


“Fragmegration” of Identity in Laurent Cantet’s *Ressources humaines* and *L’emploi du temps*

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Abstract: As James Rosenau has written, localization and globalization came crashing together at the turn of the 20th century in a type of oxymoronic chaos he labels “fragmegration” that characterizes the confusion people have as to their role in society. It is this identity confusion that Laurent Cantet portrays in his landmark films *Ressources humaines* (1999) and *L’emploi du temps* (2001). Cantet’s protagonists seek their place in society as they cope with the sudden destabilization of their local, national, and globalized identities

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“lobalization is bringing people closer apart and places farther together,” John Rennie Short writes in *Global Dimension: Space, Place, and the Contemporary World* (Rennie 2001: 12). Indeed, as James Rosenau has written in his paradigmatic book on globalization, *Distant Proximities*, localization and globalization inevitably come crashing together and create a type of oxymoronic chaos he labels “fragmegration” in order to characterize the confusion everyday people have as to their role in society (Rosenau 2003). It is this identity confusion that the socially engaged filmmaker Laurent Cantet so succinctly portrays in his landmark films *Ressources humaines* (*Human Resources*, 1999) which describes the conflicts of Frank, a young business student who returns from Paris to his home town in order to undertake a management internship in the factory where his father is employed as a blue-collar worker, and *L’emploi du temps* (*Time Out*, 2001) in which Vincent, a company executive, lies to his family about losing his job and pretends to work away from home “on business” for extended periods months while in fact drifting, sleeping rough in his car and eventually turning to criminal activity. In both films, the protagonists are seeking their “place” in society, as Frank puts it asks at the end of *Ressources humaines*. Both characters search for a type of wholeness once their work identity becomes fragmented by class issues or unemployment yet collapse into personal chaos instead. As Cantet has noted: “[...] Vincent in *Time Out* experiences the same alienation as the workers in *Human Resources* – even if he’s not an industrial worker

and the reason for his alienation is not as obvious. You don't see him on an assembly line working with a noisy machine and becoming exhausted. But his dilemma is the same – his job doesn't correspond with his needs" (Porton and Ellickson 2002: 24). Through the prism of Rosenau's *fragmegration*, one can gain further understanding on how Cantet sheds light on the dilemmas and conflicts of many individuals in the French workplace who confront, largely in silence and isolation, the onslaught of a growing economic crisis. With the sudden destabilization of their local, national, and globalized identities, Cantet's characters try desperately to regain a sense of balance in the newly alienating environment they used to call "home."

In the 1990s, France's Socialist Party, led by Lionel Jospin, capitalized on French concerns over globalization by promoting several campaigns to protect localities from the onslaught of an aseptic world-wide movement that would take away jobs and "Frenchness" from a proud nation. In the 21st-century, once globalization had already made its mark on France and was no longer considered a "new" threat, French companies had to adjust to new worldwide strategies to remain competitive without necessarily telling their workers or the public at large. As Gordon and Meunier explain:

[W]hile they call for the state to mitigate capitalism's negative effects, France's political leaders- and even more its business community - have come to realize that it is no longer possible for the state to play a dominant role in running the economy, in a European single market and a globalizing world. The result has been gradual, if rather quiet, freeing of the French economy from state control: "globalization by stealth." (Gordon and Meunier 2003: 14)

In a speech to the Nikkei Symposium in Tokyo in 1996, Jospin accurately described the "push-pull" that characterized the notion of globalization within the psyche of French society at that time as he emphasized the paradoxical influences globalization might actually have on France as a nation:

Globalization is not a phenomenon that presents both opportunities and risks. Globalization is not a single movement. If it unifies, it also divides. If it creates formidable progress, it risks creating or prolonging unacceptable inequalities. While it opens up cultures to one another, it threatens homogenization and uniformity. If it liberates energies, it also stimulates negative forces that must be tamed. (Jospin, cited in Gordon and Meunier 2003: 90)

As Gordon and Meunier have observed, French society as a whole felt frozen in their opinions on globalization as they expressed fear on the one hand and acceptance on the other, creating a collective sense of paralysis that "threatens both the French social

model and French cultural identity” (Gordon and Meunier 2003: 89). Indeed, the perceived loss of a seemingly secure and reliable economic *dirigiste* model in favor of a “great unknown” but more economically liberal phenomenon has only served to increase French anxieties. Hence, Gordon and Meunier refer to the term “globalization by stealth” to describe corporate France’s attempts to “sneak” their efforts at globalizing past unsuspecting French consumers (Gordon and Meunier 2003: 11).

Moreover it was the speed with which France had been forced to embrace certain changes that provoked the most intense feelings of fear among the French public. It was this broader sense of public anxiety towards globalization that inspired Jacques Chirac to write his famous article in *Le Figaro* in 2000, “Humaniser la mondialisation,” calling for a slower globalizing pace in order to avoid “the phenomenon of exclusion” (Chirac in Gordon and Meunier 2003: 9). This same sense of exclusion drives Cantet’s characters to make themselves count in some way that is meaningful to them: Frank eventually turns against management in *Ressources humaines*, whereas Vincent in *L’emploi du temps* chooses, more troublingly, to create a fantasy existence and ultimately to slide into oblivion following the loss of his job and sense of identity as both a father, husband and a white-collar worker.

