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NOSTALGIA, MELANCHOLY, TRAUMA: BACKLASH POSTFEMINISM IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH SCREEN ROMANCE

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Abstract:

This article draws on Diane Negra's (2009) assessment of neo-global postfeminist popular culture and cinema as displaying an obsession with time-control that is largely inimical to feminist progress, arguing that similar currents are visible in 2010s French screen romances. While manifestations of this obsession with relevance for the contemporary French context range from celebrations of ritualized, time-sensitive milestones (marriage, pregnancy) to narratives of female professional retreatism in the face of 'time-poverty' or the expansion of sexualized female identities across ages, this article focuses in depth on themes of actual or symbolic historical reversion in the intimate sphere through a close analysis of the films *Camille redouble* (Noémie Lvovsky, 2012) and *Un peu, beaucoup, aveuglement* (Clovis Cornillac, 2015). After surveying other cognate fictions, the discussion demonstrates that both these films reflect a wider backdrop of time-related trauma informing contemporary French onscreen romance and are accordingly melancholic, as well as openly nostalgic, in theme and tone. The article interrogates the backlash aspects of such narratives but also the different resonances associated with regressive 'postfeminist' elements in French as opposed to American culture. It thus demonstrates that postfeminism bears a specific relationship to the distinctive past history comprised by local feminist movements and intersects with other Gallic customs and ideologies – notably nationalistic ones – in particular ways.

Keywords: postfeminism, popular culture, cinema, romance, backlash, time, *Camille redouble*, *Un peu, beaucoup, aveuglement*

Amid a plethora of scholarly and more popular accounts of postfeminism, temporality is self-evidently fundamental to the concept's definition. In simple terms, the moment at which postfeminism became the most culturally visible form of feminism followed the liberationist era of the 1960s and 1970s, during which second-wave variants held sway; hence it is sometimes also dubbed third-wave feminism. The two most major changes to women's life experiences wrought by the impetus of women's movements during the second-wave period, arguably both stemming from the mass rollout of access to contraception and secondarily abortion, concern expanded norms of female sexuality, on the one hand, and mass female accession to the workplace accompanying a deferral or refusal of motherhood, on the other. Consequently, these tend to be the most dominant features of key sociological and cultural enquiries into the nature of postfeminism as a phenomenon of the 1980s to the present day: recurrent images of idealized postfeminist identity coalesce around the sexually desirable professional woman.¹ Within this context, the *post* in *postfeminism* has borne two somewhat contradictory meanings. It has firstly encompassed a sense that feminism has moved beyond the goals of the second wave, which have largely been achieved. However, *postfeminism* also signals – for its many detractors – the idea that feminism has ironically been the victim of a backlash, leading it to regress by venerating pre-second-wave ideals of womanhood, especially a sexual appeal reliant on the consumerist cult of manicured appearances. This common perception is worth citing because it demonstrates both the way in which critiques of the postfeminist sensibility often hinge on its twisting of feminism to serve neoliberal capitalism, and also the complexity of the notion's temporal underpinnings. Strikingly, the second major postfeminist sociological trend detailed above – women's massively increased presence in the workplace – has also been theorized as accompanied by temporal anxieties connected to life-

stage management, work-life balance and ‘time poverty’, with which representations of female experience are accordingly riven through.²

This article draws on scholarly work by Diane Negra and others examining popular cultural narratives of the 1990s and 2000s, in particular filmed romances, that were obsessively engaged with the temporal aspects of postfeminism. It takes this as a lens for understanding and interrogating the social resonances of comparable examples from more recent, post-2010, French television series and especially cinema. Thus, after providing an overview of relevant trends in a variety of film and television fictions, the discussion focuses on the case study films *Camille redouble* (Noémie Lvovsky, 2012) and *Un peu, beaucoup, aveuglement* (Clovis Cornillac, 2015),³ chosen as differently positioned but representative examples of a proliferation of backlash narratives that associate changes in gender roles with trauma and display melancholic nostalgia for earlier social arrangements. However, feminisms are always culturally variable and indeed the notion of postfeminism *à la française* that provides the title of this special issue, by combining a temporal locution with a geo-cultural one, throws into relief the extent to which these two categories can never be separated in the first place – situations always exist in both time and space.⁴ As this volume acknowledges, the trends defining postfeminism identified by Negra and others derive primordially from a neo-global, typically Anglo-American context; seminal scholarship may thus limit its focus to such parameters and/or give the impression that these are representative of the situation elsewhere. I am therefore alive to the translations and transformations (in the mathematical sense of turning the angle of view) required to apprehend Gallic cultural phenomena through a prism constructed for the USA, even as the accelerated globalization of cultures and especially screen cultures is both symptom and cause of parallels between the two mediascapes. Consequently, a key line of enquiry concerns not only the convergences but also the differences between the two trends, and what these can tell us about the contours of popular feminism, and in turn the

relations between the sexes, in France today. Specifically, what nuances arise when considering popular cultural representations of broadly legitimized inter-gender coupling dynamics from the perspective of postfeminism in a place and culture where the concept of *feminism* tracks different social arrangements and cultural values, and so connotes distinct valences, in the first place?

What a *fille* wants?

