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“Money Can't Buy Me Love”: Radical Right-Wing Populism in French Romantic Comedies of the 2010s

Mary Harrod

It is often forgotten that the French word for homeland, *la patrie*, symbolized the Revolution, upon which the modern nation state was founded, as a woman giving birth. This superimposition of maternity onto a word whose roots are in the Latin for father (*pater*) is a neat figure for the union of genders, ultimately in the service of procreation, central to both nationalist ideologies and the economy of the romantic comedy genre. Because of such overlapping interests – most basically, in progeniture, but also in units of social organization from the dyadic couple to the “family” of nation – romcoms are predisposed to speak to issues of nationhood. This article will focus on themes of nationhood, and especially right-wing populism, in French filmed romcoms of the 2010s. Although right-wing populist movements have different histories internationally, I refer with this idea to its common definitions in the West and especially Europe, which closely associate the radical right with nationalism, as well as with “anti-elitism”. My analysis will demonstrate how recurring tropes of the recent French romcom address and promote such ideological positions. In the process, I will shine light on the specificities of, firstly, nationalism and, secondly, strains of so-called anti-elitism in the local generic context, arguing that the second typically proves to be an offshoot of the first within the films under scrutiny.

Examining French romcoms of the 2010s extends my earlier (2015) analysis of the emergence and consolidation of this popular genre in the 1990s and post-2000. As such, this article surveys the key directions taken by the genre in this period, picking up on trends retrospectively identified up to 2013 and considering how they have evolved as the decade matures. While I do not claim all French romcoms are informed by radical right-wing ideologies – nor indeed that any film articulates, intratextually, any one meaning – I will argue that certain conservative or

retrograde strands have become pronounced and pervasive in the genre during this period. After briefly considering the contemporary French romcom's importance as a (trans)national genre, I will focus first on three recurrent tendencies of recent films: explicit celebrations of French culture conceived in traditional and nostalgic terms; obsessive interrogations and validations of heterosexual family structures; and a marked accentuation of homophobic, bromantic and patriarchal elements in the genre. I will then consider romcoms displaying a parodic attitude towards generic and cultural values coded as North American – albeit one typically embedded in layers of “self-reflexive” postmodern irony. I will finally argue that geo-cultural and generic self-awareness, constituting one of the complexities of the hybrid French genre *à l'américaine*, is useful for interrogating the concept of radical ideology – and its antithesis, conformity – for their different meanings in diverse contexts.

Boy Meets Girl Meets Nation

While it may not be possible to describe the contemporary French romcom as populist in any blanket way, claiming it as overwhelmingly popular seems straightforward. While I understand genre as unfixed, a descriptive category that might be applied as productively to niche auteur fare as to the mainstream, nonetheless, French films hewing closely to the recognizable format of romantic comedy have to date certainly retained if not increased the enormous popularity which they enjoyed at the end of the 2000s. In my analysis of the French romcom from around 1990 to 2010, with an addendum surveying the years 2010-2013, I noted that “popularity is the salient feature, with many rom-coms [...] featuring in the top ten (in fact almost always five) French films at the domestic box office every year since 2005” (Harrod 2015: 212). This holds true for subsequent years up to 2017, the last one for which records are available (Appendix 1).¹ In that

year, the top three French comedies – three of the top five French films – at the national box office were *all* variants of romcoms: in descending order of popularity, the high-concept *Alibi.com* (Philippe Lacheau, 2017); the wedding-set comedy of manners *Le Sens de la fête/C'est la vie* (Belgium/Canada/France, Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano 2017); and the interracial bromance *Épouse-moi mon pote* (Tarek Boudali, 2017). Such success is significant because, if film and other narratives help establish cultural codes, the more widely they are seen, the greater their power to shape mass perceptions.

On the other hand, while in 2013 there was clear evidence of “the global profile of a handful of French films” (ibid), that situation has not been sustained. Exemplary films receiving sufficient distribution and exposure abroad to guarantee significant visibility up to that moment included *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), *Décalage horaire/Jet Lag* (Danièle Thompson, 2002), *Prête-moi ta main/I Do* (Eric Lartigau, 2006), *Hors de prix/Priceless* (Pierre Salvadori, 2006), *De vrais mensonges/Beautiful Lies* (Salvadori, 2010), *L'Arnacœur/Heartbreaker* (Pascal Chaumeil, 2010) and *Populaire* (Régis Roinsard, 2012). Since then, even moderate export successes have proved elusive, with those distributed in multiple foreign territories consigned to limited exhibition (*Barbecue* [Eric Lavaine, 2014]) and/or mainly the festival circuit (*Les Combattants/Love at First Fight* [Thomas Caillou, 2014]). The international success of blockbuster *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* or to a lesser extent *L'Arnacœur*, in a frankly mainstream mode, has not been repeated; nor has the “sleeper” arc of lower-budget auteur romcom *Le Goût des autres/The Taste of Others* (Agnès Jaoui, 2000), which grossed over \$600,000 in the US. Even the \$20m *Samba* (Nakache and Toledano, 2014), starring Anglo-French international icon Charlotte Gainsbourg alongside Omar Sy, fresh from his *Intouchables* success, grossed only \$149, 805 at the US box office. Only the exhibition

opportunities afforded by Netflix somewhat ameliorate the very recent picture, with another half a dozen films available in the Anglo-sphere.

