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The “Selfish” Mothers of Contemporary French Screen Comedy

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Mary Harrod

- 1 Due to its availability for both patriarchal co-option and feminist appropriation, “mother” is perhaps the most contested identity in global culture. This is certainly true in France, where currents of feminism have centrally theorised motherhood as a facet of “equality in difference” (Dupâquier in Cova 1991: 120). French cinema, while it has always included many family-focused films, has also accorded a degree of narrative space to maternity specifically at least since the 1980s, somewhat in contrast to Hollywood’s tenacious tendency to stereotype the position (Kaplan 1992)—a difference partly connected to France’s higher proportion of female directors in the film industry (see Tarr with Rollet 2001, 113-125). Since 2000, first in print and on television then in the 2010s in cinema, popular culture representations of Western motherhoods in general have attained what Jo Littler, citing Shani Orgad, calls cultural “hypervisibility” (Littler 2020: 503) in forms that have made contradictions within them more difficult to overlook, and in the 2010s tended to openly mobilise crisis discourse.
- 2 Faced with this situation of high productivity, symptomatising palpable social anxiety about the contours of contemporary maternal identity, this article will consider key trends in the depiction of motherhood in French comic narratives on screen in the latter part of the 2010s. I focus on comedy as a genre that traditionally deals with “difficult” subjects thanks to “comic insulation” (Palmer 1987: 45)—the protective layer afforded by the genre’s apparent frivolousness and inconsequentiality—allowing it to collect around sometimes taboo topics of cultural alarm, as it is the tension generated by these that jokes exploit. Audivisual comedy is simultaneously second to none in terms of generic visibility: thus my case study films *Lolo* (Julie Delpy, 2016), *Sage femme* (Martin Provost, 2017) and *Papa ou maman 1 and 2* (Martin Bourboulon, 2015 and 2016) enjoyed box-office takings well into the millions¹ and feature extremely prominent or

star actors (Delpy, Catherine Deneuve and Marina Foïs) in maternal roles, while I also refer to a handful of other noteworthy films and one Netflix Original television show (*Plan cœur* [Noémie Saglio and Chris Lang, 2018-2019]). These narratives feature mothers of varying backgrounds and ages, although like most French familial comedies (and postfeminist fictions) they focus on white and broadly middle-class characters over around thirty. They also span different comic subgenres, crossing the divide from frankly mainstream films (*Papa ou maman*) to those with “quality” aspirations (*Sage femme*), in an attempt to capture the pervasiveness of the representational phenomena identified. The aptness of the comic lens is further apparent when we consider that many theories of humour have emphasised incongruity—such as between ideals and maternal realities, including saliently via what Henri Bergson called “*du mécanique plaqué sur le vivant*” (1938: 37): an apt description of the straitjacket of idealised maternity that many characters fail to don with ease. However, in order to grasp the points of dissonance and unease informing and in turn being worked through via onscreen mother figures, the article begins by examining in more detail the evolution of cultural views of maternity in Western societies and in France in particular, with the aim of pinpointing ways in which the increasing penetration of “external” ideas thanks to the globalisation of culture may intersect in complex ways with local customs and cultures, including through screen media themselves.

Postfeminist Maternity

- 3 Several important scholars overlap in their views of new ideas about motherhood emerging since the 1990s in the postfeminist era. For instance, Angela McRobbie notes that controlling reproduction in younger years, so as to enjoy sexual freedoms, is a feature of the sexually and economically empowered “phallic” womanhood that she sees as an ideal of femininity promulgated between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s (2007: 732), while for Anita Harris, in discourses of “can-do” or successful femininity proliferating since the early 1990s, “Motherhood has been repackaged as a profitable and attractive choice for the career woman in her mid-30s [...] Pitched as a cool and sexy endeavour” (2003: 23-4), in other words to appeal for “selfish” rather than socially responsible reasons. Both discussions emphasise the limitations of such superficial feminist models, which do not fundamentally critique the patriarchal structures within which they in fact still firmly sit, as does Diane Negra’s intervention, focusing more extensively on the sexualisation of mothers in this millennium as a strikingly new phenomenon, paradigmatically in the global hit television show *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012) (Negra 2009: 70-73).² While there has been a stronger tradition of eroticising older women in France than in many other countries (Sontag 1997: 21), in line with the nation’s tendency to celebrate sexuality—and especially female sexuality—*tout court*, such mainstream representations of desirable and desiring mothers nonetheless retain novelty in this context: thus as late as the early 2000s such prominent French thinkers as the psychoanalyst and historian of the family Élisabeth Roudinesco and the feminist Élisabeth Badinter both commented on the Gallic tendency to limit representations of French women to a desexualised maternity (the latter in a discussion of media representations) (Colville 2007: 240-241).
- 4 However, the example of *Desperate Housewives*, by virtue of its very title, also provides a useful shorthand for the way in which visions of motherhood shaped by postfeminist

notions of self-actualisation, while they may be glossily appealing, are fraught with problems: hence the series’ focus on a bevy of dark secrets repressed by the imperatives of gendered neoliberal perfectionism under which its eponymous heroines laboured. While trading on the visual appeal of affluent lifestyles, it ultimately and sometimes directly spoke to the way in which postfeminist constructions of motherhood as fulfilment, notably accented by capitalist discourses of both economic prosperity and broader self-enhancement, elide the realities of professional and personal sacrifice involved in enormously time-consuming and emotionally demanding relationships of care. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this dissonance has subsequently come to be insistently foregrounded in US and British audiovisual fictions of the 2010s in two variants on *Desperate Housewives*’ generic cocktail of mystery thriller and dark comedy: maternally-focused horror films and film and television comedies of maternal unruliness.³ Examples (among many) of the first include the films *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) (see Wood 2019) and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2014), as well as *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011) in a more arthouse-thriller mode. These films are particularly interesting for their abjection of children not as supernatural threats but simply as exceptionally demanding and sometimes destructive human beings, while focusing on mothers’ reluctance to parent with some sympathy (even if the dire consequences of failing to rise to the challenge may also be suggested). As for comedies of maternal unruliness, these are identified by Littler as mediating the contemporary crystallisation of the “mother behaving badly” social type and include the hit movies *Bad Moms* (Jon Lucas and Scott Moore, 2016) and *A Bad Mom’s Christmas* (Lucas and Moore, 2017) alongside television series *Motherland* (BBC, 2016-), *The Let Down* (VET TV, 2017-18) and *Catastrophe* (Channel 4, 2015-19), which offer cathartic visions of overstretched mothers temporarily sloughing off their responsibilities to engage in self-gratifying hedonistic behaviours such as heavy social drinking that are more usually the preserve of male characters. Indeed, Littler acknowledges these figures’ kinship with McRobbie’s phallic “ladettes” as “part of the new sexual contract that was imbuing [young] women with forms of agency within the circumscribed norms of consumer culture, enabling them to adopt male characteristics as long as they did not critique sexism too much” (2020: 504). While Littler’s (2020: 512, 515) allusions to carnival implicitly associate some of these representations with Kathleen Rowe Karlyn’s classic (1995) theorisation of female unruliness, it is important to note these representations differ in tending to exclude fatness in favour of postfeminist bodily norms of control, while retaining the original unruly woman’s defiance against total patriarchal control through (sometimes moderately grotesque) voracious appetites. In line with Littler’s (516) conclusions about the limitations of minor divergences from patriarchal control in these narratives, such a combination blunts any radically transgressive edge.