Unlike Frank, whose identity is torn between his roles as an intern working for management and his loyalty to his working class roots, Vincent’s literal dis-integration is more complex and works in several stages: He first hides his lay-off from his company from his family; then invents a new job for himself to create the illusion that he is working to his family; then, orchestrates a type of “Ponzi scheme” to maintain the illusion he has invented and later, when he is caught in all his lies and possibly tries to commit suicide, reinvents himself once again in a new “real” job he initially tried to flee at the beginning of the film. In both films, it is no wonder that the main characters suffer inner and outer turmoil in their relationships to their respective fathers in a manner that might have paralleled France’s own surreptitious shift away from the paternalistic *dirigiste* model. Cantet’s underlining of conflicts between fathers and sons represents two contrasting socio-economic classes in each film. Frank will ultimately rebel against his blue-collar father and initially seek out an *ersatz* white-collar one (his boss); Vincent revolts against the power his own wealthy father has over him and will bond with a smuggler of counterfeit goods who takes him under his wing. As Martin O’Shaughnessy has remarked regarding the paternal conflicts in these two films, they both

have heroes who turn to what could be seen as better, surrogate fathers [...] However, while in Freud’s case, the opening of the family romance onto broader socio-historical contexts is resisted, for Cantet it is a given. The films’ families and their Oedipal relationships are always knowingly tied to external questions such as class, power or ethnicity. (O’Shaughnessy 2016: 14)

***Ressources humaines*: The High Cost of "Human" Resources**

In the very first shot of *Ressources humaines*, the dichotomy between the Parisian world Frank gained access to as a student in an elite business school and his working class roots he grew up in is clearly delineated by the symbol of the train approaching its station. Far from a reassuring homecoming, Frank's return signals an inner confrontation between the two parts of his identity that will clash when he will feel torn by his desires to be accepted by his new bosses on one level, and his need to defend his father from an unscrupulous job cut two years before his retirement on the other. The spaces Frank will have to negotiate are riddled with class conflict during which he feels excluded both by the workers - who accuse him of being patronizing when he tells them they would not understand the problems he has to tackle with his new internship - and by the management executives, who close office doors on him when they want to discuss important matters or fear breaches in hierarchy when he casually proposes an idea to the company boss.

Although Frank would prefer to have lunch with the workers who are more down to earth, his father urges him not to do so as he fears he will lack all authority from that point on with them. When he does lunch with the executives however, he cannot relate to their winter vacation plans and expensive family excursions. To the casual question "vous faites du ski?" Frank can only shake his head in apparent defeat and embarrassment. Indeed, when Frank proposes a questionnaire on the issue of the *35 heures* in order to engage the workers in a dialogue with management, management seizes upon the chance to bypass the unions and divide the workers. He in fact proposes his idea as his boss is taking him back home to his family's working class neighborhood in his luxury car. When Frank accidentally learns of management's true intentions to use the *35 heures* as an excuse to lay off workers and replace them with more automation, he is shown seemingly caged in by his superior's box-like office that appears initially to be all glass to encourage transparency but has bar-like vertical shades designed to insure privacy at important times. The vertical prison-like shades further punctuate Frank's isolation within white-collar management and among the blue-collar workers.

Frank is put in an impossible situation: his training in Paris has made him an outsider to the locals who perceive his rise in management as a betrayal of his class. His position is highlighted by the CGT union representative Mme Arnoux's suspicion toward him, echoed by his childhood friend, who thinks Frank is patronizing and cannot understand how he could live in Paris. Above all, it is illustrated by his father, who is both deferential towards his bosses and wary of them. In parallel fashion, management also keeps Frank at a distance. He is never really accepted or included in any meetings even though his boss is eager to take advantage of Frank's ideas and dangles the notion that he could be eventually hired as a full-time *cadre* as a potential

carrot to keep him going. Frank's constantly blurry dynamic of not feeling at home within any social class, of being in the middle of two warring factions and of feeling constantly inadequate in whatever camp he chooses is symptomatic of the "framegrative" syndromes established by Rosenau in his paradigms of "distant proximities":

[Since] the shrinking of social and geographic distances has rendered the environment of people, organizations, and communities both distant and proximate, here a concocted label will be used to convey the essential nature of the epochal transformation. The label is "framegration" which is intended to suggest the pervasive interaction between fragmenting and integrating dynamics unfolding at every level of community. (Rosenau 2003: 11)

By embracing a middle-management business ideology he learned in Paris, he is no longer considered "local" by his old friends and family yet his working-class roots and attachment to his local upbringing immediately disqualify Frank from being considered part of the white-collar elite he fleetingly feels included in as an intern. The fragmentation of the individual faced with shifting socio-economic landscapes in *Ressources humaines* is epoch-making and often inescapable.

