoanalysis distorted its dialectical foundation, leading to either simplistic rigidity when influenced by the former or abstraction when influenced by the latter[13]. These perspectives were rejected, and from the 1990s film studies took a turn towards more 'scientific' approaches on the one side[14], and a cultural

[11] But they take on contradictory forms, as I discuss in chapter 1. One central question that runs throughout the dissertation is the distinction between elitist matters of taste and the idea of autonomy.

[12] See Wayne (2015) for a discussion of the critical democratic potential of the "image" versus that of the "word". What is meant by the 'representational quality' of images goes beyond the debate on 'indexicality' and digital versus film and is not a question of technology as such.

[13] I discuss this further in chapter 1.

[14] Central here are David Bordwell (1996) and Noel Carroll (1988), who with their rejection of 'grand theory' paved the wave for a cognitive and 'scientific' orientation within film studies, grounded in cognitive theories, schemas and analytic philosophy.

emphasis on spectator positions and various identity categories on the other[15]. In the wake of the postmodern rejection of grand narratives and the cultural move away from considerations of class, Marxian aesthetic theory does not have a prominent place in contemporary film studies[16].

This dissertation seeks to unite ethical and political perspectives in the engagement with artworks and film. Even if capitalist critique has taken a backseat since the turn to scientism and cultural studies in the 1990s, a renewed attention to ethics and philosophy has reinvigorated film studies since the millennium shift[17]. Questions on whether film is, or can do, philosophy has been a central concern[18], alongside ethical and aesthetic considerations of affect, bodies and otherness[19]. Many scholars have turned to theoretical frameworks based on the work of Gilles Deleuze[20], Maurice Merleau-Ponty[21] and Emmanuel Levinas[22], but there have also been a few studies on existentialism[23] and Simone de Beauvoir[24]. These studies on Beauvoir and film have first and foremost been concerned with feminist perspectives or

[15] What can be deemed a turn to cultural studies, see for example Holm & Duncan (2018) and Rodowick (1994).

[16] This obviously does not mean that it is dead. Notable exceptions to this include the two anthologies *Marx and the Movies* (2014) and *Contemporary Cinema and Neoliberal Ideology* (2018).

[17] This shift has been given several names and includes various strands of thinking: Asbjørn Grønstad deems it an 'ethical turn' (2016), Anu Koivunen speaks of a 'turn to affect' (2015) and Martine Beugnet a 'phenomenological turn' (2017).

[18] There have been a number of accounts of this question over the last 20 or so years. See for example Wartenberg's Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy (2007), Frampton's Filmosophy (2006), The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film (2009), Sinnerbrink's New Philosophies on Film (2011) and Elseasser's European Cinema and Continental Philosophy (2019).

[19] Prominent examples here include Sobchack (1992, 2004), Beugnet (2012) and Marks (2000).

[20] See for example Beugnet (2012), Olkowski (1999), Bolt (2010), Rizzo (2012).

[21] See for example Sobchack (1992, 2004) and Chamarette (2012).

[22] See for example Elsaesser (2019), Grønstad (2016), Hole (2015)

[23] See Pamerleau's Existentialist Cinema and Bad Faith in Film Spectatorship (2020), Dulk's New Sincerity and Frances Ha in Light of Sartre, Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective (2014) and Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Beauvorian Perspective (2012).

[24] The two central examples here are Ince's The Body and The Screen (2017) and Fuery's Ambiguous Cinema. From Simone de Beauvoir to Feminist Film-phenomenology (2020).

phenomenological attention to embodiedness and intersubjectivity, which is a different approach from the Beauvoirian conception that I am fleshing out.

A central aspect of the developments of the last couple of decades has been a critical response to how the analysis of the films themselves has been left out of film studies, which has meant a return to concerns with aesthetics and art's autonomy, often centred around the issue of 'representation'[25]. This rejection of representation took on a specific theoretical perspective following the postmodern rejection of universalism, humanism and grand narratives. Many of these aforementioned studies and perspectives have contributed valuable insights and much-needed critique of dualist rigidity and ideological forms of 'rationality'[26] that pervade our culture. The renewed attention to aesthetics and film's autonomy and specific formal characteristics has also been an inspiration for my engagements here. The overall tendency among these various theoretical strands is a general move away from universality to particularity, and an emphasis on difference and otherness. Even though I place my study within this (re)turn to ethics and philosophy, then, and especially the return to the 'films themselves', this is where my perspective differs from the above[27]. I seek to rethink and reclaim the notion of universalism, as well as questions of clarity and aesthetic autonomy, and I do this through a concrete engagement with the social logic of capitalism. Furthermore, I want to extend film-philosophical engagements with film to include a specific critical attention to the political, inspired by distinct aspects of Marx-inflected aesthetic theory and Beauvoir's existentialist ethics. I propose that bringing these perspectives together through an emphasis on freedom and authenticity pave the way for critical engagements with film that reclaim notions of clarity and the concrete while not falling prey to neither determinism nor abstraction.

[25] This follows from debates concerning art's autonomy from the onset of modernity. Jameson (2020) argues that the issue of 'representation' was the postmodern version of the earlier realism–modernism debate.

[26] Examples of this include Beugnet's critique of Cartesian dualism (2012) and Grønstad's critique of positivist mimeticism (2020). I see these critiques alongside my critique of the militant realism and cynicism of our moment, even if my study takes on a very different theoretical trajectory.

[27] This is also why I am not explicitly engaging these various perspectives much in my dissertation, even if they have informed and inspired my overall approach and engagement with film.

Ethical Engagements, Structure, Film Selection

This study develops the ethics of authenticity across six chapters, in three stages. First, I start by tracing the tensions of freedom and solidarity, emphasising the oppositional pull of subjectivity and objectivity and how this comes to the fore in ethics, politics and film aesthetics. Then I formulate an ethical framework - the ethics of authenticity – as a response to these problems. After these two initial chapters, I put the ethics to work through concrete engagements with seven different films and the way they give form to – and handle – these problems and tensions. These chapters exemplify and propose some possible directions for ethical engagement with films.

The ethics of authenticity is an authentic attitude and engagement with the world and not a static trait or a recipe, following Beauvoir's assessment that "ethics does no furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods." (1976, p. 145). The core of this authentic engagement, or method, is to grasp the thickness of the world. This is the only way to assume my freedom and the freedom of others, which is why this study oscillates between different perspectives, striving to hold on to tensions of the concrete and open. It formulates a distinct ethical principle – authenticity – that can give direction to action and unite us in solidarity, but it does not predetermine any specific content. In my engagement with the films, this means starting from this tension of the film to its surroundings by taking seriously its ontological status as relational and trying to grasp and put into words what comes out of the singular work's response to its conditions. This is a form of engagement that prohibits any determinist notion of history or technology, which is why the attention is on the films themselves.

The specific engagements thus consist of close analysis of the films themselves, not their makers, technology, or mode of production. I want to flesh out what these films do with the conditions that they exist in, *and* what they say about the world. This means that I strive to hold on to the tensions of the film's ambiguous autonomous existence and the way they give form to these tensions in the world, for example, through their human characters. The analysis connects existentialist attention to ambiguity with a more distinct political emphasis on capitalism and class conditions. Some films invite more of the former, and some more of the latter, but all engagements start from the ethics of authenticity.

Concerns with the contradictory tensions of film and pervasive capitalist logic have led me to seven contemporary Scandinavian[28] films in the space between mainstream and art: *Eat Sleep Die* (Pichler, 2012), *We Are Here Now* (Halle, 2020), *The Worst Person in the World* (Trier, 2021), *Gritt* (Guttormsen, 2021), *Triangle of Sadness* (Östlund, 2022), *Fallen Leaves* (Kaurismäki, 2023) and *Avanti* (Dahl, 2024). These specific films were chosen because they give form to interesting aspects of freedom and authenticity in our time. They mark the tension between the concrete conditions of the now and the potentiality and freedom of what could be, in ways that allow me to explore the intricacies of freedom and solidarity. While Marxist aesthetic concerns that differentiate between art and cultural products[29] provide a useful starting point for critical engagements with what capitalist does to art, my concern lies away from these kinds of strict differentiations. Rather, I am interested in the very space between these, wanting to draw attention to the contradictory tensions of standardisation and singularity that can happen within one work. This means that the selection ranges from mainstream arthouse aesthetics to low-budget independent productions, allowing me to draw attention to and discuss different aspects of the relationship between mainstream, art, taste, aesthetic conventions and popularity.

Outline

The thesis starts with a chapter in which I outline the critical background for my exploration. This is where I unite ethical, political and aesthetic engagements with freedom and authenticity, from a distinct critical perspective. In chapter 2, I formulate my ethical-political framework inspired by the existentialist ethics of Simone de Beauvoir and Marxian theory. This is also where I connect the ethics of authenticity to art and Marxian aesthetic theory. Based on this, I formulate my ontological understanding of artworks and explore aesthetic engagements from the perspective of authenticity.

[28] Out of the seven films, four are Norwegian, two are Swedish and one is Finnish. The term "Scandinavian" is therefore loosely applied, as it conveys a broader context than any given country, and "Nordic" would be too broad. It is also, quite frankly, simpler than "Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish films".

[29] Adorno & Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997b) is one prominent example here. For a newer discussion, see Brown (2019).

In chapter 3, I engage with the two arthouse and auteur films *Triangle of Sadness* and *The Worst Person in the World*. The films allow me to explore the entanglements between distinct aspects of arthouse cinema and the way it relates to ideas of beauty, authenticity and art's autonomy in contemporary culture. Chapter 4 explores the givenness of 'the real' and the anguish of meaninglessness through an analysis of *We Are Here Now* and *Avanti*. *We Are Here Now* marks out tensions of mediation and finds its way beyond ready-made aesthetic conventions while producing meaninglessness as a distinct problem of the now. Similarly, *Avanti* explores the anguish of contemporary working conditions. In chapter 5, I revisit the Marxian realist emphasis on clarity and the notion of totality with the films *Fallen Leaves* and *Eat Sleep Die*. Both films utilise aesthetic strategies of realism and clarity in their exploration of the causal complexes of class conditions, as well as the possibilities for solidarity. The last film analysis is an engagement with *Gritt,* a film that explores the stakes in striving for authenticity. It gives expression to forms of solidarity characterised by openness, curiosity and the willingness to stake a claim.

Chapter 1 Tensions of Freedom and Solidarity from The Enlightenment to Contemporary Capitalism

Since the onset of modernity, individual freedom has taken on contradictory and paradoxical forms. The belief in human rationality and autonomy replaced the rigid formal hierarchies of earlier social systems, which gave way to new, more impersonal forms of hierarchies and domination. Whereas earlier traditions were unfree, they were predictable, and religious and family structures provided moral values. As freedom was introduced, the human subject was made to stand alone, facing the harsh conditions of the world. In response to these developments and the moral vacuum that ensued, the modern ideal of authenticity arose in an attempt to create ethical meaning grounded in freedom and individuality. 'To be true to oneself' became a guideline for how to live one's life. Even though this might seem straightforward and simple, this notion, like freedom, quickly descends into obscurity. Furthermore, both notions are easily co-opted by unfree mechanisms and structures, due to their inherent ambiguous nature. This has led to an oppositional pull, for and against freedom, rationality and universalism. For and against the concept of the human subject.

In this chapter, I trace the tensions of freedom and solidarity from the onset of modernity up until today, from a distinct critical perspective. As such, it serves as a critical background that connects ethical, political, and aesthetic questions of freedom and sees these different considerations as ambiguously connected.

The Problem of Freedom

> The search for authenticity, nearly everywhere we find it in modern times, is bound up with a radical rejection of things as they are. (Berman, 2009, p. xxvii)

Authenticity is a distinctly modern ethical ideal[30]. It can be traced back to the onset of modernity in Europe and the pursuit for freedom, which led to major changes in our ontological understanding of human existence. Old hierarchies and traditions were seen as an obstacle to change, and religion was rejected alongside the scientific belief in a natural human telos. Human beings were to be seen as individual subjects with rational capacities rather than mere placeholders in a social system. As these social hierarchies broke down, one's sense of self in the world was fundamentally transformed. Now the individual became the source of ethical value instead of some higher power such as God or a sovereign king. In the absence of explicitly enforced rules, a vacuum was created. Authenticity thus came to be in the clash between rationality and freedom on one side, and the ensued yearning for pre-modern community and morals on the other.

Modernity is understood by its division from the medieval era, a decisive break that meant one could no longer rely on assumptions, traditions and practices previously taken for granted. The preceding feudal system was defined by agricultural economy, and countries were controlled by monarchs or emperors. With modernity, the economy became industrial, and the social system became capitalist, with the implementation of various institutions and policies that eventually led to liberal democracies. What defined the modern era intellectually was the project of Enlightenment, driven by the underlying belief that expansion of knowledge through scientific understanding and reason would lead to epistemological progress. These scientific advancements coincided with political emancipatory struggles, which culminated with the French Revolution and "the realization of a free legal, political and personal order, within which people were encouraged to live mature individual lives" (Shuttleworth, 2021, p. 19).

Immanuel Kant (1996) famously proclaimed that "Sapere aude! Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding!" was the motto of Enlightenment. He

[30] It is authenticity as a form of ethical engagement with the world starting from modernity that concerns me here, which draws from pre-modern notions of originality, but takes on a different conceptual/historical direction. This outline is built on studies on authenticity as a concept by Taylor (1991), Shuttleworth (2021), Berman (2009) and Trilling (1972).

argued that the goal of enlightenment was for man to emerge from self-incurred immaturity – the choice to remain dependent on others. For Kant, the project of Enlightenment had to do with challenging conventions and enlightening the masses: to mature intellectually was to liberate oneself from authority. Maturity was not only an end, but also a means to increased freedom or autonomy. From this, Kant (2007) formulated a categorical imperative grounded on the principle of rational nature. Not only do I conceive of my own existence as rational, but this is also the same for every rational being; it is universal. The practical imperative that follows is that we should act in ways that treat humanity "never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (2007, p. 107).

The Enlightenment project brought about ideals of freedom, rationality and universality, and this was politically radical in the sense that it paved the way for emancipatory struggles and civil liberties. Central here is the idea that in order to be truly free, I need to be able to decide for myself how to live my life. The individual and the system were caught up in tensions from the start, for in order to advance my freedom I need to live in a world that allows me to do so. Thus, the newfound concept of individual freedom led to contradictory developments, as domination and hierarchies took on new forms.

Capitalism or Enlightenment

In the softening of formalised social hierarchies, modernity brought with it new ways of organising society to better ensure the freedom of each individual. Instead of an absolutist ruler, the modern state was to ensure the rights and freedoms of its citizens under the rule of law. A distinct difference between earlier forms of explicit hierarchies and the new liberal state has to do with the separation of private and public spheres, as Ellen Meiksins Wood[31] points out, for liberalism "has as its fundamental pre-condition the development of a centralized state separate from and superior to other, more particularistic jurisdictions" (2016, p. 229). This new division, between state and 'civil society', meant a transfer of power relations and domination to private property, which laid the foundation for an increasing separation of the private from public responsibilities, which came to fruition in capitalism (ibid, p. 252).

[31] The following outline is largely based on her Marx-inflected historical analysis.

For Wood, capitalism[32] represents the culmination of a long development as well as a qualitative break. Characterised by the transformation of social power and division of labour between state and private property, it marked the creation of a new form of social coercion: the market.

In earlier societies, relationships were founded on static and more or less permanent social roles that were ascribed to you, which meant that it was very difficult to flee or advance. Since power hierarchies were explicit and clearly stated, one's sense of self, was stable and never really in flux. It was fundamentally unfree but predictable. Marshall Berman points to how servitude was personal in pre-modernity, and the servants were bound to their particular master (2009, p. 143). Modern society changed the nature of human relationships by the specific role that competition played for the individual's inclusion in the social system. People now have to compete with each other, to distinguish themselves as valuable, for their place in the world is neither given nor permanent. Relationships are thus experienced as perpetually unstable, for we are told that we can always advance, that we can always do better. The separation of state and civil society has certainly given rise to new forms of freedom and equality, but it has also "created new modes of domination and coercion" (Wood, 2016, p. 254).

The creation of the distinctly new private realm[33] made way for a unique structure of power and domination based on a "ruthless systemic logic" (Wood, 2016, p. 254). What is distinct about the state of freedom in modernity is that "a man at the bottom seemed as free as the man at the top", and the system of domination has become impersonal, hidden, Berman argues (2009, p. 143). Our lives are dominated by capitalist structures, but we are told that we are free, that we can advance our position at any time. Capitalism depends on the idea that the human being has absolute freedom in order to advance its logic of capital accumulation, and so it takes up Enlightenment notions of universalism and egalitarianism to advance its only goal: capital accumulation.

Wood points to the way capitalism is taken for granted and seen as 'natural', something that was always already there. We are told that the economy is something abstract and 'out there' and that our private lives are free, but since

[32] Wood defines capitalism as "a system in which good and services, down to the most basic necessities of life, are produced for profitable exchange where even human-labour power is a commodity for sale in the market and where the requirements of competitions and profit-maximization are the fundamental rules of life" (2000, p. 408).

[33] See Wood (2012, 2016) for her in-depth historical examination of the transformation from pre-modern systems to modern capitalist society.

we are forced to partake in wage labour to survive, we cannot escape the market coercion in society. From this perspective, capitalism is a system of social totality, but it works by fragmentation, splitting and dividing its potential opposing forces. In his work on capitalist totality, George Lukács pointed to how modern science, due to the specialisation of skills, has destroyed "every image of the whole" (2018, p. 82). As such, science cannot comprehend the social character of the economy and the way it works as a totality.

It is important to not conflate the capitalist mode of production with the Enlightenment project. For while it is often told as the story where capitalism, liberalism, and the Enlightenment project form a single cultural formation, these should be seen as distinct formations with different ideological origins, Wood contends. In *Capitalism or Enlightenment?* (2000) she stresses the distinctions between them, pointing out the intellectual difference between capitalist and enlightenment theory. To put it simply, the main distinction between capitalism and the Enlightenment project is that while both sought progress and development, the Enlightenment project sought progress with the improvement of humanity as its main goal[34], while for capitalism the goal was advancement of productivity and profit above all else (Wood, 2000, p. 426). Tracing Enlightenment thought to France and capitalism to England, she points out that the Enlightenment thinkers were first and foremost bourgeois intellectuals who concerned themselves with ideas, while the English were landlords of members of the royal society with an interest in enhancing labour productivity (2000, p. 418). This is not to undermine the evils perpetrated in the name of Enlightenment, such as its oppressive, racist and imperialist manifestations, Wood insists, but to acknowledge its paradoxical and complicated nature.

This paradox became even more apparent with modern liberal democracy, which introduced liberalist principles to the newfound demand for individual freedom. Liberalism is characterised by an emphasis on civil liberties, the protection of privacy against the state, toleration, individuality and diversity (Wood, 2016, p. 227). Where ancient democracy meant rule by the people in a direct sense of political participation, liberalism introduced the idea of 'representative democracy', which meant that the majority were to choose representatives to make political decisions for them. The emphasis on inclusion and diversity advocated by liberals, such as John Stuart Mill, led to the fight for civil liberties for all, including universal suffrage. While there is no doubt

[34] Wood points to the ideas of Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet and his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* as an example of this.

that this particular aspect of liberalism addresses the lack of inclusivity in ancient democracy, it is important to acknowledge that the introduction of modern democracy resulted in a transfer of political power from the majority of the people to the few[35]. The division between state, economy and private spheres also meant that economic power was moved out of politics at the same time that politics became more inclusive. Wood points out that the critical issue is not merely that representation replaced direct democracy, but that it was founded on a basis that favoured the rich and the well-off[36].

Throughout the 20th century, this tension of economy and democracy led to much conflict, but after the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracy became characterised by a renewed dominance of liberalist principles, market orientation and splitting of spheres. Contemporary critical thinkers such as Nancy Fraser (2022) and Quinn Slobodian (2023) argue that the ongoing pressures on democratic principles must begin from a critique of capitalism. In the words of Fraser, "capitalism is fundamentally anti-democratic" (2022, p. 109).

Authenticity and the quest for purity

> (…) the history of inwardness became, from its first day on, the history of its downfall (Adorno, 2003, p. 59)

The ideal of authenticity came about as a response to these historical developments: to a perceived loss of meaning, and a process of rationalisation that led to what Max Weber famously proclaimed as "the disenchantment of the world" (1991, p. 155). With the onset of modernity, scientific standards and reason replaced earlier cultural practices that did not uphold these standards. In addition, the capitalist mode of production paved the way for a social system characterised by market coercion, competition and fragmentation. From the perspective of capital, there is no morality, only the logic of capital accumulation. These simultaneous developments caused a

[35] It is important to point out that Wood does not in any way advocate that we go back to a time before liberal civil liberties, but to shed critical light on the consequences of the development of liberal democracy. The answer is not to go back in time, but to find new ways forward.

[36] Wood traces the notion of the distinctly modern form of 'representative democracy' to the founders of the US constitution.

moral crisis of sorts, for at the same time as religious frameworks were weakened, competition also led to the weakening of community structures. Hence, as Shuttleworth summarises, the problem of modernity lies in the loss of meaning and "the promise and failure to deliver individual freedom" (2021, p. 34). No wonder, then, that so many turned towards idealised notions of the past, or ideas of a human subject in complete harmony with nature, separated from these destructive social structures. The entanglement of this moral longing with the Enlightenment quest for knowledge and truth contributed to the notion that some ideas, and thus some people or groups of people, were superior to others. Conceptions of human existence linked to purity and transcendence were a central aspect of these disturbing manifestations.

In Charles Taylor's view, authenticity is a child of the Romantic period and draws from the critique of disengaged rationality and the atomism that has severed the ties of community (1991, p. 25). It draws from earlier religious notions of morality and a sense of being in contact with some source of good in order to be a complete human. In earlier times, this sense of being good was attributed to God, but with modernity came the view that it stemmed from ourselves, and we needed to turn inward to find our innermost essence. As argued by Shuttleworth, contemporary notions of authenticity often draw upon these romantic ideals, inspired above all by the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau[37], but also Friedrich Hölderlin and Johann Gottfried von Herder (2021, p. 46-54). This romantic approach to authenticity implies that we all possess some inner essence that we must discover through self-reflection. Furthermore, this essence is often linked to a sense of natural wholeness and of reunification with nature. In 1970, Marshall Berman (2009) articulated a new morality and politics inspired by Rousseau, emphasising a sense of ethical individualism and a vision of a new type of authentic being[38].

The notion of reuniting with one's inner wholeness presupposes a conception of 'real' human nature as split from the social, a sense of pureness outside of historical conditions. Rousseau's view of 'the natural man' is that he is unity, an "absolute whole" that is only fractured when placed within society (1979, p. 39-40). His analysis of the oppressive social structures and its consequences for human freedom led to exceptionally valuable implementations of

[37] Both Charles Taylor (1991), Marshall Berman (2009) and Lionel Trilling (1972) all link the ethics of authenticity to Rousseau.

[38] This is especially evident in *Emile* where Rousseau lays out a detailed plan for education so that one can be in integrity with oneself: "to be something, to be oneself and always one, a man must act as he speaks; he must always be decisive in making his choice" (1979, p. 40).

democratic ideals and equality[39], but problems arise when this inner wholeness is given specific values of goodness or badness. In Rousseau's view of human existence, we are naturally harmonious, but modernity introduced competition and market coercion that led to alienation and fragmentation. While his critique of modernity and its effects on human beings were radical and forward-thinking in many aspects, the notion of inner harmonious unity has troublesome consequences. It can lead to forms of nostalgia that does not acknowledge the problems of the past[40], and turning inwards can also become a distinguishing feature, linked to individual superiority.

Since individuals now had to distinguish themselves from each other in competition, authenticity and superiority became vehicles for laying claim to advantageous differences. It was from this perspective that Theodor Adorno launched his critique of authenticity, especially of the German variations[41], and its links to authoritarianism from the 1920s onwards. In several of his texts, Adorno addressed the concept and the ways it points to a dangerous illusion of originality beyond the social realm.

This idea of the supremacy of the original has horrific social consequences, Adorno argued, for it legitimises the claim that "he who was there first has the greatest rights". Values like authenticity when understood as supremacy of the original can thus become a means of "usurping religious-authoritarian pathos," which he links to "converted and unconverted philosophers of fascism" (2020, p. 162). In *The Jargon of Authenticity* (2003), he argued that these ideas had seeped into society, becoming an ideology, a jargon and a 'cult of inwardness'. From this perspective, the authentic state is contrasted with the contingent one, which led to a quest for purity that "retreats from the empirical content of subjectivity. The very premise that we should search for some lost purity or wholeness within can quickly turn elitist, with people thinking themselves superior and 'belonging to an extraordinary family'" (ibid, p. 61).

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[39] His defence of (direct) democracy in *The Social Contract* (2004) is just one of his many valuable contributions.

[40] Against this, Berman (2009) argues that Rousseau's emphasis on individual freedom was far from an argument for going back to pre-modern times. What concerns me here is not an assessment of Rousseau's philosophy specifically, but the particular problems that follow from the conception of inner unity and how it relates to authenticity as an ethical ideal.

[41] In *The Jargon of Authenticity* (2003), Adorno traces authenticity to the work of a group of religious revivalists in the 1920's, inspired by the religious philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. The central thinker he engages in the text is Martin Heidegger. As heirs of this thinking, he mentions Karl Jaspers, Otto Friedrich Bollnow and Ulrich Sonnemann. These thinkers were called "the authentic ones" (Jay, 2006, p. 24).

Simone de Beauvoir also linked the belief in purity to elitism, and the contradictory ways that new hierarchies could be built from the premise of universal freedom: for "superiority is the ultimate justification" (2012b, p. 165). As Karl Marx (1998) pointed out in his critique of German ideology, domination is intimately linked to the control of ideas. With modernity, the ideas increasingly took on the form of universality, "to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society" (…) "and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones" (1998, p. 68). Inspired by this Marxian notion, Beauvoir (2012b) maintained that the specific kind of universalism proclaimed by those in power[42] is a form of elitist thinking that espouses universality while always working for exclusion and notions of intrinsic superiority. This is based on a wildly inconsistent logic where superiority is both innate *and* deserved, a whole system of thought that "amounts to this truism: privilege belongs to the privileged" (2012b, p. 164). This is intimately linked to a conception of humanity as a given species, Beauvoir claims, a view of human nature that goes against "both history and praxis" (ibid, p. 176).

Art's Autonomy and The Question of Realism

Authenticity understood as something pure and original outside of history is thus characterised by its opposition to the chaos of the world, an answer to the need for a new ethical value facing the fragmentation of new orders. This points towards the close links between authenticity and art, and how the contradictory visions of freedom prompted by the Enlightenment affected understandings of art and beauty. Earlier understandings of art were led by the notion of mimesis[43]; art was first and foremost seen to be a representation of reality. The modern sense of art, on the other hand, placed value on art's autonomy. Art was no longer a mere imitation of the world; it had its own value and created something distinctly new. From this perspective, art is defined as

[42] Her attack in this text is on "the bourgeoise", which she links to 'right wing thought', and various different political and theoretical strands of thinking.

[43] Mimesis is foremost linked to the Ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and the word is most often translated to mean 'imitation' or 'to imitate'. From this perspective, art is seen to first and foremost imitate reality. (See for example *Plato's Aesthetics* in Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.)

having some self-legislating features, and "its form is intelligible, but not by reference to any external end" (Brown, 2019, p. 31).

Kant's conception of aesthetics became especially influential for the modern perspective on art: for him, the aesthetic experience was without specific use value. After all, a person deserted on a desert island would not seek out the experience of beautiful flowers (2000, p. 177). This gave rise to the perspective of art and aesthetics as a specific form of sensory experience, one that is "disconnected from the normal forms of sensory experience" as summarised by Jacques Rancière (2015, p. 181). What happened during Kant's time could be seen as an 'aesthetic revolution', where the hierarchical domination of the representative order was overturned (ibid, p. 184). As such, the freedom of art was connected to the freedom of humans, and in the breakdown of former hierarchies, new ones were established. The idea of aesthetics as something distinct from the rest of society gave rise to new forms of paradoxical tensions with regards to freedom and authenticity, as ideas of art were used as a new tool for social distinction[44]. The ability to appreciate beauty for its own sake could play a part in education, and in being an enlightened, free person, as opposed to the unknowing majority. Thus, even though Kant's influence on aesthetic thinking has much broader implications, it also contributed to the distinct ways in which beauty and art could be used as a tool for exclusion, to distinguish freedom as something for the few and not for the majority. This became especially evident in the clash of capitalism and freedom.

With industrial capitalist mass production, the purposiveness of artworks became caught up in the pervasive logic of capital accumulation, tying them to market processes and notions of exchangeability[45]. Artworks thus found themselves in a bind due to their linkage to commodity characteristics: being something that has use value in a society predetermined by the logic of market exchange. This relationship between art and capitalism was a central concern for anti-capitalist thinkers, who concerned themselves with the distinct ways that capitalism and ideals of modernity came together to form an ideology of mass deception. Artworks and culture became central to their critique, especially the question of whether art could act as an oppositional force. Here,

[44] I follow from Gernot Böhme's (2017, chap. 4) argument that Kant's aesthetic thinking is an example of the 'aesthetics of taste', with its source in English sensualism, and the idea of the beautiful and the sublime, concerned with senses, taste, aesthetic education, and thus social distinction. (2016, p. 54-57).

[45] This outline is inspired by Nicholas Brown's critical perspective in *Autonomy – The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (2019), who lays out this development in more detail. See also Böhme (2017) and Beech (2019).

art's autonomy and form and the role of the working class, or 'the people', played a central role, as evidenced by the opposition between popular culture and the avant-garde.

As Walter Benjamin (2008) has pointed out, it was against the background of reproducibility and the technology of mass production that one began to obsess over art's originality and authenticity. The idea of the authentic artwork was thus born out of, and against, the idea of the inauthentic, mass-produced art[46]. According to Benjamin, artworks had previously been defined by their 'aura', their 'one-of-a-kind' value that was derived from ritual and tradition (2008, p. 11). The reproduced work of art, on the other hand, is detached from this sphere of tradition, which changes the nature and function of art. Instead of being defined by distance and contemplation, art could now enter people's lives, potentially breaking down barriers and mobilising "the participation of the masses" (ibid, p. 23). He believed that the changed sensory participation brought about by changes could have positive political consequences due to its immersive qualities, especially in cinema, where "the audience is an examiner, but a distracted one" (ibid, p. 35).

Opposed to this view, Adorno & Horkheimer (1997b) saw the technology of mass production as a standardising tool that formalises and unifies society, resulting in negation of individuality and a "wholesale deception of the masses" (1997b, p. 42). They argued that capitalist production made art into pure commodities, interchangeable and exchangeable, and any singularity was replaced by familiar tropes, ready-made clichés and generalised features. Adorno was especially critical of Benjamin's belief in the mobilising potential of popular culture and what he saw as a "blind confidence on the spontaneous power of the proletariat in the historical process" (2020, p. 133). He disagreed with Benjamin's assessment of aura and argued for the autonomous potentiality of artworks, which he found to be first and foremost in modernist works. In his view, autonomous art opposes dominant structures by forming their own world with their own internal logic detached from the empirical world. As such, his perspective is an example of a distinctly critical conception of autonomy, one that differs from the Kantian version[47].

[46] Martin Jay (2006) and Eva Geulen (2002) have both pointed to this specific aspect of Benjamin's essay. As Geulen writes: "authenticity is a belated effect. In the beginning was not the original, but rather the reproduction, which makes the concept of authenticity possible in the first place" (2002, p. 135).

[47] Gernot Böhme's distinction between two different sources of aesthetic theory from modernity is useful here: unlike Kant's aesthetics of taste, the Adornian source can be

For Adorno, the autonomous potential of artworks lies in their form, for "real denunciation is probably only a capacity of form which is overlooked by a social aesthetic that believes in themes" (1997a, p. 313). He opposed the notion that art could challenge capitalism through statement, content or themes, believing that "art becomes social knowledge by grasping the essence, not by endlessly talking about it, illustrating it, or somehow imitating it" (ibid, p. 350). Adorno rejected realism as idealism, because it postulates reality as an unbroken continuum joining subject and object (2020, p. 194). From his perspective, the technology of film was suspect due to the photographic process which made it "primarily representational". He felt that "the aesthetics of film is thus inherently concerned with society" (1981, p. 202).

Realism as an aesthetic strategy is multifaceted, as evidenced by the differing opinions of some of its proponents, such as George Lukács, Bertolt Brecht and André Bazin. It follows from classical notions of art but goes in different directions, as it is taken up by critical anti-capitalist thinkers. The belief in realist art, coupled with faith in the mobilising potential of art to 'educate', has long since been associated with Marxian aesthetic thought[48]. Lukács (2020) emphasised the way that realism probed beneath the surface of immediate experience into the reality of life under capitalist totality, as opposed to the abstract strategy of modernism, which he believed only served to reinforce the logic of fragmentation. His primary interest was realist novels and the creation of certain personality traits and characters that could serve as "prophetic figures" (2020, p. 45). He was critical of modern technologies, especially film montage, which he felt only served to tear particular pieces of reality from their context – a completely different take on film from Adorno. Furthermore, Lukács linked the emphasis on 'totality' and the 'whole' to an aesthetic concern with *content*, instead of what he deemed to be a formalist modernism, whose aesthetic emphasis cut it off from mainstream society.

Brecht had a different take on realism, often in direct opposition to Lukács[49]. He took issue with what he thought to be a narrow approach, specifically the

found in German rationalism, and is characterised by the development of aesthetics as a distinct theory of art, unlike Kant's "aesthetics of taste". (2017, pp. 53-70).

[48] This dissertation take as a starting point some distinct aspects of the opposition of realism and modernism as it relates to freedom, but will not provide any in-depth exploration of its many differing aspects. See Jameson (2020), Mazierska and Kristensen (2015) and Wayne (2015) for updated discussions of the connection between realism and Marxist thought, the two latter for discussion of film specifically.

[49] His text "Against Georg Lukács" in *Aesthetics & Politics* (2020) was a direct confrontation with George Lukács, written in 1938.

emphasis on content as opposed to form, which he saw as being "too primitive". Realism as a method was meant to reveal the causal complexes of society, but the specific strategies used would necessarily change from case to case, since "reality changes", Brecht argued, and it did not make sense to pin down the "one and only realism" (2015, p. 232). He argued in favour of formal experimentation and took an anti-elitist stance against the notion that workers would not be interested in experimentation. For Brecht, popularity and realism were natural companions, for truthful representations of life are in the interests of the people. He thus argued for an art that served "the broad masses of the people, for the many oppressed by the few" (2015, p. 231).

