FIVE **NEARLY UTOPIAN, NEARLY NORMAL**

Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*

1. *Nearly . . .*

In one sense, this chapter begins where the last one ended—in a scene where a contingent being tries, aversively and indirectly, to induce through an improvised relation with a semi-stranger an attachment that might become a solidarity that could produce more and better traction in the world; an attempt at a speculative intimate tethering more impulsive than strategic whose affective stakes are both unstated and profound. In *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, this situation amounts to a suspension of violence that throws the historical present into relief as a thing to be overcome by a completely, and perhaps gratefully, enigmatic future. In the films *La Promesse* (1996) and *Rosetta*

4. Rosetta chants herself to sleep (Dardennes, *Rosetta*, 1999)

(1999), written and directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, the scene is of aspiring to a tractable *present*. Two nearly utopian moments in the films mark the core desperation, and historical specificity, of this desire.

In the first, we find Rosetta at the end of a very long day. She has made a friend, Riquet, and through that friendship found an off-the-books job at a waffle maker, escaped her alcoholic and sexually profligate mother, and, with Riquet, spent the evening imitating what it might be like sometime to have fun with a friend or in a couple. She is awkward at this thing called relaxing but she is game; she'll take the risk of submitting to someone else's pleasure economy in order to get that *thing* she wants, whose qualities she describes as she goes to sleep: "Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You found a job. I found a job. You have a friend. I've got a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won't fall through the cracks. I won't fall through the cracks. Good night. Good night."

Many reviews of *Rosetta* call this catechistic quasi-prayer the film's most heartbreaking moment: for Rosetta, all the world of possible desires has been pared down to a friend and a job, a state of attaining some bare minimum of social recognition. But this is an episode of intimacy, belonging, and sociability that, ultimately, Rosetta can have only with herself, in the private, hoarded space that's usually occupied by a cramping pain—a condition of attrition that the film suggests is a symbol and consequence of the intensity of aching life-making activity that she otherwise goes through every day merely to survive. Even the measured tone of Rosetta's repetitions expresses the wish to be able to use the French *rester*, which means not to rest exactly but to stay somewhere, over time, in a place to which one can return: *I rest here*.

When some Belgians saw *Rosetta* they understood this scene to exemplify a national crisis, and the government promptly sponsored and passed

a law called the "Rosetta Plan" that forced businesses to hire the young Belgians who, like Rosetta, were desperately struggling to gain a foothold of any sort in the increasingly global economy.[1] Much contemporary theory defines citizenship as an amalgam of the legal and commercial activity of states and business and individual acts of participation and consumption, but Rosetta's speech about falling through the cracks and the effects of the cinematic event remind that citizenship, in its formal and informal senses of social belonging, is also an affective state where attachments that matter take shape.

Here, the affects of belonging are all tied up with what happens at the point of production. When the Dardennes describe *Rosetta* as a "war film," it is these aspects of the politics of everyday life and contemporary struggle to which they point.[2] Indeed, the film opens amid a tumbling chaos of camera and body movement as the diminutive girl is fired and physically fights two enormous men to keep from being ejected from another low-skill, low-paying, and repetitive job. She finally leaves that workplace to continue the circle she runs in every day, tracking a pattern from her home, to the town, to the bus, across a field, where she hides her precious "good shoes"—the ones that make her presentable to employers in the service economy—and into a trailer park where she lives, badly, with her mother.

Thus, by the time Rosetta makes her whispered, bedtime affirmation, we know the emotional costs of her contentment: the impersonal pulses of capitalist exchange have had devastating personal, including physical, effects and now, momentarily secure, she has optimism about the prospect of becoming what she pridefully calls "a good worker." This matters so desperately that she rejects state welfare, because she says that she wants to earn her value the way "normal" people do. Thus far she had taken in to her home cleaning and sewing work. But to be hired by a stranger who runs a workplace confirms her legitimate place in the world. Without membership in that army of laborers, she has had no room even for a little cramped fantasy about spaces of the good life or good times ahead; with a job, Rosetta's fantasy is not at a grandiose scale but evokes a scene of an entirely imaginable normalcy whose simplicity enables her to rest without anxiety and, for the first and only time in the film, to have a good night. It matters not that she is still unofficial, off the books in all the bureaucratic senses. Even in an extremely informal economy the goodness of the good life now *feels* possible to her and thus *feels* already like a confirming reality, calming her even before she lives it as an ongoing practice. The ongoing prospect of low-waged and

uninteresting labor is for Rosetta nearly utopian; it makes possible imagining living the *proper* life that capitalism offers as a route to the *good* life. That the route is a rut matters not to Rosetta: when the world exists between the routinized rut and the ominous cracks, she chooses the rut, the impasse. What operates here are the affects of aspirational normativity, understanding the persistence of which in the project of life-building on the bottom of contemporary class society is the descriptive project of this chapter.

Likewise, in *La Promesse*, our protagonist, Igor, finds optimism for being in the world at the scene of hyperexploited, off-the-books, home-based labor and, as in *Rosetta*, the benefits of bad work are soul-making, not soul-killing. Like the sidekick in the horror movies from which his name comes, Igor works for a bad mastermind—his father, Roger, who runs a racket for illegal immigrant workers, providing for them false papers and substandard, shit-reeking housing in exchange for a never-ending series of exorbitant fees. When, inevitably, they become indebted to Roger, they are employed to work it off by building a big white house for him and his son. Meanwhile, Roger conscripts Igor to work on the white house as well. He also doctors the migrants' papers, collects their rent, and executes ordinary upkeep tasks. At the same time, Igor is apprenticed to an auto mechanic, who is not only teaching him a trade but also enabling him to build a go-cart in which to tool around with his buddies. But as the film begins, Roger insists that the son be available to do his bidding and gets Igor fired.[3] Roger forces this situation as, in his view, the child's labor obligations begin at home.

One day on the construction site Amidou, an illegal African immigrant who works to pay off his gambling debts, takes a hard fall. While the fall is not fatal, Amidou soon dies from it because Roger, afraid of being exposed as a smuggler, refuses to take him to the hospital. Roger and Igor bury the black Amidou in the foundation of the white house on which he died laboring, and lie to Amidou's wife, Assita, that her husband has fled town to avoid paying off his gambling debts.

But before Amidou dies he extracts from Igor the titular "promise" to take care of Assita and their newly born child. Igor is haunted by this promise, and his filial commitment is slowly displaced by his turn toward the obligation he incurred to his father's worker. Meanwhile, Assita is suspicious of Roger, who eventually contracts to sell her into prostitution to get her out of his hair.[4] At this point Igor steps in to hide her from Roger and save her from this fate: yet he does not tell her that Amidou is dead. Like Rosetta with

5.1–5.2. The hug and the impasse (Dardennes, *La Promesse*, 1996)

Riquet, Igor does not exactly know what he is doing when he enters a plot, if not a life, with Assita. He works out of a headstrong, aggressive incoherence: he abandons an affect that he doesn't want to have, to risk having one he can barely imagine.

For shelter, Igor takes Assita to the garage at which he formerly worked—he's kept the keys to his previous home away from home. But Assita refuses to play displaced house with Igor and it frustrates him, for he cannot bear that Assita does not want to give him gratitude or any other sign of attachment. As they improvise their new relationship he is shocked to see that she does not want reciprocity with him or trust him to have her interests at heart. Indeed Assita puts a knife to his throat—for she can tell there's still a secret somewhere. They bicker and scream, but ultimately he forces her to shut up and submit to giving him what he wants: a hug.

What does the hug that he forces her to bear stand for? We know that Igor has softly stalked Assita, peering in the pinhole in their family door, seeing her in a white slip caring for her husband and child. The hug is enigmatic like Igor's face in those scenes, neither infantile nor sexual, or maybe both, a muddy mess; and when Assita breaks from the clinch she just looks at Igor, uncomprehending as he is, I think. Having experienced a moment of

relieving bodily simplicity, he leaves for a smoke and weeps in the dark. In the clinch he had conjured the unadorned affect of reciprocity or being-with that he has longed for, and without much realizing it, dedicates himself to securing the conditions of its repetition.

In these nearly peaceful episodic eruptions the productive instabilities of the contemporary capitalist economy engender new affective practices, in which children scavenge toward a sense of authentic social belonging by breaking from their parents' way of attaining the good life. At the same time, the will to attach that children manifest is not shared, really, by anyone, certainly not the people who make it possible. Happiness exists in the children's heads, in their commitment to bring life in line with the affect they want to continue experiencing, and above all in the triumph of their will to engender a silence in the enabling other that can seem like consent, thereby ensuring the continued affective experience of solidity and importance that might have been provided by parents and the family form.[5] I say "affect" rather than "emotion" here to emphasize that the children do not know fully what they're doing, flinging themselves at life in order to be in proximity to a feeling of *something* that is strangely both enigmatic and simplifying. Their objects of desire are really scenes they orchestrate in order to experience absorption, a sense of being held in a scene, of having reciprocity, and being unanxious somewhere. Yet their optimistic gestures also show how much aggression is involved in lining up life with fantasy, and the films track what it means to force hard bargains under duress to attain proximity to even the most vaguely, inarticulately defined pleasure.

These quiet moments in the middle of the films are also high points in these children's stories. They perform not the achieved materiality of a better life but the approximate feeling of belonging to a world that doesn't yet exist reliably. Both children are impulsive: they act urgently to calibrate life in an affective economy and then make emotional sense of it later. Yet this way of describing the cultivation of a world through recourse to impulse, gesture, and episodic improvisation does not take into account what we also see, that the creativity of the children keeps being rerouted to repeating some version of their parents' perverse approximations of the normative good life. It is as though the children, knowing nothing but that index of projected happiness, were compelled to repeat attachment to the very forms whose failure to secure the basic dignities of ordinary existence is central to the reproduction of the difficulty of their singular stories and lived struggle on the

bottom of class society in the first place. This chapter is most broadly about the political and affective economies of normativity at the present time, the production as desire of a collective will to imagine oneself as a solitary agent who can and must live the good life promised by capitalist culture. It tells a story from the perspective of the economic bottom's thick space of contingency. It is about the fantasy of meritocracy, a fantasy of being deserving, and its relation to practices of intimacy, at home, at work, and in consumer worlds. It is a story about plenitude and scarcity—about so many bad jobs contingently available to so many contingent workers and never enough money, never enough love, and barely any rest, yet with ruthless fantasy abounding. It is a story about the calibrations of reciprocity and about how proximity to the fantasy life of normativity might be what remains to animate living on, for some on the contemporary economic bottom.

Finally, it is an account of normativity that sees normativity as something other than a synonym for privilege. Rather, in my view, to understand collective attachments to fundamentally stressful conventional lives, we need to think about normativity as aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging that can be entered into in a number of ways, in affective transactions that take place alongside the more instrumental ones.

The all-too-present cause of the effects these films track is the volatile here and now of that porous domain of hyperexploitive entrepreneurial atomism that has been variously dubbed globalization, liberal sovereignty, late capitalism, post-Fordism, or neoliberalism. It is a scene of mass but not collective activity. It is a scene in which the lower you are on economic scales, and the less formal your relation to the economy, the more alone you are in the project of maintaining and reproducing life. Communities, when they exist, are at best fragile and contingent. The story from this perspective is about the historical present as a scene of constant bargaining with normalcy in the face of conditions that can barely support even the memory of the fantasy. How do fantasy-practice clusters such as those we've seen become the grounds for political and social conservatism? How can we understand the singular tragedies of Rosetta and Igor in light of the wave of uprisings in Paris (2006), Italy (2008), Greece (2010–2011), and the UK (2010–2011), where students marched to maintain the same state-secured labor and welfare protections enjoyed by their parents, who benefited from the postwar Western European promise of social democracy? What happens

when the economic and social promise of a state becomes privatized like everything else, redistributed through emerging nonstate institutions and formal and informal economies?

