

“Come you spirits unsex me!” Representations of the Female Executive
in Recent French Film and Fiction’

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the representation of female executives in a corpus of French films and novels produced from 2000 on. The corpus includes a mixture of male and female directors and novelists, all of whom adopt broadly centre-left or left-wing positions that are highly critical of contemporary forms of globalised, neo-liberal capitalism. Yet each of these directors and novelists depicts powerful female executives in highly conservative terms, figuring them as 'unsexed' beings who have turned their backs on their 'natural' destinies as wives and mothers. Further, these films and novels all imply that neo-liberal capitalism could be defeated if women were just to return to their traditional roles as wives and mothers and if the patriarchal nuclear family could once again perform its proper role as the foundation of community and national integrity. The corpus thus offers depictions of a range of powerful women who are, alternately, punished, pitied, or tamed. This being the price that must apparently be paid, if French national integrity is to be preserved from what are figured as the inherently foreign forces of globalised capitalism. Having offered an inventory of these deeply conservative tropes, the article concludes by suggesting some possible reasons for their dispiriting recurrence.

Cet article analyse la représentation de femmes cadres dans un corpus de films et de romans d'expression française parus depuis l'an 2000. Le corpus comprend des romanciers et des metteurs en scène de sexe masculin ainsi que de sexe féminin qui se situent à la gauche ou au centre-gauche de l'échiquier politique et qui sont donc tous très critiques face aux formes actuelles du capitalisme néo-libéral mondialisé. Pourtant chacun de ces auteurs dépeint les femmes cadres puissantes d'une manière extrêmement conservatrice, les figurant comme des êtres 'contre-nature', qui auraient tourné le dos à leurs destins 'naturels', en refusant de devenir des mères de famille conventionnelles. De plus, tous ces films et romans laissent entendre que le capitalisme néo-libéral pourrait être vaincu si seulement les femmes acceptaient de retrouver leurs rôles traditionnels de mères de famille et si la famille nucléaire patriarcale pouvait encore une fois servir de fondement à l'intégrité de la communauté nationale. Le corpus nous propose, donc, des portraits d'une série de femmes puissantes soit dont il faut avoir pitié, soit dont les prétentions à l'autonomie professionnelle seront punies ou domptées. Ceci étant le prix à payer, paraît-il, pour préserver l'intégrité nationale française contre ce que l'on nous présente comme étant les forces essentiellement étrangères du capitalisme mondialisé. Ayant dressé un inventaire de ces topoi profondément conservateurs, l'article tentera, en guise de conclusion, d'expliquer leur récurrence plutôt désolante.

KEYWORDS

Female executives, gender, maternity, nuclear family, community, nation, neo-liberal globalisation, French model.

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*‘... Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts! Unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top full
Of direst cruelty’
Macbeth, Act 1, Scene V.*

In his *A quoi sert le travail?* (2003), the sociologist Philippe Zarifian argues that one reason for women’s under-representation in top executive roles is the assumption that, as women, they are ruled by their biology, by a maternal function that prevents them from making judgements on a purely rational basis, in the name of universal criteria. It is assumed that when faced with the necessity of mass redundancies in order to safeguard the future profitability of her firm, a female *Directrice de ressources humaines* will prove unable to act in the name of the greater good. Blinded by her maternal instincts, such a woman will tend to sympathise with the individual victims of redundancy and hence fail to take the unpleasant actions legitimated by a purely intellectual assessment of future profitability. Thus, Zarifian concludes, in order to succeed in the current conjuncture, women executives are compelled to become men, to adopt and ape typically masculine attributes of ruthlessness and cool rational calculation of future gain:

Ce DRH ne peut être qu’un homme. Entendons: peu importe qu’il soit ‘réellement’ un homme ou une femme. Mais il ne peut se comporter que ‘comme un homme’. Et cet ‘homme’, symbole de l’intellectualité pure en action, aura toutes les chances

d'être bien noté et de progresser dans l'échelle hiérarchique. Ce sera un homme 'bien'. Il aura le droit de rester au sein de l'élite. (Zarifian 2003, 114-15)

Zarifian's choice of a *DRH* as an illustrative job function is by no means accidental. For this reflects the fact that Human Resources is one professional sector in which women have achieved significant successes, successes that are often explained by reference to women's supposedly greater aptitude for the so-called 'soft skills', for communication, collaboration, and human relationships. By a nice irony, then, women who have achieved the status of *DRH*, in recognition of their supposedly inherently feminine characteristics, find themselves, in Zarifian's scenario, forced to behave in a specifically masculine fashion in order to be appreciated and rewarded by their superiors.

At this point, a certain ambivalence or ambiguity slips in to Zarifian's argument. Clearly, he is seeking here to criticise the manner in which socially constructed gender categories ascribe limited capacities to women, passing these off as inherent, natural, biological, and hence immutable characteristics. At the same time, however, Zarifian implies that the imperative for women to adopt masculine values in the workplace is to be lamented inasmuch as this corresponds to some kind of violation of their true or natural selves. To suggest that for women to behave in a ruthless or coolly calculating manner requires they adopt a set of masculine, hence alien values, is to risk reasserting those same gendered oppositions that Zarifian is ostensibly seeking to challenge. At the very least, Zarifian's scenario involving a female *DRH* forced to become a man in order to succeed risks evoking much older fantasies of powerful women as fundamentally unnatural hybrid beings. In the English-speaking context, Zarifian's *DRH* is likely to evoke memories of Lady Macbeth, a woman who famously had to be 'unsexed' in order to achieve her ambitions, even as she continued to exploit her supposedly characteristically feminine wiles to seduce her husband into first sharing, then realising those ambitions.

