

# Precarious Lives: The Deepening Pathologies of Neoliberalism in French Cinema (1980 to the Present)

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## **Abstract**

Understood as a politico-epistemological program rather than simply free-market fundamentalism, as a particular production of subjectivity that constitutes individual subjects as ‘human capital’ rather than simply a way of governing economies or states, neoliberalism has led to the profound destruction of social bonds and to the production of economic, social, and political vulnerability and precarity. Precarity – referring to the rise in flexible and precarious forms of labour, the growth of the knowledge economy, the reduction of welfare state provisions, the suppression of unions, and the association of migration with illegality – has become one of the buzz words in studies of neoliberalism’s restructuring of the global economy and of the entire human sensorium. The recent volume *Insecurity*<sup>1</sup> encapsulates the dominant understanding of precarity and precariousness as the default state of life today, the logic governing the present cultural, economic, political, and social life in the West. This article identifies several dominant narrative motifs in French films made between the 1980s and 2020s that take precarity and precaritization as their subject, and draws attention to an important shift in attitudes to work and class struggle, a shift indicative of the deepening pathologies of neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** Precarity, Neoliberalism, French Cinema, Class, Ethics, Affect.

## **Introduction**

Originally signifying a social condition linked to poverty,<sup>2</sup> precarity is associated with the rise in flexible and precarious forms of labour, the reduction of welfare state provisions, the suppression of unions, the growth of the knowledge economy, and the association of migration with illegality. The ‘precariat’ might encompass only “people whose lives are precarious because they have little or no job security”,<sup>3</sup> but inasmuch as neoliberalism is “a political rationality that extends and disseminates market values to all institutions and social action”<sup>4</sup> the *logic* of precarity pervades the entirety of society. Most recent scholarship approaches precarity as extending beyond the expression of an economic condition to indicate an entire ‘affective environment’: consider, for

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Grusin (ed.), *Insecurity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Claude Barbier, ‘A survey of the use of the term *précarité* in French economics and sociology’, *Documents de travail CEE*, vol. 19, CEE Noisy le Grand (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Alex Foti, *General Theory of the Precariat: Great Recession, Revolution, Reaction* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2017), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Brown, ‘Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy’, *Theory and Event*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2003), p. 7.

instance, Sianne Ngai's discussion of envy, anxiety, irritation, resentment and paranoia in *Ugly Feelings*;<sup>5</sup> Guy Standing's attentiveness to the precariat's anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*;<sup>6</sup> Lauren Berlant's analysis of 'post-Fordist affect', the affective language of anxiety, contingency and precarity in *Cruel Optimism*;<sup>7</sup> and Francesco Sticchi's examination of precarity's 'chronotopes' of anxiety, depression, and expulsion/extinction' in *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television*.<sup>8</sup> How neoliberal affects are theorised, however, still varies widely: for instance, Berlant deems 'cruel optimism'<sup>9</sup> an apolitical and/or politically regressive affective strategy of adjustment in response to the attrition of social fantasies like upward mobility, job security, meritocracy, political and social equality; while Ngai invites us to consider the potentially political work of 'ugly feelings', arguing that it is these feelings – rather than the grander passions from which utopian, universalising projects or ideals are born – that define the age of transnational capitalism.

What has come to be known as 'the new European cinema of precarity'<sup>10</sup> builds upon the legacy of late 1920s-1930s British documentaries of working-class life; 1930s French poetic realist films permeated by a sense of pessimism and fatalism; postwar Italian neorealist films featuring working-class characters, real locations and documentary style; 1930s and 1940s Hollywood melodramas populated by suffering protagonists dealing with conflicts between personal desires and mounting social pressures; the British New Wave, particularly 'kitchen sink' films exploring the fragmentation of the working class; and French 'New Realism'. In this article I identify a few dominant narrative motifs in French films made between the 1980s and 2020s that take precarity and precaritization as their subject, while also drawing attention to an important shift in attitudes to work and class struggle, a shift indicative of the deepening pathologies of neoliberalism.

### From Timetable to Time Out

Given that the term 'précarité' only became attached to employment in the 1980s, it is instructive to begin with Robert Guédiguian and Frank Le Wita's *Dernier été/Last Summer*.<sup>11</sup> Set in Estaque, against the background of France's deindustrialization, *Dernier été* follows a group of friends in their twenties as they try to adapt to the new economic reality setting in. With factories closing down and paid work hard to come by, Gilbert and his friends spend their days hanging out, doing

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<sup>5</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Francesco Sticchi, *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> "Optimism is 'cruel' insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming," Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Alice Bardan and Áine O'Healy, 'Transnational Mobility and Precarious Labour in Post-Cold War Europe: The Spectral Disruptions of Carmine Amoroso's *Cover Boy*', in *The Cinemas of Italian Migration: European and Transatlantic Narratives*, ed. Sabine Schrader and Daniel Winkler (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 69-90.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Guédiguian and Frank Le Wita, *Dernier été/Last Summer* (Les Films de l'Arquebuse, 1981).

