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EDITORIAL

New directions in contemporary French comedies: from nation, sex and class to ethnicity, community and the vagaries of the postmodern

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Comedy, as is the case with many national cinemas, is one of the most dominant genres, if not the most dominant in French cinema, as Raphaëlle Moine has shown (2015, 233–234). Comedies are even more popular now than they used to be in terms of spectator numbers. Since 2000, for example, French comedies have dominated the best-seller list in France, as can be seen in Table 1, which gives the 27 best-selling films since 2000.¹ In the period 2000–2007 there were only 6 French comedies out of the 18 best-sellers in Table 1, representing a third (positions 11, 25, 26, 47, 57, 59), while from 2008–2014 6 out of 9 French films are comedies (positions 2, 3, 19, 51, 68, 96), representing two-thirds. This corresponds to a shift from a 39% share of the total number of French spectators in the first half of the period to an astonishing 72% of the best-selling films since 2008.

APPROXIMATE PLACING. ENSURE THAT TABLE IS ON A SINGLE PAGE

Position	Year of release	Title	Director	Spectators
2	2008	<i>Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis/Welcome to the Sticks</i>	Dany Boon	20,489,303
3	2011	<i>Intouchables/The Intouchables</i>	Olivier Nakache, Éric Toledano	19,490,688
8	2009	<i>Avatar</i>	James Cameron	14,775,990
11	2002	<i>Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre/Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra</i>	Alain Chabat	14,559,509
19	2014	<i>Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?/Serial (Bad) Weddings</i>	Philippe de Chauveron	12,353,181
25	2006	<i>Les Bronzés 3: amis pour la vie/French Fried Vacation 3: Friends Forever</i>	Patrice Leconte	10,355,930
26	2000	<i>Taxi 2</i>	Gérard Krawczyk	10,345,901
33	2003	<i>Finding Nemo</i>	Andrew Stanton, Lee Unkrich	9,528,033
35	2001	<i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i>	Chris Columbus	9,470,090
39	2002	<i>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets</i>	Chris Columbus	9,144,701
47	2001	<i>Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie</i>	Jean-Pierre Jeunet	8,636,041
48	2004	<i>Les Choristes/The Chorus</i>	Christophe Barratier	8,636,013
51	2011	<i>Rien à déclarer/Nothing to Declare</i>	Dany Boon	8,150,825
57	2007	<i>Ratatouille</i>	Brad Bird, Jan Pinkava	7,845,210
59	2001	<i>La Vérité si je mens! 2/Would I Lie to You 2</i>	Thomas Gilou	7,826,393

61	2009	<i>Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs</i>	Carlos Saldanha, Mike Thurmeier	7,803,757
62	2000	<i>The Sixth Sense</i>	M. Night Shyamalan	7,799,130
64	2005	<i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</i>	Mike Newell	7,731,601
68	2014	<i>La Famille Bélier</i>	Éric Lartigau	7,450,944
70	2003	<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i>	Peter Jackson	7,393,904
75	2005	<i>Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith</i>	George Lucas	7,247,809
78	2004	<i>Shrek 2</i>	Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, Conrad Vernon	7,185,626
79	2004	<i>Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban</i>	Alfonso Cuarón	7,138,548
83	2002	<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i>	Peter Jackson	7,070,194
87	2012	<i>Skyfall</i>	Sam Mendes	7,003,902
90	2001	<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring</i>	Peter Jackson	6,951,441
96	2008	<i>Astérix aux jeux olympiques/Asterix at the Olympic Games</i>	Frédéric Forestier, Thomas Langmann	6,817,803

Table 1. The best-selling films on the French market since 2000 (extracted from a list of the 100 best-sellers, Internet Movie Database).

And yet, surprisingly, while there are many coffee-table or popular books on the genre in French cinema, such as biographies of stars, there is as yet very little major academic work. General works on genre tend to focus on Hollywood comedies, occasionally with some nods to French comic stars, for example Olivier Mongin's reflection on the genre which includes some work on Jacques Tati and Louis de Funès (2002). There are few academic monographs on directors associated with the genre. There is a thesis on Pierre Colombier, active during the 1920s and 1930s, and director of major comic stars such as Georges Milton in *Le Roi des resquilleurs* (1930), Raimu in *Ces Messieurs de la Santé* (1933) and *Théodore et Cie* (1933), and Fernandel in *Ignace* (1937) (Binet 2003), and a couple of standard introductions to the work of Jean-Pierre Mocky (Prédal 1988, Le Roy 2000). But there is as yet nothing substantial on Gérard Oury, Jean-Marie Poiré or Francis Veber, directors of some of the most successful French comedies of the 1980s and beyond. The only two major works on French film comedy in recent times are both by Anglophone academics: Rémi Lanzoni's broad introduction (2014) and Mary Harrod's in-depth study of the recent development of the rom-com (2015). With the exception of some essential articles by Raphaëlle Moine, which we refer to in this introduction, there is as yet nothing major by French academics on contemporary developments.

It is not difficult to understand why this is the case. Comedy, more than any other genre, is a 'bad object', a repository of low-denominator stereotypes and the source of the potentially guilty pleasure accruing from them that appears to be difficult to justify critically. This is particularly the case in France, where the critical establishment has until recently been more interested in auteur cinema than popular genres. As Moine has argued in her book on genre (2005, 66–85), whether one adopts the position of the Frankfurt School – that comedies like all genres function principally to maintain the status quo – or whether one adopts the position inspired by Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth – that comedy, like other genres, functions to express and reconcile social and cultural tensions – these two positions, antithetical in appearance, both operate to neutralise dissent, allowing bad objects to inculcate Sartrean bad faith as the audience unquestioningly accepts questionable representations. As Moine says, the guilty pleasure one may feel emerges from the fact that comedy 'autorise un plaisir contre-culturel sans générer de danger social'² (Moine 2005, 79).