In her groundbreaking 2009 *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, Negra dissects a culture whose hollow promises of self-actualization for women emerge as bound up with an insidiously ubiquitous injunction for them to return to earlier, pre-liberationist forms of social organization and/or embrace capitalist consumerism. One important arena in which she sees this playing out is across a wide range of female-oriented popular cultural texts marked in various ways by time panic, which Negra views as broadly suggestive of postfeminism's own anxiety about the temporal bad faith of feigning a 'post'ness predicated on that spurious notion that feminism's gains have all been won.⁵ What we might, following Lauren Berlant,⁶ call the cruel optimism of such a positive view of women's current social status can be seen in Negra's account to equate to a letting down of the guard by advocates of social equality, allowing space to open up again for the paradoxical promotion of traditional and ultimately discriminatory values. These slip under the popular feminist radar all the more easily thanks to a patina of edgy modernity in mainstream artefacts deriving from aesthetic style and postmodern irony.⁷

For Negra, this female-accented perceived crisis of temporality appears in various popular cultural trends of the late 1990s and 2000s. The visibility of these in 2010s French filmed romances suggests the gradual spread of the US-associated discourses of equality (in the bedroom, in the workplace) on which postfeminism is at least notionally based but which

also determine its backlash nature. Thus, one such manifestation of the preoccupation can be witnessed in a relentless staging of time-bound rituals of the imagined female life-cycle, such as exorbitant ‘statement’ weddings and their on-screen depiction, as well as the hypervisibility of maternity, especially in the press.⁸ These tendencies – also seemingly undiminished in the Anglosphere to date (the blows dealt to the wedding industry by COVID-19 notwithstanding) – have substantially taken hold in French onscreen romances. In my interrogation of the French romcom pre-2012 I picked out only three (fairly obscure) films released in the 2000s centrally concerned with weddings as such, with two of these ironically undercutting the ritual, in contrast to ‘the emergence of the “wedding film” as a significant strand of the chick-flick genre’ over the same decade in US filmmaking.⁹ However, my sense that such global neo-traditional romances were beginning to exert greater influence is borne out by a non-exhaustive search of pertinent films of the 2010s which immediately throws up seven films bunched towards the latter half of the decade in which weddings structure the narrative, very often featuring in the title as well: *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* (English title *Serial (Bad) Weddings*) (2014), *Papa ou maman 2* (2016), *Gaspard va au mariage*, *Le Sens de la fête*, *Épouse-moi mon pote*, *Jour J (Wedding Unplanned)* (all 2017) and *Le Discours (The Wedding Speech)* (2020).¹⁰ What is more, *Le Sens de la fête* and *Épouse-moi mon pote* figured among the top ten home-grown releases for their year at the French box office (and *Papa ou maman 2* in the top 15), while *Qu’est-ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu?* is the fifth-highest grossing domestic film of all time.¹¹ As for the pronounced visibility of maternity and in particular the figure of the pregnant woman, this is less a change than a dovetailing with a pre-existing cult of motherhood linked to French feminist philosophy’s well-known celebration of embodied female specificity; nonetheless, example films across auteur and mainstream cinema and television abound, including the drama *17 filles* (2011) focused on a pregnancy pact between schoolgirls, the Binoche vehicle comedy *Telle mère telle fille* (2017) depicting a mother and daughter who fall

pregnant simultaneously and Seasons 1 and 2 of the Netflix Original romcom series *Plan cœur* (2019–22) in which one of the three main female protagonists' pregnancy and then motherhood is an important thread, articulated through scenes of negotiating work with a baby bump, undergoing ultrasound scans and dealing with early infant care.¹²

A second trend Negra has discerned concerns female retreatism away from the workplace to domestic bliss, seen all over US culture and associated with the so-called opt out revolution.¹³ Among several French films of the 2010s openly promoting the abandonment of high-status female professionalism, the star-studded romance *La Vie d'une autre* (2012) is 'archetypally representative of this retraditionalist paradigm'.¹⁴ In it, Juliette Binoche plays a woman who undergoes a brain trauma in her sleep, provoking amnesia about the last fifteen years of her life, and discovers to her dismay that she has become a career-obsessed global businesswoman who neglects her son and whose marriage to a cartoonist (Mathieu Kassovitz) is on the rocks. She is prompted to make new lifestyle choices and renew bonds with both family members, in a literal turn back to an earlier version of womanhood defined through emotional connection and care ethics. However, while professional retreatism is becoming fairly recurrent in French audiovisual comedy (*Chic!* (2015), *Neuf mois ferme* (2016), *Dix pour cent* Season 4 (Netflix, 2020)) – and comparable narratives also peppered the pre-2010s romcom here and there, with at least three films dealing with similar themes reasonably centrally¹⁵ – French popular cinema, despite being traversed by many nostalgic currents, has not yet seen a proliferation of such narratives on a par with the US context's (nor the parallel concerted consolidation of the workplace romcom visible there in prominent films such as *Set It Up* (2018) and *What Men Want* (2019)). Instead, it is more likely for women to be depicted as working than retreating, but in lower-status jobs than men. This is readily illustrated by the wildly popular ensemble television show *Scènes de ménages* (2009–), broadcast every weekday evening at 8.35pm on M6, in which the female halves of the various couples focalized

by the narrative work almost without exception in lower-status jobs than their partners, as a beautician, a temporary worker/student, a yoga teacher and a saleswoman married to a professor (alongside one former housewife and another couple who have a joint business). This tallies with the social reality of ongoing gender inequities in the workplace but also the French-specific resistance to neoliberalism, enshrined in policies of higher taxation and a larger public services sector than in the USA or UK, including better social support for working mothers through subsidies and affordable, dependable childcare. The latter is one cause and result of a more elusive cultural difference in attitudes towards children, whose frequently collective, state-sponsored care indicates their relatively weak historical claim on the ‘attention economy’ (not to mention the maternal body, through breastfeeding) in France compared with the USA.¹⁶ There are some early signs of a gradual change in this domain that *La Vie d'une autre*'s scenes of hyper-present mothering index through the lead character's rediscovery of her own playful side;¹⁷ yet even here this plotline plays a quiet second fiddle to the love story, which dominates the second half. In other words, French anxiety about female professionalism for now attaches itself to fears about the future not so much of children as of romance itself, whose gendered labour-intensity thus implicitly and ironically emerges from the picture.