odd jobs, occasionally resorting to petty crime. In its exploration of the decomposition of the working class the film calls to mind British kitchen sink dramas, particularly in the way it figures the generational conflict between unemployed youth and their parents (especially fathers). Gilbert has chosen the precarious life of a petty thief working short-term contracts, over that of his father, an alcoholic, whose life of permanent employment at the shipyard Gilbert sees as a form of self-imposed slavery, to which a life of precarity is preferable. Guédiguian's characters are not resentful of their social status or preoccupied with class mobility (they never discuss money or debt); on the contrary, Gilbert brags that he works only one month of the year and is free to do as he pleases the rest of the time. While a few decades earlier (1960s) or later (the 2000s) his refusal to work might have been theorised as a gesture of revolt, here it is not that anymore (or not that yet): when he and his friends make off from cafes without paying or commit petty thefts, they are hardly rebelling against the class structure.



Figure 1. *Dernier été/Last Summer* (Robert Guédiguian and Frank Le Wita, 1981).

“What if a man loses his job but continues to live his life as if nothing happened?” – this is the premise of *L’emploi du temps/Time Out*,<sup>12</sup> in which a company executive (Vincent) loses his job but continues to maintain the illusion of being employed.

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<sup>12</sup> Laurent Cantet, *L’emploi du temps/Time Out* (Paris: Haut et Court, 2001).



Figure 2. *L'emploi du temps/Time Out* (Laurent Cantet, 2001).

Vincent begins his unpremeditated defection from the corporate world by accidentally driving past an exit on his way to a business meeting. Rather than correct his mistake he lets himself drift to the point where he is forced to leave his real job, invent a fictitious one at the UN office in Geneva, and eventually turn to criminal activities. Unlike Franck, who suffers from a split class identity, Vincent is not tormented by a class conflict but by a type of introverted rebellion against the corporate world he has come to loathe. Unlike *Resources humaines*, which explores a clearly defined class conflict, setting the social drama on the shopfloor, *L'emploi du temps* is a psychological thriller, which puts us directly in Vincent's subjective point of view. Vincent experiences alienation not as a class-bound experience but as an experience of derealisation bordering on a psychotic break: opting out of his job means opting out of reality, severing all personal and social bonds that used to sustain him. Here the effects of precaritization are not limited to unemployment of poverty but are much more pervasive and potentially pathological.

Notable about Vincent's 'adjustment strategy' to his new precarious existence is the absence of despair or anxiety he displays; as Berlant argues, when 'crisis' is no longer experienced as traumatic but as 'crisis ordinariness' the response to it takes the form of an impasse. Opting out of satisfying the neoliberal imperative of constantly working to maintain his employability, Vincent retreats into a life of napping, spacing out, wandering in non-places (hotel lobbies, parking lots, office waiting areas). What he does when he is 'not' working – the imaginary job he invents as an altruistic UN bureaucrat in charge of Third World development, the Ponzi scheme he orchestrates to extract money from old friends, the smuggling operation of counterfeit goods he joins – links his artful dissimulation with "the false promises of a faltering European economic order."<sup>13</sup> While Vincent's 'time out' could be read in terms of Peter Fleming's analysis of silence, sleep, absenteeism, sickness and suicide as political strategies embodying the logic of refusal to talk to power, "to enter into the discursive mirror game that is now governing so much liberal

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Porton, Lee Ellickson and Laurent Cantet, 'Alienated Labor: An Interview with Laurent Cantet', *Cinéaste*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2002), p. 24.

discourse”,<sup>14</sup> the film illuminates the surreptitious ways in which neoliberalism co-opts such forms of resistance: the pleasure Vincent takes in his freedom from a 9-to-5 job, his transient life, which allows him to ‘design’ his days as he pleases, to ‘use time’ (hence the title: *L’emploi du temps*) as he pleases, underpins neoliberal values of flexibility, self-entrepreneurship, and autonomy.

### From Class Struggle to Ethical Dilemmas

By the late 1990s and early 2000s the ‘romantic’ conception of precarity (albeit with fatalistic undertones), which associates it with freedom, choice, unpredictability, and even rebellion, was no longer possible. The next several films I will consider are not only more pessimistic but increasingly preoccupied with questions of class and class conflict, though they tackle these questions in very different ways, narratively and stylistically. One of the works of French ‘New Realism’,<sup>15</sup> *Resources humaines/Human Resources*<sup>16</sup> revolves around the transformation of the French working class within the context of the demise of Fordism and the specific case of the implementation of the 35-hour working week, a new labour regime associated with the casualisation of labour and weakening unions.



Figure 3. *Resources humaines/Human Resources* (Laurent Cantet, 1999).

