

I can quit whenever I want

The academic precariat in Italian cinema

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Introduction

In July 2017, Massimo Piermattei, a researcher at the University of Tuscia, in a letter sent to the newspapers to explain the reasons that had led him to leave academia after several years spent in teaching and research, observed:

I was a historian of European integration, I am 39 years old and I have decided to quit the university [...] All those reforms that were proclaimed that were supposed to reward merit [...] reforms that only wound up penalising the most vulnerable [...] The bit about merit is a cloying refrain: the scarcity of funds and positions in academia has started a war between insiders and outsiders and, even worse, between have-nots [...] What remains unacceptable and disconcerting, at least for me, is the waste of talent of a multitude of young scholars [...] All those people I met in my ten years at the university. All that talent, that potential to innovate their fields, research, teaching methods. How angry I feel seeing them, seeing us, wither, vanish, leave. Today I am one of them [...] I am leaving mainly for a question of dignity and justice [...] As Paul of Tarsus wrote to Timothy, words that I hold dear: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” I can quit whenever I want.

(Piermattei 2017, 15–26, translation mine)

Piermattei’s letter elicited numerous comments and once again stimulated public debate about the state of malaise in academia, a condition that appears to affect not only Italian universities but the academic world as a whole. Over the last decade, scholars in Europe and the United States have drawn attention to working conditions in universities and, particularly, to the rise of a new academic precariat. With different approaches and key concepts, such as neoliberalism, competitiveness, and occupational identity, their studies have focused on an academic context marked by the crucial, problematic dualism between those who hold stable, well-paid positions and those who are forced to accept frustrating, lasting instability and insecurity. It is in terms of this divide, conceptualised by scholars with the

term “dualisation” (Standing 2009, 2011, 2014; Pulignano, Meardi, and Doerflinger 2015; Isidorsson and Kubisa 2018), that analysis has focused on a new class of precarious academic workers subject to hyper-flexible, unstable contracts, with irregular hours, low pay, and no benefits. This academic precariat is deeply marginalised despite the fact that it represents a fundamental part of the university system, performs vital tasks, and makes an outstanding contribution to teaching and research. What is interesting in the current situation is that this divide is largely structural, in the sense that the academic system simply could not work without the large supply of these so-called outsiders who appear to be ready to accept any kind of employment contract. In this regard, in some way anticipating the themes of film representation, Alexandre Afonso (2014) observed that the academic job market is structured in many respects like a “drug gang” which relies on a shrinking core of insiders and an expanding mass of outsiders: a rank and file of drug dealers hoping to become drug lords.¹ In this scenario, precarity appears to be precisely the condition that pathologically sustains the current academic model.

I. The neoliberal paradigm

Many scholars have identified the origin of this phenomenon in the legitimization and implementation of neoliberal policies in higher education (Giroux 2013, 2014; Courtois and O’Keefe 2015; Gill 2016; Giroux and Samalavičius 2016; Gupta, Habjan, and Tutek 2016). In the past twenty years, in spite of the prolonged economic crisis that has especially hit Europe, and some critical voices that have been raised against it, the neoliberal paradigm has become omnipotent and omnipresent (Clarke 2008), also deeply influencing the academic context. In one of his articles against the neoliberal university, Henry Giroux (2013) observed, “The mantras of neoliberalism are now well known: government is the problem; society is a fiction; sovereignty is market-driven; deregulation and commodification are vehicles for freedom; and higher education should serve corporate interests rather than the public good” (Giroux 2013, 4). For neoliberals, education and knowledge are commodities that individuals should purchase in the marketplace for their own benefit. Over the last twenty years, the university has become an institution whose mission is to facilitate the production of specific research outputs and skills, in keeping with a commercial perspective which considers the production of knowledge instrumental to economic impact on the marketplace. According to Giroux, central to this neoliberal turn in higher education is “a market-driven paradigm that seeks to eliminate tenure, turn the humanities into a job preparation

1 More recently, however, in a comparative study on the variety of academic labour market in Europe, reflecting on dualisation, Afonso (2016) observed, “patterns of dualization have been mediated by different organizational features. As such, it is difficult to speak of one European labor market in the light of the striking differences in terms of access and career progression across countries” (Afonso 2016, 820).

service, and transform most faculty into an army of temporary subaltern labor” (Giroux 2013, 5). Precarity is considered by Giroux as a weapon used both to exploit these temporary workers and to suppress dissent by keeping them in a constant state of fear over losing their jobs. As Andrew Whelan (2015) laconically observed, precarious academic workers are “‘YIYOs’ – ‘year in, year outs’” (Whelan 2015, 131), who are paid an hourly rate under fixed-term contracts, and are often re-hired for a number of years and kept in a prolonged state of fear and instability.