Stereotypes and postmodernity

Or at least that might once have been the case. Postmodern cinema has to some extent neutralised this effect: first by mixing genres in the attempt to address increasingly fragmented audiences; second by foregrounding generic rules in parodic fashion. We laugh knowingly because we *see through* what might otherwise be opaque ideological processes. In the postmodern cinema, we are presented with ‘a play of signs [which] is by no means enjoyed only by an intellectual audience’ (Schweinitz 2011, 119), and where the emphasis is on cerebral (but not necessarily intellectual) pleasure without guilt, pleasure deriving from the recognition of a mechanism that plays with its materials. As the French might say, in such films, ‘il y a du jeu’. This is a double-entendre: we perceive a game (this is the more literal meaning), and it is a game in which the mechanism is loose or wobbly (the more figurative meaning). This creates not a monolithic and unquestioning pleasure, but a fissured pleasure in which recognition of the fissure is what gives rise to pleasure; or to put it another way, it is the pleasure of intimate knowledge, but from a distance:

The phenomenon of distance effects a sense of conscious individual superiority over the stereotype and one’s pleasure derived from it. As a result, one is at least given *a feeling* of a deconstructed world of stereotypes. This effect is enhanced by many films assuming an ironic, sometimes satirical tone, occasionally even straying toward the absurd or the grotesque. The intent is [...] a hyperaccentuated pastiche of stereotypes, which for all its irony [...] allows the enjoyment of the patterns, sometimes even pushing the fascination that they hold to the point of mystification. One alternates between a monument to and carnival of stereotypes. (Schweinitz 2011, 119)

The pleasure is not as ubiquitously and essentially generic as the comments by Schweinitz might suggest. As Moine points out, however one might wish to conceive of the function of genres, that function ‘ne prend forme que dans des contextes historiques, sociaux ou de réception particuliers’³ (2005, 85). For example, much of the criticism by Anglophone reviewers of *Intouchables* relates to stereotypes identified in particular by American critics, such as *Variety*’s Jay Weissberg who found the film unusually offensive in what he perceived as its Uncle Tom-ism (2011, quoted in Pettersen 2015, 4–5); whereas much of the pleasure to be had from the film if you are French is in the way that Omar Sy recycles his character from the TV programme *Service après vente des émissions* (Canal+, 2005–2012; Figure 1), as Ginette Vincendeau has pointed out (Vincendeau 2014, 559). One might argue that this layered appeal has much less to do with the racist stereotypes familiar to American audiences. The response from *Libération* to Weissberg was a Gallic shrug: “Et alors?” (Anon. 2011). The actress and thriller writer, Sylvie Granotier, emphasised this, suggesting Weissberg’s lack of cultural competence, in a short piece in the same daily: ‘Je n’aime pas être jugée, moi et sept millions de mes camarades spectateurs, assez sotte pour confondre conte de fées et réalité. Mon goût pour la réalité n’empêche pas que j’aime les contes de fées’⁴ (2011).

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Omar Sy and Fred Testot hosting *Service après vente des émissions* (www.20minutes.fr/).

One could of course argue that this is yet another example of a national comedy being ‘unexportable’, a term frequently used for film comedies whatever their nationality, except, noblesse oblige, Hollywood. In the mid-1970s the influential US National Society of Critics commented on what we might call the national parochialism of comedy: ‘Comedy can be remarkably insular, basing its humor totally on customs, attitudes, or news events with which only certain initiates are familiar. Comedies that might be labeled provincial provide the backbone of most nations’ film industries, and in almost every case are considered unexportable’ (Byron and Weis 1977, 259). The ‘unexportability’ of comedy has since hardened into a critical commonplace as academics try to explain culturally specific linguistic items or attitudes. That said, while ‘unexportability’ might well be true of many, if not most, French comedies, we should also remember that some successful comedies have found favour beyond the French border, in the form of Hollywood remakes. *Trois hommes et un couffin/Three Men and a Cradle* (Coline Serreau, 1985; 10,251,465 spectators) was remade as the highly successful *Three Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987). Nimoy’s film was the highest-earning film of 1987 in the USA, grossing \$168 million,⁵ against the \$2million grossed in the USA by the original French film.⁶ *Les Visiteurs/The Visitors* (Jean-Marie Poiré, 1993; 13,782,991) was remade by the same director as the flop *Just Visiting* (2001). The remake of *Les Visiteurs* grossed under \$5 million,⁷ but this was still considerably more than the original French film, which grossed \$659,810 in the USA.⁸

Moreover, the presumed ‘unexportability’ of French comedies has recently been disproven by the two most successful comedies of the last few years: *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* and *Intouchables*, both hovering around the 20-million French spectator mark, as can be seen in Table 1. The former grossed \$194 million in France, but also grossed \$51 million in the rest of the world (with the exception of the USA).⁹ *Intouchables* grossed \$166 million in France with \$250 million worldwide and a further \$10 million in the USA,¹⁰ also managing to become the top-grossing foreign film on the US market for 2012 (McClintock 2012). Indeed, *Intouchables*, with its 32 million spectators worldwide, is the fourth best-selling French film after three English-language action films from Luc Besson’s Europacorp: *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014, 52 million), *Taken 2* (Olivier Megaton, 2012; 48 million), and *Le Cinquième Élément/The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997; 36 million). If for no other reason than this, a special number on comedy could not avoid addressing *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* and *Intouchables*, the latter films both overtaking what had for decades been the most talked about French comedy because of its 17 million spectators, *La Grande Vadrouille* (Gérard Oury, 1966). Oury’s film, about a male duo in WWII, looks back to the past; but Louis de Funès’s fulminations at a changing French society in the post-war period of rapid industrial change have over the years gradually lost their purchase. *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* and *Intouchables* with their male duos may look rather similar to their forefather, but clearly address contemporary changes in French society, principally those of multiculturalism and the postmodern play on well-established stereotypes.

Ethnicity and community

Moine explores *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* and *Intouchables* from this perspective, pointing out how these two films may well owe part of their success to the inversion of stereotypes. In *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis*, for example, the more prevalent stereotype of the Midi – picturesque landscapes where locals speak with thick Provençal accents – is reversed, as the

film is premised on stereotypes of Northern France (especially working-class stereotypes for Moine 2010) that the film slowly undermines while poking fun at them. As Moine argues, however, there is a delicate balance to be struck between the enunciation of stereotypes and their denunciation. To what extent, for example, is the apparently all-white male comic duo undermined by the fact that the two stars are ethnically mixed, both being half-Algerian? Would French spectators remember these well-publicised facts so that they feed into what we could call a metastereotypical multiethnic reading of the film?

INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2. The contrast between the two stars of *Intouchables* as seen in the poster (Gaumont).

That particular tension is unavoidable in *Intouchables*, as the two leads are contrasted in every possible way, socially, politically, physiologically, and through the colour of their skin, as can be seen in the full-on poster for the film (Figure 2); and the changes to the original novel emphasise binary contrasts, as many reviews have pointed out. And yet, we could claim that in its foregrounding of a black actor who has become a star, particularly for the younger generation,¹¹ the film is more progressive than *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*. After the welcome visibility of second-generation Maghrebi actors in the last decade, Sy's move from comedy to the patrimonial genre in *Chocolat/Monsieur Chocolat* (Roschdy Zem, 2016), a biopic of Chocolat, part of the clown duo Footit and Chocolat who performed in the late 1890s, suggests that multiethnicity has become a key strand of contemporary French cinema. This is confirmed by another successful comedy, *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*, mentioned by several contributors to this special issue, a film in which the daughters of a Catholic bourgeois couple marry men from a range of ethnicities, exposing the racism of the parents as they (and the film) struggle to cope with ethnic stereotypes.¹² The fact that the father is played by Christian Clavier, a familiar face in successful French comedies of the 1980s and 1990s, only serves to underline the transition from comedies anchored in (Gallic) sex and class to comedies anchored in sex and class...and ethnicity.

A second and not unrelated development is discussed by Mireille Rosello: the fragmentation of the national into discrete communities. Contemporary comedies have developed more of an interest in the concept of specific groups of people, as is reflected in *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* Rosello explores what 'community' might mean in this context, covering not just ethnic communities, but queer communities, professional communities, and so on, before focusing on Jewish communities and the way in which cultural specificities potentially erect a barrier for non-Jewish spectators in a republican society that privileges non-culturally specific equality before the law. Her analysis of key funeral scenes in *Rue Mandar* (Idit Cebula, 2013) and *Des gens qui s'embrassent/It Happened in Saint-Tropez* (Danièle Thompson, 2013) demonstrates the fissure between culturally-specific knowledge and culturally-specific identification. Non-Jewish (and some Jewish) spectators can identify with the community because there is generally a member of that community in the film who does not understand the ritual, while Jewish spectators, who know the ritual, can also identify with the community represented. Through a careful analysis of the pedagogic function of such comedies – is their aim to inform spectators of the 'rules' of the community? – Rosello shows that we are in reality neither 'in' nor 'out' of

the community, but in a postmodern 'beyond', a meta-space which is also an abstracted national non-space, bereft of any significant identity.

Gender, couples and the nation

It comes as no surprise that this process of recognition mitigated by distance, that manages to resolve the tensions at work in these comedies, is also a feature of comedies focusing more on gender, such as *Les Garçons et Guillaume, à table!/Me, Myself, and Mum* (Guillaume Gallienne, 2013). Unlike *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, *Intouchables* and *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?*, this film is more an 'auteur comedy', a subgenre that has developed since the turn of the millennium, and that Moine has defined as a crossover between popular cinema and auteur cinema, characterised by 'the observation of contemporary mores with a "mixed" form of comedy (in contrast to the laughter of farce and pure comedy)' (Moine 2015, 247). The crossover can be seen by its relatively high spectator figures (2,907,906) on the one hand and its five Césars on the other (Best Film, Best First Film, Best Actor, Best Screenplay, Best Editing). Wishing to understand how a film about an 'effeminate' man managed to be so popular at a time when same-sex marriage was a contested social issue in France, Jules Sandeau explores these tensions from the point of view of the film's reception in the analysis of internet blogs. Sandeau draws much the same conclusions as Rosello: that the film does not so much resolve tensions and contradictions as maintain a middle ground of ambivalence such that, as we put it above, spectators are neither in nor out, neither for nor against, but in an ambiguous and ill-defined although knowing and knowingly postmodern beyond, arguably having their cake and eating it.

Thomas Pillard's article explores heterosexual gender relations in four equally more 'serious', even darker-edged, comedies whose common theme is sex as an economic contract: *Ah! Si j'étais riche/If I Were a Rich Man* (Gérard Bitton and Michel Munz, 2002), *Le Coût de la vie/The Cost of Living* (Philippe Le Guay, 2003), *Le Prix à payer/The Price to Pay* (Alexandra Leclère, 2007) and *Cliente/A French Gigolo* (Josiane Balasko, 2008). All four films did reasonably well at the box-office (spectator numbers being respectively 1,142,152; 1,131,697; 1,368,791; 698,623). The first three are stereotypically sexist, in that men control the relationship through money, this being characterised in a vulgar and lapidary fashion by the character played by Christian Clavier in *Le Coût de la vie*, who says to his wife played by Nathalie Baye: 'Pas de cul, pas de fric!'.¹³ It is undoubtedly not coincidental that the last of these four, in which Baye plays a sympathetic businesswoman in her 50s who hires a gigolo, inverts the stereotype, and arguably as a result did relatively less well at the box-office than the first three. This is all the more striking in light of the pronounced star status of its director Josiane Balasko, who plays a secondary role in the film.

