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À Plein Temps (Full Time, 2021): On the Inconvenience of Other People's Strikes

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This paper situates Éric Gravel's 2021 feature film *À plein temps* at a hinge point between the "cinema of precarity" and something new. Building on Lauren Berlant's (2022) conceptualisation of inconvenience, I argue that the film's depiction of strike action as inconvenient is precisely what allows it to portray and comment on an emergent post-neoliberal structure of feeling in France and beyond.

À Plein Temps (Full Time, 2021): On the Inconvenience of Other People's Strikes

Charlotte Fraser

> "All politics involves at least one group becoming inconvenient to the reproduction of power." – Lauren Berlant[1]
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> "But plenty of your members are not living on subsidies and living on food banks, are they? And some of the people who are going to be inconvenienced, possibly very inconvenienced by what you are doing, are." – BBC Radio 4 presenter interviewing Mick Lynch[2]

Éric Gravel's 2021 feature *À plein temps* (*Full Time*) opens with the protagonist, a single mother called Julie, waking before dawn to get her two children ready for school.[3] The radio pulses in the background: due to ongoing public sector strikes, only one in three trains is running in the suburban area, with even fewer on the Paris Métro. But, despite her breathless attention to the news, Julie is not involved in the strikes. Instead, she must overcome them, travelling into Paris from the village where she lives to her shift at the five-star hotel where she is the head chambermaid, and where her performance is currently under review. To compound the issue, after years of sending out her CV, Julie finally has an interview for a job she wants. The film follows her race to find cover for her shifts, beat the incessant traffic and appear composed when sat in front of her interviewer – every step of the way made more difficult by other people's strikes. In this article, I want to think with *Full Time* to tease out some connections between precarity, resistance, and inconvenience. Though Julie's work and her access to the job market are precarious, she is more preoccupied with her individual self-actualisation than with fighting the further erosion of her civil liberties alongside other workers. How do we parse the politics of a film in which strike action is present, but relegated to inconvenience?

The public sector strikes in *Full Time*, which target and resist a proposed extension to working hours, gradually radiate outwards into nationwide uprisings and violently policed protests. In this, Gravel's 2021 film is uncannily prescient. In the first half of 2023, workers across France organised five months of industrial action and civil disobedience to protest Emmanuel Macron's pension reform bill. As in the film, the strikes were

[1] Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Writing Matters! (Duke University Press, 2022), p. 4.

[2] 'BBC News – 11:00 AM GMT', *TVEyes – BBC News 24*, 2022, Nexis.

[3] *À plein temps/Full Time*, dir. by Éric Gravel (Haut et Court, 2021).

merely one expression of a wider, explosive social context, from the brutally repressed environmental protests at Sainte-Soline in March 2023 to the eight days of uprisings in June following the murder of teenager Nahel Merzouk by an armed policeman. Sociologist Ugo Palheta has written recently of a "crisis of hegemony" in Macron's neoliberalising project, opening a terrain of political struggle that is increasingly polarised between the left and the right and, as activist François Ruffin attests, urban and rural areas.[4] *Full Time* has something to say about such a fractious social context and how it arrives in the life of a precariously positioned, self-made worker. In doing so, I will argue, it can also speak to a British context where strike action and civil disobedience have become widespread, favoured tactics on a scale not seen for decades.

In particular, I want to let this French film shed light on the British politics of "inconvenience." Workers win strikes by forcing unacceptable loss onto their employers. Such loss can be economic, but it is just as often measured in terms of reputation, trust, and goodwill. When teachers strike, for example, they rupture a key contract between the government and the public, which creates a platform for their demands to be heard. The success of this tactic relies on having any inconvenience to the public accepted by them as both necessary and proportionate, and on successfully articulating its structural significance. However, since at least the turn of the twentieth century, a key strike-breaking tactic in the UK has been to *personalise* strike action.[5] This entails extricating it from a wider context of class struggle and dividing the public into two groups: strikers, and those who have strike action done to them.[6] What is true of both French and British contexts, and demonstrated by *Full Time,* is that this tactic is now facilitated by the rise of precarious, gig-economy work, which not only isolates workers from each other but also raises the stakes for those whose days are disrupted. The result, which has proliferated in recent years, is a highly emotional anti-strike discourse. My approach in this article, therefore, is to examine precarity and inconvenience as affective structures that are central to understanding resistance – and its detractors – in the contemporary moment.