A third tendency wherein the French comparison is different again concerns the expanded age range of sexualized femininity depicted in US culture, which has encompassed both older and younger women (and girls) under postfeminism. Here, France if anything has a longer history than the USA, in line with the centrality of sex in general and the sexualized female body especially to its culture. While onscreen examples in the current period can be immediately drawn from – among numerous examples – the same films cited above as celebrating pregnancy (*17 filles*, in which one schoolgirl's ability to even bear children at her early stage of physical development is questioned; *Telle mère telle fille*, with the resplendent Binoche pregnant in her mid-forties), a specific subtrend concerns relationships with large age

gaps. The increased visibility of the ‘cougar’ is a US-led phenomenon of significance to this discussion and in French filmed romances of the 2010s, mid-forties actor Virginie Efira stands out thanks to popular films such as *Vingt ans d’écart* (2013) or *Victoria* (2016), where the actor, born in 1977, is paired with men born in 1989 and 1993, respectively. However, to demonstrate this is not a new development, we might recall her forerunner in this role, Nathalie Baye, being cast as a sexually desirable and desiring female lead in her fifties (*Vénus Beauté (Institut)* (1999) and even sixties (*Cliente*, 2008). *Vénus Beauté* also offers an example of the same phenomenon but gender-switched, pairing Audrey Tautou with an actor 49 years older than her, Robert Hossein. The ongoing recurrence of such pairings is exemplified by the recent release of *Seize printemps* (2020), a film guaranteed a certain cultural visibility due to being directed by the daughter of well-known actors Vincent Lindon and Sandrine Kiberlain, Suzanne Lindon, who also stars as a schoolgirl who falls in love with a thirty-five-year-old man. Ginette Vincendeau’s review of Lindon’s debut rightly makes the specific connection to earlier ‘incestuous’ cultural artefacts featuring the oddly physically similar Charlotte Gainsbourg, foregrounding the very different cultural stakes of age-gap relationships between older men and younger women in comparison to those characterized by the reverse dynamic.¹⁸ That is, such pairings appear disturbingly nostalgic for a time of greater ‘innocence’ about the proto-abusive underpinnings of unbalanced power dynamics in heterosexual (or other) couples brought out so forcefully by the Weinstein affair and its multi-stranded fallout, including in France the sensational abuse memoirs discussed by Douglas Morrey in this volume.

Yet, while postfeminist culture celebrates mature female sexuality conversely as a gain in the context of a heterosexual economy that historically tended to write older women out of cultural visibility, Negra rightly pinpoints a bleaker edge to even those narratives that show sexually mature, older women attempting to self-actualize through strident self-sexualization in the absence of other sources of satisfaction. A behemoth reference point here is the

appropriately named *Desperate Housewives* television franchise (ABC, 2004–12), where glossy lifestyles barely masked dark secrets and anxieties.¹⁹ Such an ambivalence of tone is perhaps particularly in evidence in France in *Victoria*, whose English title *In Bed with Victoria* alludes to a crisis in the intimate domain, since the character – a glamorously attired high-flying lawyer and divorcee – has unsatisfying casual sex until meeting a man young enough and subordinate enough (as he works for her) to apparently live up to the dream of postfeminist masculinity as including care and sensitivity – what we might call the trope of the ‘hair-stroker’ – alongside patriarchal authority.²⁰ That this dream is still largely unfulfilled by relationships with older men in France is in evidence more widely through the harder edge of many romcoms. While this genre is no stranger to the realist tradition so influential in French cinema, and even the US variant (perhaps increasingly) tolerates considerable infiltration by melodramatic tonalities, black comic and absurd romantic narratives are remarkably numerous in the last few years in Gallic filmmaking.²¹ For instance, divorce comedies *Papa ou maman 2*, *Sous le même toit* (2017) and *L’Amour flou* (2018) all evoke failed coupledness in spatio-temporal terms, in that they posit the failure of relationships to live up to earlier imagined ideals as a spatial problem. Thus, these films depict couples with children who are, as one amateur review of *L’Amour flou* puts it, ‘victims of the passage of time’ so they separate but end up living opposite each other (*Papa ou maman 2*), next door with apartments joined by the children’s bedroom (*L’Amour flou*) or actually in the same house (*Sous le même toit*) (Figure 1).²² <Figure 1 near here>