French Motherhoods: from Maternance to Madness

- 5 If the cultural incorporation and endemic foregrounding of postfeminist maternal norms tends to point up flipside intimations of individuals’ failure to live up to these even in the Anglosphere from which they broadly hail, how might such norms be received and adapted to the different culture(s) of parenthood in France? Apprehending the latter is far from straightforward; even considering only feminist views of motherhood in France historically, it is markedly difficult to generalise, as

conclusions depend on which strain of feminism one chooses to focalise (Cova 1991: 119). Nonetheless, Badinter (2020: 48-82) has highlighted the way in which one facet of postfeminist-associated ideas of perfectionist labour-as-fulfilment may have found a natural home in France: through discourses of *naturalisme*. By this is meant the co-option of discourses loosely connected with recent ecological movements—and, we might note, traditionally associated with the political Left that is at least on the face of it more usually feminism’s ally—to prop up neo-Rousseauist ideals locating women’s “natural” place at the side of their child, notably through the increased pressure on women to breastfeed infants for longer. Badinter (76-7) directly associates the newly potent rhetoric of “natural” maternity with the influence of various public figures and writers including well-known French paediatrician, media personality and author Edwige Antier, whose ideal of motherhood can, I suggest, be usefully summarised through reference to the broader notion of *maternance*. A variant of this term, literally meaning *motherhood* but much less common than *maternité*, thus appears in Antier’s (2003: 119) defense of traditional, stay-at-home mothering (where she mocks the advent of *le père maternant*), and I use it in this sense, with morphological and cultural connotations of active (maternal) care, of vigilance and hard work.

- 6 Notions of active parenting chime with sociological theorisations of French attitudes towards parenting in general, offered for instance by Raymonde Carroll in a 1987 comparison of French and US approaches that conveys the background context for the changes Badinter later identifies. For Carroll (1987: 46-7), parenthood in France has historically implied a duty to society first and to the child only second—in direct opposition to the North American approach. Consequently, there is a strong social pressure to be a “good” parent, that is, of a well-behaved—polite, respectful and socially adapted—child (56): a model evidently requiring vigilance and, given that women are still overwhelmingly the primary child-carers in France as elsewhere in the world, *maternance* in particular. It should be recognised that French parents have received relatively extensive social support in the endeavour of raising French children, with high levels of state funding for childcare facilities as well as better pro-natalist familial policies and longer maternity leave provision than is typical anywhere else in the world (Wyatt 2007). This has helped allow high numbers of women to continue working while having children without sacrificing (shared) vigilance over the young (Badinter 2010: 234).
- 7 From this perspective, one can see the historical situation with an ongoing legacy in France as one typified by high standards of parenting but understood through discipline and a network of social support. What had been less emphasised until recently was the emotional welfare of children, for instance through theories of infantile attachment popular elsewhere since at least the 1970s and compatible with the ideology of compulsory *maternance*, alongside the linked issue of respect for their rights (Lécossais 2014). Arguably, the influence of such global ideas has created a veritable crucible of pressures on French parents (cf. Bastard 2006) and on mothers especially (Von Münchow 2011) to reconcile contradictory initiatives, including at a moment when advanced capitalism is demanding ever more hours of professional work from the increasingly dominant two-income family unit. The unhappy effects of this pressure-cooker on mothers’ lives are reflected by the emergence and mass-popularity (at home and abroad) of the French comic artist Emma, author of cartoon strips whose subject has now become a feminist *bête noire*: *la charge mentale* or the mental load,

referring to the hidden labour of strategising and organising domestic labour, notably in relation to childcare, that still falls most heavily on women. It is in this context that compulsory *maternance* joins other imperatives to produce a situation of borderline “madness” or high stress in which it becomes impossible for mothers to fulfil all commitments. Faced with the untenable situation described above, in a culture where working motherhood has been so widespread, Badinter (2010: 34) predicted that birth rates in France—among the very highest in Europe—would fall and indeed they have begun to drop off quite markedly since 2016.⁴ Accordingly, “narratives of non-mothering” comprise the subject matter of several key works of French literature in this millennium (Edwards 2015).

- 8 When it comes to audiovisual fictions, one reflection of the concrete slight turn away from compulsory maternity, as well as other factors such as increased professional precarity and a renewal of (perennial) discourses of masculinity in “crisis” since second-wave (Dupuis-Déri 2018) and notably post-feminist movements (cf. Hamad 2013: 26), is an overemphasis on all-encompassing fatherhood that nonetheless belies statistical realities—including in narratives of absentee motherhood, where women have simply refused the maddening pressures of the mother role, such as the emblematic high-grossing Omar Sy vehicle *Demain tout commence* (Hugo Gélin, 2016).⁵ Of more direct relevance for the present inquiry, with absence making the figure of the mother an idealised placeholder, symbol of infantile bliss and of pre-lapsarian utopia, the opposed trope of maternal restitution is also in evidence here and there. In *Demain tout commence* itself, in the end the English-language title’s claim that “two is a family” is belied by Sy’s character learning the lesson that his daughter also needs even an unreliable mother, while in the more dramatic *La Consolation* (Cyril Mennegun, 2017), the lost mother’s idealisation and eventual return comprises the film’s entire *raison d’être* and narrative momentum.
- 9 The nostalgic elements of narratives like these are directly foregrounded by “time-travel” comedies in the first half of the decade that pave the way for more modern narratives. Thus in the romcom *La Vie d’une autre* (Sylvie Testud, 2012), it is a key theme of the protagonist’s (Juliette Binoche) apparent decision following the loss of her memories of her married life to reverse her decision to become a career woman and decide to focus on her husband and son instead; ironically, here mental deficiency is coded as sanity in opposition to the madness and self-estrangement of choosing working motherhood. In low-budget independent romcom *Camille redouble* (Noémie Lvovsky, 2012), Camille, played by the film’s avowedly feminist auteur director Lvovsky, returns magically to her high school years prior to the untimely death of her “idealised” (Lvovsky in Blottière 2012) kindly and domestically-oriented mother, played by Yolande Moreau, banishing the unruly aspects of some of the comic actor’s roles, such as in adultery-focused, carnival-themed *Quand la mer monte* [Moreau and Gilles Porte, 2004]).⁶ It is significant that Camille goes to lengths to record her mother’s voice for her future self, as this remnant instantiates embodied presence, reifying the corporeality of the maternal bond in line with much French feminist “difference as equality” philosophy. In all these films, lost pasts of maternal plenitude can be seen to figure social longing through individual characters.
- 10 Equally backward-looking are more extensive and direct portraits of *mères maternantes* in a positive light, such as the one found in blockbuster comedy *La Famille Bélier* (Éric Lartigau, 2014). This film denies maternal reluctance by championing a traditional