In contrast to the whiteness and sterility of the management-level, the workers' section of the factory is deafening, dark and expansive. A sign warns: "Méfiez-vous d'un mécanisme inconnu"¹—a metaphoric warning to Frank that he is navigating dangerously uncharted waters in the company—while, simultaneously, his father takes comfort in the routinized structure of the assembly quotas he must fulfill daily. When his son turns on his bosses in favor of the workers by printing a secret letter announcing several layoffs (including the father's), he is in fact horrified rather than proud that his son would in effect blow all his chances at getting a good position within the company. When the workers go on strike, storm the plant and encourage the father to join them, he shoos them away telling them that "je n'ai demandé à personne de venir me défendre." Just as Frank had to see-saw between his ambitions to become part of management one day and his need to defend workers against management's cynical schemes, his father is also alienated from his fellow workers by refusing to join their uprising and by wishing his son would do the same. Later, as Frank goes to a workers' rally held in a gymnasium, Frank initially walks in half way before retreating and crying at the gymnasium's doorsteps. Conversely, when the workers take over the factory, the

¹ Will Higbee has astutely observed that the sign "(Beware of unfamiliar machinery)" is stuck to the door through which Frank enters the factory floor for the first time. The poster, literally intended as a simple reminder to machine-operator workers about safety on the shop floor, also serves as a warning to Frank to approach his relationship with the unknown political and 'social mechanisms' of the workplace (unions, management, the factory workers) with caution" (Higbee 2004: 244).

executives who tower above them from the second floor, are paralyzed and powerless. The way Cantet chooses to frame the physical and social separation of these groups is striking: the class that is in power is suddenly rendered impotent and fearful despite a literal position of superiority.

By attempting to use the questionnaire on the *35 heures* to essentially automate and reduce the size of its work force in order to be able to compete globally, management had tried to "globalize by stealth." When Frank unwittingly unveils their plan, chaos and revolt ensue just as it did in France at that time when the country was going through the throes of proto-neo liberalism in its urge to privatize the economy as much as possible. The "privatization/ denationalization" push that began under Prime Minister Jacques Chirac in 1986 to 1988, and then resumed again during the Right's return to power in 1993 to 1997 was implemented with little resistance. Similarly, when the Socialists led by Jospin took power in 1997, they too implemented a denationalization initiative they called "private sector participation" (Gordon/Meunier 2001: 22) that essentially privatized major companies such as Thomson-CSF, Aerospatiale, Crédit Lyonnais and CIC, while leaving, "highly symbolic companies like France-Télécom and Air France" which had already been semi-privatized, still under government ownership (22).

"Tu vois où ça mène ta libéralisme à la con!" snarls Frank's brother-in-law snarls at a dinner, when the family learns of the father's imminent layoff. Yet Frank, who at the beginning of the film seems poised to fit in well within management, as a good pupil might, is effectively a human time-bomb, set to auto-destruct at the end of the film by betraying both his boss (yelling at him and branding him a coward and a weasel) and then by screaming furiously at his father when he resists the workers' pleas to join them. He unleashes years of pent-up anger and class shame as he confesses to his father that he suffers from "la honte d'être fils d'ouvrier, la honte d'avoir la honte d'être fils d'ouvrier. La honte de sa classe. Je ne serais jamais ouvrier. J'aurais le pouvoir de te parler comme je te parle maintenant. De te virer!" Of course, he is just letting off steam but he is also pointing to his inner revulsion at the choices he feels he has to make with his life. When Mme. Arnoux warns him "tu risques ta place" as he helps with the strike, she is inadvertently pointing to his self-sabotage in his struggle to please his real father, to appease his sense of justice as well as the ersatz father his boss appears like at the beginning of his internship. As Higbee has discussed, because Frank is spatially distanced from the people he encounters throughout the film, when he asks, at the very end, "elle est où ta place?" it is as "though he were addressing a third party, the question refers to Frank's own predicament [but] he is a body adrift in search of a place to belong and a sense of identity" (Higbee 2004: 245). As such, when the workers leave the factory after having stormed it, Cantet dwells on a shot of the machines void of all people. It is a shot similar to the one that ends Cantet's *Entre les murs* (2008) as well as the ending to his first film, *Les sanguinaires* (1997) which focuses on the empty streets of Ajaccio at daybreak on New Year's day. As the title *Ressources humaines* implies, the de-

humanizing aspect of the factory machines (which management hopes will eventually replace the workers entirely) ignores the factory's real strength which is in its "human" resources and not its mechanical or ruthlessly "inhuman" ones up management's sleeve.