Set in a small Normandy town and shot in a real factory with mostly non-professional actors, the film follows Franck, a management student who returns to his hometown to do an internship in the HR office of the factory where his father has worked for thirty years. Eager to impress

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Fleming, ‘Common as Silence’, *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, vol. 13, no.3 (2013), p. 629.

<sup>15</sup> On ‘New Realism’, see Martin O’Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film Since 1995* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Laurent Cantet, *Resources humaines/ Human Resources* (Paris: Haut et Court, 1999).

management, but also sympathetic to the workers' plight, Franck naively proposes a referendum to assess workers' attitudes toward instituting a 35-hour workweek only to find out that his boss is planning to use the referendum to justify downsizing, his father being among those to be fired. The film illuminates the connection between the crisis of Fordism and the crisis of white masculinity by foregrounding the emasculating effects of Franck's father impending unemployment. Like other European films whose protagonists search for alternatives to their precarious worlds without a fully formed political framework [e.g., the Dardenne brothers' *Two Days and One Night*],<sup>17</sup> *Resources humaines* lacks the unified class protagonist of 1960s' committed cinema: the film locates the possibility for change not in the traditional working class embodied by Franck's father (who refuses to join the strike instigated by his own son) but in Franck, a man with a split class identity who feels equally alienated from both workers and management, and Alain, a Black worker with whom Franck collaborates to sabotage the factory. Although precarity is not (yet) an obstacle to political struggle – e.g., “the non-white identity is central to recovering the language of solidarity”<sup>18</sup> – the struggle is becoming increasingly fragmented.

*Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré/Work Hard, Play Hard*<sup>19</sup> came out during a period of labour unrest in France that saw tens of thousands of public sector workers take to the streets to express opposition to the government's move toward privatisation and inadequate salaries and benefits.



Figure 4. *Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré/Work Hard, Play Hard* (Jean-Marc Moutot, 2003)

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, *Two Days and One Night* (Liège: Les Films du Fleuve, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Ergin Bulut, 'Can the Intern Resist? Precarity of Blue-Collar Labor and the Fragmented Resistance of the White-Collar Intern in Laurent Cantet's *Human Resources*', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2017), pp. 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Marc Moutot, *Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré/Work Hard, Play Hard* (Paris: TS Productions, 2003).

The film centres on Philippe, a young business management graduate, who joins a Parisian management consultancy company specialising in mergers and restructuring industries to increase profit. The company's ruthless and charismatic head-hunter, Hugo Paradis, assigns Philippe to do an audit on a company that is about to be taken over by another, with a view to deciding which operations need to be downgraded or shut down. Armed with a chronometer, Philippe is sent to the shopfloor to measure the efficiency of each employee and dismiss the least efficient ones. Philippe's girlfriend Eva, a single mother in precarious employment, serves as Philippe's (and the film's) moral conscience – she breaks off their relationship because of his decision to proceed with the dismissal of eighty workers. Although Philippe is sympathetic to the workers and befriends the company's Muslim cafeteria chef, the possibility for a cross-class alliance quickly evaporates, and Philippe ultimately overcomes his 'crisis of conscience'.

The parallels between *Resources humaines* and *Violence des échanges* are unmistakable: in both films a business school graduate is torn between his desire to advance his career and his sympathy for the workers. However, Philippe's inner conflict is not dramatised in class or generational terms but only through his romantic relationship with Eva: he must choose not between 'the precariat' (Eva) and management (Hugo) but rather between career and personal happiness, a conflict that used to be limited to so-called 'women's films'. Unlike *Resources humaines*, which tells a specific story but through it comments on larger processes of class decomposition, the weakening of labour unions and the crisis of white masculinity, *Violence des échanges* presents Philippe's story as that of a single man's moral and ethical degradation, framing it as a conflict between financial gain and personal ethics, rather than as an exploration of the systemic violence of neoliberalism evoked in the film's title.

Only five years separate *Resources humaines* and *Violence des échanges* yet the simple fact that Franck aligns himself with the working class, to which he himself no longer belongs, while Philippe ends up internalising the managerial discourse of his charismatic boss and naturalising it as something inevitable (the law of the market) reveals the extent to which neoliberalism has entered its "normative stage".<sup>20</sup> *L'emploi du temps*, which shifts the attention to the state of white-collar labour under neoliberalism, underscores the protagonist's refusal to obey neoliberal imperatives of work, echoing the gesture of refusal dramatised in *Dernier été*, but it also makes clear the terrifyingly real consequences of this refusal and the pathologies it gives rise to. By the time we get to *Violence des échanges* the idea of revolt, whether in the sense of refusing to work (Gilbert), instigating a strike (Franck), or taking 'time out' (Vincent), begins to seem unimaginable. Despite its narrative similarities to *Resources humaines*, *Violence des échanges* no longer stages the conflict between labour and capital in class terms but rather in ethical and thus psychological terms.