The frequency of auteurist and openly socially engaged comedies like *Cliente* in France underlines an aspect of recent French comedy that, while not new to the national film industry and its genre system, has been catalysed by postmodernity: its flexibility, notably in comparison with Hollywood models. In the relatively low-budget *Cliente* and all of Pillard's examples, Gallic explorations of the comic topos of coupledness accommodate a much more (melo)dramatic bent than is usual for Hollywood mainstream comedies. This and other French particularities come into relief for romcoms, precisely because of their North-American genre lineage, often prompting fairly explicit transatlantic references. These can be within the text; *Cliente* features a native American Indian in the role of partner to Balasko's character. They can be in marketing materials; *Des gens qui s'embrassent* by

Anglophile filmmaker Thompson implicitly acknowledges uneasy geo-generic positioning in using as its poster strapline the phrase, 'une comédie pas tout à fait romantique'¹⁴; or they can be suggested by critics. It is therefore worth pausing to consider the role of romantic comedies (including the more broadly family-focused variants) in recent developments, as foregrounded by Rosello and Pillard's articles, as well as to shed greater light on comedy's various national and transnational affiliations and potential markets. These films account for a very significant proportion of French comedy production today, with examples in the top ten or even five French films at the box office almost every year for the last decade or so. Moreover, the romcom (sub)genre has hosted – in usefully crystallised form – the same trends seen elsewhere, while also often preserving the relative conservatism of this narrative form concerned with familial, and by extension national, renewal, albeit in fissured form. Indeed, in such cases postmodernism's multiplicity and polysemy can also renew much more traditional discourses.

Harrod identified many of the recent French comic tendencies discussed in this special issue in romcom for the period 1990s to the early 2010s (Harrod 2015); these have intensified since then. A pertinent example is *La Famille Bélier* (2014), directed by Éric Lartigau – who had already enjoyed considerable success in romcom with *Prête-moi ta main/! Do* (2006) – not least because it features in Table 1, yet has not attracted much attention by other contributors to the volume. Like *Qu'est-ce-qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu* and other films discussed by Rosello, this is a film that strongly foregrounds the idea of community; however, if ethnicity is highlighted, it is only by virtue of the film's dazzling whiteness. Instead of racial minorities, the group concerned here is the French rural *peuple*, farmers in particular, alongside a more frequently marginalised group: the disabled. The film focuses on the eponymous Béliers, comprising a mother and father (Karin Viard and François Damiens, reprising their star couple from the 2011 *Rien à déclarer*) and two children, all of whom are profoundly deaf but for the oldest daughter Paula (Louane Emera), the film's real star. This does not, however, stop the father from deciding to stand for mayor in the local town in order, he claims, to protect 'la communauté' from the ravages of changes being effected by big business. The drama turns on the fact that Paula, on whom the family rely to translate their signing to the world, embarks on a rites-of-passage trajectory threatening to sever her from the homestead when she discovers that she has a wonderful singing voice and would be well advised to audition for a prestigious school in Paris. Like Rosello's examples, the film features a translator character allowing viewers to inhabit a liminal space with respect to the miniature community it depicts. It is also comparable to many of these and especially *Qu'est-ce-qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu* in genre terms, as an example of a highly French (social) family comedy, hybridising with more classically North-American generic frameworks: both the romcom, through a storyline in which homely country girl Paula falls for a Parisian boy at school, and particularly the even more recently domestically emergent teenpic.¹⁵

Foregrounding such transnational origins in the usual postmodern fashion, *La Famille Bélier* has one of Paula's schoolfriends say to her at one point outside the classroom, 'Regarde-toi! On dirait Bella dans *Twilight*'.¹⁶ However, the stereotype is not so much played with in this case as openly rejected: high-school teenpic-fantasy *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) is set in a small town in Washington State where it is almost constantly grey and raining, whereas this film takes place in green and sun-dappled countryside. Similarly, the round-faced, blonde Paula exudes youthful good health, in utter contrast to Bella Swann's famously wraithlike and eventually vampiric persona, and other troubled US

teenage girls from the worlds of *Heathers* (Michael Lehman, 1988) to *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004). It is noteworthy that eschewing such a sorority chimes with the film's interest in highly conventional heterosexuality, in view of *Twilight* star Kristen Stewart's openly queer sexual identity, not to mention the whole franchise's status as a site of prolific queer fandom (Jones 2014). This detail underlines the importance of considering a film such as *La Famille Bélier* as a regressive counterweight to the potentially more progressive use of stereotypes elsewhere in some of the French comedies featured in this issue. The oppositions clearly set up in this film concern countryside versus city, older versus younger generation, tradition versus progress and community versus globalisation (the father dismisses out of hand a local resident's desire to have improved internet connectivity in the village). Indeed, the family's deafness invites interpretation as a metaphor for proud French isolationism, as when Viard as the mother – gulping wine from a bottle in the cellar – signs frantically to Paula that she wept when her daughter was born, because she can't stand people who can hear. The scene also highlights the value of deafness as a plot device to facilitate the showcasing of French stars' acting range and comic ability, for which Viard is especially known. Here this takes the form of a gestural expressivity that is *franco-français*, more than any serious exploration of disability.¹⁷ Nor is it a coincidence that the family's surname means 'ram', deriving from the same root as the bellicosity with which the horned animal is associated: Paula's parents embody the stereotype of fiery Frenchness, not to mention being wildly over-sexed, in a running joke that combines elements of Gallic frankness about matters physical with Americanised 'gross-out' moments.

At the same time, *La Famille Bélier* itself can be seen to represent the domestic industry's combative refusal to bow to Hollywood dominance, a major theme of this special issue. In both ambition and theme, the film bears unexpected comparison with the Oscar-winning transnational hit *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2014), even if it has not penetrated Anglophone markets as that film did. Both narratives use the enforced silencing of a character's voice to explore anxieties about identity and self-expression that have a markedly French character, considering the decline of and protectionism around the nation's language. It must be acknowledged that, in a narrative arc belonging to the subgenre of youth films concerned with self-actualisation, such as *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* (Alan Metter, 1985), *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2002), *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002) or *School of Rock* (Richard Linklater, 2003), Paula does finally convince her parents to endorse her decision to move to Paris, in spite of that fact that it is unclear whether her love interest will follow. This ending is strikingly hybrid in generic but also geo-cultural terms. At first, Paula's departure for Paris looks set to be collapsed in favour of a familial focus, as she jumps out of her teacher's car and returns for a final emotional goodbye. Then, in classic coming-of-age fashion, we see her running towards her future after all, alone; yet the score of a Michel Sardou song Paula has earlier sung over the following credits intones 'elle court, elle court... la maladie d'amour'.¹⁸ At first the lyrics seem to refer to Paula running, yet with the verb's subject following later in a lyrical or poetic fashion (a grammatical possibility in Romance languages, where English has less flexibility), it becomes clear that instead what is 'running' or going around is love sickness, an idea reinforced by snapshots of Paula and her Parisian beau and various other couples from the film together, recalling *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and other Anglo-American romcoms. These elements keep the sidelined romcom storyline alive in the viewer's mind; but the full force of the *jeu de mots* is only preserved for fully informed French-speaking audiences who are also familiar with neo-global genre frameworks. This then, unlike for *The*

