Representations of Neoliberal Work in Contemporary Francophone Film

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of neoliberal work and its broader context in contemporary Francophone film. The relationship between work and cinema is complex, not least because cinema has been historically associated with leisure time and therefore opposed to work in popular imaginaries. Influential critics argue that work often remains invisible in film, or that film necessarily reinforces hegemonic narratives surrounding work. This study reconsiders some of these assumptions as part of a broader interrogation of the relationship between cinema and work in the neoliberal conjuncture, probing the possibilities and limitations that contemporary cinema encounters in its attempts to represent and critique the workplace and its broader context. I draw upon a corpus of recent work-centred film which dramatises diverse environments, from working-class industrial production to white-collar management careers. This corpus has often remained unexamined in academic contexts, but represents a significant filmic response to neoliberal workplace upheavals that opens up important and novel perspectives on the relationship between cinema and neoliberalism more generally. I combine thematic and aesthetic analyses of these films with a sophisticated and nuanced theoretical framework that draws upon Marxian and Foucauldian influences. My close readings place film and theory into a productive dialogue that acknowledges the fundamental differences between them while casting light upon the potentialities implicit in reading them alongside each other. I argue that much contemporary cinema proves adept at critiquing neoliberal work, but struggles to move beyond this to put forth a positive vision of change. I also identify a number of works which break from this trend, maintaining a more pronounced sense of political hope while demonstrating an implicit awareness of their own limitations.

Table of contents

List of figures

Images are used on the understanding that such use constitutes fair dealing. Directors are listed in the filmography. All figures are screenshots from DVD editions of the films, and have been cropped and brightened for clarity.

Introduction

Work is such an everyday part of life that it sometimes goes unquestioned in popular imaginaries. Work is, after all, something that virtually everyone does: it is something of an inevitability. Yet, even the most cursory examination reveals the broad-reaching significance and complexity of work. On a basic level, work is something that we spend a significant portion of our lives doing; it therefore shapes the trajectories of our existences in profound ways. Its influence permeates well beyond the confines of the workplace itself: the relations of production that work both presupposes and generates structure ways of thinking and living that extend throughout diverse environments (Marx 1976: 280; Mau 2023: 113). Work often provides a sense of personal identity; it shapes communities that are centred around its presence or absence. Significantly, work is also a way in which we are organised, stratified, and judged by others. Work can provide fulfilment, yet it also places us at risk of harm—to varying degrees of severity depending on our position within global socio-economic frameworks.[1] Critically, work in the form of waged labour is one of the defining features of capitalism. Therefore, work crystallises a number of seemingly abstract forces, bringing them into the realm of tangible, material experience.

This study was partly inspired by my own reckoning with the significance and complexity of work, during a period in which I was working a number of irregular, precarious jobs. During this time, which was characterised by bouts of activity interspersed with periods of stasis and stagnation, I watched a number of the films which would later end up within the corpus addressed in this thesis. In parallel with a questioning of my own situation and the particular position of work within my life, this led me to reflect on the prevalence of work and its associated frameworks within recent cinema, and French-language cinema in particular. Work and cinema may seem like odd bedfellows; indeed, cinema is often perceived as a leisure activity that is counterposed with the act of working (Comolli 2005). We will come to explore this disjuncture in more detail shortly, but for now it suffices to stress my contention that the relationship between work, film, and theory is an important and salient object of interrogation. Film is, in many ways, uniquely placed to dramatise, embody, and refigure the transformations in the workplace that have been a critical element of neoliberalism—the form of capitalism that has been dominant since the late 1970s. The semiotics of cinema are distinctively rich, incorporating language alongside gesture, space, sound, and other non-discursive means of communication (Lazzarato 2014: 109).[2] This provides a stimulating contrast and

[1] The Covid-19 pandemic forced this (often under-recognised) tendency to the surface.
[2] On gesture in film, see Väliaho 2010; Chare and Watkins eds. 2017.

counterpart to discursive theorisations of neoliberalism: when theory and film are placed into dialogue, their differences point us towards more nuanced understandings of the contemporary workplace and its associated environments. However, film also comes up against certain limits in its attempts to dramatise contemporary work. Probing the possibilities and limitations that cinema encounters in this pursuit opens up new perspectives on the political potentialities of film more generally.

The primary catalyst for this study has been the renewed interest in work and its associated contexts within film during recent years, following a significant period in which these subjects remained more marginal. The relatively mainstream success of films such as *Deux jours, une nuit* (2015, addressed in Chapter 3), *La Loi du marché* (also 2015, addressed in Chapter 4), *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) is testament to this. The fact that two of the above films are French is significant. As Michel Cadé (2018) argues, French and Francophone Belgian film has been particularly attentive to work and its associated environments since the mid-1990s. These work-centred narratives form part of what Martin O'Shaughnessy (2007) terms the return of a 'politically committed' French cinema. The reasons that French cinema (and films produced in its neighbouring countries, often in co-production with French companies) has proven especially interested in work are multiple. One is that the French film industry is buttressed by a state-funded subsidy model that eases some of the commercial pressures faced by filmmakers (O'Shaughnessy 2012: 328-46). Therefore, in theory, a greater number of films with less mainstream appeal (within which we can include many work-centred narratives) are likely to be made. Another is the particular political cultures of France, which have often demonstrated significant resistance to contemporary workplace developments, something I examine in more detail in Chapter 1. In short, a combination of industrial and cultural factors means that French (and Francophone Belgian and Swiss) cinema offers particularly fertile ground for an interrogation of the relationship between work and contemporary film.

It is important to briefly address the broader factors behind the renewed filmic interest in work and workers. As indicated, neoliberalism has catalysed profound upheavals in the workplace (and beyond). These developments are complex and multifaceted. There is, however, an overarching tendency which encapsulates the general trajectory of labour in the neoliberal era: the increasing precarity of workers, who are rendered highly vulnerable to the threat of unemployment in ways which contrast with many experiences of the post-war era. Describing a French context that could equally be extrapolated to much of the global North, Jeremy Lane and Sarah Waters write of 'a dismantling of the stable contractual relations that defined work in the post-war Fordist era and an erosion of the forms of collective representation and solidarity by which workers defined their

identity and place in the world' (2018a: 225). These precarity-related themes persistently emerge in diverse forms and contexts across contemporary work-centred film.

This proliferation of work-related cinema has been paralleled by a growing body of theory focused on work and its associated problems in the context of neoliberal upheaval. Perhaps most common are texts which critique the particular working conditions associated with neoliberalism. In a French context, the works of Christophe Dejours (1998; 2003; Dejours and Deranty 2015) and his associates (Deranty 2011; Dashtipour and Vidaillet 2017) are highly important, not least because Dejours' work has reached a significant popular audience. Dejours uses a distinctive theoretical and methodological framework, the psychodynamics of work, which is grounded in Freudian clinical practice. Across his oeuvre, he closely examines experiences of workplace suffering driven by new forms of control that have emerged in the neoliberal era (new management techniques in particular). Another prominent French critic is Vincent de Gaulejac, who, like Dejours, is especially interested in the role of managerialism in the development of contemporary work-related pathologies (De Gaulejac 2005; 2011). One general emphasis of these thinkers' arguments is that this system of workplace organisation is not only bad for employees, but for companies as well (de Gaulejac and Mercier 2012: 5).

Others take a more provocative and radical stance to the question of work. For instance, David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs* (2018) centres the experience of worker testimony, arguing that many (if not most) jobs are meaningless, or 'bullshit'.[3] Again in a French context, Maurizio Lazzarato's *Experimental Politics* (2017) combines anthropological research and activist practice (alongside the movement of creative workers *les intermittents du spectacle*) with a theoretical framework influenced by Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, and autonomist Marxism. He argues that the erosion of these workers' employment privileges forms part of a broader process of precarisation which is leading to subjective and material impoverishment, but also sees significant potential for political change in the movement of the *intermittents*. Texts which take this radicalism to its furthest extent include Kathi Weeks' *The Problem with Work* (2011), an influential book which takes a resolutely anti-productivist stance towards work and working cultures, challenging the widely-held presupposition that work is an inherent good. Traces of Weeks' thought can be found in another influential text, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' *Inventing the Future* (2015), which channels anti-work sentiment alongside a techno-utopian valorisation of automation. Aaron Benanav's 2020 book *Automation and the Future of Work* serves as a welcome corrective to some of the more

[3] Graeber's thesis is, in some significant ways, flawed, and arguably misrepresents the nature of the hegemony of work in the contemporary era. See Magdalena, Wood and Burchell 2022 for an empirical critique of *Bullshit Jobs*.

deterministic elements of works such as *Inventing the Future*, which perceive rapid technological change (the mass automation of jobs in particular) as something of an inevitability (Benanav 2020: 1-8). It retains a stringent critique of work itself while acknowledging that work is likely to remain necessary to the reproduction of future societies (whether capitalist, communist, or otherwise). Like much of this canon, these texts mobilise avowedly Marxist approaches.

This is a limited selection, but gives some indication of the different approaches that recent thinkers have taken to the question of neoliberal work.[4] I identify three threads that run throughout these texts, emphasised to differing extents in each. The first is a picture of a rapidly changing workplace beset by new forms of problem. The second is a critique of this workplace, whether on moral, material, or other grounds. The final thread is an attempt to think *beyond* the dominance of work that characterises neoliberalism and perhaps to envision alternative organisations of societies and economies. Critically, these three distinct but interrelated components also resonate throughout my cinematic corpus, and indeed contemporary work-centred film more generally.

With this filmic and theoretical terrain in mind, the clusters of research questions which frame this study are as follows:

> First, what are the recurrent narrative motifs in work-centred Francophone film? How do these reflect, respond to, or indeed participate in the construction of the neoliberal present?
>
> Second, what archetypes of subjectivity emerge in this cinematic corpus, and how do these relate to neoliberalism? To what extent do these films show a coming into crisis of neoliberal subjects, and how is this stratified by class and gender?
>
> Third, in an age of neoliberal hegemony, how does this cinema attempt to do justice to the anxieties that it represents, and what modes does it employ to do this? In stronger words, in which ways might these films challenge voicelessness, track embodied resistances, and force different forms of violence and alternative practices into view?
>
> Finally, and most broadly, what possibilities and limitations does this cinematic corpus encounter in its attempts to represent neoliberal work? What does this tell us about cinema, neoliberalism, and the relationship between the two?

[4] See also, for instance, Horgan 2021; Mueller 2021; Smith 2020; Komlosy 2018; Jaffe 2021; Cederström and Fleming 2012; Fleming 2015; Hester and Srnicek 2023; Press 2023; Jones 2021; Pfannebecker and Smith 2020 for a range of recent critical studies of work.

In what follows, I examine the representation of waged work and its associated environments—the picket line or the job centre, for instance—within contemporary French-language film. I place close readings of the films in dialogue with a sophisticated theoretical framework which draws primarily upon Marxian and Foucauldian influences. My corpus of films has largely remained underexamined by scholars, yet I contend that it provides a valuable and generative resource for thinking about the relationship between cinema, work, and neoliberalism. The current moment of crisis-stricken neoliberalism is the opportune time to explore this problematic.

Before providing an overview of the thesis chapters, it is necessary to clarify some terminology that structures my argument. The first is that of 'work' itself. Some thinkers draw a neat distinction between the concepts of work and labour. Hannah Arendt is one of the most significant of these: for her, labour refers to the activity of reproducing life, and work refers to the creation of the object world around us (1998). She valorises the latter in opposition to the former: the craft of work creates permanent artefacts which form an essential part of the human condition, whereas labour is a biological necessity characterised by toil and hardship (1998: 94). There is clearly value to this distinction for Arendt, and others have used it productively in a film studies context (Mazierska 2012, for instance). However, the division between the categories of (good) 'work' and (bad) 'labour' is too neat for the purposes of this study; further, it problematically implies the existence of a pure and untainted form of work, as Weeks argues (2011: 14-6). I often use the words work and labour interchangeably here, more frequently choosing 'work' because it is most commonly used to refer to the broader frameworks of waged employment that my corpus of films dramatises. Where I use the word 'labour' I am often referring to specific aspects of the working process itself; contra Arendt, there is no value judgement implied by my use of these terms. The second is neoliberalism: why neoliberalism and not 'post-Fordism', for instance? While terminology such as 'post-Fordism' does refer more specifically to contemporary forms of labour than 'neoliberalism' does, this precision is also its weakness. The term 'neoliberalism' encompasses not just the shape of the contemporary workplace but also the structures which frame it: particular social relations and subjectivities, political developments, and forms of organisation of global economies, for instance. It is therefore more applicable for the purposes of this study, which situates representations of work within the broader socio-economic structures of the contemporary era.

Chapter outline

This study begins with two theoretical chapters which provide the foundations upon which my analysis is built. In Chapter 1 I theorise neoliberalism, beginning with an overview of its rise to

hegemony that includes a brief account of its institutional and intellectual origins. I then examine some of the most salient features of neoliberalism in the contemporary era: in particular, its impacts upon social relations and subjectivities and its related transformations of the workplace. Chapter 2 takes the previous chapter's focus on work and brings it into conversation with film studies, probing the relationship between cinema and work. By way of a dialogue between several relevant film theorists, I pose the questions: how does cinema approach work, what happens when work is represented, and what are the broader implications of this?

We then reach the main body of this study, which comprises five chapters of filmic analysis. My cinematic corpus is primarily taken from the years 2010 onwards, for the simple reason that this period has seen a proliferation of films which explicitly address work and its broader context.[5] I have chosen films which typify broader trends within work-centred cinema and are therefore broadly representative of a potentially much wider corpus. Despite this, many of these works have received little academic attention, with a few notable exceptions (I will justify the inclusion of particular films in more detail shortly). My corpus covers significant ground, but a number of patterns and motifs emerge throughout which serve to unite the different films. The most prominent narrative motif is the threat of the expulsion from labour. This emerges in diverse diegetic contexts, in small locally-grounded companies as in large multinationals, in low-paid industrial work and prestigious white-collar careers; it structures the narrative of nearly every film I analyse. Its prevalence is both a reflection of and response to the increasing precarity of workers that characterises the neoliberal era. It is from this starting point that the majority of these films launch their critiques of neoliberalism; this motif is therefore of pivotal importance.

In the context of the threatened or enacted expulsion from labour, these films make various efforts to trace the contours of neoliberal power; this forms the second motif. While these attempts are relatively diverse, several repeated patterns can be found. One prevalent trope sees protagonists attempt to physically confront the bearers of power—often individuals or small groups of people—in order to change their situations. In some instances, these confrontations resolve satisfactorily, providing narrative closure. In others, attempts to confront power are repeatedly thwarted. Other narratives differ: some characters show little desire to confront the sources of power but are forced to do so as part of their day-to-day existences; some are even confronted with their own complicity within the power structures of neoliberalism. In rarer instances, films address the workings of power in less immediate ways, some of which do not directly implicate protagonists. These varied

[5] The 2007-8 financial crisis has been one catalyst for cinema's growing interest in work, given the upheaval of labour markets that it resulted in. However, it is important to note that precarity-related themes permeate films which long predate the crisis (O'Shaughnessy 2022: 3-6).

representations frequently embody the films' most pronounced attempts to explore and critique the ways in which neoliberalism operates. They are a crucial object of my interrogation, as they cast significant light upon the possibilities and limitations that cinema encounters in this pursuit. I interpret these moments symptomatically, returning to the important question: what do these attempts to bring the operations of power into representation tell us about cinema, the neoliberal conjuncture, and the relationship between the two?

The third motif that pervades this corpus is the counterpart to expulsion from labour: exit from labour. I use the term 'exit from labour' to refer to characters' withdrawals from work—whether temporary or permanent. While expulsion from labour is imposed from without, exit from labour is something that characters undertake themselves. These exits take a number of forms. One is ethical withdrawal: protagonists reasserting their agency and dignity by walking away from workplaces characterised by cruelty and exploitation. Another is worker suicide: workers faced with extreme hardship who have been left with no other option but to take their own lives. Drawing upon Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian theorisation of violence and Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming's analysis of worker suicide, O'Shaughnessy (2019) differentiates between three different forms of suicide, two of which will be important here. The first is suicide in the Lacanian *real*, which reflects the complete identification of the subject with the figure of work and the negation of a sense of selfhood not related to work. When the conditions of work decline, workers commit suicide. The second is suicide in the *imaginary*, which is 'sustained by narcissistic satisfaction derived from the *imagined* effect on those chosen as witnesses of the victim's death which the victim himself or herself will not be able to observe for obvious reasons' (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 318, emphasis in original).[6] These suicides are often forms of protest against the degradation of working conditions.

The exit motif frequently emerges as a response to the threat of expulsion. In this regard, cinema's turn to the exit can be seen as an attempt to move beyond straightforward critique and to point towards a disruption of the neoliberal order. This disruption can be a positive one which attempts to open up the possibility of different futures, as in the case of many ethical withdrawals. It can also be a profoundly negative one which serves as a filmic attempt to force the violences of neoliberalism to the surface but which ultimately forecloses the possibility of different futures, as in the case of many worker suicides. As these exits are often the closest the films come to offering constructive visions of change, they are particularly important to read symptomatically. Many exits clearly have very limited

[6] The third type of suicide identified by O'Shaughnessy is suicide in the *symbolic*: an incomplete act of suicide that leads to a killing of the worker within the self. O'Shaughnessy puts this concept to productive use, but for my purposes it is more helpful to separate enacted worker suicides (including those in the *real* and *imaginary*) and other forms of exit from labour more clearly.

effects beyond the protagonist; what might this be a symptom of? If exit is shown to be impossible, what might this suggest? Further, how might film articulate exit from labour, which nearly always takes place on an individual basis, with a broader vision of change?

Chapter 3, 'Resisting the threat of expulsion', analyses two films, *En guerre* (Stéphane Brizé, 2018) and *Deux jours, une nuit* (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 2014), which centre around the defence of industrial work in the face of looming unemployment. Both films draw upon generic conventions common within politically-orientated cinema: *En guerre* generally employs a documentary-like aesthetic, while *Deux jours* is a work of social realism. The films stage various confrontations between their protagonists and the workings of neoliberal power, probing the possibility of individual and collective resistance to the degradation of workplace conditions in neoliberal societies. The protagonists—Laurent, a male trade union leader and Sandra, a young mother—reach points of severe crisis in their attempts to change their situations. *En guerre* concludes with Laurent's suicide: an exit from labour that signals the foreclosure of different futures and carries allegorical meaning concerning the decline of the industrial working class. *Deux jours* concludes on a different note, as Sandra walks away from work in a moment of personal triumph. This ethical withdrawal from labour serves as an individual rejection of neoliberal work but struggles to point towards the prospect of broader change. These two films highlight different functions of the exit motif and, through this, different answers to our question about the possibilities and limitations that this cinematic corpus encounters in its attempts to critique neoliberal work. *En guerre* has not been examined in detail in a scholarly fashion, but warrants inclusion in my corpus as a relatively rare example of a contemporary film about the 'traditional' labour action of a strike. *Deux jours*, on the other hand, has received significant academic attention (Marks 2019; Steele 2019: Chapter 2; Picard 2016; Bazin 2016, for instance), but at the time of writing has not been placed into comparative analysis with a film about a traditional labour mobilisation. It is through the contrast and tension between the films' representations of their protagonists' resistances against neoliberal working conditions that I am able to draw out a productive interpretation of their politics.

The narratives of the films analysed in Chapter 4, 'After the struggle', take place after deindustrialisation has decisively set in. These films: *L'Atelier* (Laurent Cantet, 2017), *Jamais de la vie* (Pierre Jolivet, 2015) and *La Loi du marché* (Stéphane Brizé, also 2015), cast a close eye upon both the experience of unemployment and the type of service-sector work that is privileged in neoliberal economies. In this regard, the environments they dramatise are situated closer to a model of advanced neoliberalism than those of the films addressed in Chapter 3. The films chart various subjective crises related to the relationship between work and masculinity: that of the older Fordist worker cast out from stable employment (*Jamais de la vie* and *La Loi du marché*), and that of the

younger male struggling with a profound lack of opportunities in the wake of Fordist decline (*L'Atelier*). This forms part of their broader interrogations of the relationship between the Fordist past and neoliberal present; a critical focus of all three works is the question of how to deal with the defeat of the left-wing institutions that were foundational to the Fordist era. *Jamais de la vie* and *La Loi* attempt to use fragments of the Fordist past to move beyond the neoliberal present, but encounter significant limitations in doing so. *L'Atelier* employs a different mode of filmmaking that gives a novel perspective on the possibilities and limitations of contemporary work-centred cinema. All three films draw upon social realist conventions; *L'Atelier* and, particularly, *Jamais de la vie* also draw upon thriller tropes. Cantet's film has received a small amount of academic interest (Toohey 2020), but the implications of its depictions of work and working cultures have not been comprehensively examined. *Jamais de la vie* has not at the time of writing been examined in a scholarly context, but deals explicitly with the relationship between the Fordist past and neoliberal present in a way which clearly compliments the other two works. *La Loi du marché* received significant popular and critical acclaim, and consequently has been examined in academic contexts. My interpretation of its representation of the relationship between past and present sheds new light upon previous readings.

The films addressed in Chapters 3 and 4 dramatise working-class environments. Chapter 5, 'Desiring neoliberal subjects', broadens the social frame, probing the representation of middle-class men positioned close to the neoliberal ideal in two works: *L'Emploi du temps* (Laurent Cantet, 2001) and *Ceux qui travaillent* (Antoine Russbach, 2018). This marks a significant step in our trajectory towards films which dramatise visions of advanced neoliberalism. Despite this different context, an increasing climate of precarity still pervades the narratives of the films, both of which are structured by their protagonists' expulsions from the labour force. Subjective crises are also prevalent. Both protagonists idealise and identify with the norms of neoliberal rationality to the extent that their desires have been colonised by those of the enterprise. However, they encounter severe points of crisis in trying to reach the standards demanded of neoliberal subjects. This is closely related to their perceived failures as patriarchs within bourgeois family units; the relationship between neoliberalism, the family, and gender will therefore be a key focus of this chapter. In response to these problems, both characters move towards suicide. However, they do not complete these acts and return to work in the closing minutes of the films; their exit from labour is therefore shown to be impossible. This highlights a different modality of the exit motif: the impossibility of exit in this bourgeois context forms a crucial part of the films' critique of neoliberal work while also suggesting their difficulty in moving beyond critique to put forth a positive vision of change.

It should be noted that *L'Emploi du temps* has received significant academic attention (O'Shaughnessy 2015: Chapter 3; Marks 2011; Archer 2008, for instance); released in 2001, it also predates the period from which I have generally drawn my corpus. I have included this work because it both typifies and stands apart from a broader selection of films about bourgeois workers reaching points of crisis in ways which make it an essential counterpart to the rest of my corpus (and to *Ceux qui travaillent* in particular). In the first instance, films with similar narrative trajectories have become increasingly prevalent since its release, something which can be partially attributed to the increasing precarity of middle-class workers in recent years but also to the influence of Cantet's film. Indeed, *Ceux qui travaillent* bears remarkable similarities to *L'Emploi du temps*; the influence of the latter film is one reason for its inclusion. On the other hand, Cantet's film stands out from many other works of this type through its style, which bears clear neorealist influences. This is particularly important to my analysis of its representation of its protagonist, Vincent, who often appears almost to passively reflect broader structural forces, rather than operating on an agential basis (a key characteristic of neorealism [Deleuze 1989: 41]). Despite the narrative similarities between the two films, *Ceux qui travaillent* differs markedly in this respect, embodying the combination between social realism and thriller we have already encountered. My analysis draws out the (narrative and formal) contrasts between the two films in ways which provide an important answer to my final research question concerning the potentialities and limitations of contemporary work-centred film.

Chapter 6, 'Women at work', continues in a similar direction while sustaining and developing the previous chapter's focus on gender. It analyses representations of the pressures placed on successful white-collar women in neoliberal workplaces in two films: *Numéro Une* and *Corporate* (both 2017) Both films are thrillers, and are perhaps the clearest examples of genre films in my corpus. *Numéro Une* in particular represents a further step towards an image of advanced neoliberalism in that it endorses some of the key tenets of neoliberal rationality; *Corporate* is more typical of my corpus in its critical approach to neoliberal work. The films' contrasting visions of neoliberalism are an important object of my enquiry, as is their use of conspiracy thriller forms. When considered together, these provide further important answers to our question about the possibilities and limitations of contemporary work-centred cinema. The body is a key means through which many of my corpus films attempt to critique neoliberal work and its broader context. This has been a developing focus of the previous chapters, but is foregrounded particularly here. In these works, the female body is shown to be a critical object of gendered power. These bodies register broader meaning in the relative absence of explanatory dialogue, forcing different forms of violence into view. While both films depict pervasive forms of gendered control, their contrasting visions of neoliberalism feed into divergent commentaries on gender and work. *Numéro Une* posits a

particular vision of neoliberalism as a solution to the gendered problems it critiques, while *Corporate* implicitly valorises the embrace of traditional gender roles as a counterforce to neoliberal work. This casts further light on my second research question surrounding the relationship between neoliberal subjectivities and gender. *Corporate* has received very limited academic attention (see Lane 2020: 3, 19, 20 for a brief examination); *Numéro Une* has not at the time of writing been discussed in an academic context. Both are valuable inclusions to my corpus for their commentary on gender and neoliberal work, but also for their use of thriller generic conventions, the political implications of which will be explored in detail.

Chapter 7, 'Unbelonging bodies', is the final chapter of filmic analysis. It diverges from the trajectory we have followed thus far, addressing three films which foreground protagonists who are often at a significant distance from the neoliberal ideal. The films: *Louise-Michel* (2008), *Mammuth* (2010) and *Le Grand Soir* (2012; all directed by Benoît Delépine and Gustave Kervern), also differ from those addressed in previous chapters through their comedic tone, which constitutes a key focus of my analysis. In addition, they attempt to put forth a more developed vision of change than the other films we have analysed, which sometimes remain within the realms of critique. These multiple differences explain the chapter's positioning: the particular modality of filmmaking employed here provides quite a different answer to my final research question concerning the possibilities and limitations of contemporary work-centred film. As the chapter title suggests, bodies are a significant focus here. The films use their protagonists' bodies to register neoliberal power structures and therefore to force different forms of violence into view. They also take these bodies, which have been discarded by work, as springboards for resistances to work and suggestions of alternative forms of living. The alternative practices the films point towards often emerge from exits from labour. *Le Grand Soir* in particular suggests ways in which the individual exit from labour might be articulated with a broader political movement. This highlights a different modality of the exit motif which rounds out our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of this cinematic corpus. A final point of note is that *Louise-Michel*, released in 2008, slightly predates the general (post-2010) periodisation of my corpus. However, it bears important thematic and formal similarities to the other two works discussed in this chapter. In this regard it is an essential inclusion not just because of its fit with the general theme of my thesis, but also because it enables us to chart a progression in the directors Delépine and Kervern's development of a filmic critique of work.

Chapter 1: Neoliberalism

It has become something of a commonplace to note that neoliberalism is a highly contested term within contemporary discourse (Mills 2021), and that many commentators have called for this terminology to be abandoned due to its imprecision, its ideological connotations, or its over-generalised and unquestioning use (Dunn 2017; Birch 2017: 79-83; Dean 2014: 150). The definition of neoliberalism is inarguably contested, as many such concepts are; yet, despite this, I follow Tom Mills in arguing that it is more appropriate to state that the term neoliberalism 'can quite legitimately be used to refer to a very broad range of ideas, events, structures, and practices' (2021). Consequently, what follows in this chapter makes no claims to being a comprehensive account of neoliberalism. Indeed, certain tendencies which have been key features of neoliberal polities are mostly absent from the analysis below—a discussion of authoritarian nationalism, for instance (see Bruff and Tansel 2020; Brown 2019; Chamayou 2021: 223). Further, an examination of the partial divergences from neoliberal rationality during the Covid-19 crisis is also absent (see Gerbaudo 2021).[7] Rather, I sketch out an analysis of the key features of neoliberalism as they relate to the context within which my corpus was produced, and, relatedly, the contexts which it dramatises. In what follows, then, neoliberalism is considered as a governing rationality, or a 'sophisticated common sense' (Brown 2015: 35) in more Gramscian terms; a particular mode of social and workplace organisation; and a set of broader material tendencies. While neoliberalism has achieved global hegemony in a way that is incomparable with previous forms of capitalism (Traverso 2016: 2), my focus will be on how these developments have unfolded in the global North: Western Europe and France in particular.

In terms of neoliberalism's distinct rationality, my key focus will be on the remaking of society according to the principles of individualised competition and market logics (see Dardot and Laval 2013, for instance). These values have come to saturate contemporary common sense, and are exemplified in the subjective model of human capital, or *homo oeconomicus*, a figure I analyse in some detail. The normative logics that are foundational to neoliberalism are of course propagated through discursive means, but also and crucially through more strictly speaking material developments too; the workplace is an important arena within which this process takes place. My analysis of the neoliberal workplace below focuses on a number of important changes: the sustained commitment of neoliberals to diminishing the power and influence of trade unions and workplace collectives more generally, the concomitant atomisation and precarisation of workers,

[7] Importantly, many of the most important characteristics of the neoliberal labour market have in fact become further exaggerated since the pandemic, rather than deviated from (see Stevano, Ali and Jamieson 2020).

deindustrialisation and the emergence of new forms of labour, and the spread of new managerial techniques. This argument will be linked back to broader socio-economic and political developments, including the erosion of the welfare state, the growth of wealth and income inequalities, financialisation, globalisation, and the intervention of the state to create and sustain competitive market environments.

This study's theoretical foundations are grounded in Marxian and Foucauldian approaches, combining these without seeking to elide differences between the two. I wish to take a moment to justify this choice of theory, particularly given the fact that Marxian and Foucauldian approaches have sometimes been considered mutually incompatible.[8] It is my contention that a film studies project should take its filmic corpus as a starting point, rather than using film to illustrate pre-established theoretical axioms. I attempt to place film and theory into productive dialogue in a way which enables the richest possible interpretations of the films themselves, also casting new light upon theory without reducing one medium to the other.

With this in mind, it is important to consider the ways in which my corpus films generally function. On a narrative basis, these works are often driven by internal and interpersonal tensions and conflict; by extension, these relations are used to explore and critique the workings of neoliberalism. This explains my recourse to Foucauldian theories of neoliberalism, a body of work which has frequently attempted to analyse neoliberalism in terms of its subjective and intersubjective effects. Specifically, such accounts often centre around the production of subjectivity under neoliberal conditions. Their explorations of different subjective models (the entrepreneur of the self, in particular), alongside different patterns of 'self-conduct' (Christiaens 2019: 495) and 'techniques of the self' (Dardot and Laval 2013: 274), are highly important to my filmic analyses, particularly where

[8] Foucault himself was frequently antagonistic towards Marxism, including in his lectures on neoliberalism (Foucault 2008: 130, 164, 167, for instance). Indeed, it is arguable that Foucault's entire project, founded on a conception of (productive) power, is intended to call a Marxist vision of (repressive) power into account (see Alderson 2016: 22). Less frequently, Foucault was more sympathetic towards Marxian thinkers: the Frankfurt School in particular (Dews 2007: 183; Foucault 1991: 115-20). Somewhat regrettably, it is the former tendency which often persists in contemporary Foucauldianism, including that of Dardot and Laval, whose work I cite extensively but whose critiques of Marxian 'economism' are often quite one-dimensional, as Alberto Toscano argues (2023: 184; see Dardot and Laval 2013: 6-12 for an example of this). From the other side of the argument, Marxian thinkers have accused Foucault of influencing a 'fracturing of the social realm and a retreat from class analysis' (Oksala 2023: 582), sometimes veering into reactionary diatribes against 'identity politics'. More interesting for my purposes are critiques which suggest that Foucault is indifferent to the sources of power and pays insufficient attention to inequalities of power relations (Spencer 2017: 145-7; Dean & Zamora 2021: 233; Said 1983: 221-2). This is true of his analysis of neoliberalism, in which 'neoliberal theories seem to emerge out of nothing and to find acceptance without any motivation' (Rehmann 2016: 133). Many more recent Foucauldian analyses of neoliberalism at least partially rectify this shortcoming, therefore representing a valuable resource for thinking about structural inequalities of power in ways which Foucault's own writings perhaps do not.

they foreground character studies. Foucauldian theorisations are also valuable for their examinations of the insidious and subtle forms of power that characterise the contemporary era, often subsumed under the umbrella term of 'governmentality'.[9] 'Governmentality' encompasses the control of 'actions upon other actions' (Foucault 1982: 789), 'government through freedom' (Rose 1999a: xxiii), and other forms of power which err towards the 'productive' rather than the 'repressive'; these represent key problematics within my corpus of films.

However, we must acknowledge certain limitations to these theories, both in relation to my corpus and more generally. Firstly, the films that I analyse dramatise forms of power that are far more overt than many theories of governmentality allow for. Foucauldian theories often provide a view of neoliberalism which elides its more authoritarian or repressive characteristics; this therefore does not always allow for a complete interpretation of the films, nor does it give a comprehensive account of neoliberalism more generally. Further, the films situate their objects within a broader system of socio-economic structures that Foucauldian accounts sometimes struggle to confront. The Marxian accounts of neoliberalism that I draw upon are better placed to analyse these qualities. In considering neoliberalism as a particular form of capitalism, they are able to grasp its structural nature as 'an ensemble of mutually reinforcing social, political and economic arrangements' (Butler 2018: 313). Such theories pay close attention to processes of domination and exploitation and their interconnections with broader structures of economic and political power; in short, they consider neoliberalism as hegemonic.[10]

These differences in approach should not mean, however, that Marxian theories are necessarily incompatible with Foucauldian ones. Rather, I argue that it is impossible to comprehend the developments in the sphere of 'governmentality' described in Foucauldian accounts without a strong grasp of the political economy of neoliberalism. The ensemble of techniques of neoliberal government that Foucauldian accounts analyse must be situated within the broader socio-economic structures of neoliberalism: its class dynamics in particular. In this light, we might posit that neoliberalism is a particular mode of governmentality associated with a particular form of the

[9] This is, as Jan Rehmann (2016: 107-14) argues, a term fraught with complications and which is often used with insufficient critical intent. I address some of the limitations of Foucauldian theories of governmentality below.

[10] Despite these similarities, I do not wish to impose a false unity upon these Marxian thinkers, whose analyses of neoliberalism vary in important ways. For instance, those such as David Harvey (2005) largely see neoliberalism as something imposed from above by the capitalist classes, whereas those such as Lazzarato (2017) draw upon autonomist influences in perceiving the actions of capital as fundamentally dependent on and responsive to labour (see Gilbert 2014: 4-9). My argument takes both of these positions into account.

capitalist mode of production.[11] This is effectively the understanding of neoliberalism exhibited in many of its most insightful analyses (Dardot and Laval 2013, for instance), even if it is not laid out in the Marxian terminology I have used here.[12] Having established the theoretical foundations of this project, I will begin now by delineating neoliberalism's rise to hegemony, in order to provide the important historical context which will frame my analysis going forward.

Keynesian capitalism in crisis

The period around the late 1970s and early 80s is widely considered to be the pivotal era in neoliberalism's rise to dominance in the global North, with Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan taking power on both sides of the Atlantic within just two years of one another. These events were preceded by the rule of Augusto Pinochet in Chile from 1973 onwards, during which a range of neoliberal policies—extensive financial deregulation and the rapid privatisation of national industries in particular—were trialled, prior to their implementation elsewhere (Taylor 2006: 1-10). Pinochet rose to power in a U.S.-backed coup d'état against the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende; his rule was characterised by the violent repression of his (left-wing) opponents (Harvey 2005: 7-8). The material factors underpinning these developments are critical to consider. The 1970s was a decade beset by a variety of economic crises, including perhaps most significantly the 1973 OPEC oil embargo. States across the globe were experiencing rising inflation as a result of this instability; the leverage exerted by the comparatively strong working-class movements of the time was widely regarded as contributing to this. In addition, many countries in the global North were also faced with rising unemployment, as Fordism—the industrial paradigm that had become dominant in the post-war years—was increasingly in crisis (Lane 2020: Chapter 1; Benanav 2020: 19). During this post-war period, governments in the global North had largely shared Keynesian economic policy platforms, characterised by programmes of state investment, nationalised core industries, relatively generous welfare states, and the pursuit of full employment (Harvey 2005: 10-

[11] This is not to say that transformations in the sphere of production (economic base) straightforwardly determine the socio-cultural/legal-political changes (superstructure/governmentality) of neoliberalism, as an Orthodox Marxist account might posit (on this 'productive force determinism', see Mau 2023: 55; Olssen 2004: 454-7). Rather, the relationship between the economic and socio-cultural/legal-political is far more complex and fluid than this. Indeed, as Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, a rigid distinction between the two is impossible to uphold: we should instead consider a 'continuous structure of social relations and forms with varying degrees of distance from the immediate processes of production and appropriation' (2016: 25-6; see also Wood 2016: 19-75).

[12] For thinkers who have more explicitly attempted to combine Marxian and Foucauldian theories (to varying degrees of success), see Honneth and Roberts 1986; Bidet 2016; Cook 2018; Negri 2017; Read 2003; Oksala 2023.

2). Critically, however, Keynesian mechanisms of intervention were proving insufficient to address the problems of the time (Harvey 2005: 12).

Ultimately, the various economic and political conditions of the period led to a fall in the rate of profitability and a consequent crisis of capital accumulation. By extension, they also contributed to the weakening of the legitimacy of the Keynesian/Fordist consensus. This crisis, and the resultant discontent amongst the capitalist classes, was arguably the most important factor in the initial implementation of neoliberal policies in the United States and United Kingdom by the governments of Reagan and Thatcher (Harvey 2005: 12-3). These governments made drastic interventions, including unprecedented deregulations of capital flows, assaults on the power of organised labour, and privatisations of core national industries, which helped to restore (or in some cases reconfigure) the political and economic power of the capitalist classes. In all, this amounted to a dramatic overthrow of the tenets of the Keynesian era, in which capital and labour had reached a certain 'class compromise' that ensured greater rights for many workers alongside relatively stable economic growth (Daguerre 2013; Harvey 2005: 10). This impetus—a re-establishment or reconfiguring of class power—ultimately lies at the foundations of many of the changes wrought in the neoliberal era (Gilbert 2013: 16). Yet, these factors alone are insufficient to explain the rise of neoliberalism to its position of global hegemony: such a mechanistic narrative is clearly incomplete. Rather, as Dardot and Laval argue from a Foucauldian perspective, 'neoliberalism responded not only to a crisis of *accumulation*, but also to a crisis of *governmentality*, which itself pertained to a severe crisis of hitherto dominant forms of power' (2019: 58, emphasis in original). To begin to interrogate neoliberalism's rise to power more thoroughly, it is first of all necessary to return to the origins of neoliberal thought, before grounding neoliberalism within the terrain of social conflict that characterised the post-war years.

Neoliberalism's war of position

Strains of thought that can be identified as neoliberal can be traced as far back as the 1920s (Brennetot 2015: 31). The intellectuals responsible for the genesis of neoliberalism were scattered across the globe: Paris, Vienna, Chicago, and various German cities were of particular importance (Dardot and Laval 2013: 50, 75; Brennetot 2015: 31; Innset 2020: 7, 22-7). Significant ideological disparities exist between the various figures whose work populates this loosely-defined canon, most notably regarding the precise role and nature of the constructivist state. Certain thinkers, of which the German ordoliberals are the most significant grouping, argued consistently for a strong state that would intervene in order to create and sustain market environments (Mirowski 2013: 55-6;

Dardot and Laval 2013: 75-100). Others, including the Austrian School comprising Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises (and later on also the American Milton Friedman), were far more opposed to the idea of state intervention than the ordoliberals; the work of Mises in particular tends almost towards anarcho-capitalism in this respect (Olsen and Slobodian 2022). While this ideological divide is crucial, it is but one of many that exists between these thinkers. Indeed, as Dieter Plehwe and others note, it is more accurate to think of neoliberalism as an ideological assemblage with multiple competing strands than as a singular, perfectly cohesive set of principles (2006: 2).

In spite of these differences, however, these thinkers were ultimately united in a number of key respects, including through their shared focus on individualisation, marketisation, and a diminished social state (Cerny 2016; Foucault 2008: 79; Dardot and Laval 2013: 50); importantly, they would also come to share a significant institutional unity. The group came together for the first time in 1938 for the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, which was held in Paris. Out of this event emerged a new organisation—*Centre International d'Études pour la Rénovation du Libéralisme*—which tied these thinkers to the common aim of the renewal of classical liberalism (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 54). Contemporary liberalism, according to the group, was undergoing a profound crisis, most notably due to challenges from communist, socialist, and fascist collectivism, each of which would lead to—or indeed had led to—totalitarianism (Dardot and Laval 2013: 46, 52). It was thus in urgent need of revision and revitalisation. This collective direction of travel catalysed the emergence of what was to become *neo*liberalism as we know it today; notably, from the group's initial impetus we can see neoliberalism's pronounced emphasis on the centrality of the individual subject begin to develop. After a break imposed by World War II, in 1947 the group of intellectuals would meet again, this time at the inaugural meeting of what was to become known as the Mont Pelerin Society—a private intellectual network which picked up where the *Centre International* had left off. The Mont Pelerin Society represented (and continues to represent) a critical agent in the spread of neoliberal ideologies and practices; what is crucial about this organisation is that, as Jamie Peck notes, it was engaged in a 'long-run *war of position* in the "battle of ideas"' (2010: 49, emphasis in original). The society appreciated from the very beginning that in order to eventually prosper, there must be a long term, global ideological struggle; this struggle 'made a major contribution to legitimating the new [neoliberal] norm when the latter finally emerged' (Dardot and Laval 2013: 150). The group aimed to change 'political common sense' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 54), and understood the need to construct and deploy 'elaborate social machinery designed to collect, create, debate, disseminate, and mobilize neoliberal ideas' (Mirowski 2009: 432).

The Mont Pelerin Society was archetypal of a range of think tanks and other important actors which together created a coherent counter-hegemonic framework that ultimately came to dominance—

albeit in a complicated and refracted way—during the economic shocks of the 1970s, when the Keynesian/Fordist historical bloc had reached a point of crisis (Mirowski 2013; Plehwe 2009; Williams 2020). Crucially in this respect, as Srnicek and Williams argue, '[a]n important element of neoliberalism's eventual ideological success is that there was both a crisis and a readily available solution' (2015: 65). The notion of neoliberal hegemony that I employ here thus emphasises 'a very determined kind of right-wing agency as pursued through, and transformative of, institutions' (Alderson 2016: 53), with the ultimate aim of establishing a common sense that saturates society to such an extent that it corresponds to social existence. Of course, the disparate actors involved in the establishment of neoliberal counter-hegemony were not necessarily acting consciously in concert (although some clearly were) (Alderson 2016: 50-1), nor did they share a strict conceptual or intellectual unity. However, this confluence of forces ultimately shared an intellectual direction of travel, and—importantly—class interests; these factors were crucial in neoliberalism's path to dominance.

Contemporary social conflict

In addition to these institutional factors which, broadly speaking, relate to the means through which neoliberalism was imposed from top down, we also need to consider the terrain of social struggle upon which neoliberalism rose to prominence, and relatedly the crisis of power and governmentality to which Dardot and Laval refer. Importantly, the period around the late 1960s and 70s was one characterised by increasing worker indiscipline in the global North. The pillars of the post-war consensus—functioning welfare states, a Keynesian emphasis on full employment, and comparatively robust trade union rights—meant that many workers were in a state of relative empowerment, as Chamayou argues (2021: 7-32). This coincided with a broader challenging of hierarchies of power around gender, sexuality and race (Foucault 1994: 94); thus, considered as a whole, this was a society that Chamayou aptly describes as 'ungovernable'. In particular, the situation concerning workers posed clear problems for capital: strikes were at a record high, and fundamental questions about the nature and value of work were being posed (see, for instance, the events which took place at the LIP watch factory in France during the early 70s [Chamayou 2021: 16]). Ultimately, the core tenets of neoliberalism represented a response to these circumstances: as we will come to see, the atomisation of workers and the assault on organised labour represent a crucial means through which to restore and further labour discipline. Yet, importantly, neoliberalism has also incorporated elements of the workers' critiques into its hegemonic forms of labour: as Jeremy Gilbert notes, neoliberalism 'has only become "advanced" […] by pillaging and retooling the

techniques of […] its defeated enemies' (2014: 91). Amongst these elements we can include the demands for increased autonomy, flexibility, and creativity at work (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), of which more below.

It bears mention that neoliberalism also promised to alleviate more widely-felt problems than just the waning political and economic power of the capitalist classes; consequently, in many cases neoliberal policy platforms initially drew upon significant popular support (Albertson and Stepney 2020: 335-6; Harvey 2005: 40; Jones 2014: 5). The inflation that dogged contemporary societies is one of the defining issues here. Neoliberalism offered a monetarist solution to this—embodied most forcefully in the interest rates increases of the 1980s—that ultimately had hugely damaging consequences but which nonetheless appeared to offer a clear route out of the impasse (Harvey 2005: 23). On a more general level, the emphasis on individual freedom and opportunity inherent to neoliberal discourses resonated strongly amongst contemporary societies (Harvey 2005: 40-2); this was counterposed with the supposed unfreedom of Keynesian capitalism. Indeed, an emphasis on 'freedom' remains a critical component of neoliberalism's hegemony: as Chamayou argues, one of the key 'seductions' of neoliberalism is the promise of 'individual autonomy' embodied in the figure of the 'emancipated subject' (2021: 238). This is deeply implicated with the supposed meritocracy and concomitant emphasis on hard work that are critical components of the neoliberal work ethic (Littler 2018). Relatedly, we also need to consider the fact that the corporatist institutions characteristic of the Keynesian/Fordist era had come to be associated with stasis, stagnation, and bureaucracy, which stood in contrast to the supposed vitality and dynamism of neoliberalism (Dardot and Laval 2013: 166; Chamayou 2021: 29). As Srnicek and Williams argue, then, '[h]egemony […] builds on the very real desires of the population. Neoliberal hegemony has played upon ideas, yearnings and drives already existing within society, mobilising and promising to fulfil those that could be aligned with its basic agenda' (2015: 64). Of course, these promises have in many cases remained unfulfilled, and neoliberalism has been beset by repeated crises of legitimacy, particularly since the financial crash of 2007-8. Paradoxically, however, neoliberal hegemony in some respects appears more deeply rooted than ever before, even while neoliberal ideals are often embraced with little enthusiasm by subjects (Gilbert 2013: 18). This is one of the key problematics that my corpus films grapple with: how is neoliberalism simultaneously stricken by crisis and ever-further embedded, and how might we respond to this? With these thoughts in mind, I will now turn to an analysis of the rationality that forms a key part of neoliberalism as it is experienced on a day-to-day basis.

Theories of neoliberal rationality

Neoliberalism's rise to hegemony is deeply intertwined with a profound transformation of the normative logics that circulate throughout societies. This has taken place through the transformation of institutions, class structures, and ideologies and discourses, culminating in the embedded nature of neoliberalism in the contemporary (Cahill 2018; Cerny 2008). Theorists employ a number of different terms to refer to this saturation of everyday life by neoliberal norms. Dardot and Laval's use of the word 'rationality' functions well to capture the normative order of reason immanent to neoliberalism's functioning, which catalyses the construction of an interwoven network of subjects, states, and markets centred around the axiomatic principle of individualised competition. Writing from a similar perspective, Wendy Brown writes that '[n]eoliberalism governs as *sophisticated common sense*, a *reality principle* remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation' (Brown 2015: 35, emphasis mine); the key feature of this process of remaking according to Brown's argument is the spread of market logics to almost every sphere of existence. Neoliberal rationality will be the primary term that I use to describe these processes and this order of reason, although the more Gramscian 'common sense' that Brown invokes will also be used throughout my argument.

The key thing to take from both of these approaches is that neoliberalism is actively '*productive* of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities' (Dardot and Laval 2013: 3, emphasis in original). This is clearly the case even while neoliberal discourse 'claims to present not an ideal, but a reality; human nature' (Read 2009: 26). As Thomas Lemke argues, then, neoliberalism is best understood as a 'political project that endeavors to create a social reality that it suggests already exists' (2002: 60; see also Mirowski 2013: 53). Critically, neoliberal rationalities are complex and not always coherent. Of course, all hegemonic projects incorporate complex and potentially even contradictory elements, but this is particularly clear when it comes to neoliberalism, leading some to speak of a neoliberal 'paradox' (Kiely 2018). Further, we also need to consider the fact that neoliberalism functions differently in different national and temporal contexts, as Chamayou (2021: 223) argues. However, one of the strongest and most often-repeated elements within neoliberal rationalities and neoliberal government is the expansion of competitive norms and market logics to diverse corners of contemporary societies. This takes place across a range of environments, including throughout politics, education, welfare, and the state more generally, as well as the workplace (Brown 2015). The subjective figure of human capital, or *homo oeconomicus*—which must be considered the paradigmatic form of the neoliberal subject—functions as a critical part of this rationality.

Before examining what characterises this subjective model in more detail, it is important to clarify the nature of the processes of subjectification that I am discussing here. Firstly, I do not wish to argue that subjects are passively interpellated in a mechanistic, cause and effect fashion: the process of subjectification is complex and ultimately can only reductively be described in such terms. Rather, as David Alderson notes, '"[s]ocial construction" should be grasped as a *relation* (of the active and passive; that which we do and which is done to us)' (2016: 77, emphasis in original). Further, while the emphasis in many Foucauldian accounts—and in Brown's *Undoing the Demos* in particular—is placed on how discourses bring subjects into being (McClanahan 2017: 511; Wark 2019: 16; Brown 2015: 38), my analysis argues that material factors play a far more significant role in subjectification than much of this work allows for. The reason that neoliberal rationality is so deeply rooted is not simply because of its saturation of dominant discourses, but because it is embedded in the material structures that underpin our work and our lives more generally (Dardot and Laval 2013: 180; Gilbert 2013: 15). In fact, some of the most important drivers in the formation of neoliberal subjects are to be found in material pressures, working in tandem with discourses. This will become particularly clear as my analysis turns towards the contemporary workplace (Paltrinieri 2017).

What, then, does it mean to be a subject of human capital? Michel Foucault's influential lectures on biopolitics provide the starting point for many theorisations of this subjective model (2008). Drawing on the American neoliberal Gary Becker, Foucault argues that neoliberalism produces subjects as 'entrepreneurs of the self' (2008: 226), seeking to calculatedly maximise the means available to them at any given moment and therefore to increase their value on a literal or metaphorical market. Consequently, every choice and behaviour must be understood according to a particular cost-benefit calculation (Read 2009: 28): everything comes to be considered an investment in one's personal portfolio. As Brown argues, this becomes the case 'even where monetary wealth generation is not the immediate issue, for example, in approaching one's education, health, fitness, family life, or neighborhood' (2015: 31). Foucault's theorisation goes some way to capturing the behaviours demanded of human capital, particularly in its stress on competitive individualism and the constant need to seek out value. However, his description of human capitals as strictly rational agents—as per Becker—is incomplete. Rather, as Tim Christiaens contends, we also need to take into account non-calculative, risk-taking behaviours as part of analyses of human capital (2020); compared to the conservatism of Foucault's *homo oeconomicus*, these behaviours correspond more closely to the discourses of entrepreneurship that are mobilised in this theoretical literature. Brown sticks largely to the Beckerian utility-maximising model in her analysis of *homo oeconomicus*, but her comparison of human capital to financialised firms (2015: 33-4) goes some way to capturing the combination of rationalisation and risk that Christiaens identifies: the arena of financial markets is one in which the

more conservative values of 'cost reduction' and 'adaptation' are mobilised alongside the riskier strategies of 'speculation' and 'leveraging' (Brown 2015: 34). Similarly, Dardot and Laval's emphasis on human capitals as subjects absorbed in competition strikes this balance: these authors write repeatedly of the neoliberal injunction to 'risk-taking' (2013: 292) alongside risk management. Importantly, all of these theorisations are founded on individualist ontologies: human capitals are placed in atomised competition with one another, striving to gain competitive advantage wherever possible. A turn to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's influential study *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) complicates this image of atomised competition somewhat, however. Drawing upon a range of managerial literature, these authors stress repeatedly that the archetypal subject of neoliberalism must permanently be engaged in a process of networking, seeking out new contacts with which to collaborate. This consequently suggests the importance of a certain kind of collectivism to this subjective model. However, as Gilbert writes, the ideal networker must also be 'prepared to jettison any relationship at a moment's notice as soon as it becomes unprofitable' (2014: 26). Thus, any spirit of collaboration inherent to the model of human capital takes place strictly according to competitive market logics.