model of family (see Harrod 2020: 103-4), with maternity embodied by the domestically popular actor Karin Viard in the role of Gigi. Viard is styled in the mode of a glamorous 1950s housewife, striding around the farm improbably in high heels and figure-hugging dresses; Gigi’s active sex life with her husband provides one of the film’s recurrent jokes. Even the character’s name is old-fashioned and somewhat infantilising thanks to both its easily pronounced repetitive duo-syllabic form and the intertext with Colette’s well-known young girl character. Viard’s emotive acting style evokes motherhood as passionate and physical, again predicated on close bodily and emotional attachment. Further, although a maternal ethics of care here threatens to tip over into a picture of narcissistic inter-ego-permutation akin to a Freudian model of pathological motherhood, when Gigi attempts to prevent her able-bodied daughter Paula from leaving the fold of her deaf family to pursue a singing career, this clingy and overbearing version of maternity is promoted by the film as having produced a happy and harmonious household.

- 11 These narratives represent, then, extreme reactions to the contemporary status of *maternant* motherhood in France as under negotiation if not in decline, at least as traditionally understood. The remainder of the article will analyse in more detail two more dominant but also more ambivalent trends discernible within the large body of French comedies of the last five years focalising motherhood as such and which cleave more closely to (without entirely mimicking) the globally prominent trends outlined earlier for representing “selfish” mothers: French versions of the can-do mother and her sometimes overlapping rebel twin, the mother behaving badly.

Can-Do Mothers

- 12 As indicated, can-do mothers are self-serving to the extent that they are culturally apostrophised as a group in a manner that suggests personal fulfilment is achievable partly through parenthood: a resonant promise during an epoch when the meaningfulness of institutions such as the Church as well as community has declined, leaving material values to pick up much of the slack. In short, the identity is constructed to be compatible with if not to enhance a lifestyle characterised by both professional success and enjoyment of sexualised consumer habits. Prominent French maternal comedies that can be usefully seen from this perspective include two female-directed examples from 2017: *Victoria* (Justine Triet), starring Virginie Efira, and *Telle mère, telle fille* (Noémie Saglio), featuring Juliette Binoche and Camille Cottin as a mother and daughter who fall pregnant at the same time.
- 13 *Victoria* focuses on a criminal lawyer who is also the single mother of pre-school age twin girls. She is just about managing to juggle commitments until she is temporarily suspended from practising law due to a formality at the same time that her ex-husband begins to publish fiction about a caricaturally unpleasant version of her, undisguised to the extent of even keeping her name, provoking further professional problems. Relief comes in the shape of Sam (Vincent Lacoste), a young man with aspirations to become a lawyer who offers to be her live-in nanny and with whom she begins an affair.
- 14 Postfeminist models of motherhood are relevant to *Victoria*’s characterisation in ways that transcend her overt characterisation as tending toward the “femme phallique” archetype, as her ex’s book dubs her. The film draws on relatively well-built Efira’s tendency to play “strong”, professional woman roles, notably in the romcom *20 ans*

d’écart (David Moreau, 2013), where she was also paired up with a much younger and less socially powerful man. While this inter-generational coupling is a classic tendency in postfeminist representations going back at least to *Sex and the City* (Darren Star, 1998-2004), the trope of the male partner who provides marked support for busy working women specifically is becoming more common in French romantic fiction (Holmes 2021: 185). The importance of sexuality to the film is reflected by the English title, *In Bed with Victoria*, and the fact that in addition to professional challenges, Victoria is dealing with a lack of libido, despite her best efforts to hook up with various strangers from the internet whom she invites to her boudoir, with poor results, in a vision of marketised intimacy presented as unsatisfying. The “can’t do” realities always tracking can-do women come to the fore and temporarily turn Victoria into a mother behaving moderately badly during a montage sequence dealing with her month spent out of work caring for the daughters who are usually largely ignored: thus Victoria is shown generally in a state of sartorial disarray, ostentatiously smoking while flipping a pancake or pouring spirits into a smoothie. With a more dramatic edge, she also suffers panic attacks through which Sam helps her; indeed, despite his status as the domestic support that the postfeminist mother direly needs her male partner to be, not only does Sam’s care ethic allow her to regain her sexual identity, but he further rescues her at the film’s climax, after she overdoses on sleeping pills, by giving her amphetamines to allow her to perform in court. Although this plays as an instance of “white knighting” familiar within postfeminist fantasies, Victoria is a fully fleshed out character with whom we are aligned in the face of major obstacles and the resolution reconciles professional success, sexual satisfaction and motherhood. Moreover, while Geneviève Sellier’s (2016) review may critique the film’s “*refus de traiter ce sujet brûlant (l’épuisement physique et moral d’une femme qui travaille tout en élevant seule deux jeunes enfants) en pointant les causes sociales de cette situation : les injonctions contradictoires faites aux femmes « modernes » d’être à la fois des bonnes mères, des amoureuses disponibles et des professionnelles accomplies*”, these issues bleed through the film’s comic patina.⁷

- 15 *Telle mère, telle fille* presents a mother, Mado (Binoche), who is one step further removed from classic can-do femininity in that she has no career, instead sponging off her daughter and son-in-law, such that her characterisation foregrounds the more immature aspects of phallic femininity and even its kinship with Ariel Levy’s closely related “female chauvinist pigs” (2005). The narrative is overt in its mother-daughter role-reversal, with Mado’s character coming home late and failing to tidy her room. She is also associated with drinking, smoking cannabis and sex for pleasure—although she is again constructed as even less responsible than the average “phallic girl” (or indeed the mother behaving badly, who only takes temporary respite from duties) in her inability to control her fertility, when she becomes pregnant without having planned to. Levy’s book is subtitled “women and the rise of raunch culture” and while it would be an exaggeration to compare Mado with emblematic figures from her work such as Britney Spears (also cited by Harris [2003: 72] as an exemplary can-do girl), she is typically styled in skin-tight jeans, high-heeled boots and a little leather jacket and rides a motor-scooter, wearing a red helmet.
- 16 While *Telle mère, telle fille* does align viewers with Cottin’s despairing daughter character in similar proportions to her mother through narrative focus and even devices such as cross-cutting or split screens placing the two in parallel, stardom and performance position Mado as at least equal in appeal (while she is even more favourably contrasted with an overbearing mother-in-law played by Catherine Jacob, in

an exemplification of the ongoing recognisability of this *maternant* stereotype in France). In particular, Vincendeau (2015: 135) has picked out an association with childishness as a component of Binoche’s star identity. Not many actors could through their disingenuous smile make farting in an ante-natal yoga class a charming expression of the “natural” (including eroticised) older motherhood the film ultimately offers. Interestingly, similar ambivalences over whether to chastise maternal reluctance or depict it sympathetically govern the identity in Saglio’s co-directed *Plan cœur* (Netflix, 2018-), through the character of Émilie (Joséphine Drai).⁸ It should in the first place be noted that reference to a Netflix television series in this discussion further underlines the debt owed by the shift in views of motherhood under examination to the globalisation of (screen) culture. Remarkably, “traditional”, domestically oriented French television series of the past decade continue to portray maternity as a largely unquestioned destiny broadly compatible with professional work (Lécossais 2016; see also Sellier 2015: 4; Sellier 2021), in total opposition to the new trend visible both in films marked by Anglo-American genre tropes and/or packaged with an eye on the export market (not least thanks to the presence of global stars) and also in on-demand television produced in conjunction with non-French partners.⁹