The ambiguities inherent in Zarifian's account highlight the fact that the distinction between understanding gender as a socially constructed category and positing it as a biologically determined fact is rarely clear-cut. Further, such ambiguities point to the extent to which representing or conceptualising powerful female executives continues to pose problems even for apparently progressive, enlightened commentators such as Zarifian. In what follows, I will argue that such problems have been not simply reflected, but also amplified in a range of fictional representations of female executives in French feature films and novels from the 2000s on.¹ To focus exclusively on the figure of the female executive is, of course, to concentrate purely on upper-middle and middle class women, to the detriment of any consideration of petty bourgeois or working class women. However, this socially exclusive focus is justified by the fact that female executives, by definition, possess a professional power in the workplace and an economic power in broader society that distinguishes them from working women of lower social class or status. As such, the figure of the female executive poses particularly acute challenges in a context in which conventional representational schema continue to posit power and femininity as mutually exclusive terms.

My corpus of novels and films has been chosen to include only those novelists and directors who adopt a left-wing or centre-left position on the contemporary workplace, seeking to criticise what they identify as the heightened forms of exploitation inherent to processes of neo-liberal globalisation and their accompanying coercive management practices.² Yet, as will be shown, these ostensibly left-wing authors and directors struggle to articulate their critique of contemporary capitalism without relying on some highly conservative, even misogynistic assumptions about women and their supposedly proper roles as wives and mothers. By including a mixture of male and female novelists and filmmakers, it will be possible to show that such conservative assumptions by no means reflect uniquely *male* anxieties at women's increased power in the workplace. Rather, it will become clear that conservative assumptions about gender are as common amongst female as amongst male *auteurs*. Indeed, in every case, these assumptions are

overdetermined by equally questionable presuppositions about family, community, and nation, in a manner that points to an inability to articulate a critique of capitalism that does not rely on naturalising these social institutions, by figuring them as guarantors of integrity and wholesomeness, bulwarks against a rootless, cosmopolitan neo-liberalism.³

Across the corpus, then, powerful female executives are repeatedly represented as having been unsexed in some way, prevented by their professional lives from adopting their supposedly natural roles as wives, mothers, and hence bedrocks of the French national community. If foreign, these women will be figured as perversely polymorphous destroyers of family, maternity, and national community. As incarnations of a rootless and insatiable global capitalism, these foreign women must thus be punished by their deaths, for any hope of the restoration of French national community to emerge. If French, these women who have turned their backs on their proper maternal function, are either pitied, as victims of the demands of the neo-liberal workplace, or ultimately tamed, defeating those demands by reconnecting with their previously abandoned femininity and maternity. Female executives, it appears, must thus be punished, pitied, or tamed, if family, community, and French nation are to be restored to their natural, wholesome state. This natural, wholesome state is typically figured as being threatened by the aggressive forces of neo-liberal capitalism, forces which are regularly coded as being inherently foreign or 'Anglo-Saxon' in origin. Having sketched a somewhat dispiriting inventory of these gendered, nationalistic, and conservative tropes, this article will conclude by suggesting some possible reasons for their depressingly frequent recurrence.

Women Punished

Eric Reinhardt's 2011 novel, *Le Système Victoria*, tells the tale of the adulterous, passionate love affair between its narrator, David Kolski, and the elegant, powerful business executive, Victoria de Winter. David is a frustrated architect turned Project

Manager, responsible for the construction of a new tower block in La Défense. Aged 42 and married with a young daughter, he is the son of a working class Polish immigrant and remains ostensibly committed to left-wing ideals. Victoria, an advocate for globalised neo-liberalism, is much richer and more powerful than David. The *DRH* of a company that was, originally, 'un fleuron de l'industrie anglaise' but is now 'un groupe à capitaux internationaux, essentiellement américains, implanté dans une vingtaine de pays', she spends her working life jetting between Paris, London, and a host of other exotic locations (Reinhardt 2011, 33). This mobility not only reflects Victoria's professional role, it also confirms her status as what David terms 'une expatriée fondamentale', who was born in Barcelona to an English mother and a German father, before being brought up in France and then taking up jobs 'en Chine, à Singapour, en Allemagne et désormais à Londres' (106). Despite his immigrant origins on his father's side, David is identified as being more rooted in rural France through his mother and grandmother. When his affair with Victoria ends tragically in a murder for which David is principal suspect, he is pursued by the media and banned from any contact with his wife and daughter. He seeks refuge in an isolated country hotel, close to what he describes to its proprietor as "[le] village de ma famille, [le] village où mon père a rencontré ma mère. J'y ai passé toutes mes vacances, de ma naissance jusqu'à mes dix-huit ans. Ma grand-mère y vit toujours, elle a aujourd'hui, attendez, elle est née en 1919..." (410).

David's doomed affair with Victoria thus allegorises the fatal attraction felt by elements of the French left, and by the French nation more generally, for the alluring but ultimately destructive promises of neo-liberal globalisation. Victoria is a very particular kind of *femme fatale*; sexually rapacious, temperamental, devious, and enigmatic, she exerts a strong hold over David. On learning that he is merely the last in a long line of men with whom Victoria has betrayed her husband, David marvels at what he figures as her essentially feminine capacity for lying: 'Victoria possède la faculté de dépasser les vérités qui l'embarrassent pour en inventer d'autres un peu plus haut où elle agit métamorphosée – comme une déesse dont les pouvoirs sont sans limites'. This divinely