In addition to this combination of rationalisation and risk-taking, of networking and individualism, we also need to consider a number of other demands that are placed upon human capital. For instance, human capitals must be flexible and mobile, responding with dynamism to the vicissitudes of the market. They should not only be reactive, however, but must also demonstrate autonomy and creativity in making the most of the opportunities available. These conflicting demands are not simply posed from without; rather, human capitals must bring their subjectivities into being through constant work on the self: 'processes of self-constitution, recognition and reflection' (Houghton 2019: 617) that are performed in reference to an ideal subject type. These projects of self-development and self-mastery serve as a speculation on one's future value. As well as being constructive, generative processes, we also need to consider the negative or repressive aspects of this self-work: Nilima Chowdury argues compellingly that 'work on the self relies on an ongoing process of *othering* those facets—skills, attributes, bodily properties—that do not conform to the image of the ideal neoliberal subject' (2022: 211, emphasis in original).

Attaining the standards required by neoliberalism is made even more complex by the realities of the contemporary marketplace, which—as with any capitalist economy—is ultimately founded on a clear hierarchy of winners and losers.[13] Thus, even if one meets the many demands of neoliberal

[13] As Philip Mirowski argues, this tendency is particularly pronounced in neoliberalism (contra, for instance, classical liberalism, which theoretically aimed towards a certain level of equality among subjects). He writes

subjecthood, this in itself is no guarantee of success. Jan Rehmann captures this contradiction well in his assertion that neoliberalism

> mobilises its subjects by permanently interpellating them to be active and creative, to show initiative and to believe optimistically in the success of their efforts. At the same time, it calls upon the subjects to submit to the fateful order of the market that regularly and increasingly fails and frustrates the efforts of the many (2013: 287).

This is compounded by the profound emphasis placed on personal responsibility within neoliberal societies. Every human capital is faced with choices, possibilities, risks, and opportunities in the marketplace that they must capitalise upon; if one fails to do so then the responsibility must be directed inward (Dardot and Laval 2013: 98-100, 166, 180). Neoliberalism thus 'entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, and so forth, and for life in society, into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of "self-care."' (Lemke 2002: 59). This process of responsibilisation can be considered both as productive of subjects in a Foucauldian sense, and also ideological in the classical Marxist sense (Marx and Engels 1970) in that it mystifies the power hierarchies that underpin neoliberal societies. These latter points underscore the difficulties with which many experience the subjective demands of neoliberalism. With these theoretical frameworks in mind, it is important to address how life as human capital is experienced in the everyday.

Life as human capital

In practice, neoliberal subjecthood takes a broad range of forms. Of course, some subjects will reflect the image of 'entrepreneurship' mobilised in the theoretical literature above in a conventional manner. We might consider the middle-class subject managing his or her CV to maximise the chances of success within the labour market, or making careful self-investments through particular choices of education or training, for instance. Yet, as Annie McClanahan argues, the language of entrepreneurship, with its connotations of wealth and success, often leads to an obfuscation of the more everyday experience of neoliberal subjecthood. The exemplary subject of neoliberalism, according to McClanahan, would more closely resemble

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convincingly that '[n]eoliberals regard inequality of economic resources and political rights not as an unfortunate by-product of capitalism, but a necessary functional characteristic of their ideal market system' (2013: 54).

> an underemployed part-timer, probably working in the service sector, buying her groceries on her credit card and cashing her paychecks at a check cashing service, renting rather than owning her home, barely able to survive day to day and thus unlikely to see any of this precarity as an interest-bearing investment in her own future (2017: 513).

McClanahan captures well the ways in which, in an environment beset by extreme inequalities, strategies of 'entrepreneurship' are likely to be resorted to as coping mechanisms, devoid of any sense of futurity, rather than a calculated investment in one's future self.

Brown's 2019 text, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, provides further substantiation of what such contemporary 'entrepreneurship' might look like: she writes that '[b]y leasing out rooms on Airbnb, driving for Lyft or Uber, Task Rabbit free-lancing, bike, tool, and car sharing, or simply managing a variety of part-time or short-term sources of income ("side hustles"), individuals and households aim to survive economic cutbacks and downturns' (2019: 38-9). Lazzarato's work is also instructive here: he writes incisively that '[f]or the majority of the population, to become an economic subject […] means no more than being compelled to manage declining wages and income, precarity, unemployment, and poverty in the same way one would manage a corporate balance-sheet' (2014: 9). Lazzarato focuses particularly on the way in which debt functions as a crucial disciplinary mechanism in contemporary societies, bearing down upon subjects and colonising their futures. Importantly, all three thinkers draw attention to the material factors that drive these processes of subjectification: McClanahan speaks of contemporary patterns of underemployment, Lazzarato notes the importance of indebtedness, and Brown speaks of economic crisis more generally. Also crucial to note is that while neoliberalism still mobilises the discourses of freedom that have underpinned its hegemonic appeal from its inception and which are a key element of its rationality, the systemic coercion experienced by subjects is very difficult to reconcile with this image (Gourevitch and Robin 2020; Chamayou 2021: 238-41). The workplace is an arena in which we see these tensions and contradictions—between the supposed freedom of human capital and the realities of contemporary existence—develop starkly.

The precarisation of work and welfare

The significance of the workplace transformations that have taken place in the neoliberal era cannot be overstated. One of the struggles that has had the most substantial bearing on these developments has been the war waged against organised labour by neoliberals; Thatcher's battle with the NUM in the UK must clearly be considered amongst the most dramatic and symbolic

conflicts of this type. In France there has been less of an open declaration of war on trade unionism, but since François Mitterrand's turn towards neoliberalism in the early 1980s there has arguably been a concerted effort to limit the powers and rights of labour (Bensaïd 1996); I address neoliberalism in a specifically French context below. These attempts to thwart the efforts of organised labour are not merely of interest on discrete bases; rather, they are symbolic of the broader struggle between the collective and the individual that characterises neoliberalism. The neoliberal antagonism towards many forms of collective—and organised labour in particular—is propelled by a number of factors, including straightforwardly ideological ones concerning the primacy of the sovereign individual (Brown 2019: 39), the right to free trade, and the moral function of markets (Chamayou 2021: 22). Most important for the time being, however, are the parallel drives to restore labour discipline and profitability that have been a crucial part of neoliberalism's reorganisation of capitalism from the 1970s onwards.

Battles waged between the capitalist classes and trade union movements have most often ended in defeat for workers in the neoliberal era; this has had profound ramifications. One of the most important of these has been an acceleration of the process of deindustrialisation. As a critical point of note, deindustrialisation is a symptom of the decline of the Fordist organisation of mass production which, having produced significant and sustained growth through the post-war years, began to wane as an engine of surplus value due to a number of interrelated pressures, including the increasing globalisation of economies (Benanav 2020: 22-8). Despite fierce opposition from labour movements, the large factories that characterised the Fordist productive paradigm have largely been moved offshore, often leaving more casualised, insecure, and poorly-paid forms of work in their wake (Lane 2020: 32). This has been accompanied by a more general shift to financialised, asset-driven economies and labour market flexibilisation (Lane 2020: 6), weakening labour's position in a number of key economic respects (Barradas 2019). These developments have worked to partially restore capitalist profitability: financialisation has provided a new avenue of value production, and capitalists have been able to exploit cheaper labour in both high-income and low-income countries (Benanav 2020: 53-5). They have also clearly had a profound impact on worker discipline. The closure of these large industrial sites and the defeat of trade union movements has resulted in a fracturing of the industrial working classes, who often now find themselves temporally and spatially dispersed and working on individualised contracts rather than those negotiated under collective bargaining agreements. Relatedly, contemporary workplaces also frequently lack the shared institutions and languages of solidarity that are vital components of labour movements. This has further accentuated workplace atomisation and precarity, which is, as Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea argue, experienced on both a material and affective basis (2013: 12), emerging in patterns of

depression, anxiety, and stress (see also Dejours 1998, for instance). Considered together, these trends have resulted in a significant expansion of what Olivier Schwartz (2014) terms the 'sphere of social disadvantage' in the neoliberal era; he highlights those in low-paid private sector jobs and the young as particularly affected by issues of marginalisation and unemployment.

These developments are a crucial preoccupation of the films analysed in Chapters 3, 4, and 7 of this thesis, which focus on the decline of industrial employment in working-class communities. Yet, while class remains of pivotal importance to any analysis of precarity, the effects of this process of precarisation are not confined solely to a particular socioeconomic group. Rather, as Isabell Lorey writes, '[t]he many precarious are dispersed both in relations of production and through diverse modes of production' (2015: 9). What is important to take from Lorey's argument is that white-collar workers are also increasingly subject to a workplace insecurity which is at the root of the particular socio-ontological condition of the contemporary era (2015; see also Berlant 2011: 192; Chamayou 2021: Chapter 7; Barbier 2004). This is a trend which resonates throughout my corpus; I discuss in more detail the features of the contemporary workplace which precipitate this condition below. Before proceeding, it is worth examining the dismantling of welfare states that has been a key feature of neoliberal societies, occurring conterminously with deindustrialisation. In many ways, social welfare provisions are incompatible with the foundational neoliberal values of individualised competition and self-reliance; they are also perceived to distort the moral and economic functioning of markets by neoliberal theorists such as Becker (see Becker 1993 for example). While the welfare states associated with Fordism were manifestly riven with gendered and racialised tensions, inequalities and exclusions (Cooper 2017: 8; Lane 2020: 1-28; Lorey 2015: 42), as well as functioning as powerful disciplinary mechanisms (Fraser 2003), they clearly provided a crucial safety net for many. The erosion of their material provisions, which has often gone hand in hand with the enforcement of increasingly punitive barriers to participation (Wacquant 2010; Wright, Fletcher and Stewart 2020), has left subjects in a state of further pronounced precarity. When we consider these developments together—the individualisation of employment, the destruction of cultures of solidarity, and the dismantling of collective welfare provisions—we begin to see the neoliberal subjectification process come into even sharper relief. This process creates atomised subjects of human capital, impelled to compete with one another through particular material circumstances and incentives.

Perpetual crisis

The 2007-8 financial crisis is a critical moment in this narrative, and consequently deserves further examination here. At a macro level, the state-backed deregulation of financial markets that has characterised the economic policy of the neoliberal era led to the emergence of significant structural imbalances (Daguerre 2013: 323). The crisis that erupted between 2007 and 2008 forced these contradictions to the surface, as complex networks of capital accumulation collapsed—perhaps most significantly in the case of the US subprime mortgage crisis. Yet, in spite of fervent opposition from various social movements (Mau 2023: 1), this moment did not mark a turn away from financialisation or indeed neoliberalism more generally. Rather, as Cédric Durand argues at length, 'nothing suggests that our societies are on a path to freeing ourselves' from the 'grip' of financialisation (2017: 1). In fact, interventionist neoliberal states and supra-national institutions across the global North stepped in to save financial markets from collapse, pumping money into markets through programmes of quantitative easing (Ashworth 2020: Chapter 3) and engaging in other forms of bailout. Thus, as Dardot and Laval write, '[n]eoliberalism, while widely discredited among ever broader swathes of the population, while provoking multifaceted resistance, was *radicalized* under the cloak of the crisis' (2019: 15). The capacity of the interventionist neoliberal state to create and maintain competitive market conditions was strengthened, but financial markets have faced few substantial attempts at regulation by states or other institutions (Durand 2017: 1). Crisis has not been averted, then; rather, a sense of permanent crisis has arguably become a crucial part of neoliberal governance (Lazzarato 2015: 10), weaponised in order to defeat any potential threat to neoliberalism and to strengthen the power of the capitalist classes. Dardot and Laval summarise the perverse, circular logic of this situation as follows:

> [t]he worse things go, the more they must go on. Lower taxes for the wealthiest and their counterpart—increases for the majority—are not to be abandoned by governments just because they have not delivered the promised results. On the contrary: the same course must be maintained, because those reductions and increases were insufficiently large (2019: 15).

The crisis has manifested more broadly in '[d]eclining growth rates, deflation, rising levels of indebtedness, [...] *labor precarity, and ever widening gaps in social and economic inequality*' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019: 21, emphasis mine). It has also 'accentuated pre-existing trends towards the casualization of work and the recommodification of labour' (Daguerre 2013: 324). In other words, it has accelerated the processes of precarisation that we have examined in detail above. The promises of neoliberalism become increasingly untenable in this environment.

Significantly, the rhetoric of individual freedom rings hollow in the context of desperate labour market conditions; the supposed opportunities of flexibility and mobility are lived out as insecurity and precarity instead. The autonomy demanded of subjects is experienced as isolation; this 'autonomy' is in any case accompanied by insidious mechanisms of control. According to Lazzarato, the collapse of these neoliberal promises has led to a crisis of subjectivation: the project of replacing the figure of the Fordist worker with that of human capital has run aground, as the demands and promises of neoliberalism appear increasingly incoherent and detached from one another (2015: 14). Alongside this, neoliberal states—which have always harnessed authoritarian mechanisms of power—become increasingly punitive in their disciplinary strategies (Gallo 2021), unable to offer hope to their citizens. This stokes a sense of ressentiment amongst subjects, which itself is deeply intertwined with the inegalitarian spirit of neoliberalism (Brown 2019: 177).

Neoliberalism in France

The image of neoliberalism developed above mostly omits the consideration of different national contexts in favour of a broader-reaching overview. Yet, given this study's primary focus on films that dramatise French contexts (with the exception of one Francophone Belgian and one Francophone Swiss example), it is important to briefly summarise the development of neoliberalism within France. As Charles Masquelier argues, 'France has been subjected to a profound transformation of its economy along neoliberal lines, starting as early as the so-called neoliberal pioneers, the United Kingdom and United States' (2021: 66). Mitterrand's premiership marked a critical early turn towards neoliberalism (Judt 2005: 553-4); the more recent governments of François Hollande and—particularly—Emmanuel Macron embody the cementing of the neoliberal order in the Elysée (Amable and Palombarini 2021: 137-45, 159-65).[14] The programmes of 'reforms' carried out in France have not followed a linear trajectory (Amable and Palombarini 2021: 121; Amable 2017: 5), and it should be noted that the French model still harbours residual elements of the post-war contract (Amable, Guillaud and Palombarini 2012: 1175). However, when considered as a whole, these reforms largely mirror the core neoliberal template: the privatisation of core industries and public assets, the marketisation of welfare programmes, the flexibilisation of labour markets, and the liberation of financial flows (Amable, Guillaud and Palombarini 2012: 1169-72). Mark I. Vail and others highlight the effects of these developments upon labour movements, writing that, in France,

[14] Mitterrand and Hollande were leaders of the *Parti Socialiste*; Macron was also formerly a member of this party. It is significant that, as Amable and Palombarini (2021: ix) argue, the putatively left-wing *PS* has played such a critical role in the development of neoliberalism in France.

'[s]tate power reshaped society and subjected many important decisions about the allocation of economic resources to the market, rather than to various forms of democratic practice. The result has been the political and economic disenfranchisement of workers' (2023: 378).

However, it is critical to note that the imposition of neoliberal policies has been (at best) ambiguously received by the public. Indeed, the French population has repeatedly reacted in fierce opposition to attempts by the government to unravel the framework of the post-war consensus; the recent response to Macron's 2023 pension reforms is a pertinent example of this (Beauvalet and Skomski 2023). Notably, neoliberalism is frequently seen—rightly or wrongly—as something that is imposed from without—particularly by Anglo-Saxon influences (Lane 2020: 17; Amable 2017: 32; Amable, Guillaud and Palombarini 2012). As Bruno Amable writes, then, 'France is far from being the country most favourable to the diffusion of neoliberal policies' (2017: 3). This relative militancy distinguishes France to a certain degree from the 'neoliberal pioneers' of the US and the UK, something Vivien Schmidt summarises aptly: '[France] has engaged in major reform efforts without having succeeded in legitimating them sufficiently or satisfactorily [...] with the French public' (2016: 622). This disconnect is a key feature of a distinctively French neoliberalism, in which neoliberal policies are steadily advanced but without substantial popular consent (Biscahie 2022: 483). A symptom of this situation is that solidaristic cultures of various kinds continue to represent a significant oppositional force. Such cultures include organisations such as trade unions, albeit this is complicated by the fact that French unions have shown varying degrees of complicity with neoliberalism (Amable and Palombarini 2021: 132). We also need to consider different forms of social movements that are not so neatly articulated with the traditional structures, institutions, and ideologies of the left (Vail et al 2023: 379). For instance, the 2016 *Nuit debout* movements saw thousands take to the streets in opposition to labour market reforms that, amongst other things, shifted the balance of power away from workers and towards company management (Harsin 2018). The *gilets jaunes* constitute another recent (2018 onwards) protest group that has emerged in response to declining living standards. The *gilets* represent the longest-running protest in the post-war period in France (Waters 2020: 10), although it must be mentioned that they are not easy to place on the left-right spectrum (Bendali et al 2019: 145). The generally critical nature of my corpus of films reflects this sense of disconnect between the forces of neoliberalisation and popular consent. Indeed, cinema itself can be considered as an oppositional voice which sits amongst these others within French society, although its potential effects are clearly very different to the movements I have just mentioned.

Immaterial labour

With both a general image of neoliberalism and a more specific idea of its French implementation in mind, I will examine in more detail the particular kinds of labour that have emerged in the wake of Fordist decline. First, it is worth clarifying our understanding of Fordist work. To recap, Fordism was the dominant organisation of production and accumulation in advanced capitalist societies throughout much of the 20th century; the period between the end of World War II and the late 1970s in particular has been termed 'high Fordism' (Antonio and Bonnano 2000: 36). Fordism was characterised by the mass production of consumer goods in factories. This assembly-line work involved highly specialised labour: each worker would carry out a spatially and temporally delineated task; this has been termed a process of 'deskilling' (Braverman 1998). This was accompanied by Taylorist programmes of rationalisation which contributed to significant productivity gains. In short, the key driver of growth in the Fordist era was highly routine industrial work that provided stable incomes for a significant subsection of the popular classes as part of a 'class compromise' (Harvey 2005: 10-2); this was a gendered and racialised organisation of production and social relations, privileging white men integrated within the heteropatriarchal family unit (Cooper 2017: 8).

One of the most important trends that has occurred in the neoliberal era has been the expansion of service sector employment. While this had long been seen as peripheral to Fordist mass production, the loss of industrial jobs and the search for new avenues of profit—amongst other factors—has led to significant growth in this sector (Benanav 2020: 56-60); it is now clearly dominant in high-income countries (World Bank 2021). This type of work takes a broad range of different forms: we need to consider low-paid care or retail work alongside financial services and creative industries, for instance. Importantly, this labour, which is hegemonic in neoliberalism, incorporates linguistic, informational, and affective qualities in a way that many forms of labour in Fordism did not. Theorists have coined a range of terms to describe this type of work (Gill and Pratt 2008); the two that I will use throughout my argument are immaterial and affective labour. The former of these points towards the fact that this work often generates no material products, although it should be noted that such work is still founded upon material infrastructures to a significant degree (Wark 2019: 25); the latter term is one I will use when the labour under discussion has clear affective or emotional qualities (Pfannebecker and Smith 2020: 85; Gill and Pratt 2008). Lazzarato is one of the scholars who has written most extensively on these developments; importantly, he argues that the dominance of this type of work encapsulates the way in which the qualitative divisions that existed between bourgeois and proletarian labour have been eroded in the neoliberal era. He writes,

> in our society today, there is but one population that engages in activities all of which contain "coefficients" of creativity, speech, developed sensibilities, intellect, and refined culture—in other words, all that once constituted the exclusive "heritage" of the bourgeoisie (or the aristocracy). Salaried workers, the unemployed, and welfare recipients represent a continuum that encompasses manual and intellectual labor, which were once separated between different classes (2017: 157).

Lazzarato perhaps goes too far in suggesting the similarity of these different types of labour, but it is clear that the erosion of boundaries he describes has at least partially occurred, thus marking a qualitative shift in the composition of labour.

The weakening of the class division that Lazzarato describes is paralleled from a gendered perspective. Many feminist theorists have drawn attention to the fact that the affect-related qualities of hegemonic neoliberal labour reflect the kind of work that has traditionally been coded as female and performed by women; this has consequently been termed the 'feminisation of labour' (Weeks 2017; Morini 2007). Kathi Weeks summarises these developments, writing that '[o]ne of the remarkable features of the contemporary post-Fordist economy is how traditional forms of women's work have come to characterize so many different kinds of employment' (2017: 38). Like Lazzarato, she argues that the two poles of mental and manual labour that had been separated in Fordist employment are now often combined and integrated into contemporary forms of work: '[t]o the extent that the flexible, caring, emotional, cooperative, and communicative model of femininity has come to represent the ideal worker, women's work under Fordism has arguably become the template for, rather than merely ancillary to, post-Fordist capitalist economies' (2017: 38). While this type of labour has gained dominance as more and more women have entered the workforce (Fraser 2016), it can of course be performed by both men and women. What is important to take from these accounts is this labour's qualitative difference to Fordist labour—in particular its mobilisation of linguistic, affective, and informational qualities. One point of note is that the 'cooperation' Weeks describes sits uneasily with the image of an increasingly atomised workforce outlined above. Yet, critically, cooperation and atomisation can co-exist: while 'it is quite clear that neoliberal practice is dependent on, and must actively reproduce, an individualist ideology which normalises competitive market relations as the paradigmatic form of human interaction' (Gilbert 2014: 25), it is also true that capital is, perhaps more than ever, dependent on the collective organisation of vast numbers of workers (Read 2003: 15; Mezzadra and Neilson 2019: 8). Consequently, it helps to think of this in terms of a dialectical relation: the more neoliberalism harnesses the cooperative work of labour, the more efforts it must undertake to atomise these subjects.

Managerialism

Perhaps the defining feature of the contemporary workplace which functions to atomise, individualise, and precarise subjects is managerialism. In short, the term managerialism refers to a range of techniques designed to increase profitability in the workplace. Given managerialism's prominence within contemporary workplaces, it is a key way in which neoliberalism is experienced 'on the ground'. These programmes should be considered part of 'a quest for perpetual productivity and growth' (Klikauer 2013: 10) characterised by 'a progressive concentration of power in the hands of professional managers who move between industry sectors' (Spillane and Jouillié 2021: 2). The mechanisms employed may not be overtly punitive (Cederström and Fleming 2012: 11-3), yet, in their most severe forms, they have led to epidemics of worker suicides, including at France Télécom (Waters 2014) and La Poste (Waters 2018). The French context of these two cases is important: as Sarah Waters argues, while all European workplaces underwent a transition to neoliberalism, 'the French management model was distinguished by a form of governance by psychology […] that operated outside a formal legal or disciplinary framework and used manipulative tactics against employees (2020: 47). The prevalence of (often subtle and insidious) psychological methods of workplace control and abuse in France has led to the introduction of a specific legal category that is designed to protect workers, *harcèlement moral* (translated literally as 'moral harrassment') (Waters 2020: 45-7). More broadly, Chamayou argues at length that these mechanisms are a critical component of the authoritarian nature of neoliberalism (2021); Thomas Klikauer argues similarly that managerialism is defined by its emphasis on domination and 'totalitarian' control (2013: 16).

The origins of managerialism can be traced back to broader developments in the neoliberal economy, including most importantly the shift to asset-driven value generation. This led to a change in the role of managers, who had once been tasked with what Chamayou terms 'ethical managerialism' (2021: 40). Now, however, this has largely been replaced with the straightforward goal of increasing a company's share value. Beholden to short-term financial imperatives, management effectively act as agents of shareholders; a key means through which this alliance has been cemented has been the alignment of managers' wages with share value (Chamayou 2021: 50). It is clear that managers themselves are frequently placed in very difficult positions in trying to align the market and the conduct of the enterprise (Chamayou 2021: 51), and must bear significant personal sacrifices as a result; indeed, this is a key focus of a number of my corpus films. However, the ultimate target of managerialism, and those who must bear its impacts most significantly, is the workforce at large, who are often subjected to increasingly more insidious and perverse mechanisms

of control. This leads to tragic consequences: as Chamayou writes, 'while profits go up, what falls like drops of rain are the pressure tactics, the moral harassment, the accidents at work, bouts of depression, musculoskeletal disorders, social death – and sometimes, just death' (Chamayou 2021: 60).

Waters' account of the epidemic of suicides that took place between 2006 and 2011 at France Télécom corroborates Chamayou's evocative words. Workers were constantly undermined and destabilised, being forced 'to change jobs on an almost continuous basis' (2014: 121). Invasive surveillance techniques were widespread, as were displays of petty but demeaning authoritarianism: Waters reports of call centre workers having to request permission to go to the toilet, for instance (2014: 135). The ultimate aim of this form of managerialism is to undermine working conditions and force workers to leave the company—a clear embodiment of the expulsion from labour. It is important to note that this programme had consequences beyond the immediate confines of the workplace: indeed, as Waters argues, managers worked to undermine 'the social relationships by which workers defined themselves and derived a sense of identity' (2014: 122). The company, which had recently transferred from public to private ownership, was consequently transformed into 'a site for extreme and competitive individualism' (Waters 2014: 137-8); this pushed a significant number of workers to take their own lives. France Télécom is clearly an extreme example, but should be considered the logical endpoint of a managerialism beholden to the ruthless financial imperatives of neoliberalism. As Waters writes, this 'management strategy [...] sought to fulfil the imperatives of finance capitalism by eliminating what was seen as an unacceptable obstacle to extraneous financial goals: the company's own employees' (2014: 122). The events that took place at France Télécom loom over my corpus—and throughout work-centred French film more generally—in which suicide and punitive financial imperatives represent crucial problematics. Indeed, as we will come to see, suicide represents one of the most prevalent forms of exit from labour that permeates these films.

The working body

We have considered the cognitive aspects of neoliberal subjectivation in some detail, but this discussion of suicide also illuminates the ways in which the body is deeply implicated with mechanisms of neoliberal power. Taking a step back from the extreme act of worker suicide, it is important to consider the broader integration of the body into the productive process. The cultural imaginary often associates physical expenditure with a particular type of (Fordist or industrial) work. Indeed, this is an association which permeates throughout contemporary theory as well: thinkers such as Vincent de Gaulejac and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi are but two who argue that, while Fordist work

targeted the body, the work of neoliberalism primarily engages the mind (de Gaulejac 2011: 62; Berardi 2009: 21).

However, it is clear that neoliberal work and its broader contexts make particular embodied demands of subjects. As Steffan Blayney, Joey Hornsby and Savannah Whaley argue,

> [c]apitalism, driven by accumulation, is characterized by a compulsion to make bodies *productive*: to make them work and work harder, to make them intelligible and knowable, and to integrate them as functional parts within its networks of production, consumption and exchange (2023a: 1, emphasis in original).

While neoliberal work certainly mobilises linguistic, affective, and cognitive faculties in a way that many forms of Fordist work did not, '[i]n today's capitalism, it is not difficult to find examples of direct control, exploitation and abuse carried out at the level of the body' (Blayney, Horsnby and Whaley 2023a: 2). At a global level, we should consider the highly exploitative industrial production of the material goods that facilitate 'immaterial' production, which often takes place in the global South. Many different kinds of service-sector work also place explicit embodied demands upon subjects alongside the requirement to manage emotion, language, and affect: Arlie Hochschild's famous early theorisation of 'emotional labour' tellingly speaks of 'the management of feeling to create a *publicly observable facial and bodily display*' (1983: 7, emphasis mine). Somewhat less directly, forms of workplace burnout, depression, and fatigue all take place on an embodied basis. Further, models of neoliberal subjecthood are also associated with particular embodied norms of presentability and efficiency (see Luna 2019, for instance). Film is a medium which, like production, puts bodies to work; the embodied demands of neoliberal work are often an important focus of my analysis.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism is a complex and multifaceted concept which defies straightforward definition. This chapter has demonstrated its conceptual utility by exploring important developments in interrelated economic, social, and political spheres. First, we took a historical stance, contextualising neoliberalism's rise to hegemony in the wake of the crisis of Fordism. We then turned to examine neoliberalism's distinct rationality, most notably through the figure of human capital. Next, we undertook a closer examination of transformations in the neoliberal workplace that play a key part in the propagation of this rationality and the reproduction of the dominant subjective models of neoliberalism. We then examined qualitative shifts in the nature of labour itself, before turning to

the managerial techniques which pervade many contemporary workplaces and examining the integration of the body within the productive process. The nuanced image of neoliberalism developed above informs the filmic analysis that follows, but it is not a benchmark against which to compare cinema. As O'Shaughnessy writes, film and theory have different objectives, and should therefore be approached differently: '[t]heory works upon the conceptual and the abstract. Cinema upon the concrete, affective, sensuous and aesthetic' (2022: 3). They also employ fundamentally different semiotic mechanisms: the materiality of film clearly cannot be reduced to discursive theory, and vice versa. Therefore, it is critically important to interrogate film's differences to theory, and to question how these differences might alter or perhaps even enrich our understandings of neoliberalism. The next chapter develops these lines of questioning, interrogating the ways in which cinema has approached the representation of work throughout its history.

Chapter 2: Interrogating work and cinema

We now have a clear picture of the developments that characterise the neoliberal workplace, including an idea of the qualitative differences between the hegemonic patterns of neoliberal labour and those of Fordism. We have also developed a refined image of the broader frameworks that underpin these changes: new subjectivities and forms of social relations, modulations in welfare systems, and comprehensive transformations in the functioning of global economies. This chapter moves a step closer towards the filmic analyses to follow, engaging with a problematic which is foundational to this thesis. Its objective is to explore the ways in which cinema approaches work and its associated environments and frameworks, through an interrogation of the different ways in which this has been theorised.

I begin with a literature review which serves as an overview of the major theorisations of the relationship between work and film. Subsequently, I utilise the Lumière brothers' film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* (*La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon*, 1895) as an entry point into the main discussion. This early piece of cinema brings together work and film in a way which condenses a number of the key issues at stake in the contemporary era. To expand upon these thoughts, I draw upon a range of thinkers, amongst whom Jean-Louis Comolli and Ewa Mazierska are the most significant—and whose thoughts diverge most clearly on the question of film's relationship with work. I aim to place these theorists in productive dialogue with one another. In the first instance, I contrast their general approaches to the question of cinema's figuration of work, later developing a closer reading of their theses concerning the nature of representation that takes place. The lattermost part of this chapter attends to the representation of contemporary labour, probing the challenges and possibilities that cinema encounters in its efforts to dramatise neoliberal work and its associated environments.

Literature review

Keith Wagner (2014: 314) is one of many who argues that the topics of work and its associated frameworks (socioeconomic class in particular) have remained on the periphery of academic film studies for much of its history (see also Mazierska 2012: 149; Mennel 2019: 17, for instance). Indeed, the 20th century saw only a scattering of works explicitly dedicated to the subject of work and film. Comolli stands out as one of the few thinkers who has long been concerned with the theorisation of this relationship. Perhaps best known for his association with the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* (serving as its editor-in-chief from 1966 to 1978), Comolli was a prolific filmmaker as well as a critic.

An influential essay of Comolli's which encapsulates the general thrust of his arguments on work and film is 'Mechanical Bodies, Ever More Heavenly' (1998). This piece examines the different ways in which (documentary) film has represented the productive process, arguing that cinema tends to avoid or misrepresent work. An anthology book that spans over 15 years of Comolli's writing, *Voir et pouvoir* (2004), also contains a number of essays on this subject. In 2005, he conducted a series of seminars with the Belgian organisation *des images* on similar terrain; these were later published online and in print.

Harun Farocki is another filmmaker-theorist who has repeatedly approached this topic. His 1995 essay film *Workers Leaving the Factory*, which compiles footage of workers from throughout the preceding century, is particularly notable; this was accompanied by a written piece (2001). Farocki broadly agrees with Comolli in his assertion that cinema neglects the representation of work; I draw upon both below. In addition to Comolli's and Farocki's texts, two rare examples of 20th century books on or around this subject deserve mention. Peter Stead's *Film and the Working Class* (1989) is one of these: it analyses the figure of the male industrial worker in British and American feature films, asking questions of the authenticity and realism of these representations. Another is David James and Rick Berg's edited collection *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class* (1996), which probes the representation of class in film and pointedly notes the lack of a framework that is adequate for this task within academic discourse (James 1996: 5). The essays in this collection analyse Hollywood, Russian, and Chinese films; the representation of work is something of a secondary focus overall, but some pieces do engage more thoroughly with this topic (Nichols 1996; Collings 1996, for instance).

In comparison to the historic dearth of scholarship on work and film, the turn of the century has seen markedly greater interest in the area. This is paralleled in the increased visibility of labour subjects within cinema that we noted in this work's introduction. Tom Zaniello's *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Expanded Guide to Films About Labour* (2003) is an important text that forms part of this revived academic interest.[15] This book summarises representations of labour across a broad body of film, conceptualising a framework that compartmentalises labour films into six distinct categories: social-realist documentaries, traditional documentaries, *cinema verité*, TV documentary, agitprop, and postmodern documentaries (2003: 8-11). Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vondereau's edited collection *Films that Work* (2009) takes a more specialist path, examining industrial films and their relationship to broader developments within capitalism.

[15] This expanded edition builds upon the book's first iteration (Zaniello 1996).

Closer in focus to this thesis are the works of Mazierska, who has written prolifically about work and film. She notably breaks from Comolli and Farocki, arguing that work is diffusely present across a broad range of films (2012: 150). Her 2015 text *From Self-fulfilment to Survival of the Fittest* analyses the representation of work across European cinema from the 1960s onwards, mostly paying attention to recurrent narrative tendencies. A 2017 monograph, *Poland Daily*, probes the representation of work, class and consumption in Polish film. Two further edited collections deserve mention: 2013's *Work in Cinema* covers significant ground, including the nature of the representation of specifically neoliberal labour (see Fraser 2013, for instance); *Contemporary Cinema and Neoliberal Ideology* (2018, edited with Lars Kristensen) takes a broader look at the relationship between film and neoliberalism, incorporating industry-focused studies as well as those which centre filmic analyses. These sit alongside numerous articles and an edited dossier within a special issue of the journal *Framework*, 'Working Now and Then' (2012a).

Important texts by other authors include Barbara Mennel's monograph *Women at Work in Twenty-First-Century European Cinema* (2019), which investigates the representation of women's labour in recent films which 'employ female characters to embody contemporary European fantasies and social realities of the political economy of work' (2019: 1). The other dossier within the special issue of *Framework* mentioned above is Elena Gorfinkel's edited collection 'The Work of the Image: Cinema, Labor, Aesthetics' (2012), which pays close attention to the relationship between filmic form and work. Thinking about neoliberalism and cinema more broadly leads us to further sources. For instance, a 2019 issue of *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 'Cinema and the Cultures of Neoliberalism', gives a comprehensive overview of a range of different theoretical approaches to the study of this topic (see Cooper 2019). Wagner and Jyostna Kapur's edited book, *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema* (2012), combines a broad range of Marxian studies of film. A 2020 collection, *Cinema of Crisis* (Austin and Koutsourakis eds.), is refreshing for its analyses of diverse kinds of filmmakers working in a broad range of formats. These latter texts do not always centre the representation of work, but are valuable nonetheless, as the contexts they explore are deeply intertwined with developments in the workplace.

Theorists of French film studies have proven to be particularly interested in the representation of work and its associated environments. O'Shaughnessy's influential *The New Face of Political Cinema* (2007) concentrates on French and Belgian political film, casting a close eye on the experiences of work and unemployment in neoliberal societies. Florian Grandena's *Showing the World to the World* (2008) operates along similar lines, addressing the renewed interest in socio-political themes in French film; work is a peripheral, but important, focus here. Two special issues of *Modern & Contemporary France* have relatively recently been published which explicitly examine the state of

the workplace in France: 'Work in Crisis' (2018), and 'Figurations of Work in Post-Fordist France' (2011). Both issues contain valuable analyses of filmic representations of work alongside studies of literary representations and theory. More recently still, Sarah Waters' 2020 work *Suicide Voices* confronts the phenomenon of worker suicides in France, mobilising analyses of films at various points. Also published in 2020 is Jeremy Lane's monograph *Republican Citizens, Precarious Subjects: Representations of Work in Post-Fordist France*. This book exhibits important parallels with my thesis, engaging a range of filmic and literary works to explore questions of French citizenship through the lens of representations of labour market developments.

My thesis must clearly position itself within this body of work: it builds upon many of the arguments found within these texts. However, it makes a substantial original contribution in terms of its close focus on work and the matter of its representation. Many of these books and articles (those of Mazierska and Lane, for instance) largely neglect questions of filmic style and form in favour of broader narrative overviews, reading films as sociological and cultural texts. One of the key objectives of this thesis, on the other hand, is to question precisely the ways in which cinema attempts to represent work. Further, this study draws upon a unique selection of films, many of which have not been discussed in an academic context. I contend that this corpus represents a valuable and productive resource for interrogating the relationship between cinema, work, and neoliberalism. With this picture of a growing academic interest in work and film in mind, and an idea of this study's relationship to it, I will now turn to a more detailed discussion of the relationship between cinema and work.

Workers Leaving the Factory

The first point of note in any discussion of the relationship between cinema and work is the deep intertwinement of film and labour on a general level. Most straightforwardly, as Gorfinkel argues, all cinema is a spectacularised product of labour—'be it the labor behind the camera, in the bodies placed before it, or in those exertions that evade its view, transpiring offscreen, out of frame, before, after, and beyond it' (2012a: 44). We also need to consider the relationship between film, labour, and capitalism more broadly: developments in filmic technology and industries are clearly connected to larger-scale developments within labour markets and the forces of production. In the first instance, some important technologies that would later facilitate commercial cinema emerged from capitalist factories towards the end of the 19th century (Mennel 2019: 9; Farocki 2001: 230), although other actors were equally important in the development of these technologies (Lipton 2021). Later on, the moving image came to be used as part of Taylorist programmes of

rationalisation, which recorded the motions of workers in order to drive efficiency gains (Mennel 2019: 15). Taylorism is of course closely related to the Fordist organisation of production; it bears mention that the Ford company itself made extensive use of 'educational' films in order to instruct audiences 'in the new ways of mass production and in the corresponding political economy of advanced capitalism' (Grieveson 2012: 26). This constitutes an early example of the use of film to build consent and enthusiasm amongst subjects for a particular model of capitalism. More recently, Jonathan Beller goes as far as to argue that the process of watching constitutes the paradigmatic form of productive labour in the contemporary 'attention economy', and thus that the cinema serves as a prototype of this new type of production. He writes, '[c]inema and its succeeding (if still simultaneous), formations, particularly television, video, computers, and the internet, are deterritorialized factories in which spectators work, that is, in which we perform value-productive labor' (2006: 1).

The Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon* is an important piece of cinema which stages a confrontation between film, labour, and production. *Workers Leaving the Factory* was first shown to the public at the Grand Café in Paris on December 28, 1895, and thus represents one of the very first motion picture films. The film begins as the gates of the Lumière factory open; crowds of workers flood out to the left and right of the frame for the entirety of its brief 46 second runtime.[16] This work is interesting both for what it shows and what it does not show. In terms of the former, it is crucial that the film's actors—Lumière's own employees—are captured by the nascent medium of cinema at precisely the moment that work ends and their leisure time begins. Consequently, the working process is elided and cinema is implicitly aligned with leisure; as we will come to see, this forms a key part of Comolli's arguments. Relatedly, it is important that we only very briefly see these subjects as a collective of workers before they splinter off as individuals with divergent identities. With regard to what is not shown, it is notable that the viewer is denied entry to the factory. This points towards the fact that visualisation is always a political process, intertwined with particular relations of power: why, precisely, are we forbidden to see beyond the factory gates? This is a question to which I will return shortly.

Importantly, then, at this very early point in cinema's history, we witness a representation which sets the stage for the depictions of work which are to follow it: as Gorfinkel argues, the Lumière brothers' film encapsulates the fact that 'work and its figuration are *ambiguously central* to the history of cinema' (2012a: 43, emphasis in original). This ambiguity can be found in the fact that while cinema is always a spectacularised product of labour, cinema often fails to represent this

[16] There are several different edits of the film, but the 46-second version is the most commonly invoked.

labour. Of course, this can partly be explained by the fact that much of the labour involved in the production of film is intended to remain invisible. This in itself is important, for it captures film's ambivalent relationship with labour—its simultaneous reliance upon and impulse to hide it. This tendency also highlights the similarities between cinematic and capitalistic production more generally: both aim to hide the processual labour involved in the production of the final commodity (Marx 1976: 163-77). On a related note, we might also consider the ways in which classical narrative forms aim to hide the work that they themselves do, striving to appear natural and coherent yet operating in specific, determined ways (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985: 265). From this analysis, we can begin to see an impression of the complex relationship between cinema and labour emerge.

Different theoretical perspectives

Taking *Workers Leaving the Factory* as his starting point and focusing largely on documentary, Comolli argues that film has neglected or failed to represent work throughout its history. This is the case for a number of reasons. Among the most obvious are that film is typically a form of entertainment and escapism: as Comolli writes, 'to go to the cinema was to escape temporarily from the fatigue of work, from oppression, from everyday life' (2005).[17] Cinema is thus drawn to less mundane activities than work, which is considered 'insufficiently flattering', 'minimally spellbound or spellbinding', or simply 'too tedious' (1998: 19) for the camera. For Comolli, this reinforces the association of cinema with leisure that is emblematised in *Workers Leaving the Factory.* Another, potentially more interesting, reason behind film's neglect of work has been that workplaces are frequently private spaces that are made inaccessible to filmmakers. As Comolli writes, 'I do not have the right to enter into factories without the permission of management' (2005).[18]

The theme of the Lumière brothers' early work that inspires Comolli's argument was reprised by Farocki on that work's centenary in 1995. His essay film, which as we have seen is also titled *Workers Leaving the Factory*, takes excerpts from documentaries, industrial and propaganda films, newsreels, and features (Farocki 2001). A montage of the various pieces of footage is accompanied by a voiceover which serves as an insightful meta-analysis of visual representations of workers throughout the 20th Century; at 36 minutes, the resultant work is many times longer than the

[17] All translations are mine, original French is provided in footnotes: 'aller au cinéma, c'était échapper temporairement à la fatigue du travail, à l'oppression, à la vie quotidienne'
[18] 'je n'ai pas le droit d'entrer dans les usines sans autorisation de la direction'. Fiction film is afforded more freedom through its detachment from real-world constraints.

Lumière brothers' film. Farocki affirms Comolli's thesis concerning film's obfuscation of work: in a written piece accompanying the film, he contends that

> [t]he first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory, but a century later it can be said that film is hardly drawn to the factory and is even repelled by it. Films about work or workers have not become one of the main genres, and the space in front of the factory has remained on the sidelines (2001: 232).

Others do not necessarily share Comolli's and Farocki's viewpoints on cinema's neglect of work, approaching this problematic from a slightly different angle. For instance, Jennifer Peterson writes contra Farocki that 'labor and industry persisted as subjects for documentaries, even if labor subjects were never a particularly mainstream theme in fiction film' (2013: 598). She highlights a particular resurgence in documentary films made since the beginning of the twenty-first century that have turned towards work in order to confront its changing nature:

> [t]his return to questions of industry in cinema and media is symptomatic of the historical shift away from manufacturing toward the dominance of finance capital: these new "industrial films," if we can call them that, document and respond to the state of labor in the contemporary global economy (2013: 598).

Peterson draws primarily upon experimental documentary in her argument, which represents something of a difference in approach when compared to Farocki and Comolli. Yet, she also hints towards a more general need to define work more broadly, particularly given its changing form. Farocki and Comolli focus resolutely on industrial work, and frequently centre the representation of the productive process itself in their analyses. This raises certain complications that we need to bear in mind. The first is that the nature of work has changed significantly in the neoliberal era, as we have examined in some detail: in the global North, industrial production is often in decline. The reified image of work as something performed only by men in factories is therefore increasingly misleading in the contemporary era.[19] A further complication to these arguments is that the relations of production that underpin work permeate far beyond the confines of the workplace itself: they structure ways of thinking and living that are experienced on a wider basis. A limited focus on the factory therefore leads to something of an incomplete picture.

[19] Of course, this image has always been misrepresentative of the vast variety of work that is performed by different people and in different environments.

Mazierska is a thinker who develops these arguments to their fullest extent, probing the relationship between cinema and work with a highly inclusive definition of the latter. In this respect, her writings represent a conscious divergence from Comolli and Farocki. Mazierska writes provocatively that work 'is present in practically every film concerning humans […] The process of laboring might not be shown, but work is usually mentioned in dialogues; it affects the construction of characters and the choice of mise-en-scène. When reading even rudimentary synopses of films, we typically learn that the character is a factory worker, clerk, artist, politician, or housewife' (2012: 150). Thus, for Mazierska, we need to look not only in explicitly work-centred films to think about work, but to 'read' diverse films for traces of work, in order to uncover 'fresher and more complex representations' (2012: 151). Each of these approaches has its merits; in this situation, it proves helpful to turn them into lines of questioning. For instance, if the type of work that Comolli and Farocki identify is absent from film, why is this the case? What broader structural factors might this be a symptom of? On the other hand, what might we gain from interpreting work more broadly, as per Mazierska? In what ways are films structured by work, even in the absence of the representation of the productive process?

Looking more closely at cinema and work

Comolli posits interesting arguments concerning the nature of the representation of production itself. He contends that cinema is particularly drawn to the movements of industrial machinery (1998: 20). This machinery becomes the archetypal embodiment of work, superseding and displacing the worker himself.[20] Clearly, as Comolli explains, this poses problems from any perspective that aims to critically examine work: it neglects the experience of work by workers, and, relatedly, obfuscates the role of labour in the productive process more generally. According to Comolli, when the worker is represented, he becomes 'an athlete, a dancer, an acrobat', responding to the machine (1998: 21); the gestures of work therefore become reified and eroticised. For Comolli, then, cinema is enchanted by '[t]he cult of surface and movement as quintessence of spectacle' (1998: 19), rather than representing work's 'complexity, duress, and boredom' (O'Shaughnessy 2011: 60).

Comolli argues that the temporalities of work prove particularly difficult to represent. While the productive process is lengthy, film compresses the acts of workers into short sequences and we are left with just '*confettis de travail*' (2005)—aestheticised fragments of work. A (sometimes implicit) element of his argument here concerns the synergies between the Fordist/Taylorist organisation of

[20] The worker within Comolli's thesis is implied to be male, as per the general norms of Fordism.

production and the cinematic representation of labour. Both are driven by temporal efficiency; both involve the organisation and manipulation of bodies (Aguilera Skvirsky 2020: 120). For Comolli, then, 'the beat of the machines' is accompanied by 'a leap of a camera' (1998: 20); these different machines come together in a 'mechanical ballet' (1998: 20), characterised by the '[r]epetition of repetition' (1998: 21). Further, Comolli argues that filmic depictions of work naturally fail to do justice to the oppressive and unequal nature of the wage relation. He writes, 'work is a power relation, it is power exercised by a few over the others. It is a submission of bodies to power. This submission clearly resists mise-en-scène, it resists representation because it does not appear precisely' (2005).[21] For all of these reasons, Comolli contends that filmic representations of work tend to reinforce hegemonic norms.

We can see from this summary that Mazierska's primary criticism of Comolli—that he approaches his analysis of the relationship between film and work with a pre-conceived notion of what constitutes work (Mazierska 2013a: 2)—is not unfounded. Indeed, as Mazierska contends, Comolli equates all work with Fordist factory work; for him, this can only ever be characterised by toil and alienation (Mazierska 2012: 149-50). Mazierska argues on the contrary that for many people work is fulfilling and pleasant, introducing an Arendtian distinction between work and labour in order to make this clear (2015: 9; 2013: 4). For Arendt, labour—deriving from the Latin *laborare*—is associated with physical effort, toil, and a sense of pain. Work, on the other hand, can be skilled, artistic, and intellectual: it creates the world around us, and is a distinct part of the human condition (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 79-174). Mazierska thus argues that it is crucial to factor in a broad range of different conceptions of work and labour in our analyses of film; this lies at the foundation of her assertion that work can be found diffusely across almost every work of cinema. By extension, she takes issue with Comolli's argument that representations of work tend to reinforce hegemonic norms, perceiving this to be too deterministic (see also Aguilera Skvirsky 2020: 120). The invitation to extend our definition of work that Mazierska makes is welcome and indeed necessary, given the changing nature of work and its permeation into ever-more areas of life. She asks us to start with cinema itself: what does film tell us about work? This extends to films which reflect positively upon the working experience—films about the enjoyment of work, even; these texts offer valid and interesting perspectives, according to Mazierska's argument. With that said, certain key aspects of Comolli's thought can nonetheless be extrapolated and put to use in the broader context that Mazierska describes. Comolli is surely correct that film makes elisions, obfuscations, and

[21] 'Le travail est un rapport de force, c'est du pouvoir exercé par les uns sur les autres. C'est une soumission des corps à un pouvoir. Cette soumission résiste bien évidemment à sa mise en scène, sa mise en représentation pour qu'elle n'apparaisse pas précisément.'

aestheticisations in its representation of work (2005). The question remains: what is being elided in representations of work (of all kinds), and what effect does this have?

Critically, Comolli is not entirely sceptical about film's ability to represent work. Rather, he contends that film must resist its dominant representational tendencies: it must film 'against cinema' (2005).[22] This is a route towards representing different experiences of work that might be put to more critical purposes. Some ways in which film might accomplish this include resisting spectacularisation, showing that work comprises more than just a set of predetermined gestures, or employing unconventional temporalities, for instance. This is where Comolli's thoughts perhaps find clearest application beyond the representation of the industrial productive process itself. He raises the important question: how can cinema represent those aspects of work that remain invisible, including those that permeate into life outside the workplace? Capitalism has always relied upon an obfuscation of the power relations that underpin its functioning; what mechanisms can film employ to force these into view?

One of the most significant devices that Comolli highlights is the use of the off-screen—that which is not shown. To illustrate this point, we should think back to the fact that the conditions of what is shown are always determined by particular relations of power. Comolli summarises the implications of this: '[t]he cinema frame acts like a scalpel in its division of the filmed world into the visible and non-visible […] To frame is to inflict violence — a virtual violence, naturally, but a highly visible violence' (2010: 64; see also Comolli 1998: 20). In terms of workplace documentary in particular, the camera is frequently confined to spaces outside of the production line, unable to observe workers in this environment. Yet, Comolli (2005) argues that this very lack of access can be put to productive use, for it serves to highlight the hierarchies of power that bear down upon workers. Looking towards my corpus films, Stéphane Brizé's *En guerre* (2018) is particularly notable in this light. At key moments during that film, a group of workers threatened with unemployment travel to the headquarters of MEDEF, an association of French employers. They, and the camera, are persistently denied access to representatives of these employers, who remain in the upper echelons of the building while the workers are crammed into the lobby. This use of off-screen space thus serves to highlight the political relations that govern the conditions of the struggle.

In a similar vein, Comolli also makes a case for the use of language to invoke off-screen experiences of the workplace; this can often take the form of interviews or other kinds of oral testimony. We should consider the fact that, as O'Shaughnessy writes, '[t]his obligation to turn to the word to give access to the unseen might be understood as a simple making do with what was available' (2011:

[22] 'contre le cinéma'

63). However, Comolli argues instead that cinema might actually be more effective when it does not show something directly: 'cinema was built upon an acceptance of this fact: to show something is to hide […] It is from the non-visible that anything can happen' (2005).[23] In this respect, by representing the effects of work through language, cinema invites the viewer to confront workers' experiences of work, even while it remains off-screen.[24] We begin to see interesting commonalities emerge between Comolli and Mazierska. In particular, Comolli's instruction to look for work in places where it is not immediately visible (the off-screen, language) bears certain parallels with Mazierska's command to search out traces of work in diverse spaces and environments.

