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The Non-Place between Sacred and Profane: Utopian Gestures in the Apparatus of Semiocapitalism in Laurent Cantet's L'emploi du temps

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates the possibility of the utopian use of late capitalist non-places through Laurent Cantet's film *L'emploi du temps*, arguing that the protagonist's mental breakdown caused by cognitive overstimulation open up an unexpected critical perspective through which the contradictions of the system become visible. With the help of Agamben's theory of profanation I argue that the hero's inoperative, free use of former sites mediating semiocapitalist flows offers an example of a form-of-life that is not captured by the apparatuses of commodification.

Author Notes

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Introduction

Laurent Cantet's *L'emploi du temps* [*Time Out*, 2001] paints a bleak picture of contemporary France's post-industrial capitalism where cognitive workers willingly drive themselves to the brink of mental collapse to keep an increasingly more abstract machine of production running. Yet, the film presents the very sites of immaterial labor responsible for its hero's alienation and despair in an unexpectedly hopeful light, despite the fact they clearly don't offer any alternative to the capitalist mode of production. *Time Out*'s non-places of featureless office buildings, uniform gas stations and highway picnic areas carry a utopian impulse while simultaneously attesting to the contemporary failure of utopian imagination. Such a deadlock is symptomatic of the era when capitalism has reached its global stage, when, as Fredric Jameson insists, all the remaining enclaves of the premodern world have become saturated by its logic, creating a total economic system with no outside.[1] According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, capital expansion now becomes intensive rather than extensive, leading to an unprecedented technological revolution that helps to establish new digital systems of control to extend the working day beyond its previously set limits, allowing for the permanent exploitation of workers' affective capacities.[2] Franco Berardi calls this new regime semiocapitalism, as it captures the cognitive processes rather than

the bodily movements of workers in apparatuses of financialized, digital, networked capital, producing semiotic flows of information rather than material objects as the source of profit.[3]

Time Out presents a case of precarious semiocapitalist labor through its financial consultant protagonist, Vincent, whose function is to create nodes of "recombinant capital," linking and recombining financialized asset-fragments on the market, connecting clients with surplus liquidity not tied to any material production process but to a free floating network of venture capital, pension funds, derivatives, etc.[4] The plot narrates his gradual, involuntary disconnection from this network of "real abstraction," the loss of signifying power from his once convincing financial discourse—a process that slowly leads to his schizophrenic collapse. One of the merits of the film is the painfully detailed exploration of Vincent's silent despair in a universe totally saturated by semiocapital where he has no sanctuary to which to withdraw after being fired, no firm ground to stand on that would shelter him from the continuous pressures of immaterial production. He therefore remains stuck in the transitory non-places of his former job, trying to postpone the inevitable collapse of their connective function by setting up a Ponzi investment scheme while living in his car. By creating what Foucault called a heterotopic space of exception with no transparency and oversight, he, for a while at least, succeeds in imitating and exploiting the modus operandi of today's capitalism: the periodic inflation of financial bubbles. Yet, it is his process of

deflation that the film is really about and which is the focus of this paper. Curiously, as his impending doom is getting closer and closer, instead of being simply paralyzed by anxiety, Vincent cannot but find a strange satisfaction in his continued, increasingly more empty performance of immaterial labor, in his gradual detachment from any pretense of a profit motive. He eventually loses interest in building a heterotopic bubble and embraces instead his disconnect from the transcendental regulative network of semiocapitalism attached to it that serves, I argue, as today's secular apparatus of the sacred. He finds himself abandoned to a non-place of radical immanence where his cognitive labor falls back on him, opening up the possibility of an uncontrolled use of its substance: our common language freed from the confines of the capitalist machine parasitizing it. Therefore, beyond the ostensibly psychopathological nature of his behavior, Vincent's aimless actions also exemplify what Giorgio Agamben calls profanation, the restoration of objects, bodies, spaces that capitalism placed into a separate, sacred sphere of commodification to free use by becoming indifferent to the ends they served on the marketplace.[5] Cantet, of course, remains pessimistic about such utopian use of non-places and the disconnected bodies of cognitive laborers, ending the film with Vincent's reintegration into the status quo, making him yield to the pressure to live up to his patriarchal role and abandon his profanations for the benefit of his bourgeois family. Nevertheless, I argue that his failure is by no means necessary and the film, perhaps against its director's

conscious intentions, successfully demonstrates the structural contradictions of today's semiocapitalist regime, exposing its fragility and contingency.

The Non-Place as Semiocapitalism's Sacred Heterotopia

In his *Precarious Rhapsody*, Franco Berardi draws attention to the increasing gap that separates the contemporary cognitive worker's experience of space from that of time, claiming it to be the main cause of late capitalist mental disorders. While through the new information technologies and digital networks the expansion and colonization of (cyber)space becomes a virtually limitless enterprise, our biological bodies cannot endure a similar acceleration of time. Such incapacity becomes the central obstacle to the expansion of semiocapitalism, the apparatus that has been the hegemonic source of global surplus value since the 1990s. As a result, cognitive laborers exposed to the endless psychic stimulation of this regime start to develop symptoms of panic and depression. To counteract these effects of psychic malfunction, subjects react with an increase in mental automatism that helps them to avoid "reflection or a conscious and emotional reaction."[6]