protean aptitude for mendacity elicits in him equal amounts of desire and fear: 'cette fascination n'a pas manqué de produire sur mon imaginaire, au même instant, un effroi adjacent' (321). Through both her sexual appetites and her elevated professional status, Victoria thus upsets conventional gender hierarchies. Not only does she earn far more than David, she also earns more than her husband. As she explains to David: 'C'est moi qui paye pratiquement tout mais personne ne doit le dire, le sujet est tabou, mon mari le refoule en permanence [...]. [A]ux yeux de ma belle-famille [...] j'ai été assez vulgaire pour avoir voulu supplanter mon mari sur les plans symbolique et matériel' (341). Unlike the typical *femme fatale*, then, Victoria is in no way beholden to a controlling older man, so her affair with David reflects simply the insatiability of her sexual desires, rather than a strategy to escape any such patriarchal control. She is also unlike the typical *femme fatale* in that she does have children and is potentially therefore a maternal, rather than a purely sexual being. However, the facts that we only learn of her children's existence about halfway through the 600-page novel, that she rarely mentions them, and is never depicted in their presence, merely serves to emphasize the extent to which she has turned her back on her expected wifely and maternal roles.

Victoria's rejection of her traditionally gendered role is mirrored, of course, in her professional life. As she explains to David, to operate effectively at work, she is obliged to 'faire des concessions à la bête masculine, me montrer conciliante. [...] Alors je me montre peu exigeante sur la qualité des conversations, je suis parfois d'une lourdeur comparable à la leur, il m'arrive d'aller voir des matchs de foot dans de vieux stades en Pologne, ça les rassure de me voir à leur portée' (73-4). Yet, the novel implies, Victoria's feigning masculinity for the purposes of work is merely one further expression of a predisposition to mendacity that is figured as essentially feminine. Throughout the novel her primary professional task is to negotiate with the trades unions in order to manage the closure of a steel plant in the Lorraine. Here too, her ruthless, stereotypically masculine determination to pursue profit despite the human costs is allied with her supposedly feminine aptitude for duplicity, as she convinces the unions they should

welcome the 'filialisation' of their plant, whilst all the while knowing this is merely a precursor to its outright sale to a Brazilian asset-stripper (527). As David remarks of her negotiating strategy, 'tu les amadoues, tu les ensorcelles...' (522). Like Lady Macbeth before her, then, Victoria has been unsexed. Yet, again like Lady Macbeth, the cruelty this allows her to exercise, in both her professional and personal dealings with men, continues to be combined with the canny exploitation of some stereotypically feminine wiles.

As the novel progresses, its narrator David becomes increasingly aware that there is no distinction between Victoria's ruthless pursuit of her desires in her private life and her behaviour in the professional domain. Thus she becomes not simply an incarnation of male fears at both female sexual potency and women's increasing autonomy through salaried labour, according to a slightly reworked model of the *femme fatale*.⁴ She simultaneously serves as a personification of neo-liberal globalisation itself, of its amorality, its rootlessness, its mobility, its insatiable desire for new returns whatever the human costs. Indeed, it is this parallel between the ruthless insatiability of her sexual desires and the insatiability of the globalised capitalism she advocates that lies at the core of the 'système Victoria' that gives the novel its title:

Tel était le système qui fondait l'existence de Victoria: ne jamais être à la même place, se segmenter dans un grand nombre d'activités et de projets, pour ne jamais se laisser enfermer dans aucune vérité – mais être à soi-même, dans le mouvement, sa propre vérité. Victoria n'éprouvait pas de pitié, de remords, de tristesse ou d'angoisses, car elle les dissolvait par le mouvement et la fragmentation. C'est la vitesse la vérité de notre monde, et pas les situations locales qu'elle permet aux puissants de survoler, de traverser ou d'entrapercevoir. Victoria était partout chez elle, n'était contrainte nulle part, disposait d'une échappatoire en toute circonstance. Il n'y avait que le sexe pour interrompre sa fuite en avant.

Née d'une mère anglaise et d'un père berlinois, élevée en grande partie dans un pays, la France, qui n'était pas le sien, Victoria se vantait d'être une femme internationale, sans point d'ancrage particulier. (529)

The novel thus figures Victoria's insatiable sexual desires as functioning according to a logic that is strictly analogous to that of globalised capitalism. Ultimately, those insatiable sexual desires will be the cause of her downfall. Having been taken by David to a Parisian porn cinema to engage their mutual desire for group sex, Victoria agrees, despite David's protestations, to accompany two unknown men in their van to continue the orgy elsewhere. She is found murdered the next morning by the police, who subsequently arrest David in his family home, ruining his career and family life in the process, leaving him to seek a solitary refuge in *la France profonde*, close to the village of his mother's and grandmother's birth. As he puts it on the novel's final page: 'Je voulais [...] m'engager le plus profondément possible à l'intérieur de la France' (611). A national identity rooted in the French countryside and in the fixed gender roles of the patriarchal nuclear family has thus been destroyed by a rootless, cosmopolitan, sexually and professionally insatiable foreign female executive. Victoria's violent end serves both as punishment for her temerity in rejecting her traditional role as wife and mother and as an allegory for the self-destructive tendencies of the global capitalism she embodies. This is a peculiarly overdetermined allegory which, although focalised through the experiences of an avowedly left-wing narrator, relies on some profoundly conservative assumptions about gender, family, and rootedness in local community, all figured as keys to the preservation of the integrity of the French national polity.

This figure of the foreign female executive as a disruptive *femme fatale*, who must be punished for the immoderate nature of her professional and sexual desires, is mirrored in Alain Corneau's 2010 thriller, *Crime d'amour*. The film centres on the murderous professional rivalry between two female executives who work in the La Défense offices of an American consultancy firm. One of these women is a young French junior executive,

Isabelle (Ludivine Sagnier), whose blond hair and youth make of her an embodiment of French innocence threatened by her induction into the immoral world of 'Anglo-Saxon' capitalism. That immoral world is personified by her boss, the ruthless, manipulative, unmarried, childless, and sexually perverse Christine, played by Kristin Scott Thomas as someone whose British accent when speaking French and unaccented fluency in English, combined with her recognisable star persona, clearly communicate her 'Anglo-Saxon' origins.