***L'emploi du temps*: Cantet's Invisible Man**

In just a few years after *Ressources humaines* was released, Cantet's *L'emploi du temps*, takes the notion of "stealth globalization" even further with the character of Vincent whose own life becomes a stealth but counterfeit facsimile of his real flesh and blood one. Unlike Frank's inner schism, Vincent is not torn by class conflict but by a type of rebellion against the numbing constraints he feels regarding the alienation of his professional life and his desire to maintain his position as a bourgeois patriarch (which, ultimately, can only persist if, as at the end of the film, he accepts his fate, a kind of social "death,"² and returns to the corporate world that he has come to loath). Similar to a wayward electron, Vincent begins his defection from his company by driving past an exit on his way to a meeting. Rather than correcting his mistake, he lets himself drift to the point where he has to leave his real job and invent a fictitious one in order to reassure his family that he is still the breadwinner. He pretends to set off to work every day in a suit and tie, filling his days by driving aimlessly in his car to business meetings that don't exist.³ Vincent effectively becomes his own ghost looking for an idealized, unobtainable life he desires. As various critics and scholars have remarked (Vincendeau, Higbee) the spaces that Vincent haunts - hotel lobbies, parking lots, office waiting areas - all fit into Marc Augé's notion of the *non-lieux*.⁴

The opening shot of the film is of his waking up near a school as parents take their children to classes. *L'emploi du temps* also begins with the image of a train which Vincent tries to out-run in his car for fun rather than be a passenger like the ones the train is presumably taking to work. The title *L'emploi du temps*, and especially its English translation, *Time Out*, point to how Vincent's parallel life is pegged to and a rebellion against both a school and work structure. His days are taken up with time rather than *emploi*. Vincent is essentially a dreamer, using sleep as an escape from the intolerable business world structure that had been unconsciously eating away at his soul. The many scenes of his napping, dozing, or sleeping are all interrupted because he sleeps either in inappropriate spaces such as a hotel parking lot or at inappropriate times as when he returns exhausted from days on his aimless road trips by his father who wants to make sure Vincent is up in time for his children's school event. When Vincent is awakened in the afternoon by his father, Cantet underlines his regression: his father is waking him up

² As Cantet states: "I think he might as well be dead at the end of the film; life is not exciting anymore" (Porton and Ellickson 2002: 25).

³ For more on Cantet's metaphoric usage of the car as a metaphor for drifting see Archer's excellent article in "Works Cited" below.

⁴ See Augé, *Non-lieux*.

as though he were still a child, rather than the father of his grandchildren. In keeping with the strains of neo-liberalism and the imperatives caused by the specter of a globalized economy in which workers can never work enough to sustain their jobs or expectations, Vincent retreats into a type of fetal position in which he can momentarily escape responsibility and reality. It is a global pressure that destabilizes what were once "normal" expectations at the work place, replacing them with nebulous ones that lead to feelings of inadequacy. It is a syndrome O'Shaughnessy describes in terms of an era that seeks "a consistent imperative for the self to move beyond itself, to perform better, to become more efficient, to enjoy more intensely in a way fully in harmony with the macro-imperatives that govern the behavior of companies within the global economy" (Open Roads: 166).⁵ As Paul Virilio suggests, there are certain sleepers who sleep in order to separate themselves from the world rather than to simply recharge. There are so many images being spewed in the world, Virilio argues, that many people are perpetually exhausted:

L'homme ébloui de lui-même fabrique son double, son spectre intelligent, et confie la thésaurisation de son savoir à un reflet. Nous sommes là encore dans le domaine de l'illusion cinématique, du mirage de l'information précipitée dans l'écran de l'ordinateur. Ce qui est donnée, c'est justement de l'information mais pas la sensation, c'est de l'*apatheia*, cette impassibilité scientifique qui fait que plus l'homme est informé, plus s'étend autour de lui le désert du monde. (Virilio 1990: 54)

As such, Vincent's car provides him with constant movement, as though he were on a ship yet he is not in search of his "place" as Frank was but rather enjoys a perpetual sense of *dé-placement*. Vincent seeks to be invisible while pretending to be a part of a very visible, international entity in Geneva, the U.N., with a name focused ironically on world unity while Vincent himself really seeks anonymity and disappearance. "J'adore conduire," he explains, "En bossant, c'est ce que j'ai aimé le mieux. Je ne pense à rien. La seule chose qui me plaisait au boulot c'était les trajets." Rather than the destinations or even the *flâneries*, what interests him the most is spacing out, not being anywhere, obtaining no goods or, in a "Zen" way, having no thoughts. Similarly, an ex-colleague of his also admits that he never has space for himself at work, is forced to socialize with colleagues he has nothing in common with and complains of feeling empty at day's end to the point where he feels he has to go out "en boîte, pour avoir l'impression que j'ai fait quelque chose de ma journée."