Vincent, the hero of *Time Out,* is a financial consultant suffering from the symptoms above. He just got fired from his job apparently because he enjoyed spending his time driving from one client to another a little too much. To avoid

the admission of his guilt and possible humiliation in front of his family, he decides to keep pretending that he goes to work as if nothing happened, sustaining his everyday rituals that supplemented his former job. He drives around for hours on highways, has coffee at gas stations, calls his wife to tell her he will be home late because of a meeting, etc., to the point when his entire life starts to consist of nothing but these automatisms. Like Berardi, John Marks also stresses the pathological dimension of such a mental transformation. For him, Vincent's performances of empty gestures indicate the breakdown of his formerly "hyperfunctioning self"; he simply cannot keep up with the regime's demands of "increasing personal investment, instant decision making and communication, [and] the necessity to succeed within a global marketplace."[7]

This reading of *Time Out*, while to the point in its critique of semiocapitalism, nonetheless ignores the utopian dimension of Vincent's ostensibly psychopathic empty rituals. For instance, the opening shot of the film shows him sleeping peacefully in his car, protected from the outside world by the foggy windshield. The camera watches him patiently from the back seat until the heat of the rising sun slowly dries up the window, waking Vincent up; it now becomes clear that he had spent the night in the parking lot of a highway rest area. Yet, he doesn't seem disturbed, agitated or in a hurry to leave; quite the contrary. He walks around a little, surrounded by a group of schoolchildren who don't pay much attention to him; he then enters the gas station shop, browses through

different brands of bubblegum, buys coffee from a machine and takes his time looking at magazines. When he is finally back on the road driving his car, he stays relaxed; the sight of a train puts a boyish smile on his face as he pretends they are racing. The camera follows his distraction with a comfortably paced shot-reverse shot sequence, capturing the small signs of excitement through close-ups of Vincent's face. As Ginette Vincendeau notes,[8] the ease of such solitude and anonymity is closely linked to the protagonist's occupying what Marc Auge called the non-place, this worldless space of supermodernity such as a parking lot, a hotel lobby, or a highway toll gate that escapes historicity and identity. "A person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver."[9] According to Neil Archer, the non-place has an immense appeal for Vincent because by entering it he can suspend any decision about himself, escape his identity as a male breadwinner, and thereby avoid confrontation with his family.[10]

The fundamental ambiguity about the status of non-places in *Time Out* derives from their unclear relation to cognitive capitalism. Do they offer a separate space, forming a transcendental exception to the sphere of late capitalist circulation in which semiotic flows come to a halt and lose their meaning, or, on the contrary, do they exemplify rather the essence of today's abstract capitalist machine of empty signs that has long dissolved any indexical link to the

materiality of the so called real economy? Will Higbee suggests the former, insisting that the non-place for Vincent is what Foucault called a "crisis heterotopia," a "distant or removed place or location that allows sacred or forbidden acts to be performed outside the social space they affect in order for a certain 'crisis' to be resolved."[11] The road, then, is Vincent's peculiar sanatorium where he "withdraws" to heal the wound caused by his involuntary unemployment. In Foucault's model what various heterotopias such as boarding schools, prisons, retirement homes, cemeteries or museums have in common is that they are all in one way or another counter-sites to the normative social order, embodying its ideal or inverted mirror image, its excess separated by a boundary that can be crossed only under special circumstances, following special regulations. Unlike utopias, Foucault argues, these sites not only do exist but they also have a clear function "in relation to all the space that remains."[12] He suggests, somewhat enigmatically, that this function has to do with modern society's continuing reliance on the sacred.[13]

It's crucial to note here that this Foucauldian understanding of heterotopias as modern sites of the sacred goes against the commonplace wisdom, taken from Max Weber, according to which capitalist modernization leads to a radically desacralized universe.[14] This Weberian doxa opposing disenchanted modernity to a still sacralized premodern world is the basis of Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane.*[15] He insists that it were the now disappearing sacred

spaces that originally introduced heterogeneity into a previously homogenous, neutral, that is, profane and inhuman universe. "When the sacred manifests itself […] there is […] a revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world."[16] It is only by excluding and isolating the "absolute real" into the site of the sacred that the space of mundane everyday life becomes possible as its counterpart to be inhabited, measured and expanded. As Eliade emphasizes, the various forms of sacred rituals (like that of the sacrifice) are nothing but symbolic repetitions of the gods' primordial world founding gesture, this purely formal act of separation which introduces cosmos into the former chaos, and which serves as the guarantee of a meaningful world as such.[17] According to this narrative, capitalist disenchantment undermines this guarantee; as Slavoj Žižek puts it: "although it is global, encompassing all worlds, [capitalism] sustains a stricto sensu 'worldless' ideological constellation, depriving the great majority of people of any meaningful 'cognitive mapping'." Talking about its endless de-territorializing force, Žižek argues (paraphrasing Marx) that capitalism is not limited by a fixed symbolic constellation of meaning structured around a founding exclusion like worlds built on the sacred negation of chaos used to be. In fact capitalism "can reproduce itself only through its constant self-revolutionizing, through the constant overcoming of its own limit."[18]

