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The Aesthetics of Impasse and the Affective Rhythms of Survival: Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* as Cinema of Precarity

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Abstract

This article reads Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009) through Lauren Berlant's conceptualisation of impasse and the affective rhythms of survival, which Berlant develops in their reflections on the cinema of precarity. This framework, I contend, has the potential to open up new avenues of inquiry within the study of Arnold's work, usually discussed in relation to either British (social) realist cinema or the phenomenological representations of female experience. Situating *Fish Tank* within the broader framework of the cinema of precarity helps articulate a position from which to problematise the overemphasis on movement in critical writings on the film – which, as I will discuss, is also predominant in both affect theory and film phenomenology. I argue that with its simultaneous focus on movement *and* impasse, articulated through framing and composition of the shot, camera movement, and repetition of visual tropes that convey confinement, *Fish Tank* is able to capture and aesthetically re-enact the impact of neoliberalism, while simultaneously paying attention to class and gendered styles of bodily adjustment to crisis ordinariness. I conclude that Berlant's critical apparatus illuminates the formal and affective complexity of *Fish Tank* in new ways, and creates space to address larger questions of affect, aesthetics, and the profilmic body.

Keywords: movement, impasse, rhythms of survival, affect, film phenomenology, cinema of precarity.

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Introduction

What if I did a whole film where I just did one-takes?
Something very real and raw would have to happen.
(Arnold quoted in Mullen 2009)

In her study of a phenomenology of girlhood in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009), Lucy Bolton mentions the interview cited above to emphasise that "something very real and raw" is an apt description of the visceral impact of the film (2016: 82). Bolton compares her viewing experience to "spending time with Mia" (2016: 83), the film's 15-year-old protagonist, who lives on an East London council estate with her mother, Joanne, and younger sister, Tyler. With its gritty exposition of the environments of so-called "broken Britain", and the limited choices for its inhabitants, *Fish Tank* can be inscribed within the mode of social-realist filmmaking,¹ but for Bolton the film is *more* than that: it "might look like social-realism but is also phenomenological experimentation" (2016: 76). David Forrest, in turn, places Arnold firmly within the British realist tradition, which, as he argues in his book on new realism (2020), has undergone a markedly poetic turn over the last twenty years, as illustrated by filmmakers such as Duane Hopkins, Joanna Hogg, Shane Meadows, and Clio Barnard. He argues that this new realism eschews the "unambiguously and unapologetically didactic approach" of filmmakers like Ken Loach in favour of lyrical and often opaque encounters with place, and a focus on sensory experiences that interact with the rhythms of everyday life (2020: 9).²

In this article I aim to contribute to the conversation on the role of the rhythms of the everyday in Arnold's *Fish Tank* by reading it through Lauren Berlant's conceptualisation of the "affective rhythms of survival" (2011: 11), which Berlant develops in *Cruel Optimism*. While several scholars have noted that Arnold's camera movement, which creates the physicality of being-in-the-world, is crucial to theorising the film's phenomenological realism and the visceral, participatory, or even ethical mode of its address (Horeck 2011, Bolton 2016, Ince 2017, Forrest 2020), it is less often discussed how Mia's ceaseless mobility is formally and thematically restrained. In spite of an apparently hopeful ending, Mia's bodily rhythms are trapped in a more circular, repetitive pattern, rather than forging a forward motion. Therefore, however incessantly mobile Mia and the camera that follows her may be, the way Arnold frames this movement epitomises what I term here, following Berlant's (2011) work on the cinema of precarity,³ the aesthetics of impasse, making reference to the film's ambivalent oscillation between action and inertia, confinement and the promise of escape, breathing and suffocation. I propose to read *Fish Tank* as an example of Berlant's cinema of precarity to make two critical interventions. First, situating *Fish Tank* within this conceptual framework helps articulate a position from which to problematise the overemphasis on movement in the scholarly reception of the film, which, as I will show in the first section of this article, is also predominant in both affect theory and film phenomenology. Berlant's interest in the impasse, and aesthetic forms that track that impasse, opens up space for redressing such an overemphasis, as well as for conceptually linking

phenomenological readings of *Fish Tank* with considerations on precarity under neoliberalism. Second, in inscribing the film within Berlant's critical apparatus, I wish to examine Arnold's work not in relation to the specifically British cinematic traditions – an interpretative framework that, to an even greater extent than the phenomenological approach, has predominated in scholarly and critical responses to *Fish Tank* and Arnold's films more generally⁴ – but as part of the “global style” of the cinema of precarity (Berlant 2011: 201), and in doing so underscore Arnold's attention to the pervasive social precariousness in the capitalist scene. Such attention, certainly manifest in her previous works depicting socio-economic realities in early twenty-first century Britain, including short films *Dog* (2001) and Oscar-winning *Wasp* (2003), as well as her first feature film *Red Road* (2006), has been taken up more recently in Arnold's latest feature film to date, and the only one shot outside Britain, *American Honey* (2016), in which she offers a rewriting of the road movie within an explicitly post-recessionary, neoliberal US context. Though Arnold's films have not typically been discussed as part of a wider tendency towards the representation of social precariousness across different cinematic traditions, my reading of *Fish Tank* suggests ways in which it might be fruitful to examine how its aesthetics of impasse relates to Berlant's cinema of precarity, where films “track the attrition of what had been sustaining national, social, economic, and political bonds and the abandonment of a variety of populations to being cast as waste” (2011: 201).⁵ Bearing in mind Berlant's argument on the transnational dimension of the cinema of precarity (2011: 3), I put *Fish Tank* in dialogue with two other films about the limited possibilities available to women on the economic margins: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Rosetta* (1999) and, to a lesser degree, *Two Days, One Night* (*Deux jours, une nuit*, 2014). While the films of the Dardennes are not the focus in this article, they provide a useful point of comparison for thinking about the fantasy of the “good” life under neoliberalism and emphasise the fruitfulness of addressing the corporeal economies of restraint through Berlant's critical apparatus. My reading of *Fish Tank* offers, in sum, yet another instance of how cinema can track situations of social precariousness, though it adapts and refocuses Berlant's reflections toward the field of film theory to address larger questions of affect, aesthetics, and movement.

While engaging with affect and phenomenologically-informed film theory, which has influenced much of scholarly writing on Arnold to date, I am guided by Berlant's more formalist approach to reading patterns of adjustment to crisis. Thus, I am not concerned with how *Fish Tank* affects the viewer at a sensorial level, even if I might sometimes gesture toward the potential implications for embodied perception, but with how Arnold's aesthetics can be productively put in dialogue with Berlant's theoretical propositions. This decision is partly driven by the belief that, as Eugenie Brinkema (2014) has observed, discussions of cinematic affect have been disconnected from those of textuality for too long: “The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation” (2014: xiv). Therefore, my approach privileges the questions of form and representation, with close reading as a method, and stems from a non-binary comprehension of the relationship between affect/emotion and thought/cognition, following feminist critiques of Massumi's

early work (Hemmings 2005, Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, among others).⁶ By insisting on the formal dimension of what Berlant dubs affective realism⁷, my hope is to return, in the spirit of Deleuze – and Brinkema who follows this path – to the distinct, the particular, the contingent, with all their dense details (2014: xv).

