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Precarious Lives:
The Deepening Pathologies of Neoliberalism in French Cinema (1980-present)

I. Introduction

Neoliberalism is not simply a way of governing economies or states. It constitutes the individual subject as an 'entrepreneur of the self', an idea that Roger Foster traces back to the emergence of mass culture and a therapeutic ethos[1] and their synchronization with neoconservative ideals and values around key ideals like autonomy, personal growth, self-reliance, and self-government. The neoliberal self is constructed as both a brave risk-taker and as permanently precarious. The psychological pressure of producing and sustaining the ideal self-managing neoliberal subject is reflected in the growing number of con artists, grifters, hustlers and impostors populating contemporary cinema and television, pursuing with deranged determination the 'good life' "straight down the line" (*Double Indemnity*, 1944), where distinctions between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, disappear. SLIDE The radical transformations of the welfare state and the labor market have initiated the golden age of the con artist as the omnipresence of the impostor in cultural production testifies, from *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), *L'emploi du temps* (2001), *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), *Us* (Jordan Peele, 2014), *A Perfect Man* (Yann Gozlan, 2015), *Faultless* (2016), *Parasite* (2019), to *The Origin of Evil* (2022), *Ozark* (2017-2022), *The Dropout* (2022), *Inventing Anna* (2022). The impostor, which has now attained a celebrity status, both on and off screen, and in which neoliberal ideas of individual self-monitoring and self-reliance intersect, embodies the new pathologies of self-deception and delusion that neoliberalism has given rise to.

Neoliberalism has led to the profound destruction of social bonds and to the production of economic, social, and political vulnerability and precarity. Most recent scholarship approaches precarity as extending beyond the expression of an economic condition to indicate an entire 'affective environment'—SLIDE consider Sianne Ngai's discussion of envy, anxiety, irritation, resentment and paranoia in *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Guy Standing's attentiveness to the precariat's anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation in *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Lauren Berlant's analysis of 'post-Fordist affect', the affective language of anxiety, contingency and precarity in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), and Francesco Sticchi's examination of precarity's 'chronotopes' of anxiety, depression, and expulsion/extinction' in *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (2021). How neoliberal affects are theorized still varies widely: for instance, Berlant deems 'cruel optimism'[2] 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, universalizing projects or ideals are born—that define the age of transnational capitalism. SLIDE Thus, scholars are increasingly thinking of 'precarity' as a political tool rather than a socioeconomic condition from which there is no escape, and trying to envision new forms of solidarity and collectivity, as Martin O'Shaughnessy does in *Looking Beyond Neoliberalism: French and Francophone Belgian Cinema and the Crisis* (2022),[3] or as Francesco Sticchi does in *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and*

Television (2022),[4] in which he tries to identify new *ethical* alternatives to the risk-taking, self-optimizing neoliberal 'entrepreneur of the self'.

3 SLIDES What has come to be known as 'the new European cinema of precarity'[5] 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'. Here I will identify a few dominant narrative motifs in French films made between the 1980s and 2020s that take precarity as their subject and I will draw attention to an important shift in attitudes to work and class struggle, a shift indicative of the deepening pathologies of neoliberalism.

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II. From Timetable to Time Out

SLIDE Given that the term 'précarité' only became attached to employment in the 1980s, it is instructive to begin with a film made in 1981, Robert Guédiguian's *Dernier été/Last Summer*. Set in Estaque, against the background of France's deindustrialization, *Dernier été* follows a group of friends in their 20s 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 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 theorized 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.

SLIDE "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* (Laurent Cantet, 2001), in which a company executive (Vincent) loses his job but continues to maintain the illusion of being employed. 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. Vincent is not tormented by a class conflict but by a type of introverted rebellion against the corporate world he has come to loathe. Vincent experiences alienation not as a class-bound experience but as an experience of derealization 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. As the film

makes clear, the effects of precaritization are not limited to unemployment or 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."[6] 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 discourse,"[7] 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, underpins neoliberal values of flexibility, self-entrepreneurship, and autonomy.

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III. From class struggle to ethical dilemmas

By the late 1990s and early 2000s the 'romantic' conception of precarity, which associates it with freedom, choice, unpredictability, and even rebellion, is no longer possible. SLIDE One of the works of French 'New Realism',[8] *Resources humaines/Human Resources* (Laurent Cantet, 1999) 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 labor regime associated with the casualization of labor and weakening unions. 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 30 years. Eager to impress 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* (2015)], *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"[9]—the struggle is becoming increasingly fragmented.