Notwithstanding such possible exceptions, as well as the poor performance of romcoms generally at the world box office since 2013, the new circumscription of the French romcom's orbit is partly a function of the renewed nationalism that characterizes today's genre.² To illustrate this point, one film proves exemplary: the 2014 breakout success *La Famille Bélier/The Bélier Family* (Éric Lartigau). French romcoms often blend with family narratives and this is the case here, with a rites-of-passage narrative thrown in. The story focuses on a family of deaf dairy farmers who rely on their able-bodied daughter Paula to mediate between them and the world, until the situation is threatened by a teacher's suggestion she should audition for Radio France in Paris. Meanwhile, she falls for a boy from the French capital. In marketing terms, the film was able to capitalize on the fame of its young female star, Louane Emera, as a runner up on *The Voice: la plus belle voix*. This televisual parentage reflects the production's genesis within domestic culture, as does the identity of its principal, first-time screenwriter, Victoria Bedos, the daughter of veteran actor Guy Bedos: an example of the phenomenon of dynastic nepotism that is exceptionally widespread within "the family of French cinema" (Mérigeau 2014). However, according to Stéphane Célérier from co-producer and distributor Mars Films, so extraordinarily well received was the film at preview screenings in France that before its official release it was pre-sold in multiple foreign territories including the US, where it was also to be remade. Indeed, experts were predicting not only a César award (which would later go to Emera for Most Promising Actress), but success on the scale of global hit *Intouchables*" (in Simon 2014).

Yet the film totally failed to reproduce its domestic success abroad, never even penetrating the lucrative US market. Phil Powrie and I have argued elsewhere (2018: 8) that *La Famille*

Bélier's themes, like its stars, appeal to a French audience and perhaps even a nationalistic sensibility. Notably, the deaf family are portrayed as markedly conservative, as well being highly idealized. For instance, the father (François Damiens) runs for town mayor in order to promote local interests and community, while being openly scornful of modernizing changes, such as the need for broadband. Their "salt-of-the-earth" existence appears entirely fulfilling to them (no mention is made of the real-world problems besetting French farmers), as they exude health and vitality, crystallized in the parents' high sex drive, and their family is portrayed as a proudly self-sufficient social unit. The parallels with a certain idea of the French nation are not hard to see, given the centrality of both familial metaphors (see for instance McClintock 1992) and rural communities in the "retraditionaliz[ing]" (Nagel 1996, 193) impetus of nationalism. Moreover, the narrative prominence of a pubescent daughter chimes with such interests, when we recall that the female body is one of the clearest historical focal points for anxieties about the protection of national identity (and other bloodlines) – as reflected by the revolutionary image of *la mère patrie* (motherland). This connotation is underscored when Paula starts her period, making her available for courting by *le Parisien*, the boy who unwittingly fuels her interest in the singing career that will uproot her from her community. That the film ends on an upbeat note but with Paula leaving for Paris suggests its availability for varying ideological interpretations. However, there is no doubt that this is a narrative working through issues of identity connected to tensions between tradition and progress and "unifying" (Buisson 2014) viewers around a nostalgic celebration of rural French life.

Further, many of the drives *La Famille Bélier* reveals and appeals to are not merely nationalistic but inherently populist. The film is set in Brittany, a region historically associated with the right wing, although socialist influence has taken hold since the 1970s and indeed the far

right may be less entrenched there than elsewhere in France – notably in the North.³ However, nostalgia is expressed by the diegetic centrality of the songs of Michel Sardou, adored by Paula’s singing coach (Éric Elmosisno). This is particularly remarkable since his character is portrayed as having been forced to take a job in what he sees as a rural backwater, after the glories of Paris. His musical taste heralds a trajectory that will see him finding his work in a provincial high school fulfilling after all, a fate mirrored, too, by that of *le Parisien*, who also appears adapted to country life at the end of the film, reversing and to an extent counterbalancing Paula’s outward movement towards the modernizing metropolis. For Sardou’s music is associated not only with what *Le Monde* patronizingly calls “suicidal cashiers” (Sotinel 2014), in other words the working classes, but more specifically the political right. Indeed, the critic in center-right magazine *Le Figaro* dubs detractors of Sardou’s music “caricaturally Left-wing” and those of the film excessively intellectualist (“the thinking Press”) (Buisson 2014).