- 17 As for the specifics of Émilie’s depiction, on the one hand, she cuts an appealingly defiant and capable figure as she refuses her husband’s entreaties to stop working as an architect at a building site when she is pregnant. On the other, her disengagement from her infant in favour of nights out with girlfriends after the birth leaves open space for disapproval, as does her forthright personality, in scenes where her longsuffering male nurse partner takes on extra childcare and becomes increasingly unhappy with being treated in a brusquely businesslike manner. In reversing stereotypical gender roles to cast the man in caring roles and the woman as a borderline neglectful hedonistic pleasure-seeker and ambitious professional, indeed, *Plan cœur* also arguably flirts briefly with another archetype proliferating in recent transglobal cultures, including francophone: the truly “horrible” mother (Bourdeau 2019). The potential to read Émilie’s behaviour in this way should be understood in relation to an issue of importance for the project of evaluating ideologically the characterisation of the maternal figures in all these narratives: the historical imperative for femininity to be modelled through selflessness, which is of course indissoluble from the social use (for patriarchal societies) of women’s maternal role. As Lisa Downing has pointed out, the difficulties feminism faces in deciding whether or on what terms to valorise female selfishness as an ethos seemingly at odds with care ethics stem from the confusion between ideologies promoting *individuality*, “the notion that human beings need to be acknowledged as different from each other” and as having “valid needs, wants, and equal rights” and those focused on *individualism*, which “holds that individual freedom is a more important social principle than shared responsibility, but considers harm to (the freedom of) the other as its ethical limit” (2019: 2). A recognition of human beings’ equal rights is as close as feminism comes to having a central tenet; however, aspects of individualist discourse have on the other hand dovetailed with the neoliberalist ideologies of hedonistic consumerism. In other words, while it appears desirable for women to have access to the same freedoms as men - for instance to frequent social spaces such as her workplace even when pregnant, for Émilie, rather than avoiding any possible risk to her unborn child posed by the construction site - the forms such freedoms take cannot always be hived off from value and especially wealth systems that still ultimately serve men more immediately than women (such as through the pay

gap). However, Western social life’s embedding within neoliberal capitalism cannot invalidate the pursuit of greater gender equality within it, provisional and imperfect though its contours may be. That is, while its expressions are varied, in societies that have sought to rob women of selfhood, “selfishness” must be understood at a primary level in the terms proposed by George Sand, for whom “nothing, perhaps, resembles it more closely than self-respect” (in Downing 2019: 1).

- 18 The last can-do mother I want to examine more fully is the lead character in Julie Delpy’s 2015 *Lolo*, Violette, played by the actor-director. This is partly due to Delpy’s transatlantic cultural status as a resident of Hollywood, situating her ideally to apprehend global discourses, but in a film widely seen to have returned her to the specifically French-accented territory of the family comedy (Guichet, *Télérama*, 28 October 2015) after several more US-oriented films. At the same time, Delpy’s dual role as author and performer lends additional interest to its comic structure of address, notably as pertains to the issue of motherhood.
- 19 *Lolo* is the film that comes closest to maternal horror, since it deals with an eponymous child who is presented as simply “a monster” (Morain, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 28 October 2015) (with no psychological explanation offered). Thus twenty-year-old Eloi, known as Lolo (Vincent Lacoste), does everything he can to create obstacles to Violette’s relationships with men as he wants her attention for himself—even, we later learn, having chased away his own father (symbolically reproducing the patricide narrative of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*). Dramatic irony arises from adoring mother Violette’s innocence about her son’s destructive ways as she falls in love with a provincial type, Jean-René (Dany Boon), offering Lolo ample opportunity to make the latter look a fool. As for the can-do model, this comes into focus through Violette’s professional success as a fashion director and thus ultra-identification with “post-feminist masquerade” (McRobbie 2009: 722-726), including through her own adherence to norms of female beauty. She also engages in such consumerist and/or self-surveilling activities as shopping and visiting a spa with her friend Ariane (Karin Viard, in a strong secondary maternal role characterised by a cynicism more typical for the actor than was the Gigi incarnation of *La Famille Bélier*). Finally, Ariane and Violette partake of bawdy feminist culture from the film’s very opening scene onwards to the extent of explicitly discussing sex, not to mention sharing “dick pics”, in a fashion so insistent as to be seen as jarring by the vast majority of the film’s French-language reviews, as if Delpy is more concerned to deliberately invoke the recent Anglophone wave of “gross-out” feminism (Strimpel 2016) than to appear authentic.
- 20 On the other hand, the trappings of can-do femininity are without exception distanced or tempered in Delpy’s film. Violette’s job in fashion is sent up by a pretentious party in a metro station and by her open comments that she is simply “trop grosse” to work in fashion: a condemnation of her own broad subscription to a postfeminist masquerade whose French-specific overemphasis on weight is in evidence in other female-oriented domestic comedies (Harrod 2016: 39-40). The latter type of comment has started to recur across Delpy’s “mature” oeuvre, following her character Céline’s despair about her “fat ass” in *Before Sunrise*, which Delpy famously co-wrote. Despite the actor’s widely recognised beauty, or rather because of it, this tendency to comic self-denigration is particularly noteworthy from a star who earlier in her career was vaunted as a muse of auteur cinema by Jean-Luc Godard, Leos Carax, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Bertrand Tavernier and others. Here, Violette’s candour and her verbosity