In the film's opening scene, we see Isabelle and Christine working late together in the drawing room of the latter's luxurious home. This is a scene of seduction in which the dark-haired older Christine attempts to seduce the blonde-haired young Isabelle both sexually, by sniffing her perfume and kissing her neck, and ideologically, by initiating her into the sharp practices of the 'Anglo-Saxon' business world. This attempted seduction allegorises, of course, the seduction of good by evil, of youth by experience, and of the honour and integrity of France itself by a cynically exploitative foreign model of socio-economic organisation. Halfway through the scene, Philippe arrives, another of Christine's professional juniors and also her lover. As Christine stretches out on the couch, caressing Philippe's thigh with her foot, she stares into Isabelle's eyes, a wicked smile tacitly inviting her to join them in a *ménage à trois*.

At this point Isabelle makes her excuses and leaves, explaining she will finish her work at home. We cut to a scene in a dimly lit interior, the camera first holding on a stylish but empty dining room table and chairs, before tracking back across this deserted scene and panning right to reveal Isabelle seated at a polished steel kitchen work surface, working on her laptop and talking to a work colleague on her mobile. The empty table and chairs emphasize what Isabelle has had to give up to become an executive; the husband and children who are conspicuous by their absence. What should, then, have been a scene of feminine domesticity and familial conviviality has been contaminated by the demands of the 'Anglo-Saxon' workplace. This contamination is also represented visually, as the shiny surfaces of Isabelle's immaculate and unused kitchen

mirror the glass and steel of the American consultancy firm's offices in La Défense. In two subsequent short scenes, we see Isabelle eating a rushed breakfast before work, standing alone, surrounded by those same shiny surfaces, as if to reinforce this point about the shocking absence of familial conviviality. Indeed, Isabelle's house itself, a modern suburban *pavillon*, whose exterior styling attempts to evoke rustic domesticity, yet whose fashionable interior appears cold and sanitised, represents a kind of degraded simulacrum of a genuine family home.

Later in the film, distraught at her treatment at the hands of the ruthless Christine, Isabelle leaves Paris, seeking refuge and solace at her sister's home in the provinces, the same family home in which Isabelle herself grew up. Where Isabelle's *pavillon* is but a degraded simulacrum of a genuine traditional family home, her sister's house is the real thing; its ivy-covered façade, its provincial location and considerable age connote its rootedness in a *terroir* that is strikingly contrasted to the *non-lieu* of Isabelle's anonymous Parisian suburb.⁵ Where Isabelle works and is hence childless and unmarried, her sister stays at home, preparing meals for her working husband and looking after their angelic daughter. As Isabelle laments to her sister, she too might have enjoyed this happy domestic life, had she not been seduced by the lure of 'Anglo-Saxon' business into abandoning her maternal role and hence, the film implies, threatening the institutions of family, community, and nation. To quote Isabelle: 'Un gentil petit mari, une gentille petite fille, une gentille petite vie, ça doit pas être mon truc, ça'.

A number of complicated plot twists follow, which result in Isabelle getting away with the vengeful murder of her boss Christine and returning triumphant to replace her at the American consultancy firm. The summit of Isabelle's professional success, but the nadir of her moral degradation, occurs when she is invited to a meeting at her firm's Washington headquarters. After she has wowed her American colleagues, one of them is heard to declare, in English: 'Isabelle, I think I speak for all of us when I say that you are the perfect woman'. 'What kind of a perverted conception of perfect womanhood do

these Americans possess?' the audience is surely meant to ask itself at this point. After all, as the scene in Isabelle's sister's home has taught us, in fact Isabelle has had precisely to renounce her womanhood in order to achieve this sort of professional recognition.

In the film's final sequence, Isabelle's Personal Assistant reveals to her that he knows she is guilty of Christine's murder and will use that knowledge as a means to secure his own professional advancement. Here again, Isabelle's moment of triumph thus coincides with her moral defeat, as she realises there is now no escape from the world of ruthless professional rivalries into which she has been inducted. This sequence is a reprise of the final scene of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's classic Hollywood tale of female professional rivalry, *All about Eve* (1950), in which former understudy Eve Harrington's (Anne Baxter) triumph in displacing Margo Channing (Bette Davis) as Broadway's top star is mitigated by her realisation that her own understudy is already plotting to steal her newly won crown. More broadly, in its tale of female rivalry in the contemporary workplace, *Crime d'amour* owes a considerable debt to a more recent Hollywood production, Mike Nichols's *Working Girl* (1988). Both of these allusions to Hollywood precursors reinforce the film's message that the cutthroat professional mores it depicts are essentially foreign to France, inherently American or 'Anglo-Saxon' in origin. In Nichols's *Working Girl*, these rivalries are worked out in such a way as to support one of America's most enduring national myths, namely that it is a land of opportunity in which hard work pays and hence the enterprising junior employee, played by Melanie Griffiths, can ultimately win out against inherited wealth and privilege, as personified by her superior, played by Sigourney Weaver. Alain Corneau's reinterpretation of this Hollywood model supports, by contrast, a specifically French national myth, namely that neo-liberal capitalism is an inherently foreign imposition that threatens a French national polity whose integrity can be secured by women respecting their natural maternal and domestic roles and by a return to the rooted certainties of provincial France, of family, community, and nation.