Artist, is *La Famille Bélier's* truly ideal audience (hence its failure to export): as with *Intouchables*, reception context is crucial to determining meaning, who is 'in the club'. Equally, in the film itself, traditional French values are in fact championed by every aspect except its overt narrative resolution: not only is the setting appealing but the close-knit, self-reliant family are loving, dynamic and fun; Viard's character is an impossible vision of 1950s' femininity at its most alluring, bedecked in dresses to flatter her curvaceous form and wearing high-heels to stride round the farm; and the extensive use of French-language songs by national treasures such as Sardou and Gérard Lenorman is more reminiscent of the backward-looking comedy celebrating national heritage *Les Choristes/The Chorus* (Christophe Barratier, 2004) than *High School Musical* (Peter Barsocchini, 2006), the use of 'Americanised' stylistic techniques such as the montage notwithstanding.

Moreover, there are limits to the openness of the narrative resolution: Paula may be allowed to conquer Paris, but it is highly revealing that not once but twice in the film she is shown to be exceptionally and unapologetically bad at learning foreign languages. The 'insularity' and 'parochialism' Byron and Weis attribute to comedy does persist here, disguised under a postmodern sheen of reflexive hybridity. Inside-outside positioning remains, then – as in Rosello's examples – limited to subnational cultures, while the superiority of national identity itself is not seriously challenged. Interestingly, comparable arguments have been made about both *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (Harrod 2012) and indeed *Intouchables* (Lee forthcoming). Both films have been read as in part fables in support of French republican values, for all their apparent celebration of difference. In other words, despite being complicated in various ways, comedy's nationalistic inflections – in terms of both influence and key target audience – are very far from disappearing, even in films that have successfully exported.

Equally retrograde attitudes also continue to be on display towards women in coupling comedies, not only when foregrounded by darker humour, as in Pillard's examples, but also more ingenuously espoused in broader comedies focused around the couple in one way or another. One example is *Retour chez ma mère/Back to Mom's* (Éric Lavaine, 2016), which features Balasko (again) opposite Alexandra Lamy, as a mother and her 40-year-old unmarried daughter who come to blows when the latter is forced to move back home after losing her job. Female professionalism is equally rendered as synonymous with beleaguered singlehood in *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) pastiche *Chic!* (Jérôme Cornuau, 2015), starring Marina Hands as a career-oriented 'bitch' in the Miranda Priestly mould, alongside Fanny Ardant and Éric Elmosino.

It is not our view that romcoms are inherently conservative in any blanket sense, any more than is comedy as a whole (not least since subgenres cannot be neatly segregated). In fact, coupling comedies are if anything less sexist than average, at least in terms of the opportunities for female actresses and directors since the 1990s. Not only that, but many romcoms present more varied attitudes towards social change. Auteur romcoms, though hardly the only contributors to this development, often provide salient examples, as with *Cliente's* considered interest in mature female sexuality.¹⁹ Similarly, when it comes to queer identities in romcom, the modestly exported *À trois on y va/All About Them* (Jérôme Bonnell, 2015) takes up the baton of the internationally successful musical romcom-drama *Les Chansons d'amour/Love Songs* (Christophe Honoré, 2007). It explores polyamory through a *ménage à trois*, without sensationalism and while also focusing on work-related struggles faced by young professionals and themes of freedom versus commitment that transcend gender or sexual orientation.²⁰ Such examples point to the value of exploring

both box-office hits as well as less successful and more marginal films when tracing generic innovation (Deleyto 2009, 2–3).

Marginality, liminality and multiplicity

One important area to consider in order to address less popular, but nonetheless distinctive developments in the genre is crossover TV comedies. We saw above how important TV is for an understanding of the cultural connotations of comic stars such as Omar Sy. Similar examples are provided by *Les Nuls* (Canal+, 1987–1992) for actor turned director Alain Chabat, *Les Carnets de Monsieur Manatane* (Canal+, 1997–1998) for Benoît Poelvoorde (star of *Rien à déclarer*, in thirteenth place in Table 1), or the stand-up series *Jamel Comedy Club* (Canal+, 2006–2008) for Jamel Debbouze; to these actors we could add Kad Merad and Jean Dujardin (see Moine 2015, 238), as well as the latter's ex-partner turned romcom star Alexandra Lamy, who co-featured with him in the wildly popular, often daily screened *Un gars, une fille* (France 2, 1999–2003). Some major directors have also turned to the TV series format, such as the gritty police drama *Le Bureau des légendes* (Éric Rochant, Canal+, 2015 onwards) or Olivier Assayas's well-received biography of Carlos the Jackal, a three-part mini-series (Canal+, 2010), which was shown in full out of competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010.

In this issue, Nikolaj Lübecker writes on a comedy series also shown at Cannes, by a director whom we would not normally associate with comedy, Bruno Dumont's 4-part series *P'tit Quinquin/L'il Quinquin*, shown on Arte in September 2014, but which had premiered at the Cannes Film Festival earlier that year with all 4 episodes shown in full. *P'tit Quinquin* is, to use Lübecker's terms, a tragi-comic 'feel-bad' comedy, whose characters, played by non-professionals, function mechanically (see Figure 4), so that it is difficult to see them as anything other than marionettes. The comedy, much like Samuel Beckett's work, is a kind of black humour that stifles laughter. As Lübecker intimates, *P'tit Quinquin* can be seen partly as a dark version of *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, as it is set in the North of France; but it is also a knowing reference to Dumont's previous films, sparer, even more sparse, and very much off-kilter. Dumont has pursued this type of comedy in *Ma Loute/Slack Bay* (2016) with its cartoon-like characters played by A-list stars (Fabrice Luchini, Juliette Binoche, Valeria Bruno-Tedeschi) who are murdered and eaten by cannibal locals. *Le Monde* characterised the film as a mix of 'mélo, burlesque, gore et polar'²¹ (Regnier 2016), which emphasises once more the postmodern nature of comedy.

