

Between Two Worlds: The brutally exploited in France

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Between Two Worlds is a film directed and co-written by French author Emmanuel Carrère. It is loosely based on an autobiographical work by Belgian-born journalist Florence Aubenas, who spent months working undercover as a cleaner to investigate the conditions facing lower-paid workers.

Her 2010 book's French title, *Le Quai de Ouistreham* (Ouistreham pier or dock), refers to the ferry service between the northwestern French port of Ouistreham and England's Portsmouth for which she worked as part of her research. But Aubenas also clearly meant the title to bring to mind British writer George Orwell's famed 1937 work, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (in French, *Le Quai de Wigan*), which recounts his experiences among workers in the West Midlands devastated by the Depression.

In the fictionalized film adaptation of Aubenas's book (which won various prizes), well-known author Marianne Winckler (Juliette Binoche) gives up her life and connections in Paris to work as a cleaning woman (the English title of Aubenas' work is *The Night Cleaner*) in Caen in northern France. In actual fact, the first character we see, marching with determination through the industrial landscape, is Christèle (Hélène Lambert). When she arrives at the government unemployment office, she angrily berates an official for the bureaucratic red tape that may result in her losing benefits. She has three children to feed and no money coming in.

Marianne, after first learning the humiliating demands of the job interview process ("I'm energetic, a team-spirited person," etc.), finds employment with a cleaning firm. She undergoes another humiliation, a course on cleaning with a "trainer." Christèle shows up here, as does Marilou (Léa Carne), the two women to whom Marianne will ultimately grow especially close.

Fired for talking back to a bullying boss, Marianne returns to the unemployment office, where she is

recognized for who and what she is by her counselor, who promises to keep the secret. Meanwhile, Marianne confides in Marilou that she never realized before that there are "no real jobs left," none, that is, with decent hours, benefits and possibilities for advancement.

Eventually, the investigative reporter-writer finds work on the ferry, cleaning rooms, while it is docked in Ouistreham. The woman who hires her, a fellow worker, tells her the job is sheer "hell," a "commando operation," and all for the minimum wage. The cleaning crew has 320 rooms to clean on the ferry, only four minutes to each room. Marianne finds herself paralyzed with exhaustion after the first night's work.

She begins to develop a friendship with the tough, thick-skinned Christèle, offering the other woman, who has no car, a ride to work each morning. In one touching sequence, Marianne spots Christèle going through her bag and wallet. But nothing is missing. On the appropriate day, Christèle and her three adorable young sons celebrate Marianne's birthday. Christèle had been looking at her identity card for her date of birth! The young boys present Marianne with a necklace, which she pledges to wear the rest of her life.

Marianne also meets, or is met by, Cédric (Didier Pupin), also unemployed, and something of a ladies man. At one point, he fixes a flat tire for her. They spend a little time together, but nothing serious.

Things unravel—reader beware!—when Marilou leaves her coat behind in a cabin and the trio hurry back to retrieve it, only to have the ferry leave for England with them aboard. They hide out in a first-class room and sip champagne. But an old friend recognizes Marianne ... and her secret emerges.

Between Two Worlds has a certain authenticity, as far as it goes. Binoche is fine, and the other actors take their working class characters seriously.

The existence of "precarious" employment, insecure,

poorly paid, easily eliminated, is a global phenomenon, seriously aggravated by the pandemic. France has one of the highest percentages of precarious workers in Europe, with millions falling into that category.

The bleak outlook for Christèle, Marilou, Cédric and the others is a part of contemporary social reality, as is the complete abandonment of these workers by the so-called labor movement, the trade unions, and the official “left” parties.

Between Two Worlds also takes time to consider briefly the situation of those even worse off, undocumented immigrants from Sudan, for example, harassed by the police at 5:00 a.m., who take away their blankets in freezing weather.

The film’s ending presents problems. Again, reader beware. Once Marianne’s imposture emerges, Christèle and, to a certain extent, Marilou, find it unforgivable. Christèle calls Marianne “a fake person, less than me.” Marianne has humiliated everyone, “pretending to be what you weren’t ... Get lost.” After the book-exposé comes out, Christèle summons Marianne one final time to the docks and challenges her to clean rooms for just an hour and a half, after which she will be returned to her friends. Marianne finds that pointless. So, Christèle says, “Everyone in their place,” and leaves without another word.

There’s something misplaced or false here. It’s understandable that a friend would initially be irritated by the deception, but isn’t the exposure of the social conditions the central issue? With whatever limitations, and from whatever imperfect combination of motives, Marianne has brought to light the harsh exploitation and brutal life situations of these workers. This sort of moralizing would prevent artists, intellectuals generally from ever discussing or publicizing the circumstances of the working class. Carrère’s film spends its final energies on a secondary or tertiary issue. What about the facts of modern life?

Overall, although *Between Two Worlds* is sincere enough, it has a rather tepid, unadventurous character. The subject matter is worthwhile, but the film is hardly ground-breaking. (Its most moving moment is the impromptu, surprise birthday party.) Least of all does Carrère entertain the possibility that these workers might revolt against their conditions, although French workers are almost continuously demonstrating their intense combativity.

Carrère is celebrated in some quarters as a major French writer. This reviewer cannot render a judgment, but it is

not encouraging—to say the least!—to come across Carrère’s journalistic tribute, which appeared in *The Guardian* in 2017, to France’s new president at the time, Emmanuel Macron, now best known (and widely hated) as the “president of the rich.”

This is the sort of passage Carrère wasted his time on in that article: “Every interaction with Macron follows the same protocol. He turns his penetrating blue eyes on you and doesn’t look away. As for your hand, he shakes it in two stages: first a normal grip, and then, as if to show that this was no ordinary, routine handshake, he increases the pressure while at the same time intensifying his gaze.”

And, “The professional commentators who started to drop him after just a few months of his presidency can keep calling him a powdered marquis, a megalomaniac with royal pretensions, a rich man’s president or a communicator without a cause, but he [Macron] couldn’t care less. The people, by contrast, with whom he is directly, physically in contact, are his bread and butter. Anyone who’s had their hand shaken by Macron is lost to the opposition: they’re destined to vote Macron and to convert to Macronism.”

More: “This is a guy who only runs for a single office in his entire life, that of president of the republic, and wins. A guy who understands that the parties that have structured French public life since the end of the second world war are clinically dead, and that it is time to offer the French something new.” Even this admission doesn’t improve matters: “At the same time, I knew that my vote was a class vote: it was normal for privileged people to vote for Macron.”

Enough, this is pathetic and shallow, journalistic impressionism and wishful thinking. Someone who thinks and says such things will never penetrate to the most critical, burning issues of our day, in art or politics.



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