Another area of common ground between these two thinkers can be found in their arguments about film's general representation of workers in the neoliberal era. Mazierska contends that cinema charts and indeed anticipates the deterioration of workers' situations of neoliberalism: 'their lives are less stable, their political power has diminished and they are squeezed out from the places where they could share their experiences' (2015: 262). In a similar vein, Comolli argues that the nature of the representation of workers has changed in the neoliberal era. He contends that, while workers and their struggles have not disappeared completely from film, the conflicts dramatised in contemporary cinema are characterised by the absence of the promise of emancipation, particularly when compared to those of the past (2004: 528). Therefore, the desire to represent workers in film is even further quelled. Indeed, according to Comolli, workers themselves have little interest in witnessing these narratives of defeat (2004: 529). As O'Shaughnessy remarks, the consequence of this trend is that workers 'no longer believe that they have a willing audience'; '[n]ot only are they the losers of history, but they have also lost the battle at the level of representation' (2011: 60). In this light, both Mazierska's and Comolli's arguments lead us to another potentially fruitful line of questioning. Given the realities of the neoliberal era—which has most often seen a deterioration of workers' circumstances—what is the point in films which dramatise the defeats of workers' struggles, or indeed their discontent more generally? Can films that channel hopelessness be interesting, useful, or valuable, and, if so, how?

[23] '[l]e cinéma s'est construit sur cette acceptation : montrer, c'est cacher […] C'est à partir du non visible que tout peut arriver.'

[24] When considering this recourse to language, we need to bear in mind that the Fordist work that Comolli discusses has traditionally been associated with silence; it is at times when workers have downed tools that we have most often witnessed outpourings of workers' voices. Historically, this has most commonly taken place on a mass scale due to conflicts in the workplace; the wealth of documentary films made in the aftermath of May 1968 is perhaps the most poignant evidence of this. The fact that neoliberal labour frequently incorporates language into its mechanisms complicates this argument to a certain degree.

Representing neoliberal work

I wish to return now to the question of representing work and its associated structures in neoliberal contexts: what is different about neoliberal work that we need to bear in mind? As we have seen, a key aspect of Comolli's argument concerns film's difficulty in representing the temporalities of Fordist labour. Clearly, certain working temporalities are shared between the Fordist and neoliberal eras. In particular, we need to consider work's overall duration, which spans over many years and results in a gradual wearing down of the worker on both a physical and mental basis. A time-bound medium, cinema struggles to directly represent this timespan, for obvious reasons. In these respects, Comolli's theses seem to be straightforwardly applicable to representations of neoliberal forms of labour.

From a different angle, Comolli's arguments about the temporalities of work and film are complicated somewhat, because the rhythms of neoliberal labour are often different to those that Comolli describes. Comolli argues that there is a temporal synergy between Fordist production and cinema. Both are driven by a rhythmic drive towards efficiency: production aims to save time through endlessly repeated gestures, while cinema aims to do so through the relatively standardised elimination of superfluous time in the editing process. In comparison to the clearly delineated temporal divisions of Fordist work, neoliberal labour is frequently more temporally irregular and less directly repetitive. The routine hours of work that were common in Fordism have also often been superseded in the neoliberal era, in which more inconsistent patterns of work are increasingly prevalent. What does this divergence between the temporal patterns of work and film mean for the latter? We can be certain that film will still compress the working process to some degree. However, the question remains open of what mechanisms it might employ to represent these different working temporalities, and what the broader implications of this might be.

We can posit similar arguments concerning the aestheticisation of labour in the neoliberal era more generally. The 'beat of the [Fordist] machines' (1998: 20) that Comolli describes is clearly not directly applicable to many kinds of neoliberal work, yet the camera is still frequently drawn to spectacle, aestheticising select aspects of work while neglecting others. Thinking more broadly, neoliberal economies are characterised by ever-increasing complexification. The networks of accumulation that structure the productive process are characterised by vast spatialities: hugely complex chains of financialised accumulation encompass myriad subjects, industries, and economies. This is something that film can struggle to confront directly, given its tendency to home in on the local and particular, rather than the global and multiple (see Toscano and Kinkle 2015; Jameson 1995 for critical examinations of attempts to represent capitalism in its totality). That said, cinema's tendency to

aestheticise and occlude is something of an inevitability, and not something that is unique to the representation of neoliberalism. Once more, the critical question surrounds the nature of aestheticisation and occlusion that takes place. What does film centre in its representations of work; conversely, what is elided and what effect does this have? Conversely, what mechanisms can film use to bring hidden aspects of work, the broader working experience, and the structures of neoliberalism to light?

There are certain characteristics of neoliberal work which potentially prove more amenable to representation. For instance, as examined in the last chapter, bodies represent a critical object of power in neoliberal workplaces. This is the case even in white-collar jobs which are less obviously physically demanding than the typical work of Fordism (Blayney, Hornsby and Whaley 2023a: 2). Comolli speaks of the difficulty of representing the 'submission of bodies to power' (2005), yet others paint a slightly different picture.[25] For example, O'Shaughnessy (2007: 39, 139-40) contends that the body is a key site upon which the power relations of neoliberalism become inscribed—particularly in the absence of a coherent discursive framework to articulate the changes wrought in the neoliberal era. In this argument, the body registers a range of different forces both within and outside of the workplace itself. This makes sense given that film is a medium which depends on the mobilisation of bodies in a similar way to many forms of work. Relatedly, affective and communicative qualities are frequently incorporated into neoliberal labour. Film also incorporates the affective labour of actors, and demands a certain affective labour of the viewer (Gorfinkel 2012: 44). From this perspective, another point of connection arises between neoliberal work and cinema. Film is a communicative medium that relies upon affect, language, and other communicative codes in order to produce an emotional or affective response; many forms of neoliberal labour employ similar mechanisms. This might suggest that cinema has the ability to represent forms of affective or emotional labour in ways that it does not for other forms of work.

Conclusion

The relationship between cinema and work is a complex one. It is clear that film and labour are deeply intertwined in some respects: on a foundational level, film is reliant upon many forms of labour in its production, and also demands a kind of (affective) labour from its audiences. Beyond this, however, things become more difficult. As we have seen, theorists are divided on the question of whether film neglects work (Comolli), or whether it represents it in a multitude of often under-

[25] 'une soumission des corps à un pouvoir'

examined ways (Mazierska). I attempt to bridge these arguments. It is inevitable that film will make elisions and obfuscations in the process of representation. This is a simple fact of the temporal and spatial constraints of the medium. We must therefore be permanently attentive, as Comolli suggests, to what is being elided, and what effects this might have. As both Comolli and Mazierska argue in different ways, we must also pay close attention to the ways in which film can force the hidden aspects of work and its associated structures to the surface. To return to one of the research questions which drives this study, how does film challenge voicelessness, track embodied resistances, and force different forms of violence and alternative practices into view?

Chapter 3: Resisting the threat of expulsion

Having taken stock of the changes wrought in the workplace in the neoliberal era, and interrogated the relationship between cinema and work, it is now time to turn towards the core of this thesis. The following five chapters comprise detailed filmic analyses which build upon the issues we have examined thus far, probing the mechanisms that film utilises to represent contemporary work and the structures that surround it. This chapter introduces two films—Stéphane Brizé's *En guerre* (2018) and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Deux jours, une nuit* (2014)—which represent a particularly appropriate starting point, as they concentrate a number of themes which pervade this body of work more broadly.

The first of these is the threat of expulsion from labour, which is dramatised across my corpus in a range of different contexts. In this instance, both films centre around the impact of deindustrialisation and the precarisation of employment that has ensued. The second is the question of the possibility of resistance to this threat, and by extension to the broader structures that lie behind it. The films' responses to this question emerge in the form of two further motifs that emerge repeatedly across this corpus. One is the confrontation with power. In these cases, the protagonists of both films attempt to physically approach the forces that impose upon their everyday lives. The other is the exit from labour, which appears here in two different, archetypal forms: worker suicide (*En guerre*), and ethical withdrawal (*Deux jours, une nuit*).

These concerns are underpinned by the films' broader considerations of the demands of neoliberal subjecthood and, relatedly, the relationship between the individual and collective in neoliberal societies. The questions that animate this chapter are simple: what vision of resistance to the neoliberal degradation of workplace conditions do these films stake out, and how do they do this? What does this tell us about the relationship between this cinematic corpus and neoliberalism? To develop these lines of inquiry, I draw extensively upon the theoretical foundations established in this work's first and second chapters. In particular, I place the different theorisations of neoliberal rationality and neoliberal subjecthood that we examined in Chapter 1 in dialogue with these films, while drawing on the theories of representation that we addressed in the previous chapter.

En guerre

2018's *En guerre* is the second instalment in Brizé's trilogy of work-centred film; the first of these, *La Loi du marché* (2015), is addressed in the next chapter; the final is *Un autre monde* (2022). This film

depicts a tense, embittered battle between unionised workers at a car parts factory in Agen, south-west France, and the management of the factory's German parent company, Dimke, who have made the decision to close the factory down. During a fraught and sometimes violent struggle, the multiple unions splinter into different factions; by the film's conclusion the workers have effectively ceded defeat. This catastrophic loss plays out over the body of the film's protagonist, union figurehead Laurent Amédéo (Vincent Lindon), who commits suicide by self-immolation outside the headquarters of Dimke. Laurent's suicide is an exit from labour that emerges in response to the expulsion from labour that commences the film; I address the interrelationship of these two actions below. Tellingly, *En guerre* is the only film within this corpus in which an active trade union movement plays a significant part, and one of the few whose narrative centres around industrial work. Consequently, its narrative bears the most significant traces of the Fordist organisation of politics and production found in the films, although the context of brutal shareholder capitalism in which the strike occurs is undoubtedly neoliberal. Its narrative is driven almost entirely by the ebbs and flows of the workers' struggle; in contrast to many other work-centred films, there is very little exposition of interpersonal relationships outside of the direct environments of workplace conflict.[26] In this sense, *En guerre* attempts to draw direct attention to the structural developments of neoliberalism and their impact on groups and individuals; it is one of the most overtly 'political' of the films discussed in this thesis.

On a broad thematic level, the film is clearly preoccupied with the social consequences of deindustrialisation and the model of neoliberal capitalism at its root: it makes plain that the factory's closure will be catastrophic not only for the workers themselves but also for the region more widely, which is blighted by a lack of alternative employment opportunities. In France, programmes of deindustrialisation have created particularly spatialised patterns of inequality, with peripheral areas such as Agen often the worst affected (Lane 2020: 32); the narrative must be situated within this context. Perhaps more than this, however, *En guerre* is about the possibility of collective politics in the neoliberal era. It is convinced of the need for such a politics; this is evidenced in the title card, which quotes Bertolt Brecht ('He who fights can lose, but he who does not fight has already lost').[27] In spite of this belief, however, the film portrays the institution of the trade union and its associated political structures as ever-more untenable in the face of the pervasive forces of neoliberalism. Indeed, Gérard Mauger goes as far as to argue that '[t]he battle is already lost' (2018: 118) from the

[26] As O'Shaughnessy (2007) argues, contemporary political film often turns to interpersonal or familial relationships to mediate its commentary on neoliberalism. The use of these melodramatic strategies is something I examine in Chapter 5 in particular.

[27] 'Celui qui combat peut perdre, mais celui qui ne combat pas a déjà perdu'

film's beginning.[28] With this in mind, the title card seems to represent something of a forewarning to the audience—urging it not to lose hope over the course of the film's runtime in spite of the ultimate fatalism of the narrative. This fatalism is a symptom of the broader trajectory of organised labour movements in the neoliberal era, which have more often faced losses than victories. As examined in Chapter 1, trade unions and other labour movements have been subject to targeted programmes of attack and repression—a process that will be referred to below as one of depoliticisation.

A key part of the film's exploration of neoliberal depoliticisation is a concern with the politics of representation. It employs the aesthetic of a fabricated documentary, making extensive use of handheld cameras. These cameras are situated amongst the workers; often, they move as if attached to another body that is present at the scene, thus representing what amounts to an inside perspective on the workers' struggle. In this regard it is also significant that the cast is composed entirely of non-professional actors, save for Lindon. This lends the work a sense of heightened realism; in Brizé's own words, 'I cast people who can play themselves in front of the camera' (Srisavasdi 2019). The scenes amongst the workers are counterposed with intradiegetic sequences shot as though they are television news broadcasts; *En guerre* frequently draws attention to the difference between these perspectives, implicitly critiquing the ways in which workplace conflicts are mediated on mainstream platforms. Outside of these intradiegetic sequences themselves, the main camera frequently focuses on the news cameras and the crews that surround them. This persistent focus draws attention to the fact that *En guerre* is engaged in a process of self-reflexive questioning of the representation of conflicts such as these. Significantly, Brizé notes in interviews (Diaphana 2018) that he used the freedoms afforded by fiction filmmaking (unhindered access to workplaces, for instance) to make a documentary-like work that goes beyond where documentary can conventionally go, aiming to open up new perspectives on workplace struggle. This creates interesting resonances with Comolli's theories addressed in the previous chapter—of which more below. With an awareness of these narrative and formal qualities in mind, I will now turn to an interrogation of the film's depiction of the workers' struggle.

The possibility of collective politics

It must be made clear that, in some ways, *En guerre* depicts a landscape in which trade unions still wield considerable force. 1100 of the factory's workers are on strike, and at least to begin with

[28] 'Le combat est perdu d'avance'

appear largely united behind the common goal of saving the factory and returning to work (Figure 1). They garner significant public support in the region, something evidenced in the large rallies they hold; they also receive messages of solidarity from workers as far afield as Sunderland, England. Further, their militancy is such that they are able to close down and occupy not only the factory in Agen, but also another in Montceau-les-Mines, nearly 600km away. Around two-thirds of the way through the film, this strength leads the union to achieve one of the primary goals of its struggle—a face-to-face meeting with Monsieur Hauser, the German CEO of Dimke. However, for much of the film, the workers' defeat seems inevitable. Even the dispute's fleeting moments of hope are underpinned by Bertrand Blessing's tense, ominous soundtrack, which almost never hints towards resolution. A specific use of sound that deserves mention comes during a rare scene shot from within the inside of the empty factory, which is accompanied by mournful, sombre music. Here, the factory takes on the impression of a graveyard: its ageing machinery shows little sign of coming back to life (Figure 2). This is accentuated by the use of longer takes and static cameras, which contrasts with the shorter takes and handheld cameras used elsewhere. In these moments, the film suggests that the process of deindustrialisation is unstoppable, or perhaps almost already complete.

Figure 1

Figure 2

It is instructive to return to Comolli's arguments about the representation of work and workplace conflicts. Comolli argues that the documentary camera is frequently hindered by its inability to access working spaces (2005). The camera's access to the inside of the factory underlines the fictional nature of this work; its unlimited access is important here and throughout, highlighting the ways in which the film goes beyond the typical scope of workplace documentary. Comolli also contends that representations of contemporary workplace struggles are characterised by the absence of the promise of emancipation, and notes a relative dearth of films that centre around industrial conflict in the neoliberal era (2004: 528-9). *En guerre* would seem to reinforce this argument in both respects: the promise of emancipation is almost entirely absent throughout the film, and it is one of only a small number of contemporary texts which dramatises industrial workplace conflict. A key obstacle that the workers face in this conflict is the delegitimisation and neutralisation of their political logics, which hinge upon the typical principles of (Fordist) trade unionism: the contradictory interests of labour and capital, the right to withdraw labour, and the duties of employers to their employees.

Depoliticisation in action

An early meeting between representatives of Dimke and the unions encapsulates this trend. These meetings are perceived by the workers to be a key means of confronting the power that bears down upon them, and constitute some of the film's most developed attempts to explore the operations of neoliberal power. This meeting also establishes the key terms of the conflict. Two years before the decision to shut the factory down was made public, an agreement between unions and management was signed in which the workers had agreed to carry out extra work with no additional pay, in order

to ensure the factory's continuing viability. Management have breached this agreement three years before its intended finish, citing an insufficient rate of return on shareholders' investments; this provokes industrial action. Importantly, the unions surmise that Dimke plans to move the productive capacity to a country in which labour costs are lower. The ability of management to break this pact illustrates starkly the different constraints placed on labour as compared to those faced by capital in the film. Indeed, the absence of rules placed upon Dimke is one of the most important features of this conflict; the workers' struggle is often founded on an attempt to re-establish a principle of accountability that Dimke must adhere to.

Despite the huge profits that Dimke continues to accrue, the decision to close the factory is a straightforward one for the management representatives. One of them states, 'The reality of the market is extremely difficult', and 'It is simply a question of looking at the figures'.[29] Any appeals by the union are thus countered immediately and irrevocably by a logic that precludes any grounds for debate. In this respect, the film maps out a depiction of neoliberal rationality in its most economistic form (see Brown 2015, for instance). The returns delivered to shareholders are the only metric that matters; this trumps any particular agreement that may have been made, or indeed any broader responsibility that the employers might once have held. As Frédéric Lordon writes, this appetite for profit is insatiable: 'Why close a profitable factory? Because it is not profitable enough.' (2018).[30] The logic depicted here, expressed through language, forms part of the broader structural shifts towards financialised, asset-driven economies that we examined in Chapter 1 (see Barradas 2019). *En guerre* makes clear that this neoliberal re-orientation towards maximising shareholder value significantly weakens the political and economic power of labour; in this respect its argument aligns quite clearly with various Marxian critiques of neoliberalism (Harvey 2005; Durand 2017; Chamayou 2021).

Importantly, the film also suggests that these particular power relations—whereby capital plays by fundamentally different rules to labour—often remain obscured in the popular media through which many people perceive conflicts such as these. Its representation of these meetings must be seen as an attempt to force these into visibility. As noted, Brizé's use of a fabricated documentary form combines a documentary-like aesthetic with a camera that has unlimited access to spaces normally beyond the reach of journalists or filmmakers. The film makes this clear in a pivotal later meeting between the union and Dimke's management team. At this moment, journalists from major television networks are asked to leave by senior management figures; the filmmaker's camera, however, remains. Resonating with Comolli's arguments concerning the control that the owners or

[29] 'La réalité du marché est extrêmement dure'; 'Il est simplement une question de reprendre les chiffres'
[30] 'Pourquoi fermer une usine rentable ? Parce qu'elle ne l'est pas assez.'

management of businesses exert over access (2005), *En guerre* comments on these power relations by highlighting the influence that senior management figures maintain over precisely what is represented in mainstream media. At the same time, it utilises the freedoms afforded by its fictional nature to bring a different perspective—that of the workers—to light. This highlights the ways in which the form of the film represents a self-conscious attempt to reframe the narrative that typically emerges in relation to workplace political mobilisations.

The discourses employed by the management representatives play a key role in the process of depoliticisation that these scenes represent, and deserve further examination here. The rhetoric used is notably neutral in tone, rejecting any notion of competing interests. This avowed rejection of ideology and conflict aligns with what Slavoj Žižek terms 'post-political biopolitics'—'a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and instead focus on expert management and administration' (2008: 40). This language also forms part of a broader discursive field: its sense of inevitability and resignation to the laws of the market resonates with the famous neoliberal adage *there is no alternative* (Séville 2016), and with the norms of what Agnès Vandevelde-Rougale terms *la novlangue managériale* (managerial newspeak), which 'aims towards the elimination of the possibility of expressing subversive thoughts' (2017: 19).[31]

One particularly illuminating example of dialogue arises when a Dimke representative asserts, 'You need to understand that today, workers and management aren't on different sides—we're all in the same boat'.[32] This non-conflictual language disavows power and agency, implicitly invoking the higher power of the market—a kind of big Other that remains off screen, resisting filmic representation. Its disavowal of conflict is itself a form of attack, however, in that it deliberately effaces the conditions of conflict between Dimke and the unions. In this light it can be considered as performative (Austin 1962): its articulation erodes the very basis for a trade union, or perhaps even collective or antagonistic politics altogether. These discourses are a crucial mechanism of depoliticisation in the film, and thus an important way in which it explores the workings of neoliberal power. Of course, *En guerre* makes very clear that beneath these bland managerial discourses of neutrality and civility, this struggle is underpinned by clear hierarchies of power. Mélanie, Laurent's closest confidante, succinctly articulates this: 'If we're in the same boat […] we are in the cabins at the bottom with the rats and the shit, and you are on the top deck'.[33] Whereas the discourses employed by management are neutralising, then, those that the union mobilise are polarising and

[31] '[La novlangue managériale] visaient à l'élimination de la possibilité d'expression de pensées subversives.'
[32] 'il faut bien comprendre qu'aujourd'hui il n'y a pas d'un côté les salariés, de l'autre côté la direction—on est tous sur le même bateau'
[33] 'si on est dans le même bateau, [...] on est dans les couchettes du bas avec les rats et la merde, là, et vous, vous êtes dans celles du haut.'

charged with anger. They represent an attempt to re-establish the terms of an antagonistic struggle within the discursive field. Language thus represents one of the battlegrounds that the film's title—*At War*—surely alludes to. This conflict between discourses forms part of a broader one between different subjective archetypes.

Subjectivities

Thinking back to the discussion of neoliberal subjects we examined in Chapter 1, we can see that, in many ways, the management representatives embody the archetype of neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* (human capital) in its most straightforward form: agents governed by rational, calculative market norms (see for instance Foucault 2008: 269). Brown argues that the battle waged between this figure and *homo politicus*—that of political and popular sovereignty—is a key feature of neoliberal societies, asserting that the dominance of *homo oeconomicus* is a crucial indicator of the climate of depoliticisation that characterises the contemporary era. She writes, '[w]hen *homo politicus* fades and the figure of human capital takes its place, […] No longer is there an open question of what one wants from life or how one might wish to craft the self' (2015: 109); this has 'enormous consequences for democratic institutions, cultures, and imaginaries' (2015: 35). Laurent, as union leader, clearly represents a figure of popular sovereignty—resonating with Brown's description of the declining *homo politicus.* The film repeatedly stages clashes between these different subjective figures, as we have seen. However, Brown's invocation of a binary struggle between *oeconomicus* and *politicus* does not quite tell the whole story. A turn to Samuel A. Chambers' (2018) sympathetic critique of Brown's *Undoing the Demos* (2015) is instructive here. Chambers argues that Brown's ahistorical use of the term *homo politicus* is problematic: he writes that 'there has never been just *homo politicus*. History does not produce for us one single genus that has endured throughout time. Rather, there has been *homo politicus athenikos*, *homo politicus republicanus*, *homo politicus liberalis*, *homo politicus democraticus*, *homo politikus communistus*' (2018: 722). In other words, there have been different archetypal figures popular sovereignty through different periods of history. Further, he contends that Brown's positioning of *homo oeconomicus* at the vanguard of neoliberalism risks losing sight of the specifically political aspects of neoliberalism's hegemony: '[n]eoliberalism is not only an economic logic but also a political project whose goal is the very constitution of *homo politicus neoliberalis*' (2018: 706).[34] The neoliberal *homo politicus* is a figure which aims to reshape society along structural, political grounds in accordance

[34] Chambers' account clearly parallels the narrative of neoliberalism's rise to hegemony developed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, which emphasises the combined political and economic nature of neoliberalisation.

with the norms of neoliberal rationality. Various embodiments of this figure have therefore been instrumental in the wide dissemination of neoliberal norms into diverse institutions and structures, and thus into the fabrics of everyday life.

Chambers also reminds us that these subjective archetypes are never embodied in a 'pure', untainted form: there is always an element of mixing and combination occurring (2018: 723). This point is crucial: while the actions of these management figures are clearly economistic and individualistic, they are not solely so. Rather, they also embody a certain political thrust, in that they aim to reshape the structures of society—relations of power—in line with the norms of neoliberal rationality. They are also collectivist in a very narrowly-defined way: this collective is motivated by the protection and extension of the rights of capital. As a consequence, we can surely consider these characters not only as embodiments of *homo oeconomicus*, but also of *homo politicus neoliberalis.* In this regard, we perhaps need to reconsider our earlier thoughts about the question of the possibility of collective politics that the film stakes out. Clearly, *En guerre* argues that it is very difficult for the workers to organise as a collective political force; indeed, much of its runtime explores their fracturing into different factions. However, the film does not rule out the possibility of collective political organisation altogether. Rather, it makes the argument that this privilege is only afforded to the capitalist classes, who possess the unity and power to effect their political aims. As we will come to see, these figures exert significant influence not only over Dimke, but also the state, supranational institutions, and societies more generally. This leads Lordon to argue that these '[neo]liberals are structural Marxists in practice' (2018), in that they have accomplished the reconfiguration of the structures that govern everyday life.[35] In this light, how might we interpret Laurent's characterisation? Importantly, while he is clearly a figure of political sovereignty, Laurent also embodies an archetype whose politics are out of step with the dominant rationality of the contemporary. He represents a specific iteration of *homo politicus* whose form is linked to the social and political norms and institutions of the Fordist era. This clash—between two different forms of *homo politicus*—perhaps more accurately reflects the contrast that *En guerre* establishes in these meetings.

The film grounds these different ways of understanding (and attempts at changing) the world not only in language, but also in different types of bodies. As Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc and Armelle Talbot argue, *En guerre* charts 'the states of bodies which record the subjective effects of linguistic confrontations in which worker solidarity is constructed and deconstructed' (2020: 104).[36] For

[35] 'On ne redira jamais assez que les grands libéraux sont des marxistes structuralistes à l'état pratique'
[36] '[*En guerre* confronte] aux états de corps qui inscrivent les effets subjectifs des affrontements langagiers dans lesquels se construit et se déconstruit la solidarité ouvrière.'

instance, Laurent often shouts and clamours, frustrated at the refusal to recognise the basis of the union's struggle and the promises that have been broken; his eyes are wide and his body writhes in agitation. His body bears marks of the conflict as a whole: its potential repercussions both for him as an individual and for the workers more generally find an outlet through exasperated, exaggerated gestures (Figure 3). Mélanie, too, is particularly physically animated. Her embodied subjectivity highlights the importance of Brizé's use of non-professional actors: there is a visceral nature to this performance, and those of many of the other workers. This use of non-professionals clearly reflects Brizé's ambition to create a work that is 'realistic', frequently reflecting the form of a documentary. With that said, it is notable that Lindon's portrayal of Laurent is the most explicit (and most exaggerated) embodiment of the archetype of the trade unionist in the film. Further, the camera is drawn to Lindon's performance throughout the film (Sibertin-Blanc and Talbot 2020: 112), sometimes at the expense of other actors—many of whom come from trade unionist backgrounds themselves. This provokes interesting questions about the figure of the trade unionist that Laurent embodies: can such an archetype only be performed by an actor? Is such a figure absent from the terrain of the contemporary era, destined only to be impersonated by a professional? On the other side of the table, the management representatives are calm and collected, remaining seated and only very rarely raising their voices (Figure 4). These patterns of embodiment reflect their discipline, unity, and power as a class. The embodied contrast between the workers and management figures is a theme we see play out across the film's runtime.

Figure 3

Figure 4

What we witness in these meetings is a complete deadlock between these two parties: the different languages and logics that Dimke and the unions employ are irreconcilable. The limitations of the workers' discourses (and that of Laurent in particular, for there are divergences between these different figures) are put into stark relief, as Sibertin-Blanc and Talbot (2020) argue. From the perspective of the union, the arena of debate that appeared to represent a crucial component of their political strategy is shown to be worthless: in these meetings, Dimke is able to play by completely different rules to the workers, whose oppositional discourses run aground in the face of the power of the enterprise. A key indicator of the power that Dimke holds is its simple ability to withdraw. In the first instance, it is able to pull out of the apparently binding agreement that both parties signed. Further, as we have seen, it withdraws from the terrain of struggle on a discursive level—mobilising neutralising discourses to obfuscate the conflicting interests of the two parties. In this regard, the film's depiction of Dimke echoes Yves Citton's argument that '[o]ur era […] is that of the maximum engagement of employees, and also that of the *minimal engagement* of the owners of capital' (2012: 45, emphasis in original).[37] The conclusive act of withdrawal that Dimke is reaching towards is that of removing its productive capacity from Agen and relocating to a more readily-exploitable country. The company's ability to traverse national borders in this way clearly reflects the tendency towards increasingly globalised economies that is a key component of neoliberalisation. In the film, the transnational corporation takes on an almost immaterial form, unhindered by ties to space or place; this is reflected in the relative absence of capitalist figures from the camera's view (more below). The mobility of capital confounds the workers' tactics, which frequently centre around attempts to physically confront the sources of power. In an attempt to re-

[37] 'Notre époque [...] est celle de l'engagement maximal des employés, est aussi celle de l'*engagement minimal* des détenteurs de capital.'

establish accountability and to re-ground Dimke within the confines of the nation, the workers turn towards the French state.

The neoliberal nation state

The strength of belief that the workers hold in the capacity of the state as an intermediary in this conflict should not be understated, and can be seen to reflect this work's specifically French context. While France has in many respects entered a neoliberal phase (as examined in Chapter 1), it has historically maintained an interventionist, *dirigiste* state that was called upon to mediate industrial conflicts; this model of government was perceived to curb the excesses of capitalism to a certain degree (Clift 2006; Howell 2009). The film charts a residual influence of this historical tendency: when the union's demand for a state interlocutor is met, crowds of striking workers chant 'State, state, solidarity!', while Tricolore flags are waved in the air.[38] Yet, when the interlocutor, Monsieur Grosset, arrives, he is effectively powerless to address the workers' concerns. Importantly, he states that one of the reasons he is unable to fight the union's corner is that 'We are in a democratic country'.[39] This invocation of the language of democracy—foundational to the constitution of the French Republic—clearly rings hollow. Rather, democracy here appears to refer to the rights of capital to act with impunity. This is reinforced in later dialogue: M. Grosset affirms the state's support for the strikers, but this is overridden by the fact that 'a state interventionism that is too strong would also be counter-productive'.[40] To do this would send 'a negative message to investors, and notably to foreign investors, and we need these investments to create jobs in our country'.[41] The language used here bears traces of *dirigisme* but ultimately falls back on the sense of resignation and acceptance of market norms that characterises the discourses employed by management figures. Thus, the economistic neoliberal rationality that we saw developed in the meetings between the union and Dimke also pervades the inner workings of the state.

In this regard, the film maps out a structural realignment through which a transnational capitalist class has become more powerful than any government—a fact at which the workers are outraged. This restructuring of the relationship between enterprise and state has been a key development of the neoliberal era, as many authors have noted (see Brown 2015: Chapters 1, 4; Dardot and Laval 2013: Chapter 5; Dardot and Laval 2019; Lazzarato 2015: 94-104; Mirowski 2013: 56-7). There is also

[38] 'État, état, solidarité !'
[39] 'Nous sommes dans un pays démocratique'
[40] 'un interventionnisme trop fort de l'État serait aussi contre-productif'
[41] 'un message négatif aux investisseurs, et notamment aux investisseurs étrangers, et on a besoin de ces investissements aussi pour créer de l'emploi dans notre pays'

a palpable irony to M. Grosset's statement, which reflects a particular logic that is often embedded in neoliberal polities. A representative of the state is defending the right of a multinational enterprise to make hundreds of workers redundant, in order to make France a more attractive place for other international companies to invest and therefore, in theory, create new streams of employment. It is tantamount to treating the problems of neoliberalism with their causes—a kind of circular logic (see Dardot and Laval 2019: 15). As Jean-Phillipe Tessé argues, then, the film makes a case for 'the powerlessness of the state to protect its citizens from capitalist predation and to defend public benefits from their appropriation by multinational companies' (2018: 57).[42] Both the intransigence of Dimke and the complicity of the state strictly delimit the possibility of a collective leftist politics in *En guerre*. Faced with these multiple blocks, violence often emerges.

Violence

Four particular sequences which encapsulate the portrayal of violence in the film deserve further examination here. The first eruption of physical violence occurs when the workers have travelled en masse to Paris to visit the headquarters of the employers' organisation *Mouvement des Entreprises de France* (*MEDEF*). This is another step in the workers' attempt to confront the forces that impose upon them: their goal is to secure a meeting with a senior representative. While the workers represent a united force upon their arrival, this soon disintegrates as they are denied a meeting with senior representatives. A confused violence emerges across the mass of bodies in the lobby of the building, who are jostled by overzealous security guards (Figure 5). The claustrophobic framing of these shots conveys a sense of entrapment which reflects the political impasse the workers find themselves in. The camera remains amongst them, aligned with their position; management representatives simply walk upstairs in safety (Figure 6). In contrast to the workers, these people have space to move freely; they are isolated from the embodied anger that ensues. This serves as a neat embodiment of capital's freedom, power, and ability to withdraw—this time expressed through a simple spatial metaphor. Further, the unity of capital is once more posed in contrast to the fragmentation of labour. A subsequent long take from within the melee emphasises the volatile energy that emerges across bodies in response to this impasse: limbs flail as people are crammed against one another, and the camera swings around erratically, struggling to find focus amidst the chaos.

[42] 'l'impuissance de l'État à protéger ses citoyens de la prédation capitaliste et à préserver les subsides publics de leur détournement par des multinationales'

Figure 5

Figure 6

The next example comes during the barricading of the gates of the factory. At this point in the film, tensions within and between the unions are at a high: struggles over strategy have divided the workers and some wish to break the strike and return to work. In the face of this breakdown of solidarity, those led by Laurent chain themselves to the factory gates. Bailiffs dismantle the blockade before engaging in open physical struggle with the strikers, who punch and kick at their shields impotently. At this moment, a dark filter is applied to the camera lens (Figure 7), and the electronic soundtrack returns, conveying a tense, ominous atmosphere. We have seen already how capital's power is maintained on discursive and spatial bases; this scene forces the physical power of capital to the surface through the representation of direct conflict between bodies. Importantly, the violence has now morphed from one that was broadly directed in frustration at Dimke and its representatives to one that also takes place among the workers themselves. Ultimately, the strike-breakers return to the factory floor, ready to restart production.

Figure 7

The film's final, conclusive, act of violence—Laurent's suicide—takes place on an even further diminished basis; I turn to a more thoroughgoing analysis of this scene below. Critically, these three sequences are all framed by a prominent formal motif: after the culmination of each act of violence, the film makes an abrupt cut to black. This motif is one of the most conspicuous stylistic elements of *En guerre*, complicating its documentary-like form. It is also rich with symbolism, and should be read as a kind of thwarted dialectic. Clearly, the film's narrative exposition of a battle between workers and capital reflects a dialectical conception of class struggle. This is something which the montage sequences that precede these cuts to black also embody: their foci dart between capital and labour, suggesting a contradiction between them through contrasting images. Yet, the void represented by this black image seems to suggest that there can be no resolution to this dialectic. From this perspective, these sequences represent a lack of futurity that borders on hopelessness. Certainly, the logics, tactics, and institutional forms of the trade unions offer little prospect of moving beyond neoliberalism in the film. These three scenes are also notable for the way in which they chart the division of the workers. Each takes place across a diminishing number of bodies; this can be interpreted as allegorical of the decline of trade union movements more generally. Indeed, these sequences also chart the increasing power of capital, which expresses itself in the first instance through spatial and discursive power, in the second through direct physical repression, and in the third through the complete destruction of Laurent. Before addressing some of these points in more detail, it is important to turn to one further act of violence, which functions slightly differently.

The workers secure a meeting with Monsieur Hauser, Dimke's CEO, around two-thirds of the way through the film. This meeting represents the conclusive attempt of the unions to materially confront the forces of capital, in order to break the deadlock that characterises the negotiations. Predictably, however, these discussions lead nowhere; consequently, hundreds of workers leave the

building full of anger, turning M. Hauser's car on its roof and leaving him bloodied and shaken. Unlike the other major acts of violence in the film, this sequence does not resolve with a cut to black. Instead, after the negotiations in the boardroom grind to a halt, the film shifts immediately to an intradiegetic news sequence in which we witness this violence erupt (Figure 8). This moment serves as the most explicit comment on the politics of representation throughout the film, drawing clear attention to the manner in which workplace conflicts are mediated. The film juxtaposes its lengthy exposition of the workers' struggle—which aims to cast light on the structural reasons for their failure—with this television footage. While the varied news broadcasts interspersed throughout the film have not always condemned the workers, the film suggests that, in the final instance, these media are drawn to sensationalism and violence, and ultimately function to reinforce the narrative put forth by the capitalist classes. As Lordon (2018) argues, then, the invisibility of workers' struggles—and of injustice more generally—is largely what the film is fighting against.

Figure 8

These instances of violence each serve slightly different purposes within the formal and narrative economy of the film, but all derive from an exhaustion of the possibility of the political mechanisms of the unions and their associated cultures. When negotiations, manifestations, and face-to-face confrontations fail, the workers act in a way which is from the beginning detached from any potential amelioration of their position. Taking from Žižek, these events often resemble

> what Lacan called a *passage à l'acte*—an impulsive movement into action which can't be translated into speech or thought and carries with it an intolerable weight of frustration. This bears witness […] to […] an inability to locate the experience of [one's] situation within a meaningful whole (2008: 76).

What the acts can each be seen to represent, then, are crises of recognition: each instance of violence in the film is an attempt to gain visibility in the 'meaningful whole' of neoliberalism which refuses to recognise the workers' struggle, their rights, or perhaps even their subjectivities more generally.

Worker suicide

Laurent's suicide is the ultimate example of this pattern: the highly spectacular act of self-immolation outside the gates of Dimke should clearly be read as a plea for acknowledgement. This act forms part of a broader tendency: suicide that is catalysed by a refusal of recognition within the workplace is one of the most prominent archetypes of the exits from labour that permeate the narratives of my filmic corpus. It is significant that Laurent is shouting (inaudibly) as he sets himself alight. This gives weight to Sarah Waters' assertion that '[worker] suicide is a desperate howl of protest against working conditions that are deemed to be unbearable' (2020: 17). In this instance, the exit from labour is—in part—an attempt to reassert a particular type of political voice in the face of institutions and structures which refuse to listen. While the act is in certain respects an agential one, in another regard it appears less so. Rather, Laurent has internalised the conditions of the conflict, something which plays out over his body throughout the film. In the face of the workers' defeat, he is no longer able to sustain a coherent sense of identity; suicide appears as the only option (see Berardi 2015: 162). In this sense, Laurent's exit from labour is something which is imposed from without; the boundary between the (imposed) expulsion and (agential) exit from labour therefore becomes blurred.

Figure 9

Figure 10

In an examination of filmic worker suicides, O'Shaughnessy (2019) argues that these acts often serve to force neoliberalism's hidden systemic violences (the effects of political and economic systems) to the surface. Laurent's suicide clearly does function in this way to a certain degree, but, at this late moment in the film, the viewer can be in little doubt about the systemic violence of neoliberalism. Indeed, the majority of *En guerre*'s runtime is dedicated to an exposition of these structures of domination and exploitation. It is thus more fitting to interpret Laurent's suicide as emblematic of the destruction of a particular political subjectivity—the Fordist *homo politicus*—and the decline of an industrial labouring class. It is also allegorical for the process of *workers leaving the factory* on a much broader scale; in this sense, it is one of the most conclusive and widest reaching forms of the exit from labour. This is cemented in the depiction of Laurent's funeral which occurs directly after the cut to black that frames his suicide. Each of the workers attending is framed individually by the camera, thus reinforcing their atomisation into individual units. Significantly, the tense electronic music that underpinned the workers' struggle has resolved to a melancholic acoustic ballad. Slow-motion clips of Laurent's union battles also evoke an air of nostalgia for something that once was. These stylistic devices (which break from documentary-like conventions) impart a sense of finality—a point of no return—that stands in marked contrast to the tense and claustrophobic atmosphere that dominates the film's runtime. This particular resolution has a significant bearing on our reading of the film's politics, a point I return to shortly. First, it is important to briefly examine the film as a whole, in order to clarify our thoughts.

The sense of the whole

Returning to a foundational problematic that underpins this study—the question of the representation of work—it is clear that *En guerre* depicts deindustrialisation as a process that labour struggles to challenge in the context of neoliberal hegemony. A neoliberal reorganisation of work therefore appears inevitable; in the case of the fictionalised Agen, this is likely to emerge as widespread unemployment. The decline of Fordist work that the film depicts is paralleled by the decline of the cultures associated with Fordism. *En guerre* methodically explores what a struggle between trade unions and a multinational employer might look like in the neoliberal era, depicting a range of structural realignments within intertwined political and economic spheres that amount to a decisive shift in power towards the capitalist classes. As the workers are confronted with what appears to be inevitable defeat, the overwhelming impression of their struggle is one of tension, frustration, and claustrophobia; this is expressed through the use of sparse extra-diegetic music, long scenes of unresolved conflicts, and punctuating moments of physical violence that erupt over frustrated bodies. Ultimately, the workers are faced with obstacles that they are unable to overcome. The languages, cultures, strategies, and institutions of the trade unions are not enough to hold a solidaristic group together.

The film draws particular attention to the failure of the workers' efforts to physically confront power. Laurent's final, fateful journey to the headquarters of Dimke constitutes one of these attempts. It is significant that his actions take place outside the company gates: even at this final point, he remains at a remove from the inner workings of power. The failure of the workers' attempts is a symptom of the complexification of power that often characterises neoliberalism. Capitalist figures are frequently absent from the diegesis; structural forces prove nearly impossible to physically confront. These sequences also implicitly acknowledge the difficulties that cinema encounters in representing complex and diffuse forms of neoliberal power, suggesting that film, like the workers, is drawn to individual sources of power rather than broader structures. However, this acknowledgement also serves as an allusion towards the structural nature of power, even while this power resists direct representation.

In all, the trajectory of the film suggests that triumphant narratives of trade union victories that mobilise traditional imagery of strikes, demonstrations, and occupations are increasingly untenable in the neoliberal era, which is characterised by a profound hopelessness for traditional left-wing movements. At this moment, it is important to recall a line of questioning briefly introduced in the previous chapter: what can films that dramatise hopelessness do?

Lordon acknowledges the despair of the film, but contends that—paradoxically—this functions as a call to action. He writes,

> We can only resist the suffocating power of Stéphane Brizé's film […] by discerning in it an empty place, the place of a missing discourse. It is absolutely necessary to see in the film this empty space, and the possibility of refilling it, the space of a response, that is to say of a discourse to deploy, opposable to the impossibilities shown in the film, capable of getting over the wall (2018).[43]

This reading certainly bears some weight, and is one that I am sympathetic to. Interestingly, while I have interpreted the formal motif of the cut to black as a kind of thwarted dialectic that signals a limitation on political action, these moments could also be read as a literal embodiment of the 'empty space' that Lordon identifies. Yet, the finality of *En guerre*'s ending dampens this argument somewhat. It is perhaps inevitable, and indeed important, that the film would depict such a deeply-embedded neoliberal rationality; this constitutes a sustained effort to explore and critique the structures of neoliberal power. However, its sentimental and conclusive resolution hinders any orientation towards the future that might be implicit in the 'empty space' it represents. Indeed, as Sibertin-Blanc and Talbot argue, after the confrontation with M. Hauser, 'it seems as though the director has nothing more to say […] no conflictual language to make heard' (2020: 109).[44] The profound hopelessness that the film charts does serve as an implicit call for a different kind of oppositional politics, but this very sense of hopelessness is also affirmed in the film's conclusive moments, which cement the fracturing of the workers into atomised individuals.

Other aspects of the film point towards different, potentially more productive, political emphases. Its fabricated documentary form is particularly important, and provides a further answer to our question about the potentialities of films about hopelessness. Unable to offer broad scale political hope through its narrative, *En guerre* turns instead towards an area where film is more capable of intervention: the politics of representation. On a straightforward level, it is rare for a contemporary film to so rigorously explore the obstacles that impede trade unions. *En guerre* uses the freedoms of its fictional form to do this, fulfilling Brizé's ambition of creating a documentary-like work that goes

[43] 'On ne résiste à la puissance suffocante du film de Stéphane Brizé […] qu'à y discerner une place vide, la place du discours manquant. Il faut absolument y voir cet espace inoccupé, et la possibilité de le remplir, l'espace d'une réponse, c'est-à-dire d'un discours à déployer, opposable aux impossibilités montrées par le film, capable d'en faire sauter un mur.'

[44] 'après l'échec de la rencontre avec le P.-D.G., il semble que le cinéaste n'a plus rien à dire, c'est-à-dire nulle parole en lutte à faire entendre'

beyond the typical scope of documentary. This forms part of its broader project of critical reflection on the role of media within neoliberalism. *En guerre* implicitly argues that mainstream media reinforce hegemonic voices at the expense of those of workers, while also self-reflexively highlighting its own ability to bring a different perspective to light.[45] *Deux jours, une nuit* represents a valuable and productive contrast to *En guerre*; I will now turn to an analysis of this second film, drawing upon points of comparison as they arise.

Deux jours, une nuit

The brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne began their careers by directing a number of documentaries that focused on the labour movements local to their hometown of Seraing, Belgium in the 1970s and 80s (Cummings 2008: 55). Work has also been a feature of their fiction films; the widely-acclaimed 2014 film *Deux jours, une nuit* is one of the most prominent examples of this. The film charts the plight of Sandra (Marion Cotillard), a young mother who has been signed off from her job at the solar panel manufacturer Solwal with depression and anxiety. Before she is able to return, she discovers that the company's management team has asked her colleagues to vote on whether or not she is to be made redundant. Faced with a choice of receiving a 1000€ bonus or Sandra's return to work, her peers overwhelmingly choose the former. The 'two days' and 'one night' over which the film's narrative takes place see Sandra track down her colleagues one by one in order to convince them to change their minds. She gains significant support, but not the required majority. However, the manager of Solwal, Monsieur Dumont, admires Sandra's tenacity and offers her a return to work, explaining that he will balance the company's finances by not renewing another worker's temporary contract. Sandra refuses in the last instance, choosing simply to walk away from Solwal's offices.

As indicated, the narratives of both films hinge around the decline of the type of stable industrial work that was dominant in the Fordist era. This emerges most forcefully in the expulsions from labour that commence their narratives. Relatedly, both are framed within a broader climate of heightened precarity: Sandra and her family struggle to keep afloat and face a return to social housing if she loses her job, and many of her colleagues are in similar situations. *Deux jours* focuses far less on the specific political and economic developments of neoliberalism than *En guerre*, but it should also be noted that competitive global markets are used as a pretext for Sandra's redundancy in a similar manner to their invocation by management figures in *En guerre*. This is the case even

[45] Arguably, this could be read as a narrowing of the ambitions of avowedly political film such as this; we could perhaps interpret this self-reflexive turn as a further symptom of neoliberal depolicisation.

though Solwal is a far smaller company than Dimke (it appears to operate primarily within Seraing), and thus points towards the broad-reaching pressures of neoliberal financialisation.

Like *En guerre*, *Deux jours* is fundamentally concerned with the possibility of collective resistance. However, its interrogation of this possibility takes place in a very different context.[46] Industrial production is still present within the film's diegesis, but the political institutions typically associated with (Fordist) industrial production have long since vacated the Seraing of the film. While *En guerre* focusses on these institutions and structures in an overtly political fashion, *Deux jours* takes a narrower perspective, examining the local and particular in more detail. Consequently, I argue below that *Deux jours*, like many of the Dardennes' films, employs ethical frameworks in a more pronounced manner than it does political ones. The films' overall trajectories also differ significantly. *En guerre* depicts the fragmentation of a political collective; conversely, over the course of *Deux jours*, Sandra is able to establish a group which tentatively resists the tenets of neoliberal work. In spite of this, the Dardennes' film also concludes with an individual action: Sandra's withdrawal from labour. A symptomatic reading of this trajectory is very important to our interpretation of the film's politics, of which more below.

The different foci of the films' narratives are reflected in their different styles. Both films make extensive use of handheld cameras and close-up shots. However, the Dardennes' film is far more naturalistic than *En guerre*. It lacks the intra-diegetic media footage that breaks up Brizé's work; extra-diegetic music is also absent; and long takes are far more prevalent, as opposed to the quicker cuts that predominate in *En guerre*. Both films are often tense viewing experiences, but accomplish this in different ways; the intensely claustrophobic atmosphere of *En guerre* is replaced here by a much sparser one. In short, the divergent workplace struggles of the films are accompanied by divergent modes of filmmaking.

Individual struggle

The opening scenes of the film are indicative of its overall style; they also establish the nature of the struggle which drives the narrative. After brief credits and a title card, *Deux jours* opens with a close-up, handheld shot of Sandra; she is asleep and her mobile phone is ringing (Figure 11). The use of the close-up is critical; it will be repeated in different forms throughout the film and represents an important component of the Dardennes' filmmaking (Frampton 2006: 147; Rushton 2014). The shot

[46] Like many of the Dardenne brothers' films, this work is set in Seraing. Consequently, the references made in *En guerre* to institutions that are particular to France—*MEDEF* and the French state—are absent.

encourages a certain amount of identification with Sandra, emphasised through the camera's proximity to her. However, Sandra's face is turned to the side and we are thus only able to see half of it in a way which hinders any straightforward identification.[47] As Sarah Cooper (2007) argues, this stylistic tendency must be read through the Levinasian ethics that inform the Dardennes' filmmaking. Emmanuel Levinas is a French philosopher of ethics to whom the Dardennes have made explicit allusion (see for instance Dardenne 2008: 71). The most important element of Levinasian thought to the brothers' filmmaking is the question of the self/Other dichotomy. For Levinas, the individual self can only exist in relation to the Other. Ethical responsibility is thus figured not as something that is willed through the subject itself, but demanded by the Other; this responsibility is lived out in face-to-face encounters in which the subject encounters the Other's vulnerability. Importantly, the Other is defined by its radical alterity and ultimate unknowability: the boundary between self and Other can never be overcome (Cummings 2008: 56-7). On a narrative level, this influence plays out across the Dardennes' oeuvre through a repeated focus on the face-to-face encounter; I analyse the exposition of these situations in *Deux jours* below. This opening shot serves as a concise formal embodiment of these Levinasian ethics. It establishes a face-to-face confrontation between viewer and subject in which we are confronted with the Other's (Sandra's) vulnerability; the alterity between viewer and subject is maintained as we are offered only partial identification with her and her emotions are only ever partially legible. The importance of the alterity of self and Other to the Dardennes has a critical impact on the way in which we might interpret the film's commentary on the possibility of collective resistance, and indeed its response to neoliberalism more generally.

[47] See Rushton 2014 for an analysis of this tendency across the Dardennes' earlier works.

Figure 11

The film opens *in medias res*, after the event that sets up the diegesis, the expulsion from labour, has occurred. This represents another key element of the Dardennes' style (Rushton 2014: 9); as Joseph Mai writes, it has the effect of emphasising the impossibility of achieving an omniscient, external point of view (2010: 54). *En guerre* also opens in the midst of action, as negotiations between the union and Dimke are ongoing. These very different scenarios exemplify the divergent workplace struggles that the films dramatise. While the action of *En guerre* followed the traditional divide of labour and capital, the opening of *Deux jours* suggests that it will be as much about Sandra's battle with herself as about that which she has with others. This is exemplified in the moments that follow the shot of her asleep: the camera tracks her around her home before she reaches the bathroom. She is then framed in what amounts to a two-shot; her body is framed from behind, and her is face reflected in a mirror (Figure 12). She takes an anti-anxiety pill, looks herself briefly in the eye, and states, 'You mustn't cry'.[48] At this moment the film cuts abruptly, and Sandra's husband Manu returns to the house.[49] In another long take, Manu encourages Sandra to pursue her fight; the latter's colleague Juliette has secured a re-run of the vote on Monday morning. Numerous two-shots emphasise the bond that the couple shares; this relationship is to be of critical importance to Sandra's journey. These opening minutes, which take place entirely in the family home, highlight

[48] 'il [ne] faut pas pleurer'

[49] It is not insignificant that Manu works as a chef—typical of the service-sector employment that has risen to prominence in the neoliberal era.

the centrality of the domestic sphere to the film's spatiality, and the importance of interpersonal relationships to its narrative. This stands in marked contrast to *En guerre*.

Figure 12

The nature of this struggle also finds expression through Sandra's body. She shakes and wretches when taking the anti-anxiety pill for instance; Cotillard moves in a highly exaggerated way, almost as if attempting to emulate the raw performance of a non-professional actor. This turn to gesture reflects the absence of linguistic resources that Sandra can draw upon; it registers a situation of extreme precarity and uncertainty. We have seen how, in *En guerre*, the tensions of the broader socioeconomic situation also express themselves corporeally. While both Laurent and Sandra make displays of embodiment that are defined by excess, there are clear gendered differences to bear in mind. Laurent's excessive embodiment most frequently represents a righteous anger directed at representatives of the capitalist classes, even in his act of suicide at the gates of Dimke. In this respect it is befitting his status as trade union leader. The body of the cinematic Fordist worker is almost always gendered as male, in accordance with the dominant labour market dynamics of the Fordist era (see Cooper 2017: 8). Sandra's body, on the other hand, which charts internal struggles as much as external and stresses her vulnerability rather than her rage, is one which resonates more closely with traditionally feminine imagery of excessive emotion (Shields 2002: 3). The precarious subject of neoliberalism has also often been associated with femininity; Sandra's characterisation

partially echoes this archetype.[50] While gender will not be the primary focus here, it is important to note that these different gendered dynamics significantly inflect the divergent visions of workplace struggle that the films develop. With these differences in mind, I will turn to a more detailed analysis of the climate of atomisation and depoliticisation that *Deux jours* represents.