in general parallel Delpy’s own adoption of a speaking position and refusal to remain an object of the gaze - not to mention her reputation as outspoken and un-politically correct (including through comments made about directors’ mistreatment of her in early roles, more often referenced in the international than French press)—in a fashion reminiscent of earlier female comedians such as Mae West’s tendency to “make fun of traditional femininity” in acceding to the position of joke-maker (see Mizejewski 2012: 2). Christine Geraghty (2000: 196) has shown that female actors’ star images in particular are heavily informed by their private lives and Delpy repeatedly portrays herself as unpretentious, active and comical rather than an inherently static, ethereal beauty: her avowed fondness for “les choses énergétiques” (in Patrick Goupil, *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest*, 10 November 2003) coincides with Violette’s characterisation, as does the hypochondria she often references in interviews. This is significant in endowing the character with the director-actor’s wide popularity and intellectual authority (Delpy has been co-nominated for screenwriting Oscars for two of Richard Linklater’s *Before* trilogy films, while she also writes and performs songs), positioning the audience on Violette’s side as she faces troubles rather than merely rendering her as a depreciable failure. Authorship also adds feminist heft to Delpy’s deployment of elements of the “fat carnivalesque” (Littler 2020: 515) usually banished from postfeminist representations although intermittently popping up in the mother-behaving-badly category. Violette’s greater closeness to the unruly woman, described by Ginette Vincendeau as a figure “qui occupe l’espace social” (2012: 16), than to a hypesexualised female chauvinist pig is readily apparent in a scene in which she and Ariane discuss cunnilingus on a train, complete with parodic (not sexy) tongue and finger gestures and giggles, to the horror of a conservatively-dressed, upright-looking bourgeois woman opposite them. Importantly, Delpy/Violette’s authorial ownership of grotesque spectacle is key to reading moments of female unruliness like this one as empowering for this maternal figure, as opposed to merely dismissive or pathologising. Further, recognising that fat is an ideologically contradictory element central to both motherhood and (like “vulgarity”) to feminine sexuality itself reveals the stakes of Delpy’s specific challenge to the pretty versus funny binary that historically consigned many women to silence and objectification.¹⁰ That is, the actor goes beyond merely disavowing “traditional femininity”, instead rewriting this to interweave culturally desirable elements with those more typically seen as “distasteful”, rendering the denial of the latter’s existence a contradiction in terms in a fashion still quite alien to French culture.

- 21 As regards the interrogation of mothering per se, the plot motor of the entire film is the elusiveness of the triumvirate of work, maternity and sexual fulfilment (cf. Kaplan 1992: 183). In the first place, the latter is almost stolen from Violette because of her close relationship with her son, whom she must learn to reject. Moreover, her style of parenting itself is a more serious topic of consideration than the film’s lightness might suggest—as several reviews noted—when we consider the revelation of not only her tendency to molly-coddle Lolo, humorously figured by her cooking of boiled eggs shot from above to resemble the maternal breasts Lolo recalls in flashback, but also her inability to perform certain tasks usually associated with parenting such as cook more than one dish or exert authority over her son. Instead, she occupies the role of his buddy, even sharing marijuana with him. This egalitarian approach is much more identifiable with US approaches to parenting than with French ones that have often argued children need a dominant structure (*cadre*) to kick against (Druckerman 2013:

106-7)—indeed, Delpy reports basing the film on many parents she knows (in *Grisel, Le Figaro Madame*, 23 October), presumably mainly where she lives (and is raising a son of her own)—and parental immaturity of this sort recurs elsewhere in the behaviours of more extreme cases of maternal “selfishness”.

Mothers Behaving Badly

- 22 While the previous section exclusively examined works by women where the narratives allowed mothers to maintain the possibility of fulfilment on multiple fronts, I turn now to one film and one franchise directed by men where female attempts to maintain several spheres are coded as transgressive and ultimately narratively neutralised. I nonetheless argue that the actors embodying mothers who refuse *maternance* in favour of sexual fulfilment and/or pursuing a career “author” performances that work to resist such narrative punishment and invest self-serving behaviour by mothers with appeal.
- 23 The first example is maternal restitution “dramedy” *Sage femme*, starring Catherine Deneuve as a surrogate mother, Béatrice: the former mistress of Claire’s (Catherine Frot) long-dead father who gets in touch thirty years after disappearing overnight—an act which unbeknown to her led to her ex-lover’s suicide. Béatrice is positioned as an erstwhile mother figure to Claire by their references to their previously close relationship (in contrast to Claire’s alienation from her biological mother) and the rekindling of love between them—not to mention the film’s overarching themes of maternalistic care thanks to Claire’s job as a midwife—and thus as a culturally execrable abandoning mother. She puts her disappearance down simply to an inability to be a wife and mother and she is indeed characterised by restlessness and pleasure-seeking, enjoying rich food, hard drink, cigarettes, poker and stylish clothing.
- 24 Through such character construction, *Sage femme* echoes *Telle mère, telle fille* in introducing a generational dynamic to its construction of female hedonism: although Deneuve is older than Binoche, both belong broadly to the Baby Boomer generation increasingly scorned by successors as having enjoyed wealth and other privileges unavailable to their children. In both cases, a beautiful older actor dresses fashionably and devotes herself to epicureanism while her “daughter” wears browns and beiges—Béatrice repeatedly criticises Claire’s drab mackintosh—and works hard. Like Mado, Béatrice is also marked by a childishness heightened by her de facto daughter’s contrasting responsibility: she often inhales sharply in excitement, makes “mmm” noises of visceral approval at the prospect of small pleasures and refuses to take her medicine because, to Claire’s consternation, “J’aime pas le goût”. However, while Binoche’s ladette-like role in *Telle mère, telle fille* is coloured by postfeminism, Deneuve’s original “core” persona is essentially prefeminist” (Vincendeau 2000: 203) (more recent visible and sometimes controversial forays into openly feminist debates such as #MeToo notwithstanding); as I discuss more fully below, this retardataire image is integral to the Deneuve/Béatrice character, who is narratively associated with the past by a storyline that sees her at the eve of her life revisiting the terrain of the one romantic relationship she says meant something to her. Accordingly, although it is implied she has had several lovers, Béatrice’s “masculine” features do not extend to overt raunchiness, including at the level of costume, where her leather coat recalls Gérard Depardieu’s famous comment that the actor is “l’homme que j’aurais voulu

être,” (see Vincendeau 2000: 206) but her clothes are tailored rather than revealing or tight. All the same, the comparison reminds us of the extent to which postfeminism’s championing of hedonistic bourgeois consumerism draws on extremely traditional ideals of femininity (not to mention Deneuve’s bridging function between tradition and modernity [Le Gras 2010]).¹¹