Of course, Vincent flees his work in order to no longer feel boxed in by "la boîte" (which in this case can mean both "a box" and "an office" in French), his ex-

⁵ O'Shaughnessy is also referencing the social critics Dardot and Laval's paradigmatic work *La Nouvelle raison du monde: Essai sur la société néo-libérale* (436-437).

office, and actually chooses to be transitory rather than chase after the security of another job. When another ex-colleague calls him repeatedly to try to help him get connected with possible employers, for example, he ignores his calls. As Cantet reveals: “Vincent is not comfortable with his place, it’s not what he wants even though everyone loves him and he has so many comforts – a nice car, his family. So he tries to find a place that doesn’t exist and that is the place he invents. And he can’t get comfortable there for the very reason that it does not exist but is invented in his imagination” (Toumarkine 2002: 36). At one point, when he visits the U.N. building he pretends to work at, he follows a group of office workers into the building under a big advertisement for “Manpower,” a temping agency. Although the workers are all dressed in dark business suits, he wears a light tanned trench coat which makes him look like a ghost. He is in fact the opposite of “Manpower,” of course, as he is a man who is without power, but also in tune with the advertisement in the sense that he is reveling in the temporary and rejecting the permanency of a stable job. As he floats seemingly invisibly from office to office like a corporate tourist, and as he peers into other people’s meetings through glass windows (in an office aesthetic similar to the offices in *Ressources humaines*), he is at once a *revenant* and a *voyeur* as well as an intruder.⁶ As Cantet sees it: “When he sneaks into the Geneva office building, he just needs to wear the costume to take part in the world. What defines him are the symbols of that job – the briefcase, the overcoat, the uniform” (Toumarkine 2002: 37). He almost becomes a metonymic version of himself, yet as Cantet points out: “He stays behind the glass. He wants to document what others do. He already knows their working world but they are comfortable. For him to be outside is comfortable, so he enjoys what they are doing vicariously. His lying allows him to have things both ways. The dream he has, the solidarity he needs” (Toumarkine 2002: 37).

At another point, after he has taken the money from Nono, a musician friend, as part of the improvised Ponzi scheme he is attempting in order to sustain the illusion that he is making money for his family, he peeks into his friend’s family apartment in true voyeuristic fashion. He seems to long for that modest family’s simple bliss (as opposed to his grand bourgeois structure he enjoys in his own home) and marvels at their coziness. He, in fact, begins to feel guilty for his duplicity. Eventually, when his scheme begins to unravel and others question him about the money they gave him, Vincent abruptly returns Nono’s money with a huge bit of interest as if to back-peddle before he hurts others with his fantasies. As Amy Taubin confirms: “The point of view in *Time Out* [...] is that of a man who is outside looking in [...]. We see him labor through a point of view that’s a mix of desire, anger, frustration, contempt, and sheer terror” (Taubin 2001: 40). Indeed, as he confesses to his wife one insomniacal evening (in a confession that is a truth within a lie), he admits to having trouble adapting to his

⁶ For a detailed analysis of Cantet’s use of glass and windows to highlight Vincent’s ghostly voyeurism, see O’Shaughnessy “Open Roads,” 166-67.

new work space at the UN and is seized with panic attacks as well as constant feelings of inadequacy in relation to his family's perceived high expectations of him: "Je savais qu'il y aurait une période d'adaptation, mais je ne savais pas que ç'allait être si dur," he sighs, "J'ai peur de ne pas maîtriser la situation, de te décevoir, de vivre un mensonge. Dès fois, je ne sais pas ce qu'on me demande de moi. Je me permets de me raconter des histoires que tout va bien mais c'est faux."

When Vincent disappears from his family, he becomes his own proper ghost as he haunts spaces that he wished he had been able to frequent himself such as the U.N. office in Geneva. Yet, as Ackbar Abbas has remarked regarding the ambivalence of disappearance:

A space of disappearance challenges historical representation in a special way, in that it is difficult to describe precisely because it can adapt so quickly that it becomes non-descript [...] We can think about a non-descript space as that strange thing: an ordinary, everyday space that has somehow lost some of its usual systems of interconnectedness, a deregulated space. Such a space defeats description not because it is illegible and none of the categories fit, but because it is hyperlegible and all the categories fit. (Abbas 1997: 73)

For Abbas, then, it is no longer a question of uncanny *déjà-vu*, that characterizes the aesthetic sensibility of our era, but rather a *déjà disparu*. Quoting Henri Lefebvre's comments on what he considers "the abstract space of neo-capitalism" (Abbas 1997: 48), he writes: "That which is merely seen (and merely visible) is hard to see" (Abbas 1997: 48). As such, Vincent too has lost his "inter-connectedness" – with his family, his ex-colleagues at work, and those he encounters during his escapades. In fact, while the corporate world he left rages on, he relishes his dropping out and cherishes the solitary, private marauding his car can provide. His old self is long gone by the time his family catches up with him.