Full Time is a good starting point for such an investigation, because it juxtaposes the two structures in a remarkably heightened manner. Éric Gravel's taut and absorbing

[4] Ugo Palheta, 'France's Pension Protests Are the Culmination of a Long Rebellion Against Neoliberalism', *Jacobin*, 7 April 2023 <https://jacobin.com/2023/04/france-pension-protests-movement-long-rebellion-neoliberalism-emmanuel-macron> [accessed 17 April 2024]; François Ruffin and Cole Stangler, 'François Ruffin: It's Time to Put an End to the Neoliberal Era', *Jacobin*, 20 January 2023<https://jacobin.com/2023/01/francois-ruffin-france-insoumise-neoliberal-era-pension-reform> [accessed 17 April 2024].

[5] The date I'm referring to here is the 1900 Taff Vale ruling, which ordered that unions were liable for the loss of profit caused by their strikes. This was made possible by reclassifying unions from "merely an association of individuals without any collective personality" into a legal entity that could be sued (see McCord, 1993: 247).

[6] For a brilliant example of this from the mainstream media see Hay, 1996.

film sees Julie race from her childminder, disgruntled after days of late pickups, to her first- and second-round interviews, throwing money at taxis, hotels and last-minute interview outfits made necessary by the total shutdown of Paris's transit system. The film shows us a high-wire act, emphasising Julie's feats of physical and organisational prowess in the face of the hurdles she encounters. At the same time, these external hurdles — not only strikes, but a sick passenger on the line, her child's broken arm, her temperamental boiler — come so thick and so fast that they defy probability, while Julie's ability to jump those hurdles becomes increasingly exaggerated in its heroism. The narrative drive of the film is that this high-wire act is also, as Temenuga Trifonova has pointed out, a gamble: Julie attending her interviews means missing work without leave, and eventually being fired for it.[7] At the film's close, therefore, Julie is jobless and aimless, having heard nothing from her interviewers for several days. She takes her children out of school to spend the day at a theme park near Paris. It is here that she receives a belated phone call from the marketing firm, offering her the role she thought she'd lost out on. Improbably and, as we will see, controversially, her gamble has paid off.

In unpicking the film's stance on precarity and inconvenience, I will draw on several theoretical resources. My first step will be to situate the film within the cinematic tradition of the "cinema of precarity," a set of films spanning the 1990s to the present day that depict changes to norms of employment under neoliberalism. There is a rich body of scholarship on how the tradition has changed over the last three decades and how this reflects changes in the structures of feeling that characterise different phases of neoliberalism. I will build on this work by situating *Full Time* at a hinge point between this tradition and something new, arguing that the way inconvenience is presented in the film is precisely what creates a window into an emergent (post-?) neoliberalism in France and beyond. My key interlocutor will be the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, who coined the term "cinema of precarity" and was influential in defining its boundaries. Berlant's project of mapping the genres of the present is akin to what I aim to do here but, more pertinently, their most recent monograph, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), takes up the question of inconvenience directly. My final aim, therefore, is to triangulate a cinematic tradition and political context with a shift in Berlant's thinking, suggesting that all three have moved in a similar direction in the last few years.

[7] Temenuga Trifonova, 'Precarious Lives: The Deepening Pathologies of Neoliberalism in French Cinema (1980 to the Present)', *Literature & Aesthetics*, 33.2 (2023), p. 76 <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/LA/article/view/17785> [accessed 18 January 2024].