The quarrel of realism stems from a misunderstanding, according to Bazin – a confusion between 'true realism', which has to do with a significant and concrete expression of the world and its essence, and a 'pseudo-realism' that produces illusory appearances (2010, p. 91). Bazin concerned himself first and foremost with photography and film, which due to its technological process was "the art of the real". It was the objective quality of the photograph that gave it a specific obligation towards reality, which points to the specific responsibility of representing the nature of the world before attempting to change it. As such, these differing perspectives on realism all have to do with the strategy of exposing reality before transforming it. The distinction between realism as truth or illusion influenced a lot of critical engagements with art, especially from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, but it remains just as relevant today.

The realism-modernism aesthetic debate thus points to the contradictions of freedom and authenticity and the oppositional pull of subjectivity and objectivity. Do we oppose exploitation by detailing and exposing the layers of our social totality or by pointing the way beyond our current situation through detachment and rupture? Do we place our emphasis on the totality of capitalist exploitation or the singularity of subjective experience? Clarity of the message or obscure experimentation? Of course, all these various thinkers had in common a critical engagement with artwork's relation to the social totality, and a political investment in putting an end to the domination of capitalism. Where they differed was in their stance on which side of the dialectic of art and society to put their emphasis. What is revealed by this short outline is the inherent difficulty of staying in the tension of the dialectic[50].

[50] I will get back to this question, and Adorno's aesthetic theory, in chapter 2.

Marxian humanism and historical materialism

> A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. (Marx, 2013, p. 120-121)

> A Marxism shorn of humanism is a Marxism no longer interested in human emancipation. (Wayne & Leslie, 2017)

What happens to the human being when met with the dominating logic of capital accumulation? The most prominent critique of capitalism and the way it delimits human freedom was advanced by Karl Marx, and he has been the foremost source of anti-capitalist critique since the end of the 1800s. He was a humanist thinker, especially in his earlier writings, and his notion of freedom was the foundation of his emancipatory project[51]. Although Marx's analysis of capitalism – especially in *The Capital* (2013) – is well known, his emphasis on human existence and freedom is rarely engaged with in contemporary theory. This must be seen in connection with the prevalence of antihumanism, and the distortion of Marx's thought in the postwar era, labelling him as an economic reductionist[52]. Although Marx's materialist understanding of the world went through many phases, it was always marked by an engagement with what it means to be human. He started out with a critique of pure idealism[53] and the troubling implications that come from thinking that human beings are pure subjectivity, but he was just as critical of the reductive abstractions of the materialist philosophies of his time: "The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity" (Marx, 1998, p. 571). His is a form of materialism that sought to hold on to the emphasis on subjectivity as well as the materialist insistence of the facticity of human beings: "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is (…) directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men" (ibid, p. 42).

[51] See for example the anthology *For Humanism* (2017*)*, Mau (2023), Hägglund (2019) for recent advancements of this perspective on Marx as a humanist.

[52] See Anderson (2017), Wood (2016) for this argument. A recent example of the argument that Marx was a purely economistic thinker is Nancy Fraser's latest work *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022).

[53] See his 1844 manuscripts, and critique of Hegelianism.

Marx's early critique of capitalism was deeply concerned with the way that capitalism alienates us from our human nature, as exemplified in his *1844 Manuscripts:*

> Since money, as the existing and active concept of value, confounds and confuses all things, it is the general confounding and confusing of all things – the world upside-down – the confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities. (Marx, 1959)

Here he opposes money, something external to the human, with the natural quality of human beings. Money is not only confusing, but it also turns the world upside-down and confuses humans in their very nature. His earliest humanist engagements were thus also characterised by a romantic essentialism; for example, he proposed that communism could be "the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence". This latter quote points to how Marx's early humanist critique was influenced by romantic notions of human existence, believing that capitalism distorted some sense of natural harmony and unity among men[54]. Marx soon left these earlier romantic inclinations behind in favour of an idea of capitalism as a system of social relations[55].

This was the major contribution of Marx: he exposed the system of capitalism as a system of social relations[56]. He radically went against the academic tradition of his time and questioned the premise that the economy was to be studied only as an economistic relation[57]. Capitalism thrives off of dividing the world into different spheres, to be seen as a purely economic system, and Marx laid bare this illusion in his thorough analysis of the nature of capitalism. To see capitalism as a social relation that permeates society instead of merely an economic one means that we can acknowledge that capitalism is "a particular relation belonging to a historic form of society" (Marx, 1993, p. 264). When

[54] It is important to acknowledge how romanticised notions of human subjectivity have influenced socialist and humanist thinkers. Erich Fromm (1961) is a central postwar thinker here. In our contemporary moment, eco-socialist thinkers often espouse similar conceptions of humanity, see for example Kohei Saito's Karl Marx's Ecosocialism (2017).

[55] See among other Søren Mau (2023) for a discussion of the development of Marx's social ontology and thinking on human nature and humanism.

[56] See Marx (1844, 1993, 2013), Wood (2000, 2012, 2016).

[57] Wood writes that Marx's "critique of political economy was, among other things, intended to reveal the political face of the economy which has been obscured by classical political economists" (2016, p. 20).

capitalism is analysed as something distinctly historical and social, then we can also know that something existed before it, and something can exist after. Marx's distinct historical materialist method is grounded in his ontological understanding that there exist no strict divisions between individuals and their social relations. The relationship between them is mediated; it is dialectical.

Marxian dialectics cannot rigidly be defined, which is why there are so many differing forms of dialectic engagements in his name. As David Harvey points out, Marx himself never wrote out a principle "for a very good reason", which means that "the only way to understand his method is by following his practice" (Harvey, 1996, p. 48). For me, the most important aspect here is that a dialectical conception sees parts and wholes as mutually constitutive of each other. These various processes are seen as internally contradictory due to the various amounts of processes that constitute them, which means that they are simultaneously supporting and undermining one another (ibid, p. 52). This allows us to see the ways that the parts are irreducibly related to the whole through the way that the parts contain moments of the system within it. For this to not be an abstract endeavour or rigid schematics[58], the critical historical method of Marx is vital. Crucially, a dialectical understanding and method is an important antidote to reductionist practices and methods that isolate parts as preexisting units that then form a whole. Marxian aesthetic thinking emphasised that artworks were particularly equipped to expose these dialectical tensions, highlighting the fact that ideas are always already caught up in the material.

Existentialist humanism

In the decades following the second world war, a shortly lived tradition was founded upon the notion of humanism and Marxian anti-capitalist ideas[59]. Various socialist, Marxist and existentialist humanists emphasised the common social needs of humans and the benefit of cooperation. In the words

[58] As pointed out by Lukács in History and Class Consciousness (2018, p. 173).

[59] Such as Erich Fromm, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre to name a few. See Timothy Brennan (2017) and Barbara Epstein (2017) for an overview of the history of humanism in the post-war era. See also Spencer (2017) for a discussion of postcolonialism and humanism.

of Frantz Fanon, the goal was to "assume the universalism inherent in the human condition" (2008, p. x).

Systems built from a conception of purity allow for pre-established hierarchies, which is how authenticity in the Heideggerian version can be both "a philosophy of immanence and a religion of the Transcendent" (Beauvoir 2012b, p. 180). Avoiding the complexity of reality can lead to thinking that is both pessimistic and optimistic, for human nature can be seen as both innately good and innately bad depending on the state of the argument. The point is that it must be pre-given. From this perspective, the romantic ideals of Rousseau can meet with Hobbesian darkness[60], as the former sees society as an inhibition to individual freedom while the latter sees the state as the only guarantee for protection of individuals from each other. Existentialist ethics goes against both conceptions of human existence.

As originally defined by Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre[61], existentialism is a philosophy that defines the human subject as freedom, and from this it follows that "man is not naturally good, but he is not naturally bad either; he is nothing at first" (Beauvoir 2004a, p. 212). It is up to each of us to define our actions and projects in the world; it is not essentially predetermined. This is what Sartre means in his lecture *Existentialism is a humanism* (1989), where he proclaimed that for human beings, "existence precedes its essence". Existentialism is also an ethical theory that freedom must be treated as valuable and as the foundation of all other values, as argued by Jonathan Webber (2018, p. 11).

From an existentialist perspective, authenticity is seen as the ethical virtue that we ought to assume the freedom of human existence. This existentialist ethics is first and foremost advanced by Beauvoir, since Sartre never develops "a robust argument for *why* authenticity is morally required" (Webber, 2018, p. 168). The biggest strength of Beauvoir's ethical-political engagement with freedom is that she allows us to form a framework where freedom is not only the (ontological) ground, but also the value that points beyond the freedom of

[60] Hobbes has famously been connected to a negative view of human nature and the human condition, stating that before societies were formed, in what he described as the state of nature, "the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (*Leviathan*, ch. 13).

[61] While it has often been used as an umbrella term that incorporates a range of thinkers who concerned themselves with modern existence, I am here referring to a more precise and narrow definition that distinguishes between the broad use of 'existential' and the specific philosophy and ethical theory of 'existentialism'. This also how Jonathan Webber defines it in *Rethinking Existentialism* (2018).

the self, towards solidarity. This is preconditioned by her conception of the ambiguity of human existence, and an idea of freedom that allows for the concrete and messy relations of subject and object[62]. In the next chapter, I take inspiration from her philosophy to formulate a vision of freedom and an ethics of authenticity for our time. The short-lived tradition of existentialist and socialist humanist perspectives has been largely overlooked by the critical rejection of humanism and universalism that followed[63].

The Cultural Turn

> What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy, but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available (Jameson, 2005, p. xii).

We live in a time where there are no real alternatives to capitalism on the horizon. More than a generation has passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and along with it any outside threat to the capitalist social system. Capitalism has survived the 2008 financial crisis, a global pandemic and increasing political distrust. As Mark Fisher (2008) argued, we live in a time where capitalism has become so dominant that the logic is one of 'capitalist realism', firmly established in the 1980s and 1990s by the slogan, 'There Is No Alternative[64]'. Fisher followed in the footsteps of Fredric Jameson (1991) and his analysis of the cultural logic of postmodernism, defined by its break with

[62] There has been considerable debate among scholars on the differences in the conception of freedom between Sartre and Beauvoir (see for example Kirkpatrick (2023), Kruks (2001), Webber (2018). I agree with Kirkpatrick that these discussions tend to either overstate or undermine their disagreements, but there is little doubt that Beauvoir offered a more developed moral framework, grounded in concrete analysis of the ways that conditions delimit freedom.

[63] See *For Humanism* (2017) for an outline of these historical developments and critique of the Antihumanist backlash. Shuttleworth (2021) also make the argument that existentialist notions of authenticity has been displaced in favour of romantic versions.

[64] Made famous by conservative politician Margareth Thatcher who served as British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, famous for implementing a range of policies deemed "Thatcherism": particularly privatisation of nationalised industries, limiting the role of government, free markets and low taxes.

the project of the modern movement. Postmodernism was characterised by satire, irony and pastiche, grounded in a distanced and lost relationship to the concreteness of history. The dominant mood of capitalist realism is cynical distance[65], where people are fully aware of the dangers of capitalism, but they are still contributing to it. The fragmenting and naturalising logic of capitalism prohibits any alternative visions: we tell ourselves that it is flawed, but it is the only option we have, and so we put our emphasis elsewhere. Against this background, oppositional forces have been split up, co-opted and fragmented in new ways, making meaningful critique and action even more difficult.

For the past four or five decades there has been a theoretical shift away from the Marxist emphasis on class relations, material conditions and humanism. This has taken different forms, and one of the most pronounced forms might be scientism, as evidenced by the 'turn to neuroscience'[66], cognitive theories and schemas, as well as digital humanities. Timothy Brennan links this to the academic differences between the methodologies of natural sciences versus that of the humanities: "the sciences isolate manageable parts of matter in order to control observation; the humanities consider the social whole" (2017, p. 9). He points to a tendency where humanities scholars have taken up methods from natural science, from Saussurian linguistics, structuralism, analytic philosophy and logical positivism, in ways that risk obstructing the critical value of humanist thought. Seeing these methods as 'superior' means shifting the emphasis from interpretation, critical thinking and analysis to that of collecting data, and increased reliance on machines[67]. While there is nothing wrong with these methods for natural sciences, the splitting of the social whole into manageable parts has specific consequences for our understanding of society.

During the 1980s and 1990s, interest and belief in the working class as the foundation for collective organising or resistance was weakened, so much so that class was even pronounced 'dead'[68]. The argument was that while class formation was strong during early industrialisation, it was no longer *the* driving

[65] Fisher follows Slavoj Zizek (2008) and Peter Sloterdijk's (1988) here.

[66] A turn towards the brain, genetics and neuroscience as described by Roseneil & Frosh (2012, p. 6).

[67] This is not to say that critical thinking and interpretation has been displaced by these methods, nor that there are no advantages to these methods, but I want here to point to a tendency with some specific consequences.

[68] As Pakulski & Waters (1996) proclaimed in *The Death of Class*. See also discussions of this shift in Arbeiderklassen (2021).

force for politics. Furthermore, other forms of oppression, such as gender or race, were to be seen alongside class in a complex network of mechanisms for inequality (Hansen & Uvaag, 2021, p. 65). In what can be described as a 'cultural turn'[69], attention shifted from an emphasis on class formation based on material conditions and unifying interests, to a focus on culture, language, and difference. Cultural preferences and different identity markers became the source of sociological studies, and the working class was no longer seen as a force of social mobilisation and change (ibid).

The rejection of humanism and Marxism was led by an attack on universalism. In a multifaceted wave of critique, feminist, antiracist and postcolonial thinkers[70] launched an attack on the idea of the universal human subject, and many argued instead for a decentred and particularist analysis as grounds for opposition. In the view of one of the most central postcolonial thinkers, Gayatri Spivak, "there is an affinity between the imperialist subject and the subject of humanism" (1988, as cited in Spencer, 2017, p. 121). Since universalism was widely used as an ideological tool for domination in the name of humanism, it is no wonder that these distorted notions of universalism and humanism were rejected. There is also no doubt that these various perspectives have contributed greatly to strengthen emancipatory projects. The problem was that as a general tendency, the baby was thrown out with the bathwater, and instead of opposing the specificities of the pluralist elitist project, the very ideas of universalism, freedom and human nature came under attack. A central driving force here was Michel Foucault, who mounted an attack on humanism, in *Discipline and Punish* (1995) among other works, linking the oppressive character of the modern apparatuses of surveillance to humanism. His criticism was grounded in the view that human beings display distinct differences from each other and that these differences are undermined by a humanist universalist framework.

Thus, it was the view on the human subject that was at stake. As summarised by Sonia Kruks (2012), this shift within critical theory and political philosophy gave way to an impasse between the view of the self as a rational autonomous agent and a post-structuralist view based on discourse-constructionist theories

[69] See among others Jameson (1998), Ray & Sayer (1999) and Hansen & Uvaag (2021) for discussions of these shifts under the term 'cultural turn'.

[70] Some central names here include Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said. These critiques took on a multitude of different perspectives, not all of them were anti-humanist. Edward Said (2004) is but one example of a humanist thinker who advanced humanism from a postcolonial critique. What I am pointing to here is rather a general shift and tendency.

of the self. Foucault himself was a 'slippery thinker', Kruks claims, for he evoked the concept of the subject a little as he pleases, wanting to get rid of it altogether while also implying a subject affected by these modalities of power (2001, p. 58.). Foucault's claim that the individual is merely a "prime effect" of power means that he fails to account for the ways that a person can respond to and resist power. In his later writings, Foucault does address the possibility of resisting power. In *History of Sexuality*, for example, he writes that the very existence of power "depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance" (cited in Anderson, 2017, p. 95). But, as Kevin Anderson (2017) points out, this is a notion of resistance that posits that "it is everywhere without a fixed point". This idea of resistance is bound up in Foucault's "one-sided and too sweeping critique of Western modernity" (2017, p. 84), he argues. Seeing Enlightenment reason as the great danger to oppose, he ends up rejecting a conception of the freedom of the human subject and paves the way for a notion of resistance as something vague and abstract, everywhere and nowhere at once. What Foucault exemplifies, then, is how the rejection of humanism and universalism could end up in apolitical abstraction, for without a concrete human subject with distinct human qualities, there can be no concrete starting point for emancipatory struggles. From this perspective, then, the rejection of the human subject in favour of different decentred, fragmented notions of resistance leads to the eclipse of freedom. Furthermore, the rejection of universalism makes unifying projects of solidarity difficult.

While the genuine emphasis on diversity and difference paved the way for greater knowledge on various forms of oppression, it soon became entangled with and co-opted by liberalist and capitalist institutionalised practices and ideologies. Wood argues that the new forms of pluralism went beyond political interests or behaviour, to the inner depths of 'identity', to a concern with lifestyle rather than interests (2016, p. 256). Furthermore, it presupposed a view of the world where it was not the totalizing force of capitalism, but the unique heterogeneity of fragmented 'postmodern' society that was driving the need for more complex pluralist principles. The tale was that "we are living in a postmodern world, a world in which diversity and difference has dissolved all the old certainties and all the old universalities" (ibid, p. 257). The connection between the emphasis on identity and difference with liberalist institutions ended up as a 'new pluralism', connecting radical opposition to centrist liberalist principles, which has ended up as a form of 'liberal status quo'[71]. The central political fight moved away from anti-capitalist visions to

[71] See also Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's *Elite Capture. How the Powerful took over Identity Politics (And everything else)* (2022) for a newer critique of this phenomenon.

a defence of liberal institutions and liberal democracy, without much concern for the unfreedom of its capitalist entanglements. As Olúfémi O. Táíwò points out, freedom is now something that "need only be found at ballot boxes rather than in, say, its workplaces" (2022, p. 24).

The Althusserian brand of structuralism played a distinct part in these developments[72]. Lois Althusser's structuralism was initially formulated as a response to go beyond reductionist arguments concerning ideology and the material base but ended up reinforcing reductionism by its insistence on the division of spheres. He (1963) argued for an 'epistemological break' in Marx's theory, between an idealist emphasis on human subjectivity and a more scientific form of materialism. He rejected the idealist, humanist version of Marx in favour of a more scientific structuralist analysis that established a rigid dualism between theory and history. This strict division between theory and practice led him away from the distinctly historically situated method that defined the core of Marx's analysis. Within many academic fields, Althusser's structuralism came to stand for 'Marxism', and this has been one of the contributing factors to the distortion of Marx's thought as merely economist reductionism to the present day.

Film studies after the cultural turn

The theoretical shift away from humanism, universalism and class relations also had consequences for academic and cultural engagements with art. The development within film studies from the 1960s onwards serves as an interesting example of these tensions. Ideology critique became central to film theory, inspired by Althusserian structuralism, but also psychoanalysis and text-oriented semiotics. This wave of post-Marxist ideology critique, often called 'Apparatus theory', gave life to a variety of different perspectives, filled with internal contradictions and debates. Central was the critique of illusionism, now associated with realism, and an aesthetics of transparency, linearity and closure[73]. Several scholars, such as Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, argued for a counter-cinema, one that could oppose the dominant

[72] As argued by among others Anderson (2017), Wood (2016) and Mau (2023).

[73] See among others Wollen (1986), Comolli & Narboni (2009), Mulvey (2010). For many of these thinkers, realism meant the illusory proclamation of the real, while actually reality was associated with the avant-garde. This points to the many contradictory uses of the term 'realism'.

ideology. Wollen argued, for example, that alternative film could disrupt and interrupt the flow and thereby refocus the attention of the spectator (1986, p. 121). The critique of ideology was thus primarily concerned with the formal characteristics of the artwork or cultural product itself; it all had to do with the internal dynamics of 'the text'. D. N. Rodowick summarises how the two projects – critique of realist Hollywood cinema as illusionistic, and the promotion of modernist counterstrategies – were inseparable (1994, p. xiv). The main problem, he thought, was the way that the problem of film's meaning was reduced to the question of form alone, along with a rigid emphasis on dualisms and opposition. This had to do with, among other things, a reductionist take on ideology and culture, premised by Althusser's structuralist take.

In opposition to this, many scholars began to turn their focus away from the artworks themselves, and over to the spectator, viewer, and different kinds of identification. Feminist thinkers questioned the idea of a universal male viewer, and many of them, such as Laura Mulvey, took inspiration from psychoanalysis but continued from the critical tradition of ideology critique and Marxism. But the most prominent corrective to Marxism within academia came out of the development of Culture Studies[74] in the 1980s and 1990s. Cultural studies started by applying the Althusserian brand of Marxism, and concerns of ideology based in structuralist division, but then turned against its rigid determinism and started to emphasise the perspective of audiences and their specific differences based on categories such as class, race, gender, and age. As Holm & Duncan (2018) point out, the opposition to structuralism was often informed by a conflation of Althusser's structuralism with Marxism in general, and both were associated with rigid formalism. The result was a rejection of both Marxism and aesthetics as bound up with elitism and rigid power relations[75]. Interestingly, the move away from aesthetics as a main concern within cultural studies has also led to a conflation of cultural studies with Marxism, made to stand for an 'objectivist' approach that loses sight of

[74] Cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field concerned with the social formation of culture, emerged in Britain in the late 1950s and subsequently became a well-established field, notably in the United States and Australia. It made its mark most notably from the 1980s onwards. (Holm & Duncan, 2018).

[75] A point advanced most notably by Tony Bennett's *Outside Literature*. Holm & Duncan maintain that even if the influence of Bennet's 'pugilistic attitude 'should not be overstated, his brand of Foucauldian culture studies was central in shaping cultural studies in ways that if not outright antagonistic to aesthetics, never placed it central to its concerns.

the specificities of artworks and sees them as passive recipients or ideological markers[76].

The reaction against the political concerns over ideology critique has taken many different forms, but what most of them have in common is that they have pointed us further away from the issue of class and critiques of capitalism as totality. Within film studies, the most forceful attack came in the 1990s from David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, whose sweeping rejection of 'grand theory' paved the wave for a cognitive[77] and 'scientific' orientation within film studies, grounded in cognitive theories, schemas and analytic philosophy. The attack on grand theories in many ways ended up as an attack on theory in general, evidenced by a shift from theoretical and ideological concerns to empirical and archival studies[78], but also studies of style[79] and history that split concerns with film form from its societal or historical basis. As argued by Jameson (2008), theory went through a crisis after the cultural turn, characterised by the renunciation of meaning, content and interpretation. He connects this rejection of interpretation to the tradition of formalism, which he sees as a change in emphasis from the referential values of the work and its societal meaning, to matters of technique and formal construction as an end in itself (ibid, p. 8-9). This resulted in an emphasis on details that risks obscuring the relation to the social whole. The theoretical and methodological developments for the last decades points to the very different variations this can take, both in the form of cultural studies' move away from aesthetics as a main concern and the schematic approaches inspired by the natural sciences.

[76] In her discussion of aesthetic developments, for example, Jenny Chamarette couples together Althusser with The Frankfurt school and Foucault under the headline 'cultural materialism' or an "Marxist-Foucauldian approach" (2012, p. 46-53).

[77] Central texts from this period of change is Noel Carroll's Mystifying Movies (1988), Bordwell & Carroll's Post-Theory (1996), Murray Smith's Engaging Characters (1995).

[78] Koivunen (2015) for example, writes of a turn to "history and archives" in the 1990s, alongside other developments.

[79] Bordwell & Thompsons's *Film Art* (2013) is the most prominent example here, so influential that it has been part of the curriculum within Scandinavian Film Studies for decades. Indeed, Bordwell could be seen as paving the wave for a new formalism within film studies.

Turn to affect, ethics, philosophy

One strand of theoretical development that could be seen as a response both to the methods of cultural studies and the following move towards scientism, or the overall "waning of affect"[80] within postmodern culture, is the turn to 'affect'[81], ethics and new notions of materiality. Against what was deemed a disembodied, immaterial and linguistically oriented notion of bodies and subjectivity, many scholars introduced theoretical frameworks based on phenomenology, new materialism and the theories of Gilles Deleuze. This meant a renewed scholarly interest in feelings, affect, emotion and an emphasis on blurred boundaries, immediacy and the-inbetween. It also meant a renewed interest in art's autonomy, often centred around the issue of 'representation' that harkens back to the onset of modernity, but now in a postmodern context grounded in the rejection of universalism and humanism. Barbara Bolt sees "representation" not as "an outcome, but rather a mode of thinking that involves a will to fixity and mastery" (2010, p. 12). To engage art as a form of representation, then, is to see it as a stand-in for reality, a placeholder. Furthermore, it consists of a dominating view that posits art as a pure object for the pure (human) subject. The anti-representational perspective sought to oppose hierarchical and fixed power relations, indicated by how Deleuzian thinking served as inspiration for much feminist and postcolonial thought[82].

In addition to concerns with representation, Deleuze-inspired scholarship[83] often emphasises subjectivity as a becoming instead of being: "one does not become something; rather what matters is the process of becoming itself or the movement in-between categories" (Rizzo, 2012, p. 69). As Koivunen points out, this is not an exploration of concrete bodies that exist in the world, and sensations are conceptualised as beyond subjective positionality, signalling an overall move away from concerns with subjectivity (2015, p. 106). Phenomenological perspectives share this emphasis on process and the inbetweeness of categories, often inspired by Merleau-Ponty and a conception

[80] As Fredric Jameson puts in his seminal text on Postmodernism (1991, p. 10).

[81] Prominent examples here include Sobchack (1992, 2004), Beugnet (2012) and Marks (2000). See also Koivunen's discussion of a turn to affect within film theory from the 1990s onwards (2015). Beugnet (2017) writes of a 'phenomenological turn' and Asbjørn Grønstad an 'ethical turn' (2016) within film studies from the 2000s.

[82] See for example Rizzo (2012), Bolt (2010), Marks (2000).

[83] See for example Beugnet (2012), Olkowski (1999), Bolt (2010), Rizzo (2012).

of intersubjectivity[84]. Unlike Deleuze-inspired scholarship, phenomenology often centres on an embodied notion of subjectivity and takes the situated body as its primary starting point for aesthetic engagement. Jenny Chamarette contends that phenomenology then may "cut a 'middle way' between the subjectivism of a reality constructed through the subject or an empirical objectivism (such as a primitive form of cultural studies might argue)" (2012, p. 53). In emphasising our complicated and messy engagements with the world, phenomenology seeks to discount any notion of hard limits between subjectivity and objectivity. This meant a rethinking of the relationship between art and spectator where they are no longer seen as separate objects and subjects, but as two mutually interwoven beings who both share communicative and sensuous capabilities. Central to the phenomenological approach to art, then, is a breakdown of the strict boundaries between art object and audience. While the intention is an emphasis on situated bodies, the conceptual breakdown of boundaries makes it difficult to grasp the distinct concreteness of both art and human subject.

One interesting aspect of this turn to affect and ethics is that it also proclaims a 'turn to materiality', but not the Marxist kind: this is a new materiality. Martine Beugnet (2012) exemplifies how these elements work towards the emphasis on aesthetics away from the purely cultural in her connection of the sensuous dimensions of the film experience to the materiality of film. In her focus on an 'aesthetics of sensation', the material and sensuous dimensions of film are given precedence over functions such as plot and characters, identification and narrative logic. In her words, "to foreground the materiality of the film medium is to unsettle the frontier between subject and object, figure and ground – the basis of our conception and representation of the self as a separate unity" (2012, p. 63). The attention to materiality here is therefore a continuation of Marxist aesthetic concerns with aesthetic form, but with the added emphasis on unfixity and sensuous dimensions.

These differing approaches to art and culture thus continue the opposition to universalism initiated by the cultural turn, while they respond to a lack of attention to the sensuous, feeling body. One recent tendency that follows from these developments is the emphasis on closeness, immediacy, and total absorption. Anna Kornbluh argues that what we see today is an even deeper enthralment in spectacle of mass abjection, a "total sensory engagement" (2023, p. 17). This is a form of aesthetics that reacts to, or moves beyond,

[84] Central in this development is Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye, a Phenomenology of Film Experience* (1992).

postmodern irony and play, to an emphasis on 'the real' and sincerity. Kornbluh points out how this immediate form of aesthetics sees 'the real' as extreme phenomenological closeness, first person narration and virulent opinionism (speak your truth!). This is a very different form of 'real' than 'realism', for while what we see is real people and real-life events, we get so close to it that we risk losing sight of what is actually going on.

What these differing engagements point to is how the opposition to fixed subjectivity and determinism have marked so many theoretical engagements since the cultural turn. While the above outline in no way summarises all the various approaches that have sprung from this concern, the overall tendency has nonetheless pulled us further away from notions of universalism, humanism, and the emphasis of class conditions[85]. Whereas the scientific methods split art off from the rest of the world, the turn to affect has marked a breaking down of boundaries, emphasising the unclear and indistinct. Emphasising art as an experience, or the inbetween space of viewer and artwork, breaks up and rethinks the meaning of art in valuable ways. But the stark opposition to determinism and rigidity risk landing us in theoretical abstraction, where the concrete conditions of the now get lost in detail, fragments and notions of unclarity. In the following, I want to extend ethical engagements with film to include a specific critical attention to the political, inspired by distinct aspects of Marx-inflected aesthetic theory and Beauvoir's existentialist ethics. This is a return to ideology critique that seeks to bypass the limitations of structuralist determinism, by its emphasis on the relational autonomy of art.

Authenticity and contemporary culture wars

One central problem after postmodernism is that the divide between the mainstream and the alternative no longer make sense, as the mainstream quickly absorbs and co-opts notions of independence and autonomy. Postmodern aesthetics were thus characterised by their distance to historicity, by irony, pastiche and "the imitation of dead styles" (Jameson, 1991, p. 18). In

[85] This certainly does not mean that there is no scholarship that point to the relation of art, class and capitalism. Important examples here include Nicholas Brown (2019), Anna Kornbluh (2023), Dave Beech (2019), Gernot Böhme (2017). Within film studies examples include Mike Wayne (2015), Mazierska & Kristensen (2014), Martine Beugnet (2013) and Stefanie Baumann (2021).

the absence of any alternatives, capitalism no longer has any external threats, which means that politics becomes less about actual change and more about system infighting and posturing. The entanglement of identity politics with liberal ideals has given rise to a strengthened emphasis on formal political representation and correct rhetoric, rather than actual democratic accountability. In addition, as Wood pointed to, these entanglements meant doubling down on pluralism and difference, often understood as pluralism of lifestyles and personal identities. From this perspective, 'the cultural turn' also characterises a critical move from politics to culture, giving rise to radical performativity, ideas of art and culture as radical by their stated intention and proclamation. This deepened the stakes in the already oppositional pull between society and art's autonomy. For Rancière, the postmodern moment acted as a smokescreen for the breakdown between aesthetic autonomy and ethics, overturning the emancipatory potential of art (2015, chap. 13). With the breakdown of barriers between art, politics and ethics, art is reduced to a state of mourning, he argued, bearing witness to a catastrophe, stripped of the ability to pave the way for change. This follows from the critical idea that in order to oppose exploitation, one needs to be able to carve out an autonomous space. Opposition depends on freedom.

From the onset of modernity, the concept of freedom has been fraught with contradictions and tensions. While inherently radical, the idea was soon taken up by hierarchical and elitist ideologies that proclaim certain groups to be more suitable for freedom than others. Under the disguise of universalism, these ideals have been used to advance unfreedom and exploitation. Capitalism, for example, is completely dependent on the notion of absolute freedom and the idea that individual free choices can be made no matter the circumstance. Throughout the 1900s, capitalist logic was contested, giving rise to alternatives, where the most prominent of them – the Soviet Union – turned out to be just as unfree. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, capitalism has entered a new phase where it is uncontested, giving rise to capitalist realism.

Today, modes of cynicism and apathy permeate, and they both stem from a form of blind realism[86] that distorts and refuses any alternatives or real change. Cynicism and apathy follow from each other, and both modes indicate an attitude of giving up that comes from the pursuit for simple answers. This is

[86] This is especially evident with regards to the climate crisis, which is mired by the overall "militant realism" within international politics, as argued by Anders Dunker (2024). This is a form of realism that thinks it is worth risking the safety of the whole planet in favour of national security.

realism that is cut off from any sense of morality, which is why it functions so well as an ideological vehicle of capitalism. Pure realism gives way to an attitude that reaching the goal is more important than the goal itself, such that one becomes a mere "technician" that need not be concerned with ethics or visions, for the only problems that exist are of a tactical nature, and reality is already given (Beauvoir, 2004c, p. 182). What matters is therefore not what one is fighting for, but vague notions of stability, balance or security, something that does not disrupt or cause fundamental change. In the next chapter, I look to Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy for an ethical vision that paves the way beyond pure realism and idealism, determinism and fragmentation.

Chapter 2 Solidarity Must be Created: Ambiguous Human Existence and the Ethics of Authenticity

> To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won. (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 139)

Inspired by the existentialist ethics of Simone de Beauvoir and Marxian theory, I here develop an ethical-political framework grounded in freedom and authenticity. The ethics of authenticity start from freedom, both as an ontological form and as a direction and value. This is not a recipe, nor does it prescribe specific content or actions: it is an ethical engagement, a way of being in the world. The framework starts from the enlightenment notion of individual freedom: that I have to make my own decisions and choose my own projects in the world. But it complicates matters by adding that I am an ambiguous existence who lives my freedom concretely in a situation, which means that my freedom is contingent. This form of existence grounds an ethical relation with all others, but this freedom is delimited by – and takes on contradictory forms in relation to – material conditions and social systems. The ethics of authenticity that I conceptualise here propose a way beyond determinism and fragmentation, allowing for the concreteness of the now as well as the movement of freedom. Artworks can give form to this ambiguous movement, for their materiality places them in relation to their outside, which is distinct from human existence. Towards the end of chapter, I suggest that art can appeal to freedom by existing as confrontations between the freedom of the art and the constraints of the world.

Ontological Freedom

The ethical-political thinking of Simone de Beauvoir springs out of her ontological conception of human existence; it is the *precondition* of her moral philosophy. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she writes about the formal conditions for ethical actions and engagements with the world. She maintains that two conditions have to be met: "First I must be allowed to appeal. I will therefore struggle against those who want to stifle my voice, prevent me from expressing myself, and prevent me from being" (2004d, p. 136). This condition has to do with the individual freedom of each person, for in order to 'appeal', we have to be free to do so, and we have to be free to choose our own actions and projects in the world, thus to 'express' ourselves in our own individual way. The second condition has to do with the freedom of other people; "Next, I must have before me men who are free *for me*, who can respond to my appeal" (ibid, p. 137). This points to how ethical engagements are bound up in the freedom of other people, because they can only engage with me (respond to my appeal) if they too are free. Beauvoir's ethical-political thinking is thus grounded in the idea that my ethical actions are preconditioned by the ontological freedom of both self and others.