Vincent's decision to hide the truth of his joblessness from his family by disappearing for extended periods and filling his days with often random activities, also evokes French philosopher Paul Virilio's observations on technology, space, the body and globalization and inertia as the defining response to the demands and conditions of the modern world. Virilio has decried the hyper-acceleration of the world through a barrage of rapid communication (mobile phones, emails, faxes) which he feels contributes to "*l'ère du stress*." Vincent indulges in it once he no longer is a part of it. He can try to race a commuter train in his car, or drive a new Range Rover he buys in circles for fun: he no longer *must* go anywhere, he goes only where he *feels* like going. He subverts what Virilio describes as being symptomatic of our times, a "conception assistée de l'existence: plaisir d'un rendez-vous à distance, d'une réunion sans réunion [...] perte d'intérêt pour notre prochain au profit d'êtres inconnus et lointains qui

demeurent à l'écart, spectres sans importance qui n'encombrent pas notre emploi du temps" (Virilio 1990: 48). Although Virilio, writing originally in the 1990s, warns that people could become so used to sending texts and emails that they forgo the pleasures of human contact, Vincent uses them to his advantage by cloaking his disappearances with his mobile phone which allows him to pretend to his wife that he is at business meetings that do not in fact take place.

What Vincent is also confirming to a certain extent is France's collective phantasm at that time of what full globalization might entail: a corporate "American style" hegemony where no one is really secure in their jobs, or are over-worked, and never feel as though they are either fulfilled or achieving enough. This *volksgeist* in turn creates a general anxiety as well as a massive fatigue not from too much work necessarily but too much pressure or too many expectations. As he continues: "Je ne sais pas ce qu'on attend de moi, alors je panique. Même un coup de fil devient insurmontable." It is as though he were describing a nervous breakdown, yet at one point he justifies all his lying by telling an ex-colleague that he has invented his double life to shield his wife from the stress she suffered during her own nervous breakdown. Vincent goes on to describe his alienation at work that could not only describe his past employed life but also his ghostly visits to strangers' offices and meetings where he truly doesn't belong: "Je regarde les visages autour de moi, des visages complètement étrangers, des gens avec qui je suis censé travailler, comme des moments d'absence."

Vincent's alienation from what was once his real work and his fictitious one is quite different from Frank's, for example, in *Ressources humaines*. While Frank was in a "catch-22" of being rejected by management because of his working-class roots and by the working class because of the business management degree he obtained in Paris, Vincent feels as though he does not belong because he thinks of himself as an impostor (or even an 'impostor of an impostor') when he paradoxically tells the truth at the same time he is lying to his wife. He really doesn't belong because he has separated himself from society and chosen a counterfeit existence (and joined forces with a smuggler of counterfeit goods). Frank had been divided into two parts of himself that clashed but which were highly authentic. Before Vincent had to leave his real job, he had already felt as though he were a fake who could never live up to the ideals of his company or family; when he created a false existence for himself, it did not solve his feelings of inadequacy, it ultimately compounded them as the truth inevitably erupts to the surface as when the smuggler who recruits him invites himself to dinner at Vincent's home. It is at such moments in the film where Vincent's fictitious and real lives inevitably collide. As with the smuggling of fake products itself, Vincent becomes his own counterfeit product as though he were not only a victim of globalization but its personification. As Rosenau asserts in terms of fragmentation's effect on individual and collective identities:

The relentless surge toward multiplying and specifying identities is inherent in the age of fragmentation. As some organizations fragment

and others cohere, as some countries, economies and societies break down while others move toward integration, as the pulls of deterritorialization compete ever more with the ties that bind people to territory, and as some social movements expand transnationally even as some ethnic and religious groups become increasingly exclusive, so do identities proliferate as each of these diverse distant proximities raises powerful concerns about the extent to which one's prime affiliations are spatially near-at-hand or remote. (Rosenau 2003: 181)

For Rosenau, the nebulous frontiers enabled by globalized mindsets inevitably lead to fragmented identities, "increasingly people have to think of themselves in terms of a multiplicity of identities. Except for the Insular Locals and the Territorial Globals, gone are the days when one could define oneself in terms of a singular geographic space" (181). In Frank's case, he has trouble finding his "place" because he is rejected by the two spaces he frequents simultaneously (management and workers). He is in the middle and shifts from one to the other because he had left his local space (his family's town) and then subsequently left the city of his higher education (Paris). Vincent, on the other hand, dreams of being a truly globalized man (that is why he chooses the UN in Geneva as the locus for his fantasy job) but cannot completely abandon (and is doomed to live in) the space governed by his family. He fantasizes about the United Nations because he is far from united within himself and lives in a foggy morass of economic and social borders and boundaries. It is a condition O'Shaughnessy describes in terms of a type of pseudo-chameleon-like existence, a shell game within himself in which he loses not only his money but his identity:

Traditional road movies are predicated upon the perhaps doomed belief that, by escaping from an inauthentic life, characters could search for something truer to themselves. But in *L'emploi du temps*, movement itself has become a form of conformism and entrapment. It is Vincent's very mobility, his ability to adapt to different contexts and satisfy the expectation of others that means that there may no longer be an authentic self to find. (O'Shaughnessy 2012: 164)

