

La loi du marché (*The Measure of a Man*): An attempt at a drama of the French working class

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Directed by Stéphane Brizé; written by Brizé and Olivier Gorce

At this year's Cannes film festival, Vincent Lindon won the prize for best male actor for his part in *La loi du marché* (*The Law of the Market*; English-language title: *The Measure of a Man*), directed and co-written by Stéphane Brizé and set in contemporary France.

Lindon plays 51-year-old Thierry, who has lost his job in a factory closure 18 months ago. Thierry is urgently trying to find work as his unemployment benefit will soon run out and his income will be reduced to €500 (\$US562) per month, not enough to pay the mortgage on his flat and maintain his wife and handicapped teenage son.

We see Thierry go through a series of disappointments: the opening scene, where he bluntly tells the employment office interviewer that the courses he has been offered are useless; a painful, stumbling interview on Skype with a potential employer who finally tells him his prospects for a job are virtually nil; a group training session for job interviews where his fellow job-seekers mercilessly criticise him. Despite these difficulties, Thierry comes over as a loving father and husband, with generous instincts.

Thierry finally takes a job as a supermarket security guard where he is obliged to catch and shame impoverished shoppers and fellow workers. When a checkout clerk with many years service is hauled into a confrontation with management for having collected customers' unclaimed loyalty points and is sacked, the outcome is tragic.

The film's concern with the conditions of the working class is a welcome change from the self-obsession of the upper middle class and trivial fodder

too often offered up by the French film industry. *La loi du marché* has had success both at the box office and with critics—though doubtless for somewhat different reasons.

Many individual scenes, particularly those dealing with the indignities heaped upon Thierry as he struggles to find work and prevent a total collapse of his family's finances, ring true. In a country where over 5.5 million people (20 percent of the active population) are unemployed or partially employed, working people all face such experiences, themselves or through their friends and family. Masses of people are eager to see these realities examined, probed and given artistic expression in film.

Nevertheless, the film adds up to somewhat less than the sum of its parts. The situation Brizé has chosen to represent certainly contains the potential for drama. Yet the filmgoer comes away with little other than a certain elemental anger and frustration from *La loi du marché*. Its approach, apparently influenced by figures like Britain's Ken Loach and the Dardenne brothers from Belgium, skates across the surface of working class life.

Brizé invents “at my simple level, very modestly”, he says in an interview with *Regards.fr*, explaining that he resists the urge to make comments or statements with his camera: “It's a camera which takes no decisions, it adapts to what is happening”.

Such passive, garden-variety conceptions help make Brizé's work palatable to film critics and the academic establishment in France. However, constant adaptation to surface appearances of working class life, or rather of what a filmmaker believes working class life is like, comes at a real artistic price.

Brizé elaborates a theory of “hyper-realism”, using

non-professional actors—an employment office employee, supermarket checkout staff and others—to play themselves, in improvised scenes. As a result, there are many realistic touches in the film, in which Lindon is the only professional actor. Yet the film does not really piece together these scenes and touches into a coherent, moving account of the experience of a middle-aged French worker.

The focus on Thierry’s family life, the time he spends with his wife and his struggle to care for his handicapped son opens up real possibilities. These are people with many stories to tell that are not often told. Thierry’s wife is given little to say, however, and there is a certain flatness or even coldness in the resulting portrayal of Thierry’s family.

Brizé briefly evokes the resistance in the working class to the wave of factory closures and mass layoffs since the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008. It features a brief cameo by Xavier Mathieu, a union delegate who led the struggle against the closure of the Continental tyre plant at Clairoux in 2009.

Playing himself, Mathieu tries to convince Thierry to keep participating in a union campaign for greater compensation for the plant closure he suffered. Thierry politely but firmly tells Xavier Mathieu to get lost. Thierry is no longer interested; he wants to “turn the page” and find a new job.

Again, there is a real story to be told here. Why did Thierry become disillusioned, what do he and his wife, and millions of other workers, say and think about Mathieu and his ilk at the dinner table, as they go to bed or when they are out shopping? What do they say to each other about France’s corrupt union bureaucracy and its so-called Socialist Party government, who are presiding over these attacks on the workers? What do they think of the unutterable hypocrisy of official public life?

The film-goer wants to and needs to hear more about these issues. It is not a matter of Brizé inventing a mass revolt that has not yet taken place, but to look for the truth of what is taking place, what is happening beneath the surface and where the collective anger of millions of Thierry’s is headed. One should not forget that this is the working class which since the 1968 general strike has terrified the bourgeoisie and its petty bourgeois hangers-on with its revolutionary potential. It is

impossible to examine these realities seriously, however, by deciding not to take decisions.

Whatever its problems, Brizé’s film, in any case, is a start. After nearly seven years of deep economic crisis, the issue of working class reality is posed, and exploring it attracts an audience. What is the next film that will take up this issue, and deal with it more richly and colorfully?



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