

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 place-nessness 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 meta-physical 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-