Against this intensifying process of deterritorialization, the rituals performed by the hero of *Time Out* indeed seem like an attempt to reintroduce a secular version of the sacred space into the worldless desert of late capitalism. He builds a solitary life world out of non-places which he purifies from their profane function they used to have as transitory spaces linking endless semiotic flows of capital. For him, non-places and the rituals performed in them become ends in themselves, emptied out of every utilitarian purpose. As Agamben notes, "at the center of the sacrifice is simply a determinate action that, as such, is separated and marked by exclusion; in this way it becomes *sacer* and is invested with a series of prohibitions and ritual prescriptives."[19] The sacred prohibitions Vincent introduces have to do with transparency and oversight; with his actions becoming unaccountable. This is not an easy task within the universe of *Time Out* where everything seems to be visible, out in the open. Martin O'Shaughnessy draws attention to the presence of glass structures throughout the film, including the windshield of Vincent's car, the large French window of his family home, and the walls of various office buildings, all of which can be seen through from both sides, thereby collapsing the territorial distinction between inside and outside. Whenever the protagonist observers the world from his solitary bubble in non-places, he can be sure that there he is also being gazed at, being surveilled.[20] In a couple of cases he is even caught by security cameras and as a result gets kicked out of a hotel parking lot and a conference center for loitering in private (non-)

spaces. This means, first of all, that the film's regime of semiocapitalism is what Debord called the society of spectacle: in a world fully dissolved into sign-commodities nothing can remain hidden from view. Second, the only effective way to become invisible in such a universe is to hide in plain sight, to set up an ersatz performance of cognitive labor while secretly (privately) not producing anything. The sacred sphere Vincent constructs is therefore not a properly other space like Foucault's heterotopias but the very space of the normative (deterritorialized, fully transparent) capitalist order submitted to a different use, the contours of which are invisible for anyone else but him as long as he remains convincing in his role as an ordinary person.

While scouting for a new fake job, for instance, he enters the UN building in Geneva by blending in with a group of visitors; he wanders around in corridors, peeks into offices, and eavesdrops on conference meetings, but the security guard only notices him after he had been sitting in the lobby for hours. He then tells his friends and family about his responsibilities at his non-existent UN job in great detail, so successfully that he even manages to convince several of them to invest into a fake business venture on the "emerging markets" he supposedly had learned about through his diplomatic connections. He takes their money like monks take alms, to look after the sacred, to continue with his rituals that separate *his* non-place from the homogenous chaos of capitalism. If we accept, then, the narrative about the desacralizing and deterritorializing forces of capital, Vincent's sacred

acts are a resistant move towards reterritorialization, towards a new autonomous zone with a stable (although mobile) anchoring point indexed to his private self.

The Role of the Non-Place in the Totality of Capital's Sacred Apparatus

At the same time, however, from the perspective of Vincent's family his actions simultaneously deterritorialize another heterotopic exception from the endless flux of capital, the bourgeois home, which eventually becomes the reason for his downfall. It is striking how his gradual purification of the non-place from the logic of profit seeking is strictly correlative to his introduction of capitalist management techniques within his family. It seems that the more immersed he becomes with his new life as the priest of the sacred, the more he has to keep the domestic space of his former life separate by profaning it. Topics of work and business opportunities start to dominate table conversations—indeed such discourse appears to be the full extent of Vincent's relationship with his father. At a school fair he scolds his young son for selling his toy cars too cheap. He also encourages his wife, Muriel, to go back to the job market now that with his new high profile UN appointment they can afford to pay someone to take care of the children. Finally, he turns ecstatic when he sees his eldest son winning a judo match, clearly disavowing the martial art's non-competitive and "non-showy"

philosophy emphasized by the son. Through these actions Vincent disrespects and profanes the sacred bubbles that were deployed by members of his family in a similar way to his own temporary withdrawal into non-places while still employed: as places of private refuge. In a couple of scenes we see the fragility of both the wife's and the older son's sanctuary from the protagonist's perspective who gazes at them from the outside through glass windows while they are occupied with domestic work and judo practice. It's not that they cannot look back; rather, like the UN employees Vincent glances at in Geneva through the open doors and see-through windows of their offices, they are indifferent to the surveillance of others,[21] and it is this indifference that turns the space they occupy into a heterotopic exception from the deterritorializing force of capital. Vincent's intrusion into his wife and children's sacred spaces, by contrast, turns them into the extension of the market place where, as in Gary Becker's notorious neoliberal economic model, family members are to calculate cost-benefit ratios while investing in each other.[22]

Vincent's sacred non-place therefore becomes a monstrous meta-institution for other heterotopias with a distinct identity to collapse into. This is because unlike his family, he has no illusions about any sanctuary untouched by the forces of global capitalism. His vulgar profanation of their private heterotopias only reveals what those spaces already were: supplements to the semiocapitalist circulation, offering a "time out," an inner refuge to subjects who want to

temporarily withdraw from the pressures of 24/7 cognitive production (we learn, significantly, that Muriel gave up her job and opted for domesticity because of her depression, etc.). We could say that Vincent simply applies the well-known New Testament injunction to the late capitalist situation: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God,"[23] as "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."[24] As the non-place takes over the sacred function from other heterotopias, it becomes clear that God and money are not two separate entities but two (sacred and profane) modalities of one and the same thing. And Vincent can only suspend the functioning of the profane, deterritorializing machine of semiocapitalism by occupying its dominant sites and performing its normative tasks while remaining indifferent to whether its goals of extended reproduction are viable (ignoring his Ponzi clients' request for a detailed business plan and transparent bank accounts). However, isn't this recklessness precisely what characterizes the actual managers of capital today, what led, among other things, to the recent global financial meltdown of 2008? This is where one should remember the old warning of Deleuze and Guattari about an all too hasty reduction of capitalism to the forces of deterritorialization. In their *Anti-Oedipus* they remind us that "the more the capitalist machine de-territorializes, decoding and axiomatizing flows in order to extract surplus value from them, the more its ancillary apparatuses, such as government bureaucracies