In these films, what might have been political agency is diffused throughout the social, as the work of the reproduction of life absorbs most of the energy and creativity people have; and so much of it is absorbed by dramas of the tattered family, the lone institution of reciprocity remaining here for fantasy to attach itself to. But this does not mean that all world-building contexts are alike under stress: the Dardennes focus almost entirely on the destinies of white working-class and subproletarian citizens and migrants whose legal and social statuses are all shifting amid the forces inducing massive global migration. For everyone, regardless of their ethnic and racial origin, all sorts of normative emotions about how the fantasy and actuality of the good life might be tethered together stand in for affective urges for a better social world beyond what the conventional forms deliver. For the white citizens, the Belgian state still provides forms of visible relief in welfare and policing bureaucracies. But the state is not enough; it is a weakened environment mediated by individuals who may be benign or on the make but are always too late to prevent a crisis, and while its infrastructures can sustain the trains and provide the dole, they cannot maintain the world openly and robustly. At the same time the improvisations of labor make available alternative, non-kinship-organized spaces of positive reciprocity. Beyond that, the kids engage in their own lateral modes of world-building. Any of these scenes might generate new political or social genres of belonging, but at the moment of these films, they all amount to pleasures seized in the folds of productive contingency. There, there is no room to make a distinction among political, economic, and affective forms of existence, because the institutions of intimacy that constitute the everyday environments of the social are only viscerally distinct but actually, as we know, intricately and dynamically related to all sorts of institutional, economic, historical, and symbolic dynamics.

What follows includes an investigation of some psychoanalytic and materialist explanations of social attachment in the context of structural inequality, to see if we might find better ways of understanding how it is that forms associated with ordinary violence remain desirable—perhaps because of a kind of narcotic/utopian pleasure in their very familiarity. Using the Dardennes' films plus the work of Judith Butler and Lillian Rubin, I focus on some stories about the conscription of children to the worlds of their par-

ents, the worlds of their parents' desires, and the gaps of disappointment and failure that the children see, because the articulation of children and neoliberalism is so crucial now in the academy, the middlebrow public, and the social policy and human rights communities, as an image of the contemporary ethical, political, and economic conundrums of structural subordination and social betrayal. This scene also enables us to consider the vertical attachments—say, of parents and children, bosses and workers—along with the horizontal, much less reliable ones, of friends, coworkers, and couples. The vertical and horizontal keep getting mixed up here, though: the daughter acts as the mother's mother, the father tells his son to call him Roger and gives him a ring to bind their fraternity. These confusions signify the immediate crisis out of which the children are trying to fight their way.

This is a way of describing the specificity of the experience of ordinariness—of, as Thomas Dumm writes, "ordinary life, the life-world, the everyday, the quotidian, the low, the common, the private, the personal"—in its visceral temporality today.[6] The ordinary, in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*, is organized around the solicitation of children to the reproduction of what we should call not the good life but "the bad life"—that is, a life dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water—the time of *not-stopping*.

The Dardennes draw the Belgium of the 1990s as a colony of globalization with its legal citizens trying to maintain a grip on the waning shards of liberty, sovereignty, and economic hegemony:[7] it's a world of intensified economic and social volatility, a mainly deindustrialized, small business economy where impersonality and intimacy are enmeshed in a renewed regime of sweatshops and domestic labor.[8] This world is visually and physically crowded, both overwhelming and underwhelming in its assault, allowing little time to luxuriate in its sounds, tastes, and smells. As Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman put it, about the African context, this "suggests that it is in everyday life that the crisis as a limitless experience and a field dramatizing particular forms of subjectivity is authored, receives its translations, is institutionalized, loses its exceptional character and in the end, [appears] as a 'normal,' ordinary and banal phenomenon."[9]

Mbembe and Roitman see crisis ordinariness as the condition for the production of revolutionary consciousness. But the Dardennes' scenario puts forth no hint of that, nor of the potentiality or revolutionary possibility that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri attribute to the activity of immaterial

6. Igor plays with whiteness

labor in their analysis of the contemporary global mode of production.[10] In these films, the citizen's dissatisfaction leads to reinvestment in the normative promises of capital and intimacy under capital. The quality of that reinvestment is not political in any of the normative senses, though—it's a feeling of aspirational normalcy, the desire to feel normal, and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented. That feeling does not require any particular forms of living to stimulate it; nor does it depend on the flourishing of the forms of living to which it attaches. Optimism attaches to their mere existence. The will to feel that feeling again becomes the first order object of desire. But this puts pressure on the infrastructure of the social world to be maintained despite its distributions of violence and negation.

A nearly comic, silent movie–style example from *La Promesse* plays out this activity beautifully, pointing additionally to what's singular about globalization's sensual flesh. It is Igor's job to white out the immigrant passports, making their bearers seem already legal. Yet when he arrives at Assita's papers and sees the contrast of her dark skin and her white teeth, Igor immediately moves to a mirror and whites out his own teeth, erasing working-class staining and emphasizing his racial whiteness as an homage to her smile and also to her blotted-out identity. It is also clear that he doesn't get it: his racial location, his privilege of citizenship, his dependency on her familial labor. Nothing happens from this moment of play, whose gestures are ordinary, forgettable, forgotten. In fact, in these films play itself is a momentary privilege crowded out constantly by risk, which is play with life-denting consequences. Both play and risk are shaped by the pressures of contemporary labor, with its demands for survival and incitement to fantasy without a scaffold, a net, or a retreat. Play allows a *sense* of normalcy, though, while risk tries to make some headway in the impasse: play is the

performance of an interruption without risk. Yet it takes place as barely enjoyed comic relief from the risk that must be borne.

Thus, how to talk about the need to maintain binding to the normal in the context of crisis is a theoretical and political problem of more than consciousness. The Dardennes represent consciousness under present systemic economic, political, and intimate conditions as absorbed in regimes of bargaining with movement amid the slow train wreck that is always coming in the catastrophic time of capitalism, where if you're lucky you *get* to be exploited, and if you're lucky you can avoid one more day being the focus of a scene that hails and ejects you when it is your time to again become worthless. This is why exploitation is not what the children cast as the enemy. They want to be exploited, to enter the proletarian economy in the crummy service-sector jobs it is all too easy to disdain as the proof of someone's loserdom or tragedy. The risk would be opting out of the game. One does not *necessarily* require families or nations to secure this feeling; any reciprocal form will do—friendship, collegiality, a project, the state, a union, whatever has the capacity to deliver an affective, transpersonal sense of unconflictedness, belonging, and worth.

The history of sentimentality around children that sees them as the reason to have optimism—for if nothing else, their lives are not already ruined—thus takes on an ethical, political, and aesthetic purchase in these films. The audience is obligated to side with the child's will not to be defeated, even if the difference between defeat and all its others is the capacity to attach optimism for a less bad future to a blighted field of possibility. We are incited to have compassion for fruitless and even self-undermining—cruel—desires. In *La Promesse*, the promise of post-Fordist citizenship marks out agency not as that which changes the world but as that which bargains with it by developing affective bonds or "promise" within the regime of production that extends everywhere, as everyone is on the make. In *Rosetta*, belonging isn't an a priori but something that must be purchased by participation in the everyday economy. Community and civil society from this class perspective are not seen as resources for building anything, neither fantasy nor an ordinary life that can be trusted, rested in. Attachments are as brittle as the economic system that hails and then bails on its reserve army of workers.

It matters also that these films are not centrally organized around the consciousness and affects of migrants whose migration is animated by hope for a better good life, but around citizens who thought that the traditional forms of social reciprocity would provide scenes for life-building, not the

attrition of being. For legal citizens (here, of Europe), the difference between having papers and not determines which economies you can participate in, and how. Yet the ease of attaining the paper identity that performs a simulacrum of secure social tethering smudges the legal/illegal distinction. In the economic lifeworld of these films, citizens without capital and migrants with fake papers are in proximate, interdependent boats structurally and affectively. All might as well be called survivalists, scavengers bargaining to maintain the paradox of entrepreneurial optimism against defeat by the capitalist destruction of life.[11]

In this fraying context, the children sometimes encounter private individuals who ameliorate the beatdown of overwhelming inequality, injustice, and just getting by in the folds of the modes of production—nice employers, for example. Sometimes they are even nice employers themselves: in *Rosetta*, the daughter who sews and markets the clothing they make compliments her mother on her creative sewing; in *La Promesse* Igor freely dispenses cigarettes and advice to the deracinated employees who work for him. Some government workers act compassionately, too, making it possible to imagine political institutions of a less bad life. Niceness here means manners, nothing more. But manners are not nothing, as we will see here and in the next chapter. They provide an infrastructure of sociality alongside of the other ones, one more potential opportunity for flourishing. Likewise, sometimes, there is leisure, especially where music and drink and unproductive randomness can be folded in, as in the father-son karaoke double date in *La Promesse* and the dinner-dancing moment in *Rosetta*. But when the camera pulls back, we see the ordinary experience of post-Fordist practice not just in the occasional moments of affect-lifting connection but in the constant movement of people and things through national boundaries, temporary homes, small and big business, and above all an informal economy of secrets, stashes, bargaining, and bribes that link women to small men, and small men to bigger ones.

Once anywhere in the chain, they can imagine their place in the big picture. For instance, when Rosetta screams at and beats up her mother, she is refusing the bargains her mother makes to be able to maintain her fantasy of normalcy. The mother's state of falling apart has reduced them to living at a trailer park ironically named Grand Canyon, a space of American wonder and leisure, but when the mother plants flowers or tries to make a middle-class dinner there, Rosetta destroys them, because the simulacrum of normalcy is a perversion in their context. She wants the real thing, the

promise, and a relation of care that produces the ballast of a normal life.[12] Together they sew and sell clothes trying to get enough money to live. But when Rosetta is out making the profits, the mother accepts food and booze from the owner of the trailer park in exchange for sex; she also performs fellatio in lieu of parting with the money her daughter gives her to buy water, so that later she can buy drink. Brutal, that informal economy. Rosetta tells her to go to a state-run drying-out facility and the mother says she doesn't want to sober up, to which Rosetta replies, bargainingly, that she'll buy a sewing machine for the mother if she goes and dries out. The mother responds to the offer by pushing Rosetta into a pond of muddy water, nearly drowning her. But Rosetta knows how to tread water—that's what she knows.

In *La Promesse*, too, there's lots of bargaining in the grey economy: it's a coerced relation in which good manipulative skills can feel like agency. Roger's workers want to become illegals, migrate to benefit from the grey economy, and do not complain much when they are forced to appear and disappear at will; and what money they do acquire, we note, is often gambled away. When Amidou loses at gambling and complains that he's been cheated, Igor says, "It's not my problem you always lose. You should just stop playing." But in the informal economy where you may or may not get paid for what you do, where you don't exist on the identification papers the state recognizes, where you are always paid under the table if at all, you're always playing for the possibility of achieving, through the repetition of fraud, the ballast of capital or simply presence that will provide the social density of citizenship at the scale of a legitimate linkage to the reciprocal social world. The question is not *whether* citizenship as a guarantee of social reciprocity is fantasmatic, but how, and in what fantasmatic registers, it operates as such.

