

Parody of Political Correctness or
Allegory of 'Immaterial Labour'?
A Second Look at Francis Veber's *Le Placard* (2001).

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Abstract

This article questions whether readings of Francis Veber's *Le Placard* (2001) as simply a parody of political correctness have tended to overlook the allegorical significance of its depiction of a middle-aged executive forced to pretend to be gay, simulating libidinal investments he does not in fact possess, in order to protect his job. It argues that the film merits re-interpretation as being not only a parody of political correctness but also a powerful allegory for the increasing demands placed on employees to invest their most personal affects and aptitudes in their work. Drawing on the work of Yann Moulier Boutang, the article interprets such demands as symptomatic of a regime of 'cognitive capitalism', in which 'immaterial' forms of labour represent the primary source of surplus value. The article thus offers an alternative reading of the film's treatment of questions of work, gender, sexuality, family, and nation, before situating *Le Placard* in the context of a broader range of recent French filmic representations of the contemporary workplace.

Keywords

Le Placard (2001); political correctness; immaterial labour; cognitive capitalism; Yann Moulier Boutang; work; gender; sexuality; family; nation.

One of the comic set pieces of Francis Veber's 2001 film, *Le Placard*, features his hapless protagonist, François Pignon (Daniel Auteil), parading through the streets of Paris on his company's float at the city's Gay Pride March. Seated on a throne beneath a huge inflatable pink condom and sporting, by way of a crown, another rolled-up pink condom on his head, Pignon is visibly uncomfortable. We then cut to Franck, his estranged teenage son, who is flicking between television channels in his bedroom, before alighting on coverage of Pignon's appearance at Gay Pride, intrigued to discover what he takes to be the hitherto hidden truth of his father's sexual identity. The humour of this sequence derives from the film's politically conservative assumption that nothing could be more humiliating for a heterosexual French man than to be 'outed' as gay to his son. For the audience

knows that Pignon is not really gay. Rather he is pretending to be gay at work, in order to see off the threat of imminent redundancy, having understood that his company, a condom manufacturer, would not risk alienating its all-important gay client base by sacking its only gay employee. What this sequence offers us, then, is a depiction of a middle-aged executive who, in order to hold on to his job, has been forced to betray his deepest emotions and authentic sense of self, to symbolically prostitute himself, as it were, by pretending to have feelings, emotions, libidinal investments he does not, in fact, possess.

This depiction of someone forced to prostitute himself in order to maintain his position in the workplace, in the sphere of production, invites comparison with a sequence from a very different French film that dates from an earlier moment in French post-war economic history. That film is Jean-Luc Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (1967) and, in the sequence in question, we see the young housewife, Juliette Janson (Marina Vlady), first enter a clothes shop and choose a dress, before asking the shop assistant to put it aside for her whilst she goes to the 'bank'. Over the next couple of scenes, the audience realises that Juliette is not going to the bank at all. Rather she has gone in search of a client or 'trick' from whom she will earn the money to buy the dress. Thus, where in his 2001 film Veber offers us a depiction of a man forced figuratively to prostitute himself in order to maintain his position in the sphere of *production*, in his film of 1967 Godard depicts a woman forced literally to prostitute herself in order to participate in the burgeoning sphere of French mass *consumption*.

Critical commentary on *Le Placard* has, understandably, tended to focus on the film's sexual politics, seeing the film as a rather clumsy parody of political correctness, let down by what Vinay Swamy rightly concludes is its conservative politics, its ultimate reassertion of 'an order that is both patriarchal and heteronormative' (Swamy 2006:59).¹ However, this exclusive focus on *Le Placard's* sexual politics may have concealed the potential allegorical significance of the film's depiction of a middle-aged executive forced to feign or perform