- 25 The film’s conventional arc shows how Claire and Béatrice both provide one another with something missing from their lives: daughterly support—material, financial and emotional—for Béatrice, who is dying of cancer, and emotional closeness and a spirit of fun for the midwife whose life as her son leaves home has become calcified routine but who now begins to wear lipstick and perfume, drink alcohol and eat luxury foods, even laughing off a minor driving collision as a mark of her newfound spirit of freedom. Thus Béatrice is recuperated as the mother “in her proper place”, reinforced by a melodramatic ending sees her end her own life and jump into the Seine rather than deteriorate slowly: a fitting close for a film determined to restore women to their “natural” essences—i.e., maternal roles, even when not strictly biological—when we note the overdetermination of metaphors of water in depictions of the eternal feminine. Narratively, then, Béatrice’s culture of artifice, consumption and masculine-accented hedonism is ultimately rejected in favour of a return to Claire’s feminised “natural” ways, represented by the garden allotment in which she spends her free time and where Béatrice’s suicide occurs. Likewise, Deneuve’s early styling in bright colours including gold jewellery and a slightly garish pink shirt gives way to a more muted wardrobe and even floral-print nightwear. While the incompleteness of Claire’s life is underlined, her professional choices are never questioned in the scenes of real childbirth filmed in an unadorned style evoking an attitude of seriousness and hallowed respect, and it is noteworthy that her ethos includes a retrograde view of midwifery as a profession best left to women and a fear of technology that leads her to refuse to join the private hospital that will take over from her clinic. The character’s conformity to notions of corporeality as female-identified and opposed to the rational world are summed up by her statement: “Le corps sait très bien ce qu’il a à faire; le problème c’est le mental.” Moreover, Claire is also partly “healed” by a physically passionate affair with a truck driver (Olivier Gourmet) from the neighbouring allotment, who approximates an earthy, working-class French answer to the postfeminist new man ideal to the extent that Béatrice describes him as “costaud” yet “sensible”—like Vincent of Victoria (and the male protagonist of *Énorme*, alluded to shortly), he notably helps her out at home, when she needs someone to look after the sickly Béatrice one night. While offering a reasonably flexible ideal of heterosexual relations, such narrative details nonetheless leave us to understand that the “sage femme”—a phrase from which the hyphen deliberately fades away during the opening credits—is she who accepts the heteronormative imperatives of “nature”.
- 26 However, several details invite more complex readings that make newly capacious definitions of maternity less easy to dismiss. In the first place, cinematography and sound align us with Béatrice, notably through sequences where blurred vision and subjective, muted audio evoke the sympathy-provoking effects of her illness. More importantly, Deneuve’s ultra-famous star persona—one with perhaps more power to re-author films beyond the intentions of directors than that of any other French actor (Le Gras 2010: 272)—adds layers of distance and knowing irony to her appearance here in the role of the dissolute woman who is narratively punished. Not only did Deneuve embody the untamed woman more than once in 1970s comedies marked by second-

wave feminism such as *Le Sauvage* (Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 1975) and *L’Africain* (Philippe de Broca, 1983), where Gwénaëlle Le Gras finds her final narrative containment to ring hollow (*ibid*: 174), but since then she has made a speciality of capitalising on the duality in her own image between “fire and ice”, elegance and sleaziness, repression and appetites (Vincendeau 2000: 196-214). More particularly, just as Vincendeau suggests Deneuve’s image has historically relied centrally on the notion of a cool exterior with fire underneath, films from the niche *Drôle d’endroit pour une rencontre* (François Dupeyron, 1988) (see Le Gras 2010: 272-4) to the mainstream *Place Vendôme* (Nicole Garcia, 1998) have created an ugly spectacle of the collision between these two Deneuves—in the latter case as coloured further by the ageing process, as she plays the dwindling alcoholic present-day iteration of a character whose former beauty is evoked in extended flashbacks (with Emmanuelle Seigner in the younger role) (cf. Vincendeau 2000: 209-10). *Sage femme* references this persona to more light-hearted ends: thus the makeup and perfume allude to Deneuve’s modelling work, while a vintage handbag quotes the Chanel look with which she was particularly associated—but redeployed off kilter, as it swings unclasped on her arm in a manner typical of her overall stylisation as a faded model of elegance, first introduced wearing an elegant long dressing robe but with the waist-tie hanging loose to accommodate a no longer sylph-like figure, smoking in bed.

- 27 It is equally significant that the film unmasks “Béatrice Sobolewski”, as she had dubbed herself, claiming Russian royal ancestry, to be in reality the plain Béatrice Sobot, humble daughter of a concierge and a security guard. Given the centrality of bourgeois identity to the media construction of Deneuve’s star identity, this detail further exemplifies knowing play with realities “underneath” the façade (cf. Vincendeau 2000: 202). While this is a plot detail, it is significant that Béatrice herself reveals the truth, endowing the Deneuve figure with power as the author of her own image, just as the intertextual echoes that add layers of meaning to her character here are identifiable with the actor herself beyond the screenplay or even individual film performance, and thus in the comic schema construct her with knowing possession and authority: the position of the joke-teller. Such a reading is borne out, too, by multiple reviews’ comments on the formulaic nature of the film itself and its animation only through female leads’ performances. Although Frot was also praised for her rendering of the irritatingly pious Claire, Deneuve’s stardom is without compare in France and (as a French actor) beyond and is a primary factor in ensuring that this actor’s performance of a barely suppressed wildness or “fire” cannot be extinguished by (surrogate) maternity any more than it can by the Seine: in the words of a review that also invokes the comparison with *Le Sauvage*, “Fantasque et mordant, elle excelle en trublion glamour qui, même une fois évaporée, rayonne dans une trace de rouge à lèvres” (Barnett, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 22 March 2017).
- 28 I want to make comparable claims in my final example for the motherhood embodied by Marina Foïs in broad comedies *Papa ou maman 1* and *2*. This franchise’s¹² high concept has Foïs and Laurent Lafitte play Florence and Vincent, divorcing upper-middle-class parents of three who, ostensibly due to their busy careers, compete at bad caregiving to encourage their children to choose the other parent as their main custodian. Given that mothers remain the primary carers in such circumstances, its darkly comic premise reflects directly on the perceived crisis in this domain—especially when we consider the pronounced gravity of Florence’s transgressions in particular, which extend to

“accidentally on purpose” poisoning her children, by serving them pasta laced with detergent.

- 29 As mainstream blockbuster products, the *Papa ou maman* films on the face of it wish away problems: the first film reunites the couple to make a fourth child even as they are divorcing and Florence capitulates to taking on the childcare in the short term to allow her spouse to work abroad unencumbered for some months (while she takes the children along on her own secondment to Denmark); the second sets them up as neighbours with shared custody only to have them reconcile yet again by the end of the film, albeit unbeknownst for now to their children, who have only just adapted to the new arrangements.¹³ However, aspects of Foïs’ characterisation, celebrity persona and performance style strongly work against the credibility of her lasting reabsorption into the patriarchal nuclear familial model. It is noteworthy here that the actor’s influence on the role is particularly difficult to disentangle in view of the well-publicised working model adopted on set and which included improvisational elements, as is common with star-led comedy, making the close fit between the character and Foïs’ image logical.
- 30 Florence is firstly characterised as sympathetic because of her challenging situation. Despite her demanding, manager-level job as a structural engineer, she demonstrably bears *la charge mentale* at home, such that when Vincent takes more responsibility he requires extensive instructions and is portrayed as less domestically-oriented than her; yet she is sufficiently self-aware and solicitous of others that even when their nanny walks out without notice and she displays a moderate level of stress she apologises: “Je dois être chiante, non ?” She is also coded as a discursively authoritative joke-maker through her witty one-liners: for instance, when a sexist colleague suggests she may only be twenty years old, unfazed, she quips she’s actually sixteen. This is one aspect of Flo’s “masculinisation”, but within now mainstream parameters of amplified femininity (see Ballou 2013, Mizejewski 2014); likewise, when she is not sporting a hard hat and high visibility vest at work, she wears plain colours and shirts (sometimes silk, suggesting classed elegance) but also fitted jackets that flatter her exceptionally compact and muscular physique, with her hair casually but attractively swept back. Yet she also exhibits unruly behaviour, provoking Vincent’s displeasure during the opening sequence by smoking and putting her feet on the car dashboard, and later sticking her middle finger up at him, talking with her mouth full and drinking alone. More extremely, when she is attempting to put the children off living with her, she behaves in a sexually suggestive way at a party attended by her pre-teen daughter, lobs food at her teenaged son after he has been reprimanded for doing the same at school and throws a party for her precocious nine-year-old where, to his chagrin, she dresses as a fairy princess and invites the guests to engage in the age-inappropriate activity of liberating sweets from a piñata, as “il va pas les chier, les Smarties!”. That these behaviours are self-consciously outrageous lends them all the more infectious glee for the performer, with whom we are aligned in her virtuosity at bringing out comic *décalage* or incongruousness: Foïs’ exaggerated, staccato faux-raunchy dancing amid a group of twelve-year-old boys taking photos and extolling the virtues of “MILF” is a highlight of the film.
- 31 As with Deneuve, the interplay between control and abandon is central to the characterisation of this maternal avatar in ways that are intertextually determined. While Foïs is not an international star in the public eye to anything like the same degree as the older actor, she is a household name in France, due originally to her roots