Lest this appear an isolated or extreme example, Brittany also provides a counterpoint to urban cultures in a contemporaneous romcom equally nakedly caught up in the negotiation of issues of progress versus tradition that again exploits Elmosisno’s persona: *Chic!* (Jérôme Cornuau, 2015). Like *La Famille Bélier*, this may have been produced with an eye on the export market, as it draws heavily on *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, USA/France 2006) and stars international veteran actress Fanny Ardant as a wrong partner for Elmosisno. On the other hand, its inspiration is nothing less anachronistic than a La Fontaine fable, “Le Rat de la ville et le rat des champs” (“The Town Rat and the Country Rat”) (Anon 2015), and the resulting narrative proves reactionary almost to the point of caricature. The plot focuses on a prima donna international fashion designer, Alicia (Ardant), and her Director of Communications, Hélène (Marina Hands). When Alicia is jilted by a lover and threatens to refuse to design her next

collection, H  l  ne hires a gigolo to woo her. Instead, Alicia takes an improbable liking to plain (-speaking, living and looking) Breton landscape gardener Julien (Elmosisno), hired – and just fired by “hard-nosed bitch” H  l  ne – to beautify the corporation’s grounds. Equally implausibly, he allows himself to be bribed into courting Alicia and moving into H  l  ne’s Parisian home for the duration of the charade. Instead, H  l  ne and Julien fall in love, prompting her to quit her job, soften her business-like appearance and relocate to North-Western France, whose stunning coastline captured in sweeping pans provides a spectacular backdrop to their union (Figure 1). In opposing this life to a vision of international business depicted as vapid and dehumanizing, including through cross-cutting in the final sequence, *Chic!* joins hit lottery-win comedy franchise *Les Tuche/The Tuche Family* (Olivier Baroux, 2011, with further instalments in 2016 and 2018) and a raft of money-oriented smaller and/or auteur comedies of the 2000s (see Pillard 2018) in responding to the threatening encroachment of global capitalism by offering narratives that defensively shore up patriarchal nationalist values.⁴

The Family of the French

Many of the films described above evoke the topos of the family. In *Chic!*, Julien assumes H  l  ne’s ex left her because she wanted children, when it was the other way around. While this may to some degree counter the clich   of women’s reproductive “destiny”, the move is largely undermined by H  l  ne’s evident pathology (for instance, she cruelly has Julien thrown out of her offices for demanding pay she does not deny he is owed) and her storyline’s contribution to a growing French romcom trend for women’s work to be entirely swept aside by love (see Harrod 2015, 103-6, 210). Julien, in contrast, is a single father, while his business partner buddy’s exceptionally close relationship with his mother figures the local community in familial terms. *La Famille B  lier* is

among a slew of romcoms whose titles explicitly evoke the family's status as a site of cultural interrogation. These include *Retour chez ma mère/Back to Mom's* (Eric Lavaine, 2016), *Papa ou Maman 1 and 2/Daddy or Mommy* and *Divorce French Style, C'est quoi cette famille?/We Are a Family* (Gabriel Julien-Lafarrière, 2016), the Juliette Binoche vehicle *Telle mère, telle fille/Baby Bump* (Noémie Saglio, 2017), *Les Dents, pipi et au lit/The Full House* (Emmanuel Gilibert, 2018) and, more indirectly, *Adopte un veuf/Roommates Wanted* (François Desagnat 2016; literally, *Adopt a Widow*) post-2013. By way of comparison, similar cases from the previous two decades number over half a dozen (Harrod 2015, 241-245), such that a dogged and ostentatious focus on the family in recent romcoms represents an intensification of an existing tendency.

Papa ou Maman and its sequel speak to the importance of film titles and easily seize-able high concepts in potentially symptomatizing and shaping cultural ideas. This franchise's arresting conceit is that the central couple (Laurent Lafitte and Marina Foïs), parents of three, have decided to divorce; however, unlike in more dramatic treatments ranging from the Omar Sy vehicle "dramedy" (van Hoeij 2016) *Demain tout commence/Two is a Family* (Hugo Gélin, France 2016) to the harrowing, internationally distributed *Jusqu'à la garde/Custody* (Xavier Legrand 2017), neither parent wants the children! Such an irreverent move for the subgenre of comic films about divorcing families is unexpected against a backdrop of repeated narratives of anxiety around child welfare – including also *Happy Few/Four Lovers* (Antony Cordier, 2010), invoked by Foïs' starring role in both – and the films' success is striking. As both parents are motivated by career opportunities to travel with international organizations, the legacy of advanced capitalism is apparent, and further evoked by their spacious and open-plan detached family home outfitted with huge windows and a view of countryside, more evocative of moneyed US neighborhoods than France. However, because the parents' work opportunities concern a humanitarian mission in

Haiti for him, but a Scandinavian placement through an engineering company for her, women's incorporation into the neoliberal workplace is more closely aligned with rampant individualism than men's in this film.