emotions and libidinal investments he does not in fact possess, in order to hold on to his job. Godard's focus on prostitution in *Deux ou trois choses...* reflects less his interest in the exploitative realities of sex work in 1960s France, than his conviction that prostitution could serve as a powerful metaphor for the ways in which the authentic desires of French citizens were being solicited and exploited by the multiple discourses of advertising and mass consumerism unleashed in the era of Gaullist economic modernisation.² In what follows, I want, in similar vein, to explore the possibility that Veber's focus on his protagonist's sexuality may have relatively little of interest to tell us about the realities of gay politics in France today. Rather, Pignon's need to feign a gay identity in order to avoid redundancy may prove more revealing when read as an allegory for the kinds of demand made of workers in the straightened economic conjuncture of the new millennium, a conjuncture very different to that of the 'trente glorieuses' depicted in *Deux ou trois choses...* To this end, and despite their very obvious differences in terms of genre, form, and political orientation, Godard's film can serve as a useful initial point of comparison and contrast in any analysis of *Le Placard's* potential significance as an allegory of the excessive demands made of workers in the contemporary French workplace. Before analysing Veber's film in any detail, it will be necessary to sketch in some of the differences between the economic conjuncture represented in Godard's film and the rather different economic circumstances that form the backdrop to *Le Placard*. This sketch will necessarily be somewhat schematic. Thus the two models of economic organisation, division of labour, and wage relation offered here are best understood as *idealtypes*, idealised models of developments that are surely more uneven and contradictory in reality, models which, nonetheless, can serve an important heuristic function in crystallising the nature of broader, albeit more variegated trends or shifts.

Fordist 'Schizophrenia' – Affect-laden Consumption, Affectless Production

In its focus on the way in which mass consumerism was soliciting and exploiting the desires of the citizens of 1960s France, *Deux ou trois choses...* partakes of a much broader trend in critical representations and theorisations of the period, a trend evident in the currency of the trope of 'colonisation' to describe these processes. Thus, at the opening of his 1962 study *L'Esprit du temps*, Edgar Morin announced the dawning of the era of 'la seconde colonisation', which would no longer be 'horizontal', spreading out from the European metropolis to conquer foreign territories, but 'vertical', penetrating 'la grande Réserve qu'est l'âme humaine' (Morin 1962:11). This trope would be taken up by both Henri Lefebvre and the Situationists, in the form of their various laments at the 'colonisation de la vie quotidienne' and would culminate in the latter publishing a tract in May 1968 that included amongst its revolutionary demands a call for 'la décolonisation totale de la vie quotidienne' (Anon 1968:271).

This trope of the 'colonisation' of the soul or of everyday life, like Godard's metaphor of prostitution, thus expressed the sense that, in these years, the sphere of consumption was characterised by the constant solicitation and exploitation of consumers' most intimate desires, affects, and investments. The sphere of consumption was thus typically figured as a realm of excessive and inauthentic, because extorted, desires. By contrast, influential accounts of the world of work or sphere of production, from the same period, tended to characterise this realm in diametrically opposed terms. The world of work was typically seen as being marked by a troubling absence of affect or of personal engagement by workers in tasks characterised as repetitive and boring. Thus in his *Le Travail en miettes*, Georges Friedmann (1964:200) lamented the fact that: 'Aujourd'hui [...], plusieurs centaines de millions d'ouvriers et d'employés sont occupés à des tâches parcellisées, répétées à cadences rapides, n'impliquant que

peu ou pas de connaissances professionnelles, d'initiative, d'engagement psychologique ou moral dans l'entreprise qui les paye'.

If it is easy to see how assembly line labour, organised according to a combination of Taylorist and Fordist principles, might merit such a negative portrayal, Michel Crozier's 1965 study of white-collar work suggested these phenomena were by no means limited to the manufacturing sector. Crozier painted a dispiriting picture of office work characterised by stifling routine, rigid professional hierarchies, and a consequent absence of interest, affective investment, or initiative amongst the employees he studied (Crozier 1965). An excessive solicitation and exploitation of desires in the sphere of consumption seemed, then, to go hand in hand with a dispiriting absence of affect in the sphere of production in these years of French post-war economic boom.³ Indeed, we might understand that dichotomy as itself characteristic of France's post-war Fordist compromise, whereby workers exchanged submission, docility, and boredom at work for the stable employment, relatively good pay, and guaranteed welfare benefits that enabled them to find an outlet for their affective investments by participating fully in the burgeoning sphere of mass consumption.