SLIDE *Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré/Work Hard, Play Hard* (Jean-Marc Moutot, 2003) 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 privatization and inadequate salaries and benefits. The film centers 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. Phillipe'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 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 dramatized 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 we are familiar with mostly from women's films. Unlike *Resources humaines*, which tells a specific story but through it comments on larger processes of class decomposition, the weakening of labor 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 internalizing the managerial discourse of his charismatic boss and naturalizing it as something inevitable (the law of the market) reveals the extent to which neoliberalism has entered its "normative stage" (William Davies)[10] *L'emploi du temps*, which shifts the attention to the state of white-collar labor under neoliberalism, underscores the protagonist's refusal to obey neoliberal imperatives of work, echoing the gesture of refusal dramatized 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 labor and capital in class terms but rather in ethical and thus psychological terms.

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IV. 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*, 2007), Paul's murder/suicide (*De bon matin*, 2011) and Laurent's suicide (*En guerre*, 2018).

SLIDE *La question humaine/Heartbeat Detector* (Nicolas Klotz, 2007) 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.[11] 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. After reading the German draft of the company policy 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.

SLIDE In the opening sequence of *De bon matin/Early One Morning* (Jean-Marc Moutot, 2011) 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, starting with the arrival of his new ruthless boss, under whom Paul increasingly finds himself sidelined and eventually made redundant because of his "poor metrics." 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 psycho-thriller—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. What white-collar and working-class films do share, however, is a deepening concern with the ethical/moral/human costs of neoliberalism.

Unlike the films discussed above, Stéphane Brizé's *La loi du marché/The Measure of a Man* (2015) and *En guerre/At War* (2018)[12] operate within the recognizable conventions of social realism: working-class characters, non-professional actors, episodic narratives, and a quasi-documentary feel. SLIDE In *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 dramatize 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.

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 organizes a grief management workshop, whose purpose is to psychologize 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"[13] rather than from a collective sense of class consciousness.

SLIDE *La loi du marché* and *En guerre* can be seen as a working-class version of parallel universe films like *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998): 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. SLIDE In *En guerre* an automotive parts plant in Agen is deemed non-competitive and ordered closed 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. While Brizé paints the industrial debate as a class conflict, with labor 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 epitomizes 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 CEO. The way in which 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.

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 internalized 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.

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V. 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. SLIDE *A Plein Temps/Full Time (*Eric Gravel*, 2021)* 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 bottom or shoot up to the top, each of these being equally probable. 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, 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. 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. The film underscores the difficulty of precarious subjects organizing themselves politically: it's 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 supports but in which she has no time to participate. All she can do is look for an individual solution to her predicament.

SLIDE Gravel's previous film, *Crash Test Aglaé* (2017), 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. 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 find or reinvent oneself.[14]

SLIDE The first half of *Rien à foutre/Zero Fucks Given* (Julie Lecoustre and Emmanuel Marre, 2021), which centers on Cassandre, a young flight attendant for a low-cost airline company, is shot in cinema verité 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* dramatizes the production of neoliberal subjectivity through rhetoric, training, workshops, surveillance and self-surveillance. 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.[15] 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.

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 (embodied by Cassandre and Julie) is incapable of wishing, only of desiring or wanting ("the further a wish reaches out in time, the greater the hopes for its fulfillment").[16] 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 herself). 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).

SLIDE

VI. The Poetics of the New European Cinema of Precarity: Beyond Social Realism

The expository, often didactic, approach to social issues has always been a hallmark of social realism. However, unlike previous film movements or styles of committed cinema, which generally follow the conventions of social realism, the European cinema of precarity is stylistically and generically diverse—from psychological thrillers through comedies to crime films—and increasingly transcends the limits of social realism.[17] When the cinema of precarity enters genre territory it often borrows the elimination logic of reality shows like *Survivor* (2000), *Squid Game* (2021) and *The Traitors* (2022), which divide the world into 'winners' and 'losers',

and ask: "How far would one go to 'win' or simply to survive?" Suicides and murders, including murder-suicides, both among blue-collar and white-collar workers, feature with increasing regularity in the cinema of precarity [Mrs. Anselmi's suicide in *The Measure of a Man*, Vincent's (symbolic) suicide in *Time Out*, Gregoire's suicide in *The Father of My Children*, Laurent's suicide in *At War*, Paul's suicide in *Early One Morning*].