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<sup>20</sup> William Davies, 'The New Neoliberalism', *New Left Review* (2016). At: <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii101/articles/william-davies-the-new-neoliberalism>. Accessed 28/01/2023. Davies provides a useful periodisation of neoliberalism: combative neoliberalism (1979-1989); normative neoliberalism (1989-2008); and punitive neoliberalism (post-2008).

### The New Landscape of Class Struggle: Mental Breakdown, Suicide, Murder

Films made after the 2007-2008 global financial crisis reflect the deepening pathologies of neoliberalism, with Vincent's *symbolic* suicide giving way to Kessler's psychotic breakdown (*La question humaine*),<sup>21</sup> Paul's murder/suicide (*De bon matin*)<sup>22</sup> and Laurent's suicide (*En guerre*).<sup>23</sup> *La question humaine/Heartbeat Detector* revolves around Kessler, a psychologist employed by the French subsidiary of a German petrochemical company to evaluate the mental health of its employees and advise on firings and hirings. He is hired by the company's German president, Karl Rose, to secretly observe and report on Mathias Jüst, the company's CEO, who appears to be on the verge of a breakdown. As a cover for his investigation Kessler suggests re-forming a string quartet in which Jüst used to play with other employees. A member of the quartet turns out to be Arie Neumann, a Jewish musician and disgruntled former employee, who has been sending anonymous letters to Jüst. As Kessler investigates Jüst's secret past he begins to uncover disturbing connections between the workings of international corporations and the Holocaust, while his own perception of reality becomes increasingly skewed.<sup>24</sup> The first time Kessler becomes aware of the analogy between corporate policy and the Holocaust is when he compares the original version of Rose's restructuring plan, in German, to its redacted French translation. As he sits on the floor in his apartment, mechanically mouthing the German words for "relocation" and "restructuration," the spectre of the Holocaust begins to haunt the film, and what was initially a metaphorical connection between the corporate policy of downsizing and the extermination of the Jews becomes literal. It is precisely after reading the German draft of the company policy that Kessler finds himself, for the first time ever, unable to complete what should have been a "routine selection file" (selecting the workers to be fired).

Despite obvious continuities between *Violence des échanges* and *La question humaine*, there are also significant differences: Philippe is hired to participate in the restructuring of the company by evaluating workers' efficiency understood in *material* terms (he measures their speed with a chronometer) while Kessler evaluates the employees' *mental* fit, their capacity for self-regulation. Kessler's dilemma, like Philippe's, is framed in ethical terms, but whereas for Philippe the ethical conflict is a personal one (he has to choose between his girlfriend and his career), not only is Kessler's ethical dilemma given much broader significance by linking it to the Holocaust, but the dilemma also drives Kessler, a psychologist, to the edge of a psychotic breakdown, demonstrating that the norms according to which neoliberalism reproduces itself as a political philosophy are not immune to the pathologies they are supposed to identify and punish.

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<sup>21</sup> Nicolas Klotz, *La question humaine/Heartbeat Detector* (Paris: Sophie Dulac Productions, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Marc Moutout, *De bon matin/Early One Morning* (Paris: Les Films du Losange, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Stéphane Brizé, *En guerre/At War* (Paris: Nord-Ouest Films, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> The film suggests that Jüst's father might have been implicated in the Final Solution, while Karl Rose might be a product of the *Lebensborn*, the Nazis' eugenic scheme to create a 'master race'.





Figure 5. *La question humaine/Heartbeat Detector* (Nicolas Klotz, 2007).

In the opening sequence of *De bon matin/ Early One Morning* Paul, manager at the International Credit and Trade Bank, arrives in the office on time, takes out a gun, shoots his boss and another employee, locks himself in his office and, while he waits for the police, reflects on the events leading up to this day. The film engages directly with the 2008 financial crisis – the dialogue is full of references to sub-prime loans, refinancing, foreclosure – and, like the other films discussed here, reveals the deepening psychopathologies of neoliberalism through the recurring motifs of psychotic breakdown (Paul’s hallucinatory visions of his boss in the forest), suicide (Paul’s suicidal thoughts following his demotion to another position in the ‘middle office’), and murder (Paul’s murder of his boss). *De bon matin* explores the world of work not within the framework of social realism but through what appears to be an emerging hybrid genre – the corporate psychotriller – which draws on film noir, melodrama, and the psychological thriller. Indeed, what is notable about *De bon matin*, *L’emploi du temps*, *Violence des échanges* and *La question humaine*, whose protagonists are all white-collar workers, is how different they are stylistically from the quasi-documentary look of *Dernier été*, *Resources humaines*, and Stéphane Brizé’s films (see below), which center on working-class characters.