When his wife decides to visit him in Geneva, he of course has to provide an alternative space for her since he has no apartment of his own there. He chooses to rent a romantic chalet which in turn rekindles their romantic feelings for each other, as it gives the wife a much needed "time out" from the stresses of motherhood. Yet the chalet, which is surrounded by mountains and snow, functions as an ersatz type of *heimat* for Vincent – a substitute, fictional home in his double life that emerges out of a dreamy fantasy. At one point, however, when they are going for a walk, he loses sight of her in the snow as the screen becomes completely blurry. For a moment, his two

realities converge and he is no longer even seemingly in control as he gasps for air as though he were drowning. When his wife resurfaces, she tries to reassure him with a question: “tu croyais m’avoir perdu?” While he indeed was afraid of that, it is really his own sense of self that he has misplaced and has trouble finding again as well.⁷

At the end of the film, when his web of lies finally catch up with him, and his family confronts him when he comes home from one of his trips, Vincent makes a desperate attempt to flee, just as his father comes home to drive some sense in him, as a kind of ultimate judge. The penultimate shot is of his jumping into some bushes from his car, as he tries to escape the reassuring voices of his wife and father who try to speak to him on his cell phone. Obviously they fear he will commit suicide (or worse, as in Nicole Garcia’s *L’adversaire* more specifically based on the sociopathic Jean-Claude Romand who murdered his family rather than face the truth). Yet, as Cantet points out, his fate is worse for him than if he had run away forever as the very last scene is of his accepting another job that his father presumably set up for him to bail him out: “I think he might as well be dead at the end of the film; life is not exciting anymore. He’s just doing what other people expect him to do and he doesn’t have the courage to go on fighting [...] I think he’s committing suicide slowly” (Porton and Ellickson 2002: 25). He will return to a job to be with the family he loves but he will go through the motions of his work life in a lobotomized way. When he convinces his new boss that he is not afraid to take on new challenges, his last line in the film is yet another lie as he boasts: “Je n’ai pas peur” since he is in fact terrified of many things including his new job and the constraints it will force on him.

The Return of the *fin de siècle* Blues

Vincent’s suppressed hysteria, collapse of masculinity and exhaustion at the turn of the twentieth century reflect a new form of *fin de siècle névrosé* not too dissimilar to such predecessors in French literature as J.K. Huysman’s Folantin in *A van-l’eau* (1882)

⁷ The scene in the snow blind is similar to the “lost in the snow” scene at the end of Ruben Ostlund’s recent film *Force Majeure* (2014) which also focuses on a crisis of masculinity within a *grand bourgeois* Swedish “nuclear family.” Parallel to *L’emploi du temps*, *Force Majeure* describes the internal and external meltdown of an externally happy executive, Tomas, who is crumbling with fear on the inside. When a sudden (but controlled) avalanche interrupts his family’s lunch overlooking a snowy mountain at the ski resort where they are vacationing, Tomas’ first reaction is to save his cell phone and then himself before checking in on his family once the avalanche is over. The rest of the film chronicles his feeble attempts to regain his family’s confidence through various denials and spurious justifications. Tomas ultimately finds himself in a situation that is similar to Vincent’s, as his family gives him one last chance to ski together as a unit. When his wife gets lost in the mist, Tomas knows that he has to redeem himself with a major act of masculinity and gender-role fulfillment. Tomas succeeds in finding and bringing back his wife whereas Vincent regresses further and further into a type of childish, emasculated pattern of dependency.

who also no longer felt secure in a rapidly changing French society as he slowly drifted off the social grid. Cantet in fact had already examined such a *fin de siècle* crisis in *Les sanguinaires*, a film specifically commissioned by Arte and "La Mission pour la Célébration de l'An 2000" as part of a series of shorter films from around the world devoted to this theme. Cantet represented France. In the first scene of *Les sanguinaires*, it seems as though Cantet would be embracing the new century, as shots of cheering crowds around the world ring in the new year with joy. Yet, the scene is really taking place in a travel agent's office as he is planning a new year's vacation on a deserted island off the coast of Corsica for a group of friends who want to flee all the excitement. Led by François, who insists on restricting his friends and family from having any contact with the outside world, the friends are meant to enjoy a certain peace away from the fake festivities around them. Yet, he begins to unravel and act like a fanatic as he rails against "tous ces crétins devant la télé en criant 'l'an 2000!'" as though his friends were castaways in Marivaux's *L'Île aux esclaves*. He criticizes his friends and his children for wanting to ring in the new millennium in some way and little by little begins to fade away from the group, disillusioned, and disgruntled with society until he finally disappears at the end of the film. His masculinity as *père de famille* and husband fritters away as well, as everyone begins ignoring his edicts, and he loses interest in making love to his wife. Moreover, he becomes jealous of the young, virile caretaker of the island (played by Jalil Lespert who plays Frank in *Ressources humaines*) and his ability to come and go as he pleases off the island in his motor boat while François and his friends seem paralyzed on the island.