The vote

The narrative device which most clearly catalyses the atomisation in the film is the vote imposed on workers by management. A key influence on the Dardenne brothers in the writing of the film was a chapter in Pierre Bourdieu's influential anthology *The Weight of the World* (1999), entitled 'The shop steward's world in disarray' (Pialoux 1991). In this 1991 text, a shop steward at a Peugeot factory in France expresses his dismay at the fact that his fellow workers have conspired to have an older colleague made redundant. These workers felt that their colleague was working too slowly and inefficiently, and that this was impacting upon the bonuses they were receiving. As John Marks notes, this episode can be read as 'evidence of a turning point in social relations in the neoliberal era; of a growing individualism even amongst workers who are willing to undertake strike action' (2019: 240). Of course, the situation in *Deux jours* is further developed than that in 'The shop steward's world': the very concept of solidarity is almost completely alien to these characters. The vote can therefore be read as a heightened dramatisation of the individualism portrayed in this story; it is made more powerful by the fact that it has been instigated by management.[51] By extension, it serves as a dramatic device which encapsulates the individualising drive of a neoliberal rationality which is designed to hinder any attempts at building solidarity amongst workers. Indeed, the vote places concrete material and social barriers between Sandra and her colleagues; there is a clear economic incentive for her peers to vote against her return. As Hélène Picard indicates, '[t]he dilemma is thus framed as a binary opposition: either "her *or* me"' (2016: 134, emphasis in original).

It is also significant that the vote is couched in the language of democracy—bestowing a kind of agency upon the characters. This iteration of democracy is far removed from any kind of egalitarian

[50] Natalia Flores-Garrido (2021) summarises the ways in which women are more susceptible to precarity than men but also how precarity 'started as a condition of women's work and then became widespread'. Lorey (2015) also highlights the ways in which precarity is experienced on a gendered basis. See also Berlant (2011: Chapter 5) for a discussion of gender, precarity, and the Dardennes' *Rosetta* (1999).

[51] On a technical note, the vote as deployed in the film would be illegal under current Belgian or French labour laws. Nonetheless, as Bénédicte Vidaillet (2018: 126) argues, similar situations—in which workers are made to individually vote on the implementation of job losses—have taken place across Europe.

'rule by the people', as the etymology and tradition of that word might suggest (Brown 2015: 19). Instead, the vote is governed by clear inequalities of power (more shortly). It bears mention that a similar mechanism—whereby workers are called upon to vote on their working conditions—is to be found in Laurent Cantet's influential 1997 film *Ressources humaines*. In this earlier film, factory workers were asked to complete a survey on the introduction of the 35-hour working week, the results of which were later used by management as a justification for redundancies. This form of worker consultation—which only ever takes place on management's terms—represents a hollowed out, passive form of participation which very partially responds to pressure from workers for increased democracy, but often further shifts the balance of power in favour of capital.[52]

Taking a broader perspective, the vote can be interpreted as encapsulating the processes of 'responsibilisation' that are a key part of neoliberal subjectification (Lemke 2002). As we saw in Chapter 1, the neoliberal subject must bear responsibility for the risks of the (metaphorical or literal) market. The characters of *Deux jours* are from the very beginning made responsible for the problems wrought by management figures and the neoliberal organisation of production more generally. Thus, while the workers of Brizé's film were in the first instance able to struggle collectively against a coherent enemy, in this film, the characters are forced to fight amongst themselves. This reflects capital's near-total withdrawal from the terrain of conflict, something that was in progress throughout *En guerre*. The result of this withdrawal is that power has been devolved into subjects themselves: neoliberal norms propagate through and amongst workers, rather than primarily at the will of powerful political and economic actors as in *En guerre*. Capitalist figures paradoxically exert significant power through their absence; this power is diffuse and fragmented, and is consequently all the more effective. In this regard, the film's representation of these workers resonates with the Foucauldian descriptions of subject formation and governmentality that we examined in Chapter 1 (see Foucault 2008; Dardot and Laval 2013; Brown 2015, for instance).[53]

It is important to consider how this situation is rendered on a filmic basis. Firstly, the individualisation of these subjects is emphasised through the sheer distance between them: much of Sandra's time is spent travelling between different loci in an attempt to track her colleagues down. Even after these journeys have been made, Sandra struggles to reach those who are hidden behind opaque windows, protected by intercom systems, or simply not in; these spatial boundaries stress the deep-rooted atomisation of subjects that the film portrays (Figure 13). If we think back to the demands of neoliberal subjecthood that we examined in Chapter 1, we will recall that the archetypal

[52] As we have seen, *En guerre* also dramatises a vision of democracy in decline: in the hollowed-out debate between Dimke and the unions, and in terms of a nation state that has been overrun by neoliberal principles.
[53] I examine this trend in more detail in my examination of Sandra's face-to-face confrontations with her peers.

subject of neoliberalism engages in networking activities in order to maximise their literal or metaphorical market value. This image is completely absent from the film's depiction of proletarian subjects who seemingly turn to further accentuated states of isolation at least in partial response to the degradation of their living conditions. The film's spatial economy also emphasises the absence of capital from the terrain of struggle. While much of the union's activity in *En Guerre* was centred around the factory or dedicated to (ultimately fruitless) attempts to reach the material loci of capital, in *Deux jours* such a pursuit does not even register as a possibility. Rather, Sandra's attempt to save her job is abstracted from the workplace and its associated environs, into people's homes and places of leisure. The temporality of the film is also significant: its narrative takes place across the 'two days' and 'one night' of a weekend, which has typically been demarcated as leisure time for many workers.

Figure 13

It is instructive to return to Comolli's thoughts once more. As we have seen, Comolli argues that work has typically been misrepresented or simply not represented at all in film. In his argument, the medium of cinema has historically been associated with leisure time—with *workers leaving the factory*. In one respect, *Deux jours* reinforces this argument through its distance from Sandra's place of work, Solwal. We only gain a brief glimpse of the inside of Solwal's buildings, in the closing minutes of the film; even here, we only see areas that are peripheral to the sphere of production itself. Yet, from a different perspective, the film represents a permeation of work into different spheres, rather than eliding the representation of work altogether. In the most straightforward sense, some of Sandra's colleagues must find employment outside of Solwal in order to support

themselves. This might be casual work, such as reclaiming and restoring old tiles; intermittent work in service-sector employment also features. Waged work is thus present in the film, but is spread out across different loci, away from the more regular spatial and temporal boundaries of the Fordist work that Comolli has in mind. From another regard, we need to consider the fact that Sandra's actions across the course of the film must be considered as a kind of work themselves. Certainly, *Deux jours* could hardly be interpreted as a film that is about leisure time in its most common sense. Thus, the film does feature *workers leaving the factory*—as do so many others. However, in many cases they have not yet finished work, which now encroaches into ever more facets of existence. In this regard, the spatiality and temporality of *Deux jours* suggests that neoliberal societies are characterised by an insidious growth of the sphere of work.

Confronting the Other

The face-to-face confrontations that make up much of the film's runtime constitute the film's most developed attempt to explore the workings of neoliberal power. As indicated, capitalist figures are almost entirely absent from Sandra's pursuit. This is symptomatic of the increasing power of capital in neoliberal societies, which is able to withdraw from the terrain of conflict. However, the absence of capitalist figures allows the film to examine the ways in which complex and diffuse networks of power circulate through everyday subjects. These scenes are important not just in terms of the film's critique of neoliberalism, but also in terms of its attempts to point towards a different organisation of society. In each of the confrontations, Sandra makes an ethical plea for her colleagues to acknowledge her and thus to reject the atomisation of neoliberal rationality. She confronts them in her embodied vulnerability, staging the interaction between self and Other that is foundational to Levinasian ethics. In a way, this plea for recognition resembles some of the acts of the workers in *En guerre*, who attempted to gain recognition in the face of an institutionalised rationality that refused to acknowledge them. However, there are critical differences. First, there is little sense of politics, rather than ethics, in these confrontations. Second, Sandra's pleas for recognition are sometimes successful, leading to moments of transformation.

An early meeting takes place between Sandra and Willy, a middle-aged man who is working in the garden when she arrives. When Sandra informs him that there is to be another vote on the Monday morning and asks Willy to vote for her to keep her job, he is reluctant to engage, stating, 'I didn't vote against you, I voted for my bonus', neatly capturing the dynamic of opposition sown by the

vote.[54] What is also accentuated here is the absence of any shared framework for comprehending the broader socioeconomic situation. Consequently, a focus on individual needs is all that emerges: as Yoann Bazin writes, '[a]ctors remain focused on local emotions and individual frustrations in the face of injustice. [...] Even the justifications of their situations, or of the "system", to use the vocabulary of psycho-sociology, tend not to include mention of any social, managerial or political frames of reference' (2016: 143). The turn to embodied gesture in the absence of such an explanatory discourse deserves mention: Willy is silent throughout much of this confrontation, clutching his work gloves anxiously—almost like a child with a blanket. Without a vocalisation of psychological motivation or an explanatory discursive framework, Willy's discontent and vulnerability become legible over his body, much in the same way as we see with Sandra. It is left to Willy's wife to explain that she is unemployed and that Willy is working in the garden to make extra money through the sale of salvaged building materials—a fact at which he appears ashamed. The former is more forthright than Willy, and effectively refuses Sandra's request. This scene stresses the division between Sandra and Willy through its framing, which foregrounds a piece of garden furniture that stands between the pair (Figure 14). This visual metaphor symbolises the division sown by the vote, but also implicitly reflects the principle of the alterity of self and Other that informs the Dardennes' filmmaking more generally. The use of a long take stresses the gravity of the situation in a similar way to certain sections of *En guerre*; however, while the (relatively few) long takes of *En guerre* often descended into the cacophony of competing voices, those in *Deux jours* are characterised by their relative silence. The claustrophobic atmosphere of Brizé's film is replaced by a more contemplative one, but the sense of a divide that is nearly impossible to breach remains.

[54] 'J'ai pas voté contre toi, j'ai voté pour ma prime'

Figure 14

Later meetings take a variety of forms. Some lead to awkward goodbyes, as with Mireille—a woman of a similar age to Sandra who has recently moved flat and argues that she needs her bonus to pay for new consumer appliances. Others lead to more aggressive expressions of negativity; for instance, a colleague named Julien states that 'Dumont has seen that it works with 16 people. Why would he take you back?'.[55] These confrontations dramatise an uncompromising vision of neoliberal rationality, in which characters are unable or unwilling to think beyond their immediate material situations. The characters embody figures of human capital in near-total isolation from one another; as Picard notes, in each of these exchanges, 'market laws […] dictate the terms of human exchanges, following the model of pure and perfect competition' (2016: 135). Interestingly, these figures also turn to strategies of survival that could reasonably be described as entrepreneurial; Willy's salvaging of building materials is one such example. Yet, such behaviours are clearly a far cry from the environs we might associate with 'entrepreneurship'. The representations within *Deux jours* could thus be read as a critique of visions of neoliberal subjecthood which over-emphasise the importance of the 'entrepreneur' at the expense of more precarious existences.

One particularly important confrontation takes place between Sandra and a father and son pair, Yvon and Jérôme, who are working on a car when Sandra arrives. Yvon shows sympathy to Sandra, listening carefully to her words; Jérôme leaves the frame as the remaining pair are framed in a medium-distance two-shot that is typical of these scenes. Jérôme soon returns, however,

[55] 'Dumont a vu qu'à 16, ça allait. Pourquoi il te reprendrait ?'

confronting his father and angrily stating, 'She doesn't want us to get our bonus […] We worked to get it—it's ours' (Figure 15); he then strikes Yvon, who is left briefly unconscious on the floor.[56] This is the most exaggerated display of aggression that the film depicts, once more encapsulating the zero-sum game that the vote establishes. However, it is also a confrontation which hints towards a process of change: when Yvon comes around, he promises his support to Sandra. He has come face-to-face with Sandra's embodied vulnerability, yet is also confronted with his own (Figure 16). This face-to-face confrontation has been transformative; it is in these moments that the film locates its opposition to an atomising and economising neoliberal rationality.

Figure 15

[56] 'elle veut qu'on ait pas notre fric [...] on a bossé pour l'avoir, c'est à nous'

Figure 16

Over the course of the film, Sandra eventually garners solidarity and support from a number of colleagues as a result of these face-to-face pleas for recognition. In accordance with the Levinasian ethics that inform the Dardennes' filmmaking, Sandra's peers respond to her demanding presence and act according to the ethical duty to the Other that is imposed upon them. They are thus, to use Doug Cummings' words, 'reborn as more self-aware, complete human beings' (2008: 57). Sandra too is reborn, displaying a new-found confidence in having struggled against her redundancy. This is made most clear in the closing minutes of the film: after the vote has been carried out at Solwal's headquarters, Sandra's supporters are grouped in a room together, smiling and hugging—resembling a fragile collective. We saw in *En guerre* that the kinds of language and physical confrontation that the unions relied upon ultimately proved fruitless; in *Deux jours*, on the other hand, different forms of language and face-to-face confrontation are key to changing the situation. Yet, it is important to interrogate the ends to which these actions lead. These moments are undoubtedly powerful, and the importance of the characters' ethical opposition to the individualising, competitive norms of neoliberal rationality should not be understated. However, there is little conception of politics to be witnessed here. While the film tentatively points towards the establishment of a collective—thus moving in the opposite direction to *En guerre*'s depiction of fragmentation and decline—this could not plausibly be described as a political organisation. There is no consideration of a structural realignment of power; all of the discussions that take place centre around individual, rather than systemic issues. Thus, as Bénédicte Vidaillet argues, '[a]lthough [the characters] understand that the rules are unfair, no one directly disputes them' (2016: 129).

Ethical withdrawal from labour

The film's ending must be situated within this pattern. In the meeting with Monsieur Dumont, Sandra makes a statement of solidarity with her colleagues: she does not want to take her job back if it means that another worker's contract will not be renewed. She then asserts her power over the situation by walking away from Dumont and out of the offices. The camera tracks her from the front as she calls Manu. She expresses her happiness at having fought, and tentative hope for the future. The camera pans around her body until it frames her from behind, ultimately coming to a halt as she walks into the distance (Figure 17). This quietly triumphant withdrawal from labour is interesting in a number of respects. First, Sandra's actions mimic the power that this film, and *En guerre*, depict as belonging to the capitalist classes—that of withdrawal. It also restores dignity to her: Sandra feels that she has taken back control over her own existence. It is an act of solidarity with precarious workers, and thus represents a decisive moment in which the film points towards a break from the norms of neoliberal work.

However, this type of exit from labour must also be considered as a compensatory narrative device that emerges in the absence of the ability to conceive of political change. In this instance, it mimics the powers of capital, but only in a hollowed out sense: this withdrawal effects no structural change, and only realistically provides a very temporary respite from the difficulties of neoliberal labour. It is effectively an act of self-sacrifice within the ethical sphere; its broader impact is therefore highly limited. We might also consider how, with the film having charted the establishment of a tentative collective that is united—however briefly—by a shared ethical commitment to the Other, it then concludes with an individual action. The camerawork is notable here: the final distancing of the viewer from Sandra could be read as a severing of our relationship with her. This clearly serves to reinforce the alterity of self and Other that is foundational to the ethical project of the Dardennes, and can be read in two ways. In the first sense, this severing could be taken as a challenge: having witnessed and experienced the action of the film, the viewer is left in the position where he or she must live by this ethical commandment—a foundational duty to the Other that informs all action. Yet, by the same token, this final severing could be read as signalling the impossibility of collective action. If we maintain such a radical ethical alterity of self and Other, can a collective organisation be established? By extension, what opposition to the individualisation of neoliberal rationality can be established, beyond individual actions?

Figure 17

Conclusion

Both films discussed in this chapter dramatise a climate of increasing precarity that emerges in the wake of deindustrialisation. This is accompanied and catalysed by a range of mechanisms—material and discursive—which individualise and divide workers in their opposition to the degradation of workplace conditions. Together, these give the impression of a neoliberal rationality which is deeply embedded within the economic and political structures of Europe (*En guerre*), and—perhaps more insidiously—within people's everyday ways of thinking and living (*Deux jours*). These works attempt to represent this environment using a number of stylistic devices. The repeated focus on the body in both films is an important common thread. Bodies register the pressures of neoliberalism in the context of the exhaustion of linguistic resources (*En guerre*) and their near-complete absence (*Deux jours*).

Workers attempt to counteract the situation by searching for physical embodiments of power: representatives of capital in *En guerre*, and everyday subjects in *Deux jours*. The relative absence of capitalist figures from both narratives is significant, and is symptomatic of both the complexification of power relations that has taken place in the neoliberal era and the increasing power of capital itself, which is able to tactically withdraw from the scene of conflict as part of a broader mode of governance (see for instance Marks 2019). The absence of these figures also implicitly points

towards the difficulties that film tends to encounter in its attempts to represent diffuse and complex networks of power, which often traverse boundaries of space and time.

In the end, neither film is able to conceive of a political force which might change the state of things; a realignment of structural power in neoliberal societies is effectively unthinkable. As a response to this, two archetypes of exit from labour emerge. The first of these is Laurent's suicide in *En guerre*—a cry for recognition made out of total desperation and a filmic attempt to encapsulate the severity of the situation. The second is Sandra's ethical withdrawal (*Deux jours*)—a principled exit from labour that temporarily restores dignity to the protagonist. Significantly, while both films dramatise forms of collective resistance, these exits take place on an individual basis. This is a further symptom of their inability to figure the kind of collective political change that their narratives implicitly demand. Both films can be read as a call to action, yet both could also be read as resigned to the current state of things. This in itself is symptomatic of a neoliberal present characterised by the simultaneous degradation of workplace conditions and the relative lack of a cohesive, large-scale political force that might lead to structural change. In the next chapter I build upon the themes established here, analysing films which dramatise societies closer to the neoliberal ideal: after the struggle to defend stable employment has already been lost.

Chapter 4: After the struggle

In the previous chapter I addressed two films which centre around the ongoing decline of Fordist work. This chapter analyses three texts whose narratives take place after a rupture with this industrial past: Laurent Cantet's *L'Atelier* (2017), Pierre Jolivet's *Jamais de la vie* (2015), and Stephane Brizé's *La Loi du marché* (also 2015). The expulsion from Fordist labour that was ongoing in *En guerre* and *Deux jours, une nuit* has already conclusively taken place in these films. The presence of industrial employment has been almost completely erased from their diegeses; in its place lies insecure service-sector service work or unemployment. Relatedly, these films map out environments in which struggles against the degradation of workplace conditions have already been lost, grappling with the defeat of the left-wing movements which were dominant in the Fordist era—trade unions in particular.[57] Traces of Fordist cultures and histories remain highly important, however: these works are all punctuated by the recalcitrant presence or re-emergence of fragments of this recent past. They effect a range of articulations and disarticulations between memories of Fordist cultures and the neoliberal present.

The films attempt to confront the workings of neoliberal power in various ways. *L'Atelier* is the least polemical of the three, probing the emergence of contemporary social problems in a contemplative and reflective manner. *Jamais de la vie* takes a more conventional path, using social realist tropes to explore the degradation of social conditions; the film's protagonist, Franck, attempts to confront the bearers of power in the film's second half. *La Loi du marché* stages a different kind of confrontation between its protagonist, Thierry, and the workings of neoliberal power. Thierry reluctantly engages with the demands of neoliberal employment, coming face to face with his own complicity in structures of domination as the film draws on.

The lines of enquiry that animate this chapter's analysis are as follows. Firstly, what precisely emerges in wake of the decline of Fordist work in these diegeses; what are the legacies of Fordism, and how are these represented? Secondly, what articulations and disarticulations are made between Fordist and neoliberal imaginaries in these films? Further, what possible orientation towards the future emerges, if any? The general accounts of neoliberalism laid out in my first two chapters will of course inform the discussion here, but it is also necessary to supplement them with more specific resources to address the topic at hand, something I will also do in subsequent chapters. In this

[57] The struggle against the degradation of workplace conditions is not necessarily associated with Fordism (whether considered as a particular organisation of production and societies or as a period of history). However, these films articulate struggle with broadly-speaking Fordist imaginaries.

instance, I draw upon Walter Benjamin's, Wendy Brown's, and Enzo Traverso's theorisations of left melancholy. These theories are fundamentally concerned with the relationship between past, present, and future, and thus will be of significant conceptual utility to the analysis that follows and its relation to this thesis more generally.

Left melancholy

The term left melancholy first appears in the work of Walter Benjamin (1995), who coined it to describe particular shortcomings of contemporary political art. Benjamin argues that this art tends towards a backwards-looking moralism that, while ostensibly deriving from noble intentions, leads instead towards debilitating inaction and complacency, characterised by a 'disarmed, hollow sentimentality' (Acaroglu 2021: 98). While the art he has in mind does cast its gaze upon inequalities and exploitation, it reifies them so that they appear static and unchanging. Importantly, however, Benjamin does not see melancholy as a problem to be solved as such (Flatley 2008: 65; Traverso 2016: 48). Rather, he argues instead for a politicisation of melancholy, and—while castigating the contemporary intelligentsia for the way they represent the past—perceives a confrontation with the lost battles of history as a political necessity. This forms part of a broader project of dialectical materialism that aims to reactivate the past in order to transform the present: Benjamin writes of the importance of 'fanning the spark of hope in the past' (2007: 255), and observes for instance that '[h]istorical materialism sees the work of the past as still uncompleted' (2008: 124).[58] As Onur Acaroglu argues, then, 'Benjamin ridicules the melancholy of the intelligentsia as cynical detachment, while expounding on the *redemptive potential* of the vanquished in history' (2021: 90-1, emphasis mine).

More recent theorisations of left melancholy extrapolate from Benjamin's initial focus on art, applying his theses to left-wing movements more broadly. Importantly, they are divided on the question of whether left melancholy might represent a potential resource, or whether it should simply be considered an obstacle to political action. Wendy Brown's well-known text 'Resisting Left Melancholy' is, as its title would suggest, exemplary of the tendency which sees this melancholy as something to be overcome. Writing in 1999 in the midst of a 'crisis of the left' that had been ongoing for two decades—effectively since the end of the Fordist era—Brown speaks of a leftist movement that 'has become *more attached to its impossibility* than its potential fruitfulness' and 'is caught in a structure of *melancholic attachment* to a certain strain of its own dead past' (1999: 26, emphasis

[58] Benjamin's particular project is highly unconventional within the Marxist tradition, combining dialectical materialism with Jewish messianism (see Loveluck 2011; Traverso 2016: 227).

mine). The Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia that Brown draws upon is key: the melancholy she describes is a kind of pathological mourning, lacking the end point associated with the (non-pathological) mourning process. Thus, in Brown's theorisation, left melancholy refers to a perverse attachment to a lost object (in the Freudian sense) which inhibits action in the present day.

The kind of melancholic attachment that Brown has in mind is clear: she argues that the contemporary left 'clings to the formations and formulations of another epoch, one in which the notion of unified movements, social totalities, and class-based politics appeared to be viable categories of political and theoretical analysis' (1999: 25). Brown does not invoke Fordism and its associated political cultures explicitly, but we can reasonably consider nostalgia for Fordism as one of the types of left melancholy that she has in mind. For Brown, we risk being trapped indefinitely in a melancholic impasse; the political possibilities of the present are wasted, and leftist movements are unable to uncover a new 'critical and visionary spirit' (Brown 1999: 26) that might break with the current order. Clearly, this theorisation of left melancholy differs significantly from Benjamin's. Perhaps most notably, Brown's text abandons wholeheartedly the dialectical vision of history that underpins the latter's work: there is little question of whether melancholy might be politicised, or whether the 'redemptive potential of the vanquished in history' (Acaroglu 2021: 91) might be put to use in her text. Rather, 'Resisting Left Melancholy' functions instead as a fairly straightforward rallying call for a clean break with the left's (communist) history and thus with the melancholic impasse of the present.

Writing nearly twenty years after Brown, Enzo Traverso also perceives the present to be characterised by an impasse, albeit one of a different nature. Describing a 'transition from utopia to memory' (2016: xiv) that has gradually become cemented since the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of triumphalist 'end of history' narratives, Traverso writes, '[t]he utopias of the past century have disappeared, leaving a present charged with memory but unable to project itself into the future' (2016: 7). Rather than incorporating memories of defeat into present-day struggles with a hope to making good on the dreams of the vanquished, left-wing movements have now succumbed to a 'a melancholic vision of history as remembrance' (2016: xiv). Consequently, we are overcome by the suspended time of neoliberal presentism, trapped between 'an unmasterable past and a denied future' (2016: 8). It is the Benjaminian tradition of left melancholy that Traverso wishes to revive: a politicisation of memory and a confrontation with the lost battles of the past is vital.

Traverso and Brown both diagnose a contemporary impasse that acts as a brake upon left-wing movements, then, but there is clear water between the pair: while the latter perceives the left's

melancholic attachment to the memories of communism or Fordism to be the source of the impasse, Traverso argues that it is the depoliticisation of this attachment—and of memory more generally—that is the problem. Thus, where Brown argues for the necessity of a clean break with the past, Traverso argues instead for a recalibration of our relationship with it, and a revitalisation of the dialectical tradition of history that strives to mobilise fragments of the past in order to transform the present. The nuanced differences between these thinkers function as a springboard for the filmic analysis that follows: each of the works discussed below deals with the legacy of left-wing defeat in different ways, and each stakes out differing relationships between past, present, and future.

L'Atelier

Laurent Cantet is a director who has turned his attention to work and the absence of work on a repeated basis, employing a reflective directorial style to pose salient questions about the nature of the contemporary era (O'Shaughnessy 2015: Chapters 1, 3).[59] *L'Atelier* must be situated within this oeuvre: it is a stylistically distinctive film which uses narrative polyphony and an ensemble cast to explore and unravel a number of competing narratives surrounding deindustrialisation and the legacies of Fordist cultures. The temporal economy of the film is also significant, and will be a key focus of the analysis below. The film dramatises the titular *atelier* (or workshop), in which a number of unemployed young adults in the town of La Ciotat—close to Marseille—must collaboratively develop the plot of a novel, as part of a course intended to improve their limited employment prospects. The course is led by a well-known Parisian writer, Olivia Dejazet (Marina Foïs), who engages in a dangerous relationship of mutual fascination and disdain with Antoine (Matthieu Lucci), a disaffected workshop participant with far-right political leanings. This culminates in Antoine's kidnapping of Olivia; he threatens to kill her but ultimately lets her go free. In the closing moments of the film, Antoine finds work; he is depicted sailing away from La Ciotat, apparently happier than before.

The deindustrialised backdrop of the town's port and shipyards is of crucial importance. Firstly, it is the locus around which much of the narrative revolves—most obviously because the unemployment and decline that it embodies underpin the action. The yards can be seen as a material embodiment of the historic expulsion from Fordist labour that bears down upon La Ciotat. On the other hand, many of the town's scant employment opportunities are to be found in its tourist industry or the remaining part of the shipyard, which now manufactures luxury yachts. We thus see immediately

[59] I examine his 2001 work *L'Emploi du temps* in the next chapter.

how this environment is situated at the sharp intersection of the decline of Fordism and the neoliberal present. Deindustrialisation, and neoliberalism more generally, are undoubtedly objects of the film's critique, but *L'Atelier* is more ambiguous in its portrayal of the contemporary era than the works we have addressed thus far. It explores the social problems wrought by deindustrialisation, but also highlights the intelligence and creativity of the students. Vacant shipyards often enter the camera's view, but striking long shots of the Mediterranean coastline which emphasise the area's beauty are also common. This highlights a different mode of filmmaking to the ones we have examined thus far, the implications of which I will consider below.

The workshop

The workshop scenes are characterised by tense debate amongst the different participants, the conditions of which are established through particular stylistic choices. The characters are typically framed in close-up shots which emphasise their relative equality (Figures 18-20); in addition, there is no attempt to encourage audience identification through point-of-view shots in these sequences. A two-camera setup is used so that the dialogue, which is frequently improvised (Macaulay and Cantet 2018), can flow uninterrupted. Further, the cast is primarily composed of non-professional actors (with the exception of Foïs), which contributes to a certain impression of verisimilitude. This arrangement sets the stage for the extended periods of debate that comprise much of the film's runtime. The key question that dominates the discussions in the workshop is that of the relevance and legacy of the shipyards and their heritage: firstly, to the narrative of the novel that the students are writing, but also by extension to their lives more generally.[60] The film is engaged in a process of self-reflexive questioning: it is a text whose narrative centres on how narratives of the past might be retold or even re-experienced. By extension, these scenes function as a springboard for broader considerations of the relation between the Fordist past, neoliberal present, and any possible beyond.

[60] The boundaries between the fictitious novel and reality are often somewhat blurred for the students. We might suggest that the film invites the viewer to engage in a similar relationship, whereby it serves as a proxy for viewers' considerations of the relationship between Fordist histories and the neoliberal present.

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

It becomes clear from early on that the closing of the town's shipyards has marked all of the students' consciousnesses; however, the ways in which different members of the group react to these events vary widely. Amongst the most prominent (and conflicting) voices in the workshop are those of Malika (Warda Rammach) and Antoine. Malika, whose father and grandfather worked at the docks, is keen to recount tales of militancy and stress the bravery and dignity of the shipyard's workers in their struggles against deindustrialisation. She places a constant emphasis on the heroic nature of the battles the workers fought, demonstrating how mythologies of struggle are passed from generation to generation. Yet it is often unclear precisely what such narratives offer to Malika—or the other students—in the present day, beyond a somewhat cloying nostalgia. Some of Malika's peers bristle at the sentimentality of her speech—one expresses a certain incredulity at being proud of 'welding in the dark and breathing in asbestos', for instance.[61] Others question the ongoing relevance of these events, many of which took place before they were born. In this respect, we might consider Malika as epitomising the left melancholic tendency that Brown describes in such negative terms. Brown writes that the archetypal subject of such a melancholy is 'attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal—even to the failure of that ideal—than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present' (1999: 20). Malika's backward-looking outlook, which reifies the left-wing mythologies that surround the shipyards, clearly resonates with this description.

At times, Antoine seems almost attuned to Brown's critique of the attachments of melancholy, striving to cut the ties of La Ciotat's Fordist past. Early in the film, for instance, he dismissively states, 'you want to speak about the shipyard—it's dead'; some other students nod in agreement.[62] Here we find echoes of Brown when she writes of a left that is 'caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of *its own dead past*' (1999: 26, emphasis mine). Further, in his final monologue at the workshop, Antoine speaks frustratedly of the crane in the shipyard being 'preserved like a work of art in a museum, like a church', recalling Brown's description of the past being rendered as 'thinglike and frozen' (1999: 22) in left melancholic practices.[63] Tellingly, at this moment the film permits him a long, uninterrupted speech that diverges from the polyvocality of the other workshop scenes; I address the camera's repeated focus on Antoine in more detail below. Antoine makes clear that he perceives Malika's melancholic attachment to the shipyard as stultifying, then; like Brown, he strives to make a clean break with the Fordist past and look towards a different future. That said, it should be noted that his disaffection comes from a very different place than Brown's leftist intervention; further, his attraction to nationalist politics represents an

[61] 'souder dans le noir et bouffer de l'amiante'
[62] 'tu veux parler du chantier—c'est mort'
[63] 'cette grue qu'on entetenait comme une oeuvre d'art dans un musée, comme une église'

attachment to (imagined) ideals of the past in a way that mirrors the melancholic attachments that Brown critiques. At points he also acknowledges a more complex connection between the town's industrial past and its present, which hints towards the difficulty of making a neat disarticulation between the two. Again, in his final speech, for instance, Antoine speaks of 'the shipyard that no one can escape'. Thus, even as he has throughout the film disavowed the relevance of the port and its legacies, he admits here its lingering, inescapable presence in the town's present day.[64] The only moment at which he is able to break from this presence is by sailing away from La Ciotat in the film's final moments (Figure 21).

Figure 21

Certain edited sequences reinforce this complex temporal relation. A key moment early in the film's runtime, for example, cuts between past and present. We initially witness Antoine watching a video on a tablet of Luc Borel (Figure 22), a far-right nationalist politician inspired by the real-life figure of Alain Soral.[65] A sharp cut moves us to a promotional video of local shipyards from some period around the 1960s (Figure 23). This archival footage emphasises the range of new technologies utilised in the shipyard, portraying an era of prosperity; its final shot depicts thousands of smiling workers running out of the shipyard gates at the end of the working day (Figure 24). The camera tracks the swarm of workers, creating a sense of movement. We then cut to a series of static shots of the shipyard in the present day (Figure 25). Here, the cranes and various other pieces of fixed capital loom over the landscape as monoliths—as decaying remnants of a distant past. At this moment, Cantet plays with the diegetic sound: the noise of the bustling workers from the archive

[64] 'Ce chantier auquel on pouvait pas échapper'

[65] Soral is a one-time employee of the *Front National* whose internet presence attracts legions of primarily young followers; he has been convicted of a range of hate crimes including incentive to racial hatred and holocaust denial. Notably, the discourses that he employs incorporate residual elements of anti-capitalism alongside the incitement of racial hatred; this is mirrored in the film's depiction of Borel.

footage continues over these shots, creating an obvious juxtaposition with the empty and motionless images of the present day. The editing must be read as effecting a simultaneous disarticulation and articulation of past and present. In the first respect, the stark contrast between the movement and action of the archival footage and the stillness of the present day would seem to suggest that 'the shipyard *is* dead': past and present are thus disarticulated. Yet, the continuation of the workers' voices over the final element of the sequence suggests instead that the shipyards and their legacies retain a connection of some sorts with the contemporary that is impossible to sever. The shipyard is not completely dead, then; rather, it continues to structure the action of the present day.

Figure 22

Figure 23

Figure 24

Figure 25

In this regard, we also need to bear in mind the fact that this sequence connects deindustrialisation and Antoine's attraction to the far-right. It suggests that the rise of the latter must be considered in light of the decline of industry. The film's implicit identification of the historical catalysts for a present-day problem constitutes one of the most prominent ways in which it attempts to confront the workings and origins of neoliberal power, albeit in a way which is less direct and more subtle than we have seen elsewhere. However, rather than making a straightforward correlation between material decline and the rise of these nationalist politics, the sequence implicitly makes a more nuanced argument. Once more, the final montage element—the static shots combined with the voices of the (former) workers—is instructive. This combination of sound and image serves as a kind of reanimation of the past spirit of the port in the present day. When considered in combination with the footage of Borel, it could be read as suggesting that when only nostalgic, left melancholic forces—represented through the archival sound—attempt to revitalise the port and shipyards, this

leaves a void within which the far-right can emerge. Thinking more broadly, it is important that Antoine is the only character who is drawn towards these politics; the other workshop participants largely treat his views with disdain. This stands in contrast to a certain, well-worn, narrative that straightforwardly links deindustrialisation to the rise of the far right. This rejection of historical determinism is a key part of the film's political thrust, and importantly is made possible by its polyphonic narrative structure.

The bearing down of the Fordist past upon the present day is also reflected in the way in which the shipyards are figured in the film's landscape. Often, they are to be found at the rear of the frame—looming over the landscape even as they are largely absent from the primary narrative. At one point, for instance, Antoine meets with a group of friends who share his political allegiances. They spend the night shooting guns in a forest and discussing their hatred of various minority groups, heading down to the seafront when the sun rises. The port is in the background of the shots of this meeting, and thus frames the group's actions (Figure 26). This pattern is repeated after the film's dramatic climax, in which Antoine kidnaps Olivia. Crucially, the port and shipyards are also visible from the workshop itself, although rarely foregrounded directly by the camera. Thus, the port is simultaneously close and distant from the film's action. In terms of the former quality, its omnipresence is crucial: it is rarely far from the camera's—and the characters'—line of sight. This highlights once more the sense of the interpenetration of past and present that the film develops, and the bearing down of the history embodied in the port upon the future. Yet its distance is equally significant: relatively little of the film's runtime takes place within the confines of the shipyard itself. If the omnipresence of the port and shipyards signals the film's acknowledgment of the necessity, or at least inevitability, of some kind of attachment to the past, their distance acknowledges the difficulty of politicising this relation, or perhaps more simply the distance between the town's industrial past and the present day.

Figure 26

The turn to violence

The final act of the film deserves further examination. As I have suggested, the mutual fascination between Olivia and Antoine is a key driver of the film's storyline. This initially springs from disagreements in the workshop: Olivia castigates Antoine for the violent prose he writes; Antoine quotes violent passages from Olivia's own novels in response, highlighting her double standards. The pair begin to observe each other: Antoine spies on Olivia in her home, and Olivia pores through his Facebook page. Stylistically, these sequences diverge somewhat from the 'fabricated realism' (Toohey 2020: 1) of the workshop scenes, more closely approximating thriller conventions: extreme-long shots are employed during the acts of surveillance, for instance. In the final third of the film, this thriller-like trajectory culminates in Antoine's kidnapping of Olivia by gunpoint. He takes her to a secluded area of seafront at night, but, rather than kill her, lets her leave and shoots his gun at the sky instead. How might we interpret this? In the first instance, we should read Antoine's acts as a desire to break from the impasse of the present. He makes plain that the stagnation of the present—characterised by a lack of (employment) opportunities—is a significant source of pain for him: in his final monologue, he states, 'Yes, a man can kill out of boredom […] just so that something would happen.'[66]

This narrative trajectory can also be interpreted as an attempt to physically confront power. Olivia approaches the students, and Antoine in particular, with a pre-conceived idea of what they are like.

[66] 'Oui, un homme peut tuer par ennui […] juste pour que quelque chose se passe.' Antoine's monologue is presented from the perspective of a fictional character, recounted in the third person. However, it is implied that the distance between Antoine's own subjectivity and this fictional character is only very slim.

She is in a position of power relative to the young people in terms of both her class and cultural background. In Antoine's state of frustration, she seems to be an embodiment of the power relations that bear down upon him. He clearly considers himself as a rebel against the dominant structures of society—a kind of ill-defined system—and thinks of Olivia as a part of that system (referring to her as 'people like you').[67] The kidnapping can therefore be seen as an attempt to gain control of this situation by confronting an agent of power. It could perhaps be argued that, during the kidnapping, Antoine realises that his behaviour is somewhat incoherent or futile, hence his release of Olivia. We could also interpret his aimless, impotent shooting at the sky as an implicit acknowledgement of the difficulty of locating power, something we also observed in the previous chapter, despite the difference of the films.

We also need to consider these events in the context of Antoine's gender. The decline of Fordism has often been associated with a crisis of masculinity (Lane 2020: 103-38). While the most common image of the Fordist male in decline is that of an older man, *L'Atelier* maps out a different version of this crisis. Rather than having lost his position as the socially privileged male worker (as might be the case for older subjects), Antoine has never occupied this position. This partially explains the fact that, throughout the film, he engages in a number of behaviours that are attempts at *establishing* (rather than regaining) a masculine self-identity. This frequently takes individualistic, embodied forms: calisthenics exercises, or tensing his muscles in the mirror, for instance (Figure 27). We might also consider his interest in video games with hypermasculine protagonists, or his attraction to army recruitment adverts.[68] As Elizabeth Toohey argues, then, with older models of masculinity unavailable, Antoine engages with a number of models of masculinity 'based on physical prowess and aggression towards others' (2020: 28); his abduction of Olivia clearly forms part of this pattern.

[67] 'les gens comme vous'

[68] It is notable that these take place on an individual basis. These behaviours all form part of broader patterns of neoliberal subjecthood: the emphases on self-improvement and competition are critical. This is markedly different from the crises of masculinity we see amongst older Fordist workers, who are often uncomfortable with the demands of neoliberal subjecthood.

Figure 27

The burdensome past

L'Atelier explores a range of meanings and legacies of La Ciotat's Fordist past and their articulation or disarticulation with the present. The film often centres around clashes between characters whose experiences of this history diverge, probing these different viewpoints in its workshop scenes. While its camera setup emphasises the relative equality between these characters and their viewpoints, the film does not remain entirely neutral. The unbridled sentimentality of Malika's storytelling, which centres around a nostalgic vision of the shipyards and their cultures, is repeatedly called into question. Her melancholic attachment to the ideals of the past is treated with ridicule by many of her peers, and the film itself seems to suggest that these narratives are of little use in the present. The only situations in which they are reanimated are through processes of nostalgic memorialisation—notably during a guided tour that the students undertake at the shipyards.

Cantet's own words offer further clues: in a contemporary interview, he argues that the youth of today are 'now confronted with completely different problems' to those of the (Fordist) past.[69] Among those are the difficulties of

> [f]inding their place in a world which does not take them into account, feeling like they have no control over things and over their own lives. And also confronting a violent society, torn apart by worrying social and political issues: precarity, terrorism, the rise of the extreme right (2017).[70]

[69] 'maintenant confrontés à des problèmes tout autres'

[70] 'Trouver leur place dans un monde qui ne les prend pas en compte, avoir l'impression de n'avoir aucune prise sur le déroulement des choses et sur leur propre vie. Et faire face aussi à une société violente, déchirée par des enjeux sociaux et politiques inquiétants : précarité, terrorisme, montée de l'extrême droite …'

We might implicitly read this interview as a critique of a melancholic attachment to the ideals of the past. Such a critique is most closely embodied in the film through Antoine, who reacts forcefully to the melancholic narratives propounded by Malika. He has a fundamentally different impression of the legacy of La Ciotat's past, and wishes to make a clean break from the lingering influence of the shipyards and their associated cultures. As we have explored, this echoes Brown's critique of left melancholy, which also calls for a break with the Fordist past; unlike Brown, however, Antoine has no allegiance to left-wing movements. It should be noted that the camera follows Antoine more closely than any of the other characters, establishing an intimate relationship with him. His moral complexity is emphasised repeatedly through drawn-out scenes of his caring family life. In this respect he receives more character development than any of the other workshop participants.[71] This arguably amounts to a sympathetic representation; indeed, Cantet's intention to portray Antoine somewhat sympathetically is something he has alluded to in interviews (Rapold and Cantet 2017).

Yet, while *L'Atelier* appears to be partially sympathetic towards Antoine and by extension his desire to break from a seemingly endless, melancholic attachment to the shipyards and their cultures, it ultimately suggests that a clean break from this history would be impossible. Rather, the film's aesthetics—its use of editing and space in particular—point towards a complex interweaving of past and present that cannot be easily undone. This sits uneasily with the temporal relations established in Brown's critique of left melancholy, hinting instead towards the understanding of history found in Traverso's and Benjamin's writings. Cantet's work thus brings out the complexity and ambiguity of left melancholy, which has been interpreted in fundamentally different ways by theorists.

Importantly, however, there is one relation between past and present that does seem markedly absent, and that is the call for the politicisation of memory that is found in Benjamin's and Traverso's thought. For those thinkers, memory is a resource through which we might transform the present and perhaps move towards different futures. *L'Atelier* does not foreclose the future; in fact, its polyphonic and open-ended narrative leaves open the possibility of a different kind of society. However, the lost battles of the past function almost solely as a burden in the film, rather than a potential resource in the present. This leaves the viewer in an ambiguous position. Nostalgia for the past is untenable, but this past is very difficult to cast off. The present is riven with problems; while a different kind of future might be possible, there are no easy routes towards it. In fact, there is little, if any, suggestion of what form a future society might take, or what politics might lead there.

In this regard, *L'Atelier* is a film which more often poses questions than it attempts to offer answers, something it shares with much of Cantet's work (O'Shaughnessy 2015: 25-6). The collective

[71] Toohey (2020) critiques this tendency in relation to Cantet's *Entre les murs* (2008).

expulsion from Fordist labour structures the narrative, but the film does not treat this polemically, nor does it attempt to offer a direct response. Perhaps the closest it comes to offering a resolution is in its final moments, when Antoine has found work and is able to leave La Ciotat, appearing happier than in much of the rest of the film. This highly ambiguous exit *into* labour stands in contrast to the exits from labour that often emerge throughout my filmic corpus. O'Shaughnessy (2016: 54-5) suggests that Cantet's mode of filmmaking perhaps represents the limits of what political cinema is able to accomplish in the neoliberal era. He describes a situation of 'deep uncertainty and real openness' (2016: 55) in the director's films. This uncertainty is symptomatic of a neoliberal present haunted by the failures of history. The 'real openness' is an attempt to do justice to a situation that is not without the prospect of hope; it is a refusal to foreclose the future. It should be noted that narrative openness is not a technique which is necessarily associated with a neoliberal context. Indeed, as Peter Wollen argues, narrative aperture was a key technique of modernist filmmakers in the 1960s and 70s: he highlights the French New Wave and Jean-Luc Godard in particular, arguing that narrative openness and intertextuality leads to a politically progressive 'genuine polyphony' (Wollen 1972: 423).[72] However, O'Shaughnessy is right to locate Cantet's repeated recourse to narrative aperture within a neoliberal era which has been characterised by the decline of a universalising left-wing narrative. This (generally Marxian) narrative might once have pointed towards answers to political problems, also providing a framework for political filmmakers to draw upon (see, for instance, Godard's *Tout va bien* [1972]). By extension, his general argument—that the political cinema of neoliberalism is better suited to questioning than providing answers—is a convincing one, particularly in light of our examination of the difficulties which *Deux jours, une nuit* and *En guerre* encountered in their attempts to identify solutions to the problems they critique. It is an argument which will be tested throughout my thesis: is contemporary work-centred film only able to ask questions, or is it able to hint towards answers, even if only very tentatively?[73] *Jamais de la vie* casts further light upon our understanding of this problematic.

Jamais de la vie

Pierre Jolivet's works often operate at the interface of popular genre and socio-political themes; this mode of filmmaking stands in contrast to that of Brizé and Cantet, both of whom embody the figure

[72] The reflexivity of L'Atelier (its dramatisation of a narrative within a narrative) could also be perceived as drawing upon modernist filmmaking traditions, although it is far gentler than some of the extreme reflexivity of many modernist films (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010: 72-5).

[73] It might also be argued that the conclusion of *L'Atelier* (released after O'Shaughnessy's 2016 piece) does point tentatively towards a solution: Antoine's return to work. This in itself could be perceived as quite conservative.

of the *auteur* more closely. Jolivet's 2015 film *Jamais de la vie* fits this mould well, striking a somewhat uneasy compromise between thriller and social realism. While this bears certain parallels with *L'Atelier,* the elements of thriller are far more conspicuously rendered in Jolivet's work. The film depicts the travails of Franck (Olivier Gourmet), a former trade unionist who now works night shifts as a security guard at a shopping centre on the outskirts of Paris (the English title of the film is *The Night Watchman*). Franck was previously employed as an industrial worker; as in *L'Atelier*, then, the narrative is framed by an expulsion from Fordist labour that took place a number of years before the events of the film. Franck's life has largely been bereft of meaning since his years as a firebrand union man came to an end; he lives alone in the *banlieue* and numbs his ennui by drinking. His current work is boring, unfulfilling, and insecure, but he strikes up a friendship with a beleaguered Pôle Emploi (job centre) employee, Mylène (Valérie Bonneton), who brings a glimmer of hope to his apparently joyless existence. The film's primary plot arc hinges on Franck's surveillance of a criminal gang which plans to rob the shopping centre; in the film's conclusion he intercepts this mob, takes the money they have stolen, and deposits it in Mylène's car as a gift. Gravely injured by his exploits, it is unclear whether or not Franck survives. Franck's final, potentially fatal, act of martyrdom bears important similarities with the exits from labour we have seen elsewhere.[74] Like Laurent's suicide in *En guerre*, Franck's actions emerge from a place of desperation and a desire that things might be different. In common with Sandra's ethical withdrawal in *Deux jours, une nuit*, the actions emerge in the absence of a political force that might lead to structural change. They also play a compensatory narrative role in a similar way to Sandra's actions. These points are critical to our understanding of the film's limitations; I expand upon them below.

Neoliberal work

The opening moments of *Jamais de la vie* are indicative of the tone that characterises much of its first half. The film opens with a close-up shot of Franck, smoking outside in the cold; it then cuts to an extreme long shot of the Intermarché supermarket at which he works. Here, we see that he is pacing up and down the car park, alone. Our identification with Franck is assured in the first shots, but, more importantly, the boredom and solitude of night work are emphasised in those that follow. Later moments reinforce this impression. We see Franck shout out in sheer frustration as a result of his boredom, for instance; at one point his colleague states, 'The night is as dark as death'.[75] This

[74] It can only be very ambiguously interpreted as an exit from labour: it is unclear to what extent Franck intends to withdraw from work.
[75] 'La nuit, c'est sombre comme la mort'

isolation stands in contrast to the implied camaraderie of Franck's previous work at the manufacturing company Syntilex. We might also consider how the routine rhythms of Fordist labour are contrasted with the less clearly regimented temporalities of post-Fordist work. Comolli (1998: 21) argues that there is a synergy between Fordist production and cinema; both are driven by a rhythmic drive towards efficiency. The film's depiction of post-Fordist work differs from this in that it often uses relatively long takes which reinforce a sense of stagnation.

While the actual mechanics of Franck's labour as a security guard are not probed extensively in the film, his choice of employment is undoubtedly important. The cinematic figure of the security guard is often an older male who has been displaced from the Fordist workforce and—having once been in a position of relative unity with his workmates—now sits alone, surveilling people so that capital accumulation can continue as smoothly as possible. This qualitative shift in class position—from a member of a relatively united working class to a direct servant of capital—is something of a recurring theme throughout contemporary work-centred film, and expresses a concern with the fracturing of the formerly united industrial working classes. The protagonist of *La Loi du marché*, Thierry, also works as a security guard; I examine the latter film's representation of this work below.

Although Franck is only on a temporary, part-time contract at the beginning of the film, he appears fortunate to have any work at all. Indeed, unemployment is a looming threat that bears down upon him and those around him—including the other residents of his graffiti-ridden housing estate but also Mylène, the Pôle Emploi worker, who is seen to be living in a precarious condition as well. The scenes in the Pôle Emploi itself offer us further instances of the film's critique. One early moment sees an irate man reacting aggressively at the prospect of having his benefits cut. Another scene sees Franck almost on the verge of tears, speaking of how, in his present circumstances, he will effectively never be able to retire. The camera zooms in as Franck speaks, tightly framing his face (Figure 28); a series of shot-reverse shots emphasise Mylène's sympathy with his plight (Figure 29). This represents a rare display of emotional vulnerability from Franck, who more frequently channels his frustration into a particularly masculine rage.

Figure 28

Figure 29

The gendered nature of Franck's characterisation deserves further examination. Significantly, Franck's masculinity is never in doubt: in addition to his moments of intense physical anger and generally gruff persona, he demonstrates a clear attraction to Mylène and an aversion to her effeminate male colleague that mark him out as a heterosexual (and heterosexist) male subject. We also need to bear in mind once more that Fordist work has almost always been associated with masculinity. The physicality of Olivier Gourmet's body is noteworthy here. Gourmet is an actor who emerges frequently across the corpus of work-centred film, including a brief cameo in *Deux jours, une nuit* and a leading role in *Ceux qui travaillent*, which I examine in the next chapter. He is often cast as a Fordist worker, something we can relate to the size and build of his burly male frame, which appears well-suited to manual labour. His age is also important: given that Fordist work has been in decline for a number of decades, the Fordist worker of contemporary cinema tends to be around middle age or slightly older (Vincent Lindon also fits this mould). As we saw in *L'Atelier*, the decline

of Fordism is deeply implicated with crises of masculinity. Cantet's film engages with this tendency somewhat unconventionally in its focus on Antoine, a man in his late teens. *Jamais de la vie*, on the other hand, engages more typically with the representation of this subject in that it charts an older worker struggling to come to terms with the concurrent decline of Fordist employment and waning of his masculinity. This is a tendency that Jeremy Lane identifies across a range of contemporary filmic and literary texts (2020: 103-37).