Beauvoir's conception of ontological freedom[87] refers to the freedom that we all have as human beings; the fact that "every man is originally free" (1976, p. 25). From her perspective, freedom is the most characteristic aspect of our species, and it can transcend our specific situations. This notion of freedom rejects the notion of any predetermined meaning: "man is not naturally good, but he is not naturally bad either; he is nothing at first" (2004a, p. 212). We are therefore not born with a set of inherent values and set meanings, for "only the subject defines the meaning of his action" (2004d, p. 114). Values and meanings are created by each individual out in the world, and we have the capacity to dedicate ourselves to actions and projects that uphold those values. For these projects to be moral, they cannot be decided from the outside (2004d, p. 100), by conventions, or norms or other people; they have to be the result of our own free will. Our projects are "not waiting to be called forth; they are rushing toward a future that is not prefigured anywhere" (2004d, p. 123). Thus, it is through our actions that we follow through on our values and beliefs, and we cannot escape the choice: "Every refusal is a choice, every silence has a

[87] I follow Tove Pettersen and Kristana Arp in terming it ontological freedom, whereas Beauvoir herself often deems this 'natural freedom' or just 'freedom' (Pettersen 2015, p. 71). Jonathan Webber uses the terms ontological and metaphysical freedom interchangeably (2018, p. 6).

voice. Our very passivity is willed; in order not to choose, we still must choose not to choose. It is impossible to escape" (2004d, p. 126). As subjects we act in the world, and these actions enforce values that have consequences no matter how much we might try to avoid the responsibility of them.

Thus, to be human is to act, for: "I am not a thing, but a project of self toward the other" (2004d, p. 93). In the staged dialogue between Pyrrhus, a military king, and Cineas, his advisor, Beauvoir explores the rationality of action. They are discussing Pyrrhus' plan to conquer the world. He wants to go out into the world and attempt to conquer it, no matter what happens, for he "is not leaving to return; he is leaving in order to conquer" (2004d, p. 100). His advisor Cineas, on the other hand, is critical of action. He stands for rationality and thinks that the right thing to do is think through all consequences, which ultimately leads to the conclusion that no action truly makes sense. Therefore, the best thing to do is to stay put. Beauvoir aligns herself with Pyrrhus. This has nothing to do with the specificity of his project, but his willingness to act. Hence, before delving into *how* we might act ethically, Beauvoir probes the existential structure of the act itself. We cannot know in advance the result of our actions, but our actions nonetheless leave a mark on the world. As such, the specificity of our action cannot be separated from what it means to act. We can only make meaning through action, we need to move forward: "all enjoyment is project. It surpasses the past toward the future" (2004d, p. 96).

Even though human subjects are defined by our ontological freedom, we can only realise ourselves through projects that transcend our being. We must therefore project ourselves into the world, and in so doing "a man situates himself by situating other men around him" (2004d, p. 108). It is therefore only in the concrete social world that our projects come to be, and only there can we realise our freedoms. Our projects and subjective freedom are always situated in a concrete time and place, and from this it follows that our freedom is situated. The conditions in which we find ourselves influence our engagement with the world and our projects.

Oppressive conditions and concrete freedom

Our capacity for freedom does not mean that we are completely free to pursue any kind of action or project in the world without constraints. Another crucial aspect of Beauvoir's ethical thinking is the notion that our freedom is situated, that it depends on our concrete material circumstances. Oppressive conditions,

such as poverty, health, and security issues, all contribute to form the degree of freedom we have to engage in the world (1976, p. 88, 2004d, p. 137.). This means that our ontological freedom stands in tension with our concrete material situation. It is this tension that characterises the ambiguity of human existence, according to Beauvoir: that each of us experiences the world as both a subject and object; we are free *and* situated, embodying both transcendence *and* immanence (1976, p. 5). As subjects, we realise ourselves as freedoms in the world, but at the same time we experience ourselves "as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things". We have individual ways of being and of engaging with the world, but we always find ourselves situated within that world. This means that we cannot reduce our existence to either matter or consciousness. To be human is to be both a material *and* a conscious being. We are part of the world of which we are a consciousness.

Throughout her work, Beauvoir examines different ways that material conditions may constrain our freedom, but *The Second Sex* (2011) stands out in its detailed analysis of the ways in which situation forms an individual subject's possibilities and lived experience. Here she examines the situation of women to show how human actions can become sedimented in social structures and institutions that in turn delimit freedom. The text is divided into two volumes. Volume 1 describes the way that practices, institutions and social structures form the situation of women, while volume 2 explores how these structures are subjectively lived and experienced. Sonia Kruks argues that we should read these volumes dialectically, and not sequentially, as they probe the ambiguity of human existence and the existential tension of freedom and facticity (2012, p. 65).

Beauvoir makes it clear that a woman's passivity and immanence do not stem from any sort of biological destiny but are due to how she is being formed as such from an early age. She gives a detailed account of how society and institutions form her early years and shapes her understanding of herself and her possibilities for action in the world. The girl is taught to see herself as an object while she at the same time always remains a subject who seeks freedom and transcendence. This leads to endless inner conflict. In a passage, Beauvoir describes how it feels when an individual who sees themself as a subject discovers inferiority as a given essence of themselves; it is like trying to climb a mountain with many obstacles in the way, and no matter how hard she tries, the universal is out of reach for her: "that is what happens to the little girl when, learning about the world, she grasps herself as a woman in it" (2011, p. 322).

It is crucial that Beauvoir sees this form of otherness as something imposed on the subject and not as an essential trait. Since every human is a freedom, it

makes us existentially separate from all others. But to be made separate on the basis of social categories is oppressive; it is to deny us the existential separateness that is inherent in human freedom. In her analysis of gender as a situation rather than an essence, identity or biological fact, Beauvoir takes her conceptualisation of the ambiguity of human existence down to earth. Her characterisation of the endless inner conflict of a subject who finds herself in a situation that delimits her freedom allows her to examine the way that our subjectivity stands in tension with our material circumstances. It is not that a situation is some external structure that constrains a pure subject and her projects, but that our freedom is always already situated. We do not live our lives as pure subjects who experience situations as something outside of us; we become who we are in constant engagements with the world. Highlighting the situatedness of our being is thus to say that we must always pay attention to historical, social and political conditions in addition to the specificity of each subjective experience.

Thus, oppressive structures stand in tension with our ontological freedom, not because we are born with a different outlook, but because they constrain the existentialist perspective that we are born as "nothing", that we have no predetermined essence. To claim that we all have ontological freedom is thus to lay claim to the value of individuality, that we all have our particular way of engaging with the world. This particularity is a "universal fact".

Ambiguous human existence

Human existence is thus lived in ambiguous boundaries to our surroundings. It is important to note that this does not mean that we blend in with our environments or that we are indistinguishable from the material conditions that we experience. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas,* Beauvoir makes a distinction between power as something finite, that can be restricted from the outside, and our ontological freedom "that remains infinite in all cases" (2004d, p. 124). She acknowledges that violence does exist, that "man is freedom and facticity at the same time" and that he "is free in situation". But she maintains that the "violence does not reach him in his heart" (ibid.). While Beauvoir does acknowledge that freedom is not abstract, she still goes on to claim that the 'situation' only constrains freedom on the exterior; it cannot take away our inherent ontological freedom. While this has been taken to mean that Beauvoir's thinking was underdeveloped at this point, this view is not abandoned in her later analysis of situation in *The Second Sex*. Here she

maintains freedom as essential to all human existence: "freedom is entire in each" (2011, p. 680). There can be no inner conflict without experiencing yourself as an existential freedom, and it is precisely the conflict of a subject in a situation that defines "women's drama" (2011, p. 17). In other words, an ambiguous boundary protects our freedom, even if oppressive circumstances have real existential impact[88].

Beauvoir writes that:

> By asserting, I make myself be; it is I who am. As I distinguish myself from my pure presence by reaching out toward something other than me, I also distinguish myself from this other toward which I reach by the very fact that I reach toward it. (Beauvoir 2004d, p. 101)

Her ontological understanding of human existence thus makes it clear that I stand out from my surroundings, I am not indistinguishable from it. I am a part of the world, but I distinguish myself by my capacity for subjectivity, "for reaching out toward something other than me". This characterises my being. The above quote continues: "My presence is. It breaks up the unity and the continuity from that mass of indifference into which I wanted it to be absorbed. Spinoza's existence sharply contradicts the truth of Spinozism". Beauvoir rejects Spinoza's substance monism, that we are part of one single substance of being[89]. I am not the same as the world around me; I stand out from it by my capacity for self-awareness and rationality, which renders me able to assume my freedom and responsibility in the world.

At the same time, I am not a pure subject who lives completely separated from the world around me. Beauvoir also rejects mind-body dualism, for it establishes "a hierarchy between body and soul which permits of considering as negligible the part of the self which cannot be saved" (1976, p. 6). Beauvoir's understanding of human existence thus paves the way for an ontology that goes beyond the problems inherent in both material monism and idealist dualism. As such, it serves as an alternative to different posthumanist modes of thinking that disclaim human exceptionalism in favour of a monist

[88] In extreme situations of oppression, such as war and genocide, this ontological freedom will be almost impossible to assume.

[89] "This statement captures Spinoza's substance monism and his substance necessitarianism: there is only one possible substance, God, and that substance necessarily exists." (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

view that we are all part of the same matter[90]. Against this, Beauvoir maintains that human freedom and capacity for awareness are distinguishable from the rest of nature. Importantly, this grounds our moral responsibility. On the other hand: we are part of nature, we are creatures of flesh and blood, which makes us vulnerable to our surroundings. I am not completely separated from other beings and the world around us, even if I am 'distinguishable'. Instead of clinging on to the notion that we are either pure matter or pure mind, we need to accept and assume this ambiguity of our existence. I exist in relation to my surroundings; I am neither cut off from nor indistinguishable from it. This relational ontology grounds Beauvoir's ethical-political thinking.

Beauvoir's understanding of human existence has much in common with Marx's historical materialism[91]. She was deeply concerned with class and capitalist exploitation throughout her life, and while her relationship with Marxism and communist party politics varied, her ethical-political thinking was consistently influenced by Marxian perspectives. From the Marxian understanding that we advance here, his is a form of materialism that holds on to the emphasis of subjectivity as well as an instance on the material conditions and the facticity of our existence. Marx's extensive empirical research of the system of capitalism was always infused by a distinctly political perspective. From the very beginning, he emphasised the ways that capitalism oppressed human nature by constraining our freedom, and even if he changed his methods and perspectives throughout his work, he continued to contribute to the analysis of the tension between human freedom and the historically distinct condition of capitalism. His emphasis on history precludes any determinist or absolute notion, for "determinism is always bound to be disappointed by history" (Wood, 2016, p. 9).

Universalism

Human beings are subjects who live in tension with their surroundings; we are both subjects and objects. This means that we live our lives as subjects who always have some degree of ontological freedom, as well as a specific way of being and engaging with the world. However, since our freedom is concretely

[90] Sonia Kruks (2020) makes this argument with regards to new materialism specifically.

[91] Sonia Kruks argues that Marx remained a vital, "if not always fully explicit" influence on Beauvoir's lifelong philosophical and political orientation (2017, p. 246). See Kruks (2017, 2020, 2012) as well as Meryl Altman (2020) for an overview of the connection between Beauvoir and Marx' thinking.

situated, external factors constantly mediate our being in the world. This has consequences and can constrain freedom as we have seen from the examples of different oppressive conditions. Even if each of us experience oppressive conditions differently, all human beings have in common this tension between their ontological freedom and concrete situation. Beauvoir's conception of human existence stipulates that our particularity, our concretely lived experience, is a universal fact.

It is an important aspect of Beauvoir's humanist philosophy that she starts from the insistence of the universality of human nature. The ontological freedom of human beings and our capacity for rationality and transcendence are not mere historical constructions, even if their concrete manifestations are always historically inflected. In order to grasp historical conditions, we need to have a conception of that which is not historically conditioned. Without a conception of a concrete human being, it is hard to fight oppression, for this would entail that we *are* the oppression. Early Foucauldian analysis comes close to this in the formulation of the subject as an *effect* of power. Who is getting oppressed if not a subject who is inherently a freedom? The conception of subjectivity as ambiguous, on the other hand, allow for an intentional subject that engages with historical conditions without subscribing to the notion that there exists some predetermined meaning in all of us. This is a human subject who is a part of nature, but who also stands out from nature.

When Beauvoir writes that violence does not reach into our heart, she is arguing that we all maintain a degree of freedom within us, no matter the circumstance. The degree of freedom that we have to act in the world is a result of the tension between our freedom and our situation, the never-ending engagement between our subjectivity and being a part of the world. To acknowledge that we have some degree of freedom, even if it depends on the circumstance, is crucial for any moral and political action in the world. If we do not recognise that we have at least some freedom, how can we assume any sort of moral responsibility?

Since human subjects live in mediated relationships with our surroundings, we are vulnerable to material conditions and oppression. This is equally true for all humans, according to Beauvoir. We all share the pain and ambiguity of our existence. However, different situations give rise to very different concrete experiences. To designate someone as solely an 'other' or to treat them as things is to attempt to strip them of their universal humanity, which equals oppression. This must be "rejected at any cost" (1976, p. 103). This notion allows us to conceptualize a truer form of universality, for only by actively acknowledging the concrete ways that conditions may delimit our subjectivity

can we fight for all of humanity. This is a universality that start from enlightenment ideals of universal freedom, but in actively insisting on existential separateness against that of group separateness, it bypasses any elitist or nationalist claim to universalism. As such, this notion of universalism sees human subjects in their particularity and original difference from each other but maintains that this is true for all.

We must therefore focus our attention on changing the oppressive situation since we cannot do anything about human nature, ontological freedom cannot be eliminated. Exploitation of workers has their source in the capitalist mode of production, not in any inherent trait in individual workers. Women's historical subordination has not to do with any gendered feminine essence but gendered conditions in society. It is the situation that must change, not the individual person. Even though each of us are born with an inherent capacity to oppose our conditions due to our ontological freedom, this freedom is always already situated. As a subject I seek to transcend my being, and this can only occur in a concrete situation. My existence is thus always bound up in the existence of other people: "the existence of others as a freedom defines my situations and is even the condition of my own freedom" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 97). Therefore, it is our moral duty to fight against all structures that delimit freedom.

Solidarity Must be Created

The core of existentialist ethics is that we are born as nothing. This is the existential truth that followed from enlightenment's secular awakening: we are all born into this world as individuals without any predetermined meaning ascribed to us. Beauvoir maintains that "humanity is a discontinuous succession of free men who are irretrievably isolated by their subjectivity" (2004d, p. 109). This goes against the romantic humanist notion of some inherent or immediate bond among all of humanity, for "there doesn't exist any preestablished harmony between men". Rather, Beauvoir sees human relationships as contradictory precisely because we are ambiguous separate beings. The vulnerability of our human conditions makes unity difficult, as we are often positioned against each other by external conditions, and we have no essence of 'goodness' to fall back on. This does not mean that conflict is a pre-determined outcome either, for no pre-established order exists'; "with each man humanity makes a fresh start" (2004d, p. 110). Our relationships are conflictual because we are separate beings, not because we are natural

adversaries. More importantly, the distinct hierarchical forms that make up our modern societies are not given by nature, even if this is the ideological assumption that capitalism rests on. Human beings are neither inherently good nor bad, neither naturally harmonious nor adversaries. Societies are built; they do not spontaneously happen.

Beauvoir does not shy away from the fact that the ambiguity of our existence makes projects of solidarity difficult. In her text *Must we burn Sade* (2012b), she uses the example of Marquis de Sade to probe the difficulty of ethical engagements between human beings on the basis of our separateness. She contends that Sade fails his ethical responsibility because he uses his privileged position to refuse transcendence to the other, but his example forces us to call into question what she deemed the "essential problem" of her time; the true relationship of man to man" (2012b, p. 95). This allowed her to make the argument that if we want to fight for unity and solidarity, "to surmount the separation of individuals, it is on the condition of not underestimating it". Hence, if we want to fight for solidarity and freedom for all, we must come down to earth and acknowledge our existential individuality, the concreteness of each situation. We cannot take unity for granted; it is not given to us by nature or any other predetermination. As freedoms we are "neither unified nor opposed but separated. In projecting himself into the world, a man situates himself by situating other men around him. So solidarities are created, but a man cannot enter into solidarity with all the others, because they do not all choose the same goals since their choices are free." (2004d, p. 108).

Since we are all individual subjects with our own individual outlooks on the world, who become who we are in never-ending engagements with our environment, there can be no ideal political subject. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir gives an argument for how solidarity ought to be created on the basis of universality, not distinct categories of oppression:

> For if it is true that the cause of freedom is the cause of each one, it is also true that the urgency of liberation is not the same for all; Marx has rightly said that it is only to the oppressed that it appears as immediately necessary. As for us, we do not believe in a literal necessity but in a moral exigence (…) the proletarian is no more naturally a moral man than another (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 94)

The above quote points out that even if an oppressive situation makes it so that liberation is more urgent for some than for others, this does not entail that the oppressed is morally superior. Importantly, she points out that it is not "naturally" so, dismissing any romantic notion of inherent morality among the

oppressed. Rather, she points to how the cause of freedom is the moral responsibility of all; it is a universally human responsibility. Even though we are all bound up in each other, our concrete situations make it so that our relationships with each other take concrete asymmetrical forms. Therefore, we cannot merely evoke solidarity based on literal necessity; we must appeal to a universal and existential responsibility. This is a radical alternative to ethical-political frameworks based on identity or difference, who tend to further highlight group difference instead of human commonality[92]. Instead of being a corrective to essentialism, these perspectives reinforce it, now on the basis of (group) identity. Seeing humans as universally separate means that to be placed as other based on social distinction is oppressive, so the answer is to fight against difference, to be liberated from it, not to double down on it.

The fact that we are all ethically responsible for each other does not mean that I can fight *for* anyone else. Against the contemporary notion of "allyship", that those who are 'privileged' should support and join the struggle of those who are oppressed, or defer to them, Beauvoir maintains that "we must not delude ourselves with the hope that we can do anything for others" (2004d, p. 124). We are all responsible for the freedom of others, not because we should be good people or 'allies', but because it is in our interest to do so. Even though my concrete situation might not make fighting against oppression a literal necessity at the moment, circumstances can change. I might not be oppressed today, but I could be tomorrow. Fighting for the freedom of all is thus to fight for my own freedom. Any project of emancipation needs to be grounded in this existential fact.

This does not mean that we should ignore the fact that power often takes institutionalised or fixed forms, or that we should not form emancipatory projects around our common ground. It is merely to warn against any notion that solidarity is naturally formed, and to acknowledge that our existential separateness makes it so that we need to ground solidarity in our universal vulnerability. Furthermore, each of us needs to contribute to solidarity in our own particular way; it cannot be enforced upon us by predetermined categories. A worker is not only part of the working class, but she is also an individual freedom. The Marxian critique of capitalism is based on the principle of self-emancipation of the working class; we should be critical of the notion that a self-proclaimed enlightened minority knows what is best for

[92] As Wendy Brown points out, gender has become something "that can be bent, proliferated, troubled, re-signified, morphed, theatricalized, parodied, deployed, resisted, imitated, regulated. But not emancipated" (2003, p. 13).

any group of others. This is what happens if we see classes of people as static categories completely determined by historical or material conditions instead of free beings.

In the wake of the 'cultural turn'[93] in the 1960s and 1970s, critical theoretical attention moved from class exploitation to much more fragmented notions of oppression and resistance, often based on group identity. Ellen Meiksins Wood connects the idea of seeing classes as mere "bearers of historical process without agency" with the theoretical construction of an ideal class identity (2016, p. 104). Ideas of the 'good victim' alongside emphasis on group identity over universal human features make unifying projects difficult. Both positions dismiss the messy and ambiguous nature of historical processes.

Against the notion of resistance for the sake of resistance, a political project grounded in universal freedom allows us to move towards something instead of merely opposing what is. In addition, it allows us to build bridges instead of division, emphasising our commonalities instead of our differences. The fact that we are all separate individuals does not mean that we cannot form unifying projects, for it is exactly this separateness that makes us connected. Our subjective freedom makes it so that emancipation is always possible, that we do not become our oppressive conditions. A worker or a woman is not subordinate in her essential self; she lives her life in constant tension with her situation. Both Marxian and Beauvoirian social ontology require any emancipatory project to take seriously our ambiguous entanglement with our surroundings. The fact that we share a common ground and material oppression with others can be a fruitful starting point for liberation, which is why Marxian emphasis on material conditions and class exploitation serves as a productive inspiration for alternative visions to our contemporary moment.

Class exploitation has a specific historical status due to its strategic location "at the heart of capitalism" (Wood, 2016, p. 262). Capitalism cannot survive without class exploitation; this is a precondition for its mode of production. Thus, it is a system that is constituted by class oppression, but it is also characterised by its totalising features, where it reaches far beyond the workplace and shapes every aspect of our lives. In fact, this is what distinguishes it from earlier societies (Wood, 2016, chap. 10). Unlike pre-capitalist societies where economic power was inseparable from the household and social life, capitalism rests on the division of the economy from everything else. Production is cut off from the rest of our lives and placed in specialised

[93] See discussion of this in chapter 1.

institutions; we have neither a personal relationship to it nor any control of it. Transferring power relations from the state to private property does not mean that structural domination stops occurring, but that it becomes harder to oppose. One example is how market structures have become a new form of coercion, "subjecting all human activities and relationships to its requirements" (ibid, p. 252). This results in a form of domination that is much more opaque and less transparent than earlier forms, hiding behind the appearance that it is only "the economy". Capitalism therefore weakens our autonomy precisely due to its ideological mystifications.

Beauvoir's ethics is grounded in the need for the other to have their material conditions met: "they need health, leisure, security, and the freedom to do with themselves what they want" (2004d, p. 137). If others do not have their material conditions met, then I cannot be free, for my freedom is bound up in other people. Capitalism reaches into all of our lives and delimits our freedom, but it cannot survive without class oppression. Centring class exploitation is therefore a strategic starting point for universal projects of human liberation. What the emphasis on class teaches us more than the specifics of class oppression is that we need to centre our attention on the concrete experiences and the material conditions that shape people's lives. Hence, starting from freedom as the ethical value to guide us, we must oppose capitalism, but not for the sake of opposing capitalism. There have been problems of freedom before capitalism, and there will be problems of freedom after. Thus, projects of solidarity cannot be built from purely opposing capitalism; we must be *for* something. We need visions of new social systems, built on the foundation of freedom and authenticity.

Since our existential separateness does not allow for any natural harmony, or predetermined projects, we need to formulate ethical-political values to guide us. Liberation does not spontaneously happen. It is precisely because we are born without any predetermined meaning or essence, as separate subjectivities, that we need ethics and principles to guide us: "one does not offer ethics to a god" (Beauvoir, 1976, p.). If we are to counteract the elitist notion that we can formulate projects for others, these principles need to be founded on the very individual freedom that it seeks to uphold.

The Ethics of Authenticity

> I exist as an authentic subject, in a constantly renewed upspringing that is opposed to the fixed reality of things. I throw myself without help and without guidance into a world where I am not installed ahead of time waiting for myself (Beauvoir, 2004a, p. 212)

As we have seen, it is the ontology of human existence that grounds freedom as a precondition for ethical action. To assume my freedom and the freedom of others is to acknowledge both our human need for transcendence as well as our need for meaning to ground us. The fact of our transcendence does not mean that Beauvoir thinks we should merely struggle for the sake of struggle, or that the stakes do not matter. If that were the case, it would not be a struggle but "a stupid marching in place" (2004d, p. 99). It is crucial that both the struggle and the stakes matter, since the end is ambiguous. She criticises what she calls the illusion of false objectivity: that we can separate the end from the project and give it some intrinsic objective value, one that is out there in the world to be discovered. This might lead us down a dangerous dogmatic path where human particularities are dismissed in the face of the ultimate goal. On the other hand, she also dismisses the notion of false subjectivity, to see the project as a game or diversion for the sake of it, denying that any value exists in the world. Stakes are what give action meaning; we want an end, but only in order for it to be surpassed. Going beyond the dangers of false objectivity and false subjectivity, Beauvoir holds on to the tension of both value and forward movement: as humans we are defined by action and transcendence, but we need stakes to give action meaning.

It is a crucial aspect of Beauvoir's ethical-political thinking that she maintains that just because there are no predetermined projects or meaning out there for us to discover, this does not mean that life is without meaning. And this meaning, for Beauvoir, is freedom. To take ethical responsibility in the world is to assume the freedom of our existence, and it is to stake a claim. We have to assume our own freedom in choosing our particular projects that express our own individual engagement with the world. Additionally, since our freedom is bound up in the freedom of other people, "to will oneself free is also to will others free". Since we exist in the world as subject-objects, I cannot separate my freedom from yours. This means that "freedom is not to be engulfed in any goal", to be free "is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a

freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (1976, p. 97). I cannot assume my own freedom without fighting for the freedom of others, and this understanding goes against the notion that freedom has to do with following every whim or 'doing what you like'. To live an authentic life is to assume the freedom of self and others. It is an ethical imperative[94] that can lead us beyond ourselves towards projects of solidarity.

To live an authentic life is to pursue actions that contribute to universal freedom. Since this is premised on assuming my own freedom, the particularity of my project must be self-determined; I must choose my own project. There is no specific recipe for what specifically constitutes a good and bad action, for "ethics does no furnish recipes any more than do science and art" (1976, p. 145). Nobody can be forced into any specific action or project, and the individual's autonomy is therefore maintained. So, what is to stop anyone from laying claim to universal freedom while they pursue their own egotistical ends? If ethical action is self-determined, will we not end up in complete individualism? From the perspective of authenticity, we can only truly assume our own freedom if we recognise that we are both subjects and objects in the world, that we are vulnerable to conditions outside of our own control. If my actions spring from the illusion that I am a pure subject that does not need to fight oppression because I myself am not affected, this is inauthentic. The same is true if I think myself to be a pure object without any control over my conditions whatsoever. Since my material interests are bound up in the freedom of other people, the only way to assume my own freedom is by fighting for the freedom of all: "we have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom" (1976, p. 97). Therefore, projects that delimit freedom must be opposed, if necessary, even by violence. Freedom as an existentialist principle is therefore bound up in responsibility. To be a freedom is to accept the responsibility of being a part of the world. We can never know the full extent of our consequences in advance, but this does not mean that we can avoid action: "our actions are not waiting to be called forth; they are rushing toward a future that is not prefigured anywhere" (2004d, p. 123). This is the freedom and pain of our ambiguous existence: there are no definite answers. All we can do is try.

[94] Following Kant, Beauvoir's ethical conception can be seen as a moral imperative, an objective value that goes beyond our distinct historical situation. See Webber (2018) who outlines this specific argument, calling Beauvoir's philosophy "an Existentialist Kantian ethics", arguing that she presents a particularly sophisticated response to the problem of "establishing the objective value of human agency when the only opening premise that the reasoning subject must accept is the value of their own subjective ends" (p. 185).

The painfulness of indefinite questioning

> Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods. (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 145)
>
> In each situation he must question himself new about his ends, and he must choose and justify them without assistance. But it is precisely in this free engagement that morality resides. (Beauvoir, 2004c, p. 187)

To assume the responsibility of our freedom is no easy task. Not only are we directly constrained by external circumstances, but the very tensions that define our existence prohibit any ready-made answers for *how* we should engage authentically with the world in every given situation. How we fight for the freedom of self and others must necessarily look different in different historical conditions, but this is no excuse for a detached attitude. We have a responsibility to fight for the freedom of humanity; this is what grants meaning to our existence. But the only way we can ever hope to successfully apply this value onto our existence is by accepting that we have to constantly assess our own actions and be open to change. We also have to be prepared to fail without letting this be an excuse to avoid trying. In short, "morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 144).

This pain is why so many avoid their ethical responsibility. It is also why it is so much easier to emphasise either the subjective or the objective aspect of our existence instead of holding on to the tension between them. The only way to assume this tension is to concretely engage with it: "we must affirm the concrete particular thickness of this world" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 114). An ethics that stays in the abstract has no value for Beauvoir; it needs to "bite into the world" (2004c, p. 178). The notion of pure subjectivity and pure objectivity can thus be found in the opposition of ethics to politics. In *Moral Idealism and Political Realism* (2004c), she discusses the dangers of falling into the trap of emphasising either moralism or cynical realism, linking this to the opposition between ethics and politics, making the case that they cannot be separated. The problem with pure idealism is that it encloses itself in pure subjectivity and applies universal, timeless imperatives on the world (2004c, p. 177). This is a form of engagement with the world that opts out of action and sets itself on the sidelines, for taking a chance means that one is unable to stay pure. Pure realism, on the other hand, sees reality as something static and given, and ends

up justifying amoral behaviour in the name of efficiency. The pure realists are often politicians who forget what they are fighting for and who end up renouncing "an idea under pretext of ensuring its effectiveness" (ibid, p. 185). Beauvoir argues that both sides need to "come down to earth", which means among other things that they must accept failure and that "it is impossible to save everything" (ibid, p. 190).

From this it also follows that ethical considerations of what a human is and what it means to lead an authentic life cannot be separated from political considerations of oppression and liberation. For Beauvoir, "reconciling ethics and politics is thus reconciling man with himself" (2004c, p. 189), and we cannot emphasise one over the other because we live our lives irreducibly linked to the world. For the existentialists, it made no sense to divide philosophical questions of human existence from the realm of art or politics. Under contemporary capitalism, these divisions have become even more entrenched, with increasing specialisation and splitting of spheres. Holding on to the tension becomes increasingly difficult as realist politics dominate power institutions and decentred fragmentation dominate the fields of critique.

Since the ethics of authenticity is preconditioned by the ambiguity of existence, it cannot furnish recipes, only method, and this has to do with how we engage with the world. The ambiguity of the human condition means that we are both separate and connected, rationality and corporeality, subject and object. This is not an arbitrary relation; it is contingent and must be engaged within its specificity. Beauvoirian and Marxian social ontology give way to a method of concrete analysis preconditioned by the mediated nature of human existence. This means engaging the tensions between freedom and condition, which again means to grasp the thickness of our situation. This prohibits dogmatic politics, for it ensures that we always remain open to change. On the other hand, the ethics of authenticity provides us with a clear guiding principle, that we must fight for the freedom of all. This gives direction to action and projects, and links us in solidarity, but it does not predetermine any specific content for each of us. We have to find our own way. Thus, the most crucial aspect of this ethical engagement has to do with holding on to the concrete and the open, seeing freedom as a movement and value that is always concretely situated. It means that we need to get down to earth to test the value of freedom against the concreteness of the world in front of us. It means genuinely trying, which necessitates risking failure.

Art, Meaning, and Authenticity

> Like morality, authentic art confronts the world through its living becoming; to try and freeze the human and endlessly copy dead forms, is to work against it (Beauvoir, 2012a, p. 160)

> The socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts; where in their expression, historically determined, the untruth of the social situation comes to light. It is actually this against which the rage at art reacts. (Adorno, 1997a, p. 323)

Art can engage with authenticity in ways that theory cannot. They give concrete form to the tensions of subjectivity and objectivity in ways that are graspable. This has to do with their distinct ontological presence in the world, being born out of a society which they have the potential to be opposed to. Unlike human beings, artworks do not have ethical or political responsibility; they do not themselves have an obligation to fight for freedom. They can, however, grasp the thickness of the world in distinct ways that create meaning and enable visions of authenticity. Like ethics, the authenticity of artworks is preconditioned by their ontological status, of their mediated relation to their surroundings.

Art's social ontology

In several of her works, Beauvoir argues that artworks are especially suited to authentic engagements: she emphasises art as an example of reciprocal movements that open possibilities (1976, p. 86), and claims that art is an attempt to "found the world anew on a human freedom" (2011, p. 764). She sees art as concrete, but never finished or resolved; it is in constant movement, establishing itself through failure. This is very similar to the way she imagines ethical engagements in the world, and it is clear that Beauvoir imagines art to be projects of freedom and "singular experiments" that exist as confrontations between the freedom of the art and the constraints of the world (2004b, p. 272). In Pyrrhus and Cineas, she writes that although art is an object made by men, "it is made neither to entertain nor to edify. It does not respond to a pre-existing

need that it must fulfil. It is a surpassing of the past, a gratuitous and free invention, but in its newness, it demands to be understood and justified" (2004d, p. 136).

Works of art differ from philosophy because they allow for a manifestation of the singular, subjective, and ambiguous character of experience. Art can thus grasp the anguish of ambiguous existence and the thickness of the world in a specific manner that springs from its distinct presence in the world. While she did not conceptualise a fully-fledged aesthetic framework, Beauvoir's differing engagements with art bear the mark of what defines her ethics and philosophy: an emphasis on freedom, movement, and risking failure. Since the ethics of authenticity means to assume ambiguity, its ethics must be bound up in the tension of subjectivity and objectivity. It has to do with the relationship of art to society.

Like human subjects, artworks are outside of the world that they are at the same time a part of, but their materiality places them in a relation to their outside that is distinct from human existence. A central aspect of this problem has to do with the degree that artworks are allowed to be something other than a reproducing feature of its external conditions. The notion of art's autonomy can be traced back to Kant, who claimed that aesthetic judgments are made without reference to external uses. This gave rise to a fundamental change in the perception of art, from seeing it as mere imitations of the world, to a conception of its freedom and opportunity for creative expression. The perspective of relational autonomy that I am fleshing out here sees the autonomy of art as conditioned by social processes, which means that it is never fully autonomous nor determined. Furthermore, relational autonomy presupposes a relation between parts, which is to say that art is distinguishable from the rest of the world, including its creator(s). This necessitates a concrete conception of that which is outside of the artwork.

Due to their link to commodity characteristics, artworks stand in a specific tension with capitalism. Marxist aesthetic thinking[95] has therefore contributed perspectives that help ground an understanding of art's relational existence. Their differing emphasis on the ways that the social logic of capitalism interacts with artworks presuppose an understanding of art's mediated relation

[95] I am referring specifically to Walter Benjamin, George Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Fredric Jameson, and Theodor Adorno – and also newer Marxist engagement with art such as Nicholas Brown (2019), Anna Kornbluh (2023), Dave Beech (2019, Stefanie Bauman (2021), Gernot Böhme (2017) and Mike Wayne (2015). Of these, Theodor Adorno have especially inspired my conception of art's ontology.

to their surroundings. For Theodor Adorno, artworks are defined by their double character as both autonomous and social, which means that "their own tension is binding to the tension external to them" (1997a, p. 7). With Horkheimer (1997b) he criticised the way that the capitalist mode of production deprived art of its autonomy and singularity and argued that mass production produced cultural products marked by their interchangeability and generalised features, making them one with the rest of society instead of something other to it. From this perspective, it is thus in stepping outside of the standardisation of the market and claiming their singularity that artworks become something *other* to capitalism.

