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Markets, Globalization & Development Review



Film Review

Cédric Klapisch: My Piece of the Pie (2011) – Intersecting Markets and Lives

My Piece of the Pie (2011) is a film by Cédric Klapisch, which brings together the separate lives of a working-class woman named France, and Steve, a hedge fund manager. The story unfolds in the context of the 2008 global financial crisis. France loses her job in a factory in Dunkirk, an industrial town in Northern France, while Steve is relocated to Paris from London where he worked for 10 years. After losing her job, France becomes Steve's housemaid, and later nanny, in Paris. The film moves back and forth between Steve's luxury penthouse with a private gym, spa and a view of the Eiffel Tower; and Dunkirk, located on the coast of the English Channel, ten kilometers to the Belgian border, hosting one of the biggest industrial harbors in France.

One of the opening scenes of *My Piece of the Pie* is a shot of an oceanic coast, which locates us on the map. The story of the film takes off as we hear about the suicide attempt of France, a 40-something single mother of three, laid off from the factory for which she worked for 20 years. France survives the suicide attempt and the film follows her to Paris, as she ventures into a world of precarious labor as a service economy worker.

Shot mostly from France's point of view, the film gives a glimpse of the lives of both protagonists. France commutes back to Dunkirk on the weekends, spending time with her children and showing them photos of her new work place. Content that she has quickly located a job and her work place is such a luxury apartment, she keeps a cheerful profile. Steve is a rich and successful broker who works for a multinational finance company and makes money by buying and selling hedge funds. He demonstrates in one scene how he can make 60,000 euros in two hours by just anticipating currency fluctuations and pushing a few buttons while sitting in front of his six computer screens in his study.

France's weekend trips to Dunkirk are interrupted as Steve asks her to work for him as a nanny for a month, when Steve's ex-wife drops off their three year old son, Alban, without notice. The unexpectedly high payment Steve offers makes France accept the offer. As she becomes a live-in nanny taking care of Alban, we see two major changes: first, emotional labor becomes a more prominent element of her job. France's job now entails making her male employer comfortable in his apartment and of using her emotional capabilities to attend to his son. Second, it is increasingly difficult to tell where work begins and ends in France's job. Her role in Steve's household

transforms almost into the gendered role of a woman as mother and wife in a family. On one occasion, she is asked to perform as Steve's female partner in a business dinner.

In *The Managed Heart* (1983), Arlie Hochschild introduced the concept of emotional labor and defined how feelings become commodified in new service economy jobs. Hochschild's sociological research demonstrated the ways in which emotion management becomes an essential part of a job in a number of professions such as those of flight attendants, domestic workers, nannies, waitresses. In these kinds of work, the worker's emotional management skills, which used to be a thing of private life only, become an indispensable element of labor markets in which feelings are bought and sold.

While Hochschild's work made emotional labor visible by recognizing it as an integral part of paid labor, feminist studies took it one step further by attracting attention to the disproportionate amount of labor women undertake to fulfill others' emotional needs in everyday life. Talking about affective rather than emotional labor, scholars such as Kathi Weeks (2007), Silvia Federici (2012) and Emma Dowling (2016) emphasized the gendered nature of the emotional performance expected of women, who are supposed to be "just better at this stuff." This involves exerting energy to address the feelings of others, to make them comfortable, or to live up to their expectations. Feminist studies highlighted that the gender inequality in physical household work applies also to women's intangible work in the world of emotions. This concerns women's social roles in public as well as in private, including love relationships that demand hard emotional work (Dowling 2016).

My Piece of the Pie's character Steve is not good at managing emotions. His self-confidence in his work does not find a counterpart in the world of intimate relationships. He treats people close to him in the same way he deals with hedge funds – detached and unsparing; he is on top of the world and he can do what he pleases without paying attention to the feelings of others. At the age of 35, Steve is divorced, has a 3 year old son, Alban, who lives with his mother. He has ruined the only thing close to a relationship he has had with a woman of his rank, the broker Melody, who left him after he cheated on her by sleeping with a call girl. Steve does not understand why he should apologize to Melody, as for him, the night with the call girl "doesn't count." His emotional detachment makes him incapable of relating to a lover's feelings. This is also so in his relationship with his son: he does not know how to relate to him, does not understand the needs of a three year old, does not know the rules of the game on that (emotional) front.