The unreliable narrator and the femme fatale, staples of film noir, have recently resurfaced in thrillers centered on precarious protagonists e.g., in Sébastien Marnier's films *Faultless* (2016) and *The Origin of Evil* (2022). Both explore their impostor protagonists' descent into lawlessness, delusion and derealization, and dedicate more time to the characters' subjective experiences than to examining the social and economic structures that produce the delusions and obsessions they suffer from.[18]

SLIDE 26 *Faultless* which mixes elements of the crime film, psychological thriller, and film noir, follows 40-year-old Constance, who, after losing her job as a real estate agent in Paris, returns to her hometown in rural France hoping to get a job at the small real estate company where she used to work before moving to Paris. However, her former boss hires a much younger woman (Audrey), who is willing to work for less than a living wage. Constance becomes obsessed with the idea of getting rid of her rival. She begins stalking Audrey, posing as an apartment hunter under an assumed name to infiltrate her life.[19] Upon its release the film was received as a psychological thriller *a la Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), about a sociopath "intent on getting her old job back, no matter what it takes."[20]

What I think is most important about the film, however, is the way it depicts precarity as indicating an entire 'affective environment' rather than merely an economic condition.[21] Constance's obsession with getting a job is not motivated entirely by the pressing need for money but by a *deeper psychological need*, which the opening scene hints at. Constance wakes up from a nap, in her Paris apartment, and lights a cigarette but is interrupted by a real estate agent who is showing the apartment to a young couple. Constance quickly comes up with an excuse, collects her belongings in a single suitcase and leaves the apartment. It is this painful sense of shame and failure that motivates her subsequent actions. Unable to actively change her circumstances, the only way she can exercise agency is in the form of verbal persuasion (she tries to convince Audrey to leave her job and join her fiancée in Russia) and pranks (she deletes appointments from Audrey's agenda, turns off the power in her house so Audrey doesn't hear her alarm clock in the morning, etc.) There is a long history of pranks as a political tactics (the Situationists were particularly fond of them)[22]; Constance's pranks, however, are not so much a form of resistance as an indication of her loss of agency, which she desperately tries to reclaim by literally trying to 'be' Audrey: she breaks into Audrey's house, lounges in her bedroom, eats her food, showers in her bathroom, sleeps in her bed.

SLIDE Nathalie, the protagonist of *The Origin of Evil* (2022), also tries to reclaim her sense of agency by assuming the identity of the person she wants to be. On the verge of financial collapse, she attempts to reconnect with her wealthy businessman and his new family by assuming the identity of his long-lost daughter. Nathalie's performance is so convincing that she comes to believe she *is* his daughter. SLIDE Some critics called the film "an homage to Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, with echoes of Agatha Christie and Victorian melodrama.[23] I would argue, however, that the obvious predecessor to Nathalie's (and Constance's) die-hard investment in "the fantasy of the good life" (Berlant) is Rosetta, from the Dardenne brothers' 1999 eponymous film, though there are important differences between the three characters. SLIDE In *Rosetta*, a teenager living with her alcoholic mother in a caravan park

makes numerous attempts to secure a stable job. Twenty-five years later Nathalie, a middle-aged woman equally deprived of a support network (she is an orphan) is barely making ends meet as a worker in a fish canning factory and living out of her suitcase. If Rosetta's 'cruel optimism' manifested itself in her determination to secure a job at any cost, Nathalie's 'adaptation strategy' is to succumb to the fantasy of the good life completely and cling to it at any cost (even murdering her own lover). Nathalie takes a huge risk, but there is nothing revolutionary about her project of infiltrating Serge's wealthy family: she has no intention of challenging the system of social relations that upholds the class inequalities that produce precarity. The films are also radically opposed in terms of genre and style: *Rosetta* is a social drama shot in a neo-realist style, episodic in structure, centered on character rather than plot, with attention to the details of everyday life; *Faultless* and *The Origin of Evil* are thrillers filled with plot twists and revelations. Rosetta is a supremely ethical character who, driven by circumstances and by despair, does the unthinkable: she betrays the very person who helps her get a job in order to get his job, and suffers the moral consequences (she quits the job she stole from her friend and tries to commit suicide). In *Faultless* and *The Origin of Evil* such ethical questions and internal conflicts are replaced by plot questions: Will Nathalie and Constance get away with it? Will they win or lose?

VII. Conclusion

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, 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? I hope that my discussion of several films representing different moments in the historical arc of neoliberalism as it played out in France, has shown that while earlier films dramatizing 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 an alarming frequency,[24] testify to the deepening pathological effects of neoliberalism.