in the popular comic troupe *Les Robins des bois* that was a regular Canal + fixture in 2000 then made several films, as well as prolific subsequent roles particularly in cinema and on stage—often with healthy national press coverage—and her marriage to well-known comic director Éric Lartigau (who made *La Famille Bélier*). I have thus referred to her as a celebrity more than a star, emphasising relative “ordinariness” rather than the markers of celestial distancing that tend to punctuate commentaries on Deneuve; indeed, this is a feature of her persona itself, with interviews repeatedly referencing her family’s modest if not “marginal” (anti-capitalist) status. More particularly, she occupies the niche ground of the cult comic star. If such figures’ performance is typified by ironic knowingness and mastery of discourse, Foïs’ roles and press depictions emphasise control, notably in her craft, described in terms of “un jeu raffiné, précis à un degré chirurgical” (Luciani, *Le Monde*, 6 July 2016) Her characters’ association with exercise (shown as compulsive in the pertinently named thriller *Irréprochable* [Sébastien Marnier, 2016], while she jogs and alludes to yoga in the *Papa ou maman* films) and even an eating disorder in the critically acclaimed, festival-decorated realist police drama *Polisse* (Maïwenn, 2011) tie this aspect of her persona to her physique. The latter role is particularly significant outside the purely comic oeuvre given the film’s visibility and in it Foïs’ character plays an outwardly calm policewoman working in child protection whose misandry spills out in occasional vicious comments. In a shock ending, despite having betrayed no emotion in such difficult situations as explaining to a young victim of sexual abuse why their attacker did something wrong, she commits suicide. In light of such instantiations of *décalage* between apparent conformity and inner mutiny and turbulence across films as well as within *Papa ou maman 1* and *2* themselves, played now for shocks now for laughs, the impression of the mother who refuses to be a doormat far outlives the textual neutralisation of Florence’s rebellion in these films—indeed, it is surely thanks to her embodiment of such a position that her next role would be in cult comic director Sophie Letourneur’s *Énorme* (2019), as a career woman blindsided when her husband tricks her into pregnancy.¹⁴

Conclusion: “Yummy Mummies” and French Children Who Throw Food

- 32 One recurrent feature emerging from these analyses of variations on traditional motherhood in French screen comedy is the greater role played by sex than work as a source of conflict. In can-do mother narratives *Victoria*, *Lolo* and *Plan cœur* the protagonists discussed are professionally successful but struggle with intimate relationships (*Victoria* notes she almost failed to see Sam’s rightness for her because her brain is cluttered by motherhood and work), while in *Telle mère, telle fille*, it is Mado’s personal freedoms alone she refuses to allow motherhood to curb. As for the mothers who directly contravene sacrosanct norms of maternal care, while it would be a stretch to call Béatrice’s gambling a career, she appears successful enough at it to have lived a life of some leisure—but one empty of emotional connection since she left Claire and her father. Florence’s professional success is emphasised in the *Papa ou maman* films; what prompts her to take a stand against inequality is not career hunger but rather her outrage when she realises Vincent is sleeping with a young colleague, prompting open soul-searching about her own ongoing attractiveness as a single

mother-of-three. In the sequel, interestingly, she has acquired a new partner (cue Vincent’s reciprocal jealousy) and appears to be thriving, with blonder hair, subtly enhanced makeup and a more relaxed mien—until narrative events intervene to wrench her back into the familial unit. The need for sexual fulfilment is thus a key component of the expanded boundaries of motherhood becoming normalised on screens in France. This development tallies with the global rise of what one popular book calls the “yummy mummy” (Frazer 2016) but also intersects with France’s greater cultural emphasis on sexuality for wellbeing and indeed the particular cult of female sexualisation, now extending to mothers for better (if it is a choice) and worse (when “choice” becomes a cultural imperative, as critiques of this postfeminist notion identify is typically the case).

- 33 Another prominent book about contemporary parenting with relevance to this discussion is Pamela Druckerman’s 2013 *French Children Don’t Throw Food*, a journalistic panegyric to traditionally strict Gallic parenting methods which *Papa ou maman* seems ironically to reference almost explicitly by having the family’s oldest son do just that—and his mother, too. Indeed, the final feature to which I want to give further prominence in relation to these films is the overt discourse of concern over such change that they engage. Thus reactions to both *Lolo* and *Papa et maman* express dismay about the advent of the (originally US-associated) “enfant-roi”. While the review of the latter in one right-wing publication suggests these children could use a slap (Buisson, *Le Figaro Magazine*, 30 January 2015), popular magazine *L’Express* takes the film as a jumping off point for a much more considered reflection on contemporary parenting with commentary from a Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychology, suggesting *Papa ou maman* reflects a real tendency to give children an unwelcome degree of choice over their own destinies (Carrière, *L’Express*, 7 December 2016). Like Druckerman’s book, this interview gives a platform to the view that treating children as equals constitutes a failure of parental responsibility: the ostensible message of a scene such as the one where the nine-year-old son has taken to drinking wine “[pour] oublier”. That such moral neglect should be attributed especially to women is illustrated by an allusion to failed maternity specifically through a figuration of absence in *Papa ou maman 2* itself, in a scene where the daughter, Emma, asks Florence if she can get a piercing. When Emma says that her dad told her to ask her mother, Foïs’ character simply replies “Oui, demande à ta mère,” and sails out of the room. Demonstrating true Bergsonian disengaged automatism, such a response absolutely rejects a tendency towards self-reflexivity discourses about maternity can be seen to have produced in earlier televisual fictions (Lécossais 2014): in misidentifying with her own role, Florence simply refuses the culturally ascribed maternal position of self-examination and its attendant affects of culpability, guilt and ultimately shame.
- 34 In conclusion, *L’Express* is astute in its observation that “derrières les rires, [il y a] une question de fond”: specifically, the evacuation of the mother role as previously understood in France, as elsewhere. This raises genuine issues at a time when cuts to social support under neoliberal capitalism and accelerated by the global pandemic of 2020 surely threaten even France. Popular representations that reflect such change in more or less explicit ways are also subject to significant variations and ideological limitations, not to mention divergences of interpretation. Nonetheless, the recent tendency to banish compulsory *maternance* and offer complex negotiations of motherhood to counter the “illegib[ility]” (Downing 2019: i) of women who do not allow

other selves to eclipse their own is overall surely a welcome development for a feminism invested in pluralising the range of identities available for us all.