Women Pitied

In the murders of both Reinhardt's Victoria and Corneau's Christine, we thus have examples of foreign female executives who, it seems, must be punished for choosing to turn their backs on their roles as wives and mothers, in pursuit of professional power and status. In the figure of Isabelle, however, we have a different variant in the representation of female executives. She too has given up on marriage and family. Yet this is something she has been seduced into, rather than having freely chosen and, as a result, Isabelle is a woman we are invited to pity rather than to punish. Another example of a female executive whose rejection of marriage and family the audience is invited to pity rather than condemn can be found in Jean-Marc Moutout's 2003 film *Violence des échanges en milieu tempéré*.

Moutout's film focuses on the experiences of Philippe (Jérémie Rénier), a young executive who works at the La Défense offices of another American management consultancy. Philippe is sent to a manufacturing company in the provinces, ostensibly to undertake a 'bilan des compétences' of each employee and to pilot the introduction of Japanese total quality techniques into the factory's production processes. In fact, these exercises are merely intended to make the company more attractive to a foreign buyer, by increasing productivity and paving the way for a round of redundancies. The factory's *DRH*, Suzanne Delmas (Martine Chevallier), a middle-aged woman, initially collaborates with Philippe. However, towards the end of the film, she gets wind of the imminent redundancies, realising that she will figure amongst them. Late in the film, then, Suzanne is found by her colleague, the factory's middle-aged Production Manager Roland (Olivier Perrier), at home, alone, drunk and sobbing, lamenting the fact that she has given up the chance of marriage and children to pursue her career, only now to have been let go: 'J'ai tenu bon toute ma vie et pourquoi? Pour montrer que j'étais une femme forte. J'avais des responsabilités. J'étais fière, fière de mon travail, de mon indépendance. Je voudrais pouvoir tout recommencer, tu vois?'

Granted, this scene is ambiguous. It could be read as a quasi-feminist critique of the price women have to pay to succeed professionally. At the same time, Suzanne's words here carry the strong implication that had she not been so 'proud' as to seek independence through work, she could have been a happily married mother and hence have avoided her current distress. Moreover, Suzanne's lament needs to be placed in the context of the film's more sustained focus on the inability of its hero, Philippe, himself to form a successful nuclear family with the young single mother Eva (Sylvia Malki), whom he meets on the metro on the way to La Défense. Just before Eva and Philippe split up because of the pressures of the latter's job, a high angle shot shows the two of them embracing, as Eva cradles her young daughter. This idealised tableau of an apparently perfect young nuclear family emphasizes the state of natural harmony that has been shattered by a rapacious, American globalised capitalism. For all its supposedly left-wing credentials, then, Moutout's critique of neo-liberal globalisation relies on some now familiar oppositions between America and France, Paris and the provinces, capitalism and the family, whose role as bedrock of a harmonious national community can, it seems, only be secured provided women respect their natural roles as wives and mothers. As the images of Suzanne drunk, sobbing, and alone at the film's end remind the audience, there is a heavy price to be paid by any woman who neglects that natural role.

Nathalie Kuperman's 2010 novel, *Nous étions des êtres vivants*, offers a broader range of female characters who have neglected or been denied the pleasures of marriage and motherhood in pursuit of their executive careers. The novel is set in the Paris offices of a children's publisher that has just been bought out by an aggressive French executive, Paul Cathéter, who is planning to restructure and modernise the business by shifting to electronic publishing and initiating a programme of redundancies. Although this personification of a menacing global capitalism is French, the novel nonetheless manages to imply that the real source of this threat is America. As the publishing house's employees collectively explain: 'Le repreneur aime l'Amérique du Nord, et nous

allons être “managés” à l’américaine. L’Amérique nous fait peur soudain. Nous n’avions pas imaginé que le danger pouvait venir de si loin’ (Kuperman 2010, 18-19).

Gender is explicitly placed at the core of the novel’s concerns. Publishing, like Human Resources, is a professional sector with a high proportion of female employees, again in recognition of women’s supposedly innate facility for linguistic and communicative skills. The fact that this is a children’s publisher means that work is doubly feminised here, since both those feminine ‘soft skills’ and the female employees’ presumed maternal instincts apparently predispose them to the production of children’s magazines and games. As one of the employees remarks : ‘Nous sommes des femmes, principalement, et les rares hommes qui travaillent parmi nous ont pris des allures efféminées’ (Kuperman 2010, 40). This process of feminisation does not, of course, apply to Paul Cathéter, the businessman who has bought the company out. Thus Cathéter personifies what are figured as a set of inherently masculine, ruthless, commercial values that threaten to shatter the firm’s older commitment to feminine solidarity between its employees and maternal concern for its young customers. Caught at the centre of this struggle between masculine and feminine values is Muriel Dupont-Delvich, whom Cathéter promotes to the post of *Directeur général* to help him identify suitable candidates for redundancy. Thus, as Muriel herself explains, she will have to supplement her stereotypically feminine aptitude for personal relationships and personnel management with Cathéter’s more masculine commitment to the rational calculation of future profit, regardless of the human cost:

Je reconnais que pour moi qui aime les gens, qui éprouve du plaisir à écouter leurs problèmes, qui participe à leur vie dispensant conseil et consolations, difficile sera le chemin qui m’éloignera d’eux, me forcera à considérer leurs plaintes comme des humeurs déplacées, à naviguer entre le souvenir de nos relations et nos relations actuelles. Car, m’a prévenue Paul Cathéter, il faudra changer ma façon de

gouverner : Vous voulez participer au redressement de cette boîte, ou vous accrocher à des principes qui conduisent à sa perte ? (44)

Muriel must, therefore, become a kind of unnatural hybrid; masculine, through her commitment to Cathéter's goals, she will nonetheless continue to rely on what she herself figures as an inherently feminine gift for achieving those goals by devious means: 'ce don d'organiser les choses comme elles me conviennent sans que personne ne se rende compte que je tire les ficelles' (34). It is in tacit recognition of her new hybrid identity that she refuses the job title of *Directrice générale*, opting for *la Directeur général* instead.