Berlant coined the term "cinema of precarity" in their 2011 monograph *Cruel Optimism,* a work that mapped affective and aesthetic responses to the social transformations of the 1980s and 90s. "Cruel optimism," they argued, was the affective structure binding us to liberal capitalism's fantasies of the "good life," despite the "good life" becoming increasingly hard to locate and despite that fantasy standing in the way of truly liberatory action and politics. In two central chapters of *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant drew attention to an emergent strand of realist Francophone cinema that exemplified the affective structure they were trying to conceptualise. The four films that they placed in this tradition, *La Promesse* (The Promise, 1996) and *Rosetta* (1999) by the Dardenne brothers and *Ressources humaines* (Human Resources, 1999) and *L'emploi du temps* (Time Out, 2001) by Laurent Cantet, featured protagonists on the fringes of normative sociality and struggling with work, family, love, or status.[8] With reference to these films, Berlant conceived of precarity's affective nature as fundamentally static: generically defined by the "impasse," a temporary space in which "being treads water," awaiting a clear sense of how to act in response to their situation, and the "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."[9]

Later theorists, whether working in the Berlantian tradition or not, have expanded the category of "cinema of precarity" to include a wider range of films and a more diverse set of reactions to precarity from their protagonists.[10] Alice Bardan highlights a seam of activist work within the "cinema of precarity" that turns a loss of traditional models of political resistance (such as trade unions) into hope for more innovative, everyday forms of action.[11] Martin O'Shaughnessy's (2022) summary of precarity in French and Francophone Belgian cinema suggests that while films featuring a male protagonist in the fall out from Fordism tend to "frame examples of resistance, where they are seen at all, as residual reflexes rather than newly emergent," other strands offer an emergent politics more suited to the times.[12] In the documentary montage of Sylvain George, for

[8] *La Promesse/The Promise*, dir. by Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne (ARP Sélection, 1996); *Rosetta*, dir. by Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne (ARP Sélection, 1999); *Ressources Humaines/Human Resources*, dir. by Laurent Cantet (Haut et Court, 1999); *L'Emploi Du Temps/Time Out*, dir. by Laurent Cantet (Haut et Court, 2001).

[9] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 10, 176.

[10] For overviews of the breadth and diversity of this scholarship, see Bardan, 2013; and Kirsten, 2022. For articles that build on Berlant's conceptualisation, see Vij, 2013; Stewart, 2018; and Paszkiewicz, 2023. For studies of precarity in cinema that don't centre Berlant's analysis, see Bortzmeyer, 2020; and Sticchi, 2021.

[11] Alice Bardan, 'The New European Cinema of Precarity: A Transnational Perspective', in *Work in Cinema: Labor and the Human Condition*, ed. by Ewa Mazierska (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), pp. 69–90.

[12] Martin O'Shaughnessy, 'Precarious Narratives in French and Francophone Belgian Cinema', in *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses* (De Gruyter, 2022), p. 39.

example, "the global is re-signified as a locus of potential political agency."[13] Work by the Dardenne brothers, however, depicts "an interpersonal ethics based on the self-other diptych" that traps the politics of the film, O'Shaughnessy argues, in an individualist frame.[14] Trifonova also draws attention to the role of the "ethical dilemma" in these films, but more explicitly links this framing to a specific stage in the development of the tradition and neoliberalism more broadly, starting with Jean-Marc Moutout's *Violences des échanges en milieu tempéré* (*Work Hard, Play Hard*) in 2001. For Trifonova, films of this era "increasingly reframe issues of class and class struggle in ethical or moral terms," particularly when white-collar or middle management protagonists are called upon to be complicit in the brutalities of the competitive neoliberal system.[15]

Full Time bears the traces of this tradition whilst also being something entirely new. It depicts a character who is prevented from participating in social action not only by her precarious working conditions but also by her cruelly optimistic attachment to a normative, capitalist vision of happiness. Julie's good life fantasy involves both a white-collar job in the city and a rural idyll in which her children can grow up: a promise literalised by the extensive RER railway network that ferries commuters into Paris each day. It is this attachment that renders her particularly vulnerable to a strike by rail workers and which so exhausts her by the weekend that she can barely get through her son's birthday party, let alone travel into Paris again to protest.

However, the depiction of precarity in *Full Time* bears little resemblance to the static, recursive state first theorised by Berlant in *Cruel Optimism.* Rather, the film propels Julie and the viewer forward along her high wire, ratcheting up the tension with its charged electronic score. For Trifonova, this generic shift signals a disconcerting departure for the tradition. In a brilliant periodisation of the Francophone "cinema of precarity," she argues that *Full Time* moves away from the post-2007/8 era's cinematic landscape of murder, suicide and mental breakdown towards a "focus on individual protagonists looking for individual solutions to their problems."[16] In juxtaposition with the strike action, Trifonova argues, Julie's gamble on her new job shows that she is "unable to conceive of a future and thus unable to imagine [herself] as [a] political subject[t]."[17]

The film's politics are certainly not easy to parse. At the very least, it is not actively anti-strike. Julie herself is ambivalent towards the strikes, telling a neighbour that she

[13] O'Shaughnessy, p. 42.