Considered together, these different factors contribute to an impression of the disintegration of the Fordist legacy in the present day. Even where there is no direct mention of the past, this functions as an implicit nostalgia for Fordism that could be considered a form of left melancholy of the kind that Brown critiques. The film makes plain that this general situation is in dire need of change. In an institutional sense, the welfare state is seen to be collapsing: even its employees, as the case of Mylène testifies, cannot afford to survive comfortably. For Franck, the promise that decades of stable (if also likely repetitive and boring) work would be followed by a relatively comfortable retirement has been broken; instead, both work and retirement have been thrown into flux. By extension, his position as the privileged male subject of Fordism has been compromised, and he is forced to comply with new workplace demands. Stylistically, we have seen already how the camera encourages identification with his frustration, but the generally slow pacing and cold colour palette further contribute to a generalised atmosphere of stasis and discontent. A sombre instrumental soundtrack cements the negative impression the film establishes. The second half of the film, which diverges from the social realist tropes established here, represents an attempt to break from the impasse of neoliberalism—more below.

Articulating past and present

The film dramatises a vision of the neoliberal present that is often overwhelming, but memories of the past do emerge—albeit in fragmentary and distorted forms. As in *L'Atelier*, one of the key ways in which the past is linked to the present in the film is through dialogue. In an early conversation with Mylène, for example, Franck reveals that he was unemployed for ten years after the closure of Syntilex. At this point he acknowledges his former militancy; it is implied that he struggled to find work because of this history. In this instance, the failures of the past seep through the cracks in his normally guarded persona, structuring the realities of his present-day existence. Still, at this stage it is unclear to what extent he wishes to draw a line under this past: his face bears a wry smile as he reveals his militant history to Mylène, even if it is clear that his years spent in unemployment were arduous, and that the conditions of his current employment offer little prospect of fulfilment or

hope. In a similar manner to *L'Atelier*, then, the relationship between past and present is established as an ambiguous one from the very beginning, although this complexity is limited only to a single narrative voice as opposed to the polyvocality of Cantet's work.

These memories emerge in other ways: later, for instance, we see that Franck keeps a picture of himself and Étienne, an old union comrade, on the wall of his bedroom (Figure 30). Worthy of note is the symbolism of the old photograph—a black and white print. This suggests that the past is motionless and frozen in time, a relic of a bygone era that nonetheless hangs over Franck in the intimate surroundings of his bedroom. Its static depiction of camaraderie serves as a material embodiment of Traverso's description of the 'transition from utopia to memory' (2016: xiv) that characterises the politics of remembering in the neoliberal era. Franck no longer sees Étienne or any other compatriots from his time at Syntilex: in a conversation with his sister he states, 'If I see Étienne again, I see myself'.[76] This remark can be interpreted in two ways: in one reading, Franck is proud of his union past and uncomfortable with what he has now become; in another, the trauma of the union's defeat is what he wishes to avoid confronting. In likelihood it is some combination of the two; what is important is that the past is once again figured ambiguously. It may once have been full of promise, yet here it appears tinged with regret—as a burden which nonetheless has not been completely emptied of its former content.

Figure 30

In an interesting moment later in the film, the picture reappears. At this point, a highly intoxicated Franck looks through a pair of binoculars at the photograph of himself and Étienne (Figure 31). He then turns to a picture of himself and his ex-wife, and finally to a book entitled *A Practical Guide to your Rights* (*Guide pratique de vos droits*; Figure 32)—another physical embodiment of his union

[76] 'Étienne, si je le revois, je me vois'

past. Importantly, all Franck can do is laugh at the book, apparently perplexed as to what it ever meant to him. The shot is framed from Franck's point of view, through the lenses of the binoculars. Conventionally used to view faraway objects, the latter serve to represent the distance between Franck's present-day existence and his past, yet paradoxically the pictures and book are mere metres away from him. We thus see a simultaneous closeness and distance between past and present emerge—an almost contradictory relationship. Clearly, this scene further reinforces the ambiguity that we have already witnessed: the past is at once irrelevant and burdensome, unable—at least at this stage—to be put to use in the present, but impossible to cast off. The simultaneous closeness and distance encapsulated in this scene parallels the figuration of the port and shipyards in *L'Atelier*, which also exhibit these paradoxical qualities. The more general sense of the intertwinement of past and present that was developed in Cantet's film is prominent here too: while Franck does demonstrate a cynical detachment from the Fordist past at certain moments, the film more often suggests a complex intertwinement of past and present. As with *L'Atelier*, this resonates with the vision of history expounded in the writings of Benjamin and Traverso. Jolivet's work moves closer to the temporal economies established in Benjamin's and Traverso's theorisations of left melancholy than Cantet's, attempting to reactivate fragments of the past and put them to transformative purposes, of which more shortly.

Figure 31

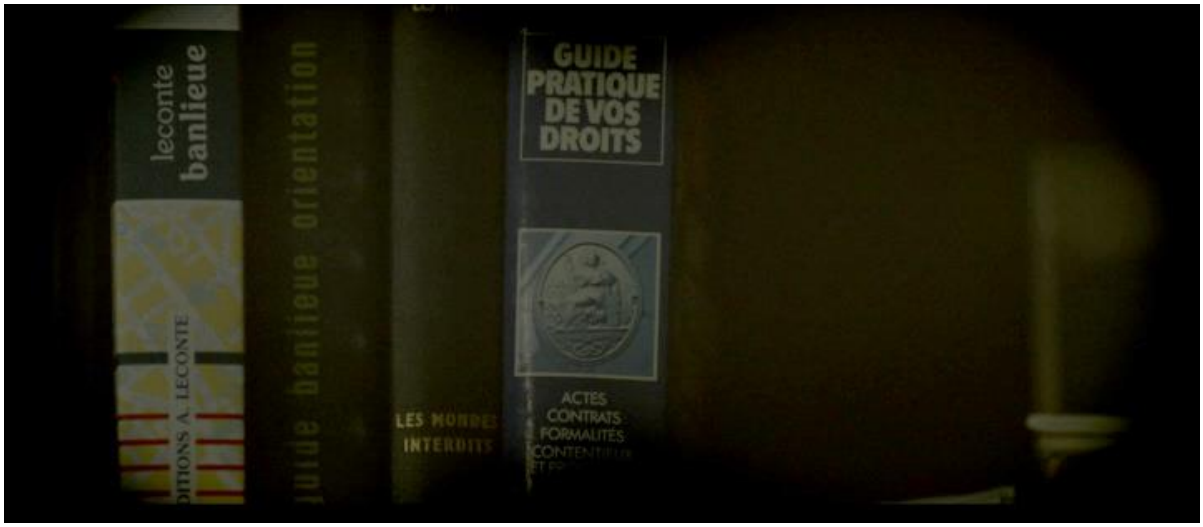

Figure 32

The past lingers in the present in other important ways. For instance, Franck is still adept at manual labour, something which is demonstrated as he fixes broken electronics alongside his security work. This informal, cash-in-hand work emphasises Franck's need to supplement the income from his main job and thus the poor material conditions associated with his insecure post-Fordist employment; it also represents traces of the type of manual work that was once dominant re-emerging physically through his body. In this respect, the residual presence of these skills and habits could be seen as an embodied expression of Franck's desire for more fulfilling employment. Franck also embarks on an intoxicated rant that is more explicitly tied to his former political activity. Speaking to an acquaintance who is beginning his morning shift as a refuse collector, Franck's unprovoked outburst takes aim at the rich getting richer and the wastefulness of consumer culture. This dialogue represents a further residue of the leftist discourses that defined Franck's past, yet, importantly, it cannot be articulated with any collective project, or indeed a coherent politics altogether.

Attempting to break from neoliberalism

Perhaps most significantly, we need to consider the ways in which Franck's final act of heroism shows the continuing influence of his former life. In the film's conclusion, he intercepts a violent robbery at the shopping centre; he is shot and severely wounded in the process. After the violence concludes, he deposits the blood-stained money in the boot of Mylène's car. Throughout the film it is suggested that Franck is searching for some kind of solidaristic outlet. This act appears to represent the best way to fulfil this need: it constitutes a moment of redistribution that resonates with the discourses and practices of his leftist past, and is also tinged with the militancy for which he

was well known.[77] In this regard, Franck's behaviour aligns with Traverso's and Benjamin's calls to reactivate memory in order to transform the present: it is his attempt at utilising fragments of the 'lost battles of the past' (Traverso 2016: xv) for redemptive purposes. We examined the generalised atmosphere of stagnation that the film's first half emphasises, expressed through its pacing. Franck's pursuit of the gang coincides with a departure from this atmosphere: the film begins to make quicker and more frequent cuts as its conspiracy thriller elements are brought to the fore, generating a sense of forwards momentum. His final act represents the peak of this trajectory, and must therefore be read as an attempt to break with the stasis of the neoliberal present that the film at least partially endorses.[78]

However, the limited scope of Franck's actions is clear, and complicates their alignment with Traverso's and Benjamin's theorisations of left melancholy. As explored, these thinkers argue that political engagement with history is a potentially transformative process. In Benjamin's dialectical vision of history, when past and present collide there is the possibility of rupture and perhaps even revolution (Traverso 2016: 226-31).[79] Franck's actions are devoid of this sense of transformation or rupture, taking place on an individual basis and effecting no structural change. The film perhaps acknowledges these limitations in its final shot (Figure 33). Franck is left for dead, motionless at the wheel of his car; his stasis and lifelessness symbolise the failure of his attempt at creating movement or rupture. By extension, while the film aims to agitate beyond the neoliberal stagnation it depicts, it too remains trapped in an impasse, anchored to a present haunted by spectres of left-wing defeat. Indeed, we might interpret it as a filmic embodiment of the trend that Traverso describes whereby '[t]he utopias of the past century have disappeared, leaving a present *charged with memory but unable to project itself into the future*' (2016: 7, emphasis mine). In this regard, *Jamais de la vie* is perhaps most interesting as a film which charts the difficulties of politicising memories of the Fordist past—of politicising left melancholy—in the neoliberal era. Its inability to reach a satisfactory temporal resolution is a symptom of the depoliticisation of memory that Traverso argues is a crucial characteristic of neoliberalism (2016: xiv).

[77] Franck's rallying to the defence of Ketu, a colleague who is *sans papiers*, is another example of this, but one which there is insufficient space to address here.
[78] In its attempt to reactivate fragments of the Fordist past, *Jamais de la vie* clearly contrasts with *L'Atelier*, in which those fragments nearly always represented an unwanted burden.
[79] Possibility, rather than certainty, should be stressed. Benjamin is not a teleological or deterministic thinker (Traverso 2016: 221, 229), and was a fervent critic of linear historicism, including the kind associated with a more orthodox Marxism (Sankar 2019: 125).

Figure 33

Other aspects of the film's structure deserve consideration in comparison to the rest of my corpus. Franck's pursuit of the criminal gang is an attempt to confront a source of power. It partially resembles those we have seen elsewhere—the workers' efforts to reach the owners of Dimke in *En guerre*, for instance. However, while those other pursuits were directed at coherent targets, Franck's is different in that the gang has nothing to do with the problems that the film frequently critiques. The film is unable to pinpoint an agent of neoliberal degradation; this is symptomatic of the complexification of power relations that characterises neoliberalism. It responds to this complexification by identifying the figure of the gang as Franck's target; this is a compensatory strategy that results from its inability to figure neoliberalism from a political or structural perspective.[80] While other films are able to use their protagonists' pursuits of power to explore the ways in which neoliberalism functions, even when those pursuits are thwarted, *Jamais de la vie* is unable to do this in a convincing manner.

This narrative trajectory casts light on the different modes of filmmaking employed by Cantet and Jolivet. We have seen that *Jamais de la vie* encounters significant difficulties in attempting to offer coherent answers or solutions to the problems it depicts. This highlights the limitations of its form, which combines a social realist critique of neoliberalism with thriller tropes.[81] The thriller-like elements in the film, generating a sense of momentum, function as a response to the social realist critique of neoliberal stagnation. The latter part of the narrative is driven by a search for answers. Unable to locate straightforward answers in the context of neoliberal complexification, the film resorts to compensatory narrative devices. In all, this does little to enhance our understanding of

[80] This in itself is a symptom of the interrelated processes of neoliberal complexification and depoliticisation.
[81] I explore the political implications of the thriller genre in more detail in Chapter 6.

neoliberalism or point towards ways in which we might think beyond it, except when read symptomatically.[82] This gives further weight to O'Shaughnessy's arguments about the abilities of political film in the neoliberal era, suggesting that more reflective modes of filmmaking (such as Cantet's) represent a more productive avenue to pursue.

La Loi du marché

La Loi du marché engages less explicitly with questions of the relationship between past and present than the other two works, but represents an interesting counterpoint to the other films nonetheless. Released in 2015 to significant critical and popular acclaim, it represents the first of director/co-writer Brizé's loose trilogy of films about work. The film centres on Thierry (Vincent Lindon), a middle-aged former industrial worker who is plunged into unemployment before the start of the film's narrative. As with the other two films, then, an expulsion from Fordist labour is key; in this case, it occurs only a short amount of time before the start of the narrative. Exhausted by the ongoing trade union dispute pertaining to his dismissal, Thierry renounces his former comrades and commits himself to searching for work. After a gruelling process, he finally finds employment as a security guard at a supermarket. Tasked with the intense surveillance of both customers and his co-workers, Thierry finds himself in an uneasy alliance with the management of the supermarket, performing unfulfilling and dehumanising work. The management's surveillance of one of the supermarket's employees, Gisèle, ultimately leads to her suicide after she is caught stealing discount coupons. This act of violence forces Thierry to confront his role in the apparatus of the supermarket; the film concludes as he walks away from this job. This is an unambiguous form of the exit from labour which is very similar to that depicted in *Deux jours, une nuit*, something I explore later in the chapter. There is also narrative crossover with *Jamais de la vie*: both films chart the paths of former industrial workers who go on to become security guards (*vigiles*). Stylistically, *La Loi du marché* lacks the thriller elements that permeate the other two works addressed in this chapter. It employs a highly naturalistic, documentary-like style characterised by the use of handheld cameras and long takes. The film's consistently long takes develop an atmosphere of stagnation that is more pronounced than those represented in Cantet's and Jolivet's films, which has an important bearing on the film's relation to theories of left melancholy. I will also consider the film's use of long takes in relation to the way it attempts to position its audience, and therefore in terms of the politics of its form.

[82] The films analysed in Chapter 6 also cast light on the limitations of the thriller form.

Cutting the ties of the past

There is little direct reference to the legacies of Fordism in the film, save for an early scene in which Thierry meets with his former colleagues in a café (Figure 34). Several of them want to continue the fight against their former bosses. The factory they worked at was financially viable (as in *En guerre*); their former employers have therefore acted illegally by closing it down. The horizons of the battle are very narrow: the most the workers can hope to gain is the punishment of their former bosses. Thierry explains his reluctance to engage any further: 'I feel like I'm going round in circles […] I am tired, I am tired, I am tired.'[83] Tellingly, this fatigue is something that plays out over his body throughout the film: his movements are sluggish, his shoulders are often rounded, and his face is frequently unanimated. Thierry's body itself represents a kind of legacy of Fordism in the present day: it appears weary from manual work, and tired and defeated from the failures of political mobilisation. It also expresses his inability to perform the kind of flexibility and enthusiasm demanded of neoliberal workers, as we will come to see.[84] Thierry's peers protest at his statements, but he continues: 'I would rather draw a line... Move onto other things'.[85] This desire to cut the ties of Fordist cultures bears similarities with Brown's critique of melancholic attachments to the past: it appears that for Thierry, as for Brown, these mechanisms have been exhausted (although we should also consider the trauma of defeat that inflects his actions). It should be noted that this scene, like much of the film, comprises a long take shot with a handheld camera. In this instance, the camera remains fairly neutral in that it does not immediately identify with one character or another; the film therefore does not suggest that Thierry is somehow wrong for abandoning his peers at this stage.

[83] 'j'ai une impression de tourner en rond […] je suis fatigué, je suis fatigué, je suis fatigué.'
[84] In spite of the similarities between Lindon's role here and that in *En guerre*, these very different patterns of embodiment illustrate the more significant contrast between the two characterisations. Whereas Laurent (*En guerre*) is charged with energy and permanently agitating, Thierry is resigned and exhausted.
[85] 'je préfère tirer un trait... Passer à autre chose'

Figure 34

The contemporary landscape

After breaking with his former comrades, Thierry must confront a landscape characterised by widespread unemployment similar to those depicted in the other two films. Consequently, a key focus of the narrative is the contemporary French welfare state. Like Franck (*Jamais de la vie*), Thierry makes repeated visits to the Pôle Emploi in the early part of the film, and is required to engage in a number of training courses in order to continue receiving his unemployment benefits. As identified by Gilles Deleuze, amongst others, the imperative to engage in a process of '*perpetual training*' (Deleuze 1992: 5, emphasis in original) is a key characteristic of neoliberal societies, superseding the spatially and temporally enclosed educational space of the school that characterised the Fordist era (see also Rose 1999b: 234). These courses are of little use when it comes to finding work; Thierry perceives them to be a racket which benefits the training companies rather than the attendees.[86] The state has only very limited power to change his situation, something a Pôle Emploi worker admits in the film's opening scene: 'It's the employers who decide to recruit, not us'.[87] This admission signals the increasing power of capital and the concomitant weakening of the welfare state. As in *Jamais de la vie*, this amounts to a disintegration of the legacies of Fordism.

[86] As Brown (2015: 49) argues, the closer integration of private companies into public sector institutions is a key feature of neoliberalism.

[87] 'les employeurs, c'est eux qui décident de recruter, c'est pas nous'

Figure 35

Thierry's face is framed closely as he speaks to the Pôle Emploi employee (Figure 35), even while the latter is talking; his furrowed brow and exasperated manner are foregrounded as he talks of his benefits being cut. This framing is clearly intended to provoke empathy and identification with Thierry; Brizé also makes use of a characteristic long take that deserves further exploration. Art cinema's use of the long take has attracted a wealth of academic attention in recent years, particularly in studies of the loosely-defined genre of slow cinema.[88] Theorists have identified divergent effects of this stylistic trope: Lutz Koepnick (2017) argues that the long take can encourage 'wondrous', appreciative viewing, for instance, while long takes have also been associated with directors' desires to frustrate or coerce the spectator (Lubecker 2017: 33-4; Rhodes 2006: 19; Koepnick 2017: 142-4; see also Nagib 2015: 27).[89] *La Loi du marché* is clearly not slow in the ways that Koepnick and other theorists such as Tiago de Luca (2016) describe. Yet its persistent use of long takes, particularly during scenes of Thierry's frustration and humiliation, has two important effects. First, it creates an atmosphere of stagnation that appears difficult to break from, reinforcing the film's depiction of the impasse that has emerged in the wake of the defeat of left-wing movements. Second, and relatedly, these long takes have the effect of encouraging a desire for catharsis and escape in the viewer in ways which resemble the use of long takes by directors such as Michael Haneke and Gus Van Sant, albeit in a less extreme fashion. This spectatorial desire is repeatedly denied until the closing minutes of the film; in this respect, *La Loi du marché* bears significant traces of what Nikolaj Lübecker terms the *feel-bad film* in that it 'produces a spectatorial

[88] While slow cinema is often associated with long takes, a 'reliance on the long take does not necessarily elicit the experience of slowness by the spectator', as Lúcia Nagib argues (2015: 27).
[89] I address briefly above how long takes are employed in *Jamais de la vie*, but it bears mention that *L'Atelier* also makes sporadic use of long takes, often seemingly to encourage spectatorial contemplation.

desire, but then blocks its satisfaction' (2015: 3).[90] As with Brizé's *En guerre*, the profound sense of hopelessness that much of the film tracks—its *feel-bad* affect and inability to offer solutions to the problems it depicts—should be read as symptomatic of a neoliberal present that is characterised by a significant degradation of workplace conditions and the absence of a political force that might change this situation. However, its attempt to create spectatorial dissatisfaction could also be read as a formal means of encouraging agitation amongst its audience, which might in turn encourage political action.

A training course depicted later in the film represents one of the most prominent instances of Thierry's suffering. In this workshop, he has undertaken a mock job interview which has been filmed by the training provider. He and other participants sit around a table as the video is replayed; they are asked to reflect upon Thierry's performance. Scathing comments emerge pertaining to Thierry's appearance, his posture, his manner—often crossing the line into judgments on his personality itself; Thierry does not respond to these criticisms. This scene is important in a number of respects. In the first instance, it represents a deeper engagement with the specific demands of neoliberal subjecthood than we see in the other two films. Thierry must market himself as 'capital to be invested in' (Brown 2015: 110) through closely-regulated behaviours that are vocalised and materialised across his body. This forms part of a broader requirement to undertake *work on the self*; as noted in Chapter 1, this is a crucial component of neoliberal subjecthood.[91] The film reflects astutely on the ways in which perpetual training and work on the self have been incorporated into the modern-day welfare state, as a form of what has been termed *workfare* (Wacquant 2010), welfare payments that are conditional on work performed. It suggests that neoliberal welfare institutions play a diminished social role and are primarily concerned with reshaping subjects according to the demands of neoliberal subjecthood (for flexibility and responsibility in particular) and serving private interests (those of the training course providers). *L'Atelier* also features mandatory training for jobseekers, but the re-integration course of Cantet's film—centred around the collective writing of a novel—is tinged with a Republican valorisation of literature, not merely neoliberal instrumentalism. The vision of welfare institutions in *La Loi du marché* differs significantly in this respect.

[90] The *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic Jean-Philippe Tessé takes issue with this pattern of editing, arguing that the film wallows in the humiliation of Thierry and his peers: '[the film] invites us to look at the pathetic spectacle of the dominated and the powerless' ('[le film] nous convie au spectacle pathétique des dominés et des impuissants' [2015: 16]).[90] There is certainly an element of truth to this: Thierry is largely powerless and subservient throughout the film, and we witness repeated and prolonged scenes of his degradation.

[91] I examine the cinematic representation of work on the self in more detail in the next chapter.

Relatedly, the representation of the training course reflects a more deeply-rooted atomisation than we witness in the other two films, bearing greater resemblance to the environment dramatised in *Deux jours, une nuit*, for instance. Subjects are placed in intense, unbridled competition with one another; this is the defining characteristic of their interactions.[92] The solidaristic cultures shared among Thierry's former workmates (that we briefly saw at the beginning of the film) function as a structuring absence here. There were clearly divisions between Thierry and the other men as evidenced most starkly in the heated discussion between them. However, the sense of shared purpose and common interests that characterised their conversation contrasts starkly with this image of atomisation. This is the primary way in which the (Fordist) past is rendered in the film: through the negative.

We should also consider the contrast between the visions of embodied masculinity that emerge in the films discussed in this chapter. *L'Atelier* charts the development of a frustrated, violent masculinity that emerges in response to the stagnation of the neoliberal present. *Jamais de la vie* depicts a heroic and particularly masculine act of martyrdom which is also a response to the lack of opportunities of the present day but bears traces of the solidaristic cultures of the recent past as well. *La Loi du marché*, on the other hand, represents an attitude of dejected and stoically silent defeat that plays out over Thierry's body. These constitute three different responses to the decline of Fordism: different archetypes of masculinity that give nuance to our understanding of neoliberalism's reshaping of gender norms.

It must be mentioned that the reaction of Thierry's peers to his performance represents not only an increased climate of individualised competition, but also the fact that he *is* out of step with the demands of neoliberal subjecthood. Despite his best efforts, he is clearly uncomfortable with his position as a figure of human capital, unable to perform the affective labour (*wanting* to be employable) or its physical counterpart (embodying the desire to work and the dynamism and vitality required to do so) that are demanded of contemporary subjects. In this respect he represents a further example of the Fordist male who is misaligned with the norms of neoliberalism, in a similar fashion to Franck (*Jamais de la vie*) and Laurent (*En guerre*). The training course is filmed in much the same way as the earlier scene in the job centre, emphasising Thierry's continuous suffering (Figure 36). He is usually framed alone as his peers criticise him; his hunched body gives a sense of resignation that is reinforced by that fact that he nearly always remains silent—lacking the language or perhaps even the desire to combat this situation. A long take is used once more, forcing us to

[92] This atmosphere of intra-class conflict, combined with an emphasis on surveillance, also serves as an anticipation of the kind of work that Thierry will soon be undertaking.

confront an image of suffering and cruelty at the heart of neoliberal social relations as borne out by Lindon's body and face.

Figure 36

The image of the unemployment that emerges in the wake of Fordism's decline is unremittingly bleak, then. In this, the film is closer to *Jamais de la vie*'s representation of the neoliberal present than *L'Atelier*. Thierry also experiences frustration in the domestic sphere. One interesting scene depicts him at a dance class with his wife, unable to move in time with the rhythms of the music. The teacher, a slightly younger man, eventually moves Thierry's wife out of the way, dancing with him to help him learn the routine (Figure 37). This hints implicitly towards the intertwinement of the decline of Fordism and a crisis in masculinity that we have already seen in *Jamais de la vie* in particular: Thierry clearly feels emasculated in these moments. We might also read his inability to keep time in this dance class as a metaphor for his being out of step with contemporary models of subjectivity.[93] The family is often a source of refuge in the film: Thierry shares loving relationships with his wife and son. At points, however, he is also depicted as listless and purposeless in the family home. The long take is employed at these moments, lingering on him as he performs menial jobs or simply stares out of the window. Elsewhere, we have seen how these long takes are used to encourage identification or to emphasise the seriousness of various situations, but these scenes impart a slightly different meaning to them. Here, they come to symbolise the stagnation of unemployment; comparable atmospheres are developed in all three films discussed in this chapter. Much has been made of the quickened temporalities of neoliberal societies (see for instance Harvey 1990; Hassan 2009), but the slow pace of *La Loi du marché* highlights a different kind of experience

[93] It is interesting that Thierry is assessed in his leisure time as well as within those environments associated with work (job interviews, training courses). The film suggests that pervasive assessment and quantification is a key characteristic of neoliberalism. Brown (2015: 10) is but one theorist who describes similar developments.

that is equally important to consider. The film's temporality also suggests that realising the sense of movement implicit in all three conceptions of left melancholy is extremely complicated in the neoliberal era: the neoliberal present appears difficult, if not impossible, to move beyond.

Figure 37

Employment

There are moments of camaraderie amongst the workers at the supermarket, but the film's representation of this workplace more often emphasises the image of intense atomisation developed elsewhere. Thierry is tasked with surveilling the people in the shop, both by patrolling the aisles and watching CCTV footage. Like Franck, he is often framed alone by the camera; this stresses his isolation from his peers. His duties are significantly more degrading than Franck's, however. One scene sees him perform a lengthy interrogation of a poverty-stricken elderly man who has stolen a piece of meat. A humanistic concern with the 'deserving poor' emerges as the shame and desperation upon the elderly man's face is made clear. The interrogations take place in cramped rooms that are lit only with harsh fluorescent lighting; this use of space can be read as a simple metaphor for the state of entrapment that Thierry finds himself in—spatial embodiments of the impasse of the present expressed through the film's pacing. He is often framed with his back to the camera or otherwise near the edges of the frame in these scenes (Figure 38), which has the effect of emphasising his apparent lack of agency. He appears almost like a passenger or spectator—an appendage to the broader apparatus of the supermarket.

Figure 38

The film makes extensive use of intradiegetic CCTV footage to critically reflect upon the intrusive surveillance that this type of employment entails. In the first sequence of this kind, Thierry is taught by his colleague to maintain permanent suspicion towards those around him as the footage plays: 'Everyone is liable to steal'.[94] In the next such sequence there is no dialogue, just images from the cameras that Thierry is controlling. The CCTV camera often focuses on people's hands, their bags, and the products in the supermarket; its high position symbolises the power differential at play. This has a dehumanising effect that contrasts markedly with the film's primary viewpoint, which frequently focuses on people's faces and is positioned at eye level. The long take is also prominent in these surveillance scenes.[95] The film's representation of contemporary labour therefore contrasts markedly with the rhythmic temporalities that Comolli associates with the representation of Fordist work, further contributing to the generalised atmosphere of stagnation developed throughout.

The division of workers

Thierry must also keep a close eye on his colleagues at the supermarket; his obligation to do this represents a division of the labouring classes by management in a way that parallels the mechanism of the vote in *Deux jours, une nuit*. The kind of solidarity once shared by Thierry and his former colleagues functions again as a structuring absence here. While they were focused on collectively rebalancing the power between labour and capital, in the supermarket, representatives of the capitalist classes have almost entirely withdrawn from the scene of conflict, and workers must

[94] 'Tout le monde est susceptible de voler'

[95] We might also consider the fact that the permanently-recording CCTV camera could be seen as an example of the ultimate long take. This is a theme which is reflected upon in the work of Haneke—*Caché* (2005) in particular.

individually police each other's behaviours with increasing levels of control. A discursive framework that these subjects might use to describe or understand this situation is completely absent.

A critical moment occurs when a well-liked colleague, Françoise, is caught collecting discount coupons that should have been thrown away. Thierry assists management during their interrogation and dismissal of her (Figure 39); shortly after, Françoise kills herself off-screen. This is an instance of worker suicide—an exit from labour—that emerges in response to expulsion from labour. This desperate act forces the violence of the social relations of neoliberalism to the surface: it makes clear that the titular *law of the market* is one of punitive sanctions for atomised workers who are pitted against each other, while management figures remain unaccountable. The supermarket soon returns to business as usual, however. Indeed, directly after Françoise's funeral the film cuts to a shot of the checkouts; the return to normality is emphasised through the rhythmic movement of the workers' hands and the repetitive bleeps of the scanners. This impression is further reinforced by the film's continued use of long takes, which reinforces its emphasis on the difficulty in disrupting the stagnation of the present. As in the other two films, then, an act of violence emerges in response to the conditions of contemporary work; this has little, if any, effect on the broader structures of neoliberalism.

Figure 39

The suicide of Françoise is, however, a rupture of kinds for Thierry. When tasked with another interrogation of a worker who has 'stolen' loyalty card discount points, he abruptly leaves the meeting room they are in, collects his possessions from his locker, and exits the supermarket

building (Figure 40).[96] The film's sole use of extra-diegetic sound—slightly jaunty harp music—occurs as Thierry gets into his car and drives away; at this point, the camera remains stationary. The openness of the outdoors is counterposed with the enclosed space of the supermarket interior; Thierry's mobility contrasts with his relative immobility in the workplace. This is therefore the closest the film comes to offering us a triumphant moment. Like Sandra's concluding acts in *Deux jours*, this represents an ethical withdrawal from labour that offers temporary respite from neoliberal work and restores dignity to the film's protagonist, of which more shortly.

Disarticulation of past and present

For the most part, it appears that the film's diegesis has been decisively disarticulated from the Fordist past. With the exception of one brief scene, Thierry's former life as a trade unionist does not directly intrude upon the narrative. Rather, the solidaristic cultures we briefly saw at the start of the film have functioned as a structuring absence through which we can comprehend the individuation of the present. The film implies that the defeat of workers' movements has been one important factor that has led to the bleak environment of its present day. Its final moments serve as a suggestion that the kind of solidarity we might associate with Thierry's past is necessary, perhaps more than ever: Thierry's actions are, effectively, a very limited act of solidarity with the other workers at the supermarket.

Critically, this act is severed from a political project. It takes place on an individual basis and effects no structural change, something the film implicitly acknowledges. Cars and people continue to circulate after Thierry has left, and the lights of the shopping centre remain on in the background. In effect, this signals once more that business will carry on as usual. We should therefore read Thierry's act as another example of exit from labour that emerges in the face an inability to conceive of a coherent political force in the neoliberal conjuncture, and therefore as a symptom of neoliberal depoliticisation. What is left in the absence of politics are individual gestures of self-sacrifice; this is a pattern we have also seen in *Deux jours, une nuit* and *Jamais de la vie*. In this particular instance, exit is a symptom of the difficulty of conceiving of temporal or political change in a present that is haunted by left-wing defeat. A sense of movement—of the kind that is invoked in all three theories of left melancholy we have examined—is nearly completely absent, and the film is unable to agitate

[96] As I have mentioned, these concluding moments bear clear parallels with those of *Deux jours, une nuit*. The Levinasian ethics that inform their filmmaking can also be applied here: in the meeting room, Thierry is confronted with the embodied vulnerability of the Other, upon whom the camera lingers. Here, he must make an ethical choice—to stay or to go. The camera tracks Thierry from behind as he leaves the building—again in a manner which is characteristic of the Dardennes.

beyond the confines of the present. Withdrawal functions as the next best option, effecting a very temporary suspension of the operation of the punitive laws of the supermarket, rather than changing them. It also plays a compensatory narrative role in a very similar way to Sandra's exit (*Deux jours, une nuit*).

Figure 40

Conclusion

The three films all grapple with the legacy of the recent past, and with the defeat of the left-wing movements associated with the Fordist era in particular. Theories of left melancholy represent a productive lens through which to think about this, opening up important lines of questioning concerning the films, their temporalities, and the articulation of those temporalities with politics. Two temporal patterns emerge in all three works. The first is a generalised atmosphere of stasis and stagnation ensuing from the historic expulsion from Fordist labour. Characterised by widespread un- or underemployment, this situation is often rendered through the use of long takes. The second is the sense of a complex intertwinement of past and present that is difficult to unravel, something established through a range of mechanisms: edited sequences, the use of the off-screen, and dialogue, for instance.

The films take three different routes out of this which exemplify their different filmmaking styles. *L'Atelier* is perhaps the most interesting response. While it explores a range of socioeconomic problems that relate to deindustrialisation, it is less openly critical of the present than the other two works, retaining a very tentative sense of hope. Its open-ended, polyphonic narrative leaves open the possibility of a different future. The film makes little suggestion that memories of the Fordist past represent a resource in the present, but is unable to cast these off completely. By contrast, *La*

Loi du marché makes a searing and powerful critique of the present, leaving the viewer in no doubt that this is a situation in desperate need of change. Unable to conceive of a coherent political force that might lead to this, it dramatises two forms of exit from labour. The first, a worker suicide, is a cinematic attempt to force the severity of neoliberal governance into recognition. The second, an ethical withdrawal from the workplace, represents a very limited act of solidarity with other workers. Neither is able to break from the neoliberal present, something the film implicitly acknowledges; the prospect of a different future seems unlikely. *Jamais de la vie* also paints a stark picture of the neoliberal present and suggests the need to locate a political force that might counteract this. Its thriller-like structure centres around an attempt to confront a source of power, but the film is unable to identify a bearer of power that coherently relates to its critique of neoliberalism. Like Brizé's film, it concludes with an individual act of solidarity with very limited effects; it too remains trapped in the neoliberal present despite its attempts at generating a rupture.

The latter two works make implicit attempts to put pieces of the Fordist past to use (memories of trade union struggles in particular), but fail to do so in a productive way; as indicated, Cantet's film does not attempt this at all. The failure or refusal to reactivate these imaginaries is symptomatic of the general trajectory of traditional labour movements in the neoliberal era, which have often seen defeat rather than victories. In this context, perhaps it is inevitable that the films struggle to articulate memories of these traditional forms of political organisation with the terrain of the present day. Perhaps more interestingly, it also points to the power of the depoliticisation of memory that characterises neoliberalism. As Traverso argues, neoliberalism is often characterised by a 'general eclipse of utopias' (2016: 5), in which the 'redemptive potential' (Acaroglu 2021: 91) in the lost battles of history is undermined. Thus, even where the films are able to identify the latent potential in history, they struggle to use this to catalyse thinking beyond neoliberalism. By extension, the films often reinforce the impression developed in the last chapter of a cinematic corpus that is adept at critiquing neoliberalism but struggles to move beyond this. Of the three works discussed above, *L'Atelier* comes closest to doing this, leaving open the tentative possibility of a different future. However, it remains unable to suggest what this might look with any certainty, suggesting that the neoliberal 'eclipse of utopias' (Traverso 2016: 5) still looms over its diegesis.

Chapter 5: Desiring neoliberal subjects

The films examined in the previous two chapters chart various visions of the neoliberal contemporary; all of them are characterised by the dominant position of the subjective figure of human capital. Within some we encountered characters compelled, against deeply-held instincts, to adapt themselves to the new subjective demands of this model, reaching points of severe crisis through their inability to do so. In others, we saw those who openly rejected those demands, only to come face to face with a world which has no place for them. This chapter focuses on representations of subjects who engage with the model of human capital in a qualitatively different way, actively identifying with and internalising the norms of neoliberal rationality that it implies. The narratives of the films—Laurent Cantet's *L'Emploi du temps* (2001) and Antoine Russbach's *Ceux qui travaillent* (2018)—focus on bourgeois, middle-aged men who have experienced significant levels of financial success in their careers, and who often idealise employment, enthusiastically upholding and furthering the neoliberal work ethic. Despite their fundamentally different class positioning compared to characters examined in previous chapters, the protagonists of both films develop severe pathologies as a result of the demands of neoliberal work; crises of subjectivity therefore remain a key focus of these texts. The threat of expulsion from labour also remains an important characteristic of the workplaces depicted in these films in a way which suggests the emergence of a precarity that is spreading far beyond the confines of the proletariat (see also Lorey 2015, for instance). In response to this threat of expulsion, the films stage various confrontations between characters and the workings of neoliberal power. Both protagonists move towards suicide at points; these represent partially-desired exits from labour attempted out of desperation. In the closing minutes of the films, however, the characters return to work. These trajectories are highly important to our understanding of the films' critique of neoliberalism.

In the films discussed so far, I have often discussed the crisis of labour in relation to the individual male subject. In the two works discussed in this chapter, the crisis reverberates within the personal sphere, allowing me to bring the neoliberal family into focus. Both films chart a blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work (the family in particular) that is typical of neoliberalism (Deranty 2015: 78; Cederström and Fleming 2012: 7, 9-10). They aim to cast light upon changes in the workplace, the family, and the relationship between the two, drawing on the generic codes of the family melodrama to do so. The aims of this chapter are twofold, then: I will first pursue my examination of the process of subject formation and subjectification as it is represented in these films, analysing the contrasting ways in which they dramatise middle class archetypes of the

neoliberal subject. I also examine the question of the relationship between the family, work, and neoliberal subjecthood. This investigation problematises the typically monadic construction of the neoliberal subject, exploring the ways in which neoliberal work relies upon and remakes that which lies outside it. These lines of enquiry form part of our broader interrogation of the relationship between my cinematic corpus and neoliberalism.

The colonisation of desire

Dardot and Laval's *The New Way of the World* (2013) provides much of the theoretical grounding for the study of subjectivity in this chapter. I have invoked this work's theorisation of neoliberalism throughout this thesis, but draw upon slightly different sections of the book here. In their discussion of the creation of the ideal entrepreneurial subject, Dardot and Laval diverge from the avowedly Foucauldian approach that characterises the main body of the text, turning to Lacanian psychoanalysis to buttress their arguments. This may seem like an unconventional combination, yet it should not be read as a wholesale endorsement of the tenets of psychoanalysis. Rather, psychoanalytic discourses function as heuristics, opening up ways of thinking about subjecthood that reach different places than Foucauldian frameworks, particularly pertaining to questions of desire.

We have already discussed in some detail how the paradigmatic subject of neoliberalism is one who is modelled on the figure of the highly competitive and individualistic entrepreneur, and explored its representation in a number of environments. One critical aspect of these developments is the rise of the incitation for affective investment in work. More than ever, people are impelled to love their jobs (Jaffe 2021)—to align their desires with that of the enterprise. As Dardot and Laval write, then, neoliberal rationality 'is a question of governing beings all of whose subjectivity must be involved in the activity they are required to perform. To this end, the irreducible element of desire that constitutes them must be recognized' (2013: 260). They continue,

> In this sense, modern management is a "Lacanian" government: the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other. It is up to the new power to make itself the Other of the subject. That is precisely what construction of the tutelary figures of the market, the enterprise and money tends to do (2013: 260).

This image is one which echoes throughout contemporary texts on the sociology and philosophy of work. For instance, Jean-Philippe Deranty argues that, in neoliberal societies, 'the enterprise comes

to capture the desires and the imagination of the individual' (2011: 78).[97] Similarly, de Gaulejac contends that 'the relationships are very close between the financial economy and the libidinal economy, between managerial norms and psychic mobilisation, between the management of enterprises and the management of the self' (2005: 18).[98] This vision of a subject inhabited by the desires of the enterprise is very important to the analysis that follows. The protagonists of *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent* are, to varying degrees, *desiring* neoliberal subjects, who willingly and enthusiastically commit themselves to the norms of neoliberal rationality, identifying with the fundamental institution of neoliberalism—the enterprise.

L'Emploi du temps

L'Emploi du temps, Cantet's second feature-length film, is an important example of a work which reflects upon these issues. As a preliminary point of note, this film—released in 2001—is considerably older than many of the works within my corpus of films; its narrative is situated contemporaneously. Despite this slight temporal distance, the questions that the film poses about the nature of neoliberal work and its associated subjectivities are of continuing relevance. Further, its stylistic distinctiveness makes it an essential inclusion to the discussion below, enhancing our understanding of the ways in which cinema can attempt to figure and critique neoliberalism. The film's narrative is inspired by Jean-Claude Romand, a man who, after failing his medical studies, fabricated an elaborate, fantastical life story centred around a research career he was apparently engaged in at the World Health Organisation. He sustained his lifestyle in part by embezzling significant amounts of money obtained from his family and other contacts, spending much of his time simply wandering around from place to place. Somehow managing to uphold this ruse for 18 years, Romand was finally confronted with the prospect of being unmasked; as a consequence, he murdered his parents, wife, and children within the space of 24 hours, failing to kill his mistress and making an apparently unconvincing attempt on his own life in the process.

L'Emploi du temps steers clear of the sensational aspects of Romand's story, however; a murder spree is notably absent. Rather, as O'Shaughnessy notes, Cantet 'moved the story towards the ordinary and used it to explore the relationship between an individual and the world of work' (2015: 59-60). Like Romand, then, the film's protagonist Vincent (Aurélien Recoing) entangles himself in an increasingly complex web of lies. This situation emerges from the fact that he has been fired from his

[97] '[l]'entreprise en vient à capter les désirs et l'imaginaire de l'individu.'
[98] 'les rapports sont étroits entre l'économie financière et l'économie libidinale, entre les normes managériales et la mobilisation psychique, entre la gestion des entreprises et la gestion de soi.'

prestigious job at a financial consulting firm but feels unable to admit this to his family. Despite having achieved a significant level of personal and professional success, Vincent intensely dislikes many of the demands and constraints of the neoliberal workplace. He often enjoys the freedoms of unemployment; in this sense, his journey can be considered a kind of agential withdrawal from labour that emerges in response to the demands of work.

While unemployed, he tells those around him that he is working as a benevolent bureaucrat for the United Nations in Geneva, channelling money towards financialised development projects in the global South. He also convinces friends, family and acquaintances to 'invest' in a number of fraudulent funds and schemes, using their money to maintain his lifestyle. Like Romand, he spends a significant amount of time simply drifting from place to place; the film thus fits loosely within the mould of a road movie, in that Vincent's journey is more important than his destination. This ruse inevitably becomes untenable, and the realities of Vincent's deception become apparent to his family. The film suggests that he is about to commit suicide, but concludes instead with his reintroduction to the world of work, at a job interview organised by his father. Vincent's relationship with work—the work from which he has fled, the work he conducts to sustain his ruse, and the work he ultimately returns to, almost against his will—is the key focus of the film; the inextricable relationship between neoliberal work and neoliberal subjecthood more broadly is also crucial. It is important at this point to discuss the film's distinctive style, beginning with its use of melodrama.

While the definition of melodrama is highly contested and scholarship surrounding the topic often riven with contradictions (Ravizza 2020: 91; Mercer and Shingler 2004: 4), there are certain key features which enable it to be understood as a relatively coherent mode. The most significant of these to my argument below is the use of familial or interpersonal relationships to mediate social or political crises (O'Shaughnessy 2015: 21). Thomas Elsaesser traces this tendency back to the 18th century sentimental novel, which frequently made use of interpersonal relationships and other melodramatic elements to 'record the struggle of a morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism' (2012: 436). Importantly, he continues, the 'interiorization and personalization of what are primarily ideological conflicts […] is important in all subsequent forms of melodrama' (2012: 436). O'Shaughnessy (2007) describes a growing use of melodramatic devices such as these in contemporary political film, including that of Cantet (see also Higbee 2004). He argues that (interpersonal) melodrama is increasingly used to dramatise systemic violence in the context of the decline of a left-wing discourse that might function as a universalising political voice (O'Shaughnessy 2007: Chapter 3). His argument is certainly valuable for our purposes, casting significant light upon Cantet's filmmaking style and its politics. While (cinematic) melodrama can sometimes be seen to highlight the ways in which popular culture has 'resolutely refused to

understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms' and has therefore demonstrated an 'ignorance of the properly social and political dimensions of these changes and their causality' (Elsaesser 2012: 437), Cantet's work articulates its melodramatic action with a broader socio-economic frame of reference, as we will come to see. In light of Elsaesser's account, however, we should also note that the kind of melodramatic turn that O'Shaughnessy describes is not entirely novel to the neoliberal era. Rather, the popularity of melodrama and the forms which preceded it has frequently coincided with 'periods of intense social and ideological crisis' (Elsaesser 2012: 435).[99]

Another key element of melodrama is a tendency towards excess: in particular, the eruption of heightened displays of emotion (Brooks 1995: 12-4). The counterpart to this excess is repression, something that often manifests in the interplay between form and narrative. As Will Higbee writes, '[m]elodrama […] allows for excessive displays of emotion or, alternatively, a siphoning off into the *mise-en-scène* and soundtrack of repressed emotion that dares not be articulated by characters' (2004: 243); one of the most striking formal aspects of *L'Emploi du temps* that works to this effect is its wistful orchestral score, composed by Jocelyn Pook. One further characteristic of melodrama that will prove important will be the recourse to gesture and other non-linguistic means of expression (O'Shaughnessy 2007: 132); in particular, a turn towards the body to express suffering or emotion more generally (Ravizza 2020: 137). This trend is evident across the films discussed in this thesis, but it is important to relate it to the specifically melodramatic qualities of this film.

The other important generic influence upon *L'Emploi du temps* is Italian neorealism. The influence of neorealism can be found in the film's loose, '*dispersive situation*' (Deleuze 1986: 210, emphasis in original), which lacks a tightly sequenced narrative or clearly-defined spatial economy; its related use of a meandering journey without a clear end (Amell 2015: 181); its characterisation of Vincent, who sometimes appears to act without significant agency or intent (more below); and, in a less significant manner, its use of non-professional actors (all except for the two leads). Together, these factors contribute to a kind of realism in which 'the real [is] no longer represented or reproduced but "aimed at"' (Deleuze 1989: 1). Melodrama has often been counterposed with realism, yet, as Louis Bayman writes, 'in Italian neorealism, melodrama and realism interact and at times even combine' (2009: 47; see also André Bazin's earlier discussions of the connections between neorealism and melodrama: Bazin 2005: 48, 80, 83, for instance). He argues that the claim to realism, at a fundamental level, is that 'a particular artwork reaches closer to an important, otherwise neglected,

[99] Laura Mulvey (1989: Chapter 5) discusses 1950s melodrama and its relation to gender and social upheaval, for instance.

aspect of reality' (2009: 47). Melodrama, on the other hand, can be considered as 'the pathos of the expressive elevation of fundamentally ordinary feelings' (Bayman 2009: 48). Significantly, Bayman perceives a certain compatibility between these aims: the 'fundamentally ordinary feelings' (2009: 48) that echo throughout melodrama are, after all, an 'important […] part of reality' (2009: 47; see also O'Shaughnessy 2007: 131). My argument below is that this is born out within *L'Emploi du temps*. The film often mobilises elements of these different generic modes in order to cast light upon an 'otherwise neglected' (Bayman 2009: 47) part of reality: the difficulty of living neoliberal subjecthood.

Vincent's neoliberal subjecthood

The film's opening offers immediate clues as to the nature of Vincent's status as neoliberal subject. Shot from the inside of his car, Vincent is sleeping at a service station until he is awoken by a phone call from his wife, Muriel (Karin Viard). Throughout the call he placates Muriel with talk of important interviews and business meetings that he needs to attend, making excuses for his absence from the family home; at this stage, the viewer is unaware that he is unemployed. When the call ends, he visits the service station shop to pick up a copy of a financial newspaper before returning to the open road, evincing a child-like pleasure as he races a train (Figures 41-2). These loci—motorways, car parks, and other transitional places that one would typically pass through—define the landscape of the film: Vincent spends much of his time travelling aimlessly, but importantly is always connected to others through his mobile phone.

Figure 41

Figure 42

Vincent's interconnectedness and mobility resonate clearly with the dominant ideals of neoliberal subjecthood. For instance, as Boltanski and Chiapello stress repeatedly throughout *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005), the archetypal subject of neoliberal managerial literature is one who can establish him- or herself within a broad network of personal relations and take advantage of them for his/her own competitive gain. Such a subject should also be unhindered by rigid ties to space or place: he or

she should be 'streamlined' and mobile—attributes closely tied to the demand for subjects to be constantly adaptable to the vicissitudes of market forces (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 78-9, for instance). These traits are of course intrinsically linked to more strictly speaking material developments: the growing interconnectedness of firms and entrepreneurs, the increasing mobility of capital, and technological advances—particularly within the sphere of telecommunications. Given this, the use of space in *L'Emploi du temps* contrasts with that of the films discussed in previous chapters. Those films—all of which dramatised more proletarian narratives—were each rooted quite firmly in a particular place, even if this was a place which had clearly been marred by neoliberal decline or implicated in broader networks of capital circulation. In contrast, *L'Emploi du temps* is largely unhindered by ties to space or place; its use of landscape thus functions as a kind of cartographical embodiment of the new neoliberal ideal. We might also argue that this is a way in which the film confronts the workings of neoliberal power, tracing the contours of the mobility of capital through Vincent's journey.

Yet, there are a number of tensions here which are important to address. The first is that these transitory spaces are, as James S. Williams argues, not quite the *non-places* that we might associate with a neoliberal geography (Williams 2016: 155; Augé 1995). Rather, despite facilitating flows of capital and embodying interconnectedness, they also represent something of an escape from the demands of neoliberalism for Vincent—something which is demonstrated as he races the train. After all, the very reason that Vincent is on the road is to run away from working. This complicates my suggestion that the film utilises its landscape to confront new forms of power. For Vincent, these roads appear to be a route to escape that very power—the route to an exit from labour, even. It plainly also complicates Vincent's status as archetypal neoliberal subject, of which more below. The tensions embodied in these places are reflected in the nature of Vincent's 'escape' from work more generally: importantly, as John Marks argues, the escape that Vincent fabricates is a 'fully networked' one (Marks 2011: 488). Indeed, his flight from work increasingly mirrors the life of neoliberal work from which he has fled—particularly as the film draws on, and greater numbers of people are enveloped into his network.

Marks argues convincingly that this can be read as an attempt to represent the ways in which the autonomy promised by neoliberalism is instead experienced as a kind of *control*, as per Deleuze's famous theorisation (1992). Deleuze contends that subjects in contemporary societies are often less exposed to the kind of direct disciplinary power that characterised the Fordist era—typically exerted in institutions such as the factory, the school, or the church. However, the mechanisms of power that define the neoliberal era have in many respects become much more diffuse and insidious; he

refers to these as 'societies of control' (1992).[100] As Marks writes, in the film, '[a]utonomy becomes burdensome, and an anxious, "responsibilised" individual emerges in the context of a shift from external disciplinary norms to a much more fluid and mobile social field' (2011: 488). The devices of the car and mobile phone, and the film's use of landscape, are crucial in its attempt to represent these traits. Each embodies a tension between the freedom and autonomy promised by neoliberalism and the demands that are the counterpart of these promises; each offers a certain escape for Vincent, while also trapping him under the pressures of the contemporary. The overall point of this trajectory is that Vincent is unable to escape the grip of the diffuse forms of power that characterise neoliberalism.