It is also noteworthy in regards to postfeminism’s inextricability from neoliberalism that circumstances arise in two out of three films listed above significantly for financial reasons, speaking to a phenomenon described by the celebrated British writer Julian Barnes in his 2018 romantic novel *The Only Story*: ‘Nowadays [...] it’s not so much marriage that ties people together as the shared occupation of a property.’²³ This shift is a function of the growth in the

wealth divide under advanced capitalism; ironically, the social mobility promised by this economic system has ended up producing a situation akin to patrimonial wealth systems.²⁴ This in turn would appear to cue a neoliberally nuanced return to pre-twentieth-century ideas of marriage – or simply coupledness today – which viewed the union as an alliance rather than an expression of romantic love, in ways that chime with ‘empowered’ postfeminism’s impetus to reduce social interactions to transactions geared towards personal advancement: the ugly face of aspirations for equality within a society based on patriarchal capitalist ideals. In such a situation, the longstanding French tradition of adultery promises renewed vigour as the site of romance outside of pragmatically conceived marriage, in the manner seen in French eighteenth-century libertine discourse and literature. Yet the temporal rub of such obsolete arrangements in a modern world that simultaneously valorizes transparency in relationships and gender mutuality is reflected by the plot of zany comedy *Antoinette dans les Cévennes* (2020), in which popular actress Laure Calamy plays a woman so put out when her lover books a family holiday clashing with their own planned getaway that she ends up joining the family uninvited and incognito – on a donkey! The figure of asynchronous double lives forced into a discordant attempt at harmony here articulates, in other words, the incompatibility of types of romantic narrative and gender ideals deriving from different eras: the postfeminist woman may seek physical passion, but she is no longer to be marginalized as the other woman rendered invisible by the dominance of family structures privileging social reproduction.

That enunciations of the ethical imperative to consider women’s once suppressed emotional and material needs (*what a girl wants*) should co-exist with the flipside tendency for postfeminism to instrumentalize human interactions underscores the postfeminist sensibility’s slippery nature. To examine how such apparently opposed impulses can play out along the very same cultural lines – and thus postfeminism’s flexibility and potency as a convergence site for criss-crossing and polyvalent discourses – in more detail, I turn now to close analysis of two

case study films, both of which form part of a wave of texts emulating an emblematic manifestation of postfeminist temporal crisis: the time-travel fantasy romance.

Romancing the past: *Camille [et al] redouble[nt]*

If in the 2000s in the USA, films involving literal time-travel such as *Kate and Leopold* (2001) or *The Lake House* (2006) transparently catered to nostalgic yearnings for greater gender differentiation by reanimating chivalrous heroes of the past, other films such as auteur director Jonathan Glazer's *Birth* (2004), in which Nicole Kidman's widow heroine is convinced a young boy is her husband reincarnated, spoke to a drive to return to the past in the face of traumatic disturbances to heterosexual intimacy in more roundabout ways.²⁵ Of relevance, too, is Yvonne Tasker's identification of a simultaneous embrace of fantasy 'proper' epitomized by a film such as *Enchanted* (2007), which she saw as evidence of a telling turn away from contemporary gender realities.²⁶ While fantasy and period elements were both contrastingly conspicuous by their absence from French filmed romantic comedies (let alone recurring in lower-budget TV equivalents) in the 2000s, in the 2010s a handful of films have taken up the Hollywood baton in dealing with actual or symbolic time-travel – in a manner perhaps unsurprising when we consider the local disarray into which contemporary gender realities have been thrown under postfeminism's influence. Specifically, an extreme discrepancy has emerged between the French attachment to values of seduction and gallantry dating back at least to the eighteenth century and contemporary discourses of rape culture and toxic masculinity, coming particularly from USA.²⁷ Put simply, time-travel can allow a return to earlier values to be aesthetically enjoyed while remaining at least superficially ideologically distanced.

French screen romances of note for their literal temporal acrobatics include, in addition to *La Vie d'une autre*, the female-directed auteur piece *Camille redouble* (2012) and the Netflix

Original film *Je ne suis pas un homme facile* (2018) (while as we shall see in the next section *Un peu, beaucoup* operates symbolically in this regard). Fascinatingly, all three films' time disturbances are moreover precipitated by traumas to the head. The narrative phenomenon of time-travel's constellation with such (literalized) trauma tallies with Tamar Jeffers McDonald's observations about trends renewing the global romcom genre in the 2010s and which she also attributes significantly to a misfit between the structure of romance as a discourse predicated on extreme gender differentiation and the increased demands for equality that characterize the postfeminist period.²⁸ To put it another way, onscreen trauma can be seen in this account to displace and disavow the 'traumatic' blows to certain patriarchally determined mores brought about by an emphasis on female agency, by re-engaging fantasies of the past as the context for staging inter-gender relations.

It is for this reason worth lingering for a moment over the fact that the first film clearly coloured by such a reactionary position, *Camille redouble*, should be an auteur piece shown at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes and authored by a filmmaker, Noémie Lvovsky, once associated with the social engagement of 'le jeune cinéma français' realist movement – although Carrie Tarr with Brigitte Rollet detect ambivalences of register identifiable with postfeminist irony even in her work during that period.²⁹ In it, struggling actress Camille played by Lvovsky has been married to Éric (Samir Guesmi) for twenty-five years, since school; now he has left her for a younger woman and, already an alcoholic, she drinks herself into a blackout from which she awakes 16 years old again in the 1980s and able to do things differently. This is an exact reprisal of the plot of Francis Ford Coppola's 1986 *Peggy Sue Got Married*, which forms part of a wave of films nostalgically obsessed with 'fiftiesness' that Negra sees as a forerunner of those she examines in the 1990s–2000s.³⁰ As also with that film, a striking conceit sees Lvovsky play her younger as well as her present-day self – with even more startling results in this case as she is fifteen years older than was Kathleen Turner as Peggy. The same approach

is also adopted for Guesmi, although – unlike in Coppola’s film – the couple’s friends are played by younger actors, further foregrounding the protagonists’ temporal *décalage* (Figure 2). <Figure 2 near here> In addition to this deliberately disruptive detail, Lvovsky eschews special effects and even the use of elaborate makeup, opting instead for a low-production-values, artisanal look – a choice also reflected in a DVD menu that reproduces a VHS rewinding interface. Likewise, just as Lvovsky’s capture of herself on screen rejects hi-tech or digital means of distorting her image in favour of a paradoxical realism within fantasy, the character Camille maintains fondness for analogue technologies, such as the cassette tape she uses to record the voice of her dead mother, played by well-liked comedian Yolande Moreau, to take back to the future with her at the end. Altogether, despite (or perhaps consonant with) *Camille redouble*’s total nostalgic idealization of the past, commented on by numerous reviews, the film courts greater melancholia than did Coppola’s tale of rejuvenation, not least thanks to the look of the film’s protagonists marked by the passage of time.