In what follows I contextualise my argument in relation to Berlant’s cinema of precarity to underscore how bringing together her ideas on impasse on the one hand, and the rethinking of film viewing in terms of affect and lived experience on the other, might push the debates on “realness” and “rawness” in *Fish Tank* in a new direction. The second section of this article shows how the aesthetics of impasse works in *Fish Tank* as a formal core. After exploring the sensuous register in the film’s opening sequence, which allows us to trace key tendencies in the film’s affective and formal trajectory, I elaborate on the significance of distinct rhythms of Mia’s movement to argue, in the remainder of the article, that Arnold’s imagining of the living body is never divorced from awareness of threats to its survival. My central argument is that through the formal focus on stuckness and not-stopping (Berlant 2007: 279), articulated through framing and composition of the shot, camera movement, and repetition of visual tropes that convey confinement, *Fish Tank* is able to capture and aesthetically re-enact the impact of neoliberalism within the ordinary, paying close attention to class and gendered constraints. Addressing distinct bodily rhythms in the film – walking, dancing, and the rhythm that connects all of them, breathing – as exemplary of Mia’s unique style of affective adjustment to “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant 2011),⁸ this article traces the fraying relation between her rituals and fantasies of the “good” life, as discussed by Berlant in their meditation on the contemporary world of spreading precarity.

Cinema of precarity: affect, movement, and impasse

Although the cinema of precarity, commonly associated with the depictions of the adversities of working-class life, is not unprecedented, as it can certainly be traced back to Italian neorealism or, in the context of British cinema, to the post-war social realist tradition, Berlant links it to the films that have been emerging since the 1990s in Europe and the United States. Berlant is particularly interested in how people navigate situations of incoherence and precariousness after neoliberal post-war restructuring, while still being attached to fantasies of the “good” life: promises of “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” (2011: 3), even though these fantasies are now fraying. Berlant turns to affective realism, derived from the “embodied, affective rhythms of survival” (2011: 11), not to suggest that “what happens to aesthetically mediated *characters* [is] equivalent to what happens to people but to see that in the affective *scenarios* of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life” (2011: 9, emphasis in original). Crucially, aesthetics is closely related to our experience of the world, as it allows us to “rehabilitate our sensorium by taking in new material”, and “it provides metrics for understanding how

we pace and space our encounters with things” (2011: 12) – an argument which aligns Berlant not only with affect theory, but also with a phenomenological comprehension of the body.

Berlant places *Cruel Optimism* alongside Brian Massumi’s (2002) and Teresa Brennan’s (2004) work on the affective atmospheres of the present, as well as theorists of the ordinary such as Marc Augé (1995), Nigel Thrift (2007), and Kathleen Stewart (2007) – though the scholar departs from many of the critical strands that have marked the affective turn, especially those influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁹ The metaphors used by Deleuze and Guattari provide the vocabulary for much affect theory in terms like “movement”, “potentiality”, “intensity”, “force”, “flows”, “speeds” and “energy”. For example, Massumi counterposes his definition of affect to approaches to the discursive body which “[subtract] movement from the picture”, by catching it “in cultural freeze-frame” within a range of social positionings (2002: 3). Affect is thus said to disrupt, interrupt, agitate (see also Brinkema 2014: xii). Berlant, in turn, is interested in other dimensions of affect; on the one hand, Berlant focuses on the affective economies of normativity, and on the other, on an aesthetic and formal rendering of affective experience that is “more ambient, diffuse” (2011: 233), that is more scaled-down, monotonous, or sometimes “flat” (Berlant 2015). In her critique of the prevailing comprehension of the body as “having the potential to be affected”, that is, as being marked by its capacity for movement and change, Lisa Blackman observes that “the complex processes of subject-constitution [...] induce both *becoming* and *becoming-stuck*” (2008: 47, emphasis in original) and thus points to what might have been occluded or forgotten in affect theory.¹⁰ Blackman’s insights on the overemphatic use of affect are resonant with Berlant’s interest in the aesthetics of bodily stuckness, a concept that the latter employs to describe the everyday rhythms and realities in which living is repetitious, not heroic, and which is particularly apt for thinking about the affective-aesthetic work in *Fish Tank*.

Berlant’s emphasis not only on how “we pace and space our encounters with things” (2011: 12), but also on how we might sometimes become “stuck” (2011: 21), is a highly relevant one to the discussion of cinema and film experience. Indeed, Berlant’s insights on the cinema of precarity, which “attends to the proprioceptive” by registering “bodies moving in space performing affectively laden gestures” (2011: 201), evoke phenomenological understandings of film viewing, for instance, Jennifer Barker’s (2009) extension of the haptic to encompass three overlapping dimensions of the cinematic experience: the skin, the musculature, and the viscera. We respond, orient, and dispose ourselves toward whole cinematic structures, “because we and the film make sense of space by moving through it muscularly in similar ways and with similar attitudes” (2009: 75). Barker’s phenomenological consideration of musculature as linked to spatiality (ways of taking up, moving through, and stretching in space), which she theorises in connection to the notion of kinaesthetic empathy, is particularly resonant with Berlant’s understanding of proprioception as a metric for apprehending the world, and it also resonates compellingly with Arnold’s rich filmography, not least in terms of audience address.

However, as Berlant underscores in their own understanding of cinema, this is not to suggest that films re-enact “some universally haptic sense of the world that is registered as bodily flesh” (2011:

197), and in this regard, their ideas can be aligned to the critical strands in feminist and queer film studies that have consistently sought to rethink affect theory and phenomenology in order to better understand the multiple ways of being-in-the-world (and thus perceiving the world). In this context, queer phenomenology has been vital in challenging such “universal” structures that supposedly underpin our perceptive relations to the world, and to cinema. Through the notion of bodily orientations, Sara Ahmed (2006) asks if all bodies “matter” in traditional phenomenology, pointing to how the postulate on the relationality and reversibility between the world and the subject is often too broad to account for the singularities of the bodies’ comportment, postures, and gestures. Drawing on these insights in her queer critique of film phenomenology, Katharina Lindner (2012) argues that Barker’s understanding of our encounters with cinema in terms of seemingly unproblematic “general attitudes” is, despite all its emphasis on the materiality and embodiment, inadvertently underpinned by the normative (white, male, heterosexual, and able) body.¹¹ Following on from Ahmed’s rethinking of Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Lindner contends: “The mobile body that can do things, that is characterised by an ease of movement, and for whom space constitutes the possibility of action, desire, and contact, is a body that takes up a very particular orientation towards the world and others that is based on the normative embodiment of heterosexuality and whiteness” (2012). Lindner’s queer reading of film phenomenology offers some useful insights for my analysis of *Fish Tank*, though I am more concerned with the formal and narrative features than with reflections on how Arnold’s film and the viewer might be acting together, correlationally. Even if *Fish Tank* does not feature explicitly queer subjectivities, Ahmed’s remarks on being-in-the-world in terms of how different objects and others are “within reach” or “out of reach” (2006: 566) engender compelling ways of thinking about Mia’s class and gendered affective disorientations. This is less to argue that Mia is facing the world the “wrong” way, tending towards “inappropriate” others (Lindner 2012), but rather that her kinaesthetic, or muscular, relations to the world, and her experience of movement itself, are disoriented or, thinking back to Berlant, constricted.