The autonomous potentiality of artworks can be found in the specificity of the artworks themselves, and this is grounded in its relation to the standardising features of modern society. Starting from a critical analysis of capitalist and modern society, the formal characteristics of the works became a primary concern for many critical thinkers[96]. This is what leads Adorno to conclude that "art and society converge in the artwork's content, not in anything external to it" (1997a, p. 311). The artwork's materiality is always already situated, however, sitting in mediated tension with its historical conditions as well as with content. This dialectic between society and the specific artwork leaves traces in the artworks themselves, as unresolved forms or truths that we can engage with. Art is therefore especially interesting as sites of dialectical exploration, for they reveal that all things are caught up in the contradictory processes with the social relations of which they are a part.

Artworks form their own world; they have their unique ways of engaging the material conditions of the world. The contradictory nature of subjectivity and objectivity meet in artworks, and by engaging them in their specificities they can reveal truths about our moment. To take this seriously means to go beyond any attention to author[97] or spectator that predetermines meaning. Artworks cannot be reduced to neither specific technologies nor the intention of their makers, precisely because they have their own individual ways of being in the world. From this it also follows that they cannot be subsumed under any spectator interpretation, that the meaning of an artwork is not dependent on

[96] They differed in their conclusions: see the difference between Lukács and Adorno in chapter 1 and 5 for example. Even if Lukács supposedly argued for the value of 'content' opposed Adorno emphasis on 'form', both thinkers concerned themselves with form *and* content, which points to the inherent contradictions of this opposition from the start.

[97] I depart from some Marxist aesthetic thinking in distinguishing the work from the artist, and what I see as a contradiction from the perspective of art's autonomy. See chapter 3 for a discussion of how this can play out in perspectives on the auteur and art film.

any specific spectator position[98]. This 'getting back to the artworks themselves' follows from the modern idea of art's autonomy, but it takes on a distinct ethical-political dimension from the perspective of ambiguity and Marxian dialectics. Considerations of form, style and art's singularity is not opposed to 'content' or ideas, for it is all caught up in ambiguous tension with its conditions. Any analysis of artworks that split their formal characteristics from their historical conditions will only lead to abstraction.

Thus, authentic engagements with artworks start from this tension of artwork to its surroundings, problematising its autonomous status by taking seriously its ontological status as relational. This means an emphasis on historical conditions, of the concrete situation that the artwork comes to be. From the perspective of history as process, the specific outcome of artwork's relation to their environment can never be predetermined. To take this seriously is to depart from certain variations of Marxist aesthetic thinking that see art as determined by history and technology[99]. Thus, to truly centre on the specificities of artworks themselves must mean to reject any determinist notion of history or technology, for the form of the artwork has not to do with technology or technique, even if this is part of its condition. The clash between artwork's singularity and its conditions, then, has to do with the way that art responds to the social logic of its concrete historical moment. From Marx we have learned that ideas and materiality cannot be separated, and artworks are uniquely suited to grasp the intricacies of this truth.

Confronting the world through its living becoming

Authenticity as an ethical value is not a static quality or trait, but a way of being in the world. What kinds of aesthetic engagements can spring out of an ethics of authenticity, then? Here, Beauvoir and Adorno's differing engagements with authenticity[100] and art point towards forms of art that confront the world instead of escaping it. For Beauvoir, authentic artworks appeal to freedom

[98] I take inspiration from Lisa Siraganian (2012) notion of "meaning's autonomy" here.

[99] This is especially evident in Althusserian structuralist perspectives, but aspects of this view can also be found in the rigid opposition between realism and modernism, or between the cultural industry and autonomous works of art.

[100] Both of their engagements with authenticity and art are grounded in a critique of the troublesome manifestations that come from the quest for purity, see chapter 1.

because they stake a claim in the uncertainty that defines our human existence, and they invite us to assume this ambiguity instead of trying to resolve it. She was very critical of any notion of art that severed its relationship from the messiness of the world, linking it to bourgeois elitism and notions of pure transcendence. Art and beauty can be easily co-opted by proclamations of authenticity that first and foremost serve as social distinguishing factors, opposing mass art in favour of 'elegance', refinement and elusive notions of quality (2012a). Authentic artworks, on the other hand, "confront the world through its living becoming"; they grasp the thickness of the world and make us realise that "a smile is indistinguishable from a smiling face, and the meaning of an event indistinguishable from the event itself" (Beauvoir, 2004c, p. 275).

Even though he was very critical of authenticity, Adorno also found that authenticity could be used as a critical concept in his engagement with art. Importantly, the distinction between what he thought to be a salvageable use of authenticity as a concept had to with artworks that register history instead of setting itself outside of it. Artworks that are authentic do not position themselves as outside of historical conditions; they take the conflict of the world up in themselves, for the "scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity" (1997a, p. 32). Authentic artworks thus rest on a deeply historical temporality, as opposed to any notion of something originary outside of history. This follows from his conception of the double character of artworks, being both autonomous and social.

Both Beauvoir and Adorno were highly critical of authenticity when it was used as an ideological and linguistic means to proclaim itself outside of history. Adorno's different uses of authenticity point to the contradictory nature of not only the term itself, but of freedom and art's autonomy as an *other* to capitalism. In fact, his aesthetic theory is built around this very problem, that of artwork's ability to reveal the contradictory nature of capitalism, which also points towards the possibility of freedom. For Adorno, since the subject–object relation under capitalism is one of contradiction and anguish, "the socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts" (1997a, p. 323). It is an important aspect of his aesthetic thinking that authentic artworks do not shy away from the painful reality of life under capitalism, but precisely that they "reveal themselves as the wounds of society". From this perspective, any artwork that tries to smooth things over becomes unfree, blending in with its surroundings.

In various texts, Adorno (2020, 1997a, 1997b) concluded that the social criticality of artworks was to be found in modernist art, which stands in

contrast to realist art, which he associated with a didactic style and an emphasis on theme and message over autonomous expression. His rejection of realist works of art in favour of modernist art points to a certain discrepancy between his ontological conception and placing a value on a distinct form of aesthetic expression. Realist Marxian thinkers such as Lukács and Brecht had in common with Adorno a critical engagement with artwork's relation to the social totality, and a political investment in putting an end to capitalist exploitation. Their main difference had to do with which side of the dialectic to put their foremost emphasis: on totality or the particularity of the artwork. From the perspective of Lukács, modernist art reinforced the fragmentation of capitalism in its emphasis on subjectivity and formal experimentation. For Brecht, however, realism was more about a political attitude than a concrete aesthetic strategy. It had to do with "discovering the causal complexes of society" (2020, p. 86). He argued that aesthetic strategies needed to change with historical conditions, for the truth can be expressed in many ways and by many methods. Against any static notions or formulas, he thought that "one must compare the depiction of life in a work of art with the life itself that is being depicted, instead of comparing it with another depiction" (ibid, p. 89). This is a stunning testament against any account of art that attempts to cut it off from the rest of the world, and an important corrective to elitist engagements with art that get lost in notions of taste[101]. Furthermore, this Brechtian notion of realism as attitude comes close to the Beauvorian emphasis on trying, failing, and staking a claim. The ethics of authenticity preclude any predetermined strategies or static formulas, for "ethics has no recipe, only method" (1976, p. 145). It is a way of engaging with the world. To engage with art's authenticity means to be able to look past predetermined aesthetic categories to the work's specific form of being in the world. It has to do with confronting the world as-is, *and* paving the way for the new; not as an opposition, but as the same movement.

Meaning is formed in this concrete movement against freedom. Authenticity finds itself in this tension, between subjectivity and objectivity, the concrete and open. By paying attention to how the artwork handles and responds to its circumstance, truths about the conditions of freedom can unfold from this very movement. This necessitates a conception of that circumstance, which here means critical attention to the social system of capitalism, and the pervasive

[101] Adorno's aesthetic theory could be seen as contradictory in this matter, for his ontological conception grounds art firmly in the messiness of the world, but his various judgments of art (such as the attack on realism) sometimes show a rigid and uncompromising stance bound up with notions of taste and purity.

logic of capital accumulation. Works that smooth over these tensions blend into the seamless logic, becoming one with it. Art that appeals to freedom, on the other hand, draws attention to the places where it hurts. Building from Marxist aesthetic engagement and its emphasis on the dialectic tensions of artwork and totality, the ethics of authenticity adds specific attention to the subjective and what it means to meet with the whole. This means to engage with art's movement and way of being, in their specific circumstance, without concluding on their meaning ahead of time. It is an engagement with artworks that allows for the concrete *and* the open, rethinking notions of clarity and autonomy for our time.

Chapter 3 Arthouse Cinema and Modes of Cynicism and Nostalgia

We live in a world where the domination of capitalism is an uncontested fact, something agreed upon by both those in favour of it and those who dream of something else. Since capitalism no longer faces any external threats, there is no danger in allowing for critique of it. We live in what appears to be a post-ideological world, according to Slavoj Zizek (2008); one cannot pose any threat to capitalism by merely stating its horrors anymore. Capitalist ideology has therefore adjusted by overvaluing subjective beliefs and moral assertions over meaningful actions in the world. If we know about the dangers of capitalism and oppose it in our hearts (or state it on our social media), then we can go on participating in capitalist exchange with good conscience. This kind of moral critique can therefore strengthen capitalism; we continue to act in ways that are no threat to it, while at the same time allowing us to feel like we are opposing it.

One distinct characteristic of the system of capitalism is exactly the ability to reinvent itself, adapt to, and co-opt criticisms of it. Fredric Jameson (1991) and Mark Fisher (2008), among others, have pointed to how the notion of 'alternative' no longer designates anything outside of the mainstream but has become the dominant style *within* the mainstream. Gestural anti-capitalism is thus no threat to capitalism but becomes an integral part of it. This makes any form of cultural opposition inherently contradictory, as it stands in tension with capitalist structures and the fragile autonomous status of artworks. One answer could be to completely dismiss any claim to artwork's autonomy, or to apply determinist analysis onto artworks based on different technological criteria. But this is to opt out of the thickness of history, for it is in the tension of these contradictions that we find traces both of what-is and what-could-be.

From the onset of modernity, the idea of art's autonomy was caught up in elitist notions of taste and superiority. Gernot Böhme connects Kantian aesthetic notion of autonomy to the 'aesthetics of taste', concerned with social distinction and aesthetic competence connected with the emergence of the

educated middle class (2017, p. 55). This was also a central concern for Beauvoir, who connected elitist notions of beauty to inauthentic claims to purity, asserting oneself outside of history. From this perspective, art stands opposed to the chaos of the world, offering a "well ordered significative universe" (2012a, p. 159). Beautiful art is to be used against the ambiguity of human existence, allowing us to surpass ourselves, setting us outside the messy reality of the world. This is why, according to Beauvoir, that beauty can become an aristocratic dogma, one that can be used against the majority of people to justify the established order. Central here are vague notions of 'quality' and 'elegance' that cannot be appreciated by the 'common people'. The principle of exclusion is the foundation for such a perspective on aesthetics, for that which is accessible to all has little value. To understand and appreciate beautiful art is a privilege that belongs to the few. What Beauvoir points out here is not merely how art can become a tool for social distinction, but how it applied specific notions of art's beauty and elegance. Dominant ideology takes on highly contradictory and selective forms, she argues, of which the designation of art's 'quality' and beauty plays a central role. Today, under the liberal status quo with its contradictory yet impenetrable ideology of cynicism and apathy, these selective forms find new manifestations.

Since the ethical ideal of authenticity stands for true autonomy beyond conventions, it can lead to distinct cultural expressions and contradictory performative aspects in its entanglement with capitalist structures. In contemporary culture, this is increasingly linked to an emphasis on preservation of more traditional ways of life: a sustainable lifestyle, handmade products and vintage clothing. To be authentic is to reject generic production and standardisation, in favour of a true relationship to oneself and one's surroundings. This is easily conflated with a sense of nostalgia, of looking back to an idealised past, looking past the inherent inauthenticity in such romantic ideals.

Arthouse Cinema and Ideas of Art's Autonomy

Arthouse cinema and its entanglement with auteurism is interesting as an expression of how standardisation can meet with the appearance of autonomy in forms of functional beauty and the auteur as brand. Here, tensions of elitism, taste, and autonomy take on particular forms against the backdrop of our contemporary moment.

Arthouse cinema is the kind of film that is situated on the creative and economic spectrum between mainstream cinema and what we call the avant-garde, low budget or art film. Bert Cardullo writes that "art-house films are typically characterized by aesthetic norms that are different from those of classical narrative films (…). But art-house cinema is still a commercial cinema, which depends for its existence on profits rather than the more ethereal rewards of status and prestige" (2011, p. 2). Instead of opposing profit and the rewards of status and prestige, what characterises the arthouse film is exactly the way it depends on both. In fact, it is the promise of prestige, critical acclaim and possible festival awards that give the arthouse film its profitable edge. As Michael O'Pray writes, "Art cinema is that which combines artistic ambition with commercialism" (2003, p. 2).

Central to arthouse films is the idea of the auteur, the film's director or 'maker'. While a contested term[102], the emphasis on the film's director as an 'auteur' is most often linked with an emphasis on the director's distinct personal style. This emphasis is often conflated with an emphasis on art's autonomous characteristics[103]. With increased standardisation and commercialisation, this has changed: for the last few decades, the auteur has become "a fixture of the popular media's general personality cult", "actively deployed as a brand name and marketing tool", both in the commercial film industry and art cinema, as argued by Thomas Elsaesser (2019, p. 276-277). Both 'art cinema' and 'the auteur' are now considered a part of the market, where film festivals act as portals and gatekeepers. In his analysis of European cinema, Elsaesser makes the case that the auteur, due to their specific and contradictory positioning inside-outside the system, might reinvent and 'save cinema'. Even though he acknowledges the contradictory position of the auteur, he exemplifies a perspective on art that looks back to what was in order to save the now. Furthermore, the notion of the auteur itself is connected to the highly selective and elitist idea of art's autonomy, as Janet Staiger has pointed out in her critique of the film canon[104] (1985, p. 13).

[102] For a discussion of the different perspectives of auteurism and film's authorship, see Aaron Meskin (2009).

[103] This is especially true for the European auteurs from the 1940s and onwards, who were often seen as outsiders or rebels against the system. These directors enjoyed their autonomy and were shielded from the full force of the market (Elsaesser, 2019, p. 290).

[104] More recently, Jenny Chamarette (2021) has argued that it is an inherent contradiction that so many film critics fail to problematize the status of lauded auteurs as they become institutions themselves, continuing to proclaim them as 'rebels' against the system.

In the following, I engage with two films that can be deemed as both arthouse and auteur films: *Triangle of Sadness* (2022) directed by Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund and *The Worst Person in the World* (2021) directed by the Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier. The films are directed by two well-known filmmakers known for their specific characteristics and style, both among, if not *the,* most esteemed or award-winning director in their respective country at the moment. Both films are largely state funded with budgets between 5 and 10 million euros, which is relatively high given their Scandinavian context. *Triangle of Sadness* won the main prize in Cannes in 2022 and was nominated for three Academy Awards, including best film. *The Worst Person in the World* won the prize for best actress in Cannes and was also nominated for two Academy Awards. The films allow me to explore some distinct aspects of arthouse cinema and how it relates to ideas of beauty, authenticity and autonomy in contemporary culture. Where *Triangle of Sadness* rejects history by adhering to the liberal status quo, *The Worst Person in the World* suggests that there are values to be found in the recent past. The former keeps us at a distance through a functionalist shield, while the latter invites us in via cracks in its struggle with the now.

An Unbreakable Surface

Triangle of Sadness centres on a celebrity model couple who are on vacation on a yacht with wealthy people and end up stranded on a desert island. The film is classically structured in three parts: the first one follows the couple in their working context, mainly centred around several dialogue scenes between them on gender roles, money, and power. The second part is set on the yacht, dominated by a longer sequence involving a captain's dinner and a bad storm. Pirates' blow up the yacht and it goes down, and some of the guests and crew end up on an island. The third part is focused on how the power relation between them changes as circumstances change. The film follows a classic dramatic structure for storytelling, and the form, the film's specific way of being, serves to illustrate a message in a clear and effective manner, mostly conveyed in longer scenes through mise-èn-scene and dialogue. Apart from a dinner scene, which we will return to, there are no hints at formal disruption in the film, no contradictions or breaks of the functional unity that the film upholds in its structural being. In making use of a standardised formula for functional beauty, the film gives the appearance of autonomy while adhering to conformity, an ideological (dis)illusion typical for our moment.

In a scene set at a restaurant, the two main characters Carl and Yaya end up in an argument about who should pay the bill for the dinner they just had. The scene, and the ones following, serve to illustrate the message that gender relations play into and form expectations of who should pay the bill in heterosexual couples. At the restaurant, the couple is shown sitting at the table, the dialogue between them is shown through a classic short-reverse-shot while the entire mise-én-scene is built around the atmosphere of being at a restaurant: the sounds, the lighting and the things that surround them all work in unison to form the experience of 'Hollywood realism'[105]. The dialogue is what drives the scene forward: Carl questions whether or not Yaya is deliberately ignoring the bill that has been put on their table, pointing out that she said she would pay the last time they went out only to end up pushing him into paying by ignoring the bill and saying "thank you" when he touches it. The discussion between them continues in the taxi after, with the camera moving smoothly between them as we hear rain falling and see traffic in the background. The following dialogue in the taxi spells out the political message that the scene(s) want to convey:

> Carl: I do think it's quite crazy how it's such a hard thing to talk about. Money. It's such a touchy subject. Don't you think?
>
> Yaya: Yeah, I think it's un-sexy to talk about money.
>
> Carl: Okay, but then why is that?
>
> Yaya: I don't know, it's just not sexy.
>
> Carl: Well, you don't think it's because it's so tied to gender roles? Fucking hell, the menu in the restaurant didn't even have prices for you.
>
> Yaya: That's not fair, Carl. I'm always paying.
>
> Carl: No, no, no. Let's take you out of it here. And just talk about women in general.
>
> Yaya: I'm a generous person, Carl. Ask any of my friends.
>
> Carl: Sure you're generous, but..

[105] This is a form of realism characterised by illusion, transparency and closure – typically associated with Classical Hollywood Cinema. See Wollen (1986), Maccabe (1986),

> Yaya: But?
>
> Carl: When it comes to you and me, we're dealing with roles that I hate. I don't want to be the man, whilst you're the woman, I want us to be best friends.
>
> Yaya: I don't want to sleep with my best friend.
>
> Carl: You don't understand what I am trying to say. I mean, we shouldn't just slip into the stereotypical gender-based roles that everyone else seems to be doing. I want us to be equal.

This taxi scene is a typical example of how dialogue is used to illustrate ethical or political discussions in the film, with all the formal specificities of the film working in unison and service of the message. This is also the case in scenes that leave the realm of realism and play with absurdity and humour: these hints of formal excess do not in any way work against the communication of the message, but work in favour of it, strengthening the didactic force.

Another message that the film communicates is that the rich are egotistical and out of touch with the reality of the workers. This is also communicated in a direct manner, such as when one of the rich people onboard Vera demands that the crew members take a swim because "everyone is equal", and she wants to simply "reverse roles". When crew member Alicia tries to explain that she cannot swim during work hours, Vera commands her to swim, telling her repeatedly to "shut up" and live in the moment. Vera goes on to demand that all crew should swim, disrupting the work that they do and delaying the upcoming dinner. Unlike the scene between the couple in the taxi, this sequence starts from a purely realistic setting, but quickly escalates by the use of exaggeration and humour. In a montage sequence, we are shown how different parts of the crew – even those who work under deck – have to abandon their roles while rhythmic music of woodwind instruments fills the soundtrack, adding a layer of comedy and absurdity to the very clear message. Other examples that illustrate variations over the message that the rich are evil include a scene where an older British couple who work on production of hand grenades and land mines tell Yaya and Carl that they work on "upholding democracy all over the world" or how the old Russian oligarch is more concerned with removing the jewellery from Vera's neck than grieving her death after he finds her dead body. The characters of the film are there to illustrate ready-made points, as efficiency and functionality dominate. The added humour or absurdity to the political message does not take away from

or preclude the explicit treatment of the themes at hand; it merely makes it go down easier – which, of course, is the point.

Vera's wish for role reversal is fulfilled in the last and third part of the film. Here, the overall message of the film is hammered in: power is contingent, and it corrupts. This part is set on a beach where the characters who survived the shipwreck have to renegotiate their own roles in the power hierarchy. The skills needed on an empty island are different to those required on a luxury yacht, and the film very quickly lets the former toilet manager Abigail step into the role of power-hungry leader. While the others lay back on the beach eating chips, Abigail goes hunting for octopus. The juxtaposition of the two frames: one where we see all the other characters sitting or lying comfortably on the beach eating chips, and the other where we see Abigail from afar, using her body to work in the sea, work to justify her claim to power and convey the message with efficacy. To simplify the situation further, none of the other guests can make a fire or clean an octopus, and they generally do not have any skills that are useful for being stranded on an island. Abigail, of course, knows everything. And if the point was not already made clear, there is a scene staging a power conflict where Abigail gets to state that she of course deserves more food and power, because she "did everything". The scene takes place around the fire with everyone eating the octopus that Abigail has caught. She is told to comply and distribute the food more evenly among them "because she is an employee". Abigail then stands up and, shown from a low angle, making clear her newfound power, she states that: "On the yacht, toilet manager. Here, captain." Then she demands that all the others call her captain. The shift in power dynamics also pertains to sexual relations, with Abigail instantly taking advantage of the situation to sleep with the young model Carl. The message is clear: as circumstances change, so do power dynamics, and all the money in the world does not matter when you are stranded on an island without the particular skills needed to survive there.

In setting each part of the film in very different material circumstances, the points are illustrated very effectively. But the film is not allowing for the tension of its own contingent being in the world. When everything points in the same direction in service of functionality and efficiency, the film seals itself off from the messiness of mediation. The film, being an object within a capitalist system, is necessarily caught up in contradictory processes, but these tensions become concealed by its smooth unifying structure. It is stamped by sameness and standardisation in ways that make it one with its external conditions instead of something other to it. There are no wounds, tensions or

pain to be found in its unbreakable surface, and as such there is no opening for engagements that take seriously the ambiguity of existence.

When Adorno and Horkheimer argued for how advertising and the culture industry merged, they pointed to how the standard became one of effectiveness: "striking yet familiar, easy yet catchy, skilful yet simple" (1997b, p. 163). The form of *Triangle of Sadness* is one of efficiency – everything works together to illustrate a few straightforward and simple messages. What makes the film stand out from any other standardised culture product, is therefore first and foremost the fact that its external branding is autonomous due to its auteur and art film status. It stands out from Hollywood blockbuster aesthetics in its commitment to stylistic consistency and formal harmony. It forms its own fictional world and moves away from the notion of reality as pure representationality. The formal consistency makes use of conventions of beauty: every frame is precise, rules followed, colours crisp. Adorno points to the difference between the beauty of the autonomous artwork and functionalist incidental beauty, characterised by formal harmony (1997a, chap. 3). The beauty of the autonomous work of art becomes problematic; it suffers from "functionless functioning" (ibid, p. 82). In *Triangle of Sadness*, the beauty is a functioning, serving an external end that is the form of beauty as an ideological marker of freedom. In a culture where mainstream films have long since become "advertisements for themselves" (Adorno, 1981, p. 205), art films can perform the illusory function of freedom.

Brutal conformity

The functionalist style and didactic manner notwithstanding, the political message that the film proclaims also speaks to the distinct distance to class politics in contemporary society. It is no coincidence that the film's political message is a safely liberal one, positioning itself at a distance from both Marxists and Russian oligarchs. The dinner scene in part 2 is an especially good example of this, for even if this is one of the few parts of the film where it is allowed some room to play outside of mere illustration, it is also where the most heavy-handed political commentary is conveyed.

The scene is set within the dining hall at the yacht, where everyone has gathered for "the captain's dinner". A storm causes a lot of turbulence onboard, which is what allows for the most extreme sequence of the film in terms of formal excess, playing on affective extremities, while conveying the

longest and most explicit political dialogue in the film. It is exactly this juxtaposition of vomit, diarrhoea and political commentary that makes the scene stand out. After polite dinner conversations to further emphasise how wealthy and horrible the guests are, the storm takes centre stage, with close-ups of shaky food, vomit pouring down windows, and the absurdity of a crew who pretend that everything is quite all right. Soon, most people in the dining hall start puking and shitting all over the place, while the frame imitates the tilting angle of a ship on rough sea.

In the middle of the chaos of the storm, the Captain and the Russian oligarch Dimitri come together and talk about politics: the captain is a Marxist while Dimitri is a capitalist. Surrounded by champagne bottles, food, wine and classical paintings, they site quotations from, among others, Ronald Reagan, Vladimir Lenin, Margaret Thatcher and Karl Marx to each other. Cutting back and forth between them, we see them reading quotes from their phones, drinking alcohol and laughing at each other as they try to one up the other by finding the better quote to undermine the other's political position. After the first round of quotes, Dimitri comments, "A Russian capitalist and an American communist," while throwing his hands out to indicate the irony of the situation. The captain follows up with "on a 250-million dollar luxury yacht" while cheering towards Dimitri. These comments, when put together: "A Russian capitalist and an American communist on a 250-million-dollar luxury yacht" mark the advertising logic behind these scenes. The back and forth between lines that represent communist and capitalist stances is nothing but fun and games, mere entertainment, and the absurdity of the American being a Marxist and the Russian a capitalist is a fun selling point, nothing more.

Unlike the rest of the film where the message is often presented in longer scenes with clear situations playing out in front of the camera without much interruption, this dinner and vomit sequence is more untidily organised, allowing for hints of disruption and chaos. The movements and tilting, more unpredictable editing, and greater variety in framing are unnecessary excess to the content of the message that is more clearly presented elsewhere. While this allows the film some relief from the sole emphasis on the clarity of the message, this is simply replaced by another externalised emphasis: shock value for the purpose of entertainment. While the film otherwise signals towards the

external world in the form of a unidirectional message, we are here offered a distraction from it by way of irresistible immersion[106].

Dimitri and the captain find their way to the ship's intercom system and start to address the guests while continuing their political exchange. The voices of the two of them are juxtaposed with images of the other passengers getting thrown around on the ship, some of them bathing in their own shit and puke. In an answer to Dimitri's question of whether or not he is a communist, the captain starts addressing the richer classes' failure to pay enough taxes. Sat in a leather chair, speaking into the intercom and looking towards the camera with a serious look on his face and a calm earnestness in his voice, he says, "And while you're swimming in abundance, the rest of the world is drowning in misery. That's not the way it's meant to be."

While the crew starts cleaning, the song *New Noise* by the Swedish hardcore band Refused starts playing, first from the earphones of one of the workers, then on full blast, while images of toilets and shit water match the rhythm of the music. The film is at its most chaotic in these moments, only quieting down slightly when the captain starts reading from his diary. He is shown in a wide shot, sitting in the dark with only the glow from a small light to aid his reading while Dimitri stands opposite him, listening in the dark. Starting from the personal, hearing his mother crying after the death of Martin Luther King and Bob Kennedy, the captain goes on to make a political monologue on the American government as a war machine. "War itself became our most lucrative industry. Every bomb that's dropped, somebody makes a million dollars. You don't have to see where those bombs are exploding or the grieving mothers," he states loudly while making excited gestures with his hands. While he speaks, an acoustic guitar is heard, and we see images of the other guests sitting around in their life vests, wide-eyed and listening in. The juxtaposition of this earnest speech of leftist radicality with the formal commitment to pure entertainment and chaos allows for an inclusion of radicality as well as a rejection of its romantic illusions at the same time. The specific commitment to the cynical safety found in liberal status quo is uncovered; playing up the extremities allows the film to situate itself as a balanced middle ground. Contemporary liberal capitalism, the pervasive systemic logic of our time, remains unscathed and unmentioned.

[106] Anna Kornbluh (2023) points to how immediacy and immersion becomes a (renewed) aesthetic strategy under contemporary capitalism, as a distraction from mediation and the complexities of the social whole.

To say that the film performs banal political critique might seem evident at this point. It is not merely that the film abandons any real notion of art's autonomy in favour of 'the message', but it also takes it one step further and distances itself even from the idea of autonomy. The juxtaposition of the streamlining, stylistic consistency and liberal messaging work together to form a distinct variation of brutal all-encompassing conformity. Brutal in the sense that it becomes impenetrable, with safety nets everywhere. In the dinner sequence, this becomes especially obvious: Marxism and capitalism are literally sat together at the table, made to be equal under the guise of entertainment. What is interesting is not simply that the film equates the two, but the ease in which it does it – with no obstacle or ambiguity anywhere to be found. This becomes especially evident in the third act, where the working-class hero is exposed to be just as brutal and power hungry as the wealthy, conveniently dismissing utopian visions as dangerous illusions. The unifying form conceals the wounds and contradictions of relations under capitalism, and the perceived neutrality of the liberal messaging is sure to please everyone.

The way the film streamlines its messaging, both in its formal structure and its ideological foundation, points towards an almost spasmodic engagement with liberal capitalism. Mark Fisher wrote about performative anticapitalism nearly 20 years ago, but *Triangle of Sadness* points to another layer of detachment. Not only is class relations used as a device for comedy and entertainment, but it adds a new layer of distance to the idea of engaging class relations at all. The result is not merely an ironic distance, but a post-postmodernist stance of ridiculing the thought of engaging class in a meaningful way. This is underlined by how the film conflates its brand of 'Marxism' with liberal protest messaging and clunky identity politics. In the film's first and third part it is not class but gender relations that is played up, and here the film wants to have its cake and eat it too. Simultaneously commenting on gender relation and on the performative aspects of virtue signalling shows how it continuously seeks the safe middle road.

Since everything in *Triangle of Sadness* works seamlessly together to illustrate a message, consensus is formed, closing off the opportunity for meaningful engagement. There is no doubt or ambiguity to be found here, no acknowledgment of the film's own vulnerable status in the world. The smooth structure thus works to form an impenetrable style of functional beauty. Its stylistic consistency sets it apart from the kind of culture products that lay no claim to artistic ambitions, but it remains standardised, nonetheless. This is an aesthetic that borrows from the prestige of art but remains subservient to external means. This becomes even more clear in the way it conveys safe

liberal politics. In a world where the alternative has long since been swallowed up by the mainstream, *Triangle of Sadness* demonstrates the distance to real alternatives.

Self-Creation in the Absence of Meaning

Authenticity has to do with individuality and freedom, for it was not until we had a concept of individual freedom that it became a distinct concept and value for how to live our lives. To be authentic is to be able to choose your actions, the specificity of your projects, and how you pursue meaning. Choosing for yourself means that you should not merely accept external pressures and norms but take an active stand and acknowledge the responsibility of the choice. In contemporary culture, the notion of authenticity has become distorted and co-opted by capitalism, leading to different ideological variants of authenticity. One distinct aspect of what Charles Taylor (1991) called deviant authenticity is pure individualism and self-creation solely for one's own sake. *The Worst Person in the World* engages with some of the distinct ways that this tension of individual freedom and meaning-making comes to the fore in contemporary culture. It engages with different aspects of contemporary freedom, among other things, by contrasting authenticity and inauthenticity, tradition and rootlessness, rationality and irrationality. Central here are the characters of Julie and Aksel, who are made to represent these differences.

The main character Julie is a restless subject who struggles with meaninglessness but keeps on trying. Throughout the film, she is shown attempting to assume her ontological freedom in a Beauvoirian sense, by throwing herself into the world and the specificities of projects. She therefore recognises that one makes oneself be through action, that she "is not a thing, but a project" (Beauvoir 2004d, p. 93). This becomes clear already in the film's prologue, where the character is introduced as a subject who is trying to find her way by attempting different studies, interests and romantic partners. A third-person voiceover introduces her qualms in choosing a life path while different moments of her life are shown as a montage, moving swiftly between different perspectives, sounds and movements. The montage guides us into the realm of simplicity in its use of romantic-comedy genre. We learn that Julie starts to study medicine because she wants to put her good grades to use, but when she realises that she is more interested in the mind than anatomy, she switches to psychology. At the same time, she breaks up with her boyfriend who becomes "devastated but had to respect the way she took control of her

life". Soon thereafter, she changes course again. Realising she is a visual person, Julie declares to her mum that she wants to be a photographer. No longer looking for security, the voiceover states, she takes a temporary job in a bookstore while taking photography courses and enjoying her new life, meeting new people at new places.

From the start we are confronted with a distinct feature of freedom and authenticity in the Scandinavian society, that of having the opportunity to switch up and try different studies due to the availability of student loans. This is certainly not to say that having the means to not "prioritise security" is something afforded all Scandinavians[107]. The film is firmly situated in the upper middle class: a world of big swanky apartments, summer houses, and the kind of freedoms grounded in financial security. At one of these parties, among the cultural elite, Julie meets cartoon writer Aksel, and they become romantically involved. Importantly, the voiceover proclaims that it is only after Aksel proposes that they should go their separate ways because she should enjoy her freedom that she falls in love with him. What follows is a romantic montage of cheerful music, showing different moments from their happy union through juxtaposing moments of laughter with those of pure romantic bliss.

As evidenced from the prologue, the character of Julie tries out the kind of engagement with freedom that recognises and acknowledges that there is no predetermined meaning to life. She attempts to assume her freedom and allows herself to try and fail in the pursuit of purpose. Instead of grabbing on to a set of values or a specific role and clinging to it, she remains open to the possibility that no choice can be made once and for all. Her genuine attempt at different engagements with what life has to offer makes her philosophy an authentic one from the perspective of individuality and self-creation. The problem is that she does not have core values to lead her, and her method of trying and failing are based on whims rather than a place of meaning. It is entirely possible to remain open to trying and failing while still being guided by ethical principles, but the film marks out how a distinct feature of contemporary society is exactly the lack of principles. From this perspective, creating ourselves authentically becomes difficult because the room for freedom is limited by the pervasive nature of capitalism. The principles available are those produced by the market and the different variations of performative authenticity. Julie demonstrates

[107] Economic inequality is on the rise, and so is the division between classes, especially in terms of education. See for example Ljungberg & Hansen's *Arbeiderklassen* (2021) for an overview of class developments in Norway.

this in her quest to find herself, in moments of both genuine contemplation and near-autonomy as well as moments of performance.

The conflict of being for self and being for others is made evident in a sequence where Julie takes mushrooms and has ensuing hallucinations. This is one of the moments where the film breaks from its recurring style of realism to evoke the subjective experience of being high. We see images of Julie in a fat suit with the hands of different people touching her, her throwing a tampon onto her dad, a big crowd reacting and laughing, and an animated sequence involving Aksel. The juxtaposition of several of the character's recurring inner conflicts with images of being looked at, either by a crowd or by people she knows, evokes the tension in the problem of performativity. How do you distinguish your authentic self from the expectations of others, especially in a culture of visibility, where the line between image and reality become increasingly difficult to differentiate? In her vision, a much-needed confrontation with an avoidant father takes the form of a performance where she throws a tampon at him, only to smear her period blood on her face as war paint. This scene blurs the line between meaningful action and performance, evoking the difficulty of authentic action in engagement with external pressures and a culture where we are even made to perform our childhood experiences.