[14] O'Shaughnessy, p. 39.

[15] Trifonova, p. 77.

[16] Trifonova, p. 72.

[17] Trifonova, p. 76.

would join in if she had more time and taking the circumstances in her stride with stoic determination. *Full Time* is not a depiction of the "negative solidarity" that Jason Read describes as "the belief that because one has suffered through work [...] then others should too," nor is it a rage-filled depiction that recruits the viewer to its vision of selfish activists and innocent victims.[18] In fact, those who are causing the public upheaval are eerily absent from the frame. In a somewhat puzzling move, the film, and Julie herself, abstract them into something faceless that is happening to her, background conditions dictating the probability of her success in the job market.

Perhaps there is, as Trifonova suggests, something cynical or defeatist about such a move. Julie's antagonist, in so far as she conceives it, is not herself (as in the films of the "ethical dilemma"), nor her employers (as in older films with a clearer class politics), but the obstacles that fortune sends her way – and she does, just about, back herself to surmount them. Gravel creates a character who rises to the challenge with skill and, at times, ruthlessness. Julie uses her social location as a middle-class white woman to charm and manipulate her way out of the problems that she faces. By asking us to invest in her high wire act alone, the film misses an opportunity to explore how inconvenience is experienced by the other chambermaids she works with, and who in turn inconvenience Julie when they are unable to cover her shifts or keep her absence hidden from the manager. What it foregrounds instead is Julie's control of and triumph over the circumstances around her: what we might call her sovereign agency.

Only this narrow focus, which relegates other characters to problems to be dealt with, is viciously undercut by the final scene of the film. In the Parc d'Acclimatation, fresh off the phone with her new manager and her children just out of shot, a distraught Julie finally breaks down. A spidery fairground ride whirs into action behind her, striking up an offkey carousel waltz, as if to signal that Julie's faith in the odds — and not other people — could only deliver a *deus ex machina* ending. In contrast to Trifonova, therefore, I read Julie's gamble as a provocation. What would it have taken for Julie to read the world around her not as an abstracted series of more or less probable outcomes but as a densely knitted scene of what Berlant calls "nonsovereign relationality"?[19] What will it take us?

In asking these questions, I am suggesting that the film problematises its own focus on Julie's gamble. I am also going to argue that its depiction of the tension between

[18] Jason Read, *The Double Shift: Spinoza and Marx on the Politics of Work*, eBook (Verso, 2024), Introduction, para. 16.

[19] Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. x.

sovereignty and inconvenience is precisely what distinguishes it from the "cinema of precarity" and gestures towards an emergent post-neoliberalism.

In *Cruel Optimism,* it is the changing nature of the state that forces Berlant's subjects to readjust their expectations of the good life. *Rosetta*'s protagonist, for example, is buffeted by insecure employment and the demolition of the welfare state.[20] In *Human Resources*, the threat comes by way of the proposed 35-hour working week and its attendant transformation of a factory's organisational structure.[21] In *Full Time,* however, the threat to Julie's peace of mind is other people's strike action: a more hopeful shattering and, perhaps, one that maps on to a progression in Berlant's work.

The concept of inconvenience forms the backbone of Berlant's 2022 monograph *On the Inconvenience of Other People.* In this work, Berlant addresses "sex, democracy, and life-in-struggle": three "scenes that people say they want, are uneasy wanting, try to make do with, try to get at, go in and out of caring about, and want to be okay with."[22] For Berlant, inconvenience is the "friction" at the heart of these three scenes, that which draws us into an ambivalent relation with them. We want other people, yes, but they also need to be managed. At various levels of intensity, inconvenience is contact that "disturbs the vision of yourself you carry around that supports your sovereign fantasy, your fantasy of being in control:" it is the hiccup, the diversion, the hurdle that must be leaped. So, in opening our eyes to the "pressures of coexistence," it offers capacities for relearning how to be together.[23]

With *Inconvenience*, Berlant is acutely responsive to how the political climate has changed since *Cruel Optimism* was published in 2011. In the last ten years, national sovereignty has been revived as the calling card of the Right, despite the health and ecological crises that have underscored our mutual vulnerability and interdependence. At the same time, the disruptive action of today comes from a dizzying and proliferating array of social movements and clans, each with "a crisis of their own."[24] As democracy moves onto the streets, reminders of other people's difference — how inconvenient this is — multiply. For Berlant, however, this friction offers opportunity. Why does it fail in *Full Time*?