In what follows I set out to reflect upon the affective rhythms of survival that are at stake in *Fish Tank* and which are established through the focus on Mia’s moving body. Pointing to “the multi-layered temporality” in *Fish Tank*, Bolton observes how Arnold creates “a viewing experience of acute intensity and tension” (2016: 78). As she further explains, “these layers are, simply, the world as experienced by the striding Mia”, relating to other types of physicality and different rhythms of life: nature, music, and non-human beings (2016: 78). Recognising that these distinct rhythms are of great significance in *Fish Tank*, and Arnold’s filmography in general, I zoom in on Mia’s bodily rhythms – walking, dancing, and breathing – to argue that *Fish Tank* works on various levels to privilege not only the protagonist’s movement, but also her bodily disorientation and resilience, duress and suspension, in the context of overwhelming precarity. Paying attention to the corporeal rhythms of ordinary experience as they relate to the social environment recalls Lefebvre’s method of rhythmanalysis, which implies, as Berlant puts it, understanding action “that does not express internal states but measures a situation”

(2011: 198). I similarly take Mia's distinct movements as a point of departure to re-examine how the film stages not only motion but also inertia, thus shedding light on yet another facet of the "realness" and "rawness" in Arnold's work. But, following Berlant, the emphasis here is not so much on "the bodily rhythm forced by the architecture of the everyday and the modes of dressage that enable living" (2011: 191), but on the "overwhelming ordinary that is *disorganized*" (2011: 8) by capitalism and the adjustments improvised around it.

The rhythms of survival in *Fish Tank*

Fish Tank takes place in a decaying public housing estate on the outskirts of London. Much of the film was shot in the Mardyke Estate, built in the 1960s to offer flats for workers at the Ford Dagenham automobile construction plant. The protagonist, Mia (Katie Jarvis), destined for a pupil referral unit as a result of her outbursts of rage, finds moments of relief in dance and in her interactions with her mother's (Kierston Wareing) new boyfriend, Conor (Michael Fassbender). The first scene in *Fish Tank*, exemplary of the filmmaker's usual formal techniques, is prescient of how Mia's moving body will not be simply observed (as a fish can be observed in the titular fish tank) but will guide our sensory experience of the narrative. Significantly, we are introduced to Mia not through the image of her body, but through the sound of her breathing. The film starts *in medias res*: as the credits are displayed on a black screen, we hear her exhale first and then inhale. Only on the third exhale is her breathing synchronised with her image. Mia appears against a pale blue wall in a medium, high-angle shot, hunched and with her hands resting on her thighs, head down but moving up with each intake of air (fig. 1). Her continued panting merges with the muffled ambient noise of the traffic. She stretches her body to look up (the camera instantly follows her with a slight tilt), as she strives to catch her breath, her chest rhythmically expanding and contracting. In the next shot the camera is placed behind Mia standing in front of a window in what turns out to be an abandoned flat. The protagonist is initially centred in the frame, facing the only half-open window, as if to catch some fresh air, her dark silhouette set against a wide view of the urban landscape, with trees, buildings, and pylons visible in the distance (fig. 2). She then moves forward and to the left of the frame to make a phone call, and the film cuts to a shot in which only her head and shoulders are visible from behind and are, initially, out of focus. When she puts the phone down, the camera brings her figure into focus, though with parts of her body still in the dark, but as soon as she leaves the room, it immediately changes its focus to rest again on the view of the landscape.



Figures 1-2: Mia struggling to breathe.

It matters that the entry into the film is realised through the intensification of the sound of breathing, which from the onset anticipates the various sensuous bodily rhythms still to come. As David Forrest notes in his discussion of Arnold's selective processes of emphasis and de-emphasis, the filmmaker "varies the depth of field with the handheld camera moving gently, seemingly in rhythm with Mia's breath" (2020: 102). His observation on the prominence of Mia's breathing, which is heard whenever the protagonist is shown dancing, walking, and running, is particularly relevant to my argument, and I return to it in due course. For now, though, I would like to centre on how the shifting focalisations and textured shot composition in these opening moments, which mark the subjective relationship between the protagonist and her environment, "with Mia's body and environment vying against each other for primacy" (2020: 107) as Forrest suggests, are crucial in creating

phenomenological and/or affective proximity. A number of scholars have argued that Arnold's tactile vocabulary – an elaborate use of selective focus, lighting contrasts, as well as flowing hand-held camerawork in which the image itself seems to “breathe” – can be conceptualised through Laura Marks's notion of haptic visuality, which occurs when looking is “more inclined to graze than to gaze” (Marks 2000: 162).¹² For Kate Ince, *Fish Tank* illustrates “feminist phenomenological theory in practice” (2017: 51). The first time we see Mia it is not through the “fetishistic fragmentation” of her figure, but “head-on, with attention to activity, effort and *movement*” (2017: 51, emphasis mine). Tanya Horeck, in turn, emphasises the protagonist's “gestural and affective *force*” (2011: 173, emphasis mine) by drawing on Elena del Rio's elaboration of what she terms the “powers of affection”, that is, “the body's expressive capacities and their effect upon oppressive structures” that challenge “the notion of the female body as a visual, static fetish” (2008: 17). While these observations are underpinned by different models of movement and affect, they are particularly fruitful in terms of understanding Mia's body as “always more than just the fetishised construct of the male gaze” (del Rio 2008: 114) – even if they sometimes might be seen to overemphasise the transformative or expansive potential of the protagonist's (and the camera's) mobility. Indeed, I would like to suggest that from the very beginning Mia's movement and affective force are contained in several ways. That the viewer does not get to *see* her dance, only her exhausted body panting heavily after the act – an image which will be returned to throughout the film – is relevant, as it points not to her movement, but struggle, as implied by her defeated posture and laboured breathing.

Such an argument might seem, at first sight, contradictory, given Mia's sturdy walk and bullish behaviour that is shown directly after the opening sequence. In fact, Mia's relentless striding, which punctuates key moments in the film, is what has attracted most critical attention to date. Forrest (2020: 106) usefully quantifies that almost 10% of the film consists of shots of Mia walking, many of which are continuous and unbroken, either filmed from behind, frontally, or by the side. Throughout the film, the camera is tethered to her body as she traverses the diegetic space at relative speed. She is frequently centred in the frame, shown at a close distance, either through mid-shots or close-up tracking shots that follow her angry footsteps. Ince associates Mia's striding with “a young woman's desire [...] filmed in all its raw spontaneity” (2017: 136). It is through this determined walking, she argues, that “Mia counters anyone who acts upon her (any other subject who would objectify her)” (Ince 2017: 135). For Bolton, too, the film's underscoring of Mia's movement, when “the camera picks up on her energy through its urgently unsteady hand-held motion and the accompanying sound of her exercised breathing” (2016: 77), is crucial to Arnold's “feminist phenomenological statement of *this* girl's experience” (2016: 78, emphasis in original). Forrest (2020: 106) further argues for the political potential of Mia's mobility (and its representation) in class terms, comparing Arnold's use of the hand-held moving camera to the prominent walking Steadicam shots in Alan Clarke's television and film work, which similarly place the viewers within the characters' lived experience.¹³ For Forrest, one of the most compelling walking sequences of the film is Mia's journey to Conor's home in Tilbury, which

is “a journey from one highly class-bound landscape to another” (2020: 108), after their sexual encounter the night before. Forrest examines Mia’s forward motion through multiple sceneries shown in the sequence, for instance, as she walks past a wide area with housing estates and pylons visible in the background – the same landscape that Mia only observed in the opening sequence but now “moves through and beyond” (2020: 108).