The narrative milks comedy from the callousness towards dependents posited by its setup, as each parent tries to be as useless as possible to encourage the children to live with the other. The mother's "lapses" are particularly extreme – wringing humor from the incongruousness between naked self-interest and the ethics of care superimposed onto the kind of idealized concepts of motherhood central to nationalist ideologies – as she behaves in sexually inappropriate ways at her children's social events and poisons them by feeding them pasta cooked in a detergent-streaked pan. All the same, it is "Mommy" who ends up taking the kids, mirroring the global sociological tendency – although they accompany her to Denmark. The film ends ambiguously with her returning in an epilogue to France months later, pregnant, thanks to a one-off liaison with her husband during the film's resolution. By the second instalment, Mommy and Daddy are set up in two different houses on the same street, Daddy with his live-in lover. All four children are ferried back and forth with dizzying regularity; the film constructs their potential emotional destabilization as banal and a source of physical comedy. Things start to go awry when Mommy, too, produces a serious boyfriend, prompting patriarchal jealousy – again, with obvious implications about gendered double standards and their wide recognizability-cum-acceptability for French audiences. The series ends by moving from the second film's envisioning of an extreme example of *la famille recomposée* (literally reconstituted or reorganized), which is both a sociological reality and a cultural trope for clinging to some version of the family at all costs, to resurrecting the nuclear family as the parents reunite... although the cycle can be revisited again via a spin-off television show launched this year on French television channel M6.

Papa ou Mama 2's reconciliatory ending clearly acts as a palliative to fears about the impact of individualistic cultures, and the ever-increasing demands of modern work, on social bonding and the family. The significance of this issue, arguably underlined by the popularity of the franchise, stems from the fact that family ties, especially parent-child relationships, have often been seen as potentially outside capitalist economies; yet today child-rearing, too, may be being increasingly constructed as a site for individualistic "self-actualization" or achievement. The problems with such an ideological move are underlined in the ensemble buddy romcom *Barbecue* when a middle-aged mother, Olivia (Florence Foresti) comments on the "swindle" of parenthood, complaining that nobody is forewarned what a one-sided exchange it constitutes. *Papa ou Maman 2* banishes the uncomfortable suggestion of parenthood as an off-puttingly "non-profit" endeavour from its resolution; however, this potential truth is surely a key selling point for a nation whose traditionally very high birth rate has begun since 2015 to drop off sharply.⁵ This change was foreseen by feminist Élisabeth Badinter (2010), discussing the increasingly impossible pressures on French women to fulfill multiple roles. Badinter rightly constellates this partly within the increasing penetration of US-associated discourses about gender equality – whose attendant "crisis of social reproduction" has now led to comparably anxiety-ridden popular cultural representations of motherhood in the Anglosphere (Littler forthcoming). Slow birth rates may be trans-culturally associable with populism (Auerswald and Yun 2018). It is certainly possible to see the arc of the protagonists of *Papa ou Maman* – who go from globe-trotting to cultivating their own garden, from experimenting with new influences and partners to returning to a familial unit underpinned by blood ties – as promulgating a nationalistic fantasy, even as the film's ambivalences about corporate global values are undermined by the privileged lifestyle of its protagonists.

Heterosexual masculinity and the (b)romance of Gallic patriarchy

A more backward-looking manifestation of fear about the fate of the heterosexual family, alongside a celebration of primitive forms of masculinity, is discernible in overtly homophobic strains within recent French romcoms. Once again, these developments have earlier roots; however, the obsessive recuperation of heterosexuality reaches new heights in the 2015 film *Toute première fois/I Kissed a Girl* (Maxime Govare and Noémie Saglio).⁶ This film, which sold a solid 337,387 tickets domestically, contributes to the emergence of the meme of “coming in” – a gay person “going straight” – also referenced *en passant*, demonstrating its cultural incorporation, in *Épouse-moi mon pote*.⁷ Thus, *Toute première fois* focuses on Jérémy’s (Pio Marmaï) realization during his engagement to his long-term partner Antoine (Lannick Gautry) that he has fallen in love with a Swedish woman, Adna, played by Franco-Polish model Adrianna Gradziel. In this way it blends romcom with a man-child rites-of-passage narrative, doubling up the fatalistic generic momentum of its protagonist’s progress towards fulfilment in heterosexual love.

Much humor derives from comic reversals, notably the fact that Jérémy’s family are supportive of his gay identity to the point of extreme deprecation of heterosexuality, with his father comparing the conformity of “bourgeois marriage” unfavorably to “the brave act of gay marriage”. This appears (perhaps unintentionally) ironic in view of the extreme middle-class homonormativity of magazine editor Jérémy and doctor Antoine’s metropolitan Parisian lifestyle, including a luxurious apartment. Yet what is striking is that the (pro-)queer characters, with the exception of Antoine, are constructed as dislikeable. These include a camp, self-involved artist friend of the main couple’s who paints vaginas in extreme close-up [Figure 2]. More startlingly, Jérémy’s parents appropriate their son’s gay identity as a badge of cool for their own pseudo-bohemian allegiances and treat their more conventional daughter disdainfully. Incredibly, when

she has a baby, they pronounce childbirth “disgusting”. Meanwhile, “coming in” and coupling up with a beautiful, sexually liberated blonde, who also becomes Jérémy’s employee, is reimagined as a transgressive act.