Another factor constraining authenticity in contemporary society is the way online presence streamlines our discussions. In the first chapter of the film, Aksel and Julie visit his friends, two other couples, in an idyllic summer house near the beach. Here we are presented with a situation where the upper middle class come together to enjoy some time off, and the ensuing obligatory conversation themes that this entails: career ambitions, children, and complaints about life in the digital age. The topicality of conversation becomes especially evident in a scene where everyone is gathered outside of the house, enjoying food, wine and conversation. We see the table overflowing with wine bottles, glasses, food and decorations. The style is tastefully subdued, characterised by the natural light of the sun's golden hour, making the skin of the human faces glow against the defocused background. The conversation signals topicality, especially when Julie ends up in an argument about men having periods and the concept of mansplaining, examples of some of the most circulated talking points in online culture's popular feminism[108]. These talking

[108] As an example, famous feminist Gloria Steinem published a satirical essay called "if men could menstruate" already in 1978. After the 2000s, this point has been repeated in

points have become so ever-present in our lives that it becomes difficult to maintain a critical distance towards it, to address it as such. Julie's earnest manner and the guests' reactions, along with the subdued style, denote that this is a spontaneous engagement with the topic at hand, not a summary of current debates. On the one hand, the film explores how the rootlessness and search for meaning is susceptible to getting swept up by popular sentiments, but on the other, the film becomes enraptured by its own exploration.

Authenticity as nostalgia

Unlike Julie's struggles with varied attempts at coming to terms with her own individuality, the character of Aksel is established as the moral core of the film. The film sets this up as a distinct contrast, where Julie is shown as flaky, restless and trying different things, while Aksel is rational, calm, and knows what he wants. This is exemplified by scenes where he expresses wanting kids, his commitment to his work and artistic integrity, a dinner where he discusses the ideas of Freud, and his recurring negative statements on aspects of contemporary digital culture. The fact that he gets sick with cancer and dies further grounds him as the anchor of the more dramatic and serious aspects of the film. Aksel thus exemplifies the kind of freedom that commits to moral values and holds on to them. He lives by the ethical notion that "freedom is not to do anything you like" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 97) and stakes a claim in values associated with tradition, rationality and authenticity. He uses his freedom to assume meaning and escape rootlessness, but there is a discrepancy between his claim to the value of authenticity and his overall commitment to a nostalgic pastness. Aksel shows how authenticity can be invoked as an ideological shield against the dangers of contemporary capitalism.

One distinct aspect of Aksel's – and the film's – commitment to authenticity as nostalgia has to do with the emphasis on cultural objects and art forms of the past. Values and meaning are connected to a past where freedom was more readily available, here exemplified by artistic freedom and the tangibility of art objects. Two scenes following each other exemplify tensions within the film between conformity and autonomy. Both scenes are set at the end of the film when Aksel is sick in the hospital, and Julie stops by to visit him.

numerous instances, such as the WaterAid commercials, and several other TV shows and films.

In the first scene, Aksel sits on the hospital bed listening to music on his headphones while Julie comes in through the door. At first, we only see him defocused and partially at the edge of the frame; a figure moving and the muffled sounds of rock music, from his headphones. Then the perspective changes, and we see Aksel from the back, moving slowly towards him while the music gets louder. It cuts to a position on the floor, where we see a close-up of two Converse shoes tapping against the floor to the rhythm of the music. Then, moving up along the body, we see hands tapping on thighs, and we follow their trajectory as they start drumming in the air. We move out to see the whole of Aksel's upper body and his face become visible. He is sitting on the hospital bed wearing a hospital gown and jeans. The frame suddenly moves closer in, and again we get to follow his hands while air drumming as if we are thrown around with the movement of his hands and the rhythm of the music. These sudden movements continue as we move around Aksel's body, until it is interrupted by Julie's entrance.

This moment with Aksel on the hospital bed is only one minute long, but it is a significant minute because it works as an excess and interruption where the film is allowed freedom to breathe. Although there are other singular moments of excess in the film, this moment stands out in its dedication to openness. While grounded in Aksel's character trajectory, the formal specificity is without obvious purpose; it becomes a moment of genuine play.

What follows are scenes of conversation between Julie and Aksel; they start off on a more personal note and then venture into the topic of culture and time. The two are sitting outside the hospital at a bench surrounded by trees in natural light, with the style of the film underscoring the seriousness of the dialogue, cutting between the two of them while moving seamlessly closer. Aksel describes how he feels like an old man because he "grew up in a time without internet and mobile phones". He speaks of how he keeps on watching the same old films over and over, that it feels like his world is disappearing, a world where he could go to physical stores to buy and listen to records and video. It was a time "where cultural objects were physical, and we became interested in them because we could be surrounded by them. We could pick them up. Hold them in our hands." Now, being sick and on the verge of death, Aksel proclaims that it "is all I have, what I dedicated my life to", "knowledge without value about things nobody cares about". Julie points out that he has his art, his cartoons, and that she wishes she had what he had, to be able to dedicate herself to something "without doubting that you're doing what you're supposed to do. I really wish I had that."

Towards the end of the conversation, Aksel is shown in a close-up. With tears in his eyes and a shaking voice, he describes how he suddenly "began to worship what has been", and now when he has no future to look forward to, he realises that it has nothing to with art, "not even nostalgia" – it has to do with being scared of dying. The conversations summarise, not only in the words spoken but also in the sober sentimentality of the overall style, the film's expressive commitment to pastness. It exemplifies how the film positions Aksel as the moral driver of authenticity and meaning, but also how this notion of authenticity is linked to notions of an ideal past, where artworks were tangible and free. While the points are conveyed through dialogue and sentimental tropes, it is also significant that it follows from a moment of genuine play. It grounds the longing in something authentically free, a direction towards something true. But there is a crucial difference between this moment of play and the kind of authenticity we see outside on the hospital bench: the former has a critical value, but the latter risks becoming a vehicle of ideology and jargon.

The film relates its notion of the authentically free to freedom of the recent past, a freedom in opposition to that which characterises the contemporary notions of freedom. Authenticity as opposed to the digital, social media, identity politics and sanitised art. It is a distinct feature of the film how it continuously links freedom to cultural consumption and style: both in its setting and its formal structure. The film expresses many different stylistic modes, changes up rhythms and foregrounds its mediacy through interspersed use of, among other things, animation, montage sequences and slow motion. It starts by playing to the conventions of the romantic comedy, but also associations to French New Wave, old Hollywood musicals and classic drama. As such, it might be said to adopt a postmodern logic to aesthetics in the reveling of genre, comedy, and the incessant commenting on culture. But the recurring style is more closely associated with realism and clarity, albeit characterised by natural lighting and deep focus, keeping the framing mostly to medium and wide shots. The style of the film is therefore characterised by its juxtaposition of irony and distance, to that of sincerity and nostalgia. In fact, the mix of the two serves to exacerbate the effect of nostalgia. This is especially evident in the way the film literally stops time in the scene where Julie runs through the city of Oslo.

The scene takes place in the middle of the film, after Julie starts having doubts about her relationship with Aksel. It takes place in the morning; the doubts Julie is having are expressed through images of her staring into thin air and sombre piano tones on the soundtrack. After Aksel asks if she wants coffee,

Julie hits the light switch, and as she is lit up by a spotlight, Aksel stands frozen, with the camera moving around him to show how still he is compared to the movement of Julie. Julie then runs down the stairs and through the streets of Oslo where she is the only thing moving; all the people, cars and motorcycles are standing still. She ends up at the café where Eivind, her new love interest, works. He is also moving unlike anyone else in the café, and the music changes as they walk towards each other and start kissing. They spend the day together, walking around in Oslo, sharing kisses, but no words, until the sun rises again the next day. As the two of them move across streets and parks where everyone else is frozen but them, the film plays up different genre expressions, oscillating between romance, musical and classical realism. Rather than pushing against genre-as-convention, the film revels in them, trying them on, becoming one with them. This genre play has a distinct ahistorical inflection: while the film is very much set in a distinct historical time and place, a contemporary Oslo, it also points away from this here and now. When time is stopped, what materialises is a romantic version of Oslo, characterised by silence, love, and the magical beauty of sunrise. Here authenticity, understood as the genuine and affective, is marked out as a thing of the past. Furthermore, since the film mostly takes on genre conventions rather than marking out their mediacy, it adopts this nostalgia without much friction.

Since we live in a time characterised by a crisis of futurity, idealising the past becomes an understandable solution to existential anguish. In *The Worst Person in the World*, rupture and mediacy consistently convey pastness or idealisation, with no room for the thickness of the present. While an authentic engagement with the world acknowledges and pushes against the contradictory tensions of history, the film points to an outside of the now towards an authenticity that never was. As such, it points to the conflation of authenticity with nostalgia, and the difference between an idealisation of the past and a confrontation with the now.

Culture wars

While *The Worst Person in the World* mostly concerns itself with authenticity as the quest for meaning in an existential sense for concrete characters, the film also invokes contemporary issues in more disparate moments that stand out from the rest of the film in that they end up as explicit commentary or message. These moments comes off as inorganic add-odds, especially in their explicit

engagement with contemporary culture wars. Two scenes exemplify this: one from Eivind's perspective on his girlfriend Sunniva becoming a militant environmentalist and another where Julie watches Aksel in a television debate.

The first scene happens in the middle of the film, and it is a montage over how the character Sunniva becomes an environmentalist. In line with the film's overall play with the genre of romantic comedy, the social issues in question are treated lightheartedly with humour. The voice of the film's narrator guides us through the scene, starting by telling us about how Sunniva suddenly became an activist after realising she was 3.4% from Sami origin, making it clear right away that her activism might be a shallow endeavour. The sequence starts by showing Sunniva kneeling in front of a reindeer at the Finnmark highland in Northern Norway, with a serious expression on her face, while the sentimental music plays up the clichés of the scene. The scene changes mode, and what follows is a montage where the images rapidly change between Sunniva's journey, Eivind's reactions, and different illustrations of natural catastrophes, struggling animals and aboriginal people. The narrator tells us that the Inuit in Canada starve due to climate change, reindeers cannot find food and aboriginal people die from skin cancer due to holes in the ozone layer.

Alongside the narrator's voice, a rhythmic music track is heard, which exacerbates the light and humorous mood change of the scene. The emphasis is mostly on Sunniva's boyfriend Eivind, and the narrator concentrates on his perspective on Sunniva's journey: "Eivind could forget about flying to New York", and "It was like the sum of Western guilt sat beside him on the couch and laid with him in bed at night". The end of the scene contrasts Sunniva with the main character of the film, Julie (who Eivind later ends up being romantically involved with), and we see his fantasy where he watches Julie dancing in slow motion in a beautiful blue dim light. In its exploration of different variations of authenticity, the film ridicules Sunniva's sudden turn to activism and especially the seriousness in which she does this, showing it as inauthentic. This is further exemplified by Sunniva's love for yoga and being an Instagram influencer who often poses in her underwear. Sunniva's ethical commitments are thus connected to the superficiality of internet culture, which points to the contradictions of authentic self-expression in social media culture. The forms of authenticity found online are often a form that "wants to be observed as authentic", as Moeller & D'Ambrosio (2021, p. 174) point out. To be recognised and seen as authentic becomes more about expressing a certain identity and lifestyle than genuine ethical commitments to the world.

Sunniva's determination and expression are contrasted to the free restless nature of Julie. Out of the two of them the films positions Julie, the adventurer,

closer to the truth, for it is better to remain open and in constant movement than to hold on to a bad faith notion of predetermined values. The way the film engages Sunniva as a character is to make her an example and stand-in for a specific position that allows the film to differentiate between different ways of engaging with the world, and also of different versions of authenticity.

The other culture war example is a scene where Aksel debates his cartoons on the Norwegian debate show Dagsnytt 18. This scene stands out in how it invokes "the real" as an addition to Aksel's overall commitment to authenticity, thus connecting the two. The scene starts with Julie running on the treadmill at the gym when she suddenly sees Aksel on the television, which is hanging from the roof. The perspective changes from her watching the television to the studio where Aksel debates a woman named Marthe on the Norwegian debate show Dagsnytt 18. We hear Marthe talking about how his cartoons are unethical and that they have gained popularity at the cost of women, in which Aksel asks, "Do we stop creating because some people might feel bad?" He then goes on to talk about how some artists are killed for their cartoons: "I think art has to be messy and free. It has to be a little dangerous." The debate between them becomes a staged presentation of some of the key arguments of contemporary culture wars, opposing freedom of expression to progressive politics.

Apart from a few cutaways to Julie's reactions, the aesthetics replicate that of the original debate show: both in terms of using the actual studio and the real host of the show, in the different framings of the characters, and the clarity of the sound and image. These formal expressions invoke 'the real' through its clear association with the specific show, and therefore debate shows in general, and their inherent claim to seriousness.

In the way that it imitates the form of the debate show and demonstrates the various arguments of the culture war through dialogue, the film does not stake a claim in politics, but asserts a stylistic distanced attitude of neutrality. Since the film otherwise places dramatic and serious responsibility on Aksel, who is a main character unlike Marthe, this neutrality is an illusion. What is interesting here is not what kind of ideological argument the film sides with, but the fact that the film's form – the way it relates to the standardising formats of the television debate show – asserts this idea of neutrality. In the first scene with Sunniva, the play with the comedic genre treats the social issues at hand in a distanced and fragmented manner, ridiculing her superficial commitment. Here, in the debate scene, the strictness of the format along with the staging of argument through dialogue make the film's treatment more didactic. It

distinguishes between a notion of performative authenticity, exemplified by Sunniva, and the notion of the real, here in the debate show with Aksel.

Since Aksel is set up as the film's moral core, his nostalgic stance towards culture is aligned with the factual and serious. The kind of authenticity that the film lays claim to is therefore an authenticity that idealises the past, and a notion of the real and sincere as opposed to social media performativity and identity politics. This captures the cultural ideal of authenticity in our moment, linking it both to pastness, a notion of the originary, and culture. We have grown more aware of the consequences of our online presence[109], the pressures of self-optimalisation and acceleration and escalation of our world into ever-faster motion[110]. The way the film rejects Sunniva's performativity and sides with Aksel while laying claim to the factual exposes some of the inherent paradoxes of authenticity.

The Worst Person in the World explores different variations of authenticity in contemporary Norwegian society; the need for self-exploration, trying, failing, performance, as well as the need for an ethical core. While Julie is set up as the main character in the way we follow her trajectory, it is Aksel who is the film's centre and moral core. This is underlined both by how his presence is accompanied by the more dramatic and sober stylistic moods of the film, with his appearance on a debate TV show as a standout for connecting his character to authenticity and notions of the factual and serious. Aksel's emphasis on the culture of the pasts and his longing for what was, as opposed to contemporary digitality, is underscored by the film's recurring reliance on genre conventions. While oscillating between different styles, the film's main dramatic moments take us out of the now and back to an idealised historical past.

This marks out one difficult contradiction while striving for authenticity: that of a critical engagement with the now while also looking for answers in history. The film tries out different forms, and longs for moments of genuine individuality and autonomy, but ends up embracing nostalgia as its main vehicle for engagement. This speaks to what Fredric Jameson deems the crisis of historicity, and of the struggle for authentic engagements in a world without alternatives on the horizon. In withdrawing from the thickness of the now and

[109] Our moment is characterised by an increasing critique of social media and the effects it has on our lives, exemplified among others by the popularity of Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*, where he connects a surge in anxiety and depression among young people to the effects of social media.

[110] Harmut Rosa makes this specific point on acceleration as characteristic for our time in *Resonance* (2019).

dreaming back, we can solve the crippling effect for a moment. Drawing on different conventions of the recent past can work as a buffer for existential anguish, but the selective nature of nostalgia conceals problems of the past that constrain and delimit freedom instead of assuming it.

Battles of freedom

Pushing the value of freedom against our historical moment means dealing with the inherent contradictions of contemporary capitalism. The social system of capitalism is fraught with exploitation, and what is unique about our contemporary moment is the lack of any alternative social systems. Envisioning anything new becomes increasingly difficult under these conditions. What ensues is a social system so dominant that the only way to get relief is by performing opposition to it, in ways that do not threaten its foundation. While the cultural logic of postmodernism opted out of the misery by recycling the past and modes of parody and irony, a longing for authenticity and 'the real' has resurfaced in a multifaceted and paradoxical fashion. Modes of performativity run through both, along with nostalgia.

From a certain cultural perspective, the recent past looks much more desirable than the now. It seems obvious that digital culture, social media, and the hyper-speed of our contemporary moment work against any true notion of individual autonomy and authenticity. So, what characterises this recent past? The cultural turn led to increased emphasis on language, discourse, and intellectual debate on popular phenomena. Living through and love-hating postmodernism could provide safety away from the reality of the increasing dominating force of capitalism. Pushing against its totality proved futile, and as society became more fragmented, so did the intellectual engagements. Among many critical theorists, totality and universalism were replaced as dominant concepts in favour of identity and difference.

The battle of identity and culture provided a new arena for debate for and against past and present. Those who rejected the past rejected universalism, and with it, notions of freedom and human subjectivity. On the other side, supposedly against identity politics and 'the new', were those who proclaimed universalism that in actuality fought for a particularist freedom of the past. They wanted to go back to a 'better time', ignoring the fact that for the vast majority of people, the past was much less free than the present. Of course, these culture wars were never about 'freedom', it was always different identity

groups fighting for – or defending – their own freedom. What *The Worst Person in the World* points to is how different variations of nostalgia play into these culture wars. The film's nostalgic mood is not a conservative or authoritarian form that harks back to pre-modern times; it is closer to what Walter Benjamin (2019) called 'left wing melancholia', a mournful attachment to certain feelings, concepts and convictions of the past. While the melancholy that Benjamin described is attached to socialist ideas and dreams, *The Worst Person in the World* ascribes feelings to cultural expressions and taste, capturing the distance to the concrete thickness of the now. It evokes nostalgia for a particular cultural formation that grew out of postmodernity, where former radical belief in mass culture and universalism was caught up in bourgeois notions of taste. Opposition to the mainstream took on selective ideas of art's autonomy that obscured the radical origins of freedom in favour of static aesthetic categories. Given the volatile polarisation of today, the film marks out a certain ideological blind spot among progressives and the liberal elite, wanting to go back to an easier time where their cultural expertise felt like it really mattered.

Ascribing certain qualities to predetermined aesthetic categories will always be a selective and highly contradictory endeavour. And, as Beauvoir pointed out, values such as 'beauty' and 'quality' are easily caught up in dominant ideologies and elitist notions of taste. Freedom as a concept and idea is mobilised by contemporary culture wars in similar ways. Instead of the emancipatory potential of universal freedom, we get a war between different particularist notions, while too few are pointing out the wrongness of the very premise of the debate. Aesthetic taste is bundled up with the performative logic of politics, keeping us detached from our concrete historical situation. But the answer lies neither in the hardened surface of liberal status quo nor in idealised notions of the past.

What *The Worst Person in the World* shows us is how nostalgia creates new cultural battles, where one can reject certain forms of performativity while bringing forth others. Here Sunniva's social media performativity is deemed inauthentic, while Aksel's authenticity-as-nostalgia is favoured. *Triangle of Sadness* comes at this from another angle, rejecting the past as romantic, in favour of a liberal status quo. Both perspectives opt out of the thickness of the now, of the tensions of freedom under contemporary capitalism.

The marketable idol

To counter capitalist standardisation of artworks, many thus look to the past. Within contemporary film culture, arthouse production and auteur film become a symbol of a time when everything was a little better. This view is grounded in the perspective that artworks and filmmakers alike were more autonomous in the era of the auteur film. As Adorno pointed out, autonomous artworks are characterised by the way they "grasp the essence" of the social world, so that "the unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form" (1997a, p. 7). These formal expressions then reveal themselves as wounds of society.

There are few wounds, cracks or scars to be found in the two arthouse productions engaged with here. Both are stylistically coherent, skilfully made, and provide different forms of relief from the messiness of the now. While *The Worst Person in the World* allowed for moments of genuine autonomy and play, *Triangle of Sadness* maintains its hardened exterior throughout, opting out of its own mediated existence in the world. This points to variations among films deemed as 'arthouse', and to the inherent problematics of any categorisation: it strips the individual artworks of their specificity. When engaging these two films, it is their specific ways of engaging authenticity that has been the point of analysis; their expression has not been equated with the intention of their makers, nor the category of 'arthouse'.

To propose auteurism as an answer for film art could be seen as an escape from the ambiguity that lies in the aesthetics of artworks themselves. For they contain the contradictory nature of society within them, which means that we must engage with them in their specificities as they are historically conditioned. Artwork's autonomous status lies in mediated relation with its circumstances, but it still remains a distinct entity with its own specific properties, which means it cannot be reduced to either the artist who made it or to the reception of it. To engage with artworks' authenticity is to try to remain open to each artwork's way of being in the world without letting external conditions predetermine their autonomous status, and this includes the emphasis on its maker(s). To argue that artworks autonomy be best preserved by an emphasis on their makers is thus illogical, for it conflates the autonomous status of the maker with that of the artwork. This is not to say that films made by acclaimed auteurs are more or less authentic; it is to say that auteurism is not a precondition for an artwork's meaning or qualitative characteristics.

A (re-)emphasis on the auteur thus becomes a symptom of a culture that desperately wants to avoid the painfulness of confrontation with the

dominating logic of capital. The auteur is a marketable idol, conveniently located within the system while lending it legitimacy. Importantly too, the stamp of auteurism makes it easier for financiers and critics alike to assess the supposed quality of artworks without having to engage with them in their specificity. In other words, it allows them to avoid being confronted with the harsh reality of standardisation under contemporary capitalism.

Auteurism is therefore the wrong answer to the question of what we should learn from the past. The liberatory notion of autonomy is not to be found in any predetermined assessment based in selective criteria of auteurism, but in the universal potential of art's autonomy. It is not by engaging the contradictory nature of the auteur's autonomy that we best explore the state of freedom in our contemporary moment, but by paying attention to the specificities of the artworks themselves. This is where the stakes of freedom play out, in the constant ambiguous tension of subjectivity and objectivity.

Chapter 4 The Anguish of Meaninglessness

> Normally the child escapes the anguish of freedom. He can, if he likes, be recalcitrant, lazy; his whims and his faults concern only him. They do not weigh upon the earth. They can not make a dent in the serene order of a world which existed before him, without him, where he is in a state of security by virtue of his very insignificance. He can do with impunity whatever he likes. He knows that nothing can ever happen through him; everything is already given; his acts engage nothing, not even himself. (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 39)

Human beings have always grappled with their ambiguity, questioning whether there is some objective meaning out there for us to discover, something outside of ourselves to determine what we ought to do. Many have looked for the answers externally in high powers such as God, the king or some other authority. Some have seen themselves as this high power, rejecting all obstacles and treating the world and those around them like pure objects. Others again view themselves as pure objects without any freedom and thus no responsibility for their own situation or the situation of others. According to Simone de Beauvoir, both positions refuse to accept the tension, the ambiguous truth of human existence: that we are both subjects *and* objects in the world.

Philosophers have tried to eliminate this ambiguity by choosing to emphasise either matter or mind, subjectivity or objectivity, the individual or the collective – asserting themselves as pure inwardness or pure externality. This is to deny our freedom and responsibility as subjects in the world. If we instead assume this tension and face the anguish that comes with it, we realise that it is our obligation to create meaning and change through our actions in the world. After all, "the task of man is one: to fashion the world by giving it a meaning" (Beauvoir, 2004e, p. 325). We should therefore give the world meaning by engaging in projects of freedom, but this is made difficult by the constraining conditions of the world.

As a response to the painful weight of responsibility, we might opt out of the distress by different strategies. Beauvoir points to how we as children escape the "anguish of freedom", to avoid the responsibility of taking action in the world, because "his whims and his faults concern only him" (1976, p. 39). She maintains that a lot of adults maintain this child-like behaviour and continue to escape the pain of their own responsibility.

To assume the ambiguity of our existence therefore has to do with recognising that the way of the world is not given. Only then can we fully realise that we weigh upon the world, that we have a responsibility in our engagements with others. Oppression is marked by its naturalising logic, for one will not revolt against nature. But it is human beings that give rise to oppression; exploitation does not appear out of thin air but is grounded in the very vulnerability of our ambiguous condition. Questioning the givenness of reality as we experience it becomes a crucial part in the quest for meaning. Authentic engagements are thus complicated by contradictory mechanisms that produce ideas of what is true, factual and real.

In contemporary culture, notions of authenticity take on distinct forms that include lifestyle choices, nostalgia and cultural taste. Another aspect has to do with a (re)turn to the real in terms of (ideas of) truth and science. This must be seen against the background of the rise of recent populist movements, and its contradictory connections to illiberal tendencies, causing a fear that we live in a post-factual world[111]. The scientism of our contemporary moment has led to (further) splitting and fragmenting so as to better be able to control and observe[112]. In the cultural realm, this is linked to, among other things, a re-emergence of different 'styles of the real': autobiographies, documentary forms, and an overall turn away from pure fictionality[113].

When certain aesthetic categories are given an assumed truth-telling authority, their ideological construction is less likely to be questioned. Notions of the real risk being co-opted by forms that streamline and unify. An example of this is how documentary films in the last few decades have appropriated notions of authenticity and critical distance while being converted "into culinary entertainment products", as Stefanie Baumann argues in her study (2021, p.

[111] As indicated by the fact that Oxford dictionary voted 'post-truth' as its word of the year in 2016.

[112] As pointed out by, among others, Timothy Brennan (2017). See also chap. 1.

[113] Fredric Jameson, among others, make this point in *The Antinomies of Realism* (2015) where he writes of "the weakening of the fictional".

413). Big commercial documentary productions such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006), *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite, 2013) and *Inside Job* (Ferguson, 2010) are screened at mainstream cinemas, and on the largest streaming sites such as Netflix or Amazon Prime. As Baumann shows, these kinds of documentary films are often centred around scandals or shock, seeking to uncover illicit practices or atrocities, asserting themselves as a "critical consciousness of societal evil" (ibid). At the same time, they have adopted a streamlined style inspired by a Hollywood fictional aesthetic (intriguing characters, suspenseful narratives) that has developed into a formula, allowing for smooth consumption.

These films are characterised by generalised features that stamp out their singularities, making them one with their conditions. Whereas arthouse productions lay claim to the autonomous quality of art, these documentaries lay claim to truth, ethical responsibility and critique. What this points to is the inherent contradictions in proclamations of truth and freedom, and how this shows up in aesthetic categorisations such as 'documentary'.

In this chapter, I engage with two films that pushes against the givenness of the real, producing it as a problem instead. In *We Are Here Now* (Halle, 2020)[114], we follow a group of babies and their parents on maternity leave over the course of a year. We follow along as the adults and babies find themselves in different completely ordinary situations; they eat, they play, and they face different life- and work-related difficulties. The ordinariness of their situations and the style of the film plays up documentary conventions, but the film marks out inherent tensions of mediation and finds its way beyond ready-made aesthetic categories. Similarly, the music video *Avanti* (Dahl, 2024) explores the superficiality of the way we relate to each under contemporary working conditions, exposing the role of 'happy man' as an ideological veil that hide the anguish of contemporary life.

[114] The film is produced by Alternativet, a production collective that explicitly positions itself in opposition to standardised modes of production within the film industry. Their main principle is to make films without depending on various funding systems, and the filmmakers get to own the films that they make. See alternativetproduksjon.no, and also *Kampen for alternative strukturer* (Rushprint, 2018).

Mediation and the real

We Are Here Now pushes against the notion of unmediated reality. From the very beginning, the film takes on modes of presence often associated with the documentary form and plays with it. The film's style is marked by the kind of movements and angles that ground the image in an observing presence, watching and following along. It is as if "we look in on life as it is lived[115]". An example is the tilted angle in one of the first scenes of the film, right after the title card. Here we are put straight into a situation with the maternity group; the image is cluttered without a distinct emphasis: a big room with four adults and four babies spread out alongside various furniture, toys, and food on a kitchen table. The tilt, height and shakiness of the movement all foreground the presence of someone behind the camera, which, along with the seemingly unfocused randomness of the image, evokes the kind of rawness associated with the observational documentary mode or even home video aesthetics. The soundtrack is similarly unfocused, with all the sounds of the room arriving at us unfiltered: people talking, walking, some voices louder than others. This observational mode continues throughout the film; the distinct sense of following along, of being there alongside them, but without being acknowledged by any direct address.

The film's structure is characterised by these glimpses into situations with various adults and babies from the maternity group, often while they are just hanging around, eating and talking. They are shown as if everything is just happening and the camera follows spontaneously along, in an unplanned manner. The film lacks any conventional narrative structure or character arcs, which further evoke the associations to observation and documentation. This is exacerbated by amplifying the digital aesthetics; the subjects are rarely perfectly lit nor in focus, there is a lot of burnt-out whiteness, and the image has that bland colour quality typically associated with digital. In addition, the sounds are harsh: we hear clothes against microphones and the loudness from papers being signed. It is as if we follow along some acute situation that does not allow for us to adjust accordingly, such that what follows are unfiltered moments of reality. But the situations at hand do not call for this kind of hurry at all; they are controlled situations of parents and babies hanging out at a single location. What could be perceived as 'faults' from the perspective of cinematic beauty are here put on full display. The style is reminiscent of the Dogme-95 movement with their rules of chastity, but *We Are Here Now* breaks

[115] This is how Bill Nichols summarises the "observational mode" of documentary films (2001, p. 174).

several of the rules in its play with and against fictionality. Its project is something else.

The observational mode that distinguishes so much of the film is disrupted by several fictional elements throughout, making any straightforward categorisation of the film difficult. Most obvious is the inclusion of an adult human baby, introduced early on in the film as if he were any other baby. Played by an adult man, the baby behaves as we expect babies to behave; he is mostly laying around, sucking upon his pacifier, playing, or sleeping. Nobody in the film reacts as if he is anything other than an ordinary baby, exemplified by a scene where he is laying in the lap of his dad who plays with him while talking with the other parents who all have (actual) babies in their laps. The juxtaposition of the adult baby with images of the other babies adds to the absurdity of the situation; in playing up the supposed normalcy of this grown baby, the pretension of reality is foregrounded in order to be shattered.

Another striking element that disturbs the notion of reality is the exaggeration of the parents' health: many of them use crutches, sometimes two of them, and in a scene on a family trip one of them is suddenly sitting in a wheelchair that arrives out of nowhere. As the film goes on, several situations escalate in ways that make it obvious that they are staged or planned, and as the credits roll, we can be certain that the parents are played by actors. All of these fictional disturbances happen without the film leaving its formal mode of observation. Fictional elements are thus pitted against the mode of the real in an unpredictable manner that foreground their tension. The film plays with and against aesthetic conventions of truth and documentation in ways that puts the idea of the real into question.

A good example of how the film assumes this tension is a scene where one of the dads, Dave, reads aloud from a mental health questionnaire to one of the other parents, while taking care of his own child as well as the adult baby Karl. In this scene, the planned and the spontaneous clash, emphasising the conflicting nature of mediation. The scene's structural starting point is Dave's reading of the questionnaire to Nina, a character who – like many of the parents – is struggling with her mental health throughout the film. She is mostly out of the frame, however, and the visual emphasis is on Dave, his baby, and adult baby Karl. The camera stays in the background as an observing presence throughout the scene, only panning and tilting to follow the action as it occurs. Dave's child brings an impulsive and disruptive energy to the scene: running around only wearing a diaper, grabbing on to various objects, causing Dave to follow along. At one point, the baby runs towards the frame with a pen in hand, stopping to look in the direction behind the camera. As Dave comes closer, the

baby runs right towards us, disappearing into the bottom of the frame, causing a shaking movement. Dave comes closer, and he is seen unfocused, leaning in towards the camera and pulling the baby up from behind the frame, who lets out a joyous scream. The film then cuts, and in the next image the baby is further from the frame, with Dave sitting with the back towards us, between the frame and the baby. This is a moment where the disruptive energy of the child is directly causing a cut in the film, where the spontaneity of the real comes barging into the film's form.

As the scene goes on, the adult child and Dave's child plays together, foregrounding fictional absurdity as the adult actor slides across the floor imitating the behaviour of a baby. The actual child is unaffected by the absurdity, and as they continue to play and engage with each other, the line between fiction and real is blurred further. While the adult actor is playing a part, the baby is not, and in their engaging and reacting to each other it becomes impossible to draw a simple line to determine what is real. In their encounter, something that is both real and unreal happens, and it is caused by the film's mediation of the two. It is the staging of the fictional elements that allow this engagement to occur; only by emphasising the contrast to the fictional does the real come to the front. Dave's continued aloud reading from the questionnaire, along with non-diegetic piano music – the only occurrence of non-diegetic music in the film – are other fictional elements that foreground mediation in the scene. The film is thus able to show what a moment of real spontaneity looks like, and it does not come from a proclamation of truth, but by pushing real and unreal against each other to expose their mediation. Hence, the mediated construction of reality is exposed, and the notion of unmediated or 'given' reality is rejected.

Unstandardised notions of freedom

We Are Here Now is thus not easily put into any specific mode of film. It plays with and against fictionality, rendering it uneasy to place it within any standardised aesthetic category. Its commitment to play and mediation foregrounds the contradictory nature of constructed reality. In probing the mediated nature of reality, it also exposes certain truths that reside in the contingency of freedom in contemporary society. It is able to do this due to its specific kind of engagement with freedom, finding space outside of standardisation of the mainstream and the risk of abstraction in the avant-garde. It is led by something other than aesthetic conventions, and as such it

finds its own way, exemplifying what it can mean to risk staking a claim, trying and failing outside of the established.

The film does not seek a new category or status as art; it is not sealed in itself but points outwards to its mediated relation with society. Its formal structure should not be seen as a new form of aesthetic but as a singular way of being. In its imperfections and contradictions, it assumes ambiguity, and as an artwork it does so in specific ways that play with and against aesthetic freedom. In this case, what it means to remain outside of standardisation has not to do with building new standards outside of the mainstream that are very easily co-opted. Rather, it is about allowing the ambiguous freedom of the artwork to lead.

The intervention of the real therefore does not relate to aesthetic categories, but poses constructions of the given as a problem. In assuming the tension of the real and the unreal, the immediate and the mediated, the film probes into the thickness of the present, but it does not stop there. The film does not expose unmediated reality as a problem in ways that render the notion of the real in complete flux, nor does it merely point towards the 'inbetweeness' of fiction and reality. In assuming the tension of its own ambiguity, it also stakes a claim in the very thickness it exposes. The film points beyond itself in its engagement with historical specificities, probing into the idea of freedom in contemporary Scandinavia and revealing meaninglessness as a problem. *We Are Here Now* does not end up in complete abstraction, but presents concrete situations that give form to an immanent coherence. There is a coherent logicality of the situations presented by the film, even if this coherence does not find its form already existing in the world.