An empty characterisation

Vincent's general demeanour is markedly different from those of the protagonists of the films discussed in previous chapters, and indeed is something of an outlier in mainstream film altogether. While the figure of the subject alienated from work is a relatively common one, Vincent's alienation goes beyond this typical image to the extent that he often seems detached from almost everything around him. The corollary of this sense of alienation is that Vincent also frequently appears devoid of any clear psychological intent: there is a palpable emptiness to his characterisation. There is scant dialogue in which Vincent explains his motivations; when he does speak, he frequently parrots managerial clichés pertaining to investment, networking and risk-taking, as if on autopilot. As Marks identifies, Vincent is a character who 'forms a dreamlike connection to his milieu, and for whom the possibilities of action or transformation appear limited' (2011: 481); he frequently 'floats' or drifts through the film's landscape rather than acting with any clear sense of purpose. Deleuze argues that this kind of character—that he terms a 'seer'—is typical of neorealist film. These figures 'find themselves condemned to wander about or go off on a trip; they are 'pure seers, who no longer exist except in the interval of movement' (Deleuze 1989: 41). Lacking a real connection to 'matter' or 'control of the spirit', they are 'given over to something intolerable which is simply their everydayness itself' (Deleuze 1989: 41). One way in which these characteristics are expressed is through Vincent's body, which is often pallid and sickly, hinting towards ghostly or zombie-like imagery.

[100] The films examined in Chapter 3 (*Deux jours, une nuit* in particular) also dramatise the changing nature of neoliberal power in a way which resonates with Deleuze's theory of control societies.

Figure 43

An early scene typifies this representation. At this moment, Vincent is sleeping in a darkened room in the family home—lying on his back, arranged as if he is in a coffin (Figure 43). His father wakes him, commenting on his pallor; Vincent slowly arises into a hunched position on the edge of the bed, his eyes glazed over. His ghost-like body serves as a physical manifestation of his empty subjectivity. Choice moments of dialogue reinforce this sense of embodied affect: just prior to the above scene, for instance, Vincent states to Muriel, 'I'm worn out'; another important moment sees him utter, 'I'm being carried along, that's all […] my head is empty'.[101] These scenes highlight the importance of the combination of neorealism and melodrama to the film. Vincent clearly embodies the neorealist 'seer' as per Deleuze, but his body reflects the conventions of melodrama: its mute suffering conveys meaning while language often remains repressed (O'Shaughnessy 2007: 132). The significance of this (anti) characterisation is twofold: firstly, it suggests that the demands for constant flexibility and autonomy placed upon contemporary subjects are experienced as disorientating and confounding, rather than liberating. Secondly, it enables the film to move away, to a certain extent, from a humanistic concern with a particular individual's relationship with the workplace, and to cast light more broadly upon the structural reproduction of the neoliberal subject as well. In this latter sense, the void left by Vincent's lack of characterisation enables him to function as a vehicle through which neoliberal subjectivity more generally can be considered.

[101] 'Je suis crevé', which can be translated literally as 'I am dead'; 'Je me laisse porter, c'est tout […] j'ai la tête vide'

To return to the theoretical discussion at the start of the chapter, then, the film's representation of Vincent clearly resonates with the image of a worker colonised by the desire of the enterprise. There apparently remains little of a coherent subjectivity within him; rather, a simulacrum of the enterprise occupies his consciousness, emerging in fitful bursts. As per Lacan's famous formulation invoked by Dardot and Laval, his desires are the desires of the Other; this Other is the neoliberal enterprise. *L'Emploi du temps* is particularly interesting for its efforts to explore the ways in which subjectification takes place—to examine how Vincent has reached this stage. A key device through which it explores these mechanisms is its representation of the 'work on the self' that Vincent undertakes. Constant work on the self is a crucial aspect of neoliberalism, as we have seen. Indeed, Dardot and Laval contend that 'everyone must learn to become an "active" and "autonomous" subject in and through the action they must perform on themselves' (2013: 268); such activity is 'expressly conceived to harmonize the individual's conduct with the "cosmological order" of global competition enveloping it' (2013: 273).

Representing work on the self

Vincent's work on the self takes a number of different forms. In his car, for instance, he listens to stock market reports on the radio; while at the service station, he makes notes on the financial papers. Vincent has little material interest in either of these activities, apparently having no plans to put money into the stock market nor to return to the world of paid employment; these actions must therefore be considered a subjective investment above all else. The most conspicuous example of this work on the self is Vincent's absorption of managerial literature, which he memorises almost by rote—a key example of him being inhabited by the desire of the enterprise. In one early scene, for instance, he steals himself away to a cabin in the French Alps. He sits memorising pamphlets obtained from the UN relating to his fictional life as a bureaucrat, reading aloud as he does so (Figure 44). The use of space and landscape is once again of crucial importance, lending itself to a psychoanalytic reading. The cabin is isolated in the mountains, severed from the interconnected highways that dominate much of the film's landscape and only accessible by foot. Vincent's reading continues in voice-over as the film cuts away from the interior of the cabin to a static long shot and long take of the mountainous peaks that tower above it (Figure 45); at this moment, the score ramps up in intensity. Mist shrouds the mountains as the light begins to dim, and the barren landscape imparts a sense of danger and mystery. In light of this sense of isolation, mystery, and danger, we might plausibly read this setting as correlating to Vincent's unconscious. Indeed, the repetitious nature of this work on the self also reflects the rhythms of the psychoanalytic process and the

construction of the ego—itself produced by repetition (Tambling 2012: 35; Nasio 2019). What is important to take from this reading as a whole is that this process of work on the self—a kind of self-interpellation—comes to dominate Vincent's entire psyche. Vincent is undoubtedly an extreme representation of this subjective archetype, but this enables the film to explore in significant detail the processes of subjectification that are key to the reproduction of neoliberalism. These processes would often take place on an internal psychological register, thus resisting representation in film; Vincent's exaggerated autodidacticism forces them into visibility and audibility. The melodramatic use of music accentuates these emotions—which are an everyday part of Vincent's life—and instils in them a significance that emphasises the scale of the colonisation of desire that is taking place.

Figure 44

Figure 45

The labour of deception

The type of work that drives much of the film's narrative is Vincent's work as fraudster. Vincent deceives family, friends and acquaintances into giving him large sums of money, beginning with his father, who is under the impression that he is helping Vincent purchase an apartment near the UN headquarters. Vincent shows little remorse at recruiting wealthy acquaintances into his fraudulent investment schemes, mobilising all of his knowledge of management literature to convince them (Figure 46).[102] However, he becomes uneasy when a less well-off friend, Nono, becomes interested and wants to pledge his life savings. This scheme represents another clear example of the use of melodrama to force broader social and political crises to the surface: it mediates a model of a market economy through interpersonal relations, thus drawing attention to power imbalances as it does so. As with Vincent's characterisation and its relation to neoliberal subjecthood, this work represents an extreme caricature of the kind of labour that is hegemonic in neoliberalism. Vincent's manipulation of affect and his mastery of linguistic competencies are important: in a certain way, they embody the kind of communicative labour that is fundamental to contemporary work. The class dynamics of this work are also significant: Vincent clearly leverages his bourgeois credentials in order to instil trust in people. What is perhaps most interesting about this work, however, is its 'fictitious' nature, based as it is upon illusions, confidence and speculation. As Marks argues, this work

[102] In this respect he is, in a perverse way, a successful neoliberal subject.

functions as a critique of the '"fictional", virtual nature of *le consulting*' (2011: 486); we might also extend this argument to say that it works as a critique of neoliberal economic models more broadly. In this respect, the elements of trickery, trust, and speculation in Vincent's work operate as a pastiche of financialised economies which are arguably founded on similar principles (see Durand 2017, for instance). Of course, just as Vincent's schemes become unsustainable, so too have financialised neoliberal economies, as the promises of speculative gains they offer have proven illusory.

Figure 46: Vincent mobilising his linguistic competencies

As we might expect, however, there are tensions within this representation of work which complicate Vincent's status as neoliberal subject. Perhaps most importantly, Vincent is frequently unable to truly convince those around him. Despite flashes of lucidity during which he capitalises upon his cultural capital, linguistic capabilities, and status as desiring subject, his overriding demeanour of detachment does not lend itself well to his 'occupation'. Indeed, long before his family begins to suspect him, he is unmasked by Jean-Michel (played by real-life ex-convict Serge Livrozet), an experienced conman who overhears Vincent's bluster in a hotel lobby and confronts him (Figure 47), later recruiting him to assist in the smuggling of counterfeit goods. The paradoxical nature of Vincent's personality, which operates on dualisms that are difficult to reconcile, is something that Cantet stresses in a 2001 interview. Cantet states, '[Vincent] lets himself be carried along by his environment and, at the same time, is someone who is always taking action. […] we

wanted to create a character who is both endearing and completely opaque' (2001).[103] The aspect of Vincent's characterisation that best represents this contradictory nature is his clear distaste for the work of consulting, combined with his overarching desire to contort himself to fit the model of the entrepreneur of the self which is deeply entwined with this work. The question of why Vincent is compelled to pursue these norms given his clear dislike of them and inability to fulfil them is one which can be partly answered through an analysis of the film's representation of the family.

Figure 47: Jean-Michel uncovers Vincent

The family

Before examining the film's representation of the family, it is important to clarify the role of the family within neoliberalism; Melinda Cooper's 2017 work *Family Values* will be of crucial importance here. As Cooper argues, there is a tendency within left-wing scholarship to perceive neoliberalism solely as a homogenising and economising force and therefore as indifferent to or destructive of the institution of the family (2017: 9); *all that is solid melts into air*, after all. Contrary to these accounts, however, and looking at a US context, Cooper persuasively demonstrates how neoliberalism has from the beginning relied upon a strengthening of the family unit, particularly in order to

[103] '[Vincent] se laisse porter par son environnement et, en même temps, c'est quelqu'un qui agit tout le temps. […] nous avions envie de créer un personnage à la fois attachant et totalement opaque.'

compensate for the dismantling of the social state (2017: 67-117).[104] Indeed, neoliberal politicians of all stripes have called for the strengthening of kinship relations, especially since the 2008 financial crisis and the politics of austerity that ensued. Importantly, this family unit is not necessarily analogous to the Fordist family founded upon the male breadwinner; rather, as Wolfgang Streeck argues, models of the family have in some ways become more 'flexible' alongside the flexibilisation of labour markets (2009: 16). What is important is the continuing importance of the family to the reproduction of neoliberalism, even if it now takes somewhat different forms. It would of course be unwise to attempt to directly transplant Cooper's thesis—based primarily on an analysis of education and welfare reforms in the US—to the European context that these films dramatise. Yet, these works' melodramatic staging of familial dramas to mediate the social and political crises of neoliberalism is indicative of their broader concern with the relationship between neoliberalism and the family, even as it takes place outside of the environment that Cooper's work analyses.

Within the diegesis of *L'Emploi du temps*, the boundary between work and non-work has been significantly eroded, and the institution of the family has become one of the most important mechanisms in the reproduction of the neoliberal subject. This is most clearly articulated through Vincent's relationship with his father, but the relationship between Vincent and his children is of particular importance as well. In terms of the former, it is clear that the pressure placed on Vincent by his father is a key reason for his overwhelming desire to conform to the dominant norms of neoliberalism.[105] The latter notably encourages Vincent's wholehearted self-investment in his (fictional) work ('It's good that Vincent is investing himself in this'); indeed, work and money appear to dominate their every conversation.[106] Off-screen dialogue is used to reinforce the connection between Vincent's desire and the institution of the family. In a crucial scene, we see Vincent standing outside his parents' large, traditional house, gazing inwards (Figure 48). The steely look on his face suggests a sense of determination, as if he is trying hard to study and learn from what he sees: the model of bourgeois success. The score begins to play as the camera cuts to a long shot of Vincent's father, framed through the window (Figure 49); at this moment we begin to hear Vincent's voice repeating phrases from the pamphlets he has obtained from the UN. This moment is indicative of the film's use of the melodramatic mode in two respects. The first is the use of the wistful score to impart a sense of intense emotion (as we have seen elsewhere); the second is the focus on the

[104] Cooper's work might productively be read alongside Wendy Brown's *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (2019), which makes a compelling case for a broader stress on tradition both within the works of important neoliberal thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, and within American politics more generally.
[105] The importance of these father-son relationships also represents a connection between the psychoanalytically-inflected interpretation of this film I have been pursuing and melodrama (see Brooks 2018).
[106] 'C'est bien que Vincent s'investisse là-dedans'

father—perhaps the most important familial relationship within this film. This melodramatic moment draws a clear connection between Vincent's work on the self, his father, and the family more broadly. Dardot and Laval argue that neoliberalism is characterised by the redundance of 'the normative paths of the Oedipal family' (2013: 294), and that the figure of the father has been replaced by that of the enterprise. However, *L'Emploi du temps* develops a different image, in which the norms of the patriarchal family work in tandem with the idealisation of the enterprise. In this situation, the figure of the traditional patriarch remains of paramount importance, although the shape of this figure is clearly changing from generation to generation (Lane 2020: 117-8).

Figure 48

Figure 49

The film's closing scene is another illustration of the link between family and neoliberal subjecthood, also reflecting on the more general importance of the bourgeois family in maintaining privileges (and thus inequalities) over time (Cooper 2017: 16). In this scene, Vincent is at a job interview that has been arranged by his father; it is clearly something of a formality. The interviewer asks Vincent why he has spent so long away from work; Vincent responds that he has been looking for a job that would fully satisfy him, a response which pleases the other man. Vincent is informed that he will be expected to make a significant personal investment to correspond with the investment the company will be making; he concludes the conversation by stating, unconvincingly, 'But I'm not afraid of that at all'.[107] At the behest of his father, then, Vincent has vowed his total subjective commitment to a job that he clearly dreads. The camera zooms in on his face during the interview; his manner appears increasingly dejected (Figure 50). The movement of this camera, which boxes Vincent in, can be interpreted as embodying the inescapability of the pressures of work. It is significant in this regard that the film concludes with Vincent's re-entry into labour, following two attempts at exit (his embrace of unemployment and his incomplete suicide). The exit from labour is shown to be impossible here; a key part of work's inescapability is the power of the institution of the family.

[107] 'Mais ça ne me fait pas peur'

Figure 50: Vincent's return to work

Turning our attention to Vincent's relationship with his children, the film shows from early on how he instils particular values in them that clearly relate to neoliberal subjecthood. At a school fair, for instance, Vincent's son Félix is selling his unwanted toys. Vincent castigates him for lowering his prices, whispering, 'He doesn't know that you don't like this car very much' about one of Félix's 'customers'—a young child.[108] Vincent thus attempts to embed the norms of the enterprise—speculation, trickery—in Félix from this very early stage. Vincent's eldest son, Julien, is most frequently on the receiving end of this behaviour. One key moment sees Vincent respond to Julien's aloofness by giving him a significant amount of money, as if investing in him like an enterprise. Notably, Julien is also in possession of a mobile phone—a key signifier of interconnectedness and, by extension, neoliberal subjecthood. Julien's sport of choice—Judo—is also crucial: an interesting scene sees Vincent and Muriel seen on the sidelines of Julien's match, cheering him as he wrestles another boy to the floor. In this representation, this sport's highly competitive nature reflects the demands of neoliberal subjecthood once more. Julien's distance from Vincent appears to be a significant source of concern for the latter, who makes repeated efforts to impress his son but ultimately is shunned each time. I do not wish to draw a neat causal line between Julien's adolescent petulance and the norms of neoliberal subjecthood, but it is worth mentioning that, in a certain way, Julien is only acting in accordance with the dominant norms of neoliberal rationality: maximising his (monetary) income while minimising his (affective) expenditure.

[108] 'Il sait pas que tu aimes pas trop cette voiture'

Taken together, these instances make a clear case for the family as the primary institution through which subjective norms are disseminated on an intergenerational basis. These developments follow a particular gendered schema: Vincent does not appear to treat his daughter in the same way as his sons, and also dismisses Muriel's career ambitions. The business of work largely remains the domain of men in this diegesis, then. In this respect, the family represented in *L'Emploi du temps* resembles quite straightforwardly the heteropatriarchal one that has been dominant throughout capitalist societies (and beyond), more than it does the 'flexible' one that Streeck invokes. What marks this out as a family of the neoliberal era is the way in which exchange relations infiltrate and inflect familial interactions, in addition to the specific subjective models that are being transferred from generation to generation. Echoing the thrust of Cooper's argument, the heteropatriarchal family of the film provides a stable counterpoint to the flux and indeterminacy of neoliberal work, buttressed by material wealth; it is thus essential to the reproduction of neoliberalism—even as the demands of contemporary work clearly place a significant strain on the relationships within it. All that is solid has not melted into air; rather, the reproduction of new kinds of subjectivity and the rising prevalence of new forms of labour are aligned with the reproduction of traditional patriarchal gender models. The film makes extensive use of the melodramatic mode in order to explore this colonisation of the family by the enterprise. One final point of note is that this clearly distinguishes it from traditional melodrama, in which the family more often represents a refuge from the burdens and pressures of society (Vicinus 1981: 131, 137). In *L'Emploi du temps*, the family is shown to be inextricable from those very pressures.

Ceux qui travaillent

Ceux qui travaillent, directed by Antoine Russbach and released in 2018, exhibits a number of narrative similarities to *L'Emploi du temps*. As is the case for Vincent, its protagonist, Franck (Olivier Gourmet), is fired from a highly-paid job, and attempts to keep his unemployment a secret from his family. Also like Vincent, Franck contemplates suicide at one stage, although ultimately chooses not to go through with this. Further, the film concludes in a similar manner to Cantet's work, with Franck returning to the world of paid employment, somewhat reluctantly. We see from this that the relationship between the expulsion and exit from labour is critical to this film, as it is to Cantet's. Stylistically, *Ceux qui travaillent* diverges in some important respects from the text that appears to have inspired it; the influences of neorealism are notably absent in it. However, it does draw extensively upon the melodramatic mode to mediate broader social issues in a similar way to *L'Emploi du temps,* combining melodramatic elements with a thriller-like structure. The narrative,

which takes place just over the French border in Switzerland, centres around the consequences of the way in which Franck deals with a stowaway aboard one of the ships he is responsible for in his capacity as a manager at a shipping logistics firm. Franck demands that the crew throw the stowaway overboard so that the ship can keep to its planned schedule; the fallout from this is what triggers his expulsion from work and the events that ensue.[109] Franck is unable to cope with a life outside of work; only his relationship with his youngest daughter, Mathilde, can bring him back from the brink of complete devastation. Franck comes from a poor, working-class background that is markedly different from Vincent's; this significantly inflects the action of the film. I will begin my analysis by addressing Franck's characterisation, placing this into dialogue with both Vincent's persona and the neoliberal norm.

Franck as neoliberal subject

Ceux qui travaillent employs a number of devices to emphasise Franck's status as a privileged subject of neoliberalism. For instance, like Vincent, Franck is deeply enmeshed in a network of contacts through his mobile phone (Figure 51). The film emphasises repeatedly that he is constantly on call—even at his daughter Mathilde's birthday party, or when he and his wife are asleep, for instance. As for Vincent, the mobile phone operates as an embodiment of Franck's interconnectedness; his characterisation therefore echoes the ideals propounded in managerial discourses. The mobile phone is also used to highlight the intensification of the neoliberal labour process, which is now unhindered by constraints on time or space. The blurring of boundaries between work and non-work (the infiltration of work into the family in particular) is a key focus of this film, then, as it was in *L'Emploi du temps*. The industry in which Franck works is also crucial to note. The expansion of supply chains through shipping logistics is deeply implicated with the process of globalisation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019; Chapter 4); this narrative choice anchors Franck's position as a functionary of neoliberalisation.

[109] It is revealed in the film that Franck's behaviour was only used as a pretext for his dismissal. In fact, the company forced him out due to his seniority.

Figure 51

A further parallel with Vincent is found in Franck's repetition of discourses centred around work, although Franck does this in a more direct and aggressive manner than Vincent. Early in the film, for example, Franck unpromptedly asks his daughter's boyfriend, 'Working more to earn more, what do you think of that?'—the first part of the quote being lifted straight from Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 presidential campaign (Ferrant 2019).[110] The boyfriend responds, 'That's a bit simplistic, isn't it? [...] There isn't enough work for everyone'. Franck rebuts this: 'OK but the question is you. Which side do you want to be on, those that work or the others?'.[111] Clearly, then, Franck demonstrates an ontological identification with work: like Vincent, he is inhabited by the desire of the enterprise, and thus bears a marked resemblance to the archetype of subject examined in the theoretical literature discussed above. This resemblance is further stressed by Franck's recourse to the bodily routine that he associates with work. Even after having been fired, at the beginning of every day he continues a strict procedure: he arises early, takes a cold shower, and methodically puts on his suit—clothing with clear symbolic associations (Figure 52). More than a simple attempt to hide his unemployment from his family, this ritual appears to be a part of his maintenance of his sense of self. These scenes also suggest the importance of particular embodied norms to the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivity.

[110] 'travailler plus pour gagner plus, t'en penses quoi ?'
[111] 'C'est un peu simpliste, non ? [...] Il n'y a pas assez de travail pour tout le monde'; 'D'accord mais la question c'est toi. De quel côté tu veux être, ceux qui travaillent ou les autres ?'

Figure 52

One final aspect of Franck's characterisation that warrants discussion centres around his decision to command the ship's crew to throw the stowaway overboard. Franck initially deliberates over this choice, but ultimately decides that it is in both his and the company's best interest to kill the Liberian man. The qualities of decisiveness and the propensity to take risks are valorised in many neoliberal discourses (see for instance Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 123; Dardot and Laval 2013: 111-2). Franck's callous decision to call for the death of the stowaway can be seen to align with these demands to a certain degree; however, he is ultimately castigated for his actions by his superiors and forced to resign from his job as a result of them. This sequence of events is telling, for it is representative of the film's commentary both on the ways in which Franck falls short of the neoliberal ideal and, relatedly, on the nature of neoliberal work more generally, which does not reward loyalty to the enterprise in the way that Franck expects (more below).

Despite Franck's commitment to work, it is important to examine the ways in which his characterisation diverges from the archetypal figure of the neoliberal subject; importantly, these differ markedly to Vincent's shortcomings. The first thing to consider is that where Vincent takes a certain pleasure in the indeterminacies and (partial) freedom that confront him during his spell of unemployment, Franck is clearly unable to cope without the routine that work provides him. Vincent is fleeing the control and discipline of the neoliberal workplace, but Franck finds himself at a loss without such constraints imposed upon him. At this moment, it is appropriate to think back to the ritual that he undertakes every morning—arising early, taking a cold shower, and methodically putting on his suit. While the suit that Franck dons does suggest his identification with the figure of

the neoliberal manager, the ritualistic and repetitive aspects of this sequence also echo the kind of routine work that was dominant in the Fordist era, rather than the more flexible labour that is hegemonic in neoliberalism. From this we can begin to consider Franck as a character somewhat out of step with the demands of the contemporary era.

Franck's attraction to stability and routine over the vicissitudes of neoliberal labour is expressed through a number of other means, and is also reflected in the film's broader formal qualities. We should consider the different narrative structures of Russbach's and Cantet's works, for example. *L'Emploi du temps*, as a work influenced by neorealism, often seems to drift through time, whereas *Ceux qui travaillent* sticks to a more closely-sequenced thriller plotline centred around a key lever of dramatic tension. These different temporalities echo in a certain way the temporal differences between Fordist labour and that of neoliberalism: *L'Emploi du temps* could be read as a film which charts the fluid temporalities of contemporary work, whereas the rhythms of *Ceux qui travaillent* seem to be drawn to more routine temporal structures. The contrasting use of landscape in the two films follows a similar pattern: *Ceux qui travaillent* most often centres around the office and the family home, with little focus on the transitory spaces that often feature in *L'Emploi du temps*. It is more firmly rooted in a particular space and place than Cantet's film, and thus more closely corresponds to a cartography we might associate with the Fordist era, characterised by enclosed spaces.

In terms of specific narrative elements, Franck's tendency towards stability is embodied most clearly in the fact that, prior to his enforced resignation, he had worked for the same company for his entire career. This betrays a loyalty that is misaligned with the flux that characterises the paradigmatic neoliberal enterprise. Richard Sennett writes that the ideal neoliberal subject is one who 'eschews dependency; he or she does not cling to others' (2006: 46); it has been asserted that 'no one owns their place in her organization, that past service in particular earns no employee a guaranteed place' (2006: 4). Boltanski and Chiapello write similarly that 'to move, to change—this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often synonymous with inaction' (2005: 155). It is clear that Franck fails to conform to this standard and indeed is sent into shock when his loyalty—or dependency—to the enterprise is disregarded. After all, it was this sense of loyalty that led him to call for the stowaway to be killed. The film thus suggests two things: the first is that the demands of the neoliberal workplace—for ruthlessness and decisiveness—are impossible to fulfil, and lead only to failure even for committed subjects such as Franck. The second is that while Franck is clearly inhabited by the desire of the enterprise in a similar way to Vincent, the types of enterprise that they idealise are fundamentally different, with Vincent internalising the norms of the hegemonic enterprise of neoliberalism much more closely than Franck.

Related to these traits are Franck's discomfort with the aspects of neoliberal labour to which Vincent appears to be most closely drawn: communication and the mobilisation of affect. During a meeting with a work coach, for instance, Franck must state whether he feels he corresponds to a list of adjectives. He asserts with little hesitation that he is 'rigorous', 'reliable', and capable of 'self-discipline'; he is not, however, 'communicative' or 'sensitive', nor does he 'search out what is new'.[112] A similar exercise sees Franck identify most of all with 'rigidity' over a number of other attributes.[113] It is significant that the work coach is young and female, and demonstrates a mastery of the communicative and affective components of feminised neoliberal labour (Morini 2007). Her body moves fluidly during these interviews (Figure 53); her eyes are wide and expressive. Franck, on the other hand, is often gruff and non-communicative. His brow remains furrowed, betraying an air of suspicion at the demands placed upon him; his body makes only small movements (Figure 54). This is representative of his general characterisation which, like many of Olivier Gourmet's other roles, is defined almost exclusively by traditionally masculine characteristics. A gendered contrast is thus made clear. The film suggests that Franck embodies a particular model of masculinity that is incompatible with the demands of neoliberal work, which increasingly incorporates linguistic and affective competencies alongside the demand for flexibility and mobility; these qualities have traditionally been coded as female (Weeks 2017).

Figure 53

[112] 'rigoureux'; 'fiable'; 'autodiscipline'; 'communicatif'; 'sensible'; 'recherche ce qui est nouveau'
[113] 'rigidité'

Figure 54

Relatedly, Franck is also uncomfortable with the processes of work on the self—in particular self-evaluation—that are foundational to neoliberal work and indeed neoliberal subjecthood more generally. He undoubtedly identifies on an ontological basis with the figure of the worker, but when the work coach asks him to engage with his self-image on an affective level he struggles. Thus, while Vincent is sometimes able to deceive those around him through his linguistic competence, is comfortable with certain of the virtual, 'fictional' aspects of neoliberal labour, and is clearly drawn towards work on the self, Franck is severely limited in this respect. Crucially, then, the work ethics that dominate these characters' subjectivities are fundamentally different. Both characters are inhabited by the desire of the Other, but these Others are not the same figure. To illuminate this, it is helpful to think back to Franck's ventriloquising of Sarkozy's campaign slogans: importantly, these outbursts are lacking in the kind of speculative qualities that characterise the discourses that Vincent mobilises. Rather, Franck's work ethic is a far more straightforward—and in some ways outmoded—one, founded on the primacy of hard work above all else. Despite these differences, *Ceux qui travaillent* like *L'Emploi du temps* points towards the family as one of the key institutions in the reproduction of neoliberalism and also the origin of its protagonist's subjecthood. It is to this which I will now turn.

The family and melodrama

Like Cantet's film, *Ceux qui travaillent* draws connections between three different generations of the same family; unlike in *L'Emploi du temps*, however, the eldest generation—Franck's parents—remains off-screen. As I have indicated, Franck is a tight-lipped character who rarely elaborates upon his thoughts with any lucidity. That said, there are a number of moments of excess in which he breaks from his usual demeanour and reveals to us the nature of his upbringing; these constitute returns of repressed emotions that are typical of melodrama (Brooks 2018: 278).[114] The first of these comes during a trip away to an employment skills convention. Franck and a number of other people are sitting in a circle, discussing their experiences of unemployment. A man discloses his inner turmoil after having lost his job and consequently witnessed his marriage disintegrate, almost overcome with emotion as he does so; Franck looks on, seemingly unimpressed and unmoved. However, after being prompted to speak by the leader of the session, Franck uncharacteristically opens up to the group. Speaking of his childhood, he states, 'In my house we brought up children like we brought up animals. When I didn't want to go, I was hit, and I would go. That's how I got to where I am now […] Life without work? I don't know what that is.'[115] Franck also reveals to the group that his family is unaware of his unemployment, and confesses his fear that they will be ashamed when they discover the truth. This reinforces the scene as a key moment of melodramatic rupture in which otherwise repressed emotions rise to the surface, primarily through the heightened use of emotional language but also through Franck's body: tears are beginning to appear in his eyes by the end of this monologue (Figure 55). Like Vincent, then, Franck experiences a desire to submit to the demands of the workplace in spite of the harm it causes him. Yet, Franck's compulsion to work only makes sense in the context of his very specific upbringing: as I have argued, it diverges to a certain degree from the norms of neoliberalism. This marks a key narrative divergence between the two films: while *L'Emploi du temps* steers away from explicitly identifying a unitary cause behind Vincent's circumstances and thus lends itself to a broader critique of structural forces, *Ceux qui travaillent* psychologises Franck's subjecthood to a much greater degree, providing a neat explanation for it through melodramatic language in a manner that is more typical of the genre than Cantet's film.

[114] In this respect, *Ceux qui travaillent* also lends itself to a (fairly conventional) psychoanalytical reading concerning Franck's repressed childhood memories.

[115] 'Chez moi on élevait les enfants comme on élevait les bêtes. Quand je ne voulais pas avancer, on m'a frappé et j'irais. C'est comme ça que je suis arrivé là où je suis [...] La vie sans travail ? Je ne sais pas ce qu'est-ce que c'est.'

Figure 55: Franck breaks down

Rather than draw attention to the structural reproduction of the neoliberal subject, Russbach's film uses its representation of the family to explore socioeconomic class. In a further key moment of excess, Franck embarks on another monologue around the family dinner table—a quintessentially melodramatic environment—troubled by the display of excessive consumption he perceives in front of him. As his children and wife descend into silence, Franck recounts a tale in which he was severely beaten for the crime of giving away a piece of ham to an intruder to his family's farm. This moment of overwrought emotion represents another return of memories that have remained repressed throughout the film. This is not the only point at which Franck appears uncomfortable with contemporary habits of consumption. One scene sees his younger son, Harold, demand a new mobile phone. Seeing that his phone still functions, Franck refuses; Harold continues to protest. Franck calmly asks to see the phone before violently smashing it to pieces on the table in front of Harold (Figure 56); the film quickly cuts to the next scene. This represents another moment of melodramatic excess in which repressed emotions emerge over the body.

Figure 56: Franck smashes the phone

There are a number of patterns to note here, the first of which is the contrast between Franck's and Vincent's characterisations. Whereas the former is clearly uncomfortable with the encroachment of neoliberal norms—in particular the excesses of neoliberal consumption—into the sphere of the family, the latter encourages them. Franck's lingering unease with consumption is almost certainly a residual trace of his ascetic working-class background. The film's depiction of generational conflict aims to cast light on the impossibility of class mobility for Franck, suggesting that, in spite of his best efforts, he has been unable to cast off the shackles of his upbringing. It is significant that Franck is also unwelcome amongst the siblings with whom he shares this background. In a scene later in the film, for instance, he drives to the shipyard where his brothers work and is met with a palpably cold response. It is implied that his brothers have spurned him for his abandonment of his class; Franck is therefore doubly out of place, caught in between two classes.[116] In all, these scenes illuminate a more conventional use of melodrama than Cantet's: to provide clarity to a particular personal story.

Mathilde as refuge

The climactic section of the film combines melodrama with suspense thriller-like elements. In these scenes, Franck attempts to track down the ship from which the stowaway was thrown. Importantly,

[116] In a way, this recalls Cantet's first feature film, *Ressources humaines* (1999), whose newly middle-class protagonist—also called Franck—feels profound shame at his own working-class background but is also deeply uncomfortable with his the social mobility he has experienced.

he takes his youngest daughter Mathilde with him, of which more shortly. The cargo ship is emblematic of various power structures. It represents the logistics industry within which Franck has spent his whole career and upon which he has founded his entire identity, but which has now rejected him. It embodies the brutality of work in other ways through its association with the murder of the stowaway. By extension, it is also an emblem of the kind of globalised consumer capitalism that the film portrays and implicitly critiques (through its representation of the vapid consumerism of Franck's children, for instance). Franck's pursuit of the ship appears to represent his attempt to answer questions about his own relationship with work, and also the film's attempt to bring the repressed realities of work (and contemporary capitalism more broadly) to the surface. In the latter respect it resembles some other attempts to confront power we have seen elsewhere (the workers' pursuit of representatives of capital in *En guerre*, for instance).

Franck takes a loaded shotgun with him, apparently ready to commit suicide. This heightens the sense of tension of this part of the film. He eventually finds the ship's captain in a bar (Figure 57); the latter recognises his voice and confronts him. The film hints towards the possibility of two moments of melodramatic excess that might emerge. The first is Franck's reckoning with his role in the stowaway's death. However, while the captain does allude to this, what happened to the stowaway remains largely unspoken. The second is Franck's threatened suicide, a potential exit from labour. Franck's desperate mental situation derives in part from the sense of loss he feels without work; his feeling of dejection at having been poorly treated by a workplace to which he was loyal is also a factor. He appears unable to maintain a coherent sense of selfhood in this situation; this act therefore partially resembles other worker suicides we have seen elsewhere—Laurent's in *En guerre*, for example.[117] However, the sight of Mathilde convinces Franck to change his mind.[118] The pair hug lovingly (Figure 58) and return to the family home; the two moments of potential rupture are thwarted. The relationship Franck shares with Mathilde represents a pure form of love, largely untainted by the infiltration of market relations. In this respect, the family embodies the kind of refuge from society that one might expect to find in a conventional work of melodrama. The film's recourse to the relationship between Franck and his young, innocent daughter is symptomatic of its desire to find a space or a relationship not colonised by neoliberalism.

[117] Another reason behind Franck's move towards suicide is his sense of guilt at playing a key role within a brutal system of accumulation that disregards human life. In this, it differs from suicides we have analysed elsewhere.

[118] When Vincent (*L'Emploi du temps*) moves towards suicide, it is implied that his wife Muriel's voice brings him back from the edge.

Figure 57: Confronting the captain

Figure 58: Franck hugs Mathilde

The family's dual status both as a refuge and as an institution that has been colonised by neoliberal norms is thus more pronounced here than in Cantet's film, in which its status as a refuge from neoliberalism was less obvious. This is epitomised in the closing scenes, in which Franck wakes up in the living room of the family home, almost as if his near-suicide never happened (Figure 59). Light shines into the room, and he is surrounded by his loving family. The bright, airy surroundings and picture of familial unity would seem to reinforce the impression of this environment as a refuge.

However, the picture is more ambiguous than this: just prior to this moment, upon his re-entry to the family home, Franck signs a contract for a job with an illicit shipping company that operates under even less moral scrutiny than his previous employer. This sequence thus draws a clear connection between the family and Franck's need to work. The family is a refuge, then, but it is also deeply entwined with the reproduction of work and its associated structures. Significantly, as in Cantet's film, the figure of the patriarch remains of paramount importance to the reproduction of capitalism. There is little sign of a flexibilisation of the heteropatriarchal family unit, although there has been a weakening of traditional gender roles within the workplace (something made clear during the scenes with the work coach, which charted the decline of a particular model of masculinity). It is also important that, as in *L'Emploi du temps*, the exit from labour is shown to be impossible under these circumstances, albeit for slightly different reasons than in Cantet's film. Vincent was unable to make an exit from labour due in large part to his integration within the frameworks of bourgeois life. These frameworks certainly impact upon Franck's decision, too, but in this case we also need to consider his pathological desire to work in spite of the harm that it causes him, something that derives from his upbringing. The film reveals this to us in quite a straightforwardly psychologising manner.

Figure 59

Conclusion

As we have examined, the threat of expulsion from labour infiltrates the white-collar contexts of these films in a similar manner to the working-class ones dramatised elsewhere. The films use their protagonists' expulsions as springboards for their critiques of neoliberal work and attempts to confront neoliberal power more generally. *L'Emploi du temps* is able to explore the workings of neoliberalism in novel and subtle ways. In particular, Vincent's 'empty' characterisation enables him to function as a vehicle through which the film draws attention to the structural reproduction of new forms of neoliberal subjecthood. *Ceux qui travaillent* also draws attention to structural developments at points, but takes a more conventionally character-driven route that limits the scope of its critique.

The films also try to find spaces or relations outside of neoliberal structures. In *L'Emploi du temps*, this takes the form of Vincent's temporary escape from work—a form of exit from labour—and the freedom that comes with it. In *Ceux qui travaillent*, Franck's loving relationship with his daughter Mathilde contrasts with the instrumentalism of neoliberal work, representing a refuge. These are clearly very limited forms of escape or resistance, something the films are aware of to varying degrees.[119] The absence of the possibility of resistance is affirmed in the films' circular narratives.[120] *L'Emploi du temps* centres around a road trip; *Ceux qui travaillent* features a quest journey. Both are punctuated by incomplete suicides that represent partially-desired exits from labour. However, in their conclusions, the films' protagonists return to where they started: work.

These thwarted exits from labour form a key part of the films' critiques. The obligations of Vincent and Franck to their families are significant factors in their returns to work. Therefore, the impossibility of exit suggests that the bourgeois family is deeply integrated within the broader structures of neoliberalism. More generally, both films depict the process of the reproduction of the heteropatriarchal family unit as intertwined with the reproduction of particular models of (neoliberal) subjectivity and socioeconomic privileges. Related to this, we should read the impossibility of exit as symptomatic of the ways in which neoliberal employment relations are

[119] In *L'Emploi du temps*, Vincent's freedom is fraught with complications from the beginning and unravels entirely over the course of the narrative. *Ceux qui travaillent* also seems aware of the fact that familial relationships alone can offer no real counterforce to the problems of neoliberalism, albeit the image of the family as refuge is still employed in something of a compensatory manner. It should be noted that the absence of the possibility of resistance in these films is partly a reflection of the white-collar contexts they dramatise. There are few political movements in the upper echelons of neoliberal work which might counter the degradation of workplace conditions. Further, as explored above, bourgeois subjects are often materially and subjectively invested in the reproduction of neoliberalism in ways which working class characters usually are not.

[120] The circular narrative of *L'Emploi du temps* contrasts with the open-endedness of *L'Atelier.*

encroaching into ever-more environments. The boundaries between work and non-work in these films are increasingly blurred; this is a trend that many theorists have identified as a fundamental characteristic of neoliberalism (Deranty 2011; De Gaulejac 2005; Crary 2013: 45; Fleming 2015; Pfannebecker and Smith 2020: 5, for instance). The consequence of this is that the pressures of work are very difficult to escape: after all, if work is everywhere, how could an exit ever be possible? These trajectories arguably express a profound sense of hopelessness, foreclosing the possibility of different futures. In turn, the films further our impression of a cinematic corpus which is able to critique neoliberalism—sometimes in very interesting ways—but struggles to conceive of a different type of society. The next chapter develops a number of these concerns, examining the representation of successful professional women in two films. However, in contrast to *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent*, these works attempt to put forth more positive visions of change.

Chapter 6: Women at work

In the previous chapter we examined the representation of subjects who idealised and internalised the norms of neoliberal rationality but were confronted, in different ways, with their own vulnerability. This chapter addresses two films which develop some of the same focuses, dramatising white-collar workplaces beset by deeply-rooted problems. Their critical difference from the films addressed in the last chapter is that they centre female protagonists. We have seen how, in *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent*, the reproduction of neoliberalism was deeply imbricated with the reproduction of the heteropatriarchal family and, by extension, the privileged male subject. It is crucial to examine what films which spotlight female protagonists say that is different. How do they frame the relationship between gender, work, neoliberal subjectivity and the family? How does the workplace function as an arena within which gender norms are reproduced?

These films, Tonie Marshall's *Numéro Une* and Nicolas Silhol's *Corporate* (both 2017), feature financially successful subjects who identify with the figure of the white-collar professional, much like Franck (*Ceux qui travaillent*) and Vincent (*L'Emploi du temps*). The protagonist of *Numéro Une*, Emmannuelle Blachey (Emmanuelle Devos), is engaged in a bid to become the first female CEO of a CAC 40 company—in this case, the water company Anthéa.[121] She must contend with a group of nefarious, openly sexist men who are attempting to thwart her rise to success and force her out of the competition, but ultimately prevails in her pursuit. The film's narrative is primarily driven by her attempts to confront and counteract the power of the group of men. In addition to its explicit commentary on gender hierarchies within work, it also reflects in detail upon the shape of the contemporary family. In contrast to the other films within my corpus, it presents neoliberal workplace developments in a positive light; I will argue that it is an archetypal text of neoliberal feminism. In *Corporate*, Emilie Tesson-Hansen (Céline Sallette) is a senior HR manager at the multinational company Esen, known for the severity and efficiency with which she lays off staff. She is a purveyor of managerialism in its most punitive form: an executor of the expulsion from labour.[122] The suicide of one of her targets, Didier Dalmat (Xavier de Guillebon), results in her rejection of the norms of neoliberal work. In alliance with a state work inspector, she exposes the role of her boss, Stéphane Froncart (Lambert Wilson), in the company's brutal managerial project. This constitutes one of the film's most developed attempts to force the workings of neoliberal power into visibility. The film draws upon an established statist critique of work, offering (often implicit) commentary on

[121] CAC 40 is the benchmark French stock market index.
[122] She is known as a *killeuse* (cost killer) within the company.

the relationship between gender and neoliberalism as well. Both films incorporate melodramatic elements, particularly through their representations of the family. They also engage extensively with conspiracy thriller conventions, which are closely linked to their protagonists' attempts to confront and expose the sources of power. In accordance with conspiracy thriller conventions, power remains largely tied to individuals in both works. This presents certain limitations which are to be an important focus of my argument.

Women and work in the neoliberal era

Before commencing, it is important to identify some key developments in the relationship between women and neoliberal work. The first, and most important, is the entrance of many more women into the workforce in Western capitalist economies.[123] This occurred as a result of a range of interconnected economic and political pressures. Firstly, there were the crises of capital accumulation of the 1970s, which drove the capitalist classes to search for new avenues for profit. This in turn resulted in an increase in the labour supply and a broader flexibilisation of employment standards, as we explored in Chapter 1. The drive to uncover new avenues for profit also led to changes in the form of contemporary labour sometimes seen as a form of 'feminisation' (Weeks 2017; Morini 2007). Labour came to incorporate 'emotional' 'cooperative', and 'communicative' qualities in particular (Weeks 2017; Morini 2007). Clearly, it could be performed by men and women, but it remains important that these qualities have traditionally been coded as female.

Economic factors alone are insufficient to explain these developments, however. Feminist critiques of the Fordist wage structure rightfully identified the highly gendered nature of the 'family wage' (Cooper 2017: 8) and demanded that women have the same rights as men in the workplace. As Nancy Fraser argues:

> [t]he new [neoliberal] regime emerged from the fateful intersection of two sets of struggles. One set pitted an ascending party of free-marketeers, bent on liberalizing and globalizing the capitalist economy, against declining labour movements in the countries of the core […] The other set of struggles pitted progressive "new social movements", opposed to hierarchies of

[123] Many former socialist countries, on the other hand, saw a decline in women's participation in the (formal) labour force as part of the transition to capitalism (Pollert 2003: 339). In Western economies, women's increasing participation in waged labour has occurred alongside the dismantling of the economic safety net associated with the Fordist welfare state, the cutting back of social services, and generally declining wages. These changes have consequently had profoundly contradictory impacts, affecting members of different social classes in divergent ways; as Premilla Nadasen (2012) notes, it is primarily wealthy, educated women who have benefitted, in line with the general class dynamics of neoliberalism.

> gender, sex, "race", ethnicity and religion, against populations seeking to defend established lifeworlds and privileges, now threatened by the "cosmopolitanism" of the new economy (2016: 113).

She continues, '[o]ut of the collision of these two sets of struggles there emerged a surprising result: a "progressive" neoliberalism, which celebrates "diversity", meritocracy and "emancipation" while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction' (2016: 113). Within the 'progressive' strain of neoliberalism that Fraser identifies the most significant tendency is neoliberal feminism (see Rottenberg 2014; Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020; McRobbie 2008). Arguably the dominant feminist tendency within mainstream discourse, neoliberal feminism effectively combines individualist neoliberal norms with a limited concern with certain gender inequalities. Importantly, the political aims of neoliberal feminists are often centred around women's access to the upper echelons of the contemporary workplace; it is clear how an engagement with this terrain will be important when examining films that focus on bourgeois professional women.

Numéro Une

Numéro Une clearly comments on the changing nature of neoliberal labour through its depiction of Emmanuelle, who, in her role as a senior executive at the wind turbine manufacturer Théorès, is valued most significantly for her interpersonal, communicative skills. She demonstrates charm and emotional intelligence in her relationships with her colleagues, mobilising these qualities, which are almost always performed by women in the film, to the benefit of herself and the business as a whole. An important moment which exemplifies this characterisation sees her engaging with visiting Chinese investors (Figure 60), confidently speaking to them in Mandarin while her male colleagues look on, perplexed. This scene also stresses her tendency towards openness and internationalism—key characteristics within certain neoliberal discourses (Steger and Roy 2010: Chapter 3). Through her mastery of these female-coded competencies, Emmanuelle is figured as a modernising force within the contemporary workplace. She therefore serves as an embodiment of the process of feminisation of labour discussed in the theoretical literature mentioned above (Weeks 2017: 38). Emmanuelle and the women around her are often posed in contrast to reactionary, backwards-looking men in this film. We have seen elsewhere that feminised labour can be performed by both men and women, but *Numéro Une* takes something of an essentialist path in associating these skills with women alone.

Figure 60: Emmanuelle charms visiting investors

Sexism in the workplace

The pronounced gender binary that the film establishes is reflected in the forceful critique of workplace sexism that it develops. Emmanuelle must confront pervasive misogyny at Théorès. An early scene draws together a number of the gendered pressures that face her. As it begins, the camera tracks Emmanuelle from behind as she walks to a meeting with other senior members of staff. Male voices echo around the corridors, their volume amplified, indicating the extent to which they bear down upon Emmanuelle. When she enters the conference room, its walls are lined with pictures of men, further emphasising the ubiquity of gendered inequality. During the meeting, Emmanuelle is treated politely but dismissively: while her boss is keen to stress 'Bonjour à tous *et à toutes*' ('hello to all men *and women*') at the beginning of the session, the former's suggestions are not taken seriously. Emmanuelle's bodily movements and costume emphasise these inequalities of power: just prior to entering the meeting, she buttons her shirt up closer to her neck, as if compelled to replicate the dress code of the men that dominate these offices (Figure 61). In this respect, the film seems to echo Orlaith Darling's argument that 'neoliberal values of self-regulation and self-control manifest in a specifically embodied way for women' (2022: 7-8), a theme we also see play out to a significant extent in *Corporate*. However, it is important to note that the film associates neoliberalisation far more clearly with feminist gains than it does with gendered inequality, of which more shortly.

Figure 61

The meeting with visiting Chinese businessmen is also instructive in an analysis of the pervasive sexism that the film depicts. In the taxi journey following this meeting, Emmanuelle's boss suggests that she should be moved to a role within HR. This draws upon longstanding ideas about 'women's supposedly greater aptitude for the so-called "soft skills"' (Lane 2015: 512) that are associated with Human Resources. Given Emmanuelle's seniority within the company, the suggestion amounts to a dismissal of her career plans, implying that 'real business' should perhaps be left to men. The power imbalance is reinforced as he places his hand upon her leg, as if exerting his dominance over her body (Figure 62). A further moment of importance comes when Emmanuelle must sack one of her junior colleagues, Yves. As tensions run high, a male colleague aggressively infers that Emmanuelle, as a woman, is incapable of carrying out the task, offering to do so himself. This moment of overwrought emotion is one important instance of the melodramatic mode within the film: it is a forcing to the surface of the gender imbalance that has elsewhere frequently been confined to (slightly) more subtle means of representation, including costume and mise-en-scène as identified above. Considered together, these moments contribute to the film's representation of a neoliberal workplace dogged by the lingering, insidious influence of patriarchal inequalities. The workplace depicted here thus plays a pivotal role in the reproduction of patriarchal gender norms.

Figure 62

The response to misogyny

One of the few spaces untainted by misogyny is the forum for businesswomen that provides the setting for the film's opening and conclusion. Emmanuelle arrives at the conference amongst hundreds of other women who have seemingly travelled from across the world. Business English is the language of choice here, again reflecting the film's valorisation of a particularly neoliberal internationalism. At the conference, a solitary speaker on the stage states, 'This is a forum for a woman who wants to change the world'. She subsequently recites a Margaret Atwood quote, 'Men are afraid that women laugh at them, women are afraid that men kill them'; notably, just prior to her arrival, Emmanuelle received a disturbing, sexual voicemail from an anonymous man. There are a number of points that need to be unpacked here. The first is that the film establishes a clear gender binary founded on the threat of predatory men from its very beginning, thus making a transparent case for the necessity of feminism, of some variety. The second is that it clearly identifies the women's business forum as the institution which best answers this call: the workplace reproduces patriarchal norms, but this conference offers the opportunity to reshape or overturn them. Crucially, this is a fundamentally neoliberal environment, explicitly aligned with corporate interests. The individualism on display is significant: the speaker is framed alone on stage, and stresses the need for 'a [singular] woman' to change the world. This individualism is also reflected in the film's title—after all, there can only be one *Numéro Une.* These factors align with the neoliberal demand for competitive individualism while also mobilising avowedly feminist discourses. It is

instructive at this moment to turn to Catherine Rottenberg's theorisation of neoliberal feminism, which she argues is characterised by the celebration of corporate values, the interweaving of positive affect and intensified individuation, and a limited concern with (some) gender inequalities (2014). With this image in mind, the film's ending is also worth examining in brief. Having secured her position as a CEO, Emmanuelle takes to the stage at the business forum, framed alone and speaking of the importance of using power to the benefit of all. Extra-diegetic, emotionally-charged string music rises in intensity, signifying the importance of this triumphant moment. This moment of melodramatic emotion epitomises the film's interweaving of positive affect and individualism, also evincing its concern with particular gender inequalities. In combining these different emphases, *Numéro Une* clearly represents a neoliberal feminist text.

Figure 63: Emmanuelle's triumph

Masculinities

The counterpart of the women's group is the shadowy cabal of men who seek to undermine Emmanuelle in order to uphold the masculinist grip upon the contemporary workplace. The group is comprised primarily of three members: Jean Beaumel (Richard Berry), an older man who heads the operation; Marc Ronsin (Benjamin Biolay), a suave middle-aged man who primarily fulfils a public relations role; and Mathieu Rivas (Philippe Dusseau), their chosen candidate to succeed the ailing boss of Anthéa. The film makes it very clear that this group will stop at nothing to ensure that Rivas

triumphs over Emmanuelle: they employ a range of deeply underhand tactics, including spreading pernicious rumours about Emmanuelle's mental health to the media and having her husband, Gary, fired from his job. It often appears that the group is compelled to pursue its aims by a straightforward form of misogyny. Beaumel in particular is consistently misogynistic: one key moment sees him state to Emmanuelle, after an attempt to convince her to stand down from the contest, that women 'understand nothing of power... They behave like […] stupid birds'.[124] Alongside Beaumel's outright chauvinism, Ronsin is apparently a prolific womaniser; he also espouses a range of alpha male clichés, asserting that 'there are three essential motors: power, sex, and money', for instance.[125]

The film establishes this group as defenders of a traditional order. For instance, the first time we encounter the men is in an old-fashioned tennis club; Beaumel is playing with a wooden racquet and the walls are adorned with antique features. This use of mise-en-scène conveys the fact that this is—literally—an old boys' club. Close up shots of male handshakes conclude the group's meetings, reinforcing this impression. The men are counterposed to the modernising drive of Emmanuelle and her female peers in other ways. In particular, their aggression stands in contrast to the women's group, which often mobilises collectivist feminist discourses that are brought together with a softer form of individualism (Emmanuelle is told that she, as an individual, must 'advance the cause of women whenever […] possible', for instance).[126] This difference is reflected in the general pattern of framing that the film employs, which sees the men more often figured at a distance from one another in comparison to the women's closeness. Importantly, the male group's masculinity is what ultimately drives them apart: macho infighting (Figure 64) fragments the campaign and causes Ronsin to provide the women's group with crucial evidence to be used against Beaumel. Male-coded qualities are thus represented as inimical to the needs of the neoliberal enterprise more generally, which thrives instead on the kind of 'soft skills' that Emmanuelle clearly possesses. Effectively, then, the film suggests that there is a more humane form of capitalism that is still individualistic but in a less destructive fashion. Critically, it associates this with a particular model of femininity; by extension, it fundamentally links the ideal model of neoliberal subjecthood with femininity too.[127] The construction of women as the 'ideal subjects' of neoliberalism is something that a number of feminist thinkers have suggested. For instance, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011: 7) contend

[124] '[les femmes] ne comprennent rien au pouvoir … Elles se comportent comme [...] des bécasses'
[125] 'il y a trois moteurs essentiels : le pouvoir, le sexe et l'argent'
[126] 'avancer la cause des femmes à chaque fois que ça [...] sera possible'
[127] This is a tendency that *L'Emploi du temps* seemed to deny in its representation of the close relationship between privileged neoliberal subjects and patriarchal gender hierarchies. Ceux *qui travaillent* developed a similar image to *L'Emploi du temps* but also hinted implicitly towards neoliberalism's privileging of a subject capable of performing feminised labour. This was contrasted with its protagonist Franck's masculinity.

that demands for self-management and self-transformation are most often directed at women, noting that these are also critical components of neoliberal subjecthood. Weeks (2017: 38) argues similarly that neoliberal demands for flexibility and resilience align with traditional models of femininity. *Numéro Une* seems to affirm and celebrate the connection between femininity and neoliberal subjecthood through its depiction of Emmanuelle.