Even the category *children* is as volatile as the categories of *citizen* and *worker*. I call these protagonists "children," but actually that's an open question whose openness is an index of how hard it is to describe anyone in the flux of improvised survival habits that constitute existence in the contemporary economy. It is appropriate to call Rosetta and Igor children in that their stories are organized by intimacy with a parent with whom they live. At the same time, though, they are adolescents on the verge of seeking out sexual attachments and experience while also being adults economically, in that their days are organized mainly around the material reproduction of their lives. This convoluted regime of survival and low expectation is what childhood means now, for an increasing number: precocious adulthood. Jody Heyman's *Forgotten Families* documents the astronomical global

expansion of the number of families in which the parents and older children work long hours daily in order to maintain inadequate housing and malnourishment, optimistically hoping that the sacrifice of their health will add up to something else, something better for the younger children.[13] In the family struggling to survive on the bottom, the ordinary splintering effects of exploitation or state violence in its open-secret arbitrariness continue to shape proximate norms of imaginary belonging whose theoretical availability comes to occupy the bottom line *and* the utopian horizon in the scene of survival, failure, and disappointment with which globalization impresses. Such are the paradoxes of cruel optimism.

So even if, in these two films, the promise of familial love is the conveyance for the incitement to misrecognize the bad life as a good one, this is also a story about the conditions under which fantasy takes the most conservative shape on the bottom of so many class structures. The adults want to pass the promise of the promise on to their children.[14] That may be the children's only sure inheritance—fantasy as the only capital assuredly passable from one contingent space to another. And of course here, as everywhere, the gendered division of labor mediates the attritions of capital and the intimate spaces in which the labor of living is imagined beyond the urgencies of necessity. As Gayatri Spivak writes of another example, "This is not the old particularism/universalism debate. It is the emergence of the generalized value form, global commensurability in the field of gender. All the diversity of daily life escapes this, yet it is inescapable."[15] *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* are training differently gendered children to take up a position not within normative institutions of intimacy but within something proximate to them. The hypervigilance required to maintain this proximity is the main visceral scene of post-Fordist affect. The fantasy of intimacy that will make one *feel* normal (as opposed to making one able to secure the conditions of dependable reciprocal life) provides a false logic of commensurateness and continuity between everyday appearance and a whole set of abstract value-generating relations. The aesthetic of the potentially good enough love enables crisis to feel ordinary and less of a threat than the affective bounty that makes it worth risking being amid capitalist social life.

But in the Dardennes' *mise en scène*, normative intimacy has been worn down to the nub of the formal and the gestural. The emotions associated with intimacy, like tenderness, are most easily assumed as scavenging strategies that the children are compelled to develop to get by. Igor acts genuinely sweet to the old woman whose wallet he steals in the opening scene; Rosetta

acts in loving and protective ways toward her mother, whom she also beats for manifesting nonnormative appetites. Roger appeals to Igor for loyalty, although he has also lied to him, beat him, and destroyed his opportunity to be a kid and to cultivate a different life (also involving building things: but go-carts that move, not houses that require property). Yet Roger can still say, "The house, this whole thing, it's all for you!" To which Igor can only say, "Shut up! Shut up!" because there is no story to counter Roger with, no proof that it wasn't love, or that love was a bad idea. Apparently, the register of love is what there is to work with, when you are managing belonging to worlds that have no obligation to you.

But this is why optimism for belonging in a scene of potential reciprocity amid tragic impediments is, in these films, not merely cruel, even in its repetitions. The endings of these films tie the audience in identificatory knots of vicarious reciprocity that extend in affective and formal ways beyond the actual episode. Rosetta approaches her final shots having just had to quit her hard-won job in order to take care of her degenerating mother. She is miserable and defeated by her daughterly love and her commitment to not living outside the loop of a reciprocity whose feeling feels legitimate to her.

At the end, we see her dragging a big canister of gas. It is unclear whether she is about to commit suicide by asphyxiation, or to make a go of things the way she always does, and it doesn't matter: her body collapses in exhaustion as Riquet arrives. Riquet—whom she has previously beaten up, left to drown, turned in as a thief, and had a strange, unsteady, asexual night with, a night that ends with her sleeping, not alone, but whispering intimately with herself.[16] Riquet—who is stalking her in revenge for taking his job. He is the only resource for potential reciprocity she has. As the film closes, Rosetta weeps, looking off-screen toward he who is only a proximate friend, in the hope of stimulating his compassionate impulse to rescue her. And the film cuts to darkness.

Likewise, the close of *La Promesse* involves a scene of wishful gallantry. In the train station, just as Assita is about to escape Belgium, Igor's father, Igor, and the whole shoddy mess, Igor confesses one part of his secret. Perversely fulfilling and breaking "the promise" after which the picture is named, he gambles that revealing Amidou's death will keep Assita there, and indeed it binds her and her child to him and to the local scene of danger, violence, and poverty for the indefinite future. In the final shot, they walk away from the camera, together and not together, and as they become smaller the film cuts sharply to black. Both of these works thus end engendering in the audience

7. Rosetta's pathetic appeal

a kind of normativity hangover, a residue of the optimism of their advocacy for achieving whatever it was for which the protagonists were scavenging. Because Rosetta and Igor are cut off from the normal, the spectators become holders of the promise.

In classic Hollywood cinema and much of queer theory, such expectant "families we choose" endings would make these films, generically, comedies, and the anxieties we feel on the way would be just the effects of the conventional obstacles genres put out there that threaten the genre's failure.[17] In Foucault's rendering, such scenes of communicative tears and confession would mark the children's ascension into sexuality, that is, into the place where desiring acts evince the youths' subjugation to the clarifying taxonomic machinery of familial and social discipline. In *La Promesse* and *Rosetta* it *is* where they become sexual, but such evocations of the two clarifying institutions of social intelligibility, genre and gender, would mishear the tonalities of these particular episodes. In these scenarios, sexuality is not only an accession to being intelligible, but also a performance of affective avarice, a demand for a feeling fix that would inject a *sense* of normality.

What does it mean to want a sense of something rather than something? In the emergent regime of privatization that provokes aggressive fantasies of affective social confirmation in proximity to the political often without being in its register, genre shifts can point to new ways of apprehending improvisations within the ordinary. In the Dardennes' films, the formal achievement of genre and gender suggests not success but survival, a survival reeking of something that partakes of the new generic hybrid, *situation tragedy*: the marriage between tragedy and situation comedy where people are fated to express their flaws episodically, over and over, without learning, changing, being relieved, becoming better, or dying.[18] In the situation comedy, personality is figured as a limited set of repetitions that will inevi-

8. The never-ending ending of *La Promesse*

tably appear in new situations—but what makes them comic and not tragic is that in this genre's imaginary, *the world has the kind of room for us that enables us to endure*. In contrast, in the situation tragedy, one moves between having a little and being ejected from the social, where life is lived on the outside of value, in terrifying nonplaces where one is a squatter, trying to make an event in which one will matter to something or someone, even as a familiar joke (in the situation tragedy, protagonists often try heart-wrenchingly to live as though they are in a situation comedy).[19] In reinventing some version of the couple, the family, or the love link, at the end, Rosetta and Igor are repeating a desire they have fancied and longed for throughout: a desire simply and minimally to be in the game. Not controlling the conditions of labor, they take up positions within sexuality that at least enable a feeling of vague normalcy that can be derived on the fly, in a do-it-yourself (DIY) fashion. They do this in gestures that try to force a sense of obligation in someone, which will just have to stand in as the achievement of their desire for acknowledgment and a way of life.

Thus, we see forming here submission to necessity in the guise of desire; a passionate attachment to a world in which they have no controlling share; and aggression, an insistence on being proximate to the thing. If these motives stand as the promise of the scene that will provide them that holding feeling they want, the proof that it's worth investing in these forms is not too demanding. There is a very low evidentiary bar. The key here is *proximity*; ownership has been relinquished as the children's fantasy. The geopolitical space of fantasy is not a nation or a plot of land secured by a deed but a neighborhood. And just as both films feature careers involving soldering and sewing, techniques that bind parts to bigger wholes, they restage at the close our protagonists' coercive appeal to a relative stranger for rescue and reciprocity, and all the stranger has to do is to be near, to stick around.

That this is an appeal to a proximate normativity is signified by their spatial placement outside the home (in a terminal, on the ground) but never very far afield at all; they are all in proximity to the natal and fantasmatic home, in the end. And, affectively speaking, is Riquet not a man on whom the silent Rosetta must depend; and is Assita not a mother/sister/lover/friend forced by Igor, by his sweet downcast eyes and aphonia, to submit?

Normalcy's embrace can only flicker, therefore, in the Dardennes' rendering of the contemporary historical moment. Each time it looks as though a reciprocal relation has been forged, the temporal and monetary economy in which the experience of belonging can be enjoyed is interrupted by other needs, the needs of others that seem always to take priority. Nonetheless, in the context of material and parental deprivation, Rosetta and Igor crowd the cramped space of any potentially transitional moment to maintain, for one more minute, their optimism about having a thing, a life, a scene of practices of belonging and dignity that can be iterated, repeated, and depended on without much being looked forward to.

So, what does it mean that the endings of these films solicit audience desire one more time for the protagonists to receive, finally, the help they seek because it feels like their last chance to experience, through openness to another, a good change amid the violence and numbing everywhere present? Since "at all costs" is no metaphor from this perch on the bottom of the class structure, here fantasy and survival are indistinguishable effects of the affects' own informal economy. To be made to *desire* a normativity hangover trains the audience in cruel optimism.

Thus, there is more to the story of the affect the children display than the tragedy of particular individual attachments to the feeling of optimism that someday they might rest in a sense of belonging; at stake is measuring the distribution of the subjective accommodation to the political economy of dependable reciprocity. Belgium, an exemplary hub of immigrant labor from Africa, other French postcolonies, Korea, and the generic European countryside, was a scene of expanding informal economies and welfare state shrinkage in the 1990s; from this perspective *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* are fiercely, deliberately actuarial in their depiction of the emotional effects of globalization. So much creativity and effort go into attempts to rescue oneself and sometimes others from drowning in scenes of personal and impersonal violence; and if here appeasement of the family constitutes the absorbing work of ordinariness as it usually does for children, this situation is intensified because now, again, urban families on the bottom are also sites

of production. In *Rosetta* the drama is activated locally by the daughter's resentful and loving desire to support her mother and herself, to have a job that will enable the mother to cease her pathetic gestures of optimism and disappointment—"All you do is fuck and drink!" Rosetta repeatedly says; in *La Promesse* the drama is activated by the father's desire to repeat himself in his son, and the son's ambivalence about reproducing the multitude of exploitations this vision of the patriarchal good life involves. The women run a sweatshop for themselves, making clothing; Rosetta looks for other jobs in every other public zone of exchange she enters, such as food shops and clothing stores. The men import illegals, make money off them, and get them in debt to be paid off by forced labor on the house that is the father's entailment to his son.

This gives the Belgian family that occupies the reserve army of labor a paradoxical social location, as evinced in the children themselves. It participates in the informal economy, often acting as part of an informal petit bourgeoisie, with an informal chamber of commerce composed of like-minded, grey-economy profiteers, and at the same time engenders new social locations, shapeless spaces defined by who moves through them and how, marked by practices and modes of being so evanescent that they're hard to describe, to speak in, and to confront. Relative to other films, everyday communication in *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* is as convoluted as identity is now, wandering in the economo-affective lag time of transition, negotiation, untruth, and anxiety. Its voiceover would sound something like "Be next to me, don't overwhelm me, don't say anything, don't interfere with my desire to imagine how it would feel to have my needs recognized by you, say something, give me something, let's try, be quiet."

What's striking in the temporal imaginary of both the citizen and the migrant workers, then, is the ways they look forward to getting ahead, to making it, *and* to a condition of stasis, of being able to *be somewhere* and to make a life, exercising existence as a fact, not a project.[20] In other words, in this version of transnational class fantasy, mobility is a dream and a nightmare. The end of mobility as a fantasy of endless upwardness, and the shift to the aspiration toward achieving an impasse and stop-loss, is a subtle redirection of the fantasy bribes transacted to effect the reproduction of life under the present economic conditions.[21] Given these conditions, if one is an informal or unofficial worker, there is little room for imagining revolution or indeed any future beyond the scavenging present, though it happens.[22] Given these pressures, it is easy to see how post-Fordist subjectivity

can shrink the imaginary social field to a repetition of actions that might be either building a foundation for staying or staving off defeat.