Working-class characters relentlessly walking through bleak urban landscapes is a recurrent trope in the history of (social) realist cinema, but perhaps what is the most striking in *Fish Tank* is how, even if we do not necessarily empathise with the protagonist, nor adopt a similar perspective from a psychological point of view, “the film creates alignment with Mia’s perspective in terms of what she sees, hears, and does” (Bolton 2016: 77). Or, drawing on Barker’s (2009) conceptualisation of touch at a kinaesthetic level, our musculatures entangle with her. This is because, as Barker adds in her argument on the mimetic dimensions of film viewing, “film and viewer share certain deep-seated muscular habits, beginning with the very tendency to move through the world in an upright position. We and the film are both inclined that way, as we are inclined to move and look forward, to face things directly” (2009: 81). However, while most writings on *Fish Tank* underscore Mia’s youthful energy, her determined facing forward and her desire-driven advancement,¹⁴ in what follows I shed light on the arrested, disoriented nature of her gendered and classed walking, therefore pointing to the other side of her movement that previous scholarship on the film seems to only partially recognise.

The film’s aesthetics are organised by difficulty and impediment, and the general avoidance of widescreen, all of which notably limit our visual field. The restriction is formally pronounced in Arnold’s use of a cramped, nearly square aspect ratio (1.33:1), which recreates Mia’s grim environment while cutting out the peripheral, thus transmitting Mia’s sense of isolation and confined view.¹⁵ She might be constantly in motion, but her activity is a simultaneous register of her stuckness, which points to the complexity of the cinematic rendering of her movement. Mia’s rhythms can be understood through Elena Gorfinkel’s (2012) theorisation of “enduration” (a term conjoining “endurance” and “duration”),¹⁶ which she argues, adapting Berlant’s insights specifically to art cinema, is a useful theoretical framework for understanding the body as a site of struggle. For Gorfinkel, enduration operates as a concept that “assigns a corporeal persistence, a certain resilience through and toward, a physical withstanding, a bearing of pressure” (2012: 318) – thus crucially it points not only to cinematic (delayed) temporality, but also to the questions of survival. With its focus on Mia’s ceaseless corporal motion rendered through similarly ceaseless camera movement, *Fish Tank* does not participate in the more durational art cinema aesthetics, which is Gorfinkel’s main interest, but it nonetheless provides a fertile manifestation of embodied *durée*, asking “how much a body can endure as a condition of its continuous survival, set against the entropic and deteriorating force of gravity” (2012: 314).

Mia’s walking and the sheer vitality of her filmed body, encapsulated in closed frames, is particularly resonant with the Dardennes’ *Rosetta* (notably addressed by both Berlant and Gorfinkel), which offers a similar portrayal of the restless movement of its young female protagonist, filmed in

dilapidated urban landscapes and claustrophobic spaces. Rosetta lives in a caravan park with her mother, who exchanges sexual favours for alcohol, and when she is sober, mends worn clothes for Rosetta to sell to charity shops. Rosetta, like Mia, is making attempts to escape her situation, trying to secure a job which would allow her to move away from the caravan and her dysfunctional family. The opening scenes in both films are particularly significant, as they both point to the protagonists' agitated, yet at once arrested, movement. In the first scene in *Rosetta*, the jerky, chaotic handheld camera pursues the protagonist, dressed in a white lab coat and hairnet, as she paces feverishly through a series of corridors, rooms, and stairs – which recalls Mia's ceaseless pace, similarly highlighted by the persistent sound of her breath.¹⁷ As it turns out, Rosetta is fighting to keep a job: she is being chased after being told that her trial period in a factory has finished and she refuses to leave. “Why not start with Rosetta at work?”, Kent Jones asks in his reading of the movie to later argue that “it is a film not about having a job but about *needing* to have a job” (2012, emphasis in original). In a similar vein, one could pose the question: why not start with Mia's dancing but with her exhausted breathing instead? I would suggest that Mia's corporeal energy is, from the very beginning of the film, inscribed within the framework of endurance, “in the field of her inexhaustible exhaustion” (Gorfinkel 2012: 326), which points not so much to her youthful vitality, but to her frantic struggle for survival.

In their close reading of the Dardennes' *La Promesse* (1999) and *Rosetta* (1996), Berlant calls these films “nearly utopian, nearly normal”: the protagonists move toward the utopian zone, while being “actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding on to the ledge, treading water, *not-stopping*” (2007: 279, emphasis in original). In a similar way, *Fish Tank* also offers a figuration of impotence and perseverance of the body treading water, that aspires but fails to find viable living conditions. Mia's fantasy, equally ingenuous as Rosetta's, if perhaps more grandiose in scale, also operates within the hegemonic promises of cruel optimism as described by Berlant.¹⁸ The pervasive atmosphere of entrapment is contrasted with her dream of becoming a dancer and that of establishing a durable intimacy with Conor, both of which will collapse towards the end of the film, emphasising the protagonist's vulnerability and privation. As Bolton observes, after her dance routines we often see Mia surveying the estate from the balcony: “this is a place of exertion and stillness, retreat and promise, escape and creation” (2016: 78). But, returning to Berlant, what operates here are “the affects of aspirational normativity”, the persistence of a project of life built “on the bottom of contemporary class society” (2011: 164). Mia's attachment to the fantasy of the successful audition that might offer her a way out of her harsh reality enables her to endure life which would be unliveable without this larger fantasy framework. Her object of desire, Conor – in all his complexity, as he stands for friend, father, and lover – is the only resource for potential reciprocity, the promise of “the present and future experience of social belonging” (2011: 167), given that Mia's own shattered family, the institutionalised version of reciprocity, does not provide it for her. The simulacrum of the normalcy takes shape when Mia's mother cleans their apartment so that it looks more “homelike” for Conor or

when they spend time as a “regular” middle-class family on a day trip – but it all falls apart when it is unmasked as a false relationship of correspondence.