White-collar films are not concerned with representing a particular social problem, whether unemployment, labour unrest, or class conflict but with exploring ‘adjustment strategies’ – or rather the failure to adjust – to the ‘new spirit’ of neoliberalism understood as the extension of economic logic to all areas of life. What white-collar and working-class films do share, however, is a deepening concern with (for) the ethical/ moral/ human costs of neoliberalism.



Figure 6. *De bon matin/Early One Morning* (Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011).

Unlike the films discussed above, Stéphane Brizé's *La loi du marché/The Measure of a Man*<sup>25</sup> and *En guerre/At War*<sup>26</sup> operate within the recognizable conventions of social realism: working-class characters, non-professional actors, episodic narratives, and a quasi-documentary feel. In the first scenes of *La loi du marché* Thierry, an unemployed factory worker, meets with an unhelpful unemployment agency employee, a bank employee, who advises him to sell his apartment so that his loved ones are taken care of “after he is gone”, and a humiliating recruiter who, after assessing Thierry's willingness to work flexible hours for less money, informs him he has no chance of getting the job he is interviewing for. These scenes dramatise the power that previously minor, anonymous characters representing various governmental mechanisms and structures, from banks through unemployment agencies to HR offices, usually present only as disembodied voices on the phone or on computer platforms, have come to play in sustaining and determining our lives. Another scene, set at a performance management workshop during which Thierry's peers dutifully dissect his poor body language, rhythm of speech and vocabulary choices, renders painfully visible the ways in which neoliberalism's governmental practices pass through the individual, subjectivity, conducts and lifestyles. Every conflict in the film is motivated by the extension of economic logic and market values (such as ‘performance’) to social and personal relations: selling the family mobile home at a heavily discounted price means putting a price tag on the many happy years Thierry spent there with his family; mock job interviews are about disciplining bodies to make them marketable; even education is about the same thing (Thierry's disabled son has to meet the same standards of performance and efficiency as his father).

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<sup>25</sup> Stéphane Brizé, *La loi du marché/The Measure of a Man* (Paris: Nord-Ouest Films, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Brizé closes his ‘work trilogy’ with *Un autre monde/Another World* (2021), which reverses the perspective of the previous two films: Vincent Landon plays a white-collar manager caught between his corporate superiors and his factory employees.



Figure 7. *La loi du marché/The Measure of a Man* (Stéphane Brizé, 2015).

Once Thierry gets a job as a supermarket security guard (in yet another instance of post-industrial nostalgia Thierry's personal crisis follows the loss of factory work and his demotion to the service sector) the perverse logic of neoliberalism is brutally exposed. Thierry is forced to collude with management in restructuring the company that employs him, spying not only on customers through surveillance cameras, but also on his fellow workers. One of the cashiers, Mrs Anselmi, is caught 'stealing coupons' and fired right away; the following day she commits suicide. After Mrs Anselmi is fired (her dismissal is framed in psychological terms – she 'betrayed' the company's trust – making downsizing appear no different from a break up) HR organises a grief management workshop, whose purpose is to psychologise away the structural violence to which all employees are subjected: work did not define Mrs Anselmi's entire life, the head of HR tells employees, and no one can really know the reason for (i.e., be held accountable for) her suicide. When at the end of the film Thierry is faced with the prospect of having to witness and participate in the firing of yet another store cashier, he quits his job. Throughout the film Brizé's hand-held camera puts us in the position of an observer, mirroring Thierry's own position, forcing us to ask ourselves what we would do in this situation. By framing every conflict as an ethical test Brizé attempts to counter neoliberalism's reduction of social relations to quasi-metric aggregates. While in *Dernier été* Gilbert's refusal to work was *not* ethically or morally determined, *La loi du marché* frames Thierry's choice to quit his job as an ethical one. His gesture of refusal to be complicit in the punitive system that both rewards and disciplines the likes of him and Mrs. Anselmi is ethically unquestionable, but its political significance is harder to decipher since his refusal proceeds from the "individual atomisation of precarity"<sup>27</sup> rather than from a collective sense of class consciousness.

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<sup>27</sup> Francesco Sticchi, *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 59.

*La loi du marché* and *En guerre* can be seen as a working-class version of parallel universe films like *Sliding Doors*:<sup>28</sup> in the first, more introverted version of the story, Thierry retreats from the workers' struggle and in the other, more militant one Laurent fights till the end. Both versions, however, end in an impasse: Thierry takes an ethical stand at the cost of losing his job, and Laurent commits suicide. In *En guerre* an automotive parts plant in Agen is deemed non-competitive and ordered to close by its German management. The workers, having agreed two years prior to forego bonuses and work additional unpaid hours, vote to strike, led by Laurent.



Figure 8. *En guerre/At War* (Stéphane Brizé, 2018).