The fact that Lvovsky defends her rejection of effects on the Barthesian basis that photography is by its nature about time comprises an intellectualizing auteurist identification with high-culture, realist art of the pre-digital era.³¹ This stance is perhaps most apparent within the film through a cameo by Nouvelle Vague darling Jean-Pierre Léaud, whose role as a clock-maker prompts one reviewer to further liken *Camille redouble* to Baudelaire’s literary classic poem ‘L’Horloge’.³² The relationship such a nostalgic mode of address bears to backlash postfeminism (beyond the masculinism of the New Wave as a cultural reference point) lies significantly in the film’s attitude to embodied identities, celebrating the humanist subject wherein ‘an ideal of bodily perfection doubles up as a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values’.³³ Specifically, Camille suggests that she finds flirting with and kissing *Éric more* exciting the second time, with the benefit of experience and knowledge. What is more, Camille (like Peggy) ultimately and fatalistically decides to get together with the husband who will later

leave her again. The way in which the ironic distance associated with postfeminism works to scramble politics is highly in evidence here, as Camille's potentially explosive knowledge of the dangers romance poses for women is reduced to an amused expression on the actress's face during her stint in the past (and one superficially Medusa-like laugh when a *lycéen* is unable to cope with her sexual adventurousness). While Lvovsky stops short of the remarriage comedy format in which Camille and Éric would eventually reunite in the present, as occurred in Coppola's film, and the refusal to mask ageing in one sense keeps alive reminders of the ravages of time, as much on romance as on the human body, she retains affective and aesthetic nostalgia for romantic, one-and-only ideologies: in Éric's words, 'on est comme deux planètes qui s'attirent, c'est comme ça, on n'y est pour rien'. As Michele Schreiber has noted in relation to female-centric Hollywood romances, nostalgic cinema moreover elicits viewer participation in the affective mode, pre-eminently (in her example) but by no means exclusively among communities of women.³⁴ Since an attitude of yearning for romantic ideologies is endorsed as inevitable and passion valorized for its meaningfulness in the moment, even in acknowledgement these will ultimately disappoint, the film positions women as prisoners of their bodily desires. In this way, it affirms the legacy of the past in a fashion more often aligned with the agenda of (white) patriarchy (including in many Hollywood time-travel films of the Reaganite 1980s).³⁵ As for the question of race raised by this observation and of pertinence to *Camille redouble*'s biracial lead duo, the colour-blind casting of second-generation North African Guesmi in a role where his ethnicity appears irrelevant to the story is largely explicable in terms of French Republican ideologies, which ironically rely on an effacement of history, including as inscribed on the (racialized) body. Such a choice thus runs diametrically counter to the film's view of gender as highly embodied and so points up a longstanding, acute double standard in French universalism.³⁶ In this sense, the nonetheless very direct borrowings from US postfeminist romcoms on display in *Camille redouble* harmonize perfectly with a strong

seam in French culture, including feminism, that bestows meaning upon experience, and female experience most particularly, through sexualization.

Myopia and melancholy in *Un peu, beaucoup, aveuglement*

While *Un peu, beaucoup* is the only film of the group to diverge from the pattern of head trauma, privileging a wilfully espoused form of impairment – symbolic blindness – resulting from a bereaved character hiding themselves away from the world, it merits attention for being markedly naked in its anxiety about the destabilizing of certain ‘traditional’, French-accented gender roles under both postfeminism and neoliberalism more widely. Presenting mental instability as a form of temporal dislocation, rather than supernatural time-travel elements as such, the film follows a female lead character (Mélanie Bernier) who is a concert pianist damaged by a relationship with an emotionally abusive former teacher, which destroyed her confidence such that she suffers panic attacks on performing, opposite a male lead, her neighbour, a misanthropic inventor afflicted by obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and agoraphobia (played by comedian Clovis Cornillac, who also directed). The two make contact through the wall of her apartment after her piano playing disturbs him and they are forced to work out a compromise of hours when she can play. They fall in love through subsequent conversations without ever meeting face to face – or even exchanging real names, simply calling themselves Machine and Machin – until the climactic moment of union.