Queerness in *Toute première fois* intersects with discourses of not only class but also (trans)national identity. The way in which the public face of queer has moved from a strong association with mass popular cultures to appropriation by the bourgeoisie is reflected by Jérémy’s parents’ stance. However, this evolution has been inseparable from queer culture’s growing cosmopolitanism, making it a signifier of the transnational middlebrow (Galt and Schoonover 2016, 201-3). In cinema, the career of queer film director Pedro Almodóvar, moving from the anti-establishment, locally circumscribed *movida* scene in post-Franco Spain to become an international auteur, emblemizes this post-1980s shift. Fascinatingly, Jérémy rejects the identitarian, US-originated face of queer when he articulates his distaste for Gay Pride. His union with Adna is consolidated in a different transnational space, as he is forced to follow her to Sweden when she discovers his engagement to Antoine. Consequently, Jérémy and his unreconstructed friend Charles fly to and trek across the frozen North, where he finds Adna in a hot tub with her family and proves his love by performing a local rite of plunging into freezing water. Scandinavia can be seen here to represent a hazily delineated core of Old European values. The liberal attitudes evoked by images of Adna’s family relaxing semi-naked together provide a patina of modernity. However, just as bathing in hot springs forms part of ancient Nordic tradition, the superficially “liberal European” overlay conceals reactionary if not mythological social structures based on the handing over of women from their fathers to suitably “virile” suitors. Arguably, this film carves out a more insidiously retrograde and anti-global/anti-American ideological position than does, for instance, *La Famille Bélier*, precisely because it distances itself from open populism or bombastic

nationalism. This is thanks to its pro-Europeanism and only subtle recuperation of the national, in the final sequence, on French soil. Here again, the setting – the interracial gay wedding of old friends of Jérémy and Antoine – smacks of hip modernity while also functioning as a stand-in for Jérémy and Adna’s generically anticipated straight wedding. Moreover, the queerness of any principal characters is pushed out of the spotlight, and gay masculinity characterized by impotent enmity towards heterosexual couples and women specifically, as Antoine secretly spits in Adna’s drink.

Amusingly, *Toute première fois* literalizes a charge commonly made against homophobia, that it serves as an alibi for the pursuit of heterosexual interests. Thus, after two-timing Jérémy has been injured in a chivalrous act protecting Adna from aggression by her former boss, when questioned, he blames his state on a homophobic attack. Jérémy’s caricatural description of homophobia personified as a “bling”-bedecked immigrant functions as a thin veil over the real prejudice permeating the narrative.⁸ The logic of homophobia as the handmaiden of patriarchy likewise reverberates through John Alberti’s analyses of masculinity in recent US romcoms, where he reads male characters’ investment in straightness as a leitmotif of bromantic narratives that seek to negotiate (if not disavow) men’s changed place in contemporary society – even when dealing with apparently on-trend, contemporary, metropolitan masculine identities (2013, 62-5). I have hinted at the importance of bromantic elements in *Toute première fois* through Jérémy’s friendship with inveterate womanizer Charles (Franck Gastambide, drawing on the persona known to French viewers from the buddy comedy *Les Kâira/Porn in the Hood*), through which the narrative is also able to position the less openly immoral protagonist at one remove from patriarchy’s most brazenly misogynistic face. More generally, while bromance was already an important feature of French romcoms by 2010, dovetailing with the longstanding French buddy comedy tradition, the centrality

of male-male bonding to the genre has only become more entrenched since then. Salient examples include *Barbecue, Fiston* (Pascal Bordiaux, 2014) and the domestic mega-hit *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?/Serial (Bad) Weddings* (Philippe de Chauveron, 2014). Furthermore, the sending up of homoerotic subtexts within such relationships in the critically lauded romcom-drama *Les Deux amis/Two Friends* (Louis Garrel, 2015; see Harrod and Powrie 2018, 13) and lately also the hit *Épouse-moi mon pote* – whose title (*Marry Me, Buddy*) evokes *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, USA 2009) – affirms the ready cultural intelligibility of the phenomenon of women's replacement by male friends in narratives otherwise coded as romantic.