The Dardennes’ later film, *Two Days, One Night* (2014), is also deeply resonant with *Fish Tank* in the way it dramatises the fight for a “less-bad bad life” (Berlant 2011: 180) amid major impediments. The protagonist, Sandra, a young mother and a factory worker in a Belgian industrial town, is dismissed after being on a medical health leave for depression and anxiety, following a vote among her colleagues who have opted for covering her shifts in exchange for a 1000 euros bonus. She has only one weekend to convince her workmates to give up the extra money so that she can keep her job. The camera never detaches from Sandra as she rides the bus, walks down city streets, climbs the stairs; sometimes right behind or beside her, these shots are very similar to those of Mia striding around her council estate. In her reading of *Fish Tank* and *Two Days, One Night*, Kathleen Kampeas-Rittenhouse points to the protagonists’ physical similarities, despite their age difference, and grim expressions that “convey the collective emotional toll of economic survival” (2016).¹⁹ Mia’s, like Rosetta’s and Sandra’s, narrative arc is constituted by ceaseless wandering and dispossession, and her optimism for belonging. What these three films have in common, then, is their focus on precariousness and endurance, and the limited resources available to their female protagonists, living on the economic periphery. Even if these works emerge in a different social context and draw on different film traditions, they all insist on the formal restriction of movement with a simultaneous incessant mobility of bodies on screen, and they could all be considered within the broader framework of the cinema of precarity as discussed by Berlant, and which portrays “subjects not with similar historical identities or social locations but with similar adjustment styles to the pressures of the emergent new ordinariness” (2011: 201-202).²⁰

Indeed, *Fish Tank* and the Dardennes’ films of precarity do “far more in their gestural and aesthetic economies than in their narratives” (Gorfinkel 2012: 342) to critique this reality, staging the impasse through their specific temporal and spatial rhythms. The word impasse, from French *im-* (“not”, “opposite of”) and *passer* (“to pass”), refers to an impassable road, blind alley, dead end, as well as to being deadlocked, in a stalemate, in a difficult position in which it is impossible to make any progress. As Berlant notes: “One takes a *pass* to avoid something or to get somewhere: it’s a formal figure of transit. But the impasse is a *cul-de-sac* [...] [in which] one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*” (2011: 199, emphasis in original). Mia’s lack of advancement is reinforced by the symbolic tropes: the skinny old white mare permanently chained up at the travellers’ site, the caravan caught in a state of motionlessness, the cage which houses Tyler’s hamster, or the prison-like imagery seen when Mia traverses the narrow corridors in her housing estate and the nearby wastelands (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Prison-like imagery in *Fish Tank*.

Mia ventures to free the horse twice in the film, both episodes happening in the first 11 minutes, during which she walks back and forth between the empty flat where she practices her dancing, her apartment, and the travellers' site. As Ince rightly observes, even though she moves “swiftly, vigorously and with a sense of purpose [...]”, in fact she is moving in circles as if under the sway of some kind of repetition compulsion, counteracting the negativity of these circles with the positivity of her intention to give the horse its freedom – an action in which she does not succeed” (2017: 134-135). These visual repetitions of Mia walking in circles constitute the film's structural rhythm that marks her relation to the outside world: incessantly mobile, but entrapped, indeed like a fish swimming in a tank. Furthermore, the landscape she traverses is often presented as a sphere of precarity, considerable risk, and even deadly threat. In the few instances when we see her running in the film, she is running for her life, for example, in the travellers' site when she is physically restrained and assaulted by two men. We also see her running after returning Conor's daughter, Keira, home, when Conor chases her by car, then pursues her on foot, reaches her and violently slaps her without uttering a single word.

It matters that Mia's movement on foot is contrasted with the rhythms of a car ride (her mother does not own a vehicle, as is revealed during her conversation with a social worker who decides to send Mia to a referral unit). Mia is filmed in a car on three occasions: first, on an improvised excursion out of town; second, when Conor, panicked by Mia's unexpected visit, drags her away from his home to take her to a train station; and, finally, in the film's ending, when she leaves her family home to drive with Billy (Harry Treadaway), a young man from the travellers' community she has befriended. The first of the scenes, in which Conor takes her family on a road trip to the country, provides a rare glimpse of what happiness might look like in the protagonist's life. During the journey, the camera stays with Mia in the backseat, with the window down as the car races down the highway. She puts her head and one of her arms out of the window, looking up at trees and streams of light, escaping the confinement of her housing estate. Conor's car facilitates freedom of movement and access to the “good” life fantasy, punctuated by the song they listen to while driving, Bobby Womack's version of “California

Dreaming”. The tone of this sequence is very different from the second instance when she is in the car with Conor, this time in the front seat and filmed mostly from behind, with no music and with the pouring rain outside, blocking her view. The brevity and palpable tension of the ride to Tilbury Station contrasts with both their first car journey and the long sequence of Mia getting to Conor’s gated suburban community on foot, shot at different moments, when as noted by Forrest (2020: 108), she trespasses the boundaries of her social class. The final car ride with Billy inflects the previous car scenes, showing Mia in the front seat but looking back at her sister and the housing estate she is leaving behind. The sequence stages an escape, though on this occasion with no American Dream in sight. If, as a number of commentators have argued, the road film, in the same way as Westerns, participates in the myth of adventure that emphasises the ease of movement, usually through its figuration of majestic landscape (Klinger 1997), Arnold avoids wide picturesque vistas in this ending, only showing us Mia’s peripheral view.

Ultimately, the rhythms of Mia’s movement in *Fish Tank*, mostly on foot, challenge the ethos of freedom and transit attributed to the road film, as well as the sensuous wandering usually associated with modernist *flânerie*. Even though it is focused on roaming, Arnold’s film is far from the so-called “cinema of walking” (Flanagan 2008), a subcategory of slow cinema in which urban perambulations are a primary feature. Mia’s physical movement is agitated, intertwined with impediments and the futility of progress, and the tracking shots that move with Mia’s wandering are stripped of any glamour.²¹ In this sense, the film could be inscribed within the legacy of feminist wanderer films, for example, Agnès Varda’s *Sans toi ni loi (Vagabond, 1985)*, a film with which *Rosetta* and *Two Days, One Night* also engage. Mia, like *Vagabond*’s Mona, is deprived of institutional support but, in contrast to Mona, she does not get to experience this situation as “joyous anarchy” (see Gorfinkel 2012: 323).

While aligned with this female wanderer tradition, Mia forges her unique path through different sorts of privation and hindrance with the support of everyday gestures, routines, and rituals. Perhaps the most complex of these are her dance rehearsals, which also display distinct rhythms in the film. Like her first car ride with Conor, dance represents the promise of happiness and (upward) mobility. As previously noted, the fact that the initial dance scene happens off-screen is significant. *Fish Tank* opens right after Mia has performed one of her routines in the abandoned flat – in contrast to, for instance, *Billy Elliot (2000)*,²² a film whose 11-year-old working-class protagonist becomes a professional ballet dancer and that shows the boy leaping happily to T-Rex’s “Cosmic Dancer” song in the opening credits. Mia’s corporeal attitude, in turn, can be linked to Deleuzian “sliding of postures”, that is, a body leaning against a wall and “losing its sense of balance and uprightness, [...] acquiescing to gravity” (Gorfinkel 2012: 316). Following the first sequence, Mia observes disapprovingly a group of girls practicing dance moves in a parking lot near the council estate. Mia’s non-gendered grey tracksuit contrasts with their more stereotypically feminine, colourful clothing.²³ As she sits on the fence, she glances over to a group of boys also watching the girls and making objectifying comments about them (“I’d have that one”). When one of the girls challenges Mia, the latter strides towards her and confronts her with a head-butt.

