

# *On Falling*: Crushing exploitation and a sense that something's got to give

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*On Falling* is a realist feature film following Aurora (Joanna Santos), a Portuguese immigrant in Scotland working as a picker in an Amazon-style warehouse. The film, director Laura Carreira's debut, received critical praise, winning Best Director in the San Sebastian International Film Festival and the Sutherland Prize for Best First Feature at the BFI London Film Festival.

It is an impressive work, critical and highly sensitive, examining the destruction of workers' sense of self under conditions of extreme exploitation. Aurora's monotonous and grinding existence leaves her with no life outside of work, unable to cultivate one without the time, energy or finances to do so. She lives to work in a way many workers will find painfully familiar.

Carreira repeatedly returns to the same settings of Aurora's work and life, almost tableaux, to illustrate the repetitiveness and drudgery of her existence. The frame is almost never steady, opting instead for a handheld camera while cutting into tight and uncomfortable close-ups of Aurora. The shaky-cam technique reflects the instability of Aurora's life and the close ups give a sense of the claustrophobia felt when social life is so tightly penned in by circumstance.

Aurora has a tiny room to herself and shares a bathroom and kitchen, seemingly the only large, shared room in the building. It constantly hums with the repetitive bang of the washing machine. New flatmates come and go. Despite this sparse accommodation, her miniscule wages do not properly cover the cost of living. On several occasions, she is caught with unexpected bills which leave her penniless.

A smashed phone screen costing £99 to fix falls close to her week for topping up the shared electricity, which she misses. She is so ashamed when the power cuts out one night—while she is showering, guiltily using another flat mate's shampoo—that she sneaks back into her room dripping wet and crawls under her duvet, where she remains through the next morning, ignoring all knocks from her flatmates. One of them pays in her stead, leaving her embarrassed and in debt to him.

She is left with no food money for the rest of the month, relying on the generosity of her flatmates, scraped together spare change for small snacks and loading her coffees with sugar.

One powerful scene highlights the class basis of Aurora's food instability. At a warehouse staff party/fundraiser, managers laud the huge profits made by the company and pressure workers to give over some of their paltry wages to a charity as part of a corporate PR-stunt. Aurora slips free cakes into her bag and sneaks into the bathroom to eat them, her only meal of the day.

When Aurora preforms well in the warehouse early in the month, management insultingly reward her with her choice of chocolate bar, as if she were a child. But when she is clearly suffering with exhaustion and depression and her picking becomes slower, she is immediately reprimanded. There is no support offered or even an inquiry into her mental wellbeing. The company installs suicide deterrent nets.

Scrambling even for the essentials, Aurora lacks the resources to build connections with the people in her life. She tends to go home and straight to bed, where she will sit alone scrolling through short videos on social media. The film examines this reality sympathetically, cutting across the middle-class sneering attitude that young workers are “on their phones too much.” *On Falling* establishes that this is not Aurora's individual choice but is all she can engage with after being left with no time, energy or money to pursue her actual interests.

In the warehouse, workers are given no time to establish any true friendships and are rushed off their feet. The only opportunity they get to talk is over lunch. In one conversation Aurora speaks to a colleague, bonding over the drudgery of their lives and both concluding that all they do at home is wash their laundry. On the next shift she looks out for him, only to find out that he has killed himself.

His colleagues ask, “What do you think was wrong at home?” One calls the action selfish but then reveals that he too has thought about how he would take his own life. The

theme of suicide or suicidal thoughts is present throughout the film, which leaves no doubt about where these pressures actually come from.

There is a notable absence of any organised labour movement presence in Aurora's life, reflecting the abandonment of the most exploited layers of the working class by the trade union bureaucracy. Where unions do involve themselves, their leaders act to limit, isolate and strangle workers' struggles, aiming at a cosy partnership with management.

At the climax of the film Aurora has an interview for a new job with a social care company.

At first she is relieved when the interviewer doesn't ask her for her qualifications, but being asked to describe her interests and hobbies—who she is as a person—is worse. Struggling for an answer, Aurora breaks down in tears, realising that she has been allowed no life at all. She leaves the interview and passes out in a park, likely of malnourishment and exhaustion, staying there until the groundskeeper finds her. She takes comfort in his embrace.

The film leaves the audience with a sense that something has got to give. Either workers are forced to sacrifice themselves at the altar of profit or the working class abolishes capitalism.

In *On Falling's* final scene a technical issue stops work, finally giving Aurora and her colleagues the chance to speak and even play with each other. These are the social beings humans are when not crushed under the weight of exploitation. Music—almost entirely absent throughout the film—fills the scene while Aurora looks happy for the first in a long time. Her face soon drops when she realises it won't last, and the audience is left with that crestfallen image.

Explaining the motivations behind the film, Carreira told *Big Issue*, “Cinema avoids looking at work... And I wanted to challenge myself to do it... We work our entire lives and we don't question why. And, you know, I have the suspicion we don't have to work as much and get paid as little. There's an irrationality in the way we're living and I find it baffling that we don't talk about it more often... Films can be used to escape your life. But we should maybe look at why we're trying to escape life so often.”

She speaks from experience, moving from Portugal to Edinburgh herself, and working in the gig economy. “It was just that shock of how little you were paid, and actually in my second job, I later found out, I wasn't even being paid minimum wage. My life immediately got consumed. Even a simple thing like meeting a friend all of a sudden became this big complication where people had different shifts.”

Getting to the heart of *On Falling*, and the universal experience it speaks to in contemporary society, she explains, “Money limits the amount of choices you have, the

time you have and what you can do with it. If you don't have money to interact with society in a way that leaves you with some agency, then you isolate yourself and it will be harder to make connections with other people.

“The film is about scarcity, not just financial but of experience, of meaning as well. If you need a job to pay your bills then that sense of vulnerability is universal. In this particular job, the dynamic is more grotesque but anyone who needs to work for a living is experiencing it.”

Her comments on automation are incisive: “I like the idea that with automation we can remove jobs that are repetitive and not interesting to do so it frees us to do other things... but it can't be done at the expense of people's lives. People in these jobs are being expected to work like robots. But people are still cheaper than robots and for as long as that's the case and we do our own maintenance, we'll keep getting the jobs.”

She urges that workers recognise they are not to blame for their situation, produced by the system which exploits their labour and dominates their lives. “What's really important to me is removing this sense of looking within to fix the problem. We're told that if you're experiencing poverty, then, how exactly do you spend your money? If you're experiencing mental health issues, well, there's therapy, you can go for a walk.

“There are all these symptoms and the solutions always seem to be focused on the individual. I hope the film invites us to look at the way we're living as the place to look for answers as to why we're feeling this way.”

Workers are beginning to rebel against these conditions. In 2022, a wave of wildcat actions erupted at Amazon warehouses in the UK, with one workers telling the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We are not treated as workers but as slaves”. Strikes took place against the company across the UK, Australia, Europe, the US and beyond last year.

Carreira's film helps workers reflect on how much of their own lives they are being denied by their subordination to corporate profit interests, and the commonality of that experience. It and others like it will play a role in furthering the process already underway in the working class of collective struggle which turns isolating experiences of hardship into the solidarity of resistance.



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