After Fordism – 'Immaterial Labour', Affective Workers

If in the 1960s, then, French sociological accounts tended to depict the workplace as a locus characterised by a dispiriting absence of affect, from broadly the 1990s onwards the opposite appears to be the case; commentators have lined up to denounce the excessive demands now made of workers to demonstrate their affective investment and engagement in their work, their dedication, personal initiative, and commitment to company goals, their autonomy and adaptability. As Michel Lallement puts it: 'Hier, nous déplorions la séparation du travailleur de ses oeuvres; aujourd'hui, c'est l'excès d'attachement à ses activités ou à son entreprise qui façonne les pathologies identitaires' (Lallement 2007:271). One striking manifestation of this shift is the increasing

recourse, in accounts of the contemporary workplace, to that trope of 'colonisation', whose use had previously been reserved for the description of the realm of consumption. Thus, Michel Kokoreff and Jacques Rodriguez (2012:113) argue that the ultimate goal of contemporary management practices is to 'coloniser la psychologie des salariés: faire en sorte que le travail ne soit plus vécu comme une nécessité ou une contrainte, mais comme une façon de satisfaire ses désirs et de construire son bonheur'. Vincent de Gaulejac (2009:118) employs the trope in a more restrictive sense to figure the steady incursion of work into private or leisure time as 'une colonisation progressive de l'espace-temps intime par des préoccupations professionnelles'. For Frédéric Lordon (2010:110), meanwhile, demands made of Indian call centre workers that they feign an American identity in their conversations with their clients represent 'la colonisation de leur personne'. Lordon also applies the metaphor of prostitution to the workplace by arguing that contemporary workers are being asked to produce the equivalent of the 'girl friend experience' offered by those sex workers who promise their clients they will simulate the level of interest, love, and commitment a real girlfriend would show (109-111).

As we have noted, in the 1960s these tropes of 'colonisation' and prostitution were typically employed to describe a sphere of consumption characterised by an excess of artificial affect or inauthentic desire and defined in opposition to a sphere of production marked by the dispiriting absence of any such desires or affects. It seems that by the new millennium some kind of slippage had taken place, whereby tropes previously reserved to descriptions of the realm of consumption were now being regularly employed in analyses of the sphere of production. One way of understanding this metaphorical slippage or shift would be to read it as symptomatic of what Yann Moulier Boutang has claimed is the increasing centrality of 'immaterial labour' to the production of surplus value under the current regime of capitalist accumulation, which he names 'cognitive capitalism'.

Moulier Boutang defines 'cognitive capitalism' in terms of its difference from the Fordist regime of accumulation that preceded it and that was established in France, as in all developed economies, in the decades immediately following the Second World War. He argues that under that earlier Fordist regime, surplus value was extracted primarily through a highly sophisticated division of labour, along Taylorist principles, allied to mass assembly techniques pioneered by Henry Ford. In accordance with Taylorist principles of 'scientific management', each assembly line worker would be given a very limited set of simple, 'parcellised' tasks to perform, which demanded little in the way of either costly training or of knowledge, understanding, or personal investment in the production process on the part of workers. Surplus value was thus extracted under such a regime by a combination of the exploitation of the worker's brute physical labour with the economies of scale and productivity gains secured by a Taylorist division of labour allied to Fordist mechanised production (Moulier Boutang 2007:79-80). In contemporary forms of 'cognitive capitalism', by contrast, Moulier Boutang argues that the primary source of surplus value is what he terms 'immaterial labour', that is to say the kind of intangible, creative, communicative, and cooperative labour that is invested in the design and marketing of high-value branded products. For example, the manufacturer of branded sports shoes will derive most of their profit not from the economies of scale secured through sophisticated mechanised production but rather through the 'immaterial labour' of design, marketing, and branding. To quote Moulier Boutang (2007:50):

Du point de vue de la survaleur ou de la plus-value [...] l'essentiel n'est plus la dépense de force humaine de travail, mais *la force-invention*, le savoir vivant non réductible à des machines, ainsi que l'opinion partagée en commun par le plus grand nombre d'êtres humains. Lorsqu'une paire de chaussures coûte 4 ou 5 euros à fabriquer, 2 ou 3 euros à transporter, mais qu'elle se vend entre 20 euros et 300 euros, selon qu'elle porte ou pas la

griffe Nike ou Adidas, on dira que l'essentiel de la valeur d'échange ou valeur marchande tient à la valeur de la marque qui est un immatériel ou un intangible.