The extent to which this bizarre form of ongoing blind date is framed within a timeless (for which read backward) chronotope is conveyed by various visual and narrative details. In the first place, the separation of our two main characters by a partition wall can be interpreted without much difficulty as a fairly crude figure for extreme gender differentiation of the kind to which France has been historically attached. This high-concept *mise-en-scène* not only looks forward to the spatial compartmentalization of the genders by late 2010s divorce comedies

discussed earlier, but it also inevitably harks back to one of the most iconic scenes in classical Hollywood romantic comedy, the ‘walls of Jericho’ moment in Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934) in which our leads – who are more or less strangers – are forced by circumstances to share a hotel room and Clark Gable’s male protagonist erects a makeshift partition to protect the lady’s modesty (Figures 3 and 4). <insert figures 3 and 4 near here> The sequence’s humour turns on the innuendo of his imagining of her nudity as women’s clothes are strewn over the ‘wall’, such that the scene has become emblematic not only of ingenious ways to circumvent the strictures of the Hays Code censoring sexualized material in Hollywood at that time but also of an era in which the genders were defined by opposition to one another, as enshrined in the ‘screwball’ warring that characterized romantic comedies of the 1930s–1950s cycle.³⁷ Pre-second-wave Hollywood presents, then, an unthreatening reference point for exploring a nostalgically reimagined version of contemporary gender roles in which sexual openness is firmly excluded from the picture and romance maintained in its originary fictionalized or fantastical narrative realm – that is, at the level of the word, as underlined by Machine’s reflection at one point that she sometimes wonders if Machin even exists (with further echoes of both Rostand’s 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac* and retro romcom *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain* (2001), among other texts). Indeed, there is a strong contrast between this world of logos and the brute material reality of Machin threatening at one low point, following a dispute, to crudely penetrate the wall dividing them.

Just as the chaste nature of their relationship is quaint, while the English title *Blind Date* gestures to a more recent custom that has also been rendered largely obsolete by modern internet dating practices, Machine’s characterization initially rejects postfeminist values around sexuality. The petite, soft-voiced Bernier is costumed to look as mousy as possible in minimal makeup, high-necked blouses and glasses with her hair usually in a bun – until the climax where Machin’s support helps her find her rhythm at the recital that she has until then

been too frightened to give, flinging her locks down to ‘reveal’ her beauty in a scene that heavily codes artistic fulfilment as standing in for the promise of erotic consummation. At the same time, although she is more in tune with the contemporary world than her interlocutor, not least by virtue of regularly venturing out into it, Machine’s profession – like Camille’s in *Camille redouble* – aligns her with artistry outside the corporate sphere.

The characterization of the film’s key male identification figure, Machin, also accentuates anachronism and so plays to a backlash sensibility, even as these features are sometimes glossed by a veneer of ‘progressive’ postfeminist masculinity. Beginning with his association with former eras, when he professes to love the music of Serge Lama, a star of the 1960s, Machine says drolly, ‘En fait, vous avez soixante-dix ans?’, only for him to reply that ‘Il n’y a pas d’âge pour écouter Serge’. Meanwhile, his profession of inventor to which he obsessively devotes almost all his time consists of constructing an elaborate, precisely engineered model-based children’s game (Figure 5) and at one point he launches into a vitriolic attack against mobile phone technology targeting the young. <Insert figure 5 near here> Worse, his last invention, a game called Buzzle, has been ripped off by an online version, threatening his solvency; like the protagonist of *Camille redouble*, he sees only analogue technologies as his friend. It is not difficult to see the nostalgic-cum-folkloric elements at play in this characterization and the twinning of his apartment with his female neighbour’s creates a space removed from contemporary realities. Such a space is typified by what Diana Holmes in her work on French romantic literature calls *dépaysement* or a pleasurable defamiliarization,³⁸ but also by a form of what we might dub *temporisation*, or a wilful deferral of reality (i.e., the realities of postfeminist and neoliberal social norms) to some future horizon. However, Machin’s mental health issues simultaneously speak to iterations of beleaguered masculinity that perennially track feminist movements.³⁹ At a more superficial level, his phobia of other people’s physicality bears some comparison with a millennial move away from engaging in

sex that cannot be wholly unpicked from a consumerist rhetoric that, along with the massive expansion of virtual technologies (ironically, Machin's *bête noire*), has promoted an airbrushed perfection alien to material realities and an explosion in self-care discourses.⁴⁰ To disavow the dark underbelly of this particular neurosis, Cornillac's fit-looking, slim appearance is further signalled by dialogue in which he contrasts his silhouette with that of his pot-bellied best friend Artus (Philippe Duquesne) when the latter, charged with purchasing quinoa crackers on Machin's behalf, accuses him of eating like a woman. Even more unambiguously positive in this regard is Machin's status as an accomplished cook, by contrast with Machine, in a reversal of old-fashioned gender tropes underlined by a sequence in which the couple have a dinner-party in their two apartments eating the same food prepared separately and hers is much less appetizing than his.

Indeed, since masculinity (like femininity) has no original model,⁴¹ Machin's shifting and highly contradictory adherence or otherwise to particular masculine types can only be even partially pinned down to postfeminist shifts when it is considered in relation to other iterations of masculine identity. A case in point concerns his 'sensitive' interest in Machine's piano playing, on which he advises her about how to let herself be swept up in emotional transports. This stands in contrast to the emphasis on dry technique promoted by her ex-teacher, an overbearing caricature whose behaviour evokes the unequal status characterizing many heterosexual partnerships (though it is left unclear if this liaison was more than professional). Nevertheless, while Machin's attitude tallies with other features of the new man and particularly the earlier cited emergent desirable figure of the male partner able to dedicate time and energy to supporting a woman's career, the knowing tone characterizing his tips nonetheless leads to him telling her how to do her job: the hair-stroker conceals a mansplainer. The juxtaposition of Machin with Artus already adumbrated further mitigates the potential problems such a dynamic might pose for many contemporary audiences – perhaps with the