On the surface, this academic precariat, consisting of highly educated workers that play their roles in one of the most elitist sectors of society, appears to be somewhat different from the typical precarious worker. Nonetheless, while it maintains its specificity, this growing group of underprivileged academic workers suffers the same frustration and anxiety as other precarious workers, in a condition that goes beyond the boundaries of the workplace, negatively affecting their private lives and personal relationships, and producing a sort of “precarisation of existence” (Deranty 2008; Fumagalli and Lucarelli 2010; Bozzon et al. 2017).

Recent works have analysed the distinctive features that characterise this new class of academic workers, and three different aspects have been repeatedly highlighted: first, the weakening of the boundaries between work and other life spheres, in an ambiguous exchange between vocation and precariousness; second, an escalation of competition and increasing pressure on academic workers in quantitative and qualitative terms; and third, the precariousness of contractual forms and working conditions, with low or no remuneration. Regarding the last point, on several occasions in recent years, *The Guardian* reported on the widespread use of “zero-hour contracts” at UK universities.² These are contracts which do not specify the number of hours expected of the academic worker, and basically imply that workers need to be available to the employer whenever there is work. As Emanuele Toscano et al. (2014) emphasised in their study on the precariat of research, the academic world seems to be increasingly relying on a work force of scientists and specialists who often can barely make ends meet – a sizeable number of individuals forced into situations in which they lack adequate space and resources to work, an academic world based essentially on underpaid or free work: the case of some Italian universities that have offered symbolic contracts for one euro per year is a notorious example (Cerino 2010).

2. Italian cinema and the revenge of the precarious researcher

This academic precariat has also become the subject of film representations. Over the last few years, some popular Italian movies – such as *Into Paradise* (*Into*

2 For example, in 2013, in an article in *The Guardian*, Harriet Swain wrote, “The extent of casual contracts in universities has come to the fore following freedom of information requests by the University and College Union (UCU) on zero-hours contracts. The union found more than half of the 145 UK universities that responded, and two-thirds of the further education colleges, said they used these contracts, which do not guarantee work and can deny holiday and sick pay” (Swain 2013).

Paradiso 2010, Randi), *Unlikely Revolutionaries* (*Figli delle stelle* 2010, Pellegrini), *Some Say No* (*C'è chi dice no* 2011, Avellino), and especially the very popular trilogy by Sydney Sibilia, *I Can Quit Whenever I Want* (*Smetto quando voglio* 2014; *Smetto quando voglio: Ad honorem* 2017; *Smetto quando voglio: Masterclass* 2017),³ have offered interesting depictions of these precarious academic workers, with a particular emphasis on the effects that such unstable working conditions produce on their personal lives.

Effectively and trenchantly, often adopting a comic-grotesque style, these movies convey the state of uncertainty that characterises the existence of this academic precariat. The lack of an adequate, reliable source of income and the perceived labile boundary that separates unstable working conditions from unemployment, forces the precarious worker into a state of permanent dependency. A vulnerable, anxiety-ridden class of workers emerges: impotent, frustrated individuals who live in a state of permanent incompleteness, subjugated by a prolonged “not yet”, which leads them to continuous projection of their own expectations into the future. “I have been calm for eleven years, teaching for you, doing exams and research that you sign as your own [...] I cannot work for free my whole life!” is what Samuele, one of the protagonists in Giambattista Avellino’s movie *Some Say No*, replies to the professor who tells him that he has once again failed to be awarded a tenure-track position. A very similar situation is represented in the first film of the trilogy *I Can Quit Whenever I Want*, when the protagonist Pietro Zinni, a neurobiology researcher, finds out that his contract will not be renewed:

PIETRO: Professor, does this mean no long-term contract?

PROFESSOR: They won't even give you a year's contract!

PIETRO: Those 500 euros a month kept me going Professor! I'm 37, what can I start doing now?

Pietro’s upset expression is quite eloquently and ironically opposed to the manifest lack of concern of the professor who is on the phone confirming the booking of a mooring place for his boat. Through its grotesque style, the scene again proposes the dualisation schema and the contraposition between those who have stable positions and exert power and those who remain subjugated by the indefinite prolongation of their precarious conditions.⁴

3 The movies cited are part of a broad popular strand of contemporary Italian cinema which has created trenchant portrayals of the world of precarity and unemployment in movies such as *A Whole Life Ahead* (*Tutta la vita davanti* 2008, Virzì), *The 1000-Euro Generation* (*Generazione 1000 euro* 2009, Venier), *Intrepido: A Lonely Hero* (*L'intrepido* 2013, Amelio), and *Do You See Me?* (*Scusate se esisto!* 2014, Milani). For a more extensive discussion on the subject which broadens the issue to encompass European cinema, see Alice Bardan’s essay, “The New European Cinema of Precarity: A Transnational Perspective” (Bardan 2013).