As Moulier Boutang points out, when surplus value depends on these cooperative and creative aspects of 'immaterial labour', a Taylorist division of labour, which breaks down the productive process into routinised, repetitive, unthinking tasks, will no longer do. On the contrary, employers must now demand of their workers 'un degré élevé de coopération, "d'implication" de la personne et du cerveau (et plus simplement du corps mécanique et schizophrène du capitalisme machinique)' (Moulier Boutang 2007:111). The old 'schizophrenia' of Fordism, according to which workers repressed their affects and desires in the workplace only to unleash them in the realm of mass consumption, has thus disappeared, so that the trope of the 'colonisation' of the self that Morin, Lefebvre, and the Situationists had reserved for their analyses of mass consumerism, now becomes equally relevant to the newly affective sphere of productive labour. Further, since the cooperative and creative elements of 'immaterial labour' are inherently intangible, employers can no longer monitor workers' productivity through purely quantitative mechanisms such as production targets or time-and-motion studies. Hence what Moulier Boutang (2007:113) terms 'la prolifération' of new apparatuses of audit and evaluation of each employee's individual 'compétences', apparatuses that are perceived 'comme autant d'éléments stressants et comme une intrusion dans la vie privée de l'individu'. For employers to assess the aptitude or competence of their employees for 'immaterial labour' necessarily involves enquiring into qualities that would previously have been considered strictly private or personal; it is to erode any older division between the public world of work and the private realm of intimate desires and identities; it is to ask less what an employee can do than to enquire into what kind of a person they are; in so doing, it is to seek to impose or

produce a particular kind of identity or subjectivity, that of the worker as, to use Michel Foucault's term, 'un entrepreneur de soi', someone required constantly to nurture and manage their stock of 'human capital' (Foucault 2004:221-44).

Clear evidence of the increasing importance attached to his kind of 'évaluation des compétences' is provided by the fact that in 1998 the French employers' organisation, the Medef, dedicated its 'journées internationales de la formation' to the theme 'Objectif compétences'. Indeed, Medef's then President, Antoine Seillière, placed this new focus on 'compétences' at the heart of the 'révolution managériale' he was advocating (Reynaud 2001). Catherine Paradeise and Yves Lichtenberger (2001) have interpreted this as symptomatic of a gradual shift away from what they term 'le modèle de la qualification' towards a new 'modèle de la compétence'. The 'modèle de la qualification' emerged in the immediate post-war years and was exemplified by the 'arrêtés Parodi', the decrees passed by the French government in 1945 in an effort to impose wage controls across the labour market, from heavy industry to service sectors such as banking, insurance, and accountancy. This involved identifying a variety of 'champs professionnels', then classifying the range of job functions within each field, before stipulating the minimum and maximum salaries of each such function or role (Saglio 2007). As Paradeise and Lichtenberger (2001:35) argue, the 'arrêtés Parodi' thus established a stable wage relation based on a causal link between two principal variables. The first variable was 'les capacités individuelles' attested to by 'le titre (reconnaissant l'incorporation formelle des savoirs et savoir-faire par la formation initiale ou continue) et/ou l'ancienneté (validant les acquis irréversibles de l'expérience)'. These objectively validated 'capacités' then determined the nature and rank of 'le poste (décrit par le contenu présumé exhaustif des tâches prescrites)' occupied by any individual worker. Hence, a relatively stable wage relation was institutionalised, based on the equation 'titre + ancienneté = poste = salaire' (Paradeise & Lichtenberger 2001:38).

Although the system of wage control initiated by the 'arrêtés Parodi' would only last until the beginning of 1950, the 'normes de salaire' and professional hierarchies on which these were based lasted for several decades (Saglio 2007:53). This 'modèle de la qualification' began to come under pressure with the global economic downturn of the 1970s and in the face of a number of developments – disaffection of workers at both the rigidity of professional hierarchies and the mindlessness of the tasks they were expected to perform; customer dissatisfaction at the standardised and low quality products of Fordist mass production; falling rates of profit in the face of worker demands for better pay, rising energy costs after the first oil crisis, the waning of the initial productivity gains achieved by the adoption of Fordist manufacturing techniques, and the growing pressure of international competition.