With its complex juxtaposition of one person's struggle and that of a wider movement, *Full Time* generates new political terrain for the early 2020s. It offers a

[20] *Rosetta*.

[21] *Ressources Humaines/Human Resources*.

[22] Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 9.

[23] Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 3.

[24] Adam Tooze, 'Chartbook 262 Crisis Tribes – On Europe Now', *Chartbook*, 2024 <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-262-crisis-tribes-on-europe?r=1pogeu&utm_medium=email> [accessed 20 February 2024].

depiction of contemporary (class) struggle that spirals out into generalised social unrest and arrives at our protagonist as inconvenience. And it dramatises how the mass media renders that inconvenience opaque, isolating, and polarising. In *Full Time,* the news is always on. The radio prepares Julie for the day ahead with travel updates and summaries of the growing social malaise: 287 arrests at a Parisian protest, 110 injured, cars burned, shops looted, and six buildings set on fire. It accompanies her drive home after her second interview, as striking worker and inconvenienced manager shout accusations at each other on a talk show. To comment on this reduction of a complex social picture to sensationalist headlines, the film itself deploys what I have come to call a "crisis imaginary," that portfolio of stock images that are invoked, in the United Kingdom at least, any time social breakdown is implied or threatened. These stock images, such as the uncollected refuse that piles up outside the hotel room Julie is forced to take one evening when she can't get home, or the smoke pillowing out of the *banlieue's* high rises, indicate that *something* is happening at the same time as they abstract that something so that it no longer resembles other people. This is inconvenience in its lay form: as something to be avoided, weaponised by the media to make the political feel like a bad thing being done *to you* and to delegitimise its social value. In the most remarkable scene in the film, Julie puts on her make-up as she listens to the news. She pats powder onto her cheeks and back onto the area under her eyes where her tears are falling. It's a scene of great isolation, in which she cannot connect with the anger that surrounds her except to weep for how hard it will make her day, when she is already exhausted.

On the other hand, there is inconvenience as Berlant theorises it. For Berlant, inconvenience is a glitch in our normal ways of being in the world, and particularly in our everyday infrastructures, but it is also the affective demand that social contact places on us as we absorb and react to other people.[25] When workers shut down the Paris transit system, they force new infrastructures into being, the film's dominant example of this being the car-pooling that springs up organically around Julie's now defunct suburban rail station. The car-pooling occasions some of the film's most uncanny images, such as a train station with a queue of people waiting not on the platform, but in the carpark, and hitchhikers walking the motorways and main roads of Paris. There is potential in the car sharing, but it is fragile, requiring that Julie "unlear[n] the overskilled sensorium that is so quick to adapt to damaged life with a straight, and not a queer, face."[26]

[25] Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 18.

[26] Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, p. 85.

As it is, she twice puts up a defensive barrier between herself and the neighbour who offers her a lift into town one morning and asks if she is planning to protest. When she calls him later that evening to see if he might be able to drive her back to their village, in the split second between her request and his reply and faced with the inconvenience of possible rejection, she pulls a defensive grimace. When he turns out to have left Paris hours ago, the grimace is replaced by her smiling assertions that this is not an inconvenience at all. A few days later, grateful that he has been able to fix her boiler, Julie misreads the fragile openings of solidarity that he is offering as a romantic overture. Rather than staying open to the inconvenience his contact places on her, she calcifies it into a recognisable social form — flirtation — ultimately driving him away with a kiss that turns out to have been wholly inappropriate. They are moments of contact with the outside world that could put a human face to what is going on, but they are moments that Julie tries to smooth over. In that, therefore, they are moments of failure. What can we learn from them?

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