Clearly, Kuperman intends this as a critique of the pressures women face in the workplace, pressures rooted in the social construction and naturalisation of gender identities. However, as the novel progresses its focus shifts from gender to biology, to identifying Muriel's frustrated maternal instincts as the real source of her difficulties. We learn that, as a much younger woman, she had fallen pregnant, passionately wanting to keep the child, her future son. Her then partner, however, forced her to have an abortion and she is now tormented by this 'haute trahison' and by memories of what might have been: 'je garde l'image d'une sorte de sainte destinée à l'amour filial, et qui fut empêchée par un caprice' (150). Muriel feels that her co-workers, the vast majority of whom are mothers, mistrust her on account of her unmarried and childless status: 'Tout le monde dans cette boîte sait que je n'ai pas d'enfants' (63). By way of revenge, she hoards all the free toy samples the company is sent to prevent her co-employees taking them home as presents for their own children. On finding this hidden cache of toys in Muriel's office, her Assistant, Ariane Stein, remarks: 'Muriel Dupont-Delvich est les enfants qu'elle n'a pas eus' (111). Indeed, the professional rift between Muriel and Ariane dates from the moment when the latter had announced her pregnancy and imminent marriage. As Ariane notes of Muriel : 'Sa foudre s'est abattue sur moi lorsque je lui ai annoncé que j'étais enceinte, quatre années après notre rencontre, pendant

lesquelles nous avons vécu une sorte d'idylle. [...] Elle m'aimait fille, elle m'aimait seule, elle m'aimait dépendante de mon travail, et c'était le cas' (80-1).

Having given birth to two young children, Ariane has subsequently split up with her husband. Thus where Muriel is tormented by memories of the son she was prevented from having, Ariane indulges in recurrent fantasies of recreating the perfect nuclear family she has lost: 'me rattrape la nostalgie d'une vie de famille, et me prend à la gorge ce sentiment que j'ai raté ma vie' (140). However, the most pathetic figure of all in this respect is Agathe Rougier, who explains she has abandoned marriage and motherhood for her career and who now lives alone with only a cat and her collection of dolls for company (19). So lonely is Agathe that she fantasises about having an affair with her cat (20), before concluding that: 'Je manque cruellement d'un mari pour remettre mes idées en place' (27).

Doubtless, Kuperman intends the plight of Muriel, Ariane, and Agathe to serve as a critique of the destructive effects of contemporary capitalism and its associated work culture on the personal and social lives of employees today. However, the problem here is Kuperman's relentless naturalising of marriage, motherhood, and the nuclear family as the only possible sources of fulfilment for women, whose absence is posited as a self-evident and inevitable cause of their distress. The novel seems quite incapable of imagining alternative forms of relationship, of parenting, or of family as the possible bases for a functioning community or national polity. Similarly, it is incapable of acknowledging that the nuclear family might produce its own specific pathologies, or that this social institution might itself be, in part at least, a product of capitalism, rather than its natural, wholesome antidote.

At one point in the novel, Ariane gives in to her jealous anxieties at the prospect that her ex-husband's glamorous new partner, Dominique, might steal the affections of her two young children, seducing them with tasty cuisine and exciting outings (137-39). The novel presents these jealous fantasies as being wholly natural and understandable, inviting the reader to empathise with Ariane's fears. What the novel cannot countenance

here is the possibility that these jealous fantasies might be thoroughly pathological. Indeed, such jealousy may point to the extent to which the emotions typically engendered within the nuclear family are not so much the antidote to capitalism as determined by its very logic. After all, it would surely be possible for Ariane to welcome the prospect of her children contracting loving or affectionate relationships with a diverse range of adults, outside the bounds of their immediate family. If she is unable to do this, it is because she appears to conceive of her children and their affections, according to a fundamentally capitalist logic, as what economists term 'rival goods', goods which, if possessed by another, cannot be possessed or shared by oneself, and vice versa.

It might be argued that what we have here is a striking illustration of Frederick Engels's old point about the causal relationships between the patriarchal nuclear family, with its attendant claims to an exclusive right to the love and affection of spouses and children, on the one hand, and, on the other, both capitalist property rights and the reproduction of the capitalist labour force (Engels 1884). We might supplement Engels here with Christine Delphy's more recent claim that women's greater investment in marriage, family, interpersonal relations, love, and romance needs to be understood as both a form of compensation for and a contributory factor in their relative marginalisation in the workplace (Delphy 1998, 167-215). This would, in turn, help us to understand the nuclear family to be less a wholesome, natural bulwark against the ravages of contemporary capitalism, than an institution that is bound up with capitalism's logic in complex ways. Ariane's jealous claim to exclusive ownership of her children's affections might thus be read symptomatically, as a kind of return of the repressed material bases of the pathological emotions generated within the nuclear family. These material bases must, of course, be repressed in order for Kuperman to maintain the straightforward opposition between contemporary capitalism and the family on which her critique of the former rests.

One recent film, in which this articulation between a critique of capitalism and the naturalisation of motherhood, marriage, and family is expressed in particularly striking

fashion is Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar's *Bowling* (2012). This film provides one final variant in the representation of female executives, in the form of a childless *DRH*, whose threat to family and community will be *tamed*, as she reconnects with her thus far abjured maternal instinct, in order to see off the destructive forces of capitalism she previously personified.