The 'modèle de la compétence' thus emerged in response to these challenges as way of ensuring increased responsiveness to the market, as well as greater product quality and differentiation, by insisting workers invest more of their intellect and initiative in their work, that they prove more adaptable and flexible in response to consumer demand. Further, as firms increasingly off-shored their manufacturing functions to the developing world, in search of lower wage costs, so the French economy became more centred on its service sector, that is to say on a sector where these more cooperative, responsive, affective, and personalised 'compétences' were key to commercial success. It is these 'compétences' that are central to the 'immaterial labour' that Moulier Boutang argues has become the primary source of surplus value under 'cognitive capitalism'. Finally, as Cristina Morini has argued, these developments possess a decidedly gendered aspect. This is because the 'compétences' demanded under cognitive capitalism – 'capacities for relationships, emotional aspects, linguistic aspects, propensity for care' – have traditionally been coded as feminine. Hence the increasing centrality of 'immaterial labour' to the extraction of surplus value

in developed economies might itself be glossed as a kind of 'becoming woman of work' (Morini 2007:42).

François Pignon as 'Entrepreneur de soi'

On the basis of this admittedly schematic account of the characteristic features of 'cognitive capitalism', it should now be possible to return to *Le Placard* and see how Pignon's feigning of a gay identity could be read as an allegory of his attempts to adapt to the demands of a regime of accumulation based on the exploitation of 'immaterial labour'. The first thing to note here is that if Pignon is threatened with redundancy, this by no means reflects any professional incompetence on his part, any lack of the objective knowledge or qualifications necessary to perform his tasks as company accountant. On the contrary, on two separate occasions, the film emphasizes the extent of his professional abilities. In one scene, we see Pignon sharing a take-away meal at his desk with his immediate superior, the beautiful and efficient Mademoiselle Bertrand, with whom he has stayed late at the office in order to meet an accounting deadline. Pignon suggests a subtle accounting wheeze in order to make the books balance, only to be upbraided by his boss for talking business during their dinner break.

The professional skills Pignon demonstrates in this scene serve as confirmation of a remark Mlle Bertrand had made earlier in the film, in a discussion with her Personal Assistant, Ariane, concerning their colleague's imminent redundancy:

Mlle Bertrand: C'était un bon comptable. J'essaie de le défendre, mais...

Ariane: Il est gentil mais pas très marrant.

Mlle Bertrand: Non, mais honnête et plein de bonne volonté.

Ariane: C'est ça. Chiant quoi!

As this brief exchange makes clear, Pignon in no way lacks the objective qualifications or knowledge required to be a very good accountant. His problem is, as Ariane rather cruelly puts it, that he is 'chiant'. Or, as Pignon will later himself admit, 'mon problème, c'est que je suis insignifiant'. Or again, as Mlle Bertrand remarks, he gives the impression of being 'un petit bonhomme grisâtre, sans physique, sans intelligence, sans couilles, sans rien'. To employ Michel Lallement's terminology, Pignon clearly possesses the objective 'savoir' necessary to fulfil his role, a 'savoir' that would have sufficed under the earlier 'modèle de la qualification'. However, he conspicuously lacks the 'savoir-être', the 'aptitudes nécessaires en matière de relations humaines' that are demanded under the current 'modèle de la compétence', in which 'le diplôme n'est pas suffisant pour évaluer la qualité d'un salarié' (Lallement 2007:140).

By pretending to be gay, Pignon will overcome this problem. Indeed, this adoption of a gay identity works as an allegory for the exploitation of workers' 'immaterial labour' under a 'modèle de la compétence' in a number of interrelated ways. Firstly, Pignon's feigning of a gay identity marks him out as an 'entrepreneur de soi', an employee forced to foster and exhibit his supposed personal attributes, his 'human capital', in order to retain his job. As we have noted, within the heteronormative frame of *Le Placard*, pretending to be gay is figured as inherently feminising and thus allegorises what Morini has termed 'the becoming woman of work' under cognitive capitalism, the imperative to possess those feminised aptitudes for cooperative and communicative 'immaterial labour', the 'savoir-être', that Pignon conspicuously lacks at the film's opening.