Steve is arrogant; he thinks that he can/should always get what he wants. Attracted to a supermodel during a fashion magazine shoot in front of his office, he approaches her and later takes her to Venice

for the weekend in his private plane. He does not understand when the model rejects to sleep with him saying that she has to “feel something” first. It is the same model who accuses him, later in the film, that he would never let a woman love him because he does not know how to share with others. Steve responds to this accusation not with sadness but with anger; he does not think for a minute before he kicks her out of his apartment. The anger turns into despair later as he chats with France about his unsuccessful relationships with women. Despite France pampering him, Steve admits that “his (emotional) life is shit.” This is when the film begins to reveal the emotional insecurities of the ruthless broker.

Before France enters Steve’s life as his housemaid, we see her being trained as a cleaning lady in Paris, with the help of a North African immigrant hailing from her hometown. Klapisch here highlights the role of immigrant labor in the growing service economy in France. The North African man who helps France find a job as a housemaid, and the women taking the training, are all immigrants. France is told by her mentor that it would be good if she spoke with an accent, such as that of an Eastern European immigrant. The film shows how in the new global economy European working class French citizens and immigrants are treated alike as members of the new working class, now forced to work service jobs instead of buttressing industrial production as manual laborers. The (rather simplistic) allegory that the film’s main character’s name is France, makes the viewer think about the expansion of precarious labor in a European country.

As France loses her factory job and goes into the precarious world of service work, we realize she already has the skills to undertake the responsibilities that a caregiver job requires. The film demonstrates how service economy readily exploits the immaterial skills France has developed through her life as a woman and a single mother of three, in other words by doing unpaid work in the family. Her emotionally demanding care work for her own family, which did not count as work, turns into paid labor and thereby becomes visible as she works for Steve. France’s skills of managing the field of emotions make her a successful housemaid and nanny – a good service worker. Her capabilities extend also to giving Steve good advice on his relationships with women. Our hotshot broker learns a thing or two from his cleaning lady when it comes to intimate relationships.

As the relation between Steve and France evolve into a friendly one, and as Steve begins to listen to and learn from France, we see him beginning to make an effort in the world of emotions. For instance, he agrees to read a bedtime story to his son on one occasion. It feels as if we get close to a Hollywood-style redemption through which Steve transforms into “a good person” — which, however, never occurs in this

film. The male hedge fund manager character has such a self-centered existence; ultimately he does not care beyond profit and pleasure.

Steve's self-indulgence is confirmed once again after he sleeps with France while they are together on a business trip in London. In bed in the morning after, we finally hear about the fact that it was Steve who "iced" France's company and caused her to lose her job in Dunkirk. Steve finds this piece of news funny, while France is shocked being in bed with the perpetrator. The shock turns into intimidation when France overhears a mocking phone conversation between Steve and his friend about the night they spent together. The film makes this incident the moment when France's working class sensibilities are evoked. That is also the moment, we sense, when France conceives the events that will make the end of the film.

France takes Alban with her to Dunkirk, creating a situation in which Steve thinks Alban is kidnapped by her. Yet, her real intention is not really kidnapping Alban; she just wants to play a little game with Steve. She wants Steve to go see Dunkirk for himself, naively thinking that would give him a new perspective and humanize him. The game, however, turns into a criminal incident as Steve calls the police and drives down to Dunkirk together with Melody. In a scene in the car, we see Steve apologize to Melody for his cheating and receive a positive reaction from her. For the first time in the film we see Steve sharing a moment of compassion with another person. This scene confirms (not Steve's but) France's emotional capabilities: it was France's advice to Steve that he should apologize to Melody if he wants to regain her love.

The final scene takes place in Dunkirk. The police arrive and arrest France. We are once again near the beach on the ocean front. Her fellow working class friends defend her; they do not allow the police car to move and take her away. Simultaneously, Steve comes and picks up his son. France's oldest daughter, Lucie, informs France's ex-fellow-workers that it is this guy who closed down their factory. The ending then takes the form of a face-to-face class conflict, in which Steve is confronted by the ex-workers of the "iced" company. We see him vulnerable and disturbed. In the scene before the last one, we see Steve run towards the sea: he disappears into the darkness.

This is a story of a victim and a perpetrator, a loser and a winner of global economic markets. This way of seeing the film can make one think that "there is nothing new under the sun." The film's strength, however, is elsewhere: besides highlighting the social inequalities between the material lives of a hedge fund manager and a housemaid/ex-industrial worker, the film also shows the reverse inequalities when it comes to skills in the world of emotions. Seen through that lens, Steve is quite unqualified. France, while she does not know how to manage hedge funds, has an immanent capability in terms of how to manage emotions. Indeed, the very last shot of *My*

Piece of the Pie shows us a cheerful France again: sitting in the police car, she laughs it all away, as the frame freezes.

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