Woman Tamed

Bowling, for which Mention-Schaar acted as both director and scriptwriter, is based on true events, namely the successful campaign by the residents of Carhaix, in Brittany, to save the local maternity unit from its threatened closure on purely economic grounds. In Mention-Schaar's fictionalised version of events, the local women's bowling team, captained by Mathilde (Mathilde Seignier), a midwife and married mother, forms the core of the opposition to the threatened closure. The film fully exploits the symbolic resonance of the maternity unit as the foundation of both family and local community, whilst playing on the twin meanings of the French term 'maternité', as referring to both the maternity unit itself and the local women's biological, maternal function. Quite what is at stake here is made clear in the plot summary that features on the back of the DVD of the film:

Un petit hôpital, une maternité paisible... Nous sommes à Carhaix, une charmante ville bretonne. Mathilde, sage-femme, Firmine, puéricultrice, et Louise, propriétaire du bowling de la ville, y vivent heureuses. Mais l'arrivée de Catherine, chargée de restructurer la maternité, pourrait bien rompre cette harmonie. Malgré leurs différences, ces femmes vont former une équipe pleine d'humanité et d'humour pour défendre leur maternité.

As the ambiguity of that final phrase 'défendre leur maternité' indicates, the 'harmony' of this French rural town will only be maintained against external threat on condition that both the maternity unit be saved and the local women's maternal function be preserved. Moreover, the film will suggest that this harmony rests on the reproduction of the Carhasiens' organic rootedness in their home-town, in the local *terroir*. At one point in the film, having heard tell of the threat to the maternity unit, Mathilde's young son, Merlin, asks her:

Merlin : Est-ce qu'on peut toujours être Carhasien si on est né à Quimper ?

Mathilde : Mais non. On porte le nom de la ville où on est né. C'est comme ça.

Merlin : Mais maman, où on va fabriquer les nouveaux Carhasiens si on peut pas les fabriquer à Carhaix ?

This notion of rootedness in *terroir* will be re-emphasized in the film's final sequence. As the team drive back from a bowling match, having learnt the maternity unit will be saved, their van breaks down, only for Louise (Laurence Arné) to go into labour. Refusing to give birth by the side of the road, Louise insists on the assembled townsfolk pushing the van into Carhaix, a feat they achieve just in time for Louise's child to be born within the town's borders. Defeating the threat posed to this local community by the economic logic of capitalism will thus depend on the reassertion not only of maternity but also of questionable myths of organicity and rootedness in the provincial soil.

As already mentioned, this threat to the values of motherhood and rooted community is personified by a female executive, who has been parachuted in to oversee the restructuring of the local hospital as its *DRH*. Catherine (Catherine Frot) is an elegant, sophisticated Parisian, who, although married, is childless. As we learn early in the film,

her husband has little interest in Catherine and still less in children, devoting all his energies to collecting modernist statues, which he significantly refers to as 'mes filles'. The film thus sets up a rather predictable opposition between the authenticity of provincial life, secured by women's maternity, on the one hand, and a rootless, cosmopolitan, capitalist Paris, the site of a sterile intellectualism, or even of a predilection for decadent art, on the other. These oppositions are quickly reasserted in an early scene in the maternity unit in which we see Firmine (Firmine Richard), a rather plump nurse of Antillean origin, helping a local teacher to learn to breastfeed. The hapless teacher, earlier identified as 'une intellectuelle', attempts in vain to learn this skill from the numerous manuals that litter her hospital room. Firmine dismisses this book-learning in the name of folk wisdom and maternal instinct: 'Mais oui, écoutez votre instinct. Eh oui, laissez-vous aller. Et vous verrez, ça va bien se passer. Parole de Firmine'.

Later Firmine is interviewed by Catherine as part of the restructuring process. Catherine tells her there have been complaints about her practice of addressing the patients in the 'tu' form and telling them off for not breastfeeding. Firmine's response identifies her still more clearly as the personification of authenticity, of simple folk wisdoms and maternal instincts that stand opposed to Catherine's Parisian pretensions:

'Ici, les gens sont très simples, vous savez. La terre, la famille, l'amitié. On est pas coincé du popotin. C'est comme ça que les Antillais et les Bretons se ressemblent. Je suis une Brantillaise.'

Firmine's claim to personify a combination of Antillean and Breton characteristics reflects the ethnocentric nature of her depiction. Stereotypes concerning Brittany as a land of myth, magic, and folklore combine here with Firmine's role as the incarnation of the asexual but maternal and instinctual 'black mammy'.⁶

As the film progresses, Catherine will gradually be converted to the cause of defending the maternity unit, precisely on account of being seduced by this powerful 'brantillais' mix of instinct, folk wisdom, and authentic female community. A key moment in her conversion occurs when she accompanies Mathilde to help out as a farmer's wife gives birth in an isolated farmhouse. Immediately after the birth, Catherine emerges in a doorway, cradling the new-born, tears streaming down her cheeks. The childless Parisian executive has thus been tamed, reconnected with her maternal instincts through her salutary exposure to the rooted certainties of provincial life, its simple folk wisdoms and attendant sense of community. Catherine will hence manage to save the maternity unit by helping it achieve the prestigious status of 'Maison des bébés', a mark of quality that, her secretary explains, is equivalent to an 'appellation contrôlée'. Motherhood, family, community, and *terroir*, then, finally win out against the nakedly capitalist logic behind the unit's threatened closure. The hospital's *directeur* had justified that closure by evoking Renault's merger with Nissan and Peugeot's with Mitsubishi, before declaring: 'Eh bien! Les hôpitaux, c'est pareil!'. Where those icons of French industrial might surrendered to the logic of global capital, losing their specifically French identities as they did so, the plucky folk of Carhaix resisted and won.