INSERT FIGURE 3

Figure 3. The bumbling police inspector Van Der Weyden in *P'tit Quinquin* (Blaq Out).

In the final contribution to this special issue, Caroline San Martin writes on the similarly ex-mainstream form of the short comic film, which, as she reminds us, is arguably in historical terms the comic format par excellence. No less than the feature-length films we consider, the short films she examines are postmodern. They pastiche specific genres, notably those that highlight the dialogue with Hollywood: the teenpic (again) and also the road movie and the western. Indeed, *Ce n'est pas un film de cow-boys/It's Not a Cowboy Movie* (Benjamin Parent, 2012) specifically references *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005); and the characters in all these films again self-reflexively question their own status. As is often the case, these short films function as the testing ground for feature films in the directors' careers: Thomas Cailley has gone on to direct transnationally exported romcom-

drama *Les Combattants/Love at First Fight* (2014), while Vincent Mariette has made *Tristesse Club/Fool Circle* (2014) and Julie Ducournau *Grave/Raw* (2017), which are not comedies, but which reprise the misfit and eccentric nature of their previous characters.

Given the opening focus in this editorial on a table of box office results, it is apposite to close it by emphasising a third way in which more marginally consumed, but in this case nonetheless theatrically distributed films may demand scrutiny: by virtue of their cultural visibility. This includes critical visibility in cinephilic circles, where they have the power to influence future generic and other filmic developments. An exemplary film in this category that is also pertinent for considering many of the key issues outlined in this editorial – nation, ethnicity, gender, class and the postmodern – is well-known actor and *Chansons d'amour* star Louis Garrel's directorial debut, co-scripted with Christophe Honoré, *Les Deux Amis/Two Friends* (2016). This romcom-drama presents a highly French, *Nouvelle Vague*-indebted love triangle between Abel (Garrel), Clément (Vincent Macaigne) and Mona (Golshifteh Farahani). Although it was not particularly successful with 91,374 spectators, most reviews were positive and, perhaps even more importantly, it was very extensively reviewed. For instance the Bibliothèque du film's online catalogue of press reviews includes a high figure of 22 for the film, which is eight more than for the hugely successful mainstream comedy *La Famille Bélier* the year before. The film seems to appear readily via internet push notifications for consumers of French films about couples, at least via Amazon.co.uk. This is no doubt because of its cinephilic pedigree and its related and typically French realist/*misérabiliste* elements, including a drab Parisian look to the *mise-en-scène* and a suicide attempt by one character. Such coverage suggests the cultural significance of the film's 'narrative image' (Ellis 1981, 30).

INSERT FIGURE 4

Figure 4. Marketing materials for *Les Deux Amis* contribute to its high cultural visibility.

As its poster (Figure 4) shows, *Les Deux Amis* is remarkable for giving rare prominence to a non-white (Iranian) performer, this time female, in an ethnically unmarked role, exemplifying the 'assimilationist' tendency for such actors discussed by Moine in these pages and which Carrie Tarr (2015, 311) judges the best indicator of their progress towards equality with Gallic counterparts. It also explores topical themes with far-reaching significance, such as the effects of the absence of religious faith in contemporary society. This is a recurrent trope of French romcoms, just as there is an emergent sense that 'post-secular'²² religious elements are a growing feature of contemporary Western culture as a whole. Specifically, Mona propositions Abel in a church - and not, significantly, a mosque. It is striking that the use of solemn Latin chants over a sex scene between Abel and Mona via an extended sound bridge directly echoes the equally melodramatic romcom *Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite/God is Great and I'm Not* (Pascale Bailly, 2001), starring Audrey Tautou and also featuring a suicide attempt. In both cases, such elements point to a spiritual void as a cause of overinvestment in other people, which in neither narrative proves clearly rewarding, since couples are not formed by the end.²³

Despite such details apparently addressing a 'sophisticated' viewing position, however, in other respects *Les Deux Amis* is more ideologically ambivalent, suggesting that it would be a mistake to associate progressive attitudes with auteurist films and regressive attitudes with mainstream films. For example, Mona's North-African identity is subsumed into her working-class status, since the film's high concept concerns her (secret) identity as

a prison inmate who is periodically allowed out in order to work at a fast-food restaurant at the Gare de l'Est. And it is implied that Abel first becomes seriously attracted to Mona during a scene at a café where she dances wildly, the camera lingering on Golshifteh's physical dynamism, her bodily contours and mane of black hair, in a spectacle framed by a male gaze troublingly redolent of Orientalism.

The ending, title and overall narrative focus of *Les Deux Amis* highlight a final key feature of popular French comedy across the board that endures alongside its diverse nature, so obvious as to almost pass for a prerequisite: a recurrent overall focus on masculinity, even in a 'feminised' variant such as romantic comedy. Romcoms *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* and to an extent *La Famille Bélier* remain exceptions that prove the rule: of the French comedies featured in Table 1, they are the only two that might be considered primarily female-focused, in terms of the characters' subjectivity and the screen time devoted to them. It is arguable that *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis*, *Intouchables* and indeed *Rien à déclarer* are 'bromance' variants on the romcom formula, common in both the US and especially in France, given that they all contain heterosexual romance subplots and retain the kind of puerile misogynistic elements associated, for instance, with the films of Judd Apatow. *Intouchables* goes beyond the Hollywood model in infringing political correctness, such as when East-Asian women are ushered in for a paid erotic head massage enjoyed as a bonding experience by the male duo.²⁴ In any case, although a tentative trend for female friendship films directed by women such as *Comme t'y es belle/Hey Good Looking!* (Lisa Azuelos, 2006, also one of the films set in a Jewish community alluded to by Rosello), *Mince alors!* (Charlotte De Turckheim, 2012) or, in the alternative, cult comic circuit, *Les Coquillettes* (Sophie Letourneur, 2012) has of late emerged, partly as an offshoot of romcom's success (see Harrod 2016), the hit successes remain dominated by male protagonists; and this fact determines the major directions taken by comic subgenres. *Les Deux Amis* is more self-aware than average about the slippery territory of homosociality tinged with homerotic possibilities, whose endpoint is freedom altogether from the need for women to feature in the representational economy of romantic fiction. Thus a camp barman mistakes Clément and Abel, whom the film ultimately leaves alone together, for a gay couple, prompting the latter to disavow the assumption. The fact that the barman offers the quiet, smiling rejoinder that 'J'ai longtemps été comme toi [...] Pas vouloir donner de nom... pas définir le truc,'²⁵ returns the viewer to the space of postmodern ambivalence.²⁶ Looking at a more marginally positioned, generically mobile comedy, in other words, shows that the buddy dynamics so central to French comedy and the nation's cinema altogether are becoming sufficiently frequent and over-determining that they too are increasingly ripe for undermining and irony.²⁷