The desire for a less-bad bad life involves finding resting places; the reproduction of normativity occurs when rest is imagined nostalgically—that is, in the places where rest is supposed to have happened, a fantasy masquerading as screen memory or paramnesia. One might read these repetitions as nostalgia for nostalgia, a kind of desperate regression toward the desire to soon experience an imaginary security one *knows* without having ever had, and fair enough; but normativity where there is no foundation for the expectation of it beyond a lasting fantasy can also be read as a form of bargaining with what is overwhelming about the present, a bargaining against the fall between the cracks, the living death of repetition that's just one step above the fall into death by drowning or by hitting the concrete at full speed. It's a mode of living-on with the dread of an eternal present that gets drowned out by the noise of promised normativity's soothing bustle. This is an empirical question as well as a theoretical one, but one of the empirical questions is about the transmission, content, form, and force of fantasy. For in order for normative conservatism to take hold in fantasy, or in order for fantasy to join ideology, somewhere in there the children learn to fantasize that the bad life that threatens impossibility or death *could* be the good life that must materialize from all this labor. The intensity of the need to *feel* normal is created by economic conditions of nonreciprocity that are mimetically reproduced in households that try to maintain the affective forms of middle-class exchange while having an entirely different context of anxiety and economy to manage. What is it in the relation of fantasy to the everyday that enjambs the children in shaky fidelity to a practice of intimacy whose manifestation in their own lives could easily have produced their rejection of it?

11. *Psychoanalysis, Ethics, and the Infantile*

So far I have suggested that neoliberal economic and social conditions of reproducing everyday life shape the affective horizon of normativity in the Dardennes' films in a way that illuminates some more general questions about why the bad life is not repudiated by those whom it has failed. Mothers make dinner, fathers build houses and businesses, people are mostly reliable until things get stressed out and inconvenient, and a certain familiar tenderness is transacted transgenerationally. All of these gestures

are not themselves objects of desire but a tightly proximate cluster of placeholders for what everyone seems to want, a space of a collective relief from the ongoing present in which living on is an activity of treading water and stopping loss amid unreliable dependencies. The parental gestures would work, would lubricate thriving, if only they could drown out or distract the scavenging hypervigilance toward survival and acknowledgment that constitutes the subjective practice of the children. But the dramatic action of the films emerges because the children come to cast parental gestures of life-building, reciprocity, and acknowledgment in the light of suspicion, as zombie forms through which normativity reproduces itself as an unlivable animating desire. Realism about love forces affect to become materialist. But this does not mean that the children detach from the fantasy forms they associate with parental love, however badly practiced. How to explain why the children protect their attachments to such fantasy, the lived version of which is at best anxious and at worse tragic?

From a certain political perspective, a feminist one, it has long been argued that love is a bargaining tool for convincing others to join in making a life that also provides a loophole through which people can view themselves nonetheless as fundamentally noninstrumental—selfless, sacrificial, magnanimous—in their intimacies.[23] The code phrase for this loophole is the distinction between the public and the private. This structure is what Jürgen Habermas points to as well when he distinguishes the modern bourgeois as someone who shifts between his identity as a calculating man of the market and his identity as an *homme* who locates his true self in the performance of intimacy in the theater of domestic space.[24] The displaced relation within the capitalist subject between his instrumental persona and his loving persona enables him to disidentify with what's aggressive in his pursuit of desire and interest in all spaces, and to see himself as fundamentally ethical because he means to have solidarity with some humans he knows. This perspective would suggest that the children in the Dardennes' films are caught in the contradictory knot of their parents' economo-affective practices, which similarly cast intimate well-intentioned activity as importantly life-affirming and only situationally aggressive, coercive, or disappointing.

Judith Butler's formidable work on "grievable life" produces a quite different account of attachments to "the bad life." From *The Psychic Life of Power* through *Precarious Life*, Butler also develops an account of social inequality that grows from the intricate and contradictory bindings of power within the family. But she pursues a *developmental* model of political subjectivity that

sees infantile dependency as the seed of a kind of sadistic normativity in adults that can be interrupted by an ethical commitment to compassionate emotion. In recognizing the previously ungrieved "grievable life" or lives, the Butlerian progressive subject dismantles her pathological sense of defensive sovereignty or sovereign indifference on behalf of a healthy non-sovereign identification with those populations that need to be included in communities of compassion in order to gain access to the machineries of justice.

Since many people, including Belgian policymakers, responded to the Dardennes' films as though already trained in making ungrieved lives subjects of their transformative compassion, it would seem that these films would enact the emotion-work that Butler proposes. Yet, as we will see, in translating the psychoanalytic to the ethical by way of normativity, Butler writes the unconscious out of the story, producing subjects as ethical intentionalists who can make cognitive decisions to short-circuit foundational affective attachments in order to gain a better good life. One might note the political problems with this circuit of displacement: as I and others have argued, projects of compassionate recognition have enabled a habit of political obfuscation of the differences between emotional and material (legal, economic, and institutional) kinds of social reciprocity.[25] Self-transforming compassionate recognition and its cognate forms of solidarity *are* necessary for making political movements thrive contentiously against all sorts of privilege, but they have also provided a means for making minor structural adjustments seem like major events, because the theater of compassion is emotionally intense. Recognition all too often becomes an experiential end in itself, an emotional event that protects what is unconscious, impersonal, and unrelated to anyone's intentions about maintaining political privilege.

However, my focus here is not on Butler's argument about empathic capacities as central to justice, but on the developmental aspect of the account, which argues that the experience of sovereignty is a reaction formation against infantile dependency. Claiming that "[t]o desire the conditions of one's own subordination is . . . required to persist as oneself [such that we] embrace the very form of power—regulation, prohibition, suppression—that threatens one with dissolution in an effort, precisely, to persist in one's own existence," she enmeshes all sorts of unlike phenomena, conflating dependence with subordination, psychic self-dispossession with political injustice, and personal with political subjectivity.[26] This enmeshment

is not an accident or unconscious in Butler's work—it is an explicit project of explanation about how "this condition of my formation" is expressed in "the sphere of politics."[27] More important for our purposes, the work equates infantile dependency with normative attachments and normative attachments with attachments to power and privilege. Is the infantile structure of dependency sublimated into love really the origin of all patience with injustice? Let me briefly open up some problems that such enmeshing generates for a concept of political subjectivity generally and of post-Fordist affect from the perspective of the economic bottom in particular. Here is the most developed version of the argument:

> The task is doubtless to think through this primary impressionability and vulnerability with a theory of power and recognition. To do this would no doubt be one way a politically informed psychoanalytic feminism could proceed. The "I" who cannot come into being without a "you" is also fundamentally dependent on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the "I" nor with the "you." What is prematurely, or belatedly, called the "I" is, at the outset, enthralled, even if it is to a violence, an abandonment, a mechanism; doubtless it seems better at that point to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one's being and becoming. . . . So the question of primary support for primary vulnerability is an ethical one for the infant and for the child. But there are broader ethical consequences from this situation, ones that pertain not only to the adult world but to the sphere of politics and its implicit ethical dimension.[28]

Butler and I are not clinicians: what matters here are arguments about how to understand passionate or irrational attachments to normative authority and normative worlds. To Butler, answering this means characterizing desires for autonomy as adult symptoms of a wounded narcissism of the dependent child. She insists that when adults imagine autonomy or sovereignty as synonymous with freedom, they are manifesting a humiliated reaction formation to having been duped, as an infant, into idealizing a love that was always self-dispossessing and never not disappointing.[29] As a result, Butler argues, the adult repudiates interdependency and becomes deeply authoritarian. She deems ethno-racisms, homophobia, and misogyny to be expressions of this compensation.[30] Nonetheless, she suggests that there is enough ambivalence in the subject's love of subjection that opportunities exist to choose

not to reproduce attachments to subordination; the way to do this is to make ethical interventions into unconscious attachments, to produce a new vulnerability that will undo the humiliation of the original one.

As I argue in the next section, it is not at all clear that infantile dependency provides a bad education in the phenomenology of justice. But for the moment let's accept the claim that children organize their optimism for living through attachments they never consented to making, that they make do with what's around that might respond adequately to their needs. They may even come to be in love with the promise of the promise that there will be a moment of reciprocal *something* between themselves and the world, if they're good, that is, *if they become a good subject of the promise*, and they may mistake love for subjection to the will of others who have promised to care for/love them. W. R. D. Fairbairn provides a different angle on this, arguing that the child becomes attached not to subordinated dependency but to the scene of the opportunity to imagine the optimistic overcoming of what's disempowering about this dependency.[31] Likewise, Christopher Bollas has adapted Donald Winnicott to argue for thinking of the object of desire not as an object but as a transformational environment.[32] As I suggested in "Slow Death," an environment is a scene to which you can return that is characterized by a recognizable atmosphere. It is loose and porous, a space that you can enter in a number of ways and change within, without violating the fundamental attachment. Scenes like this magnetize a noncoherent cluster of desires for reciprocity, acknowledgment, or recognition that can converge into a mirage of solidity—it's a vitalist, pointillist notion of the object of desire. From this theoretical perspective on what love does to reproduce normativity, infantile dependency would not really be an experience of attaching to domination but a scene where the subject negotiates an overdetermined set of promises and potentials for recognition and even thriving. It might be more like an environment where the subject is trained to cathect with optimism, a relational affect whose practices and objects are themselves normatively mediated.

What we are talking about here is the hardest problem: understanding the difficulty of unlearning attachments to regimes of injustice. Justice itself is a technology of deferral or patience that keeps people engrossed politically, when they are, in the ongoing drama of optimism and disappointment.[33] Yet Butler's theoretical stance about power in relation to the law, normative authority, normative values, and structural privilege underdescribes the number of internally contradictory promises (of acknowledgment, amelio-

ration, protection, retribution, balancing, delegation, discipline, and enabling to thrive) that its activity represents. It also neglects what *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* show intricately, that recognition and reciprocity can take many forms, some of which mime equality as collaboration, some of which produce contexts of trust in interdependency, some of which are coerced or tactical, and all of which are deeply ambiguous, compromised, and unstable.

Indeed, one analysis of the crisis scripted by the Dardennes would focus on the increasingly impossible task of recognizing what counts as reciprocity at any scale of sociality. In the scene of economic, national, and transnational life that has provided this essay's case, love is only slightly less contingent than work. During the last twenty years of state shrinkage and temp culture both at work and in the institutions of intimacy, the work of (re)production has been shaped by the increasing demand for flexibility and the increasing expectation that in love as at work, one might well be only a temporary employee, without affective or material benefits reliably in the present or the future. At moments like this the fantasy of an unconflicted, normative lifeworld can provide the affective pre-experience of a potential site of rest, even if one has known it only as at best a mirage of solidity and stability. This is why whatever account of attachment to normative fantasy we make needs a more complicated notion of object choice and of what it means to desire to have a cluster of affects and feelings in lieu of having a world.