In its narrative of a community on Europe's 'Celtic fringe' that relies on its folk wisdom to see off the threat of global capital, *Bowling* owes a considerable debt to Bill Forsyth's classic *Local Hero* (1983). However, Mention-Schaar reinterprets the basic structure of that film in a much more literal way and her film lacks the multiple knowing ironies that allow Forsyth to undercut the myths of national identity and authentic Scottish community with which his film plays. *Bowling*, by contrast, appears to take seriously the oppositions it mobilises between a rootless cosmopolitan capitalism and the certainties of motherhood, family, and community, all seen as essential to the defence of French national integrity. Indeed, in its depiction of maternity and of community rooted in *terroir*, as in its ethnocentric idealisation of France's regional and ethnic minorities, the film appears to endorse significant elements of the Vichy regime's ideology. *Bowling* thus

offers us the perplexing spectacle of a feel-good tale of anti-capitalism and female solidarity that rehearses many of the ideological motifs of France's most reactionary political regime.

Within our chosen corpus, then, *Bowling* represents the most extreme example of a more general tendency, first, to figure powerful female executives as the incarnations of a destructive global capitalism and, second, to posit motherhood, the nuclear family, rooted community, and the preservation of national integrity as the only possible antidotes to capitalism's destructive power. These profoundly conservative assumptions about gender, family, community, and nation appear to be equally distributed across our corpus, as common amongst female as male novelists and directors. One trope that *is* specific to our chosen male *auteurs*, however, is their reliance on the fantasy figure of the *femme fatale* to domesticate the threat posed by the sexually, professionally, and economically autonomous women they portray. Thus, there is no equivalent to the perversely polymorphous figures of Reinhardt's Victoria or Corneau's Christine in either Kuperman's *Nous étions des êtres vivants* or Mention-Schaar's *Bowling*. However, this is surely scant consolation.

The depressing recurrence of these conservative assumptions about gender, family, and nation in accounts that position themselves on the left or centre-left of the political spectrum demands some form of explanation. One answer might be to suggest that this reflects the tendency of many French commentators to understand the challenges of neo-liberal globalisation in terms of a manichaeian struggle between an egalitarian 'French model' of socio-economic organisation and its 'Anglo-Saxon' nemesis. This, in turn, typically generates a nostalgia for the 'trente glorieuses', understood to correspond to that model's presumed golden age of stable employment, economic growth, good welfare benefits, and social cohesion, all of which are taken to have been eroded by 'Anglo-Saxon' globalisation. No doubt, there is a 'redemptive' aspect to such nostalgia, in the precise sense in which Walter Benjamin uses that term to refer to the political potential inherent in laments at the present's failure to live up to the unrealised dreams

of egalitarian social revolution contained in the recent past (Benjamin 1973, 245-55). However, there are dangers in both this kind of nostalgia and in appeals to a simple dichotomy between French and 'Anglo-Saxon' models, if these are not accompanied by a critical awareness of some of the flaws inherent to that French model.

As Bruno Palier has noted, the post-war French model of social integration and justice, through a combination of work and corporatist forms of welfare, was always based around the model of the male breadwinner and the patriarchal nuclear family. Consequently, it placed great emphasis on subsidising women's role as wives and mothers, in pursuit of the natalist goals inherent to the system of 'allocations familiales' (Palier 2005, 3). Étienne Balibar, meanwhile, has highlighted the specifically national, not to say nationalist nature of that post-war social model (Balibar 1992). It would seem that those who seek to articulate an anti-globalisation agenda, appealing to the French model without thinking through its gendered and nationalistic foundations, are destined to reproduce that model's inherent flaws and biases. As this article has sought to show, those biases and flaws appear to coalesce around fictional representations of the female executive, as an unsexed monstrosity, who must be punished, pitied, or tamed, if globalisation is to be defeated and French national integrity restored.

NOTES

1. These problems have been demonstrated empirically in the results of a 2014 report on the representation of female characters in the popular films of 11 countries. The report reveals that between 1/1/10 and 1/5/13 only 18.8% of female characters in French films were depicted as working women, as against the 47.4% of women who actually work in France. See Smith et al. (2014).

2. I have intentionally chosen not to discuss the novels of Michel Houellebecq, in which anxieties about the role of women in the workplace and a critique of the depredations of neo-liberal globalisation are articulated in a particularly insistent and explicit form. However, in Houellebecq, this forms an integral part of a critique of neo-liberalism that is rooted in a clearly expressed and unapologetic adherence to a tradition of conservative and counterrevolutionary corporatism. My interest in this article, by contrast, is in the reliance by apparently left or centre-left novelists and film-makers on conservative assumptions about gender that they paradoxically, and presumably unwittingly, share with Houellebecq.

3. In his study of 'new' French political cinema since 1995, Martin O'Shaughnessy (2007, 147-58) cogently defends the focus on family against the accusation that this reflects a shift away from the political into a purely sentimental domain of melodrama. I agree that to focus on the family is not necessarily depoliticising. However, my interest here is in the way in which *naturalising* the family serves profoundly conservative political ends.

4. For a detailed analysis of the figure of the *femme fatale* as a symptom of the anxieties generated by women's entry into the workforce in the 1940s and 50s, see Kaplan (1998). Reinhardt's figuration of Victoria as a seductive and destructively sexual force clearly rehearses those older male anxieties. Yet by making of Victoria a personification of global capitalism in its entirety, he remodels the typical figure of the *femme fatale* in ways that point to the magnification of such anxieties in the current economic and political conjuncture.

5. Marc Augé (1992, 100) defines the *non lieu* as follows: 'Si un lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel, et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu'.

6. For an account of the genesis of this figure of 'black mammy' and its racist connotations, see hooks (1981, 84-5).

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