4 In this regard, however, from a different perspective and by detecting the “constitutive separateness” that characterises all academic workers, due to cognitive and creative

The first aspect that these movies underline is the prolonged duration of the state of subjugation and patient acceptance in which precarious academic workers remain awaiting a better future, before deciding that it is time to react. What the films reveal is what scholars have described as the “passion trap” (Murgia, Poggio, and Torchio 2012; Busso and Rivetti 2014) and the “internalization of responsibility” (Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda 2014), two psychological mechanisms which serve to explain why precarious researchers meekly accept unfavourable job conditions that negatively affect their wellbeing and private lives. According to Pellegrino (2016), it is difficult for a precarious academic worker to take a position against these dynamics because recognising these forms of exploitation would oblige them to cut their ties with relational processes and conditions to which the worker is closely linked, even though they know they are being underpaid (Pellegrino 2016, 60).

These representations highlight the vulnerability of working conditions in academia, especially with regard to social welfare and pension rights, with a deprivation which affects these workers not only in the present but will also have deeply negative effects in the long run. On film screens, the precarious researcher is always represented as someone who is over thirty and realises that relatives and friends the same age as they are, who have followed non-academic careers, have steady, well-paid positions. As a confirmation of this film representation, the available data on Italian academic staff indicate that the average age of precarious researchers is now over 35. Despite their age, in the university context they are often optimistically labelled early-career researchers. Through the comparison with more stable work situations and more established and identifiable careers, film representations emphasise the marginality and the characteristic “anomie”⁵ of the position to which precarious academic workers are relegated, which even makes it difficult to exactly define their condition (Pellegrino 2016, 57). What emerges is a new type of educated precariat who, according to Standing (2014), “experience in their irregular labour and in the lack of opportunity to construct a narrative for their lives a sense of relative deprivation and status frustration, because they have no sense of future” (Standing 2014, 8).

processes which are conducted in almost individual, autonomous forms, Vincenza Pellegrino (2016) suggested that there exists a symmetry between the emotional conditions of stable workers and those of precarious workers, and observed how difficult it is in analysing working conditions in academia “to conceptualize power,” and consider them through “a class political discourse ‘precarious against non-precarious’ [...] precisely because of the ‘fragmenting’ nature of production processes” (50, translation mine).

5 “Anomie” is one of the four terms Standing (2011) used to identify the “dangerous” class of precarious workers. In this regard, Standing wrote, “The precariat experiences the four A’s—anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation” (Standing 2011, 19). And, with regard to anomie, he observed, “anomie is a feeling of passivity born of despair [...] Anomie comes from a listlessness associated with sustained defeat, compounded by the condemnation lobbed at many in the precariat by politicians and middle-class commentators castigating them as lazy, directionless, undeserving, socially irresponsible or worse” (Standing 2011, 20).

The prolonged uncertainty of the working conditions in which these researchers are forced to operate goes beyond the boundaries of the workplace and negatively affects their lives outside the university. In this regard, a second aspect that emerges in film representations is what scholars have called “domestication” (Bologna and Fumagalli 1997). There is no clear separation between work and private life, and there are no separate times and places. This is shown to have a negative impact on social relationships, especially on the relationship with the partner. As some recent surveys have noted (*Times Higher Education* 2016), academia creeps into the couple relationship and becomes an ever-present third party. Not having a fixed schedule often means the adoption of a long-hours culture (Currie, Harris, and Thiele 2000), being available on demand and working evenings, weekends, and holidays, in order to meet deadlines, satisfy the increasing demands of the academic institution, and try to construct a competitive curriculum. Working conditions such as these severely undermine the individual’s ability to create stable couple relationships and make long-term plans and investments, and also make it unthinkable to decide to have children.

This problematic condition is well represented in Sibilia’s movie *I Can Quit Whenever I Want*, in which the protagonist Pietro maintains a difficult relationship with his girlfriend Giulia because of his precarious university job. After years of sacrificing and scrimping, constant worry about whether or not they would be able to pay their bills, Pietro cannot bring himself to confess to Giulia that his contract has not been renewed and lies that he has been given tenure:

PIETRO: I wanted to talk to you for a minute ...