Secondly, the fact that Pignon must pass as gay, must simulate a series of desires and libidinal investments in order to hold on to his job, betraying his authentic sense of self as he does so, acts as a powerful allegory for the negative effects of the 'colonisation' of workers' private selves by the demands of the contemporary workplace. In pretending to be gay, the film implies, Pignon is engaged in a self-betrayal, a prostitution of his authentic desires and emotions as

profound as that involved in the 'girlfriend experience', which Frédéric Lordon uses as an analogy for the exploitation of workers' most intimate desires, affects, and sense of self under contemporary capitalism.

Thirdly, the effectiveness of Pignon's strategy turns on the issue of 'immaterial' value. Once they believe him to be gay, Pignon's bosses decide they must retain him not because of the tangible skills or knowledge he brings to their firm. Rather, they fear the damage that sacking him would cause to their brand image amongst the gay community; they thus hold on to Pignon in order to protect the 'immaterial' value of their brand, itself the product of years of 'immaterial labour' in the form of design, marketing, and public relations. Significantly, it is the firm's Head of Public Relations who explains to the PDG why, once Pignon's supposedly gay identity has been revealed, they can no longer sack him.

Finally, the film's satire on the politically correct ethics that underpin the firm's decision not to sack Pignon rests on an implicit lament at the manner in which such political correctness has eroded an older French republican division between the public and private selves of the citizen. This apparently specifically political point also possesses an allegorical significance inasmuch as the erosion of the public-private split implicit in the politics of sexual identities and political correctness is strictly analogous to the erosion of the public-private split inherent to the 'modèle de la compétence', in which employers seek to elicit, evaluate, and exploit aptitudes and attitudes that would previously have been considered part of their workers' private lives and selves. In all these ways, then, *Le Placard* can be read not simply as a parody of political correctness but simultaneously as a satire on the exploitation of 'immaterial labour' under cognitive capitalism. Yet such an interpretation leaves unresolved one of the film's central paradoxes, namely that, although Pignon's adoption of a gay identity is initially presented as a profoundly humiliating experience, ultimately this will prove the source of his professional and personal salvation.

The Ambivalence of 'Immaterial Labour'

At the beginning of the film, Pignon cuts a sorry figure; edged out of the company photograph, overlooked by his two female co-workers (his daily offer to get them a coffee is routinely ignored), on the verge of redundancy, he is also shunned by his ex-wife and estranged teenage son, both of whom ignore his telephone calls and requests for meetings on the basis that he is 'chiant'. Once his supposedly gay identity is revealed, however, all this changes. Not only does he keep his job; he has sex and forms a new couple with the company's most attractive female employee, his immediate superior Mlle Bertrand; his son is suddenly eager to spend time with him; even his ex-wife agrees to meet him for dinner. As Pignon himself concludes: 'Depuis que je passe pour un homo, j'ai commencé à me conduire comme un homme'.

Pignon's son's reaction to the revelation of his father's sexuality initially seems the easiest of these phenomena to explain. For Franck, gay identity appears to connote an attractive ethics of free self-expression, hence his sudden eagerness to share both a meal and a joint with a father he now sees more as a friend and equal than as a traditionally disciplinary paternal figure. Indeed, we could interpret Franck's attitude as representative of his generation as a whole, a younger generation educated in institutions, the family and the school, that have gradually shed their disciplinary characteristics to become instead the primary mechanisms for fostering the 'compétences' and the 'human capital' of their young charges. As Jean-Pierre Le Goff has argued, the new pedagogic techniques now routinely employed throughout the French school system address pupils precisely as 'entrepreneurs de soi', who are enjoined to sign 'individualised learning contracts', which stipulate not only goals to be achieved but also individual 'compétences' to be nurtured and evaluated. Hence, Le Goff, argues, the close homology between the kinds of 'évaluation des compétences' employed in the school and those used in the workplace: 'Dans les deux cas, la

structuration globale des outils d'évaluation des compétences est curieusement semblable, et le processus qui se déroule est le même: injonction à l'autonomie et à la responsabilité, évaluation, élaboration d'objectifs et "contrat" (Le Goff 1999:9). We might thus interpret Franck as representative of a generation educated in a system that has swapped the disciplinary uniformity of traditional French republican education for the more individualising logic of modern pedagogic practices. This may explain why he feels an immediate affinity for his father when the latter reveals himself to be a kind of 'entrepreneur de soi', apparently exhibiting and struggling to manage personal characteristics that the film figures as being analogous to those individualised 'compétences' now rewarded in the workplace, as much as in the school.