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NOTES

1. This includes international box-office takings of over \$7.5m according to www.imdb.com (accessed 10 November 2020) for *Lolo*; at home it sold over 850,000 admissions tickets (see www.allocine.com, accessed 10 November 2020). Like *Victoria*, discussed later, it is also available on Amazon Prime, all of which suggests the still greater appetite for what I will shortly dub ‘can-do’ motherhood in the Anglosphere than in France.

2. Harris. McRobbie and Negra all gloss femininity through a concept of expanded 'girlhood' (i.e., womanhood up to ever-receding 'old age') that is endemic in postfeminist culture.
3. The ideologically overlapping work of these two body genres is neatly evoked by film scholar William Paul's 1995 book *Laughing Screaming*.
4. https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/data/france/births-fertility/changes-fertility/ (accessed 10 November 2020).
5. In her forthcoming PhD thesis, Pallavi Joshi identifies 120 French films of the 2010s that focus on actual or surrogate single fathering, typically constructed sympathetically across a variety of generic registers, with 'vigilante' as well as likable 'man-child' archetypes (à la Sy) salient.
6. Lvovsky has also described the film as a maternal love story as much as a romantic one (Heymann 2012).
7. Sellier notes that Victoria blames herself for not being able to cope; yet a narrative multiplying obstacles to her wellbeing offers spectators ample clues that the fault does not here lie with her. In this way, in its bid to create biting comedy the film (no doubt partly inadvertently) tends to explore or even simply reflect the effects of structural inequalities, rather than programmatically indict them.
8. Since drafting this article, the altogether more Americanised Season 3 (2022) of this now internationally popular show has veered much more towards sympathy for Émilie, depicting her choice to have an abortion when she becomes pregnant a second time, at a moment when her career is picking up, sympathetically. This plotline is reproduced in Netflix's contemporaneous *Drôle* (also 2022).
9. In another salient example, the final season of Netflix's office comedy *Dix pour cent* (2015-2020) notably makes maintaining both spheres impossible for protagonist Andréa (Camille Cottin). Arte's woman-centric dramedy *Mytho* (2019) and Canal +'s policier *Engrenages* (2005-2020), aligned with European and French production houses, respectively, but widely internationally exported, sit somewhere in between in offering maternal storylines that touch substantially on the challenges of juggling work and motherhood without despairing of reconciling the two. I thank Geneviève Sellier and Ginette Vincendeau for dialogue on this question, as well as for their reading of an earlier draft of this article.
10. The desire to exclude women from speaking positions in the audiovisual sphere by severing attractiveness from humour was in recent times perhaps most infamously manifested by eminent *Vanity Fair* journalist Christopher Hitchens in his widely circulated 2007 essay 'Why Women Aren't Funny' (see Mizejewski 2014: 1).
11. This point is resumed well by the scene that comes closes to offering a postfeminist space in *Sage femme*, where Claire and Béatrice wear pyjamas, drink wine and watch an old slide-show of the dead patriarch's days as a champion swimmer, and Béatrice comments: 'Quel canon!'
12. It includes a television series, *Papa ou maman* (M6, 2018-), with a different cast.
13. See also Harrod (2020: 108).
14. Although this film, while generally highly ambivalent about pregnancy, seems ultimately to cast doubt on the wisdom of Foïs' character's resistance by closing with a seemingly broadly positive resolution around (working) parenthood.

ABSTRACTS

This article explores a salient trend for “selfish” behaviours featuring in comic depictions of motherhood and the female actors who embody it in French cinema and secondarily television in the late 2010s. I identify tensions between various postfeminist ideals and the self-sacrifice and morally exemplary behaviour associated with contemporary parenting norms, including as coloured by US influence, which combines in an exigent admixture with traditionally more draconian French approaches. Specifically, the article focalises the emergence of the “can-do” mother who combines maternity with professional and successful fulfilment in female-authored film, as well as the “mother behaving badly” informed by comparable Anglophone representations. In both cases, it homes in on the images of star actors (in particular, Julie Delpy, Catherine Deneuve and Marina Foïs but also Karin Viard, Virginie Efira and Juliette Binoche) as key determinants in the ideological resonance of the portrayals under examination, with their popular personae fleshing out and tending to endorse recently expanded parameters for contemporary French motherhood.

Cet article étudie les représentations récurrentes d'une maternité « égoïste » dans la comédie française de la seconde moitié des années 2010. Il met en lumière les tensions entre les idéaux postféministes et le modèle de dévouement et de comportement moralement exemplaire, au sein de normes parentales contemporaines contraignantes où l'influence américaine s'articule à une tradition française plus draconienne en la matière. Deux figures dominantes sont successivement examinées : celle de la mère « capable (*can-do*) » chez qui la maternité s'ajoute aux succès professionnel et sexuel, dans des films réalisés par des femmes, et celle de la « mère qui se comporte mal (*mother behaving badly*) », particulièrement répandue dans le paysage audiovisuel anglophone. Dans les deux cas, une attention particulière est portée aux actrices qui incarnent ces rôles (notamment Julie Delpy, Catherine Deneuve et Marina Foïs, mais aussi Karin Viard, Virginie Efira et Juliette Binoche), dont la *persona* et la popularité influent de manière déterminante la portée idéologique de ces portraits de mères « égoïstes », en leur donnant de la consistance et de l'attrait, contribuant ainsi à l'élargissement des normes de maternité dans la société française contemporaine.

INDEX

Mots-clés: postféminisme, maternité, comédie, Delpy, Deneuve, Foïs

Keywords: postfeminism, motherhood, comedy, Delpy, Deneuve, Foïs

AUTHOR

MARY HARROD

Mary Harrod is Associate Professor in French Studies at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *From France with Love: Gender and Identity in French Romantic Comedy* (I.B. Tauris, 2015) and the co-editor of *The Europeanness of European Cinema: Identity, Meaning, Globalization* (I.B. Tauris, 2015) and *Women Do Genre in Film and Television* (Routledge, 2017, winner of British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies Best Edited Collection Prize 2019), as well as numerous articles and chapters. She is co-Chief General Editor of the journal *French Screen Studies* with Ginette Vincendeau and her forthcoming books include the co-edited collection *Imagining*

*"We" in the Age of "I": Romance and Social Bonding in Contemporary Culture and the monograph
Heightened Genre and Cine-fille Filmmaking in Hollywood* (Palgrave, 2021).