and the forces of law and order, do their utmost to re-territorialize, absorbing in the process a larger and larger share of surplus value."[25] Vincent's sacrificial reterritorialization is not a line of flight from the rule of capital but an element constitutive of its dialectic, capturing the surplus liquidity of the world market in much the same way as investment banks and hedge funds do, unconcerned about the devastating effect this process has on human lives.

It is therefore not enough to say as Eliade does that the worldlessness of capitalism implies the dissolution/deterritorialization of the sacred as the anchoring point of the precapitalist universe. One has to give an account of how this world-destroying logic of capitalism itself has a religious form. This is what Walter Benjamin does in his *Capitalism as Religion*, arguing that capitalism is a "pure cultic religion without a dogma," a kind of meta-religion that overwrites previous versions of the sacred. As such, instead of introducing a fixed spatiotemporal heterogeneity like former religions, it collapses the difference between sacred and profane, work and cultic celebration, creating one homogenous sanctified space and time. Perhaps the most important consequence of this transformation is a new relation between guilt and redemption. While previously the sacred allowed one to reach psychic balance through a given amount of atonement, capitalism universalizes guilt and eliminates the possibility of forgiveness, thus enslaving its subjects into infinite repentance, that is, work.[26]

Giorgio Agamben develops Benjamin's thesis further in his *Profanations*. Like Eliade, Agamben identifies the sacred as that which introduces a split between the human and the divine spheres. But for him, just like for Benjamin, instead of abolishing it, "the capitalist religion realizes the pure form of [this] separation [between sacred and profane], to the point that there is nothing left to separate"; "where sacrifice once marked the passage from the profane to the sacred […] there is now a Single, multiform, ceaseless process of separation that assails every thing, every place, every human activity in order to divide it from itself." This process is universal commodification, the sacred form of which separates objects from their use value and installs them into the sphere of capitalist circulation. Agamben's point is that when the entire territory of the world is consecrated this way (turned into a spectacle of sign-commodities), there is no more room for profane use, thus the two terms of the binary collapse into each other, making total consecration coincide with "an absolute profanation without remainder."[27] This is *Time Out*'s universe made out of non-places that stand both for the absolute profane deterritorialization *and* the total consecration of the world through the territoriality of private sanctuaries created by its atomized individuals.

The territorial autonomy of Vincent's sacred bubble therefore is also an illusion which starts to fade the moment he is reminded that he never left the capitalist religion's guilt (debt) – work continuum, that is, when he actually has to

produce money to pay back the loans he took to inflate his phantasmatic sanctuary. At this point he is forced to take up smuggling counterfeit goods from Eastern Europe through the Swiss-French border, as if he all of a sudden had to face the real (profane) weight of his imaginary (sacred) financial investment scheme. This grotesque turn of events shows the impossibility of traditional sacrifice in the age of semiocapitalism only too clearly insofar as Vincent's purely symbolic gestures separated from the vulgar production process are revealed now as identical in effect to that of the abstractions organizing late capitalism's unrepresentable financial networks, always already linked through invisible threads to the so called real economy.

The moment just before Vincent's resignation to his new role his facial expression betrays the shock of realizing this fact. As it turns out, Jean-Michel, a smuggler uses the same featureless hotel to hide his goods in which Vincent would arrange the meetings with his duped clients. After the more experienced criminal observes the protagonist's amateurish scheme, he decides to recruit him into his own operation. However, when Jean-Michel shows him a room full of carton boxes, explaining to his apprentice-to-be how to run a well-organized illegal enterprise, Vincent just stands there by the door, hesitant to step inside. At the smuggler's request he moves along like an automaton, with fear and disgust in his eyes. We see his growing despair in a long held medium close-up while the man keeps talking to him about the benefits of joining his organization. With his

last breath of resistance Vincent says: "I don't think I'm interested," to which Jean-Michel responds: "You don't seem to have many other options." Vincent looks down and walks out of the room, but he really doesn't have other options.

Towards a Profane Utopia

Capitalism as a religion is therefore capable of turning even the biological limits of Vincent's body in its favor, exploiting the very constraints his time out put on capital's potentially endless expansion. When he is back to business serving the system's infinite demand for profit, what appeared to be a meltdown caused by his mind's finite capacity to deliver, his *private* indifference to the semiocapitalist network, is seen now as an unorthodox but clever application of its rules (Jean-Michel simply takes Vincent to be a con man). This dialectic is repeated at the end of the film where not only does Vincent get reinstated as a high level financial consultant but even his months of unaccounted absence are taken as a sign of successful self-restructuring. It's not only that his sacred territory is eventually deterritorialized; its very territoriality is retroactively turned into its opposite, as if Vincent's sacred had always already been a form of deterritorialization. Yet, the very fact that such a retroactive intervention by figures of (paternal) authority has to occur at all suggests that time outs also pose