Comfort in proximity to a vague object or scene that promises to deliver some ballast in sociality is not the same as enjoying supremacist pleasure, just as, psychoanalytically speaking, misrecognition is not the same as being mistaken. The hegemonic is, after all, not merely domination dressed more becomingly—it is a metastructure of consent. To see hegemony as domination and subordination is to disavow how much of dependable life relies on the sheerly optimistic formalism of attachment. As citizens of the promise of hegemonic sociability we have consented to consent to a story about the potentialities of the good life around which people execute all sorts of collateral agreements. This is why the people who enforce the reality-effect of this commitment to imminent generality are not just "the hegemons" like CEOs, heteros, Anglos, and U.S. Americans. Commitments to a society of the General Will are enforced by people who have varying access to power, both economic and intimate. From this point of view, instead of embracing ethics as a kind of emotional orthopedics of the political, we might also attend to the convolutions of attachment that involve a desire to stay prox-

imate, no matter what, to the potential openings marked out by fantasies of the good life, self-continuity, or unconflictedness.

III. *Worlds of Pain*

I've been suggesting that Butler's attempt to explain the subject's love of subordination reads normativity too narrowly as an authoritarian desire. In trying to understand how bargaining gets confused with reciprocity and how participation in the economy gets confused with social belonging, this epistemology sees ambivalence as coming after object choice, which is fundamentally abject. What would happen if we saw subjectivization as happening historically, as training in affective sense perception and intuition? Since the 1960s, Lillian Rubin has completed a series of ethnographies of working-class families in the United States in the hope of understanding the ties that bind them to the scenes of deprivation in which they'd become literate as members of the social. Rubin's take on working-class attachment connects it to the cramped temporality of the everyday, twenty-five years before speedup had spread from the two-income, working-class household to the professional-managerial class itself.[34] "But with so little time for normal family life, there's little room for anyone or anything outside. Friendships founder, and adult social activities are put on hold as parents try to do in two days a week what usually takes seven—that is, to establish a sense of family life for themselves and their children. For those whose days off don't match, the problems of sustaining both the couple relationship and family life are magnified enormously."[35]

Meanwhile, the children watch the parents' worlds shrink inwardly to the scale of getting through the day—and the stress is so palpable that the kids learn to try to take up as little space as possible. They grow up feeling guilty about taking up space, seeing their parents as doing their best, but being powerless as well:

> However imperfectly articulated or understood, children in such families sense the adults' frustration and helplessness. Their own hurt notwithstanding, assigning blame to parents makes little sense to these children. Their anger either is turned inward and directed against self . . . . or projected outward and directed against other, less threatening objects. . . . For all children, life often feels fearful and uncontrollable. When a child's experience suggests that the adults on whom he must depend for sur-

> vival have little control as well, his fears of being unprotected and overwhelmed are so great that he must either deny and repress his experience or succumb to his terror.[36]

Thus, the working-class child is directed away from critique or complaint. "Children in all families frequently are 'lonely or scared,' or both," she writes. "But the child in the working class family understands that often there's nothing his parents can do about it. They're stuck just as he is—stuck with a life over which they have relatively little control."[37] Rubin here does not describe children's consent to their or to anyone's subordination; nor does she describe love of familial compensations for social powerlessness in the mode of exaggerated patriarchalism and maternality. Instead, the children appear to her to be depressive realists, not idealizing, for the most part, their parents' struggles or modes of survival while at the same time feeling protective of them for the ordinariness of their social humiliation.[38] Another way to say this is that even before the children's lives can be let in as transformatively grievable, the parents' lives must be taken seriously as something other than already wasted. It is the function of the children to do that.

How such fantasy becomes the inheritance of an impossible life is most beautifully described by Loïc Wacquant in his ethnography of Chicago's South Side. His informant, Kenny, is a man on the make: he scavenges to live, he builds some skills and lets them lapse, but never gives up his dreams. His dreams, though, are vague: to be a vet, to have a life, to be a star boxer, to make a family. Wacquant says that Kenny has little sense of how these ends might be achieved—the enabling fantasy lives in a disavowed disconnect from the pressures of getting through the day: "Under such conditions of relentless and all-pervading social and economic insecurity, where existence becomes reduced to the craft of day-to-day survival and where one must continually do one's best with whatever is at hand, that is, precious little, the present becomes so uncertain that it devours the future and prohibits thinking about it except as fantasy. . . . [I]n its own way, [it is] a *labor of social mourning* that does not say its name."[39]

Homosexuality, the love that dare not speak its name, echoes within this phrasing of the labor of social mourning: both phrases are about what must remain veiled in order that a scene of social belonging may still be endured. Such euphemisms protect the vulnerable subjects and the social order that ejects them from appropriateness. In Kenny's case, social mourning amid poverty must remain unstated directly, on behalf of not feeling defeated. To

Wacquant, Kenny manifests mourning without feeling it in an explicit way, but we would likely call it cruel optimism, a projection of sustaining but unworkable fantasy.[40]

Thus, perhaps this combination of disappointment and protectiveness can be misread as a hardwired love of subordination, but I think not. *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* show in countless ways the children's desire to protect their parents from experiencing, within the family, a repetition of the humiliation they know all too well outside of it. At the same time, these children are forced, by the parents' lack of fight, to fight the parents on behalf of a dignity and sense of possibility that they maintain only as a fantasy they pass down to their kids. This is clearly the case in Rosetta's constant refusal of her mother's homemaking gestures—making salmon, planting plants outside their caravan—because those things are effects of charity and sexual exchange, and "we are not beggars" and "you are not a whore." Likewise Igor never says no to his father, even after they kill Amidou, but instead falls silent, and though he rescues Assita from his father and she wants to go to the police, Igor says, "My father's wrong, but I'm no snitch." In the end, it is Assita who must physically overpower Roger, because Igor wants to protect him from facing the reality that the network of illegal patriarchalism has now been exposed not as making do or building a life but as the petty reproduction of exploitation's instrumentality at the level of the informal everyday. Igor begins to see it, but his body freezes, much as Rosetta's body is being eaten alive by an ulcer that cramps her up, but neither of them can reject the drowning parental body that is also pulling them down, perhaps for fear of becoming identical to the police, the state, the bosses, and inspectors who would see only practices and care little for the motives of love.

Given the films' geopolitical and historical specificity, what can we take away from thinking through these readings of the ways some children reproduce the forms of the bad life insofar as they are rooted in the family? We have seen that the child, the subordinated subject, learns early that relations of reciprocity are likely to be betrayed when the only way to survive the world is to resort to informal economies and the bribes and bargains of biopower, with its discourses of untruth. The films show the youths struggling to tell their truths without harming anyone. But to do so is impossible, because in their worlds love is constituted through acts of lying to protect the feelings of intimates, while at the same time, and behind the veil of lies, the ruthlessness for survival that anyone on the bottom of class society must mobilize ends up shaking up the intimate sphere as much as anything else. The sub-

jects of survival require cultivating techniques of scavenging, syncretism, and mistrust. There is barely time to reflect on belonging, and no time not to react to threat; the tiny folds of moral peace and optimism these two films allow their protagonists cannot be sustained by personal will, after all, but by control over resources they do not have.

I close, therefore, not with a solution to the problem of aspirational normativity as expressed in the conventionalities of subaltern feeling, because, I am arguing, the subordinated sensorium of the worker, whose acts of rage and ruthlessness are mixed with forms of care, is an effect of the relation between capitalism's refusal of futurity in an overwhelmingly productive present and the normative promise of intimacy, which enables us to imagine that having a friend, or making a date, or looking longingly at someone who might, after all, show compassion for our struggles, is really where living takes place.

The time for theory is always now.
—Teresa de Lauretis

SIX **AFTER THE GOOD LIFE, AN IMPASSE**

Time Out, *Human Resources*, and the Precarious Present

1. *Always Now: Situation, Gesture, Impasse*

This chapter extends to the bourgeois family our attention to the relation between the reproduction of life and the attenuation of life in lived scenes of contemporary capitalist activity. Laurent Cantet's assessments of French labor in the late 1990s—*Ressources humaines* (1999) and *L'emploi du temps* (2001)—have been extolled as aesthetic reenactments of the impact of neoliberalism on the everyday life of formerly protected classes.[1] Documenting the shifting up of economic precarity into what Giorgio Agamben has called the new "planetary petty bourgeoisie" (PPB) comprised of unionized populations, entrepreneurs, small property owners, and the professional managerial

class, the films detail major and minute recalibrations of relations among the state, the market, and how people live.[2] Their precarity is therefore significantly more than economic: it is structural in many senses and permeates the affective environment too. The films witness the blow to traditional props for optimism about life-building that had sustained the aspirationally upwardly mobile, and pay attention to how different kinds of people catch up to their new situation.

What does it mean even to propose that a spreading precarity provides the dominant *structure* and *experience* of the present moment, cutting across class and localities?[3] There is broad agreement on the emergence of this situation, but descriptions of the affected populations veer wildly from workers in regimes of immaterial labor and the historical working class to the global managerial class; neobohemians who go to university, live off part-time or temporary jobs, and sometimes the dole while making art; and, well, everyone whose bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms.[4] In what sense, then, is it accurate to call this phenomenon a new global *class*—one that has indeed been termed the *precariat*?[5] This emergent taxonomy raises questions about to what degree precarity is an economic and political condition suffered by a population or by the subjects of capitalism generally; or a way of life; or an affective atmosphere; or an existential truth about contingencies of living, namely, that there are no guarantees that the life one intends can or will be built.[6]

At root, precarity is a condition of dependency—as a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else's hands.[7] Yet capitalist activity always induces destabilizing scenes of productive destruction—of resources and of lives being made and unmade according to the dictates and whims of the market. But, as David Harvey and many others argue, neoliberal economic practices mobilize this instability in unprecedented ways. The profit interests of the owners of neoliberal capital are served by the shrinkage of the social welfare state, the privatization of what had once been publicly held utilities and institutions, the increase in state, banking, and corporate pension insecurity, and the ever more "flexible" practices of contractual reciprocity between owners and workers, which ostensibly keeps business nimble and more capable of responding to market demand. Add to this the global transformation of unions from a force driving forward security and upward mobility to administrative entities managing workers' decreasing legitimacy for claims-making on profit and security, and you get a broad picture of the neoliberal feedback loop,

with its efficiency at distributing and shaping the experience of insecurity throughout the class structure and across the globe.

Many analysts claim that the managerial classes of the industrialized West, in particular, have recently been forced to enter a new historical phase. Pundits have noted that the latest banking crisis in the United States was unusually "democratic" in its shattering of the expectations, rules, and norms of reciprocity that govern life across diverse locales and statuses.[8] Richard Sennett and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri would have predicted this; they shape their otherwise dissimilar analyses of contemporary capitalist subjectivity by noting the increasing corrosion of *security* as a condition of life for workers across different concentrations of economic and political privilege.[9] But they also claim that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, security became less of an aspiration for the classes who had less access to it, and indeed that this labile labor environment produced a sense of freedom and potential for many members of the PPB. They report that some members saw labor as a system that could be gamed on behalf of forging a more satisfying life, others opted out of a live-to-work ideology altogether, and still others focused on developing their craft, not their lifestyles.

How this affective shift toward valuing lateral freedoms and creative ambitions over strict upward mobility will fare in the current economic crisis, amid expanding claims on the state and the frantic grasping to stay in labor as such, remains to be seen. A concrete example of this synergy between neoliberal interests and the shift in worker desires was evident in the "Precarious" movement itself: in its film and its polemic, for example, the group *Precarias de la Deriva* ("The Precarious Adrift") narrates both the frustration and free-feeling pleasure of the educated, underemployed classes of Europe as they move around cities, make deals and build networks, and insist on their centrality and not marginality to the social. In the rhetoric of a crisis of care, they demand a new metric of reciprocity for a new social ecology, wanting the state to guarantee basic conditions of flourishing—food, clothing, shelter, jobs—without anyone having to give up the flexible, wandering way of living they have carved out.[10] This view places what used to be antagonistic classes in apparent solidarity: both the managers and the multitude sense in this shift the radical potential for the destruction of work as we know it, while expecting the state to maintain its provision of economic security and infrastructural solidity.