Such reinforced patriarchal masculinism in French romcoms underscores alignments with nationalist ideologies, when we recall that “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (Enloe 1990, 45). Moving beyond nationalism and into potentially more specifically populist ideological territory, a comparable masculinist as well as broadly anti-elitist trend that echoes US tendencies, while adding a local nuance, concerns the emergence of the “lout” or his close cousin the “beta male” (Alberti 2013, 27). This figure has been birthed from the Judd Apatow stable, to complement his still populous French predecessor the “melodramatized male” (see Harrod 2015, 108-113).⁹ The appearance of French louts has not even been couched in the same neuroticism as in Hollywood films, lacking the dysfunctional or even proto-pathological associations Alberti identifies in Seth Rogen's Cal (*Knocked Up* [Apatow, USA 2005]) or Steve Carrell's Andy (*The 40-Year-Old Virgin* [Apatow, USA 2005]), respectively. The persona of well-known comic actor Manu Payet is paradigmatic here, in a glut of very recent comedies including *Tout pour être heureux/Dad in Training* (Cyril Gelblat, 2015), which marries a family focus with the trope of educating the adult man, and especially his own directorial debut, *Situation amoureuse: c'est compliquée/Relationship Status:*

It's Complicated (2014). In this film, diminutive in stature and unremarkable-looking if not without boyish charm, Payet's protagonist Ben is unapologetic as to his beta or even ceta status. We open with a (nostalgic) Woody Allen-esque flashback, voiced over by the hero, to his schooldays as a "C-student" who fell in love with a girl physically and socially out of his league. His loutish and bromantic connotations emerge when he asks his attractive present-day fiancée Juliette (Anaïs Demoustier) if he can use his "feebleness card" to be excused from an evening planning their wedding to go out with his male friends. Here, regressive masculinity is signalled by Ben's superhero T-shirt (echoing the presence of this culture in Apatow films and paralleling its proliferation in French bromances from *Ma Vie en l'air* [Rémi Bezançon, 2005] to 2017's *Alibi.com*), and soon after by his insistence on retaining his messy habits in "my own flat" that he shares with Juliette. The narrative's plot motor is the return to France from the USA of Ben's childhood crush Vanessa (Emanuelle Chriqui), a gorgeous restaurateur who inexplicably falls for him – as his successful businesswoman fiancée did – despite his modest career as an events photographer-filmmaker. That this happens precisely because of his lack of overbearing alpha traits is implied by a scene in which Vanessa is unimpressed by the "romantic" gestures of a pick-up artist who approaches her in an art gallery with pretentious lines, pronouncing herself much more taken with Ben's habit of adopting silly poses in front of paintings to make her laugh. This film presents the infantile male as so much a stock figure as to be ripe for (affectionate, self-knowing) parody, later on when Ben, dumped by Juliette, descends into a depression that reduces him to the explicit status of a baby whose food needs to be mashed up by his bromance buddy Sylvain (Jean-François Cayrey). Still, one quick video promising an overhaul of his approach to personal hygiene and tidiness and Juliette is won back over to the film's once more insouciant protagonist.

Such beta masculinity in contemporary French romcoms recalls the 2010 *L'Arnacœur*, where markers of seductive con-artist Alex's (Romain Duris) imperfect but earthy Gallicized identity, including breath smelling of Roquefort cheese, were compared favourably to "sterile" Anglo-Saxon worldly success (Harrod 2015, 206-7). This echo throws into relief the hybridization of the different ancestries of "French" carnality and "American" loutishness in the contemporary French stereotype of desirable masculinity. Joanne Nagel's historical analysis of masculinity and nationalism implicitly foregrounds Frenchness when she argues that in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries "US and European male codes of honour" have "reflected masculine ideals such as liberty, equality and fraternity" (Nagel 2010, 245). In the twenty-first century, in any case, a cultural obsession with asserting expanded norms of "ordinary" legitimate French masculinity demands to be read in the same context as the nationalist and/or populist sentiment bubbling up in the remarkable French support for the far-right Rassemblement National in the 2017 elections and other areas of both domestic and global contemporary politics and life.¹⁰

Reflexivity and Radicalism

Like *L'Arnacœur*, masculinist romcoms of the 2010s often embrace the same pseudo-ironic approach they take to promoting backward visions of French masculinity when it comes to their schizophrenic evocations of global, especially US, culture as both inspiration and menace. Such fears are perhaps most obvious in the continued presence in the genre of wrong partners inflected with globalized values, including bilingual Vanessa of *Situation amoureuse*. This film's mediation of conflicted sentiments about the USA is apparent from the fact that the turning point in Vanessa's friendship with Ben occurs when she calls him "amazing" in English, prompting a music and dance

fantasy sequence that suggests the influence of Americanized “clip culture” (Michael 2018). Yet Ben’s reconciliation with Juliette is set up, by contrast, as a return from narcissistic masculine fantasies of worldliness to French realism and authenticity.