FIGURES

Figure 1. *Dernier été/Last Summer* (Robert Guédiguian, 1981)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

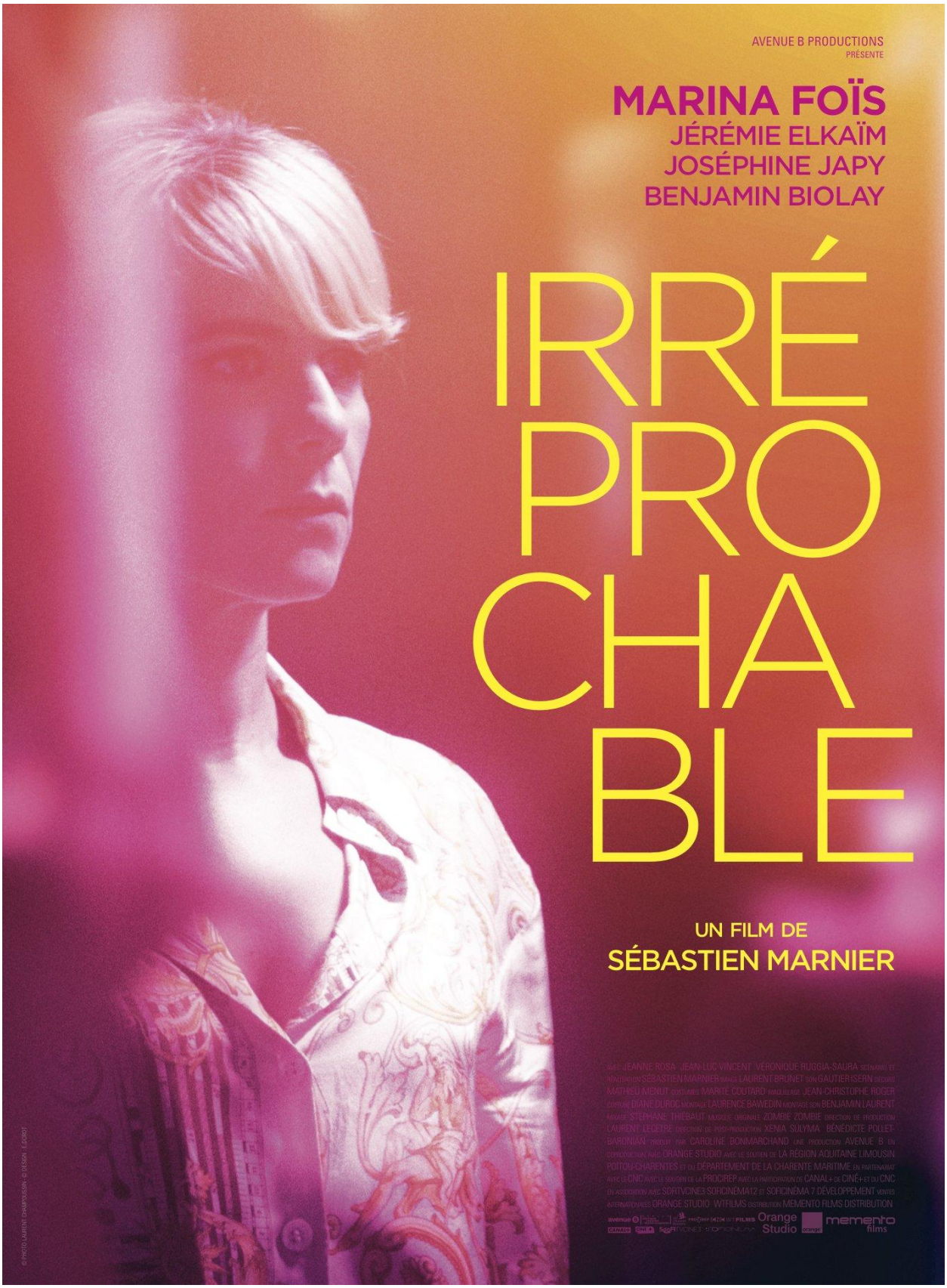
Figure 9. *En guerre/At War* (Stéphane Brizé, 2018)

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

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

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

Figure 13.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SÉBASTIEN MARNIER
memento films

Figure 14.

[1] Roger Foster, "The Therapeutic Spirit of Neoliberalism." Political Theory, Vol.44, No.1 (Feb 2016), pp.82-105. My essay argues that neoliberal forms of government emerged through the shifting political trajectory of the therapeutic ethos in the postwar period in Anglo-American societies. In the postwar era, the therapeutic ethos attracted the attention of conservative cultural critics who described it as a destructive force on communal obligation. Initially, the therapeutic ethos appeared to align naturally with New Left ideas of democratization in the workplace and private sphere. However, I argue that the New Right was subsequently able to sever the therapeutic ethos from its alignment with social democratization by imbuing it with an alternative set of meanings centered on the ideas of market freedom and the entrepreneur. The result was the construction of the new, neoliberal forms of power, which, I argue, take the form of the management of subjectivity. Finally, I outline the two major social pathologies of the neoliberal era, namely, the consequences of its contractualized notion of citizenship and the explosion of social inequality, both of which are traceable to the influence of therapeutic notions of the self.