GIULIA: Are there problems with your contract?

PIETRO: No. It’s just that the new contract has kind of ...

GIULIA: Did they give you a new contract or not?

PIETRO: If you want a simple yes or no ...

GIULIA: Yes or no?

PIETRO: Yes! Yes ... and a full-time contract. I wanted to surprise you, but you spoiled it.

As some scholars have observed, domestication is one of the aspects that transforms the academic precarious worker into a sort of microenterprise⁶ (Armano and Murgia 2014) that must always be willing to work.⁷ The term “Uberification of

6 As the two authors argued, the emphasis is on “a work condition that has only the constraints of an enterprise, because it is the individual worker who must assume, subjectively and creatively, enterprise risk” (Armano and Murgia 2014, 105, translation mine).

7 To describe the alienating conditions that characterise this “cybertariat”, a new advanced form of proletariat without regular working times and schedules, Pellegrino (2016) identified it as “a multitude of intellectuals constantly connected, even deprived of travel time, sleep, food in autonomy from the machine,” which is involved in a continuous work process (Pellegrino 2016, 58–59, translation mine).

the university" (Hall 2016) has been adopted to define a context in which precarious researchers are forced to become "micro-entrepreneurs of themselves", within a public sector that increasingly apes the private sector and for conditions that contradictorily seem to identify a status of self-employed-but-dependent worker, who must continually imagine new strategies to resist and remain active in the market. In this light, it appears to be obvious that the stress generated by such alienating conditions and the current difficulties of the "academic market" force many of these so-called microenterprises to quit. In Piermattei's book *Smetto quando voglio* (Piermattei 2017), published after his open letter, the author refers to them as "the Spoon River of failed academics" (Piermattei 2017, 40), people who leave university in their thirties and are certainly not in a good position to find a new job. In this regard, in Sibilia's movie, the dialogue between Pietro and his two friends, both former researchers in the humanities, is ironically indicative:

Guys, I have a court order to pay, they're going to seize my things, and it's all really stressing at home! [...] This is pathetic! I mean, look at yourselves! I don't want to end up like you! Internationally acclaimed Latin scholars standing in a gas station working for a Singhalese guy who pays you cash.

While in the past, having an academic degree was an effective means of social liberation and upward mobility, today it appears to offer faint hope and often does not help the degree holder to find a better job and improve their quality of life, but instead becomes a useless (or even negative) element. As Piermattei (2017) observed, for the labour market, a PhD is not the demonstration that you can manage a project, organise your work, and innovate your sector of activity: it is another useless piece of paper, an error of youth (Piermattei 2017, 23). Similar considerations are humorously expressed in a dialogue in Sibilia's movie, when Andrea, a former scholar of cultural anthropology with important international publications, before deciding to join "the gang of researchers", is fruitlessly trying to get hired by a scrapyard owner:

SCRAPYARD OWNER: You are a graduate.

ANDREA: I'm not a graduate.

SCRAPYARD OWNER: I was clear. I don't take graduates.

ANDREA: I'm not! I got kicked out of middle school for selling dope.

SCRAPYARD OWNER: You can't be trusted.

ANDREA: Why would I be here, then?

SCRAPYARD OWNER: You are the third this week.

ANDREA: I'm not a graduate! ... All right, I am, but it was a youthful mistake that

I regret. I'm asking to renounce my academic qualifications. In two weeks, I'll be back to grade 5 level.

SCRAPYARD OWNER: You get your hands dirty here.

ANDREA: That's why I'm here.

SCRAPYARD OWNER: I don't need people who are always reading. Is that clear?

Another aspect that in film representation sadly characterises the academic context is widespread nepotism and a systematic cronyism. These are aspects that in film narratives give rise to the criminal ventures of the pirates of merit (*Some Say No*) and the gang of researchers (*I Can Quit Whenever I Want*). What has a negative, decisive impact on the film characters' lives is the fact that the few, coveted positions that exist are filled not by evaluating applicants' curricula, but on different criteria. For this reason, the first point of the pirates of merit's manifesto is "to bring down the regime of string-pullers", fighting those who are stealing their lives. As the pirates proclaim, "Merit theft is life theft, they're not only stealing your job, but your dreams, your children, your dignity, everything". And it is a phenomenon that unfortunately is not merely the fruit of author's imagination, as is attested by recent news and expressed without reticence in the testimonies transcribed in Piermattei's book. In this regard, Filippomaria Pontani argued that this does not necessarily mean that the person selected is the worst candidate, but that "there can be candidates with better academic qualifications than the *predetermined* candidate (because, any way you look at it, there is always a predetermined one) that have very little chance of success [...] That is the reason why often the number of candidates in these competitions is fewer than 2" (Piermattei 2017, 117, translation mine). These considerations to some extent evoke the depressing image of the department chair in *Some Say No* who, fearing a possible investigation, in an attempt to destroy the evidence of myriad rigged competitions, almost incredulously exclaims, "There must have been one regular competition at least!" Pontani's simple, provocative question is, "Why not base recruitment on direct cooptation?" (Piermattei 2017, 121).