While Brizé paints the industrial debate as a class conflict, with labour and management in a perpetual face-off, he is also attentive to the ways in which class struggle has changed: the crucial parts of the mostly verbal struggle happen in meeting rooms, with workers trying to break through management's purposefully evasive corporate lingo. Laurent epitomises the importance of 'knowledge capital' to class struggle. It is because Laurent is knowledgeable about the company's operations in a transnational context – knowledgeable about marketing, political economy, the justice system, and geopolitics – that he is able to argue that the factory is not 'non-competitive', that the real reason for closing it is to relocate operations to Romania. To fight "intelligently", as Laurent calls on workers to do, they must think like accountants and political economists and understand the workings of global capitalism. In fact, Hauser, the CEO of the German group Dimke, of which the French company is a subsidiary, is so impressed by Laurent's knowledge of 'the Market' that he tells him he would make a great chef d'entreprise. The way in which

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Howitt, *Sliding Doors* (London: Intermedia Films, 1998).

neoliberals like Hauser blame the exploitation of workers on ‘the Market’, presenting it as an impersonal force over which no one (including neoliberals) have control, reminds us that one of the central strategies neoliberalism uses to perpetuate itself is to invoke the obsolete notion of ‘laissez faire’ in order to disavow the role of the state and the justice system in creating and sustaining a market-friendly culture.



Figure 9. *En guerre/At War* (Stéphane Brizé, 2018).

It is not only the nature of class struggle that has changed but also the stakes. In *La loi du marché* Thierry is fighting to put bread on the table, while preserving his personal integrity. In *En guerre*, when the workers finally meet Hauser, Laurent declares forcefully that the aim of class war is not a paycheck at the end of the month: “We have come here for money? No, we don’t care about money. We want work!” The workers are fighting for the fundamental right to have rights, including the right to work. Laurent’s final symbolic act of self-immolation registers the full extent to which this idea(l) of class struggle has been undermined by the internal fragmentation of the working class, with an increasing number of workers viewing class struggle in merely financial terms: having internalised the logic of neoliberalism, they fight for a bigger paycheck or severance package, and see their relation to other workers not in terms of a shared past, values and goals, but in economic terms.

### **From Collective to Individual Struggle**

The last three films I want to consider reflect a declining sense of working-class unity and purpose, focus on individual protagonists looking for individual solutions to their problems, and even buy into the neoliberal rhetoric of autonomy by depicting precarity as an opportunity for self-emancipation. *A Plein Temps/Full Time*<sup>29</sup> is symptomatic of precarity cinema’s tendency to strip its protagonists of any safety nets, presenting them with only two options – sink further to the

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<sup>29</sup> Eric Gravel, *A Plein Temps/Full Time* (Paris: Novoprod, 2021).

bottom or shoot up to the top, each of these being equally probable – so that what might otherwise appear like small inconveniences, bad luck, or minor obstacles suddenly become a question of life or death. With a propulsive editing style and a hypnotic, ominous electronic score, the film follows Julie, a 40-ish single mother of two kids, from the moment when she gets her kids ready for school and drops them off at their elderly childminder's home, through her long commute to Paris, at the mercy of public transportation constantly interrupted by medical emergencies and transport strikes, to her evening journey back home, which depends on replacement bus services and hitched rides. Julie's days are a never-ending series of worries and fears, triggered by factors beyond her control: her ex-husband, who owes her alimony, is unreachable by 'phone; her bank keeps calling her about outstanding mortgage payments; she is on the verge of losing her stressful job as a head chambermaid in a posh Paris hotel (on account of being late to work or leaving work too early because of transit strikes and a job interview for a full-time job scheduled during her work shift); and her childminder threatens to call social services. In the absence of any state-provided safety nets Julie is dependent on a precarious support network: a neighbor is minding her kids, her co-workers occasionally cover for her but only when it suits them; various assorted strangers give her rides to Paris; a friendly hotel security guard helps her get a taxi to her job interview.



Figure 10. *A Plein Temps/Full Time* (Eric Gravel, 2021).

The film underscores the difficulty of precarious subjects organising themselves politically: it is not accidental that the event that disrupts Julie's daily commute and her attempts to attend full-time job interviews is a transit strike, which she in principle supports, but in which she has no time to participate. All she can do is look for an individual solution to her predicament. One day, with nothing else to do, Julie takes her kids to an amusement park, and it is there that she finally gets the 'phone call she has been waiting for all along: she is offered the full-time job she interviewed for. Standing in front of the merry-go-round in the Jardin de Acclamation Julie breaks down in tears, but these are tears of helpless despair rather than of joy and relief, for she knows that taking on the full-time job means getting back on the merry-go-round that is her work life.

Gravel's previous film, *Crash Test Aglaé*,<sup>30</sup> tells the story of a young, socially awkward, and uptight female worker (Aglaé) fully dedicated to her job as a technician in a car crash test laboratory. When the company suddenly moves the entire factory offshore (in Kolkata) Aglaé decides – to the amazement of her coworkers and her managers – to follow her job to Kolkata rather than face the prospect of redundancy. Drawing on several genres – from road movies and globalization stories to comedies, women's films, and industrial action stories – the film traces Aglaé's self-emancipation from a precarious work-slave isolated from any family or state support networks to a confident, independent young woman.