A similarly retreatist dynamic underpins the Netflix Original romcom *Blockbuster* (July Hygreck, 2018), where Lola (rising romcom star Charlotte Gabris) has a dalliance with a romantic international NGO worker during a split from immature protagonist Jérémy (Syrus Shahidi). This self-referentially named film reflects the influence of today’s interpenetrating multi-mediascape at the level of its form, which includes multiple ostentatiously digital and other interfaces, animations and other hyper-artificial in-camera effects and hybrid genre aesthetics from socio-realist-accented cinematography and locations to a love-story enacted partially in superhero costumes. Saturated in comic book and film culture because of Lola’s job in the equally archly named Comic Books Shop and the main couple’s fetishizing of superheroes (again), *Blockbuster* begins as an embedded, extensive home video about their relationship, being made by Jérémy to cheer up his dying father. Thus fakery, always the sparring partner of romance, is the fibre of their relationship. Related to such thematizing of issues of authenticity, *Blockbuster* is also compulsively aware of its transatlantic positioning. Although “American” superhero culture is strongly associated with performative artifice in the narrative, its inextricable embedding in French culture is evident through its aesthetically retro and narratively cult status. As for film culture, the central duo pepper their (French) dialogue with cinematic phrases in English, but often misquoted, evoking the changed status of cultural tropes once they cross national borders. Likewise, when Jérémy exhorts himself to perform his role in the home video with the words “Do it for America!”, this phrase’s original jingoistic overtones are mockingly undercut through contextual displacement. Hence, generic citationality in French films can be a cover for nationalistically-inflected distancing from

and jibing at the USA. Further, it is significant that Jérémy and Lola's performances in fact serve the interest of Jérémy's ailing father. This vulnerable patriarch embodies French patriarchy in crisis, as underscored by the absence of any women in the family to visit the sickbed alongside Jérémy and his older brother. *Blockbuster's* *mise en scène* of filmmaking can therefore be read as a *mise en abyme* of French genre film production's appropriation of global models and platforms, for French (economic) benefit but also, paradoxically, for insular and nationalistic self-narrativization. Since down-to-earth Lola's eventual fatigue at Jérémy's constant performing of both love and superhero antics nearly destroys their relationship, authenticity is enshrined as outside the realm of (paradigmatically US) genre representation. Her plea to him to give her "nothing but the truth" again evokes the European realist tradition – but it is made by video and they are reconciled while dressed as Spiderman and Wonder Woman! It is as though, faced with the impossibility of exact emulation, *Blockbuster* in the end defiantly but nonsensically positions itself in opposition to the popular US culture that nonetheless permeates it to the last. Such a move is symptomatic of the increasingly acute contradictions of the ever-more inward-looking French romcom 'à l'américaine', whose apparently dwindling export potential also contrasts with the relative international saleability of realist (and other high art) cinema traditions.

The odd nexus of values presented by recent romcoms which are self-aware enough about the unpalatability of their ideological frameworks for many audiences, and so color articulations of reactionary ideologies with more culturally current elements through theme (*Toute première fois*) and/or postmodern ironies and aesthetics (*Situation amoureuse* and *Blockbuster*), foregrounds the different meanings of radicalism in disparate cultural contexts. Radicalism is often conceptualized as synonymous with progressive positions; however, radical right-wing movements prescribe a break with recent innovations in favor of a return to earlier values. Thus,

the “coming-in” film is anti-conformist by virtue of being radically – boldly – regressive. Similar nuances need applying to any so-called elites being critiqued. Notably, given anglophone romcom criticism’s frequent censure of the genre’s aspirational capitalist values, French ambivalence about neoliberal commerce – including, in *Blockbuster*, franchise and mass films themselves – might appear a “democratizing” breath of fresh air. However, I hope to have shown the extent to which this “radical” ideology derives from populist and particularly anti-American sentiments that the same groups would be unlikely to applaud.

Exceptions (or Exceptionalism?)

Before concluding, mention should be made of ethnicity in these films, where – seemingly against the populist argument – diversity has always been more visible than in US equivalents and is now so normalized as to have become a generic trope. This development reflects France’s high and rising interracial marriage rate (Bancaud 2017) and perhaps courts the more diverse audience enfranchised by the expansion of suburban cinemas of late (Hargreaves 2015, 237). Ethnic minorities are not only ubiquitous but, increasingly, they play ethnically unmarked roles, as with Manu Payet, who is from La Réunion, or *Blockbuster*’s Syrus Shahidi, of Iranian origin. Female examples, though less numerous, include the Franco-Algerian Camélia Jordana and Franco-Iranian Golshifteh Farahani. However – as elsewhere in French cinema (Dubois 2016, 107) – “color-blindness” excludes black identities, as underlined by the storyline of *Il a déjà tes yeux/He Even Has Your Eyes* (Lucien Jean-Baptiste, 2016), whose comic plot arises when a black French couple adopt a white baby. It might also be argued that characters’ very lack of ethnic markers, celebrating a secular culture that is as embattled as any aspect of contemporary republican life, promotes nationalistic fantasies about ethnic minorities’ incorporation as French citizens. Such an ideology

perpetuates the ideals of a republicanism that constructs Frenchness as, although special, individually achievable rather than a “blood-and-soil” essence (Schnapper, 1994). Interestingly given the (paternalistic) familial configurations of much colonial rhetoric, the trace of universalist-exceptionalist ideology in romantic comedy can be seen here to offer a racialized image of the *famille recomposée* of the nation.