Figure 64

The turn to conspiracy

The male group's more general role within the film's narrative deserves further consideration. Clearly, the existence of a cohesive but secretive group which exerts unparalleled dominance over the course of the narrative ties into conspiracy thriller conventions. Further, the film uses various hidden pieces of evidence as transformative plot devices, a strategy which also aligns with the codes of the genre.[128] The film's turn to conspiracy forms part of its attempt to confront the sources of the problems it critiques, and to point towards the ways in which these problems might be solved. Importantly, because it is tied to individuals, power is successfully located and challenged here, unlike in some of the other instances we have examined: in the end, the group of men is overthrown and the narrative resolves satisfactorily. This resolution is particularly compensatory. Its simplistic

[128] For instance, the women's group is able to end Ronsin's journey to power with evidence of his corruption. The men fabricate and publicise evidence of Emmanuelle's colleague Yves' wrongdoings in order to weaken the women's campaign; they also weaponise footage of Véra's daughter taking drugs to the same effect.

and somewhat contrived nature suggests that the film encounters significant difficulties in coming to terms with the complexity of (patriarchal) power. In this light, we might consider how *Numéro Une* recalls Fredric Jameson's examination of the use of conspiracy as 'an attempt […] to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves' (1995: 1-2). As with the works that Jameson examines, *Numéro Une* grapples with an attempt to represent a complex phenomenon—in this case, misogyny in the contemporary workplace—but ultimately falls back on a formulaic, conspiratorial textual explanation which is inadequate to support its political aims, if not actively obfuscatory. A final point is that conspiracy theories (and the resolutions thereof) restore agency to the individual (in this case, Emmanuelle), rather than emphasising the structural nature of power. This corresponds with the film's broader valorisation of individualism and by extension its soft endorsement of some of the tenets of neoliberal rationality.[129]

The family

In addition to the use of suspense thriller tropes, the film engages significantly with the melodramatic mode. This is most pronounced in its representations of the family, which are used to explore the broader relationship between neoliberalism and gender. The primary familial relationship the film represents is between Emmanuelle and her Irish husband, Gary, who have two children together. While the families represented in the previous chapter still rested on patriarchal foundations, the relationship between Emmanuelle and Gary partially breaks from this, in that Emmanuelle has the more successful and prestigious career of the two parties. Further, while the wives in *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent* remained the primary caregivers to their children, in *Numéro Une* it appears that many of these socially reproductive duties have been outsourced to other parties. This echoes Fraser's argument that the re-externalisation of domestic labour to third parties is a key component of 'progressive' neoliberalism (2016: 113). Emmanuelle's success relative to Gary's is a clear source of tension in the relationship; Gary often appears threatened by Emmanuelle's ambition, reverting to self-pity in the face of potential emasculation. The film brings this to the surface through moments of intense melodramatic emotion. For instance, one scene sees Emmanuelle suggest that her victory might be beneficial for them both, to which Gary mockingly responds, 'I'd have a good job, all thanks to you!' (Figure 65).[130] *Numéro Une* thus

[129] The film's relatively neat resolution is also a sign of its aim towards a broader appeal in comparison to the works addressed in the previous chapter, which notably lacked conclusions in which their protagonists' desires were satisfied.

[130] 'J'aurais du bon job, grâce à toi !'

utilises melodrama to explore the emergence of a masculine vulnerability and insecurity that results from women's gains in the labour market.[131] In comparison to *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent*, then, there is little impression given here of the family functioning as a crucial institution within the reproduction of neoliberalism. In this respect, the family depicted sits uneasily with the image that Cooper puts forth in *Family Values* (2017): for the most part, it is figured in tension with neoliberal developments. Certainly, the patriarchal family is presented as outmoded, incompatible with the flux of the contemporary era. This is exemplified in the fact that Emmanuelle and Gary's relationship is clearly in decline by the end of the film, which sees Gary leave France to pursue his own career goals.

Figure 65

We also need to consider Emmanuelle's relationship with her father, Henri, an elderly man who lives in supported accommodation. Like Gary, he is wary of Emmanuelle's ambitions, albeit for different reasons. A proud former philosophy teacher, Henri is sceptical of the praise that bosses and CEOs receive; his unease with Emmanuelle's individualism is a significant source of tension between the pair. His politics are not made explicit, but his former profession and discomfort with the individualism of contemporary capitalism suggest that he can be interpreted as an embodiment of an older generation of Republican citizen. Henri's ill health is important: the decline of his ailing body

[131] Thinking back to the ideals of neoliberal subjectivity once more, we might also consider the ways in which Emmanuelle's adaptability and flexibility—coded as feminine—contrast with Gary's intransigence in the face of change.

should be seen as a metaphor for the waning of his politics.[132] Towards the end of the film, Henri effectively gives Emmanuelle his blessing to continue her mission. This moment should be read as a passing of the baton from an older Republican politics to Emmanuelle's new dogma of (progressive) neoliberalism. The film's implicit message is that progressive social change is not achieved through the traditional institutions of the Republic (such as the school or state), but can be better reached through the world of neoliberal work.

Figure 66: Henri's frail body

Progressive neoliberalism

Numéro Une stands out amongst the films addressed in this thesis for its celebratory vision of neoliberalism, which promises a fairer, kinder workplace in which female-coded labour (most often performed by women) prevails. This is underpinned by the valorisation of a soft individualism—sometimes cloaked in collectivist, feminist discourses—that is contrasted with an aggressive, male-coded competitiveness that pervades the contemporary workplace in insidious ways. *Numéro Une* suggests that women are the privileged subjects of progressive neoliberalism, and in its celebration of this represents an archetypal text of neoliberal feminism. In terms of its overall commentary on gender, the film takes quite an essentialist and traditionalist line, drawing upon long-standing ideas concerning female and male qualities and largely endorsing them. However, it also depicts a

[132] This highlights another use of melodrama in the film: the suffering body conveys broader allegorical meaning in the relative absence of explanatory dialogue.

disruption of traditional gender structures that has taken place in the neoliberal era—particularly in its representation of the patriarchal family, which is placed under significant strain as a result of women's entry into the workplace.

Corporate

While neoliberal labour market developments are presented in a positive light in *Numéro une*, *Corporate* is scathing about these changes. As we examined, the former film associates neoliberalism with positive gains for women and indeed for workers more generally. The face of neoliberalism in that film is one of communicative co-operation, underpinned by a soft individualism. By contrast, in *Corporate*, the neoliberal workplace is predominantly characterised by a highly punitive form of managerialism, in which the constant threat of expulsion from labour looms over the company's employees. Centred around the fictional multinational company Esen, the film anchors its narrative within the historical context of the epidemic of worker suicides that took place at a number of prominent French companies throughout the 2000s, starting with a simple title slide stating, 'The characters are fictional, but the management methods are real' (Waters 2020: 49).[133] It is significant that many of the words associated with the film's depiction of managerialism (*corporate* and *management*, for instance) are transplanted from English, and that the film's protagonist, Emilie, trained at a prestigious management school in London. As we noted in Chapter 1, neoliberalism is often seen as something that is imposed from without in France—particularly from Anglo-American sources; *Corporate* reflects this mentality. Its recourse to the nation state as a bulwark against neoliberalism is also crucial, reflecting the valorisation of the *dirigiste* state that still permeates French culture to a certain extent. In this regard, *Corporate* effects a distinctively French critique of neoliberalism that resonates with the work of thinkers such as Christophe Dejours (Dejours 1998, 2003; Dashtipour and Vidaillet 2017).

Managerialism in action

The managerial techniques employed in the film are an attempt to destabilise the workforce, with the aim of making them more productive or forcing them to leave the company. Constant demands for redeployment are crucial, as is a process of individual responsibilisation of employees for broader

[133] 'Les personnages sont fictifs, mais les méthodes de management sont réelles'. In a certain way, the explicit framing of the film's fictional narrative around real-life issues recalls Laurent Cantet's methodology in *L'Emploi du temps*—which used the story of Jean-Claude Romand as a starting point—and *Ressources humaines*, whose narrative sprung from the introduction of the 35-hour working week to France.

structural forces.[134] As we have seen, this is a critical component of neoliberal rationality which, as Lemke writes, 'entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, and so forth, [...] into the domain for which the individual is responsible' (2002: 59). An early meeting that Emilie is conducting with an employee is instructive in this respect (Figure 67). She stresses to the worker that 'Our world is constantly moving. You mustn't just submit to its developments, you need to know how to anticipate them', invoking a state of flux and unpredictability while also placing responsibility for this upon the employee.[135] This is a form of double movement that obscures the precise control that Emilie and her peers exert over the running of the company. The sense of inevitability—of forces that lie outside of anyone's control—recalls the discourses we saw employed by management in *En guerre*. This discursive strategy is employed to more manipulative purposes here than in Brizé's film: Emilie is highly knowledgeable of the lives of these employees, employing a range of psychological techniques to discipline and control them on an individual, personal basis. Later in the interview, she states, 'I do not want to reflect for you, but we can reflect together'.[136] She is engaged in a display of domination over the employee, yet the language employed constantly emphasises the latter's agency and capacity to change her personal situation while partially disavowing Emilie's own power. The employee's agency is of course only ever illusory; this encapsulates the process of responsibilisation that is taking place.

Figure 67: Emilie conducting an interview

[134] As Waters notes, these techniques closely resemble the 'Time to Move' strategy that was employed at France Télécom (2020: 49).
[135] 'Notre monde est en mutation permanente. Il ne faut pas subir ces évolutions, il faut savoir les anticiper'
[136] 'Je ne veux pas réfléchir pour vous, mais on peut réfléchir ensemble'

The representation of managerialism in the film echoes analysis developed by Peter Fleming, who writes that '[w]hen the managed are unsuccessful, the failure must be structured in a manner that highlights their agency and self-authority' (2015: 80-1). The techniques employed by Emilie and her colleagues are purportedly neutral: Froncart argues, 'Evaluations are a tool. They are neither good, nor bad', for instance.[137] However, the failure of employees in the film is a given; indeed, Emilie's aptitude at forcing staff out of their jobs is the reason that she is so valued by Esen. Again, Fleming's description of managerialism resonates with the film: he writes that 'managerialism epitomizes the will to postpone, the imposition of a "target" that is never quite achievable. Often this is unstated and merely insinuated' (2015: 80). Further, 'if managerialism today has an ideology […] it is one that continuously communicates our postponed but inevitable abandonment' (2015: 84). Abandonment functions as a means of governance at Esen: the threat of expulsion from labour looms over nearly every employee. In particular, and as we will see, the film explores the threat of expulsion as it erupts over the body of Didier Dalmat, the worker who commits suicide early in the film.

Managerialism and gender

It is important to consider the gendered aspects of this representation of managerialism. Emilie's role as HR manager is one which is typically associated with femininity. As noted above, the association between women and HR often rests upon essentialist arguments concerning women's supposedly greater or more natural capacity for emotional and communicative 'soft skills' (Lane 2015: 512). These qualities are also incorporated into contemporary forms of feminised neoliberal labour. In a certain respect, the techniques that Emilie employs resonate with theorisations of feminised labour. The dialogue quoted above—'we can reflect together'—encapsulates this: on the surface, this represents a kind of caring and emotionally-attuned labour that thinkers such as Weeks (2017) and Morini (2007) argue is crucial to neoliberalism. However, we cannot consider these discourses in isolation. Emilie sometimes claims to be helping her targets—or, more accurately, helping them help themselves—but the film makes it very clear that beneath this rhetoric lies an overwhelming cruelty: specifically, a kind of communicative and affective control. In this respect, the type of feminised labour that *Numéro Une* valorises—the ability to talk about emotions, in particular—has been contorted in *Corporate,* weaponised and put to the service of a punitive regime of capital accumulation. The film's representation of the gendered nature of neoliberal labour is

[137] 'Les évaluations c'est un outil. Ce n'est ni bon, ni mauvais'

therefore more ambiguous than in Marshall's film. While Emilie clearly mobilises female-coded qualities, in other respects her work demonstrates clearer parallels with male-coded ones. In this, the film breaks to a certain degree from the essentialism of *Numéro Une* in that women are able to perform masculinities as well as fulfilling roles traditionally associated with femininity.

The discipline of management has a notably gendered history, which, as Stephen Whitehead contends, 'has long privileged man as the "natural" manager and leader' (2013: 444). Whitehead consequently argues that management and managerialism in the contemporary organisation are deeply intertwined with ideals of masculinity; arguing that these 'masculinities persist within organizations while remaining hidden and invisible' (2013: 438). He notes, '[m]any dominant practices and values of management continue to serve and reinforce this gendered association—e.g. instrumental rational behaviour; individualized competitive attitudes; […] ruthlessness and violence; control and unquestioned authority; punitive audit and accountability; […] aggressive leadership; […] authoritarian hierarchical structures; […] hard expressions of human resource management' (2013: 444). Clearly, the film makes a case for the persistence of these managerial masculinities within the contemporary French workplace. A training event highlights Emilie's ruthlessness: during a role-playing exercise she leverages an employee's mother's ill health in order to force him out of the company, for instance. Her 'control and unquestioned authority' (Whitehead 2013: 444) over the other employees is also made clear: for instance, shortly after the death of Dalmat, Catherine (Camille Japy), an employee, has broken down crying in the office (Figure 68). As Emilie approaches, her first instinct is to ask in exasperation, 'Do you mind if I cry? Does it stop the others from working?'.[138] As such, where these male-coded practices were presented as incompatible with or detrimental to the neoliberal workplace in *Numéro Une*, in *Corporate* they are figured as fundamental to its functioning. In addition to highlighting the fear instilled in the employees through dialogue, this latter scene is of further interest for the way in which it diverts us away from just narrative or discursive concerns. It is significant that Catherine's body is figured as excessive—shaking, messy, and leaky—as opposed to Emilie, whose still body and emotionless face are nothing if not restrained (Figure 69). The suffering body is an important trope within melodrama, as we have seen; *Corporate* mobilises this to a significant extent in order to develop its critique of neoliberal work.

[138] 'Ça vous gêne que je pleure ? Ça empêche les autres de travailler ?'

Figure 68: The excessive body

Figure 69: Corporeal restraint

The body represents a key means through which gender norms are reproduced within the workplace; this is something we saw hinted at in *Numéro Une*. The theorist Susan Bordo has written extensively on gender and the body, and is particularly interested in the figure of the professional woman, arguing that 'the lean body of the career businesswoman today may symbolize […] symbolic allegiance to the professional, white, male world along with her lack of intention to subvert that arena with alternative "female values"' (1993: 208). While there are several displays of excessive embodiment throughout the film, Emilie remains for the most part unemotional and inhibited, her face expressionless albeit clearly weary. Her manner of embodiment in the office thus reinforces Darling's argument that '[a]s women enter boardrooms and politics, their bodies must be repackaged as non-excessive, non-porous, and impenetrable' (2022: 140); this is a key way in which Emilie performs the masculinities which permit her to function as a member of the corporate elite.

Another crucial embodied moment comes during an early interview that Marie (Violaine Fumeau), the *inspectrice du travail* (work inspector), is conducting with Emilie, at a stage when the latter is almost completely refusing to cooperate with her investigation. While Marie's bodily movements appear fluid and effortless—reflecting the challenge she poses to the values of the office—Emilie sits in precisely the same position throughout the interview, her bodily containment mirroring her containment of information. The disciplined body, aligned with the needs of the neoliberal workplace, is thus juxtaposed with Marie's female-coded body. We see a certain inversion of this process of containment during a number of repeated sequences in which Emilie has awoken in her car, in the company car park.[139] At these moments Emilie's body appears messier and more unbounded; importantly, clothed only in her underwear from the waist up, she also appears more obviously feminine (Figure 70). In each instance she is visibly dishevelled: her morning routine consists of applying deodorant in lieu of showering, putting on a clean shirt, and returning to the office. The car functions as a spatial metaphor to delineate what is allowed or not allowed to be seen in the workplace: once more, the excessive, female-coded body is banished to the privacy of personal space. Emilie's embodied demeanour is clearly a project of self-mastery and self-surveillance; these demands of neoliberal subjecthood are felt particularly acutely by women, as Gill and Scharff argue (2013: 7). While theorists such as de Gaulejac have argued that the primary object of neoliberal power is the psyche rather than the body (de Gaulejac 2011: 62), *Corporate* attests on the contrary to the persistence of gendered bodily control as a key feature of the contemporary workplace. The subject of gender rarely enters dialogue in the film, but these repeated focuses on the unbelonging female body constitute a sustained commentary on the relationship between gender and neoliberal work. The film suggests that, while the contemporary workplace does mobilise female-coded emotional labour in some respects, it also attempts to contain expressions of femininity, and indeed excessive displays of (embodied) emotion more generally.

[139] As in *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent*, these moments reflect upon the intensification and expansion of the neoliberal working process: there appears to be little concept of life outside of work for Emilie.

Figure 70

Exit from labour and the suffering body

The most significant and excessive contrast to Emilie's corporeal restraint is found in Dalmat's suffering body. In a pivotal moment just before his suicide, Dalmat approaches Emilie outside a restaurant, attempting to confront the source of his anguish. Emilie is clearly threatened by his presence; her facial expression is placed under scrutiny in a close-up, betraying a vulnerability and shock that contrasts with her usual emotionless façade. A series of swift shot/reverse shots using handheld cameras emphasises the volatility of the situation as Emilie reveals to Dalmat the real reason for his dismissal—his deliberate abandonment by the company. He is then framed in a lingering medium close-up which emphasises his ghostly, pale demeanour (Figure 71). Standing alone, Dalmat is unshaven, his shoulders are rounded, and he has deep bags under his eyes, which are beginning to well up. His pallid, suffering body represents the corpse of the workforce upon which Esen is dependent. Significantly, his subsequent suicide is an archetypal instance of the exit from labour. Like that of Laurent in *En guerre*, it takes place outside company headquarters and should be read as a plea for recognition in the face of the cruelty of neoliberal governance. In a typically melodramatic fashion, it forces the everyday violences of managerial practices to the surface (see O'Shaughnessy 2019; 2022: 70-97 for a more detailed analysis of this type of suicide). The way in which Dalmat's excessive body breaches the confines of the workplace from which it has been banished is also important. We have seen how the workplace depicted in the film functions through processes of discipline and containment, yet, as Waters argues, Dalmat's suicide resists these forces. She writes, 'his suicide acts as an intrusion of violence in the everyday. […] the key message of the film is that the act of suicide cannot be symbolically contained, rationalised, or

smoothed over' (Waters 2020: 80). This act 'indelibly transforms' the workplace, 'destabilising relationships and forcing employees, and Emilie in particular, to ask profound moral questions of themselves' (Waters 2020: 80).

Figure 71

Immediately after Dalmat's death, it becomes clear that Emilie is also disposable in the eyes of the company, having faltered in her role as 'hired protection' (Fleming 2015: 93) for the upper echelons of management. The process of responsibilisation inherent to managerialism is henceforth turned against Emilie herself, as she is individually scapegoated by her seniors for the broader managerial project of which she was only one constituent part. Like Dalmat, Emilie must confront her inevitable abandonment at this stage; a key argument of the film is that no worker is safe from the machinations of managerialism. Importantly, this narrative development strikes at the heart of the two films' different conceptions of agency and its relation to neoliberal subjective norms. While Marshall's film ultimately reinforces the idealisation of the sovereign (female) neoliberal subject, *Corporate* strongly implies that individual agency in the neoliberal workplace is always compromised to a certain degree by broader, structural, forces. In this respect, the film works to unravel the association of positive affect and workplace individualism that *Numéro Une* represents.

<u>The state as a solution to managerialism</u>

As Waters noted, these events precipitate a turning point in Emilie's characterisation, forcing her to confront her role within the company. Marie, the state-employed work inspector, plays a pivotal role in Emilie's transformation, serving as an embodiment of the Republican ideals that the film represents as a counterforce to managerialism. Around two-thirds of the way through the film,

Emilie turns up unannounced to Marie's office, much to the latter's surprise. In a later meeting, Emilie wears casual dress including a colourful scarf, which represents a marked contrast to the cold and austere business suits that she dons in the office. Marie is dressed similarly, and comments positively on Emilie's new attire; the similar costumes clearly mark a growing affinity between the women, and hint towards the possibility of a resistance to the cruelties of the neoliberal workplace founded on the female-coded values of cooperation and care. Emilie joins Marie on a number of workplace inspections, and the latter encourages her to testify against Esen. Emilie's volte-face is reflected in the use of space as well as costume: the pair walk through recognisably Parisian streets whose quaint cafés contrast with the modern glass of La Défense (Figure 72); the softer light also differs to the harsh light of the Esen buildings. This clear change of tone encapsulates the film's shift towards an emphasis on the role of the French state as a bulwark against neoliberalism; this resistance is founded on implicitly female-coded values.

Figure 72: A growing bond

The film's conclusion draws these concerns together. Emilie discovers crucial information concerning Dalmat's death from Patricia, Froncart's secretary; she then goes to meet Froncart to extract a confession from him using a hidden recording device. Froncart is frustrated throughout the meeting, questioning how his protégée's path has diverged so much from its intended course. Interestingly, in the face of his intransigence, Emilie states, 'It's not a question of morals, it's a question of rights'.[140] Lane notes that 'one of the specificities of the French Fordist post-war compromise was the manner in which it institutionalised a particularly close interrelationship between *salaried employment*, *rights to social protection*, and, through that, *access to full republican citizenship'* (2020: 9, emphasis mine). Therefore, Emilie's words, which invoke rights to social protection in the context of

[140] 'C'est pas une question de morale, c'est une question de droit'

employment, could be interpreted as a further allusion to a particular vision of French Republicanism. Having extracted and recorded the confession, Emilie's assistant Sophie uploads the file to the company intranet. The former walks out of the building as triumphant extra-diegetic music plays; this constitutes a clear form of the ethical, agential exit from labour that emerges in response to the threat of expulsion.[141] Importantly, Emilie's exit from labour is facilitated by a loose coalition of women who articulate the voice and agency of the state; this provides the opposition to managerialism that the film demands. Therefore, while Emilie's exit is an act of individual triumph, it is also articulated with the structural force of the state to a limit degree.

The state also plays a role, albeit a minor one, in *Numéro Une*. In that film's conclusion, Véra, one of the women who supported Emmanuelle, goes to visit an unnamed man in the ornate and traditional surroundings of the Elysée. She demands that Emmanuelle be allowed to become CEO of Anthéa and implies that the state is entangled in the interests of the powerful men in the film. Consequently, the state reneges on its support for Beaumel, the leader of the men's campaign, and endorses Emmanuelle in the last instance. The Elysée is presented as being resistant to positive change; it is also implicitly aligned with male values of domination and aggression until the final throes of the narrative. By contrast, the state in *Corporate* is both implicitly associated with a caring model of femininity, and—relatedly—is the most important institution of progressive political change in the film. This exemplifies the film's statist and distinctively French critique of managerialism. More broadly, we should consider the different emphases the two works place on the relationship between the nation state and neoliberalism. While *Numéro Une* clearly valorises a particular type of networked neoliberal internationalism, in *Corporate* such an internationalism is associated with the infiltration of Anglo-American managerialism into the contemporary workplace; the (French) nation state represents the antidote to this. As I have indicated, it is crucial that Emilie learnt how to perform managerialism at Anglophone schools, and honed these skills while working in London.

The melodramatic thriller

Like *Numéro Une*, *Corporate* draws heavily upon conspiracy thriller conventions. We need to consider the generally cold colour palette, the use of electronic music to instil tension, and the

[141] Like some other forms of the ethical withdrawal—Sandra's, in *Deux jours, une nuit*, for instance—this is a form of self-sacrifice. In addition to giving up her prestigious and well-paid job, Emilie also implicates herself in the criminal proceedings that surround Dalmat's death, handing herself into the police station for questioning in the closing minutes of the film.

setting of the financial district of Paris that is common to both films. More important, however, is the use of secret pieces of evidence as pivotal plot devices. In *Corporate*, Froncart's confession to deliberately hounding Dalmat to the point of his suicide is the most important example of this tendency. Emilie's pursuit of Froncart represents a drive to confront power that emerges in response to the threat of expulsion from labour; as in Marshall's work, this trajectory culminates in a fairly neat resolution to the film's narrative. In both films there is a double movement whereby systemic issues relating to the contemporary workplace are dramatised throughout, yet the narratives ultimately hinge on the use of individualising forms of conspiracy to resolve these issues. This reflects the prioritisation of narrative closure within mainstream fiction film, but, in *Corporate* as in *Numéro Une*, should also be read as a symptom of the complexification of power within the contemporary workplace. In short, simple solutions emerge in these films as compensatory responses to complex problems.

The other important generic influence on *Corporate* is melodrama. We have already examined how the film mobilises the suffering melodramatic body to expound its critique of the contemporary workplace, noting the clear gendered aspects that run through this representation. Like *Numéro Une* (and the films addressed in the previous chapter), the film also explores the relationship between the family and neoliberal work, often through moments of heightened melodramatic emotion. Emilie's husband, Colin, is English, and is unemployed for much of the narrative; he takes primary care of the couple's son. However, in comparison to Gary in *Numéro Une*, he does not appear to resent his position of relative subordination compared to Emilie. During the part of the film in which Emilie is aligned with the status quo at Esen, the family represents a space that has clearly been infiltrated by neoliberal subjective norms, reflecting to varying degrees the families depicted in *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent*. This is exemplified in a number of mock job interviews that Emilie attempts to conduct with Colin. The first of these takes place in the family home; Colin states, resignedly, 'I don't want to play that game with you', frustrated at the disintegration of the boundary between work and family.[142] The second of these occurs in the offices of Esen (Figure 73); Colin has travelled here to retrieve Emilie, who is at a point of crisis. Emilie probes her husband: 'Your wife is more important than your husband, Mr. Hansen? [...] Wrong response.'[143] As she continues, she undoes her shirt buttons and reveals her underwear. This scene charts an intertwinement of intimate life and neoliberal work, in which the ('legitimate') object of Emilie's desire, Colin, has been partially displaced by her desire of the enterprise. The film's depiction of this process—the colonisation of desire by the enterprise—bears some similarities with the depiction of

[142] 'Je veux pas jouer à ça avec toi'
[143] 'Votre femme est plus importante que votre travail, Monsieur Hansen ? […] Mauvaise réponse.'

Vincent in *L'Emploi du temps*, although *Corporate* makes more explicit suggestions about neoliberalism's impact upon erotic desire than Cantet's work. Interestingly, the discourses employed by Emilie during this roleplay—'We are looking for a man who has balls'—also emphasise the gendered nature of the managerialism represented in this film.[144]

Figure 73: A mock job interview

This moment of heightened melodramatic emotion is emphasised by mournful extra-diegetic piano music, and reaches its culmination as Emilie begins to break into tears; Colin implores her to return to the family home. This hints towards the development that the family is to undergo in the latter part of the film. By the end, it comes to resemble a refuge from the demands associated with neoliberalism, thus more closely reflecting melodramatic conventions. The family is figured ambiguously in *Corporate*, then. Initially, it is colonised by neoliberal subjective norms but placed under significant strain as a result of this. Neoliberalism is shown to be disruptive of the traditional family; the film presents this in a relatively negative light. The family then undergoes a transformation, ultimately becoming much more cohesive as Emilie withdraws from the neoliberal labour market and forges an alliance with the state. As in *Numéro Une*, there is little sense of the family working to sustain neoliberalism in this film. The shape of the family has clearly changed as a result of labour market developments—it has become more flexible, as Streeck (2009) terms it—but it is ultimately figured in tension with the developments wrought by neoliberalisation. This is an image shared with Marshall's film; the difference between the two texts is that *Corporate* valorises the reinforced family as part of a broader resistance against neoliberalism, while *Numéro Une* is

[144] 'Nous cherchons un homme qui a des couilles'

ambivalent about its demise in the face of Emmanuelle's success in the contemporary labour market.

Conclusion

The politics of these two films differ markedly; this is embodied most clearly in their divergent visions of neoliberalism. Of the two, *Corporate* is more typical of my corpus, making a scathing critique of neoliberal work through its depiction of a toxic form of managerialism that uses the constant threat of expulsion from labour as a form of governance. *Numéro Une*, on the other hand, depicts neoliberal developments in a positive light, valorising an emotional, communicative form of feminised labour alongside a soft individualism that broadly aligns with privileged models of neoliberal subjectivity. In this respect it provides a different answer to our question about the abilities of work-centred film in the neoliberal era. Marshall's film suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that film is able to celebrate and reinforce dominant visions of neoliberalism as well as critique them.

These different visions of neoliberalism feed into the films' commentary on gender. In both films, women are subject to forms of embodied and emotional control in the workplace. In Marshall's film this is due to deeply-rooted patriarchal power and explicit misogyny. Its vision of a progressive version of neoliberalism (embodied in Emmanuelle, the progressive neoliberal subject) is posed as a solution to this, promising gains for women both in the workplace and more broadly. In *Corporate*, neoliberal managerialism is implied to be the most significant source of gendered control. In its opposition to this, the film goes in quite a conservative direction. When Emilie does perform masculinities in her role as neoliberal subject, she is deeply unhappy, and her body appears pale and exhausted. The major turning point in the film coincides with her embrace of a more traditionally feminine gender role, including within the family. The film therefore implicitly valorises the naturalisation of traditional gender norms as part of an opposition to the problems that it depicts.[145] This represents something of an impasse, leaving us with the open question: is an endorsement of traditional gender norms the only way of critiquing neoliberal mechanisms of gendered control?

[145] This work forms part of a broader body of French film identified by Lane (2015), which portrays the financially and professionally successful female executive as a threat that can be neutralised by a recourse to traditional gender norms.

While the films' critiques differ markedly, they employ very similar filmmaking styles that combine melodramatic elements with thriller-like structures.[146] Their uses of thriller tropes are most important to my argument here, as the films use these mechanisms to attempt bring the workings of power to light. While they dramatise structural problems, both works ultimately tie power to small groups of individuals in a conspiratorial fashion. This expresses a desire to map the contours of power that can only be fulfilled in a partial way, and is therefore symptomatic of the complex nature of the different forms of power that the films attempt to represent. Their narratives resolve by bringing these figures to justice; this serves a compensatory or cathartic function. The limitations that the films encounter suggest that the conspiracy thriller form struggles to convincingly represent structural forms of power, privileging individuals in ways which obfuscate the effects of broader economic, social, and political structures.

[146] As explored above, the films often use melodramatic elements to explore the relationship between neoliberalism and the patriarchal family. These representations differ markedly to those of the films addressed in the previous chapter, suggesting that neoliberalism destabilises the traditional family unit rather than reinforcing it.

Chapter 7: Unbelonging bodies

Across the previous four chapters we have broadly followed a linear trajectory, analysing works whose protagonists—and often the environments that surround them—are situated increasingly close to the neoliberal ideal. For example, *En guerre*—the first film we examined—centres around Laurent, a trade unionist who is clearly out of step with the norms of neoliberal rationality; *Numéro Une*, addressed in the previous chapter, foregrounds Emmanuelle, a businesswoman who embraces many of the subjective norms of neoliberalism. This chapter diverges from this pattern, examining three films which centre protagonists who are clearly detached from neoliberal norms, perhaps to a more significant degree than any of the characters we have examined so far. These texts: *Louise-Michel* (2008), *Mammuth* (2010), and *Le Grand Soir* (2012), are all collaborations between the French directors Benoît Delépine and Gustave Kervern.

The reasons for this change in direction are several. First, many of the films we have analysed thus far have been adept at critiquing neoliberalism. However, they have often struggled to suggest ways in which things might be different, or been reluctant to do so altogether. The works of Delépine and Kervern make more pronounced attempts to put forth a positive vision of change than the rest of my corpus. Their films therefore provide a novel answer to the question posed repeatedly in this thesis about the abilities and limitations of work-centred film in the neoliberal era. Second, the three films differ from the others in this study in another critical way: they employ a distinctive black comedic style which stands in opposition to the dramatic conventions of much work-centred film; this is another factor which sets this chapter apart from the previous ones and consequently explains its positioning. The politics of the films' use of comedy deserves further mention before proceeding. The films can be seen to draw upon two comedic traditions in particular. The first is satire: in this case, neoliberal social norms are satirised in favour of broadly-speaking socialist ones (Krutnik and Neale 1990: 19-20). While comedic responses to neoliberal work are comparatively rare, these films draw upon a longstanding tradition of political culture that utilises comedy for politically progressive purposes. The other key form of humour employed in the films is slapstick, body comedy.[147] This is put to multiple different purposes. In some instances, bodily incongruity and excess are treated as the objects of the films' jokes; in others, it seems that bodily excess plays a part in resistances to the neoliberal order. In other instances still, the films' delight in 'low' humour can be seen as a deliberate and quite straightforward affront to bourgeois notions of dignity.

[147] For a detailed examination of the philosophy of slapstick, see Trahair 2007.

While this chapter diverges from one trajectory within the outline of this thesis, it also fits more neatly within another. The representation of the body has been an important, developing concern of the previous chapters. The body is spotlighted especially clearly in the films of Delépine and Kervern, at least partly because the protagonists of these films often struggle to vocalise their thoughts. Therefore, this chapter is the space in which we can most thoroughly examine a theoretical problematic—the question of the representation of neoliberalism and the body—that has been developing throughout this thesis.

I will introduce the films in more detail shortly, but it is firstly important to clarify the shared focus of these works and introduce the questions that will frame this chapter's analysis. *Louise-Michel* and *Mammuth* take place in the context of the decline of Fordist industrial work. The former commences with a mass redundancy; the latter starts with its protagonist's retirement. *Le Grand Soir* focuses more closely on white-collar precarity but like *Louise-Michel* centres around its protagonist's expulsion from labour—in this case, a sacking. Their reasons for leaving the workforce are different, but the central characters of the films are all left in profound states of disorientation in the absence of work. In response to this, they embark on various quest narratives which the films use to explore the workings of neoliberalism. The films conclude with their protagonists' exits from labour. These exits bear close resemblance to the archetype of ethical withdrawal, but stand out for their radicalism compared to those we have examined elsewhere. Likewise, the bodies that play such a significant part in these films are out of step with the privileged norms of the neoliberal contemporary: they are, in different ways, non-conforming or unbelonging. With this picture in mind, the questions that preoccupy this chapter are as follows. First, what specific gestural economies emerge over bodies in these films, and how do these relate to neoliberal work or the neoliberal conjuncture more generally? Secondly, how do these films figure embodied resistance in the wake of weariness and exhaustion—what happens to the bodies that refuse to conform? Before proceeding, it is worth refining our understanding of the relationship between the body and capitalism.

Contested bodies

We have seen throughout our filmic analyses that different bodies are coded to perform different kinds of work, and that hegemonic norms dictate what the ideal body type is. Consequently, bodily manifestations are stratified along the interrelated lines of class, gender, and ethnicity (Bourdieu 1984: 191-3). Relatedly, we have also examined the ways in which bodies bear the marks of capitalist production processes, often through a sense of fatigue that is not confined merely to the

industrial workers of Fordism but also emerges amongst white-collar ones as well. In the most extreme instances, worker suicide also represents an imposition of capitalist forces upon the body. Considered together, these factors point towards the deep intertwinement of work, capitalism, and the body. Blayney, Hornsby and Whaley's argument summarises this relationship well: '[c]apitalism requires work, work needs bodies and bodies are shaped by capital. Far from being a natural given, the body is therefore a site of continuous mediation and ideological contestation' (2023a: 1).

David Harvey contends similarly that 'the body is [...] embedded in the processes that produce, sustain, bound, and ultimately dissolve it' (1998: 402). Silvia Federici extends these arguments, writing that capitalism has, through its need to 'maximise the exploitation of living labor […] been the factor that more than any other has shaped our bodies' (2020: 10). Both Federici and Harvey speak of a mechanisation process by which bodies become machine-like in their movements—becoming machines integrated into the broader machine of capital accumulation. Federici writes: '[c]apitalism has treated our bodies as work-machines because it is the social system that most systematically has made of human labor the essence of the accumulation of wealth and has most needed to maximize its exploitation' (2020: 11). This takes place through 'the imposition of more intense and uniform forms of labor as well as multiple disciplinary regimes and institutions' (Federici 2020: 12). From the perspective of the Global North, perhaps the most pertinent of these disciplinary regimes—designed both to increase control over subjects and to facilitate the accumulation of capital—is Taylorism, which, as Federici argues, 'turned the mechanization of the workers' bodies into a scientific project' (2020: 12).

Crucially, for Harvey—as for Marx before him—'the exigencies of capitalist production push the limits of the working body—its capacities and possibilities—in a variety of different and often fundamentally contradictory directions' (1998: 406). Harvey notes amongst these contradictions that 'on the one hand capital requires educated and flexible laborers, but on the other hand it refuses the idea that laborers should think for themselves. Capital requires certain kinds of skills but abhors any kind of monopolizable skill. […] Although subservience and respect for authority (sometimes amounting to abject submission) are paramount, the creative passions, spontaneous responses, and animal spirits necessary to the "form-giving fire" of the labor process must also be liberated and mobilized' (1998: 406). The consequence of this perverse dynamic is that 'healthy bodies may be needed but deformities, pathologies, sickness are often produced' (Harvey 1998: 406).

In the films of Delépine and Kervern, these tendencies are frequently staged over the weary, fatigued bodies of subjects who have spent their lifetimes labouring. The weary body is a common figure within art cinema, as Gorfinkel (2012b) identifies. Gorfinkel writes, drawing primarily upon

Deleuze, that '[w]eariness implies or forces a slowed pace, *a distended, delayed, or arrested productivity*' (2012b: 313, emphasis mine). The latter part of this quote is of particular relevance: each of the protagonists of these three films has undergone a departure—whether an expulsion or a conscious exit—from the labour force, and has thus ceased to be 'productive'. Gorfinkel also writes, intriguingly, '[a]n active inactivity, fatigue troubles a body's self-knowledge and performs a reflexive questioning of endurability. A corporeal threshold made temporal, the contingency, threat, and potential of tiredness lies in the question of its mutability, of when it will abate or transform into an energetic state' (2012b: 315). This excerpt is instructive, for it hints that tiredness might serve as the precursor to something new.

The potentialities of the body

At this point we must identify a tension at play. I have stressed thus far the extent to which capitalism's demands are imposed upon bodies, yet the body cannot simply be reduced to a by-product of the processes of capital accumulation, nor must bodies be considered only as inert or passive entities upon which meanings become inscribed. It is also crucial to consider the ways in which bodies actively intervene in the creation of the world around them. The films addressed in this chapter represent an excess within subjects which goes beyond the forces of capital: while capital undoubtedly imposes itself to a great extent upon these characters' bodies and subjectivities, the subject can never be completely colonised. It is instructive at this point to return to Harvey, who expresses the nature of this contradiction incisively, writing that

> even if labor under the domination of capital is condemned for the most part to produce the conditions and instruments of its own domination […] the transformative and creative capacities of the laborer always carry the potentiality (however unimaginable in the present circumstances) to fashion an alternative mode of production, exchange, and consumption. Those transformative capacities can never be erased (1998: 413).

What we are dealing with here, then, are particular patterns of gesture that often articulate this tension between colonisation and resistance, emerging in relation to the socioeconomic developments of neoliberalisation. To borrow Lauren Berlant's words, these gestural economies 'register norms of self-management that differ according to what kinds of confidence people have enjoyed about the entitlements of their social location' (2011: 5); they are elements of impulse and

instinctual expression that seem to escape language. With this theoretical framework in mind, I will now address each of the three films in turn.

Louise-Michel

Louise-Michel's diegesis takes place in an unnamed French town which is undergoing a process of deindustrialisation. Towards the beginning of the film, its protagonist, Louise (Yolande Moreau), is made redundant from her job in a toy factory, along with her co-workers. The apparent stability of Fordist employment is disappearing before these subjects' eyes: indeed, one day Louise and her colleagues turn up at the factory to find that the machinery therein has literally disappeared. The aggrieved women decide to pool their redundancy payments together in order to pay for the assassination of their former boss. Louise must source the would-be assassin; she stumbles upon the hapless Michel (Bouli Lanners) in a chance encounter, and they embark on a mission to locate the factory's owner together. This constitutes a clear attempt to confront the sources of power of the kind we have seen elsewhere (in *En guerre*, for instance). The film uses this quest narrative to interrogate the ways in which neoliberalism functions; it will therefore be a key object of my analysis.

The two protagonists both have unconventional gender identities: Louise was born male and was named Jean-Pierre; she is now passing as a woman. Michel, on the other hand, was born as female and named Cathy; he is now passing as male. That their names become conjoined in the film's title hints towards its conclusion, in which the pair begin a romantic relationship after having shot the man they believe to be the factory owner. It also serves as a nod to the real-life Louise Michel, who was an important figure in the anarchist movements surrounding the Paris Commune (Thomas 1971). From this summary we can gather a clear idea of the distinctive style of Delépine and Kervern that is expressed in all three films considered in this chapter. This style is characterised by a dark, bizarre sense of humour—exemplified by surreal situations, eccentric characters and the extensive focalisation of bodies—that is used to effect a substantive critique of the nature of work in contemporary capitalism, and of social relations in neoliberal societies more generally.

Bodies and work

Louise-Michel features a brief representation of work prior to the expulsion from labour that takes place. This scene depicts women performing a range of different roles—of which sewing is the most prominent—in the toy factory (Figure 74). The process here bears clear traces of the Fordist

organisation of production. Most obviously, it involves the mass production of standardised consumer goods; the division of labour is also notable, with each woman working on a different, specialised task. The repetitious nature of this work is emphasised through shots of hands packing toys into boxes on the assembly line; the rhythms of production are accentuated through the diegetic noises of sewing machines. The film's repetitive, rhythmic depiction of these women clearly resonates with Harvey's and Federici's descriptions of machinic working bodies that are integrated into the broader productive apparatus. In a straightforward sense, this sequence also illuminates the ways in which different bodies are coded to perform different kinds of work: sewing is a skill which has historically been performed by women rather than men.

Figure 74

Louise-Michel also explores the different demands placed on the working body in a more explicit and polemical fashion. At one important moment, Louise states that she chooses to present as a woman in order to secure employment amongst the female workforce in the factory. Michel, on the other hand, is compelled to pass as a man because of his need to work as a security guard. This is revealed through a visit to his parents, who are greatly discomfited by his gender presentation. Indeed, his father states, 'I'll never get used to it'; his mother retorts, 'What did you want? It was either that or unemployment.'[148] Of course, it is comparatively rare that subjects are forced to change their gender identities to such a significant extent in order to find work. However, beneath this surreal

[148] 'Je m'habituerai jamais'; 'Qu'est-ce que tu veux ? C'était ça ou le chômage.'

representation there lies a transparent critique of the processes by which bodies must be contorted and their manifestations governed through the institutions of the labour market.

One early scene which exemplifies this critique comes when Flambart, the assistant manager of the factory, visits Louise at her home in order to take a cut of her salary (owing to a debt that Louise had accrued). Louise is often verbally uncommunicative, frequently grunting rather than speaking in full sentences; this places significant emphasis on her body here and throughout the film. Upon arriving at her apartment, Flambart demands that she tries on a new work smock. He has apparently accidentally had 'Jean-Pierre' inscribed upon the garment, something that dismays Louise. Once Louise has changed into the smock, Flambart instructs her to pretend that he is not there and proceeds to watch over her, making bizarre noises while he stares (Figure 75). The absurd demands of employment upon subjects are a key object of satire: Flambard maintains direct power and surveillance over Louise's body, even outside of work.[149] Indeed, the fact that he inscribes 'Jean-Pierre' upon Louise's smock suggests that he even holds a certain control over her name and gender identity. The affective dimensions of the worker-boss relationship are emphasised: Louise is left humiliated and largely powerless at the hands of her economic superior. This marks a key example of the film utilising surreal humour to force a more serious societal critique to the surface.

Figure 75

[149] This scene can also be seen as commentary upon the power hierarchies of the creditor/debtor relation, something that is key to neoliberalism (see Lazzarato 2012; 2015); however, there is limited space to discuss this here.

In addition to its focus on the non-conforming bodies of Louise and Michel, the film depicts a number of bodies that are closer to the ideals privileged in contemporary society. An early example of this comes during a flashback Louise experiences during Flambart's visit to her apartment. The viewer is transported back to the moment at which Louise murdered a bank manager who, like Flambard, had come to collect debt repayments. The bank manager is framed in the centre of this shot, neatly groomed and wearing a suit and tie; he talks assuredly about the debts that Louise owes. Significantly, Louise remains out of shot; the viewer can only hear her slurring incomprehensibly. The framing here represents a kind of boundary of acceptability from which Louise is denied access: this boundary suggests that bodies such as Louise's are destined to remain beyond the margins of society. The scene concludes as a shotgun comes into frame; Louise pulls the trigger and the bank manager's head explodes in a moment of surreal gore. The film's representation of violent revenge against representatives of the capitalist classes is something I examine in more detail below.

This theme is further developed as the protagonists are led to Jersey in their quest to track down the owner of the factory. On their travels, Louise and Michel encounter various slender, mobile young bodies which consistently escape their grasp. For instance, one scene in a business headquarters sees the protagonists struggling to keep up with a young woman who floats through the corridors on a Segway (Figure 76)—a personal transportation vehicle which clearly embodies a kind of individual mobility that resonates with the dominant norms of neoliberal subjecthood. Another sees a man swiftly pace away from Louise and Michel, aided by a GPS device which guides him through the streets. The besuited bodies of these characters, aided by technology, seem to confer class privileges that Louise and Michel can only dream of; their neat, disciplined bodies are contrasted with the excesses of Louise and Michel.[150] Further, the fact that Louise and Michel struggle to keep pace with these characters reflects the broader theme that echoes throughout this film of the unknowability of a rapidly-changing world, experienced most palpably through the body.

[150] The suggestion of the importance of embodied discipline to successful neoliberal subjecthood bears certain parallels with the representation of Emilie's body in *Corporate*.

Figure 76: A belonging body

The thwarted search for power

Despite their best efforts, the pair are unable to confront the true owner of the factory. Their journey constitutes an attempt to locate the sources of neoliberal power that is thwarted at each step; the film draws upon this for comic effect. The persistent inability of the pair to confront the owner of the factory reflects not only their ineptitude as assassins, but, as we have seen in many other films, the near-impossibility of coming face to face with an embodiment of capital in neoliberal societies that are characterised by increasing economic, political, and social complexification. A particularly pertinent moment takes place in Jersey, when Louise and Michel believe (again) that they have managed to track down the true address of the factory owner. However, upon their arrival they discover it merely to be a letterbox (Figure 77)—an administrative formality in a jurisdiction characterised by opaque legislation whose purpose is to enable the accumulation of capital. Significantly, it is revealed in a coda that the factory was actually owned by a pension fund based in Florida; thus, there was never a single embodiment of the factory ownership that Louise and Michel could have located. As Bénédicte Vidaillet and Grégory Gamot argue, then, one of the film's primary themes is 'the difficulty in identifying where power lies' (2015: 988). In this regard, Louise and Michel's attempts to confront an embodiment of capital bear similarities with those of the workers in *En guerre*, who were engaged in a similar (and similarly fruitless) quest. As Vidaillet and Gamot

continue, the message of the film is that the absence of capital from the terrain of conflict makes its power 'almost impossible to oppose' (2015: 988); this is a theme that echoes broadly throughout my filmic corpus.

Figure 77: The letterbox

Louise and Michel do kill a number of other representatives of the capitalist classes, including in the film's climax, in which they break into an opulent Jersey mansion before shooting a businessman dead. Vidaillet and Gamot discuss the violence of this attempt to confront power from a Lacanian perspective, a framework that—while divergent from that which underpins much of this thesis—provides a productive means of thinking about the relationship between authority and the subject, and the displacement or substitution of desires. These thinkers argue that in the absence of an identifiable big Other, or master signifier, workers 'attempt to reconstruct a symbolic point of authority' (2015: 1004). In the film, 'as the ultimate decision maker cannot be found anywhere, [Louise and Michel] kill all those who, at some time or other, have claimed to personify a symbolic point of authority when relaying decisions affecting the workers of the factory' (Vidaillet and Gamot 2015: 1007). In more straightforward terms, these acts are compensatory: unable to reach the intended target, Louise and Michel simply pick out the next-best option. They might even be considered as a kind of reversal of the expulsion from labour that is imposed upon Louise and the other workers: having been forced out of the workforce, Louise and Michel force an expulsion from life itself upon their targets. For Vidaillet and Gamot, these acts represent a type of 'spectacular

violence' (2015: 1007) that can be 'quasi-religious' (2015: 1008). It is violence shorn of strategy, and can thus largely be differentiated from the 'symbolic, codified and "framed" violence' (Vidaillet and Gamot 2015: 1007) that often characterises acts such as strikes, protests or demonstrations. Once more, the behaviour of Louise and Michel resonates with some of the acts of violence that pepper *En guerre*, but also to a certain degree with the final moments of *Jamais de la vie*: these films all depict moments of blind aggression that are (mis)directed towards adversaries who prove difficult, if not impossible, to confront.

The film stops short of wholly endorsing these violent acts: in the end, the pair are never able to restore justice through these means. They are also clearly comedic; there is consequently little sense that this might constitute a serious oppositional strategy. In spite of this, *Louise-Michel* also evinces sympathy with the behaviour of its protagonists. Significantly, its clearest moment of resolution comes after Louise and Michel's final murder. Further, members of the capitalist classes are satirised and critiqued extensively in the film. Their greed and disregard for those subordinate to them is never in doubt; they are therefore presented, to a certain extent, as worthy targets of violence. The film's allegiances are spelled out just as the credits are about to begin through a poem that is written on the screen: 'Now that we know that the rich are thieves, if our father or mother were not able to purge them from the earth, when we grow old, we will make them into mince meat'.[151] Thus, while the naïve, dangerous, and sometimes manipulative acts of violence that Louise and Michel enact are ultimately futile, they also express a desire to redress the balance of power between workers and capital that the film at least partially supports.

Exit from labour

Importantly, however, Louise and Michel ultimately find solace not primarily through the acts of violence themselves, but through the discovery of each other, and concomitantly of their less-alienated selves. This process of de-alienation occurs through the coming together of previously atomised individuals, and emerges in the form of new patterns of gestures. This is exemplified during the film's conclusion: immediately after the killing of the supposed boss figure, Louise and Michel dance exuberantly around the lavish house they have invaded (Figure 78). The motions of their bodies seem unfamiliar to the pair but are nonetheless clearly acts of joy; they contrast starkly with the trudging, weary gestures that characterised their movements throughout much of the rest of the film. We witness new, previously unknown gestures begin to emerge as the old ones break

[151] 'Maintenant que nous savons que les riches sont des larrons, si notre père, notre mère n'en peuvent purger la terre, nous, quand nous aurond grandi, nous en ferons du hachis'

down, opening up a new space of possibility; this recalls Berlant's suggestion that '[t]he gesture […] makes time, holding the present open to unpredicted exchange' (2011: 198-9). The pair hug for the first time; at this point, the film cuts to a black frame with the words 'Some months later' upon it.[152] The next time we see the pair they have been imprisoned, and Cathy (Michel) is giving birth to their child, appearing elated (Figure 79).