a real threat to the system. I suggest therefore to read them as symptoms showing the necessary failure of a total commodification/consecration of the world, the impossibility of a final "connective mutation"[28] of human beings that would reduce them to perfectly functional digital nodes between immaterial flows of capital. During these time outs it is in fact the religious logic of capitalism that becomes momentarily suspended out of necessity to give way to its opposite: profanation. As Agamben stresses, "to profane means not simply to abolish and erase [sacred] separations but to learn to put them to a new use, to play with them."[29] Upon closer look this is exactly what the hero of Laurent Cantet's film does before he gets caught. The irony is that in a fully consecrated (deterritorialized) world any attempt to re-introduce a traditional sacred territoriality cannot but appear as the profane (tainted, contaminated) remainder of the absolute sacrifice of universal commodification. Therefore, Vincent's ritualistic use of the non-place effectively turns the traditional form of sacrifice inoperative; instead of being an end in itself offered to gods beyond the human symbolic order it works as an empty gesture, what Agamben calls a "pure means without an end," used only to reveal the linguistic contours of people's collective being together.[30] Language is thereby freed from the semiocapitalist network; without the profit motive its empty form becomes illuminated for free use and profane play. This is the utopian dimension at the heart of late capitalist alienation which, however, can go entirely unnoticed if it remains a private phenomenon.

Viewed from this perspective, when Vincent lures his friends into his fake financial scheme he is not unlike Agamben's paradigmatic cat playing with a mouse, profaning the ritual of hunting rather than practicing it.[31] He also exposes a pure, purposeless form of mediality when he enters the UN building in Geneva blending in with a group of visitors, pretending to have a meeting until the security guard kicks him out. On the other hand, one cannot simply ignore how his "game," insofar as it remains private, also reproduces very traditional boundaries between his fictitious yet masculine workplace and a commodified but still feminine domestic sphere. Keeping the true nature of his rituals a secret from his family is very much in line with Vincent's patriarchal gender role. This is why, and the ending certainly corroborates this, even if they express a utopian desire for the profane, his non-places retain part of their instrumental, heterotopic function as masculine "hubs of irresponsibility"[32] where he retreats in flight from a feminine, from the scrutinizing gaze of his wife and children emasculating him as his home becomes, in his mind, metonymically linked to the endless network of semiocapitalist production. A more cynical reading could even suggest that profanation itself is nothing but a phallic exception to the world of total commodification, a masculine toy helping to release the tension arising from the incompatibility of the traditional, Oedipal role of the father with the challenges of late capitalism.

Alternatively, however, one could call Vincent's profane way of life an unfinished collective utopian project. Viewed from this angle even the film's apparently rigid gender dynamics become more complicated. After all, as I have already mentioned, we see Vincent's profane interventions into the sacred space of his family members' private bubbles (domestic work, school fair, judo match) parallel to his profaning the non-place (his own former sacred heterotopia). He is not trying to disappear; he is developing a profane play with them, introducing them into a different form of life they understandably resist at first. For instance, when he, irresponsibly from a bourgeois perspective only, gives 500 Francs to his son "to buy clothes for himself," he meets the immediate disapproval of his wife for the profane (non-fetishistic) treatment of money. He also keeps talking to them about his nonexistent UN job, having long debates with his father about the possible development of African countries, showing a strange, affectless enthusiasm that doesn't suit the pragmatic considerations of mere deception. His father remains skeptical to the idea, but his real resistance is to that small dissonance in his son's behavior which he cannot quite put his finger on yet. Later on Vincent is also clearly indifferent to the gendered separation of spaces when he brings Jean-Michel, masquerading as his co-worker from Geneva, to the family dinner table. The intrusion of the friendly but rather vulgar looking guest, a formerly imprisoned entrepreneur whose rustic image clearly doesn't fit that of a

high profile UN executive and who is not trying very hard to keep their illegal operation a secret provokes Muriel's already suspicious gaze further.

Moreover, when his wife comes to visit him in Geneva to check up on him and the apartment he is supposed to have bought with his father's money, Vincent tries to initiate her into his alternative lifestyle by driving her to a run-down mountain cabin for a romantic weekend instead. This is the only place in the film that has a properly utopian form instead of merely expressing an unrealized utopian longing like Vincent's non-places. As Fredric Jameson notes, utopias in this narrow sense must have a spatial "closure or enclave structure [...] Utopian spaces are [...] on whatever scale totalities; they are symbolic of a world transformed; as such they must posit limits, boundaries between the Utopian and the non-Utopian."[33]

Significantly, the couple has to leave behind the non-place of Vincent's car and walk through a snowbound mountain path to get to the house. As we see them in a long shot walking up to the building, a mist of clouds is slowly ascending towards them from below, adding a sublime, otherworldly feel to the landscape. The house also has no glass windows on display;[34] all of its wooden blinds are closed so the couple uses candles as a light source. Muriel plays along but remains anxious; after they have sex she returns to the topic of the Geneva apartment and seeing Vincent's reluctance to talk about it she figures there is

something going on. The next day they go for a walk on the snowy mountain where the horizon has now disappeared completely behind the thick fog. Vincent leads the way, looking back from time to time at Muriel to see whether she is okay. The only sounds we can hear are their footsteps and the slight blow of the wind. After a while she vanishes from view and the camera shows her husband's gaze slowly panning the landscape to find her. He quickly distinguishes her contours walking away from him towards another hill. A reverse shot of his face reveals unease and concern. He takes a few steps in her direction and when he sees that she had stopped, he smiles and cries out her name but she doesn't respond. As he walks up to her, the film's eerie cello music score joins in as if to materialize the lure that led her away. A medium close-up frames the two of them from behind: she is standing with her back towards him, staring at a tree line, the boundary of their utopian enclave in the mist. Then she turns back to show her face and smiles: "Did you think you had lost me?" Perhaps this shot of her turning back, her smile breaking the previous composition's focus on the distant background exemplifies the utopian more than anything else in the film.