[2] "'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." Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011), p.2.
[3] Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Looking Beyond Neoliberalism: French and Francophone Belgian Cinema and the Crisis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2022).
[4] Francesco Sticchi, *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).
[5] 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. S. Schrader and D. Winkle (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp.69-90.
[6] Richard Porton, Lee Ellickson and Laurent Cantet, 'Alienated Labor: An Interview with Laurent Cantet', *Cinéaste*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2002), p.24.
[7] Peter Fleming, 'Common as Silence,' *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, vol. 13, no.3 (2013), p. 629.
[8] 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).
[9] 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.
[10] 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 periodization of neoliberalism: combative neoliberalism (1979-1989), normative neoliberalism (1989–2008), and punitive neoliberalism (post-2008).
[11] 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'.
[12] 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.
[13] Francesco Sticchi, *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p.59.
[14] This is not the only film that frames precaritization as an opportunity for self-reinvention: e.g., see *Terrados/Rooftops* (Demian Sabini, 2011).
[15] 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.
[16] Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' in *Walter Benjamin: Essays and Reflections*, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.179.
[17] This is especially visible in British cinema, which used to be virtually synonymous with the tradition of social realism. While British filmmakers continue to explore pressing social issues, they do so in a much more self-conscious and often intimate way than Ken Loach's brand of social realism, for example by moving towards a hybrid of art cinema and sociopolitical commentary [*TwentyFourSeven* (Shane Meadows, 1997)], commenting on the medium of film

itself [e.g., *Bait* (Mark Jenkin, 2019)], or exploring the intermedial relation between film and other visual arts [e.g., *Ray & Liz* (Richard Billingham, 2018)].

[18] The constitution of the self-managing neoliberal subject in contemporary cinema and tv is always gendered. Compare male-centered films about financial fraud and con artistry like *The Big Short* (2015), about the 2007-2008 financial crisis, and *Dumb Money* (2023), which chronicles the GameStop short squeeze of Jan 2021, with films and tv series centered on female protagonists like *Faultless*, *The Origin of Evil*, *The Dropout*, and *Inventing Anna*. *The Big Short* and *Dumb Money*, ensemble-driven biographical comedy-dramas, are plot-driven rather than exploring the individual psychology of their protagonists. Lauded as films about modern day class warfare, they require audiences to possess a certain level of expertise in finance, with the former famously featuring cameo appearances by celebrities explaining concepts like 'subprime mortgages' and 'synthetic collateralized debt obligations.' By contrast, female-centered films about con artists and impostors are framed as character studies: *Inventing Anna* spawned endless discussions of its protagonist's mental condition (from antisocial personality disorder, through narcissistic personality disorder, to delusions of grandeur), while *The Dropout* attributed its protagonist's imposterism to a sexual assault trauma (Holmes testified she was sexually assaulted while she was at Stanford; in the series final episode the company's legal advisor spells out the reasons for Holmes' sociopathic lack of affect: it's because Holmes was in denial about her assault, allegedly because her mother advised her to forget about it, that she was incapable of understanding that her fraudulent company is hurting real people).

[19] It is later revealed that Constance's stalking of Audrey is not the first time she had exhibited that kind of behavior. Constance meets a lawyer who is supposed to defend her in a sexual harassment trial against her former boss in Paris. Up until now, based on what Constance tells other characters, we had assumed that Constance is suing her boss for firing her after their affair came out in the open, and for allegedly making it impossible for her to find a job at another real estate agency. However, Constance's defense attorney informs Constance that it is her former boss who is suing her—rather than the other way around—for stalking him. It was not Constance's boss who had stalked her and sent her hundreds of texts and phone messages; on the contrary, it was Constance who stalked him and sent him hundreds of messages, demanding that he does abandon her and threatening to expose their affair if he does.

[20] https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/faultless-rome-film-review-1201917372/

[21] She moves back into her family home with no electricity (unable to pay the bills), is forced to eat canned corn (cannot afford anything better), steals money from her lover, steals food from a hospital food cart, and spends most of the time wears the same knockoff Versace blouse (cannot afford to buy new clothes).

[22] https://www.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product_detail&p=599

[23] https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/the-origin-of-evil-venice-review/5173334.article

[24] *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.