Figure 11. *Crash Test Aglaé* (Eric Gravel, 2017).

Although the film starts out as an industrial action story, as soon as Aglaé hits the road her story is reframed as a personal quest: her self-emancipation comes at the cost of class emancipation. When, at the end of the film, a few boys discover her, almost dead, dumped in a pile of garbage, and take her to a hospital in Kolkata, Aglaé transforms overnight from a nobody into a symbol of what Zygmunt Bauman calls the 'human waste' of globalization. Her absurd journey to India becomes an instant media sensation and forces the Swiss owner of the factory where Aglaé works to rethink offshoring. The head of the company's HR department arrives in Kolkata to offer Aglaé her job back and to convince her to give a press conference, at least for the sake of her co-workers, for whom Aglaé has become a potent symbol of class struggle. Aglaé refuses, and instead of returning to France she decides to stay in India, where she 'feels more herself': her personal quest turns out to be more important to her than the industrial action she has inspired back in France. Although the film starts out as a critique of offshoring as a principle of global neoliberal capitalism, it ultimately devolves into an acceptance of the neoliberal discourse of precarity as an 'opportunity' to reinvent oneself.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Eric Gravel, *Crash Test Aglaé* (Paris: Novoprod, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> This is not the only film that frames precaritization as an opportunity for self-reinvention. See, for example, Demian Sabini, *Terrados/ Rooftops* (Barcelona: Moviemment Films, 2011).

The first half of *Rien à foutre/ Zero Fucks Given*,<sup>32</sup> which centers on Cassandre, a young flight attendant for a low-cost airline company, is shot in *cinéma vérité* style and features real flight attendants. The quasi-documentary approach immerses us in their day-to-day working life, from the ritual of selling duty free goods, first-aid training exercises and emergency landing safety drills, to smile workshops; in short, like *La loi du marché*, *Rien à foutre* dramatises the production of neoliberal subjectivity through rhetoric, training, workshops, surveillance and self-surveillance.



Figure 12. *Rien à foutre/Zero Fucks Given* (Julie Lecoustre and Emmanuel Marre, 2021).

However, like *Crash Test Algae*, *Rien à foutre* filters its (potential) critique of precarious work through the protagonist's personal trauma: early on, Cassandre, in a moment of drunken stupor, tells another flight attendant that her mother died a few years ago in a tragic car accident. Cassandre, we are meant to understand, has freely *chosen* the exploitative, emotionally destructive, and precarious work for a low-cost airline as a way of dealing with personal trauma.<sup>33</sup> The film does hint at some of the reasons for Cassandre's apolitical attitude: when they are invited by striking airport employees to join their fight for better pay and working conditions the flight attendants are hesitant to strike for fear of losing their job, but it is Cassandre's response that best captures the precarious subject's difficulty in envisioning a future in the name of which they would fight, sacrificing what little security she may have. Cassandre declares that she doesn't believe in change, that she is too busy working to think about the future; all she can think about is her next flight. "I don't even know if I will be alive tomorrow!" she laughs as she runs to catch her flight. The film renders Cassandre's almost maniacal despair as a private affair, a consequence of her family tragedy rather than of the systemic injustices suffered by precarious workers like her.

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<sup>32</sup> Julie Lecoustre and Emmanuel Marre, *Rien à foutre/ Zero Fucks Given* (Brussels: Wrong Men North, 2021).

<sup>33</sup> In the film's second half Cassandre violates company policy regarding in-flight purchases and is forced to return home to Brussels, where she tries to reconnect with her sister and father, whom she abandoned after her mother's death.



The combination of dynamic editing, vividly impressionistic shots framed in a quasi-home movie style, montage sequences, and a soundtrack that alternates between elevator music and Eurotrash hits, captures perfectly the memoryless, repetitive, disorienting existence of flight attendants – punctuated by long stretches of downtime between flights, during which Cassandre gets drunk, hooks up with Tinder dates, posts on social media – and of precarious workers in general. Julie (*A Plein Temps*) and Cassandre are suspended in the same perpetual, scavenging present, unable to conceive of a future and thus unable to imagine themselves as political subjects. There are important parallels between Walter Benjamin’s theorization of the gambler/factory wage slave as a quintessential figure of modernity defined by his inability to project himself either in the past or the future, and neoliberalism’s precarious subject embodied by characters like Cassandre and Julie. For the gambler, Benjamin writes, all that exists is the present, while the future is reduced to the next throw of the dice: winnings secured earlier have no bearing on the next throw of the dice; similarly, the factory worker assigned a particular place in the production line does not concern herself with what comes before or after but only with the part of the production process she is assigned to. Like the gambler, the precarious worker is incapable of wishing, only of desiring or wanting (“the further a wish reaches out in time, the greater the hopes for its fulfillment”).<sup>34</sup> The precarious subject’s personal life shrinks to the ‘downtown’ that separates one working day from the next: all that exists for the precarious subject is the next flight, the next commute to work. This ‘downtime’ – this life – is not ‘experienced’ but ‘spent’ (in Cassandre’s case, on drinking, partying, having casual sex, forgetting oneself). Like the gambler, trapped in the present as a repetition of equally banal moments, the precarious subject is doomed to occupy only two positions, that of a loser or a winner (thanks to a lucky streak), unable to project herself either in the past (and thus unable to find solace or inspiration in historical revolutionary struggles and in a shared sense of working-class identity) or in the future (by envisioning a different order of things).