The range of comic films in France is substantial, with a multitude of subgenres, as Moine has pointed out (2015, 234–235). In this special issue, we have attempted to cover some of the principal trends in contemporary comedy, and to explore the many tensions that comedies bring to the fore, whether these are connected to ethnicity, gender or (trans)national identity (and not always in readily separable ways). Moine has suggested that comedies are a kind of 'comic laboratory' in which 'propositions are developed and formulated, sometimes stereotyped, sometimes progressive, and often ambivalent, in which social, gendered, and ethnic assignments are redistributed, confirmed, or contested' (2015, 235). The articles in this special issue suggest that contemporary comedies often do all of this at one and the same time. The reason we may well both abhor them for their stereotypes and take delight in them for the way in which they knowingly appear to play

with those stereotypes is that they confirm more than any other genre the inevitable confusion and messiness of life, where there are no easy answers. At a time when comedy's inherently liminal nature conspires with postmodernity's 'smart', unfixed sensibility to produce highly open legibility, a special issue devoted to comedy is all the more urgent.

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Filmography

À trois on y va, 2015, Jérôme Bonnell, France/Belgium
Ah! Si j'étais riche, 2002, Gérard Bitton and Michel Munz, France
Ange & Gabrielle, 2015, Anne Giafferi, France
Les Apprentis, 1995, Pierre Salvadori, France
The Artist, 2014, Michel Hazanavicius, France/USA/Belgium
Astérix aux jeux olympiques, 2008, Frédéric Forestier & Thomas Langmann, France/Germany/Spain/Italy/Belgium
Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre, 2002, Alain Chabat, France/Germany
Avatar, 2009, James Cameron, UK/USA
Bend It Like Beckham, 2002, Gurinder Chadha, UK/Germany/USA
Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis, 2008, Dany Boon, France
Billy Elliot, 2002, Stephen Daldry, UK/France
Brokeback Mountain, 2005, Ang Lee, USA/Canada
Les Bronzés 3: amis pour la vie, 2006, Patrice Leconte, France
Carlos, 2014, Olivier Assayas, France/Germany
Ce n'est pas un film de cow-boys, 2012, Benjamin Parent, France
Ces Messieurs de la Santé, 1933, Pierre Colombier, France
Les Chansons d'amour, 2007, Christophe Honoré, France
Chic!, 2015, Jérôme Cornuau, France
Chocolat, 2016, Roschdy Zem, France
Les Choristes, 2004, Christophe Barratier, France/Switzerland/Germany
Les Combattants, 2014, Thomas Cailley, France
Cliente, 2008, Josiane Balasko, France
Comme t'y es belle, 2006, Lisa Azuelos, UK/Luxemburg/France/Belgium

Les Coquillettes, 2012, Sophie Letourneur, France
Le Coût de la vie, 2003, Philippe Le Guay, France
Des gens qui s'embrassent, 2013, Danièle Thompson, France/Belgium
Les Deux Amis, 2016, Louis Garrel, France
The Devil Wears Prada, 2006, David Frankel, USA/France
Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite, 2001, Pascale Bailly, France
Le Dîner de cons, 1998, Francis Veber, France
Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain, 2001, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, France
La Famille Bélier, 2014, Éric Lartigau, France/Belgium
Le Cinquième Élément, 1997, Luc Besson, France
Finding Nemo, 2003, Andrew Stanton & Lee Unkrich, USA
Four Weddings and a Funeral, 1994, Mike Newell, UK
Les Garçons et Guillaume, à table!, 2013, Guillaume Gallienne, France/Belgium
Get Out, 2017, Jordan Peele, USA
Girls Just Want to Have Fun, 1985, Alan Metter, USA
La Grande Vadrouille, 1966, Gérard Oury, France/UK
Grave, 2017, Julie Ducournau, France/Belgium
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, 2002, Chris Columbus, UK/USA/Germany
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 2005, Mike Newell, UK/USA
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, 2001, Chris Columbus, UK/USA
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, 2004, Alfonso Cuarón, UK/USA
Heathers, 1988, Michael Lemann, USA
High School Musical, 2006, Peter Barsocchini, USA
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs, 2009, Carlos Saldanha & Mike Thurmeier, USA
Ignace, 1937, Pierre Colombier, France
Intouchables, 2011, Olivier Nakache & Éric Toledano, France
Just Visiting, 2001, Jean-Marie Poiré, France/USA
Les Lézards, 2013, Vincent Mariette, France
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, 2001, Peter Jackson, New Zealand/USA
The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King, 2003, Peter Jackson, USA/New Zealand
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, 2002, Peter Jackson, USA/New Zealand
Lucy, 2014, Luc Besson, France
Ma Loute, 2016, Bruno Dumont, France/Germany
Mean Girls, 2004, Mark Waters, USA/Canada
Mince alors!, 2012, Charlotte De Turckheim, France
Paris Shanghai, 2011, Thomas Cailley, France
Prête-moi ta main, 2006, Éric Lartigau, France
Le Prix à payer, 2007, Alexandra Leclère, France
P'tit Quinquin, 2014, Bruno Dumont, France
Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?, 2014, Philippe de Chauveron, France
Ratatouille, 2007, Brad Bird, Jan Pinkava, USA
Retour chez ma mère, 2016, Éric Lavaine, France
Rien à déclarer, 2011, Dany Boon, France
Le Roi des resquilleurs, 1930, Pierre Colombier, France
Rue Mandar, 2013, Idit Cebula, France
School of Rock, 2003, Richard Linklater, USA/Germany
Shrek 2, 2004, Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury & Conrad Vernon, USA