At a more general level, the fact that Pignon's pretence of being gay is seen as both humiliating and the source of his salvation might be read as evidence of the inherent *ambivalence* of employer demands that their employees invest ever more of their personal aptitudes and affects in their work. As Moulier Boutang (2007:113) argues, although demands that workers invest their affects, desires, and initiative in their work can indeed be perceived as 'une intrusion dans la vie privée de l'individu', these new modes of working do also possess some genuine opportunities to achieve greater autonomy or demonstrate real initiative. Indeed, this is precisely what Mlle Bertrand responds to in Pignon's behaviour. Having grasped that he is merely pretending to be gay, she is impressed by the initiative and determination this demonstrates, taking it as proof that he is far from the 'petit bonhomme grisâtre, sans physique, sans intelligence, sans couilles, sans rien' she had initially imagined. Hence, she sets out to seduce him. Yet if Mlle Bertrand initiates their sexual encounter, Pignon is soon shown to be literally and figuratively on top as the two have sex on the condom factory's assembly line. Pignon and Bertrand are then caught *in flagrante delicto* by the company's PDG, who is escorting four Japanese executives on a tour of the factory. Since political correctness and sexual identity politics are routinely coded as American in France,

we might have expected these foreign witnesses to the ultimate triumph of French male heterosexual potency to be American also. The fact that they are Japanese lends further support to our interpretation of *Le Placard* as an allegory of the ambivalence of 'immaterial labour'. For, as Lallement (2007:196) argues, the more cooperative, affective, cognitive forms of labour demanded of workers, as French businesses modernised through the 1980s and 90s, were widely coded as Japanese, seen as originating in the just-in-time, total quality, zero defects techniques characteristic of so-called 'Toyotism'. Indeed, Christophe Dejours (2003:25) reports actual cases of French car workers seeking to reassert French national pride in front of visiting Japanese executives by engaging in 'scènes absolument invraisemblables' of their manufacturing prowess.

Pignon's conquest of the beautiful Mlle Bertrand in front of Japanese visitors, at the film's end, can thus be read as signifying the ultimate victory of male French heterosexual and national potency in the face of the numerous threats posed to it in the contemporary workplace. It is these feminised and 'immaterial' threats that *Le Placard* both allegorises and satirises through its narrative of a man forced to pretend to be gay to hold on to his job. At the film's opening, Pignon is already a feminised figure; displaced from his role as 'père de famille' by the indifference of his ex-wife and teenage son, he is in a position of subservience to the two women with whom he shares an office, one of whom is his immediate superior. The liberalisation of divorce laws and the feminisation of the workplace are thus implicitly identified as threats to French masculinity analogous to the threat of redundancy. Paradoxically, by initially assuming what the film presents as an even more effeminate identity, Pignon is able to see off all these threats, transforming the apparent effeminacy of his assumed identity into a token of his masculine determination and initiative, regaining the respect of his son, sexually conquering his beautiful superior, reasserting male French national pride in the face of the foreign threat personified by the Japanese visitors, and, in a particularly misogynistic scene, cruelly dismissing his ex-wife as a bad wife and

mother. If *Le Placard* is an allegory of the ambivalence of 'immaterial labour', it is, then, a highly conservative one that seeks closure in the restoration of masculinity, family, and the heterosexual couple, seeing all three as key to the maintenance of French national prestige.