The Problem of Meaninglessness

The 'now' in *We Are Here Now* points to the concrete historical conditions of the now that the film is probing. This is not the kind of immediate here-now that Anna Kornbluh describes as distinctive for the logic of 'immediacy', another aspect of the 'turn to the real' (2023, p. 108). Whereas the immediate here-now is characterised by closeness, immersiveness and flow – an experienced personalised now – the now in *We Are Here Now* is marked by thickness, ambiguity and mediation. Immediacy as an aesthetic, points to 'the real' as ordinary life inspired by the flow and flux of social media. It is an escape from the ambiguity of existence, choosing pure subjectivity over the

straitjacket of objectivity. As a reaction to a dubious and dangerous (mis)understanding of universality, it makes sense, but it is an overreaction, nonetheless. The answer to an overemphasis on objectivity is not pure subjectivity or a rejection of truth, but to assume their tension.

The film is made up of glimpses and episodes where people from the maternity group come together. In the staging of these episodes, the film explores the conditions of meaning and freedom for the contemporary white middle class, and it does this by amplifying the conditions of its own ambiguity. These situations most often consist of observing these people in the home of one of them, and we observe them as they do and talk about the most ordinary and banal things. They often eat together, such as in a scene at the new home of some of the parents. We see them preparing the food, talking about details of the shopping process, whether or not the salad is washed, if the babies can eat onion and the difficulties of not having an appetite. We see them from the observing presence, allowing us to be a part of the meal and conversation. To exemplify the tone of the conversation, here is an excerpt:

> Dad: I am not used to the department stores here. And we don't have an oven yet. So, yeah, it's a Prior chicken [a standard chicken brand]. So, I don't know. There are other chickens. Ecological ones. But they are not ready-made. So, this was the only available choice.
>
> Mum: Considering the fact that you have recently moved, I fully understand that you don't have the opportunity to…
>
> Dad: Yeah, well, just so you know, it is Prior chicken in the salad, so if you guys don't like that, you can eat some of the other things available.
>
> Mum 2: It looks good. A lot of good things. I would love some chicken.
>
> Mum 3: I think the food is very good. Delicious.

Other scenes include conversations about interpersonal conflict, divorce, mental health and problems at work. The dialogues rarely follow a red thread or thematic trajectory; they mostly spring out from the situation at hand, which means that they jump around and seldom stay on one track. This is another layer of the film's play with the notion of the real; the conversations seem spontaneous, as if we are merely observing the group as flies on the wall. But due to the inclusion of fictional elements throughout, the film cannot be easily placed within any categorisation or mode. We observe situations that seem spontaneous, but they are also marked by the fact that they might not be. The

most striking aspect about these scenes then becomes the sheer inclusion of them, and how the film lets the ordinariness of these situations go on and on. This ordinary is thus revealed as produced, presented and mediated.

The ordinary in *We Are Here Now* is flickering fragmentation and meaninglessness. It probes a situation with subjects who are not able to stay on topic or look past the very situation that they find themselves in. Several of them are so physically exhausted that they have to use crutches or lie down in the middle of conversations. Some of them try to stand for something at work but are surrounded by others who are sick or inept. An example of this is how the dad of the adult baby Karl is struggling with how to navigate the politics of pedagogy at the school where he works. In one of the situations, we see him talking about it on the phone while he is walking around inside and outside the house, letting out frustrated comments on how the current politics are "separating instead of helping" the pupils. At the same time, we hear the other parents talking about food, and one mum has an engaged monologue about ancient grains, and how they are not allowed to grow them, which is "totally wild!" Several situations show how this dad is trying to communicate with his boss, Ben, who is unwilling to engage in actual communication: he has to use crutches, goes on sick leave, but still keeps showing up at the school while refusing to take any responsibility while there. In one of the confrontations between them, Ben is accused of calling the parents of the pupils and telling them to keep their children at home, but his response to the accusation shows the circularity of his logic as well as the (resulting) difficulty of communication:

> Ben: Right now I am on sick leave, that means that I am allowed to be at home.
>
> Father: But why are you here, then?
>
> Ben: I don't understand why you are having such a problem with me being here. This is my work!
>
> Dad: But you are always talking about how you are on sick leave.
>
> Ben: Yes, but I am only here to get my things.

While they are talking, the camera moves so that we only see their feet and Ben's crutch, further emphasising the inability of these people to engage with each other in a meaningful manner. These different situations and glimpses all point to how the opportunity for meaningful action and engagement is getting

blocked, resulting in resignation and sickness. Moreover, all of these glimpses into middle-class life become almost indistinguishable from each other, indicating their normalcy. These are not exceptional people or exceptional situations; the film expresses that this is the norm.

The banality of the situations shows how these parents fail to engage with each other or the world in ways that probe beneath the surface. In the rare instances when they touch upon world events or even when they state worry for each other, they express no heightened intensity or capacity for action or responsibility. Concerns about corn or chicken are engaged with in the same way as the future of our planet; as chatter, something that cannot penetrate the layer of banality that dominates their lives. The teacher tries to stand up to his boss but is met with circular logic from someone sick from resignation after having tried to stand up to the system themselves, and so the resignation spreads.

Towards the end of the film, a Swedish film crew enters the lives of these parents with a "1,000-year project", where they want to make a film to say something about the present moment to those who come after us. The ideas of the crew are expressed in the same banal mode as the rest of the film, while they all sit around the dinner table wearing silly wigs. When asked what they want to say to the people of the future, the parents express that they hope "people are taking care of each other", that "things are better than now" and that they "hope everything is not destroyed". These statements, while delivered in a sober tone, come off as platitudes in the way it follows from fun table chatter. Even if they point to a dark view of the world and real crisis of our time, the adults cannot grasp the seriousness of the words they utter. The parents' interest in any larger perspective than themselves comes out through an interest in participating in a silly film project.

The parents thus remain unable to escape the banality of their situation, and they become sick from it. The episodic structure of the film, where the situations are without a clear beginning or end and are somewhat indistinguishable from each other, point to how it is the very lives they lead that make them ill. The attempts to form some kind of meaning are feeble and characterised by resignation. Thus, the mood is not one of conflict, but of a state of having already given up. So many of these adults are suffering, but they are unable to do anything other than whine about it or have non-communicative conflicts with their partners or peers. They lead inauthentic lives, and they suffer from it. Through the film's foregrounding of mediation and contradictory tensions, the banality and meaninglessness of contemporary living is exposed as a problem.

Middle class sickness

The Norwegian punk band Honningbarna's 2022 album *Animorph* also points to this distinct form of meaninglessness. Juxtaposing hardcore rhythms, dynamic walls of noise and lyrics of despair, the music marks out a space for ambiguity that takes seriously the anguish of contemporary life. In the music video for the song *Avanti*, the music becomes a contrast to the images of a sterile office and a job interview. The situation is mired by the same moods of banality and giving-up-ness that we experience in *We Are Here Now*; it starts with the interviewer spewing out business trivialities, asking the interviewee, "Who are you, who is Steinar?" An abrupt movement turns the camera towards the young man being interviewed, and this marks the start of the music. With no passion or engagement in his face, he is barely articulating the words with his mouth: "I am a happy man, avanti avanti, I am a happy man, 100% lifetime guarantee."

The music video continues to play up the disparities of the music, lyrics and images, probing the superficiality and meaningless in the way we engage with each other under contemporary working conditions. Playing the role of 'happy man' is exposed as an ideological veil that hides the anguish and pain of contemporary life. When the interview is over, another young man comes in the door, and is asked the very same question, and the music starts again: "I am a happy man". These men are indistinguishable from each other, their individuality stamped out by the situation they find themselves in. Both *We Are Here Now* and *Avanti* point to this role-playing of superficiality and conventions in Norwegian society and produces it as problems.

Children "do not weigh upon the earth", Beauvoir writes. They do not have the freedom nor the responsibility that adults do; they can do whatever they like. The parents in *We Are Here Now* are stuck in patterns and situations of meaninglessness, unable to assume their own freedom and the responsibility that comes from it. They remain in a childlike state, whining and complaining about their situation without doing anything about it. The babies of the film, on the other hand, are content, and mostly calm and relaxed. They are not crying or screaming, which emphasises the childlike immaturity of their parents even more. Assuming freedom is painful and difficult but not weighing upon this earth leads to a banal existence of sickness and meaninglessness. Adults who do not accept the responsibility of their adulthood can try to play pretend, like the young men of *Avanti*, or they break down. In *We Are Here Now*, the subjects oscillate between these states, and some handle the role-playing better than others.

Another distinct aspect of the meaninglessness and helplessness is how it spreads like a sickness. The film does not have a main character, and even if there are some that stand out more than others, the film is marked by how it follows a group of people instead of singular individuals. These are not fleshed-out characters with linear progressions and the situations in which we meet them are often disorganised, prohibiting easy overviews of who is who and the progression of individual trajectories. As the film goes on, some of them get more and more sick – such as Astrid who starts out with crutches and ends up in a wheelchair, or the principle at the school – while others are continuously sick throughout. Nina is one of the characters who is continuously sickly throughout. From the beginning, she has to lie down and take a timeout. She then goes to therapy, attempts more alternative methods, and she also disappears in the middle of one of the episodes. When she is gone, the others continue to talk about her, indicating the presence of the problems also when she is not there. Exhaustion, helplessness and sickness permeate the film from start to finish. The meaninglessness is not individual; it marks the whole group, and also the people they work with and the film crew who are invited into their sphere.

This is a sphere distinctly marked by class: the film does not mark out a mode of meaninglessness that pertains to parenthood generally, but a very distinct group of middle-class people in or around the biggest city in Norway, Oslo. The various episodes that make up the structure of the film are set in large, beautifully furnished homes, conversations revolve around buying additional apartments, and when one couple has problems, one of them can move into her own apartment because "she needs space". Some of them attempt to stive off their meaninglessness with feeble attempts at authenticity via therapy, alternative medicine, and investing in artistic projects 'about something important'. This is, however, another layer of the middle class than the one we meet in *The Worst Person in the World*. Here, some of the parents are lawyers, while other are teachers, which means that their prosperity stems from economic security rather than cultural superiority. We do not meet with the cultural elite here, but those who make up a majority of the Norwegian population, the lower and upper middle class[116]. While there are differences within the group in terms of working conditions, the film first and foremost marks out a class position of *safety*. They are protected by their class position in terms of material security and enjoy large degrees of freedom, but they are

[116] See Hansen & Ljungberg (2021, chap. 2) for a recent discussion of the different layers of the middle class in a Norwegian context.

not capitalist owners, so their freedom is still mostly bound up in some sort of wage labour.

Having a secure material position makes it easier to opt out of ethical responsibility, Beauvoir points out, for you get caught up in illusions of purity. If you think that you are safe you can more easily reject the reality of ambiguous human existence, that we are all connected by our vulnerability. The film probes this connection between a certain feeling of safety and meaninglessness, pointing to a concrete link between them in contemporary society. When you live in the safe bubble of the Scandinavian middle class, you can get lulled into cycles of banality, prohibiting responsibility and meaning.

One cannot revolt against nature

The ideology of safety in the Scandinavian middle class grounds illusions of pure subjectivity that give rise to forms of meaninglessness and childlike irresponsibility. In *We Are Here Now*, this leads to sickness and helplessness that spreads; these adults become incapable of breaking through the cloak of banality. They are stuck in cycles where the ground for their meaninglessness leads only to behaviour and actions that reinforce the meaninglessness, much like the young men going for job interviews in *Avanti*. But there is hope to be found in this despair. The suffering proves hopeful, for the alternative would be that they were at a complete distance from meaning. Although the parents lull themselves with soothing conversations about organic food and new apartments, many of them still get sick, and it spreads. The young man in the interview loses his cool and calls the interviewer a cunt. The meaninglessness is not merely produced as a statement, but as a problem, pointing towards the need for change.

All unfreedom thrives off of camouflaging itself behind the notions of its givenness, pretending it is as natural as a tornado or earthquake. As Beauvoir made clear, “one cannot revolt against nature”. Hence, all oppression is grounded in this naturalising logic. Aesthetic forms that lay claim to the factual or authenticity must be met with critical engagements of its formal construction, for if it maintains its surface as a unifying force, then it cannot account for the ambiguity inherent in existence. In pushing towards the tensions of the real and the unreal, *We Are Here Now* assumes its own ambiguous status in the world. Through its play of fictional and spontaneous elements, it probes the inherent contradictory nature of mediation, exposing the notion of givenness as false. It does not do this by adapting to some external

measure or aesthetic category, and it refuses to adhere to ready-made conventions of beauty.

Locating its source of meaning not in any aesthetic category but in the relation of freedom to the world, the film is able to expose constructed givenness as an illusion, without rendering reality as such in flux. Pushing against the tension of the real and the unreal depends on there being a real and an unreal. Here, the material conditions of class relations are pushed against the film's unconventional movements. The meaninglessness that stems from illusions of pure subjectivity is not a given reality. It is contingent, and it can change. The capitalist mode of production is a system of relations, not a natural phenomenon. Emphasising the mediacy of any constructions of reality is therefore crucial.

Freedom without direction is meaningless. In addition to problematising its own autonomous status, the film stakes a claim in a particular problem and therefore points beyond itself. Following a group of people in a specific situation under concrete circumstances lets the film grasp the thickness of the now. Starting from a concrete situation and outlook allows for an exploration of how meaninglessness permeates under *these specific conditions*. This is preconditioned by the film's ontological openness to itself and the world. Its being in the world acts as an example of a way to assume ambiguity in our time; a way to try and risk failing, assuming thickness of our historical moment without adhering to any ready-made way of doing just that. In producing meaninglessness as a distinct problem for the middle class, it also suggests a possible route to solidarity. By breaking through sick forms of banality caused by a false sense of security, the middle class can recognise that their material vulnerability aligns them with all other humans. Meaning can then be assumed by throwing themselves into projects that create freedom for all.

Chapter 5 Rethinking Notions of Clarity: Working Class Relations and Imperfect Forms of Solidarity

Class situations give rise to class formations (Wood, 2016, p. 83)

In capitalist society, workers are forced to sell their labour power for less than its full value in order to survive. A fundamental aspect of Marxian critique is thus that capitalism leads to class exploitation and pits human beings against each other. Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that we need to see class as a relation and a process, not just a "structural location" (2016, chap. 3). From her perspective, class formation grows out of "the process of struggle, as people 'experience' and 'handle' their class situations" (2016, p. 80). This allows for a conception of workers as active historical beings, instead of passive objects of material conditions. To see class as a relation is not to minimise the impact of objective relations to the means of production – on the contrary, it is the only way to fully account for the contradictory processes of class exploitation. Material conditions establish the conflicts and struggles that lead to class formation, thus "class situations give rise to class formations" (2016, p. 83). Wood argues that the only way to properly understand capitalism is to study it as a historical process: from the perspective of historical materialism, we cannot see the "objective" and the "subjective" as separated entities. The objective relations of means of productions give rise to a specific experience of the world, one that is directly linked to its structural positioning, but cannot be reduced to it. Wood sees experience as a mediation between material conditions and the individual human subject, in ways that are similar to Simone de Beauvoir's conception of human existence.

To see class purely as a static structural location discounts the messy nature of historical processes, and the ways that class consciousness and class solidarity come about in conflictual and contradictory manners. Historical beings are not

born with any inherent bond to each other; there "is no preestablished harmony between men" (Beauvoir, 2004d, p. 108). Our ambiguous human condition makes projects of solidarity difficult because we also live in conditions that often position us against each other. Being part of the same oppressed group does not predetermine forms of engagement with the world, for each of us experience our conditions as individual freedoms. Being part of the working class does not mean that one is "more naturally a moral man" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 94); there can be no ideal perfect political subject.

The post-Marxist move away from the emphasis on the working class is tied to this notion of the perfect political subject, Wood argues. Solidarity and class consciousness take place in and through historical processes, which means that they are often partial and imperfect. From a reductionist structuralist position, imperfect forms of class consciousness are 'false' and in need of substitutes (2016, p. 104). Seeing classes as passive "bearers of historical processes" stems from the view that capitalism's power is complete, leading to an "all-embracing domination" upon the ruled. This perspective can lead to the notion that it is up to elite intellectuals to break through the hegemony and to create counter-hegemonic consciousness (ibid). These ideas can be caught up in elitist rejections of popular culture[117] that lead to contempt of the working class and its cultural expressions. This points to the inherent difficulties in formulating opposition to domination, and the various contradictory practices that ensue. Opposing the status quo in favour of counterculture has brought about important and much-needed critique, but it also has elitist consequences, among them the rejection of imperfect or impartial forms of solidarity.

Marxian cultural critique and the notion of clarity

> One must compare the depiction of life in a work of art with the life itself that is being depicted, instead of comparing it with another depiction (Brecht, 2020, p. 89).

[117] See chapter 3 for a discussion of some specific aspects of this relation between elitism, taste, and art's autonomy.

This opposition between popular culture and counter-culture finds a concrete manifestation in the Marxian realism-modernism debate[118]. One distinct aspect of this debate is the opposition between clarity and rupture. Realism as an aesthetic strategy was associated with clarity, truth, and forms that explicitly emphasise oppressive conditions under capitalist totality. From the perspective of George Lukács (2020), realism gave form to totality in ways that made it comprehensible, unlike the fragmentary logic of capitalism. Modernism, on the other hand, was, among other things, characterised by an emphasis on rupture, and of breaking up totality through singularity. Theodor Adorno maintained that the realist emphasis on theme and didactic messages was unable to counter oppressive conditions, and furthermore, that 'reflecting totality' meant depicting reality as an unbroken continuum, as if reconciliation had already been accomplished (2020, p. 194). Lukács opposed this view and argued that the emphasis on formal experimentation associated with modernism and abstract art was elitist and reinforced the fragmentary logic instead of exposing it. What this opposition masks is the difference between the idea of realism as an aesthetic recipe[119] and as an attitude characterised by clarity and concrete confrontation with capitalism.

Bertolt Brecht's notion of realism breaks with this opposition. He agreed with Lukács that realism was an important issue that transcended art: he saw it as an issue of political, philosophical and practical importance that should be treated as a "matter of general human interest" (2020, p. 79). But he was very critical of what he saw as a narrow and simplistic understanding of content as opposed to form. For him, realism was a political and artistic attitude rather than something that could be pinned down to a specific formal aesthetic strategy. Realism as a method was meant to reveal the causal complexes of society, but the specific strategies involved would necessarily change from case to case, since "reality changes" and "the oppressors do not work in the same way in every epoch" (ibid, p. 87). Brecht shared with Lukács a belief in the mass appeal of realism, but his specific anti-elitist stance also rejected any notion that workers would not be interested in experimentation. Workers are first and foremost concerned with truth, he argued, which means that "one need not be afraid to produce daring, unusual things for the proletariat so long as

[118] I am referring specifically to the realism-modernism debate in the early to mid-1900s where some of the key participants were Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht and George Lukács.

[119] For example, George Lukács' specific emphasis on great personalities and prophetic figures, or Andre Bazin's (2010) specific considerations of mise-én-scene in (neo) realist film.

they deal with its real situation" (2020, p. 88). The most important thing was that art was "for the many oppressed by the few" (2015, p. 231).

Ethical engagements preconditioned by ambiguity prohibit predetermined answers and static formulas, for we must remain open to change. The Beauvorian method of trying and failing share connections with Brecht's notion of realism as an attitude. Importantly, this ethical experimentation is grounded in freedom, a value that necessitates direction and prohibits abstraction. It strives to hold on to the tension of confronting what is with the movement towards freedom. Part of this ethical attitude is thus to stake a claim, to risk failure by making an attempt, to stand for something. An authentic engagement with the world consists of stating your truth and risking the judgement of others. This risk-taking may involve a certain notion of clarity, one that does not prohibit criticality, but invites it. Against an aesthetics of unifying standardisation, directness or clarity can even act as a form of confrontation or rupture.

What can the aesthetic attitude of realism contribute to our moment, then? Jameson (2020) argued already back in the 1970s that the fragmentary manner of capitalism calls for a reinvention of the category of totality. Since then, culture has gone through postmodernity, and now we find ourselves at something of a crossroads, characterised by cultural polarisation and contradictory modes of cynicism and nostalgia. One such cultural opposition has to do with popularity: exaggerated notions of 'elitist modernist art' are weaponised in favour of an idea of art with mass appeal. One characteristic of such mass appeal is clarity, which is associated with, but transcends, aesthetic oppositional categories such as classical – modernist, and realist – modernist. In the following, I therefore want to revisit and explore notions of clarity from a critical realist perspective, through close analysis of two films.

Here I engage with two films that engage with different realist strategies and notions of clarity. To revisit realist emphasis on clarity and the notion of totality is also to engage with the specific conditions of class. *Fallen Leaves*[120] (Kaurismäki, 2023) and *Eat Sleep Die*[121] (Pichler, 2012*)* probe different layers

[120] Fallen Leaves was directed by renowned Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki, won the jury prize at Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for numerous awards. As such, it can be characterised as both an arthouse production and an auteur film.

[121] Swedish Eat Sleep Die is the debut feature film by Gabriela Pichler. It won four awards at the Guldbagge awards and has been screened at various festivals. It is a smaller and less internationally acclaimed production than Fallen Leaves, especially given the auteur status of its director, but it was highly acclaimed within the Swedish context.

of class conditions in contemporary Finnish and Swedish society. Both films utilise aesthetic strategies of realism and clarity in their exploration of the causal complexes of class conditions as well as the possibilities of solidarity. In their engagement with the working class, they shed light on some key problematics of the modernism-realism debate: the multifaceted tensions of capitalist totality, autonomy, and class solidarity. The following analysis is thus not an exploration of realism and modernism as concepts, or the debate as such, for the realist attitude starts from a genuine curiosity towards the now.

Class as lived experience

Eat Sleep Die explores class both as a structural location, and as a lived experience and social relation. The film stakes a claim in the oppressive conditions of class exploitation, not by commenting on it from a detached distance, but by throwing us into the very conditions it sets out to probe. The film follows factory worker Raša as she loses her job and is faced with the absurd and contradictory reality of unemployment. Taking place in a rural setting on the countryside in Southern Sweden, we are cast into a world of old brick buildings, asphalt greyness and decay. But we also encounter camaraderie and people who never give up, prohibiting the film from falling into the trap of hopelessness and apathy. The factory where Raša works is a claustrophobic place of endless walls without windows, but as we follow Raša around it, the social engagements within the walls provide contrasting movement and relief.

In a light-hearted scene early in the film, we see Raša with a small group of her colleagues, packaging food while singing. First, Raša starts by singing the Swedish dance band hit “Leende guldbruna ögon” and the camera moves to show how the others try to follow along awkwardly, while they comment that they do not know the song. Food and tall stables of food cartons loom behind them, but the emphasis in this short moment is on the faces of the workers, who are listening to each other while continuing to work. One of the women starts to sing in Thai, and we hear her voice against the mechanic sounds of the factory while the image moves between the food, hands working, and the face of the woman singing. The juxtaposition of the movement, duration, and sound makes the moment sober and unsentimental, showing how relationships form around work without stepping away from the mundane.

We stay in close proximity to Raša throughout the whole film in an observing mode that moves between closeness and distance, emphasising the tension between the individual and the harsh conditions of contemporary capitalism. Even though Raša is the clear main character, the film pays just as much attention to the environment she finds herself in and the relationships and people that surround her. The film oscillates between different kinds of engagements, from the very close, lived and subjective, to the social, structural and hierarchical. The scene where the workers sing in the factory is an example of how these levels often work together in the film, while other parts of the film place a more marked emphasis on the structural level of their working conditions. These scenes are a significant aspect of the film's exploration of class as they probe the structural positioning of class and put on display the contrast between hierarchical relations and the class formation among the members of a class. The structural emphasis also points out an inauthentic flight from responsibility of certain members of the managerial class.

In one of these scenes, we observe a meeting where the management of the factory and the union gather the workers to inform them that there will be company layoffs. The scene juxtaposes images showing the management and union leaders while they speak, with the reactions of the many workers who find themselves in the exposed situation of not knowing whether or not they will keep their jobs. Here the many are contrasted against the few who are in a position to make the decisions. One after the other, the leaders stand in front of the workers and maintain that there is nothing to be done and that they have to choose between the survival of the factory and keeping the workers. Some key sentences from their speeches include sentences like, "We are *forced* to let workers go", "It's hard *to have to make* this decision, I really tried" and "I hope everyone can contribute to make the best out of the situation, so that the company can survive". The management are mostly shown at a bit of a distance, from the perspective of the workers, or they are only heard and not shown at all. The capitalist mode of production looms as the unspoken determining factor between the lines spoken by these leaders, while the film emphasises the faces of the many workers, getting closer and closer to them. At the end of the scene, the management are only heard as a voice, to further emphasise the systemic characteristic of these kinds of decisions. Strikingly, the union leaders are shown to be just as powerless as the management of the factory, indicating a felt powerlessness and inability to assume responsibility that come from their structural positioning. These leaders' claims of powerlessness are here shown as ideological smoke and mirrors against the concrete human faces of the working class.

This is also exemplified in the scenes where Raša and several other workers from the factory meet with the employment agency after having been fired. In these scenes, the film exposes the absurdity of the system with a clarity that utilises the tools of Marxian realism and concreteness. Again, the film juxtaposes the words of the employment office managers with the images of the workers, who are often shown from the shoulder up or in close-ups, giving sober and earnest replies with subdued facial expressions. The people working for the employment agency place the responsibility of the situation on the workers, emphasising confidence as a main factor for their success in the job market: "the meetings we have is to ensure that you get your confidence back. You will be 'boosted' so that you really believe in yourself!", one woman from the agency proclaims during their first meeting. The workers are challenged with talking about "what they are really good at" to build confidence, to which Raša comes up with a very practical answer: that she can weigh 175 grams of rucola with her hand. The woman from the agency then suggests that she might try a "career within food". This marks a hierarchical contrast between the thought-out and ideological, against the practical, lived and material. The structural positioning between the employment office and the workers is perhaps most explicit when they practise job interviews. Raša and her colleagues are seen sitting on chairs in a wide shot with the lady from the agency looming over them in the background, walking back and forth while nodding and giving comments of approval.

Whether shown looming in the background, or as a background voice, these leaders and managerial class figures have a diffuse presence in the film, unlike Raša and her friends and family. The film shows us these managerial characters as both ordinary and abstract, representations of a system made to not make sense by the film. The senselessness comes to the fore only through contrast with the concrete lived experience of the workers; the film does not play up the absurd logic by extreme exaggeration but allows for the juxtaposition of ordinary conditions to do the work. One example of this is how the logic of the doctor is rendered absurd when he refuses to grant sick leave to Raša's father because he (the father) continues to work. The doctor tells him he should be less "greedy", while we see images of the father's blue and bruised up body. Another example: the employment office managers tell the workers "to go out and get a hobby", and that "you create the conditions for getting a job", juxtaposed scenes where Raša is spending all her time desperately trying – in often ingenious ways – to find a job. These examples mark out the disconnection between the lived experience of material uncertainty and an ideology that tells us that all can be wealthy and prosperous if we just "work

hard enough". It does not make sense, and the film probes into the nonsensical logic and reveals it as ideology.

The structural positioning of the managerial class is linked to an inauthentic flight from responsibility; like Beauvorian sub-men[122], they are espousing ready-made values of the system, telling themselves that it is impossible to do things any other way. They are hiding behind the system which is also a real objective determining factor of their lives. It is crucial that the film does not position them as evil and that none of one them stand out as individual antagonists. Instead, the film is exposing exactly how unexceptional and mundane these situations and these people are, pointing to the systemic level instead of individualising their behaviour. In addition, since they are shown as ordinary people, they are also not an 'abstract mass'; they are individuals in a specific structural position, espousing ideology and refusing their responsibility. Their ordinariness is further unscored by how the working class are shown as anything but ideal or perfect subjects, hence avoiding caricatures and oversimplified analysis. As such, the film points to how capitalism structures our lives in ways that constrain our ability to accept responsibility. The film manages to hold on to these different levels without choosing the individual or the systemic level, while at the same time pointing to their contradictory engagement.

An overemphasis on the structural level risks stamping out the specificity of the subjective and lived. Many of the above-mentioned scenes push towards the limitations of clarity and realism through their selective juxtapositions, with all aesthetic strategies pointing in the same direction. It is therefore crucial that the film not only probes into some specific conditions of class under contemporary capitalism, but that it stakes a claim in class as an experience. A striking aspect of this is how the experience of time changes when Raša loses her job. In several moments, we follow along as Raša does nothing, often outside, while time is passing, and she stares into nothingness. In other moments, we follow her as she eats or smokes, as the silence points to what is not there, making her restlessness and despair felt. Raša is shown as resourceful and hardworking; she tries everything to get a job, walking around and asking around in all the stores of the little town. She even tries to create her own job, helping people pack their groceries or gathering signatures. There is little help to be gained from the employment agency and, towards the end, she gets a job by lying about having a driver's licence, only to be fired when

[122] An ethical attitude of rejecting freedom and responsibility by taking shelter behind ready-made values (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 49).

they find out. At this point, the logic that "you create your own conditions" has long since been exposed as ideology through the juxtaposition of different mundane situations. But it is in moments such as when Raša goes out into the woods and lays down on the moss that the class conditions are given form and concrete expression. We see her waiting and hanging around with seemingly no purpose, and the film forces us to wait and hang with her, in silence.

In these moments, the conditions of class become lived experience. The uncertainty that comes with material insecurity seeps into the film's way of being; time slows down, and everything sounds and looks different. The same goes for several scenes where Rasa hangs out with her friend or father. In these moments, the film is allowed space to find its perspective outside of the politics of class conditions. It makes evident the inability to relax under conditions of material uncertainty, and how hobbies are for people who have a certain level of security. There is a striking contrast between the feeling of meaninglessness in *We Are Here Now*, and Raša's agony and restless emptiness. Her freedom is constrained, but she pushes back. In the end, Raša makes a choice that grants her an opportunity to work, but it requires sacrifice: she has to leave her father and her home.

To think of class as relation is to think through the different levels of relationships that this entails. As Wood point out, this has to do with the relationship between classes as well as those among the same class. Class conditions are lived by people. In *Eat Sleep Die*, Raša experiences the material conditions in ways that affect her very being in the world. When she loses her job, time stops, and she feels herself as a vulnerable individual in the world. But she is not alone in this experience, as is evident from the very moment we see the coworkers singing together while working in the factory. Raša continues to go back to her old work to visit her colleagues, and she meets with those who also got fired, both at the employment agency and outside of it. All the important relationships in her life, even the closest one she has which is with her father, revolves around work. It is their shared working conditions and the outlook on life that comes with it that form bonds that remain also outside of the specific employment.

The engagements within these relationships are often marked by a no-bullshit attitude, bluntness and bickering. This becomes clear when Eva, a young woman close to Raša's age, starts working at the food packaging factory "but only for three weeks". Raša tells Eva what to do in a blunt and straightforward manner with no pleasantries, and as she has to step away for a moment, Eva cannot keep up with the pace demanded and packages pile up. Raša comes back and goes straight to work in correcting the mistake, shoving cartons into

Eva's hand and telling her to "come on, go go go", while Eva is visibly uncomfortable and upset. Eva's polite and tentative manner is here contrasted with Raša's bulldozing commitment to getting the job done; she does not have time to tend to hurt feelings. Similar to the scenes at the employment office, there is a marked difference in communication style and intersubjective engagement, which goes beyond what is being said.

Human connection under conditions of alienation

In *Fallen Leaves*, we are also invited into a world centred around work and relationships that form among the working class. Here we meet with a smaller cast, focusing mainly on two characters as they meet and fall in love in contemporary Helsinki: Ansa who works at a supermarket, and Holappa who works as a sandblaster. Each of them also has one close colleague and friend that has a recurring presence throughout the film. The working-class experience here is characterised by insecurity and precarity; this is an environment of poor working conditions, zero-hour contracts, being paid under the table, and getting hurt on the job. Holappa lives in barracks with the other workers, but when he gets fired – due to his drinking on the job – he also loses his place to sleep. The film probes the connection of working conditions and the social sphere of loneliness and intimacy, utilising dry humour, simplicity and restraint, in its exploration of the difficulty of relating under contemporary capitalism.

One of the most distinct aspects of *Fallen Leaves'* exploration of human connection is how it builds meaning from the contrast between the monotone and feeling. The film is characterised by static frames and a minimalist mise-én-scene, alongside carefully placed splashes of humour and colour. Similarly, the characters are of few words, and their manner and expressions are subdued, making tiny hints of expressive emotion stand out. Unlike *Eat Sleep Die*'s moving and observing presence, we are here placed more at a distance, emphasising the aesthetic border by carefully constructed staging of events. The different scenes are experienced almost like caricatures of situations – due to the dry deliverance and framing – but they remain poignant and with feeling due to the film's commitment to the thickness of historical conditions.

Ansa works at a supermarket on a zero-hour contract at the beginning of the film, until she is fired for taking expired food. The scene where she is fired is a good example of how the film engages with the strategy of clarity to grasp

the contradictory nature of class relations. On her way home for the day, Ansa is stopped by her boss and a guard in the hallway of the supermarket. First, we see them as they are standing in front of Ansa, who has her back towards us. The boss stops her with an exaggerated hand gesture indicating "stop" while the guard stands completely still beside him, staring at Ansa with an ominous look on his face. The film then cuts to an angle showing the three of them from the side, as the boss demands to see what Ansa has in her purse. The space they inhabit is empty, only a steel table occupying the space between them, and the background wall is a blank steel surface. As the scene goes on and the boss finds out that she has brought expired food with her and then fires her "without notice", he speaks while standing completely still, barely moving a muscle in either his face or his body. The guard continues to stand beside him, completely still.

Ansa's reaction to getting fired is similarly unaffected. She merely tilts her head a tiny bit to the side and dryly replies with little change in facial expression: "We don't have a notice period; we are on a zero-hour contract." At this point, her two colleagues have come into the frame, standing behind her, all three of them shown frontally. As the two colleagues back Ansa up by showing that they too have taken expired food and are happy to quit along with her, the film moves closer. With her colleagues behind her, staring at the boss, Ansa turns her head towards the guard and comments: "You'll go far", followed by a close-up of him replying that he "was just following orders". The demonstration of the boss and guard's structural class positioning against Ansa and her colleagues are thus made abundantly clear, both by the way they take up space within the frame as well as their body gestures and words spoken. What is made just as clear as the scene goes on is how Ansa is backed up by her colleagues who share her place in the work hierarchy, by the way they physically occupy the space alongside her. At the end, Ansa tells her boss to stand aside, and the three of them leave one by one.