The Sixth Sense, 2000, M. Night Shyamalan, USA
Skyfall, 2012, Sam Mendes, UK/USA
Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith, 2005, George Lucas, USA
Taken 2, 2012, Olivier Megaton, France
Taxi 2, 2000, Gérard Krawczyk, France
Théodore et C^{ie}, 1933, Pierre Colombier, France
Three Men and a Baby, 1987, Leonard Nimoy, USA
Tristesse Club, 2014, Vincent Mariette, France
Trois hommes et un couffin, 1985, Coline Serreau, France
Twilight, 2008, Catherine Hardwicke, USA
Une nouvelle amie, 2014, François Ozon, France
La Vérité si je mens! 2, 2001, Thomas Gilou, France
Les Visiteurs, 1993, Jean-Marie Poiré, France

TV series

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Les Carnets de Monsieur Manatane, 1997–1998, Canal+, Benoît Poelvoorde
and Pascal Le Brun
Jamel Comedy Club, 2006–2008, Canal+, Jamel Debbouze
Un gars, une fille, 1999–2003, France 2, Guy A. Lepage
Le Bureau des legends, 2015–, Canal+, Éric Rochant
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¹ This list is extracted from a longer list of the top 100 best-sellers in France since 1945; the numbers in the first column indicate the position of each film in that list of 100.

² 'Permits counter-cultural pleasure without producing something that is socially dangerous.'

³ 'Takes shape in specific contexts, whether historical, social or relating to reception'

⁴ 'I don't like being judged, me and seven million of my fellow spectators, stupid enough to confuse fairy tale and reality. My taste for reality doesn't stop me from liking fairy tales.'

⁵ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=threemenandababy.htm>, accessed March 30, 2017.

⁶ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=threemenandacradle.htm>, accessed March 30, 2017.

⁷ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/search/?q=Just%20Visiting>, accessed March 30, 2017.

⁸ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/search/?q=les%20visiteurs>, accessed March 30, 2017.

⁹ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=bienvenuechezleschtis.htm>, accessed March 30, 2017.

¹⁰ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=intouchables.htm>, accessed March 30, 2017.

¹¹ See for example 'Omar Sy, numéro un dans le coeur des jeunes Français, sa réaction sur Instagram', on the website *Nonstop celebrities*, <http://omar-sy.non-stop-celebrities.com/actus/omar-sy-numro-un-dans-le-coeur-des-jeunes-franais-sa-raction-sur-instagram-106754>, accessed April 2, 2017.

¹² A similar drive to expose everyday racism by depicting the attitudes displayed by white parents towards a daughter's black boyfriend underpins the more heavily satirical recent US hit horror-comedy *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).

¹³ 'No sex, no money!'

¹⁴ 'Not exactly a romcom.'

¹⁵ In this its close predecessor is the hit film *Lol (Laughing Out Loud)* (Lisa Azuelos, 2008; 3,562,075 tickets sold). Other relevant films are a more modestly successful follow-up from the following year *Une semaine sur deux (et la moitié des vacances scolaires)/Alternate Weeks (and Half the Vacation)* (Ivan Calbérac, 2009; 469,296 tickets sold). *Lou! Journal infime* (Julian Neel, 2014; 130,509 tickets sold), based on a well-known strip cartoon already adapted for television, is a contemporaneous example of this ongoing trend.

¹⁶ 'Look at you! You look like Bella from *Twilight*.'

¹⁷ On the other hand, the positive representations of disabled people featured in this film and in *Intouchables* can only be seen as a mark of progress from the point of view of representational politics broadly defined, against a backdrop of such characters' relative absence from the mainstream, and there is a markedly greater sense of political correctness about certain marginalised groups in these stories when comparing them, for instance, with a film such as Veber's popular *Le Dîner de cons*, which made stupidity the butt of its joke.

¹⁸ 'It runs, it runs, the disease of love.'

¹⁹ French romcoms' well-established tendency to depict somewhat older couples and notably women of a certain age has also been continued of late by the much 'straighter' comic example *Ange & Gabrielle/Love at First Child* (Anne Giafferi, 2015), where a young woman's mother unexpectedly finds herself the protagonist of a love-story.

²⁰ Although this did not prevent sensationalistic international marketing focusing on the film's 'French' sauciness. The presence of Anaïs Demoustier facilitated this positioning, as well as being cogent for the film's generic focus, given her recent turn in François Ozon's queer noir comedy-drama *Une nouvelle amie/The New Girlfriend* (2014).

²¹ 'Melodrama, burlesque, gore and police thriller.'

²² For instance, the tendency to return to spirituality or even religiosity in a presumed secular Western culture was the subject of a recent major international conference, '(Post)secular: imagining faith in contemporary cultures', University of Warwick, June 8–10, 2017.

²³ For a fuller analysis of *Dieu est grand, je suis toute petite* see Harrod (2015, 51–54).

²⁴ *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* meanwhile offers highly stereotyped female characters, largely consigned to an economy of exchange between men (see also Harrod 2012, 83; Moine 2014, 243–244).

²⁵ 'I was like you for a long time [...] Not wanting to give it a name, to define what was happening'.

²⁶ Elsewhere the film also potentially undercuts its own pretension to ('French') seriousness, when Clément asks Abel, played by the famously knot-browed Garrel, if he thinks looking grumpy all the time makes him seem deep.

²⁷ Any early forerunner conforming to the self-mocking buddy romcom model was the film *Les Apprentis/The Apprentices* (Pierre Salvadori, 1995); see Harrod 2015, 113–117 for this and more recent and less self-aware examples.