Netflix licencing deal in mind. While Artus is broadly positively portrayed in this film as a loyal figure who shops for and offers moral support to his reclusive friend, the character is coloured by Duquesne's growing association with 'tragic'-cum-toxic secondary characters. While he plays generally conservative figures in many high-profile comedies including *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (2008), *Alibi.com* and *Épouse-moi mon pote* (both 2017), his role in the romcom *Situation amoureuse c'est compliquée* (2014) stands out, as his description of undermining women ('Je construis le mur du mépris') exemplifies the 'negging' central to a wave of contemporary popular misogyny responding to popular (post)feminism.⁴² Against this backdrop, Machin's combative questioning as to whether Artus '[va] passer le reste de [sa] vie à aller gratter à la porte de [son] ex-femme?' highlights an identity bordering on inceldom, another pillar of (networked) intra-male communication that 'coheres various groups around the sexual objectification of women and the mandate to achieve heterosexual confidence'.⁴³ This is a sequence whose lines are traced not only by Artus, improbably – and to his visible glee – paired up at film's end with Machine's beautiful, sexually adventurous sister, but also broadly by Machin. For despite Artus's status as a pathetic foil to the leading man, it is of course the latter who has embodied the iconic sad man sitting at home all along.

Conclusion: postfeminist (post)nationalism

In her discussion of *La Vie d'une autre*, Julie Rodgers notes that the film explicitly associates the dehumanizing workplace with Anglophone values most obviously evident through the use of English in it – which we also find in *Chic!* – in turn illustrating Jeremy Lane's observation that French commentators have a tendency to 'understand the challenges of neo-liberal globalisation in terms of a Manichean struggle between an egalitarian "French model" of socio-economic organisation and its "anglo-Saxon" nemesis'.⁴⁴ I have likewise noted that French romcoms frequently express hostility towards the Anglosphere by casting Anglophone actors

as the generically execrable ‘wrong partner’ figure.⁴⁵ Considering these ideas together, we might say that in narratives of professional retraditionalism the right partner has allowed herself to become (temporarily) wrong through embracing an Americanized dream of workplace equality to the detriment of her domestic life and her very femininity. These narratives, in other words, exemplify a phenomenon I wish to emphasize in concluding this analysis: the deployment of Anglo-American (post)feminist discourses by French films to displace anxiety about *national* identity, notably as impacted by neoliberal globalization, onto menacing visions of *gender* identity, whose socially threatening character is then resolved by plot reversals. In other words, (post)feminism can be somewhat paradoxically adapted to shore up national norms. This point underlines the way in which it is in fact reductive to echo the tendency described by Lane above and simply see either postfeminism or its dialogical partner neoliberalism as ‘other’ to French culture – aesthetic forms channel cultural values that are hybrid at their inception. It is apt, indeed, to recall here Steve Neale’s early elucidation of wrong partners as embodying an aspect of the protagonist themselves – one that heterosexual success requires them to cast aside.⁴⁶

In sum, although gendered socio-cultural norms in the films examined in this article emerge as heavily coloured by global trends that pick up increased momentum when they are compatible with local ones, at times it would be more accurate to describe French appropriations of postfeminism in terms of nationalist backlash. I have suggested that both *Camille redouble* and *Un peu, beaucoup* manifest suspicion towards digital technologies. In the latter case this is explicitly tied to global capital flows in ways synonymous with the same ‘American’ capitalism whose global advancement is decried by *La Vie d’une autre*.⁴⁷ Similarly, the cinephilic and artistic tradition celebrated by *Camille redouble* is European- and especially French-accented (through the espousal of liberal humanism and citations of French cultural texts, respectively). It is also of note that rarely has the psychoanalytic contention that dyadic

romance is propelled by a desire to regain a state of infantile maternal bliss been illustrated so clearly as it is by this film, where Camille regains both her lover and her beloved mother, whose death she claims originally drove her to drink, while Lvovsky dedicates the film to her own mother in a closing title. Such a shift begs reading, in turn, through the archetypal association of maternal bodies with nation, and thus as a return to fusion with a comforting and ‘innocent’ earlier national moment characterized by a blissful (perceived) unity of self. It is perhaps not unrelated that the film took nearly \$7 million in France but did little business abroad (and almost none outside Europe).⁴⁸ As for *Un peu, beaucoup*, Netflix distribution notwithstanding, it is peopled by domestically recognizable actors – indeed, Cornillac even plays that Gallic icon Astérix in the film franchise of the well-loved comic books – cut to the measure of its (not exclusively but) particularly locally resonant anxieties. These are neatly resumed in the pathological expression of alienation from the self that underpins clinical definitions of OCD, emphasizing a will to (re-)assert narcissistic control: the very currency that French masculinity has seen stripped away by feminist progress. It will be an objective of future research to determine whether Gallic narratives such as the superficially comparable but Netflix-originated *Je ne suis pas un homme facile*, which are more postnational at the site of production, plough new furrows for both French gender identities and Frenchness as such.

¹ This is true even as fourth-wave or intersectional feminisms have also begun to gain cultural ground in US-accented global culture, especially since the late 2010s; see Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

² Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 24; Angela McRobbie, ‘Post-Feminism and Popular Culture’, *Feminist Media Studies*, 4:3 (2004), 255–64; Catherine A. Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal*

Feminism (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2018),

<<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190901226.001.0001/oso-9780190901226>>, p. 119 [accessed 26 July 2022].

³ Hereafter *Un peu, beaucoup*.

⁴ Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', *New Left Review*, 196 (Nov/Dec 1992), 65–84; Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁵ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 47–85 (p. 85).

⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁷ Cf. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 'Introduction', in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. by Tasker and Negra (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-25 (p. 15); McRobbie, 'Post-Feminism and Popular Culture'.

⁸ Negra, *What a Girl*, pp. 52, 63–70.

⁹ Mary Harrod, *From France with Love: Gender and Identity in French Romantic Comedy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), p. 78; Negra, *What a Girl*, p. 52.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹¹ Figures sourced from CNC France and IMDb, <<https://www.imdb.com/list/ls069079785/>> [accessed 22 September 2021].

¹² See also later seasons of *Engrenages* (2005–20), after the protagonist falls pregnant in Season 5, and Season 4 of the much-talked-about *Dix pour cent* (2016–20). On the other hand, Season 3 of *Plan cœur*, like the recently released first season of *Drôle* (2022–, scripted by *Dix pour cent*'s Fanny Herrero), are strikingly novel in the French context in endorsing abortion as a valid choice – albeit for women who already have one child, and offset in the

first example by another storyline's focus on a couple struggling with infertility and ultimately adopting a child.

¹³ See also Negra, 'Structural Integrity, Historical Reversion, and the Post 9/11 Chick Flick', *Feminist Media Studies*, 8:1 (March 2008), 51–68 (pp. 51–6).

¹⁴ Julie Rodgers, "'Mais qui va garder les enfants?'" Postfeminist Retraditionalism in Sylvie Testud's *La Vie d'une autre* (2012)', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 30:1 (2021), 19–31.

¹⁵ Harrod, *From France*, p. 104.

¹⁶ On breastfeeding in 2013, for example, see <<http://breastfeeding-rates.info>> [accessed 20 September 2021].

¹⁷ Mary Harrod, 'The "Selfish" Mothers of Contemporary French Screen Comedy', *Genre en séries* (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Ginette Vincendeau, '*Seize printemps*', *Le Genre et l'écran* (15 June 2021), <<https://genre-ecran.net/?Seize-printemps>> [accessed 22 September 2021].

¹⁹ Negra, *What a Girl*, pp. 72–3.

²⁰ Cf. Diana Holmes, '*Plaisirs d'amour*: Love and Popular Fiction in Contemporary France', in *Imagining 'We' in the Age of 'I': Romance and Social Bonding in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Mary Harrod, Suzanne Leonard and Diane Negra (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 175–90 (p. 185).

²¹ On France see Harrod, *From France*, pp. 7, 80, 157. On the USA see Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2007), p. 85; Shelley Cobb and Diane Negra, "'I Hate to be the Feminist Here"... Reading the Post-Epitaph Chick Flick', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 31:6 (2017), 757–66.

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- ²² Ulicnormanowen, ‘Airlock or corridor?’, IMDb website, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8792898/reviews?ref_=tt_urv> [accessed 22 September 2021]
- ²³ Julian Barnes, *The Only Story* (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 59.
- ²⁴ Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).
- ²⁵ The recent release of *Last Letter From Your Lover* (2021) demonstrates the tendency’s ongoing traction.
- ²⁶ Yvonne Tasker, ‘*Enchanted* (2007) by Postfeminism: Gender, Irony, and the New Romantic Comedy’, in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. by Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 67–79.
- ²⁷ While this culture clash was most evident in the events surrounding #MeToo and specifically the now infamous letter by various French celebrities and intellectuals opposing the movement published in *Le Monde* in 2018, its much longer roots had already produced spectacular shoots during the 2011 DSK affair.
- ²⁸ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, ‘Romantic Comedy Today: Teenagers, Head Trauma and Time-Loops?’, paper delivered at ‘Imagining “We” in the Age of “I”’ study day, University of Warwick, 29 March 2019.
- ²⁹ Carrie Tarr with Brigitte Rollet, *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women’s Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s*, pp. 28, 34–6.
- ³⁰ Negra, *What a Girl*, p. 54.
- ³¹ Mathilde Blottière, ‘Noémie Lvovsky,’ *Télérama*, 12 September 2012.
- ³² Jean-Marc Lalanne, ‘*Camille redouble de Noémie Lvovsky*’, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 12 September 2012. Mathieu Amalric and Denis Podalydès also feature.
- ³³ Rosi Braidotti, ‘Posthuman Humanities’, *European Educational Research Journal*, 12:1 (2013), 1–19 (p. 1).

³⁴ Michele Schreiber, *American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance and Contemporary Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 96.

³⁵ Daniel Clarke, “‘Eighteen going on Eighties’: The Body Swap Comedy in 1980s Hollywood’, paper delivered at British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies Conference, 2021 (online).

³⁶ Joan W. Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁷ See Linda Mizejewski, *‘It Happened One Night’* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 41–68.

³⁸ Diana Holmes, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France: Love Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 123.

³⁹ Francis Dupuis-Déri, *La Crise de la masculinité: autopsie d’un mythe tenace* (Montréal: Les Éditions Remue-ménage, 2018).

⁴⁰ Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill and Laura Harvey, *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), pp. 9, 52.

⁴¹ Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 81–5.

⁴² Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 119.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ In Rodgers, ‘Mais qui?’, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Harrod, *From France*, pp. 186–9.

⁴⁶ Steve Neale, ‘The Big Romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today’, *Screen*, 33:3 (Autumn 1992), 284–99 (p. 289).

⁴⁷ Although the schizophrenic and conflicted nature of Machin's attitude towards the USA is hinted at by the fact that he describes his idealized fantastic self to Machine as tall and wearing cowboy boots.

⁴⁸ <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt2253939/?ref_=bo_se_r_1> [accessed 22 September 2021].