In contrast, while agreeing that precarity has saturated the consciousness and economic life of subjects transnationally and across populations,

Jacques Rancière, in *Hatred of Democracy*, and Adam Phillips, in *Equals*, claim that the majority in the formerly protected classes increasingly "hate" the instabilities, incongruities, antagonisms, ambiguities, and messes that constitute their life in contemporary capitalist mass society. They argue that the PPB wants to hoard for itself not radical flexibility but the privilege of only moderately creative living and working amid relatively predictable security, while demanding from everyone else deference, docility, self-management, and predictability.[11] In their view, which is also Agamben's, the managers of capital and its service class are finding the threat of real vulnerability a crisis condition within the ordinary; their response to it has been fundamentally antidemocratic, producing at best gestural solidarities with other precarious populations.

Add to this Phillips's claim about the synergies of radical democracy and psychoanalysis. Phillips argues that the historic mission of psychoanalysis—to build skills for the subject's capacity to live and flourish under conditions of ongoing disorientation and insecurity—should find solidarity with the radical democratic embrace of the chaos, antagonisms, and interests of the least privileged that would characterize any true democracy. His strong claim is that the central sensual experience of equality and democracy is not knowing where one is. But people come to fear and hate these processes because they exert a constant pressure for negotiating social location. Cruel optimism or not, they feel attached to the soft hierarchies of inequality to provide a sense of *their place in the world*. The internal tensions between capitalism and democracy seem resolved as long as a little voting, a little privacy, and unimpeded consumer privilege prevail to prop up the sense that the good-life fantasy is available to everyone. Ideally, then, one would achieve both mental health and a commitment to equality if one embraced precarity as the condition of being and belonging.

Cantet's films resonate with these broad descriptions of affective placenessness amid the situation of structural adjustment in contemporary Europe and the United States. They do not assume a globalized comparative perspective on class or on the good-life fantasy—they're not analytics or polemics—and so can only partly help to answer the question of what it means to enter insecurity from a variety of class locations. Yet even the most local perspective in these films is an outcome of globalization and neoliberal restructuring: none of these dramas would occur without shifts in state tax, labor, and welfare policy that promote the disempowerment of unions, a corporate culture that suppresses wages, benefits, and worker's rights, and

the concomitant expansion of production systems scattered across spaces in Europe, Korea, and elsewhere. Focusing on dramatic reconfigurations of economic and affectional relations of "responsibility" among bosses, contract workers, and satellite intimates, Cantet's films stage how close the relatively privileged now are to living the affective life of those who have never been economically and institutionally secure. The hanging last line of *Human Resources*—*where is your place?*—could be spoken by anyone to anyone else in the films, is unanswerable, and is the least rhetorical question imaginable at this moment in time. Perhaps, in the impasse of the transitional present, where situations unfold in ongoing crisis, what were rhetorical questions become genuine ones.

This strange cohesion of neoliberal interest, psychoanalytic theory, and radical theoretical commitments to contingent conditions for the reinvigoration of social life suggests, in short, two things about contemporary precarity. One is that the precariat must be a fundamentally affective class, since the economic and political processes that put people there continue to structure inequalities according to locale, gender, race, histories of class and political privilege, available state resources, and skills.[12] The other is that, in the affective imaginary of this class, adaptation to a *sense* of precarity dramatizes the situation of the present. Throughout this book I have been calling the historical present a *situation* deliberately, to develop it as a concept for tracking transactions within the elongated *durée* of the present moment. As we know from situation comedy, a situation is a genre of living that one knows one's in but that one has to find out about, a circumstance embedded in life but not in one's control. A situation is a disturbance, a sense genre of animated suspension—not suspended animation. It has a punctum, like a photograph; it forces one to take notice, to become *interested* in potential changes to ordinariness. When a situation unfolds, people try to maintain themselves in it until they figure out how to adjust.

What makes the present historical moment a situation is not just that finally the wealthy are experiencing the material and sensual fragilities and unpredictability that have long been distributed to the poor and socially marginal. It is that adaptation to the adaptive imperative is producing a whole new precarious public sphere, defined by debates about how to rework insecurity in the ongoing present, and defined as well by an emerging aesthetic.[13] These shifts have provoked strange continuities in neoliberal and radical analyses of causality and futurity—for example, of how things got to be this way and whether better futures are even imaginable.[14]

Whereas in the Dardennes' work (see chapter 5, "Nearly Normal") play-risk and life-risk provide alternative folds of potentiality within the contingencies of contemporary capitalist precarity as seen from "below," for Cantet's more privileged population the increases in vulnerability and in risk seem to produce more confusion than optimism about what kinds of adjustment to prefer. For what defines this pressing situation is the problem of living in the ongoing now of it. The enduring present that is at once overpresent and enigmatic requires finding one's footing in new manners of being in it. The haunting question is how much of one's creativity and hypervigilant energy the situation will absorb before it destroys its subjects or finds a way to appear as merely a steady hum of livable crisis ordinariness.

Nonetheless, the situation is not, finally, proof that economic and political fragility everywhere has engendered a new globalized or mass-homogeneous class. That remains to be seen. It is that there has been a mass dissolution of a disavowal. The promise of the good life no longer masks the living precarity of this historical present. This is evidenced in the emergence of a new mask, a precarious visage that now graces myriad accounts of how people are living the end of both social and market democracy in Europe and the United States: a recession grimace has appeared, somewhere between a frown, a smile, and a tightened lip. As more people from more social locations are seen watching their dreams become foreclosed on in material and fantasmatic ways, the grimace produces another layer of face to create a space of delay while the subject and world adjust to how profoundly fantasmatic the good-life dreams were, after all.[15]

Cantet's films enact an aesthetic style of living and of mediation that tracks this disturbance. In the films, shifting relations among economic and political conditions of contingency refract in singular, simultaneous, and yet collective bodily performances of instability—the instability of the ongoing present as the ground for living. It is an aesthetic shaped by the fraying of norms, that is, of genres of reliable being. Fraying implies something slow, delicate, processual, something happening on its own time. Aesthetically, we observe this politico-affective condition mainly in messy situations, episodes, incidents, and gestures, and not often in the genre of the dramatic event.

A proprioceptive history, an archive of exemplary bodily adjustments, provides access to the affective reeducation that transpires in response to the stress fractures now appearing in the normative fantasy and its related economies. In "Precarity: A Savage Journey to the Heart of Embodied Capi-

talism," Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos list a whole series of nervous-system symptoms to attend to—although this analysis locates precarity only in the subjects of immaterial labor.[16] These include:

> (a) vulnerability: the steadily experience of flexibility without any form of protection [*sic*]; (b) hyperactivity: the imperative to accommodate constant availability; (c) simultaneity: the ability to handle at the same [time] the different tempi and velocities of multiple activities; (d) recombination: the crossings between various networks, social spaces, and available resources; (e) post-sexuality: the other as dildo; (f) fluid intimacies: the bodily production of indeterminate gender relations; (g) restlessness: being exposed to and trying to cope with the overabundance of communication, cooperation and interactivity; (h) unsettledness: the continuous experience of mobility across different spaces and time lines; (i) affective exhaustion: emotional exploitation, or, emotion as an important element for the control of employability and multiple dependencies; (j) cunning: able to be deceitful, persistent, opportunistic, a trickster.

Precarious bodies, in other words, are not merely demonstrating a shift in the social contract, but in ordinary affective states. This instability requires, if not psychoanalytic training in contingency management, embarking on an intensified and stressed out learning curve about how to maintain footing, bearings, a way of being, and new modes of composure amid unraveling institutions and social relations of reciprocity.

Queer phenomenology, as a scene for putting into circulation a bodily orientation, provides another intellectual context for the rise of proprioception as a metric for apprehending the historical present. To turn toward cinematic bodies transacting in space is not to re-argue that cinema reenacts and transforms some universally haptic sense of the world that is registered as bodily flesh. Queer phenomenology—see especially work by Camilla Griggers, Laura Marks, Gail Weiss, Elspeth Probyn, and Sara Ahmed—has demanded a political analysis of the ongoing activity of bodily orientation and the modes of circulation through which subjects enter into contemporary worldliness, identity, and belonging. Aesthetic mediation here produces exemplary translations between singular and general patterns of orientation, self-projection, attachment, and a psychic, affectional, neural *sense* of proximity. In contrast to Tsianos and Papadopoulos's work, queer phenomenology is involved not mainly with gathering up evidence of symptoms of affective damage, but with following the tracks of longing and be-

longing to create new openings for how to live, and to offer the wild living or outside belonging that already takes place as opportunities for others to re-imagine the practice of making and building lives. In this work social attachments are evidenced in practice, including the practices of the senses that are always working in the now and are active and responsive without being expressive, necessarily, of ideologies, or truths, or anything.[17]

Interested in how people live through historical moments of loss, this chapter looks even more locally toward how bodies figure *glitches* in the conditions of the reproduction of life in the historical present. A glitch is an interruption amid a transition. I want to show how transactions of the body of the aestheticized or mediated subject absorb, register, reenact, refigure, and make possible a political understanding of shifts and hiccups in the relations among structural forces that alter a class's *sense* of things, its sensing of things.[18] It involves encountering what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift and to use reconfigurations of manner amid the persistence of the body in the world to embody not the continuities of institutionalized history but something incoherent or uncongealed in the ongoing activity of the social.[19] It is to see what is happening to systems of self-intelligibility through watching subjects getting, losing, and keeping their bearing within a thick present. It is to understand action that does not express internal states but measures a situation. Henri Lefebvre would call this a *rhythmanalysis*, but it is not the bodily rhythm forced by the architecture of the everyday and the modes of dressage that enable living in it that I focus on here. This chapter is a rhythmanalysis of a disturbance in the situation of the present and the adaptations improvised around it.[20]

Such a relation of embodied perturbation to adaptation is what Agamben points to when he claims that "By the end of the nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures."[21] Film, he argues, registers this "generalized catastrophe" by gathering up the lost gestures as a measure of what it means to be archaic.[22] As a genre, the gesture is not identical to the Brechtian concept of *gestus*, a mode of aesthetic communication that releases to the public occluded, illegitimate knowledge about the mode of production and its manifestation in typical people's individual and collective lives.[23] Instead, to Agamben, the gesture is a medial act, neither ends- nor means-oriented, a sign of being in the world, in the middle of the world, a sign of sociality. To elaborate, this version of the gesture is not a message; it is more formal than that—the performance of a shift that could turn into a disturbance, or what Deleuze would call a "problem-event."[24] The gesture

does not mark time, if time is a movement forward, but makes time, holding the present open to attention and unpredicted exchange. The grimace is such a gesture. So is a deadpan nonresponse. A situation can grow around it or not, because it makes the smallest opening, a movement-created space. The gesture is thus only a potential event, the initiation of something present that could accrue density, whether dramatic or not. The movement could make a situation, and then the gesture would start to look different in it. In this view the present is not always a sense of something fleeting or a metaphysical experience of loss; nor is it mainly a dumping ground of anachronistic historical forces. When the disturbance of the gesture is lived as adjustment, remediation, or adaptation, the present is a stretch of time that is being sensed and shaped—an impasse.

It might seem amiss to call a live situation where actors do things an impasse, since the world remains largely organized by dedramatized clusters of causes, consequences, and microtransformations. I offer impasse both as a formal term for encountering the duration of the present, and a specific term for tracking the circulation of precariousness through diverse locales and bodies. The concept of the present as impasse opens up different ways that the interruption of norms of the reproduction of life can be adapted to, felt out, and lived. The impasse is a space of time lived without a narrative genre. Adaptation to it usually involves a gesture or undramatic action that points to and revises an unresolved situation. One takes a *pass* to avoid something or to get somewhere: it's a formal figure of transit. But the impasse is a *cul-de-sac*—indeed, the word *impasse* was invented to replace *cul-de-sac*, with its untoward implications in French. In a cul-de-sac one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*. An impasse is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity.[25] The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading. That delay enables us to develop gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with in the world as well as of rejection, refusal, detachment, psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation.

