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Women at Work in Twenty-First-Century European Cinema by
Barbara Mennel (review)

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(Review)

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Women at Work in Twenty-First-Century European Cinema. By Barbara Mennel. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 243. Paper \$27.95. ISBN 978-0252083952.

Barbara Mennel's new book could be considered an implicit response to a crucial observation made by Christian Petzold. With reference to his late mentor, Harun Farocki, and around the time he made *Yella* (2007), Petzold frequently pointed out that we do not yet have any new images of neoliberal capitalism. He meant to call attention to the fact that too many contemporary films depict processes of labor as if the mode of capitalist production had not undergone significant changes from the Fordism that Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) depicts to an economic regime—call it finance, communicative, or just-in-time capitalism—that increasingly extracts profit from immaterial or affective labor, including care and human attention.

While Mennel does not discuss Petzold's films—perhaps a surprising omission given both the sheer quantity of contemporary films from fifteen European countries that she analyzes and the fact that Petzold's films are populated by working female protagonists—her central argument nevertheless is characterized by the desire not only to shed light on the sheer variety of work depicted in European films between 2001 and 2016 but also to foreground the crucial roles women are given in them. Even beyond her intervention in the more local debates within feminism that provide the overall theoretical context, Mennel's central accomplishment is to conclusively demonstrate that any cinematic effort to find new images of, and for, capitalism in the age of neoliberalism must take seriously *women's* work—whether work done by women born within the European borders or that performed by those having migrated to Europe, whether work in which well-educated middle- or upper-class women engage or labor offered by women from less privileged economic backgrounds that frequently enable the better-off (white) women to leave the home. Translated into the practice of film criticism, this also means that any *critical* conversation about contemporary labor (in Europe) cannot afford to ignore the crucial role women's work assumes in a neoliberal regime of power that increasingly derives its profits from the kind of skills often associated with femininity, namely “flexibility and adaptability” (5). Important to Mennel's argument is, furthermore, the need to embrace intersectionality as both a methodological tool and a political value, not least since the dialectical relationship between contemporary white women's ability to leave the home and become professionals (and thus potentially icons of feminist liberation) and women of color willing to accept low pay for the very work on which their more privileged sisters have been able to turn their backs, thanks to the (successful) interventions of second-wave feminism.

Mennel invites readers on a journey across Europe, from Scandinavia to the Iberian Peninsula, from Great Britain to Bosnia, Macedonia, and Greece, covering

both cinemas of “small nations” and those of European powerhouses. Moreover, Mennel’s critical eye does not limit itself merely to one kind of film such as, for example, independent or art cinema, which is often alleged to be more politically conscious than mainstream productions or exercises in genre cinema. While the cost of such a transnational methodology applied to a wide range of film forms is, at times, a lack of depth regarding the analysis of any given country and its cinema’s representation of women at work, its benefit—which clearly outweighs the cost—is the ability to counteract a facile privileging of one specific instantiation of neoliberal capitalism: that of Europe’s core economic powers. In other words, too often claims about labor in the neoliberal age posit the economically “most developed” countries such as Germany, France, and the UK as the norm; in turn, such analyses both diagnose contemporary capitalism as if it were a monolithic phenomenon and imagine possibilities of resistance based on such normative assumptions. Mennel, in contrast, turns to Ernst Bloch’s concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* (nonsimultaneity or nonsynchronism), and especially his idea of “the simultaneity of nonsynchronism” (6). Bloch developed this notion in order to contest critical views (including those of his leftist comrades) assuming that all people exist in the same Now, an assumption itself predicated on a teleological and thus understanding of Marx, whose notion of “uneven development” clearly inspired Bloch’s concept—something of which Mennel could have perhaps made more, not least since the most powerful accounts of contemporary capitalism are still largely inspired by, derived from, or indebted to (aspects of) Marx’s analysis. It is this choice of methodological framework that allows Mennel to examine how contemporary European cinema depicts women at work without reducing these multiple, because unevenly developed, instantiations of female labor to a hegemonic (read: German- or French-dominated) perspective.

Women at Work offers seven chapters, which are framed by a theoretical introduction and a brief conclusion. Each of the chapters focuses on specific ways in which contemporary female labor manifests itself. Covering issues such as migration (chapter 4), care work (chapter 5), and reproductive labor in the age of biopolitics (chapter 6), Mennel’s analysis, which also engages how heritage cinema exhibits rather different attitudes to the pre-neoliberal past of industrial labor—nostalgically in English and French productions, considerably more skeptically in Eastern European films (chapter 3)—repeatedly calls our attention to how these women at work “function as sites for critical negotiation over gender roles, agency, and subjectivity in the present” (20). This present is shot through with a sense of precarity (chapter 2) that has only intensified in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (chapter 7). Yet, it is in “The Specter of Domesticity”—a felicitous title for the book’s first chapter given the role domesticity has played in second-wave feminism’s politics—that Mennel stages how complex the issue of women at work is today, not least due to the role migration plays in contemporary European life. It is precisely the presence of women of color

from the global South in the European domestic sphere that makes any celebration of wage labor as providing “access to the public sphere and citizenship” (27) more complicated and decidedly less utopian than imagined by second-wave feminists. Yet, while Mennel convincingly shows why the “work that feminism is called upon to do has changed” (204) from its second-wave moment, she nevertheless affirms feminist methodologies *in their multiplicity*. She does so precisely because, as she writes in her introduction in which she stages her own feminist intervention within the tradition of feminist criticism, “Contemporary European feminist cinemas depart from the 1970s cinefeminism by not advancing a coherent style and investment in the liberation through access to equality and through professional identity” but instead “engage in a range of narrative strategies and aesthetics styles” (21). Mennel, then, simultaneously affirms the important work done by second-wave feminism and insists on the need now to take seriously the simultaneity of nonsynchronic feminisms across Europe—a multiplicity of feminisms that respond differently to different degrees of development of neoliberalism as it manifests itself across Europe.

Even though Mennel spends all but ten pages discussing German-language filmmakers (Maren Ade, Barbara Albert, Tatjana Turansky, and Volker Schlöndorff), her book should nevertheless be of great interest to German (film) studies. Participating in the ongoing transnational turn in film studies, *Women at Work* offers us a rich archive of cinematic depictions of female labor that, *inter alia*, demonstrates the considerably negative effects that European monetary policy—always closely aligned with Germany’s Central Bank and thus the country’s *national* political desires—has had, and continues to have, on many European nations. As Ade’s *Toni Erdman* (2016) dramatizes, Germans’ ability to enjoy their country’s postmillennial prosperity (which is, to be sure, vastly unevenly developed within Germany) is dialectically linked to the ongoing suffering across eastern and southern Europe—a suffering that is crucially embodied in the work women across the continent do. It is to the credit of Mennel’s sweeping cinematic analysis of the present that we now have a better understanding of not only the work women do across the continent but also the variety of *new* images contemporary European cinema has been offering us of the unevenly developed economic regime we call neoliberalism.

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Cosmic Miniatures and the Future Sense: Alexander Kluge’s Twenty-First-Century Literary Experiments in German Culture and Narrative Form. By Leslie A. Adelson. Berlin: DeGruyter, 2018. Pp. 304. Paper \$68.99. ISBN 978-3110611083.

One element common to all of the works by the multimedia narrator Alexander Kluge is his continual contesting and examination of—and confrontation with—the multiple