The way the scene plays out transcends spoken words and language, due to the simplicity of the character's gestures and movements, which is enhanced by the blank emptiness of the room. As the film goes on, and a romance between Ansa and Holappa unfolds, the film creates meaning in allowing the different layers of engagement to develop over time. But already here in this early scene where Ansa is fired, there is meaning to be found in the camaraderie shown by the colleagues, which is emphasised by the unspoken plainness of the situation. The minimalism of the scene makes the solidarity among the women seem simple and obvious, just as being fired for taking food that was otherwise getting thrown away is made to seem obviously absurd. By stripping away

emotions as well as physical things, the moral value of solidarity is thus made to seem obvious.

Drunken melancholy

The Helsinki of *Fallen Leaves* is a city of harsh working conditions, brick walls and bars filled with smoke and drunken melancholy. People do not know how to talk each other, so they mostly exist around each other drinking beer instead. The clientele of the several pubs we visit during the film's duration rarely talk to each other; they have little to no facial expressions, and they mostly just stare out into nothingness. The grey monotony of the static frames and these faces lay bare the experience of alienation and distanced engagement as a mode of our time. Here it is ever-present, embodied by the film's being. But there is always some rupture in this monotony, always a splash of something else, to remind us that it can be otherwise. The continued use of humour is one way that the film is able to disturb the seeming flatness; in pushing towards the perspective of absurdity, the film throws a wrench in the totalising experience of alienation. At the bar where Ansa works after being fired from the supermarket, the film juxtaposes the emptiness of the many tired faces with colourful posters, the song *Mambo Italiano* playing on the jukebox, and a colourful bartender who smokes her cigarette while looking into the frame. The communication between the characters also plays with and against the coldness and distance of human connection, such as in the following dialogue between Holappa and Hannes. The characters are seated together in a corner at a pub, each one with a beer in front of them.

> Hannes: What is wrong with you? You make me fall asleep.
>
> Holappa: I'm depressed.
>
> Hannes: Why?
>
> Holappa: Because I drink so much.
>
> Hannes: Why do you drink so much?
>
> Holappa: Because I'm depressed.
>
> Hannes: Circular reasoning.

Holappa: What's that?

Hannes: Forget the whole thing. Don't drink if you don't like it.

Holappa: I do like it. But…

Hannes: Forget it. Let's talk about football.

In spelling out Holappa's inconsistency, the film here plays up the attitude of performing and staging; it is almost like it is performing alienation with a wink. Alongside the film's stringent style, these elements of humour and meta commentary risk pushing the film towards the distancing realm of performativity, but *Fallen Leaves* balances the distance with moments of earnest feeling. The film's juxtaposition of performance and feeling is not played up for the sake of it; it is grounded in the thickness of social relations.

One distinct expression of this contrast plays out in a core moment of the film when Holappa and Hannes go to a bar where the band Maustetytöt performs. At this moment in the film, Ansa and Holappa have broken up over Holappa's drinking problem. We hear the music of the band, and their earnest lyrics of misery, while we see the expressionless faces of the band members, Holappa and the audience alike. The condition of general loneliness is at its most exposed here, with static images of faces staring into space or directly towards us, pushing towards aesthetic as well as human boundaries. In the most emotionally charged moment of the film, we get close to Holappa, seeing him in a static close-up that lasts for 30 seconds. The moment starts with Holappa looking down with a serious squinting look on his face, and as the seconds go by, he slowly looks up, with his head following along in a subtle movement as his eyes opens up a little bit more. His face also goes in and out of focus in a subtle yet striking manner due to the otherwise stillness: an example of the film's play on clarity. There is not much movement here, but it becomes emotional precisely due to the restraint and simplicity. What follows from here is that Holappa stops drinking and reunites with Ansa, and we are to understand that this is the moment that he realised he could not go on drinking.

The scene stands out because it connects this deeply felt personalised loneliness to the other people that reside in the background. It is not only as a contrast to the emotional restraint that Holappa has shown throughout the film that the moment become charged, but against the background of loneliness as a condition in society. The film's sensitive attention to loneliness takes us on a journey between darkness and light. As such, it probes the conditions of human connection and finds space in the contradictory relation between what

is and what could be. *Fallen Leaves* finds its expression in the ambiguous tensions between the concrete and movement, where clarity-of-the-message exists alongside absurdity and play. The film's specific way of being shows how art's autonomous status need not stand in opposition to truth-telling, precisely by pushing against the thickness of the now. Juxtaposing a pursuit for truth alongside playful experimentation and rupture evokes the Brechtian vision of realism as an attitude rather than formula.

Imperfect subjects and possibilities of solidarity

One core problem in contemporary society has to do with the difficulty of unifying visions and projects of solidarity. In a time when national integrity and security are presented as the answers to our problems, this becomes especially true for international solidarity. Both in *Fallen Leaves* and *Eat Sleep Die*, nationalism becomes entangled with class relations. In *Fallen Leaves*, an international event breaks into the lives of the Finnish working class through the radio, which functions as a persistent rupture and reminder. In *Eat Sleep Die*, nationalism is exposed as ideology. Both films abstain from straightforward judgements and allow for perspectives other than the ones permeating the status quo. As Slavoj Zizek has pointed out, both progressive liberals and nationalist anti-immigration politicians have in common the "need to keep others at a proper distance" (2010).

Early on in *Eat Sleep Die*, there is a scene where Raša and her father are walking home together, when a car that is backing out of a parking spot almost hits them. Raša's father is furious and lectures the driver, calling him a "svartskalle", an extremely offensive and racist Swedish term. As they continue walking, Raša is very uncomfortable, she becomes quiet and shrinks into herself. When the driver confronts them, she takes on the role of peacemaker, assuring the man that her father did not mean it that way. As soon as the driver is gone, she yells at her dad: "Are you normal? How could you say that to him? You're stupid, for fuck's sake", making it clear that he has really crossed a line. This is one of several occasions when the film evokes racist and nationalist language through dialogue. What makes this scene stand out is the fact that there is an embodied person at the receiving end of the offensive language, and that it happens outside of a working context.

For the most part, nationalist and racist language is evoked much more flippantly in the film, for example when the laid off factory workers get

together socially, and the conversation goes from joking around and discussing job prospects to blaming "foreigners and Muslims" for taking all the jobs, since "they cost less". Raša reacts and points out that she herself is a Muslim, but in another scene, she evokes the same logic when she is confronted with the reality of layoffs. In this scene, some of the colleagues are standing around outside the factory, nervously awaiting their destiny. When they receive word that there will indeed be layoffs, Raša says that they can fire Lena (the new girl that she dislikes) or "the Iraqis, they have been in Sweden for a shorter time". Another colleague chimes in: "Yes, last in, first out."

What these examples point to is the logical inconsistency and hypocrisy that characterise human engagements under conditions of insecurity. In one moment, Raša reacts to her father's and her colleagues' racist remarks, but when faced with the shock of possible termination, she evokes the same logic. Throughout the film, we see how both Raša, her father, and other workers, struggle with their experience of insecurity. The engagements between the workers are marked by playful bickering and bluntness, and racist and sexist comments are sometimes part of the interaction. The film does not place any specific emphasis on these remarks, and apart from the one scene with Raša's father and the driver, they are shown as just another part of the banter and communication. The film is not merely demonstrating that Raša and her peers are 'imperfect human beings', which is clearly also the case. Their imperfect behaviour is also made to make sense against the background of their conditions. More importantly, the film shows the discrepancy between the nationalist or racist remarks and the actual lived lives of these workers, staking a claim in the importance of the latter over the former.

Already from the very first scenes, *Eat Sleep Die* shows how the workers of many different ethnic backgrounds form relationships centred around their shared experience. They sing together, drink beer together, play-fight and face the insecurities of their working conditions together at the employment agency. In the scene where a Swedish factory worker makes comments about "foreigners and Muslims taking their jobs", he and Raša are joking around and hugging each other just a few moments before. The racist and nationalist remarks are only expressed through dialogue, pointing out the discrepancy between the lived experience of ethnic diversity and camaraderie, and the words uttered. The film's overall commitment to observation and experience place importance on action and movement over the words uttered, which place the racist remarks as something outside of, or external to, the practical lived lives of these workers. The racist language does not seep into the engagements between the workers. The film does not seek to 'reveal' or comment on racism

and nationalism among the working class. Rather, it stakes a claim in nationalism as an ideology that does not stem from, nor is it an ideological core, of the working class. This points the difference between an aesthetic strategy of simplicity and clarity, and one of spelling out morality thorough language. As the film moves between the external and internal levels of class relations, it lays bare how ideology works as a top-down mechanism that ensures the smooth operation of capitalist production. The racist and sexist banter among the workers is clearly not the source of rot and decay in the rural setting of the film. The film points away from the importance of language and rhetoric, emphasising experience and the relation to material conditions instead, suggesting that this is the place from which community is formed.

Connection and disconnection

Fallen Leaves probes the tensions of nationality from a different angle, as an international crisis is juxtaposed with the lived lives of the Finnish working class. Here the radio becomes the main interlocutor between them, as a persistent reminder and sound of the world banging at the door. The radio also follows the trajectory of Ansa and Holappa's relationship, present at crucial moments of their relationship, pointing to the emphasis on intersubjective connection. It is introduced early on as Ansa comes home from work to her sparsely furnished apartment, as we see her turning on the radio and news from the Russian invasion of Ukraine is heard. The news continues in the background as Ansa heats food in the microwave. She then has to throw away the food because she forgot to take off the plastic. She changes the channel to listen to melancholic music, and we follow her as she sits down on her couch, having a moment to herself.

From here, the news from Ukraine becomes a recurring element throughout the film, taking on a position of both background and foreground at the same time. The characters in the film are for the most part not explicitly reacting to, nor discussing, the news, but due to its repeated occurrence and the film's overall minimalism and restraint, it takes on a prominent position. When Ansa listens to the radio in the aforementioned scene, it takes on significance also because she turns it on as opposed to having it already be on, so her action draws attention to the radio, and the sound fills the silence and sparsity of the moment. This first occurrence thus introduces and marks the radio's presence in the film as meaningful, so that when it reoccurs, we pay attention.

The second time the radio makes an appearance, also with news from Ukraine, we only hear the sound of it while the image shows Holappa as he is lying on the bed reading a Superman comic ("Teräsmies" in Finnish). He lives in small work barracks with colleagues, under simple conditions, with old furniture and a poster of Tom Jones hanging over his bed. Hannes comes along to take him to Karaoke – where Holappa will see Ansa for the first time – and the sound from the radio blends into the background. Later in the film, the radio appears again when Holappa realises that he has lost Ansa's number, which means that he is unable to contact her since they did not exchange names or contact information. The film then cuts to a close-up of Ansa's radio, and then to an image of her sitting at her table waiting for Holappa to call her. Here the radio connects the two of them in time, as they listen to the same news at the same time. What follows is a scene where they just miss each other, Holappa leaving the cinema where they last met, just as Ansa is arriving. When they finally get together again to have dinner at Ansa's, the radio reappears. We see the two of them sitting at opposite ends of Ansa's couch with their hands in their laps. After an awkward exchange about how small the bed is and whether she has any more of the "apéritif", Ansa gets up to turn on the radio, saying she will "put on some music". When she turns it on, news from the war is heard once again, and as we hear the male reporter's voice talking about the number of victims in Mariupol, the film cuts to Holappa with a sober look on his face. Ansa turns off the radio and proclaims, "bloody war!" while looking intensely in the direction of both Holappa and the camera. This is the only time the radio news is explicitly addressed. The film cuts to Holappa's surprised reaction, and a subtle light change on his face lends the moment even more poignancy. He goes to get a drink from his jacket, which results in a fight where they break off their relationship.

The radio thus follows the trajectory of Ansa and Holappa's relationship, functioning both as a reminder of the world outside, and as an object that points to connection and disconnection. Neither of them can fully relate to or engage with the news: in the first instances, Ansa switches channels while Holappa does not acknowledge the news at all, occupied by his comic. The film makes evident how the characters resort to distraction and entertainment over the reality of international crisis.

Throughout, the film plays with and against references of cultural products and elitist high culture, such as when Ansa and Holappa go to the cinema and watch the zombie film *The Dead Don't Die*. After the film, we see two grey-haired men come out of the cinema door only to say the following sentences: "Great film, it reminded me of Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*" to which the other

responds “I was thinking of Godard’s *Bande à part*”. They then split off and walk in opposite directions. A few moments after, Ansa and Holappa come out of the same door and Ansa says with a straight face that she liked the film and that she has “never laughed so much”. In the background we see several film posters, among others, of films by the aforementioned Godard and Bresson. Once again, this is an example of how the film contrasts monotony with humour, but here it also pushes towards the contrast between highbrow (in this case, cinephile) culture and the conditions of the working class. While Ansa enjoys art because it makes her laugh or offers comfort, these men relate to the film only by reference to other canonised films. Clearly two different ways of engaging art are contrasted here, but the film is not interested in choosing sides.

Instead, the film goes beyond this purely cultural analysis and stakes a claim in the material conditions of class exploitation and the way it affects human engagement under contemporary capitalism. Throughout the film, the working conditions are juxtaposed and connected to the difficulty of human connection, and as such, what is at stake here is not the contrast between cultural products or ‘real news’, but between connection and disconnection. The sparseness of the environment that these characters find themselves in when they listen to the radio, as well as the emotional monotony, point to how difficult it is to engage in international matters when you live under conditions of exploitation. The radio signals the difficulty of relating under contemporary capitalism, both inside and outside the nation. Its recurring presence works as a reminder of the universality of human struggles.

The relationship between Ansa and Holappa points to pressure points of connection, but it also prefigures authentic human engagement through the way they work through these difficulties. Their relationship is characterised by honesty, and the unease of trying and failing. When they first see each other, they cannot even bare to look at each other, let alone make contact or talk. Their interest in each other is not based on anything other than meeting each other’s gaze across the room, of being at the same place at the same time in a certain moment. Despite this, they remain open to each other, offering the other a chance based on nothing more than shared circumstance. The film makes clear that it is exactly these circumstances that grounds their connection. Ansa and Holappa come from the same world of insecurity and exploitation, and they share this with the other people that surround them throughout the film. When they look across the room and become attracted to each other, it is both because of and despite the conditions in which they live.

The relationship between Raša and her father in *Eat Sleep Die* bears similar characteristics. It is marked by their working conditions and social situation,

and much of their interaction revolves around worrying about money and job prospects. It is also a distinctly intimate connection, and the film lends time and space to several moments of them eating together, bickering, play-fighting and falling asleep together in front of the television. Raša takes care of her father with much concern, helping him take a bath and massaging his aching body, while he makes her dinner and takes her shopping for clothes. Their relationship is honest, and their communication is to the point; they do not show love for each other with words; it is through action, doing things together, helping each other out.

Since alienation and loneliness mark human engagements under capitalism, it prohibits openness and reciprocity, causing us to meet each other with fear. Both *Fallen Leaves* and *Eat Sleep Die* show how this takes on a specific form among the working class, who are pushed to see each other as competition against a background of material insecurity. But the fundamental relational aspect of human existence can never do away with human connection, even if conditions make it harder. Insisting on continuing to try and fail while remaining open to the other is the only way to break through this alienating boundary. The imperfect relationships in both films points to a way of relating to each other marked by a vulnerability that starts from honesty over politeness and correct behaviour. When Ansa and Holappa make mistakes, they try again. Their exchanges are awkward, they misunderstand each other, and when Ansa confronts Holappa about his drinking he takes off instead of staying to work things out through communication. Instead, he works on his shit. Similarly to Raša and her father, he prefers to do, instead of talking. Both films points towards the limitations of language and norms of human engagements. Strikingly, they both contrast interpersonal connection with that of institutions, or the world outside. If these films show a way towards authentic human engagements, then, the answer lie away from current institutional structures. Where the welfare state once was a beacon of hope, it is now a part of the problem.

Ambiguity, clarity and rupture

To see class as a relation instead of a location is to open up possibilities for change. It is to engage with lived experience and the distinctly contingent ways that we relate to ourselves and the world around us. The capitalist mode of production is neither an abstract natural fact nor something completely beyond our reach. It is a pervasive social system that delimits and structures our

possibilities and engagements, but it depends upon constant reinforcing as well as ideological constructions. Hence, capitalist conditions form the way in which human beings experience their world, but our experiences are never completely determined by it. Class situations give rise to class formations, but as Wood pointed out, workers handle and experience their situations in distinct ways.

Eat Sleep Die and *Fallen leaves* probe class situations as an experience. Here, material conditions are not rendered abstract or at a distance but as concrete limitations to freedom and connection. It is not cultural taste or identity that marks out the commonalities among these workers, but the very conditions in which they live. In *Eat Sleep Die,* we are placed alongside Rasa, her colleagues, and father, who all work manual labour jobs. Their lives are marked by insecurity and restlessness; they are unable to fully relax or control their own time. The film explores how conditions work with and against solidarity in the way that the workers find common ground but are also positioned against each other in competition. This leads to impartial and ambiguous forms of solidarity among them, marked by blunt and direct communication, bickering, vulgarities, intimacy and vulnerability. Since the film stakes a claim in class as a relation, it emphasises how conditions shape these encounters. As such, their engagements are not just honest in the form of interpersonal communication; the film points to how they are materially bound up in each other. Their blunt forms of engagement are therefore not an essential quality among the working class but spring from their experience. These imperfect relational forms are situated, lived and not inherent. The films avoid essentialist and romantic idealisation of working-class solidarity and probe the structures that work against and delimit unity.

Similarly, the workers in *Fallen Leaves* form imperfect bonds characterised by trials and errors. The film explores how contemporary capitalism works to disconnect and alienate us from each other, both within and between national borders. Ansa and Holappa meet each other with kindness, trepidation and genuine openness. They find themselves in surroundings characterised by loneliness and despair, but the film's juxtapositions provide connections and possibilities. Through playful contrasts and disruptions, life is made less monotonous, pointing towards something else. The radio connects the workers to the rest of the world and the universal vulnerability of all beings, but it also marks the difficulty of such connection. Here, the material insecurity forms bonds among some but disconnect others. In *Eat Sleep Die*, nationalism is evoked only through language and is exposed as ideology. Here, the distance across borders is pointed out, marked as disconnection and rupture. In both

instances, the films point to material conditions as the foundation, suggesting that international solidarity remains impossible under the current social system.

Both films stake a claim in a specific form of engagement with class as experience. They explore class relations through staged situations that give expression to capitalist exploitation in ways that evoke associations to Marxist realist strategies. The critique of realist aesthetics has often to do with charges of emphasising content, themes and message over the autonomous characteristics of the artwork. This was Adorno's accusation, that realist's such as Brecht sought to coerce a desired effect through a didactic style. For him, the autonomous characteristics of artworks are opposed to communication, which are the attributes of culture products rather than art. *Eat Sleep Die* and *Fallen Leaves* point to these tensions due to the way they utilise strategies of clarity and simplicity as tools to explore contemporary class conditions.

In these films, we are thrown into situations with the working class as we see circumstances play out, rather than being served political commentary or analysis via dialogue. Both films ground their exploration of the working class in the specific characteristics of the film as something other than reality, thus forming their own distinct presence in the world. In *Eat Sleep Die,* this is marked by perspectival shifts and moments of extreme closeness and subjectivity, while *Fallen Leaves* plays up a staged and orchestrated style with splashes of humour and rupture. Neither are swallowed up by didactic content that streamlines all aspects into a unifying message, nor are they rendered passive signifiers of external intentionality; both play with and against these situations in ways that emphasise their mediation.

While they stake a claim in the specific perspective of the working class, their specific ways of being are grounded in the thickness of experience and not entertainment or standardising conventions. As such, they avoid unifying their surface in impenetrable ways, but hold on to the tensions and contradictions that do exist. Through staking a claim, they risk the specificity of a distinct perspective that opens up rather than closes down. Instead of staying in the safe realm of functionality, at a clear-cut distance from reality, they probe some truths about contemporary class relations. The films thus exemplify how strategies of clarity and truth does not have to be subsumed by standardisation, but can act as forms of rupture or confrontation with the now.

Chapter 6 The Lot of Being Torn Apart

> If the individual is nothing, then society can not be something. (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 114)
>
> The lot of being torn apart [déchirement] is the ransom for his presence in the world. (Beauvoir, 2004b, p. 190)

To be human is to act. Through our actions, we enact values and beliefs and there is no escape: "Every refusal is a choice, every silence has a voice. Our very passivity is willed; in order not to choose, we still must choose not to choose. It is impossible to escape" (Beauvoir, 2004d, p. 126). Avoiding responsibility leads to childish behaviour and meaninglessness, but what happens if we try to assume ambiguity under conditions of inauthenticity? What does it cost to go against systems of elitism and inauthenticity? The Norwegian film *Gritt*[123] (Guttormsen, 2021) probes these questions and explores the conditions at stake for the human subject who makes the attempt. The film also expresses a form of solidarity marked by openness, curiosity and lucid generosity.

[123] Gritt is the debut feature film by director Itonje Søimer Guttormsen. It had its world premiere at Tromsø International Film Festival in 2021 and its international premiere at International Film Festival Rotterdam, a festival known for its promotion of non-commercial and alternative film productions. Guttormsen is part of initiatives that seeks to open up new spaces for challenging films and to generate a more vivid independent film scene.

Striving for authenticity

Gritt, both the film and the character, commits to methods of trying, failing and changing. As we first meet with Gritt the character, she is in New York with her friend Marte, who is attending a culture festival. We see her face up close as she talks with great intensity about her newest performing arts project, "Den hvite betennelsen" (The White Inflammation), a "sort of ritual" where she goes into different roles and tries to break free of them in order to "transcend to a higher level of freedom". As she moves through the film, we see her try on these different roles, continuously changing course, adapting and going in new directions.

In New York, she meets with "The Living Theatre", a free theatre group that leads her to the "Theatre of Cruelty" as she returns to Oslo. After being rejected by Kulturrådet, she seeks out the leader of the theatre, Lars, to help produce her project, but quickly adapts into an assisting role in *his* project. She starts by interviewing asylum seekers for Lars' project, but then goes on to develop the material into a performance as part of her own project. When this does not pan out and she is kicked out from the theatre, she takes her project into the woods, inspired by a group of witches that she is introduced to. Here, she turns her attention inwards as she explores herself in the realm of nature. These twists and turns are the result of circumstance, and at the same time, it is the stated intention of her project from the start: to transcend, to move forward. Gritt is moving forward through the method of trying, the only meaningful method for any project that takes seriously the facticity of our existence, accepting that it is impossible to control every aspect of our situation. As such, she tries, fails and experiences both harsh rejection and genuine connection on her journey.

The art project is Gritt's foundation for her engagements with the world; it forms her experiences and movements. She is committed to action, much like Beauvoir's militaristic king Pyrrhus, and just like him, she exemplifies the ontological truth that to be human is to act. Pyrrhus believes that projects give themselves meaning and that they cannot be defined from the outside. He wants to go out into the world and attempt to conquer it, and no matter what happens, he "is not leaving to return; he is leaving in order to conquer" (2004d, p. 100). His opponent Cineas, on the other hand, is critical of action. He stands for pure rationality and thinks that the right thing to do is to think through all consequences, which ultimately leads to the conclusion that no action truly makes sense. For Cineas, the best thing is to do nothing and stay put. But Gritt does not want to stay put. She embraces her ontological freedom through action and exemplifies what it can look like to throw yourself into a project fully. She

believes in her project so much so that she sacrifices both comfort and material security in order to follow through. This constant movement renders her restless, always moving, underscored by her homelessness and always dragging her suitcase around.

The film, too, remains unsettled, trying on different modes and ways of being. It plays with formats, time, pace, movement, music and voiceover, changing between longer observational sequences and montage throughout. There is no neat or predictable logic to its rhythm; rather, the film keeps us on our toes, making it irregular without getting lost in abstraction. Gritt's lived experience is its anchor; we stay close to her at all times, blurring boundaries between film and character as they work together to explore the tensions inherent in ambiguous existence. Often, they push in different directions, giving form to unresolved contradictions of being. As such, the film is neither fully an observer nor an expression of the inner life of its title character; it plays up the tension in meaningful ways. An example: After having spent one night at Marte's place, Gritt goes out into Oslo with her suitcase. The sequence is introduced by organ music, as we see Gritt walking the pavement with her rolling suitcase, and we hear her earnest voiceover stating the following words: "A willingness to replace or redefine the role of body and art in social, cultural and political life. Change as potential founded in an embodied perspective. We need voices of difference to be reminded that it is weird to be alive. Unfathomable, beautiful and disgusting." As we hear the words, the film varies between observing Gritt and showing us glimpses of Oslo: a hairdresser, trees, asphalt, buildings. The film embraces an attitude of openness and curiosity as it follows along: when Gritt suddenly drops her suitcase, the film follows the movement in a twitchy manner and zooms in on it, as if caught by surprise. When she is writing in the park, the film scours the scene with a tremble, looking for her, finding her, and then zooming in. This juxtaposition of the voiceover, movements and changing perspective, exemplifies the way the film engages with existence. The voiceover functions as the serious and earnest aspect of striving for truth, Gritt's project as performed and formulated, while the movements point towards openness and curiosity. The film assumes the tension between them, as both are vital aspects of an attitude of authenticity.

Gritt strives for authenticity, both in the way she throws herself into action and the openness of trying, but also in the way she stakes a claim and remains true to her values. Throughout the film, she expresses the kind of earnest intensity that is often associated with pretension, especially in a culture where the serious is long since replaced by irony, cynicism and distance. When she defiantly changes and adapts, she holds on to the integrity of her project,

always putting it first, no matter the opposition. Gritt always finds a way to steer a conversation onto her project and the values that spring from it, and she approaches all of life through the same lens. This causes her to become a nuisance to those around her: she comes off as self-absorbed, and she also functions as an annoying reminder that the sweet comfort of standard living comes with a price. Her opposition to Kulturrådet or the leader of Grusomhetens Teater is one thing; another is her commitment to those same ideals in her private life. When Gritt stays with her friend Marte, this tension becomes an issue. Gritt is continuously pushing against Marte's easier-going attitude, problematising the ethics of work relationships and commenting on the sexism in the film that they watch to which Marte annoyingly proclaims that she just wants to "enjoy it". For Gritt, there is no way to just enjoy it; she is consumed with her realisations about the state of the world and her responsibility for it. She approaches her project with her whole self; she believes in it, and there is no separation between her and what she pursues.

Staying consistent with your values throughout your being is difficult against a background of fragmentation. Under contemporary capitalism, we are encouraged to turn on and off different parts of ourselves, to play roles that split our engagement with the world into different separated spheres. The consistency in which Gritt approaches the world questions the comfort that lies in fragmentation, that which allows us to shut off our brain after work so that we can recover from the alienating reality of having to sell our labour. The earnestness of a character like Gritt becomes irritating and uncomfortable because we are confronted with the fact that it could be otherwise.

Crushed by the dark weight of other things

At the start of the film, Gritt is filled with energy and belief in her project. As she faces opposition and fails, she tries again and again, until she cannot anymore. The film probes the tumultuous journey of attempting to stay true to your project and to strive for authenticity in contemporary society and lays bare the pain of striving to break free. Since the quest for authenticity entails that the project cannot be dictated by external conditions, there is bound to be tension in the engagements between project and system. Gritt learns the difficulty of navigating structures designed to maintain a current order of things. In her various engagements with gatekeepers of the system, she becomes disillusioned, and in the end, she retreats into the woods and herself.

When Gritt first comes back to Oslo from New York, her life and circumstances are filled with possibilities. She is humming along with the cheerful soundtrack of the film, and we attend theatre shows, go to clothing stores and eat candy in the street with her. This changes as her project application is rejected by Kulturrådet (Arts Council Norway) due to formal requirements. We stay close to Gritt as she is scouring the webpage of the council, her concerned face lit up by her laptop. When she learns that her application is rejected, she takes a deep breath and in the next image she is calling the council for a justification. She talks with the woman from the council and learns that her application has not been considered since she does not have formal education, nor the amount of practical experience needed to substitute for the lack of education. Her positive and polite manner changes at once. She stutters as she hangs up and has a huge reaction where she tears down her project plans from the wall and screams. While we observe this outburst, the film pushes optimistically forward as the soundtrack fills our ears with energetic and cheerful music. Surely enough, in the next scenes Gritt carries on, first going to the gym to gain "general strength", and then she seeks out Grusomhetens Teater (Theatre of Cruelty) to talk to Lars. As she moves through Oslo to find the theatre, the film continues its energetic openness, zooming in on and moving alongside Gritt, juxtaposing trying, failing, rejection and inspiration.

In her first meeting with Lars, Gritt sees him as a shelter or an ally in her plight against the bureaucracy of Kulturrådet. She wants him to produce her project, but only formally since "they are so rigid with formal requirements". As they sit across from each other, the scene starts out positioning them as equals, in alignment, going back and forth between them as Gritt talks about her project and why she is there. When Lars calmly and self-assuredly says that he cannot produce her project because he has "more than enough with my own projects", Gritt once again adjusts to rejection. The mood shifts as she becomes more aware of their unequal power positions, her facial expression and body language change and she becomes more agitated, contrasting Lars' steady calm. The film stays with Gritt's face as she alters her request, saying that she would love to learn from the theatre, offering a helping hand. From here on, Lars becomes more of a mentor and boss to Gritt, someone who helps her, more than a partner. Gritt cleans and helps out in the theatre, and also sits in on Lars' lectures, once again inspired and interested. The theatre becomes her whole world, and she even ends up sleeping there since she does not have anywhere else to go.

When Lars finds out that she has been sleeping in the theatre, he offers her an opportunity to help him with research for his project on the 'abject'. At this point, Gritt is clearly subservient to Lars, having experienced several rounds of rejections, in addition to being homeless. She reacts to his offer by running to the sink to get a drink of water, as if she does not quite know how to respond to possibility after all the denials. During her research work, she meets with asylum seekers and assists them in filming themselves and their lives and the enthusiasm for her own art project returns. With renewed faith in her own project, she is energised once more and takes charge of her situation. She takes on a leadership role with the asylum seekers and declares that they will make a performance together, one that is "authentic" and unlike what you might see at the "National Theatre". Gritt incorporates the stories of the asylum seekers into her own project, lies about having funds and uses the theatre as a place for rehearsals. Oslo becomes a city of art and opportunity again: we follow along as she befriends another artist named Frida, attends art exhibits, concerts and dances across the floor of the theatre. After having experienced rejection and loss of faith, this renewed enthusiasm has a frantic quality. Her confidence is caught up in a sense of hurry: fear and doubt lurking just beneath the surface. When Lars calls and confronts her with her actions, a droning sound of dread and despair drowns out all other sounds, and we understand with Gritt that it is over. She abandons the asylum seekers and leaves the theatre.

Gritt hits her breaking point. In the film chapter titled *Kairos*, an ancient Greek word for "the right or critical moment", she breaks down in order to find her path forward. This part starts when Gritt visits a collective of women who worship the mythology of Lillith. When she first arrives at the house, the women are chanting, and the film moves between their singing faces, guiding us into a sphere of spirituality and the profoundness of change. Gritt learns about Lillith, a woman who chose "the free and wild" as opposed to the safe, leading her to be demonised. Once again, she relates her newfound knowledge to her own project, saying to the women that "it is so serendipity that she is there now", drawing a line back to her meeting with the theatre in New York where they say that it was "serendipitous" that she was there with them. As we move around the house, the film gradually gives way to another realm, another format: a montage sequence where time and bodies speed up until hitting a pinnacle of flickering fire and then landing on images of nature. Gritt wakes up on the sofa of the collective. The montage once again blurs the boundaries of art project and life, giving form to the intensity and frantic nature of Gritt's engagement with her project. This scene maximises the intensity, indicating a sense of shattering and overwhelm as Gritt reaches into the core of her project, losing all control as images and light flicker. At the end of the montage, a path

forward is indicated, towards nature, but the realisation has a cost. The path forward is never linear, always painful, and it is when you are at your breaking point that truth unfolds.

A system of non-solidarity

In her moment of Kairos, Gritt makes two last desperate attempts at adjusting or fitting in, which only pushes her further away from societal structures: she first seeks psychiatric help, then visits with an old friend and her family. After waking up on the sofa in the women's collective, Gritt goes to a psychiatric clinic and asks to be admitted. Her meeting with the people working at the clinic manifests Gritt's outsidedness and probes further into what it means to engage with the kind of institutional bureaucracy that Gritt first encountered with Kulturrådet.

We observe the meeting in a white sterile room, mostly staying close to Gritt's agitated and twitching body as she answers the questions from the psychologists. At the beginning, she is crying intensely while talking about her situation, saying that she just wants "to contribute with something but ends up destroying everything". In a striking moment at the end of the encounter, Gritt is asked if she has thoughts of suicide, to which she answers, "Yes, yes, but that is just something I have always had", and that sometimes it would be "nice to just let everything go" but that "everyone thinks that sometimes". When the male psychologist asks what is stopping her, the film changes angle slightly as we get very close to Gritt's face as she asks, "From killing myself?" with a trembling voice. The image changes from clarity to defocus as she contemplates her answer, letting out a sincerely felt "eh...". It then cuts to an image of the female psychologist who calmly lets out an "mmm", and then goes on to say, "I guess we are at the end now". We hear the voice of the man explaining that it is obvious that Gritt is going through a crisis, but they don't believe that she needs to be admitted, because she can "fix her problems, out there in her life". The woman goes on to talk about NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration), that there are several authorities that she can utilise, that she "is not alone in this". As they talk, we see the look of disillusionment on Gritt's face; what this encounter has made evident is exactly the opposite; she is indeed alone in this, especially as far as institutional structures are concerned.

The scene at the clinic lays bare how alienating it can feel to be a subject facing governmental systems and structures, especially if you are in an outsider position. Gritt is humbling herself and asking for help; she is open about contemplating suicide with no answer to what is stopping her from killing herself, yet in the next moment she is back on the street with her rolling suitcase. The moment is rendered absurd, not because of the decision that Gritt should not be admitted, but due to the way the film juxtaposes her painful subjective experience with the generic response, pointing to an ideology that claims to promote inclusion while demonstrating the opposite. The contrast of Gritt's trembling body against the white sterile room and the psychologists who act as gatekeepers for the system marks the structural brutality. Not because Gritt is especially worthy, or because the psychologists are especially unsympathetic. Like Rasa's meeting with the employment agency in *Eat Sleep Die*, the film stakes a claim in the ordinariness of a non-solidaric system. These experiences stand in conflict with the Scandinavian ideal of equality and freedom that ground these institutional structures. They should exist in order to help people who are struggling, but their detached bureaucratic formation opposes any notion of individual subjectivity or freedom. The fact that they exist, then, only exacerbates the experience of being outside. Gritt gives expression to the distinct form of existential loneliness that can ensue in a society that proclaims that everyone is included.