Yet not all stretches of life and time in the present are suspended in the same way. As the chapter proceeds, I'll focus on two kinds of impasse while gesturing toward and performing a third. First, there is the impasse after the dramatic event of a forced loss, such as after a broken heart, a sudden death,

or a social catastrophe, when one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust. Second, there is what happens when one finds oneself adrift amid normative intimate or material terms of reciprocity without an event to have given the situation a name and procedures for managing it—coasting through life, as it were, until one discovers a loss of traction. Third, there are situations where managing the presence of a problem/event that dissolves the old sureties and forces improvisation and reflection on life-without-guarantees is a pleasure and a plus, not a loss. Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) provides a problematic, exuberant example of happy life-without-guarantees in the impasse, as do the lateral pleasures of aesthetic interpretation itself.[26] (Note that these three versions of postoptimistic response echo the case material of chapter 1, "Cruel Optimism.")

Whatever else it is, and however one enters it, the historical present—as an impasse, a thick moment of ongoingness, a situation that can absorb many genres without having one itself—is a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape. It is experienced in transitions and transactions. It is the name for the space where the urgencies of livelihood are worked out all over again, without assurances of futurity, but nevertheless proceeding via durable norms of adaptation. People are destroyed in it, or discouraged but maintaining, or happily managing things, or playful and enthralled. Add to this the fading of security and upward mobility as national capitalist alibis for exploitation in the present. If the precariat is an affective class, then for the formerly psychically and economically protected members of the precariat there has been at least one enduring and collectively binding loss—of the gestures that maintained the disavowals and contradictions that sustained so many social democratic good-life fantasies. This is where the details of the dissolution, and how they are exemplified, and the fantasies that continue to bind people to fantasy, matter politically to the history of the present.[27]

II. "*It's normal to be a bit nervous*": Ressources humaines

Jean-Claude Barbier's extremely useful "A Comparative Analysis of 'Employment Precariousness' in Europe"[28] claims that the word *précarité* originally referred only to lives mired in poverty, and only became attached to employment in the 1980s, when neoliberal restructuring in the guise of flexible labor was becoming a byword in national and transnational corporate poli-

tics.[29] Flexibility was sold as a freedom both for corporations responding to an increasingly dynamic or unstable economy and for people who saw being tied down to jobs as a hindrance both to pleasure and to upward mobility. Many have written about the consequences of this shift for the loosening and convolution of the traditional national-liberal terms of social obligation. Barbier argues that in the French case "precarity" underdescribes the variety of labor contracts that operate in the nation, but nonetheless the concept has become elastic, describing an affective atmosphere penetrating all classes. Finally, in parallel with this continuous extension of *précarité* to *précarité de l'emploi* and then to *précarité du travail*, a fourth extension of the scope of phenomena to which the notion referred led to the introduction of *précarisation*, that is, the process of society as a whole becoming more precarious and basically destabilized.

What has been called the French cinematic "New Realism" of the 1990s and after—a global style that amounts to a *Cinema of Precarity*—documents this shift in precarity from limited structure to pervasive life environment.[30] Returning to the hinge between the melodramatic realism associated with Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s and postwar Italian neorealism, the Cinema of Precarity melds melodrama and politics into a more reticent aesthetic to track the attrition of what had been sustaining national, social, economic, and political bonds and the abandonment of a variety of populations to being cast as waste.

Precarious cinema destabilizes the neat postwar shift from a bourgeois private idiom into a national public idiom in that the story it tells about what is exemplary in the privatization of public life and the fragility of all of the institutions and spaces for the reproduction of life—intimate, public, private, national, economic, transnational, environmental—emphasizes the present as a transitional zone where normative forms of reciprocity are wearing out, both in the world and aesthetically—barring the reproduction of inherited fantasies of what it means to want to add up to something—that story of the good life. The ongoing crisis of institutions, economies, and fantasy in the ordinary destabilizes exemplarity itself at these moments, and the films record the loneliness of collective singularity, the impacts of affective fraying, and the tiny optimism of recuperative gestures in the middle of it all, for those who can manage them. The Cinema of Precarity therefore attends to the proprioceptive—to bodies moving in space performing affectively laden gestures—to investigate new potential conditions of solidarity emerging from subjects not with similar historical identities or social loca-

tions but with similar adjustment styles to the pressures of the emergent new ordinariness.

Cantet's *Human Resources* is most explicit about this transition into the beyond of convention, and equates the aesthetic problem with the problem of living, of livelihood. It tells a simple, exemplary microhistory of the expansion of precarity in the story of what happens between two people, in one family, one factory, and one community, at a recent historic moment in France. And yet the very simplicity of this story—which sees in the details of the reproduction of life the end of a mode of production and of life—mobilizes multiple, terrible ironies. Cantet plants his scenario firmly in the irony I outlined at the start of this essay, where radical imaginaries for the reconfiguration of work and neoliberal interests in greater profit extraction through more "flexible" relations of obligation and responsibility to workers and business locales assumed a terrible synergy. In particular, the film is set as a thought experiment prior to the instantiation of the French socialist program to shorten the workweek to thirty-five hours (the 1998 film was predicting the state of things in 2000, when the policy legislating the so-called "*trente-cinq*" was enacted). This moment was marked as historic, as a collective event, because it involved state action to reshape the everyday lives of working citizens.

By subsidizing a more equal distribution and expansion of job opportunity (for so many were unemployed while so many others were working overtime), the socialists also made concessions to neoliberal corporate claims that labor must become more flexible and available to respond quickly to the rise and fall of market demand. Thus the thirty-five-hour week is actually a misnomer and instead points to an average to be calculated over a year: workers might be asked to increase or decrease their hours at any time. It is also worth noting that in France the salient distinction is between jobs *with status*—that is, legally protected jobs—and jobs without status—that is, precarious, temporary, and episodic jobs. Established workers had thought that they had jobs for life, steady, predictable time-extensive ruts created by showing up and doing enough rather than showing up and being anxious about constantly re-earning their jobs. The thirty-five-hour workweek has brought with it an increase of contract labor, a decrease in the power of unions, and a crisis in the terms of the national social contract, insofar as that contract is evidenced in economic policy.[31] Cantet's film predicted all of this.

If the collaboration of socialist and corporate interests was inauspicious in itself, the outcome of this mutual adaptation has also had world-

distorting consequences. The second irony involves the perverse rhetorical synergies that emerge from the marriage of the language of market risk to that of class struggle: in *Human Resources*, the language of precarity and of the threatening "situation" is used not only by workers, whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by pressures on industry to increase both production and profits, but by the managers themselves. The first line that Rouet, the factory boss, says in *Human Resources* translates as, "Do not terrify him with our precarious situation." At a moment of fierce contestation between the interests of workers and capital, it is now possible to bracket or to claim as archaic long-standing debates about what it means for individuals, the masses, and the state to live democracy by asserting that everyone now lives capitalism in proximity to risk, threat, and ongoing anxiety at the situation that something autonomous called "life" seems to present equally, everywhere. Competing precarities can morph in an instant to sound like grounds for solidarity.

So in some sense, the new realism or melodramatic impasse of *Human Resources* is right on the surface and the precarious public sphere is just a development in capitalist/democratic crisis management of long-embedded historical contradictions. It is, after all, a tale in which states manage capital not on behalf of citizens but on behalf of profit to be enjoyed elsewhere, by a few, while maintaining the traditional manners of a liberal polis run by the presumption of good intentions on all sides and a theoretically equal distribution of vulnerability. What makes this situation historically specific, however, is *how* these struggles are played out in a shift between older and newer idioms of sociality, not only in wars of words but according to the metric of manners.

When the unions fight management in this film, for example, Mme. Arnoux, a furiously direct, classically belligerent union representative, is called crazy and irrational not only by the plant managers but by her fellow syndicalists. She pounds the table and calls the bosses vulgar liars, to which her male colleagues respond by saying, "what she is saying in her own way . . . ," rephrasing her claims in the tones of management, the language of reason, trust, coolness, and dispassion. Later, when she turns out to be right, she gloats that what they called crazy bad manners was really the last barrier to an appeasement that had already taken place, as though the union men's commitment to manners was greater than it was to facing what was incommensurable about the interests of the owners of capital and those of the workers.

Pressures to adapt all down the line increase, though, and the discourse fellowship gets increasingly brittle. As the film goes on, it focuses more and more on minor moments, not so much of lives colliding but of bodies demurring, averting, hesitating, double-talking, rushing into proximity but then recoiling. We watch the exhaustion of one mode of life, the spreading out of the edges of its loss into an endless ongoingness, and then a blockage of any imaginary for what else could happen next, apart from a slower chipping away at the good life that had been achieved. What's revelatory and painful about Cantet's version of this, additionally, is his sensitivity to national-capitalist restructuring as a catastrophe for democracy, starting in the most intimate spaces. What begins as relations of comfortable banter can only aspire, at the end, to a numbness made of a mix of defeat, anxiety, and stupefaction: a mixed space of delayed reaction that can allow the fantasy and memory of intimate feeling to persist along with the truth of the end of economic optimism. Upward mobility tips over into the impasse, into phrases like "it is what it is."

Two moments condense this shift revealingly. The filmic action begins and ends on a train, but what's in transit is what's at home. Franck returns to Normandy from Paris to take up a management position in the factory his father has worked in for over three decades. This return has "enormous symbolic" importance to Franck: as a child he went to summer camp run by the factory, attended their Christmas spectaculars, and it is clear that he's intimate with the parental social life that has extended from the father's work life. But although Franck has lived within walking distance of the factory his entire life, it is only on his very first day of wearing the tailored suit that marks his class difference from his uniformed father that he first sees his father's machine, and the labor his father does on it. "I wanted to show him my machine," the father says to his foreman. There's a lyric rhythm to the father's relation to his phrases, which are responded to rhythmically shot by shot: "You put down the part. The welder's at the back. A bolt drops into place by itself. You put the part on top. With practice, you do 700 an hour." Here, as at home in the family woodshop, the son looks on quietly at his father's competence, his face a little masked. But one foreman sees the scene of performing and watching differently: "It's not a zoo here. Even for your son. . . . You should know it's no circus here!" Another foreman interrupts the scene by berating the father for his slowed-down output.

Franck's illiteracy in his father's machine is likely a deliberate outcome of familial decisions probably made before the son was sentient. Franck em-

9. Franck brings the New Normal (Cantet, *Human Resources*, 1999)

bodies the postwar social democratic contract to grant the working classes access to *embourgeoisement*. His father owns a home and makes furniture in his well-machined woodshop; his mother tends house, makes meals, says the right things, polices manners, and keeps the family flowing. His sister, Sylvie, works in the father's factory and has married Olivier, a paternal look-alike, who also works there. They have two children, and their own, larger, home. But Franck, the "baby," is special. He embodies the familial investment in upward mobility. Sent away to Paris and to business school, he has been educated prior to that *not to know* much about his family's work lives. He is cultural, social, economic capital that's been squirreled away, fussed over, not yet invested: it is appropriate, therefore, that he is named after money. In contrast, his parents have no names in the film's credits: "*le père*" and "*la mère*" are there as human resources for Franck.[32] They have invested their labor in him behind the scenes, as it were, and kept what the mother calls their "sacrifice" to themselves. In investing money, time, ignorance, and pride in their son this way, they reproduce the hierarchy of class deference whose very legitimation splinters during the film. You see this in the very first family scene, where the father veers between awe of "my son" (a phrase he repeats throughout with pride) and soft paternalism. You see it too in the scenes where the parents apologize to him for making noise while he's working in the family living room.