For Agamben, the space of the "coming community" indifferent to the capitalist machine is one without sacred exclusions. In it every subject's singularity is bordering "the outside [that] is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access – in a word it is its face, its *eidos*".[35] It is this turning away from the non-utopian

capitalist world that turns its promise of a sacred and ultimately private exteriority inoperative, transforming it into a smile on Muriel's face who remains vulnerable but indifferent to the transcendental call behind her back. It is only insofar as subjects are ready to deactivate the spell of their individual sacred bubble and expose their singularity to others that they can form the basis of a non-capitalist collective. But Muriel's smile doesn't last, which signals the fragility of this utopian moment, her temporary willingness to ignore her husband's strange behavior. She turns back towards the pine trees looming on the horizon and Vincent cannot but do the same.

Regressing into a Gendered Competition over the Sacred

After the scene on the mountain we immediately cut to the protagonist driving his car alone again, his peaceful solitude interrupted by the anxious phone call of a client asking for his money back. Once at home, Muriel's suspicions also return and after calling Vincent's former co-worker she finally learns that her husband has been lying to her. But it is only when Vincent realizes that his wife *knows* that he himself accepts, out of guilt, the necessity of a gendered conflict between masculine non-place and feminine domestic, the topology of an eternal competition between two private heterotopias without the possibility of a utopian

community indifferent to such petty rivalry. As a last desperate attempt he tries to preserve the sacred status of both places at the same time: on the one hand, he unloads the smuggled goods from his car and leaves them in a hotel parking lot; on the other, he gives back the money to the family of his old friend who invested all their savings in his scheme. His sacrifices, however, don't work; they only cause more confusion about the location of the sacred exception. This is expressed in the shot towards the end of the film when Vincent is standing outside his house in the dark, staring at his family as they appear inside, framed by a window, going about their daily lives without him. Staging his final homecoming as a patriarchal fundamental fantasy, Cantet emphasizes how the failure of his hero's utopian project increases his voyeuristic libidinal investment in the status quo. This shot finally sutures an earlier one from Muriel's perspective just before the dinner scene, anxiously watching her husband's arrival with his criminal friend from the second floor window, fearing the male homosocial intrusion into her heterotopic bubble. This antagonism becomes even more overt in the denouement where Vincent's family (Muriel and the children), having learned the truth about his job loss, organizes a silent intervention to break the spell of his performance. They don't say anything but just keep staring at him with a combination of gentle concern and quiet panic. It is his eldest son who finally confronts him and we learn that Vincent's father is coming over "to talk," making it all too clear that his re-normalization involves his definitive re-introduction into

a patriarchal gender division, eliminating the threat of a potential line of flight in Vincent's former, reluctantly masculine position.

This regime that is reaffirmed by the father's arrival requires men to take their endless sacrifices on the altar of the capitalist religion *as if* they were made for the benefit of their families, pretending in front of the supposedly ignorant eyes of women and children that this postmodern simulacra of a home serves as the true site of the sacred exception. In other words, everyone can have his or her own private bubble as long as they play along and respect private boundaries. As a result, when men need a time out because the semiocapitalist machine pushes them beyond the limits of their cognitive capacities, without the possibility of the profane they mistakenly identify the source of their fatigue in a competing (feminine) sphere of the sacred the owner of which they try to keep satisfied and ignorant of their own sanctuary guarded by male monks. This ideological misrecognition is the consequence of a denial about the real deterritorializing effects of global semiocapitalism destroying traditional sacred territories—a blindness that makes the hero of *Time Out* regress into clichés of classical Oedipal masculinity in the end by identifying with the "strong silent type." In his defense, Vincent confirms his belonging to this rather outdated phallocentric ideal in front of his son by claiming: "But nothing changed for you. Are you aware of that? I did that so you could live like nothing happened… I could have just run off. You know that?"[36]

Yet, there is more to this refusal to run than what can be explained away as a confused attempt to reconstruct the hero's wounded manhood. It also signals Vincent's real unwillingness to identify with what Agamben calls the *homo sacer*, the "sacred man" abandoned by the community for posing, with his way of life, a threat to the clean cut binary oppositions supporting the force of law. By not going away to a masculine heterotopia he refused to serve as the constitutive (that is, stabilizing) outside to his patriarchal bourgeois family. As Agamben notes, the fundamental ambiguity of the term *homo sacer* comes from the fact that his ban is at the same time expected to take place as the free choice of the excluded subject performing his self-withdrawal from the symbolic community.[37] The silent intervention of Vincent's family has a similar dual function: on the one hand, to directly undermine the hero's potentially subversive (collective) profane form of life, on the other, to activate his guilt and thus make him condemn himself to (private) banishment. Accordingly, right after the conversation with his son Vincent finally does run off: he climbs out of a window the moment his father arrives. He drives away but the non-place of his car doesn't offer him solace anymore, so he leaves it by the roadside and walks into the darkness of the night. There is no music to underscore his disappearance. The camera doesn't follow him; it stays in the car, listening to the noise of the highway and Muriel's concerned voice on the speakerphone. She says she loves him but Vincent cannot hear it anymore. We then immediately cut to the final interview scene a few

months later where he is about to get a new job arranged by his father. Retrospectively, this indicates the futility of his schizophrenic flight which is not only unable to terminate his participation in the semiocapitalist apparatus but even facilitates his success in it: by abandoning the territory of his non-place, he is now ready to enter the worldless desert of capital as a pure, precarious commodity, ready to sell his labor power once again.