Mia's overt defiance of the somewhat clumsy imitation of sexualised choreography can be read as a rejection of conventional performance of working-class teenage femininity, and, more generally, of the scopopic economy of looking associated with gendered regimes of the visual that have been scrutinised by Laura Mulvey (1975). The scene shows how the protagonist is limited not only by the context of poverty – a common trope in British social-realist filmmaking, historically centred on working-class masculinity – but also by the gender norms that she is struggling to resist.²⁴

The scene with the dancing girls – framed as if they were performing for Mia (and for the viewer) – stands in stark contrast to more haptic, trance-like forms of representation when she is practicing her routines, notably with no onlookers and with the camera barely showing her whole body. As Pam Hirsch (2014) observes, drawing on Angela McRobbie's comments on the contradictory meanings that dance carries for girls – from the conformity with conventional gender roles to “displaced, shared and nebulous eroticism” that goes beyond “a straightforward romantic heterosexual ‘goal-oriented drive’” (McRobbie cited in Hirsch 2014: 475) – Mia's dancing is “an attempt at gaining some agency, and evading family pressures”, by focusing on her own bodily pleasure (Hirsch 2014: 475). However, while it may be argued that through these brief interludes of dancing Mia sidesteps such “otherwise unbearable pressures” (2014: 476), her movements, framed in a closed space of the empty council flat, seem awkward, contorted, and restrained (just like the movement of the camera that follows them). As Marie Puységur rightly notices in her recent reading of the film: “She practices with the same brusque gracelessness that accompanies her progress through the estate. [The camera] leaves no space for virtuosity, and hardly any for pleasure [...]. There is a lack of fluidity to her steps, something in her that resists expression” (2020: 124).

Yet, the rhythm of Mia's dance metamorphoses throughout the film. Nowhere is it more apparent than in her rehearsal of the audition routine in the abandoned flat at sundown. In this instant we do not hear any music, as Mia is wearing headphones. The only sounds that are barely discernible are those of the drums in the song she is listening to, her steps, the traffic outside, and her breathing. Arnold manipulates the sound and slows the film down, so that the distant noises of the city blend with Mia's breathing, producing an eerie underwater effect, with Mia's movements flowing smoothly, as if she were swimming around the room (importantly, Mia cannot swim, as is stated by her mother earlier in the film). The close framing and the heavily textured soundscape incite a sense of hapticity reminiscent of the opening sequence. Just like at the beginning of the film, her silhouette, filmed from behind, is set against the cityscape, here rendered dark blue-grey by the fading daylight, with the focus repeatedly alternating between Mia and the view from the window. But, in contrast to the opening sequence, Mia can now finally stretch her arms, spreading her body in space. I suggest that the scene's appeal lies in its articulation of spatial orientations and being-in-the-world that are akin to queerness, as discussed by Lindner in her analysis of the bodily movement in and through water in Jordan Scott's *Cracks* (2009). Unlike in the previous scenes, in which Mia did not seem to be “at ease” and her body was “oblique [and] out of line”, at least in terms of the normative lines of gender and class,²⁵ here her

body extends space comfortably, her movement seemingly “free from the familiar rules of gravity and comportment” (Lindner 2012). In this unique sequence in the film, she is neither the object of a heterosexually desiring gaze, in the way that the girls were earlier in the film, nor uncomfortably boxed in by claustrophobic framing, with her usual angry, muscular intensity threatening to burst forth.

However, when she performs the same audition piece to Conor, at his request, later that evening, her dance is ambivalently reintroduced in the gender and class power relations. We see Mia bathed in warm yellow-orange light from a streetlamp entering the window in the sitting room. Ince observes in her reading of this moment that “there are no full-body shots of Mia that stand in for Conor’s gaze at her dancing [...]; instead, close-ups on her face and upper body keep us close to the sensations of movement she is experiencing” (2017: 52-53). Yet, the shot/countershot rhetoric does nonetheless underscore his looking at her through the entire sequence, and the episode ends with a situation, as Bolton argues, of “immense vulnerability” for Mia, due to her “desire to please him, the recognition that their trip together was meaningful to her, and the ambiguity about the response she expects” (2016: 81). The scene echoes their first meeting earlier in the film, when Mia was dancing in the kitchen in front of the TV, imitating the movements from a music video, with Conor appraising her body, at first without her knowledge. For Horeck, this scene sets up a dynamic “between feminine performance, the kind of cultural appraisal and judgement that attend it, and the way the female body – and also the film’s body – is able to move against, and away from, such cultural constraints” (2011: 175). However, the scene also points to Mia’s precarious position. Throughout the film, the promises of the “good” life, domestic happiness or material success, always hover in the background in the form of music videos, reality shows, and other images of aspirational consumerism that Mia and her sister are watching. The visual motif in the background, a wallpaper with sunny palm trees, seen when Mia dances for Conor, stands in for her dream of escape and success, reinforced by the soundtrack of “California Dreaming”, the song Conor first introduced her to and the one he says is his favourite. The fantasy of durable intimacy is broken when Conor leaves without saying goodbye the next day (one can assume because he fears accusations of statutory rape). Mia’s dream of becoming a dancer is ultimately shattered when, deeply perturbed by Conor’s betrayal, she shows up to her audition to perform her routine, dressed in her usual hoodie and tracksuit, only to realise that the agency advertising the search of “fresh young talent” is, in fact, looking for erotic dancers for a night club. Mia observes a participant performing sexualised moves, which echo those of her peers in the parking lot, and ultimately freezes on the stage herself when she is asked if she can dance in hotpants. *Fish Tank*, thus, interrogates the contradictions and ambivalences in Mia’s project and her attachments, tracking the eventual attrition of the fantasies that had been sustaining her.

The image of palm trees returns as a meaningful background at the end of the film, during the last dance scene, when Mia is about to embark on a journey with Billy to Cardiff. Before she leaves, she joins her mother dancing in parallel against the wallpaper. She mirrors Joanne’s steps, with Tyler also joining them, holding on to Mia’s waist to keep up with their pace. Mia’s wordless synchronisation

with the rhythms of her mother, from which she was earlier constantly excluded (for example during her mother's parties or when we first see Joanne dancing in the kitchen, presumably after her first night with Conor), evokes powerful affective binding, if only in terms of movement and gesture – though it is significantly accompanied by The Nas's lyrics "Life's a bitch and then you die". For Bolton, this is an "overdetermined but striking evocation of the rhythms they share as women in the same family" (2016: 82). Hirsch, in turn, reads the scene as visually representing "the most likely future for Mia, as another young mother trapped without qualifications or opportunities" (2014: 476). Indeed, although Mia's departure with Billy might look like a happy ending – a rescue from a complicated family situation additionally embellished by heterosexual coupling – her relationship with Billy remains unclear. Her escape seems very limited, as there is no clear sense of future for her "beyond the scavenging present" (Berlant 2011: 179). When Mia sits down in the front seat, the camera does not centre on what is in front of her. She turns back to look at her sister (Rebecca Griffiths) through a back window, which frames the oppressive space of her council estate. Before Mia turns around toward the view in front of her, which is shown out of focus, we hear her deep intake of breath, one last time in the film. The final shot in *Fish Tank* is that of a silver balloon floating above the tower buildings in the estate before the film cuts to darkness.