Nonetheless, some recent mass-popular French romcoms resist categorisation as populist. The hit film *Épouse-moi mon pote* indicates how my arguments about the way in which even interracial romances appear to promote Frenchness may be complicated by considering questions of (in this case *beur*) authorship, since this narrative’s mixed-race couple finally emigrates to Morocco. It also shows a somewhat more tolerant attitude towards queer identities than does *Toute première fois*, even if these are caricatured (since star performer Lacheau’s character discovers he’s gay by performing camp gayness to marry a friend in need of a visa). In opposition to the bromance trend, some films, including multi-star vehicle *Sous les jupes des filles/French Women* (Audrey Dana, 2014) and two romcoms focused on working single mothers *Lolo* (Julie Delpy, 2015) and *Victoria* (Justine Triet, 2016), look back to the French romcom’s 1990s feminist roots, in giving center stage to the challenges faced by women today, conceived along broadly Western and middle-class lines. The fact that the latter two appeared on British Airways’ 2017 roster perhaps suggests that female-focused romcoms are in very recent years more easily exportable from France than the recent crop of extreme bromance variants. Likewise, another internationally visible (through Netflix) and female-directed film, *Les Goûts et les couleurs/To Each, Her Own* (Myriam Aziza, 2018), refuses either to paper over the potential difficulties of inter-ethnic unions or even to adopt a binaristic view of straight versus queer (female) identities. All the same, in seeking to apprehend the most striking developments within the genre, I have been confronted

with a body of films characterized by retrenchment if not outright panic – albeit one multifarious and ambivalent enough to remind us of the political and geo-cultural situatedness on which binaries of tradition and progress, and therefore radicalism, repose.

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¹ The strong performance of romantic comedies has been a significant factor in the overall rise to a position of extreme market dominance of film comedies at the French box office since 2008 (see Harrod and Powrie 2018: 2-3).

² Strikingly, not a single film made after 2012 features in Box Office Mojo's top 100 highest grossing romcoms internationally, for reasons surely partly connected to the rise of streaming platforms well suited to "domestic", rather than spectacular, genres. <https://www.listchallenges.com/top-100-grossing-romantic-comedy-films/checklist/3>. Accessed 14 December 2018

³ [http://www.icare.to/news.php?fr/2012-04#LA BRETAGNE, TERRE DE RÉSISTANCE À L'EXTRÊME DROITE \(France\)](http://www.icare.to/news.php?fr/2012-04#LA_BRETAGNE,_TERRE_DE_RÉSISTANCE_À_L'EXTRÊME_DROITE_(France)) Accessed 8 October 2018.

⁴ Money continues to be a source of anxiety bound up with gendered and now also intergenerational conflict in prominent recent mainstream comedies including *Radin! Penny Pincher!* (Fred Cavayé, 2016) and *La Monnaie de leur pièce/Family Business* (Anne Le Ny, 2018).

⁵ https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/data/france/births-fertility/changes-fertility/. As a comparison, popular 1950s French films' resistance to discourses of social mobility (Hayward 2016, 46) coincided with another drop-off in birth rates https://www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/173/pop_and_soc_english_374.en.pdf. Both accessed 19 October 2018

⁶ My thanks to Mélanie Boissonneau for pointing out this film and highlighting the prominence in France of Manu Payet, discussed later, as well as to her colleagues Raphaëlle Moine and Thomas Pillard for the invaluable opportunity to present this research at Paris III: Sorbonne.

⁷ http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=228720.html Accessed 8 October 2018. The blockbuster comedy *Les Garçons et Guillaume, à table!/Me, Myself and Mum* (Guillaume Gallienne, 2013) is comparable in tracing the protagonist's arc from trans-to cis-gender.

⁸ This very stereotype is embodied by a (covertly gay) homophobic street gangster in *Épouse-moi mon pote*.

⁹ Alberti in the same passage also identifies this figure in US films.

¹⁰ For instance, appearing on BBC Radio 4's "The World This Weekend," on 13 May 2018, Célia Belin of Brookings Institution Washington, Agathe Démarais from The Economist Intelligence Unit, Malcolm Chalmers from RUSI and historian Jonathan Fenby commented on the nationalism underlying President Macron's steps towards consolidating and projecting French military power globally, as well as his pseudo-positioning in the European Parliament as an international democrat standing for liberal values. *A contrario*, the ongoing and increasingly globally imitated *anti-governmental Gilets jaunes* populist movement includes both right- and left-wing elements (and a small majority of men <https://newsmavens.com/news/aha-moments/2260/who-are-the-women-of-the-gilets-jaunes-movement>. Accessed 22 January 2019).