One of the most perspicacious analyses of such masculinity that seems to fall behind in the late capitalist competition but in the end succeeds not only despite but even *because* of its apparent failure is offered by David Savran, looking at the Hollywood film *Forrest Gump* (1994), a saccharine fable about a slow-witted suburban white boy's inexplicable rise to the rank of national hero and soothsayer:

> For Forrest is the paradigm of the new, sensitive, spiritualized male, the holy fool, the perfect fantasy of the white male as victim, the legitimate descendant of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the man who discovers an imaginary integrity by abusing and manipulating the people around him all the while believing that it is he who has been the victim, the man who disavows his castration by projecting it onto others, the man who becomes a "white Negro" the better to exploit those whom he both envies and fears,

the man who leaves a trail of corpses behind him and wonders what it all means.[38]

Savran detects a masochistic bent in such masculinities which I have linked to the human mind's inability to comply with the demands of semiocapitalist production. In this sense Vincent is indeed very close to Forrest Gump as both of them are trying to keep up at any cost ("Run, Forrest, run!"), despite the concomitant meltdown of their higher brain functions. By doing this, they are both playfully profaning a totally commodified/consecrated world, blissfully ignoring any socially established purpose of their actions, which the normative society misinterprets as sign of hidden (sacred) wisdom. (Forrest unwittingly resolves an international conflict with China, exposes the Watergate scandal, etc., while Vincent becomes an investment guru in the eyes of his friends and family.) Savran's conclusion is that such performance is disingenuous and manipulative precisely because of its inevitable cooptation by the status quo; Forrest participates in constructing the hegemonic reading of US history today, told from the perspective of white bourgeois heterosexual men, while Vincent ends up as a "real" financial consultant once again. For Savran what I have described as profanation is just another name for the masculine disavowal of imperfection, for the act of what he calls reflexive sadomasochism where a man appears as the victim of his own dysfunctional phallic gestures the norms of which he keeps publicly identifying with despite their ostensibly devastating effects on his own

self.[39] Privileged white men can thereby become holy fools and safely jump off the cliff of reason knowing that the safety-net of patriarchy will break their fall and eventually reinstate them into their rightful position.

But what exactly is the public for which these characters supposedly perform their sadomasochistic rituals? In the case of Forrest Gump, the whole American nation cherishes him as a victim-hero, including various figures of traditional phallic authority like the president himself. Vincent's indifference to the capitalist machine, however, makes him keep his victimhood (his job loss) a secret from everybody, significantly from his father as well, making the bourgeois public believe that he is just like anyone else, turning a profit. This is how, I have suggested, the sacred heterotopic function of his non-places in reconstructing phallic power is turned inoperative, giving way instead to potentially collective profane rites. By contrast, the profane dimension of Forrest's life, much like that of the clueless hero in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), becomes the source of his "holy" celebrity status by living his private (sacred) life entirely in front of the public media. Their lives exemplify the logic of total consecration/commodification in the late capitalist society of spectacle where, as Agamben notes, the formerly meaningful distinction between use and exchange value collapses into the exhibition value they themselves embody,[40] demonstrating how "that which appears is good, that which is good appears."[41] For their audience there is no difference between profanation and sacralization:

Forrest and Truman's unknowing collaboration in suspending any meaningful purpose of their lives in the name of the pure means offered by the stupefying teleplay parasitizing every idiotic detail of their existence is already the end in itself that semiocapitalism strives for. Agamben himself sums up this problematic by stating that capitalism is indeed "nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means, that is, profanatory behaviors."[42] For this reason profanations are better not thought of as an outside to the spectacular totality of late capitalism. Their emancipatory potential that Agamben aims to delineate lies rather, similar to Benjamin's messianic realm,[43] in the minimal shift of perspective they provide from the necessary blind spot within this apparently homogenous totality: the possibility of indifference to the ends of the semiocapitalist apparatus and the free use of its objects as pure means.

In spatial terms, non-places are the perfect expression of such an inherent ambivalence of the totally consecrated world. On the one hand, they are symptom of the incompleteness of every capitalist totalization, the gap between cyberspace and cybertime, the spatial correlate to the contemporary human subjects' time outs. They are the profane excess to the "absolutely unprofanable,"[44] a space neither private nor public; a place where solitude itself acquires a collective dimension through anonymously shared similitude.[45] Yet, on the other hand, their redemptive potential can remain entirely invisible as they can fit in perfectly with the capitalist logic as transitory spaces or crisis heterotopias. For instance, as the

more cynical readings of *Time Out* clearly suggest, given the undisturbed patriarchal and bourgeois frame of the film, its non-places are at best a temporarily reterritorialized playground for boys who despite their discontent are unable to turn against their fathers who oversee capital's dialectic of reterritorialization and deterritorialization. From this perspective, all that people like Vincent can do is to create temporary bubbles that are bound to be dissolved, sacrificed, commodified to fuel the all-encompassing flux of capital.