While the scene might be interpreted as indicating a hopeful ending – Mia avoids the threat of being sent to a deferral unit – I suggest that her breathing, not only in this moment, but also in the film in general, is connected with vulnerability and exposure to death in disturbing ways. As noted on various occasions, Mia's breathing accompanies other rhythms in the film, and in this sense, it can be considered central to her narrative trajectory. Forrest, following other scholars who have also paid attention to the accented movements of breathing as "an intrinsic element of the film's sensory, poetic vocabulary", observes that it is employed to evoke both "a familiar auditory and bodily process" and "an ambient sound which locks in our affect-centred relationship with the protagonist" (2020: 104). However, the rhythm of breathing also operates in *Fish Tank* on a metaphorical, and not only phenomenological level. As Davina Quinlivan argues in her examination of breath in relation to the embodied modes of spectatorship and representation analysed by Vivian Sobchak and Laura Marks, "breathing suggests a relationship with the image that involves the mind of the viewer as well as the body" (2012: 21). Indeed, breathing is a complex signifier, which in Arnold's cinema can be read as pointing to not only the living, but also the suffering body. Much scholarly work on *Fish Tank* associates the sounds of Mia's amplified breathing with her burgeoning desire, focusing specifically on her laboured panting during moments of intimacy with Conor, additionally highlighted by the subtle slowing down of the image and the use of close-ups: when Conor carries Mia to bed, when he tends to her injured foot, when he tells her to jump on his back or to breathe in his aftershave while he leans over her. Yet, Arnold's poetics of breathing also connects us to the mortality and the violence looming large in Mia's lived experience, in particular, through the evocation of suffocation by drowning, a metaphor prompted early in the film in the visual detail of the crystal ball with a rabbit inside (fig. 4).



Figure 4: Suffocation by drowning in *Fish Tank*.

Suffocation refers to the difficulty of breathing, the state or process of dying from being deprived of air, and to a feeling of being trapped and oppressed. Breath ensures cellular activity and, thus, sustains life itself, but it also invokes a last breath that is exhaled before death. Arnold's imagining of the (dying) breathing body is materialised in a disturbing close-up of the fish convulsing on the verge of a pond. Moments before, Conor got into the water, with the stumbling Mia just behind him, to catch the animal with his bare hands. When he gets out, he spears it with a long branch. As Bolton observes, "his seduction of the carp echoes his coaxing of Mia into the water to help him, and prefigures the brutality of the future of their relationship" (2016: 80). When Mia tries to get out of the pond, she seems to struggle against gravity, as if the murky water and thick mud have pulled her inside, swallowing her up to drown her. Her movement is further hampered when she cuts her ankle. We see her climbing up on the shore and hear her pained sound. In the next shot the camera focuses on the fish, and we hear Mia's grunt coming from off screen one more time. Tyler asks if the fish is dying, to which their mother responds, "No, it's dancing, you silly cow. What d'ya think it's doing?", thus drawing a connection between the suffocating animal and dancing Mia. Indeed, the words uttered by Joanne evoke the "aquarium" dance scene in which, as discussed earlier, Mia appears to be able to breathe underwater.

The sound of Mia's breathing is featured prominently from the very beginning of *Fish Tank* in which we see her hunched against a blue wall. She is also shown hunched and panting heavily when she helps Keira out of the river after pushing her in,²⁶ and when the white horse Mia tried to rescue dies towards the end of the film. Billy tells Mia they had to shoot the animal and Mia sits down and sobs, hardly able to catch her breath. For Catherine Grant (2016), there is something very puzzling about this latter scene. In her video-essay *Un/Contained*, she observes that, after showing Mia crying, the film cuts away fleetingly to focus on the red caravan from an unfamiliar angle: "The cutaway shot is handled

and moves slightly. It thus feels embodied, although it isn't precisely a point of view shot" (2016). Grant connects the cutaway to a shot in an earlier sequence in the film, when Billy takes Mia to a scrapyard to help him get parts for a car he is rebuilding (fig. 5-6). While this second shot is more clearly marked as the protagonist's point of view, like the earlier shot it takes us too close to what it shows to be clearly identified with Mia's looking position. This "uncannily floating point of view", punctuated by an almost identical cracking sound in both sequences, leads Grant to conclude that "the film marks these two locations as connected sites of death for Mia" (2016).



Figures 5-6: Sites of death in *Fish Tank*.

Grant's illuminating analysis of the two sequences points to how the film links Mia's extreme vulnerability to both the ontological condition of precariousness, that is, our "existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance" (Butler 2012: 148), and precarity, understood as a sense of uncertainty that originates from Mia's social environment, explicitly tied to neoliberal capitalism, and gender and class power relations. Such maximised precariousness, as Judith Butler argues, is unevenly distributed, as it is experienced by disenfranchised populations who "suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2009: 25). Indeed, under neoliberalism certain lives and bodies are protected, while others are not.

The film's final sequence, in which Mia accepts a lift to Cardiff where Billy "knows some people", can also be connected to the sinister, ominous tone of the shot of a cracked car window with remnants of hair which, as Grant (2016) writes, makes her think of Mia's hair. Significantly, the car in which Mia departs is an old Volvo repaired by Billy (as he clarifies earlier, "they [Volvo] don't buckle easily in a smash"), which adds to the complex network of signifiers that destabilises the film's supposedly hopeful ending. The visual markers that precede Mia's departure imply that, even though she might finally be leaving her aquarium, she is an extremely precarious traveller, unable to advance within the harsh demands of the social world around her. Therefore, while the theme of escape features prominently in *Fish Tank*, through her sharply attentive camera Arnold seems to challenge the narrative

drive towards the protagonist's success, articulating a nuanced critique that can be aligned with Berlant's cruel optimism and a simultaneous sense of vulnerability and uncertainty about one's own fate.

Through a close reading of Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*, this article has brought together Berlant's work on the cinema of precarity and phenomenologically-informed film theory to explore how the protagonist's aspirations to geographical and social mobility are undercut by her class and gendered constraints. *Fish Tank* offers first and foremost an affective, sensory experience, but one that is not only based on force and determination with which Mia moves against such cultural constraints, but also one that implies suffocation, inertia, and vulnerability. In Mia's impasse, and in the fantasies that shape her adjustment to crisis ordinariness, we can pinpoint distinct rhythms of survival that she enacts while enduring the present. In detailing the repeated patterns of movement and sound, materialised in the protagonist's bodily rhythms of walking, dancing, and breathing, I have suggested that the impasse works in *Fish Tank* as an aesthetic core. It is through these rhythms that the film presents a set of inherent tensions: between motion and entrapment, between aspirations and the ordinary endurance, between the promise of happiness and the sense of deprivation. As Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* suggests, only by recognising the various dramas of adjustment and bodily rhythms of survival (and death) can we begin to imagine alternative conditions for living otherwise.