Ambiguous existence

From the perspective of ambiguity, human existence lies in the tension between ontological freedom and external conditions. This means that our freedom is continually formed in an ongoing dialectical movement. The film takes seriously this ambiguous reality of existence and remains disinterested in simplicity; Gritt fights for her project and is met with rejection, but it is a logical rejection from the point of view of the status quo. When she goes to visit an old friend after having been rejected at the psychiatric clinic, the friend makes the case that Gritt is always making everything difficult for herself, pointing to her responsibility for her situation. It is easy to understand her point from an observing perspective: her project is highly ambitious, but she does not have any education or the right amount of experience to carry it out, at least as far as Kulturrådet is concerned. In addition, she continues to work on her own project when she could have been patient and continued to help out at Grusomhetens Teater and wait for her moment. She does not comply to fit in,

which makes it difficult for her to get along with a lot of people, so her loneliness could also be seen as a consequence of her own actions. There is also another way of looking at it, one that does not emphasise Gritt's choices, but her responsibility as a human subject in the world. From this point of view, Gritt exemplifies what it means to try to assume responsibility in an authentic way in contemporary society.

Gritt starts out as passionate and hopeful towards her project, and she sees it as a way to take responsibility in the world. She engages the world with openness, invites everyone into her project and applies for money and help from institutions to realise it. From the perspective of openness and authenticity, societal rules and norms do not always make sense, and Gritt's unknowing naivety in applying for money despite lacking education points towards such a possible tension between authenticity and norms. She mistakenly thinks that the project will be judged on quality rather than formal requirements, such as education, because from her perspective these limitations are incomprehensible. This is taken further by her encounter with the hierarchy at Grusomhetens Teater, where she soon learns that she needs to subordinate herself and help advance Lars' project instead of focusing on her own project. When Gritt returns to her project, she has become more desperate and frantic; she lies and acts unethically, still attempting to hold on to her original idea. When she receives her final rejection, she breaks down, and we experience her overwhelm and breakdown. Rather than marking out what is right and what is wrong, the film probes what it does to a human subject to strive for authenticity. We experience things with her as she is gradually broken down by her engagement with various structures, not judging her, but also not siding with her. The film delves into the difficulty in fighting for what you believe in when this is in opposition to contemporary norms, without judging whether or not the specific project or actions in question is 'right'.

While a rational analysis might deem Gritt's actions as idealistic naivety, then, the film remains open to her plight, taking us beyond the confines of norms and what-is. We follow along as she goes from openness to shutting down, and we experience this from an ambiguous perspective of experience as it is lived. Whether or not Gritt is responsible for her own demise is beside the point; the film invites us to pay attention to the ways that institutional structures and norms limit and restrain. Probing a situation of being positioned outside of power structures, the film reveals the boundaries that can be ignored by those inside. We live in a society that proclaims freedom and equality, especially in the art world, but the film draws our attention to how limitations function and structure experience in formal and informal ways. Gritt's encounter with Lars

is particularly interesting, as it points to the dynamics between the haves and have-nots. His calm and self-assured mode of being, in contrast with Gritt's frantic defensiveness, marks the embodied experience of being in a position of power. It is only by probing the perspective of outsidedness that these limitations reveal themselves.

The film's ambiguous positioning is crucial: sometimes it observes Gritt, either up close or trying to find her from a distance, while at other times it gives form to her project and voice, as if trying out different ways it might come to life. This works as a movement between ideas and conditions; the film puts the idea (l) of authenticity into contact with specific circumstances, as a way to explore the concrete characteristics of their tension in contemporary society. The film is grounded in the thickness of today, both through its exploration of subjective experience and in the way it engages with specific institutions and the life of Oslo. The city we experience is a specific city, set in a specific time: asphalt buildings, foodora bicyclists, ramen noodles, homeless people, cranes, shopping centres, people walking around with shopping bags, shops selling flat screen TVs, posters supporting Palestine. The streets are experienced alongside Gritt, placing her in it rather than fully adopting her point of view, a juxtaposition that functions to mark out the tension of subjectivity and objectivity. The film's use of actual institutions, such as Kulturrådet and Grusomhetens Teater, further grounds the episodes of Gritt's various encounters so that it never gets lost in abstraction. In these situations, we are brought down to earth, observing encounters that feel like they matter, due to their closeness to lived experience.

Even though Gritt experiences rejection and pain as she engages systems of power, the world outside of these institutional boundaries invites other encounters, marked by curiosity, openness and honesty. Many respond to her earnestness by opening up themselves, especially in her many meetings with fellow artists, such as her meeting with the Living Theatre in New York or Frida who introduces her to the women's collective. As she walks around the cities of both New York and Oslo, Gritt talks to strangers about her passions with ease. After her rejection from Kulturrådet, she goes to the gym and befriends and opens up to the owner. Here, we get to experience a meeting marked by kindness, as the owner gives Gritt life advice from the perspective of openness. He does not judge her but offers understanding while pushing against her despair. Here, the film also puts us in a concrete situation, we observe and follow along as Gritt lifts weights and moves across the small and crowded gym. When they go to the backroom to talk, he asks her what she does for a living and Gritt opens up about her recent rejection by Kulturrådet.

The owner responds compassionately by grasping her arm gently while commenting that "there are so many worse things" and that "this is just one rejection". They continue the conversation, complaining about "the Cultural Ministry, a really shitty Ministry" and the owner continues to comfort Gritt with honesty. This little encounter serves as an example of how to engage other people with honest generosity, understanding where the other is coming from without judgment while still offering another perspective. At the end he summarises, "Life goes by, why should I be disappointed?" and he goes on to sing, the sound carrying over onto images of Gritt going out into Oslo again.

Passion and inauthenticity

To live in ambiguous tension means that our engagement with the world is an ongoing movement. We might start out with a project of genuine openness, but as we encounter the world, trying, we often end up failing, even acting against our original intension. As we meet with closed systems and structures of inauthenticity, it becomes increasingly hard to maintain integrity. Gritt starts out wanting to do good but ends up cracking under pressure, unable to stay true to her own stated values. She faces institutional boundaries and social relations that work against her, and she becomes desperate and frantic.

When we deny our own freedom, we also undermine our responsibility for the freedom of others. To face our freedom is hard and painful, so we locate power and responsibility outside of ourselves and cling on to this assumption to avoid this painful reality. Of course, power is first and foremost located among the elite few. Under contemporary capitalism, we are made to compete with each other, see each other as threats, playing up identity and culture wars that oppose unifying projects of solidarity. *Eat Sleep Die* probed the ways in which racism can act as an ideological mechanism to split and fragment. In *Gritt,* this exploration of irresponsibility takes on another character, emphasising the existential cost of striving for authenticity.

After having been rejected by Kulturrådet, Gritt ends up at Grusomhetens Teater, where she sleeps and acts as a helper after initially wanting help to work on her own project. She does research for Lars' new project, meeting with asylum seekers to get them to film moments from their everyday life. Upon seeing their everyday snippets, Gritt is visibly moved and quickly adjusts to make it a part of her own project. She misrepresents her own position towards the asylum centre, acting as if she has the funds and authority to put

on her own performance with the group of asylum seekers. Gritt and a small group of men from the centre end up working together in the theatre, doing exercises and planning this performance. With renewed confidence, she proclaims that the new project is about exploring the situation of being in an unknown country, and she records their personal stories of war and government oppression to use as part of the performance. When the representative from the asylum centre asks what the "boys" will get out of their experience, Gritt's answer is that it is about getting their stories out, emphasising that it is "important for the audience".

As we observe the work that they do together, the film gets close to these men, their faces, bodies and voices. One of them, a young man from Syria, talks about his experience of being shot by ISIS. As he talks, we see his face and body up close, contrasting the black background and silence of the theatre. The film moves down his body, showing us the scars from being shot, as we hear the sound of his pants rubbing against his skin. This moment goes beyond the confines of Gritt's project and evokes the tangible reality of *his* experience. As Gritt loses herself to her vision, the film continues to move between perspectives, here inviting us into the subjective presence of these men, if only for a few moments. As such, it diverges from Gritt's loss of focus, acting as a refocus, refusing simple release from the inherent contradictions at play.

Gritt becomes blinded by her own project and ends up acting inauthentically. She pursues her project for the sake of the project, causing her to use these asylum seekers as a means to an end; they become objects to her cause. Like Beauvoir's notion of the passionate man, nothing exists outside of her project; it is the only thing that "appears real and full", and everything else becomes insignificant (1976, p. 69). When they tell their stories, she is genuinely moved, and she attempts to involve them in her project by allowing them to express themselves, lending importance to their perspective. However, in misrepresenting her own role, lying and losing sight of these men's needs and challenges, she does not engage with them as freedoms. These men become indistinguishable from her project; she does not treat them as subjects, but as part of her plan to regain control. While her stated intention is to fight injustice and awaken people to the white "inflammation" that paralyses society, she loses sight of her own responsibility in the concrete encounter with other subjects. The "good cause" takes on abstract meaning.

Throughout the film, Gritt's quest for authenticity is marked by her openness and the method of trying. She absorbs and takes inspiration from the world around her in ways that blur the boundaries of both herself and the project, as well as the project and the world. When she meets with other artists, she

becomes inspired and incorporates their ideas into her project-self, always changing and adjusting, exemplified by how she often repeats the phrases of others. The film starts with Gritt's clear vision of her project, and she always returns to her own ideas. However, her openness renders her fragile, and the film points to the extreme difficulty of holding on to a sense of self while remaining open. When faced with norms and structures of rigidity, Gritt becomes shattered. As she attempts to take back control through the performance with the asylum seekers, her sense of inferiority from her previous engagements is carried over and she is not able to accept the responsibility that follows from this new situation. Her experience of being an outsider carries over into a situation where she herself acts as an institutional figure, and she abuses her newfound power in her engagement with these men. In its ambiguous positioning, the film renders Gritt's actions unethical, aligning with the subjectivities of these men without resorting to straightforward judgments of her character. It allows us to hold on to the tensions inherent in "the painfulness of an indefinite questioning" (Beauvoir, 1976, p. 144); the quest for authenticity necessarily entails failing, but that does not redeem us from responsibility.

Authentic engagements start from assuming my own freedom, as it is bound up in the freedom of others. Projects of solidarity must spring from these values and not be pursued for the sake of passion itself. For Beauvoir, genuine passion does not absorb the other like an object; by treating others as things, we renounce our own freedom: "no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others" (1976, p. 72). Treating the asylum seekers as a means for Gritt's own project is thus inauthentic for it denounces their freedom as subjects. The film remains uninterested in making any straightforward judgements but gives expression to what it means to strive for authenticity and the tumultuous journey that this entails.

Turning inward

When Gritt faces rejection, she becomes desperate and ends up failing in her engagement with the asylum centre. Where can she go from there? The film explores three alternatives: the system, relationships and retreating into oneself. We have seen that Gritt's encounter with institutional structures was unsuccessful, as she was faced with an ideological wall that she was unable to penetrate. She then visits with an old friend, who lives in a villa outside of Oslo with a partner and two children. In this encounter, Gritt is faced with what it

could mean if she just stopped "making it so hard for herself" and allowed for intimate connection and family. The scene establishes Gritt's outsidedness even further; she is like a fish out of water in this environment: she is wearing the wrong clothes, saying the wrong things and is generally very uncomfortable. As she sits down with the family for dinner, she is wearing a new leather jacket, and when asked if she rides a bike, she lies and says yes. The jacket makes visible her contrast to this stable family life: initially it makes her take on a role, and when she removes it, only wearing a sports bra underneath, she quickly puts it back on, after noticing the surprised glances of the parents. When asked about having children, Gritt goes on to talk about the climate catastrophe, saying that she would not dare to have children under the current circumstances. Once again, she is unable to fit into the expected norms of polite behaviour; she cannot relax and puts up an act to guard herself. When her friend confronts her to say that she can see that she is not doing too good and asks her why she can't cut herself some slack and allow someone in, the film shows us Gritt's mute, expressionless face.

From here follows a short chaotic sequence where the film invites us into her distress; her restlessness felt in the unstable movements and editing, as she is trying to run away from herself and us. The soundtrack bombards us with various sources, pointing in vastly different directions and intensifying the sense of disorder. After having faced professional and institutional rejection, Gritt experiences deeply felt pain but also inspiration and direction as she meets with women who worship Lillith. When she wakes up in the women's collective, she is in a transitional state, having had visions of the path forward, but still living the reality of isolation and insecurity. This leads to her last few desperate attempts at getting back into the ordinary – first the psychiatric Clinique and then her old friend. Visiting her old friend functions as the last push. As her friend confronts her, she goes out into the world and faces the most brutal existential truth: that she is alone.

Gritt escapes the realm of other people and retreats into a cabin in the woods. Having finally faced her own corporality, she follows the path of her visions and embraces solitude as a choice. In this part of the film, given the title "The hermit", we follow Gritt as she goes to live at her aunt's cabin. Here, time slows down and we get close: close to nature, close to everyday routines, close to her body, close to the movement of life. The film absorbs itself in the subjective, trying out what it means to exist here, in this moment. We experience this with Gritt as she gets closer to nature, and closer to her self. She learns how to fish and make a fire; she experiments with food, and gets to

know her body: how it functions, how it moves, how it reacts. We experience seasons change, from winter and snow to spring with birds chirping.

This last chapter contrasts the rest of the film in its narrower emphasis on Gritt's subjective experience. It is as if the film finds its rhythm here, with her, as they slow down together, allowing for time to pass, enjoying the calm simplicity. She moves her body with much more ease as the sequence goes on; gone is the tremble and agitated hurry. In getting away from Oslo and other people, Gritt can finally relax. More importantly, she can look inwards. Here, her solitude is chosen for herself, not enforced upon her by alienating structures. She can get relief from the outsidedness felt in the contact with others. In learning about herself, how to survive and take care of herself, Gritt finds strength. Earlier in the film, we experience city life and other people as a source of both inspiration and separation. A life of frantic trying, failing, stimulation and rejection. When she retreats, her openness and curiosity are directed towards herself and her surroundings, and as she gets to know herself, calmness ensues.

Gritt discovers herself in relation to nature. The emphasis is often on her body and its basic biological needs for food and shelter, connecting her to the natural environment around her. Here she can find connection in ways other than in her attempts at fitting into society from an outsider position. Her genuine openness and willingness to learn is not rejected or exploited, but rewarded in the form of nourishment, skills and insight. Being closer to nature brings her closer to her own specific nature, her human existence. The film does not equate Gritt's body with nature but places her in it, juxtaposing the two, suggesting their relatedness. Gritt learns from and through nature; she does not become it. As such, the film probes the ontological ambiguity of human existence: how we are a part of the world of which we are a consciousness.

Throughout the sequence, Gritt continues to explore her artistic vision: drawing, sowing, gathering, creating. She often listens to the radio, and the voices serve as a reminder of the society outside and the constant presence of culture. As in *Fallen Leaves*, the radio functions as a vehicle for connection to the world, but here it also serves as a linkage between culture and nature: language, analysis and ideas juxtaposed Gritt's corporeal existence. Getting away from the city does not mean that Gritt gives up on her artistic endeavour; it reframes it, strengthens it, through the strengthening of her self. The film holds on to the tension of nature and art, nature and culture, nature and self. An example: As spring comes, we see Gritt come out of the cabin, and we hear the sounds of birds and the river as she is stretching her body. She then looks down towards her crutch, and as her hand reaches into her pants, the film

zooms in, curiously. It then moves up as she looks at her hand, now with blood on it, and she dries it off on the door frame next to her, leaving red stains. She then goes on into the woods. In this moment, we learn, with Gritt, that she is on her period, and the film plays with the performative aspect of it, once again blurring the boundaries of subject and project. The film allows for the ambiguity of mind and matter to stay in tension, emphasising Gritt's artistic endeavours, tying it to her specific human responsibility.

From the existentialist perspective of ambiguity and authenticity, we must assume our own freedom as well as the freedom of others. In political projects intended for solidarity, the emphasis is most often on the latter, overlooking or even flat out rejecting the need for individual freedom. The 'collective' serves as a higher goal, often at the expense of the individual in practice. In her critique of fascism and Soviet communism, Beauvoir laments their contempt for the individual, arguing that "if the individual nothing, society can not be something (1976, p. 114)". For Beauvoir, individual freedom is the cornerstone in any just society. Of course, the human subject is always already bound up in external structures: this is what defines our ambiguous existence. Gritt explores this ambiguity in contemporary society, asking what it means to strive for authenticity and openness under current conditions. In the end, Gritt must retreat into herself to gain strength, after numerous attempts at breaking through invisible barriers. In the very last moments of the film, she gathers her things to hitch-hike back into society, which suggests that she needed to recluse herself in order to go back and try again. Gritt does not go into social isolation to stay there; rather, it is a way for her to come back into society stronger. We cannot know if she will succeed, but this is always an unknown. The film does not provide an answer, but it points towards the importance of turning inward and strengthening the self in the quest for authenticity.

Lucid generosity

Throughout the film, we remain close to Gritt: never fully adopting her perspective nor an observational position but pushing towards the inner-outer tensions of ambiguous existence. This allows for a specific exploration of human engagement with the world that emphasises the vulnerability of our ambiguity. Starting from the distinct individuality of Gritt's position in the world, the film makes it clear that she is not a representative for anyone other than herself. Probing one specific way of being, the film gives expression to a form of solidarity that is grounded in the universality of our specificity. It

engages with Gritt in a form of 'lucid generosity[124]': marked by openness, curiosity and the willingness to stake a claim. Sometimes it is curiously searching for her, wondering what she is doing; other times it takes on her subjective experience and artistic visions. When she acts in inauthenticity with the asylum seekers, it takes on their perspective, marking its relational autonomy. The film does not judge Gritt, but it accepts and assumes her ambiguous humanity, allowing her to try and fail, without approving or disapproving her choices.

Gritt is not a perfect rational subject. She makes mistakes and then acts illogically from the perspective of the status quo. This prohibits any straightforward claim to sympathise with her character[125]. Furthermore, the film does not delve into biographical details of Gritt's life in order to evoke an understanding of her choices: apart from her aunt and a visit with some old friends, we learn little of her past. Instead, we are invited into her experience here and now, one that is marked by social insecurity and de facto homelessness. In her various encounters, Gritt is disruptive and intense, but also fragile and vulnerable. It is her embodied lived presence in the film that marks her 'outside' the structures, not formulated explanations or identity categories. She does not fit into any neat role deemed eligible for sympathy or victimhood, and the film constantly works against any attempt at providing simple answers for her situation.

Through its lucid generosity, the film tries out a form of solidarity grounded in the universality of humanity rather than specific choices, group affiliations or likeability. This is a form of solidarity that de-emphasises victimhood as the basis of vulnerability, pointing to the ways that responsibility and power relations change with specific conditions. While Gritt lives in a situation of social insecurity, she is still responsible, although the forms of responsibility changes in her various encounters. Through one concrete and singular experience, the film explores the vulnerability of ambiguity and the distinct ways it can play out in contemporary Norwegian society. It suggests that striving for authenticity, remaining open to trying but failing to go against conventions can be a crushing experience for those in an outside position. Set inside and against different cultural institutions, the film explores how hierarchical structures and norms form within spheres associated with freedom

[124] Beauvoir writes in Pyrrhus and Cineas that a "lucid generosity is what should guide our actions" (2004d, p. 124).

[125] For example, the "structure of sympathy" that Murray Smith conceptualizes in *Engaging Characters* (1995).

and authenticity, without placing blame or pointing to simple solutions. The film is not interested in simple judgements but in challenging our sense of solidarity based on the vulnerabilities that we all share.

Summary and Conclusion

This thesis started from the proposition that the ethics of authenticity might provide a compelling response to the problems of freedom and disillusionment and bring new critical insights to the relationship between ethics, film, and the world. The ethical framework has been developed across six chapters: I started with a theoretical exploration where I trace some key problems and propose an ethical framework as a response, then I put this framework to work through concrete engagements with seven films. Here I will summarize and comment on some key aspects of this study.

Chapter 1 outlines the critical background for the study, tracing the tensions of freedom and solidarity in its ethical, political and aesthetic manifestations. I start by linking the value of authenticity to the ethical vacuum left by the onset of modernity. Then I trace the contradictory developments of freedom when Enlightenment ideals clash with capitalism and liberalism, pointing to their entanglements as well as their distinct differences. The quest for authenticity was caught up in these developments, and I address some of the troublesome aspects of the quest for purity and idealising pre-modern times. The entanglement of art with capital accumulation and mass production became a central concern for Marxist aesthetic theory, and I connect the problem of freedom to the oppositional pulls of popular culture and counter-culture. Then I turn to more recent times and discussed some distinct developments within critical theory and culture for the last four or five decades, pointing to the turn away from humanism, universalism and the emphasis on class relations. I shortly outline some of the developments within film studies, from the ideology critique in the 1960s and 1970s, via a turn to more 'scientific' approaches, to a renewed attention to bodies, affect, ethics and the autonomy of art. At the end I argue for a renewed attention to the distinctly critical and political aspects of Marxist aesthetic theory.

In Chapter 2 I develop an ethical-political framework as a response to the aforementioned problems, inspired by the existentialist ethics of Simone de Beauvoir and Marxist theory. The ethics of authenticity is an ethical

engagement that is preconditioned by the ambiguity of human existence: that I am both a subject and an object in the world. This form of existence grounds an ethical relation with all others, since we live in ambiguous tension with others and the world. But it also takes on contradictory forms in relation to material conditions and social systems, such as the capitalist mode of production. Authenticity is the ethical principle that, based on this existential fact of ambiguity, we ought to assume the freedom of all. Furthermore, we have a responsibility to fight for the freedom of all, and this is what grants meaning to our existence.

The ethics of authenticity is not a static trait, it does not furnish recipes, but it proposes a way of engaging with the world. Beauvoirian and Marxian social ontology presuppose emphasis on concrete conditions, and the tension of freedom and material conditions. This means that we must grasp the thickness of the situation at hand, that we must remain open to trying, adjusting and changing according to historical circumstance. Thus, one of the most central aspects of this ethical engagement has to do with holding on to the concrete and the open, seeing freedom as a movement and value that is always concretely situated. I argue that artworks can give form to this ambiguous movement, for their materiality places them in a relation to their outside that is distinct from human existence. Towards the end of the chapter, I discuss what kind of aesthetic engagement that springs out of the ethics of authenticity and propose – with Beauvoir and Adorno – that it needs to confront the world *and* pave the way for freedom.

In chapters 3-6 I engage with seven different contemporary Scandinavian films in the space between art and the mainstream. These chapters put the ethical-political method to work, as I strive to hold on to the ambiguous tension of art's autonomy and the conditions of the now from this distinct critical perspective. The films give concrete form to the tensions of freedom and solidarity and their various manifestations in our contemporary moment. Thus, the analyses engaged with the films' way of being, how they try out different ethical-aesthetic engagements, and what they say about the world they find themselves in.

Chapter 3 engages with two critically acclaimed arthouse and auteur films: *Triangle of Sadness* (Östlund, 2022) and *The Worst Person in the World* (Trier, 2021). Against the background of pervasive capitalism, these films shed light on the contradictory tensions of autonomy as it relates to taste, notions of beauty and elitism. In the analysis of *Triangle of Sadness* I argue that the film is characterised by the way that everything works together to form an impenetrable style of functional beauty. Furthermore, it gives form to the

cynical ideology of liberal status quo, committing to the safety found in the middle ground, located between extremes of 'Marxism' and 'capitalism'. *The Worst Person in the World* is more ambivalent in its connection to standardisation, and the status quo. It struggles with the now, inviting us in via cracks of autonomous bursts, but ends up retreating to idealised notions of the past, conflating authenticity with nostalgia. In some disparate scenes, it also engages in explicit commentary and message, in ways that expose some inherent paradoxes of laying claim to authenticity. Both films are stylistically coherent, directed by lauded auteurs, while also engaging in different standardising aesthetic strategies that opt out of the messiness of the world. I argue that this points to the contradictions in auteurism when it gets conflated with art's autonomy, as it points away from the specificity of the artwork. Furthermore, I note how the auteur can become a 'marketable idol' that allow us to cling on to the safety of pre-packaged notions of freedom rather than confronting the difficulty of the now.

We are Here Now (Halle, 2020) does not follow any predetermined aesthetic recipe; it finds its own way in pushing against the givenness of the real. In chapter 4 I engage with how the film plays with and against the notion of the real and fictionality, foregrounding the contradictory nature of constructions of reality. Avoiding the standardisation of the mainstream *and* the standardisation of art films, it exemplifies what it can mean to take risks, to try and fail outside of established norms. As such, the film's distinct expression is not a new aesthetic category but a singular way of being that arises from this particular engagement with the world. In assuming the tension of its own ambiguity, it points to its mediated relation to society without rendering the notion of the real in flux. *We are here now* points beyond itself by giving form to concrete historical specificity and situation, probing the idea of freedom and producing meaninglessness and banality as distinct problems among the middle class. Similarly, the music video *Avanti* (Dahl, 2024) explores the superficiality of how we relate to each under contemporary working conditions. Pushing against the contrast of punk and business sterility, the role of a "happy man" is exposed as an ideological veil that hide the anguish of contemporary life. Both films mark out the structural and systemic aspects of this meaninglessness and stake a claim in how it permeates under specific conditions. As such, I suggest that they point out a possible way to solidarity, in breaking through the sickness of banality.

In chapter 5 I explore what an aesthetic attitude of realism might contribute to our moment. Inspired by a distinct Marxist understanding, I connect it to a notion of clarity, of staking a claim in truth in a direct manner, specifically with

regards to capitalist totality. I argue that to revisit this realist emphasis on clarity is to engage with aesthetic exploration of class conditions. *Fallen Leaves (*Kaurismäki ,2023*)* and *Eat Sleep Die (*Pichler*,* 2012) make use of the aesthetic strategies of realism and clarity in their exploration of class conditions in contemporary Finland and Sweden. Both films engage with class as an experience, probing the concrete manifestations of lived lives among the working class. *Eat Sleep Die* throws us into a world at the rural countryside in Sweden, were we follow main character Raša as she loses her job. It juxtaposes the structural location of class with the existential and subjectively lived reality under conditions of material insecurity, exposing the absurd ideology of institutional structures. *Fallen Leaves* explores the difficulty of relating and connecting to others, connecting harsh material conditions to issues of loneliness and intimacy. The romantic relationship between Ansa and Holappa develops out of these conditions, and when they fall in love the film shows how their genuine connection is formed with and against the conditions in which they live. Both films give expression to imperfect relational bonds, characterised by bluntness, bickering, vulgarities and misunderstandings – but also intimacy and vulnerability. I argue that they prefigure impartial and imperfect connections of solidarity based in material conditions. While the films probe these conditions through staged situations that expose capitalist totality in a manner that risks standardisation, I argue that their distinct engagements with the thickness of the now, open rather than close off the films' ambiguous movements.

In the last chapter I engage with the film and the character *Gritt* (Guttormsen, 2021). The film explores the difficulty in striving for authenticity in an inauthentic world, and the painful tensions of individual freedom and society. Throughout, we stay close to its main character, as she tries, fails, and struggles on her quest for authenticity. Gritt is committed to action and embraces her ontological freedom and responsibility in the world, throwing herself into her art project with her whole being. Faced with different institutional structures, Gritt is knocked down, but always finds her way back to her project. The film also tries on different modes and ways of being in the world, playing with format, time and rhythm, pushing in different directions without getting lost in abstraction. It is neither fully an observer nor an expression of the inner life of Gritt, it plays with and against this tension, giving form to the ambiguity of existence. This allows for a distinct exploration of human engagement with the world that emphasises our vulnerabilities. Gritt's situation is marked by an outsideness and social insecurity that the film never provides any straightforward explanation for. The film's engagement with the title character is marked by generosity, openness and curiosity, never judging her actions nor

approving them. I argue that the film tries on a form of solidarity, one that is grounded in the universality of humanity rather than specific actions, identities or likeability.

Visions of freedom and solidarity

A crucial aspect of the ethics of authenticity is that in order to pave the way for freedom, we have to confront what is. The different engagements with these seven films have given concrete form to some of the problems and contradictions of contemporary capitalist logic. Several of the films capture the distinct moods of apathy and cynicism in a world characterised by its increasing distance from alternative systems. The having-already-given-up-ness of apathy finds its expression in working conditions and institutional structures blindly centred on rule following, so distanced from any genuine sense of empathy or compassion that the idea is rendered absurd. *Eat Sleep Die* and *Gritt* expose the disillusionment of institutions designed to help those who struggle, and how business ontology has become so ingrained that its representatives have long since stopped confronting it or asking questions. These are systems that cannot face the individual subject: for the rules must be followed, and the bureaucracy is so pervasive, that if they stop to listen and take in the complexities of each person, they are scared that the system will turn against them next. It is not that these people do not care, but that the structures work against solidarity, replacing connection with rules and schemas. *Fallen Leaves* too probes this connection between system and personal relationships, showing how these alienating forms of engagement lead to isolation and loneliness.

The naturalising logic of capitalist realism depends on performative oppositional gestures of moral superiority that are no threat to capitalism but allow us to continue to participate in it with a (somewhat) better conscience. Triangle of Sadness points to how the mainstream can absorb notions of autonomy through the way it uses conventions of beauty borrowed from the prestige of art. It forms a functionalist shield of formal harmony, while engaging in explicit but non-threatening political commentary. The way the film lands its neutral safe liberal stance by marking its distance to polarisation and extremes, gives expression to how contemporary liberal ideology maintains its grip by playing up the danger of everything else. Yes, liberal capitalism is imperfect, but at least it's not as bad as the alternatives. The safety of the liberal middle ground alongside pluralist identity politics, provides

capitalism with a moral defence, resulting in an impenetrable standardised surface prepared for any attack.

One response to these isolating and cynical modes of being, is to look for answers in the past. Contemporary culture wars mobilise issues of identity and culture and produce distorted notions of freedom. *The Worst Person in the World* show us how nostalgia can take form also among progressives, in the form of aesthetic and cultural notions of taste. It points to the entanglements of autonomy and elitism that hark back to the onset of modernity, where freedom and authenticity were to be found by retreating from the messiness of mainstream culture. In a contemporary culture characterised by the standardisation of artworks, many look back to cultural categories in the recent past. But the past was not necessarily better or freer, and the cultural debate between past and present distorts and distracts from the harsh reality of life under capitalism. Our present moment is a scary one, but we should not accept the premise that the only viable alternatives are liberalist capitalism or nostalgic longing for a time that was a tiny bit better in some specific ways. People are hurting, mental health issues are skyrocketing, and loneliness and isolation are a real political problem. Confronted with the rise of authoritarian and conservative forces, the answer is not to double down on the dominant liberal capitalist order that got us here in the first place.

Authenticity is found in the tensions between subjectivity and objectivity, in the concrete movement toward freedom. This means that each of us engages with this tension in our own particular way, and the different films have responded to their conditions in different ways, from the hardened surface in *Triangle of Sadness*, to the movement against the givenness of the real in *We are Here Now*. While the arthouse films in chapter 3 laid bare some distinct ways that standardisation can lead to opting out of the now, the films in the following chapters have shown how very different strategies can confront the world and open up for meaningful movements. *Gritt*, *Avanti,* and *We are here now* all find their way as singular beings in the world, pushing against the world and giving form to a distinct engagement away from aesthetic categorisation. This would suggest that the movement towards freedom is most likely be found in the strategies of the avant-garde, in setting oneself outside of the mainstream. *Fallen Leaves* and *Eat Sleep Die* complicate this notion by engaging in realist populist conventions, while still being able to confront standardisation instead of becoming one with it. The films' different ways of being in the world show a way toward authenticity that lies away from ready-made categories or specific aesthetic strategies, that it is an attitude towards the world rather than a recipe. They show how ethical engagements with the

world can and must look a bit differently based on the lot that we have been given, and the historical conditions in which we live. They have in common a willingness to confront the world, to stake a claim, while still holding on to the movements and tensions of ambiguity.

I started this text by suggesting that one of the biggest problems of our time is the oppositional pull between freedom and solidarity, that our fragmented societies make unifying projects of solidarity difficult. I outlined this problem in chapter 1, tracing the problem of freedom and the ensuing ethical vacuum from the onset of modernity. Throughout the last four chapters, the films express different visions of freedom and solidarity. *Eat Sleep Die* and *Fallen Leaves* give form to notions of solidarity grounded in the material conditions of the working class, characterised by insecurity and precarity. *We are Here Now* comes at this from the perspective of the middle class, proposing a way to solidarity in breaking through the false sense of security that produces meaninglessness and banality. *Gritt* tries out a form of solidarity in its exploration of the vulnerability of the individual human subject that throws herself into an art project, striving for authenticity in an inauthentic world. These films ground their notion of solidarity in the thickness of material conditions, instead of cultural markers, identities, or appropriate behaviours. To the contrary, the films stake a claim precisely in the imperfection of ambiguous existence, uniting the struggles of the working class, middle class and artists. Seen together, the films juxtapose class relations and individual freedom in a way that foregrounds experience and material conditions as the foundation for projects of solidarity. As such, the films mark out the ways that contemporary capitalist society delimits freedom, emphasising the social cost of such alienating structures. They suggest that the way to freedom lies in alternative social systems that allow for authentic human connection and freedom.

Ethical engagements that assume the ambiguity of our existence depends on openness, on being willing to try and risk failing. Throughout this study I have tried to give form to an ethics of authenticity in response to the problems of our time, cutting across different traditions, perspectives and methods in the process. Connecting the traditions of continental existentialist philosophy and Marxist capitalist critique has meant that I have strived to hold on to the concrete and the open, of being clear and critical – while allowing for complexity and movement. The result is a text that is sometimes repetitive, other times abrupt. Sometimes I give too much detail, other times I paint with a broad brush in order to make a point. Since the theoretical framework pulls from many different sources, it is not as stringent or integrated as it could have

been. There are several film analyses that I wish I had the time to include. Such is the living life of a project; it never really turns out the way you had planned. The hope is that by laying the groundwork for the ethics of authenticity and exemplifying some possible directions for ethical engagements with films, that I have been able to show that it is indeed a valuable framework. I hope that this can invite and inspire new critical engagements, studies, and explorations of the relationship between film, art, ethics and the conditions of the world.

At the end of this journey, as the world looks even more frightening, I am more convinced than ever of the ethical value of authenticity. Confronting modes of apathy and cynicism requires a willingness to stake a claim in lucid forms of generosity, to emphasise commonalities over differences, and to form projects of solidarity grounded in our universal vulnerabilities. It demands being willing to open up for the new, for the uncertain and untried. The movement towards freedom is an eternal, bumpy ride. We all have a responsibility to try.

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