Figure 78

[152] 'Quelques mois plus tard'

Figure 79

In this regard, the film resolves with a straightforward and slightly sentimental valorisation of love that plays a compensatory narrative role. However, this conclusion also represents a certain type of exit from labour that hints towards a theme that is developed in *Mammuth* and *Le Grand Soir*: the fundamental rejection of the demands of work. Importantly, the prison that houses Jean-Pierre (Louise) and Cathy (Michel) is a space that is detached from productive processes. Despite the presence of priests and nuns—whom we might expect to be socially conservative characters—the couple are free to exist in their androgynous, non-conforming bodies in it, away from the demands of figures such as Flambart and indeed the embodied pressures of contemporary society more generally. This is certainly an unconventional and unlikely post-work, anti-work, or anti-capitalist arena, but it is an implicit space of liberation nonetheless.

The film's final coda, which takes place after the credits have finished, deserves further mention. At this point, the group of women from the factory discover that the man Louise and Michel killed in Jersey was not the real owner; they vow to continue the fight to track this figure down. In one respect, this is another comedic moment which stresses the futility of the search to locate and confront power. We know that the women's actions are almost certain to be pointless: there is no way to assassinate a pension fund, after all. Yet this also serves as a very implicit nod to the importance of collective struggle in any opposition to neoliberalism: even as the film ends, *la lutte continue*. In sum, *Louise-Michel* makes a sustained critique of the demands and contortions that the capitalist productive process imposes upon bodies, satirising these demands through its surreal sense of humour. New forms of gestures begin to emerge over these bodies once they are freed from the demands of work. The expulsion from labour thus leads to something more positive: a tentative embodied rejection of the tenets of work.

<u>*Mammuth*</u>

Mammuth develops a number of these themes, placing a spotlight on unbelonging bodies in a different context. The film tells the story of Serge Pilardosse (Gérard Depardieu), a large man who lives in a small house in suburban France with his wife, Catherine (Yolande Moreau appears in one of her repeated collaborations with Delépine and Kervern). Serge's body is, like those of Louise and Michel, defined by its excess—its large size in particular. He also shares a tendency towards non-communication with Louise; as in the former film, this encourages particular scrutiny of the body. Serge has recently turned sixty and is about to retire from his job as a slaughterhouse worker. Upon

finishing his final shift in the abattoir, he discovers from a welfare state bureaucrat that he will not be able to receive his pension until he is able to fill in a number of gaps in his employment history. Over the course of his working life, he has worked in a range of temporary, undocumented, or illegitimate occupations, including as a gravedigger, handyman, security guard and fairground hand. His employers have often failed to complete the requisite paperwork, presumably in order to avoid paying tax.

The film's narrative centres around the road trip Serge must take from his home to the premises of various former employers aboard the Münch Mammut motorcycle from which the film derives its name. Unlike Louise and Michel's quest, there is little sense that Serge wants to confront the sources of capitalist power on this journey. However, the film uses his encounters with former bosses and workplaces to explore the workings of neoliberalism and its relation to the Fordist past. The journey engenders in Serge a gradual realisation that the world of employment he once knew has changed immeasurably, and that any sense of permanence or groundedness he may have derived from a life spent labouring now seems unsettled. During the latter part of the film, he finds a form of inner peace and a sense of freedom through companionship with his niece, Miss Ming (Miss Ming), and her group of friends, who inhabit bohemian existences outside of the conventional frameworks that have characterised Serge's life. Importantly, these subjects appear to reject work altogether. In what follows, I analyse the film's depiction of work and worklessness, paying particular attention to the gestural economies that emerge.

Work

Like *Louise*-Michel, the film provides us with only a brief glimpse of Serge's working life in the abattoir, at its very start. At this stage, *Mammuth*'s comic tone has yet to be made clear; indeed, these early scenes, shot like the rest of the film on Super 16mm stock, appear as though they could have been taken from a gritty, sombre documentary. The visual impact of the shots is reinforced by the diegetic sound—a mixture of tools slicing through bones and pigs squealing as they are put to the slaughter. We see bodies of pigs hanging on hooks as Serge lumbers past with a large and heavy carcass draped over his shoulder (Figure 80). He drops the pig onto the cutting table, and his co-workers methodically slice and tear the animal apart using a range of hand tools and machinery. The division of labour in the abattoir is plain to see, with workers' bodies moving rhythmically as they go about their designated tasks. The clear enmeshment of the workers' bodies in the production process resonates once more with Harvey's and Federici's descriptions of the machinic working body. Harvey's assertion that 'capital circulates, as it were, through the body of the laborer […] and

thereby turns the laborer into a mere appendage of the circulation of capital itself' (1982: 157) seems particularly apposite; in this scene, 'work does not treat the body as something extraneous, it *steps through* the body into the muscles and into the head' (Melossi 1981: 63, emphasis in original). As in *Louise-Michel*, the coding of different bodies to perform different kinds of work is clear: this is an entirely masculine space.

Figure 80

Unemployment and the body

The sense of order, boundedness, and purpose imparted by the working environment contrasts starkly with Serge's existence in retirement, which is instead characterised by an overwhelming sense of uncertainty and precariousness. In the first days following his departure from work, he finds himself in a restless state, with few substantive tasks to fill his day. One memorable moment sees him pacing up and down the living area of his home, the heft of his body overwhelming the cramped space (Figure 81). This physical attempt to find order amidst listlessness and boredom contrasts with the earlier scenes in the abattoir, yet at the same time both suggest that the discipline intrinsic to the productive process becomes deeply ingrained within the body. In this case it tries to find an outlet through repetitive, rhythmic movements: Serge's body is haunted by machine-like gestures, even as he is no longer part of the greater machine of production. Again, this resonates with the descriptions of embodied discipline that Harvey and Federici put forth, but what is interesting about the film's depiction is that it occurs outside of the working environment itself. While Harvey and

Federici concentrate primarily on the forces imposed on the body during the labouring process, the film gives a sense of an even more deeply pervasive mechanism: the remnants of these gestures continue to try to find release even as Serge has been expelled from the workforce.

Figure 81

Serge's disorientation is not confined to the space of the home. A visit to the supermarket sees him damage two vehicles in the car park, attempting to ram his shopping trolley between them. He also gets into an altercation with a meat counter employee, and upon finding a collapsed body on the floor of the aisles simply prods it with a baguette—as if testing for signs of life.[153] The bright artificial light in the vast building underlines its status as an alien environment: Serge effectively finds himself placed under a spotlight. Catherine also works at this supermarket and is demoted from her position as a result of his behaviours; she later castigates him for this and for his ineptitude more generally. As in films such as *Jamais de la vie*, then, *Mammuth* dramatises a crisis of (Fordist) masculinity through its representation of Serge. Sue Harris summarises this situation succinctly: 'Serge's new state of idleness' is 'characterized by incomprehension, inarticulacy and emasculation. His participation in the labour force and his attendant productive citizenship have been abruptly taken from him by arbitrary forces' (2015: 328).

This affective environment is further developed as Serge departs on the winding journey to retrieve his paperwork. One important early scene sees him perched atop a bunk bed in a hostel, wearing

[153] These moments are typical of the surreal physical humour employed in the film.

practically nothing on his lower half (Figure 82). In a bed that resembles that of a child, dressed in a manner befitting a child, he reaches to a phone he has borrowed from Catherine and calls her to reassure her that he is managing to get by. Serge leaves multiple messages, stuttering and rushing to get his words out. While played out for comic effect, his hesitant, uncertain movements, chaotic speech, and scant clothing convey a sense of vulnerability that reflects his status as a subject whose body has been used and who has now been rendered redundant. The near complete lack of meaningful dialogue encourages particular scrutiny of the body in this scene, highlighting the ways in which *Mammuth* eschews language and mobilises the body in order to register the structural effects of neoliberalisation.

Figure 82

Another crucial moment comes later in the film's runtime, during a scene in which the documents that Serge has gone to great lengths to retrieve have started flying off the back of his motorbike. The film again emphasises Serge's vulnerability, hunched over as he collects the paperwork, and with cars flying past him: he is 60 years old but his trudging gait and misshapen posture betray a tiredness and exhaustion befitting a man much older (Figure 83). A sense of premature ageing stands in a certain tension with the tentative movements of his limbs and the confused expression on his face, which suggest the return of a certain child-like nature—an inability to understand and react to a world that is changing rapidly. Indeed, the movement of the cars passing by—counterposed with Serge's relative stasis—might be read as a metaphor for a world that is leaving him behind. The scene also encourages the viewer to consider the ephemerality of a lifetime spent working.

Depardieu's large, fatigued body is juxtaposed with the papers that disappear in the breeze. The body bears the physical marks of the labouring process, whereas the paper represents the bureaucratic trace of its previous working existence. Only one of these—the paperwork—promises any future economic value, however, and it is slipping away from Serge in the wind, escaping the slow movements of his limbs.

Figure 83

Serge's body has internalised the forces imposed upon it through a lifetime spent labouring, yet upon its eviction from labour is confronted with a world that has no place for it: it is now unbelonging. It therefore exists in a processual relationship of accumulation and absorption with the environment around it; this resonates with the thoughts of Harvey, Federici, and a diverse range of other thinkers (see Blayney, Hornsby and Whaley 2023, for instance). How might we interpret the particular gestural economy that the film develops, which is characterised by both a profound weariness and a kind of regression to childhood?

Serge's weariness has straightforward origins: it is the result of his lifetime spent physically labouring, and also implies what Gorfinkel describes as an 'arrested productivity' (2012b: 313). A turn to Berlant's theorisation of 'impasse' helps cast further light upon the counterpart to this weariness—a reversion to child-like motions.[154] Berlant argues that a particular type of impasse is a key feature of neoliberalism, in which 'the promise of the good life no longer masks the living

[154] I have used the word impasse in a number of different contexts throughout this thesis. In this discussion, I use it according to Berlant's particular theorisation.

precarity of this historical present' (2011: 196). The impasse is a paradoxical sense of 'crisis ordinariness' (2011: 10) in which the present is experienced as both momentous and banal. Importantly, it can manifest as 'a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is *at once intensely present and enigmatic*, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things' (2011: 4, emphasis mine). Berlant's description of the world as 'intensely present and enigmatic' captures well the way in which these environs confront Serge. His physical presence in the neoliberal world is never in doubt, yet its enigmatic qualities are frequently overwhelming, thus provoking child-like or otherwise bizarre embodied responses. It is also clear that he is engaged, often unsuccessfully, in an attempt to collect information that might help him make sense of the crisis of the present. The film thus depicts an impasse—and a particular embodied response to impasse—that emerges in the wake of the decline of the Fordist productive paradigm and its associated welfare state. While in Berlant's conception impasse is not always experienced negatively, the film clearly critiques the sense of loss and disorientation that Serge is confronted with upon his exit from the labour force, in spite of the humour that permeates the diegesis.

In this respect, the film's framing of the breakdown of Fordism echoes those of a number of other films within this corpus. We might consider a comparison between Serge and Laurent, from *En guerre*, for instance: both find themselves out of place within the structures of neoliberalism. Serge's listlessness also bears similarities to that of Franck in *Jamais de la vie*; his grappling with bureaucracy parallels that of Thierry in *La Loi du marché*. Like these characters, Serge must be seen as an archetypal (if, at the same time, rather singular) example of a subject who entered into a bargain with the institutions of Fordism; this is one example of what Berlant refers to as an attachment to 'the promise of the good life' (2011: 196). As in the other films, the implicit promises of the Fordist consensus—in this case, that subjects would be rewarded with relative comfort in retirement in reward for lifetimes spent labouring—are collapsing in the neoliberal era. This disintegrating pact is no longer enough to mask 'the living precarity' (Berlant 2011: 196) of the neoliberal present; this is experienced on a material level but also as a broader affective atmosphere.

The film also casts a more specific gaze over the changing nature of work across the Fordist and post-Fordist eras. In one critical example, a mill at which Serge used to work has been replaced by a graphic design business named Funny Rabbit. Upon arrival, Serge buzzes the intercom and lists off his former duties at the mill in order to identify himself. However, the woman on the other end of the line understands nothing of the list of equipment and manual jobs that Serge recounts to her; the building has of course been emptied of the machinery that he describes. His reaction to the mill's closure is one of sheer bewilderment: he simply has no concept of what might have taken its

place. This scene is interesting in a number of respects. Firstly, it reflects upon the ways in which the kind of fixed capital that was critical to Fordist production has been superseded by increasingly mobile, nomadic operations, unencumbered by the ties to place that material production requires. The fact that the operator on the other end of the intercom remains off-screen and thus disembodied—contrasting with Dépardieu's hulking frame—further accentuates this impression. Secondly, the fractured conversation between the two parties makes clear that the machinery of material production that defined Serge's existence is not only missing physically, but is absent from the contemporary discursive field as well: there appears to exist little shared vocabulary between the two parties to describe the experience of work. This is exemplified most poignantly when the woman at Funny Rabbit tells Serge to go to the company's (web)site (*site*). Serge can only respond, 'The site? But I'm on the site!'.[155] In a final respect, Lane identifies this scene as encapsulating the crisis of Fordist masculinity that the film depicts more broadly. The building of Funny Rabbit has been painted bright pink; the femininity of the intercom operator is also significant given the association of neoliberal labour with a process of feminisation (Morini 2007). Thus, Lane argues that the scene charts the displacement of 'a form of masculine artisanal labour […] by a feminised, deterritorialised, dematerialised service sector activity carried out by a company with a jarringly "Anglo-Saxon" name' (2020: 103-4).

While the film's depiction of Serge's experience of unemployment is undoubtedly critical, *Mammuth* also clearly rejects nostalgia for a life spent working. In addition to its depiction of the brutality of the slaughterhouse and the fatigue that is inscribed on Serge's body, the film evinces a number of other substantive critiques of work. Most obviously, Serge's encounters with disdainful former bosses represent an attempt to satirise the worker-boss relationship on a general level. The most important example of this comes during his visit to a vineyard. His former employer mockingly asks him a series of leading questions in an attempt to make him realise why he only occupied a subordinate position within the company, why he remained undocumented, and ultimately to make him come to terms with his own stupidity. When Serge is unable to grasp what his former boss is implying, the latter finishes the conversation by stating, simply, 'I'm going to help you […] you are stupid.'[156] Of course, Serge *is* hopelessly naïve and lacking in basic competencies, and the film clearly draws on this for comic effect. However, this exchange still serves to highlight the element of domination at the heart of the wage relation. In this respect, it must be seen as a satirical

[155] 'Le site ? Mais j'y suis sur le site !'. The theme of searching for permanence and physicality in a world increasingly characterised by the ephemeral and immaterial that this scene captures is common to both *Mammuth* and *Louise-Michel*, and indeed is a repeated motif throughout my corpus; I examine this in more detail below.

[156] 'Je vais t'aider […] tu es con.'

representation of the affective elements of class experience, in which subordination to and even humiliation by the owners of capital is commonplace. It is also an illustration of neoliberal responsibilisation in that Serge is made individually responsible for structural inequalities of power. This aspect of the film's critique is not confined only to Serge's experiences. One interesting moment sees Catherine remembering the first time she and Serge met—in the supermarket she was working at, as Serge was about to purchase a knife with which he planned to kill himself. Catherine is able to convince her future husband to put the knife back with the assertion that 'Life is shit, but you have to make do with it'. Tellingly, this conversation is expressed through a voiceover that represents Catherine's thoughts as she looks over her place of work and thus directly associates a 'shit life' with the act of working.[157]

The potentialities of the discarded body

Having identified the primary objects of *Mammuth*'s critique, it is important to examine the ways in which the film depicts the potentialities implicit in bodily relations and embodied experience. Most straightforwardly, as Serge becomes more accustomed to the boundlessness of his new existence he begins to derive pleasure from simple bodily experiences: taking his hands off the handlebars of his motorbike, or swimming in a lake (Figure 84), for instance. We have explored in some detail how the impasse that confronts Serge upon leaving the labour force has been experienced negatively, yet these moments point towards a different meaning of the impasse—one which offers tentative possibilities for change (see Berlant 2011: 263). In these moments, the film depicts the inverse of the processes of discipline and confinement that we witnessed briefly during the scene at the slaughterhouse: fleeting moments of bodily pleasure appear as the potential precursors of the new horizons that open up as the film advances. We should recall Berlant's description of the embodied gesture as making 'the smallest opening' (2011: 199) in the fabric of everyday life: new gestures begin to emerge over Serge's body as the old ones are in the process of breaking down, in a similar albeit further pronounced manner to that which we witnessed in *Louise-Michel.*

[157] 'La vie est merde, mais comme même il faut faire avec'

Figure 84

These impulses are developed later in the film, in which the focus moves from individual bodily pleasures to a more substantial treatment of the collective. In one significant scene, Serge is with Miss Ming and her friends. The group is sat on top of a water tower, smiling and leaning on one another. Serge lies amongst them, appearing as though he has finally regained the capacity to rest: the machine-like gestures have now vacated his body. It appears that the impasse has forced a questioning in Serge: his attachments to and identifications with the figure of the worker are slowly being undone. Lazzarato's valorisation of 'laziness' provides a useful complement to Berlant's suggestion of the potentialities implicit in the impasse. Lazzarato defines laziness as a form of inactivity that amounts to a refusal of work: he writes, 'I call "laziness" political action that at once refuses and eludes the roles, functions, and significations of the social division of labor and, in so doing, creates new possibilities' (2015: 246). It is the impasse that confronts Serge that allows him to finally rest—to embrace a kind of laziness—and thus to refuse the (embodied) role, function, and signification of worker. From this rupture, new possibilities—a new kind of subjectivity, in particular—emerge, of which more below.

We might also consider how the only other time we witness Serge depicted as part of a collective is during the scene in the abattoir, in which he was embedded in the collective machinery of production. Gilbert argues that '[c]apitalism works […] by regulating our modes of relationality, prohibiting many types of relationship and only enabling others, to ensure that only those which facilitate capital accumulation can occur' (2014: 129). By contrast, the film depicts the brief

emergence of a space in which the embrace of a collective that is not oriented towards capital accumulation becomes a potential site of (embodied) resistance. The difference between these two types of collective is emphasised through divergent patterns of editing. In the scene at the water tower, the camera swiftly moves between different body parts and faces in shaky close-up shots (Figure 85). The grainy images from the Super 16mm film flicker, and at times it is unclear which body part belongs to which person. As well as suggesting the emergence of a fragile collective, this editing also hints towards a process of decentring the subject: the swift movements between different parts of different bodies suggest a diminution of the importance of the individual, and the often blurry focus hints towards a concomitant undoing of the boundedness of individual bodies. The somewhat anarchic, liberated affective environment shared amongst this group is expressed through this camerawork; this is counterposed with the machinic discipline evidenced in the abattoir, which made more use of static cameras and routinely rhythmic editing.

Figure 85: Blurred bodies

A voiceover in the film's closing scenes emphasises the scale of the subjective transformation that Serge has experienced. Serge has uncovered what must be considered a kind of 'authentic self': he has sold his motorbike, started wearing a large and colourful kaftan, and embraced a sensitive, artistic disposition. Like Louise and Michel, he is able to discover a sense of liberation upon leaving the labour force and rejecting the norms of work. Consequently, he decides to return to school to complete a philosophy exam alongside a classroom full of teenagers. As he writes, Miss Ming's extra-diegetic voice reads his words: 'Work: my little finger tells me I've done it all my life. All my life,

counting the hours. My whole life, drenched in pouring sweat. All I earned in the hard winter, I spent in the summer, year after year. [...] I worked and sold my soul to forget [...] Now I can say to you, I lived the worst, but thanks to my muses, I know that from now on my only work is to love.'[158] This clear rejection of productivism represents a significant break with the subjectification that had defined Serge's life up until this point.

The limitations and potentialities of exit

This exit from labour must be placed into context with the others that we have identified across this corpus. The film's conclusion perhaps bears most similarities with that of *Deux jours, une nuit*. Both works depict the development of collectives that are opposed (to varying degrees) to the social norms of neoliberalism; both resolve with what is effectively an individual action that does not in itself effect structural change—a conscious exit from labour. Further, as with Sandra's refusal of the employment contract, Serge's behaviours in the film's closing moments are self-sacrificial: having collected the requisite documents to receive his pension, he donates the proceeds to Miss Ming. This recourse to individual actions of generosity could be read as a further symptom of neoliberal depoliticisation. It is also important to examine the manner in which Serge discovers what appears to be his authentic self. Perhaps what we see here is not the creation of new a new subjectivity (as Lazzarato describes as one of the possibilities of laziness), but a more straightforwardly humanist concern with alienation—a kind of uncovering of Serge's true self. We might be left to question whether work can be rejected only through the discovery of such an authentic, artistically-inclined subjectivity.

Yet, *Mammuth* also points towards a more fundamental break from the dominant values of neoliberalism than the other films we have addressed so far. Having mapped out a specific embodied response to a present stricken by crisis, in which the breakdown of the Fordist consensus presents interrelated affective and material challenges, the film nonetheless harbours a clear belief in the potential for resistance even amongst weary subjects worn down by years of labouring. It also briefly acknowledges the importance of the collective in any such resistance, albeit this is overridden somewhat by the individualism of the film's ending. Most importantly, the rejection of productivism and the questioning of the very purpose of work itself entailed in Serge's exit from labour endows it

[158] 'Le travail, mon petit doigt me dit que je l'ai fait toute ma vie. Toute ma vie, à compter les heures, toute la vie, à verser les sueurs. Ce que je gagnais l'hiver tout entier, je le dépensais en été, année après année. […] J'ai travaillé comme un damné pour oublier […] Maintenant je peux vous le dire, j'ai vécu le pire, mais grace à mes muses, je sais que désormais mon seul travail c'est d'aimer.'

with a radicalism that goes beyond those exits we have seen elsewhere, even if it is couched in a fairly simplistic humanism. In all, *Mammuth* takes the discarded body of the worker as a starting point which, to borrow Federici's words, becomes the foundation for

> a refusal to reduce one's activity to abstract labor, to renounce the satisfaction of one's desires, to relate to our bodies as machines, and a determination as well *to define our body in ways that are nondependent on our capacity to function as labor* power (2020: 84, emphasis in original).

The theme of discarded and excessive bodies becoming springboards for thinking beyond neoliberalism is one which echoes throughout both *Mammuth* and *Louise-Michel*, but which perhaps finds its most refined expression in *Le Grand Soir*.

Le Grand Soir

Le Grand Soir foregrounds two middle-aged brothers who represent caricatures with opposing lifestyles and worldviews. The first of these is Not (Benoît Poelvoorde), a self-styled *punk à chien* who has his name tattooed on his forehead. Not has already undertaken a conscious exit from labour and, rather than working, spends much of his time drinking, loitering, and generally antagonising those around him, with his dog permanently in tow. Jean-Pierre (Albert Dupontel), on the other hand, is a mattress salesman who is initially enthusiastic about his role within the neoliberal system. However, due both to the ongoing financial crisis and his inability to reach his sales targets, he is informed that his job is at risk. With his personal life also in flux, he undergoes a journey of severe subjective and embodied decline. In a drunk, delirious state he vandalises the mattress shop and scrawls a resignation letter ('I quit this shit job'); his boss refuses to reinstate him when he returns the next day.[159] He also attempts, but fails, to commit suicide in the supermarket next to the mattress shop; this constitutes another example of (attempted) exit from labour. However, Jean-Pierre's trajectory begins to change as Not takes him under his wing, teaching him to reject work and to appreciate the joys of aimlessly wandering instead. As with the other two films, much of the runtime of *Le Grand Soir* centres around a journey that the protagonists embark on. However, this journey differs somewhat from the others we have encountered in that it has no clear objective; I explore the implications of this below. In response to the general state of the neoliberal present, Not and Jean-Pierre develop a plot to attack the shopping centre. The concluding moments of the film demonstrate the failure of these actions, due in large part to the lack of collective support

[159] 'Démissioner de ce boulot de merde'

the pair are able to muster. This is critical in that it demonstrates a more explicit acknowledgement of the need for a collective opposition to neoliberalism than either of the other two films (O'Shaughnessy 2022: 95).

Belonging and unbelonging bodies

Not is a character who, from the film's offset, fulfils the role of unbelonging body that we have encountered already in Serge, Louise, and Michel. Yet, the difference between Not and these other characters is that he quite deliberately styles himself as unbelonging. His nickname should be read as a deliberate rejection of conformity and convention; it is inscribed upon his body for all to see. Early moments that are representative of Not's behaviour see him wildly gesticulating in front of CCTV cameras, or dancing in front of a mirrored restaurant window (Figure 86)—much to the confusion of the diners inside. He embodies a joyful embodied excess and anarchic spirit that Delépine and Kervern clearly value.

Figure 86

Jean-Pierre is initially counterposed with Not, reflecting the kind of professional figure we have seen elsewhere in the works of these directors. He is often dressed in a suit and tie, signalling his allegiance to the status quo. He maintains embodied discipline throughout these early parts of the film, even when subject to humiliation at the hands of his boss and the would-be clients of the mattress shop (Figure 87). In this latter regard, *Le Grand Soir* documents a similar critique of work to the other two films, effectively depicting a range of embodied and subjective demands placed upon workers that form part of a broader system of domination and exploitation; the difference is that this critique takes place in a white-collar context. As the conditions of Jean-Pierre's employment and

personal life decline, however, these patterns of gesture begin to unravel, emerging in bizarre and unpredictable ways. To repurpose Gorfinkel's words, we might argue that Jean-Pierre's fatigue of the contradictory demands of work 'troubles [his] body's self-knowledge' (2012b: 313); this leads to increasingly erratic behaviour that contrasts starkly with the earlier vision of his embodied discipline.

Figure 87: Jean-Pierre at work

This trajectory reaches an early climax as Jean-Pierre is caught jumping wildly and violently between the beds at his place of work, leaving behind his resignation letter at the same time. In a later sequence, he throws his work phone in the air and pretends to shoot it; he also returns to the mattress shop and turns his imaginary gun on his boss (Figure 88). These moments reflect a kind of embodied wish fulfilment—a (sometimes imaginary) violence that Jean-Pierre targets at the perceived sources of his dismay. In this regard they represent a similar pattern to the one we encountered in *Louise-Michel*, in which a somewhat incoherent violence erupts against various embodiments of work and its associated figures or loci.

Figure 88

Around halfway through the film, Jean-Pierre attempts to commit suicide. He begins by drenching himself in petrol; his once-neat suit is now dirty and dishevelled, reflecting the distance he has taken from his former life. He then heads to the supermarket near to the mattress shop, tracked by the CCTV operator as he paces the aisles.[160] Centrally framed in the middle of the supermarket, the viewer is prepared for a spectacular event as Jean-Pierre sets himself alight, shouting 'Justice!'.[161] Drawing upon Žižek's Lacanian framework for understanding suicide, O'Shaughnessy defines this as an attempted suicide in the Lacanian *imaginary* (2022: 94). As noted in my Introduction, suicides in the *imaginary* are 'sustained by narcissistic satisfaction derived from the *imagined* effect on those chosen as witnesses of the victim's death which the victim himself or herself will not be able to observe for obvious reasons' (O'Shaughnessy 2019: 318, emphasis in original). At this point we should consider certain similarities with Laurent's acts in *En guerre*. Like the suicide in Brizé's film, Jean-Pierre's act of self-immolation is a suicide with political intent, aiming to impact upon its witnesses and lead to broader change. Yet, in contrast to Laurent's acts, which were filmed by an intended witness, not one of the shoppers notices Jean-Pierre's attempted suicide. Further, after just a few seconds, the sprinklers in the supermarket ceiling are activated, and the flames upon Jean-Pierre's body are extinguished (Figure 89). The failure of this act is critical: the film's message seems to be that the 'justice' that Jean-Pierre desires—a redressal of the power hierarchies of neoliberal work—cannot be achieved through these means alone. Its humorous tone allows it to take a certain distance from this attempted suicide: in representing it as a comic act, it demonstrates an implicit acknowledgement of the shortcomings in individual actions such as this, which are clearly

[160] The theme of surveillance apparatuses being weaponised against subjects is one which is also found in *La Loi du marché*, albeit the tone is very different here.
[161] 'Justice !'

disarticulated from a strategy that might achieve structural change. This sequence therefore points towards the political potentialities of comedy in the neoliberal era.

Figure 89: An unsuccessful suicide

An aimless quest

Jean-Pierre's attempted suicide functions as a springboard for a more prolonged process of unlearning. This takes place over the course of a journey that the pair undertake which bears certain similarities with those of Serge, Louise and Michel. However, as I have indicated, the journey that Not and Jean-Pierre take is defined by its lack of objective, distinguishing it from the others. The pair meander aimlessly through various different landscapes and engage in chance encounters with those around them (Figure 90). One notable (and surreal) moment sees them talk a man out of committing suicide. Their journey bears close resemblance to the Situationist practice of the *dérive* (drift) (Debord 1958).[162] As Guy Debord writes, the *dérive* is a practice during which 'one or more persons […] drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, […] and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there' (1958: 62). It is a journey of 'playful-constructive behavior' (Debord 1958: 62) with the potential to open up different horizons. Over the course of the journey, Jean-Pierre comes to reject the norms and values of the work that he once held so dear. Not begins the journey by telling his brother, 'I'm freeing you from the yoke—from work'; this is precisely what happens.[163] This trajectory is registered over Jean-Pierre's body. In the first instance, Not shaves the sides of his head—marking a rejection of the discipline with which

[162]Perhaps the closest comparison within my corpus of films is Vincent's journey to nowhere in *L'Emploi du temps*.
[163] 'je te libère du joug, de l'emploi'

his neatly-trimmed style was associated. Not later tattoos 'dead' on his brother's forehead; when stood together, the pair read 'not dead'—a permanent message of defiance. The film's rejection of the norms of work is thus more pronounced and developed than the ones we witness in the other two films. It openly valorises a form of exit from labour which challenges the values of work on a fundamental basis; this tendency is present in the other two texts but is not addressed so explicitly or repeatedly.

Figure 90: A dérive through the countryside

Articulating exit and politics

In its latter moments, the film hints implicitly towards the ways in which this anti-work philosophy might be articulated with a broader political project. Not and Jean-Pierre hatch a plan to 'fuck up the shopping centre', in order to redress the balance of power in favour of those who are 'poorly paid, poorly thought of'.[164] They attempt to gather mass support for this (ill-defined) action, including by speaking over the PA system in the supermarket itself. Yet, when the time comes—the titular *grand soir*—no one else turns up (Figure 91). Like Jean-Pierre's attempted suicide, then, this action is shown to be insufficient to lead to political change. The film's comic tone allows it to take distance from these acts while also evincing sympathy with them, in common with *Louise-Michel*'s treatment of its protagonists' murder spree. The failure of Not and Jean-Pierre to recruit any other people implies the need for a longer-term strategy of political movement-building in order to build a collective opposition to the conditions of neoliberalism, and the harms of neoliberal work in particular. This is not a message of dejection or hopelessness, however: rather, Not and Jean-Pierre

[164] 'Foutre le bordel dans la zone commerciale'; 'mal payés, mal considérés'

steal giant letters from each of the signs in the shopping centre and use them to spell out the defiant message 'We are not dead' on a slope (Figure 92). Like *Louise-Michel*, *Le Grand Soir* suggests the need for continued, ongoing political struggle, highlighting the difficulties in achieving it but also retaining hope for the future.

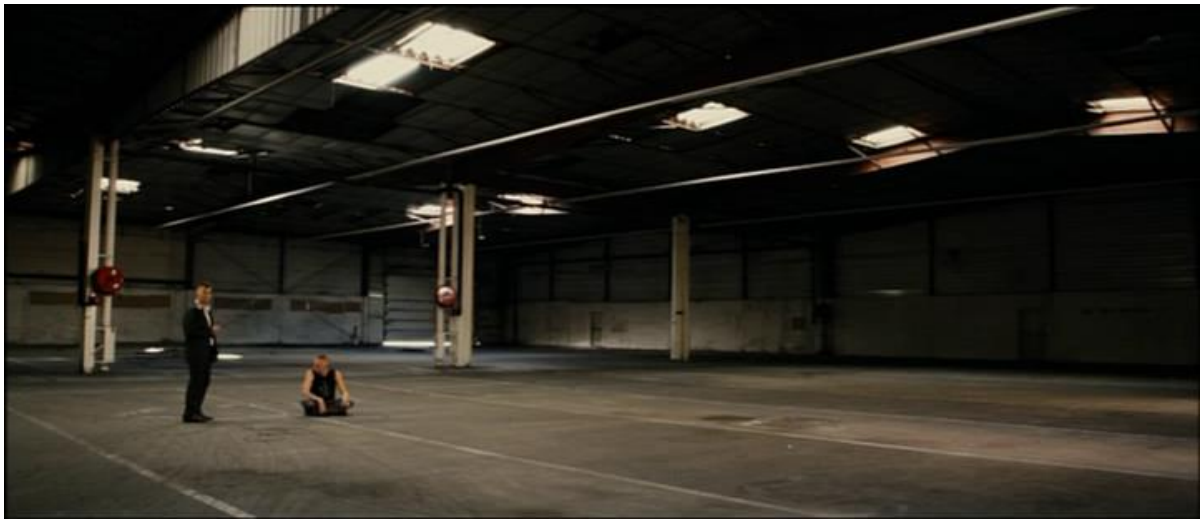

Figure 91

Figure 92

Conclusion

The films of Delépine and Kervern map out a range of gestural economies that emerge in response to the neoliberal conjuncture, and the expulsion from labour in particular. In the first instance, the bodies in these films were often characterised by a profound weariness. This in turn led to confusion and disorientation in the cases of *Mammuth* and *Louise-Michel*, and an erratic and unpredictable

rage in *Le Grand Soir*. Despite their varying states of decline, these films take the unbelonging bodies of workers as a springboard for thinking against and beyond the valorisation of work that is fundamental to neoliberalism. New gestural economies emerge as the films' protagonists undertake a form of the exit from labour that leads to a questioning of the foundational values of work. These range from taking simple pleasures from the act of not working (*Mammuth*) to more overt displays of embodied resistance (*Le Grand Soir*). It should be made clear that the films by no means attempt to offer a simple solution to the ills they depict. This is reflected in the fact that attempts to confront power often prove elusive in these films as they have elsewhere. Yet, these works differ somewhat from others we have encountered which adeptly critique neoliberalism but struggle to put forth positive visions of change. Rather, at points, they acknowledge the difficulty of establishing a political movement fit for the neoliberal era while also hinting towards the possibility and necessity of a collective politics that might be articulated with the anti-work subjectivities embodied in their protagonists. This expresses an implicit self-awareness of the limitations of film, which cannot plausibly point towards a direct route for political organisation, while at the same time rejecting political fatalism. It is for these reasons that these films represent some of the most interesting (and unique) responses to neoliberal work that we have encountered in this study.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I posed four clusters of research questions.

> First, what are the recurrent narrative motifs in work-centred Francophone film? How do these reflect, respond to, or indeed participate in the construction of the neoliberal present?
>
> Second, what archetypes of subjectivity emerge in this cinematic corpus, and how do these relate to neoliberalism? To what extent do these films show a coming into crisis of neoliberal subjects, and how is this stratified by class and gender?
>
> Third, in an age of neoliberal hegemony, how does this cinema attempt to do justice to the anxieties that it represents, and what modes does it employ to do this? In stronger words, in which ways might these films challenge voicelessness, track embodied resistances, and force different forms of violence and alternative practices into view?
>
> Finally, and most broadly, what possibilities and limitations does this cinematic corpus encounter in its attempts to represent neoliberal work? What does this tell us about cinema, neoliberalism, and the relationship between the two?

I will begin to respond to the first two clusters of questions by way of a recap. Each of the five chapters of filmic analysis that represent the core of my thesis reflects a broader narrative trend within contemporary work-centred film. Chapter 3, 'Resisting the threat of expulsion', examined two films: *En guerre* and *Deux jours, une nuit*. Both works centre around the looming threat of unemployment in the context of neoliberal deindustrialisation. The threat of expulsion from labour is a motif which unites my corpus more broadly, structuring the narrative of nearly every film therein. The films considered in this chapter feature two archetypes of subject: Laurent, a male trade unionist (*En guerre*), and Sandra, a precarious young woman (*Deux jours*). They respond to the threat of unemployment in different ways: Laurent heads a political campaign in his role as trade union leader; Sandra makes an ethical plea for recognition to her peers. Both characters reach points of severe crisis relating to their precarious positions within neoliberalism. Laurent commits suicide in the closing minutes of *En guerre*, while Sandra walks away from work in a quietly triumphant rejection of its tenets. These two exits from labour constitute an important mechanism through which these films attempt to do justice to the problems they critique, of which more below.

Chapter 4, 'After the struggle', analysed three films: *L'Atelier*, *Jamais de la vie* and *La Loi du marché*. Expulsions from industrial labour had already taken place in their diegeses, which are often characterised by widespread unemployment. Where work is depicted, it is the kind of service-sector work that is privileged in neoliberal economies. In this respect, the films move closer to a vision of advanced neoliberalism than those analysed in Chapter 3. An explicit focus of these works is the defeat of the labour movements that were most powerful during the Fordist era, and the question of how to deal with these losses. While each film depicts the pervasive influence of Fordist history within the contemporary, these traces of the past prove difficult to put to use in the neoliberal present of these diegeses. As in *En guerre*, the figure of the Fordist male in crisis is critical to *Jamais de la vie* and *La Loi du marché*. *L'Atelier* depicts a different type of masculine crisis through its protagonist Antoine, a young man drawn to violence and far-right politics. Together, these representations suggest that neoliberalism has significantly disrupted gender norms amongst working-class men.

The films addressed in Chapters 3 and 4 dramatise working-class contexts. In Chapter 5, 'Desiring neoliberal subjects', we broadened the analytical frame, probing the representation of middle-class subjects positioned close to the neoliberal ideal in two films: *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent*. This marked a significant step in our trajectory towards films which dramatise visions of advanced neoliberalism. Despite the different context, expulsion from labour and subjective crisis remain critical focuses of these works. Both Vincent (*L'Emploi du temps*) and Franck (*Ceux qui travaillent*) are forced out of work early in the narratives. They are committed neoliberal subjects (albeit not in straightforward ways), but struggle to meet the subjective demands imposed upon them; this leads them towards suicides. Neither character goes through with suicide, however, and in the conclusions of both films they return to work. Exit from labour is therefore shown to be impossible here, highlighting a different modality of this motif (more shortly). The protagonists' positions as patriarchs within traditional family units was a key element of our analysis. The family is an important reason behind their return to work; the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivities is shown to be deeply imbricated with the reproduction of traditional gender hierarchies and family models. This contrasts with the films considered in chapter 4, which depicted a neoliberal disruption of traditional gender norms.

Chapter 6, 'Women at work', continues in a similar direction, introducing a closer focus on representations of the gendered workplace pressures placed on bourgeois women in two films: *Numéro Une* and *Corporate*. The films depict pervasive forms of gendered control and power within the contemporary workplace. This proves a significant factor in the subjective crises of their protagonists, Emmanuelle (*Numéro Une*) and Emilie (*Corporate*). *Numéro Une* occupies a unique

position in my corpus, putting forth a positive vision of neoliberal work as a solution to the problem of patriarchal power. It suggests that the ideal neoliberal subject is female, endorsing a particular model of neoliberal subjecthood founded upon soft individualism and a communicative and empathetic form of labour. *Corporate* is more typical of my corpus in its critique of neoliberalism. New managerial techniques are its main concern, and are the primary mechanism of gendered power that the film critiques. The film suggests that neoliberalism contains and controls femininity rather than thrives upon it as in *Numéro Une*. In response to these problems, Emilie makes an ethical withdrawal from labour in alliance with the French state, also returning to her role as wife and mother within a relatively conventional family unit. The film valorises the power of the state and implicitly endorses a more traditional image of femininity in opposition to neoliberalism.

Chapter 7, 'Unbelonging bodies', marked a change in direction. The object of our analytical trajectory had steadily moved closer towards visions of advanced neoliberalism and committed neoliberal subjects, but the three films considered in this chapter—*Louise-Michel*, *Mammuth* and *Le Grand Soir*—often foreground protagonists who are at a significant distance from the neoliberal ideal. As indicated, the chapter's positioning is explained by the unique style and tone of these films. Deindustrialisation is a key concern of *Louise-Michel* and *Mammuth*, while white-collar precarity is foregrounded in *Le Grand Soir*. In some respects, the films repeat archetypes of subjective crisis we have seen elsewhere: that of the Fordist male in *Mammuth*, and of the white collar worker in *Le Grand Soir*. In other ways, these characters are quite singular: they are excessive and often non-verbal subjects who are out of step with the norms of the contemporary era. Exits from labour are critical to the politics of all three works. The exits that conclude the films bear close resemblance to the motif of ethical withdrawal. However, they are often more radical in their scope, and there is more of a sense of how they might be articulated with new subjectivities and a broader project for structural change.

We now have a clear idea of what this corpus says about neoliberalism in terms of its recurrent narrative themes and character archetypes, providing an answer to my first two clusters of research questions. The most prominent motif, occurring in nearly every film, is the threat of expulsion from labour, which is a symptom of the increasing precarity of workers which characterises the neoliberal era (see Chapter 2). Various subjective archetypes, including the Fordist male, the precarious woman, the young unemployed male, and the female executive, reach points of severe crisis. Together, this points towards a broader crisis in the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivities, and perhaps of neoliberalism more broadly. We might perhaps expect subjective archetypes such as the Fordist male to appear increasingly untenable in the neoliberal era, but my corpus suggests that the neoliberal project of disseminating the subjective model of human capital is riven with tensions in

diverse environments, including the white-collar workplaces within which we might expect *entrepreneurs of the self* to thrive. It resonates with Lazzarato's argument (2015: 14) that, in the context of material degradation and encroaching precarity, the promises of neoliberalism are not enough to sustain the reproduction of its dominant subjective models. I will now turn to the final two clusters of research questions, which relate more closely to *how* this corpus attempts to represent neoliberalism, and how it posits responses to the problems it critiques, including the possibility of the emergence of new subjectivities to replace those stricken by crisis. I will also interrogate the possibilities and limitations this corpus encounters as a whole, and consider what this suggests about the relationship between cinema and neoliberalism.

In response to the threat of expulsion and in an attempt to do justice to the problems of the present conjuncture, this corpus repeatedly employs two further motifs. First, films attempt to confront the workings of neoliberal power. Sometimes, this takes place in a direct fashion through protagonists' pursuits of powerful figures. Clear examples of this tendency include conspiracy thrillers such as *Numéro Une*, *Corporate*, and to a lesser extent *Jamais de la vie*. These texts identify small numbers of rogue operatives as the agents of workplace degradation, resolving with the unmasking or defeat of these figures. The use of conspiracy thriller forms clearly expresses a wish to map the contours of power that can only be partially fulfilled (see Jameson 1995: 1-2), and is always partially self-defeating. In this regard, it is a compensatory tendency which provides narrative closure in the face of the inability to figure the complex operations of neoliberal power. In some cases, conspiracy functions as a simplification of the workings of neoliberal power but nonetheless does identify convincing agents of exploitation and domination (*Corporate*); in others, the turn to conspiracy is less coherent (*Jamais de la vie*), and is more obviously symptomatic of the difficulty in identifying where power lies.

In other films, protagonists' attempts to confront power are thwarted. Examples include Louise and Michel's attempted assassinations (*Louise-Michel*), or the workers' attempts to reach management figures in *En guerre*. These films are often more successful than those which employ conspiracy thriller forms. In highlighting the inability of their protagonists to physically locate the source of their oppression, they paradoxically cast light upon structural forms of power more effectively. This represents an important way in which film shows an implicit awareness of its own positioning within neoliberalism. Some other works attempt to confront the workings of neoliberal power while making little attempt to identify representatives of capital, implicitly acknowledging their near-complete withdrawal from the terrain of struggle. *Deux jours, une nuit* is an important example. In this film, power has been devolved to 'everyday' subjects; its protagonist, Sandra, must confront her working-class peers in an attempt to change her situation. Films such as this suggest that

contemporary operations of power have become diffuse and increasingly complex. This often means that local change may be possible, but the fundamental rules of play are destined to remain the same.

With a broad idea of this motif in mind, it is important to turn to the specific mechanisms that film uses to dramatise it. The use of bodies to register the operations of power is a critical and recurrent technique employed in my corpus. *En guerre* is a pertinent example. Straightforwardly, in the confrontations between workers and management figures that constitute much of the film, different subjectivities are associated with different gestural economies and embodied norms.[165] As the conflict develops, the direct physical power of capital and its impact upon bodies becomes clearer. Denied access to the offices of the employers' organisation *MEDEF* and surrounded by security guards, the group of workers struggle to maintain a cohesive grouping. The once-united mass of bodies ultimately breaks into a confused, scattered violence. The workers' bodies register the frustration and difficulties of the conflict, while capitalist figures are able to withdraw from the scene of struggle. Bodies track the forces of neoliberalism in very different contexts. *Deux jours, une nuit* represents an image of embodied vulnerability and precarity that often remains unexplained through dialogue. *L'Emploi du temps* depicts an 'empty', zombie-like subject whose psyche has been colonised by the desires of the enterprise. *Mammuth* dramatises a gestural economy of weariness and confusion that relates to the transition from Fordism to neoliberalism. All of these constitute examples of film attempting to dramatise or confront the workings of neoliberal power through bodies.

What does this tell us about the relationship between this corpus and neoliberalism? I have identified three tendencies: unconvincing or incoherent conspiracy narratives, thwarted attempts to reach capital, and the near-complete absence of capitalist figures altogether. As indicated, together these suggest that power has become highly complex in neoliberal societies, in ways which characters struggle to confront in a convincing or productive manner. The complexification of neoliberal power poses a problem not just for the characters within these films, but for cinema itself.[166] Film is a medium that is grounded in the material, often privileging a singular narrative focus and a linear temporality. Power in neoliberal societies, on the other hand, frequently implicates

[165] This trend is evidenced throughout my corpus: in *Louise-Michel*, *Le Grand Soir*, *Corporate* and *Ceux qui travaillent*, for instance.

[166] That said, it is important not to overstate the novelty of neoliberal complexification, nor of film's difficulty in representing particular forms of power. Most forms of capitalism have been characterised by complex structural power relations. The nature of structural power is that it is difficult to physically confront, and thus also to represent through the semiotic codes of cinema. While the complexification of power structures in neoliberalism accentuates this difficulty, this tendency is not unique to the contemporary era.

immaterial elements as well as material ones, and relies upon the integration of multiple different operations at different times and in different places; it sometimes functions without a clear linear relationship between causes and effects (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019: 5, 17-21). The spatial and temporal parameters of mainstream cinema clearly struggle to confront this (Toscano and Kinkle 2015: 10-1); this partially explains the turn to the (individual) body as a locus of suffering. In the inability to represent structural power, film turns towards something it does know how to represent: the body. We should not see cinema's turn to the body as necessarily insufficient or obfuscatory, however. As we have explored, embodied representations can provide a stimulating counterpart and contrast to more abstract discursive theorisations of neoliberalism. Film is particularly successful when it is able to associate these bodily representations and gestural economies with broader power structures, even if it is not able to directly represent the latter. The cases of *En guerre* and *Mammuth* are pertinent examples of this.

The other, perhaps most significant, motif that we have examined is the counterpart to expulsion: exit from labour. While film's attempt to confront power serves to critique neoliberalism, the exit motif frequently moves beyond this, attempting to point towards visions of change. Exit takes a variety of forms. One is the kind of ethical withdrawal from labour that we see in *Deux jours, une nuit* and *La Loi du marché*, amongst others; another is the act of worker suicide that emerges across a majority of my corpus films. The repeated turn to the exit should be read as symptomatic of a number of different forces. Most important are the increasingly oppressive workplace conditions that frequently characterise neoliberalism. In expressing a desire to leave work behind and perhaps imagine alternative spaces outside of work, exit functions as a response to this. Exit is frequently detached from broader political projects that might lead to structural change, and nearly always takes place on an individual basis. In this regard it is a symptom of neoliberal depoliticisation and of the individualisation that is deeply embedded within both neoliberal rationality and the dominant codes of mainstream cinema. I expand upon these points below.

Different types of exit resonate differently. For instance, ethical withdrawal from labour serves as an attempt to challenge voicelessness and force alternative practices into view. It often restores dignity and agency to protagonists who have suffered significant hardship in their positions as precarious workers, hinting at the possibility of a break from neoliberalism. In some instances (*La Loi du marché*), it serves as an implicit attempt to put fragments of the lost battles of left-wing history to use in the present. In others (*Mammuth*, *Corporate*), it suggests the emergence of different forms of embodied subjectivity that are not oriented towards processes of capital accumulation. However, the exit it opens up is only very temporary; further, individual withdrawal from labour alone effects no structural change. While it is oriented towards the future, it frequently leaves protagonists

anchored to the neoliberal present. In this regard, it serves as a compensatory device in the absence of the possibility of broader political change.

The worker suicides which we see, on the other hand, appear far less agential than ethical withdrawal, and lack the compensatory qualities of the latter. Frequently occurring in workplaces or other associated loci (company headquarters, for instance), they emerge as a very last resort for subjects who have been forced into positions of extreme desperation. They often force the hardships of neoliberal work to the surface through moments of spectacular violence; in clear opposition to ethical withdrawals, they are characterised by their permanence. While functioning as powerful means of critique, they foreclose any sense of futurity. Suicide is, of course, an embodied action. These acts underscore the importance of the body to this corpus once more. As we have seen, film is frequently unable to directly confront structural power or offer political change. In this situation, the individual body emerges as the primary locus of suffering. In other cases, the potential for exit from labour is hinted at but only in order to shut off its possibility altogether, as in *L'Emploi du temps* and *Ceux qui travaillent*. Like other exits, this serves as an implicit demand for change, albeit one which underscores the strength of neoliberal power structures. In two other films—*L'Atelier* and *Numéro Une*—there is little trace at all of the attempted exit from labour in the face of expulsion. In the case of *L'Atelier*, this is a reflection of its distinctive formal organisation, which poses questions more than it attempts to offer solutions or closure. *Numéro Une*, on the other hand, does not turn towards the exit because it largely represents neoliberal work in a positive light unlike the other films in the corpus.

In the majority of these instances, exits from labour have limited—if any—effect on the broader structures of neoliberal work that the films expose. This reinforces the fact that work-centred cinema's turn towards the individual exit from labour must be considered as both reflective of and responsive to neoliberal depoliticisation: the closing down of political horizons. In this way, the repeated turn to exit within my corpus suggests that it is adept at critiquing neoliberalism, but struggles to convincingly point towards alternative practices or forms of living, except for in compensatory ways. However, some films counter this trend, articulating exits from labour with different structures and institutions. For example, *Corporate* takes its protagonist's withdrawal from neoliberal labour as a springboard for a valorisation of the nation state as a counterforce to the ills of the neoliberal workplace. This represents something of an over-identification with the powers of government, particularly given the (French Republican) state's role in advancing neoliberalism (Amable and Palombarini 2021; Kahn 1995). Nonetheless, it serves as a tacit acknowledgement that the structural change implicitly demanded by these films will not emerge from an individual exit from labour alone. In the rather singular films of Delépine and Kervern, addressed in the previous

chapter, there is a more explicit awareness that isolated withdrawals from labour are very limited in their effects. These films—*Le Grand Soir*, in particular—hint instead at the need for collective political movements that could harness the critique of work that is inherent in exits from labour. Exits from labour often reflect a hopelessness or serve as a compensatory device that masks the powerlessness of contemporary subjects, but these examples demonstrate the ways in which it can be put towards a different, potentially more hopeful, purpose. They show how exit can challenge the fundamental tenets of neoliberal work and open up the possibility of new kinds of subjectivity. At the same time they implicitly acknowledge the difficulties of political organisation in neoliberalism, hinting towards the need for new forms of collective organisation and leaving open the possibility of achieving them.

Filmography

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