## Conclusion

The question what makes a film political has always preoccupied filmmakers and film theorists alike. While some locate the political significance of a film in its formal properties – e.g., the blurring of fiction and documentary techniques in *La vie est à nous/ Life Is Ours*<sup>35</sup> is said to account for the importance of that film in the history of Left filmmaking in France<sup>36</sup> – others caution that an excessive focus on aesthetic form might divert attention from the political issues a film sets out to explore.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, Francois Bégaudeau, co-writer and star of *Entre les murs/The Class*<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in *Walter Benjamin: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 179.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Renoir, *La vie est à nous/ Life Is Ours* (Paris: Collective Films, 1936).

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Cinema Engagé: Film in the Popular Front* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 283. Importantly, this kind of argument has been made not only with reference to 1930s Left filmmaking in France but also with reference to post-1995 French political cinema. See Jonathan Ervine, *Cinema and the Republic: Filming on the Margins in Contemporary France* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Laurent Cantet, *Entre les murs/The Class* (Paris: Haut et Court, 2008).

– a film that was unanimously described as political – argues that what we understand as ‘political’ is intimately connected to the historical moment in which a particular film is made: “the political is less about content, opinions and watchwords than designating a means of stitching together and unstitching what is real, monitoring what could be in what is and anticipating movement in that which is static.”<sup>39</sup> Martin O’Shaughnessy, too, emphasises the importance of evaluating the political value of French films in their present context rather than comparing them to previous forms of political cinema (e.g., post-1968 cinema). Post-1995 political cinema, he avers, operates “in the difficult space between the politics that was and an emergent new politics”,<sup>40</sup> which accounts for the mostly compensatory nature of its “melodramatic politics”<sup>41</sup> that seeks “to restore eloquence and significance to struggles seemingly condemned to silence and meaninglessness.”<sup>42</sup>

As the logic of the market penetrates the social and even the private realm, and work becomes synonymous with existence, precaritization is increasingly experienced as an existential sense of ungroundedness: to be out of work is tantamount to being, symbolically or literally, dead. What kind of “emergent new politics” do we find in post-1980s French films, which no longer romanticise the precarious existence of social outcasts or drifters but depict precaritization as a devastating experience equivalent to falling out of society altogether, depriving one’s life of meaning, and losing one’s sense of identity and/or experiencing a psychotic break? The foregoing discussion of several films that represent different moments in the historical arc of neoliberalism, as it played out in France, reveals important shifts in the representation of precarity in French cinema. While earlier films dramatising the fragmentation of the traditional working class might still conceive the possibility of recovering the language of solidarity, more recent films, which increasingly reframe issues of class and class struggle in ethical or moral terms, and in which nervous breakdowns, suicides and murder-suicides figure with a disturbing frequency,<sup>43</sup> testify to the deepening pathological effects of neoliberalism. Even more alarmingly, some recent films no longer depict precarity/precritization as a shared experience out of which a collective sense of class consciousness could potentially emerge but as a state of quiet resignation that allows one to rest and reconnect with oneself (ironically, Julie, in *En plein temps*, appears to be happiest and most at peace with herself when she is fired and forced to stay home, unable to even worry because she has no other options available to her) or as a perversely desirable state of mental and emotional numbness (Cassandre).

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<sup>39</sup> Francois Bégaudeau, ‘Vous avez dit film politique?’, *Cahiers du cinema*, vol. 604 (2005), p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> Martin O’Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film Since 1995* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> This melodramatic politics is characterised by “the production of moments of confrontation and collision; the corporeal and the gestural; the restoration of ethical transparency to a world that has become opaque; the emotive focus on individuals and families rather than abstract forces.” O’Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema*, p. 136.

<sup>42</sup> O’Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema*, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Le Père de mes enfants/Father of my Children* (Mia Hansen-Løve, 2009) is another film exploring precarity, debt and suicide. On worker suicides, see Sarah Waters, ‘Suicide as Protest in the French Workplace’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2015), pp. 1-20.