From a different perspective, Pellegrino (2016) observed that, opposed to the rhetoric of curriculum that you have to put up with, "selection is transformed into a long ritual of behavioural belonging to the context", through practices which verge "on the edge of irrationalism" (Pellegrino 2016, 55). The focus of assessment therefore moves from competence and ability to "evaluation of endurance", and to similarity between those who hire and those who are hired. Pellegrino argues that this creates "a contradictory ambivalence between demand for creativity and autonomy, on the one hand, and for institutionally appropriate behaviour on the other" (Pellegrino 2016, 56, translation mine). Thus, for Pellegrino, precarious academic workers experience totalizing working processes, which are based on the passion trap rather than on coercive exploitation, and produce convergence in behaviour, language, and desires (Pellegrino 2016, 57).

If adaptation to context and the stressful conditions of prolonged precariousness is one of the possible options, a range of different strategies can be adopted, including abstention and attack (Feldman and Sandoval 2018). It is this last form of reaction that prevails in film representation, with openly deviant behaviour. Almost confirming the adjective "dangerous" which Standing (2011) used to denote this new class of academic precariat, beyond their ironic style, all the Italian movies considered here show how the prolonged penalizing situation leads precarious researchers to seek revenge by engaging in unethical, illegal activities.

Through kidnapping, harassment and stalking, or the production and pushing of new psychotropic drugs, the grotesque solution that film indicates to this bunch of over-thirty precarious researchers without a future is a venture into the world of crime. If years of study and research have not allowed them to get steady well-paid positions in academia, they can at least enable them to carry out a lucrative criminal activity. Faced with the social injustice suffered within the university context, the ethical question seems less important than a deep desire for revenge, which somehow appears to be justified. After all, they are university researchers not criminals. “I’ll spare you all the lectures on the ethical level, because I abandoned ethics when they kicked me out of the university. I’m being practical. I don’t want to go to jail!” This is how Sibilia’s movie character Alberto, the former microbiology researcher working as an off-the-books dishwasher, laconically answers Pietro, who proposes they produce a new psychotropic molecule. Pietro’s reply is quite clear: “Alberto, criminals go to jail, are you and I criminals? I make a molecule that’s not on the ministry’s list and you produce it. Together we make the best substance ever and we do it all legally [...] You’re a university professor and you don’t deserve this life!”

It is time for them to get what they deserve, Pietro argues. The issue of merit therefore shifts from the level of acknowledgement to the level of claim, from confidence in the university and its rules to a more pragmatic, albeit deviant approach. Film seems to justify this criminal behaviour as a legitimate reaction to what they have undergone and a way for these precarious academic workers to get what they already richly deserve. Obviously, the issue cannot be reconsidered here on a purely moral or ethical level. Rather, it is necessary to recognise that in the mutual symbolic relationship between film and reality, satire goes straight to the heart of the problem, and shamelessly reveals the anomalies and contradictions of the academic system we are part of. With its comic-satirical register, film interrogates us directly and irreverently about the quality and value of the academic world. Through paradoxical representations, film unmasks this world’s contradictions and forces us to distance ourselves from it. Satire eschews both the pessimism of impotence and fear of condemnation, calling for urgent solutions. It is only film, but it can move critical thinking and stimulate action.

Based on these film representations, a final reflection can be made. As numerous surveys have also confirmed, many precarious academic workers describe their condition with negative terms such as “depressed”, “frustrated”, or “disillusioned”, and, according to Max Haiven (2014), academia no longer appears to be an “ivory tower” but rather an “ivory cage”. Possible organizational solutions should be grounded in the awareness that these precarious researchers are not mere providers of labour, producers of publications, projects and lectures, flexibly fluctuating in time and space, but whole subjects with concrete needs of their own operating in an academic context in which the boundary between work and life is intrinsically blurred.

An oft-quoted passage from an article by Toni Morrison seems to me to still be pertinent to the current university situation:

If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.

(Morrison 2001, 278)

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