However conservative the film's assumptions, *Le Placard* does anticipate a series of both thematic concerns and representative character types present in a range of apparently more serious recent French films about the workplace. The figure of the middle-aged executive struggling to meet the demands of the 'modèle de la compétence', personified by François Pignon, is mirrored in the character of Vincent (Aurélien Recoing), the protagonist of Laurent Cantet's *Emploi du temps* (2001). Vincent quits his job precisely to escape the pressures of performing the role of engaged, autonomous, networked management consultant, only to find that the Ponzi scheme he sets up as an alternative source of income demands he simulate these very same 'immaterial' aptitudes. In Mathias Gokalp's *Rien de personnel* (2008), the pressure to simulate these 'immaterial' qualities is depicted in the form of an exercise in executive 'coaching', a kind of infernal *jeu de miroirs* in which no-one knows who is sincere and who simply playing a part, feigning the affects and 'compétences' demanded of the 'immaterial' executive worker.

Pignon's son, Franck, has an important precursor and successor, respectively, in the young protagonists of Cantet's *Ressources humaines* (1999) and of Jean-Marc Moutout's *Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré* (2003). As young executives and recent graduates of elite Parisian *écoles de commerce*, both have been educated in accordance with the precepts of the 'modèle de la compétence'. They represent a younger generation genuinely committed, initially at least, to fostering the values of 'participation', 'mobilisation', and 'compétence' whose presence they seek to evaluate and elicit amongst the employees of the respective provincial factories to which they are attached.

Mlle Bertrand, the beautiful, efficient female executive, whose unmarried and childless status, *Le Placard* implies, is the price she has paid for having turned her back on her 'natural' destiny as wife and mother, also has some recognisable successors in more recent films. One example would be the character of Christine (Kristin Scott Thomas) in Alain Corneau's *Crime d'amour* (2010), the ruthless, childless and unmarried boss of the young Isabelle (Ludivine Sagnier), whom she initiates into the cut-throat business practices characteristic of the American management consultancy in whose Paris office both women work. Seduced into this world of 'Anglo-Saxon' business, Isabelle is thus prevented from following the example set by her sister, who has settled in the provinces with her husband, staying at home to look after their daughter, while he goes out to work. Another example of the childless powerful working woman is offered by the character of Catherine (Catherine Frot) in Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar's mass-market comedy, *Bowling* (2012). Catherine is a haughty Parisian *Directrice de ressources humaines* sent to a small Breton town to close down the local maternity unit and hence threaten the core of this close-knit, authentically French community by curtailing its ability to reproduce and nurture the next generation of French citizens.

Indeed, in nearly all these films the absence or breakdown of the nuclear family, whether threatened or real, is taken as an index of the destructive effects of current working patterns. This crisis of the nuclear family is typically figured as both psychologically damaging to the individual employees concerned and simultaneously as threatening one of the bedrocks of the French national polity as a whole. Finally, as in *Le Placard*, these threats to the French nation are frequently figured as fundamentally foreign, as the impositions of either American management consultancy firms (*Violence des échanges...*, *Crime d'amour*) and/or as emanating from a Parisian metropolis, whose rootless cosmopolitanism is implicitly contrasted with the authenticity of the French provinces (*Ressources humaines*, *Bowling*, *Violence des échanges...*). If, then, *Le Placard* adopts a

resolutely conservative approach to its treatment of questions of work, gender, sexual identity, the family, and the nation, this is by no means an isolated case. Reading the film as an allegory of the ambivalence of contemporary forms of 'immaterial labour', rather than simply or exclusively as a parody of political correctness, can help identify the precise nature of that conservatism by exploring its multiple resonances with a broader range of recent French filmic production.

NOTES

1. See, for example Crick (2001) and Waldren (2006).
2. Godard discusses the metaphorical significance he attaches to this phenomenon of occasional prostitution amongst French housewives in the 1960s in his introductory remarks to the published screenplay. See Godard (1971:17).
3. One important exception to this general rule was the work of Serge Mallet and Pierre Belleville on the so-called 'nouvelle classe ouvrière', an elite of workers supposedly characterised by the greater levels of intelligence and initiative they were called upon to invest in controlling increasingly technically sophisticated manufacturing plant in France's modernising factories. See Mallet (1963) and Belleville (1963). Mallet and Belleville's 'new working class' might be seen as important precursors of the so-called 'cognitariat', of contemporary workers called upon to invest their intellectual and affective abilities in their labours. The significance of such affective and 'immaterial' forms of labour is discussed later in this article.

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