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¹ See Bolton on the Conservative party's discourse of "broken Britain", which, as she explains, makes reference to pathologising "single mothers, poor education, anti-social behaviour, alcohol abuse, teenage sex, and lack of employment" (2016: 75). Arnold has frequently been considered a "successor" to social-realist filmmaker Ken Loach, though this correlation might be complicated in many ways (see, for example, Forrest 2020: 86). On social realism as a discursive term, see Hallam and Marshment (2000, 184-219).

² See also Horeck's reflections on Arnold's "poetic social realist art cinema" (2011: 170).

³ As Berlant observes, the term precarity has taken different shapes: it is both "realist", in denoting the conditions of instability prompted by capitalism and its relationship with the state, and "affective", describing how the historical present is lived (2011: 201-202). While precarity and precariousness tend to be used interchangeably, in this article I take precarity as closely intertwined with the sense of uncertainty that originates from the disappearance of stable jobs and issues of housing, debt, and welfare provision, and precariousness as an ontological condition shared by all human beings, as theorised by Judith Butler (2009: 25).

⁴ With the exception of Tanya Horeck's (2011) consideration of Arnold's oeuvre, specifically *Red Road* and *Fish Tank*, in relation to "the new extremism" in European cinema, her work is usually seen as belonging to British (social) realism.

⁵ To identify the new affective idioms of the global economy in Europe and the United States, Berlant addresses two examples of the cinema of precarity: Laurent Cantet's *Ressources humaines/Human Resources* (1999) and *L'Emploi du temps/Time Out* (2001).

⁶ Berlant also redirects critical attention away from affect as something ahistorical or pre-conscious by bringing it back to Raymond Williams's idea of "thought as felt and feeling as thought" (Williams 1977: 132). That is, for Berlant affect is understood as mediation between thought and feeling, not something that precedes it.

⁷ As Berlant explains, affective realism is not meant to be understood as "an aesthetic mode with codifiable qualities" (2011: 274) but as different genres, understood broadly as affectively-invested zones of expectations that help track the multiple dramas of adjustment to the pervasive atmosphere of precarity.

⁸ For Berlant, affect and aesthetics are crucial to grasping the conditions of "crisis ordinariness", which they describe as "a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (2011: 10).

⁹ There are several contemporary permutations and various frictions among the proponents of what has been dubbed the "affective turn" in the humanities and social sciences, which are too pervasive and important to fully recount here. Most frequently, however, affect signifies "a body's *capacity* to affect and be affected" (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 2; original italics) and it is argued, especially in the Spinozist-Deleuzian line taken up by Massumi, that it "cannot be reduced to either 'discourse' or 'emotion', but rather exceeds these categories" (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012: 116). Berlant, among other feminist and queer scholars, has pointed out the risks of certain mobilisations of the affective turn, in particular, those perspectives "that slide towards equating knowing through affect as offering access to being or truth outside of histories and structures of power and representation" (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012: 120). As Berlant's own reflection on the cruelty of normative optimism clearly demonstrates, the affective responses might strengthen rather than challenge a dominant order.

¹⁰ Clare Hemmings observes that the interest in "the good affect that undoes the bad" of writers like Massumi and Eve Sedgwick overlooks the ways in which affect "manifests precisely not as difference, but as a central mechanism of social reproduction in the most glaring ways" (2005: 550-551). It is worth noting that a number of feminist and queer scholars turn towards "ugly" feelings to counterbalance a privileged treatment of "joyful" affect in Deleuze and Massumi. Berlant also emblematises this turn.

¹¹ In the same vein, Sobchack, also drawing on Merleau-Ponty, addresses "common structures of embodied existence [and] similar modes of being-in-the-world" (1992: 5). However, she later acknowledges that we "see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (2004: 63), therefore implying that there are multiple forms of carnal knowledge at stake here.

¹² See, for example, Thornham (2016).

¹³ For the opposite view, see Nwonka (2014), who argues that *Fish Tank* is depoliticising owing to the camera's proximity to Mia at the expense of a wide-ranging account of class power relations.

¹⁴ For example, in his discussion of Mia's walk to Conor's home, Forrest points to how "the aural continuity from the sexual encounter the night before is maintained through Mia's restless, desire-driven panting, as she sets out, impetuously, to pursue Conor" (2020: 104).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Arnold herself opposes the view that her film is "grim": "All the people who look at it and study it and talk about it – write about it – are middle-class, so they always see films about the working class as being grim, because the people in the film don't have what they have" (Arnold in Mullen, 2009: 16).

¹⁶ This term, as Gorfinkel (2012: 344-345) acknowledges, has a complex etymology. It intersects with the term "induration", used in medical contexts to describe obstinacy, hardness, sclerosis, or loss of elasticity; the French noun drawing its root of "endure"; as well as Bergsonian *durée*.

¹⁷ In her reading of the scene, Davina Quinlivan observes how the film's aesthetics, combining hand-held camera and the use of Dolby SR, give prominence to "the sound and vibrant image of a constantly moving, breathing body" (2012: 26).

¹⁸ Mia might not be seen as displaying her hopefulness in a straightforward manner, but, as Berlant suggests, optimism "might *feel* any number of ways" (2011: 4, emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Both films feature "an unsmiling young woman with dark-circled eyes, brown hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, tensed shoulders poking out from a tank top" (Kampeas-Rittenhouse 2016).

²⁰ In the case of *Fish Tank*, adding to the fictional diegesis are the details of casting, which deepen the viewing of Mia's endurance. Katie Jarvis was chosen after being seen arguing with her boyfriend in a railway station, Tilbury Town, which is the station also featured in the film. The entrapment of the working-class teenage girl is represented in the film by a nonprofessional actress, selected because of her similar background to that of her on-screen character. In 2019, Jarvis admitted that she had taken a step back from acting due to financial difficulties and started working as a security guard in a shop, for which she was "job-shamed" in tabloid press.

²¹ This is not to imply Mia's utter victimisation and lack of agency. Impasse is not inaction, but a body holding in suspension, infused with potentiality, "a potentiality never shorn of struggle" (Gorfinkel 2012: 342).

²² *Fish Tank* is frequently compared to *Billy Elliot*. In contrast to the former, Daldry's film offers a feel-good fantasy of success in "broken Britain".

²³ Mia's usual outfit also contrasts with clothes worn by her mother and sister.

²⁴ As Pam Hirsch notes in her comparative discussion of *Fish Tank* and Karyn Kusama's *Girlfight*, the motif of escape into physical activity, usually intertwined with the escape into another social class, with an attendant transition to a different socio-geographic location, has often been employed in films on working-class men, but more recently we have also witnessed it in movies that "focus on a girl or woman who is transgressive in terms of gender norms" (2012: 475).

²⁵ See also Puysségur's (2020) recent discussion of *Fish Tank* and Sciamma's *Girlhood*.

²⁶ This scene echoes two similar moments in *Rosetta*: first, when the protagonist nearly drowns after being pushed by her own mother into a small creek where she secretly fishes; second, when a person she befriends, Riquet (whose job she desperately needs), falls into the creek and, after a long hesitation, she pulls him out using a tree branch as he gasps for air.