At first the father is so proud of the son that he can barely approach him: as the son is an abstraction, a screen for fantasy investments, when he returns home his body perturbs and requires an adjustment, a shift that takes place at the level of manners. "You're not saying hello?" says the mother to the father, who hovers on the periphery of the intimate family crowd on the train station platform. Then, later, the father, more comfortable on the couch next to his son, erupts with advice about how the son, now unpre-

10. Franck and his father debate expectations at work

pared, can survive in the real world. The scene is shot in the romantic light of standard, soft Hollywood domestic comedy: ambient noise, the camera acting like an amused guest following the bantering conversation. This is the kind of forgettable conversation that happens in ordinary information and wisdom transmission across generations. But the final cut pins the tail on the plot to come.

Le père: Tomorrow don't act smart with the boss. Find out what he wants first. . . . I mean it. He's not one of your professors. Work's not like school. You have to be serious.
Franck: I'm only a trainee.
Le père: It's no reason to stroll in unprepared.
Franck: I won't stroll in unprepared. . . . I wasn't nervous. Now I am. Happy?
Le père: It's normal to be a bit nervous.
Franck: I don't know. . . . Maybe.

The bottom line here is that labor is not a casual space, and that to be a good worker is to be an anxious one. On the next day, the film takes a dive into the new normal. The atmospherics are of excitement, pride, awkwardness, and bodies jostling while inventing new habits of being and relating in space. By the end of the day, we see how out of synch the father is with the new capital, which Franck represents. But Franck is also in over his head. Well-mannered, he absorbs all kinds of sniping ambivalence in the management offices and on the production floor. He seems to absorb this hazing as the price of upward mobility; but, having learned nothing at home or in business school about the labor struggles of the twentieth century, he does not take the hazing as political commentary. Protected by his father's archaic

deferentialism and the experience of unions as a cultural, rather than political, force, he retains the liberal fantasy that management and unions are on the same side and slips easily into the new model of universal precarity. Saying that he hopes that the new world of flexible labor will help bosses and workers economically and "will further implicate employees in company affairs," he expresses a desire to make the workers' forced adaptation feel like rational critical democracy and not the insult to their capacity to reproduce life that it is. He does not notice when the boss says, "We'll win it together!" that the referent of "we" excludes the workers. And when he offers a plan to circumvent the union by canvassing workers about the *trente-cinq* directly, he thinks he enacts classic public sphere ethics: the business ought to represent what the people want, and the unions are a self-interest group that hampers individual sovereignty and self-determination. He has no clue that he's providing an alibi for decisions about downsizing that have already been made: he's not yet suspicious of the class to which he's been educated.

Later, when Franck realizes that he's been used by the factory managers to justify downsizing, including the downsizing of his father, he becomes angry, reveals management secrets, works for the union, and helps to organize a strike. But the father is mortified by the son's political transformation. The end of the old normal produces tears "like a woman's," the mother says; and soon the son cries too, not like a woman but a lost child. The tear is a tear, a rip, a glitch. What do they do next, after the good life, after patronage, after loving paternalism, and without clarity about what makes sacrifice and risk worth it?

Franck's response is to rub his father's face in his own despair. Attacking him for refusing to stop work and join the strike, he strikes out at his father on the factory floor, in front of his entire community. Representing and contesting the new phase of capital, the son makes his father face the new normal.[33]

Franck: You'll never stop. You're pathetic. I'm ashamed of you! Understand? I've been ashamed since I was small. Ashamed to be the son of a worker. Now I'm ashamed of being ashamed!

Arnoux: No reason for shame.

Franck: Tell him! He taught me! . . . Ashamed of his class. I have good news. You're not fired, you're retiring. Not because you worked hard for 30 years. It's a favor from the boss. He did it for me. Because he likes me. We talk as equals. That makes me sick. That!

11.1–11.3. Franck and his father confront the new normal

> Do you understand it makes me sick? [Sister tries to stop him] I know I'm unfair! I should thank him. I should thank him and mom for your sacrifices. You did it. Your son's on the bosses' side. I'll never be a worker. I'll have an interesting job. I'll earn money. I'll have responsibilities and power. The power to talk to you like this. The power to fire you like this. But you gave me your shame. I'll have it inside me all my life.

Embedding affective transmission in the historical, this scene of searing pedagogy links the power to talk and to act to visceral atmospheres of shame dissociated from explicit social performance but present everywhere in the intimate atmospheres of the reproduction of life. Shame is the trace of disavowed class anxiety, the darker side of aspiration's optimism. Franck tells his father that it is now Franck who has the power to be dissociated, to act as a beneficent patriarch of sorts, pretending, if he wanted to, that kindness has nothing to do with the shaming deference culture of the factory and the family. This inverts their historical relation, as the son's job had been to be good and deserving of his parents' investment in him, so that their class self-disidentification would not become expressed in his failure to aspire and achieve.

Out of shame, these subjects of capital have protected each other from frank talks about what *exactly* has been sacrificed in managing the domestic/industrial labor nexus that has constituted lifemaking. Out of love, these subjects of capital protect the fantasies of intimates by suppressing the costs of adjustment to labor's physical and affective demands. Out of love and shame, the subjects of class shame have *all* been being good, acting optimistic, building lives, and hoping that the affective bargains passed as obligation and care among them will not have been in error. Everyone's appropriateness had turned shame's threat into pride.

This scene of shock in the factory should not shock the father, in a way: just the previous year twenty-two workers were let go "in the shadow" of the company's threat to go out of business if adequate rates of profit were not protected. But here the father's early casual, intimate, teasing banter, bodily comfort, and paternalist transmission of expertise become exposed publicly as archaic, associated with the paternalist capitalist social relations that accompanied the gains made by socialist and social democratic workers' movements in the twentieth century. The old normal came with a body that absorbed the slings and arrows of working-class discipline into a kind of

solidity and quiet grace. This solidity made the father a valued colleague who did not talk much, but gave helpful advice when he did—not only to Franck but to Alain, the father's French-African neighbor in the production line, who tells Franck about how the father taught him to work the machines. Now, Alain says, "You know, sometimes, without meaning to, I still look his way. . . . to see if he's satisfied. Seeing him cope helps me cope." Alain, not Franck, is the heir of the father's pride in his class attachments. At one level, coping here is a manner of being working-class, a rhythm of being. It says nothing about how anyone lines up affectively or emotionally behind their practices: purely formal, its performance of self-discontinuity produces continuity itself. But as the camera tracks the situation of the present in *Human Resources* and, later, in *Time Out*, this structure of labor-related affective splitting comes to pervade contemporary experience.

In the old normal the paternal face was the same as the body: it said a little, it absorbed a lot, it was a barrier sponge that enabled living on to be something to look forward to. What's new is that the father is being forced to be *seen seeing* his own desire to work under the radar as political, and to be *seen seeing* the political as saturating all of his most intimate fantasies, gestures, and ordinary casualness. This doubling dissolves his fantasmatic legitimations for doing the work that, as Alain says, "no one wants to do." His way of standing apart, sitting aside, writing a check, and whispering so as not to be a bother becomes identical to appeasing the bosses when they ask the workers to give back more hard-fought rights. When they speak of all this at home, he blusters and throws his family out. But in the intimate space of work he can no longer access his defenses.

The father's flesh registers his assimilation to the public news that there is no such thing as being under the radar by way of a disturbance in his facial composure. The father's quivering lip moves not toward speech but threatens to become out of control, to decompose. The quivering lower lip denotes someone overwhelmed by a wordless response without a way of saving face. He is stuck in the impasse of the present without routines left to prop up even a lip, let alone a person. Deleuze's and Guattari's much-commented-on concept of faciality posits the face as a porous relay between the chaos of subjectivization and the clarities of signification, an always failing barrier between the subject's composure and the affective instability that exists in a domain quite different from the body's proprioceptive dynamics. But here the class politics of bodily performance advises a different way of reading

12. Franck, imploded

that de-ontologizes the face and embeds its stunned expressivity in a historical zone of circulation, affect management, and self-projection.

Cantet cuts from the father's quivering lip to the empty factory because there is no outside to this situation. The scene of facial drama reminds us that disbelief can be a political emotion, but not in the usual sense, since it is not oriented toward opinion. It is, rather, the scene of stopping while being full of unacted-on sensation related to refusing a consensual real: an emotional space-time for adjustment, adjudication. Ordinarily, uncommitted emotions like this are deemed apolitical, even blockages to the political: and to the degree that negative political affects accompany nonparticipation in voting or political culture, one can see why this convention of reading detachment in dispassionateness persists. But disbelief stands here as a variety of political depression. And we know what the other telltale signs of that are: dramatic and undramatic versions of hopelessness, helplessness, dread, anxiety, stress, worry, lack of interest, and so on. What's the difference between the father's emotional neutralization in the old normal and his disbelief in the new? Neutralization was a vehicle for upward mobility and class aspiration; disbelief is a suspended affective transaction that enables life to move on insecurely in the impasse's enigmatic space.

Looking at the history of class-analytic cinema, moments of bodily stuckness like these are not unprecedented: the spectacle of stunned ineloquence as dreams of deferred gratification are remanded to permanent deferral is a central trope of the aesthetics of struggle. What makes this film's scenario an emanation of the present moment is its performance of the becoming-archaic of the dreamscapes and gratifications of capitalist modernity, and of the fantasies that enabled everyday life to be lived in small doses of leisure that promise to become longer scenes of aged enjoyment. By the last scene

of the film the father has adapted, and saved parts of his dream: at a union picnic amid the strike, he plays with his grandchildren with a gentle exuberance that suggests that there's nothing now but the present and whatever sweetness he can squeeze into it, and he seems at peace with that.

Meanwhile, Franck seems to have inherited his father's disbelief. His young face has completely imploded and lost expression; he sits on the margins, still and plotless. Without an imaginable future or a home, on his way back to Paris without a plan, and emptied out of confidence and impulsive gestures, all he *has* is impassivity. It is as though all of the varieties of precarity have crept in to still his very marrow, and so he has to stop his body from transacting with anything. In the cinema of precarity, the shift in the portrayal of immobility from a normative, conventional, habituated solidity to a living paralysis, playful repetition, or animated still-life has become a convention of representing the impasse as a relief from the devastating pain of this unfinished class transition.

III. *Why Should You Be Spared?*: L'Emploi du temps

Cantet's attention to class-related varieties of impassivity as coping strategies and responses to neoliberal restructuring takes on a new set of connotations in his return to the situation in *L'Emploi du temps*. *L'Emploi du temps* also features a series of scenes that mark the development of proprioceptive skills that communicate changes in their case study subjects' transference with the situation of the historical present. Unlike *Ressources humaines*, though, no event marks the onset of the new normal, and indeed what's striking here is that no manner of being mannered is disturbed in the film's narration of the fraying of a life. Instead, we begin and end in the middle of a story, a story about drifting.

L'Emploi du temps tells the story of Vincent, a consultant who has been released from his labor contract sometime in the French 1990s. Vincent does not tell his family that he has been released from his contract, though, and his opacity to his parents, wife, and children is repeated in the physical atmosphere of the film when it opens, which also means that the film transmits the historical present as a situation, a moment held in abeyance. Vincent sleeps in a car, near a railroad, in the passenger seat, the windscreen foggy with his breath. It is a beautiful abstraction that suggests something enigmatic in the real from which it protects our gaze. Then a bus arrives and children spill out, passing before a space in the glass that is not yet misted