Conclusion

The merit of *Time Out* is that it shows profanations not simply as the motor of capitalism but *also* as spatiotemporal phenomena that have to be foreclosed, that have to remain uncounted and unaccounted for in their utopian potential so that the cynical identity of the profane and the sacred can emerge, driving the dialectic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization forward. Crucially, it is only when the autonomous spatiality of Vincent's rituals is eliminated by his family's intervention—when upon looking for refuge in the non-place he instead finds himself beyond territoriality, in the vast, empty desert of schizophrenia—then and only then does he turn into a proper capitalist subject ready for his new job and the new heterotopic privileges of reterritorialization that come with it. That is to

say, only when his flight is not counted spatially anymore, only when his profanation is transformed into deterritorialization can he as a schizo drive the flux of capital to the next level to temporarily solidify again.[46] The crucial point to emphasize here is that Vincent's profanations are obstacles to both movements of capital: they successfully disturb the logic of his former financial consultant job *and* make it impossible to dissolve its now ineffective limit in order to move on towards a more abstract, more unprofanable position. Only after the disturbing memory of Vincent's adventure into the non-place is erased do we arrive to the spectacular universe of *Forrest Gump* and *The Truman Show* where only a dupe or an idiot can believe that the capitalist apparatus has an alternative.

But *Time Out* also goes a step further in exposing the contingency of today's semiocapitalist universe by showing Vincent's refusal to simply withdraw into a crisis heterotopia after being fired, his choice to extend his formerly private non-place towards a new collective. If the ending retroactively allows for a cynical reading of the film, it is the scene on the mountain that provides its utopian counter-closure, symbolizing where a different exit from the inherently ambiguous non-place might take us. While Vincent in the end is indeed pulled back into the apparatus of semiocapitalism, his example nonetheless suggests that profanation can always potentially break with the very logic of the sacred that sustains the capitalist machine.

[1] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 399-418.

[2] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univesity Press, 2001), 272; 338.

[3] Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation,* trans. A. Bove et al. (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 118.

[4] Ibid., 78-79.

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations,* trans. J. Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 73-93.

[6] Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*, 118.

[7] John Marks, "'Ça tient qu'à toi': Cartographies of Post-Fordist Labour in Laurent Cantet's L'Emploi du temps," *Modern & Contemporary France* 19:4 (2011): 489.

[8] Ginette Vincendeau, "White Collar Blues," *Sight and Sound* 12, no. 4 (2002): 31.

[9] Augé, *Non-Places*, 103.

[10] Neil Archer, "The Road as the (Non)-Place of Masculinity: L'Emploi du temps," *Studies in French Cinema* 8, no. 2 (2008): 142.

[11] Will Higbee, "'Elle est où, ta place?' The Social-Realist Melodramas of Laurent Cantet: Ressources humaines (2000) and Emploi du temps (2001)," *French Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3 (2004): 246.

[12] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 26.

[13] Ibid., 23.

[14] See Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 129-159.

[15] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harvest Books, 1959), 13.

[16] Ibid., 21.

[17] Ibid., 52.

[18] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 318.

[19] Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. K. E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 105.

[20] Martin O'Shaughnessy, "The Crisis before the Crisis: Reading Films by Laurent Cantet and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne Through the Lens of Debt," *SubStance* 43, no 1 (2014): 89-90.

[21] Muriel even points this out to her husband while they are watching their son's judo practice through glass walls: "Little brat! Acting like he doesn't see us!"

[22] See Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981)

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[23] Mark 12:17 New Living Translation

[24] Matt. 6:24 NLT

[25] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. R. Hutley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 34.

[26] Walter Benjamin, "Fragment 74: Capitalism as Religion." In *Religion as Critique: The Frankfurt School's Critique of Religion*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta, trans. C. Kautzer (New York: Routledge, 2005), 260.

[27] Agamben, *Profanations,* 81.

[28] See Franco Berardi, "Biopolitics and Connective Mutation," *Culture Machine* 7 (2005), accessed April 27, 2014. http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/viewArticle/27/34

[29] Agamben, *Profantations*, 87.

[30] Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without and End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 2000), 49-63.

[31] Agamben, *Profanations*, 86-87.

[32] Archer, "The Road as the (Non)-Place," 142.

[33] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), 415.

[34] The snowbound terrain is the obverse of see-through glass structures that dominate the film and can be read as the society of the spectacle in a frozen state, with its mandate of universal transparency deactivated.

[35] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 66-67.

[36] L'emploi du temps [Time Out], DVD, directed by Laurent Cantet (2001; New York, eOne Films, 2003)

[37] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 104-112.

[38] David Savran, *Talking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 304.

[39] Ibid., 307.; Lauren Berlant calls this "cruel optimism", "when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" Laurent Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

[40] See Agamben, Profanations, 90.

[41] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Black & Red, 1970), 12.

[42] Agamben, Profanations, 87.

[43] See "The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different." Benjamin quoted in Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 52.

[44] Ibid., 82.

[45] Auge, Non-Places, 101.

[46] See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 67.

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