In one of the first scenes, François becomes enraged when the caretaker takes out his loaded pistol to impress the guests. It is a further sign of a machismo that the spiraling François continuously lacks. François dreams of a Robinson Crusoe existence far from the stresses and pressures of modern life with such intensity that he simply vanishes after becoming mesmerized by a phosphorous glow on the ocean's surface. If Vincent *wishes* he could disappear but is forced back into his responsibilities by his family, François succeeds in actually vanishing: his wife tries to go after him but, passes out during a dizzy spell on a rock, a symbol, perhaps, of a permanence and solidity that eludes her husband. The last shots of the film are in fact of her as she looks down at the sea from a rescue helicopter and then onto the deserted streets of Ajaccio after all the revelers have gone to bed as if to give François the satisfaction and peace he was seeking but was unattainable during the collective but artificial new year's frenzies that were anathema to him. As the travel agent tries to reassure him at the beginning of the film, as he types in capital letters: "IL NE SE PASSERA RIEN" – nothingness, especially during world-wide end of century celebrations, becomes one of the most elusive goals for Cantet's characters.

If André Breton begins *Nadja* by stating that the question should not be "qui suis-je" but "qui je hante," Cantet's *fin de siècle* characters ask both those questions at the same time. France itself might have asked the same question as well during that time as

it was going through the spasms of a surreptitious economic transition from hyper-nationalizations under Mitterrand's first term to gradual privatization under Chirac's government. Nonetheless, what Cantet especially underlines are the resistances each of his characters attempts at blending in blindly to the status quo. However unsuccessful they are at resolving their internal and external crises, they at least refuse to become simple pegs assigned to well-defined positions. They struggle to come to terms with some kind of palatable resolution to their struggles that does not sacrifice their own individuality. "Je préfère, encore une fois, marcher dans la nuit à me croire celui qui marche dans le jour," Breton affirms, "rien ne sert d'être vivant, le temps qu'on travaille" (*Nadja*, 1928: 69). It is possible that neither Frank nor Vincent might actually find a thorough anchoring to their identities or find their true place in French society. As Cantet reflects regarding the extreme efforts Vincent must undergo to preserve his fictitious life: "He's not a lazy man. He just wants to be a master of his own time and work when he wants to. He's rejecting the path of 'I work and you'll pay me money.' He chooses to escape, to leave his job" (Porton and Ellickson 2002: 24). Yet, as Cantet ultimately warns: "Not working is very tiring" (24). Although many critics have examined notions of "New Realism" in French cinema in the 1990's, it is also possible that Cantet, in 1999 and 2002, might have focused rather on a new *fin de siècle* type of *névrosés* not too dissimilar to their counterparts just a century earlier.

Conclusion

"Loss of work allows Vincent to experience both freedom and a ludic creativity manifested not simply in the race with the car but also in the role playing he deploys to cover up his real situation," O'Shaughnessy writes, "yet such things can only be engaged in a covert manner and temporarily" (*Open Roads*: 160). How do Vincent and Frank compare to their cinematic predecessors in work-related films in France? Indeed, Vincent's dropping out of society may have been temporary, but it is a common thread in much of French cinema throughout the ages. One can think of early films such as René Clair's *A nous la liberté* (1931), for example, in which a prisoner escapes from jail, eventually runs a factory, but ultimately prefers leading a bohemian life on the roads as he joyously sings "La liberté, c'est pour les heureux" at the end of the film, or Jean Renoir's classic Popular Front film *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936) in which the abandoned workers of a publishing house take over the company when their thieving boss disappears. Work, for both white and blue collar workers, has often been seen as an unsavory antithesis to happiness and fulfillment in French cinema. Similarly, strained relations between corrupt managers and exploited workers have also been a prominent theme. Yet, it was Jacques Tati, by his prescient films such as *Mon oncle* (1958) and *Playtime* (1967), who was able to truly anticipate how modern, globalized work-forces would be stifled by pressures to over-achieve and over-produce. Similar to Cantet's title *Time Out*, Tati's *Playtime* highlights how Monsieur Hulot's eccentric, befuddled sense of

humanity can throw a monkey wrench into antiseptic, "La Defense"- like work spaces where, as Tati explains, all is "uniformity, all the chairs [...] in the restaurant, in the bank: they're the same. The floor's the same, the paint's the same" (Rosenbaum 1972: 37). In *Mon oncle*, when Monsieur Hulot must work in a plastics factory, he throws the assembly line out of whack because he cannot conform to the line's rhythm. It is exactly this type of "swerve" in the system that Cantet underlines in *Ressources humaines* and *L'emploi du temps* as well: whether it is Frank's turning on his supervisors and leading a rebellion of workers against management, or Vincent's revolt against the *emploi du temps* imposed upon him by corporate France, Cantet shows us both the symptoms of French society's confusion of identity in the work place at the turn of the last century as well as some unorthodox reactions to them.

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